

# ***SIGNPOSTS ON THE EMOTIONAL ROAD OF LIFE***

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## **Platero and I**

One of the most famous Spanish poets of the XXth Century, Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1956, Juan Ramon Jimenez wrote a charming story titled *Platero y Yo*.

Platero is the poet's donkey and "I," obviously refers to the poet himself, born in a country village in the southern part of Spain.

There are no donkeys in the Philippines and it may not be easy to capture all the nuances of this story. The book can be found in our library in Spanish and in the English translation *Platero and I*.

Allow me to read the first chapter.

Platero.

Platero is small, downy, smooth – so soft to the touch that one would think he were all cotton, that he had no bones. Only the jet mirrors of his eyes are hard as the beetles of dark crystal.

I let him run loose and he goes off to the meadow; softly, scarcely touching them he brushes his nose against the tiny flowers of pink, sky-blue and golden yellow.

I call him gently, “Platero” and he comes to me at a gay little trot as though he were laughing, lost in a clatter of fancy.

He eats everything I give him.

He likes tangerines, muscatel grapes, all amber-colored, and purple figs with their crystal paint of honey.

He is tender and loving as a little boy, as a little girl, but strong and firm as a stone.

When I ride him on Sunday through the lanes at the edge of the town, the men from the country-side, clean-dressed and slow moving, stand still to watch him.

“He is made of steel.”

He is made of steel. Both steel and quick silver.

I belong to a very large family.

At the time I am trying to recover now... there were only three of us: Alfonso, the eldest, was ten years old. I was seven, and my sister Esther, four. Six more brothers and sisters came afterwards, but by that time I was already away from home.

Esther did not really count that much then.

My point of reference was Alfonso, my idol and my adversary. I was always the loser, but it did not matter, for as long as he allowed me to join in his game.

In our little town there were only two schools, one for boys and one for girls, and though I was one of the smallest boys, this did not bother me. My brother’s presence was like a shield. Only his shadow gave me assurance.

At midday, we joined our grandparents for lunch at their home. My grandfather, already retired from farming, kept an old donkey who carried him whenever he visited his honey-bees far away in the woods.

To ride that creature was one of the greatest pleasures for me in those days, and I would try to outrun my brother to be given the privilege to bring our little Platero to his watering place. It made my day if I did, or rather if he permitted me to.

When I was eight, a Dominican priest visited our school and recruited the best students, among them my brother Alfonso, for the Dominican minor seminary in Valladolid, a couple of days away from our place. This constituted a big event in the family and Alfonso became a true hero for me, especially at the end of every month, when my father would open the letter containing his news and his grades, in the presence of the whole family.

I admired him, yes, but I missed him too.

And I was longing for the day I would be old enough to join him.

This happened when I turned 11 years old myself. I entered the Dominican seminary away from home, but close to my older brother. Of course, I missed Father and Mother and I would cry in moments of sadness, but now I could emulate my brother.

We were allowed to see each other only once a month. I would tell him all my troubles and listened to his advice. These shorts visits energized me and I looked up to him as a model seminarian.

I had always dreamed of becoming a priest myself. This desire might be traced back to my earliest memories. I can make my own the expression of Isaiah (49:1) :

Listen to me, you islands;  
hear this, you distant nations;  
Before I was born the Lord called me;  
from my birth he has made  
mention of my name...

But it was never my intention to become a Dominican. I did not like the sound of the word “Dominicos” in Spanish, and the white habit

gave the impression of distance. To my humble origins the brown color of the Capuchins, their beard, their sandals, their homely demeanor seemed much more appropriate.

My father had entered the Capuchins, but he was compelled to leave their seminary to heal from a festering wound. We loved listening to his stories about brother Primitivo who dressed his wound, or Father Antonio who carried him on his shoulders when he could not walk.

But the Capuchins would recede into the realm of dreams, like my grandfather's old donkey.

After finishing Minor Seminary studies, Alfonso entered the Novitiate and then proceeded to College Seminary (what we call the study of Philosophy). I continued in the Minor Seminary. I was fifteen by then.

One day, Father Tomás Pinto, a venerable missionary from Vietnam who was very good friends with my brother, called on me to deliver the sad news that Alfonso had abandoned his vocation and returned home. This was a shock!

My reaction came immediately. Next day I would pack and go home too. The old priest looked at me from his towering two meters and just said this: "Angel, be a man. Your brother is not you. Make your own choice." These few words restored me to my senses.

My brother was intelligent, handsome, the friend of all the priests. He would soon find a girlfriend. He does not need me. Why should I always depend on him?

It was not easy, especially when our mentors would remind me of the abandonment of my brother. Would I also desert the seminary? But at least there was old Fr. Tomas Pinto. He understood. He cared. He was like Platero, willing to carry me on his shoulders.

## **UST and Jerusalem**

It is now 50 years since I first left home at 11. My parents are still alive, blessed be God. I feel a knot in my throat at the moment of saying goodbye on my way back to the Philippines: my father, whom I never saw crying when I was small, now will quietly sob; my mother, the silent type, only asks me one question, "Son, when are you coming back?" It is hard, I guess, for a mother to let her children leave one after another.

My brothers and sisters visit them frequently. I do not feel guilty, though. They have been amply rewarded by God and, at present, I am grateful to the Dominican Order and to the community of Sto. Tomas for allowing me a yearly visit.

But there was a time when things were a little harder. Upon my arrival in UST almost everything seemed to be the opposite of what I had expected.

I don't need to enter into details here. Suffice it to say that I seriously thought of abandoning the place. Had I had enough money to buy a plane ticket, I would have vanished from this accursed place. Even what I most appreciate in life, that is, my priesthood, was in danger.

Was this what I had prepared for?

As a seminarian, I had experienced to the full the Vatican II Council, when a current of fresh air seemed to change old patterns in seminaries and in the church.

Those were also the last days of Franco's dictatorship in Spain. We young people dreamt of a new social order and were eager to assume responsibilities in the new country we would build.

After my ordination as a priest, I was given the opportunity for further studies in Rome, Jerusalem and Oxford. This endowed me with a very liberal attitude, a kind of cosmopolitanism! But most of all, I was young and full of illusions.

Upon my arrival at UST I did not like the walls that surround the campus; I was not prepared for living in a community that resembled the Sanhedrin. The conflicts arising from the Filipinization of UST, as they called it at the time, had a deep effect on me.

Was I to endure all this?

Thirty years later, I still remember it vividly. It was June 6, 1979, at night. My former classmates, Fr. Mario Javares and Fr. Paulino Gonzalez, picked me up at the Manila Airport. As we reached Luneta, Fr. Javares pointed to the horizon and showed me the blue cross of UST floating in the distance. I was delighted to finally reach my destination after a long trip and a longer wait of eight years. That cross, though, would loom large all throughout those years. But its meaning would only be disclosed to me slowly.

In 1995, fifteen years after my arrival, I got a scholarship from my old school in Jerusalem, the Ecole Biblique et Archeologique Francaise. I spent four most beautiful and productive months in the Holy Land.

Almost everyday after lunch, I would wander through the streets of Jerusalem, and most times I would end at the Church of Holy Sepulcher to say a prayer or to watch the pilgrims coming from the whole world to worship at the place of Jesus' death and resurrection.

As Fr. J. Murphy O'Connor said:

One expects the central shrine of Christendom to stand out in majestic isolation, but there everything is mixed up. One comes to pray for numinous light, but darkness waits for him there. One hopes for peace, but the ear is assailed by a cacophony of worrying chants. One desires holiness, only to encounter a jealous possessiveness: six different groups of occupants (Latin Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, Ethiopians) watch one another suspiciously for any infringement of rights. The frailty of humanity is nowhere more apparent than there; it epitomizes the human condition. The empty who comes to be filled, will leave desolate; those who permit the church to question them, may begin to understand why hundreds of thousands thought it worthwhile to risk death or slavery in order to pray there.

One day while sitting there looking at the place on which Jesus had been executed I could not stop my tears. I don't cry easily, not even when I say goodbye to my parents. That day, as I came out of the Holy Sepulcher Church, I felt relieved of so much anger and frustration which had clung to my heart through many years of struggles, silences and humiliations in UST. While watching the bare rock of Calvary I could not believe that the man Jesus of Nazareth agonizing there was the Son of God. Like Paul of Tarsus I wanted to cling to my old insecurities and convictions and knowledge, and fears.

One wonders why it takes us so long to see light. One wonders how the young and brilliant student of Holy Scriptures, Paul of Tarsus, was unable to discern the true meaning of Holy Scriptures.

Until he was touched on the way to Damascus.

He called it grace, pure grace, only grace.

And that is what grace is all about, a gentle touch, a momentary vision, a lasting state of friendship with the divine.

### **“Burnt Norton”**

“Burnt Norton” is the first poem in T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets.

The poem’s title refers to a manor house Eliot visited. The manor’s garden served as an important image within the poem. It contains five stanzas. And it begins thus:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation ...

Last May 25, while in Spain, I received an invitation to a gathering of classmates in Avila.

Avila is far from my place and it was not particularly exciting to attend a sort of nostalgic reunion with people I had last heard of forty years ago. I didn’t know what they were, and they didn’t know where or what I had become. There was so little we had in common!

But my mother gently convinced me. Then my brother Alfonso facilitated things by making his car available for me to drive there. There were no more excuses to keep me from joining the reunion.

Needless to say, we hardly recognized each other: Tomas, Felipe, Paco, Juan... up to 30 or so, plus their respective wives. It was a kind of discovery through guess work, until images started to fit in my mind ...

Isaac Arroyo had replaced me in my job as conductor of the semi-annual choir. Here he was with his wife, telling me the sad story of their adopted daughter... But in spite of everything, they are happy, satisfied. Life has been good to them. Blessed be God!

Juan and his lovely wife Tita. Juan was one of the best persons I had ever met. Now he could not speak. He has been operated on for a tumor in his throat. But still he is that marvelous kid I used to know.

Paco and sweet Dory. I had introduced them in Oxford. They have two daughters now.

Tirso never had a vocation. He had entered the seminary through his mother's urgent desires. Now he is a successful broker. He still feels some bitterness toward priests.

Terron, Jose Luis, who was cute and had never seen snow in his life, since he came from the warm south Spain... Those of us who came from the north could not understand how anybody could feel surprised at this phenomenon. Nothing of his innocence seems to be left.

Why is it that out of forty classmates at the Novitiate, only eight of us made it to the priesthood? Were they, thirty of them, naughtier or less capable? Not necessarily. Were we holier and less adventurous? Not necessarily. Perhaps one, two, half a dozen from the whole batch were not meant for the priesthood and were in the seminary only by accident or due to different circumstances. But what about the rest?

This is still a dilemma for me. I find some points of references in the Bible. But I have no time to pursue them here. I leave them for another occasion.

On my way back home, alone, I was driving fast, very fast. The road was smooth. The day had been more than what I expected. I was glad to have joined the group.

Through the back mirror, I could see thick clouds of an incoming storm. I was not flying away from the past. I just wanted to share with my parents the joy of encountering these old friends of mine. I just wanted to thank my mother and my brother for being the instruments of a beautiful experience.

Back home I reflected on these verses of T.S. Eliot:

Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to an end, which is always present.  
Time and the bell have buried the day.  
The black cloud carried the sun away.

Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis  
stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray clutch and cling?

### **The Home of a Friar**

My parents' home, the place where I was born, is now a beautiful place. When I am there all memories are good. Everybody tries to make my sojourn a happy and memorable one. All my brothers, nine of them, will visit with their families.

Our little school is now closed for lack of children. Manuel, the only boy, goes to the next village. Again, I remember that:

... Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus in your mind.  
(T.S. Eliot)

The little donkeys and horses, and cows and oxen have been replaced by tractors and harvesters. Fields that before needed 100 farmers are now cultivated by half a dozen.

On Sundays, our big church is filled with just 50 old people.

Here, in the Philippines, in UST, people usually ask questions like: How long have you been here? When will you return to Spain? Do you love the Philippines? Don't you miss your loved ones?

A missionary does not have a choice, or a home. But he is totally free and he feels at home wherever he is at the moment.

This is how these questions would be answered by my favorite saint:

When shall I leave this place?  
It seems to me that it may just as well  
Be now or later, for two thousand years  
Are no more than thirty in God's sight – or than a single day.  
(St. Therese of Lisieux)

But you must not think – my dear friends – that this little friar wishes to leave UST. He never asked for a time. What matters, is being done day after day in the service of God and neighbor.

What I value most now is to do God’s will and my heart rejoices in whatever good comes on my account, for I know and now understand that God needs no one. – me, less than anybody else –to do good on earth, the Philippines or Spain.

And to end these reflections on a melancholic note, let me read the last verses from *Platero y Yo*. Platero is dead, and has been buried. The poet is at the tomb with some children who had grown to love the old donkey.

“Platero, my friend!” I said to the earth.

“If you are now in a field in heaven, as I think you are, carrying youthful angels on you soft, furry back, I wonder if perhaps you have forgotten me. Tell me, Platero, do you still remember me?”

As if an answer to my question. A delicate white butterfly which I had not seen before flew insistently from iris to iris like a soul.