

February 8, 2015  
Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings  
The Soul

If there is a single question most appropriate to the approach of Lent, I suggest it is the query "What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" This is not a fun question; it does not lend itself to frivolity. It is the most serious question posed to the human mind. I suggest there are three things especially to be said about the loss of the soul.

First, it is difficult to pose this as a question today, because ours is the first age in which there is widespread disbelief in the very existence of the soul. People now demand some form of proof for it.

We must say that this is a strange situation, because in prior times the existence of the soul was considered a self-evident truth. If there is widespread doubt about the existence of the soul these days, it is not because the truth of it is less clear, but because men's minds are sorely distracted by weird theories of materialism.

Because many modern men have been misdirected to believe that everything is material, they have lost contact with their spirits, unsure they even have spirits. Such folk imagine that human thought is simply a mechanical process of the brain. They fancy that human choice is determined solely by emotional impulses. They no longer think of human beings as chiefly distinguished by critical thought and free choice.

The Gothic writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft explored this modern phenomenon explicitly in a series of short stories called "Herbert West — Reanimator." In those tales Lovecraft described the efforts of a purely materialistic doctor, someone with no belief in the immortal soul, to restore vitality to dead bodies. He did this with various kinds of animating fluids of his own creation. Dr. West had a very strange career and came to a bad end. All his efforts could produce was a series of monsters that eventually banded together and put him out of his misery.

Literature of this kind points to a real problem of modern life: the monstrosities that man creates by assuming a purely materialist view of human experience. Let us assert this much about a man's loss of his soul — namely, he is most likely to lose his soul who begins by denying that he has one.

Second, there are many other people these days, who, while not exactly losing their soul, tend to *lose track* of it. Even though they theoretically admit the existence of the soul, they have had almost no experience of themselves as spiritual beings. That is to say, they are so completely distracted by various kinds of noises—both external and internal noises—that they never, or almost never, make contact with their inner selves. Their heads are so full of garbage that they walk around clueless about who they are, where they came from, and where they're going.

In all honesty we must say that contemporary culture, including much of contemporary education, discourages us from finding our souls. We have in large measure lost the traditional meaning of education in this respect. There was a time—nor was it so very long ago—when music, art, and literature served as normal paths in the discovery of the soul. In former days our teachers taught us the nature and structure of our souls by introducing us to the likes of Mozart, Rafael, and Jane Austen.

It sounds old-fashioned to say such things, but there really is a reliable canon of standard texts that have served the test of time in the discovery of the soul, and only at great peril do we abandon that canon.

Third, to find our souls we must close our eyes and go within, to discover the height and depth, the length and breadth of our spirit. We must purge our inner recesses from passions and distractions.

By this question—“What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”—Jesus our Teacher gives the back of His hand to all that is trivial, transient, and frivolous.

When we beat our breasts in prayer, one of the important things we are trying to do, I believe, is to summon our inner selves. We beat on our hearts as though to inquire “Is anybody in there? Is anybody home?” Lent

is the proper time to knock on that door, in the hope of not losing our souls.

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