

Address of His Grace Most Reverend Francis Leo
Metropolitan Archbishop of Toronto
Southdown Annual Benefit Dinner - 1 May 2024

Life to the full

Thank you very much for the gracious invitation to partake in this annual benefit dinner for such a worthy cause of such a venerable organization. I salute in a very special way Rev. François Diouf, OSB, President and Chief Clinical Officer, the members of the Board, staff, volunteers and all of you, friends and benefactors, who have accepted, as I have, this kind invitation.

To care for others, especially the vulnerable, the afflicted and wounded in many ways, is a most Christian thing to do as Our Divine Lord identified himself with those in need when he said: “You did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Consequently, participating this evening in this benefit is a concrete and tangible way of living out the Lord’s command and, in imitation of him, of becoming a source of hope, of healing and of new opportunities for a great number of persons, our beloved sisters and brothers. But the vocation of Southdown is also to accompany, educate, listen, challenge and offer fraternal support to many who need a word of solace and of reassurance, a message of love and of forgiveness, a new lease on life and a new hope for their faith journey, their ministry, their walk with the Lord. For all of this, and much, much more, we are grateful and we are proud that such an institution exists and that it contributes to many persons being able to fulfill the Lord’s wish that we may have life to the full (cf. Jn 10:10).

Indeed, **the abundant life**, Jn 10:10, (it is one of my favorite biblical passages), words spoken by Christ himself, in a real sense summarize, if you will, his mission and his dream for us: That we may live abundant lives, here and now, and so prepare for life eternal when we will be called back to him.

But what does the abundant life consist of, exactly?

The following are three ideas I’d like to share with you:

1. The Abundant life is a life lived in right relationship with God

I recently read¹ about a psychologist by the name of Madeline Levine who met with a the fifteen-year-old teenager and in the conversation, she noticed a “cutter disguise” - a long sleeve shirt pulled halfway over her hand commonly used by people for self-harm. When the young girl pulled back her sleeve, the astute psychologist was shocked to find that the girl had used a razor to carve the word “empty” on her forearm. She was distraught that such a thing would happen; but Madeline cared and made sure the suffering teenager got the help she desperately needed.

¹ <https://odb.org/2021/11/20/he-fills-the-empty>

The teenager, in a way, represents a great number of young persons and adults as well, brothers and sisters in our contemporary world, who've carved "empty"- perhaps not on their arms or wrists - but in some equally sad way on their very hearts, their souls. Persons who do not know God; who are hurting so much; who are in despair; who do not feel loved or appreciated; who have not known goodness shown to them – and the list goes on. There are many reasons for the emptiness that many experience. But the Christ came to fill the emptiness, spiritual, emotional, social and otherwise, and to offer to us the real possibility and living invitation to live life "to the full" – the abundant life of the Gospel, the Kingdom of God.

For the Lord has wisely and providentially placed the desire for the abundant life in the heart of every human being created in his divine image and likeness; and furthermore, he truly desires for us to experience and live out our days in a loving, personal relationship with him. However, the context of the Gospel passage John 10:10 is that of the Good Shepherd, and in which we are also warned that there is a "thief" who would use people, things, and circumstances in an effort to devastate their lives. The empty promises the bandits made, in the end, would prove to be fake, counterfeit and miserably false. On the other hand, and this is part of the Good News, Jesus continues to offer to us what is most fundamentally true: eternal life which begins here on earth and which is twinned with the promise that "no one will snatch us out of his hand" (v. 28).

We know by our faith and by experience as believers that, in the end, it is solely Christ who can fill to the abundance the empty spaces found in the deep recesses of our hearts – and he does so with the gift of his own life. In times when we are feeling empty, when the spiritual and emotional tank is running low, we can always call out to him; and if we are experiencing serious struggles, we ought to seek help and counsel. He fills us up with meaning in our daily living; with great purpose to rise up in the morning mindful of bearing a mission to accomplish with him, his awesome, life-giving, life-filling dream to be achieved in and through us.

Pope Benedict XVI, in *Spe Salvi* 27, wrote the following inspiring words much to this same point: "*Jesus, who said that he had come so that we might have life and have it in its fullness, in abundance (cf. Jn 10,10), has also explained to us what "life" means: "this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17,3). Life in its true sense is not something we have exclusively in or from ourselves: it is a relationship. And life in its totality is a relationship with him who is the source of life. If we are in relation with him who does not die, who is Life itself and Love itself, then we are in life. Then we "live".*

2. The Abundant life is the virtuous life

Our health, in its manifold dimensions of spiritual, psychological, physical and social, depends, to a large extent, on living a truly virtuous lifestyle. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, (cf. 1803 – 1804), tells us that human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of our intellect and our will that govern our actions, order our passions/emotions and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They

make it possible for us to master ourselves and experience true joy in leading a morally good life. We acquire the virtues by human effort, of course, and aided by the grace of God. We do our part; he does his. A virtuous person tends toward/pursues what is good, true and beautiful with all his/her senses and spiritual powers and chooses it in concrete, real actions. We acquire virtues also through education, by choosing deliberate acts and by not giving up, i.e., by persevering in our earnest efforts – which are assisted by the Lord’s unfailing help (cf. CCC 1810). The goal of a virtuous life is ultimately to become like God. To live God’s dream for us. To experience the abundance of his love. To witness to the holiness of life in Christ. To imitate the life and lifestyle of Christ himself. To allow the Holy Spirit to prune us so we bear abundant fruit; to be shaped on the Potter’s wheel.

“It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ’s gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. Everyone should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil.” (CCC 1811).

Just as evil actions repeated over and over again produce vice and bad or vicious habits, so virtuous or good habits are the result of good actions. And the beauty of it is that the virtuous life is also the happy life – it’s what we’re made for; we’re wired for it; we inherently desire it and are fulfilled when we practice it. However, it takes effort and practice, patience and perseverance... and it begins with a thought. In his book *Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas*, Peter Kreeft notes: *“It begins in the mind and will, with thinking and deciding. ‘Sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny’.* Every good choice makes the next one easier and more delightful.

In addition, living life to the full involves living specifically the top seven virtues: first the **3 theological virtues** called faith, hope and love (charity) that connect us directly with God. We received them in baptism through the mediation of the Church, they are invisible, they are gifts and are developed with the help of the Holy Spirit and by living in faith and right relationship with him. This life includes believing in and trusting God, placing our hope in God and loving God above all others. And from this love comes forth charity – love for others.

And then come the **moral virtues** which are called so because they help us live within the moral parameters set forth by the Gospel. Among them we underscore “The Big 4” also called the “cardinal virtues”, which are human virtues to be developed by effort, education and skill. From the Latin word “cardo” - hinges on a door - they are very important on the human level, to begin with, since all hinges on them; their roots are found in the writings of Greek philosophy, the wise Plato among others, as well as in the Biblical wisdom literature. They are the foundation of all other human virtues since all others come back to one of these four. The “famous four” are: prudence or wise

decision-making; fortitude or courage; temperance or self-control and justice or fairness.²

There are other human virtues as well. I'd like to underscore another list of guiding principles on how to live properly and fully, in harmony and peace, a tradition stemming from the Indigenous world. Perhaps we have heard of the Seven Grandfather Teachings or the Seven Sacred Teachings which form a firm foundation of an Indigenous way of life: Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, and Truth. These too are beautiful and helpful human virtues to consider.

To conclude this second point, if we live the virtues, they bring meaning and order to life and help us become a gift for others. And this brings me to my final point.

3. The Abundant life is a life lived for others

Christ is always our model. We see in the Gospels how he was at all times oriented to the Father to accomplish his will and the mission he received – while at the same time focused on others, men and women of his time. He was a man, in his divine and human natures, who lived for others, who gave himself to others in love. Living life to the full means that we accept, decide and choose to live not for ourselves in a selfish way but for God and for our neighbour in a generous way. As humans, we have been endowed by our loving Creator with gifts of a heart, an intellect, a will and many others. In addition, we are called to go out of ourselves, to give of ourselves to others in love; this love which is an all-embracing power and which gives meaning to all the other aspects of our human condition and daily living. A person realizes himself/herself as a human to the extent that he/she decides to love fully, just as Christ did. It is sad but true that if we decide to close shut the door of our heart to others, we end up becoming less human – and we start to die on the inside. In other words, by striving to become ever more a man or a woman who is “other-oriented”, living “for others,” we become more fully human and closer to God’s image and likeness, thus more Godly. Accordingly, those who live

² Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 24 April 2024: “In recent weeks we have reflected on the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. They are the four cardinal virtues. As we have emphasized several times, these four virtues belong to a very ancient wisdom that predates even Christianity. Even before Christ, honesty was preached as a civic duty, wisdom as the rule for actions, courage as the fundamental ingredient for a life that tends towards the good, and moderation as the necessary measure not to be overwhelmed by excesses. This patrimony that is so ancient, the patrimony of humanity has not been replaced by Christianity, but focused on, enhanced, purified, and integrated in the faith. There is therefore in the heart of every man and woman the capacity to seek the good. The Holy Spirit is given so that those who receive it can clearly distinguish good from evil, have the strength to adhere to good by shunning evil, and, in so doing, achieve full self-realization. But in the journey that we are all making towards the fullness of life, which belongs to the destiny of every person – the destiny of each person is fullness, to be full of life – the Christian enjoys special assistance from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. It is implemented through the gift of three other, distinctly Christian virtues, which are often mentioned together in the New Testament writings. These fundamental attributes, which characterize the life of the Christian, are three virtues that we often speak of together: faith, hope and charity.”

only for their own interests, in self-centredness and pride, not only provide nothing for others, they are even more diminished in their own humanity.

Pope Francis illustrated this point in a recent homily while commenting on the image of oil and its “calling” to give of itself completely:

“There is another aspect of oil: it exists in order to be consumed. Only when it is burned does it spread light. Our lives are like that: they radiate light only if they are consumed, if they spend themselves in service. The secret to live is to live to serve. Service is the ticket to be presented at the door of the eternal wedding banquet. Whatever will remain of life, at the doorstep of eternity, is not what we gained but what we gave away (cf. Mt 6:19-21; 1 Cor 13:8). The meaning of life is found in our response to God’s offer of love. And that response is made up of true love, self-giving and service. Serving others involved a cost, since it involves spending ourselves, letting ourselves be consumed. In our ministry, those who do not live to serve do not de-serve to live. Those who hold on too tightly to their lives will lose them.”³

Moreover, we learn to live for others when first we acknowledge and accept that we ourselves are created, known, loved and empowered by the Lord. Then we are determinedly equipped to out of our comfortable ways in order to become a blessing or mediate a grace for others. The calling is lofty indeed but within our reach through grace: to shape a more just and peaceful world, to build God’s Kingdom through concrete actions of compassion and mercy; to gravitate towards those who suffer and are in need of hope, love and support, especially the forgotten and wounded; to open our heart to journey with others, in community; to recognize our own limitations and despite that very fact, choose to use them to better understand the sufferings of others, and so endeavour to alleviate them. It is said that the following words were expressed by the wise Albert Schweitzer: *“Life becomes harder for us when we live for others, but it also becomes richer and happier.”*

Dear Friends, my prayer and wish are that Southdown and its staff, board members, volunteers and supporters, will continue for many, many more years to be a powerful and lasting channel of God’s abundant life to those persons who come through these doors. Thank you.

³ Pope Francis, *Homily*, Holy Mass for the Repose of the Souls of the Cardinals and Bishops who died over the course of the year, Vatican Basilica, Altar of the Chair of Saint Peter, 3 November 2018
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20181103_omelia-suffragio-defunti.html