

THE COMMUNITY OF ST. FRANCIS

Chicago, IL

July 31/August 1, 2010

THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Revised Common Lectionary)

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, 12-14; 2:18-23 *Psalms 49:1-12*

Colossians 3:1-11 *Luke 12:13-21*

To view these readings go to <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=273>

A BLESSED “NOTHING”

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Whether we call it ennui, alienation, Max Weber’s “Iron Cage,” anomie, malaise or depression, we’ve all been there (at least all the folk I know have, and I certainly have myself). Whether we feel a sense of un-connectedness, social distance, the stifling effect of too tight a structure, the debilitation of lack of structure, the seeming atrophy of mind-body-spirit, or a paralyzing emptiness and despair we know the terrible burden of “The Nothing” as characterized in Michael Ende’s fantasy novel *The Never Ending Story*.

“The Nothing”—and you know it if you have ever felt it—is often reckoned to be a problem peculiar to the those who live in Modern or Post-Modern cultures. Certainly there are plenty of bits of evidence for this assertion. One thinks immediately of the novels and short stories of Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann, or the Lyrics of Peggy Lee’s 1969 hit song “Is That All There Is?”, or the infamous 1972 suicide note of actor George Sanders: “Dear World, I am leaving because I am bored. I feel I have lived long enough. I am leaving you with your worries in this sweet cesspool. Good luck,” or Sylvia Plath’s 2006 poem, “Ennui,” particularly the quatrain: “Jeopardy is jejune now: naïve knight / finds ogres out-of-date and dragons unheard / of, while blasé princesses indict tilts at terror as downright absurd.”

But one of our readings for this coming Sunday’s mass suggests that “The Nothing” has great antiquity. The book of *Ecclesiastes* is of uncertain vintage, but the best arguments place it somewhere in the 4th to 2nd centuries before Christ (with

a majority of the best arguments opting for the 3rd century). This book (and our reading for next Sunday) begins with the observation that “All is vanity” (or “meaningless” or “useless” depending on the translation). God has given us unhappy things to be busy with. The writer hates his toil. All seems futile because whether wise or foolish, we will all end our lives in death. Toward the end of this passage the author “turned and gave [his] heart up to despair concerning all the toil of [his] labors.”

Very well; “The Nothing” is of ancient lineage, but whether ancient or more recent, and whether we call it “ennui” or any other of those sociological and therapeutic names, why would anyone claim that “The Nothing” is blessed?

It is blessed in the same way that fear is blessed in *Proverbs* 9:10 and *Psalms* 111:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Fear is to wisdom as “The Nothing” is to salvation. One does not wish to stay living in fear, but to continue in wisdom. Fear, however, is a necessary stage in our journey toward wisdom. In the same way “The Nothing”—our realizing that left to our own devices we likely will fall into the realm of the meaningless—is a necessary stage in our journey toward salvation conceived as Union with Christ. Yes, I am continuing that theme from last week and you should expect to see a continuation of that theme for some weeks to come. This is a concept of salvation where the emphasis is on our accepting our necessary death in order to emerge as part of Christ’s New Creation and live into eternity centered in our baptism. In this view of salvation we are invited to leave “The Nothing” in the grave along with obsessions about our sinful natures. But let’s not forget that the “The Nothing” was essential in this process.

So, how do we get beyond “The Nothing” and fully embrace our new life in Christ? The readings from both *Hebrews* and *Luke* have a lot to say about that. If you want more information join us for mass at 5 p.m. next Saturday and I’ll try my best to unpack that message in the homily. And yes, I think it would be a good idea to pick up a copy of *The Never Ending Story*, either the novel or the movie—recommended for kids of all ages, up to 100 and beyond.