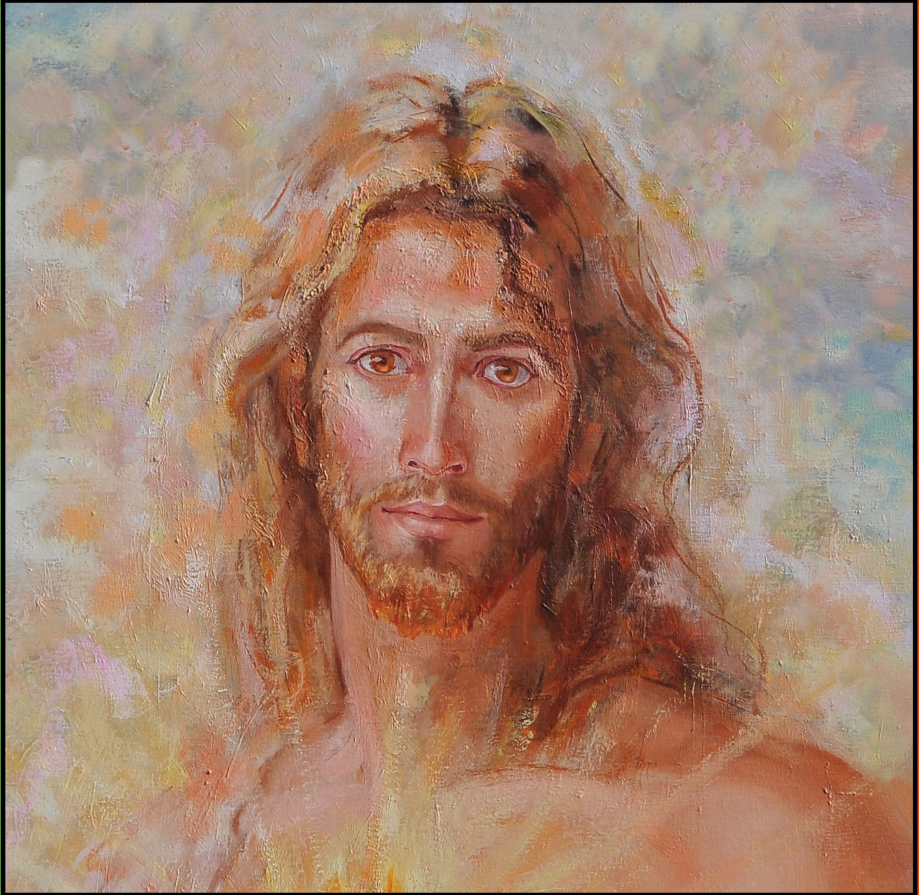


Come Encounter Jesus



A Personal Relationship with Jesus

Updated 2024

Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P.



Jesus is the most talked about and written about person in history. Most people know about him and many even go to church, but not everyone knows Jesus in a personal way. You can know Jesus personally when you receive what he came to give you:

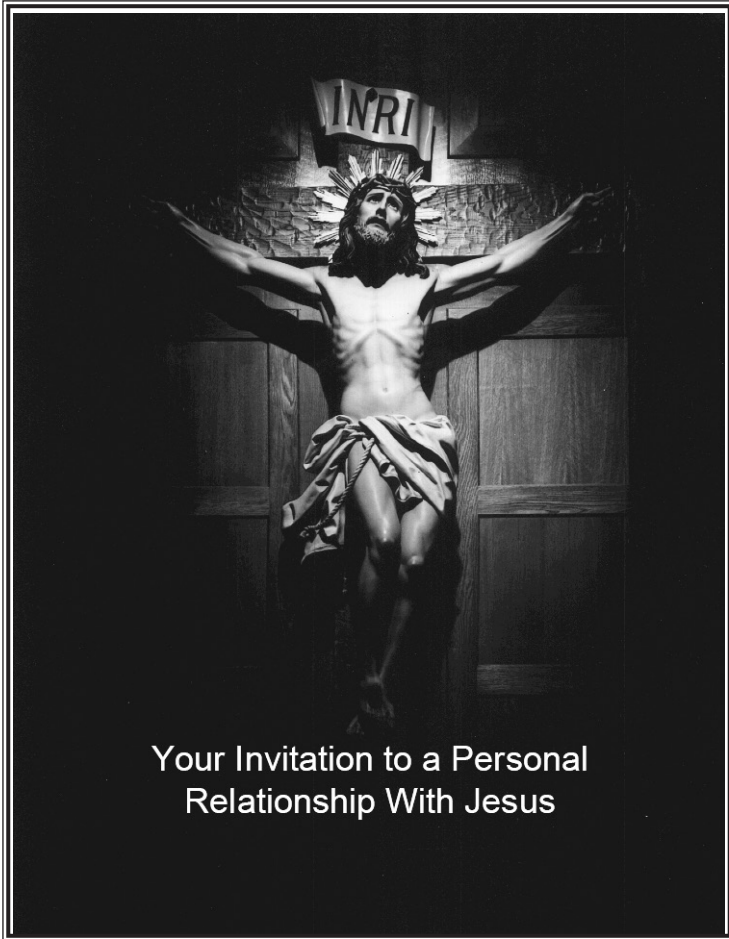
- Salvation
- Intimacy with Jesus
- The Holy Spirit
- Knowledge of Jesus' character
- The ability to hear Jesus' voice
- The power to go through life's difficulties

This book was written and designed to help you come to Jesus and abide in him. This book can:

- Lead you into a personal relationship with Jesus
- Help you receive salvation through his Cross
- Assure you of Jesus' presence with you always
- Inspire you with the character and personality of Jesus
- Assist you to hear Jesus' voice
- Help you to become Jesus' image
- Identify the ways Jesus is working in your everyday life
- Motivate you to make resurrection choices in your life

Jesus offers us this gracious invitation, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest." (Mt. 11:28) I invite you to *Come Encounter Jesus* through this book.

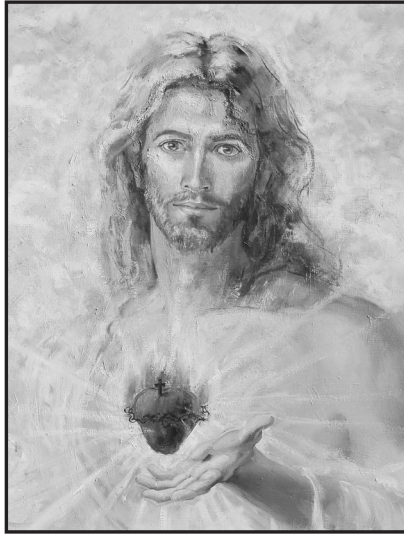
COME ENCOUNTER JESUS



by

Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P.

Motto of the Passionists:
May the Passion of Jesus Christ
be always in our heart.



[Original Oil Painting by Joseph Fanelli Copyright 1993 For use or information go to SacredheartofJesus.net]

This depiction of Jesus shows Jesus with white skin. I have studied the Bible in the Holy Land. Palestinians have a darker complexion. Jesus most likely would have had darker type skin. I use this image on my television episodes and in this book because it is attractive and is but one example of deeper truths: Jesus comes to us in a way that we can relate to and Jesus meets us where we are at. If you are American, African American, Hispanic, Asian, or of another ethnic origin, picture Jesus coming to you in your ethnicity. Although Jewish, he speaks to us in our language of English, Spanish or your vernacular. Jesus is one of us. Out of love he is all things to all people.

You will notice Jesus' Sacred Heart. The Solemnity of the Sacred Heart (occurring in June) is a very important feast day and devotion in the Catholic Church. Jesus' heart is pure, loving, compassionate and humble. His heart burns with love for you and me. We esteem the character of Jesus and our purpose is to become Christ-like. Jesus taught, "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart."

The colors on the cover include the colors of the liturgical year: Purple, White, Green and Red. The various seasons in our Church are all about Jesus: His life, teachings, death, resurrection and his second coming.

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Passionist Publications ♦ Houston

FOREWORD

One of my friends, a Passionist priest and missionary, told me this story of preaching at a particular mission. His opening sermon was about Jesus. The next day he was accosted by a few of the members of the church and critiqued.

Father, we heard your sermon about Jesus. After your talk, a few of us got together and discussed what you said. It was Jesus this and Jesus that. What we need is doctrine. If we wanted to hear about Jesus we would have gone to the Baptist church!

My priest friend said he was more than a little shocked that people who had grown up Catholic could give Jesus away to the Baptists!

St. Paul tells us that Jesus is the head of the Church. God has made Jesus “our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification and our redemption.” (1 Cor. 1:30) Every sacrament celebrated is a celebration of Jesus. When the priest processes in at Mass, he kisses the altar because the altar is the symbol of Jesus. The Pope himself is the vicar (earthly representative) of Christ. The Church is the bride of Christ. Everything about the Catholic church is about Jesus.

As I update this in 2024, I have been a missionary for over thirty-five years. I have preached in person to hundreds of thousands of people. Every mission I have preached is called “Come *Encounter* Jesus.” I believe that the greatest need in our Catholic church is for people to have some kind of a touch, a personal meeting with Jesus. Jesus invites us to know him personally. Many know *about* Jesus and have some acquaintance with him, but he came to bring us assurance, depth, and moment-by-moment intimacy.

I write books and minister on television and radio proclaiming Jesus. I reach out to all people everywhere with the treasure I have discovered: Jesus Christ. The four Gospels all center around the person of Jesus Christ. Their purpose

is to proclaim that he is the divine son of God who brings salvation, eternal life. Each Gospel writer provides a distinct portrait of Jesus and all arrive at the same conclusion: Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, sent by God to rescue us from death. As Paul wrote: “Jesus is the one we proclaim, toiling with all the energy he mightily inspires within me.” (Col. 1:28-29) Jesus is what really matters.

The world is full of problems. Jesus may not take away the problems, but he is the solution. Jesus is the answer to all of the questions this world imposes. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. It is my highest call and my greatest honor to proclaim Christ to you.

I heard a priest tell of how he met a woman in her forties on a plane. He was dressed in his collar and they were seated together. After some small talk she said,

“I grew up Catholic and all the church gave me was a *plastic Jesus*. In my heart I wanted something more and I left the church and joined a non-denominational church. I finally have the personal relationship with Jesus I so hungered for.

A priest said, ‘It’s sad that all you received from our church was a plastic Jesus. The Catholic church exists to bring people into a relationship with a living Jesus. You can find a personal relationship with Jesus in our church too.’

Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, wrote: I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed *personal encounter* with Jesus Christ. (#3) At its highest and at every level of leadership, the Catholic church exists to bring people to Jesus.

Unfortunately, some Catholics have a relationship with some artist’s rendering of Jesus, a Jesus of their own making, or their parents’ Jesus. The church invites us to intimacy with the real, living, resurrected Lord. In order for that to

happen, there must be a fresh new encounter. People need to meet Jesus, again, or for the first time. I took the initiative and produced programs for television and radio. I now air on EWTN, TBN (and inspire), Daystar, FE-TV as well as several stations. I want all people everywhere to realize that Jesus loves them and desires something special with each of us. My desire for people to encounter Jesus is why I travel across the country preaching. Just one moment with the King of Kings and our lives will be forever changed. The Gospels are full of occurrences where people heard Jesus' teachings or simply touched the tassel of his cloak and were never the same. An encounter with Jesus is what we crave deep within and what this book is all about. Is it just "special" people who can encounter God? No. We were all created equally. Everyone is loved and has the same opportunity to come into communion with God.

In fact, Jesus seemed to gravitate towards the marginalized and outcasts. One of the reasons he was put to death is because of his association with less than religious people.

The phrase "a personal relationship with Jesus" is in vogue by many preachers and ministers. It is certainly at the foundation of my ministry! I define it from my own experience, after all, you can't give what you don't have. But what I do have, I share, and that is the treasure of something genuine with Jesus.

A personal relationship with Jesus is something that is first of all real. Jesus is alive and he is able to intermingle with your everyday walk and life experiences. It is no longer "I" who live but Christ who lives in me. We actually develop and have the mind of Christ! A relationship with Jesus is intimate in that there is a profound sharing and supernatural knowing. This relationship endures through thick and thin. Jesus is always faithful and even though you sin, he will not abandon you. In fact, when we fall we may discover the depths of his mercy and learn to trust him even more. Jesus called us friends and

he is our best friend. This enduring relationship begins now and will continue through our death into eternity. Not even death can separate us from his love.

Jesus has the ability to be all things for all people. He doesn't change, he is the same yesterday, today and forever. But, he is able to meet us on our own terms where we are at. He knows us fully and somehow is able to synch with us. If you are a surfer, expect to meet him holding a surf board. If you are a quilter, expect to encounter Jesus holding knitting needles. If you are a parent, Jesus understands your ups and downs. If you are religious we find communion in our prayer and silence. As I wrote on the inside cover: Jesus bears our ethnicity and speaks our language. Single or married, young or old, rich or poor, male or female, no matter your culture, Jesus is universal and able to meet you where you are at.

Bible study groups are springing up everywhere because people are hungering for the abundance and "more" that Jesus came to bring. You will find this bounty in my writings, preaching and productions. Jesus is the treasure buried in a field and is the pearl of great price.

A personal relationship with Jesus is characterized by assurance. You believe and know in the depths of your being Jesus loves you and suffered on your behalf. You have "blessed assurance" because you know he suffered and died in your place. You experience forgiveness and know God has given you eternal life. You forgive yourself and are filled with hope. The efficacy comes from the intimacy.

Unfortunately, many go to church but don't know what it is to be saved. When you receive the salvation he came to give you through his Cross, you then know Jesus as your personal Savior. I can't emphasize enough the importance of believing and knowing that Jesus died and rose for you personally so that you can have eternal life. (Jn. 17:3) Eternal life is both quantitative and qualitative. It is a life that will last forever. But it is also a new quality of life. It is characterized by a becoming

a “new creation.” Your mind changes. You have new desires and motivations. You look at yourself and life differently. You know you are loved and heaven bound! You have blessed assurance because you have a relationship with the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit dwelling in your heart. This new life is also characterized by a deepening intimacy. You become aware of Jesus’ voice helping you in your daily life and you know him as you never have before. He transforms your mind in every way. You go from fear to faith. You realize that he is always with you and will never ever forsake you. Through Jesus, with him and in him we can become all that we can be.

In addition, you know Jesus personally when you experience him working in your life. Perhaps God’s greatest work in you is to transform you into the image and likeness of Christ. In order for this to happen, you must be refined, pruned, and purified. It is in this process of the “working out” of your salvation that you come to know Jesus. You come to know Jesus when you experience the trials and tribulations of life and go through them. You grow through as you go through. Trust isn’t garnered cheaply. It is through the expensive lessons of life that we attach ourselves to Jesus and learn about his faithfulness. One of my favorite prayers is: “Jesus, I trust in you.” Trust is something that grows through the ups and downs of life. As you journey, you grow in knowing Jesus when you learn about his character and discover his own unique personality through the Bible. St. Jerome said, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” (Catechism #133) The corollary is: Knowledge of the Bible is knowledge of Jesus. The biblical Jesus is the authentic Jesus. As we spend time reading and hearing the Gospels we get a true sense of who Jesus really is. His fragrance emanates from the pages of the Bible. As we watch his journeyings and listen to his teachings we come to know him and his heart.

I am grateful that you hunger enough for Jesus to read this book. Of all my books, this book about Jesus isn’t the book

people choose as their most popular. It could be that people think what they have is enough or all they will ever have. They don't think there is anything more. Perhaps it is because most aren't willing to commit themselves to the demands of a relationship with Jesus. But you have proved by your reading of this book, you are willing to deepen what you already have. Be assured that I pray for all reading this important book. The risen Lord Jesus himself will be mysteriously present through the medium of the words of this book. The early apostles realized they were encountering God in the person of Jesus. Now, as John wrote, this "eternal life" can be ours.

That which was from the beginning,
 which we have heard,
 which we have seen with our eyes,
 which we have looked upon
 and touched with our hands,
 concerning the word of life—
 the life was made manifest, and we saw it,
 and testify to it, and proclaim to you
 the eternal life which was with the Father
 and was made manifest to us—
 that which we have seen and heard
 we proclaim also to you,
 so that you may have fellowship with us;
 and our fellowship is with the Father
 and his Son Jesus Christ.
 (1 Jn. 1:1-3)

Jesus called many people when he walked the earth. He called them to be with him (intimacy) to follow him (discipleship) and to proclaim him (evangelism.) Jesus calls *you* by name. My prayer is that you will hear his call. I invite you to Come, *Encounter* Jesus.

Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P.

1

JESUS' INVITATION TO INTIMACY

One of the most powerful words in the Bible is the word “come.” Jesus used it many times when he spoke to people. When two of the disciples of John the Baptist wanted to know where Jesus was staying, Jesus replied, “Come and see.” (Jn. 1:39) Jesus prayed about how God reveals secret things to those who seek in simplicity. Then he announced, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Mt. 11:28) Peter himself left everything to follow him. Peter wrote, “Come to him [Jesus], that living stone rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious.” (1 Pet. 2:4) Finally, the last few verses of the Bible conclude with these words, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the thirsty one come.” (Rev. 22:17)

An encounter with Jesus and a personal relationship with Christ begins and develops by obeying that simple, gracious invitation over and over: *come*.

The word “come” is defined in the dictionary as: 1) to move from one place to another, 2) to approach or reach by moving toward, 3) to draw near, or 4) to move close to. Jesus desires nearness, communion, and oneness. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus prayed, “Father, that my disciples and I may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me that they may become perfectly one.” (Jn. 17:22-23)

This “coming” begins with us making a move toward Jesus and continues as a day-by-day *lifestyle* of drawing near to him. Consistency must develop. Seeking is not just a one-time or once-a-week kind of thing. We must take up our cross

daily. In this instance, taking up the cross (of obedience and sacrifice) requires yielding our time and attention. We must spend time with Jesus. That is where the rubber meets the road. Reading the Scriptures, spiritual books and praying is crucial.

We will never develop and maintain a personal relationship with Jesus unless we make time for him daily. We can be as close to him as we want to be.

MY MISSION

I am a missionary priest. I travel the United States and Canada preaching parish missions or retreats. The retreat begins when I preach at all the Masses on a particular weekend. My goal is to try to attract people to come back to my talks on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. This vitally important homily on the weekend is the “call” to the mission. Through enthusiasm, stories, humor, and personal examples, I *invite*. I try my best to persuade people to come, but it is Jesus who calls. I always pray, “Jesus, when I preach, you reach.” I invite people to make a move. I ask people to spend some time with Jesus. Through me, Jesus is calling the people to “come.”

During the mission itself, I focus on developing a personal relationship with Jesus. Jesus desires friendship and closeness with each of us. I focus my talks on the means to achieving that closeness: I help those attending to receive salvation at the cross, to learn about prayer, and to receive the Holy Spirit. During the course of the mission/retreat, I always dedicate some time to talking about making a new decision for Jesus. I believe that Jesus gives us a brand-new, fresh start whenever we ask. At the conclusion of my talk on Tuesday evening, I invite people to pray a prayer of surrender. Then I offer the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. The Bible tells us to “confess your sins to one another.” (Jas. 5:16)

Celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation is a Catholic “altar call.” Confession is a major way to come to Jesus.

COME TO JESUS

There are many other ways to come to Jesus. Simply surrendering yourself to him during the course of your day is something to try. Jesus wants us to abide in him. In order to abide we must work at remaining connected. Spending time in prayer is extremely important. Turning away from sin is vital. You come to Jesus when you choose not to sin in the midst of temptation. Obedience is also necessary. Reaching out to others in service is a way to draw near. Trusting in and believing in Jesus is a way to come into oneness with him. On my missions, I usually have people pray a simple prayer, “Jesus, I trust in you.” When you pray that prayer in good times as well in tribulation, you are inviting Jesus to take control of your life even though you may have confusion or be suffering. The prayer of those who sought Jesus in the desert was “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

There are still other ways to come to Jesus. Giving thanks and praise to God opens your heart to him. Going to Mass or other services, such as missions and retreats, are good ways to come to Christ. (Heb. 10:25) Reading the Bible on your own or in a group can be life changing. Reading spiritual books like this one can help you. Watching religious programming or listening to inspirational programs on the radio is a way. Listening to good spirit-filled music can deepen you. Dedicating your time to others and getting involved in your church and civic community are yet other ways to draw near to Jesus.

There are so many ways to make a move toward the Lord. The important thing is that you *come*. It is crucial that you spend time with Jesus. He is there for you. Jesus' word of welcome is addressed to you and to all: “Come.”

ABIDE IN ME

When I was nineteen years old, I was drawn by God into a season of initial searching and coming to Jesus. I hardly knew who Jesus was and I was eager to learn about him and come to know him. To my amazement, I discovered that I *could* know him. He mercifully heard the prayers of a teenager. I believed in the forgiveness of my sins and developed an initial relationship with Jesus. Now, years later, I still come to him, but the initial coming has turned into an abiding. In any relationship, there must first be a period of time for building a foundation, an initial getting-to-know-you process. Of course, growth will continue as long as the relationship endures, but at some point the relationship attains a lasting degree of familiarity. The solid foundation is there and the bond between the two endures. Then the closeness that exists must be maintained and nurtured.

Jesus taught, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” (Jn. 15:4) Chapter 15 in John’s Gospel includes many examples of Jesus teaching his disciples to abide in him. That is because abiding is important and the norm for a disciple. The word “abide” means to “stay connected, be joined to, be attached, cling to, dwell in, be in.” (If we merge with Jesus, we will always emerge another person!) In other words, Jesus called his disciples to live connected to him daily. As disciples, we can’t just live independent lives. Rather, we are “in Christ” and Christ is “in us.” Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer “I” who lives, but Christ who lives in me.

(Gal. 2:20) The mysticism of Paul is meant for us too. We are so intertwined with Jesus that we die with him, and rise to new life in him. It is not just a matter of “Oh yes, I believe Jesus was the Son of God.” Even demons believe we are told in the Bible. No, rather, we are in the process of being

mystically united with Christ and we are being transformed into his image.

How To Abide/Connect with Jesus:

- Think about Jesus as you wake up
- Invite Jesus into your decisions
- Stop what you are doing and connect through momentary prayer
- Read the Bible and Spiritual books
- Participate in the Mass/ religious services
- Attend a mission or retreat
- If Catholic celebrate reconciliation/confession
- Get involved in a Bible Study
- Walk the stations of the Cross
- Look at a crucifix/remember his Passion
- Express your trust in Jesus to him
- Fast and your hunger will unite you to Jesus
- Look for Jesus in others
- Watch spiritual programs on TV and computer/iPhone
- Listen on radio/internet
- Habitual lifestyle
- At bedtime commit your spirit into His hands

We are compared to branches on a vine. This image, really, is the hallmark of what it means to be a disciple. I've discovered I am connected at times and disconnected at other times. What Jesus is after is more consistency. He wants us to be connected not only when we pray but in the other episodes of our lives such as leisure time and work. We follow a living, risen Lord who wants connection and communion.

The branch gets its moisture and nutrients from the sap that flows between the branch and vine. That sap is a symbol for the Holy Spirit who brings us true life. We always need to be connected to Jesus to live out our call to be true disciples. If we keep clinging to Jesus, we will be pruned and bear fruit. The pruning Jesus speaks of is to remove from us that which is sinful, non-productive and foolish. Part of knowing Jesus personally is understanding and accepting the ways he prunes us. I will speak more about the idea of pruning when I talk about how God refines us in Christ.

Bearing fruit is so important that Jesus taught about it in a number of parables. One teaching in particular demonstrates the seriousness of fruit bearing.

He told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Let it alone sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'

(Lk. 13:6-9)

God is looking for fruit (intimacy, virtue, reaching out to others) from his people. He is willing to give us some time. Time is a gift given to us to allow us to come to change. He will dig around us and manure us, prune and refine us, and do everything he can to produce fruit in us. If we continue to refuse his grace and stubbornly disobey, however, a day will come when we will be cut down.

Primarily, the fruit that Jesus refers to consists of intimacy with God. It is up to God to determine what type of intimacy he wills to give us. Be we have a say in our closeness also. Next, we are fruitful when our character matures and we become

Christ-like. The fruit of the Holy Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23 are extremely important. Our hearts must become holy. This fruit comes from the sap of the Spirit but must also be chosen and ripened in our life. Patience, for example, is already in us in seed form, but can only develop as we are put in situations where it can mature. Another example of character fruit is godly speech, which reveals the state of our heart. (Mt. 12:33-34) We come to know Jesus as he deals with us about our choice of words (swearing, negativity, and gossip) and as we experience ourselves changing. In addition, we are fruitful when we develop our potential and live with passion. Enthusiasm, creativity, discovering our talents and outreach to others are all important ingredients in the call to bear fruit. Jesus bore fruit that endures. Just like our master we must live our lives in significant ways that will effect others and be pleasing to God.

YOU MUST BE PRUNED (JN. 15:2)

While I was visiting my mother years ago, she had me prune her bushes. I used sharp shears and cut back many of the branches. I noticed that some of the branches were thick and hard to cut while others just took a simple snip. When I finished, the bushes were small, stubby and had hardly any growth left on them. I returned some months later to see those bushes were alive and well and fuller than ever before.

Jesus taught us that we must be pruned also. There are areas in our lives that simply must be dealt with. God is the "vinedresser," as Jesus put it. He is the master gardener and knows just where to cut and how much to cut off. You are either going to be cut back or cut off, but *you will be cut*. Cutting hurts, but is necessary to be fruitful. We can develop unhealthy relationships, have a habitual sin of some sort, be lazy, or be dependent on some substance or person, place or thing. God has worked in me and freeing me from my dependence on things and helping me rely on God as my foundation.

Some time back, I was mumbling and grumbling about the people I live with and how slowly things seemed to be happening in my ministry. I am always believing that my ministry will grow to reach more and more people, but it happens inch by inch. I felt so negative and cynical about everything and everybody. Later when I was praying, I felt so disconnected. This happened for several days in a row. I knew something was wrong. God seemed distant and I felt despondent within. It was a feeling of extreme discomfort.

A spiritual book I was reading at the time helped me understand what was going on. The book discussed the concept of grieving the Holy Spirit. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” (Eph. 4:30) I discovered that being angry and letting evil talk come out of my mouth is one of the ways that I grieve the Spirit. Not only that, but when the Spirit is grieved, I also sense that discomfort in my heart. As I was grieving God, God was pruning me by allowing me to feel the grief and sense the distance in my prayer life. (Not all distance in prayer is pruning, but this was.)

It took me some time to understand that what I was sensing was God pruning me. Often, we are being “dealt with” by God and don’t even know it. It took me a while to figure it out. I know from the Bible that the opposite of grieving the Spirit is to be filled with the Spirit. “Be ever filled with the Spirit.” (Eph. 5:19) One way we get filled comes immediately after that verse. We must sing in our hearts, speak the word of God, and especially *be thankful*. I really believe that is the role that music and singing has in church. It opens us up to the good things of God and helps us to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Instead of giving thanks, I had been caught up in being bitter. I’ve been bitter and cynical in the past, but this time God was dealing with me. Rather than let me get away with it, God let me know that my behavior was an offense to him.

After all, we are the home of God and God doesn't want to hear complaints and murmurings and negativity all the time. As I grow in my relationship with God, I should be growing in character. The fruit of character is a life-long process but extremely important. Our purpose in life is to become the image of Jesus! (Ro. 8:29)

The second type of fruit has to do with service to others. God is very interested in how we treat others, and his will is that we influence others for good. God wills all to be saved and he cares about the hard times people are going through. Often he sends us to help them. In fact, God is glorified (honored and worshipped) when we offer our lives to help others. I discovered that as I seriously abided in Christ, I began to have the desire to help and impact others. I felt the fire of desire and did something about it. I made a move in my life and my action turned into fruitfulness. I serve others by living the religious life, traveling, preaching, the media ministry and counseling. One of the ways I grow in character and fruitfulness is by writing books.

Whenever the Lord prompts me to write a new book, I always laugh inside. "O great," I think, "you are trying to kill me again." Through experience, I've learned the cost of writing books. It takes time, discipline, sacrifice, and involves a lot of work. I will have to give up free time, golf games, and watching TV. In addition, nothing ever happens as fast as I want it to. It usually takes just about a year from the time I start until I have the actual book in my hand. Writing is just one phase. The book takes months of editing and then about two more months to be printed. Then there are the updates and revisions years later! I always want the product right away, but I have to wait. I grow in patience with every book I write. I have to die to my wants and desires and timetables. I have to accept and resign myself to the way life is instead of trying to control it. Not having everything my way hurts me, but I realize that

God is pruning away my impatience. Not surprisingly, writing about the character of Christ actually develops the character of Christ in me.

Service impacts and helps people. Blessing others makes all the pain worth it. Our lives as disciples ought to concentrate on outreach. Productive service is the fruit-bearing that God is after. The first command in the Bible was “Be fruitful and multiply.” (Gen. 1:28) That command is still in effect today.

The final and most important type of fruit besides character and service is intimacy with God. If you are clinging to the vine, remaining in Christ, and spending time with God, you will grow in your level of familiarity with God. The life-giving sap of the Spirit will bring you a right relationship with God, peace, and joy, as well as experiences of God’s glorious presence and person. Communion with God is what we should be seeking of first importance.

GAIN AND MAINTAIN

An intimate relationship with Christ begins with an initial coming to Jesus. As you continue to hunger and thirst for more of him, you continue to seek him. Your relationship catapults to a new level and becomes a personal relationship as you grasp and believe that Jesus died for you personally. He is no longer some distant religious figure, but you know him as your living savior who went to the Cross for your sins. Your relationship becomes ever more personal as you experience baptism in the Holy Spirit. Union with God is what Jesus came to bring. You gain even greater depths as you hear his voice in prayer. Your intimacy increases and develops as you are able to go through difficulties and life experiences because he is with you. You learn God’s character is faithful as you “go through.” You grow even more as you understand you are being refined and pruned along the journey. Your image of God and of Christ is deepened as you spend time getting to know him in the Bible. As a disciple, your relationship deepens as

you abide and stay connected. A personal relationship with Jesus is progressive and develops over time.

The type of fruit you are bearing (virtue, service, and intimacy) or the lack thereof is a very good indicator of the degree of your abiding in Christ. Jesus taught, "By their fruit you will know them." (Mt. 7:20) In other words, those who say they have a personal relationship with Jesus but aren't growing in character, helping others, or spending time with God, are fooling themselves. Abiding and bearing fruit is perhaps the greatest responsibility we have as Christians. Abiding in Christ is not only an invitation but a *command* Jesus gives us. This teaching of Jesus demands personal responsibility. It boils down to our daily choice to live *in* Christ, not *independent* of him. We must determine within that we want to become a fruit-bearing person. I want my time on Earth to be fruitful time.

Relationships simply cannot develop without time spent together. Everything in life has a price. The cost of a personal relationship with Jesus is quality time every day of your life. Paul taught, "I die daily." (1 Cor. 15:31) We must die to self and live for Jesus. St. Francis de Sales put it succinctly, "Live Jesus!" You must come to him each day and then abide in him throughout the day. When you get up in the morning you first get connected. When you are driving you think of Jesus and don't allow traffic to overwhelm you. When you eat meals you acknowledge his gift and presence. When you are with others you ask Jesus to help you be a witness. Get centered and stay attached!

Sometimes when I preach, I sing this old African American folk song:

Jesus, Jesus,
Jesus in the morning,
Jesus in the noon time.
Jesus, Jesus,
Jesus when the Sun goes down.

When you develop a relationship with the Lord, you deepen your awareness that he is always with you. Intimacy develops as you become adept of being conscious of his presence and have a running dialogue with him. For example, one activity we do after a meal in community is to hit a glass with a spoon. At the appropriate time the person who led prayer at Mass hits the glass and says, “presence of God.” All conversations cease and we remember we are in God’s presence. We all then pray our Passionist motto: “May the Passion of Jesus Christ be always in our hearts.” Remembering God’s presence wherever you are is an important part of deepening your relationship with God. In prayer this remembering is called “consenting to the presence of God.”

MARTHA OR MARY?

I can further illustrate what it means to deepen your relationship with Jesus through the famous story of Martha and Mary.

Jesus entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the better portion, which shall not be taken away from her.”

(Lk. 10:38-42)

We have all heard a lot of teaching about this story and there are many points I could highlight. I want to dwell upon the fact that Martha invited Jesus into her house, but Mary asked the Lord into her heart. There are many who have been

born into Catholicism. Most of us were baptized as babies. The Catholic faith has become a part of the heritage and ethnicity of many groups of people. There are Irish Catholics, black Catholics and Italian Catholics, to name a few. Some think that having been born and baptized a Catholic makes them authentically Catholic.

I was born and brought up Catholic in an Italian/Albanian/Slovak home. Our family had crosses on our walls and a Bible on our shelf. Jesus was in our house. But there were so many activities – school, work, TV, leisure, sports, you name it. Because of all our distractions, involvements, and worries, Jesus remained on the wall and on the shelf. There were many weekends when we wouldn't even go to church. My family and I, for all intents and purposes, were cultural Catholics. I meet people like this all the time, who were brought up Catholic and possibly even attended Catholic schools but have now fallen away. There are millions who have the foundation but stop there. Saint John Paul II called them "baptized pagans." Others are still going to church once a week but lack intimacy with God. They have some relationship, but don't know Jesus as their savior, haven't been filled with the Holy Spirit, and don't recognize the voice of Jesus in their daily walk.

Church is not the place we go to appease God, fulfill obligations, or soothe our guilt-laden conscience. The Catholic church is a sacrament wherein we can meet and experience Jesus. Through hearing the Word, worshipping together, and participating in community, we ought to encounter Christ, grow in the Holy Spirit, and learn how to be in fellowship with God. The Church exists not as an end in itself. The Catholic church is a means to a deeper relationship with Jesus. The Church will eventually pass away. Its purpose now to point the way to Jesus.

I have been a mission preacher for some 35 years as I update this book. I have had the occasion to return to some

parishes where I had given a mission previously in order to preach a second or even third mission. Once in a while, people tell me what the effect or fruit of the first mission has been in their lives. Some will show me the old prayer card of surrender to Jesus that I gave them years before. They will tell me that they still pray that prayer every day. Surrendering to Jesus is very important. I rejoice when a person tells me that yielding to Jesus has become a part of their daily routine! Others will tell me about how they came to confession and received the mercy of God. Still others will tell me how my preaching or books have made a difference in their lives.

I enjoy those testimonies to be sure, but what keeps me going is when I hear stories like this one.

Father, when you first spoke here I was attending church. I heard you speak on Sunday and came to your talks. Your mission was a catalyst for motivating me to develop my relationship with Jesus. Previously, I did have a relationship with Jesus, but now it is so much more! I know him as my Savior. I walk with the Holy Spirit. I acknowledge God in all of my ways and walk with him every day. Before I had religion, but now I have personal relationship with Jesus.

I received a letter from a woman in Missouri who attended one of my missions and still purchases my books and CD's periodically. She wrote, "I have always thought I was a religious person. But now I know I was nothing compared to what I can be. You have opened my eyes and my heart so much I can't get enough."

I once was at a community dinner. There were about 100 people gathered, many of whom I did not know. I sat at a table next to a man I hadn't met and I shook his hand.

'Hi, I'm Father Cedric,' I said.

He replied, 'I know who you are. I attended a mission you gave at our parish years ago. It was a tough time for me spiritually. I felt like I was in a desert. That mission was a turning point for me. My prayer life has changed and now I know Jesus like I never have.'

I love hearing stories like that. The goal of my ministry is to bring people to Jesus and help them to know him as Lord and savior. I like everyone else am growing in my walk with Christ. There are ups and downs. Sometimes I feel close, other times distant. But the foundation is there. I trust that he lives in me, died for me and I am loved. These are the essentials for a personal relationship with Jesus. It is not solely about feelings, the relationship is based on facts.

My life as a young man was similar to Martha's. I had Jesus in my home and was religious to some degree, but I was distracted by life. I had my career, goals, and relationships foremost on my mind. But none of these things were making me happy. When I was 19, I began waking up in the morning and realized I wasn't happy. I was trying to do everything I could to be happy, but none of it was working. I allowed the emptiness and dissatisfaction in my life to motivate me to do something I rarely did: seek God. I began seeking God through reading the Bible, praying and turning away from known sin in my life. After months of reading the Bible, praying, turning away from sin, and surrendering, I had an encounter! When I talk about encounter with God some are dramatic, but most times not so much. My encounters as a young man were very dramatic and life changing. Meeting Jesus was so unusual for me because I was never very religious. He seemed to touch other people, but I always felt left out. Now, finally, I felt included, like I belonged.

Soon after, I knew I needed to find a church home. I explored many denominations, but after much prayer I re-chose Catholicism. I realized that you shouldn't be Catholic (or any other denomination) simply because you were born that way. Don't go to church just because your parents say so or because it is their church. *Choose* your denomination (and particular church) for yourself! I explored many denominations at that time in my life. It seemed like Catholicism was so large and anonymous and impersonal. The preaching and music wasn't inspiring me. I looked other places. During that exploratory season, I came across a saying by The Christophers, who are a community in the Catholic Church. The saying was: "*Better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.*" At that time in my life, I was discouraged by uninspired Masses I was attending. I sensed God telling me through that saying, "Cedric, instead of leaving and badmouthing the Catholic Church, why don't you become a light and make a difference?"

When God touches you, it is for a purpose. God wants you to have a relationship with him, but also to influence the community. God doesn't light a lamp in order to put it under a bushel basket. He lights it to give light to the whole house! So not only did I stay in the Catholic Church, I got very involved! Now instead of mumbling about the darkness, I am trying to be a light and am making a difference as God directed me.

A major breakthrough for me in my relationship with Jesus was "the message of the Cross." (1 Cor. 1:18) Through reading the Bible and listening to good preaching, I heard the Good News that Jesus suffered and died on the Cross so I could be forgiven and cleansed within. Because of the way I had been living, I knew I so needed to be forgiven. I lived with guilt and an inner emptiness. I believed this simple Gospel message with all my heart and wholeheartedly trusted that Jesus suffered

and died for me. Then, by the gift of God, I received the Holy Spirit. As I wrote in my book *Glorious Holy Spirit*, when you are baptized in the Holy Spirit, your heart begins to change as you experience rebirth. Now through Jesus's Spirit living within, I have a new awareness of just how close he is. He helps me and gives me the courage to confront, go through, and not run away from the hard things in life. At times, I hear the still, small voice of the Good Shepherd. I have embraced the Gospel story and fallen in love with Jesus. Now I can truly say that it is no longer "I" who lives, but Christ who lives in me. I still have a cross on the wall and a Bible on my shelf, but now, like Mary, I've invited him into my heart and have chosen the better portion.

Martha had Jesus right there in her house but was distracted with other things. Mary, on the other hand, chose the "better portion." This book is all about making sure that you invite Jesus into your heart and not just your house. It is about choosing the better portion by coming to Jesus and abiding in him. I want you to know Jesus as your personal Savior. I want you to experience baptism in the Holy Spirit. I pray you will know the biblical Jesus and have a correct "Jesus image" in your heart. My heart's desire is that you live your life being led by the Holy Spirit. As you follow Jesus, you will be refined and pruned so that you can bear abundant fruit. These are the hallmarks of a personal relationship with Jesus.

A personal relationship with Jesus consists in these foundational truths: 1) You believe Jesus suffered and died for you personally. Because of this truth, you are forgiven, saved, and on the way to heaven. 2) You believe in and experience God's intimate and passionate love for you. This love cannot be earned or deserved, but can be accepted and received. 3) You receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a person and is God's love poured into our heart. Jesus came to bring us this "abundant life", and "eternal life." This grace is why we

were created. 4) You have a new intimacy with Jesus. You walk with him and give yourself to him in prayer and in the ordinary events of everyday. This lifestyle leads to an ever-deepening communion. You strive to abide and stay connected over and over again as a disciple. You may have encounters, manifestations, and graced moments. But most of this walk is quite ordinary although mystical.

Sometimes an encounter with Jesus can be dramatic. Most times though, quite ordinary. We may not feel or see anything. To those who want the sensational but haven't felt it I share with you the words of Jesus himself: "Blessed are those who believe *without* seeing." (Jn. 20:29) Peter put it this way, "Without having seen him, you love him and believe..." (1 Pet. 1:8)

Having something real and significant are the elements of a personal relationship with Jesus. Take a moment now and connect with Jesus. Ask for greater intimacy. Thank him for suffering and dying for you to receive forgiveness. Pray to receive the Holy Spirit more fully. Simply become aware of his love for you. Give more of yourself to abide in Jesus each day. A relationship with Jesus is deeply personal and never ends!

2

FROM PRECEPTS TO PASSION (FROM LAW TO LOVE)

One of the hallmarks of a personal relationship with Jesus is knowing that he came to save you. It is crucial that you know Jesus as your *Savior*. My ministry is all about pointing people to Jesus. My motto is: Touching lives/Saving souls.

Names are important! Any of you who are parents know the discussion and time involved in choosing your baby's name. Another example of the importance of our name has to do with checks and credit cards. In order to validate them, we must sign our name. Our signature denotes our assent and calls us to responsibility. Your name represents who you are, your person and your reputation. You should always want to behave in a way that will not tarnish your good name.

When my grandparents came over to the United States from Collelongo, Italy, they settled in Worcester, Massachusetts. When my dad was born they named him Cesidio Pisegna. This name was too foreign-sounding. They searched for something more English-sounding and the closest they could find was Cedric. (I'm Cedric Junior.) Cedric is a name of Welsh origin. I found out that like most names, Cedric has a meaning. Cedric means "Battle chieftain" or "warrior". This rings true for me as I go to war with evil and fight battles for the people of God as a priest. Your name has meaning too. Similarly, biblical names have meaning and help identify the character of the one named.

Before Jesus was born, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Mary will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

(Mt. 1:21) This is Jesus' identity and job description: salvation. Scripture is telling us that more than anything else, Jesus is *Savior*.

I live at our Passionist center in Houston, Holy Name Retreat Center. It is a place dedicated to the holy name of Jesus. Perhaps you've seen the "IHS" on some priests' outer garments? (Sometimes the IHS is impressed upon the communion host, too.) These are the first three letters (iota, eta, sigma) of the Greek spelling of "Jesus."

On my Passionist habit, I wear our sign, a heart with a cross above it. Inside the heart are the words "The Passion of Jesus Christ." These words are written in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, the languages of the Cross. I am proud and unworthy to wear the name of Jesus on my heart.

The desert fathers left the world to center their minds and hearts on God. Contemplative prayer can be difficult because of a multitude of distractions. Many of the spiritual masters teach that a powerful way to get centered is to use the name of Jesus. His name is anointed. When we whisper "Jesus" in our hearts, it leads to transcendence.

Jesus is the name above all names. It was in the name of Jesus that the disciples performed healings. (Acts 3:6) We pray not in and of ourselves and our uprightness, but in the name of Jesus. (Jn. 14:13) At the name of Jesus, every knee must bend, in heaven, on the earth, and under the earth. (Phil. 2:10) The name of Jesus has power and is saving. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

I love the song verse:

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.
There's just something about that name.
Master, Lord, Savior,
Like the fragrance after a rain.

Jesus' job description, more than anything else, was to deliver us from sin and death. He came to save us. The primary Greek word for "save" (sozo) can also mean to heal. When Jesus ministered to people two thousand years ago, he touched them with his healing power. That same healing power is now available to us. Jesus is still touching people, healing people, and saving people through his Cross. (When I talk about the Cross, I don't mean any particular crucifix or piece of wood. Rather, I refer to the event that all crosses symbolize: the once-and-for-all self-sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth on the Cross at Calvary.)

(1 COR. 1:23)

All scripture scholars learn theories about how the Gospels were formulated. Most agree that at first the stories about Jesus were oral traditions that were shared. These narratives about Jesus and what he taught came from the apostles and were passed on to their communities. As time wore on, bits and pieces of what would become the gospel narrative were written down. These written traditions included miracle stories and some of the teachings of Jesus. These were written to instruct specific communities and to speak to their problems and needs.

Such stories were used in the early liturgies and helped shape the early Christians' worship experiences. As the apostles and other eyewitnesses started to die, members of the early church began to stitch together these circulated stories. One major document that scholars believe existed is called the "Q" (Source) document. It has never been discovered, but scholars can deduce that it existed. The preexisting Q seems to have been the source for the first Gospel that would be written: Mark. Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q as their sources. Each evangelist (or community) wove these Q stories (and others) together in certain strategic ways for their own various practical and theological purposes. Four of these

“Gospels” were canonized by the church and were preserved for our reading. Some of the other early documents, such as the Gospel of Thomas and other compilations of stories, were not considered orthodox material. They were not canonized by the Councils of Hippo, Carthage, or Trent.

Some scholars say that the four gospel writers actually began writing their Gospels with the passion narratives. The early church had to deal with the scandal of its founder having been put to death on a cross. The evangelists couldn't ignore the fact of the crucifixion, so they had to justify it and explain it. Having written down the various stories surrounding Jesus' death, they worked backwards with the stories and other teachings that comprised their Gospel. I remember being taught by one scholar that “The Gospels are actually the passion narratives with a long introduction.”

Whether or not the passion narratives were the first written, we know that each Gospel highlights the passion narrative and holds it in special esteem. These accounts are always read on Passion (Palm) Sunday, which begins Holy Week. Depending on the particular church year (Cycle A, B or C) we hear the account of Matthew, Mark or Luke proclaimed. John's Gospel is always proclaimed on Good Friday itself.

Gospels should be viewed as individual, separate portraits or even caricatures of Jesus with distinct theological truths being proclaimed. It is as if each of the four evangelists painted his own portrait of Jesus and who he is. It is not correct to meld the four theologically. If you do, you lose the flavor of what the individual evangelist was trying to do. It would be like taking Rembrandt's painting of Jesus on the Cross and trying to meld it with Salvador Dali's. Each painter had a purpose and nuanced his work in order to speak on its own. So it is with the Gospels. Each of the three synoptic (a word that means to see together) Gospels is a little different and with good reason. (John's is very different, a maverick Gospel.)

A look at Mark's crucifixion account will highlight what I mean. Scholars tell us that Mark compiled his Gospel first, sometime around 67 A.D. One of the major purposes of his Gospel was Christological. In other words, Mark was trying to identify Jesus as the Son of God to his reader. Also, he defined what he meant by the term "Son of God."

Beginning with Chapter 1, verse 1, the reader is told who Jesus is. In the opening line of Mark's Gospel we read, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the *Son of God*." The reader knows what is to follow will explain that Jesus is the Son of God and what makes him so. A close reading of the gospel story as it unfolds will surface an interesting point. You will notice that throughout the Gospel account no human being ever recognizes Jesus as the Son of God. This silence is a dramatic technique Mark will use to highlight the meaning of "Son of God" later. Yes, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Son of the living God in Matthew 16:16 but never in Mark. In Mark 8:29, Peter simply calls Jesus "the Christ." (Remember, I said not to meld two or more Gospels, but look closely at each one as a separate portrait in order to discover the author's purposes.)

Interestingly enough, demons recognize Jesus as God's Son. (Mk. 3:11) God also announces Jesus as "my beloved Son" both at his baptism and his transfiguration. (Mk. 1:11; 9:7) No human, however, has identified Jesus for who he really is. This fact seems to be hidden from people. The reader knows from the beginning, but Jesus' identity is hidden from those in the Gospel. What Mark is doing (if you read between the lines) is setting up his drama for this revelation at a key moment in his Gospel.

That marquee moment comes at the crucifixion. There is a Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion who watches Jesus die. At the climactic moment when Jesus screams and suffocates in agony, this foreign, Gentile soldier (an unlikely)

exclaims, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mk. 15:39) *Finally* a human being recognizes Jesus’ true identity. The fact that someone was a foreign soldier makes it all the more telling. Notice when this happens. It is *at the Cross* where Jesus’ true identity is revealed. Mark is telling us that it is not Jesus’ healing, his miracles, or even his sublime teaching that reveals him as God’s Son, but his death on the Cross!

The astute reader should be prepared for this. Mark has Jesus himself proclaim this crucial verse: “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) Jesus’ role, job description, and identity as the Son of God are all tied up in the Cross. He came to give himself and to ransom many (language now used at the consecration at Mass) from sin and death. Mark is proclaiming that Jesus’ death on the Cross most identifies Jesus as the Son of God.

SIGN LANGUAGE

In 1985, I professed my vows as a Passionist religious. Six years later, I was ordained a priest. When I was professed on September 8, 1985, I received the sign that I wear on the outside of my habit. Prominently placed on the sign is the cross. We wear this sign over our heart to remind all that the Passion should be always in our heart.

The vows I professed publicly include my first vow to mediate on and proclaim the meaning of the Cross of Jesus to all. I fulfill my vows as I pray, celebrate Eucharist, preach, and write and produce about the Passion. Many people think we wear a badge. It is not a badge, but a sign. The Passionists used to publish *Sign* magazine.

A “sign” is something significant in the Bible. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ miracles were called “signs.” The Cross is the ultimate sign that would draw all people to himself. (Jn. 12:32) Jesus spoke of his Cross and resurrection as the “sign of Jonah.” (Mt. 16:4) When speaking of the end times,

Jesus tells us that there will be a “sign of the Son of Man in heaven.” (Mt. 24:30) I believe this sign will be the cross, displayed for all to see immediately before the end of the world. In the year 312, the emperor Constantine saw a P superimposed on an X (Chi-Rho – symbol for the Christ) in the sky and heard, “In this sign you shall conquer.” He then won the battle at the Milvian Bridge. This led to the Edict of Milan in 313 which granted legal toleration to all religions. The Edict paved the way for Christian favor in Rome.

The Five Man Electrical Band sang “Signs” The refrain: Sign, sign, everywhere a sign. There are billboards advertising products in parking lots and along street corners and highways. Signs abound in restaurants and other public meeting places. Perhaps the place where we are most familiar with signs is on the road. As we drive, we constantly see speed limit signs, yield signs, and stop signs.

Signs are so commonplace that often we begin to ignore them. I remember when I was preaching a mission in Gainesville, Florida and had just moved into the rectory there. The pastor was gone and I wanted to wash my clothes. I noticed a washing machine and dryer just outside the kitchen in the garage. As I opened the lid of the washer and threw my clothes in, I noticed an old, faded, curled up sign on the lid, but didn’t pay any attention to it. I started the washing machine and then went inside.

About ten minutes later I thought I would go out into the garage to check up on my wash. When I opened the door, much to my dismay I saw there was soapy, sudsy water on the floor everywhere. I stopped the washer and read the sign on the top of it. The sign said, “Be SURE you put the hose out the back door before starting the washer.” How could I have missed it? I quickly put the hose out the door and cleaned up the mess. Signs are so prevalent everywhere that often we can become jaded to their presence and message.

I've found that that is the way it is with the cross. The sign that is the cross is on steeples, in sanctuaries, around necks and tattooed on arms. Could it be that because it is so commonplace and familiar, we have a tendency to take for granted what it really signifies?

The Catholic actor Mel Gibson financed and produced a movie about Jesus called *The Passion of the Christ*. He said that he wanted to produce a movie about the Passion of Jesus that was as realistic as possible. The movie depicts the violence, pain, and torture that Jesus had to endure. It was meant to be a true representation of the actual horror of the Cross. I believe that movies like *The Passion* can help draw us into the story that is the passion. Jesus' passion is captivating. Even the hardest of hearts are prone to melt when they see the extreme sufferings Jesus endured for us.

The cross is such an important sign that we must pay close attention to it. St. Paul of the Cross, the founder of the Passionists, said, "The Cross is the miracle of miracles. Everything is to be found in the Cross. It is the most overwhelming work of God's love." Someone once said that the horizontal and vertical lines formed by the two crossbeams are the ultimate plus (+) sign. Everything about the cross is positive. We must reflect upon this sign because the cross is the sign of God's love, healing, forgiveness, and salvation. The Cross is the crux of Christianity.

THE GOSPEL IS THE POWER OF GOD (ROM. 1:16)

Paul the apostle wrote the community at Corinth, "Christ crucified is the power and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:18, 24) I want to spend some time reflecting about how Jesus (and his Cross) is the power and wisdom of God.

I grew up Catholic and was instructed in the faith from my childhood. I heard about laws, rules, and regulations all of my early life. Teachings like the Ten Commandments and "thou shalt not" dominated a lot of the instruction I received.

It didn't take long before I identified Christianity as a religion of law. Even Jesus spoke of the law and quoted the Ten Commandments (for example, to the rich young man in Luke 18:20). At first, I saw Jesus as just another Moses, a religious figure promulgating even more laws and rules that were hard to follow.

I must say that laws, rules, and regulations are good and needed. For example, I wouldn't want to drive on the street unless there was some system of organization – otherwise there would be complete chaos. People wouldn't stop when they should, and there would be numerous accidents. For society to function, we need rules and mores to dictate human behavior; otherwise, people would just do what they felt like doing. That would be disastrous. Might would be right and the strong would rule. People would be violated very quickly.

The other side of the coin is that people can fall victim to laws and regulations. I meet many people in the confessional and elsewhere who are scrupulous. They are excessively worried about whether or not they are "making a good confession." Such people are extreme perfectionists. Scrupulous people suffer from a rigidity, inflexibility and harshness with self that is simply not Gospel-like. They try to carry out the commands of our church to the letter. There are innumerable obligations, duties and "should's." In reality, no one can keep every law and rule, but these people carry extreme guilt because they can't. Such people are bound to always walk around burdened and guilty. They look so troubled that I sense they are in a straightjacket and long to be delivered and set free. I always tell them God understands the suffering of their scrupulosity and will have mercy.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were a lay group rigorously devoted to the law of Israel. They thought that knowledge of the law and following its 613 proscriptions and warnings was a guarantee of piety. Jesus blasted them many times in

his teaching. One of my favorite quotes is “You blind guides, straining out a mosquito and swallowing a camel!” (Mt. 23:24) Jesus was saying that they put all their time and energy into the insignificant points of the law, while they missed the weightier matters, such as loving people! This seems to be the trend with scrupulous people also. They are long on the law, but short on love. The way they see it, religion is a system of black and white rules. If you obey and follow them perfectly, then God will be appeased and not angry. Somehow the law never gets *fulfilled* in their mind and heart. They never go to the next level, which is to live with justice, mercy, and love. After all, those virtues are not black and white, but grey.

Jesus, on the other hand, is soft and easy. He is not burdened or wrought up. He said, “My yoke is easy and my burden light.” (Mt. 11:30) There is a softness, gentleness and tenderness to Jesus that is refreshing and beautiful. I would have thought that someone like Jesus who taught ethics and a radical morality would be hard, harsh, stiff, and pressing. Jesus was quite the opposite. He had compassion, understanding, and unbounded mercy.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

He said he came to “fulfill” the law, not to abolish it. (Mt. 5:17) Jesus was proclaiming that the laws of the Old Testament were good and upright. Jesus did not come to do away with them, but to complete them. An example of this is one of his many Sabbath controversies. The Sabbath, of course, was very sacred to every Jew. On the Sabbath, they were not to travel very far or to work. It was a day of rest and reverence. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he broke that law by “working.” Another time he plucked grain on the Sabbath. He constantly responded to the necessity of doing good and helping others. For Jesus, *people* supersede precepts. He said, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” (Mk. 2:27)

Jesus also fulfilled the law by going beyond the mere letter of the law to its heart. In Chapter 5, Matthew presents us with a number of bare bones laws that were completed by the teaching of Jesus. For example, Jesus taught that murder begins in the heart with anger. Adultery starts within us and progresses with an impure look. Piety must be sought not for show but for the right motives. Jesus always went beyond the law to its root: he fulfills it. Motivation, *why* we do what we do, is vitally important.

We must remember that God is a God of hearts. Christianity is primarily a religion of the heart. Every Ash Wednesday, we begin Lent by hearing from the prophet Joel, “Rend your hearts, not your garments.” (Jl. 2:13) The prophet is telling the people to change interiorly. Our religion is not just an outward show of attire; it has to do with the heart. “First cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate so that the outside also may be clean.” (Mt. 23:26) Catholicism is not all about rules and regulation and law, as good as they may be. While there are a lot of black and white distinctions in our faith, much of our religion has to do with motivations, attitude, and the heart and these matters are often grey. A well-formed conscience is crucial to making good solid moral choices.

I’m always scandalized when I see people fasting, spending hours before the Blessed Sacrament and never missing Mass, who then go out and treat people rudely. I can’t help think, “What kind of religion is that? You are just deceiving yourself.” Our religion is primarily about people, not law. Consider the story of the Good Samaritan that Jesus told in Luke 10:29-37. Both the Levite and the priest were extremely religious people and were most likely on their way up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice and pray. When they saw the bruised and beaten man, they moved to the other side of the road and left him. I’ll bet they made it to prayer on time, but God would have been more pleased if they missed the prayer and helped the

person. James tells us, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.” (Jas. 1:27)

Paul the apostle proclaimed that the purpose of the law was to watch over us, as a guardian would a child, until the Messiah came. (Gal. 3:23) Humanity was formed and guided and led by the Old Testament moral precepts. The law was meant to help us form our consciences and teach us the moral will of God. But in Jesus, we are called to move beyond the letter of the law to the heart of it.

Laws alone do not save; in fact, faith in them can be quite dangerous. No one can keep them completely. Paul made this stunning statement in Galatians 3:10. “All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.”

There is something about the law that I find intriguing. Sometimes when we are commanded *not* to do something, it ironically makes us want to do it! Paul talks about this in Romans 7:7. “Yet if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” Our first parents fell prey to temptation only when they were told, “Don’t eat from that tree.” One law . . . and they broke it!

A DRIVING LESSON

I remember what happened right after my first profession as a Passionist in 1985. After a year of novitiate in Pittsburgh, I was about to go to Chicago to begin my studies for the priesthood. Before my theological studies, I was eager to spend a few weeks with my parents. They were living in Florida at the time. I hadn’t seen the beach in ages. My dad was a carpenter and he had this elongated Dodge van with

many of his tools in it. Since I didn't have the money to rent a car, he let me use his van. He laid out only one command. "This is my livelihood," he told me, "drive the van anywhere you want but do *not* drive my van on the beach." (People can drive on the hard packed beaches in the Daytona area where they lived.)

I so appreciated my dad letting me take his van, and I was enjoying cruising around in the Florida sun. Suddenly, that wasn't good enough. Temptation got the best of me. I soon got bored by the blacktop and got a hankering for sand and surf. The words of my dad echoed in my mind, "This is my livelihood, do *not* drive it on the beach." I reasoned that nothing would happen and I would just take it for a short drive on the beach. Who would know?

Somehow the thrill of doing something I wasn't supposed to do made it even more enjoyable. I had my window rolled down and enjoyed tooling down the beach soaking in the scenery. Before long, I came to a jetty and had to turn around. I made the mistake of turning toward the water. I noticed that the sand was really soft and there were ruts where many others had turned on that same spot. I slowed down, made the turn and felt the van start to sink. I began to hit the accelerator and my heart sank when the back wheels spun. Soon, like a bad dream, I was stuck. Not only was I stuck, but I was only about ten feet from the pounding surf and the tide was coming in! My father's one command, "This is my livelihood, do not drive it on the beach," resounded in my brain.

I began to panic. I jumped out of the van and looked at the bottom frame of the van, now level with the sand beneath. The wheels had spun two deep ruts in the sand and the van was stuck solid. I glanced at the white foam inching ever closer. I looked around for a house, but there was none nearby. I

had visions of my dad's van bobbing in the surf and being sucked under. I ran as fast as I could toward the road (which I fervently wished I had stayed on)! I came upon the first house, ran to the door, and started to pound on it like a madman. No one was home. I ran further down the street and found a 7/11 convenience store. I fumbled with the quarter as I put it in the pay phone and called a tow truck. They assured me they would come but it would cost \$50. (I had only been given \$100 spending money for my two weeks off.) "Who cares?" I thought. I would have paid any money to get that van towed!

After what seemed to be an eternity, the tow truck came. I kept thinking, "It'll never work, it is in too deep. The water is almost lapping at the wheels. I'm a goner." The driver fastened the hook to the bumper and, sure enough, the van popped out of those deep ruts. Perhaps one of the most joyful moments of my life was when I saw that van safe and secure up on the blacktop again. I had such an adrenaline rush that it took me an hour to stop shaking!

THE LAW IS POWERLESS

The point of my story is that while laws are good, they do nothing to change a person within. In fact, as Paul pointed out, that which is good can even serve to kill a person, as in the case of our first parents. For the longest time, Christianity to me was all about rules and regulations. Because I saw it as a rule-oriented religion, there was no power in it for me. Sadly, that's all that Christianity is for many people.

I can remember being discouraged when I was a young man. I read parts of the Bible and thought, "Even if all this is true, I can never keep all these rules." Without knowing it, I was instinctively right. *No one* can keep the law perfectly. Only Jesus did! There came a point when I was nineteen years old that I realized that I had broken so many laws and sinned against all the rules so often that I could never make up for

it. God had me right where he wanted me. I believe we must come to the point where we realize that we can never make up for the wrongs we have done. That is where grace begins. I love Paul's statement in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

At age nineteen, I finally came to Jesus just as I was (the only way you can ever come) and surrendered myself to Jesus at the Cross. I realized that he died for me personally and that I was forgiven. I could never make up for my sins, but I could and did accept the grace he offered to me. "Come to me," Jesus said, "all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." (Mt. 11:28) Of course the labor and heavy burdens that Jesus was referring to were my efforts to obey the law perfectly!

At that point, my relationship with Jesus changed drastically. Instead of seeing him as a lawgiver, he became for me, a forgiver. As Jesus taught, "For God sent his son into the world, not to *condemn* the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (Jn. 3:17) I was so relieved when I understood that Jesus wasn't out to burden me, but to relieve me from all my burdens! I love what Psalm 81:6 says, "A voice I had not known said to me, 'I relieved your shoulder of the burden.'" When you come to Jesus, you can lay your burdens down.

Soon after, when I returned to the Catholic church, I had fears deep inside that I would be recommitting myself to a system of rules and regulations once again. My fears weren't realized. A mature Christianity took root. I began to develop a relationship with a *person*, not a precept. Instead of words carved on stone, we now have a story engraved in our hearts. The wisdom of the cross is that we are allured and united to Jesus through his passion. Because I had a personal relationship with Jesus, I didn't have to follow every law perfectly. I was freed from that burden. Certainly there

are laws in following Jesus, but it is your relationship with him that is primary. When you fall in love with Jesus, you develop the desire to follow his ways. Then laws that you never had the desire to keep become doable.

If you read the lives of any of your favorite saints, they will show you the essence of Christianity. The heart of it all is a love relationship with God in Jesus. Some of my favorites are St. Catherine of Sienna, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Julian of Norwich. Many of these saints will comment on and use the Song of Songs in the Bible. The Song of Songs is a love song using poetry and even erotic language to describe a desired relationship. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." (Song 6:3) Our hearts can burn with longing for God. We can have mystical and in-depth experiences. Every disciple is a temple of God wherein dwells the living God. Discipleship is more than following Jesus, it is getting to know him in a deep, intimate way.

Jesus didn't come simply to give us another system of rules and regulations, he came to invite us into a relationship with him that would change our hearts and give us the power to fulfill the law. I love what the first letter of John chapter 5:3 teaches. "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are *not burdensome*." A relationship with Jesus replaces the burden of trying with the ease of trusting him.

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Back in 1982, years before I joined the Passionists, I went on a retreat at a Trappist abbey way out in the woods of Ava, Missouri. The monks there make their living by creating cinder blocks from scratch. It is a tough life of hard work, prayer, and community. The contemplative Trappists rarely leave their particular abbey. They are cloistered from the world.

I chose to go to confession to one of the monks. As I walked with the priest and proclaimed my sins, I received the forgiveness of God. The monk counseled me and shared with me something about morality that I never forgot. He said the moral life all boils down to “the obedience of faith.” This is a phrase that Paul uses to begin and end his sublime letter to the Romans. (Rom. 1:5; 16:26) The letter to the Romans is a power-packed epistle full of musings about morality and teachings about faith. This phrase, “the obedience of faith,” functions as bookends to this lofty letter. I gave great weight to the wisdom this priest shared with me and it has always stuck with me. If you truly believe, you will be obedient to the teachings of Jesus. You will follow your informed conscience and not compromise.

I believe that monk was telling me to focus on Jesus. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to “keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Our faith and trust must be in him. He has paved the way of morality and ethics for us. He *is* the way. As we read the Gospels, the heart of Jesus is revealed. “Turn the other cheek. Love. Have pure motives. Be generous and compassionate. Forgive.” It is faith in his person and obedience to his heart that must be our guide. Of course, this leaves a lot of grey area and ambiguity, but life and experiences are grey and ambiguous. We must meet each situation by “putting on Christ.” (Col. 3:12-13)

The Catechism of our church confirms this view. The whole third section (out of four) has to do with morality and is called *Life in Christ*. In it we read, “The first and last point of reference of this catechesis will always be Jesus Christ himself, who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ It is by looking to him in faith that Christ’s faithful can hope that he himself fulfills his promises in them, and that, by loving him with the same love with which he has loved them, they may perform

works in keeping with their dignity. ‘For to me, to live is Christ.’” (*Catechism* #1698) Morality and ethics is a vast area. Nothing is simple, but we have the correct foundation. Jesus, his teaching, and his manner are that rock foundation. (Mt. 7:24)

For years now many young people have been wearing a wrist band marked with the initials W.W.J.D. The initials stand for “What would Jesus do?” In every situation, we are called to a code of ethics that is simple yet profound. How would Jesus react? What would his action be? How do you see him in this circumstance? Go and do likewise. Responding like Jesus is the obedience of faith and our code of ethics. Of course, this requires that we know Jesus and what he taught first. A well-formed conscience is a necessity.

God was aware through observing generations of people that laws written in stone have little effect on changing hearts. What God does in his new covenant is to write them in our *hearts* through baptizing us into a relationship with a person. This is the “wisdom” of the Cross. The Cross captivates, captures, calls, and conquers. The Gospel about a young upright carpenter unjustly put to death for sinners captivates and captures hearts. There is power in the Cross that calls us to God and conquers our rebellion. Because Jesus was lifted up, he draws us to himself like a magnet. (Jn. 12:32) We are attracted by the truth, depth and profundity of this amazing story. Rules try to make us obey, but a relationship gives us the motivation to follow and to change deep within. Over and over again in the Scriptures, we are promised a new heart with a new ability to please God. We want to please the one we love who sacrificed his all for us. All of us are responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion and no one wants to ignore his sufferings by sinning. What the law could not accomplish, God has done in Jesus!

In several places in the Bible, we are told that there is now a new covenant. (Heb. 8:10-13) Are you an “old covenant”

or “new covenant” Christian? Don’t live under the burden of trying to earn heaven by following a bunch of laws in order to be justified. We have been freed from the rigors of the law in order to walk with and in Christ.

Jesus put it this way: “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins.” (Mk. 2:21-22)

Jesus was saying that he came to bring something very new and different from what already existed. Old wineskins are hard, rigid, inflexible, dried out, and impervious to change. New wineskins are supple, flexible, adaptable, and open to change. The heart of our religion is not obligation, rules, rituals, regulations, and law. The news that Jesus came to bring has to do with a deep *relationship* with God and his Holy Spirit. We are regenerated and renewed through his love, mercy, and grace. These things don’t always “fit” well into the old system. In fact, if someone comes along who proclaims these things, it will be so upsetting to the guardians of the black-and-white traditions that they will end up persecuting and killing such a prophet. That is exactly what happened to Jesus – this was one of the major reasons he was put to death. Don’t live a shrunken up, rigid, burdensome, old covenant Christianity! Jesus came to bring new wine and he wants to pour this into containers who are open, flexible, and willing to change. New wine is for new wineskins!

The wisdom of the Cross is that we are drawn into an intimate relationship with Jesus. There is also power because we know we are now forgiven and loved. The power of the Cross is demonstrated by the grace to change. The Cross’ power radiates with eternal life. The power of the Cross also produces zeal in the person receiving grace.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST COMPELS

“Zeal” is defined in the dictionary as fervor, zest, intense enthusiasm, or passion. It includes the concepts of being creative, realizing your potential, and becoming all you can be. When I was touched by the message of the Cross and invited Jesus into my heart, many things happened. I developed a personal relationship with Jesus and knew him as my Savior. My heart began to be cleansed and regenerated and I was given the power to change. (For fuller teaching about how to change, I refer you to my book *You Can Change*.) I also sensed a call to proclaim Jesus and reoriented my life to follow that call.

In my early days of college, I was studying business. I was hoping to graduate with a degree in Business Administration and become successful in the financial world. When Jesus touched me the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, my motivations, desires, and goals shifted drastically. Instead of desiring to make a lot of money, I wanted to help a lot of people. I discovered a fire within me to make Jesus known. I found an energy within me that simply wouldn't let me sit still. I know how Jeremiah felt when he wrote, “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” (Jer. 20:9)

I am naturally quite shy and don't enjoy the limelight. I marvel that God has me up in front of people all the time. I think one of the reasons he chose me to do this is because I don't have a need to be before others. I really don't desire the spotlight. In fact, I still have fear and anxiety about performing. Jesus spoke often about the inner life of the heart. As I examine

my heart, I search for my motivation. While we all like to be noticed and thought well of, it is clear to me that helping people is my primary motivation. There is a power within me that pushes me forward. "The love of Christ controls me." (2 Cor. 5:14) The Greek word for controls means to propel, compel, or drive a person. It is God's love within me that brings the zeal, enthusiasm, and desire to obey him through preaching, writing, and producing. I found this ardor because of the Cross. Jesus showed zeal for me when he suffered. I reciprocate in love.

Jesus certainly lived with passion, and when you give your life to him, you will find a new energy within you. This enthusiasm for life is yours to enjoy whether you are married, single, or called to the religious life. God's love is a fire within and inspires us to live a selfless life for others. It invites us to push ourselves to be creative and to realize our potential. I believe that within each person there is a tremendous treasure trove of possibility. I've discovered that in order for that capacity to be released in me I have to push myself, too. I must use discipline, determination, and goal-setting. Many people are motivated to do good, but few have the self-discipline to allow the grace within them to emerge. Zeal begins as energy and is fulfilled as we change our behavior and bear fruit.

When we are an infant, one of the first things we do is reach. We reach for our mother, our pacifier, our bottle. We reach to explore our surroundings. We are made to explore, made for adventure. Somewhere along the line, many lose the desire to reach. I've discovered there are endless things to reach for. There are no limits. Passion means reaching and there are endless possibilities in life. Life is an amazing adventure. Reach for the stars and at least you'll get the moon.

I met many other students in my seminary days. Some were on fire for Jesus and couldn't wait to get out and preach. Others loved God but weren't all that zealous. As I examined the source of zeal, I discerned that those who didn't have the zeal to evangelize somehow thought that people didn't need it. They weren't sure about heaven, hell, judgment, and being saved. Their confusion in this area led to a lack of desire to go out and call people to Christ. I noticed that the ones without zeal were usually among those who left the seminary. Even if they stayed, they often got involved in helping-type ministries versus those that were more explicitly evangelistic.

I remember after God touched me as a 20-year-old, I received the grace to preach. This gift or burden is good and actually is love for people. The burden is a heaviness knowing that many are lost. It is a feeling of compassion and wanting to reach out. Since I experienced salvation and new birth at the Cross, I feel a call from God to make sure that others know that they can experience salvation. When I travel around the U.S. preaching, I try to offer a moment during the course of the mission when people can give their life to Jesus. I preach explicitly about salvation as a free gift from God that results in eternal life and blessed assurance. Salvation is something we cannot earn, don't deserve, and can never merit. Many are intrigued by my boldness and thousands have been giving their life to Christ and receiving blessed assurance of life with God in heaven forever. God wants us to know where we are going. When I preach a mission, I have a purpose. I am not trying to tickle people's ears, but to make sure they are on their way to heaven. Helping people receive eternal life is my mission in life.

On Tuesday night of my mission (I call it transformation Tuesday), I often preach about the Cross of Jesus and offer people an invitation to pray a prayer similar to this. I invite you to pray it to God, from your heart, now.

Prayer of Self-Surrender to Jesus

Jesus,
I believe you suffered and died
on the Cross for me.
I have sinned and
I am sorry.
I surrender my life to you
Just as I am.
I believe that because you
suffered and died for me,
I am forgiven and I am saved.
Thank you that I have eternal life
and am on the way to heaven.
I love you Lord Jesus.
Amen.

Now that you have prayed that prayer, relax. God loves you. Receive his mercy and care for you personally. Simply soak in this wondrous truth. Jesus died for you and me. All of our sins are forgiven. God has a wonderful destiny for you and me in heaven. Rejoice that you are called and chosen. You are on the way to heaven!

Of course a prayer alone does not save; however, praying such a prayer can open you up to the grace that Jesus offers you. I hope that you will receive God's unconditional love for you. I pray that you will have assurance deep within that you are on the way to heaven – then the joy of the Lord will be your strength. There is no greater joy than knowing that you will live with God forever! Such joy will color the rest of your life on earth with hope.

Being baptized and celebrating the sacraments is important. But the late Pope John Paul II has said, "Our church has been over-sacramentalized and under-evangelized." What he meant is that our people are familiar with the sacraments but often forget what the sacraments stand for and represent. Many

keep the rules but are lacking depth. The purpose of a mission/retreat and my call as a missionary is to concentrate on the basic tenets of our faith: salvation, a personal relationship with Jesus, and new life in the Holy Spirit. These fundamentals are what God has impressed upon my heart from the beginning. My life's mission is to open up the treasure of the Gospel to everyone. The message of the Gospel inspires and fires my heart. As Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe." (Rom. 1:16)

Saint Pope John Paul II has called for a "new evangelization" in our church. He wants us to spread the Good News with new ardor, new expressions, and new methods. Ardor is passion. The number one thing I hear from people about my preaching is that I have enthusiasm. One of the reasons I have such energy is that the message I preach is so vitally important. The message of Jesus' love and the salvation he offers fires me. Also, I instinctively know that if I don't preach with energy people will zone out on me and fall asleep. I have to have passion or people will never come back – they are not obligated to come to my mission. They vote with their feet and simply will not return to a dry, dull, dead, lifeless service. Wanting to reach out beyond the walls of the church led to my developing my TV/Radio programs: *Live with Passion!*

Because of Jesus and his passion for us, I believe that this ardor is available not just for priests but for everyone. Parents who deny themselves by sacrificing for their children always touch me. Their constant giving is ardor. It inspires me to see single people who are in school and studying hard to achieve their dreams. Pursuing your dreams and working hard is passion. It blesses me to see older people who write poetry, paint, garden, and help others. The vision of Pentecost was that young people would see visions and old people would dream dreams. (Acts 2:17) I always say that you are never too young to have a vision and never too old to dream a dream!

Because Jesus died for you, *you* have a mission! How you live out your vocation is unique to you. Regardless of circumstances, your mission is to live for God and proclaim him in whatever walk of life you choose. All of us are called to live passionately and zealously. Who we are is God's gift to us; who we become is our gift to God.

I've discovered that the power of the Cross requires that I give myself to others. Zeal also means that I give myself to God. Paul Daneo, canonized St. Paul of the Cross, had tremendous ardor and zeal for Jesus crucified and loved to proclaim the Cross. That was one side of Paul.

The other side of Paul was his contemplative side. The same zeal that made him go out and preach also made him turn and look within. He was a great man of prayer, on fire with love for God. He saw the Cross as the "meeting tent" where we can encounter God. When the Hebrews journeyed through the desert, they would stop at the end of each day. They then set up a tent, and Moses would go there to meet with God. In fact, when John described Jesus' coming among us, he said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt [pitched his tent] among us." (Jn. 1:14) Here John was referring to the tent in the desert where God was so vividly present.

Paul of the Cross founded a community dedicated to proclaiming the Cross of Jesus. In our first vow, we promise to meditate on and proclaim the Cross and its meaning to all the faithful. Paul was a great man of prayer. He taught, "Meditation on the Passion of Jesus is the door which leads the soul to intimate union with God, to interior recollection, and to the most sublime contemplation." I have personally discovered that the mercy that God offers at the Cross is the pathway to contemplation. The desert fathers used to meditate whispering this mantra, "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me." Mercy mediates depth and intimacy. Since God is loving, there is no reason to fear getting close to God.

The Passion of Jesus is the door to knowing him personally. First of all, Jesus died to ransom us from death and to save us. We can only know him fully if we believe and accept eternal life. Bringing us abundant life is the reason Jesus was born. He was not just a righteous lawgiver. Jesus is *Savior*. Secondly, faith in Jesus and in what he has done for us leads to a change of heart. Jesus revolutionizes us and brings about a change leading to obedience. The obedience I refer to is not simple adherence to rules, but to Jesus himself. In addition, meditation on his suffering is the doorway to contemplation and greater union with him. Mystical insights, spiritual experiences, and depth of intimacy is the heritage of those who come to him through the Passion. There are a variety of ways to reflect upon the passion. Some include praying the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, walking the stations of the cross, imagining Jesus through meditative prayer and simply reading the passion accounts in the Bible. St. Paul of the Cross upheld meditating upon Jesus' sufferings as a primary way to know him personally. I've discovered that such meditations unite me to Jesus in a profound mystical way. May Jesus' passion be ever in our hearts.

3

REFINER'S FIRE

The prophet Malachi, writing some five hundred years before Jesus was born, told us something interesting about the long-awaited Messiah.

The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple . . . For he is like a refiner's fire and like a fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord.

(Mal. 3:1, 2-3)

If I were to ask you, "Is God working in your life right now?" most of you would say, "Yes, of course God is." But if I were to ask you, "What exactly is God doing?" few know how to answer. Most people would say, "I believe God is working, but I'm not sure what God is doing."

Some people think that after God created the world, he rested from all activity. While God took a Sabbath rest, I assure you God is still very much at work in his creation! Jesus taught, "My father is working *still* and I am working." (Jn. 5:17) In other words, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father are all intricately and intimately involved in our lives. God's working is mysterious and sometimes imperceptible to us, but God is active nevertheless.

When I think about the activity of God in the world, there are so many examples I could give. I see God giving safe travel to the scores of airplanes flying through turbulence at this moment. God is working through the hands of physicians who are presently performing heart operations or other surgeries. God is blessing mothers who are about to give birth and

helps bring the babies into the world safely. God is presently healing people who are broken-hearted through abuse. God helps people addicted to various substances such as alcohol to lead victorious lives of recovery, one day at a time. God is giving people faith in Jesus and saving those who pray to him. God assists all of us who cry out to him to conquer sin in our lives. God is listening to and answering prayer in countless ways. God is active and at work in the lives of all humans at this very moment. We simply need to be aware and recognize this. God is an active, awesome God! Each morning, we religiously pray, "O God, come to my assistance, O Lord, make haste to help me." (Ps. 70:1) We are asking for God's assistance during our prayers as well as his help with the activities of the day.

Malachi identifies one major way God is working in our lives: as a refiner. We must remember that God's plan is to mold us into the image of Jesus. We develop a personal relationship with Jesus when we see God working in us, making us the image of Jesus. I heard about a couple who went into a silversmith's shop in England. When they looked around, they saw all kinds of beautiful, pure sterling silver plates hanging on the wall. Although they were quite expensive, they found one that they simply adored. They wanted to buy it, but there was no one in the shop to take their money.

They noticed a curtain at the back of the shop and when they peeked through it, they saw a man sitting by a large pot with a fire under it.

"Sir," they said, "We fell in love with one of your plates and we would like to buy it."

The man never took his eyes off the pot and replied, "Please come back a little later. I am in the process of purifying this silver and I am at the crucial stage.

If the fire begins to go out, the silver will harden with the impurities still in it. If I leave the silver in too long, it will liquefy and spoil. It has to be just right.”

“How do you know when it is just right?” asked the couple. “That’s the easy part,” said the silversmith. “I know the silver is perfect when I can see my reflection in it.”

Romans 8:29 is one of the most telling verses in the entire Bible. “God predestined us to be *conformed* to the image of his Son.” What, then, is God doing in our daily life? God is refining us, purifying us, sifting us, and molding us to become the very image, the reflection, of Jesus of Nazareth. God does this through the sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit and through our real life experiences.

I must make it clear that it is not *imitating* Jesus that brings salvation. It’s *accepting* Jesus and believing that he suffered for you on the Cross that brings about the rebirth. However, imitation (following Jesus) is the natural fruit of our believing and a major part of God’s will for you. Jesus was the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, and the goal of our lifelong journey and the fruit of faith is to become like him.

Conversion is a journey *and* a process. Initial conversion occurs when you believe in and come to Jesus. There is an awakening/rebirth/graced experience. This encounter can be quite dramatic or ordinary, but something happens. Then the process of conversion continues through the transformation of the old you into the new you. *We come to know Jesus personally as we are being changed.* Selfishness must be transformed into selflessness, cynicism to joy, gossip to silence, bitterness to forgiveness, lust to love, brokenness to wholeness, and holiness. Conversion is the journey of our life. We become new as we live and are dealt with by God.

I want to look at how God refines us in our everyday lives. Certainly God will work in and through circumstances, our bodies, aging, and trials in order to purify us. In addition, I have found that one of the major ways I am purified and dealt with is through ordinary relationships. These relationships offer me opportunities to grow.

ORDINARY PEOPLE

I live in a community of seven priests in Houston. Different men have different standards of what they consider clean around the house. Some leave the kitchen counters dirty and do not clean up after themselves. Others leave lights on. Still others leave things lying around.

I am the opposite. I like the house clean and I notice right away when things are out of order. I get easily agitated when rooms are not neat. I try to take responsibility for my actions and feel it is common courtesy to the others that I live with to clean up after myself. I often want to say something about the messes. In situations like this, I've found that it is important to pick your battles. I've learned that if I am going to confront someone about their behaviors around the house, I better be ready for some negative feedback about my behavior! I have a choice to accept people the way they are or to confront them in a gentle way. Some battles are not worth fighting.

I come to know Jesus in my daily living situations when I forgive and am flexible. I try to accept people the way they are, not the way I want them to be. I am not in control of everything and everyone and that is hard for me. I must accept each individual and his behavior as he is (as long as he is not too far out of line)! I find Jesus working in me not only when I forgive and accept, but also when I look for the positive in each person. My tendency is to write a person off because they don't live up to my "standards." I find Jesus at work in me when I focus on what is positive in a person's

personality, such as their energy or joy or professionalism. I can't always have everything my way. Jesus helps me to be positive, adapt, and let things go. Jesus works through community life to show me where I need to grow. As I observe how Jesus handled difficult people in his life, I am fortified to do the same in mine. He turned the other cheek and so can I.

Each day we pray together as a community in the morning and afternoon. We gather to pray the Liturgy of the Hours and to celebrate Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Hours is a recitation of Psalms and other scriptures. When we are gathered, the people on one side of the chapel recite a few lines then become silent while the other side of the chapel continues with the Psalm. We go back and forth antiphonally until the Psalm is completed. There is always someone who wants to chant the scriptures too quickly or loudly for my taste, and this can speed things up so much that I feel the sense of prayerfulness is lost.

In community meetings, I have discussed our prayer life in common and my desire to slow down. I know everyone has different paces, but it is *common* prayer, not individual prayer. Although I have tried to bring a more meditative pace to our prayer, some of the other men prefer a speedy recitation of the Psalms. This frustrates me and makes it difficult for me to want to pray with them. Time and time again, I have had to surrender my need to go slow to the Lord. When I approach the Lord, I sense God telling me that I need to be easy, flexible, and adaptable. I can't always have it my way. It is life in common. God is working through the community to let go of my notions and adapt.

We live life in close quarters. Bathrooms and doors are close to each other. When one person gets up in the morning, everyone can hear the water running. When someone comes or goes, doors slam and are heard by everyone. We have to agree on a common temperature. Some like it warm, others

like it chilly. We have five cars that we all share. Usually when I climb in one and turn on the ignition, the seat will be way forward, the mirror is adjusted wrong, the air conditioner is on full blast, and the radio blares loudly. Nothing is set for me. The cars are shared *in common*.

I struggle because there is not complete unanimity within our community. Most are democrats and the political conversations can get heated. I try not to argue. I have never seen our country so divided and polarized politically as the present time. People aren't just angry, they are enraged.

At 5:30 p.m. our community gathers in the TV room to watch the national news. It is hard for me to sit there while comments are made that I strongly disagree with. I must admit that at times I go to my room thinking, "Why couldn't I join a community where everyone agrees? Why do I stay with them?" But as I reflect on it, there is no community in which everyone agrees. I have heard the struggles of married people who are upset because their spouse doesn't agree with them or think like they do. There is no perfect marriage, either! There will always be disagreement and a variety of points-of-view. Being with those who have opposite views can make me feel frustrated at times, but it also challenges me and stretches me to consider other viewpoints. God is working in me to accept and respect the views of others. I don't have to agree with everyone, and they don't have to agree with me! I see Jesus at work in me through the community. I come to know him as I see how he works and allow him to move in me. Being flexible takes continual surrender.

Some time ago, a young man who had attended a mission I preached in Austin, Texas became interested in religious life. He approached me about joining our community and I dialogued with him for about a year. I was his spiritual director and took a great interest in him. I was glad that he wanted to join the Passionists and I tried to help him the best I could.

About two weeks before he was to move into residence with us in Houston, he discerned ours was not the life for him. (It wasn't the paper trail, prayer or cars!) His decision came out of the blue and took me completely by surprise – I was very disappointed.

I vividly remember the morning he informed me of his decision. I was driving to a mission I was about to preach and was trying to get my weekend homily together in my mind. It was a chaotic morning. Just hours before, the space shuttle Columbia had disintegrated during its re-entry to earth. I was upset about the shuttle disaster. I called the young man on my cell phone to see how he was doing. When he told me that he had decided not to enter our community, I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. I had worked hard on our relationship and had so much hope for him. I believed he would fit well into our community. It was especially difficult for me because in the past I had directed a number of other young men who had gone elsewhere. I remember thinking, "Why do I try at all? No one wants to be a priest anymore, much less join our community! I've had it. I will never counsel anyone who looks at our community again."

Then, as I gave it some time, I sensed God whisper, "Cedric, you've never run from hard things in the past. Keep trying. Don't give up." God was dealing with me about my negative attitude. This is a no-brainer, but everything that is positive is of God and everything negative is of evil. God was inspiring me to be positive. Every community is struggling with vocations. Whether or not we have more young men, it is still God's church and God has a plan. I decided to let go of my disappointment the best I could. Then I recommitted myself to providing discernment counseling in the future for any young man who asks that of me.

After devoting so much time and energy to this relationship, I really didn't want to talk to this young man again, but I did call

him back to try to help him find another community that would be better suited for him. He is a very traditional, extremely conservative young man who felt that some of the progressive/contemporary ideas of our community might be too much for him. I tried to keep his best interest in mind. It took a lot of grace for me to call him. In fact, a part of me never wanted to speak to him again. After all I had given him, I was hurt. It took the supernatural anointing of the Holy Spirit to help me have a good attitude.

My point in all this is that God works through and in the fire! Difficulties, irritations, disappointments and the cold hard realities of various personalities are opportunities for growth. You know what the difference between a lump of coal and a shimmering diamond is? Time and pressure. I believe each of us is a diamond in the rough. We all have potential and possibility. God is using the pressures and trials of life to motivate us and polish us. God is molding and shaping our attitudes, thoughts, and will through various people and events of our lives. These events include relationships and the stress and pressures that come from them. I see the hand of God at work in my life through the people I am in contact with. Nothing happens by accident. God's purpose is revealed in every incident. It is very important that we realize we are being purified and refined in everyday life. As we are refined, we come to know God because we see him working in and through the trials. When we are disciplined and encounter trials, we know that God is dealing with us as his children. (Heb. 12:7)

Remember, God is the refiner who sits watching us. He knows just how hot to allow the fire to be. He will use the fires in our lives to transform us, if we will cooperate.

I AM WITH YOU

Think of what you are going through right now. Some of you are dealing with old age and health problems. God has

sifted and transformed me through my scars and physical maladies. Others are experiencing relationships that are in turmoil. Still others are dealing with financial problems or emotional difficulties such as a low self-image. God is dealing with the whole earth population through the pandemic and racial tensions. The wonderful truth about God is that he brings about growth and purification as we go through. God doesn't always take us above, beneath, or around, but *through*. A favorite reading at funerals is from Psalm 23. "Even though I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil because you are with me." God could take us around the difficulties in our lives, but he chooses not to. For God, it is a greater thing that our faith is tested, our trust is stretched, and our steadfastness grows as we go *through*. We can grow through as we go through.

Throughout the Bible, people were called to courage in the face of difficulties. Every person was told that the reason they would be able to go through and be victorious is because "I am with you." Moses had led the Hebrews to the brink of the Promised Land. When he died, they needed a courageous leader to take them in and fight with the tribes that were already there. Joshua was the one chosen to be that leader. God told him to be strong and of good courage. The justification for that was God's mighty presence. "Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God *is with you* wherever you go." (Jos. 1:9)

This wonderful truth of God's nearness is highlighted throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Toward the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is named "Emmanuel." This is a name that means "God with us." (Mt. 1:23) In the middle of the Gospel, we read, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with you." (Mt. 18:20) Finally, in the Gospel's last verse, we are told that the reason the disciples can go and evangelize the nations is because "I am with you always." (Mt. 28:20)

To be with someone means to “be alongside of” and “near to,” and “being with” denotes companionship. One of the definitions for the Holy Spirit in John 14:26 is that he is the “standby.” I remember watching television one time when the screen went blank. Soon words came on the screen – “Technical difficulties: please stand by.” We were asked to wait as they worked on the problem. In a similar way, the Holy Spirit is always waiting by our side to help us in any problem or difficulty we may face. He may not take the problem away, but will give us the grace to go through. Being with also means being on your side. A powerful Scripture is: If God is for us, who can be against? (Ro. 8:31)

Parents can come to know God’s strength and help as they go through raising their children. Older people come to know Jesus as they go through operations, sicknesses, and the limitations growing older brings. Priests come to know Jesus as we go through the tribulations of ministry. Students come to know God as they go through the hardships of school. It is in the *going through* that we gain wisdom and experience God’s faithfulness. This is a major way that we come to know God in our lives.

Life doesn’t just happen arbitrarily. It all has significance and meaning to the one who has the eyes of faith. Look for meaning in purpose in your everyday life. Jesus refines us through relationships, sufferings, disappointment, and trials. The truth is that the way we behave in our relationships is like a mirror that shows us our innermost heart. If we have bitterness, anger, negativity, and envy, God will work to remove those impurities from us. Besides being purified, we come to know God in the process of purification and growth. Another significant way we come to know him is through experiencing life and observing what happens as he journeys with us. You

come to know him in a personal way when you discover the courage and strength to go through and not give up. Jesus is our companion on the journey. He is the good shepherd who does not run when the wolf comes. (Jn.10:11-12) Jesus has promised to never fail or forsake us. He is in our company and will not abandon us. He stays with us through thick and thin and he even laid down his life for us. I assure you that he is there for you right now. As you trust in him, you will see him work in you and your relationship with him will deepen.

Besides coming to know God, one of the greatest purposes in our life is to be purified. In traditional religious language, this is called "sanctification." This is the life-long process of becoming like Jesus. Becoming the image of Jesus is God's will for us. When push comes to shove, becoming Christ-like is the purpose of our life. We not only have the call to come to Jesus but to become like Jesus. Purification takes time. Seasoned with suffering and real life experiences we will change. Who you are is God's gift to you, but who you become is your gift to God.

4

GOD IS IN YOUR EVERY DAY

I came to know Jesus personally when I believed in his sacrifice for me on the Cross. I have also come to know him as I see him at work in me conforming me into his image. In prayer, I maintain my love relationship with Jesus and continue to deepen my love. In addition, I have come to know him through the many events of my life. When I observe my life experiences and the victory he gives, I come to know him in my day-by-day life experiences. For example, when I contemplated preaching missions/parish retreats as a seminarian, I was afraid and thought that I might not be able to do it. How could I get up there in front of all those people? What would I say? When I stepped out (that in itself was the Lord!) and preached my first mission, I saw how the Lord anointed me and kept me positive, and how he touched people through me. I was encouraged and thought, "I think I am called to preach, and with God's help, I can do this again." Not only did I preach a second mission, I continue to preach around the country and lead pilgrimages to Israel, Greece, and Italy. As of this writing, I have preached over 500 evangelistic missions. As I approach each mission, I still have anxiety and fear, but I know I can do it because Jesus has helped me in the past, and I believe he will help me in the future. Looking at and remembering my graced past experiences is one of the ways I have come to "know" him. God is faithful. Since he has blessed us in the past, I know that God will continue to bless and give us victory in the future.

Who can forget the famous story of David in the Old Testament? The giant Goliath was threatening the Israelites and no one was courageous enough to fight him. The young

David, however, stepped forward and volunteered to do battle against this mighty Philistine. King Saul told him that he wouldn't be able to fight Goliath because David was just a youth and Goliath was a man of war. David justified himself before Saul by talking about how the Lord had given him victory in the past against lions and bears. "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." (1 Sam. 17:37)

In other words, David was looking back on the victories that God had given him in the past. David had come to know the Lord through these experiences. Because he had conquered in the past, David had faith that he could overcome in the present. The only way to be a giant-killer is to build on the fact that God worked in your past experiences and walk with faith into the present and future. If anyone ever asks you how you are going to accomplish your dreams, tell them, "With a slingshot and a few smooth stones, because *God* is with me!"

I find this true with the missions I preach. When I first began to give missions, I worked with another priest. I was fearful, but I had faith in God. God had touched my life, filled me with the Holy Spirit, and helped me in many instances in my past. Prior to my ministry, when I went through the difficulties of the seminary, God was there. When I encountered students and directors who didn't like me, God helped me. When I went through the tribulations of living in community, God ushered me through. My trust in God's faithfulness to and for me became deeply rooted in my heart because of these tribulations.

When I first began to preach missions solo, again I relied on God. Although I had never passed that way before, I knew the way-maker. He had called me, anointed me, and helped me in the past. Why shouldn't he be there for me now? I must admit it was difficult at first. I had to fight the voice of

doubt and failure. But all the while, I sensed the still, small voice within telling me, "You can do it!" After I had a few solo missions under my belt, God called me to some really big churches. Again the voice of doubt bellowed, "You can do it in small places, but how about in front of 1,000 people? You'll choke. They won't like you. Others can do it better."

Long after his encounter with Goliath, David ran into trouble with the Amalekites. (1 Sam. 30) They burned his city and took two of his wives captive. His own people were bitter and thought about stoning him. Imagine David's temptation to be negative and to give up! But although he was distressed, he didn't quit; rather, he "encouraged himself in the Lord." (1 Sam. 30:6) I've discovered that there are times in your life when your family isn't close by, friends are distant, and no one is rooting you on. In times like these, you must encourage yourself. You must stay positive and be your own best friend. God is for you, who can be against? The Holy Spirit is very positive and will be whispering confidence into your mind. You must pay attention to this and cooperate by agreeing with God in your "self-talk." If you enter into the temptation to be negative, you will fail. In life, you will either be a giant-killer or a giant flop. Which you become is up to you.

MORE THAN CONQUERORS!

I still preach missions all around the country. No matter how many I've done, every time I hit the road, the voice of doubt and negativity assails me. I hear, "They won't like you. Only a few will come. They won't buy your books." Sometimes when I arrive at yet another rectory, I even feel physically weak and sick inside. What I have discovered is that we are "*more* than conquerors through him who loved us." (Rom. 8:37) What that "more" means is that not only will we have victory, but based on God's support in the past, we can *know* we have the victory even *before* we try new things.

Now when I go on a mission, brave new territory, or write a new book, I know I will be victorious. I've seen what God has done in the past. Even if I struggle and run into noise, sound system problems, travel delays, irritating people, and other troubles, I know that in the end I will have the victory. Some time back I returned from a mission at a church in Lake Charles, Louisiana. The first time I was there, some 1,000 people turned out! It was one of the most enthusiastic, vibrant missions I have ever given. There was electricity in the air the whole time.

Seven years later, they invited me back to preach again. The voice of negativity said, "The church will only be half full. They won't come. You aren't as good as you were back then." But I stood my ground and encouraged myself in the Lord. I reasoned, "Even if 1000 people don't show up, I am still better than I was back then. I've matured over the years and my teaching is more profound. I know God is going to give me the victory no matter what."

The mission ended up having 1000 people again. I sold more books and resources at that mission than at any mission I have ever had. When I returned home, I thanked God for the mission. I smiled when I prayed because I knew in faith I would have the victory even before I left for the mission.

I know the way I will continue to make progress and go forward in my ministry is through determination, discipline, and faith in God. "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our *faith*." (1 Jn. 5:4) Years ago I presented my dream of preaching on TV before 100 of our priests and laity at our Passionist chapter meeting. I was very reticent about sharing this publicly because I wasn't sure if it would happen. If it didn't, I fear they might see me in the future and think, "Here is a man who planned, but could not build." (Lk. 14:30) Or some might react, "Who does he think he is? Is he good looking

enough? Does he preach well enough? Is he marketable?” In spite of my concerns, I risked sharing my dream.

Launching out into the deep is always risky. It demands courage. As I write this, I have been on TV for 18 years now. God has given me a national platform to share the Gospel. I’m the first minister to ever be on the three major Christian networks (TBN, EWTN and Daystar) at the same time! My dream has come true. But there is more. I want to expand and influence even more people. The Lord has spoken to me about this through this bible verse many times. This verse from the prophet Isaiah was crucial when I dreamt about broadcast media.

It is too little, God says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

(Is. 49:6)

How could I dare to even dream such things? Because God is with me and because of the way God has worked through me in the past.

I’m writing some of these meditations while on retreat at the New Camaldoli Hermitage at Big Sur, California. I am praying at a hermitage some 1300 feet above the Pacific Ocean. As I look out my window, the turquoise blue Pacific stretches forever and merges into the light blue sky. Way down below, I can see wave after wave crashing against the rugged coastline as land and sea meet in a white foam handshake. At night, countless stars shimmer and twinkle as they proclaim the creativity, power, and eternity of God. Creation draws me to contemplation. As I walked during my retreat, I thought, “After witnessing the power of God evident here in creation, the question isn’t: ‘How am I ever going to get on TV with the Gospel?’ Rather, the question is: ‘Why aren’t the airwaves

flooded with more preachers?” *God is able*. God is looking for people through whom he can show himself strong. He simply wants faith, trust, and confidence. God has been with me in the past, and I know he will be faithful to help me in the future. I dare to dream because “God is *able* to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” (Eph. 3:20)

When I have written books in the past, I have experienced his anointing. One of the great fears I have when I write is that I will start and not be able to finish. God has helped me over and over again to confront that fear. He has given me the determination I need, and I have come to believe and know that he will help me whenever I take the risk of writing again. I come to know myself and how God works in me as I dream, risk, and minister. I have gained courage, endurance, and have become quite creative. I have now written 25 books and have over 300 TV episodes. If you dream of writing a book, I want to help you. I have a document I wrote about how to write a book at www.francedric.org/freestuff

When my dad died suddenly in his sleep, Jesus gave me peace and was my companion in the grieving process. His amazing grace helped me through. When I presided at my mother’s funeral, I had the strength and words to celebrate her life well. As I live in community, I find a supernatural strength to forgive and love others. In my prayer life, I come to know Jesus through his touches of grace and consistent presence. Even when I am devoid of feeling at times, I remember the past glories, and those memories encourage me to keep pressing on. When I am tempted, I come to know Jesus through my ability to overcome that temptation and live in integrity. When I am afraid and feel panicky, I experience Jesus because he gives me the courage to confront my fears. When I suffer, I find meaning and purpose and purification because Jesus is with me. I find intimate union with him as I unite my sufferings to his. There are many more examples, but my point is that I come to know Jesus as I journey and

he develops his character in me. I know this does not come through my own effort alone, but by his grace alive in me!

Before you start thinking, “Wow, Father Cedric is really blessed and unusual in all his experiences,” let me clarify. I am just like you, but I examine my experience through the lens of faith. Can you review your life and see where Jesus has worked and brought you through? I’m sure you each could tell all kinds of stories of healings, deliverances, and blessings. Jesus is there for every one of us. He is at work in you. He is with us. He will never leave us.

Notice how I am coming to know Jesus. I came to experience Jesus as I went *through*. Jesus didn’t take me around my first mission, my dad’s death, or life in a religious community. He didn’t take me above temptation or physical and psychological suffering. I’m not beneath having anxiety and fears. But as I go through, I come to experience Jesus, know him, understand him, and love him. He is in my every day. You and I are not exempt from going through!

At times I still shake and panic and become afraid. I still have doubts about my abilities. Preaching live on national TV is the most terrifying, yet exhilarating thing I do. Jesus didn’t say he would take all my fear and doubt away, but he did say that he would never fail me or forsake me. I am human and afraid, but because of Jesus I have the courage to face and confront my fears and walk right through them. It’s okay to be afraid, but it’s not okay to run away.

How can you come to know Jesus? By going through and examining your everyday experiences. You come to know Jesus as you experience his fortifications when you help your elderly parent. You come to know him as you surrender your life and decisions to him while you raise your children. You realize he is giving you his strength when you turn away from temptations. If you are a young person, you come to know Jesus as he journeys with you in your education and inspires

within you dreams and visions for your future. For those who are married, you come to know Jesus as you forgive your spouse and stay faithful no matter what. You experience Jesus as you deal with difficult people in a noble way at work. You come to know him when you have trials at work, but you stand strong. He is in you, with you, and ever faithful to you. I cling to these verses from the letter to the Hebrews, “I will never fail you or forsake you.’ Hence we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.’” (Heb. 13:5-6)

Being aware of the presence of Jesus in my past experiences inspires me with determination, courage, resilience, patient endurance, stability, and strength. Seeing his presence with me in the past empowers me to remain positive and to dream dreams.

I came across some prose attributed to St. Patrick. He used it as a prayer when coming before the pagan Druid king of Ireland in order to ask permission to evangelize. He could have been killed for such a request and he prayed to God. God was faithful. Patrick was protected, given permission and because of his preaching, scores of people were converted. I use a sample of this prayer as the final blessing on my some of my missions. Patrick’s prayer is one way to abide in Jesus. Here is a portion of St. Patrick’s Breastplate:

Christ be with me,
Christ be before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie,
Christ where I sit,
Christ where I arise.

God is intimately and intricately involved with us through the happenings of our everyday life. How God is involved is

different for everyone, yet *that* God is involved is the same for all. God is after similar results for each of us: our purification and sanctification. I am fond of quoting St. Francis de Sales who said, "God has measured out our crosses to the tiniest millimeter and weighed them to the tiniest milligram." In other words, God is at work in all of our situations. God even works through harmful and difficult people in our lives. Jesus experienced the will of God coming to him through the denial of Peter and the betrayal of Judas in his life. He handled them both through the companionship and strength of God.

YOUR INCARNATION

Sometimes I get discouraged when the house is messy, my prayer is shallow and boring, the living situation is noisy, and add in the community is aging and dwindling. I think, "God, did you dupe me? I'm not sure if I really want to live here, I hate this!" Time and time again I sense God saying to me, "Bloom where you are planted." When you think about it, there is no perfect place to live. Even if we change locations similar issues are present. The vocation we have each chosen is the exact place where we meet God daily.

I very much want to achieve my potential. I want to bear fruit and do God's will for my life. I want to invest myself fully in the community and my ministry. If I keep waiting for everything to be perfect, I'll never get going. I've discovered: no situation is ever going to be perfect. Every relationship will come with flaws. Life will have its struggles no matter what the vocation or the circumstance; therefore, we must make the best of whatever situation God has put us in. We are where we are for a reason. That doesn't mean we can't change situations, but while we are here, we can grow and learn from it. I choose to embrace life and not run from it.

Jesus didn't keep choosing new disciples every time one of the twelve messed up. He stuck with them. He took

responsibility for his commitment. He knew that no matter whom he chose there would be problems. Jesus' attitude showed his adaptability and ability to bend and be flexible.

I was praying about the hassles of my relationships and my life call one time when I sensed God's whisper. "Cedric, no matter where you go and what you do you will always have difficult, imperfect circumstances, and people who are hard to get along with. These are a given, but your *reaction* to these things can change and develop as you grow." As we learn to react well to the difficulties of life, we mature. As disciples, we will have difficulties but not necessarily defeat.

Before the penitential season of Lent begins, I pray, "Lord, in what areas do I need to grow this Lent?" One year, I sensed God leading me to change my reactions (over-reactions) toward life. You see, I am a type A personality and a perfectionist – not a good way to experience life. I set myself up for a lot of heartache even before I enter situations. I've heard it said, "The devil sets you up to get upset." We set ourselves up for endless frustrations by our own inflexible attitudes.

When circumstances and people aren't the way I want them, I am tempted to give up. I can begin to hate my situation and despise my life. I have a tendency to complain, to be envious of others, and to live with negativity. I look at my culture and community with a lot of cynicism. What God was showing me was that responding negatively are actually temptations that I had been yielding to very easily. During that Lent, whenever I found myself even thinking cynically or judgmentally or negatively, I asked the Holy Spirit to help me stop. I've realized that evil will tempt me to over-react to situations so that Satan can steal my joy and bring me to live in misery. If he can't steal your soul, Satan's second strategy is to make you unhappy. Satan is a thief and a liar from the beginning, but Jesus came to bring us his abundant life of peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (John 10:10)

Paul the apostle wrote a lot about being content in the midst of his trials and personal experiences. When the Holy Spirit revealed to him that only afflictions and imprisonments awaited him, Paul said, “None of these things move me.” (Acts 20:24) Wow! What a powerful statement. Paul was saying that no matter how hard the experience might be, he would not be shaken or unhappy. Paul remained emotionally stable and steadfast, in control of his own ability to have peace, and enjoy his life. So often I get bent out of shape from any little thing that doesn’t go my way. Sometimes I set myself up for disaster by predicting what will go wrong ahead of time. Then when things *do* go wrong, it makes my misery all the more tormenting. Thinking like this can be self-fulfilling. Job said, “What I feared has come upon me.” (Job 3:25)

I have come to realize that each of us is responsible for our own joy. Circumstances and people can determine your mood if you let them. You cannot rely on someone else complimenting you or not complimenting you, paying attention to you or not paying attention to you, to determine whether or not you have a good day. If you allow another person to dictate whether or not you have joy, a good mood, or a good day because of the way he or she treats you, you have placed yourself in a position of dependency to that person. Your emotions and reactions are so tied to him or her that you have given up your *own* control of the way you feel. The only way out of this dilemma is through awareness of it and detachment. With the help of God you must esteem yourself and break free from letting others determine your feelings. Instead of being attached to wishy-washy people, stay connected to God who is always stable.

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK

One of the great strengths of Jesus’ personality is that he would not be controlled by anyone. He was totally free. He encourages us, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free

indeed.” (Jn. 8:36) His revolutionary statement, “If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer him the other,” (Mt. 5:39) reveals the depths of his autonomy. It is hard enough to avoid over-reacting when someone talks ugly about you or cuts you off as you drive. How can you not only refrain from anger when you are slapped, but also turn the other cheek? Jesus reveals meekness here. Meekness is not weakness. “Meek” comes from a Greek word that describes a thoroughbred horse under control. In other words, to turn the other cheek in a conversation or physical altercation is not being wimpy, but warrior-like. It is strength under control. Jesus displayed this quality in the Garden of Gethsemane when arrested. He could have called a legion of angels to help him, but didn’t.

Jesus was totally committed to God first and had great stability and strength of spirit. The miracle of the loaves and fishes is recounted in all four Gospels. John’s account says, “Jesus perceived that they were about to come and make him king, and he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” (Jn. 6:15) Rather than yield to the crowd’s expectation that he would be a worldly/bread king, Jesus sought communion and communication with his Father. He would not bow to people’s preconceived notions about who the Messiah should be. When Peter tried to convince him not to go to the Cross, he called Peter “Satan” because in a very real way, Satan was using Peter to try to dissuade Jesus from God’s plan. (Mk. 8:33) John adds that when Jesus’ popularity was increasing, Jesus “did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in a man.” (Jn. 2:23-24)

Jesus was not dependent on the fickle feelings of crowds or even close friends, but found his life’s strength and stability in the rock-solid foundation of the person of God. Because Jesus cultivated his relationship with God, he was able to experience contentment, peace, and joy no matter the circumstance.

DESPAIR REPAIR

I love sunny weather. I lived in Sacramento for ten years and enjoyed the cloudless, sunny weather we had most days. However, from December until the end of February, we would experience rain and fog. The valley would get soaked in with Tule fog each day. I hated those days that would last for weeks on end. I let the weather affect my mood and I would actually get angry about it! There is a recognized psychological illness called SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder). SAD is sometimes called the winter blues. Some people in cloudy climates experience mild to moderate clinical depression because of the lack of sun. They have recurring depressive episodes beginning in September or October and ending in April or May. SAD can also be seen in people who live in the north or work at night. Sixty to ninety per cent of sufferers are women. One of the treatments for this illness is light therapy. It helps to keep your room as bright as possible.

After I moved to Houston, I began to experience a lot of cloudy, rainy days. One “El Nino” winter the jet stream was right above our city every day. Low pressure systems, one after another, paraded right over Houston. We had fog, rain, and no sunny days for about a month straight. I listened to the radio and heard the Carpenter’s song, “Rainy days and Mondays always get me down.” Every time I watched the weather channel, I got upset and aggravated because most of the rest of the country was enjoying sunshine, and here we were socked in by clouds and rain.

I love the outdoors. I walk every day and play golf once a week. In addition, I must be part cat. Cats love to play and lay in the sun. I simply like it when bright beams of sunshine are flowing through my window. In my bedroom at home, I not only open the drapes, I pull them back and tuck them behind the cords that draw them so I can let in as much light as possible.

As I prayed about my weather/moodiness, I could sense the Lord helping me to move from allowing my peace and joy to be stolen by the lousy weather to being more stable in spite of the storms. When I made the decision to do this, I actually heard the thought well up within me, “It may be raining on the outside, but it’s sunny on the inside!” I thought, “Wow, where’d that come from?” I am discovering that I don’t have to have my joy determined by clouds or crowds.

For years, I would be a basket case when I finished preaching. The moment I finished a sermon, I was always at my most vulnerable. I would stand at the back of church waiting for someone, anyone, to compliment me. I had to know that I affected their lives or came across as stellar, or I would reject myself. If no one complimented me, I would either get mad at everyone or beat myself up inside (or both)! I was dependent on the crowd to give me affirmation and joy. Of course, as humans we need strokes, but our self-esteem cannot be conditioned on the approval of others. Jesus once said, “How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (Jn. 5:44)

I admit that I am still vulnerable to some degree at the moment I complete the preaching event, but I am not the gaping wound that I once was. I have grown to be less dependent on the approval of others and more dependent on God’s approval of me. Growth in this area has aided me to be willing to preach new material as well as more challenging truths. I may not be getting a lot of laughs or applause, but I know that I am preaching what I believe God wants me to preach in obedience to him. It is very freeing to be able to preach without needing or expecting compliments. Crowds and clouds don’t have to determine your well-being.

Many people today are touched with discouragement, depression, or despair. One of our priests, a psychologist, called depression the “common cold” of mental illness. The

person suffering from severe depression feels like no one else can understand how debilitating depression can be. This is a devastating mental illness. If you are going through this suffering, I appreciate the intensity of your struggle and offer a few suggestions.

When a depressed person comes to me seeking help, I first try to determine the intensity of his or her suffering. Some depression is chemically based and people with that illness will require medication to help them. Most sufferers, though, can be helped with a few simple changes. The first thing I tell people is “Move!” Don’t stay still and just think about how bad things are. Do something, anything. Get moving. Every once in a while when I am on the road preaching, I will feel weak and lonely and start to feel inadequate. I have big crowds coming and they expect great things – I can feel the start of depression. I begin to lose energy and just feel like lying down. Instead of stewing in self-pity and anxiety, I go to a mall, take a walk, or jog. Exercise, a change of scenery, and occupying my mind with different thoughts really helps me. My down feelings are often a result of how I have been thinking. I get caught up in a swirl of negativity. Much of this is of our own doing, but some of it is evil oppression. The evil one oppresses everyone in their thought life. I have been helped by thinking this: “The devil is a liar.” In my thoughts, I try to identify the lies and separate them from the truth. In order to change my feelings, I need to exercise, breathe fresh air, see new sights and experience new surroundings (at least for a little while). Often after my run, walk or, visit to the mall, I think differently and feel much better.

Many people just stay inside and sit idly in front of the television. This can be toxic. During 2020-23 the world was in the midst of the Corona virus pandemic. All the networks covered this with their own perspectives. We saw the inside of hospitals and people suffocating on respirators. Everyone

was terrified thinking, “Will I get this virus and die a horrible death?” Psychologists tell us to only watch a little news each day and not get fixated on the negativity. Otherwise, the bombardment will bring you down.

One Sunday morning, I was preaching a mission in Plano, Texas. St. Mark’s is a huge parish, and I had to preach at seven Masses that day. I would be preaching to about 5,000 people in one day. I needed to be “on” and strong. As I woke up and lay in bed early that morning, I thought about getting up and turning on the television to see how the war was going. I strongly sensed the Holy Spirit telling me to stay away from the TV. What I needed was to be quiet and allow the Holy Spirit to strengthen me and help me. I obeyed the voice of the Lord. I prayed a lot that morning and got built up in the Lord. My preaching that day was anointed and I was as fresh after the seventh Mass as I was at the first! If I had watched war coverage first thing in the morning, I believe I would have been weak, tired and not as sharp. The Bible tells us, “Guard your heart for from it flows the springs of life.” (Pr. 4:23) This applies to despair and depression too. If you sit around watching soap operas or Jerry Springer, it will affect you. Whenever I see those programs, I start to feel vertigo.

In addition to exercising and watching your leisure habits, also watch your diet. I have a saying that I have used for years, “Food determines mood.” If you eat junk food and non-nutritious food consistently, it will influence your thoughts and feelings. Non-healthy food can make you feel tired, never mind its long term effects on your body. It is important to eat a balanced diet, rich in nutrients, and the vitamins that your body needs. I like salads with spinach and tomatoes. I try to eat low fat foods like fish and chicken. Everyone loves sugar, but we have to keep it in moderation. Nutritionists tell us to drink plenty of fresh water each day, too, so our bodies will function and flush out the toxins.

SELF-CONTROL OR OUT OF CONTROL?

Lastly, to get a handle on depression, try to get some sense of control in your life. One of the best ways I break out of melancholy is to aggressively work on my environment. If your room is dirty, clothes are everywhere, and your bed is not made, you will feel that way about your life, too. Start to do things for yourself. Respect yourself enough to pick up after yourself, make your bed, and get some order in your life. When you do that, you are moving and staying active instead of passively swimming in your feelings. The saying is true, "You made your bed and you have to sleep in it." One thing will then lead to another and soon you will have some sense of control restored. I am always amazed at how good I feel after I work. Many times when I used to visit my Mom in Florida she wanted me to clean the gutters and trim the hedges. I never felt like doing it. In fact, I felt quite lazy. But after I'd put in a few hours of work and I'd rested, I felt good about myself. The same thing happens when I write. I never really feel like writing, but after I push myself to do what I am called to do, I feel so much better about myself. I get my mind off myself and on to other things.

Discipline and self-control are so very important in life. If you simply live by how you feel, you will never accomplish much in life and you will live in despair. The Bible tells us to "choose life and live." (Dt. 30:19) The will can override emotions. What the Bible calls the "flesh" is lazy, lukewarm, and undisciplined. I don't always feel like working out, writing, or eating well. It hurts to work out and I sweat. It is work to create and write. I sacrifice pleasure to eat low cholesterol foods and to eat in moderation. That is one form of pain. But I have found that it hurts me more to be out of shape, fat, and not achieving the goals I've set for myself. Life is always about picking your pain. I've discovered in my own life that the pain of discipline and self-control is always less than the pain of despair and feeling out of control. I will choose life and live!

If despair or depression is overwhelming you, these are some steps you can take to help yourself. Certainly if the problem persists, seek professional help. God can work through doctors and counselors to help you improve.

GOD IS IN THE JOURNEY

“The joy of the Lord will be our strength,” Nehemiah 8:10 tells us. The struggles of tribulations, whether they are problems with health, circumstances, or relationships can work to draw us outside of our center. The world will woo us to find fulfillment and satisfaction as well as contentment through a dependent relationship with it. The world is so alluring and there are many attractions that beckon to us. While we must be dependent on the world to some degree, we must detach from people and things in order to attach ourselves to God fully. We are responsible for our own peace and joy. To make that joy of the Lord a reality, we must make the appropriate life choices in the temptations that life brings. We can allow things and people to control us or we can choose to be free by attaching ourselves to God.

God is after a temperament of steadfastness and constancy in us and will use the challenges and tests of life to tease it out.

Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

(Jas. 1:2-4)

Trials can “produce” a lot of things in us – like frustration, impatience, and giving up. The purification process we are in is meant to “produce” maturity and complete us. The difference between frustration and fullness lies in our everyday choices.

Pay attention to your journey! Observe your day-to-day living. How you react to the people and circumstances of life will reveal who you are to yourself. Life is like a mirror that shows you your reflection. Also, in the journey, you will find that God is close at hand and with you. Examine your trials and you will see God at work helping and purifying you. God is the potter and we are the clay. He is not afraid to get his hands muddy in the messes of our life. One of the ways we come to know God is by experiencing that he is with us as we go through. We can experience God on the mountaintop, but the Lord is a shepherd who reveals himself as we go through the valleys of life. It is in tribulation that we learn about ourselves and our God.

A personal relationship with Jesus develops. There is the foundation of being saved and receiving the Holy Spirit. But we also grow through as we go through. Trust is learned and deepened. We gain experience and come to know Jesus in the trials and tribulations of life. He wants us to abide in him no matter what, and is faithful to be with us and bring us through. We actually grow through as we go through.

5

FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPLATION

There is a story in the Old Testament that I absolutely love, the call of the prophet Samuel. (1 Samuel 3:1-11) God called to Samuel more than once. Each time God called, Samuel went to Eli because he thought Eli had called him. The Bible gives us a clue why Samuel made this mistake. “Now Samuel was not yet familiar with the Lord [didn’t know him] and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” (1 Sam. 3:7) I believe God calls to everyone but many don’t listen or respond because they are not familiar with God. They don’t know his voice.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (Jn. 10:14,27) One of the ways you can encounter Jesus is by hearing his voice. The hallmark of the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and written about in the New Testament is: “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts; for *all will know me* from the least of them to the greatest.” (Heb. 8:10-11) Scripture tells us that the new covenant is all about coming to know Jesus in a personal way. One of the aspects of a personal relationship with Jesus is coming to know his voice.

Scripture tells us about God’s voice in many places besides the call of Samuel. One other fascinating passage is 1 Kings 19:9-13. In these verses, the prophet Elijah was running from the wicked Queen Jezebel. He came to a cave on Mount Horeb and rested. As he stood on the mount, the Lord passed by. There was a strong wind, a shaking earthquake, and a ferocious fire, but the Lord was not in the wind, the

earthquake, or the fire. After all that, Elijah heard a “still small voice,” a tiny whisper. When he heard that gentle sound, he knew it was God.

God said to Elijah, “What are you doing here?” (1 Kings 19:13) That is such a classic line. If you are in a casino, watching lust-filled programs on TV, shopping too much, or spending too much time lounging around and procrastinating, you will hear, “What are you doing here?” The bold Elijah, who had just slain 450 false prophets in a classic contest, was now running in fear. God challenged him to go back and face his fears.

I have discovered that one reason that God’s voice speaks to us is so we will stop running. People run from fear all the time. Some won’t look at their self-image because it is too painful. Still others deny their addictions, anger, or judgmental heart. Some deny that they are far from God because they don’t want to die to self. God’s spirit will confront you and intervene in your heart. The Spirit God has given us is not a “cowardly spirit, but a spirit of power and love and self-control.” (2 Tim. 1:7) I have found that the Holy Spirit will not allow me to run. In the power of God, I can stand and embrace my issues and be led into victory.

That story about Elijah teaches that God can and does come to us in the spectacular, but ordinarily he comes in everyday silence. I have discovered that I need to cultivate stillness and quiet in my life in order to be *susceptible* to his voice. Centering prayer and silence soften my hard heart and help me listen. We all have the capacity to hear from God, but we must work at it. If you are honest with yourself, you will hear the Spirit of Jesus leading you to come to the quiet. One great time to savor the silence and start your day right is the early morning. I like getting up before the mowers, blowers, and traffic starts. The stillness is intoxicating. God speaks without saying a word.

Jesus himself was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert. (Mk. 1:12) While he was there, he communed with God and discerned God's voice. I had the privilege of studying in Egypt and Israel back in 1987. I journeyed to the wilderness of Sinai and the Judean desert. They are barren, dry, rocky, sandy places. The desert is also a very quiet place. When you are in the desert, you leave behind TVs, computers, radios, phones, shopping, casinos, and golf courses. The desert is a place where you can listen to what is going on in your heart and sense God. The desert is the place where God revealed himself to his people in the Bible. Are you willing to allow God to allure you into the desert and "speak tenderly to your heart?" (Hos. 2:14) Don't be afraid of what you will hear.

Right before the Gulf War with Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003, hundreds of thousands of our troops were assembled in the desert to await their marching orders. Before the combat, the soldiers had time to wonder what was going to happen. Were they going to die soon? The troops who found themselves there also had time to examine their lives. Separated from their home life (which was often filled with idols), some looked within themselves and saw a deep emptiness. They realized that they weren't right with God and that they needed something more. There were many conversions. I saw news clips showing troops being baptized in the desert. That old saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes," has a true ring to it.

Sometimes people talk about their spiritual lives being "in the desert." What they mean is that they feel no consolation and sense a dryness and emptiness in their prayer life. But in the Bible, the desert is the theatre of revelation. It is where God spoke to and formed his people. God gave them the law and led them. The absence of noise and distractions does not necessarily make the desert a barren place, but rather a place where one can sense the voice of God. The same

thing happened during the pandemic of 2020-23. People were forced into isolation and stripped of their attachments. Many turned to Christian television and prayer became a focal point.

In my experience, only when I have been separated from the idols and noise in my life can I sense the impressions and impulses of God most clearly. My conversion to Christ came as a result of hearing the voice of God through my conscience early in the morning. About the only time that I was susceptible enough to hear and listen was early in the morning, before I got immersed in TV and other activities. As a young college student, I used to wake up and sit on the edge of my bed and think, “What is this? There must be more to life than what I know. I am not happy. There must be something more.” What I heard was the voice of my conscience, but it was also God appealing to me through my conscience. “Conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.” (*Catechism* #1795) The old saying, “Let your conscience be your guide” holds true. I finally did something about that voice and made a determined response toward Jesus.

God speaks to us in our consciences about making right choices. One of these choices is that we make time for God. God bids us, “Come to the quiet. Make time for me.” He invites us to pray and seek him. Through the silence, God speaks to you and I.

MORNING HAS BROKEN

God seems to speak to me in the early hours of the morning (at least that’s when I am able to sense his voice more clearly). Even though I may not hear a “voice” in the silence, I sense a “movement, an intuition, an impression” within. While there is nothing audible in this, the sense I get is an inspiration from God. Don’t search for voices, look for

inner movements of grace. It is similar to a woman who is pregnant. From time to time, she “feels” her baby moving or kicking inside of her.

It is in the stillness that you can be aware of what is going on inside of you. Instead of being focused on things and distractions, an inner awareness develops. One Sunday morning, I had many Masses and would be preaching to thousands of people. As I just began to awaken, I started to become anxious and afraid. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard the melody of a song. I didn't hear the words, just a part of a song that I had heard and knew well. When I began to hear it I thought, “What is that song?” It took me a while, but then I realized it was the comforting hymn, “Yahweh, I Know You Are Near.” The chorus talks about how God is “standing always at my side.” I smiled because I knew that God was speaking to me through the melody he gave me. God was telling me, “Cedric, I know you are worried about the busy day ahead of you, but I will be right there with you and near you to help you.” God did and wow, did that song recognition comfort me!

Speaking of waking up, I heard a story about a mother who was trying to get her son out of bed.

‘C'mon,’ she said, ‘It's time to get up and go to church!’

I don't want to go to church. It's boring and nobody likes me there. Give me two good reasons why I should go.

‘I'll give you three,’ she said. ‘It's Sunday morning. You are sixty years old, and you're the pastor of the church!’

I love Isaiah's words: “Morning by morning God wakens, he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.” (Is. 50:4) It's interesting that St. Catherine of Siena became

an esteemed doctor of the church even though she had little formal education. Her book *Dialogues with God* is a spiritual classic. In this book, she documents conversations God had with her. She heard the authentic voice of God and many truths were made known. She became the first female doctor of the church because of her willingness to hear from and listen to God.

I pride myself on my ability to hear. My ears are extra sensitive and I think I can hear better than a dog. I hear all kinds of little noises that few people notice. But there is another hearing that goes beyond physical ears. St. Benedict, the great monk and founder of Western monasticism, said “Listen with the ears of your *heart*.” Deep within, we all have the ability to hear. God gives us “impressions” and “impulses.” Imagine. Your heart has ears. If we believe we can, we will hear. We simply have to develop this undiscovered sense. Hearing is the first step, but *listening* involves obedience. Once we sense something is from God, we must go the next step and obey.

I really believe that this verse from Isaiah 50:4 is the foundation behind inspired preaching. Fine preaching all begins with hearing from God. It is okay to consult commentaries and read books. Homily helps can be useful, but hearing from God is what separates just another homily from one that is anointed and touches people. Perhaps some of my most intimate moments of “encounter” with Jesus come when I am stewing over a homily I am about to give. I will wake up and my mind will become flooded with images, thoughts, words, and direction. I know it is the impulse of the Spirit within me, sharing with me a word of wisdom. (1 Cor. 12:8) This word will be a word in due season for myself as well as for the community for whom I will be preaching.

I once went to a workshop in Louisville, Kentucky for evangelists sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. One of the workshops had to do with constructing

a sermon. The teacher said that some of your best ideas will come in the middle of the night or when you first wake up. He recommended that you always keep a notepad and pen by the side of the bed so that you can write these ideas down. If you don't, you will lose them. I do that with preaching and with ideas God gives me while I am writing books.

The same voice which sparks good preaching is also the cornerstone to a call. God will whisper, speak to you, and call you. As you heed the call, you will receive strength to stay determined and press forward. On Passion Sunday, we hear this word from Isaiah 50:6-7, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been confounded; therefore I have set my face like flint." Jesus was able to endure opposition, betrayal, and denials from friend and foe alike, and even to face the Cross, through the strength that came from hearing from God. He spent entire nights in prayer and was very vulnerable and sensitive to the promptings, leadings, and impressions of the Holy Spirit. That same grace calls you to your vocation and will sustain you in the hard times. Your role is to be open and listen.

A good friend who is a Christian insurance salesman tells me that openness to God's leading is crucial in his business. He actively listens for God to speak to him each day about the opportunities that are present. Even difficulties can be "diamonds in the rough." He said that most business people aren't open to God's leading. I agree. But if you cooperate with grace and approach God with expectancy, great things can happen. Encountering Jesus can happen every day as we are susceptible to his voice within. Hearing the voice of God doesn't just help us with religious issues, but with jobs, raising children, and making everyday decisions.

HUSH

I've heard it said that the reason we have two ears and one mouth is because God created us to listen at least twice as much as we speak!

The secret to life is right under our nose. Literally. You know that indentation we have on our upper lip? That was put there for a purpose. You probably don't remember why. Let me tell you. At the moment of your birth, just before you came out of your mother's womb, an angel of God was assigned to you to give you the secret to victory and contentment in life. He put his finger to your upper lip and said, "Shhh!" The mark of his finger remains on your face to remind you.

Back in October of 2002, two snipers were terrorizing the Washington D.C. area. For many days people were being shot. The snipers killed ten people and wounded three. Millions around the world were praying that they would eventually be captured and that life in the Washington area could get back to normal. A group of 50 Christian truckers, including a man named Ron Lantz, had a prayer meeting about this. During the meeting Ron had a sure *feeling* that God was going to answer his prayers regarding the snipers and that somehow God was going to use him to do it.

A few days later, Ron was driving through the area and felt *compelled* to pull off the highway into a rest area. He had been listening to the radio and heard about a car being sought in the sniper case. Amazingly, a car matching that description and license number was sitting there right in front of his truck! He called the police and the rest is history. The snipers were caught when God answered our prayers by speaking to Ron, and when Ron obeyed.

Notice, it is one thing to hear from God, but it is another thing to obey. The word "obey" comes from the word which means "to listen." When a mother says to her child, "Will you

listen to me?” she means “Will you obey me?” The Scriptures tell us, “Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered.” (Heb. 5:8) In other words, his loneliness, trials, physical sufferings, and hardships taught him to *listen*. Son of God though he was, he had to learn this, and so must we. Suffering can be eye opening. It can be a great teacher. Some of the greatest lessons I’ve ever learned have come as a result of pain. One premise of my book *You Can Change* is that suffering is a catalyst for change. If you are comfortable and not experiencing pain of any sort, why would you want to change? The prodigal son, for example, was having a ball. He had money and popularity; he was the life of the party! Then the money ran out and he had to get a job. Suddenly a famine hit. It was only after his stomach was growling as he slopped with the pigs in the mud and that “he came to his senses.” (Lk. 15:17) His suffering led him to wake up and seek change.

God blesses obedience. Remember, it is one thing to hear and another to listen. At every mission I preach, I speak at all the Masses on the weekend. Sometimes I’ll speak to upwards of 5,000 people over the course of the weekend. These homilies are the important “call to the mission.” My role as a missionary is to *invite* all my hearers to the rest of the mission, but it is *God* who *calls*. I have a sense when I am preaching that God is speaking to people and calling them. Many make a commitment, thinking, “Yes, I will come.” But after they go home and time passes and temptations come and memories fade, many disobey and don’t come back. Often on a Monday night, there will be a good crowd of 400-500 people. I appreciate the ones who come, but where are the other 90 percent? I like to tell the people who come that they will be blessed because of their obedience. Not only did they sense the voice of the Lord calling them to the mission, they made the move to come. Others who heard God were

too lazy, or forgot, or were tempted away by other “pressing” things. The folks that come will be alive in their prayer life, aware of their salvation, and filled with the Holy Spirit while many others who didn’t come will be wondering why they are not experiencing God!

SET THE PRISONERS FREE

One time I was preaching a mission in Folsom, California. The Church of St. John the Baptist is located very near the Folsom high-security prison. I began by complimenting all who had come out that first night. I told them that they weren’t there by accident. God had called them by name and given them a personal invitation. Across the street people are just numbers. In the prison system people are de-personalized. But with God, you are precious and he calls you by name. “You are not a number, you are a name!” I told them. God knows your name and he’s got your number!

After the service, a man came to talk to me. I had just preached what I thought was an eloquent 45-minute sermon on prayer. He came up to me and said, “Thank you. Something you said touched me.” I thought, “I know that talk on prayer had a lot of powerful points.” I asked him, “What did I say that touched you?” “In your introduction, you said that we are not numbers, but names. I was released from prison a few weeks ago. For years, I was taught to think that I was a number. Tonight, for the first time, when you talked about how we are a name, I received my identity back.” God had spoken to him in those simple words and he received God’s truth. Sometimes it’s not the eloquent sermons but the simple statements that God uses to speak to us.

When God speaks, he can use anyone, anywhere, anyhow, anyway he wants! The classic story illustrating that truth in the Old Testament comes from the Book of Numbers (21:21-30) where God spoke to the disobedient prophet Balaam through

his ass. If God can speak through an ass, he can certainly speak to you through your spouse, your boss, or your children!

Because that man in Folsom was obedient and came to the mission, God did a great work in his heart. God certainly blesses obedience. One woman in Saginaw, Michigan wrote me about a video of mine that she purchased at a mission I was preaching there. She wrote, "I ordered the videos 'The Heart of Catholicism/ Peace is Your Gift.'" They were excellent. A strange thing happened immediately after watching the video. I had left the room and when I came back, the TV screen was all blue, like usual when the V.C.R. is on and there isn't a tape playing. But for some reason, this reminded me of a certificate I had stuck in a box to get back half the price I paid for the TV set in 10 years. The certificate expires within 90 days of the tenth anniversary of the sale. I had *completely* forgotten about it. I immediately searched for it and found the anniversary date was within the 90-day period. It was worth \$500. I would have never remembered it on my own!"

I believe because she was being obedient by purchasing and watching the video, God honored her obedience and her \$15 turned into \$500! Similarly, when you are obedient with regards to your donations at offering time, God honors your sacrifice. Paul wrote, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." (2 Cor. 9:6)

When I write and produce DVDs and CDs, I believe there is an anointing from God on the teaching. Whenever I preach a mission, I am praying not only for those in attendance but also for all of you who are delving into my teaching long after the mission is over. I periodically pray for you to have an encounter with Jesus through my teachings. God often uses the natural means of words to touch people supernaturally. I hope and pray that this book will be a means to that encounter for you.

It's interesting that the woman was "reminded." That is one of the ways that the Holy Spirit speaks. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to teach us all things. "He will bring to remembrance all that I have said to you." (Jn. 14:26) It's amazing how I will be writing or preaching or thinking and suddenly a teaching of Jesus or some other Scripture will "pop" into my mind. I believe it is the Holy Spirit bringing to mind or prompting me with what I need at that particular moment. The Spirit's role and responsibility is to bring these truths to mind. Our responsibility is to know the Word! We have to give the Holy Spirit something to work with. Jesus showed us the way when he was tempted in the desert. Each time the devil tried to defeat Jesus, he replied with a Spirit-prompted Scripture. Jesus had victory over temptation through knowing the Word, allowing the Spirit to prompt him, and speaking the Word.

***THE SPIRIT BEARS WITNESS WITH OUR SPIRIT
(ROM. 8:16)***

The Holy Spirit speaks to us about the certainty of salvation. Sometimes it is not an audible voice that we hear. The simple, glorious presence of the Spirit is message enough.

One of the central truths that I have been called to proclaim is the blessed assurance of knowing eternal life *now*. My call is to try to instill this belief in the people of God and have them receive it. All of my teachings refer to salvation in one way or another. Many people struggle with this certainty. They have doubts or fear it is presumptuous to think they are saved. Actually, according to the Catechism, presumption is something entirely different. There are two kinds of presumption. "Either man presumes upon his own capacities (hoping to be able to save himself without help from on high), or he presumes upon God's almighty power or his mercy (hoping to obtain his forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit)."

(*Catechism* #2092) Presumption is thinking you can *earn* heaven by your works or your own goodness. Your salvation requires faith, acceptance, and conversion, but you can never earn it by doing good deeds.

In fact, the *Catechism* explains, presumption is a close relative to the sin of despair. “By despair, man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God.” (*Catechism* #2091) In other words, the Spirit testifies to us that we are saved by grace and on the way to heaven. We can’t earn this, we don’t deserve this, but we must receive it to know salvation in our heart. It is far from presumption to know the assurance that salvation is ours to enjoy because of our faith.

Those who don’t know salvation now are really missing the central reason why Jesus came. On Christmas at dawn, we hear this as the second reading.

When the kindness
and love of God our Savior appeared,
he saved us,
not because of any righteous
deeds we had done,
but because of his mercy.
He saved us through the baptism
of new birth
and renewal by the Holy Spirit.
This Spirit he lavished on us
through Jesus Christ our Savior,
that we might be justified by his grace
and become heirs, in hope of eternal life.
(Tit. 3:4-7)

It is clear to me that those who doubt salvation don’t know the Holy Spirit or the Scriptures. The testimony of the Scripture is: “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6) The Holy Spirit is the *guarantee* and down payment (foretaste) of our inheritance until we acquire

full possession of it to the praise of God's glory. (Eph. 1:14) Another scripture that I love tells us that we have been "sealed" by the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 1:13, 4:30) A seal in the ancient world was proof of ownership. We are God's possession! I discuss this ministry of the Holy Spirit more extensively in my book *Glorious Holy Spirit*.

The Holy Spirit is the foretaste and the guarantee of what is to come! When the Spirit shares his glory with you, touches you with sweet intimacy, or prompts you about truth, you *know*. You know deep within that you belong to God and nothing will ever be able to separate you from God. When you are led by the Spirit and stirred up to pray "Abba! Daddy!" you know in your heart that you are a part of God's family now and forever. I love 1 John 3:2. "Beloved, we are God's children *now*." This crucial reading is proclaimed on every All Saints Day, and rightly so. Saints aren't just those who are canonized so by the church. All who are baptized into the Holy Spirit are saints.

I dislike it when people parade around in ignorance and hurt the faith of others. They try to dissuade people from believing that we are joint heirs with Christ *now* and our inheritance is eternal. They clearly haven't tasted and don't know what God has in store for those who love him. They preach from their limited experience instead of from the fullness of what is ours in Christ. What their eyes have not seen and their ears have not heard, God has revealed to us through the Spirit! (1 Cor. 2:9-10) Much like the Sadducees who denied the resurrection in Jesus' day, some people today deny the blessed assurance of salvation. What Jesus told the mistaken leaders of his day holds true here also. "You are wrong, because you neither know the Scriptures nor the power of God." Anyone knowing what Scripture teaches and having tasted the power of the Holy Spirit knows who they are and where they are going.

The Spirit not only speaks about salvation but also “convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness.” (Jn. 16:8) On Tuesday night of my missions, I always have a reconciliation service. Often the pastor invites many of the neighboring priests and sometimes we have 10 or 15 extra priests with us to celebrate reconciliation. Whenever I get up on those nights, I trust that the Lord will be present to speak to his people and call them to reconciliation. I call it “the grace of the mission” because there are always people who come to confession who haven’t been in 10, 20 or 40 years. I know they are moved because the Spirit of God works within them and calls them to celebrate forgiveness.

Every sacrament is a celebration and a healing touch from Jesus. It is a moment of encounter. Jesus feeds us in the Eucharist. We receive bread and strength for the journey. We receive his forgiveness in Reconciliation. We experience cleansing through the blood of Jesus and can begin anew. We are claimed for Christ and given a new identity in Baptism. Confirmation proclaims that we are sealed by the Spirit and anointed for ministry. Jesus empowers us to grow and make choices that are mature. Whatever sacrament we celebrate, it is an encounter with Christ. We come just as we are and experience the grace and the favor of God. One touch from Jesus can change us forever. I love the words we speak right before receiving Jesus in communion, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” A sacrament is an opportunity for receiving Jesus and encountering his healing touch.

One time I was celebrating reconciliation during a mission. The lines were long and some waited almost two hours to confess their sins. Finally, the last woman in line stepped up. I was impressed by her patience and I thanked her for waiting so long in line. She replied, “O no, Father. I haven’t been standing in line that long. I went home after the mission. But

while I was home *something* told me to come back and confess my sins.” I know as well as you do that that “something” was “someone.” The Holy Spirit was speaking to her through her conscience and she obeyed.

Hearing the voice of Jesus through the Holy Spirit is real and undeniable, but keep balance. Some people are constantly claiming that “God spoke to me about this and Jesus spoke to me about that.” They are always talking about how God spoke to them. To be frank, they can appear flaky. On the other hand, others put up walls and obstacles to hearing God’s voice because of their doubts and hardness of heart. (Ps. 95:8) They don’t think they can ever hear from God. Both are extremes. What is needed is balance. You can encounter Jesus through his still, small voice. He does speak each day. Believe you can hear, be aware, and listen.

FRET NOT YOURSELF (PS. 37:8)

I have found that God cares so much for me that he doesn’t even want me to feel flustered or upset. Often I will sense his voice within me when I am going through a difficulty or being tempted to overreact. For example, one year at the start of Lent I was driving to a mission in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Route 10, the major east/west highway, was under construction. Just before I passed over the Sabine River to cross into Louisiana, all the traffic was backed up in both lanes for what turned out to be ten miles. It made a long trip longer and meant I would be late for my appointment with the pastor. I had left in plenty of time so I would be early. I am a type A personality and we type A’s pride ourselves on being on time or early. As I sat there in traffic, I began to be very agitated about the situation. In the midst of my anxiety came this comforting and positive thought, “This too shall pass.” That was a perfect word from God for me at that moment. It took a while, but the traffic jam passed. I was a little late, but the slight delay wasn’t worth getting all worked up about. It was a lesson learned for other delays, too.

When the Lord speaks a word into your heart, it probably isn't only for your present situation. God will expect you to remember and apply that word and insight to new circumstances and troubles and trials that you will encounter in the future. For example, since God spoke that "this too shall pass" message into my heart, I have used it countless times in other situations. The words have brought great relief to me. I've found that this insight is now embedded in my heart and useful all the time. Once God spoke to me as I was grieving about my dad's death. I heard God's voice through the words of a rock-and-roll song. In the midst of great heartache I heard the words, "It's alright have a good time, 'cuz it's alright." Whenever I would be tempted to get upset about losing Dad, I remembered those words. When God speaks to you it is a "now" word and for the future as well.

As I listen, I have discerned that there are two distinct voices that I can hear. One voice, the evil one, is always negative. For example, when you hear, "You can't do it, you're afraid, something bad is going to happen, it won't work, you hate your life," you are most likely hearing the voice of evil. I'm not saying you are possessed. We all have what psychologists call "self-talk." Both evil and good can speak to us through our constant inner dialogue.

Everything about Jesus is up and positive. He said, "The sheep follow the Good Shepherd because they know his voice." (Jn. 10:4) I have learned to distinguish God's voice within. Jesus is always positive. You will hear him tell you things like, "I love you, I will help you, you can do it, you have a glorious future before you, fear not, I will make you more than a conqueror, confront your issues, don't give up!"

I was once preaching a mission in Gainesville, Florida. One morning before I was to preach at the four Sunday

Masses, the water in the toilet at the rectory overflowed all over the floor. Later, when I got to the church some two miles away, I found out that all the water in those toilets had overflowed also. The church was a new building, only about a year old. I was told that the toilets had never overflowed before. For the rectory and the church to overflow simultaneously was quite odd. On top of that, the sound system was acting up and cutting out on me while I preached. I was disturbed by these happenings and sensed Satan was trying to harass me and disrupt the mission.

That afternoon, I decided to walk around the church building to look at the various rooms and chapels. It was a stunning, six-million-dollar complex with lots of nooks and crannies. One of the rooms that I came upon was the St. Teresa of Jesus room. I saw a plaque on the wall and I read that St. Teresa of Jesus is the patron of missionaries. I thought to myself, "Hmm, I'm a missionary. Why not pray for her intercession in all this turmoil?" I prayed, "St. Teresa, you are the patron of missionaries. You know what I am trying to do here in this mission. I am praying that people get touched and saved. I sense evil is agitating me and trying to disrupt this from happening. Please pray for me." The moment I prayed this I didn't hear a voice, but I sensed within that everything was going to be all right. It was an inner knowing of relief. I felt peace. It was extremely comforting to me. I thought, "Wow, I know God has just heard my prayer." The rest of the mission turned out great. The toilets soon got fixed, the sound system worked well, and the mission touched a lot of people.

Jesus never promised us a turmoil-free life; rather he said, "In the world, you will have tribulation, but cheer up, I have overcome the world." (Jn. 16:33) Evil may try to cause strife by agitating, disrupting, tempting, and troubling us. Jesus

has something to say about all this. In fact, as we go through these things, we can *expect* to hear his voice. Messes can be places of meeting Jesus!

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew people wandered through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. Whenever they stopped and camped, they would set up a “meeting tent.” Moses would enter that tent and be directed by God. The shekinah glory cloud would descend upon the tent. It was the place of encounter. (Ex. 40)

I believe that we all have our own meeting tents or places of encounter with God. As I said before, the Cross is a place where we can meet God. We are all on a journey to the Promised Land. Besides the Cross, the tents of meeting for us are numerous: suffering, troubles, and tribulations. We meet God in other people as well as in our own conscience and in prayer. Catholic tradition has always taught that God comes in endless ways to meet us. Christ comes camouflaged in the poor. Creation speaks without saying a word. (Ps. 19:3-4) Our conscience clearly speaks the voice of God. Jesus comes through the Bible, the breaking of bread, and other sacraments, sermons, books, music, movies, TV, animals, dreams, and certainly through the still, small voice discerned in prayer.

Once a fish was swimming in the ocean and asked another fish, “Hey, where’s the ocean?” The other fish laughed at him and said, “It’s what you are swimming in now!” In God we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28) God is woven into the fabric of every moment.

Some can’t understand how you can hear the voice of God. I can’t understand how you *can’t* hear the voice of God. Encounters with Jesus are to be found everywhere, in endless variety. Most people journey through life like graffiti vandals

walking through an art museum. Their senses are dulled to the beauty and treasure all around them. The early disciples heard Jesus while taking a walk and recognized him when bread was broken. I love to simply take walks with God. The Bible says about Enoch, “Enoch walked with God.” (Gen. 5:24) Even something as ordinary as a walk can be a time of encounter.

There are wine tasters who can distinguish between wines with many subtle differences in character. Wines that taste the same to those who are less appreciative differ greatly to those who are connoisseurs. Be a connoisseur of the fine wine of God’s presence. Pray for the gift of appreciating the variety of ways that he comes to you. When Jesus healed the deaf man, he said, “Be opened!” (Mk. 7:34) I believe God wants to open our ears to hear also. *Be open* to the ways God comes to you. Whenever Jesus would present a parable that spoke of deep mysteries, he would conclude, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.” (Mk. 4:9,23) He wasn’t just talking about physical ears. He was telling us to listen to life. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder; be a beholder! Look at life through the eyes of faith. Life is full of encounters with the living God.

THE SPIRIT HELPS US IN OUR WEAKNESS
(ROM. 8:27)

We come to know Jesus personally through the Holy Spirit because the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. (2 Cor. 3:17-18) There is a great hunger today for a relationship with the Holy Spirit. I believe that a major call in my priesthood has been to proclaim the fact that the Holy Spirit lives within us. I help people to get in touch with the person of God in their hearts. My book *Glorious Holy Spirit* is full of examples of how we can come to know the Lord. One of the ways we can have an encounter with Jesus in his Spirit is through our prayer life.

One morning the phone rang at our monastery in Houston. I picked up the phone and there was a woman on the line. "Are you a priest?" "Yes," I answered. "Father, I am desperate. I drink every day and I can't stop. This is driving me crazy. I need help." "You are in a good place," I replied. "What?" she queried. "You are in a good place – because you have admitted that you have a problem and are powerless over alcohol. That is the first step. It is crucial that you admit that you cannot come to recovery on your own." I then counseled her about getting help.

Those who have a drinking, shopping, drug, food, or whatever-other-substance problem must come to the point of facing the truth and admitting they need help or they will never recover. Most people who are addicted to various substances are prideful, compulsive, controlling, and independent. They have to make the giant leap of admitting that they are powerless. Once people come to the point of embracing their own helplessness, healing can occur.

In a similar way, we can only encounter the Holy Spirit when we surrender our control and self-sufficiency and allow ourselves to be spirit-led. This is true in all aspects of life, but especially in prayer. St. Paul of the Cross was a great spiritual director. Part of what made him so helpful was his struggle with his own weaknesses. When he counseled about prayer, he liked to say, "Remain in your own nothingness." Getting in touch with our nothingness is a note sung by many of the spiritual masters, including Thomas Merton. That may sound strange, but we have all had the experience of trying to make something happen in prayer when nothing seems to be going on. Rather than trying to make something happen in our own strength, it is better to get in touch with our "weakness" and then surrender to the grace of the Holy Spirit to help us. St. Romuald's brief rule for monks states, "Empty yourself

completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God, like the chick who tastes nothing and eats nothing but what his mother brings him.”

When I speak of our nothingness, I do not mean that we are not good. We are graced, gifted, and very good. We are the very children of God. However, we all have a deep poverty within us that we must acknowledge and not deny. St. Paul of the Cross counseled many about their aridity and desolation in prayer. He directed people not to run from the lack of feelings. When we pray, we must seek *God*, not necessarily *feelings*. Faith grows through staying stable, steadfast and patient whether feelings come or not. Our nothingness is an attitude that recognizes that we must be completely dependent on God for everything. Most of us are self-sufficient in our lives, but our call in prayer is to be *God-sufficient*. We are nothing and God is everything. Jesus taught that we must humble ourselves in order to be exalted. The prime principle when it comes to prayer is that “all is gift.” We are receivers, not achievers. As we wait in trust, God will respond according to his design for our lives.

One of the most powerful prayers in the New Testament is this one from Ephesians 3:14-19. In this prayer, the author prays that the Ephesians will be filled with all the fullness of God. This is my prayer for you too. “According to the riches of his glory may God grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in your inner man. May you know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Once in a homily, I showed the community an empty glass. I said, “It is only when the glass is empty that it can be filled. If it is already full, there is no room for more.” Similarly, we must empty ourselves of our pride, control, selfishness, and our ability to make things happen. When we surrender in this way, God will fill us as he wills.

SELF-EMPTYING

An ancient liturgical hymn (Phil. 2:5-11) used in the worship of the early church expresses this principle and tells us, “Jesus *emptied* himself, taking the form of a servant and being born in the likeness of men.” Jesus stripped himself of counting equality with God something to be held onto. He emptied himself by becoming human. He humbled himself by identifying with us in his baptism. Jesus shared in our suffering and limitations. He poured himself out to death, even death on a cross. *Jesus lost control*. He submitted to God. He was humble and selfless. Because of his attitude, God filled him and highly exalted him. Are you full of yourself or full of God?

Paul the apostle was a gifted preacher and missionary. He was strong-willed and very opinionated. Even though he had a lot going for him, he was troubled with a “thorn in the flesh.” (2 Cor. 12:9) He prayed three times for this thorn to be removed. The answer God gave him was interesting. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God taught Paul that weakness serves the purpose of making us susceptible to grace. Paul even made the astounding statement that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more! (Rom. 5:20) Mysteriously, it is our powerlessness, lack of ability, and even sin that provides the platform for God’s grace to work. Self-sufficiency may work on Wall Street, but it isn’t an asset in the Kingdom of God. Paul garnered wisdom through his life experience and said, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor. 12:10)

When we look for an encounter with Jesus, most want to go up onto a mountaintop and experience him there. We can certainly encounter God on retreat, but real life dictates that we are constantly bombarded with pain and problems. The Good Shepherd is more often found in the valley than on the mountain, helping us to go through. If you ask recovering

alcoholics how they came to sobriety, they will talk about the miracle of how God, their higher power, helped them. What they will proclaim is a new-found strength in their weakness. Often an encounter comes through brokenness.

Over and over again, I have experienced the Holy Spirit coming to my aid in the weaknesses of being human. For example, I have always struggled with self-image and accepting myself just as I am. I believe self-image and self-esteem problems are at the root of all addictions and most people are unaware of the power that self-image has in their life. The Holy Spirit has embraced me, and his love for me has helped me to come to a new self-understanding. I have come to a whole new, positive way of seeing myself because God has loved me.

All of us struggle with sin in our life. In our culture, we are born and bred to be self-absorbed. We participate in idolatry, lust, and anger. Hard as we try, the issues we struggle to master for a while still eventually come back to haunt us. Just when we think we have it licked, sin rears its ugly head. Sin is often cyclic in nature. Satan will quit tempting us for a season but always waits for an “opportune time.” The way we overcome sin is to admit our weakness in confession. First, we must admit the nature of our sins. The Twelve-Step Program has a saying, “You are only as sick as your secrets.” Then, we must confess our inability to help ourselves. A sacramental confession can be healing. Confession helps take the wind out of the sails of sin. However, no matter how much we go to confession, we must still surrender our minds and wills to the Holy Spirit. “*If by the Spirit* you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live.” (Rom. 8:13) The Spirit helps us to put to death the deeds of the flesh by giving us new strength in temptation. Sin is really betraying God and sabotaging self. The Spirit gives us victory by loving us and gracing us to love ourselves. As we come to new levels of

self-acceptance, we begin to stop sabotaging our lives. Also, the Spirit works by sharing power to resist temptation and to make mature decisions.

Fear is another weakness common to us all. As I examine my life, I realize that I have allowed fear to control me in many instances. For example, sometimes at community meetings, I will remain silent rather than speaking up out of fear of what others will think. After all, I would hate to tarnish my “stellar reputation.” I have also struggled with social phobias all my life. Imagine how hard it has been for me to get to where I am now! It is the Spirit of God within me that helps me to identify why I am afraid and inspires the courage within me to face my fears. As I confront my fears, I respect myself even more. Fear has been and continues to be a place where I encounter Jesus. I am discovering that as I face my fears I find freedom. Where I am weak, I find power to be strong. I wrote a booklet about facing your fears that can be found for free on www.francedric.org

Prayer is another major area where we are weak and the Spirit helps us. This famous passage is read on the Vigil of Pentecost.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. God who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

(Rom. 8:26-27)

First of all, the Holy Spirit helps us by praying for us. One of the ministries of the Spirit of Jesus on our behalf is that of intercession. We are told that the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God. We often grope and search for God’s specific will for our lives. The Spirit knows exactly what

that will is, and prays that God's will be accomplished in our lives. When it comes to our destiny, we have an intercessor who not only helps us with life-defining decisions but also guides us to make moral choices in our day-to-day affairs. The Spirit knows our issues and sins. Most of us pray to "get things and be blessed," but the Spirit is praying for what we *really* need. Perhaps we need to apologize to someone, or recognize and confront gluttony, or laugh more. The Spirit knows exactly what we need, and even though we don't know how to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit is praying for us exactly according to God's will.

Secondly, the Spirit helps us because in our weakness, we don't even want to pray. "The [our] spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak," Jesus told us. It is so easy to watch TV or take a nap or play golf rather than pray. It is the Holy Spirit who creates the thirst and the hunger in us even to pray at all. Remember, all prayer is a *gift from God to us* that we must receive. It is the Spirit who gives us the desire to pray. I saw an advertisement for a soft drink that said, "Listen to your thirst." When Jesus dialogued with the Samaritan woman, he tried to get her in touch with her thirst. The Holy Spirit helps us by making us thirsty for prayer. Our responsibility is to listen to this movement within and obey.

I once had a week alone for a contemplative retreat at a strict observance monastery. I had been letting my centering prayer slide and wanted to get back on track. (That desire in and of itself was from the Spirit.) When I began to try centering prayer again, there were all kinds of distractions. I felt nothing. I wanted to quit trying. I sensed the Spirit tell me, "Be faithful. Be patient. Grace will come." As I continued, I still struggled, but I began to be comfortable with my nothingness and kept surrendering to God. I trusted even when it wasn't easy. Eventually I was able to reach a still point and commune with God in a fresh new way. It was the Spirit who helped me

to persevere by encouraging me. God's Spirit also helped calm my thoughts. I was graced to receive peace and new perspectives about myself.

Next, the Spirit helps us by consoling us. One of the titles describing the Holy Spirit is "the comforter." Often prayer can be dry and arid. At times, there will be no feeling and God will seem distant. This happens in every prayer form we might employ. Naturally this will make us want to give up. Sometimes God actually withdraws consolation in order to test our motives in prayer. Are we seeking feelings or God? We must be faithful even without feelings. If we love God, we will offer ourselves to him even though we feel empty.

The Spirit helps us when we struggle, either by giving us joy, peace, assurance, glory, and goose bumps when we need them most or by reminding us of the glorious times we have enjoyed in the past. These memories encourage us to keep pressing on. A fresh new touch or the memory of past touches comforts us and inspires our faith when we feel dry. Desolation can serve the purpose of getting us in touch with our nothingness. Consolation, however, is God's way of helping us to stay consistent and strong. (Remember to seek not consolation, but *God*.)

In addition, the Spirit helps us by leading us. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." (Rom. 8:14) I invite you to surrender your prayer life to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Your prayer life ought not to be so structured that there is no room left for God! Some pray at the same time each day with the same posture in similar words. Routine and structure can be helpful for some, but as I experience the leading of God's Spirit, I have discovered that God loves variety. If you are bored with your prayer life, think how God feels! Try new things as you submit to the Spirit.

There are many forms of prayer. Most of us pray liturgically. As a religious, I pray the Liturgy of the Hours each day and worship at Mass. I do this in community, but I have many opportunities to pray alone. When I pray by myself, I try many different forms. Sometimes, I will praise God. Other times, I will be silent and get centered. There are times when I intercede for people. I simply talk to God sometimes. Once I was sitting in silence getting centered on God's presence within. I suddenly stood up and began thanking God and praying for my needs. I didn't even think of doing that. I believe it was the Spirit who moved in me and led me to suddenly get up. We are not puppets on a string, but when we surrender to the Holy Spirit, God will take over.

I believe in variety in prayer. It keeps us fresh. When I go on retreats I vary that experience also. I love to get in touch with my center. I have visited many retreat centers in various parts of the country. I treasure silence and abandonment to God. Other times, I will retreat at large conferences in civic areas. Most of these are hosted by non-denominational charismatics. I love singing and praising God to the sound of drums and guitars. When there are thousands of people singing, the corporate anointing can be powerful. Still other times, I will go on preached retreats. I try to let the Holy Spirit guide me about what type of retreat and when. I am not locked into one experience.

One of the novel teachings of St. Paul of the Cross is that when we pray, we should be comfortable. For some reason, we have been brought up to think that if we kneel long enough on a hard wooden kneeler, then our prayer will be acceptable to God, that somehow God wants us to suffer in prayer. Ironically, Paul was into asceticism and penance, yet he taught that being comfortable helps facilitate union with God. Try various positions in your private prayer life. At

times stand, other times kneel, possibly you may want to lay prostrate or bow, and still other times sit and pray. I like to walk and pray. You may even want to try to pray lying down, but this can be dangerous. It may lead to what monks call “holy drowsiness.” Your posture is just one example of being Spirit-led.

You can be led in your time also. One of the great fallacies about prayer is that it has to be long in order to be good. Jesus warned us about that when he taught, “Don’t multiply your words like the Gentiles.” (Mt. 6:7) Whether it is short or long, any prayer is acceptable to God. Let the Spirit lead you. I pray for a long time in the morning sometimes, other days for a shorter while. Some days, I stop in the middle of the day and pray longer than I normally do. Other times, I will center for a half hour in the middle of the night. Sometimes I sleep all the way through the night. I believe the Spirit will help you know how long each prayer session ought to be. There is no reason to pray in the same way for the same amount of time each day.

One other area where the Spirit helps us is by bringing us into intimacy with God. “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6) This phrase of Jesus means Daddy or Papa. It is a term of endearment that proclaims intimacy with God. While in our weakness we may feel distant from God, the Spirit cries out, “Daddy!” The Spirit draws our heart into the heart of God and makes us one. In addition to Spirit-led words, there is the “sigh” of the Spirit that is too deep for words. (Rom. 8:26) Sometimes when I am praying, nothing seems to be happening and my words seem so meaningless. I will stop and surrender and say, “Holy Spirit, you speak through me.” I will find myself letting out a deep breath and groaning or sighing. On one hand, I know that I am the one doing this. On the other hand, I believe it is the

language of the Spirit groaning through me to God. At other times, I will pray in tongues as the Spirit leads me. Speaking in tongues is a faith gift that can help your prayer life.

My point in all this is that as humans we are weak. Our weakness, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. Our helplessness can be an opportunity to encounter the Spirit of Jesus. In our nothingness, Jesus becomes everything. As we empty ourselves, we can be filled. Even in our inability to pray, Jesus helps us and empowers us to pray effectively. Prayer and getting in touch with the Holy Spirit is a major way to abide in Jesus. As we put forth time and effort be assured, we will bear much fruit.

God isn't always silent. God's voice flashes flames of fire! We simply need to learn how to discern his voice. There are many ways to hear the voice of God. We must believe that we have the ability and trust that God is speaking. Listening and being obedient to God's leading is an important part of being a disciple and having a personal relationship with Jesus. As Jesus taught, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." (Jn. 10:27)

6

A SEASON OF SURPRISES

I grew up in a small town called Feeding Hills, Massachusetts. Feeding Hills is in the southwestern part of Massachusetts, on the Connecticut border. Living in New England, I experienced four seasons every year. Winters were harsh, snowy, windy and cold. Trees were barren and because we were so far north, it got dark before five p.m. Winter lasted a long time, but finally gave way to spring. Spring was wonderful. The temperatures started to warm, buds blossomed, and the trees greened. I loved it because I was on the high school golf team and I would finally be able to go outside and play golf. The fragrances, colors, and sounds of spring were life-giving.

Soon spring would give way to summer. The summers in New England can be hot and humid, but for the most part the temperatures were moderate. Sometimes we would get a lot of humidity. Trees and grass would turn green and because we were so far north, the light shone until about nine p.m. After a few chilly and blustery September mornings, the leaves would begin to change, the signal that fall was upon us. The colors in Massachusetts are glorious. People travel from miles around to “leaf peep.” I love it when pumpkin-colored oranges, florescent yellows, and fiery red colors can be seen everywhere. It always made me feel peaceful to view the “mountains of marmalade” as I called them. But I also knew that the leaves would soon drop and winter would be around the corner.

A season is a period of time in a person’s life as well as in nature. I wrote a book about this truth called *Seasons of Life*. For example, a person may go through a season of sensing God’s closeness in a tangible, definite way. This can last

for months or even years. Then, for some unknown reason, that same person can experience a sense of dryness and a season of “desert.” But remember the desert was the place where God revealed himself to his people. Various seasons are just that. They are only for a limited period of time and are meant to help us grow. One season will give way to another.

If you are in a desert right now, take heart that “this too shall pass.” Remember not to base your closeness to God on feelings. God uses seasons in our lives to get us rooted in him and to prepare us for the next season.

THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

I heard a story about a young bush that grew near the top of a hill. It was always very windy up there and the little bush was buffeted and had its branches tossed to and fro by the constant winds. It looked down in the valley and couldn't help but notice that the bushes and trees down there had such calm. They weren't buffeted by any wind and seemed to have such an easy life. “Why was I planted up here with all this wind? I hate this constant pressure,” the bush moaned.

As the winds continued, something interesting happened. The bush began to send its roots deeper and deeper into the ground. The harsh winds forced the bush to anchor itself ever more securely. The turbulence actually led to deeper growth and stability.

One day a hurricane hit. The wind came with fury and force and everything that stood in its way was in danger. The trees and bushes in the valley were no match for the harsh winds. They were used to peace and calm and had shallow roots. They were easily uprooted and blown away. The fierce winds also ravished the hillside. The wrath of the hurricane hit the bush hard, but the bush held firm. Its deep roots kept the bush in place. The bush had become accustomed to harsh weather and was prepared for this tribulation.

I believe that hard or harsh seasons in our lives root us ever more deeply in God and prepare us for the trials to come. It is important that we are firmly anchored. Roots must go deep. The seasons of aridity and hardship can actually have the effect of making us strong and stable.

LITURGICAL SEASONS

Our church has seasons also. The year is divided into five liturgical seasons: Advent, Christmas, Ordinary Time, Lent, and Easter. The Christmas season is the shortest, lasting about three weeks. Ordinary time lasts the longest, comprising some seven or eight months. Each season has a different emphasis. The purpose of each season is to focus on a specific mystery of Christ's life and to get us rooted more deeply in him. It's amazing how a liturgical season will parallel whatever particular season we may be going through in our own personal lives. For example, a person may have just lost a loved one and is dealing with grief. Someone may be going through depression or unemployment. In each of our liturgical seasons, word and sacrament will bring strength, refreshment, and meaning.

Easter is a mysterious, yet glorious season in our church year. It lasts for 50 days. The 40 days of Lent prepare us for the 50 days of Easter. I believe it is a season like no other for encountering and experiencing Jesus.

The pastor at my mother's home parish in New Smyrna Beach, Florida asked me to preach at the Easter Vigil. When I preached, I told the people gathered there that for most people Easter lasts just one day. Many fallen-away Catholics come back to church on Easter morning and stand along the walls, looking to see if anything is different or if anything has changed. Our culture emphasizes Easter bonnets and dresses, the Easter bunny, egg hunts, and lots of candy and chocolates. Once Easter Sunday is over, the pretty clothes

are put back into the closet, the candy is eaten, and the ham is made into sandwiches, Easter has ended in many people's minds. It is gone and forgotten.

Not so in our church! What I emphasized to the people that night is that Easter is a *season* of resurrection, new life, and expectancy. We need time to delve into the mystery of the resurrection of Jesus. This event is so stupendous and wondrous that we need more than one day to unpack it. In the O.C.I.A. (Order of Christian Initiation of Adults) program, this period of continuing formation is called mystagogia. God gives us a season to grow, get rooted, and experience the risen Christ. Don't lose heart if you go to church on Easter and don't have a resurrection experience. If you stay in faith and expectancy, there will be more time to encounter the risen Lord along the journey of mystagogia.

That is exactly what happened in the famous Emmaus story. (Lk. 24:13-36) Two disciples (Cleopas and one unnamed) were journeying to the small village of Emmaus which is about seven miles from Jerusalem. When I studied in the Holy Land in 1988, I found out that there are actually four different places that all claim to be the original Emmaus. They are located approximately north, south, east, and west of modern day Jerusalem. That told me that Emmaus is not simply a place near Jerusalem, but symbolically represents *any* destination where we are presently heading.

We are all on a journey. I am fascinated with this metaphor of the journey. The journey theme predominates throughout the Scriptures. The earliest designation for the Church in the Bible was "The Way." (Acts 9:2) In 1999, as we prepared for the millennium year 2000, the theme of our church was "The Journey Back to the Father." I have led many pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Greece, and Italy. A pilgrimage is a journey of faith. When you think about it, our life, from beginning to end, is really a journey, a pilgrimage toward God.

In my ministry and life in general, I have met three types of people. The first are those who are moving away from God. Some have never believed in God and have a hardened heart toward Jesus. Others have tasted the goodness of God and are backsliding. Of them it is written, “The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire.” (2 Pet. 2:22) Still others simply have doubts, live in the flesh, and are absorbed in selfish, worldly pursuits. Leisure, travel, money, lust, sports, and success become their idols and God gets pushed further and further away. Many don’t go to church because they “don’t get anything out of it.”

Secondly, there are those who are stuck right where they are. Perhaps they attend church once a week, but they never really experience anything that gets them moving. People like this may pray, but their prayer life is unsatisfying and not life-giving. These people succumb to the impulses of self and live with a lot of frustration rather than joy. They are entangled by the idols and pleasures of this world and make self-gratification their god. Some are stuck in the past or mired in the future and are not living today to the full. Still others are addicted to substances such as food and alcohol. Addictions to excitement and the desires of our flesh can dominate and destroy lives. These people see others living in victory and want that life, but never really seem to find the key to break through. They aren’t willing to pay the price of obedience and count the cost of a commitment to Christ. These people are lukewarm and not really growing.

Lastly, there are those hungry for God and his ways. Because of their desire and thirst, these people are motivated to move forward. They seek God through Scripture, attending church, reading books, and any other means they can find. They cooperate with grace and make good decisions in their lives. They are obedient to the gospel call to deny self and follow Jesus. They are growing in character, getting rooted, and

developing a personal relationship with God. They surrender themselves by serving others. They have counted the cost of discipleship and chosen it for themselves.

The obvious question is: “Where are you on the journey?” Are you moving toward God? Are you stuck and not really making any progress? Or are you moving backward? You need to honestly examine the truth about yourself and then take responsibility for doing something about it. I am praying that this book will help you move forward through an encounter with the risen Lord.

In the Emmaus story, the disciples were walking away from Jerusalem. In the Gospel of Luke, Jerusalem is always portrayed in a very favorable light. It was the place where the early community met. It was the starting point of a mission. Jerusalem was also the place of resurrection. The disciples had dashed dreams. Their hope was smothered by the death of Jesus. Negativity, fear, and doubt had seized control.

Suddenly, Jesus showed up, in the guise of a stranger. That tells me that anywhere, anytime, anyhow, Jesus can suddenly show up and touch you. Even when you are moving away from God, that can be a moment of God invading your life. A life-changing encounter with God could be just around the corner! Christ can come camouflaged in the form of a stranger or come to you through someone you know. He can come through Scripture, books, or music. Be open to the suddenlies of life. Suddenly your life can change. At any time, you can be shaken and not just stirred! (Acts 4:31)

Especially during the 50-day season of Easter (or even outside of the Easter season), believe in Easter surprises. The two disciples had an encounter. The dictionary defines the word “encounter” as a meeting, especially an *unexpected* surprise. Back in 1983, I was a youth minister in St. Louis, Missouri. I had a core group of about 20 or so young people.

They were active, faith-filled, and a lot of fun to be with. During that year, I had discerned a call to the Passionists and finally I had to tell the teens my time with them over and I was moving on. It was hard to let them know because I enjoyed being with them and had grown to love them.

One day after I let them know, I was invited by two of the teenagers to their house to spend some time with their family. After I arrived, I was invited to see their basement and to play some pool. As I walked down the basement stairs, suddenly the lights came on and many people jumped out of nowhere shouting, "Surprise!" They had planned a surprise going-away party for me and I was completely unaware. I still remember the strange feeling of being caught off guard. I was smiling on the outside and surprised, but inwardly, I felt out of control and not sure what to do. I was very touched by their generous gift and through them I encountered Jesus thanking me for the year of service.

The two disciples experienced a surprise as Jesus spoke the word and when he broke bread (the traditional term for Eucharist in the early church). I meet so many people who are Catholic but don't go to church. I understand that often it is hard to get something out of Mass or that it may seem boring. I've had to deal with that all my life. But the command still remains to keep the Sabbath holy. It's not just what you get out of church, but what you give that matters. When you don't attend, we miss your presence and are deprived of the gifts you can bring to the body. Scripture tells us, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another . . ." (Heb. 10:24-25) Everywhere I preach, I talk about getting involved and how it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. Surprises still happen when you get involved.

WELCOME THE WORD (JAS. 1:21)

The Word of God is so special and a gift of great grace. It is a wonderful place to encounter Jesus and sense his presence. I love spending time studying and preparing homilies. I delve into the Word and let it fill my mind. When you read the Gospels, you cannot help but come to know Jesus more deeply. As I quoted earlier, St. Jerome said, "Ignorance of the Gospels is ignorance of Christ." The corollary of that is, "Knowledge of the Gospels is knowledge of Christ."

I become more rooted in Jesus as I familiarize myself with the Scriptures. I remember when I used to help my Mom with the yard work, she asked me to dig up a few bushes. I got a shovel and tried digging a circle around them and then prying them up. It was very hard to do because of the roots. Some of the roots were thick and it was tough to cut through them. Until the roots were cut, those bushes weren't going anywhere.

In a similar way, the Evil One will try to dig into you and move you around at will. He will try to agitate, aggravate, and upset you emotionally. He will tempt you to sin. He will suggest wayward imaginations. You must stand firm. Roots, of course, go into the ground to keep the bush or tree steady and stable. Roots also are the vehicle through which moisture and nutrients in the ground get into the bush. If you want to water a bush, put water at its base, not on the branches. Your roots must go deep and be thick. One major way you abide in Christ and stay rooted is by dwelling in the Word. The Scriptures will bring you the strength and the nourishment you need to live in victory. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my word." (Jn. 14:23)

In my preaching, I always focus on the Scriptures because I know when I preach the Word, Jesus shows up and touches people. There is inbuilt power in the Word of God to touch

and help people. In fact, the Second Vatican Council told us, “The primary duty of priests is the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all.” (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests #4*) Most think that being a priest is all about presiding over rituals. That’s not true. A priest’s true function and call is to proclaim the Word of God. Our Pope’s call for a new evangelization directs us to focus not on dogma or doctrine, but on *Jesus*.

I read an article a while ago that touched my heart and made me nod my head in agreement. Its title was *Dullness Can Be a Sin* by a top Vatican official:

How many of us have left church bewildered and even angry because we have not heard the Word broken open in an inspiring way? Dull liturgy can tear faith down. . . . When it comes to proclaiming the faith, dullness can be a *mortal sin*,

The late John P. Cardinal Foley, then president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, warned that the Catholic church was losing opportunities and some of its members because *others have been more skilled, more imaginative and more dedicated in communicating their vision of faith in Jesus Christ*. A central part of a priest’s job should be *communicating our faith in a compelling manner*.

Amen, Cardinal Foley!

In my book *Thy Kingdom Come*, I spent a whole section talking about the Bible and how to read it. Let me simply say here that I believe that God wants to speak a word into your individual situation. This is called a “rhema” (now) word. When you go to church and worship and listen, and when you read the Bible on your own, you give God room to speak. Surprises await.

The Emmaus story tells us that God wants us to experience him. It was Jesus who took the initiative and drew close to the downcast disciples. God graciously comes to us each day, although our eyes can be closed to these “visitations.” Once their eyes were opened, the disciples invited Jesus to “stay with” them. We must cooperate with the grace of God. God will meet us more than half way, but we must appreciate his initiative and invite God to stay with us daily. Jesus was invited to remain and he said, “Yes.” We invite Jesus to stay with us when we come to him in his Word, spend time in prayer, and make a place for him in our thoughts and imaginings each day. A beautiful prayer is simply “Stay with me, Lord.”

Because of God’s grace and the disciples’ cooperation, two things happened. First, their hearts burned when they listened to Jesus. In the Word of God, you will hear about God’s forgiveness, mercy, truth, and love. In a previous chapter, I spoke about the fire of God that brings purification. God’s fire also creates a burning within. It is a gentle, gracious feeling that is very delicate. I believe their burning when they heard Jesus was actually a *yearning* for more. They didn’t want him to leave! Once you experience the Word touch your heart, you will come back to it time and time again because you yearn for more. “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:103)

Also, because they invited Jesus to dine with them, the two had their “eyes opened.” It’s interesting that in the Book of Genesis (3:7) when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the forbidden tree, the eyes of both of them were “opened.” They then realized that they were naked and felt shame. Sometimes, I will be on a morning flight. The flight attendant will offer me “an eye-opener,” some sort of alcoholic beverage. I always think to myself, “At this hour of the morning, the only thing a drink would do is close my eyes!” In this resurrection account, there is a reversal of what happened in the Garden

of Eden. When the disciples' eyes were opened, instead of shame, they saw glory. Instead of death, they saw life. Instead of darkened, understanding; they begin to have true insight.

An encounter with Jesus brings revelation. When you "get a revelation," it can be life-changing. I love this prayer of Jesus. "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and *revealed* them to babes; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." (Mt. 11:25-26) Come to Jesus in his Word simply and sincerely and you can expect that he will reveal himself to you.

Once the disciples encountered the risen Jesus, they immediately (that same hour) headed back toward Jerusalem. U-turns are permitted in the Kingdom. The disciples had their dreams reborn. Sadness turned into gladness. Their moping turned into hoping. Instead of being discouraged, they were now encouraged. Their disappointment was changed into *reappointment*. Now they were moving in the right direction. They were heading back to the place of community and ministry. When Jesus shows up, things and people change. The road to Emmaus is our story also.

Perhaps you are discouraged over some circumstance in your life such as a broken dream or relationship. You can believe that Jesus will strengthen and encourage you.

It could be that you have been running the wrong way out of fear or not wanting to confront issues in your life. Jesus will help you go the right way.

Possibly you are disappointed with the church and the sexual scandals. God will reappoint you as you seek him.

Maybe you are sad because of doubts or confusion. Jesus turns sadness into gladness when you invite him in. That's the Emmaus story.

Gladness, encouragement, new strength, reappointment, and hope are the results of an encounter with Jesus. Jesus brings us the grace to be positive and to have a new outlook on life. The climax of the story is that the disciples did a U-turn. The sign that you are encountering Jesus is that you are changing. You are not stuck or going backward. The resurrection causes us to make a new move toward God. In Jesus, our destiny unfolds graciously.

GO!

The story ends with Cleopas and his friend going back to the eleven and proclaiming the Good News. The resurrection caused them to get on the right track. They went back to the community and the place of mission. Their misery turned into their mission.

I like the translation in the lectionary, “They *recounted* what had happened on the road and how Jesus made himself known to them.” In order to experience Jesus, I think we have to re-count our blessings time and time again. We’re used to recounting our money, why not our blessings? Considering how we have been blessed and giving thanks is the *will* of God for us in Christ. (1 Th. 5:18)

I have worked out consistently for some 50 years! One time after a workout , I found myself thanking God. What sparked my thanks was that my older sister, at that time in her forties, had had an operation that took out one half of her left lung. The doctor found cancer in her lung. Subsequently, she has had some of her colon removed. Knowing how fragile life is always helps me to appreciate and recount my blessings.

Some years ago, I met a blind priest. Soon after that, I met another priest who was losing his voice. Meeting them helped me to appreciate my blessings. I treasure the ability to work out, to see, to speak. I try to take nothing for granted. Recount and count again and announce your blessings! Psalm

22:3 tells us that God inhabits or enthrones himself upon our praises. It was at the moment the disciples were recounting what had happened to them that Jesus drew near and stood among them. (Luke 24:36)

It must be said that we don't even know who these two disciples were. One was named (Cleopas) but the other was unnamed. Nothing was said about them previous to this story, yet they are the ones proclaiming the resurrection to the mighty apostles! There are so many undercurrents of truth in this story. It is a facsimile of the Christmas story when God showed his mighty deeds to lowly shepherds. This story tells us that Jesus can come to us in the ordinary things of life such as walking, talking, and eating – we just have to have the eyes to see. Luke is also making the point that we are to assemble together. Where two or three (or more!) are gathered in Jesus' name, he is there in our midst. Our hearts can burn when we welcome the Word. We can recognize Jesus in new ways when we come to Eucharist and break bread. One of the primary places we can have encounters with the Risen Lord is when we assemble at church.

It is interesting to note that, for the most part, the Gospels do not concern themselves with philosophizing about the resurrection or even trying to describe what happened to Jesus when he rose. What they do record is how his followers experienced its effects. I call this the “results” of the resurrection. One of the first results of the resurrection is that common, ordinary, fearful people began to get very bold and proclaim a very unusual message. “Jesus of Nazareth is risen from the grave!” This proclamation would cost some their lives.

I know this result of the resurrection to be true in my own life. I wasn't there when Jesus rose from the tomb. I have encountered Jesus as I came to him in faith, just as I

was. The number one effect that these encounters with the risen Lord have had in me is to make me want to tell someone about the Good News. The desire was so strong in me that I surrendered my life to a religious community, studied for years to become a priest, and now dedicate my time and efforts to preaching, writing, and communicating the message the best I can. People are looking for credible witnesses to announce the Gospel. So many are living lives that are empty, broken, sinful, and unhappy. People are searching for hope in this world of darkness. The resurrection makes us the light of the world.

RE-WORDS

Another result of the resurrection is reassurance. As Cleopas and his friend were telling the other apostles about seeing Jesus, Jesus himself stood in their midst and spoke, "Peace be with you." (Lk. 24:36) This was not only a greeting but also the gift of the risen Lord to his scattered, disappointed apostles. Jesus was reassuring and reappointing his friends with these words. He didn't want them troubled, agitated, and full of doubt.

A friend of mine has a bumper sticker on her car. The first line says "No Jesus, No Peace." Directly beneath it is the exact same line, but it is spelled differently: "Know Jesus, Know Peace." I love to write and preach about peace. It was Jesus' final gift at the Last Supper and first gift at the resurrection. Peace does not mean the absence of work, difficult relationships, financial problems, or tribulations, but a new strength and serenity *in* those things. When we come to know Jesus personally, his peace will always be with us.

As this story unfolds, the Gospel writer Luke falls all over himself trying to demonstrate the *reality* and *certainty* of the resurrection. First, Jesus has the disciples look at his hands and his feet. (Lk. 24:39-40) Next, he invites them to touch and feel him to verify that he is not a ghost but has a living body. (Lk. 24:39) Then, as Luke recounts many times before, Jesus

verifies his real presence by dining with them. “He took a piece of baked fish and ate it in front of them.” (Lk. 24:43) Eating a meal with someone in the Semitic world connoted intimacy. Lastly, he taught them about his death and resurrection.

These demonstrations of the risen Jesus were meant to be proofs of the actual truth of the physical, literal resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is not a ghost and his resurrection is not merely a myth or a symbol. The resurrection is an objective, historical *fact*. (*Catechism* #639) This appearance was meant to clear up the confusion and take away the doubts. Its purpose was to revive the hearts of the disappointed disciples. This account is also meant to inspire us to believe with certainty concerning the truth of the Easter story. The resurrection *is* real.

In October of 2000, my 76-year-old father died suddenly in his sleep. I thank God that I was near him because he and my mother had come to hear me preach a mission in West Hartford, Connecticut. All of a sudden, I had the shock of his passing. In addition, I had his funeral thrust on me. Actually we had two funerals for him, one in Massachusetts where he grew up and had relatives and one near his retirement home in Florida.

One of the hardest things I ever had to do in my life was to preside and preach at my dad’s funerals. I was able to do so with grace and strength only because I am a believer in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus also helped me to grieve well in the months and years following my dad’s death. I know with certainty that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Because of this awesome truth, I believe I will see my dad again one day in heaven.

The Bible offers us not just something to believe in but *certainty* and *assurance*. The Word of God helps us stir up our faith so that we will know deep within the truth of Jesus’ rising so we can experience its effects. The resurrection brings us hope, strength, and certainty.

When Jesus showed himself to his early followers, he was bringing reassurance and new strength to them in the midst of a swirl of confusion and difficult circumstances. Before he appeared, they were confused, disheartened, and disoriented.

Some years back there was a hit song being played on the radio by the rock group Genesis. The name of the song was “Land of Confusion.” The point of the song is that we live in the midst of modern day dangers, complex problems, and people without love. There is confusion all around. I think if you read today’s newspaper, you will see that these conditions still exist. We live in the midst of a continued pandemic, sexual scandals, and wars. There is a humanitarian crisis at our borders, a war on terrorism, and our economy is very shaky. We live in a world of pollution, racism, fluctuating gas prices, and crime. Our future is uncertain.

In the middle of all of these problems, global and individual, the Gospel proclaims the unwavering, uncontested, irrefutable certainty of Jesus’ resurrection. In the midst of a shaky, uncertain, dangerous world, we can have stability and stand firm because of the resurrection. Also, in the midst of abuse, emotional turmoil, and addictions, the resurrection brings new life. The resurrection of Jesus Christ can bring revival, renewal, rebirth, refreshment, and hopefully repentance to our lives.

ONLY BELIEVE! (JN 11:40)

The Good News is revealed “through faith and for faith, as it is written, ‘The one who through faith is righteous shall live.’” (Rom. 1:17) Without faith, we cannot be pleasing to God. We don’t have to attain perfection in life. The one thing God asks of us is that we believe. (Jn. 6:29) Belief is the door to more. It is the passageway to blessings. It opens us up to encounters with Jesus and the new life he came to bring.

When I go to preach a mission, I always meet with resistance. The battle begins before I even leave. I usually

feel anxious at the prospect of what is about to happen in my life. Certainly, evil will come against me and try to agitate me. Satan tries to discourage me and tempts me to give up. When I arrive, most times I meet resistance at one of the Masses. There are times when people seem like they just don't want to hear what I have to say. Young people will often oppose the Word I am trying to proclaim to them. I can see it in their uninterested faces and crossed arms. This is difficult for me to face, but the victory we have in our faith overcomes the world. (1 Jn. 5:4) I stand firm because I am a believer. None of these setbacks moves me.

One problem that does disturb me is doubt. Everywhere I go, good people who attend Mass and are going to the mission come up to me and say, "Father, I have doubts about our religion." Doubt is born from a variety of circumstances in life. It is simply one form of negativity. Evil will use your life experience to coax you into doubting. Doubt leads to fear and falling away. It can torment a person because of the lack of certainty. Is life just a sham? Does anything make sense? Faith, however, is an act of the will that leads to religious experience and thus, certainty.

Jesus said something very interesting to Thomas when the doubting apostle finally encountered him. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." (Jn. 20:29) That tells me that you don't have to have a religious experience to be a believer. If you haven't seen the risen Lord, that doesn't make you a second-class Christian. It is those who *haven't* seen, yet believe, who are graced. Faith is a force that wells up within you as a gift of God. It is also an act of will, a decision. When push comes to shove, you *choose* to believe. That shows what type of person you are. If you are a believer, you stand for virtue and for life. You do not have to have twelve visitations from angels to be a believer. Faith can't be bought, but it is priceless. Blessed are you who believe without seeing.

Yet in the Gospel of John, believing always leads to *more*. The verb “believe” is found some 98 times in John’s Gospel. John tells us that his purpose in writing the whole Gospel is so we will come to faith. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing *you may have life* in his name.” (Jn. 20:31) In other words, believing in Jesus leads to further experiences of grace. The “life” John talks about is eternal life. Eternal life for John (and us!) is not just for the hereafter, but also for the here and now. It is a new *quality* of being (blessed with joy, peace, and experiences of God) that can come only from God, but it is made possible by our faith.

Faith is something that starts small. You simply make the decision to believe. What do we believe? We proclaim it every Easter and every Sunday when we announce our creed. The creed has been changed from “We” to “I.” I like that change because it personalizes our faith.

I believe in God.

I believe in Jesus Christ.

I believe that he rose on the third day.

I believe in the Holy Spirit.

I believe in the Catholic church.

I believe in the resurrection.

I believe in life everlasting.

Amen!

These are the basics of our faith. Jesus said that faith is like a mustard seed. It starts small, then grows to become a tree so large that birds come and nest in its branches.

I remember years ago as a young (19-year-old) man, I simply believed. My faith was small, but it began to grow. Christianity seemed right, but I wasn’t sure. Believing in God over time allowed me to experience his grace and glory. As I began to encounter Jesus, I grew in my faith. I began to see

the world through the lens of faith. Now all of my experiences are filtered through faith. What started small has become everything that I am. Today I am a priest with a substantial ministry and birds (people) have come to rest in my branches (teachings) which are still growing.

Intellectually, faith begins as an assent to a creed, but it is much more than that. Believing is something of the heart. It flows from the core of who we are. It is the leaning of your entire personality on God. You know that God is there for you and at work in your life. Believing is an ongoing, continuous surrender to and trust in God. You lean on him, rely on him and hold fast to him. You seek God in all of your decisions and acknowledge him in all of your ways. Faith becomes an inner knowing of God's presence and activity in your life. You know that even though you cannot see it physically, God is active and present in every moment.

John makes it clear that he wrote his Gospel so that we may believe and have life through this belief. The way to an encounter with Jesus is to believe in him. That faith will bring about changes such as deeper hunger for God and repentance. As you are obedient (the flip side of faith), experiences and encounters of God will come your way. How they occur and when they happen is up to God. Your role is to stay in faith. Hebrews 11:6 is a crucial verse in the Bible. "Without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that God *rewards those who seek him.*" In other words, believe not only that God *is*, but also that God is a good God and will bless you as you stay faithful. I have personally experienced that this faith is the key to an encounter with Jesus: believing leads to seeing and seeing leads to further believing.

The story of Thomas is an interesting one. He was told by the other disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead yet he still doubted. Why did he doubt their witness? Perhaps it

wasn't because of the profundity of the message of Jesus rising from the dead. Possibly it was because even though the disciples *said* they believed in the resurrection, they were still meeting behind closed doors for fear of the Jews! (Jn. 20:19,26) Thomas knew instinctively, as we all do, that if we are going to profess to be a believer, we'd better have the fruit. Faith is caught more than taught.

The results of the resurrection are faith, boldness, courage, self-understanding, integrity, proclamation, and victory. When you are experiencing these effects, you are encountering Jesus. In order to experience the new life Jesus came to bring, you must make a faith stand.

STAND IN FAITH

During the war with Iraq in 2003, some of our troops were taken as POWs. Seven in particular were highlighted in the news, especially because two of them were women. Soon after the capture of Baghdad, a local citizen came up to some Marines and offered them information about the whereabouts of the POWs. They were supposedly located in a house north of Baghdad.

The Marines created a diversion and planned to storm the house. When they arrived at the house, they weren't sure just who was in there. It could have been a trap set up by the Iraqis to kill the Marines. When they busted down the front door, the Marines yelled, "Everyone down on the floor! If you are an American, stand up!" One by one the Americans stood as they proudly proclaimed, "I'm an American!"

I am asking you to proudly make a stand in your life and proclaim, "I'm a believer!" Possibly you have been struggling with or nurturing your doubts. Entertaining doubts will lead nowhere. Dare to believe. I want you to profess your belief in God, in Jesus as his only Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Believe in the resurrection. Believe that you are saved through the

death and resurrection of Jesus. Believe that you are on the way to heaven. Don't let doubt and unbelief rule your life and steal your joy any longer. Make a firm, clear-cut decision to make a stand and be a believer! Pray with me:

Jesus,
I believe in you.
I believe you died for me.
I believe you rose from the dead.
I want to encounter you.
I want to know abundant life.
Change me inside and out.
Amen!

The resurrection power of Jesus can flow through you and lift you out from among the dead! (Phil. 3:10)

BE RESURRECTED!

When I studied the Scriptures in the Holy Land, we stayed at a retreat center in Bethany, right outside Jerusalem. Bethany, you may remember, was where Lazarus, Martha, and Mary lived. I used to go up on the roof of our retreat center to pray. From the roof, I could see the Church of Lazarus built right next to the place where tradition tells us Lazarus was raised from the dead.

Once in a while, I would take a walk down to the church to pray. The church building itself is very beautiful with several murals about the resurrection of Lazarus. When you enter the church, your eyes are drawn to the golden mosaics front and center over the altar. "I am the resurrection and the life."

John's Gospel contains an exciting theology scholars call a "realized eschatology." What that means is that judgment, eternal life, and resurrection are not only future events but occur *right now*. For example, a person is already judged by their response to Christ. (Jn. 3:18) Jesus asserts that the one who believes in him will never die. (Jn. 11:26) The one who

believes *has* eternal life and has passed from death to life now. (Jn. 5:24) In other words, eternal life is a new quality of life *now* that continues into eternity. An intimate faith relationship with Jesus is a spiritual resurrection!

Paul the apostle echoes this truth in his powerful statement, hoping “that I may know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil. 3:10-11) What Paul was saying was that as he walked as a disciple, he wanted to become progressively more intimate with Jesus. As he grew in his relationship with Jesus, he believed he would come to know Jesus’ resurrection power in the present moment and experience a resurrection in the areas that were dead in him.

It’s one thing to believe that there is a resurrection. It is another to believe that God wants you to experience it *now!*

THE TOMB BECOMES A WOMB

What does this resurrection *now* mean in practical terms? A tired, lazy, listless body can suddenly receive a new impulse of energy, passion, and strength. Instead of lounging around watching TV all the time, you desire to take a walk, clean, or create. Your prayer life may be dry and dull and suddenly a new flow of power comes upon you. Your mind, full of worry, anxiety and fear, suddenly experiences tranquility. The circumstance or person that was bothering you is still there, but the negative thoughts dissipate. A fearful person can experience the fortitude to face hard situations with courage. You can live your everyday life with joy. Resurrection power anoints us to stand firm, confront, and go through, not run from. Doubts dissipate and faith emerges. Remember, eternal life is a new *quality* of life that begins now and continues into eternity. With Jesus, anything is possible. Pray to know Christ

and the power flowing from his resurrection. That power can touch every aspect of your being: body, soul, and spirit.

I know I am tapping into the power of Jesus' resurrection when I have the courage to face my fears. I know I am living the risen life when I have more peace. I am experiencing the resurrection when I change within. For example, I may find myself more tolerant of an irritating person. Somehow I find the strength to forgive and even laugh about an agitating event that may happen over and over in my life. Resiliency, acceptance, flexibility, generosity, thanksgiving, and kindness are all signs of the resurrection. Resurrection living means having a good attitude, loving people, and developing the capacity to enjoy your life. Resurrection power gifts you with the ability to love and accept yourself deep within. The power that flows from Jesus' resurrection comes not to enable us to leap buildings, but to deal with people, cope with circumstances, and embrace ourselves in a stable, godly way. Thus the empty tomb has become a womb of new life for us.

RESURRECTION = NEW BIRTH

When Jesus talked to Nicodemus about the new birth, he spoke of the wind. Jesus said that you can hear the sound of it although you cannot see it or know where it came from or where it goes. I believe you can "hear the sound" of the resurrection in you when you see its results. Spiritual maturity is characterized by intimacy with God, the desire to grow, and the will to make solid choices. These are all sounds of the wind within us. When I talk about encountering Jesus, often people immediately think of seeing a man with a beard standing at the foot of their bed as they wake up in the middle of the night. Encountering Jesus is much more subtle than that. Often it is a matter of "hearing the sound" of the wind that is already blowing in your heart. Don't miss what is going on in you! Your heart is the place of encounter. You are much deeper than simply your conscious awareness.

I love this quote attributed to St. Augustine:

Men go abroad to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they *pass by themselves without wondering*.

RESURRECTION CHOICES

One way I experience resurrection is through what I call “resurrection choices.” Psychologists tell us that we literally make thousands of decisions each day. We choose when to get up, what we put on, what we say, where we go, and what we do. Our moral life is full of decisions. Some decisions are more deliberate than others, but we still choose. For example, you chose to buy this book and read it. Because you are reading this, I believe a new impulse of resurrection energy will flow in and through you. You could choose to do something else with your time, like watching TV. The result of that choice would probably not be as rich. “A tree is known by its fruit,” Jesus taught.

Choices have consequences. When we sow good seed, we bear good fruit. A series of bad choices can end up getting us in trouble. Bad decisions can separate us from God and can contribute to loss of faith, money problems, or health problems. The only way out of the messes we create is by a series of right choices. One right choice will not reverse a lifetime of wrong choices. We can’t reverse, with one day of work, months of going into debt through wild spending. We must choose to do the right thing over and over and over again, consistently. Then, eventually, things will turn around and change. For example, this book did not get written because I chose to start it. It was written because I chose to write over and over again. It took many good decisions. Good decisions lead to fruit and bad choices lead to folly.

PICK YOUR PAIN

During one of my missions, a woman set up an appointment to talk to me. She had lost her husband to death and was very lonely. In her grief and pain, she became involved with a married man. Both were Catholic. Both were well-meaning, good people, but they were caught in something very grave, adultery.

She wanted my opinion on the subject. After all, she said, “God had made her to love and be loved. Was it so very wrong to have an affair?” As I explored this relationship with her, it became clear that she was devastated inside. She felt like a hypocrite, guilty and unworthy of communion. I told her that she must pick her pain. The pain of staying with this man meant guilt, separation from God and eventually, eternal death. The pain of leaving him meant loneliness and lack of intimacy from another human, but she would be following God’s will and would experience the comfort and help of God. There is always pain in life. The pain of doing what is right is always less than the pain of wrong choices.

I asked her to make a choice for God right at that moment. She got into that relationship through a series of wrong choices. In order to get right again, she had to make a series of right choices. She had to begin with a quality decision to withdraw from that man now. I asked her to make a resurrection choice.

She did just that! She came to me the next day and said she talked to him and that the withdrawal had begun. The man even came to me in confession and got right with God. I was so glad for them both, but I know that lonely times will come and that they will be tempted to call each other and fall back into what they had. That is exactly when they will need the grace of God to continue to make solid consistent choices. I pray for them. I also pray for all of those who may be caught

in pornography, adultery, TV addictions, overeating, gambling, excessive shopping, or any other moral malady. Choose your pain. There is the pain of withdrawing from the gratification that your pleasure brings versus the pain of feeling guilty, separated from God, and dead inside.

I told the woman that for some time after she made that positive choice, evil and her own conscience would try to torment her and beat her up for what she had done. People love to tell themselves what monsters they are and to stew in self-pity. Berating yourself is choosing death. A major part of making a resurrection choice is to forget what lies behind and press on to what lies ahead. (Phil. 3:13) Apply the blood of Jesus on the doorpost of your heart and move on. Jesus told the woman caught in adultery to go forward with her life and sin no more. He didn't say go home and beat yourself up for the rest of your life because of what you did. When Jesus forgives you, you are forgiven. It is over and done with. Your character actually begins to change and be raised up. God cleanses and creates a new heart in us. (Ps. 51:10)

I believe that it is human and okay to make a mistake. We are entitled to mistakes, large or small. But it is *not* okay to continue to wallow in our mistakes and keep on making them. God will give us time to get things right and take responsibility for our life. The beautiful truth about mistakes and sins, no matter how little or large, is that we can learn from them. That's what the human journey is all about. This is one of the ways we garner wisdom from life experience. We have no excuse to stay stuck. We must learn from our mistakes and go forward.

Scripture tells us to "choose life and live." (Dt. 30:19) Life and death come through the power of free will and choice. Humanity fell through a choice and we can rise through a decision also. God's resurrection power comes

to give us the desire to decide aright and the power to actually do so. The power is always grace mixed with our cooperation. This is how we change our sinful behavior, too.

There are many areas where we need to make right choices. For example, I usually don't feel like exercising. I do so because I know it will help reduce my cholesterol and stress levels as well as keep my weight down. As I choose to exercise consistently, I stay healthy. I like the pain of exercising more than the pain of heart disease and stroke! I don't always feel like forgiving the people in my community who can be harsh and upset me. Forgiveness is a decision. As I cooperate with the grace of God (the resurrection power in me), I can let things go. Sometimes I feel like watching programs on TV instead of praying. It is the power of God and my cooperation with God's grace that helps me manage my feelings and do the right thing. I pick the pain of missing pleasurable shows over the pain of guilt and offending God. When I am cut off in traffic and anger wells up in me, I immediately want to strike back in some form. Resurrection choices help me to let it go instead of retaliating. It is easy to be lazy instead of working on books. Because I want to be a fruit-bearing tree, I deny the flesh and choose to work. The pain of a fruitless life far outweighs the pain of work.

If we were bereft of good choices, all of us would be angry, overweight non-achievers. We would be far from God and mired in selfishness. We would be stuck in guilt, shame and condemnation. A life of good, solid choices bears fruit and begets more solid decisions. Eventually we reach a higher plateau of graced living that leads to the fruit of peace with God and self. Our will is like a muscle. If we discipline ourselves and choose the good, it will be easier and easier to make right choices the next time. If we are undisciplined and weak, we will have trouble choosing what will benefit us.

Your faith in Jesus, that he suffered for you, loves you and walks with you is a key ingredient in abiding in Jesus. Basing your decisions on Jesus and what he would do in your situation is a way to abide in him. He will lift you up as you believe and choose well.

There are many things that are dead in us: sin, hate, doubt, bitterness, shame, guilt, negativity, discouragement, and gossip, to name a few. Excessive grief and wayward imaginations can steal our life. But we *can* experience resurrection. When Ezekiel saw his vision of a valley of dry bones, he was told that those bones were the whole house of Israel. (Ez. 37:11) He was told to prophesy to the bones. When he did, breath entered them and they lived.

I prophesy to you who are reading this book that you will know the resurrection power of Jesus and that he will raise you from the dead! No matter what is dry or dead or lost in you, I pray that the breath of God enter you *right now*. I prophesy that you will make better choices in your life. The physical resurrection is coming, but it is also for you today. Be resurrected in Jesus' name! "I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord have spoken, and I have done it," says the Lord." (Ez. 37:14)

7

THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

I have a favorite portrait of Jesus hanging in a prominent place in my bedroom. Every time I enter my bedroom, it is one of the first things I see. The painting, done by the religious artist Hook, shows a very dignified and noble-looking Jesus. He has rosy cheeks, a beard, and long hair. His face is handsome and royal. I like this portrait because the Jesus portrayed is attractive, strong, and masculine. His nobility radiates.

There are a few other portraits of Jesus that inspire me. One is of the image I used on the cover of this book. I use this depiction in some of my TV episodes. Another stirring portrait is called “The Joy of the Lord.” This illustration shows a human, handsome Jesus with a sense of humor. I invite you to see it at: www.gregolsen.com While these images of Jesus show Jesus as a white person, we know he was an Israelite. Palestinians today are darker in color. Jesus would have had a darker type complexion. Still, these illustrations inspire me because we know Jesus meets us where we are at.

All of our life, we have been confronted with images of how Jesus looked. These images come from painted portraits, crosses, and icons. Most of the time, Jesus is shown with long hair and a beard. Perhaps one of the reasons artists have portrayed him that way is because of the shroud of Turin. The image left on that shroud was that of a man with long hair and a beard. Some of these artists’ images are magnificent, but most are wanting.

When I produce television programs I have my producer add supplementary media called “B-roll.” These added images help the viewer’s imagination and illustrate my teachings.

When I speak about Jesus, my producer will often edit in shots of Jesus from a movie here and there. In the past he would show old, unattractive Jesus images. I would forcefully tell him, “We are trying to help people have a good image of who Jesus is. Never show old, unappealing Jesus images!” I demand of him, “Make sure they are attractive images. I want people to have a good sense of who Jesus really was, not some old stodgy concept.” Psalm 45:2 speaks of the coming Messiah, “You are the fairest of the children of men.” While Jesus was a man of sorrows and suffered greatly, I believe he was very noble looking. After all, he was God incarnate. Jesus was a real person. I want you to know the authentic Jesus in your mind’s eye and heart. Imaginative concepts help, but the bottom line is this: “Without having seen him, you love him.” (1 Pet. 1:8)

However Jesus actually looked, Pope Francis told us, “Jesus is the face of God’s mercy.” He wrote this wonderful truth in the beginning of his papal bull of indiction “Misericordiae Vultus” calling for the Holy Year of Mercy in 2016. When I would preach missions during that year, I used to hold up a crucifix and proclaim, “What does mercy look like? Look at the cross!” Jesus’ noble, yet spit upon face is God’s mercy revealed to us.

The Gospels themselves do not concern themselves with how Jesus looked. Perhaps this is so we will instead use our imagination. The four Gospels are more concerned that we believe in Jesus as God’s son who can save us from sin and death. There really are no limits regarding to how Jesus may have looked. Whenever I see someone who is very good-looking or is articulate, I like to think, “I’ll bet Jesus was like that.” The Gospel of John tells us Jesus was so well spoken that when they went to arrest him, Jesus arrested them with his words! They said of him, “No one has ever spoken like this man.” (Jn. 7:46) Since we have no single image for Jesus, we will not limit him, but will remain wide open to the

multiplicity of ways he comes to us. My novice master, Fr. John Render presented us with “the 1000 faces of Christ.” It was a slide show, presented over the course of five days, of hundreds of renditions of Christ taken from antiquity. When it comes to how Jesus looked, the possibilities are endless. Since Jesus has countless faces, perhaps we will be open to the way Christ comes camouflaged in the poor and in our neighbor. (Mt. 25:40) Our founder, St. Paul of the Cross, saw the name of Jesus written on the forehead of the poor. Jesus himself told us that we when visit the sick or those in prison, we are actually visiting Jesus himself!

Isaiah gives us a possible lead regarding how Jesus looked. In his famous servant songs, which Christianity has interpreted as referring to Jesus, he tells us that the servant had a beard that was plucked and a face that was spit upon. (Is. 50:6) Was Jesus good looking? Not according to Isaiah. In Chapter 53, verse 2 he says, “He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” This verse begins the description of the crucifixion which would have marred the look of any man. Perhaps Jesus had been attractive and also sacrificed his beauty as part of his offering at Calvary. As I wrote earlier, Psalm 45:2 calls the king to come “the fairest of the sons of men.” Jesus was certainly a prince and a king. He had an alluring charismatic charm. He was so magnetic, his apostles dropped everything immediately in order to follow him.

Because we have no actual picture, the way Jesus is viewed is for each of us to imagine. We want to know what he looked like, but the Gospels are more concerned with Jesus’ *character*. No matter his appearance, it was his actions and his makeup that concern the Gospel writers. John ends his Gospel by saying, “Were every one of the deeds of Jesus to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (Jn. 21:25) No matter how much I write about Jesus, I will just be probing the tip of the

iceberg, so to speak. My intent here is not to give a complete portrait of Jesus, (the way he looked) but a glimpse and taste of who the master is.

WHO?

When Jesus journeyed with his disciples to the remote region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked them a poignant question. “Who do people say that I am?’ And they told him, ‘John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets.’ And he asked them, ‘But who do *you* say that I am?’” (Mk. 8:27-29) Pope John Paul II once said that that is the most important question we can ever ask ourselves.

It seems that everyone in the Gospels had that question on their mind. Who is Jesus? Pilate, Herod, and the chief priests, as well as the common people, all want to know who Jesus is. Jesus’ identity is hidden even from the disciples themselves. After Jesus calms the storm in Mark 4:41, they ask, “*Who* then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?”

The question of *who* usually has to do with Jesus’ identity. Was he the Son of God? The Messiah? A prophet? In addition, the question of *who* tries to decipher the divine/human mix in Jesus. If Jesus is divine as well as human, just how does that work? Does he know the future? Did he know everything that would happen to him? Was he confused about things just like we are? Did he make mistakes?

One of the prime motivations of the four Gospel writers was to get us to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Each goes about this task in a different way, but each Gospel arrives at the same conclusion. In order to know Jesus personally, we must first believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the one sent by God to save us. It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus was human as well as divine. His numerous miracles, profound teaching, and perfect life testify to his divinity. Although he was God, he was also like us. He was tempted and tasted death. He was acquainted

with hunger and thirst and knew what it was to be tired. Jesus grew in wisdom and understanding. Jesus was one of us.

My goal here is not to concern myself so much with Jesus' identity (as Son of God) as with his *character*. "Character" is defined in the dictionary as "the pattern of behavior or personality found in an individual." It is Jesus' disposition that I haven't read much about. What type of person do we meet in the Gospels? What was Jesus like as a real person? Can we get some kind of portrait of the disposition of Jesus of Nazareth from the Bible? I believe we can. As we discover who Jesus is, we can come to know him in a deeply personal way, and hopefully not only emulate him, but be changed into his very image.

THE LION-HEARTED LAMB

The Bible calls Jesus the "Lion" of the tribe of Judah. (Rev. 5:5) When you see lions on TV, you can tell they are fierce warriors. They are fast and at the top of the food chain. They capture and eat their foe with great ease. When they roar, the entire jungle hears. I used to have a cat and when I would let her outside, she would prowl her territory looking for any intruders. After her inspection, she would sit on a high spot and simply watch. The back yard was her empire. The kingly characteristic of a lion to rule is instinctual in cats also.

In another setting, Jesus was called the "Lamb" of God by John the Baptist. (Jn. 1:29) This is a description we Catholics use at Mass: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb." We identify Jesus as the lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world. (Rev. 13:8) If you go to a petting zoo, you will most likely find lambs. They are put there because of their easy-going, non-violent nature. Children can approach them and pet them without fear of reprisal because lambs are very meek and tame. Lambs in the Old Testament were among the animals sacrificed to God. The blood of lambs

was sprinkled on the doorposts of the Jews in exile in Egypt so that the angel of death would pass over their homes in the first Passover. (Ex. 12:7)

What a contradiction! Jesus was a lion and yet a lamb. The lion certainly represents royalty, but it also symbolizes all that is stereotypically masculine and warrior-like. After all, Jesus had a fierce heart. He spoke out against the religious hypocrisy of his day. He turned temple tables upside down. He challenged evil spirits. He didn't run when confronted with torture and death, but he did God's will with courageous determination. He was full of magnetism and able to gather people together from all walks of life. Jesus was a natural leader who was able to band a close-knit community together. He taught the multitudes the meaning of life. He had passionate zeal and his heart was a blazing fire for God. His novel, straightforward, confrontational teachings, associations with outcasts and miraculous healings eventually made the religious leaders turn against him. They saw him as a radical, dangerous person. He was finally put to death under the charge of sedition against Rome. Ironically, over his head on the Cross was a plaque proclaiming him "King."

A lamb is often used to symbolize meekness and gentleness. Jesus gathered with and befriended outcasts. He had women (considered lower class in his culture) as his companions. He had many friends and worked hard at developing his personal relationships. He taught non-violence and told his followers to turn the other cheek. The core of his message was to love all, especially those who hate you and are your enemies. He never forced himself on anyone, but invited all to come to him. He welcomed children and enjoyed nature. Jesus was a gentleman. He pushed the boundaries of the law but never broke them. His preaching was creative and clear. Scripture spoke of him, "He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets; he will

not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick.” (Mt. 12:19-20) He even forgave his executioners while dying on the cross.

Psychologists say that in order for you to be well integrated there should be a good blend of both stereotypical masculine and feminine qualities within you. If you are a male and live with aggression and power while neglecting your need for relationships and tenderness, you will be incomplete. Perhaps the imbalance will come out in dreams, headaches, irrational fears, a heart attack, bullying or fixations of lust and anger. You must nurture your feminine side. If you are a woman, it is healthy to explore competition and other characteristically masculine traits such as assertiveness. The blend of both rounds us out as humans and individuals. Often, a spouse will talk about his or her mate and say, “He or she completes me.” That is because mates can offer each other what each needs for full integration and can fill in the gaps of personality traits that may be missing in one or the other.

Jesus had a beautiful balance of masculinity and femininity. He was tough yet tender, courageous yet careful, savage yet soft, fierce yet friendly, dangerous yet distinguished. He showed us in his actions, teachings, and personality just what a fully human person looks like. He had the fierce courageous heart of a lion king leader. He also had the surrendered, submissive, gentle heart of a lamb. Both are needed to be complete, integrated, and whole. Jesus displayed true royalty; the man come from heaven. Here are some stories that display Jesus’ nature.

CALM, COOL, AND COLLECTED

One story that reveals the personality of Jesus is in Luke 7:36-50. Jesus was invited to the house of a Pharisee. While they were eating, a notorious sinner burst into the house and began to weep at Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

Then she anointed his feet with an ointment she brought with her. This is one of the most beautiful scenes in the whole Bible.

Apparently, this woman had seen Jesus preach and interact with people before. She had listened to his wisdom and saw his princely disposition. She had never seen a man like this before. After viewing true beauty, she came to see that her way of life was wrong. She felt a strong attraction to Jesus. She risked rebuke and braved public shame to show Jesus that she appreciated his magnificent character.

What I love about this story is the way Jesus reacted to her display of love. Jesus *allowed* her to show reverence toward him. He permitted her to serve him in this adoring way. Most people would have pulled back in false humility, embarrassed. This was Peter's reaction when the Lord wanted to wash his feet. "You shall never wash my feet," Peter said. (Jn. 13:8) We all have a natural instinct *not* to let people do things for us. We somehow feel that we are not worthy, or we will owe them something if they show us kindness. I've learned that one of the greatest services I can do for people is to let them do something nice for me. (I'm getting good at this!) If I prevent them from doing their good deed, I am hindering their need to give. Jesus recognized that in this case it was right and good to let the woman express her gratitude and reverence.

If it had been me, I would have been concerned about what everyone thought of me. Our reputations are so very important to us! It would have been politically correct for Jesus to try to curry favor with these Pharisees and rebuke the obvious sinner. After all, what could she ever do for him? The Pharisees could give him high recommendations throughout Israel. Jesus was very sensitive. He cared more about not hurting this woman than he did about the favor of his observers. I love Jesus because time and time again he demonstrates his appreciation of the value of the individual and ignores the ingrained prejudices of those around him.

His character shines in this story because he didn't bend to the pressure of the opinion of a group of religious people. He was calm, cool, and collected.

One of the reasons those in power sought to kill Jesus was because of his inclusiveness. He included women as his traveling companions, which was unheard of in those days. He dined with notorious sinners. He was a friend to the marginalized. When questioned about this by the Pharisees, he replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mt. 9:12-13) I once heard someone say that the church is not simply a gathering of holy people, but a hospital for the sick. That is why anyone, anywhere can "come to Jesus." He will accept you just as you are.

I remember the pressure in high school to hang out with the right people. If you were seen with someone who was not cool or popular, you would immediately be judged. There was pressure to make friends, and the people you associated yourself with identified you to others. Jesus cut through all those false judgments with his love for people. He was willing to be misunderstood and falsely judged so that we could be set free. He cared more about insignificant people than he did his reputation. Most importantly, he cared what *God* thought of him. People look on the outside but the Lord looks at the heart. (1 Sam. 16:7)

Back in 1976 I was invited to see the play *Godspell* at the Old Charles Theatre in Boston. I went with my girlfriend and neither of us were very religious. Little did I know but I was about to be doused with grace. *Godspell* is a presentation of the Gospel of Matthew in theatrical form. Through story, song, acting and humor, the Gospel was presented. Although I had been born and brought up Catholic, I had never "felt" the Gospel until that presentation.

As I sat there and watched the play unfold, I was struck by the beauty of Jesus. I could see his love for people, his wisdom and the overall truth of who he was and what he stood for. I was attracted by his charisma and charm. This was a man of who loved God and lived with courage. He reached out to the marginalized and was unjustly condemned. He was more religious than the “professionals” yet in a new fresh, contemporary way. The tragedy of his story cut me to the heart.

As I watched, I also knew I was an outsider. I had been born and baptized and confirmed in the religion of Catholicism. I knew about Jesus but was not his disciple. As I watched, I got in touch with an emptiness within and longed to be connected to this man who was obviously more than a man. I felt a call to come to him and while I didn't right away, I promised myself that one day I would look into this. This play along with many other factors would move me to eventually “look into this.” It took time, but once I did investigate Jesus, true to the Gospel, I was reborn! My life will never be the same.

I am but one story out of millions. This is the impact Jesus has on those who are struck by his “spell.” (God-spell) Jesus is more than magnetic and charismatic. While human, Jesus is more than a man. He is who he says he is and the proof is in the pudding. What a difference he's made in my life! This tidal wave of change is what multitudes in the Gospel experienced. I now live my life telling the world about Jesus, the Son of God.

A GREAT HIGH PRIEST (HEB. 4:15)

Right after my ordination in 1991, I visited Hawaii. On the island of Oahu, there is a shrine dedicated to Blessed Damien de Veuster. He is commonly known as Damien the Leper. In 1873, he arrived from Belgium to begin his ministry on the island of Molokai. He knew that the colony of lepers there needed a priest, and at great personal risk, he began to live with and minister to the diseased. Leprosy is a contagious

disease and until modern times there was no treatment. It eats away at the skin and muscles of those who contract it. Besides the physical problems, there is a huge social stigma attached to the scars and ugliness that result from the illness. In biblical times, lepers were outcasts and had to ring a bell whenever anyone approached. The law required them to cry “Unclean! Unclean!” to warn others to stay away from them. The people of that time believed that when a person came into contact with someone who had leprosy, it rendered the healthy person unclean, too. What a life of loneliness, humiliation, and agony!

Within twelve years of the start of his ministry to these people, Damien himself contracted the disease. He could have saved himself numerous times by leaving the island, but he chose to stay with the people that he loved. Some four years later, at the young age of 49, Damien died of leprosy. Like his master, he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. (Is. 53:2) He was quoted as saying, “I make myself a leper with lepers, to gain all for Jesus Christ.”

The story of Damien parallels, to some degree, the story of Jesus himself. Jesus was born in lowly circumstances to peasant people in little Bethlehem. He knew the toil and pain of labor, making a living as a carpenter. He identified with sinners when he was baptized in the Jordan. Throughout his ministry, he connected with the poor and outcasts, and accepted all people who would come to him. He was betrayed, denied, and unjustly judged. He was forced to die the death of a criminal and was tortured between two malefactors. All the while, Peter says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.” (1 Pet. 2:24) “For our sake, God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21) Jesus became sin on the Cross so we could experience becoming divine.

Make no mistake about it, we are all lepers. The leprosy we all have is sin. It makes us unclean and separates us from God. Jesus associated himself with us and became our disease so that we could be redeemed. His willingness to be misunderstood (still) and unjustly judged, and to go through such suffering, rejection, and turmoil, reveals a precious heart of self-giving. He invites all who will, to come to him. He still reaches out to the marginalized and rejected. As Jesus put it, “The one who comes to me I will in no wise cast out.” (Jn. 6:37)

Such royal character inspires me to be like him. When I am at a gathering and see someone alone, I try to take notice, go over, and strike up a conversation. I don't avoid loners and am not afraid of what people think. I am more concerned with obeying the one who reached out to me! When I am in the confessional, I always think about the inclusiveness of Jesus. When I hear horrendous sins, I don't judge. I identify with the sinner and think, “There but for the grace of God go I.” We are all in the same boat. We are not islands unto ourselves, but we are all part of the same continent.

It is obvious that the Gospels were written to show who Jesus is. What is not clear to some is that the Gospels were also written to *help us become like Jesus*. Jesus is the firstborn of many brothers and sisters. As he is, so one day we shall become. Our life's purpose is to “be conformed to the image of God's son.” (Rom. 8:29) We are all in the process of becoming someone. God holds his Son up before us and desires that we become like him. That is our life journey. We only really know Jesus in a personal way when we become like him.

When we were baptized into Christ, one of the effects was sealing us with the indelible spiritual character of Christ. (*Catechism #1272*) His character is alive in us and our life must be about releasing and showing forth this character.

It is not enough to know about Jesus. We only really know him when we allow his character to emerge in our everyday behavior.

The story ends with a Pharisee being taught a lesson and a woman being set free. Jesus had been snubbed because his host did not give him the usual welcome of a kiss and some water to cleanse his dusty feet. He was, after all, just a carpenter in the house of a religious giant. Jesus used the occasion of his host's rudeness to teach a lesson. This woman's extravagance demonstrated the love she had within and Jesus' response showed that she was forgiven. The Pharisee's bad manners displayed his lack of love and thus his need to be forgiven. It was Jesus' calm receptive nature that allowed this woman to express her love and thus experience salvation. His same alluring nature calls to us today.

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

We can learn a lot about Jesus' character by noticing how he handled stressful situations, especially his Passion. We Passionists profess a vow to meditate upon the Passion of Jesus and proclaim its riches to the faithful. One scene I think of often is when Jesus was being dragged before King Herod. Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great who had tried to kill Jesus when he was an infant. Herod Antipas was the one who had John the Baptist beheaded. Herod said of Jesus, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" (Lk. 9:9)

When Jesus finally was brought before Herod, something unheard of happened. Jesus didn't say a word. Imagine the scene. There was Herod seated on his lavish king's throne, and the throne room was packed with his court of soldiers and invited guests. Gathered also were many religious leaders. They were looking for some entertainment. At first Herod questioned Jesus as if he was a magician. Jesus knew that

anything he said would be twisted and used against him. He taught, “Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.” (Mt. 7:6) So Jesus decided to remain silent. Can you imagine how hard it would have been not to say a word at that moment?

Jesus remained silent because he was meek. He taught that the meek will inherit the earth. (Mt. 5:5) A meek person isn't weak or wimpy. A meek person has a gentle, soothing disposition. As I said before, the word “meek” in the Greek comes from a word that means “to harness control of a strong horse.” Another example of meekness is a man with a black belt in karate who is accosted by another but chooses not to defend himself. In other words, meekness is strength under control. James tells us that the one who can tame the tongue is the perfect man. (Jas. 3:2) Jesus was demonstrating extreme self-control. Jesus could have freed himself from any situation at any time. When in Gethsemane, for example, he told Peter, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Mt. 26:53)

Imagine how hard it was to stay quiet before all those people! The urge to defend himself must have been overwhelming. What incredible patience and forbearance Jesus exhibited. The one who taught “turn the other cheek” practiced what he preached. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing Jesus. (Lk. 23:10) Herod and his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. St. Peter wrote, “Christ also suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, that you should follow in his steps. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to God who judges justly.” (1 Pt. 2:21,23) Jesus knew that he was there for us. He also knew that God was his vindicator.

The same thing happened when Jesus was tortured on the Cross. He remained silent except for a few words. Someone once told me she had a mystical vision of Jesus on the cross. As he suffered he was thinking, "How long will this last? When will this be over?" Jesus suffered a seeming interminable agony. I have studied the process of crucifixion. In the hours of humiliation, extreme agony, and torture, the person often went mad. But Jesus hung there for some three to six hours patiently enduring, and attracting our impatience and careless words to himself. "For gold is tested in the fire and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation." (Sir. 2:5) Jesus was tried under the most extreme circumstances. Nothing could break him, not even the torture of crucifixion. His response during his Passion revealed the extent of Jesus' character. He patiently endured and completely surrendered his life and cause to God. He was called Master because we was master of his appetites and emotions. Even a pagan Roman centurion saw the way he patiently died and proclaimed, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Mk. 15:17)

How easy it is to take offense and get impatient. In the confessional, I hear about impatience from people of all ages. Have you ever noticed how some people and situations in life are so slow? For example, sometimes I attend Mass at a local parish. The priest there drags everything out and his homily is long. Mass takes forever! I find myself getting upset and angry. If the foursome in front of me is playing golf too slowly, I can get so frustrated that it affects my game. There are slow clerks in stores, slow traffic, delaying commercials on TV, airplane delays, and red lights everywhere. It is so easy to overreact and get bent out of shape. I saw a motivational poster that read, "It is not the circumstances in life that determine who we are, but our *reaction* to those circumstances."

My formation as a Passionist and my studies for the priesthood didn't happen overnight. When I was in my

early twenties, God put it into my heart to serve people and evangelize and I wanted it all to happen right away. Before anything else, I learned that I had to submit to God's timetable. My studies for the priesthood took *years* of hard work, study, and prayer. Anything worthwhile that we do in life will take time. "A dream comes to pass with much labor." (Ec. 5:3) There is no microwave maturity. Nothing happens quickly in life. The name of the game is patience. The sooner we learn this the better. We need patience for the little inconveniences of life as well as for our dreams. "By patient endurance, you will win your souls," Jesus taught. (Lk. 21:19)

When the Roman centurion, used to seeing men break during crucifixions, saw the patience with which Jesus died, he said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" Contrary to what our culture teaches us, retaliation is not the measure of strength; rather, patient endurance is the evidence of exceptional strength of character. The patience and forbearance of Jesus demonstrate that he is the Son of God. We are constantly being tested and tried by life. We display the character of Christ when we gain and show forth meekness and patience in life. "But if you do right and suffer patiently, you have God's approval. For *to this* you have been called." (1 Pet. 2:20-21)

A BROKEN HEART YOU WILL NOT SPURN
(PS. 51:17)

When Pilate condemned Jesus to be crucified, he would have taken a stick, broken it, and thrown it at his feet. By this symbol, the condemned man was shown that not only his body but also his spirit was about to be broken. I have discovered that sometimes in order to grow, we must be "crucified with Christ." (Gal. 2:20) There must be a breaking in us. Psalm 51:17 tells us that a broken spirit is acceptable to God.

In order to be ridden, a horse must be "broken" first. In the same way, God will allow us to go through difficulties so we will become obedient and capable of being ridden. The hard, outer shell of a seed must break before the growth can

sprout forth. I've heard it said that when a shepherd has a wayward, disobedient sheep, he will actually break its legs to teach it not to stray. It's better that the sheep go through the breaking than be lost.

In the same way, God will use the people and events of life to discipline us and break us so we will grow and become the image of Christ. The breaking that occurs is like the pruning process. It comes from life experiences, but the fingerprints of God are everywhere. To some degree, each of us has what the Bible calls "a hard heart." In this state, we are disobedient, insensitive to God's voice, selfish, stubborn, opinionated, rebellious, deaf, and blind. Left alone, a hard-hearted person will fall into vice and destruction. Evil working through our culture will swallow people like this whole and lead them down the road to death.

One way that God brings understanding and new life to us is to break our heart. The breaking usually is painful, but it leads to growth. Some years back, 19-year-old college student showed up at our retreat center. She had just joined Alcoholics Anonymous and wanted to share her fifth step. (The fifth step, as a means to experience recovery, is a declaration of the wrongs and sins that a person has committed in his or her life.) When I asked her what brought her to A.A. at such a young age, she replied that her sorority sisters in college told her she had a problem. She said, "When college kids who drink all the time tell you that you have a problem, then you know there is a *real* problem."

For this young lady, an intervention by her friends helped break her. For others, it is a bottoming-out experience of some sort. Physical suffering or trials or even relationships can break your heart. I like to tell the story about how a break up with my girlfriend in college broke my heart enough for me to seek God. Other tools God has used to break me are acne, fear, and the difficulties of growing older. God uses the stuff

of life (trials, people, circumstances, negative experiences, living arrangements) to correct us, discipline us, and break us so that we will surrender to him and be obedient (be ridden). Throughout the Bible, we see instances of God dealing with people by allowing hardship in order to get their attention and change their heart. The classic example is God's dealing with hard-hearted Pharaoh in order to get him to obey. After many plagues, he still wasn't broken. It took the death of his firstborn son to finally soften his heart.

Builders have "ground breaking" ceremonies to celebrate the beginning of a new building. Breaking leads to something new. In the writings of the prophets, we are commanded to "break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns." (Jer. 4:3, Hos. 10:12) Fallow ground was plowed and left unused for a few seasons. The soil would get hard and crusty and needed to be broken and tilled again. The breaking brought the richness to surface. Soil was broken to make it more fruitful. Of course, the prophets were referring to the state of our hearts.

Mark's Gospel tells about a woman who anointed Jesus' head with ointment. The ointment was very costly and it was only when the flask was broken that the oil poured over Jesus' head and the fragrance filled the room. (Mk. 14:3) Paul tells us that we are the fragrance of Christ among people. (2 Cor. 2:14-16) In order for us to be that aroma that will bring life, we must be broken. A hard heart that is broken can be transformed into a soft, tender, contrite heart. Such a heart is quickly obedient, compassionate (because it too has suffered), humble, loving, and attentive.

The virtues (patience, meekness, openness, acceptance) that Jesus developed were cultivated through his life experiences. "Son though he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered." (Heb. 5:8) The word "obedience" comes from the root word in Latin that means "to listen."

Suffering deepened Jesus. Through pain he garnered wisdom. Wisdom is the understanding that comes through life experience. Tribulations taught him to go beneath the surface of events and challenges and listen. It is the same in our lives. Virtues aren't cheap. Can you see that what you are going through, the suffering you have borne and are bearing, is God dealing with you? Are you resisting, or allowing yourself to be broken? God's gracious plan is to create you, take you, break you, and remake you. Jesus allowed himself to be broken. If we are to know him, we must let God break us, too.

AUTHENTICITY

Years ago I preached a revival at our African American parishes in Birmingham, Alabama. We Passionists have staffed these two mission parishes for 85 years now. I am keenly aware that the black style of preaching is very different from mine. Often black pastors will get loud, shout, and work up a sweat. I have heard many black ministers preach with unbridled enthusiasm and watched as they tried to work their congregation up into a frenzy.

I sought the Lord in prayer about this because I felt some pressure to "perform." I sensed the Lord telling me, "Cedric, don't try to be anyone you are not. The hallmark of your preaching has always been sincerity and authenticity." I decided to relax and love the people and be myself. The revival turned out wonderfully. I had a special anointing to preach and the people loved what I had to say. I have also preached at the National Black Congress and have been true to myself. I don't "put on" a false persona.

I really dislike it when I see preachers put on artificial personas when they preach. As I listen, I lose the message because of the fluff of the messenger. Whenever I am about to preach, I always tell myself, "Be sincere. Don't try to be anyone you are not. Don't put on a false persona. Speak from your heart."

When I imagine Jesus as a preacher and teacher, I see a person of gravity and dignity. Jesus had enthusiasm, for sure, but he spoke very conversationally and loved to tell stories. His gentle, caring sincerity flowed from an easy yet serious heart. He never put on airs, but was real. These verses from Isaiah proclaim it well:

He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will any one hear his voice in the
streets; he will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick,
till he brings justice to victory;
and in his name the Gentiles shall hope.
(Mt. 12:19-21)

I am often suspicious of preachers who shout and I wonder what their motives are. I have examined my heart about this time and time again. Because I sell books at my missions, it is easy to fall into the trap of wanting to preach in such a way that people will buy my books and DVDs. (Even when I have that desire, my aim is not to make money but to allow more people to experience my teaching.) Popularity can become an issue with those who proclaim the Word. Some will compromise their values to become well-known. The desire to be a people-pleaser is perhaps the greatest danger facing a messenger of God's Word.

When I look at the Gospels, I see a contradiction that flies in the face of reason. Time and time again, Jesus actually told people to be quiet about his miracles. (Mt. 12:16) Once when he multiplied the loaves and fish, the people tried to make him king by force, but he withdrew to a mountain by himself to pray. (Jn. 6:15) He told people if they wanted to follow him, they must deny themselves daily and take up their own cross. This is not a good marketing strategy! The picture we get from the Bible is of someone who sought to do his Father's will and did not seek popularity or political power of

any sort. Jesus was genuine. He wanted people to be blessed. His sole motivation was God's will and the welfare of others.

As leaders, we are often called to proclaim unpopular teaching. People love it when I proclaim what's in it for them. But when any preacher starts talking about social justice, suffering, sacrifice, sin and community involvement, many tune him or her out. I feel discomfort when I invite people to come to the mission I preach. That means a sacrifice of time and effort on their part. Often I feel resistance to my message when I try to persuade people to make a difference in their community. People love to hear about what Jesus did for them on the Cross, but hate to "take up their cross and follow him." The truth is that there are no padded crosses. Self-denial and suffering have never been popular!

Jesus' teachings are the most challenging in history. Jesus didn't mince words to gain followers. He not only preached about sin but went to the heart of the matter. For example, during his Sermon on the Mount, he explained that not only evil deeds but even impure motives are sinful. (Mt. 5:21-48) Once he was preaching the truth that he was the bread of life. Jesus knew that the people were murmuring and that this truth was unpopular. Still he said, "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." This caused many of his disciples to draw back and no longer follow him. Even today, many denominations don't follow Jesus fully because of this. When they quit, Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" "Lord, to whom shall we go?" answered Peter. "You have the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:68)

When I examine how Jesus taught and spoke to the religious leaders, I see an uncompromising message of truth. Jesus wasn't wishy-washy. He told the educated, respected Nicodemus that he must be born again. (Jn. 3:3) Rebirth

continues to scandalize many religious people today. Jesus didn't come to give us more laws but to revolutionize our ideas about religion.

It is clear that Jesus disagreed with many leaders in his day and the number one problem he had with them was their hypocrisy. Examples abound. Here is one vehement proclamation from Matthew's Gospel, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisee, *hypocrites!* For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." (Mt. 23:27) What upset Jesus more than anything was when a person play-acted. That is what the word hypocrite means. This tells me that Jesus was very concerned with consistency inside and out. He taught that it is what comes from *within* that defiles a person. (Mk. 7:15) Jesus spent so much time teaching about our inner life.

He did not try to curry favor with the powerful to advance his name either. Rather, his reputation with God was more important to him than his reputation with people. He taught us to fear God rather than people.

The apostle James tells us that it is not hair, skin, jewelry, or fine clothing that makes a person beautiful; rather, it is the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit which is precious to God. (Jas. 3:3-4) We're not sure exactly what Jesus looked like, but his beautiful heart glows from the pages of the Gospels. Jesus was just a carpenter, but his sincerity, authenticity, and depth radiate from the New Testament. He may not have been ordained in any religious institution, but his wisdom is clearly from God. Jesus taught that a man's words reveal his heart. (Mt. 12:34-35) If that is true, Jesus' words reveal a heart motivated solely by his love for God.

JESUS WEPT (JN. 11:35)

There are many aspects to love. If you read 1 Corinthians 13, you will see that love is patient, kind, and not self-seeking.

I liken love to a diamond. A diamond is precious, valuable, and pleasing to look at. Diamonds have many distinct facets to them. Similarly, love is generous, forgiving, sacrificial, protective, and caring as well as many other things. Even a surface reading of the Bible will reveal that love is central.

The Greek language has four main words for love. The first is “eros.” Eros was the name of the Greek god of love. We get the word erotic from this root. It is a love that is focused on self-fulfillment. It mostly has to do with receiving. A second kind of love is “philia.” Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. Philia implies giving as well as getting. “Storage” is loving people with a familial type love. It is the love people within a nuclear family show for each other. “Agape” is the fourth word. Agape love is pure self-giving with no strings attached. It is unconditional love. This is the way God loves. When the early Christians got together to break bread, they called it an “agape feast.” They were sharing a meal celebrating God’s love. God’s love for us is not based on our goodness or our merit, but on who God is. We cannot earn God’s love. God gives freely and generously to all. Jesus said, “God makes his sun to rise on the evil as well as the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” (Mt. 5:45) He was proclaiming that God loves all unconditionally and equally.

Jesus loved with unselfish agape love. Romans 5:7-8 defines this love.

Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man –
 though perhaps for a good man
 one will dare even to die.
 But God shows his love for us in that
 while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Jesus went to the Cross for you and me before we ever made a move to get our act together. He suffered because he deeply cares for each one of us. I want to focus on the

facet of agape love that is caring or affection. The dictionary defines affection as “fond or tender feeling; warm liking.” When lovers are affectionate, there are intense emotions. Passion burns. The fire of love moves people.

Once Jesus had withdrawn to a lonely place to rest for a while. His ministry was expanding and so many people were coming to him that Jesus and the apostles didn’t even have time to eat! When the boat came ashore, he saw a great throng of people waiting for him. “He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” (Mk. 6:34) First, Jesus fed their hearts, but eventually he would feed their stomachs when he multiplied the loaves and fishes.

The word used here for compassion means to be moved within with pity. It denotes deep emotion that comes from a person’s gut. The word is the same word that is used for the father when he welcomed his prodigal son home. (Lk. 15:20) This compassion moved the father to run toward his son with forgiveness. The word was also used in the story of the Good Samaritan. (Lk. 10:33) The Samaritan saw the beaten man and was so moved that he bound up his wounds, poured on oil and wine, set him on his donkey, and brought him to an inn. He took care of the man.

Jesus had a number of friends. One of these was Lazarus. It’s interesting that when his sisters sent word to Jesus about Lazarus’ illness, they said, “The one whom you *love* is sick.” (Jn. 11:3) We are told that Jesus loved Martha and Mary also. (Jn. 11:5) When Jesus came after Lazarus died, he saw them all weeping and “he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” This caused Jesus to weep. The shortest and perhaps the most powerful verse in the Bible is John 11:35, “*Jesus wept.*” Those two words speak volumes to me. They reveal a heart that cares, one that is full of emotion, that grieves when a relationship is broken. Love is not some obscure philosophical

notion. It is not simply obedience to some law or truth. Love is emotion and feeling that moves you. Love is concern and care for others. Ministry involves being with others, caring for others, weeping and rejoicing with them. It is a heartfelt desire to help. Love is action.

When Jesus met people, he *loved* them. Remember the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus? He ran up and knelt before Jesus and wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. When Jesus spoke of the commandments, the man replied that he had observed all of them from his youth. Instead of being put out by this reply or feeling like the man had not given him a profound enough answer, Jesus looked at him and loved him. (Mk. 10:21) I'm sure Mark adds that detail because of the demanding teaching Jesus was about to give about selling all and following him. Regardless, Jesus loved him with the agape love of God, unconditionally. Jesus didn't view people suspiciously or as a threat, as many of us instinctively do. He loved. He cared. He felt. He gave himself to us.

Part of his loving this man was to *look* at him. I've noticed that when people speak to each other few make eye contact for very long. Passive-aggressive people hurt those they live with by not looking at them. In the seminary, I took a class in pastoral counseling and we engaged in a very disturbing exercise. First, we were paired up with someone from the class. I got as my partner a young man about my age whom I didn't know very well. Then for two long minutes, we had to stare into each other's eyes without saying a word. Wow, was that hard. The first thing that happened was smiles, laughter, and looking away. The feeling was so uncomfortable! It was as if all my defenses were down and he could read my soul. Finally, after the laughter and the discomfort subsided, simple honesty took over. I remember thinking, "Look at him. I have nothing to hide." We were staring into each other's soul. Understanding was communicated.

I can remember a girlfriend I had in high school. One night at the conclusion of our date, we sat in my car and simply stared into each other's eyes. Was that profound! I will never forget the emotion, communication, and connection I felt with her in those moments. I remember how our relationship went to a new level and the intensity of our love for each other increased after that honest, affectionate gaze.

An epic scene in the Gospel occurred when the bold, prideful Peter denied Jesus three times after he swore he wouldn't. "And immediately, while he was still speaking a cock crowed. And the Lord turned and *looked* at Peter." (Lk. 22:61) Once that happened, Peter went out and wept bitterly. What was that look? Was it the look of "I told you so?" I don't think so. Peter and the other disciples knew this look. Jesus spoke to them and gazed into their eyes day after day. They knew that they were loved by the most sincere and honest man that ever lived. There was absolutely no falsity or pretension in Jesus. Peter was familiar with the gaze. Jesus understood him. He had grown to love and appreciate the Master. When he saw Jesus look at him, his heart broke, and he burst into tears, not only because he had denied Jesus, but because Jesus *still* loved him.

I was asked by a group in Houston to give a talk about the New Evangelization called for by Pope John Paul II. Part of the newness of this evangelization is new "expressions." We have enough glum, joyless preachers. I told them, "When you share the Good News, look at people. Look into their eyes. Smile at them. Show them you care and are happy. Love them with your expression!" Your continence reveals a lot about your person. Jesus had such inner joy that radiated in his eyes and smile.

I could have written this whole book about the way Jesus of Nazareth loved. Love is the heart of who he is and he reveals the agape love of God to us. I pray that you sense

the eyes of Jesus gazing into your soul. He is in love with you and will always love you. He is not looking for your flaws but for your heart. Through this book, he is now giving you a look. You are cared for and in God's heart at every moment, at *this* moment.

On the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in June, we hear, "We love because God first loved us." (1 Jn. 4:19) Jesus' heart is sacred because it is a heart of compassion, mercy, and love. Love is the core of who Jesus is. His love is really astounding. He is quick to forgive and radically selfless. His heart is best revealed on the Cross. I believe the judgment of God will be so stern and final because everyone first had the opportunity to come to his merciful love. Those who hardened their hearts over and over again toward God will stand in shame because they will realize what they constantly refused.

It is the love of Jesus for me personally that has changed my heart. Instead of being self-serving and just interested about myself all the time, I have developed a heart of compassion for others. It is God's love operative in me that compels me. Love creates feelings intense enough to make me go outside myself and reach out. This is what it means to be a Christian. It was said of the early Christians, "See how they love one another." I was at a workshop with about 100 people once. The question was asked, "What makes a person an effective minister?" Just about everyone independently voted that it was compassion. If you are Christ-like, you will have affection for others and reach out.

A.W.E.

During the course of my formation as a religious, I was evaluated through a variety of personality tests. One well-known test that helps identify an individual's strengths and personality preferences is called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. I am not going to go into detail here about the

various personality types. If you want to know what your preferences are (or want to better understand others such as your spouse), a great book is *Please Understand Me* by Keirsey and Bates.

One of our personality traits concerns how we are energized. For example, does being around people drain you or excite you? If you find yourself energized by being in groups and at parties, you are probably an extrovert. If you process ideas alone rather than bouncing them off of other people, you most likely tend toward introversion. One of the other categories in this test has to do with how we gather information. Sensate people notice things and gather information from their own experience. Intuitive people have a tendency to rely on instinct and feeling.

While Jesus was intuitive to some degree, there is a great deal of evidence that he was a sensate. It is obvious his teaching came from his observations. He had a keen eye toward nature as well as people. Once he simply sat watching people by the temple treasury. He noticed a poor widow who put in two copper coins. He drew a lesson from this, teaching that when you give out of your need, you give more than those who give out of their abundance. (Lk. 21:1-4) Jesus watched life. He was aware. He learned from his experiences.

We all know about his teaching to cast our care on God. He drew his lessons from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He told us to look at the birds and consider the lilies also. (Mt. 6:25-33) His teaching on the providence of God included sparrows. He taught that although they were common and ordinary and not worth much, “not one of them is forgotten before God.” (Lk. 12:6)

Some time ago, I was playing golf in Houston and walked near the edge of the woods. I stopped for a moment and noticed a small bug turned upside down on a little leaf. He

was trying to right himself and his little legs were flailing rapidly. No one in the world knew about the struggle that was going on there. I never would have been aware of it had I not happened to walk that way. The thought came to me, “With all that is going on in the world today – wars, Wall Street problems, and people involved in every sort of activity – God is aware of even this little bug trying to right himself.” It was as if I shared a private moment with God. Jesus taught us to look, to notice, and to realize how involved our God is in the intricacies of our life.

Every fifteen years or so, we religious are allowed to take some sabbath rest. This is called a “sabbatical year.” My sabbatical happened from July, 2003 to June, 2004. A sabbatical year is a year of study, travel, retreats, and rest. I studied theology at the North American College in Rome. When I returned to the states, I travelled to our national parks. I have already been to Yosemite, Sequoia, and Montana’s Glacier National Park. I have also visited the Grand Canyon, Zion, and Bryce National Parks. Whenever I go to these parks, I am awed. There is so much to see and such peace there. The last time I visited one, I promised myself that I would return. It has been years since I went. For me, enjoying nature mediates an encounter with God.

I remember when I studied in Israel back in 1987. Our group took a side trip to Mt. Sinai in Egypt and spent five nights sleeping out in the wilderness. I recall how in touch I was with what was going on around me and with all creation. When I slept outside, it was evident what phase the moon was in. I was acutely aware of the exact time it got dark and when the sun rose. I also found out that there are still remnants of the plague of flies in Egypt!

When I lived in Galilee, I was struck by how agricultural the land was. It was very green, and there were farms everywhere.

I understood why many of Jesus' parables talk about seeds, farming, fruit, and harvest. (Mk. 4) He worked with trees and made his living as a carpenter. He was familiar with the water and even taught seasoned fisherman how to fish. Jesus was a man who immersed himself in life and saw parables in it. He allowed life to teach him. I believe he loved the outdoors and especially loved preaching outside. This aspect of Jesus' personality has prompted me to try to be more aware of my surroundings. I am much more contemplative that way. I try not to miss the miracles that are all around me.

When Jesus spoke about himself, he said, "Learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart." (Mt. 11:29) Take it one day at a time, Jesus taught. (Mt. 6:34) "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Mt. 11:30) Jesus' gentle, easy way enabled him to have a keen recognition of life. He appreciated nature, people, and the miracle of life itself. He had a simple joy. He wasn't in a hurry. He took time to smell the roses.

One of our great, now deceased, Passionist missionaries used to give a sermon on awe. In his talk, he said that there are three aspects to awe. A – awareness, W – wonder, and E – enthusiasm. Jesus' life and teaching demonstrate that he was a person who noticed people and events then drew lessons from what he saw. Jesus lived in touch with his surroundings. He revered nature and learned from life. Jesus lived with awe.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT JESUS

Whenever I read the Gospels, I am stirred by the effect Jesus had on people's lives. He impacted them radically. Currently we have our modern-day heroes. People spend hours watching TV and spend lots of money to see their favorite athlete perform. Tiger Woods can demand some two million dollars just to appear at a tournament! I attended the Colonial Golf Tournament in Fort Worth in May, 2003. History

was made there when a woman golfer, Annika Sorenstam, became the first female in 58 years to play on the men's tour. I have never seen such crowds on a golf course! As tall as I am, I had to stand on my toes just to catch a glimpse of her. The throng cheered madly whenever she hit a shot.

I remember when the Beatles were extremely popular years ago. When they came to the United States, there was pandemonium everywhere they went. Modern day rock bands still command the allegiance of their followers. Politicians have their followings. People are looking for someone who will usher in a prosperous life. People are attracted by athleticism, fame, and entertainment power.

Jesus was very charismatic and had a profound effect on people. Throughout the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus had an amazing impact. In John's account, Andrew spent just one night with Jesus and the first thing he did was to go to his brother Peter and tell him, "We have found the Messiah." (Jn. 1:41) The Messiah was the long awaited, God sent, anointed one. What did Andrew encounter that would make him say such a thing?

In Mark's account, Peter and Andrew, James and John were fishing. At Jesus invitation, they *immediately* left their father, servants, and boat to follow Jesus. Great multitudes followed Jesus. There were times when the crowd was so great Jesus had to get into a boat so that the people wouldn't crush him. (Mk. 3:9, 4:1) Once over four thousand people were so mesmerized by Jesus that they were with him for three days without any food. They were so hungry Jesus was afraid they were going to faint on the way home. (Mt. 15:32) The people who came to Jesus were Jewish and Gentile, women and men, religious and lay. He left multitudes of healed people in his wake. What happened when Jesus came among us must be told to all. All must have the opportunity to know him.

Once a woman with a hemorrhage pressed through the large crowd in order to just touch the tassel of his garment, believing if she did so she would be healed. Another time, a chief tax collector climbed a tree so that he could see Jesus. A rich young ruler ran to Jesus, knelt before him and asked him about life. Parents came bringing their children to Jesus so he could touch them. One man came to Jesus and said he would follow him anywhere. Once four men brought their paralytic friend and ripped a piece of roof off a house in order to get to Jesus. Jesus went off by himself to pray and people hunted him down. Lepers knelt before him, blind men shouted out to him, demons called him the Son of God, and even storms obeyed him.

When Jesus was born, Magi from the east came to do him homage. Toward the end of his life, philosophers from Greece sought him out. The religious leaders were divided because of him. Politicians were befuddled. Many times the chief priests and Pharisees wanted to arrest him. One time they sent guards to arrest him and the officers came back empty handed. The police said, "No man ever spoke like this man!" Wisdom and grace flowed from his lips. Even the Roman centurion in charge of his crucifixion called Jesus "the Son of God."

Jesus certainly had an astounding effect on people. The evidence from the Bible shows us that Jesus had amazing charm and allure. Jesus himself called people blessed who saw and heard him. "Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." (Lk. 10:23) Because of Jesus' character and deeds, Mary anointed Jesus' feet with pure nard and wiped them with her hair. Judas spoke against such "waste." Jesus defended her and said, "The poor you always have with you but you do not always have me." (Mt. 26:11)

What was it that they saw? Sadly, during our time on earth, we will never know the complexion and contour of his face or the length and color of his hair. We can't enjoy his smile or hear the tone of his voice. We won't be able to look into his engaging eyes. His hands, gestures, body, voice, and spirit-filled personality must have been quite impressive. He was the man from heaven. Again, Psalm 45:2 tells us, "You are the fairest of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips." Jesus was a true prince. An aura of blessing surrounded Jesus and followed him everywhere he went. On Mount Tabor, his face shone like the Sun and God himself attested to him! There were astounding healings and miracles. The Gospels leave his appearance open to our imagination. Jesus taught that those who seek him will experience revelation about him. (Mt. 11:25) You may not know his physical appearance, but you will experience him in a spiritual manner. God will give us what we need to know now, and more will come on the day we meet him face to face.

More importantly, Jesus' teachings, deeds, and integrity are clearly set forth in the Bible. He spoke with wisdom previously unknown and secret from the "foundation of world." (Mt. 13:35) His practical teaching through parables about how to live is a lamp to our feet to guide us on our way. He backed up his words with impeccable character. He was disciplined, obedient, passionate, humble, free, courageous, and completely devoted to his Father. No one could ever accuse him of having committed any falsehood or sin! His deeds brought healing and restoration, but for us, his greatest act was his sacrifice on the Cross. The salvation and forgiveness that he won for us there continues to change lives every day.

Because Jesus lived, people are still being attracted to him like a magnet. Men and women across all racial lines, economic boundaries, and geographical borders still follow him. People throughout the ages have been martyred for

Jesus. Men and women have radically changed their lives and forsaken marriage to live in contemplative communities. He has given tremendous meaning and significance to countless millions. Many are realizing their potential as human beings and as servants because of Jesus – doctors, nurses, authors, poets, song writers, preachers, police, firemen, parents, social workers, rich and poor, young and old, black and white. He inspires hope. He gives faith. Jesus motivates us to love. He has made countless sinners become the greatest of saints. It is amazing the effect that Jesus is *still* having upon people today. I shared my witness earlier. What a *difference* Jesus makes!

TRUE SATISFACTION

The truth is that you and I were made for Jesus. We cannot be complete without him. We will never find ourselves apart from him. It is God's gift that we live "through him, with him, and in him." Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. We receive a flow of life through him. Apart from him, we can do nothing lasting, but in him, all things are possible. Happiness shouldn't be the goal of our life, union of God should be. But when we give ourselves to Jesus there is a joy unspeakable and full of glory that is ours.

I'm reminded of the Rolling Stones' song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." Every once in a while, that song is still broadcast on the radio. Isaiah the prophet proclaimed the same message to the people of his day when he said, "Why spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" (Is. 55:2) All people everywhere and of every age are looking for gratification, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

I've discovered that big BMW's, boats, booze, buffets and the Bahamas don't do it. The glitter of gold, gambling, golf, gluttony, and the gorgeous girls on TV don't make us happy. Sex, success, sweets, shopping, and sports simply don't

satisfy. These things may bring us temporary gratification, but nothing lasting. The hole in our soul will still remain. The world cannot and will not ever complete us.

I remember when I was a 19-year-old sophomore in college. Morning after morning I would wake up, and as I began to get out of bed, I heard, “You are not satisfied. You are missing something. There is more to life and you do not know what it is.” I knew within that I wasn’t happy. I was hearing the voice of Jesus through my conscience; only at that time I didn’t know it was him. I had pleasures, but nothing lasting. I had things, but not God. I had the temporal, but not the eternal.

After seriously examining my life, I made a decision to come to Jesus. I knew I needed something more. As I surrendered to him over and over again, I finally encountered Jesus and found deep-down satisfaction. He completes me with a fulfillment that doesn’t go away. I no longer feel like I’m missing something. Jesus is ultimate contentment. Jesus is our life-long faithful friend.

The contentment he brings is having a personal relationship with God.

The satisfaction he delivers is the blessed assurance that you are saved and on the way to heaven.

The fulfillment he conveys is having profound meaning in your life and impacting others in a positive way.

I love what the Bible says about the crowds at the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. “And they all ate and *were satisfied*.” (Mk. 6:42) It’s amazing that although millions upon millions can come to Jesus at one and the same time, all can be nourished and find satisfaction. The miracle of the multiplication continues today. He is the true bread of life.

This book has been about knowing Jesus personally. I pray that you have “come” to him in a new way. He suffered and died for you. God bless you with faith in Jesus crucified so that you may have assurance of eternal life deep in your heart. My hope is that you will sense his voice speaking to you each day. His impulses and impressions will lead you into being positive and help you to accept yourself. Jesus will help you go through the hardships of life. Trust that he is *with* you as you journey. Jesus will refine you and remake your heart according to his image. As you are being purified daily, you will come to know him in the journey.

The biblical image of Jesus is one of a person of integrity, gentleness, and love. As you pilgrimage every step of the way, I pray that the “Jesus image” in your mind’s eye will be one of a gentle shepherd who loves you very much. The earliest statue found portraying Jesus was discovered in a Roman catacomb dating from the year 175 A.D. It is of a shepherd cradling a lamb around his neck. The shepherd holds the legs of the lamb on either side of his shoulders. You know what happens, the little lamb strays from the fold and gets lost. Inevitably she wanders and gets stuck in a hazardous predicament. Perhaps she stumbles down a ravine or gets caught in a bramble bush. The shepherd is aware the lamb is missing and goes in search. Instinct kicks in and eventually he finds his beloved lamb. Even though he risks danger, he extricates her from her hazardous situation, puts her around his neck and safely brings her home!

This is the picture of grace, of love I want to leave with you. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He will never fail or forsake you. Jesus doesn’t condemn you, rather he intercedes for you! The risen Jesus will help you to make resurrection choices in matters large and small as you keep calling upon him. The Holy Spirit will bring you depth in your prayer life and new life in Christ as you seek him.

When I was in a Wal-Mart department store some time ago, I noticed their slogan “Satisfaction Guaranteed.” It’s not what we buy, who we know, or what we do in life that fulfills. I tried all of that and discovered Jesus is the only way to satisfaction. I saw a saying that I like: Jesus brings joy, fulfillment and eternal life. If you find a better offer: take it!

What a difference Jesus makes! The proof is in the pudding. Come to Jesus and abide in him over and over again each day. Eventually you will have encounters that will change you and fulfill you. It is Jesus who alone can bring the satisfaction we all crave. Because our hearts were made for heaven, we will never be 100% happy here on earth, but the joy Jesus brings will complete us. The Risen Lord is present with you as you conclude this book. Remember to abide/stay connected with him. Whatever trials you are going through, pray: *Jesus I trust in you!*

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Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P. is a Passionist priest who professed vows in September 1985. He was born in Springfield, Massachusetts and graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with B.S. in social work and a minor in business. In addition, he has studied philosophy at Southern Illinois University and has studied speech and drama at Northwestern University in Chicago. Fr. Cedric graduated from the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago in May 1990, receiving his Master of Divinity degree with Bible Specialization. He was ordained a priest on June 29, 1991.

Presently, Fr. Cedric preaches retreats and missions throughout the United States and Canada, ministering out of the Passionist retreat complex in Houston, Texas. He has preached more than 500 missions for 33 years. Fr. Cedric produces a program for TV and Radio, *Live with Passion!*, which presently airs nationally and internationally on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (T.B.N.), the Daystar Network, the Catholic EWTN, and other networks/stations. He has numerous CDs and DVDs on Christian living and has authored 25 books.

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The Passionists are a religious community in the Catholic Church. They were founded in 1720 in Italy. The founder of the Passionists was Paul Daneo (St. Paul of the Cross). Their headquarters is in Rome, Italy. They are in 64 countries around the world. The major ministry of the Passionist priests, brothers and sisters is prayer and evangelization.

A Passionist religious professes vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Along with these is the unique first vow of a Passionist: to remember and meditate upon the Passion of Jesus and to proclaim its meaning to the world. The sign that Passionists wear on their religious habit (Jesu XPI Passio) means "The Passion of Jesus Christ." A familiar saying of Passionists is: "May the Passion of Jesus Christ be always in our hearts."

For more information about the Passionists or if you are interested in a religious vocation, please contact:

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