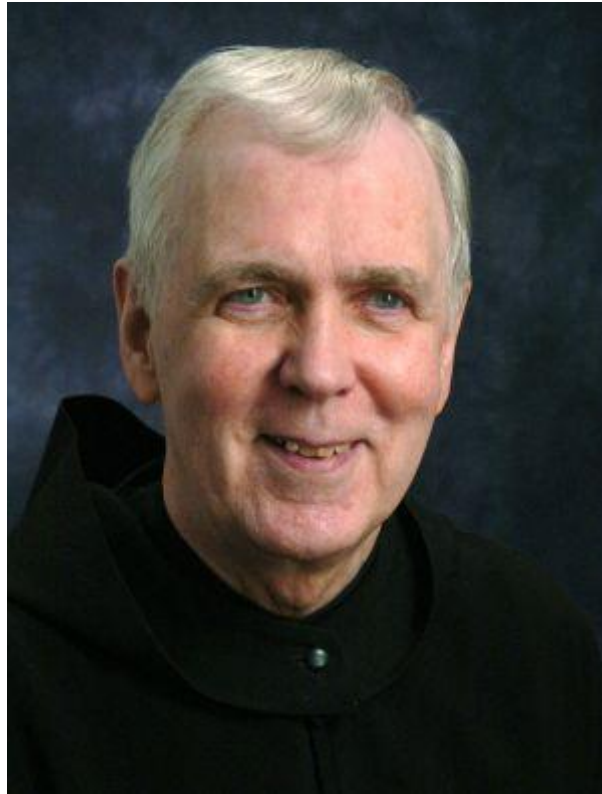


What Do We See When We See?

A Kevin Seasoltz Omnibus



Introduction

Robert Kevin Seasoltz was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania on December 29, 1930. Educated as a diocesan priest in the Johnstown diocese, he pursued a doctorate in canon law at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, focusing on liturgical law. This was the starting point for his falling in love with all things related to liturgy: texts, ritual, and liturgical spaces. In 1960 he professed vows at Saint Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, an English Benedictine monastery and in the spring of 1988 he transferred his monastic stability to Saint John's Abbey.

Beginning in 1976, Father Kevin taught for years in the summer program at the School of Theology and Seminary in Collegetown, and after his transfer to Saint John's Abbey, he taught courses that focused largely on sacramental and liturgical theology. As importantly, he became editor of *Worship* magazine in 1987, which furthered his own scholarship and sharpened his awareness of trends in liturgical thinking.

One of Father Kevin’s great gifts, among many, was his ability to read, study, and synthesize ideas and insights from across a wide range of fields: liturgical studies, canon law, history, anthropology, art, architecture, and literature. In his teaching, conferences, books, articles, and homilies, he would regularly engage with material across that intellectual horizon. Father Kevin was unusually attuned to beauty in all its forms, especially the visual. He was also a voracious reader of works of fiction. In these reflections, Father Kevin uses passages and characters from these works as points of access into the meaning of major themes in the Scriptures. They are ways to get at the “affective relevance” of the biblical text.

As we remember the fourth anniversary of Father Kevin’s birth into eternal life, we offer these reflections to the larger public and hope that they give as much joy to you as they have to us.

Abbot John Klassen, OSB

April 27, 2017

Editor’s Preface

This document is mainly made up of excerpts from the unpublished papers of Father Kevin Seasoltz. The excerpts were chosen to demonstrate the wide variety of literary and artistic sources that Father Kevin drew on to show how the Word of God—as Scripture and as the Word Incarnate—speaks to the human condition.

Following this preface, there is an index of topics that Father Kevin addressed. By doing a search (include the hyphen in front of the topic you are searching), you will be taken to the excerpt(s) in which the topic appears.

At the very end of the document there is another index with the names of all the authors Father Kevin cited. You can also use these names to search for the corresponding citation.

As Abbot John notes in his introduction, in addition to his teaching, Father Kevin was also an accomplished and respected author. The titles of the books he wrote during the decade before his death at the age of 82 on April 27, 2013, reveal the breadth of his theological scholarship: *A Sense of the Sacred: Theological Foundations of Christian Architecture and Art* (Continuum, 2005); *God’s Gift Giving: In Christ and through the Spirit* (Continuum, 2007); *A Virtuous Church: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Liturgy for the 21st Century* (Orbis, 2012). In addition, he contributed chapters for books and numerous articles for scholarly and more popular journals. To *Worship* alone, he contributed 72 book reviews and 12 articles between the years 2000 and 2011.

Father Kevin was also a skilled homilist and popular speaker for clergy and religious. He gave hundreds of lectures at symposia, seminars, retreats, workshops, and conferences in the United States, Canada, and the British Isles. His presentations were always marked by impeccable preparation, careful reasoning, and polished delivery. One of the most noticeable features of his preaching and spiritual conferences was the way he connected Christian spirituality and practice with literature, film, music, and the visual arts.

Father Kevin was diagnosed with cancer early in 2013. The disease progressed very rapidly, and the main effect of the intensive chemotherapy he underwent was to drain him, emotionally and physically. Since there was so little time between the discovery of his cancer and his death a few months later, and since his energy was so depleted, he was unable to organize his papers or to draw up a complete bibliography of his published works. Apart from the texts of homilies, there is almost no indication in the three boxes of papers he left behind if they were intended as conferences or articles, and, if the latter, if they were published. Usually there is simply a title, and that is included with the excerpts from these papers that are included in this omnibus.

In some cases, Father Kevin provides bibliographical information for his citations, and this information is provided in footnotes. When he does not, the source, if it could be found, is also given in a footnote.

William Skudlarek, OSB

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Homily for Friday of the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time

Several years ago, Liturgical Training Publications produced a video on the communion rite at Sunday Mass. The producers interviewed a middle-aged truck driver by the name of Sam. They asked him, “At Sunday Mass what gets changed?”

Sam looked back at them as if to say the question was too easy.

“What gets changed? Sam! Sam gets changed.”

-Death

Homily for Friday of the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time

Alexander the Great once came upon Diogenes, the philosopher, looking intently at a heap of bones. Alexander asked him, "What are you looking for?" Diogenes answered, "Something I cannot find." "And what is that?" asked Alexander. Diogenes replied, "The difference between your father's bones and those of his slaves."

Death indeed is the great equalizer. And as Ezekiel reminds us, it is only the Spirit of the living God who can make those bones rise again.

-Indwelling –God -Trouble

Homily for Thursday in the Twenty-Fifth Week of Ordinary Time

The Lord Jesus has sent his Holy Spirit upon all of us, making us, as Paul insists, temples of God's presence and vital members of the Body of Christ.

In her delightful novel, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker has Shug make that clear assertion.

“Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you're not looking, or don't know what you're looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord.”¹

¹ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 177.

-Environment -Ecology

“Some Themes in Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century”

As the century comes to an end, connectedness dominates our thinking in another way as well, as we recognize it extending beyond us humans to the planet. Where human beings once exploited nature thoughtlessly or in the belief that no great harm could be done to the environment, the twentieth century is leaving us with a transformation of such unconsciousness. We now recognize we have an intimate connection with air, water, soil, fire, everything—a connection summed up in Celie’s last letter in *The Color Purple*: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.”²

² *The Color Purple*, 242.

-Miracles

Homily for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A long time ago, a traveler journeyed all over the world searching for God. He came to one village that was known to be a special place of peace and tranquility. After a while, the traveler said to the elder of the place, “I really like it here and I’d like to stay. But before I make up my mind, I need to know: Does your God work miracles?”

The elder replied, “Well, it all depends what you think is a miracle. There are those who say that a miracle is when God does the will of the people; but we say here that a miracle is when people do the will of God.”

-Forgiveness –Judas –Peter’s denial –Sorrowful Mother

Homily for the Requiem Mass of Abbot Alan Rees, October 10, 2005

Many years ago, I was shown an icon of two women embracing. Before I realized they were women, I thought it might be the usual icon of Saint Peter and Saint Paul or Saint Peter and Saint Andrew. I asked the monk who they were, as the writing was in Slavonic or Rumanian. He said, ‘This is Our Lady, the Mother of Jesus, and that is the Mother of Judas. Both mothers lost their sons on Good Friday and both mothers were helpless as they stood by and watched their sons die. That day a sword pierced two hearts, not one. Our Lady is assuring Judas’ mother that Jesus died and rose again to save us all, even Judas.’”

-Revenge –Anger –Resentment -Forgiveness

*“Forgive as We Forgive”*³

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*,⁴ Tevye and his Jewish neighbors are forced out of their small village in Eastern Europe by the Russian police. One of the neighbors angrily shouts, “We should defend ourselves. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!”

The simple milkman Tevye, who has experienced so much sadness and pain in his life, replies sardonically, “Very good. And that way, the whole world will be blind and toothless.”

Tevye understands the destructive nature of vengeance; he instinctively knows that anger and resentment not only hurt the targets of our revenge but lessen our true humanity and can even destroy us.

³ Published in *Spirituality* (2002)

⁴ *Fiddler on the Roof*, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnich, and book by Joseph Stein. Opened on Broadway in 1964.

-Mercy -Sinner

Homily for Saturday in the Third Week of Lent

In the homily that he preached at the funeral Mass for Basil Hume, the Benedictine Archbishop of Westminster, Bishop John Crowley described the cardinal's reaction when he learned of his terminal cancer two months earlier. Cardinal Hume told him how at first he was tempted to think, "If only I could start all over again I would be a much better monk, much better abbot, and much better bishop. But then I thought how much better if I could come before God when I die not to say thanks to God that I was such a good monk, a good abbot, a good bishop, but rather to say, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner.' For if I come empty-handed, then I will be ready to receive God's gift: 'God be merciful to me a sinner.'"

-Hate

Homily for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the daily comic strip about the simple events in family life, *For Better or for Worse*, teenager Lizzy has had a fight with her friend Candace over a particular boy. The two are not speaking.

In the first panel, Lizzy and Candace walk right by each other. “There’s Candace,” Lizzy says to herself “I do not know her.”

Second panel, in the corridor, on the way to class: “She’s going down the hall one way, so I’ll go the other way. If she sits near me in class, I’ll move!”

Third panel, in class: “Here comes Candace. If she talks to me, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear her. If she looks at me, I’ll pretend I didn’t see her.”

In the final panel, with Candace sitting in the background, Lizzy puts her head in her hands and reflect, “Whew! I didn’t think hating somebody could be so much WORK!”

-Trust

“God’s Word and Human Words”

Several years before he died, Henri Nouwen befriended the Flying Rodleights, a family of trapeze artists who taught him much about God. Nouwen’s attraction to the trapeze performance had to do with the special relationship between the flyer and the catcher. The daredevil flyer swinging high above the crowd lets go of the trapeze and simply stretches out his arms and waits to feel the strong hands of the catcher pluck him out of the air.

“The flyer must never catch the catcher,” Rodleigh told Henri. “He must watch and wait in absolute trust.”⁵

We often try to catch God—by our pious practices, by our observance of rules, by our competencies, by our virtuous life. The gospel truth, however, is that we are simply invited to yield more and more into the loving hands of God, the Eternal Catcher. We are called to let go and let God!

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 66-67.

-Faith -Trust

“Woman, Great Is Your Faith”

In *The Heart of the World*, Thomas Keating, the Cistercian, who has done much popularize centering prayer, tells a parable about the leap of faith.

A neighbor’s house is burning down. His little boy is trapped on the third floor while all the rest of the family have escaped. The father cannot go back into the house to rescue the child, but as he is standing outside under the window, he sees his son at the window, silhouetted against the flames. He cries out, “Jump! I’ll catch you.”

The little boy’s eyes are filled with smoke, so he cannot see his father on the ground. He is afraid to jump, even though he desperately wants to be saved.

The father cries out again, “Jump! Don’t be afraid!”

The little boy cries out, “But Daddy, I can’t see you!”

The father calls back, “But I can see you! Jump!”

He climbs out onto the windowsill, jumps, and lands in his father’s outstretched arms.⁶

⁶ Thomas Keating, *The Heart of the World* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 40

-Suffering -Darkness

Homily for the Thirty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

For those who have patiently dwelt in suffering and known its darkness, their passage to new life is not unlike Dante's ascent as he trudged upward out of the black depths and emerged into what he saw as "the shining world." As he says, ". . . we came forth, and once again beheld the stars."

The challenge is set out in vivid contemporary images by Phoebe Hesketh. She writes:

I am tired of white beauty:

Daffodils in spring,
Sunset on a hill,
A young deer leaping over snow,
Blue winds across a blue sea,
Crystal as naked as the spirit.

Give me dark beauty:

A flower half dead,
A grey sky,
A dog that limps,
Broken glass and a cut finger,
A swamp where a tree looks like an amputee.
Darkness is a special kind of light,
Pain is ebony shining like a new sun.

Speaking through the prophet, God above all has the assuring promise: "After shadow and darkness, the eyes of the blind will see."

In a dark time, the eyes begin to see.

-Stories -Trinity

Homily for Trinity Sunday – Year B

There was once a young boy named Naftali, so the story goes, who loved more than anything to tell stories. One day a wise rabbi, himself a master storyteller, invited Naftali to become his apprentice. The rabbi told him, “We’ll be friends and we’ll tell each other many stories. What’s life, after all? The future isn’t here and you cannot foresee what it will bring. The present is only a moment; the past is one long story. Those who don’t tell stories and don’t hear stories live only for the moment, and that isn’t enough.”

We need to hear our own story, the one that makes us who we are, over and over again. “Since the Lord, your God, is a merciful God, he will not abandon and destroy you, nor forget the covenant which under oath he made with your ancestors” (Deut 4:31). That verse, coming just before our first reading this morning, sums up the most wondrous story of all and provides the theme for today's feast, the mystery of God's relationship to us and our life in God.

-Change -Conversion

“Pentecost: We Are Temples of the Holy Spirit”

Having Our Say is a delightful book that chronicles the lives of the two sisters, Sadie, who was 105, and Bessie, who was 103. Very independent women, the daughters of a slave who became the first African-American appointed bishop in the Episcopal Church in the United States, they wrote of their childhood in Raleigh, North Carolina. With humor and grace, they recount how Bessie struggled to overcome the obstacles because of her race to become a dentist, and how Sadie quietly integrated the New York school system as a high school teacher. Asked the secret of her long life, Bessie said, “You have to decide. Am I going to change the world, or am I going to change me? Or maybe change the world a little bit, just by changing me? It took me a hundred years to figure out I can’t change the world. I can only change Bessie. And honey, that ain’t easy either.”⁷

⁷ Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delaney, with Amy Hill Hearth, *Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters’ First 100 Years* (New York: Kodansha International, 1993), 127.

-Messiness of life

*“Serving the Word”*⁸

So often we go to great lengths to avoid life’s messiness as well as those who create the mess. Good shepherding means getting involved in the messiness of life, in the pain and the grit and the dirt of life. That’s precisely how new discoveries, new advances, are made.

In 1928, the British microbiologist Alexander Fleming noticed that some dust had accidentally contaminated one of his uncovered culture plates. On inspection, he observed that a certain mold in the culture destroyed the lethal bacteria. Fleming’s experiments eventually led to the isolation of the antibacterial agent and the development of modern antibiotics, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1945.

Some years later, Fleming was touring a new state-of-the-art research laboratory and the sterile, dust-free, air-conditioned environment in which the scientists carried out their experiments. His guide remarked, “What a pity you didn’t have a place like this in which to work, Dr. Fleming. Imagine what you could have discovered in such a place.” Dr. Fleming smiled and said quietly, “I certainly wouldn’t have discovered penicillin!”

⁸ Published in *Homily Service*, n.d., 68

-Eucharist

“Love is the Strangest Thing”

During the political upheavals in one of the Latin American countries in the last century, about 10,000 prisoners were detained by the country’s repressive and cruel regime. A group of the prisoners wanted to celebrate the Eucharist on Easter Sunday, but they had no bread, no wine, no bible, and no priest. One of the prisoners was for many years an altar server in his home parish. He had attended closely to what the priest did and said during Mass, so he said to the others, “We have no bread, no wine, no priest, but we will act as though we do.” He then led the others through the Eucharistic Prayer, surprised at how many of the words he remembered.

When he got to the words Jesus had proclaimed at the Last Supper, he simply turned to the prisoner next to him, held out his empty arms and embraced his comrade as he said, “This is my body given for you.” Then they went round in the circle, one by one, each man opening his arms, embracing the other, and repeating the words of Jesus, “This is my body given for you.”

-God as judge -Forgiveness

Homily for Friday of the Twenty-Eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Unfortunately this gospel pericope with its assertion that “there is nothing hidden that will not be made known” and that everything we have said “in the dark will be heard in the daylight” has inclined many people to think of God in fearsome terms—as the harsh judge who presides in heaven and records all that we have ever done or failed to do.

In a recent collection of reflections on Cardinal Basil Hume’s life and ministry as archbishop of Westminster there are some rather sad comments on his childhood upbringing by his French Catholic mother. Her God was indeed a stern God. She instilled in her young son an impression that God sees everything, especially all that he might do that is wrong. She told him that if he stole an apple from the pantry, God would surely see him and not approve.

Fortunately, while a student with the Benedictines at Ampleforth College, he radically changed his image of God to one who is indeed loving, compassionate and always forgiving. Reflecting on the apple stolen from the pantry, he came to believe that instead of disapproving, God would say to him, “Why don’t you take two!”

-Gratitude -Eucharist

Homily for Monday of the Twentieth Week of Ordinary Time

John Shea tells a charming story about a little boy who seemed to know the meaning of gratitude. He was leading his family in prayer before they enjoyed a festive Thanksgiving meal. First, he thanked the turkey, which was sure to taste very good, then his mother for cooking the turkey and his father for buying it, then the clerk in the market who sold it, and then the farmer who raised it.

At the end he asked, "Did I forget anyone?"

His older brother piped up: "You forgot God!"

Unflustered, the little boy said solemnly, "I was just getting to Him."

The Eucharist we celebrate so regularly is always gift, never earned, never deserved, never merited. It is given, not so we might somehow become pious; it is given so we might be transformed and learn to share what we have been given so others might enjoy God's plentiful bounty. It is given so we might become a little more like God - who always lives for giving. We come with open hands symbolic of open minds and hearts. They show that we are always beggars standing before the Lord with empty bowls, willing to share whatever our gracious God gives to us.

-Seeing -Looking

“Pray without Ceasing. Struggle for Justice”

Several years ago, Tracy Chevalier wrote a beautiful novel called *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. It is about a girl named Griet, who works initially as a cleaning girl for Jan Vermeer, the distinguished seventeenth-century Dutch painter, but later becomes an assistant in his studio.

One morning she is mixing paints for her master who invites her over to the studio window to watch the clouds disappearing behind the church tower. He asks Griet, “What color are those clouds?” “Why, white, sir,” she responds. Vermeer raises his eyebrows and asks, “Are they? Come, Griet, you can do better than that.”

Gradually, Griet comes to see that there is blue in the clouds, and yellow, and even some green. Then she says, “I had been looking at clouds all my life, but I felt as if I saw them for the first time at that moment.”⁹

One of the reasons the Church proclaims the parables of Jesus when we come to worship is that we might ask ourselves, “Are the clouds really white?”

What do we see when we see? Do we see at all? What do we see when we watch the evening news and read the daily papers?

⁹ Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (New York: Dutton, 1999),

-Generosity -Eucharist

“Eucharist: Food and Love”

Writing in the *Christian Century*, Thomas Long tells of a father and his son who were jogging in an inner-city neighborhood. Halfway through their run, they decided to phone ahead for a home-delivered pizza. As they ran toward a phone booth, however, a homeless man approached them, asking for some spare change. The father reached into the pocket of his shorts and pulled out a handful of change. “Here,” he said to the poor man, “take what you need.”

The homeless man, scarcely believing his good fortune, said, “I’ll take it all,” as he scooped up the coins in his hands and prepared to go on his way.

As the man turned to leave, the father realized that now he had no change for the phone call. “Pardon me,” he called to the homeless man. “We need to make a phone call. Could you spare some change?”

The homeless man turned and held out his handful of coins and said, “Here, take what you need.”

We are all beggars and prodigals in need—in need of compassion, in need of nourishment on our journey through life. We all seek a place at God’s bountiful table, but we take only what is given to us as a gift. We have no right to the Eucharist; it is always God’s freely given gift.

-Discipleship -Eucharist

Eucharist – Food and Love

Giacomo Puccini composed some of the world's greatest operas: *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*. In 1922, as he began what many critics consider his finest work, *Turandot*, Puccini was diagnosed with cancer. He struggled to finish the opera before he died, but as the disease sapped his energy, he told his students that, if he did not complete the work, they should finish it for him. After his death in 1924, Puccini's students assembled all his notes, studied them carefully, and proceeded to complete the work.

In 1926, the world premiere of *Turandot* took place in Milan's famous La Scala opera house. Puccini's prize pupil, Arturo Toscanini, was the conductor. It proceeded beautifully until Toscanini came to the end of what Puccini composed. He stopped the music, put down his baton, and turned to the audience.

"Thus far the master wrote, until he died." There was a long pause. Then Toscanini announced, "But his disciples finished the work."

The conductor, with tears in his eyes, picked up the baton again, and the opera concluded to thunderous applause and a permanent place in the world of great operas.

Through the Eucharist, God breathes the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus into our lives so we might be faithful to our vocations and faithfully finish the work entrusted to us by the risen Lord.

-Non-violence -Love

Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian champion of non-violence, was a devout Hindu, but he had a deep respect for Jesus and his teachings. When asked why he himself did not become a Christian, Gandhi answered soberly, “Because I never met one.”

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love.” With that simple statement, Jesus sets before us what it means to be a Christian, to be his disciple. We are to love as God loves—without counting the cost, without holding back anything.

Psychologists tell us that our ability to love and to trust is conditioned by our earliest experience of being loved.

Philosophers tell us that being in love is the first step toward becoming morally mature, since love empowers us to act for the good of another rather than for ourselves.

Theologians tell us that the core of Christian faith is being in love with God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Yet in the everydayness of our lives, not to mention the pain of flawed relationships and lost loves, do we allow ourselves to be in love with God or with anyone? Living in a competitive, consumerist, individualistic, success-oriented culture, do we heed E.E. Cummings’ admonition “to be of love a little more careful than of anything”?

-God –Love –Fatherhood

*Sample Homily, Feast of the Holy Trinity, June 9, 1974.*¹⁰

A number of years ago, Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish director, writer and producer, probed man's search for true childhood in a superb trilogy of films, *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*.

In *Through a Glass Darkly*, Minus, a teenage boy, asks his father if God exists. When the father answers affirmatively, the boy asks for a proof. There is a proof, his father explains, but one must listen carefully, for the proof is the reality of love. For the first time, Minus and his father really communicate with one another. In accepting the reality of love and God together, they reach an understanding of one another. Together father and son become brothers, children of the same God.

The final words in the film are eloquent. From the beautiful, childlike face of that adolescent boy, there come quiet words of hope: "Papa spoke to me; Papa spoke to me." Man's search for genuine fatherhood and childhood, a search for a God who speaks because he loves, is expressed in those few words. God speaks to us only if we speak to one another. This spirit of childhood communicates itself, just as the smile on the face of a father moves his child so that he smiles too.

¹⁰ Published in *Homily Service with Scriptural Commentary* (The Liturgical Conference), Vol 7, No. 1, April 1974

-Hunger –Self-righteousness –Joy –Fear –Religion -Christianity

Homily for Tuesday of the Second Week of Ordinary Time

The novel and film *Chocolat* is a wonderful fable in which a mysterious chocolate maker comes to set up shop in a pious French village. Ruled by the sanctimonious Count de Reynard, the townsfolk are in the midst of an austere Lent. Their lives are mired in the cold joylessness of their religion—suppression, intolerance, and self-denial bordering on self-loathing. Vianne, who opens her chocolate shop at the beginning of Lent, draws down the wrath of the Count who condemns her for her bad business timing and what he considers her libertine lifestyle.

But Vianne not only re-awakens the palates of the people with her wonderful confections; her warmth and kindness re-open their hearts and spirits to long-buried joy—joy that comes from compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. By Easter Sunday, the town has experienced a true rebirth in mood and attitude. They discover that their real hunger is not for good food but for the love and community, they denied themselves out of fear and self-righteousness.

Even the young parish priest, struggling with his Easter Sunday sermon, finally gets it right in his simple homily: “Our faith in the risen Christ cannot be based on what we are NOT or what we do NOT do,” he stammers. “Our religion is what we ARE and what we DO.”

-Eucharist

“Eucharist as Gift of Our Sacrificing God”

The story is told of a poor Irish family that decided to escape the 1884 famine and to immigrate to America. On the lowest deck of the ship, the father warned the children to keep to themselves. The mother had carefully prepared a big basket of food, which she doled out very carefully. A six-year-old, however, was so hungry that he begged his father for a few pennies to buy some more food.

After an hour, the frantic father went looking for the boy and found him in a large dining room with a full plate of food in front of him. His father seized him by the collar and growled that he could never pay for all that food. The child looked up and said with his mouth full, “Da, you don’t understand. Food’s free. Comes with the price of the ticket!”

Baptism is our “ticket” that gives us entry to the table of the Lord where the Holy Bread and Saving Cup are free; they are offered so lavishly that there are always leftovers. The bounty is all paid for by the life and love, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹¹

The Eucharist is indeed the gift of God’s food and love for us, but it is given so we in turn might be food and love for one another.

¹¹ Verna A. Holyhead, *Sowing the Seed* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 150

-God's love –God, images of

“God's Word and Human Words”

God's love and providence are always mysterious. The problem is that we tend to confine God in the limited images we have of God. Anthony de Mello affirmed this important point by an amusing story.

A big elephant was swimming in a pond one day when a little rat came up to the edge of the water and insisted that the elephant get out of the pond.

“I won't,” said the elephant. “I am enjoying myself and I won't be disturbed.”

“I insist that you get out right now,” said the rat.

“Why?” responded the elephant.

“I won't tell you until you get out of the pond,” replied the rat.

The rat continued to badger the elephant until he finally lumbered out of the water. He then said to the rat, “Now, why did you want me to get out of the water?”

“I just wanted to see whether you were wearing my swimming suit!”¹²

De Mello's point is that it is infinitely easier for an elephant to fit into the swimming suit of a rat than it is for God to fit into the limited ideas and images we have of God. It seems we instinctively strive to capture God in clear dogmatic statements or perhaps in the pious life we try to lead. We think we then have a firm hold on God.

¹² Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (Garden City: Image Books, 1984), 6.

-God –Jesus Christ

“Baptism: ‘On You My Favor Rests’”

Zen Buddhist writings often describe a dialogue between a student and a teacher. In one such piece, the dialogue goes like this:

Student: If the Buddha is more than Siddhartha Gautama, who lived many centuries ago, then please tell me, what is the real nature of Buddha?

Teacher: The blossoming branch of a plum tree.

Student: What I asked, worthy sir, and what I am eager to know is, what is the Buddha?

Teacher. A pink fish with golden fins swimming idly through the blue sea.

Student: Will not your reverence tell me what the Buddha is?

Teacher: The full moon, cold and silent in the night sky, turning the dark meadow to silver.¹³

For all his apparent evasiveness, the Zen master really wanted to show the student that he had asked an unanswerable question. The Buddha cannot be defined in commonsense terms, and so it is with Jesus Christ. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the narrow gate, the pearl of great price, the mustard seed, the treasure hidden in the field. He is the good shepherd who searches for his lost sheep; he is the font of living water, the living Word and the Bread of Life. He is the Cup of Salvation. Above all, he is God’s beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased.

¹³ Quoted from Alan W. Watts by Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 155-56.

-Eucharist –Change –Body of Christ

“Eucharist as Gift of Our Sacrificing God”

Augustine often reflected on the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of Christians. In his *Confessions*, he imagined Christ saying, “I am the food of grown men and women. Grow, and you shall feed upon me. You will not change me into yourself, as you change food into your flesh, but you will be changed into me.”¹⁴

He made a similar point in one of his sermons: “So if you want to understand the Body of Christ, listen to the apostle telling the faithful You are the body of Christ and its members (1 Cor 12:27). So, it’s you that are the Body of Christ and its members, it’s the mystery meaning you that has been placed on the Lord’s table; what you receive is the mystery that means you. It is to what you are that you reply ‘Amen,’ and by so replying you express your assent. What you hear, you see, is the Body of Christ, and you answer, ‘Amen.’ So be a member of the Body of Christ, in order to make that Amen true.”¹⁵

The Lord Jesus is not only on the eucharistic table; he is at the eucharistic table and is present in all those who gather around the table as well.

¹⁴ Book VIII: 10, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1960), 171.

¹⁵ Sermon 272, *The Works of Saint Augustine, Sermons*, III/7, trans. Edmond Hill, ed. John E. Ratelle (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 300.

-Eucharist –Love –God’s love

“Eucharist as Gift of Our Sacrificing God”

Cardinal Basil Hume, the Benedictine archbishop of Westminster in England, once told a moving story that illuminates the essential characteristics of the Eucharist: God’s love for us and our love for one another.

It happened in Ethiopia. The cardinal had been asked to visit a settlement where starving people were waiting for the arrival of food that was unlikely to come. A Russian helicopter had been put at his disposal. As he got out of the helicopter, a small boy came up to him and took his hand. He was about ten years old and had nothing on but a loincloth round his waist.

The whole time the cardinal spent there, that child would not let go of his hand. He made two gestures: with his free hand, he pointed to his mouth to indicate his need for food. With the other, he took the cardinal’s hand and rubbed it on his cheek.

Sometime later the Cardinal wrote, “I have never forgotten that incident and to this day wonder whether that child is still alive. I remember that when I boarded the helicopter, he stood and looked at me reproachfully. An abandoned, starving ten-year-old child. With one gesture, he showed his need for food, and with the other his need for love. It was much later that day I realized in a new way the secret of the Eucharist, for the Eucharist is food and love.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Basil Hume, “The Heart of the Eucharist” in *Briefings* 35 (1987), 16-17.

-Forgiveness

Homily for Friday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

In his recently published memoirs, *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church*,¹⁷ Archbishop Rembert Weakland, retired archbishop of Milwaukee, recounts his sad experience of becoming untouchable in the minds of various people and his deep need for healing. He titles the introductory chapter of his book “Broken and Re-Glued.”

He made a serious mistake for which he was deeply sorry and because of which he submitted his resignation as archbishop. He was a gifted musician and was determined to take his piano with him when he moved from the archbishop’s house to a retirement center for priests in the archdiocese. The movers, however, dropped the instrument. Since it was old, the glue had not held and the piano had broken apart. Now it obviously had to be totally re-assembled and re-glued, re-strung and re-voiced. It had to be made whole again.

The broken the piano became for the archbishop a symbol of his own life, for he too had to be glued back together by God’s healing power, by God’s love.

“Broken and Re-glued”—that’s the story of our lives, all of us. We are always “re-glued” if our God, like Jesus, is indeed a healing God, not a God who is simply a law-giver, not simply a fearful God who is to be feared, not simply a harsh judge who keeps a record of what we have done and what we have failed to do.

¹⁷ Rembert Weakland, *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2009)

-Death

“Death: The Port of Entry to New Life”

Obviously, the suffering and pain of dying are not only experienced by the person who actually dies. The pain of deep grief is invariably felt by spouses, children, and close friends of the deceased.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized this when he was imprisoned by the Nazis before his final execution. In a letter written to a dear friend on Christmas Eve, 1943, he sincerely acknowledged how difficult separations can be, but he stressed that he has learned an important lesson:

Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time, it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; he does not fill it, but on the contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer goes on to emphasize that gratitude for rich memories can change the pain of memories into joy. Furthermore, fear and anxiety can magnify the difficulties of coping with separation. It is imperative, then, that we learn to commend our dear ones unreservedly to God and leave them in his provident hands.¹⁹

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1953), 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116-17.

-Love -Giving

Homily for Friday of the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time

In one of her books, Anne Lamott tells a true story that illustrates the meaning of our Christian love for one another.²⁰

An eight-year-old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia. His parents explained to him that she needed a blood transfusion. Tests showed that his blood was indeed a good match, so they asked him if he would be willing to give his sister a pint of his blood so she might go on living.

He asked if he could think about it overnight. The next day he said he was willing to give his blood to his sister, so his parents took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his sister. Both of them were hooked up to IVs. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the little boy, which was then put into his sister's IV. The boy lay on the gurney quietly watching his blood drip into his sister. The doctor came over and asked how he was doing. The boy then asked, "How soon until I start to die?"

Intuitively, the little boy grasped the meaning of love for neighbor: it means sharing our own lives that others might live. We die to our own self-preoccupation and self-centeredness so that others might also live. The little boy also intuitively sensed the meaning of God's great love for us, for our God was willing to allow his Son to share his life with all of us so we might live as God lives: in unity and peace.

²⁰ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p. 205. She introduces the story as follows: "Here is the best true story on giving I know, and it was told by Jack Kornfield of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre.

-Promise –Fidelity –Marriage –Commitment –Vows -Ordination

“A Promise Is a Promise Is a Promise”

Is fidelity to promises once made a possibility these days? Can we recover that fidelity that certainly was the glue that stabilized and sustained countless relationships in friendships, marriages, families, religious communities and churches in the past?

In Thornton Wilder’s play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, there is a powerful and provocative remark made by Maggie to her husband who is about to leave his wife for his mistress. She says, “I didn’t marry you because you were perfect. I didn’t even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. . . . That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. . . . And when our children were growing up, it wasn’t a house that protected them; and it wasn’t our love that protected them—it was that promise.”²¹

Our great challenge involves the fact that our lives as Catholics generally take the form of a lifelong commitment in the context of marriage, religious vows or presbyteral ordination. . . . Just as it is the presence and power of a forgiving God in our hearts that makes Christian forgiveness possible, so it is the presence and power of a God who is always faithful to promises made that enables us also to make promises and to keep them. God is always an essential partner in our Christian promises.

²¹ Thornton Wilder, *Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker*, A Bantam Book (New York: Harper & Row 1958) 113.

-Time –Acceptable time

Homily for the Second Sunday of Lent

There have been three films based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In the first, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the young hobbit Frodo Baggins finds himself in possession of a ring that once belonged to the Dark Lord.

The magic ring, which contains all manner of cruelty, malice and the will to dominate all life, gives the possessor unspeakable power. The Dark Lord, who seeks the return of the powerful ring for his own evil plan to enslave the world, kills and destroys everyone and everything in his path as he searches for the ring.

Frodo is now unexpectedly thrust into a struggle for the very survival of the world. Frodo's friend, the wizard Gandalf, explains that the ring must be destroyed in the fiery pits of the mountains of Mordor, where the ring was originally forged.

Frodo, Gandalf and a motley band of hobbits, dwarves, elves and human warriors then begin the perilous journey to Mordor, relentlessly pursued by the Dark Lord and his minions.

At one point in their long quest, after yet another narrow escape, the discouraged Frodo laments to Gandalf: "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened."

The kindly old wizard replies: "So do all who live to see such times, but that it not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

As we heard on Ash Wednesday, "This is the acceptable time." This is the time that is given to us. Our lives are journeys that constantly call us to decide what we are to do with the time we are given.

-Death –Meaning of life – Fleetingness of life

Homily for the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In many Tibetan monasteries there is a ritual intended to introduce students to the principles of Buddhism. Over a nine-day period, with prayers and chanting the monks create an elaborate sand painting, called a mandala. The painting is composed of colored sand, chalk, saffron spice and wheat. The finished mandala includes representations of all the sacred principles of Buddhism. The monks pray that the Divine will descend from the heavens and temporarily dwell in the mandala. When the mandala is completed, the students are then invited to come and study with the monks the meaning of the various symbols and, through the mandala, to be reborn in the faith.

In the final stage of the ritual, the monks offer thanks for the divine presence in their work and request that the Divine then “leave” the mandala. The sands of the mandala are ritually defaced and placed in urns, which the monks then solemnly take to a nearby lake or river where they prayerfully pour the sands into the water. Like the passing of all things bright and beautiful, the mandala is washed away, existing simply in the memories of those who created it and those who have discovered the divine presence within it.

The ritual affirms the utter transcendence, ultimacy, and absoluteness of the Divine and the ephemeral, relative, and temporal character of everything else.

Most of us spend our days believing that we are somehow building a life, a legacy, a future that will outlive us. Some of us rear families, perhaps amass sizeable estates, write books, produce art works, or acquire reputations that we hope will survive after we are dead. In fact, however, everything we possess or create or use is like the sand in the monks’ mandala—someday, sooner rather than later, it will all be washed away.

-Resurrection -Indwelling

*“Serving the Word”*²²

Shortly after he defected from the Soviet Union, Mikhail Baryshnikov, the distinguished Russian ballet dancer, performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington. He chose as his partner the young ballerina Gelsey Kirkland. The critics raved about their performance. They noted that Kirkland sparkled and appeared to be full of life because she was the subject of the miracle whereby one person, Baryshnikov, brought out of her the very best.

That is precisely the miracle of the resurrection. God brings out the very best in Jesus, and the Lord Jesus, through the power of the Spirit, brings out the very best in each one of us. As Kierkegaard was fond of saying, we are not called to be like Christ, nor like anybody else; we are simply called to be our true selves. It is the Spirit of the risen Christ who makes that possible. When we become our true selves, it is our true spirit, the very Spirit of God within us, that is brought out in each one of us.

Robin Williams credits Jonathan Winters for playing a major influence on his comedy. Williams learned a great deal about writing and performing comedy simply by studying Winters’ genius for spontaneity and improvisation. Likewise, Jonathan Larson, the composer of the musical “Rent,” acknowledged that he was deeply influenced by the work of Stephen Sondheim, one of musical theater’s most imaginative composers.

Robin Williams and Jonathan Larson not only admired their heroes, they allowed their work to touch them deeply so that they truly understood it, learned from it and in fact incorporated the spirit of their masters into their own lives and work. That’s the challenge that faces us: Do we allow the Spirit of the risen Christ to so penetrate our minds and hearts that the very best is drawn out of us?

²² Published in *Homily Service*, May 20, 2001, 43f

-Easter -Resurrection

Homily for Saturday in Easter Week

On December 8, 1875, the German ship the *Deutschland* sank in the North Sea, off the English coast. Among the 157 passengers who perished were five Franciscan sisters traveling to Missouri to take up new teaching assignments. The young sisters sacrificed their own lives so that others could be rescued. According to one account, they remained below the deck as the ship sank. As the water rose around them, they clasped hands and were heard praying, “O Christ, O Christ, come quickly.”

The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was profoundly moved by the story and wrote a poem about the tragedy, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, which he dedicated to the five Franciscans. He saw in their death a parallel to the suffering of Christ. Hopkins included in his poem the line “Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cressed east.”²³

As used in the poem, the word “easter” is a nautical term. It means steering a craft toward the east, into the light. “Let him easter in us.”

Easter as a verb—not just the name of the great feast that we have been celebrating this week—means something we think, we feel, we do.

“Let him easter in us” that we may live our lives in the light of the Lord’s compassion and peace, his justice and forgiveness. “Let him easter in us” that we may be humble servants like the Lord, healers like him, teachers like him, footwashers like him. “Let him easter in us” that we may bear our crosses for one another as he bore his cross for us. “Let him easter in us” that we may, at the end of our own voyage, “easter in him.”

²³ *Major Poems and Spiritual Writings of Gerard Manly Hopkins*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2003, p, 26.

-Eucharist -Hospitality

“Eucharist as Meal”

Many years ago, in a short story that she described as an account of a Martha living in the midst of two Marys, the Danish author Baroness Karen von Blixen-Finecke, also known by the pen name Isak Dinesen, beautifully illustrated the ability of a meal to reconcile individuals. Adapted as a popular film, *Babette's Feast* takes place in the home of two daughters of a stern Scandinavian Lutheran pastor.²⁴ They had rejected the amorous overtures of distinguished gentlemen to serve God on the inhospitable coast of Norway where they live.

The pious spinsters live meagerly as they care for their late father's aging flock. One stormy night a mysterious Frenchwoman appears at the door with a letter of introduction. Her name is Babette; she is fleeing the 1871 Communard uprising in Paris where political enemies have already killed her husband and child. Though she is penniless, the sisters take her in. Babette serves them for years as housekeeper and cook. Even though she was once the *maitresse de cuisine* at a famous Paris restaurant, she dutifully prepares the dull split cod and ale-and-bread soup that was the daily diet of the poor people living in Berlevaag.

After years in exile, Babette surprisingly wins the French lottery and to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Lutheran Dean, she decides to spend all her money on a splendid feast for her ascetical mistresses and their few remaining parishioners, who in old age had grown acrimonious in their relationships with each other. Former grievances had surfaced and snide remarks were often passed among the group.

Like a true artist, Babette seeks to give her all. What is most striking about her hospitality is its ability to transform her guests. True hospitality has that wonderful potential. Enemies can indeed be reconciled as hostility fades away. Memories can be refined while humor once again finds its place in human hearts.

²⁴ Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast and Other Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 3-48.

-Forgiveness –Remembering -Reconciliation

*“Forgive as We Forgive”*²⁵

A remarkable book, published in England after the Second World War, tells the tale of a Jewish woman who remembered but also forgave.²⁶ When Hitler unleashed his hatred of the Jews in the 1930s, Ilse Joseph managed to smuggle her two children out of Germany to the presumed safety of a Jewish orphanage in The Hague. She herself went on to England in 1940, hoping that the two girls would soon be able to follow.

In May of that year, Holland was overrun by the Nazis. She never saw her children again. After the war, she searched desperately for the girls, only to discover on a visit to Israel in 1965 that the names of her two daughters were in the archives of the Yad Vashem Memorial to the Holocaust victims. They had died together, gassed on the Jewish Day of Atonement in September 1942.

In her journal, called *Playing for Peace*, this remarkable woman says she prayed not to feel hatred, not to seek revenge. She prayed that she might find some caring and constructive work in which she might express forgiveness and in some small way spread peace and reconciliation among the divided peoples of the world.

A talented violinist, Ilse Joseph determined to use her music to forge bonds of community; in place of discord, she would bring harmony and peace. Her theme music was the “Kol Nidre, “Max Bruch’s musical interpretation of the haunting Jewish prayer for forgiveness with which Yom Kippur begins. Until shortly before her death in 1985, she took her message of reconciliation and peace throughout the world. As she said, “If one Jewish mother who mourns her children can clearly speak forgiveness . . . so can others. Each of us breaks out of the repetitive circle of hatred and retaliation and moves in as straight a line as we can towards the unity of a loving God.”

²⁵ Published in *Spirituality* (2002)

²⁶ Joseph, Ilse and Audrey Davis, *Playing for Peace: A Survivor’s Mission* (London: Book Guild Ltd., 1986).

-Eternal life -Death

“Death: The Port of Entry to New Life”

In his novels and short stories, John Updike was often preoccupied with the questions of separation, death, and afterlife. This is the subject of “Pigeon Feathers,” a short story Updike wrote in the early nineteen-sixties. It focuses on a year in the life of David Kem, an adolescent boy whose family has moved to a rural farm in Pennsylvania. David finds the move disturbing in many ways. His parents bicker constantly, he finds few friends at school, and is uncomfortable even in his catechism class at the Lutheran church with the young incompetent pastor. Troubled with many questions and bored with his life at home, one day David searched through some of his mother’s books from her college days, including H. G. Wells’s *The Outline of History*, where the author denies the divinity of Jesus. That night David has a vision of death, including his own. Terrified with his thoughts, he seeks consolation from his pastor who is simply unable even to understand David’s questions about the possibility of heaven.²⁷

Somewhat later, his grandmother asks that he shoot the pigeons who are dirtying the furniture stored in the old barn. As he kills the birds, he has hints that they have been created, and as he buries the birds, he is assured of this fact. He gets lost in the geometrical designs of the birds’ bodies and the beauty of the delicately sculptured feathers. In memorable lines, Updike writes:

Into the fragrant open earth, he dropped one [bird] broadly banded in slate shades of blue, and on top of it another, mottled all over in rhythms of lilac and gray. . . .As he fitted the last two [in the hole he had dug] . . . he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever.”²⁸

²⁷ John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1962), 84-105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

-Patience

“Now is the Acceptable Time”

The garden is a useful metaphor for the interior life, because it implies growth and transformation. However, one must water and weed the garden and wait in patience for growth to take place. Likewise, the roots of life and love and ministry need watering through silence, personal and communal prayer, and holy reading. We must also cooperate with the Spirit in weeding out what obstructs transformation and growth. Patience too must be part of every life and every human relationship. It does not astonish us that it takes a whole year to bring forth a rose in the garden. In fact, it seems appropriate that the delight in something so rich should be earned with patience and trust. Yet in our relations with God and each other we are often chagrined and sometimes depressed that we must wait in patience for the moments of flowering and achievement. What is even more disconcerting is that the peak moments do not seem to last.

In recent years there has been an extravagant interest in Vincent Van Gogh’s paintings (at least in the United States), but much less interest in his rather profound journals. He experienced life as deeply painful. In a letter to his brother Theo he wrote,

Well, then, what can I say; does what goes on inside show on the outside? Someone has a great fire in his soul and nobody ever comes to warm themselves at it, and passers-by see nothing but a little smoke at the top of the chimney and then go on their way. So now what are we to do, keep this fire alive inside, have salt in ourselves, wait patiently, but with how much impatience, await the hour, I say, when whoever wants to, will come and sit down there, will stay there, for all I know? May whoever believes in God await the hour, which will come sooner or later.²⁹

²⁹ *Vincent van Gogh, Ever Yours, The Essential Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 127.

-Eucharist –Motherhood -Women

“Eucharist as Meal”

Victor Hugo, the nineteenth-century French novelist, told the story of a French mother who, after the Revolution, was driven from her home with her two children. She wandered through the woods for several days, while she and her children lived on roots and berries. On the third morning, they hid in some bushes when they heard the approach of two soldiers. The captain ordered the sergeant to find out what was stirring in the bushes. He prodded the mother and her two children onto the path and brought them to the captain’s side. The captain saw immediately that they were starving, so he reached into his pack and gave them a *baguette*. The mother took it eagerly, like a famished animal, but she broke it into two pieces, and gave one piece to the first child and the other to the second.

The sergeant looked at the captain and said, “Is it because the mother is not hungry?”

The captain replied, “No, sergeant, it is because she is a mother.”

Modern scholars have noted that in the Gospels Jesus not only took and blessed bread but he also broke and gave it to his friends. The latter roles of breaking and giving were relegated to servants at a banquet in the ancient world, and female servants at that. Serving food at table was a gender-linked activity, woman’s work. So we have Jesus not only taking on the role of a servant, but the role of a woman as well. And not only the role of a woman but also the role of a mother, for a mother not only gives food to her child, she shares her very life, her very body and blood with her child—like the Lord Jesus. That is precisely why medieval mystics, like Julian of Norwich, Gertrude of Helfta, and Mechtild of Magdeburg, spoke of “Mother Jesus.”

It is in a sense the motherhood of Jesus that we celebrate in the Eucharist, for the Lord Jesus shares his very body and blood, his very life with us in the Eucharist.

-Baptism –Blessing –Interior life

“Baptism: ‘On You My Favor Rests’”

May Sarton, the New England poet and novelist, was deeply aware of the importance of the interior life. In her *Journal of a Solitude*, she writes, “Friends . . . are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid yet I taste it fully only when I am alone and ‘the house and I resume old conversations’.”³⁰

In a poem entitled “The Work of Happiness,” she affirms more explicitly the significance of an integrated experience of the interior life:

No one has heard thought or listened to a mind,
But where people have lived in inwardness
The air is charged with blessing and does bless.”³¹

We all need blessings, not only from other people but also from ourselves, and yet we know from experience that we can often travel for long stretches across tundras of spiritual and emotional dryness without getting them. Above all, it is then that we need the blessings of God, just as Jesus needed the blessing of his Father: “You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests.”

We also need much courage and encouragement to persevere in the development of our baptismal commitments and our inner life. There is often the temptation to feel that mystery must be mastered and reduced to a series of problems to be solved. In T. S. Eliot’s *The Confidential Clerk*, a man who feels that his life has collapsed because he had to give up his career as a musician is told by a friend:

But it’s only the outer world that you’ve lost:
You’ve still got your inner world—a world that’s more real.
That’s why you’re different from the rest of us:
You have your secret garden. To which you can retire
And lock the gate behind you.”³²

³⁰ May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 11.

³¹ Mary Sarton, *Collected Poems (1930-1973)*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 203.

³² T. S. Eliot, *The Confidential Clerk* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954) 63.

-Christ in others -Seeing

“*What Do We See When We See?*”

In his novella *Franny and Zooey*, J. D. Salinger characterizes the ill, the poor, the lonely, the marginal, the misfits, as the “Fat Lady.” She’s the one who sits in an old wicker chair on the front porch swatting flies with her radio going full-blast; she suffers from cancer.

In the story, Zooey tells Franny, “There isn’t anyone anywhere that isn’t the Fat Lady. Don’t you know that? And don’t you know who the Fat Lady really is? Ah, Buddy. Ah, Buddy. It’s Christ Himself, Christ Himself, Buddy.”³³

Christ himself is the Fat Lady. In Christ, God has come so close to us as to become one with us in our misery, our poverty, our illness, our pain. Christ is the one “so disfigured that he seemed no longer human. . . . Without beauty, without majesty, no looks to attract our eyes. . . . a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering . . .” (Isa 52:13-18). God in Christ comes close to us in our sorrows; he touches us first so we in turn might reach out and touch God in order to be healed and made whole.

Alexander Schmemmann, the distinguished Orthodox priest and theologian, once told his students how he found Christ in the Fat Lady. When he was a young man living in Paris, he was traveling on the metro with his fiancée. They were very much in love and preoccupied with one another. The train stopped and an elderly and very homely woman got on. She was dressed in the uniform of the Salvation Army, and she came and sat near Schmemmann. The young lovers began to whisper in Russian so she would not understand. With disgust, they noted the obesity and ugliness of the old woman. The train came to a stop. The old woman got up and, as she passed the two young people, she said to them in perfect Russian, “I was not always ugly.” She brought the young Schmemmann the shock of revelation, the shock that enabled him to see that what was there was much, much more than an ugly woman.

³³ J. D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 200.

-Baptism –Christ –Conversion -Repentance

“Baptism: ‘On You My Favor Rests’”

The contemporary quality of Christ’s baptismal experience was captured well by the British artist Stanley Spencer in his scenes from the gospels, which he set in his native village of Cookham. In his “Baptism by John,” Jesus is immersed in the River Thames at Cookham, with people in contemporary bathing suits all around him. Spencer invites us to see the event as an experience that should affect us now. He would affirm that a Christ who is not contemporary, who does not live with us in our time, is not the Christ of Christian faith. Therefore, in his “Way of the Cross,” Spencer shows Christ carrying his cross through the modern village streets of Cookham, just as in his “Crucifixion,” Spencer shows us houses, telephone wires, and a curious crowd climbing the wall to watch the men in red brewers’ hats nail a criminal to the cross as if it were their daily work.³⁴

Christian conversion is not a turning to a God who is distant from his people. It is a journey into the depths of our being where God truly abides. Repentance consists essentially in faith in the person and mission of Jesus Christ who calls us to union with his Father.³⁵ The content of the call is a summons to embrace God who shares his life and liberates us from enslaving idols. At the heart of the gospel message is the disconcerting reversal of merely human expectations: the mighty are pulled down from their thrones and the lowly are exalted; the hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty; the poor man obedient unto death on the cross is exalted and receives the name above every other name. Worldly value scales are turned upside down; human self-sufficiencies, whether of power, wealth or moral righteousness, are rejected. God reigns in the hearts of the humble, the poor, and the repentant. His desire is to be God within each of us naturally conflicts with human self-sufficiency in its various forms. The authentic motive for the human response to the presence and power of God can only be love.

³⁴ Fiona MacCarthy, *Stanley Spencer: An English Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 55, 62.

³⁵ Dermot A. Lane, *The Experience of God* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), 73-98

-Search for God –Depression –God –Conversion –Love –Indwelling

“*Word of God: Creative, Promising, Challenging*”

Anne Sexton was already a widely recognized poet before her early death by suicide in October 1974. Although the lure of death is prevalent in her poetry, she seemed to be able to hold it at bay and to send a powerful awareness of life into the world of her readers. The final collection of her poems, *The Awful Rowing toward God*³⁶ recounts the agonizing search for God that is often a common phenomenon. She explores the doubts and the triumphs, the pain and the peace of what seems in many ways to be an unorthodox faith. She writes,

I cannot walk an inch
without trying to walk with God,
I cannot move a finger
without trying to reach God.”³⁷

Sexton’s God is a being intimately bound up with all of creation, but especially with his people.

God owns heaven
but he craves the earth. . . .
He is all soul
but he would like to house it in a body.”³⁸

In a sense, her God seems to need us, much as we need God, and therefore the awful rowing in which we are all engaged is an ordeal, but one with an end in sight. This is the theme of the first poem in the collection. It is simply called “Rowing.”

I am rowing, I am rowing,
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty. . . .
and I know that that island will not be perfect,
it will have the flaws of life. . . .
but there will be a door
and I will open it
and I will get rid of the rat inside of me,

³⁶ Anne Sexton, *The Awful Rowing toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24f.

the gnawing pestilential rat.

God will take it with his two hands
and embrace it.³⁹

Christian conversion, then, is not a turning to a God who is distant from his people. It is a rowing inward into the depths of our being where God truly abides.

God reigns in the hearts of the poor and repentant. His desire to be God within each of us naturally conflicts with human self-sufficiency in its various forms. The motive for the human response to the presence and power of God can only be love.

³⁹ Ibid., 2.

-Suffering

*"Suffering, Healing, Forgiveness, Reconciliation and their Relationship with Priestly Identity and Ministry."*⁴⁰

Jesus invites us who are sometimes, perhaps often weary and burdened to come to him. He does not promise that he will take our burdens away, but he does guarantee us light, strength, and eventually peace. The New Testament regularly protests against a spirituality without suffering and conflict; it protests against the false illusion that God is to be found apart from Jesus Christ crucified. If we want to be reformed in God's image and share in the risen life of Christ, we must first of all be in the image of Jesus on the cross. However, the acceptance of suffering must not be equated with passivity, indifference or abstract endurance. Such responses in fact harden the human heart and dehumanize the person. The real self never surfaces.

The trap that is set for us was exemplified in an amusing but disturbing Charles Addams cartoon in the *New Yorker*. Two women are looking at an enormous blob sitting in an armchair. The only signs of life are its beady eyes. One woman turns to the other and says, "We're still waiting for Stanley to jell."

Sometimes we are tempted simply to abstract from life, to yield up all responsibility, all initiative, all choice. We refuse the gift of God's Spirit and become "blobs" that never really jell. We idle away our time with long hours before the television or by surfing the internet, or we deaden our feelings with alcohol. In fact, we are called to confront suffering and struggle through it so we may become more capable of love—and more capable even of suffering. We know from experience that there are times when our hardened hearts are in fact broken open by suffering, and as a result, there is more room within them both for God and for other people.

Leon Bloy, the French literary figure, is said to have remarked, "There are places in the human heart that do not yet exist. Suffering enters into them so they might have existence." In strange ways, suffering is a key to the discovery of who we really are and what we have within us to become, if only we are able to summon forth the strength.

"What makes the desert beautiful," reflected Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince, "is that it hides a well somewhere."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Conference for Dublin Priests

⁴¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1943; English translation ©2000 by Richard Howard), 68.

-Time -Relationships

Homily for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The New York *Times*' best-seller *Three Cups of Tea* is the story of Greg Mortenson, an American mountain climber who has become a beloved figure among the people who live in the Himalayan villages of Central Asia. After a failed attempt to climb one of the most difficult mountains, so-called K-2, Mortenson was saved by the villagers of the isolated, impoverished village of Korphe. He returned their kindness by raising the funds to build a school for the village. Once the Korphe school was completed, word spread to other villages of the Balti region; people there begged Mortenson to build schools in their villages as well. It was the beginning of a one-man mission to promote peace, one small school at a time.

The title of the book—*Three Cups of Tea*—is the most important lesson Greg Mortenson learned as he began his work in Korphe. After securing the funds and the supplies, he finally arrived in Korphe ready to go. With typical American intensity, he was driving the villagers mad with his meticulous orders and demands to work faster, harder and better. Finally the village chief, a wise man named Haji Ali, pulled Greg aside for tea. As he poured the tea, he gave the young American this advice:

“If you want to survive in Baltisan, you must respect our ways. The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you share a cup of tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die. Greg, you must take time to share three cups of tea. We may be uneducated, but we are not stupid. We have lived and survived a long time.”

Greg Mortenson remembers: “That day, Haji Ali taught me the most important lesson. We Americans think we have to accomplish everything quickly. We are the country of thirty-minute power lunches and two-minute football drills. Haji Ali taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down and make building relationships as important as building projects. He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them.”⁴²

⁴² Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea* (New York, Penguin Group, 2006), 150.

-Women

“Woman, Great Is Your Faith”

The Old Testament is laced with accounts where women made a significant difference. For example, Rebecca deceived old Isaac to insure that the descendants of Jacob rather than those of irresponsible Esau played a major role in the redemption of the world. There are also the fascinating stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, Esther, and Judith, as well as the New Testament account of Mary’s firm “Yes” to the Word of God. In so many instances, while men tended to be cowards or to run away, a woman emerges to take initiative and promote the well-being of the human family. In the process, the feminine becomes a strong metaphor of God’s own Spirit working to create and renew the cosmos and bring it out of chaos.

It should make us wonder why women are still so often treated as inferior to men in our Church, why they are not given more responsible positions and included in decision-making processes. In the western world, they are often very well educated to the doctoral level in the religious sciences, including canon law and liturgical studies; often they are much more competent than the priests who administer parishes and chanceries.

This is an enigma that often puzzled the Little Flower, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. In her autobiography, she recounts her trip to Rome when she was only fifteen years old: “I still cannot understand why women are so easily excommunicated in Italy, for every minute someone was saying, ‘Don’t enter here! Don’t enter there, you will be excommunicated!’ Ah! Poor women, how they are misunderstood! Yet they love God in much larger numbers than men do. . . . One day when we were visiting a Carmelite monastery of men, I advanced into the inner cloisters, when all of a sudden I saw a good old Carmelite friar at a little distance making a sign for me to leave. But instead of going, I approached him and showing him the cloister paintings, I made a sign that they were beautiful. He smiled at me kindly and left. He saw he was not in the presence of an enemy.”⁴³

This young teenager, who is now a Doctor of the Church, was as shrewd as the Canaanite woman in the Gospel was! She was bold enough even to want to be a priest!

⁴³ Saint Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 140.

-Time –Silence –Stillness -Worship

“God’s Word and Human Words”

Someone once asked the distinguished pianist Arthur Rubenstein, “How do you handle the notes as well as you do?” He replied, “I handle the notes no better than many others, but the pauses between the notes—that is where the real music resides.”

We are accustomed to rush through our days hitting all the “notes” in the score we have been given, but the “notes” of our lives are blurred into static or mere noise. We take no time between the notes to hear the music running through our life: the love of God for each of us, the positive values of our work, the hope that comes from forgiveness, the strength that comes in time of trial.

Bernard Lonergan, the Canadian theologian, developed a very simple method for living life meaningfully.⁴⁴ It includes four steps: experience, understanding, judgment, and commitment. Our lives are often surfeited with experience as we move aimlessly from one experience to another. We often fail to take time to get distance from the experience we have had and so fail to understand what we have experienced. As a result, we are not in a position to make a responsible judgment about the way we live, and in the end, we do not make any realistic commitments. We drift through the score of our lives. We muddle through life. We need to pause, to be silent, to be still, so we might reflect on the meaning of God’s presence as we live with each other in executing the scores we have each been given. Great words come out of silence and go back into silence. Great rituals and gestures come out of stillness and go back into stillness.

Although almost all religions assert that silence is the fundamental responses of the human person to the revelation of the holy, the Jewish and Christian traditions give special stress to its positive, dynamic quality. The biblical writers associate silence with wisdom, which is the free gift of God to the listening heart. When they attempt to describe the human person’s initial religious experience or encounter with God, stress is placed on the two emotions of awe and fascination, both of which issue from silence. A response of awe and wonder develops in the presence of sublimity and exaltation. This element is never absent in true worship; in fact, it is at the root of all authentic worship.

⁴⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Bender, 1973).

-Holy Spirit –Meaning of life

“Pentecost: We Are Temples of the Holy Spirit”

Flannery O’Connor’s story “The Enduring Chill,” is about the dynamic presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of a jaded young hypochondriac named Asbury Fox.⁴⁵ He has tried his luck unsuccessfully as a writer in New York and then returns to his hometown in Georgia to die. He promptly takes to his bed. From there he stares at the water stains on the walls and ceiling of his bare gray room. Over his bed, a leak in the ceiling has made the image of a fierce bird with spread wings. It has been there since his childhood and has always irritated and even frightened him.

Since his life has no meaning, Asbury has decided to die in the most dramatic way possible. He rules out suicide, because in a life riddled with disappointments, suicide would not have been a victory. With cunning, he constructs the scenes that will lead to his most meaningful experience of himself. He lies in bed, stares at the bird-like stain on the ceiling of his room, heaps sarcasm on everyone brave enough to come near him, including his mother, the doctor, and the priest, and waits for that final delicious moment—a defiant death that will reveal the ultimate absurdity of life. However, death eludes him. A cold recognition finally dawns on him: he will live, robbed of his great moment. The stain on the ceiling of his room reveals its terrible symbolism.

O’Connor writes, “The fierce bird, which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness has been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched. . . . He saw that for the rest of his days . . . he would live in the face of purifying terror. . . . The Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continues, implacable to descend.”

O’Connor encourages us to think of the Spirit’s work in fierce ways, for in Asbury’s experience, the Spirit appeared not as a consoler but as purifying terror. The Spirit fell upon him with unexpected violence to strip him of self-deception and to make him face his life for what it has become—a sham. The story is harsh: The Spirit is not only a source of solace, but a source of painful confrontation as well. Maturing in Christian faith implies the ability to recognize the presence of God’s Spirit even in the midst of our catastrophic limitations.

⁴⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 357-382.

-Relationship –Communication –Good Shepherd

*“Forgive as We Forgive”*⁴⁶

In his first short published play called *The Bald Soprano*, the Romanian-born playwright Eugene Ionesco described the dreary character of the lives of many people today in a rather amusing way. In the course of that play, a man and a woman find themselves facing one another in an English sitting room. The gentleman timidly initiates a conversation: “Excuse me, madam, but it seems to me, unless I’m mistaken, that I’ve met you somewhere before. “She replies, “I too, sir. “He then asks whether they might have met in Manchester. She says that’s possible because she came from Manchester. He too was originally from Manchester, but he says that he left the city five weeks ago. That’s curious because she left Manchester about five weeks ago. He took the 8:30 morning train which arrived in London at 4:45, and that’s precisely the train she took. In fact, they both traveled second class, seated in coach 8, compartment 6. He had seat no. 3 next to the window; she had seat no. 6, across from him and next to the window. It happens that in London he lives in Bromfield Street and so does she. He lives at no. 19 and so does she. His flat is on the fifth floor, no. 8, to which she responds, “How curious it is, good Lord, how bizarre! And what a coincidence. I too reside on the fifth floor, in flat no. 8. “In his bedroom there is a bed covered with a green eiderdown. Her bedroom also has a bed covered with a green eiderdown. At that point the gentleman says, “How bizarre, curious, strange! Then madam, we live in the same flat and sleep in the same bed, dear lady. It is perhaps there that we have met!”⁴⁷

Husband and wife, living in the same flat, sharing the same bed and yet total strangers. Physically present to each other but not present as persons knowing and loving one another. True of so many husbands and wives these days. True also of people who live in religious communities, true also of priests who isolate themselves from their fellow priests and their bishop and even from their parishioners. Their lives are reduced to merely necessary functions. Their identity is simply in the work that they do.

How different is the intimate relationship between the Good Shepherd and his sheep: “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father “(John 10:14).

⁴⁶ Published in *Spirituality* (2002)

⁴⁷ Eugene Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 15-18.

-Death

“Word of God: Creative, Promising, Challenging.”

The Washington Post is one of those rare newspapers that regularly attempts to nourish the inner life of its readers on its editorial pages. It has done so in the past, especially through the profound and pertinent columns of Colman McCarthy. Among his pieces, which have been collected and published in a volume called *Inner Companions*, there is a brief but moving account of the death of Michele Murray, a Washington writer who died of cancer in 1974 at the age of forty. A gifted literary critic, she spent the last hours of her life with her family in the library of her home where she studied and wrote. Hers was a firm resistance against the tyranny of the American way of dying. In McCarthy’s words:

On the morning of the day before she died, Mrs. Murray, lying on a small couch in her library, talked individually with three of her four children—David, eighteen; Jonathan, sixteen; and Sarah, thirteen. She told them she would die soon, though she didn’t know when, and that she had enjoyed being their mother. And she offered, characteristically, practical advice about their lives after her death. She had a comfortable day, however, and a comfortable night as well.

By 10:00 a.m. of the next morning, she began losing consciousness. Her husband Jim read the Psalms to her—the joyful psalms which Mrs. Murray had learned to recite in her Jewish childhood. He recited also the poetry of Catherine de Vinck, played recordings of Mozart’s chamber music, kissed her and prayed with her. Alone with his dying wife—the children were in school—he could do nothing now except acknowledge that an awesome mystery was occurring. Between one and two in the afternoon, she died. Mrs. Murray had declined the help of doctors in her last hours; keeping her alive was their business now past, but dying was hers.⁴⁸

Christians have always had a special comprehension of death as a moral force that affects every aspect of existence here and now. At the same time, to the extent that they have been truly Christian they have not had a morbid preoccupation with death, since the focus of biblical faith is not upon death as such but upon the resurrection from death. Because Christian faith relates the power of death to the Word of God and gives simultaneous attention to both the scope of death and the accessible power of God in overcoming the strength of death in this present world, Christianity has been for its adherents a religion of realistic optimism.

⁴⁸ Colman McCarthy, *Inner Companions* (Washington: Acropolis Books, 1975), 37.

-Marriage -Love

Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

In a little book called *A Marriage Made in Heaven, or, Too Tired for an Affair*, Erma Bombeck, the American Catholic humorist who died a few years ago, wrote about her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary:

We looked a little ridiculous – two 47-year-old adults sitting alone at a card table in the back yard with party hats strapped under our chins.

It wasn't the way I had imagined our 25th wedding anniversary gala. I had fantasized a large white tent decorated with flowers and housing a six-piece orchestra. Several hundred guests would be milling around. My husband and I would exchange diamond-studded matching tennis bracelets. He would romantically feed me out-of-season blueberries, and the orchestra would play our favorite song, "Our love is here to stay," while we swayed together on the dance floor. Later, we would throw streamers from the deck of a cruise ship and swill champagne while our misty-eyed children waved from the pier.

The reality was, our kids had thrown a couple of hamburgers and a few hot dogs on the barbecue grill, gobbled them and left, leaving us to clean up. The table held our bounty: matching one-size-fits-all bathrobes and a showerhead fixture from my husband with five positions ranging from gentle spray to pin-you-against-the-wall. . . .

Bill scraped the last hamburger from the grill. "Do you want this?" I popped it in my mouth. "This is nice," he said.

"Did you know that Richard Burton bought Liz a rare diamond and she bought him a full-length fur coat?"

"What would I do with a fur coat?" he snorted.

I looked at him as he returned the folding chairs to their original boxes. We had gone through three wars, two miscarriages, five houses, three children, nine cars, 23 funerals, seven camping trips, 12 jobs, 19 banks and three credit unions. I had cut his hair, and turned 33,488 pieces of his underwear right side out. He had washed my feet when I was pregnant and couldn't see them and put his car seat back to its original position 18,675 times after I had used it. We had shared toothpaste, debts, closets and relatives. We had given one another honesty and trust.

He came over to where I was seated and said, "I've got a present for you."

"What is it?" I asked excitedly.

"Close your eyes."

When I opened them, he was holding a cauliflower that comes packed in a pickle jar.

"I hid it from the kids," he said, "because I know you like the cauliflower."

Maybe love was that simple.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Erma Bombeck, *A Marriage Made in Heaven, or, Too Tired for an Affair* (NY: HarperCollins, 1993), 141-145.

-Hospitality -Dependency

“Death: The Port of Entry to New Life”

It is somewhat curious but significant that with telling frequency, particularly in ancient languages, host and stranger are the same word. In ancient Greek, for example, *xenos* means both guest and host; in Latin *hospes* has the same double meaning as does *hôte* in French and *ospite* in Italian. In one sense, the words refer to the stranger who in a foreign place finds himself without friend or kin and so depends on those who dwell in the land for shelter, food and companionship. However, boundless one's resources at home, one is helpless on the road. Whatever one's standing and estate may be at home, as a stranger, as a wayfarer, one is necessarily a suppliant.

In another sense, the words refer to the host, who is essentially secure. This fact alone places a man or woman in a position of power over the pilgrim, but the fact is cancelled when the host bends to the guest to attend to his or her needs. The sheer needy presence of the stranger, then, seems to estrange the host: “Let a stranger live with you, and he will estrange your way of life.”⁵⁰ The host is a little less at home, and the guest, made to feel at home, is a little less strange. The dispositions in the host and the guest are really the same—a willingness to receive. The host is willing to receive from the guest, the guest willing to receive the gift of hospitality from the host. They meet mid-way and share in a life that is greater than either.

Perhaps the willingness to receive and the willingness to acknowledge one's dependency are the most basic dispositions that should exist in the lives of Christians. Prophets like Isaiah and John the Baptist of old, and other more contemporary “strangers” keep walking into our lives, disturbing our peace, shouting for justice, calling us to see the meaning of the Lord's presence, inviting us to respond, to take a position, and to enlarge our horizons. In one of the choruses from *The Rock*, T. S. Eliot is the spokesman for these strangers:

When the Stranger, says: “What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?”
What will you answer? “We all dwell together
To make money from each other”? or “This is community”?
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert.
O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger,
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.⁵¹

⁵⁰ See Robert E. Meagher, “Strangers at the Gate,” in *Parabola* 214, 10-15.

⁵¹ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1935* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1936), 191-92.

-Doubt –Faith -Questioning

“Christian Faith in the Midst of Doubt”

We doubt for many reasons. In a certain sense, we doubt because we are willing to grow and change. We doubt because we think there is more to life than we are really living. If we are to grow, we must move in new directions, explore new avenues, gain deeper insights, and expand our horizons. We must be willing to go beyond what is known and familiar to what is sometimes threatening and insecure. Such doubt is often costly, but the transformation is worth the pain. Reflecting on the growth occasioned by doubt in his life, Dostoevsky is reputed to have once exclaimed that his hosannas were forged in the crucible of doubt.

To refuse to move into the future by accepting the creative gift of new life means that one becomes a prisoner of the present or the past. In a sense, growth in faith implies loss, but it is loss for the sake of greater gain. This is the point made by the 17th-century Japanese poet Mizuta Masahide in a haunting haiku:

Since my house burned down
I now have a better view
Of the rising moon.

It is the task of preachers and educators—those who proclaim the Word of Christian faith—not simply to appeal to the human intellect by communicating a body of organized information. Their responsibility is to appeal to the total person and to stimulate life on all levels. Their hope is to involve others in a profound relationship with ultimacy—a relationship that not only transforms individuals but also communities. Their task is not so much to provide facile answers but rather to stimulate inquiry and search.

In his novel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, Elie Wiesel makes the point very effectively. He tells the story of David, a man haunted by love and war and obsessed by a dream of life. “Once in the Orient,” David says, “I talked of suicide with a sage whose clear and gentle eyes seemed forever to be gazing at a never-ending sunset. “Dying is no solution,” he affirmed. “And living?” David asked. “Nor living either,” the sage conceded. “But who tells you there is a solution?”

Then David continues, “You will not convince me he was not right. He was too wise not to realize that one can do without solutions. Only the questions matter. We may share them or turn away from them. Either way you will in the end admit they hold no answers. Only secrets.”⁵²

It is possible that we have learned the answers—at least some of them—concerning Christian faith and revelation. It is the questions, the secrets, we often do not know.

⁵² Elie Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), 15-16.

-Waiting –Patience -Looking

“*Waiting for God, God Waiting for Us.*”

Waiting is the obvious theme in Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*.⁵³ As Vladimir and Estrogen anxiously wait, they try to remember the specified time and place for Godot’s promised arrival.

Their previous conversation had been in part about the Bible. In reflecting upon their chances of escaping the miserable present, Vladimir had introduced the narrative of the crucified thieves who flanked Jesus on Good Friday and had remarked on the old tradition that holds that one of the thieves was saved.

It is significant that they were told to wait “by a tree” and that they were told to wait on Saturday.

Beckett denied that he was making any religious affirmations—not saying that the tree of the cross has the power to save us, or that the Saturday after the crucifixion will in turn be followed by the Sunday of resurrection.

Even though he rejected any Christian interpretation of his play, that assertion has not prevented commentators from drawing out their own Christian meaning of the diverse symbols. Certainly, Beckett used biblical allusions that exercise powerful suggestiveness. It has been claimed that he intimated that our existence could best be described as being like the Saturday after the hope for the world seemed lost.

The fact is that much of life often resembles the life of waiting that marked that Saturday after Christ’s crucifixion and death. The question posed by commentators is whether Sunday is worth waiting for, whether the Christian proclamation that Sunday, as the day of resurrection and salvation, may not simply be an outrageous error.

The title of Becket’s complex play is similar to the title of a collection of letters and essays written by Simone Weil, called *Waiting for God* in English translation.⁵⁴ Born in Paris in 1909 into an agnostic household of Jewish ancestry, as an adult Weil encountered Christianity and developed into a profound mystic. Although she was attracted to Christianity and specifically to Roman Catholicism, she declined to be baptized. She died in England in 1943, probably from self-imposed malnutrition. During her short life, she learned the profound meaning of patience, of longing, of waiting, and of life. For her to live was simply to look, and to look was to find. She maintained that one of the principal truths of Christianity is that looking is what really saves us. She remembered that in the Bible the bronze serpent was lifted up so that those who lay maimed should look upon it and be saved. She forces us to ask, What is it that we look at and what do we look for? What do we expect in life?

⁵³ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987).

⁵⁴ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. Putnam Sons, 1951).

-Baptism –Searching –Meaning of Life

“Baptism: ‘On You My Favor Rests’”

Flannery O’Connor’s short story “The River” is about a little boy named Bevel who was taken by a sitter to a healing service at the river. There he was baptized by preacher who proclaimed that there is “but one river and that’s the River of Life . . . moving toward the Kingdom of Christ.”⁵⁵ Back home that night the little boy’s shiftless alcoholic parents, who regularly made a joke of everything, including life, ridiculed his experience.

To escape from what was no life to Life itself, Bevel made his way again to the river the following morning. He decided not to fool around with preachers but to baptize himself and to keep on going in the water until he found the Kingdom of Christ. After several attempts to stay under the water, he finally took a deep plunge so that the current caught him and pulled him swiftly forward and down. He knew he was getting where he wanted to go.⁵⁶

In both mythology and depth psychology, water has a double meaning: it is the symbol of both death and life. As a symbol of death, it represents the forces of dissolution and disintegration. The enemy of order and form, it is the hostile power that seeks to reduce the world once more to formless chaos. To go into water is to enter into darkness and death; it is to be submerged in a realm where everything is dissolved. However, water is also the source of life. In accounts of the origin of the word “water,” including the biblical account, water is presented as the mother-element from which the rest of creation proceeds. It is not only at the origin of life; it is also the means by which life is renewed. Water dissolves in order to purify, invigorate, and refresh. Although O’Connor does not indicate precisely what Bevel was searching for, readers probably presume he was searching to escape from the deadliness of his home life and to find what the preacher had described as real Life. . . .

We spend our whole lives becoming the persons we are called to be. If we live as Jesus lived, we respond to the baptismal call to ongoing conversion away from sin and death to God and the fullness of God’s life. The desire to be with God forever and to see God in the company of other people, by being freed from the anxieties of life and the experience of death, is an integral part of the human person. We yearn, like Bevel in O’Connor’s story, to be baptized into new Life. That yearning is a response to a word of summons that is spoken within every human heart. The God we seek is already there, for we would not seek God if God had not already found us.

⁵⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 165.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 173f.

-Liturgy -Celebration

*“Peace: Belief, Prayer and Life”*⁵⁷

In the summer little children like to catch insects and put them in jars so they can look at them closely and see how fascinating they really are. Then they usually let them go again so they can go about their normal business of making the world an interesting place in which to live. In a sense, a liturgical celebration is like a jar. It holds something precious so we can look at it closely, appreciate it more deeply, see how meaningful it is, and share its riches with others. But just as the insects die if they are kept in the jar too long, so also liturgies become empty and effete if they do not return us to the business of life transformed.

Boris Pasternak made the same point in a different way in his account of the Moscow encampment in his novel *Doctor Zhivago*:

The large duck was an unheard of luxury in those already hungry days, but there was no bread to go with it, and because of this its splendor was somehow pointless—it even got on one’s nerves. But the saddest thing of all was that their party was a kind of betrayal. You could not imagine anyone in the houses across the street eating or drinking in the same way at the same time. Beyond the windows lay silent, dark, hungry Moscow. Its shops were empty, and as for game and vodka, people had even forgotten to think about such things. And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not even happiness, so that duck and vodka, when they seem to be the only ones in town, are not even duck and vodka. And that was most vexing of all.⁵⁸

The point is that genuine celebrations - be they liturgies or family meals and parties - must grow out of life and help people return to life with deeper understanding, renewed strength, and invigorated hope.⁵⁹ In many ways, it is a person’s life that makes genuine celebrations possible, but the converse is also true. Human life is made possible by celebrations. To put that in the language of liturgical theology, liturgy is expressive of life but it is also constitutive of life on deeper and deeper levels. The order of prayer is not only the order of believing; it is also the order of right living.⁶⁰ Likewise the order of believing is also the order of praying and living in accord with that pray.”. What is it, then, that Christians believe concerning peace, how do we celebrate that peace liturgically, and what implications do Christian beliefs and celebrations concerning peace have for the way we should live?

⁵⁷ Published in *Worship* 56:2 (1982), 152-172.

⁵⁸ Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 175.

⁵⁹ See Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965).

⁶⁰ See Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 218-82, 399-434.

-Priesthood -Light

“Living with Tensions in the Ordained Priesthood”

In our sometimes-darkened world, people look to and expect their ordained priests to be sources of light in their lives. However, priests themselves are also in need of light. Robert Bela Wilhelm, a well-known storyteller, recounts a simple tale that focuses on light.

In the beginning, when the Great Spirit created all that is, the each animal received a Cedar Box containing a special gift. One by one, the animals opened their boxes. The first contained water, the second mountains, the third the seeds of all things that grow, and the fourth box contained the wind to carry the seeds.

All the boxes were opened except the one given to Sea Gull, who took his box and hid it under his wings. “It’s mine,” he exclaimed. Now in his box was all the light of the world. Since Sea Gull wouldn’t open his box, in the beginning there was darkness

The animals all pleaded with Sea Gull.

Rabbit said, “If there is no light, how will the grass grow and how will I eat?”

Robin said, “If there is no light, how will my breast become red?”

Fox said, “If there is no light, how can I see the burr in my tail?”

Bear said, “If there is no light, how can I tell a friend from a foe to invite into my home?”

But the more they pleaded, the tighter Sea Gull held onto his box.

Finally, crafty Raven tried his hand. He flattered Sea Gull, but that didn’t work.

He got angry and threatened him, but that didn’t work.

Raven thought and thought: “Sea Gull is causing a lot of trouble for everyone; he deserves to have a thorn stuck in his foot!”

All of a sudden, Sea Gull gave a cry. “What’s the matter?” Raven asked. “My foot! It hurts.” “Let me see,” said Raven.

Raven felt until he came to the place where the thorn was, and he pushed it in further, so that Sea Gull cried even more. “I’m sorry, Sea Gull,” said Raven. “I could see better, if only I had some light.”

Sea Gull opened the box ever so slightly, and some tiny lights floated up into the sky and became stars. Raven squinted, felt around again, and again pushed the thorn in deeper.

Sea Gull cried out, but Raven said, “I’m sorry, Sea Gull, but there still isn’t quite enough light. Open the box some more so I can see.”

Sea Gull lifted one wing and the lid opened more. A light floated upwards, and lo, there was the moon in the sky along with the stars.

Once more, Raven bent over and looked, once more felt around and this time he gave such a mighty push to the thorn that Sea Gull screamed and flapped open both wings. The box fell down, the lid fell off, and suddenly the sun streamed out in a great burst. There was light, and light put an end to the chaos.

Wilhelm concludes: “If you watch where Sea Gull lives, you’ll see him standing with one foot in the air.”

All of life depends on light, and light that is given is light that must be shared.

-Suffering

“*Pentecost: We Are Temples of the Holy Spirit*”

Sir Edward Elgar, the distinguished British composer, once listened admiringly to a young singer with a beautiful voice and superb technique. “She is good,” he said, “but not yet great. She will, however, be great, when something happens to break her heart.”⁶¹

In a similar vein, there is the account of Antonín Dvořák’s struggle to complete his exquisite choral setting of the *Stabat Mater*, the medieval Latin sequence about the sorrowing of the Blessed Mother at the foot of the cross of Jesus. In 1875, Dvořák and his wife lost a child, Josefa, two days after her birth. The husband and father turned his mind to the text of the *Stabat Mater* and attempted to turn his grief into music but he was not able to complete the work.

It was not until two years later that further tragedy impelled him to return to the composition. Within the space of a month, Dvořák had lost another baby daughter, eleven-month-old Rose, to accidental poisoning on August 13, and his three-year-old son, Otakar, to smallpox on September 8.

Dvořák’s *Stabat Mater*, like his *Requiem*, is a death-haunted but profoundly moving work.⁶² By a mysterious alchemy, this musical genius and deeply religious man was able to change his leaden sorrow into passionately beautiful and transcendent music. Like an exquisite pearl, which comes to birth by the introduction of some irritating and alien stimulant into the oyster, Dvořák’s choral composition is deeply rooted in the intense suffering that lay behind the composition. His work shows how intimately related pain and redemptive beauty often are. . . .

Jesus himself never gave a satisfactory explanation of suffering in the world, especially the suffering that comes from natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornados, droughts, and floods. He did, however, teach us how we should respond to pain, including the suffering that comes from natural disasters. When pain strikes, we are often paralyzed, so we have to wait in patience to gain some perspective. Being broken and mysteriously put together again is the universal experience of people born in time. As Eugene O’Neill wrote, “We are born broken; we live by mending; the grace of God is the glue.”⁶³ There are, however, no easy solutions to our struggles with pain. What we sometimes discover, however, is that when our hearts are broken, there is more room in them for God and for others.

It is surely not surprising that in a world that has been scarred by the concentration camps in Germany and Poland, the horrors of atomic warfare in Japan, the folly of the wars in Vietnam, Europe, Africa, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iraq, as well as the tragedies in Northern Ireland and the Holy Land, many people are so jaded that they have turned away from God and the possibility that life has any meaning. Yet, as people look back on the experience of tragedies, they sometimes sense that in mysterious

⁶¹ Mary Craig, *Blessings* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000), 139.

⁶² Klaus Doge, “Dvořák, Antonin,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 7, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Grove’s Dictionaries Inc., 2001), 791.

⁶³ Craig, *Blessings*, 139.

ways good has come out of evil. As C. S. Lewis claimed, “Pain is God’s megaphone to arouse a deaf world.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 122.

-Death –Life -Loss

“*Death: The Port of Entry to New Life*”

In Mary Gordon’s novel *Final Payments*, Isabel Moore, the principal character, is a young woman who cared for her invalid father until he died. Then at thirty, she finds herself standing before his open grave with an open life before her. She adjusts rather well until a man whom she loves asks that they commit themselves to each other and to a new life together. Frightened by the prospect of a lifetime commitment, Isabel withdraws into depression and goes to care for an elderly woman who was one of her father’s close friends. Initially it seemed better to care for a self-preoccupied, self-pitying person in a deadening environment than to run the risk of appropriating new life which is always ambiguous and therefore often threatening. Finally, she resolves the crisis and takes on the challenge:

That night I thought of what I had come here to get away from. I had promised Margaret I would stay with her as an acknowledgment of my own dying. . . . It came to me that life was monstrous; what you loved you were always in danger of losing. The greatest love meant only, finally, the greatest danger. That was life; life was monstrous. But it was life I wanted. . . . Life and loss.⁶⁵

With poignancy, Isabel affirms the paradox that on one level human life, if it is really life, is always accompanied by loss, and this loss is inevitably linked with death. When we consume animals that have been killed for our use, we implicitly acknowledge that our life is preferred to theirs. Frequently we eat what would have engendered new life or sustained the life of another living being. When we ensure our own lives and our own survival, it seems we often take or diminish the life of another being. In every experience of nourishment there is the experience of death as a prerequisite; every struggle for life implies a victory conditioned by death. As Rabindranath Tagore wrote, “Death belongs to life as birth does. The walk is in raising the step and also in laying it down.”⁶⁶

In recent decades, there has been extensive documentation on death and dying. Fiction too has often focused on the experience. For example, in her novel *A Reckoning* May Sarton, the New England writer, gave the reader the opportunity to experience death and dying through the eyes and heart of a wise and endearing woman as she “lives her dying.”

Since Laura Spelman learned she had inoperable cancer, her one wish was to be allowed to die in her own way, with as little medical intervention as possible. She looked on this last illness as a journey during which she had to reckon up her life, give up the nonessentials, and concentrate on what she called “the real connections.” Laura tells her son that dying is the most interesting thing she had ever done.⁶⁷

Sarton describes a difficult and painful journey which the reader shares, but strangely enough, it is not a depressing one, as little by little Laura comes to understand herself and learns to “let go.” She hears the call of death— “Come after me”—and she answers. She abandons all her nets and follows the

⁶⁵ Mary Gordon, *Final Payments* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1978), 294-95.

⁶⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1967), 70.

⁶⁷ Mary Sarton, *A Reckoning* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), 216-18.

call into the future. Learning how to die and how to live—isn't that the lesson that human life seeks to teach all of us?

-Service –Love –Forgiveness –Compassion –Mystical Body –Kingdom of God

“Coming of the Kingdom”

In *Beyond Love*, a challenging account of one of the Mother Teresa’s Sisters of Charity, Dominique Lapierre movingly memorializes Christ’s humble service of all who suffer

Lapierre tells the story of Ananda, a thirteen-year-old Indian girl born into the lowest and most impure cast in the Hindu hierarchy. She spent her days searching for treasures in the putrid Ganges River near Benares, thickened by the ashes of the deceased who were cremated by her father nearby. With luck, she might find a ring, a religious pendant, a gold tooth. When she reached puberty, her father found her a future husband but at the same time, she discovered a strange blemish, insensitive to touch, on her cheek.

Her mother sent her to an old quack who examined the young girl. “There is no ointment to cure this disease,” he said softly. “It’s leprosy.”

Born into the lowest caste, Ananda was now doubly impure. In the presence of the whole family, her father pointed to the door of the house and announced, “The gods have cursed you. You have no place here. Go!”

Driven into the streets of Benares, she was picked up by a pimp who never noticed the blotch on her cheek. Like thousands of other poor Indian girls, she was marketed as a prostitute until she finally escaped. In desperation one day, she sought help at the Benares dispensary run by Mother Teresa’s Sisters of Charity. There she was welcomed, finally cured of her leprosy, loved back into humanity, initiated into the Catholic Church, and eventually professed as one of the Sisters on December 8, 1985. After her profession, she was sent along with four other Sisters to minister at the hospice for AIDS patients that Cardinal John O’Connor had opened in New York City.

Terry Miles, the clinic coordinator, was proud of his nurses in their saris, but he never suspected the torments that sometimes beset those women. One morning during prayer in chapel, one of the Sisters broke into sobs. “I can’t take it anymore,” she moaned through her tears. “We’re not being asked to look after lepers or people who are dying, but real monsters, pariahs that God has cursed, outcasts that God has punished for their sins. It’s beyond me to respect and love them.”

Sister Paul, the superior took the Sister in her arms, wiped away her tears, and tried to calm her. “It’s because God has punished them that we must offer Him their suffering and ours.”

It was then that Sister Ananda intervened. “These men are neither monsters nor hopeless sinners. They’re victims. I have lived through some of their moral and physical degradation. I’ve been abused as many of them have been abused. No, little Sister, their illness isn’t a punishment, but the proof that God loves them as God loved Jesus, as God loves me, and God loves you too in your anguish.”⁶⁸

Ananda had learned the gospel message of Jesus well. There is no place for finger pointing, no time for harsh judgment. We are all called at all times to conversion. As Paul told the Church at Corinth,

⁶⁸ Dominique Lapierre, *Beyond Love*, (New York: Warner Books, 1991), 358.

“If one member suffers, all the other members suffer too; if one flourishes, all rejoice together.” (1 Cor 12:26).

God took on human flesh in Jesus and sent his Spirit upon all of us so that we all might become members of the Body of Christ. His Mystical Body brings together . . . friends from a soup kitchen in Dublin, a battered woman and her children from a shelter in Liverpool, a black man unjustly imprisoned in Nashville, Tennessee, a teenaged runaway from Covenant House in New York City. Membership in that Body is not offered to the complacent, the self-centered, and self-satisfied, but only to those who are compassionate and suffer along with all those who suffer.” Just as you did for the least of my family, you did for me.” It is there - in the poor, the lonely, the sick, the marginalized - that we find the true reign of God and the coming of God’s Kingdom.

-Love -Forgiveness

“Love is the Strangest Thing”

Abraham Verghese has written a powerful book that illustrates the human ability to love and forgive that is almost beyond reason. It is called *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story* and takes place in Johnson City, a small town in the Smoky Mountains of eastern Tennessee, a town that had always seemed exempt from the anxieties of modern American life. Then, on August 11, 1985, the local hospital treated its first AIDS patient, and before long, a crisis that had once seemed an urban problem had arrived in the town to stay.

Dr. Verghese was a young Indian doctor specializing in infectious diseases. He became by necessity the local AIDS expert, soon besieged by a shocking number of male and female patients whose stories came to occupy his mind and heart and even take over his life. Verghese brought a unique perspective to Johnson City: as a medical practitioner competent in his specialization, as an outsider who could talk compassionately to people suspicious of local prejudiced and narrow-minded doctors and nurses, above all as a human being of grace and understanding who saw that what was happening in this conservative community was not only a medical emergency but also a deeply spiritual challenge.

Though he never called it grace, Verghese sensed that there was some powerful force, some gift that often operated in the life of his patients in a most mysterious way. Moreover, he came to see himself somehow as a humble instrument through which that power operated.

Among his patients was a simple, poor, uneducated couple, Clyde and Vicki. Clyde was bisexual, had contracted AIDS, and ended up infecting both his wife and his wife's sister with the same dreadful disease. Yet Vicki stood firmly by his side. When it was clear after months of intense suffering that Clyde was fading rapidly, she was adamant that he should die at home, in the bedroom of their trailer with the whole family at his side.

After Clyde died, Vicki told her doctor friend, “All I could think was, Oh, God, it's here, and it's here. I sent my cousin to the school to fetch Danielle because Danielle had very much wanted to be there when her Daddy died. Danielle was my partner, helping me take care of her Daddy all those days. . . . I decided that she was old enough for that if that was what she wanted. We were both there at his side, talking to him, telling him how much we loved him, each one of us holding his hand. He opened his big eyes once and saw us both and for just a moment, it seemed like it was the old Clyde behind those eyes. He wanted to say something to us but he couldn't. I knew he was scared—I'd been married to the man so long I could read his mind. I said to him, ‘It's all right, sweetheart. Go on. It's all right. God loves you. He will take care of you. Jesus will take care of you. Go on.’ He opened his eyes a few minutes later, as if he'd seen or heard something else right above him, and that was it. We were there when he took his last breath.”⁶⁹

A few months after Clyde died, Dr. Verghese asked Vicki a question that had nagged him: How was it that she managed to retain so much love for Clyde? In her journals and her poems, which she shared

⁶⁹ Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 355.

with the doctor, and in the pictures on the wall, she had memorialized him. Yet this was the man who gave her a disease that might take away her life and make her children orphans.

Vicki's face took on a teary-eyed, somewhat shamed expression as she said, "I don't know. I can't explain it. . . . See Abraham," she said, "I know. I can't explain it. . . . See Abraham," she said, "I don't understand how he was able to attract those women, how I ever forgave him. . . . And I don't know why I still love him, but I do. . . . It's the strangest thing."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ibid., 414

-Kingdom of God –Christ in others

“Coming of the Kingdom,”

Standing outside the Church of Christ the King in Las Vegas, Nevada, are three huge Indiana limestone blocks from which Joseph O’Connell has chiseled the “Coming of the Kingdom.” It is a powerful piece of art inspiring a sense of mystery and awe in those who enter the church.

O’Connor was a sculptor who lived in Collegeville, Minnesota, for many years, was an artist in residence at the College of Saint Benedict, and died of cancer of the esophagus shortly after he finished his work for the Nevada parish in 1995. There are two long, horizontal rectangles facing a tall, vertical panel in the center of the triptych. The middle panel depicts Christ, with a strong but gentle face and large, out-stretched hands, sitting on a donkey. With a face set like flint, he looks to the future. There is not a trace of pity or anger in that face, simply conviction, courage, and wonder. That is amazing, for what he sees on either side are the victims of human cruelty and privation—and he is soon to be a victim of that cruelty himself, that same cowardice which prefers power and prestige to honesty and oppression and cruelty to human rights. O’Connor chose a very difficult, strictly frontal perspective in order to show Christ entering the city of Jerusalem, our city, and heading straight down what we today would call Avenue of Despair or the City of Shattered Dreams.

In the Synoptic accounts of Jesus entering Jerusalem the disciples of Jesus bring him a tethered colt, a donkey, to ride into the city. The gospel text recalls how Solomon rode to his anointing as king plodding along on a donkey, a humble work animal, not on a powerful warrior’s charger. (1 Kgs 1:38) This mode of travel would have reminded Solomon that his primary work was the defense of the poor and disadvantaged and a search for peace not war. . . .

It is quite likely that the crowds who accompanied Jesus were people like Bartimaeus: the poor, the sick, the outcasts who were touched by Jesus and who joined the jubilant pilgrims who were coming up to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. As we join in the Palm Sunday celebration, are we among the people whose eyes have been opened, people whose paralysis has been cured, folks whose hearts have been opened because of our life of Christian conversion?⁷¹

In O’Connor’s sculpture, quite a sad lot of wretched folk emerges from the two side panels. They certainly are not gathered to welcome anyone, definitely not Jesus Christ. They are simply a motley collection of miserable humanity, each overwhelmed with a sad but very heavy burden. A man’s hand reaches through iron bars to touch the shoulder of a woman who stands erect and tight-lipped against the prison wall, infant in arms and a little ragged girl clutching her skirts. A prostitute and her child drained of any interest in life or hope for the future, stares into the street through a broken pane of their upstairs window. An emaciated boy fingers his empty rice bowl. A teenage runaway huddles in a cubicle hiding from all possible horrors yet open to everything because nothing really matters. Then there is a row of homeless people with listless eyes, half-wild and weary, half-cunning and crafty, each searching for a patch of space. A long column of human heads, each blindfolded, gagged, or constrained in some way,

⁷¹ Verna Holyhead, *Saving the Seed* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 45-46.

hem in another man stretched out on a sack. Especially shocking, there is a Christmas nativity scene in reverse: a pathetic couple grieving over their dead child, attended only by a mangy cat, a scrawny dog, and a rat. These are the stone faces of the imprisoned, the silenced and the mute, the abused, the blind and the blinded, the homeless, widowed, orphaned people, refugees and prisoners of conscience, all starved in spirit and body. These are the least of our sisters and brothers but our brothers and sisters nonetheless. These are the people whose company we would probably not choose to keep, and yet as we stand before the triptych, we find ourselves drawn into the midst of these poor, pathetic souls. Even the donkey seems somewhat dismayed by what lies before him, yet he carries the King of Kings whose words are inscribed in deep letters at the head of one of the panels: “Just as you did for the least of my family you did for me. I was hungry, you gave me food; thirsty, you gave me drink; a stranger, you welcomed me; naked, you clothed me; sick, you took care of me; in prison and you visited me.”⁷²

⁷² Colman O’Connell, ed., *Divine Favor: The Art of Joseph O’Connell* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 98-105.

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