

July 29, 2018 - Nine Days without Food and Little Hope of Survival!

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

For 18 days the eyes of the whole world were fixed on 12 boys and their young coach. On June 23 they entered Tham Luang caves near Chiang Rai in Northern Thailand and got trapped as the heavy monsoon rains blocked their way out. In our age of instant information, we have become accustomed to frequent Breaking News. Most of the time they relate to violent tragedies. I, for one, do not watch television and am not following any social media. However, I do read newspapers and keep informed on major events. I am confident that most of you had an opportunity to follow the drama of the 12 Thai boys and their coach entrapped deep in a flooded cave. There were key moments:

1. July 2nd, a rescue team discovers the boys and Coach Ekapol. They had been without food and with little hope of survival for a total of nine days! Thanks to their coach's leadership, they survived those nine days of total isolation from the world and no food at all:

- (i) he gave them a sense of purpose (and hope) by having them dig a tunnel in the rock,
- (ii) he had them drink water coming down from the cave stalactites, and
- (iii) as a former novice monk, he taught them meditation.

2. On July 8, despite many difficulties such as rising waters, four of the boys were rescued.

3. By July 10, the remaining boys and their coach were rescued just in time before the heavy monsoon rains came.

I invite everyone to reflect on this amazing rescue & recovery operation from a Christian perspective. Imagine for a moment that you are trapped in a cold, humid, dark place where there is no food and no hope to get out of it. You are not alone. You are with 12 other people and they are facing the same impossible situation as you. Yet one of them has much more wisdom than anyone else. He is your coach. Would you listen to him? He is the only one who can give you a sense of purpose in your current difficulties. You feel like a child without any power, totally dependent on your coach. He is the only one who can teach you how to meditate and pray, and find some peace. Here's the teaching parable out of this story: Jesus is your coach, your teacher in whom you trust totally. You are one of his first 12 disciples. You are hungry for a spiritual relationship with God and you need stronger faith and hope so as to become more aware of God's Love in your life and accept your daily crosses on your journey toward eternal happiness.

In my nine years as priest, I have encountered only a few people, thanks be to God, who have become hopeless to the point of considering suicide as their only option. All of us, including myself, have faced a series of setbacks that may include our health, or overwhelmed by difficulties at work (with their bosses or co-workers), or strife in their families (constant battles with their spouses, or children).

Such a sense of hopelessness may have led many people to follow Jesus so as to be healed physically, emotionally or spiritually. In today's Gospel (John 6:1-15), "A large crowd followed Jesus because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick." This led Jesus to have pity on them as they were hungry, and it gave him the opportunity for his greatest miracle: the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish. This is the Eucharistic miracle feeding over 5,000 people: "Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining...." Not only was everyone fed, but the disciples collected leftovers filling 12 wicker baskets.

When we are hungry, Jesus is always there to feed us. When we are afraid, Jesus gives us calm and peace. As I was facing health issues these last two months, I was hungry to return to our parish. I was impatient. But I did find peace while adoring Jesus, truly present in the Blessed Sacrament and receiving His Body and Blood in the Holy Communion at daily Mass. I also found it helpful to read quotes from great Saints. One of my favorite ones is from the great Mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila:

"Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away:
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things,
Whoever has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices."

Next time you feel trapped in an impossible situation, I invite you to think about the story of the 12 Thai children and their coach, and to repeat the above encouraging words of St. Teresa of Avila: Let nothing disturb you...God alone suffices."

May God's greatest, daily gift to us, the Eucharist, give us peace!

One in Christ,
Fr. Alain