

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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THE REAL WORLD

We are cruising the Caribbean so the ship docks most days at a tourist-prepared island. Nice. Warm. A chance to escape our real world and create a relaxing counter-world which will eventually mesh with similar alter-worlds to form jumbled memories of times spent “away.” Nice and warm indeed.

We cruise as often as our pocketbook and time allow. We like the carefree, entertain-me lifestyle, and the Caribbean is no stranger.

One vacation to these islands anchors all the rest, and my memories of that trip remain clear, persistent, and transforming. It was July 2002 and our then 25 year old twins, Kevin and Karla, joined us. That cruise was financed by a small inheritance I received from my mother who died the previous November and who often accompanied us on our family vacations as the twins were growing up. A fitting way to remember and celebrate her life.

It was the last time we experienced the stable Karla. Shortly after that trip, her bipolar disorder drove her to mania, then psychosis, then her deepest depression. It ended, as some mental illness do, with her suicide on January 13, 2003.

We are aboard the same ship that we sailed in 2002, the *Explorer of the Seas*. The ship’s configuration and some of the islands blend as then and now wrestle.

After time and much grief work, I have assimilated Karla’s death into my on-going life. This cruise reminder of her does not torture me; it brings her to memory and I can spend time in that memory since I have little else to do. It is mostly a pleasant time; I am able to feel her presence as my living daughter and not get stuck any more on how she died. Coming here helps me experience her this way better than back in my “real world”, and I will take this level of awareness whenever and however I can get it!

There is a spiritual dimension to cruising. The sacraments of blue, horizon-framed seas, and deep, endless skies come alive, and the island cultures awaken innate impulses to unite diverse humans who also reflect God-in-us. Nature and humanity reveal the spark of divinity implanted by the Creator.

In this context, the harsh realities of the institutional Church (my usual focus in this column) shrink to extraneous foibles. When our spiritual core surfaces, when we touch our deepest wounds, strengths, and resurrections, priorities rearrange themselves, and we discover that the God of death and life looks lovingly on our clear-eyed souls.

The most tragic times are often the most fertile times. We proclaim a joyous resurrection but, sadly, the doorway to that joy is usually pain. My joy will always be shaded by Karla's death but it is a joy nonetheless. That joy seemed impossible in 2003, but it is now real.

I am convinced that my exposure to multiple versions of the death-resurrection of Jesus conditioned me to get through her death into my resurrected life. Thousands of Eucharists, countless verses of Scripture, and repetitious core teachings of Jesus' life, death and re-life shaped me so that I could assimilate Karla's life and death. That's one of the main reasons I remain Catholic when the institutional Church provides so many easy reasons to leave. Not even "they" can tear me away from these core spiritual realities that guide my troubled ship to safe harbors.

Theoretically, I don't need a cruise to awaken these central, basic faith convictions. My real world should contain easy enough access to these truths. But generally that world doesn't deliver as well as this counter-world.

On the other hand and more significantly, both worlds, the back home one and this away one, are real. One is not more real than the other. I experience both, and both shape me. In fact, this away vacation may be more "real" than the much longer one back home because this one delivers Karla and my accompanying spiritual impulses, in a deeper, truer way than my time at home.

All experiences are real. Our challenge is to integrate all of them into one steady ocean of awareness.

I may have to cruise again – soon.