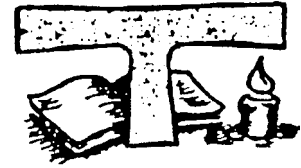


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Raphael,

Greetings and peace!

A while back, your Dad asked me to write you a note of encouragement as you prepare to enter the Milwaukee Archdiocesan Seminary Program. I imagine the feelings you are experiencing about now are daunting and thrilling. As I think back, I first met your Dad when he was only a couple of years older than you are now.

Some years back I wrote a similar piece, at a mother's request, for a young man preparing to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah. I titled it "Mazeltov! Mordy," his real name by the way. You can read it on my website at:
<http://www.appleseeds.org/Mazeltov-Mordy.htm>.

Well, Raphael, hopefully God provides some inspiration for this piece of writing. Reflecting on what to say, I started recalling when I was heading off to the seminary and what guidance I was given, as well, as what advice I picked up during my initial years of formation. I leafed through the Bible that I prayed with early on noting the things I wrote down on some blank pages. Hopefully, the following wisdom seeds will fortify you during times of questioning and lead you further along the journey of seeking wisdom and understanding in your discernment process.

So, let's begin with the first wisdom seed of sage advice from the pastor emeritus at my parish when I asked him to write a letter of reference for me to enter the TORs. He said, let me pass along this wisdom I received from my pastor when I was preparing to leave for the seminary: "When things are tough and looking doubt-filled, and you are ready to pack it in and go home, first, pack your bags, then wait for the following Friday before leaving." Simple, eh!

There were several times I had my bags packed, just waiting, but each time by the following Friday somehow the dark cloud of confusion or angst lifted. Maybe it

was in those times, the Light found a way to penetrate the shadows of my stubbornness. At times, I felt it was a minor miracle.

I began reading Scripture prior to entering the seminary, but was haphazard in my direction. This time I decided to read God's Word in its entirety. I thought if I was going to be preaching it might be good to be very familiar with the Book. Plus, it would be cool to be able to answer someone when they might ask, "And, so, have you read the Bible, cover to cover?" And I could say, "Why, yes, I have." I've read through it now two-and-a-half times.

There was a verse from the Book of Sirach that was a God-sent anchor through many a stormy times during those years of formation. So this is my second wisdom seed to pass along to you:

Book of Sirach 2:1–9 (NAB)

My son, when you come to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for trials.
Be sincere of heart and steadfast,
undisturbed in time of adversity.
Cling to him, forsake him not;
thus will your future be great.
Accept whatever befalls you,
in crushing misfortune be patient;

For in fire gold is tested,
and worthy men in the crucible of humiliation.
Trust God and he will help you;
make straight your ways and hope in him.

You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy,
turn not away lest you fall.
You who fear the Lord, trust him,
and your reward will not be lost.
You who fear the Lord, hope for good things,
for lasting joy and mercy.

I started referring to this verse as The Prayer for Novices and passed it along to many others over the years. Find it in your Bible and mark its place with a Post-It Note®. I'm sure you will turn to it often for comfort and strength during your times of "troubled waters."

In preparation for reading the Bible, I would recite a brief prayer that helped me focus my thoughts and opened my heart to listen to God's Word speak to me. Later on, I found out I was praying a variation of the prayer known as

**"St. Francis Prayer to Discern God's Will
Said Before The Crucifix"**

Most High, glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me right faith, certain hope,
and perfect charity, wisdom and understanding, Lord, that I may carry
out your holy and true command. Amen.

This is a prayer of expectation, Raphael, expecting God to respond to you. I've found that God oftentimes does meet us in our expectations, though seldom in our wistful wishes. This, then, is the third wisdom seed I'm passing along.

My Bible Reading Plan consisted of reading one chapter from an Old Testament book before Morning Prayer; then one chapter before Evening Prayer from a New Testament book. I recommend that you begin with your favorite books to get started, e.g., Proverbs, Psalms and the Letters of John; leave Judges, Chronicles, Lamentations and Revelations until the end, just so you can say, yes, I read the Bible cover-to-cover.

You only need 20 minutes to prayerfully read the text – the introduction page for each book I considered like a chapter. Underline, highlight passages that catch your attention, then with remaining time “sit under” what you just read and let it speak to you in silence. Here you might want to have a prayer journal – those black and white composition notebooks work best – where you can put the date, the verse number and those thoughts that come to you that you want to recall later on.

It took me about a year and a half to read the Bible cover to cover with this method. And the second time through God's Word, I heard so many different things than I had the first time. The Word is always new and God will speak, when we learn to be still and listen. Over time, I put together my thoughts on ways of studying Scripture:

4 Ways to Study Scripture:

1. Informational – gathering of facts and information;
2. Inspirational – the Word begins to stir in one's spirit, elevating one's heart;
3. Incarnational – the Word becomes personal and spreads roots in one's soul;
4. Transformational – the Word begins to produce fruit in one's daily life. As Jesus said, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it” (Lk 8:21, NAB, RE).

Hmm, seems this is the fourth wisdom seed. We might get a real garden going pretty soon!

Actually, Raphael, you might consider writing down the quotations, stories, or whatever you come across in your readings that you might want to save and recall, or use later on in a homily or retreat. One of our friars suggested this to me early on in formation. He said your memory just isn't that good and you will forget what it was or from where you read it. By the way, it turns out Fr. Gus was

quite correct on that matter. Well, I did start writing down those quotations and stories that deeply spoke to me; now I have 63 volumes filled up with more to come. You will find a lot of these wisdom seeds on my website: “Apple Seeds”® – <http://www.appleseeds.org/>

One of the early quotes, from volume 1 of my journals, is known as “The Merton Prayer” by the late Trappist monk Thomas Merton:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 nor do I really know myself,
 and the fact that I think I am following your will
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
 does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
 though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
 and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

This fifth wisdom seed will see you through many confusing times when you will seem to be lost and not sure which is the path to follow.

One day, I was speaking with Fr. Gus – your father can tell you many Fr. Gus tales – and he handed me an index card that he discovered on his desk that morning. He had no idea how it got there but was sure that it was meant for me. Its content is on page 2 of my first journal, written by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and titled “Be Patient”:

I want to beg you as much as I can, to be patient to all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Do not seek now answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live with them.

And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then someday without knowing it live along gradually into the answer...

Take whatever comes with great trust, and if only it comes out of your own will, out of some need of your innermost being, take it into yourself...and hate nothing.

This sixth wisdom seed I have used so many times over the years, and have passed it along to students who are teeming with so many questions; however they just may not be ready for the answers – *Be patient, Raphael, live the questions now!*

The seventh wisdom seed is one of my favorites that helps guide me along life's journey. It is from the esteemed Pope Saint John XXIII:

Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams,
Think not about your frustrations but about your unfulfilled potential.
Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in,
but with what it is possible for you to do.

Raphael, so often it is our fears, frustrations and failures that hold us back, they are our *unfulfilled potential*. Instead, look to your *hopes and dreams*, and, always, *what is possible for you to do*.

Finally, when you are reading God's Word, carefully listen to it and a power verse might pop off the page and stare you in the face. Take this Word, plant it in your heart and let it bear abundant fruit.

The eighth wisdom seed is my power verse which God planted in my heart over 35 years ago that provides still the vision that fills me with a sense of meaning and purpose. It is from St. Paul's 1st letter to the Thessalonians:

Encourage one another; build one another up.
Be at peace among yourselves...
Always seek to do good to one another...
Rejoice always, pray constantly,
Give thanks in all circumstances;
For this is God's will in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thess. 5:11, 13, 15-18 (RSV)

Raphael, I will pray that God inspires you with your own power verse; one that will instill a vision to fill you with a sense of meaning and purpose.

In closing, Raphael, as you begin your great adventure, I leave you with this blessing:

May God guide you and guard you; protect you in safety and peace.
May God enlighten you with wisdom and understanding, and
May God grant you every grace and blessing you will need to face the
challenges of this day.
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Peace and Blessings!

Fr. Brian TOR