

# CATHOLIC VIEWS: BLOG BY FATHER PAUL KEENAN

## The Triumph of Kindness

June 3, 2008

If you haven't done so, please take time to read Father Bob Pagliari's most recent column in [Catholic New York](#). It's a very touching story about a man bringing his forgetful father to the doctor's office. The father's poor memory became a problem during the early stages of the visit, but the son treated his father with love and respect the entire time. It's very easy to become impatient in such circumstances but the son didn't even once give way to the temptation. It's a powerful story of the triumph of kindness.

There are millions of opportunities to test the triumph of kindness. I think of parents whose children have special needs or disabilities. How many times they may be tempted to react with understandable anger and frustration. And how many times they choose patience and kindness instead! It happens time after time, each and every day. Or you can watch family and friends deal with people with speech impediments or with hearing difficulties. Instead of conversations being tense, these people take the whole thing as a matter of course without causing the other person hurt or embarrassment. It is the triumph of kindness once again.

Kindness, I think, is at its best when we are dealing with someone with whom we disagree. Can we express our opinions to each other without putting the other down or insulting them? If so, that is the triumph of kindness.

In his book, *My Little Church Around the Corner*, The Reverend Doctor Randolph Ray wrote these words about kindness: "Kindness is the life's blood, the elixir of marriage. Kindness makes the difference between passion and caring. Kindness is tenderness. Kindness is love, but perhaps greater than love ... Kindness is good will. Kindness says, 'I want you to be happy.' Kindness comes very close to the benevolence of God." Truer words were never spoken.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A World Without Father's Day

May 25, 2008

In case you haven't been watching television or listening to the radio lately, Father's Day is just around the corner. We're hearing and seeing multitudes of ads telling us about the perfect gift for Father's Day. We might bemoan the commercialization of special days like Mother's Day and Father's Day, but I have this nagging question in the back of my head – how long will there be a Father's Day?

Sounds absurd, doesn't it? Who would dare to put an end to Father's Day?

Think about it, though. There are movements afoot in our world the logical conclusion of which would make it unnecessary for there to be fathers for human procreation. Look at the recent [legislation](#) passed in the United Kingdom overturning a ban on embryonic stem cell research and on hybrid embryo research. People hail these sorts of procedures as wonderful advances that will make it possible for various dread diseases to be cured, even though the evidence for that is slight, indeed.

There are many problems, morally speaking, with such procedures. Important among them is the removal of humanity from sex. The sexual act was created by God for the purpose of procreating children, yes. But the forgotten element in much of this current research is that the context for the procreation of children was to be a total self-giving love between the husband and the wife. The child was meant to be the fruit of that union. But now sex in marriage is to be replaced by sex by praxis. Life can be produced in a lab and the whole matter can be accomplished, some say, even without the necessity of a human father. There is a grave danger that we are coming to lose the humanity in the act of marriage and in marriage itself. And when we lose the humanity, we also lose a sense of the God who created humanity in the first place.

The fact is, when we lose the sense of total intimacy between a husband and a wife, we lose the whole beautiful mystery behind marriage and the procreation of the human race as God intended. It is one more subtle but very real chipping away at the mystery of life itself, with the additional sad factor that in many of these experiments human beings are created, without any consent on their part, simply in order to do the bidding of science and others are destroyed when they are no longer deemed to be needed.

It may be difficult for us to get our minds around what a world would be like without mystery.

But perhaps we can start with this. What would the world be like without Father's Day?

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## California's Judicial Activism

May 21, 2008

There are many problems with the decision by the Supreme Court of California to legalize gay marriage. Catholic moral theologians will certainly point out the difficulty of legalizing a definition of marriage that goes against the plan established by God in which marriage is between a husband and a wife, that is to say, a man and a woman. But there are problems from a legal perspective as well, as Jay Sekulow, a noted Supreme Court lawyer, points out in a recent article, "[Same Sex Marriage in California by Judicial Fiat](#)" on Catholic Online.

In this article, Sekulow argues that from a legal perspective, the real problem with the State Supreme Court's decision is that it is the product of judicial activism. He writes, "The California high court failed to uphold what the state legislature and an overwhelming majority of California voters clearly understand – that the institution of marriage is limited to one man and one woman." The court's decision that the right to marry is given constitutionally to same-sex marriages and to heterosexual marriages is, he says, the product of the court's interpretation and completely ignores the will of the state legislature and usurps the voice of the voters of California as well. As to the former, he points out that over thirty years ago, the California legislature specifically defined marriage as between a man and a woman. As to the latter, he notes that in 2000, sixty-one percent of California voters approved Proposition 21 which held that marriage was exclusively between a man and a woman.

Here is what the dissenting opinion, written by two of the state's justices concluded: "A bare majority of this court, not satisfied with the pace of democratic change, now abruptly forestalls that process and substitutes, by judicial fiat, its own social policy views for those expressed by the People themselves." Where, they ask, is the distinction between the judiciary and the legislative branch of government. As Justice Carol Corrigan noted in her dissent: "If there is to be a new understanding of the meaning of marriage in California, it should develop among the people of our state and find its expression at the ballot box."

That clearly did not happen in California and it sets a dangerous legal precedent. Other states, of course, will use this decision as a basis for similar rulings. And the question remains, "Where is the voice of the People?"

It is something for us to think seriously about. Hopefully, in November, the ballot box will overturn this ruling and once again make heterosexual marriage the only standard for marriage in the state. But it is a matter of grave seriousness when the judicial system attempts to override the voice of the People. Nothing could be further from the true spirit of American democracy.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Subsidiarity and Solidarity

May 7, 2008

On a broadcast following the Holy Father's [speech at the United Nations](#) during his recent visit, I had the opportunity of serving as a commentator for ABC News Radio. I remember speaking with Aaron Katersky, the anchor for the broadcast, about the Pope's reference to two fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching – subsidiarity and solidarity. It was impressive to hear the Holy Father refer to these principles and to use them as the springboard for his speech to the United Nations. Now in the aftermath of his visit, the Holy Father has [continued his reflections](#) on these two important topics and relates them to the Trinity.

What exactly are subsidiarity and solidarity? Subsidiarity means that in any relationship, the lower entity must be allowed to do as much as it can without interference from the higher entity. For example, in the United States, the federal government must allow the states to regulate their life as much as possible without interfering with their rights. Similarly, the United Nations must help individual nations without interfering with their sovereign right to govern their people. In a family, the parents must rule and guide their children without squelching their innate freedom.

What is solidarity? Solidarity means that the members of the various nations in the world or states in a country such as ours must work together in unison for the common good. Why are these two principles important? All too often we have seen large entities try to take away the individual freedoms of those who belong to them. To have peace in the world, it is necessary that each country have the opportunity to do what it needs to do to govern its people, and by the same token that country must respect the needs of its people and to treat them with dignity and respect.

Where does the Trinity come in? Pope Benedict points out that subsidiarity and solidarity are not merely horizontal qualities, but are also vertical, relating us to God. As the Holy Father expressed it, "The responsibility of Christians to work for peace and justice, their irrevocable commitment to build up the common good, is inseparable from their mission to proclaim the gift of eternal life to which God has called every man and woman." God has given us our calling and our freedom (which he will never take away) and we must respect his higher authority in our lives. In his address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, he reminded the scholars, "When those responsible for the public good attune themselves to the natural human desire for self-governance based on subsidiarity," he added, "they leave space for individual responsibility and initiative, but most importantly, they leave space for love, which always remains 'the most excellent way.'"

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Encouraging Statistics

**April 29, 2008**

Reports from Italy and Europe indicate an interesting trend concerning abortion. Doctors in both countries are increasingly reluctant to perform them. According to an article in [“Catholic Online”](#), the Italian Ministry of Health reports that “70 percent of Italian gynecologists now refuse to perform abortions on moral grounds and that the number is only increasing.” This is due to a conscientious objection clause which allows doctors to opt out of performing abortions if they object to doing so. For anesthetists helping in abortions, the figure of those refusing to participate rose from 45.7 percent to 50.4 percent, according to the Ministry.

Something similar is taking place in Britain, according to [“The Independent,”](#) which describes an “abortion crisis” in the United Kingdom. According to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, this reluctance on the part of doctors to perform abortions stems from both distaste for performing the procedure and ethical issues. According to Ann Faredi of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, "There is a real crisis looming. Unless we can address the problem and motivate doctors to train in abortion, we may well face a situation in five years' time in which women's access to abortion is severely restricted. It is our biggest headache."

These are interesting statistics when you stop to realize the intensive secularism that pervades both of these countries, something that has Pope Benedict XVI concerned. It would be difficult, it seems, to connect the doctor’s reluctance to perform abortions to religious fervor. Rather it seems to be connected with a growing natural disgust with performing the procedure and a realization that it is often a disheartening operation to perform. For someone whose professional instincts are to heal, the very idea of spending a significant part of one’s medical career terminating life becomes very discouraging and difficult to sustain.

It would be nice if this were due to religious sentiments, but very interesting that it is due to a natural reluctance to abort. But if it means a reduction in the number of abortions being performed in the world, I’ll take it.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Remembering the Papal Visit

**April 23, 2008**

The visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States was a magnificent event. He really instilled the message of hope that was the promise of his trip. I think his direct addressing of the sexual abuse scandal and his visit with victims of sexual abuse by clergy were remarkable moments that lay the groundwork for much healing.

Personally, I had the opportunity to follow the visit closely in my role as broadcaster. I had the privilege of covering the Pope's arrival in Washington and his speech at the UN for ABC News Radio and the St. Patrick's Cathedral and Yankee Stadium Masses (the latter with Sister Marie Pappas, the Superintendent of Schools for the Archdiocese of New York) for [The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159](#).

Looking back, there were many wonderful moments both in the preparation for the visit and in the visit itself. Helping to program the Papal Archives Channel for Sirius was a great experience for me. It gave me access to historical speeches by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II during their visits to America, which was a treat in itself. I was fascinated by the technology behind the production of the channel. Producer Dan Miele and I spent hours going through the material, making selections from the library of speeches. Then, with the help of Todd Stack at Sirius, I voice tracked the introductions and conclusions to each segment. Then it went back to Dan who put music behind my voice and put all of the elements together to give the channel a coherent sound. I had never done anything quite like that before, and it was an amazing experience.

Two of my most amazing moments of the visit came during the Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral. I was sitting by the chancel organ behind the main altar with a great view of everything. As the Mass began, I looked up and there was the Pope no more than three feet away from me, vested and ready for the procession to begin the Mass. Needless to say I had never been that close to a Pope before, and this was, to say the least, a peak experience. The other great moment on that day was when the Holy Father recorded a special blessing for the Catholic Channel. Cardinal Egan brought him to the room in his residence from which he does his weekly radio broadcast, and the Pope recorded the blessing. It debuted at the end of my program from the Cathedral on Saturday, and when I heard it I got goosebumps. The whole day was like a dream come true. As Joe Zwilling, the Communications Director for the Archdiocese of New York, said to me later, "Who would have thought when you started out fifteen years ago that you would one day broadcast a Papal Mass from St. Patrick's Cathedral, nationally on satellite radio?" Who would have thought, indeed. It's going to be difficult to top that experience!

Another watershed moment came the next day, Sunday, when, with Sister Marie Pappas, I anchored The Catholic Channel's coverage of the Holy Father's Mass from Yankee Stadium. I almost had to pinch myself when I realized that I was sitting in the announcers' broadcast booth overlooking the entire stadium! As a kid I practically idolized the sports announcers for the Kansas City Athletics (yes, I'm that old!) and

fantasized one day sitting up there broadcasting the games. Now, here I was in Yankee Stadium in New York City, sitting in that very booth broadcasting a papal Mass! It was pretty heady stuff. I'll always remember the popemobile coming out of the bullpen in left field and making its way around the stadium to the Yankee dugout where the Pope vested for Mass. 57,000 people went wild, waving white and gold flags and cheering

“Benedetto, Benedetto” to greet the Holy Father. The Mass was beautiful and it was an unforgettable privilege to be the eyes and ears of our listeners for that magnificent event. One little perk – because of our vantage point, Sister Marie and I got a unique last look at the Popemobile as it made its way off of the warning track into the tent as the Pope departed the stadium. That was a special moment as well.

These are my reflections, but each of our Catholic Channel team has their own memories based on the events they covered and the things they noticed. In fact, the teamwork among all of us at the Catholic Channel was something I will never forget. We all worked long hours, endured security checks, long waits, bus rides and the press of the crowds and the teamwork was magnificent. Everybody pitched in and helped. We covered for each other, fetched what our colleagues needed for their broadcasts and truly worked together to produce the programs for the visit. It was a marvelous team to be a part of.

After all the preparations and hard work, it's difficult to realize that the Papal Visit is over. In the weeks ahead, I know we will all be working to keep the spirit of the visit alive, and to renew our sense of the Pope's message to us – that Christ is our Hope.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Time of Faith

**April 7, 2008**

As we prepare for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, many interesting items are starting to appear in the media, items that give us something of an insider's view of the visit. One such story is that of [Mark Ackermann](#), the Chief Executive Officer of St. Vincent's Medical Centers who was tapped by Cardinal Edward Egan to coordinate the Pope's visit to the Archdiocese of New York. A significant change of assignment, to be sure, but one that will surely help the Pope's visit to go off without a hitch.

Another interesting [story](#) is that of the various people from all over the world who have requested tickets to see the Pope in Washington or New York. A significant factor is the number of people who are formerly lapsed Catholics who have returned to the faith and who see the Pope's visit as an important way for them to confirm their return to the Church.

A look at the [Pope's schedule](#) shows a daunting series of events for the Pope. With all of the meetings, speeches and activities, one hopes that the Papal advisors have somehow built some time for rest into his schedule. Security for this papal visit is tighter than that of the visits of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, and the Pope's schedule on this trip is very tight, so fewer people will likely get to see the Pope during this trip. But the visit will be widely televised and will be covered wall to wall on three channels on Sirius – [The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159](#), the Papal Archives Channel/Sirius 119 and the Papal Replay Channel/Sirius 143.

All of which goes to show that this is not merely an exciting time in the history of the Church in America; it is also a time of deep personal spirituality and faith. Just as with papal visits in the past, this one will be a source of great blessing to both individuals and to the nation at large.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Hidden Lives, Hidden Treasures

April 1, 2008

One of the most interesting things I find as I interview people on the radio or speak to them in various other venues is learning how they found their life's direction. Recently I read the story of [Mother Antonia](#), who, at age 81, has served prisoners in Mexico for more than three decades. The elderly nun actually lives in the prison with the prisoners, something she feels called to do despite her admission that it can be extremely difficult. She recounts that in the prison, there is rampant disrespect for others and the physical conditions are extremely uncomfortable. Yet she admits that when she first went there, she felt as though she had come home. Mother Antonia was originally Mary :Brenner Clarke, a housewife and grandmother who on a trip to the prison found her new calling. It was quite different, to be sure, from the comfortable lifestyle of southern California where she had been living. Yet in her heart, she felt she was doing what God wanted her to do.

I love stories like this because they remind me of how relatively unknown people are doing so much good in the world. Sometimes we think we have to be rich or famous or attract a lot of attention in order to do God's work. Not so. The stories of celebrities whose lives are in chaos frequent the newspapers, the internet and television tabloid shows. When we find someone relatively unknown who has decided to give his or her life to help others, it is like a hidden treasure buried in the field.

But that's exactly what Jesus said, isn't it? The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a man sells all of his possession to attain. Mother Antonia and those generous hidden souls like her have given up everything to follow a calling that was given them by God. The other side of the coin is that God has taken these treasures and hidden them so that we will find him and understand what life in him is truly all about.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## The Voice of the Popes

**March 26, 2008**

As we prepare for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, I have the privilege of reviewing the audio of various speeches given by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II on their various visits to the United States. These will be part of a Papal Archives Channel that we at The Catholic Channel are putting together for the papal visit. On this channel, listeners to Sirius Satellite Radio will be able to hear archived speeches by the Popes at the various venues which they visited on their apostolic journeys to this country.

There are solemn moments and there are lighter moments. Pope Paul VI spoke before the United Nations General Assembly and told them, “War no more. War never again.” Pope John Paul II spoke before that same body and, echoing his predecessor’s remarks, argued for the importance of a spiritual dimension to lasting political solutions to world crises.

On a lighter note, there is the speech given by Pope John Paul II at Shea Stadium in 1979. During that speech, the Pope mispronounced the word “skyscraper” and quickly corrected himself. With great affection, the crowd roared with laughter, and, taking up the joke, the Pope proceeded to translate the word into several other languages! It was a moment of great humor – the sort of thing Pope John Paul loved when among a crowd. What is amazing is how the words of the Popes from as many as forty-three years ago ring true today. There is a perennial aspect of the message of the Church that remains firm even though the particular circumstances of the world change differently.

I hope that many of you will take advantage of our coverage of the Papal visit on [The Catholic Channel](#). We will have the best of the present and the past as well.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## People of Faith

March 12, 2008

I was very interested to see an article in [Catholic Online](#) (originally from the Milwaukee *Catholic Herald*) about CNN anchor Soledad O'Brien and how she practices her Catholic faith. Despite a grueling schedule as an anchor and reporter for a major cable news network, she manages to find time to be with her husband and five children, to get them to Mass on Sunday, and to talk to them about the faith and about how to live responsibly in today's world.

I don't know Soledad O'Brien personally, but the story reminded me of the number of times in my fourteen years working full-time in the Office of Communications at the Archdiocese that I met reporters who were practicing Catholics and who lived their faith and managed to integrate it into their professional lives without losing their objectivity and professional integrity. Some of them were lectors and Eucharistic ministers in their parishes. Some volunteered their services to charitable organizations in their spare time. Many brought Catholicism into their homes and gladly taught prayers and values to their children. From time to time when I was hosting *Religion on the Line* on Sunday mornings at WABC, I worked with a young woman who was our news anchor. She would drive in from New Jersey to be on the air at 7:00, finish her shift at 11:00, drive home again, pick up her husband and the kids and get them off to Mass. I happened to know about the Catholics, but I am sure that there were many others who were equally conscientious about practicing their own religion and bringing it into their homes.

It's an untold story, but I think it deserves mentioning. Multiply these stories by the number of others who are in other professions and who do exactly the same thing. We need to hear these stories because they get lost in the midst of all of the negative stories that are brought to our attention. .

When we stop to think about it, we might be surprised to learn how many people of faith there are and where we might find them.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## "We Won the Lottery!"

**March 4, 2008**

"We won the lottery!" That happy announcement was made to me on Sunday by the husband and wife team who were my Eucharistic Ministers at Mass. My initial reaction was to be very happy for them. These people moved up to New York and to our parish after suffering devastating losses in Hurricane Katrina. In the time they have been with us, I have had the opportunity to meet many of their adult children and their grandchildren and to have a sense of what a fine Catholic couple they are. So when they said that they had won the lottery, I was very happy for them.

As I learned more, it turned out that the lottery they won wasn't the New York State Lottery, but rather the parish lottery for tickets to see the Pope when he visits next month. That was the reason for their great excitement. They had seen Pope John Paul II in New Orleans and now they were going to see Pope Benedict XVI in New York. It struck me as a wonderful blessing after all they had been through.

I read another [story](#) about a woman in Dallas who was given tickets when she told about her daughter who is very sick and how greatly she would benefit from praying with the Pope. The story of my parishioners and the story of this Dallas woman show how deeply rooted people's faith is, even when (and perhaps especially when) they have gone through terrible tragedy. It brings home the true significance of the Pope's title "Vicar of Christ on Earth." Seeing the Pope, it will be as though Christ himself has touched them and brought hope and joy into their lives.

There's a lot of work connected with a Papal visit, but when you hear stories like this you know that all of the effort combined cannot outweigh the joy in the hearts of the faithful to have the Holy Father on our soil.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Learning to Speak

**February 28, 2008**

I hope you have noticed by now that the website of the Archdiocese of New York currently contains reflections by various catechists in the Archdiocese about the scripture readings for Lent. If you haven't seen it already, take time to click on the link on the home page. These one-minute reflections are treasures.

The one for today dealt with the Gospel reading about Jesus healing the man who was mute. It emphasizes the tremendous joy the man must have felt when Jesus healed him and he could speak. It got me thinking about how Lent is a time when we are emptied and opened so that we can speak more readily about the joy of being a Christian and being bombarded by the grace of God every single day. We come into Lent full of negative thoughts and attitudes, perhaps even with sinful habits and actions. Having these, it is difficult for us to fully experience and express the joy of living in God's grace. The prayers and penances that are part of our Lenten journey help us to deepen in our sense of the spiritual life and together with God's grace, free us to the point that we want to express the greater depth in life that we are experiencing and to sing praise to God.

Just as Jesus suffered criticism for healing the man who was mute, so we may endure criticism from others who do not understand why we are taking Lent so seriously. We ourselves may be tempted at times to let our resolutions and our practices fall by the wayside. That's where today's Gospel is an important reminder of why we are doing what we are doing.

Here's an idea. Take a minute, right now, and express q word of praise to God for something wondering he is doing in your life. See, you spoke, and like the mute man, you will continue to speak and to proclaim the greatness of what is happening in your life.

And you know what? The more you speak those praises, the more reasons you will have to continue praising! You'll be amazed.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## The Final Weeks

**February 26, 2008**

One of the wonderful things about this time of year is to hear the excitement of [RCIA](#) candidates who are preparing to receive their sacraments at the Easter Vigil. I hear from them in various ways, through email, through my parish, via phone calls to my program “[As You Think](#)” on the Catholic Channel. Invariably, they talk about the excitement they joy they experience as the Easter Vigil draws near. In recent weeks they have had the Rite of Election, being presented to the Bishop at the Cathedral and verified as worthy candidates for receiving the sacraments. Now they are in the midst of the Scrutinies, those beautiful prayers of examination and healing that are celebrated the last three Sundays of Lent. Increasingly, the candidates are called into the center of the Church’s attention, and they feel very special.

The beauty of the RCIA is that it is a communal journey, and the candidates I talk to really appreciate that fact very much. They have come to love their RCIA team and the others who are making the journey to sacraments with them. They have developed a special relationship with their sponsor. One woman I know who in the course of the year moved to another city stays in touch with her original sponsor and finds her a wonderful mentor and friend. The candidates are touched when each week they experience the entire community at Mass praying for them as they are dismissed in order to reflect upon the Word of God.

During these days, it is good for us to remember to pray for our RCIA candidates. Though these are happy days for them, they are days of some nervousness, as is the case when any big change in life is coming about. Our prayers for them are an important sign of our support for them and a tremendous help to them as they enter into the final days before full entry into the Catholic Faith.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Our Lady of Lourdes

**February 11, 2008**

Today marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the appearance of Our Lady to the young Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes, France. This year especially, people are making pilgrimages from all over the world to the shrine at Lourdes to honor our Lady and mark her appearances there.

What I did not know until recently is that the shrine at Lourdes has a website. At <http://www.lourdes-france.org> you can learn all about the story of the apparitions, read accounts of the miracles that have happened there, and view the grotto and other parts of the shrine via webcams. If you cannot go to Lourdes, you can certainly visit on line. The story of Bernadette is one of great persistence and dutiful obedience. Through many of the apparitions, she did not know that the beautiful young woman was the Mother of God. It was much later that Mary revealed herself, saying, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Bernadette was virtually uneducated and her family, the neighbors, the Sisters in the local school and the parish priest himself at first refused to believe her. Despite all the skepticism, Bernadette remained faithful to the instructions of the young lady, including digging in the mud to discover the spring that would prove to be healing for so many.

As we mark this anniversary and celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, we can strive to imitate the faithfulness of Bernadette and her devotion to the Mother of God.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Doing for Lent

**February 8, 2008**

When you work in a Catholic setting such as I do on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159, the main question on everybody's mind these days is "What are you doing for Lent?" There are so many different answers, so many approaches, so many different ways of looking at Lent.

For some people, it's a time to give something up. It may be candy or a favorite food or watching television. It may even be giving up a habit of action that is not truly in their best interest. For them, Lent is a season of fasting and self-denial.

Others take what they consider to be a more positive approach to Lent. A couple of callers on my radio program "As You Think" on The Catholic Channel called in to say that during Lent this year they were planning to do whatever they could to be better husbands and fathers. These men had looked into their lives and seen that they were not being the very best they could be. They decided during this holy season to do something about that.

There is no right way or wrong way to mark Lent, so long as what we do is intended to bring us closer to Jesus Christ and helps us in some way to enter more fully into a sense of his Passion and death. Lent is not about ourselves -- getting slimmer or following a program of self development. It is about drawing closer to Christ, and whether we choose to fast or to work on our service to others -- or both -- the point is to draw closer to Jesus Christ.

One thing that came up in my Ash Wednesday radio program was the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Many parishes have Penance Services during Lent. In some dioceses, all of the churches have confession on a set night of the week. Virtually every church has confession at some point on Saturday. Confession is a joyous celebration of the kindness and forgiveness of the Lord. Seen in that light, confession helps us to draw closer to him, to experience and emulate his mercy and kindness in our own lives.

Most parishes have special devotions during Lent -- Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and the Stations of the Cross are the most common. Some parishes have a simple Lenten supper followed by a Bible study or spiritual discussion.

There are so many ways that we can grow close to Christ during this season of Lent. May we embrace it as a wonderful, grace-filled opportunity to grow in holiness.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## One for the Books

**January 31, 2008**

Well, here's one for the books. A Christian photographer refuses a request to photograph a same-sex ceremony and ends up being sued for discrimination. A same-sex couple wanted to hire them for their commitment ceremony. As a Christian, [Elaine Huguenin](#) does not believe in same sex unions. She felt it was her right to refuse to be hired as a photographer for such a ceremony. The couple sued her, charging discrimination and they are asking a ruling that will say that Elaine Huguenin may never again refuse to photograph a same-sex ceremony, plus legal expenses. Fortunately, the Alliance Defense Fund has come to her assistance saying that an operator of a private business should, under the First Amendment, be able to choose which clients she will and will not represent. They liken it to the 1995 Hurley Case in Boston, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a privately-run parade could not be forced to allow people to march and carry banners bearing a message contrary to the beliefs of that group. Once again, we are reminded of how difficult it is for those of us who uphold traditional values in our society. The very idea of a photographer being sued for standing up for her values should alarm us all. Let us hope and pray that the ADF will be successful in her defense.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Aquinas for Today

**January 25, 2008**

You probably haven't read the following clause very often recently, but the other day I was looking over [Thomas Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God](#). I've been doing a series called "Learning to Live" on my program "As You Think" on [The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159](#), and since I had been talking about our being made in the image and likeness of God, I wanted to say something on the air about those five proofs. I wonder when was the last time a talk show host explained the five proofs for the existence of God from the Angelic Doctor?

At any rate, as I was reviewing the proofs for myself, I came upon an interesting thought. Indeed, they are proofs for the existence of God, in the sense that they prove that it is reasonable for someone to believe in God. They are not – and are not intended to be – scientific demonstrations done in a lab in a controlled experiment. However, it occurred to me that, besides being proofs for the existence of God – indeed because they are proofs for the existence of God – they are also demonstrations against relativism and secularism. Without going into the complexities of each proof, it seems to me that all of them come down to one simple principle: you can't get something from nothing. If something exists, someone caused it, and if anyone caused it there cannot be an infinite series of causes because at the beginning you would have nothing. There must be a cause that is uncaused. And that is God.

It's the same with what Aquinas called "gradations." For something to have more of a quality (such as truth, goodness, etc.) or for something else to have less of that quality, there must be a reference to a maximum – otherwise the very talk of the quality becomes meaningless. There must be a maximum which causes things to have their qualities. And that is God.

What this comes down to for us today is that these demonstrations are arguments against relativism and secularism. The world cannot create itself. Relative values must have absolutes in order to have any meaning or any standing in existence.

Thomas's five ways of proving the existence of God are also five ways of affirming the rationality of spirit and of absolute truth. Looking again at the old master, we find something that can serve us well in our search for truth today.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## "Starting a Conversation"

**January 18, 2008**

How would you like it if, when you died, your organs would, by default, be taken by the government for transplant purposes? That is the [conversation](#) British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is opening up in the UK.

In his [statement](#) on the subject of how he hopes to improve the National Health Service, Brown said that he wants to “to make the NHS a more personal service: as good at preventing illness as it is at treatment and cure, and far more willing to give more control directly into the hands of patients.” In a sleight of hand that defies logic, Brown then says that he wants to start “a real and thoughtful public debate involving faith communities, patients and families” about a system that would precisely remove control from the hands of patients.

He will have a difficult time convincing the nation’s Roman Catholics of the rectitude of his plan. The [teaching of the Church](#) on organ donation is clear: consent is one of the prime requirements for organ donation to be morally right. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is very clear on the matter: “Organ transplants are not morally acceptable if the donor or those who legitimately speak for him have not given their informed consent. Organ transplants conform with the moral law and can be meritorious if the physical and psychological dangers and risk incurred by the donor are proportionate to the good sought for the recipient. It is morally inadmissible directly to bring about the disabling mutilation or death of a human being, even in order to delay the death of the other persons.” (2296). This is consistent with the teaching of the Church since the time of Pope Pius XII, and Pope John Paul II stressed that organ transplants must be carried out in “an ethically acceptable manner.” Since consent is a primary part of the criteria for moral acceptability, it seems that Brown’s proposal lacks moral rectitude.

It will be interesting to see where the Church of England goes on this issue. Already one of their bishops has spoken out on the matter. The [Right Reverend Tom Butler](#), the Bishop of Southwark, has said that in this conversation, all options for maintaining an opt-in system should be explored, but that if there were no viable options, he would then approve Brown’s proposal. If the Bishop’s remarks were quoted correctly in the British press, they reveal a remarkable lack of metaphysical underpinning. Are actions morally right simply because we cannot find a viable alternative to them? Or are they morally right because they are consistent with the fundamental nature of human life as God created it?

To be fair, the Prime Minister and the Bishop are both starting down a good path. There are not enough organs being donated under the present system, and something needs to be done about that. That ‘something’ is that voluntary organ donations have to be more strongly encouraged so that people understand the need for them. That is a morally correct solution to the problem. The other is not.

As always, in moral matters, we need to be careful of arguments that go in the direction of the end justifying the means. The end may be good, but the means to achieving it have to be good as well. In the move to achieve an end, it may be tempting to bypass the question of the morality of the means. But we must not let ourselves be lulled into doing so.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## What We Think About

**January 11, 2008**

About a week ago, I tuned into a national cable news channel hoping to catch up on the events taking place around the world that day. Benazir Bhutto had recently been assassinated by a suicide bomber in Pakistan. Tensions were running high in post-election Kenya. In this country, political candidates were preparing for the Iowa caucus.

To my dismay, in the course of about half an hour, I heard very little at all about any of those stories. It seems a different story had captured the attention of the editors at the news channel, presumably because they felt it had captured the attention of their audience. The previous day, Brittany Spears held her children hostage for three hours in a standoff against police and in the end was forcibly removed from her home and hospitalized for psychiatric observation. When I turned on the news, a reporter from Brittany's home was detailing the events. A few minutes later, the anchor gave the details of the story again. A couple of minutes after that, the anchor teased the story as the top story that would be featured in the next hour. In the next hour, a program on entertainment did a complete recounting of the story again with yet another live report. In the space of a little over half an hour, I had heard roughly four reports of this story.

My question was: why? With everything else going on in the world, why did this story top everything else? Over the past couple of years, we have been presented the sad spectacle of this poor young woman slowly unraveling her life. It's tragic. What has happened to her and her family is profoundly sad. It ought to lead us, to be sure, to pray for her. But why do we spend enormous amounts of time obsessing over her fate?

There are many reasons. It's a fascinating story and it draws viewers and readers and improves ratings and circulation. It is also easier and more entertaining to focus on someone else's problems as a distraction from our own. It gives us something to talk about, and as we do, we are able to give the impression of being very wise.

To me, this is just another example of a principle that I keep returning to increasingly: we need to guard our thoughts because we get more and more of what we think about. If we spend our time obsessing about the problems of a young celebrity, we are thinking about problems and tragedies, and we will see increasing amounts of them in our lives and in our world. We don't need this. We need to be careful.

The fact is, most of us would do far better to spend our time praying and reflecting about our own lives and how we can make a better and more substantial contribution to the good of the world. The time we spend focusing on Brittany Spears is time we would do better to spend focusing on how to improve ourselves so as to be the best version of God's image and likeness that we can be. The world needs us to be producing those kinds of thoughts far more than it needs us to be obsessing over the fate of a celebrity.

We do need to be careful because we can easily be swept away by the tide of public opinion and practice. I didn't want to hear a half hour's worth of news about Brittany that day - I wanted to hear the news of the world, yet that wasn't what I got. We need to develop critical habits of mind that enable us to guard ourselves against the menu that is so often being presented to us.

The thoughts we entertain are the thoughts we get to keep. The scriptures, our daily liturgy, moments of silent prayer and a large array of spiritual books (including classics) are so readily available to us to give us thoughts that nourish and uplift. Those are the thoughts we can choose to have, if we wish.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## To Kill or not to Kill?

**January 3, 2008**

In October of 2002, three bombs detonated on Bali killed 202 people and injured a further 209. Five years later, the question has arisen as to the appropriateness of the death penalty for the perpetrators of the bombing.

[Archbishop John Battersby](#) of Brisbane has publicly asked the Australian government not to impose the death penalty on the terrorists. "No evil can justify the death penalty as a punishment, no matter how horrible the crime that may have been committed," the Archbishop said.

The appeal has met with what could be described as deaf ears from the Australian government. The acting Prime Minister, [Julia Gillard](#), has responded to the effect that the Australian government's interests reach only to Australian citizens. "Our position is perfectly clear. We support global moves against the death penalty (but) we only use our diplomatic resources on behalf of Australian nationals who are at risk of the death penalty overseas," she said. "I think that that's entirely appropriate. Obviously our obligations are on behalf of our citizens and nationals. We intervene on their behalf."

That response, though political, lacks a broader humanitarian focus. The point of Archbishop Battersby's appeal lies in the belief that all human beings, not only Australians, are made in the image and likeness of God. His opposition to the execution of the Bali bombers underscores the sacredness of human life regardless of so-called mitigating circumstances, including the committing of heinous capital crime.

Over the years, I have spoken to many Catholics who have taken offense at this position when I have proposed it on my various radio programs. They have argued that when someone kills another human being, he or she voids his or her rights as a human being. "If someone came along and killed my daughter," one caller angrily informed me, "I would definitely want to see him killed."

You can understand why people say things like this – if a daughter of mine were gunned down by someone, I would probably feel like having them killed, too. But my feelings would not make that right. The killer, regardless of how he acts or acted, is still a human being with the same right to life as my daughter had. If it was wrong to take her life, it is wrong to take his life.

The pro-capital punishment position is sometimes maintained by people who also consider themselves to be staunchly pro-life. When I question them about the consistency of their pro-life position, they answer me to the effect that abortion is wrong because it violates innocent human life, while capital punishment is permissible because it pertains to guilty human life. They fail to recognize that they are ignoring the common denominator here, which is human life itself. I grant them that there is a special character to the tragedy of abortion in that it does involve the violation of innocent human life, but I deny that the real issue here is the difference between innocent and guilty. A human

being is a human being, and one can never resign from one's humanity. Guilt or innocence is not the fundamental question.

I am glad to see the Archbishop of Brisbane speaking out against capital punishment for the Bali bombers. I am most certainly not condoning what they did. I am most certainly claiming that they, too, are human beings, and have not relinquished their right to life.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Canterbury Tales

December 20, 2007

I wonder if by now the Archbishop of Canterbury wishes he had never given [that interview](#) to Radio 5 Live, the one where he spoke about the veracity of the stories about the Christmas season. Whatever it was the Archbishop intended to say, I'm sure he didn't anticipate the headlines he received. "Three Wise Men Just a Legend, Says Archbishop of Canterbury." "Three Wise Men Leading Us Astray." "Archbishop Says Nativity 'a Legend.'" I wonder if by now he has had an "oops" moment as he ponders the effect of his words and his headlines on the souls of Christians in his own country and around the world.

"It works quite well as a legend." That was how the Archbishop described the gospel story of the three wise men. The problem is not so much with what he said as with what he appeared to say. He appeared to say that the story of the Magi and its association with the Christmas story is strictly a matter of legend. It's not, as a reading of [Matthew 2](#) will reveal.

One wonders what the Archbishop was thinking, and I wonder if by now he wonders about that himself. The press has had a field day with it. Some of the headlines and stories about his interview implied that he was dismissing the Christmas story itself from beginning to end. A careful reading of the text of his remarks reveals that this wasn't his intention, but unfortunately it's how his remarks are remembered.

Having given a number of interviews about religion myself, I know how easily this could happen to any of us. One of the first things one learns in workshops given to those who speak to the media is to be careful always to make your point and not theirs. Hindsight is always better than foresight, but instead of submitting to Simon Mayo's questions, the Archbishop would have done well to have launched into an explanation of the truth of the Gospel story and how the Christmas story as we know it evolved and why. Instead of giving the impression that the whole story was pretty much a legend, he could have explained the biblical core of the story without undermining the faith of many Christian believers. When interviewed, it's important to take the lead rather than follow it. The Archbishop failed to do that, and the results are most unfortunate.

One especially troubling part of the interview comes when the Archbishop speaks about the virgin birth. After stating he believes in the virgin birth as part of what he has inherited from his Christian faith, he then proceeds to say that "I don't want to set it as a kind of hurdle that people have to get over before they, you know, be signed up." This appears to mean that he does not believe that the virgin birth is an essential doctrine for those who wish to call themselves Christians. On this matter, George Cardinal Pell, the Australian prelate, has it right: "What is important is that the Christ child was and is the son of God," Pell said. "For this belief and fact, the virgin birth is essential."

Part of the problem with all of this speculation about the historicity of Christmas is that we can easily go off track when we insist that our collective memories of certain aspects of the story could not possibly be true. How does anyone know that there were not animals in the manger? How does anyone know that the Magi were not three in number? The truth is, we simply do not know. And what is the point, when it all comes down to it, of making public statements at Christmastime that will do nothing but upset many believing people?

I sincerely hope that the Archbishop of Canterbury is thinking twice about his interview. In some ways, it's not his fault – he can't help how what he says is reported. But like any of us who speak to the media, he can learn to be sure that he gets out the message he wants and not what someone else wants him to say.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# True Evangelization

**December 18, 2007**

In a recently published [note](#), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith made some important clarifying statements about the necessity of evangelization for Catholics. There has been some confusion about the place of evangelization in the Church. Some have felt that there was something inappropriate in Catholics evangelizing Jews, Muslims and other religious groups. Others felt that the Kingdom of God was not grounded in the person of Jesus Christ but was rather an overarching umbrella covering all religions, Christian and non-Christian. Still others held that one religion was as valid as any other. And still others said that evangelization was not necessary so long as Catholics set a good example for people of other faiths.

To all of this the CDF makes the important correction that the Church exists for evangelization and that this evangelization must be in teaching as well as in action. Evangelization, it claims is “an exact order from the Lord.” It stressed that this exact order was given by Jesus in the Great Commission: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

This means that, while we very much respect the right of others to believe differently from us, we do not allow ourselves to be hesitant about sharing our beliefs with them. To be sure, this must be done in a manner that is both respectful and non-offensive, but it must be done. In this, however, the document makes clear that “there is no question of proselytism in the negative connotation of this term.” If someone from another faith does convert to Catholicism, this must be regarded as a free act of conscience guided by the Holy Spirit and not a question of the person’s being nagged or forced into believing. Grace and freedom are the keys to genuine evangelization.

It’s a good idea for Catholics of all ages to take a look at this document or at least a summary of it. Sharing our faith is part of our vocation to follow Christ and this doctrinal note helps us to understand how to do it properly.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Who Knocked Off Catholic Central?

**December 13, 2007**

Googling the word “Catholic,” I happened upon a startling headline. It read, “Schenectady knocks off Catholic Central.” Often when I’m reading headlines I try to imagine that I am someone from another country just learning English and trying to make sense of what I am reading. Reading the above headline, my mind immediately lapsed into that frivolous exercise. I’m afraid my mythical visitor would be shocked to hear that the town of Schenectady had done something as world-shattering as knocking out the very center of Roman Catholicism itself.

Now, Schenectady is not all that far away from New York City, and I wouldn’t want to risk offending the people of Schenectady by falsely accusing them of something so horrendous. The headline was, after all, about a basketball game in which Schenectady was victorious. The good people of Schenectady would never dream of such a thing as knocking off “Catholic Central.” But if they had, they would not have been far behind many in this world of ours who would love to do that very thing.

Subtly and not so subtly, there are those who would simply love to wipe Catholicism out of the box. We see it in those who bend over backwards to pass along comments and reports critical of the Catholic Church without ever offering a word of praise for all the good that is done by the Church and by individual Catholics. We see it in those who would rob us of the Christmas season in the name of fairness. We see it in those who would attempt to force our Catholic institutions to establish policies contrary to the teachings of the Church. We see it in those who, overtly and even openly, make a mockery of the Church in various forms of entertainment. They are the ones who are trying desperately to “knock off Catholic Central.”

From my earliest days, my Catholic parents instilled in me the notion that the Holy Spirit was always with the Church to protect it. I say that, not to assert that the Church has not made mistakes in the course of its history – it surely has. The Holy Spirit cannot condone what is wrong. I say it, rather, to remind us who are Catholic that we do not have to take a back seat to those who would eradicate us. We are not and should not be helpless victims. We have the power of the Holy Spirit who, as Jesus explicitly told his disciples, will always tell us what to say in the face of persecution. We Catholics need to draw ever more upon that Holy Spirit, our Advocate, meaning one who speaks for us in times of trial. With his help, we will know what to say and what to do, in the face of those who would “knock off Catholic Central.”

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Happy Birthday Catholic Channel

**December 4, 2007**

It's simply amazing to think that we on [The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159](#) have completed a year of broadcasting. What a year it has been. We've come a long way since December 4, 2006 when we started our first programs. I remember how nervous we all were. Even those of us who had done radio before were nervous. Now we look back and see what a year of grace it has been. We've polished our professional skills as broadcasters. We've developed confidence in our abilities. We've discovered that no matter how experienced we are there's always something new to learn.

Best of all, we have developed a whole new world of friends across the United States and Canada who listen to us, who call us on the air and who email us. When I think of all the people I know now whom I didn't know a year ago, I feel very warm and very grateful to God. We are blessed with our listeners – they are like family to us.

If by any chance you're not familiar with The Catholic Channel, click on the link above and get acquainted. There's even a way you can listen to us free for three days – it's all there on the website. Browse our "A Question of Faith" essays, read our diaries, look at our pictures. Get to know us and you'll want to join in the fun.

So thanks to God and thanks to our General Manager Joe Zwilling to Program Director Rob Astorino and to all who have made this such a successful year. We look forward to many more to come.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications and host "As You Think," 10 p.m ET Monday through Friday on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159

# Christmas Giving

**November 27, 2007**

One of the nice things about the Thanksgiving weekend this year was the opportunity to have substantive conversations with people about a wide variety of subjects. At Thanksgiving dinner with friends, a number of topics comfortably arose, some political, some more spiritual in nature. No debates or heated disagreements on the political topics -- just expressions of opinion and lots of listening. And on the spiritual topics -- time taken to say what we appreciated about one person at the table (in turn) and time taken to express what things in our lives we were thankful for. The meal was exquisite but the benefits of the dinner transcended even the gloriousness of the cuisine.

A couple of days after Thanksgiving, I had a lengthy and important telephone conversation with a friend. Neither of us was burdened by the press of time, and in the course of our conversation I learned about what he was doing, how his family was faring, with a wide range of topics in between. It was one of those good old conversations that we're usually too rushed to take part in but which a holiday makes possible with its gift of leisure.

In the course of our conversation, the subject of Christmas came up. My friend reminded me of his long-standing policy not to shop for gifts at Christmas. It's not that he's cheap or secular -- in fact, he's a devout Catholic and a very generous person. Rather he feels that all the rushing around doing Christmas shopping detracts from his ability to focus on the season. My friend is a man who is generous in his friendships all year long and with the time and attention he gives to his parents, his niece and nephews. You couldn't find a better friend and the intensity with which he cares for people is truly amazing.

So when my friend doesn't give gifts for Christmas, it's not about a Scrooge-like disdain for the season. On the contrary, it's due to a profound respect for the real meaning of the season and for the importance of giving to others of one's time and presence all year long.

He talked about how angry he became one year when a friend of his, a Hindu, asked him if he were finished with his Christmas shopping. My friend, of course, told him that he did not do Christmas shopping. His acquaintance replied, "Well, I'm finished with all of mine!"

"Why do you observe Christmas?" my friend asked politely. "You're not a Christian."

"Oh," the man replied, "Christmas is not a Christian holiday anymore."

That sent my friend into a raging fit of anger, the kind which you don't want to be around.

Reflecting on it, I came to the conclusion that there was a little bit of truth on both sides. Someone of a non-Christian faith or someone who does not believe in God should be able to give gifts out of the goodness of their heart. On the other hand, there is in our society the real or implicit impression that Christmas and Christianity have nothing to do with one another. Secularism and materialism can take over to the point where the true meaning of the feast is forgotten. This is exemplified in the "Wars Against Christmas" in which huge objections are raised to anything that is or is interpreted to be a Christian symbol being displayed in public places. Displaying a Christmas tree is no substitute for displaying a manger, and it is the manger that is truer expression of the feast. I have no problem with religious symbols of other faiths celebrating holidays at this time being displayed alongside the manger. But let's have the manger!

Most of us will not be like my friend and give up all Christmas giving this season. But we can try to achieve a wholesome balance between the giving of gifts and the expression of love and peace that was at the heart of the Nativity and which is at the heart of Christmas as well. We can't give love and peace unless we have it ourselves, so perhaps our first priority might be to sit reflectively (either physically or in imagination) at the entrance to the manger and reflect on what it is we are truly to be about during this holy Season.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## All Eyes on Colorado

**November 19, 2007**

An interesting development regarding human life may go on the ballot next year in Colorado. The initiative would give legal rights to fertilized eggs. According to the [New York Times](#), this would be the most sweeping legislation in the country with regard to the rights of the unborn.

It's not a done deal yet, as the proposal must go through several more steps before making the ballot. But its existence on the ballot could raise significant discussion and debate, especially as the presidential election is forthcoming and the Democratic National Convention will be meeting in Denver.

Of course, both sides are making political points over this. NARAL Pro-Choice Colorado is predicting that the courts will be swamped with claims for unborn children due to what they describe as the unclear language of the proposal. Those who support the proposed legislation say that the beauty of the proposal is the simplicity with which it raises and answers questions about the origins of life.

This will be an interesting few months politically in many respects, not the least of which will be watching this proposal (hopefully) make its way to the ballot box. Stay tuned, for this one is well worth watching.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# True Heroes

**November 13, 2007**

What is a hero? We often think of someone who is larger than life, someone who commands respect for his brave deeds by his imposing presence and his thirst for valor. A recent [study](#) shows that, if that is our definition of hero, we had better think again. Interviews conducted with World War II heroes show that many heroes are quiet and unassuming. They have a deep sense of duty and esprit-de-corps but do not in any way wish to see themselves as extraordinary. Drawing attention to themselves is the farthest thing from their minds. As they look at themselves, they are simply men who did what they were supposed to do.

Looking back on the words of Jesus, it seems that this was his definition of a hero as well. At one point, he brought forward a little child and proclaimed him to be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. On another occasion, he admonished disciples who were arguing over who among them would be the first in God's Kingdom. On the night before he died, he washed the disciples' feet to show them that they were to be servants of others. On the Cross he gave us an example of how heroism can often appear as crushing defeat.

I was truly touched by reading the stories of the quiet heroes of World War II. Would that we all could be like them as we make sacrifices large and small in our journey through life. We can learn from them that in life, it's not about us; it's about what we do quietly and without fanfare to serve others.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Anticipating a Papal Visit

**November 12, 2007**

Today's [announcement](#) of the forthcoming visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the Archdiocese of New York is very happy news, indeed. The Holy Father will visit Ground Zero during his stay in New York, celebrate a Mass in Yankee Stadium and celebrate Mass for priests, deacons and members of religious orders, in addition to an ecumenical ceremony and a visit to St. Joseph's Seminary.

Having been involved in the visit of Pope John Paul II to New York in 1995, I can tell you that a papal visit is a time of exceptional grace not only for the Archdiocese but for the City of New York as well. Given the extensive media coverage of a papal visit, the lives not only of Catholics but also of people of every faith and of no particular faith are touched by the presence of the Pope. I recall 50,000 people assembled on the Great Lawn of Central Park for an outdoor Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II. Though it had poured rain the day before, the clouds parted as the Pope came out to greet the crowds before Mass. In his characteristically cheerful fashion, the Pope stood at the center of the huge stage, pointed to the sky and said, "No sun, no rain!" The crowd applauded and roared with laughter. A few moments later, the Pontiff vested for Mass and the atmosphere became charged with reverence and solemnity as the liturgy commenced. It was a breathtaking occasion.

The details involved in the preparation for a papal visit are many. In 1995, committees met for months planning every aspect of the event. Inevitably, things would go wrong along the way and some detail or other would appear impossible to accomplish, but in the end all the rough ways were made smooth and every event on the Pope's agenda went as planned. God's grace abounded at every step along the way.

So now we have something wonderful to look forward to. April seems a long way off from this vantage point, but it will be here before we know it. Meanwhile, there's much to be done, most especially the prayers of everyone for a happy and blessed Papal visit.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Red Light, Green Light, Not This Season

November 6, 2007

It's beginning. No, not just the Christmas season – it is beginning, have you seen the toy ads that have been slipping stealthily into television commercial time?

What are beginning, more significantly, are the attacks on Christmas. Here's the first one that I have encountered, and already it is the prime candidate for the award for political correct Christmas silliness. It seems that a special task force in [Fort Collins, Colorado](#) is about to recommend that all red and green lights be banned from Christmas displays. The feeling apparently is that such lights send a message to certain members of the community that they are not wanted, according to a spokesman for the task force. The intent is to make everyone feel comfortable and to have no one be offended by displays that might smack of Christianity.

Does this make the least bit of sense at all? Not to me. I've been a Catholic for sixty-one years, and this is the first time I have thought of red and green lights as being symbols that would offend or bother non-Christians. Somehow it seems to me that the people of Fort Collins, Colorado, might have more important things to worry about than the color of holiday display lights. If people are offended by the color of lights, perhaps it might be suggested to them that they look at more important matters to be concerned about.

But of course, it goes deeper than that. This is only the beginning. Before much longer, we are going to see more and more disputes about having religious symbols on public property. The dubious premise behind all of this is going to be that having seasonal religious symbols on public property is tantamount to establishing that religion on behalf of the township, city or state. Personally, it doesn't matter to me if they put displays of different religions on city property, so long as Christianity is permitted a place there. It's going to be an interesting Christmas season in Fort Collins. With red and green lights banned, one wonders what they are going to do about traffic signals.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Random Acts of Kindness

**November 1, 2007**

On a daily basis, we have so many opportunities to hear about all of the bad things that are happening in the world. The news is full of them. Most of us have people in our lives who are more than willing to tell us about them. It's not atypical for us to tell ourselves on a regular basis about all of the bad things that are happening to us.

That's why it was so refreshing to [read about](#) a couple in Tennessee who have started Random Acts of Kindness in their church. They are non-Catholic Christians, but I think their idea applies to Catholics and to non-Christians as well.

The idea is to make a point of doing random acts of kindness whenever you can. It might mean leaving a roll of quarters at the Laundromat, finding a child who needs school supplies and paying for them, leaving grocery cards or gas cards in a grocery cart at the supermarket, even the old-fashioned Boy Scout action of helping someone across the street.

The idea is to do it after prayer and reflection, to do it quietly and with a joyous heart. The beauty of this method is that after awhile we begin looking for ways to help others who are in need.

The whole idea is to put good news into the world on a regular basis. It may not get reported on the newscasts, but it will help us to know that there is really more good news out there than we are normally told about. And we are making it happen.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Pro-Choice No-Choice: Conformity Over Conscience

October 31, 2007

An [editorial](#) in the San Jose Mercury News bears a headline that, in and of itself, bespeaks a great truth, but unfortunately misses that truth in favor of a misguided analysis of an important ethical situation. The headline reads: “Pharmacist’s Duty to Patient, Not Pope.” The editorial refers to the address given to pharmacists in Rome this week by Pope Benedict in which the Pope said that Catholic pharmacists should exercise “conscientious objection” when considering administering medications the use of which goes against the teachings of the Church. The editorial says that Catholic pharmacists should ignore the Pope on this issue.

Let’s look at the headline by itself for a moment. Though it doesn’t intend to, it actually makes the Pope’s case very well. The Pope didn’t say that the pharmacists’ duty is to follow him over caring for the patient. He said that their duty is precisely *to the patient* when the patient is asking for something that is morally wrong. In other words – really act in their best interests by giving them only what is morally acceptable. I agree with the headline – the pharmacist’s duty is to the patient, which is why the Pope gave the guideline in the first place. The Pope wasn’t saying, “Choose doing what I say over the rights of the patient.” He was saying, “Do the best for the patient by giving him or her only what is morally right.” There’s a huge difference, and the Mercury News’s headline ends up missing the point of the Pope’s remarks.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, how Catholics and other Christians are expected to give up their moral principles because other people ask them to? I’m thinking of a couple in Britain who have had a foster child taken out of their home and who have been told that they will no longer receive foster children because they refused to teach the boy – age 11 – that homosexual partnerships are as legitimate as heterosexual marriages, refused to teach him about gay dating practices and, horror of horrors, even refused to have him attend meetings of homosexual associations if he asked to do so! The parents are Christians, have never discriminated against anybody in their lives by their own admission and are being forced to retire from foster care because they are following their Christian convictions as to what is right and wrong and as to what is in the best interests of their foster child. A couple in Nebraska had their baby snatched from his older brother’s arms by the state, tested against their will and put into foster care because their religious beliefs didn’t support the letting of blood required for the mandatory testing. The Commission in Britain may be backtracking on their demands of the couple and the State of Nebraska returned the baby to his parents, but damage has been done that cannot be undone. Now The San Jose Mercury News and various states and lawmakers want it to be against the law for Catholic pharmacists to exercise *their* consciences when it comes to dispensing certain medications.

Have we lost all sense of conscience?

The Mercury News concludes its editorial by saying that “Pharmacists who cannot bring themselves to fill a prescription for moral or religious reasons should find a new profession.” Unfortunately, that may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not long ago, I had an email from a young Catholic woman finishing high school who wanted very much to become a pharmacist. She wondered whether she could do this without, at times,

having to violate her conscience and her Catholic principles. I was able to steer her toward some good moral guidance on the subject. Last week, I had a follow-up email from her, telling me that she had decided that it would be best for her to steer away from pharmacy as a profession. The Mercury News would applaud her decision. It troubles me that conscientious young Catholics like her feel that they have no alternative but to opt out of becoming pharmacists. Are we going to be left with only those who will give everybody what they want, regardless of their own personal beliefs about doing so? No, the Pope is not the villain in this piece. It is the hypocrisy that tells us that is alright to choose whatever we want regardless of whether what we want violates the beliefs of the person who would give it to us. You could call it "pro-choice no-choice." We seem to value conformity over conscience, a trend that is disastrous for the moral health of society.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Where In the World Are We?

**October 25, 2007**

Here's a [story](#) that will curl your hair. A husband and wife in the UK who have a long history of taking in foster children (in addition to raising their own children) are being forced to surrender their current foster child. Why? Because they refuse to teach their child that gay partnerships are on an equal footing with heterosexual marriages.

As a result, the couple will lose the eleven-year-old boy, and he will be placed in a hostel.

Here is a couple who are trying to live according to the convictions of their Christian faith but are not being allowed to do so. They promise to fight the matter in the courts, and I hope they do and I hope they win. It seems that even in one's own home, political correctness rules over one's own personal convictions.

Cicero himself could not have said it better: "*Ubinam gentium sumus?*" Where in the world are we?

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Chutzpah

October 23, 2007

A rabbi friend of mine likes to use the word "chutzpah" and over the years has taught me appropriate ways to use that Yiddish expression.

It was the first word that came to mind when I read about the [statement](#) of a United Nations official in Honduras who said that the Catholic Church should change its stand on the use of condoms. He claimed that the AIDS epidemic in Latin America is being worsened because the Catholic Church does not allow the use of condoms.

Forget for a moment the fact that the Vatican has been quietly studying this issue to see if an accommodation can be made in such instances without compromising the Church's teachings on sexuality. For me, the first word that came to mind when I saw the UN official's statement was "chutzpah." By what right does a UN official presume to tell the Catholic Church or any other organization what it should believe and practice? Regardless of whether he agrees or disagrees with the Church's position, where does the UN get the right to tell a religious body what to believe, much less to blame the spread of AIDS on the religious beliefs of that organization? If it were any group other than the Catholic Church, one wonders whether such claims would be made.

There is a common belief in the world today that the Pope can wake up one morning and change critical Church teachings with a wave of his hand. There is a widespread failure to realize that when the Church teaches something, it does so based on its understanding of what human nature is, on its study of the scriptures and a long-standing tradition of thought on the matter. That may be too sophisticated for certain UN officials and others who think Church teachings are like governmental policies that can be altered by a vote or an executive decision here or there. It just doesn't work that way.

There's no denying the AIDS crisis, but there is also no denying all that the Church does throughout the world to help with it. To blame the Church for the worsening of the crisis is to misname the problem. The problem, as the UN official manages to point out, is teenage sexual activity. The official claims, "Abstinence is not working," but it's truer to say that it is working where it is practiced.

I'm trying very hard to conjure up an image in my mind, an image of Jesus handing condoms to kids and saying, "Be careful." However, the phrase that keeps coming back to me from the New Testament is, "Go your way and sin no more." The AIDS crisis is serious and the Church continues to work alongside of many other agencies to combat it. To blame the Church for the rise of AIDS is a shallow observation which smacks of a failure to understand both the problem and the Church's teaching.

In short, it's chutzpah.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Plans Are Being Made

**October 18, 2007**

Plans are being made.

Yesterday, Bishop William Skylstad, the head of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and several other USCCB officials [met with Pope Benedict](#) today and had a wide-ranging discussion of several issues, including the upcoming April visit of the Pope to the United Nations.

It's hard enough planning for the visit of a friend of relative who is staying with you, but planning for a visit from the Pope is infinitely more complicated. I remember helping with the visit of Pope John Paul II to New York in 1995. His visit was preceded by months of meetings in which thousands of issues had to be addressed. We worked closely with the NYPD, the FBI and the Secret Service in order to assure the highest level of security for the papal visit. Working with the City of New York, we made arrangements for the Pope's Mass in Central Park. Hundreds upon hundreds of media from all over the world had to be credentialed, accommodated and walked through security check points – all of that had to be arranged ahead of time. Everything needed for the Mass in Central Park and for the visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral had to be planned well ahead of time. Arrangements had to be made for priests, religious, laity and religious leaders from a variety of faiths to be able to take part in the events. It was an exciting time, an exhausting time and one I wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

It's starting all over again. We don't know yet exactly what the details of the Pope's visit will be, but wheels are being set in motion and the excitement is already beginning.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Dinosaurs and Wonder

**October 16, 2007**

[Scientists report](#) that they have found the remains of a 105-foot dinosaur in Argentina. Needless to say, it is one of the largest prehistoric animals ever discovered, although there have been larger ones, found in Argentina as well.

The find raises some questions, to be sure.

For one thing, where do you display the remains of a 105-foot dinosaur? Do you have to build a whole new building big enough to hold him? It reminds me of the Cary Grant movie in which he plays an absent-minded paleontologist who is patiently reconstructing the anatomy of a huge dinosaur, only to have his femme fatale knock the whole exhibit down in a daredevil climb of the structure. Storing a dinosaur must be a daunting task. Another question that comes to mind is, how in the world would there ever be enough vegetation to keep the dinosaur fed and happy for even one day? A hungry 105-foot dinosaur can't be very much fun to be around.

On a serious note, however, the discovery gives us one more fascinating glimpse into the mysteries of the universe and of the God who created it. It seems we are always discovering something new either under or above the sun – new fossils, new celestial bodies, new forms of ancient animal life. Our universe is a tremendous mystery that keeps tantalizing us with its secrets, letting us have them drop by drop.

I guess the lesson is never to lose our fascination with the world in which we live. Something new is revealing itself to us every day, and we have the privilege of watching the mystery unfold with awe and wonder. We may never grasp the whole picture, but knowing it is there and enjoying the intimations as they come to us enables us to live with a sense of fascination at the unfathomable riches of the world and of its Creator.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Paying It Forward

**October 9, 2007**

I am always amazed and gratified by the ideas that the team around me on my Sirius radio program "As You Think" (10 p.m. ET Monday through Friday on The Catholic Channel/ Sirius 159) come up with. Both my Producer, Emily Marlow, and my Technical Director, Jim Kavanaugh, are just about thirty years younger than I am, so I rely on them to keep my abreast of what young people today are thinking about.

The other day, Emily came up with the idea of "paying it forward," something I was familiar with from conversations I had had with people but honestly had not thought very much about. It came from a book and a movie, and presents a great idea as to how we can change the world. So often I hear people, myself included, decrying the problems of the world, and I think many of us feel helpless to do anything about them. But this principle, "Pay It Forward," gives us something practical we all can do.

Before stating the principle, maybe an example would help. I read a story about a young boy who had smashed up his bicycle and wasn't going to be able to afford another one. Another boy had just received a new bicycle and decided to give it to the first young man, with the admonition, "Pay it forward."

A few weeks later, the boy who had give his bicycle away saw a story in a newspaper. It was about a young boy who had rescued a sack full of abandoned kittens and saw to it that they were given good homes. When he read farther he learned that the boy who helped the kittens was the same boy to whom he had given his bicycle!

That's what it means to "Pay it forward." One person does something good to three people, expecting nothing in return and telling them only to "Pay it forward." Each of those people, in turn, helps three other people, and the "Pay It Forward" cycle is underway.

The principle has become so popular that a Pay It Forward Foundation has been established to encourage and record the good deeds. What I like about this is that it makes it possible for each of us, no matter how "important" or how "insignificant" to do something every day to make the world a better place. Each of us can help someone else with something that they need or would appreciate. It can be as simple as writing a letter or as big as giving away a bicycle. In an age in which we often feel uncertain as to what to do, here is a plan that enables us to plan out own giving and to do something to help.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## If We Can Do It, Is It Right?

**October 2, 2007**

During a recent [conference](#) in Rome, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, the president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, made an excellent point which often gets lost in our highly technological society. Remarking on our tendency to jump to use the most recent technological developments that come into existence on an almost weekly basis, the Cardinal reminded his audience that just because we can do something does not mean that it's ethically permissible.

The Cardinal remarked that the good of man must be the criterion for deciding what technological procedures or devices should be used. "Technology left to itself can build or destroy man, technology in itself is blind, even if it appears to be the most advanced and the most marvelous. In itself, biotechnology is blind and ambivalent."

That's an important thing to remember. Our modern technological progress can easily lead us to believe that whatever is possible for us is alright to do.

We do the same thing in our personal lives, however. Listening to some, we can easily get the impression that if we can think about something, it is perfectly alright for us to do it. This is the principal of a society based on a misguided notion of choice. If we can choose it, then it is fine for us to do it – or at least what they would like us to believe.

It all comes down to the forgotten ethical principle that the end does not justify the means. Just because a procedure might lead to a good result does not make it morally right in and of itself. For example, the claims, largely unproven, of all of the illnesses that embryonic stem cell research can supposedly cure almost always ignore the fact that embryonic stem cell research kills human life at the same time that it is claiming to foster it.

In the end, we must look to what is genuinely morally good and on that basis judge whatever action we are considering, whether it be of a personal nature or whether it involves the scientific or medical use of technology. Novelty and promise are not self-sustaining criteria for making ethical decisions. It all comes down to the bar of right and wrong.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Saying "I Do" All Over Again

October 1, 2007

There was an [inspiring article](#) from the Catholic News Service on the pages of [www.catholic.org](http://www.catholic.org) about a special Mass that was held in the Diocese of Tucson in which some two hundred couples from thirty-eight parishes in the diocese gathered at a special Mass to celebrate their marriages and to renew their vows. We have such a ceremony each year in the Archdiocese of New York, and it is equally moving. For many years, I conducted a retreat for married couples in a retreat house outside of New York City, and every year at Mass, the attending couples would renew their marital vows. That Mass was the highlight of their retreat.

The renewal of vows is very touching and special. Each year that a couple pronounces their vows again, the promises mean something very different from what they meant the year before. Perhaps the renewal comes after a heartbreaking year in which a family member has been sick or has died. Some years are more difficult than others, and perhaps in a given year the vow renewal signals a year of staying together despite arguments and differences. Other years are joyous - a new baby has arrived, and the renewal of the wedding vows expresses the happiness of new parents and the hope for the continued growth of family life. Renewing the vows marks all of those occasions and brings them forward into faith and hope for the years to come.

I wonder if our skyrocketing divorce rate would diminish significantly if married couples annually renewed their marriage vows? We all (even unmarried people) need to be reminded what it means to love and honor for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad until death do us part. The stresses of daily life can dull our awareness, but a yearly renewal of the vows brings it all home again. If things are going well, each year brings a fuller realization of the challenges of married and family life, while at the same time increasing the sense of the love that grows through all the moments, good and bad.

Renewing the vows, of course, does not mean getting married all over again. However, it does remind us of the commitment we made to each other before God. I offer it as a suggestion to husbands and wives as a way of strengthening the precious bond that lies between them.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Tragic Story

September 27, 2007

There's a tragic [story from Italy](#) about a couple who were about to have twins. From amniocentesis, they knew that one of their twins had Down Syndrome and they decided they wanted to have the child aborted. Their intention was to allow the other infant to live.

Things went terribly wrong. Unbeknownst to the surgeon, the twins shifted positions in the womb, and when the abortion was performed, the child without Down Syndrome was accidentally aborted. When the mistake was discovered, the parents had the second child aborted as well.

The surgeon's reaction: "[This was an] act of fate that could not have been foreseen." My reaction: "Why not?" Why should the life of a child with Down Syndrome be any less valuable than her sister who does not have that condition? This is by no means an "act of fate." It was the act and conscious decision of human beings.

The parents say that their lives are now ruined and that they cannot sleep. I feel for them, because I have counseled many women and men who have suffered because of their decision to abort their child. Post-abortion stress syndrome is very real. But by the same token, I must say to the parents – if you think your lives are ruined and you can't sleep, what about the lives of your two precious children? They can't eat or sleep or breathe or play or go to school or grow up because of a decision only you had something to do with. They are fortunate that God is merciful.

This is a heartbreaking story. Yet it draws us back to the issues involved in the decision to have an abortion. When we try to value one life over another we make a horrific mistake. When we choose to terminate a life because it is not "perfect" in some dubious sense of the word, we make a serious judgment that has dire consequences.

When pro-abortion people talk about having an abortion, they often make it seem as though it were as simple as removing a toenail. This story shows how much sadness, heartache and grief can be involved in this heinous decision.

-- Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Helping Men

September 25, 2007

The story of [Chris Aubert](#) is a particularly interesting one. Prior to his present marriage, he fathered two children whom he aborted. For a long time he thought nothing about it. He told himself that they were just bits of tissue and that it was the woman's body that was involved and not him. But it was when he entered into a stable marriage and for the first time saw the ultrasound of the child his wife was carrying that he realized he had murdered two of his kids. That realization helped him to turn his life around, and today he gives talks to men about abortion and how to deal with it and prevent it.

What's interesting about his work is that so much of our efforts on abortion center around women. The role of men often gets neglected. Yet men suffer from the trauma as well, and often hide or bury their deep feelings about what they have done. Most of us who have done post-abortion counseling have had the experience of having a man sit with us in tears as he tells us about an abortion he has participated in. The joy of watching these men receive the forgiving grace of God is an amazing thing.

Hats off to Chris Aubert and others like him who help men, and women, to understand the harsh reality of abortion, to see the alternatives, and to experience the healing grace of God.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## New Thoughts, New Life

**September 20, 2007**

A listener to my radio program, "As You Think" on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159, wrote to me about all of the problems he is having with his life, and asked for my advice. This is what I said in my response to him, at least in part. I think he is going through something that many people experience in their lives - being stuck and having no place to go. Perhaps these words will be of help to you or to someone you love.

"It sounds to me as though you are thinking that you're in a no-win position with your back against the wall and nowhere to turn. I have to be honest with you and say that the more you tell yourself that, the more you will be stuck. You seem to be caught up in the negatives -- no job, no money, no family, no friends, no hope. Those negative thought patterns, I think, are the source of your problem.

What I'd like you to do for starters is to get a piece of paper and list all of the things, big and small, that you are grateful for in your life. List as many as you can. Use both sides of the paper and use a second or third sheet if you need to. List everything, no matter how small you think it is. These are all things you have manifested in your life with the help of God.

That's your starting point for a new life, because a life lived in gratitude produces more things to be grateful for.

Your negative thoughts are not telling you the truth about who you are. Even though at times we may feel stuck, no one is ever really stuck. There's a spiritual solution for every problem.

When you're making your list of things you are grateful for, start listing as well all the things you love to do. If you need to, go back to your childhood and include on your list anything you loved to do -- riding a bike, playing sports, reading, whatever. Bring it forward and think about what you love to do today. Consider the possibility that you can spend your life and career doing what you love. Wouldn't that be a better way of life?

You ask about your purpose in life. It's the same for all of us -- it's to serve God and serve other people, to make other people happy and to make yourself happy doing it. Whatever you love to do can be a way of making other people happy and doing it would make you happy. It can be your "job." It's win-win for everybody.

Another thing would be to make a list of all of the things you want in life. But instead of saying, "I want a well-paying and fulfilling job" take it into the present and write "I have a well-paying and fulfilling job." Wanting keeps you in wanting. Having already makes it possible for you to manifest it. Be specific about what you want -- salary, benefits, recreation time, your house, your car, your friends. Go for everything you can think of. Write it down.

Now, get excited about the life you have mapped out for yourself. It can be yours.

I think the key is to get rid of the negative thinking and replace it with practical, positive beliefs. It's your thoughts that are keeping you where you are.

The good news is that you've already taken the first step toward change. You know what you don't want. Now, turn those "don't wants" into "already haves" and let yourself start to dream.

One other thing. In a couple of places you call this a "crazy world." Labeling it that way is another way of keeping yourself in the craziness. Sure, crazy stuff happens, but the world isn't crazy, it's an adventure, full of exciting opportunities and possibilities for you.

You are at the threshold of making an important change in your life and your view of the world. I really hope you go for it. You can!"

-- Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Mystery of Conscience

**September 17, 2007**

Last week, [sixteen Catholic Democrats](#) in the U.S. Senate voted to overturn the Mexico City Policy, which prohibits federal funding for any overseas health clinics that provide abortion. President George W. Bush reinstated the policy on his first day in office. It was initiated by President Ronald Reagan and was rescinded by President Bill Clinton. It continues to amaze me that Catholic politicians who run for election as Catholics and who presumably support Church teaching in their private lives can oppose Church teaching when it comes to their public record. If you are personally against abortion and believe it is wrong, then how can you say that others should have a right to it? The usual argument is that such politicians are aware of a need to represent their total constituency, many of whom believe they have a right to abortion. But in truth, these politicians are disenfranchising their Catholic constituents who no longer have an effective say in the discussion. It's not clear how this can be called supporting one's total constituency. It just doesn't make sense.

Ironically, Senator Bob Casey, Jr., of Pennsylvania, a Catholic who voted for the overturn of the Mexico City policy, ran as a pro-life candidate against Rick Santorum and won! His father, Bob Casey, Sr., who was so ardently pro-life, must be turning over in his grave.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Care of the Sick

September 12, 2007

Recently, Cardinal Renato Martino made some pertinent [remarks](#) about the treatment of the sick in our society and what pilgrimages and sacred shrines can do to offset that. He noted that often in our world, the poor and the sick are marginalized, set aside from the center of society and placed on the fringes. He noted that through pilgrimages and sacred shrines, the Church is able to reach out to millions of those who are sick and poor throughout the world and give them a sense of their importance in the eyes of God.

That is clearly the message of Jesus Christ. Throughout his life, he brought the poor, the sick and sinners to himself. When others forced them to the fringes of society, Jesus reached out to them, loved them, healed them and, where appropriate, forgave them. He helped them to understand that our tendency to ostracize them is unacceptable. He let them know that they were important members of the Kingdom of God.

Those of us who have ever experienced serious illness get the point. Take even a fairly simple illness like the flu. How many times have you heard someone say to you that they don't want to be around you when you're sick? It makes perfect sense of course, because they don't want to get sick or to spread the illness themselves. And precautions should be taken to prevent that. However, are there not ways of including the sick in our lives through phone calls, emails, cards and by letting them know we're praying for them? Letting sick people know that they have our love and support can keep alive for them their sense of humanity, their sense of being loved by God.

Cardinal Martino's remarks give us something to think about. Whom can we contact today to let them know that, even in their illness, they are recipients of our love...and God's?

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Remembering September 11

**September 11, 2007**

Today marks the sixth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. They say that time heals all wounds, but that is certainly not the case for many who suffer from illness and psychological trauma in the aftermath of the attacks. Certainly our world is very different from what it was before 8:45 a.m. on that fateful day. We are still mourning losses of those who died in the attacks. Homeland security has become not only a major issue but a source of real change in how we live our everyday lives. The War on Terror resulting from those attacks has affected not only those of us who live in the United States, but everyone throughout the world. There is not a part of Planet Earth that has not been affected by the fall of the Twin Towers.

On this day, we take time to mourn and to remember. Most of us remember exactly where we were when the first plane hit the World Trade Center, and certainly we recall the traumatic days of learning which of our loved ones had been lost. Then there were the long weeks of attending memorial services for our loved ones, including first response persons who gave their lives in the cause of helping others that day. I personally remember a police officer who spoke to me in tears over the death of one of his superior officers. We spoke just prior to a memorial service for that commanding officer at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

No, the pain doesn't go away. But in a strange sort of way, it teaches us something very important. Our feelings remind us that the real answer to terrorism lies not outside us but inside. The ultimate solution to terrorism is spiritual. We need to look inside and ask ourselves what we really want for ourselves and for our world. It's good to remember 9/11, but we need to add to our remembering a spirit-inspired reflection on how to create peace, build bridges of understanding and make it possible for such a terrible event to ever happen again. It requires a commitment on the part of each of us to do what is necessary to bring peace to every area of our lives. Each of us building peace in our corner of the world contributes immensely to the establishment of peace throughout the world. Contemplation and inspired action are the keys to achieving this. We must think and pray, and we must act.

Today as we remember our loved ones and all of those who died on September 11, 2001, let us commit ourselves to the spirit of the words of St. Frances: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Clearing Up the Confusion

September 5, 2007

There's [big controversy](#) brewing in British Columbia over marriage. In Canada, same sex marriage has been legalized. But now a Mormon group wants to practice polygamy and the British Columbia Attorney General and others are threatening to prosecute them for that practice.

As a result, people are raising the question as to why there's no problem with same sex marriage but there's a problem with polygamy, which is normally heterosexual in practice. Why, they ask, are we granting rights to one group while denying them to another?

If you take the question at face value, it's got a lot of merit. Why are sexual rights granted to one group and not to another? Why does society bless one group and want to prosecute the other? Stepping back from the controversy a bit, we can see that society has become confused about what human sexuality is all about. That's the heart of the problem. Society has arrived at a place where it doesn't really know how to apply consistent norms to the area of sexual practice.

That's where the Catholic Church can be of help. Instead of beginning the discussion with the issue of "rights," the Church says, "Let's take a look at what human sexuality really is for, and then make our determination about specific cases."

In the eyes of the Catholic Church, God ordained human sexuality to be an expression of love and a means of procreation of children for husbands and wives, and for that purpose only. Any other use of human sexuality goes against that divine ordination and is morally wrong.

Some people think that the Church's teaching is discriminatory against homosexuals. They see it as homophobic. But if you stop to think about it, the teaching applies to everybody, including married people, single people, gay people, straight people - everyone. No one is left out of that teaching. Human sexuality is for husbands and wives and that is that. The Scriptures are clear that God created marriage for man and woman and not for man and man, woman and woman, or for man and several women. And sexuality is to be exercised between a husband and wife.

If we press the matter further, we can see why polygamy is wrong. Marriage between a man and a woman is meant to image the covenant relationship between God and his people. A covenant is a bond of love. It differs from a contract, which is an exchange of goods and services. It is a union of two persons. The intimacy of a covenant cannot be shared among a spouse and many other spouses. The bond is not the same. One of the Mormon leaders in the British Columbia controversy is said to have fathered 100 children by 20 wives. How can there be a covenant relationship between a man and twenty women?

If we put all of this together, we see that the confusion in British Columbia exists because the very nature of marriage and of human sexuality has been forgotten. If you forget that, of course there is confusion. If the argument begins with rights rather than with nature, then it seems like everybody has a right to do what they want, which is the heart of the controversy in Canada. If you begin by asking what sexuality is for, you get a very different answer.

As with so many things, society needs to get back to a sense of the nature and purpose of things. Against this background, then clear and sensible decisions can be made about what individual people and groups can do.

## Setting the Record Straight

September 4, 2007

[Our Sunday Visitor](#) recently did an interesting article on why religious stories in the media so often contain errors. Several religion journalists were questioned about this and their answers were not surprising, at least to me. They ranged from reporters' ignorance about the basics of religion to the problem of bias to the way in which editors want a story to be slanted. Having worked for many years in the Office of Communications of the Archdiocese, I agreed with much of what was said. I would only add that in many instances there is a sincere effort on the part of journalists to get a story right, and I am often amazed at the amount of hard work they put into making sure the story is accurate.

What really caught my eye in the OSV piece, however, was a statement toward the end of the article. Ray Arroyo of EWTN was quoted as saying, "If Catholics were better catechized, bad secular coverage wouldn't matter. But because there are such deficiencies in understanding, people are subject to all sorts of propaganda and bad reporting. The real problem is people don't know their faith."

This, I think, is closer to the the heart of the problem. People of all faiths and people with no particular religious affiliation get their religious information largely from the secular media, and in many cases this is all the information they have about what is going on in the world of religion. So when Catholics read about the return of the Latin Mass, for example, they believe that this is an assault on Vatican II and an attempt to kowtow to extreme right-wing Catholics. Unless they happen to know better, they'll believe that. Or when the Pope gave his speech at Regensburg University that inflamed the Muslim world, they believe that the Pope deliberately set out to attack Muslims. Or when they read that the restoration of the Tridentine liturgy will mean the inclusion of Good Friday prayers offensive to Jews, they will believe it, even though it is not true.

But the lack of knowledge of the essentials of the faith on the part of Catholics is only half the problem. The other half is the frequent lack of critical thinking about what they read. People don't just buy what they read when it comes to politics or sports, for example; but when it comes to religion many tend to accept what is reported as absolutely true. When reading or viewing the coverage of religious topics, it is important to ask critical questions. Does what is being reported sound right to me? Is there perhaps another side to the story? Where can I turn to investigate the matter more thoroughly before jumping to a conclusion that may be wrong? The same skills we use in other areas should also be applied to religious news stories.

It is all too easy to blame the media when religious news coverage goes awry. It seems to me that we get the coverage we allow. If we review what we read and see with a critical eye and refuse to settle for coverage that is misleading and false, we will demand better of the media and we will get it. When it comes to the dollars and cents of ratings and newspaper sales, we have the ability to make them listen to us. If we become better

informed and more discerning in our thought, we can exercise our right to demand the truth and to assure the accuracy that we seek.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Allowing God

**August 30, 2007**

In [his general audience](#) yesterday, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about the teachings of St. Gregory of Nyssa, the fourth century doctor of the Church. In so doing, the Holy Father made an important distinction about the role of the human person in the world. On the one hand, the Holy Father said, the human person is made to rule over all creation. On the other hand, if he is to reach his true perfection, he must recognize the presence of God within him. More precisely, Pope Benedict said, the human person must allow God to be present within him.

That's an important statement for an age that so readily puts the human person at the head of everything. Secularism and the culture of choice would have us believe that whatever the human person can choose is automatically morally correct. Pope Benedict reminds us that we are subject to a higher authority and that our relationship with God must affect the choices that we make.

But he's saying something else that's important as well. The human person must allow God to be present within him. Therein lies the heart of the matter of choice, and we can see here that the freedom God has given us is remarkable. We can choose whether or not to allow God to be present within us. If we, by conscious choice, refuse to accept the presence of God within us, we are not actually removing God, for he is within us anyway. But we are interfering with God's work, and as a consequence we are hampering our ability to do our true work on earth as well.

For our true work on earth is to praise, reverence and serve God and as a result of that to love and care for one another. Do the choices we make help or hinder our fulfillment of that purpose? That is the question the Holy Father is asking us to ponder.

Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Scaling New Heights to Old Places

**August 29, 2007**

The Vatican's presence in the world reached a new high on Monday with the launching of a new [charter airline service](#) to Lourdes. The Vatican has contracted with Mistral Air, a cargo airline based in Rome, to book charter flights to various holy sites around the world. Pilgrims on the way can watch religious movies and hear religious messages in preparation for their visit to the shrine and holy places. Lourdes, Fatima, Santiago di Compostela, the Holy Land, Poland and Mexico are among the places to which passengers will be able to fly. The Vatican expects to fly 150,000 pilgrims a year on its Boeing 747.

The slogan on the headrests is especially fitting, "I Search for Your Face, O Lord." It's a reminder to us that, on pilgrimages as well as in all of life's journey, we are seeking the face of the one who made us. Pilgrimages are especially sacred, but every aspect of our journey in life is an invitation to know, love and serve God. Things like this remind us of that and keep us attentive to the presence of God in our everyday lives.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## True Dialogue

July 19, 2007

I recently read an article from Our Sunday Visitor about the incompatibility between Buddhism and Christianity. While this flies in the face of what many Christian and even Catholic thinkers have been saying, I do think there is validity to the argument. The discussion highlights one of the great problems in interreligious and interfaith dialogue -- the tendency to see complete compatibility where only some similarity exists.

I have been engaged in interfaith and interreligious dialogue for many years. One of the ideas I have often heard bandied about is that "my religion is right for me and your religion is right for you." Now, that's true as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. When you or I espouse a particular religion, we are not merely saying that its teachings and practices are right for us. We are saying that those teachings and practices have objective truth. It makes a difference, for example, whether my religion believes that the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of Christ or whether it holds that the Eucharist is a mere symbol of Christ's presence. It makes a difference whether my religion holds that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and yours holds that the Messiah is still to come. Those differences, hopefully, do not make us enemies, but neither do they support the conclusion that there is no objective truth about them. We believe what we believe, not just because it works for us, but because we believe that there is an objective truth about what our religion teaches.

The innocent and well-meant attempt to blend all religions into one came home to me after a Protestant minister wrote a letter to the editor chiding me for using, in a column I wrote, the word "religions" plurally to refer to Protestants and Catholics. He claimed that, as Christians, we were one religion and that I had the terminology wrong. Now, to me, what makes up a religion is creed, code and worship. While there are many similarities among Protestants and Catholics in all three, there are distinct differences. To give an easy example, Protestants do not hold the Pope to be the Vicar of Christ on earth, while Catholics do. It's not an insult to refer to these various faiths as religions -- it is simply a clear statement of what they are. It does everybody a disservice when we try to blend them all together. This is the truth the Congregation for the Deposit of the Faith was making when it spoke of the primacy of the Catholic Church. It was not meant to be a slam at other religions, but rather it was intended to be a clear statement of what the Catholic Church says is true. Fruitful ecumenical and interreligious dialogue demands that everyone be truly honest with each other. It does not need us to all be one and the same. We all need to declare that we believe what we believe to be objectively true. Friendship can exist when differences exist, but it is a tenuous friendship which pretends that differences do not exist.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Lessons from the Burning Bush

July 18, 2007

The [First Reading](#) for today is the story of Moses and the burning bush. This incident was a pivotal moment in the history of the people of God. Moses, it seems, had no idea that anything special was about to happen when a voice from a burning bush summoned him to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt.

What caught Moses' attention in particular was the fact that the bush, though burning, was not consumed. Ordinarily, a bush on fire would be burned to a crisp, but that was not happening in this case. This fact aroused his curiosity and led him, ultimately, to an encounter with God.

Perhaps we could consider this phenomenon as symbolic of our encounter with God. When God sets our hearts on fire, his presence is definitely forceful and evident, but he does not destroy us. Rather, he transforms us. The supernatural does not destroy the natural, but elevates it to something beyond itself. When we read the lives of the saints, we discover that, along with the special graces they received from God, they retained their personalities, often with the same sorts of traits that we see in ourselves. Saints do not lose their humanity; rather their lives are touched by God in such a way that their human characteristics are able to be used by him for his divine purposes.

It is the same with death. The Preface for the funeral Mass reminds us, "Life is changed, not ended." When a soul goes to heaven, it does not lose its identity, but is carried upward into union with God. It is a remarkable transformation into eternal life.

There is a saying in Zen Buddhism that, before enlightenment, you chop wood and carry water, and that after enlightenment you still chop wood and carry water. Sometimes we feel discouraged that, despite our efforts to live a spiritual life, we feel pretty much the same as before. It may well be that God is using us, just as we are, to bring his love and salvation to the world. As with the burning bush, his grace transforms, but it does not destroy.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Understanding the Church

**July 11, 2007** It has been very interesting to note the media coverage of the issuing of a document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled "Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church." The manner in which many in the media and on various blogs reported and commented about the document made it sound almost sinister and unfriendly to other Christian faiths. It has even been suggested that the Pope and the CDF are going back on Vatican II.

The purpose of the document is to clarify the Church's teaching on the meaning of "the Church." It is not intended to retract anything that took place at Vatican II. It is an effort to correct certain misimpressions about the meaning of and the identity of "the Church" that have arisen since Vatican II. That is explicitly stated in the document.

Nor is the document intended to demean or insult other Christian faith communities. In fact, the document seeks to make clear to such faith communities - and to Catholics as well - what are some of the foundations for genuine dialogue.

Since Vatican II, great strides have been made in the area of interfaith and interreligious dialogue. Warm friendships have been formed among faith groups where previously there had been aloofness at the very least. However, alongside of these has grown an often-stated and often-assumed belief that "all the churches are really the same, after all" and that the differences between and among us are of little real importance. If I'm not mistaken, that is the impression that this document seeks to correct. In essence, the document is saying that if we are going to enter together into serious religious dialogue, then everyone needs to be very clear as to the Catholic position on the meaning of "the Church." Having that position be misrepresented or misunderstood, however innocently, will not lead to fruitful dialogue.

The document is meant to clarify these matters for Catholics as well. Over the years, I have heard many Catholics say that the religions are really all the same and that our differences in doctrine with other faith communities really don't amount to anything of importance. This document is meant in part to counter that impression. It reminds Catholics that there is a difference between being a Roman Catholic and being anything else. That doesn't mean that we should lessen our celebration of the similarities, much less of the friendship, between Catholics and various other faith groups. It is simply saying that Catholics have certain beliefs about the nature of the Church founded by Jesus Christ, and that some important elements of that belief are not shared by others. This clarification is important for Catholics as a reminder that what we believe is important and not, as some in our culture would say, trivial.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Doubting Thomas

**July 3, 2007**

Today is the feast of [St. Thomas the Apostle](#), whom we know popularly as "Doubting Thomas." In a way, it's kind of unfair to single Thomas out like that, since many of the other apostles had their doubts and misunderstandings about Jesus and his mission. Yet [the incident](#) in which Thomas refused to believe in the resurrection until he had placed his hands into Jesus' wounds really does stand out in our recollections of the apostles.

What is so amazing about this story is that Jesus meets Thomas exactly on his terms. When Jesus re-appears to the disciples, this time with Thomas present, he does precisely what the apostle asked - he invites Thomas to place his hands into his wounds. This says a lot about our relationship with the Lord - he lets us be ourselves. He meets us exactly where we are and gently brings us to where he wants us to be. He doesn't child Thomas for making such a request; rather he meets him precisely where he is.

This enables Thomas to come to a genuine belief in the Risen Lord. His meeting with Jesus is a true meeting of minds and hearts. By allowing Thomas to be himself, Jesus opens up to him the possibility of a true conversion.

This is truly the best way to evangelize. Sometimes in their enthusiasm, Christians have been known to practically beat others over the head with the Gospel message. Jesus' method is much more gentle and respectful. It says what it has to say, all the while allowing others to absorb the message at their own pace and in their own way. Had Jesus acted different, who knows whether Thomas would have ever come to believe? We do well to follow the respectful path of Jesus and to allow others their time and space to absorb the message. That respect, in most instances, will be greatly rewarded.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Our Search for God

**June 28, 2007**

Lately, as I interview people on my radio program, "[As You Think](#)," I've been noticing that a particular theme seems to be creeping up in many of the interviews. It has to do with our relative inability to relax, to pay attention to what is happening in our lives, to treasure and enjoy relationships and to take time for all of the above. In short, it seems to me that we are being told that it is time for us to pay attention to the spiritual aspect of our lives.

The great number of books that touch upon these subjects points, it seems to me, to a semi-conscious realization on our parts that something important is missing from our lives. We may not always be able to articulate that longing, but the fact that there is so much talk about it in current literature seems to indicate that such a realization is there. It's strange when you think about it - as a society we probably have more outlets for entertainment than any previous culture, and here we are having to be told repeatedly that we need to slow down and live. I know a little about the publishing world, and I know that publishing companies don't agree to publish manuscripts unless they are reasonably sure that their theme will resonate with a significant audience. The fact that there are so many books that in one way or other tell us that we have to get off the treadmill tells me, at least, that deep down we know it and are eagerly searching for ways to do it.

St. Augustine said it centuries ago: "Our hearts were made for Thee, O Lord, and they will never rest until they rest in Thee." Our search for something more is really a search for a relationship with the divine. To me, it's important that we acknowledge that directly so that we understand what (or whom) we are looking for and keep that as our focus while we are trying out different approaches to what we call "soulful living." Otherwise, our search for inner meaning can devolve into a variety of programs and efforts and experiments all of which leave us as scattered and exhausted as we were before.

It is God whom we are seeking, and as we undertake various forms of time management, engage in meditation practices, make changes in our diet, do spiritual reading and join groups of likeminded seekers, it is essential that we keep in mind that what we are seeking is God, and all of our means of seeking are meant to lead us to him. Our relationship with him is the point of it all.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## "Perfect?"

June 26, 2007

An article by Father John Flynn on <http://www.zenit.org> about the desire on the part of some to choose their children prenatally raises the question of the morality of such a practice. He concludes, rightly, that any such procedures that involve the destruction of human life are immoral.

That's the most important point, of course, but it is also interesting to ponder the reasoning behind such destruction of human life when it occurs. Behind much of this lurks a definition of "perfection" that is highly questionable. For some, the perfect child is of a certain gender, has no major physical problems, and may even have a certain eye color if that's what they desire. They'll choose the child on the basis of those qualities. They want to choose their children the same way they want to choose their automobiles.

There's an assumption here about what it means to be a perfect human being. That assumption rules out the possibility that every human life is perfect simply because it is a human life. It rejects the notion that someone is perfect simply because they exist.

[Aristotle](#) had a different view, and none other than Thomas Aquinas picked up on it as well. Aristotle maintained that there was a difference between substance and accidents. Substance was the very essence, the very nature of a thing. Accidents were qualities or characteristics that belonged, if you will, to the substance. These would include Quantity, Quality, Relation, Action, Passion, Time, Place, Disposition (the arrangement of parts), and Habit (how a thing is dressed) Accidents only existed insofar as a substance existed for them to belong to.

Not everyone, of course, is going to buy into Aristotelian philosophy, but there's a point to be made here nonetheless. Some things are more important than others and the qualities that cannot endure without a substance to underlie them are, though important, less important than the substance. They are less enduring and of a lesser order of being. To use them as a basis for deciding who is going to live and who is not is clearly preposterous. It is a complete reversal of the right order of being.

Yet there's something so deeply engrained in the human condition that makes us go the other way. As a kid in school, I was always the last guy to be chosen for a team. Why? I was a bit on the pudgy side and pretty inept when it came to sports. On that level, common sense would make it perfectly understandable that I would always be chosen last, right? There's the problem. From the very beginning, we become so inured to choosing on the basis of what Aristotle would call accidents. We assume that perfection means having the right sort of characteristics. We go on to do the same sort of thing all of our lives - we choose the prettiest girl or the handsomest guy at the dance; we admire the "richest," the "best," and the "brightest" and we leave behind and even denigrate some really wonderful, but not so evidently gifted, human beings along the way. Now we have reached a point where we even want to choose our children in that precise same manner.

I understand how difficult it is to care for a child who is disabled, say. But I wish I had a dollar for every parent of a disabled child who has told me how that child has been a grace and a blessing to them and to their families. They don't just say it - they practically glow. They've caught on to the fact that there really is something more to a human being than their looks, their IQ, even their health. That's the substance. That's the part that we call the image and likeness of God. .

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## One Saint -- Three Lessons

**June 21, 2007**

Today is the feast of [St. Aloysius Gonzaga](#), a Jesuit who lived from 1568-1591. He is remarkable for his great piety, even as a very young child. He was born to a princely family in Florence, and though he was exposed to a very secular life, he maintained an unusual discipline of prayer and mortification. When, as a young man, he read of the work of the Jesuits in India and wanted to join the Society of Jesus, he fought off the resistance of his father and a whole string of other noblemen and Church officials who rose up in opposition. In the end, he won and entered the Jesuits. The first lesson we can learn from Aloysius is that one can maintain spirituality even in the face of strong opposition from the culture and from influential people.

The second lesson is that of moderation. When he entered the Jesuits, he was encouraged by his superiors to temper his spiritual practices. He was told to eat more, to take recreation and to pray only at the times prescribed by the Jesuit rule. Prayer and penance are wonderful things, Aloysius learned, but even they are to be experienced in moderation.

There is a third lesson we can learn from Aloysius Gonzaga, and that is dedication. When a plague struck Rome in 1591, Aloysius joined his fellow Jesuits in operating a hospital to care for the sick. In the course of taking care of others, Aloysius caught the plague himself, and continued to work tirelessly until he could work no more, and continued his ardent spiritual life until his death in 1591.

One saint, three lessons. St. Aloysius Gonzaga is indeed a model for us in our efforts to follow Christ.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Thirty Years Ago

June 12, 2007

This month, on June 3, in fact, marks the thirtieth year of my ordination. Thirty years - it's just amazing when I stop to think about it. Just for fun, I took a look at Wikipedia and discovered that these things were taking place shortly after my ordination that year.

- [June 5](#) - A [coup](#) takes place in [Seychelles](#).
- [June 5](#) - The first [Apple II](#) computers go on sale.
- [June 6-June 9](#) - [Jubilee](#) celebrations are held in the [United Kingdom](#) to celebrate twenty-five years of [Elizabeth II](#)'s reign.
- [June 7](#) - After campaigning by [Anita Bryant](#) and her anti-gay "Save Our Children" crusade, [Miami-Dade County, Florida](#) voters overwhelmingly vote to repeal the county's [gay](#) rights ordinance.
- [June 10](#) - [James Earl Ray](#) escapes from [Brushy Mountain State Prison](#) in [Petros, Tennessee](#) (he is recaptured on [June 13](#)).
- [June 15](#) - [Spain](#) has its first democratic [elections](#), after 41 years under the [Franco](#) regime.
- [June 20](#) - The [Supreme Court of the United States](#) rules that states are not required to spend [Medicaid](#) funds on elective abortions.
- [June 20](#) - [Anglia Television](#) broadcasts the fake documentary "[Alternative 3](#)", which enters into the conspiracy theory canon.
- [June 22](#) - Robert Hillsborough, a [gay](#) San Franciscan, is brutally stabbed to death just steps from his home by 4 youths.
- [June 25](#) - [American Roy Sullivan](#) is struck by [lightning](#) for the 7th time.
- [June 26](#) - Some 200,000 protesters march through the streets of [San Francisco](#), protesting [Anita Bryant](#)'s anti-gay remarks and Robert Hillsborough's murder.

Imagine. The Apple II computer and I have roughly the same anniversary.

In 1977, we didn't have the internet. We didn't have cell phones. No text messaging, no websites - we may not have had fax machines, I'm not sure. Legionnaire's Disease had been identified six months before, but although there was no hint of AIDS and the epidemic we know today, but ebola was rampant in Africa. When I was ordained, a first class stamp cost 13 cents, the Yankees would beat the Dodgers in the World Series, Bjorn Borg would beat Jimmie Connors at Wimbledon and Seattle Slew won the Kentucky Derby. "Roots" hit the airwaves for the first time and Elvis Presley would be dead in a couple of months. Saturday Night Fever, Star Wars, Annie Hall, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, and Julia were hits at the box office. That year, the neutron bomb was developed and lasers were first used to initiate a fusion reaction.

It's amazing to look back and see how different things were back then. But one thing is the same. God is still worth dedicating your life to, and other than God there is nothing more important than your friends. God and your friends are what get you through, and the realization of how blessed I have been and continue to be.

Thirty years after I knelt down before Bishop Charles Helmsley in Kansas City to become a priest, I am immensely grateful.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Tobit's Tale

**June 7, 2007**

At Mass, we're reading these days from the [Book of Tobit](#), which is one of the most delightful and poignant stories in the Bible, but one that is not as well known as some of the others. My favorite part of the story involves two characters, Tobit and Sarah. Tobit becomes blinded and disgusted with life and prays that he might die. Sarah has been unlucky in love and marriage and, from a place far away from where Tobit is, also prays to die. Their prayers go up to God at exactly the same moment. God hears them, and decides to send his angel, Raphael, to help each of them. The story is well worth reading for itself, but the bottom line is that Raphael works it out so that Tobit's son and Sarah meet and marry and together they find a salve that will cure Tobit's blindness.

The story never ceases to amaze me. Two people who do not know each other and who live in far-off corners of the world, pray to die and are heard by God in such a way as to connect them to one another and save them both. It's a wonderful lesson about the power of prayer and the wisdom of God. In our own lives and prayers, we must never underestimate the power of God to help and to heal us. The Book of Tobit reminds us that God is the best networker in the world.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Remarkable Story

**May 30, 2007**

Last night on my program "As You Think" on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159 I interviewed Kerry Max Cook, the author of a book called *Chasing Justice*. He told the riveting story of his incarceration for twenty-two years on death row for a crime he did not commit. He told of the desperate conditions he survived in prison, the desolation of heart, mind and soul and the joy of finally being vindicated and freed.

Due to a deep encounter with the Lord, inspired by a chaplain's visit and reading the Bible, Kerry was able to experience the Lord in a very personal way and to forgive everyone who had offended and betrayed him. Remarkably, he also shared that throughout his long ordeal, he was somehow able to keep faith in humankind and to know that even in his darkest moments, he needed to maintain his dreams and go on.

Listening to this man talk about his profound faith, his love of the simple things in life which he had lost for twenty-two years, his love for his wife and son and his dedication to opposing capital punishment, I was just amazed at how with the help of God Kerry Max Cook had overcome profound adversity and become a devoted human being. It renewed my faith that with the help of God we can surmount the tremendous power of evil and make something of our lives. The words of St. Paul come to mind once again, "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Remaining in Christ

May 23, 2007

Vatican reporter John Allen made his usual perceptive comments about Pope Benedict XVI's recent trip to Brazil. In a column for the National Catholic Reporter, Allen summarized the Pope's message as calling for a return to Christ. Allen noted that the Pope's intention was not to downplay the need for various kinds of social reform. On the contrary, his message was that the only really successful types of social reform are those that are grounded in the message of Christ and of the Church. He reflected that the Pope has spent a great deal of time pondering the phenomenon of liberation theology, popular in many parts of Latin America. "In essence," Allen said, "his conviction is that whenever a theological movement tries to recast the faith in order to serve some social good, it not only distorts the church's tradition, it also fails to deliver on its promised utopia."

John Allen's summary of the Pope's message gives all of us something to think about. The key factor in achieving any kind of social program lies in our centering ourselves in Christ. It is only by capturing his spirit and allowing it to permeate our every thought, word and deed that any initiatives to improve things outside of ourselves will succeed. The reason is simple: we are made in the image and likeness of God, and Christ is the Word of God through whom he made the universe. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Programs may come and programs may go, but what lasts is Christ.

"This was precisely the great error of the dominant tendencies of the last century, a most destructive error, as we can see from the results of both Marxist and capitalist systems," Pope Benedict said. "They falsify the notion of reality by detaching it from the foundational and decisive reality, which is God." The truth is, when we detach ourselves from God, we are engaging in a mission impossible, for, existentially, we cannot exist apart from God. Try as we might to find our way, we can only lose our way. Pope Benedict has said this repeatedly with reference to the secularism that is rampant in many parts of Europe. Those who embrace secularism are engaging in a search that cannot be fulfilled. Recently, I saw a photo of a church bulletin board that read, "Google can't satisfy every search." How true those words are!

The Pope's words in Brazil are a reminder to us all to stay close to Christ in all our endeavors. No one but he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Beehive of Activity

May 23, 2007

Being a priest in this day and age can involve you in a beehive of activity, and that is especially true for one Vermont priest, [Father Adam Krempa](#). At age 76, Father Krempa maintains an activity that has been part of his life for forty years - beekeeping. Catholic Online reports that this veteran priest maintains five hives on his family homestead. Not only does he bottle (glass bottles are best) and sell the honey, he also sells beeswax. From time to time, he gets stung, but thinks nothing of it, preferring to see the bees as "God's creation."

Beekeeping is by no means all that consumes Father Krempa's time. He is pastor of St. Raphael Church in Poultney, VT. But it is an important part of his life, nonetheless. It's interesting, isn't it, to find the diverse ways in which people experience the presence of God? Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote that, "Christ plays in ten thousand places." How wonderful it is to know that there are so many places in which we can find God. It challenges us to stay awake and creative and helps us not to fall into ruts or become stale or arid in our life of faith. There is always some new place in which to find the Lord and to rejoice in his abundant presence.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Beautiful Mother's Day

May 14, 2007

A couple whom I have known for a long time invited me to spend Mother's Day with them. It was a beautiful sunny day; there were plenty of good food and good conversation as we sat around the table on the patio for a lovely afternoon.

The good food, good conversation and good companionship were not the best part of the day, however. Shortly after I arrived, so did the rest of the family. Before long the place was alive with the sounds of teenage children and small children - brothers, sisters and cousins - laughing and playing and genuinely enjoying each other's company. Their parents - the adult children of my friends - were there as well, interacting with each other and playing with their own children and their nieces and nephews as well. In some respects it was an idyllic scene - complete with the happy romping of the family dog. But the point is - it was a *real* scene - not a fairy tale or a made up story - but a real scene, a real afternoon with real grandparents and parents and real children and grandchildren.

As I say, I have known this family for a long time, well enough to know that there have been sadness and heartaches and struggles over the years along with deep commitment and joy. That is why I knew that this happy Mother's Day afternoon was not pretend, not something put on to please Grandmother or Grandfather or the visiting priest, but something beautiful and real. At times the conversation turned to what happened at Sunday Mass this week and why the oldest granddaughter loved being a Catholic. Yes, Sunday Mass for the family and involvement in parish and other Catholic organizations was clearly a priority in these busy families' lives. Life wouldn't be the same for them without it.

I came away from Mother's Day with the understanding that Catholic marriages and Catholic families can work. They have all the busy-ness, all the stresses and strains of other families, but they can *work*. These days, you hear more about the disagreements and the divorces and all the reasons it's difficult to be a Catholic family today. You sometimes come away with the feeling that marriage seldom works. But yesterday, I saw before me the truth that it can work and the feeling that it probably does work more than we are generally led to believe.

I say this not to disparage those for whom it is not working or has not worked, not at all. But I am saying this to counter the belief that, in this day and age and in this society, it cannot work. It is simply not true to say that the Catholic view of marriage and family is a thing of days gone by, a lovely ideal that has no place in our modern sophisticated culture. It is an ideal, of course, but it is an ideal well worth striving for and one that, in cooperation with the grace of God, can be achieved. When you see it in action as I did on Mother's Day, you know it represents the best that we can hope for - a wonderful best, indeed.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Remembering the Good

May 10, 2007

We hear so much on a daily basis about the bad things that happen in the world, the insane and cruel things that human beings do to each other. The truth is, there are probably more good things done in the world every day than there are evil things. The good things often go unnoticed in our rush to pay attention to the spectacular, the unimaginable, the horrific.

I was thinking about this after reading a [story](#) from The Catholic Herald in Milwaukee about a woman whose parish is surrounding her and her family with love in the face of her diagnosis of breast cancer. In fact, the parish was the first place she called when she learned of the news. Immediately, the parish secretary mobilized volunteers to arrange what would turn out to be the biggest bake sale in the parish's history. Other parishioners, some of whom did not even know the woman in question, volunteered to bake bread, make phone calls and do anything else the family needed. The parish priest made himself available for counseling, assuring the woman that, yes, it was quite alright to be angry with God if that was how she felt. And then there were the numerous phone calls from parish friends offering their support.

I looked it up, and there are some 30,000 incorporated cities in the United States of America. I don't believe that figure includes towns and villages. It's not hard to imagine that every day, at least one story like that one from Milwaukee does not take place in every city, town and village in the country. Probably many more than that. This happened to be about a Catholic parish, but add to that the number of synagogues, churches, mosques and other houses of worship where similar things are happening every day. Add to that the good deeds done by those who do not espouse any particular religion. Add to that the good deeds that are done by hospitals, hospices, orphanages, drop-in medical facilities, rehabilitation programs and in private homes and offices - the list could go on and on. At any given moment on any given day, literally millions of good deeds are being done by people willing to help those in need.

We need to think about that. We don't hear it often enough. I'm not suggesting that we should stop concerning ourselves about the evils in the world. But I am saying that we would do well to stop more frequently to consider how many times each day the evils in the world are met by forces of good. We need this as an antidote to what we read, hear and see in the headlines each day. We're constantly bombarded by reports of evil, so much so that we can easily become discouraged at the state of the world. Yes, there is evil, but the truth is, there is so much good being done as well. When we focus on that, we have a whole different outlook on life. When we do encounter evil, instead of being discouraged, we can ask, "What can I do, in the face of this, to bring good?" That's what they did in Milwaukee, and that's what you and I can do, too.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# "Keeping My Word"

**May 7, 2007**

The Gospel for today, from the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, has Jesus saying, "Whoever loves me will keep my word." That expression "keeping my word" is one that most of us do not reflect sufficiently upon. We think of it as doing the will of God -- following his commandments -- and, indeed, that is a legitimate meaning of the phrase. But keeping the word of God has a whole other meaning which is much richer and more precious. It literally means treasuring the word. When we have valuables that we do not want to see stolen or damaged, we put them in a safe place, such as a safe deposit box, so that nothing will harm them. By the same token, when we keep the word of God, we treasure it. We keep it in our hearts, keep it alive and well and brimming with meaning. We care for it and do not want anyone to distort or alter its meaning.

How do we keep the word of God in this deeper sense? For one thing, by reading it carefully and lovingly and taking it to heart. For another, by sharing it with others so that it does not dry up in our hearts but stays flowing and alive and vibrant. And for still another, yes, by living it to the best of our ability at every moment of our lives.

Keeping the word of God is a powerful responsibility. But God has entrusted it to us and it is ours. With his help, we can keep the word of God alive and well in our lives and in our world. It is what he asks us to do.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Put God First

May 3, 2007

It was a lovely spring - almost summer - afternoon in New York City, and I was privileged to spend a couple of hours of it having pasta and a glass of wine with an old friend whom I had not seen for several months. He and I used to have lunch together fairly regularly, but - you know how it goes - we both got busy, my schedule changed and the rest is history. So today was a very special celebration.

My friend is in his seventies, is active in business, in his church, in church organizations and charities and is very warmly present to his family. He's had some problems lately, as we all do from time to time, but he said to me, "You know, I deal with them head on and I love a challenge!" He told me that he felt younger today than he had at any other point in his life. He's the friend I've often quoted as saying, "Enjoy the good times, because the bad times will always find you," a saying which has helped me many times to keep my priorities straight.

Looking across our table in that crowded New York restaurant, I could not help but wonder at the beautiful power of soul that my friend exuded. He was so vibrant and full of life. He revealed his secret to me in the course of our conversation. I know he wouldn't mind if I told it to you. It's this: put God first.

He said, "For me, it's God first, then my Church, my family, my work and my friends. It's so important to put God first." My friend doesn't just talk the talk; he walks the walk as well. Every morning on his way to work - he runs a large company - he stops in at a nearby church and makes a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He and his wife are Eucharistic ministers and feel so very privileged to have that ministry. Once a week or so he and his wife make a Eucharistic vigil in their parish. In everything they do, whether separately or together as a family their motto is: put God first.

I guess my friend and his wife have discovered a new secret for longevity. They are both young in spirit and really active. People sometimes wonder why the characters in the Old Testament lived to be hundreds of years old. Maybe that's why - they put God first in their lives and they lived long and prospered.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## St. Joseph the Worker

**May 1, 2007**

I was a mere boy of nine in 1955 when Pope Pius XII established May 1 as the feast of St. Joseph the Worker. The feast was established in response to the "May Day" festivities of the Soviet Union and the various secular celebrations of the working person in some European countries.

It's fitting to place this just man in the position of being the patron saint of working people. Although we know little about him from the scriptures, we do know that he was a man of great sensitivity, had a deep love for Jesus and Mary and was immediately receptive to doing the will of God at great personal inconvenience to himself. We can only imagine that the tender care we see in the Scriptures extended into the hidden life at Nazareth. There, he and Mary must have continued to nurture Jesus physically and spiritually and to model for him the essence of married love.

As for his work, it is reasonable to assume that Joseph took the same pride in his carpentry as he did in his family life and that he cared for his customers in the same kind and generous manner that we see in his care for his wife and foster-Son. The life of a carpenter in a small town cannot have been an easy one, yet we see Joseph as bearing his joys and sorrows every day with the knowledge that his daily life was an offering to God.

Contemplating the life of Joseph, we can approach our own work with the same dedication that we see in the gentle carpenter from Nazareth. Sometimes our work is pleasant and sometimes it is not. In either event, we can invoke the intercession of this wonderful saint and let our lives model that same faithfulness and dedication that was his two thousand years ago.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# The Power of a Promise

April 26, 2007

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 thirty-seven years, and seventy-nine-year-old [Kate O'Bara](#) continues to care for her daughter Edwarda who for all these 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. *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'Bara's that 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 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 even 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?"

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.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Limbo

April 23, 2007

The latest news to come out of the Vatican is the [abolition of the concept of Limbo](#). Limbo, as you know, was held to be the place where unbaptized children went if they died, obviously before receiving the grace of baptism. The argument was that since baptism is necessary for salvation and the children were not baptized, they could not go to heaven. On the other hand, they would not be in hell, because they did not do anything wrong. The intermediary solution was to place them in an in-between state, called Limbo (the word, in Latin, means "edge" or "boundary") where they would be in a state of natural happiness.

In a recent document, the Vatican has abolished the notion of Limbo, saying it is not consistent with Christ's attitude toward children nor that of the Church. The Vatican International Theological Commission said that the notion of Limbo led to an "unduly restrictive view of salvation." It stressed that baptism is the ordinary means of salvation, but it reflected that God is merciful and wants all human beings to be saved."

While the promulgation of this opinion has been expected for a long time, no doubt its realization will be a source of some confusion and even anger on the part of some Catholics. They wonder how a teaching of the Church could change like that. How could the Church suddenly go from saying unbaptized babies went to Limbo to saying they went to heaven?

This gives us an excellent opportunity to reflect upon some aspects of Church teaching. Though we Catholics were all taught the concept of Limbo from our earliest days, the fact is that it was more a theological hypothesis than an actual teaching of the Church. Pope Benedict, as Cardinal Ratzinger, said this back in 2005. There is nothing in the Scripture about Limbo *per se*, and it was simply a way of trying to understand what happened when unbaptized babies died. Though we were taught it practically from the cradle, it was never an official doctrine of the Church. That's the first important thing to understand.

The other thing that it is important to understand is that the Church often reflects upon its teachings and sometimes modifies or changes them. A good example is the Church's teaching on capital punishment, which changed with the second edition of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Like everyone else, the Church can grow in its understanding of its beliefs, and sometimes makes adaptations or changes as a result of further consideration.

That fact continues to shock some Catholics. They wonder, "If the Church can change its mind on Limbo, what else can it change its mind on?" They worry that central doctrines will yield to the mores of the times. It's important to remember that Church doctrine is not vulnerable to current trends in thought. Beliefs such as the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacredness of human life from the moment of conception to the

moment of natural death, and so on are so rooted in the scriptures and the tradition of the Church that it is most unlikely that they will ever change. Again, Limbo was not a central teaching of the Church and its reversal by no means heralds a change in Church teaching overall.

Others worry that the denial of Limbo implies a diminishment of the importance of Baptism. "Well, if our baby is not going to go to Limbo, why bother to have him or her baptized if he or she is going to go to heaven anyway?" It's an understandable question, but it is actually the product of a results-driven mind. The question leaves out the whole special life of grace and of membership in the Catholic and Christian community that is the result of baptism. The graces of baptism and the benefits of belonging to the faith community are great helps to the spiritual life of a child growing up. In a world that is often so broken and so full of evil, it is preferable to have the child immersed in the life of grace and in a supportive community of faith. So baptism is still very important and not to be ignored.

The new teaching on the salvation of unbaptized infants is a very welcome development in the life of the Church. Let us hope and pray that it will ease the minds of those who worry because their child died before baptism. Let us hope that it draws us all to a deeper appreciation of the bountiful mercy of God.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Covering a Tragedy, Ministering to our Listeners

**April 17, 2007**

Last night's program on "As You Think" (9 p.m. - Midnight ET on the Catholic Channel, Sirius 159) was clearly the most heart wrenching program we have had to date. For nearly all of our three hours, we covered the tragic shootings that took place yesterday at Virginia Tech. ABC News Radio's Aaron Katersky provided his usual clear and poignant account of the nub of the story and the heartache surrounding it. Father James Arsenault and Deacon Tom Ellersbrook of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Blacksburg told what it was like to have parishioners and friends injured, killed and worried about their children. Both of them came to us from ministering to victims and their friends and families. Deacon Tom reflected on what it was like for him, as a professor at the University, to learn of the death of one of his students and, as a father, to learn that his daughter, a freshman, was safe. Joanne Nattress, the Executive Director of Commonwealth Catholic Charities of Virginia told of the work of Catholic Charities on the scene (they are located in the Newman Center on campus) as they provided assistance to those in need while struggling with their own feelings about the terrible tragedy. Eric Maisel, an author and expert on Zen (who was already a scheduled guest) took us through ten steps that would help us to come to terms with the tragedy. And Sister Mary Jo Kearns, a Catholic Sister and experienced grief counselor, reminded us who had been watching and listening to the events as they unfolded that, as Christians and Catholics, we have a choice to make - either to let ourselves be submerged in the horror of the day or to draw upon our faith to recall that we are not powerless, that God is empowering us to do whatever we feel drawn to do, in work and in prayer, to continue to make the world a better place.

A very poignant call came in from a listener who had been deeply involved in law enforcement for the Oklahoma City bombings in 1995, and who had suffered post traumatic stress syndrome as a result. He told us that all of that started coming back to him as a result of the Virginia Tech tragedy and that a call to a priest friend and to "As You Think" had helped to pull him through.

What I liked is that we were able to cover the story while at the same time keeping a focus on ministering to our listeners who inevitably are so deeply affected whenever something like this happens. News and inspiration. It's what we aim for at the Catholic Channel/Sirius 159.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Email the Pope for His Birthday

**April 16, 2007**

Today is the eightieth birthday of the Holy Father and if you are under the impression that there is no way you could send the Pope a birthday greeting, think again! The Vatican has added a page to its website for you to send an [electronic birthday greeting](#) to the Holy Father. For the first time in history, people from around the world can send prayers and good wishes to the Pope for his birthday by email. The web page has spaces for you to type in your name, your address, your country, your email address and your message of congratulations.

That means it's not too late. Most of us who send birthday cards have to remember to get them into the mail several days before the birthday. You can do it today if you wish and it will still get there in plenty of time.

Who knows whether the Holy Father will have time to read all of the messages he is sent. But just the sheer energy of all of those positive messages being sent to commemorate his birthday will be a source of great encouragement to him, I am sure.

And you can always tell your grandchildren that you emailed the Pope!

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Good Confession

April 4, 2007

"It has been thirty years since my last Confession." As a priest hearing that statement from a Lenten penitent, what is my reaction? Many people stay away from Confession, fearing that the response to such an admission will be a loud, "It's been *what?*"

Whenever it has been my privilege to hear that sentence, usually said somewhat sheepishly, my reaction has been to rejoice. I am so happy that someone who has been away from Confession and possibly also the Church for such a long time has taken the step of coming back. It is clearly the work of God's grace and for me there is no more appropriate response than to marvel, to rejoice and to welcome.

I think most priests today feel the same way. We take very seriously the parable of the Prodigal Son. He squandered his inheritance and brought himself to the lowest point of his life - feeding pigs food that he longed to eat himself. He took himself back to his father, asking only that he be readmitted to the household as a servant. The father would have none of it. Instead, he welcomed him with open arms, clothed him in the finest robes and threw a magnificent "Welcome Home" party. Jesus meant that parable, I am sure, at least in part, to remind his apostles and their priestly successors that God is all about mercy and that, in dealing with other sinners, we should act accordingly.

There is another parable that is appropriate here. Jesus told the story of a master who forgave his servant a huge debt. That servant, in turn, refused to forgive a smaller debt owed him by a fellow servant. The master called in the first servant and threw him in prison until he could pay his original debt. There's a subtle lesson here for those of us who are privileged to hear confessions: we have been forgiven much - therefore we should ourselves be compassionate and forgiving.

Holy Week is a time when many avail themselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is also a time when others think about it and hesitate. They are embarrassed and often afraid of what will happen if they admit how long it has been since their last Confession and what they have done. May they realize that the priest hearing Confession is a sinner, too, and that, no matter what twists and turns the story has taken, he will understand, forgive and welcome. He too has experienced God's forgiveness and he knows how difficult a struggle life can sometimes be.

I'm sure the Prodigal Son was afraid when he returned home to his father. What a shame it would have been if he had let his fear stand in the way of being fully reinstated into his father's household. Let us pray that those who are considering a return to Confession may look past their own fears and enjoy the wonderful gift of inner peace and happiness that are the result of a good Confession.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Holy Week

**April 1, 2007**

Palm Sunday is here, and with it comes the wonderful time of Holy Week, in which we come close to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in a very special way. Today, we commemorate his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. St. Luke tells us in his Gospel that Jesus determinedly set his face toward Jerusalem, and what we commemorate today is the fulfillment of that decision.

Now, however, the rest of the story unfolds - the story that leads to his suffering and death, which we commemorate on Good Friday and, in stark silence, first part of Holy Saturday. We contemplate the horrific events that constitute his Passion and death - the three tragic hours on the Cross and the Seven Last Words that he proclaimed. We cringe at the enormity of the pain, and we are humbled when we realize that Jesus underwent it for us.

Along the way, we remember the bittersweet day of Holy Thursday. Jesus celebrates Passover with his friends and, with a heavy heart of his own, tries to console the disciples, who know that gruesome events are about to take place. And we remember as well the joyous moment when Jesus took the bread and wine and for the first time transformed them into his body and blood.

The Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday is a truly joyous event, celebrating the resurrection of the Lord and the way in which he makes all things new. New fire, new candle, new water, newly initiated Catholics - it is a joy-filled celebration of new life. After the sadness of the previous days, we now rejoice in the triumph of the Savior over sin, suffering and death.

This is a week in which to practice mindfulness. There is so much to experience this week. Let us keep the eyes of our mind and heart open to capture all of the wondrous moment that are there for us.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Signs from God?

**March 28, 2007**

There are a couple of initiatives by Catholics around the country to put the image and message of Jesus on billboards. [Joe Cannon](#) of Brooklyn and Deacon Don De Haven of California have taken to putting pictures of Jesus and religious slogans, plus an 800-number on billboards placed in various locations various places around the country.

To some, this may seem a bit out of the ordinary, but the initiative seems to be having positive results. Many people have called the 800 number to say how suddenly seeing one of the billboards on a highway has comforted them and given them a deep sense of the love and presence of God in their lives.

The pun is too obvious, but the reality is so true - many of us look for signs from God all the time. Life becomes burdensome, our hearts become wearied and broken and we look for signs that God is with us, that he comforts us, that he cares. We in the Catholic Church are blessed with many such signs. Chief among them are the sacraments, literally "outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace." The sacraments are special signs because they actually do what they signify; they present to us the grace that is signified in the form and matter of each sacrament.

In addition to the sacraments there are numerous other signs that the Church uses to show the loving presence of God. These are called sacramentals. They are not sacraments, but are holy objects that remind us that God is near. Crucifixes, rosaries, scapulars, holy water, holy cards and so on help us to stay aware of God's love each and every day.

Then, of course, there are those random events which we perceive as signs of God's presence in our lives. We pray for a sign from God, and a friend's seemingly chance words give us the inspiration and guidance we need. We ask God to help us, and the words of a song on the radio speak to us of God's comforting love. These signs are often a bit more difficult to discern and require prayerful confirmation, but they, too, can be signs from God, giving us direction and reminding us of his eternal love.

Let us be grateful to God for the many signs he gives us of his abiding love and care for us. Those reminders help us to stay the course as we make our journey through life with the help of God.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Taking God Seriously

March 22, 2007

It is interesting to meditate upon the [First Reading](#) for today's liturgy, in which there is a remarkable dialogue between God and Moses. The Lord begins by telling Moses to go down and speak to the people, because they have become worshippers of false gods instead of worshipping only the God "who brought them forth from the land of Egypt." God threatens to vent his anger upon his people.

At this point, Moses takes up the conversation. He reminds God of his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Israel to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. He reminds God how he once saved his people by bringing them forth from the land of Egypt, as he had said just a moment earlier. He implores the Lord to let his blazing wrath die down, and to remember the love he has shown to his people. As a result of Moses' words, the reading goes, "the LORD relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people."

Sometimes people question the effectiveness of prayer. Does God really answer their prayers, they wonder? Or does he wrap himself up in his own ideas and fail to listen to his people?

The joy of this reading and others like it in the Old Testament is that they show clearly how God listens to our prayers and takes them seriously. Interestingly enough, Moses takes God's declaration of anger seriously as well, and there is an important lesson for us there, too. When God speaks to us, whether in joy or anger, it is important that we listen, truly listen to what he says. That is a prerequisite for genuine dialogue between any two parties, and certainly between God and us. God takes us seriously, but we must take him seriously as well. That is true, even when God is telling us something that we do not want to hear. That's genuine prayer, and the hallmark of a mature relationship.

As we continue our journey through Lent, we are encouraged to enter into genuine dialogue with God. If we want him to listen to us, we must be willing to listen to him. Prayer is a two-way street.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Late for Lent?

**March 21, 2007**

By now, we are well into the season of Lent. For some, it has been a time of profound prayer and either sacrifice or special activities that have been leading them closer to Christ. For others, it has been a time of good beginning, perhaps, but at this stage of the game also a time of promises unfulfilled.

In case you are finding that Lent is passing you by, don't feel guilty. There is still plenty of time to make this a special season. There is still time to take part in special Lenten devotions such as Stations of the Cross. It's not too late to add a special devotion to your own calendar -- to go to Mass one day other than Sunday, to spend a few moments pondering the Mass readings for each day or to give up something that you really like or enjoy.

What you do for Lent is very personal and people do interesting things to mark the Lenten season. Recently, a woman called my radio program "As You Think" to say that she had decided, for Lent, to give up listening to all the other stations she used to listen to and instead to listen only to The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159. She hastened to add that doing this was not a penance, but a thoroughly enjoyable and beneficial activity. She said that she was learning so much about her faith!

It's also possible during Lent to take on an activity that would help others, such as volunteering in a soup kitchen or visiting the sick in the hospital. That can be done at any time, and would make an excellent way of catching up on Lent.

And finally, there is the notion of fasting from certain thoughts and feasting on others. If we have been thinking harmful or negative thoughts we can replace them with positive and growth-filled ones. Mental fasting and feasting is a great way to honor the season.

So, don't feel guilty and don't despair if you have been letting the Lenten season pass you by. There's still plenty of time, and lots you can do!

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Made in God's Image and Likeness

**March 13, 2007**

Last night, when I did a brief segment about marriage on my Sirius radio program, "As You Think," a listener called in expressing the opinion that the Church's position on what constitutes a marriage was a way of saying that people of homosexual orientation were bad. In the light of that and of the Holy Father's recent remarks about the necessity of Catholic politicians opposing gay marriage, I thought it might be a good idea to clarify.

People sometimes say that the Church's position that marriage is between a man and a woman is discriminatory against people of homosexual orientation. It's just not so. The Church believes that marriage is between a man and a woman and that any sexual activity outside of marriage, by anyone, is sinful. The application of that moral law applies equally to every single human being regardless of their sexual orientation. It applies to married couples. It applies to all unmarried people as well. The Church's teaching on marriage is meant to be just that - a teaching on what constitutes a valid and licit marital relationship. It applies to everyone, and in no way discriminates against any group of people. The principle applies equally to all.

Moreover, while the Church maintains that all sexual activity outside of marriage - including homosexual activity - is morally wrong, it never in any way proclaims that people of homosexual orientation are "bad" people. They are people made in the image and likeness of God just as all of us are. They have the same opportunities to participate in the life of the Church as anyone else. They are simply asked, as everyone else is, to abide by the teachings of the Church on sexuality and marriage. There are many gay Catholics who are active participants in the life of the Church, living according to the Church's teachings. In many instances, they are helped by the Catholic organization Courage to live good Catholic lives by following the rules of the Church.

We'll likely have to keep repeating this message over and over again, since it's fashionable to attempt to distort the teachings of the Church into something that they are not. But it's worth repeating, just as it's worth repeating that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. We need as many reminders of that as we can get.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## The Lesson of Christa Lilly

**March 8, 2007**

Joyous news and sad news. The joyous news was that [Christa Lilly](#) of Colorado Springs came out of a coma after six years. She met family members she had not met before, caught up on the news (including the happenings on September 11, 2001) and even gave an interview to a local television station. There was great joy in her family that, after such a long time, she had returned to consciousness.

The sad news is that Christa Lilly has relapsed and gone back into the coma. Yet despite the disappointment in that news, there is a lesson for all of us to learn. When our society rushes to claim that comatose people are "vegetables" or less than fully human, we must remember that the seemingly vegetative person is truly a human being. I have interviewed for radio a woman who was in a seemingly-irreversible comatose state and who suddenly returned to consciousness. She is now active in the cause of helping comatose people retain their rights. I have read story after story of similar situations. These stories provide living proof that the comatose patient is a human being with the same dignity and right to life as any other. They are merely in a different state of awareness..

It has been my practice, whenever I am called to the bedside of comatose person, always to talk to them, to hold their hand, to speak to them as I would to someone who is able to respond. I encourage family members to do the same, and suggest that they never talk about or around the patient as though he or she weren't there. It is my belief that at some level they are aware. It is my belief that always they are truly human beings.

All of us can keep Christa Lilly in our prayers. And, when others claim that they are "vegetables" or less than fully human, let us remember her example. The life of a comatose person is not a "vegetative state." It is the life of a real human being.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## The Wisdom of a Child

**March 6, 2007**

Sometimes, when we're contemplating huge life issues and moral issues, it is good to have the benefit of the wisdom of a child.

In one of his Washington Times columns, Nat Hentoff told the story of a dinner conversation that took place one evening between two doctors, both of whom performed abortions, and their nine-year-old son. Hearing his parents talking and curious about what they were talking about, the boy asked, "What's an abortion?" Very carefully, the mother tried to explain as best she could to a nine-year-old the nature of abortion. Horrified, the little boy piped up, "But that means killing babies." The mother patiently tried to explain that there was a certain point in the pregnancy after which abortions could not be performed, with few exceptions. Undaunted, the boy replied, "It doesn't matter what month. It's still killing the babies."

Nat Hentoff reported that the father, who was a friend, couldn't manage to get the conversation out of his mind. No wonder. Isn't it true that sometimes things that are not so clear to us are very clear to children? In a nutshell, this little boy grasped what many in our society today fail to see - that, no matter how you try to explain it away, abortion is about killing babies. The same could be said about assisted suicide as well. However you attempt to justify it, assisted suicide is killing human beings. No matter how we try to explain it away, killing is killing.

In our highly efficient and technological society, we seem to have lost the art of letting live and letting die in natural ways. We feel compelled to interfere with natural birth and with natural death. The haunting question of a nine-year-old brings us sharply back to reality. Have we become too "sophisticated," too "modern" to realize very clearly what we are doing when we end a life before birth and before natural death?

There is a reason that the father in the story could not get his son's words out of his mind. They rang true. His son could see what his parents, with all of their sophistication and expertise could no longer see.

There is something to be said for the clarity of vision of a child.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Tales from the Crypt?

February 27, 2007

The "news" that a Discovery Channel documentary will claim to give evidence that (1) a crypt discovered 27 years ago in Jerusalem contains the bones of Jesus; (2) Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene; (3) the couple had a son named Judah; and (4) all three were buried together.

Interestingly, at the news conference at which these claims were announced, several of the experts who served as collaborators for the project said that they were, in the words of [\*The New York Times\*](#), "excited but uncertain."

I can understand why they're excited, but I can understand even more why they are uncertain. The producer of the documentary, James Cameron of *Titanic* fame, called this "the biggest archeological story of the century." But Lawrence E. Stager, Dorot professor of archeology of Israel at Harvard, commented in the *Times*, "One of the problems is that there are so many biblically illiterate people around the world that they don't know what is real judicious assessment and what is what some of us in the field call "fantastic archaeology."

The problem is that at one and the same time there is too much and too little information available to us in this highly-advanced information age. On the one hand, all of us have access to tons of information. On the other, we do not always have the information and experience necessary for evaluating the information we receive. As a result, great damage is done. Every major media outlet in the world, it seems, covered this story yesterday. Now, the world knows that this so-called information is out there, but how are most of us able to evaluate its validity? How do parents explain to children what this all means? How do they explain it to themselves? What will happen to the faith of many who will see this and prematurely take it to be true and accurate? Will they be able to understand the myriad of archeologists and biblical scholars who find the evidence presented in the documentary flimsy and worthy of skepticism?

A little learning is a dangerous thing. There are, in my mind, serious ethical questions about putting a documentary like this out into the general public. Listen to the *Times* report of a response given by the documentary's director, Simcha Jacobovici, in answer to the question as to why filmmakers did not conduct DNA tests on the ossuaries other than those of Jesus and Mary Magdalene? "We're not scientists. At the end of the day we can't wait until every ossuary is tested for DNA. We took the story that far. At some point you have to say, 'I've done my job as a journalist.'"

Can't wait? Why not? Why the urgency to get out a story that may not be true and may do a damage to some people's faith?

It's not good enough, I'm afraid. The producers of this documentary are playing off the voracious hunger of people for knowledge of Jesus (which is a good thing) and off of the insatiable quest for any sort of knowledge, proven or unproven (which is a bad thing).

No service is done here to people of faith. More sensationalism in the name of Jesus has once again proven the order of the day.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Christ's Values

**February 21, 2007**

As we begin the season of Lent, we are encouraged to put on the mind of Christ and to observe his attitudes of mind and heart and to make them our own. It is my personal belief that many of the attitudes of mind and heart that were embraced by Jesus were formed in the crucible of his hidden life in Nazareth. There, Jesus learned the best and the worst of human thought at the time and at many points became discontent with it. Later, he would say, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth."

Here are some of the differences between what people thought and what Jesus held. As we begin this holy season, we can ponder the values we see and hear around us, and, like Jesus, we can prayerfully ask ourselves what values we would like to see replace them.

## **What Jesus Heard from Others**

"Sinners are to be ostracized."

"The sick are punished by God."

"We are stuck in our own limits."

"We must worry about everything."

"Position demands respect."

"Enemies must be hated."

"Caesar is the be-all and end-all."

"Leadership is to be served."

"Life ends in death."

"The rich, as such, have a monopoly on salvation."

## **The Values Jesus Chose Instead**

"Sinners are to be loved and helped to repent."

"God loves the sick and heals them."

"We can be freed for a better life."

"Do not worry."

"Doing God's will is what commands respect."

"Enemies must be loved."

"Render to God what is God's."

"Leadership serves."

"Death ends in life."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit."

As we begin Lent, we are asked to reflect as to which set of values represents our own.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Lent: A New Morning

February 19, 2007

"Be patient with every one, but above all with yourself. I mean, do not be disturbed because of your imperfections, and always rise up bravely from a fall. I am glad that you make a daily new beginning; there is no better means of progress in the spiritual life than to be continually beginning afresh, and never to think that we have done enough."

These words of St. Francis de Sales can give strength and encouragement to us all, especially as we think about our entry into Lent this week. Lent is a time for a new beginning as we enter into a time of prayer and penance in our efforts to unite our minds and hearts and souls with the Passion, death and resurrection of the Savior.

Often, because it is a penitential time, Lent is portrayed as a time of solemn sadness. But if we look at the words of St. Francis de Sales, we can see it as a type of new morning in which we have the opportunity to leave behind the old day and awaken to the beauty of the new. In a way, Lent is a celebration of a wonderful power that God has given us - the power to choose our thoughts and our actions. If yesterday we made mistakes, today we can correct them. If we believed things then that we now know not to be true, we can embrace the truth today.

One of the false beliefs that most commonly get us into trouble is that we cannot change. People might laugh at us. We might try and fail and be embarrassed. It's easier and more comfortable to stay with the old ways. We have gone so far away from God that he will not possibly forgive us or even allow us to find him. Our old behavior is just who we are, ingrained into us by family or education and reinforced by habit and there is no way we can escape its snare. In these and countless other ways, we reassure ourselves that change is impossible for us.

Yet the simple fact is that none of these ideas is ultimately true. When we get up in the morning, we have the choice to put on different clothing from what we wore the day before. Similarly, we can choose to change any patterns of thought and behavior left over from previous days. We do not have to wear or to do the exact same thing today, just because we did yesterday. The power of choice is a God-given gift, and if we have been choosing badly, then, with the help of God, we can begin to choose well.

In two days' time, we shall be entering into Lent. Let us see it as a new morning, an opportunity to rectify our choices and to enjoy a sense of closer union with God.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Putting On the Mind of Christ

February 8, 2007

Years ago, when I was just beginning in radio, I interviewed Jerold Jampolsky and Diane Cirincione about their book, "Change Your Mind, Change Your Life." The authors, the book and its title all impressed me very much. Recently, in another context altogether, I read a similar maxim: "Change the thoughts and you change the person." It really is true - when our thoughts are of worry, anxiety, stress, disgust, anger, greed and despair, we are one sort of person. When instead they are full of joy, confidence, happiness, enthusiasm, and love, we are entirely different.

When I reflect on the public ministry of Jesus Christ, I am struck by how much of his public work was dedicated to helping people to change themselves by changing their thoughts. Read the Sermon on the Mount, and see how different its approach is to the ordinary way in which people think. Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are the meek? Happy are you when people persecute you? Jesus' ideas were clearly a challenge to our ordinary ways of thinking.

The same was true of his works of healing. Many times in the gospels, Jesus took people away from the village in which they lived and took them off to a place where they could be alone with him, and then he performed the miracle. He needed to get them away from the negativity of the persons, places and things that had been part of their former life. His healings were not just physical healings; they were also healings of the heart, mind and spirit. People thought it was strange, even blasphemous, that Jesus told the paralytic man who had been brought in through the roof, "Your sins are forgiven." But he wanted to work a much deeper healing than simply healing his physical paralysis. He wanted him to be completely free. Even the idea of lifting off the roof shows the importance of overcoming limitations in our encounter with Christ.

St. Paul said, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12: 1-2.) Paul exhorted the Romans not to give in to the ways of this world or its attitudes, but instead to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. The lesson is there for us as well. Jesus Christ offers us a pattern of salvation that is filled with enriching, life-giving ideas. These ideas, by the way, include the notion of suffering and the daily carrying of the cross. But even in the midst of his own suffering, Jesus was able to look in front of his cross and see Mary and John grieving there. In a remarkable moment of looking beyond one's own suffering to see the needs of others, he gave them to each other: "Behold your son; behold your Mother." To Jesus, suffering did not obliterate selfless love. Rather, it provided an occasion for demonstrating it.

Paul tells us, "Put on the mind of Christ." Following this direction, we can literally change ourselves and become new persons. By changing our mind, we can truly change our life.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Paul Miki

**February 6, 2007**

It is always good for us to look at the lives of the saints, for there we find a treasure of stories of courageous men and women who lived their lives and died their deaths for the sake of Christ. This is most certainly true of today's saints, [Paul Miki](#) and his twenty-five companions who were crucified in 1597 in Japan for their relentless dedication to Jesus Christ.

Remarkable though it may seem, Paul Miki actually preached from the cross to the people who had come to watch his execution. His message reveals his tremendous commitment to the faith. "The sentence of judgment says these men came to Japan from the Philippines, but I did not come from any other country. I am a true Japanese. The only reason for my being killed is that I have taught the doctrine of Christ. I certainly did teach the doctrine of Christ. I thank God it is for this reason I die. I believe that I am telling only the truth before I die. I know you believe me and I want to say to you all once again: Ask Christ to help you to become happy. I obey Christ. After Christ's example I forgive my persecutors. I do not hate them. I ask God to have pity on all, and I hope my blood will fall on my fellow men as a fruitful rain."

Over four centuries later, we remember these remarkable men who died for their Christian and Catholic beliefs. We can learn from their steadfast commitment. In a world which often does not reflect or embrace the values which we stand for as Catholics, we can pray for the grace to stand up for our values as they stood up for them in their times. To withstand opposition, and to do it with love as Paul Miki did, is an example for us of dedication and faithfulness. And the exhortation, "As Christ to help you to become happy" is certainly one from which our world, and we ourselves can benefit greatly.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# February

**February 1, 2007**

Today, we begin the month of February. It is a conspicuous month, with many feasts and celebrations, such as Candlemas Day, the feast of St. Blaise, Valentine's Day, Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays in the United States, and the Feast of the Chair of Peter. It is the shortest of the months, having only twenty-eight days except in Leap Year. February is often considered to be a turning point for the winter, since it is, technically the last full month of winter.

In its history, February is an example of the Biblical saying that "the last shall be first," more or less. Did you know that the month of February used to be the last month of the year? Along with January, it was the last of the months added to the Roman calendar in 700 BC. That was changed by in about 450 B.C. when it became the second month. It actually remained the second month of the year even when, in the Middle Ages, the Year of the Lord began on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation or December 25, Christmas.

February is named for the purification ritual that was part of the old Roman calendar. For Catholics, the month marks the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is also known as Candelmas, and is celebrated on February 2.

The season of Lent often begins in February, as it does this year on February 21.

As we begin this new month, we are very conscious that it is still winter and will be for another several weeks. Yet the ecclesiastical and secular calendars are filled with celebrations, reminding us that what we in North America often experience as the ravages of winter, and the ability to rejoice and celebrate, go hand in hand. Life is about both, and the month of February encourages us to keep in our hearts both a spirit of rejoicing and a spirit of penance as we make our way from winter to spring, temporally as well as spiritually.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Two Feasts

**January 30, 2007**

Two feasts coming up this week deserve special mention. [Candlemas Day](#) is Friday, February 2. This is the day on which candles are brought to the church to be blessed and on which the ceremonial candles used in the services are also blessed. Blessed candles are used in the home to represent how the light of Christ banishes the powers of darkness. Whether the darkness be due to sickness, depression, severe weather or domestic strife, the blessed candle serves as a powerful symbol of how invoking the light of Christ in our times of difficulty gives us hope and strength. It is a kind of prayer, invoking the power of God over the forces of sadness and evil. Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, conquered death and the forces of evil by his own suffering and death. The use of blessed candles invokes his power over these forces and gives us one more reason to follow his injunction, "Do not be afraid." This feast, called, Candlemas, is more prominently known as the Presentation of the Lord, to commemorate Mary and Joseph's bringing the Christ Child to the temple to present him to the Lord and, as things turned out, to Simeon and Anna.

The following day, February 3, is the feast of [St. Blaise](#), bishop and martyr. Tradition has it that Blaise healed the throat of a boy, and for this reason he has become the patron saint of illnesses of the throat. In the ceremonial blessing of throats, we use candles which were blessed the previous day and, holding them to the throat of the person seeking the blessing, say, "Through the intercession of St. Blaise, bishop and martyr, may the Lord deliver you from evils of the throat and from every other evil, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Our throats and our voices are powerful instruments of evangelization and communication. We may not have any particular illness of the throat at this time, but receiving the blessing reminds us to dedicate our voices to spreading the love of God and the powerful message of the Gospel.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Ordinary Time

**January 24, 2007**

For the past couple of weeks, Catholics have found themselves back in Ordinary Time in the liturgical calendar. In liturgical parlance, Ordinary Time is the part of the year where no special season is being celebrated, such as Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter. Put negatively, it is the time in between the major seasons.

Yet there is much more to Ordinary Time than this. Ordinary Time is a season in its own right. It celebrates the very important fact that the ordinary days and the ordinary moments of our lives are precious and sacred. In life, we can't just live for the high moments; for while they come and are most meaningful and significant to us, they are not the whole story about life. Life is also made up of the days when we have nothing especially outstanding to do or to celebrate, but our whole time is taken up in doing the routine tasks that life requires of us. Ordinary Time is about the daily commute, the batch of paperwork waiting to be done at the office. It's about cooking meals and sweeping floors. It's also about sitting at the bedside of a loved one who is sick, and about consoling a friend or family member at a time of loss. It's about going to Mass on Sunday and offering all of these "ordinary" tasks to God along with the bread and wine which is to be consecrated into the Body and the Blood of Christ.

On Sundays in Ordinary Time (weekdays, too, if we attend daily Mass), we offer those moments and celebrate the fact that those very times have a sacred quality about them. God is present in them, waiting for us to discover him behind and within the appearances of ordinariness, similar to the way he is present in the Eucharist, waiting for us to discover him under the appearances of bread and wine. People talk so much these days about daily miracles, but I often think that what they are really experiencing is God's unfailing presence to us in the daily routine. Ordinary Time reminds us that the unheralded and sometimes humdrum hours of our day are times when God is present, calling us to acknowledge his unfailing care for us and desire to be with us.

Come to think of it, Ordinary Time isn't so ordinary, after all.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

**January 17, 2007**

Tomorrow begins the [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#), which is celebrated each year at this time. During this week, Christians of all denominations around the world gather to pray that the divisions among us may be resolved with the help of God.

This year's week of prayer is centered around [Mark 7: 31-37](#), in which Jesus heals a deaf man, saying to him, "Be opened." The passage was chosen because it reveals Jesus' deep desire to heal any blocks or barrier that might keep us from hearing one another as we strive in different ways to proclaim and live the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The passage indicates that Jesus wants openness. Just as he healed the deaf man, so he desires to heal us of anything that would prevent us from hearing his Word together.

The theme of this year's Week of Prayer was suggested by [representative of Umlazi](#) in South Africa, where racism, poverty and unemployment bring great suffering to the people. The Christian representatives of Umlazi suggested that the passage from Mark represents Jesus wish to break the bonds that keep Christians and others without adequate housing, medical treatment and schools.

During this week, we can join in prayer with Christians all over the world, asking that our ears be opened to hear the plight of so many Christians around the world and that through our prayers and actions their suffering will be alleviated.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Blessed William Carter

**January 11, 2007**

To be perfectly honest, until today I had never heard of [Blessed William Carter](#), but now he is one of my heroes. He was a printer's apprentice and later a printer in [Elizabethan England](#), when it was anathema to be a Roman Catholic. Some of the printers for whom he worked were arrested and jailed for printing Catholic materials, and late Carter himself was imprisoned for having vestments and Catholic books and pamphlets in his home, and for printing them himself as well. His wife was also arrested. Eventually, he was tried, imprisoned and ultimately drawn and quartered for his efforts on behalf of his faith.

Blessed William used the printing presses as a tool of evangelization, taking the risk of being harassed and martyred for his Catholic faith. Those of us in the Catholic media and those who enjoy Catholic newspapers, radio, television and the internet can profit by his wonderful example of courage. In parts of the world today, people are still persecuted and put to death for being Christian and Catholic, and even here in North America the scourge of anti-Catholicism is still active. May we exhibit the courage and commitment of Blessed William Carter, who sacrificed himself on behalf of his beliefs. May we take him as an example of dedication to our Catholic Faith.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# The Catholic Channel

**January 9, 2007**

The new Catholic Channel/Sirius 159 is over a month old now and for all of us involved with the Channel it has been an exciting new beginning. Before startup, we had hoped that the Catholic Channel would be a wonderful tool for evangelization, a new and different way of spreading the message of the Catholic Church throughout the United States and Canada. We have by no means been disappointed. It has been heartwarming to receive the phone calls on the air and the emails from listeners telling us how much our programming means to them and how happy they are to have this new vehicle for communicating the Catholic Faith. We are encouraged by this positive response, and look forward to improving our broadcasts even more as our Channel continues to grow and prosper.

If you have not yet had the opportunity to hear the Catholic Channel on Sirius 159, I sincerely hope you will do so. If you are already a regular listener, please let others know that we are on the air. It's easy to subscribe, and it's well worth the small monthly cost of the service.

If you want more information about the Catholic Channel, just click [on this link](#) to the Sirius website. Happy listening to the Catholic Channel/Sirius 159!

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## "Little Christmas"

**January 4, 2007**

I have friends who celebrate "Little Christmas," as they called it. Generally, we call it the Feast of the Epiphany or the Three Kings, and it's coming up in just a couple of days. For my friends, it's an annual time to get together with other friends whom they did not get to see over "Big Christmas" and exchange gifts and enjoy each other's company.

Growing up, we did not especially celebrate the Epiphany with any particular flourish. As I left home and came more into contact with people of other cultures, I learned that the Feast of the Three Kings is celebrated widely in many corners of the world. In some parts of the world, the celebrations are even more elaborate than those of Christmas.

The term "epiphany" has become an important word in our vocabulary. Generally these days, it refers to a kind of special insight into ourselves or about some one else or some situation. A person suddenly discovering the purpose of their life is said to have an epiphany. Someone who comes to understand why a difficult boss or friend acts the way they do is described as having an epiphany.

The term has become rather stretched and overused in our society. On the first Epiphany, the realization was not on the part of the Christ Child, but on the part of the Magi: they came to realize who this baby was. Going back to the etymological meaning of "epiphany," which implies "shining forth," it was the Christ Child and the star that shone forth on that first Epiphany, telling the Magi and the world who the newborn baby truly was.

The Magi brought gifts on the Epiphany - gold, frankincense and myrrh - expensive gifts fit for a king, but also for a king who someday would die. Interesting how the theme of death is so often woven into even the happy moments in the life of the Lord.

So when my friends bring gifts to their friends on "Little Christmas," they will be following a rich and noble tradition. The eleventh-century Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievalux, wrote that, "God is friendship," meaning that the members of the Trinity are friends of one another. Given that, it makes perfect sense to visit friends and give them gifts on Epiphany. It is simply acting like people made in the image and likeness of God, which is precisely what we are.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Imitating John the Baptist

**January 2, 2007**

Looking at the [Gospel reading](#) for today, one gets a very clear view of the temperament of John the Baptist. Clearly, he was a very honest man. When asked about his identity, he could very easily have exalted himself, but he refused to do so. He was not the Christ, not Elijah and not the Prophet, and he clearly said so.

Moreover, he stated his mission clearly, "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." No frills, no exaggeration, no putting on airs - John insisted upon being real, and he insisted that others be real as well. When asked, his basic advice to people was that they act in accordance with their station in life, act fairly and honestly and accept their everyday responsibilities.

At this time of year, many resolutions are made - and broken. Perhaps we would do well to consider the attitude of John the Baptist when thinking about how we would like things to go in this new year. Taking our cue from him, we could look honestly at our state in life and the responsibilities it brings and make a pledge to fulfill them as best we can. That involves being totally honest about who we are and who we are not. If we find that we have too many responsibilities for one person to handle, we need to prioritize, ask for help, and perhaps even cut back on certain roles or activities. Just as John refused to accept an identity or a role that was not truly his, so should we make sure that we are acting in accordance with who we truly are. If there is honestly more that we could do, then we can feel free to assume new responsibilities, so long as we are not overdoing.

As we begin this new year, we can use John the Baptist as a role model for living up to our responsibilities and for making our presence in world as effective as it can be.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Happy New Year!

**January 1, 2007**

Happy New Year! We celebrate the first day of the new year with the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. How fitting it is that we honor Mary as we begin the year. She is our Mother and our chief intercessor before her divine Son, and it is fitting that we dedicate our year to her intercession.

The [Gospel reading](#) for today tells us that Mary kept all of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus in her heart and reflected upon them there. We can be sure that, from her place in Heaven, she keeps all of the events of our lives and our world and brings them to prayer as well. In so doing, she is a model for us, teaching us to pray through the events of our lives and the happenings in our world in order to deal with them wisely. We need not be living in a monastery in order to bring our world to prayerful reflection. In fact, all of us are called to live reflective lives. It is part of our being made in the image and likeness of God, and part of our human nature with its gifts of intellect and free will. When we bring the events of our world to prayer, we offer them to God and we ponder the course of action he might wish us to take both in our personal lives and in the world as a whole.

Today, at the start of 2007, let us thank God for the gift of a New Year and ask the intercession of his Blessed Mother that the year will be a happy and blessed one for all.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## The Simple Event

**December 26, 2006**

In his homily at Midnight Mass this Christmas, Pope Benedict emphasized the simplicity of what we celebrate at Christmas. He quoted a Greek translation of a passage from the Old Testament that Paul, in turn, quoted in the Letter to the Romans. The translation reads, "God made his Word short, he abbreviated it (Is 10:23; Rom 9:28)." Indeed, Christmas is, by nature, very simple, although we complicate it endlessly with "the Christmas rush." It is as simple as a baby being born in a manger, and as simple as the Son of God becoming human. His was not a birth that took place in magnificence or worldly splendor. It happened quietly in a manger, with only two other people in attendance. And yet this moment wrought the salvation of the world.

Now that Christmas is over, perhaps we will find time to contemplate and to appreciate the simplicity of this event. In our mind's eye we can behold the manger, with the Christ child, Mary and Joseph, and let our imagination take us to their life there, their conversations, their concerns, their faith. Doing this, we will experience simplicity in our own hearts, the simplicity of finding the grace of the Son of God there and rejoicing in that wonderful gift. We will find the true meaning of Christmas and celebrate it in the very depths of our being.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Savoring the Silence

**December 21, 2006**

New York is magnificent at this time of year. The tree in Rockefeller Center this year seems particularly stunning. The lights all around the city are extremely beautiful. Street corners are lined with Christmas trees ready to be purchased and taken home and decorated. Restaurants are alive with numerous parties and private get-togethers to celebrate the holidays. Around the city, you sense the excitement as tourists and New Yorkers alike take in the breathtaking beauty of New York at Christmas.

In the midst of all of this, it's important to remember the real "reason for the season." Amidst all of the bustle and activity, it is easy to forget the simple, silent fact that lies beneath the Christmas rush. The theologian Karl Rahner referred to the first Christmas as a time of silence, the beautiful silence that engulfed the ineffable mystery of the birth of the savior.

In the midst of all of the stress and activity, it is good for us to take a few moments every now and then to sit quietly, compose ourselves, and enjoy the silence that is the real hallmark of the season. Perhaps we could take a moment to read the Scripture of the day. Perhaps we could read a favorite psalm and savor its message. Or we could reflect on the meaning of a religious Christmas carol. Whatever we do, it is important that we enjoy the quiet aspect of the Christmas season. It is a season in which mystery prevails, the unexplainable incarnation of the Son of God. In the midst of all of the rush, let us not lose the real beauty of this moment. If we capture that, we can put all the rest into perspective and make this a truly blessed Christmas.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Seasonal Wisdom

**December 19, 2006**

In these final days before Christmas, we can find a variety of moods and sentiments. For some, it's a time of eager anticipation, wondering what gifts Santa will bring. For others, it's a time of office parties and get togethers to celebrate the season. Last night, I overheard a fairly young person turning down an invitation to a party. "Our office party is tomorrow night," he said. "I can't handle two parties back to back." I guess that's the epitome of holiday stress! Others are downright stressed out with last-minute shopping and the rush of the season. Earlier last night, I was in a taxicab on my way to the studios of Sirius Satellite Radio. On the way, we passed the tree at Rockefeller Center, which I and countless others who were standing about thought was absolutely beautiful. My driver, however, went into an absolute tirade about the stupidity of the tree and how senseless it was for people to be gathering to gaze at it! The season evokes lots of reactions, depending on one's point of view.

That's the way it was with the birth of Jesus as well, I suppose. Mary and Joseph were initially frightened, but yielded to the vision of God. The shepherds were astounded when the angels came and sang "Glory to God in the highest." The Wise Men calmly followed their star, while Herod craftily tried to have them give him the information that would allow him to put the child to death. Jesus, for all we know, surrendered to it all and calmly allowed himself to be inserted into the world that needed him so much.

At this time of year, it is most important that we remember what this season is really all about. In the midst of the holiday rush, we can remember the Christ Child in the manger and the calm with which he greeted his new world, the world which he had come to save. With that vision, we can remain calm ourselves and enjoy the true spirit of the season.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Culture of Blame

**December 14, 2006**

In a recent [address](#) to visiting Canadian bishops, Pope Benedict spoke of the possibility of what he called "a culture of blame." He reminded the bishops that unless people take personal responsibility for their sinfulness, they will tend to focus the blame for their sins upon other people or upon circumstances external to themselves.

The Pope is right, of course. The "culture of blame" began in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God. When God approached them after their fall, Adam blamed Eve for his sin and Eve blamed the serpent. Ever since, people have preferred to blame someone or something else rather than accept responsibility for their transgressions. They blame drinking, drugs, a bad childhood, poverty, their parents, their teachers, the education they received - everything and everybody but themselves. Reminding the bishops of the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation, the Holy Father stressed the importance of our taking full responsibility for our actions, even when they are actions we are not proud of.

The fact is, true maturity comes only when we accept responsibility for our choices. Others may have played a part, but in the end it is we and we alone who make our decisions. Only by accepting full responsibility for our actions can we really stand in the truth before God and others.

The notion of a "culture of blame" goes well beyond individual attempts to deflect responsibility. It indicates a widespread pandemic of blame-shifting. It becomes another case of the all too familiar "Everybody's Doing It." It comes very close to being a "culture of lying" in which everybody refuses to see the truth about themselves. Need we be reminded of the identity of the Father of Lies? Is this the direction we want our world to take?

The Pope's words serve as a reminder of the importance of truth and of the sacrament of reconciliation. We need not slip into a "culture of blame." We can stand up and accept the responsibility for what we have done, and if we are not proud of it, we can change.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## "Chance" Encounters

**December 13, 2006**

Our animal companions have such a power over us. Last night, I was at Sirius Satellite Radio doing some last-minute preparation for my program, "As You Think," which airs on the Catholic Channel (Sirius 159) from 9:00 p.m. - 1:00 a.m. ET. I was printing out some tributes given by animal owners to their dogs and cats, complete with pictures. There's a common printer in the area where I was working, and when the machine ran out of paper, a young man kindly offered to put in paper. He and a woman working nearby saw the pictures and a conversation ensued about our pets and our love for them. It turned out that, in addition to being an animal lover, the young man was the son of a Greek Orthodox priest and he was delighted to know that I was a Roman Catholic priest. As things moved along, I was able to help the woman to find a Christian radio station that she had once enjoyed but lost track of.

I find these spontaneous encounters so interesting. It seems that sometimes God puts people together to touch each other's lives at a particular moment. The moment ends, but the effect of the encounter remains. It is one of the mysterious and powerful workings of the Spirit, whose plans for us are amazing if only we allow them to be.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Doing What Is Right

**December 12, 2006**

I love old movies, mostly because, for the most part, they show people doing the right thing, when they had every opportunity to do otherwise. Yesterday, I watched for the first time, a 1942 movie starring Bette Davis and Olivia De Havilland called "In This Our Life." It tells the story of the complex relationship between two sisters. Betty Davis plays Stanley, who is one of the most self-centered persons anyone would want to meet. She seemingly stops at nothing, including wooing and marrying her sister's husband. She rides roughshod over everyone, including her sister, her parents and her adoring uncle (played by Charles Coburn). She will stop at nothing to get exactly whatever she wants at the moment. In the end, she even tries to escape responsibility for a hit and run car accident which kills a child and seriously injures the child's mother. Only in the end is she forced to admit what she has done and to pay the price.

Yet that's exactly what happens - in the end, she does what is right. As in "Casablanca," "Now, Voyager" and "The Bishop's Wife," to name three others, there are twists and turns and subplots, but in the end the heroes and heroines make the right choices and do the right things. It's refreshing as well as entertaining to watch movies of this caliber and to think back to an age when people were encouraged to accept their responsibilities and do what is right. Nowadays, it almost seems that we are encouraged to embrace every passion that comes our way. It's is refreshing to look back and to see responsibility heralded as something that is desirable and doable for all of us.

In this day and age, we would do well to revisit these old movies and to learn the moral lessons they portray.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Giving Thanks

**December 7, 2006**

Recently, I was rereading an article in *Catholic New York* about the Thanksgiving weekend homily delivered by Edward Cardinal Egan, Archbishop of New York. It was the first time the Cardinal had preached in St. Patrick's Cathedral since his painful knee-replacement surgery some months earlier. The Cardinal stressed the importance of giving thanks to all of those who do so much for us, including God.

Two things struck me especially about the Cardinal's homily. One was a statement he made about God. Urging the congregation to spend time thanking God, the Cardinal referred to him as "{the one who} waits to spend an eternity with you." I had never heard it put quite that way before. Usually, we think of ourselves as waiting for God - either waiting for him to do something for us or waiting to get to heaven. The Cardinal said it differently - God is waiting for us. He is waiting to spend eternity with us.

It makes sense, when you stop to think about it. Didn't Jesus [say](#), "I am going to prepare a place for you?" Imagine God preparing eternity for us, perhaps in the same way we prepare for someone to come and stay with us. The difference is - we are not going to be staying for just a little while; we will be there forever. I find it exciting to think of God's waiting in eager anticipation for our arrival.

The other point the Cardinal made that I found striking involved an old man in a wheelchair whom he met while on a visit to St. Mark the Evangelist School in Harlem. After a presentation by the students, this quiet old man stopped the Cardinal and told him, "Mother Katherine paid for my piano lessons."

"Who are you?" the Cardinal asked.

The answer - [Lionel Hampton](#), the famous jazz musician. It turns out that [St. Katherine Drexel](#), the Philadelphia heiress who founded schools for African American and Native American children around the country, had paid for Lionel Hampton's piano lessons way back when.

Stop to think about that for a minute. At that time, Katherine Drexel had no idea who Lionel Hampton was. He was a kid, not a renowned musician. Yet in God's providence, she provided the money that would eventually bring so much happiness to the world. Lionel Hampton, years later, wanted to say thanks.

There's one other facet to this story that is also fascinating. In 1997, Lionel Hampton lost everything - clothes, music and memorabilia - in an [apartment fire](#). Yet when he met the Cardinal a few years later, he was able to say thanks.

These stories from the Cardinal's Sunday after Thanksgiving homily remind us how much we have to be grateful for. --Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Catholic Channel

**December 4, 2006**

As I write this, I am listening to the new [Catholic Channel](#) in its first day of broadcasting on Sirius 159. This is the culmination of over a year of hard work and planning on the part of the Archdiocese of New York and Sirius Satellite Radio. The goal of this channel is to provide a wide range of Catholic teaching and culture in what will generally be a talk radio format. For example, I am now listening to an informative interview with a reporter from the Vatican on Gus Lloyd's morning program, "Seize the Day." Later, Dave and Susan Konig, a married couple, will present insights into Catholic family life and its challenges and opportunities today. Bob Dunning will keep us talking about issues of the day and how they relate to Catholic life. Lino Rulli, the Catholic Guy, will provide humor and insight into the life of young Catholics. Father Dave Dwyer of "Busted Halo" will reach out to today's Catholic with topics that today's Catholic wants to talk about. Following him, I will be there with "As You Think," giving us an opportunity to reflect on the spirituality behind our Catholic faith and on how we can think about the news of the day. Plus, daily Mass from St. Patrick's Cathedral, news from Vatican Radio and ABC and great weekend programming. You can call all of our programs toll-free at 1-888-3-Catholic. It's an exciting venture and we're honored to be able to provide great Catholic program over Sirius.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## No Defense Beforehand

**November 28, 2006**

"Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute." These words from tomorrow's [Gospel](#) express Jesus' advice to those who were preparing for the fall of Jerusalem. Looking back after 70 A.D., St. Luke saw that the prediction of Jesus turned out to be true. But he took comfort, because he knew that, when the end of the world came, Jesus' promise about final redemption would come true as well.

"Do not prepare your defense beforehand." This is a remarkable statement. Many of us, when we are in conflict with people, engage in countless internal dialogues about what brilliant thing we are going to say to prove that we are right and the other person is wrong. What if, instead, we were to turn our minds and hearts over to Jesus, allowing him to speak through us a message of healing and reconciliation instead of a message of who is right and who is wrong?

On a larger scale, that is what Jesus is telling his followers. There is no need for clever defenses or for playing the blame game. His wisdom is so much greater than anything we could possibly think up. And we have it for the asking. All we need to do is to ask for his guidance and it will be there.

If that is true in the instance of the destruction of a huge city, how very true it is in our personal and professional relationships with others. Jesus' words give us an approach that reduces our anxiety and leaves us in a state of peace.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Thoughtful Giving

**November 27, 2006**

I was in an interesting conversation with some people the other night, in the course of which the subject of Christmas came up. It turns out that one of the couples has close family who lost everything in Hurricane Katrina and who are still just recovering from the devastation they have experienced. This couple has decided this year to give gifts that are somehow related to Katrina, either to organizations that are helping people to recover, or giving gifts that will somehow contribute to stimulating the economy in the affected region. The people to whom they give gifts this Christmas will be told that such gifts have been given in their name. They have decided that instead of giving expensive presents, they will use the money in a way that will help those in need.

For various reasons, not everyone will want to follow their example, but I thought their decision provided an interesting alternative for those who might be looking for a different way to celebrate Christmas this year. It's a very creative approach, and people can tailor their giving to meet the needs of people and places that they know are in need and will benefit from their gift. Some people will probably be offended at not receiving a "real" present, but I think most people will be delighted to know that they have been thought of in such a caring way.

Even if we do decide to give regular presents, the example set by this couple teaches us to be simple and thoughtful in our giving. We get besieged at this time of year by all of the suggestions as to how we might spend our money and people feel tremendous pressure to give elaborate gifts that often they cannot afford. Their decision reminds us to be reflective about how and what we give, and to keep our giving within the spiritual meaning of the season.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Thanksgiving

**November 22, 2006**

This is a time of year to be thankful. No matter how bad things can seem, we always have so much to be thankful for. And the important thing about thankfulness is - the more we make it a part of our life, the more we discover that we have to be thankful for.

When Jesus [multiplied the loaves and the fishes](#) to feed the multitude, he first said thanks. Everyone else was telling him that there wasn't enough money to feed the crowd and that a few loaves and fishes wouldn't be enough. Instead of listening to all of that negativity, Jesus simply said thanks to his heavenly Father for providing what was there. Before long, everybody had more than enough to eat, and there was a surplus!

It's so easy for us to find things to complain about. We're filled on a daily basis with the news of all of the things that are going wrong in the world. What if, like Jesus, we refused to put our focus upon those things and instead said thanks? We would certainly be in a better frame of mind.

But thankfulness helps us in another way. We can't just ignore the problems in the world or in our own lives. But if we maintain an attitude of thanksgiving, our minds become open to the sort of inspiration that guides us to the resolution of those problems. We live an inspired and inspiring life.

So beginning with this season, let us all try to be thankful as much as we can. God gives us so much. Being thankful will help us to make the world a better place.

Happy Thanksgiving!

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Slavery Today

**November 21, 2006**

Except in places like the Sudan, we tend to think that slavery is a thing of the past. Or we tend to think that it means solely the practice of "owning" human beings. In a recent talk, the Procurator General of the [Mercedarian](#) religious order highlighted other dimensions of slavery that are equally horrifying.

[Father Damaso Masabo](#) pointed out that in China and Pakistan, for example, human organs are harvested and sold for incredible sums of money. "Added to traditional slavery and the slave trade, is the sale of children, prostitution and child pornography, the exploitation of child labor, sexual mutilation of girls, the use of minors in armed conflicts, slavery caused by debt, the trafficking of people and the sale of human organs, exploitation of prostitution, and certain practices of colonial and 'apartheid' regimes," he reported.

In fact, actual slavery is far from over in our modern world. Father Masabo reports that there are over 270 million people living in slavery around the world. Compare this figure with the 11.7 million captured and enslaved in Africa between 1450 and 1900. An addition 200 million children are exploited, according to Father Masabo. Some 50,000 - 70,000 women live and work in the streets as prostitutes in Italy.

The Mercedarians were founded in 1218 with the charism of rescuing slaves from Muslims, so the issue of slavery is an important one for them. It is good for all of us to be aware of what is happening in this regard. We need to do whatever we can, especially through prayer and good works, to bring an end to this cruel exploitation of human beings. We don't hear much about it in the media, so thanks to people like Father Masabo for making us aware.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Filiation

**November 16, 2006**

When the Pope uses a word like "filiation," you tend to sit up and take notice. In his [weekly audience](#) yesterday, Pope Benedict XVI used that very word as part of his teaching on the meaning of the Holy Spirit to St. Paul. "Our great dignity consists in this: We are not only images but children of God. And this constitutes an invitation to live our filiation, to be ever more conscious that we are adoptive children in the great family of God." By "filiation," the Pope means our being sons and daughters of God, being children of God. And this we are by virtue of our baptism and through the work of the Holy Spirit.

While the Holy Father tells us that we do have responsibilities as children of God, his emphasis in this talk is on who we are, rather than what we do. That's important, because all too often we tend to judge people only by their actions and forget that what is really more important is the essence of the person, their interior identity. "It is as if saying that the Holy Spirit, namely, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, becomes the soul of our soul, the most secret part of our being, from which rises incessantly to God a movement of prayer, of which we cannot even specify the terms."

The Holy Father goes on to point out that the Spirit puts us into the rhythm of divine life, making us participants in the love between the Father and the Son. We are not just guests; we are family members.

This is such a rich reflection, something that we do not think of often enough. Through the Holy Spirit, we are in the divine household. If we thought enough about that, what a difference it would make in how we see ourselves and how we see and treat others.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# A Providential Opportunity

**November 13, 2006**

Over the course of his pontificate, it has been fairly clear that one of the deepest concerns of Pope Benedict XVI has been the secularization of modern society, especially in his native Europe. I think it is a worry that many of us share as well. That's why it was encouraging to hear the Pope's [recent message](#) to the bishops of Germany, in which he said that secularization should be seen as an opportunity for the Church to express its faith. He called it a providential circumstance.

The problem with secularization, the Pope said, is that it leaves people with so many unanswered questions about life. "Reinforced by this awareness we can present with confidence proposals and answers to those who ask us for reasons for our hope." He noted that the Gospel-based teachings of the Church have withstood the test of time, having proven their accuracy in intellectual battles over the course of two millennia.

The Holy Father also pointed out that we have a providential opportunity to evangelize, not only to secularists but also to our brothers and sisters in other religions. "They," he said, "have a right to our humble but firm testimony of Jesus Christ."

How encouraging it is to hear the Holy Father's vision of a providential opportunity. So many forces in our world try to discourage us and to make us feel that our values are outmoded. Pope Benedict offers us a challenge in the opposite direction: use this time to lovingly and humbly stand firm in our convictions, knowing that by the grace of God they have withstood the test of time and will continue to do so.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Interfaith Dialogue

**November 9, 2006**

The last blog's reflection on St. Francis and the Sultan brings to mind the importance of respectful and prayerful dialogue among people of different faiths. [Catholic Online](#) tells the story of efforts at Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in Dubuque, Iowa, and reveals how many painful memories there are of the days when our divisions were greater.

In Assisi, young people from thirty nations and thirteen different faith groups gathered for dialogue, reflection and prayer. Listening to reports on [Vatican Radio](#), I was touched to hear such powerful testimonies from young people about the need for respectful dialogue in order to heal the divisions of the world. Pope Benedict echoed this theme when he greeted the young people at his General Audience in Rome on Wednesday.

For fourteen years, I had the privilege of being part of a radio program in New York City called "Religion on the Line." As co-host of the program, I had the opportunity to dialogue on a regular basis with people of many different faith groups. I learned a great deal about other religions and in a real way the dialogue helped me to better understand my own. The most important thing I learned was the importance of mutual respect. When people of different religious backgrounds can sit down together in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, so many wonderful things can happen.

We see so much evidence of disrespect and hatred in our world. These interreligious dialogues can do much, in a quiet but powerful way, to heal the wounds of division and misunderstanding. In a very real sense, they can help to heal the world.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## St. Francis and the Sultan

**November 6, 2006**

Every so often, a piece of information appears that gives new insight into something very familiar. Recently, I ran across an [article](#) about St. Francis of Assisi that told me something about the saint that I had never heard before. We are all familiar with Francis's conversion to a life of poverty, his love of nature and animals and his commitment to peace. This article, by Wendy A. Hoke of the *Catholic Universe Bulletin*, tells of the saint's involvement with Muslims during the Fifth Crusade.

Growing increasingly disgusted with the violent behavior of his fellow Christians, Francis undertook a pilgrimage to the tent of the Sultan, Malik-al-Kamil. Initially, his intention was to convert the Sultan to Christianity, or if he failed, to become a martyr in the effort. During the meeting, Francis explained his Christian faith to the Sultan; but at the same time, he became impressed with the Sultan's Muslim faith. Wendy Hoke says that this was perhaps the first Christian-Muslim dialogue. Impressed by the Muslim practice of regular daily prayer, Francis later recommended this practice to his fellow Christians. And one of the Sultan's spiritual advisors had engraved on his tombstone that the meeting between Francis and the Sultan changed his life.

The story is worth reflecting upon, especially in the situation in which we find ourselves in the world today. The Holy Father has repeatedly invited Catholic-Muslim dialogue. If the two religions could come to understand and respect each other as St. Francis and the Sultan did, we would have an important key to spreading peace and reducing hatred and violence.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# The Nature of Awareness

October 30, 2006

(Continued)

The key to creating the kind of world in which miracles abound lies in awareness. The etymological roots of this word mean "to perceive" or "to watch out for." Both meanings tell us a great deal about what the quality of awareness means.

On the one hand, to be aware of something is to perceive it. When we perceive something we sense that it is there. We know its qualities, what it looks like, how it feels, how it sounds and so on. The word also has connotations of understanding. "I perceive that you are a good and honest person," for example. This means that not only do I know you with my senses, I understand something about you. I grasp something of your inner being. Wise people are often praised for their gift of perception.

On the other hand, awareness also means watching out for, having an expectancy. When we say that a person is aware, we mean that he or she is on the lookout for experience. They are intelligent and mentally savvy, on the alert for right ideas.

Both of these meanings are important. In order to survive, we need to be aware of our world and our environment, and to be aware of ourselves and of who we truly are. But at the same time, we need to develop that form of awareness that we have called expectancy. There are two ways to look at this. First of all, our eyes-wide-open expectancy comes from an awareness of the wonder of who we are as human beings. It is not looking for something that isn't there, but rather it is looking at what already is. We do not have to achieve humanity; we already have it and need only to appreciate it and to rejoice in its richness. And secondly, our sense of expectancy gives us a sense of the magic and grandeur and wonder of life. When we don't know who we are, and don't know how to live accordingly, there is no magic to life. Life becomes one problem after another, many of which are of our own creation. The expectant aspect of awareness is what we call living in mystery. .

The fact that our awareness is of a positive rather than a negative nature is demonstrated in a wonderful passage from the book of Jeremiah. In this passage, (Jeremiah 31: 7-9), the prophet speaks to a broken and defeated people and tells them, "The Lord has delivered his people." This is in the face of all visible evidence, but he says it nonetheless: the Lord has delivered his people. With that established, he then proceeds to outline for them a bright and happy future under the Lord's guidance. But it is clear that this future will only take place because the Lord has already delivered his people, even though they don't know it.

We Christians believe that through Jesus Christ that same declaration can be made - the Lord has delivered us and our future can be bright. It is important that we have that awareness of who we already are, even though it often seems to us that we are

imprisoned by a host of situations that are beyond our ability to control. When we can establish this awareness - the awareness of our true freedom here and now - then, with the help of God, we can go forward.

It is worth noting here that awareness is generally what is called a transitive quality. Awareness is awareness of something. A mother is aware that her child may be getting into trouble. A businessman or woman is aware of the current trends in their line of work. Right now, I am aware of the bright sunshine and the cloudless blue sky I see through my window. We may not always know precisely what we are aware of, but we know that we are aware of something. A person may have a hunch that something is wrong, but not know exactly what or why. But the special gift of awareness is that it brings us out of ourselves and in doing so adds to us in some way.

The kind of awareness that brings about a better world is of a special kind. It is awareness of who we truly are, awareness of our being, awareness of our human nature. So much of the craziness in the world stems from the fact that human beings have forgotten who they are. The philosopher Frank Sheed used to say that not knowing who we are was a form of insanity, and I believe that he was right. We can be sane - which means healthy and whole - only when we live lives that are ordered to our human nature. When we have a distorted view of that nature or when we try to ignore it, we end up with a mess.

Who are we then? That is going to be the focus of these ongoing reflections. We will go on an exploration journey to see if we can gain a true sense of ourselves. It will be, as we shall soon see, a journey into ourselves and a journey into the mind and heart of God..

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Changing Our Thoughts

October 27, 2006

(Continued)

The day has dawned. And we can awaken.

But how? Before we develop an answer to that question, we need to understand something about habit. Because the way in which we know and evaluate life is very habit-related.

Habits are actions that we repeat, usually without thinking too much about it. We use certain words and expressions. We wear certain kinds of clothing. We swing the golf club a certain way. This is the force of habit, and it is very good. Without habit, we would be forced to rethink every single thing we do each time we do it. Habits help and even protect us. They give us a sense of familiarity and safety. We need them.

But habits can lock us in as well. That is the down side of habits. Every so often a golfer experiences a slump. When that happens, he or she must study their swing, re-think the pattern they have developed and make changes. It's true for all of us in so many other areas of life. Every so often we need to examine our habits and see what changes need to be made. If we keep doing what we're doing, we'll just keep getting the same results.

Our habits of thought are an important example of this. Someone once told me that most human beings have about 60,000 thoughts each day. Unfortunately, they keep having the same thoughts over and over again. Many of these thoughts reinforce various negative ideas and beliefs that lead to a very dreary view of life and to the creation of unfortunate situations. Many of these beliefs are picked up almost by osmosis from the general consensus of what humankind thinks to be true about life. The more we reinforce them, the more they harden like cement and the more they affect the quality of our life. They become the things that we "know" and they come to serve as the touchstones of our everyday life. We hear examples of this every day. "We're here to make as much money as we can." "There's not enough money to go around." "Everybody else gets to be successful, but not me." "It's not safe to go out at night." "You can't trust anybody." "All politicians (doctors, insurance people, real estate agents, etc.) are a bunch of crooks!" "You can't be nice and be a success in business." The list goes on and on.

Habits of thought such as these are particularly toxic because of the way the human mind works. There is a great similarity between the mind and a copy machine. The mind makes more and more of what it focuses on. If you take a piece of paper with a hundred negative statements on it (such as those listed above) and place it in a copy machine and press the button, what you get is the multiplication of those negative thoughts. Take a piece of paper with a hundred positive affirmations on it and copy it, what do you get? The multiplication of positive thoughts. It's the same with our minds. If we go around all day focusing on gloomy thoughts, our world will become increasingly gloomy, and so will we. But if we focus positively, our life and our experience will tend to be positive.

What is even more important is that our negative habits of thought are contagious. Most of us at one time or other have worked in a setting that was very negative. It's a miserable situation, because the negativity is so all-pervasive. It affects everybody from the boss on down. We can look to the Holocaust or to the massive genocide in Darfur to see examples of how deadly our negative ideas can be on a worldwide scale.

The amazing thing is that it is just as easy to express and to manifest positive, life-giving experiences as it is to manifest toxic ones. Why is there so much negativity in the world? Why are our newspapers and newscasts filled with so much tragedy? Because we have become comfortable with it. Worse yet, somewhere along the way we have become convinced that this is really the only way things can be. "That's just how it is," we tell ourselves. It would be nice if we could have the Christmas spirit every day, but the fact is that the day after Christmas, it's back to business as usual, right? There's a sentence just loaded with negative presuppositions! Yet it's how we think all the time.

Unless we re-evaluate our thinking, that is. Remember, if we want to get different results from those we're getting, we have to do things differently, and that means we must think different thoughts. We must be like the man in Plato's cave who broke away from the chains that limited the minds of others. We must question what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called "the prevailing form of the forms of thought." When we do, we will find that there are more reasons to think life-giving thoughts than there are to think poisonous ones. If we want our world to look, think, feel and act differently, we must become initiators of change, and that change must take place within ourselves. We are very much like the prophets of old, who were called to speak to a people in captivity. Each of those prophets had to undergo a personal transformation of mind and heart in order to be able to bring a different message to the people. Recall the story of Isaiah, the at-first reluctant prophet whose prophesying required having an angel hold a burning coal to his lips. We may not have such a physically dramatic experience, but if we are to make a different world, we must allow ourselves to be purified nonetheless.

What kind of world do we want? Do we want a world where half of the marriages end in divorce? A world in which terrorism is a daily matter of concern? One in which greed runs rampant and where success means getting ahead materially at the expense of the other guy? Do we want our mornings to start with fights and arguments and the irreverent rantings of a shock jock? Do we want to feel that love and happiness will always elude us?

Or do we want a world in which miracles abound? A world in which families get along and enjoy each other's company? A world without terrorism, racism and violence? A world where decency and mutual assistance and altruistic kindness enable us all to help each other to succeed? If this is what we want, we can have it. All it requires is that we change our thoughts. One person at a time.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Two Kinds of Wonder

October 25, 2006

It was Henry David Thoreau who said, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." It's one of those sayings that is often quoted and taken as absolutely true. But the fact is, the day dawns whether we are awake to it or not. Granted, the dawning of the day doesn't mean very much to us if we are asleep when it happens. But that's the tragedy - the day dawns and we are asleep. The central core of every great religion in the world is to create in human beings a state of awakeness. It has been a constant human problem though the ages - the forces of life lull us into slumber. We create for ourselves a world, or better, a view of the world and we reassure ourselves and one another that the way we see things is truly the way things are. Yet in the process we tend to eliminate a whole other reality, the one that grounds the world we think we know so well, and surpasses it.

Back in ancient Greece, Plato told the story of the cave. There is a dark cave, and on the back wall of that cave, people are chained. One person manages to break the chains and by progressive steps comes closer and closer to the mouth of the cave. As he goes, he experiences increasing increments of light, until finally he approaches the mouth of the cave and steps outside into the bright light of day. He is amazed to see what is there - a colorful and luminous reality more magnificent than anything he has ever seen before. He is so taken by the wonder of it all that he feels he must return to the cave and tell others what he has seen. When he does, no one will believe him, and in the end they even manage to put him to death for what they perceive to be his nonsense.

The Allegory of the Cave could be called the archetypal story of human history. We see what we are accustomed to see, and that is that. The great spiritual teachers of the ages are those who have broken free of the chains of limitation and have made the journey into the light. But most of us prefer to flounder in the darkness. It is familiar. It is what we know. We are comfortable there.

The tragedy is that the day is there for us to see, and we prefer not to see it. When told of it, we write it off as nonsense or take it to be a lovely story. But what if it were true?

Sometimes events take place that cause us to crane our necks toward the mouth of the cave. In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, people began to look for solace, reasons, meaning in the tragedy and in their own personal lives. The endless plethora of memorial services which they attended gave people a concrete re-entry into religion. They went back to houses of worship in great numbers, both to attend services for their loved ones and also to return to a sense of deeper meaning for themselves. The tug of the spirit was evident. You could not stand at Ground Zero without actually feeling the presence of those who had perished there. There had to be something more than the death and destruction that we saw. We began to move toward the mouth of the cave.

Fortunately, it does not have to take a tragedy for us to see beyond our noses. It is possible for us to develop a mindset, or better, a soulset that enables us to see what is really real and to put what we think is really real into a better perspective. As we shall see, it begins and ends with wonder.

There are two kinds of wonder, really. The first is the one that gives rise to expressions such as, "I wonder why this is happening to me?" Or "I wonder why a benign God permits such things to happen?" This is incipient wonder; it gets us going along the path of questioning when something has happened which has somehow shaken our foundations. It's the push on the bumper of the car that has become stuck in the mud. Incipient wonder gets us moving beyond where we are right now.

But that is not the only kind of wonder. At the other end of the spectrum, there is that wonderful state of wonder, by virtue of which we live in absolute awe over life and creation. Here, we marvel at how life unfolds. We may still question and wonder in the first sense of the word, but now we have come out of the cave, have glimpsed the larger picture and are amazed at what we see. There is a joy in this that is a foretaste of heaven. Here we realize that previously we have been seeing the world in a less than perfect way. St. Paul captured it when he said, "Now we see as through a glass, darkly; then we shall see face to face."

How can we make the journey from the first kind of wonder to the second? When Jesus Christ came into the world and said, "Follow me," he was in every single instance inviting people to leave behind old ways of thinking and living and to come into what he called the Kingdom of God. "Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will give you rest."

That invitation to a new level of vision and living is there for us today. If we feel ourselves chained to the wall of the cave, we can break the chains and come out into the light.

The day has dawned. And we can awaken.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# American Catechism

October 24, 2006

When one hears about the new [\*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults\*](#), he or she might harken back to the Baltimore Catechism of grade school days. By all reports, nothing could be further from the truth. This Catechism, published by the [USCCB](#), is over six hundred pages long. Instead of questions and answers, it works with stories, explanations and prayers. It covers subject not even dreamed of by the writers of the Baltimore Catechism, such as ecology and terrorism, which are now important topics for faith reflection.

This catechism makes it possible for Catholics to reflect intelligently on important topics related to creed, sacraments, morality and prayer. And in an appendix, it offers prayers for Catholics to say by themselves or in their families and parishes. Plus, it uses stories to highlight the deep catechetical points it explains.

"What a model!" says [St. Anthony Messenger](#). "Attend to the human story (enriched by grace), extrapolate its lesson(s), apply them to life in this nation, engage in dialogue and carry the resulting questions and concerns to meditation and prayer."

This is a book for its times, bringing the truths of the Catholic faith to American Catholics and at the same time teaching them the relationship between belief, practice and prayer.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## The Practical Side of Love

October 20, 2006

*Catholic Digest* recently published an article on love and marriage, much of which I found myself in agreement with. The part about arranged marriages having a more sustained loving quality, I'll have to set aside and think about, I don't know. But I loved the heart of the article, which can be summed up in this quotation from it, "Marriage needs to be sustained by daily, loving acts of thoughtfulness, generosity, and helpfulness. This practical side of love takes courage, effort, commitment, and acceptance."

Since *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts Matrimony and Holy Orders together as Sacraments in the Service of the Community, I wondered if in any way this same insight might be applied to those in Holy Orders. In other words, could we accurately make this statement: "Holy Orders needs to be sustained by daily, loving acts of thoughtfulness, generosity, and helpfulness. This practical side of love takes courage, effort, commitment, and acceptance?"

I think it can. When those of us in the priesthood make an effort to be kind to one another and to those whom we serve, it makes all the difference in the world in the life of the priest. For a number of years, I have been blessed to serve under a pastor who is the soul of kindness to me, to the other priests who help out in the parish and to the faithful who come to him. It's a happy place, in a very special quiet way filled with love and life that sustain all of us as readily as do the sacraments we celebrate there.

As in marriage, "this practical side of love takes courage, effort, commitment and acceptance." No one feels good every single day. Sometimes it takes *effort* and *courage* to be kind to someone in need. Yet that is part of the *commitment* of the priest (or deacon), his *acceptance* of the call to serve Christ and his people.

That "practical side of love" makes all the difference in the interaction of Matrimony and Holy Orders in the day-to-day order of a parish community. When people are kind to their priests, and when priests are kind to their people, it makes all the difference in the world. The same sacraments are celebrated in a parish that is filled with strife and in one that is filled with love, yet you sense something very different in each case.

The *Catholic Digest* article is right - there is a practical side to love. And that practical side is expressed in real acts of kindness every day.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## What Catholics Can Do

**October 17, 2006**

In yesterday's blog, I wrote about the important role Catholics can play in a society that increasingly manifests and promotes values different from that of the Church. In the light of that, it was heartening to read a story which provides a perfect example of this in the world of business. [David and Carmen Cartaya](#) of Tampa, Florida, have owned a pharmacy for over thirty years in which they practice the pro-life principles of their Catholicism. They refuse to sell condoms or contraceptives, and they openly display signs such as, "If you're pregnant, it's a baby. Choose life." They believe they have touched countless lives in maintaining this witness. They tell the story told of one woman who was pregnant and whose friends were telling her that she would be crazy not to have an abortion. The couple counseled her and let her know that choosing life was not crazy, but rather was the right thing to do. The woman felt enormously relieved and chose to keep the baby.

In addition to their staunch pro-life approach to their pharmacy, David and Carmen are outstanding in at least one other respect: they put God first in their lives. God and family are the most important to them and the business is last on their list. They call it "pleasing God before pleasing men."

When we read the statements of Archbishop Prendergast of Halifax and Bishop Olmsted of Phoenix quoted in yesterday's blog, it is natural to wonder how we can face such an uphill battle in maintaining Catholic values in our society. The Cartaya's show us that indeed it can be done. It is truly possible to live our faith, serve God, touch lives and run a successful business doing so. Their example gives all Catholics much to think about and much to hope for.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Being Catholic Today

October 16, 2006

Two recent news articles led me to reflect upon the role of the Church in public life.

The first came from Canada, where the Province of Nova Scotia recently passed a law permitting Sunday shopping. That seems almost incredible to most of us in the United States, where Sunday shopping has been in effect for years. Yet it caused quite a stir in Nova Scotia, where heated reaction took place both for and against the passage of the law. I was most interested in the insightful comments of [Archbishop Terrence Prendergast](#), the Archbishop of Halifax. Expressing his disappointment over the new rule, the Archbishop commented, "Despite the church's efforts in recent decades to place responsibility for an informed and active faith on one's own shoulders, without outside guidance from laws and norms we all fall short." The Archbishop makes a very good point, it seems to me, one that goes far beyond Canada and touches our lives as Catholics here in the United States and around the world. While Sunday shopping may in and of itself not seem to some to be a matter of great importance, it does point to the fact that there are fewer and fewer societal and legal supports for values that are important to Catholics. It becomes all too easy for the prevailing winds of change to override important values. It becomes increasingly difficult for Catholics to resist these tendencies because the general social conscience makes them so palatable. Some very important things get overlooked in the name of being "modern."

The other story that got me thinking along these lines came from Phoenix, where [Bishop Thomas Olmsted](#) has written a booklet urging Catholics to take a more active role in political life. In a sense, Bishop Olmsted joins Archbishop Prendergast in pointing out the difficulty Catholics have today in facing societal pressure: "If we let our faith impact on the way we practice a profession, engage the culture, or become involved in political struggles, then we are accused of imposing our faith on others. These voices have become increasingly strident in the United States over the past 50 years; and they can intimidate believers, making them afraid or uneasy to let their faith influence their involvement in the public square."

Bishop Olmsted continues, "St. James writes in his New Testament epistle, in Chapter 2, Verse 26, 'Faith without works is dead.' When Catholics are afraid to express their beliefs in public, they begin to travel down the path that divides faith from life. Faith begins to be purely spiritual, with no impact on other dimension of their lives."

Both bishops' comments highlight a genuine problem and a genuine challenge for Catholics today. There are many influences within society that attempt to undermine values that Catholics hold dear, and at times we may feel as though we appear foolish in the eyes of many when we uphold those values. That is when it is important that we maintain the courage of our convictions even though we may appear to be in the minority in doing so.

Perhaps the great lesson here is one that the Sisters back in my grammar school days taught us. Whenever one of us was caught doing something we shouldn't, our excuse would inevitably be, "Everybody else is doing it." The Sisters ingrained into us the truth that what everybody else was doing was not necessarily right. It's a lesson that all of us would do well to reflect upon today.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## St. Francis and the Animals

**October 14, 2006**

It's October and this month we celebrate the feast of [St. Francis of Assisi](#). In addition to being the founder of the Franciscans, St. Francis was best known as a lover of animals. Catholics and non-Catholics alike hail St. Francis as the patron saint of their pets.

That's why I was so touched to see an article on Catholic Online about John Grogan, a newspaper columnist and author, who wrote a tribute to his Labrador retriever, Marley, after Marley died. He wrote about Marley and how much the beloved dog had taught him about life and about God. Apparently, after he wrote that column, Grogan received a tremendous outpouring of letters and emails from people who appreciated his column and understood what he meant.

That meant a lot to me, because after my twenty-five-year-old kitty, Teddy, died last April, I wrote a similar column in [Catholic New York](#) and had a similar outpouring of appreciation and condolences from my readers. Here, in part, is what I wrote.

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

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

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

Last weekend, I took part in two blessings of animals at two parishes in New York City. As we bless the beloved pets (and give them treats), I prayed for all the animals of the earth and those who love them. They are so very dear to all of us and to the God who made them.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Arians and Pelagians

October 10, 2006

In a recent [interview](#), the new Vatican Secretary of State, Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone, warned against two ancient heresies that he sees as threats to the Church today. The first is Arianism. The second is Pelagianism.

[Arianism](#) is the belief that Jesus Christ was not divine, not the Son of God. It directly casts doubt upon the divinity of Jesus. [Pelagianism](#) is the belief that we can arrange our salvation ourselves without the help of God.

The two heresies together are a lethal combination. We see them evidenced in the secularism that plagues so much our Europe and even our own society here in North America. It is manifested in the sort of humanism that exalts our human abilities while at the same time reducing Jesus Christ to the ranks of "a good man" or "a wise teacher."

It is easy to get lulled into this sort of thinking. While genuine interreligious study is to be encouraged, there is a danger that an uncritical approach to it can lead to a belief that all religions are the same. Or if we espouse a particular religion, we feel we are expected to hold that "my religion is right for me" rather than something that has absolute objective value. In truth, the whole point of espousing a religion is that said religion holds as objectively true certain beliefs about God, the world, the meaning of life, and the nature of humankind. When we accept a religion, we accept it not as right simply for us (much as we would choose a shirt because we liked its color); we are saying that we believe that what it teaches is objectively correct.

And this is where Cardinal Bertone's point takes hold. As Catholics, we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. We believe that as an objective fact. We do not believe that it is true for us but not for others. We believe that it is true, and that belief makes all the difference in the world for how we see ourselves and how we live our lives. When we acknowledge that Christ is God, then we cannot espouse the sort of humanism that says that we are gods or that we are called to run the world and manage life by ourselves alone. Instead we espouse the sort of humanism that says that we human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, and that while we have a responsibility to create a just and peaceful world, we also have a spiritual responsibility in this world and in the world to come, a responsibility that can only be fulfilled with the help of Christ. It says, too, that Christ is the pattern and model for how we live.

When we lose sight of those truths or when we treat them as though they were merely subjectively true, we shortchange ourselves. But as Cardinal Bertone points out, we also shortchange our society. When we acknowledge their objective importance and live accordingly, we enrich our society and ourselves in important spiritual ways.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Prayer in Families

**October 3, 2006**

I was taken recently with an [article](#) on Catholic Online that suggested some very practical ways in which families can learn to pray. It's one thing to encourage people to pray, but often they don't know where or how to begin. Even the disciples of Jesus had that difficulty when they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

The article, entitled "The Family that Prays Together: These Steps Can Enrich Your Prayer Life and Your Marriage," appeared originally in [Catholic Digest](#). The author, Julie McCarty, speaks of the realization she and her husband that prayer on a daily basis was important, and how they carved out their own times and ways for prayer. In my home growing up, there was always [Grace Before Meals](#) and the [Daily Rosary](#); but often today it seems as though prayer is kind of a "no-man's land" for many Catholic families. That's why Julia McCarty's article was so refreshing.

What does she suggest? Make a plan and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Make sure your plan is comfortable for all family members. Perhaps begin by reciting a formal prayer, such as the Our Father; get comfortable with that and then look for other prayers or styles with which you are comfortable. Consider Scripture-based prayers, including prayers from the Divine Office. Pray with respect for one another; never pray in a way that manipulates a family member or that makes a family member uncomfortable. Allow time for silence; prayer need not be "all words." And finally, end your prayer with a hug and a kiss.

I liked this because it makes prayer so approachable for people who may have fallen out of the habit of prayer and are uncomfortable getting back into a prayer life. Just telling someone to pray isn't enough; most of us need a little guidance. But once we get that good start, we are comfortable and know what to do.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# The Rosary and the Missions

**October 2, 2006**

At the [Angelus](#) yesterday, the Holy Father, Pope Pope Benedict XVI, spoke of the relationship between the rosary and the missions. October is traditionally the month of the rosary, and the Holy Father stressed the importance of the rosary as a missionary prayer. "It is the prayer of the Christian who advances in the pilgrimage of faith, in the following of Jesus, preceded by Mary. I would like to invite you, dear brothers and sisters, to pray the rosary as a family during this month, and in communities and parishes, for the intentions of the Pope, for the mission of the Church and for peace in the world," he said. He stressed that the rosary is a Christocentric prayer, inseparable from reflection on the Scriptures.

October is world mission month and October 22 will be [World Mission Sunday](#), celebrating the presence of those missionaries throughout the world who are bringing the message and the love of Christ to so many. I had the opportunity to speak recently with Sister Pauline Chirchirillo, the Director of the [Society for the Propagation of the Faith](#) for the [Archdiocese of New York](#). Sister Pauline is a seasoned missionary, both abroad and here at home. She reflected that, in addition to those persons whom we consider missionaries, each and every one of us is a missionary as well. Each of us is called to spread the love of Christ in whatever part of the world we live or travel. World Mission Sunday and the entire month of October are times for each of us to reflect on how we mission to others, how we show them the love of Christ in the various situations in which they find themselves.

Pope Benedict has given us a powerful mixture of ideas to consider. On the one hand, we are missionaries and pray for those who are the more "formal" missionaries throughout the world. On the other hand, the rosary is a powerful tool both for praying for all missionaries and their work and for reminding ourselves of our call to be missionaries wherever we are.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Families, Technology and the Ten Commandments

**September 28, 2006**

There's a wonderful article in [Catholic Online](#) about the importance of family life in our society. It was interesting to see, because recently reports have surfaced about how modern technology can actually interfere with family life. With increasing numbers of people working from home and with the portability of laptops and cell phones, in many instances technology has taken over almost every room in the house, including the bedroom. Family members end up waiting for their spouses and children to get off the laptop or the cell phone in order to have any kind of communication. It's a problem, and it's essential that within families there be a definite understanding as to where and when technology can be used.

The Catholic Online article didn't talk about technology, but it did give a refreshing slant to the relationship between parents and children. Author Mary McCarty outlines how the Ten Commandments offer an exceptional guideline for parents and children as to how to live a peaceful and harmonious family life. What comes across throughout is the understanding that parents are the models for their children, and that children will develop morally in a proper way if they see their parents modeling proper behavior. How can children learn not to steal, for example, if they see their parents doing it? How can they learn to honor their father and their mother if their parents do not act respectfully toward each other? To go back to our original idea, how can children learn the proper place of technology if their parents appear to make of it an omnipresent and omniscient god?

It's not just parents, of course. The entire society models various kinds of behavior, good and bad. Parents, though, have the opportunity and the responsibility to see to it that only the right values enter into the home. The Ten Commandments provide an excellent program for guarding moral values and of making the family a happy and healthy place to be.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Forgiveness

**September 26, 2006**

It was amazing to read the account of the Sister in Somalia who was shot by the three gunmen who entered the hospital there. She forgave them. As she was dying, her words were, "I forgive." You read something like that and wonder how such a thing is possible. How could someone forgive the people who shot her?

Most people's first thought, I imagine is that, well, this was a holy woman who was really closer to God than most ordinary people - you'd expect her to forgive. Yet that's not what Christian doctrine teaches. The teaching of Jesus Christ is that forgiveness is not only possible, but also demanded, of us all. It's not just for a Sister in Somalia - forgiveness is something expected of all of us.

And yet we know how difficult this is. People hurt us and sometimes very deeply. Must we forgive? Can we forgive?

One consideration here is that forgiveness often takes time. If we're having trouble forgiving someone, we must not beat up on ourselves. We need to remember that God can do in us what we feel it is impossible to do by ourselves. If we can at least be open to forgiving and ask God for help, he will give it to us.

It is also helpful to think of forgiveness as a gift we give to ourselves. When we forgive, we release ourselves from the nasty and unpleasant energy of hatred, anger and hurt. We may or may not be able to free the other person from their bad habits or ways of acting, but we can certainly free ourselves of feelings that eat away at us and keep us from going ahead in life.

Forgiving also does not mean letting the other person off the hook. When Pope John Paul II went to the jail cell of the man who tried to kill him, he did not ask that the person be let out of jail. He's free now, but he served his entire sentence. The Holy Father taught us that we can forgive and yet still let the other person accept responsibility for his or her deeds.

Forgiveness has a lot to be said for it, even though it can be difficult to do. The Sister in Somalia gave us a great deal to think about.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# The Message to All Nations

September 19, 2006

It was like the first day of school. Hosts, producers, board operators and screeners gathered for the first time at the studios of [Sirius Satellite Radio](#) for an orientation in preparation for the launch of the Catholic Channel next Tuesday, September 26. They arrived at 10:00 to get their ID photos and cards, and in an afternoon luncheon meeting, Joe Zwilling of the [Archdiocese of New York](#) and Jay Clark and Walter Sabo of Sirius gave a detailed presentation of the mission of the Catholic Channel and the mechanics of good talk radio. This was followed by a tour of the new channel's studios and offices. It was a full day.

Especially wonderful was the chance to meet so many people who are enthusiastic and excited about Catholic broadcasting. I think most of us who are Catholic broadcasters sometime feel that we are the only people on earth who are doing this. Not so. As we have been preparing for the Catholic Channel, I have been surprised and gratified to learn of the many wonderful Catholic radio stations and programs that are in operation around the nation. The Catholic Church is doing a great deal to get its message out to people all over the country and indeed all over the world.

The command of Christ to the apostles was, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28: 19) One quick look at the newspapers headlines give us a good idea of how much this is needed today. And what is the heart of the message? It can be said in many ways, but I think it can be summarized in three very simple statements.

1. *We are made in the image and likeness of God.* No matter how much certain elements of modern society try to tell us that the material world is all there is, or that we forfeit our humanity when we commit certain crimes or that life is not sacred from the moment of conception (and so on), we are sacred human beings because we are made in God's image and likeness. No matter how down we feel; no matter how many times we have failed, we are still made in the image and likeness of God and nothing can ever take that away.
2. *Things are not as they appear to be.* Most of the judgments human beings make in life are grounded in "what everybody knows" and what the five senses reveal. The Catholic Church teaches that human beings have souls, spirits, and this gives a whole different perspective to draw upon in forming values, in declaring what is true and false, and in judging whether things are going well or badly. When we learn to see things through the divine perspective, we often see that they are not as we first thought they were. Being down and out for instance is often the beginning of a whole new and brighter chapter of life.
3. *"Do not be afraid."* The words of Jesus were echoed time and time again by the late Pope John Paul II. In fact, they were, for all intents and purposes, the motto of his papacy. This principle follows from the first two. Made in the image and

likeness of God, we are, with the help of God's grace, able to draw upon the spiritual resources that will make our day to day lives work out. The materialistic and purely rationalistic view is often rooted in a sense of danger and limitation - in other words, fear. The divine perspective basks in God's omnipotence and abundant love for us, and so there is nothing to fear.

Armed with these principles, we can go into the world confident of fulfilling our mission and purpose. As we spread this message to others, we enable them to hear the good news that life in the Spirit brings. This can only make the world a better place.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Facing a Challenge

**September 14, 2006**

Well, the lesson is over, as yesterday I had my first training to operate the boards for my new radio program, "Sleepless with Sirius" when the [Catholic Channel](#) opens on September 26. The studio we'll be using at Sirius is state of the art - a first-rate radio studio. The boards are simply amazing. I was first struck by the seemingly hundreds of buttons, switches and lights that were before me as I sat at the board. There are computers to operate, telephones to program, buttons to push, switches to move, a delay machine to activate - at first it was pretty daunting. How to approach the apparent complexity of the equipment I saw before me?

My solution was to narrow my focus - to appreciate the magnitude of the board but at the same time to focus on the aspects of it that I would have to master to get the program up and running. Right now, I don't need to know how to operate the CD players or when to put certain buttons into audition, for example. Once I get comfortable with what I have to do, I can learn those things. First things first.

The other thing that helped was the realization that running the board is supposed to be fun. It's not meant to be a confusing chore; it's meant to be an enjoyable activity, something to enjoy as much as I will enjoy hosting the show. I know I'm going to make mistakes, but let's face it, over sixteen years in radio I've seen a lot of seasoned board-ops make mistakes. Why should I be an exception?

Upon reflection, I realized that what I experienced yesterday in learning the boards was very much like what we experience at any moment in life when we're facing something that at first seems overwhelming. When we encounter a huge problem it can seem overwhelming, with too many aspects to face and too many things to handle. We often complicate matters by engaging in "What ifs" What if this happened, or what if that took place, or what if we made a mistake or what if we looked foolish? When we ask those questions, we add complications to the problem.

The best thing is to calm down and to figure out what we really need to know and to do. What is the first step we need to take? Never mind all the complications and the possible negative outcomes - what do we need to do first? Then do it! Then what do we need to do next? Before long, we have a reasonable handle on things.

The other thing to realize that that what we call crises and problems are really opportunities. They are chance to learn, to take responsibility and to do things that we never thought we could accomplish. Of course, we'll make mistakes along the way - everybody does, but we'll learn from them and then we'll be experts in something, and people will turn to us for advice.

That's another thing. During my training I made sure I asked questions and slowed down the explanations when I didn't understand. In real life, that translates into asking for

help. God is provident, and he sends us the people and things that we need to help us - if we ask.

Finally, don't forget to ask for God's help. I asked him for help yesterday, and I knew he was there. You'd be amazed how God can guide us to do things easily. We often insist on doing things on our own, but when we do we complicate everything. God knows the simple way, so why not follow him?

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Doing Things New

**September 13, 2006**

Today is going to be an interesting day for me. This afternoon, I am going over to [Sirius](#) to be trained to run the boards for my forthcoming show, "Sleepless with Sirius," airing from 11:00 p.m. - 3:00 a.m. on [The Catholic Channel](#) (Sirius 159), beginning September 26. This means that in addition to hosting the program, I'll be running the controls, too. That's a bit daunting, and I must admit I'm feeling a few butterflies, but on the whole I'm excited to learn this new skill and to add this dimension to my radio ministry. I've been doing radio for fifteen years but I've always been the host and left managing the controls to the engineers. They've turned on the microphones, adjusted the volume of the sound, pressed the buttons to go to the breaks, and so on. Now, it's going to be me.

Starting anything new like this is exciting and a bit nervous-making. But in life, it's important that we take risks, welcome new adventures and grow. If we don't grow, we stagnate. No matter how long we have been in a job, it's important that we continue to expand our knowledge, our contacts and our skill base. That's what makes life exciting and fun.

It's probably a small matter, but I love the way Pope Benedict XVI has been slowly bringing out examples of papal fashion that we haven't seen for quite some time. At one of his winter audiences he wore a red cap called a [camauro](#) to protect himself from the cold. More recently, he donned a red wide-brimmed hat called a [saturno hat](#). While he's doing this really to protect himself from the elements, it's a wonderful and even playful gesture of doing something new just for the sake of it. And the magic is that the "something new" in both of these cases is really something old!

All through life it's important that we do new things. Newness is an important part of the work of God: "[Behold, I make all things new.](#)" Years ago, a fellow college teacher told me that he tried to do something new every day. He continues to be healthy and strong into a good old age. I wonder why?

Here's another Papal lesson: "Don't be afraid." Pope John Paul II made this his constant cry from the beginning to the end of his pontificate. This wonderful Pope was not afraid to stand up to Communism, to travel all over the world or to battle Parkinson's. He lived what he preached and so became a wonderful model of newness for us.

So today, join me in trying something new. What a wonderful way to celebrate the gift of life!

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Remembering September 11

## September 7, 2006

It is hard to believe that it is time to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Inevitably, it brings back memories of that horrible day, the days, weeks and months that followed, and the unspeakable grief we all felt. The events of that day changed not only our personal lives; but also our public life. It made life different.

We remember those who lost their lives, their families and friends. All of us have people whom we will never forget whose lives were taken on that day. We remember all the heroes - the police, the firefighters, emergency technicians and all others who worked so diligently to save lives and recover the lost, even at the cost of their own lives. We also remember those who still remain physically and emotionally scarred by the physical and emotional toll of that day. We honor the many religious representatives of different faiths who rushed to the scene to help, and, of course, especially Father Mychal Judge, O.F.M., who gave his life that day.

The Cathedral of St. Patrick is holding several services over the coming few days to commemorate September 11. Perhaps you would like to join in some of these services, either physically or in spirit.

### *September 10, 2006*

Ecumenical Prayer Service Sponsored by FDNY Chaplains, 2:00 p.m.

St. Patrick's Cathedral Sunday Organ Recital Series, 4:45 p.m.

### *September 11, 2006*

Masses at St. Patrick's Cathedral: 7:00, 7:30, 8:00, 8:30 a.m., 12:00 noon, 1:00 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.

Celebratory Mass Sponsored by the Third Battalion of the FDNY 10:30 a.m.

Official 9/11 Memorial Mass, celebrated by Bishop Dennis Sullivan, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of New York 4:00 p.m.

Concert for 9/11 Victims and their Families Sponsored by the New York Choral Society 7:30 p.m.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Utilizing the Media

September 6, 2006

Recently, I had occasion to revisit a most important Apostolic Letter written by the late [Pope John Paul II](#) in January 2005. It is entitled "[The Rapid Development](#)" from the opening words of the document: "The rapid development of technology in the area of the media is surely one of the signs of progress in today's society."

In this letter, the Holy Father urged that the Church enter into the use of all communications media as instruments of evangelization. He also noted that the various means of communication could be highly instrumental in promoting dialogue not only among Catholics and Christians but also across the board with people of other religions and the world in general.

In this, the Holy Father urged our imitation of Christ. "The eternal Word made flesh, in communicating Himself, always shows respect for those who listen, teaches understanding of their situation and needs, is moved to compassion for their suffering and to a resolute determination to say to them only what they need to hear without imposition or compromise, deceit or manipulation. Jesus teaches that communication is a moral act."

Toward the end of the document, Pope John Paul reiterated the central theme of his pontificate: [Do not be afraid](#) "Do not be afraid of new technologies! These rank 'among the marvelous things' - *inter mirifica* - which God has placed at our disposal to discover, to use and to make known the truth, also the truth about our dignity and about our destiny as his children, heirs of his eternal Kingdom." He pointed out that this includes not being afraid of opposing the values of the world when we communicate. "Jesus has assured us, 'I have conquered the world.'"

These are important words to ponder as we prepare to inaugurate a new [Catholic Channel](#) on Sirius Satellite Radio on September 26. For those of us who are involved in this project, the Holy Father's words remind us of the magnitude of what we are undertaking.

For those who will be our listeners, it will be an opportunity to embrace this new technology, to take advantage of it and to enter into the dialogue the Catholic Channel will foster about how to apply the Catholic faith to our daily lives.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Believing in Our Beliefs

September 5, 2006

In a recent statement, [Pope Benedict XVI](#) spoke favorably about interfaith prayer gatherings in favor of peace, provided they are authentic expressions of each of the religions, are not syncretistic in nature and do not give the impression that there are no essential differences among the religions.

As a participant in numerous interfaith prayer services over the years, I have found it gratifying to know that despite differences of doctrine and practice, religions can rise to the level of common prayer. I have always found such services to be inspiring and uplifting and creative of an atmosphere of understanding and peace.

The Pope's cautions are important, however, because one of the dangers I have found in interfaith dialogue is the occasional impression that all religions are equally true. On that reasoning, if I am a Catholic, I believe that Catholicism is true "for me," and if you are a member of another faith, you believe that that faith is true "for you." That statement is fine in a way, but to me it doesn't go far enough.

Let's take it a step farther. I believe in the Roman Catholic Church, its teachings and practices. Those teachings express, not just a personal world view of mine, but some very objective statements about what life is, what being is, who I am and who God is. When I personally assent to Catholicism, I am not just saying, "This is true for me." I am saying, "This is true." I respect the right of others to believe and practice differently, but I am a Catholic because I believe that the teachings of the Church truly describe how things are. Though I respect your different belief (and though I would never force mine upon you), I do not think it is correct, at least in some very important ways. And the same thing is true of any member of any other religion. The fact that we can share prayer together, enjoy sociability, practice social action together and enter into compassionate dialogue does not eradicate the fact that we believe what we believe because we believe it is objectively true, not just true for given individuals.

We're losing sight of that in society in general, and it is by no means the fault of interfaith dialogue, which is truly a wonderful thing. It's part of the creeping relativism that has found its way into our minds and hearts. The good contribution that interfaith dialogue makes is that it teaches us that believing that what we believe is right doesn't mean we can't have warm and friendly relationships with each other. We can and should. Staunchly believing in the truth of our beliefs need not make us dislike or hate each other. That mistake has happened all too often in the course of history and continues in some instances today.

There is a way to respect one another while at the same time honoring our own beliefs. That's the message the Holy Father was giving in his speech. That message is extremely important, not only for interfaith prayer but also for our other interactions with those from whom we differ.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Social Communication

September 1, 2006

It was most gratifying to see the Holy Father's monthly [prayer intention for September](#). It reads, ""That those who use the means of social communication may always do so consciously and responsibly." It's a wonderful prayer, because it addresses issues that have been of particular concern in this country for some time. One such issue is that of indecency and profanity on the airwaves. This issue has drawn a great deal of attention in recent years, and now broadcasters face stiff fines for even occasional and unintentional airing of indecent programming and language.

Another issue is that of fairness in communicating. How many times have we seen people's lives paraded across the pages of newspapers and magazines and on radio and television programs -- in some cases almost having them convicted in the public eye before having actually gone to trial? To be honest, this sort of thing is a two-way street. If the public didn't clamor for sensational stories, they would never be printed or aired, at least not to the degree they are today. If one is going to challenge the media, one also ought to challenge the minds and hearts of the people for whom these stories are presented.

That brings us to a very important, though subtle, point in the Holy Father's intention. The prayer is for the proper use of the means of social communication by those who use them. Of course, that includes broadcasters and journalists; but by no means does it stop there. We who are the consumers of the media have a responsibility to use them consciously and responsibly, and the Holy Father's intention bears a message for us as well. In selecting what means of social communication we use for information and entertainment, we must be responsible for choosing what we read, watch and listen to; and those choices must be made against the background of moral principles of justice and decency.

The word "consciously" in the Holy Father's intention is intriguing. What does he mean when he says we must use them consciously? We are such a media-oriented world that it is all too easy for us to fall into a pattern of watching, listening, reading and surfing without giving it a second thought. We automatically plop down in front of the television or boot up the computer and start to surf, without ever reflecting on why we are doing what we are doing or whether it is the best thing for us to be doing. The Holy Father is reminding us that living an authentic human life means making informed, conscious and reasoned choices about what we read and watch. This is important, because it is all too easy for us to fall asleep mentally, spiritually and morally. We must, as St. Peter said, "[be sober and vigilant](#)."

In this one line for the month of September, Pope Benedict XVI has given us much to think about. May our prayer be that both those who broadcast and print and those who read and listen may grow in our understanding of the human use of our sources of entertainment and information. --Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Heroes

**August 31, 2006**

One of the amazing things about life is that you never know for sure how things are going to turn out. Some people find that depressing, others find it adventurous. Adventurous is probably the better choice, since things do happen to us that are not under our control.

For months, we had scheduled a "Hero Appreciation Day" at Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, New Jersey, for [Religion on the Line](#) to honor the heroes of the New York City Fire Department who so generously give their lives for us on a daily basis. We did it last Sunday, August 27, on a day that was marked by some good weather but a lot of rain. The show went well, and we had the opportunity to talk at great length with [Salvatore Cassano](#), the Chief of Department of the FDNY. The Chief is a proud Catholic, a dedicated family man, and a man of total commitment to the members of the FDNY. As he often does, the Chief spoke about the total dedication a firefighter must have and how willing firefighters must be to go directly into danger for the sake of others. Without that, he said, there would be no reason to be a firefighter. He also mentioned how every day of his life, he goes out the door not knowing for sure whether he is going to see his family again. Every firefighter faces that, and thus every firefighter knows how important those moments with family are. In the course of the day, the firefighters of the FDNY were honored for their service.

How ironic that miles away in the Bronx that rainy afternoon, [a young probationary firefighter and a seasoned veteran](#) were trapped in a blazing building and died while saving lives. Michael C. Reilly, an ex-Marine and enthusiastic probationary firefighter and veteran firefighter Lieutenant Howard J. Carpluk, Jr., perished despite the best efforts of their colleagues to save them. Just that morning, we had been talking about the bravery of firefighters, and before we knew it two more had died in the line of duty. It's the sort of thing that makes you scratch your head.

I've had the privilege of being around FDNY folks from time to time and their upbeat spirit always amazes me. In times of tragedy, they bond together as one family, and they encourage and support each other. I am always taken by how positive and upbeat they are, these men and women who face danger and death every day. A lot of it has to do with the spirit of a firefighter, but I also think a lot of it has to do with faith. Most of the men and women on the fire department are deeply committed to a religious faith and consider that to be an important part of their lives. They understand the meaning of something bigger than themselves and they know of the importance of turning to God in times of danger. In facing the mystery of evil and death, they know that having God to turn to is essential.

Most of us don't face danger and death every day as the firefighters do, but we do confront the reality of evil and loss in some form or other. We learn in life that we cannot make it by ourselves - that we need others around us and we need God most of all. We need to recall, too, that even though we face problems and mysteries in life, we

can face them with a confident spirit. We are not meant to go through life crying, "Why me?" or cowering in fear. We can look back on our lives and see that we have faced difficult situations in the past and overcome them with the help of God. If at times we have failed (and who hasn't?) with a little reflection we can see how those failures taught us something or gave us an inner resolve that we would not have had otherwise. In some cases, they have led us to new places where we have achieved great success. Armed with that knowledge, we can face the uncertainties of the future with great confidence in God and in ourselves. As St. Paul said, "[I have strength for everything through him who empowers me.](#)"

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Poor in Spirit

August 23, 2006

Not long ago I happened to discover a tape of a talk given by the well-known development coach Anthony Robbins. In the course of his very energetic and passionate address he made a distinction that I found interesting and worth thinking about: the difference between manifestation and fulfillment. I've read a lot of the self-development literature over the years, but I had never heard it quite put that way. There's a lot of talk there about how to manifest the desires of our hearts, and that's fine. But Tony Robbins was pointing out that you could manifest the desires of your heart and still not be happy. We've all known people like that - people who have millions of dollars, the best of everything, yet unfulfilled hearts.

In my forthcoming book, *Elisha's Jars: Enjoying Abundance and Prosperity When Life Seems Limited*, I point out much the same thing. It's strange how sometimes people who are relatively poor can be rich and people who are rich can be poor. There's much more to living happy, abundant lives than having a lot of things. The things must have a context.

Jesus said much the same thing. Remember the story of the Rich Young Man ([Mark 10: 17 - 22](#))? He was a good young man who was holding himself to the highest standards of the law. He really wanted eternal life. Yet the one thing he could not do was part with his riches. Actually, when you stop to think about it, he was not merely asked to part with his riches; he was also asked to give them to the poor. Apparently, he could not see beyond his own coffers, and as a result he "went away sad."

Another example of that is the story of the Rich Man and the Beggar, commonly known as Dives and Lazarus ([Luke 16: 20 ff.](#)). Dives was so blinded by his riches that he could not see that there was a poor ill man begging at this gate. Even when he was punished in the afterlife, he still did not get it: he wanted to use the poor man (now blessed in heaven) to be a messenger of warning to his family who were still alive. He never got past the notion that everything and everyone revolved around him.

It does not have to be that way. To be rich in every sense of the word we must, in the words of Jesus, be "poor in spirit ([Matthew 5: 3](#))," realizing that everything we have comes from God and is to be used for God's work of blessing the world. We must also, of course, take care of ourselves; but for all of us the fundamental purpose of life is to help others and to make the world a better place. That's why God sends us here. Being poor in spirit means being willing to accept whatever helps us to do God's work and being willing to let go of anything that does not.

There is a difference between manifestation and fulfillment. They are not mutually exclusive, but without the fulfillment aspect (meaning, in our terms, realizing our deep connection to God) the things that we manifest will become dry as dust. God does not want it that way. He wants us to be happy in this life, and when sorrows come, to turn to

him for help. He does not want us to live dry, unhappy lives. Like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son ([Luke 15: 11 ff](#)), he wants us to bask in the glow of his love each and every day.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Helping People

**August 22, 2006**

When I was a kid in school, I was home sick one day and was watching a children's program on television hosted by [Whizzo the Clown](#). Whizzo (in real life Frank Wiziarde) was a figure in Kansas City television for thirty-three years, and generations of children grew up singing, laughing and smiling with their favorite clown. This particular day, Whizzo asked one little girl what she wanted to be when she grew up. "I want to be a nurse," she replied without hesitation. "Why do you want to be a nurse?" Whizzo wondered. "So I can help people," was her assured reply.

I don't know, of course, what became of that little girl or whether she went on to fulfill her dream. I sincerely hope, however, that she did not lose the profound insight she revealed on television that day. "So I can help people." For in that one sentence she proclaimed the meaning of life.

In the sixties and seventies it was common for young people to be confused about the meaning of life. "I'm searching for myself" and "I'm looking for my identity" came to be fairly common phrases. As time went on, we became aware of the mid-life crisis, in which people who had lived for awhile and experience some form of success began to find that success unsatisfying and took to searching for another way to be in the world. Then we learned that a sort of confusion was built into each of life's passages - infancy, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and old age. We watched more and more marriages crumble and clergy and religious of all faiths leave their callings in search of other ways to live. Pain and confusion about the meaning of life seemed to take over the world.

That's why I like to remember the refreshing simplicity of that little girl's response back in the fifties: "So I can help people." That phrase alone would do much to eliminate the buildup of confusion and identity-void that has come to be such a common occurrence.

For in a phrase that little girl summed up the essence of why we are here. If we find ourselves being confused about our role in life, we have a base from which to start - we are here to help people.

The reason that is such a wonderful answer is that it cuts across all of the why's and how's. Let's say that for one reason or other you're not sure about your role in life or are between jobs or are discerning your vocation. Today, your purpose is to help people. How depends only on what you perceive they need and what they ask of you. It may involve seeing a friend in the hospital, writing a card to a lonely relative, going shopping for a homebound person - the day can bring anything and everything. The mystery of it all is exciting. Through it all, your job is to help people.

There's an important footnote here about helping people. Two of the people you are here to help are God and yourself. If we forget either of them, the whole thing will go awry.

That's precisely how people, even religious people, burn themselves out in the service of others. We don't want that.

We're here on earth to help God do his work. A lot of zealous souls take this mission and use it to drive themselves into sheer exhaustion. What we need to remember is that we best do God's work when we relax and let him do it in us. There are so many places in the Bible where God tells his people that the last thing he wants from them is sacrifice. It's the same principle. When we align ourselves with God we can relax into his love and learn to give it easily and effortlessly. He is the source of our energy and he will send us to the people who need us and will also send them to us. Pretty much all we have to do is keep our eyes open.

The other person we often forget is ourselves. There is a reason Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Taking ourselves seriously is not the same as being selfish, no matter what years of personal emotional history might tell us. We are no good to others if we fail to be good to ourselves. Again, we do not have to live lives that are ongoingly sacrificial. Sacrifices are at times necessary, but God does not expect us or even want us to spend our entire lives being miserable. "The glory of God," [Irenaeus](#) said, "is the human person fully alive."

There are times of great confusion in life, to be sure. My point is that we can cut through a lot of that confusion by remembering that, even in the confusing times, our job is to help people. That is a certainty we do well to draw upon.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## A Market for Innocence

**August 18, 2006**

The latest edition of the comic strip "Peanuts" just popped into my e-mail. It comes every day, and even though [Charles Schulz](#) is no longer around to draw them, the cartoons never fail to give me a laugh and a lot to think about.

I love a particular statement that Schulz made about his work: "There's a market for innocence." Reading those words, I can only say, "I hope so, and, yes, I think so." It gets tougher and tougher to hold onto that when you see some of the television programs and internet offerings we can be exposed to these days. Society was changing drastically during the decades when Charles Schulz was drawing "Peanuts" yet he managed to find a way to imbue us every morning with innocence, with insight into ourselves, with whimsy and with laughter. Those things are the stuff of life.

To take an example, there was the strip published back on [July 23, 1959](#) in which Charlie Brown tells Linus that it's okay for *him* (Linus) to be complacent, but Charlie Brown has responsibilities to his baby sister and cannot afford complacency. After all, he says, the world is becoming an awful place; and he proceeds to list all of the terrible things people do every day. In the last pane of the strip, Snoopy, lying on the roof of his doghouse and overhearing the conversation says, "Don't forget about kicking dogs. People are always kicking dogs, too."

A lot of things are packed into those few inches of newsprint. There's a sweetness about how tenderly Charlie Brown takes responsibility for the well-being of his new baby sister. He's really serious about it. In his seriousness, he brands poor Linus as complacent, when, in fact, all the poor kid wants to do is hug his blanket. The blanket, too, is a story unto itself - so many of us over the years related to Linus and his security blanket. In fact, the term "security blanket" became a household word. Interestingly, Charlie's sense of responsibility gets him off on a tangent in which he focuses on all the bad things in the world and how worried he is about them. Snoopy's line may pain those of us who are animal lovers, but there's a point to his reminder. The mind gets more and more of what it thinks about. Charlie Brown, like so many of us, gets the ball rolling about all the bad things there are about people, and Snoopy just can't resist adding one more. It's a real study in human psychology. It's also a study in how a good inclination - Charlie Brown's care for his sister - can go wrong if it's not checked at every step. St. Ignatius Loyola said the same thing back in the sixteenth century: watch the beginning, the middle and the end of your inclinations. They can so readily go awry.

I hope and pray that Charles Schulz was right, that there is still a market for innocence. The innocence of the "Peanuts" comic strip made it possible for Schulz to say many things in just a few strokes of the pen. His innocence was also eloquence. We do well in this day and age to think about that when we speak, write, draw and choose our entertainment.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Beauty Is Truth

August 16, 2006

Last Sunday, I had the privilege of [interviewing](#) Father George McCauley, a Jesuit priest from Fordham who has written a book called [Eddie's Dream](#), a novel about changes in the culture of the Catholic Church since Vatican II. In the course of our conversation, Father McCauley remarked that in our society in general we tend to pay too little attention to beauty. I couldn't help thinking how true that was. It's ironic because our culture stresses beauty in the sense of physical beauty, and a person can literally spend a fortune in pursuit of good looks. Yet this isn't the kind of beauty Father McCauley was talking about and that I was speaking of in the last blog, where I alluded briefly to the definition of beauty given by Aristotelians and Thomists.

When we focus excessively on physical beauty we cease to experience the most important things in life. Listen to what [Theodore Dreiser](#) said about artistic beauty: "Art is the stored honey of the human soul, gathered on wings of misery and travail." In my book [Good News for Bad Days](#), I compared the soul to a bee in a field of flowers. The soul hovers in and around our experiences, removes the pollen from them and makes honey. Dreiser is saying something similar. We get in life more and more of what we focus on. If we direct our focus away from genuine beauty, we lose sight of what is richest and dearest in life.

The experience of beauty has been described in many ways. [John Dewey](#) referred to it as "an experience," distinguished from the ordinary flow of experiences that we have every day. [Martin Buber](#) spoke of the I-Thou relationship, distinguished from the impersonal I-It relationships that can consume most of everyday life. [Gabriel Marcel](#) put it into the realm of "mystery," which takes us up and consumes us, distinguished from the realm of "problem" where we deal with objects and things to solve or fix. [St. Augustine](#) saw the essence of beauty in God, as he lamented, "Late have I loved Thee, Beauty so ancient and so new." In like manner, [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) found true beauty in the Eucharist itself: "O hidden Godhead, humbly I adore Thee. Who truly art beneath the forms before me. To Thee my heart I bow with bended knee. As failing quite in contemplating Thee."

One of the wisest descriptions of beauty comes from the pen of [John Keats](#) in his [Ode on a Grecian Urn](#): "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." In this age of intensive investigative reporting, we hear much about finding the truth. Sadly, we find very little beauty in that effort. We need to remind ourselves that beauty is the truth of the soul and has no brief for the endless public exposure of private lives that so often passes for the truth.

Beauty is often found in small things. Jesus described the Kingdom of Heaven as [a pearl of great price](#) which the one who finds it sells everything to buy. [George Herbert](#) found it in the sweeping of a room, as we see from his poem [Elixir](#): "Who sweeps a room as for thy laws/ Makes that and th'action fine."

I agree with Father McCauley. Each of us would do well to set an intention consciously to bring beauty into our lives and to recognize the beauty that is there.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Tears and Laughter

**August 10, 2006**

Just when you thought you'd seen it all, something even more shocking comes along. An email from a friend alerted me to the [news](#) of the use of embryonic stem cells for expensive beauty treatments in several parts of the world. I suppose we should have expected it, but when you actually see it reported you are dumbfounded.

The first problem, of course, with these procedures, is that they involve the stem cells of embryos which are, in point of fact, helpless human beings. That is alarming enough.

The second problem is that the people receiving the treatments apparently don't care that babies are involved in these procedures. They simply don't care. The self-centeredness and lack of respect for human life are astounding.

Why should we be outraged about this? Because, though any disrespect for human life is intolerable, disrespect for human life at its beginnings is even more atrocious. And because it represents one more hardening of the human spirit, one more instance of reckless insensitivity to what is beautiful and sacred.

Destroying the young to look young? Are we really making progress?

Here's a much better use of technology - can ice cream cure cancer? It seems that Baskin Robbins, the American Cancer Society and the Diocese of Phoenix are determined to find out. They're teaming up to host "[An Afternoon of Humor and Healing](#)" to which cancer patients are invited in the hope of showing how humor can promote healing. There's a good deal of [evidence](#) that laughter, by increasing endorphins, can help people to become and to stay healthy. You will recall that years ago, [Norman Cousins](#), helped to heal himself of a major disease by putting himself in a good mood through watching Marx Brothers movies. I recently saw the story of a woman who had cured herself of cancer by surrounding herself with humor and beauty and by making a real effort to eliminate stress from her life. Let's hope that the joy and love tucked into those ice cream cones in Phoenix will work their magic!



If you want to cheer yourself up and no ice cream is available, contemplate something truly beautiful, like this flower. Notice the delicacy of its coloring, the way in which it is at once complex and simple. St. Thomas Aquinas said that the characteristics of beauty are integrity, consonance and clarity. How do those qualities manifest themselves in this photograph? Think about that for awhile, and watch your spiritual and physical endorphins soar!

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Updates

**August 8, 2006**

It's time to give you an update on the progress of the Catholic Channel on Sirius Satellite Radio. As you know if you are a regular reader of this blog, the Archdiocese is working with Sirius to start a Catholic Channel, a national satellite radio service that will provide 24/7 programming of interest to Catholics and hopefully to people of other faiths as well. The channel will be up and running in late September.

The idea behind this channel is to provide information and compelling talk (for the most part) radio that will help our listeners to understand how the Church responds to important issues of the day. We'll have a lively morning show, including Mass from the Cathedral of St. Patrick and other major churches around the nation. Our programs will include a number of interactive talk programs with guests and listener phone calls. There will be an overnight show especially designed to interest people who for one reason or other are up all night. We'll have news-oriented programming, shows on family issues and parenting, and even a smattering of music and live sports broadcasts. Stay tuned for more information about our programs and the start date.

I was very saddened to learn today of the passing of Bill Reidy, for many years the proprietor of Reidy's restaurant here in New York City. Reidy's was a great place to go for a meal; and if you were lucky, as I was, you had many a scintillating conversation with Bill, who succeeded his father Morris as owner of the restaurant. Bill Reidy was a family man, whose favorite images of the Church were "Mother" and "family." We often talked about how the Church reaches out and makes a home for so many different kinds of people in so many situations. Bill was a devoted family man and a church-every-single-Sunday Catholic. He loved the Church and he loved his large family. About a year ago, I had the privilege of being invited to dinner at the Reidy home. It was a lively evening, full of laughter and good-natured debate and discussion. Bill had been retired from the restaurant for a number of years by that time, and I could see how happy he was to be able to spend his days surrounded by those he loved. During our frequent chats at Reidy's, Bill and I often talked about starting a radio program called "The Father and the Father" giving our respective views from our individual perspectives on various moral and life issues of the day. It didn't happen, but it was fun to talk about it. All of us who knew Bill will miss him greatly. He provided so much thought, laughter and hospitality to so many. May he rest in peace.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

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## A Faith-Filled View of Life

**August 3, 2006**

I just got off the phone from a most delightful conversation with Antoinette Bosco. She is a journalist and writer of many books, the latest of which is *Growing in Faith: When a Catholic Marriage Fails*. It was a conversation that left me truly inspired.

I hope you will read some or all of [Toni's books](#). If you do, you will see that she is a woman who has suffered unspeakable pain at several points in her life. She writes very candidly about her pain, in the hope that others having similar experiences will find courage and comfort in the love of God as she has.

What strikes me about her writing, and what struck me forcefully during our conversation today is that the story for Toni never ends in sorrow or tragedy. It always ends in blessings. Over and over again as we talked, she kept saying, "I am so blessed! I have so many blessings,"

Let me point out that hers is not a sort of "feel good" philosophy that blinds one to the reality of pain. Often in her writings, Toni reflects upon the sufferings of Christ, who chose suffering and a life that was not easy so that he would be in a better position to love us more. As she says in her current book, "[The Lord] never gave me false assurances that life would be easy. On the contrary, he allowed me to be put on the cross many times over, but never to the death, always soothing my wounds with a bouquet of joy. (p. 98)."

I know that Toni has no desire to be made out to be extraordinary. In our conversation today, she said, "All I ever wanted to do was to do God's work." When she writes of her pain and how the Lord has helped her through it, she is doing it so that others may come to know that in their pain, the Lord is a steadfast helpmate.

When I look at the stories that dominate the news today, I find myself needing the message that Toni Bosco brings. We live in a world that is full of brokenness and sorrow and even hatred. It is difficult to face that world. Toni Bosco helps us to remember that in the difficult times when darkness seems to be overpowering, the love of Christ is near.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Keys to Growth

**August 2, 2006**

Last week, when I was writing the blog called, "Just Like You?" I alluded to the fact that there are two kinds of struggles. I called them "blessed struggles" and "diminishing struggles." It occurred to me afterwards that I probably should have said more about the difference between the two, so here goes.

When I wrote that, I was remembering a distinction which Pierre Teilhard de Chardin made in *The Divine Milieu* when he distinguished between what he called "passivities of growth" and "passivities of diminishment." Put simply, things happen to us. We get hurt, we get sick, we get fired, we grow old. Those are not directly things that we do to ourselves; they are things that happen to us. Why do some people, in the midst of those passivities thrive, while others buckle?

There's a lot of talk in spiritual circles these days to the effect that when something adverse happens to us, we are responsible for its happening at some level. Frankly, I don't know whether that is true or not. It doesn't seem always to be the case, but I guess in the final analysis I don't really know enough to say for sure that it's not so. What is true is this - when something adverse happens to us, either we step up to the plate and take responsibility for it or we let it get the best of us. The struggles we experience in life either bless us or curse us, depending on how we choose to deal with them.

That's what I was saying last week about relationships, and the relationship of marriage in particular. Too often, I think, the struggles in a marriage crater the relationship unnecessarily. If couples could learn to help each other in their struggles, what blessings would come from those struggles!

It's the same story whether the struggle is in a marriage, or with finances, health, addictions or emotions. Success in facing a struggle means just that - facing it. Here it's important to be gentle with ourselves and to be patient about the times we fail or slip. As I'm writing this, I am thinking about a time when I was in college when I got an average grade in a class in which I really should have excelled. The grade stood out like a sore thumb on my report card, and I felt miserable, even though I knew I had tried my best. It would have been so helpful for me, if instead of heaping guilt on me and telling me that this was going to ruin my academic life, the people around me had been gentle with me, helped me to see what had happened and encouraged me to go on from there. That's what people need in times of stress. Sometimes, yes, they need a good swift kick, proverbially speaking. But most of the time, they just need love and encouragement and a pat on the back to get them back on track.

We all fail from time to time, and we all struggle. It's all about knowing how to deal with those times. It's about knowing that with a little love and a little ingenuity, we can, with the help of God, let those dark times lead us to remarkable blessings. We have every reason to be encouraged.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Just Like You?

July 27, 2006

The e-mail service I subscribe to has a "Bulk" folder where the spam goes, and there's usually plenty of it. I never open the e-mails in my Bulk folder and therefore never click on links in them which could do horrible things to my computer. But I do read the subject lines, which are often involuted in the hope of thwarting the spam filter.

This morning, there was a particularly eye-catching one - "Meet Someone Just Like You." My immediate thought was, "Why on earth would I want to meet someone just like me?" What would be the point of meeting someone when everything they would offer would be what I already had or was?

This led me to a series of thoughts on how we view relationships in our society. In one of his books, my friend Dr. Wayne Dyer defined the over-used term "soul mate." "Your soul mate," he said, "is the person whom you absolutely cannot stand." I think he was being somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but he had a point. The real test of a relationship comes when people learn to love each other even though they are different and sometimes those differences drive each other crazy. That takes a lot of growth and learning over months and years; it is not usually to be found during the initial stage of "being in love." Not every relationship is able to survive this, and for me, that's why the Church sees marriage as a [sacrament](#). At the altar, the bride and groom administer the Sacrament of Matrimony to each other; and every day of their married life they administer its graces to each other again, against the backdrop of the commitment they have made. In first love, they see their similarities. In later life, they see their differences. The question is, can they let those differences be a source of grace and maturity?

This is also true, it seems to me, of our relationship with God. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and in that sense, God and we are alike, yes. But in the day to day living of our lives, God and we can seem very different. "[His ways are not our ways](#)," the Bible tells us; and often in life we struggle, like [John Milton](#), "to justify the ways of God to men." [Jacob's struggle with the angel](#) in the Book of Genesis is a prototype of the times we struggle with God. Yet the struggle, in the end, need not be something horrible and self-defeating. Jacob received a blessing and a mission. Since we and God are alike in the sense described above, the struggles can be a source of growth and deepening of a loving relationship with him. Our struggle with God is often portrayed as God's relentlessly saying, "My way or the highway;" and sometimes that's the case. But I love those times in the Bible when God relents. When God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, [Abraham](#) pleads with him and he relents. Sometimes in the struggle, God honors us - many more times that we realize, I am sure.

There is a difference between blessed struggles and diminishing struggles. If a person or a couple is engaged in a life of relentless struggle, they need to step back and get back into alignment. They need to get help. And in many cases, they can be helped -

marriages can be reconciled, troubled souls can find peace. It all hinges on the ability to turn the struggle into an adventure that leads to creating a mature love and a wise presence in the world.

So let's be careful of messages that urge us to "find someone just like you." The beauty of relationship lies in allowing differences to become advantages. There is no one just like you. And that is wonderful.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Our Unseen Sensor

July 13, 2006

There is an amazing story in today's [New York Times](#) about a young paralyzed man who had a small sensor implanted in his brain. When hooked up to a computer, he was able to operate a robot, move the cursor on the computer and control a television set all by the power of his thought. The article says that, though the technology needs further development, this young man's story gives hope to paralyzed people and people with movement impairing diseases.

We're amazed when we read stories like this, because such cases seem to break through the barriers of impossibility. What was once impossible now is possible. That's exciting.

It seems to me, however, that such technological wonders can take place only because they have a spiritual counterpart. While most of us don't have a sensor implanted in our brain, there is a sense in which we do have a God-given spiritual ability to move the world outside of us. Our mind is that sensor that enables us, by the power of thought, to change the world for the better.

Though they may have the full use of their arms and legs, many feel paralyzed as they go through life. They come into each day full of beliefs about God, the world and themselves; and those beliefs affect the outcomes that they experience in their lives. The motivational broadcaster and author Earl Nightingale once summed up the entire history of Western thought in six words: "We are what we think about." Our minds are so constructed that they multiply the essence of what we think about. It's like a copy machine. Take a really ugly picture, put it in the machine, press "Copy" and what do you get? More of the ugly picture. Put a beautiful picture under the glass and press the button and what do you get? More of the beautiful picture. Our mind works just like that. Negative ideas create more negativity. Positive ideas create more positivity.

Now, we can chip away at our negative beliefs and ideas one by one. That helps a great deal, but it takes a lot of work. Once we realize that our negative beliefs and experiences are the result of some underlying forces, we can make some real progress in changing our thought patterns if we work to eliminate those underlying forces. I like to call those forces "needs" or "wants." In a book called *The Sedona Method*, Hale Dworkis whittles them down to four: the need for approval, the need for control, the need for security and the need for separateness. He adds that each of these needs carries with it the force of its opposite, so that we also need disapproval, to be controlled, insecurity and oneness. That sounds odd at first, but I think he's onto something.

Regardless of how you delineate the needs, they are there. And here's the thing to notice: when we operate out of need, we create more and more and more needs. We become more and more needy. Why? The copy machine has taken "need," pressed the green button and made copy after copy after copy of needs. I'll say it again: we become needy. Need defines our world. And need means lack and lack breeds frustration. Need

and lack and frustration become, if you will, the wallpaper of our lives. When we go into each day, we may not think about it, but truly we just *assume* that the world is lacking and we are trapped in need. Everything else in our lives revolves around that gloomy sun.

As I say, it's kind of like wallpaper. If the wallpaper in, say, your kitchen is dark and gloomy, everything you do in your kitchen will be done against a dark and gloomy background. You may not notice it, but it affects everything you do there. It's the same with negative assumptions. If you go into the day with negative assumptions about life, it's going to affect your day and your life.

John, we'll call him, realized that growing up in his childhood home, there were certain core attitudes that he picked up. His family criticized him for almost everything he did or said; as a result he believed (and in fact *knew*) that the world disapproved of him. He *needed* (i.e., did not have) approval. His parents controlled every area of his life; his own desires were rarely considered. As a result, he believed (and *knew*) that little or nothing was within his control. He *needed* (i.e., did not have) control. His parents were always worried about money and lived in constant fear that something dire would happen to them. As a result, John believed (and in fact *knew*) that he was never safe. He *needed* (i.e., did not have) security. The pressures resulting from his family's beliefs made him want to be alone, but they insisted he be around them. As a result, John believed (and in fact *knew*) that he could never be himself. He *needed* (i.e., did not have) appropriate solitude. The wallpaper of his life told him that life for him was about disapproval, lack of control, insecurity and inability to be truly himself. That was the wallpaper that framed his life every day.

Back to the notion of a sensor. John's sensor, his mind, picked up and displayed the negative messages of the wallpaper of his life, just as the young man in the *New York Times* story moved the objects he thought about. He was in danger of being trapped in a frustrating, negative life. He had to change his wallpaper. He had to take down the old and put up the new.

It is possible for John to do this by himself, but that would be very difficult. The Catholic Church offers several opportunities whereby people like John can take a deep look into their core beliefs and, with the help of God, change them.

One of these opportunities is the [Sacrament of Reconciliation](#), Confession. Though not every confession is radical and life-changing, many people whose lives are difficult have found solace and consolation in a good soul-searching confession. The confessor can help guide this process, and mediate the healing grace that makes a true conversion of heart and mind possible.

Another is through making a retreat. A retreat is a time away for prayer and reflection. Many laymen and women go to various retreat houses for a weekend or a week every year to get to the bottom of things that are bothering them and find a God-given solution.

If you're interested in finding out about how to make a retreat, here is a [list](#) of Catholic retreat houses in the United States and in other countries.

Another way of getting down to the heart of things and staying there on a regular basis is seeing a spiritual director. A spiritual director is a priest, religious or layperson who is specially trained in the guidance of souls and in helping people to grow in the spiritual side of life. Some people see their spiritual director weekly or monthly, depending on their needs. It is good, because it gives them someone to talk to on a regular basis about their spiritual life. A call to some of the retreat houses mentioned above would be one way of finding a spiritual director.

Each of us has within us our mind that God-given sensor that helps us to make our world. When our minds are attuned to God, when we come to understand [the breadth and length, the height and depth of things](#), our lives become much more peaceful and focused.

We are more fully who we were meant to be - people made in the image and likeness of God.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Catholic News

July 12, 2006

[Catholic News Service](#) this morning carried a couple of stories that caught my attention. One was the passing of Father Thomas Stahel, S.J., former editor of [America magazine](#). Over the years I had the privilege of meeting Father Stahel on several occasions. He always impressed me with his gentleness and kindness. For someone who held numerous important jobs in his career (he was Provincial of the Southern Province of the Jesuits and was part of the formation team for novices in Paraguay and Nigeria), he never gave the sense of being anything but a good priest who loved serving the Lord wherever he was. In a post-Katrina issue of America, Father Stahel wrote how the [Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary](#) helped him and provided for him a symbol of the recovery of New Orleans. His fellow Jesuits and the countless people he touched will miss him greatly. May he rest in peace.

The other interesting piece of news on CNS was a story about the co-owner of [Barbaro](#), the Kentucky-Derby-winning horse who was injured at the Preakness. The article tells how her Catholic faith sustains Gretchen Jackson and continues to give her hope for her horse's full recovery. "With an animal, you cannot fake talent, or what you are. It's all exposed, as one is exposed to God," she said. What an insight! She says that taking care of horses such as Barbaro is a God-given responsibility. In an earlier [blog](#) I praised Mrs. Jackson and her husband for their commitment to keeping Barbaro alive and rehabilitating him. It's wonderful to discover that there's a powerful faith commitment behind that decision.

[Zenit.org](#) and other news sources are reporting the resignation of [Dr. Joaquin Navarro-Valls](#) as the head of the [Holy See Press Office](#). He had been in that position for twenty-two years. He is probably best remembered for his accessibility and openness to members of the media. One of the most-recalled moments of his tenure occurred the day before the death of Pope John Paul II, when a reporter asked Navarro-Valls what were his feelings about the imminent death of the Pope. He immediately became choked up and left the room.

Navarro-Valls will be replaced by Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, currently the head of [Vatican Radio](#) and the [Vatican Television Center](#). It is anticipated that Father Lombardi will continue to head both of those agencies.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Of Thoughts and Pigs

**July 11, 2006**

Last week, one of the Gospel readings was [St. Matthew's account](#) of Jesus curing the Gadarene demoniac and sending the demons into the herd of swine. It is, indeed, a strange story; and scripture scholars and homilists have put a great deal of effort into trying to make sense of it.

As often happens with Scripture, when I read the passage in preparation for Mass, I was struck by something I hadn't paid attention to before. My new insight was by no means the "complete answer" to the meaning of the passage, but it had a point nonetheless.

It struck me forcefully that, strangely, the townspeople in the story paid more attention to the fate of the pigs than they did to the fact that the Son of God was in their midst. In fact, they outright demanded that he get out of town! It is very clear from the story that they were afraid of Jesus.

Most of us, I think, can relate to that. We do the same thing all the time. Our attention is taken up with all of the bad news in the world. Yesterday alone, the news was dominated by a building explosion in New York, the drowning of five children who were on an outing in Missouri, and by North Korea's taunting the world with its missile testing. For many, their minds are filled with the latest water-cooler gossip and the ups and downs of their favorite entertainment stars. We need to stay informed, and a certain amount of all of that is fine, but for many the bad news of the day has become a singular preoccupation. When our minds are filled with so much that is negative, it is difficult for us to hear the Good News of God's living presence in our lives. Like the townsfolk in the story, we can become so caught up in the negative and the spectacular that we can lose sight of God in our midst.

What we pay attention to multiplies - that's the rule by which our minds operate. That's why it's good for us to do a little housekeeping every once in awhile to see what thoughts are currently dominating our horizon. We have free will - we don't have to simply absorb the thoughts around us. We can entertain positive, wholesome thoughts and a sense of the presence of God.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## In the Catholic Media

July 6, 2006

As previously mentioned we are in the process of putting together a Catholic Channel in cooperation with [Sirius Satellite Radio](#). It's exciting to be working on such a positive and creative project. One of the best things about the experience has been discovering the wealth of Catholic radio that is out there on the airwaves of America. There are a lot of really creative men and women who are dedicating their lives and their talents toward bringing the Catholic faith into the homes and hearts of millions of people across the country. We'll be presenting some of them on the Catholic Channel once it hits the airwaves in September. For now, I'll let you be surprised. And I know you will be, very pleasantly.

It was rather sad saying goodbye last week to [Art McKenna](#), longtime General Manager of our newspaper *Catholic New York*, who retired last Friday. Over the years, Art and I became friends and engaged in many lengthy and impassioned conversations about the Church's presence in the media. Actually, I did most of the listening, which was fine with me, because those conversations were a graduate course in media and evangelization. I loved how excited Art would always be about the new technology and the ways it would complement, rather than replace, the Catholic newspaper. When we spoke last Friday, his mind was abuzz with new ideas for merging the new technology and the Catholic press. In our last conversation, he pointed out to me how important it is that those of us in every aspect of evangelization keep abreast of what the others are doing. In the past, each of us tended to be isolated, but now we realize how much we have to share together and how greatly we can help each other. I know that Art's expertise will be sought out frequently by those involved with the Catholic media, including me. I am grateful for my friend and mentor, and I look forward to further continuation of our dialogue now that he is freed up from the pressure of deadlines. Thanks, Art, for many wonderful times. I look forward to many more..

Speaking of radio, were you listening a couple of weeks ago when Congressman Peter King gave our radio program "Religion on the Line" the first scoop on his intention to investigate the New York Times for its reporting on a secret financial-monitoring program used to monitor terrorists? I'm not going to take sides one way or the other on that political issue on this website, but it was interesting that he chose our program to break the story to Rabbi Joseph Potasnik and me before he went to the television Sunday talk shows. Maybe it's a good idea to keep the radio tuned to WABC (770 AM in New York) and the computer to [www.wabcradio.com](http://www.wabcradio.com) on Sunday mornings from 7:00 - 10:00. You might just hear it first from us.

By the way, if you want to keep abreast of the news of the Catholic World on a daily basis during the workweek, log on to the [Catholic New York](#) website and click on the stories there plus the "Catholic News Service News of the Day" link from CNS.

For those of you who speak Spanish, there's a long-standing radio program called "Hora Catolica" on Sunday mornings from 8:00 - 9:00 a.m. Father Lorenzo Ato is the host.. The program features inspiration, interviews and phone calls. You can hear it in the New York area on 1280 WADO or listen live anywhere from [their website](#).

Please keep coming back here to keep up to date on Catholic media in the Archdiocese of New York.

--Father Paul Keenan, Archdiocese of New York

## Fullness or Lack?

July 5, 2006

A friend of mine was leaving church on Sunday and happened to run into an old friend of hers. It turned out that they were headed in the same direction, namely, a local gourmet food establishment to do some shopping, so they went together and chatted along the way. My friend's friend teaches six and seven-year-old students, and she was talking about some of the kids and how they learn. One day, she was teaching a class on Jesus and his death and one seven-year-old piped up, "Teacher, I know what [Pontius Pilate's](#) problem was."

"What was it?" the teacher replied, with genuine curiosity.

Came the reply, "He was under a lot of peer pressure."

I laughed when I heard the story, but part of my laughter came from the realization that that young man was absolutely right. If Pontius Pilate had had the courage of his own convictions, the history of humankind would be very different. Somehow this child had intuited what saints and scripture scholars and people like me have struggled to articulate. Pontius Pilate did not have the courage of his convictions.

What happens when we don't have the courage of our convictions? We let others do our thinking for us. And we do that because we are operating out a need for approval. We feel threatened in a situation and, instead of thinking things out for ourselves, we take control of the situation and find security in it by giving in to others, even when we have serious misgivings.

Now, let's be really clear about something: there is nothing wrong with wanting approval, or seeking to be in control of a situation or in wanting to be secure. The problem comes when we approach those things (and life) in a spirit of *want* or *need*.

When we live our lives out of want or need, we are focusing on lack rather than on abundance. And as so many writers on self-help and spirituality with tell you - we get more and more of what we focus on. If we focus on want or need or lack, we'll get more and more of it.

Look at Jesus, for example. He didn't go around in need of an audience, in need of approval, in need of food and clothing and shelter. Nor did he encourage others to do so. He could look at a sick person and see the possibility of a well person. He could look at five loaves and two fishes and see the possibility of feeding a multitude. He could even look at this own crucifixion and see the possibility of his resurrection. When his friends abandoned him and people scorned him, he didn't back down in search of their approval. He stood strong within himself and let his truth be the truth.

This is more than just positive thinking, which often tries to make bad-feeling situations go away by drumming up positive ideas. This is instead an actual commitment to seeing our work and ourselves in their perfection. This is why we call the message of Jesus "Good News." It's *news*. It's not news that we are sinners, that we are capable of doing horrific things in business, in politics and in family life. Stories reporting those things are available to us on channel after channel, station after station, newspaper after newspaper every day of the week. What's new about that? The *news* is that we don't have to *stay* sinners, that God sees us in our perfection, and that we don't have to make the same tragic mistakes over and over again. We can live out of an atmosphere of fullness; we can choose to see things differently.

The [Sacraments](#) are excellent teachers of that truth. Have you noticed that the Sacraments touch every significant time in human life? Baptism = birth. Holy Eucharist = nourishment. Confirmation = growing up. Marriage and Holy Orders = times of life-commitment. Reconciliation = times of repentance. Anointing of the Sick = times of healing from sickness. The Sacraments are constant reminders that grace is everywhere.

Contrary to appearances and to news reports, the Sacraments tell us some real news. They tell us that life is abundant, that we do not have to live in darkness and that good news is everywhere.

Oh, yes, we may feel the fear that Pilate felt at times when life seems to overwhelm us and we are inclined to opt for lesser and seemingly more-convenient "truth." Those are good times to ask ourselves, "How come a seven-year-old boy in a religion class could see what Pilate could not see?"

Whose vision would we prefer to follow?

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Ideologies and Hope

**June 30, 2006**

I was very much struck by [the words of Pope Benedict XVI](#) to the new archbishops who received the [pallium](#) yesterday at St. Peter's on the [Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul](#). In his homily, the Pope told the archbishops that while the Church would always experience the power of evil, that power would never overcome it. He particularly pointed out "the winds of ideologies" that buffet the Church just as the winds buffeted the boat in the [Gospel story](#).

This struck me as an extremely hopeful message, one that would be welcomed not only by the new archbishops but also by other clergy and lay Catholics throughout the world.

It is particularly interesting that the Holy Father made such a point of ideologies. The vitality of people's souls is directly linked to the vitality of their minds. What people think and believe determines how they live, how they treat others, and what moral choices they make. As a history professor I had in college told us, "Ideas have consequences."

A great deal of the problem with ideas lies in the fact that they can be so readily absorbed subliminally. We don't realize that there can be a connection between our fascination with violence in news and entertainment, for example, and the way we treat others at work, at home or behind the wheel. If a subtle message is delivered that violence is normal or acceptable, that can easily become part of our daily life. And that's just one example. Others include sexuality, family issues, economics, business ethics, medical ethics and so on. These are not obscure issues that are the exclusive property of highly-trained experts; they are issues that appear constantly in the media, in most instances presented through the lens of a particular point of view. They are the stuff of family conversations, discussions with neighbors and co-workers, and the content of blogs and podcasts. Values and ideologies are hidden everywhere. The question is, can we recognize them and evaluate them? And on what basis do we do that evaluation?

The question of the evaluation of ideas is a particularly poignant one in our society. Often there is a tendency to say that since any point of view can be expressed, every point of view is valid. One point of view, therefore, is as valid as another. There's a truth to that, of course - the truth that every thought contains a grain of truth in it. But where does that grain of truth go astray, when it does, and how do we know when it does? There has to be a way of discerning what is true from what is false.

It is important that we know what we think, what others think, and why. Otherwise, we end up in a mental and moral fog.

That's why the Holy Father's words yesterday are so encouraging. Staying intellectually and morally sharp in this day and age is a daunting task. The long tradition of the Church has been and continues to be to provide guidance as people sort out the complexities of

daily living. We can be grateful to God for that guidance and do our best to understand and to utilize it as we journey through life.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# Unanswered Prayers?

**June 28, 2006**

"Why don't my prayers get answered?" I can't tell you how many times I have heard people ask that question. At times, I've even asked it myself. It's a great question and one that speaks to the discouragement of many people. What's going on? Does God hate me, or is he getting even with me? Am I doing something wrong? What's the answer?

Let's look for a moment at this question. There's an underlying assumption behind it, and it would be a good idea for us to unearth it, because it subtly leads us to believe something that just isn't true. Can you find the assumption? The question, as stated, assumes that our prayers are not getting answered, and from that assumption proceeds to build the case for their not being answered. The truth is, our prayers are answered all the time, not always in the way that we expect.

We don't always realize it, but prayer (here I'm just talking about prayers of petition; there are many other kinds of prayer) is deeply rooted in who we truly are and what we truly desire. And we don't always know or remember who we truly are, and sometimes we don't know what we truly want. We think we know who we are, but we are not seeing ourselves deeply enough. We think we are asking for what we want, but we may actually be missing something that would more fully give us the essence of our desire.

It gets complicated, because there are some things that we are 100% sure we really want. Our spouse is dying and we pray for him or her to recover. We want that very much, and when it doesn't happen we feel hurt and angry that our heartfelt request was denied. It may take us a while to understand, but the end result of the grieving process is for us to treasure what we derived from our time with our spouse, and to use those gifts as we move on to new life. It's not easy, but the answer to prayer may sometimes come in a very different form from what we expected when we made the prayer. Sometimes our loss results in our creating or taking up a work in their memory, something that gives honor to them while at the same time helping others. Sometimes when it seems as though our request was denied, we may be on the way to something that we would never have thought to ask for, but which is much better for us. We thought we knew who we were and what we wanted, but now we see things differently.

There are times when it seems that our prayers are not being answered, when the problem is that we need to make some changes in our thoughts or feelings. Do we secretly believe (perhaps because people and situations have repeatedly told us) that we are not worthy to receive what we are asking for? We may pray and pray, and all of the right circumstances may be put into place, but if we think we're unworthy we'll never step into the picture.

Are we desperate for the thing we want? People don't always realize it, but being too attached to what we are asking for can actually drive it away from us. A good job interviewer can usually tell when an applicant is desperate for a job. That doesn't work

very well in an interview. When we pray out of desperation, a number of things are involved, none of which is helpful. First of all, we are focusing on our need and on what we don't have, which inevitably brings more and more need and lack to us. That's not a sadistic trick on God's part; it's simply how things work. What we focus on, we get more of - it's often called The Law of Attraction. It works when we focus on fullness and gratefulness, too. Secondly, when we are desperate, we are really saying that, rightly or wrongly, we are people who live in a void. We are defining ourselves as people who lack. That's not who we really are nor is it how God wants us to see ourselves. When it seems that God is withholding a favor, perhaps it is because he wants us to learn to think better of ourselves. He wants us to see ourselves as he sees us - as his beloved children worthy of the best in life. He has no interest in seeing us as sniveling creatures crawling on the ground. He wants us to see ourselves living happy, grateful lives.

Are we grateful enough for the blessings in our lives? When life becomes difficult, we can easily expand our gloom to fit our entire situation. Nothing seems to be going right. The thing is, each and every one of us has something (and usually many things) to be grateful for. Even if we're grateful for the blue sky and the air we breathe and the stars at night, we have reason to be grateful. Like gloom, gratefulness expands. Once we are grateful for the moon and the stars, we can be grateful that we can see them, then grateful that we can feel joy in them, then grateful for the ability to marvel at their beauty. Once we get the gratefulness habit, we find more and more things to be grateful for.

I know that somebody is thinking it. As I'm saying this, someone is thinking that the reason for gratefulness in prayer is that God likes to be flattered or complimented. The truth is, God is just like you and me in this regard. He likes to be complimented but only when the compliment comes from a sincere heart. Being grateful is not about flattering God so that he will grant our request. Praying with a grateful heart means that we express our desire out of the realization that we already have much to be grateful for. We pray, then, knowing that with God's help we have already manifested a great deal of abundance, and that with his help we will manifest this new desire (or something better) as well.

This is an important perspective for us to have, both in praying and in living. I know a man who has been extremely successful in his life. Recently, a friend remarked on the man's ability to express a desire for something and manifest it. The man was astonished. Despite all of his successes, he had never thought of himself as a good manifester. In fact, he thought of himself as a poor manifester, often having to struggle for what he wanted. His friend's remark made him stop and think, and when he did he saw himself in a whole new light. The remark literally changed his life. It makes a real difference whether we approach life (and approach God) as struggling or as successful and willing to add to our success.

What we believe about God and about ourselves is all-important in prayer. So is letting go of results. Remember, God may choose to give us something different from what we asked for, but better. If we insist on our results in our time and in our designated way, we may be disappointed. Either we will not get what we want and miss the higher good that

appears instead, or we will get what we asked for and not be happy. Prayer of petition is not really about the thing we are asking for; it is really about the essence of that thing - what it does for us or means to us. If we're praying to get a particular job, say, we want that job because it will give us greater economic freedom, a friendly workplace and a chance to use our talents in ways that we enjoy. Maybe we didn't get that job, and we feel our prayer wasn't answered, when actually we are being directed toward a better opportunity that will give us more of what we really want. In praying for something, we have to let go and realize that God will either grant us our request or will grant us something that fulfills our desires better.

In conclusion, petitionary prayer is about who we think we are and how we see ourselves before God. We come with a philosophy, a set of beliefs about life, about ourselves and about God. Like the [Prodigal Son](#), we often come pleading, expecting little or even outright rejection. Like the Prodigal Son, our prayer of petition can bring us a wonderful surprise. When we look closely at that parable, we see that the father actually denied the son's request. What he did instead was to give him something infinitely better.

Are you ready to be surprised?

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Vacation from God?

**June 27, 2006**

When it comes down to the summer months, parishioners start saying goodbye, some for a couple of weeks, others for the entire summer. It's an interesting time of year, because as some of our "regulars" go away, our pews become filled with visitors who are vacationing here in New York City and who want to spend some time with God.

When I was a child, our pastor had a standard sermon with which he began the summer months. He was a man who knew how to thunder in the pulpit, a trait that could sometimes be terrifying to a small child. As he got more and more into his sermon, his face would become beet red and as his blood pressure rose, so did his voice. "There may be a vacation from work," he would tell us, "BUT THERE IS NO VACATION FROM GOD!" That was our theme for the summer!

As time went by, the homiletic styles of priests changed, but I never forgot that early-summer sermon of my childhood priest. My fellow preachers and I might say it differently today, but my parish priest was right, absolutely right. There really is no vacation from God.

And the thing is, why would you want to take one?

I can't think of anything more wonderful than taking time in the summer to enjoy consciously the presence of God. Whether we go to the beach or to the mountains, or put up a hammock someplace and laze under a tree, we can consciously enjoy the presence of God. If we stay home and enjoy time with the family, we can thank God for time to spend with the loved ones he has given us. If we go away, going to Mass in a nearby church gives us the sense that in God's family, we belong, even when we are strangers. Our leisure time in the summer is well used when we choose to connect with God our Source. Everything we have comes from him, and our leisure time is a good time to discover him in the midst of it all.

The Psalmist preceded my parish priest by a few centuries with this insight. In [Psalm 139](#), he asks, "Where can I hide from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, you are there too. If I fly with the wings of dawn and alight beyond the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand hold me fast." There is no place from which God is absent. We must be intent upon finding him.

Why is it that so often we fail to see God in the people, places and things in our lives? I believe it has a lot to do with our ability to wonder. [St. Augustine](#) said it well: "People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains, at the huge waves of the seas, at the long course of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and yet they pass by themselves without wondering." The ability to wonder is one of the

greatest gifts God has given us, yet so often we bury it underneath our hectic schedules and the shallow offerings of many of our forms of entertainment.

What is wonder? Wonder is the ability to stand back from our experience and to be amazed by it. Another word for it, although I am not sure it is quite a synonym for it, is appreciation. Like God at the dawn of creation, we look at our experience as say, "This is good and very good." When we appreciate, we are using our abilities as people made in the image and likeness of God.

But Augustine is making a deeper point. In order to find wonder, we must take time to wonder at ourselves. To truly wonder about ourselves, it is not enough that we be puzzled - that can be crippling. To truly wonder about ourselves, we must be appreciative of ourselves. That may take some work. Far too many of us were told that we would amount to nothing or were plagued with worry about whether we would succeed in life. From our human perspective, it may seem that we will not wonder about God or about anything else in the truest sense unless we first appreciate ourselves. But actually, as St. John tells us, it is the other way around: "We love because he first loved us. ([1 John 4: 19](#))." It is God's love that comes and rescues us from our wounds, sins and bad habits, although to us it may seem that we made the first move! When that happens, true appreciation can begin. And true wonder.

Yes, there is no vacation from God, and that is a good thing. If there were, we would be locked into so much negativity and evil. As it stands, we can be free.

When it comes right down to it, there is no vacation from God because God refuses to take a vacation from us.

Think about that one for a while.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# The Wisdom of Waiting

June 19, 2006

I love it when, while I am reading a book, especially a familiar one, a particular passage leaps out and points out something very profound about life.

Recently, while re-reading Frances Mayes best-selling book, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, I was delighted to discover this passage and its marvelous wisdom.

"Lying awake, I feel the familiar sense of the Answer arriving. Like answers on the bottom of the black fortune-telling eight ball that I loved when I was ten, often I can feel an idea or the solution to a dilemma floating up through murky liquid, then it is as if I see the suddenly clear white writing. I like the charged zone of waiting, a mental and physical sensation of the bends as something mysterious zigzags to the surface of consciousness." {Frances Mayes, *Under the Tuscan Sun* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996, p. 19.)

Waiting is something many of us find difficult to do. We are information-age people, practical, get-the-job-done people, and we want what we want now. "The charged zone of waiting" is uncomfortable for us.

Yet much of life is spent in waiting, and if we savor those moments of waiting, we will find something truly delicious. An expectant mother waits for the birth of her child, and those months can be a time of deep bonding and of experiencing a very special fullness of life. A college student waits for graduation, and those long years of study are often a time of strong intellectual and personal growth.

Waiting can be hard. I know a man who has been waiting for three years for someone to donate the kidney that will bring him closer to good health. There is a definite frustration in his tone of voice when he speaks of his situation. Yet at the same time, he is using those moments to engage in activities, such as coaching, that benefit others and remind him that this long period of anticipation does not render him useless. He is continuing to live and to exhibit remarkable courage.

In times of waiting, it is important to capture the spirit of the first sentence of Frances Mayes's paragraph: "Lying awake, I feel the familiar sense of the Answer arriving." In the face of discouragement and apparent failure, it is all too easy to give up on the arrival of the Answer. We may not always feel "the solution to a dilemma floating up through murky liquid;" we may not feel the solution at all. Yet it is important that we continue to believe in the solution, not necessarily as coming via the route we imagine, but somehow.

The companion word to "waiting" is "hope." Hope is not, as we ordinarily express it, a wish contrary to fact. Rather, hope is a trust that God, in his infinite wisdom and marvelous creativity, will bring the solution our way, and in a way that is for the highest

good of all. In fact, one of the benefits of our times of waiting is that it strengthens the virtue of hope in us. Hope is the special gift that waiting gives to our souls.

Waiting also brings us wisdom and a certain self-understanding. In times of waiting, we may come to realize that certain beliefs and attitudes of ours may actually be blocking our solution, our good. We may harbor a belief that God is not anxious to give us what we want. We may believe that we are destined to be on the short end of the stick when it comes to receiving the blessings of life. We may feel that we are not worthy to have our desires fulfilled. During times of waiting, we can learn much about our philosophy of life and can remove unhelpful attitudes and adopt better ones. Waiting and learning go hand in hand.

Here in North America, it is summer. The summer months are often times of waiting. We wait for vacation, perhaps. Or we wait for the rhythm of the work-year to begin again. We may find ourselves occasionally bored by the long hot summer days. We wait. We wait. We wait. It is good for us to remember that this, and all of the times of waiting in our lives, can be times of growth, of anticipation, and of eagerness. We can learn to reap the benefits of hope.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

# The Power of Concerned Optimism

**June 14, 2006**

Not long ago, I was at a party which many people attended, most of whom did not know each other. Everyone was having a wonderful time chatting, eating hamburgers and hot dogs and enjoying the lovely day and the good companionship. Suddenly, one of the guests, an older woman who had been responsible for much of the planning for the party, dropped her plate and slumped over in a kind of stupor. Apparently, she had been out in the sun too long and it was too much for her.

What happened next was amazing. Once people realized what was happening, everyone rushed to help. People gently lifted her chair and moved her out of the sun into the shade. Someone called 911. People got wet towels to place on her neck, and one woman held the towels against her neck and held up her head. People were talking to her, comforting her, consoling her. Before long, an ambulance came and took her to a nearby hospital. One of the guests rode in the ambulance with her so that she wouldn't be alone.

Now, one would think that an incident like this would ruin the party. Amazingly, it didn't. Once the ambulance left, people went back to milling and chatting and making the day happy. Yet through all of this, the woman was on everyone's mind and everyone expressed concern for her. When new guests arrived, they learned about the incident and themselves expressed concern. Yet the spirit of the party went on in a happy and festive fashion.

Now here's a lesson in optimism. After she was hospitalized, the woman (who, after undergoing some tests will be home again and okay) remarked, "It was a good thing that this happened where it did. Imagine what would have happened if I had not been at the party and had been home alone." Talk about seeing the silver lining in the storm cloud!

What impressed me so much was the genuine concern that total strangers continued to express for a woman whom most didn't know. The host of the party remarked that days later, people were calling and e-mailing to find out how she was, and they were genuinely relieved to find that she was going to be okay.

It's encouraging to know that there is that kind of positive and caring attitude alive in the world. We hear so much discouraging news that it is easy to become discouraged ourselves and even cynical about the level of goodness in the world. The whole incident, to me, was a lesson in the power of joy and of friendship.

Sometimes, things happen to us that are tragic, or happen to people we know, or even to total strangers. We need to act positively with care and concern when those things happen. But, like the guests at the party, we need not let that misfortune ruin our spirits. We can go on, as the party did, without letting the moment be ruined, yet at the same time continuing to care and be involved.

The power of concerned optimism is an amazing thing!

# Where Is God? Where Are We?

**June 8, 2006**

I was interested to see a [letter to the editor](#) of the New York Daily News this morning from Bishop Francisco J. Betancourt of the Catholic Apostolic Church in North America commenting on a column written by [Richard Cohen](#) in last Tuesday's Daily News. In his column, Cohen questioned the words of Pope Benedict XVI at Auschwitz, particularly when he said, "In a place like this, words fail. In the end, there can only be a dread silence - a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God. Why, Lord, did You remain silent? How could You tolerate all this?" Cohen said that the Pope's words could give the impression that if God could be silent in the face of Auschwitz, then the Church could be silent, too.

The Bishop pointed out that Cohen was raising the wrong question in trying to wrestle with the meaning of the Pope's words. The real question," the Bishop wrote, "is, 'Why do we turn a deaf ear to the presence of God in our lives?' Why do we choose to hate instead of love? Silence is a choice often made by religious and world leaders. It is a choice made by the common man. God is present to us, we are often not present to God."

In response to both men, let me say that I do not espouse the belief that the Church was silent in the face of the Holocaust. There are numerous [resources](#) that indicate otherwise.

What I objected to about Cohen's column was that, like so many of the media who reported on the Pope's visit to Auschwitz, he took the Pope's words out of context. Here's what the Pope [actually said](#):

How many questions arise in this place! Constantly the question comes up: Where was God in those days? Why was he silent? How could he permit this endless slaughter, this triumph of evil? The words of Psalm 44 come to mind, Israel's lament for its woes: "You have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness ... because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!" (*Ps* 44:19, 22-26). This cry of anguish, which Israel raised to God in its suffering, at moments of deep distress, is also the cry for help raised by all those who in every age - yesterday, today and tomorrow - suffer for the love of God, for the love of truth and goodness. How many they are, even in our own day!

We cannot peer into God's mysterious plan - we see only piecemeal, and we would be wrong to set ourselves up as judges of God and history. Then we would not be defending man, but only contributing to his downfall. No - when all is said and done, we must continue to cry out humbly yet insistently to God: Rouse

yourself! Do not forget mankind, your creature! And our cry to God must also be a cry that pierces our very heart, a cry that awakens within us God's hidden presence - so that his power, the power he has planted in our hearts, will not be buried or choked within us by the mire of selfishness, pusillanimity, indifference or opportunism.

I can well understand people's confusion about the Pope's words at Auschwitz, since they were widely reported out of context. It does not appear to me that the Pope is suggesting that God was looking the other way when the Holocaust happened. It appears to me that he is giving voice to some of the many questions that human beings have asked over the years in the face of that terrible tragedy. I do not read the Pope's words as suggesting that God was silent. Then where was God? I think the Pope is saying that the answer to that is a mystery, and indeed it is. He is saying, however, that the best prayer humankind can offer is a prayer asking God to see to it that his presence is made known to us and that his presence may not be choked within us.

That's where the Bishop's letter comes in. It dovetails nicely with the Pope's comments about our selfishness, pusillanimity, indifference and opportunism. Where are we when it comes to God? Have we turned away and hence cannot see his presence or hear his voice? He raises an important question.

Cohen seems to suggest in his column that the Pope was looking for a way to get the Church off the hook in the face of accusations of its silence during the Holocaust. I see that as a complete misreading of the Pope's intentions, and one wonders what good can possibly come from such speculation. We are far better served, I think, by some comments of a rabbi friend of mine who, when faced with questions about Catholic culpability for the Holocaust says that, since the Holocaust took place, it's clear that everyone could have done more. Why single out one group, he asks, when so many others did and said so little? Again, I refer the reader to the documents referenced above which indicate how much the Church did to ward off the Holocaust. Yet it's true - even all of that wasn't enough.

Over the years, I have learned that genuine interfaith dialogue demands both the acknowledgement of differences on the one hand and mutual respect on the other. Without the acknowledgement of differences, all you have is useless glad-handing which is a complete waste of time. Without the mutual respect what you have is backstabbing which only makes matters worse. There will always be questions, but they must be asked - and when they can be, answered - in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Lacking that, we are back to the Bishop's question, "Why do we choose to hate instead of love?"

# The Gift of Reflection

June 7, 2006

One of the most pressing needs of humankind today is to realize the power of our ability to think and reflect critically. Today we are literally bombarded with messages of every sort, filled with presuppositions about what human nature is, what the purpose of life should be and how to be happy. Some of the messages are subtle; a lot of them are straight upfront. We hear them on radio, see them on television, read them in the way news stories are reported and find them in the presuppositions behind much of our daily conversation.

Increasingly, I am inclined to believe that the most important question we can ask today is, "What is the presupposition here?" Once we learn to ask that question and to reflect upon what we find, we have taken a big step toward living in a human way.

Across the history of spirituality, men and women have been urged to "wake up." [St. Peter](#) told his followers, "Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for (someone) to devour. Resist him, steadfast in faith."

[Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins](#) reminds us of the importance of staying awake, spiritually. One of the great tactics of evil is to throw us off guard, to surprise us. If we are not alert to what is happening, we can fall prey to temptation.

I remember my freshman English professor in college, Father Lakas, telling us to maintain our curiosity by asking two questions about any situation that confronts us: what is it, and how many of it are there. What is it? That's an important question because it helps us to know whether this particular thing or experience is good or bad for us. "What is it?" is shorthand for "Know what you are doing." "How many of them are there?" seems like a strange question when we first hear it. But actually, one very good way of getting to know something is to know things that are like it. I might not always know what is good, but if I have a good sense by analogy of what things are good, it helps me in my quest to do good and avoid evil. I have a more or less general principle to apply to this particular case.

We should take time to cherish the wonderful gift of reflection that God has given us. Since as human beings we are, as Aristotle said, "rational animals," when we take time to develop our reflective capacities, we are exercising our humanity in a very essential way.

# Empire State Catholics and The Catholic Channel

**June 6, 2006**

Just a few moments ago, right before sitting down to write, I was reading the galleys of a soon-to-be-published book, *Empire State Catholics* by Father Thomas J. Shelley, published by *Editions du Signe*. The book is written primarily for children as a religion and social studies textbook, but adults (or should I say children of all ages?) would find this book enjoyable reading, particularly if history is your forte.

I've read the book several times already in various stages of its development (I had the privilege of writing the Introduction), and one of the things that struck me so forcefully each time was the realization of how the Catholic Church stepped in whenever there was a need, identifying it and filling it. Whether the need was for parishes, clergy, schools, orphanages, social services for the poor, organizations to benefit young people - wherever the need arose, the Catholic Church was there.

That's a very powerful lesson when you stop to think about it. I'm not sure that Catholics often take time to think about their religion and how much it has contributed to the culture of New York State. (Elsewhere, too, of course, but the focus of the book is the Empire State.) It is a lesson that can help us in our daily life.

It's impossible to get through life (much less a day) without facing challenges, sometimes ones that seem insurmountable. There's an optimism inherent in the Catholic faith which enables us to roll up our sleeves and get to work. That doesn't mean we don't get discouraged or even grow weary sometimes. It means that when we do feel those things, we have somewhere to go. In our times of discouragement, the Church leads us to God.

"If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God." Those words of Dorothy Day, the foundress of the [Catholic Worker Movement](#), summarize the Catholic spirit that I am describing. Of course, that spirit is present in people of other faiths, too, but I'm reading about Catholicism and I'm thinking that Catholics often don't spend much time reflecting upon what makes them tick as Catholics. The Catholic spirit, buoyed by the seven sacraments, reflects a belief that God is truly present daily and in all of the major moments of life. The Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist) show God's presence in the beginnings of our lives (and particularly in the case of the Eucharist, every day). The Sacraments of Healing (Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick) show us that God is present as a healing force in moments of pain and suffering. Marriage and Holy Orders, the Sacraments in the Service of Communion, reflect that we are best acting in God's image and likeness when we are serving others in his name. The sacraments remind us: God is present everywhere. And they make it possible for us to call upon him when we are faced with challenges.

I hope that when *Empire State Catholics* is published (it should be in the next couple of months) that it will reach not only schoolchildren but their parents and other relatives as

well. Particularly today, Catholics need to feel proud of who they are and to bask in the hope that is so much their hallmark and their heritage.

Speaking of our Catholic heritage, these are exciting days as we prepare to launch the new Catholic Channel on [Sirius Satellite Radio](#). We are planning to have it up and running in September. We think that this channel will provide interesting, interactive programs that will stimulate good conversation and exchange of ideas on subjects of interest to Catholics. This will include news, sports, marriage and family issues, music, inspiration, current topics in the news, family issues, and much much more. We'll have Mass from the Cathedral of St. Patrick in New York City as well as from other major cathedrals and churches around the United States. All in all, it will be a lifestyle channel that will present our Catholic faith to today's active and well-informed person. I'll be telling you more as things develop and especially when we're getting close to startup.

## A Bee in My Bonnet

June 2, 2006

Words, like anything else, can be underused, overused or used appropriately. I just read a wonderful column in the *Christian Science Monitor* in which satirist David Martin encourages us to ["Break Free From Verbose Verbiage."](#) As you'll see if you wander over to that link, it's a satirical piece on how sometimes we use (and overuse) big words in order to impress ourselves and others. Any of us who have read much technical or academic writing have seen many examples of this. The best writers are the ones who write from the heart and in down to earth language. (Did I just skewer *Finnegan's Wake*?)

There's a place for big and awkward words and one of those places is a spelling bee. I hadn't thought much about spelling bees in years, not since I misspelled "acquaint" in an eight-grade spelling bee. (That was before I knew Latin other than what we had memorized for serving Mass. Once I hit Latin I in high school, making a mistake like that was forever behind me.)

So I was, shall we say, quite astonished when I got a phone call from a friend all excited that ABC was televising the [Scripps National Spelling Bee](#). When I turned on my set, sure enough, there were a bunch of teenage kids spelling words that could best be described as jawbreakers. I had been listening to some nice classical music on the radio, and I must confess I was not thrilled at the prospect of watching a spelling bee. I hung in there for a while, and eventually switched back to the radio (surprise, surprise).

When I woke up this morning and booted up the computer, what did I discover as the Top Story In The News but *the spelling bee*! For the second time in twenty-four hours, I couldn't believe my eyes. "There must be something to all of this that I'm missing," said I." So I thought about it.

Sometimes I find it helpful, when puzzling something out, to ask myself "What's missing?" When I thought of that in terms of the spelling bee, the answer was obvious. What I didn't see were kids doing drugs, engaging in promiscuous behavior, sassing their parents, dissing their teachers or involving themselves in gratuitous violence. What I *did* see were kids who were with their parents, learning something, interested in language, up for a challenge and involved in improving themselves. And when I stopped to think that the kids in that final competition represented only a handful of all those other youngsters across the nation and around the world who had competed in previous spelling bees back home, the magnitude of what I had seen truly came home to me.

"What does this have to do with religion?" you may be asking. Both religion and spirituality, I believe, get us to think about things at more than just the surface level. I wonder how many people tuning in to ABC last night were annoyed that their favorite program had been preempted by a spelling bee? I wonder how many people, like myself, looked in and said, "You've got to be kidding." But once I began to do some serious

reflecting about my attitude, I saw there was a broader and a deeper level from which to view the event. Once I got that insight, there was no turning back to my initial superficial point of view. I was wrong, and I hit upon a truth, and there is no turning back.

Jesus spent his earthly life trying to get people to see beyond appearances and envision a deeper level of truth. A farmer sowing seed is an image of the Kingdom of Heaven. A widow putting two small coins into the Temple treasury has given more than all the rest. Five loaves and two fishes are suddenly enough to feed an entire crowd of thousands. The shortest man in town (Zacchaeus) becomes a man everyone is to look up to. Time and time again, Jesus amazed people (angered them, too) by insisting that they look more deeply than they ordinarily would.

Sometimes his challenge could be downright puzzling. Nicodemus could not figure out how to be born again. Peter could not believe he was walking on water. Thomas had to put his hands into Jesus' wounds before believing in the Resurrection.

Yet that's the demand - change your perspective. Stop seeing things superficially and realize that God has planted a deeper message into things we think are cut and dried.

I started this by talking about simple and complex words, so I'd like to come full circle. Jesus used very simple words to convey his message, words that take us to the very bottom of our being and of being itself. Theologians sometimes describe these as "primal words," the very saying of which touches the bottom of the heart. We see it especially in the writings of John, with words like "bread," "life," "love," "good shepherd," "vine and branches," "truth," "I Am." Saying these words out loud, we are instantly drawn beyond their mundane significance straight into the language of the heart, indeed the language of the soul. That's the difference between Jesus' words and the highfalutin words that David Martin satirizes in his article. Jesus words are, as he himself pointed out, words of Spirit and Life. And so should ours be.

## A Look at the News

**June 1, 2006**

It's the first of June, and it's as good a time as any to catch up on some of the news.

June marks the [annual spring meeting](#) of the U.S. Catholic Bishops in Los Angeles. The bishops will meet June 15-17 and will discuss a variety of important subjects. These include a vote on adaptations to the Order of the Mass and liturgical translations by the International Committee on English in the Liturgy; among other things.

What's up with the changes in the Order of the Mass? In their June meeting, the U.S. Bishops will vote on a new translation. Vatican approval is required subsequent to their vote, should the bishops approve the new translation. Among the changes: "And with your spirit" would be the congregation's response to "The Lord be with you." A portion of the *Confiteor* (I Confess) would be altered to say, "I have sinned greatly... through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." The Nicene Creed will begin, "I believe" instead of "We believe." The *Sanctus* would begin, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts." A backgrounder of these changes can be found at [CatholicOnline.com](#)

There continues to be a good deal of news surrounding stem cell research. One of the most striking stories comes from The Catholic Healthcare Partnership of New Jersey and the New Jersey Catholic Conference, who jointly announced an initiative on the part of the Catholic Hospitals in New Jersey to encourage the donation of adult stem cells via umbilical cord and placenta blood donation. It should be carefully noted that this initiative is limited exclusively to adult stem cell donations, and does not involve embryonic stem cells. More information can be found on the website of the [Diocese of Paterson](#).

Meanwhile, Governor Jim Doyle of Wisconsin has rejected the appeals of the Wisconsin Bishops to reconsider his stance in favor of embryonic stem cell research. In a [letter](#) dated May 22, Bishops Timothy Dolan and Robert Morlino urged the governor to rethink the state's policy on the destruction of human embryos.

Meanwhile, studies show that the majority of Americans continue to oppose embryonic stem cell research. A recent poll commissioned by the USCCB shows that nearly half of the 1000 adult respondents opposed embryonic stem cell research while only 38.6% supported it. The poll also shows overwhelming opposition to human cloning. Details of this research can be found at the [USCCB](#) website.

In another front, the head of Catholic Charities, Father Larry Snyder, visited the Gulf Coast to thank the workers for the tremendous effort they made to assist those who were affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The [Sun Herald](#) reported on the phenomenal work of Catholic Charities in serving over 13, 500 people with 96 tons of supplies. To read of the relief efforts in the affected areas, go to the [Catholic Charities USA](#) website.

June has traditionally been known as the month of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Recently Pope Benedict XVI wrote to Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, urging the Jesuits to continue to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart, a task which they have undertaken for some 150 years. A [summary](#) of the letter can be found at Catholic Online. For an article describing to a general audience our devotion to the Sacred Heart, go to [SoulfulLiving.com](http://SoulfulLiving.com)

## Willing to Fail

May 31, 2006

Today I celebrated Mass for the Feast of the Visitation of Mary. This feast commemorates the visitation of Elizabeth by her cousin Mary after Mary consented to the angel Gabriel's (and really God's) request that she be the Mother of God. Mary undertook that long journey to see Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. The whole beautiful story is revealed in the Gospel of [Luke \(1: 36-56\)](#).

Reflecting on the feast, I am struck by the generosity of the Holy Family (and Elizabeth, too, in this story). Mary, Joseph, and later Jesus all manifested the characteristic of being able to look past their own needs to tend to the needs of others. Joseph did it for Mary; when he was tempted to divorce her quietly upon the announcement of her pregnancy, he instead listened to the guidance of a dream that told him to take her as his wife. Mary did it for Elizabeth - after the startling announcement by the angel, Mary went off to aid her cousin. From the Cross, Jesus looked to Mary and to John and gave them into each other's care. Elizabeth, when the child leapt in her womb, took time to honor Mary with humble words of praise.

The Feast of the Visitation of Mary teaches us a wonderful lesson. When we are in need we can still reach out and help others. We may feel powerless at the moment, but sometimes when we help others we find our own spirits lifted.

When we don't do that, it is often because we think we can't. I liked what the poet Mary Karr said in a [Beliefnet interview](#) in which she outlined her harrowing journey from alcoholism to Catholicism. "The thing I have to do as a writer, and that God permits me to do, is that I have to be willing to fail." That's the secret. We have to be willing to fail. There's a saying in the sacred writings of Hinduism: "Act without experiencing the fruits of action." That applies to us all. When we try things, we have no guarantee that we are going to be successful. But the effort itself releases grace into the world, and that is really more important than the anticipated results. And sometimes we fail, but then something better happens as a result. There's a book called [Good News for Bad Days](#) that will tell you something about that.

The Holy Family knew that secret. I think of Jesus and his earthly mission. From one point of view it ended in crucifixion, and he expressed his willingness to accept that possibility, if it came, in the words, "Not my will, but thine be done."

We, too, can have that spirit. We can look past our needs and (without neglecting to tend to them) try to help others. Whether our efforts succeed or not, we will have released grace into the world and blessed it.

## Faith, Three Ladies and "The Da Vinci Code"

May 30, 2006

Over the weekend, someone e-mailed me the text of a [column](#) by the Episcopalian bishop John Shelby Spong in which he gave his review of *The Da Vinci Code*. I haven't seen the movie yet, so I don't want to say anything about the Bishop's review of it. Perhaps another time, we'll see.

What troubled me, though, about the Bishop's article was what he said in the second and third paragraphs. There, he spoke of his experience at the movie theater as he was on his way to see the show. On arriving, he met three Roman Catholic women who were picketing the theater and carrying a placard reading "*The Da Vinci Code* insults our Lord and his Church. Stop blasphemy." The Bishop then showed the ladies his press card and began to interview them. Upon questioning, he learned that they had neither read the book nor seen the movie because they would not dream of reading (or seeing) blasphemy. When asked how they knew that the movie insulted their Lord and his Church, the ladies replied, "Our church said so." When they expressed praise for Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, the bishop told them that most biblical scholars regard the film as a gross distortion of the New Testament. The ladies replied, "Our church told us that it [the movie] was true." The bishop ended the paragraph with the words of an unidentified evangelical leader: "We live in a Jesus-haunted culture that is biblically illiterate."

Two things troubled me about the Bishop's relating of this story.

One, it isn't said, but one gets the impression from this story that the Bishop thinks that Catholics are biblically illiterate and refuse to think for themselves. Perhaps he thinks it's true most Protestants, too, since he says, "We live." Now, I'm the first to admit that there are Catholics who don't know very much about the Bible, but that is less and less true today than it was years ago. Good books on Scripture for Catholics are more readily available today than ever before. More and more Catholics are making retreats, attending bible studies, even getting advanced degrees in theology. To imply that Roman Catholics are biblically illiterate is simply not true.

But what really troubles me about the Bishop's story is the implication that there was something wrong with those three ladies. The Bishop might disagree with their stance, even disagree with their theology, and that's fine. But what strikes me is that here are three ladies with enough courage of their convictions to take a public stand. I myself might choose to do it differently, but why subject them to almost ridicule in the column?

While I think most Roman Catholics today approach books and movies with more education and reflection than on the surface those three ladies appear to, it is not right to hold them up as foolish for believing as they do. I doubt that most Catholics today approach values without engaging in some sort of reflection. And as for these ladies, I would wager that, had their religious leaders told them that Jesus was married to Mary

Magdalene and had a child by her, they would not have hesitated to affirm that those leaders were wrong. Just because they claim to adhere to the teachings of the Church does not make them ignorant or unreflective.

All of us need to be very careful when we try to judge the faith of other persons. What on the surface might seem to be a very superficial faith may, in reality, be a very deep and committed one. Every person's faith is unique, even when we are members of the same faith community.

## The Catholic Church -- An Easy Target?

May 26, 2006

In Thursday's *New York Daily News*, columnist Stanley Crouch writes about the Catholic Church, Madonna, *The Da Vinci Code*, and what motivates Hollywood. It's a complex piece, and I hope I'm not misunderstanding it. It seems to be about to suggest at first that the Catholic Church deserves what it gets when Madonna or a movie such as *The Da Vinci Code* mocks or misrepresents the Church because of the way in which the leadership of the Catholic Church handled the sexual abuse crisis. But on the other hand, it seems to be saying that there's no point to the claims that the aforementioned phenomena are anti-Catholic, because Hollywood knows that the public loves stunts (as he refers to Madonna's performance) and conspiracies (*a la The Da Vinci Code*). Then, having brought up the clergy sexual abuse crisis at the top of his column, Mr. Crouch says that "ignoring all of that" the reason that the Church is taking its lumps is not anti-Catholicism but because Hollywood knows that stunts and conspiracies will sell. The Church, he says, is a fair target because it stands against what is "defined by the left as liberal and modern."

*"Ubinam gentium sumus?"* Cicero once asked. "Where in the world are we?"

How can you bring up the sexual abuse crisis, and then say, "Ignoring all that...?" Why make such a point of it if you're going to ignore it? Why bring it up at all if, by your own admission, it's not germane to your column? And once you've highlighted it, how can you ignore it?

And why, pray tell, bring up only one aspect of the sexual abuse crisis - the Church's mistakes? If you're going to refer to the crisis, why not also mention the Church's sincere and forceful efforts to atone for those mistakes and correct them? If you're going to tell one side of the story, then why not tell the other, before telling us to ignore it?

Mr. Crouch is right, I think, when he says that things like Madonna and *The Da Vinci Code* are motivated by the desire for profit. But that doesn't mean that they are not to be taken as anti-Catholic. Mr. Crouch himself admits that one reason the Church is taking a hit is that it stands for values which are not appreciated by much of modern society. To suggest (and this is what I think Mr. Crouch is doing) that Catholics should not take the message of these entertainments too seriously is a little like saying that a man's wife should not be upset if he abuses her because someone is paying him to. After all, the argument seems to go, he's really doing it for profit, so she shouldn't take it personally.

That doesn't make sense to me. Yes, the Church is an easy target because of what it stands for (not only for what it stands *against*). But that doesn't mean that it's somehow okay or inconsequential for that to happen. Catholics have every right to be upset. It should matter to them when their faith is mocked or misrepresented. Because, let's face it, "inordinate hostility toward the Catholic Church" is, unfortunately, alive and well.

# Ideas, Creativity and the Great Chain of Being

**May 24, 2006**

Who knows why certain ideas appear in our minds when they do? For some reason that I cannot imagine, a memory came to me of a man I knew vaguely some fifty years ago. My father used to buy his newspaper on his way to work at a store operated by a man who was blind. Unfailingly, if you asked for a particular newspaper, the man would get it for you and make the correct change. He ran a successful business and people seemed to like him.

My father was the sort of man who talked to everybody. It didn't matter to him whether you were the President or the man at the local shoeshine parlor, if you were around, my father befriended you and treated you with deep respect. That's the sort of man he was, my father. It goes without saying, then, that Dad often got into conversation with the man at the newspaper store and discovered that, when he wasn't selling newspapers, he was a piano tuner. I remember my father coming home and telling me, with the greatest admiration in his voice, about the blind man who ran a successful newspaper business and was a piano tuner to boot. I think he wanted me to share his respect for the man (whom I would see when occasionally I accompanied my father to work) and also to learn the lesson that when life gives you a limitation, you should look for avenues of opportunity that might be, quite literally, at your fingertips. My father was good at imparting lessons like that.

Over the years, I have thought of that man from time to time and recalled Dad's earnest lessons. For some reason, when I thought of him this morning, I thought of him in a whole new way. It occurred to me that if that man was a piano tuner, he must also have been something of a pianist. How could a room he inhabited ever be dark when he filled it with beautiful music? The thought brought me up short, as I thought of that gifted man happily playing his music and sharing it with others. I hope Sister Rita, my freshman high school English teacher, who keeps track of me (along with our friend Sister Raymond) from out in Kansas, doesn't read this blog because I am about to mix a metaphor. I want to say that the man lit up his world through sound.

The other thought that occurred to me for the first time (which is the one Dad probably wanted me to get most of all, even fifty years late) was that despite or because of his adversity, my Dad's friend determined to make a rich and varied life for himself. He had many talents and interests and he used them to diversify and enrich his life and the lives of others. He could have lived a sheltered and narrow life; instead he lived a broad and diverse one. He made his life interesting and purposeful.

Now, you probably think this blog is about making the most of limitations and adversities, but it's not. (I've written about that at much greater length in [Good News for](#)

*Bad Days: Living a Soulful Life (Warner Books, 1998.)* No, this blog is about ideas, creativity and the great chain of being. Are we there yet?

What amazes me is how an idea (of the man in the newspaper store) that I've had in my head for over fifty years and have thought about, when I did, in pretty much the same way every time, suddenly burst into new life and new dimension. I had not thought about him as a pianist nor had I thought about the rich variety that was his life. It seems as though this fairly monochrome idea suddenly burst forth into color and range, giving me a whole new line of thought, a new level of appreciation, a new locus of wonder and an enhanced outlook on life. It had been sitting there sort of like a lump and suddenly it was alive and blossoming, even splaying like a firecracker.

It's a little like the well-known Shakespeare quote: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Suddenly something familiar and oft-forgotten takes on a new life of its own. What happened?

It's tempting to use the word "epiphany," but that wonderful Joycean concept has been way overused, and it's a little too subjectively-oriented for my tastes, anyway. It's not enough to say I had this experience; I want to know *why*.

And the *why*, I think, has to do with something I talked about yesterday in this blog when I was taking about whether we should value things simply because they are productive or wealth-producing. I said, responding negatively to those two suggestions, that we should value things because they exist, because they are. People, places and things are priceless because they *are*.

I remember back in college when we were first studying Thomas Aquinas and learning of his doctrine of the "act of existing," I thought I had landed on a far-off planet whose inhabitants spoke a language I didn't know. But here you have it - some powerful force in my idea lay dormant until this morning when it broke through into newness. And that powerful force, I believe, is the existence of the idea. The new manifestation came from the power of its existence.

And that's what I want to say about existence. We pooh-pooh existence as though it were no big deal, when actually it is the power within that can burst forth in remarkable dimensions. That's what creativity is all about. And creativity is not limited to the specially gifted, no sir, no ma'am. My father's friend was a perfect example of that. I'm sure many people tried to stereotype him and even encouraged him to think of himself as handicapped. I doubt that he knew much about "the act of existing," but he certainly knew what to do with it. He allowed it to burst forth into his store, his piano tuning and his music. That's why my Dad wanted me to know about him, so that maybe, just maybe, I would be like him.

One last thing. Whether you believe in evolution, the Big Bang or the seven days of creation, you have to reckon with the act of existing because, as St. Thomas used to say, "good is diffusive of itself" and that fact is at the very heart of creation. From Almighty

God down to the tiniest creature or smallest particle of energy in the universe, the great chain of being from beginning to end is a tribute to the evocative power of existence. That creative power is in our every breath and heartbeat, and there is nothing we can do about it except, if we have any sense, admire it and enjoy it.

So there you have it, as promised - ideas, creativity and the great chain of being. If one drop of an idea lying in my head for fifty years can burst forth into new vitality, then what can one human being, perhaps feeling useless, worthless and unloved, do for the world when he or she comes to realize the wonder of existence and allows that great inward idea to empower them to enrich the world?

# Horse Sense

May 23, 2006

## Horse Sense

I didn't see the Preakness last Saturday. Nonetheless, like so many others, I was touched by the tragic events surrounding the Kentucky Derby winner, Barbaro. To see a beautiful champion animal lose his ability to race in just a matter of seconds was truly heartbreaking.

From what I can tell, the owners, the jockey, the handlers and the medical team that performed surgery on Barbaro all acted out of concern for the horse and his well-being. I felt very good about that, and they are to be commended for it. What I am about to say should not be taken as a criticism of them, but rather the criticism of an idea. Perhaps the statement I am about to take exception to was taken out of context, but when I read it, it jarred me to the bone. The statement I'm referring to is a reported statement allegedly made by the surgeon on one of the morning news shows. It was this: "Realistically, it's going to be months before we know if he's going to make it. We're salvaging him as a breeding animal."

Now, the doctor may have simply meant to say that Barbaro would not race again, I don't know. I don't want to put words into his mouth; I am criticizing an idea here, not a person. But what jarred me about that statement was the question, "What if it turns out that Barbaro can't be a breeding animal? Is breeding the only reason for saving his life? Couldn't he be saved just because he is a *horse*?"

The doctor may not have meant anything by it, but, perhaps unwittingly, his words touched on something that unfortunately is all too prevalent in our society: the notion that something is valuable only insofar as it is useful, even profitable. Perhaps my questions are inspired by the fact that last night on television I heard an expert on horseracing comment on just how lucrative Barbaro's career as a breeding horse might be.

But the question continues to haunt me: Is it worthwhile to save the horse regardless of whether he can breed? And my answer is, "I hope so."

I hope we have not reached the point where we feel that something is valuable only if it brings financial gain or prestige into our lives. I like to think that we believe that people, animals and things have value even if they do not show up in the account book. I keep thinking of the words of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta: "The poor give us much more than we give them. They're such strong people, living day to day with no food, and they never curse, never complain. We don't have to give them pity or sympathy. We have so much to learn from them." People who love plants and animals know that they, too, are remarkable teachers.

When does someone or something have value? When it exists. That is so simple, really. I remember when I was a kid we lived a few doors down from a man who was a singer on a popular television program. I was thinking about how "neat" that was, when suddenly I stopped dead in my tracks and asked myself, "Is somebody really more important just because lots of people know their name?" In that second I realized that the celebrated singer was no more and no less valuable than the elderly lady next door whose circle of acquaintances was far, far smaller. Sometimes the realization of that truth hits us hard. I remember visiting what are sometimes referred to as the "back wards" of the New York Foundling Hospital and seeing babies who were seriously deformed. I remember being thankful for the hospital staff who took these children in and found them precious when others had abandoned them.

When is an animal valuable? I think of my old kitty Lionel who, a month before his death, was diagnosed with diabetes and Cushing's syndrome. For a month, and without losing any of his dignity, Lionel dragged himself to food, water and my lap, where eventually he died naturally and peacefully. And of Teddy, my twenty-five-year old who died just recently, who was clearly becoming "a very old man," and who was precious right up to the moment he died in his sleep.

When is a plant valuable? I don't have much of a green thumb myself, but I have friends who do, and who take such delight in nursing a sickly, apparently-fading plant to robust health.

Somehow we have to get in tune with the notion that existence is the key to value. It's not productivity, the ability to make money, the number of people you impress - none of that. If we could learn to value sheer existence, we would find ourselves living lives of wonder and awe and unspeakable joy. The reason we don't live those kinds of lives is that we have lost the ability to wonder at our existence and at the existence of others.

It is time to be existentially surprised.

## Robert J. Kreyche -- Philosopher and Friend

May 22, 2006

### *Robert J. Kreyche -- Philosopher and Friend.*

Just for fun about a week ago, I entered the name of Robert Kreyche into the search engine at Amazon.com. To my surprise, up came eight entries of books written by my philosopher friend from my college days. I saw the title of one of my favorites, *God and Contemporary Man*. Years ago, Dr. Kreyche gave me an autographed copy of that book, but somehow it managed to get itself lost. I have long wanted to read it again, so I sent off for a used copy (no new ones were in stock) and to my delight it arrived the other day.

Bob Kreyche was one of the most remarkable people I have ever known. When I first knew him, he was a professor of philosophy at [Rockhurst College](#) (now University) in Kansas City where I was a student. In high school, we had used his book *Logic for Undergraduates* and one day when he was in his office I stopped in to meet him. I never had him in the classroom, but that first meeting began a great friendship.

Bob Kreyche was one of those idealists who believed that ideals were meant to be applied here on earth. When he left Rockhurst for Arizona State University at Tempe, he would spend his weeks teaching and writing and his weekends helping migrant workers in Mexico. He believed that the ideals he taught in the classroom were not to be left in some lofty world of ideas, but were meant to be applied to everyday life. That's why the two of us saw eye to eye, I think.

So here I sit with the bright orange cover of *God and Contemporary Man* in front of me. Just being with the book again fills me with wonderful memories of long conversations on things philosophical. When I open the book, each page is like a trip back in time. There's the wonderful introduction written by [John Howard Griffin](#) (of *Black Like Me* fame) in which he tells of how he rebuffed a racist White Citizens' Council by reciting for them the list of logical fallacies from Bob's on-tape course in logic! I have always loved that story and have thought of it many times over the years. The White Citizens' Council had shown up at Griffin's door to bully him into submission, but instead he overcame them with logic.

But the best part of all is reading Bob's gentle but powerful wisdom. My friend saw everything in depth; he eschewed the superficial. Listen to this: "What is necessary here is to get beyond the level of tabloid thinking, popular journalism, and the like to a solid understanding of the issues that underlie life's problems (p. 133)." And to this bit of wisdom about the contemporary mind: "The tragedy, then, of so much of contemporary existentialism is that it sees only the crisis side of human experience. It is so deeply immersed in the categories of anguish and despair that it fails to point upward to the illuminating heights of a higher wisdom that is shut off from its eyes (pp. 64 -65)." We would all do well to chew on this for awhile: "The spirit of naturalism in modern life has

identified itself less with a spirit of responsibility than with a spirit of intense, and even, at times, ruthless competition (p. 149)." I could go on and on.

As I sit with his book in my hand, I am brought back to the night my friend and mentor knocked on the front door of my parents' house, sat in a chair in my room and smoked his pipe while we talked philosophy. He was light years beyond me, but he was always affirming, never condescending, ever kind.

Sadly, Bob passed away in Arizona some twenty-five years ago. As I read his book, I am pleased to find that the virtues I so admired in him continue to ring so very true. Though many years have passed, I can still sit at his feet and learn.

That's what a "perennial philosophy" is all about.

# Should Children Choose Their Own Religion?

May 19, 2006

## Should Children Choose their Own Religion?

A couple of weeks ago, a caller to the radio program [Religion on the Line](#) (Sundays, 7:00 - 10:00 a.m. on WABC Radio) spoke to Rabbi Joseph Potasnik and me about his young grandson's religious upbringing. He told us that his son had married a Catholic, and that they were teaching the boy Catholicism, while the grandfather (our caller) was teaching the boy Judaism. The idea, he told us, was not to bring the boy up in either religion, but rather to allow him to make up his own mind.

The Rabbi and I disagree on many issues, but not on this one. We both stated that there was something wrong about placing the burden of choosing a religion upon a child. It was not our intention to criticize people who were trying to do their best, but we were asked our opinion and that was what we said. The conversation seemed to generate a lot of heat and I thought it might be something to address on the blog.

The Catholic Church is very clear on its rules about this sort of situation. When a Catholic marries a non-Catholic, the Catholic party makes a promise to do their best to raise the children Catholic. The rule doesn't say that it is not all right to teach the children about the other parent's religion, but that when it comes to raising them, the Catholic spouse agrees to raise them Catholic.

There's some feeling these days that children should be allowed to make their own choices when it comes to religion. Granted, down the road as they mature they will have the opportunity to choose their religious practice, but how can they do that as children? They need a definite formation of some kind or other and a commitment to a particular religion. If later on they choose something different, they can certainly do that. We wouldn't tell our children it was okay to eat whatever they wanted. Down the road, they'll choose their diet, but how will they do it wisely without strong guidance as kids?

Working with people of other faiths a great deal, I sometimes hear the expression, "My religion is right *for me*, and your religion is right *for you*." That's fine as far as it goes, but I don't believe it goes far enough. Every religion has a view about how the world works and about what life is all about. When I espouse a religion, I espouse it not just because it's right *for me*, but because it tells the truth about the nature of life and about why we are in the world. That doesn't mean that I am going to disrespect another's religion or try to coerce him or her into joining mine, but it does mean that I genuinely believe that what my religion teaches is truly the way things are. The fact that our religions agree on so many things does not mean that they don't disagree on many important issues as well.

Several months ago, a reader of my monthly column in *Catholic New York* chided me for speaking about Christian religions in the plural. The reader, a minister, suggested that

there was only one Christian religion and that we Christians were all members of that one religion. Now, the last time I checked, the elements of a religion were creed, code and ritual. While many of the Christian churches share common elements of all three, the reason that these churches go by different names is that their creeds, codes and rituals contain some significant differences. Some believe that the bread and wine in the Eucharist are truly the body and blood of Christ; others do not. Some believe in remarriage after a divorce; others believe a marriage should be annulled prior to a subsequent marriage. Some believe that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ on Earth; others do not. These differences are very real.

Now, you might ask, in an age where we are emphasizing unity among the religions, why am I pointing out the differences? Didn't Jesus say, "May they all be one"? Of course he did, and of course we are working toward unity and of course we celebrate the great strides that have been taken toward that unity and of course we continue to work for more. But where did we get the idea that unity was synonymous with sameness? Our different religious expressions can be "one," in the sense of being "in accord" with one another. But that does not mean that they are all the same.

When I say that my religion expresses the truth about being and life, I am not saying that we should be in the business of condemning to hell those who hold other beliefs. But we do have the right to say that our beliefs best express the way things are. We can and must respect each other, but that respect does not imply that we have to weaken or set aside our own beliefs.

Circling back, this means that when it comes to raising children, couples of different faiths need to have discussed and settled the issues surrounding the practice of their faith as part of their preparation for marriage. It's too late to wait until later and then discover that there are huge differences. They need to come, before marriage, to a firm decision about how they are going to raise their children religiously. This includes the issue of how the non-Catholic party feels about the Catholic requirement about raising the children Catholic. Children are too young to make these decisions for themselves, and parents need to be in accord when raising them religiously. Parents of different religious traditions can make their differences a source of enrichment rather than a source of division, as they hope to do in so many other areas of life. But it takes forethought and planning and lots of prayers for guidance.

# Defining Human Life

May 17, 2006

## *Defining Human Life*

The world congress of the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations at its meeting in Barcelona issued what it called an [Ecumenical Declaration in favor of Life, Dignity and Health](#). According to Zenit.com, the main points of the declaration, which was signed by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, other Protestants and Orthodox representatives, are as follows:

- God as Creator of the Universe and Father of humanity is the basis of the dignity that characterizes all human beings.
- Man is the subject, center and end of all human activity.
- Human life in its physical dimension constitutes a fundamental and primary good for man.
- The human being must have his most important right recognized, which is life.
- Health is a good which must be promoted and protected.
- Sickness and suffering can only be fully understood in the light of Christ's paschal mystery.
- Death is the last stage of earthly life and its natural limit.

While such an ecumenical declaration in support of the dignity of human life is highly commendable, it is disappointing, though not surprising, to note the lack of mention of the important question of the origin of human life. Apparently, the ecumenical committee could not arrive at a common understanding of when human life begins.

Some might say that given the unprecedented ability of the group to formulate as many common statements about human life as they did, perhaps the omission of the "origin" question is not really significant. Yet without a reference to that question, the declaration loses a great deal of its clout. St. Thomas Aquinas said that in entering into discussion about anything, it is important to carefully define the terms used in the discussion. What impact do the above statements have, absent a clear definition of the term "man"?

I am reminded of something Frank J. Sheed wrote in a book called *Society and Sanity* in which he remarked that the very essence of insanity in human beings lies in their not knowing who they are. He wasn't only talking about clinical insanity; he was also talking about the insanity we perpetrate upon the universe when we are unable to properly define ourselves. How can we properly define ourselves if we cannot or will not come to a

conclusion about when human life (however we choose to conceive of it) begins? That question brings us to the very nub of the question of human identity.

I don't blame the aforementioned ecumenists. It seems the world has gone haywire on the question of the origin of human life. As I've noted before in this blog, there has been a movement of late to make it possible for both those who oppose abortion and those who favor it to argue that "life begins at the moment of conception." Those of us who oppose abortion tend to think of conception as the moment of fertilization of an ovum by a sperm, and we claim that it is then that human life begins. But there is a growing tendency among proponents of abortion to say that, no, conception occurs when the fertilized ovum is implanted in the uterus, not when the fertilization takes place. Therefore they argue, yes, that life begins at the moment of conception, though what they mean by that is worlds apart from what we mean when we say it. To them, the period from fertilization up to implantation is a kind of no-man's land precisely because, according to them, there literally is "no man." For us, there is human life from the moment of conception/fertilization, and that humanity does not originate at the moment of implantation.

I've been told, on occasion, that this is just a question of semantics and doesn't amount to the proverbial hill of beans. But is that really the case? At the [12th General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life](#) held last January, both Pope Benedict XVI and later the members of the Academy emphasized that "God's love does not differentiate between the newly conceived infant still in his or her mother's womb and the child or young person, or the adult and the elderly person. God does not distinguish between them because he sees an impression of his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) in each one.

"He makes no distinctions because he perceives in all of them a reflection of the face of his Only-begotten Son, whom 'he chose ... before the foundation of the world.... He predestined us in love to be his sons ... according to the purpose of his will' (Ephesians 1:4-6)"

So when we're saying things like "God as Creator of the Universe and Father of humanity is the basis of the dignity that characterizes all human beings," (as the aforementioned ecumenists did), we would do well also to remember the very nature of divine love. Certain human beings might be willing to say, "Well, technically, it's not *really* human until the moment of implantation," but God's love is not. How could it?

# Spring Sacraments

May 16, 2006

## ***Spring Sacraments***

At this time of year, many families and faith communities are celebrating First Communions and Confirmations. These are wonderful occasions, times of great joy for one and all.

The Sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Confirmation are two of the Sacraments of Initiation. The third, of course, is Baptism, which is a prerequisite for receiving the other two. The Sacraments of Initiation mark the beginning of the sacramental life of a Christian. The person receiving the sacraments enters the faith community and subsequently deepens his or her commitment to it, just as the community deepens its commitment to them. Receiving these sacraments, the person accepts the teachings of the Church and progressively deepens their union with Christ. Though Baptism and Confirmation are administered only once in a person's lifetime, the intent of all three sacraments is that the person deepen their commitment to Christ and to Christian living throughout their life.

What are the Sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Confirmation?

Holy Eucharist is the name of the sacrament in which we receive the body and blood of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine. Roman Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is really and truly present and that what they receive is truly the body and blood of Christ. Some Christians maintain that the consecrated bread and wine are symbols of the presence of Christ, but Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine are transubstantiated (change their very substance) into the body and blood of Christ. This teaching is known as the doctrine of the Real Presence. This transformation takes place at the Consecration during the Mass, when the priest says the words of Christ, "This is my body; this is my blood." At the Last Supper, Jesus said those words over the bread and wine he was sharing with his disciples, and he commanded them, "Do this in remembrance of me."

Confirmation harkens back to the first Pentecost when the disciples and those others in the upper room received the Holy Spirit in the form of the wind and tongues of fire. The disciples were then emboldened to go out and proclaim the message of Jesus openly. The individual Christian, receiving the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation, receives the spiritual strength to proclaim and practice his or her faith, especially when times are difficult or when there is resistance on the part of others. They receive the Gifts of the Holy Spirit [Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety (faithfulness) and Fear of (meaning respect for) the Lord] - gifts that they can draw upon throughout their lives. Since the Holy Spirit is the bond of divine love between the Father and the Son, the Christian receives God's infinite and unconditional love in a special way in this sacrament.

No wonder First Communion and Confirmation are such important celebrations in the life of a parish. Those receiving the sacraments have engaged in careful preparation for the sacrament, and whenever possible their families are involved as well. Sacraments are, by nature, not individualized administrations of grace, but communal celebrations.

It's important to note also that, not only children, but many adults as well receive Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a program that enables adults to prepare to receive these sacraments and to deepen their relationship to the Church. It's known as RCIA and is available in most parishes.

If you live in the Archdiocese of New York and would like to learn more about the RCIA, you can contact your local [parish](#) or the [Catechetical Office](#) at the Archdiocese.

# Sirius, Archdiocese of New York to Launch Catholic Channel

May 10, 2006

## Sirius, Archdiocese of New York to Launch Catholic Channel

Sirius Satellite Radio [announced](#) today the launch of a new Catholic Channel in partnership with the Archdiocese of New York. Slated to begin in the fall, this will be a twenty-four hour talk, music and lifestyle channel and will feature daily Mass from St. Patrick's Cathedral. Edward Cardinal Egan, Archbishop of New York, will be a major participant in the channel's programming. Through the Catholic Channel we hope to have a forum for sharing Catholic issues, news, devotion and music with the vast audience of Sirius listeners. Listeners will be encouraged to call in on many programs to enter into discussion of issues of the day from a Catholic perspective.

We at the Archdiocese of New York are delighted to be participants in this wonderful opportunity to bring Catholic teaching, issues and lifestyles to the exciting new medium of satellite radio. We will keep you posted on these developments as we approach our start date.

## Da Vinci Code

The media hype surrounding the forthcoming release of the movie *The Da Vinci Code* continues. Pat McDonough in an [op-ed piece](#) in today's Newsday suggests that the timing of the movie's release is perfect for Catholics who are "disillusioned by the priest sex-abuse scandal, worn out by the clergy crisis and conflicts between culture and church teaching," and opines that while the movie will not replace faith, it will be "a sign that broken hearts still want to believe."

It is indeed possible that some disillusioned and troubled Catholics may find some solace in the forthcoming film. Nonetheless, two questions are in order. One, when these "disillusioned Catholics" attend the movie, will they be getting accurate information? If Catholics who are disillusioned and troubled are looking for hope, it does them a great disservice to be given a highly fictionalized account of the life of Jesus, his relationship with Mary Magdalene, and the nature of Opus Dei, to name just a few of the more dubious points. Two, what about those Catholics who, while equally disturbed by the sex-abuse scandal and bothered by certain conflicts between culture and Church teaching, nonetheless follow the rules and teachings of their religion and are not by any means looking for a movie to "set its record straight"? Do a book and a movie that misrepresent their religion help them?

Neither category of Catholic will be well served by the movie. An intriguing adventure story, no matter how well presented, is not necessarily food for the soul. See *The Da Vinci Code* if you will, but see it as a work of fiction, not as a work of history or of faith.

# Capital Punishment, Condoms and China

May 4, 2006

## *Zacarias Moussaoui Given Life Sentence*

Terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui was given a life sentence rather than the death penalty for his involvement with the 9/11 terrorist attacks on this country. While acknowledging that his incarceration will be severe and without privileges of any sort, some critics are saying that he should have been given the death penalty instead.

The Catholic Church, of course, stands generally against the death penalty. In 1999, during his visit to St. Louis, Pope John Paul II specifically [appealed](#) to the United States to be pro-life in every arena, including capital punishment. If you speak to Catholics about this issue, you will find Catholics both favoring and opposing the death penalty. The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), while maintaining the validity of the death penalty "if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor" it goes on to say that when non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect the people's safety from the aggressor, those means should be used.

What are the reasons for the Church's teaching against capital punishment? Father Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J., of Xavier University [delineates](#) four basic principles inherent in the U.S. Bishops' teaching on capital punishment: (1) Opposition to the death penalty shows that we can break the cycle of violence; (2) Each person, regardless of their history or actions, is a human being with worth and dignity from the moment of conception onward; (3) God, alone is the Lord of life; and (4) The abolition of the death penalty follows the example of Jesus.

One of the arguments often proposed by people who support the death penalty, either in general or in the case of someone such as Moussaoui, is that by committing capital or other heinous crimes, such perpetrators lose their identity as human beings and forfeit all the rights and privileges pertaining thereunto. That position is thoroughly inconsistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church, which hold that human life is sacred from the moment of conception onward and that this sacredness can never be forfeited. Even though someone ceases to act humanely, he or she still remains fundamentally a human being and his or her life remains sacred, despite their heinous actions. That can be a difficult concept to grasp in the concrete - especially when one's own family or close friends have been murdered in a capital crime. Yet the tenets of religion have as one of their purposes to call into question the validity of moral claims based on feeling - even understandable feeling - and to ask whether those moral claims proceed far enough. If they do not align themselves with fundamental principles such as the unconditional dignity of human life, then their conclusions, no matter how understandable, are not valid.

Another, and similar, argument goes: "The perpetrator didn't honor the dignity of human life. Why should we honor theirs?" Again, if it is not right to disrespect human life in one instance, it is not right to disrespect it in another. Retaliation is not the same as justice.

The issue of capital punishment is one that Catholics and other people of faith wrestle with on a daily basis. We will continue to explore these issues here as questions arise.

### ***Rethinking Condoms?***

The media has reported widely of late that the Vatican is re-thinking its ban on the use of condoms. In some instances, the impression is given that the Church is going to reverse its teachings in the 1968 encyclical of Pope Paul VI, [\*Humanae Vitae\*](#).

Nothing could be further from the truth. What is true is that Pope Benedict XVI has requested a report on whether it might be acceptable for Catholic couples to use condoms to protect life when one spouse has H.I.V. or AIDS. The only change that is being contemplated is in this special case, no other. Would the use of condoms constitute a "lesser evil" than the transmission of AIDS? That is the issue that must be thought through, and will be thought through, carefully. According to Cardinal Lozano Barragan, quoted in *La Repubblica* and reported in the [\*New York Times\*](#), President of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Workers, the Pope requested the study two months ago, as part of a broader examination of bioethical issues. The study is just in preliminary stages, according to the Cardinal.

In other words, should the Pope decide to allow the use of condoms in this one particular circumstance, he would not be permitting the use of condoms in any other situation. This would not amount to a reversal in the teachings of the Church about human sexuality, nor would it be a relaxing of the Church's teachings.

### ***Trouble in China***

The state-controlled Catholic Church in China within the past few days has announced the ordination of two bishops. The Vatican, up to and including Pope Benedict himself, views this as an act of defiance and a serious threat to the talks that were being held toward the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and China. The [\*New York Times\*](#) reported that Pope Benedict has expressed his extreme displeasure at the ordinations and that the bishops involved could be excommunicated.

While the Chinese government has said that they meant no disrespect to the Holy Father but were simply filling necessary Episcopal posts, the feeling is that the government is actually working to maintain its hold upon religion.

The Beijing government claims that it permits freedom of religion in China. However, this freedom is extended only to those who belong to such government-approved groups as the China Christian Council and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Other

groups, Protestant and Catholic, are forced to practice their faith in secret. Supporters of the official groups quote low estimates for the numbers of underground Christians. However, reports of some evangelical groups estimate their numbers in the tens of millions, which, if true, would constitute a majority of Chinese Christians, "official" and "unofficial." This is not even to mention Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists.

The United States Department of State has long been critical of violations of human rights in China. For example, here is a section of its [report from 2005](#):

" The law provides for freedom of religious belief and the freedom not to believe. However, the government sought to restrict religious practice to government-sanctioned organizations and registered places of worship and to control the growth and scope of the activity of religious groups. The government recognized five main religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. A government-affiliated association monitored and supervised the activities of each of these faiths. Membership in these faiths as well as unregistered religious groups grew rapidly. The government tried to control and regulate religious groups, especially groups that were unregistered, to prevent the rise of sources of authority outside the control of the government and the party.

The government's respect for religious freedom remained poor, although the extent of religious freedom continued to vary widely within the country. Freedom to participate in officially sanctioned religious activity continued to increase in most areas. Religious activity grew not only among the five main religions, but also among Korean Christians, Russian Orthodox, and folk religions. Bibles and other religious texts were available in most parts of the country. At the same time, crackdowns against unregistered Protestants and Catholics, Muslim Uighurs, and Tibetan Buddhists (see Tibet Addendum) continued. The government continued its repression of groups that it determined to be "cults" and of the Falun Gong spiritual movement in particular."

### ***Pause and Ponder***

"It is written in the prophets, "They shall all be taught by God." (John 6:45).

One of the most difficult things for us to do is to allow ourselves to be taught by God. We come to life full of our own plans, our dreams our desires and sometimes they work. But more often than not at some point in our lives, we sit and wonder why we don't have more satisfaction. Or why we don't have better results.

I loved a story I discovered on the website of the television program ["New Morning."](#) It's the story of (and by) [Ruth Van Reken](#) who describes her fruitless efforts at organizing a ministry in Africa. She could never get around to it because she was always being asked to provide water for the countless children who showed up at her door. She kept talking to God in frustration because her plans were all thwarted and she thought that passing out water was too small a contribution. Listening to God, she realized that this was exactly what God was calling her to do. And she learned some other things: (1)When God made you, he made you right. (2) Lay down your plans and your dreams. (3) Make a list of

what does and doesn't come naturally. (4) Begin to use whatever gifts you've identified - no matter how insignificant they seem. (5) Ask God how you can serve him right now and then do it. (6) Stop trying to be what God didn't make you to be. (6) Celebrate the gifts God has given to others.

It's amazing how, when we let God teach us, we can learn so very much.

# Blogdom, Immigration, the Pope's First Easter and More

May 3, 2006

## *Blogging 101*

There is no scarcity of religious-related issues in the news these days, and whether you do your chatting the old-fashioned way around the water cooler or the new-fashioned way via a weblog, there are plenty of interesting things going on which can either get you revved up for your work or take your mind off of it completely, depending upon your need.

With the inauguration of our newly-enhanced website, we are happy to welcome one and all to the world of religious blogging. A "blog," short for "weblog" seems to have as many definitions as there are people who blog. Basically, a blog is a place on the web where people can share their interests, tell their stories and get their message across. Here, we'll be blogging two or three times a week, trying to keep you up to date on what's happening in the world from a religious, and specifically Roman Catholic, point of view. There'll also be a way for you to respond. Of course, I can't guarantee that I'll be able to respond to every comment, or that every response you send will appear on the site, but we'll see where the dialogue leads us as we go along.

## *Immigration*

One of the hot issues in the news these days is the issue of immigration, both in terms of border security and in terms of what to do about the undocumented immigrants who already here. Just before Holy Week, it looked like there might be a compromise between those who would criminalize and deport all those who are in this country illegally, and those who would favor a way of allowing them to legalize their situation. However, that ended up in total collapse before Congress went into recess.

Reactions from U.S. Bishops have generally been in favor of finding a way to treat those already present illegally in a humane way. Roger Cardinal Mahony of Los Angeles earlier urged his Catholics to disobey any law that would punish those (particularly Church workers) who would assist illegal aliens in any way. Recently, Cardinal Mahoney led [a day of prayer and fasting](#) on behalf of illegal immigrants. Edward Cardinal Egan wrote letters to New York Senators Charles Schumer and Hillary Rodham Clinton, urging them to support legislation that would provide moderation and fair treatment both to illegal immigrants and to the Church organizations that help them. Congress will likely resume deliberations on this issue when it returns after its recess.

On the whole the face of the Catholic Church in the United States is changing, and among the changing is the new presence of Asian Catholics. [Father Andrew Nguyen](#) of

California, a Vietnamese-American priest, reflects on what this means for the Church in the United States.

### ***Where Is God?***

In the stunning and tragic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many sought answers to questions such as "Where was God when all of this took place?" The Denver Register carried the thoughtful [reflections](#) of San Antonio Archbishop Jose H. Gomez, S.T.D. (a former Denver auxiliary bishop) as to the whereabouts of God, including his presence in us. Meanwhile Bishop Robert Muench of Baton Rouge reflected in a [homily](#) about the necessity of hope as his diocese opened its doors and heart to hundreds of victims. Meanwhile, the U.S. Bishops have organized a [task force](#) to deal with the various aspects of the aftermath of Katrina.

### ***Charter Compliance***

The Office of Child and Youth Protection of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued its [third report](#) on the compliance of various dioceses with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People approved by the Bishops in 2002 and re-affirmed in 2005. The auditors found that nearly 89% of the dioceses and eparchies audited in 2005 were in compliance with the Charter.

### ***First Easter***

Marking his first Holy Week and Easter as Pope, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Palm Sunday with a [homily](#) on the Cross of Christ. In his Palm Sunday homily, the Pope contrasted the happiness brought to the world through the Cross of Christ with the fleeting promises of happiness that are widespread in our world today. At the same ceremony, the World Youth Day Cross was transferred from German youths to youths from Australia in anticipation of World Youth Day 2006. On Good Friday, the Holy :Father preached the [Way of the Cross](#), in which he emphasized the destructive power of sin in the world.

In his homily at the [Easter Vigil](#), Pope Benedict remarked, "The great explosion of the Resurrection has seized us in baptism so as to draw us on. Thus we are associated with a new dimension of life into which, amid the tribulations of our day, we are already in some way introduced." Seven catechumens received Baptism and Confirmation from the Holy Father. In his [Urbi et Orbi](#) Easter Message, the Holy Father made specific appeals for peace in various trouble spots in the world.

Easter Sunday this year was also the seventy-ninth birthday of the Holy Father.

Inevitably, the media moved in to give their assessment of Pope Benedict after his first year and first Easter as Pope. [USA Today's](#) Eric J. Lyman saw the Holy Father as moving beyond his initial caricature as being a hard-liner to an image of geniality and

warmth. Stephen McGinty of [The Scotsman](#) called him "A very surprising Pope." And Alexander Smoltczyk of [Spiegel](#) speaks of Benedict's "Quiet Non-Revolution."

Meanwhile, Catholics around the world continue to remember the beloved Pope John Paul II. Ceremonies marking the first anniversary of the Pontiff's death were held in St. Peter's and all over the world. In [South Korea](#), a prayer vigil was held to pray for the beatification of the late beloved Pope. Meanwhile, Pope Benedict has scheduled a visit to [Auschwitz](#) in May. And Baltimore's Cardinal Keeler has announced that the Pope will likely visit the [United States](#) in 2007.

### ***Catholic Sports***

If you're Catholic and if March Madness and the start of Baseball haven't whetted your appetite for sports action, check out [Atlanta Catholic Sports](#), a group that coordinates all of the sports projects of the Archdiocese of Atlanta. By the way, if you want to find out about sports opportunities for young people in the Archdiocese of New York, [this link](#) will give you all you need to know.

### ***The Catholic Frog?***

So they wouldn't let you sing in the choir because they claimed you sounded like a frog? Fight back. The [Catholic frog](#) from Down Under might give you just the encouragement you need to give it a second try.

### ***At the Movies***

Many of us recall the Legion of Decency list of films, with its warnings about films not to see. Did you know that the Vatican maintains a list of [Top 45](#) films to see? If you're looking to see some great films and want your family to see them, too, here's just the place.

Recently, Pope Benedict XVI watched a new movie about the late Pope John Paul II, "Karol: A Pope Who Remained a Man." His [comments](#) about the film and his remembrances of his beloved predecessor are poignant.

Meanwhile, controversy swirls around the forthcoming movie, "The Da Vinci Code," just as it did with Dan Brown's book by the same name. Catholics in particular have objected to the story, claiming that it distorts the role of the Church and its history and misconstrues the nature of the organization Opus Dei. You can [read a review](#) from Zenit.org and a response from a spokesman for [Opus Dei](#) before deciding whether to head for the movies.

### ***What's Cookin'?***

It's dinnertime and you haven't a clue what to prepare. Here's a [website](#) that claims to have "recipes for Catholic mamas," although we suspect that a Catholic papa or two with a culinary gift might find them good.

### ***Music Survey Lists Top 25 Catholic Hymns***

The National Association of Pastoral Musicians has conducted a survey among their readers asking them. How many of the [top 25](#) do you know?

### ***Here is the Church...Here is the Steeple***

Just when you thought you had heard everything in terms of modern technology, a Roman Catholic diocese in Austria is offering downloadable ringtones of three of its churches. Perhaps it quells the embarrassment of having your cell phone go off in the middle of Mass. Read all about it [here](#). And download the ringtones [here](#).

### ***Gospel of Judas?***

By now, you've probably heard of the Gospel of Judas, an ancient Gnostic manuscript that claims that Judas acted on the orders of Jesus to betray him. One of best responses to the news about the manuscript and the television program about it comes from a Philippine scholar, Father Angel Aparicio of the University of San Tomas. You can read his comments here in an [interview](#).

Meanwhile, in his [Holy Thursday homily](#), Pope Benedict held to the traditional view of Judas as a traitor, calling him "a liar, he plays the game of double jeopardy with truth; he lives in lies and loses the sense of the supreme truth, God."

### ***Rise-ing to the Occasion***

A California-based Catholic rock group called "[Rise](#)" has issued a new CD, which it named "Stand the Line." What is so unusual about this album is that one of the songs, "Cancer's Creation," depicts the year-long cancer struggle of band member Steve Rogers, who wrote the song in order to give hope and inspiration to those who are battling cancer.

### ***Pause and Ponder (By Father Paul Keenan)***

I find it interesting that so many of the major holy days and holidays in the Church urge us to slow down and pay attention to life. Advent asks us to slow down and prepare for a sacred celebration of Christmas. Lent asks us to pause and reflect on the meaning of our baptism and about the overall direction of our lives as we prepare for Easter. Even Ordinary Time calls upon us to stop and think about the sacred in the ordinary.

There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that one of our fundamental flaws is that we allow ourselves to become so driven that we often lose sight of anything that is

not part of the agenda for the day. We'd like to have more time for prayer, but when would we do it? It would be nice to have a lot of family time, but we're all just so busy.

In the midst of our global busy-ness the Church asks us to put on the brakes for a while, to slow down and to think about what is really important in life. We can spend so much time getting things accomplished that we neglect to care for our soul. When we do that, we feel that something is missing, but we may not be able to identify quite what it is. For awhile we go on missing the kids grow up, wishing we had time to plant a garden, and longing to get away for two glorious weeks at the shore. The liturgical seasons and feast are important, because they invite us to detach ourselves from the rat race and think about life.

The other reason (not unrelated) has to do with the nature of the soul. The soul is that divine spark within us that keeps us in touch with God and that keeps insisting that we act with the leisurely pace of God. Sometimes that divine pace frustrates us. If we are looking for instant healing of relationships, instant answers to the problem of world peace, or instant healing of illness, we often find ourselves frustrated in our dealing with God. Why, we wonder, does God not just jump in and do what we ask? In our rush to get things done, we often lose sight of the fact that God is the big picture. We get used to thinking that what we want is the big picture, but it is not true. The soul is that aspect of ourselves that keeps us in touch with the divine, that calls us to slow our maddening pace and to follow the timing of God. The reason we have that empty feeling described above - that feeling that something is missing from our lives - is that our soul is calling us back unto itself, back unto God, really, and inviting us to get our lives back into perspective.

There are a lot of ways to talk about this - we can speak of "living in the moment," or "treating life as a journey and not merely as a destination." But what we really need to reflect upon is that all of this means getting back to God. The less we use and reflect upon the name of God, the more confused we are going to become. The error of secularism is playing itself out all over the map of the world these days, and the only cure for it is a sense of God. That doesn't mean that we will all have the same religion or the same idea of God. It doesn't even mean that everyone in the world will believe in God. But it does mean that we must stop being afraid to invoke the name of God. We must not be afraid to establish a relationship with him, to proclaim that we have a relationship with him, and to let that relationship guide our thoughts and actions. We cannot control what others do, but as Christians and as Catholics, we believe in God and in his Son Jesus Christ and we believe in his guidance. There is a belief abroad in the world that holds that being tolerant means backing away from our beliefs so as not to impose them on others. That results in our allowing others to impose their beliefs on us. No, tolerance means understanding that others may believe differently, but that we believe strongly what we believe, and we express it.

Our holidays and our holy seasons give us time to pause and to re-connect with the God we believe in and to adjust ourselves to be in tune with his presence within us.