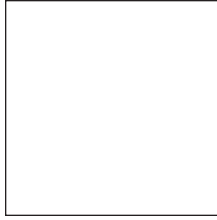


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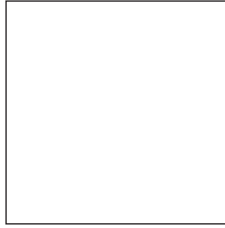
“Faith, Religion, Church:
Terrible Tensions”

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Bishop of San Jose

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Faith, Religion, Church: Terrible Tensions

by Bishop Pierre DuMaine

The latest novel of one of my favorite writers opens with this brief episode: “At that particular moment, the Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot, down in the rectory of the Fourth Presbyterian Church, at the corner of Straight Street and Broadway, felt the last particles of his faith leave him. The sensation was distinct—a visceral surrender, a set of dark, sparkling bubbles escaping upward.”

Now, as the narrative proceeds, it’s clear that this 44-year-old minister suddenly sees all religion as an unbelievable sham and has come not to doubts about his faith, but to the certainty that God does not exist. As he says later, “To put it in mathematical terms...God is a non-factor. All equations work without him.”

I cite this passage from John Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies* for two reasons. First, I find it a useful introduction to some of the comments I’m going to make, and, second, I take the occasion to protest publicly that John Updike has stolen my idea. About six years ago, during a retreat with the priests of this diocese, I described what I call a waking nightmare that I sometimes conjure up deliberately for salutary meditation. Suppose the light of faith should suddenly go out, never to come back. Suppose this happens to a priest or a bishop—to me. I could probably continue doing the job. Even celebrate Mass. I’ve had enough practice.

But then, of course, the Church would become a theater; the sanctuary a stage; the altar and sacred vessels so many props; the vestments a costume; the scripture and the homily a well-rehearsed script. But why not? Who would know the difference? How?

In the novel, the Reverend Wilmot is forced to live this nightmare. No one believes he doesn’t believe and never will again. His wife says “Oh, stop this tedious mooning about faith. Faith is something you build; it’s a habit.” The chief elder remonstrates, “You’re too gullible. Out of your gullible nature, you’ve let the enemy infect your thinking, my friend. Think of your state of mind as a disease. You need to convalesce, to rest.”

And when he submits his formal resignation from the ministry and from the Church, the administrator of the Presbytery of New Jersey rejects it, and in accord with The Book of Discipline, requires him to continue in ministry for at least a probationary year. When the Reverend Wilmot protests, “The parishioners already sense how hollow I am,” his superior replies, “With all respect, I wonder if they do. You are not the source of what they seek. You are God’s conduit, merely, and hollowness is no fault in a conduit, is it? Renounce your intellectual pride, and give God’s grace a chance to do its work.”

Now, the plight of Clarence Wilmot and my own contrived nightmare are extreme cases. They nevertheless illustrate certain aspects of the less dramatic and commonplace tensions I'd like to talk about here. They illustrate that the strongest faith is a fragile gift, that it can flicker like lights in a storm, even if it doesn't go permanently dark. That it can be faked, even unconsciously, or simply performed. That it can be distorted, as in the case of Reverend Wilmot's comforters, by smugness or obtuseness or by official rules and routines. They also illustrate that faith, though a gift of grace, is not our personal invention or possession, but is acquired and lived, abandoned or lost, only through the tangles of human relationships and communication.

However, the tensions I propose to explore are not those that flow from our own psyche, and are common to many areas of our life, but rather those tensions that I believe are inherent in faith and religion and Church. Tensions that may wax and wane, but will never go away. And if tension is akin to stress, we can derive some wisdom from the therapist who observed that stress is not what happens to you, it's what you do with it. If so, then we must recognize and acknowledge the inevitable tensions in our own life of faith, religion, and Church, whether we experience them "alone or with others."

I have to limit the scope of this topic at the outset. I'll be talking about the Roman Catholic Church, the Christian religion, and faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of Jesus. More broadly, for better or worse, I'm talking about the institutional Church, organized religion, and faith in a personal God. I can almost feel the tensions rising already just at these phrases themselves that are rife today with conflicting and pejorative connotations.

The term "organized religion" always reminds me of Will Rogers, who used to say, "I don't belong to any organized political party—I'm a Democrat." I'd like to appropriate that and say "I don't belong to any organized religion—I'm a Roman Catholic." I know this contradicts the prevailing image, but after a lifetime in the Catholic Church, 40 years as a priest, nearly 20 as a bishop, I've concluded that our Church may be the most elaborately structured anarchy in the history of human institutions.

I'm really only half-joking, and I want to assure you that I do believe in both organized religion and the institutional Church. The formalities of creed, code, and cult provide the only way I see for faith to be learned, and lived, and transmitted across generations. Similarly, I think of institution as simply a community, but a community that transcends and out-lives all its members; a community with a past and a future, with a memory and a vision. I may deal later with the organizational baggage that

often encumbers institutions and can obscure or thwart their essential mission—another source of many tensions.

In any case, unless organized religion and institutional Church beget and nourish a personal faith, unless they foster the freedom and understanding of the creatures made in God's image, then they are indeed the sham that Reverend Wilmot decided they were. Conversely, I am not aware of great evidence that personal faith, as I understand the term, arises in isolation from a culture that has been penetrated by some formal religion marked by temples, shrines, churches, synagogues, mosques, or simply sacred places of tribal cults.

When we talk about personal faith and a personal God, we run afoul of many misconceptions and misunderstandings in our secular and religiously illiterate age. "Personal" does not mean, as often assumed, a matter of personal opinion and private interests, but a connection with a real "Self" outside of ourselves, outside of our time, outside of our world. It's not simply, as sometimes caricatured, a variation on the pagan deities and household gods, or some vague, giant hominoid, like a Macy's balloon in the Thanksgiving Parade, or the old man that must be flattered or cajoled or begged, or the ever-popular "Good Guy God" who makes no demands and indulges our foibles.

The God we speak of, this "personal" God, is no extension or caricature of our feeble human nature. By "personal" we mean the power to know, the power to love, the power to choose, all of which in God are absolute, infinite, and unconditioned. This is not just a vague force behind the universe. I think it was Teilhard de Chardin who said he believed in a force that had a face and a heart, a God who knows and loves and cares, and has special care for those creatures made in the divine image, creatures with a comparable, but not remotely equal, power to know, to love, and to choose freely.

By now you can see that I'm not undertaking a treatise in theology or philosophy. This is a purely personal reflection, by no means "official," of my own experience of faith, religion, and Church. But I cannot rely on my personal experience alone. I set a high value on vicarious experience, everything we can learn from others in the course of study, ministry, community, family, friendship. For one thing, it's the only way we can experience the varieties of belief and unbelief and all the dimensions of religion and Church, or at least more of them.

Without that vicarious learning, we would each live in a very small and isolated world, and I have the sad impression that many do. However, my aim is not to acquaint you with my experience, but to reacquaint you with your

own. I urge you as we go along, to substitute your experience for mine and to explore your own convictions, doubts, and tensions.

Doubt is not excluded by faith, as people of faith know. Faith is not a matter of certitude, but of mystery—entering the mystery, not dancing around it to figure it out. This is important because I believe that one of the most pervasive sources of tension is a propensity to consider our own experience and convictions as normative for others in matters of faith and religion and to press them with a righteous certitude. If we rest our faith or religion on such a narrow base, then conviction will outrun both knowledge and experience, and, as Flannery O'Connor has said, "Conviction without experience leads to harshness." I don't think I need to list the examples of the harshness that afflict our Church and our religion, indeed all religions in some degree.

Another reason for focusing on our own experience is that faith, religion, and Church are only concepts, abstractions, ideas, even ideals, until they are embodied—"incarnated" if you will—in the faith of individuals living out their convictions in a community, which as I said transcends and outlives us all.

By now, you may also have noticed I'm still introducing the topic. In fact, this whole lecture may be an introduction to something I'll have to say some other time. (And no, I'm not soliciting another invitation.) I've already discovered that one of the truly terrible tensions arising from faith, religion, and Church is a rash agreement to talk about them in public.

As was noted in the synopsis that announced this lecture, I don't consider the three terms to be synonymous, much less interchangeable, but I do believe they are inseparable. I don't think any one of them can be adequately defined or experienced without reference to the other two. I'm obviously not counting as faith or religion the varieties of deism or the ever-popular faceless and nameless god of the woods and mountains.

Here I would like to insert a parentheses to note an article in this morning's *San Jose Mercury News*, subtitled, "Catholicism is no longer the answer for me." Now that bundles up several attitudes towards religion. Religion is an "answer for me," with no meaning outside of myself. Without disparaging a very intelligent and articulate journalist, I believe the article could be generated by a computer, programmed to tell stories of Catholic childhood and "when I grew up and got out." This particular article covers the conventional list: eight grades of parochial school, the Peter Pan collars, the plaid jumpers, the saddle shoes, the crucifixes, the First Communion dress, the Confirmation, and "I'm not really too sure what it was all about."

This is not a critique of the writer's intelligence or of the instruction she received from parents, teachers, and preachers. It's an intimation of how differently we assimilate from family or school or Church what faith, religion, and Church really mean. She finally says, as most of them do, "I stopped going to Church when I went away to college." This is another way of saying "I stopped growing in knowledge or understanding of the Church when I was a teenager." The religion of childhood and adolescence becomes what many people understand religion to be, especially the Catholic religion. The writer ends by saying that she didn't go to Church this Christmas; instead she was running ten miles on a dirt trail in the foothills of Cupertino. Again I quote, without wanting to seem disparaging or flippant: "I saw little brown bunnies, huge trees with trunks covered in velvety lime green moss, creeks gushing with water. I made eye contact with two graceful does. I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. I may not be a Catholic or a Christian, but I do feel a connection to my creator. I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything." I wish her well, as we go our different paths, but the religion she rejected, the God she does not need, and the nameless, faceless "Creator" she sees intimated in nature, is not the God that I am talking about, or the God that our Church and our religion worship, or that most of us have experienced.

I am sure you can cite your own examples, much more personal, of those who have rejected, not the God of Israel or the Father of Jesus, but a childish caricature of an unbelievable god.

I inserted this parenthesis among the misconceptions of what "personal" God means. However, I do not mean to suggest that finding our way to such a personal God is not without uncertainties or misunderstandings, even doubts and difficulties. Here I want to insert another arresting item that came to me this week in a letter from Zambia, from St. Dominic's Major Seminary in Lusaka, which I visited two years ago and where one of my own priests taught along with several other friends. One of them included in his Christmas letter a seminarian's answer to an examination question. I don't know what the question was, but here's the answer:

"Is God an almighty creature who created the Earth, too holy to worry about someone like me? Is God the person who listens to me as I pray at night alone in the dark, a loving God? Is God the encouraging force behind you in the big exam? Is God the force who allows genocide in Rwanda, an unkind God? Is God the person behind capitalist countries who trample the poor? Is God the unknown, the extraterrestrial we claim to know? Has He surely removed Himself from us, the human race, who seem to destroy everything in sight? Is He, She, God the almighty, the loving, the encourager, the unkind, the heartless, the unknown? I suppose where there's hope, there's God."

No A's for orthodoxy or theological sophistication, but A-plus for faith, religion, and Church in-the-making and for one human life aspiring to priesthood and not fussing about certitude or comfort or communing with the bunnies. (Excuse me, I can't resist.) Now, I also believe that among these terms—faith, religion, Church—there are priorities. I've already said that religion and Church are useless and worthless if they don't nourish the freely chosen and fully lived personal faith. I also believe that the most terrible tensions arise when religion and Church fail, even partly or intermittently, to attain that goal or at least to pursue it steadfastly. They fail also if the faith they engender does not respect the intelligence and freedom that constitute the image of God in each of us.

Here I want to insert two quotations that I hope will convey the principles and the climate of everything else I'm trying to say. I fastened on these texts when my primary priestly ministry was Catholic education. In trying to formulate and convey my own vision of what a Catholic school in America should be, I appropriated a passage from the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on religious liberty, significantly entitled, *Dignitatis Humanae* (Of Human Dignity):

“The principle of religious liberty contributes in no small way to the development of a situation in which people can without hindrance be invited to the Christian faith, embrace it with their own free will and give it practical expression in every sphere of their lives.”

Now, I believe this applies not only to secular political systems, and to the Catholic school, but to the Church itself. I know many disagree, and I won't debate the point here. I simply offer it as my personal conviction. I know I am making this transit from a document on political institutions to the Church itself. I run the same risks that Archbishop John Quinn did last June in taking the Pope's comment on ecumenical relations and applying it to the internal life of the Church. There are many who believe that principles we apply *ad extra* to our relations with those outside the family of faith somehow are suspended when we work *ad intra*. The problem with that, for me, is that we're still dealing with people made in God's image.

Now, the other related quotation is one I used often when I taught courses in the history or philosophy of education. The source is nearly a century old, which will account for the style and the exclusive language.

“If we're to make men Christ-like, we must not only help them to see God in all things, but help them to sympathy with all that he has made and makes. A truly Catholic spirit deems nothing that may be of service to man foreign to the will of God as revealed in Christ. We hold fast to the principle of authority; and at the same time, we believe that man's mind is free, and that he has the right to inquire into and learn whatever may be investigated and known.

Is not theology like the other sciences, bound to accept facts? To deny a fact is to stultify the intellect... The supreme fact is life, and only that is true, which is favorable to life, to its growth, its joy, its strength, its freedom, its permanence. Whatever dwarfs, whatever arrests, whatever weakens life is evil [and] whatever narrows, whatever hardens, whatever enslaves is foreign to the purpose of education," and, I would add, to the purpose of religion and Church.

Again, my application of these principles to the Church may be disputed, and I will not debate them, but merely assert them, as my personal conviction. This last quotation is from a lecture published in 1902 by John Lancaster Spaulding, Bishop of Peoria, an outstanding but controversial leader among the prelates of his time. He boldly asserted these views in the thick of Church controversies about modernism and Americanism. My appropriation of them may revive the old suspicions but, if so, I'll have to deal with them another time.

Between Spaulding's lecture in 1902 and the Council Decree in 1965, such sentiments, including my application of them to the Church, were considered suspect and perhaps heretical. The cloud over them is not yet completely lifted, and that cloud itself is a source of tension. Yet, what I understand to be the Christian tradition and the perennial teaching of the Church is that the act of faith must be free and the choice in conscience must be free. Not free to invent our own dogmas, or to devise moral principles that suit our own desires, but to strive earnestly to grasp the truth, assent to it, and act on it.

That word "assent" triggers another association and another digression because there is so much current controversy about "dissent." When Cardinal Joseph Bernardin announced his Common Ground initiative and Archbishop Quinn gave his now-famous lecture at Oxford, some critics feared they were opening the door to noxious dialogue. They warned that dialogue might give forum and sanction to dissent and declared that dissent has no rights and that truth cannot be negotiated.

Of course dissent has no rights because it is an abstraction, but dissenting individuals do have rights. I do not deny that real dissent can be intransigent, disruptive, dangerous, but I also believe that what is labeled dissent very often is the earnest effort of ordinary believers to give full and free assent to the faith they profess.

The ancient dictum, *fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding," takes on new meaning today, especially in our culture. Reasonable people, with ordinary education and good will, sincerely want to understand the articles of faith they are asked to accept, especially those doctrines that extend beyond the ancient creeds and are deeply imbedded in

their personal lives. They are not hostile to authority, but intuitively understand that an act of faith ought to be more than an act of obedience. They can accept authoritative doctrines as such, but the reasoning offered to support them may be couched in philosophical language foreign even to the most educated, and seems to be in conflict with their everyday experience.

So, if we're going to talk about *assent* to the truth, we have to recognize that what the Church teaches is not uniformly and universally what all Catholics understand and accept. The fact that we don't always believe what is true or do what is right begets the perennial temptation of Church and religion (and not just the Catholic church or the Christian religion) to coerce choice and to beget distrust of both freedom and conscience, our own as well as those of others.

This is a source of many terrible tensions, because this God-given freedom is a grave responsibility and entails some risk, a risk which our Creator took in giving us this freedom and making it the basis of every act of faith and every moral decision. With such freedom, godlessness is possible; without it, faith is impossible. With such freedom, sin is possible; without it, virtue is impossible. With such freedom, human community becomes possible; without it, community becomes oppressive.

Underlying these tensions is perhaps the deepest source of tension: the fact of sin, including what we call original sin. Notice I said "fact," not "doctrine," of sin. It is simply the tension that compelled St. Paul to say, "The things I would do, I do not do; the things I would not do, those I do." G.K. Chesterton put it his own way: "Original sin is the only dogma for which we have empirical proof."

What I am trying to say is, I think, consistent with what the Second Vatican Council said about freedom of conscience in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*:

It is...only in freedom that we can turn ourselves towards what is good. The people of our time prize freedom very highly [and rightly so]...yet they often cherish it improperly, as if it gave them leave to do anything they like, even when it is evil.... Our dignity therefore requires us to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in ourselves or by mere external constraint.

Because faith is subject to human understanding and freedom, then we must recognize that the strongest faith encompasses mystery, not certitude; that the object of our faith is not doctrinal formulations but the God they try to discern in nature and revelation, and ultimately in the Christ who came to set us free, save us from sin, and show us the Father.

Now to complete my introduction (!), I must first acknowledge that I may have already provoked more tensions than I can describe and then explain by analogy what I want to do with my remaining time.

A fascinating book, whose title I have forgotten, includes a succession of photographs showing, in sequence, the Milky Way, our solar system, our planet, our hemisphere, our country, our Midwest, a particular state, a specific city, one of its neighborhoods, one of its parks, and, finally, a patch of grass where a supine figure dozes through a picnic.

In a similar way I want to proceed abruptly from the ‘macro’ picture I have sketched very superficially to a ‘micro’ event that touches more Catholics more frequently than any other: our public worship, our liturgy. And I can apply my photo-analogy to one of the tensions: some believe public worship has become a picnic, others seem to think it ought to be—and many are supine and dozing...

I don’t want my flippancy to detract from the seriousness of the subject or the ‘terribleness’ of the tensions surrounding it. It is through the liturgy, the Council says, that “the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church.”

As such, the liturgy is also a prism through which are refracted all the fundamental beliefs of the church and also, unfortunately, most of the tensions surrounding them. Instead of manifesting “the mystery of Christ,” the liturgy may instead manifest hardened opinions and harsh judgments that distort and betray “the real nature of the true Church.”

I need not catalogue the tensions surrounding what I still call the Mass but others call Eucharist or Liturgy—even the terminology is a clue to opinions and a source of tension. I will only comment briefly on two aspects which I consider fundamental to our Catholic worship and doctrine: the Mass as Meal and as Sacrifice, and the Priesthood of all the baptized and the Priesthood of the ordained minister.

Let me begin with the priest at the altar and in the midst of the assembly. And let me do so in the context of my own experience. For my first 10 years as a priest I celebrated Mass facing the altar and the Lord, prayed in a hallowed but foreign language, in a sanctuary that emphatically separated priest and people.

I treasured this ritual and was not eager for change, but when the Church directed me to face the assembly, draw them closer to the action in both the space and the ritual, pray with them in their own language, and make of individual and private devotion an assembly of public worship, I not only accepted the change but soon appreciated its wisdom and import.

Now, thirty years later, other changes have arisen, not from the Church's doctrine or practice, but from diverse opinions and preferences that make 'tension' seem too mild a description. And many of the most manifest tensions focus on the priest—male, celibate, 'consecrated,' that is 'set apart' (not 'above,' as the Gospels make clear), the minister of the Mystery we celebrate and believe in. They also include the 'priestly people' assembled for worship, who participate fully in the Mystery and in Communion. Unfortunately, the critique of a clericalism, aloofness, and personal failings that have infected priesthood can become an attack on priesthood itself and distort the nature of Sacrament and the very Mystery we celebrate in our worship.

Whether you consider the priest to be a "presider" at a communion of a priestly people or the "celebrant" of the Sacrifice of Christ made sacramentally present, the fact remains that the Mass is and must be both Meal and Sacrifice—we are present in the Upper Room and at Calvary. The Meal and the Sacrifice, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection are complementary and inseparable realities that must be fully expressed in the Mass.

Unfortunately I have observed, as you doubtless have, that some would celebrate the Meal and build community as if suffering and death were not a present reality, while others would exclude both joy and community in a somber and private contemplation of the Sacrifice. If you will indulge one last flippancy, I tend to think of these attitudes as "the picnic at the foot of the cross" versus "the wake at the empty tomb," equally incomplete and distorted images of the mysteries we celebrate.

The painful conflicts centered in the liturgy manifest some fundamental attitudes about religion and Church that have been diagnosed with great insight by an English Catholic journalist:

One key to understanding our current disputes is to recognize a conflict between two fundamental elements in religious sensibility: (1) on the one hand the critical, innovative disposition which finds God through intellectual speculation, social action and the righting of wrongs; (2) on the other, the disposition towards awe, reverence, contemplation, order and continuity with the past. The Church badly needs both. Without the first it would atrophy. Without the second it would lose heart.

Atrophy and discouragement are indeed real dangers and are symptoms of terrible tensions within and among the faithful. A common denominator in all these tensions is the fact—the historical and inevitable fact—of change, which is an essential sign of life in a living organism, like the Body of Christ. Some fail to see, beneath the change, the essentials that do not change; others seize on change to disregard or demolish one essential element or another.

Since change—in our Church, in our selves, and in our world—is a constant in all the tensions I have suggested, it may offer the most appropriate end to these reflections. Once again I will appropriate a favorite quotation taken out of its original context but applicable to the reflections I have offered here.

In a golden little essay entitled “The Flag of the World,” G.K. Chesterton addressed the fundamental *loyalty* we must have to the world we live in. I will quote him directly—again without editing the exclusive language—and let you infer its relevance to faith, religion, Church—and change:

Love is not blind; that is the last thing it is. Love is bound; and the more it is bound the less it is blind. . . . A man must be interested in life, then he could be disinterested in his views of it. “My son, give me thy heart,” the heart must be fixed on the right thing; the moment we have a fixed heart we have a free hand. . . . What we need is not the cold acceptance of the world as a compromise, but some way in which we can heartily hate and heartily love it. We do not want joy and anger to neutralize each other and produce a surly contentment; we want a fiercer delight and a fiercer discontent. . . . Can [we] hate [the world] enough to change it, and yet love it enough to think it worth changing?

I said at the outset that the tensions I have described may wax and wane but will never go away. However, if we can bring to our personal experience of faith, religion, and Church a “fixed heart and a free hand,” a “fiercer delight and a fiercer discontent,” the “hate and love” that make change both urgent and desirable—then the tensions that endure may not be so terrible after all.

Addendum/Postscript

The conclusion of this written reflection differs from that of the lecture of January 19, 1997. I will not explain here my choice of conclusion but simply append the original one, which was an expression of my personal faith.

In a rite I once took part in but which is now discontinued by the Church, aspirants to priesthood were initiated into the clerical state by a simple ritual, in which the candidate declared: *Dominus pars hereditatis meae et calicis mei. Tu es qui restitues hereditatem meam mihi*: “The Lord is my portion and my cup. It is You who restore my heritage to me.”

This verse is taken from Psalm 16, a song of the Levites who received no allotment in the apportionment of land to the tribes of Israel, because the Lord was the portion bestowed on the priestly tribe of Levi. The entire psalm remains for me, not just a nostalgic remembrance of an ancient rite, but a prayer that affirms a faith that can make tensions tolerable and even fruitful:

Preserve me, God, I take refuge in you.
I say to the Lord: “You are my God.
My happiness lies in you alone.”

He has put into my heart a marvelous love
for the faithful ones who dwell in his land.
Those who choose other gods increase their sorrows.
Never will I offer their offerings of blood.
Never will I take their name upon my lips.

O Lord, it is you who are my portion and cup;
it is you yourself who are my prize.
The lot marked out for me is my delight:
welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me!

I will bless the Lord who gives me counsel,
who even at night directs my heart.
I keep the Lord ever in my sight:
since he is at my right hand, I shall stand firm.

And so my heart rejoices, my soul is glad;
even my body shall rest in safety.
For you will not leave my soul among the dead,
nor let your beloved know decay.

You will show me the path of life,
the fullness of joy in your presence,
at your right hand happiness forever.



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