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“IT IS THE SPIRIT WHO GIVES LIFE” (JN. 6:63)

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MOTTO OF DUQUESNE

“Spiritus est qui vivificat,” the motto of Duquesne University taken from the Gospel of John (6:63), was chosen by Fr. John F. Malloy, C.S.Sp., who taught for 20 years in the English Department at Duquesne before he became a Trappist monk. Little is known as to why Fr. Malloy chose this particular text, but his comment has survived that *“the many implications of this motto make it an excellent choice.”* It involves a clear recognition of the limits of any university in its all-too-elusive quest for happiness, knowledge, and, in particular, wisdom. For we know only too well, as G.K. Chesterton once said, that a man is not a man (and a woman is not a woman) until they have passed the breaking point and have not broken. Further, faith is not real faith until all ground of belief has been swept away and yet one keeps on believing. But it is also a reminder of the popular Alcoholics Anonymous insight of our times that help is available if we but accept our need.

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULL

There is a marvelous statement in the academy award-winning movie *“Braveheart”*: *“Everyone must die but few there are who really live!”* I think of the discussion occasioned by the death of the famous baseball player Mickey Mantle, a flawed, insecure, alcoholic hero. Underneath the laughter and the kindness, he seemed so empty inside and haunted by the fear of his own death. In his will, he asked for the song *“Yesterday when I was young”* to be played at his funeral. Significantly, it contained the provocative line, *“I never stopped to think what life was all about and every conversation that I can recall concerned itself with me and nothing else at all.”* Pope John Paul II reminded us in his encyclical on *“Faith and Reason”* that the quest for meaning has always compelled the human heart to think: *Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going? Why is there evil? What is after this life?* We recall how Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of modern psychology, used to insist that most of us suffer from a Jonah complex. As Jonah fled God’s call, so many of us flee inner calls and dreams because we think such things are beyond our grasp. He would ask students, *“Which of you hopes to write the great American novel or to be senator or governor someday?”* Maslow himself actually changed his own famous *“needs hierarchy,”* which began with the primary human needs for God, warmth, and shelter, then safety, and next the need for society. No longer, he now realized, was *“self-actualization”* (the

full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc.) the highest experience but “self transcendence,” the living for a higher purpose than oneself. He reminds me of the famous Irish atheist, George Bernard Shaw, for whom the true joy in life was being used for a mighty purpose: “*being a force of nature instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.*” Shaw saw his life as belonging to the whole community and that he was privileged to do whatever he could for it all his life long: “*I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It’s a sort of splendid torch, which I’ve got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations*” (From the Dedicatory Letter in *Man and Superman*).

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“LIFE” IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

John’s Gospel is a reflection on human life, or perhaps better put, on the quality of life which he calls eternal life. John uses the language of the prophets who speak of the search for the Lord and his Word, the language of the Wise Men who speak of the search for Wisdom, and of the Rabbis and Essenes who search the Scriptures. The search leads to the foot of the Cross where Jesus’ death is the supreme revelation and judgment of the world. For John, only the believer realizes that to search and find, in faith, is to find the absent one so that a person can truly live. Believing Jesus is the first stage of faith; the second stage is believing in Jesus’ identity and mission; and the third and final stage of faith is believing in Jesus, according to the Indian Jesuit scholar George Mlakuzhyil.¹ Jesus is the answer to the endless life-denying realities of the twenty-first century - widespread poverty, corruption, unscrupulous policies, fanaticism, racism, fundamentalism, and ecological exploitation. Life is a central theme in John; it is found in his introduction (1:3-4) and in his conclusion (20:30-31). In both of these texts he uses the Greek word *zoe*. He uses *psyche* for natural, physical life (10:11, 15, 17) and *zoe* for a qualitatively different, divine life, often qualified by the adjective “eternal” (3:15, 16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47 and, in the derivative, 6:63).

The first words in John of the key actor, Jesus, are highly significant: “*What are you seeking?*” In other words, Jesus is asking, “*What are you looking for that you do not get from the Pharisees, Sadducees, Baptists, Zealots, Herodians, Samaritans, and so on?* Somewhat confused in their own search, Jesus invites his questioners to “come and see.” They see him making the difference at a wedding by turning water into wine. They see an angry Jesus using a whip

to cleanse the Temple court, which had become a market place. They hear him treating the intellectual Nicodemus as deficient, and telling him that he hasn't understood at all and that he must begin at the beginning. He shakes them by asking a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. Yet he reminds her, "*If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you 'Give me to drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water*" (4:10). Further, they will see the cure of the royal official's son, the cure of the man ill for 38 years, the multiplication of the five barley loaves and the two fish, and the walking on water. Finally, Jesus gives a solemn discourse that he is the bread of life and quotes (6:45) the mysterious prediction of Isaiah, "*They will all be taught by God.*" Jesus insists: "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven ... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink*" (6:51, 54-5).

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Jesus invites all, not only those present, but also the Gospel readers to make the same choice of life.

In a recent study,² Stare finds two signs in Jn. 6:1-21 which introduce the theme of life. The first shows Jesus giving life-sustaining food and, in the second, Jesus' word saves the disciples in a life-threatening situation. Next, four dialogues (6:25-71) develop this foundation. Here Jesus is not merely the giver of life but the gift itself, the real bread of life. He has received this life from his Father, the source of all life. What the Spirit does is to work through the words of Jesus. The Spirit mediates this divine life to humans, but only to those who have chosen to enter into a mutual dwelling with Jesus and the Father, who come to him, who are taught and learn from him, and who "*eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood.*" Peter and the twelve here choose life. Jesus invites all, not only those present, but also the Gospel readers to make the same choice of life.

MODERN CULTURE OF DEATH

Some brief reflections from modern literature show us that, even in what John Paul II called our culture of death, the theme of life is not far from the surface. At the recent turn of the century, the fool dreaming of righting all wrongs (Don Quixote de la Mancha) was voted the best novel of the millennium. Cervantes' comment is often repeated:

I have lived nearly fifty years and I have seen life as it is: Pain, misery, hunger... cruelty beyond belief ... These were men who saw life as it is, yet they died despairing. No glory, no gallant last words...only their eyes filled with confusion, whimpering the question, 'Why?' I do not think they asked why they were dying but why they had lived.

One could also quote Bloom in *Ulysses*:

-And I belong to a race too, says Bloom, that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant ... -Robbed, says he. Plundered. Insulted. Persecuted ... -Are you talking about the new Jerusalem? says the citizen - I'm talking about injustice, says Bloom - Right, says John Wyse. Stand up to it then with force like men ... - But it's no use, says he. Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life - What? says Alf. -Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred.

“*Life is difficult*” is the opening salvo of M. Scott Peck’s best selling call to discipline, *The Road Less Traveled*. He comments: “*This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we know that life is difficult - then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.*” He concludes that laziness, or the desire to escape legitimate suffering, is the root of mental illness. But what is life? Before death? After death? Today, there is much emphasis on the quality of life, the fulfilling of our basic needs and capacities to live, love, learn, and leave a legacy, as S.R. Covey argued so eloquently in *First Things First*.

Some (not many) speeches remain in one’s mind. I still remember quite vividly the graduation speech of the late Michael Weber to our students some years ago. Michael insisted that, unfortunately, his generation had not done a very good job in the twentieth century, which had exploited a generation of immigrant workers, killed and maimed two other generations in senseless wars, and squandered the talents and resources of a fourth generation in a wasteful cold war. Yet, it produced the highest standard of living in history, scientific discoveries equal to those of any age, and cures for countless, previously fatal, diseases. Michael emphasized the following examples:

- Half of the children in America will reach adulthood without ever having known one of their parents. Many children will grow up in serial families in which parents are changed as often as one paints the house.
- Racism and segregation, once thought to be on the wane in America, have begun to reappear in city after city throughout the country.
- There are now more minorities in prison than in college. In America, a prison sentence has become a

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normal part of the male maturation process within the black community. It is ironic that the largest structure built in Allegheny County in the past two decades is the new jail sitting on the edge of our campus.

- Cancer and other physically debilitating diseases continue to claim tens of thousands of lives each year.
- Countless numbers of the aged are left alone to deal with infirmities, loneliness, and often helplessness. Life expectancy has more than doubled in this century, yet we know almost nothing about providing our elderly with dignity, grace, and a sense of importance during the last years of their lives.
- Millions of Americans live on the streets in our cities or in the mountains of Appalachia, as malnourished physically and spiritually as those in any third world country.

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Bill Gates was speaking recently at a neighboring university urging students to pay attention to the bottom two billion of the world. He noted that the top two billion don't like being bald. As a result, billions of dollars are spent on curing baldness. Among the bottom two billion, a million children die each year from malaria. Yet, there is less than 10% as much money put into malaria research as into baldness research.

Daniel Groody, in his recent book *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice*,³ gives the following startling statistics:

- In 2005, the world spent as much money on fragrances as all of Africa and the Middle East spent on education.
- The world spends almost as much money on toys and games as the poorest one-fifth of the world's population earns in a year.
- The United States and Europe spent nearly ninety times as much on luxury items as the amount of money that would be needed to provide safe drinking water and sanitation for those in our global village who do not have these necessities now.
- For one day's military spending in the U.S., we could virtually eliminate malaria in Africa.

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Recently, I noticed in an Indian study that, since 1960, America's divorce rate has doubled, the teen-suicide rate has tripled, the violent-crime rate quadrupled, and the prison population

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quintupled, with also an increase in depression, anxiety, and other mental-health problems.

“I HAVE COME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE AND HAVE IT MORE ABUNDANTLY” (Jn. 10:10)

John's Gospel is a profound analysis of the meaning of life (Jn. 20:31). For John, the purpose of Jesus' coming is that we may have a more abundant life than we are presently experiencing. But he also warns that people, even his own, prefer darkness (Jn. 1:4-11), prefer to be miserable, to hide, to cover up. For life, he uses a whole series of figures of speech: bread, light, the door, the way, the shepherd, the vine. These mean what a person longs for and must have in order to truly and fully exist and have a meaningful life. The feeding of the five thousand is the point of departure for Jesus' magisterial statement, *“I am the bread of life.”* Clearly, one must read the full text of John to get his whole picture. Here, we must be content, with the help of such scholars as Rudolf Schnackenburg, to isolate the most characteristic features of this core concept “life”:

- The starting point is Christ, who has come to give the bread of life to the world (6:33-48; 8:12; 11:25; 14:6).
- The life which Christ embodies in his person, words, and miracles is given to all who believe in his revelation. It is a liberation from death here and now and not just in the future (8:51; 11:26; 12:25).
- This gift of life is the answer to our search for the meaning of existence. People left to their own unaided resources, as seen by A.A., cannot break out of their imprisonment in their own way of thinking and acting.
- This life is neither material improvement nor magic power, but divine reality, a share in the life of the living Father, the source of all life (5:26; 1 Jn. 1:2).
- The sacraments are testifying and effective signs that unite believers with Christ and through him with God (3:5; 6:53-57; 1 Jn. 5:7-8). To be born of God is to lead an active and conscious “abiding in love” with Christ and God, a life furthered by the Eucharist (6:56).
- The divine life also becomes a moral obligation and is to result in action, in love for the brothers and sisters, in service of other people in ‘the washing of feet.’ The motivation and model is Jesus (“as I have loved you”). Individual striving for eternal life is

directed towards the community of the brethren and the practice of brotherly love as an essential condition for reaching one's goal.

Much contemporary scholarship, according to Warren Carter,⁴ has interpreted John's Gospel as the "spiritual" and "anti-synagogal" Gospel. For Schnackenburg, who overstates the emphasis, eternal life is "*set in the context of the individual human being, as is indicated sufficiently by the predominance of expressions in the singular. The Johannine idea of life has no direct connection with life in society or the future of the human race.*"⁵ For Carter, John has seldom been interpreted as negotiating the Roman imperial world, offering a vision and experience of life which sharply contests that offered by the Roman Empire. The recent tendency, however, is to see John's Gospel as a power clash between Jesus, God's agent, and the Jerusalem-centered, Temple-based, Rome-allied elite, which leads to Jesus' crucifixion. The central revelation of eternal life involves physical transformation and the establishment of God's purposes in a world dominated by Rome. It is seen in the new creation of a community of the friends of Jesus, in contrast to the friends of Caesar.

IT IS THE SPIRIT WHO GIVES LIFE

The words chosen for the motto of Duquesne provide the mysterious element of the biblical verse, as it were, in contrast to the remainder, "*while the flesh is of no avail.*" According to the late Johannine commentator, R.E. Brown, this means that the natural principle in a person cannot give happiness or eternal life. Paul makes the same distinction in Rom 8:4 and Gal 5:16 between living according to the flesh with its human limitations and living according to the Spirit. Jesus is making the principle clear that a person cannot achieve life on his or her own. His purpose is to communicate the divine Spirit from above, the Spirit who alone can give life. W.B. Yeats, in his autobiography, asks the rhetorical question, "*Can one reach God by toil?*" He answers that God gives himself to the pure of heart while asking nothing but attention. Attention in silence and prayer, waiting for the Spirit, is the only way. Unfortunately, we live in a world that believes in shortcuts, efficiency, methods. John stresses the biblical belief that the role of the Spirit is fundamental (cf. Gen. 1:2; Ez. 37:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:45). The key for the disciple is participation in the community and the Eucharistic meal, which makes present the activity and teaching of Christ and his words which are "spirit and life"(6:63).

The evangelist John thus invites the reader to identify with such different characters as the disciples, the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Mary and Martha, and Mary

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Magdalene. These people struggle with different obstacles, as they misunderstand, question, doubt, even deny, on their journey to a deep life-giving faith.

While our motto reminds us of the limits of what an all-too-human institution like a university can achieve by itself, it is also a challenge. The words of Jesus, "*Spiritus est qui vivificat*," come at a very critical time for his ministry in John's Gospel. We are told that, as a result of his remarks, "*many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him*" (6:66). We are being asked whether we have the loyalty that Peter showed when Jesus does not conform to our comfortable desires, when many are turning away because Jesus will not become a king of this world (6:66-68). It is a challenge to be led by the Spirit of Christ, that mysterious Spirit which blows where it wills. In "Humanæ Salutis" (Human Salvation) of December 1961, with which he convened the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII used the significant phrase "signs of the times." It means that the Church does not have the Spirit in its pocket. Rather, the Spirit, who is active well beyond the known boundaries of the Church, has a habit of breaking out in such developments as the social advance of working people, women's emancipation, and decolonization, to quote some familiar examples. The duty of the Church is, in fact, to recognize the "signs of the times" and to align with them.

However, the Spirit is always the Spirit of love. Significantly, the final chapter of John highlights the thrice-repeated question of Jesus, "*Do you love me?*" – even if it takes us to Jerusalem. It is a challenge to think existentially, the kind of thinking a person does when they believe their whole existence is at stake. It is a challenge to become personally, vitally, even foolishly involved, to wash feet as Jesus did, to change water into wine but not wine into water. It is a challenge to live life to the full yet to stop and think what life is all about. It is a challenge to dare to pray for the coming of the Kingdom and to say with our whole hearts "*Speak, Lord, your servant is listening*." As an American social philosopher once remarked, "*The search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness*." Maybe the poet John Donne put it best: "*I need thy thunder, O God, thy songs will not suffice me*."

Footnotes

¹ *Abundant Life*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2007, pp. 325-6.

² Mira Stare, *Durch ihn leben*, Münster, Aschendorff, 2004.

³ *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 2007, pp. 7-9. According to the United Nations Human Development Report in 1998, Europeans were then spending eleven billion dollars each year on ice-cream, two billion more than the estimated cost of providing clean water and safe sewers for the population of our planet.

⁴ *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 2008.

⁵ *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 2, Herder and Herder, New York, 1968.