

[June 5, 2008](#)

A DEEP SO PROFOUND

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

'Don't you believe that there is in man a deep so profound as to be hidden even to him in whom it is?' St. Augustine wrote those words over 1,600 years ago, and they are as true today as they were the day he penned them. That "deep so profound" is what we call "being made in the image and likeness of God," and it is true of every one of us. It is easy for us to lose sight of those deep waters within ourselves and to lose sight of them in others.

In our society, we have come dangerously close to missing the soul and the soulfulness in human beings. There are those in society who would redefine the very meaning of human life so as to exclude the unborn, those with special needs, the critically ill and the elderly. Everyone else, they say, has a right to live, but not those whose names are written on the "B-list." In so doing, they both miss and refuse to acknowledge the fundamental worth and sacredness of all human life because it is made in God's image. It is a sad and terrible omission, with grave consequences for us all.

We miss the "deep within" in other ways as well. Because we are too busy to notice or because we have bought into inadequate ideas about what constitutes importance, we can pass by manifestations of true greatness in those around us. In my radio work at the Catholic Channel on Sirius, I go to a massive office building in Rockefeller Center. Several companies have offices in that building, including important broadcasters and publishers. There are 2.5 million square feet to that building, 52 stories and 670 feet of height. It's difficult to imagine how many people work there, but there are 41 elevators, if that gives you any idea. Yet as I enter the building, there are certain people whom I notice, some of whom I have come to know. Most people walk past them without recognition. That is a mistake. For if you take a moment to acknowledge those who are responsible for the daily care of that great skyscraper, you find that they have a "deep so profound" that shines more brightly than the building itself.

I almost never enter the building without meeting the man who polishes the floors. He takes pride in his job; the expression on his face is intent. Yet when he sees me, he waves and sometimes pauses to say hello. I don't know much about him, but as I look into his eyes I see a man of faith. As I approach the elevators there is another man whose job it is to clean them and the floors around them. He works hard at that job, and his elevators are spotless; but he never fails to take time to say hello and even sometimes to press the button for me. I don't know him very well, but I know that he has the heart of a friend. Upstairs, where our offices are, there is a vibrant young woman who cleans the offices and studios, vacuums the carpets and picks up the garbage. She works furiously, yet she is never without a smile or a kind word. Nor is the man who mops the floors in the lobby

where I often sit before going to the studio. He has a happy face and, I think, a happy heart.

I look at them and I see that "deep so profound." They don't write books or broadcast radio programs, but they publish and broadcast goodness into the hustle and bustle of a world that can so easily ignore them. They are beacons of light, true images of God and bearers of the goodness of Christ. Daily they take their place beside us as workers in the vineyard, outward signs of an inward grace—the "deep so profound."

Sharing the Faith

May 8, 2008

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

One of the great privileges I have is that of working as a host at The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159. This is an entire channel dedicated to presenting Catholic news and teaching in a talk radio format. The channel has been on the air for a year and a half and during that time we have had some remarkable stories from listeners about how they have returned to the faith or become interested in Catholicism for the first time after listening to The Catholic Channel.

An equally remarkable aspect of working at The Catholic Channel is the diversity of our staff. Many of our producers and board operators are Catholics but many come from other religious backgrounds and some from no religious background at all.

Reading this, you might be surprised. You might think that The Catholic Channel would hire only Catholics. The diversity of our staff has been a tremendous asset to the channel. For example, one of our producers is Jewish and her knowledge and love of her religion has enriched the program on which she works. Another producer came from no religious background at all. Her questions about the Catholic faith have provided a valuable perspective for presenting and explaining Catholic doctrine on the program. She herself marvels at how much she has learned and her interest in religion has truly developed during the past 18 months.

I think that tells us something about evangelization. Evangelization, it seems to me, is a two-way street. On the one hand, we share the teachings of our faith with others. On the other hand, we allow them to bring their own religious backgrounds to the table and by so doing enrich the discussion. Of course, it happens a little more naturally in a place like The Catholic Channel than it might in other venues, but I think the principle holds valid nonetheless.

All too often, I think, evangelization is portrayed as our telling someone what we believe and their taking it in. My experience on The Catholic Channel has taught me that our sharing of our faith is enriched when those with whom we share it bring the richness of their backgrounds to the discussion. I also find that most of them appreciate the new knowledge they are receiving. They may or may not choose to become Catholic, but they appreciate understanding more about what Catholics believe.

The same holds true for many who listen to The Catholic Channel. While the vast majority are Catholics, many have told us that they are non-Catholics who enjoy the programming and find it interesting to them. Some of them might become Catholics one day, but those who don't have learned to be friendly with Catholics and with the Church's teachings. Whereas before they might have been aloof to Catholics and their teaching, now at least they understand.

The same thing applies to the content of our programming. On my program, "As You Think," most of my guests have been Catholic. However, I have also had guests who were Jewish, Muslim and Protestant. Once again, we enter into conversation with each other and bring the richness of our respective traditions to the discussion. That way, we all learn.

Let me be very clear that evangelization is not the same as relativism. I do not believe that the notion that "my religious is true for me and your religion is true for you" goes far enough. I am a Catholic, not just because it suits me, but because I believe that the teachings of Catholicism are objectively true. My experience on The Catholic Channel has taught me that Catholicism has much to be proud of and much to offer. When we offer it in a natural and respectful way, others become interested. Some may choose to join us; some will not. But in the dialogue, we have enriched each other's lives.

The Garden of the Soul

Apr 10, 2008

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

William Blake once wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." As I ponder these words, I am watching my kitty, Princess, look out my window at the patio and gardens beneath. I wonder what she sees, really? Does she see the old tree which was cut down years ago and which now in spring still produces leaves and remains a thing of beauty in her truncated condition? Does she see the statue of Mary in the garden reigning supreme over its promise of new life? Does she see the pigeons that gather on the window sill to sometimes taunt, sometimes greet her? Yes, I am sure that Princess sees them all. But I wonder, does she see more?

What do I see when I look through that same window? Clearly, I see what Princess sees. Unlike her, I can give names to each and every one of the things I see before me. I can

name the tree, its leaves, the statue of Mary and I know that pigeons are different from robins. Because I see with the eyes of a human being, I observe these things differently from Princess. She can see them; I can name them.

There's more. From what I can tell, Princess loves the objects of her observation for their interest. They are there and she appreciates them. The young leaves and the pigeons move and so are objects of fascination. Sometimes she tries to chase a blowing leaf or an errant pigeon, and each becomes an object of adventure. She has fun looking out the window at her patio. It engages her, and she enjoys it.

What about me? Yes, I can see and can name each of the things I see in the scene before me. Yes, I can enjoy the movement of a leaf in the wind and the taunting of the pigeons. But by the grace of God, I am able to do something more. I am able to look upon this small scene and see in it something vaster that far outreaches the limitations of my appreciative eye. I can look at this scene and see the hand of God.

Of course, I can not do that, as well. I can face the window preoccupied with things I have to do. I can have my attention on the television beside the window and not really see the scene at all. I can approach it with a mind full of things to do, worries, fears, obligations, feelings of anger or hurt, recollections of old conflicts from years ago, disappointments and resentments. When that happens, I miss the deep beauty of the scene before me and the things in it become just things, having no import at all.

To see what Blake called the "infinite," I must clean the doors of perception and somehow find a way through them, beyond them, to that place where God is all in all.

Do I have such a place? Indeed I do and it lies not outside me in the garden but within me. It is called the soul, my spiritual soul, which can see not only what is outside me and name it, but which can also see it as a work of God. Here, even the distractions of my mind find their proper perspective in the presence of God. I can sort them out, dismiss some and use others for my growth. My soul is the true garden after which the one outside my window is patterned and arranged.

April, with its promises and realizations of new life, is a time to care for the soul. Nature begs us back to God to find in him a home, a way of understanding and a life. Observing the gardens, we find the garden of the soul. We find God.

Five Life Lessons

Mar 13, 2008

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

As we move from Lent to Easter, we do a lot of praying about the meaning of life. Here are some thoughts I have been having, some life lessons that I have discovered in my reflections.

1. Laughter and Tears Go Hand in Hand.

Life is serious, but it's also true that we can take ourselves too seriously. When we're tired or sick or frazzled, we often tend to focus on the hassles and if we're not careful we can begin to act as though there were nothing else. Life has a way of wearing us down, if we let it. You may not be able to see the humor in your present situation, but never let yourself lose your ability to see humor.

2. Be a Storyteller.

It wasn't until I wrote my first book, "Good News for Bad Days," that I discovered the importance of stories. Well, not only their importance, but also their abundance. From beginning to end, our lives are stories, and so long as we can keep the stories flowing, we can stay lively and vibrant. Even if we're at a point in life where we find it difficult to tell happy stories, we need to keep the stories coming. When we let the stories stop, something inside us stops flowing as well.

3. The World Does Not Have to Stay as It Is.

The idea of our changing the world may seem preposterous. But each of us every day has the opportunity to make a decision as to what energy, what words, what beliefs, what actions he or she will release into the world. We do not have much control over what others do, but we do have control over what we think and what we do. The power lies within.

4. Angels Abound.

I believe in angels, and I think they are an important part of life. Who are they? The traditional definition is that they are messengers of God, creatures to whom God turns when he wants to get something across to us. When we think of angels, we think of radiant beings with wings. I often think of angels as thoughts or impulses that tell me things are not as grim as I imagine them to be. What makes the right person come into my life at the right moment and say just the right thing? Why is my favorite song playing on the radio just when I feel down? Why do I go to the bookstore and there on the table in front of me discover the next book I need to read? Why, in my darkest hour, do the words, "I am with you" explode in my head?

I like to think that life is an ongoing communication with God. And so, I believe in angels.

5. There Is a God and He Loves Us.

It seems to me that people are having trouble believing in God. What we need, in order to find God, is a positive sense of mystery. We have plenty of the negative sense of mystery—"Life's a mystery to me; it's too overwhelming to figure out." But mystery is a positive thing, and in its positive meaning its synonym is "wonder." When we are sufficiently overwhelmed by life, we have the ability to step back and to wonder at the course of events. When we wonder at and about the course of events, we allow ourselves to slip into the realm of thought that holds that perhaps what we see before us is not the whole picture. Perhaps there is something we do not yet know, a perspective we have not yet thought of? Perhaps there is a truth that is beyond our comprehension?

I believe that life teaches us lessons, and the greatest lesson of all is that there is a Supreme Being who enfolds the mystery of our stories into the mystery of his story.

The Middle Can Be a Glorious Place

Feb 14, 2008

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

February is a month that can leave us wondering who we are, precisely. We are in the New Year but midway through winter, still far from spring's reprieve. February is the month of the middle, and to some of us it may seem like the month of the muddle.

There is something to be said for the middle, though. The midpoint of a journey shows us the distance we have already successfully achieved and hints at what is to come. When I was a child, my grandmother and aunt used to visit us every other weekend. I loved their visits, and I was always sad when they left. On one such occasion, my father noted my sadness and said to me, "You know, if we didn't part, we'd never meet again." That's the splendor of the middle—it captures what has been and anticipates what is still to come. In the middle, you can have your cake and eat it, too.

The reason for this is that the middle is the perfect case of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. It is not the past plus the future, exactly. It is something more, a kind of metaphysical balloon that lifts us up beyond the past and the present and somehow into the transcendent heart of both. Robert Frost reflected that "We all sit around in a ring and suppose. But the secret sits in the middle and knows." In an argument, both sides claim that they really know what the object of their disagreement is. Often enough, we find that the truth lies somewhere in between the two positions, and it takes a sage with higher wisdom and perspicacity to discern it.

Jesus knew what to do with the middle. How often in the gospels do we see him sitting in the midst of a crowd or in a boat with a throng on the shore surrounding him? Physically, as well as spiritually, he was so often in the position of "the secret (who) sits in the middle and knows." Much of his earthly life was lived from the perspective of one who sat in the middle between so-called "proven truth" and the full achievement of new

insight. Every parable he preached was like a boat that was meant to take the passenger from a familiar shore to a new and unfamiliar one. Today we associate a man in the middle with a man who vacillates and never owns a truth. Jesus, our man in the middle, proved that the middle was instead the place to meet the truth. "I am the way and the truth and the life." Is it any wonder that he is the middle person of the Trinity—the meeting place between Being and Love?

We are often discontent in February because we are unhappy with being in the middle. Yet in life, the middle is precisely where we are. We have left the womb and we are not yet to eternal life. We are in the middle and it can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Yet any place on earth we call "home" is a mid-place, and it feels like home precisely because it is where we are grounded. At one and the same moment, it takes us from where we have been, prepares us for where we are going, and centers us in that midpoint. That is why Jesus said, "Make your home in me as I make mine in you." He is the middle as well as the beginning and the end of our journey and he does not make us wait for eternity to feel at home.

February, the month of the middle, is a glorious place to be. Embracing February allows us to embrace our status as pilgrims who are on a journey to a definite place and who find a home in being so.

Filling Our Empty Pockets

Jan 3, 2008

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

Colette, the French novelist, is said to have referred to January as a "month of empty pockets." I suppose by now your credit card bills from Christmas are rolling in and perhaps for you Colette's description is apt, indeed. Sometimes you feel afraid to go to the mailbox, lest you be presented with yet another bill for something that a month ago seemed like the perfect way to mark the Christmas season and its festive celebrations. If this is your circumstance, take heart. The same thing probably happened last year and the year before and somehow you survived. There is plenty of room for hope.

There is another sense in which January is a "month of empty pockets." In our house, growing up, we expressed it a bit differently. We spoke, on New Year's Eve, of "sweeping the Old Year out and sweeping the New Year in." If, by a short stretch of the imagination, you think of yourself wearing your favorite overcoat and, on an impulse, decide to empty the pockets, you will have an equally good metaphor for what takes place in a New Year. If you're like me, your pockets notoriously fill up with gloves, scarves, odd pieces of paper, store receipts, used paper clips and the like—mementos, to be sure, of places visited, purchases made, and things stuffed away for future use. After awhile, just try to find any one of them without having to shuffle through all of the others. A pocket, well utilized, can become a bit of a challenge to retrieval.

Sooner or later, we can't abide it anymore and off comes the coat, out come the contents of the pockets and we begin sorting out the wheat from the chaff. It's pocket-cleaning time, and, lo and behold, before long our pockets are empty. It feels good to have emptied our pockets. Once burdened, now we are freed. Our coat seems lighter, and so do we.

January is like that. Ending an old year is a bit like emptying our pockets. We look, we sort, we discover that some of what we have been carrying about is no longer useful and that the rest can be relocated to a more suitable place. Come New Year's Day we have empty pockets.

This is not a sad thing, as our empty financial pockets might seem to be, but rather an exciting thing. For now we get to decide what to do about those empty pockets—what to fill them with and what to refuse to place in them. We can't let them stay empty—remember what Jesus said about the man who swept his house clean but didn't fill it with anything: all his old demons came back to locate themselves in their former home. In a New Year, we must choose what to do with our empty pockets—do we fill them with things useful or do we slip back into our old junky ways?

The New Year, like our empty pockets, is filled with wonderful potential. It was Robert Louis Stevenson who, in *A Child's Garden of Verses*, said, "The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings." There is so much of joy and goodness, right action and loving-kindness that we can put into our pockets. These things never clutter. When our pockets become full of them, we are moved to share.

Happy New Year! In this "month of empty pockets" may you and I fill our pockets with the best that life can offer: faith, love, companionship, things that build peace. When we have filled them with those good things, let us remember to share them. Those treasures in our pockets can enrich the world.

The Voice of God

Dec 6, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

'Silence is the general consecration of the universe. Silence is the invisible laying on of the Divine Pontiff's hands upon the world. Silence is at once the most harmless and the most awful thing in all nature. It speaks of the Reserved Forces of Fate. Silence is the only Voice of our God.' The words of Herman Melville are appropriate for the Holy Season of Christmas, which is, above all, a season of silence.

Yes, silence. To claim this seems to fly in the face of the hard evidence of the senses. For most of us, Christmas is anything but a season of silence. Since before Thanksgiving, our airwaves have been filled with commercials heralding the various gifts that we will inevitably rush about buying before the season has run its course. Christmas carols blare

from our radios and from the public address systems of stores. The hustle of the crowds on subways and buses and the heightened din of tourist traffic assault us at every turn. How can it possibly be said that Christmas is a season of silence?

In the midst of the seasonal din, perhaps we would do well to stop to reflect on the nature of music. Most of us love to listen to music of one genre or other. We hear much music in the course of our days, but how often do we stop to think about the silence that makes all music possible? Whether our tastes go toward classical music, jazz, rock, rap or Gregorian chant, one feature of all music is that it cannot take place without silence. Without the spaces between the notes, there would be no rhythm, no cadence, no counterpoint or tremolo. There would be nothing for lyrics to do. Music can take place only where there is silence behind it and around it. Music is the language that silence speaks.

So it is with "the Christmas rush." Behind the hustle and bustle, the ring of cash registers and the jingling of bells on street corners—behind it all is a powerful intention to love which is the silence beyond and around the noise of the season. We may sometimes express it materialistically or badly or reluctantly, but underneath the pulse of the season is a latent desire to love. Beneath it all, we want to make others happy and to say, "I love you." That is the silent intention tucked within the noise of the holiday.

There is more. When we celebrate Christmas fully and rightly, we bring ourselves back to that "Silent Night" when the Word of God quietly and without ostentation was born in a stable in Bethlehem. Reflecting upon that, we see that Melville was right—on that night, silence was the voice of God. Perhaps we prefer to hear this truth from Karl Rahner: "God's silence, the eerie stillness, is filled by the Word without words, by Him who is above all names, by Him who is all in all. And his silence is telling us that He is here."

He is here. Above and beneath and around and throughout the din of the streets this Christmas there is the silence that lies at the heart of it all: the silence through which the Word of God slipped gently into our world and changed the course of history. He is here: the Word made flesh is in our midst drawing us back into the primordial silence that is at the very heart of being.

To hear him, we must become silent ourselves. We must remember the space between the notes of music and hear the quiet of that Holy Night at the manger. If, even for a moment this season, we can quiet ourselves in the midst of holiday comings and goings, we will hear the true meaning of Christmas. We will hear the voice of God.

Giving Thanks

Nov 8, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

'Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His mercy endures forever." The words of the psalmist provide a wonderful introduction to one of the great themes of the month of November. It is time for Thanksgiving Day. Once again we invite the family around the table, roast the turkey, put out the cranberry, whip up the mashed potatoes and fill the gravy boat. The wonderful smells of Thanksgiving Day permeate the house. It is a remarkable day.

In many households, Thanksgiving Day is also a day dedicated to football. I saw an advertisement on television that said that it is possible to watch 14 football games on a single Sunday. Gathering around the television for a day of watching football has also become a Thanksgiving tradition.

Thanksgiving Day can come and go with lots of celebration, but with very little attention to what the day is really all about. It is entirely possible to have a wonderful family celebration and to miss the point of the day.

Now, don't get me wrong: there is nothing wrong with the aforementioned celebrations. They bring families together and create a warm domestic atmosphere. But if we have that and do not have the true meaning of the feast we have missed something very important.

We celebrate Thanksgiving in November, but it is celebrated in different ways at different times in other parts of the world. One of the central themes of Thanksgiving is to give thanks to God for the bounty of the harvest. It is primarily a day to express gratitude to God.

This meaning of the feast may escape us, since we may not relate to the word "harvest." Most of us have never lived on a farm or in a rural area or experienced the harvesting of the crops. How can we relate to this idea?

Fortunately for us Catholics, our celebration of the Eucharist gives us a solution to this problem. At the Offertory, we offer gifts of bread and wine which become the Body and the Blood of Christ. The prayers of the Mass at the Offertory give us just the perspective we need. The bread and wine are "the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands," which "become our spiritual food (and drink)."

This means that the bread and wine that we offer at Mass are not just bread and wine; they also represent our entire lives—our work, our prayer, our families, our relationships, everything that is a part of our lives. We take everything and offer it to God. And in offering it we give thanks by saying, "Blessed be God forever."

In this way, the Eucharist (the word means "thanks") gives us the essence of what Thanksgiving Day is really all about. We may not think in terms of "harvest," but we can take everything in our lives and give thanks to God for it.

There's a fundamental principle beneath this practice of thankfulness, and it is this: everything we have comes to us from God. We sometimes think that it is due to our

blood, sweat and tears, but remember: we would not be able to work if the ability to do so were not given us by God. And much of what we have, when you stop to think about it, is not something that we work for. For example, we do not work for the trees, the sky, the sunrises and sunsets, the lilies of the field. We enjoy them and yet we don't work to get them: they are God's wonderful gift. True thanksgiving means giving glory to God for all that he has given us.

Happy Thanksgiving! May you and I remember the true meaning of this feast and bring its spirit into our daily lives.

Rethinking October Darkness

Oct 11, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

One of the amazing things about the end of summer is seeing how much shorter the days are becoming. More of our days are spent in darkness. There is no doubt about it: winter is near.

This can be challenging. We need a certain amount of light to guide us, to give us energy, to keep us from becoming sad and depressed. We wonder how people in certain parts of the world can live in almost total darkness for half the year. We realize the importance of light is for our everyday well-being.

Robert Frost wrote a poem about darkness in autumn. It is more or less a prayer to the month of October. In part it reads: "O hushed October morning mild,/Begin the hours of this day slow./Make the day seem to us less brief./Hearts not averse to being beguiled,/Beguile us in the way you know."

When I was a boy, my mother's family, who lived about 40 miles from us, would come to visit every other Sunday, and on the alternate Sundays we would go to them. I loved those weekend visits and longed for the hours to stretch and never end.

It is thus with the light of October. It is like a welcome visitor whose presence we cherish and we grieve when it is time for our visit to end. We would do anything to extend the time so that the inevitable departure might never come. That is how Frost regards October's light. He begs the trees to drop their leaves slowly—None at sunrise, one at noon, now from a tree near us, now from one far away. He prays that October will "retard the sun with gentle mist" so that its light may never fade. He begs the month, "Enchant the land with amethyst./Slow, slow!"

It is in October that we come to understand just how precious a gift light is. In the spring, light grows each day. In summer, it abounds. In October, it slowly fades and we realize what we are losing. If only we had a light that would never leave us, would never fade!

Of course, we do. As Christians, we know that there is a Light that, in the words of the Easter Vigil liturgy, "no darkness can extinguish." The progressive waning of the light of day presents us with a gift—the gift of remembering the true Light that will never go out. As we grieve the loss of sunlight in October, we remember that the Light of Christ never fades, no matter how dark things may seem to us.

If "in Christ there is no east or west" as the hymn says, then there is no sunrise or sunset, for there is no east or west in which to put them. There is only Light, pure eternal Light. When our senses tell us that our joy is fading into an impending sea of darkness, we can remember that in Christ, Light conquers darkness and joy holds triumph over sadness. Remembering this gives us great comfort and consolation in troubled times.

Robert Frost begs October to enchant. But in the fullest sense only the Light of Christ can enchant us. The word "enchant," if you look up its roots, does mean "to cast a spell." But I think a case can be made for saying it can also mean "to sing from within." The "spell" of Christ, unlike a witch's spell, is freely received by the one who is enchanted. It lifts us out of our ordinary world into the Kingdom of God. So enchanted, we "sing from within" much as David sang the Psalms and Mary sang the Magnificat. Our soul magnifies the Lord and our spirit rejoices in God our Savior.

So bring on October with its incremental darkness. We have a Source of Light that never fades.

Our 'Little Way'

Sep 13, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

One night, during my program "As You Think" on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159, I pulled out a copy of my book, "Stages of the Soul," that I keep at the station to refer to from time to time. The program that night was about "How to Understand Life So As to Make It Better," and I was going to do a segment generally reviewing the stages we go through in going from being lost souls to being fully re-enchanted with life.

During the break, I picked up the book and, without any effort on my part, it fell open to the title page. There I discovered that I had written an autograph dedicating the copy to my friends Helen and Joan, a remarkable mother and daughter whom I had known for many years. I felt a lump in my throat as I remembered that both of them had died before I was able to give them their copy. So instead of talking about "Stages of the Soul," I did the segment on Helen and Joan and how they exemplified how to understand life and make it better.

Helen was Joan's mother and as a fairly young woman working in a law office, Joan had a debilitating stroke. After months of very intensive therapy, Joan was able to go home.

She could walk only with great difficulty and her speech, though understandable, was seriously impaired. Helen became Joan's caretaker, managing her care and the responsibilities of the household for the rest of her long life, even after she herself had a stroke and was in poor health. She died well into her 90s, and Joan died a month after her mother.

What was so remarkable about these women was that there was never any absence of joy in their home or in their lives. I would go to visit them, and there was never a visit that was not replete with love and laughter. I remember one Christmas, Helen literally bossed me around as she supervised my attempts to decorate their home for the feast! Sometimes the three of us would cook together, and it was always a wonderful meal and a great occasion.

At the heart of Helen and Joan's ability to make a good life under such difficult circumstances was their practice of the Catholic faith. They couldn't get out to go to Mass, so they watched faithfully every Sunday on television and a deacon from the parish came to bring them Communion. They said the Rosary every day and had a deep devotion to the Blessed Mother. Their home was full of statues and holy pictures. They were generous to Church-related ministries. Their love of the Lord kept them joyous and steady during the many tough days of their lives.

As I sat in the studio that night and thought of Helen and Joan, I reflected that they and others like them are the real heroes in life. Little-known and somewhat hidden away in a dedicated and loving life, they manifested the truth that our daily struggles, large and small, are made doable through the help of God. What might to some have seemed to be sad and tragic lives they saw as a powerful opportunity to bring faith and love and laughter into the world, right from their little corner of it.

I thought of the Little Flower who spoke and wrote so often about the "little way" of making everyday life a way of holiness. Our little lives are the mustard seeds that, nurtured by faith and love, go on to produce the largest of trees. Helen and Joan had been given their "little way," and they embraced it joyously.

That night in the radio studio, providentially, God reminded me of two wonderful women who knew the secret to understanding life and making it better. I could not have chosen better subjects to talk about.

Hesitate in August

Aug 16, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

'Hesitate in August. Be shy. Let your toes tremble in their sandals.'" The words of Anne Sexton set us a healthy agenda for this month that marks the end of the summer and the sometimes-reluctant beginning of the fall.

Hesitate in August. For many years, I wrote a column in parish bulletins called "Pause and Ponder," and now I am using that title for a series of short reflections to air on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159. Especially at this time of year, before re-entering the whirlwind of the months to come, it is important that we do just that.

Personally, I have always found times of vacation to be great opportunities to rest and to stake stock of what has been going on in my life. This, in turn, enables me to formulate the hopes and dreams I have to the time ahead. Even if vacation is a thing of the past or is nonexistent for us this year, we can take time to hesitate. In fact, we must, because without taking time to pray, to reflect, to evaluate our lives, we will soon lose touch with them, if we have not done so already. Surely each of us is entitled to a day, or a day a week, or an hour in the morning to open our spiritual eyes to the wondrous presence of God, especially his presence within our hearts, where he says, as he did 2,000 years ago, "Make your home in me as I make mine in you."

Hesitation is often given a bad name. After all, "He who hesitates is lost," right? I say just the opposite: he or she who does not hesitate is lost. When we hesitate before speaking or before performing an action, we pause and ponder as to whether these are words or actions we wish to say or do. We stop to be sure that the immediate future will be the right expression of who we are and who we want to be.

The larger hesitation that Anne Sexton recommends is similar to that. As we learned to do in grammar school, we stop, we look, we listen to be sure that what lies ahead is the best that it can be. We must hesitate in August. It is good for us.

Be shy. An expert on networking once told me that studies show that 95 percent of us consider ourselves shy and feel inadequate in some way or other. Most of the time we try to hide our shyness. We consider it shameful. But the poetess urges us, "Be shy." It is good for us to realize that there are some things that we do badly or even wrongly and to allow ourselves the opportunity to ask the Lord and others for help. We cannot go it alone. Being shy allows us to recognize that fact and to allow others to be of help to us.

Let your toes tremble in your sandals. Tremble, not with fear, but with wonder. When we take time to hesitate and to be shy, we develop the capacity to be filled with wonder and amazement at life. Life is good sometimes, difficult sometimes, and strange sometimes. Through it all we can experience the lovely mystery that is God and the covenant that is his relationship with us and ours with him. He tells us, "Be not afraid," and exhorts us, "Be still, and know that I am God."

Wherever we are, we walk on holy ground, and there is no escaping the palm of his hand, even if we try. When our toes tremble in our sandals, we acknowledge the holy ground that is the stuff of our daily lives, and we take time to wonder.

"Hesitate in August. Be shy. Let your toes tremble in your sandals." As we prepare to end the summer, we can engage in this mystical exercise and find ourselves enriched.

The Power of the Parish

Jul 19, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

I just read a story about a 7-year-old girl in New Jersey who was seriously injured in a car accident over a year ago and was not expected to live. Last May, miraculously recovered from her injuries, she received her first holy Communion from her father, who is an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist.

It's a beautiful story in and of itself, but what makes it even more special is that the family attributes her recovery to the love and prayers of the pastor and members of her church. The prayers of the parishioners were unceasing and the pastor of the parish was quoted as saying that everyone took the little girl's plight to heart. Every Sunday, people would stop family members after Mass to inquire about her progress.

One day during her rehabilitation, she was able to leave the hospital to visit home and to go to Mass with her family. Her parish priest described the elation he felt when the family tapped him on the shoulder, he turned around and there was the bright-eyed 7-year-old sitting in the pew. When she entered the church where she would later receive her first Communion, everyone in the church stood up and gave her a standing ovation.

This put me in mind of another story I read not so long ago about a parish in Wisconsin that rallied round a family in which the mother had developed breast cancer. One of the first things the family did was to call the rectory to let the parish know. The secretary answered the phone, and after hearing the news, helped to organize what would be the most successful bake sale in parish history. People who did not know the family well bought the ingredients and donated hours of their time to baking loaves of bread for the sale. In addition, there were countless phone calls from parishioners expressing support, promising prayers and asking how they could help. The parish made a huge difference in how the family coped with this crisis.

Another family, this time in Omaha, also went through the experience of the mother's being diagnosed with breast cancer. The parish stepped in and organized a benefit to help cover some of the enormous expenses associated with the illness. The woman described belonging to the parish as "a godsend."

And then there's the story of a woman in Florida who 37 years ago promised her then-teenage daughter, as the girl slipped into a diabetic coma, "I will never leave you." For all these years the mother has kept that promise, providing love, care and medical attention at tremendous financial and physical cost to herself. Part of the story is a Catholic parish,

where students from the local Catholic school banded together with their parents to put on a garage sale to help the mother and daughter. They got the local pharmacy to offer its parking lot for the sale, and another couple put a full-page ad in their newspaper announcing the sale. As part of the venture, a group of students from the school went to the mother's home to pray, to visit and to tell stories. Again, the parish came through.

The common element in all of these stories is the parish. In each and every case, the Catholic parish provided love, support and prayers in a time of crisis. Stories like these usually make the diocesan press but seldom do they receive attention from the mainstream secular media. I wish they did. They describe Catholicism at its best and highlight the power of the parish to make a tremendous difference in the lives of people in need.

Our Catholic parishes are powerful forces for good in the world. Their faith in action reveals a powerful secret tool for making the world a better place. The secret? The parish channels individual prayer and caring into a combined impetus that can do wonders. Alone, we can do much. Together, we can do even more.

'I Will Never Leave You'

Jun 7, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

I first came into contact with this story several years ago when I was interviewing Dr. Wayne Dyer on a radio program I was hosting. Dr. Dyer wrote a book called "A Promise Is a Promise," a true story of a mother who has cared for a comatose daughter for many years. Well, the many years is now 37 years, and 79-year-old Kate O'Bara continues to care for her daughter Edwarda who for many years has been in a diabetic coma. Her care is the fulfillment of a promise. As she was slipping into unconsciousness, Edwarda appealed to her mother, "Mommy, don't ever leave me."

"I will never leave you," was her mother's reply, and Kate O'Bara has kept that promise steadfastly since 1970.

Certainly, the road has not been easy. The Florida Catholic reports that the family is \$200,000 in debt and Kate herself is not well. When asked about all of that, her response is, "I rely on faith. If you don't have faith, you don't have anything."

This is an amazing story of deep faith and profound loyalty. It gets us all thinking about the many Kate O'Baras who are out there, quietly and sacrificially caring for children and adult children who are unable to care for themselves. People for whom the last resort—the only resort—is faith.

In the Aeneid, Virgil continually refers to the hero, Aeneas, as "pius Aeneas," "faithful Aeneas." We often use the word "pious" to mean someone who is deeply religious, and that is a true definition, but at its root the word means "faithful." The virtue of faithfulness such as that exemplified by Kate O'Bara is a remarkable thing. There is something very special about it. We could even say that there is something sacred about it. And the reason we can use the word "sacred" is that such faithfulness is a mirror of the faithfulness of God to us, his people. Throughout the Old Testament, the faithfulness of God is highlighted, with the understanding that we are to be faithful to the covenant because he is faithful. When we hear Kate O'Bara say to her daughter, "I will never leave you," can we not at the same time hear the words of Jesus saying, "Behold, I am with you always"?

For that is the great promise he has given to us. No matter how dark our days, no matter how bleak our prospects seem to be, that promise is there, "I am with you always." Like Edwarda, as we slip into the darkness of life, we cry out to the Lord, "Please don't leave me." And his answer is there for all time, for all eternity, really—"I am with you always."

He asks only one thing of us: that we, in turn, be there for him and for others. Like Kate O'Bara, the Lord asks so little for himself. What he does ask is that we be there in behalf of those who are in need. "So long as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me."

The story of Kate O'Bara can serve as an inspiration to all of us to check our faithfulness quotient. Are we faithful to those whom God has put into our care? Is faithfulness to a promise an important concept for us? Are we, by our faithfulness in our daily living, mirroring the faithfulness of God?

It's a huge challenge, but it's an important way to fulfill our purpose here on earth to make the world a better place with the help of God. We hear so many times that we are made in the image and likeness of God, but it takes a Kate O'Bara to make us realize what that really means. May we, in our daily lives, mirror the faithfulness of God as truly as she does.

Dynamic Ignorance

May 10, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

"The history of the Victorian Age," wrote Lytton Strachey in "Eminent Victorians," "will never be written: we know too much about it. Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian—ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art." This is a remarkable testimonial from a distinguished historian as to how familiarity can serve us poorly and ignorance can serve us well.

We generally disdain ignorance in our knowledge-driven society where information is broadcast or webcast to us at a frighteningly rapid speed. We know so very much about so very much that we can sometimes be lured into thinking that we know or can know everything we need to know.

Lytton Strachey is by no means extolling the sort of ignorance that, often described as "bliss," is really a substitute for naiveté about life in general or various aspects of it. We often call this vincible, or culpable, ignorance—the belief that we're simply better off not knowing something that might cause us to have take responsibility for it. "I'd better off not knowing much about finance," someone might say, "because if I did, I'd be scared to death at how much I'm spending." That's not the sort of ignorance we're after here. Neither is it bliss in the true sense of the word. The conditions this sort of ignorance can cause in the long run are far from blissful.

No, the ignorance described here is of a very different sort. It occurs at those times when we hit a roadblock in our ability to figure things out and are left with the realization that we do not know as much as we thought we did. Traditionally, this is called "learned ignorance," and its function is to give birth to inquiry and to wonder. It is precisely the ignorance we face when we find ourselves in a time of personal crisis for one reason or other and realize that all of our normal sources of intelligence have failed to show us what to do. We are at an impasse.

If at this point we can humbly acknowledge our ignorance and exercise a bit of faith in God, what we know as ignorance gives way to divine intelligence. Thanks to God's infinite generosity, we who are made in his image and likeness have access to an understanding the ways of which are not our ways and far surpass them. To us it seems to be our ignorance which "simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art." But it is not our ignorance at all that does this. It is the mind of God at work in us, the partnership between God and us, the happy realization on our part that we do not have to work alone. We are nudged in the direction of an answer to our problem. Yet at the same time, we are given something more—a sort of "Friend, come up higher," in virtue of which we find ourselves rapt in glorious wonder at the mysterious and bountiful Greatness who insists upon dealing with us with such beneficence.

Like the disciples who asked Jesus, "Where do you live?" and heard him say, "Come and see," we find ourselves invited to take a place within the Wisdom of God and to find there the knowledge that surpasses all understanding.

Ignorance, then—this "learned ignorance"—is a door that opens up into the arms of God. We so often panic when some sharp turn on life's road overwhelms us. But our ignorance is not a closed door but an open one. If we can look beyond our fear, we can find that open door that says, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." Taking it, we find not only an answer to our problems but the One who is truly the only answer, after all.

Father Paul Keenan is the author of "Elisha's Jars" and "Beyond Blue Snow" and the host of "As You Think," Mondays through Fridays from 9 p.m. to midnight on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159.

The Reverie Alone Will Do

Mar 29, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

"You can get help from teachers, but you are going to have to learn a lot by yourself, sitting alone in a room." This pithy statement, from an interview in the New York Times, is attributed to someone whose name you may not know. It is Theodor Geisel, but you know him as Dr. Seuss. I love this quotation, because I think it contains a great deal of wisdom for life. Dr. Seuss was talking about learning how to write, but his words can be applied to the art of living as well.

There are so many books and programs—including my own—which are available in bookstores across the nation, all designed to teach us something about the art of living. Most of them are pretty good and can give us a great deal of insight as to how to live. But there is no substitute for sitting alone in a room and working out our own personal wisdom.

For it is one thing to be able to draw upon the knowledge of others, but it is entirely another to draw upon one's own inner beliefs. Jesus knew that, and he used it in his dealings with the apostles. One day, when they were together, he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" This was a fairly easy question, since the apostles had been traveling with him and talking with people in the towns and villages they visited. They were well aware of what people thought about Jesus. So they answered him, "Some say Moses, some say Elijah, some say John the Baptist or one of the prophets."

Of course, Jesus already knew the answer to that question, but he used it as a springboard for the next question, which was much more difficult. "Who do you say that I am?" Only lovable, impetuous Peter could answer. No answer from the others is recorded. For Jesus, it was not enough that the apostles be able to repeat what others were saying about him. He wanted them to work things out in their own hearts as well. He wanted their faith to be personal and real.

I think it was the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard who said that most of the problems we face are due to our inability to sit quietly alone in a room. It's one of the hardest things for us to do, stimulated as we are by our daily duties, the Internet, television and radio programs, our cell phones, and the chatter of people around us. Yet truly successful, creative people know that one of life's hidden treasures takes the form of golden moments spent all alone in silence, on a daily basis if possible.

Jesus knew that as well, of course. So often in the Gospels we see him going off by himself to pray, especially in moments when life was difficult. He knew that time alone with his Heavenly Father would sustain him in life's hardest moments. We Catholics are the heirs to a long tradition of quiet prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. We have opportunities for days of recollection, retreats and the practice of solitary meditation on a passage of Scripture. There is no lack of opportunity for being alone with one's thoughts and with God.

I like the way Emily Dickinson expressed it. "To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee. One clover, and a bee. And revery. The revery alone will do, if bees are few." We have within us the power of reverie, the God-given ability to pray, to imagine, to reflect, to ruminate, to silently encounter the presence of God within us.

Yes, we have teachers, and we must be grateful for them and rely on them. But, we have yet another teacher, discovered in silent encounter— that sacred space within where God holds conference with our soul. In that silent place we gather ourselves, and come home.

Inviting Christ Into Your Shadows

Mar 1, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

'Our purpose in founding the city was not to make any one class in it surpassingly happy, but to make the city as a whole as happy as possible.' This thought-provoking line comes from Socrates through Plato, in the latter's work "The Republic."

How interesting that this Greek philosopher, who lived roughly five centuries before Christ, had an inspiration very similar to that of Christ when speaking of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was the genius of Jesus to reveal to the people of his time—of all times, really—the notion that happiness in this life and the next was not the exclusive property of any one class of people, but something to be had by one and all.

The widow who gave her every penny to the temple treasury was held in higher esteem than those who gave little and bragged a lot. The beggar at the rich man's gate received blessings that the rich man at whose gate he sat did not.

What would have been the inspiration for Jesus in gaining this insight? Of course, as the Son of God, he knew that all were called to eternal bliss. But what in his human experience would have occasioned that insight to emerge into his consciousness?

It is my personal opinion that the greater part of the insights that Jesus proclaimed during his public life were formed in the crucible of his hidden life in Nazareth. From the reactions of the townspeople to Jesus' sayings and miracles in his public life, it seems that he lived pretty much as an ordinary boy and man, not displaying his divinity for all to

see. That is why they were all so astounded at his words and actions. "How can he do these things?—we know him," was their constant cry.

This leads me to believe that, in Nazareth, Jesus lived a fairly ordinary life, learning what people were thinking, saying and doing day to day, absorbing their everyday patterns of thought and action. As he grew older, he realized that some of those patterns of thought and action were misguided and needed to be corrected. That became his mission during his public life.

One of the "truths" that needed to be corrected was the notion that happiness was only for a select few. This I am sure he learned in Nazareth from Mary and Joseph, who were poor but happy people, totally devoted to doing the will of God. But the general notion among the people of the day was that only the rich and the healthy were happy and the poor and the sick were not.

Notice how dumbfounded the disciples were when Jesus told them how hard it would be for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. "Then who can be saved?" was their immediate reply. Notice, too, how exasperated the Pharisees and the scribes were when Jesus mingled with sinners and healed the sick on the Sabbath. Jesus was going against what everyone "knew" to be the case—the belief that happiness was only for a few.

What Jesus was teaching—that everyone had a chance at true happiness—went against the beliefs of his day. In Nazareth, Jesus may not have outwardly demonstrated his status as the Son of God, but his divinity was clearly present and working "behind the scenes," so to speak. Observing the everyday events and encounters of his "hidden life," Jesus was already forming some of the powerful insights that would mark his public life.

So when we think that, because of things that have happened to us, we are outside the pale of God's salvific love, let us think again. Schooled at the feet of his mother and foster father, and guided quietly by his Heavenly Father, Jesus taught us otherwise. No one is beyond the reach of God's love—and certainly not us. There is no limiting the scope of God's love.

Inviting Christ Into Your Shadows

Feb 1, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

I am a perennial fan of the movie, "Groundhog Day," in which the characters are fated to repeat a single day (Groundhog Day) over and over. It's a funny movie, and for some reason, I love the Groundhog Day custom anyway and watching this movie just taps into that.

Groundhog Day is the day on which a celebrated groundhog by the name of Punxsutawney Phil is released into the daylight. If he sees his shadow, the custom goes, there will be six more weeks of winter. If not, it will be a mild winter and early spring. In the years in which Phil sees his shadow and predicts six more weeks of winter, many of us who are not winter weather lovers hunch our shoulders and shudder visibly. But wait a minute, maybe Phil is giving us, not so much a weather prediction as, with a little help from our imaginative powers, an important insight into human life.

Seeing our shadow and expecting six more weeks of winter may not be the greatest news in the world to some. But, in life, seeing our shadow is an important and necessary part of the fully formed spiritual life. No, I don't mean the shadow that "goes in and out with me," in the words of Robert Louis Stevenson in "A Child's Garden of Verses." I mean the shadow side of our inner life, that part of us that is not so pleasant to experience and which, often, we would prefer to ignore.

Yes, we hate to acknowledge the shadow side of ourselves—that dark, often murky and negative side that we prefer to hide from houseguests and display, oddly enough, to those who love us most. The sadness, the depressing moments, the tendency to moodiness, edginess and expressions of impatience, the drives in us that lead us to want to do things that, in our regular life, we would never dream of doing. The shadow side of us is scary and dark and most of the time we would prefer to ignore it and to wish it would just go away. But it doesn't go away anymore than winter goes away, and that can get us frustrated.

What if we embraced the shadow side of ourselves, accepted it for what it is, and let it enrich our life instead of destroy it? That doesn't mean acting out of it, surrendering ourselves to the darkness of it and ending up as miserable human beings. As Catholics, we believe that Jesus Christ came to redeem both the "best" parts of us and the "worst" parts of us, and if we surrender our shadow side to the light of his grace, we will find him able to transform it into something of immense value for ourselves and others.

Ask yourself this: when struggling with some dark aspect of yourself, to whom would you rather turn—to someone who knows nothing about what you suffer or to someone who understands because they have been there themselves? The latter, I presume; and it is only because they have acknowledged their own darkness and brought it to God's merciful healing that they are able to be of help. God plus the shadow equals wisdom, understanding, counsel and all of the other Gifts of the Holy Spirit that are such an important part of our Catholic tradition.

When we admit the shadow side of ourselves, we may indeed get six more weeks of "winter." It's not easy. But remember—the frosty silence of winter is just the ambience that paves the way for the sunshine of spring. The Light, who, in the Gospel of John, shines in the darkness is at work on the murky days, as surely as the sun shines on overcast days when we do not see it. Do not be afraid—spring is on its way.

Classic Movies, Classic Morals

Jan 4, 2007

By FATHER PAUL KEENAN

Over the holidays, it was a treat to watch so many favorite classic movies on television and on DVD. I love the old movies, because in so many instances they present characters who face moral dilemmas and end up doing the right thing.

I'm thinking of movies like "Now, Voyager," a beautiful film in which the character played by Bette Davis grows from being a neurotic woman, unfortunately the ridicule of her family, to being a warm, loving person fully mature in her own right. It is a powerful story of human growth. Her moral dilemma comes when she meets Paul Henreid on a cruise and they fall in love. He is a married man and he feels a loyalty to his wife and daughter. As the plot develops, the daughter, who is troubled and unwanted by her mother, comes to Cascade, the facility run by Claude Rains, at which Bette Davis is also a patient. With Rains' approval, she takes the girl under her wing, finding her a kindred spirit. The two become very close. It becomes apparent when Henreid visits his daughter at Cascade that he and Davis are very much in love and that the temptation involved in their situation is almost unbearable.

How do they resolve their dilemma? At the end of the movie, they realize that, though they love each other, any permanent romantic relationship between them cannot be. The movie ends with Betty Davis saying to the Henreid character, "Why ask for the moon when we have the stars?"

Then there is "Casablanca" in which Humphrey Bogart plays a saloon keeper, into whose life a former lover returns (Ingrid Bergman). In their previous encounter, he had understood that they would be married, and Bergman believed her husband to be dead. They had planned to go away together when Bergman discovered that her husband was really alive, and she went to him instead. Bogart was deeply hurt, carrying the anger with him for years; and so he is none too pleased to see Bergman and her husband (Paul Henreid) show up in his saloon. They are in deep trouble for political reasons, and Bogart is in possession of letters of transit that could help them escape. Hurt and angry over Bergman's earlier rejection of him, Bogart steadfastly refuses to give them the letters, even when Bergman threatens his life.

When Bergman tearfully explains what really happened, there looms the possibility that she and Bogart could rekindle their relationship. To the very end of the movie, it's not clear what will transpire, but in the end Bogart honors her marriage and in a tearful farewell scene, releases the letters of transit to the couple and watches them take off for freedom in a plane.

Another film that comes to mind is "In This Our Life" with Bette Davis again and Olivia De Havilland. It is the story of the relationship between two sisters, Davis and De Havilland. Davis is completely self-centered and wraps everyone around her finger, including her parents and her doting uncle (played by Charles Coburn). She will stop at nothing, including wooing and marrying her sister's husband. As the story unfolds, Davis becomes involved in an automobile accident in which she hits and kills a little girl and injures her mother. She runs away from the scene and then tries to blame the accident on an innocent black law clerk. In the end, her story unravels and for the first time in her life she accepts responsibility and admits that she did wrong.

What is common to all three movies is that in the end, the characters do what is right. They agonize through their moral dilemmas, but in the end they decide in favor of the best. Though not religious in nature, these classic movies exemplify for us that good can triumph and that we can choose to do the right thing no matter how difficult it might be.

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