

*You Are Loved!*



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Perhaps the foundational statement of Christianity is “You Are Loved!” God is so in love with you he sent his only Son into the world just for you. You are loved sacrificially, passionately and unconditionally. This book will help you in these areas:

- Receive and know God’s love personally
- Understand the variety of ways God’s love is mediated
- Know the personal nature of God’s love
- Learn about the role of suffering and God’s goodness
- Get a new perception and perspective leading to Passion
- Allow God’s love to make you more loving

Because we are loved we can come to a whole new healthy appreciation of self. Through God’s love we can embrace who we are as fully human. There is no need to reject yourself because of your flaws and scars. Rather, in God’s love we realize we are his masterpiece and very good. Because we are loved we can grow and *Live with Passion!*

***YOU ARE LOVED!***



**As the Father has loved me,  
so I love you. (Jn. 15:9)**



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# Prologue



When was the last time you felt God's love? Some have experienced an intense touch from God in their past, and they want more of this sensation. The primary reason people participate in retreats, missions, read the Bible, and books like this is because they want to know God's love. We all want tangible experiences of the love of God.

Sensing and experiencing God's love is something the writer of Ephesians prayed for when he wrote, "That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and *to know the love of Christ* which surpasses all knowledge..." (Eph. 3:17-19)

Comprehending and grasping the love from God is a reality we all seek. The fact that God loves us is at the heart of the Gospels and the Bible as a whole. God's love is warm and affectionate. His love endures and lasts forever. The breadth and scope of God's love is such that God loves us as a parent, a friend and a lover at one and the same time. It is up to us to receive and appreciate the height and length of this love at various times of our life.

This book is designed to help you become *aware* of the fervent love God has for you personally. God's love can come through a direct intense revelation. Most times God's love is mediated through creation, the cross, people, books, poetry, the arts, sermons, sacraments, and an infinite variety of other ways. An experience of God's love can come through a dramatic rush of grace that can be life changing. On a day-to-day basis, it is more a matter of perception and paying attention to what is already present. God comes to us in the ordinary.

Once a student approached his spiritual master and asked, "What can I do to know God's love?" The master countered,

“What can you do to make the sun rise?” Exasperated, the student queried, “Then why do you teach us anything at all?” To which came the reply, “So you will be awake when the sun rises.”

Here are some words I want you to focus on: Awareness. Appreciation. Attention. Perception. Alert. These are key words in our endeavor to know God’s love. When someone calls us on the phone, the notification sound (ringing) is an alert. Similarly, we need to become alert to the notifications of God’s love all around us. We are constantly loved and we must do our part in receiving this love of God.

Think for a moment about the process of your waking up each morning. Each night we sleep, dream, and shut out all of our conscious perceptions. Then, when the time is right and the body and mind are fully rested, we begin the process of waking up. First your eyes open and you begin to notice light. You may hear the din of traffic in a distance, a bird chirping, or a plane flying overhead. You begin to become aware of yourself and you begin to ponder thoughts. If your automatic coffee maker is working, you begin to smell the aroma of coffee. Perhaps you become aware of your stomach growling or the aches and pains of yesterday begin to return. You may feel cold or warm. You begin to start thinking. Like the sun that rises ever so slowly, your awareness of your surroundings begins to heighten.

Eventually you get up and after going to the bathroom and splashing water on your face you awaken even more. Hopefully you turn to God in prayer early in this process. We then start to get caught up on the emails, Internet and television. Soon after eating breakfast and, for some, drinking coffee, the waking-up process is accelerated. Waking up is a process of going from non-awareness to participating fully in life. Similarly, when it comes to God’s love, we must become aware and awaken because “the Sun has risen.”



There is a song we sing sometimes during Mass at communion. It is called “Look Beyond.” The point of the song is to see more than bread and wine when you receive these elements during communion. Rather, see God’s love poured out for you in sacrifice. Perceive the very Lord himself in the guise of bread and wine. This song is apropos for the posture we must have toward life itself. Look beyond what you see and hear and feel on the surface. Look deeper and you will see more. When it comes to life, there is more than meets the eye.

You can’t see air, but I assure you, you wouldn’t be reading these words if there were no air. You can’t see gravity, but if there were none, you would be flung from your chair. You can’t feel the earth spinning at over 1000 mph, but we know that it is. Similarly, you may not perceive God’s love right now, but I assure you, God’s love is blanketing you at this very moment.

During the Pandemic of 2020-24 it may be even more difficult for you to perceive God’s love. Perhaps you or someone you know came down with the virus. Perhaps you went through weeks of sickness with the aftereffects. You may have even have lost someone to death because of CoVid-19. As of this revision there have been over 1.5 million deaths in the U.S. alone.

When you are going through trials or storms of every sort, that is when, in naked faith, “we believe in the love God has for us.” (1 Jn. 4:16) In various forms, we have all had experiences of God’s love in our past. God doesn’t love us one day, and then not love us the next. God’s love endures...forever. (Ps. 136) At times, even though we don’t feel it or sense the consolation of God’s love, we simply must believe. As Jesus taught, “Blessed are you who believe without seeing.” (Jn. 20:29) Eventually desolation will turn to consolation. We will have some feelings of the love of God. There are many “seasons” in the spiritual

life. We experience ups and downs. Another way to put it is the discipleship journey is like a symphony. Within the symphony there are “movements.” There are lows and highs, slow and quickening paces. Throughout sonata form, allegro, rondo, as well as crescendos and climaxes occur. We can’t always predict what will come, but we can pay attention and receive.

Whenever I preach about the love of God I see people’s eyes glazed over. They know but don’t feel it. I want them to experience the feeling of God’s love as I am preaching, but most times I sense they are just hearing words. For a variety of reasons, most don’t “feel” God’s love but all of us can become more aware of this constant truth. Like gravity, God’s love is always present. We just need to be more aware of what is happening when apples fall from the tree. We are immersed in God’s love for “In God we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28)

God’s love isn’t something we need to “conjure up.” You can’t conjure up a reality that is already present. Rather, as children of God, our joy is to appreciate and become aware of what already is.

God’s love is an ever-present reality we can know and tap into. God’s love for you and me is life changing. There is an endless flow of grace. Because we are loved, we can live with new meaning, purpose, and passion. God’s love gives us a whole new way of seeing ourselves and becoming. Because of God’s love, life becomes thrilling instead of bland. Since God loves us, we can become over-comers and more than conquerors!

God’s love has radically influenced and changed my life. Besides giving me a rebirth spiritually, I’ve come to a whole new sense of self-worth. One of the great plagues of our age and culture is self-deprecation. Most of my life, I have suffered

from an inner perception of inadequacy, low self-esteem and fear. Because of these psychological misconceptions, I lived with an ingrained self-rejection. God's love has revolutionized me! Because I am loved by God intimately and unconditionally, I've been able to accept myself even though I'm not the best preacher, writer or person. While I strive for excellence, I have embraced my humanity. Through God's love I have become courageous and passionate. Since there are no limits to God's immeasurable love, I live believing "All things are possible." I am a person of great dignity, created in God's image and loved. I attribute all of my inner growth and worldly "successes" to the fact that I am loved. God's love compels us to lead significant, meaningful lives.

I have a habit of re-reading my books every once in a while. As of 2025, I have written 25 books and I am continually updating them and revising them. When I reread this book, I was touched. Reading this book put me in touch with God's intimate love once again. As a result, I stressed God's love more in my sermons. Awareness of God's love brought me to prayer and thanksgiving to God.

My prayer is that this book will put you in touch with the wonderful truth and reality already present in your life. You are Loved! Because of this fact, you can have inner assurance and consolation. In addition, your life can be revolutionized and progressively different. My TV programs reach into prisons. I hope to go there in the future in person and preach. I will have a core message: *You are Loved!*





# ***Chapter 1***

## ***You Are Loved!***



My late parents were both born in 1924. They lived through the roaring 20s and 30s, the Great Depression, as well as World War II. Their parents were immigrants and settled in Massachusetts. My mother's ethnicity is Czech and Albanian. My dad's parents came from the Abruzzi region of Italy. Tom Brokaw called this the "greatest generation." They endured tough times and weathered the storms like champions.

I was born the third of three children. I have two older sisters. We were always cared for and given everything we needed. My dad worked as a carpenter and my mother was a stay-at-home Mom until I went to college. Then she worked as a bookkeeper for a diocesan chancery office. I never once questioned their love for my sisters or me. My dad was generous, gracious, and never abusive. He was a true gentleman. My mother was nurturing, faithful, and raised us with great care.

The interesting reality (and I hear this from many baby boomers about their parents) is that they seldom said, "I love you." It could be because of the way their parents raised them and the tough times they had to endure. As I said, their parents were immigrants and they struggled to make ends meet. They had to adapt and settle in a new and difficult environment and find work. My parents themselves had to go through many difficulties. My father served in the navy in World War II and was honorably discharged as a disabled veteran, having been wounded in the war. It seems many of the "greatest generation" showed love but didn't easily say the words "I love you," for whatever reason.

We are all products of our upbringing, for better or for worse. Some had great parents. Others are orphans and were raised in group settings or in a foster home. We didn't

get to pick our parents. There may be some of you reading this who were abandoned by your parents. Perhaps you were abused sexually or told you were not “as good as your brother or sister.” Words and actions done to us by significant others can build up or tear a person down. The modern day family is under attack. Many people who end up in prison come from single-parent homes and lack either a mother or father figure. I love what Psalm 27:10 says, “Even if my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will hold me close.” No matter the upbringing, the presence of God is the one constant.

Because I didn’t hear it growing up, I had trouble saying “I love you” to my parents. I didn’t have a problem articulating my love to my girlfriends, but toward my parents, voicing love was a different story. My dad was my best friend, but putting into words how much we loved each other was not a part of our vocabulary. I remember one time when I was talking to my mother on the phone. I was going through a distressing situation in my life. I risked being vulnerable and said, “I love you.” There was a pause. Then she said, “Me too.” Not exactly the words I was looking for, but I knew what she meant. It was probably the same thing for her with her mother. Most of the “greatest generation” were that way. They showed love but weren’t comfortable voicing it. As I said, I never questioned their love for me. Their care and deeds on my behalf were too numerous to count. There has never been any doubt in my mind about their devotion toward my sisters or me. However, I do wish we were more like some families who were comfortable saying, “I love you.”

Could it be that way with God’s love for us? We all “know” that we are loved, but we want to hear it, feel it, and experience it! I pray this book will help you experience how intensely you are loved.

I remember a girlfriend I once had. We would often say “I love you” to each other. However, those words were mostly

because of her initiative. I noticed that more often than not, when she said “I love you,” the words were said in such a way that she was expecting reciprocation. She was so insecure and needy that more than sharing her love with me, she wanted to hear that I loved her! I began to pick up on her co-dependence, and sometimes I wouldn’t respond. Exasperated, she would then say, “Don’t you love me?”

We can be like that with God’s love. We are so needy and even desperate to “feel” the love of God. If we don’t have some warm, fuzzy feeling, we begin to wonder what is wrong. If we go through some tribulation or hardship, we wonder if God is really as accessible as we had imagined. We live in an unpredictable, even dangerous world. Depending on our feelings and circumstances, we can be like the man who was in love with a woman and worried about her love for him. He picked a daisy and began to pull the petals off one at a time. As he did, he said, “She loves me. She loves me not. She loves me. She loves me not.”

We must go beyond feelings, circumstances, and even words to what we *know* about God’s love. Feelings are fickle. Circumstances are up and down. We can’t depend on hearing words. We must rely on truth. In my parents’ case, I knew they loved me because they treated me with dignity, cared for me, worried about me, and provided for my every need. They were friendly, communicative, and supportive. Their deeds spoke louder than any words ever could. That is why St. Francis is quoted as saying, “Preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words.”

God’s deeds for you and me are present everywhere. Here are the facts. The Scriptures are clear in stating: God loved you before the world began and gave you life. You didn’t just happen to be born. God *intentionally* gave you life in your mother’s womb. God created you in his own image with intelligence, emotion and free will. God has provided

for you, sustained you, and protected you throughout your life. God has graced you and given you a measure of faith and experiences of his love at various times. You have been forgiven, redeemed, and saved by his grace. God has a glorious eternal future for your life. When you finally die, God has promised eternity with him in heaven. Even though you may not feel the affection at this moment, realize this: You are loved!

## God is Love

I was at a pro golf tournament in Hartford, Connecticut years ago. In the midst of the large crowd around a putting green, I saw a man with rainbow-colored hair holding a sign in front of one of the CBS cameras. Perhaps you've seen him at a sporting event or on TV. The sign he held said, "John 3:16." Of course that Bible quote is the famous verse, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes would not perish but have eternal life." Thinking of that gesture, I began one of my television programs holding up a sign, "1 John 4:16." While you won't see someone at a ballgame holding up that verse because it is not that well known, the verse speaks volumes. 1 John 4:16 is, "God is love."

Love isn't something God does. Love isn't just an attribute or quality of God's character, *Love is who God is*. God is selfless, giving, caring, sacrificial, affectionate, and passionate in his love. The whole reason creation was brought into existence is because God loves. God's love breathed you and me into being. God's love is creative and the first cause of everything seen and unseen.

In 2005, our late Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI wrote his first encyclical and titled it "*Deus Caritas Est*", *God is Love*. In his introduction, our former Pope wrote,



In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred or violence, this message is timely and significant. For this reason, I wish in my first encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes upon us.

*(Introduction: Deus Caritas Est)*

As he proceeded in the encyclical, Pope Benedict referred to God by using several Greek words for love. Three of them are eros, agape, and philia. He discussed the meaning of eros love as a type of romantic and even selfish love. He also explained philia as being a friendship type of love taught by Jesus in the Gospel of John. He devoted a lot of time describing God in terms of agape love.

## **Agape Love**

God's love for us is agape because it comes to us in a completely gratuitous manner. The entire world and all life were initiated by God's gracious will. We do not merit this love. This love is given to us freely as a gift. Also, God's love is a love that forgives. (#10) Pope Benedict made it clear that God's love is revealed most clearly in the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus. Meditating on Jesus, his search for the lost and especially his death on the cross is "the starting point for this encyclical 'God is love.'" It is at the cross that our definition of love must begin." (#12) Also, the Holy Father spends some time talking about God's love revealed in Jesus' total self-giving at the Last Supper and realized in the Eucharist. (#13)

I studied in Jerusalem and visited the Cenacle. The Cenacle is the upper room where Jesus celebrated his Last Supper with his disciples. Actually, the Cenacle a pilgrim can now visit isn't from the time of Jesus, but from the Crusader

period. At his Last Supper, Jesus anticipated his death on the cross and gave us his body and blood in bread and wine. We celebrate this self-emptying and sacrificial giving at every Mass. When I visited the Cenacle, I noticed there were a number of upward rising pillars or columns. I looked closely at one of the pillars and saw something interesting. In the southwest corner, carved into the capital at the top of the column are two young pelicans and their mother. I have also seen this same carving on some altars in various churches in the U.S. Now why would an architect from the Crusader period carve these birds into one of the pillars? Tradition has it that the mother pelican will actually wound herself in her breast and feed her young with her blood. This carving symbolizes Jesus' wounds and sacrifice for us at the Last Supper and on the cross in order to become our food.

## Eros Love

When I was twenty years old, I had two near-death experiences. I wrote a book called *Death: The Final Surrender* about what happens when we die. In these near-death experiences, I went where we will all go at the moment of our death. I had a powerful audience with God. When I encountered God, I experienced light and rapturous glory. God is clothed in power. More than anything else though, I was penetrated by love. I would like to highlight the word "eros" here. God's love was overflowing and intense. The question isn't, "Am I loved?" Trust me, you are. Rather, the question is, "Do I perceive God's love for me personally?" Most of us are vaguely aware of God's love but somewhat jaded. We are saved and reborn in this love. God's love is ever present and surrounds us all the time. (Ps. 125.2)

Paul wrote that not even death can separate us from the love of God. (Ro. 8:38-39) Not only will death not separate us, but death will unite us to the love of God!

I had an interesting thought when I was in God's immediate presence during the near-death experiences. I remember thinking, "This love is so intense, it is scary." I've often reflected upon my memory of God's love during the years after these experiences. God's love for us is desperate. Like a frantic mother in search of her lost baby, God loves us. Like a lover obsessed with her beloved, God is consumed with you and I. Jesus told parables about the shepherd looking for his sheep, the woman who lost her coin, and the man who lost his son. All are desperate to find what is lost.

Upon reflection, I have reasoned that God seems needy as well as vulnerable in his love for us. I remember dating a girl when I was a college freshman. We loved each other and were very close. Although she was intelligent and had a lot going for her, I felt that she "loved me too much." She was so attached to me and clingy. I wasn't ready for that yet. I eventually backed off. Even though I initiated the break up, I was still connected to her. I had loved her, and love ties are not easily broken. For a long while, there was intense pain in my soul. I needed time to grieve our lost relationship. As the song states, "Sometimes you don't know what you've lost until it's gone." Imagine the pain and regret of those who spurn God's love now. God is abundantly available to us now, but the time will come when it will be too late. The painful regret of losing God's love is what we term in classic theology as "hell."

My experience of God's love was so overwhelming that it reminded me of the woman "loving me too much." James 4:5 says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit he had made to dwell in us." God longs and thirsts for union with us. Most people long to experience God's love. What I would say is that God's love for each person is "too much!" Even though you may not feel it, this love has been "proven" in that while we were yet sinners, Christ sacrificially died for us. (Rom. 5:8)

God's love has an indefatigable desire for us. Like lovers who express their craving for each other, God actually "needs" us.

I meet many people in my ministry who are struggling with self-acceptance and self-doubt. Many are insecure. I understand this because I've struggled with self rejection. What has helped me accept my humanness more than anything else was believing in God's love for me. Since I am loved and accepted by God himself, I know that deep down, I am lovable and good. Trust in God's love for you. You will accept yourself as human and know that you are good.

I'm fond of quoting the French Philosopher Descartes: "I think, therefore I am." This great statement of philosophy has a basic flaw. It is too egocentric. We first existed in the mind of God before we ever came to be. This great truth is, "I am loved; therefore I am." You will never truly "be" until you grasp God's profound love for you personally.

## Philia Love

Pope Benedict also brought up the Greek word *philia* for the way God loves. We are familiar with this word because we have a city named Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. Basically, this word refers to friendship. We read in the Old Testament, "Abraham was a friend of God." (Is. 41:8) St. Thomas Aquinas understood charity as friendship with God. He taught, "There is nothing on earth more to be prized than true friendship."

A friend is someone you have companionship with, share life with, and confide in. Now friendships can be developed through phones, emails, and Facebook. But nothing bonds a person to another more than personal contact. One of the longest running sitcoms was a show simply called *Friends*. The show was about six friends who lived with and near each other, supported each other, and simply shared laughs and life together. After airing for some ten years, the finale was

viewed by over fifty one million people. The episodes are still rerun everyday across the country. The show's popularity has to do with a theme we all can relate to: friends.

The Bible teaches, "Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter." (Sir. 6:14) I remember the Beatles' lyric, "I get by with a little help from my friends." Friends are more than acquaintances. They are people we become intimate with, confide in, and who support us. They are people you feel comfortable being around. Friends are our companions as we go through the ups and downs of life. Elbert Hubbard said, "A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you." Proverbs 18:24 says, "There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." True friends are faithful and become family.

It is such a joy to be with friends and share life experiences. Because of their acquaintance, life takes on a new dimension. Friends help us solve the world's problems. In some ways, we know ourselves and learn about our capacity to love and be trusted through our friend relationships. The philosopher Aristotle taught about friendship in his Nicomachean ethics. He taught that we cannot be truly happy without friends. Also, friends help us acquire the virtues necessary to be truly human.

While I've had a number of male and female friends, I still think one of the best friends I ever had was my dad. We would talk about everything. I knew I could trust him. We had wonderful memories together. We went on vacations as a family. I used to work with him. I'll never forget the 1975 World Series game 6 we attended at Fenway Park in Boston. Dad used to support me by traveling to my missions even when the mission was hundreds of miles away. He would also help me sell my resources. I loved the fact that he would confide in me. We had a great relationship. I was devastated to lose him to death in October 2000. But now I have a friend in heaven who intercedes for me.

Jesus said, “I no longer call you servants because the servant doesn’t know what his master is doing, but I call you *friends*.” (Jn. 15:15) The discipleship journey is meant to be a friendship. Jesus wants intimacy and trust and desires to share his life with us. As we grow in our relationship with Jesus, he confides in us, “for all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you.” At the time of this writing, evangelist Billy Graham celebrated his ninety-fifth birthday. During an interview he said, “My favorite song, as it was for President Eisenhower, is ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus.’”

When I studied in the seminary, we had a moral theology professor who wrote the book *Friendship and the Moral Life*. He taught that a new model of the moral life was needed, one that revolves around friendship. Instead of seeing people as a threat, we need to see them as friends. Virtues such as faithfulness, trust, and love can develop as we journey in our friendship. We come to know ourselves morally depending on how faithfully we behave in our friendships.

## **To Err is Human, to Forgive...**

One of the highest virtues we need to develop is forgiveness. Any friendship, no matter how close, will have times when forgiveness is needed. Great friendships can develop in marriages when people find their “soul mates.” Forgiveness is a necessary virtue especially in marriages. Jesus taught that we ought to forgive “seventy times seven times.” This is especially true when you live with someone. Jesus meant that forgiveness must be exercised over and over again with the same person. This doesn’t mean allowing abuse by the person and letting them walk all over you. However, it does mean letting things go and giving the other the benefit of the doubt.

A wonderful aspect of God’s love, that we sorely need, is forgiveness. “In Jesus and through his blood, we have been redeemed, and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is

God's favor to us." (Eph. 1:7-8) God's love is "immeasurable" because no matter the quantity, scope, or depth of our sins, God still offers us forgiveness. There are no boundaries to God's love. Like the universe itself, which scientists tell us is still expanding, God's love has no limits.

One of the most powerful stories in the Old Testament was about the prophet Hosea. God told Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer. After he took the prostitute in, Gomer proved unfaithful to Hosea. Then God told Hosea to take her back again even though she was living in immorality! The Lord said to Hosea, "Go and love the adulterous woman, even as the Lord loves the people of Israel though they turn to other gods." (Hos. 3:1) Even though we've been redeemed, brought back, and saved, we still sin and flippantly disregard God's love. Even when we commit adultery with the world, God forgives and accepts us back.

I worship God because God created me. I marvel at creation and the expanse of God's design. I see the stupendous workings of God all around me. I am thankful for God's favor. But, more than anything else, I adore God because of the depth and extent of his merciful forgiveness that is offered to me over and over again at the cross. We revere God for his immeasurable love. Even though I can at times forget and neglect the depths of God's love shown in the passion, time and time again I am forgiven. No matter the sin or the wrong we have committed, God loves us so much that he forgives us. I want this great hymn sung at my funeral: *How Great Thou Art*. "And when I think of God, His Son not sparing; Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in; That on the cross my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin."

I know God has me over a barrel. When irritating people annoy me over and over again, I keep thinking, "Won't they ever change?" In my arrogance, I think, "I have no desire to forgive them." Then I remember the depths of God's forgiveness for



me. I am so in need of mercy. Remembering God's goodness toward me, I am at least able to try to forgive. Forgiveness is a key ingredient in accepting God's love. As we forgive others, it opens the door for us to fully receive God's mercy.

One of the facets of the gem of divine charity is friendship. God doesn't simply want to be an acquaintance. God wants to be our friend. Abraham was a friend of God. Jesus calls us friends. God is our sturdy shelter and sure support. God confides in us and shares his life with us. God forgives us even though we sin time and time again. Friendship is a challenge because it demands reciprocation. God is willing to be friends with us. However, our investment in God is still to be decided. The kind of friend we are willing to be toward God is shown each day in our moment-to-moment decisions and behaviors.

## Intimacy Issues

What kind of friend are you? Have you proven yourself trustworthy in present and past relationships? Are you aware of past hurts and working through them?

There are many who struggle with intimacy in relationships. Some have been abused or rejected in the past which colors their present and future relationships. Others can't cope with the demands of time and energy a relationship involves. Some aren't in touch with their own emotions and it is too painful to explore them with another. Some are guarded and fear rejection or betrayal. There are a variety of reasons why people will only go so far in a relationship.

I remember one time when we had a faith sharing session in our community. The eight of us gathered and shared. When it came my time to speak, I laid my heart out on the table. I said some very vulnerable things and was very transparent. I felt like I had opened the door for some group intimacy and deep sharing to occur. Much to my consternation, the



conversation went another way. People who shared after me didn't follow my cue and the conversation stayed very superficial. I risked feeling naked before the group in the hope that our small community would become more intimate. For whatever reason, the deeper bonding didn't occur. Was it because others were afraid to share? Perhaps they weren't in touch with their feelings? Could it be that they were afraid of a deeper intimacy?

We tend to take the way we behave toward others into our relationship with God. Many construct walls that won't let them look within. These walls are built for self-protection and self-preservation. People don't want to deal with the pain and inner blemishes. Others are guarded because they don't want to be rejected, betrayed, or hurt. They haven't learned to trust. Are you holding God at arm's length for some reason? Are you afraid of what God may ask of you? Are you ashamed of your past? God's love for you is intense and personal, yet we can be the one thwarting the progression of the relationship. Try to examine how you have previously interacted with others. This can be a predictor of how you relate to God now.

One of the reasons I would keep relationships from entering into greater depth was because I was burdened with the demands of the relationship. This could take the form of my not wanting to spend as much time as the other investing in the relationship. For example, in community life, there are those who just want to sit around and talk and fellowship all the time. They want long meals, faith sharing, and several community night get-togethers. I find this difficult. I always have something I have to or want to do. I am a very "goal-oriented" person. While this leads to a lot of accomplishments on my part, it also leads to less depth in some relationships. When it comes to God, we must be careful not to do ministry for God and thereby sacrifice our relationship with God.

A new reality occurs when people get married. The two become one. Your self-image becomes a “couple” image. You might even refer to your spouse as your “better half.” When one dies, often the mourning process is devastating as people complain that “a part of me is now missing.” When you marry, you surrender your independent self to another. There is a give and take involved and a merging of selves. When one is not willing to give as much as the other, conflict can occur. One may be more giving of time and energy or willing to share emotions than the other. This discrepancy can lead to a loss of intimacy.

Similarly, in the spiritual life, God invites us to intimacy. There are demands of time and energy. You can be as close to God as you want to be, but familiarity demands generosity. We can be so selfish with our time, not willing to invest in prayer. Praying to God isn’t always satisfying, but relationships aren’t all about getting but giving. Cathy Dennis sings a song about relationships titled “Too Many Walls.” The inner walls we build can come between us and our beloved. We must be willing to tear down whatever walls we have constructed and lay vulnerable before God. Tearing down walls means first facing the reality about what lies within. No one likes the pain of looking at flaws. Often we keep our inner walls of self-reliance because we are afraid of becoming a new person. We don’t know what God will do in us. Surrendering to God takes rigorous honesty, humility, and bravery. We must trust that God will never hurt us but will gently accept us where we are and move us forward as we are able. What is one wall of self-protection you have that keeps God out?

When I dated, I feared letting each woman know who I really was for fear she would reject me. I shared a lot, but always tried to keep some mystery. I feared rejection due to feelings of inferiority and insecurities that I had deep within. I put up walls of self-protection in these relationships lest

I be rejected and devastated. God already knows us through and through. God's love for me is so safe that I am in the process of tearing down these walls of self-protection and allow myself to be human. Because of God's love for me, I am able to share so vulnerably.

The opposite of love isn't hate, it is selfishness. Love in a nutshell is selflessness. The journey of our life is to move from selfishness to selflessness. When you become selfless, you are vulnerable to becoming one with your beloved. True oneness occurs in generosity not stinginess. Be courageous enough to risk becoming one with another.

Those who are prideful and have an air of superiority over others will have trouble loving. Often they use people and are in it for themselves. They can marry, not because they love the other in a generous way, but look to the other to meet their needs and make them happy. When the other doesn't measure up, there is much unhappiness and contention.

The spiritual life demands a loss of self. You must give your time and energy and surrender your very being to God. I remember when I had a religious experience at age eighteen when I was filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit. I was possessed by God's love. I was so filled that I couldn't even think my own thoughts. God was in control. While blissful and ecstatic (the word ecstasy means to be "beside yourself"), this experience was very scary for me. I feared the loss of my "self." One of the walls we put up in our relationship with God and others is the wall of self-protection. Even though flawed and imperfect, we are afraid of change. We must trust God enough to let him take control.

In God, we truly find ourselves, but the independent, always-in-control "me" must change. One of the reasons people push God away is because they want God on their

own terms. God wants to possess us, fill us, and transform us. We can fear the loss of who we are and what we will become. Therefore, we want just enough of God to satisfy us but not enough to totally transform our being.

Trust is so crucial in accepting God's love. Trust here means believing that the other won't hurt you and has your best interest in mind. Yes, we will change and be transformed. The unknown is always scary. But, again, you must trust that God's love will never hurt you or betray you. God is faithful in his tender love. God will only do in you what is best for you. God desires intimacy and communion. God's love is very intense and mature. Are you hindering God's love in any way? Will you risk losing yourself in order to find your true self? Do your best to be aware of and remove any walls you have built.

God's love for you is ever present. There are costs and demands to being a friend of God. God is a lover like no other. Grace is always present. How deep you will go with God is up to you. Persevere even when the feelings aren't there.

## **Sacramental Love**

God's love comes through friendship, but there are other ways. When Jesus preached about the Father's love for us, he talked about ordinary events of nature of which we are all familiar. Jesus taught, "God makes his sun rise on the good and the bad, and sends rain on the just as well as the unjust." (Mt. 5:45) What was Jesus saying? God's love is indiscriminate and unconditional. All people are loved by God. If we look a little deeper at this verse, events we usually take for granted, such as feeling the warmth of the sun or the splash of rain upon our face, are actually God loving us. We may not wake up in the morning seeing the words "I love you" etched onto a chalkboard, or hear "I love you" on the radio, but the fact that we woke up speaks volumes!

I believe the world is “sacramental.” A sacrament in the Catholic Church is an outward sign that points to something more. These signs of grace connect us with divine life. For example, simple bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ for us to be nourished. They speak of Jesus’ sacrificial love. Oil and water are signs that point to immersion in God and the anointing of rebirth. The laying on of hands mediates a divine touch. We are sensory people, and God ordinarily comes to us through our senses as well as in our heart.

When I say the world is sacramental, I mean that God will come to us and display his love in the beauty of a pink sunrise and through the jaw-dropping expanse of innumerable stars littering the night sky. It is written, “No voice is heard, yet their words go to the ends of the world.” (Ps. 19:4) Even though we don’t audibly hear “I love you,” we sense it deep within through what we see and experience. Perhaps we may hear a song on the radio or at church that moves us. A stained glass window may heighten our awareness. An inspiring poem may stir us. God and his love can come to us through one verse in the Bible, or through lines in a spiritual book. Well produced television programs, dramatic plays, and creative homilies can open us to God’s love. God comes to us through religious celebrations, spontaneous conversations, as well as the inner voice of our conscience. Gerard Manley Hopkins said, “The whole world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly,” said the Little Prince. “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” While invisible, grace is usually mediated through what is visible and can be touched. I love what John said about Jesus: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, seen, and touched concerning the word of life, we saw it and testify to it...the life was made manifest.” (1 Jn. 1:1,2) God

was revealed to them (and us) through ordinary senses. We can also put it this way: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” (Jn. 1:14)

Artist Georgia O’Keefe said, “I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say any other way, things I had no words for.” This seems to be God’s way of communicating too.

As I grow in faith, my life has become so much more contemplative. I used to just see things and not reflect much upon what I saw. Now I strive to notice what lies beneath the surface and try to listen to life. Life is bursting at the seams with truth and meaning. Jesus was always saying, “You who have ears to hear, listen!” In *Three Days to See*, Helen Keller, who was blind, explains what she would do if she had three days of sight. In this work she wrote,

If I were the president of a university I should establish a compulsory course in “How to Use Your Eyes.” The professor would try to show his pupils how they could add joy to their lives by really seeing what passes unnoticed before them. He would try to awaken their dormant and sluggish faculties.

In life, there is so much to see, to hear, to feel, to touch, and to experience, yet we often miss the deeper meaning. As I wrote in my prologue, at Mass we sing the song “Look Beyond.” The song speaks of looking beyond the simple elements of bread and wine to what lies beneath it: God’s sacrificial love.

You may have heard the statement, “When the student is ready, the teacher will come.” That means we all go through various seasons, sufferings, trials, and tribulations in our life. Each of these is meant to teach us. These are meant to ready

us for future revelations of God's love. Perhaps a person is going on day to day and then something hurtful happens that ruptures a space in their heart allowing them to encounter God. I received this from a friend of mine in Michigan:

I was at my absolute lowest point. My husband was at rock bottom with an alcohol addiction, and I was ready to throw in the towel and just give up on our marriage (and to be honest, in life in general). I went out to the breezeway to get the clothes out of the dryer, and on my way back through the kitchen, I heard the song "You Are Loved" by Josh Groban. I had never heard it before, but it stopped me in my tracks. Tears started flowing as I just stood there with an arm load of laundry listening with my heart to every word. I felt as if God was speaking directly to me through that song. The message? Don't give up. You are loved. I was strengthened enough to keep the faith and press through. To this day, when I hear that song, I feel a spiritual embrace from the Lord.

It is wonderful to know that her marriage is as strong as ever now. This friend felt God's love through a song. God's love is mediated in innumerable ways. Even our sufferings can make us perceptive and ready to hear.

While special moments are wonderful and they do come through a variety of ways, we must realize that we can encounter God and his love in the ordinary. It is human nature to want powerful manifestations, signs, and wonders. They can and may come, but for the most part, we must try to be cognizant of the day-to-day wonders which we are immersed in.

In fact, twice in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus taught it is an "evil and adulterous generation that seeks a sign." (Mt. 12:39, 16:4) It seems to me that in our day and age people are addicted to "excitement." People get the itch to travel, shop, gamble, and watch television in ways that are out of balance. Rene Descartes was a French Philosopher who lived in the 1600s. His great statement became the foundation of Western philosophy. His proposition is, "I think, therefore I am." (Cogito Ergo Sum) He was saying that because we are aware of our thoughts we know for sure that we exist. I believe the philosophy of many today is: "I shop, therefore I am." "I engage in sex, therefore I am." "I earn money, therefore I am." The problem with these thoughts is trying to find your identity in things or accomplishments. There is nothing wrong with achieving, as long as it is kept in perspective. The other problem with this thinking has to do with "enough is never enough."

When we eat, shop, gamble, have sex, drink, and strive to achieve, we build up tolerance levels. For example, when a person first starts to go to the casino and wins, they get a high that actually causes pleasurable endorphins to radiate to the brain. This causes a high and excitement. But the next time, winning still feels good, but not as good. The person needs to win more or risk more to get the same high and thrill. Tolerance is built up quickly. Addictions can be formed quickly because we are pleasure seekers at heart, and we always want more and more of what brings pleasure. We crave excitement, thrills, and pleasure.

## **Less is More**

I found out years ago that things aren't necessarily bad in and of themselves. But when I get out of balance toward things, there can be a problem. Our satisfaction levels are always rising and seemingly unattainable. No matter how much money, achievements, and excitement life offers, enough



is never enough. Even though I've achieved the height of a national television program, I want a better time of airing and other stations.

I've discovered the genius of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as well as my vow toward the passion of Jesus. These vows are liberating, not limiting. In many ways, these chosen vows are the guardians of my soul. I know how easily I can fall into the trap of striving after the excitement of more and more. The genius of the vows is realizing that contentment comes through simplicity. I love what Sheryl Crow sings, "It's not having what you want, its wanting what you've got." There is so much in "mere life," yet we can easily miss it. One of the problems of striving after escalating excitement and thrills is that we can become jaded and dulled to the miracles of the everyday. Ironically, simplicity brings greater contentment, less emptiness, and a deeper appreciation of life. When it comes to life, less can definitely be more!

I say all of this because I want you to know this same principle applies to experiencing God's love. We all want the mountaintop, fire, and earthquake manifest presence! Everyone wants to hear an audible voice. We want the ecstatic, thrilling glory of God's amazing presence. We want to feel God tangibly and powerfully. Occasionally great theophanies do come. However, most of life is lived in the "mundane" and ordinary. A discerning disciple must be perceptive and notice God's love in the day-in and day-out living. As you become adept at discovering and perceiving God's love, you will actually enjoy the simple life.

Brother Lawrence lived in the 1600s and joined a Carmelite monastery in France. He lived a simple life of working in the kitchen and repairing shoes. People were attracted to him because of his peace and profound perception of God in the ordinary. He wrote a book that has become a spiritual

classic: *Practicing the Presence of God*. The thrust of his book is the same as this one. God's presence and love are always present. It is up to us to pay attention and abide in it. He wrote, "I cannot imagine how religious persons can live satisfied without the practice of the presence of God. For my part, I keep myself retired with Him in the depth of center of my soul as much as I can."

Life can become fun as you notice evidence of God loving you in and through things, events, and people. One of the reasons we go on retreat is to slow down enough to discover and perceive God more fully. I love the Scripture, "Be still and know that I am God." (Ps. 46:10) Contemplative prayer is when we empty ourselves of all thoughts and images and pray in silence. One of the fruits of contemplative prayer is a heightened awareness of God's presence and love. This increased awareness may not happen during the prayer itself, but afterward.

I like to tell the story about the fish who was swimming in the ocean. He looked at the fish swimming next to him and asked, "Where is the ocean?" The other fish smirked and said, "The ocean? It's what you are swimming in!" People ask, "Where is God?" God is what we are swimming in. Paul wrote the church at Colossae, "In him (Jesus) all things were created." (Col. 1:16) When God pronounced his name to Moses, God said, "I am." Translated this means, "I am the one who is and causes everything to be."

During his second missionary journey, Paul travelled to Athens, Greece, the center of philosophical thought, and tried evangelizing. I remember when I studied the Scriptures abroad, I went to the Areopagus. This was an outdoor place in Athens where people gathered to share ideas publicly. Paul tried to be astute and talk to them in their own philosophical language. He quoted one of their philosophers, Epimenides, when he stated, "In God, we live and move and have our

being.” (Acts 17:28) What was Paul teaching them? Whether they realized it or not, we exist because of God’s will and we exist in God. Paul was trying to help them discover the God they couldn’t find through reasoning alone. I was taught that philosophy is the handmaid of theology. I studied many courses in philosophy as a prerequisite for the seminary. While I was fascinated with the scope and depth of thought I studied, I found myself frustrated because such thinking went only so far. While St. Thomas Aquinas demonstrated the five proofs for the existence of God through reason alone (*Summa Theologica*), more is needed than intellect to encounter God. Philosophy without faith falls short.

In God, we live and move and have our being whether we know it or not. We are literally swimming in God. Psalm 139:7 asks, “Where can I flee from your presence?” The Psalm tells us God is everywhere. God is transcendent, yes, yet imminent. We don’t exist because we think. Cognition as a criterion for existence is too subjective. We are not independent beings. Rather, we exist because we are in the mind of God! I’d like to change the foundational statement of western philosophy from “I think, therefore I am” to “*I am loved*, therefore I am.” The corollary to this is “I love, therefore I am.” It isn’t cognition that proves our existence but awareness of God’s love for us. We don’t really live until we find and accept God’s love for us personally. We are not fully alive until we love others.

My job as a writer, preacher, and TV producer isn’t to bring God to you; God is already present in your life. My goal is to use story, humor, personal experiences, and Gospel truth to *heighten your awareness* of God’s love that is already in your life. In a way, good teaching rips the curtain of the ordinary so the sacred can be experienced. The word “revelation” means to “pull back the curtain.” In my teachings, I try to help everyone see that they are mystics. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said,

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” This is a profound truth. Get quiet and realize your true nature.

## **The Importance of Memory**

God’s love is revealed in the people, events, and circumstances surrounding us. This is sacramental love. Memory is another way we can come to a new consciousness of God’s love. Each day I chant and pray the Liturgy of the Hours in common or on my own. This prayer form is composed of Psalms, intercessions, readings, and songs of praise. The Psalms and readings extol God for his works in the past just about each day. For example, today I prayed “My strength and my courage is the Lord...At the breath of your anger the waters piled up...In your mercy you led the people you redeemed...” (Ex. 15) These verses from the book of Exodus call to mind how God split the Red Sea, destroyed the Egyptian army, and brought Israel to safety. Some Psalms exalt God for his power in creation. Psalm 136 talks about God’s marvelous works in creation and how God brought Israel out of Egypt and defeated the kings of Palestine. Every time one of God’s deeds is recalled, the verse “for God’s love endures forever” is repeated.

This is exactly what we are doing when we celebrate Mass or Eucharist. Mass is the “dynamic remembrance” of God’s redeeming act in Jesus’ death and resurrection. We gather to sing, pray, praise, and remember. One song sung at Mass is, “We remember how you loved us to your death...” Mass isn’t only a remembering of past events that God has done; the celebration is a “dynamic” remembering. The theological word for this is “anamnesis.” This is memory so strong that it brings the powerful acts of God right into the present. Mass is a re-presentation of the salvific efficacy of the cross of Jesus. We need to remember, because sometimes we simply forget and lose touch with the efficacy of God’s acts. I savor this

Bible verse, “God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Ro. 5:8) God’s victories in the past become our victories in the present.

St. Paul of the Cross, the founder of the Passionists, said, “The cross of Jesus is the most overwhelming work of God’s love.” He taught us to meditate on the passion of Jesus. Contemplation of the sufferings of Jesus is not meant to be morose, but to invigorate us with a sense of God’s extreme care for us. When we remember, we are put in touch with God’s immeasurable love. We are given power in our struggle against sin. When we remember, we can imitate Jesus’ virtues more easily and progress in holiness. Hebrews 12:3 exhorts, “Consider Jesus who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” Memory brings greater clarity as well as endurance. While negative memories can bring fear, positive memories mediate courage. When we remember, we realize yet again that we are saved by grace and not our good works. When we remember, we give thanks and praise that God’s love is so accessible. You may not “feel” God’s love, but you can see his love by looking at a cross.

Twice in Matthew Jesus taught, “An evil and adulterous generation looks for a sign. The only sign given would be the ‘sign of Jonah.’”(Mt. 12:39; 16:4) In these passages, Jesus was referring to his death on the cross and his resurrection. Often a person will refer to what I wear on my heart as my “badge.” Actually, we Passionists call this emblem on our habit our “sign.” Jesus performed seven signs in the Gospel of John. His signs were miracles such as turning water into wine, or the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, or raising Lazarus from the dead. His final and ultimate sign was his death on the cross. When he was “lifted up,” he would draw all to himself. (Jn. 12:33) Signs on a road usually inform us and point to something else. The sign of the cross points

to God's love for us personally. Jesus' death on the cross proclaims, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes would not perish but have eternal life." (Jn. 3:16)

The cross is the crux of Christianity. The cross captivates, captures, and draws us into the story. Scholars tell us that the passion narratives were the first part of the Gospel to be written and everything else in the Gospels was but a long introduction. During Holy Week, the dramatic passion narratives are read out loud by many different people who take various roles. Even the congregation takes part, usually by responding as the crowd in the story. This is poignant because Jesus' passion is a story that invites all to participate. No matter where we are or what generation we belong to, we become part of the redemption story.

Looking at a cross or reading the passion story speaks to us. St. Francis of Assisi was praying before a crucifix and heard Jesus tell him to "Go repair my church." The cross spoke to St. Francis and it will speak to you and me if we give it a chance. The reason the crucifix hangs above just about every sanctuary and adorns most steeples is so we will reflect on its meaning. When we look at Jesus crucified, or read the passion narrative, or see a movie about the life of Christ, what does it say? Its message is unmistakably clear. "I love you." "I suffered for you personally." "Your sins are forgiven." Unfortunately, some see a cross and feel even more guilty and condemned. But remember, God didn't send his son into the world to *condemn* the world but to save it! (Jn. 3:17)

If you look closely at our sign, you will see a heart with a cross on the top. At the bottom of the heart are three nails. Inside the heart are these words: *Jesu XPI Passio*. These words mean the Passion of Jesus Christ. The words are in the three languages of the cross: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. If you remember, above the cross of Jesus were the words

“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” (INRI) These words were also in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin so all passersby would know the charge against Jesus.

Memory is so very important in the spirituality of the Passionists as well as in the Catholic Church in general. Memory was crucial in Jewish lore also. Every year, the Jewish people gather to celebrate Passover. The youngest at the table will ask the oldest, “Why is this night different from all others?” The answer, of course, is remembering how God liberated their ancestors from slavery by many portents. Recalling what God did isn’t simply memory of the past. The Passover is a dynamic memory. The Jews believe God’s liberating deeds continue in the present moment. The memory of the Passover continues right into “this night.”

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes about the importance of memory.

Nor should we see the newness of this mission as entailing a kind of displacement or forgetfulness of the living history which surrounds us and carries us forward. Memory is a dimension of our faith which we might call “deuteronomic,” not unlike the memory of Israel itself. Jesus leaves us the Eucharist as the Church’s daily remembrance of, and deeper sharing in, the event of his Passover (cf. Lk 22:19). The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts: “It was about four o’clock in the afternoon” (Jn 1:39). Together with Jesus, this remembrance makes present to us “a great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1), some of whom, as believers, we recall with great



joy: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God” (Heb 13:7). Some of them were ordinary people who were close to us and introduced us to the life of faith: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice” (2 Tim 1:5). The believer is essentially “one who remembers”. (#13)

Psalm 103:2 reminds us, “Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” Memory brings God’s powerful deeds right into the present.

This rings true when a couple celebrates their anniversary. They gift each other with flowers or chocolate and often go out to dinner, or perhaps enjoy a cruise. During this time, they “remember” meeting, dating, and other highlights from their past. As they speak about these times and remember these past events, love is rekindled and new memories are made.

The ability to remember is so very important. Even before the day we go to school, we are quizzed on what we can remember. It was thought that the more you can remember the higher your I.Q. Now we know that more goes into a person’s I.Q. than memory. Studies have shown that while a person may not be good at mathematics or memorizing, they may have aptitudes for creating, artistry, music, engineering, or other disciplines. Beethoven was a genius in composing and playing music. Michelangelo was a prodigy when it came to frescos and sculpting. When it comes to measuring a person’s intelligence, we have to widen the circle beyond traditional understanding.

Sometimes I’ll be listening to music and hear an “oldie.” It is amazing how a song will trigger a flash of memory from high school, or the beach, or some friend I was with “way back when.” There have been times when I’ve been able to identify exactly the year the song was released because



of memories that were triggered when I heard the song. My dad was a carpenter. I used to work with him as a teenager. Even today, whenever I smell sawn wood, he vividly comes to my mind.

What are fears but negative memories? Perhaps you had a traumatic experience some time in the past. Now you avoid anything that resembles this event because you are afraid of the feelings or sufferings you might have to endure again. Fear can actually produce bodily responses such as shaking, loss of saliva, and adrenaline flow resulting in “fight or flight” symptoms. For more about fear, please read my free booklet “Face Your Fears” at [www.frcedric.org](http://www.frcedric.org). Just as a negative memory may evoke fear and bodily responses, so a positive memory can evoke faith and a “can do” attitude. When David faced the giant Goliath, he encouraged himself by remembering his past victories with the bear and the lion. This is something I do when I am faced with large crowds at a mission. I remember past victories.

At the time of this writing, star quarterback Brett Favre has been in the news. He suffered many concussions in his days as quarterback with the Green Bay Packers and Minnesota Vikings. Now, even though he is only forty-four years old, he is having trouble remembering simple things like his daughter’s name. The same thing is happening to running back Tony Dorsett and other alumni of the NFL. Older folks also have to deal with memory loss. Often I find myself struggling to remember someone’s name. All you have to do is turn on the television, and infomercials abound about natural supplements to help you augment your memory. Since so many are struggling with memory loss, chances are they will buy these products.

I participate in my own private retreat at Big Sur, California each June. The Camaldolese monks are an offshoot of the Benedictines. They have a monastery and retreat center

some 1300 feet above the Pacific just off Highway 1 south of Big Sur. I usually spend a week in solitude reading, praying, and contemplating. This past June, my retreat was blessed with many graces. I often have a highlight during my retreat. One year it was having John Michael Talbot give us a private concert. Another year God spoke to me about Sabbath rest and peace when I saw whales playing and exhaling. Another year, I was reminded about God's providential provision for me personally when I saw a flock of quail feeding. Most recently, the highlight of my retreat was one morning when I started to remember.

## Total Recall

I had just listened to a CD of a talk about God's love. I didn't really feel anything special. We all know God loves us. I stood at the door of the hermitage and looked down at the azure waters of the Pacific Ocean. Suddenly I got the insight to write down some of the ways I've been blessed by God. It required a little work, but I had the time. I began to examine my memories. Here is some of what I wrote:

I see God's love in creation when I take walks, see the ocean, and gaze at the stars at night. I see God's love in people. I have so many supporters and partners. I have friends who help me with the ministry. I thought of a special couple who used to travel with me at their own expense, live in their motor coach, and help me sell my resources. I see God's love when I accomplish and live with passion. When I write books, preach, and produce for television, God is actually doing these things for me. I used to think I was doing all this for God, but then I discovered that I am the one being blessed by God when I minister.

I see God's love when I eat delicious meals (I've never gone hungry.), when I play golf, work out, read good books, travel, and meet so many gracious people. I see God's love when I go to inspiring church services. I've been blessed to go to large conferences where there is top notch music, worship, and preaching. As I continued to write, I got in touch with the facts: God had created me, sustained me, and gave me plenteous good times. He sent his son to die for me, and his plan is that I will one day live forever with him in heaven. All believers have this glorious destiny.

I could go on and on with what I wrote that day, but after I wrote these things and appreciated what God had done for me in the past, I stood up and suddenly, without realizing it, I was in a different realm. I stood by the door again and looked down at the ocean and began to weep. I actually "felt" God's love for me in a powerful way during this gracious moment. In some mysterious way, activating my memories about God's goodness had ushered me right into an experience of God's love in the here and now. I spent the rest of that morning savoring that "touch" from God. My entire retreat revolved around that experience. I will never forget that dynamic remembering.

It was then as I stood there looking out at the ocean and soaking in the unshakable peace I felt that I decided what I wanted written on my tombstone:

I am certain that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ro. 8:38-39)

In Ephesians 3:19, its writer prays that we would “know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge.” This “knowing” is more than head knowledge; it has the meaning of “experiencing” God’s love.

When I preach, my goal is that I want people to experience God’s love. I somehow want to create a mood and atmosphere through which the people can be touched. After I deliver a homily or sermon, I’ll stand in the back of the church and greet the people. Most will shake my hand and say, “Good job,” or “Nice talk.” While that is encouraging, what I want them to say is, “Wow, I experienced God’s love while you spoke!” If I don’t hear that, I’ll go back to my room and feel disappointed. I want everyone to have emotional experiences putting them in touch with God’s passionate love. The same is true for my writing. As you read this book, I pray it will mediate an experience of God’s love for you.

We put such an emphasis on feelings. I’ve come to realize that even though we don’t “feel” God’s love, we can still know God’s love. This book is all about breaking open the various ways God loves us. Yes, I hope you will feel something as you read, but if you don’t, at least you will intellectually know you are loved. Faith in God comes by hearing (in this case reading). Your faith will swell and grow. Perhaps the feelings will come later. I like to say, “Feelings are fickle, but faith lasts forever.” Even if feelings don’t come, we are people of the heart *and* head, not just the heart. On my retreat, I was awakened to an emotional experience of God’s love as I used my head and remembered. Other mystical “high” moments of grace may come, but the ordinary way we know God’s love is through using the faculties God gave us. Through our senses, memory, and intellect we can come to know we are loved. Don’t just look for feelings. There is so much more. Jesus taught, “Blessed are they who believe without seeing (or feeling).”

I am glad I have had some glorious experiences of God's love that have overwhelmed me emotionally. I have felt the ecstatic, radiating love of God. Oh, the passionate and fervent love God has for us! I have known the healing love of God poured into my heart through the Holy Spirit. We somehow think these experiences should be the norm. Usually, though, they are few and far between. The purpose of those graced moments is to awaken us to the love that always surrounds us. I pray you have had and will have mountaintop experiences. However, if they don't come, all you need to know is within you and around you. Jesus taught, "The kingdom of God is at hand and within."

Pay attention to the facts. God created you and has sustained you. God redeemed you and has a glorious future in mind for you. I want this book to immerse you in the truth about your life. As you get in touch with the multitude of ways you are blessed, your feelings may come. But even if you don't have a mountain top experience emotionally, you will know in your heart of hearts that you are loved. Try not to equate your being loved by how much you "feel" loved. Believe what you know to be true. There is an abundance of evidence in the Scriptures. Your memory will remind you of abundant blessings. Your senses and intellect will help you perceive God's love. God is your friend. The fact is that his love for you abounds.





## ***Chapter 2***

# **You Are Loved!**

This is a book about God's love. But the title reveals more than this wonderful truth. I titled the book *You Are Loved*. We know that God loves the eight billion people that comprise the world. But I want to help you grasp that God's love is more than indiscriminate. God's love is intensely personal. God *loves* you because he is your father and created you. The fact that God gave you birth is proof of his love. Statisticians tell us the odds of you being born are some 1 in 400 trillion! The odds of you not being born are far more than your coming into life. But in addition to your being loved, God likes you. God is attracted to what makes you distinctly you. More than your looks, God sees your heart. He cherishes you and cares for you deeply. Most people reject themselves because of a negative body image. You must realize that you are so much more than the way you look. Perhaps your personality may even be unstable or quirky. You may be anxious and fearful. Maybe you are not as extraverted as you would like. Even if you reject yourself, God still accepts you. God doesn't always like the things you do, but God is able to make a distinction between who you are and how you behave. We are a mystery even to ourselves, but God understands us completely.

We are in God's image with God's DNA in us. We are made up of body, spirit, and a mix of mind, will, and emotions that comprise our personality. You look a certain way physically. You were born with an eternal nature (we have eternity in our heart) and the capacity to commune with God. You have a memory and a unique way of thinking. You have emotions that vary depending on your past upbringing and circumstances. Your personality differs as you learn from others and as you grow older. You are a unique blend of looks, thoughts,

moods, attitudes, conscience, decisions, experiences, and personality. You are totally unique. There is no one else on the earth like you.

We all have varying abilities, hobbies, talents, and a seeming predisposition toward certain likes and dislikes. Some of you have artistic talent while others can sing. Some of you enjoy sports while others write poetry. Some love to read and others like to garden. This is God's M.O. God loves variety. God created the world teeming with diversity. God's creativity shows itself in a plethora of sizes and shapes, colors, sights, sounds, and smells. Up close, no two snowflakes are alike and all of them are intricate. Each fingerprint and toeprint is distinct. Our irises are unique and are so structurally distinct they can be scanned for identification purposes.

The late Passionist bishop Norbert Dorsey, C.P. wore on his miter the motto he chose for his episcopate: "The love of God is ingenious." This saying was taken from our Saint Paul of the Cross who stated, "The love of God is ingenious and is proved not so much in words but in the deeds of the lovers." God proves his love for us in the intricacies and creative imagination of his deeds. True love is not a noun but a verb.

God doesn't simply lump you into the sum of humanity and say, "I love you, just like I love everyone else." Rather, God singles you out and sees who you are as an individual and loves your uniqueness. Years ago Peter Frampton came out with a song, "Baby I Love Your Way." God sees your way. He is aware of your motivations and intentions. He looks at your goals and what you are striving to do with your life. He is aware of your imaginations and the way you think. He sees your tenderness toward people and animals. People look at appearances, but the Lord looks beyond this to our heart. (1 Sam. 16:7)

You are unique and no one on earth is like you. In some ways, religious life extols the virtues of uniformity. We all wear



the same habit. In Catholic schools, the children (male and female) wear the same uniforms. Yet, we are all vastly different. Although there are over seven billion people on the earth, no one is exactly like you. Even identical twins aren't the same inside. Their likes, dislikes, talents, and personalities differ. We are much more complex than what meets the eye. Part of falling in love with someone is getting to know their "way." Some are more laid back. Others are more intense. Some follow through on things while others are comfortable with loose ends. Some are creative, others are passive listeners. Many tests have been devised to help us discover our personality type. One is the Meyers-Briggs. When we take this test, we can discover whether we are introverted or extraverted and find out other key traits in our personality. The Four Temperament Test breaks people down into four main areas. The Enneagram shows us nine various personality traits. All these tests are designed to help us understand ourselves.

We may all have similar character traits, but we all are very different. No one on earth has ever been or will ever be like you! I savor my individuality. While I look at others who are more talented, in order to improve, I want to remain uniquely me. You may not have had a say in the way you look, but you definitely have a say in whom you will become. Who you are is God's gift to you. Who you become is your gift to God.

The Scriptures clearly teach that we didn't simply happen or come to be through some mistake or freak of nature. God *intentionally* purposed for you to be born and intricately designed your body and being. In fact, we were predestined to be born. We were in the mind of God from the beginning. I read the odds of you being born are somewhere between one in four hundred trillion and one in seven hundred *trillion!* In other words, there was more of a chance that you wouldn't be born than that you would be born. There is really no way to calculate this, because being born is such a miracle.

According to the Bible, you are a part of God's will and plan. Just think about it. God could have created this whole, vast, immeasurable universe with all the billions of people who were, are, and will be, and left you out. No one would have known it, not even your parents. But God would have known it. God had you in mind, and his creation would not be complete without you. It would have been easier to leave you out, but God decided to include you! You have a destiny to fulfill and a character to achieve.

God has loved us with an everlasting love. Sometimes young lovers will send cards with red hearts to the effect, "I will love you forever!" Or perhaps you've seen, "My love for you is undying!" carved into a tree. Along with that sentiment is a heart with an arrow through it. Often, a month later, the relationship is over. All marriages begin with the belief they will last forever. Over 50% of marriages in the U.S. end in separation or divorce. God's love, however, isn't so fickle or based on flimsy feelings. God's love for us endures. God is faithful toward us even when we are unfaithful.

God's eternal love certainly means that God possesses a love that will endure going forward. But I also believe eternal love, going backward, means God had a love that conceived you from the beginning of creation. God "predestined" us in love to be his adopted children before the world began! (Eph. 1:5) God knew us long before we knew ourselves and will apprehend and sustain us into being long after we die.

## Psalm 139

God's love is profoundly intimate. We are intricately made. Psalm 139 gives a deep insight into the wisdom and working of God. If we explore this Psalm, we are shown many truths. First, God knows us. Few people in our life truly know us intimately. Even though we are exhorted to know ourselves, we remain a mystery even to ourselves. Have you ever thought

about what you look like to someone else? It's hard to grasp. Even though you see yourself in a mirror, what does your body shape and facial features appear like to someone else? I've often wondered what it would be like to be someone else and meet myself. We will never know exactly how we appear to another person. But God knows us through and through.

God is so aware of you that he knows when you are sitting, standing, and what your thoughts are. You probably don't know what your next words will be, but God does. God surrounds us and is closer to us than we are to ourselves. We forget about God's closeness most of the time but even though we aren't that perceptive, God is.

The Psalm goes on to teach us that it wasn't our mother or father who gave us life or designed our bodies. Rather, God did it *through* them. God had an individualized DNA blueprint for each of us. While no one, not even our parents, knew we were conceived, God was breathing his spirit into us at the moment of our conception. God was already at work secretly fashioning us in our mother's womb. We didn't choose whether we would be male or female, white or black, tall or short. God stitched that into our DNA. We didn't have a say about when or where we would be born or to whom. This was God's choice. Our personality trends, traits, and gifts were all sewn by God into our genetics. Yes, we do have a say in some of this, a degree of control, and choices, but much of who we are is determined by our God-given DNA. God didn't make us puppets but people, a little less than a god, with great dignity, honor, and glory. (Ps. 8:6)

While we have been created by God in love, there are still diseases like cancer, arthritis, and a whole host of other maladies that develop as we age. Did God plant those sicknesses in our genes? Certainly not. (More about this later.) God wanted us to be healthy and wholesome, but when humanity fell as a race, these sicknesses developed along

with God's ingenious design. God is in no way punishing us when any sickness develops. But God will allow it to bring us growth in character. One day God's original plan for our bodies will be realized when we are transformed at the resurrection. What is mortal will be swallowed up by immortality. (2 Cor. 5:4)

God is close, knows us, and knit us together. You are exactly the way God planned you to be. Don't get down on yourself because of the way you look. Give thanks because you are fearfully and wonderfully made!

## **The Body of Christ: Community**

I want to make this clear: you are loved for who you are and as you are. I have vowed myself to a religious community, the Passionists. Community at its best is very altruistic. We have a common ideal and goals. We try to treat everyone, priests, brothers, sisters, and laity equally. Some in the community are better known and have more of a high profile ministry. Paul wrote that in the body, some members have a higher profile, but all members are equally important. We all eat together, pray together, and live together. Our vow of poverty means shared life in common. Many of us were educated theologically at the same school. We studied many of the same books and had similar teachers. Yet, this conformity and uniformity doesn't deprive us of our individuality.

We are all different, and God shines through us all in various ways. God uses some Passionists to be chaplains, others to be parish ministers, some to be retreat directors, and others to be missionaries. Some are authors and produce for television. Others work with the poor, those in prison, and youth. Even within the specific call itself, each person brings their own life experiences, approaches, and unique personality to the outreach. Another simile Paul used was regarding a building. Paul wrote: "We are God's building rising on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus as

the cornerstone. We all are being ‘joined together’ into this building.” (Eph. 2:20-22)

In the Old Testament (which some call the First Testament), God not only called individuals such as Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah, God called a people unto himself. God did not lead a few out of Egypt, but a community of people. God would forge these people into his people, Israel. God required only obedience as a requisite of belonging. When some in the community sinned, the whole community suffered. When some like Moses and others repented and interceded, the whole community benefitted.

The New Testament Church is the “new or true Israel.” (Gal. 6:16) We are told that Christ loved “the church” and gave himself up for her. (Eph. 5:25) This means that Jesus died, not just for individuals, but for a community of believers. 1 Peter 2:9-10 makes it clear that we are not simply solitary believers, but a people. “We are a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people.” While a people, we will still be judged on an individual basis according to deeds done in the body. (2 Cor. 5:10)

My point is this: Believers are not meant to be solitary but a part of a community. It’s not just “me and Jesus” but “us and Jesus.” Disciples of Jesus Christ are a body and anointed to put their gifts at the service of one another. If you don’t participate in some community, you are depriving and withholding your gifts from the wider body.

My mother has a time share at a condo in Florida near where she lives. I have access to a hot tub there. The conversations you can get into with people in a public Jacuzzi are interesting! Once a woman struck up a conversation with me and asked what I did for a living. When I told her I was a priest, she said, “I don’t go to church, I don’t get much out of religion, but I’m a believer.” I then said, “We need

the gift of who you are in the community. I'm sure you have gifts and talents you could share. Respectfully, withdrawing from the community is being selfish. We need you and what you could bring to us! Without you, we are lacking." A day or two later I saw her again, and she thanked me for being so honest. She said, "You were absolutely right. I have gifts I can share, and I need to get involved."

Those whose cathedral is "the forest" and those who "find God in their own way" are fooling themselves. A privatized, independent faith is not New Testament Christianity! This is rather an interpretation of Christianity and religion in general that comes from our highly independent, individualized culture. The writer to the Hebrews addressed this attitude some two thousand years ago when he wrote: "Don't neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some..." (Heb. 10:25) Even Jesus, the Son of God worshipped in the synagogue and temple. After the resurrection, the disciples immediately came together and worshipped as a group.

I was taught in the seminary about the value of both/and versus either/or philosophy. We are gifted, unique individuals, not clones of anyone or any system. Although we are individuals, we don't exist simply of and for ourselves, but we are part of a body. We are God's building and shouldn't simply see ourselves as independent. "You are not your own," Paul writes. (1 Cor. 6:19) We are loved as individuals but also as part of the living organism that is the body of Christ. We are *both* individuals *and* members of a wider body. Authentic discipleship realizes this and gets involved.

While we are members of a large body comprised of many, we are also a unique, special part of the body. I place emphasis on our individual uniqueness because of my name. Often people will stumble or mispronounce my name. When they ask about it, they will say something like, "Cedric, that is a different name." I'll smile and say, "Not different, *rare*."

My last name, Pisegna, is even more unique. My parents always taught me to think for myself and not go along with the crowd. Even in religious life, where we are supposed to be “like minded,” I find myself having my own divergent opinion in many of the issues we discuss. Yet, I am willing to be flexible and adaptable enough to be part of a group, be tolerant, and embrace the ideas of others when I need to. I have been challenged and changed my views because of the learned opinions of others.

I disagree that religion ought to be a privatized concept. Our faith is highly public and communitarian. Whoever is off by themselves and not getting involved is deceived and not obeying the will of God for their life. While I enjoy my uniqueness, I also savor being part of something larger than me. We are disciples of Jesus and part of a *koinonia*. This is a Greek word that refers to the communion and joint participation that ought to exist within the church. Psalm 133 comes to mind: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head and running down...” There is an anointing to be together.

I believe we need to embrace a Biblical Christianity. I’ve always been inspired by the early believers who experienced the resurrection of Jesus. They banded together. They realized there was strength in numbers. “Now the company of those who believed was of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.” (Acts 4:32) The Passionist rule states: St. Paul of the Cross gathered companions together in order to proclaim the Gospel of God to all. There is power in community. Businesses and corporations show us that more can be done together than alone.

Along with community, I always stress the personalized side of our faith. I emphasize the individual nature of our faith because of my own personal religious experiences. Those



of you who have read my book *Death: the Final Surrender* know that I have had two near death experiences. In these experiences, I encountered the profound powerful love of God. I encountered God's intense and overwhelming love for me personally in these experiences. There was no "arbitrariness" about this love. God knew me through and through and was in love with me as a person. God knew me and had intense affection and tender care for me.

While there is a staggering eight billion people on earth, God is able to be invested in each one of us one person at a time. God's ability to love us all can be likened to the sunlight that shines on half the earth at any given moment. Even though billions of people are enjoying its heat, light, and energy at the same time, if I go outside, I can feel its warmth and enjoy the light also. While shining on billions at one moment, this fact doesn't diminish my enjoying its effects at the same instant. If we can grasp that concept about a tiny star in our corner of our small galaxy, which isn't even alive, how much more should we be able to grasp the concept of the intensely personal nature of God's love, which is more alive than we have ever known! If the sun can touch so many, how much more can the Risen Son! The fact that there are so many people on the earth right now makes some feel insignificant. Rather than focus on my smallness, I concentrate on the largeness of our God.

## **A Personal God**

While God loves "the world," God is in love with you as an individual. One time I heard a speaker say, whenever you hear "the world," insert your own name. For God so loved (your name) that he gave his only son. I like that idea because this personalizes what God has done for us. We have all heard the truth that Jesus would have gone to the cross just for you even if you were the only person on earth.



I want to impress upon you the personal nature of God's love for you. Yes, God makes his sun shine on the good and the bad and his rain fall on the just and the unjust. His love is indiscriminate. But I want to be clear and say even though there are over seven billion people on the face of the earth, God knows and loves you uniquely. We read in the Scriptures, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Ro. 5:5) God's love isn't simply a nice sentiment. God's love is a living person alive in our individual hearts through the Holy Spirit. We are so cherished by God that he chose to make us his home.

Any of you who are familiar with my teachings know that I preach and write a lot about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God has and continues to revolutionize my life. When I was baptized in the Spirit (touched, awakened) and encountered God's love tangibly, I began to grasp and know what I had heard about all my life, namely that God loved me. Suddenly I became aware that the distant, far-off God was closer to me than I was to myself. Through the Holy Spirit, I experience help, comfort, and communion every day of my life. The Holy Spirit is our constant companion through life, invigorating us, inspiring us, and energizing us with power. Even though I don't understand myself fully, I know I am understood. The Spirit helps me pray, comforts me when I feel alone, encourages me, as well as leads and guides me. I am growing in my understanding of the Spirit all the time.

Please know and understand that this same Spirit of God lives in you. God's love has been poured into your heart. God will deal with you in highly individualized ways according to his plan for your life and your specific need. One example of this is prayer. We are told that we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans and sighs beyond words according to the will of God for us.

(Ro. 8:26) Isn't it wonderful to know that even though you may not have the words or know what to pray for, the Spirit knows what is in your heart? God's Spirit, who lives in you, knows your every need and intercedes for you daily! If you are going through relationship problems, physical pain, financial difficulties, depression, or spiritual dryness, the Spirit knows what you need and prays specifically for you.

## God's Love

I want to emphasize again that God's love for you isn't arbitrary. His love is intensely personal because God cares for you and is with you. God doesn't just love you because he created you; he loves you for who you are. God sees your innermost heart. He realizes your uniqueness and individuality. I have encountered God's love as extremely personal. I have found that God knows me through and through.

One of the Greek words Pope Benedict XVI used in describing God's love was eros. Eros is the energy of strong desire and even sexual activity. It is the romantic love we read about in stories such as *Romeo and Juliet*. It is a love that is passionate and consuming.

The ravishing, even romantic love of God for us is brought out in a unique way in the Song of Songs. Authorship of this book was traditionally assigned to King Solomon. The book is unique since it is a dialogue between two lovers who praise, yearn, and offer themselves to each other. The metaphorical language has been seen by the Church fathers and many saints as referring to God and us. Some famous quotes include these: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth for your love is more delightful than wine." (1:2) "When I found him whom my soul loves, I held him and would not let him go." (3:4) "Behold, you are beautiful my love, behold, you are beautiful." (4:1) "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." (6:3) In truth Christianity is a sacred romance.

Each canonized saint has had revelations about God's intense affectionate love for them. Each has tried to put this love into words. Of course, words cannot do justice when writing about God. St. Thomas Aquinas is a saint and doctor of the Church. He wrote many learned and wise volumes speaking of God and God's ways. Toward the very end of his life, he received a revelation of God's love that overwhelmed him while celebrating Mass. He then said, "The end of my labors has come. I can write no more. I have seen things that make my writings like straw."

Even though words about God and his love do not suffice, saints throughout the ages have received revelations and special graces and have tried to express them. St. Paul of the Cross, the founder of the Passionists, taught all to meditate on the passion of Jesus. He once wrote, "The passion of Jesus is a sea of sorrows, but it is also an ocean of love. Dive into its depths. No matter how deep you go, you will never reach bottom." The writer to the Ephesians prayed for us to know "the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ." (Eph. 3:18-19) God's love revealed at the cross of Jesus is immeasurable. God forgives the most offensive sins, removes strongholds of guilt, and heals the deepest shame. We are safe in God's love. A communion stronger than death is formed because of God's love.

## **Love is Sacrificial**

Eucharist comes from a Greek word meaning "thanksgiving." Another word for Eucharist is Mass. When Christians gather to celebrate Mass, we are remembering the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for us. Mass begins with the sign of the cross and ends with a sign of the cross blessing. In-between is the dynamic remembering of the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary. We re-present the one sacrifice of Jesus to God on our altar. This is not a "new sacrifice" but a dynamic remembering of the once and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus.

While love can be romantic and affectionate, it is more than any feeling. In a nutshell, love is always a decision to be sacrificial. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote prose of which we are all familiar: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height.” Sacrificial love has no boundaries.

Love isn’t love unless it gives. For God so loved the world that he *gave*... Those of you who are married know the sacrifices of time, energy, and forgiveness that you offer to your spouse. Love stays determined and doesn’t give up. Parents give endlessly to their children. As a priest, I sacrifice family, money, time, and energy in order to serve others. Whatever your vocation is in life, I really believe we were created to participate in the self sacrificial love that is God. The opposite of this, of course, is selfishness. It is only in selflessness that we become who God created us to be. Sacrificing for God and others is our purpose.

During Mass, we invite God’s Spirit to move upon simple gifts of bread and wine to transform them into the very body and blood of Jesus. We celebrate his self emptying gift to us. We believers then literally come into communion with Jesus. We come forward in a posture of self-surrender and receive Jesus’ life-giving suffering and death for us. At communion, a oneness is realized that cannot be earned and is not deserved. We simply receive the gift of God. Immediately after communion, it is good to go back to your seat and simply be quiet and reflect. Let the Spirit inspire you in the moment. Try to soak in the healing moment of communion and receive the grace of being loved.

I will never forget the time I went forward to receive communion at Mass. As I was standing in line about to receive, something from the past suddenly came to mind. Years ago, my girlfriend had given me a silver bracelet that I used to wear. The words, “I love you” were engraved on the

inside. I hadn't thought of that gift in years. As I am receiving the body of Christ, those words suddenly came to mind. What was that? I believe it was God telling me through that memory that he loved me as I received communion.

One of the earliest terms for Mass was an "agape" feast. Agape is a word in the Greek used by the early Christians for God's self-sacrificing love for humanity. God's love is generous, self-emptying, and costly. Mass celebrates the horrific, torturous suffering of the Son of God in a non-bloody manner. Jesus gave his all to God and to us in an unprecedented life of self-surrender. The efficacy of this agape love continues as we revel in redemption and experience salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. If you want evidence that you are loved, simply meditate on the crucifix. Participate in Mass and receive communion thoughtfully. God so loved us that he *gave*...

## Love is Relentless

I've described God's love as a friendship. God's love is romantic and intense. God is generous and sacrificial when he loves. In addition, I like to describe God's love as relentless, faithful, and indefatigable. God never gives up on us. In 2 Peter 3:9 we read, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." Also, God's love endures. God is faithful to keep loving us today, tomorrow and forever. God's love doesn't waver and isn't up and down dependent on our deeds. The love he offers us is unconditional and everlasting. (Ps. 136)

Many doubt God and live lives independent of God. They go on day to day and reason, "Nothing bad has happened to me when I do wrong. They reason: Therefore, there must be no God." Others live lives full of disobedience. They don't attend any church. They are full of pride and self-sufficiency. Perhaps they are addicted to something and disregard the

wisdom that God offers. They reason, “God is silent. If I was wrong in my life stance and deeds, surely God would have punished me by now. God would have said something.” They wrongly interpret God’s silence as his non-existence. “The fool says in his heart there is no God.” (Ps. 14:1) Rather, God’s silence isn’t his absence but his mercy! God is allowing the rebellion and is giving a person time to turn their life around. All the while, God is at work in a person’s circumstances beckoning toward that person to come to repentance. God isn’t slow or absent, although many see it that way. God is patient and forbearing, relentless in his love.

God is the “Hound of Heaven” who not only searches for us but chases after us until we finally succumb to his many invitations. In the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as the “Good Shepherd” who searches tirelessly for stray sheep. Jesus is shown to be proactive and dynamic always moving and encountering people. Countless lives like Zacchaeus, Bartimaeus, and others were changed because Jesus reached out to them. Jesus is still searching for wandering sheep and will do anything and everything to woo people back to himself. God is persistent. In 1 Corinthians, we hear that love is patient. God wants us all to be saved and gives us time. The extra time we need shouldn’t be misconstrued that God doesn’t exist, but rather should be interpreted that God is going overboard to save us. But the day will eventually come when the grace will be ended and judgment will dawn.

Along with being patient and relentless, God’s love is faithful. Even though we are flippant at times and sin when we know better, his love never gives up on us or abandons us. Even if we are faithless, God remains faithful. 1 John 1:9 tells us, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive.” His mercy is new every day. God never gets tired of loving us. Even though we push the boundaries of God’s mercy and presume his forgiveness, God’s love for us still

radiates. We cannot “out sin” God’s capacity to love. It is written, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Pet. 4:8) God’s love will not only cover us but forgive us time and time again. God’s faithfulness is also shown in that he will never abandon us. Sin has a grip on us all. We all fail and commit the same sins over and over, but God promises, “I will never fail or forsake you.” (Heb. 13:5) God’s love is shown in “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Ro. 5:8)

## **Familial Love**

The first place I learned about sacrificial love was from my parents. Mom and Dad were married for over fifty years and raised my two older sisters and me. My dad worked as a carpenter which was hard on his body. I remember how he used to come into the kitchen after a hard day of work. He would come home, plop himself onto a kitchen chair, let out a sigh, and say, “First time today!” This would give me a moment to ask him how it went and how the job was going. Between gulps of ice water, we would share about our day. My dad worked for himself. There was no boss over him demanding that he go to work. But he worked day in and day out. I rarely saw him take a day off. Year in and year out, whether it was snowing and cold or blistering hot and humid, off he went to work. I worked with him in my teenage years. I saw how hard he worked and how dirty he got. All the while, I knew he was working to support his wife and children not just for himself.

My mother was perhaps where I learned the most about sacrificial love. One of my earliest memories of my mom was when I was about four years old. I remember being hugged tightly and cuddled against her breasts. I could hardly breathe. While the words “I love you” may not have always been uttered, her love was smothering. I was her only son and the last of her three children. I was spoiled by her love.



I was loved because Mom was the one who bore me in her womb for some nine months. She knew the pain of giving me birth. She sat up at night when I cried. She cleaned and diapered me when I couldn't do those things for myself. Mom breast fed me and held me close. When I first walked, she was there encouraging me. I'm sure she heard my first words, and I hope they were "Momma." She loved me because I was her baby and only son. God's love for us can be compared to that of a mother. In Hosea 11:3, we hear God say, "I taught Ephraim how to walk and took him up in my arms." God loves us because he reared us, brought us up, and watched us grow. I am so touched with what God tells us in Isaiah 43:4: "You are precious in my sight and I love you."

We Catholics believe Mary is a mother who loves us. When Jesus was dying on the cross, he gave his mother to John and John to his mother. (Jn. 19:26-27) From that hour, John took Mary into his home. This has always been traditionally interpreted that Mary is the mother of all believers.

I used to lead pilgrimages to Italy. One group of thirty went to the various shrines in Italy. St. Peter's Basilica is the largest church building in the world. Magnificent works of art are everywhere within the building. The history and tradition are awe-inspiring.

When we entered through the back doors, one woman in the group suddenly made a bee line straight right. Having been there many times before, I knew where she was heading. Michelangelo's moving statue of the Pieta is located on the back, right of St. Peter's. This woman was weeping as she ran. I began to weep as I saw her devotion. Obviously, she was a woman who had suffered, most likely a mother, and could relate to "the sword piercing" Mary's heart. The pieta is the sculpture of Mary cradling the body of her dead son who was just taken down from the cross. Frozen in time for all to



see is that horrific moment when Simeon's prophecy about the sword of suffering came true.

Besides leading pilgrimages to Italy, I have studied in Rome at the North American College while on sabbatical. In our studies, we had an art teacher who took us to many of the notable places in Rome. We were in St. Peter's when she taught us about the Pieta. She told us to focus on Mary's face. As we did, we saw the thin face of a fifteen year-old girl. (Mary would have been much older after the death of Jesus.) The smooth marble made her face shine. Her complexion was flawless and impeccable. Then she had us focus on her lap. While her face was thin, her lap was the lap of a five hundred pound woman! Our teacher told us that tradition holds that Michelangelo did this on purpose. He wanted to portray that not only was Mary's lap large enough for Jesus, but as our mother, her lap is large enough to cradle you and me.

One of the hardest things for me is to witness a mother whose heart is broken by a child who is into drugs or going the wrong way in life. Perhaps a mother has lost a child to death. The umbilical cord may have been cut at birth, but there are deep "soul ties" too profound to ever be severed. That's one reason why the Pieta is so poignant. Mary was so attached to Jesus that when he suffered, she was bereft of any consolation. I'll never forget the moment Jesus was taken down from the cross in the Franco Zeffirelli movie *Jesus of Nazareth*. Mary held Jesus and contemplated his death. There was a deluge of rain. She sobbed and sobbed as the prophecy of Simeon came true: A sword pierced her soul.

I hope you had a good experience with your mother. I realize some of you didn't know your mother or perhaps had a harsh, demanding mother. Most of you had nurturing, positive experiences with your Mom. Besides being sacrificial and generous, mothers can give good advice!

When I was eighteen years old, I was touched by the Holy Spirit in a powerful way. I encountered God's love in a real, tangible way and was born again. In the months following, I had such fire and passion to proclaim the truth of God to everyone. I was not ashamed of the Gospel! I used to work at Riverside Amusement Park in Agawam, Massachusetts. They used to employ young people over the age of sixteen to work in the games, rides, and food booths. I worked in the games division. When I would go to work, I actually carried my Bible with me. (Pity the person who was stuck in the same booth with me that day!) Whenever I had the opportunity, I would share with anyone and everyone about Jesus and eternal life. Although most were polite and listened to me share, many were probably thinking I was way over the top. Even my bosses shook their heads. I had a long history at Riverside. My bosses used to know me as a thief (they suspected I was taking money from the till and they were right – although I was never caught), and a partier, and now here I was being completely honest and evangelizing. They weren't quite sure what to think about me.

Right around that time, I sat on the couch with Mom one evening and had a good talk. Unbeknownst to me, Mom and Dad were wondering about my sanity. I had gone through this huge religious conversion, and they were just waiting to see what would happen. Later Mom told me they were contemplating bringing me to a psychiatrist.

I talked with my mother about my new found fire and zeal for Jesus. "Mom, I just want to tell the world about Jesus. Eternal life is real and I don't want anyone to miss it like I almost did. I want to go out on the streets and preach!" What my Mom said next helped change my life. "You can go out onto the streets if you want to, but if you do, no one will listen," she said. "You must get an education. You have to get your credentials. Then people will listen to what you have to say."

I felt my heart sink within. I had just started college. It was a lot of work and I didn't want to go through another four years of school. I went back to my bedroom upset. I was offended when so called evangelists came up to me on the street and challenged me about being "born again," and yet, here I wanted to do the same thing. I reevaluated my life. I realized Mom was right.

Although still zealous, I made the decision to lighten up and not come on so strong. I made a major decision. I decided to stick it out with school and eventually changed my major from business to social work. I began to get involved in the Catholic Church and eventually gave years of my life serving the elderly and youth in the Church. Providentially, during those years, I met the Passionists. I vowed myself with them and submitted myself to another five years of seminary education and formation. During those many years, there was more college, ministry, commitments, vows, more education, evaluations, formation, more evaluations, training, and finally final vows, ministry, and ordination.

What a long, grueling process my formation was! I learned the truth proclaimed in Sirach: "My son when you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials." (2:1) I was misunderstood and harshly evaluated by some of my peers. I was verbally abused by one priest who was my director at the time. He tried to get me to leave. I studied in Chicago and experienced many long, dark, cold, snowy winters. On top of it, I was cooped up inside this former hotel building turned dormitory with hundreds of others. I felt like an ant inside an ant farm. I couldn't run from my social phobias or the judgments of others. I couldn't escape from continual community day in and day out. I often disagreed with the views of my teachers. What was taught seemed so liberal

and uninspiring. At times, I felt like a fish out of water. Was I in the right place? I even looked at other seminaries from other denominations during the process.

But through the virtue of endurance, the grace of God, and much prayer, I persevered. I earned a Bachelor's degree in Social Work and then a Master of Divinity with a specialization in the Bible. I professed my final vows. I did ministry internships. I was ordained a deacon, and then nine months later, I was ordained a priest. I got my credentials. I worked hard, persevered, and fought the fight.

Now, a multitude of trials and years later, Mom was absolutely right! People everywhere are listening!

I just couldn't waste my sufferings. I had been through too much not to work hard. I justified my seminary trials by working passionately as a priest. I began traveling and preaching. I noticed the attendance at my preaching events were more than those who trained me. God had anointed me with a gift. I began writing books to minister to people after the mission was over. Years later, I discerned a call to preach on television and radio. The walls to do this were thick and high. I confronted these obstacles and walls proactively and in time began producing for television and radio. At this point in my ministry, my program *Live with Passion!* is broadcast around the country nationally on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) as well as locally in several cities. This is my 18th of 25 books to date. I have an internet ministry reaching out to many through my website, Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube. I am turning away requests for my missions. Mom's advice was right on. I needed to be educated, formed, trained, and matured. People honor the commitment I have made.

My whole point here is that God's love came to me through my mother and her counsel. My mom didn't give up on me when I was going through the turbulent time of my conversion.

All through my seminary years, ordination, and subsequent ministry, she was right there to support me, listen to me, and help me. One of the ways God's love and wisdom comes to us is through people.

Julian of Norwich is not a canonized saint, but widely regarded as a spiritual mystic. She lived in the fourteenth century England. Her writings about God are often quoted. She wrote a work called *Revelations about Divine Love*. In her work, she wrote about God as father, but also as mother. God is seen as mother through what has been created and through God's merciful love. Most contemporary theology recognizes that God isn't male or female. Granted, Jesus used the Aramaic word, "Abba" (daddy, papa) for God, but this word was a term of endearment and familiarity more than saying God was masculine. Jesus taught that God is Spirit. Spirits have no gender per se, and in heaven, we are told that we will neither marry or be given in marriage. Those who are in Christ Jesus are neither male nor female and so it is with God. However, God has qualities that are both stereotypically masculine and feminine. God is almighty, strong, and protective, but also, gentle, tender, and even vulnerable in the divine love.

We read, "Even if a mother should forget the child at her womb, I will never forget you my people." (Is. 49:15) In Luke 13:34, Jesus likens himself to a mother hen who "would gather her brood under her wings" when speaking about protecting the people of Jerusalem. When I am producing my television program *Live with Passion!*, I interact with my producer. After the actual filming, he will send me clips of a specific episode for me to critique. This includes shots of me preaching as well as B-roll. B-roll is independent film clips that are obtained and edited in to enhance my message.

When I am talking about God or Jesus, he used to find these old clips or still shots showing God as an old man with

a beard in the clouds. Or Jesus would be depicted looking plastic or ugly. I sat down and talked with him about this. I told him that many people have harsh images regarding God, and one of the purposes of my programs is to help people gain a fresh, new, image of who God really is. I told him to never ever portray God as God has been imaged in the past. Rather, use scenes from creation like light, or winds blowing, or spiral galaxies. Rather than trying to show God as a human being, we can talk about God through creation. Similarly with Jesus, show the touch of a finger, a hug, footprints, but no traditional plastic statue stuffy-looking Jesus!

When I'm preaching or producing a television program, there are times when I simulate God's voice from Scripture or say something that I feel is directly from God to you. I have a choice here. How do I want God's voice to sound? We all know the loud, scary "God voice" from the movies of the past. From my own spiritual life, I've experienced God's voice as a gentle whisper, a still small voice. Therefore, when I preach, I make a special effort to use a gentle, even whispered tone of voice when portraying God, rather than something loud or harsh. For my commercials, I use a soft female voice because I want to put people in touch with the kindness and gentleness of God.

I love what is written about Jesus: "Behold my servant whom I have chosen. He will not wrangle or cry aloud... he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, till he brings justice to victory..." (Mt. 12:18-20)

This was not exactly the image of the messiah the Jews were expecting. While Jesus had the valor of the most courageous warrior, he was kind and non-violent. Jesus is the lion-hearted lamb. This is why people flocked to him. He was fierce and fiery, but calm and stable. Jesus said, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and meek in heart." (Mt. 11:29)

## Marital Love

Saint Catherine of Sienna experienced a “mystical marriage” with Jesus. Once she had a vision in which the Virgin Mary presented her to Jesus who gave her a ring and said, “I, your creator and your savior, espouse you in the faith, that you will keep ever pure until you celebrate your eternal nuptials with me in heaven.” The prophet Hosea said this very thing to us when he wrote, “I will espouse you to me forever; I will espouse you in steadfast love and mercy.” (Hos. 2:19) Often Catholic religious sisters and priests will wear rings. These rings symbolize their complete dedication and even marriage to Jesus. Heaven itself is imaged as a wedding feast. The marriage is between us and God forever. We will be in complete communion with God and his ravishing beauty and ecstatic love. (Rev. 19:6-9)

Anyone adept in the spiritual life knows God created us for communion. We begin Mass with the greeting: The *communion* of the Holy Spirit be with you. Apart from God, we are empty and unfulfilled. Only in God will our souls be at rest. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord! Marriage is but a symbol of the two becoming one. It is not good for us to be alone. The purpose of the spiritual life now is to strive for union and struggle for fidelity and faithfulness. The Holy Spirit is the beginning of this union even now on earth and a foretaste of the glories to come. (Eph. 1:13-14)

Paul wrote, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20) We are all mystics, and conscious union with God here on earth must be our goal. One time Jesus appeared to St. Catherine holding a bright red and shining human heart. He opened her side and said, “Dearest daughter, as I took your heart away from you the other day, now I am giving you mine so you can go on living with it forever.” The hallmark of the New Testament is when Ezekiel prophesied,



“I will give you a new heart and put a steadfast spirit within you. I will remove from you your heart of stone.” (Ez. 36:26) The heart is the seat of consciousness and emotions. The heart is also our core, our center, where we love. Our will to love is within our heart. Jesus came to bring us something new. Because of the renewal and regeneration in the Holy Spirit, we have a new capacity to love and a greater depth to experience spiritual intimacy. God is preparing us for heaven.

## **Rooted**

I have written about God’s love in many various ways. We can know God’s love through our intellect, senses, memory, and feelings. Since God’s love has been “poured into our hearts,” the primary way we can know God’s lavish love is through our spirit, in our heart of hearts.

Through contemplation and other forms of prayer, we can come to know God’s love. “Be still and know that I am God.” (Ps. 46:10) Don’t be afraid of silence. Silence is God’s language of love rather than an indication of his absence. How will you ever be able to “hear” the impressions, impulses, and whispers of the Spirit unless you are quiet? Your understanding will increase as you cultivate quiet.

One of the most surprising places I ever visited was the National Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The building is huge and filled with books and other works from all over the world. I stood inside and looked around at all that surrounded me. I was struck by the silence. I thought about the accumulation of learning in that building. As large as it was, and even though there were many people all around, it was profoundly quiet. I sensed holiness. If only I could know some of the wisdom that surrounded me in all of those books. I thought, “I’ve been in a lot of churches, but this ranks right up there as a sacred place.”

If you want to know you are loved, simply read the Scriptures. If you are Catholic, I recommend reading the



Mass readings each day. Take a few minutes, get quiet, read, and reflect. We read about how God loves us over and over again in multiple ways. In 2008, our former Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI invited bishops from around the world to a month-long synod on the Bible. Artists, poets, scholars, and others were invited to give perspective on the Scriptures. The thrust of the synod was to invite Catholics and Christians everywhere to read the Bible. We were told that each Catholic should own and use their Bible.

At the conclusion of the Synod, Italian Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi presented the final message. He said, "As a lover reads a letter from his beloved, you must read the Scriptures. Each reader should approach the Bible with the certainty, 'It was written for me.'" This message was welcomed by a round of applause from the bishops which ratified the assembly's approval. The Bible tells us over and over again, "You are loved."

In addition, reading the Scriptures, contemplating on the cross, creation, people, music, artwork, and many other realities mediate God's love for us. The key is that we *receive* God's love. When I say "receive," I mean *believe* in God's love even though you don't necessarily feel it. Former Pope Benedict XVI began his encyclical on God's love by quoting 1 Jn. 4:16, "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us." As we believe, we see things differently. Simple meals, the ability to walk, hear, see, and the friends God has given us, all become signs of God's love. Ordinary events are charged with God's love. Through faith, our awareness can be heightened and feelings may then come.

While God's love for each person is very real and passionate, not all "receive" this love. You must understand, God loves thieves in prison as much as the Pope! Those who spend Sunday playing golf and watching football are loved as much as those who live the day by going to Church

and reading the Bible. However most in prison or who golf instead of worship are dulled to a sense of God's love for them. While all are loved, not all receive the love. Worship, reading, prayer, and reflection heighten our sensitivity toward being loved. All of us are loved, but not all do what they can to absorb God's love.

Whether you realize it or not, whether you feel it right now or not, I want you to *believe* in the love God has for you personally. Through simple faith, you can receive God's love.

When I send out my Christmas cards I include this verse: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become the children of God." (Jn. 1:12)

There are many ways to receive God's love. One important way is through *self-surrender*. Although everyone is loved, not many are willing to abandon themselves to God. It is in self-surrender that we open ourselves up to God's healing love. I invite you to pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, I believe you suffered on the cross out of love for me. I trust in your love even when I don't feel it. I believe you died to save me and bring me eternal life. I surrender control of my life as well as my heart to you. I want communion with you and the peace you give. Take my life and live in me. I love you Lord. Amen.

May your surrender put you in touch with how much you are loved! I invite you to surrender daily. Believe in the love God has for you.

## Look Beyond

It is easy to be dulled and jaded by the world. It doesn't take effort to be lulled and hardened into a sense of a lack of appreciation for how deeply we are loved. Armed with our faith

in God's love, we must do what we can to break through the malaise. Years ago the leaders of the Passionists composed a slogan, "proclaiming God's love in a world with the seeming absence of God." Our job as preachers is to break through the doubts and walls that exist in order to bring people into a deeper awareness of God. Helping people be aware of the presence of God is the goal of my writing, producing, and preaching.

We must believe in God's love because of the way "things seem." We must believe because we often don't "feel." We must trust because we can become jaded. Things aren't always what they seem. We can't simply rely on our senses. For example, it "seems" to our senses that the sun rises and sets. But in reality, we know it is the Earth rotating that causes this phenomenon. It looks to the eyes like the moon is larger than the stars. But astronomers tell us the stars are exponentially larger than the moon. We can't "see" gravity or the air, but we know both exist. Similarly, we don't always sense God's love, but we need to open ourselves up to the truth that God is in fact not absent. Believing leads to supernatural seeing.

God has loved you in the past and will love you in the future, but you are never more loved than right at this moment. You might think, "But I have lusted," or "I am angry with someone," or "I haven't prayed enough." These things don't stop God from loving you, but can prevent you from receiving God's love. It is crucial that you understand this. Our sins don't stop God from loving us. God's love is unconditional and not based on our deeds -- good or evil. However, the guilt, shame, and self-recrimination that come from sin can hinder us from receiving God's love. Self-condemnation is like a high wall. When Adam and Eve sinned, God was present, but they hid because of their guilt.

One way we can break through the negative feelings and receive God's love is by celebrating reconciliation, or

confession. This sacrament has the purpose of helping us receive forgiveness and brings healing to the feelings of guilt, shame, and condemnation we may have. Great conversions have happened in the confessional. St. Paul of the Cross said, “I preach in order to bring people to confession.” He knew “open heart surgery” could be done in the confessional.

Confession, prayer, celebrating Mass, self-surrender, believing in God, as well as simply being quiet all put us into a receiving mode. God is in love with you now as much as he will ever be! Your sins and lack of piety don’t stop God from loving you. God may be disappointed in what we do but still loves who we are.

Believing in and becoming aware of God’s love must become a lifestyle. We can’t live just on an occasional feeling from the past. We must encounter new blessings each day and be solidly rooted in God’s love. Instead of being jaded and unaware, our consciousness can heighten, and our perception of God’s love grows. God lives in you! Far from being absent, we live and move and have our being in God. You are loved. Be amazed. Live with awe. One of our Passionist missionaries who has passed to the Lord used to preach about awe. He called it “living with awareness, wonder, and enthusiasm.”

Heightened awareness of God’s love is key. Surveys have been done about people with ADD (attention deficit disorder). Some statisticians say that up to 90% of us have some form of attention problems. I’ve discovered that I don’t so much have a memory problem, rather when I forget something, I am simply distracted by something else. Therefore, what I intended to do is forgotten. One of my friends is always distracted when I talk to him. I will be saying something and I’m not sure if he is hearing me because of the way he looks. Sometimes he responds by saying something totally different or not responding at all. Our life is so full of things vying for our attention. There is television, internet, smart phones, radio, a

hectic schedule, voices everywhere, as well as what we are thinking. Often we live oblivious to the obvious. We simply don't notice the signs of God's love that are everywhere. We are surrounded by love constantly, but at times we are too busy and distracted to notice. Our lack of a simple awareness can cause us to be out of touch and miss the wonders all around us.

In these meditations, I have written about the truth of God's love for you. Sometimes it may not feel like it or seem like it. You may not feel worthy of God's love. There are signs that we miss. However, don't base your life on your feelings, but on what you know to be true. Don't wait for and expect feelings. Feelings may come, but they are not the proof. Jesus' death on the cross is the proof that we are loved.

As you strive to open yourself up to God's love, you will receive. As you live a consistent lifestyle of putting yourself in a position to receive through prayer, surrender, reading, and thanksgiving, you will become more and more rooted in God's intense, relentless love. When you slow down and notice the signs all around, you will realize God's personal love for you. Whenever I am golfing and hit my ball near a tree, I have to be careful when I swing. There are usually roots hidden in the soil that can harm my wrist. These roots give stability to the tree and provide a lifeline for the tree to be nourished. We too need stability and nourishment. May your roots grow strong and be unshakable! This prayer was composed by the writer of the letter to the Ephesians: "[My prayer is] that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:17-19)

I'd like to conclude this chapter with a poem I wrote about God's love for us:

# **I am Loved**

~Present everywhere love abounds;  
Unconditional, passionate energy surrounds.

Awake, awake, even my soul!  
God's love within me, around me, my goal.

I rise to a new beginning each day;  
Reborn by love I have a new way.

A supernatural delightful joy in love;  
Although there are troubles, new strength from above.

My past is overcome, I attain new height;  
The present is mine, the future my right.  
Although suffering is hard and affliction abounds,  
I know all will work for good: I hear hope's sounds.

At times love seems absent; I do not feel;  
Past experiences and faith assure me  
love's more than real.

I found love's language is silence;  
I strive to avoid the noisy violence.  
In the stillness within I seek communion;  
Untold joy and peace in our union.

Love possesses ecstatic glory;  
Once tasted, I am part of God's story.

Because of love's gift, I am!  
I know sometimes I can't, but love can.  
Love's high call is to give others latitude;  
Forgive and serve with a good attitude.

The divine fire I know in my heart;  
Not even death will allow to part.

I am loved! Words of gratitude will never suffice.  
Therefore, I'll love God with the lyrics of my life.~



## ***Chapter 3***

# ***God Is Good All The Time***



The Bible talks about the goodness of God in many places. A man ran up to Jesus, fell on his knees and said, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied, “No one is good but God alone.” (Mk. 10:17-18) Jesus was taking this moment to proclaim the nobility of God’s character. Earlier on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter experienced God’s glory and said, “It is good for us to be here.” (Mk. 9:5) Peter was expressing the delight of experiencing God. Moses had an intimate relationship with God. He asked, “Show me your glory.” God replied, “I will let my goodness pass in front of you.” Then God passed in front of Moses proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.” (Ex. 33, 34) God’s goodness is his resplendent glory. His glory is manifest through his virtuous character. God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, and forgiving. God shows his goodness in a variety of ways, but especially in his love for us.

Psalms 136:1 says, “Give thanks to the Lord for God is good, his love endures forever.” God’s goodness is shown in his deeds. Aren’t you glad that while we were yet sinners, God loved us and sent his son to die for us? I thank God for creating me, sustaining me, and for walking with me every day. I am always in need of forgiveness. I’m grateful that God’s mercies are new daily. I thank God for the time he gives me to grow and progress. I thank God for favor, countless blessings, and for a glorious destiny. An eternity with God in heaven awaits us as believers! God is good and his love endures forever!

I attended Mass at an African American church one Sunday. The priest was enthusiastic and dialogued with his community. Throughout his homily, he would give them this ritual cue, “God is good...” and everyone shouted, “All the time!” Then he would respond, “All the time...” and everyone replied, “God is good!” Everyone turned and laughed as they dialogued. It was a fun way to enter into the homily.

Goodness radiates from God like heat, light, and energy from the sun. There is no darkness in God. Everything God does and everything God is is good. God is good in what he does, but most of all God is good in who he is. The Scriptures proclaim, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Ps. 34:8) Not only is God good, but like Peter, we can experience this goodness and even “taste” it. God’s goodness can be experienced through his glory which is shared with us. The Holy Spirit is glorious and poured into our hearts. God’s plan from the beginning is that we would be glorified in Jesus. (Ro. 8:30) God’s glory is his pleasurable presence. God’s presence which Peter experienced on the Mount and Moses when God passed before him is electric and ecstatic. I am so comforted and strengthened by the Holy Spirit who shares his glorious goodness with me. This grace is available to every believer. We can literally “taste” and see the goodness of the Lord.

The glory we can experience now on earth is but a foretaste of heaven and the beatific vision to come. Isaiah tells us we were made for God’s glory! (Is. 43:7) God is glorious because of his virtue, integrity, and impeccable character. God is also glorious because of his mighty deeds. God is the king of glory and clothed in radiance.

Jesus’ life and ministry was summed up in these words: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power and he went about doing good.” (Acts 10:38) Think of the breadth and wisdom of Jesus’ teachings. Think of the





people he touched, healed, and forgave. Consider all the miracles and wonders he worked on earth. Remember his generous, sacrificial death for us on the cross. These were all manifestations of goodness.

God's goodness is showered upon all indiscriminately. However, God has multiplied blessings for his own people. We read in Psalm 23:6, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Imagine. Everywhere we go, we can expect God's forgiveness, generosity, protection, graciousness, and love. We are surrounded by goodness as we journey the pathways of our life.

One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is goodness. (Gal. 5:22) A close friend of mine died recently. When I talked about him to others, I summed up his life by saying, "He was a good man." His goodness was shown through his generosity. He was a people person. He always considered even the "insignificant" people he met. He was prayerful and reached out to others. In the Bible, Barnabas was someone who encouraged others. The Scriptures spoke of him as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." (Acts 11:24) Whenever we are kind, generous, gentle, forgiving, and reach out to others, we are manifesting the fruit of the Spirit that is goodness.

While God is good because of who he is (all the time!), God is good because of what he has done, is doing, and will do. The word "good" is introduced early in the Bible when God creates and makes order out of the swirling chaos. The chaos represents evil, and the Scriptures are the epic account of the battle between good and evil. The Gospel of John presents it this way: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." (Jn. 1:5) Right away in the first book of the Bible, God creates light and pronounces it good. (Gen. 1:3) As God continues to create and fashion the earth, the sea, and creatures, he pronounces them

good also. Finally, on the sixth day, God breathes his breath into humans and creates us in his own image. After God created humans, he said that it was “very” good. (Gen. 1:31) God’s goodness is revealed in the universe. Things didn’t just “happen,” but as we proclaim in our creed, God is the creator of all things visible and invisible.

For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens  
[He is God!] who formed the earth and made it.  
[God designed it; God did not create it to be  
a chaos, but formed it to be lived in!] I am the  
Lord and there is no other. (Is. 45:18)

God displays his goodness through creation. We see God’s handiwork in the earth, skies, plants, fish, animals, and people. We love to go to the theater, observe artwork, listen to music, watch television, hear stories, play games, read books, and learn new things. God’s goodness is revealed in all God has created.

I was a youth minister in St. Louis, Missouri in 1984. I ministered at Our Lady of the Pillar Parish and Chaminade College Prep High School. The high school had a dormitory for the one hundred fifty students who lived outside the state. I was one of four prefects who lived in the dormitory. Each night one of us led the students in prayer. I couldn’t help but notice that some of the students had posters of good looking girls in bikinis hanging on their walls. One night I talked about the theme of God’s goodness. I said, “I know some of you have posters of pretty girls hanging on your bedroom wall. Did you ever think how much more beautiful and good God is? Have you ever imagined what an angel must look like? If what God created is that lovely, don’t lose sight of how much more lovely God must be.” None of the young men took their posters down, but I got them thinking!



Think of all the good things in life. Most people like to eat and drink. Wines and delicacies abound to please any palate. The desire to travel and explore is in all of us. I love playing new and exotic golf courses. We love meeting and getting to know new people. We see a world resplendent with vibrant colors. Exercise is hard but fun and keeps us young. Some love to dance, others paint, some sing, and still others write. Worshipping God lifts us up. Creation is replete with soothing sounds. There are refreshing streams. God paints the sky with pink and red sunrises and sunsets. Delicious scents are everywhere. Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it."

One of the most quoted Scriptures is Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not your woe, to give you a future full of hope." This Scripture tells us that God has a good plan for our life. Sometimes it doesn't seem like it. No matter how bad things may have been in the past or how clouded circumstances may be right now, God knows how to write straight with crooked lines.

One of the famous stories in the Scriptures illustrating God working for good is the story of Joseph. If you remember, Joseph was the son of Jacob and had eleven other brothers. Joseph had great favor, and his brothers were jealous. They abducted him and sold him into slavery. He ended up in Egypt, was falsely accused, and ended up in prison. But God was with him! Because God had gifted him with interpreting dreams, he rose higher and higher and was promoted to become the governor of Egypt. In time, there was a famine in the land, and his brothers came and bowed down before him. He forgave his brothers and announced this stunning statement, "What you meant for bad, God meant for good!" (Gen. 50:20)

Through Joseph's harrowing ordeals, God was working. The end result was that the Israelites were fed, his family reunited, and a great work was done in Joseph's soul. Psalm 105:18 can be translated, "his soul came into iron." In other words, during the thirteen years Joseph was in prison, God was working in him for good. Instead of condemning his brothers, when the time came, Joseph forgave them because of the great work God had been doing in his soul. Similarly, you must understand that God's great purpose is to do a great work in your soul. Often this purifying work happens through the trials and troubles of our life.

Although we can't see it and often we aren't aware of it, we must believe in God's goodness as the foundation of our life. Like many, the Bible verse I build my life on is "In everything God works for good with those who love him and are called according to his purpose." (Ro. 8:28) I don't always see or understand God's working as I suffer, but I *believe* God is at work for good.

Perhaps I should define "good" here. For us, good means we live pain free, at ease, and in comfort. For God, good means that we develop character and achieve our destinies and influencing many beneficially. Like any parent, God will allow various trials to come upon us for purification and our overall benefit. (1 Pet. 4:12) These things may not seem so at the time, but God is able to make any situation work out for good. It is in our weakness that God's power and grace are made perfect.

The greatest tragedy that has ever occurred was when the innocent and just Son of God was nailed to a tree. Jesus went about doing good, and for that, he was put to death. Unjust, violent people falsely condemned him in a sham of a trial and this led to agonizing torture and a horrifying death. We call the day Jesus was crucified "Good" Friday. What



good could come out of an innocent man's tragedy? Isaiah prophesied the benefits years before:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions and was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and by his stripes, we are healed. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Is. 53:4-6)

God made good come out of the tragedy of the death of his own Son. We call the day of Jesus' crucifixion "Good" Friday because it was the day of our redemption and salvation. God is a God of resurrection who knows how to write straight with the crooked lines of life.

You may ask, "If God is so good, then why does he allow bad things to happen?" or "If God is so good, why do bad things happen to good people?" Perhaps you inquire for instance: "Why did my son have to die so early?" "Why did I go through this divorce?" "Why must I suffer physically?" "Why is it that my dreams haven't come to pass?" Questions such as these have been asked for thousands of years. The fact of suffering in the world has been a great scandal for many and an excuse for people who chose not to believe in God. Theologically this is called "the problem of evil." The reasoning goes like this: "How can a God, who is so good and all powerful, permit wars, sufferings, and tragedies? Either God is not good, or God is not all powerful."

Many books have been written about the problem of evil. You have probably heard about Rabbi Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. A Christian version of this is, *Mosquitoes in Paradise* by John Aurelio. I give perspectives on your sufferings in my own book *Live Passionately!* Some other books that shed positive light on the why we suffer are:

*Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, *You Gotta Keep Dancin'* by Tim Hansel, and *Turning Hurts into Halos* by Dr. Robert Schuller. None of these solve the problem completely, but all of the books help give meaning and wise perspectives.

I would like to delve into this problem of evil now and offer some additional perspectives. I have already written about how we believe God is at work when we suffer and brings good/resurrection out of them. Also remember that *God's definition of good is not always the same as our definition of good*. God is more interested in the long term than the short term. God is after more than our comfort and ease. God wants our transformation and ultimate redemption.

I get emails from numerous people about a wide variety of travails. One said, "Pray for us at the assisted care home. Why does God allow us to age and suffer like this?" Another talked about being twenty-nine weeks pregnant and having to deal with a rash called PUPPs. She asked, "Why would I receive this suffering since I've been so devout in my prayers?" Others email asking for prayers about unemployment, grieving, cancer, confusion, doubts, financial problems, marital struggles, children leaving the faith, accidents, natural storms, and much more. These are believers who are good people and are struggling. When they suffer, they wonder about God. Has God abandoned them? Is suffering punishment for past sins? Should they be doing something differently? Some are being scandalized and losing their faith in God.

We must understand that sufferings, tragedies, and troubles come to *everyone* good or bad. Much like God's love shines on all, evil seems to darken everyone's door also. What doesn't seem to make sense is that some of the best people suffer the most. Historians tell us that Mother Teresa, perhaps the most compassionate, loving woman ever, suffered with depression and spiritual desolation toward the end of her life. The late Pope



John Paul II was shot and suffered with Parkinson's disease toward the end of his life. Pope Francis has lost part of his right lung yet is as vigorous as ever. Billy Graham, perhaps the greatest evangelist ever, has Parkinson's disease, lost his wife, can't preach anymore, and is ninety-five years of age as I write this. I saw an interview with him on television, and his faith is still vibrant. Despite his sufferings, he has a staunch faith in God and recently wrote a book *Nearing Home*. The book is an optimistic look at coping with old age through faith in God. I'm glad the title wasn't *Nearing Death*.

I met a man, Brent Skillman, years ago while preaching at his church in Arlington, Texas. Brent was a good man full of faith. We ended up becoming great friends and had played numerous rounds of golf together. I was adopted into his family. We had long conversations about faith and life whenever we got together. He was married and had three children. I presided at the weddings of his son and daughter and witnessed the marriage of his other son. Unfortunately, Brent developed Hodgkin's disease about thirty years ago. This is a form of cancer in the lymph system. Treatment of this cancer damaged his lung, and for nine whole months, Brent was in the hospital receiving treatments. They ended up removing Brent's lung, but he developed infections, pneumonia, and everything else imaginable. Brent passed to the Lord at the young age of sixty-four earlier this year. During his nine long months in the hospital, he suffered greatly.

At his funeral in a crowded church of some seven hundred people, I shared how Brent taught us to reach out to people, no matter how insignificant they seem. Why did a man who was so full of faith, taught CCD at his church, raised a wonderful family, and owned a business supporting so many have to die like this? His wife and children were devastated as they dealt daily with the ups and downs of his disease. Now they suffer as they grieve Brent.



I am very familiar with the pain of suffering. I lost my dad suddenly when he died in his sleep fourteen years ago. My dad was my best friend and biggest supporter, and suddenly I was thrust into the grieving process. I am now dealing with my ninety-year-old mother who has a variety of maladies including losing her memory.

For most of my life, I was so healthy and thanked God for my good health. I worked out, ran, played golf, and enjoyed great health. At age forty-nine, I hit my wall. It all began by finding out that I had thyroid problems. I then tore the meniscus in my knee as I was running. I've had two arthroscopies since. The ravages of acne in my teen years have augmented the effects of growing older on my complexion. People are always telling me, "You look tired." For almost three years, I've been in orthodontic treatment because I was losing the sibilance when I pronounced words. Now my teeth are straight, and I have most of my resonance back, but because I have cross bite, my teeth are still hitting when I talk. Because I am a public speaker, I can't tell you how I have suffered with this. It is so difficult to pronounce words when my teeth hit in various places from one week to the next.

About twice a year (sometimes more), I suffer migraine headaches. I know some who suffer from this debilitating illness every day. The migraines I get started when I was in ninth grade. First an "aura" will appear and move across my field of vision. This causes partial blindness for about forty-five minutes. Then, when the aura moves on, the intense headache will come that makes me sick to my stomach. These headaches can occur at anytime, anywhere. Thanks be to God that I've only had one migraine in all my times of preaching. The headaches can be so bad that they cause tingling in my tongue, hands, and even slur my speech. In some ways, they mimic stroke symptoms. I've been to several doctors about





this. No one knows exactly what causes these headaches. Contributing factors are diet, stress, environmental changes, brilliant light, or a combination of the above.

I've written before about my anxiety attacks. They started in high school and manifest themselves when I read in public. Although I have learned to courageously face this social phobia, I still get adrenalin rushes at times. The adrenalin flow initiates the "fight or flight" mechanisms in my body. This physiological response leads to rapid heartbeat, shaking, and loss of breath. These mainly occur when I am asked to read on the spur of the moment without any warning. Panic attacks are very embarrassing and a source of deep anxiety and suffering for me.

Some time ago, I had my first bout of sciatica. This is a misnomer. It ought to be called "painaticia." The sciatic nerve runs through your hips down each leg and to your feet. After working out one day, I bent down to pick up my gym bag and felt a twinge in my lower back. That quickly morphed into sciatica. I went to a chiropractor and finally to a back surgeon. My MRIs showed degenerating discs everywhere. He suggested a conservative approach: physical therapy. It took three months of P.T. for the pain to subside. The hardest part was wondering if the pain would ever go away. The pain radiated while just lying in bed.

Most recently, I had to have a partial knee replacement in my right knee that had been scoped twice. I could barely walk because of the bone-on-bone pain, and now I am four months post-op as I write this. I started writing this book shortly after my surgery. For the last four months, I have been rehabbing vigorously, exercising, and working out at a health club. (The surgery came just after my sciatica subsided.) While I can now walk much better, the swelling and some pain still remain, but I am optimistic.

Besides my physical and emotional sufferings, the religious community I have vowed myself to is diminishing. We are an aging community, slowly dwindling with only a trickle of people joining us. I can't help but think, "What will happen to our community and to me in the next twenty years?" While I am optimistic, the future of religious life in the U.S. looks bleak. Everyone is going through something. It has been said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

As I wrote all this recounting my sufferings, it made me think long and hard. I felt like crying, but the tears won't come. When I consider all I've been through and all I still have to go through, I don't want any more. I feel the pain is too much to bear. We can't escape the reality that we must suffer. We all have it in varying degrees. Some get it younger than most, others when they are older. Sometimes we can feel God doesn't love us because of the suffering we must bear. Once St. Teresa of Avila was complaining to Jesus about some sufferings she had to bear. Jesus replied, "This is how I treat my friends." With her typical wit, Teresa replied, "No wonder you have so few friends."

The Book of Revelation, as with much of the Bible, was written to sustain and encourage those who were undergoing trials and persecution because of their faith in Jesus. It was written to give them hope and assure them of the ultimate victory. In Revelation, we hear God declare, "I will wipe away your tears." (Rev. 21:4) When I consider my sufferings, I rely on the many promises of God given to us in the Scriptures. These words give me great comfort and strength. Ultimately not a hair on our head will be harmed. I cling to God in hope because nothing will ever separate me from his love. A Scripture I think about time and time again is, "The sufferings of the present aren't worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to us." (Ro. 8:18)



While we all experience suffering on a personal level, we are also familiar with sufferings that occur on a wider level. A bitter memory for us as a nation was the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001. Most recently the Gulf war and the war in Afghanistan, have taken their toll on our nation. We have lost many brave men and women who died during these wars. Many others were wounded to preserve our freedoms.

Today, many oppressed people are being brutally killed in Syria with no reprisal. There is tension in North Korea, China, the Soviet Union, and Venezuela. There has been a rash of shootings at schools such as Newtown, Connecticut, airports, malls, and movie theaters. Our nation is divided as issues such as same sex marriages, abortion, and the legalization of marijuana are debated and voted upon both nationally or by individual states.

Most know about the atrocities of the Jewish holocaust, but few know about the one hundred five *million* people who perished in the Armenian holocaust of the early 1900s. Recently thousands lost their life when one of the strongest storms ever recorded, Typhoon Haiyan, ravaged the Philippines. There is poverty, hunger, murders, birth defects, SIDS, diseases, drug use, addictions, depression, and suicides. Our mother earth languishes with the effects of pollution and climate change. Our world community, our nation, and we as individuals are all familiar with suffering.

As part of my training for priesthood, I participated in a program called Clinical Pastoral Education, or C.P.E. This three-month program took place in a hospital and was interdenominational. Various individuals who were already ordained or seeking ordination participated. Some were seeking certification as hospital chaplains. Part of the program entailed the group (usually about 8 people) getting together and sharing ministry experiences. A major part of the group sharing

was delving deeply into our emotions and past details of our life. The sharing could be very intense at times. Some people would break down and cry as they shared about their life as they came face to face with their inner issues. The majority of the program had us facing the sea of sufferings that occur in any hospital. We were present to the doctors, nurses, and other staff, as well as visiting patients in their rooms.

I did my C.P.E. training back in 1988 at Sutter General Hospital in Sacramento, California. The majority of patients I visited were Catholic, but I stopped in on people of all denominations. I saw suffering of all types: cancer, heart problems, as well as people undergoing operations. On a day-to-day basis, I would gently knock, identify myself as a chaplain, and enter a person's room. Most welcomed a visit, some didn't. When invited in, I would talk with the person, get to know them a little, and pray with them. This was a wonderful ministry and taught me much compassion.

Once I got a call about a family in the waiting room. I was told their husband and father was on life support and they were contemplating "pulling the plug" because he was so non-responsive. As I approached the room, I sensed the extreme distress I was about to encounter once I opened the door. I hesitated and thought. I tried to think of the "right" things to say. Our church teaches the sanctity of life and to give a person a chance to live despite the appearances. As I stood outside the door thinking and knowing I was about to enter that traumatic situation, something strange happened. I laughed. There was nothing funny about this. But this was so awkward that the situation brought about a response I didn't expect. I then took courage, entered the room, sat with the family, listened and offered compassion. Thankfully, they decided to wait and see what happened.

I'm trying to describe that suffering surrounds us everywhere. At this very moment, thousands of hospitals are



filled with people in dire circumstances. Children's hospitals are filled with young people with cancer, blood diseases, and other maladies. Nursing homes are overflowing with people who have lived good and productive lives, who have raised families and impacted people, who are now suffering with Alzheimer's, arthritis, and other crippling diseases. Some have lost family and must deal with loneliness and depression.

## A Just God?

I once watched a movie called *God on Trial*. This movie, produced in 2008, was based on an event in Elie Wiesel's play, *The Trial of God*. It took place in the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. A group of Jewish prisoners gathered around in their barracks. God was put on trial for abandoning the Jewish people and breaking the covenant. Many of the negative parts of the Bible such as multiple wars, God desiring for Abraham to sacrifice his son, as well as the flood that destroyed the world were discussed. Each prisoner spoke in harsh terms about God and few stood up for God. The prisoners looked gaunt in their striped outfits. The barracks were austere and looked cold. All present had numbers on their chests.

Right in the middle of God's trial, a group of Nazi SS men with guns at their side, barged in and interrupted the proceedings. They began to read out numbers: 243567, 243789, 243895... Each number represented a person who had to stand up and follow the Nazi's to the gas chambers. The movie demonstrated the fragility of life.

After this horrifying scene, the trial continued, and God was found guilty of breaking the covenant and breaking faith. God was declared unjust and not a friend of the Jewish people. The emotion and ferocity of the beliefs shared was moving. The reality of suffering and injustice could not be denied. What kind of God would allow this?

The Jewish Holocaust was an unspeakable horror for us as a human race. I remember visiting the Jewish holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, just outside Jerusalem, when I studied there. I was struck by the uncountable numbers that perished, the innocence of the victims, and the absurdity of it all. Some six million Jews, as well as those of other ethnicities, were senselessly annihilated. We must never forget the horrors of the holocaust. Elie Wiesel once wrote, “to forget the holocaust is to kill twice.”

I’ve read a number of books authored by those who suffered greatly because of it. When I was in the seventh grade, I read the *Diary of Anne Frank*. Anne was only thirteen when she and her family had to hide from the Nazis. They took refuge in the sealed off annex where her father worked in Amsterdam. For two years, she lived captive in this small space, even unable to go outside. When I read the book, I felt the intensity and horror of the situation. They came close to being caught a number of times, and my heart pounded with fear as I imagined myself in their shoes. Finally, they were betrayed and captured. Anne was paraded off to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she died of Typhus.

Although young, her writings reveal the hope that is in us all. Although we go through various trials and tribulations, hope resides in everyone. I think the ability to see the good and believe for a better day is in our DNA. Here are a few of the inspiring truths Anne wrote in her diary.

In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. Everyone has inside of them a piece of good news. The good news is that you don’t know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!



## Hope Doesn't Disappoint

Paul the apostle has an interesting take on suffering. In his letter to the Romans he wrote, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...” (Ro. 5:3-5) Ironically, he wrote, sufferings lead to hope!

Sufferings can either make you or break you. You can become bitter or better. If you have faith in God, difficulties can produce endurance, character, and hope. Paul knew suffering. In these lofty verses, he assures us that our hope will never disappoint! Paul is not talking about a fanciful wish or a gamble. The hope Paul discusses isn't a false, whimsical maybe. When Paul writes about hope, he talks about a future that is sure and firm. First Peter tells us we have been born anew to a “living” hope! (1 Pet. 1:3) Hope is alive. Because hope lives, we *dare* to hope. We are assured that hope will never disappoint because we have *even now* the foretaste of what is to come. Paul tells us, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” (Ro. 5:5) Paul talks about the Holy Spirit as the “foretaste,” “down payment,” and “*guarantee*” of what is to come in other places. Hope is a guaranteed reality.

Sometimes I'll channel surf and see boxing on television. I've noticed on various occasions that one of the boxers will have “Everlast” on the top of his trunks. While that is a brand of sports equipment, I think it is also sending a message to his opponent: “I can outlast you! I will defeat you.” Paul instructed the young Timothy to “fight the good fight of faith.” (1 Tim. 6:12) Just before this verse, Paul talked about pursuing virtues such as endurance and love. We are in a struggle that demands endurance. Believing in Jesus is a life-long journey. The only way to gain endurance is to stand toe to toe with our



adversaries and adversities and persevere. None of the virtues come cheaply or easily. The only way to gain endurance is to endure. Our model of endurance is Jesus. We are exhorted to keep our eyes focused on him who “for the joy set before him, endured the cross.” (Heb. 12:2)

When I workout in a health club, I have a routine. First I stretch out my back and muscles in several ways. Then I exercise on a bike, run on the elliptical, tone with weights, and then swim several laps. When I first started, all of these exercises were very hard to do. Over time, I have pressed through the pain and have built up endurance. When I feel resistance, I don’t quit. This has led to a toned body and the ability to endure the hardships that come when I travel. After some time, endurance becomes a lifestyle and a part of my character. Becoming the character of Christ, after all, is our life goal. Hope means that God is at work as we suffer bringing about good in us. God is at work in our circumstances and is helping us become what we never could do on our own: becoming the image of Jesus Christ. “It is for discipline that we have to endure. God is treating you like children.” (Heb. 12:7)

We inherit God’s promises, not only through faith, but through patience. (Heb. 6:12) Patience is another virtue that can emerge when we are faced with suffering. It is interesting, but when we are sick and go to a doctor or hospital, we are called a “patient.” Whether you are good at waiting or not, you will be forced to be patient if you suffer. When I had my knee operation, the whole long process of preparing for the operation, checking in, getting prepped, waiting for the surgeon, having the operation, and then the post-op proceedings, taught me a lot of patience!

Biblical patience isn’t simply waiting. Everyone has to wait whether it is at a red light or for a slow clerk at a store. We





simply can't have life in this world on our own time schedule. Rather, biblical patience means we wait with expectancy and a good attitude. We Catholics celebrate the season of Advent. We wait for the coming of Christ at Christmas as well as the end of time. While we wait, we don't succumb to drunkenness and sins of the flesh, rather we wait with expectancy. The great symbol of Advent is the Virgin Mary pregnant with her son. We call a pregnant woman a person who is "expecting." Even though your dreams aren't being accomplished right away, be patient. Wait with expectancy and hope. Don't murmur, complain, and give up. Endure and wait well. God is at work in your situation.

When I went to the hospital to have my knee operation in October 2013, I had a good idea of what the pre-op process would be like. I had already had two arthroscopies on my knee. If you have ever had an operation, you know you have everything taken away from you, including your watch, and put into a bag. I call it the "stripping." Your clothes and all of your personal effects are taken and given back to you when you leave. Not only that, my leg was shaved and my arm was punctured for the IV. You are naked, hooked up, and alone. I knew what was about to happen, and this time I took my breviary with me. Another name for the breviary is the Liturgy of the Hours. These are the Psalms of praise and thanksgiving as well as intercessions and other prayers that priests and many lay people pray several times a day. You can pray this online by going to [www.divineoffice.org](http://www.divineoffice.org).

I had my book with me, and when they took everything away, I told the nurse that I was a priest and asked her if I could keep this book until they wheeled me in for the operation. She compassionately said, "OK." Instead of lying there all nervous and in distress, I decided to pray and praise God. First Thessalonians 5:18 tells us it is actually the will of God for us to give thanks in all circumstances. Notice, the Scriptures

don't tell us to thank God "for" the circumstance, but "in" the situation. That is exactly what I was doing as I waited. I knew that doctors are hardly ever on time for surgeries, and as advertised, mine was an additional forty-five minutes late.

While I waited, I praised God for his goodness and love and thanked God that he was with me and was going to bring me through this! I prayed for a great result. I love Psalm 116 which we pray quite frequently: "I trusted, even when I said: 'I am sorely afflicted.'" Notice it is the afflictions that lead to trust. Trusting in God is another key virtue that suffering can produce. To trust in God means to rely on, have confidence in, and depend on God in the midst of trying circumstances. Paul wrote the Corinthians and said, "We experienced affliction so great that we were utterly, unbearably crushed so we despaired of life itself. We felt we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely, not on ourselves, *but on God* who raises the dead." (2 Cor. 1:8-9)

I also love Psalm 63:8: "My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast." As I trusted and relied on God, I was strengthened. As I praised God, I was able to face the dire moments before that operation with new ability. God is after character. Our afflictions can devastate us and cause us to give up and lose hope. Or, ironically, they can be the catalyst for us to be patient, endure, and trust in God. As character is being forged in us, hope springs forth, a hope that will never disappoint. Hope means a better day is coming. Hope means God is at work bringing about good even now. Dare to hope! Choose to hope, and keep pressing on no matter what.

When I led a pilgrimage to the shines of Italy, I took my people to the Catacomb of St. Callixtus on the Appian Way, just outside of Rome. In the early centuries, Christians took refuge from the persecutions by going underground. Many of the early saints and Popes are buried in these catacombs.



I had the honor of presiding at Mass in one of the crypts. I had read about the symbol on an anchor that had been etched into one of the walls. While I was there, I had a guide take me down one of the tunnels, and we found the symbol. The etching was that of an anchor with a cross on top. (In fact, as you enter the catacombs, the hedges above ground were shaped as an anchor.) That anchor comes from Hebrews 6:19: "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain where Jesus has gone on our behalf..."

When the Christians were being persecuted and hiding out, one of them carved the anchor into the wall as a symbol of the sure hope that was theirs even as they suffered. When a ship is buffeted by the storm, often they drop anchor. The prongs of the anchor dig into the ground below and hold the ship firm despite the raging waves and storm. Similarly, it is our sure hope in God that holds us firm when the storms of suffering rage. St. Paul of the Cross loved to write about "unshakable faith." Faith and hope give us stability as we face life.

Another book that has had a positive influence in my life is *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. This book was suggested to me by my novice master while I was in the novitiate. Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychologist who was arrested and held in Auschwitz. He saw life at its worst and best. He found that there are only two classes of humanity that exist: those who are decent and those who are unprincipled. He was separated from his wife when he was held in prison. It was the hope of being reunited with her that kept him going through the cold nights and hunger. The Bible talks about us as "prisoners of hope." (Zech. 9:12) Even though we can be behind bars, we are held captive by a stronger force than steel: hope. Hope pervades the boundaries of captivity and misery. Hope brings energy and strength even when others give up. Hope keeps us positive even in desperate circumstances.

Dr. Frankl noticed that when people lost hope, they gave up. In the deprivation of the concentration camps, he saw humanity at its most basic level. The hard labor, lack of food, loss of comforts, as well as the threat of death was meant to break a person's spirit. Some gave up and committed suicide by throwing themselves into the electric fence. But because of hope, others clung to life and fought for life at all costs. One of Victor Frankl's famous quotes that has touched me deeply and rings true: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last and greatest of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Our attitude toward life, our circumstances, and people are not predetermined. Our disposition is our own choice. When you choose to be positive, it will eventually become your lifestyle and thus your character.

Recently a book was sent to me with an interesting title: *Rare*. The full title of the book if you wish to purchase it is: *Rare, My Daughter's Faithful Journey Through Cancer*. The book was sent by the parents of a young girl named Rebecca Stepusin, who developed a rare form of cancer called rhabdomyosarcoma. Rebecca was an intelligent teenage girl who started college at the University of Florida when she found out about her cancer. Right from the start, she and her father decided to document in a book what would unfold. They chronicled the journey in surprising detail. Her desire to simply attend classes and live a normal life touched me. So many take this for granted and feel entitled to an education. Rebecca showed us what a privilege it is to live and demonstrated such passion to learn.

As I read the book, I was struck with Rebecca's positive attitude and sense of humor in the midst of the growing sickness. She had a peace and calm about her that everyone could see. She never asked, "Why me?" Everyone her age were dating and attending classes and enjoying sports.



Rebecca lie in her bed, slowly losing her life. She had to undergo many harrowing operations. I recently reread a book by Rev. Robert Schuller *Turning Hurts into Halos and Scars into Stars*. He talks about various forms of suffering and attitude. He taught that when suffering comes, don't ask, "Why me?" Rather ask, "What now?" In other words, instead of thinking, "Why did this come upon me?" Think, "How can I learn, grow, and journey forward because of this?" "How can I find meaning in this?" Attitude is so crucial in hard times as well as in good times.

I wept when I read about how Rebecca faced her dire surgeries with such courage. One night she and her friends went out to the movies on the evening of one of her surgeries. When her mother tried to stop her, she simply said, "O Mom, they are just going to put me to sleep in the morning any ways!" Rebecca's faith in God was very evident as was her love for her family, friends, and life itself. Her smile and way lit up any room despite her many chemo treatments and loss of hair, weight, and eventually her life.

Through reading the book, I found myself appreciating life so much more. The little things that normally harass me seemed like nothing in comparison with what this young lady faced with such nobility. All Rebecca wanted to do was live a normal life, go to school, learn, and live life. She kept fighting through all the treatments and operations, but after a year of many sufferings, succumbed to the disease. But, her nobility of spirit and her attitude and love for life live on. She taught us how to face our difficulties with dignity. She showed me once again how precious life is and not to take anything for granted. Rebecca chose life over and over again even in the most grim circumstances. She taught us all that no matter what, we have a choice. She found meaning in her suffering and clung to God. I strongly urge you to read *Rare* written by Rebecca and her father Paul Stepusin.

One of the fruits of our afflictions is becoming rooted more deeply in God. I heard a story about a tree that was planted on the top of a large hill. Day after day this tree was buffeted by the wind. The tree looked down into the valley and he noticed there was hardly any wind down there. The vegetation looked so lush and all the trees looked so happy. He lamented that he was planted on a hill and had to endure the harsh conditions at that elevation. One day a ferocious storm came with hurricane-force winds. Once again the tree swayed in the gale and circled like a swizzle stick. As he looked down into the valley, he saw the vegetation and trees devastated by the hurricane force winds. Trees were uprooted and tossed about and broken everywhere. But, the tree on the hill survived. Although the tree was buffeted by the same winds, its roots had grown strong by its prior suffering. When the major storm came, its root system kept it alive. The other trees had no depth and were uprooted easily.

The writer of Ephesians prayed for us to be rooted and established in God's love. (3:17) We are established and rooted through suffering. Afflictions give us depth and stretch us so we won't be moved when more tribulations come. Eventually, our sufferings are preparing us for the final storm all must face: death. As we get rooted more and more in God now, we will not be shaken at our final hour. Don't waste your sufferings. They are too valuable. You can see more through a teardrop than you can through a telescope. Let trials thicken you and teach you. Jesus talked about the necessity of having firm foundations at the end of his Sermon on the Mount. He talked about being founded on rock and being prepared for the storms that will inevitably come.

Dr. Frankl survived the horrors of the concentration camps and continued his psychotherapy practice after the war. He incorporated what he learned through his dramatic experiences into a new branch of psychology which he developed called



“logotherapy.” His basic premise is that people develop neuroses through lack of meaning or purpose. Once a person can apprehend meaning in their life, they begin to get better.

While I believe logotherapy isn’t the “secret” to everyone getting better, I think it is a place of great truth and insight. For example, there are many who are unemployed. This is devastating to the human psyche. We were made to express our talents and realize our potential. When someone is unemployed or underemployed, they are left with themselves and often they regress into discouragement and depression. The unemployed struggle with loss of identity. If you can give that person meaning and purpose, their outlook will improve. Once filled with hope, passion and energy will return. Similarly, a person with a broken dream will give up and become listless. If they can come to understand their life in a new context, with meaning, instead of crumbling into discouragement or an addiction, they can find serenity. Frankl said, “A person can deal with any ‘what’ if they have a ‘why.’” A meaningless existence is absurdity. Passion will flow out of purpose and meaning.

While many books have been written regarding suffering that is optimistic, the book *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, offered little hope. This is another book about the Jewish Holocaust. This book is very different from the illumination Frankl’s book brought. *Night* documents his experience in Auschwitz and Buchenwald at the height of the Holocaust. Wiesel recounts the horrors of the camp and the many deaths that occurred. In one scene, his own father was beaten to death by a Nazi as he watched, helpless and unable to do anything lest he be beaten also. Much like the Jews who put God on trial, Elie Wiesel struggled with God and God’s seeming absence during such atrocities. In his book, a young boy was hung in the sight of all the prisoners. It took a while for him to die because he didn’t weigh very much. All the prisoners were



forced to look at him full in the face. Someone in the crowd lamented, “Where is God now?” Elie heard a voice within him that answered, “Here he is, hanging here on these gallows.” Later he sadly wrote, “Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.”

While we may not be struggling with Auschwitz, many have to deal with Alzheimer’s. Others are struggling with spiritual desolation, depression, or physical maladies of one sort or another. We can ask, “Where is God now?” “Why doesn’t God help me?” “How can God let this happen to me?” Suffering confronts us with what we really believe in our heart of hearts.

## **Prayer in Distress**

There are a number of writings in the Bible that wrestle with suffering. One of these books is Lamentations which is traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. Scholars are fairly certain he did not write this, but since it is attributed to the prophet, Lamentations appears chronologically after the writings of Jeremiah who himself suffered much for proclaiming God’s word. The Book of Lamentations is a collection of poems that shows great sorrow for the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 BCE. Jerusalem and its temple were the heart of Jewish culture and worship. All this was destroyed and the people brought into captivity. The author laments the dead and the desertion of the city by God.

Although full of lament for the disaster and having the tone of a funeral dirge, there are glimmers of hope. The author remembers how God acted favorably in the past and believes better times are ahead. In a quoted Scripture, we often read, “Great is God’s faithfulness, his mercies are new every morning.” (Lam. 3:22) The book ends with a prayer for restoration: “Restore us to yourself O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old!” (Lam. 5:21) This is a great prayer for anyone who is struggling.





That is exactly what is going on in Psalm 43. The author is suffering and wants to pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He prays for healing and vindication against his enemies. While he feels “cast off” and mourns, he trusts in God. He prays for vindication and then muses within his own heart, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God for I will again praise him, my help and my God.” (Ps. 43:5) In the divine office, we pray this Psalm over and over again as the weeks go by. No matter what we are going through, we are being taught to encourage ourselves and keep hoping for a better day. We are invited to cling to God no matter what.

When Jesus was being tortured on the cross, he cried out in the words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The human Jesus not only suffered physically, but also emotionally. We know of his intense fear in the Garden of Gethsemani. But he also went through extreme desolation on the cross. He had to experience everything we go through in order to redeem us. We are all familiar with rejection, being abandoned, and loneliness. Many lives are crushed by these emotions. Jesus was overwhelmed with these emotions as part of his passion. These feelings were real, intense, and enough to break any man. In a very real way, Jesus bore the punishment we deserved by our sins. He was condemned, forsaken, and suffered death. He felt what we should have felt because of our transgressions. He bore our sins and iniquities. For those horrible hours on the cross, God hid his face from Jesus.

Along with suffering these emotions intensely, Jesus was also fulfilling this Scripture. Psalm 22, like one third of all the Psalms, is a writing of lament. David is praying for deliverance from an enemy. The first half of the Psalm begins lamenting, “Why are you so far from me? I cry by day but you do not answer.” It speaks of the sufferings he must endure: “All

who seek me mock me. Many bulls encompass me. I am poured out like water and my heart is like wax melted within my breast.” These words were literally fulfilled in surprising detail by Jesus on the cross. Jesus was expressing the horror of his feelings but also uniquely fulfilling a Psalm about the sufferings of the messiah.

Psalm 22, like most writings of lament, begin with the tragic situation, but end in hope, in praise. Lamentations pour out their confusion and complaint to God, but hope is always around the corner. The authors always remind God of the situation they are going through and then express their hope in the God who can save them. Even though his bones can be counted, his enemies gloat over him, and his garments are divided among those who taunt him, the Psalmist expresses hope. “I will tell of your name to my brothers. You who fear the Lord, praise God! God has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted. May your hearts live forever!”

When Jesus quoted Psalm 22 on the cross, he was expressing what he was going through: desolation and brokenness. He was being tortured. He was bearing the weight of the sins of the world upon his shoulders. His body was broken like a dish being smashed. For hours of agony, he was forsaken by God for our sakes. Yet, in quoting this Psalm (which Jesus knew so well), Jesus was expressing hope of God’s vindication and a better day. He was proclaiming the sovereignty of God and God’s ability to save. Jesus was saying, “No matter your pain, God hears and will answer!” Psalm 22 is really a writing of hope and trust in God. God proved it true when he raised Jesus from the dead. He will prove it true in our life too when we cling to hope. When you are going through difficulties, pour out your complaint to God. However, a true lament always relies on God confidently. Somehow in your prayer, “Hope in God, for I will praise him still!”



## In the End

We are all familiar with the Book of Job. Job was a righteous man who was greatly blessed by God. In a conversation that represents the struggle between evil and good, Satan claims that Job only worships God because of his blessings. Evil argued, if the good things were removed, Job would curse God. God allows Satan to touch Job's life, and he experiences great suffering. Job questions why all the hardships came upon him since he is blameless and upright. The Book of Job wrestles with this question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The prevalent belief at that time was that you suffer because you have done something wrong. This was shown when a blind man was brought to Jesus and they asked, "Who sinned, the man or his parents, that this blindness should come upon him?" Jesus dispelled this way of thinking when he taught about the glory of God that can shine through suffering.

Even though he suffered, Job maintained his innocence. His friends engage him in theological discourses and Job listens. His own wife tells him to curse God and die, but Job still holds on to hope. He remains blameless and sinless in the face of the negativity of people and his suffering. The lesson for us is the same as for Job. When people are negative and sufferings abound, trust God. There are many great lines in Job. One is: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust God." (13:15) Another which is read at many a funeral and has been set to music is "I Know My Redeemer Lives." (19:25)

Finally, after many argumentations, God appears to Job in the whirlwind and poses several questions to Job. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, or caused the dawn to know its place?" These are but a couple of the questions posed demonstrating God's abilities.

Sometimes I question God's working in the world. Why do evil people prosper? Why do good people suffer? Why are women who want to have children barren and those who don't become pregnant? Many, many things in our world simply do not make sense. Sometimes I say to myself, "If I were God, I would do it this way or that way..." Of course, I say that tongue in cheek because I know deep down, I lack understanding. I didn't even cause my own being. I don't know my own end. We all need a wider and deeper perspective.

The conclusion of the Book of Job is filled with blessings. Job trusts God, remains blameless, and even prays for the negative people in his life who tried to dissuade him. In the end, the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before! The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than in his beginning. The Book of Job shares wisdom meant for all of us. When afflictions and sufferings come to us, its source is evil, not God. People may offer advice, but usually understanding is lacking. It is up to you to decide what sort of person you will be when trials and sufferings come. These sufferings come, not because you have done wrong per se, but because you are human. Your sufferings need not define you, but they can refine you. Doing the right thing when the wrong thing is happening to you is a great sign of maturity. Somehow, somehow God will right the wrongs in your life. God is looking for "unshakable" faith. The Book of Job teaches us that none of us understand life completely, but God still reigns.

## **Greater Clarity**

In Paul's famous chapter on love, he writes, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." (1 Cor. 13:12) Most of you know I have had two near-death experiences when I was eighteen years old. I wrote about these in my book *Death: The Final Surrender*.



These life changing experiences radically reoriented my life and helped me trust God through life's countless changes and unexplained sufferings. For a few brief moments, I "understood fully as I have been fully understood." I realized that all that weighs us down now and possesses our thoughts will melt away when we stand in God's presence. None of our questionings and worries will matter or even come to mind. On that day, we will be renewed, transformed, and made whole in God. The many questions we have now will be answered, not so much with a definite response, but simply by being with God. In the end, your fortunes will be restored doubly. No matter what you are going through now, like Job, your "end" is coming!

The final book in the Bible, Revelation, offers us this truth: "God will dwell with them, and they shall be God's people, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:4) Singer Eric Clapton wrote a song "Tears in Heaven" following the death of his four-year-old son, Conor. Little Conor fell out of a fifty-third floor window to his death in New York City in 1991. This ballad became a hit on the radio. Writing and performing the song helped Clapton grieve his little son. Ironically, the song isn't about tears in heaven, but rather he sings, "I know there'll be no more tears in heaven."

Perhaps the most famous teaching Jesus ever gave was his Sermon on the Mount. (Luke edits this for his purposes and changes the location to a plain.) The scene was a hill in Galilee overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Poppies and wildflowers grow there. Birds abound and the backdrop was the azure sea. Studies have been done on this particular spot as there is a natural amphitheater in this location. Thousands would have been able to hear Jesus speak even without a microphone. Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses who goes to the

mountain and sits while he teaches. Sitting is the posture of authority while teaching. Jesus is the new lawgiver. While there are some wealthy among his hearers, for the most part the gathered are poor, sick, and needy. We hear Jesus announce:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. (Mt. 5:1-12)

I want you to notice that a large majority of Jesus' teachings had to do with the future kingdom. Although Jesus was a healer and healed many, he taught that our poverty, mourning, persecutions, and wrongs will be made right in heaven. That is not to say that God is not able to reward us here, remember Job got double and you can too. If you are believing and obedient, you can expect help and prosperous times from God. But when it comes to suffering, injustices, and even death itself, our main vindication will come from God after we die. This hope invigorates my life with joy even now. In the midst of my trials and sufferings, I know I was made for more than this and a glorious new day is coming.

The Psalmist once mused, as do all of us, about the "prosperity of the wicked." It seems strange when unbelievers seemingly have it so good. Their businesses prosper, their health is good, and they don't seem to have any problems. The author Asaph mused, "My feet had



almost stumbled, for I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” But then he prayed and gained wisdom. “I perceived their end. They will fall in ruin.” But toward believers, “You hold my right hand. *Afterward* you will receive me to glory.” (Ps. 73)

Jesus taught that a great reversal is coming. “Many that are first will be last and the last will be first.” (Mk. 10:31) The poor and Gentiles would be exalted even over those “born into” the Jewish faith. This would happen, not because they were necessarily poor or foreign born, but because they became believers in Jesus as the Son of God. We may begin to see signs of this reversal even now, but primarily Jesus taught, the exaltation will come in heaven.

I think often of these verses from 1 Peter 1:3-7:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy, we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, *kept in heaven for you*, who by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Believers experience happiness, joy, blessings, and God’s presence now. God walks with us through thick and thin and holds our hand. We are more than conquerors because of God’s love. But our true vindication will come in the salvation

yet to be revealed. The truth is we are only sojourners here on earth. This is not our true home. “Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 3:20)

## God is Faithful

When Paul wrote the church at Corinth, he told them God would sustain them guiltless as they awaited the day of the revealing of Jesus Christ. Then he said, “God is faithful.” (1 Cor. 1:9) God will not fail or forsake us as we journey through the sufferings, trials, and tribulations we must all endure. God is loyal, consistent, and true. He doesn’t waver in his fidelity toward us. God isn’t up and down, but the same yesterday, today, and forever. We read in 1 John, God is faithful to forgive when we acknowledge our sins. God walks with us and will never fail or forsake us. God who began a great work of faith in us will bring it through to completion. When I pray the Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours, I am always struck by the short and powerful Psalm 117. “Strong is God’s love for us. God is *faithful forever!*” God’s love and faithfulness will endure for all eternity. In the Book of Revelation, John has a vision of Jesus on a white horse and its rider was called “faithful and true.” Even though we can be unfaithful, God cannot deny himself.

No matter the suffering, trial, difficulty, injustice, or confusion you may go through, God is faithful. God will see you through. I love the song “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” It is sung with such simplicity and sureness. This song was based on Lamentations 3 and talks about the trials we must go through. More than the trials, the song extols the fact that God never changes. Seasons change, but God’s compassion and mercy never do. Because God is faithful, we have great hope. God will see us through!





Perhaps you've heard the story about the missionary and his wife who served in Africa for many years. After countless years of service, they were on a ship returning to the United States. They had given their all and now their health was failing and they had no money or pension. As the ship crossed the Atlantic they found out that President Teddy Roosevelt was on board returning from an African hunting expedition. When the ship docked in New York, a band awaited his return. Dignitaries from everywhere were there to greet the president. But no one even noticed the missionary couple. The man struggled with the lack of appreciation. Here he had given his life for the poor and there was no fanfare on his return. Yet the president was celebrated.

While he struggled about this disparity, his wife invited him to go to the hotel bedroom and pray about it. After about an hour, he came out of the bedroom with a smile on his face. "Did you pray about your anguish?" asked the wife. "Yes, I did," said the husband. "I talked to God about the president's homecoming and how no one even noticed us. I poured out my anguish before God about this great injustice. Then suddenly, I felt a sense of peace. It was as if God wrapped his arms around me and said, 'But you aren't home yet.'"

There is truly, "No place like home." God is good all the time! All the time God is good! Although the facts of our life may not be friendly, the facts about God are friendly. While we don't understand all that is happening to us on the journey, God is using the journey to ready us for our homecoming. God would never be so unjust to forget your work and service. (Heb. 6:10) Even though life isn't fair and you have suffered, move beyond staying stuck in confusion and self-pity. Never lose trust or faith in God. Be patient, and in the end you will triumph.

We desire that each one of you show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

(Heb. 6:11-12)

Yes, we live in a world of great injustices with many unanswered questions. Because we are human, we will suffer and eventually die. Life isn't fair. God didn't cause our sufferings or death but has redeemed them. There is meaning in our pain. Our sufferings can bring character and hope. The hope birthed is a living hope that will never disappoint. If we endure, stay steadfast, and don't give up, we will encounter God along the way. No matter what, always remember: God is at work making all things work to good. God is faithful toward us. One day he will right the wrongs. Like Job, we can expect vindication. God will give us more than enough here. In addition, God promises us a new day where we will understand as we are understood. God is good all the time. All the time...



## ***Chapter 4*** ***Get A New*** ***Perspective***



We Passionists have a retreat center in Sierra Madre, California. The grounds are lovely and the buildings were constructed on the base of the Sierra Madre Mountains. The lights of Los Angeles are clearly visible at night, and on clear days, the Pacific Ocean can be seen. Night or day you can see scores of people living below as well as the rush hour commutes. Along with the scenic views come new perspectives. One year the retreat slogan was, “Come to the mountaintop. Things look different from up here.”

Even though I’ve flown for over thirty years, I still like to sit by the window. It is amazing how insignificant everything looks from the air. Sometimes I’ll look down on Houston during heavy traffic and it all looks so insignificant. Even traffic looks different when you get a new perspective.

Perception is key when it comes to perspective. Susan Boyle is now a household name when it comes to great singers, but it wasn’t always that way. Perhaps you’ve seen the audition she had on *Britain’s Got Talent* in 2009. This forty-seven year old, unemployed, unknown with disheveled hair shuffled out before Piers Morgan, Simon Cowell, and Amanda Holden, as well as an auditorium full of people. As they questioned her about her dreams of becoming a great singer, people were seen smirking and the judges were seemingly toying with her. Then she began to sing “I Dreamed a Dream.” Everyone’s jaw dropped. Fifteen seconds into the song people began to stand and applaud. The judges all had a look of amazement on their faces. After the standing ovation at the end, Piers said, “I’m reeling from shock!” Amanda Holden said, “This

is my biggest wake up call ever.” Later on Susan ended up winning *Britain’s Got Talent* as she sang “Memory” from Cats. That show launched her career. More than that, it showed us that we need to get a new perspective because our first perceptions aren’t always correct. Never judge a book by its cover, a person by their appearance, and your life by your surroundings.

The prophet Samuel came to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as king of Israel. His seven tall and good looking sons all were paraded before Samuel. None of these were chosen. As an afterthought, the youngest one, David, was finally brought in and was the one chosen. This story demonstrates that God doesn’t so much look at appearances but at the heart. Similarly, when Jesus began his ministry, he came to Nazareth where he grew up. They had the very Son of God in their midst and all they saw was Joseph’s son, the carpenter. Their perception was too biased and clouded. They missed the blessings they could have had because of their narrow perspective.

Abraham was once pouring out his complaint to God. He had had no offspring because his wife was barren, and both were now getting older. God did something interesting; he took Abraham out of his tent! “He brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them.’” (Gen. 15:1-5) What was God doing? He was giving Abraham another perspective. Abraham was just looking myopically at his age and negative circumstances. He needed to look beyond his myopic focus.

It is easy to live under the tent of discontent. We can focus on the negative circumstances and close in on ourselves. I can do that when I am home from preaching missions. I think about how my knee hurts, how my face looks older,



how noisy things are, and how time is passing quickly. We all fall into routines. Because things seem the same day after day, we can fall into flawed patterns of thinking. “I don’t like my boss.” “I hate all this traffic.” “There are so many commercials on television.” “Why are people so strange?” “I feel so anxious and irritable.”

This is why Abraham was taken outside. He needed to see the expanse beyond his nearsighted perspective. Abraham needed to focus on God instead of his everyday circumstances. There is so much more beyond our little world.

I’ve been preaching parish missions for some twenty-five years now. About a week before I am going to leave, I still struggle. I know there will be new experiences, but I know there will be sufferings. The word “travel” comes from the word “travail.” There are hardships on the road. Yet, whenever I finally leave, I always adjust to the new adventure. I meet new people and experience new places. While some aspects of travel are similar, there are always novel experiences. I used to lead pilgrimages to Israel, Greece, and Italy. You cannot buy what these experiences have given me. Travel is an education. You learn things that cannot be taught in a book or on the Internet. I’ve also studied in Italy, Greece, Egypt, and in the Holy Land. All these experiences together have broadened and stretched me. I have learned so much about life, history, and other cultures by getting out of my tent. When I travel and when I minister to others, the focus is off me. I gain new perspectives.

This is the reason we read books and go on retreats. We want to open ourselves up to new ways of thinking and living. We want new ideas, insights, and lifestyles. We want a fresh perspective in order to face our difficulties. Don’t limit your challenges. Challenge your limits!

One of the truths I've noticed when I travel is how big and expansive things are. People are everywhere. There are now over eight billion people on the face of the earth. The earth is huge. While planes make it possible for us to go abroad more easily, the vastness of our planet is amazing. I have studied astronomy and have learned so much about our universe. Light travels at some 186,000 miles per second. Imagine how far light travels in one year. Scientists who measure the Milky Way galaxy tell us it would take light 100,000 *years* to travel across our galaxy! Our galaxy is a comparatively small one. Now think of this. Astronomers tell us there are some *trillion* galaxies in our universe! We don't have the mind to grasp the numbers and the size and conception of reality.

People used to think the earth was at the center of it all and everything revolved around us. Then came the Copernican revolution. We gained a new perspective when we realized we were not at the center. The reality is, in the scope of things, we are a small planet, in a tiny solar system, in an insignificant galaxy. Now that the James Webb telescope has been sent into space we are seeing sights we could have only dreamed of before.

The earth rising over the moon is one of the most iconic photos of the twentieth century. This stunning photo was taken by astronaut Bill Anders aboard the Apollo 8 command module on Christmas eve 1968. It shows the bright, rounded, lunar landscape. Above and beyond the moon, in a blanket of darkness, the small, blue earth was seen. It looked so insignificant from that distance. Hard to believe but billions of people were alive on the planet. Yet, at the moment of the snapshot, babies were being born, people were working, sleeping, driving cars, and watching television. Although the planet looked like a thimble from a distance, up close it was alive with significance.



Despite sophisticated instruments like the James Webb and Hubble telescopes, we cannot see the edge of what is. The universe is expanding at a rate that defies our ability to see and describe it. We search for words to articulate reality as it is being revealed to us. The staggering immensity of creation dwarfs our perception of what “large” really means.

God is the God of the stars but also the atom. Telescopes look up but microscopes look down. In high school, I used to be so amazed when we looked through our microscopes. An entirely different world exists around us and beneath us of which we are unaware. We live in the midst of molecules, atoms, and electrons too small to perceive. Once I saw the infinitesimal creatures who live in the carpet we walk on. If we only saw the tiny beings crawling around in our rugs and what they looked like up close, we definitely wouldn’t go barefoot anymore! When it comes to the magnificence of life, we can be like a fly on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We are surrounded by greatness but sometimes too close to perceive it correctly.

## Corresponding Perception

In the Book of Wisdom, chapter 13, the author speaks out against idolatry. He cites the foolishness of those who would make fire, wind, stars, turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven the gods that rule the world. For us, it would be television, computers, iPhones, cars, addictions, and money. The writer of the Book of Wisdom then makes a statement that shouldn’t be missed: “For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.” (Wis. 13:5) Creation is exquisite. There is the vast array of stars, sunrises, sunsets, oceans, mountains, rainbows, waterfalls, flowers, national parks, and I could go on and on. There is so much to write about; not to mention the over seven

billion people. Besides the beauty and bounty, there is the sheer immensity. The earth may look like a thimble from far away, but our planet is massive!

What does all this tell us about God? If the greatness of created things gives us a corresponding perception about God, God is magnificent beyond all comparison. We must allow what we can see to give us some conception about what we cannot see. Imagine what God must be like since he is the source of all that is beautiful and good here.

J.B. Phillips wrote a book with an interesting title: *Your God is too Small*. The point he was trying to make is because of our limited life experiences we fail to grasp the largeness of our God. Even if one million people were to pool their stories, life experiences, and learning, the resulting knowledge still wouldn't capture the greatness of God. All the collective knowledge of the libraries of the world isn't enough to grasp God's fullness. Our creed tells us God is Almighty. God has the power and is able to do all things. Theologically, we believe God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnipresent (everywhere present). Our imaginations fail us when trying to grasp this concept regarding God. I think agnostics simply have lazy imaginations. They don't allow what they can see and hear fire their imaginations about what is possible.

Quit looking at your tiny tent and look rather to the extent of God's ability!

That's what David did when faced with the giant. Instead of focusing on how big his adversary was, he focused on how big his God was. He was able to defeat his enemy by relying on the power of the Almighty. Everyone else was talking about how large Goliath was. In the story, David never spoke about the size of Goliath from his own mouth. The only thing that was heard from David's mouth was, "I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God





of hosts!" (1 Sam. 17:45) The mistake we can make is how we magnify our problems instead of magnifying our God. We need to get a correct perspective.

I remember going on my annual retreat to Big Sur, California. There is a Camaldolese Retreat Center on a mountain some 1300 feet above the Pacific Ocean. The views are intoxicating. As you look out into the blue ocean, it is hard to tell where the ocean ends and the horizon begins. At night, the stars put on a show. I call this place the "edge of creation." God brings me there each year to get me out of my tent. The beauty of creation mediates contemplation as well as inspiration. I go there to get fresh, new perspectives about my life.

For years, I had the dream of reaching out with the Gospel through the medium of television. While I had this inspiration, the realization of it was far from reality. My reality was no money, no producer, no programs, and no outlets. Goliath was huge and he was taunting me. As I spent time on retreat one year, my imagination about God was ignited. I gazed upon the vast ocean day after day and meditated. At night, I looked at the stars and felt pulled into the scene. The delicious silence spoke volumes. God created all this from nothing simply by speaking it. I considered how the earth was spinning on its axis at over 1000 mph and never wobbles. It seems like we are not moving, yet we are rotating on our axis like a spinning top as well as hurling through our galaxy at thousands of miles per hour.

As I considered all these things, I began to get a new perspective. Instead of focusing on how big my problems were, I began to focus on how great God is! I thought, "If God can do all this, certainly, God can work in my life to accomplish great things. If this dream is from God, it not only can happen, it *will* happen!" My thinking, my boundaries,

and my believing all started to expand. I was determined to challenge my limits and my limited thinking. Negative thinking can be our default setting. We think things like, “I can’t do it.” “It’ll never happen.” “It’s too hard.” “Others get the breaks, but this is reality.” “I don’t think so.” Rather, we need to give God a chance to work. Faith in God is being positive. It is getting a glimpse of who God really is and allowing him to work in our life. Instead, I began to think, “God, you are almighty. I believe you can do all things. Getting me on television is a piece of cake for you. I surrender to your plan for my life. I will do everything I can to bring this plan to pass. I believe you will be at work and make it happen!” Evil works through negativity. Positivity and faith opens a door for God to work.

God’s power brings passion. For me, I had energy to evangelize already. Now I found new creativity, imagination, and determination I never knew before. I began to write, sell books, and CDs. I made contacts. I learned about television. I did what I needed to do. All the while, God was working behind the scenes bringing his vision for my life to pass. I’ve learned that if you do what you can do, God will do what you can’t do. God will open doors through faith if it be his will. Remember though, you inherit the promises of God through faith and *patience*. There are no overnight successes. Nothing happens as quickly as you want or in the way you want.

Every year I would go back for retreat at Big Sur and review the year I just had. I would think about the newest book I had just written in that year, the places I had preached, and how I had progressed toward my dream. I saw how doors were opening ever so slowly. Over the course of seven years, I went from nothing to reaching out in many cities on television and then nationally on TBN’s Church Channel. In the eighth year another milestone, TBN itself invited me to air on its flagship network. I was doing the work, producing the programs, and reaching out the best I knew how.



When it comes to television, it is important to do what you can do, but some things need to happen that are beyond your control. The first is the money must become available because television production and airing is very costly. The Catholic stations give me free airtime, but I buy time on networks and other stations. Another thing that happened is that many generous people have stepped forward and are becoming partners and support my television ministry. Also, many people buy my books and resources through TV and my personal appearances. The next necessary ingredient beyond my control is media outlets. You can have the best programs in the world, but if you have no place to air them, nothing will happen.

Starting in 2006, I began airing on Catholic stations in cities such as New York, Boston, and New Orleans. Being welcomed on these stations was an act of God. God gave me favor with the programming managers of these stations when no one knew of my programs.

As time went on, I began to buy air time in some cities on secular stations. The cost of the air time was expensive. But, little by little, I began reaching out to more and more places. I kept waiting and believing for a national opportunity though. I found out buying time on a national network was expensive, but since networks cover every city, it's like buying in bulk.

In October 2011, I had a major breakthrough with the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN)! They welcomed my programs and I became the only Catholic who air with them. My programs are on their important Sunday lineup. In addition, the Catholic Eternal Word television network (EWTN) has welcomed my programs. I have a prime time Sunday morning with them. Executives also welcome me to preach their Mass live and have interviewed me about several of my books.

I must note here that my TV and radio programs, books, and preaching are not all about me. Ego has nothing to do with

this. Although I do talk about my life and many experiences as a way of connecting with people, my outreach is all about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. St. Paul of the Cross, the founder of the Passionists, was nicknamed, “The Hunter of Souls.” Once I saw a seminarian being interviewed back in the 1950s. The young man had a crew cut and was dressed in a long white alb. The interviewer asked, “Why do you want to be a priest?” He replied, “To save souls.” While I want to inspire, encourage, and help people, my primary purpose and goal as a Catholic priest is to save souls. Helping people to be reborn, saved, filled with the Holy Spirit, and have the assurance of eternal life is what my ministry is all about! I am a hunter of souls. I am a fisher of men and women. I throw the nets out everywhere through TV, radio, books, and other resources, and preaching in person. This is the call I have received, and I hunt and fish the best I can.

My television programs are bearing fruit! I’m not getting the overwhelming response I always hope for, but these shows are reaching out to many. Perhaps you are reading this book because you first saw me on television. I get many emails and letters with testimonies that touch my heart deeply. This one came from a man in prison: “I’m an inmate serving fifteen years to life for murder. I came to Christ through your program on TBN. I want to grow in knowledge of Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Please send me some literature.” (I did.)

In December 2013, Paul Crouch, the owner and founder of TBN died. This man and his family built TBN into a world-wide network from the ground up through faith, patience, and hard work. Unbeknownst to me his wife, Jan Crouch, had been viewing my programs on their former Church Channel and liked what she saw. She invited me to begin airing *Live with Passion!* on TBN itself! This network goes many places in the world and is on all the cable and satellite systems in the U.S. As of this writing, *Live with Passion!* is airing Sundays at 7 am



ET. In addition my programs air on the Catholic global network EWTN at 9:30 am ET and many other Catholic networks. While I have to pay for these times, and it is costly, these outlets are a platform to broadcast my programs everywhere. These breakthroughs are something I could not make happen on my own. God was working behind the scenes giving me favor. I continue to do what I can do, and believe God will do what I cannot do. The same is true for you in your families and with your dreams.

## **All Things are Possible**

Get a new perspective! Instead of focusing on your limitations and the size of your giants, focus on God. God is much bigger than any problem. He wants you to accomplish much in your life and impact the lives of others. God wants your life to be full of passion and purpose. Let life teach you about God. My mind harkens back to Big Sur, getting out of my tent, and staring at the stars. I got in touch with God's greatness and got a new perspective of his working. From the greatness and beauty of life, we get a corresponding perception about the magnificence of our God. Abraham was the Father of Faith. He believed and opened the door for God to work powerfully in his life. When we believe, we open that same door.

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians prayed for our hearts and minds to be illumined about God's greatness. He prayed, "That you may know the immeasurable greatness of God's power in us who believe." (Eph. 1:19) He goes on to say that this power is the same might that raised Jesus from the dead. What is he praying? He wants us to know God and the same power that brings people back from the grave. The same vivifying force that raised Jesus from death and will raise us from non-existence is available to us as believers now. We can't measure, or categorize, or figure out this power. Like the expanding universe, God's power is unlimited, incalculable,

and infinite. As believers, we have a right and access to this potential. Jesus taught that power would come upon us when we received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:8)

Those who are in the Twelve-Step Program talk about being in and staying in recovery because of their “Higher Power.” We know that God is much more personal than a higher power, but they are right. God gives people the power to admit their addiction and summon the humility and courage to move into recovery and face the roots of their addiction. You can overcome any addiction you may be facing! God’s power is greater than any substance abuse.

A couple may be struggling in a marriage. Perhaps you have been married for twenty-five years and your patterns and communication aren’t healthy. You sense the marriage deteriorating and your ways of relating are dysfunctional. God’s power can give you the energy to deal with the problems and start anew. Marriages can become better than they ever were with God’s strength.

You may have received a dream from God and have been lazy and doubting it will come to pass. You can receive a new vivifying power to be obedient, creative, and passionate. As I wrote above, dreams can be realized! Begin again. God is at work behind the scenes and will promote you if you stay in faith and do what you can do. Perhaps your prayer life has been in the desert for a long time and you have put it on the back burner. You pray, but not like you know you could. In this Ephesians prayer the writer prayed, “The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened...” (Eph. 1:17-18) The writer to the Ephesians was saying that a fresh power is available to spark our hearts and make them alive with God. God can and will reveal himself to you and enlighten our hearts anew.



Many today feel tired and worn out. Even though they sleep, there is a heaviness and burden that consistently weighs them down. They have lost energy and zeal toward relationships and productivity. I love the Scripture that talks about God in this way:

He gives power to the faint, and to the one who has no might, he increases strength...they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Is. 40:28-31)

This power is available to those who are stressed and burnt out. God's strength is for the lonely and grieving also.

I meet so many who are distressed about their children leaving the faith. Parents blame themselves for not doing enough or being a worthy witness. They are in distress because they want their children to have eternal life. Don't focus on the hardness in your children. Maybe they won't go to church or have anything to do with God. Focus rather on God's greatness. In Ephesians we read, "God is able to do far more than we can ever dare to ask, think, or imagine." (Eph. 3:20) God has the ability. God possesses the power. If you can imagine your son and daughter experiencing God, it can happen. Dare to ask God and keep believing. Our Houston retreat center has the slogan, "Where miracles happen." Believing in God is where true miracles take place.

God's power is available to change lives. One of my top selling books is *You Can Change*. The basic supposition of the book is that lasting, significant change comes only through God's help. We can change ourselves somewhat for a time. But in order to experience a new lifestyle and become a new person, we need to cooperate with God's grace. The book



is very positive. We are not too young nor too old to change. Something new can occur no matter the human flaw or inner brokenness. We *can* change.

I write and preach from my own, personal experiences. When I had just turned eighteen years old, I had a major conversion experience. I was born and brought up Catholic. While I prayed, I was not very religious. I found Mass boring. I was never an altar boy. I went through CCD classes until I was confirmed in the eighth grade. After that, I fell away from Church and hardly ever attended. It wasn't that I didn't believe in God, I did. But I just wasn't all that interested. Religion wasn't exciting. I wasn't attracted to liturgy and ritual. I was involved in other things that immediately touched my life. I wouldn't even say my heart was hardened; I was just distracted by other things.

When I come into a particular parish to preach the "call to the mission" on a given weekend, I know that some are waiting for the retreat and will definitely participate in the next three days. Those are usually the pillars of the parish. They are the 7% or so who attend spiritual gatherings, get involved with helping, and donate a large percentage of the offering. During my homily though, I am there to spark interest in those who are nominal or lukewarm Catholics. Many think, "I don't need this, I'm just not interested." They go to church once a week, try to be good, pray at times, and think that is all there is to Catholicism. I try to inspire them in order to lure them back, so they can discover the vast treasures and riches of the faith we express in Catholicism. There are multitudes of people who were baptized and don't go, and many more who do attend Mass and live unfulfilling lives.

For years, I was a fallen-away Catholic. I wouldn't have ever thought of participating or getting involved in any type of a committed way. But God displayed his power in me by touching my life, becoming real to me, and changing my





behavior and thinking. I was rescued, redeemed, and saved. God invited me into a love relationship with him. The Pew research survey tells us that some 30% of Americans are unaffiliated with a denomination. They are called “nones.” Through television, radio, writing and my preaching, I want to reach these people with the treasure that is the Gospel.

I think there is one thing as bad as being a non-believer. What’s as bad is being a believer who is nominal or lukewarm. Jesus himself said this in Revelation: “I would rather you be hot or cold, but because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.” (Rev. 3:16) It seems to me it is easier for a nonbeliever to have a radical shift than it is for a nonchalant believer. Yet, God can change both. Never doubt God’s power to move and change a person. Stories of change abound throughout the centuries and in our generation. All things are possible with God! When we talk about God’s power, we must look at what he can do in us.

I love what it says in Ephesians 1:7, “In Christ and through his blood, we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so *immeasurably generous* is God’s favor to us.” There are no boundaries or limits when it comes to God’s forgiveness. Think of the deepest, darkest sins ever committed. All have sinned. Some have committed adultery, abortion, murder, lying, cheating, stealing, and addictions with substances of every kind. God’s love covers all this. Our sins have been atoned for by the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. God’s power is certainly on display in the massive size and scope of creation. However, I believe his power is more on display in lives that are changing and the immeasurable scope of his forgiveness!

God can work in the hardest or most lukewarm heart. God can solve the biggest problems that face us. God can bring us through the most difficult of situations. Perhaps you have a family member who simply isn’t interested in “religion.” I want

you to trust that God is working in their life. You may have a son or daughter who has fallen away from the faith. God is working to bring them back. You may seem stuck with some character flaws. God is at work in you and things will change. All things are possible with God!

## Intelligent Design

Creation didn't just "happen" by chance through some casual explosion. God intentionally purposed for everything to become. Isaiah tells us, "The Lord, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth, and made it. God established it and did not create it to be a chaos but *designed* it to be lived in." (Is. 45:18) Reality could be totally different. Life is the way it is through the definite plan and purpose of God.

My dad was a carpenter, and I used to work with him. Before we would build a house, garage, or breezeway, he would draw up a set of blueprints. These blueprints would include the exact length, height, and depth of things from several different angles. Then we would construct the building according to the precise design. One of my sisters is an architect and uses her computer to design houses. She is able to adjust rooms and nuance sizes all according to the whim and desire of the owner. Her houses are drawn up according to exact specifications. Similarly, God had "blueprints" for the earth and universe with an intricate, definite design. While perfection is yet to come, God gave us a wonderful environment to inhabit. Everything fits together purposely and has a symbiotic relationship.

I remember watching one of my all-time favorite movies, *The Lion King*. The movie was about the animal kingdom and the food chain. There was a vast variety of animals shown in the movie from lions to meerkats and warthogs,



birds, and monkeys. While some were more ferocious than others, all of the animals formed a symbiotic relationship. Some animals attacked others, but those lost were replaced by the next generation. This life cycle continued day after day as it was meant to be. “Circle of Life” was one of the theme songs of the movie. Its lyrics expressed the harmonic balance of the circle of life of which we are all a part. When I was growing up, David Clayton Thomas sang a song where he expressed that he wasn’t afraid of dying. He sang that when he was gone there would be “one child born to carry on, carry on.”

My mother passed away some years back at the age of 90. When I talked to her about her upcoming death I asked, “What do you think about death? You seem so courageous.” She replied, “Everyone has to die. I will meet those who have gone before me. I want to be with your father again. It is something we all must go through.” She was describing the circle of life.

I wrote earlier about my friend Brent Skillman who recently died of complications from lung cancer. I presided at and witnessed the weddings of his children. Coincidentally, his daughter and both daughters-in-law were all pregnant while he was dying. He passed to the Lord months ago and all three women gave birth to healthy babies a month or two later. Brent’s wife is devastated and grieving, but the births of those three babies were a God-send to her. The circle of life.

Our world isn’t happen-chance. God designed our life cycle and the circle of life itself. There is a rhythm to life, a movement, like the waves that splash and crash upon the seashore then recede and swell again. Every day the sun rises and sets. The moon waxes and wanes. Planets orbit the sun precisely. Seasons come and go. There is the ebb and flow to the tides. Babies are constantly born. There is a continuous

flow of blood within us. Cars and airplanes are in a constant flow of traffic. Women have their periods of menstruation. We have regular bowel movements. Animals, plant life, planets, and humans are all a part of this cyclic current of life.

All these movements together aren't without meaning. There is a purpose and hope to our lives as well as to all creation itself. The earth isn't just spinning meaninglessly. We don't exist without purpose. God has a destiny in mind for all of us, including creation. Paul writes. "Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Ro. 8:21) The present design now is leading us to a completely harmonious existence where:

The lion will lay down with the lamb and the child will play at the cobra's nest. There will be no more harm on my holy mountain and the earth will be filled with the "very knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Is. 11:7-9)

Paul wrote further, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all description." (2 Cor. 4:17) All of life now is but a foretaste of the perfection to come.

## **We are "Very Good"**

We are rapidly approaching some eight billion people on the face of the earth! The sheer numbers shouldn't make you feel insignificant and lost in the shuffle. Rather, the multitudes should make you focus on God's ability to create, sustain, and know each person at one and the same time! Think about it. God has created mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, babies, as well as all races. There are teachers and preachers, poets and politicians, artists and artisans, investors and inventors, athletes and authors, entrepreneurs,



and explorers. People are male and female and of every race, color, and imaginable creed. We are all different yet all are made in God's image. We are not islands unto ourselves, but part of a larger continent.

When God created the world in the first five days, at the end of each day he saw and pronounced what he had made as "good." On the sixth day, God created man and woman, and after he observed what he had made, God pronounced us "very good." (Gen. 1:31) We are the pinnacle of God's creation, masterfully and wonderfully made.

One statistic I read said that for every second, somewhere in the world, four people are being born and two people die. Every second! There is this continual flow of people coming from God and going back to God. In one minute, we will have 240 new citizens of our planet, while we will lose 120 people. We fear the inevitable mostly because we don't know what it will be like. I assure you, death is as natural as being born. I like to swim in a large pool in order to exercise. When I jump in, there is a split second where I feel the cold water and hear the whoosh. Then, I am quickly acclimated. This is the way death will be -- a quick jolt, then comfortable acclimation.

As I wrote before, the odds of you and I being born are 1 in 400 *trillion!* The odds of you hitting the lottery several times are better than the odds of you being born. In a sense, by our birth, we have hit the lottery! We are one of the lucky (blessed) ones who have the opportunity to live. Paul writes, "Thank God for his indescribable gift!" (1 Cor. 9:15)

Regarding our birth, imagine only one, solitary turtle existed in all of the millions of square miles of the oceans of the earth. Now imagine that someone threw a small, round life preserver somewhere in the ocean. The odds of you being born would be like the turtle surfacing and raising its head in the exact middle of the preserver!

I heard a story about a scientist who spoke to God and said, “God, we really don’t need you anymore. Our technology and advances in science are so rapid and widespread that we can do just about everything ourselves. We can clone animals and people, transplant organs, and even send people to the moon. What used to be called miraculous is now commonplace.”

God replied, “Since you don’t need me, let’s have a contest. Let’s create a male human being.” “You are on,” said the scientist who continued, “Let’s do it in the old fashioned way, like you did in the book of Genesis with Adam.” As he said that, he bent down to scoop up some dirt with his hands.

God said, “Whoa. Wait a minute. Get your own dirt.”

Psalms 139 tells us it was God who knit us together in our mother’s womb. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We didn’t just happen to be, God created us on purpose. He had us in mind before the world began! God gave us just the right chromosomes and put a unique DNA in each of us. Each one of us is different and special. All of us are *very* good.

Do you want to have a religious experience? Try googling “The brain and its functions.” The brain is comprised of several sections and each one has its own function. One lobe controls vision, another language, and yet another movement. We have places for memory and imagination. The brain automatically controls our breathing and regulates blood flow. When I look at the sections and functions of the brain, I see God’s intelligent design on display. These parts of the brain didn’t just evolve over the years; they were intentionally planned and intended by the one whose ingenuity is magnificent. God’s working revealed in the brain and human body isn’t just wonderful, it is astounding and even breathtaking. We take most of it for granted and don’t even think about things like consciousness, breathing, and motor function.



There are some eleven systems that comprise the human body. They regulate things like our movement and blood flow. In addition, digestion, heart functions, and breathing all work together to keep us alive. God even gave us a system so we could reproduce! All these systems work together intricately and marvelously so we could live, function, and regenerate.

## I Am

When you consider the concept of consciousness, how do you explain it? We exist and we have a unique self-awareness. One major way we differ from animals is our ability to self-reflect. Philosophers throughout the ages have tried to come to grips with exactly what constitutes “being.” As I wrote earlier, one famous statement comes from the French Philosopher Rene Descartes: “I think therefore I am.” This foundational statement is called *cogito ergo sum*. I would like to nuance this to, “I am loved therefore I am.” Also, “I love therefore I am.” Isn’t this why we were created? We haven’t really come to be in its fullest sense until we are aware of being loved and give love. Until we receive love, we simply exist. Once we are loved, we can live with passion.

Psychology will speak of our id, ego, and superego. It was Sigmund Freud who first broke our inner makeup into these categories. Our id is driven by the pleasure principal. It strives for immediate gratification. Our ego tries to regulate the inner desires we have in a manner acceptable to society. Our ego is comprised of our conscious and unconscious mind. Our superego is our moral standards and sense of right and wrong. A major component of our superego is our conscience.

Our multifaceted personality is comprised of these three components, along with other ingredients. We acquire our personality through nature and nurture. We all have a genetic disposition to act in a certain way, but we also learn how we will

behave through what we are taught along with watching others. Many of us describe ourselves as introverts or extroverts. We become the way we want to be through a series of continuous choices. Self-perceived body image plays a factor also. We can change and develop as we grow older. When I graduated from high school, I was very introverted and withdrawn. I didn't have much confidence and was very shy. I was filled with the Holy Spirit as a freshman in college and experienced God's love. When I encountered God's love, I began to develop a new understanding about myself. I wasn't just the child of my parents. I wasn't only my looks, my level of intelligence, my sex appeal, or capability at sports and various jobs. In my heart of hearts, I came to embrace the truth that I was now an adopted child of God. Through this self-understanding, I began to grow in courage and risked taking chances with my life. I also began to accept myself as flawed and human, but loved by God. God's forgiveness, unconditional acceptance, and continual faithfulness toward me have helped me develop into who I am today.

*Because we are loved, we can change, grow, and become!* While I am still introverted, most wouldn't think so. I travel, preach boldly, and spend lots of time with groups, communities, and make new friends all the time. I have now become a "people person." It is not my looks, successes or failures, flaws or gifts that determine my identity. My unshakable core identity and the source of my self-concept is the Holy Spirit living in me. It is the Spirit of God who transforms our initial self-understanding and helps us become all that we can be. The wonderful work of God's Spirit is to mold us to become like Jesus. Pray to have a Spirit-filled personality.

When I was ordained a priest through the sacrament of holy orders, I was given a new character. This was etched "indelibly" on my soul. This character of Christ is something I discover, grow into, and become. I once wrote an article titled





*“Becoming a Priest Every Day.”* In this article, I write about how we are all a work in progress. I didn’t become the fullness of new character when I was ordained. I’m growing into it. This Christ-character within must be identified and embraced. Similarly, we all have the fruit of the Spirit (character) when God came to live in us. We must discover and grow in this Christ-like character within.

## Spirit

The Bible talks about us as being comprised as a body, soul, and spirit. (1 Thes. 5:23) In the greeting at Mass, the priest used to begin, “The Lord be with you.” The community would respond, “And also with you.” Years ago this response was changed to, “And with your spirit.” The “you” of our being at our deepest level is our spirit. Our spirit is our animating force that “quickens” the body. It is our spirit that will live forever and contains the essence of our being. In contemplative prayer, we seek to transcend our feelings, thoughts, and imaginations to get to our deepest level. As referenced before, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, “We are not human beings having spiritual experiences. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

## Body

We are very familiar with our body. We look at it every day in the mirror and spend a lot of time cleaning, grooming, and feeding our body striving to keep it healthy. Much time is spent on body maintenance. It is easy to link our self-image with our body-image. If we like the way we look, we like ourselves. If we don’t like our body, we can reject ourselves. However, we must move beyond simple appearances. We are much more than our body and the way we look to ourselves or to others. Through God’s love, you can love yourself even if you are blemished and unhealthy.

Our body isn't just our outer shell that we endure during our sojourn on earth. It isn't the prison of the soul and spirit. In Catholic theology, the body is the noble shrine of God and holy. We will be reunited to our transformed bodies at the resurrection. Many ask, is cremation a sin? No it isn't. As Catholics, the Church allows this. In fact, in some ways, it demonstrates an even greater faith in God. You are believing that like the mythological Phoenix, God can raise you up from the ashes. The risen Jesus still had his same body with scars, however it was different. Paul speaks of the new body we will receive as a *spiritual* body.

The body was sown in dishonor and weakness; it is raised in glory and honor. It is sown in infirmity and weakness; it is resurrected in strength and endued with power. It is sown a natural body and raised a supernatural spiritual body. There is a physical body; there is also a spiritual body. (1 Cor. 15:43-44)

Even though we suffer and our body deteriorates, we can be renewed inwardly. The Scriptures teach that in the scheme of things, our bodily afflictions aren't that hard and won't last that long. Paul taught, "Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs our afflictions." (1 Cor. 4:16-17) The inward renewal is called regeneration. Our spirits come to know God more deeply. Our thoughts become positive and peaceful. Our wills merge with God's. Our emotions become stable. Psalm 23:3 tells us that God refreshes and restores our soul.

## Soul

Our soul can be described as our will, mind, emotions, conscience, and heart. Our soul has affections, desires, and



consciousness. We think, reason, and make decisions in our soul. People talk about marrying their “soul mate.” This is when they have found someone they can share with heart to heart. The Blues Brothers made a movie released in 1980. A hit song from that movie was called “Soul Man.” If you remember, the Blues Brothers lived a soulish hedonistic lifestyle. They let their hungers, lusts, and emotions determine their behaviors. However, the soulish part of us isn’t just negative. Sometimes I’ll see a woman or man singing and think, “Wow, they have soul.” That means they are passionate. They have heart. They are in touch with more than simply meets the eye. I once saw an interview with a seminarian. The interviewer asked him why he wanted to be a priest. He answered, “To save souls.”

In Catholic theology, the distinction between the spirit and soul isn’t so separate. Often the words are used interchangeably. Both can refer to our immortal nature. These definitions come from the *New Catholic Catechism*:

Soul refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God’s image: ‘soul’ signifies the spiritual principle in man. (#363)

The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God – it is not “produced” by the parents – and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final resurrection. (#366)

Sometimes the soul is distinguished from the spirit. For instance, St. Paul prays that God may sanctify his people “wholly,” with “spirit and soul and body,” kept sound and blameless at the Lord’s coming. The Church teaches that this distinction does not introduce a duality into

the soul. “Spirit signifies that from creation man is ordered to a supernatural end and that his soul can gratuitously be raised beyond all it deserves to communion with God.” (#367)

I think the point being made here is that we are not divided beings, but tri-part humans containing a deep oneness. Although we are spirit, soul, and body, we are made up of a harmonious unity. You can't put our spirit and soul under a microscope and determine where one begins and the other ends. While a mysterious unity, there is a distinction I like to make. Our spirit is the deepest part of who we are that can commune with God. “Who knows a person's thoughts but their own spirit within them?” (1 Cor. 2:11) Our soul represents the faculties we are more familiar with such as our thinking, choosing, emotions, imagination, and conscience. There is uniqueness to our soul and spirit. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, “The Word of God is sharp even to the dividing of soul and spirit.” This verse tells us there is a distinction in us although we are a symmetrical unity. God's Word reveals and judges our innermost heart. Both our soul and spirit are immortal and will be reunited to our spiritual body at the resurrection.

We are not simple beings. We are complex and multifaceted beings. Like God who is a trinity of persons, yet one, we are tri-part beings, yet one. We are intricately made in God's image. Because we are loved, we can come to a totally new healthy appreciation of self. Through God's love, we can embrace who we are as fully human.

There is no need to reject yourself because of your flaws and scars. Rather, in God's love, we realize we are his masterpiece and not just good but *very* good.

I love this quote by St. Augustine: “Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of the 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 even wondering.”

## **I Get by with a Little Help from My Friends**

God loves us in and through the people who surround us. I already wrote about God’s love being revealed through my mother. Sometimes I will have people come to me for spiritual direction. They will ask, “How can I find God more fully in my life?” Everyone wants to deepen their personal relationship with God and rightly so. If they are married, I ask them to consider looking more deeply at their spouse. The sacrament of matrimony declares you can find Christ coming to you in each other.

One thing I love about Catholic theology is that it is wholistic not narrow. What I mean is that God is found in more than simply the Eucharist, prayer, and the Bible. There should be no separation between the sacred and the secular, between the human and the holy. God is present in and penetrates all that he has made. Instead of sequestering yourself in prayer, I invite you to pray by trying to find God in your husband or wife and even in your children. I’m sure you pray they will find God in you! Consider their generosity, care, and gentleness. Remember how you can trust them and be vulnerable with them. Your family can be a safe place where you can be yourself and feel at home. Finding these qualities in the people you love is another way of noticing God’s love toward you. God was “incarnated” (became flesh) in the person of his Son Jesus, but God is also incarnated in your spouse, family, and friends.

I have vowed myself to the Passionist religious community. We live together and pray together in small groups called a

local community. I have been very blessed to have met and lived with some very gracious men over the years. I have seen the face of Christ in many of these men. One priest is over ninety years old yet always smiles when he sees me and has a listening ear. Another supports me and encourages me with his words and by spending time with me. Another leads our community without being controlling and really cares for us.

I have many friends, ministry partners, and benefactors who help me reach out with the Gospel. I cannot reach out with the Gospel as I do alone. I could write an entire book documenting the sacrifices and generosity of each of these people. I need the help of my friends and ministry partners to enable me to reach out in the way I am called. Together we are making a difference. I have people who use their expertise, volunteer time, give advice, and share finances. All these people, gifts, and talents together buoy me and show me God's love. God's love is mediated through people. Hopefully you allow God to love others through you. We can have a tendency to focus on the negatives in peoples' lives, but if we concentrate on their good qualities, we will see them pointing to God himself. You are loved by God in and through your parents, families, friends, and supporters. Visualize the people God has placed in your life. Can you see God's love coming to you through them?

## **God's Goodness Abounds**

Every human being is a miracle and precious to God. Even our death is valuable to God. "*Precious* in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful." (Ps. 116:15) God prizes everything he has made. He made each of us as a masterpiece. God has given us friends, family, and community to support and encourage us.

Sometimes I will receive emails from people asking me if their deceased pet will go to heaven. I tell them yes. I like



the verse, “God protects both man and beast.” (Ps. 36:6) I already wrote about the lion and the lamb in heaven. While a metaphor, I believe it proclaims the truth that animals will be in paradise. As much as we like to think of ourselves at the center of the universe, God created the earth and animals *before* he created us.

The earth and stars speak to us about God’s power. Animals have a lot to tell us about God’s characteristics also. Besides being creative, God celebrates variety. Just about every major city has a zoo. I invite you to visit one sometime. You will see a plethora of creatures you don’t ordinarily encounter. They come in different sizes, shapes, and colors. Some fly, some crawl, some hop, and some run very fast. God created giraffes and gerbils, elephants and eels, lions and leopards, skunks and squirrels, birds and boars, ostriches and aardvarks. I heard that there are some 10,000 species of birds, 17,500 species of butterflies, and 269,000 species of flowers and 32,000 fish!

Besides the colors and shapes, there is the contrast in character. Nothing can stop a stampeding elephant. If you’ve ever seen the Jurassic Park trilogy, you got as close to an earth quaking, man eating Tyrannosaurus Rex as you will ever want to get. Yet, God also creates the baby kitten. Recently I got to hold a one-month-old kitten. She was so light and fragile. She was soft and cuddly. Her little purr made me tingle and feel serenity. The wide variety of animals displays the ingenuity, sovereignty, as well as vulnerability of our God.

If you go outside, you will always run into an insect of some kind or another. We get buzzed by bees and flies and bit by mosquitoes. One scientist said there are some 8.7 million species of insects, but no one knows for sure. Think for a moment about the varieties of birds. I love to look at red cardinals. There are orangey robins, yellow canaries, and blue

jays. Humming birds flit about like speedy helicopters able to stop on a dime. Each species of bird is distinguishable by their distinct look and song.

My parents used to love gardening. In their garden, there were rows of corn, peppers, lettuce, and tomatoes. I especially loved to eat the corn on the cob. I love to play golf. When I am out on the course, I am struck with the many varieties of grass. Some types of grass make up the fairways. A wilder type grass make up the rough. It is amazing to me how fine and smooth the grass on the greens can be. Some greens are so well manicured that the ball rolls quickly and smoothly with hardly any resistance. Of all the grown foods we eat, my favorites are fruits. I love bananas most of all. In addition, I love to put raspberries and blueberries on my cereal in the morning. Our planet boasts an abundance of grasses, shrubs, trees, vegetables, and fruits of every sort.

Years ago, I wrote a book titled *God's Not Boring!* God paints the sky, clothes the birds of the air, and splashes an infinite variety of colors and textures everywhere. God certainly isn't boring. There are an amazing variety of foods to nourish us and scintillate our taste buds. One of my favorite television channels is The Weather Channel. Have you ever noticed the roller coaster ride we can be on weather-wise? There are ups and downs with temperature. Clouds, wind, rain, ice, and snow come and go. Some days are humid, others are dry. Seasons change. Our different weather patterns show us that God loves variety.

To me, travel is adventure. Every time I leave home for a mission, I envision it as an exploit. Our national parks are some of my favorite destinations. I've visited Yosemite, Sequoia, King's Canyon, Glacier National, Bryce Canyon, and the Grand Canyon national parks. I'll never forget the time I stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon for the first time. As





I approached the edge, I had been wondering if it was worth all the hype. I came to the edge and looked out at the huge expanse and varying colors. I was overwhelmed with goose bumps! Wow, was it wonderful. I didn't want to speak. I just wanted to stand there in silence and take it all in. I was like a thirsty person drinking cold water on a hot day. The view was intoxicating.

I've also visited Alaska and Hawaii. I took a small plane ride over Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska that was fascinating. I'll always remember the snow, the animals foraging about, as well as the story-book views. One time I took a helicopter ride over the Kilauea volcano on the Big Island of Hawaii. As the helicopter banked over the volcano, I could feel the heat of the lava below and see the fiery red glow. The next day I took an expedition up the highest mountain in Hawaii, Mauna Kea. This inactive volcano is almost 14,000 feet high. We went from tropical weather to snow in the hour we ascended the mountain! I enjoyed an amazing sunset from up there. There is an observatory on top and seeing the stars and planets from the telescopes was mystifying.

I love nature. I used to live in Sacramento. The Pacific Ocean was only two hours west and the Sierra Nevadas and Lake Tahoe only an hour and a half east. I loved hiking the Sierra Nevadas and seeing the 3-D views as I looked out toward Nevada. I didn't grow up with landscape like that in Massachusetts! As a missionary, I have the privilege of traveling to parishes near mountains, lakes, oceans, and farms. I used to enjoy running through the cornfields in Michigan in my free time. Part of the allure of travel is seeing new places, meeting new people, and going where I've never been before. I even like going to new large cities. Each place is unique, and I learn new things wherever I visit.

As a part of my formation as a Catholic priest, I studied abroad in Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and Israel. There are

many things you can learn from a textbook and many more you can learn during travel. I experienced different cultures and mindsets. I saw the remains of ancient civilizations and their effect on our modern day thinking. I love philosophy and journeying to Greece, where so many prominent philosophers lived, was inspiring. I'll always remember the deserts of Egypt and Israel, snorkeling in the Red Sea, and floating in the Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth. My favorite place of all was Galilee where Jesus grew up and so much of his ministry took place. I got a great feeling of where he lived, what he saw, and how he grew and developed. I sensed his wonderful ministry and miracles as I visited the Sea of Galilee and Capernaum.

I write all this not to give you a travel log, but to help you consider the greatness of our God. God has created all things in infinite variety and has an ingenious imagination. He is the God of history, of the future, and of the present. In Revelation, we hear God say, "I am the God who is, who was, and who is to come." (Rev. 1:8) Psalm 24 teaches us, "The earth is the *Lord's* and the fullness thereof, and all who dwell in it." Everything has been created on purpose for a purpose. God has given sovereignty of the earth to people. Creation is ours to enjoy and master. All is ours to enjoy because we are loved.

I've covered many aspects about life including ourselves, outer space, the earth, animals, and other realities familiar to all of us. One area I haven't looked at is technology. There has been such an explosion and advance in technology on every front. Our medicine and the ways we are now treated have advanced. The way we travel has been revolutionized in the past one hundred years. Cars are becoming more tech savvy. Planes are more comfortable and now equipped with WiFi and TVs. In addition, we now live in an information age.

I've seen cities where major newspapers are struggling because people now get their information and news



instantaneously on the Internet. Why wait to get your sports scores when you can see them online as they happen? If there is breaking news anywhere in the world, you can see it on TV or on the Internet. Even the US Post Office is struggling financially because of the instantaneous nature and ease of emails. You can electronically mail anyone in the world and your message will safely get there in seconds. Not only can messages be emailed, but pictures, videos, and entire books can be sent through email. My book editor lives in Illinois, my book producer lives in Oregon, and I live in Texas. Throughout the editing process, we emailed the entire text of this book back and forth among us several times until we all concluded it was ready to be printed. In the past, this editing process would have extended the release date of the book by several months.

Household appliances are becoming more efficient and user friendly. Now there are high definition and even three dimensional TVs. DVRs offer us the ability to record programs, cut out commercials, back up, fast forward, and put programs on hold. Through a DVR, we can watch television on our own terms and redeem our time. Our community has something called a sling adapter that plugs into our DVR at home. With this device, I can watch our home TV anywhere I happen to be through my computer or iPhone. I can even record TV programs and watch them later in high definition on my computer.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen called the age we live in the TV age. I know there are smart phones, iPads, computers, and other mobile devices. The majority of people still like TV. Through the use of TV, my ministry has multiplied exponentially. My program *Live with Passion!* now airs throughout our country and even internationally on TBN and EWTN. I have found the secret of Bilocation: Television. I am now reaching out into prisons, homes, hospitals, and hotels while I am at home

writing, praying, or resting. You can pass the poorest home with broken down fences and shattered windows and you will usually see a TV antenna on the roof. Almost everyone, all over the world, enjoys TV. We seek our information, entertainment, and inspiration from TV.

What's next? Innovators are talking about cars that fly. The Jetsons cartoon program of old may soon become reality. I'm waiting for the day when we can be "beamed up" as people were by Scotty in *Star Trek*. What a way to travel! No waiting in line or going through TSA check points. Just simply go where you want to go, when you want to go, instantaneously. Impossible? That's what they said about going to the moon a few decades past. What about time travel? The trilogy *Back to the Future* showed time traveling lies in our imagination. Who says it can't be done? God has created a world of infinite possibilities limited only by our imagination and willingness to work for a solution. On every front, we need people with imagination to dream dreams and make discoveries. We need innovators and inventors to exercise their creative genius. We need people willing to come together and work for the good of all. Together we can unlock the potential of this universe and make our way of life healthier and more efficient.

"From the greatness of created things comes a corresponding idea of our creator." (Wis. 13:5) God gives us a glimpse of his power, intelligence, creative genius, and wisdom in the expanse and potential of the universe he has made. We stand breathless when we consider the stars, mountains, seas, animals, plants, insects, and fish. We are loved by God through creation.

One of our elder priests who has passed used to preach a sermon called "Awe." He broke it down to awareness, wonder, and enthusiasm. Never become jaded and lose your sense of wonder. Don't take for granted the sunrises and



sunsets of your life. Observe each one as if they are just for you, because they are! Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Be a beholder. Be a connoisseur of life. Ask God to give you wonder and curiosity. The desire to learn is the beginning of wisdom. (Wis. 6:17)

Live amazed. Today some people with smart phones are walking around like zombie robots in a trance. I've seen people crossing streets with their face buried in the phone not knowing where they are. People drive while texting endangering their lives and the lives of those around them. A couple can sit at dinner and both of them will be texting instead of talking. While technology is good, it can lead to the dulling of our senses and relationships. Our world is really a magnificent place if we could but appreciate it.

Vincent Van Gogh was a Dutch painter who lived in the late 1800s. His life was a struggle. He lived with mental illness and anxiety. Many think he committed suicide through a self-inflicted gunshot wound. After cutting off a piece of his own ear, he was taken to the hospital and placed under the care of Dr. Felix Rey. Because he didn't have money, Van Gogh decided to repay Doctor Rey by painting a portrait of him. Doctor Rey didn't like the portrait and decided to plug up a hole in a chicken coup with it. Years later, the portrait was found and sold for millions of dollars. Doctor Rey had something of great value, but unappreciated. We and our environment are of inestimable value if only we can appreciate it! Pause, take a deep breath, and consider. Get a new perspective.

Although it may not seem like it, God is ever present everywhere. When you get up in the morning, God is there. When you drive, fly, work, play, and exercise, God is there. When you eat, go to the bathroom, clean up, and go to bed, God is there. When you pray, go on retreat, read, and watch TV, God is there. Authentic spirituality isn't a matter of trying

to conjure God up in prayer as much as it is attempting to become more aware and conscious of God's presence throughout your day.

I started this chapter inviting you to obtain a new perspective. You have seen how God loves us by creating us purposely, intricately, and wonderfully. You are God's handiwork and a masterpiece. We are God's holy temple. The odds of you coming to be are too unlimited not to marvel. We are surrounded by miracles too numerous to mention. Albert Einstein said, "Either nothing is a miracle... or everything is a miracle." There are no boundaries to what God can do and has already done. Creation gives us a corresponding idea regarding God's magnificence.

Abraham was called to come outside of his tent in order to get a new perspective. What is the tent in your life that limits your perception? Do you simply concentrate on your health, finances, worries, relationships, TV, addictions, and problems? We were created for more than being hypnotized by TV and our little world. God has put eternity in our hearts. (Ec. 3:11) We were made for ingenuity, passion, and dreaming dreams. Throw yourself into life. We were created in the image of God to realize our potential. Like Abraham, God is calling you outside to get a new perspective. Look beyond your self-imposed boundaries. God loves you through creation, in other people, and in your own life. All things are possible with God. Live with awe. Look beyond your tent and you will know that you are cherished and loved.



## ***Chapter 5***

### ***Be Positive***



When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, a voice from heaven was heard, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” (Mt. 3:17) This voice came to identify Jesus as the Christ for all present. The voice also came for Jesus to hear. After his baptism, Jesus would wrestle with evil in the desert and begin his ministry. The all too human Jesus needed encouragement. Time and time again he would remember this voice from God and that he was the beloved of God and pleasing to God. Just like any touches we have received from God, remembrances of such manifestations strengthen us as we live our life. As he journeyed toward Jerusalem and his passion, he would hear God’s voice once again. This time God spoke on a mountaintop in the midst of Jesus’ glorious transfiguration. “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” (Mt. 17:5) While the voice came for Peter, James, and John, God spoke again to strengthen Jesus. Jesus had to face his passion and would need supernatural strength to go through these abominable sufferings.

The same voice that Jesus listened to is for us also. God wants us to know that we are his beloved and that he is pleased with our life. We may not always do everything according to God’s will, but God is still in love with us. We may not be worthy of God’s love, but God still lavishes us with grace. Remember, our being loved by God is not dependent on our goodness; rather, God’s love is unconditional.

Time and time again in the Scriptures, we hear the voice of God encouraging us in order to strengthen us to live well. I am so touched by these verses: “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Ro. 5:8)



And “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Ro. 8:31) It is important as we journey through our lives that we stay positive and concentrate on God’s goodness to us. God is *for* you. You *are* anointed. You *are* beloved. God *is pleased* with your life. As you stay positive, you will be able to deflect insecurities, self-doubt, and self-rejection. As you remain optimistic, you will absorb the love of God daily and press on with your dreams. Focus on the voice of God and not the negative voices that want to drag you down. Most of those negative voices echo from within us. You must be positive in order to be rooted in and experience God’s love. Negativity walls you off from God. Doubts block you from receiving God’s goodness and walking in confidence.

One time I was getting ready to preside at Mass. As I was vesting, I took the lavalier mike and put a battery into the power pack. As I did, I made sure to line up the polarities correctly. Positive must touch the positive and negative to negative. While I held the battery, all of a sudden I heard a voice within me, “Cedric, you are just like this battery. You have a positive side and a negative side. Whichever you choose will be the way you will be.” We don’t always feel God’s love. We must choose to be positive and believe in the love God has for us. As I’ve quoted before, 1 John 4:16 says, “We have come to know and believe in the love God has for us.” As we remain positive in life, we develop a lifestyle of abiding in God’s love. Although we may not feel it every day, we know it and live in the love of God. People are always looking for feelings. They may or may not come. Our responsibility is to live what we know and that there will be more touches from God down the road.

It is clear from his teachings and life, Jesus was very positive, hope-filled, and optimistic. He abided in God’s life. He invited us to abide in him. Our assurance of God’s love for us is not grounds for us to live haphazard, sinful lives,



but to walk in confidence. No matter how wounded we may be from experiences in our past, God's love brings healing. God is the lifter of our head and helps us overcome any brokenness. I can face my fears because I know God is with me and loves me. I risk and launch out into the deep because I know God is for me and who can be against? I am determined and ambitious, and I achieve because I know I am more than a conqueror because of him who has loved me.

While Jesus was positive, we are a mixture of faith and doubt, optimism and pessimism, self-love and self-rejection. We must strive to become more and more positive as we face the experiences of our life. We bear the image of Christ and his character within, but we must move from an image to being like Jesus. We have to be careful not to allow our culture and the people who surround us to bring us down. Just as faith comes through hearing, doubt and negativity come through listening also. We can watch how others respond in a negative way to difficult situations and develop their responses. We watch TV and see how sitcom characters handle life. Through osmosis, negativity seeps into us. We must be vigilant and guard our hearts.

I grew up in a good family and had many opportunities. I lived in a safe, middle class neighborhood, had access to a good education, and a world of possibilities. Yet, I found myself being rather negative. In some ways, negativity was my default setting. While I had many blessings, it was so easy to focus on what went wrong in life and what I didn't have. If I had so much and focused on the downside of life, I can't imagine how hard it must be for those who grew up with little, had fewer opportunities, or who were abused.

I grew up just south of Springfield, Massachusetts. We got the *Springfield Daily News* each day. I noticed a contest they were having each week called "write a gripe." They invited

people to submit the gripes they had, and each week one would win the cash prize and be featured with a cartoon portrayal. One day I submitted, “I hate dentists with bad breath!” There is nothing worse than being in the dentist’s chair and having him talk to you while he is working and he has terrible breath. You have to breathe it in and the odor suffocates you. Wouldn’t you know I won! That week the edition showed a young man in a dentist’s chair. The dentist was leaning over and you could see the cloud of breath coming out of his mouth. The young man in the chair looked aghast and underneath was my name! The prize was a scant \$5, but the problem was that the next week I had to visit my dentist! I shuddered in horror thinking, “Oh no, what if he saw the cartoon?” Luckily he never said anything.

I play golf with people all the time. Golf is a game that is played outdoors in a park-like setting. Sometimes there are mountains and oceans in the background. There are always ponds, lakes, trees, flowers, and wildlife. The grasses are some of the best manicured on earth. Yet, when I play golf with people, it doesn’t take long for the focus to shift from the surrounding beauty to the ineptitude of their game. I hear some of the most self-degrading comments. I hear accomplished, churchgoing people swear, call themselves names, and even throw clubs. This negativity can be infectious. Here we are playing a game in one of the nicest places in any city, and all we can do is focus on how bad we are hitting the shots! Meanwhile people are in hospitals, nursing homes, while others are homeless and hungry.

I’ve played golf for over fifty years. While I’ve achieved some level of proficiency, golf is a game you can never fully control. You’d think after all those years that I’d be positive when it comes to playing difficult holes. I try to stay focused, yet I still hear the negative voices. For example, I’ll approach

a hole I've played many times with water on the right and bunkers and out of bounds on the left. It never fails. In my mind, I'll see the ball going into the bunker or water. Touring pros visualize the ball going right down the middle. Why am I so negative? Perhaps from past experience when the ball went into the bunker or water! But the truth is you don't have to allow baggage from the past weigh you down. Each day is different, and every hole is a brand-new beginning.

Even with the best of upbringings, negativity can come from the people surrounding us as well as from the ethos of our culture. A lot of what we allow to affect our attitude comes from television. While I was growing up, I used to watch Norman Lear's *All in the Family*. If you remember, Archie Bunker was the main character. He lived with his wife Edith, daughter Gloria, and son-in-law Michael. I thought the show was so funny. I found myself walking around at times mimicking Archie and even talking like him. Little did I know that his negative, cynical way was rubbing off on me. This happens today more than we know. For example, many of the young people who shoot others have watched violent video games for years. Pornography teaches others to treat people as objects. Ours is a culture that portrays power, wealth, fashion, appearances, and fame to be held in high esteem. While there are good aspects of our culture, we have to be careful with what we allow to influence us. Pope John Paul II called our culture a "culture of death."

I remember one episode of *All in the Family* that was quite humorous. Gloria, Mike, and Edith were cooking a big dinner and unbeknownst to Archie, they were serving animal tongue. They knew Archie wouldn't like anything different like this, so when they all sat down, they tried to distract him by talking. Eventually Archie looked down at the plate with a quizzical look on his face. "What is this?" he queried. Gloria answered,

“Daddy, it’s tongue. Eat it, you will like it.” “Tongue!” he said, “I ain’t eating nothing that comes out of no animal’s mouth. Edith, go get me an egg!” I laughed so hard.

Archie was contentious, prejudiced, and negative. He spoke of ethnicities other than his own and even his wife in demeaning ways. He called Edith “dingbat”, and his son-in-law “meathead.” It was ironic that Archie was served tongue because his tongue couldn’t be tamed. Often we can speak negatively about our life and circumstances. We are instructed not to grieve the Holy Spirit in whom we have been sealed. The verse before tells us how we grieve God. “Let no evil talk come from your mouths.” (Eph. 4:29) Slander, murmuring, complaining, and negativity wall us off from God and actually exasperates him.

Zechariah was a priest chosen by God to be the father of John the Baptist. An angel of God appeared to him while he was serving in the temple. The angel told Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would give birth to John. All Zechariah could do was to tell the angel why it wouldn’t happen. “I’m too old and so is my wife. How is this going to happen?” He spoke negative words of doubt. Can I teach you something? If an angel ever appears to you, agree with him!

We can be like Zechariah. We say, “I’m not good enough.” “I don’t have enough education.” “I can’t do it.” And so on. An interesting thing then happened to Zechariah. He was struck mute! I always say, there is nothing worse than a mute priest. Priests were made to speak, but to speak positively. Why was Zechariah struck mute? So that he would quit blocking God’s plan by his negative words.

When Zechariah’s tongue was finally loosed, he spoke “blessing” God. A song of praise then flowed to God called the Benedictus which we pray every day at morning prayer

during the Liturgy of the Hours. Zechariah learned a big lesson about how to speak during his silent days. Speaking positively and praising God opens a door for God to work. When you speak about God's love, even if to yourself, you begin to absorb and become that much more aware of the love of God. When I find myself muttering negatively under my breath, I try to stop immediately. Rather, time and time again I speak positive words such as, "I am more than a conqueror through him who loves me." "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." "I am anointed." "I am loved." You must speak positively also. God would rather have you mute than talking negatively. If you can't speak faith-filled words, at least be quiet.

We can't allow our circumstances, culture, and negative people who surround us determine the way we will behave. Like Jesus we must rise above the din all around us and focus on what we know to be true: We are loved by God. Because we are loved, we can live with passion and achieve our dreams.

## **Another Way**

Being positive is an entirely new way to live. But then again, you are a new creature in Christ! You have a new nature within you. Being positive is your heritage and right as a child of God. Deep within you is a reservoir of goodness and grace. While there are negative voices, the positive voices are stronger. You can choose the light and know you are loved. Just as there are examples of people who are negative in our life, we have so many more models of those who are positive. I think of my favorite saint, St. Francis of Assisi.

St. Francis wasn't always a saint. Like most young people, he was into partying and seeking happiness in all the wrong places. But Jesus entered his life and he changed.

He experienced a total transformation of heart and soul. He became one of the most joy-filled people who ever lived. In fact, our present Pope Francis took him as his name's sake for the papacy. Pope Francis' first authoritative writing was called *The Joy of the Gospel*. Our Holy Father has shown the world a face of joy through his papacy and is bringing about a revolution regarding how the world sees the Catholic Church.

The interesting truth about St. Francis is that he was never ordained a priest. He was a deacon. Francis said he didn't feel worthy to become a priest. He lived to be only forty-five years old. He was short, had ears that stuck out, and was not all that good looking. He was blind when he died. Yet, in the midst of all his afflictions and tribulations, he stayed positive and chose to be joyful.

One time he and one of his religious brothers, were out begging for a meal. Francis had embraced "lady poverty" as one of the foundations of his joy. They came to a house, and he sent his brother to the door. He knew his brother was better looking and hoped his looks would yield a good meal. When he knocked, the people at the door offered him two stale, crusty pieces of bread. He returned to Francis with the bread and said, "This is all they gave us." In contrast to his complaint, Francis smiled and said, "Let us give thanks to God for the feast he has given us!" I always remember this story when I'm not too happy with what is set before me.

Jesus told his missionaries to trust in God and be positive. He told us, "Eat what is set before you." (Lk 10:8) I have preached missions for some twenty-five years now. God has always taken care of me. However, some of the meals I've received from people haven't been what I would have chosen. I try to receive each meal with gratitude and praise. When I am on the road, I realize God is taking care of me providentially.

I learned long ago to focus on the positive in every mission I preach. Each place is different. They may have a wonderful priest, great sound system, overwhelming attendance, nice place to stay, great food, and lots of helpers. Every place has its negative points too. Perhaps people aren't involved, the rectory is noisy, the church is dark, and not many are attending. If I focus on the negative, I will become cynical and disheartened. But when I concentrate on the positive and give thanks, I sense God's presence and blessings and feel happy.

Page after page of the New Testament also reveals Jesus' positive attitude. Once he was going to heal a young girl and when he got to the house, they said she was dead. Jesus "ignored" what they said. When they laughed at him, Jesus put them out. Then he went into the house and raised her from the dead. Jesus didn't allow the negativity of those surrounding him to affect him. He knew he was the beloved of God and stayed positive. He ignored them and removed the negativity from the scene.

The multiplication of the loaves and fishes is the only miracle recorded by all four Gospels. Some five thousand people had gathered to listen to Jesus' wonderful teachings. They hung onto Jesus' every word, and it began to get late. Everyone was hungry and Jesus knew it. When he asked, they were only able to gather five loaves of bread and a few fish. Instead of complaining that all these people would need to share this little amount, Jesus chose to bless what he had and give God thanks. Suddenly, through his positive words, food began to multiply, and they had more than enough! All were satisfied and there was plenty left over. When you are positive, even the little you have is enough. When you give thanks, God provides abundantly with more than enough.

I live in a religious community called the Passionists. One of the priests who used to live with us in Houston lived to be



98 years old. Fr. Simon Herbers was one of the gentlest, kindest, most positive people I have ever met. I loved it when he was around. His simple presence was soothing. He was a priest for some seventy plus years! He was diagnosed with cancer of the intestines about thirty-five years ago. We thought we were going to lose him, but God had other plans. He recovered from his cancer and never thought of retiring. Instead, when he was in his 90's, he celebrated Mass for a community of sisters in Houston, helped with Hospice, and counseled people. Several priests and religious people sought him out for confession. He heard many confessions on the retreats. Fr. Simon also published a quarterly newsletter titled *Think Life!* Psychologists tell us that being positive leads to longevity. Fr. Simon was an example of this truth. I'm hoping to be fruitful far into older age.

Years ago a movie came out called *Grumpy Old Men*. Because of its popularity, it even had a sequel, *Grumpier Old Men*. The way you choose to be now will determine how you will turn out. I don't want to be a complaining, cynical person. I realize that if I'm like that now it will only get worse. I know I have a choice. I can become a grumpy old man or become like Fr. Simon. I choose to be positive. I like the humorous saying, "The more you complain the longer God will make you live."

I have lived as a Passionist for almost forty years. I have lived with all types of people. If I focus on their negative traits, I find myself wanting to avoid contact with each person and being passive aggressive toward them. This is called "stonewalling" the individual. This can easily happen in a marriage. You know the foibles of your spouse and you begin to resent their presence. You want them to change. By the strategy of withdrawing, you set up walls and create distance. But, if I focus on the beam that is in my own eye, then the



speck that is in theirs doesn't seem as big. Besides looking realistically at myself, I also try to concentrate on their positive points. Religious life, as well as marriage, can be extremely dysfunctional or harmonious. All depends on the maturity of the individuals and their willingness to overlook and forgive. The choice is ours to be positive or negative.

## Prayer

Our approach to prayer is another area where it is crucial to be positive. Since we are loved by God, we are invited to seek God in prayer. Prayer is our time of communication and communing with God. Prayer takes many forms from speaking to listening. We must believe that God wants communion with us and does hear our prayer. Often we simply pray but aren't sure what is going on, and we wonder if God even listens to what we are saying. Jesus taught us to "believe" when we pray. This means not only trusting that God is there, but that God is aware of our prayer and gives us a hearing.

The context of prayer is our relationship with God. God is our father. He has created us, sustains us, and loves us. Jesus called God "Abba." This is a term of endearment that means "daddy" or "papa." When Jesus came to God in prayer, he came to him based on his status as a son. When he ascended to God, Jesus taught, "I am going to my father and *your* father." Jesus taught that God is our father too. We are his beloved. We can expect a hearing.

When Jesus was in dire need in the Garden of Gethsemani, he prayed, "Abba." The Holy Spirit within us cries out "Abba." When we pray, we are not alone. The Spirit of Jesus lives within us. The risen presence of Jesus prays through us.

Once when Jesus came to the tomb of his friend Lazarus, he was confronted with death itself. There were many people

standing around watching, and this was a pressure moment. Rather than doubt that God heard him and would answer him in an unprecedented way, Jesus prayed like this: “Father I thank you that you hear me. *I know you always hear me.*” (Jn. 11:41-32) Now that is confidence! What a wonderful way to start any prayer session we have. The writer of Hebrews tells us to come “boldly” (with confidence) to God’s throne of grace to receive help. (Heb. 4:16) We aren’t bold because we are perfect people; rather, we are confident in God’s love for us so we approach.

The next time you pray, take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Relax. Remember you are God’s beloved daughter or son. Call God “Father” or “Abba.” Believe not only that God is, but that he listens to you. Have confidence as you approach God because we draw near to his throne of *grace*, not judgment. Thank God that he hears you and always listens to you. Then pray your petitions and intercessions and make your needs known to God. Be positive when you pray. As Jesus taught, “Believe what you ask for in prayer and it will be yours.” (Mk. 11:24) Of course, you will receive what you ask for if it is the will of God for you.

First and foremost, prayer is about communion with God. Much is said about believing prayer. Most people teach about how to receive what you ask for. However, primarily when Jesus taught us to “ask,” he meant we should ask for union with God in the Holy Spirit. (Lk. 11:13) Stay positive about your relationship with God. God is your father too. You are his beloved son and daughter. God wants intimacy with you. Believe that you can grow in communion with God.

## **The Right Attitude**

We all have people, situations, circumstances, and events in our lives that we have to deal with. Chuck Swindoll stated,

“The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond to it.” It is easy to murmur and complain about the price of gas, the mistakes the president is making, the ineptitude of our legislators, and the direction our church is heading. It is easy to despise your job, your boss, the traffic, and even your spouse. I know a lot of unemployed people who would love your job. There are scores of homeless who would die to have your house. The world is full of single people who are sad because they are not married. You may have some health problems, but hospitals and nursing homes are filled with people who are going through much worse than you are facing. The Israelites complained and murmured in the desert. When they did, they got lost, wandered, and were bitten by snakes. Their journey should have lasted a scant forty days, but it took them forty *years* to get to the Promised Land! The Scriptures tell us that their tragedies were meant for our instruction so we won’t have their same attitude. (1 Cor. 10:6)

It is easy to pay attention to the negatives of life. Sometimes I get down because of the health struggles I am encountering. My right knee partial replacement is still getting inflamed and causing pain. It is easy to concentrate on this, but I forget how great my digestive system, nervous system, and circulatory systems are working. One of the thrusts of my ministry is to try to inspire others to live with passion. I am so grateful for the energy I have that fuels my ambition, initiative, and creativity. Sometimes I take that for granted.

My older sister Evie was a triathlete. She loved to cycle thousands of miles, even going cross country on occasions. In 2012 in the span of only a few weeks, she went from competing to a wheelchair. She was diagnosed with a devastating autoimmune disease called Guillain-Barre syndrome. The main symptoms of this disease are lack of mobility and extreme

tiredness. She is now close to seventy years old. She has to have blood infusions every month. Because of her, I never take my energy level for granted.

One time I entered an elevator and extended my finger to press the fifth floor button. As I did, I noticed all these bumps beneath the number. I ran my finger over them and realized they were Braille for the number five. I suddenly became thankful that I could see. I became mindful that there are some who cannot see. I sometimes take this most wonderful gift for granted.

I do have some vision problems. Back in the year 2000, I noticed the floaters in my eyes were getting worse. Some of them looked like globs moving across my visual field. I saw an ophthalmologist about this and was diagnosed with PVD (Posterior Vitreous Detachment). We all have collagen attached to the inside back of our eyes. Due to aging and other factors, this collagen can detach and has nowhere else to go but float around inside the eye. This is very distressing. It is like driving around with a dirty windshield all the time. The globs move when I move my eyes but always settle right in front. I went to an eye doctor who specializes in laser surgery to remove these floaters. Having that doctor zap the inside of my eyes with a laser was one of the most terrifying things I've ever done. While he couldn't get them all, he was able to vaporize some of them. If you are thinking of having this done, be careful. The lasers can hit your retina. In addition, the floaters do re-form. When I was about to have the surgery, the doctor gave me some advice I'll never forget. He said, "Instead of focusing on the floaters, why not focus on what you can see."

Isn't all of life like that? Instead of focusing on the noise, obnoxious people, dysfunction, and health issues, try to pay attention to the good things and stay positive. In your marriage,

look at the good qualities your spouse has. In your career, don't focus on how hard things are; concentrate on your blessings. In your personal development, don't look at how far you still have to go; look at how far you've already come. As you stay positive and give thanks, you will see multiplied blessings. You are the beloved of God. This doesn't mean there won't be problems, but it does mean you can be more than a conqueror through God's love.

There are two people in life who are absolutely right: Those who say, "I can." and those who say, "I can't." Which will you decide to be?





## **Chapter 6**

### **Let Jesus In**



William Holman Hunt was an English painter who lived in the 1800s. In 1854, he painted a portrait of Jesus holding a lantern and knocking at a door. The painting, *The Light of the World*, was displayed at an art gallery. One of the comments he received was this: “Holman, we love the portrait of Jesus. He is royal, radiant, and truly the light of the world. However, we noticed that you forgot something. Jesus is knocking at a door with no knob on it!”

“I’m so glad you noticed that important detail,” Hunt replied. “That door is the one spoken of in Revelation 3:20: ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock. Whoever hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with you and you with me.’ You see, that door is the door of your heart. Jesus will never force or barge his way into a person’s heart. Rather, the only way that door can be opened is from the inside and that’s where the knob is located.”

Only *you* can open the door of your heart to God’s love!

### **The Knock**

When I was eighteen years old, I began to hear that knock and voice of Jesus. The knock and voice can come in many ways. For me, it was the voice of my conscience. A person’s conscience is our most secret core and our sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. (*Catechism* #1776)

The late priest Henri Nouwen wrote a book, *The Inner Voice of Love*. He states in one of his reflections, “Do you really want to be converted and transformed? Trust the inner

voice that shows you the way.” We are all familiar with our inner voice. We’ve all been taught, “Let your conscience be your guide.”

For me, I heard the knock when I got out of bed each morning. It was quiet and too early to be distracted with TV and computers. What I heard was, “What is this? I’m not happy. There is more to life than I am aware. I’m not satisfied.” This voice continued day after day until I made a move. I heard the knock and turned the knob. I opened the door by praying and reading Scripture. I opened the door by simply believing in God and his goodness. I opened the door by changing some of my behaviors. This led to a profound encounter with God a few months later that would revolutionize my life.

To have supper or a meal with someone in the Mediterranean world, as in ours, means intimacy. When you have a meal with another, you look at them, speak, listen, and get to know them more fully. The more you “sup” with someone, the deeper you get to know that person. Jesus offers not only his presence, but also communion with his person. This truth is celebrated every time we participate in the Eucharist. Jesus wants a personal relationship with us and us with him. The main theme of the four Gospels centers upon the person of Jesus and getting to know him.

In order for this to happen, the knob must be turned and the door opened.

## Self-Emptying

The Scriptures tell us that although Jesus was in the form of God, he *emptied himself* and became human. This self-emptying comes from the Greek word *kenosis* in the Bible. Jesus didn’t cling to his status as divine. He became fully human and lowered himself even more surrendering himself to death, even the ignominious death by crucifixion. This



radical self-sacrifice is what has redeemed us. Throughout his human life, Jesus never showed a hint of pride or selfishness, but in humility, always took the form of a servant and gave generously of himself. He gave us a wonderful example here and frequently taught about our need to deny ourselves. (Mt. 16:24)

The Twelve-Step Program (AA and others) teaches that humility is the foundation of change and growth. People who are always in control, selfish, and “full of themselves” will find it hard to improve and grow. One of the secrets to transformation is rigorous self-appraisal and honesty. Become quiet and listen to your inner voice. Are you happy? Do you have unwanted behaviors? Do you need to change? People who “empty” themselves will be filled. People who are “full of themselves” have no room for God. Not many prideful people darken the door of the confessional. Several times during our life, we must examine who and where we are and humble ourselves. Humility is a major way to turn the knob on the door of our innermost heart.

## Suffering

Often suffering can make us aware of the knock and enable us to hear what God is saying. The inner loneliness I felt when I was eighteen along with my inability to find happiness humbled me and opened me to more. I heard God inviting me to change. Admitting that you are powerless over some behavior or substance is the first step toward recovery in the Twelve-Step Program. Suffering and/or some type of bottoming-out experience often is the catalyst to get a person to recognize their need. Our culture popularizes being powerful and rightly so, but not enough is said about the “gift” of powerlessness. I have already written about many of my sufferings. I cannot express how these sufferings have made me listen to life as well as my innermost heart. These

weaknesses have made me radically depend on God and his love for me. Paul talked about his “thorn” of suffering and taught, “When I am weak, it is then that I am strong.” (2 Cor. 12:10) Paul found communion with the divine as well as supernatural strength through his sufferings.

Our sufferings can teach us and get us in touch with our heart of hearts if we will listen. They can lead us to radical dependence on God. Don’t waste your sufferings. They are too valuable! In every season of our life, we encounter new and different forms of pain that can bring us humility and move us along in our journey.

## **Jesus’ Lordship in Our Lives**

Jesus wants communion with us. In addition, he wants to be “Lord” of our everyday decisions, thoughts, actions, and journeys. The one who “sup” with us wants to transform us into who he is.

I was ordained a Catholic priest on June 29, 1991. The Mass of Ordination was celebrated at our Passionist church in Chicago. During the rite, the ordination candidates are called forward by our formation director. When our name was announced, we were instructed to respond in some appropriate manner such as, “present.” When my director publicly announced my name, I chose to respond uniquely. I stood up and said, “Here I am!” These were the words of Isaiah when God asked, “Whom shall I send?” We also sing that famous song, “Here I am, Lord,” wherein we sing, “I will go Lord if you lead me...” My response signified my giving of myself to God before all.

It is somewhat easy to empty yourself and give yourself to God in a public ceremony when everyone is watching and rooting for you. It really isn’t all that hard to give yourself to

God as you read this book. But Jesus wants to be Lord of our *everyday* life. Often, we are tempted to look at lustful images on television. Impulses of anger rise up to make us want to strike out or avoid others. Laziness weighs us down like an anchor dampening our dreams. We berate ourselves because we are never good enough or feel that God is against us. It is precisely at these moments when we must pause and open the door to Jesus. He wants communion with us 24/7, not just when we go to church or read religious documents. Emptying ourselves means surrendering in the common, human moments of our everyday life. We open the door to Jesus when we give him our gaze, what we read, how we speak, our sexuality, our time, our money, as well as our passion. Give Jesus your eyes and ears. Give him your body and sexuality. Give Jesus your time and money. Let Jesus be your all.

## **Abandon Yourself**

Doors have hinges because they are meant to be opened and reopened. Perhaps you once opened the door in one area of your life, but now it is shut. Jesus keeps knocking. The *good* news is, any door that is shut for however long can be reopened!

Blessed Charles de Foucauld lived in the 1800s, founded a community dedicated to the poor, and was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005. Charles humbled himself and opened the door to Jesus through prayer, service, and simplicity. He continually opened the door of his life to God as he prayed.

Prayer is one of the ways you can turn the knob and open the door of your heart. Charles' prayer of abandonment can help you keep the door open when faced with the multitude of decisions, thoughts, emotions, and actions that real life brings. Behold, Jesus stands at the door of your heart and

knocks. He loves you passionately and unconditionally. One of the ways you open yourself to God's love is by surrender. I invite you to receive God's love by praying:

## **Blessed Charles' Prayer of Abandonment to God**

Father, I abandon myself into your hands.  
Do with me what you will.  
Whatever you may do, I thank you.  
I am ready for all; I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me  
and in all your creatures.  
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul:  
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,  
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,  
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for you are my Father. Amen!

I pray you will experience God's love for you personally  
as you make abandoning yourself to God a daily lifestyle.



## ***Chapter 7*** ***Because You*** ***Are Loved***



I heard a story about a ten-year-old boy. He was standing barefoot by a shoe store looking into the window at the display of various shoes. His feet were all dirty and he was obviously poor. A woman who was standing nearby sized up the situation, went into the store, and bought some socks and shoes. She also came out with a basin of warm water. She washed his feet then put the socks and shoes on his feet and they fit perfectly. He looked up at her with tears in his eyes and asked, “Are you God’s wife?”

When we do good works of any sort, we display God through our deeds. Most people are familiar with “show and tell.” Unfortunately, most people tell without showing. People need to see the deeds, then they will listen to the words we have about God. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would be given to us to “be” a witness. It is precisely our character and deeds that speak loudly.

The Scriptures sum up Jesus’ life and ministry in this way: “He went about doing good.” (Acts 10:38) Jesus taught, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Let your light shine before all that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 5:13-16)

Although divine, Jesus humbled himself and became a servant. Love isn’t simply a gracious feeling toward someone, love is *action*. Love is a verb. Love shows itself in deeds. Love is generous and sacrificial. You who are parents are familiar with what love takes. Most parents sacrifice their own pleasures to provide for and raise their children.

The Gospel of John has no institution narrative of the Last Supper. Rather the Johannine Gospel is the only one that records the foot washing instead. “Jesus rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.” (Jn. 13:4-5)

Later on Jesus explained the meaning of this servant act:

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (Jn. 13:12-17)

Jesus was summarizing his life and ministry in this symbolic act. Though divine and powerful, he was a servant. Jesus was constantly doing good and giving. We have received “grace upon grace” (Jn. 1:16) from him. His ultimate sacrifice was on Good Friday. From his complete sacrifice, we have received redemption, forgiveness, and salvation. “This is love, not that we have loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.” Then John teaches us, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 Jn. 4:10-11)

Throughout this book, I have been writing about how affectionately and unconditionally we are loved by God. This love is free and available for us to receive without cost. However, a love relationship is very expensive. I’m writing this the day before Valentine’s Day. This is the time when cards, flowers, money, and chocolates are sent. Phone calls will abound. Flights will be full. Vacations are taken. Many



babies will be conceived. At our retreat center, we are having a married couples retreat with over one hundred people participating. It is a time of celebrating the special life two people have together.

God's love is free, but it will cost us everything. What kind of shallow person would you be to taste God's love and never reciprocate? We don't reach out to others in obligation but because we want others to know what we know. We serve others because we have been served by God. We are generous because God has been overwhelmingly generous to us. We forgive because our slate has been wiped clean. In addition, we reach out because God's burning love works through us. "The love of Christ compels us." (2 Cor. 5:14)

I believe this verse should be the foundation for all ministry. I don't minister because I want to be known or make money. Rather, it is God's energy, God's anointing, and God's love that motivates and moves me. When I write, produce, travel, preach, counsel, and help others, "I toil with all the energy that God mightily inspires within me." (Col. 1:29) I teach people all the time to "Live with Passion." The heart of passion is the energy of enthusiasm. Enthusiasm comes from two Greek words meaning "in God." The opposite of passion is passivity. If you are passive, you will never bear fruit or accomplish much in your life.

God's love has a *claim* on us! We must respond to this lavish love. We respond by loving God through prayer, reading, and spiritual sacrifices. But we also respond by loving others. Loving God and others was the great command of Jesus. 1 John 4:20 teaches, "If you don't love the people you can see, how can you love the God you can't see?" St. Paul of the Cross said, "I see the name of Jesus on the forehead of the poor."

God's goal for our life is to become virtuous. Virtues are characteristics such as courage, generosity, compassion,

and faithfulness. The virtue par excellence that is the greatest and lasts forever is love. Just about everyone has 1 Corinthians 13 read at their wedding. Perhaps more should have it read at their funeral as a sign that this is what they strove for in life.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Love never ends. Make love your aim.

We have to be big enough to love. There are many angry, loud, obnoxious, bitter, small people in the world. We can't let them determine who we are. Rather, we must be quick to forgive, let things go, and not allow the moods of others manipulate us. We can become people of love. Look to people with big hearts instead of looking at the small people in life. We must make love our aim. God's power in us is greater than the selfishness in the world.

I saw a video on the Internet that was sent to me in an email. In the video, a young man was being frustrated by life and the people he encountered. Someone would cut him off on the road, and he hit the horn and smirked. A skate boarder wheeled by his car as he was backing out of the driveway, and he shook his head. People throughout his day irked him and made him cynical. No one lived up to his expectations. He became an angry person.

He happened to look down and saw a pair of glasses. He put them on and began to retrace his steps. He saw the skateboarder who almost hit his car. Through these special glasses, next to the skateboarder he saw the words: "I'm lonely." Then he saw the guy who cut him off in traffic. He saw,





“I’m going through a divorce.” Other people: “I’m insecure.” “I feel lost.” “I’m depressed.” The young man realized everyone is fighting a battle. He decided to go beyond the superficial to the supernatural. Instead of reacting to people, he decided to respond. Because he had new understanding, he developed a heart of compassion for others and began to reach out to them instead of being so cynical toward everybody. Not only did he bring joy to others, but his own attitude and enjoyment of life increased.

Early in the Bible, Cain murdered his brother because Abel’s sacrifice was more pleasing to God. He was envious of his brother and crestfallen. After he committed the murder, God spoke to him and said, “Where is Abel your brother?” Cain lied, “I do not know, am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9) This is one of the most famous lines in the Bible. While Cain snidely implied, “No,” the real answer is, “Yes.” We *are* the keeper of our brothers and sisters. All people are our responsibility, not for what they can do for us, but because we are the children of God. God’s concern is for all people on the earth. God works through us. We can’t do everything, but we can do something.

## Layers of Involvement

I’ve been a parish missionary since 1990. I’ve travelled north, south, east, and west. I’ve been to farming as well as urban communities. I’ve preached in large and small churches. I’ve visited contemporary and traditional churches. I’ve met Catholics all across this country. My goal is to inspire, encourage, and renew people in their faith. I also want to reach out to those who, for whatever reason, aren’t going to church and have waned in their commitment to God.

Over the years I’ve seen a definite pattern no matter where I go. The Masses themselves are similar. For example, at the

vigil Mass on Saturday, there is usually a large crowd. For the most part, these folks are older and not very enthusiastic in their responses. Most times, I'll tell a joke at all the Masses and the levels of laughter vary from Mass to Mass. The laughter at the Saturday night Mass won't be that loud. The music at this Mass is usually traditional and not too spirited.

The first Mass on Sunday can take place as early as 6 a.m. These people are some of the pillars of the parish. While not well attended, the people are very attentive and prayerful. They don't want much music. When I preach to them, I know they will listen well and many will come to the mission. However, they don't respond loudly to prayers and jokes. The largest attended Masses are the 9, 10, and 11am Masses. This crowd loves to sing and they respond well. They laugh loudly and you can feel the atmosphere of faith in their gathering. The music is usually contemporary and there is often a choir singing. You will frequently hear babies crying at these Masses. They are a mix of young and old.

The last Mass in the morning is usually celebrated around 11:30 a.m. or noon. Strangely, even though it is late in the morning, scores of people come late to this Mass. I'll process down the middle aisle and it won't look like many are gathered. By the time the Gospel is proclaimed, a good, healthy crowd is present. Unfortunately, many also leave just after communion at this Mass. Many churches now have a teen Mass on Sunday afternoon or early evening. The music at these Masses can be a bit loud and showy. Sometimes the musicians are trying to perform rather than lead the community. Some of these groups are excellent however. Many parents will bring their teenagers to Mass at this time. Other adults come who simply like the singing and young feel of it. Youth groups will often meet after Mass for pizza and discussions.



Seems like everywhere I go there are similar patterns at the varying Masses. Of course, every church community is different and comprised of a different mix of people, but all have similarities. In addition to the types of Masses, there are layers of involvement comprising each community.

I've noticed a small percentage take ownership of their parish. The percentage varies to a small degree, but usually about 5-10% are extremely involved and take responsibility for making their community dynamic. These "pillars" attempt to minister to the people within their community and some even reach out beyond the parish boundaries to others. People take ownership by becoming members of the parish council, joining other committees, teaching CCD, being involved in RCIA, joining the choir, being a Knight of Columbus, heading up the youth group, being a part of the altar society or woman's group, and by being ushers, lectors, and Eucharistic ministers. Some bold people even risk by being evangelistic. They make phone calls, visit homes, and strategize about how to bring people back. All of these areas demand commitment and display love. They all demand a sacrifice of time and energy. Whenever you are involved, you risk judgment and rejection from the same people you are trying to support and serve. You show great love when you try to bring people back to the faith. (Jas. 5:20)

Every parish has their committed few. These are the people who have responded generously and wholeheartedly to the Gospel call. They've realized that they too are priests and sense Jesus calling them to make a difference. They are willing to risk, sacrifice, and live with passion. I firmly believe Jesus is calling *everyone* to get involved somehow. Not all are responding however. Some simply don't have that much faith. Others are selfish. Some don't want to be hurt. Still others are

shy. Remember, love is patient, kind, and not selfish. Love shows itself in deeds. Paul gave us a foundational statement about discipleship when he announced, “The only thing that matters is faith being *made effective* in love.” (Gal. 5:6) Paul was saying that it isn’t so much the externals of religion that is important. Rather, faith is shown and made effective when it expresses itself through generous love. James agreed when he said faith without works is dead. (Jas. 2:17)

Our Sunday gatherings were never meant to be places where people simply receive and usurp the blessings for themselves. Yes, we gather to praise and worship God and hear the Gospel. We sing, listen, pray, and come into communion with Jesus, the bread of life. But an anonymous, self-serving religion was never Jesus’ plan for the church. We are meant to be dynamic, Spirit-filled communities where everyone is involved and takes ownership of the community.

Can you imagine how we could change the world if everyone would do their part? Aside from the resources that would be collected on the weekends, the outreaches would be so dynamic that many would be attracted back. While such a community is a possibility, it is not probable until people on an individual basis respond generously to Jesus’ call to them personally. No one can force a person to do their part, but we can keep inviting. In addition to being involved on a parish level, people can get involved diocesan-wide. There are many programs and outreaches that need your support. Even outside the church boundaries, there are many wonderful causes that help people and are worthy places of involvement.

While preaching a mission, I was given a book *Rebuilt* authored by Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran. It is about the Church of the Nativity in Timonium, Maryland. It is the story of the transformation of a Catholic parish. Years ago the pastor realized that his particular parish wasn’t going



anywhere. The people seemed disinterested and just going through the motions at Mass. He wondered how he could breathe life into his parish. He took a risk and began learning from evangelical churches such as Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California. Fr. White began to employ some of the things he was learning into his parish. He made the services more dynamic and inviting. He made a concerted effort to invite those who weren't attending to come back to Mass. He made it attractive to get more and more people involved and take ownership of the parish. In time, things began to turn around and the parish was truly rebuilt. None of this happened without suffering and pain but it continues to occur. Now this parish is a model and beacon of hope and love. I recommend this book and pray that parishes everywhere will rebuild and reach out to the lost. See their website and watch services at [www.churchnativity.com](http://www.churchnativity.com).

When I read *Rebuilt*, I literally felt something burn in my heart. I wanted to weep. As a missionary priest, I am trying to reach out to the lukewarm and unchurched. I want churches everywhere to be dynamic places of worship and inspiration. I want all to reach out to young people and be relevant. I want the church to be a place of hope and a home for all. My mission is similar to theirs: get people involved. Reach out to all. Proclaim the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For years, I used to end my parish missions with a program I developed named "You Can Make a Difference." My final sermon was about evangelization, living with passion, and impacting other peoples' lives. Through story and personal experiences, I tried to persuade people to use their gifts and talents to enrich the community. At the end of the mission, I invited people to sign up to make a difference. I had tables in the back with various ministries people could take part in. A good percentage of the people heard the call and got

involved! Most of us are looking for ways to utilize our talents and reach out to others. We just need to know how to do this. In counseling, I hear people all the time who tell me, "I feel God is calling me to more, to get involved, but I don't know where to go or what to do." If that is you, look at what your parish offers and try to sense what your gifts are. Is it teaching, cooking, serving, counseling, or helping? The Spirit gives various gifts to all in order to build up the body of Christ. You may need to search for a spiritual director to help you discern where you are being called. Once a year parishes will usually have "ministry fairs" in order to invite people to get involved. Don't leave it to someone else to run your parish. Take ownership! Your vocation is to love and make a difference. You can do it!

While there is a small percentage who are involved and give the most monetarily, there are varying levels of involvement. In addition to those who are participating in some way ministerially, there are those who are staunch observers of their religious services. These are those who will not miss Mass on Sunday or Holy Days of Obligation for any reason. Some of these people attend daily Mass on a routine basis. Many of these people are generous with their finances.

If we were to draw concentric circles around those taking ownership of their parish, there would be the pastor and his staff and the many who are involved to some degree in the middle. This circle would be small in diameter and represent a small percentage. Outside of this circle would be another circle, not much larger, representing those who wouldn't miss a service. A wider circle would be those who come most weeks, give but aren't really involved. Still wider would be those who come to Mass once in a while and give little. The final circle around the middle ones are those who claim to be Catholic and only attend Mass on Christmas, Easter, weddings, and funerals.



During my parish missions, I reach out to all of the circles. The majority comes from the inner circle, but now because of television, I am reaching out to those who don't attend Mass at all. I am also reaching across denominational lines. At a recent mission in Florida, about ten people as well as their pastor attended from the Presbyterian Church. I've seen Jewish people, Baptists, and Non-Denominationals as well as those with no affiliations attend. Another word for Pope is Pontiff. This word literally means "bridge builder." My ministry is very ecumenical, and in many ways, I am a bridge builder between denominations. As I wrote previously, I am the only Catholic priest airing on the largely Protestant TBN network. I try to inspire, encourage, and invite all to a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. I think what helps attract others to my message is that I'm not trying to make people Catholic, per se, but I want them to come to a saving relationship with God in Jesus. Once that happens, they can discern on their own where to express their faith. I will help them in any way I can to become Catholic, but I will also help them plug into whatever church they feel called. Mine is a ministry of renewal trying to inspire and bring people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. I also want to equip people to live their lives with passion and purpose.

The Gospel is all about people. While our religion has laws, rituals, and rubrics, it is mostly a religion about right relationships. Jesus often taught about forgiveness, reconciliation, and reaching out. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction..." (Jas. 1:27) "This is the fast I want, work for justice, share your food with the hungry, and clothe the naked." (Is. 58:6-7) Often we "strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Mt. 23:24) when it comes to the way we live our faith. We stress the things that are less important rituals and don't emphasize the most important: helping people.



Perhaps the story par excellence summarizing the heart of Jesus' teachings is the Good Samaritan. This story was used as the symbol for the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. The parable demonstrates that it isn't your standing in the church or your dedication to ritual that matters to God foremost. What is truly important is how you respond to people. The question isn't "who is my neighbor?" for all are. Rather, the heart of our faith and the question Jesus asks is, "Are *you* a neighbor to all, including the least in your midst?" Yes, we are the keeper of our brothers and sisters.

If we really read Jesus' teachings, we will find them very troubling because they are so demanding! I'd love an anonymous, easy Christianity. Some rationalize that this is what Christianity is. But a comfortable religion isn't the Christianity of the Gospels. Jesus' call is sacrificial, costly, and demanding. He dupes no one. He clearly and explicitly asks us to count the cost first, then follow. He promises to provide the strength and ability through his personal presence. He doesn't demand perfection. Discipleship is a journey of progression. I realized early in this journey that if I was to follow the Master, I had to get over myself, get involved, dedicate myself to people, and live with passion. My life and ministry is all about embracing others with the love of Christ. I love because I am loved. While difficult, sacrificial love is the only authentic response to being loved so lavishly by God.

## **Charity Begins at Home**

Years ago I came into contact with the Passionist Community. I was a young man just out of college, and the Passionists were sponsoring an outreach to the poor in Baja, Mexico. The program was only three weeks, but in the hot July sun, it seemed to last forever.

I met six Passionist priests during that outreach. They all made an impression on me. They were dedicated to the poor,





prayed joyously, and worked hard. One priest in particular touched me. His name was Fr. Joe Mitchell. He had been ordained a year prior and was full of zeal and joy. He was an itinerant missionary, the very ministry that attracted me. We hit it off and became great friends. We talked easily about many things, and he took a deep interest in me. Long after the program was over, he stayed in contact and even visited my home and parents in Massachusetts. He gave me a good image of what a priest is. He encouraged and supported me along my journey. He was one of the reasons why I ended up choosing the Passionists. His generosity, love, and energy toward me were compelling. When I was finally ordained a priest in June 1991, Fr. Joe gave the homily at my Mass of Thanksgiving the day after. In his homily, he spoke about priesthood as a platform to make a difference in others' lives.

When I joined religious life, I met a number of fine men in our community. There were many zealous priests and religious who were published, sought after speakers, and generous servants. I admired and looked up to many of these men. They were dedicated, modern day apostles. Some were heroic in their generosity and optimism. I was overjoyed to be a part of this community. However, I began to notice that not all were of "one mind and heart" as Luke idealistically wrote about the early church. Some religious weren't happy. I quickly became disillusioned with religious life. I had thought everyone loved each other and would be easy to get along with. I discovered early that I had to take the bad with the good in community.

My initial response to difficult people was avoidance and passive aggressive behavior. I simply would avoid contact with such individuals. Since we are living in close quarters, this was hard to do. We are periodically in chapel together. We share meals in common. We pass each other in the hallways and living room. I was forced to make some

decisions about how I wanted to be. If you know my teachings, I sometimes say, “Are you a thermometer or a thermostat?” A thermometer reacts up and down depending on the temperature of the room. A thermostat, however, determines the temperature of the room. Do I allow others to dictate my attitude, or am I stable and positive no matter what?

I must say it is so easy to love those who support and love me. But, I am so stretched trying to love when I have an aversion toward a person. We all have difficult, irritating people in our life. These people are in our life to stretch us. We are anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit precisely to be positive and be kind when we are confronted with people we would rather not be around.

One of the many documents promulgated at Vatican II was *Perfectae Charitatis*. The Church Fathers sought to renew religious life by having each community focus on its original charism. The document reminds all religious that the norm of religious life is the Gospels themselves. Jesus’ high call upon all was for us to be perfect (in love) as our heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt. 5:48) The purpose of consecrated life is missionary. We live together in community in order to proclaim the Gospel of God to all. In addition, living together serves to purify and sanctify the community members. In our daily life together, we are stretched to forgive, accept others, and be generous as followers of Jesus. I have found it easy to love all the people I don’t live with, but to love the ones with whom I live who irritate me is tough! Forgiving 70 x 7 and maintaining a positive attitude shows growth and progression. It is easy to stonewall (shut people out) and disain difficult people. But you know you are growing when you summon the courage to be kind over and over again.

Those of you who are married know your spouse all too well. You know their tendencies and sometimes even their



thoughts! There are attitudes and behaviors that inspire you and some behaviors that discourage or even disgust you. Some married people share with me in the confessional that they have resentments toward their spouse. Perhaps it was a past betrayal they are having trouble letting go of. It could be their spouse always has the need to be right and is contentious. There may have been some wrongs done that are easily remembered. Whatever the case, it is hard to forgive and let go of past wrongs. It is easy to hold that resentment over their head time and time again. Yet, the Gospel call is to love. Trust can be regained. Marriage is that sacrament where God will purify you through your spouse. For better or for worse, it is the vocation you said “Yes” to. Your wedding day was just the beginning. The sacrament occurs when you become Christ-like by saying “yes” over and over again. Because you are loved and forgiven by God, there is power to overcome your negative feelings and let things go.

As I wrote previously, my mother’s love for me revealed God to me in many ways. A mother’s love is a deep bond whose connection can never be broken. It is easy to love your mother when she is doing things for you and being generous to you. However, one situation that more and more baby boomers are encountering is being the caregiver for their elderly parents. Besides the decisions that need to be made regarding their care, it is hard to be patient with a parent whose mind is fading and whose body is wearing out.

When my mother was 90 she was in that situation. My sisters and I made the decision that she couldn’t drive anymore. I found myself being impatient around her. It was hard for her to lose her liberties. Her growing old was hard on all of us. But I realized that God was doing a work in me as well. Could I love my own mother “unconditionally?” I was used to loving her because she gave to me. Now the shoe was on the other foot. I was stretched and grew in love as I cared for her. I was

by her side as she passed to the Lord in the hospital. I will never forget how courageous she was in her dying. In many ways she taught me how to die.

Sometimes we have to show “tough love.” It is not easy to take a car away from an elderly parent or move them into assisted care. It is hard to ground a child and take away their privileges. They may balk at this and get angry at you. But if you are doing it for their best interest, it is tough love. I talked to a mother who had to ask her son to leave her home. He wasn’t working and he was doing drugs. He is in his early twenties. She realized she was enabling him by letting him live at home. He was using her as a crutch. As much as it broke her heart, she made him leave. That courageous choice was tough love.

It is tough love to perform an intervention for someone. A family member or friend may be addicted to alcohol or drugs and displaying self-sabotaging tendencies. True love is proactive. When the time is right, an intervention gathers people together who love that person and confronts him or her with their behavior. The goal is to get that person into recovery. When the timing is right and when done in appropriate ways, interventions can lead to a new start.

Confrontations can also be tough love. There are times when people you live with behave in selfish, rude, and manipulative ways. If you continue to let them walk all over you, then you are enabling them to some degree. Confrontation is always difficult, but when done in emotionally stable ways, relationships can deepen and become more satisfying. Always use caution with interventions or confrontations. There is nothing easy when confronting another about their behaviors. People get defensive quickly. You must be the one who stays calm and not let your emotions get the best of you. True love is gentle and kind, but it is also proactive and at times forceful.



Charity begins at home. Because we are anointed with the Holy Spirit, we can love struggling parents, difficult community members, and selfish spouses. Charity begins where we live but ought to extend to all. I remember taking a survey about ministering to people. We were asked, “What is your number one virtue as a minister?” The number one quality listed was compassion. We all have a heart of compassion for the plight and sufferings of others. We can open or close our heart to compassion. That’s why 1 John 3:17-18 asks us, “How does God’s love abide in you if you close your heart toward others in need? Let us love not in word and speech, but in deed and truth.” Love is energy. Love is generosity. Love is action. Love is more than words and feelings.

## **Be a Witness**

The New Evangelization has really come to the forefront of Catholic teaching in the past number of years. Even nominal Catholics must admit they know how the Church is stressing that we all take responsibility for this outreach. Some use the excuse that evangelization is for priests and bishops and the Pope. While that is true, the new evangelization stresses the laity’s role in a significant Gospel outreach. Our laity are gifted, talented, and blessed. Some of you are poets, speakers, writers, teachers, artists, and artisans. All of you have faith in God. We need your creative talents and energies. You are ambassadors of Christ and represent the church wherever you go in the world. We need you to be a shining witness in our world. Lay people comprise the vast majority of the church and can leaven our world as you let your light shine.

Our Holy Father Pope Francis has created quite a stir both inside and outside the church. Most love his simplicity, his joy, and his concern for others. He has brought a new enthusiasm for our faith among many. We’ve been captivated by his episodes with people as well as his humanness. He is a

modern day image of Jesus himself. He is also very quotable. It seems like everyone is quoting him and saying the Pope said this or that. Pope Francis wrote an Apostolic Exhortation titled *The Joy of the Gospel*. This inspiring document was written to excite us about our life in Christ. He tries to encourage us to know Jesus' love and passionately share with others about God. Permit me to share some of the quotes from this stirring document. I invite you to read these quotes slowly and purposefully.

First, Pope Francis invites all of us to draw near to Jesus in order to encounter his love firsthand. Even if we have failed and are in need of forgiveness, Jesus is there to forgive us and bring us back.

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord." The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step toward Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: "Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways, I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace". How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost! Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy. Christ, who told us to forgive



one another “seventy times seven” (Mt 18:22) has given us his example: he has forgiven us seventy times seven. Time and time again he bears us on his shoulders. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love. (*Joy of the Gospel* #3)

Pope Francis writes about the importance of our encountering the person of Jesus. It is through developing a relationship with Jesus and knowing his love that we will want to share the Good News. Sometimes we get so “used to” the Gospel. We must receive the Gospel with a heart-pounding breathlessness as if for the first time. Like Peter, we must run to the tomb and let our heart throb as we find it empty. The good news is that an ordinary carpenter, one of us, is the Son of God. He endured torture and death so that our failures and sins can be forgiven, and we can have a brand-new start over and over again. God raised Jesus from death! Now we are redeemed and have a glorious destiny. The Gospel is overwhelmingly joyful news.

I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (#7)

Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration

of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others? (#8) An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads, and welcome the outcast. (#24)

## **Attraction or Attrition?**

It is precisely because we are loved that we will even want to share the Gospel with others. God's love is the thrust and compelling energy behind the new evangelization. There is a great joy that flows from being loved. Because we are forgiven, indwelt by God, loved constantly, and on the way to heaven, a fresh spring of happiness invades our lives. Joy is what people everywhere are seeking. Joy is the energy and attractiveness of the new evangelization. When people see we are happy, they will want what we have. Any good fisherman knows that in order to catch a fish, they must use a lure and bait to attract the fish. Our allure is joy. We certainly aren't trying to push anything on anyone. We are simply sharing the treasure we have found. "Invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction." (#15)

Knowing that joy is attractive, our Holy Father reminds us not to share the Gospel with a "sourpuss" look. "There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. (#6) A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum." (#83)

The document makes clear that all of us have the responsibility to announce the Good News. This privilege was





first given to the apostles and now to us. It is an honor to be a witness to Jesus Christ. In chapter one, I wrote about the important subject of memory. When it comes to evangelization, I try not to focus on those who are mediocre and not bearing fruit. They have no zeal and live listless lives. Yes, they are rigorously religious, but they are the “mummies in a museum” that Pope Francis writes about. Rather, “remember your leaders who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith.” (Heb. 13:7) I’ve been impacted by so many zealous men and women of God. People like the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis, Billy Graham, faithful Passionist priests, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Sienna, and others inspire me to live with passion. Don’t let negative people bring you down. Allow positive people to lift you up!

The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”. (#120)

Pope Francis gets very practical about the sharing of the Gospel. He instructs priests and bishops about the importance of the homily. He even gives a teaching about how to preach! He also gives us practical advice for sharing about Jesus outside the church walls.

Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey.

In this preaching, which is always respectful and gentle, the first step is personal dialogue, when the other person speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes, and concerns for loved ones, or so many other heartfelt needs. Only afterward is it possible to bring up God's word, perhaps by reading a Bible verse or relating a story, but always keeping in mind the fundamental message: the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living, and who offers us his salvation and his friendship. This message has to be shared humbly as a testimony on the part of one who is always willing to learn, in the awareness that the message is so rich and so deep that it always exceeds our grasp.

At times the message can be presented directly, at times by way of a personal witness or gesture, or in a way which the Holy Spirit may suggest in that particular situation. If it seems prudent and if the circumstances are right, this fraternal and missionary encounter could end with a brief prayer related to the concerns which the person may have expressed. (#128)

The heart of our message isn't a religion or any specific denomination. We aren't simply trying to get people to come to our church. Rather we want to introduce them to the person of Jesus Christ.



I would now like to speak of the task which bears upon us in every age and place, for “there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord”, and without “the primacy of the proclamation of Jesus Christ in all evangelizing work” (#110)

On the lips of the catechist, the first proclamation must ring out over and over: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and free you.” (#164)

The primary reason for evangelizing is, and always will be, the love of Jesus which we have received and the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known? If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence. (#264)

Finally, our Holy Father wants us to live with *passion!* We must look beyond ourselves and see the true state of our world. Scores are lost and without meaning. People are searching in all the wrong places. We must have a heart for all people.

Mission outreach is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. (#268)

If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our

giving. Not for their physical appearance, their abilities, their language, their way of thinking, or for any satisfaction that we might receive, but rather because they are God's handiwork, his creation. God created that person in his image, and he or she reflects something of God's glory. Every human being is the object of God's infinite tenderness, and he himself is present in their lives. Jesus offered his precious blood on the cross for that person. Appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love. (#274)

An encounter with God's love has transformed me from someone who was selfish to someone who is becoming selfless. Instead of just being concerned with myself, I am very concerned with helping others. My primary concern is for their eternal soul. I have discovered a treasure in Jesus and his Gospel. This "pearl of great value" has revolutionized my life. I want all to know the Lord and his blessings. I want all to taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I've determined not to push anything onto anyone. However, I do share my story gently and generously. One example of this is my programs on television. My program *Live with Passion!* has been airing on television since 2006. I have learned by watching other preachers. I purposely don't want to appear "preachy." I come across as gentle and someone viewers can relate to. I try to attract through joy and integrity. I take as my foundation, "Be ready to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence." (1 Pet. 3:15)

Television is very expensive. Besides the time and cost of the production of the programs themselves, I decided to buy airtime. I was given airtime on many of the Catholic



stations such as The Catholic Faith Network on Long Island, NET in New York City, and Boston Catholic TV. But I felt the call to reach out beyond the Catholic stations. For years, I bought time on Fox affiliates in cities such as Saginaw, Lake Charles, and Lafayette. I buy time on the PBS station in New Orleans, and in San Antonio. My largest expense comes from the airtime expenses on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN.) The money comes from donors, my partners, and the royalties from my resources. My point: It *costs* to share the Gospel. Besides money involved in outreach, perhaps you are afraid of rejection or nervous about how you will come across. Yes, there is a cost to being a missionary! I invite you to be sincere. Show your joy. Tell your story. Be gracious, gentle, and generous. As I've stated previously, speaking is important, but so is serving others.

## Through People

God touches people with his boundless love in many and various ways. We are loved through the magnificence of creation. We are loved through the sublimity of church services. We are loved through appreciating the artistry of our own being. God loves us most often through other people. From the beginning of the church, God has worked through people to turn the world upside down and right side up. That is the genius of the “acts” of the apostles. God wants to work through you. It is not enough to be loved. We must reciprocate this wonderful love.

I hope this book has helped you receive God's love. My goal has been to help you become aware of God's love and to actually experience this wonderful affection. Love is who God is. You are loved passionately, intensely, and unconditionally. God's love has the potential to revolutionize our lives. God's love can make us live with passion and purpose. We can

accept ourselves and gain new self-esteem. God's love can transform us and give us rebirth. Because of this immeasurable love displayed in so many ways, a new fervor arises within us. We move from selfishness to selflessness. There is a new fire within to share this treasure we have discovered. God works in mysterious and mystical ways, but ordinarily works through people.

I want to conclude this book by sharing a story. One summer I took a storytelling class at Northwestern University in Chicago. I took this class to improve my skills of telling stories. Jesus' genius was storytelling. If we want to attract and impact others, we must also learn how to tell our stories well. This story demonstrates that God uses people to touch the lives of others. My prayer is that God will use you to turn the world upside down and right side up. (Acts 17:6)

Some years ago there was an epic one hundred year flood in the Midwest of the United States. Farms everywhere were flooded. One farmer in Missouri had a large five thousand acre farm right on the shores of the Mississippi River. When all the snow melted and rains came, the river swelled the banks and flooded all of his land.

As the water levels rose, a policeman drove to the farmer's house and knocked at his door. "Sir, the flood waters are almost to your doorstep. Please gather your valuables and come with me." The farmer replied, "That's okay officer. No thanks. I'm a man of faith. I've prayed to God and I felt the assurance that God was going to help me." After trying to persuade him more, the officer gave up and left.

Soon the water level rose so high it brimmed to the ceiling of the first floor. Debris floated by the house yet the structure stood. A boat with two firemen in it approached the house. The farmer could be seen looking out of his second floor bedroom window. The boat floated near the window, and one



of the fireman shouted, "The waters are still rising. Please gather your valuables and get into our boat now!" "I'm fine," said the farmer, "I'm staying right here. God will protect me!" After multiple tries, the boat drove away.

A day later the water level had risen so high it was up to the roof. The farmer took refuge on the apex of the roof, and for miles around, the water could be seen cascading by. From the distance, the sound of a helicopter grew louder and louder. Finally the rescue helicopter hovered right over the house. A rope ladder was dropped and a paramedic on the chopper spoke over a megaphone.

"This is your last chance! Grab the ladder now and save yourself!" The farmer shouted back, "No thanks! God promised he would save me!" After a few circles, the helicopter pilot reluctantly flew away.

Soon thereafter, the water rose so high the farmer could no longer hold on and he drowned. He was immediately ushered before Almighty God. When he stood before God, the farmer said, "God, I don't understand. When I prayed to you, you told me you would help me. What happened?" God replied, "I sent you a policeman in a squad car, a fireman in a boat, and a paramedic in a helicopter. What more did you want me to do for you?"







## ***Epilogue***



We in the Passionist Community are devoted to the suffering and passion of Jesus Christ. Along with the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, our first vow is to meditate on the passion of Jesus and proclaim its meaning to all. The sign we wear on our heart proclaims, “The Passion of Jesus Christ” in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. We Passionists have a motto that we frequently profess: May the passion of Jesus Christ be always in our hearts.” It is the memory of the passion that puts us in touch with God’s love and brings mystical communion with the Lord. Our monasteries and retreat centers are schools of contemplation. As we meditate on Jesus’ sufferings, our awareness of God’s immense love for us is heightened.

Jesus taught, “No greater love has someone than to give up his life for another.” (Jn. 15:13) Jesus lived what he taught. He held nothing back from God or from us. We hear about heroic stories in the news where people risk their life for another. We are aware of those like St. Maximillian Kolbe and others who sacrificially died in the place of another. “For a good person, someone might possibly dare to die. But God proves his love for us in while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Ro. 5:7-8) Not only did Jesus give up his life, but he died an excruciating, tortuous death.

I suffer from panic attacks. Besides the social embarrassment, the most difficult aspect of this is the suffering that comes from not being able to breathe. It is hard to describe the panicky feeling that overwhelms a person in the throes of an anxiety attack. At its height, my heart is racing so fast, I am not able to gasp for air fast enough. I feel like I am suffocating under the watchful eyes of others. People have described it as thinking they were going to die. These attacks come while I am trying to read publicly, so it is very noticeable and doubly tough to try to mask it. It is like being underwater

and unable to take a breath. If you have ever tried to hold your breath in water for as long as you can, try to remember that last millisecond when you can't stand it any longer and frantically surface. You begin to panic, your lungs ache, and your body flails to gasp for air.

Even if you don't suffer from panic attacks, most know the feeling of going to bed with congestion and struggling to breathe. Sleep can be illusive when every breath is labored. Some panic at the very thought of being buried alive. Our most basic instinct is the impulse to breathe. When our breathing is threatened, we are filled with terror.

Without knowing it or thinking about it 24/7, we automatically breathe. Even while we sleep, our autonomous nervous system regulates our breathing. Our bodies need precious oxygen in order to live. The cells of our blood must carry oxygen to the brain, heart, and other organs of our body in order to function well and survive. Breathing is vital to our survival and well-being.

I'll spare you the details, but death from crucifixion was the worst execution method ever devised. The excruciating pain would make the condemned go mad. (If you are interested in the details, read the book *A Doctor at Calvary*.) Pain would radiate toward the brain from all quarters. There was public shame, humiliation, and embarrassment. Besides the overwhelming suffering, the condemned person was reduced to the animalistic state of having to fight for every breath. In order to breathe, they would have to pull themselves up time and time again, causing even worse, torturous pain. The reason the executioners broke the legs of the condemned was so they could no longer push themselves up and death by asphyxiation would come sooner.

Jesus died in the throes of maddening pain by suffocation. Get in touch with your breathing right now. The ability to breathe is the primordial, yet wonderful gift we take for granted. We read at the moment of his death on the cross, Jesus “breathed his last.” (Mk. 15:37) God breathed the breath of life into the first Adam. The second Adam became the “life-giving Spirit.” (1 Cor. 15:45) The most basic of bodily functions, and of life itself, is breath. In the Bible, the word for breath, *pneuma*, is also the word for Spirit. Interestingly, at the resurrection, Jesus breathed on his disciples, and they received the renewal and regeneration of the Holy Spirit. (Jn. 20:22) We are invigorated with the breath of God all because Jesus breathed his last on the cross.

If you want to know how much God loves you, simply get in touch with your ability to breathe. Never take this most basic of gifts for granted. Not only did God give your breath in the first place, in his death, Jesus was suffocated for our redemption. God proves his love on the cross. Several times in this book I have quoted Romans 5:8 *God proves his love for us in this: While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.* St. Paul of the Cross put it this way: Jesus’ passion is the most overwhelming work of God’s love for us.

You are loved affectionately, passionately, and relentlessly. God’s love is strong and will endure forever. Want proof? Simply look at a crucifix.

# ***WORKS CONSULTED***

The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha. Revised Standard Version. © 1973, 1977 by Oxford University Press

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, 1997 by United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC

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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 a 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 37 years. Fr. Cedric produces a program for TV and Radio, Live with Passion!, which presently airs nationally and internationally on the Catholic network EWTN, the Trinity Broadcasting Network (T.B.N.), and several stations and radio besides. He has numerous CDs and DVDs on Christian living and has authored 25 books.

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# ***THE CONGREGATION OF THE PASSION***

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:

Vocation Director  
Passionist Community  
[Vocations@passionist.org](mailto:Vocations@passionist.org)

Websites:  
[www.passionist.org](http://www.passionist.org)  
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*Live With Passion!*





# Fr. Cedric Ministries

## *Touching Lives / Saving Souls*



### **Our Mission Statement**

Fr. Cedric Ministries is a Roman Catholic ministry dedicated to reaching out to as many people as possible, in as deep a way as possible, with the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ.

While this ministry is Catholic in origin and belief, it is designed to reach out to people of all faiths, as well as those who have not yet come to faith in Jesus.

All about the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ, Fr. Cedric Ministries is an expression of the "New Evangelization" called for by our late Holy Father, Saint Pope John Paul II.

As a preacher, author of 25 books, and producer for television, Fr. Cedric endeavors to help people come to know Jesus in a personal way. God has also called him to make known the imperishable riches of the Holy Spirit. The salvation and new life that comes from the Cross of Jesus is the core of his proclamation.

Fr. Cedric Ministries is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. We do not share donor information with any other organization.

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# Ministry Outreach

In 2006, Fr. Cedric began producing the television program *Live with Passion!* – which today airs nationally and internationally on: (*Times subject to change*)

- Trinity Broadcasting Network (Sundays 7 am ET)
- EWTN Global Catholic television (Sundays 9:30 am ET)

*Live with Passion!* airs on local Catholic affiliates in markets such as New York City, Long Island, Boston, Atlanta, San Antonio, New Orleans, and many others.

His radio program – also titled *Live with Passion!* – airs in numerous markets such as Radio Maria, Portland (OR), Baton Rouge, Baltimore, Canton and Columbus (OH), among others.

In addition to producing *Live with Passion!* Fr. Cedric also:

- Travels extensively preaching parish missions (retreats) in Catholic churches across the U.S.
- Has a large prison outreach ministry. This “Pen Pal” program has over 100 writers who send letters to those incarcerated that request correspondence. In addition, Fr. Cedric makes available Bibles and his own books free of charge to those in prison. Contact [steve@frcedric.org](mailto:steve@frcedric.org) for more information about becoming a pen pal.
- Has a Pro-Life Outreach. Fr. Cedric educates through his preaching, productions, and writing about the need to protect the unborn. *The dazzling value of one soul!*
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*Live With Passion!*

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Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P.

Christianity is a religion that relates to and addresses real life issues. To be human is to "go through" various trials, afflictions, and sufferings, as well as joys. Our faith in Jesus not only gives us meaning but empowers us to face our weaknesses. As we journey, we are transformed in the process. This book will identify real life issues and provide practical solutions. Subjects include:

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- Mental Illness: Positivity and Coping Skills



We are born into a fallen, futile world, yet we have hope! We all must encounter trials, tribulations, and hardships. Being human is a place of grace. God's glory shines and transforms us in the journey. Amid our trials, we are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us.