

# LIVING OUR FAITH



ARTICLES BY  
**Br. Columba Gleeson**

Originally published in Today's Catholic Kuching



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Originally published in  
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## FOREWORD

*LIVING OUR FAITH* was born out of the desire to share wholesome and salutary reading materials on the Catholic faith, presented in a light-and-easy reading manner, by an acclaimed teacher, a De La Salle Brother, who has devoted almost the whole of his working life teaching in Sarawak, Malaysia.

Like most of the De La Salle Brothers, Brother Columba Gleeson, the author of this book, was an extremely dedicated teacher. To his former students he carries with him a mark of excellence as a teacher. If you read this book you will have a good idea of why it is so. Some of you would most likely recognize the source of the articles that form the contents of this publication.

The articles were originally published as a series over a period of 15 years in the *Today's Catholic*, a monthly publication by the Archdiocese of Kuching. The first article written was published in the September 1997 issue while the last article was published in December 2012. The last article was accompanied by a special appreciation by the Management of *Today's Catholic* on the writer's contribution towards the publication. It was principally for health reasons that the writer decided to discontinue the series. Upon the discontinuation of the series some loyal followers and fans felt a sense of void. This feeling sparked the idea of sharing and extending these beautiful pieces of writings to many others who have missed these gems of spiritual thoughts and words of wisdom, illustrated with short and simple stories. These stories gently lead the readers towards the central message or the lesson to be learned. These stories are cleverly linked to the words of the Greatest Teacher of all, Our Lord Jesus Christ. The emphasis is almost always on love, mercy and justice as taught by the Lord and Master.

## FOREWORD

The articles share with us good values, the priorities in life and how to be true disciples of the Lord Jesus as we journey through life. They also define our relationships with our Creator, families, neighbours and the community around us. Readers will find this book particularly useful for reflections on our lives, as well as for the Special Events in our Church Calendar. It is a publication recommended for both the young and old, as it can help them set their priorities in life from a Christian perspective, and live a life pleasing to God and our neighbours.

Lastly, it is pertinent to mention here that *Living Our Faith* is in a way a sister publication to an earlier book *The Signpost*, published in the year 2000. The book was also a collection of articles which were first written for the *Today's Catholic*, by another prominent and outstanding De La Salle teacher, Brother Albinus, who served as an educationist practically all his life in Sarawak.

***Archbishop Dato John Ha***

Kuching, Sarawak

14th June 2013

## INTRODUCTION

These articles were written in Ireland over a period of fifteen years, for publication each month in *Today's Catholic* newspaper in Kuching. They represent a labour of love for a Church in which I lived and worked for thirty years. Though published as part of a series titled *Signpost*, each article stands on its own, so readers may choose topics at random. They are not meant to be profound theological or doctrinal presentations but are very much personal musings and reflections on what it means to be a Christian today, and which I hope will be a source of some encouragement and inspiration. The stories used are ones I have heard or read from various sources over the years and have been adapted so as to best illustrate particular topics.

Though each article is separate there is a common theme running through them, namely that our Christian faith must go beyond doctrinal beliefs and religious practices, to find expression in every aspect of our daily living and relationships. The religious leaders in Jesus' time were strict observers of the law and of religious rituals but were roundly condemned for neglecting "to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty." In many cases I have found writing these articles personally challenging and even disturbing. I hope readers will have the same experience, for we all at times need to be disturbed in our comfort zones.

I am aware that the articles contain much repetition of ideas, of quotations and of gospel references. When written and read at intervals of several months or years this was not so noticeable as when they are published together in one volume. For editorial purposes I could attempt to correct the problem, but it would tend to be artificial, because in the normal course of

# INTRODUCTION

thinking and reflecting, we all find ourselves returning to the same ideas, particularly if they lie at the heart of our personal convictions. I have no regrets about this, for as teachers know, repetition is often needed to drive a lesson home. I hope readers will take time to reflect prayerfully on each message, perhaps taking just one article a day as part of their spiritual diet. May the Lord bless each of us and may his Spirit touch our hearts and transform our lives as we journey on.

My sincere thanks goes to those friends in Kuching who suggested and undertook the publication of this book, for their generous support and encouragement, all much appreciated.

***Br. Columba Gleeson***

**PART 1**

**REFLECTIONS**

**FOR**

**DAILY LIVING**

## 01 TRAVELLING LIGHT

It is the summer holiday season and airports are crowded with people coming and going on holidays. I always find airports fascinating places to observe human behaviour; the joyful reunions and sorrowful farewells, the hours of waiting for flights to land and take off, lonely faces in crowded places. It all seems so symbolic of the comings and goings, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears of our journey through life itself.

A particularly interesting aspect of the airport scene is to observe the amount of luggage people carry, ranging from backpackers with nothing but a rucksack on their back, to others burdened and hassled with numerous cases. Here again we find a reflection of human life. Some travel light through life, satisfied with meeting ordinary daily needs and comforts, with no particular ambition to pile up excess baggage. At the other extreme are those with an addictive obsession for collecting ever more and more in terms of wealth and possessions. The former go through life relatively carefree, happy and open to others. The latter are often burdened with many fears and worries, calling for high fences and protective security devices, as they withdraw into lonely isolation.

Many readers may have heard the story of how some West African hunters catch monkeys. They slice a small piece off a fallen coconut, making a hole just big enough for the monkey's paw to go in. They then put some groundnuts into the coconut and leave it for the monkey to discover. As soon as he does he inserts his paw and grabs some groundnuts, but then finds that the full paw cannot come out through the small hole. Too greedy and short-sighted to let go of the nuts, he hobbles about dragging the coconut, unable to run or climb and is easily captured. It is sad that so many 'intelligent' humans behave likewise, weighed down by excess baggage and unwilling to let go of what they don't need.

## 01 TRAVELLING LIGHT

Most of the burdens we carry in life are self-imposed and could be greatly reduced by a truly Christian vision that does not take either ourselves or our possessions too seriously. We need a liberating awareness that we are only transit passengers here below, that even the most 'important' of us is totally dispensable and that ultimately we can take nothing with us when we go. That's why the only garment which never needs a pocket is a burial shroud, and why we never find a shop in a cemetery! Of course the burdens which weigh us down are not caused only by material things. Much of our excess baggage lies within us: in hurtful memories, anger, guilt, hatred or broken relationships, perhaps from long ago but which we still cling on to. They weigh us down and restrict our inner freedom and growth. We need to 'let go' of these demons through forgiveness and healing if we are to experience again what St Paul calls "the freedom of the children of God".

As always Jesus is our perfect model. He travelled light through life, having no regard for wealth, obsequious titles or grand dress. In his reference to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field (Mt.6:26-34) he teaches us that our true worth in the eyes of God is not measured by titles or possessions. But as Albert Nolan points out in his book *Jesus Today*, we Christians "don't really take Jesus seriously...by and large we don't love our enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive seventy times seven, share what we have with the poor and put all our hope and trust in God". Some even wonder if Jesus really meant what he said? We pay pious lip service to his teachings but don't allow them to affect us much in practice. After all we are not saints and have to be practical!

In a world of widespread hunger and suffering let us learn to count our blessings, to reassess our priorities, to distinguish between our needs and our wants, to let go and share with those whose needs are much greater than our own. For blessed indeed is the cheerful giver.

## 02 OUR WORLD IS HOLY

I recently came across the following North American Indian prayer in a Catholic prayer book:

“Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me. I am small and weak. I need your strength and wisdom. Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset. Make my hands respect the things you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice. Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.”

As I reflected on the deep spirituality of this prayer I was reminded of one of the first catechism questions I learned as a child at school...“Where is God?” and the short but profound answer, “God is everywhere.” Nobody realised this truth more than Jesus, whose life, mission and spirituality was deeply integrated with nature, from his birth in a stable, surrounded by animals, to his ascent into heaven from a hill-top in Galilee. He was baptised in a river, fasted in the wilderness and taught the crowds from lakeside and hillside. He prayed in agony in a garden the night before he was cruelly crucified on the hill of Calvary.

In his teachings and parables, Jesus made frequent references to nature; to vineyards and harvest fields, to fishing and herding, to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. We are told that “long before daybreak he went away to a lonely place, where he prayed,” communing deeply with the Father in the midst of his creation, God’s great earthly cathedral. To him nature was a sacrament, a sign proclaiming the awesome glory and generosity of the creator.

The Old Testament, especially the Psalms, makes frequent reference to creation as expressing the power and glory and generosity of God.

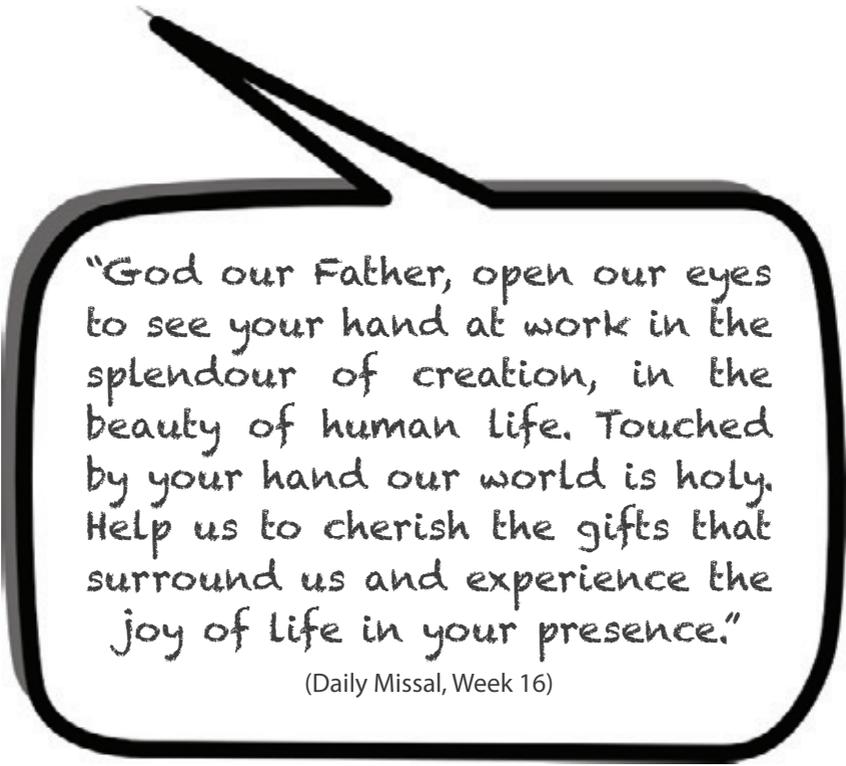
## 02 OUR WORLD IS HOLY

The Canticle of Daniel urges all of creation to sing the praises of God..“O all you works of the Lord, O bless the Lord” And down through the ages great poets and mystics have experienced the presence and glory of God through the wonders of the universe. St Francis of Assisi was famous for his love of nature and in his Canticle of the Sun he speaks of Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Mother Earth.

Have we, in our modern technological world, lost this sense of awe, reverence and mystery before the presence of God who is all around us? Have religions themselves tended to diminish God, to tame, domesticate and limit him to “holy” times and places, to dogmas and doctrines? And is this loss of a sense of the sacred in nature and in life an important cause of the threat being caused to our planet through pollution, deforestation and global warming? Scientists warn us that rising temperatures are already rapidly melting polar ice-caps, causing sea levels to rise, threatening coastal lowlands and cities with permanent flooding. In other regions it will lead to increasing drought, expansion of desert areas and widespread starvation. The commercial rape of the world’s forests is already proving disastrous to traditional peoples who have always lived in harmony with nature, polluting their rivers, destroying their food sources and threatening their way of life and very survival. At the heart of this problem, described by scientists as “the most critical danger human society has ever faced” lies a combination of corporate greed and political corruption which have no regard for the future wellbeing of society.

## 02 OUR WORLD IS HOLY

U.N. Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon believes religions have a unique role to play in the struggle to save the environment, claiming they can do what governments rarely do, that is inspire people to change their attitudes and behaviour. As we began this article with an American Indian prayer, let us finish with a prayer of the Church:



"God our Father, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendour of creation, in the beauty of human life. Touched by your hand our world is holy. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us and experience the joy of life in your presence."

(Daily Missal, Week 16)

## 03 OUR GUIDE IN JOY AND SORROW

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is one of the outstanding features of Catholic faith and practice. In fact most mainstream Christian Churches hold Mary in high esteem and honour her. But it is in the Catholic Church that devotion to Mary is most widespread and finds the richest diversity of expression; in liturgical feasts, in titles of honour, in reported apparitions and messages, in places of pilgrimage, in religious objects such as statues and medals and in a wide variety of devotions such as novenas and above all the rosary. By long established tradition the month of October each year is especially devoted to the rosary.

In our rich array of devotions towards Mary two aspects are important. First, all veneration of Mary has its origin in her son; in her unique vocation as the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ; as the one whose ‘Yes’ brought about the Incarnation. Secondly, though privileged by God because of her unique role in our redemption, Mary remains one of us. She is not divine, not a goddess. We venerate and honour her, but never worship her. She is a human person of flesh and blood like us, and therefore an inspirational model of how to be true to God amidst the struggles and uncertainties of ordinary life. Perhaps a few reflections on the Joyful Mysteries may help us to see this; for the glory of these joyful events was also heavily tinged with suffering and fear. We can easily over-spiritualise scripture scenes, making them ‘nice and holy’ as in our holy pictures. But real life isn’t like that. It wasn’t for Jesus and Mary. And it isn’t like that for us today.

The Incarnation must have been a terrifying experience for a simple, teenage Jewish girl. Mary was “deeply troubled” by the angel’s message that she would become pregnant. How would her parents react? What would Joseph, to whom she was engaged, think? What would the village gossips whisper? Suddenly she was faced with a life-changing situation, but her faith and trust in God were deep and strong and without knowing how it would all

## 03 OUR GUIDE IN JOY AND SORROW

end up, she replied, “May it happen to me as you have said”. How do we react to unexpected and life-changing events, like illness, failure or bereavement in our own lives?

Having learned from the angel that by God’s grace her elderly cousin Elizabeth was six months pregnant, Mary “got ready and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judea”, a long distance from Nazareth. She must surely have been accompanied on this journey that was arduous and dangerous. But Mary’s concerns were for Elizabeth. Mary was a woman for others and stayed with Elizabeth for three months in her time of greatest need. How willing are we to put others’ needs before our own convenience?

When her own time to give birth came it was in circumstances of hardship and worry: the difficult journey to Bethlehem, the search for accommodation, the primitive surroundings of a stable and the absence of any other woman to assist her. Our Christmas scenes are warm and romantic, with choirs of angels and wide-eyed shepherds, overlooking the grim reality of the poverty and distress of that first Christmas night,

And when Joseph and Mary took the child to the Temple to present him to the Lord they were amazed by Simeon’s prophecy that he would be “a light to reveal God’s will to the Gentiles and bring glory to his people, Israel”. But for Mary there was a darker prophecy; “And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart”; words that must have hung over her like a dark cloud in the years ahead, as the image of Calvary loomed on the horizon.

Twelve years later, at the Passover Festival in Jerusalem, the boy Jesus went missing for three days, staying behind in the Temple, while his parents set out for home. When eventually they found him Mary’s heartfelt question,

## 03 OUR GUIDE IN JOY AND SORROW

“Son, why have you done this to us?” is one still familiar to many parents today.

When God put in motion his ‘rescue plan’ for our redemption, the highest honour ever given to a human person went to Mary; not to the powerful and learned but to a humble maiden from Nazareth. Mary’s greatness lay in her total fidelity to the Lord, amidst the joys, sorrows and ordinary events of life, and her selfless concern for the wellbeing of others. As we meditate on the Rosary, whether in personal, family or community prayer let us strive to follow her example in all our seasons, good and bad.



## 04 IN HIS TIME

“One morning I discovered a cocoon (in which a silkworm develops into a butterfly), just as the butterfly was making a hole to come out. I watched in amazement but it was slow in appearing and I grew impatient. I bent over and breathed on it to warm it, and the miracle of life unfolded before my eyes. The cocoon opened and the butterfly began crawling out.

But I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its little wings were folded back and crumpled. The poor butterfly struggled with its whole trembling body to unfold them but in vain. It needed to be hatched out slowly; the unfolding of the wings should have been a gradual process in the sun. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled up, before its time. It struggled desperately, but a few seconds later, it died in the palm of my hand.

I realise today that it is a crime to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient with ourselves or with others, but should confidently obey the eternal rhythm” (adapted from Zorba the Greek)

The experience of Zorba has valuable lessons for all of us. People of earlier generations understood and respected the rhythm of nature, and structured their lives and cultures around it. The Bible tells us, “There is a time for everything happening under heaven. A time for giving birth, a time for dying; a time for planting and a time for uprooting”. We are all part of this rhythm; And Jesus refers to the same rhythm of nature when he says, “A man scatters seed on the soil. Whether he is asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, he does not know how. But when the grain is ripe the man starts cutting it because harvest time has come”...in its own time.

Our generation however is a generation in a hurry, demanding instant results. We rush to work, “clock in” and “clock out”, students are pressured to be ready for exams regardless of differing ability; we have instant food to save cooking time, and instant communication by fax, e-mail and internet. We want instant pleasure, remedies and wealth...all here and now, regardless of future costs. One of the costs is increasing health problems such as high blood-pressure, heart attacks and nervous tensions. Others include strain on family life, with little quality time together, environment destruction and neglect of the spiritual.

Some of the most important aspects of life such as growth, education, friendship, love, faith, conversion and forgiveness are not instant phenomena; they cannot be hurried but are processes that require time and patience. Our God is a waiting God who does not demand instant results; he waits till we are ready.

Yet the more we advance the less time we seem to have to relate, to relax and enjoy life, to experience solitude and prayer. We become slaves to targets and deadlines, get swept along in the rat-race, and before we realise it life has passed us by, before we have really begun to live it. We need to slow down. To develop patience, to keep Zorba’s little butterfly before our minds to show us the way. “Lord, please show me every day that you do just what you say, in your time”



## 05 HOLIER THAN THOU

A young businessman was planning to marry his girlfriend whom he had been dating for some months. However, being cautious by nature, he decided before proposing to her, to employ a private detective agency to check out her character. The agency assigned an experienced detective who had no knowledge of the businessman to conduct the investigation. After detailed secret observation and enquiry, the detective finally submitted his report to the agency. It read as follows. "This is a very charming, honest and honourable young lady. There is only one problem, namely that she has for some time been keeping company with a businessman of very doubtful character and questionable reputation." We don't know what happened next but hope that the good lady escaped marrying such an untrusting, hypocritical and self-righteous person.

In the gospels Jesus' strongest condemnation was directed at the Scribes and Pharisees, the upright and respected religious leaders of his people, who prided themselves on their strict observance of Jewish religious laws and who despised and condemned those who failed to do so. They were blind to their own pride and corruption and assumed that their outward observances assured them of honoured places in heaven. The meek and mild Jesus shocks us by calling them 'hypocrites' and 'snakes', comparing them to whitewashed tombs, clean and shining on the outside but "full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside" (Mt. 23:27).

Those same self-righteous pillars of society, who "loved the best places at feasts and the reserved seats in the synagogue" (Mt.23:6) were scandalised to see Jesus mixing freely with the outcasts of society; with tax-collectors (cheats), prostitutes, adulterers and other sinners. To these he showed compassion, gentleness and forgiveness, for in them he found a sense of need

## 05 HOLIER THAN THOU

of emptiness and longing for his acceptance, mercy and love. Unlike the Pharisees, whose cup was overflowing with pride, the cup of these least of our brothers and sisters was empty and waiting to be filled.

The contrasting attitudes of Jesus towards these two types of people have important implications for all who wish to be his disciples. We can easily be 'converted' by our highly competitive world into judging ourselves and others by external performance and be too ready to put labels on people; 'practising', 'lapsed', 'lukewarm' and so on. We can imagine that we have to earn our way into heaven; that it is a reward for our performance rather than God's free gift to those open and humble enough to receive it, like the good thief who stole his way into paradise! God warned Samuel of old, "Yahweh does not judge as man judges; humans see with the eyes but God sees the heart" (1Sam. 16:7). Jesus warned the Pharisees that they had got their priorities wrong. "You neglect to observe the really important teachings of the Law such as justice, mercy and honesty" (Mt. 23:23).

Our true discipleship is measured by the extent to which we live our ordinary everyday lives according to the teachings and example of Jesus; being humble, truthful, compassionate and helpful in our relations with our family, colleagues, employees and others. Everything else is secondary. The businessman in our opening story was, like the Pharisees, hypocritical and judgemental, wanting his future wife to be perfect, unlike himself.

I once showed some Malaysian friends around Belfast. They were amazed at the number of churches along the route but puzzled by the miles of tall 'Peace Walls', erected to prevent violence and bloodshed between hostile, sectarian Christian groups. I wonder what Jesus thinks of such 'religion'?

## 06 THE LONELY PLACE

Deep in the beautiful hills of Antrim where I manage a hostel called Kilmore House, a Catholic layman, Pdraig Twomey, organises silent weekend retreats four times a year. The participants come from various churches, mostly evangelical, where worship consists mainly of preaching, witnessing, lively praise and worship sessions but very little silence. Here, in the midst of nature, God's own cathedral, they have time for personal reflection, silent prayer and bible reading. They love the silence and go away refreshed and renewed.

Today many people's lives are characterised by noise, speed and the resultant pressures. They seem to fear silence and solitude. Their lives are 'plugged in' to loud music, radio, mobile phone, iPod, TV, etc., all harmless in themselves, offering endless entertainment, communication and distraction. At the same time there are work pressures to achieve results and meet time frames, so that there is little time or quiet for people to stop and ask "Who really am I? What is life all about? Where am I going?" Pressures can threaten to overwhelm us and we can end up leading superficial lives and feeling that our value as human beings is measured only by our achievements.

...it is here in the  
'lonely place'  
that Jesus finds  
the strength and  
courage to do  
the Father's will

The first chapter of Mark's gospel is one of hectic activity as Jesus begins his public ministry, teaching, healing and calling disciples. But in the midst of all this action we suddenly read, "Very early the next morning, long before daybreak, Jesus left the house and went out of town to a lonely place where he prayed" (v.35). Some spiritual writers suggest that it is here in the 'lonely place' that Jesus finds the strength and courage to do the Father's will, the compassion to heal the sick and comfort the troubled, the mercy to forgive sinners, the commitment to persevere to the end, even to death itself.

## 06 THE LONELY PLACE

Again, after teaching and feeding the 5000, we read that Jesus “went off into the hills to pray” (Mk.6:46), and when his disciples returned from their first mission he invited them to “come away to a lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while” (Mk.6:30-31). The ‘lonely place’ was essential for rest, reflection, self-discovery and communion with the Father.

In modern life, more than ever before, we too need a ‘lonely place’, where in quiet and solitude we come face to face with ourselves and with our God. Here the masks we wear can be removed and we can humbly recognise and accept our limitations and acknowledge our dependence on a power greater than ourselves. Here too we come to accept and value our true worth, which far exceeds our achievements. We can cut through all that is superficial in life: the pretences, distractions and distortions to rediscover who we really are and where we are going: to get our lives and our relationships in focus again.

In the Old Testament we read how the prophet Elijah, in near despair at his people’s infidelity, went up Mount Horeb to encounter God. There a mighty hurricane shattered the mountain, then a violent earthquake and a raging fire, but God was not in any of them. There followed a gentle breeze and out of that silence God spoke and ministered to his prophet (1 Kings 19:11-14). Through the psalmist God continues to urge each of us, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:11).

In the midst of the hurricanes and earthquakes, the tensions and struggles that may assail our lives, we need regularly to seek a ‘lonely place’, a quiet room, a chapel or church, a peaceful garden, river, mountain or seaside, where we can rediscover ourselves and the God in whose presence “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) ... even when we forget him.

## 07 GOD COMES LOOKING FOR US

Two clergymen were discussing the scriptures; one old and wise, the other young and learning. The old one asked, "Was the world better off before or after the fall of Adam and Eve?" The young one answered confidently, "That's easy! Surely it was better off before the fall." The old man paused before responding, "No! The world is better off after the fall, because now we have a God who comes to look for us." Then, as now, it is always God who makes the first move.

Genesis tells us that when Adam and Eve, after their sin, hid from God in the garden he came searching for them, calling out, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). Without the fall there would have been no Incarnation, no need for God to enter into our human nature to show us the truth about himself. It was this which caused St. Thomas Aquinas to speak of Original Sin as "Oh happy fault that merited so great a Redeemer", a phrase which we repeat each year in that beautiful Easter hymn, the Exultet.

That idea of a God who reaches out and searches for us, even in our sins, is emphasised throughout the scriptures and reaches its climax in the redemptive mission of Jesus. It is central to his teaching and example as we see in his love, mercy and compassion towards sinners; in his willingness to give his life for us on the cross. For our relationship with God, as portrayed by Jesus, is not one of legalism; of laws and rules, of reward and punishment. It is above all a love story.

The enemies of Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees, were strong on legalism and were scandalised that he was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt.11:19). In more recent times, some older ones among us remember parish missions featuring powerful sermons on sin, judgement, hell-fire and eternal damnation, which sent good simple people home in fear and trembling. There are still Christians whose religion is one of reward and

## 07 GOD COMES LOOKING FOR US

punishment; who see God as a policeman, a spy-in-the-sky God, a banking-system God. Children are warned that God is watching them and will be angry if they do wrong. I have known good-living people who approached death in great fear because this was the God they had been taught to believe in and were asked to love.

Someone has described our God as one of second chances. Peter denied Jesus, Thomas wouldn't believe he had risen, all the disciples abandoned him; yet their failures were forgiven without reprimand and they became the foundation group on which the Church was built. Zaccheus, the adulterous woman, the good thief and many others were given second or indeed many chances. Jesus himself taught us that we should forgive even "seventy-seven times", and surely he practises what he preaches. All that is needed is that we be sorry for our failures and be open to the Lord's loving mercy and forgiveness.

Perhaps the most beautiful parable told by Jesus is that of the Prodigal Son. A young man who thought he knew everything wanted to enjoy the freedom and pleasures of modern living at that time. He claimed his share of the property from his heart-broken father and "went to a country far away where he wasted his money on reckless living" (Lk.15:13). With nothing left, poverty and hunger soon brought him to his senses and he decided to return home in shame. While he was still a long way off his father, who had been longing and waiting for his return "saw him; his heart was filled with pity and he ran to meet him, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Lk.15:20). A big celebration followed, but no scolding, no apologies demanded...just a love that forgives unconditionally and welcomes us home.

That father represents the God of Jesus. May it be our picture of God too; the God we strive to love and serve in his own infinite goodness and in those around us who are precious in his eyes.

## 08 FALSE IMAGE OF GOD

On Sunday night July 11th 2010, eight young men aged 18-24, all from the Inishowen Peninsula here in Ireland were killed in a horrific car crash as they drove home from watching the World Cup Final on a big screen. A whole community was left shocked and confused as their remains were brought to their own parish churches over the following days for requiem Mass and burial. Speaking at one of these services the parish priest shared the community's sense of shock and grief at the senseless loss of so many young lives. He went on to say, "In the face of mystery I don't have answers. But of one thing I am certain. This was not the will of God, for that is not the kind of God we believe in."

These were words of deep spirituality, wisdom and consolation for grieving families and friends from an elderly, compassionate priest. Here in Ireland we tend to refer to tragic events as "the will of God", a phrase rarely used for joyful occasions. It is probably our way of trying to comfort the distressed; to give answers where we don't and can't have answers, but it doesn't

seem fair to God! It is not enough for us to proclaim "We believe in one God", as we do at the beginning of the Creed. Equally, or perhaps more important is the kind of God we believe in. We are told at the beginning of the Bible that God created man and woman in his own image and likeness but sadly, since then, human beings have tended to create God in their own image and likeness; narrow-minded, vindictive, retaliatory, unfeeling and sectarian.

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## 08 FALSE IMAGE OF GOD

Too often religion itself has presented distorted images of God. A God who sends suffering to test and punish us, not only for our own sins but even for those of our ancestors. A God who has enough feeling to be deeply hurt by our sins but not enough feeling to care about our sufferings. A God who miraculously heals the minor ailments of his 'favoured' ones while indifferently allowing 40,000 innocent children to die daily from hunger and disease. A God who sends tsunamis and earthquakes (referred to by insurance companies as 'acts of God!') which claim thousands of innocent lives, to punish a sinful world. Such beliefs and attitudes offend seriously against the 1st Commandment which warns "Thou shalt not have strange (false) Gods before me." The above images are surely false if we accept St. John's definition that "God is love" (1Jn. 4:8)

The real God is of course nowhere more clearly or truly reflected than in the person of Jesus, in whom he 'became flesh'. This was a God who never caused suffering; a God of infinite compassion and mercy, especially for the most despised of sinners. This shocked the self-righteous Pharisees as it would still shock some Christians today. Even in the Old Testament, despite some time and culturally conditioned images of a God of anger and revenge, the predominant image of God is of one who cares; a God who anguishes over his unfaithful spouse Israel but who seeks her out and will not give her up (Hosea 2).

The God of Jesus is not a comfortable God ("unless you take up your cross every day and follow me you cannot be my disciple"), but he is a deeply comforting God, who has shared fully in our human sufferings and sorrows, our darkness and fears. As the people of the Inishowen Peninsula here in Ireland struggled with heart-breaking grief, I'm sure that God wept with them and for them; that he shared deeply in their pain and loss, as he did long ago when his friend Lazarus died and "Jesus wept" (Jn. 11:35)

## 09 BUILDING BRIDGES

A story is told of two brothers who lived on neighbouring farms. They had lived in harmony and friendship for forty years, but then conflict arose between them, beginning with a small misunderstanding which then exploded into bitter words and a long silence.

One morning the older brother John heard a knock on his door. He opened it to find a man standing there, holding a carpenter's toolbox. "Sir, I'm looking for a few days' work", he said. "Perhaps you have some small jobs here that I could do?" John thought for a moment before answering, "Yes, I do have a job for you. Look across at that farm, my younger brother's. Last week there was a green grassy field between us, but he took his bulldozer and dug a deep channel through it, which quickly filled with water from the nearby river, forming an impassable barrier between us. But now I'll do him one better!"

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"I want you to take those wooden planks from the barn and build an eight-foot high fence between us, so I won't see his place or his face any more." The carpenter said, "I think I understand. I promise to do a job that will please you." John had to go away for two days, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then left. The carpenter worked hard all that day and next day, measuring, sawing, nailing. About sunset on the second day when the farmer returned the carpenter had just finished his job

John's eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. There was no fence at all but a fine new bridge, stretching from one side of the water-filled channel to the other. And his younger brother was coming towards them smiling broadly, his

## 09 BUILDING BRIDGES

hand outstretched. "You're quite a fellow to build this bridge," he exclaimed, "after all I've said and done against you." The two met in the middle of the bridge and embraced each other, free again from their self-imposed burdens of anger and guilt. They turned to see the carpenter pick up his toolbox to go away. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've got other projects for you," said John. "I'd love to stay" the carpenter replied, "but I have many more bridges to build".

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they also brought about disharmony and conflict in the human family. We read in the first book of the Bible how their son Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen 4:1-16), and in the same book how Jacob's sons sold their youngest brother Joseph as a slave into Egypt (Gen 37:12-36). Hostility and conflict have been part of the human story ever since, and is often most bitter when it occurs within the family or among close associates. Jesus came among us to build bridges: to bridge the divide between God and humanity and to heal divisions among people.

Yet, as we know, forgiveness is not easy. In confession our focus is often more on externals such as neglecting prayers, missing Sunday Mass or eating meat on Friday rather than on sins of the heart such as failure to forgive. Jesus warned us that if we are about to offer sacrifice and remember that we are in conflict with another, we should first go and make peace with the other and "then come back and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23-24). In the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt 18:21-35) he again emphasises that we cannot expect forgiveness from God if we refuse to forgive even the minor offences of our neighbour.

Enmity and hatred are heavy burdens to carry in life. Forgiving is not surrender or defeat; it is liberation from the burdens of hatred and guilt, both for ourselves and our enemies. Then we can begin living fully once more in the light of Christ, the bridge-building carpenter from Nazareth.

## 10 GOD'S WIFE

On a cold December day in New York city, a thin barefoot boy of about six years old stood staring into a shoe-shop window, shivering with the cold. A kindly woman approached and asked, "Little boy, why are you staring into that window?" "I was asking God for a pair of shoes", he replied sadly. The woman took him by the hand into the shop and asked the assistant to bring him a pair of socks, while she herself invited him to select a pair of shoes. As he put on the socks and fitted on his new shoes, the woman paid the bill. She then accompanied him to the door and patting him on the head said "Now young man, I hope you will be more comfortable". And as she turned to leave, the astonished lad caught her by the hand and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked "Are you God's wife?" With a gentle smile the lady told him, "No my friend, I am just one of his children". The boy's face lit up as he nodded knowingly, "That's it! I just knew you must be related".

Mother Teresa, in her book "Where there is love there is God", proclaimed that God is alive and present among us and wants to love the world through us. "Each of us is in some way called to be a carrier of God's love" she said, "giving us the opportunity to become holy through the works of love that we do, because holiness is not the luxury of the few". Nearly 500 years earlier St. Teresa of Avila expressed the same truth in another way, pointing out that the Jesus who once walked among us doing good now needs our help to continue his work. "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands or feet on earth but yours" she wrote. "Yours are the eyes through which he now looks out with compassion on the world". We do not need to be saints or heroes to be channels of God's love. The woman in our opening story illustrated, in a simple and practical way, that goodness which is our common vocation.

The media often give the impression that we live in a world full of evil; a world of violence and crime, of war and injustice, of selfishness and corruption. Yet if we stop and think of all the people we have known and met, this negative picture of human nature seems far from the truth. It is easy to

overlook the ocean of goodness that is all around us. God is still present, healing and helping, comforting and consoling, through the selfless love, goodness and generosity of ordinary men and women.

When major disasters such as earthquakes, volcanoes and floods occur, international relief agencies spring into action. Large sums of money are raised for aid through the donations of countless 'little people' and many ordinary people like nurses and builders travel to the stricken areas, giving freely of their time and effort to rescue and help the most needy. But it is at local level that this human goodness is often most clearly seen. We see it in families, in the sacrifices people make for their children and those who are unwell; in the work of volunteers who provide 'meals on wheels' for the elderly and housebound or who staff shelters and 'soup kitchens' for the poor and homeless, or who act as carers for people young and old, with special needs. We see it in the 'down and out' addict who comes out from his dark alleyway to help a blind man across the street.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus describes how two Jewish religious officials walked past the wounded man lying half dead on the road and gave no help. It was a Samaritan, despised by the Jews as a pagan, whose heart was filled with pity and who came to the rescue of the victim, becoming a channel of God's love and mercy. The ocean of goodness which is alive in our world can be found among people of all faiths or of no faith and is not the exclusive possession of any. The challenge for each of us is to recognise, appreciate and support such goodness wherever we find it, and to emulate it generously in our own lives.

**"Not everyone who calls me "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do. (Mt. 7:21).**

## 11 TAKING JESUS SERIOUSLY

At the Seattle Special Olympics in 1976, nine competitors, all physically or mentally disabled, lined up for the start of the 100 yards sprint. At the sound of the gun they all started, each determined to win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled and fell, rolled over on the track and began to cry. The others heard the cry, slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned and went back. They helped him to his feet, linked arms and walked together to the finishing line. Everyone in the stadium stood and the cheering went on for several minutes. People had witnessed something special which spoke deeply to their hearts. Care and compassion had taken precedence over the naked individualism which dominates so much of our lives.

In our competitive world it is taken for granted that people should be rewarded according to their efforts and achievements. It is easy to extend this way of thinking to our religion and to assume that God must reward or punish us according to our performance; according to whether we are good or bad, practising or lapsed. The Pharisee thought this way when he prayed in the temple, "I thank you God that I am not like other people" (Lk.18:9-14), and then proceeded to list out his religious performances. There is something of the Pharisee in each of us; in those touches of pride and self-righteousness which make it so easy for us to look down on others. But God warns us that he judges differently, "Humans see with the eyes but Yahweh sees the heart", symbol of the emotional, spiritual and moral core of the human person.. It is significant that in the Bible the heart is mentioned far more frequently than the head or the hands and that the Sacred Heart of Jesus is one of the most popular devotional images among Catholics.

In his book *Jesus Today* the Dominican spiritual writer Fr. Albert Nolan claims that most Christians don't really take Jesus seriously. Their daily lives are governed more by the material and individualistic norms of modern culture, rather than by the values of the gospel, to which they pay lip service.

## 11 TAKING JESUS SERIOUSLY

We are comfortable with a theology of dogmas and doctrines but struggle with a gospel-based spirituality governing our attitudes and behaviour. Yet it is this spirituality which dominates the example and teachings of Jesus and which was powerfully present in the life and witness of the early Church.

In Chapter 15 of Luke's gospel Jesus relates three 'lost and found' parables to emphasise God's special love and care for the stray, the outcast and the hopeless, in contrast to the attitudes and conventional wisdom of society. In response to the Pharisees' complaint that he "welcomes sinners and eats with them" Jesus tells the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. The lost are indeed precious; all else is forgotten while they are sought, and when they are found each story ends with "Let us celebrate for there will be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent." Doesn't seem right in our way of thinking!

Elsewhere it is the sinful woman in Simon the Pharisee's house who is praised for "the great love she has shown". And the woman caught committing adultery (alone?) is sent away with a gentle admonition, "Go, but do not sin again", while her self-righteous accusers slink away in shame, leaving behind the stones they had gathered to stone her to death.

The clear message is that we cannot earn God's love or buy our way into heaven. That love is a free gift; we only have to reach out and accept it. What is important in God's eyes is not our performances: our failures or past sins. What is of vital importance is that we recognise in our hearts our own weakness, our total dependence on God and the wonder of his unconditional and unending love for each of us.

## 12 VALUING DIFFERENCE

On a flight from Johannesburg, South Africa, years ago, a middle-aged, white South African woman found herself seated beside a black man. She called the flight attendant to complain. "What seems to be the problem, Madam?" asked the attendant. "Can't you see?" she said. "You made me sit next to this black man. Find me another seat!" "Please calm down, Madam," the stewardess urged. "The flight is very full today but I'll check if we have any vacant seat." Soon she returned and addressed the woman. "Madam, unfortunately economy is full. However we do have one vacant seat in first class. An upgrade like this is most unusual, but the captain agrees that no one should be forced to sit beside such an offensive person." An arrogant grin of victory appeared on the woman's face but it vanished quickly when the stewardess spoke to the black man, "Sir, if you bring your luggage, your seat is ready for you in first class." The surrounding passengers applauded as the black man went forward to his first class seat.

For eight years I lived in Belfast, capital of Northern Ireland, where conflict between the pro-British Protestant loyalist community and the Catholic nationalist community struggling for a united Ireland claimed over 3,500 lives, mostly civilians, between 1968 and 1998. Though a Peace Agreement now officially exists, Belfast still has several miles of 'Peace Lines' or high walls separating Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods to minimise inter-communal conflict. Despite this, incidents of bitter sectarian violence still occasionally occur. And all this in a city which probably has more churches than any other city in the world of comparable size. A sad contradiction indeed! It is not surprising that the great Indian spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I love your Christ, but not your Christians who are so unlike him." Gandhi was deeply attracted by Christ's teachings and example, but on a visit to South Africa was insulted and refused entry to a Christian service because he was black.

## 12 VALUING DIFFERENCE

Great advances have been made in our world in the areas of human rights and justice. Slavery has for long been officially banned, civil rights have been achieved in the USA where a coloured man is now President, apartheid is ended in South Africa and women are steadily attaining their rights to social equality, having served as Presidents and Prime Ministers in several countries. Sadly ethnic and religious conflicts still persist in some countries. Small-minded elements want to discriminate against those whom they see as 'different', not realising that they themselves are victims of ignorance, bigotry and fear. At times unscrupulous and evil leaders stir up and exploit such fears among their people for their own selfish ends, to retain political control and for the wealth that goes with it.

Jesus lived in a very intolerant religious society which excluded and despised 'outsiders' such as pagan Samaritans, colonising Romans, unclean lepers, dishonest tax-collectors and public sinners. But Jesus was open to all, and was accused by his fellow Jews of mixing with outcasts and sinners: of visiting their homes and sharing their meals. He rejected such accusations, pointing out that we must go beyond outward, comfortable religion if we want to please God, for "whatever you do to one of these least important ones, you do it to me." Gandhi expressed this teaching of Jesus powerfully when he said, "If you don't find God in the very next person you meet, it is a waste of time looking for him further."

The saddest forms of prejudice and rejection are those which can occur within our own families. Jealousy and misunderstanding can lead to long term hostility and division, making some 'outsiders' among their own people. Jesus has warned us "If you are about to offer your gift to God and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift before the altar, go and make peace with your brother and then come back and offer your gift to God." (Mt. 5:23). I wonder was he serious?

## 13 THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

A Zen Buddhist story tells of a cat which strayed into a monastery and decided to stay there. Every morning and evening as the monks assembled for meditation the cat would follow them into the prayer room, where it jumped and rolled about playfully, causing much amusement and distraction. The abbot decided that this must stop and appointed the youngest monk to catch and tie up the cat in a corner of the room before prayers began. This was done faithfully and became part of the monastery routine, so that the monks could pray with proper piety and concentration.

As years passed, many of the older monks, including the abbot, died and new monks joined the monastery. Eventually the cat also died, causing disruption to the long-established prayer routine. Most of the monks had never seen a prayer session begin without the cat being tied up in its corner. The new abbot decided that meditation would be suspended until another cat was found, so that tradition could be observed. The next day a replacement was obtained and monastery life returned to normal.

Most formal religions tend to collect 'cats': practices and rituals, rules and traditions which in themselves may be harmless or even helpful, but are not a central part of that faith. This is natural, for as physical beings living in a material world we use that world to experience and express the presence and love of God in our daily lives. Thus for us Catholics statues, holy pictures, medals, pilgrimages and other practices are part of our religious tradition, serving as reminders or as aids to our understanding of deeper spiritual realities. Jesus himself frequently used examples from life and from nature in his teaching; salt and leaven; the birds of the air and lilies of the field, sowing and harvesting etc, not to improve the people's agricultural knowledge but to give them deeper insights into the heart of his teaching.

However, these external aids or signposts must not become ends in

## 13 THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

themselves. They must never take precedence over what lies at the centre of Christian faith. The Jews at the time of Jesus had hundreds of religious rules, but he strongly condemned their legalism and externalism, especially their lack of compassion, care and forgiveness. In Matthew 23 he says, "You give to God a tenth of everything you possess as the Law requires, but neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice, mercy and honesty".

The essence of Christian faith is not laws or external practices but a person, Jesus of Nazareth, true God and true man. Our challenge is to live all aspects of our lives and relationships according to his teachings and example: love God and your neighbour as yourself; love your enemies; forgive seventy times seven; see and serve Christ in the least of his brothers and sisters; do not judge others; share what you have with those in need. These are of course difficult precepts to put into practice but are the real measure of what it means to be a practising Christian. We live in a world where people shun pain and hardship in all forms and whose main desire is self fulfilment. They would like a comforting, pain-free religion, but that is not the gospel of Jesus who warns, "Whoever does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

As in our opening story, there is always a danger of getting our priorities wrong; of confusing what is good but secondary with what is essential. It is possible to be faithful church members and religious observers while holding on to values and attitudes which are totally unchristian, perhaps in how we look upon or treat family members, our employees or people of other races or religions. We know that down through history terrible crimes have been committed in the name of various religions when their true teachings become distorted, to be used for political control or oppression, rather than for the glory of God and the wellbeing of his people.

## 14 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

The story is told of a boy living in a remote village in Kenya, whose face was badly disfigured by a hare-lip. A priest visiting the village, persuaded the parents to allow him to take the boy back to the mission clinic where he could be operated on by the 'flying doctor', who visited once a month. After the operation the boy was kept at the clinic until his wound had healed and the dressing was removed. The priest was amazed when he saw the transformation in the boy's appearance. The operation was a beautiful job, with almost no sign of the hare-lip which had disfigured the boy all his life.

When the priest took the boy home to his village, they first met his father working in the fields. The boy bowed to his father who, as is the custom, placed his hand on his son's head by way of blessing. No words were spoken and the father did not seem to notice the transformation in the boy's appearance. But when the priest took him to the humble family home it was very different. The mother and family members went wild with excitement, hugging the boy and shedding tears of joy.

As the father returned from the fields, the priest went out to meet him, and asked with some annoyance if he was pleased with the doctor's operation. The old man's eyes lit up as he replied, "Of course I am. Very pleased". "Well", said the priest, "You certainly didn't show any great joy when I brought him to you in the field!" The father looked at the priest and with great sincerity and tears in his eyes replied, "I love my son most dearly. If I had shown great excitement when I saw the wonderful improvement in his appearance, it might have caused him to think that I hadn't really loved him before, when he had the hare-lip. I love him now, but not any more than I loved him then, and as I will love him always!"

'Love' is one of the most commonly used words in human language and in the scriptures. The problem is that it is used with so many different and even conflicting meanings that it is difficult to know what is meant by loving

## 14 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

God and our neighbour? The word often refers to feelings, emotions, attractions, affections or desires. But as used by Jesus it is more than a 'feeling' word; it is an 'action' word that places the wellbeing and needs of others before our own. It is a word which receives others with respect and acts kindly. As the beloved disciple, St. John tells us, "Our love should not be just words or talk; it should be true love, which shows itself in action" (1 Jn. 3:18); like the love which Jesus expressed so totally by his cruel death on the cross. No other statement more powerfully captures the selfless nature of authentic love than St. Paul's words, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8) He didn't wait till we repented, or were baptised or performed some religious ritual. God's love is unconditional and universal; we don't have to earn it; we simply have to reach out to accept it and respond to it in faith and trust. He loves and accepts us as we are, here and now, hare-lips and all! The Pharisees demanded that the adulterous woman be stoned to death. That is our human way. But Jesus said, "I do not condemn you. Go but do not sin again". That is God's way. Religious people often find this difficult to accept. For them, salvation, which Jesus won for us on the cross, must still be earned, through some kind of spiritual banking system!

Recently I lost a brother after a long and painful struggle with cancer. It was a sad and painful occasion for all the family, but also a rich experience of the true meaning of love, as expressed through the extraordinary care and compassion of doctors, nurses and care staff; through family unity and solidarity; through the kindness, sympathy, support and generosity of so many neighbours and friends. In times of great sorrow and loss, people may sometimes ask, "Where is our loving God in all of this?" For us, the answer was clear. "He is right here, in the voices of people who ask, 'Is there any way we can help?' He is in the hands of neighbours who arrive at the wake, laden with dishes of food and refreshments. He is in the tired eyes of friends who kept long hours of vigil with us. He is in the comforting and consoling arms that embraced us and shared our grief. For where there is love there is God.

## 15 THE PEOPLE'S POPE

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) has been described as the greatest church event of the 20th century; indeed many would say since the Council of Trent in 1545. It brought about a dramatic transformation in our understanding of the nature and mission of the Church in the world today and in the practice of our liturgy. The man responsible for convening the Council was Pope John XXIII, the greatest reforming Pope of modern times and possibly the most popular Pope in history. An Ecumenical or General Council of the Church is the most solemn and official assembly of all the bishops of the world which, when summoned by the Pope, constitutes the highest teaching authority in the Church. Vatican 2 was attended by about 2,500 bishops, by far the greatest number ever to attend a Council. It was a powerful new Pentecost, calling for the loyalty and support of the whole Church

Pope John was born Angelo Roncalli in 1881 in northern Italy, the 4th child in a family of 13. They were humble farmers who were no strangers to poverty and hardship. Angelo was ordained priest in 1904 and was made bishop in 1920. He was sent as the Pope's representative in anti-Catholic Bulgaria, the first of several diplomatic appointments which included Turkey, Greece and France. Through his years of service in countries where the majority population was not Catholic, Roncalli established relationships of respect and esteem with other Christian Churches, as well as with Jews and Muslims. His approach was always one of gospel simplicity and openness, nourished daily by prolonged periods of prayer and meditation.

When Pope Pius XI died in 1958 Angelo Roncalli was Cardinal Patriarch of Venice. He was already 77 years old, had endeared himself to the people by his sincerity and humility, and looked forward to living out his remaining years in peace among them. When called to Rome to participate in the papal election he had no ambitions or thoughts of becoming Pope. In fact he had already chosen his burial site in Venice and purchased a return train ticket!

## 15 THE PEOPLE'S POPE

However on reaching Rome he was surprised to hear his name being mentioned as the possible next Pope. His simplicity and cheerfulness had made him popular and many saw him as an ideal stop-gap Pope, who would keep the Church on course without disturbing the status quo, while they waited for a more suitable long term candidate to emerge. They couldn't have been more wrong, for the Spirit of God had other plans. Angelo Roncalli was elected Pope on 28 October 1958 and chose the name John XXIII. After he addressed the assembled crowd, the new Pope confided in a friend that, as he spoke, he had felt "all trussed up" in a pinned-together cassock hidden under his surplice. They had prepared three cassock sizes, small, medium and large, not realising that the new Pope would need size XXL! Pope John was a big man, with a big smile and a big heart.

The Pope is of course also Bishop of Rome and John quickly endeared himself to the people of the city by his pastoral care and concern. He was the first Pope in nearly a hundred years to visit Roman parishes, especially those in poor and deprived areas. He also visited the diocesan seminary and invited the priests of the diocese to be his guests at the Vatican. On Christmas Day he visited the Children's Hospital, going from bed to bed to speak to children stricken with polio, and then visited the Holy Spirit Hospital for adults. The next day he was at Rome's major prison, telling the prisoners "You couldn't visit me so I've come to visit you." Such warmth and informality was unheard of and got much attention in the world media. Noting that the Vatican staff were underpaid he immediately brought their wages up to standard and took a personal interest in their welfare. His habit of sneaking out at night and walking the streets of Rome earned him the nickname "Johnny Walker," a joking reference to the whisky brand of that name!

## 15 THE PEOPLE'S POPE

Pope John's short pontificate presented him to the world as an authentic image of the good shepherd. In the words of Fr Luca De Rosa, the Italian Franciscan in charge of promoting John's cause for sainthood, he was "a man of goodness, holiness and vision; a true messenger of God and servant of humanity." John spoke of the need to open the windows of the Church and let the fresh air in. He did just that when he shocked the world and the Church by announcing Vatican 2.



## 16 A CHURCH FOR OUR TIME

Few of our Catholics today can remember what attending Mass was like before Vatican 2 (1962-66). The altar and the sanctuary were separated from the rest of the church by a railing, at which people knelt to receive Holy Communion on the tongue. The altar faced away from the congregation and the priest presided at Mass with his back towards the people. Except for the homily the language used throughout the Mass was Latin. The responses were also given in Latin by the altar boys, who had memorised them. There were no lay ministers, as the scripture readings and distribution of Communion were done only by the priest. The congregation was largely passive, praying their own private devotions, especially the rosary. Singing, if any, was by a choir, with none of the popular congregational hymn singing of today.

This passive attendance at Mass reflected the more clerical Church of the time. After the break up of Christianity at the Protestant Reformation, the Church at the Council of Trent (1545) adopted a defensive, inward-looking mentality, characterised by a mistrust of 'the world' and an emphasis on the spiritual over secular life. Centralised control was strengthened and strict disciplinary rules introduced while the number and meaning of sacraments, especially the Eucharist were rigidly defined. All of this gave increased prominence and power to the position of the clergy. The laity, by contrast, had little active role to play, causing the Church to be referred to as "a sleeping giant", and the role of the laity as being "to pray, pay and obey!" After 400 years with little change, Pope John XXIII, guided by the Holy Spirit, felt it was time for the sleeping giant to be awakened; time for the Church, closed in on itself for so long, to "open the windows and let the fresh air in". He spoke of "a new Pentecost"; of the need for updating and renewal in the Church. On Christmas Day 1960 he announced the Second Vatican Council.

Among the first acts of the Council was the renewal of the liturgy, especially allowing the use of the vernacular (local language) instead of

## 16 A CHURCH FOR OUR TIME

Latin in Church services, encouraging full and active participation by all. The Council also began to see the Church less as a hierarchical institution and more as “The People of God”, on a human and religious pilgrimage through life. All the faithful, by virtue of their common baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in their lives, enjoy equal dignity as children of God and members of the Christian community. Today, thanks to these developments, our liturgies are alive and the laity play an active role in the life of the Church, as members of Parish Pastoral Councils, as liturgical ministers, as participants in the numerous lay apostolate and spiritual organisations which blossomed after the Council.

Among the cherished hopes of Pope John in calling the Council was the promotion of Christian unity. The Council welcomed observers from other Churches, acknowledging that we all share the blame for our sad divisions and urging prayer and effort towards greater unity. It also expressed respect for non-Christian faiths, ‘rejecting nothing that is true and holy’ in them. It saw the Church’s role in the world as one of openness and service to the whole human family, endorsing the principle of religious freedom for all and respecting the rights of the individual conscience. Today, our Association of Churches in Sarawak and Inter Faith bodies are welcome fruits of the Council, replacing the rivalry and even hostility of earlier times.

Vatican II also involved an opening to the world; a recognition that God is honoured and served, not only in religious ceremonies, but also in every aspect of economic, social and family life. One of the most powerful documents of the Council, *The Church in the Modern World*, is founded on this recognition and on the belief that the Holy Spirit is present to people everywhere. These teachings were strongly endorsed by Pope John Paul II in his 1988 encyclical, *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*. The title alone is rich in meaning and worthy of much reflection! The Pope

## 16 A CHURCH FOR OUR TIME

writes “The gospel images of salt, light and leaven apply specially to the laity. They speak not only of their deep involvement and full participation in the affairs of the world and of the human community, but above all of the unique character of their involvement and participation in spreading the gospel” (15)

Vatican II has transformed our Church in many ways, but its teachings still await full acceptance and implementation. Let us pray to the Holy Spirit for continued conversion and renewal.



Before Vatican II, the Priest celebrated Mass standing in front of the altar (background), with his back to the people. Now the priest stands behind the new altar (foreground), facing the people, with the congregation participating actively.

## 17 OUR COMMON VOCATION

Fr Mike is assistant priest in a small town parish. He lives in the parish house and is kept busy presiding at Masses, administering the sacraments, visiting the sick, advising parish organisations and ministering to outstations. He also devotes time to his own prayer life and spiritual growth.

Betty is a farmer's wife, living in a small kampong house with her husband Vincent and their three children. While Vincent works on their farm and part time at a local pottery, Betty is busy caring for their children, as well as cleaning, washing, cooking and looking after their vegetable plot.

Dr Peter is a general practitioner whose clinic is busy from morning till evening. As well as examining his patients, diagnosing their illnesses and prescribing medicines, he visits the housebound, serves on the Parish Council and spends as much time as he can with his own family.

What do these three Church members, of different ages, ethnic origins and ways of life have in common? They are all living out in their daily lives the vocation they received in Baptism: a vocation to love, serve and give witness (especially by example) to the Good News. Everyone shares this vocation in different ways, and no one way is more important than the others as St Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, where he compares the Church to the human body, whose many parts are interdependent.

Here in Ireland we celebrated a 'Year of Vocation', from Vocation Sunday '08 to Vocation Sunday '09. The special booklet published by my own diocese for this occasion starts by stating, "With its threefold themes, 'called to love, called to serve, called to witness' Vocation Year will include all vocations within the Church. Whatever we do, wherever we are – whether we are single or married, young or older, priest or religious, men or women – it will have something to say to all of us in our following of Jesus Christ".

## 17 OUR COMMON VOCATION

Unfortunately Church language has tended to restrict the word 'vocation' to God's call to ministerial priesthood and religious life. These vocations are indeed special. They are vital for the life of the Church and must remain the object of our frequent prayers. But to limit the word 'vocation' to them is wrong and shows little respect for the God-given vocation which every Christian receives in Baptism and has reaffirmed in Confirmation; a vocation which is lived out daily in the family, the community and society at large. When we use the word exclusively for priesthood and religious life we should say so.

Vatican II refers frequently to the God-given mission of the laity to evangelise the secular world in which they live. Through the witness of their lives they become the leaven which transforms the world from within. We must help the laity appreciate the dignity and challenge of this vocation; to be aware that their engagements in family life, in work and social affairs, like Betty and Dr Peter, are not just 'secular' or 'worldly' activities but are the means by which they sanctify themselves, loving and serving and building a better world. When in my morning prayer I offer to Jesus "all my prayers, works and sufferings of this day" I am reminding myself of this reality.

Bishop John Fleming of Killala in Ireland expressed beautifully the richness and diversity of Christian vocation when, for his Episcopal ordination, he incorporated his mother's wedding ring into his bishop's ring, pointing out that his priestly vocation was first of all dependant on his parents vocation to marriage!

## 18 A TAXI DRIVER'S STORY

When I arrived at 2:30 a.m. the building was dark except for a single light in a ground floor window. I sounded the horn twice but there was no response. Thinking this might be an impoverished old person who needed help I walked to the door and knocked. "Just a minute", answered a frail, elderly female voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor.

After a long pause the door opened. In front of me stood a small, stooped woman in her 80's, with a small, nylon suitcase beside her. The apartment was run down and looked as if no one had lived there for years. "Would you carry my bag to the car please?" she asked. I took the suitcase to the taxi and went back to help the old lady. She took my arm and we walked slowly to the taxi, the lady thanking me all the time for my kindness.

We are conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments or important events, but great moments often come to us in disguise, beautifully wrapped in what most people would consider ordinary happenings.

She settled into the back seat, gave me the address to go to, and then asked, "Can you drive me through downtown?" "It's not the shortest way", I replied "and will cost you extra". "Oh I don't mind", she answered. "I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a nursing home". I looked in the rear mirror and saw tears in her eyes. "I have no family left" she added, "and the doctor says I haven't long to live". I quietly shut off the fare meter and asked, "What route would you like me to take?"

For the next two hours we drove around the city as she directed. She pointed out where she had first worked as a young shop assistant, the humble house where she and her husband had lived happily after their

## 18 A TAXI DRIVER'S STORY

wedding and the large building which was once a ballroom and where she had first met him. Sometimes she would ask me to slow down in front of a particular building and would sit there in silence staring into the darkness, reliving the past.

As the rising sun began to colour the horizon she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let's go now". We drove in silence to the address she had given me. At the Home two white-uniformed nurses came out, gentle and caring, to help her in. They had obviously been expecting her. I opened the boot and carried the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked. "Nothing", I replied. "But you have to make a living", she protested. "There are other passengers", I responded. Then almost without thinking I bent down and gave her a big hug. She clung to me tightly and said, "You gave an old woman precious moments of great joy. Thank you very, very much". I squeezed her hand and walked into the dim morning light with a lump in my throat. Behind me I heard a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life!

I didn't pick up any other passengers on that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought, and for the rest of the day I could hardly talk. On reflection, I don't think I have done anything more important in my life. We are conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments or important events, but great moments often come to us in disguise, beautifully wrapped in what most people would consider ordinary happenings. People in life may not remember exactly what we said or did but they will always remember how we made them feel.

## 19 JUDGING OTHERS

Mrs. Wee was worried. Her office colleague, Rita, was unusually silent and unfriendly. "What can be wrong?" she thought. "Have I said or done something to offend her?" But it was near the end of the month; office work had piled up, and Mrs Wee was too busy to be upset over young people's changing moods.

When Rita got back that evening to the flat which she shared with her friend Grace, she let fly. "How can that Mrs. Wee look me in the face and act as if nothing has happened?" she blurted out, throwing her shoulder bag on the chair, from where it fell onto the floor.

"You didn't find your engagement ring then?" enquired Grace. "No, and I won't find it either," snapped Rita. "She has made sure of that. She has probably sold it by now."

"You can't say that, Rita," Grace said quietly. "There may be some other explanation. You can't accuse a person of stealing without some evidence."

"What other explanation can there be?" Rita shouted back. "I must have removed the ring to wash my hands. Everyone else had gone home except Mrs. Wee and myself, and when I left she was all alone. I tell you, she needs the money, being a widow struggling to support 3 children. She saw her chance of getting some cash and took it."

"Aren't you jumping to conclusions too fast?" Grace retorted. "Why don't you speak to her tomorrow? Just tell her what happened and ask her if by any chance she saw the ring".

But Rita turned on her, sneering "That's just like you, always thinking the best of everyone Grace. You're not in touch. People today are out for whatever they can get the easy way, and Mrs. Wee is no different. And anyway, she is hardly going to admit that she stole it."

## 19 JUDGING OTHERS

Grace, a nurse, gave up. She glanced at her watch and said, "Well, it's time for me to be going. I'm on shift duty in 20 minutes." As she moved towards the door she stumbled over Rita's shoulder bag, causing the contents to spill out over the floor. While she tried to scoop everything back into the bag, something sparkled in the rays of the setting sun.

"My ring," screamed Rita in delight, as she pounced on it and slipped it back on her finger. It must have fallen in among my cosmetics when I was putting on my watch, after drying my hands. I was in such a rush to get home that I didn't notice".

"But what about Mrs. Wee?" Grace asked gently. "Isn't it a good reminder to all of us not to forget the Lord's warning 'Judge not and you shall not be judged.' Easier said than done."

Sin ultimately is in the mind and heart and there are few things more evil than a bad or suspicious mind which wrongly suspects others and makes false accusations against them. Relationships are damaged and reputations ruined beyond repair. A story is told of a woman who confessed to making malicious rumours against her neighbour. As a penance the priest asked her to take a bag of feathers to the top of a tall building on a windy day and to release them there. She was then required to come down and collect back all the feathers, an almost impossible task. But no more impossible than repairing the damage caused to a person's good name by malicious accusations.

In Holy Week each year we are reminded that it was on the basis of false charges that Jesus was tortured and crucified, and that whenever we cause hardship and suffering to others through our false accusations, we are prolonging the Lord's Passion. For he has told us clearly that "whatever you do to one of these, the least of my followers, you do it to me". And he wasn't joking!

## 20 SAINTS AND SINNERS

Some years ago I was leading a discussion among a group of 17 year old girls at our Retreat Centre in Castletown, here in Ireland. The girls were sharing what was, for each of them, her greatest wish or concern in life. Naturally their responses varied greatly, from success in exams to owning a racehorse! But I was particularly touched by one girl's wish that she would have enough money to support herself and her baby. Chiara was already a single mother, unfortunately something no longer rare in Ireland.

Such situations have always happened, though less frequently. But in the strictly traditional Catholic Ireland in which I grew up, Chiara would have been an outcast. To save her family from disgrace she would have been sent away discreetly to a 'home' for single mothers, run by a religious order, under the control of both Church and state. Her baby would have been taken from her and given in adoption to people she would never know. In many cases both mother and baby later spent years searching for each other, mostly in vain because of lack of information from the institutions concerned. Sometimes when a mother's location was eventually found it was too late as she had already passed away. Only in recent years have public enquiries revealed how inhuman and unchristian conditions were in these institutions. To protect their families' reputation other girls in Chiara's situation were often forced to leave the country and, all alone, seek work in places like London. There in desperation many sought an abortion and, being poorly educated, ended up in miserable working conditions or resorted to prostitution to survive; a heavy price to pay for the social and religious respectability of those at home.

In one sense I can only rejoice that today Chiara could give birth to her baby and keep him at home; that her family, though hurt, forgave and supported her; that she could return to school and complete her education, and that she had come of her own choice to follow a two-day spiritual retreat.

## 20 SAINTS AND SINNERS

I feel that the spirit of forgiveness and respect, of openness and acceptance which made all this possible is much closer to the heart of Jesus than the rejection and condemnation which arose from the selective morality of the past. The Kingdom of God is taking shape around us in ways of which we are often unaware.

I do not in any way wish to excuse or glamorise Chiara's situation. She behaved badly and brought hurt and shame to her family. She also robbed herself of the carefree days of her youth and was faced prematurely with the responsibilities of parenthood. Neither do I condone the fall in moral standards which has accompanied growing materialism and individualism in Ireland and which is hurting many young lives. We must however distinguish between sin and the sinner as Jesus always did. He never condoned sin but showed such warmth and openness to sinners that he was accused of being their friend. We must model our attitudes and behaviour on the Lord and not on the self-righteous Pharisees. Among the community of his followers no one must ever feel condemned or excluded because they are not good enough to be among us. May God forgive us if that should ever happen.

We are called to be an inclusive Church where saints and sinners can be at home together. Vatican 2 states that the Church **“clasp[ing] sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal”** (LG.8). Many good people in Ireland today, shocked by recent Church scandals, are deeply conscious of the need for such purification, penance and renewal; for a humbler and more Christ-like Church that will appeal to the people of our time, especially to our younger generation who hunger for meaning in their lives.

## 21 TIME FLIES

Ben was a financial speculator, investing in stocks and shares, in the hope of selling them at a profit when their value rose. Every day he studied the financial pages of the newspaper in great detail to decide what to invest in. One day he said aloud to himself, "I wish I could see now what will be in these pages in a year's time". Suddenly there was a puff of smoke and by magic a copy of the newspaper, dated one year ahead, appeared on his table. His wish had come true! Excitedly he turned to the financial pages and his eyes goggled with amazement when he saw which securities had shot up in value. He could now invest heavily in these while their prices were still low and be a millionaire in a year's time. While waiting for his driver to take him to the stockbroker's office he glanced through the rest of the paper. Suddenly he was horrified to read in the obituary columns the notice of his own sudden death and funeral arrangements. He had only a year to live! We don't know how he reacted to the shocking news but we might like to reflect on how it would have affected our own lives in similar circumstances?

We need to slow  
down and enjoy  
the precious  
gift of time while  
we still have it.

Time really does fly. With scientific progress, such as in air travel and electronic communications, distance no longer poses us with serious communication problems, but time remains unconquerable, the one thing beyond our control. We cannot slow it down or hasten it; once gone it will never return, and for each of us it will, sooner or later, stop arriving! As we advance in years we increasingly reflect this in our communications with phrases such as "where have all those years gone?" I personally find it difficult to believe that 25 years have passed since I retired as principal of St. Joseph's Secondary School, Kuching, and 15 since I returned to Ireland, facts I was frequently reminded of during a recent visit 'home' to Kuching.

How then do we value and use this precious gift of time? For some, it becomes an ongoing struggle to accumulate ever more wealth and possessions, like Ben in our story, or the rich fool described by Jesus in Lk.12:16, 'forgetting that we must leave all our possessions behind when our time runs out. Or like the miser who, on his death bed, made his wife swear that she would place all his money in his coffin before his burial. He wanted to be assured of respect and status in the next life. His wife dutifully obeyed but did so by transferring it all into her own bank account and then refunding him fully with a cheque which she placed in his cold hand in the coffin!

We live in an age when many people claim to have 'no time'. They live under constant pressure, always in a hurry. To meet this hectic way of life we have come up with instant answers...instant food, instant communication, instant entertainment, instant remedies; all available 'right here and now', regardless of future costs. One of these costs is increasing health problems such as high blood pressure, heart attacks and nervous tensions. Others include strain on family life with little quality communication or time together and less time for the spiritual, such as prayer or bible sharing. The most popular and time consuming shrine in many homes is the TV. Some of the most important aspects of life such as growth, education, friendship, love, faith and forgiveness are not instant phenomena. They cannot be hurried but are processes that require time and patience. Our God is a waiting God who does not demand instant results; he waits till we are ready.

At least in western society, the more we advance the less time we seem to have for each other, to relate, to relax, to admire and experience the glories of creation, to enjoy life. We become slaves to targets and deadlines, get swept along in the rat-race, and before we realise it life has passed us by before we have really begun to live it. We need to slow down and enjoy the precious gift of time while we still have it.

## 22 LIVING THE EUCHARIST

Many years ago a religion teacher asked her class of 10-year-olds what was the most important part of the Mass. Johnny said it was the 'Our Father' because Jesus himself gave us that prayer. Jane thought it was the 'Lamb of God' because that's what John the Baptist called Jesus. Mary said it was the consecration when the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. But little Tommy, who loved football, thought it was the concluding words of the Mass at that time, "Go, the Mass is ended." The children all giggled but the teacher was not amused.

At Mass we gather as a community to remember, celebrate and give thanks for what binds us together as Christians, namely the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. As we celebrate his total self-offering, a body 'given' for us, blood 'poured out' for us, we too offer up our own lives "through him, with him and in him". United with the infinite sacrifice of Jesus our humble offering takes on a powerful meaning as we place our lives at God's service for the coming week.

Our participation in the Mass is not just a personal event, a private devotion. It is essentially and by its very nature a community celebration. Our very language betrays a false and superficial vision. We don't just 'attend' Mass; the priest doesn't just 'say' Mass. We are not just physically present at a performance, fulfilling a private duty. The ordained priest presides at the Mass, but it is the whole assembly, including the priest, which celebrates. We are active participants, together with all those others who form the body of Christ. There is no place in Christianity for individualism; we go to God with and through those around us.

Jesus gave us the Eucharist through the symbolism of a meal and all of us in Asia know what a powerful symbol that is. In ordinary life, we have no

## 22 LIVING THE EUCHARIST

better way to celebrate an occasion than to invite family and friends to share a meal...at weddings, birthdays, anniversaries or reunions. There we share company, experiences and memories as well as food and drink. It is our way of showing gratitude, expressing friendship and building community. Similarly our sharing together in the Eucharist not only nourishes our personal spiritual lives but symbolises and brings about our unity in Christ, our fellowship and solidarity as a Christian family.

Obviously this sense of unity, fellowship and solidarity, if sincere, must not end when the liturgical celebration is over. That is why little Tommy's answer in our opening story is not just funny; it has important implications! All is not over as we leave the church. We are commissioned to go forth and to live out fully in our lives and relationships all that we have celebrated in the Eucharist. Having shared together the Body of Christ we are challenged to change, to become more Christ-like, so that his presence can become visible in our attitudes and behaviour. We are called to bring peace into lives that are troubled and painful, to reach out in love to those in need. To celebrate the Eucharist together and see no connection between that celebration and our lived daily life is either ignorance or hypocrisy. The Mass is mystery but not magic!

The late much-loved Cardinal Thomas O'Fiach of Ireland expressed this profound and challenging truth as follows:

**Paddy Murphy went to Mass; he never missed a Sunday,  
But Paddy Murphy went to hell, for what he did on Monday!**

## 22 LIVING THE EUCHARIST

In other words, being a 'practising' Catholic calls for much more than regular physical presence at Sunday Mass or other rituals. We are called to live the Eucharist daily...to go out of self, to sacrifice, to serve, to share, to support, to love. When young people really see that essential connection, they will come to celebrate the Eucharist.

Having shared together the Body of Christ we are challenged to change, to become more Christ-like, so that his presence can become visible in our attitudes and behaviour.

## 23 GOD IN THE ORDINARY

Returning from visiting some parishioners just before Christmas, Fr. Tim stopped at the local Health Centre to collect some medicine. The waiting room was full of people with all sorts of ailments, men and women, young and old, many with children. Among them a thin and pale looking man stood coughing and wheezing, obviously very ill. A worried father held the hand of his little daughter, whose eyes were red and swollen from an infection. And Mary, whom Fr. Tim knew to be a diabetic, sat waiting for the insulin injection she needed to keep her alive. Others sat in worried silence, waiting to be attended.

Observing the scene, Fr. Tim had a deep sense of the healing Jesus present and at work in it all. The drugs and medicines came from God's storehouse of nature, while doctors and nurses were using their God-given knowledge and skills to help and heal their patients. The priest was conscious of being in the presence of goodness and holiness. "When the little girl longs for her inflamed eyes to be healed," he writes, "I think of Bartimaeus in the Gospel, pleading to get his sight back, and wonder if what Jesus did long ago in Palestine, he is still doing now, in a very different way, in this very clinic?" At Christmas each year we celebrate God's entry into our human life, in simplicity, humility and all our human frailty.

Sometimes we draw lines in our minds, separating what is holy from the unholy, the sacred from the profane. But religion is about all of our life and relationships; it is not a private, spiritual insurance policy, not just a separate part of life but a whole way of life. In his Apostolic Exhortation, 'The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World' (1988), Pope John Paul 2 pointed out two serious temptations facing the lay faithful. Firstly, "the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the

## 23 GOD IN THE ORDINARY

professional, social, cultural and political world, and secondly, the temptation of accepting the false separation of faith from life; that is, separating belief in the Gospel from the actual living of the Gospel in daily situations.”

The incarnation bridged for all time the false divide Pope John Paul referred to, between life and religion, between the secular and the holy. The God who became flesh is to be discovered, experienced and celebrated in the fabric of each day’s living, in family, workplace and community. This is what we celebrate in our sacraments and liturgies, through the medium of natural things like bread, wine and water; the reality of the God of love, present and at work among us and through us. Rich or poor, healthy or sick, educated or uneducated, the Lord resides in all. As Blessed Mother Teresa said, “In the Mass we have Jesus in the appearance of bread, while in the slums we see Christ and touch him in broken bodies and in abandoned children.” At Christmas we welcome him as a baby.

The mystery we celebrate is not just a historical event but it is a living reality, as Emmanuel, God-with-us, strives to be made flesh in each of our lives.

In our Nursing Home here in Castletown, I daily admire and experience the cheerful, self-sacrificing love and care of our lay nursing staff who bring comfort and happiness into the final years of our sick and elderly Brothers. The Church in Sarawak is blessed with a variety of organisations that specialise in reaching out to those struggling with the many problems of life. And all over the world, clergy and religious, parents, medical personnel, teachers, social workers, civil servants, farmers and others all serve

## 23 GOD IN THE ORDINARY

the needs of society. Wherever people do this, the Word is still taking flesh and the Kingdom of God is being established.

The mystery we celebrate and reflect on every Christmas is not just a historical event that happened 2000 years ago in Bethlehem. It is a living reality, as Emmanuel, God-with-us, strives to be made flesh in each of our lives; challenging us to be transformed more and more into his likeness and to bring him to birth in people around us. This is indeed our common Christian vocation; to be, in the words of the Gospel, the salt, light and leaven that will help transform our troubled Church and world.



## 24 THE COST OF LOVE

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*, tells the story of a man's love for his wife, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Every afternoon, he visited her in the nursing home and fed her lunch. He would then sit with her, show her pictures of their children and tell her the latest family news, all of which she forgot as soon as she heard it. He would gently remind her that they had been married for the past 52 years, had two daughters and a son, and four beautiful grandchildren. He would hold her hand as she drifted in and out of consciousness and before leaving he would kiss her and assure her how much he loved her....and she wouldn't even realise that he had been there.

His close friends would ask him, "Why do you keep going when she doesn't even know who you are?" And he would always reply, with a gentle smile, "Ah, but I know who she is. That's why I keep going". That indeed is true love, which surpasses the physical and romantic, both of which are precious gifts of God. But true love is more. It is selfless, unconditional and timeless.

Many of us have probably witnessed similar love stories in our own lives; experiences which have inspired and humbled us. I think of my own brother Pat who had to retire from active farming several years ago to care for his wife Sally who has advanced multiple sclerosis and is now a total invalid. They have three mentally retarded sons, now in their 30's, who are in residential care but who come home at weekends and holiday periods. Pat and Sally have carried heavy burdens in life but remain deeply in love and never complain. Then Pat himself was diagnosed with terminal cancer and passed away in 2012. Such human stories of sacrificial love amaze us and yet they are but a faint shadow of the infinite love of God for each of us.

## 24 THE COST OF LOVE

The Passion of Christ, the greatest love story in human history, reminds us of what true love really means. Down through the Old Testament, we witness God's unfailing love for his people. Repeatedly they fell away, failed to recognise him and reverted to the worship of false gods. Yet time and again, he forgave them and delivered them from the miseries

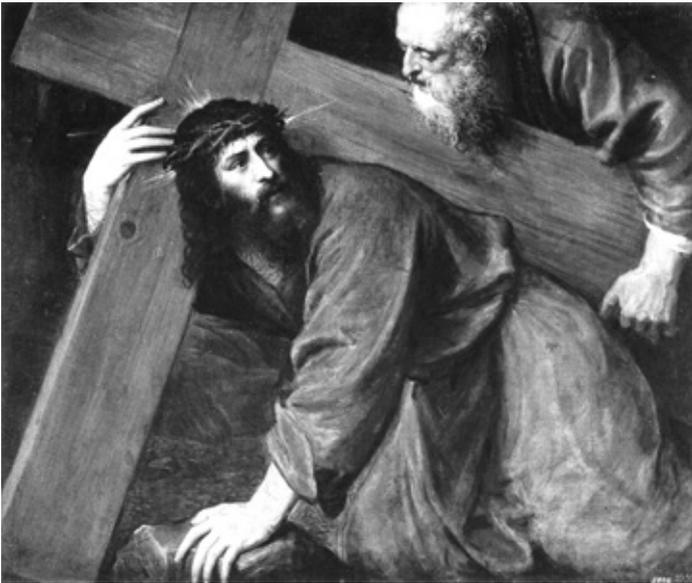
The Passion of Christ, the greatest love story in human history, reminds us of what true love really means.

their infidelities had brought upon them. God's unfailing love for us reached its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which we remember and celebrate during Holy Week. St. Paul struggled to find words to describe this love when he prayed that his Ephesian readers would "understand the width, the length, the height and the depth of the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge" (Eph. 3:18-19).

Modern culture places great emphasis on the ideal of romantic love, as reflected in the media and in much of popular music, film and literature. It is the basis of most modern marriages, in contrast to past times when marriages were usually arranged by family or elders. This indeed is progress and yet the growing frequency of marriage breakdown, especially in western society, suggests that something is seriously lacking. What is missing is the realisation that love has a price; that love costs, as the above examples show. Someone has said that falling in love is easy but staying in love is something very special and often, in the pressures of modern life, very difficult. Love is not a bed of roses and that is why the Church today emphasises the importance of Marriage Preparation programmes.

## 24 THE COST OF LOVE

God describes his love for us in the most tender and personal terms. "Can a woman forget the baby at her breast and have no love for the child she has borne? But even if a woman should forget her child, I will never forget you. I have written your name on the palm of my hands" (Isaiah 49:14-16)... the same hands which were pierced and torn by the nails on Calvary. Love and suffering are never far apart. That love poured out for us on the cross is now channelled to us through the love and compassion of those around us. Our Christian vocation calls us to do likewise for those in greatest need in our families and our community. "Happy are those who are merciful; God will be merciful to them" (Mt. 5:7)



Fr. John Powell SJ., university professor and religious writer, tells the following true story. It is the story of Tommy, who registered one semester for his Theology course at Loyola University. Tommy was loud and brash, with the long flowing hair in fashion at that time. He was often a pain for Fr. Powell who describes him as the 'atheist' in his class, constantly objecting to, laughing at and mocking the idea of an unconditionally loving God. When, at the end of the course, he came up to hand in his final exam scripts, he asked in a cynical tone, "Do you think I'll ever find God?" To shock him, Fr. Powell replied firmly "No Tommy", but then called after him, "but I'm absolutely certain He will find you!"

God is love and  
anyone who  
lives in love is  
living in God

A few years later, the priest received the sad news that Tommy had terminal cancer. When he came to visit, his body was already wasted and his hair all gone from chemo treatment, but his eyes were still bright and his voice firm. Fr. Powell greeted him, saying, "I've thought about you often, Tommy...but I hear you are sick". Tommy replied, "Oh yes, very sick. It's a matter of weeks only". As they chatted, the priest asked "Tommy, what's it like to be only twenty-four and dying?" "It's tough", he replied, "but it could be worse". When asked what he meant, he paused and then said "Like being fifty and having no values or ideals; like thinking that booze, seducing women and making money are the 'biggies' in life."

Tommy continued, "But I really came to see you about something you said to me on our last day of class. You said I would never find God but that He would find me. I thought a lot about that and when the doctor confirmed I had cancer, I got really serious about finding Him." He described how he had banged daily on the doors of heaven but God did not come out. In fact,

## 25 FINDING GOD

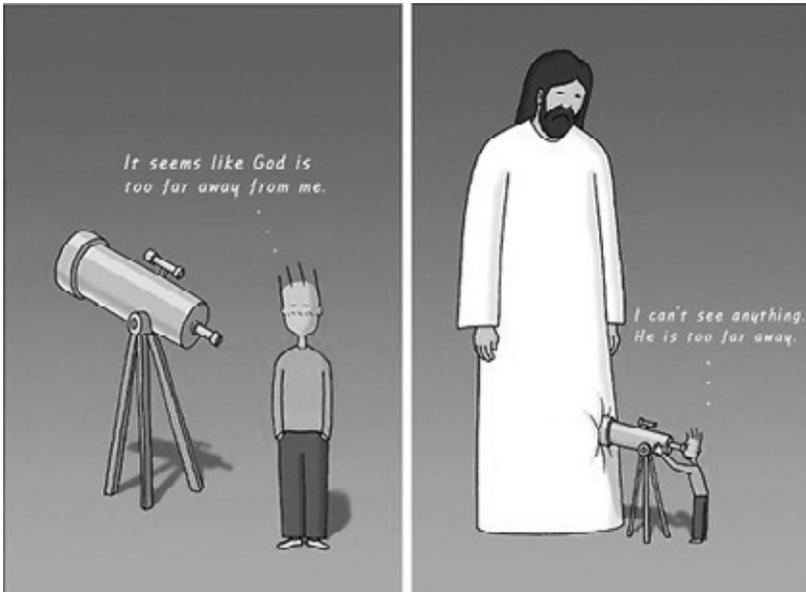
nothing happened. In the end, he gave up and decided to use the little time he had left doing something more useful. It was then he remembered something else Fr. Powell had said; that the saddest thing is to go through life without loving, and never telling those you loved that you had loved them. So he decided to start with the hardest one, his Dad!

Dad was reading a newspaper when he approached and said, "Dad, I'd like to talk to you". Without taking down the paper, his father answered gruffly, "Well talk." Tom replied "Dad, I love you. I just want you to know that while I'm still around." The newspaper fluttered to the floor and then, Tommy says, "My father did two things he had never done before; he cried and he hugged me...and we talked all night! It felt so good to be close to my Dad, to see his tears, to feel his hug, to hear him say that he loved me. It was the best feeling I ever had. It was easier with my mother and little brother; just more tears and hugs. We shared the things we had been keeping secret for so many years. I was sorry that I had waited so long!"

"And then," Tommy added, "one day God was suddenly there, clear in my mind and heart. Seemingly God does things in His own way and time. He didn't come when I pleaded for Him but the important thing is that He is here now. He found me even after I stopped looking for Him." Amazed, Fr. Powell said, "Tommy, I think you are saying something very important; that the surest way to find God is not to make Him a private possession, a personal problem-solver, an instant consolation in time of need, but rather by opening out to love. The Apostle John said 'God is love and anyone who lives in love is living in God'. Tommy, do you think you could tell my present Theology class what you have just told me? It would be much more effective coming from you." Tommy was hesitant at first but finally agreed to do so and they fixed on a date.

## 25 FINDING GOD

But Tommy never made it, for a much more important appointment took him home; home to a life far more beautiful than the mind of man can ever imagine. Before he died, he had contacted Fr. Powell. "I'm not going to make it to your class," he said weakly. "Will you tell them for me? Will you tell the whole world for me?" And with a lump in his throat Fr Powell assured the 'atheist' who had been such a nuisance in that Theology class, "I will Tom. I'll tell them for you. I'll do my best."



## 26 THE ROSARY

Working-class Catholic West Belfast where I live is separated by a high 'Peace Wall' from its Protestant neighbours, a product of over 30 years of sectarian violence between the two communities, which is now thankfully coming to an end. A prominent religious and cultural symbol, emphasising the Catholic identity of this area, is the presence of a statue of Our Lady in most traffic roundabouts. While other property may sometimes be vandalised the statues of Mary are never damaged, for in this area she represents 'us' and who we are.

Devotion to Mary has always been a special feature of Catholic faith. It is expressed in many ways: in liturgical feasts, in pilgrimages, in special Marian devotions, in our use of statues and shrines and in the litany of titles which the Church has bestowed upon her. But by far the most widespread and popular of these devotions is the recitation of the Rosary. The 7th October each year is the feast of the Holy Rosary and the whole month of October is especially dedicated to the Rosary.

The Rosary has been a popular Catholic prayer for over 500 years. As we recite the set prayers, we are encouraged to meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus, as seen through the experiences of Mary who "remembered all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk.2:19). The twenty Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious and Luminous mysteries into which the Rosary is divided cover the key events in the story of our redemption. They make the Rosary a deeply scriptural prayer which led Pope Pius XII to describe it as "a summary of the entire Gospel".

The Church has long recommended the Rosary as an ideal form of prayer for every Catholic home. In the second half of the last century Fr. Patrick Peyton, known as 'the Rosary Priest' conducted Rosary campaigns all over the world and popularised the slogan "The family that prays together

stays together". This did not mean of course that they would continue to live together but that the members would always remain united in mind and heart. Today, with TV, tuition and other distractions, it is more difficult for families to find a common time to pray the Rosary together but 'where there is a will, there is a way'. Pope John Paul 2 reminded us, "We need to return to the practice of family prayer, continuing to use the Rosary".

Recent times have seen the rapid growth of Block Rosary groups, especially in third world countries, including our own Sarawak. As families come together to pray the Rosary, accompanied by hymn singing and often by Bible reflection, people's faith is nourished and community spirit strengthened. The witness of a community, united in prayer, love and service, is also a powerful means of evangelisation as it was in the early Church where observers would exclaim "See how these Christians love one another", and were drawn to join the community.

Let us strengthen our devotion to Mary and renew our fidelity to the Rosary. As a result of her unique role in the mystery of the Incarnation, Mary foretold that "people forever will call me blessed" (Lk.1:48). However our devotion to Mary must never go to excess. She is not a goddess, above and beyond our reach. She is not a beautified plastic statue (even a weeping one!) but a fully human woman of flesh and blood. It was out of her deep humanity that she said "Yes" to God. It is in her deep humanity that she is the supreme model and inspiration for each of us as we too struggle to say "I am the Lord's servant: may it happen to me as you wish". Let us strive to imitate her deep faith and trust in God even when she could not understand, her profound humility, her self-sacrificing service of others and her fidelity to the ordinary, as housewife and mother, in times of joy and sorrow. Her advice to us for all time is "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn.2:5).

## 27 FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE

Maria Santos (not her real name) was a devout Catholic. She was also very rich, owning a large sugar estate in the central Philippines and living in a grand villa, with a private chapel. She was a daily communicant and a generous donor to the Church.

Yet the workers on her plantation and their families lived in miserable poverty, with a high infant death rate resulting from malnutrition and lack of medical care. When confronted by a priest about this situation Maria wept at the thought that she might now lose the privilege of keeping the Blessed Sacrament in her house and daily receiving communion, but she shed no tears for the hundreds of children who were dying of neglect on her estate.

Speaking long ago through the prophet Isaiah, God scolded the people of Israel. "I am sick of your sacrifices; they fill me with disgust. You may multiply your prayers but I shall not listen. First, stop doing evil, search for justice, help the oppressed" (Isa.1:13 :15 -17). Jesus constantly preached this same message: we cannot love God while ignoring our neighbour.

Charity is always needed; indeed it is essential. Many of us give very generously to charitable causes. But charity alone is not enough and will never bring justice to the world's oppressed. It must grow into justice, which goes beyond mere giving, to valuing the poor as our equals, accepting their right to a fair share of the world's wealth and condemning the unjust systems which keep them poor.

We live in a world of scandalous inequality where large numbers are dying of hunger, while elsewhere dieting to lose weight is a major concern! Churches rightly condemn the huge loss of human life through abortion but seem less concerned that 35,000 children already born die daily from lack of food and medical care. In a world where there is plenty for everyone, if fairly distributed, this is surely a moral crime, a blasphemy against the God for

## 27 FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE

whom every human life is equally precious.

Charity alone is not enough and will never bring justice to the world's oppressed. It must grow into justice, which goes beyond mere giving...

In view of such evil we naturally ask, "But what can I do?" Perhaps not much, but we can at least become more aware of the injustice and immorality of economic and social systems which favour rich individuals and countries while oppressing the poor. More important however is to reflect on how I personally practice justice. Charity is about giving but justice is more; it is about attitudes and values. Do I really see the poor as my equals? Do I treat

them with the dignity and respect I show to the rich? Do I recognise their God-given right to a better life? Do I condemn the corrupt and unjust systems that keep them poor? Am I just and fair to those who work for me? Do I practice fairness in my own family? Do I support programmes that promote justice such as the Rural Students Tuition Project in the Archdiocese?

In my youth, most shops in Ireland had on the counter a donation box for "Black Babies". People were encouraged to donate their change, and as a result large sums of money were sent annually to Irish missionaries in Africa. We are a charitable people! In recent years considerable numbers of Africans have come to Catholic Ireland as refugees, asylum seekers or economic migrants. Many have met with racial hostility, abuse and exploitation. They are accused of being criminals, of taking our jobs and abusing our welfare system. Our charity seems to have stopped short of hospitality and justice! May God forgive us.

"When I feed the poor, people call me a saint. When I ask why they have no food, they call me a communist" (Archbishop Helder Camara)

## 28 EDUCATION

One day in the U.S.A. a partially deaf boy arrived home from school with a note, which suggested that his parents take him out of school because he was “too stupid to learn”. The mother’s response was, “My son Tom is not stupid. I will teach him myself”. When Tom died many years later the nation paid tribute to him by turning off all the lights for one minute. Thomas Edison had invented, not only the electric light bulb, but also the cinema, despite being “too stupid to learn”!

Education is an important part of modern life, so it may be useful to look at it from a Christian perspective. People understand education in different ways. In a communist system it involves indoctrination and brain-washing into fixed beliefs and values, denying students scope for individuality, creativity and freedom. Some other societies attempt to do the same, but in more subtle and less extreme ways!

For others education is all about acquiring knowledge; about learning, remembering and reproducing facts. This is like pouring liquid into a container. Some containers can hold more than others but all remain totally unchanged by what is poured into them! Academic ability tends to be the most valued quality in students, perhaps because it is easier to measure, but there are more important talents which influence the quality of people’s lives and their contribution to family, society and human well-being.

Still others see the main purpose of education as shaping and developing the individual character according to accepted social norms. In this view the teacher is like a potter who works to mould a piece of clay into a predetermined form. This may seem to be a more honourable objective, but it means that the teacher is “playing God”. For it is God who creates every human person, each one of us gifted in his/her own way and called to achieve

his/her own unique identity. Isaiah tells us, as we sing in a popular hymn, "You are the potter: we are the clay, the work of your hand" (Is64:8).

Perhaps a more Christian model of education is that of a gardener tending his plants, giving them space and time to grow into their own particular shape and beauty. The gardener's task is to prepare the soil; to plant, fertilise, water, nurture and at times prune and support the plant as it matures. St. Paul, looking back on his ministry, could say "I planted, Apollo watered but God gave the increase" (1Cor.3:6). That too is the teacher's vocation; to plant and water and leave the outcome to God.

The word 'education' comes from the Latin word 'educare', which means to lead out; that is to draw out and develop the special God-given talents within each person. The true focus of education therefore is the human person, not just the knowledge or qualifications, which are of course important by-products of any balanced education. Every child is different; a unique and precious creation of God, regardless of academic ability. God never produces carbon copies; only originals---thus no two people have the same thumb-print! The teacher's challenge is to discern and respect that uniqueness: to facilitate and nurture its development.

The gospels say little about Jesus' education; just one simple statement that he "grew in wisdom, age and grace, gaining favour with God and people" (Lk.2:52). Wisdom is more than knowledge; it is the ability to use our experience and talents to make good and wise judgements. May all of our children grow likewise!

## 29 HAVING EYES TO SEE

The liturgy for Week 17 of Ordinary time offers us the inspirational prayer “God our Father, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendour of creation, in the beauty of human life. Touched by your hand our world is holy. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us; to share your blessings with our brothers and sisters, and to experience the joy of life in your presence”. A beautiful morning prayer for every day of the year!

Genesis describes in story form how “God created heaven and earth”. It was all his handiwork and when completed “God saw all that he had made and indeed it was very good” (Gen.1:31). Throughout his public ministry Jesus made frequent references to the wonders of nature as expressions of God’s loving care and presence in our world. He spoke of the birds, flowers and trees; of rain, stars and sunshine; of farming, herding and fishing. And at Mass we still proclaim “All creatures rightly give you praise; heaven and earth are full of your glory”.

Sadly many seem to have lost this deep awareness of the sacred around us; of the God in whose presence “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). We are spiritually impoverished if we confine our awareness of God to religious places and events, for all of creation is God’s great cathedral. Holy men and women like the great St. Francis of Assisi, as well as artists and poets, have always been deeply conscious of God’s presence in our world.

The American Catholic poet Alfred J. Kilmer in his poem ‘Trees’ wrote

*“I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree;*

*A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed against the  
earth’s sweet flowing breast;*

*A tree that looks to God all day and lifts her leafy arms to pray;*

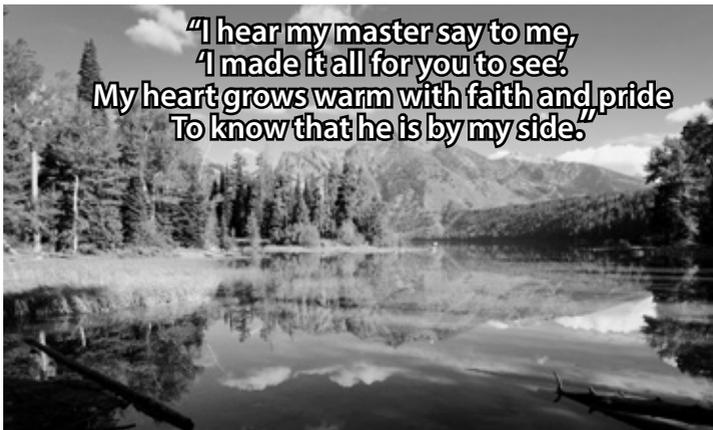
*Poems are made by fools like me but only God can make a tree;*

## 29 HAVING EYES TO SEE

Rivers are frequently mentioned in the Bible as symbols of life. Born as tiny streams coming forth from the womb of our mountains, they grow in size and vitality like children, rippling and tumbling over waterfalls and rapids, before maturing in mid-stream into smooth, powerful, fast-flowing rivers, and then in old age slowing down and being absorbed into the mighty ocean, the great beyond---all an image of our human journey!

The liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff saw the mountains as sacraments or signs of the power and permanence of God. He wrote "The Mountain is like God. It supports everything, endures everything, welcomes and shelters everything". And the Irish poet, Joseph M. Plunkett in his beautiful poem 'The Lord's Autograph' sees the Lord's presence all around him; sees "His blood on every rose---his face in every flower: the thunder and the singing of the birds are just his voice. His crown of thorns is twined in every thorn; his cross is every tree".

Sarawak, land of mighty rivers, forests and mountains is rich in symbols of God's handiwork, of his awesome presence, providence and love everywhere. Here too in Ireland, in the beautiful Glens of Antrim where I now work, the glory of God, in mountain and valley; in river, sea and sky, shouts out for recognition and praise. Let us share the U.S. poet Shawnee Kellie's sentiments:



## 30 THE ANGUISH OF THE HEART

Ben was 75 years old. He was alert and healthy but desperately unhappy since his wife died two years earlier. Then one day Ben had a fall and though his doctors thought his injuries were minor, three days later he was dead. Those who knew Ben concluded that he hadn't died from the fall but from deep loneliness. He had no more will to go on living a life that had become empty and without hope.

We are daily confronted in the media with tragic stories and pictures of the widespread destruction of human life in earthquakes, warfare, famine, accidents and terrorist atrocities. Yet the greatest suffering is not physical pain or illness but the unseen suffering of the heart, often hidden from the world by the masks we wear and mostly borne alone. The media can photograph broken bodies but not broken hearts!

This unseen ocean of suffering takes many forms: the pain of infidelity and betrayal; the anguish of losing a loved one; the guilt and shame of failure or past mistakes. Above all there is the humiliation and anguish of being rejected, especially by those nearest to us. Most of the 430 suicides here in Ireland last year (mainly young people) arose from such inner turmoil which people couldn't cope with, leaving shattered families and friends wondering why?

We are all part of this sad story, carrying our own inner pains, doubts and fears, or inflicting suffering and anguish on others – or both. The American author, Henry Thoreau, once wrote, "The great majority of people live lives of quiet desperation".

As Christians we need to remember that Jesus has walked this road before us. In his own village of Nazareth he suffered the hurt of being rejected and excluded by his own who asked scornfully, "Is he not the carpenter,

## 30 THE ANGUISH OF THE HEART

Mary's son?" And throughout his public life he was constantly criticised for befriending sinners, for healing on the Sabbath and was even accused of being possessed by devils.

The Passion narratives emphasise the physical torture inflicted on Jesus; the scourging, crowning with thorns, journey to Calvary and slow painful death on the cross. But there was also the emotional agony of being betrayed by one of his own, deserted by his closest friends, denied by his chosen successor, abused by the crowd he loved and left to die in desolation on the cross. His heartfelt cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" surely marks the pinnacle of his suffering. How heart-breaking all this rejection must have been.

Do we at times still reject him, when we neglect even to speak to him, except perhaps on Sunday; when we largely exclude his teaching and values from our daily lives? Do we continue to heap humiliation and rejection on him where he lives in those around us? We are called to be his voice; his eyes and his ears and heart to those crying out silently for acceptance and support; to be sensitive to people's feelings and responsive to their needs.

And in our darkest hours we are assured of his ever loving presence. In our anguish we too pray, "**Father, let this chalice pass from me; yet not my will but yours be done**". Remember that the anguished plea of Jesus was not answered by release from suffering, but by the grace to endure it with dignity and courage. We too are offered that same grace if only we have faith and trust in God's unfailing love.

## 31 EACH ONE IS PRECIOUS

A story is told about a heavy bronze bell which sank to the bottom of a lake in ancient China. All efforts to raise it failed until a clever abbot asked permission to try, provided the bell would be given to his monastery.

On receiving permission he ordered his monks to collect bamboo poles, which divers then took down, one by one, and tied to the bell. Bamboo is hollow, light and doesn't sink, so after hundreds of poles were fastened to it, the great bell began to move. Eventually, when the last pole was added, the upward pressure became so great that the bell rose slowly to the surface.

It was the last bamboo that finally caused the bell to rise, illustrating the *importance of each individual person*, however humble or insignificant. In our modern, competitive world, where one's value, is measured by wealth and status, it is easy for 'ordinary' people to feel worthless and to go through life unaware of their own value, their own unique gifts and talents.

Each of us is called to do our bit wherever we are; to make a difference in life -- even a small difference!

Yet Christian faith assures us that each one is precious in God's eyes and that he loves us unconditionally as we are; that he suffered, died and rose for each of us, and at Pentecost gifted us through his Spirit -- "each one has a special gift from God" (1Cor 7:7).

Years ago, the spiritual writer Fr John Powell imagined God saying to us, "I could have created a world without you, but a world without you would have been incomplete for me. I could have made you different, but I didn't want a different you. It is *this* you that I love, that I have always loved and will always love".

## 31 EACH ONE IS PRECIOUS

So let us be conscious of our God-given dignity and value, regardless of our achievements or social status. For in God's eyes a humble nomadic hunter is no less important than the richest and most learned in the land. The same is true in the Church where, by virtue of our common baptism, all are equal in dignity as children of God.

The Editor of the Redemptorist magazine Reality wrote in a recent editorial (about child-abuse cases), "A 10-year-old girl is as much the Church as a 75-year-old cardinal; a 14-year-old boy is as much the Church as a 40-year-old priest".

But our bamboo story also illustrates *the importance of community*, for it was the combined power of individual bamboos that raised that bell. In the beginning God said, "it is not good for man (or woman) to be alone." We are born into the community of family and later of neighbourhood, Church, school and workplace. It is through community relationships that we develop our personality and achieve our potential. St Paul says we are gifted by God, not just for our own glory but "for the good of all" (1Cor 12:7), for love and service of others, especially those who are made by society to feel worthless and rejected.

Faced with evil and suffering we often feel helpless, and therefore do nothing. Yet, like the last bamboo pole, it may require only one more person with conviction, courage and commitment to stand alongside others, to bring about change. Writing on 'The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful', Pope John Paul II stressed that today, "it is not permissible for anyone to remain idle". For each of us is called to do our bit wherever we are; to make a difference in life -- even a small difference!

## 32 MIND YOUR TONGUE

Speech is one of God's most precious gifts to the human family, distinguishing us from other forms of life. It enables us to communicate, exchange ideas, share news and express feelings; to comfort, console and encourage each other. Long before people became literate, knowledge and traditions were preserved and passed on orally, in word, poetry and song. Indeed speech plays a vital role in building community, in binding people together in harmony and trust. To become one with us God 'spoke', and "The *Word* became flesh and lived among us". (Jn 1:14)

Speech however is a two-edged sword that can also destroy. It destroys when it is used to mislead and promote falsehood, or breed mistrust and hatred. Today language is often distorted to hide what is ugly and evil. Abortion becomes "termination of pregnancy" rather than destruction of life, and the slaughter of innocent civilians by missiles is "collateral damage" rather than brutal war crimes. We have become too 'civilised' to speak the truth!

Speech is often abused through false accusations, through perjury in court and through rash judgements, all of which may destroy a person's reputation or career and undermine relationships and family life. Such abuses offend against the 8th Commandment which demands of us fidelity to truth and justice: they destroy lives as tragically as more commonly condemned moral failures.

But perhaps the greatest damage done by speech is through malicious gossip and scandal mongering - the whispered lie or rumour, or even the truth which the hearer has no need or right to know. Some people hunger for gossip, for knowing what goes on over the fence, for minding other people's business and broadcasting it! How many friendships are damaged, families broken, reputations destroyed and careers ruined through that greatest weapon of mass-destruction, the uncontrolled tongue?

## 32 MIND YOUR TONGUE

Here in Ireland, gossip is often seen as a particular weakness of 'religious' people. The whispered query, "Did you hear ...?" followed by the latest tasty gossip, which is passed on and on, always confidentially of course, poisoning minds and hearts, until huge damage is done!

The greatest damage done by speech is through malicious gossip and scandal mongering - the whispered lie or rumour, or even the truth which the hearer has no need or right to know.

A film called Gossip tells how three college pals decided, as a study project, to start a rumour and then monitor how quickly it spread and changed. But their plan spiralled out of control as the rumour spread like wildfire, taking on a life of its own and causing widespread conflict, leading to criminal accusations, police investigations and rumours of murder. They were shocked that a story, so easily started, became impossible to control; that truth became

powerless in the face of gossip.

St James points out that just as a tiny spark can spread to destroy a huge forest, so too the tongue, the smallest of organs, can do immense harm. He speaks of it as being "evil and uncontrollable, full of deadly poison" and says, "We use it to give thanks to our Lord and Father and also to curse our neighbour who is created in the likeness of God" (Jas 3:8-9).

Depending on the damage caused, sins against truth can be serious and require us to undo the harm inflicted on our victim. A priest once heard a penitent confess that she had spread evil gossip about a neighbour. As a penance he asked her to release a large bag of feathers from the top of a high tower during a violent storm, and then go and collect back every feather! An almost impossible task but perhaps easier than repairing the damage her gossip had caused?

## 33 WHEN GOD GOES MISSING

Following the dreadful Asian tsunami disaster in December 2004, which left 300,000 innocent and mostly poor people dead, a common media headline in many countries was, "Where was God in all of this?" Enemies of religion used the tragedy to ridicule religious belief and deny the existence of God, while believers of all religions had their faith shaken by the enormity of the calamity. The question arises whether it is wrong for Christians to ask such questions and allow their faith to be challenged by doubts.

Faith and doubt should not be seen as opposites that are mutually exclusive. God is mystery, always beyond our full understanding. This does not excuse us, as rational human beings, from striving, as *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (158) urges, to know God better and understand more fully what he has revealed. We have a duty to grow throughout our lives in the knowledge of our Christian faith so that we may appreciate and live it better, defend it against attack and explain it meaningfully to others, especially our children. There is great need for adult faith formation programmes to enable us to do this.

The greatest enemy of faith is not doubt but self-righteous fundamentalist certainty that claims to know all the answers

As we struggle with mystery, especially in times of tragedy; of illness, death or family crisis, questions and doubts are natural; perhaps even an essential part of a mature and growing faith. 'Doubting Thomas' refused to believe the Lord had risen until he personally saw him. But his doubts were only the reverse side of a profound faith, expressed in the cry, "My Lord and my God", which is the highest point of John's Gospel.

*St Theresa of Lisieux* (the Little Flower), like many saints, endured

## 33 WHEN GOD GOES MISSING

severe religious doubts towards the end of her short life, but in the midst of darkness she placed complete trust in God's love. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta also suffered from doubts and spiritual darkness for many years. She wrote of a sense of "separation and emptiness: the feeling of the absence of God, of terrible aloneness". This sense of desolation led her to deeper union with God and helped her appreciate better the poverty and helplessness of the poor.

At the Annunciation Mary questioned what she could not understand, "How can this be?" But trusting blindly in God she then proclaimed, "May it happen to me as you have said". On the cross Jesus too was overcome by doubt and darkness, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" but again anguish was followed by complete submission, "Father, in your hands I place my spirit".

After the tsunami disaster the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote: "Every tragedy should upset a faith based on comfort and ready answers". Similarly the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, said that a real Christian is one who "is able to doubt". The greatest enemy of faith is not doubt but self-righteous fundamentalist certainty that claims to know all the answers and can tell you why God "sent the tsunami" or "struck down" a loved one with cancer! It is such naive 'certainties' which produce suicide bombers and moral judgementalists, and which do most to destroy belief in a God of love and mercy.

It is a humbling fact that neither religious faith nor scientific knowledge have all the answers to the mysteries of life, suffering or God. While we struggle to understand, we must live in peace with mystery, assured through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus that God is intimately with us, and weeps with us in our darkest hour - even when he seems to have gone missing. "I believe. Lord, help my unbelief" (Mk 9:24)

## 34 SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MASS

As we come together from our weekday lives to celebrate the Eucharist, we gather as equal members of the Christian community. The *Introductory Rites* of the Mass emphasise this sense of community, as celebrant and people greet each other, confess their sins and beg pardon of each other, before joining in the great hymn of praise, 'Glory to God in the highest'.

In the *Liturgy of the Word*, we listen attentively as God speaks to us and we respond to him in faith: "Thanks be to God". The priest in his homily explains the readings and applies them to our daily lives, before we stand and together profess our belief in all that we have heard, and in the basic truths of our Christian faith.

The *Liturgy of the Eucharist* begins with our offerings of bread and wine being carried to the altar: basic food and drink that symbolise our human lives, which we now offer to God - 'All that I am', etc. There is nothing more that we can give than our very selves, with all our gifts and failings, and we pray that this unworthy sacrifice may be pleasing to the Almighty.

In the *Eucharistic Prayer*, Jesus takes over our humble offerings, and in the words of consecration transforms them into his own body and blood which were 'given up' and 'shed' for us. The sacrifice of Calvary is made present to us again, echoing down through the ages. This changing of the offerings, which represent our human lives, into the body and blood of Christ, is a call and challenge for us too to be transformed, to become 'other Christs', filled with his values and outlook. His command to "Do this in memory of me" demands that we too pour ourselves out in service of God and of each other. "Through Jesus, with him and in him" our humble offering is now incorporated into the infinite sacrifice of Calvary.

Having offered ourselves to the Father, Jesus now comes to us in *Holy Communion*, to be intimately united to each of us, but also to unite us more

## 34 SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MASS

closely with all who have shared the same banquet. He comes to strengthen us and heal us, to be with us on our journey.

And just as we started by bringing our lives into the Mass, we are now sent forth in the *Concluding Rite*, to bring the Mass into our lives; to live it in love and service of God and our neighbour, as leaven in the community in which we live.

In his book, *Revolution of the Heart*, missionary priest Fr Niall O'Brien tells of a very rich sugar plantation owner in the Philippines, who lived in a luxurious villa where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved and where she received communion daily. When told that this could not continue she wept bitterly. Yet she seemed indifferent to the miserable poverty of the workers on her plantation and the many children dying through lack of food and basic medical care. She had a deep love of Jesus in the Eucharist, but contributed to crucifying him daily in the victims of poverty and injustice.

In his letter for the Year of the Eucharist, Pope John Paul II says that the Eucharist should have a transforming power that carries beyond Sunday Mass and into daily life; in the love shown for others and the care given to the needy. It is not enough to attend Mass; we must live it.

The Eucharist should have a transforming power that carries beyond Sunday Mass and into daily life; in the love shown for others and the care given to the needy.

## 35 TIE A YELLOW RIBBON

In 1972 the *New York Post* published a story about a group of young people on a bus trip to Miami. They noticed among them a middle-aged, poorly dressed man, looking worried and lonely. One of the girls offered him a drink, which he accepted gladly, and he was soon telling her his story.

He had just completed five years in prison for forging cheques. When he was sentenced, he had written to his wife in shame and guilt, telling her he would be away for a long time. If she couldn't take it, he wrote, she should forget him and get on with her own life. He told her not to write or contact him, and she didn't. "She's a wonderful woman," he said gently, "really good and special."

"And now," the girl asked, "you're going home, not sure what to expect?"

"Yes," he replied. "Last week I wrote again, telling her I would be on this bus. Just outside Jacksonville, where we live, there is a big oak tree. I asked her, if she is willing to take me back, to tie a yellow ribbon on the tree and I'd get off the bus and come home. If she didn't want me, forget it. No yellow ribbon, and I'd just keep on going."

The girl told her friends the story and they all became involved. As they approached Jacksonville a hushed silence fell over them, all looking anxiously for the oak tree. Vingo, as they had come to call the man, grew more tense and worried. Then suddenly the young people were jumping and shouting, dancing and crying. All except Vingo. He sat there stunned, staring at the oak tree covered with yellow ribbons, like a huge welcoming banner. Then he rose, made his way slowly to the front of the bus, smiled back through flowing tears at his young friends and got off.

## 35 TIE A YELLOW RIBBON

This true story became the inspiration for the song *Tie a Yellow Ribbon round the Old Oak Tree*, which became a number one best seller worldwide in 1973, as older readers may remember!

Jesus always welcomes sinners. In fact, one of the main accusations for which he was crucified was, "This man welcomes sinners and even eats with them" (Lk 15:2). The religious leaders, who despised sinners, were outraged by his behaviour and by his teachings about the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15), The Adulterous Woman (Jn. 8), the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk. 18), the Sinful Woman in Simon's house (Lk. 7), as well as the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Lk15).

Compassion, mercy and forgiveness towards sinners lay at the very heart of Jesus' ministry. The mission of the Church, which is all of us, is to make this Jesus present in our world today. We cannot be his representatives if we are legalistic and judgemental; if we nurture bitterness and hatred; if we exclude people rather than welcome them. We cannot even pray the Our Father honestly if we refuse to forgive - "Forgive us our sins (just) as we forgive those who sin against us".

In all Jesus' "Welcome home" stories, there is rejoicing and celebration when the sinner returns, just as there was in our 'Yellow Ribbon' story. For forgiveness not only brings new life to both the forgiven and forgiver, but brings healing to the whole community. How badly our world needs such healing.

**"There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety nine just"**

(Lk. 15:7)

## 36 LIVING IN THE PRESENT

It has been noted that as countries develop economically and modernise, the number of people who die early from stress related causes such as strokes, heart attacks and even suicides increases sharply. People now live in a world dominated by activity, competition and pressure - by timetables, deadlines and production targets. The lap-top, email and handpone often mean that peiole's work accompanies them home. Life is lived in the fast lane, as people struggle for more, more, more. As a result there may be "no time" for the more important things in life: for rest, recreation, personal reflection, human relationships - or for God. In the rat race, it is not only health which may suffer but the whole quality of life, as reflected in reduced peace and happiness, in weakened family and social relationships and spiritual wellbeing.

An Irish spiritual writer, John O'Donohue, says "Often we miss out on the great treasures in our lives because we are so restless and out of touch with the present. Many people are haunted by the past, burdened by memories and prisoners of what has passed. Others are haunted by the future, anxious and worried by what lies ahead." Yet, when Moses asked God who he was, the reply he received was, "My name is I AM" -- not I WAS or I WILL BE, but the God of the here and now who is always with us.

It would be a good practice, for both body and soul, to give ourselves a space each day where we slow down and give our spirits time to catch up with us - time when we can be with ourselves and with God in the present.

It is this "God with us" that Jesus had in mind when he said to his disciples, "Do not worry about your life - can any of you for all your worry add one day to your span of life? Think of the wild flowers; they never have to

## 36 LIVING IN THE PRESENT

work or spin, yet not even Solomon in all his glory had clothes as beautiful as these. Now, if that is how God clothes the grass of the field, will he not much more look after you?" (Lk 12:22-32)

What we need in life is a sense of balance. Obviously we need to earn a living, support our family, educate our children and provide for the future. But in the midst of all this activity, the spirit too must be nourished. We need to find time to appreciate the 'miracle' of the here and now, the God-filled present. When the disciples returned, tired out after their first missionary effort, Jesus gently invited them, "Let us go off by ourselves to some place where we are alone, and you can rest for a while" (Mk 6:31). The lonely place, the quiet time is essential if we are to find the real 'treasure' which we are so desperately, and often vainly, looking for.

John o'Donohue tells a story about a European explorer traveling through the jungle in Africa. He moved forward with great speed and urgency despite the great heat. The Africans carrying his equipment struggled to keep up with him, but on the third morning, they sat down and refused to move. He asked them what the matter was and finally the leader of the group replied, "We have moved too quickly to reach here; now we must wait to give our spirits a chance to catch up with us."

It would be a good practice, for both body and soul, to give ourselves a space each day where we slow down and give our spirits time to catch up with us - time when we can be with ourselves and with God in the present.

## 37 A MODERN PARABLE

As he drove home in his rickety old car one cold, wet evening, he almost missed the elderly lady, stranded on the roadside, and obviously in need of help. So he pulled up in front of her shining Mercedes and approached her with a smile.

As well as being wet and miserable, the woman was afraid. She needed help but could she trust this rather scruffy and miserable-looking stranger? He did not look safe. Was he going to attack or rob her?

Sensing her fear, he said, "I am here to help you, ma'am. Why don't you wait inside the car where it's warm? By the way, my name is Bryan Anderson." He saw that her problem was a flat tyre, so he took the spare wheel from the car boot, and soon fixed it in place, getting cold, wet and dirty in the process.

As he tightened the nuts, the old lady let down the window and said she couldn't thank him enough for coming to her rescue. She imagined the awful things that could have happened if he had not stopped and asked him how much she could pay him.

Bryan smiled. For him this was not a pay job. This was helping someone in need, just as others had helped him in the past. So he told her, "If you really want to pay me, then next time you meet someone in trouble, please help them - and think of me." He waited till she started her car and drove off. It had been a cold and depressing day, but somehow he now felt good as he drove home in the darkness.

A few miles down the road, the lady came to a small cafe. It looked dingy and run-down, but she could get something to eat and warm herself up before setting out on the long journey home. The waitress approached

## 37 A MODERN PARABLE

her with a warm smile, bringing her a clean towel to dry her hair. The lady noticed that she was about eight months pregnant, and looked strained and tired after a long day on her feet. She wondered how someone who seemed to have so little could be so kind and helpful to a stranger. Then she remembered Bryan.

In the midst of all that is dark and evil, God is still present and at work among us - in ordinary people with generous hearts.

On finishing her meal, she paid with a \$100 note, and quietly slipped out the side door while the waitress went for change. When the girl returned she wondered where the lady could be, but then she saw something written on the napkin. Tears came to her eyes when she read, "You don't owe me anything. I have been in need of help too. If you really want to repay me, don't let this chain of love end with you." Under the nap-

kin were four more \$100 notes!

After cleaning up and closing the cafe, the waitress went home, exhausted but happy. As she climbed into bed she was thinking of the money and what the lady had written. How could the stranger have known how much she and her husband needed the money, especially with the baby due soon? She knew how worried her husband was, and as he lay sleeping beside her, she gave him a soft kiss, and whispered in his ear, "Everything's going to be alright. I love you, Bryan Anderson."

Yes, the Good Samaritan never died and, in the midst of all that is dark and evil, God is still present and at work among us - in ordinary people with generous hearts.

## 38 OUR SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

Happy Birthday! Happy Christmas! Happy Anniversary! ---all familiar greetings which reflect the deepest longing in every human heart for happiness and well-being. For Christians our ultimate aim is eternal happiness in heaven, while Buddhists strive for Nirvana, "the highest happiness". God has created each of us to share in his complete happiness, beginning in this world before reaching its fullness in the life to come.

Sadly, few people achieve the happiness they long for and which God offers them, the reason being that they search in the wrong places. Driven by the media and misguided consumerism, they become engrossed in a frantic search for happiness in possessions, achievements, pleasure and status. Of course, having enough to satisfy our basic human needs is important for our happiness, but the frenzied search for more, more, more; for the newest and most expensive 'adult toys' often brings, not real and lasting happiness, but greater anxiety, fear and jealousy.

True happiness can never come from external sources but from within ourselves; from our values, attitudes and outlook. No one can ever 'make' us happy and when we are unhappy it is useless blaming others, as we usually do! We must search for the real cause inside ourselves. The spiritual writer Fr. John Powell S.J. wrote "I have a sign on my mirror, the first thing I see every morning, which reads 'You are now looking at the person who will be responsible for your happiness today'". The Greek philosopher Aristotle also wrote "Happiness depends on ourselves". Among the most important teachings of Jesus were the Beatitudes---"Blessed are the poor in spirit" etc. (Mt5:3-11). These are his prescriptions for being happy, even in the midst of adversity. The secret lies in our inner attitudes; in trust, humility, kindness, forgiveness, respect and compassion.

In his book *'The Christian Vision'* Fr. Powell relates the following imaginary story or parable about twin boys, one of whom was an optimist,

## 38 OUR SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

always cheerful, and the other a pessimist, always gloomy. In an effort to level out their behaviour, a psychiatrist advised their parents to give them very different presents on their next birthday. So they bought the gloomy one a costly new computer but wrapped up a box of horse manure for the cheerful one, and placed the presents in separate rooms!

Our happiness lies within ourselves and its greatest enemy is selfishness. Real happiness reaches out to others and has its foundation in love and generosity. Truly, "happiness lies more in giving than receiving". (Acts 20:35)

In the morning the parents peeped into the room where the pessimist was opening his gift and heard him complaining that he didn't like that brand and that his friend Joey had a better one. He looked miserable. Then glancing into the other room they saw the cheerful one jumping around the box of manure, his face alight with joy as he shouted, "they can't fool me! Where there's this much manure, there's got to be a horse nearby!". The boys' responses were not determined by the nature of their presents but by their individual attitudes. Some people

look beyond the present circumstances and see hope and possibilities ahead; the good things that so often come to us disguised at first as problems. Others see only the present and worry about what is likely to go wrong---and usually it does!

Our happiness lies within ourselves and its greatest enemy is selfishness; an obsession with self that may bring some passing satisfaction or pleasure---a 'happiness' which is temporary and quickly evaporates in the face of difficulty or hardship. Real happiness reaches out to others and has its foundation in love and generosity. Truly, "happiness lies more in giving than receiving". (Acts 20:35)

## 39 THE GOLDEN YEARS

The building of a Home of Peace in the Kuching Archdiocese was a project which gives true gospel expression to Christian faith. Quoting the words of St. James, "I by my works will show you my faith". Pope John Paul 2 urged us to "courageously express our faith in Christ in works of charity and solidarity with those who are in need". For many today, in a world with increasing numbers of elderly people, old age is indeed a time of need.

Western society, with its superficial 'celebrity' culture, tends to glorify youth, fitness, productivity and physical beauty. People go to extraordinary trouble and expense to hide the signs of aging with cosmetics, hair dyes, wrinkle removing cream and even plastic surgery in an effort to deceive themselves and others! As they inevitably age (a process which starts the day we are born!), people can increasingly feel inferior or worthless. As they slow down they may look fearfully into a future of declining energy and mobility, of growing weakness and dependence, feeling that life has passed them by and emptiness lies ahead.

Our Christian faith requires us to respect the elderly, to value their wisdom and experience, to promote their dignity and wellbeing in every way possible.

But this is a very superficial and unchristian way of thinking. The French do not speak of declining years but of 'la vie montante'; the ascending age, the golden years, when we can bask in the memory of our achievements, take time to enjoy the glories of nature, pursue personal interests, help out in the Church or social organisations, reminisce with contemporaries and relax with loved ones and grandchildren: things for which we had 'no time' in our busy past!

## 39 THE GOLDEN YEARS

The fears and difficulties of old age are of course real, but when viewed from a Christian perspective they have a rich value and meaning of their own. Though Jesus died in the prime of life he shared deeply in all that the aged go through: in the fear, suffering, helplessness, humiliation and loneliness of his final hours. When the elderly unite their sufferings with those of Christ, their prayer becomes truly powerful and redemptive.

Many of us remember touching pictures of Pope John Paul in his final declining years. He struggled to speak, could hardly walk, grew tired quickly and was obviously in pain. In a media age where appearance and efficiency are considered important qualities of leadership, some called for his resignation. But others saw his suffering and courage, his generosity and enthusiasm as his most powerful witness to Christian values. In a culture which increasingly sees old age as a burden, which promotes 'mercy killing' and assisted suicide, his example proclaimed the value and dignity of human life at every stage.

Speaking to the elderly in the Jubilee Year 2000, the Pope spoke of old age as a time of special grace. "The Church needs you" he assured them. "Civil society needs you. May you use generously the time and talents God now grants you by assisting others. Help proclaim the gospel as catechists, as liturgical leaders, as witnesses of Christian living. Devote time to prayer, to reading and reflecting on the word of God".

Our Christian faith requires us to respect the elderly, to value their wisdom and experience, to promote their dignity and wellbeing in every way possible. And when for practical reasons their needs can no longer be satisfied in the family, your Home of Peace will provide a haven of care and love, where the aged can await their entry into the fullness and happiness of eternal life, where fear, pain and loneliness are no more.

## 40 THE FACE OF GOD

A newspaper reporter was sent to Ecuador in 1987 to cover the earthquake which destroyed much of the country. This is how he described a queue of people at a food distribution centre.

“The line of people moved forward slowly, with a young girl at the very end. She waited patiently as those before her received a little rice, some canned food and fresh fruit. She did not notice that the food was running out, for her attention was all the time focused on three smaller children, under a tree across the street. At last her turn came and she stepped forward to collect her food but by now the only thing left was a banana.

The girl did not seem to mind as she ran across the street to the three smaller ones, probably her sisters and a brother. Carefully she peeled the banana and divided it into three equal parts. Placing the precious food into the eager hands of the little ones - ‘one for you, one for you and one for you’, she sat down and licked the inside of the banana skin herself. It was at that moment, I swear, that I first saw the face of God.”

A simple  
greeting, an act  
of kindness,  
a word of thanks,  
a sign of  
forgiveness  
can touch hearts.

One small act of tender love, generosity and compassion led an unbelieving reporter to find God.

Our world highlights what is great, powerful and spectacular, but God is most often found in the small and ordinary. Jesus promised to reward anyone who gives “even a cup of cold water” (Matt 10:42) to the needy and says the widow who put two small coins in the donation box gave more than the rich who gave large offerings (Lk 21:1-4). He compared the kingdom of

## 40 THE FACE OF GOD

Heaven to a tiny seed, to yeast hidden in the flour (LK 13:18-21). For Jesus, small is beautiful!

To recognise and honour Jesus in our lives and bring him into the lives of others, we don't have to do extraordinary things. Few are called to be heroes, to perform wonders or to achieve greatness but all are called to love.

A simple greeting, an act of kindness, a word of thanks, a sign of forgiveness - all can touch hearts. A smile costs nothing and crosses all language barriers, but may bring a spark of joy and hope into a broken or lonely life. Old timers may remember a hit-song of the '70s, 'You don't have to be a star to be in my show'. We can imagine Jesus saying these words today, calling us to be apostles of the ordinary.

A dying woman was greatly distressed because she had lost all sense of God. "If only he would let me feel that he is here." she cried.

The old lady by her bedside urged her, "Pray for him to touch you."

The woman closed her eyes in deep prayer and suddenly felt the hand of God in hers. Overjoyed, she exclaimed, "Yes, he has touched me." Then, after a pause she said, "But you know, his hand felt just like yours!"

The old lady replied, "Of course it was mine. Did you think God would stretch out a long arm all the way from heaven to touch you? He just took my hand, which was nearest, and used that." Soon after, the woman died peacefully.

St Teresa has told us that Christ has no body now on earth but ours; no other hands, or feet, or eyes with which to bring his healing love and compassion to the world. How can we refuse him?

## 41 THE HIDDEN YEARS

The religion teacher asked little Johnny, "Can you tell me who made you?" Johnny replied, "God made part of me". Puzzled, the teacher continued, "And who made the rest of you?" Again Johnny answered confidently, "I grew the rest myself".

Johnny was of course right. God gives us the gift of life, but how we grow up and develop depends on our family upbringing and our own efforts. When God took flesh in the person of Jesus, he too had to grow and develop through childhood and adolescence, into the maturity of adult life.

In the liturgy we complete our celebration of the infancy of Jesus on the feast of the Epiphany, and then immediately jump to celebrate his baptism by John when he was "about thirty years old". (Lk.3:23). It seems extraordinary that Jesus spent ninety per cent of his life on earth in the obscurity and privacy of home life in Nazareth. Apart from one incident where he was lost and found in the temple at the age of twelve (Lk.2:41-50), the scriptures are completely silent about those thirty "hidden years".

What we do know is that they were very ordinary years of growing up—playing, learning, working and praying. They were so ordinary that when he began his public ministry of teaching and healing, the local people refused to accept him saying, "Surely this is the carpenter, the son of Mary!" (Mk.6:3). With our modern stress on productive time management, those 'lost' years may seem a waste! We can be certain however that they did not happen by chance but were part of God's divine plan. So, what can we learn from them?

Firstly, they emphasise the full humanity of Jesus, who shared in our growth to maturity and become one with us "in all ways except in sin" (Heb.4:15). The first heresy encountered by the early Church was the denial

## 41 THE HIDDEN YEARS

that Jesus was really human; the claim that the Son of God only seemed or appeared to be human. It is an error which Christians who focus on the divine, miracle-working Jesus still struggle with. Are we to imagine that the young Jesus walked about Nazareth with a solemn appearance, a shiny halo around his head and that he spent most of his time in prayer?

We are called to grow in knowledge, wisdom and holiness: to value our God-given identity and talents like Jesus.

Those ‘hidden years’ were also important in Jesus’ preparation for his public ministry. We are told that he “grew both in body and wisdom, gaining favour with God and people” (Lk.2:52), just as we are called to grow. Through study, prayer and reflection, he became familiar with the scriptures and was also a close and sensitive observer of nature and of human behaviour, which is later so strongly

reflected in his teaching, especially his parables.

Also those silent years point to the sacredness of human life, the holiness of ordinary family life and work. The great majority of people live simple, ‘hidden’ lives, yet their humble work is the foundation on which society is built. The fact that the Son of God chose to spend most of his life in obscurity is a powerful assurance that our littleness is precious before God—“Blessed are you poor” etc. (Lk.6:20).

Like Jesus we are called to grow in knowledge, wisdom and holiness: to value our God-given identity and talents, and, like little Johnny, to “grow them” ourselves, into full human maturity. St. Irenaeus assures us that “the glory of God is the human person fully alive”, the kind of person God wants him/her to be.

## 42 RELIGION AND WORK

On 6th January, the Feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate how the Magi worshipped the infant Jesus. The following day we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, when he was 30 years old.

Liturgically that is a 'long jump'; in 24 hours we span 30 years of our Lord's life! What happened during those 'hidden' years, which were part of God's plan and which accounted for 90% of Jesus' life on earth?

St Luke simply tells us "He grew in body and wisdom, gaining favour with God and people" (Lk2:52); growing normally through childhood and adolescence and soon learning the carpenter's skills from Joseph. Jesus thus spent most of his life at work, becoming the family breadwinner when Joseph died. At the start of his public ministry, his friends and neighbours asked in surprise, "Isn't this the carpenter?" (Mk6:3). They saw him as an ordinary worker like themselves.

Work is not just a secular activity but something the Lord himself has made sacred. It occupies most of people's lives and is an important part of our Christian vocation. Through it we share in God's on-going work of creation. We use and develop the talents he has given us, thus growing in maturity and fullness as human persons. Whatever our work, however distinguished or insignificant, it contributes to social progress and human well-being, fulfilling God's command to love and serve our neighbour.

One false attitude, common among some religious people, is to *undervalue* work, thinking that the spiritual and holy is confined to Church practices and pious devotions.

But Vatican II warns that "One of our most serious errors is the separation between the faith we profess and the practices of our daily lives".

## 42 RELIGION AND WORK

Condemning this “false division” it goes on to say, “The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties towards his neighbour and towards God himself”.

An opposite error is to overvalue work, to the extent of becoming ‘workaholics’, thereby neglecting family life and relationships, church or community service and even our own need for recreation and social interaction. This problem usually arises from a craving for ever more wealth, in the false belief that ‘more’ means ‘happier’.

Such false attitudes may also cause us to value others by their wealth and achievements, meaning that the lives of the handicapped, manual labourers, the aged and even housewives (“she’s not working!”) are of little or no value. Can one who believes and lives by such values be regarded as a ‘practising’ Christian?

A woodcutter once got a job with a timber merchant. The first day he cut down 18 trees and was praised by his boss. Feeling very pleased he worked even harder next day but only cut 15. Each day, however hard he tried, he felled fewer trees. Ashamed and frustrated, he apologised to his boss, saying he couldn’t understand what was wrong.

“When did you last sharpen your axe?” the boss asked. “I had no time to do so,” he replied. “I was too busy trying to cut more trees”.

Each year, Lent is a good time for us to sharpen our ‘axes’; to sharpen our vision and review our attitudes towards work. I cannot be a ‘good Catholic’ if I am negligent, indifferent or dishonest in my work, regardless of how often I am in Church! True religion is not a separate *part of my life*, but *a way of life* that permeates and influences my role in the family, Church, workplace and society in general.

## 43 THE UNSEEN PRESENCE

Among the Cherokee Indian people of the USA a legend describes how, when a boy reached the age of manhood, he had to go through a rite of passage or initiation. His father took him deep into the forest at nightfall, blindfolded him and left him there alone. He had to sit on a tree stump all night and not remove the blindfold until the rays of the rising sun shone through it. He must not cry out for help but once he had survived the night he was declared a man.

During the night the boy was terrified. The cries of wild animals and sounds of strange movements all around him filled him with fear. The wind blew, the leaves rustled and the cold made him shiver. The hours passed slowly but he sat there bravely, never removing the blindfold until at last the sun's rays filtered through it. Then taking it off he was surprised to find his father sitting on the stump next to his! He had been there all night, protecting his son from harm.

Because we  
cannot see God  
doesn't mean he is  
not there. We need  
to walk by faith,  
not by sight

Many people live through periods, sometimes long periods, of suffering, doubt and fear arising from illness or from personal, family or social problems. At such times God may seem to be absent, prayers to go unanswered and life itself to be without meaning. It is then we need to recall the lesson of the Indian legend: that we are never really alone; that God is always with us, watching over us with loving care, especially in our darkest and most fearful hours. There we shall surely find him when at last our blindfold is removed, even if for some that will happen only after death.

In her earliest years of religious life the saintly Mother Teresa of Calcutta experienced a great awareness of the presence and love of Jesus

## 43 THE UNSEEN PRESENCE

in her life, years of deep spiritual joy and consolation. Few however realise that later, for over 50 years until her death in 1997, she struggled with great spiritual darkness.

“In my soul,” she wrote, “I feel that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing”.

It is ironic that the woman whom the world increasingly regarded as ‘a living saint’ struggled so painfully with her own faith. She united her sufferings with those of Jesus who prayed in the Garden the night before his death, “Father, if possible take this suffering from me”, and who cried out on the cross the next day, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

Like her Master, Mother Teresa remained steadfast and faithful in her love for a God who seemed not to be there and for serving him in the poorest of his people.

There is a tendency to think that if we are really religious we must experience great joy, consolation and peace. But while we should be thankful for such gifts if they come our way, we must never forget that following Jesus is above all a call to fidelity, day by day and year by year striving to walk in his footsteps. It has little to do with feelings; the cross is an integral part of the journey. But sooner or later the blindfold will come off, a new day will dawn and we shall see that our Father has been with us through it all. “Because we cannot see God doesn’t mean he is not there. We need to walk by faith, not by sight.”

## 44 MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Most people in Sarawak are familiar with the excellent work which the Cheshire Home in Kuching has done for people suffering from various physical handicaps. It offers them accommodation and care, support and training, providing many with their only real home and family. Perhaps not so many are aware of how the Cheshire Home came about.

Leonard Cheshire was born in England in 1917. After a rather wild and undisciplined youth he was drafted into the Royal Air Force (RAF) at the outbreak of war in 1939. He had many hair-raising experiences flying bombers over Germany and was awarded Distinguished Service medals three times for his brilliant leadership and flying skills. In 1944 he was awarded Britain's highest honour, the Victoria Cross. His last major war mission was in 1945 when he was the official British observer at the dropping of the US atomic bomb on Nagasaki in Japan.

But his war experiences brought group Captain Cheshire more than military honours. They changed him from being a proud and self-centred university student to someone filled with deep humility and compassion. In 1948 he was shocked when a close friend, dying of cancer, could not be kept in hospital because of lack of room. Cheshire himself cared for him until his death, which had a profound effect upon him and influenced him to join the Catholic Church later that year.

He now took more and more people into his home, some disabled, others frail and elderly. A second home was soon opened, and in 1952 the Cheshire Trust was set up. Cheshire himself suffered several bouts of TB, which gave him more quiet time for prayer and contemplation. Gazing on a picture of the crucified Saviour he said, "I felt impelled not so much to go on looking as to get up and act. Who could not fail to see the suffering Christ's reflection in the poor and the handicapped, the sick, the dying, the

## 44 MAKING A DIFFERENCE

unwanted, the lonely; in all who suffer or are in need from whatever cause: Who, having seen this, could be content to lie back and rest as long as there remains even one human being in want or distress?"

Today there are over 250 Cheshire projects in over 50 countries, caring for about 250,000 disabled people. The Cheshire Foundation strives to attain total recognition of the dignity and human rights of all disabled people and to promote excellence in all aspects of care, from both staff and volunteers.

By translating Christian faith into Christian action, Leonard Cheshire sowed a gospel seed which produced a harvest far beyond what he could have foreseen. Another layman, Jean Vanier did likewise in founding the L'Arche Community to care for the mentally retarded, as did Anton Wallich-Clifford who founded the Simon Community in 1963 to provide food and shelter for the homeless. All were inspiring witnesses and instruments of the ongoing healing and saving mission of Jesus in our world.

Being a Christian means being called "to get up and act". The gospel command to love is a call to service, to become involved, to give of ourselves, to make a difference. Leonard Cheshire died in 1992, but his work lives on in the care provided for the disabled people worldwide... he continues to make a difference. Do we?

**"My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love which shows itself in action"**

(1 Jn 3:18).

## 45 BLAMING GOD

In concluding an article entitled 'False images of God and how they blind us', scripture scholar Fr. Wilfrid Harrington O P writes, "It can be argued that the more insidious enemy of God is not atheism but religion". He is of course referring to how various religions down through the centuries have distorted the image of God and used it to justify their own narrow hatreds and crimes against others. "So many lives have been shattered in the name of God".

The 2001 horrific attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the loss of more innocent lives in the retaliatory strikes on Afghanistan bring home to us the danger and the evil of using, or rather abusing, God for our own purposes. In a video statement, Osama bin Laden proclaimed, "Here is America, struck by God Almighty in one of its vital organs, Grace and gratitude to God". At the same time a US spokesperson stated that President Bush was "getting his strength from his belief that he was doing God's will" in mobilizing the world against the Taliban. Bush's frequent phrase, "God bless America", is surely admirable, provided we remember that God loves and blesses all people. He has no favourites.

At different times and in different places, followers of all major world faiths have justified atrocities against others on grounds that they were doing "God's will", that their cause was righteous and that those who died for it would be eternally rewarded. We need think only of modern examples in Israel, Palestine, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, India, Nigeria and elsewhere, to find Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs justifying indiscriminate acts of violence and terror as a means of protecting their own religious interests and resolving ethnic grievances.

The tendency to create God "in our own image and likeness"... a God as narrow, biased and vengeful as we are, goes back even to the Bible. In the

Book of Joshua, for example, the Israelites are described as doing God's will when "They seized Jericho, and with the sword killed everyone in the city, men and women, young and old" (Josh 6:21). Here, a primitive people followed the mentality of the time to wipe out their enemies. From the fact that God allowed the slaughter to happen, it was a short step for them to claim that God willed it and ordered it. The God who promised them this land must also, they believed, destroy all that would prevent them occupying it. God of course is not a cruel tyrant and would never order the slaughter of innocent men, women and children.

**God is infinite, God is mystery.**

He is the God of all, not the exclusive ownership of any one race, nation or religion. To justify war or violence in the name of God is to dishonour and profane God himself.

Unfortunately we can all be guilty at times of creating a sectarian God... a God owned by us and our religion, a God whose love and mercy are exclusively meant for us, a God who will punish and destroy our

enemies. At the time of Jesus, the Jews claimed exclusive access to God and his kingdom. Jesus angered them when he pointed out in his teachings that the despised and 'pagan' Samaritans were often closer to God than they were.

God is infinite, God is mystery. He is the God of all, not the exclusive ownership of any one race, nation or religion. To justify war or violence in the name of God is to dishonour and profane God himself... the God whom St John describes as "love" (1 Jn 4:8) and who, St Paul tells us, "wants everyone to be saved" (1 Tim 2:4).

## 46 THE FULLY HUMAN JESUS

Fred, a model Christian, was invited during a gospel-based retreat to visualise the wedding feast of Cana, to imagine that he was present and to reflect on the event. Later, the retreat director asked him what he saw. Fred described a scene of great merriment, tables heaped with food and drink and guests dancing joyfully. "Did you see Jesus?" he was asked. "Yes" replied Fred, "he was sitting upright, dressed in white robe, with a staff in his hand and a crown of thorns on his head, looking solemn and disapproving." Fred had a serious problem with the mystery of the incarnation!

It was the human Jesus who attracted the crowds and the disciples. Amazed by his teaching and miracles they asked, "Who is this man?". The clear conviction that Jesus was truly God developed among the early believers only after the resurrection and Pentecost experiences. In fact debate about his divinity and humanity, continued for several centuries before it was finally proclaimed that Jesus Christ was "true God and true man". In the words of Pope Leo the Great, "the same one who is a genuine human being is also genuinely God", for in Christ two distinct natures, the divine and the human, are united in one person.

Jesus  
"humbled  
himself to  
share in  
our humanity"

It will always be a mystery how two distinct natures could co-exist in Jesus, without either dominating the other. While non-Christians have difficulty accepting that the historic human person called Jesus was also God among us, many pious Christians like Fred have difficulty accepting his full humanity. They are comfortable with the miracle-working Jesus, to see him

## 46 THE FULLY HUMAN JESUS

with a halo around his head and a solemn look on his face, a Jesus who never smiles and somehow looks different. They are less comfortable with the Jesus who became flesh, who entered fully into our human condition, sharing our physical needs and functions, our emotional struggles, our human limitations.

Of course they accept that Jesus suffered pain and sorrow, hunger and weariness, frustration and betrayal, but somehow, in the back of their minds is the thought, "Ah yes, but for Jesus it was different. After all, he was God and knew that he would come out on top in the end". They may even come close to the early Church heresy of Docetism, which denied that Jesus was fully human and claimed that he only appeared to be so.

Such an outlook diminishes the awesome wonder of the central Christian mystery of the incarnation, blurring the greatest expression of God's infinite love for humanity. It also diminishes our appreciation of the dignity and sacredness of all human life and of creation itself. It makes it easier for us to find God in holy places, in visions and wonders, than to recognise his real presence in what Jesus called "the least of my brothers". It contributes to what Vatican II and Pope John Paul II describe as a false and dangerous division between religion and life, faith and work, social and spiritual life.

Realising that Jesus "humbled himself to share in our humanity" we can approach him in our deepest pain and sorrow, our fears and uncertainties, and hear him gently assure us, "Yes, I understand, I have been there before you. Take courage! I am with you through it all". He is of course equally present in our joys, pleasures and celebrations...one who is like us in all ways except sin.

## 47 THE VOCATION OF THE LAITY

On 9th August 1995, a Seminar on the Priesthood was held in Kuching as part of the Jubilee Celebrations of Archbishop Peter Chung. The Seminar, conducted by Fr Noel Hanrahan, focussed on the Common Priesthood of all the faithful and was an important landmark in the formation of the laity of the Archdiocese.

Before Vatican 2 the role of the laity was generally seen as passive (to 'pray, pay and obey!'), while the Church's teaching and saving mission in the world was regarded as the task of the hierarchy; the Pope, bishops and priests. This distinction was reflected at Mass, where the priest presided in Latin in the enclosed sanctuary, with his back towards the people, who busied themselves with their own private devotions. The Church had become identified with the hierarchy who comprised only about two percent of its membership.

But it is in ***the world***, through their daily lives, that the laity specially exercise their Common Priesthood

Vatican 2 re-emphasised the centrality of baptism and confirmation in establishing the role and dignity of every member of the Church. Without in any way diminishing the importance and special role of the ordained priesthood it spoke of "a true equality regarding the dignity and activity which all share in building up the Body of Christ" (LG32). This it called the Common Priesthood which belongs to all, as a right and a duty, by virtue of their baptism. Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World* (1988) again emphasised the role of the laity. Its title means that the words 'vocation' and 'mission' cannot be restricted to the priesthood and religious life.

## 47 THE VOCATION OF THE LAITY

In *Church* today lay people no longer just 'attend' Mass but participate fully in it, offering themselves and their lives to God, in union with the infinite sacrifice of Calvary. They also participate in various Church ministries, sharing in Church leadership through diocesan and parish councils and being active in spiritual and pastoral organisations. Together with the hierarchy they can truly proclaim "We are the Church".

But it is in *the world*, through their daily lives, that the laity specially exercise their Common Priesthood - in family and workplace; in professional, economic, social and political life. By their witness and example their vocation is to be the leaven, the salt which transforms society at all levels, infusing it with Christian values, Vatican 2 stressed that the separation between faith or religion and daily life is "one of the greatest errors today" and warns that Christians who neglect their earthly duties neglect their responsibility to society and to God, and "put their eternal salvation in danger" (GS 43). Religion then is not a separate part of life but rather a way of life which governs all our thoughts, words, deeds and relationships.

Fifty years after Vatican 2 and nearly twenty years after that special seminar is a good time to reflect on the role of the laity in the local Church. There is reason to rejoice and be thankful for the active involvement of so many in various aspects of *Church* life in Sarawak, in contrast to the mainly lifeless parishes here in the West. But are people sufficiently aware of their duty, in the words of Fr Hanrahan, "to inject gospel values into their particular sphere of temporal activity, helping to consecrate their bit of *the world* to Christ?" - through kindness, respect, honesty, commitment, truthfulness and generosity.

## 48 DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Heartbreaking pictures and stories from Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the Sichuan earthquake in China in 2008, as well as memories of the dreadful Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 shocked the world. Between them these natural disasters claimed over 500,000 lives and left many more people injured and grieving for loved ones.

For many people this huge loss of innocent human life and widespread suffering raises questions of why an all powerful and all loving God allows such things to happen. The truth of course is that when we speak of God we speak of mystery. We can say with Job in the Old Testament, "I have been speaking on matters I cannot understand; on marvels beyond me and my knowledge" (Job 42:2-6).

Vast majority of suffering is caused by human beings themselves, through violence, exploitation, crime and warfare, carried out in the name of false gods.

Trying to understand our infinite God with our limited human intelligence is like trying to mop up the ocean with a sponge. The Lord himself tells us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways are not your ways" (Isa 55:8). The whole problem of evil, of natural disasters and human suffering must be considered in the context of eternity, of the larger picture, when God will set right the injustices which puzzle and anger us here and now.

To explain the problem of evil, Fr John Powell SJ once suggested the following example. A visitor from Mars, on his first contact with human beings, was taken into the operating room of a large hospital, where he was horrified by what he saw. A patient was stretched out on a table by a group of white gowned and masked humans. They forced a plastic cover over the

## 48 DELIVER US FROM EVIL

victim's mouth and when he became unconscious they cut into his body with sharp knives and took out some of his organs. Their gloved hands were covered with the poor man's blood as he lay there motionless. Horrified by the cruel and revolting scene, the Martian fled back to the safety of his own planet, with visions of how merciless we humans are.

What the Martian saw was entirely outside his experience. He could see only cruelty and bloodshed, but could not see the broader picture of a surgeon and his team struggling to save the life of a seriously ill patient. Perhaps we are all Martians when we blame God for human suffering.

Of course the vast majority of suffering is caused by human beings themselves, through violence, exploitation, crime and warfare, carried out in the name of false gods such as nationalism, racism, tribalism, political ideologies and downright greed for power and wealth. We are all a part of this sad story by the way we judge and treat others in our workplace, community and families. Jesus calls on his followers to share, to give and forgive, to love, and by doing so to promote his kingdom among us here on earth.

At the beginning of human history our alienation from God through original sin saw the birth of suffering and evil. And though redeemed through the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus we still carry in us the effects of that sin, which also damaged creation itself. St Paul writes, "Up to now creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. But it is not just creation which groans – we also groan within ourselves, as we wait for God to set our whole being free" (Rom 8:22-23). Both human beings and nature itself are undergoing a process of transformation, where pain and suffering remain but which, like the pains of childbirth, is the prelude to new life, as we are born into "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21).

## 49 GOD OF MERCY AND COMPASSION

Irish Jesuit priest Fr Peter McVerry suggests that Jesus was crucified by well-meaning people who genuinely believed they were doing God's will by removing a dangerous troublemaker. They were well-respected, good living people who kept the Jewish religious laws faithfully; praying, fasting, paying their tithes, observing the Sabbath strictly and avoiding contact with sinners. Why then did Jesus condemn them so strongly?

Keeping the law and observing our religious duties are obviously good and virtuous deeds. The problem arises when we think that such observance is sufficient or even the most important part of religion. In his account of the Last Judgement (Mt. 25) and in the Parables of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16) and The Good Samaritan (Lk. 10) Jesus makes it clear that without love, service, compassion and mercy, outward religious performance is empty.

On several occasions in the Gospels Jesus is described as feeling compassion – for the crowd, for two blind men and for the widow of Nain, always responding to the pain and sorrow of the needy. Compassion lay at the heart of his ministry, as it must for his Church, which is all of us. But those whose religion was confined to legal observance and outward ritual, while neglecting mercy and compassion, he condemned as “hypocrites” (Mt 23:13-28).

Our world places great emphasis on performance; on success, wealth and status. It admires and glorifies ‘celebrities’ and ‘high fliers’ – those in the fast lane of life! We have been fed by the media with stories of Olympic ‘stars’ creating new records and achieving world fame. Of course there is nothing wrong with striving for success and progress. Indeed it is our duty to develop our talents and achieve our full potential in life and in society. The problem arises when we regard these achievements as a measure of our true worth; when they become an end in themselves to such an extent that we are ready

## 49 GOD OF MERCY AND COMPASSION

to resort to any means – drugs, corruption and other dishonest methods to achieve them, and look down on those left behind.

There is always the danger that our religious attitudes too may become corrupted by the superficial values of the world we live in. We may judge our spiritual health by external performances like the Pharisees of old. Some religious groups imagine that salvation is reserved for the elite (including themselves of course!), for those who are 'righteous', and they will ask "Are you saved?" But God himself assures us, "The Lord does not see as human beings see; they look at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

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At the Special Olympics (for handi-capped people) in Seattle, USA in 1976, nine competitors lined up for the 100 metres final. At the sound of the gun they all started but one of them stumbled, fell over on the track and began to cry. The others heard the cry, slowed down and looked round. Then they turned and went back, helped the fallen runner to rise and, arm in arm, walked together to the finishing line, as the whole stadium burst into prolonged applause. I'm sure Jesus applauded too!

When it comes to the heavenly Olympics prize-giving, there will be many surprises! Jesus tells us "Many who are now first will be last and many who are now last will be first" (Mt 19:30), and he thanks the Father, "Lord of heaven and earth, for having hidden these things from the wise and learned and making them known to little children" (Lk 10:21); to the ordinary, humble, simple and compassionate people of our world.

## 50 TO JESUS WITH MARY

A story is told that Jesus went for an evening stroll in heaven and was pleased with everything he saw until he turned into a side street and noticed some people there who were not yet ready for the Kingdom. Returning to the Father's house he summoned Peter and expressed his disappointment. "Peter", he said, "I gave you the keys and put you in charge of admissions. Then how did these people get in?" Peter defended himself saying "Lord, I do indeed turn away the unworthy. But then they go round to the back door and your mother lets them in". Jesus smiled and went off to have lunch with the good thief.

It's only a story and not good theology but it does have a message. Catholics have always had a special devotion to Mary, the 'refuge of sinners' whom we frequently ask to 'pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death'. The simplest and most popular devotion to Mary is the Rosary, which we are specially reminded of each year in the month of October.

Pope John Paul 2 described the Rosary as a treasured form of prayer in which we contemplate the life and teachings of Jesus through the eyes and experiences of Mary, who herself "remembered all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk.2:19). It is a scripture-based reflection on the main events of the Lord's life, with Mary herself encouraging us to "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn.2:5). It might be beneficial sometimes to read and reflect on a relevant gospel passage before praying a particular decade, even if it means saying fewer decades.

Our devotion to Mary should go beyond just asking for favours, to imitating her inspirational example of Christian witness. There is her outstanding faith and trust in God which enabled her to accept his will, even when she couldn't understand. At the Annunciation the angel's message "You will bear a son" (Lk.1:31) must have been deeply worrying to a young

## 50 TO JESUS WITH MARY

and still single Jewish girl, in whose society pregnancy outside marriage was deeply shameful and punishable even by stoning to death. But Mary's response was total acceptance of God's will; "Be it done to me according to your will" (Lk1:38). Years later she shows the same blind faith and trust in the face of mystery as she stands in anguish at the foot of the cross. How often in illness or misfortune do we demand answers and explanations---"why should this happen to me?"

Then there is Mary's selfless concern for others as we see in the Visitation, when despite her pregnancy she travels far to assist her older cousin Elizabeth in her time of need. And at the Cana wedding feast she is first to see the embarrassment of the hosts at the shortage of wine. Again with blind faith and trust she advises the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them. During his public ministry she is in the background and again at Pentecost she is with the disciples---always present, always 'there' for others.

Mary above all symbolises the holiness of the ordinary; a simple spouse, mother and housewife, faithfully fulfilling her daily tasks and reaching out in loving care to those in need. Some women today are disappointed to discover the strange fact that less than twenty per cent of canonised saints are women! They can take pride and joy in the fact that the greatest of all saints is Mary, mother of Jesus and our mother too!



## 51 FRIEND OF SINNERS

Imagine that there is a knock on your door and, to your amazement, you find Jesus standing there. He is smiling and dressed simply, but you have no doubt whatsoever that it is the Risen Lord. Overjoyed but also nervous, you invite Jesus into your house, ask him to make himself at home and introduce him to your wife and children. He seems very pleased and tells you that he would like to stay for some time. In the coming days you invite some of your friends to meet him. All feel honoured and enjoy speaking and listening to your surprise guest.

Soon however things begin to go wrong. Some of his statements make people angry. When your son refuses to forgive his younger brother, Jesus reminds him he should forgive, not once, but 70 times. The teenager marches out of the room, slamming the door after him. When you tell him about a former friend who has cheated you, causing you great financial loss, he says he understands your hurt but that you must love your enemies, not hate them. You find this very difficult to accept, but manage to keep quiet.

You decide it would be good to invite the Lord to speak to parish leaders, some of whom are very conscious of their religious respectability but rather condemnatory towards those who are lukewarm or lapsed. When he gives much the same sermon which he gave to the scribes and Pharisees long ago ("tax-collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before you"), there is much anger and many resignations. Naturally, you are greatly embarrassed, and the parish clergy very upset.

The situation reaches its worst when, taking seriously your invitation to make himself at home, he begins to invite some of his new friends to your house. They are the same kind of friends he was accused of mixing with in the gospel, mostly social outcasts and well-known sinners. Your family is very

## 51 FRIEND OF SINNERS

hurt and ashamed and your neighbours complain that he is giving a bad reputation to their respectable neighbourhood. You breathe a huge sigh of relief when, soon afterwards, Jesus tells you that he is returning to his own place and bids your family farewell.

Jesus himself  
condemns those  
who honour him  
with their lips  
but whose hearts  
and lives are far  
from him.

St. Paul tells us, "Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday and will be forever" (Heb 13:8). His teachings and lifestyle deeply disturbed people in his lifetime. If we take him seriously they will continue to disturb us today. A real danger facing all Christians is that of a split spirituality; one which distinguishes between the spiritual or sacred on the one hand, and the material or secular on the

other, confining God to the former ("his own place") and excluding him from the latter. Can a Christian pray for peace, yet support war, or praise God while exploiting his workers? Am I a 'practising Catholic' because I go to Mass on Sunday, even if I neglect justice and refuse to forgive? Vatican 2 warns that such false division is "among the more serious errors of our age" (Church in the Modern World, 43). Jesus himself condemns those who honour him with their lips but whose hearts and lives are far from him.

Our liturgies and prayer life are the essential sources of that spiritual power which helps us to live daily by gospel values ... the spiritual and material are not separable. The Spirit of Pentecost permeates and animates every aspect of human living, empowering us to leave behind the locked room of our self-centredness, to go forth and transform our world. Our religion must not be just a part of life, but a way of life.

## 52 LOVING YOURSELF

Some readers may be familiar with the American Indian story of the farmyard chicken, as told by spiritual writers Anthony de Mello and John Powell. The story relates how a farmer found an eagle's egg in his garden. He put it, with other eggs, in the nest of a farmyard hen. The young eagle hatched out into life and grew up with the ordinary chickens, learning to live and act like one of them. He scratched the earth in search of seeds and worms; he clucked and cackled as they did, and occasionally flapped his wings and flew a few feet into the air, before flopping down on the ground again. Apart from being somewhat larger in size, he behaved like any of his farmyard friends..

Years passed and the eagle chicken grew old. Then one day he looked up and saw a magnificent bird, soaring and gliding majestically, high in the clear blue sky. Something stirred deep within him and, gasping with astonishment he asked, "What is that?" His neighbour replied in surprise, "Do you not know? That is an eagle, the greatest and most magnificent of all the birds. He has been made for the sky, but we belong to the earth, for we are only farmyard chickens."

And so the eagle, imprisoned in this belief, continued to scratch the ground and flutter a few feet into the air. He lived and died as a farmyard chicken, forever unaware of the power and potential that lay unused within him. The tragedy of the eagle is the tragedy of many people's

Let us pray that we may recognise and value the gifts which God has given us, and use them to build up his Kingdom around us, bringing peace, happiness and fulfilment to ourselves and to others, not necessarily by any extraordinary achievements, but by performing the ordinary tasks of human loving and living extraordinarily well.

lives. They grow up, robbed of an awareness of their unique gifts and talents, and as a result, never achieve their own God-given potential. This can happen, especially in our brutally competitive world which recognises, values and rewards only a narrow range of gifts; ones that can be seen and measured by examination results, business profits or career advancement. Those who cannot 'measure up' are left behind, to falsely consider themselves as 'failures'. The honest answer to "Why can't you be like your brother/sister?" is "Because I'm not my brother/sister!"

Our Christian faith assures us that each of us is loved and treasured by God, not just because we are 'good' or 'successful' or 'practising,' or anything else, but because we are sons and daughters of God, each of us gifted in our own unique and personal way, not just as society measures, but as God has made us and wants us to be.

We have been brought up to see the command of Jesus to "love the Lord your God" and "love your neighbour as yourself," as two commands rather than as three mutually inseparable calls to love God, neighbour and self. We somehow feel uncomfortable about the idea of loving self; it sounds too selfish and self-centred. Yet if I cannot love myself, in the best sense of the word 'love,' it is impossible for me to love the God who made me in his own image and likeness, or to love my neighbour created in that same image. Let us pray that we may recognise and value the gifts which God has given us, and use them to build up his Kingdom around us, bringing peace, happiness and fulfilment to ourselves and to others, not necessarily by any extraordinary achievements, but by performing the ordinary tasks of human loving and living extraordinarily well.

## 53 A MODERN MARTYR

The liturgy of Holy Week and Easter is dominated by the celebration of the central mysteries of our faith, the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. These great mysteries belong not just to the distant past but are reflected in nature itself and in our human lives today.

Here in Ireland, we are emerging from the cold, dark and barren season of winter. Daylight hours grow longer, the sun shines more brightly and nature bursts forth into new life. Flowers begin to bloom, leaves grow again on the trees, birds are nesting and hatching out their young, animals are giving birth. Life is once again victorious over death, as it always is in the long run.

On 24 March, people in many parts of the world remember the assassination on that date in 1980 of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador in Central America. A Catholic country, El Salvador was then ruled by a cruel and corrupt military government, funded largely by the USA. They ruled in partnership with a small rich elite who oppressed the vast majority of poor peasants, driving them off their land and forcing them to live in slave-like labour conditions. Eighty per cent of the land was owned by just two per cent of the population.

In the face of such oppression and corruption the Church began to speak out strongly in defence of the poor and exploited, calling for a return to justice and respect of human rights. When Oscar Romero was named Archbishop of San Salvador, the capital city, in 1977 he was regarded as a quiet man, with moderate political and spiritual values. He was a man of deep prayer but as he realized that more and more simple peasants were being killed or “disappeared”, he became convinced that the gospel called for more than prayers for the oppressed.

## 53 A MODERN MARTYR

Despite repeated threats to his own life, he used his Sunday sermons over the Church radio station to condemn the military oppression and the injustice of the social system. He spent his time among the poor, comforting and encouraging them, and assuring them that God was on their side. The military government saw him as a growing threat to their power, especially when he ordered the army to refuse to obey orders to kill innocent people. The military arranged to have him shot dead as he said Mass in the chapel of the cancer hospital where he lived humbly. His cause of canonization has been introduced in Rome but he is already widely venerated as a saint by the poor of El Salvador and of Latin America.

Archbishop Romero had assured his people, "You have not suffered alone, for you are the Church; you are the people of God; you are Jesus in the here and now. His is crucified in you just as surely as he was crucified 2000 years ago on that hill outside Jerusalem, and you should know that your pain and suffering, like his, will contribute to resurrection: to El Salvador's liberation and redemption".

In the 10 years after Romero's murder, over 70,000 people, including priests and religious, were killed or "disappeared", but in 1992 a political agreement was signed and peace came at last to a tortured people. Archbishop Romero's prophecy was fulfilled, "Your bishop will die but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish". Resurrection follows suffering: life follows death. A comforting thought in times of darkness and suffering in all of our lives!

Many in Latin America regard Archbishop Romero as a martyr for his faith and for his people. He may be regarded as a "saint-in-waiting" but is not the kind of saint who would have found favour in Rome in recent decades. We pray for change.

## 54 DOES GOD ALWAYS ANSWER?

After a severe hurricane, flood waters began to rise rapidly and police with loud speakers called on people to leave their homes and use the transport provided to get to higher ground quickly. All moved except John, who had absolute trust in the power of prayer and believed that God would save him. As the flood levels rose however, John was forced to retreat upstairs. A rescue boat passed by and seeing him at the window, urged him to go with them, but he refused, placing total faith in the Lord's help. The waters continued to rise and John was eventually forced to climb on the roof. Then a helicopter came along offering to rescue him but again he refused, certain that God would save him at the last moment. Soon after, he was swept away by the surging waters and drowned.

John arrived in heaven a very angry man. He challenged St Peter, asking why his repeated prayers were not answered. Peter was puzzled, asked for the man's name and checked through his records. "Yes," he said, "there is a record here of your requests, but there is also a record of several answers to your prayers. It says that we sent you the police, a rescue boat and even a helicopter. What happened to all these? Did they not turn up?"

Prayer is not about changing or controlling God, it is about changing me. It is a humble acceptance of my own blindness and dependence. It is recognition that God's ways are not my ways, that his vision is of eternity when I can't even see tomorrow! God is love but he is also a mystery, utterly beyond my limited understanding. As such, my every prayer should end like that of Jesus himself... "not my will but yours be done".

Fundamentalists have problems living with a God of mystery. They need to have answers to everything, to be able to tell you that your prayer was not answered because you lack faith or have not repented for a past sin or because of some sin committed by your great-grandparents! The truth is

## 54 DOES GOD ALWAYS ANSWER?

that they neither know nor have any right to know why you didn't get what you prayed for. That is in God's hands.

God is love but he is also a mystery, utterly beyond my limited understanding. As such, my every prayer should end like that of Jesus himself... "not my will but yours be done".

When Jesus said, "Ask and you shall receive", he did not promise that we would receive what we asked for. He loves us far too much to give us some of the silly things we want. Prayer, of course, is more than asking; it is also praise, thanksgiving and contemplation. But when it is asking, even for our most precious needs, it simply presents those needs to God, leaving entirely in his hands, the manner, nature and timing of his response. We might like God to intervene in our lives with spectacular

miracles, but if he normally chooses to answer my prayers by sending the police, a boat or a helicopter, that is his decision. I simply need the faith to see his hand at work in the ordinary.

A young boy prayed that Santa would bring him a bicycle for Christmas. When he didn't get it his pals made fun of him, saying that his prayers had not been answered. "Oh yes", the boy replied with quiet conviction, "God did answer, only this time his answer was 'No'." For 'No' is also an answer!

## 55 THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE

The story is told of a great missionary priest in Sarawak, who, on visiting the hospital, made friends with a dying patient, an Anglican. The sick man asked to become a Catholic and was received into the Church. When he died soon after, arrangements were made for a Catholic funeral service and burial but his family objected saying they wanted him buried beside other family members, in the Anglican cemetery. After some discussion the priest reluctantly agreed, saying, "All right; you can have the body. We already have the soul".

The priest concerned was in fact noted for working closely with other Christian groups and people of other faiths in various charitable causes. His answer was merely an echo of attitudes that were all too common between different Churches up to the 1960's, an attitude of rivalry and competition. Sadly, from early times, doctrinal and administrative divisions occurred among Christians. At times, these divisions, combined with political conflicts, became so bitter as to result in hostility, persecution and even bloodshed, all in the name of God, as in Northern Ireland in recent decades. "Too many Catholics, too many Protestants and not enough Christians", as one commentator remarked!

Vatican II in its Decree on Ecumenism recognised that these divisions "openly contradict the will of Christ, scandalise the world and damage the preaching of the Gospel". Christ's passionate prayer for his followers the night before his death, "that they all may be one, as you Father in me and I in you, that the world may believe that you sent me", has been denied fulfilment by human pride and narrowness. The Council confessed that we all share the blame for the scandal – "In humble prayer we beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren, just as we forgive them that offend us". It urged "all Catholics to recognise the signs of the times, and to take an active part in the work of ecumenism".

## 55 THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE

Although the young Churches of Asia were spared these ancient conflicts they have sadly inherited and are witnesses of the resulting division among Christians. We rejoice however that remarkable progress towards unity has been made in recent decades. Here our Churches have formed The Association of Churches in Sarawak, through which they organise joint services and functions, pray and share the scriptures together and co-operate in serving social needs. The new Christian Centre at Stampin stands as an impressive symbol of our growing oneness.

While theologians strive to resolve theological differences, it is the serious duty of every Christian to celebrate and promote that unity for which Christ prayed and which already far surpasses the extent of our differences. The religion of Jesus was inclusive. He had time and place for all, especially the most needy. He reprimanded his disciples when they wanted to stop a man casting out demons in his name, because “he doesn’t belong to our group”. Too often the attitude of his followers has been exclusive, erecting man-made barriers to separate ‘them’ from ‘us’; barriers which have caused great scandal and suffering, not least in mixed marriages.

I remember telling a young Anglican priest after Mass at a combined seminar, how sad I felt that he was unable to join us in receiving the Eucharist. He smiled gently, took my hand and said, “It’s all right Brother. We are paying for the sins of the past.”

During Christian Unity Week (18-26 January) each year we pray earnestly that our remaining divisions will soon be past and that the prayer of Jesus may finally be answered.

## 56 GOD'S FREE GIFT

The flying-doctor visited a remote mission clinic in Kenya once a month, concentrating on a particular ailment each month. On one visit he operated on people suffering from hare-lips and cleft palates. It was customary, especially when a child was involved, for several family members to come along as well.

The local priest watched as patients emerged from the clinic. He was amazed to see young Etim James, who had a hare-lip which greatly disfigured his face, come out completely transformed, with almost no evidence of his previous ailment. As was customary, the boy went over to his father who was sitting under a tree and bowed before him, while the father placed his hand on his head as a blessing.

The mother and other family members came rushing to the scene, wild with excitement. With tears of joy they danced around Etim, hugging and embracing him. The father however remained seated passively, and the priest, feeling annoyed, asked why he was not pleased with the operation. The father replied sincerely, "I am indeed pleased. I love my son dearly, but if I showed great excitement now he might think that I hadn't really loved him when he had his hare-lip. I loved him then as much as I do now, and shall always love him".

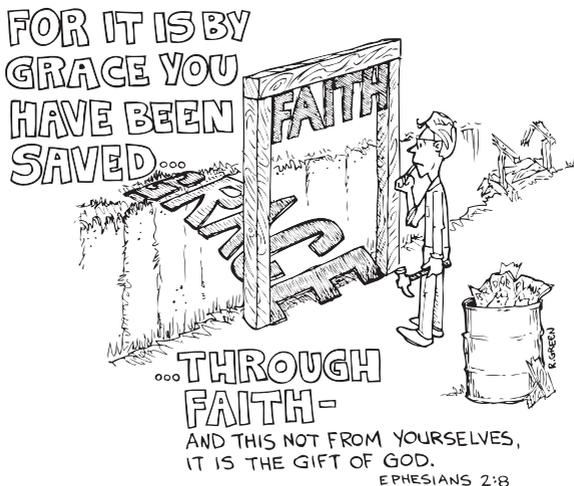
We live today in a highly competitive world where our value or worth is measured by our achievements, by external factors or appearances. Fame, riches and honours have to be earned by our efforts or performance. There is a real danger that we may measure our relationship with God in the same way, thinking that we must earn our salvation through our religious performance or achievements, that God's love has to be bought at a price.

But God has said, "My ways are not your ways". Jesus tells us that it was not the Pharisee who proudly listed out his virtues in the temple who was pleasing to God, but the sinful tax-collector who prayed from the

bottom of his heart, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk 18: 13). St John tells us that "God is love". That love is free and unconditional; it does not have to be earned by human effort. To be humble enough to believe in and accept his love, unearned and unmerited, is the essence of holiness.

Sinners were particularly close to Jesus because they were helpless and broken, deeply conscious of their unworthiness and need. Their cup was empty, ready to be filled with the overflowing love of God, whereas the cup of the legalistic religious leaders was already overflowing with self-righteous pride. Pope John Paul pointed out that St. Paul was a persecutor of Christians up to the moment of his conversion, and that it was soon after he denied his master that Peter was appointed head of the Church. The Pope adds, "Nothing is due to our merits; all is grace".

All this is not to minimize the evil of sin or our need to lead good lives. Our efforts however are not just to earn heaven or save our souls, which we can never do on our own, but rather to respond to the infinite love of God, a love which is ours whether we have hare-lips or not.



## 57 PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

Ken was a successful businessman. He served on the Boards of several companies and also ran his own business. He loved his family but had little time to be with them, as his commitments kept him busy from morning till night and required him to travel a lot. He gave his teenage son, Tony, everything he wanted, but did not know that his son had become dependent on drugs, until the day when Tony attempted suicide!

In a state of shock Ken rushed home and exclaimed, "Son, how could you do this? Have I not given you everything you wanted?"

"No dad", Tony answered. "You did not give me your time. We do not know each other, and when I needed you most, you were not there".

We live in a busy world where many people's lives are dominated by pressure: pressure to achieve, to perform, to acquire, whether in business, studies or social status. Such hectic activity has brought much material progress, but often at a heavy cost in terms of physical and mental health. Even more serious, it has brought a decline in the quality of personal relationships, affecting family and community life.

Too easily the human person becomes a mere object, a cog in the wheel of 'the system'. A pupil becomes a name in the class register. A hospital patient becomes a bed number, a body to be repaired. A spouse and children are family members to be supplied with all their material needs. There is often 'no time' for deeper, more personal relationships, for being present to each other, for listening...not just hearing words, but tuning in to the emotions and feelings which are beneath the words.

## 57 PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

As human beings, we all need this gift of presence and as Christians we are called to be that gift for others. It is not the wealth or material comforts we provide which enrich the lives of others but the quality of presence. A poem begging fathers to spend more time with their children ends with the lines.

**The toys and presents will all fade away,  
But they'll never forget the gift of a day**

Jesus in the gospel lived for people. He was always there, available, willing to listen and help. Nowhere do we read that he had 'no time'. When the disciples wanted to send the children away, he scolded them. When they wanted to send the five thousand on the hillside home he said, "Give them something to eat". He spent many hours of quality time with his disciples... "Let us go off to some place where we can be alone".

He was particularly available to those in any kind of trouble, the poor, the sick, the sinners. He had time for the blind beggar whom the crowd ordered to keep quiet. He had time for the thief beside him on the cross. He spoke and listened to the 'sinful' woman whom society scorned, seeing beyond all their external acts to the hurt, shame, guilt and sorrow in their hearts. He did all this, not just because he was God but because he was a sensitive caring human being.

Like Martha in the gospel we tend to be busy, "worried and troubled over many things". We must learn to slow down and like Mary, find time to be with God, for it is from this presence that the qualities of all other relationships especially family relationships, flow.

## 58 A FRIEND IN NEED

During the 1st World War a unit of soldiers found themselves surrounded by the enemy. Shells were exploding on all sides and the cries of the dying were everywhere. One young soldier wanted to rush out of the foxhole to rescue his wounded pal.

An officer stopped him, shouting, "Don't be stupid! Your pal is dead and if you go out you'll be dead too." But the young man ignored orders, climbed out of the hole and rushed into the open field.

Hours later he returned, badly wounded, dragging his dead friend. "I told you it wasn't worth it," scolded the officer.

But the young soldier disagreed, saying, "Oh yes, it was worth it. You see, when I reached him he was still alive, and when I knelt to pray and pick him up, he looked into my eyes and muttered with a smile, 'Jim, I knew you would come.'"

We have all experienced or heard of acts of human heroism where people have risked or lost their lives attempting to rescue someone in great danger. But equally heroic are the countless ordinary acts of daily loving care and service shown to people in all kinds of need. In such acts the human spirit is at its greatest; at its most Godlike. God has created us in his "own image and likeness", and God is a giving God, who has poured himself out in the great miracle of creation, and above all in the mystery of "the Word made flesh".

St John tells us "God is love", and love by its nature reaches out, putting others before self. The love of God is unconditional and is for everyone. We can't earn it; it is freely given. It is that love which finds expression in the baby lying in a manger, surrounded by humble shepherds, and 33 years

later, in the grown up, tortured body hanging on a cross, between two thieves. Both Christmas Day and Good Friday celebrate the outpouring love of God for every human person.

Our true discipleship of the infant in the manger will always be measured by the extent to which we go beyond self and selfish interests, to reach in love, respect and compassion to the most needy among us.

In his homily at Midnight Mass in Dublin's Women's Prison in 2002, Fr Peter McVerry, SJ had this to say, "Many want to hear about God's infinite love for *them*, but they don't want to hear about God's infinite love for *you* prisoners. Some things have not changed much since Jesus' day. He got into a lot of trouble when he talked about and revealed God's love for prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners. That upset some very important and respectable people. So Jesus, God's revelation of love, was rejected and silenced. Today he is again rejected and silenced every time we exclude and marginalise groups or individuals in our society, no matter what excuses we use for doing so."

How much has really changed in our world? As Fr McVerry said, "Refugees, the homeless, the poor, the addicted, prisoners and others are often despised, unwanted, pushed aside and treated like inferior human beings."

We must not deceive ourselves by diluting the challenge of the gospels to make it more comfortable! Our true discipleship of the infant in the manger will always be measured by the extent to which we go beyond self and selfish interests, to reach out in love, respect and compassion to the most needy among us. It is then that we are most fully human and most truly Godlike. It is then that we are practising Christians.

## 59 WHAT DID YOU DO?

A missionary in Africa was preparing a whole tribe for baptism. He was puzzled by the fact that the only one not interested was the tribal chief, who declared that the new religion was not for him. The priest respected his decision, but three years later, he was surprised when the chief approached him and announced that he now wanted to become a Christian. The priest was delighted but wondered why he had refused to be baptized with the rest of his people. The chief's explanation was simple, sincere and very wise. "All my life," he said, "I have tried to act wisely. I could not accept baptism just because others suggested it. I had to come to that decision myself. For three years I have watched my people closely because I needed to see for myself that baptism really made a difference in their lives. I have now seen that evidence and am eager to join them."

The chief had identified an important aspect of Christian faith; it must make a practical difference in the way we think and act. For Christianity goes beyond beliefs, rituals and devotions, important though these undoubtedly are. It calls for action. I am often frightened by Jesus' preview of the general judgement in Matthew 25... "I was hungry but you would not feed me, a stranger and you would not welcome me into your homes, sick and in prison but you would not care for me. Away from me to the eternal fire..."

This judgement scene is shocking. The questions asked are not about religious beliefs and practices, about visions or religious experiences, but rather about ordinary material things... a slice of bread, a cup of water, an item of clothing! "What did you do?" will be the question that will keep ringing in my ears as each scene of my life is relayed before me. It will not be enough to pray for the poor, the weak, the outcast... "These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me".



## 59 WHAT DID YOU DO?

The Christian symbol, the cross is made up of vertical and horizontal beams. The vertical beam represents the personal relationship between God and me while the horizontal beam represents the social relationship between me and others. God's unconditional love for me and my efforts to respond to that love lies at the heart of my Christian life, but this must find practical expression in my attitude towards and service of others. Jesus has warned that if we want to receive mercy and forgiveness from God we must begin by showing mercy and forgiveness ourselves.

St Luke records the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Ch 16) The rich man lived in luxury and "feasted every day. At his gate lay Lazarus, a poor man, who longed to eat just the scraps that fell from the rich man's table" Both men died and the poor man found himself enjoying eternal bliss in Abraham's bosom. The rich man however found himself condemned to eternal flames. Conscious that he had not abused or ill-treated the poor man in any way, a story tells how he protested his innocence to Abraham, saying, "But I didn't do anything", upon which Abraham replied "Yes, and that is exactly the reason why you are here." We sin by doing but perhaps more often we sin by failing to do!

For the ordinary Christian, giving practical witness to the gospel is the chief means of bringing others to Christ, as we see in the story of the African chief. The failure of Christians to give such witness is the greatest obstacle to evangelisation. We are told that Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader and holy man, was given a copy of the gospels when living in London as a young man. He read it and was heard to exclaim, "I have just come to admire your Jesus but to despise your Christians". Unlike the African chief, Gandhi's experience was of people calling themselves Christians, many of them church-going, but whose daily lives bore little resemblance to the Jesus of the gospels. "By their fruits you shall know them".

## 60 KEEP SMILING

I recently read of a young girl who was born without the nerve which enables the facial muscles to form a smile. For seven years she never smiled. Then she underwent two operations and on her eighth birthday she put on, not only her bright new dress, but more importantly, her bright new smile. It was a new life for Emily, her family and friends.

It is difficult to imagine not being able to smile, especially as God has given us so much to be happy about. When God created the world “he saw that it was good”. He still sees it as good today, despite so much evil and suffering. Life is indeed good; people are basically good and even in the midst of pain and tragedy, it is possible to smile and find happiness.

In 1998, former Eurovision Song Contest winner, Irishman Charlie McGettigan, lost his twenty-year-old son in a fatal building site accident. When asked in a television interview how he now feels about the tragedy, he responded, “Apart from the shock and pain, what I remember most is the goodness of people who for months visited and consoled us. And though we still miss John deeply, we are filled with gratitude and joy that we had him as a gift and treasure to light up our lives for twenty years. “Even in pain and loss, Charlie is able to rejoice.

We are called not only to preach the Good News, but to be Good News to others; to show it on our faces. Being holy does not mean being gloomy, for “the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy and peace...”  
(Gal 5:22)

From the mass media it would be easy to conclude that our world is dark and evil, with their emphasis on crime and tragedy; it seems good news does not sell well! But what about the beauty, power and mystery of creation all around us, the progress in health, literacy and living standards, and the

countless acts of self-sacrificing human goodness that are never reported in the media? Just think of the sacrifices mothers make to look after their babies, the fathers who toil to support their families, the care-workers who lovingly look after the sick and elderly. The list could go on... God gracing his world with goodness.

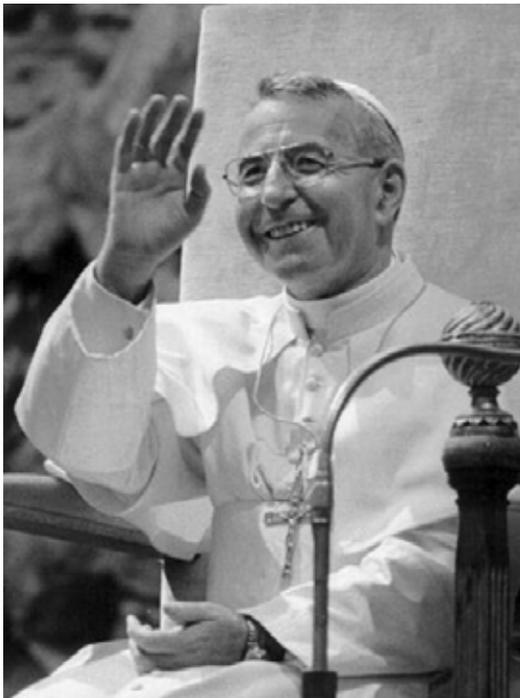
As Christians we have all the more reason to smile. The gospel of Jesus is the good News that we are saved, that God loves each of us with an unconditional and unchanging love. As his followers, we are called not only to preach the Good News, but to be Good News to others; to show it on our faces. Being holy does not mean being gloomy, for "the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy and peace..." (Gal 5:22)

Some older readers may remember "the Smiling Pope", John Paul I who was elected on 26 August 1978 and died of a heart attack only 33 days later, one of the shortest papal reigns in history. But even in this short time he made a deep impression on the world with his simplicity, kindness, natural friendliness and warm smile.. He set about introducing a simpler and less formal style of papacy but sudden death cut his efforts short. Blessed Mother Teresa said at the time, "He has been the greatest gift of God, a sunray of God's love shining on the darkness of the world." Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, said "His smile was not a mask behind which one can hide, nor was it an artificial gesture to achieve some objective, but the unconscious and natural expression of a soul transparent and luminous to its very depths. The "Smiling Pope" had captivated the world, which his sudden death left shocked and grieving.

## 60 KEEP SMILING

Yet, how often do we see pictures of a smiling Jesus? And why not? Surely the Jesus who attracted children and enjoyed the company of friends, who worked his first miracle at a wedding feast, who drew huge crowds wherever he went, must himself have been a warm, cheerful person with a ready smile and keen sense of humour. For some Christians religion is a serious business and not something to smile about!

At Easter we are assured each year of the ultimate victory of good over evil, of joy over suffering, of life over death. Good reason surely to rejoice and celebrate, to smile more often. For nothing is more affirming, bridge-building, life-giving and God-like than a warm, friendly smile. It may even be contagious, so keep smiling!



## 61 PRAYING HANDS

Around 1490 in Germany there were two young struggling artists who were close friends. Albrecht Durer and Franz Knigstein were very poor and could not afford to pay for proper art training. They decided to cast lots to decide which one would go to the Art Academy, while the other worked to support him. They would then exchange roles so that the second one could go for training. Albrecht won the toss and went off to study with some of the most famous artists in the country while Franz went down into the nearby cold, wet mines and worked hard to support them both.

Albrecht's art work soon proved to be sensational, better even than that of his professors. When he qualified and returned to his village he could well afford to send Franz to follow in his footsteps. But to his horror he discovered that the heavy manual work in the cold and dangerous mines had ruined Franz's hands for ever. The fingers had been broken and arthritis had left them stiff and painful. He had sacrificed his dreams for the sake of his friend.

One day Albrecht found Franz on his knees, his twisted hands joined in prayer. Hurriedly he sketched the joined hands and produced what has become the world famous 'Praying Hands' picture, still familiar to many of us today. Inspired by this picture and story, the famous author of inspirational literature, Helen Steiner Rice, composed a poem with the same title, 'Praying Hands', which in turn became the most popular greeting card ever written. Here are some extracts:

## 61 PRAYING HANDS

*“These hands so scarred and toil-worn  
tell the story of a man  
who sacrificed his talent  
in accordance with God’s plan.  
For in God’s plan are many things  
man cannot understand.  
But we must trust God’s judgement  
and be guided by his hand.*

*For when we give ourselves away  
in sacrifice and love  
we are laying up rich treasure  
in God’s kingdom up above.  
For any sacrifice on earth  
made in the dear Lord’s name  
assures the giver of a place  
in ‘Heaven’s Hall of Fame.’”*

The joined hands symbolise prayer, so essential to nurture our spiritual life. The rough, toil-worn hands represent our life of work, of love and service, which is also an essential part of our Christian journey. In fact Vatican 2 warns us that “some people wrongly think that religion consists only in acts of worship and a few moral duties. But our life of faith and our daily life must never be separated like this. They are one life.” (Church in the Modern World, 43).

## 61 PRAYING HANDS

When serving as a Eucharistic Minister many years ago in Kuching I was often touched when old men and women, with lined and weather-worn faces stretched out bruised and gnarled hands to receive the Lord. They brought to the Eucharist all the pains and struggles of lives poured out in loving service of family and community. I have no doubt that, like Franz in our story, they had “laid up rich treasures in God’s kingdom up above”.



## 62 CHRIST OUR KING

November brings us to the end of the Church's liturgical year. Having prepared for Christ's coming the previous Advent, we have, during the year, celebrated and reflected on his birth and childhood, his baptism, teaching and miracles, his death and resurrection, and his continued presence in the Church and in the world. This leads up to the proclamation and celebration of his sovereignty over all of creation in the feast of Christ the King, on the last Sunday of November.

Some feel uncomfortable with the title 'King', for kings are associated with grandeur, wealth, power and sometimes oppression. The kingdom of Christ however is very different. He preached a kingdom of contradiction, where God would "put down the mighty and raise up the lowly" (Lk 1:52), where "the first would be last and the last first" (Mt 19:30). He turned upside down the worldly wisdom of his age - and of ours!

It is our lives, not  
our words which  
will count, when  
we appear before  
our King.

Born in a stable to humble parents and brought up as a carpenter, Jesus spent his public life teaching and healing, with no home to call his own. He was surrounded by lowly fishermen, tax collectors and sinners; by the blind, lame and lepers - not the powerful or famous, not even the holy. He himself became an outcast, scorned, tortured and finally condemned to a shameful death on a cross, which became his 'throne'. The marks of his reign were not power and glory, luxury and wealth, pomp and ceremony, but committed love and humble service - a reign of healing, forgiveness, love and compassion.

This is the King we are called to worship and follow. The gospel for the feast makes frighteningly clear how we must do this: by reaching out to

## 62 CHRIST OUR KING

the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner. "Whenever you did this for one of the least of my brethren, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40).

We find it easy to profess our faith in words, to 'practise' our religion outwardly, to honour Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist, but too often we fail to recognise and serve him in the poor, the suffering and the outcasts - "You would not take care of me" (Mt 25:43).

The Preface of the Mass for the feast of Christ the King describes his kingdom as one of "truth and life, of holiness and grace, of love, justice and peace". This is the kingdom we pray for whenever we say "Your kingdom come"; the kingdom each of us is called to build and serve. It is not enough to be baptised, to be a Christian in name. What is demanded is radical change of mind and heart; of the value systems which govern our lives and relationships. "The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had" (Phil 2:5).

Those who have done most to promote gospel values in our time are those who have lived prophetic lives, who have condemned and struggled peacefully against evil and injustice. People like the martyred Archbishop Romero, Mother Teresa, the murdered Martin Luther King, but especially the millions of ordinary men and women who every day stand up for and live by the values of Jesus, even when it 'costs' them heavily.

Michel Quoist wrote, "The gospel is easy to hear but hard to live", and the great Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like your Christ but not your Christians". It is our lives, not our words which will count, when we appear before our King.



**PART 2**  
**REFLECTIONS**  
**FOR**  
**SPECIAL TIMES**

## 63 ONE LIKE US

Pedro was a kind and good living man but he could not believe in the Incarnation and considered Christmas meaningless. He refused to accompany his wife and children to midnight Mass, saying "I'd feel like a hypocrite. I simply cannot understand this claim that God became man and was born in a stable. It doesn't make any sense to me. I'll stay at home and wait up for you".

Soon after his family drove off in the car, snow began to fall heavily. "If we must have Christmas", he thought to himself as he sat by the fire reading his newspaper, "it's nice to have a white one". After some time he was startled by a thudding sound, quickly followed by another, then another. He thought some children must be throwing snowballs at his window and went to the front door to investigate. He found six wild geese huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, perhaps with one of them injured, and in a desperate search for shelter had tried to fly through his lighted window. "I can't let them lie there and freeze," he thought. "But how can I help?" Then he remembered the empty barn which would provide a warm shelter.

Putting on his coat and heavy boots he tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the door wide and turned on the light, but the birds didn't come in. He then went out and tried to drive them into the barn, moving around them and waving his arms, but they flapped their wings and scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn. "They are terrified of me," he thought, "and I can't think of any way to show them they can trust me. If only I could become a bird myself, perhaps I could lead them to safety!" At that moment the church bells began to ring. He stood in deep thought, listening to the bells chiming out the glad tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow. "Now at last I understand," he whispered in prayer. "Now I see why You had to do it."

As we gaze again on the Christmas scene it is good to remind ourselves that we are celebrating the central and unique truth of our Christian

faith; that God in Jesus “was made flesh”, taking a body like ours and sharing fully in all that is human....our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears, our pleasures and pains, our friendships and rejections, becoming “one like us in all things but sin.” Christmas celebrates God among us, not only in Bethlehem long ago, but here and now in our daily lives.

Because of the Incarnation human life and all of creation have become holy and reveal to us the glory and mystery of God. For too long Christian faith focussed mainly on the spiritual, on religious rituals and devotions, on the next life rather than this life. But Vatican 2 stressed that there must be no split between religion and daily life, between faith and work, between social and spiritual life, warning that such division must be “counted among the more serious errors of our day” (LG 43). The Incarnation brings home to us the dignity and sacredness of every human life, from conception to the grave. It proclaims the infinite and unconditional love of God for each of us, as we are.

Incarnational spirituality also means that we find and serve God, not only in religious places and rituals but in our daily work and in the midst of nature, forever made holy by his coming among us. In his ministry Jesus travelled the countryside, proclaiming the good news. His teaching was often based on examples from nature; on stories of herding, ploughing and fishing, of planting and harvesting, of vineyards, lakes and hillsides, of stars, rain and sunshine, of flowers, birds and trees. Are we conscious that God’s masterpiece of creation is truly holy? Do we believe that the wilful destruction of nature for selfish gain or so-called material progress is a crime against God and a threat to future generations.

At Christmas let us ponder reverently the fact that our God of infinite majesty and power is also a God of intimate presence and tenderness, as simple as “a babe lying in a manger”.

## 64 LOST AND FOUND

It was the week after Christmas. The tearful voice on Fr. Joe's phone cried, "Fr, someone has stolen Jesus from the chapel." On arrival at the Old Folks' Home, Fr. Joe was led to the chapel by a very upset elderly lady, and true enough the statue of the baby Jesus was missing from the crib. Later that day, following a tip-off, Fr. Joe drove to the Lost and Found Office down town.

There he approached the clerk who asked him cheerfully, "May I help you?" "Yes," he replied. "I'm looking for Jesus." He then showed the astonished clerk his identification as a priest and explained what he wanted.. "O yes," she replied, "he's here all right. I just saw him on a shelf." In a few minutes she returned with the baby Jesus statue in her arms and asked Fr. Joe to sign the form authorising him to take it. "I've got to tell you Fr," she said, "that this is the first time I've ever seen Jesus here. Missing, lost and discarded articles of all kinds we see every day, but not Jesus. It doesn't seem right that he should end up here in the midst of so much junk."

The priest looked at her and said, "You know, I think Jesus felt perfectly at home here! If you read the Christmas story and reflect on the rest of the gospels you will see that Jesus spent a lot of his time among the lost, the abandoned, the rejected; in fact more time than with any other group because they were the ones who needed him most. We so often just want to keep him in church. Perhaps there's a lesson here on how he wants us to live our faith." With that Fr. Joe picked up the statue and returned it to its crib.

Our world of competition and consumerism glorifies success and power, and from an early age we are encouraged to "think big". But Christmas introduces us to a different set of values in the form of a fragile, helpless baby. The shepherds "found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger"; a scene of utter human simplicity, stripped of all pretence and grandeur. And throughout the rest of his private and public life Jesus continued to associate with and hold up for our imitation all that is humble, simple and lowly.

Born in poverty to village parents he grew up unnoticed as “the carpenter”. He chose fishermen as his disciples and lived a simple life-style, devoid of titles and finery. He taught strange ideas such as “Blessed are the poor” and “Love your enemies”. He stressed that following him meant challenging the ways of the world...“the greatest among you must be your servant”, and that getting to heaven depends on little acts of kindness and generosity...“whatever you did to one of these least followers of mine you did it to me”. He mixed so freely with those who were ‘nobody’ in society that he was branded “a friend of sinners”.

How are we, his followers, to interpret all of this in our daily lives in the 21st century? Are we expected to take the Lord seriously? Must we give away our wealth and comforts to be good Christians? If this were so, there would be few Christians left! But the gospel message is not that wealth, comfort and social status are in themselves bad. Their danger lies in how they can distort our priorities and our values. They can fool us into thinking that because we are rich, hold important positions or exercise power over others we are of greater value or dignity as human persons and as children of God. And that may mislead us to look down on the poor and lowly as inferior human beings. It may also make us proud, hardhearted and unjust. Throughout history Christians, both as individuals and as a Church, have struggled between the values of the world and those of the gospel, a struggle which still goes on today.

As we gaze in wonder at the crib this Christmas let us put on the mind of Christ. **Let us learn to value what is small, treasure what is simple, nurture what is weak, rejoice in what is gentle and forgive what is wrong.** And then, like the shepherds of old, let us return to our homes and work, “glorifying God for what we have heard and seen”.

## 65 TIME TO COME OUT OF OUR TRENCHES

The 1st World War (1914-18) claimed over 15 million lives. As the first Christmas of the war approached the two armies faced each other in cold muddy trenches, with 'No Man's Land' of about 100 metres between them. Pope Benedict XV had called for a cease-fire on Christ's birthday but commanders on both sides absolutely refused.

The ordinary soldiers however, at the risk of facing court-martial, refused to fight, and on a freezing Christmas Eve the guns gradually fell silent. As midnight approached German troops began singing 'Stille Nacht' ('Silent Night' in German) and the opposing British troops joined them in English. Then, nervously at first, men from both sides climbed out of their trenches and advanced unarmed to greet each other, with a mixture of laughter and tears.

On Christmas Day gifts of food and cigars were exchanged and football matches played. Christmas greetings were expressed, the most popular being wishes of 'Peace'. But as evening fell, soldiers sadly trickled back into their trenches, to resume next morning the painful business of killing each other. Military commanders ensured that the 'Christmas Miracle' of 1914 was not repeated, but for those involved, that experience remained a life-long precious memory.

Reconciliation and peace are still central to our celebration of Christmas. At Bethlehem, the God who created us in his own image and likeness took on our human form, "becoming one with us in all ways except sin", so that we might once again share in his divine life. By his birth as a humble babe Jesus made all human life sacred, restoring us to the dignity of children of God, all equally precious in his eyes. God and humanity, heaven and earth, are once again reconciled.

## 65 TIME TO COME OUT OF OUR TRENCHES

But the God who has reached out to us in love and mercy also demands that we forgive and respect one another, offering “peace on earth to all those of goodwill”, as the angels announced to the shepherds. Are there some people we don’t speak to or mix with? Are there strained or broken relationships among us, in our community, in our parish, even in our families? Christmas is a time to climb out of our trenches of hostility and mistrust, to extend the hand of reconciliation and friendship, as the enemy soldiers did in 1914. Let peace be our special gift at Christmas.

Christmas also profoundly challenges our distorted values and priorities. In choosing to be born of humble parents in a cold stable Jesus shows us that our true value and dignity as human persons is not measured by our wealth, status or power. Indeed it is those who put others before self who are most likely to find Jesus. The humble shepherds left their flocks, to seek and worship him in a stable. The magi left the comfort and security of their homeland to go on a dangerous and uncertain journey, guided only by a star. They too found the Lord. On the other hand, the inn-keeper thought first of his business and reputation and refused shelter to a poor and desperate family. Herod, fearing for his own position and power, ordered all male infants to be slaughtered, to destroy any future rival ‘King of the Jews’. These people never got to experience the joy of the good news.

Someone has suggested that the secret of true peace and happiness in life can be found in the word JOY, a word so much associated with Christmas. ‘J’ stands for Jesus, who should be given first place in everything. ‘O’ stands for ‘Others’ whom we are called to love and serve, and lastly ‘Y’ stands for ‘You’. The recipe for true and lasting happiness is to give priority to Jesus in all things and to others in their hour of need, rather than the “me-first” unchristian selfish attitude, so out of place especially in the Christmas season.

## 66 THE INNKEEPER'S STORY

I am an innkeeper. A few weeks ago I had some unusual visitors to my inn, a group of Christians. I had heard of this new religious group which had been causing trouble in Jerusalem. They were talking about how their leader was put to death, and yet they say he rose from the dead. They even claim he is the Messiah, the promised one Israel has been waiting for.

I was captivated by their discussion and listened with growing curiosity. What I heard not only astonished me; it began to trouble me. You see, they said the Messiah was born here in Bethlehem, where I have lived all my life. If he was born here, surely I should know.

With all my heart I wanted to believe, but I couldn't. Sensing my disbelief, one of them put his hand upon mine, looked into my eyes and said, "At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken and everyone went to register in his own town. Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the city of David called Bethlehem (because he was a descendant of David), together with Mary, his espoused wife, who was with child. And while they were there she gave birth to a son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

As he spoke I became more deeply troubled. You see, I remembered this couple because the man's young wife was heavily pregnant. It was the busiest week of the year and the inn was nearly full. The couple looked poor, and richer customers were waiting, so I told them I had no spare room and that the only shelter they were likely to find was among the stables. And that's where they went.

Now these men were telling me that the couple who stayed in my stable were God's appointed parents for his Son. The Messiah had at last come and was born here in Bethlehem. If only I had known, I would have

## 66 THE INNKEEPER'S STORY

welcomed them and offered them my best room, but I missed it. I was so busy with my guests, so eager to maximise my profits that I hadn't time to see. I refused to let God into my inn and his coming passed me by.

And that friends, is my greatest concern for you. I have seen your busy Christmas preparations: your decorations, your shopping, your wrapping of gifts, your planning of parties and Christmas dinners, and I fear that you too may fail to see him. Like me, you may be so busy with externals that you find no place for him in the inn of your hearts, and especially that you may fail to recognise him in the poor and lowly among you.

As you share the joy of your children and grandchildren, your family and loved ones, exchanging gifts and enjoying your Christmas together, let Christ be at the heart of your celebrations, because he is the reason for it all. He is waiting to be born again, not in a stable, but in your hearts and in your lives. Do not keep him out, do not reject him as I did, because you are too blind to see.

On Christmas morning may you and your family experience anew what the angels and shepherds proclaimed long ago; that "Christ the Saviour is born" - born again in each of us.



## 67 STREETS OF GOLD

It was only four days to Christmas and Pedro was doing last minute shopping in the crowded store, buying presents for people who mostly did not need them. Bored and tired, he pushed his loaded shopping trolley into the queue for the check-out counter, ready for a long wait.

In front of him were two small children, a boy of about six and a younger girl. Wearing ragged clothes and torn shoes they looked pale and hungry. The boy clutched a few dollar notes in his hand, while the girl carried a beautiful pair of gold-coloured slippers.

On finally reaching the check-out desk, the girl carefully placed the precious slippers on the counter, while the sales-girl clicked the cash register and said, "That will be \$8.50 please." The boy counted the crumpled dollar notes and searched deep into his pockets, but came up with a total of only \$5.20. Sadly he said, "Sorry, I guess we will have to put them back".

At this the girl began to sob softly. "But Jesus would have loved these shoes", she cried. Putting his arm around her, the boy whispered gently, "Don't cry! We'll find some more money and come back, maybe tomorrow". Quickly Pedro leaned over them and handed \$5.00 to the cashier; after all it was Christmas! Suddenly a pair of small arms came around his leg and a little voice said, "Thank you mister. Mummy will be so happy".

Turning to the little one, Pedro asked, "What did you mean when you said Jesus would love the shoes?"

The boy answered, "Our mummy is very sick and going to heaven. Daddy says she might go before Christmas, to be with Jesus."

The little girl added solemnly, "And my Sunday School teacher says the streets of heaven are paved with gold, just like these shoes. Won't mummy look beautiful as she walks to meet Jesus?"

The teacher had obviously read Rev 21:21. Tears came to Pedro's eyes as he looked into the girl's innocent face and said, "Yes, I'm sure she will."

Set in the midst of mad consumer spending, this simple story says much about the true spirit of Christmas, which is not about expensive presents and sumptuous dinners. It is about the love in our hearts which leads us to share with others, as Jesus came to share himself with us. It is about simplicity and generosity, loving and goodness, caring and sharing.

It is not enough at Christmas to gaze in reverence and awe at the baby in the manger. We need to look beyond the romantic setting, the lights, decorations, colours and scenery, and ask ourselves what was God trying to tell us in coming among us in such poverty and simplicity - a stable, a manger, animals and shepherds!

Indeed, the manger at Bethlehem contradicts all our fixed ideas about importance, success, protocol and power. If we could really understand what God is saying and if we lived by the Christmas spirit, in our values, priorities and relationships, what a difference it would make to our personal lives, our families, our communities and our Church?

Christmas would not be just another glitzy festival, but a truly life-changing and enriching spiritual experience, enabling us to recognise Emmanuel, "God with us" -- in the ordinary, the unexpected, the familiar. To see him in the joys and sorrows of daily living and serve him in the people who accompany us as we journey together towards the "streets of gold".

## 68 "I AM NOW ONE OF YOU"

In 1873 a young Belgian missionary priest in Hawaii, Fr Damien de Veuster, begged to be allowed to work among the lepers on the remote island of Molokai. Unable to control the deadly and highly contagious disease at that time, the Hawaiian government forcefully removed the victims from their families and exiled them to Molokai, which became known as 'the colony of death'. There they lived in misery and squalor as the dreaded disease devoured their bodies. Abandoned and hopeless they soon lost all sense of human dignity and self-esteem and sought escape from their suffering through alcohol abuse and widespread immorality. In this 'gateway to hell' they died in despair, their decayed bodies thrown into shallow graves, only to be dug up and devoured by wild animals.

Horrified by this sub-human misery, Fr Damien reached out to the lepers with care and affection, but they knew he was 'different'; he was not one of them – a leper! His great challenge was to win their trust and restore among them a sense of self-worth. He established a fenced-off cemetery where the dead could rest in dignity. He built a clinic, a Church, an orphanage and clean new houses to replace their filthy shacks. He taught them to farm and to play musical instruments and trained a choir. He ministered lovingly to their spiritual needs, washed their bodies and dressed their foul smelling sores. Gradually they recovered a sense of dignity and community which their illness had threatened to destroy.

Christmas is a time for seeing beyond the superficial values of our world, for recognising and respecting the true dignity of every human person

Inevitably Fr Damien contracted the disease. One day, at the age of 45, he addressed his congregation as, "My fellow lepers; I am now one of you".

## 68 "I AM NOW ONE OF YOU"

No longer 'different', he was truly one of their own! For the next four years, he continued to pour himself out in loving service of his fellow lepers, as his body wasted away. He died on 15 April 1889, aged 49, and was beatified as Blessed Damien of Molokai by Pope John Paul II in 1995

Fr Damien is truly a *Christmas saint*, for Christmas is above all about giving. In pouring out his life for the lepers of Molokai and becoming one of them he was following closely in the footsteps of his master in whom God took on human flesh and became one with us in all ways except sin. Jesus came among us, not in power and glory, but as a helpless babe in the poverty of a stable. Throughout his life he identified himself with the poor and lowly of the world, the lepers, the 'outcasts and sinners', whom he was accused of befriending. He did so to teach us that our true value, worth and dignity lies in *who we are* as children of God and not in *what we possess* in the form of wealth, appearance, power or social status. It is a lesson we find difficult to learn in our VIP celebrity culture.

Christmas is a time for *seeing* beyond the superficial values of our world, for recognising and respecting the true dignity of every human person, even the lowliest, in our family, school and parish, in our community and workplace. It is a time for *going* beyond self, for reaching out to others, especially those in greatest material, social, emotional or spiritual need. A time to follow the babe of Bethlehem in simple, humble ways as Fr Damien did so heroically, a time to give glory to God in the highest and build peace and goodwill among his people on earth.

## 69 I SHALL NOT PASS THIS WAY AGAIN

The ancient Romans had many gods and the month of January is named after one of them. Janus was the god of doors and gateways, of beginnings and endings. Thus in English we refer to the doorkeeper of a building as the janitor. The temple of Janus had doors facing east and west, towards the rising and setting of the sun, the beginning and end of each day. Between the two doors stood a large statue of Janus with two faces, one looking east and the other west

New Year celebrations are among the oldest festive events in human history, dating back about 5000 years. Among the most widely celebrated today are the Gregorian or western New Year which falls on 1st January and the Chinese or lunar New Year which starts on the second new moon of the winter solstice. But there are many other New Years, celebrated at other times in different countries and cultures. The dates of some are fixed while others vary and are determined by a variety of factors such as the time for sowing or harvesting, by the movement of heavenly bodies or by religious decree.

Though the celebration of New Year varies widely between cultures they all seem to express common human themes. All mark the relentless passage of *time* which mankind with all its scientific advances can do nothing to slow down or stop. An old proverb says "Time and tide wait for no one", whether powerfully rich or helplessly poor. The young long for time to pass quickly, to grow up and become adults. The old long for time to slow down so as to live longer! But time relentlessly marches on at its own unchanging speed. The important question for all of us is how do we use it? A saying attributed to Stephen Grellet exclaims "I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good therefore that I can do or any kindness I can show, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again"....and I don't know how long I'll be here!

## 69 I SHALL NOT PASS THIS WAY AGAIN

New Year then is a time, like Janus, for looking back; for taking stock like any good businessman; for assessing how I have balanced the demands of work, family, friends and society, and my own spiritual life? Time to thank God for his blessings and for the kindness and goodness of others. But time also to acknowledge the hurts I have caused and which need healing; the wrongs I have done and which need to be set right. Above all however New Year is a time for looking forward with renewed hope and commitment. In eastern tradition people clean the house, wear new clothes and make fresh resolutions, all symbolic of making a clean start, a new beginning, not only outwardly but more importantly, internally too. As we celebrate *time*, some say making New Year resolutions is a waste of time because they are soon forgotten and we just continue as before. Perhaps this is because we confuse wishes with resolutions. "I want to pass my exam this year" is a wish. "I will study an extra hour each day" is a resolution. "I want to give God a greater place in my life" is an admirable wish. "I will give half an hour each night to prayer and scripture reading" is a resolution. Wishes, hopes and good intentions need resolutions and will power to translate them into reality. Another old proverb says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions"; with wishes, goals and desires which were never put into practice.

Let this New Year represent a fresh start in our spiritual journey, by our making practical and achievable resolutions that need not call for heroic sacrifice. The great Archbishop Oscar Romero who gave his life for the faith and for his people once said "We plant the seed that one day will grow; we water plants sown by those who went before us; we lay foundations that others will build on; we provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our own capabilities. We cannot do *everything* and that is a blessing, for it frees us to do *something*. It may be incomplete but it allows the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest". What will your 'something' be this year? Will it make a difference in someone's life and to the world in which we live?

## 70 THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

On Christmas Eve Rose was surprised to find a letter in her mail box, with no stamp or postmark; just her name and address. Surprise turned to shock when she read it;

*"Dear Rose,*

*I shall be in your area this Christmas and would like to stop by for a chat.*

*Love always,  
Jesus"*

Rose's hands were shaking as she wondered, "Why would the Lord visit me? I'm nobody special". Then she realised she had no food; nothing to offer her guest and the shops would soon be closing. With her last five dollars she rushed out and was soon on her way back with a loaf of bread, some sliced turkey and a carton of milk! Then she heard a voice calling out "Hey lady, can you help us?" A man and a woman were huddled in an alleyway, dirty, smelly and dressed in rags. "I ain't got a job" he continued, and my wife and I have been living on the street. Now it's getting cold and we're hungry. It's Christmas Eve lady, and if you can help us we'd be most grateful".

Peering into the alleyway Rose explained, "I'd like to help but I'm a poor woman myself. All I have is a few slices of turkey and some bread, and I'm expecting an important guest for dinner".

"Yeah, well okay lady, I understand. Thanks anyway!, said the man, putting his arm around the woman's shoulder and heading back into the dark alley, as the snow began to fall. Rose's heart followed them and she called out, "Sir, wait". The couple stopped and turned as she ran into the alley after them. "Look, take this food. I'll figure out something else for my guest". As she

## 70 THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

handed the man her shopping bag she noticed that the woman was heavily pregnant and shivering from the cold. "I've got another coat at home", she said. "Look, why don't you take this one." She unbuttoned her jacket and placed it over the woman's shoulders. Then she headed for home, with the voices of the couple following her, "Thank you very much lady and Merry Christmas!"

As Rose opened her door she saw another letter in her mailbox. Opening it hurriedly she read,

*"Dear Rose,*

*It was so good to see you again. Thank you for the lovely Christmas dinner, and also for the beautiful coat!*

*Love always,  
Jesus"*

It's only a simple story! The parables of Jesus were also 'only stories' but carried profound and disturbing messages! Christmas is about more than cards, trees, decorations, presents, dinners or even cribs and churches, all very good in their own way. It is about love and giving; about a baby born in a manger to teach us lessons we find very difficult to learn. It is about God taking flesh, teaching us that it is there, in human flesh that we shall find him, always with us. Jesus himself would later emphasise this truth with frightening force as he proclaimed, "When I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison" you served me. "Whenever you did this for one of the least important followers of mine you did it for me" (Mt.25:31-46). If we don't find him there we won't really find him at all.

## 70 THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

Could we this Christmas invite a homeless person, a poor or lonely person to our Christmas dinner? Could we pledge to support a worthy cause, like the Vincent de Paul Society or the Cheshire Home, or the Pro-Life Movement so that it may enable other babies to be born? Are we ready, in the light of the Christmas story, to re-assess the values, the priorities that govern our daily lives? Will this year's Christmas celebrations make a difference, or will they just come--- and go?

### LOVE LETTER



### A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



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You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

— 2 CORINTHIANS 3:3 NIV

## 71 CHANGING COURSE

A large battleship was taking part in training exercises in a stormy sea. Visibility was poor, with thick fog, so the captain remained alert on the bridge. Shortly after dark the lookout officer reported "Light straight ahead". "Is it stationary or moving?" called the captain. "Stationary, sir" came the reply. This meant it was on a dangerous collision course, sailing directly towards their ship, for if the light was moving to right or left it would pass them by on a different course.

Lent however calls us to go beyond purely external practices to a deeper change of mind and heart; a change of direction.

The captain shouted to his signalman, "Signal that ship, we are on a collision course. Advise you alter course 20 degrees". Back came a signal, 'Advisable for you to change course'. The captain ordered his signalman to send another message, 'I'm a qualified ship's captain. Change your course now'. 'I'm a seaman 2nd class' came the reply. 'You had better change course immediately'. By now the captain was furious. He shouted out, "Send this message", 'This is a battleship. Change course instantly'. Back came the terse reply, 'This is a lighthouse'. The captain quickly and quietly changed course!

We are challenged each year during the forty days of Lent to reflect on the course of our spiritual lives. All of us are sinners. Like the ship's captain we easily get stuck in our fixed ways. Pride and stubbornness prevent us from seeing the need for us to repent, to change course. We travel this journey only once and our eternity depends upon it. We have no GPS to help us but the Word of God is our unfailing guide.

During Lent we reflect on the forty years journey of God's Chosen People through the wilderness of Sinai with all its sufferings, trials and

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temptations. They blamed Moses for leading them there and blamed God for abandoning them, but through it all God was with them, guiding, moulding and forming them into a people, as he is still present in our struggling lives today.

We reflect on the Lord's forty days fast in the wilderness and his struggles in his weakness against the temptations of the devil; temptations to satisfy his physical needs and to betray his principles in order to gain power, wealth and popularity; temptations the Lord rejected outright. We reflect on our own journey and our temptations to compromise our Christian values and our heavenly home, for the sake of short term worldly gain.

In my younger days Lent was seen as a time for doing penance, by 'giving up' things we liked such as sweets or cigarettes, or by 'taking up' extra practices such as daily Mass attendance or acts of charity.. Lent however calls us to go beyond purely external practices to a deeper change of mind and heart; a change of direction. Jesus tells us the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector at prayer in the temple. The Pharisee in his prayer thanked God that he was not dishonest or an adulterer like others. He fasted two days a week and gave one tenth of his income to the temple. He was a faithful, 'practising' Samaritan. But the tax collector, considered as dishonest by most Jews, prayed simply with bowed head, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner". Jesus tells us this prayer was pleasing to God, rather than that of the Pharisee. People judge by outward performance but the Lord sees the heart.

About thirty years ago, a priest was waiting for a bus in New York city on a bitterly cold March night, with his coat pulled up around his neck to keep warm. Suddenly a man emerged from the shadows, brandishing a handgun and demanding that he hand over his wallet. When the priest opened his coat to take out his wallet, the man saw his clerical collar and exclaimed, "Oh,

I'm sorry, Father. I wouldn't rob you. I'm a Catholic". The priest, thinking he might be able to influence the man, decided to chat with him and, as was common at the time, offered him a cigarette. But the robber immediately replied, "Oh no, Father. I've given up smoking for Lent"! Our conversion needs to go beyond externals!

Religion must not be divorced from life. It is not just a part of life that can be switched on and off, but rather a way of life based on gospel values that influence every aspect of living. What values are dominating my life at present? How do I need to change course this Lent?

## TELESCOPE

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.  
For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

- 2 CORINTHIANS 4:18 NIV

## 72 PLAYING MY PART

In winter time in colder climates, it is a common sight to see a flock of wild geese flying in the sky in a “V” formation, with one goose leading and the rest following in two diverging lines. Scientists tell us that they fly in this way because as each bird flaps its wings, it affects the air flows, creating an uplift or support for the bird immediately behind it. We are told that by flying in this “V” formation, the flock adds over 70 per cent to the distance it can fly, than if each bird followed its own path.

Similarly it is important for the Christian community to have a common sense of direction and a willingness to work together to achieve its objectives more effectively. During the Silver Jubilee Celebration of the Archdiocese in 2001, there was much emphasis on the role of the laity in the Church, while the Archdiocesan Convention pointed the way forward, identifying goals and priorities for the future. As I write this ‘Signpost’ article in 2002, we realise that achieving these goals is a challenge for the whole community, at village, parish and diocesan levels. The theme chosen for last year’s celebrations was ‘We are the Church’ which implies, in the words of Archbishop Peter Chung, that “every baptized person in our Archdiocese has not just the right to the Church’s care and concern, but also responsibility for the Church’s life, welfare and mission”.

We can rejoice that in the past 25 years, there has been a remarkable increase in lay participation in the life of the local Church, but there is still a long way to go before “every baptized person” is involved! Many are still passive or satisfied with a privatized religion. Yet we relate with God, not just as individuals but above all as a community of faith, a pilgrim people journeying through life together, supporting and encouraging each other. In baptism we are born into this community, in confirmation we publicly confirm our commitment to it and in the Eucharist we celebrate our unity with Christ and each other.

## 72 PLAYING MY PART

As we go through the season of Lent, a time for conversion and renewal, perhaps we could focus this year, not just on our personal faults and failings but on the extent to which we are playing our part in building up our Christian community. Is there more I should be doing? Would I consider becoming a Sunday School or RCIA teacher, or becoming an active member of one of our liturgical ministries, or joining an organisation that visits the sick, helps the poor and reaches out to the marginalized?

To return to our example of the wild geese, we are told that if one of the flock is wounded or falls ill and is forced to land, two other geese fall out of formation and accompany it down to earth, where they give it help and protection. They stay with the fallen bird until it is able to fly again or it dies; only then do they take off to catch up with the flock. Again, nature has lessons to teach us, especially in our age of individualism and self-interest.

As we prepare to receive new members into the Church at Easter, let us commit ourselves this Lent to playing a more active and responsible role in building up the local Church and serving the community. Then we will be able to claim with ever deeper meaning, "We are the Church".



## 73 WHAT I HAVE FAILED TO DO

At the beginning of Mass we ask God's forgiveness for our sins; for "what I have done and what I have failed to do"; forgiveness for the sinful deeds I have committed and for the good things I have neglected---for sins of commission and omission. When a Sunday School teacher asked her class "What are sins of omission?" little Paula's hand shot up and she answered confidently, "Teacher, these are the sins we forgot to commit!" Paula's theology was, of course, a little bit confused!

Adults too get confused! We mostly focus on sins of commission; on the bad things we have done, and easily forget about sins of omission---the good things we could and should do but so often neglect. The Pharisees, obsessed with the law, condemned Jesus for things he had done, like healing on the Sabbath or eating and drinking with sinners. Jesus however focussed on the positive, proclaiming that the greatest commandment of all is to love God with all our being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. That, for him, summed up the whole Law and the prophets.

Lent is a time for penance and renewal; a time to look into our hearts and make a new start.

Jesus warned of the danger which sins of omission pose to our salvation in his teaching on the Final Judgement (Mt 25:31). He condemned the self-centred to "eternal fire" because "I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink, a stranger but you would not welcome me, naked but you would not clothe me, sick and in prison but you would not care for me". They protested loudly of course that they had never seen him in these circumstances, only to be told, "Whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones you refused to help me". They were condemned, not for evil deeds, but for neglecting mercy.

## 73 WHAT I HAVE FAILED TO DO

Similarly, in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk.10:33), the Jewish priest and Levite, probably travelling to the Temple, did not do anything bad; they just “walked past”, leaving the injured man half dead on the road. They sinned against the primary law of love. So too in the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk.15:11), the virtuous elder brother did no wrong but sinned by failing to forgive. “If you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive you”.

We mostly focus on sins of commission, on the bad things we have done, and easily forget about sins of omission – the good things we could and should do, but so often neglect.

Lent is a time for penance and renewal; a time to look into our hearts and make a new start. Traditionally, we make resolutions to give up some luxuries or bad habits. Perhaps this year, we could be more positive, focusing on ‘take-ups’ rather than ‘give-ups’; on basic Christian duties that we too easily neglect. We could give more time to God in personal and family prayer; to reading and reflecting on the scriptures, to serving our community. We could spend more time with our families,

showing them greater respect, gratitude and love, affirming them and forgiving old hurts. We could reach out to anyone in trouble, with respect, care and encouragement.

In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk.16:19), Lazarus lay at the rich man’s door, covered in sores and hoping in vain for some scraps of food. When the rich man died and found himself in hell while Lazarus enjoyed eternal bliss, some commentators suggest that he protested angrily, “Why Lord? I did no wrong. I didn’t make him poor or give him these sores. I didn’t assault him or drive him away. For heaven’s sake Jesus, **I didn’t do anything**”. The Lord looked at him sadly and said “That’s it! That’s exactly why you’re here!”

## 74 CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

A travelling portrait painter stopped at a small town, hoping to find some customers. While waiting he offered to paint the portrait of Toby, the town drunk, who was unwashed, smelly and dressed in rags. Toby was delighted at this unexpected honour and posed for the painter with as much dignity as he could manage. The artist laboured longer than usual before he finally lifted the painting from its stand and showed it to the man.

“That’s not me,” protested the astonished drunk in a slurred voice as he gazed at the smiling, clean-shaven, well dressed man in the picture. The artist, who had looked beneath Toby’s scruffy appearance and recognised his God-given dignity, thoughtfully replied, “Perhaps not. But it is the man you can yet become”.

Toby’s own weakness and his rejection by ‘respectable’ society had robbed him of all self-esteem and led him to accept that he was a no-good, down and out failure. “That is Toby”, he thought to himself, and that is what he will always be. Many of our failures and miseries in life are symptoms or outward expressions of our lack of a sense of self worth, of our dignity as human beings and as children of God.

Perhaps our greatest need is to believe that God loves each of us as we now are, with an unconditional and unchanging love. Many of us find this very difficult to accept. We have been brought up to believe that God can’t love us unless we avoid sin, unless we do good, unless we earn his love, and most of us know that often we fail that test. The late Cardinal Heenan of Westminster was once asked which Christian truth he found most difficult to believe and surprised everyone, not by mentioning some deep theological doctrine, but by replying simply, “The hardest truth for me to accept is that God loves me as I am”.

## 74 CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

One great difference between Jesus and the Pharisees and religious people of his time was their obsession with sin and unworthiness. They accused him of being a “friend of sinners” (Lk 15:2) and of breaking the Sabbath (Mt 12:1). They were shocked that he should stay in the house of Zacchaeus, “a sinner” (Lk 19:2) and wanted to stone to death a woman caught committing adultery. But Jesus looked beyond her sins to see the suffering and hurt she had endured, the goodness that was in her heart and assured her, “Neither do I condemn you”. Many Christians are still too obsessed with sin and evil and too blind to the goodness that is in us and around us.

Lent a time for  
change in our  
attitudes and in  
our lives.

Lent is a season for looking beneath the surface of our lives, beneath the mess which we often get into. It is a time to reflect on the fact that God has created us in his own image, that we are gifted and called to be worthy of our dignity as his children and that he loves each of us, even as we struggle to become the persons

he has created us to be.

Our story about Toby has a happy ending. The painter persuaded him to keep his portrait and as he gazed on it daily, he decided to give up his miserable life-style and change into “the man you can yet become”. In the recent US Presidential election Barrack Obama took as his slogans “Time for Change” and “Change is Possible”. Let each of us make this Lent a time for change in our attitudes and in our lives.

## 75 THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART

A huge oak tree stood majestically on the college campus. Its giant branches provided shelter for generations of students and a safe nesting place for countless birds. It seemed a permanent part of the landscape until one day, with a mighty crash, it came tumbling to the ground. Those who gazed sadly on the wreckage realised that their oak, which had seemed so powerful and lasting, was in fact hollow, its inside eaten away by years of viral infection and decay. The apparently eternal and beautiful oak was really only an empty shell.

People are often judged, by themselves as well as by others, on external factors such as wealth, status, power and appearance. The news media highlight the exploits of so-called celebrities and stars, but we are much more important than what we possess, than the influence we exercise or the popularity we enjoy. Each one of us is a unique person, a special reflection of the love, goodness and beauty of God. Glamour and fame are often superficial and always passing, for all must be left behind when we pass on. Someone has wisely said that the only garment that never needs a pocket is a burial shroud!

Lent challenges us to look into our hearts and ask ourselves what will God see there when we appear before him, when distracting externals have been stripped away and left behind?

For Christians, Lent is a time each year for digging beneath the surface, for discerning the real state of our moral health: a time to put aside pretence, remove the masks we wear and honestly face the truth.

The Pharisees of old were looked upon as pillars of society, as models of strict religious observance. Yet it was to them that Jesus addressed his harshest words, "You neglect to obey the really important teachings such

## 75 THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART

as justice, mercy and honesty. You are like white-washed tombs which look fine on the outside but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside" (Mt 23:23,27) - just like our hollow oak!

In the Old Testament, when Samuel was choosing a king for Israel, and the eldest of Jesse's sons was presented to him, the Lord said, "Take no notice of his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. God does not see as humans see: people look at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart" (Sam 16:7).

Lent challenges us to look into our hearts and ask ourselves what will God see there when we appear before him, when all distracting externals have been stripped away and left behind?

The traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are important means of improving our relationship with God, with ourselves and with our neighbour. Many people also make Lenten resolutions to give up bad habits or take on additional religious practices. More important however than any external practices is the need to re-examine our inner attitudes, the dispositions of mind and heart which really influence and control our lives.

Lent is then a time to reflect on the deeper meaning of life and where we are really going. It is a time to rediscover and nurture my inner God-given self. It is so easy for hidden cancers like pride, greed, jealousy and prejudice to eat away at the heart of my being, blurring or destroying the image of God in which I am made. Unless these cancers are diagnosed and treated through honest repentance and conversion, my life, like that of the great oak, may be no more than an empty shell.

This call to repentance and conversion is what Lent is all about.

## 76 JESUS OR BARABBAS?

The prisoner was a notorious criminal. He was detained on death-row and the day of his execution had arrived. He was now waiting to hear the sound of the executioner's dreaded footsteps approaching, when instead he heard a growing commotion in the courtyard above his cell. He presumed it must be the crowd gathering to witness his execution. Then everything went very quiet. After what seemed like hours, two soldiers came for him. They opened his cell door, but instead of dragging him out for execution they told him he was set free and could go home. One of them however, pointed to the three crosses erected on the distant hill. "Take a good look at the man they are going to hang on that middle cross," he said. "That cross was meant for you but he is taking your place." That man was of course taking the place, not just of Barabbas, but of you and me.

As we celebrate the solemn events of Holy Week we are not just remembering what happened two thousand years ago. The Jews were only the first to choose Barabbas over Jesus. Christians have been doing so ever since. All of us are part of this story. We choose Barabbas whenever we knowingly and willingly reject the Lord's teachings in favour of our own self-interest. At every Mass we remind ourselves that the Lamb of God came "to take away the sins of the world"; the sins of all generations and all places, including ours.

On the feast of Passover, it was customary for the Roman governor to set free any one prisoner chosen by the people. Convinced that Jesus was innocent and anxious to release him, Pilate offered the crowd a choice. Should he release Jesus or Barabbas? This was the same crowd that had given Jesus a royal welcome into Jerusalem the previous Sunday but now, spurred on by the chief priests and elders, they shouted for Barabbas and warned Pilate that he could be no friend of Caesar if he set Jesus free. Self-interest prevailed over truth and justice. Pilate released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to be crucified.

## 76 JESUS OR BARABBAS?

His disciples had earlier promised Jesus that they would never abandon him. “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn.6:67). Peter even vowed, “Lord, I am ready to die for you” (Jn.13:37). But now, fearful for their own safety, Peter even denied that he knew Jesus, while the rest scattered and went into hiding. So much for human promises! But we too have made our promises in baptism and confirmation to live by the values and teachings of Jesus. Yet, when called on to make moral choices how easily we are swayed by our modern ‘high priests and elders’ (the media and our culture of individualism and materialism) to choose Barabbas before Jesus; to opt for self-interest before the values of the gospel.

Mindful that Jesus still lives among us in his people, do we sometimes treat him like that fickle crowd who called for him to be crucified, or like the disciples who abandoned him in the hour of danger, or like Pilate who washed his hands of responsibility and sentenced him to death to win favour with Caesar? Or hopefully, do we emulate the kindness of Veronica who wiped the sweat and blood from his face, or the women of Jerusalem who wept with pity at his appearance, or the love and courage of his mother Mary who stood by the cross with John, the beloved disciple, or the generosity of Joseph of Arimathea who provided the tomb for his burial, or the loyalty of Mary Magdalene who stood by the tomb as he was laid to rest? In the gospel accounts of the Passion we cannot fail to notice the sharp contrast between the courage and presence of those women who had followed Jesus in his ministry and the almost total absence of his chosen disciples!

The choices people had to make in that first Holy Week were similar to the choices we are called to make daily as we struggle to live our Christian lives. We are all capable of acclaiming Jesus on Sunday and rejecting or ignoring him in the least of his brethren during the week. We need resurrection to enable us to rise above our human frailty and weakness. Holy Week and Easter is a good time to start.

## 77 TRULY HUMAN

In his book, *God of Surprises*, Gerard Hughes SJ tells of a devout young man called Fred whom he guided through a private retreat. To assist Fred in his prayer life, he encouraged him to choose scenes from the gospels and to imagine that he was present at and participated in the event.

Having reflected on the wedding feast at Cana, Fred shared with the priest what he had seen in his imagination. He saw tables heaped with delicious food and guests dancing, among scenes of great merriment. When Fr. Hughes asked if he had seen Jesus there Fred replied, "Yes, Jesus was sitting upright to one side, clothed in a white robe, with a staff in his hand, a crown of thorns on his head and looking very displeased."

Like all Christians, Fred often professed his belief in Jesus Christ as "true God and true man", but deep down in his heart, far more truly God than man! He could not imagine Jesus laughing, dancing, singing and drinking, or having normal human needs and desires. He would consider that to be disrespectful or even blasphemous. He might speak of a God of love and compassion but deep down a different image of God was influencing and guiding his life; a severe and demanding God who disapproved of human joy and pleasure. Yet St Paul assures us that in Jesus, the Son of God became "like us in all things but sin", a phrase beautifully repeated in our 4th Eucharistic Prayer.

The gospels make very clear how normal and down-to-earth Jesus really was, but many prefer to overlook this evidence. We can marvel at how he reached out to those on the margins of society, those who were rejected by upright religious people! Luke tells how "The tax-collectors and sinners were all seeking his company". Sinners usually avoid 'religious' people, feeling unworthy and fearing rejection and condemnation. But they were drawn to

Jesus because he didn't judge or look down on them; because he showed compassion, respect and understanding.

We see this in his meeting with Zacchaeus, with the sinful woman in Simon's house and the Samaritan woman at the well. We see it also in parables like The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan. This is the Jesus whom the Church and each of us is called to follow and reflect to humanity around us.

St Paul assures us that in Jesus, the Son of God became "like us in all things but sin".

As we approach Holy Week, it is important not to lose sight of the deep humanity of Jesus. It is easy to overspiritualise the events surrounding the Passion, feeling that his sufferings were somehow made less by the fact that he was God and knew that he was in control. This would be to devalue the wonderful mystery of the incarnation. The *sorrow* Jesus felt at the farewell meal with his disciples, the *pain* of being betrayed, denied and abandoned by his friends, the *fear* of all that was to come, the *physical torture*, the *hurt* of being rejected and insulted by his own people, the *anguish* of being parted from his mother and the *desolation* of his last, painful hours on the cross, when even the Father seemed to have abandoned him ... these were all sufferings which Jesus really felt in the depths of his humanity.

And when suffering inevitably enters our own lives, let us be encouraged by the fact that Jesus has been there before us, that his sufferings are interwoven with ours, and that for us too, resurrection somehow lies ahead, despite the darkness, pain and almost despair of the here and now.

## 78 WHO KILLED JESUS?

Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, aroused much controversy worldwide. It was hailed as "the greatest Bible movie ever made" but was also criticised for scenes of extreme violence and for encouraging an upsurge of anti-Jewish hatred, which Christians were guilty of for many centuries.

The film may also give rise to false images of God as a cruel and vengeful master who insisted on the bloody suffering and death of his Son, as the price that had to be paid for our salvation. This distorted and almost blasphemous image of God would suggest that the Pharisees, chief priests, Judas and Pilate were virtuously carrying out God's plan!

In the past such primitive thinking arose from a literal understanding of some Old Testament passages and from ascribing to God the Roman concept of right order, of just retribution and full punishment for crime - the "eye for an eye" mentality which Jesus strongly condemned. This surely is not the God revealed to us in the gospels as 'Abba', our loving Father - the father who welcomed home his prodigal son with open arms and unconditional forgiveness.

Thomas Aquinas teaches that Jesus saved us by his whole life; by his total "Yes" to the Father. While entering fully into our humanity Jesus remained always divine, so that his every action was of infinite value, sufficient to free us from sin and restore us to union with God. Why then did he have to undergo the horrors of Calvary, as depicted in the bloody scenes of Gibson's film?

The truth is that Jesus' total fidelity to the Father's will, to God's way of truth, love and justice, inevitably brought him into conflict with the forces of falsehood, hatred and injustice which dominated the social and religious

## 78 WHO KILLED JESUS?

structures around him. Because he absolutely refused to compromise or be silenced, he was a threat to their system and their interests, and had to be disposed of. It was human evil, not a heartless God, which caused the Passion.

Would it be any different if Jesus returned in person today? If he condemned the obscene wealth of some in a world of degrading poverty; if he spoke out against the corruption, falsehood, greed, racism, religious bigotry and injustice which cause so much human suffering and misery, would he again be arrested and tortured as subversive, guilty of “stirring up the people”? When asked who killed Jesus, film director Gibson replied without hesitation, “We all did”.

Our faith tells us that Jesus still lives among us, not only in churches and sacraments, but in his people. He continues to suffer wherever people are victims of poverty, hunger, injustice and oppression - “Whatever you did to the least of my brethren you did it to me”(Mt.25:40).The people and systems that cause these sufferings still scourge and crucify him today. Shortly before his assassination in 1980, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador assured his suffering people, “You are the Church - Christ is crucified again in you each day”. For challenging a corrupt and oppressive regime, Archbishop Romero too had to be removed, and was shot dead while celebrating the Eucharist.

Mel Gibson is a committed Christian, a member of a conservative group called Old Catholics, which broke away from the Church over a hundred years ago. He has left us a powerful and deeply moving film, but one from which we must not draw false conclusions.

## 79 A NEW DAWN

Anton's interest in biology at school led to a strange hobby, a live collection of caterpillars! Their home was an old shoe box in the garden shed, with some earth and twigs inside and a wire screen on top. He spent hours watching them chewing the green leaves which he fed them and crawling about on the floor. But suddenly this activity stopped as each caterpillar attached itself firmly to a twig and lay there motionless, while a dull grey shell slowly grew around it. They all seemed to be dead, with no movement whatever. Anton removed the covering screen from the box and waited.

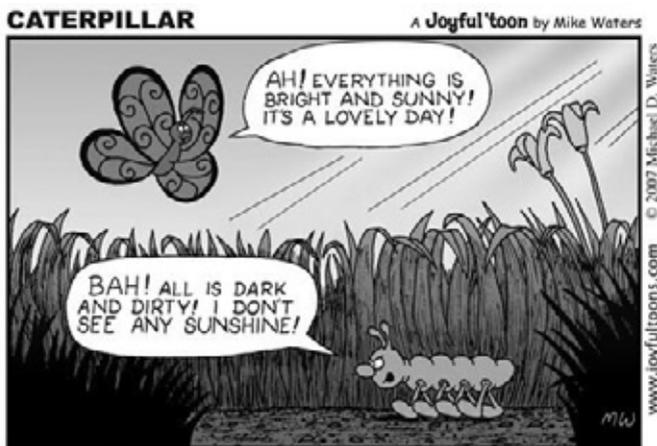
Then one day the grey shells began to twist violently and suddenly burst open. From each, a beautiful butterfly emerged, and stood for a time gently moving its wings, as if to build up strength. Then, in a flash of colours, each flew upwards and gracefully soared away on the summer breeze. Nothing remained but the empty box and the broken shells.

Soon after, at Easter Mass, Anton listened with new interest to the reading about Peter and John running to the tomb, and finding there only the burial cloth that had been wrapped around the Lord's body. The body was missing, for Jesus passed through the bondage of death, leaving only his grave clothes as evidence of where he had lain. Anton's thoughts went back to his caterpillars and to the beautiful butterflies that had emerged from their dark shells into the splendour of new life. And he thought to himself "Now I understand the resurrection".

Some weeks later, that understanding was painfully deepened. As Anton stood by the bedside, gazing through tear-filled eyes on the cold, lifeless body of his beloved grandfather, he recalled the love and kindness, the hard work, the joys and sorrows that had filled that precious life, lived so generously for others. But these were only memories now of milestones on a journey suddenly ended in the cold finality of death.

Or was it merely a transition to a new beginning? As Anton remembered the empty shells from which the radiant butterflies had burst forth; as he reflected on the story of the empty tomb and the empty grave cloths, he had mental visions of his beloved grandad's spirit, free at last from the burdens that had embodied him in life and rising to new heights of glory. Only the 'shell', the cold lifeless body was left behind, to await its own glory, in God's good time. Over Anton's pain and sorrow there now flowed a wave of peace and hope, as he imagined the risen Lord gently assuring him, "He is not here; he has been raised--- he is going ahead of you" (Mk.16:6,7).

The gospel stories of the resurrection begin with the words, "Towards dawn, on the first day of the week" (Mt.28:1). It was indeed a new dawn; the first day not only of a week long ago but a whole new beginning for human-kind! As I write here in Ireland, the dark, cold days of winter are giving way to the new life of spring. Bare trees are being 're-clothed' in fresh young leaves, flowers are bursting forth in splendour, birds are building their nests and the fields are full of lambs. Nature is responding once more to the breath of God, breathing new life into his creation, into your life and mine, calling us too to a new beginning.



In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." - JOHN 3:3 NIV

## 80 LIFE GOES ON

EASTER SEASON

Recently I transferred back to Castletown in the Republic of Ireland; a quiet, scenic rural village where I spent the first six years after my return to Ireland in 1997. It is the De La Salle Brothers' main complex in the country, comprising a student Pastoral Centre, Brothers' Retirement Community and Brothers' Nursing Home. In many ways, Castletown is a replica or image of the transience of our life on earth

Often as I attend Mass in our Nursing Home and see many elderly Brothers, some in second childhood mentally, others weak and immobile physically. I am reminded of the fleeting nature of our human journey and how futile are many of the cares and worries with which we burden ourselves, as if life could not go on without us. But it does go on fine without us. These thoughts are reinforced when I look out over our beautifully kept cemetery, with its neat rows of identical crosses, nearly 400 of them, bearing the names of Brothers who, since the 1880's have lived, worked and passed on to their eternal reward. Plaques at the side of the cemetery list the names and burial places of over 300 other Irish Brothers who laboured and are buried abroad, some in Malaysia and Singapore. Their life's work done, they have moved through death and resurrection to their eternal home.

Beyond the cold and dark experiences of life, lies the light of Easter morning

Then when I cross the compound to our Pastoral Centre, I find groups of teenage boys and girls who come here to follow a retreat; seeking answers to the many questions which confront them; a new generation with hopes and dreams for the life still ahead of them, bubbling over with enthusiasm and vitality. They are the future of our country and our Church. Theirs is the task of carrying on and building on the work of previous generations, in the very different circumstances of their own time.

Here too, in the midst of the countryside, nature itself points to resurrection, as the cold, dark barrenness of winter gives way to the new life of spring. Flowers push up through the earth; tree buds open to produce blossoms and new leaves; farmers are busy as cows and sheep give birth; daylight hours grow longer, while the chirping and singing of birds fill the morning air to welcome the sunrise. If one's eyes and heart are open, every day becomes a homily on the presence of the life-giving God, on the wonders of his creation and on the mystery and sacredness of human life.

However, there is one powerful symbol of new life in your Sarawak Church which I miss here in Ireland...the RCIA at Easter! Adult baptisms are very rare here. Rather we have a Church deep in the winter of decline and old age, with greatly reduced church attendance and religious practice. But the Church too experiences periods of death and resurrection and in the midst of our present barrenness, the Spirit is at work and seeds are germinating, signs of new life which faith and hope assure us, will ultimately bring a new face and renewed vitality to the Irish Church. After my 2011 visit to Kuching memories are still fresh of full Church congregations, the large presence of young people and the vitality of your liturgies; a Church truly alive.

On our individual journeys, Lent is a time to assess our progress, to identify areas where conversion is needed in our relationships with God and with each other. It is a time to remind ourselves that we are an Easter people, a people of hope; convinced that beyond the cold and dark experiences of life, beyond our human faults and failings, our hurts and pains, our sorrows and fears, lies the light of Easter morning. As our crucified Saviour bursts free of death and the enclosed tomb, he empowers us too to come forth from our self-constructed tombs to face life anew with the hope and joy of Easter, assured that as we pass on, life will indeed go on.

## 81 THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

EASTER SEASON

On the first Easter Sunday, two of Jesus' disciples left Jerusalem to walk the seven miles to Emmaus. Like many others they had held high hopes that Jesus, the Messiah, was the leader who would finally free Israel from oppressive Roman rule. And when that happened they probably hoped to enjoy special status in the new Israel. But now Jesus had been crucified as a criminal and their dreams were over. Despite rumours that some women had found his tomb empty their hopes were shattered. They decided to turn their backs on it all and return downhearted to their homes and previous occupations.

While they were talking sadly on the way Jesus joined them, but they did not recognise him. The 'stranger' listened gently to their story and then patiently explained to them everything in the scriptures concerning the Messiah. They listened with hearts aflame, but it was only when they reached Emmaus and he accepted their invitation to share a meal, that they suddenly recognised him in the breaking of bread.

The journey to Emmaus represents the life-journey of each of us. So often we too have our dreams and our hopes which many times end up in disappointment; plans for ourselves, our careers, our children. We can become so obsessed with these plans that when they fail we become devastated and give up hope.

Even our best plans should be provisional, for we are not masters of our own destiny. In Catholic Ireland when people spoke of the future they always added "Please God", just as good Muslims say 'Insyah Allah'. The Lord himself tells us "My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways are not your ways" (Isa 55:8). So when our best efforts meet with failure and disappointment we must be ready to let go, to stand back and see things anew.

Jesus said to the two downhearted travellers, "Don't you see?" that Christ had to suffer and so enter into his glory, and that it can't be different

## 81 THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

for you. You too have to be ready to put aside your small plans because the Father's plans for you are immeasurably greater and more wonderful. You have to be open to new ways; to trust in his love which exceeds all you could ever desire.

The journey to Emmaus assures us that at times of apparent failure and disappointment the Lord is especially close to us. Scripture promises, "The Lord is close to the broken hearted" (Ps 34:19); he journeys with us, gently listening to our human hurts and fears, and brings us new hope and strength, if only we will listen and trust in him. Like Mary at the Annunciation, in the face of mystery and confusion, we are called in faith and trust to say, "May it happen to me as you have said" (Lk 1:38).

On the road to Emmaus the two disciples failed to recognise the master whom they had followed for three years. How often, on our own life-journey, do we too fail to recognise him, even in those among whom we live and work. We honour him in Church and sacrament but find it difficult to take seriously his warning, "Whatever you did not do for one of these least brethren of mine, you did not do for me" (Mt 25:48).



He heals the brokenhearted  
and binds up their wounds.

- PSALM 147:3 NIV

## 82 ME A MISSIONARY?

EASTER SEASON

At this time of year I am nurtured by fond memories of the Kuching Archdiocese. I remember the busy RCIA activities as large numbers of catechumens prepare to receive the Sacraments of Initiation at Easter and recall especially the joyful applause as the newly baptised process into the Cathedral sanctuary, all dressed in white, at the Easter Vigil. All this is an expression of the youthful vitality, energy and growth of your local Church, a Church fully alive! By contrast, in the years since I returned to Ireland, I have experienced a Church in decline and have not seen even one adult baptism!

From the beginning, when Jesus commanded his followers to “Go to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples” (Mt 28:19) the Church has been by nature missionary. We are told that after the Ascension “the number of disciples kept growing” (Acts 6:1) and we read how St Paul travelled widely, enduring great hardships and even death to spread the Good News. In later centuries missionaries went forth to preach the gospel throughout Europe, and then to Africa and Asia. Today, in Sarawak, that great missionary outreach continues through your own local clergy, catechists and the RCIA. Large numbers are involved each year, priests, religious, catechists, teachers and sponsors, in inviting and preparing catechumens for entry into the Church.

What we can easily forget is that this work of evangelisation is not just the duty of ‘specialists’ like priests, religious and catechists, but that it is the responsibility of everyone. Pope John Paul II warned that “No believer in Christ can avoid the supreme duty to proclaim him to all peoples” (Redemptoris Missio, 3). Through Baptism and Confirmation every Christian is commissioned to bear witness to the Gospel. Many may feel that they have insufficient knowledge of their faith to teach and guide others, but there are different forms or levels of evangelisation, beginning with the most basic and

most essential: the giving of good example. Pope Paul VI emphasised this when he wrote, "The first means of evangelisation is the witness of a truly Christian life" (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 41).

Preaching begins with how we live each day in our family, neighbourhood and workplace.

A story is told that one of his monks, Bro Andrew, asked St Francis of Assisi, "Please Father, teach me to preach eloquently like you". Francis agreed and asked Andrew to follow him. They walked together through the streets, greeting and smiling at the workers, merchants and shoppers; helping an old lady carry her washing upstairs; sharing a loaf of bread with a poor beggar; listening to people's complaints and problems and praying with a traveller setting out on a journey. As they walked and walked, Bro Andrew was becoming more annoyed and finally asked "Bro Francis, excuse me, but when will you teach me to preach?" The saint smiled and answered, "Why Bro Andrew, we have been preaching all day".

Preaching begins with how we live each day in our family, neighbourhood and workplace. We do this by simple acts of kindness and helpfulness, like visiting the sick and lonely, sharing with those in need and encouraging the downhearted. When we feel people may be ready, we can respectfully ask if they would like to learn about the faith and if so, introduce them to the RCIA or a catechist. "Preach often; sometimes use words", advised St Francis! Yes, every one of us is called to be a missionary and has the ability to be one, just like those simple, uneducated fishermen whom Jesus first called to be "fishers of men" (Mt 4:19). That is still our mission today.

## 83 EASTER TRANSFORMATION

Glass is one of the most widely used substances in our daily lives. It is produced in a great variety of colours and for a wide range of uses, from drinking glasses to spectacles, mirrors, decorative crystal vases, brilliant chandeliers, beautiful stained-glass windows and many more. What most non-scientists do not realise is that the magnificent chandeliers adorning a great banquet hall are made from ordinary sand, treated with various chemicals and heated to 1,700°C. The ordinary, plain sand is transformed into something precious and beautiful and can be seen as an imperfect metaphor for Easter, when the tortured, broken body of Jesus is transformed into the glory of the Risen Lord and where humanity is transformed into the Body of Christ. The empty tomb of Easter morning is the symbol of that transformation.

Easter, the greatest feast of our Christian tradition, is one of joy, hope and transformation which is mirrored in countless ways in nature and in human experience. The Easter candle, like the rising sun of Easter morning, dispels the darkness, lights our way and slowly burns itself out in service to people. In northern climates at this time nature itself bursts into new life as bare trees are clothed anew in fresh leaves, as flowers bloom again to replace the dark, barren days of winter with a riot of colours. The birds have hatched their young who are stretching their wings and learning to fly, while in the fields sheep nurture their new-born lambs. New life is everywhere! It is the time of year when it is easy to acclaim the Risen Lord, "Heaven and earth are full of your glory". And in Sarawak you celebrate as you welcome hundreds of newly baptised members into the Church, catechumens experiencing transformation in their own lives and bringing a transfusion of new life to the whole community.

Easter proclaims  
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## 83 EASTER TRANSFORMATION

But transformation must first come through struggle, pain and purification, like the sand being melted into glass. A story is told of a pilgrim climbing a mountain in the Italian Alps to visit a popular Crucifixion Shrine. As she prayed before the large wooden cross, she noticed a small track that continued on beyond the cross. After struggling her way through the vegetation that grew along the little-used track, she was amazed to come to another shrine; a cave that symbolised the empty tomb. It was overgrown and neglected, as few pilgrims ever went beyond the Cross of the Crucifixion. Yet “if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is in vain”. (1Cor. 15:17)

We have all known hurt and heartbreak in life; perhaps the death of a loved one, a painful illness, broken relationships or a lost job. At such times we may ask “Where is God now?” We find it difficult to travel beyond the cross. But don’t forget the greater story; beyond the cross lies the empty tomb. Note that we proclaim “Christ has died”; past tense, because it happened long ago, but go on to profess “Christ is risen”; present tense, because resurrection still takes place and Christ is still alive. He lives at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He lives in the Eucharist where we worship his presence. He lives in our world and in the hearts of his people. We don’t have to die to share in the resurrection. It takes place every time we trust again after being betrayed; when we love after being rejected, hope again after our dreams were shattered. Resurrection is with us when lies give way to truth, when hatred surrenders to love, when indifference is replaced by compassion.

Easter proclaims that there is a purpose to our living beyond the cares and concerns of this earthly world; that the sand of our brief desert journey through life will be transformed into the crystal glass of heaven, for us to shine like the stars for all eternity.

## 84 THROUGH DEATH TO LIFE

Easter is the greatest feast of the Church's year. Indeed for Christians it celebrates the most important event in human history. "Very early in the morning of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb" (Mt 28:1). It was the beginning, not only of a new day and a new week, but a whole new beginning for humankind.

At Easter we remember and celebrate Christ's triumph over suffering and death. But it is much more than the celebration of a historic event which took place over 2000 years ago. Easter is about today, about our life here and now. It is our guarantee that for us too death is no longer final. It is our assurance that we too can come forth from the dark tombs in which we often find ourselves: tombs of fear, guilt, hatred, despair and many more. It is about hope and new beginnings; about transformation in our own lives and in the world around us.

The resurrection story, as told in John's gospel, unfolds only gradually. Jesus doesn't appear to his disciples immediately after his burial. First there is the empty silence of Holy Saturday. Then on Sunday morning Mary goes to the tomb and, seeing the stone removed, runs to tell Peter and the others. Peter and John next rush to the tomb. John gets there first and notices the linen cloths but does not enter. Then Peter arrives and goes in, sees the linen cloths and also, in a separate place, the napkin which had been around the Lord's head.

The various apparitions follow; to the weeping Mary outside the tomb, to the frightened disciples gathered behind locked doors, to the two downhearted followers on the road to Emmaus and later to 'doubting' Thomas. Only gradually did his followers come to accept the reality and significance of the Lord's resurrection. In our own lives resurrection is also a process;

## 84 THROUGH DEATH TO LIFE

a gradual rising above all that weighs us down; an opening of our eyes to behold a new vision of life and of our destiny.

We are all familiar with the beautiful hymn Amazing Grace, one of the best loved hymns of all time. We may not be familiar with the life story of its author, John Newton (1725-1809). Bitter at God over the death of his mother when he was only thirteen, he abandoned all religious practice. He followed his father, a sea-captain and became a sailor. He is said to have “declined into rebellion and degradation” for many years, later describing himself as having been “an infidel and a libertine”. He became captain of a slave ship, transporting captured slaves from Africa to America.

On one such voyage a violent storm threatened to sink his ship. When all hope seemed lost Newton experienced what he later called his “great deliverance”, as he cried out “Lord, have mercy upon us”. From that moment God’s grace worked powerfully in his life. He gave up seafaring, educated himself, was ordained a Church minister and became famous as a preacher and author of many hymns.

God’s grace brought resurrection to John Newton, as so often happens, at a time of great crisis. This “wretch” who once was lost is now found; who was blind to truth and goodness can now see. One of those he influenced deeply was William Wilberforce who later played a leading role in the abolition of slavery. Throughout history God’s grace has been at work in the lives of men and women, making resurrection a reality in our world. He longs to do the same through us today.

Easter is about the risen Lord still journeying with us through life; through pain, loss and death into hope, resurrection and new life.

## 85 NOURISHED BY MEMORIES

Each year, Easter is the time when I most miss Kuching! I think of the vibrant Easter services taking place throughout the Archdiocese, as the resurrection is joyously celebrated and many hundred adults are baptised into full membership of the Church. Memories flood back of the Easter Vigil ceremonies in the overflowing St. Joseph's Cathedral; of over a hundred catechumens descending into the baptismal pool and emerging as new Christians; of the rapturous applause as the newly baptised, now all dressed in white, process back into the congregation. Memories of a Church truly alive, where the rich Easter liturgies, often lasting for a few hours, are characterised by lively participation and joyful celebration on the part of the whole congregation.

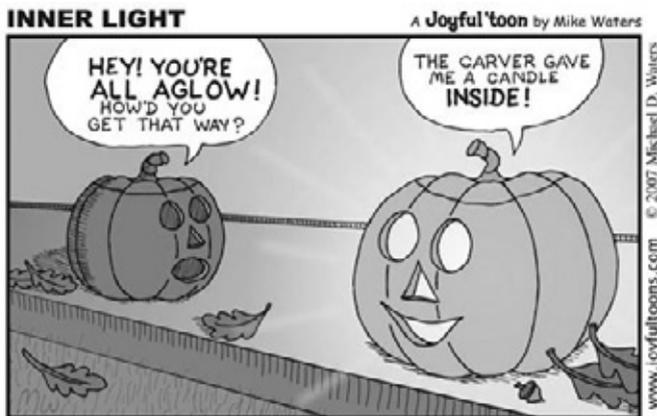
By contrast here in Christian Ireland, Easter falls rather flat. Church attendance has fallen greatly and consists mostly of the elderly. In sixteen years I have yet to see an adult baptism. We go through the liturgical rituals but the congregation is largely passive; a choir sings but the people are not invited to join in. Not surprisingly, the shorter the service the better, as watches are discreetly checked. Is it any wonder that on such occasions I am only physically present? My mind is far away. I need those memories of the vitality and youth, the spirit of joy and participation, the warm sense of community of the Sarawak Church to sustain and nurture my own struggling faith.

As you celebrate resurrection and new life at Easter, do count your blessings and commit yourself anew to the future of the Church, which is all of you. Remember that bringing the good news to others is the task and privilege of everyone. Few, if any, of the newly baptised among you were brought to Christ by reading or lectures, by intellectual debate or dramatic miracles, but rather by the example and encouragement of another ordinary person, a husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend, colleague or neighbour. For it is above all through people that Christ now touches human lives. St. Teresa of Avila reminds us that "He now has no body on earth, no hands, feet or eyes with which to reach out to people but yours."

## 85 NOURISHED BY MEMORIES

A story is told about a little boy who wandered away from his mother in a large church and found his way behind the main altar, where the sunlight shone through a stained-glass window, bathing him in the different colours of the glass. When his mother found him gazing up at the window, he asked her, "Who are these people pictured in the window." She replied, "These are saints." Next day during religion class, when the teacher asked, "Who knows what a saint is?", the boy's hand shot up and he answered confidently, "Miss, saints are people who let the light shine through."

As Christians we are all called to let the light shine through, to be witnesses of Christ to others. To do this we do not need to be learned theologians or eloquent preachers, or to make heroic sacrifices. A simple smile, a warm handshake, an act of kindness, a word of encouragement, a gentle invitation can work wonders. This is what Jesus meant when he urged us "Let your light shine before people", and what Pope Paul VI meant when he wrote, "People today listen more to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are also witnesses." Don't be shy! Reach out! Be an evangelist!



For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. - 2 CORINTHIANS 4:6 NIV

## 86 LIFE IS SACRED

EASTER SEASON

In 1973, Norma McCorvey, using the name 'Jane Roe', won her case in the US Supreme Court, upholding her right to have an abortion, thereby legalising abortion in the USA. Few people know that McCorvey went on to deliver her baby, whom she gave up for adoption. She continued however to campaign in favour of abortion and to work in abortion clinics.

But gradually she came to realise what was happening around her – the enormous violence being done to the unborn and to women. She met women seeking their eighth or ninth abortion and saw pregnancies being terminated for trivial reasons, often at advanced stages of development.

Norma began urging such mothers to reconsider their decision; to talk it over with their family and friends. "Why not have the baby and offer it for adoption?" she would ask. Not surprisingly, she was soon sacked. Filled with guilt at what she had caused, she fell into deep depression, began drinking heavily and became dependent on drugs.

In 1995 Norma began to take control of her life again, and publicly declared that her lawsuit had been a great mistake. In 1998 she published her testimony, *Won by Love* and set up her own pro-life ministry. Later that year she was received into the Catholic Church. She says that her Christian faith has enabled her "to taste true love and a sense of forgiveness". Resurrection had truly taken place in Norma McCorvey's life.

During the Easter season we continue to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord, that ultimate victory of hope and new life over sin and death, over everything that undermines and destroys human life and dignity. It is a time to give thanks for the great advances in medical science which have worked wonders to eradicate fatal illnesses, promote public health and prolong life in most parts of the world.

At the same time it is ironic that the world still witnesses massive destruction of human life. Wars, tribal and religious conflicts, terrorism and global injustice continue to bring death and misery to millions, for whom resurrection in this life remains a distant dream.

By far the greatest destroyer of human life, however, is abortion; there are no greater weapons of mass destruction than the instruments of the abortionist's clinic. Since the 'Jane Roe' verdict there have been 44 million abortions in the USA, while in Singapore, where the government is making frantic efforts to promote marriage and larger families, nearly 14,000 abortions take place each year. Similar situations exist around the world, in what Pope John Paul calls "a culture of death".

"But what can I do?" we may ask. In addition to developing a keen awareness of the value and dignity of every human life, and behaving accordingly in our own lives, one practical response would be to recognise and support the Pro-Life Movement in Kuching. In reaching out with care and compassion to women with unwanted pregnancies, who also become victims of abortion, the Movement saves unborn lives and promotes human dignity, while also helping couples seeking to adopt a baby. Besides, this deeply Christian inter-church ministry is an admirable example of ecumenism in practice. It deserves our full support.

Easter is about God journeying with us through pain, loss and death, into hope, resurrection and new life. "I have come that they may have life" says the Lord, "life in all its fullness". As his followers, we are all called to be life givers.

On our human journey, departures and farewells are usually sad and painful experiences. Airport departure lounges, ship's harbours and bus and train stations are frequent scenes of tearful embraces and heavy hearts as loved ones say 'goodbye'. There is the reluctant moving away, the farewell waves from a distance, and then they are gone! Ascension Day has been called the 'Feast of Farewells'. For the close friends who had come to know Jesus so intimately and experienced the power of his love, the time had come to say 'goodbye' and with heavy hearts to let him go. There was surely among them a human sense of sorrow, loss and emptiness, but the Ascension was also very different from our normal human partings.

For 40 days after his resurrection, the Lord appeared to his disciples many times and in different places. He talked to them about the Kingdom of God and ordered them "Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift I told you about." Then he led them out of the city as far as Bethany, and there on the Mount of Olives, he raised his hand and blessed them, saying "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and you will be witnesses for me to the ends of the earth." After saying this he was taken up to heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid him from their sight. In the creed we profess our belief that "he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father."

He raised his hand and blessed them, saying, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and you will be witnesses for me to the end of the earth." After saying this he was taken up to heaven.

How are we to understand this scene? It doesn't mean that Jesus has left us and gone away to a far distant place. Heaven is not a place, "at least five miles above the clouds" as one little boy described it! The Ascension means that Jesus is now liberated from all the restrictions of our earthly condition, from all the limitations of time and space. He has gone from our sight but is one with the Father and continues to be present in and among us by the power of the Holy Spirit in all areas and aspects of the life of his Church. Jesus has fulfilled his mission among us in human form and the time of the Spirit has now come. Through the Spirit, the Church, which is you and me and all of us, is commissioned to carry on his mission; to bring the fruits of his earthly life, death and resurrection to the ends of the earth.

As the Lord's mission ended, so ours began. St. Teresa of Avila reminds us "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours" Jesus has promised us "I shall be with you always till the end of time" but he depends on us to "go and make disciples of all nations", to be his witnesses, to teach, forgive, heal and sanctify, as he did, and as his Church has done down through the ages. It is now over to us to continue that mission and transform the world in our own time and place. The Lord has chosen to depend on us and, as far as we know, he has no Plan B.

It may seem strange to read that after the Ascension, the disciples "went back into Jerusalem filled with great joy." The Lord had promised to remain with them always and to send the Holy Spirit to inspire and empower them. He had entrusted them with carrying on his mission. So it wasn't all over as it had seemed to be on Good Friday. There was again something to live for, and in the case of many, to give their lives for. They waited as commanded for the coming of the Spirit, spending time in prayer,

## 87 OVERTO US

“together with the women and with Mary the mother of Jesus”. Time was needed for his departure to sink in, time to experience the empty space where new beginnings germinate, like the seed in the ground and the embryo in the womb.

And then came the great event of Pentecost, when they were ready. The Spirit came upon them in the forms of wind and fire, transforming, empowering and activating. New beginnings, as his Church burst into life, and “about three thousand were added to their number that day”. Let us take it from there!



## 88 THE HOLY SPIRIT TRANSFORMS

At Pentecost we celebrate the birthday of the Christian Church, and that Church is all of us. We are familiar with the story of the Holy Spirit descending upon the assembled disciples, accompanied by the sound of a strong wind and by tongues of fire, representing power, vitality and transformation. At that moment the Church exploded into life, as the disciples rushed out into the city to preach the Good News, gaining “about three thousand converts” (Acts 2:41) that day.

The Spirit poured out that first Pentecost Sunday is the same Spirit that “hovered over the waters” (Gen 1:2) at the moment of creation, bringing order, shape and meaning out of darkness and chaos; the same Spirit that God breathed into the first human being and “man became a living soul” (Gen 2:7). Throughout the Old Testament the Spirit “spoke through the prophets”, animating, guiding and transforming God’s people. At the Annunciation the angel told Mary “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (Lk.1:35), and she conceived the Son of God. The Spirit of Pentecost is the Spirit of all ages, the life-giving Spirit of transformation and change, who has hovered over the Church down through the centuries, in all its ups and downs.

The early Church suffered persecution under Roman rule. Many faced imprisonment, torture and death rather than abandon their faith, but “the blood of martyrs became the seed of Christians”, as their numbers continued to grow. In 312 the Emperor Constantine was converted and declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Empire. The Church suddenly found itself thrust into positions of power and wealth, of pomp and grandeur, from which we have never fully recovered! It grew rapidly in numbers, becoming the major influence in the development of western civilization, contributing greatly to the growth of learning and progress and producing many saintly lives. But it also became infected by scandals and abuses eventually leading to the break up of the Christian Church at the time of the Reformation, the

## 88 THE HOLY SPIRIT TRANSFORMS

sad results of which are still with us. In response the Church convened the Council of Trent (1545) which greatly tightened Church discipline and introduced much needed reforms. Authority became rigidly centralised and hierarchical, with the laity having little active role in the liturgy or in Church affairs, except 'to pray, pay and obey'!

That essentially is the Church that still prevailed 400 years later when the saintly Pope John 23rd opened the 2nd Vatican Council in 1962. An Ecumenical (General) Council is the most solemn and official assembly of all bishops which, when called by the Pope, constitutes the highest teaching authority in the Church. Vatican 2, attended by over 2,500 bishops from all over the world, was by far the largest and most global council ever held. Those of us who are old enough remember the pre-Vatican 2 Mass, which was recited entirely in Latin by a priest who stood facing the altar, with his back turned towards the congregation. There was no dialogue between priest and people, no responses, as the people recited their own prayers privately. An altar rail separated the sanctuary from the body of the church and at this rail people knelt to receive Holy Communion on the tongue. Communion was less frequent and had to be preceded by fasting from midnight.

Pope John called the Council to 'update' the Church; to open its windows and let the wind of a new Pentecost blow away the dust and cobwebs of centuries. Huge changes had taken place in the world and in society in the 400 years since Trent; the space age was just beginning, while the Church had remained largely static. To fulfil its mission on earth it needed to open up to the modern world in which people lived, to speak its language and respond to its needs. Pope John dreamt of the Spirit breathing new life into this 'sleeping giant' and the emphasis moved from seeing the Church primarily as a hierarchical institution to seeing it as the 'People of God', a community

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of people living out their lives as the leaven and salt of the gospel in the midst of the world.

Today our liturgies are alive; Spirit filled celebrations that animate our communities and nourish us for our daily journey. Parish and Diocesan Pastoral Councils, as well as numerous lay ministries and apostolates enable the laity to live out their Christian vocation in the midst of life. Diocesan assemblies, Episcopal conferences and Synods of Bishops go some way towards achieving the collegiality (shared leadership) which the Council envisaged for the future. Vatican 2 has indeed transformed our Church but the aspirations of the Council ("The highest teaching authority in the Church") have yet to be fully realised. Fear of change in certain quarters has slowed or even reversed progress. The Spirit of God does not force but blows when and where he wills, touching minds and hearts, and always prevailing in his own time. "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful..."



## 89 THE LIFE - GIVING SPIRIT

The Spirit of God permeates the Bible, inspiring and animating the human authors in their work. As we approach Pentecost, three particular examples of the work of the Spirit in the scriptures come personally to mind:

1. The very opening sentences of the Bible tell us, "In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and earth, the earth had no form and was empty; darkness was over the deep and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters". Nothing existed except God; just emptiness and darkness. But the spirit is there, transforming darkness into light and bringing order, shape and meaning out of nothingness, as the gradual evolution of the world is symbolized step by step in the Genesis creation story. "God saw everything he had made and it was very good".

Like the primeval universe, our own lives are often filled with emptiness, darkness and confusion, in times of illness, bereavement, failure or betrayal. At such times we can confidently turn to the Spirit who hovers over us too, ready to shed light on our darkness, to bring order and meaning out of our confusion.

2. In the book of Ezekiel (Ch37) we read that fascinating parable of the valley filled with dried up human bones, representing the people of Israel, exiled, scattered and dispirited. But "the Lord says to the bones, 'I am going to put spirit in you and make you live'". And the bones joined together, sinews and flesh grew on them and they were covered in skin. Then Ezekiel at the Lord's command cried out, "Spirit, come from the four winds. Breathe into these dead bones and let them live". And behold "breath entered them; they came alive again, a great immense army".

There are times when we are like that valley filled with dry bones. Our dreams are dashed, our hopes are scattered our faith is dead and God seems far away. We need to turn with hope and trust, to the life-giving

## 89 THE LIFE - GIVING SPIRIT

power of the Spirit who promises, "I shall open your tombs and bring you out of your graves when I put my Spirit within you and you shall live" (Ezek 18:13-14).

3. And then there is the powerful Pentecost scene. The disciples, with Mary the mother of Jesus and some women followers are gathered in an upper room. We can only guess how they felt. True, Jesus had promised to send them the Holy Spirit, but what did that mean? Meanwhile they were alone, a small vulnerable group in a hostile world. Their Master was gone but memories of his terrible death were fresh in their minds. Would they now suffer the same fate? And so they waited, bewildered, dispirited and fearful.

Suddenly the Holy Spirit burst upon them, the strong wind symbolizing action and power, the tongues of fire telling of transformation and witness. They were new people, filled with conviction, courage and commitment. The Church suddenly burst into life.

That same Spirit is given to each of us in baptism and dwells with us always, even in our darkest hours. The Catholic Church believes in the "sensus fidelium"; that the Holy Spirit speaks through the lives of the ordinary baptised, and through the deepest longings of the human heart, just as well as through those in high church places. The problem is that we don't always seem to listen. Let us open ourselves anew to that Spirit's transforming power, which sheds light on our darkness, breathes new vitality into our weary lives, liberates us from our fears, raises us up and sends us forth "to renew the face of the earth"...in our homes, our parishes, our work places, our communities. "Come, Holy Spirit...

## 90 HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Pentecost is often called 'the birthday of the Church'. On this day the Holy Spirit poured out his gifts on those early disciples who had, only 50 days earlier, betrayed, denied and abandoned their master. But at Pentecost, their lives were transformed. They became powerful and courageous witnesses for Christ, ready to die for him and, more importantly, to live their lives in fidelity to his teaching.

The Church that was born at Pentecost was in many ways very different from the Church we know today. The infant Church comprised a small number of fishermen, tax-collectors, farmers, housewives and other simple followers, led by a very human fisherman called Peter. There was no Vatican, no great cathedrals, no grand titles, no religious orders, no Lourdes or Medjugorje. All that was to develop much later.

But the essence of the Church was already there among those early followers, bound together as a community by their baptism into Jesus, by the breaking of bread and the witness of their daily living. Onlookers were amazed at the transformation which they saw in their lives.

We are told in Acts 4 that "the whole community of believers was united, heart and soul", that they shared their possessions and that "none of their members was ever in need" - surely the most complete expression of Christian discipleship.

It is this unity and sharing, with God and with each other, which still lies at the heart of our Christian faith. All that developed later in doctrine and ritual, in administrative structures and titles, in buildings and possessions, in rules and regulations, were for the most part necessary and useful aspects of the Church's growth and development.. But they are all secondary to those

basic Christian values which should govern and guide the lives of all true followers of Jesus, and which serve as our most convincing witness to the world around us.

A communist official was invited to open a Church conference in East Germany in 1964. He told how, as a communist, he had been imprisoned by Hitler's Nazis during the 2nd World War, and how he came to admire a fellow prisoner, a Christian. This man had been given certain privileges such as extra food, clothing and toiletries, but under strict orders not to pass them on to others. Yet he would push pieces of food, cigarettes and other items into the cells of starving prisoners, including the communist, sacrificing his own needs and risking his very life. The communist, a declared enemy of all religion, concluded by saying, "That was the first time I ever admired the Church."

It wasn't the Church's influence or grandeur which had impressed him, but the Christ-like behaviour of a humble prisoner. And this is where the Church of Christ is still to be found - in the lives and struggles of ordinary people, "the people of God".

As I look down over the working-class housing estates that comprise our parish here in Belfast, I am deeply conscious that this is our local Church - all those humble homes where people strive to rear a family and to live in harmony and peace, where they celebrate and suffer, struggle to build community, give birth and die. Many don't 'practise' their religion regularly, but here among "the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears" (Vatican 2) of everyday living, among saints and sinners, the Spirit is moving, and the Church that was born at Pentecost is still with us.

## 91 THE HONOURABLE BIRD

A non-Christian Japanese who was enquiring about the Catholic faith began going to Mass and reading religious books. One day a friend asked him how his search was progressing. He said he was happy with his learning but was having difficulty with the mystery of the Trinity. "The Father and Son, ok – I can believe," he said. "But Number 3, the Honourable Bird, I cannot understand!"

Many Christians too have difficulty understanding the nature and role of the Holy Spirit. Father and Son are familiar names and both are often depicted in art with human features, while Jesus shared fully in our human life. The Holy Spirit however is usually pictured in non-human forms such as a dove, tongues of fire and a strong wind, so we have greater difficulty visualising the nature and role of the Spirit in our lives. Thankfully we are not as bad as the Ephesian converts who told St Paul, "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (Acts 19:2)!

The fruits of the Spirit described by St. Paul – "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23).

Pentecost is the oldest feast in the Church, celebrating its birthday – the day when through the power of the Holy Spirit the life, death and resurrection of Jesus burst into life in the hearts and lives of his followers. It is a story of remarkable transformation, when fearful, discouraged disciples were transformed into powerful and courageous witnesses. It is a feast which offers us many thoughts for reflection but here I shall touch on just two.

## 91 THE HONOURABLE BIRD

The coming of the Holy Spirit is related in both John's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. John describes how the disciples "were gathered together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews", when Jesus stood among them, saying "Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, so now I am sending you". Then breathing on them he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:19-22). It is the role of the Holy Spirit to give us peace, and peace casts out fear which can paralyse us as it did the disciples. Fear of failure, rejection, loneliness, illness and even of love can keep us buried in our tombs, turned in on ourselves. May the Holy Spirit liberate us from all such fear, freeing us to go forth like the disciples to live our lives fully and share the good news of Christ with those around us.

The Pentecost story in Acts tells how the liberated and transformed disciples went forth to proclaim the Risen Lord to "people from every country in the world". These people could understand them speaking in their different languages "about the great things that God has done" (Acts 2:5-12). Indeed the Holy Spirit is active in the lives of all people of goodwill. Too often our world stresses our differences and divisions – different languages, races, social classes, tribes and religions, leading to mistrust, even hatred and conflict. Closed doors cannot block the presence of the Risen Lord, but closed hearts and minds can. Let the Holy Spirit open our hearts and enable us to respect and value difference, in our families, society and world, acknowledging that our God is the God of all.

Pentecost is not just a historic event of long ago, for the Spirit is still present and at work in the events of daily life. The fruits of the Spirit as described by St Paul seem very ordinary – "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). Yet when we experience and practise these gifts we know that the Spirit is present, that God is with us and that our world and our lives are still being transformed.

## 92 OUR POWER SUPPLY

Every Saturday Joe cut firewood for the coming week. His old hand-saw needed replacing so he went to the local hardware store and asked about a new one. The salesman took a chain saw from the shelf and told him it was the newest model. Joe bought it on the spot.

On Monday however Joe returned, complaining that he had worked very hard but cut only half of what he did with his old saw. The salesman was surprised and invited him to the back of the store where he had a pile of wood. He pulled the starter chord and as the power driven saw roared into life Joe jumped back, asking "What's that noise?" He had been struggling to saw wood manually, without turning on the power, very much like a believer who tries to live the Christian life without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit!

We often forget how confused and ignorant the disciples of Jesus were regarding his identity and mission. Despite Peter's profession of faith "You are the Messiah, the Son of God", they had different expectations, associated mostly with the political liberation of Israel. James and John even requested privileged positions in that Kingdom! Then the crucifixion shattered their earthly dreams and left them downhearted and dejected.

But Jesus, knowing their human weakness, had earlier promised to send them the Holy Spirit, "who will teach you everything". Yet, even after his post-resurrection appearances and teachings, they were still thinking of temporal power. On the morning of his ascension to the Father they asked, "Lord, will you now give the kingdom back to Israel?" (Acts. 1:6). Talk of slow learners! Jesus' reply, his final words on earth, were "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and will be witnesses for me to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7). That would surely need a major miracle!

And that is what happened on Pentecost Sunday. Jesus had fulfilled his mission; the time of the Spirit had come. In symbols of wind and fire, representing power and transformation, the Holy Spirit came upon the frightened disciples, changing their lives for ever. Fulfilling the Master's promise they became convinced and courageous witnesses of the gospel, even at the cost of their lives. Nothing reflects that transformation better than the example of the early Church, where the gospel was not just 'preached' but lived. "The whole community was one in mind and heart; they shared all things in common and no one among them was in need". As a result "they won people's favour and every day the Lord added to their number".

The Pentecost story is not ancient history. Without the Holy Spirit the Church today would be as short-sighted, powerless and confused as the first disciples were before Pentecost. When we think we can achieve salvation through our own efforts we are being as stupid as Joe in our opening story! We first have to humbly acknowledge our human weakness, then be open to the workings of the Spirit and allow him to touch the lives of others through us.

A little girl stared in silent wonder at the bright rays of the sun shining through a large stained glass window, which depicted several saints. Then rushing to her mother she exclaimed, "Mummy, I now know who saints are! They are people who let the light shine through". May the light of the Holy Spirit shine through each of us, to touch the lives of those we meet.

## 93 TO LIVE IS TO CHANGE

Forty years ago the negro Baptist pastor, Rev Martin Luther King, was shot dead in the USA for daring to demand justice and equality for his people, who were still denied entry to schools, restaurants and housing areas reserved for whites. He became the leader of the Civil Rights Movement which led in 1964 to the US Supreme Court passing the Civil Rights Act banning racial segregation.

The Irish orator Edmund Burke once proclaimed, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men (and women) to do nothing". Like the prophets of the Old Testament, King refused to "do nothing". He campaigned fearlessly for justice for his people and, like the prophets, paid with his life. Though a man of great vision he could not have foreseen that just 40 years later a black man, Barack Obama, would be US President. Extraordinary human progress indeed, though much remains to be done, to bring true equality to his people.

The creation story at the beginning of the Bible tells us that before the earth took shape "the Spirit of God hovered over the waters" (Gen 1:2). Throughout the Old Testament that same Spirit is seen as an instrument of divine action in the world, inspiring and animating the prophets and leaders of God's people, as expressed so beautifully by Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up broken hearts, to proclaim liberty to captives" (Is 61:1).

The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost in the forms of a strong wind and tongues of fire, symbols of life, power, vitality and transformation. The Spirit continues to be present and at work as an animating and transforming force in the life of the Church, guiding her progressively into the fullness of truth. We see this at Vatican II, where 2,500 bishops from all over

the world, united with the Pope, were truly agents of the Spirit in renewing the Church and responding to the needs of our time.

**“To live is to change and to live fully is to have changed often”.**

But the work of the Spirit is not confined to the Church. The same Spirit who hovered over creation at the beginning continues to hover over the earth. St Paul tells us that “all creation groans and suffers the pangs of birth” (Rom 8:22), as we struggle to bring about a better and more just world.

Recent centuries have seen remarkable human progress, not only in the US Civil Rights Act, but in many other areas such as the abolition of slavery which saw human beings being bought, sold, transported and used like animals; in the ending of apartheid in South Africa through the heroic sacrifices of people like Nelson Mandela; in recognition of the dignity and equality of women who now, in most countries, have equal rights to education and employment, and have even governed countries as diverse as Britain, India, the Philippines and Germany, and in the abolition of the death penalty in many countries. Cultures are indeed precious, but none is perfect and all need to be open to evolution and change.

All these advances in society and Church still have far to go. They have been achieved in spite of opposition from individuals and organisations who fear change and want our world and maybe our Church to be a museum. The Venerable Cardinal Newman once stated that “To live is to change and to live fully is to have changed often”. The Holy Spirit is a powerful agent of change; of transformation and progress, calling on each of us to respond with openness of mind and generosity of heart; to follow our Master in rejecting all those forms of racism, bigotry, injustice and exploitation which still plague our world.

## 94 CRACKED POTS

A Chinese story tells how a water carrier had two large pots, one hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his shoulders. One of the pots had a crack which leaked water, while the other was perfect. At the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house the cracked one was always only half full and was very ashamed of its poor performance.

One day beside the stream it told the carrier of its guilt and apologised for its inadequacy. The carrier felt sorry for the old cracked pot and in his compassion said, "As we return to the master's house I want you to take note of the beautiful flowers along the path." And true enough, all along the side of the path there were beautiful flowers growing. But when they reached the house the pot was again half empty and in shame apologised once more to the carrier who asked, "Did you notice that the flowers grew only on your side of the path? That's because I always knew of your defect and planted flower seeds on your side, and every day as you walked back from the stream you watered them. For years I have plucked those beautiful flowers to decorate the master's table. Without your fault he would not have such beauty to grace his house."

On the day of Pentecost the Church exploded into life with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. But have you ever considered what a strange group those first disciples were? They included as leader the boastful Peter who even denied he knew Jesus; ambitious followers like James and John who requested special places of honour in heaven, and cowards who "left him and ran away" when he was arrested in Gethsemane. Those Jesus called to be the foundation of his Church were weak and imperfect human beings, mostly fishermen and ordinary folk, with little or no education. Not a very promising start! But God's ways are not our ways and today, over two thousand years later, the Church has spread worldwide and is still growing!

“Human beings see with the eyes but God sees the heart” (1Sam 16:7). The Pentecost story brings home to us the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of ordinary people and the world where we live and work.

As ordinary Christians, conscious of our faults and failings, we often feel helpless, perhaps even useless. We easily forget that each of us is gifted by the Spirit in a unique way and is called to play his/her special part in the growth of the Church and in building up our local community. If we are open and generous, the Holy Spirit can work wonders through us, not in spectacular or sensational ways, but in the ordinary events of daily life. If we were to ask our many adult converts this Easter to identify the spark which ignited their desire for baptism, we would find that mostly it was their experience of ordinary Christians which somehow touched their lives. It was the same in the early Church, as onlookers were amazed to see the love, unity and sharing among those first Christians and rushed to join them.

Each of us has his/her defects. We are all cracked pots....perhaps even crackpots! But the Spirit can use even our failings to grace the Father’s table in ways we could never have imagined. Do not be afraid of your flaws, but acknowledge them humbly and you too can bring something beautiful to the Father’s house, “For when I am weak, then I am strong”. (2 Cor. 12:10).

If we are open and generous the Holy Spirit can work wonders through us, not in spectacular or sensational ways, but in the ordinary events of daily life.

## 95 “DO NOT BE AFRAID”

Scripture commentators tell us that the words “Do not be afraid” appear 366 times in various forms throughout the Bible, once for every day of the year! They are uttered especially at times of great anxiety and fear, as at the Annunciation to Mary and Joseph, or the first appearance of Jesus to his terrified disciples after his resurrection, when he greeted them, “Peace be with you”. Our New Testament faith is built on love and trust, where fear should have no place..

For most people the greatest fear in life is dying. It seems to make our existence meaningless, as we leave behind all that we have lived and struggled for; our possessions, status and especially those people who are nearest and dearest to us. Besides, modern society with its worship of youth, beauty, health, wealth and pleasure would like to pretend that death can be avoided, postponed or forgotten. Yet for each one of us it is the only absolute certainty. Of more than seven billion people living today not even one will escape it. The month of November each year reminds us that “we have here no lasting city” (Heb. 13:14). On the feasts of All Saints and All Souls we remember those who have travelled and completed the journey of life before us. The end of the month marks the passing of another liturgical year and heralds the approaching end of another calendar year. Life moves on and time waits for no one.

For most  
people the  
greatest fear in  
life is dying.

Faith in the resurrection should give Christians hope and trust to approach death calmly and peacefully. Unfortunately religion has sometimes had the opposite effect. A negative spirituality tended to undervalue our human life, to over-emphasise our sinfulness and unworthiness, seeing us as “poor banished children of Eve”, condemned to live our life “mourning and weeping in this valley of tears”. It left many burdened with a deep sense of

guilt, false images of a punishing God and fear of eternal damnation. But the truth is we are a redeemed people, redeemed by the blood of Christ "who died for us while we were still sinners"(Rom.5:6). People who have stood on the borders of death, who have gone through 'near death' experiences almost all speak of a great sense of peace and of being in the presence of a loving spirit, a personal being towards whom they feel an irresistible attraction; a God of love, mercy and forgiveness.

So how should we approach death? We must learn to live in peace with its certainty, as a perfectly natural part of life. When asked if she feared death, a woman on her deathbed answered, "I am a Christian. I am not afraid of death but I am afraid of dying", afraid of the pain, sorrow and aloneness that accompany death. Probably most of us would share her feelings. Another person has said "There's no such thing as death. You just graduate from one stage to another, like the foetus in the womb being born into its own life" The Indian poet, Tagore described it as "extinguishing the lamp because a new dawn has come". And the saintly English king, Edward the Confessor, told grieving friends around his deathbed, "Do not weep! I am leaving the land of the dying to enter the land of the living". Our final liturgy, the Requiem Mass, assures us, "Life is changed, not ended".

The English Catholic journalist and religious broadcaster, John F.X. Harriott told of a friend of his, an old French priest, lying on his deathbed, with a few seminarians standing nearby in prayer, looking suitably solemn and sad. The old man opened one eye and said in a weak voice, "Open the drawer at the bottom of the cupboard". One of them did so and found a bottle of champagne and some glasses. "Fill up your glasses", the old man said.

## 95 "DO NOT BE AFRAID"

The seminarians did as they were told and stood there, unsure what to do next. Then the old man slowly opened the other eye and said rather gruffly, "What about me?", so they filled a glass for him. Looking at them with a smile on his face he then said, "I thank God I've lived a very happy life. I'd like you now to drink with me a toast to a happy death". They drank a toast together and five minutes later he died....a man at peace with God, at peace with himself, at peace with life and at peace with death; in harmony with the Lord's assuring words, "Do not be afraid".



## 96 LIFE IS CHANGED, NOT ENDED

In northern climates the month of November in many ways reminds us of death. Nature seems to die as the warmth, colour and growth of summer give way to the cold, dark, barrenness of winter. Another calendar year nears its end, and the Church's liturgical year also draws to a close. Meanwhile the feasts of All Saints and All Souls remind us of the passing of our own lives and what lies beyond. Death is a taboo subject in many cultures and modern society with its worship of youth, health and beauty would like to forget that it exists. Yet death for each of us is the only absolute certainty in life. Of the nearly seven billion (7,000,000,000) people living today, not even one will escape it! But for all its inevitability death remains a mystery, and for many a source of deep anxiety and fear.

Among Christians, belief in the resurrection should give us hope and trust to approach death calmly, even joyously. The saintly King Edward the Confessor told those grieving around his deathbed, "Do not cry. I am leaving the land of the dying to enter the land of the living". And the Indian poet Rabindrath Tagore wrote "Death is not putting out the light; it is only putting out the lamp because a bright new day has dawned". The dying are not leaving us; they are merely moving on; going ahead of us where we too must surely follow. Perhaps we can come to understand death best, not through lofty theological reasoning but by reflecting on various analogies or images which speak to our imagination more than our heads.

Some have compared death to birth. A story tells of twin boys growing in the womb. As their simple brains develop they become conscious of their surroundings and of each other. As weeks and months pass they become aware of their growth and sense that birth is coming near. One faced this with great fear, seeing it as the end of life in the secure warmth of the womb. He argued that shedding the life-chord which joined them to the

## 96 LIFE IS CHANGED, NOT ENDED

mother would be the end of everything. Besides no one had ever re-entered the womb. But the other waited in hope, placing his trust totally in the love of the mother. And then as they were born into the light, coughing and gasping in the dry air, they opened their eyes, to find themselves cradled in the loving secure embrace of the mother, on whom they were gazing for the first time! Certain at last that there really is life after birth!

In another story, people stand on the harbour waving a tearful farewell to their loved ones, sadly sailing away from home on a great ocean liner. As it sails into the distance the ship gradually grows smaller, until at last it is only a speck on the horizon. Then someone exclaims, "There! It's gone". But gone where? Gone only from our sight, but still as large and as beautiful as before. And at that moment other voices on the opposite shore are crying out, "There! It's coming". And as the great ship approaches they prepare with joy to embrace the loved ones from whom they have been parted for too long. And that is dying!

A further story tells how slimy grubs living in the dark cold depths of a lily-pond wondered what had happened to their friends who had previously climbed up the stalks towards the light, for none had come back. They promised that the next one to go up would return to tell the others. Soon another grub did feel nature's inexorable urge to climb. When he reached the surface he was amazed at the brightness and warmth there, but even more so at what was happening to himself! He began to change shape, to take on a different form, and to emerge as a beautiful dragon-fly with wings of dazzling colours. As he flew about he could faintly see the other crawling grubs far below, but there was no way he could return, and even if he could they would not recognise such a beautiful creature as one of them. And that again is dying!

## 96 LIFE IS CHANGED, NOT ENDED

The foetuses were reluctant to be born. The passengers were sad to leave home. The grubs were afraid of what lay above, but it is all part of nature, of God's design that we move on. In death we naturally grieve and mourn, not for the loved ones who have gone home before us, but for ourselves who are left behind. The poet Edgar E. Guest speaks thus for the deceased; "Miss me a little but not too long, and not with your head bowed low. Remember the love that we once shared. Miss me but let me go".

**"Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended".**  
(Preface for the Dead)



Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

— JOHN 5:24 KJV

## 97 OUR HEAVENLY HOME

The catechist was teaching the children about heaven and decided to test their understanding. "If I give all my money to charity and take care of my sick neighbour every day, would I go to heaven?" she asked. "No" the children chorused. Surprised, she tried again. "If I live a life of love and pray often would I go to heaven?" Again the answer was "No". Getting worried, she continued, "Well then, how can I get to heaven?" It was six-year-old Angela who spoke up, "Miss, you gotta be dead first!"

In November thoughts of death and what lies beyond are prominent in our liturgy. We all want to go to heaven – but not just yet! There are so many people and things to leave behind and besides, despite the holy pictures and stories, we are not sure what heaven is like. Will those who die as children remain so forever? Will my bald head or wrinkled face be with me for all eternity? Will my darkest secrets become open knowledge? Will I be united with my loved ones again? What indeed will heaven be like?

When the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus by supposing a woman had seven husbands, each one dying in turn, and asked him whose wife would she be in heaven, he told them their question was irrelevant. Heaven will be different, people will be different – beyond time, beyond anything we can experience or imagine in this life.

Prophets, artists and poets have struggled, using various images, to give us some idea of what heaven is like. Isaiah refers to "a feast of rich food", an image that might be specially attractive in Sarawak where people love to gather for a good 'makan'! Artists have painted heavenly scenes of winged angels playing harps, because good music brings great joy. Jesus speaks of a house with many rooms while others refer to a place of eternal rest and peace. We use such human images to try to describe a reality that is beyond

our understanding or experience. A crawling caterpillar cannot foresee that it will one day fly in the air as a beautifully coloured butterfly. A blind person cannot appreciate the beauty of a rose or orchid despite our efforts to describe them. Even the best of images are incomplete and imperfect, like seeing people as blurred shadows through an opaque or frosted glass window.

Heaven is the completion, the fulfilment of all the longings, dreams and hopes of the human heart

What we do know is that heaven is not a place. It is not like being in Singapore or London, but more like being in love; a continuation and perfection of the loving relationships we have built with God and each other in this life. Pope John Paul II said it is not “a place among the clouds” but “a state of being with God”. St Paul assures us, “Eye has not seen nor ear heard what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:3); something totally beyond our human imagining.

Heaven is the completion, the fulfilment of all the longings, dreams and hopes of the human heart; of that aching for something more, something beyond, which is never fully satisfied even when we do experience some foretaste of the joys of heaven here on earth. It is the completion of all that we are called to be as human beings and is best summed up by St. Augustine who, after his vain search for happiness in learning and pleasure, cried out “You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you”.

## 98 WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

In the dark bottom of an old pond, there lived a colony of worms who could never understand why none of their friends ever came back, after crawling up the stalks of the lilies, to the surface of the water. They promised each other that the next one who was called to the upward journey would return and tell them her story.

Soon one of them felt an urgent impulse to see the surface. On reaching the top, she rested on a lily leaf, but then, to her amazement, she went through a glorious transformation into a beautiful dragon fly, with bright, shining wings. She tried desperately to keep her promise. Flying back and forth over the pond, she could see her friends below but they couldn't see her. Then she realised that even if they could see her, they would not recognise such a radiant creature as one of their own. So she flew away in the bright sunshine, surrounded by the countless others who had been transformed before her.

November is a month for memories and reflections. On All Saints Day, we remember the countless ordinary men and women who have gone before us, who lived good Christian lives, even in the simplest ways. All Souls is a time to pray for the dead who may still be undergoing a process of transformation. It is a month which confronts us with the reality and inevitability of death.

In a recent opinion poll in Britain, 70 percent said they believed in an after life. This is a surprising figure, considering that Church membership and practice is at an all time low. It reflects the deep yearning of the human heart for something more than what this life, even at its best, can offer. What do we Christians expect heaven to be like?

## 98 WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Jesus frequently spoke of heaven but never tried to describe it. St Paul tells us that the wonders of heaven are really beyond our human understanding. "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it dawned on the human mind what God has prepared for those who love him" (1Cor 2:9). Like the dragon fly story, no one has come back to tell us their story, and even if they did we would not understand.

The Bible and tradition often speak of the next life in terms of human and material images - clouds, thrones, mansions, trumpets, flames, dungeons. These are not, of course, to be understood literally. Pope John Paul has said that heaven is "neither an abstraction nor a physical place among the clouds, but a state of being with God," which still doesn't tell us much about heaven!

Perhaps it is enough to know that heaven is about relationships, not places; that in the fullness of union with God and with each other, all the longings and yearnings of the human heart will at last be fully satisfied. Mitch Alborn, in his recent best selling novel, *The five people you meet in heaven*, writes that heaven is "for understanding your life on earth". All the puzzles, hurts and injustices which angered and confused us in life, suddenly make sense; the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle finally fall into place, giving us the peace and fulfilment we have always longed for.

Death is not extinguishing the light,  
But putting out the lamp  
Because dawn has come  
(R Tagore)

## 99 HEAVEN BEGINS ON EARTH

We all hope to go to heaven, but not just yet. In fact, we do everything possible to delay our arrival! And in spite of all the holy pictures and blissful images of heaven, most of us are rather confused about what to expect.

Will babies who died still be babies in heaven, and will those who died in old age always be old? Will our wounds be healed, our missing hair restored? Will we get bored after some time? What will we do all day? In other words, what is heaven really like?

There have always been people, visionaries, mediums and over-confident Christians, who not only believed they could describe heaven, but also tell us who can get there ... only Christians of course, or perhaps only Catholics! But Jesus dispels such certainties. The Sadducees tried to trap him with the example of a woman who had married seven husbands each of whom had died. They asked him whose wife she would be in heaven. He answered that she would not be anyone's wife. Their question was irrelevant because heaven is totally different from what we know. It is beyond our questions, beyond our imagining.

People living long ago could not have envisaged our world of television and the internet. A crawling caterpillar cannot imagine that it will soon fly as a beautifully coloured butterfly. Jesus is telling us that heaven far exceeds scriptural images or the creations of artists, musicians and poets. It is more than winged angels and harps; more than a place of mansions, of feasting or of cool waters. It is far beyond anything we know or need to know... "No eye has seen nor ear heard, nor has it even entered into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1Cor.2:9). What we need is not answers but rather the deep faith and trust to live with mystery.

## 99 HEAVEN BEGINS ON EARTH

There are however important truths to remember about heaven. Firstly it is not something far removed from this world in which we live, “mourning and weeping in this valley of tears”; not a place for which we can earn or buy a spiritual admission ticket. It is a continuation of the here and now; a completion and bringing to fulfilment of the powerful evolution of God’s creation and of all that is best in the longings, hopes and strivings of the human heart. All of this yearning, this forward movement would be meaningless if it did not lead to ultimate crowning glory in God himself. As St. Augustine found, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you”.

Moreover, God does not “send” us to heaven (or to hell). He merely honours, as he always does, the free choices we make every day, the bricks with which we build our heaven. At the Ascension two angels appeared and asked the apostles, “Why are you looking up at the sky?” Jesus had told them that from now on they would find him, not in the sky, but in the broken, the outcast and the marginalized. If they recognised and served him there, heaven would be theirs... “Come and possess the Kingdom prepared for you”. Simple, but not so easy!

The following verse sums up the message:

*“Oh to be with the saints above,  
That would be perfect glory.  
But Lord, to live with the saints below;  
Now that is a different story.”*

## 100 SAINTS WITHOUT HALOS

A religious woman was greatly upset because she had lost the sense of God in her life. "If only I could feel his presence; know that he has touched me", she sighed. Her friend assured her "Pray and God will surely touch you. He will lay his hand upon you". The woman closed her eyes and prayed earnestly and suddenly felt the hand of God on her shoulder. "He touched me", she cried in an ecstasy of joy. Then suddenly she paused and said, "But you know, it felt just like your hand!" Her friend smiled. "Of course it did. It was my hand", she said. "Did you expect God to extend a long arm all the way from heaven to touch you? He just took the hand that was nearest and used that".

November brings our liturgical year to a close. Here in northern climates this coincides with the end of autumn and the beginning of winter, when trees shed their leaves, flowers wilt, the hours of darkness increase and nature seems to die. In the liturgy we focus on 'the last things'...on death, judgement and what lies beyond, and so we begin the month with the feasts of All Saints on 1st and All Souls on 2nd. Personally my favourite saint's feast is All Saints, which has been celebrated in the Church from early times. It is the day on which we remember, honour and commit ourselves to follow as best we can that "huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language" (Rev.7:9), already enjoying the fullness of salvation.

Everyone in heaven is already a saint. In the early Church saints were selected by popular choice, with the local bishop's approval. Later the Church exercised greater control over the process, but the first papal canonisation took place only in 993. Our present complex, lengthy and expensive process of canonisation evolved over the past 500 years. All Saints feast celebrates the lives of *all the* saints, but especially those countless 'unlisted' ones....ordinary men and women, farmers and labourers, housewives and mothers, nurses and teachers etc. who lived by Christian values, but are greatly under-represented in the Church's official canon (list) of saints. They include people we

# 100 SAINTS WITHOUT HALOS

have known and whose example has encouraged, inspired and challenged us to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. So far we have no canonised Sarawak saint but surely we have many 'unlisted' ones buried in our cemeteries, some of whom I fondly and gratefully remember. November 1st is the feast of all those saints without halos!

All Saints feast reminds us that sainthood is not beyond our reach if we too live by the gospel and allow God to use us by reaching out to people in need.

Despite our failings, all of us are called to be saints, living examples of what Christ calls us to be. St. Paul commonly referred to the early Christians as 'saints' and Jesus assures us that anyone who feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty and visits the lonely will be rewarded with eternal happiness (Mt.25:31-46), thus joining the ranks of the saints. All Saints feast reminds us that sainthood is not beyond our reach if we too live by the gospel

and allow God to use us by reaching out to people in need, like the friend in our opening story, through whom God touched and comforted a troubled soul. There are of course no perfect or 'instant' saints, for achieving holiness has always been a gradual process of growth through the challenges and struggles of daily living.

As Catholics, we believe that the saints intercede for us in our needs. But far more important, they serve as models of Christian living, inspiring and encouraging us on our journey. This is particularly true of our 'unlisted' saints, for often the great canonised saints may seem too high, too far beyond the reach of our ordinary struggling lives. We feel more at home with those everyday saints whom we remember on 1st November, and hopefully strive to follow. In our present age of hero worship, these are our real Christian celebrities.

## 101 ALL SAINTS

Many of us remember TV pictures of the brutal war between Hutu and Tutsi tribes in Rwanda in the mid-1990's; a war in which thousands were killed and orphaned. Margarita, a Tutsi, saw her father, mother, husband and children being hacked to death by a killer-gang, led by a neighbour whom she had known and trusted. She was left with nothing but the clothes she wore, depending for survival on relief agency help.

When the slaughter ended, Margarita realised that more hatred and revenge would bring more suffering. The only hope for the future lay in forgiveness and reconciliation, however difficult. She would begin with herself. Taking the few dollars she had, she bought food and clothing to take to the prison, to the man who had led the attack on her family. She then began to organise other survivors from both tribes gathering them in groups to talk, pray and work together. Promoting reconciliation was dangerous, as killer-gangs were still at large, but for Margarita there was no other choice. "The cost does not matter," she said.

Margarita's behaviour was an example of heroic holiness. As we celebrated the feast of All Saints on 1 November, I was deeply conscious of the thousands of ordinary people like Margarita, who have led lives of extraordinary Christian virtue, often through enormous suffering and sacrifice. They may never be canonised, but they are the salt of the earth whose example encourages and inspires us as we too struggle to live by Gospel values.

St Paul referred to the early Christians as saints and for many centuries, saints were chosen by popular opinion at a local level. Later, because of various abuses and superstitions, the Church declared that no one should be publicly venerated as a saint without approval from Rome.

Today, the process which leads to canonisation is a long and expensive one, requiring much organisation. The vast majority of canonised saints are in fact popes, bishops, priests and religious...great saints no doubt; but often far removed from ordinary people's lives. Unfortunately the laity, who make up 99% of the Church, are poorly represented in the official list of saints, especially married people. Yet the laity greatly need their own spiritual role models; saints whose spirituality was that of the family, the home and the workplace, not just of monastic life or the clerical state. In a small way the feast of All Saints makes up for this deficiency by reminding us of the countless holy men and women from all walks of life, who have gone before us; ordinary people like you and me who follow in their footsteps.

The feast of All Saints is an occasion to recognise and celebrate this goodness in the lives of those who have gone before us

Each week I visit Pat who has three mentally retarded sons in their twenties and whose wife is at an advanced stage of multiple-sclerosis, totally dependent on others. There, where every day is a miracle of hope and courage, I experience, more than in religious life, the real meaning of Christian love, commitment and sacrifice, both within the family and in the wonderful support of relatives and neighbours.

Pat who was my brother, passed away in 2012.

There is in our world an ocean of goodness and generosity, which the media mostly disregard in favour of crime and evil. The feast of All Saints is an occasion to recognise and celebrate this goodness in the lives of those who have gone before us, in our own lives and in the lives of ordinary people around us. "All you unknown saints, pray for us".

## 102 EVERYDAY SAINTS

St Anthony of Egypt, also called Anthony of the Desert, is generally regarded as the father of Christian monasticism. With the conversion of the Roman Emperor, Constantine, in the year 312, the early centuries of Christian persecution ended. Instead, being a Christian now brought status and advantages, and thousands flocked to join the Church, which enjoyed the favour of the authorities. Not surprisingly, the fervour and commitment of the earlier Christians soon became diluted, causing young Anthony and many followers to withdraw into the desert, to devote themselves to a life of austerity, penance and prayer, following the inspiration of their crucified Saviour.

At first they lived as individual hermits, but later developed into monastic communities. Anthony died peacefully at the age of one hundred and five, in a cave near the Red Sea, in the year 356. After his death, monastic communities multiplied and monasticism in general came to play a fundamental role in the extraordinary growth of the Church down to the Middle Ages.

According to an ancient legend, Jesus appeared to Anthony at one stage and asked him to leave his cave for a few days, and go into the nearest village. There he was told to find the home of the local baker and ask to stay with him for some time. Anthony was greatly puzzled by this command but set out the next morning. After many hours walking he reached the village, found the baker's house and asked if he could stay.

The baker noticed how exhausted and hungry his visitor looked and immediately invited him in. "You need something to eat and a place to rest", he said, smiling. He then called his wife and together, they prepared a good meal for the hermit and offered him a comfortable bed to sleep in. Anthony stayed for three days, asking the baker many questions about his way of life and observing how he and his wife went about their daily work. They talked a lot and became good friends.

On the long walk back to his cave Anthony wondered again why Jesus had sent him on this strange journey. When he reached the cave and settled down, Jesus appeared again and asked, "Well, what was the baker like?"

The hermit answered, "He is indeed a simple man; a happy man who likes to laugh and tell jokes. He has a wife who is expecting a baby, and they seem to love each other very much. They have a simple house; a comfortable home. Each morning several poor people come to the door and the baker always has some fresh bread to give them, free of charge. He also quietly gives money to others who need it. Both he and his wife believe very strongly in you, and pray to you every morning and evening. They have many friends and seem to be very happy."

Jesus listened very carefully and then said, "You are a great saint Anthony, and the baker and his wife are great saints too."

The message of the legend is very clear: there are many roads to sainthood. If you are Anthony, you don't need to become a baker, and if you are a baker you don't need to become a hermit. For holiness consists, not just in achieving extraordinary goals, but in doing the ordinary things of daily life extraordinarily well.

St Anthony's feast day is celebrated each year on 17 January. That of the baker and his wife is celebrated on All Saints day, together with many thousands of other unknown family saints. The official Church calendar of saints is short on bakers, and more surprisingly, on housewives and mothers, who make up nearly 50% of the human race.. As we remember our own and the many millions of other mothers, we realize how lopsided and out of touch with reality our calendar is.

## 103 OUR FAITHFUL DEPARTED

John had undergone a serious stomach operation and was greatly relieved to be safely home again. He was overjoyed when his friends invited him out for a welcome-home dinner. The food was delicious but John could only nibble at some of the dishes, while his friends relished everything. He still suffered some pain and was conscious of how much pleasure and enjoyment he was missing. Yet he enjoyed the reunion and looked forward to the day when he would fully enjoy a meal again. John's experience of happiness and relief, mixed with pain and loss, could perhaps be compared to Purgatory.

The scriptures describe heaven as "a banquet of rich food and wines", as "a wedding feast" to which all are invited. As the liturgical year draws to an end we Catholics turn our thoughts to the next life. On the feast of All Saints we celebrate the countless unknown men and women from all walks of life who already enjoy the heavenly banquet. On All Souls we remember 'the souls in purgatory', and wonder if they are excluded from the banquet.

Though the Church from early times prayed for the dead, it was not until the 12th century that belief in purgatory as a place of punishment became common, a place where the just are cut off from the presence of God until they have fully atoned for their sins. This harsh picture was based on a very legalistic understanding of sin and punishment. It differed from St Augustine's belief that all the just enter immediately into heaven, and seemed to contradict the image of God revealed to us in the person of Jesus, who was accused of being a friend of sinners and of feasting with them.

Vatican II moved away from this juridical, courthouse image of sin and punishment to one that was more personal and relational, where purgatory was understood, not as a place but as a painful process of spiritual maturing and growth into a fuller relationship with God.

## 103 OUR FAITHFUL DEPARTED

In fact our whole human journey is an ongoing, evolving process of growth and development. It starts in the mind of God ("Before I formed you in the womb I knew you..."), and continues as he calls us into human existence in the womb, into our own individual personhood at birth, into Christian belonging at baptism and, beyond death, into full and final union with himself.

Purgatory is not exclusion;  
it is not punishment imposed on us. Not a place but a painful process of spiritual maturing and growth into a fuller relationship with God.

The stages of this journey are inter-related and its passages often painful. An underdeveloped foetus becomes a weak baby; a poorly nourished child a sickly adult. Beyond death, the scars of sin and of human failings leave us inadequate and incomplete in the presence of God. Purgatory is not exclusion; it is not punishment imposed on us. Its pain is the natural consequence of sin; the pain of purification and healing, of letting go of self, of being aware that we are so much less than what God wanted us to be.

Our journey of healing and recuperation takes place in the context of the Christian community, of the communion of saints. Our healing is hastened by the support of family and friends. Let us therefore continue to pray for our loved ones who have gone before us and who await our coming. May they rest in peace.

## 104 PURGATORY: A PROCESS OF HEALING

In November, as we approach the end of another Church year and another calendar year, our thoughts also turn to the end of human life and to what lies beyond. Thus we celebrate the feasts of All Saints and All Souls on the first two days of the month. Death is inevitable for each of us; as natural a part of life as birth is. The big question is what lies beyond? In catechism we were taught that the four 'last things' were death, judgement, heaven and hell. From the beginning, the Church prayed for the dead, but only from the 12th century did belief in Purgatory as a place of punishment for sin become common; a place where the just were cut off from the presence of God until they had fully atoned for their sins. This harsh picture was based on a very legalistic understanding of sin and punishment. It seemed to contradict the image of God revealed to us in the person of Jesus, the "friend of sinners".

Vatican 2 moved away from this juridical, courthouse image of sin and punishment to one that was more relational. Purgatory was understood, not as a place, but as a painful process of spiritual maturing and growth into a fuller relationship with God. The scriptures refer to the next life in various images to help our human minds to understand. Thus heaven is described as "a banquet of rich food and fine wines". Hell is pictured as a dungeon of "eternal flames". Purgatory came to be seen as a place of purification by fire until we are fit to enter the full joy of heaven. But Purgatory, like heaven and hell is not a place, but a state of being. Beyond the grave there is no place and no time...and no fire. These are earthly, material ways of thinking from which death rescues us and brings us into the presence of the eternal, timeless God.

A friend of mine, Joe, who is a keen golf player, fractured his leg in an accident last year. The leg was set in plaster and Joe longed for the day when the plaster would be taken off and he could join his pals on the golf course again. You can imagine his joy when that day finally arrived and his huge disappointment when it was discovered that the muscles of the leg had weakened. He would have to wait patiently until it recovered strength again

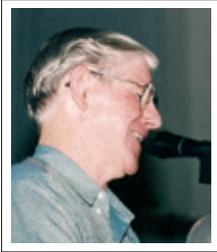
## 104 PURGATORY: A PROCESS OF HEALING

before he could exchange his crutches for his golf clubs. Sin is like a tight plaster encasing our souls. Even when it is removed by repentance, the soul is still weakened by the worldly attachments in our hearts, by our greed and selfishness and by our holding on to old hurts. Purgatory is like Joe's experience of healing. It is a painful process of recuperation which we must go through before we are able to enjoy the fullness of union with God. The deeper our worldly attachments the more intense this purifying experience will be. The less resistance to God there is in our soul at death, the less painful will be our convalescence.

The Church has always taught that the souls in Purgatory can be helped by the prayers and good works of the Christian community. The scriptural basis for this teaching is to be found mainly in the Second Book of Maccabees which records that Judas Maccabeus "made atonement for the dead so that they might be delivered from their sin" (12:46). The Protestant Bible does not include this book, which explains why Protestants in general do not follow this age-old Catholic tradition of praying for the dead.. The most efficacious prayer of all is the holy sacrifice of the Mass. All her life St. Monica prayed for her son Augustine, who was leading a sinful life. Then at last, to her great delight, he was converted, became a priest and eventually a great saint. When they were making their way back to her home in North Africa, Monica became seriously ill. As she lay dying in her son's arms she said, "Augustine, this only I ask of you, that you should remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be."

Speaking of Purgatory in 1999, Pope John Paul 2 stressed that those who live in this state of purification are not separated from God but are immersed in the love of Christ. Neither are they separated from the saints in heaven or from us still journeying on earth, for all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ.

May the souls of all our faithful departed, rest in eternal peace.



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## THE BIOGRAPHY OF

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# Br. Columba Gleeson

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Br. Columba is a De La Salle Brother who taught in Sacred Heart School, Sibuluan from 1957 to 1962, and from 1966 to 1987 at St Joseph's Secondary School, Kuching, where he was Principal from 1970 to 1978.

On his retirement from school he was employed in pastoral work in the Archdiocese of Kuching, particularly in adult faith formation and catechetical programmes, work which he found deeply fulfilling. He was involved in founding Today's Catholic newspaper in 1988, was its editor until 1997 and contributed the Signpost series of articles monthly until 2012.

In 1997 Br. Columba returned to Ireland for family reasons. He continued working for the De La Salle Brothers in Castletown and Belfast, until illness caused him to retire in 2012. He now lives at the Brothers' retirement community in Castletown.

*Taking over St. Joseph's school from Br. Columba was not an easy task. He was a strict disciplinarian and cultivate pride and love for the school. He was well liked and deeply respected by the staff and students.*

- Gerald Lee, Director, St. Joseph's Private School -



*I remember Br. Columba's "on the spot discipline." His cane would suddenly appear, hidden from inside his long sleeve ..... fortunately, I was never at the receiving end of this epic move!*

- Dr Wong Poo Sing, Consultant Cardiothoracic Surgeon, Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, Singapore -

*After Br. Columba returned to Ireland, he continued to support the Today's Catholic in the form of the monthly 'Signpost' articles. Thank you Brother for being with us in person, in text, and in spirit. No words are adequate. This book is a fitting tribute to a living legend.*

- Stella Chin, Editor of Today's Catholic -

