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Reflections

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Dawn

I did Lough Derg twice. It is a penitential three days in Ireland which involves going to a remote island associated with St Patrick. The main components are prayer and fasting. The prayer was largely accomplished barefoot over stony ground; the fast consisted of one “meal” a day of black tea and dry toast.

The participants were a motley collection; the elderly, some quietly bowed down, others seemingly in their element amidst the privation; young people too with petition in their eyes and gratitude in the way they smiled.

The all night vigil is my abiding recollection. As some of us gathered outside, it was cold and dark and damp. I will never forget the first light of dawn. Our huddled group was transformed by the sight of it. We had known darkness – maybe in ways we had chosen darkness – but ultimately darkness does not hold sway.

“In the tender compassion
of our God
the dawn from on high
shall break upon us.”
(Luke 1:78)

When all is said and done, we don't know the half of it.

There is a feeling that throughout our life we work things out. Our early hope may have aimed too high. We have learned to compromise. Our lethargy fitted us like a comfortable shoe until a taste of tragedy jolted us into a new urgency and effort. In general we were too easy on ourselves, but we cared about people and we reached out to those who needed a helping hand. We didn't protest or lobby or run for election, but we arrived at a sense of what was fair, that we were ready to vigorously defend.

We may then, after many years, have arrived at a personal stance that we consider to be decent, at a way of dealing with people that we deem to be honest. This is no mean achievement. Each step of the way has stretched our generosity. Each turning point has demanded painful sacrifice. Surely God will be pleased, may even reward us. True as this is, it's only the beginning of the adventure.

St Augustine reminds us that God does not love us because we are good, but we are good because God loves us.

A shock to selfishness

Childhood memories may be unreliable in detail, but I can clearly remember a few incidents. In one, my parents had just given me a bath and I became sharply aware of how good they were to me. This disturbed me greatly and I began crying uncontrollably.

My parents were concerned and began searching the bath water for a sharp object and, finding nothing, started wondering if it could be something I ate. But my problem wasn't physical. It was that I couldn't understand the goodness shown me. I was beginning to realize that everything had a reason and had

decided from my experience that this reason was self-interest. Not knowing the reason for my parents' goodness to me made me suspicious and afraid.

John Shea says that we can divide our life into the time before we know who we are and the time after we know who we are. We come to know who we are when we realize that we are loved by God.

I feel I didn't suddenly come to know who I am. Slowly it came home to me. I am grateful to my parents for giving me such a good start, for reflecting so well God's love for me.

Whose earth is it anyway?

I share one other childhood memory. My father was doing some springtime gardening, preparing the ground for seed. During the

day, while he was away at work, I decided I would help. So I got my little shovel, dug some earth and used a sifter to produce a pyramid of debris-free soil, ideal for receiving seed or bulbs.

My father was initially very appreciative, but the atmosphere changed when I raised the question of being paid for my labour. He didn't see why he should have to pay for his own earth.

The truth of his position floored me. It had never occurred to me and I was crushed. (Where was the new cosmology when I needed it? The cosmos does not belong to us; we belong to the cosmos.)

When I got over my childish petulance (about thirty years later), I felt I had a head start in wrestling with the challenge of continuing creation. In our creative efforts, how do we fall into step with God and try to let a flicker of his graciousness come to earth?

