**A Question for Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Life had treated him harshly.

His craggy face, in its sixth or seventh decade, bore deep creases and crevices from years of stressful worry. The smell of stale cigarette smoke clung to his clothes – evidence of the habit that was his constant companion. He spoke occasionally of years spent at war in a way that let me know that there were also unspoken memories of which he could never speak. He spoke with high praise for the stew served in a local church soup kitchen, and deep interest in the affairs of the world of which he was very well informed.

We knew each other only by first names. I saw him in the evenings at Mass when I was in law school. We would both go to the same church for the evening Mass that prayerfully bridged the gap between our busy days and nights. After Mass, he would exchange pleasantries with us before we would all part company. I would return to the warmth of dinner, friends, and study. To be honest, I did not really think about where he went as we all scattered into the evening.

One night, I was running errands and my path and his crossed several blocks away from the familiarity of the church where we usually saw each other. It was growing dark and I was in a hurry to get many things done. At the time, those things struck me as important – although I have no idea what they were. I did not recognize him in the dusk and out of the context in which I knew him. I walked past him quickly, and then I heard him call my name. I spoke to him briefly but then told him I was running late for dinner – an answer honest, but unkind; an answer complete, but empty.

We parted ways, and I went back to meet friends for dinner and he headed into the darkness of the evening. But, before we parted, he asked me a question that I have never forgotten. He asked me simply, *“Why are you so different out here?”*

He knew that when we were in the house of God, I joined others in caring conversation with him. He noticed, in a way I overlooked, that out in the street that evening, this caring concern was missing.

His question has so often crossed my mind in the decades since that brief exchange.

In part, I remember his question because it was a rebuke that stung my conscience. Few faults are criticized more vehemently than hypocrisy – the flaw of professing one thing, but doing another. I knew that lay at the heart of his poignant question. He knew that the concern I showed him in Church was not what he saw out on the street, and he wondered out loud why that was. *“Why are you so different out here?”*

That question also crosses my mind often because I think it is a question that God could ask of me – of us – each day of our time on earth. *“Why are you so different out here*?” There is a certain comfort in the rituals of faith, in the celebration of Mass, in gathering for prayer, and in being in places that are sacred and beautiful. Although I often come to those places with distractions and the worries of the world, it is easier for me to be virtuous in those places set aside from the world for that which is sacred and familiar.

Yet, the “outside” world, in the messy pain and joyful hope that fills it, is also sacred and beautiful. It is where the faith proclaimed, nourished and celebrated in sacred places is to be lived day in and day out in the people and circumstances that cross our paths, even on dark evenings when I am in a rush. I ask myself what I would answer if, at the end of each day, God asked me whether my walk in the world was consistent with what I professed it should be and, if not, *“Why are you so different out here?”*

It is a painfully difficult question. The people who I most admire need not worry about this question because they are those whose lives are *not* different “*out here.”* I have been blessed to know people like this whose lives inspire me every day. But, as for me …

As the journey through Lent 2021 gets underway, this long-ago question is the one on which I plan to reflect. As always, I will give some thought to those practices that strengthen the soul and give to God what belongs to God. But, I think a good answer to this haunting question also belongs to God. So, at the end of the day, it is the question I want to ask myself. *“Why are you so different out here?”* I hope that there will be days when the honest answer is, *“I’m not.”* Until then, this is my question for the days of Lent – and the days of ordinary times.

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