



Gift of Tears

By Fr. Randy Roche, SJ

Anyone not familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola might think that “gift” and “tears” do not belong together. Usually, we do not want people to see such an obvious sign of feelings on our faces, even if joy rather than sadness is the cause. If tears are a gift, most of us would prefer that the gift usually be experienced in private, not in public. And that is what Ignatius had in mind: that if we are praying or reflecting in private, we would at times be moved to tears by the meaningful depth of our experiences.

Whether we are alone or in company with others, tears can be a personal witness that whatever we are considering is of so much significance that our physical response becomes undeniably evident to us. We have likely been surprised at times when we began to feel the beginning of tears while we watched a movie, a play or a TV program, and we might have even “turned them off” as unwanted at the time. But when we are in our own space and as we observe or read or remember specific persons or events, we might not be reluctant to let the water from our eyes flow until the feelings pass. Rarely does anyone suffer damage from such experiences!

If we were to personally meet Pope Francis or a media star, we would have feelings, perhaps of excitement at such a memorable event. Tears are only one of many different possible internal responses to some of our more significant experiences. When we encounter God in prayer, and in a manner that somehow brings the reality of the situation powerfully into focus, our spontaneous feelings might sometimes become manifest in tears. The Ignatian suggestion is to let our tears flow if and when they arise, but to reflect and ponder on the issue that has touched us so deeply rather than on the tears themselves.

We know that there is more to life than intellectual knowledge. A sudden unexpected pain around our eyes that precedes a welling up of tears is an excellent indicator that something important is taking place within us that we might only come to understand in a limited fashion, but which we rightly accept and appreciate. For some, a scene in nature such as a particularly beautiful sunset or a soul-satisfying piece of music might elicit a strong sense of peace and joy that overflows in a moment of tears. Any one of us could be caught unawares in a twinge of tearful feelings of appreciation for love of a family member or a friend.

The gift of tears is related to many spiritual experiences, not just to our conscious prayer-relationship with God. Any insight related to truth, beauty or love might be so appropriate for our present state of mind and heart that we become aware of that peculiar sensation around our eyes that precedes the beginning of tears, even if none actually appear.

The gift of tears follows upon the prior and more important event: the movement of spiritual grace within our hearts.

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Throughout his years of ministry, he has continuously deepened his own experience of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, while also acting as a guide in the Exercises for lay people and religious. Not surprisingly, his specialty is Ignatian spirituality as a tool for discernment in decision-making.