

Most of us know someone, perhaps looking at us in the mirror each morning, perhaps someone we see on a regular basis, who has struggled with blindness. Not the blindness of the eyes, but the blindness of the soul. Not seeing the importance of God or others; living for oneself; or just falling more and more into bad decision after bad decision. In some cases it's sinful actions, but more often than not it's just a failure to see what ultimately matters most in life.

For three years, Anne Galea's son, Rob, 17, had been out of control. She felt helpless watching him spiral downward. Unbeknown to Rob, she would stand outside his bedroom door and pray as she listened to him sob. Praying was all she could do for her son because he wouldn't let her help him.

One day, the pain she felt for her suffering son brought her to her knees. She cried out to God that she would not get up until he saved her son. She begged for mercy for Rob, beseeching the Blessed Mother to be her son's mother and to carry him to Jesus.

Through her tears, she beheld in her mind's eye a picture of Rob surrounded by a group of young people. In this vision, her son was playing a guitar and singing and around his neck was a priest's collar.

Anne's son didn't sing or own a guitar, and for him to become a priest would be a miracle.

Rob Galea and his two siblings had an idyllic childhood, growing up on the beautiful Mediterranean island of Malta. The Galeas spent a lot of time on the beach and in the water. Almost every Sunday, the Galea children saw their grandparents.

Rob's carefree happiness started to disappear in primary school when two of his grandparents died in a short period of time. He couldn't understand why his life had to change.

On top of the pain of loss, Rob experienced bullying in school. His classmates mocked him for his appearance, and he was friendless. Things got a little better when he changed schools, but it was too late.

When Rob was 14, he wanted nothing to do with his parents, especially his father. He began sneaking out to clubs, drinking, smoking, lying, and shoplifting for an adrenaline high. Then he fell into the wrong crowd and started doing drugs. When he was 17, a malicious lie he told about a drug dealer put his life in danger, and he was afraid to leave his room. That's why his mother heard him crying that night, as he was afraid.

Rob, consumed with worry and loneliness, felt hopeless. He says: "As I knelt restlessly on my bed, I saw only two ways out of my misery. One was for someone, somewhere, to reach out and somehow save me, or two, to end my own life," he writes. He was in such a debilitated mental state that he would punch himself in the gut and hit his head against the wall to distract himself from thinking. He thought no one cared — not realizing that his mother was begging for the Lord to save him.

A phone call from his surviving grandmother inviting Rob's sister, Rachel, to a Catholic youth group meeting was the lifeline that Rob needed. He asked his mom if he could go with his sister. At that meeting, he witnessed the happiness of people who loved Christ, and he wanted to experience

their joy. The preacher had told the group that they could talk to Jesus. Rob grew up in a Catholic home, but he never felt that God had time for him.

Even so, what the preacher said caused him to do something unusual. He closed his bedroom door and set up two chairs facing each other. Rob sat in one chair and invited Jesus to sit in the other. Every day, he would talk to Jesus as if he was sitting in the chair across from him — praying and pouring out his problems.

In one of those prayer sessions, the other chair was no longer empty.

“[S]omething kept me waiting in silent prayer for longer than usual, and that’s when God spoke back,” he says in his book. When Rob opened his eyes, he saw Jesus. He writes: “It was like the Holy Spirit had chosen that moment to help me get rid of the inner fury, loneliness, and regret that was still left in my heart.”

Rob continued to grow closer to God, and though he first resisted, he eventually entered seminary and, in 2010, became a parish priest in Australia. He also co-founded a youth movement called the Stronger Youth

program and became a recording artist. He appeared on Australia's version of X-Factor and performed at World Youth Day.

Just like Fr. Rob, all of us at points in our lives can become spiritually blind. But also just like for Fr. Rob, must we remember that God is always there to help us see again and bring us out of spiritual exile into His kingdom.

That's what at the heart of our readings for this week.

From Jeremiah, who writes in a time when the people are in exile, he gives a message of hope: *Behold, I will bring them back from the land of the north; I will gather them from the ends of the world, with the blind and the lame in their midst, the mothers and those with child; they shall return as an immense throng. They departed in tears, but I will console them and guide them.*" Just as sin caused them to go into exile, the same is true for us, from Adam and Eve to a teenaged Fr. Rob to all of us at various points of our lives. But hopefully we reach a point where we recognize what sin has done.

That's where Bartimaeus is at. In our Gospel, we are told he is at the roadside begging. His blindness is of course not caused by any sin, but he symbolizes the inner exile of sin. All of us are Bartimaeus. And he cries out "Jesus Son of David, have pity on me," and Jesus heals him. And then he responds, as Mark tells us not only was his sight restored, but he "followed him on the way."

The takeaways for us are first, recognizing that we all are prone to be in exile; second, realizing that Jesus restores our sight; third, regularly checking our vision, and lastly, making sure we help rather than hinder others on their spiritual journey.

That first part, recognizing we can all at times be spiritually blind, is so important, because pride can cause us to think we have it all in order. Fr. Rob, as a teen, was just searching for meaning in his life and as such ran with the wrong crowd and people, and for a time was blind to what would really help him and the fact that these people he was running with were not making him better, but were preventing him from being who he really wanted to become. How easy it is for us to be blind too. So many don't recognize the bad decisions they make, or justify actions deep down they

know are wrong. No one will know, who cares it doesn't hurt anyone, going to Mass doesn't matter, it's just this one time, etc. It's an endless list of reasons of why we sin, but it all comes down to being blind to both the reality of sin and also the remedy which is a relationship with Jesus Christ. So as a starting point, we have to look at ourselves and say where am I having a hard time doing the right thing. What are the sins and struggles that I have? While we do not want to wallow in guilt and shame, we also have to call sin for what it is. Sin impacts us. Sin impacts others. And that is why whatever it is we may battle, gossip, sins of the flesh, substance abuse, lying, taking advantage of others, laziness, etc., we can't diminish it or ignore it, but must always call it out.

But as we do that, we then call on Jesus. Rob in his case went to his room and prayed and God spoke to him. Bartimaeus is a smart man. The others tell him to be silent, oblivious to who is there - but Bartimaeus knows. "Son of David" he calls out, referring to the power of Jesus. And he asks for Jesus to have pity on Him. Like the alcoholic who admits he is powerless alone to overcome the power of alcohol, we as sinners need to recognize we can't do it on our own. We need Jesus. And while it is ugly to look at sin, let's not forget what Jesus does. He dies for us. He redeems us. And

just as immediately after the resurrection he meets his friends and says “Peace be with you” that is what He does for us. Note what he does in the Gospel: he calls to Bartimaeus, and then Bartimaeus responds to the call. That’s the moment that Rob had in his room that reminded him that God loved him and did not want him to be in exile. So it’s important for us that no matter where we are at spiritually, that Jesus is calling us too. He’s calling us all to make life changes not just once a year as we begin Lent, but daily. He’s calling us to go to confession. He’s calling us to make an act of contrition and name our sins. And on our part, we have to call on him like Rob, like Bartimaeus, and recognize that with our Lord, there is never shame. There is never “you did this just a week ago why would I forgive you now?” There is only love. Sometimes people in our lives or life experiences can make understanding this truth hard, but the point is never fear turning to God because His mercy is always there.

With that turn to God though requires a constant turning. Bartimaeus follows Jesus, and this takes commitment. Fr. Rob has a great YouTube video where he talks about his story, and in it he talks about his daily prayer. As he puts it, it’s all about a “relationship with a God who I see as love personified. That is what and who God is.” Like all priests, he prays

daily, and for him he finds while exercising or even listening to music is where he gets the most out of prayer. Whether we use traditional prayers, silence, meditation, or whatever method is best, prayer needs to be a fundamental part of our lives. Along with that of course is the perfect prayer, Mass, where we encounter Jesus in the word and in the breaking of bread, and the frequent celebration of confession. All of these tools keep our spiritual vision sharp.

Lastly, we have to remember too that we should, like Fr. Rob's mother, always strive to help others see. It goes without saying blindness is everywhere. Sometimes we can contribute to that through our actions (or inactions), so we have to ask ourselves first what kind of ambassador am I for my faith? Do I go to Mass? What language do I use in public? How do I live my life? What would someone think of the Catholic faith based on how I live? But we can't stop at just being a good example. We have to get involved. That's tough! Sometimes not only are people blind, they are angry or hostile towards us. Jesus told us this would happen. But we need to never back down. And there are so many things we can do to help others see the truth. It starts by always praying for them like Fr. Rob's mom prayed for him. But it continues in not being fearful to talk about matters of

faith and morals by knowing what our Church teaches and why when we speak about marriage, abortion, the importance of going to Mass and what's contained in our catechism. It also means not being afraid to challenge someone who is making bad decisions and going further and further away from God. There may be indifference or hostility, but when we do not back down and persevere, ultimately we may find that one day they are in heaven to thank us for helping them to see.

In his video, Fr. Rob says a relationship with God changes us forever, and you and I are called to go out into the world and fill it with love so it will never be the same. God is so good, and so loving. The sad thing is so many don't see that love at all, because they are spiritually blind. They follow through life on their own way, not on His way, the way of Jesus. Like Fr. Rob, like Bartimaeus, may we have the spiritual maturity to say "Master I want to see," knowing that grace makes that possible, and may we follow Him along the way by seeing with the eyes of faith always how to take the next step along the way to His Kingdom.