Stumbling Block or Stepping Stone?

Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, Capuchin. *Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones: Spiritual Answers to Psychological Questions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987) Excerpted from: the Introduction and Chapter 1.

"The man who sat before me was at the end of the road. …We were both thinking …that it might have been easier to cope with news of a terminal illness. His situation was worse because it seemed that he was going to live with the death of all he had achieved since his own painful childhood. Despite many obstacles, he had followed what he believed was a call to be a priest. Now his priesthood was a ruin. (p. 1)…

The priest had been arrested for a public indiscretion involving the (sexual solicitation of a young man.) The priest, who was known to be hard working and caring,…was on the edge of total despair. Like a desperate animal falling off a cliff he clung to the last vestiges of his faith in God. Suicide seemed a real temptation. …When I heard the priest's story, I was struck by the fact that we can never judge anyone. His childhood had been lonely and his parents cruel, perhaps without meaning to be. He was sincere in his vocation, although he was troubled by a sexual compulsion which had come to light only several years after his ordination. He prayed fervently, but to his horror he had become Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The young man (whom he had solicited) was also apparently a troubled person caught in a similar compulsion and driven to selling himself in the street.

We arranged for the priest to have a long period of …psychological treatment by professionals informed about both psychological and spiritual growth. Gradually with spiritual and psychological help…I watched him pass from despair to remorse and then to hope. …In the course of time a new and freer and much more mature person emerged from the ruins of this man's life.

The last time I saw him…I asked him if he had learned anything from his dreadful experience (p. 27-28)…(if) there were any blessings among the curses that had fallen on him. Without a moment's hesitation he answered, "Yes. I learned that I could not save myself---that only Christ could save me." (p. 1)…I have discovered that I need friends, and most of all that I need Christ to be a friend and come to me" (p. 28).

"He learned (also) that he had believed too much in himself, in his own goodness. He had not really taken his own defects seriously. He said that he had also learned to be compassionate to others. These qualities, faith and trust in God and compassion would be the building blocks of a new start" (p.1-2).

I could only respond, "You have learned a lot." He replied, "I wish I could have learned it another way, but at least now I know from the bottom of my heart that Christ is my Savior."

Psychotherapy had been a help, perhaps an indispensable help. But in the conflict of good and evil in his own soul, he had learned the meaning of Peter's prayer on the Sea of Galilee: "Lord, save me!" (Mt. 14:30) (p. 28).

…Many---perhaps most---people have inside them something that could bring them to ruin, either in this world or in the next. This basic truth of life has been denied by both believers and unbelievers in every age. Yet anyone who has tried to help others with their problems knows that we all share a common struggle against self-destructive tendencies. Hidden in the human heart are marvelous capacities for good and dreadful possibilities of evil" (p.2).

Whatever our life's "stumbling blocks", whatever our need for emotional healing, maturity and wholeness, wherever we are spiritually, like Fr. Groeschel's young man, I believe that the Lord would use each of our struggles as "stepping stones" to grow in *faith* and *trust in God* and *compassion* for others. Doing so will require our being open to discovering:

- That at times we have believed too much in ourselves, in our own goodness, and have not really taken our weaknesses, including our dreadful possibilities of evil seriously enough.
- That at times we have believed too little in ourselves, our strengths, and our marvelous capacities for good, and that we may not be aware of or grateful enough for our own goodness.
- That we need friends.
- How to love others, some times with "tough love."
- That psychotherapy and other individual and group supports may be an indispensable help.
- That most of all we need Christ to be our friend and come to us.
- From the bottom of our hearts that Christ is our Savior.
- In the midst of the conflict of good and evil in our own soul, the meaning of Peter's prayer on the Sea of Galilee: "Lord, save me!"

Whether we or loved ones are struggling with sinful or "self-defeating" behaviors, I think that we can find hope in the lessons being learned by this young priest. We can cooperate with the Lord in turning the "stumbling blocks" in our own lives into "stepping stones" of grace and growth in virtue.

A common prayer of Our Lady at the end of each decade of the rosary reads: *"Oh My Jesus, forgive us our sins…. Lead all souls to heaven especially those most in need of your mercy." Who* needs *mercy* most, those who are unhappy – but realize their need- or those who are "happy" but do not? We who know of our need for the Lord's mercy and are struggling toward holiness may be less happy than those who are not. Yet, for all of our frustration, discouragement and shame, we are closer to our ultimate goal of knowing and loving God, others and ourselves as He loves us.

May we persevere, and with all humility ask for all the strength and mercy to keep trying until the moment when the Lord calls us home. As St. Francis de Sales said, the perfection of holiness consists not in our having overcome all of our faults- or matured in every virtue- but in our faithful efforts to try. May we keep trying each day, one day at a time! Let us remember Mother Teresa's exhortation: "We are called upon not to be successful, but to be faithful"- with the Lord's grace.

God bless us every one!
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