Lessons from the House of Charity, II

Two weeks ago I offered a reflection on prayer, based on my experience some 35 years ago at the House of Charity. This reflection is on the subject of "perfectionism". This may sound a bit strange for the House of Charity, but here goes.

Another member of our team invited me to join him and one of the men at the House of Charity on a trip to apply for entry into an alcohol treatment program offered by the Veterans Administration. We went to the local VA office to register. In the course of the interview the VA official asked our man what skills he possessed. He listed about 8 rather significant skills, such as plumber, carpenter, painter, electrician, and so forth. The VA official looked at me and said, “Father, you may think that this is a bit exaggerated, but I can tell you that I believe what he says totally. If I can put together a team of street people, sober them up, and put them on a job, they will outwork a regular crew three-to-one. One of their common traits is that they are perfectionists. They are capable of doing excellent work. But when the rest of the world does not live up to their perfectionist expectations, they get personally frustrated and can turn to drink for solace or escape.”

I found this phenomenon fascinating, and even to this day I frequently muse on lessons this “lesson” from the VA official might carry. One obvious one is that we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good. In a school setting this might mean that a B is also a good grade.

There is another lesson. The world is messy, and our lives are messy. We rarely experience totally clarity and certainty. In fact whenever I think I’ve arrived at a state of certainty, I become suspicious of myself. I think I have learned over the years to carry issues lightly, to live comfortably with ambiguity and mystery. In fact, it is precisely in this ambiguity that I most often find God. I will ask the Lord, “Where are you in all of this?” God’s answer is often a feeling of peace carrying the message or lesson, “Don’t sweat it. I’m here.” I might not have any greater clarity or certainty about the ambiguous
situation, but I do sense that that is OK. To turn an old phrase, “God’s in the midst of the mess; all’s right with the world!”