



## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# Dollar Friends

I don't know how I lived for more than five and a half decades without encountering a poem by Robert Frost called "Christmas Trees," but I did. Now that I have found it, I manage to see it everywhere. That is so typical of our awareness, isn't it? You can go forever without seeing something that has probably been right under your nose all along. When you have seen it once, it becomes your new best friend. That happens to me all the time when I'm proofreading something. When I first read it, it looks perfect; once I find a mistake, I find a hundred of them. Go figure.

"Christmas Trees" is about a man who wants to buy Frost's forest of balsam trees to sell as Christmas trees in the city, and he wants to pay a mere \$30 for a thousand of them. "But," the poet reflects, "thirty dollars seemed so small beside/ The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents/ (For that was all they figured out apiece), / Three cents so small beside the dollar friends/ I should be writing to within the hour."

Sometimes a poet's turn of phrase so captivates your mind and heart that it literally (no pun intended) changes your whole perspective. The

phrase "dollar friends" stopped me in my tracks. Its two words were a paragraph, a chapter, an entire novel. Dollar friends. Now there was something to think about.

What if you had a dollar for every person who came into your life during this past year? Wouldn't you consider yourself very rich, indeed? "Yes," you say, "but some of those people were drains on my assets." Fine, but didn't each one of them—even the liabilities—leave you richer in wisdom, making you a Solomon of understanding and insight? Every person who crosses our path brings another aspect of our diversified world and makes us richer than we were before. No matter whether we see them every day, see them once a year or never see them at all, those who directly or indirectly enter into our lives touch us in a special way, broadening and deepening our appreciation of life. Each of them is a "dollar friend" whose name you can include on your Christmas list of thankfulness.

And you—you are a dollar friend yourself. Whether you realize it or not, there are countless people whose lives you have touched this year, to whom you have been a "dollar friend." Let me

give you an example. I may never hear from you but the very fact that you are there, picking up this newspaper every month and reading this column, makes you a very special person to me. Without you, there would be no purpose in writing it. By the same token, you have no idea how your prayers this year have touched someone you've never met; how your kind words repeated or overheard have brought light into someone else's life; how your good thoughts have cheered the downcast heart of a person far away. Now add in all of the people whom you have met this year; and it's clear—you are indeed a "dollar friend."

This Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of the greatest "Dollar Friend" of all, let's remember how very rich we are, despite the bad economic news we are given. Being rich in friends is among God's greatest gifts. May you be warmed and blessed by this thought during the Christmas Season, and may you have a Blessed and Merry Christmas.

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# November and the Oil of Gladness

November traditionally is the month when we remember those who have gone before us through death into eternal life. The month begins with the feasts of All Saints and All Souls. November 11 is Veterans Day, calling to mind those who have died in the service of their country and honoring their sacrifice. Throughout the month we make a special point of remembering our beloved deceased in our Masses and prayers, acknowledging that we miss them but at the same time commemorating their journey into eternal life. There is an intriguing interfusion of solemnity and celebration in the month of November.

November is also a month of transition, when fall begins to pass the baton to winter. Time and eternity commingle. By now, the trees are bare, the temperatures tend to be colder, and earth is gradually slipping into its great sleep. The world feels more solemn now. And still, there begin the winter celebrations. Thanksgiving Day is a day of glorious gratitude to God for the blessings we have received. Later, on the last day of November this year, we bless the Advent wreath and light its very first candle. Thus begins the gradual ascent of lights until, in four weeks, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world.

Solemnity and celebration often go hand in hand, and I was never more poignantly reminded of this than on a recent Sunday afternoon when I visited a nursing home to administer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick to a beautiful young woman in her early 90s. She and all of her family are devout Catholics, and one of her sons had approached me about the possibility of her receiving the sacrament. I went to the nursing home not quite knowing what to expect. The last time I had seen her, she had been lethargic and not very responsive; and, knowing that family members were coming, I was afraid it might be a very somber occasion.

Not to worry. When I got to her room, I found a radiant queen surrounded by her sons, her daughter, a daughter-in-law, her grandson and his wife and their beautiful little girl. She was having the time of her life. It was, I was told, the first time in a long time that she had been so vibrant, so joyous, so full of laughter. It was like Mother's Day all over again. Her chattering and her angelic smile broke through even during the readings, prayers and anointing. It was perfectly wonderful, and I couldn't help thinking about the Bible's mention of "the oil of gladness." It was a touching, solemn moment, but a deeply peaceful and happy one as

well.

Of all the times I have celebrated the anointing of the sick, that one was clearly the happiest. Yet, thinking back, I have never administered that sacrament without there being that very same sense of the peace of Christ enshrouding the one being anointed. In emergency rooms, in surgical theaters, in sickrooms, in churches—no matter how quiet or how chaotic the circumstances, tranquility has always broken through, leaving all around awash in grace.

Perhaps the month of November and the sacrament of the anointing of the sick have a common lesson to teach us. By God's grace, solemnity and joy go hand in hand. Knowing this when we are feeling solemn, we can look for a silver thread of joy and peace. When feeling cheerful, we can mark the sublimity of the happy moment as it takes us all the way to God, who is the source of life itself.

As the multicolors adorn the autumn leaves, so do joy and solemnity, time and eternity, mix and mingle as they grace our lives with the variegated shades of God.

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# Just Imagine

It's Halloween's month; and, whatever our feelings about observing the night before All Saints' Day, I am sure we have all had the experience of being in a very eerie place, hearing a strange and scary noise, and having someone say to us, "Relax, it's just your imagination."

Just your imagination. How quick we are to dismiss one of the finest gifts in God's repertoire of blessings bestowed upon us. The imagination is highly underrated; but, in fact, it is a gift that enables us to manifest our status as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. The book of Genesis shows our Creator to be the Great Imaginer, who, before he creates things and declares them to be "good and very good," imagines them, holds them in his mind and enjoys them there in their pristine virtual being. If to forgive is divine, as Alexander Pope so quotably decreed, it is because forgiveness is fueled by imagination—God has a vested interest in seeing us perfect rather than miserable and broken.

One reason we so often discount the importance of imagination is that we tend to associate it with pretending, and we so often mistake the meaning of the word "pretend." We treat "pretend" as

though it meant "make-believe," when actually its roots are nobler by far.

Etymologically, "pretend" means "to extend beforehand"—literally to stretch something out before it even exists. A grandmother holds her infant granddaughter in her arms and enjoys envisioning her future before a moment of it has been lived. A mountaineer delights in his conquest of the peak before he sets out on his journey.

That's pretending, in the richest sense of the word. It's taking delight in the possibility of what is yet undone. If we had more respect for pretending, surely we would hold imagination in higher regard. It is so much more than weaving fancies and spinning daydreams.

Autumn is rife with imagination, a magnificent tribute to the resourcefulness of God. Who but God would ever think to pack such awesome beauty into the process of winding down the seasons? Just as at Cana, God has saved the best wine until last. Even fall's cloudy days have a lustrous silvery sheen about them that, to the discriminating soul, is more than a mere "dreary gray." As for the multicolored beauty of the leaves, who would have thought that the color green would yield to

such a variety of shades?

On crisp fall days, we hover between the warmth of summer and the chill of winter, aware that the air has shades of its own. Why, we might well wonder, do we insist on counting "degrees" as measures of temperature rather than as the sliding scales of texture, tone and variegation that the truly connote?

Yes, autumn is a time of high imagining. It is arguably the Creator's finest hour. Can you see him, in your mind's eye, at the dawn of Creation stretching before himself his plans for the Universe—pre-tending—and smiling ever so elatedly at his designs for the fall?

Rejoice in autumn. Instead of feeling sorry the summer is over and winter is beginning, take a lesson from nature's book (pardon the pun). Just as the green leaf weaves itself a coat of many colors, so the perceived inevitability of the moment can fashion, new tints, new tones and new possibilities.

How can you realize them?

Just imagine.

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# Recapitulation

Life never ceases to be amazing. For some reason, people have been resurfacing in my life whom I have not seen or heard from in a very long time. It's happened several times in the past few weeks. Many of these people are old friends with whom I had fallen out of touch in the past few years. Some I had not heard from in two decades. I suppose I could include in this the invitation I received to the 40th anniversary reunion of my high school class back in Kansas City. The invitation contained names of people whom I had long forgotten. It's been interesting to see this parade of people, names and faces marching across my line of vision and reconnecting with me.

There's a phenomenon in poetry and music known as "recapitulation." It involves taking a theme that has occurred at the beginning of a work, returning to that theme, and then transforming it into a higher notion or expression. A less sophisticated, but no less important, variation on this occurs when our favorite sportscaster provides us with a "recap" at the end of a game. Often this means reviewing the highlights of the game, adding the important statistics, and giving us a sense of what the game means in terms of our

favorite team's performance this season. Nowadays, this usually constitutes what is known as the "postgame show," although the same material will inevitably find its way into the "pregame show" of tomorrow.

That's the sense I have of this interesting return of long-lost people into my life. Life is providing me a sort of recapitulation—a chance to look at some of the previous moments in my life with an eye to letting them teach me something about the future, even about the eternal. That's not an unusual thing for someone at my stage of life. It adds a certain depth to life, a sense that the past can be surpassed without being lost altogether.

September is often a time of recapitulation. The brilliant colors of the leaves summarize and bring to a crescendo the arboreal work of spring and summer, and their demise gives birth to the lengthy sleep of winter in preparation for another year. As the September Song says, "It's a long, long time from May to December;" and September crystallizes that passage of time and transforms it into a thing of wonder.

Recapitulation has its joys, of course; but it can also have its sorrows. This September we mark the second anniversary of September 11, 2001. For

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those of us who lost loved ones on that tragic day, this is a poignant time. For many, the feelings of loss seem keener than ever before. Who was it that told us that time would bring comfort? The memories are there. Their crescendo is palpably there. But where is the transformation into a lasting, higher meaning? For many at this time of year, that meaning seems very far away.

Perhaps we would do well to consider two special gifts September brings us. Sept. 8 is the feast of the Birthday of Mary and Sept. 15 is the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. There's an old saying that if you're worried about getting into heaven, just go around to the back door and Mary will let you in. At a time when many find comfort elusive, we can "go around to the back door" and bask in the love of the Mother who knows sorrow intimately and who showers her love and understanding upon those who suffer. Recapitulating the sad days of two years ago under her guidance can give us a place for our grief, a place in which to feel understood. She has been there. She knows. And she reaches out with love.

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# The Power of the Wish

Recently, a friend told me about a gentleman she had just met who, at age 94, had made three wishes. One, he wanted to live to be 100. Two, on his next birthday, he wanted to see some Civil War cannons that had been refurbished and reinstalled in the town square. Three, he wanted to meet someone who would discuss philosophy with him.

This old gentleman has stumbled upon one of the great secrets of life—the power of the wish. Looking at the content of his wishes, it seems to me that each of them has a rare quality about it. Let's face it, not everyone wants to be 100. Probably even fewer people are interested in refurbished cannons. And in my experience, there are not very many people who ask to discuss philosophy with you. Politics, yes. Baseball, maybe. But philosophy, that's a whole other ball game.

But from what I gather, the uniqueness of his wishes does not deter this wonderful old gentleman from his overall love of life. Confidently, he expressed his desires to my friend and then let go of them and basked in the delight of wishing.

It's clear to me that here is a man who understands the power of the wish. Most people, when they wish, associate wishing with not having. "I

wish I had a bigger income," they say, "or a larger house or better job." For many of us, wishing is a discouraging experience, because it reminds us of what we do not have.

This hale old fellow has no such idea about his wishes. They are grounded in a wondrous admiration of the things he wishes for and a powerful confidence in life's propensity to fulfill our wishes. He is already feasting upon the things he is wishing for as he thinks about them and talks about them. His joy in them is real already. That's the secret of effective wishing, because it keeps you focused on the richness of life; and that, in turn, creates fulfillment.

Is this remarkable man at all religious? I really don't know. But I do know that, somehow, he has managed to learn one of the great secrets Jesus taught about wishes. One of Jesus' great wishes for his disciples was that "my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Jesus knew—and wanted his followers to know—that joy comes from a sense of fullness; and he wanted their joy to be complete.

When Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fishes, it was he who gave thanks for them and fed the crowd, while those around him thought up all the

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reasons it couldn't be done. Where others saw an empty field, it was Jesus who said, "Look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest" (John 4:35). When the disciples were afraid because he was leaving them, it was Jesus who told them, "I am going to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2), and "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

By sharing his absolute conviction about fullness, Jesus made it possible for us to shift our wishing, indeed, our prayer, from lack to fullness, and to complete our sense of joy. In life, we may experience disappointment and heartache, but we don't have to dwell on lack. It is the joy right within our wishing that fuels our wishes, propels them and allows us to entertain within ourselves the gift of expectancy.

I am grateful for knowing about this nonagenarian and for the friend who told me about him. He teaches us much about the power of the wish, the fuel of gratitude, and the energy of expectation. Put them all together, and they spell joy. Put them all together, and they spell the mind and heart of Christ.

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# Angel of Patience

Not long ago, a friend visiting from another country gave me an angel statue as a present. It was the Angel of Patience, a pretty, pensive angel leant forward on her legs, paying rapt attention to the world before her. I loved this angel on sight, and placed her in a window where she could look

out at the beauty of the world.

Reflecting on my new angelic friend gave me the opportunity to think about the virtue which she represents. When I was a child, my grandmother used to recite a poem that was meant to arouse the virtue of patience in me. "Patience is a virtue," Nana would

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That, I think, is the deepest and truest meaning of patience—the recognition that right now we have the presence of God in our souls and that, therefore, we require no external good to fill us up and no distraction can deter us.

The glow on the face of my Angel of Patience reminds me that since we are made in God's image and likeness, and everything good comes from him, there is nothing we can ever lack, nor can anything disturb our true identity as children of God. It teaches me to look beyond appearances of lack, diminishment and disturbance and to discover instead the reality of the loving presence of God in the beatific sacredness of the present moment.

To have patience in the ordinary senses of the word, we have to have the deep underlying assurance that, despite the appearances, all is well. Without that blessed assurance, we can have only impatience and its concomitant sense of lack, disappointment and frustration. Patience is more than putting up with bad situations. The roots of patience stretch all the way back to God, without whom there is no reason for patience and no hope of anything more than the apparent imperfection of the here and now.

So I watch my Angel of Patience beam on sunny days and on cloudy days, and her expression never changes. She glows in the daytime and she glows at night. A true angel, she is God's messenger to me that God is all in all, and that is that.

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say. "Have it if you can. Sometimes seen in women. But never seen in man." Family lore has it that Nana was not always the most patient of women. But she was patient with my cousins and me and truly adored her grandchildren.

We usually think of patience as the virtue of waiting calmly for something to happen. As children, our patience grew less each day as we wondered what presents the approaching Christmas Day might bring. Later, when we took important exams, we waited patiently, albeit nervously, for our results to arrive. Later still, we went on job interviews, and sat patiently by the telephone waiting to learn whether we had been accepted for the position.

Patience is also associated with the knack of keeping calm in the face of a difficult situation. How many parents have told their children, "You're trying my patience!" Teachers can find it difficult to be patient with students who clearly lack interest in their subject. When we're sick, it's often hard to be patient with doctors and nurses who probe us, poke at us and make us take horrible-tasting medications.

My Angel of Patience is clearly unlike either of those two "usual" definitions of patience. As I watch her, I become aware that perhaps there is another definition of patience, one which surpasses the other two. The radiance of my angel's face reflects neither the doubt-ridden anticipation of something that has yet to happen, nor the forced composure one dons in the face of adversity. No, hers is the rapture of one who knows that she is currently in the presence of everything she ever wanted or dreamed of.

# Embarking the Ark

Writing a monthly column has its advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is that you never know, when you are writing, just how the world is going to be when the column goes to press. The up side is that the writer is more inclined to focus on things that endure rather than on events that come and go. This is especially good because it bestows upon both writer and reader a certain discipline of thought—the habit of deliberately seeking out the eternal in the ever-shifting morass that daily life can be.

More and more these days, I find myself turning to the biblical story of Noah's ark (Genesis 6:1—9:17) for inspiration. Maybe it's because of all the bad weather we experienced this past winter. Perhaps it's because the economy is bad, we have been at war, and a lot of people are out of work or worried about losing their jobs. There are plenty of reasons these days to invoke the saying, "When it rains, it pours." And that's where the story of Noah's ark comes in—with its 40 days and 40 nights of rain.


The story says that God, who was angry over the corruption of the world and wanted to

destroy it, caused the rain. Some people will argue about whether God would punish the world like that. One thing we can say for sure is that when we are going through desperate times, we often feel as if God were punishing us or at least allowing us to be punished. Difficult times are times of pruning, and I think we can safely say that in ways that often we don't understand or appreciate, God will free us from certain attachments that have kept us from advancing on our spiritual journey.

But rain and destruction are by no means the entire story. Noah and his family and the animals in the ark remind us that God keeps safe the faithful spiritual aspect of ourselves that represents our true identity as his sons and daughters.

That's what the story means when it says, "God remembered Noah..." We remember what we cherish, what we want to keep safe. Through storms and peril, God will always keep our true identity safe. He will remember who we truly are, even if we should forget. In the end, when the floods recede, God renews his bond with Noah, promises his continued spiritual safety and invites him to rebuild his world. After their world has

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fallen apart, people often find their bond with God strengthened. That becomes their center and their strength as they move forward to rebuild their lives.

People often ask, "Why the animals?" Two things occur to me. As an animal lover, I have a special fondness for a God who saves animals from destruction. The presence of the animals evokes the love of God. Also, the animals were part of God's plan for rebuilding the earth. As such they remind us that God always gives us everything we need to do his work. Noah's family is part of that same divine providence, as well as being a reminder that in times of trouble, the loved ones who stay close to us are a wonderful gift from God.

The story of Noah can give us great hope in these troubled times, when it rains and, indeed pours. Calling us from centuries ago, it allows us to discover eternal truths about ourselves and to take comfort that there is far more to life—and to us—than just the storms.

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## From Lent to Easter

**I** used to wake up at 4 a.m. and start sneezing, sometimes for five hours," said author and cartoonist James Thurber. "I tried to find out what sort of allergy I had but finally came to the conclusion that it must be an allergy to consciousness."

Making our way through Lent, the Sacred Triduum and the celebration of Easter can lead us to wonder whether we, too, might have an allergy to consciousness. Lent usually starts out very nicely. We pack ourselves into churches to receive ashes and we resolve to make this year's observance of Lent better than that of any other year. For a while, we do pretty well. By mid-Lent we find ourselves really struggling to keep up with our resolutions. By Holy Saturday, we're gazing at the clock, trying to figure out how many hours and minutes of penance are left.

It's not true of everyone, of course; but many of us, I think, recognize ourselves in the above description.

Lent is about approaching and breaking through into the risen life of Christ; and as such, it is no easy matter. Lent would be daunting enough if it were what it is so often said to be—a time for self-perfection and reform of life. But when we get to

its true purpose—"putting on the mind of Christ," to use St. Paul's phrase—it is no wonder that we find ourselves sneezing and itching and fidgeting at the prospect of putting on the mind of the Son of God. We long to go back to "ordinary time" and we wonder, will Lent (like the winter of 2003) ever be over?

Truth to tell, the "mid-Lent crisis" is a very telling part of our observance of Lent. It is a time when, despite the fact that we feel we are getting nowhere, we are actually beginning to get somewhere. For it is then that the things about our former selves that we wanted to change are beginning to fall away.

The boredom, the temptation, the frustration, the discouragement that we feel are not what they appear to be; rather, they are signs that at some level, we are becoming more aware of the powerful, peaceful presence of Christ. We are beginning to see the glow of the dawning new day for which we hoped, commencing to feel the love, to experience the peace of the Christ risen. Our spiritual allergies flare up because our old self knows that a significant part of it is being put out to pasture, and it is not happy about that. A new day is dawning; and, as St. John says, "the darkness cannot comprehend it."

By Easter, and after Easter, there is that wonderful breakthrough into the life of the Risen Christ. At first, it might be difficult for us to recognize what has happened, as indeed it was for the first disciples of Jesus—they needed a witness or a voice or an apparition or an angel to show them the difference. But when we see it, we will be drawn to say, with Thomas, "My Lord and My God!" If we meditate on those words for a while, we will certainly come to some understanding of the divine power that has grasped us and renewed us. Life is different. We are different. In the words of the venerable hymn, "The strife is o'er, the battle done."

Well, for a while, anyway. The mind of Christ is so vast that we will always be challenged in embracing it. But the point is that this year, next year, every year, we can win a victory in Christ. It means "hanging in there" during the seasonal allergies of the spirit, not giving in, not giving up, but persevering in the knowledge that the Christ in whom we grow is persevering right along with us and for us.

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# 'Rule in the Midst of Your Enemies'

Recently, I read a story about a young woman who complained to her mother that her life was unbearably difficult. The mother went to the kitchen and took two large pots of boiling water and dropped a carrot into one and an egg into the other. Then she ground up some coffee beans and boiled them in a coffee pot. A few minutes later, the mother and daughter inspected the results. The carrot had become mushy and soft. The egg had become hard. But the coffee beans had transformed the water into a delicious and aromatic pot of coffee.

The young woman learned that, in her difficult circumstances, she could become soft like the carrot or hard like the egg. Or, like the coffee beans, she could transform her circumstances in a wonderful way.

That story reminded me of a line from Psalm 110 that had caught my attention not long before: "Rule in the midst of your enemies." Though it's a command from God, it looks as though it's easier said than done. Sometimes our enemies are actual people; at other times they are situations, temptations or evil tendencies. However they manage to appear to us, their whole point is to tell us that they have power over us and that if we are not very careful

they will destroy us.

Their modus operandi is to make us believe that we are weak—indeed, that we are helpless to overcome them. If life becomes especially difficult, we can respond by becoming hardened ourselves, as we give in to frustration and resentment.

God's response to all of this? "Rule in the midst of your enemies." In other words, God does not expect or want us to give in to fear. Much less does he want us to become hardened or to lose heart. The psalm assures us that with his help, we have the power to resist those who try to intimidate us without yielding to either of those unsatisfying alternatives.

The expression "Rule in the midst of your enemies" is not a suggestion or a wish. It is not God's way of patting us on the back while leaving us to face an unfriendly world. No, it is actually a command from God. He truly wants us to be courageous in facing the fears we often feel in difficult situations and to learn how to transform our difficult circumstances according to our abilities as his sons and daughters.

It's a very empowering thought for us as we mark the season of Lent this year. During this time of prayer and penance, we can easily find ourselves feeling overwhelmed either by our past failures or

by harsh elements in our lives. However, we can recall that in the history of salvation, God's people were often tormented by those who claimed that they could destroy them. Jesus himself had a constant array of people in his life who sought to trap him in his speech. A major aspect of God's faithfulness has always been his promise—and his fulfillment of the promise—to stand by his people and be with them in time of trouble.

What does the command to rule in the midst of our enemies have to do with the commandment to love them? The answer is: rule them with love. Avoid backlash: if they browbeat you, don't browbeat them back. Remember who God is and who you are (his image and likeness). Stay in charge of the situation—treat your enemies as you wish to be treated, but be strong and loving. By such means, people have been known to turn enemies into friends and allies.

Whatever our situation, we can rule in the midst of our enemies. God has asked us to. He has promised us that we can. And with his help, we most certainly will.

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# Sanitizing God

SOME YEARS AGO, a friend sent me a plastic cat, a robotic replica of a kitty, that, when batteries were installed, rolled its eyes, meowed, purred, moved its tail and walked across the room. You could “train” the “kitty” to respond by petting it and talking to it.

My cats regarded the toy with typical feline indifference; they simply didn't have time for such nonsense. They knew a cat when they saw one, and that critter didn't make the cut. Not surprisingly, those real animals had more sense than the makers of the robotic kitty attributed to humans!

When I took science classes in school, I was taught that the purpose of science was to predict and control outcomes. Today, I know that the noblest and truest purpose of science is to open us to the source of truth. Yet most of us are steeped in that schoolchild's understanding of scientific purpose, and it works quite well in a society that prioritizes prediction and control.

For whom was the plastic kitty made? I suspect it was made, not for cat lovers, but for those who wanted the comfort of cats, but not their self-sufficiency, their choosy appetites and their tendency to turn favorite furniture into scratching posts. It was the perfect cat for those who did not like what was really most endearing about a real one.

Something similar happens when human beings

approach the mystery of God. We take an aspect of God that we like and attempt to discard the rest. The question of God's identity permeates the intellectual and religious history of humankind. The Hebrew Bible, Paul's epistles in the New Testament and the writings of St. Augustine, for example, show a centuries-long struggle between worshiping nature gods and cultural idols on the one hand, and finding and loving the one true God on the other.

It gets even more complicated than that. Success in identifying the one true God often turns into deeming him irrelevant. Writing in his “Notebook” toward the end of the 19th century, Chesterton remarked, “There is one kind of infidelity, blacker than all infidelities, worse than any blow of secularist, pessimist, atheist. It is that of those persons who regard God as an old institution.”

Writing in the second half of the 20th century, Thomas Merton, in “Zen and the Birds of Appetite,” warned of a tendency, not only within society at large, but also within Christianity, to render irrelevant the traditional mystical notion of a direct, personal experience of God, and to replace it with either self-awareness or an enlightened activism.

Remaking God, we commit the fallacy of prediction and control, “The Fallacy of Misplaced Omniscience.

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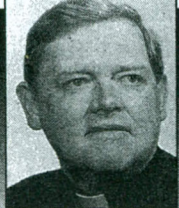


We want a God who is predictable and controllable, who, whatever we think him to be, will always be that and nothing else. Seasoned God-watchers know that this is but an effort to sanitize what is most endearing about the divinity: his infinite playfulness. But Chesterton, in his “Introduction to the Book of Job,” had it right: “The riddles of God,” he noted, “are more satisfying than the solutions of man.” Why do weary, dejected souls appear at the church door with their burdens? Because they know that it is in God's nature to break beyond the confines of their failed solutions, to comfort, and, above all, to surprise.

Who is God, really? I think back to a day, 2,000 years ago, when Jesus was visiting a temple and saw many come and go, including a poor widow who emptied her two last coins into the treasury. She knew that God was in her need and would be her plenty. She did not know then—I am sure she does now—that on that day, the Son of God stood behind her, taking note and granting her an everlasting remembrance.

Who would ever want to sanitize a God who loves so brilliantly?

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## Spiritual Matters

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# Time and the Spirit

**"I**s it my imagination," someone asked me recently, "or is time going by more quickly than ever?"

It's one of those questions I really can't answer, but it's one that I've been asked repeatedly in recent months. Can it be possible that we are beginning another New Year? It reminds me, in a way, of an old expression in the spiritual life, one that had once been in common usage, but which I have not heard for a very long time. The saying was "in the world, but not of it."

In Christianity, it meant that while we lived in the daily world and had responsibilities in it, we were not to treat the world as though it were our true home. Not being "of the world" meant realizing that our true happiness lay in our life in God, the spiritual life, and that our true destiny lay not here on earth, but in heaven.

We stopped using that expression, I think, because some found it too "other-worldly." Without denying our spiritual destiny, they emphasized that it was precisely through accepting our divine calling to "fill the earth and subdue it" that we found our spiritual fulfillment.

It always seemed to me that the supposed dichotomy between transcendental and

incarnational views of human destiny was not very persuasive. Human life is a funny juxtaposition of spirit and matter, which, I think, are more partners than adversaries when correctly understood. Yet there are times in life when we emphasize one more than the other, and each has a time in which it takes center stage while the other waits in the wings.

So when I hear people talk about how quickly time is passing, I think of that expression, "in the world, but not of it." I wonder if we are being called to a time of deeper reflection on the spiritual side of things. Is there something permanent? Is there something that lasts and has substance? Those are the questions that beckon to us as time dashes by.

As we see it in the gospels, the presence of Jesus is a fresh incursion into time, and acts in unaccustomed ways, seemingly "reaping what it did not sow," as the parables say. As Jesus moves from town to town, curing the sick, raising the dead, teaching, providing bread for the hungry, one sees that though he is busy, his time is guided by a higher law, the law of the Spirit, sometimes calling him to activity, at other times to prayer and reflection.

Perhaps that's the message for those who are

upset by the passage of time. Perhaps we could see ourselves as being invited into the deepening of life in the Spirit. We can allow ourselves to be amazed at how much is happening—what did Jesus say, "The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and blessed is he who is not scandalized in me"? (Luke 7:22.)

More importantly, we can discern that we are being drawn to the Spirit. Instead of putting our attention on the passage of time, we are called instead to pay attention to the workings of the Spirit, and to let our time be God's time. Jesus certainly led a busy life, but it never appeared to be a frantic one. He frequently took time away from his activities to talk to his heavenly Father. His time was spent in movements of activity and rest, doing good and praying, all the while staying on his Father's timetable and plan.

When we find time speeding by, we can think of ourselves as being called from a focus on time to a focus on the Spirit. Whether it calls us to work or reflect, to pray or rest, the Spirit is always in the right time; and so will we be if we follow its lead.

Father Paul Keenan, director of radio ministry, is the author of "Heartstorming," published by Contemporary Books.



*Spiritual Matters*

*Father Paul Keenan*

# On Giving and Receiving

**D**uring the holidays, most people think a great deal about giving and receiving. The pressures associated with them can drive us to distraction. Can we avoid them?

One thing we can do is to reflect on our ideas about giving and receiving. Ordinary experience tells us that whenever we give something, we give up something. In other words, we lose when we give. It costs us time, money and energy. Those are valuable commodities, and when we give them, we often find that we don't get them back. Before long, we find ourselves feeling cheated, exhausted and resentful. Unconsciously, we develop the belief that this is just how life is, and that there's not much we can do about it.

When we shift to the spiritual plane, our notion of giving changes radically. What we are giving is something inexhaustible, something that we can never lose when we give it. Let's take love, for example. When we give someone a gift, and are thinking of it in spiritual terms, what we are really wishing for him or her is to experience love. It's the essence of our gift, the real thing we intend to give. (Note that perhaps we don't need to give the most expensive gift in the world in order to do this.)

In giving love, we don't lose it; rather, we express

it. In expressing it, we convey the very essence of our being, which is to love. If we were to lose love, it would be like losing our existence, our very being. Even if the other person should reject our gift, the love behind it would simply flow back to us. We lose nothing; we only gain.

Since we are made in God's image and likeness, what we express when we give is God; and God is inexhaustible. When we give from a spiritual perspective, we can never be depleted.

Once we understand this, we are free to change the way we give materially. When we know that what we are really giving is love, we can be guided in our giving by the threefold description of love given to us by Jesus: love God, love our neighbor, love ourselves.

We are not required to exhaust ourselves and our resources in giving for the season. We may be required to do so when we are called upon to care for an elderly parent or a sick child or spouse, for example; but even then we have an obligation to find ways of taking care of ourselves, too. The rule is that what we give should be measured by whether our giving expresses the threefold love.

This brings us to our notion of receiving. All of us like the thought of receiving things, but many times

we wonder why we feel shortchanged or why the abundance of others seems greater than ours. When we think in material terms, receiving means that we lack something and that we hope someone will give it to us.

When we're thinking spiritually, however, receiving, like giving, becomes an expression of our very being. We receive, not from a posture of lack, but from one of fullness; for we could not lack the qualities of being—such as love—unless somehow we ceased to exist.

So long as we exist, love is with us. No matter how needy we might feel, we cannot possibly lack love so long as we exist. From a spiritual perspective, we welcome love, not because we lack it, but because we already have it and we love having it. This is receiving without pressure or disappointment, full and joyous receiving.

It takes some doing to resist society's tendency to have us frame our giving and receiving in material terms rather than in spiritual ones. But we can. By shifting to a spiritual perspective, we find just the rule of thumb we need.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and the author of "Heartstorming," now available in paperback from Contemporary Books.*



## Spiritual Matters

Father Paul Keenan

# The Eternal Sigh

**R**ummaging through some old cassette tapes the other day, I found one by the late Earl Nightingale. Finding it brought back many wonderful memories of his daily radio program, "Our Changing World," which I listened to avidly as a kid.

One thing that my old radio hero said on the tape caused me to stop and think. He noted that we are happiest when we are looking ahead. That amazed me, because, upon reflection, I had been thinking of happiness merely in terms of achievement. I was sure I was not that far off the mark in thinking that happiness came from the realization of a goal, and that we were never quite happy until we had achieved the goal.

Earl Nightingale's remarks made me think twice about the nature of happiness. I realized that he made a good point: happiness has a lot to do with having something to look forward to and with having goals. As I thought about it, my mind kept going back to the first chapter of Genesis, to the Bible's first description of the process of creation.

It occurred to me that at each of the six stages of creation, there were three steps to the divine creative process. First, God thought of what he wanted to create. Second, he created it. Third, he

declared it to be good, and moved on to the next day's work.

I reflected that happiness could not have been present in one aspect of the process and absent from the others; in different ways, it had to be present in each of them. God being eternal and perfect, it is impossible that he not be happy at one point and then be happy at another. So, I concluded, there must be happiness in all three stages, in different ways.

There's some food for thought there, since we're made in God's image and likeness. There's happiness for us, too, at each stage of our creative processes. If we're working toward a goal, it's almost harder not to be happy than it is to be happy. God set it up that way.

First, there is the happiness of imagining, of what we often refer to as "goal-setting." There is joy in knowing what we want. Then there is the happiness of acting, of doing what needs to be done toward the achievement of our goal. This kind of happiness is not necessarily euphoric or perpetually blissful; often it involves struggle, tears and setbacks. The woodsman's body glistens with sweat as he strikes the tree with his axe. The painter frowns and agonizes over every stroke of the brush. The

mother in labor cries with each contraction. Yet there is happiness in the doing of the work. Finally, there is the moment of completion, of realization. The goal has been reached, and there is happiness in a work completed.

The moral of all of this is that there is happiness to be had wherever we find ourselves in life. It is there if we are at the stage of the dream or the goal. It is there if we are moving toward that end. It is there if our work is completed, and there again if our goal is to find yet another goal.

What is more, there is a real relationship between the happiness of our Creator and our own. Listen to how Alexander Pope described it in his "Essay on Man":

*O happiness! our being's end and aim!  
Good, pleasure, ease, content! whate'er thy name:  
That something still which prompts the eternal sigh,  
For which we bear to live, or dare to die...*

In a world that tells us so many reasons for unhappiness, it is refreshing to know that the "eternal sigh" is offered for our hearing at each and every moment. How blessed we truly are!

Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and the author of "Heartstorming: The Way to a Purposeful Life," now available in paperback from Contemporary Books.

# The Eye of the Beheld

Beauty, we are told, is in the eye of the beholder. What that truism means, of course, is that each of us sees beauty differently. It is a slightly kinder way of expressing the truth of yet another truism, "There's no accounting for tastes." We may wonder at a friend's choice of a husband or wife. In 56 years, I have yet to discover what almost everyone else sees in eggplant. A friend who has been happily married for over 50 years once told me that one of the first arguments he and his wife had as a young couple took place the night she put a plate of broccoli rabe in front of him at the dinner table.

It's true of everything, really—our tastes in music and art, in literature, in radio and television programs, you name it. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

We've heard that maxim so often that we don't think much about it when we encounter it in conversation or in print. For that reason, we lose sight of another aspect of beauty, which would greatly enhance our existence, if we thought about it more.

Beauty is not only in the eye of the beholder. It is also in the eye of the beheld. There is a wonderful creative power to beauty that affects not only the one who is experiencing it, but also the one

who is experienced as beautiful. Due to that power, someone who may not previously have experienced himself or herself as beautiful, now can.

As a priest, I see this in the sacrament of reconciliation. A person may have been away from the sacraments for a long time, and may come into the reconciliation room feeling very alone and separate from God. When they leave, they often look like an entirely new person. They are transformed by the knowledge that God loves them and that they can live their lives basking in divine love.

Teachers and social workers understand this, too. Many times, they'll run into someone who, for a variety of reasons, has come to see himself or herself as a bad person or a hopeless case. With a little love and understanding, that person becomes transformed and often reaches new heights of competence and achievement. He or she becomes a loving, contributing member of society, and in turn gives that same life-giving love to someone else.

Beauty is in the eye of the beheld. When someone experiences love, it can make all the difference in the world.

It's true not only of persons, but of situations, too. It's not unusual these days for a married couple to come in, exhausted, hurting and ready to call

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it quits. Each spouse blames the other for the problem. A wise counselor asks, "Is there any way I can open a window here so that the husband can see his wife as lovable, and the wife can see her husband as lovable?" If each spouse can have the experience of being loved (even with faults), both the individual and the marriage can be transformed.

The creative power of beauty and its appreciation is a kind of unconditional love. It means seeing the other person as beautiful already—as the child of God they already are. We don't say, "Change first and then I'll love you." Rather, it's the case that the changes will come once the love is given and accepted.

In the midst of his agony on the cross, our Savior looked at a thief who was crucified beside him and said, "This day, you shall be with me in Paradise." Shortly before, he had looked lovingly into the eyes of Peter who had denied him, and changed the Apostle's life.

Beauty is in the eye of the beheld. We have within ourselves the power to transform another person by the power of unconditional love.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of Radio Ministry and the author of "Heartstorming: The Way to a Purposeful Life."*



# The Difference a Day Made

The other day, I happened to hear on the radio the old Dinah Washington recording of the song called "What a Difference a Day Made." That song title and the concept underlying it are, oh, so appropriate to our thoughts and reflections this month.

Indeed, what a difference a day made, the day we know as "September 11." It's not just a date; it's a life-changing concept, a benchmark we will never forget. There's hardly anyone who does not remember exactly where he or she was just before nine o'clock on that day.

By now, we have gone through the birthdays and anniversaries of our loved ones who perished on September 11. We have made it through the first round of holidays. Just recently, we made it through the first summer, with all of its memories of "what we did last summer" or "what we used to do on vacation."

Yet there have been positive things, too. Babies have been born. Marriages have taken place. Increasing numbers of people have found solace in re-connecting with their religion. There has been a massive re-consideration of the importance of family, of service, of spirit. We have experienced a renaissance of patriotism. It's important to take note of the good things, because they are part of the year, too.

Just before Labor Day last year, I was reflecting upon the end of the summer and the start of the fall. I had had a fairly nice summer, doing radio, getting some writing done, having a good bit of time for prayer and rest. In a way, I was sorry to see the summer go. But I was beginning to feel in my bones the energies of a new season ready to unfold. With the fall, there would come new events and meetings, and new parish activities.

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***We have made it through this year, and that is an accomplishment. Yet we still need to honor our losses and give ourselves the time and space to continue to heal.***

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People would be back from vacation, and so there would soon be the joy of meeting again and catching up. I remember being grateful to God for the summer and looking forward to things to come.

How differently it all turned out. One minute we were all heading into the start of a new season. The next minute, there appeared to be no normalcy anymore.

As we mark the anniversary of September 11,

where are we exactly? It's a little hard to assess. We certainly need to go on, but there is so much unfinished business about the various aspects of our grieving. One of the parables of Jesus keeps coming back to me. On one occasion, Jesus told the story of a man who planted a field to yield a crop of wheat. During the night, an enemy came and sowed weeds in the field. As the wheat began to grow, so did the weeds; and the servants advised the man to pull up the weeds. The man said no. He reasoned that to pull up the weeds would mean pulling up the wheat as well and destroying the crop. He decided to let both the weeds and the wheat grow up together. By separating them at the end, he would save his crop.

As we mark the first anniversary of September 11, we'll find in our hearts both wheat and weeds. It's tempting to pretend that now that we've reached this benchmark, we can just "get on with life." Yet personally and as a nation, we still have a lot of healing to do. It's important that we notice both the wheat and the weeds—the ways in which we have grown or have experienced life and love and divine guidance, and the ways in which we are still hurting and unsure. We have made it through this year, and that is an accomplishment. Yet we still need to honor our losses and give ourselves the time and space to continue to heal.

# Questions of Confidence



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

**T**hese days, one word we hear over and over again in the news is “confidence.” Unfortunately, it’s often used with a negative twist—“lack of confidence” or “erosion of confidence.” Questions about confidence arise almost every day in the news. Can we have confidence in big business? Has investor confidence eroded on Wall Street? Will people continue to have confidence in religion? Are the American people confident in the President and his policies? If there is, indeed, a crisis of confidence in our society, where can we go to restore confidence?

Increasingly I am coming to believe that to successfully face challenges in life, all we need to do is to return in our hearts to two simple but profound questions. The first is, “Who is God?” The second is, “Who are we?” If we take the time and opportunity to turn our thoughts toward those questions, it seems to me, we will have what we need to face our problems.

Who is God? Who are we? The opening words of the prologue to the Catechism of the Catholic

Church say it well. “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”

The first step is to recall that God is “infinitely perfect and blessed in himself.” At a time when our world is facing a crisis of confidence—and when many individuals are as well—we do well to calm our agitated hearts and minds by turning to the one who is infinitely perfect and blessed. Every word here is important.

“Perfect”—when we are tempted to believe that everything is full of imperfection, we turn to Being Itself and realize that there is One who is perfect. In other words, there is a place where there is perfection, after all, and that place is God.

“Infinite”—when we are overwhelmed by a sense of the limitations of life and of our own limited abilities to meet life’s difficulties, how refreshing it is to bring to mind the realization that God—Perfect Being—is infinite. In other words, there is a place where life is unlimited,

after all, and that place is God.

“Blessed”—at a time when so many people report feeling cursed by fate, bad luck or chance, how comforting it is to know that there is a place where life is not cursed, but blessed, and that place is God.

The second step becomes clear when we focus on the second half of the Catechism’s statement. Who are we? “God . . . in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.” In other words, God did not keep his excellence to himself. Rather, he shared it with us. But notice, he did not share it as an afterthought or accidental addition to our identity; instead, he made those marvelous perfections of his a part of our very essence. At the very core of our being, we are the image and likeness of God.

Where, then, do we turn for confidence? We turn to God, and we remember who we are. From ages ago, the words of the Book of Proverbs speak volumes in these troubled times: “The Lord will be your confidence” (Proverbs 3:26).

*The first step is to recall that God is ‘infinitely perfect and blessed in himself.’*



# The Fullness of God



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

Someone I once knew had what seemed like the perfect solution to the problem of imperfection, real or perceived. Whenever she discovered she was putting on a little weight, she always knew what to blame. Sometimes it was the mirror—"That mirror is so old and unreliable; it makes me look very heavy." At other times it was her clothes—"Everything just shrinks when you wash it or have it cleaned." Or, it was the time of year—"The holidays are just a horrible time for keeping your weight down." As long as she could blame something outside herself, she was fine.

My friend's tendency may seem somewhat amusing, but when we consider how its underlying philosophy can permeate almost every area of our lives, it doesn't seem quite so funny. The fact is that from our earliest days, we are taught that "the action" in life is on the outside. Our spiritual life is a nice luxury, if we have the time and leisure to develop it, but outside is where life really counts.

How surprised and disappointed we become when we find that the outside doesn't respond very readily to our wishes, needs and demands. If we're hit by financial disaster, we may scurry

around frantically trying to find ways to get money. If we're out of work, we'll engage in a frenzied job search, hoping that this or the next interview will be the one that lands us the job. If we have a serious health crisis, we'll try every remedy, every new medication or therapy in the hope of finding a cure. If we're lucky, we may find just the right thing. But often enough, people are not so lucky, and they spend countless hours and thousands of dollars in a fruitless search for the answer to their problems.

Instead, consider this: When we discover a gap or a need on the outside, it's time for us to start thinking about God.

Notice, I didn't say, "It's time to storm heaven." Often, that's what we do; but storming heaven can be a way of keeping God outside of ourselves, at a distance. Doing that can give us one more excuse to stay rooted in our outer world and blame it for our problems. Hence, all of our questions about why God doesn't answer our prayers.

I'm suggesting that we begin our problem solving with a quiet and ongoing series of meditations about the attributes or names, if you will, of God. Whatever lacks or gaps we may think we have in

our lives, can best be resolved by turning our minds and hearts to the fullness and abundance of God, who is all in all. He is the Supreme Being, in whom there cannot possibly be any gap or lack or flaw. When we focus on the fullness of God (he is Truth, Love, Goodness, Beauty, etc.) we deepen our relationship with him and we discover that he is by no means an outsider, but a vital part of our lives.

As we bring God's attributes to mind in prayer, we will find them manifesting in our lives more and more. Guided by their presence, we will see the whole thrust of our lives being drawn increasingly into God. This will lead us to the right employment, the right financial circumstances, right relationships and so on. Divine fullness begets fullness in every area of life.

"From the fullness of his grace," St. John tells us, "we have all received, one blessing after another" (John 1:16). May the qualities of God permeate every area of your life, bringing you love, grace and blessing upon blessing.

*Father Keenan is director of radio ministry and the author of "Heartstorming: The Way to a Purposeful Life."*

# Counting Blessings



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

**E**arly in March, when news stories about the crisis in the Church began to break, I had the wonderful experience of spending a week conducting a parish mission at St. Joseph's Church in Hewlett. It's a Long Island parish where I have made many good friends over the years, including the gifted and dedicated pastor, Msgr. Charles Fink.

Many blessings occurred in my life during that week, not the least of which was the opportunity to see some of the programs on Telecare, the magnificent Catholic station directed by my good friend Msgr. Thomas Hartman. I was grateful for Telecare that week, because its programs reminded me how very much we Catholics have to be proud of. Our rich intellectual tradition, our long history of liturgical splendor, the glorious Church music that has come down through the centuries, the art and the manuscripts preserved and handed down by the Church through the ages. I found all of that very healing at a time when many were so focused on finding fault with the Church. It was good to be reminded that whatever mistakes had been made, there was a preponderance of things about the Church of which we Catholics could continue to be proud.

Not long thereafter, I was delighted to receive a copy of a book titled "Patience of a Saint" by Charlene C. Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese (Broadway Books, 2002). I'm always happy to find good books on parenting—as a priest I know how discouraged parents can sometimes get as they struggle to help their children to reach maturity. But what delighted me especially about this book was that it put me in mind of yet another reason to be proud of our Catholic tradition—our enthusiasm for the saints. I read with great interest as the authors drew upon the lives of the saints to show how faith, hope, love, serenity, patience and a host of other virtues can prevail, even and especially when our circumstances are deeply distressing.

The lives of the saints—so accessible in this book through stories and recommended readings—speak volumes about how we can lead positive, faith-filled lives in troubled times, and teach others to do so as well. It was comforting to read of St. Catherine of Siena, who managed to persuade the pope to move the papacy from Avignon back to Rome, an effort that, as the authors point out, seemed thwarted at every turn.

Once that matter was resolved, there arose the

crisis of the "two popes." Catherine's faith and prayer were instrumental in the resolution of that troublesome problem. As we face crises of our own, the authors challenge us to be the saintly people who will sustain the Church through these difficult times.

Again, there's St. Rita of Cascia, noted for her steadfast hope and courage in enduring public humiliation as the wife of a notoriously wayward husband. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, we are told, found her life too unimportant to record. Thank goodness a superior ordered her to do so—what would our spiritual journey be like without "The Story of a Soul" to draw upon?

Reading stories of the saints such as these gave me perspective, heart and courage amid the swirl of the stories in the news.

As we sort out the crisis in the Church, it is encouraging to remember that our Church gives us much to be thankful for. We have a great abundance of resources to draw upon to sustain us—a host of reasons, while we are being humbled, to be grateful for all we have.

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# Father Freeman's Legacy



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

It was the strangest thing. I was invited to write a piece for a Web site that specializes in teaching people how to journal, and for some reason I thought of Father Freeman. Father Joseph M. Freeman was the Jesuit priest at Rockhurst College (now University) in Kansas City whose cranky and irritable style of pedagogy made him (a) feared by all of us, (b) beloved of all of us, and (c) one of the finest teachers I ever had.

After I left Kansas City, we saw each other from time to time, and a couple of years ago I wrote him to thank him for all that he had done for me. I was elated when he wrote back. It was clear that he had lost none of his vinegar and none of his chronic dissatisfaction with the mode o'day. At that point, he was in his upper 80s and still teaching on a part-time basis. I remember thinking that some "young whippersnappers" in Kansas City were pretty lucky, indeed.

Be that as it may, when Father Freeman popped into my head, I wrote my article about him and how he had taught us that, while life wouldn't always be pretty, we could learn at an early age to overcome the obstacles it would bring—by learning to think.

Imagine my surprise when, just days later, an old

classmate from Rockhurst called me off the air while I was hosting "Religion on the Line" to tell me that Father Freeman had died, just a few days before, at the tender age of 91. As I say, it was the strangest thing to hear that news, knowing that he had just been so present to me. When people talk about networking, it is experiences such as this that remind me that God is the best networker of all.

The news of Father Freeman's passing let loose a warm flood of wonderful memories from my college, and later my teaching, years. Not the least of which was an old, old prayer with which Father Freeman began each of our classes. I couldn't help but memorize it—and actually, I wanted to. You'll know it, too, I am sure.

It went, "O God, precede our actions by your holy inspiration and further them by your continual help, that every prayer and work of ours may always begin by you and through you be successfully completed, through Christ our Lord. Amen."

Based on the biblical prayer of the three young men in the fiery furnace, this prayer serves as a wonderful legacy from my old professor. He was preparing us for a world that would seem ever more tumultuous and bizarre; and he knew that, as an

educator, he was destined to prepare us for life. Teaching us to pray and teaching us to think were his weapons against the forces of Godlessness and careless thinking that he saw looming on the horizon of the world we would face.

You and I are now living in the world for which Father Freeman prepared my classmates and me. Personally, I could not face that world without those powerful weapons of prayer and logic. God put them into our hands at conception; and, thank God, more than five decades' worth of us had Father Freeman to show us how to use them.

When I became a priest, he and I agreed to pray daily for each other. The prayer he taught us has done very nicely, and always will. It reminds us that we cannot make it without God, but that with God we can achieve success.

I am sad that Father Freeman has gone. But I am heartened that so long as his prayer is on the lips of us, his former students—and so long as his passion for truth is in our hearts—his important work will live on.

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# Christ's Certain Glory



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

**I**wish it would pick one season and stay there," someone recently remarked to me about our weather of late. Indeed, it seems as though we are being taken on an endless guided tour of the seasons. It's like those whirlwind tours of Europe that land you in a new country every day. No wonder we are skeptical of spring as the month of April arrives.

April, we reason, should bring the warmth of spring—but who knows? Like Proteus in Shakespeare's "Two Gentlemen of Verona," we lament "the uncertain glory of an April day,/Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,/And by and by a cloud takes all away."

It's not only the weather that comes and goes—it's life, or so it seems. The past several months have brought enormous changes politically and socially and in our personal lives as well. Companies downsize. People suddenly find themselves unemployed. Many are experiencing tremendous personal losses of family, friends and circumstances. Change seems to be the watchword—and it seems we have very little say in the matter.

Shakespeare's phrase "uncertain glory" seems appropriate this year as we mark not only April, but

Easter as well. Can we count on spring when things are changing so? What does Easter mean when we are experiencing so much loss?

These questions are variations of a long-standing theme in the history of human thought: what is real, anyway? Some say that the world about us is an illusion, a mere shadow of an unchanging and eternal world beyond. Others say that this world is all too real—that, indeed, for better or worse, it's all there is. Still others land somewhere in between. Our day-to-day world is real, they say, and yet there is a higher force that guides it all from beyond the fray.

What can we count on?

It comes down to this. With the Risen Christ, it's not the glory that is uncertain—it is we humans who can sometimes find ourselves uncertain about seeing that glory in the face of heartbreaking challenges. The Risen Christ affirms the reality of the eternal and the temporal, the lasting and the fleeting. The Resurrection stories say it clearly—the glory of the Risen Christ embraces our disheartened vision and helps us to see anew. Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, the disciples on the way to Emmaus, Thomas the

Apostle—that's the common theme in their stories. The glory is there—what is needed is for them to find it. Or perhaps, for it to find them. And, as we see in those stories, it finds them so willingly.

Perhaps this happens in much the same way that the uncertain glory of April finds us. April has its ups and downs—its 30 days feature wind and storm, sun and rain, warmth and chill, buds and still-barren branches. April brings a variety of opposites and lots of change and flux. That really is its glory—the magnificent variety of opposites, the uncertainty of it all, and our willingness to accept that as part of the natural process that eventually gives rise to spring and summer.

Like April, life has its opposites—death and birth, taking and giving, loss and gain. In the midst of life's uncertainties—our uncertainty about life—can we accept the glory of the process and find, within the changes, the glorious presence of everlasting life?

May the glory of April and of the Risen Christ touch the minds and hearts of all of us throughout this season.

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# 'In-Between' Moments



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

When I was in college, I used to love to drop in to the chapel and spend a few quiet moments between classes. There was something special in those peaceful "in-between" times, those moments which were, in a sense, "extras" and yet which were filled with such profound meaning. Everything else about the day could be rushed—studying, getting to and from school and classes, meeting the incessant term paper deadlines, doing things at home. Yet it is those quiet, in-between moments in front of the Blessed Sacrament that I remember most fondly.

It was during those same college years that I read a book called "More Than Sentinels" by Naomi Burton. As I recall, her book was a kind of daily journal, and much of it had to do with her association with Thomas Merton. But it was also about being a Catholic, working hard every day and somehow finding peace and inspiration in the midst of her busy life. Many of her richest reflections were based upon the same daily Mass and meditation that were so much a part of my own experience in those days.

What is it about those quiet moments, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, that so touches the depths of the soul? It's very much like coming home on a cold day, and finding a fire in the hearth and a warm meal on the table, and a friend who says, "Come, sit and enjoy."

Naomi Burton's book was based on the words of Psalm 130: "My soul waits for the Lord more than sentinels wait for the dawn." The image is that of a watchman standing guard over a city by night to be sure that there will be no attacks, no danger from an enemy. A sentinel's watchful moments occur in between a city's moments of activity, so to speak. His day begins when the rush of the day ends, and ends when it begins again.

Chapels and churches are such wonderful places in which to pray. When I go to a parish to give a retreat or a mission, I try to spend a couple of hours just walking around the church, praying, before I do any speaking. I believe in the adage, "The walls have ears." I count on the walls to tell me about all of the prayers that have been offered in the church over the years, and I try to absorb within myself the

essence of those prayers, so that I can be at home in that faith community. Those prayers, offered during "in-between" moments, have sustained a parish and its members for decades. It's not so much that I receive intellectual content or information. Rather, it is a matter of the heart, absorbing the spirit of a community of Catholics who have prayed their hearts out for so many years. I find my own heart connecting with their prayers of joy, of thanks, of desperation, of grief, of anger, of despair, of hope.

Each church is different, has a different spirit. Yet every church holds a treasury of the prayers that have been offered, aloud and silently, over many years. As I allow the essence of those prayers to reach me, I find that I am better able to speak the Word to those who come. If I learn the language of the prayers, so to speak, I am better able to speak that language when the time comes.

In the rush of the day, try to find some time to visit a church or chapel for a few quiet moments. Like a sentinel waiting for the dawn, you will find there a focus, a comforting presence, and the strength to go on.

# February's Questions



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

It is hard to get through February without doing some reflection on the meaning of life or some aspect of it, anyway. February brings Groundhog Day, when Punxsutawney Phil allegedly tells us whether more or less winter lies ahead. We have Presidents' Day, honoring George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and the leadership of all past Presidents. And there's Valentine's Day, the day on which we honor love. You can scarcely get through February without encountering a life-defining moment.

Depending upon your mood and your preference, February weather will define you as well. By this time of year, all but the true polar bears among us have had enough of wintry chill—and there is the promise of at least a month more to endure. By now, you have defined yourself as a lover of frost and cold, or you have let everyone around you know that the thaw cannot come a moment too soon to suit your taste.

Into this wealth of self-definition this year comes Ash Wednesday and the start of the season of Lent. Lent is perhaps the ultimate time of self-definition. Who am I, really? What do I want to die to? How do I want to rise? To enter into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, these are the questions we must ask

ourselves.

In so doing, we may well let February's questions guide us. With Groundhog Phil, we might ask, "What shadow do I cast upon the earth?" and "Does my mark upon the world right now mean chill or warmth for myself and those around me?" With our Presidents—"What sort of leadership do I bring to the world—to my job, my family, my country?" With Valentine—"Am I known for the quality of my love?" As we listen to the Scriptures of the season, and as we take to heart the Church's call to prayer, reflection and sacrifice, these questions can concretize and focus our decisions about change.

In Lent, we enter into the desert with Jesus. "By the solemn 40 days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 540). February's questions, and the persistent chill of its weather, lend themselves to the desert experience, which, in the richness of the Church's spiritual tradition, involves both a sense of bleakness and intense self-examination. The questions of our image, our leadership and the quality of our love, do mirror the questions of the desert: Who am I really? Do I model for others qualities and attitudes I am proud of? Is my

love superficial or does it arise from the depths of a mature and committed heart? In essence, these are the questions that Jesus faced in his desert trials. The challenge for us is to allow the thrust of his answer to become our own—the answer that says, "I will accept nothing less than total reliance upon God for my image, my influence and my love." The resolution of February's questions lies solely in Jesus' answer.

So often in life, we find, the divine uplifts and transforms the human. There is a lot to be said for the theology of grace that sees God's life in us as both healing and elevating our human condition. God's grace brings our questions and answers to a new level of understanding and depth. It builds upon them, corrects what is missing or skewed in them, and shows us that our questions point to a reality infinitely richer than we originally imagined. This second month of our New Year allows us to ponder much and to focus our reflections on the mind of God. February's questions and Lent's inspiration work beautifully together.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry and author of "Heartstorming," currently available from Contemporary Books.*

# Leaving the Village



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

**T**here's a story in the eighth chapter of St. Mark's Gospel in which Jesus cures a blind man. Interestingly enough, before healing him, Jesus takes the man out of his village, and after the healing, he tells him not to return to his village.

Jesus' strategy here is really excellent psychology. Jesus knows how difficult it is for people to allow others to change. Even though clearly they have the man's best interests at heart, the people of his village have a definite vision of him as a blind man, as someone who is, in his case, relatively helpless because of his disability. By taking him out of the village, Jesus physically removes him from that sphere of negativity. It is an important first step in his healing. Jesus needs to get him away to a neutral place where he and the man can be alone and the man may be freed of the definition the villagers give him. After all, they know him so well; it may be difficult for them to see him in any other way.

Jesus knows that lesson from his own life experience. He knows how difficult it is for the people of his own town to accept him and his ministry. They "know" him, and so are unable to accept the fact that

he has such a powerful mission. "Surely," they keep saying, "this is the carpenter's son." The Gospels tell us that Jesus could do few miracles there, because of their lack of faith.

There's a powerful lesson for us as well, when we're looking to make changes in our lives. When they've discerned that a change is important, people sometimes find that they don't get the support from others that they might expect. The "old crowd" may have a great deal invested in their friend's old behavior. The decision to change may be threatening for them, because it is an implicit call for them to change as well. They'd prefer to support the old behavior so that they can maintain the same old patterns themselves.

Often, it is necessary for us to "leave the village" in which we have developed the behavior we want to change. We may not need to change residence or workplace, but we certainly need to build a support group that will sustain us in our new behavior. Without such a group to answer to, we may find ourselves slipping back into our old patterns and becoming very discouraged.

After he has healed the man, Jesus tells him not to

return to the village from which he has come. The principle is the same—by returning to the people, places and things in which the undesirable patterns were developed, we risk compromising our change. There's another dimension to this, however. When we make a significant change in one aspect of our lives, it often gives rise to change in other areas as well. People who decide that it's time to change careers, for example, often find that they are led to make other changes. Once they decide to "leave the village" in one area, they find it hard to stay put in other key areas of life.

At this time of year when many are considering changes, it's important to remember the lesson Jesus gives us. We need to "leave the village" (the old patterns of thought and habit), build plenty of support for our new patterns, and vow never to return to the patterns which we have left behind. In so doing, we allow our Lord to do what he promises in Revelation: "Behold, I am making all things new."

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# Seeing the Great Light



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

**“T**he people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

As we come into the Christmas season this year, these words from the prophet Isaiah can give us hope and inspiration. To be sure, this is a difficult year in which to be celebrating Christmas. Under normal circumstances, the holidays can be a tough time for many, especially for those who have lost loved ones during the year. This year, the losses are so staggering and so many of us have lost at least one loved one, that observing Christmas can feel like more than we are capable of doing.

Whatever we do to keep Christmas this year, it is a good year to allow ourselves to enjoy the beautiful and profound simplicity of the feast. The very essence of the season is the truth that in Jesus Christ, God became one with us and that, in a unique way, we became part of the family of God.

In the Gospels, the Christmas story is set within the context of a family—the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. As we read and hear the story, it is easy for us to perceive the darkness that was part of their life. Their life together was full of trials, inconveniences and sufferings. Yet at the same time, there was the wonderful light. Through

everything, they had each other and the wonder of the Word of God made flesh.

During these weeks since the tragedy at the World Trade Center, two beams of “great light” have been shining in the darkness. The first has been the way in which people have pulled together to be of service to one another. Among some of the most heartwarming stories have been those of family members reconciling after years of misunderstanding and separation. And, of course, we have the familiar stories of the extraordinary heroism of so many.

It appears that tragedy has taught us how important we are to each other. Someone told me about a group of people he used to see every morning on the commuter train. He didn’t know them, but they were always there—a happy, industrious group of co-workers and commuters. Since Sept. 11, he hasn’t seen them, and he misses them. He had no idea how much their presence had affected him, and how much their absence would, as well.

The second beam of light has been the return of so many to God. Houses of worship have been filled, not only at the numerous memorial services for the victims, but at regular services, too. It has

dawned on us that we need to develop a close relationship with God. We are learning to take seriously the fact that we are made in God’s image and likeness, and that unless we live in him, consciously and by deliberate choice, we will not get very far.

It’s not just that we have a kind of “auxiliary membership” in the family of God. Rather, we are made in God’s image and likeness; being part of his family is at the very heart of who we are. It seems that we are coming to see how important it is that we take our spiritual family seriously. When we do that, we may still have sorrows and trials, but we are no longer consumed by them. We sense the bright, warm presence of God at our side, guiding us and giving us strength and direction.

All in all, perhaps the true meaning of Christmas is not so far from our recent experience, after all. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” May the light of the Christ Child dawn upon you and yours, pierce the darkness and fill your hearts this Christmas.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of Radio Ministry and author of Heartstorming, which is available in bookstores.*



# Finding a New Sense of Life



By FATHER PAUL KENNAN

In the difficult days since Sept. 11, many of us have tried to establish in our lives as much normalcy as possible. There are many who, because of trauma or loss, are simply incapable of returning to a normal life, at least for the time being. Others, reflecting on their lives, find that they are moved to make considerable changes. They no longer want to return to the "normal" lives they once knew. Still others, though not feeling drawn to make such radical changes, find that just getting on with life no longer fills them as it once did.

What to do?

I found an answer in a new approach to an old friend—St. John's story about Nicodemus, the man who came to Jesus by night. Giving the invocation at a church group I had been invited to address, a faith-filled woman opened the passage to me in an entirely new way. Nicodemus, she reflected, came to Jesus full of fear, asking the meaning of Jesus' mission. He was told that he must be "born again."

Whatever else that means, the woman reflected, it means that we can let the challenging experiences of life destroy us—or we can choose to allow them to re-create us, re-direct us and deepen us. She spoke of her own experience as the mother of a child who had a disability. She told us how she had

helped her son turn his challenge into a growth experience—and how she and her husband had grown and deepened themselves.

Listening to her, it struck me that this was the answer to the "normalcy" question. We may or may not choose to return to "normal" activities—or be able to—but we can allow our experiences to transform us so that we deepen our sense of purpose. We may go back to our old jobs, but with different priorities than before. We may resume leisure activities, but do them now with our families. Indeed, as many have, we may find ourselves going to church more often, or attending together as a family unit.

Our "re-birth" may, indeed, include a major re-evaluation of our work life. One mother I know, an executive in her company, realized that she no longer wanted to work away from home. For some time, she and her husband had been working on developing an Internet-based business, and she decided that it was time to bring that to the front burner. Talking with others, she learned that other parents were feeling some of the same things as she. In what has become a complete life change for her, she now spends a considerable amount of

her time helping interested people to learn how to make the transition she is making.

The desire to be "born again" after the World Trade Center tragedy has come in so many ways. I find that people are more willing than ever to examine how they treat each other. The losses of the past two months seem to have led us to realize how precious each encounter with another human being is. The stories of last-minute cell phone calls to loved ones as victims of the tragedy were about to perish, seem to have impressed us with how important our family, friends and associates are—and how petty are many of the issues that can separate us from them. It has been so heartening to hear stories of how family members have been reunited after decades of angry separation, at last finding the courage to say the words, "I love you." We look at each other differently now, it seems—with softer eyes and kinder hearts.

I love that new take on Nicodemus, and am grateful for that mother's words that day. With all that is going on, we can still discern the voice of Christ calling us to be reborn.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of radio ministry for the archdiocese. His latest book, "Heartstorming," is just out from Contemporary Books.*

# Deeds of Man, Not God

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

There probably are not many readers of this column whose lives were untouched by the tragic destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11. Virtually all of us knew at least one person who was a victim of this devastating tragedy. With shocked disbelief, we saw the pictures and heard the sounds broadcast from downtown Manhattan. We saw horrors that we never thought we would see and experienced feelings that we never thought we would feel.

The most common question that arose following the tragedy was, "Why?" A radio news anchor, heartsick from hours of reporting the events of the first day, told me, "I looked out tonight and saw the most beautiful sunset I had ever seen in my life. Then, I looked downtown and saw the smoke and destruction. How could God do both of those things?"

It was the question many people were asking. Often when I walked the streets during those awful days, people, seeing that I was a priest, would come talk to me as though I were a family member. In one such encounter, a young man confronted me. "What does God think about this?" he wanted to know.

Whenever people asked the "Why" question, I knew I had to answer them, not so much from my

mind as from my heart. I wasn't alone in that. A rabbi friend, thinking ahead to the holy days his congregation was about to celebrate, told me, "There is no way I can go with my prepared sermons. All I can do is preach from my heart."

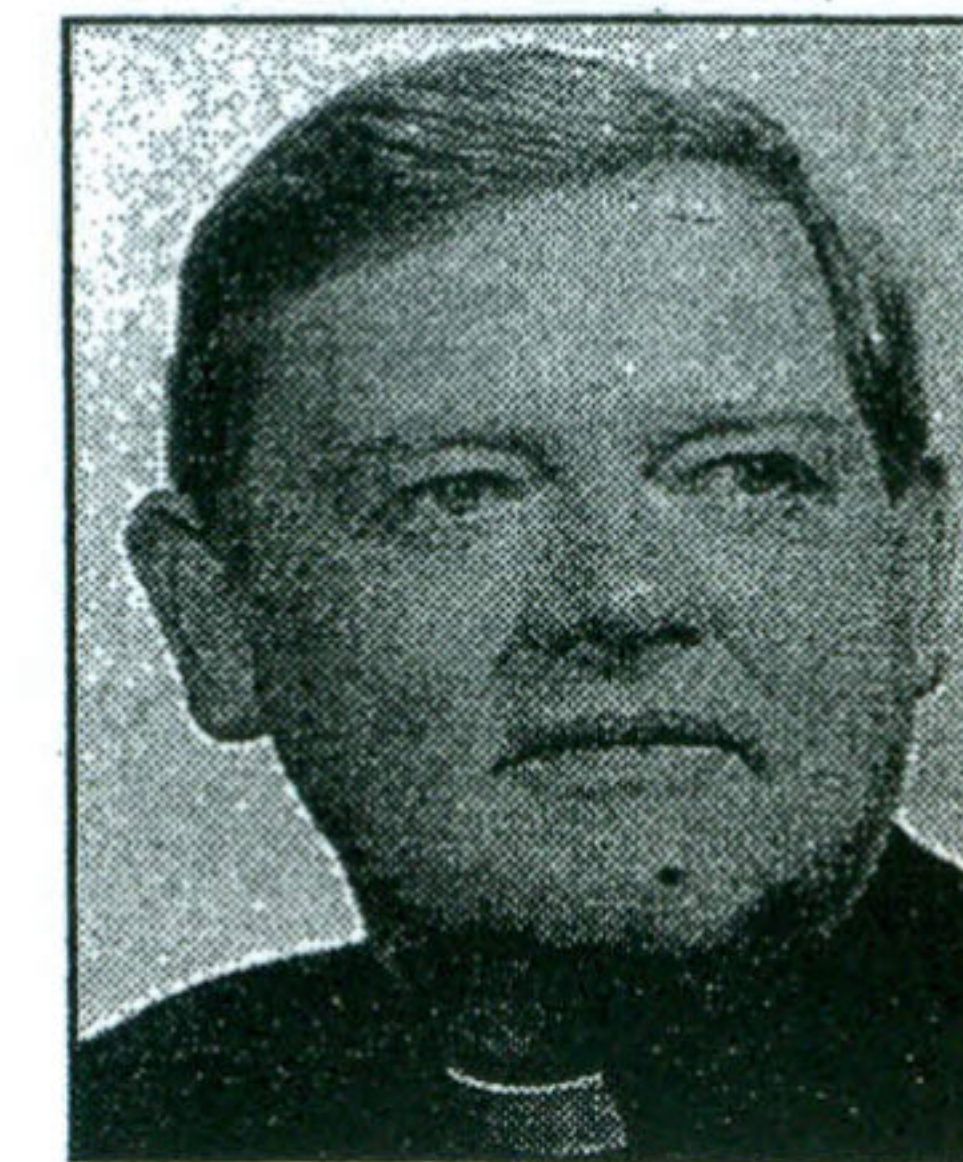
To each of those people who asked me, "Why?" after the tragedy, I knew I had to respond from the heart. Were my answers convincing or satisfactory? I'm not sure. I only know that I gave them the answers I had found for myself.

To the weary news anchor I said, "Man, not God, performed the deeds we saw at the World Trade Center this morning. God gave us the sunset tonight because he knew we needed it."

To the young man who spoke to me in the street, asking what God thought about the horrific events, I said simply, "He's shaking his head."

In the following days, I was asked even harder questions. "Why did my boyfriend have to go to that meeting?" a young woman asked me about one of my own dearest friends who had gone to a conference at Windows on the World. "What do you say to the parents of a woman who is still missing?" a clergy friend asked, as we commiserated over the stories we had heard.

Even the good stories brought their "Why's." A



friend called to tell me of his sister's miraculous escape, hand-in-hand with a co-worker. Unspoken but palpable lay the question, "Why are some spared and others, though seemingly equally deserving, not?"

We may never know the answers to all of the "why's." But we must not allow that fact to divert us from our life purpose. We are people made in the image and likeness of God, and so our reason for being here is to make the world more loving than it was before we came. I know that my friend, who at this writing is still missing in the ruins downtown, would be deeply disappointed in me if I were to lose sight of the thing that brought us together as friends—the desire to help others.

It doesn't completely answer all the "why's" but the best legacy we can give to the loved ones we have lost in this tragedy is to honor their memory by making the world better. We honor them, really, only by putting more love and joy and caring there.

Perhaps, when we don't *understand* the "why's," we are called to *make* them.

*Father Paul Keenan is Director of Radio Ministry and author of Heartstorming, to be published in October by Contemporary Books.*

# Beginning in Faith



By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

**T**he beginning," Plato said, "is the chiefest part of any work." Often, it is the scariest as well. Whether we're jumping from a diving board, facing the first blank page as we write a letter or article, or launching a new business, beginnings contain both a sense of adventure and a sense of panic. We have a goal or a dream—and we are now about to make it real.

When I'm worried about facing some new challenge or task, I often go back to the Gospel story in which Peter, in imitation of Jesus, tries to walk on water (Mt. 14: 23-33). He tries and does pretty well for a while, until he thinks about what he is doing. Terrified, he falters and begins to sink. Often enough, that's precisely what we are afraid might happen to us if we tried something new. Like Peter, we fear that the challenge might prove to be too much for us.

Of course, that's not the end of the story. There's a lot of good news left.

For one thing, Peter, in his panic, says just the right prayer: "Lord, save me!" This prayer comes from the depths of Peter's heart—it's a "life or death" prayer

that leaves no room for insincerity. In this prayer, Peter acknowledges that he cannot act by himself and that the only one who can save him is the Lord. It also indicates Peter's belief that Jesus wants to save him, even though the situation seems impossible. When we're feeling scared in the beginning stages of a new season or a new project, there's a sense in which our fear is our friend. As with Peter, fear cuts through all our pretenses and takes us to the bottom of our heart where we are most ourselves. Peter's prayer, "Lord, save me," connects us with Jesus and inspires us with the realization that, no matter how impossible our new challenge may seem, Jesus wants to help us. He cares for us that much.

More good news in Peter's story comes when Jesus responds to him immediately. Jesus reaches out to catch Peter and saves him without delay.

Then there are Jesus' words to Peter, which at first hearing do not seem like good news. "How little faith you have!" Jesus tells him. "Why did you falter?" These words are often taken as a reprimand, but I wonder. Could we just as readily see them as a

diagnosis—a much-needed naming of the problem that caused Peter to sink in the first place? If so, then they are just what Peter needs to hear. And they're what we may need to hear, as well. Often one of the chief causes of failure lies in our thinking that we have to undertake our new beginnings alone. Can we learn instead that we are never alone, that God is always near, always ready to help?

What is more, can we learn to look for the evidence of God's help in our daily lives? Those glimmers of inspiration, that Scripture passage that runs through our head, that person who unexpectedly pops in with a suggestion—are they just coincidences, or are they the hand of God? Peter gets his answer, and we get ours as well—but often we fail to see it as God's response to our prayer.

At this season of new beginnings, we can remember that the Lord is near. The work is his and ours together. With his help, we can move forward with confidence.

*Father Paul Keenan is director of Radio Ministry and author of "Heartstorming: The Way to a Purposeful Life," coming in October from Contemporary Books.*

# 'Soul Fishing'

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By **FATHER PAUL KEENAN**

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I have a very good friend who loves fly fishing so much that he decided to write a book about it. Fishing is not even his main profession—he's a banker, but it's his avocation, his hobby, his love.

When you read his stories about fishing in mountain streams or sloshing through muddy swamplands, you understand that this is my friend's passion. No obstacle can keep him from gathering his gear and heading off to some remote part of this country or another land to fish.

Having read my friend's book, I know exactly what was going on when, in Sunday's Gospel, Peter was reluctant to go out and fish. After all, he told Jesus, he had been out all night and had caught nothing. He had absolutely no desire to go back out there to fish—none whatsoever.

How could a fisherman whose life passion was to fish not want to go out? The answer: fatigue and discouragement. For Peter the fisherman, as for each one of us, from time to time in our lives, fatigue and discouragement were enemies that could kill his life's passion.

Luckily, Peter was open to learn what Jesus had to teach him—not

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the art of fishing as Peter knew it, but "soul fishing." By soul fishing I mean that Peter had to realize that the power to fish came, not from himself, but from Jesus, and that he could reach beyond his discouragement and try again. When he did that, he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

Soul fishing can work for us as well. When we're tired and discouraged, we can reach beyond our limitation and tap into the love of Jesus. At the heart of our fishing—of all of our searching—is Jesus himself.

Soul fishing means looking beyond our discouragements and seeing instead our divine mission to touch hearts and make the world a better place.

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# 'Pesca de Almas'

Por **EL PADRE PAUL KEENAN**

Tengo un muy buen amigo a quien le gusta pescar con moscas tanto que decidió escribir un libro sobre eso. La pesca no es siquiera su profesión—es un banquero, pero es su ocupación, su pasatiempo, su amor.

Cuando uno lee sus historias de pesca en ríos entre montañas o chapoteos en terrenos pantanosos, uno entiende que ésta es la pasión de mi amigo. No hay obstáculo que le impida coger sus aparejos y dirigirse a alguna parte remota de este país u otro para pescar.

Puesto que he leído el libro de mi amigo, sé exactamente lo que pasaba cuando, en el Evangelio del domingo, Pedro se resistió a ir a pescar. Después de todo, dijo a Jesús, él había estado en el mar toda la noche y nada había cogido. No tenía deseo alguno de volver allá para pescar—nada, absolutamente nada.

¿Como podía un pescador cuya pasión en la vida era pescar, no querer salir? La respuesta: fatiga y desaliento. Para el pescador Pedro, como para cada uno de nosotros, de tiempo en tiempo en nuestras vidas, fatiga y desaliento eran enemigos que podían extinguir la pasión de su vida.

Felizmente, Pedro estaba dispuesto a aprender lo que Jesús tenía que enseñarle—no el arte de pescar como Pedro lo conocía, sino "pesca de almas." Por pesca de almas quiero decir que Pedro tuvo que darse cuenta que el poder para

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pescar venía, no de él mismo, sino de Jesús, y que él podía ir más allá de sus fuerzas y tratar una vez más. Cuando hizo eso, tuvo un éxito que rebasó sus sueños más delirantes.

La pesca de almas puede ser también para nosotros. Aun cuando estemos cansados y desalentados, podemos ir más allá de nuestras limitaciones y usar el amor de Jesús. En el centro de nuestra pesca—de toda nuestra búsqueda—está Jesús.

Pesca de almas significa mirar más allá de nuestros desalientos y ver más bien nuestra misión divina de tocar corazones y hacer que el mundo sea un lugar mejor.

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