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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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GULF TO BAY TO GULF

Because I don't do jokes well, I tend not to do them at all, but here is one that came in over the transom this past month: *There are 10 kinds of people – those who understand binary numbers and those who don't.* I like it, perhaps because I've never been much good at math and I wish I were, and this is a mathematician's joke that even I can get. It also reminds me of another joke, one that plays much more to my verbal skills strength: *There are two kinds of people – those who divide people into two kinds of people and those who don't.* Actually, people dividing is something that we all do, and do a lot. Over the last couple of weeks I've been seeing this division: those who like Florida and those who don't. The former seems to be much the larger group, but I belong to the latter. I cheerfully acknowledge that the fault is mine. After all, what's not to like about Florida, especially the days in April that my sister and I spent down there visiting an aunt? It was that mid-April, just after Easter, Midwest cold snap that included snowfall and other nastiness. It was unseasonably cold, cloudy and dark, and every right thinking, right feeling person would look forward to getting out of Chicago and having a few days in Tampa Bay.

Well, Clearwater, really. We flew into the Tampa Bay airport, but my aunt lives in Clearwater, which is to the west of Tampa. To get there, you drive across the water on the Courtney Campbell Causeway to the peninsula that contains Clearwater and a dozen other communities. The causeway dumps you onto a road named "Gulf to Bay Boulevard," and you continue west on that, with a turn here and a jog

there, to my aunt's place, which is a high-rise seniors' residence right on the water. Since my aunt's apartment is very small, my sister stayed with her, and I stayed with an old family friend from Aurora who for several months of the year rents a condo across another bridge, in Clearwater Beach. We had visited my aunt a number of times in Clearwater, which visits usually included a drive to Clearwater Beach, but this was to be my first time actually staying there.

The condo was on the fourteenth floor and afforded not just one, but two spectacular views, for from that height it was just so obvious how thin was the strip of land we were sitting on. Much of Florida is ringed by sandbars. Heading outwards, there is the edge of the mainland, and then there is water (narrower or wider), and then a bit of a land strip, and then the ocean proper. In that condo with two outdoor porches, you could stand on one and look west, down to a white beach and the Gulf of Mexico. Walking through the apartment you came to the other one, where you could look east and see the four-lane road that ran north and south through Clearwater Beach, and on the other side of that a small strip mall, and just beyond that the relatively narrow, calm body of water that separated the sandbar we were on from the mainland.

While Chicago's temperature didn't get out of the forties in those days, it was about 75° in Florida and sunny. The windows and doors were open all the time, and the sound of the ocean became the background music to everything. At night it was the only thing to be heard. That first evening I stupidly thought that it might keep me awake at night, but of course it did no such

thing. If you suffer from insomnia, before you seek medical help for it you might want to find out first if the condition is curable, and the best diagnostic for that is a night spent within earshot of the ocean. If you stay awake through that, there is no help for you from any doctor, sleep clinic, or medication. During the day, you could see the water as well as hear it. Indeed, the water was almost all you could see. Aside from some people on the beach, that was pretty much all there was. The sight and sound of the Gulf filled up and overflowed the senses, always the same and always immense.

So it was a bit of a surprise to me when on the next day I noticed that I was spending more time with the eastern panorama than the western. The Gulf prospect was the new thing and ought to have held my interest, and yet I found it much more interesting to look east, across the road to the water that lay between the sandbar I was on and the mainland just beyond. When I asked my host what that body of water was called, the reply was, "Well, it's part of the Intracoastal Waterway that runs pretty much all the way up and down the Gulf Coast of the state. I guess I've just heard this part called 'the bay.'" That'll do. When I had a chance to look at maps later on, they didn't agree, one labeling it "St. Joseph Sound," another "Clearwater Harbor," and a third nothing, leaving the impression that it was somehow a part of Tampa Bay. So "the bay" will do.

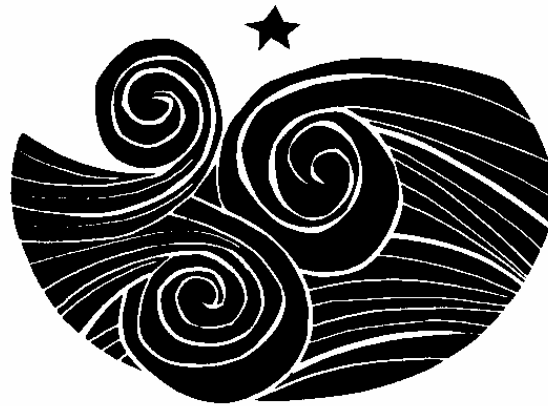
In its color and behavior, the bay reminded me a bit of Lake Michigan. It lacked the huge billows that you saw in the Gulf to the west. It also had a lot more action on it, a lot more going on to entertain the eye. Once in a while you would see a few boats on the Gulf, but there were always lots of boats on the bay. The larger birds, especially the pelicans, seemed to prefer the bay to the Gulf, and they were always wheeling and crashing into the water in a way

that seemed at once clumsy and precise. There was also the road with its traffic and the knots of people walking up to and through the mall. As day two dissolved into day three, I found myself sitting out on the eastern porch, watching the bay, a lot more than on the western balcony with its offering of the huge, but comparatively empty, Gulf of Mexico.

This is nuts, I told myself that afternoon of the third day, you're nuts. The bay side is in many ways like Lake Michigan, and you live in the Loop, you can have that almost any time you want it. The Gulf is what's different, that's what you should be spending your time on. The self-raillery had little effect. Every night I went to sleep to the sound of the ocean, and was grateful for it, but in the light of day the bay continued to hold my interest and take up the lion's share of my condo time.

Although such a preference took me by surprise at first, it would have come as no surprise at all

to St. Augustine, for in my few Florida days I was pursuing a course of action with regard to scenery and landscape that he had seen and described in his *Confessions* as an all too common pattern in human behavior. Jesus, by who he is and by what he said and by all that he did, revealed God to us as Father, Son and Spirit. Yet this Trinity of persons is not three gods, but one, always one and only one. God is love, and when he wishes to give himself in love to that which is not himself, he creates a world, a universe that is not a single thing, but many things, many parts, a multiplicity of created goods, united in that they all have God as their Creator, and yet separate and distinct, each different from the other and apart from the other. Human beings, alone of the beings that have material existence, are made in the image of God, and so they will love – it is their nature – the only interesting question being What will they love? If our full



and final love is turned to God, as it should be, then because of the unity of God we will find a unity of person within our selves, a gathering and a focusing of self in imitation of and in devotion to the One whom we love. If, however, our love is disordered, and we give ourselves totally and unreservedly to that which is not God, then our love becomes multiple and divided, and ourselves along with it, and this necessarily so, for we will be pursuing many different goods, pouring ourselves out in a variety of ways, scattering bits and pieces of ourselves abroad as our desires run off in all directions, chasing the goods of time, which pass away even as they are grasped and which are always headed in different directions. When we love God, and other and lesser goods only in him, then we find ourselves coherent and whole, focused and recollected in the One in whom all goods originate and to whom all goods tend. But when we love other and lesser goods as if they were the One, when we make false gods for ourselves out of passing and temporal things, then we fragment ourselves, divide ourselves, let ourselves fall to pieces in a welter of endless chases after multiple things. Finally, this divided life is a kind of death, the just wages of the sin that is the evil choice of some lesser good as if it could be our god. Augustine saw his earlier life, his life before his conversion to Christ, as precisely this kind of life, a life that had more death than life in it, for it meant the death of the person, the dissolution of one's integrity, the scattering of one's own self to the winds in the loving and the longing for many things.

The only way out of this death-in-life is the salvation that comes through the one mediator, Jesus Christ. In the *Confessions* X,⁶⁵ Augustine prays: "Nowhere amid all these things which I survey under your guidance do I find a safe haven for my soul except in you; only there are the scattered elements of my being collected, so that no part of me may escape from you." By Book X in the *Confessions*, Augustine was completely turned towards God, and he wanted no part of himself to "escape" from God, for he knew that any part of him that was without God would simply be lost. Earlier, however, he knew

no such thing. The scattered, distracted, and dis-integrated life, after all, has its charms, and chief among them is the fact that in such a life, and only in such a life, is it possible to truly escape from God. In this kind of fragmentary way of living there is no core, no center, no more substance and coherence than that which can be found in a million grains of sand, and if such a life necessarily slips through our own fingers, it also slips through God's. There is nothing for him to latch on to, nothing for him to grab. And of course this is precisely what we want if we want no God to rule over us, to overwhelm us with his love. Distractions – whether in prayer or in any other area of life – turn out not to be outside forces that assail us against our will. They are part and parcel of our choices, our "fear of possession, Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God." They are precisely what we want and pursue, so that at least a bit of us will escape Him and belong only to Us.

This flight from the One into the many, this losing of ourselves in distraction, when faced with the choices of scenery I had in that Florida condo, will always choose the bay over the Gulf, the water loaded with boats and birds, the street bustling with cars and people, the water in which vision is not lost in infinity but in which it moves serenely to another shore with its comfortable familiarities. "Gulf to Bay Boulevard" isn't just a street into Clearwater – it's the highway of my life, my escape route from the one God who wants all of me so that there can be a "me" to whom he can give all of himself. Such love is endless, terrifying in its infinite beauty, and in the waters of the Gulf I ran into a bit of sacramental landscape that made it all way too vivid. So, more often than not, I walked through the condo to the other prospect, losing myself in the diversity of delights and entertainments for the eye that the bay offered.

Still, I didn't do that all the time, so perhaps there is some hope. There were moments when I stayed and looked to the west, to water and sky with no break and no end. And somehow I know that when that is all I can do or want to do, then that will be the still point, the point of readiness.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.

