

# Waiting and Wonder

A number of unrelated circumstances in my recent life forced me to experience and to reflect upon the phenomenon of waiting. It was during this period that I came upon a statement made by Pope John Paul II in a general audience in July 2000. "For a stalk to grow or a flower to open," the Holy Father said, "there must be time that cannot be forced. Nine months must go by for the birth of a human child. To write a book or com-



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pose music often years must be dedicated to patient research."

Waiting is something that does not come easily to us in our world of rapid movement and intensive accomplishment. Yet it is one of the richest experiences in our treasure trove of human happenings. For while waiting, our atten-

tion is mysteriously drawn intensely into the future, and at the same time we find ourselves riveted to the present.

The rapidly approaching holidays are a perfect example of the two-sided essence of waiting. In celebrating the holidays, we prepare and plan. We don't just throw things together at the last minute;

we do everything carefully, from preparing the food for the dinner to the selection of the guests we invite. We look forward to the event, but at the same time we pay attention to the details required in the present.

Or we await the arrival of a friend. We anticipate his visit and enjoy already the moments we shall have when he arrives.

Our society, I fear, has lost its sense of the importance of waiting. One reason is that, on the whole, we have lost the sense of waiting for heaven, for the day when we shall meet God face to face. Were we more aware of the vision at the end of our journey on earth, we would have a more constant sense of the beauty and the richness of the elements of that journey that we experience here and now. Our lives cease to be mystical when we allow ourselves to feel that the positive and negative experiences we have in this life are an end unto themselves. The joys seem empty and fleeting. The sorrows seem enduring and endless.

It is only when we remember that we are on a journey to heaven that we can put the joys and sorrows of our daily experience into a proper perspective. Waiting, whatever the reason for it might be, becomes a good thing when we recall that what we are really waiting for is God and that he has made us so that we can experience something of the final joy here and now. "God's passage is mysterious,

and requires pure eyes to be discovered, and ears disposed to listening," Pope John Paul reflected in that same audience. The more we anticipate perfection, the more we are enabled to see it. The more we listen to God, the more our ears become attuned to a deeper voice.

Waiting, the Holy Father pointed out, goes hand in hand with wonder. In wonder, we struggle less in trying to figure things out and instead appreciate the unfolding of it all. The word "amazement" suggests being in a maze. Either we become frustrated or we enjoy our progress and grow in appreciation of the twists and turns of the journey. The maze becomes less frightening and far less frustrating when we sense what is really going on, and certainly when we know that what is happening is part of a higher order.

Living in anticipation and wonder, we experience the great joy for which our souls were intended. St. Thomas Aquinas expressed it well while kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament. "O Hidden Godhead, humbly I adore Thee. Who truly art beneath the forms before me. To Thee my heart I bow on bended knee. As failing quite in contemplating Thee."

It is in waiting and in wonder that we transcend what we do not know with our minds and senses and find instead that the knowledge of the soul is greater, indeed.

# Peaks and Valleys

Just received an e-mail from a food company promising to give me tips on "Entertaining With Ease." Of course, once the very idea of comes up, the first thing you think of is difficulty. Why would the company bother to help me to entertain with ease unless the first thing that the "entertain" conjured up in my head was "difficulty"?

Entertaining is fun, but it also happens to be a lot of work. Come to think of it, it's like so many things in life: it has two sides to it. That's kind of ironic, since the word "entertain" comes from words meaning "to hold mutually." It takes two to tango, they say, and at least two to entertain. In entertaining, the fun and the work go hand in hand. Entertaining with ease implies that entertaining is diffi-



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much of life is like that, having two sides. In my new book just out from Illumination Books, "Elisha's Jars: Enjoying Abundance and Prosperity When Life Seems Limited," I comment on the fact that so much of life is about ebb and flow. Last week, I had a terrible cold, and now I am in good health again. I know

people who have gone from true financial hardship to a much healthier portfolio. Life seems to be about moving from one opposite to another.

It's good to know that, especially when we are in the valley stage of things. Then, it seems as though we are stuck, as though we will never find our way up again. We try so many things, and nothing seems to work. We become discouraged.

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but life is truly more than they.  
Made in God's image and likeness,  
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the flow, destined for more.**

The fact is: life takes us up sometimes and down sometimes. We need to learn how to handle ebb and flow.

The way to handle ebb and flow is to rise above them and to turn our attention to God. This means more than desperately asking God to help us out of a valley. It means learning to forget what we think we see and instead focusing our whole being on him. It is as Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides" (Matthew 6:33). He knew how to prac-

tice what he preached: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

To many, this is unthinkable. Yet there is no other truly effective way. To avoid seeing ourselves as being battered back and forth between life's extremes, we need to "go higher" and turn our focus to God. We Catholics are fortunate to have the sacraments to help us. How many times has a good confession or an hour before the Blessed Sacrament helped us through a dark valley? How often has the grace of ordination or of matrimony helped someone through a desperate hour? Or the anointing of the sick helped lift the mind and heart during a time of illness? In addition, there are the graces of daily private prayer, a retreat or talking things over with a spiritual director. God has given us many ways of rising above the peaks and the valleys.

Should we be depressed about the peaks and valleys in life? No, because they can bring us closer to God. The ups and downs are part of life, but life is truly more than they. Made in God's image and likeness, we are greater than the ebb and the flow, destined for more. The poet Thomas Moore had it right: "Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish; Earth has no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal."

Father Paul Keenan's newest book, "Elisha's Jars: Enjoying Abundance and Prosperity When Life Seems Limited" is published by Illumination Books.

# Lessons From Heroes

Every so often, I find myself amazed by the news stories and newspaper articles I am led to read over a certain period of time. For me, it's one of those clear examples of God's guidance. It's like the angels are standing over me saying, "Read this! Read this!" Who am I to refuse?

More and more lately, I find myself reading about older priests, women religious and laypeople who maintain a vibrant Catholic faith into their advanced years, even into the second century of their lives. I read about a man over 100 who walked to Mass every day, and found that it helped him to cope with the death of his wife. Then there was the 100-year-old Benedictine priest who



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credited his Catholicism with giving him a positive outlook to sustain him through the difficult times. Then there was the nun who at around 100 years of age retired from the school where she

had been such an influence upon people's lives for so many decades. She was a disciplinarian, they say, but her former students worked to get their children into her classes because she was loving and fair.

As I read these stories, my mind went back across the miles to Kansas, where my beloved teachers, Sisters Raymond and Rita live. They are nowhere near the age of the subjects of those stories, but they have exerted such a powerful influence on me and on those whose lives they have touched and continue to touch. We share e-mails and snail mails back and forth fairly regularly, and their letters are a joy to receive.

When I contemplate the lives of all of these remarkable people, the quotation from Scripture that, for me, weaves all of their lives together is the plea of the disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray." Each of the persons mentioned above has a life story different from that of the others. But I am willing to wager that the single greatest influence each of them has had upon the lives of those they served is that they taught them how to pray, either directly or through their example. What we love about those dedicated men and women is that, almost as if by osmosis, they draw us closer

to God. You might say they are professionals in that field: they have been doing it forever.

In my book, "Good News for Bad Days," I speak about the soul being like a magnet, drawing the things to us that we need for our journey in life. The metaphor is appropriate for the men and women of my reading—and so many others like them, clergy, religious and laypeople—who by virtue of their character draw us, magnet-like, into the heart of God. It is a joy to read about them and to be around them because they remind us of who we are and why we are here. We are children of God, made in his image and likeness, and we are here to share the joy of that with others in various ways. These living saints remind us of that. Though they are as corporeal as you and I, what draws us to them is their spirit—the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of joy, the spirit of Christ. Truly, it is the presence of the Holy Spirit, in the words of the ancient prayer, filling the hearts of the faithful and enkindling them in the fire of his love.

Faithful. That's the word for them. Without knowing a great deal about their stories, we know that they have been tested in the crucible of life and remained faithful. These living heroes of our faith are perfect examples of the value of openness to God and others over time. In an age where the merit of faithfulness is constantly questioned, they teach us that faithfulness to God and to one's calling is a beautiful treasure.

# Are We Helpless?

One of the questions I am asked most frequently these days is, "Is there anything we can do in the face of all of the wars and international turmoil we see all around us?" It's a question that arises out of fear and a sense of helplessness. So much is going on that seems to be out of our control, and we worry.

One of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity is that, with God, nothing is truly out of control. The



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replete with instances of this truth. The angel Gabriel told Mary, "Nothing is impossible with God." Jesus told his followers, "Believe that you shall receive and the rest shall be done unto you." St. Paul proclaimed, "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." St. John reminded, "Perfect love drives out fear." Over and over again in teaching and story we read that nothing is impossible or out of control.

Why, then, is there so much evidence to the con-

trary? A partial answer is that in the face of terrifying events in our personal and global lives, we tend to retreat to a sense of helplessness. We see the world as a hostile, scary place in which we have to exercise constant vigilance lest we be mowed down and destroyed. A lot of it has to do with the helplessness we often felt as children, when we didn't have a lot of control over the things that happened to us. Some reacted by cowering in fear and hoping for the best; others reacted by exercising control over people and situations. Neither one of those things worked very well, and eventually we began to believe that helplessness was an essential part of life. Either we found that we couldn't control anything or, alternately, that we couldn't control everything. Life became a mess.

I am always so impressed in the Gospels at Jesus' ability to help people whose lives were a mess: the lepers, the possessed, the crippled and the blind. Often he took them off by himself, away from negative people and influences that kept them in their present state. Always, he lifted away that which was controlling them and put them in touch with the only "control" that works—the care of the soul. He made them go within and blessed them there and healed them on the outside as well. People whose lives were a mess were given a second chance and a

whole new understanding of how to live from the soul outward.

Someone recently asked me about a passage in which Jesus said that he used parables so that people would not understand. In essence, Jesus was saying that if we want to believe that life is a mess and that's that, then the parables will be nice little stories that entertain us. However, if we are open to life being something more, the parables will, after reflection and meditation, teach us how to access that "something more." It's the same with our lives—how we deal with our difficult experiences depends upon how open we are to life being more than those negative moments. Jesus spoke about abundance, and peace, justice and goodness as the very stuff of life. The more we can catch on to that view of life, the better able we'll be to turn our lives and our world around. That's his message.

So can we do anything about this mess the world is in today? If we go on seeing our lives and our world as a mess and ourselves as helpless, guess what we'll get more of? If we want to understand the real power we have in the world, we must open our hearts, our minds and our souls to the goodness that Jesus proclaimed life to be. Believe it and watch it spread across your own life and touch the world as well.



# The Gift of Acceptance

I have just returned from Cabrini Hospice where the mother of some friends of mine is dying of cancer and will probably have died by the time you read this. She is heavily sedated to keep her from feeling pain and she is just sleeping now. What struck me so profoundly was the deep sense of inner peace that radiates from her. It is the peace that comes from the soul of someone who has accepted her life and who is accepting her death as well.



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Four score years of practicing her faith has a great deal to do with that. The more I think about it, acceptance is perhaps the most important of the virtues, and the least recognized as such. I sometimes think it is even more important than love. I have known people who obviously loved each other very much but whose love was thwarted by their inability to accept themselves and each other. It is acceptance that gives love wings.

Acceptance often means being approved of by a

group, but that's not what I mean here. By acceptance I mean the gift of being able to allow life to unfold with serenity and gratitude. Acceptance can occur even when things are not going well. Here the serenity is one of knowing with St. Paul that "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." It is being able to say, "*Fiat voluntas tua*: Thy will be done."

"Acceptance," as Paul Tournier points out in "The Meaning of Persons," "is not the same as resignation." It is the same as embracing. My friends' dying mother has such inner peace, not because she is resigned to her death, but because she embraces it as a part of her life, just as she embraced her two sons when she was able.

Neither does acceptance mean putting up with what is evil. We do not have to accept people's unacceptable behavior, and should not. We may not choose to respond in kind, but we need not put up with it. Acceptance means correcting what is unacceptable insofar as we can. It means accepting responsibility.

Gratitude is the first cousin of acceptance. We can easily be grateful when things are going well, but can we be grateful when they are not? Can we accept our misfortune and let it teach us where to go next and what to do?

Acceptance is a product of faith. It is also a result of hope or trust. It means opening to the higher purpose in what is happening in our lives, even when we do not know for certain what that purpose is. As a child I had a picture of a young boy steering a boat in a raging storm. Behind him stood Jesus, his one hand on the boy's shoulder and the other on the wheel.

Sometimes acceptance comes after a struggle. We feel certain that we cannot accept ourselves or what is happening in our lives. We struggle to be grateful. It is then that we learn that an attitude of acceptance is both given to us by God and received by us. It is a grace that God shares with us. You might even say that we accept acceptance. All we can do on our own, perhaps, is to desire acceptance. Yet that step alone may be quite enough.

In the final analysis, acceptance means learning to discern the ways of God. Sometimes his ways are our ways and sometimes they are not. But his way is always for the best. We do not see ourselves as he sees us; life is a constant opening of our eyes to the divine perspective and being surprised by the beauty God sees in us. When we are accepting in the deepest sense of the word, we are moving ourselves lock, stock and barrel into our relationship with God.

## Revisiting a Friend and Mentor

The Internet is an amazing phenomenon. I am always in awe over how quickly you can get information and how much information you can get. I was astounded not so long ago, while browsing in an online bookstore, to find available a secondhand copy of a wonderful book I once owned when I was in college. It was written by a friend of mine, Dr. Robert Kreyche, who at the time taught philosophy at Rockhurst College



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Bob Kreyche was one of those truly wise scholars who managed to keep two feet on the ground even as he explored the lofty heights of the world of ideas. He was a real believer in what used to be called Catholic Action. A dedicated family man

and a committed Catholic layman, he was convinced that wisdom was a practical thing, after all, not merely something to be expressed in a theory. That's why he wrote the book that I found on the Internet, "God and Contemporary Man" (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965).

The premise of the book is that our society (back then and certainly now) needs Christian philosophers who realize that philosophy has a social role. "What the philosopher must do," Bob wrote, "is to make his wisdom relevant to the culture and society in which he lives." He was writing in the early-to-mid-'60s, before the word "relevant" became a buzzword. By "relevant" he meant that philosophy should be more than the history of philosophy, but that it should really address the questions in the hearts of our contemporaries. To him, the best kind of education is one that teaches the student to distinguish between what is true and what is false. So besides contemporaneity, a philosopher needs to have a good sense of what is universal. "Action without thought," he wrote, "is meaningless, and thought without action is stagnant." He had no use for what he called the "tabloid thinking" of his day. It was his deepest desire to teach his students to be, as he put it, "purged of the overweening influence of sophistry."

Bob Kreyche was a true philosopher, someone who mulled over the values of his day and fearlessly exposed whatever was false in them. As I read his book today, I am amazed by how contemporary it is—its title is absolutely right. Although he is dead some 30 years now, his words and his wisdom are as applicable today as they were then. His lesson is that reflection is a gift from God, given to us both to protect ourselves from falsity and to enjoy, appreciate and share what is true.

Bob wrote back then about the triumph of secularism, and he had definite ideas about why it had triumphed. He put the blame squarely on the shoulders of Christians who have "failed to show the relevancy of their traditions to the problems of contemporary life, to the problems of art, culture, the things of the intellect and deeper aspirations of the human soul." It's that superficiality again, that refusal to see into the heart and soul of things. He would often return to that theme. "Train your senses to love the beauty of truth and goodness, not the shoddy and the sham," was his forever cry.

It has been such a joy for me to turn back to the wisdom of my mentor and friend. Thankfully, it is more than just a nostalgic trip back in time. Thank you, Dr. Robert Kreyche, for your wisdom, your friendship and for your unflinching drive to teach and to make us think.

# Sunsets Into Sunrise

**I**t often happens," Blessed Pope John XXIII is reported to have said, "that I wake up at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the pope."

It's comforting to know, isn't it, that even popes have lapses of memory. Many of us can relate very well to Pope John's experience. It seems, these



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days, there are so many things to remember that sometimes pulling them out when we need them is difficult.

The Holy Father's comment brings to mind a type of forgetfulness that all of us experience, a more profound forgetfulness than forgetting this or that appointment or this or that fact. Like the pope's

forgetfulness, ours also involves forgetting who we are. Because often, we forget that we are children of God.

There's a lot to be said for independence, of

course. We get annoyed when we meet people who slothfully live off others or who constantly borrow from others, and rightly so. There is much to be said for being self-sustaining and self-supporting. We can and ought to help others; and we should not hesitate to ask the help of others when we need it. But most of us like the sort of person, and like to be the sort of person, who stands on his or her own two feet.

Because of that, we often apply the same standard when it comes to our relationship with God. Because we are responsible people, we think we have to do everything on our own. But the thing is, we are not meant to go it alone. In fact, God has created us in such a way that the independence we so cherish can only thrive when we allow ourselves to be dependent upon him. Since he created us, and since he is Life Itself, our dependence upon him is simply a truthful manifestation of who we are.

We are very good at making excuses for not calling upon him, for not living as people made in his image and likeness. He's so busy dealing with wars and famines and epidemics that it seems a shame to bother him with our problems, right? Or we're not speaking to God because he let a tragedy befall us that, in our humble opinion, he could have pre-

vented. Or it's been a while and we haven't been so good and if we approach him, he's going to yell at us or worse. And so we soldier along, dragging under the weight of our burdens, hoping for a bit of luck or a great idea or, in the worst-case scenario, wishing for death.

It's all so needless, really. The truth about God, pure and simple, is best expressed in the words of Jesus from 2,000 years ago, "Come to me, all you who labor and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Matthew 11: 28-30). We are invited to turn to him, invited to remember who we are.

St. Clement of Alexandria said it another way: "He has turned all our sunsets into sunrise." When our lives mirror the darkness of night, we can turn to the one who understands darkness and light. He may chide us if we need it, but he will not destroy us in a temperamental fit of rage. He understands darkness. He understands us. He understands.

If we forget anything or everything else as we go through life, there is one thing we can always remember. We are made in God's image and likeness. We are his family. We are never alone.

## Teddy's Legacy

When my 25-year-old cat, Teddy, passed away in April, it gave me the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of life, and how love can help people and animals to live well even under difficult conditions. Teddy died in his sleep, and without pain, one thing for which I felt very grateful as I tried to come to terms with the loss of my friend who had come into my life 18 years before.



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had given me Teddy (and Flicka, who passed away in 2000, also at the age of 25) to help them reduce their cat population from four to two. I had never had cats, and wanted to, and, it seemed, the price

The fact that Teddy lived so long, and that I had the opportunity to accompany him through the various stages of his life, is a testimony to the power of God and to the power of love. Teddy was very sick his entire life. One of my mottos derived from my long tenure as a cat-parent is "there's no such thing as a free cat." Some friends

was right.

Little did I know that, within a month, I'd be rushing Teddy off to the animal hospital for emergency surgery on his large intestine! The bill, of course, was staggering. No sooner had he recovered from that than another vet diagnosed him with a chronic immune system deficiency, which left him with bouts of flu-like illness at fairly regular intervals. Over the years, I learned how to care for Teddy at home, how to let him sleep when he needed to, how to feed him when he had lost interest in food.

Throughout these episodes, I credit the power of prayer. Many times I would hold Teddy in my arms, all the while praying for him and letting him feel whatever I could mirror of the Father's gentle love. Every time, it brought him around. Over time, his health improved, and the bouts of illness were much less frequent and easier to deal with. It was the power of prayer and the power of God's love that made all the difference. In return, I was the recipient of a million lovely visits, when Teddy would snuggle up into my lap and fall asleep. I learned that love can travel in two directions at the same time.

Looking for life lessons in my long relationship with Teddy is a fairly easy task. Here are a few. Love can conquer the distance between the human

world and the animal world. Love bridges gaps. When we feel limited in our ability to love, or feel separated or misunderstood or far away from loved ones, we can know that a simple sending forth of a loving thought or prayer can bridge even the widest of gaps. And at some level, whether we think so or not, an impulse of love comes back in return. Jesus taught us that—he called it the hundredfold. Living a happy and meaningful life does not require always being in the best of health or other outer circumstances. Indeed, adverse circumstances can soften our hearts and bring into our lives those people who are really true friends. They often create our dearest and most cherished memories.

And best of all, God's healing and protecting love is always there, whether times are good or bad, whether we feel well or feel poorly, whether we are financially secure or shaky. If we refuse to let our adversities harden us, we can let them open us to new wisdom, new understanding and an abundance of love.

I am grateful to Teddy and to all of the animals I have known over the years who have helped me to understand the meaning of life and of God's powerful love. They have been marvelous ambassadors and communicators of that which is most real and precious in life.



# God at Play

There is a theory that says that spring won't come if I don't give it a little push, so I decided to do some spring cleaning at the office the other day. Tucked back in a drawer and long forgotten, there lay a card from a friend, containing a photograph of the two of us and another friend taken after one of my radio shows.

I set the photograph aside, intending to put it into the scrapbook that for years I have been going

to get around to making, and went about my business. About an hour later, the phone rang, and on the other end, there was my friend calling to invite me to a concert she was going to be giving. What a coincidence!

Yes, we call these things coincidences, but are they really? Or is it more along the lines of the thinking of the novelist Emma Bull, who wrote, "Coincidence is the word we use when we can't see the levers and pulleys"? It seems to me that if our supernatural life means anything at all, it means an entry into a way of being and of thinking that is different from the

natural, though complementary of it.

We don't know the cause of everything, and perhaps we never will and never will need to, but what we do know and can know through the eyes of faith is that God is much more present to us than we generally give him credit for. And he is much more active in our lives than we often care to admit.

Oh, yes, we'll bring God in when there is a natural disaster or when a horrifying crime is reported in the newspapers. "Where was God when that was going on?" we ask. "Why didn't God do something to prevent it?" Having faith does not deprive us of the right to grieve and certainly not of the right to question. What it does deprive us of is the necessity of having to have all of the answers.

It seems odd to say that faith saves us from having to have all the answers, but it's true. Faith means that we continue to believe that God is working in our lives in unseen ways, even though those ways are, indeed, unseen. We don't get to have the world all figured out. Feeling puzzled by the challenges of life? There's a line forming to the right, and it's a long one.

I'm not talking here about "blind faith." The faith I

am talking about is far from blind. It is faith that is sighted. What it sees is different from what the natural eyes see. Learning to see it may take some time, some struggle, and a lot of wondering. But wondering is a positive, not a negative thing. It is when we wonder that we come alive. Our minds and hearts awaken and become open to new experiences and ideas. We consciously connect with our soul.

When we are feeling discouraged, or ill or alone, the eyes of faith enable us to see the events in our lives that are postcards of God's love. Are they coincidences? Are they a spot of good luck? No, they are deliberate intentions of God to show us his love.

I remember a wonderful book by Phyllis McGinley called "Saint Watching." Wouldn't it be nice if, along with "saint watching," we could develop an ability for "God watching"? There are so many opportunities.

Those beautiful sunrises and sunsets, that word of encouragement from a friend, that lifting of a burden that we didn't know how we could live with, the unexpected act of kindness—they are part of what Gerard Manley Hopkins meant when he said, "Christ plays in 10,000 places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his."

So the next time a "coincidence" happens, remember—it may be God at play.



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of being and of thinking that is different from the

# Treading Lightly

'Angels can fly," wrote Chesterton, "because they can take themselves lightly." It's good to be reminded of that. More often than not, we human beings tend to find ourselves feeling heavy and gloomy.

I like to think that there are two dimensions to the soul. The soul, the inward spirit in us where God dwells, lifts us upward. By virtue of the soul, we know grace, the life of God in us.



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Through it we know Truth and Beauty and Love and Goodness—the eternal absolutes by which we find our true happiness and joy. Yet there is another dimension of the soul by which it propels us toward the earth, toward the realities of daily life. We go away to refresh ourselves through music or poetry or athletics or some other form of leisure, but then we return to the tasks at hand and to the responsibilities of life. That's good, because we have a mission here on earth, and the fulfillment of that mission is the reason we

are here.

The trouble comes when we become so entrenched in our everyday world that we begin to think that it is all there is. We allow ourselves to become so burdened that we forget the higher dimension of ourselves. Through all of this the soul never ceases to call us back, but often we fail to hear or to heed the call. Like the Prodigal Son, we lapse into forgetfulness of who we truly are, and when that happens we begin to believe that there is no way out for us.

But there is a way. As St. Augustine said, "I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are wise and very beautiful; but I have never read in either of them: Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden." Reading the gospels and their accounts of the life of Jesus, I am struck by his passion for healing people from seemingly hopeless conditions. The blind, the lame, lepers, those who were social outcasts in one way or other—all of them came to him and found in him a home and an answer.

Just the thought of that can console us. That invitation, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden" touches our souls and heals them as truly as it healed 2,000 years ago. All who find themselves downcast, worried, shaken or distressed in any way can find in those words

a call to comfort.

It may mean, at the same time, a call to reform. Just as Jesus told his hearers, "Go your way and sin no more," so when he lifts our burdens he asks that we not repeat the patterns of thought and action that got us into trouble in the first place. It is sometimes more comfortable for us to return to familiar habits, but to do so is to invite the old unhappiness to return.

The Lord wants us to feel comforted by the knowledge of his love. That's the crux of Chesterton's comment about angels. Angels are messengers of God. They manifest themselves in the words, thoughts and feelings that draw us back to God. Angels definitely have a sense of humor. Sometimes the ways in which they draw us upward are truly imaginative. We'll pass a billboard that contains a message for us. A song will play on the radio that reminds us of God's love. I once received an e-mail from someone who, after praying in desperation in her city's cathedral, went to a bookstore and discovered just the book she needed. It happens all the time, really. All we need to do is notice.

Thanks to the goodness of God we can, in the end, tread lightly in this very serious world of ours. Like the angels, we can take ourselves lightly as we make our way to God.

# The Paradox of Fear

Shakespeare was a master at seeing paradoxes. I seem to recall one of my high school literature teachers remarking that you can quote Shakespeare to support either side of almost any subject. I don't know if that's true, but if it is, it's not because he was duplicitous or superficial, but because he was brilliant enough to recognize paradox—that two statements that appear to oppose each other may each proclaim a valid truth.



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*Spiritual Matters*

Recently, I read some lines from *Troilus and Cressida*, in which the two main characters discuss fear (Act 3, Scene 2). Troilus remarks, "Fear makes devils of cherubims, they never see truly." To which Cressida replies, "To fear the worst often cures the worst."

Forty years ago, those lines would have washed right over me. Today, they make me stop and think. We live in an age in which our minds and hearts are permeated with fears of every sort. In two lines, Shakespeare has given us, from the van-

tage point of 400 years ago, a great deal to think about.

Troilus is right: fear makes devils of cherubims. Cherubims are messengers of God. How many times do we allow our fears to get in the way of God's guidance and comfort? We'd love to tell the truth, but we might offend someone. We'd like to express affection, but we might be rejected. We'd really like to go for that job opportunity, but what if we failed? We know we should see the doctor, but he might find something awful.

Fear is so powerful because it takes our best ideas and turns them against us. We lose a little of the best in us. Which is why Jesus' constant challenge through the ages is "Be not afraid." And why the Holy Spirit is called "The Comforter."

Yet paradoxically, Cressida is right, too: to fear the worst often cures the worst. Her words are very wise, because they teach us how to use fear to our advantage. It's when we're afraid and know we're afraid that we can find those stronger inner voices, those cherubim, which enable us to see things aright. Sometimes our fears are telling us something we need to hear. At other times they distort our perception of reality. By acknowledging fear rather than hiding it, we either allow it to run its gambit and dissolve into nothingness or we allow it to keep us from making choices that

would harm us.

Fear, then, is paradoxical. It is bad for us and it is good for us as well. What to do? Long before Shakespeare, St. Augustine spoke of two kinds of fear, which he called servile fear and chaste fear. "The first," he wrote, "fears that it may suffer punishment; the other fears that it may lose justice. The chaste fear endures forever. Love does not destroy it or drive it out of us, but rather embraces it and holds on to it as its companion. We come to the Lord in order to see him face to face. Then a chaste fear preserves us" (Sermon on John 43, 7).

There are our two kinds of fear—the fear that turns cherubs into demons and the fear that "cures the worst." The second fear, the chaste fear, is rooted in love, God's love for us. When we fear just because we think we are going to lose something, we haven't gone far enough. When we fear because we want to remain rooted in God, we have, like the servant in Jesus' description, done what is required of us.

Augustine takes us farther yet. In one of his commentaries on the psalms, he advises, "Request the gift of God himself." Therein lies the resolution of the paradox of fear. Requesting God, we can be deprived of nothing. Our cherubim remain guardian angels. And we have God as our strength and companion.

# The Gift of Anticipation

**I**t's January, and even though this is a month given to looking ahead, I would like to take a moment first to look back. Specifically, to look back to the season of Advent and to spend some time reflecting on what struck me most forcibly during the time of preparation for Christmas.

More than during any previous Advent, I was struck by the wisdom and importance of Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday given to rejoicing. I have come to believe that this special Sunday holds the key that enables us to do wisely the looking ahead that we tend to do during this first month of the calendar year.



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about it, but when we are looking forward to something, we already possess within ourselves the joy of its presence. I remember my college days when I couldn't wait until graduation and my seminary days when I couldn't wait to be

ordained and to live the life of a priest. Looking ahead to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Church teaches us, we already experience something of the joy of his birth. Having goals enables us to live our dream in the present, and when we can do that, we rejoice.

Lately, I've taken to noticing people who have aged gracefully. I have noticed that they are people who always have something to look forward to. Even when he was in the worst of health, Pope John Paul II always had his next trip on his calendar. I'm sure the anticipation of the journey helped him through his days of great suffering. Looking back on my experience of the meaning of Gaudete Sunday, I understand the wisdom of honoring what we might call the gift of anticipation.

So now, back we come to the new month and the new year. The "holidays" are over and we can now get down in earnest to looking ahead to what we want this new year to bring. I venture to say that the vast majority of us are looking for peace in the world and in our own personal lives. Some will hope for better health, a better job, closer friends and expanded opportunities to make a difference in the world. Whatever we wish for when we think about a "Happy New Year," let's remember the gift of anticipation: taking time to experience here and now the joy we will know when

our dreams come true.

Making use of the gift of anticipation, we can defuse discouragement. When we become discouraged, it is because we do not have a present sense of fulfillment or satisfaction. I love this quotation from Helen Keller: "No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars or sailed an uncharted land, or opened a new doorway for the human spirit." When we allow ourselves to feel in anticipation the good that we hope for, we maintain the spark of joy and happiness that keeps us going when times get tough.

Another word for all of this is "gratitude." When we let ourselves be grateful in difficult times, we are making the best use of our gift of anticipation. When Jesus was confronted with a hungry crowd and the disciples kept insisting that there was not enough to eat and no way of acquiring it, he took the five loaves and two fish offered by a small boy and gave thanks over them. No one went home hungry that day.

The gift of anticipation is a valuable key to our plans for the new year. Things may happen which are beyond our control, but we can always control our attitude. By approaching the year with joyous anticipation, we allow ourselves to be creative, productive and happy and to rejoice in the goodness of God.



# What the Animals Knew

Perhaps it's because I am an animal lover and the proud "parent" of two wonderful cats, but I am always struck by the importance of animals in the traditional Christmas story. You know, the one that we tell when we recount to children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews the story of the first Christmas. "The baby Jesus," we are likely to say, "was born in a manger, a place in which animals were fed. Angels



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appeared to shepherds who were guarding their sheep by night."

Our narrative would not seem complete without including various animals that gathered in the manger to watch over the infant Jesus or the majestic camels that bore the Magi. When I was a boy, my father worked hard at his workbench

to build the manger that would be prominently displayed in our living room for many a Christmas. Alongside the Holy Family, the shepherds and the Wise Men, Dad placed a dog to watch over the Christ Child. When an adorable Boston

Terrier puppy named Spike became part of our family, he did everything in his power to assure that he and he alone had that place of honor. Whenever we were out of range, Spike would quietly remove the "other" dog from the manger and hide him away.

The Gospel stories tell us that, because of unfortunate human choices ("no room at the inn"), the infant Jesus was born in a manger. Instinctively, we feel sorry that this happened. Yet how often the unkindness of human beings sets the stage for a manifestation of the wisdom of God. When we retell the birth of the Christ Child, we almost insist on acknowledging that the story would lack something without the manger and without the animals, that they were a part of God's plan for the coming of the Savior.

It makes sense, if you know animals. When treated with love and respect, animals have a deep capacity to love and respect in return. Animals know. Recently, I heard the story of a homeless woman who, not knowing what to do with herself, stopped by a local animal shelter to visit the dogs who were waiting to be adopted. For the first time in her life, she felt cared for and useful, and began to find meaning and enjoyment in her life. The dogs loved her—one dog especially—and that turned her life around.

Today, she operates a successful shelter and adoption agency for animals who, like herself as a human being, had a tough start in life.

It's ironic, isn't it, that animals can often see what humans miss? Christ can come into our daily lives a thousand times, and yet we so often fail to notice him. Would we have noticed and recognized him had we been passing by that manger? The animals did, or at least that's how we tell the story of Christmas. They may not have known that they were in the presence of the Christ-Child, the Son of God, the promised Savior. But they recognized him nonetheless, and they stayed beside him. That's the story we dearly love to tell.

Perhaps during this Christmas season, we could profitably reflect upon what the animals saw and knew that first Christmas. That meditation alone would do wonders for our worship of God, not to mention our kindness toward others (including animals) and our joy in life. If we could come to know what the animals knew, perhaps we could sense the presence of Christ when he came to us in our neighbor, our enemy, a sick or a troubled person. Perhaps we could come to know and adore the living Christ whenever and wherever he found us each and every day.

May yours be a Blessed Christmas.



# Jeremiah's New Vision

For some reason, the month of November and the prophet Jeremiah seem to go hand in hand. November's usual weather and Jeremiah's usual mood invoke an association. God can do wonders with both, of course; and the story of Jeremiah's call, which opens the book, shows us that, with this young man, God is going to have his work cut out for him.

As the story goes, God is looking to call Jeremiah to prophecy, but the young man isn't buying it. He has plenty of good reasons for turning God down, or so he thinks. Jeremiah has been around prophets, and if he knows anything for sure, it's that prophets are old men. Or at least, they seem like old men, they are so wise and have such extensive knowl-

edge. And if there's anything else Jeremiah knows, it's that he is very young and has no such knowledge.

trouble. After all, he would be this young fellow telling people to reform their lives, speaking for God and maybe even doing miracles. People wouldn't know what to think. Or better, Jeremiah wouldn't know what to think about what people would think. They'd call him precocious. They'd chide him for pretending to be what he was not. They'd taunt him, question him and make him explain how he knew the things he was saying, and he wouldn't know how to answer them. Perhaps they'd beat him or even put him to death. And so Jeremiah says no to God. He looks God in the eye, and turns him down.

God knows just what to do. He hears Jeremiah's decision, and treats it with great respect. Perhaps we find ourselves expecting a bolt of lightning to strike or for Jeremiah to turn into a pillar of salt. But no such thing happens. Instead, God talks to the young man in an effort to allay his fears. He tells Jeremiah that if people should bother him, ridicule him, or ask him to explain himself, all he has to do is remember that divine protection will be with him. "I will tell you what to say," the Lord promises. His fears allayed, Jeremiah agrees to become a prophet, and, well, the rest is history.

Like many of us, Jeremiah is afraid to enter into the higher atmosphere of God.

When I was studying for the priesthood out in California, a fellow seminarian had some friends who had a private jet. Every so often, they would take the two of us for a beautiful ride way up above the East Bay and the city of San Francisco. I was so struck by how small the Bay appeared from way up high. On the ground, we lived our daily lives as though they encompassed the entire universe. In the air, the confines of time and space vanished as we glided free and clear across the skies. Down below, we thought we knew it all. Up there, we had a whole new vision.

Throughout my life, I have thought of those airplane rides as sojourns into the infinite. When I find myself engulfed in the daily muck and mire of life (the feeling November sometimes brings me), I recall the freedom and vastness of those California skies, which are, of course, New York skies as well. I know in my heart that it is that freedom and infinity which I have been seeking my whole life long and which I seek every day. It is true even on those days when, like Jeremiah, I may be afraid to risk my secure place on the ground for a trip up into the skies. Remembering those trips reminds me that, like Jeremiah, I can learn to risk the familiar security of my limited vision for a sojourn into the larger vision that is God's.



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There's something else on Jeremiah's mind. If he became a prophet, he would be in for lots of



# The Rosary: A Measure of Life

October is the month of the Rosary, and one of the most wonderful aspects of saying the Rosary is the way in which it marks the progress of time. Every bead looks like every other bead in most rosaries, and every prayer of the decade is the same prayer with the same words repeated—Hail Mary,



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When we are young, we have more exposure to newness. In some ways, it's kind of thrust upon us. There comes a point at which we finish grade school, high school and college, and we have to move on. Then we land that first job, and move up the career path to greater and greater success. People leave home, they get married, they start a family. Life is all about moving forward, when we're young.

Hail Mary, Hail Mary.

Yet one of the things I find so special about the Rosary is that, over against all of that sameness, it is possible to make each prayer a unique offering to the Lord, just by the way in which you touch the bead and offer the prayer.

After awhile, if we're not careful, each day can begin to look like every other day. As we move from middle age into old age, we can get caught in a routine. In some ways that's comforting, but it can take the edge off of life as well.

Unless, that is, we choose to change that. We can recite the Rosary by rote, or we can consciously focus on the uniqueness of each bead, and hear the special rareness of each syllable of the prayer. I know of a man who for the past three years has gone to the same spot to photograph the beauty of the sunrise each morning. Looking at his pictures displayed side by side, it is amazing to see how, though the same sun comes up each day, each sunrise is as unique as each unit on a string of beads. It's in the eye of the beholder—my grandmother could never pass by an open field and just see flowers. She knew the names of every one and delighted in each them.

Our Rosary reminds us that though life often appears to be the same old repetition of day upon day, each bead, each day, is different and can be seen differently and recited differently. We may find ourselves saying it differently from one day to the next,

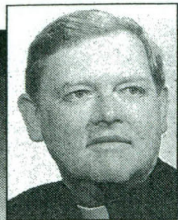
depending upon our mood or upon what we are praying for. It reminds us that we don't have to settle for sameness, and that every day we can treat ourselves to something new.

The Rosary, with its five decades, each different yet related, can teach us to appreciate the five parts to each day: morning, noontime, afternoon, evening and night. Just as each decade focuses us on a different mystery, each part of the day has its own mystery to it, its own revelation and its own beauty. The Rosary helps us to see more in each aspect of the day.

Even the distribution of the mysteries of the Rosary across the week can give us insight into the week itself and the tenor of the days that compose it. Every day has its own particular set of mysteries—Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious, Luminous. Reflecting on that, we can teach ourselves to read the mood or theme or pattern of the events that make up each of our days. Monday holds out promise and so does Friday, but the two are of a very different sort. Some days are joyful, others sorrowful, glorious and luminous—the Rosary teaches not just to endure our days, but to look for theme and meaning there.

Yes, October is the month of the Rosary. Let us use this wonderful prayer as a way of remembering the measured uniqueness of life.





*Spiritual Matters*

*Father Paul Keenan*

*September 2005*

## Creative Like Jesus

September is a good time for us to think about what it means to be creative, since at this time of year we are called upon to do new things or to do old things in new ways. In our reflections, we would do well to turn to the example of Jesus Christ, who was most creative in the way he lived his public life.

It's been said that one of the characteristics of creative people is their love for ideas. They realize that every thing that happens or is made originated as an idea, and creative people are constantly thinking up new things to make and new ways to make them. That is certainly a characteristic of Jesus. Early in his public ministry, St. Matthew tells us, Jesus sat down on top of a mountain and immediately began sharing eight (or nine) ideas that changed the world. We call them the Beatitudes. Then he went on for verse after verse elaborating on those ideas and how people could use them in their daily living. By my count, he multiplied his original eight ideas into 45 ideas by the time he had finished speaking. Creative people love to let their original ideas increase and multiply.

Creative people are also curious people. They love to ask questions and to find out about things.

Jesus was like that. His questions were amazing. He asked a stunning question of Mary and Joseph after they sought him out in the temple: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" When a violent storm rocked their boat on the lake, and the disciples were terrified, he asked, "Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?" When Mary told him about the lack of wine at Cana, he responded with a question: "Woman, how does your concern affect me?" Of the man who had been sitting at the Pool of Bethesda for 38 years, he asked, "Do you want to get well?" And of the apostle who denied him, he asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He was curious, it seems, about everything, but perhaps most especially about people's motives in accepting or rejecting the grace of God.

Creative people find their ideas in unusual places, ones that others overlook. As he wandered about the countryside, Jesus took notice of the birds and the lilies and the fish, of the seeds and the trees and of the skies before a storm, and brought them into his preaching. He found inspiration in lepers, whom people shunned; in a Samaritan woman whom her townspeople had spurned; and in little Zacchaeus, whom everyone mocked.

Jesus knew that a secret of creativity is to look for inspiration everywhere, but most especially where others have failed to take notice.

Creative people are grateful people—they seek and they always find. Jesus often expressed gratitude in the gospels: The words "I thank you, Father," were often on his lips. He gave thanks when everyone else complained about the paucity of the loaves and fishes. He thanked the Father for revealing his mysteries to simple people. When the disciples shooed the children away, Jesus blessed them. Of his disciples, he said, "They are your gift to me." He pronounced the blessing of thanksgiving over the bread he shared at the home of disciples from Emmaus. A grateful heart always finds abundance and creates more.

Successful creative people know when to share their ideas and when to protect them. Jesus urged his disciples to preach, and yet there were times when he told people not to talk about what had happened during a particular healing. The "messianic secret" was a way of protecting the sacredness of the moment of encounter with God.

As we undertake new seasons this month, we can turn to the example of Jesus to help us be creative in our new beginnings.





## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# A New Commandment

Nearly four years ago, I wrote my first column for Catholic New York. Before I had a chance to submit it, I had to rewrite it completely. September 11 occurred and our lives were changed forever. Now, once again, I find myself in the position of writing in the aftermath of a terrorist attack: July's bombings in London. Reflecting on these horrific events, I got a new and deeper insight into Jesus' words, "I give you a new commandment: love one another."

Why a new commandment? The Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament certainly expressed the necessity of love, and Jesus said elsewhere that it was not his intention to abrogate even the smallest part of them. So why does he issue a "new commandment"?

What the new commandment does abrogate is one that was not made by God, but rather found its way to Jesus' times and subsequently to our own as a fundamental principle of human sinfulness. This "old commandment" can be summarized thusly: "Hate one another." It is that commandment—the law of sin—that Jesus' "new commandment" is meant to overturn.

Clearly, we see the footprints of the "old commandment" in the events of September 11, 2001, of July 7, 2005, and in all of the suicide bombings and

other terrorist activities that have occurred before and since. Terrorism feeds off that first principle and foundation of sin, and, left unchecked, breeds further hatred and violence. It spawns a vicious circle.

Yet as a boy in school I recall Archbishop Fulton Sheen reflecting that before any large act of violence is wrought upon the world, it is wrought within the human heart. The appalling events in our world can easily distract us from noticing the workings of the law of sin in our own lives and relationships with one another. Latently or patently, hatred is at the heart of every act of evil perpetrated by human beings against other human beings.

Lying, cheating, stealing, killing, abuse, racism, road rage and so on have at their roots a fundamental disregard or disrespect for the sacredness of human beings. That is true whether we recognize it or not. In fact, one of the ploys of sin is to render us so accustomed to it that we regard it as good, as justifiable, or as a normal part of life. "Hate one another" then becomes a kind of mantra for living. And ultimately, it is directed not merely against other human beings, but against God himself.

The law of sin is extremely efficient in achieving the results that it intends. It is that very efficiency that renders the "new commandment" of Jesus so startling when it is uttered: why would we try something new when we already have a working system? (If you think that's farfetched, just pause to remember that there, in a nutshell, lies the logic of terrorists, hardened murderers, habitual thieves and inveterate liars of every sort, even when they appear to be utterly "respectable" people.)

Jesus says, "No," to all of that for yesterday, for today and forever. There were moments in his earthly life when he appeared to stand alone in doing so, just as we will at times appear to stand alone should we choose to apply the balm of his logic to the wounds of our world. The "new commandment" is far from a platitude; it is a decision to change the world. If we are tired of the same old headlines and the same old private hassles, then we need to commit or recommit ourselves to something new.

"A new commandment I give you, that you love one another." Not a helpful hint or a suggestion—a commandment. We have here a direct order not to allow the world to continue in its present direction, but to commit each and every day to replacing the ways of sinfulness with the ways of love. It's all he asks, but it's what he asks as well.

*July 2005*

# Life and the Weather

*Spiritual Matters*

*Father Paul Keenan*



**I**s the weather a metaphor for life? I hadn't thought much about it, really, until one day, in the midst of our early-summer heat wave, a man told me about a conversation he had had with his mother in California. "She was complaining," he reported, "about the weather out there. Yesterday it was 50 degrees and cloudy, and she was unhappy. I started to tell her how hot and humid it was here, but she didn't want to hear it."

Half-seriously, I suggested, "Perhaps God gave us weather so we'd have something in common to complain about."

"Oh, I never complain about the weather," my friend replied. "I can't control it, so I accept it every day, just as it is. I take it as a gift."

Sentences like that make you close your mouth and keep it closed. You're in the presence of everyday wisdom and you know better than to try to improve upon it. The more I thought about it, the more I believed that my friend's words applied not only to weather, but also to life.

Now, I wouldn't go so far as to say that the things that happen to us are entirely out of our

control. But they often appear to be. When unanticipated health issues arise, or when we unexpectedly lose our job, or when we plan on a great weekend and one of the kids gets sick and has to go to the emergency room, things really do appear to be out of our control. We get scared. We get mad. We feel helpless.

What if we could think of these events and our feelings about them as a kind of "weather"—as a backdrop for living, bringing us gifts along the way? Maybe that pink slip could make us a little more humble, help us to re-evaluate what we really want to do in life. That health scare could make us more cognizant of what is really important. Perhaps that trip to the emergency room will bring our family closer together than we have been in a very long time.

The happenings that we complain about are, like the weather, a backdrop for the lives we lead. Of course, we can choose to make them the whole story and let ourselves be derailed by them. Or, like my friend, we can treat them as weather, as a backdrop against which to enhance life each day. I often think of the story of the threefold questioning of Simon Peter by Jesus

("Do you love me?") toward the end of John's Gospel. Since Peter had denied Jesus three times, now Jesus was giving him the chance to put that into the background, learn a lesson from it, and move on to a new life of leadership.

I think, too, of the many days when Jesus had to undergo terrible criticism and ridicule, even stoning, in the course of his preaching and healing. With the help of his heavenly Father, he was able to put those unfortunate events into the background and to let them gift him with the realization of how greatly the world needed the work he had come to do. I think of the terrible agony on the Cross, which gave birth to the words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Life, like the weather, is often unpredictable, sometimes unfavorable. When it is, will it spoil our day or ruin our life? That is up to us. We certainly have the ability to let it do so, if we wish. But, like my friend, we can accept the weather we are given each day and "take it as a gift." We can let it strengthen us, let it teach us to improve our life, and to make us into a better image of the One who is the Lord of all creation.



June 2005

## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan



# The Days of the Rhythms of God

On the Sunday after Ascension Thursday this year, the first reading of the Liturgy of the Word was the story of the apostles going to the upper room in Jerusalem to ask for guidance after Jesus had ascended to heaven. As I often do when preparing a homily, I went back to the Scripture itself to read it in context. It was ironic to find that immediately following this reading (in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles) was the account of the selection of a new apostle to fill up the vacancy in the Twelve. We in our 21st-century Church had just experienced the election of a new pope to fill the vacancy created by the death of Pope John Paul II. I was reminded one more time of how our faith is grounded in a remarkable tradition going back thousands of years.

In those extraordinary weeks following the death of Pope John Paul, not only the Church but the entire world as well gave rapt attention to what was happening. Many Catholics were seeing for the first time the ceremonies following the death of a Pope, participating in the Masses and prayers during an interregnum, witnessing the funeral of a pontiff, joining in prayer as the cardinal electors entered into a conclave and rejoicing in the selection of a new Holy Father. It had, after

all, been 26 years since such events had taken place. I'm sure that many Catholics learned a great deal about their Church during those days.

People of all faiths—and people espousing no particular faith—were also riveted to those momentous events. They watched via the media from vantage points throughout the world. I had the privilege of being part of the team covering the events for ABC News Radio, and it was clear that my colleagues, who were from different faith backgrounds, viewed those events with interest, enthusiasm and profound respect. Something very important was happening during that time, and everyone sensed it.

Everyone has a favorite impression from those days. Personally, I was taken with the unhurriedness of the ceremonies. Everything happened in its own time, and everything unfolded naturally from its beginning to its conclusion. In an age in which life is often rushed, the pace of the events was noteworthy. To me, it spoke volumes about the spiritual life. Grace unfolds in its own time and in its own way and that way is often measured, deliberate and natural. The rituals led me to reflect on the nature of contemplation. The contemplative life marches step by step to the

rhythms of God, and those rhythms are much slower, often, than those of daily life. God's rhythms invite us to pace ourselves—to watch, to listen and to take to heart the events that are unfolding within us and outside of us.

The rhythms of God invite us to appreciate. People who were not necessarily churchgoers spent hours taking in the pageantry and music of the various liturgies. That's another aspect of the work of grace. As it unfolds before us, grace teases out of us an appreciation of what we are sensing. Grace draws us out of ourselves and into God's ambience, where we are enlightened, uplifted and refreshed. Things are better because they seem better, and they seem better because they are better—grace cuts both ways as it sanctifies. Grace allows for the entire spectrum of human emotion—at times we heard applause in St. Peter's Square, at other times we heard weeping. All of it was taken in and blessed by God.

Those days dedicated to the rhythms of God were days of Spirit and grace. By the grace of God, we were made witnesses to what we hope for, participants in what we pray for in a world that, often despite itself, is drawn to the presence of God.



## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# Don't Be a Stranger

Two disciples of Jesus are traveling the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are extremely downcast, and along the way they talk to each other about what is troubling them. A stranger meets up with them and asks them what they are talking about. They are astonished to learn that apparently he knows nothing of the crucifixion of Jesus, the reason that they are so upset.

When he expresses interest, they tell him the story, adding two details. The first is that their hopes are shattered, because they expected Jesus to be the triumphant Messiah. The second is that some women have reported going to the tomb where Jesus was buried and finding no evidence of his body. They are saying that Jesus has been raised from the dead. It is all too much for these overwhelmed disciples to bear.

At this point, the stranger interrupts them, saying, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!" And he interprets all of the Scriptures for them, showing them how everything foretold by Moses and the prophets points to the very events they are describing. This is the first time anyone has spoken to them like this, and the stranger's words

help them to feel encouraged. So when they reach their home and the stranger pretends to continue on, they invite him to come home with them. He accepts the invitation, and at the meal blesses and breaks the bread.

At that moment, the disciples realize that it is no stranger they have been traveling with—it is Jesus himself. They recall that their hearts were burning within them while he spoke, and they literally run back to Jerusalem to share their experience with the other disciples.

The two disciples in St. Luke's account of all this allow themselves to be mentally and emotionally crippled by the bad news that people in their circle have been bandying about. They become so negative that they forget some of the most fundamental principles that could help them to stay focused in the midst of all that negativity. They manage to leave Jerusalem, but they carry their negativity with them.

The "stranger" on the road is the first person to suggest to them that, by recalling these fundamental principles, they can come to a higher perspective on the events that have caused them so much suffering. They welcome his news; but more importantly, they welcome him. At their table, he

gives them himself and he gives them a sign that tells them exactly who he is. Their discouragement is lifted, their relief knows no bounds and they cannot wait to share their news with others.

In many ways, we are those disciples. There is so much negative information about the world, about life and about our own lives that we often find ourselves drowning in it. We can become so mired in the negativity that the Gospel can seem like a stranger when we encounter its message. Yet the basic message of the Lord is that there is a higher meaning to everything that happens and that even the most destructive and incomprehensible "facts" about life can be transformed by God's infinite wisdom. Through the Word and through the sacraments, Christ comes to us personally to give us new thoughts, higher interpretations of our experience and definite relief and joy.

The disciples invite the Lord home with them. So must we if we are to find a remedy for the half-truths, negativity and downright lies that imprison so many hearts today. If his message seems foreign—or if we've been away from it for a while—we can always return.

For his request of us is at least as fervent as deep down, ours is of him: "Don't be a stranger."





## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# Of Castles and Foundations

**D**uring Lent this year, it came home to me that the Resurrection of Jesus did not remove the factuality of the suffering he experienced. After the Resurrection, it was still true that he had been misunderstood, betrayed, denied, humiliated and crucified. None of that changed with the first Easter. What did change was the scope and manner of Jesus' life. From the Scriptures, we see that he lived now beyond the confines of time and place, mysteriously carrying the wounds of his suffering but without their limitations.

I suppose God in his infinite wisdom could have arranged that, when Jesus was raised from the dead, all evidence of his suffering and death be erased from divine and human memory. There are people who reflect upon the meaning of the Resurrection as though that were the case. Yet it's not; and thank goodness it's not, because where would that leave us as we endured our own suffering and faced our own mortality?

Knowing this helps us to realize that the suffering, death and Resurrection of Jesus are part of a whole package. When we are suffering, we can be mindful of his victory and remember that it is ours as well. We bring to bear upon our suffering

the impact of the Resurrection and we retain hope.

And at the same time, the suffering we endure is redemptive. It is caught up in the larger reality of the Resurrection and mysteriously brought to transformation even when every ounce of so-called "common sense" tells us that we are caught in a web of sheer useless pain. United with the death and Resurrection of Christ, our suffering brings grace not only to us but to others as well.

The Resurrection is a source of healing and joy. Listen to this story of someone who experienced this sort of healing. "I was really feeling down," he reported, "and very depressed about having to face my day. For some reason, I was led to reflect on the risen life of Jesus and how he bore the wounds of his crucifixion in his hands and his sides even when joyously appearing to his disciples. A thought crossed my mind, 'You can go on feeling as you are or you can change it.' I let the thought be and went about my business. Before long I began to notice something—activities I had been dreading suddenly dropped away. I was given time to do things I really liked doing, and I was able to perform the remaining difficult tasks with a sense of lightheartedness and even joy. It

seems that without very much effort on my part, one thought resulting from my meditation on Christ's Resurrection rearranged my entire day, inside and out." This is a true story.

As Catholics and Christians, we hold that the suffering, death and Resurrection of Christ are both facts and ideas. Thank God for both aspects. Were they not facts, they would simply be a lovely story, the end result of which would be mere wishes and dreams. As facts, they are also ideas whose import we can grasp and can allow to take hold in our lives. The preceding story illustrates the power an idea can have once we allow it to take root in us. And, as our earlier reflections suggest, there is tremendous power in the idea that what we suffer can be redemptive for us and for all.

"If you have built castles in the air," Thoreau once said, "your work need not be lost. That is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." By his suffering, death and Resurrection, Jesus did just that. He took the human hope that suffering could be redemptive and that sin and physical death could be overcome and put a foundation there. We who are the beneficiaries of his goodness can be grateful that he did.



## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# Why Lent Is So Long

Words are fascinating, especially their origins. When the Lenten season came along this year, I decided to do some research on the word "Lent." I learned that the name for these 40 days of prayer and penance came from the Middle English word for spring. That wasn't surprising, since Lent leads to Easter, which is a feast of the spring season.

The help of a good dictionary brought me back even farther to the Indo-European roots of the word. I was surprised and once again puzzled to learn that those roots brought into play the word "long." Now, Lent can sometimes seem to us to be the longest of seasons. Yet that isn't the connection between "Lent" and "long." The connection lies not in the seeming length of the season, but rather in the length of days. Think about it: during this time, the days are getting longer in terms of daylight hours, and that is the association between "Lent" and "long." There are more hours of daylight at the end of Lent than there were at the beginning.

The preceding is not intended to be a pedantic foray into the rarefied air of semantics. These verbal musings can give us much to think about as we

go through this holy season. They tell us that the purpose of Lent, spiritually speaking, is to awaken incrementally in us the Light of Christ. The Gospel readings for the Second and Fourth Sundays of Year A help to make this connection for us. The Gospel for the Second Sunday (Matthew 17:1-9) tells the story of the Transfiguration, in which Jesus' clothes became dazzlingly white. The Fourth Sunday gives us the story of the man born blind (John 9) in which Jesus restores the man's vision and declares himself to be the Light of the World. As we come to enter more fully into the life of Jesus, we find ourselves able to see more and more of his Light. And we find ourselves being transformed into bearers of the Light in the world.

At times during Lent, we may find ourselves weary and discouraged, wondering what is the good of all of this fasting and reflecting. That's where our etymology lesson comes in handy, bringing us back to the lengthening of days. If you don't believe your eyes, check out the sunrise and sunset listings in the newspaper. Each day there is more daylight. Light is gaining a slow but steady victory over darkness. So are we.

Letting the light dawn in us takes patience, but it

is amply rewarded. I like the words of Thomas Merton, "When a ray of light strikes a crystal, it gives a new quality to the crystal. And when God's infinitely disinterested love plays upon a human soul, the same kind of thing takes place. And that is the life called sanctifying grace." That ray of light does not only touch the crystal; through the prismatic nature of the crystal, the light finds itself deflecting and reflecting throughout the universe. To the extent that we let our crystalline souls be touched by Christ's sanctifying grace, we are bearers of that light throughout the world, dispelling its darkness.

After Lent, there is Easter, "the day which the Lord has made." St. John's account of the first Easter (in his 20th chapter) shows the same joyous progression of light, from the two Marys visiting the tomb "early in the morning while it was still dark" to the gradual dawning of the fact of the Resurrection in their minds and those of the disciples.

Watch. The days are getting longer. The day which the Lord has made is at hand.

Father Paul Keenan is director of Radio Ministry and co-host of "Religion on the Line" (Sundays, 7-10 a.m. on WABC Radio, 770 AM).

# The Responsible Life

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Father Paul Keenan



Today I received an e-mail promoting someone's new book on success. The e-mail directed me to an excerpt from the book; and I proceeded to read it, just as the author hoped I would. There I found what has become almost commonplace for self-help writers. From the get-go, the author informed me that if I wanted to make a success of my life, I had to see myself as totally responsible for it. I must stop blaming my parents, my generation, the economy, my genes, bad breaks, health problems, my neuroses and all other people and conditions for my present situation. I will not be a success, the author told me, until I have abandoned the blame game and accepted complete responsibility for my life.

The author made an excellent point, of course. We all know those who have spent their precious time blaming all sorts of people and conditions for their failure to achieve their goals. And we know all known others who have taken equally adverse circumstances and created wonderful lives. There's an insightful Chinese proverb that says, "If a person's face is ugly, one cannot blame the mirror." People who succeed in life are those who are willing to get beyond negativity and censure and move forward with zest and resourcefulness.

That's good as far as it goes, but I part company with much self-help literature when it comes to the issue of responsibility. There is too great a tendency to associate responsibility with blaming, especially when it appears that I am the one to blame. But in fact, responsibility has a whole identity of its own apart from the blame issue, a rich uniqueness which stems from the ontological partnership between God and us. Life (and the sacramental life especially) is a cooperative venture between God and us, and the very heart of responsibility lies in the mutual and mysterious collaboration between the divine and the human. Seen in this way, responsibility is rescued from that burdensome state of affairs in which the individual is held solely and frighteningly accountable for his or her destiny. Instead, God and we work together, helping one another to cultivate and to nurture the world.

In this view, responsibility raises the notion of success beyond programs and plans and outcomes. The successful life is measured not by its results but by the divine and human friendship. Failure and sacrifice will sometimes test and even strain the relationship, but in the end it is the bond between God and us that wins the day. And there are those surprising times when we discover that what we

thought we had surrendered is now more truly ours than ever.

William James, in "The Varieties of Religious Experience," explained this unburdened sense of responsibility. "Give up the feeling of responsibility," he wrote, "resign the care of your destiny to your higher powers, be genuinely indifferent as to what becomes of it all and you will find not only that you gain a perfect inward relief, but often also, in addition, the particular goods you sincerely thought you were renouncing." To some, this may seem like reckless abandon; but it is not. Seen deeply enough, it is the very essence of responsible living.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen helps us to understand this more clearly in terms of Christ. "If Jesus Christ thirsted for souls," he wrote, "must not a Christian also thirst? If he came to cast fire on the earth, must not a Christian be enkindled? Has he not called us to be his apostles and his ambassadors, in order that his Incarnation might be prolonged through the continued dispensation of the divine through the human?" The "must" bespeaks both a moral imperative and an ontological one. What we must do is what we can do because of who Christ is and who we are.

To be responsible, in the end, is to discover ourselves to be in an eternal embrace with God.

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# The Cure for 'New Year's Cranky'

Linda Darnell and Barbara Lawrence are having an argument in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1949 movie "A Letter to Three Wives." Connie Gilchrist complains to Thelma Ritter, "Can't we have some peace in this house, even on New Year's Eve?"

"You got it mixed up with Christmas," replies Thelma Ritter. "New Year's Eve is when people go back to killing each other."

We laugh, but at the same time we recognize that there's a lot of truth in the humor. We have just celebrated Christmas and by now we are into the New Year, 2005. The holidays—at least the ones on the secular calendar—are over and normal activities have resumed. In addition, we now find ourselves having to schedule those things we put off until "after the holidays." The Christmas bills are starting to come in. It's January, it's winter and it's cold. There are a thousand reasons for developing "New Year's Cranky."

The word "cranky" derives from the German word for "illness." It denotes a state of being in which something about us is definitely "off." When we're cranky, we're not ourselves. We may not even know precisely what the problem is. All we know is that something is wrong in our lives

and we don't like it.

When grouchiness overtakes us, our tendency is to put the blame on people or circumstances outside ourselves. "It's this old house. I don't know why we don't all have pneumonia. Drafty old barn of a place, it's like growing up living in a refrigerator," fumes Jimmy Stewart in Frank Capra's 1946 classic "It's a Wonderful Life." We're unhappy, to say the least; and the world is definitely the one at fault.

It's tempting to go in the other direction and to say that the fault is with us. There's often some truth to that, but the problem is, blaming ourselves often doesn't do a great deal of good. Though it is right for us to accept responsibility for any sins, mistakes or grievances we have committed, when it comes to healing a sore heart, blaming anyone, even ourselves, is not going to get us very far.

When we find ourselves getting cranky and wondering what to do about it, it's a good time to pray. God may seem like the last person we want to talk to when we're "in a state," but he's the very one we should turn to. Remember, we didn't make ourselves (even if we're "self-made" men or women); he made us, and if anyone knows how to fix

what's wrong, he's the one. It may be that a favorite formal prayer comforts us in our times of agitation. But it may also be that simply having a good candid talk with God will prove to be just what the doctor ordered.

I like Jimmy Stewart's prayer in "It's a Wonderful Life": "Dear Father, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way, O God."

As Jimmy Stewart finds out, "the way" we are shown may not be the way we expected or, on the surface, wanted. "Well, you look about the kind of angel I'd get. Sort of a fallen angel, aren't you? What happened to your wings?" he complains to his angel, Clarence, played by Henry Travers. Yet the trick is to step back and watch. What happens next, despite appearances, is the answer to the prayer we have said. And the answer to the prayer is the answer to our crankiness.

For when we're cranky, what we need are God's loving arms to fall into. "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours," the father said to the cranky elder brother in the Prodigal Son story (Luke 15:31). And he meant everything.

There, that should cheer you up.



# Healing the Paralytic Within

There is a story in the Gospels (recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels) in which people bring a paralyzed man to Jesus for healing. Jesus' response is to say to the man, "Your sins are forgiven." This causes a tremendous hubbub among the bystanders, who wonder where Jesus obtained the authority to forgive sins. In the end, Jesus heals the man of his physical defect, to the astonishment of all.

The incident brings to light the fact that we human beings are a mysterious complex of body and soul. That seems like a simple thing to say, but it is a fact that still bemuses us today. What we often miss is that this insight into our human identity has real ramifications for how we live our lives. Indeed, it is one of the salient features of what could be called the epistemology of Jesus, the approach to knowledge (and particularly self-knowledge) that Jesus takes. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus subtly draws people from matter-based thinking to Spirit-based thinking and then sends them, transformed, back into the everyday world.

The bystanders in the aforementioned Gospel passages are good sensible people whose thinking proceeds in a very down-to-earth, matter-of-fact sort of way. As they see it, the paralyzed man's

problem is that he cannot move his body; and their expectation is that Jesus will heal his body. That in itself would be amazing. There is no thought on their part that anything other than that would be required. Most of us think along similar lines. When our lives become paralyzed in one way or other, we look for something that will get things moving again—a vacation, a day at the spa, seeing a movie and so forth. All of these are fine, but often they leave us back where we started. And so, we end up lamenting, "That's just life."

Jesus sees things differently. Of course, he wants to heal the man; but what good would it be for him to heal his body without doing something about his soul? Without some sort of inner adjustment, the man will be able to walk, yes; but will his walking take him to better places? We in the 21st century are blessed with access to a broad range of informational gadgets, devices and media. Yet we seem to know less than ever about how to apply that information to lead better lives. We need to let Jesus take us to a higher, spiritual, level of thought that will give us focus and perspective.

"Forgiveness of sins" in this story must be understood to include, in addition to forgiving

moral transgressions, the removal of the limitations that plague everyday thought. It means looking beyond the "understandable, after all" pettiness, meanness of spirit and vengeance that can color our way of seeing the world and one another. It means the healing of any wide-sweeping discouragement, of any belief that we are without hope, of any feeling or idea that we have no contribution to make to the greater good. It means rooting out any fear that God will not help us, especially when we cannot help ourselves. Without inner resources, what good are all the scientific, technological and cultural advantages that are ours?

"There are two kinds of people," C.S. Lewis reflected in "The Screwtape Letters." "Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'" Jesus tells us that we can choose which kind to be. Whichever we choose, he will always be there to help us. But it's like the difference between sitting in an airplane on the tarmac and flying in it high up in the sky. Both are ways of observing the law of gravity. But, oh, what a difference in perspective!

Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and co-host of "Religion on the Line," Sundays 7-10 a.m. on WABC Radio.

*Spiritual Matters*

*Father Paul Keenan*







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Father Paul Keenan

# A Taste for Truth

I did not expect to be reading the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. One day, his name appeared while I was doing an Internet search and something made me stop and click on the link. Before I knew it, I was reading a book I hadn't seen in 38 years, "The Range of Reason," a collection of essays published in English in 1952. I marveled at the clarity and depth with which Maritain addressed issues pertinent to the year 2004. I suppose that's what a "perennial philosophy" is all about.

In 1952, roughly 40 years before the information age, Maritain pondered the overabundance of truths that were available to people of his day. "Truths are running rampant," he declared. "But the ordinary intellect hardly profits from this swarm of truths; it takes them in one on top of the other, along with the mass of errors which are also running rampant—a blotter soaking up everything without discrimination." It's one thing to have a lot of information, but it's entirely another thing to know what to do with it once you have it. We need wisdom, an underlying soulful framework that enables us to give our various truths places in the structure of our lives, and to distinguish what is true from what is false.

In "The Range of Reason," Maritain called this wisdom "a taste for truth within the minds of men,"

and declared that the taste for truth must be restored throughout society if men and women were to improve their vision. Interestingly, it seems that he was referring at once to spiritual vision and to sensory vision as well, for he says that part of the solution to the problem of truth lies "...in purifying and refreshing the sight of their eyes." Will our senses direct our souls or will our souls direct our senses? There is a question by which to measure the well-being of a society and of a life.

How are we to develop that mental clarity and to give order and meaning to our sensory knowledge? Again, Maritain had an answer: "...there is only one remedy: to reawaken in the world a sense of, and esteem for, contemplation."

Contemplation always sounds like something meant for saints and religious. But the truth is, it is intended for everyone. Contemplation means taking the matter of our everyday lives and bringing it to God: our hopes, our troubles, our joys, our fears and our weaknesses. Thinking it all over, praying it all over, in dialogue with God. It means developing a sense of partnership with God as we go through our days.

Belief in God—no-holds-barred belief—is at the very heart of contemplation. "To believe in God,"

Maritain wrote, "must mean to live in such a manner that life could not possibly be lived if God did not exist." Many of us give in to the temptation to compartmentalize our lives, with the result that we have time for everything but God. Or we have had a bad experience with God, and we have decided to banish him to a closet. Or someone has convinced us that God is superfluous and that we have no need for him.

Contemplation means giving precedence to the long-range over the instant truth, living from within instead of being ruled by the conflicting thoughts, opinions and forces of the world outside of us. It means surrendering the belief that life is a loveless rat race and instead allowing the Living Flame of Love to illumine us from within.

The taste for truth can be acquired; it means nourishing our souls with the presence of God. It means asking how things really are. It requires us, first of all, to take time, and then to embrace eternity. Maritain was right: our minds and hearts will become purer, and we will see the world through brighter eyes, as we are meant to.

Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and co-host of "Religion on the Line," Sundays 7-10 a.m. on WABC Radio.





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# Dining in the Kingdom of God

Not long ago, I was reading a book about the second half of life. The author was reflecting that in our earlier years of adulthood, we often focus on the trappings of success, only to find that they are not the most important things in life. He found that the wisest people were the ones who learned to put success into perspective, who focused their lives on being of service to others.

It occurred to me that Jesus had come to the same conclusion 2,000 years ago. Remember his story about the guests at the wedding banquet (Luke 14: 7-11)? Many of the guests seated themselves at the highest places. To their embarrassment, the host had to ask some of them to go to go down to lower places. Jesus told his listeners that if instead they sought the lowest places at the table, the host might invite them to come up higher.

This story is not just about etiquette and humility. In its own succinct way, it gives us a map of life and some wisdom for living well. One clue to this is Luke's inclusion of one guest's reaction to the story: "Blessed is the one who will dine in the Kingdom of God." There's more to this story than meets the eye.

The guests who race for the highest places are like people who "want it all and want it now." They are on the fast track and nothing is going to stop them. Then one day, when they think that have it all, something happens—they get fired, they get sick, a crisis befalls a family member, or their marriage falls apart due to neglect. Figuratively, the dinner host (a.k.a. "life") removes them from their top spot and shows them to a lower place, and they are humiliated.

The guests who start by choosing the lowest places are like people who know that while it's nice to be at the top in life, the more important thing is to build, step by step, a solid spiritual foundation. They start early on, when in unprestigious places, to be faithful, to be fair, to be concerned with the welfare of others, to put God and family first. Everything they do is done in the name of service. They may or may not be invited to the head of the table. If they are, they will bring there the wise and generous spirit that will allow them to remember what it's for. If not, they will top the list of people from all walks of life who know the satisfaction of a life well lived in service of God and humanity. Indeed, "blessed is the one who will dine in the Kingdom of God."

What if we started our lives heading for the top and currently find ourselves down at the bottom of the heap? What if we have achieved much but are dissatisfied with our accomplishments? Are we doomed to stay there? Not if we learn our lesson. We can continue to put "success" above everything else if we choose or we can try to discover ways in which we are being called to serve our families, our friends, our colleagues and our world and make that service a priority. The ability to reflect upon our lives and to change is one of God's greatest gifts to us.

Jesus' words provide us much food for thought some 2,000 years after he spoke them. Life can ask the strangest things of us. Sometimes it invites us to the top and at other times it sends us down to the bottom. Jesus tells us that we will always be on top, spiritually speaking, if we take the trouble to make time for the things that are most worthwhile. The Kingdom of God may not appear in the restaurant guides, but it is five-star dining nonetheless.

Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and co-host of "Religion on the Line," Sundays 6-9 a.m. on WABC Radio.

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# Aiming Low

When I was a young teacher interviewing for my first job, I received some memorable advice from a department chairman. "You've had a lot of teaching experience and a lot of academic achievement," he told me. "If you come here and you want to teach these young people to understand what you are teaching, remember this—aim low."

He wasn't kidding. Nor was he demeaning his students. As an experienced teacher, he was giving me one of the best pieces of advice available. Coming out of high school and having enjoyed there the abundance of ideas, I would be tempted to "wow" my students with my knowledge (or at least, with my impression of my knowledge) and to talk miles above their heads. The chairman's advice—"Aim low"—was meant to tell me to teach my students simply and clearly, and to be patient when they struggled to understand.

I took the job, but I didn't heed the advice. Looking back, I still get embarrassed when I think of the first month I taught that first month. Yes, it was only for a month. Something happened one rainy Saturday afternoon that changed the course of my life as a teacher. I was reading in the college library, when suddenly there came over me an oppressive sense of death. A few hours later I learned that at that

moment, four of our students—two of them my students—were killed in a car accident on the slippery road that was bringing them back home from a game.

Over the following days, I talked to the loved ones of those students. I listened to their grief, experienced their tears, heard the stories they told about those young men. When I went back into the classroom the following Monday, I saw the empty seats where only the previous Friday, bright young men had sat. It was a chilling emptiness.

When I had a chance to reflect upon it all, I wondered, for a while, whether the philosophy and theology that I was teaching were really all that important. But then I realized that this wasn't the lesson I was supposed to learn. It dawned on me that the young men and women who sat in front of me every day were not just grades and faces; they were people who were very dear to other people. They had parents and grandparents, sisters, brothers and friends who loved them dearly. They mattered. It became clear to me that if I were ever going to teach them anything, I would need to take an interest in their lives and let them matter to me. I realized then that over a grim weekend, the boys who died had taught me more philosophy than I had

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taught them in a month. They taught me, "Aim low."

I was reading a book about liturgy and chant recently, and the author pointed out that the structure of chant and liturgy (as well as the architecture of many of our churches) is designed, not so much to lift us heavenward, as to bring heaven down to earth and provide place and space for it. I thought about the Lord's Prayer—its requests of the Father in heaven are that his kingdom come, that his will be done on earth as in heaven, that he may give us our daily bread, and that we might practice forgiveness, be forgiven and avoid evil. It asks that God might come among us in our daily lives, that instead of aiming high, God might "aim low" and incline his ear to us. It asks that we might matter to him.

Our Catholic faith tells us that we do matter to God, and that our challenge is to learn to let God and others matter to us. Though we want to aim high, we do well to aim low, to appreciate the beauty in small things and in ordinary people, and to find there the presence of God.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and co-host of "Religion on the Line," Sundays 6-9 a.m. on WABC Radio.*





## *Spiritual Matters*

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# Security Inside and Out

The telephone rang the other day, and it was an old friend who just wanted to talk. He was feeling down, he said, and just needed someone to listen to him. Among other things, he had been listening to the news and was frustrated by it. All of the news about terrorism and stepped-up security had taken its toll on him. "I can't figure it out," he told me. "The more they step up security, the less secure I feel. I feel more and more frightened and worried every day."

There's no question about it, security is a necessity of life these days. We need to protect ourselves from terrorists and use a wide variety of means to do so. Even if we worry about the effects of terrorism, we can feel grateful for the degree to which we can feel safe as we go about our daily lives.

But where my friend needed help was in his understanding of security. Outer security is one thing. But true security is not to be found in external means of protection. On the contrary, security, in the truest sense of the word, is something that we must experience on the inside.

I often remember the time, when I was a kid, when our next-door neighbors were going on vacation. The day before they went away, they boarded up the doors and windows to their house, including

the basement windows. The place looked like a fortress, with only the front door remaining unblocked. I asked my Dad whether we were going to do something similar when we went away. "No, son," he replied. "We're going to take normal precautions and then leave our house in the hands of God."

Through the years, I've remembered that incident as an example of the meaning of true security. Though our neighbors had shored things up on the outside, it was clear that they were pretty nervous on the inside. My dad taught me a valuable lesson about security that day. It's not enough to have security on the outside, we also have to have it on the inside.

Looking up the word "security" in the dictionary, I discovered that its roots derive from Latin words meaning "to care for oneself." That is true of both outward and inward security. Having adequate security measures in a country is a way of taking care of its citizens. It can help to allay their fears and send a message to enemies that we are ready, willing and able to protect and defend ourselves.

But people like my friend need more than that. In fact, we all do, when it comes right down to it. For we need to take care of ourselves by acknowledging the guidance and protection of the God who made

us and to let our faith in him be an active and regular part of our everyday life.

The Psalms are a wonderful place to go for renewing our sense of security in the Lord.

"Happy are all who take refuge in God!" (Psalm 2:11.) "Lord, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my God, my rock of refuge, my shield, my saving horn, my stronghold!" (Psalm 18: 3.) "My safety and glory are with God, my strong rock and refuge." (Psalm 62: 8.) "More powerful than the roar of many waters, more powerful than the breakers of the sea, powerful in the heavens is the Lord." (Psalm 93:4.) "In danger I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free." (Psalm 118: 5.) "Our help is the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 124:8.) "My eyes are upon you, O God, my Lord; in you I take refuge." (Psalm 141:8.) Keeping these powerful words by our side, we can recall them in times of danger and feel secure in the Lord.

We are grateful for the many security systems that are at work in our country today. But even more, we are grateful for the presence of God, who is our true rock of safety.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and co-host of "Religion on the Line," Sundays 6-9 a.m. on WABC Radio.*



7/04

# I Call You Friends

I am blessed with good friends into whose presence God calls me just when I need them most. To me they are very special, but to the rest of the world they are not especially famous or noteworthy. No matter, they are my friends, and that's all that counts. Recently, I spent an evening with a group of them, and afterwards I reflected upon what makes them so special to me.

First, there is their devotion to family. Their families, both growing and diminishing with the passage of time, are very dear to them. They cherish their loved ones and for all the world would do nothing deliberately to hurt them. Their love for their families brings a familial quality to our friendship.

Second, there is their passion for ideas. My friends love to think, to talk and to laugh. They question. They are curious. They love to tease one another and do so with tremendous sensitivity and kindness. They are incredibly wise. Recently, one of them said to me, "I've learned that I cannot always have happiness, but I can always have peace of heart." See what I mean? I learn from them, and at least they are kind enough to say that sometimes they even learn from me.

Third, my friends have an unshakable faith in God. They have been sorely tested over the years

and are fully convinced that God is there for them. They pray on a regular basis, and would not think of doing otherwise. Their faith means the world to them, and they will tell you that they could never make it without God's protection and guidance. When my faith becomes shaky, I am glad to have theirs to draw upon.

Fourth, my friends live simple lives. They enjoy life's good things, but they know that those good things are pretty dry without love. It's love and laughter and the simple things that make the difference for them. My friends help me to remember what is truly important in life.

Fifth, my friends are always there in good times and in bad. There for each other, and there for me. They know the difference between friends who are there all of the time and friends who are there only when times are good. They face tough moments in their lives and they know how much they appreciate a kind word or deed. Because they know that, they also know how to extend that same helping hand when others need it.

Sixth, my friends are always reaching out for new life. They know that the secret to happiness lies in always doing or planning something new. There's always a new part of the world to visit, a new

experience to enjoy, a new project to undertake or a new person to get to know. Life is never stagnant for them because they choose that it not be. They also know that there is great happiness to be discovered right in their own backyard. They look to their own homes and neighborhoods for opportunities to help and to improve things. Somehow they manage to combine a great appreciation for their accomplishments with a boundless zeal for creating a better future.

Finally, my friends are honest. If they don't like something or if they disagree with something, they say so. They respect my opinion and they respect me. I always know that they have my best interests at heart, even when they're telling me something difficult to hear.

"I call you friends" (John 15:15). Jesus called his disciples friends and taught them how to be friends as well. Paraphrasing another passage from John, St. Aelred of Rievaulx wrote, "God is friendship, and whoever abides in friendship abides in God and God in them." Perhaps it is in true friendship that we best show ourselves to be in the image of God.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and co-host of "Religion on the Line," Sundays 6-9 a.m. on WABC Radio.*

*Spiritual Matters*

*Father Paul Keenan*





## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# A Papal Formula for Youth

A few weeks ago, I was doing some research for a book I'm writing on young heroes, when I came across a homily given by Pope John Paul II at World Youth Day 2000 in Toronto. In the course of that homily, the Holy Father encouraged his young listeners to maintain their sense of hope. "I have seen enough evidence," he told them, "to be unshakably convinced that no difficulty, no fear is so great that it can completely suffocate the hope that springs eternal in the hearts of the young."

When you think of all of the things the Holy Father has seen in his long life, his statement to those young people was a truly powerful one. No difficulty, no fear can completely suffocate the hope that springs eternal. With these words, he both acknowledged their hope and evoked it. And at the same time, he effectively formulated a blueprint for keeping our hearts young, regardless of what age we are.

There are two parts to the Holy Father's formula for youth. No difficulty can suffocate hope. No fear is great enough to stifle it. In this formulation, the pope includes both the exterior and the interior aspects of our lives. He affirms that hope touches the whole person,

inside and out.

First, he says, "No difficulty." Let's face it, this pope has seen his share of difficulties. Three that come to mind have been the challenge of communism, the attempted assassination and his daily battle with illness. And they are really just the tip of the iceberg. Yet no matter what his challenges, he continues to make plans, to look to the future. That is the work of hope: to eagerly and expectantly press onward in the face of obstacles. Hope has a way of allowing us to look forward so as to keep us from being imprisoned by the burdens we face.

Second, the Holy Father says, "No fear." Fear can cripple us, even when, objectively speaking, there is nothing to be afraid of. It robs us of our zest for life. When our hearts are full of fear, we are crippled. Hope changes that. It emboldens us, gives us courage and sense of strength. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13)." These words of St. Paul are the very essence of hope.

They also sum up the spirit of Pope John Paul's papacy. The words of Jesus, "Do not be afraid," have been his constant cry wherever he

has gone in the world. The pope knows full well that fear robs us of our effectiveness. Whether we are afraid of ourselves, of someone else or of some force or object outside of us, fear keeps us from being effective and it steals from us the joy of life.

There is one more thing the Holy Father's words convey: a sense of the eternal. When we are hopeless, we feel locked into the cares of the world. We lose perspective. Hope takes us instead into the realm of eternity, where infinite resources are at our disposal.

Finally, the Pope tells us, hope "springs." It doesn't creep or crawl or slink. It springs, both in the sense of leaping and in the sense of bringing spring into our hearts. We just feel better when we hope.

So there it is, the Holy Father's formula for youth. The power of hope gets us beyond our external difficulties and our internal fears and allows us to bask in the eternal spring that keeps us thinking ahead, looking forward and enjoying the very best that life has to offer.

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*Spiritual Matters*

*Father Paul Keenan*

## Incomprehensible Certainty

**Y**ou do not mean by mystery what a Catholic does. You mean an interesting uncertainty: the uncertainty ceasing, interest ceases also.... But a Catholic by mystery means an incomprehensible certainty: without certainty, without formulation there is no interest;... the clearer the formulation the greater the interest."

I stumbled across these words of the 19th-century Jesuit priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins only recently. They were written to his friend Robert Bridges, the British poet laureate, in a letter sent in 1883. Like much of his poetry, these words of Hopkins demand considerable reflection; but when that time is given, the reader is rewarded with eye-opening insight.

Hopkins is saying here that there are two ways to approach mystery in life. In virtue of the first, we focus on the enigmatic and incomprehensible character of life. This approach is the one we are more accustomed to when it comes to mystery. When we say that life is a mystery, we generally mean that it is full of puzzles and conundrums, challenges that we find difficult to overcome and happenings (some good, some bad) that we struggle to understand. Whether our focus be upon the death of a loved one or the beauty of a sunset, the mystery lies in the fact

that we cannot fully figure out what is going on. If enough strange events come our way, we shake our heads and wonder how we will ever survive in a world that is so much beyond our comprehension and control. This is the state of "interesting uncertainty" that Hopkins refers to in his letter to Bridges.

Sound familiar? If so, consider the second way of defining mystery, the way that Hopkins calls "incomprehensible certainty." Here, we still face failure, sickness, death and betrayal on the one hand, and the grandeur of a starry sky, the breathtaking majesty of a mountain and the endearing playfulness of a puppy or a kitten on the other. Yet, instead of being confused by the apparent randomness of what life deals out to us, we sense that there is some sort of plan to it all. We come to trust that, even though we haven't much of a clue about the specifics of that plan.

This is what Hopkins means by "incomprehensible certainty": we come to count on there being an overarching plan and we surrender to God who is the Author of that plan. Note that Hopkins calls it "certainty." He is not speaking of what we call "blind faith," as wonderful as that can be. No, he is talking about a knowing, a deep inner knowing, that the apparent disorder of life is merely an appearance, and

that the reality is harmony, clarity and consonance. "There lives," as Hopkins says in his poem "God's Grandeur," "the dearest freshness deep down things." Knowing this, we feel safe.

Such certainty, Hopkins says, is "incomprehensible." How do we know? We just know. "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word." "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done." "My Lord and my God!" These expressions defy comprehension while disclosing remarkable wisdom and insight.

Can we pass from interesting uncertainty to incomprehensible certainty, and if so, how? In a lovely poem called "Peace," Hopkins laments that peace is fleeting, though we long for it so. He ruminates, "O surely, reaving Peace, my Lord should leave in lieu/Some good! And so he does leave Patience exquisite/That plumes to Peace thereafter."

It is patience, literally the ability to suffer and to allow, that transports us from interesting uncertainty to incomprehensible certainty. And in the end, patience plumes to peace.

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# Three Kinds of Hope

**W**hy don't you write a column about hope?" some friends asked me not so long ago. When I asked them why, their answer rang true to my own experience. "We need to hear about hope," they said, "because life is difficult, and so many people we know are feeling very hopeless." I'd noticed that myself, especially during this exceptionally cold winter.

There are three kinds of hope, really; and the reason so many people seem to feel hopeless has a lot to do with the fact that they have opted for a lesser kind of hope. Most of the time when we speak of hope, we are saying, "I really wish that what I'm hoping for would come true, but I don't think it will." You know what I mean. You've doubtless found yourself saying at one time or other, "I hope I passed that exam," "I hope I can lose weight," or "I hope I can make more money next year."

There's a self-fulfilling prophecy tucked away in our expression of hope, and it is empowered by the belief or the fear that what we are wishing for will not come to pass. We often pray that way, turning our prayers into a wish list that, deep down, we're afraid that God won't honor.

Is it any wonder that we feel our prayers aren't answered, when we have included in them a belief that God won't answer them in our favor?

Thankfully, there is another kind of hope, a much deeper and better kind. This is the kind we experience whenever we are lifted out of despair. This type of hope is accompanied by a deeply felt sense of relief. There's nothing better than hearing someone say, "Your words gave me hope." Most of us have had moments—perhaps even months or years—when we have been close to despair. How wonderful it is when a prayer, a Scripture passage, or a word from a friend lifts us out of our doldrums and makes us feel that we can overcome our difficulty and experience true peace and joy again. This kind of hope is a beautiful experience, indeed.

The third kind of hope is the best kind of all. It is hope in God. Here, hope means acknowledging that God is with us, that he cares for us, and that we know that we can place all of our trust in him. This kind of hope is not a sort of begrudging acknowledgement of the theoretical role of divine providence in our lives. Rather, it is an absolute knowing that we are never far

from the presence of God. The Psalmist captures beautifully the spirit of this supreme hope: "The Lord is my strength and my shield, in whom my heart trusted and found help. So my heart rejoices; with my song I praise my God" (Psalm 28:7).

If we are looking to experience this third kind of hope on a regular basis, we must begin to look for signs of God's love in the things that occur in our lives each day. They are very simple occurrences usually, and they often take the form of what we like to call "coincidences," though they are far from coincidental. Sometimes, though, they are downright dramatic. In front of me on my desk is a note I received from someone who wrote to express her gratitude for the televised Daily Mass produced by our own Instructional Television. Here is the text of her note, verbatim: "83 yr. Old. 3X Cancer Surgery—breast, tongue, lung—VERY grateful for my blessings."

Now there's hope for you!

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## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# God Is at the End of Your Rope

There is nothing that will drive you to prayer sooner than having a column to write and not having a clue what you are going to write about. Come to think of it, most of our really worthwhile experiences begin in ignorance. It's amazing. If you're a fledgling cook and you've ever tried to follow a recipe, you know what I'm saying. Over the years, I've become a halfway decent cook; but I remember years ago working in a parish where the staff members were expected to take turns cooking. I had absolutely no idea what to do in a kitchen.

As I recall, the menu for my maiden voyage had meat loaf as its main course. Never in the history of humankind has a meat loaf occasioned so much consternation. Or, as it turned out, so much laughter. When all was said and done, my lovely meat loaf came out of the oven...as flat as a pancake! How was I supposed to know to take the "loaf" part of the name seriously?

It's a truism, they say, that ignorance is bliss. On the contrary, ignorance is anything but bliss. People who suffer from attacks of severe anxiety will tell you that a main cause of their angst is the realization that they do not know or might not

know what to do in a given situation. It's often called the "what if" syndrome. What if I got into the car and had an accident? What if I went on that job interview and started to sweat? What if I went to the gym and everybody made fun of my size? "What if"—the fear of not knowing what to do—is the major cause of much of the pain we put ourselves through.

The truth is, ignorance can be a powerful enemy if we go around fearing it and a wonderful friend if we employ it as an ally. Unfortunately, we often mistake ignorance for stupidity. But stupidity is an alleged inability to grasp ideas, whereas ignorance is the simple fact of not knowing. A great deal of what we call stupidity could be cured if we would just re-label it as ignorance. Most of the people we so readily call "stupid" are not stupid at all. They simply don't know something. Once they learn it, often enough they are up and running with the best of them.

So, what do we do when we don't know what to do? The first and most important thing to do is to relax. We tend to worry about how we are going to be perceived, when as a matter of fact, most of the people whose perceptions we worry about

couldn't really care less if we made a mistake. Our "what-ifs" are usually overinflated. Besides, is there really a good reason to ruin our lives and our enjoyment over what someone else might think?

If the meat loaf goes flat, laugh with those who are laughing and make a better one next time. If your financial situation goes south, sit down and work out a game plan for getting back on your feet. Ask for help. If you're nervous about giving a speech, ask someone to help you prepare. Confide your fears to someone who has been there, someone of whom you can ask specific questions. What do I do if I get up there and start to feel sick? What do I do if I find myself getting tongue-tied? A good friend can help you get the situation under control.

And don't forget to turn to God as a partner. St. Paul was right: "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." When you are at the end of your rope, God is also at the end of your rope. Never forget that.

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*Spiritual Matters*

*Father Paul Keenan*

## February's Contrasts

2/04

If any month of the year needed a spin doctor, it would be February. Over the years, this month has developed a terrible reputation. Shakespeare, for instance, in "Much Ado About Nothing," spoke of a "February face, so full of frost, of storm and cloudiness." Who would want a February face?

It gets worse. Toward the middle of the last century, the American naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch, in a line frostier than February's coldest day, wrote, "The most serious charge which can be brought against New England is not Puritanism but February." Ouch.

What's wrong with February, I wonder, and why does it have such enemies? We can turn back to Shakespeare for an answer, one that the Bard himself ought to have thought about when evaluating the second month of the year: "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars, but in ourselves." Perhaps the fault lies, not with February, but with our perception of it.

Let's turn to Emily Dickinson who, in her poem "The Blue Jay," gave us a positive rendering of what February can offer. Instead of seeing the month as a monochrome of gray, the Belle of

Amherst (forgive us, Mr. Krutch, but she was a New Englander) found that, despite the ill winds of February, the little bird "was never blown away." Indeed, she reports, "The snow and he are intimate; I've often seen them play/When heaven looked upon us all/With such severity." The glory of February lies in its wonderful power to elicit contrasts—wind and stability, frost and play, gloomy darkness and the jaunty twitter of a chipper little bird.

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***The essence of February lies in its ability to highlight opposites. That is the skill February is meant to teach us.***

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Just look at the feasts we celebrate in February. February in the Church begins with candles. There is Candlemas Day, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, on which people bring candles from home to be blessed. The following day we celebrate St. Blase, and we use yesterday's newly blessed candles to bless the throats of all who come. In the secular world, there is Valentine's Day, a time for couples to express

and renew their love. This year, Ash Wednesday begins on Feb. 25, heralding the season of Lent, a time when we juxtapose sin and forgiveness, alienation and conversion, death and life. "Turn away from sin," we are exhorted, "and be faithful to the Gospel."

All of these feasts are celebrated against the backdrop of one of the coldest, grayest months of the year. What irony, what contrast!

The essence of February lies in its ability to highlight opposites. That is the skill February is meant to teach us. Just as many see only the gray in February, so do many of us see just the gray in life. In life, as in February, it's the negative that we so often envision, and in such abundance. Yet February asks us to look again. Where we experience cold and gray, we are asked to bring out candles with their warmth and light. When we feel lifeless and monotone, February asks us to take note of love. When we feel trapped in difficult circumstances, it exhorts us to look for new life.

Look again. February is not so bad, after all.

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## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# A Treasure in Clay Jars

Jan. 18-25 is set aside each year as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year, the theme of this week of prayer comes from the second letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians: "We have this treasure in clay jars." (2 Corinthians 4: 7) The passage is meant to be a reminder that the one treasure that is our belief in Christ is often manifested in circumstances that are very tenuous and fragile. All too often, we feel overwhelmed by the situations in which we find ourselves. We feel alone, and often we feel broken. Yet as St. Paul reminded the Corinthians, we have an "extraordinary power" within us that belongs to God and does not come from us. "So," as Paul says, "we do not lose heart."

Why a week of prayer for Christian Unity? I was very taken this year by the practical nature of the guidelines for the week. They emphasize that so many throughout the world are living in "earthen vessels" situations brought on by famine, wars and religious persecutions. Others experience tremendous loneliness and sadness as they try to make their way in large urban environments that are sometimes alienating and overwhelming. We could certainly add those who suffer from illness, poverty and discrimination. There is a powerful need for the churches to reach out with their "hidden treasure," to

"let light shine out of darkness," as St. Paul says. We will do this most effectively if our own divisions are healed.

It goes without saying that prayer and work toward Christian unity is itself a monumental task that occupies much more than just a week per year of our time and attention. In the Archdiocese of New York, our Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, headed by Father Robert Aufieri, is continuing dialogues with specific religious groups to address similarities and differences. At the moment, there are active dialogues with Anglicans and Lutherans, and the hope is to extend this dialogue to as many other groups as possible. Non-Christian religions are an integral part of this dialogue as well; and there are active dialogues with Jews, Muslims and Buddhists.

On a personal note, I am pleased to learn that I have been appointed to the Jewish Dialogue, joining dedicated Catholic clergy, religious and laity who volunteer their time to break bread with their counterparts of other religions. We pray for ever-deeper understanding and ever-greater ability to work together to heal the divisions that so often scar our world today.

We Roman Catholics bring a rich treasure of Scripture, tradition, doctrine, prayer and social concern to the table when we meet with people of other faiths.

This is reflected both in our dialogues and in our everyday encounters with the people who are a part of our lives. For the healing of divisions that is done in ecumenical dialogue is only a reflection of the healing that is accomplished through the respect and kindness with which we meet one another in the course of the day. In both cases, though we agree on some things and disagree strongly on others, in the end our manner of reflecting God's infinite kindness will win the day.

For when all is said and done, it is respect and kindness that embody what people long for when they feel like "clay jars" and find the clay breaking and crumbling before their very eyes. Our theology, our prayer and our social practice must tell them that, despite what they might feel, they are not stupid or powerless or hopeless victims of bad fortune. Together we must tell them and show them that there is within them a core of wholeness that can never be broken, and we must let them know that by focusing on that treasure they will find God's "extraordinary power" renewing itself within them day by day.

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