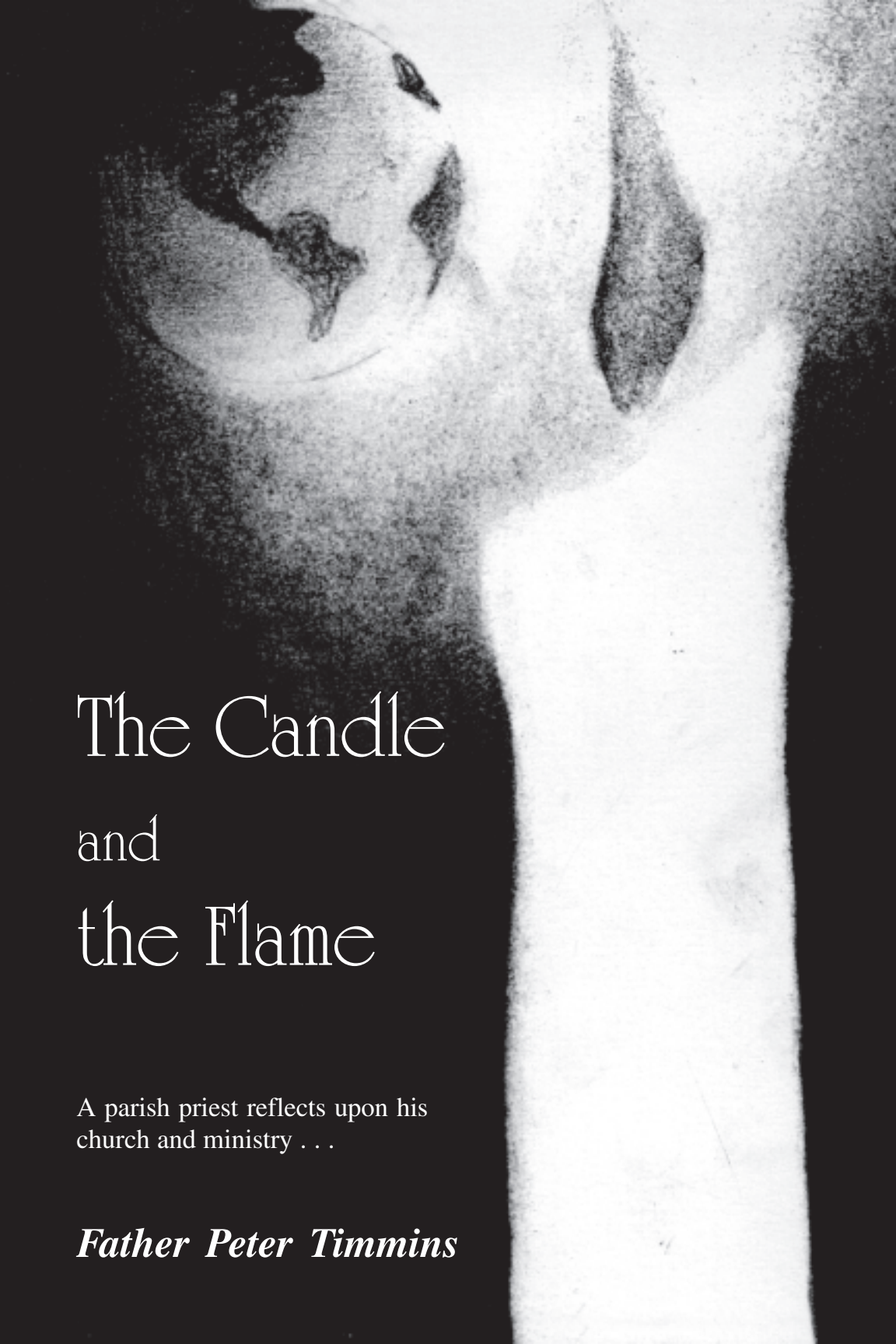

The Candle and the Flame

A parish priest reflects upon his church and ministry . . .

Father Peter Timmins

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For
My Sister
Betty

The Candle and the Flame

The candle represents the supportive institutional structure of the Church; i.e. the Vatican, the national conferences of Bishops, the diocesan and parish structures and facilities, the religious orders and organizations and their hospitals, schools and other institutions. They all exist for one reason: to support and feed the flame, the people of God, whose sacred task is to give light to the world.

The candle feeds the flame and maintains it. In its hollow, it protects it from ill winds. Without the candle, the flame dies. In order that the flame may never die, the candle goes through a continuous process of being consumed and renewed. It is totally dedicated, totally selfless, and in its members, it is one with the flame - one in Christ.

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CHAPTER

Preface

In my earlier book, entitled "Nothing For Granted", I attempted to share with you my perception of God, a perception that led quite naturally to the notion of worship. My intention in this book is to pick up where the other book left off. From the concept of worship, as briefly discussed in "Nothing For Granted", we now progress to that of community or church and to the significance of liturgy and sacrament. Before and after and along the way, many threads get woven into the fabric, not in a futile attempt to exhaust every aspect of this extraordinarily vast subject, but rather, to pull together a selection of strands which I believe to be of particular pastoral value to the average pilgrim. The driving force behind this work is my respect and affection for those who make up the parish communities which I have been privileged to serve during the past thirty years. I am a happy priest and, I hope, a loyal one, but this does not mean that I am perfectly content. As the following pages will reveal, I see an urgent need to rekindle the spirit of Vatican II and to continue the process of maturation initiated by the Council.

This book has been conceived within a framework which is partly theological, partly

philosophical and partly, autobiographical. It even includes a pinch of fiction. The autobiographical aspect is not a celebration of my person, but rather of my priesthood and of those who call me "Father". Since much of this book is based upon my experience as a parish priest, some subjects, marriage for example, are likely to be slanted toward the problematic, whereas other subjects, such as priesthood, might receive a more balanced treatment. I simply ask you to accept these inadequacies because this work was never intended to contain the last word on anything. As was the case with "Nothing For Granted", the reader will notice that some subjects are discussed more than once. This is because I believe that certain sensitive matters, such as the teaching authority of the Church, warrant being approached from more than one direction and within varying contexts. I hope that, in the course of reading these pages, you will not only learn but also be moved to laughter and perhaps, the occasional tear, that your faith will be strengthened and your confidence renewed, and that you will re-dedicate yourself as a proud and active member of Christ.

CHAPTER I

A CHURCH IS BORN

Among my earliest memories of church, is being marched down the aisle and directed into a pew in the company of other boys of my age and fidgeting there while an ancient forty-year-old white-surpliced priest prepared us for our First Communion which was to take place within the next few weeks. The priest was no stranger to me, as he and a priest friend of his used to occasionally visit the summer resort where my parents had a home. The two priests were easy to spot at the hotel swimming pool because they wore black bathing suits with matching tops. I remember being fascinated by the fact that they wore those black sleeveless tops even when they went into the water. I thought them quite weird and carefully kept my distance from them. And now here I was, in a church. I was bothered by the fact that this was not my huge, familiar, old parish church, where I was used to viewing celebrants and preachers from the warm, anonymous nest created by a parent to left of me and a parent to right of me. In that

nest, I felt comfortable and protected, especially during the winter, when both of my parents wore heavy fur coats. How clearly I can recall, half a century later, the warmth I felt wedged in between those two big furs, one a mink and the other, a raccoon. The smell of my mother's perfume blended with that of my father's cologne, and I was mesmerized by the sights and sounds of that great edifice, the Latin chant, the incense and the preacher led down the aisle by a solemn-faced teen-aged server in a scarlet cassock, who bore the sacred book of pulpit announcements and sermon notes as though it were the Word of God. Down the aisle they would come, and when they were so close I could almost touch them, they would stop; the boy would hand the books to the preacher, who would then start to climb the steps winding around the pillar until he emerged in the pulpit, as though on the pinnacle of Olympus, way above our heads.

The parishioner in front of us, as always, would turn to one side, look up to the pulpit and begin to pick his nose. This he did every Sunday for years in spite of my mother's best efforts to stare him around. The sermon was usually too long and never very interesting for a five or six-year-old, and by the time the bells rang for the Consecration and both sides of my nest went forward and got on their knees, I was quite ready to go home. After all, the collection had long since passed; the Monsignor had smiled at me and called me by name as I put my quarter, fresh from my mother's purse, into the silver plate that came right to the entry of my nest; easily the high point of every Sunday liturgy. But now, in that other church, near my school, I sat nestless and exposed, as the priest who wore a top when he went swimming terrorized me by asking questions. I went to a private school. Most of the kids went to the parochial school. They knew all the answers. He asked me the first question. I squeaked the wrong answer and everyone laughed. I felt sick to my stomach, but they got into

trouble because you must not laugh in church.

The days that followed seemed to have been filled with endless drills presided over by very tall nuns who were nice to me because I came from "the other school" and was therefore sort of a guest. When the big day came, I proudly donned my Eton suit with its grown-up collar and joined the other boys and girls at the assembly point in the school hall. The girls were all in white from their shoes to their veils and they carried little hard-covered prayer books, tightly clutched in their immaculately gloved hands. I didn't know any of the girls except my cousin, who pretended not to know me. There were no girls in my school. "Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam"..."Stick out your tongue, child. That's better." And it was all over. I had eaten Jesus...and I decided that I did not much like the taste. We went up to my paternal grandmother's house for a big party. I don't think I told anyone that I didn't like the taste, but I may have.

* * * * *

Church, to a little boy in Jerusalem or Galilee in the first centuries of the Christian era was very different from what it was for a little boy in a large Canadian city in the late 30's and early 40's. It was not something that just happened on Sundays and other special happy or sad occasions. To have been a young boy in a Christian family in the early church would have been somewhat confusing. It probably meant going to the synagogue on Saturday, surrounded by relatives and friends and then rising early on Sunday morning to go to someone's house where, in memory of the Lord Jesus, that last paschal meal would be repeated and shared and the sayings of Jesus taught and discussed. It probably also meant being acutely conscious of a division within the family, playing only with Christian cousins and friends and being snubbed or worse by others. Religion would

have been perceived as being a very serious matter. It would have permeated all facets of life and no sacrifice would have been deemed too great for its preservation. You can be sure that neither ballet nor hockey practice would have taken precedence.

The first Christians were known as Nazarenes, for they were followers of Jesus of Nazareth. On the Jewish feast of Pentecost, in about the year 30, the apostle, Peter, gathered about him a crowd of people in a square in Jerusalem. Close to him, their faces radiant with conviction, stood his intimate companions, his fellow apostles. Peter announced the birth of the church, and he did so in these words: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through Him in your midst...this Jesus you killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised Him up and of that, we are all witnesses. Being, therefore, exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured out this which you see and hear. God has made Him both Lord and Christ."

The result of this inspired sermon was that many people were moved by the Holy Spirit to request Baptism. But having become Nazarenes, did not mean that they ceased to be Jews. To the observer, they appeared to be just one of many Jewish sects. They were identified by their belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that He was somehow one with God. In so far as they were able, they lived communal lives and were guided by the teaching of the apostles, who lived among them and celebrated the Eucharist with them. Within a very short time, the local Christian community was joined by Hebrew converts, whose cultural background was Greek, rather than Aramaic. These people were known as the Diaspora Jews, meaning that they lived outside of Palestine. They were also known as Hellenists. One of their leaders was Stephen, who maintained that in the light of the Jesus event, the temple of Jerusalem and its

related forms of worship were no longer significant. This position cost Stephen his life, as he was stoned to death by indignant orthodox Jews, one of whom was Saul of Tarsus. The persecuted Hellenists fled Jerusalem and became missionaries along the Mediterranean coast. Saul of Tarsus, their most ardent enemy, himself experienced sudden and unexpected conversion and, of course, went on to become the apostle, Paul. Peter, whom Jesus had placed at the head of his apostles, soon came to the conclusion that it was not necessary for a Gentile convert to become a Jew before becoming a member of the church. Thus, the way was open for anyone to seek Baptism. It was at about this time, in Antioch, the starting point for the evangelization of the Roman Empire that the title, Christian, came into use.

As time passed, the mixing of Jewish Christians with Gentile Christians made it very difficult to sustain some of the ancient Jewish customs and traditions, especially in the area of dietary regulations. This meant that, inevitably, the gulf between synagogue and church widened. This gradual process of alienation was very hard on many of the Jerusalem converts and a number of them abandoned the church.

Within twenty years of Jesus' death on the cross, Paul and his companions had brought the faith to Europe, and particularly, to Greece. Paul became known as the apostle to the Gentiles, but throughout his life he was torn between his conviction of the universality of the Christian Gospel and his emotional ties with those who strongly believed that since Christianity had grown out of Judaism and its roots would be forever planted within the Jewish scriptures, it was blasphemous to accept non-Jews for Baptism. To say that these were tumultuous times is an understatement. Christianity had begun as a movement within Judaism, at a time when religion united the Jewish community as never before. Jews had grown weary of Roman domination. They thirsted for the promised Messianic leader who would set them

free and restore their pride and dignity. But their Christian brothers and sisters had acclaimed Jesus, an executed pacifist, as Messiah and, as though that were not enough, they were daring to question the permanence of the Mosaic law. Sometime between the year 62 and 67, Peter and Paul were both put to death, not by the Jewish establishment, but as a direct consequence of the emperor Nero's fear of the Christian challenge to HIS socio-religious influence. Back in Jerusalem, the Saducees and the Zealots, fed up with Roman domination, finally rose up in revolt and, in the year 70, the Roman army counter-attacked and destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem. This was no mean feat. It was a truly massive structure supported by columns that measured more than forty-five feet in circumference. It had taken ten thousand men nine years to build it. In the minds of the Jewish people it was virtually indestructible. It was the symbol of God's presence among them. When it came down, many Christians saw in its destruction a sign that the old dispensation had come to an end and that, henceforth, God was to be found only within the context of the Christian community. This simplistic attitude drove a further wedge between the church and the synagogue. And so the church, while preserving its Old Testament heritage, began to collect the writings which would form its own sacred scripture. The gospel narratives were recorded, Paul's letters were collected and various other writings were put into circulation. It would be many more years before a certain number of these would be authenticated and accepted by the community as the Word of God and the Gospel of the Lord.

And so it was that having outworn its welcome in the land of its Semitic roots, the Christian church was transplanted to the newly established Roman empire, whose massive territory formed a single state around the Mediterranean, with a northward extension to the British Isles. Because of Roman military roads, it was possible for people, and thus, for ideas, to move about at

unprecedented speed. The state was divided into provinces ruled by governors who reported to the Roman Senate. Troops were stationed everywhere and acted as state police, ensuring that Roman law was respected. Life in the empire revolved around its major cities and so did the church. Thus we see Paul addressing the church of Rome, of Corrinth, of Thessalonica, and so forth.

The early Christians were quick to see the parallel growth of the church and the empire. It seemed to them that God had blessed the empire through the spreading church and one enterprising Bishop wrote to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius: "After our philosophy appeared among your peoples...the power of the Romans increased in a great and splendid way...and all things have been splendid and glorious in accordance with the prayers of all." This was a polite way of suggesting to a pagan emperor that it would be to his benefit to treat the Christian presence at least as a good-luck charm.

Though the empire was made up of many nations, each with its own language, there was one language which had become common and that was Greek. Latin, however, was the language of Rome and so, whilst Greek was the language of the church, Latin was the language of government and the courts. Both languages were familiar to educated people of the east and the west, but each language carried with it its cultural heritage, so that Christians who were more at home in Latin tended to stress the importance for the churches of legal frameworks, whereas those of Greek background, because of their philosophical heritage, began to lay the foundations of theology. Herein lay the seeds for conflict and for eventual separation.

In the early church, the gospel message was spread by almost every Christian. Those who travelled by sea or road in the course of their commercial endeavors considered it their sacred task to spread the Word. It was not always easy, as these well-intentioned but frequently

ill-prepared missionaries met with considerable hostility. The religious scene in the first century after the birth of Christ was a somewhat mixed bag. To begin with, rural people had their own brand of religion, characterized by any number of cults which centered upon the worship of natural forces, such as the fertility of animals and the earth. City people, depending upon whether they were Greek or Latin, worshipped such mythological beings as Zeus, Jupiter and Mercury. Each city had its own gods and every good citizen participated in the local cults, not so much because they believed, but because it was simply part of being a good citizen. In the eastern provinces, the emperor was considered a god, a holdover from previous ages. The custom was encouraged by some emperors and as a result, spread to the west. But this cult was mostly of a political nature and was understandably popular with the army and the civil service. Later on, it became mandatory, but that is another story in itself.

At the time when Christianity was making its entry onto the world stage, there was growing in strength throughout the empire a so-called second form of religion. These religions made moral and ethical demands upon their adherents, who were initiated through various trials and rituals. Members felt themselves to be saved, to be purified, to have been lifted out of the mob and made unique and special in the eyes of the one God.

These beliefs and practices were a mix of many Asiatic, Egyptian and Middle Eastern religions, which had been brought to Rome by soldiers, slaves and travellers. Although they tended to be monotheistic, their adherents saw no problem with maintaining the more traditional forms of worship, if only for practical, political purposes. It was into this bazaar of religious belief and observance that Christianity made its entrance. But unlike the other recent imports, Christianity refused to merge. It made no concessions. It, too, had its mysteri-

ous initiation, its one God, its concept of personal relationship with the deity and the familiar death and resurrection image which played such an important part in the natural religions of the rural areas, as well as in the new elitist congregations. And so, Christianity's profile, although unique in many ways, was also, at least on the surface, familiar.

Life in the cities of the empire during the first three centuries was far from easy. A few people lived well; some lived honestly and with dignity, while others were mired in every conceivable form of degradation. It was a slave-supported economy. There were plenty of slaves, as they were the principal booty of war and a biologically renewable resource, so there was no need to emphasize scientific or technical progress. It is reported that in some towns, two-thirds of the inhabitants were slaves. With that many backs, who needs a truck? The slaves had no rights but, in some ways, were better off than the poor citizens, who often lacked the barest shelter and subsisted on free grain and, of course, circuses and games, which enabled them to vent otherwise dangerous frustrations. Women were considered inferior to men and were helpless unless they had money. They either married and put up with whatever treatment they received, or became prostitutes. Children, too, were at the mercy of their fathers, who could legally decide whether to keep them or kill them at birth. Education was given a low priority and entrusted to a slave known as the pedagogue. It was in these people, the poor, slaves, women and children, that the nascent Christian communities found their strength. They were all equal in the sight of Jesus, who had died for each one of them. They were all eligible for eternal life and eternal happiness. To them, the Gospel was indeed good news. Christianity, then, brought alienated people together into a community and, in so doing, gave them a sense of belonging and of worth. This unity, maintained within a common faith and practice, solidified a relationship be-

tween Christians, who were reborn into a new family through Baptism. They were indeed brothers and sisters, always there for each other. The focal point of their lives was Sunday morning, when they met in the homes of their more affluent members to listen to the ancient scriptures, sing and pray the psalms and hear the oral Gospels, as well as share the sacred meal. This was presided over by one who spoke in the name of the Lord Jesus and consecrated the bread and wine, which were then consumed, having been recognized by all present as the body and blood of Jesus. "Take and eat", He had said, "This is my body. Take and drink. This is my blood."

Those members of the Christian community who were under censure for having committed a serious moral fault were said to have done damage to the common good and so were for a period of time ineligible to participate in the sign or sacrament of common unity, or "communion". In due time, after having shown that their penitence was real, they were accepted back into full membership.

It was important for the Christian communities or churches to develop and enforce doctrinal orthodoxy and moral guidelines, so that they would not disintegrate from within. From the beginning, external, hostile forces were a constant worry, and these only increased with time. Christians worshipped in private. Their origins were eastern and somewhat mysterious. They tended to stick together, referring to each other as brother and sister. All sorts of rumors circulated about the strange rituals of this secret sect. They were said to be "drinkers of blood and eaters of flesh". No one wanted them in their neighborhood and yet, their numbers continued to grow at an alarming rate. Many a parent became distraught at the news of a son or daughter having been seduced by this cult. You can be sure that whenever anything went wrong, such as a bad harvest or a prolonged heat wave, fingers pointed at the Christians, with whom the traditional gods were believed to be in-

censed. Persecution became a way of life for the followers of Jesus, but still they multiplied. To the outside observer, they probably appeared to make life difficult for themselves, as they refused to take part in the worship of the local gods, kept clear of political affairs and avoided military service.

The heat applied was sufficient to cause some of the more educated Christians to write in defence of their beliefs and practices and to challenge head on some of the most damaging rumors then in circulation. These writings were called "apologies", which was a term indicating defence. The authors were thus known as "apologists". Since it was necessary for them to give explanations of what they believed, their writings were, in effect, the first books of Christian theology. Several examples of these writings still exist. Most apologists could not resist taking a passing shot or two at the opposition. Here is one example which I particularly like. Its author is, unfortunately, unknown and it is simply referred to as a letter to Diognetus, composed sometime before the year 200. It reads, in part, as follows: "Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own. They do not use a peculiar form of speech. They do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity or deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. Yet although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food, and other matters of daily living, at the same time, they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and enjoy everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland and yet, for them, every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry like every-

one else and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are "in the flesh", but they do not live according to the flesh. They busy themselves on earth but their citizenship is in Heaven. They obey the established laws but in their own lives, they go far beyond what the laws require. They love all men and by all men are persecuted. They are defamed and are vindicated. They are reviled and yet, they bless. To put it simply, what the soul is in the body, that, Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body but does not belong to the body and Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world. The soul, when faring badly as to food and drink, grows better, so too Christians, when punished day by day, increase more and more. It is to no less a post than this that God has ordered them, and they must not try to evade it."

As has already been suggested, the work of the apologists, although of theological interest and indeed significance, did not accomplish what had been hoped for. In spite of their efforts, the Christians were more and more used as scapegoats. When anything went wrong, the authorities found that persecuting Christians was an effective way of keeping the lid on an otherwise volatile situation. Put simply, people were encouraged to get rid of their frustrations by beating up on Christians. This does not mean that Christians of the first three centuries were under constant threat of death. There were long periods of peace and plenty when they were left alone. Most homicidal persecutions, when they occurred, tended to be localized and limited in duration. One of the worst was in Rome under the Emperor Nero, who chose to blame the Christian community for a terrible fire that burned throughout Rome. Many Christians were executed, both to appease and, in the amphithea-

tres, to amuse the public. Tradition includes both Peter and Paul in their number.

It was not until early in the third century that the church began to be persecuted in earnest. The Roman Empire was in trouble. Barbarian hordes were threatening the borders. The economy was suffering. Moral depravity was at an all-time high; all sorts of sexual perversions were considered normal and politicians were scheming for their own ambitious ends. The emperors, in a bid to restore unity and devotion, encouraged the spread of emperor worship. Christians throughout the empire drew the line at this and paid the price. To remain loyal to the church was to be subject to death. Many remained true witnesses to the end. They are remembered and venerated as martyrs. Many agreed to the demands of the authorities and offered their sacrifices to the gods of the empire. I often wonder what I would have done if I had been one of those forced to make the choice. The last of the persecutions proved to be the worst and the most widespread. It began in the reign of Diocletian, in about the year 300, and lasted in some areas for twelve years or more. But still the cross was held high.

Under Diocletian, the empire had been split up into four parts, each with its own sub-emperor. Before long, the four had become seven and an epic power struggle resulted. The winner of this struggle was Constantine. His mother was a Christian and, believing his victory to have been brought about by her god, he, too, became a Christian. Thus began, for better and at times for worse, the Christian Empire. Like so many momentous victories for the cause of social justice, the banner raised was red from the blood of martyrs, whose witness had proven so effective. Christians who had hitherto celebrated the Eucharist in private now began to build special buildings in order to satisfy the needs of a growing population. Some churches had been constructed earlier, but had been destroyed in the last great

persecution. The churches were designed primarily as places wherein the Eucharist would be celebrated. The term "Eucharist" comes from a Greek word meaning "thanksgiving" and encompassed the reading of scripture, the preaching of the Word and the sharing in a meal the origin of which is to be found in Jesus' last supper with His apostles. Those who wished to become Christians and, therefore, partakers in the Eucharist, were not simply baptized and introduced to the community. The period of preparation could last for as long as three years. At length, duly instructed, the candidate for Baptism was presented to the bishop by at least two Christians, who would vouch for and sponsor the new candidate as he or she took that first step within the sacramental life of the Church.

CHAPTER II

FOR YOU, FROM CALVARY

If you were to ask a second century Roman soldier the meaning of the word, "sacramentum", he would be quick to tell you that that was his oath of allegiance to Rome and its gods. Teachers within the early Church used that same familiar word as a means of partially describing what Baptism was all about. In time, "sacrament" lost its original meaning and became a "church" word, referring to seven specific rituals which were and remain rich in symbolism, standing for that which is at once familiar to us and beyond us. Although today the word "sacrament" refers in a special way to the seven distinct rituals of Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony, Eucharist, Reconciliation, and the Anointing of the Sick, it has a broader meaning, as it can be descriptive of much more. The history of the sacraments is very long and involved. Each one has been the subject of countless theological and philosophical debates as has been the very meaning of the word itself. It isn't as though Jesus at some point sat down with the apostles and said, "Here they are, one to seven. And this is how

they work." Recognition of the sacraments was a gradual process and one that can be said to continue to this day. The actual numbering of seven sacraments dates back only to the twelfth century, when a major process of stabilization took place in the western church, which was centered in Rome. This stabilization followed six centuries of hardship and confusion, brought about mainly by the collapse of the Roman Empire under the impact of invasion by Germanic tribes, as well as Moslem armies and navies.

* * * * *

Those of us who were born into the post-Reformation, pre-Vatican II church of the west were nursed on a liturgy and a sacramental theology which had remained pretty well unchanged from medieval times. It took the Council to remind us that liturgical practice and theological understanding had their roots in evolutionary change, a process which had been stalled for centuries, but was about to begin again. With respect to the sacraments, we were taught that there were seven and that a sacrament was a sign instituted by Jesus, which not only symbolized, but conferred the fruits of His redemptive sacrifice. Some of you are probably getting a little nervous, so it is time to say that all of this remains essentially valid.

When today's theologians take a hard look at traditional formulations of doctrine, they are not doing so in order to prove them wrong and thus throw the average Catholic into a state of shock and the church into turmoil. What they are trying to do is get behind the timeworn words and examine the actual experiences that prompted those words, and then, give contemporary expression to these realities.

A sacrament is a sign which points to the divine reality. Jesus was Himself a sign to others of the Father and therefore, in a broad sense, a sacrament. When peo-

ple came close to Him, their "sense of God" was heightened. Being in the presence of and communicating with a truly holy man or woman gives us an idea of this. In the case of Jesus, His resurrection continued the encounter beyond the grave and gradually He and that of which He was a sign, were seen to be one. He was, indeed, God. His closest followers, in turn, became sacraments to those to whom they ministered; through them, God healed the sick, forgave sins and entered into communion with those who sought Him. Jesus' followers, the church, began to see themselves as the extension in time of Jesus, in a sense, the new Incarnation, the paramount sign of God's life-giving presence in the world, the living conduit through which flowed the loving presence of Jesus here and now. And so, in their prayerful reflection, they identified some specific ways in which they understood Jesus to have been a sign to others of His Father. There was the giving of new life. "I have come," He said, "that you might have life". The bestowal of the Spirit, His willingness to heal and forgive, His faithfulness, His ministering to others and His loving self-sacrifice: This is what the church had to project through the centuries in a relevant fashion, so that through them, Jesus could be seen to continue His timeless ministry.

If you have a deeply personal relationship with another person, it is normal that that relationship should affect you to such an extent that you are never quite the same. Such relationships are not formed every day. They are precious but demanding, and once begun, they can be disrupted, but never quite erased. They become, forever, part of us. Similarly, if one enters fully and without reservation into the life of the Church, one is subject to certain permanent effects of the resulting sacramental encounter with Christ. Thus, Baptism is considered irreversible, as are the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders. These are irreversible in the sense that having received them, you can never be the same again. You

remain what you have become, through the power of God: a new creation sealed by the Spirit; a priest forever.

Clearly the essence of any sacrament is coming into contact with Christ. Opportunities for such encounters are presented to us within ritual frameworks or rites, which by their nature require periodic fine-tuning, so as not to lose their value as signs for successive generations and cultures. Thus, liturgical changes must be expected from time to time. This means that language and gesture can, and indeed, ought to change. All that need remain constant is the voice, the touch and the intent of Jesus, all of which can be summarized as His gift of self, or "Grace". This gift of self enables us to go beyond our natural human limits and become more like Jesus. We call this boost of Grace supernatural, precisely because it enables us to reach beyond our basic nature. Using more technical language, we can say that supernatural grace is God-given self-transcendence, a process which saw its perfection only in Jesus, who alone enjoyed complete union with God. Grace is, for us, the stuff of which that union is made, although in our case, the union is incomplete and imperfect. An illustration of sanctifying or supernatural grace which I have long used when talking to children can also be helpful to adults. If you saw your potted plant hop out of its pot and head for the sink for a drink, you would, after having gone for a drink yourself, and not to the sink, have to presume that somehow the plant had acquired the means to act beyond its nature, that is to say, supernaturally. Were your dog to go looking for water, you would not be at all surprised, since, to do so is according to its nature. But if that same dog expressed an opinion on the up-coming elections, you would probably head back once again to the bar. Plants and animals are not the recipients of supernatural grace. Only man is given the opportunity to go beyond his nature, to function on a plane which allows him to believe without having seen, and from the platform of that faith, hope in the face of despair and

love without promise of return.

Even on the purely natural level, our sacramental liturgies emphasize and dramatize fundamental values with which any well-intentioned person can associate. In other words, the sacraments elicit from us all that is best in our human nature: a willingness, as well as a need, to belong - "Baptism";... the mature acceptance of responsibility - "Confirmation";... an openness to being healed, to admitting error, seeking forgiveness and making amends, changing our life - "Reconciliation" and "Anointing",... fidelity and service to others - "Matrimony" and "Orders"; In general, a commitment to community and the brotherhood of mankind, and all the ramifications of this, from social justice to environmental responsibility. You will notice that none of these expressions are mutually exclusive. They all, in fact, overlap as they are all facets of the same ideal.

CHAPTER III

THE MAKING OF A CHRISTIAN

The first of the sacraments, and one to which we have already briefly referred, is Baptism. I have always derived a good deal of pleasure from administering the sacrament of Baptism. I am particularly aware of the continuity of the Church when I baptize an adult convert. Most of the time, I take at least a year to instruct a person, perhaps longer if they have had no formal exposure to the basics of Christianity. During that period of time, there often develops a unique bond between us. It is a humbling experience to watch the convert's level of conviction and dedication grow, as his or her openness of mind and generosity of spirit is rewarded before your eyes. Humbling, because you know from experience that the same instruction could be given to another person, one not yet disposed to receive it, and your words would have little effect. My words convince no one unless they fall on ready soil prepared by the mysterious

workings of the Holy Spirit. Once the candidate is exposed to the principal teachings and customs of the Church, he or she expresses the desire to be baptized. The Baptism itself takes little time, but it is a solemn and truly joyful moment.

The word "Baptism" comes from a Greek word meaning to dip or immerse. When John the Baptist called upon his followers to be immersed or baptized in the Jordan, he was following an ancient ritual significant of a change of heart or conversion. The symbolism was one of dying to the old ways and arising cleansed and open to the new. Jesus entered the world stage by walking into the river and asking John to baptize Him. This was clearly not because He felt the need for personal conversion, but rather, in order to associate Himself with the community and with what His precursor had thus far said and done.

Christian Baptism, as we know it, began with the birth of the church on that first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus. Those who were baptized were thereby initiated into the Christian community. This community of faith and ministry would support the newly baptized person in his or her relationship with the risen Christ. Down into the waters they went, dying as it were in the depths, only to rise again to the light of new life, the focus of which was loving witness to Jesus and service to others. Baptism was significant to the early Christians primarily because of what it meant in terms of what the baptized person could do in and for Christ. Parents presented a child for baptism so that in time, the child could become a witness to the risen Lord. Today, we tend to put emphasis on what baptism can do for us, setting us up for salvation rather than damnation or something or other in between. Although this attitude is not entirely erroneous, it is not healthy and tends to support a "me first" posture which is in direct opposition to the Christian ideal. The New Testament scripture makes it clear that those who are baptized are not auto-

matically united to Christ for all eternity. They are required to live the gift of faith and be of service to others. St. Paul, when writing to adult Roman converts said that when we are baptized in Christ Jesus, we are baptized in His death. In other words, when we are baptized, we go into the tomb with Him and join Him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead, we too may live a new life.

To get a handle on what Paul is saying, we must recall that baptism in the early church was by total immersion and the people whom Paul was addressing were adults who had attained some degree of maturity before being instructed and baptized. They were men and women who, for the most part, had been immersed in a pagan culture, in which the principal rule was survival of the fittest. To become a Christian in a world that was just beginning to hear the gospel of Jesus demanded a far more radical conversion than would be the case today when most cultures, whether they admit it or not, have been to some extent influenced by the Christian ethic.

And so the moment of baptism, or formal commitment to the person and doctrine of Jesus, was a moment of the highest dramatic impact. The converts were lowered into the water; for a moment they were totally immersed, as though buried or dead. And then to the "hosannahs" and "hallelujahs" of the assembly, they were lifted up from the water, from the grave, and born again into new life, becoming new persons. The baptized person was no longer just a merchant or a senator, a housewife, a weaver or a slave; no longer just a Greek, a Persian, or a Roman; no longer just a member of this or that family, but a Christian before and above all else. A Christian! Had not Jesus said that those who wished to be baptized must be prepared to put being a Christian before all other associations and relationships, even those of the most intimate nature? And so they rose from the waters of baptism, dead to whatever in their past lives

was contrary to Christian teaching and alive to the challenge of the gospel. They knew that this ritual was meaningful only because Jesus, by His death and resurrection and by His appointment of the apostles as ministers of baptism and of the Word, had endowed this rite with life, with His life. And so, the well-instructed, Christian converts knew that becoming a Christian was not like joining the army. It involved being literally regenerated. It meant being adopted by the Father with all the privileges and obligations inherent in such a relationship.

Now we have all received that same baptism, most of us, when we were infants. We were given that new life as a gift requested on our behalf by our parents, whose gift of natural life we had but recently received. It is up to each of us to accept that gift again and again. Think about this the next time you come into a church; dip a finger into the holy water font and bless yourself, reaffirming your baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A problem which we priests encounter every day is that of parents who want their child to be baptized, but have only the vaguest intention of nourishing the seed which they are asking us to plant. Often, their request is the result of pressure from their own parents, or it is simply the "thing to do" within the cultural context. There are times however, when they are expressing some vestige of a faith which was once strong and innocent. Whatever the case, they have a right to expect the priest to be reasonable, kind and if possible, encouraging and supportive. Sometimes it becomes necessary for us to convince the couple that, under the circumstances, their request is unrealistic and lacking in authenticity. There is nothing magic about baptism or, for that matter, any of the sacraments. Presenting a child for baptism requires a wholehearted acceptance of the obligation to bring that child up within the worshipping community of the church. Anything less is not enough. For much the

same reason, Catholics should not accept to be sponsors at a baptism unless they are reasonably certain of the parents' intentions. In the earliest days, sponsors introduced the candidate to the community and indeed, vouched for the authenticity of the candidate, assuring the church that this was not a person who would infiltrate the community with the intent of doing harm. Although the role of sponsor or godparent has taken on different emphasis over the centuries, the essential element of representing the church's interests still remains.

One of the many clarifications to come out of the Second Vatican Council was the statement that while Baptism is necessary for joining the Church, it is not necessary for salvation. I will always remember the Irish-Catholic nurse who worked in a senior position in the maternity department of a large Jewish hospital. Hardly a baby was born that she didn't quietly baptize! She kept score like a fighter-pilot and was in all probability encouraged in her undercover ministry by her pastor. Needless to say, these infants were not automatically turned into Christians. Surely it is not the intent of Jesus that all should be baptized regardless of whether or not they want to be, or in the case of infants, whether or not their parents or guardians present them for this purpose.

Late in the 4th century, when Christianity became the official religion of the empire, the steady stream of converts became a flood. The question of what proportion of these converts was sincere is a good one. There can be little doubt that the quality of instruction frequently left much to be desired. One curious scenario was that of the deathbed Baptism. Lapsed Christians who wanted to return to the fold had to do much more than make a good Confession, which is all that is required today. Various forms of severe and often public penance were demanded of the penitent as a proof of sincerity. As a result, it became the "in thing" for people who had received instruction to put off Baptism until

the last possible minute, just before death. In this way, they could break the rules with relative impunity and still pick up their passport to Heaven at the last moment. We modern-day counterparts of these early Christians gamble in the same way with the sacrament of Penance. But this approach didn't work then and it doesn't work now. Although there are some exceptions, in general it is true to say that as you live, so too, do you die.

Again, we must remind ourselves that there is nothing magical about the sacraments. If a priest were to consecrate a bakery shop, it would hardly become a huge Tabernacle. The intention of Christ is always a prerequisite for the validity of the sacraments. As mentioned earlier, the ideal reason for presenting a child for Baptism is because you want your child, in time, to become a witness to Christ - an integral part of that worshipping, serving community which is the Church. Most of us know from our own failures that there is nothing easy about being a Christian. Wearing the label is one thing, but actually reflecting the Christian ideal in our day-to-day life is very demanding. The bottom line is that we can't do it alone. And so it is that in the sacrament of Confirmation, we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. In essence, this sacrament is a second stage of Baptism. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read how the first bishops, upon hearing that there were many new converts in Samaria, decided to send two of their number, Peter, their leader, and young John, down to Samaria to meet and worship with the newly baptized and through the sign of the imposition of hands, give them the support necessary for them to live what Peter calls "a good life in Christ". In other words, once they were baptized, once they were committed, they were given the necessary divine assistance or, if you prefer, "grace", to live all that which Baptism implies. The apostles were not imparting something which was theirs to give. Rather, they were functioning as channels of God's

love, of the Holy Spirit. And so that same spirit first given in Baptism is reinforced in Confirmation, so that the recipients may become faithful witnesses and effective proclaimers of the Gospel.

There has always been disagreement over the sacrament of Confirmation. Some people consider it superfluous, or in some way demeaning to Baptism. Some feel it should be administered with Baptism; others, a little later, and still others, much later. It is my understanding that Confirmation represents the commissioning of the baptized to be witnesses to Christ and His church. It is administered by the bishop or someone delegated by him, and is therefore the confirmation of the baptized person as an integral part of not just a Christian family or parish, but a diocese and the universal Church. In this sense, it is best described and experienced as the second stage of Baptism and a celebration of Christian maturity and responsibility.

Recently I spent some time with a middle-aged man who was suffering from cancer and knew that his remaining life was being measured in weeks. With him, as with a few other people I had met in similar circumstances, I found myself, the priest who was there to minister, being ministered to by a person who was at peace with God and man.

The foundation of Baptism and Confirmation, supported and maintained by a lifetime of prayer and countless trips to the confessional and Communion rail, was at length producing its most precious fruit. Sure, this man, like most of us, had said and done a lot of things of which he was anything but proud; there were probably long gaps between his prayers and many of his confessions and communions were probably semi-automatic. But he had tried and he was open to God's influence. During those final days, God had filled him with His Spirit and everyone around him was impressed with how well he was "taking it", how brave he was. In my eyes, he was in the final stages of becoming one with

God. He was dying and coming to life all at once. Being with him deepened my faith and the holy anointing I administered was truly a promise of things to come.

CHAPTER IV

OF FISHERS AND FOOT WASHERS

The little boy who some fifty years ago, while preparing for his First Communion sat in a church and was terrorized by the priest who wore the two-piece bathing suit, was of course, himself destined to become a priest. Like so many Catholic young men of my generation, I felt that it was only fair to God that I give some consideration to the priesthood. For most of us, the choice seemed to narrow down to girls or God and girls seemed to be by far the more attractive choice. For those of us who gave the priesthood serious thought, there seemed, at least to me, to be a contest between, on the one hand, what I perceived to be the most significant and generous expression of what was best in me, and on the other hand, the sometimes overwhelming need to love and be loved by one person whom I identified as already being in my life. I knew that I could love and be loved. As time went on, I knew just as surely that of all

the professions open to me, the one that appealed to me most was the priesthood. My family encouraged but never pushed me. It was the mid-fifties. To most Catholics, the priesthood appeared to be the noblest of callings. I felt certain that I had that calling and I knew down deep that nothing would please my parents more than to see me at the altar; and yet, it seemed such a narrow and confined way of life. I wanted to be happy more than I wanted to be a hero.

Accepting the fact that I had only one life to live, I made the decision to give the seminary a try. Everyone I knew, without exception, supported me in this decision. In some strange way, I felt both saddened and encouraged. And so after two years in a general Arts program at a Jesuit college, I headed for St. Peter's, a seminary in London, Ontario, and there, for two years, I prepared for the final four years of theology. The seminaries of the 1950's were very similar to those of the 1650's. The day began at 5:30 A.M.; a half hour later you were expected to be in your place in chapel dressed in cassock, surplice and biretta. The first was the traditional long black garment of the priest, the second, a white, half-length, full-sleeved, loose-fitting whatever, and the biretta was the little three-cornered black hat with a pom-pom on top. It was made of cloth-covered cardboard and folded up flat for convenient storage in a back pocket. All the first-year students yearned for the day when their birettas would take on that somewhat travelled and tattered look that would mark them as being old hands. The chapel was in the form of a monastic choir, with three or four rows of stalls, one row set a step above the other, running down both sides of the chapel and facing toward a single, wide, centre aisle. The altar was down at the far end, so that we were, in effect, in an extended sanctuary. The first thirty or forty minutes was spent in what was called "meditation" - silent, personal, reflective prayer. For me it was a chance to drift back to sleep. I was not alone, because most mornings a snore would give rise to

a very discreet ripple of mirth. This period was followed by morning prayers led by one of the senior students. The signal for winding up meditation, or in my case, waking up, was a knocking on a wooden stall, which sounded very much like a knocking on a door. One morning it elicited a very loud and agitated, "Come in!" from one of the older and more beloved priests, who no doubt used the meditation period for the same purpose as yours truly. There was another elderly priest who always came into chapel a little later than the rest of us. His solemn and prolonged genuflection was a sight to behold. He always forced his knee right to the floor, in spite of the arthritic-induced agony that could be clearly read in his face. Once down, you would swear that he would never get up again, but somehow, he always managed to winch himself up. One day, just as his knee was about to touch bottom, the stillness of the morning was shattered by the ripping sound of tearing cloth. We all knew that his trousers had given out and split beneath his cassock which was, of course, beneath his surplice. His face glowing with embarrassment, he sprang upright faster than ever in the past forty years and taking his place, covered his face with prayerful hands. More than one of us began to choke with laughter. But the story does not end here. It came down through the teaching staff that the old boy's trousers were still intact. One of the students had planned it all, surreptitiously tearing a piece of cloth close by at just the right moment. He is probably a bishop today.

After morning prayer, the celebrant of the day came down the aisle toward the altar to celebrate the first of two Masses. He was the incarnation of what each one of us wanted to be. At about 7:30, we went down for breakfast, each to his assigned seat. Unless it was a special occasion, this meal and all others were eaten in silence. Silence meant no talking but much grunting and so forth. Breakfast over, we headed for the outdoors for conversation and a smoke. We were all young men be-

tween twenty and thirty. So-called late vocations were not yet common and were responded to in only a few specialized seminaries around the world. The seminary where I spent my first two years was a diocesan seminary, with students representing dioceses from coast to coast in Canada, as well as from some parts of the USA. We were all baptized, confirmed men from various ethnic and social backgrounds, each of whom believed that he was responding to the Spirit's urging toward the ministerial priesthood. Hardly a week went by when we did not say good-bye to someone who, with the help of his advisor, had reached the conclusion that God was calling him to another way of life.

I remember that seeing one of those young men, I often felt a twinge of jealousy. He had offered all; he had taken the chance, and God seemingly had other plans for him. It was sort of like offering your friend your most prized possession as a token of friendship and the gift being declined. You win both ways. There were days when I was convinced that I was in the wrong place. I would talk to my faculty advisor or director, who was also my confessor and thus a confidant in the strictest sense of the word. I remember him now with respect and affection. He would draw on his pipe, smile and say, "Come back and see me when it's not raining." It seems that whenever I decided to quit it was one of those dark, wet days. As the months passed, I began to feel more and more at home, that is to say, I felt I was on the right track. But the heartaches were very real, as were the headaches. I had never been a good student and I found the work difficult. The fact that much of it was taught in Latin, especially later in theology, was no help. The professors were all priests and they lived with us, so they were always available, and for the most part, patient. Somehow I managed to scrape by and when summer came, I went home a full-fledged seminarian.

It was a devastating experience. For the past year, I had been in a highly-controlled atmosphere; there was

no television, no radio, no magazines and only a limited selection of newspapers in the library. Now, when I walked along the streets of Montreal, I was assaulted by images and sounds which although I had grown up with them, appeared foreign and shrill and decadent. I had always thought of myself as a fun-loving person, shy perhaps, but not withdrawn. Now, all of a sudden, I felt like an angel in a whore-house. It was all very disconcerting. I was at home and I didn't belong. The daily preoccupations of my family and friends seemed banal and altogether unrealistic. Radio and television blared at me and everyone seemed to have something to sell but nothing to give. I honestly don't think that I felt superior. Perhaps I was more in touch with what I considered to be the essentials, but not superior. More than ever before, I sought and found peace and comfort between the silent walls of churches. However, soon the shock wore off and I began to readjust to what some find comfort in calling, "the real world". A few weeks later, I was back at the seminary, greeting what were now old friends and hearing that this one or that one had dropped out.

Whenever a particularly well-liked and seemingly well-suited seminarian decided to leave, the others felt a ripple of unease. You could almost hear them asking themselves, "If he wasn't right for it, how can I presume to be?" Through this experience, we learned that it is God who calls His priests and not the other way around. Why He called and continues to call me remains a mystery. Most of us wouldn't have chosen the twelve apostles for a softball team and yet Jesus thought that they were right for His purposes. Indeed, God's ways are not our ways. We were taught to see the will of God in our daily lives and especially in the "rule" by which each hour was governed. We were free, but we had chosen to surrender ourselves to His service and He spoke to us and guided us through our superiors and particularly through our personal spiritual director or advisor. Every

day brought with it its own specific or recurring frustrations. We were learning first hand the meaning of sacrifice and each one of us in his own way wondered if he would be able to cope with what lay ahead. We soon discovered that the secret was to cope with one day at a time. Generally, we supported each other, laughed a lot and learned to accept each others' shortcomings. I found the regimentation particularly hard; the ringing of bells to move us from our beds and from one room to another was a form of torment.

One night, or to be more precise, very early one morning, I partially awoke in the midst of a sleepwalking expedition to find the light on in what I mistakenly thought was my bedroom. I threw the switch on the wall. All hell broke loose. Bells started ringing everywhere. That is when I really woke up to discover that I was not in my room at all but out in the long hallway. The switch I had activated was the main system of electric bells, which sounded every morning at 5:30 to get us up. On this particular morning, they clanged at 3:30 A.M., courtesy of one very stunned, very naked seminarian. I switched them off. I was "miles" from the security of my own room and I was certain that I would be discovered en route. Already lights were appearing through the transoms as, one after another, my robot-like confreres prepared for another day, a little earlier than usual. Directly across from me was the door which opened onto the second-floor balcony of the chapel. The balcony was used by the choir on Sundays, but remained closed during the week. In I went, and sat quietly, my bare skin chilled as never before by the cold wooden bench. I would have given a fortune for a pair of trousers and more, to be back in my room. Below me a door creaked open, swishing the air before it as it swung inward. A light came on and a single seminarian glided down the aisle. Were he to look behind and upwards, he would have seen a cherub to inspire the likes of Bernini or Michelangelo. No one else came in. After

about five minutes, he looked at his watch and uttered a quiet but truly heart-rending, "Oh shit!". Up the aisle he came. The light went out. The door swished again and I was alone. Just me and God and I knew that God was laughing. And by this time, so was I. I dared to peer out into the corridor. All was quiet, and there were no lights coming from the rooms on either side of the long, long corridor. I streaked for home. I made it. Later, after Mass and breakfast, I was of course one of the first to ask who the hell had set off the bells at 3:30 A.M. No one knew, but everyone had a story to tell about how they had reacted. A little later on I confessed to a group of my classmates. I am assured that this story is told to this day. So no matter what you may have heard, the above is the official firsthand version.

I spent the next four years at the seminary in Montreal. They were four difficult years. The environment was quite different from that of St. Peter's. In many ways, it was, in fact, less strict, but I never came to feel at home. By this time I was certain that I wanted to be a priest, and I was ready to pay the price. I had experienced enough of those special moments in prayer to believe that my vocation was genuine and, what was most important, my spiritual director had encouraged me to stick with it. In Montreal, I had the great good fortune to have as my director another gift from God. The advice he most frequently gave me was: "as long as you don't like it here, you will probably do a good job as a priest out there." He knew what it meant to be ordained and in a parish, and he believed that I would find happiness and fulfillment in that environment.

At long, long last that day of all days came. I felt the weight of the cardinal-archbishop's hands as they came to rest on my bowed head. I sobbed in disbelief. I was a priest forever.

What happened to me on that May morning in the old basilica of Notre Dame? I believe that I became God's empowered instrument, with the emphasis on the

instrument rather than upon the power. Through my voice and hands, God would speak to and touch countless people. For reasons known only to Him, I was to be one of His chosen instruments. Of course, all the baptized are His instruments, but just as in His public life, He called certain people to a more intensely focussed ministry, so too, He had called me. On the night before He died, He had made clear to His apostles that the essence of their ministry was to serve. To their astonishment, He washed their feet - the action of a slave. He told them that if they wished to be His ministers they must wash each others' feet and, by extension, serve all of humanity. And so, on that day in May, with my heart filled with gratitude, I became a foot-washer. And now, before sharing with you some of the ups and downs of thirty years of foot-washing, I invite you to follow me through a brief and I hope, helpful history of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

When Jesus was a little boy, He would have known about priests. The priesthood in His day was a hereditary office, passed on from father to son. The priest was the one who, on behalf of the people, offered sacrifices in the inner temple. People provided the animals and birds for sacrifice and these were offered to the one God in recognition of man's dependence upon His gracious bounty. It was the sacrifice in the blood of the old Covenant established through Moses.

The day came when Jesus, no longer a little boy but a grown man, was led up the slopes of Calvary, there to bleed the blood of the new Covenant - the new and everlasting Covenant shed for all men and women. His dying was the ultimate act of love, of giving, of emptying of self. This was not in order to satisfy a stern, demanding God in Heaven, but to show how far God was willing to go to prove His love for the creatures He had made in His own image and likeness. On that day, on that mountain, Jesus gathered every one of us into His arms and started us on the road to Heaven. He is the priest of the

New Covenant, as well as the lamb, because He offered Himself through the "unknowing" hands of His persecutors. This action of offering is an ongoing one and continues to this day through the "knowing" hands of His priests...through my hands. Herein lies the incredible significance of the Mass, a subject to which we will return later. For now, let us just note that the celebration of the Mass remains the focal point of the ministry of the ordained priest. It was because they presided over the continuation of Jesus' sacrifice that the early ministers were thought of as priests. The first generation of Christians remained, for the most part, pious Jews and they accepted the ancient Jewish priesthood along with the new Christian priesthood. The total destruction of the Temple, the single place in which the Jewish priest functioned, meant in essence, the end of that priesthood. This happened in 70 A.D. and led to the belief that through the unwitting hand of the Roman legions,the old dispensation was giving way to the new and that, in any case, Jesus' sacrifice had made the temple sacrifice, and the temple itself, obsolete. This evolution of thought is clearly seen in the writings of an unknown Jewish-Christian of that era, whose work has come down to us as the letter to the Hebrews. The first Christian priests were, of course, the Apostles and those they chose to ordain. As they died off, the people they had selected became the new leaders. The chief elder within any given Christian community of the second and third centuries was the Episcopus or bishop and he presided over the Eucharist, or, to use the Latin term, the Mass. "Eucharist", you will recall, is a word coming from the Greek, meaning "thanksgiving", and "Mass" appears to derive from a Latin word meaning to be sent, as in "mission". For most, if not all bishops, this was a part-time job and they supported themselves through regular occupations. As a group, the bishops were considered to be successors of the Apostles. They had the important responsibility of making certain that the official doctrine

remained true to apostolic tradition. As Christians increased in number, the structure binding them together also grew. Being a bishop became a full-time job. The bishops were helped by presbyters, who acted as advisors and assisted in the celebration of the Eucharist. The front-line ministers, those who taught the new faith and did most of the "foot-washing", were the Deacons. These men and women were chosen and commissioned by the local bishop and ordained to their ministry in a special ceremony. The bishops, to whom the deacons reported, were elected by the people, or sometimes, by the presbyters. The presbyters, in turn, were appointed by the bishop and the other presbyters. And so, there was a structure of bishop and presbyters, who looked after the liturgy, and deacons, who did the day-to-day ministry.

By the 4th century, presbyters were filling in for the over-extended bishops and frequently, filled the priestly role at the Eucharist. By the 5th century, their numbers had really multiplied, because the empire was now officially Christian, but they still remained an extension of the bishop and under his authority. Thus, with the passage of time the presbyters, who had begun as senior advisors to the bishop, became presiders over the Eucharist or priests and parochial administrators. These men were not trained in anything except the liturgy; as a result, they were not generally allowed to preach. This was still the role of the deacon and of course, the bishop. For the same reason, these early parish priests were also forbidden to absolve penitents, unless they were on their deathbed. As if to add insult to injury, the Baptisms they performed were "confirmed" by the bishop when he came to visit. To be a parish priest, a candidate was expected to live a good moral life and be familiar with the rituals surrounding the administration of the sacraments. Rarely did a priest become a bishop; the gulf between them was too wide. Bishops came of the upper classes; they were wealthy and educated. Priests came from the lower classes and were poor and

uneducated. In the course of time, many deacons were ordained priests and thus the level of learning and culture in the priesthood was elevated. Preaching and teaching now became a priestly responsibility, whereas the deaconate became the last step toward the priesthood. The next logical step was for bishops to be drawn from the priesthood. The result of this evolutionary process was that Christian ministry became the prerogative of a male hierarchical clergy, which was generally perceived as being more knowledgeable and closer to God than the masses and which was, undoubtedly, a very powerful body whose power extended well into the realm of secular politics. To be fair, it must be said that in many cases, they were placed on pedestals which they neither designed nor desired, although among the bishops, the opposite was too often true. Although by this time bishops and priests were supposed to be full-time ministers, the reality was that many priests subsisted by working as tradesmen and farmers, whereas bishops commonly doubled as bankers, magistrates and large landholders. Most bishops and priests were married and this prevailed well into the 13th century. But there was a growing movement toward a celibate clergy, based first of all upon the model of Christ and secondly, upon the fact that priests were expected to be holy and according to ancient tradition, this condition of holiness demanded purity, especially sexual purity. Purity in turn, suggested abstinence, an ideal which was practiced by the early Jewish priests during the period when they were on active service in the temple. It was too much to expect married clergy to become celibate, although some pressure was exerted upon them to do so. Celibacy did, however, become an ideal for the newly ordained. It became a tradition in the East for priests to be allowed to marry but for bishops to be drawn only from the celibate clergy. In the west, it finally became a matter of ecclesiastical law for priests to be celibate.

In the 5th and 6th centuries, when Christianity be-

came the dominant religion of the Roman empire and the institutional church became a tremendously powerful influence at every level of domestic and international life, the truly devout Christian began to wonder if Christ had been removed from Christianity. Lay people began to group themselves into communities which, in direct contrast to society, stressed the renunciation of worldly goods and values. These men and women founded celibate communities of prayer and study, which were the first monasteries and convents. These people were, in a sense, the prophets of the New Testament calling the still young, but somewhat errant, church back to the basics. In the years that followed, theirs was often the one voice crying in a wilderness of materialism. These communities continued to grow in number and became the conscience as well as the heartbeat of the true church.

If you were a man, lived in the early middle ages and were the lord and master of a vast estate, there is a very good chance that you would have been a bishop of the Christian church, as were your father and grandfather before you. Whether bishop or layman, you would have had the obligation to build and maintain a church for the use of your peasant population. This church would be staffed by a peasant man of your selection, whose training would also be your sole responsibility, though, if you were not a bishop, your candidate would have to be examined by the local bishop prior to ordination. Clearly, as mentioned earlier, the pastor emerging from this system would need only to be able to read or, perhaps, memorize the Mass and have a basic knowledge of how to celebrate the other sacraments. Preaching was rare (a blessing which would be appreciated by a large number of modern congregations). Existing in parallel to this rather secular ecclesial system were the ever growing monasteries and convents, wherein flourished the arts and letters, philosophy and theology and prayer and penance. For the average person, religion

was a mixture of superstition and bible stories, not to mention rules and regulations, which were numbered among the many burdens of the common man of the day. To many of the rich, the church was a source of titles and honors, a power to be reckoned with and from time to time, a source of grace. During this period, the ideal was presented by the best of the monasteries and was generally recognized as just that - the ideal. But it was an ideal which was slowly but surely adopted by the secular clergy. This process was encouraged by the establishment of the first medieval universities, which brought the scholarship of the monasteries into the mainstream. Several monastic orders turned their efforts outward and began to minister to the people. Among them were celibate, monastic priests of great learning and piety. Dominicans and Franciscans are primary examples. Owing principally to their positive influence, the Lateran Council, which met four times over one hundred years, starting in the 12th century, brought about many reforms, such as special training for priests, improved procedures for the election of the pope and an insistence upon a celibate clergy modelled after the monastic tradition from which most of the current bishops had come. Almost gone were the days when a well-connected bishop could have more than one diocese in northern Europe and live in consequent splendour in the south of France. But reforms, although spelled out, were slow in coming and it took a major shock, in the form of the Protestant Reformation, to bring truly far-reaching improvements. Today, looking back, it is hard to blame the reformers for their impatience.

The church's answer to the Reformation was the Council of Trent and its reforms, coupled with those recommended by the Lateran Council, finally took hold, but they did so in a Christendom torn by strife and sadly weakened by pride and its offspring, and yet miraculously still alive in the spirit of Christ. From the Council of Trent grew the church into which I was born - a

church of institutional stability and discipline; a church through which God spoke from the pulpits of the world. The priest was a man who could do no wrong. "Father" was never drunk; he was always a little unwell. He never lusted after a woman; he was always taken advantage of. He was never lazy; he was always overworked. He was put on a pedestal and, by and large, remained on it for four hundred years. And then, along came the Second Vatican council. Vatican II asked a lot of questions, some of which remain unanswered, but many of which find their answers in the church as we know it today. Prior to the sixties, the terms "minister" and "cleric" were pretty well interchangeable. Lay people were not ministers; they were ministered to. The Holy Spirit, through the participants of Vatican II, asked why this was so and there ensued soulsearching studies of power as it relates to priesthood historically and ideally. The result was a definition of priesthood which stressed the element of service, which was illustrated by Jesus on Holy Thursday evening. Perhaps more significantly, it included others in the ministry of the church, just as the Apostles had done. Ministry was much less identified with authority. The pedestal upon which we priests had stood began to crumble. For some, this came as a relief, but for others, it was difficult, because it appeared that our roles were being diminished to the point of insignificance. For many, the sacrifices, made particularly that of celibacy, were offset by the "pedestal effect" and the apparent uniqueness of our role in society. Now, given the deeper understanding of priesthood and ministry, as well as the rather questionable underpinnings of mandatory celibacy, coupled with the advent of a permanent married deaconate, lay readers and Communion distributors, not to mention preachers, the price of priesthood began to appear too high. Many good priests took off their collars and put away their chalices. For some, the decision to leave the priesthood was triggered by a feeling of impatience because bishops and, in some cases, pastors were

fighting the spirit of Vatican II. The other end of the spectrum were those priests who were troubled because they felt that the directives were being implemented too quickly, without sufficient preparation. Whether as a result of an identity crisis, or because they felt victimized by either the "left" or "right", many priests and religious sought alternate life styles. Some of them are greatly missed.

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During the past thirty years, I have known and worked with many bishops and priests. We are, I believe, as varied a group of men as you will find in any profession. For some, I have, frankly, little respect, but for others, many others, I have a great deal of respect and admiration.

I have always looked toward elderly priests with hope, for inspiration and affirmation. And even today,as I draw closer and closer to becoming one of their numbers, I still find it heartwarming to converse with a priest whose life is nearly spent and whose faith and confidence in God and church are a source of obvious serenity. I have also known some who grew bitter as they grew older; these were priests from whom one felt a need to protect the very people they were ordained to serve. I sense that in many instances, the essential difference between these two extremes can be summed up in the last word of the previous sentence..."serve". In order to be fulfilled, a priest must see himself as servant. This is more difficult than it may at first appear. A priest, particularly a pastor of a parish, is still considered one of the more respected citizens of the community, not to mention his own parish. The many hats he wears include presider over the liturgy, preacher and teacher, parochial administrator, counsellor and advisor and they tend to set him apart, as do other people's expectations of him. He is expected to be intelligent, cultured, articu-

late, wise, prayerful, fair-minded, good-humoured, available and warm-hearted. And all of this twenty-four hours a day, every day. Many trusting people take it for granted that he is more or less all of these things and so they turn to him for help, support, and guidance as they would to their fathers. Indeed, they call him "Father" because they know him as a dispenser of life... supernatural life. His words and his hands bring God's life into theirs or, to be more accurate, bring their lives into God's life. Within this context, it can often be hard for a pastor to be humble and avoid feeling superior, as a shepherd might feel towards sheep. It is hard for him to keep in mind the ideal established by Jesus on Holy Thursday night; the ideal of the servant, the foot-washer. For years as a pastor, I washed the feet of twelve chosen men and women on Holy Thursday night. It was the only task that I would give to no other priest. It was mine. And I prayed that my doing it would not make it a farce. It is so easy to be proud and so difficult to be truly humble. The fact is that you never know when you have achieved some degree of true humility, because if you think you have, then you surely have not. How many of us are indeed proud of our humility!

I have seen priests who become as established in their rectories as lords of the manor. They live to be called "the Boss" and do all they can to protect that precious image. Gradually, they erect barriers between themselves and the people to whom they have been sent. Doors and phones are only answered at specific times. Appointments are made at their convenience, not at the convenience of those whom they serve. Homilies become unprepared, arrogant meanderings and the people gradually get the message and turn away. The pastor senses this, but blames everyone and everything other than himself. He grows old and bitter. There is a little of him or a lot of him in every one of us who has spent any time as a pastor. It isn't entirely our own fault. Some people show little or no consideration for our

privacy, because since we do not have families and live in the rectory, we are considered to be available to write out Mass cards in the middle of supper, or to discuss a minor teenage disciplinary problem on the telephone at ten o'clock at night, just when we have taken off our shoes at last and are ready to watch the news. Every pastor knows that no matter what decision he makes and how democratically it is arrived at, there will always be some in favour and some against, and the chances are that the only ones he will hear from are those against. Sometimes you just can't do anything right. I remember one Saturday afternoon when I was clearing snow from the front walk of the church, which was a means of exercise for me and a financial saving to the parish. I was trudging along behind our big snowblower when a parishioner flagged me down and gave me the devil for diminishing the reputation of the parish by making it look as though we couldn't afford a handyman. The fact is, we couldn't, but that didn't seem to matter.

The battle against arrogance and pride, in himself and others, is not the only one that the average pastor faces. There is also the problem of loneliness; a problem which oddly enough is often exacerbated by having several priests living under the same roof. When two or three men are appointed by a bishop to live in the same house, tensions inevitably soon develop. When priests decide to live under the same roof due to a mutual agreement, there is a difference...the tensions take a little longer to develop. In most cases, these tensions do not lead to insurmountable problems and can be kept under control by a little open dialogue and a lot of humour. I think that the reason behind many unhappy rectory scenes, aside from the pastor with a "boss" complex, is a peculiar kind of selfishness which tends to feed on celibacy. The celibate priest feels he does not have to give and take, as he would within a family structure. Each one tends to create his own little world in his own

suite of rooms and all socializing becomes gratuitous and dependent on mood and menu. I have no hesitation in saying that rectory strife is one of the worst by-products of celibacy and probably causes more unhappiness than any other single element in a priest's life. Another related problem is jealousy. Because we have no significant other in our lives, we have, I believe, less positive feedback in what often seems like an engulfing sea of hostility and dissatisfaction, coming from parish and rectory alike. One result of this is a common, although consistently denied, tendency to be jealous of any fellow priest who seems to be getting a better press than you are. This is particularly true between pastor and assistant. Say to a priest after Mass, "Tell Father X, when you see him, that I thought his homily last week was great", and I assure you that you will probably be treated to a painful imitation of a smile and a barely audible death-rattle-like sound, supposedly representing hearty agreement and a promise to do so. I know that this makes us no different from most people, and that is because we are very much like most people, only we live under circumstances that are sufficiently unusual as to make us appear somewhat unusual too.

I well remember a time when most of us recognized that we were, by virtue of our working and living environments, a somewhat peculiar fraternity. We took a certain amount of pride in this and had the capacity to laugh at ourselves, each trying to outdo the other with stories about life with this or that one. A typical story centered around a pastor who tended to be rather thrifty when it came to putting food on the table. One of the curates was convinced that in order to be regular, he had to have a dish of prunes each morning. For some reason, the price of prunes went up one year, and the reverend pastor let it be known that prunes were no longer a breakfast option. The junior curate became very uptight, if you know what I mean, and the other two curates decided that remedial action was essential. Word

went out and for the next month, the mailman brought countless packages of prunes to the rectory. Day after day, the parcels arrived, many with return addresses that spoke of the concern of foreign governments and various international organizations. The uptight curate loosened up and the budget- conscious pastor was quick to share the joke, which is the only reason why I feel free to cite this out of the many stories which caused us to laugh at ourselves.

Somehow, in recent years, we have become more serious and introspective. We gaze inwardly and seek to construct all sorts of support mechanisms in order to respond to what we find. We are prodded and peered at by a variety of newly-hatched experts, who assure us that although the vast majority of us are psycho-sexual disasters, there is still hope if we place ourselves in their hands. Hope for what?! Sure, there are problems associated with imposed celibacy and with pastoral ministry in an evolving church, and sure, we need to minister to each other just as we always have, but we had best beware of taking ourselves too seriously. Other people have problems too, and one of the things we have to help them do is to laugh at themselves from time to time. I pray to God that we are not losing that ability within our own fraternity.

A few pages back, I referred to relatively elderly priests, whose faith in God and church inspires me and serves as an obvious source of serenity for them. What has brought them to this happy last chapter in their lives? Although each one is very much an individual, I think there are some common denominators. I suggest that one of these is a love for women. I put this element in first place, not because I think it is the most important in a priestly life well lived, but because I feel that some of my comments thus far may have given the impression that I view celibacy as being some sort of a negation. On the contrary, it is my firm conviction that celibacy, freely and positively lived, can be of great value.

It is true that when I was ordained, I had no choice in the matter of celibacy. It went with the priesthood, at least in the western church, and it still does. I was however, free to accept or to reject ordination. In accepting the whole package I knew that I was making a sacrifice, a sacrifice which would be repeated again and again. I had no idea that within a few years, this sacrifice would be regarded even by some Catholics as valueless, if not socially harmful. I had no idea that as time went on there would be a consensus among theologians that all of the traditional and theological underpinnings of celibacy were, to say the least, of doubtful validity, and that the only supporting forces were of a psychological and sociological nature; in a word, tradition. But all of that having been said, I do not consider myself a victim of unreasonable discipline. I think that the gift that is given, as long as it is given gladly, is still significant and that the more difficult it is to give or in other words, the more it costs, the more significant it is. I don't mean to say that my celibacy is acceptable to God because of what it is in itself. Perhaps in God's eyes, it is a totally misguided concept, but it is still my gift to him and it costs me dearly and I know that therein lies its value. I have learned that sacrifice is simply giving when it hurts. It is the marriage of pain with love and is often the way to significant happiness. It has been my experience and remains my conviction that a positive example of priestly celibacy is still a valuable example from which many of our people draw strength. The celibate priest can be a potent witness to the multi-facetted nature of love.

Many children grow up today with the impression that about the only thing worth living for is erotic pleasure. These children grow into adults who believe much the same thing and become involved in and wounded by all sorts of tragic affairs, some of which pretend to be marriages. Sometimes the loving example of a good caring priest is what it takes to make them take their first steps toward discovering the many faces of love. There is

nothing wrong with a man and woman celebrating their love commitment in an erotic fashion. After all, we did not invent the joy of sex, God did. But that joy is meant to be sought after and found within the context of a galaxy of loving relationships, whose valid expressions vary according to the nature of the alliance or affinity. Celibate love, in the name of Jesus Christ, is an integral part of that galaxy. A priest does not surrender or deny his sexuality, for there is much more to sexuality than "sex".

When I was a fourth year student of theology, I was subjected to what I considered to be even then, an unhealthy interpretation of celibate life. We were actually taught that if we were giving the sacrament of the sick to a woman who was in bed, we should take care not to sit on the bed lest we give the wrong impression. By the time I had been ordained a year or two, I had anointed and held several men and women as they experienced the fear of dying. I have known too many priests who largely because of their training, constructed a protective barrier between themselves and women and sometimes, even little girls. I consider this to be unbalanced and unhealthy. Men need to have women friends and priests are men. This requirement is directly related to a basic need for intimacy. Our mental health demands a degree of both emotional and tactile intimacy. Genital intimacy, however, is a level of intimacy which can be avoided without doing violence to oneself. A priest must learn early in his career where, when and how to draw the line, so that he does not switch into a courting mode and send out the wrong signals. Needless to say, it also helps if his women friends respect his vocation and moderate their signals as well. Sure, there are risks involved, but such risks are part of life and are a necessary aspect of a healthy celibacy, as opposed to a desiccated life behind the barricades. And so I return to my original point, which was that one of the common denominators to be found in the making of happy older priests is a

love for women, which in my view is a sign, although by no means a proof, of a well-balanced attitude towards celibacy.

It is no secret that the church, particularly of late has had its share, if not more than its share, of sex-related scandals. I have had a little experience in the area of vocational processing and there is one relevant point that I would like to make. It is my belief that the church should adapt and make use of the most up-to-date psychological testing and evaluation systems available, in conjunction with its screening of applicants for the priesthood. Some priests disagree with me, on the basis that there is a danger of ignoring the divine aspect of the call to priesthood. It is my contention that God works through such scientific aids, as He does through anything or anyone else. I believe that some men who are plagued with extreme and/or unnatural adult sexual appetites look to the priesthood or to the religious life in an honest, although misguided, attempt to solve their problem. It is as though, once cloaked in the vestments of the church, they would be afforded special and unassailable divine protection and rise above their appetites, which would diminish to the point of insignificance. But it doesn't work that way. Sooner or later, the euphoria wears off. Old habits return and the religious or clerical state becomes no longer a shield against the power of evil, but rather, a shield against being discovered and unmasked. No one wins and everyone is a victim. Before leaving this subject to those who are far more expert than myself, I would like to suggest that the discipline of celibacy does not cause a person to become homosexual, heterosexual, or pederastic, nor is it a substitute for treatment for those who need it. One prominent therapist who works in a treatment centre for priest pedophiles maintains that celibacy does not create the problem of child abuse, nor is there any evidence that the effort to live celibately exacerbates the problem. He says that those inclined to use the scandal of child abuse

to condemn the celibate priesthood are misinterpreting the evidence and promoting the worst stereotypes of priesthood. (Dr. C. Connors in "America", March/92).

The question remains as to whether celibacy and priesthood should remain inseparable in the western church. I think it is only a matter of time before celibacy becomes optional. I am convinced that this is the way it should be. I am also convinced that freely chosen celibacy will always remain as a positive valid expression of love, although, perhaps, not in cultures where the celibate life is considered entirely unwholesome. The bottom line is that the priest is the minister of the Eucharist. When we baptize Christians, we are accepting them into a Eucharistic community. We, the church, undertake to provide them with the Eucharist. There are Christian communities today which see a priest no more than once a year, if that. If this lack of priests is owing to the discipline of celibacy, then, in spite of all that can be said in its defence, celibacy must cease to be a necessary condition of priesthood. It is that simple and many of the world's bishops believe this to be the case.

The centre of a priest's life, as with all the people of God, ought to be the Eucharist and prayer. I will say more on this subject later, but for now, let me draw you back to our "photo album" of the priestly life.

In general, the life of a parish priest can be very happy and rewarding. The friendships made with parishioners often outlast one's term of office and nothing makes me happier than to come back to officiate at the marriage of a former altar server or baptize the baby born to one who was also a baby such a short time ago.

Children are a delight to the soul. Being a priest and being an uncle and sometimes an uncle-priest, have given me great pleasure. I have always enjoyed children's Masses. Such liturgies, when supported by parents, teachers and musicians, can leave an impression on the minds of little children which will remain with them for the rest of their lives. A good children's liturgy

makes the kids feel at home in the church and gives a priest a chance to relate to his youngest and often, most forgiving, parishioners. To be hugged by a little child who whispers in your ear, "Why don't you take the nails out of Jesus' piggies?" is a priceless experience, as is being presented with a tattered, much-loved doll by a solemn-faced five-year-old who tells you, "She (the doll) is my best friend. Give her to a little girl who has no friends at all."

And then there was the time that I felt like I was the Lone Ranger. It was after a special children's Mass which preceded our annual Christmas dinner, an event attended by at least three hundred adult parishioners and many children. I had switched from my Mass vestments to my Santa Claus suit and was seated in my Santa chair, listening to one child after another tell me what they expected for Christmas. I noticed over the years that they didn't like me to ask them to repeat an item on their list. Somehow I was supposed to get it straight and clear the first time. So whether or not I understood a word of what they said, I always pretended to have it all down pat. That is, until one little guy, after giving me an endless list of games and toys all by their proper names, looked me hard in the eyes and said, "Okay?". "Okay", I said, "Santa will do his best". "Tell me what I asked for?", he said, never taking his eyes off of mine. "Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!", said I. That usually worked, but not this time. He just kept staring at me and then he got off my knee and faced the other kids in line. He pointed to me and announced in the well-measured tones of a senior judge, "He is the Mass man." With that, he turned his back on me and walked away. But I still came out the winner, because he went the wrong way and didn't get his candy cane from my elf.

If helping to introduce a child to the wonder and joy of life in union with God is one of the great and happy aspects of ministry, and surely it is, than yet another is the instruction of converts. In fact, my decision

to write this book and its logical predecessor, "Nothing for Granted", was motivated primarily by my experience in instructing both prospective converts and born Catholics who for one reason or another had never had much instruction. It has been my practice to always start at the beginning with each client, regardless of his or her existing belief structure. It is vital that we both believe in the same God before we can go any further. Many people faithfully struggle through life in the company of a god whom I could never accept, much less try to love. The most common is the "zapper" god, who looks down from his cloud and causes what we call accidents. Those who believe in him will assure the grieving mother of a child whose life has just been snuffed out by a drunken driver that it is all God's will. I love to explore the nature of God with people, especially as revealed in the person of Jesus. It gives me pleasure to see a person come to discover a God who is truly loveable and not merely a supreme being to be respected and feared. The same is true when it comes to gaining an appreciation of the church, which is the main focus of this volume. I want people, I want you, to get a feel for the strengths and weaknesses of the Church, today and in the light of history. I would like you to rejoice and feel secure in the presence of the Holy Spirit, who, in spite of our pride and greed, has always kept us afloat and on course. I hope, too, that you will discover in these pages the wide spectrum of humanity which is the Church. Each one of us, without exception, is called in both our weaknesses and our strengths to be the servant of the other; to be Jesus to each other.

The actual instruction of a potential convert could be compressed into a couple of months of regular meetings, but that would deny the person the time needed to pray and reflect and become comfortable with a whole series of new reference points which need to be tested in the laboratory of daily life. Christianity is not a book of rules and dogmas; it is a way of living, a way of seeing

oneself and others in reference to external realities. And so, often a year or more goes by before the individual concerned makes his or her decision to be received into the Church. There are other routes for prospective converts to take, including various forms of group instruction and programs which reflect the systems used in the early Church. Each approach has its merits and its weaknesses, but in the final analysis, it is the work of the Spirit, whose accomplishment is wonderful to behold. Convert instruction, like most teaching situations, is both demanding and rewarding. The questions asked and the opinions expressed often send the priest back to his books and back onto his knees. I have rarely instructed anyone without coming out of the process a little better informed and a little bit more balanced in my views and attitudes.

Not everyone who comes to see their parish priest does so in preparation for the sacraments or for instruction. The majority of people come because they are hurting and no one else has time to listen to them. Listening is an art; hearing is not. Listening involves not only the ears, but the rest of the body as well. If you are listening to somebody, you are not about to answer the phone, you are not looking at your watch, you are not tapping your pencil and repeating "yes, yes, yes." Listening is being entirely available and tuned in. It can be very hard to sustain over a long period of time, but your silence and attention can be more valuable to a distraught person than the wisest of words.

I learned this firsthand a few months after I was ordained. I was called down to the office to see a young girl of about twenty. She was slightly built and very pale. She had been crying. I introduced myself and sat down opposite her in the ornate old parlour-type reception room, with its heavy oak door, which featured a partially frosted glass pane through which an attentive passerby could always get a glimpse of what was going on inside without appearing to be spying. Only the ancient, very

reverend and supposedly trustworthy pastor had his own office with a solid door. I sat there in my long black cassock and she in her mini, mini skirt, with her damp, damp eyes. A picture of some long-forgotten pope scowled down at me from its perch over the phony fireplace. In spite of the glass door and the pope, I wanted to just give her a strong hug, because even before she opened her mouth, it was obvious that that was what she needed. Today, I would not hesitate, but in those days it was almost unthinkable. She began to speak hesitatingly and between sobs. She was a prostitute, as was her mother and mentor. Her long story, which as time went on spilt out faster and faster, was one which encompassed all of the potential pain and degradation of such a life. I said not a word, but listened fascinated and I suppose, somewhat titillated, by the graphic description of life in the streets beyond the rectory door. As I sensed her story was coming to an end, I became preoccupied with what I was going to say. How could I unravel all of this, put it into some kind of order and prescribe for the future? As abruptly as she had begun, she stopped and stood up. I still hadn't the foggiest idea of what to say. She stepped forward, now dry-eyed and composed. and she gave ME a hug. "Thank you", she said, "you have been a great help." "God bless you," I murmured, feeling more inadequate than I had ever felt in my life. Then she was gone, back to the street. I never saw her again, but I shall always be grateful to her for having taught me the value of listening. Not just hearing, but listening. Alive or dead, I pray that she has found peace.

As I mentioned before, not many people are inclined to seek out a priest in order to share good news or good fortune. Most of the time, the people who come are in distress. They place their fragmented belief systems in our hands and say, "Please fix it". It is not enough to tell them how and when to pray, nor to explain how their suffering can be joined to that of Jesus.

It is not enough to help them see their own lives reflected in the natural life,death and resurrection rhythms of our universe. All of these approaches are of some value, but they tend to take too much for granted. Even the most convinced of believers sometimes wonders whether it all makes sense. I try to help people talk about the God in whom they are trying to believe and as I listen to them, I often tell them that I, too, would find it hard to believe in such a god, much less seek comfort from him. The true God has revealed Himself, but many people go through a life of church affiliation tethered to a distortion of that revelation. It was in an attempt to counteract that tragic fact in some small way that I wrote "Nothing For Granted". I say this, not in order to advertise my book, but simply because it contains the necessary background to much of what we are considering in this volume.

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Most parish priests can be seen every week or so setting out with their little black bag to visit those who are confined to their homes. We call such visits "Communion calls", because we usually bring the Eucharist with us, so that those who cannot come to Mass may still receive Communion. This is a ministry which today is frequently performed by deacons or lay people. For many, the Communion call is the high point of their week. They receive the sacraments and a visit from someone who cares. This too is itself a sacrament; a sign of God's love for them. I have found over the years that Communion calls, particularly to the elderly, present an opportunity to gradually and gently prepare a person for death. As I write these words, I can't help but examine my conscience and hope that I spent enough time with all those people to do just that. The sad fact is that it was so often a matter of completing all my five or ten calls within a certain time frame which more often than not

was governed by the time my housekeeper expected me back for lunch.

When we look back on all the people who welcomed us into their homes in the name of the Lord, I guess most of us have our favourites. Among mine were two sisters who are now long since dead. They lived in a single room on the third floor of what was then a rooming house, but had at one time been a large and prosperous home. In fact, it had been their parents' home. Hard times had come upon the family and the two daughters, the last surviving members, turned the building over to someone else with the understanding that they could live together in an upstairs room. They didn't have the luxury of a private bathroom and their kitchen was a hotplate in their bedroom. When I came to know them, they were in their late eighties. One of them was blind and spent most of the time in the large old bed in which they had both been born. The other was agile enough to do some occasional shopping, but in the winter, a kindly neighbour took over that chore. Their world was their room. When I knocked on the door of their world most Friday afternoons, I was greeted by bell and candle as the bearer of our Lord. Jesus and I were tinkled in solemn procession to the little table a few feet from the door. Everything was a few feet from the door. And then, with candle in place and the pyx on the snow white linen cloth which they provided, I would hear their saintly confessions and place the sacred host on their tongues. After a moment or two of prayer and reflection, the elder sister, Rose, would ask me to sit down. Her sister, Anna, confided in me, not long before she died, that Rose would permit no one else to sit in that chair; it was for the priest and no one else. Is it any wonder that some of us get exaggerated ideas about our dignity and station in life? One day, when I was about to leave, Rose asked me to bless her arm. With this, Anna pulled back the bedclothes to reveal an arm swollen to twice its normal size and protruding at an awkward angle. Rose, be-

ing blind, could not see the look on my face, but poor old Anna did not miss it. Her mixed feelings of concern, fear and guilt were almost palpable and for me, they were heartwrenching. I said that I would get a doctor without delay. They informed me that that might be difficult since their doctor was dead. I headed for the door saying that I would return with a physician and that he or she would be alive.

I went to the office of a dear friend and relative, who agreed to come with me as he had not yet begun his afternoon clinic. He was the perfect physician for the job at hand: extremely competent, impressive in his bearing, yet gentle in manner. Anna and Rose faced him across the little room like two scared rabbits. Anna quavered the details. On the last day that I had been there, Rose had gotten up in the middle of the night. She had gone out into the hall toward the bathroom and on her return, had stepped into a bucket which someone had left on the landing. She fell to the floor. Anna came to her rescue and helped her back to bed. The next day and each day thereafter, she had treated her sister's painful injury with aspirin and talcum powder. The doctor said he would need x-rays to be certain, but he believed that Rose had a broken arm and dislocated shoulder. Anna began to weep. "Will she have to go to hospital?" she asked. "Most definitely," replied the doctor. Rose, silent to this point, spoke. "I will not be going to any hospital, thank you very much doctor. That is where people go to die and although I am closer to ninety than to eighty-five, I am not yet ready to die; and Father, you have not yet blessed my arm." The doctor took me out of the room, closed the door and told me that treatment was urgent. He said that it was up to me to get her to St. Mary's Hospital. He would set up everything, including the ambulance. All I had to do was phone the admitting office, everything would fall into place. With that, he shook my hand and with a smile, wished me good luck. "Bless your...heart", said I, or words to that effect. I re-

turned to plead my case with the two sisters, who both remained adamant: the only thing that Rose would get from going to the hospital was a funeral. When I tried to argue, I was politely informed that I was too young to understand. I was then treated to a litany of all their friends, acquaintances, and family members who, in the past eighty years, had disappeared behind hospital doors never again to see the light of day. But a plan began to form in my too-young mind. I left Anna and Rose, promising to return. Rose called me back to bless her arm. I considered saying, "only in the hospital", but I didn't have the heart. "May almighty God bless you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." I touched her arm and left them to build up their defenses. We all knew that it was not yet over.

Back at the rectory, I told my tale of woe to my pastor. He, too, thought me a little young which, incidentally, I was, and so he decided to come to my rescue. "We'll see her in St. Mary's before Vespers", said he, with a gleam in his eye. He was a Monsignor and when dressed in all his purple regalia, from the purple pompom on his purple-trimmed black biretta down to his purple socks, he cut quite a figure. He climbed into my car and we returned to the world of Rose and Anna. The effect of his appearance in the doorway was all that I could have wished for. Of course, Rose didn't know what was going on, but Anna looked as though she was seeing a vision. "His Excellency has come to plead with you", said I, with all the pomposity I could muster. The Monsignor grew another foot. "Excellency" is a term reserved for bishops, but what the hell! The opposition melted like butter. Something was mumbled about it being God's will, and we left them to prepare for the ambulance. "His Excellency" had assured them that all would be well, speaking in an Irish brogue that would have made Barry Fitzgerald jealous for life.

The story had a happy ending. In spite of complications, Rose's arm and shoulder healed and she became

the darling of a justly renowned nursing staff. Anna too, came to trust the doctors and nurses enough to speak to them of her own problems. Tests indicated that she was suffering from terminal cancer. She too was admitted and once again they shared a room if not a bed. In time, they were transferred to a nursing home where Anna received palliative care. They died within a few months of each other, at peace with God, the clergy and the medical profession.

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A constant complaint from parish priests is that they have insufficient time to devote to reading and personal prayer. Part of the problem is that you never know when you are going to be needed in the office or elsewhere, day or night, so it is hard to establish any kind of routine. Most of us are aware of the need to keep up with reading on theological and related subjects and we do the best we can, with the help of some excellent periodicals. The priest's prayer centers around the Mass, about which we will say much more in a later chapter. The Divine Office, or Breviary, or, as it is now more commonly called, the Liturgy of the Hours, is the other major element in the prayer life of the priest. When I was first ordained, we were still using the old Roman breviary, which had been designed originally for monastic use. It was long, written in Latin and full of antiphons and so forth that were followed by responses. It made many of us feel as though we were talking to ourselves, frequently without understanding what we were saying. The Breviary was, however, considered to be a serious obligation, so we soldiered on even to the point of reading by our automobile headlights in order to finish it before midnight. In the light of the reforms currently in place, all of that may appear foolish, but at the time it was far from it.

The old Breviary was divided into liturgical hours

of the day; matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none;...the latter four known as the little hours presumably for their short duration, and finally vespers and compline. Today's liturgical hours are morning prayer, daytime prayer, evening prayer, and night prayer and are arranged in a four week cycle, except for special feast days. Each day also has a couple of readings, one from scripture and the other from some other source. In general, the content of all the hours or periods of prayer is made up of hymns, psalms and prayers, with a heavy scriptural emphasis. Strictly speaking, the praying of the liturgical hours, which all told takes about thirty or forty minutes, is not part of the priest's personal prayer life. Like the Mass, it is part of the liturgy of the church and is therefore a public prayer and is prayed in the name of the entire church and in union with all those who are saying the same prayer that day. So, although the priest celebrates Mass each day and recites the Liturgy of the Hours, he also tries to find a moment or two for private personal prayer. Sometimes, having failed to do so, I fall back on a comforting thought expressed by St. Augustine: "The desire of your heart is itself your prayer." It may be worth noting in passing that although we are expected to recite the Liturgy of the Hours every day, we are not obliged to celebrate Mass each day. Our obligation is to assist at Mass each Sunday, as is the case with all Catholics, and to celebrate Mass according to the requirements and aspirations of the people, which in many, although not all, cases, means every day.

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In most parish rectories of any size, you will find a housekeeper, sometimes full-time, sometimes part-time, sometimes living in, but usually not. Generally speaking, housekeepers are a much maligned group, who more often than not deserve canonization rather than criticism. Frequently, the criticism comes from parishioners

who have encountered a housekeeper in a defensive mode. If you have rung the doorbell and asked to see the priest just as she has put the dinner on the table, you probably know what I am talking about. After one such encounter, you are likely to join the chorus proclaiming that "SHE runs the place". The truth is that the housekeeper is often the only person who knows how hectic the life of a parish priest can be. As a result, she does her best to protect him from ulcers and heart failure. Sometimes her best is too good and she becomes an impenetrable shield keeping the pastor from his people. This is, of course, a bad thing, but I would not call it typical.

At times, particularly in the past, a housekeeper tended to resent the appointment of a young curate or assistant. She was used to the pastor's ways and didn't particularly relish the extra work that would come from having another person in the house. I remember one such lady, who cast a shadow as big as that of the church itself. She had accompanied the pastor from a smaller one-man parish to a larger two-man parish and I was the other man. Clearly, she could not understand why he needed me if he had her. On the very day when they moved in, she asked me, "How do you like your meat: rare or well-done?" "I prefer rare", I answered, looking back at her steely-eyed countenance. "The pastor likes it well-done", she replied, with a note of elation in her gravelly voice. From that day onward, she scorched every piece of meat she cooked for me. Somehow, I never managed to win her approval, perhaps because I didn't want to and I suppose it showed. In spite of all her little digs and insults, I never struck back. This caused her a great deal of frustration. To get back at me, she bought a bird and put it into a cage in the pantry passage between the kitchen and the dining room. She called the bird, "Peter", which happens to be the name my parents gave to me. During meals, which were always eaten with the connecting doors wide open, Peter the bird could be

heard uttering a bird-like noise to which my nemesis would respond with a vigorous, "Shut up, Peter", or the equivalent thereof. If I happened to have been talking at the same time, her triumph was complete. One day, the mild-mannered and kindly pastor actually felt it necessary to assure me, "I hope you realize that she is not speaking to you." Lest you get the wrong idea, let me point out that most housekeepers work hard and are very flexible. They never know who will be in or out for a meal until the last moment, and they scrub and clean tirelessly often for poor wages. Along with the parish secretary, they are the unsung heroes of parish life.

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Central to the life of any parish and the reason why churches are built and priests ordained, is the Mass, the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. That first Holy Thursday morning Jesus sent Peter and young John into Jerusalem to prepare a place where they would be able to celebrate the traditional Passover meal together as a family. Judas Iscariot wondered why he had not been sent, since food purchasing, room renting, etc. were among his responsibilities. He was about to ask Jesus to reconsider, when their eyes met and he saw in Jesus' expression a depth of sadness and hurt which told him all and more than he wanted to know. Judas handed the purse to John, who joined Peter as he headed for the door, mumbling the shopping list to himself as he went: "lamb, bitter herbs, bread and wine."

Following the strangely detailed instructions given by Jesus, Peter and John soon found a suitable room and set about buying and preparing the food and drink. Later, Jesus and the others joined them. It was to be the last time they would all be together. All over the Jewish world, similar gatherings were taking place, with remembering, prayers, celebration, sharing and giving of thanks to God. But here, in the upper room of a large

Jerusalem home, there was something more than just the traditional Passover. Something unique was unfolding. He who was master, He who always acted with authority, He who people naturally addressed as Lord, got up from the table without warning and approached the washstand which stood by the door. His twelve companions watched in silence as He took off His outer robe and approached them, carrying a basin and pitcher in His hands and with a towel over His arm. Their silence turned to shocked exclamations, as one by one, He began to wash their feet, in the manner of the lowest of slaves. To their protests, He replied that He was but giving them an example, an example which they must follow or cease to be associated with Him. Jesus knew that this would be the most memorable night of his followers' lives. In terms of impact, this was prime time. And so, after all these months of training and instruction, what lesson did He chose to drive home? To lead is to serve. To love is to serve and to permit others to be of service. Jesus returned to His place at the table and instead of following the ancient ritual of the Passover ceremony, He did something that shocked His disciples yet again. Taking the unleavened bread into His hands, He blessed it and distributed it to them, saying, "Take and eat. This is my body which will be given up for you." What was happening? What did this mean? Then they began to remember; encouraging each other, they started to tie up loose ends. Judas would have been able to put it all together. With his clear and perceptive mind, he would have been one of the first to understand that they were witnessing the fulfilment of an incredible promise. But Judas was no longer at table. Moments before Jesus had risen to get the water and basin, Judas slipped out to run his final errand. Slowly, with great deliberation, Jesus gave each one of the eleven present a portion of the bread. Like children, with wonder and some apprehension, they ate the bread. Of one thing there was no doubt: although it looked and tasted like

ordinary bread, it wasn't. He had told them so, and they believed Him. How could they do otherwise? Had He not changed water into wine? (An event still spoken of in Cana). Had He not more than once given life where there had been death? Was not Lazarus walking proof of this? Had He not taken a few loaves of bread and made them into many? Had He not forgiven sins? And had He not given His solemn promise that the bread which He would one day give them would be His flesh for the life of the world? It was happening. Archbishop Alban Goodier catches the moment with this beautiful commentary in his "Life of Christ". "They heard His words. They knew that they were true. Instantly they were thinking on another plane; living in another world. A world that transcended human understanding but was nonetheless true on that account. Nay, it was almost tangible. Faith was more certain than reason. They saw and did not see, but what they did not see was more real than was the object of sight. They understood and did not understand because human understanding failed them. The impossible was transparently true."

As would be expected of deeply religious men, the disciples sat still, speaking in reverent tones, their eyes fixed on Jesus, knowing that they were participating in a new and incomparable religious event. They knew that they were making sacred history. Jesus took the wine vessel and filled His cup. According to custom, He added a little water. As He began to speak again they fell silent. No one even blinked as Jesus, in measured tones, held the chalice up for all to see and said: "Take this, all of you, and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood. The blood of the new and everlasting Covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven."

Their purpose for gathering was to celebrate and ratify the Covenant which had been made between God and man through Moses, a Covenant sealed with the symbol of life...blood. And now Jesus spoke of a new Covenant, a new testament or agreement, sealed not

with the blood of a sacrificial animal, but with His own blood. In their minds, the words of Exodus ran in parallel to the words just uttered by Jesus. "Then Moses took half of the blood and put it into bowls and the rest he poured upon the altar and taking the Book of the Covenant, he read from it in the hearing of the people and they said, "All things that the Lord has spoken we will do. We will be obedient." And he took the blood and sprinkled it upon the people and he said, "This is the Blood of the Covenant which the Lord has made with you concerning all these words." They were reminded of the prophet Jeremiah who, generations earlier, had foretold, "Behold the days shall come, says the Lord, when I will make a New Covenant with the House of Israel. I will forgive them their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more." Like the bread, the cup was passed to each of them and they drank from it. As He tasted the wine, Peter's heart was full. Thank God he had not, like so many others, turned away from Jesus when He first spoke of this common union; this Communion. "How", they had asked with a mixture of disdain and disgust, "can this man give us his flesh to eat?" How? Peter still could not answer that one, but he knew nonetheless that Jesus had done it. How? How had He cleansed the leper?... restored sight to the blind?... calmed the sea?... How? It simply didn't matter.

It was becoming more and more apparent that Jesus had been consciously training and equipping His apostles to share in His ministry. He had sent them out on their own to preach, to encourage, even to heal. Now, as they sat beside Him for the last time, united with Him as never before, He shared with them His power of priesthood. "Do this", He said, "in memory of Me". With this commission, they all became priests of the New Covenant.

(The forgoing account is taken from "Nothing for Granted" by the same author)

CHAPTER V

"...THE DEPTH OF HIS LOVE"

Hundreds of years after the ordination of the apostles, I took that single step up to the sacristy vesting table and, for the first time, put on the vestments of a priest. They had been carefully laid out for me, each item folded and placed according to timeless tradition. How often in the past I had seen them there, laid out for someone else. Now they were there for me. I could hardly believe it. In a few minutes, I would be the last person in a long, solemn procession, which, borne by a full choir, would seemingly float its way down the aisles of the basilica, which was filled almost to capacity with family, friends and countless well-wishers.

First, I picked up the white amice and tied it around my neck and shoulders. Then the long, spotless alb which reached to the top of my shining black shoes. This was secured to my waist by a belt of heavy cord. Then came the maniple; a vestment no longer used to-

day, but which was worn over the left arm. I then placed the stole around my neck, the sign of an ambassador, in this case, an ambassador of Christ. The stole is, above all others, the outward sign of the priest and is worn for the administration of all of the sacraments. And at last, over my head, came the larger, all-embracing chasuble, which, for this occasion, was, like the maniple and stole, fabricated from a beautiful cloth of gold. Beside me were the priests I had invited to assist me at this, my first solemn High Mass: the preacher, the arch-priest, the deacon, the sub-deacon and some young acolytes and servers.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, introibo ad altare Dei" - I will go unto the altar of God. The words came from my lips and from my heart and were answered by those surrounding me. I still could not believe it. Later on, as I sat in the celebrant's chair, my three-cornered black biretta firmly planted on my head, I waited for the preacher to gain the people's attention. And then, I sneaked a quick glance off to my left at the congregation. There, in the front row, sat my parents. It was too warm for fur coats, but other than that, very little had changed from those days long ago when I found such security, seated, or should I say, wedged in, between them. Silently, I thanked them for life, for their example and, of course, for their prayers. The sweet, heavy odour of incense filled the sanctuary as I prepared to offer the gifts of bread and wine. The bread and wine were symbolic of the self-donation of all those present as gifts offered to God. God would accept the bread and wine, and through my voice and hands, transform them and give them back to us. When they left my hands, they would no longer be symbols. We give symbols of ourselves; God gives Himself. And so, the bread and wine would become the body and blood of Jesus. As I prepared the bread and wine for the first part of this most holy exchange of gifts, I swung the smoking incense thurble

back and forth, over the wine and the bread, around the altar and toward the great crucifix on high. As I did so, I was supposed to be reciting, from memory, a whole series of prescribed Latin prayers. I had not yet gotten around to learning them, so I made appropriate mumbling noises, which I hoped would be drowned out by my excellent technique with the thurble, as it chinked and chanked against its chains. My deacon, accompanying me, and holding my vestments clear of the swinging thurble, was not fooled. Only recently ordained himself, he whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "Sorry, I can't help you. I don't know them either." A few minutes later, the entire church became silent and expectant. I stood alone, facing the altar, my back to the congregation, holding the bread in both hands. The moment had come and now, "hoc est enim corpus meum" - This is my body. I lifted the host above my head to show to the people, and the bells proclaimed, once again, the miracle of the Last Supper. "Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei" - This is my blood. The golden chalice, decorated with a diamond cross, which had been worn by my sister at her First Communion, and with my mother's and father's names engraved on the base, was then also raised for the people's adoration. Remembering that scene now, thirty years later, I am flooded with feelings of gratitude. And although since that day I have offered thousands of Masses, I can honestly say that nothing in my life is more meaningful.

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After Jesus died, the apostles established or, perhaps, maintained, the tradition of a weekly meal of fellowship. It may or may not have been Jesus' policy to insist that they all come together for at least one meal each week, but after their last meal together, the so-called "Last Supper", the memorial meal became the focal point of their lives. They were, after all, simply doing

what He had asked them to do in His memory. The Last Supper coincided with the Passover supper, intended to recall the blessed exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt and slavery. But combining a friendly dinner with a religious observance was not something reserved for Passover. It was a normal way of celebrating life. And so, remembering and celebrating Jesus within the context of the meal was the natural thing for the apostles to do. During those meals, they exchanged reminiscences, telling and retelling the story of Jesus' life, death and Resurrection. "The Lord's Supper" they called it and His presence was powerfully felt. And why not? Had He not promised to remain with them?

As time passed and Christians of non-Jewish origin became more and more numerous, the atmosphere of the Lord's Supper sometimes tended to be marred by overeating and excessive drinking. Some new converts were simply not prepared for the formality of this meal. The Jews, who had been schooled by ancient custom, were not happy with this scandalous behaviour. You may recall that Paul, in the first of his letters to the church in Corinth, had something to say on this subject. In Chapter XI, he points out that the Lord's Supper is primarily a celebration of Jesus' Resurrection and a commemoration of His death. Jesus' death was a sacrificial death, in that He had offered Himself. Since the Lord's Supper commemorated this death, it, too, needed to be viewed within the context of sacrifice. It was a solemn happening, a holy sacrifice.

As Christians increased in number, as well as in ethnic and philosophical diversity, the fellowship meal became both impractical and inappropriate. Christian liturgy began to come into its own. It would never lose its Semitic origins, but as the distinction between Christian and Jew became clearer, so too, did the specifics of Christian liturgy. The Lord's Supper, the holy sacrifice, began to take on the form of a symbolic meal, surrounded by prayers of praise and thanksgiving, or, as we

say today, Eucharistic prayers. Eating and drinking remained an essential part of the ceremony, but not in terms of a full-fledged supper.

I am reminded of the time I had a couple of pictures framed in a shop in a Jewish sector of town. When I came to pick them up, I found that I had lost my claim check. The proprietor, a gentleman of great warmth, took one look at my Roman collar and said, with a broad smile, "Don't worry. I know which ones must be yours." He quickly produced the two pictures, one of which was of a newly-elected Pope and the other, a print of the famous Last Supper. "Here we are," he said, "Mr. Pope and the Big Dinner!" Well, in the maturing church, the Lord's Supper became less of a big dinner and more of a eucharistic service, having at its core the continuation in time of Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper. These Sunday gatherings which had originally taken place in harmony with the traditional Saturday synagogue services, became significant expressions of Christian unity. The new liturgy was designed to draw people to God through Jesus and to each other through the same Christ, our Lord. From these gatherings, the participants were sent out by the presiding minister to bring the good news to all of mankind. You will recall that the word, "Mass", was believed to have originated from the Latin word "Missa" - to be sent.

When Christianity became the official religion of the empire, under the emperor Constantine, huge basilicas, as well as countless smaller churches, were constructed. Funds to do this came not from the free offerings of the faithful, but from the state, because, as Christianity became the official religion, liturgy took on the mantle of an official civic function. The humble table around which Jesus and His apostles and, later, Christians of many lands, had gathered was transformed into an elaborate high altar set upon a magnificent stage. Gold chalices and jewel-encrusted crucifixes contributed to the awesome majesty created by the most impressive

architecture ever seen. For the ordinary person, these great temples must have seemed like the head offices of banks we see today. Buildings like these do not give a sense of belonging; they make us feel like shedding our shoes in a spirit of reverence and unworthiness. It is no wonder, then, that at this time, public participation in the liturgy all but disappeared. One poor Bishop is quoted as lamenting, "We stand before the altar in vain. No one comes to participate." What he meant was that few people received Communion. The image that emerges is of hordes of Christians filling the churches, large and small, and simply being present, while largely unintelligible rites were carried out in a theatrical setting that spoke of power and majesty and above all, mystery. The people seemed to hope that by their presence they would somehow attract God's blessing. The congregations were so large because of wholesale conversions resulting from Constantine's conversion in the fourth century, and the mass baptisms of the Germanic people in the sixth century. For most of the converts, the level of instruction was minimal and the level of understanding even less. This was an obvious departure from the first centuries, when careful instruction and screening were needed to ensure the safety of the Christians during the periods of persecution. In the fourth century, being a Christian was the norm and the overloaded system of Catechetics broke down. The average Christian knew only that Jesus had died for him and that the Mass was the continuous offering to God of that once and for all sacrifice of Jesus. To be part of that offering was to be saved from the punishment which people felt they deserved for their abuse of free will. Communion was for the spiritual elite, those who moved with familiarity and ease amidst the gold and silver, marble and tapestry, incense and mystery of the sacred and remote sanctuary, all of which was so very distant from the main body of the church.

A further complication grew out of the gradual

changes in the language of the common people. There was stagnation of the Latin liturgy; in addition, fewer and fewer people were able to understand what was said in church. The key word, if there was one, was mystery. The high point of the Mass, that moment when all present grew silent and attentive, was the moment of Consecration. Words were whispered in a strange tongue by a robed priest, who had his back to the people; then, there was that almost magical glimpse of the sacred host, of Jesus present on the altar and being offered for their sins. Sacrifice and supplication were paramount; Communion and thanksgiving, although not forgotten, were rarely stressed. The tendency was toward distant adoration. In many ways, this was a distorted response to the Lord's invitation. Of course, adoration does have its place, but like anything, it can be carried to extremes and become spiritually unhealthy. For example, in many places, it became fashionable to race from church to church and from altar to altar to catch the elevation. A glimpse of the host was said to bring good fortune. It was more a question of magic than theology. The poor people who believed this were not to be blamed. The clergy gave them very little instruction, in many cases, because they knew no better themselves.

Priests were busy saying Masses for personal intentions, for which they were paid a stipend. There is nothing wrong with making an offering toward the maintenance of the clergy in return for having the priest-celebrant join you in praying for your intentions, but when this practice is so abused that the priest offers a dozen Masses a day in order to increase his income, there is a problem. By the fifteenth century, "Mass-priests" were being ordained to do just that: only say Mass. Some learned the body of the Mass by rote, because they were illiterate. They said Mass over and over. As many as one hundred such priests were assigned to the largest churches, which had walls lined with altars. The Mass became a principal means of making money and essen-

tially a clerical prayer, rather than a public act of worship.

Is it any wonder that reformers finally took things into their own hands and protested against these and many other abuses? Had the leaders of the Church been more faithful, there probably would never have been a Protestant reformation. Some reformers chose to work within the Church, while others, in their understandable frustration, broke away and, cut off from the mainstream, gradually came to reject more than just error and abuse. Thus was lost the precious thread of continuity. The mainstream had admittedly become badly polluted, but, nonetheless, had remained the mainstream, and gradually, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and those reformers who chose to work from within, began to flow again with its purity restored. The principal response to the reformers came through the Council of Trent, whose episcopal delegates gave Rome, or, in other words, the Pope, the authority to establish universal rules for the celebration of Mass. These rules covered every detail, word and gesture, so that, with few exceptions, the Mass would be truly uniform in every way, throughout the entire Church. Priests were limited in the number of Masses they could celebrate in one day and many other abuses were dealt with in a detailed way. These regulations, directions and liturgical texts were promulgated through a large liturgical volume called a Missal, which was published by Pope Pius V in 1570, and remained in force, virtually unchanged, until 1960. Further reforms were needed, and they came by way of the Second Vatican council. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council attempted, among many other things, to bring priests and people together in the celebration of the Mass and sacraments. The vernacular was introduced and the priest turned to face and to be one with the people, who would now have less reason to say their rosaries and read prayer books instead of following the Mass as participants. What had been happening, in

effect, was that the priest and the servers were doing their thing and the people, although present, were doing theirs, until the bell rang for the Consecration and all attention was briefly focused on the altar.

The churchgoers of a generation past, were, for the most part, devout and reasonably well-informed. The liturgical changes initiated by Vatican II were aimed at giving greater substance to their devotion and making them even better informed. However, in some cases, more harm was done than good, not because of the reforms, but because of the manner in which they were introduced: too quickly, too vigorously and, sadly enough, without sufficient charity. As early as the 19th century, theologians were stressing the importance of participation as opposed to simple presence. In the 1890's, people had missals that contained the Mass in both Latin and their own language. This permitted people to follow what the priest was doing at the altar, but the overwhelming atmosphere was still one of sacred awe and inspiring mystery. The priest in the sanctuary was in another dimension. The reforms of the sixties attempted to break through this barrier and I believe that this was a good thing, but I also believe that something was lost in the process, something of value, and that is a healthy sense of awe and mystery in the presence of that which is particularly sacred.

When I was first ordained, no one touched the host with his hands except a priest. Only a priest could wash the linen used at Mass; only a priest could open a Tabernacle door. The changes that came later shocked a lot of people, priests included. It seemed that reverence, awe and mystery had somehow been declared old-fashioned and were being replaced by familiarity and transparency. I am not speaking here of the priest, being toppled from his pedestal. I have said before that this was a good thing, so long as it was accomplished with charity and understanding. Rather, I am speaking of something as basic and fundamental as a person's sense of the Divine

presence and activity. I am speaking of a healthy fear of God and an appreciation of one's own sinfulness. I am thinking of candles and incense, Gregorian chant and Bach fugues. That we have rediscovered God's love and mercy and can find joy in balloons, guitars and informal liturgies is good and holy; it is a positive development. But let me still register a plea for balance and for a respectful sensitivity to long-established and deeply-ingrained attitudes and perceptions from which the generations which follow us may well have a great deal to learn.

The history of the Church, its teachings and its liturgies has always been one of what we might call, revolving emphasis. Even to this day, the search for balance continues. To a large extent, we have lost our sense of mystery and awe, at least for now, and that, in so far as I am concerned, is a shame. With it has gone a sense of sin. But on the other hand, we have grown tremendously in our appreciation of our unity in Christ, of our sharing, all of us, in His sacred ministry, and of God's fatherly love for us all. Fear of Hell has given way to trust in divine mercy and forgiveness, and most believers are eager to receive Holy Communion, with, or more often than not, without, the benefit of the sacrament of Penance. On this last point, I must honestly say that I have somewhat of a problem. Of the sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance, we will speak at some length in another chapter, but at this juncture, I will share with you a personal view on who should, or if you prefer, should not receive Holy Communion. I emphasize that this is a personal opinion, no doubt shared by many, but not the official teaching of the Church, at least, not yet. I am not speaking here of intercommunion, in the ecumenical sense, but rather, about Roman Catholics being prohibited, for one reason or another, from receiving Holy Communion. I believe that Catholics who believe in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and want to receive Communion ought to be able to do so, as long as

they are motivated by a sincere and humble desire to live their lives in harmony with the mind and heart of Christ. I do believe that given the opportunity, one should make regular use of the sacrament of Reconciliation, but I do not think that the valid reception of Holy Communion should be dependent upon having previously received absolution. In other words, I do not think that Communion should be a reward for having a clean slate. In fact, it has been my experience that sometimes, a so-called "bad" Communion leads to a "good" Confession.

I know that my views on this are not shared by the highest teaching authority of the Church and I admit that this makes me uncomfortable, but nonetheless, I am convinced that Jesus never intended the Eucharist to be the object of legal restraints. In his encyclical, Familiaris Consortio, Pope John Paul II gave two reasons for banning the invalidly married from receiving the sacraments. The first was that, and I quote: "Their state and condition of life objectively contradicts that union of love between Christ and the Church;" and secondly, that, "the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the Church's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage." I do not treat these reasons lightly, but in my opinion, they pale in the light of Jesus' own example when, in spite of the rigorous regulations of His day, He not only spoke with, but touched, lepers, was alone with and conversed with an often-married Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob, and took to His heart the social outcast, Mary Magdalene. None of these people wanted to be at odds with their God, or even with the less than perfect norms established by others in His name. They were, like so many people today, technically in conflict with the laws of the Church, but thirsting for contact, for intimate contact, with Jesus and the community. There are many among us who feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick, but because of the agonizing decision they have made to enter into a mari-

tal union without the blessing of the Church, they are now legally barred from fully sharing in our Eucharistic celebrations. In my view, this is insupportable. I don't think that anyone can be accused of eating and drinking the body and blood of the Lord unworthily, as long as they believe, accept responsibility for their decisions and seek a merciful judgement before God. "Lord, I am not worthy; Say but the word and I shall be healed." Some may think that in expressing this view, I am being disloyal to the Church, but I believe that love and loyalty demand that we speak out when we honestly believe that a Church policy or discipline lacks balance.

The heart of the Mass has always been the part when we do what Jesus told us to do at the Last Supper. After having listened to the word of God, the people profess their common faith and then present their offerings. These offerings, made for the preservation and development of the community, are received by the priest-celebrant who takes bread and wine as Jesus did, and offers them to God. The bread and wine come from the people and are a symbol of each person's gift of self, so that when the priest offers them to God, he is, in fact, offering each person's gift of self. Contained in the chalice and included on the paten are the cares and preoccupations, faith and goodwill of everyone present. In Jesus' name, the offering is made by the baptized, and in Jesus' name, the offering is received by the Father. Our heavenly Father accepts our offering of self because it is linked forever to Jesus' gift of self. The bread and wine become the Father's property and the great miracle of generosity takes place, as, through the instrumentality of the priest, the bread and wine shed their symbolic value and become the body and blood of Jesus. At this moment, our symbolic gift of self becomes Jesus' actual gift of self. We could express it in all sorts of ways, but we could never really capture what is happening in words, because we cannot imagine a love so great as that into which we have been incorporated. We can never hope to

appreciate the degree to which Jesus has identified with each one of us, nor the extent to which this makes us precious and lovable in the eyes of the Father. But it does not end here. The bread and wine, which began as a symbol of ourselves, but became the very essence of Jesus in His continuous loving gift of self, now becomes our food and drink, further emphasizing the degree of our intimacy with Christ. Thus, at every Eucharistic celebration, Calvary is continued and the Last Supper is repeated; we are there. In its own way, the Mass is as ingenious a creation as the process of regeneration in animals and plants, or the interaction of the earth with the sun and the moon. Our understanding of it and our means of expressing that understanding are far from exhausted. We continue to dwell upon what it means and how it happens. I suppose that of all of the mysteries of our faith, this is the one most often discussed and written about. It should not be surprising that, as we have mentioned, each period of Church history, new facets and new values are revealed in this divinely simple gesture. At times, Christians stress their unity; at other times, thanksgiving to the Father; at yet other times, the sacrifice of Jesus or His real presence in the sacred species. One aspect of Eucharist which I find particularly meaningful is the nature of the relationship between ourselves and Christ which is brought about and maintained through the reception of Holy Communion.

It goes without saying that personal relationships play a vital role in our happiness and fulfilment. These relationships range from casual to intimate, from acquaintance to close friend, from purely business to very personal. They often depend on such factors as job, neighbourhood, school, and so on. There is nothing permanent about them. The acquaintance of today might well be the close friend of tomorrow and vice versa. There is yet another category of inter-personal relationship which, because of its basis, is uniquely personal. I refer of course, to the family. It is not based

upon common interest, school, profession or neighbourhood. It is based upon flesh and blood. The relationship between mother and son or brother and sister can be strained and ruptured in a thousand ways and yet, more often than not, blood does prove to be thicker than water. In other words, the natural bond is almost impossible to ignore and generally speaking, it is within the context of flesh and blood that we find our most meaningful personal relationships. This is God's doing, not ours. According to His plan, we should all be born, or adopted, into a family, into what is, ideally, a natural school of love. It was with this ideal in mind that Jesus said that one of the effects of the sacrament of marriage was to bring about a flesh-and-blood relationship between husband and wife, so that they would be one flesh; no longer two, but one. Thus, in order to show the unique permanence and intimacy of marriage, a loving God brings about a true flesh-and-blood relationship between husband and wife. In the case of sister and brother or parent and child, this relationship's root cause is biological, while in the case of husband and wife, it is sacramental. The two types of flesh-and-blood relationships are brought about by different means, but by the same God.

"He always loved those who were His own in the world. When the time came for Him to be glorified by you, His heavenly father, He showed the depth of His love. While they were at supper, He took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to His disciples, saying, 'Take this, all of you and eat it. This is my body which will be given up for you.' In the same way, He took the cup filled with wine; He gave you thanks and giving the cup to His disciples, said, 'Take this, all of you, and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood; the blood of the new and everlasting Covenant; it will be shed for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me'."

With these words, a third chapter was added to the

sacred book of flesh-and-blood relationships. He who loved those who were His own in the world, wanted a way of expressing the depth of that love; a way which would be personal and intimate for all future generations. His way of doing so was to make it possible for each one of us to enter into and maintain a true flesh-and-blood relationship with Him, a relationship as real and intimate as between any wife and husband, as between Jesus and His mother. By offering Himself to us in this way, Jesus says, "I love you as only a parent can love a child, as only a brother can love his sister, as only a husband and wife can love each other, so do I love you."

Inspiring and consoling though all of this may be, there is an element which makes a lot of people uncomfortable. It was once put to me in a very straightforward way by a non-Catholic friend. He questioned how I could be so involved in the gross Catholic practice of eating what we call "Flesh" and drinking what we refer to as "Blood".

Jesus said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in you." Taken out of context, these words can conjure up an image of ritual cannibalism. This is a truly repulsive image because, thank God, we have a natural aversion toward eating each other. However, we have no trouble speaking of our parents and siblings as being our own flesh and blood and as we have just seen, of married couples, as being two in one flesh. So it is not the fact of a flesh and blood union with Jesus that makes some of us a little queasy, it is, rather, a distorted perception of the manner in which this union is brought about. Bread and wine are universal symbols of food and drink and, by extension, of life-sustaining nourishment. Jesus said, "The bread that I will give you to eat is my flesh." He did not say, "The flesh that I will give you to eat is mine." He said, the bread that I will give you to eat is my flesh. Now the distinction here may be subtle, and many of His hearers apparently missed it. We are told, "from this

moment on, they walked with Him no more". Jesus spoke of "the bread come down from Heaven," and it is that bread into which He has willed His very essence. Eat this bread and Jesus becomes your own flesh and blood, just like your parents and sisters and brothers. Properly understood, there is not even the least hint of cannibalism, except for the rather interesting parallel that, historically speaking, most acts of cannibalism were ritual acts, wherein the goal was to share in the strength and powers, in the prowess, of one's enemy. It was a crude and pathetic way of trying to establish a flesh-and-blood relationship with someone who, if not loved, was greatly respected. Clearly Jesus, the divine psychologist, knows how to reach us at the level of our most fundamental instincts, but in a way that encourages us to respond with civility and dignity.

There is one more point I would like to highlight here and that is, that the Mass can be seen as a celebration of ourselves, of what we are. St. Augustine, in a sermon he preached one Sunday morning, said, "You are the body of Christ. It is your own mystery which you receive at Holy Communion. It is to what you are, that you respond 'Amen'." What Augustine is saying is that entering into communion with Jesus through the Eucharist is not a private affair. It takes place in a social context. It is part of the life of the body of Christ of which each of us is a member. The Eucharist is then a mystery of a people, not of a person. St. Augustine went on to say, "On this table, He has instituted the sacrament of our peace and of our unity." Thus the Church becomes the role model of all humanity, called to unity with Christ and through Him, with all of creation and it is the Eucharist which is intended to be the common binding, connecting agent in the Father's plan. "Take and eat. This IS my body. Take and eat. This IS my blood." To this, we say, "Amen"...so be it. And we who forged our first union with Him in Baptism, concretize that union in the Eucharist over and over again."What then are we, if not

the body and blood of Christ?

"It is not I who live," declared Paul, "but Christ who lives in me." The Eucharist unites us to Jesus and to each other and, in a sense, it sends us out to say something TO, and to be something FOR, the rest of the world.

These past few pages have simply been an attempt to expose some of the multi-faceted richness of our Eucharistic heritage and, of course, the responsibilities that come with it. It is a subject that can never be exhausted. We still will continue to ask: "what does it mean and how does it happen?"

CHAPTER VI

MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM

Life was so simple in the good-old-days. If a man wanted a wife, he would raid a neighbouring community and carry off his choice, who would then become his property until he decided to dispose of her in some way. If a girl did not get "plucked" from her father's hearth by her club-wielding groom, she simply made herself useful in her father's house. Now life is so much more complicated! About the only vestige of our primitive, yet practical, past is the tradition of the groom "carrying his bride over the threshold of their new home", sans club, sans hairy attire, but nonetheless in control.

Moving beyond pre-history and placing ourselves in first century pagan Rome, we find that marriage was still a fairly uncomplicated matter. First of all, it was of no concern to the bulk of the population, namely slaves, who were forbidden to marry. To some it might appear an irony that marriage was only deemed to be an appro-

priate state for the “free”. The bride and groom of ancient Rome did not need to become involved with priests or magistrates; marriage was an arranged family affair. It was a private, monogamous arrangement involving no formal contract. There was a private dowry contract between the families. Gifts were exchanged and guests were invited to a ceremony in the home. There was no formal exchange of vows. Divorce, being equally informal, was common and available to both parties. In the case of separation, the children usually stayed with the father. Marriage was not a particularly romantic concept. It was more a civic duty necessary to the raising of a family. In deference to his pragmatic ancestors, the young Roman groom did carry his bride over the threshold, but the chances were that she would cross several thresholds in her lifetime, as wife-lending was not uncommon among close friends. A wife was an object, often prized and loved, but essentially an object. Even though she had the right to divorce, she could only do so if she had some degree of wealth in her own name. The likely alternative was prostitution. The notion of a husband and wife being “a couple” in our sense of the word was unknown. A man had a household, part of which was a wife. Adultery on either side, while not encouraged, was not taken very seriously. A couple who truly loved each other were considered to be exceptionally fortunate.

Historians relate how this joyless state of affairs gradually improved as one generation succeeded the next. Cultural mutations are not always easy to explain, so it is hard to say why, but whatever the cause, wives began to be accepted more as partners than as servants. Although fun and romance were still often to be found with a prostitute or a mistress, such antics were not admired and the question of adultery was beginning to be treated more seriously and recognized as detrimental to family life. In general, marriage came to be associated with certain moral ideals rather than simply represent-

ing a civic responsibility to produce children.

Sad to say, in the society of the ancient Hebrews, women did not fare much better. The scriptures of the Old Testament say little of wedding custom and ceremony. Private arrangements were made between the fathers of the adolescents. Women simply ceased to be the property of their fathers and became that of their husbands. Adultery was considered to be wrong, but primarily because it was a violation of property rites! Perhaps the ultimate insult was that while a man could divorce at will, a wife needed her husband's permission! Once a person was divorced, remarriage was always an option.

Jesus was one teacher who took strong exception to the marriage customs of His fellow Jews. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, reflects Jesus' attitude, writing, "Give way to one another in obedience to Christ. Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, since as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; and as the Church submits to Christ, so should wives to their husbands in everything." Having hinted at it in his opening sentence, Paul now drops his bomb. "Just as Jesus loves his body, the Church," says Paul, "so too, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man to love his wife is to love himself. A man never hates his own body but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church because it is His body and we are its living parts. For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one body." Because of this text, many have accused Paul of chauvinism, when in reality, taken in the historical and social context as we are now able to do, his words were actually revolutionary in their affirmation of the dignity of women. When this letter was first shared by the citizens of Ephesus almost twenty centuries ago, it is probable that most of the men reacted with a great deal of anxiety, since their

traditional position of lord and master was clearly being challenged, at least with regard to the manner in which it was exercised. In order to be considered morally acceptable, a man's authority was henceforth to be exercised within the context of Christ-like self-effacing devotion. Now this, while admittedly not satisfying the aspirations of thinking people of the twenty-first century, was nevertheless a giant step in the right direction in the first century. Paul was not so naive as to think that he could turn the whole Judeo-Greco-Roman structure upsidedown, but he did insist upon the fundamental dignity of all members of Christ's body, the Church.

In his "two-in-one" body-image of marriage, Paul was referring to Jesus' own words as recorded by Mark, but Jesus took His inspiration from the Hebrew scriptures, specifically, from the second of two consecutive Creation stories as recorded in the Book of Genesis. These stories were never intended to be taken literally. They have been described as an artist's conception of God as creator, told twice so as to permit a variation in imagery. The stories do not explain how we were created; nor do they support or contradict evolutionary theories. What the poet does tell us and what Jesus reaffirms is that according to the inspired wisdom of the ages, man and woman were created equally, neither having dominion over the other. We are told that both were created in God's image, that is to say, as knowers and lovers or, in other words, seekers of truth and goodness. We are further reminded that the love of husband and wife is a holy thing, rooted in nature and blessed by God as a permanent, monogamous union. In quoting from the Old Testament Book of Genesis, Jesus was reminding His hearers that His seemingly hard-line approach to the unity and indissolubility of marriage and to the equality of women was well-founded in their own traditions. When they challenged Jesus with the argument that Moses had permitted divorce and remarriage, you can be sure that they were not concerned with protect-

ing their wives' right to dump THEM. Jesus told them that Moses weakened because of their insensitivity to their own traditions or, as expressed in the Gospel, "the hardness of their hearts". Their essentially chauvinistic attitude prevailed in spite of Jesus' position and indeed, there is some evidence that the early post-Resurrection Christian community continued to sanction exceptions to this rule.

For the first three hundred years after Christ, Christians entered into marriage convinced that what they were doing was not only of divine origin, but also directly sanctioned by Jesus. It appears, however, that apart from a blessing at the weekly Eucharist, the official Church had little to do with marriages, which were conducted within the family according to civil laws. In the fourth century, faced with an empire in decline, the Christian emperor, Constantine, attempted to bring some stability to the legal structure by giving bishops the role of civil magistrates. As time went on, these bishops were given increasingly important roles as dispensers of justice and even legislators. This coming together of church and state explains why, by the fifth and sixth centuries, priests were performing many marriages. By the eighth century, the general rule was that marriages took place in a church, with a priest being the principal witness to the vows, as he joined the participants' hands together and placed garlands of flowers on their heads.

Records indicate that, in the early Middle Ages, remarriage after divorce was still permitted under certain circumstances, such as in cases of adultery, desertion and imprisonment. Some argued against this, but although ecclesiastical jurisdiction had spread across the empire, there remained many national and even local traditions and policies which defied any efforts toward uniformity. It was not until the twelfth century that Pope Alexander III gave to the entire Church a definition of marriage, which in fact remains to this day. The Pope taught that the marriage bond resulted from the cou-

ple's consent and was unbreakable, but could be declared nul and void by competent ecclesiastical authority if demonstrably invalid. A general format for the celebration of marriage also emerged: the couple were met at the church door by the priest, who asked them for their consent. The bride's father then gave the bride to the groom, at the same time, transferring her dowry. The priest blessed the wedding ring at the entrance to the Sanctuary and then he blessed the marriage. The Nuptial Mass followed. It was at this time that marriage came to be recognized as a Sacrament in the full sense of the word, equal to Baptism and the others.

So much then for the briefest of glimpses into the evolution of the Church's understanding of the Sacrament of Matrimony. This process is still going on. For example, today many ask whether the time is not right to limit the role of the church to a pastoral and religious one, while letting marriage and divorce LEGISLATION revert to the civil courts from whence they came. This is not a frivolous question. Many thoughtful Catholics, including some with considerable expertise, believe that while our ecclesiastical laws and courts seldom prevent Catholics from divorcing and remarrying, they are more likely to play a significant role in their becoming estranged from the Church. We cannot ignore such questions, especially if we keep in mind that, after all, the central activity of the Church is worshipping God. So we will return to this question again, in the context of the reflections which will make up the remainder of this chapter.

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Today's young people live in a cultural environment in which sex is considered a recreational activity and the only sacred rules are those demanding mutual consent and protection from disease and pregnancy. In fact, pregnancy is often treated as a disease, and, if con-

tracted, as something requiring treatment, akin to the removal of any other invasive growth. Those young people who feel uncomfortable with these values and look to us for alternate terms of reference, are likely to be turned off by extreme traditionalists, for whom human sexuality is defined by legalities based upon an understanding of human nature developed largely between the sixth and thirteenth centuries. As there is no room for discussion, there seldom is any. As they continue their search for wisdom, our young friends may next encounter those who state flatly that Catholic sexual morality is primarily the result of the ruminations of an historically-orientated male celibate clergy and is, therefore, of no relevance. However, between these two extremes, there are people who favour a balanced approach to human sexuality, characterized by respect for both well-founded tradition and serious modern scholarship, as well as the day-to-day experience of God's people.

In attempting to articulate a well-balanced approach to sexuality, I want first of all to distance myself from the negative attitude which the Church has historically shown towards this subject. In itself, the sexual drive is good and clearly intended to be joyful and productive. It is not just a way of making babies, although neither is it simply recreational in nature. Any rational adult will concede that indiscriminate sexual activity is always irresponsible. Sexual intercourse draws upon the very depths of a person's being and expresses emotions and values of the greatest intensity and consequence. It is a language which speaks to another in the most personal and powerful way available to us. To trivialize it, to waste it, inevitably leads to moral bankruptcy. Over these facts we have no control; that is to say, we cannot decide to make sexual relations less meaningful. We can abuse sex, but we only fool ourselves if we think that we can diminish the coinage itself. When we waste it, cheapen it and turn it into a lie, we dehumanize ourselves and

those who co-operate with us.

It is very hard to focus on the grandeur of our sexual potential in a society whose collective soul has been sold to feed the gods of wealth and power. It is very hard to recognize that sex really has nothing to do with fast cars, perfume, physical dominance, performance, popularity, jeans or beer. These connections are contrived and artificial, not to mention dangerous and harmful. However, sex does have a lot to do with procreating new life and fostering the best possible environment within which to nurture it. It is about expressing the deepest sentiments of love and devotion of which we are capable and nothing less than that. It is about commitment. It speaks not only of "now", but of "tomorrow" as well. I am referring here not only to Christian doctrine, but to nature as well. This is the way we are. It is true that we have found ways to beat some of the immediate consequences of casual sex, but in the long run, we are only fooling ourselves if we think that as individuals and as a society we are getting away with something. Few people are sadder than those who have "said it all" to just about anyone willing to "hear them". If the day comes when they really want to express themselves, to give themselves in a unique and in a special way, they are unable to do so. They are, in a sense, destitute.

There is more to being a Christian than raising the mind and heart to God. We who are baptized into Christ are temples of God; our bodies are sacred; they are divine property and we are but stewards. In other words, we do not own our bodies; God owns them. We are commissioned to use them within the framework of His purposes. When we are honest with ourselves, God's design and intent becomes abundantly clear. "Male and female, He created them", with a desire for unity, permanence and security, with the ability to hear His word and respond to His grace, with a need to reproduce themselves and to rejoice in the fruit of their union. He cre-

ated them free to serve or not serve, to listen or not listen, conform or not conform, respect their nature or degrade it, sanctify others or corrupt them. He did so because in their freedom is also found their dignity and the real value of their love and sacrifice. But this freedom also makes possible selfishness and disorientation, perversions limited only by human imagination, pleasure without responsibility. "Do your own thing." "A woman has the right to rid herself of unwanted life." These slogans and ideals are not found in sacred scripture and were never heard from the lips of Jesus or His true followers. Paul says you are NOT your own property. You must USE your body in union with your soul according to the mind and the will of your designer and for His eternal glory.

A relationship of loving commitment shared by a man and a woman who are open to the vocation of responsible parenthood is what we bless and call a marriage. Of course, such a relationship carries its own potential strains and stresses as well as joys and enriching experiences. We will be saying a lot more about marriage, but for the time being, let us explore a little further the specific subject of our sexuality as it relates to family life.

Little boys are not little girls and vice versa. They are different from each other, quite apart from genital characteristics. I think we all recognize this and accept it. Psychologists teach us that as we mature, we are more and more defined by our sexuality as a basic dimension of our personality. In general, we relate differently to members of our own sex than we do toward the opposite sex. We have different ways of showing affection and concern. Men tend to be more protective of women than of other men; we tend also to be less coarse in our language and deportment when we are in the company of women. Some people regard this as being negative and demeaning, a product of unenlightened conditioning. I, for one, think otherwise. I firmly believe in gender

equality, but I don't believe we should erase all the vestiges of the past in our quest for equal opportunity. Surely our goal ought to be to recognize and respect what we have in common and celebrate that which makes us different, and do so in a spirit of genuine romance, with even a dash of chivalry. So much for the musings of a sentimental celibate! It is commonly accepted that few, if any, people are one hundred percent male or female. The most fortunate of us are a healthy blend, but still clearly belonging to one sex or the other. This leaves the effeminate man and the masculine woman, both of which, unfortunately, find it very hard to live in an insecure society which tends to treat anyone "different" as being suspect. That such people sometimes seek each other out in order to find acceptance, understanding and love is, I feel, completely comprehensible, although a lamentable indictment of the shallowness of the majority. I do, however, have a major problem in accepting the propriety of such people expressing their love for each other through various forms of genital contact and penetration. Everything that I have come to know about human dignity and sexuality says that such activity is perverse. In my view, it is forgivable and, in the light of our sinful nature, understandable, but never acceptable, and certainly by no stretch of the imagination a natural alternative to heterosexual marital relations.

As a parish priest, I have had the privilege of being confessor and counsellor to a number of men and women who have felt attracted to those of their own sex. For whatever reason, they were not drawn in the same way to members of the opposite sex. Some showed clear signs of femininity or masculinity in contradiction to their actual gender, while others did not. They were all aware of having a problem with which they had to cope, a problem, the root causes of which are, at best, in dispute and probably unknown. The happier ones came to understand that there are many ways

of expressing love and affection which do not necessarily lead to genital contact. This, of course, is a lesson that all of us must learn and learn well, including those who are married. There are countless examples of warm, beautiful and loving relationships between brothers, between sisters, between brothers and sisters, between grandfathers and granddaughters, between priests and parishioners, between nurses and patients and the most common of all, just between friends. And all of these relationships are characterized more or less by sexual overtones, for we are, after all, sexual beings. But only one relationship provides what is not only the proper but also the natural environment for sexual intercourse and that is marriage. This is how I see it. Many disagree. I will not judge them and hope that they will not categorize me.

Throughout this limited discussion of sexuality, I have attempted to show that the general Christian sexual ethic is largely based upon human nature. But, as is the case of a good law later being complicated by questionable regulations, so too, a valid, moral generality can be complicated by less certain specific applications. I am becoming more and more convinced that it is not the role of theologians to issue detailed instructions on the specifics of morality. Our job, in a pastoral sense, is to communicate values and principles whose roots are deep in solid tradition, but whose expression is always in harmony with current experience and understanding in the Church. In other words, I believe that the teaching Church should be and indeed, is, moving toward being less judgemental and more supportive. I think we are learning to leave the judgement of individuals to God who alone reads the hearts of men and women. We should, instead, be prepared to truly respond to those who seek our help in finding the direction most in keeping with that God-given insight which is the fruit of our scripture, tradition and prayer. But we should go no farther. We should help form people's consciences, but

individuals must be left to make their own final decision, and in all but the most extreme circumstances, we should support that honest, responsible decision, rather than responding to it with a closed book and a locked Tabernacle. Consider, for example, the situation of a divorced Catholic who wishes to enter into a second marriage and, having been well-informed, is convinced that grounds for annulment of the first marriage truly exist. Could that person not enter into a second union with the blessing of the Church? This could be a "conditional" marriage, the validity of which is dependent upon the good will and the informed judgement of the petitioner, who accepts responsibility before God, as we all must in the end anyway. Is there a real need for the tribunal process? I doubt it. More and more, I doubt it. Specialist advisors in this complicated field? Yes. But tribunals? Another example is the engaged couple who decide to live together before marriage. Have we the right to DEMAND that they not do so? I remain convinced that sexual intercourse is proper only to marriage and yet I have known many young people who live together before marrying each other who do so at least partially out of respect for marriage and all that it entails. I have listened to their reasons, their concerns and their fears and I have expressed my admiration for some of their motives, while at the same time, making it clear that, in my judgement, their reasoning is faulty. I see my role here as not being a wrist-slapper but rather as one who can give another viewpoint. The decision as to how to conduct themselves and the responsibility for that decision should, finally, be theirs. Once again, I feel able to judge their actions but never to judge THEM.

A lot of the stress placed upon these young people is not of their own making. Educational and vocational goals which, in the light of economic reality are justifiable, often delay for years a marriage which, all things being equal, should have been entered into months or years before. Sexual frustration levels run high and peo-

ple have a fear of "losing each other". Also, young people are painfully, I should say, fearfully, aware of the high incidence of divorce. As they do not want to put each other through that trauma, so trial marriage seems like a good precaution. Nothing is gained by branding these young people as misguided sinners; rather, it is my responsibility, in the light of the Gospel, to suggest alternate ways of approaching the subject. For example, I can stress the importance of mutual trust and confidence in each other's ability and willingness to sacrifice, and the difference between the commitment signified in a marriage and the fear and uncertainty expressed by a trial marriage, discuss the psychological effects of the latter and review what we referred to earlier as the language of sex. But again, in the final analysis, the decision about how to govern themselves belongs to the young people alone.

It is worth noting in passing that our traditional approach to marriage is by no means universal. As we mentioned earlier, marriage is historically much more of a cultural reality than a religious state. Catholics of cultures other than our own follow ancient models which, to us, appear foreign and suspect. In Uganda, for example, the sacrament of marriage has been described as a progressive reality. This means that there is no single ceremony through which the marriage comes into being, but rather, a whole series of inter-family dealing, gift-giving and socializing, during which time it becomes more and more clear that the couple are becoming a unit. By this time they may well have started a family, for this is yet another sign of their evolving status within the complexity of their social milieu, whose support systems, unlike ours, are geared to this form of gradual marriage. Is this system wrong? Sinful? Immoral? Who is to say so? After all, it takes place within the context of their understanding of marriage. Our instinctively critical reaction to this and other similar examples of diversity illustrates our tendency to drown the essentials in a

sea of our own erroneously enshrined traditions and regulations. Armed with our books, we have become judges and referees, when in fact we are, I believe, called upon to be teachers and support-givers. Our role is to urge people, not so much to conform to a commanding church, as to respond to a compelling church.

Our heritage is rich and noble in its principles and values and has much to offer a confused and exploited generation. But those who speak on behalf of the Holy See often sound uncompromising, unfeeling and quite frankly out-of-touch. This both hurts and hinders the parish priest, who must minister to real people, such as parents for whom another pregnancy is, for any number of reasons, an unwise and unhealthy prospect. To express the fullness of their love and need for each other within the framework of some pre-plotted timetable is often uncertain, unsettling and contrived. I agree that to exclude procreation from a couple's total relationship is to destroy the balanced relationship between the essential elements of joy, commitment and procreation, and raises the spectre of selfish, irresponsible gratification. However, if the marriage is open to the procreative process within the limits set by existing physical, psychological, social and economic conditions, have we not then got a morally acceptable situation?

It has been said that the unity of sex, love and parenthood is one of our major messages to the world. (Let it be clear that when we speak of love, we mean not only romantic affection, but also commitment, respect, understanding, support, persistence, repentance and forgiveness). However, we can blur that message by an overly rigid and extraordinarily narrow focus on each genital act. In other words, we risk concentrating on the trees to the extent that we fail to see the woods...the relationship...the marriage. To pronounce judgement on each individual genital act is in my view, pharisaic, burdensome and contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. But then, who am I to speak? Well, I am one of many loyal

Catholics who believe that a broadening of focus is long overdue. Would not our time be better spent in addressing the pressures experienced by parents, who in our culture are so often isolated from the multi-faceted support mechanisms of an extended family? And how about the real need for many mothers to seek full-time work for even a small family to be adequately cared for after the tax-collector has reduced earnings to a truly immoral level? Every marriage, every family has its own story. Every couple has serious decisions to make; decisions they want to make within the communion of what is often the only potential support system they have, the Church. How often our rules box them in, so that, being left no room to manoeuvre, they break out and walk away.

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I am sure that I have turned off my share of young people through a lack of patience, insight and skill. On the other hand, I have many good memories of watching couples grow in their awareness and appreciation of the religious dimension to their lives. Most priests like to spend several hours with a couple who are preparing to be married. We try to suggest a liturgical framework which will truly reflect the common beliefs and practices of the two parties. For example, to incorporate the marriage ceremony into the Mass when neither the bride nor the groom are in fact, communicants, is hardly being authentic. In such circumstances, it makes more sense to emphasize a liturgy of the Word based upon their convictions and consequent selections. The Eucharist is, after all, not a necessary part of the Catholic marriage rite and indeed, can at times be a sign of disunity or even of hypocrisy.

In marriage preparation, whether done within the framework of a course prescribed by the diocese or private sessions with a priest, deacon, or other specialist, it

is important to air the subjects of divorce and annulment. As mentioned earlier, the statistics on marital failure are a source of very real concern for many young people. "Why do marriages break down?" is the question they most often ask. There is no simple answer, no exhaustive lists of dos and don'ts. No two people are the same. No two marriages are the same. But the fact that we can't say it all doesn't mean that we can't say something. Reflecting upon the limited experience I have gained in marriage preparation and counselling, I can agree with most experts that the main demon is the lack of communication. Some people play their cards so close to their vests that no one, including their spouses, can really get to know them. How many men die leaving their wives and children completely in the dark as to their financial situation? How many spouses are hurt by what they interpret as being a lack of trust on the part of their secretive partner? There may, in fact, well be no such lack but the message is given and is very harmful to the relationship.

I think that many communication gaps have their origin in what can be called false notions of masculinity. Let's face it, the strong-and-silent type who considers any emotion other than anger to be a sign of weakness and lack of virility is a social misfit. He usually believes that he gives his wife everything she needs to feel secure, significant and cherished as long as he earns a decent income and does not drink or philander. I would like a dollar for every man who has sat in my office and, in response to the question, "Do you love your wife?", squirmed a lot and flushed a little as he replied, "Hell, Father, I'm not the mushy type. Of course I love my wife and she knows it. I married her didn't I...thirty years ago?" What this type of man was trying to get across is that he was "a real man". Fortunately, this attitude, although still prevalent, appears to be on the wane among younger men, who are generally less inclined to wear the emotional and psychological straitjacket which previ-

ous generations wore so proudly. This male attitude may not be typical globally, but it appears to be an important part of the North American male psyche and has added significantly to the frustration of women seeking equal partnership in marriage, not to mention emotional reciprocity.

The problem of defective communication is not however, one that can be put exclusively at the door of men. Women, too, often fail to express themselves clearly and logically, as they try to avoid the least sign of confrontation. They resort to silence, or general irritability, or worse still, nagging. The bottom line is that couples must trust each other enough to be able to say what is on their minds and love and respect each other enough to never take each other for granted. This trust, respect and love must be continually and consciously communicated. There is enough mistrust, competition, secrecy and treachery outside of the home to satisfy the needs of the most insatiable masochists. Within the home, it must be different or the marriage is doomed. Both the husband and wife will simply throw up their hands and ask "Who needs it?.

Many experts point to money as being the number one problem area in marriages. In my view, money problems are usually but a facet of the communication problem. Some of the most devoted of couples are poor. The key is to work from mutually agreed priorities and then share all financial decisions, if necessary, with professional assistance. Needless to say, gambling and other irresponsible wasteful excesses are a sure way to marriage disruption. Marriage is a partnership, sharing in every sense of the word, and it must be lived as such in order to be successful. Of course, this requires a willingness to compromise. When two people disagree, a vote is not of much use, but a good used car, although it is not the new car dreamed of, may well satisfy the concerns and desires of both parties. Once again, trust, respect and an open, non-competitive atmosphere are es-

sential.

Not that many years ago, if a couple could lay claim to a reasonably good relationship, they were likely to be satisfied. Today "reasonably good" is just not good enough. There was a time when the deficiencies of the "reasonably good" relationship were made up for by the support-system of an extended family and concerned neighbours. These people supplied what might have been missing in the way of emotional security, while the security of the union itself tended to rest upon the integrity and competence of the breadwinner and the caregiving housekeeper. The scene today is very much changed. Families are scattered and neighbours are often regarded as a threat to privacy. The principal support system now consists of churches and tax-supported agencies, which are generally seen as a last resort. Clearly, the overall environment in which a marriage relationship is expected to thrive has become relatively impersonal and the relationship itself is somehow expected to generate whatever is required to make up for these basic personal needs. This has led to what is often referred to as "partnership" marriages, a concept that is potentially enriching but also demanding of interpersonal skills with which not everyone is blessed. The interweaving of roles and sharing of responsibility implied in this partnership also demands a lot of quality time together which,for two people employed outside of the home, can be hard to find. If a partnership marriage is to succeed, the partners must be self-confident, mature and trusting; they must be willing to compromise and have enough insight and understanding to react to the apprehension which so often lies behind apparent laziness, the need for affection, which is often behind what appears to be selfishness, and of course, the insecurity hiding behind arrogance. In short, both husband and wife must be ready and able to reassure, support and show affection under very trying circumstances. This is called "healing", and it is becoming more and more the

price of intimate partnership, as the walking wounded of an increasingly impersonal society seek out partners in whose embrace they can be made whole. Are our young people being adequately educated for this challenge? As Church, we must face up to this responsibility, which continues long after the marriage has been celebrated. It is our responsibility, because in a well-adjusted, well-supported marriage, the love that is experienced in relating to each other and to children is the principal means of experiencing God.

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Some people wonder how a priest can pretend to be an expert on marriage when his only personal experience is that of celibacy. Well, I don't think that many of us are, in fact, experts on marriage, but in our parochial ministry we listen a great deal and hopefully, also learn. We become aware of patterns which are also identified by other professionals and we learn to help the people involved adjust their behaviour and attitudes in the light of newly-acquired self-knowledge. And where we are unable to help a marriage along the path to better health, we can sometimes be an instrument of consolation to those who mourn its passing.

I recall having a young couple referred to me by a physician. He told me that they had been seeing a counsellor, but there were no signs of positive growth and he feared that the chances for reconciliation were becoming more and more remote. When I first interviewed the couple, I was impressed with the firmness of the battle lines, but I felt that in order for there to be so much anger and hurt, there had to be, beneath it all, a lot of love, so I at least had hope. This story had a happy ending, but not before their remarks and a little detective work on my own part revealed that their counsellor was, himself, going through a marital crisis which, sadly, led to divorce. It appears that at that point he felt that

just about every man would be doing himself a favour if he divorced his wife and so, consciously or subconsciously, he was fuelling dissension between his clients, or at least between these two. And so, perhaps it can be argued that, at least in some instances, our celibate state can enhance our objectivity, as we will not use our own marriage as something of a template.

Most priests are sensitive to the fact that when they conduct a preliminary interview of a prospective bride and groom, they are in a position to play a significant role in their lives. People usually get married soon after graduation from university or after a year or two in some form of employment. They are often emerging from a period of rebellion against most authority structures and thus are unlikely to be strongly associated with the Church, although they probably profess a belief in God. The image they have of Church is likely to be that of a power structure which calls upon people to pay their respects to an awesome, infinite god. If the priest appears impatient and judgemental, this image is only strengthened and they decide to avoid hassles and give all the right answers, so as to come out the other end duly married according to Church, state and Aunt Prudence. However, if the priest is welcoming and open, regardless of their current religious practice and living arrangements, the couple is likely to perceive him as an agent of friendship and service and the stage is set for dramatic growth and enrichment. The scheduled meetings with the priest, dreaded at first, are eagerly anticipated, as a whole new dimension of life is explored. Now, lest all of this become a little too idyllic, let me hasten to add that it doesn't always work out this way. Sometimes, in spite of the priest's best efforts, he is treated as just another functionary and his attempt to revive any remnant of faith is met with cool disdain. He then gives up and becomes the functionary that he hates to be. But such cases are the exception. I suppose if the truth were to be told, most situations come somewhere

in between..

And now a word to prospective in-laws! When a young couple who do not practice their faith within a liturgical context decide, with the help of their priest, that it would be more authentic to be married without the celebration of the Mass, please do not attack the pastor as though he were punishing them with a second-class service. As much as possible, the ceremony should reflect the couple and "where they are at", not the parents or grandparents, no matter how many of them are wardens of the parish or friends of the archbishop. Having said that, I would like to stress that it is a joy to celebrate the nuptial Mass with members of the faith community. There will always be a certain magic to the process through which two become one, having proclaimed to all present that they respect, like and trust each other to such an extent that they are willing to make a commitment to each other, their future children and society, a commitment to become, according to the eternal design of God, "two in one flesh". Remember when we spoke about the Eucharist establishing and maintaining a flesh-and-blood relationship between ourselves and Jesus? Well, this is yet another chapter in the same wondrous story of the genius of God's love as revealed in the Eucharist. Think about what happens: the bride and groom proclaim their vows and are recognized as husband and wife. Moments later, husband and wife receive Holy Communion which not only relates them to Jesus but to each other through Him. They are "Two in one flesh", only this time, it is the flesh of Jesus which unites them to Him and to each other. Three in one flesh. How intimate! How intimate is the resultant union! How indestructible if maintained! The potential for fruitful meditation is endless.

No, marriage is not, as some would have it, just a piece of paper, nor, is it but one of several possible relational frameworks. Marriage stands apart, because no other relationship is based upon a level of trust and

consequent commitment so profound as to unite a man and woman as intimately as though they were of the same flesh and blood. No court of law can declare that I am no longer my father's son nor my sister's brother. We are what we are. It is God's intention that the same union be forged between wife and husband. Two in one flesh as totally and as permanently related as any two people can be. And why not? Does it make any real sense that a mother be more closely related to a child than to her husband? Or a husband more closely related to his brother than to his wife? This is the bond of marriage; every bit as binding and as lasting as any biologically based relationship. And this, unfortunately but naturally, brings up the subject of divorce. The nature of the relationship as described above explains the Church's position on the indissolubility of valid marriages. A judge cannot declare you to be no longer your father's son, but he can declare your father to be free of all legal responsibility for you or your actions. In the same way, and for the same reasons, no judge can declare you to be no longer your husband's wife, but he can declare you to be legally separated and therefore free of the civil effects of marriage. You remain however, until death, husband and wife. The judge cannot change that. No one can.

It should be apparent that serious consideration and consultation ought to proceed any marriage. The fact that two people love each other is not enough to justify attempting marriage. I say "attempting" because there are any number of things which can render a marriage nul-and-void from the beginning. In recent years, contributions from secular disciplines have aided the Church in its understanding and identification of impediments to a valid sacramental marriage. Thus it is that annulments are being sought and granted on grounds which would not have been recognized in the past. Commonly accepted today are a whole range of character disorders and deficiencies which render a true

marital partnership in today's environment a practical impossibility. Couples who are contemplating marriage owe it to themselves and society to seek help in exploring the realities and demands of marriage. Christian marriage is not for the self-centred, the selfish, the domineering. A publication which I can recommend is entitled, "Annulment". It was written by Joseph Zwack and published by Harper and Rowe (1983). The author points out that over eighty percent of formal annulments currently being granted in the U.S. are based on psychological grounds. Sometimes these psychological problems manifest themselves after the marriage has been entered into, but are still considered to have been latently responsible for the person's original consent being defective.

Divorce and annulment may not be the favourite topics of those who are contemplating marriage, but any mature, responsible couple should seek up-to-date knowledge on these subjects as part of the process of determining their own compatibility and readiness for marriage. Marriage is a serious contract and ought to rest on solid foundations which outlast the fluttering heart and go far deeper than sexual attraction. Married life has such a great potential for happiness and fulfilment, it is a tragedy to waste it. But it is also a tragedy to live a lie and so on more than one occasion I have supported parishioners in their decision to seek a civil divorce, so that they can become free of the civil effects of marriage and live apart from their spouse. Sometimes grounds for annulment are recognized and thus leave the way open for a future marriage, while other times, such grounds are less certain. It has been said that divorce is a rock-bottom experience. I have seen many good people come out of a divorce drained of both energy and self-esteem. It is demeaning and embarrassing. But you know, apart from being free of an untenable situation, you are also more susceptible to God's gentle touch, because the chances are that you have acquired

some degree of humility and know what it feels like to be alone before God. God says to you as he once said to Paul, "My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness." You see, you ARE worth something; God DOES love and cherish you; you CAN rebuild your life as a wiser and a holier person. The reality is that, in accordance with God's mercy, understanding and forgiveness, within the dying experience of marriage breakdown, there lies the seed of resurrection and new life.

Somehow this seems a bleak note upon which to end this chapter which, although owing to my pastoral perspective, has been largely problem orientated, is nevertheless the stuff of much hope and happiness. I therefore submit for your meditation the beautiful exhortation before marriage, which was once part of our ritual and is still frequently referred to by "old hands" like yours truly.

"Dear friends in Christ: As you know, you are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious, a union which was established by God Himself. By it, He gave to man a share in the greatest work of creation, the work of the continuation of the human race. And in this way He sanctified human love and enabled man and woman to help each other live as children of God, by sharing a common life under His fatherly care.

Because God Himself is thus its author, marriage is of its very nature a holy institution, requiring of those who enter into it a complete and unreserved giving of self.

This union then is most serious, because it will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate that it will profoundly influence your whole future. That future, with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and its failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys and its sorrows, is hidden from your eyes. You know that these elements are mingled in every life and are to be expected in your own. And so not knowing

what is before you, you take each other for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.

Truly, then, these words are most serious. It is a beautiful tribute to your undoubted faith in each another, that, recognizing their full import, you are nevertheless so willing and ready to pronounce them. And because these words involve such solemn obligations, it is most fitting that you rest the security of your wedded life upon the great principle of self-sacrifice. And so you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life which you are to have in common. Henceforth you belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affections. And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy; and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son and the son so loved us that He gave Himself for our salvation.

No greater blessing can come to your married life than pure conjugal love, loyal and true to the end. May, then, this love with which you join your hands and hearts today never fail, but grow deeper and stronger as the years go on. And if true love and the unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice guide your every action, you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted to man in this vale of tears. The rest is in the hands of God. Nor will God be wanting to your needs. He will pledge you the life-long support of His graces in the holy sacrament which you are now going to receive."

CHAPTER VII

"FATHER FORGIVE THEM..."

Throughout the history of the Church there has been some mechanism, some framework, within which a Christian could admit his or her sinfulness, express repentance and be reconciled. The sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick all relate in some degree to this basic need to be healed, but there has always been some form of sacramental action dedicated specifically to this end, sometimes administered by the bishop only, sometimes by priests and sometimes by lay people. In certain periods of history, it was considered to be a once-in-a-lifetime sacrament and yet, in others, it was received as frequently as desired. Sometimes it involved incredibly complex and long-term external acts of penance in contrast to the more recent custom of saying a prayer or two. Like so many traditions which receive their initial impetus from something as simple and elemental as God's fatherly love, the path through history

of the sacrament of Penance is one which became choked with weeds until it strangled in its own excesses and distortions, only to find periodic renewal and revival, as God's Holy Spirit, as always, came to the rescue.

The related notions of sin, punishment and reconciliation were familiar to the early Christians, especially, although not exclusively, those of Hebrew background. The society of Israel was based upon a perceived relationship with God. The terms of that relationship were expressed in laws and any breaking of those laws was a sin requiring just punishment, hopefully followed by reconciliation. Punishment or acts of penance ranged from corporal punishment and temporary expulsion from the community to simple fasting and prayer.

Paul's letters to the Christians of Corinth indicate that the early Christians generally followed Jewish penitential practices. Jesus paid particular attention to contrite sinners. He forgave them and demanded no more than that they try to mend their ways. Furthermore, He made a point of associating with people whom the establishment rejected as habitual sinners: prostitutes, lepers (who were thought to be suffering for their transgressions), crooked tax collectors and a host of others whom He called His "lost sheep". Jesus, who through Baptism associated Himself with us, expressed the depth of His love for us by giving His life. The infinite power of that divine act of love is far greater than the power of all our accumulated sins and each one of us, by virtue of our association with Him, has a right to tap into that reservoir of love and repeatedly apply to our souls the soothing balm of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life. The first thing Jesus did when He became present to His apostles after His resurrection was commission them to forgive others in His name (and "others" means each one of us, without exception).

Sinfulness is at work in each of us, demanding that we care for ourselves at the expense of God and others. Its antithesis is caring for God and others at the expense

of self, in other words, charity. Sin, then, is the flip-side of love. There is nothing very mysterious about sin. It is the manifestation of our fallen nature and our abuse of free will. It is a failure to live up to the terms of the covenant between God and man which was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper and sealed on Jesus' part by His death and resurrection, and on our part, by our personal dedication to God and Gospel values and observances. When we break the covenant, it is only logical that, providing we are penitent, we should seek God's forgiveness, because God, after all, is the other party in the agreement. When we are forgiven, we are redeemed, we are saved. From What? From the effects of our wounded nature and from ourselves, from the shortsightedness which so often makes us slaves to our appetites and illusions.

Slaves were traditionally freed when someone ransomed them, so we metaphorically speak of Jesus as having "ransomed" us through His supreme act of love. This is metaphorical, because such a price was not somehow demanded of Jesus by the Father. Redemption and ransom are metaphorical terms in this context, just as are slavery and bondage. It is simply a way of saying that Jesus' death and resurrection constitute irrefutable evidence of God's endless loving patience with us all. He will never refuse to forgive and therefore, as long as we can muster the sincerity and humility to say "I am sorry", sin will never get the best of us. With God's help, our better side will always land face-up. That is salvation. That is redemption.

I cannot help but conclude that Jesus, in His wisdom, wished the process of personal reconciliation to be simple and straightforward, while still maintaining its awesome significance. After about a hundred years of one Christian simply reassuring another of Jesus' merciful forgiveness, those who rose to positions of leadership in the Church began to codify, complicate, regulate and, to some extent, distort the divine plan beyond rec-

ognition. There must be times when the Holy Spirit is exhausted to the point of "breathlessness" from trying to inspire good people possessed of noble hearts and legal minds! This mindset became truly entrenched in the third and fourth centuries when, as we have already seen, bishops under the Emperor Constantine, doubled as civil magistrates and lived in a world of crime and punishment supported by enough rules and regulations to make an ancient rabbi smile. We are not out of it yet, but with the indispensable inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we are making progress.

Even before Constantine, and especially during the final and most brutal years of persecution, the penitential discipline of the Church may appear, to our eyes, to have been unjustly harsh. Let us slip into third century Rome for a quick glimpse.

Tully took the loaf of bread offered to her by the baker and carefully turned it over in her hands looking for any tell-tale signs of age. You couldn't take anything for granted these days, she thought. Everyone seemed to be bent on cheating or in some way betraying their neighbour. Rome was full of spies who made a living by denouncing their fellow citizens to the police. The emperor, Decius, was frightened of his own shadow and saw potential enemies in every doorway. The spies, slime that they were, capitalized on this, as did the officials to whom they reported, and so on up the line to the most senior slugs of the imperial court. Those most at risk were the Jesus-people, the Christians. It seemed to Tully, that for the past two hundred years, any time the government needed a scapegoat, they pounced upon the Christians. The emperor hated, some people said, feared, Christians. Tully and her chariot-maker husband were Christians.

As she entered the courtyard which protected their little apartment from the street, she was met by her nearest neighbour, Amora, whose excessive girth and severe agitation combined to prevent her from expressing her-

self until, at last, between tearful gulps of air, she made it clear that Tully's husband, Marcus, had but moments before, been hustled away by a squad of military police.

The carefully selected loaf of bread was unceremoniously dumped on the table as Tully sat down and considered her options. She had to act quickly. Whoever had betrayed Marcus had probably betrayed her as well, although not necessarily. She knew that she was an attractive woman. Men almost always gave her that look, which made her feel naked and exposed. Marcus would not be the first of the community to be gotten rid of by someone who envied him his place in bed. Tully knew that this line of thinking, although in some ways fascinating, was leading nowhere. Unless she got going, Marcus would become a victim of the next bloody public entertainment. There was no point in searching out one of the priests or even the bishop himself. They would likely go into raptures about the blessings of martyrdom. She had heard it all before. "To die for Christ" was the ultimate privilege. It wasn't as though she didn't believe it, she simply didn't want to see her husband die. She loved him and still hoped for that as-yet-elusive pregnancy which would make them a true family.

Marcus and all the other Christians arrested that day had several choices. They could turn their eyes to the cross, affirm publicly their faith in the Lord Jesus as Son of the one true God and pray for a speedy death. Or they could deny the Lord Jesus and openly offer sacrifice to the gods of Rome. For this, they would be issued a certificate which would protect them from further arrest or harassment. There was also a chance that Tully, through connections, would be able to buy a couple of these certificates made out in each of their names and present them to the authorities, claiming false arrest and demanding Marcus' immediate release. She decided to pursue this latter route without further delay.

As Tully set out to procure the false documents, Marcus was competing for space in a crowded cell with

numerous other men, women and even children. The stench was overpowering and most people's eyes reflected the panic bubbling beneath the calm surface which owed its fragile existence to the influence of an elderly priest, whose words of comfort and encouragement came from what Marcus clearly perceived to be a mind and heart replete with truth and love. Marcus yearned for the determination and faith which he knew would enable this priest and many of his cellmates to go to their deaths singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving. Marcus also yearned for Tully, for his workshop and for the bright Roman sunshine. Still, Marcus loved the lord Jesus. He didn't fear Him; he loved Him. What he did fear was the disdain of his fellow Christians should he give in to the hourly demand to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods. At least twenty had already agreed to do so. They had walked away from this hell-and-heaven place, done what they were told, received their certificates and gone home. But they had betrayed Jesus and the Christian community. He did not want to do that. He slumped to the grimy floor, his back against the cold damp wall, and began to weep. Hands eager to comfort reached toward him, but he would not be consoled. Half aloud, he whimpered, "Tully! Tully! Where are you?.

Tully was not wasting time. She was in a back room of the military procurement offices talking earnestly to an old soldier, who had been instrumental in getting contracts for Marcus to repair war chariots. Pancras, like all veterans of military purchasing in every army of every age, had innumerable connections and for the right price, could get you anything you needed. This included fake certificates testifying to the bearers having renounced Christianity in favour of the state religion. Pancras made the usual noises about the risks he was running and the increasing cost of good forgeries, but in the end, to Tully's relief, he produced from his own desk, a couple of official certificates which he signed and sealed, having filled in Marcus' and Tully's names. The

seal he explained, with a satisfied smile, was that of a recently deceased magistrate. Although poorer by a month's income, Tully considered herself lucky as she made her way to the prison where Pancras suggested Marcus was probably being held. When the warder called his name, Marcus feared the worst. He was about to be given the chance to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods or face the consequences.

He had heard that some who feared that they would submit to the law and thus deny Jesus Christ had obtained from one of those anticipating a martyr's death a "letter of peace". Such letters, addressed to the local bishop, begged that the bearer not be judged too harshly and rumour had it that such letters often carried great weight. Before he could figure out how to obtain such a letter and have it signed by one of the future martyrs beside him, Marcus was led out of the cell and into Tully's waiting embrace.

Several weeks went by during which life returned to normal for Marcus and Tully. They continued to secretly participate in the Eucharist which was celebrated in the warren of tombs on the outskirts of the city. But they kept just as secret, the precious certificates which would protect them from just about any accusation short of being caught in a raid on the tombs themselves. Marcus did feel guilty, but it was only when he heard of yet another large number of Christians being slaughtered in the amphitheatre that he became truly remorseful, knowing that he should have been one of them and yet grateful that he wasn't. In spite of Tully's misgivings, he followed the urgings of his conscience, and after the next Eucharistic celebration, confided in the priest celebrant, who in turn, promised to bring his case to the bishop. Marcus desperately wanted the forgiveness of God and the community. He was ready to do penance. The bishop's name was Sixtus. He, himself, was destined to die a martyr's death before the end of the year and one might have supposed that he suspected as much as

he listened with patient empathy to Marcus' heartfelt confession. He had heard many others just like it and he always had the same reaction: understanding and encouragement. He explained to Marcus that although he had not committed an act of formal apostacy, he had, nevertheless, given possible grave scandal by representing himself as a former Christian. Some bishops looked upon this sin as being as serious as any, including murder, adultery and even actual apostacy, but Sixtus did not. In fact, had Marcus borne a letter of peace from a martyr, Sixtus might well have declared him absolved without further penance. But as it was, he could not, and therefore, he proposed that Marcus do public penance for the next five years and then return to him, or to his successor, for the imposition of hands which would signify that through the mercy of God, his sin was forgiven. During this period of time, Marcus would be identified within the Church as a penitent. He would be obliged to abstain from the Eucharist; he could attend no public amusement; he could drink only a minimum of wine; and he would have to give half his earnings as alms for the poor. All of this would be made public at the next Christian gathering in his district. Marcus felt as though a heavy load had been removed from his mind but he shuddered ever so slightly as the bishop's gentle voice followed him to the door. "You must also destroy the certificates." " Both of them?" Marcus asked, almost pleading. "Both of them, my son," came the firm reply.

Such was the reality of Christian life in the early Church. Being a Christian was a serious matter and was truly the focal point of a person's life. Religion was not a crutch; it was a challenge. The cross had become an ever-present reality, overshadowed only by the Resurrection. Forgiveness of minor sins could be sought and legitimately found within the community or even the family, but serious sins, like adultery, murder, major theft and apostacy were dealt with in the more formal process which has just been illustrated. According to many bish-

ops, it was a once-in-a-lifetime second chance. Others were a little more lenient permitting a person to become a public penitent more than once in a lifetime. Marcus was fortunate in that his penance was relatively short and light. These were tough times and the Church's survival called for tough measures and severe discipline. No "three Our Father's" for Marcus!

The era of public penance did not last all that long, as many people ended up simply avoiding confessing their sins because they felt absolution came at too high a price. It also became common practice for converts to embrace the practice of the faith in a non-sacramental way, in other words, put off Baptism until extreme old age. This approach of having one's cake and at least partially eating it too was vested with respectability when it was adopted by no less a personage than Constantine, the first so-called Christian emperor.

In time, the old system began to give way to new and unofficial practices, which eventually led to the formalized sacrament of Penance with which most of us grew up. Christians began to seek out wise and holy men and women to give them direction in their spiritual lives and particularly, act as confidants with regard to their most perplexing problems of conscience. Most of the "physicians of souls" were lay people. The clerical father confessor existed, but he functioned mainly within the confines of his monastery. In either case, the ministering person would assure the penitent of God's mercy and forgiveness. It was not until the 6th or 7th century that lay confessors began to give way to monks, who were extending their ministry beyond the walls of their monasteries. This evolutionary process took place in spite of the efforts of some Church officials to shore up the old system and make it more palatable by cutting back on the severity and length of penances. The forty days of Lent became the only official penitential season, beginning with the symbolic wearing of ashes on Ash Wednesday and culminating with the opportunity to re-

ceive absolution on Holy Thursday. But that didn't cause anything in the way of a renaissance. The old disciplines had become self-defeating, as they had led to the common practice of gambling on deathbed absolution or delayed Baptism. It must have been very stressful for strict traditionalists, whether cleric or lay, to see the old customs abandoned. So it has always been and so it will always be. Remember when, in the wake of Vatican II, we turned the altar around and replaced Latin with English? The Church is not an historic monument; it is a living body and like all living things, it constantly evolves, sometimes at an alarming rate, sometimes laboriously, and unfortunately for some, hopelessly slowly. The Church is the people of God blessed with the ever-present spirit of God. This spirit is sometimes poorly discerned by those who most influence policy-making and just as poorly discerned by their sternest critics, but it never weakens and sooner or later, it penetrates our defenses and our blindness, our pride and prejudice. God is so patient and so respectful of our dignity!

In retrospect, we see that in the evolution of the sacrament of Penance, one of the most influential instruments of the Spirit was St. Patrick. When Patrick returned to Ireland, where he had once been a slave, he brought with him a group of ordained monks. In their ministry to the people of Ireland, they developed the practice of hearing a person's confession, then assigning some moderate penance, which was determined by consulting a book of sins and corresponding penances that they prepared for their own use. After the penance had been performed, the priest would assure the penitent of God's forgiveness. This process could be repeated as often as the penitent reasonably requested. By the 6th century, this practice had, in spite of the opposition of many local bishops, spread throughout the continent. By the 7th century, confession to priests became the norm. Penances ranged from recitation of a few prayers to making of a long pilgrimage and forgiveness was pro-

nounced upon completion of the particular penitential act. During the time it took to perform the penance, the penitent was not supposed to receive the Eucharist. We ought to keep in mind that all of this took place within a social context very different from our own. In many areas, the only moral and legal system was that of the Church. On it depended the maintenance of day-to-day order. Sin and the violation of law were synonymous. Needless to say, abuses were very much part of the scene. Curious though it may appear, it was common practice to pay others to do your penance, especially if you were rich. Can you imagine striking a deal with some poor person to fast on your behalf for three days when, without your money, that is precisely what he would be doing anyway?

By the middle ages, confessors were giving absolution immediately after the actual confessing of sins and assigning a penance to be performed later. This was the result of solid theological reflection, which had led to the conclusion that forgiveness did NOT flow from the performance of the penance, as is the case with a prison term or a fine, but rather from the spoken words of the priest-confessor applying the merits of Jesus and functioning in His name according to the Gospel injunction. Another positive development was that as Church and state began to grow apart, both philosophically and in fact, theologians found themselves in an atmosphere in which they could more fruitfully reflect upon the difference between the quid-pro-quo justice of the civil courts and that limitless reality which is a just god's love and mercy.

In the final analysis, can sin be defined simply as the breaking of a law? To this question, some would reply immediately in the affirmative. They would maintain that a sinner is one who breaks the laws of the Church and by extension, God's laws. Just a few years ago the example most likely to spring to mind would be the Church's laws regarding fast and abstinence. A per-

son who deliberately ate meat on Friday was breaking God's law and thus committing a serious sin. But then, as we all know, this disciplinary law was changed. The penitential obligation remained but the specific law or means was abrogated. From that time on, Catholics could eat meat on Friday and it would not be a sin. All of a sudden, what was once sinful no longer is. At the time, this caused considerable confusion among the faithful and understandably so. The fact is that codified laws come and go and are, in themselves, quite accidental. What really matters is one's relationship to God and man. In essence, sin is to be found in the attitudes which are destructive of that relationship: pride, injustice, greed, lust... Sound familiar? Sin is to be found not so much in what is done or not done but in WHY it is done or left undone. This does not mean that you can rob a bank as long as it is for a good cause... or does it? What about the situation where people are naked and starving and the only means to assist them is to get at funds which authorities are refusing to release? The law of the land would be clear. There is never an excuse for bank robbery. And the only response to one who tries is punishment. But the sinfulness in this scene would likely be found in the attitudes of those who could have helped but refused to do so, not in the action of those who were desperate to clothe the naked and feed the hungry.

A lot of saints wind up in prison for breaking the law and in Heaven for the same reason. Clearly, respect for civil and criminal courts is necessary for the common good of society, but let us never forget that they are, at best, imperfect structures designed to preserve imperfect societies led by men and women whose greatest need is redemption. Thus, I suggest that, while as members of secular societies we must concern ourselves with laws and actions, as members of Christ we must concentrate on attitudes and relationships. It would seem to follow that the only truly mortal sin is a fundamental

option for evil. To be condemned by God means that you are a deliberately evil person who leaves God no choice but to respect your option. Such a person, if indeed one exists, is far from the average person who, for whatever reason, has broken a specific rule or law enunciated by Church or state or both. The road to Hell is most assuredly not paved with good intentions. It is, however, safe to say, that the road to prison often is. This might help to clarify how eating meat on Friday was once considered a mortal sin and today is only of consequence on Good Friday. The "mortal" element enters into such disciplinary rules only if the defying of the rule is intended as a statement of one's total disregard for what is personally known and understood to be, an expression, symbolic or otherwise, of God's will as expressed through the teaching church. All of which is to say that I doubt if anyone went to hell for eating meat on Friday. But if there are any people in Hell, then the chances are that most of the Catholics in that state, did, knowingly and willfully, ignore that and most other disciplines and doctrines of the Church whose heart is the Spirit and whose head is Jesus.

If sin is defined in terms of attitude and relationships, it is also defined in terms of that corporate reality we call humanity. In other words, sin is not only attributable to the individual but to society as a whole and it is on this aspect of sin that the Church is currently focussing as never before. And by Church I mean, at least in this case, not so much the Roman authorities, as the people of God, who are less preoccupied, although hopefully not totally unconcerned, with the "Pill", masturbation, bad thoughts, impatience, missing Mass on the odd Sunday, and losing their temper from time to time, and a good deal more concerned about the moral implications of warfare, world hunger, global pollution, corporate rape, etc. Perhaps we have here the makings of at least a partial explanation of why fewer people go to confession than in the past. If people are troubled by

their share of the collective responsibility for social injustice, the arms race and yes, the world population explosion, they are not likely to turn to the sacrament of reconciliation, and who can blame them? And yet we are, I think, slowly adapting to this very real need. The sacrament of Penance as it is experienced today is much less structured or formulated than in the past. As often as not, the priest and penitent are face-to-face, and the approach is conversational. In such an atmosphere it seems much more natural to express concern about one's global responsibilities, as well as discuss one's day-to-day personal moral choices within the context of the larger picture. The priest is there not to pronounce judgement, but to offer counsel and reflect with the penitent on the quality of their particular imaging of Jesus in the world. With the words of absolution come assurance of God's abiding love and enduring patience. A Catholic does not go to Confession to be judged, but rather to be reconciled and encouraged. I often remind those whom I attempt to serve as confessor that there is a fundamental and extremely significant difference between the way we tend to judge each other and the way God judges us. We generally judge according to results. That is to say, "What mark did you get on the exam ? Did you come first or last? Did you win or lose? Did you give in to temptation or not?" God really doesn't care all that much about how well we do. He is however greatly concerned about how hard we try and how much we care. Wouldn't the world be a happier place if we had the same attitude?

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At this point, I would like to share with you some of my own experiences as a confessor. I can honestly say that some of the most rewarding moments of my priesthood have been in the confessional. We know that as priests we are, when at our best, instruments in God's

hands. Each day when I speak the words of Consecration during Mass, I am conscious of having been chosen, of having been ordained for this...for others. I am very proud to wear the vestments of a priest and to be called "Father". I live within a framework of mystery, a mystery best expressed by the words, "Why me?" As I kneel in the presence of a brother priest and admit before God, my own weaknesses and failure, my own lack of faith, my own greed, lust, pride, vanity, laziness and insularity, whatever healthy guilt I feel is soon overwhelmed by a sense of acceptance by God. The words of absolution, when pronounced over me, assure me that, in spite of my sinfulness and weak resolve, God wants me, as I am, to be His ambassador, His hands and His voice. Why me? In receiving the sacrament of Penance, I sense the answer. "Because I want you. I want you at the altar, in the pulpit, by the grave, in the sick room, in the office, in the streets, in people's homes, in the confessional..

In the confessional...the first time I ever heard a confession was about three or four days after I had been ordained. My first appointment had been to a parish which did not have a church, so we functioned from a school hall. The confessional that I entered that first Saturday night was, therefore, not really a confessional at all, but just a kneeler with a screen that lifted up to give the penitent some small degree of anonymity. As I sat there in my black cassock, white surplice and purple stole, I had a pretty clear view of the hall and I could see that the pastor, whose work space was identical to mine, already had a line of customers. I was alone. Even the nuns seemed to be avoiding me.

She looked at her watch for the third time and decided to get out of the pastor's line. She headed in my direction. Through the screen I could see her coming. Should I have been looking? I wasn't sure. I reached for the card with the words of absolution carefully typed in Latin. I waited. She knelt down. I was as tense as an infantry recruit about to go over the top. She began to

recite the time-honoured formula, then followed with a list of sins. No doubt with the most serious at the top of the list and working down to the totally and "insignificant-but-what-the-hell-I-might-as-well-toss-it-in variety". Then, as suddenly as she had begun, she stopped. The ball was in my court and I had barely understood a word she had spoken. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. My first penitent had been an elderly French-speaking lady with very loose false teeth. With all the clicking and clacking and the high-speed delivery, I only picked up a few words. The image I had had of myself as the saintly young physician of souls speaking words of memorable wisdom lay shattered before me. As like a butcher ringing up a sale, I said, "One Our Father", and read off the formula of absolution. With another glance at her watch and a grateful Gaulish clickity-clack, she was out of there and I had heard my first confession. That was more than thirty years ago and in the interim, a lot of penitents have come and gone. One day I was hearing confessions at a large local church and a woman came in and began to recite the normal preliminary formula. Her voice sounded familiar and I was prompted to say, "Are you sure you want to do this, Mother?" She made it abundantly clear that she did not. We often laughed about that one, but you know, as the years went by, it became a normal thing for me to hear her confession in my car as we returned from visiting my father who was dying in a nursing home. By that time she herself had been diagnosed as having terminal cancer. He died in the spring and she followed him in the last days of the same summer. Attending to the sacramental needs of your parents is a special privilege. To have your mother bow her head and say to you, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned...", puts one in immediate touch with the transcendence of the priesthood.

Back in the days when every parish had its own adjacent bulging grade school, we all spent long hours sitting in the confessional, hearing such grave accusa-

tions as, "I fighted, I hated my sister, I didn't make my bed," and "I got the teacher mad." It was good training for them but it worked a lot better when in later years we sat with them and spoke face-to-face. The dark confessional with its little sliding door was a scary place to many a small child who had been primed by the battle-scarred veterans of the third and fourth grades to expect all sorts of horrors. One day I slid open the wicket to hear deep sobs from down close to the floor. I went to the source of the tears to find a little girl cowering in the corner. "Are there really a tiger in here," she asked? We sat in the church for a moment or two where there were no tigers. I gave her a blessing and she returned to the squirming closely-packed block of humanity which was her classmates. They couldn't wait to absorb her into their midst so that she could tell them why she had received such special treatment from the priest. I continued with another thirty or forty renditions of "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been so long since my last confession and now I tell the priest my sins." (This is exactly how many would say it.) I was surprised in the midst of it all to be addressed by an adult male who apologized for cutting in on the kids, but he said he was about to catch a plane to Europe and wanted to go to confession first. Not very good publicity for the airline, but anyway, I was glad to oblige. At the end, he said to me, somewhat hesitantly and obviously distressed, "Father, I'm afraid the radiator in here must be leaking. I have been kneeling in water." I thanked him and apologized, knowing full well that there were no pipes in there, but rather, the tangible sign of a very nervous little girl...or, perhaps, after all, an incontinent tiger. Who knows!? The saddest confessions came from children who would say that they wanted to come to Mass on Sunday, but that was the day their parents slept in, so there was no one to take them. We have to be so careful not to lessen their respect for their parents, while at the same time nourishing and encouraging their faith and

devotion.

For many, particularly among the elderly, the priest in his confessional is the only person in the world in whom they can confide. It is not only their minor sins that one hears, but their loneliness and, as in the case of penitents of all ages, their goodness. A responsible confessor will make an effort to address this by giving them all the time they want and encouraging them to come back again soon. "Father, I was to confession a week ago. I haven't done much wrong but I lost my wife a year ago and, Father, its so hard..." So many silent tears...on BOTH sides of the confessional.

No one could remain unmoved as a widower describes his efforts to get on with his life, a parent tries to come to grips with a child in prison, a cancer patient looks beyond Good Friday to Easter Sunday, the alcoholic swears he'll never touch another drop, the thief, another nickel. "Thank you, Father," they say, as they turn to leave. I have said something that gave them new courage, new hope, and through absolution, I have lifted their burden and restored their self-respect. I have done all this and yet, I have done nothing. Nowhere have I been more conscious of being an instrument, a conduit, than in the confessional. It is a good feeling. But it is a feeling that we experience less and less these days, as fewer people seek the healing Jesus in the sacrament of Reconciliation. Why is this? There are many reasons, one of which we touched on a little earlier, namely, preoccupation with global issues. Another is that sometimes people just don't find Him there; instead, they find a priest who is out of touch with his reason for being. But I don't think this happens any more than it did fifty or a hundred years ago. In fact, I think it happens less as the autocratic, disgruntled, judgemental priest becomes more and more of an anomaly.

Looking at my own experience, I would say that the biggest single reason for the decline in the number of people going to confession is the birth control debate

and its many spinoffs. Everyone knew that Pope Paul VI had appointed a broadly-based commission to advise him on the subject of birth control. Most people expected a less black-and-white result. Theologians argued in favour of the distinction between a contraceptive act and a contraceptive marriage. The commission was rumoured to be in favour of greater flexibility in the light of the inescapable demands of modern life. Good Catholics who were both generous and troubled by this issue expected that the Holy Father would be convinced of the validity of the majority opinion. There are some historians who maintain that he was, but could not justify an opinion which went against that of his predecessors. Whatever the case, he reiterated the traditional total ban on all artificial means of birth control, without qualification or exception. This was in the early 1960s, and I remember the trauma, and I use the word advisedly, of finding myself in disagreement with the Holy Father. My own very limited pastoral experience had convinced me that this was a case of putting burdens upon the backs of the people which we ourselves are not prepared to carry.. (Matthew 23, verse 4). As for our people, they continued to go to confession, but simply left birth control out of the picture. The erosion had begun. The priest was no longer to be trusted as a moral arbiter. Penitents simply submitted to their confessor what they chose and accepted full personal responsibility for matters deemed to be beyond his expertise or level of insight. At the time, many priests considered this attitude unacceptable, whereas today, we are more likely to see it as a healthy approach to an imperfect and confusing situation. Confusion is a key word here, as some confessors have maintained a strict line, while others adopted positions of varying degrees of flexibility. Even bishops and national conferences of bishops have expressed views which were not shared in Rome and, needless to say, theologians from every side had a field day. As a result, there is a growing trend away from clear-cut regu-

lations covering the morality of every conceivable human action and in favour of broader principles guiding the formation of personal conscience. Christian people do seek expert moral guidance in the formation of conscience, but they will no longer simply obey. The system has broken down and when all is said and done, I believe this to be a good thing. I believe it to be a sign that the people of God are growing up and accepting responsibility for their own actions.

Although popes and bishops do not have all the answers to every question, we prayerfully and hopefully look to them for wisdom and inspiration. And on those rare occasions when they speak to us with one voice and do so as interpreters of divine revelation, we are assured by Jesus Himself that we are hearing His own voice. This is our unique and priceless Catholic heritage, which assures us of the truth of our creeds or, in other words, of every major doctrine of our faith. But, when these same guides speak to us hesitantly and uncertainly and without unanimity, as has often been the case in matters dealing with morality, then whatever the personal views of the Holy Father, we may well find ourselves on the other side of the argument, and thus, in the admittedly uncomfortable position of being good Catholics who disagree with the Pope. Once again, I think it a particular sign of the Holy Spirit's protection that although the pontiff, in union with his bishops, has the right to formally pronounce on moral matters without fear of error, just as he can in matters of faith, he has never done so. The reason, it seems to me, is that we can all agree on basic moral principles, but when it comes down to specifics, we are not sufficiently informed, inspired or motivated to be able to make certain judgements on every moral issue. Let's face it, any society, any church, that can categorically condemn abortion, but send clerical representation to a hanging or electrocution, or a chaplain to bless an artillery piece, would seem to have a long way to go in terms of intellectual honesty. Sure, we

all agree on the general principle of the sacredness and dignity of human life, but after that...??

And let us not forget the widespread slavery, oppression and injustice which characterize many countries of this world, in which the Church's presence is divided between civil rulers and ecclesiastical hierarchies on the one side, and the poor and a handful of priests and religious on the other. The Bishop Romeros of this world are too few. Clearly, we are all in need of redemption. We are all in need of mutual support and no one has a greater need of our support than does the Holy Father, to whom I happily pledge my loyalty, but I insist that such loyalty need not be blind in order to be authentic. And so I think that the days of pray, pay and obey are about over and one of the casualties of the adjustment process has been the confessional. As I see it, this is a case of good news and bad news, because Jesus said that He had come specifically to call sinners to Himself. He gave His life for the remission of sin. He was very sin-conscious, as were His apostles, to whom He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven."

Many modern Catholics are, in my view, not sufficiently sin-conscious. We are not very convinced of our need for redemption. Guilt is seen as an aberration. We do not seek forgiveness, and yet we share with most good people a yearning to be made whole, to be one with God, humanity and nature. We fear estrangement and alienation. In the sacrament of Penance, the sacrament of Reconciliation, or as I sometimes think of it, the sacrament of SANITY, Jesus has given us a marvellous answer to both our yearnings and our fears. I have no doubt that in time we will rediscover it and this, within an enriched and broadened context to which I have already referred, wherein the Spirit urges us not so much to conform to a commanding church as to respond to a compelling church.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN LIFE IS CHANGED BUT NOT ENDED -

Those of us whose ministry is within a parish setting soon become accustomed to the fact of death. Almost every week and sometimes several times a week, the phone or door is answered to reveal a person whose life has just been torn in half or at least severely jolted. Even when long anticipated, death has a way of stunning us. When it is sudden, or premature, it can be literally unbelievable and take days to begin to register as a reality. Suicides and homicides carry their own special pain and confusion, and one has to be a parent to know how it feels to lose a child.

I guess you could say that sooner or later we see it all. I have returned home at all hours of the day and night, exhausted from the grief of others, wanting, and yet unable to console them. I have dozed off beside the beds of tired old people who had no one to keep them

company in their final moments. I have held them as they took those last shuddering breaths before finally becoming limp and strangely heavy. I have fought the urge to vomit at the sights and smells of self-inflicted mortal wounds, or those brought about by every kind of accident. I have been cursed, laughed at and praised by the dying, sometimes in their right minds and sometimes demented. I have anointed people in their beds, in chairs, on the floor, in cars, in burned-out buildings and when death caught them on the toilet or in the bathtub, I have anointed them there.

"Through this holy anointing, may the Lord, in His love and mercy, help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and may the Lord, who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up." ...a small Sign of the Cross with the Sacred Oil on the forehead and hands, and then a moment or two of prayer, until finally, the body is reverently if awkwardly prepared for transportation. How often it seems to happen between midnight and six A.M.!

"Would you like a cup of tea, Father?"

"Oh yes, please, if you are having one." I rarely drink tea, but the offer masks a need for a grief-stricken person to do anything, anything at all. I remember a dear old man who had nursed his wife through years of serious illness. Some days he would wash the bed linens six or eight times. He rarely left her side, day or night. Early one morning she died and after the body had been taken away, he looked at me through pale misty eyes and said, "I think I'd like a smoke." At the time I was, myself, a heavy smoker, and was more than anxious to join him. He went to a closet and came out with a metal "flat fifty" box of Gold Flake cigarettes, the likes of which had not been seen in the shops for thirty or forty years. He carefully opened them explaining all the while that at his wife's insistence, he had quit smoking "a few years ago", but somehow, this seemed like a good time to have one. They were no longer cigarettes, they were miniature flares, ready to burst into flame at the sight of a match.

Fortunately, as he lifted one from the box, the tobacco dust fell to the floor leaving him with a limp paper tube. He laughed a weary laugh and shook his head. "Do you think she is watching," he asked? "I know she is," I answered, and although I had a fresh pack in my pocket, I pretended to have left them at home. After all, you never really can tell!

I have been fortunate to have benefitted from the advice and helping hands of many men and women as I prepared to anoint the dead or nearly dead. When first ordained, another priest accompanied me to my first emergency call. He stood to one side, but was there if I needed him. It was a poor section of the city and the man had apparently died in a dark little musty flat which he shared with his wife. I knelt beside him and feeling no pulse, confirmed his death. As I had seen done in the movies so many times, but had never actually been instructed to do so, I reached out and closed his eyes, at which point he made a loud noise which I remember thinking sounded like a crow call. His head lifted slightly and dropped again, with his eyes once more open. By this time I was on the other side of the room, having been propelled there by the shock of it all. I tried to regain my composure in order to anoint him, when his wife smiled gently and said, in the thickest of brogues, "I don't think we'll be hearing any more from him, Father!" And she was right. As we drove home, the priest who had so kindly accompanied me assured me that I had validly administered the sacrament, but had also broken every known speed record for crossing a room.

It seems that one hears a lot of complaints these days about how inhuman the police can be. My personal experience has been quite the opposite. I recall, for example, the time a little boy was hit by a car as he left the school yard. He was bleeding profusely and the police decided to transport him to the hospital immediately without waiting for an ambulance. I will never forget, as we screamed through traffic, looking to the backseat of

the cruiser, where one of the two officers sat cradling the unconscious boy in his arms, tears running down his cheeks, as he encouraged his partner to waste no time. Upon arrival at the hospital, it was determined that the boy's head injuries were not as serious as originally feared. Reports were written and signed and the officers went back on patrol - probably to be referred to as "Pigs".

One memory triggers another. I won't go on forever, but I must share with you what turned out to be a good joke on myself. I was in the emergency department of one of our major hospitals, having just come in by ambulance with a parishioner who had suffered a severe heart attack. As soon as the medical staff had assessed the situation, they decided to get the cardiac arrest team into action. And so, the coded message went out over the public address system: "Doctor C. Arrest, Doctor C. Arrest, to Emergency!" I had always been told that such disguised names were used so as not to alarm other patients, particularly heart patients. I think today the code is simply "99". Whatever the case, in those days and in that hospital, the code was "Doctor C. Arrest". Moments after the team arrived, and went to work with electric shock paddles, etc., I heard another call on the public address system for "Doctor Resurrection" to report to Emergency. This I decided, without any hesitation but with some degree of pride in my familiarity with the hospital environment, had to be a code for the chaplain. My response was to pick up a phone and assure the operator that I, Father Timmins, was at this moment in Emergency and that consequently, there was no need to call the chaplain. As the switchboard operator tried to make sense out of this rather bizarre call, a young Philippina doctor passed me on her way into the patient's cubicle. You guessed it. On her lapel, a nameplate that read "Dr. R-e-s-u-r-r-e-c-c-i-o-n".

And so the stories could go on forever. Each priest has his own particular memories. In the last few pages, I

have made a great deal of use of the first person singular, not because my life has been more dramatic than that of the average parish priest but quite simply because the experiences I describe happened to have been mine.

Why, then, is it that we priests are so often involved with death and dying? It should be apparent by now that, as mentioned earlier, the sacraments of the Church are reflective of the more significant events and basic requirements of our lives. The sacrament of Anointing is no exception. It is God's special way of being present to us when we are seriously ill and/or dying. It is His way of being present to us when we are old and alone, or perhaps, together in a group, in a church, where the sacrament is celebrated specifically for the elderly. It also has important secondary effects upon those who are emotionally involved with the recipient. Many a friend and family member has received new strength and peace of mind from witnessing or participating in the administration of this sacrament.

History tells us that anointing with blessed oil as a sign of one's faith in Jesus' power to heal the body and spirit can be traced to the earliest days of the Church. It was administered by any believer and without reference to a special ritual. It was only in the 9th or 10th century that it became an official sacrament to be administered by a priest and only to those who were seriously ill and not expected to recover. It was essentially a preparation for death and remained so until recent years, during which its application has been once again widened to embrace those who are expected to survive, including the elderly who suffer from nothing more threatening than the natural effects of aging. Although this return to an earlier and more authentic understanding of the sacrament has not met with opposition, I think it is fair to say that most older Catholics continue to think in terms of the "last rites".

Anointing the sick with oil is a custom which is

rooted in several ancient cultures. For the people of Israel, as well as for those of other middle Eastern cultures, the possession of olive oil was necessary for the preparation of food, but it was also used for medications, lamps, and perhaps most importantly, barter. It was, therefore, considered to be symbolic of life itself. As such, it took on a religious and ceremonial significance which has been maintained to this day and is evident not only in the ritual of this sacrament, but also in that of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders. Today each parish church maintains and, during Holy Week, renews three oil stocks: chrism for Confirmation and Holy Orders, the oil of the sick and the oil used for the first anointing of Baptism. These oils are usually identical, almost always olive oil, and become distinguished by the purpose imposed on them by the Bishop's blessing on Holy Thursday of each year.

Clearly this is another sacrament with a history of shifting emphasis: preparation for imminent death, divine help to regroup and live on; bodily health. As we have seen with every other sacrament, every age, if not generation, has its own particular area of concern and consequent emphasis. What remains common and constant is Jesus' hand in ours as we encounter the daily challenges and the milestones that shape and define our lives: the hand of Jesus, the hand of physician, comforter, lover, provider, teacher. The hand of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the hand which holds firmly, feeds generously, blesses willingly, admonishes regretfully, forgives wholeheartedly and constantly reaches out, always making the first move. All the rules and regulations, all the tall spired churches and vested priests, all the gestures and symbols are but servants of the relationship of the people of God, with God and with each other.

I can assure you that God works many miracles in and around sick beds: miracles of conversion, miracles of reconciliation, miracles of healing. It should not be hard to understand why this is so. Time and again, Jesus

tells us that He can reach us only if we are aware of our need for Him, that is, aware of the ephemeral nature of everything BUT Him. When confronted by sickness and/or death, we tend to focus on the ultimate realities and our everyday preoccupations seem less significant. And that is a blessing from which other blessings tend to flow. To be able to say with sincerity, "without you, Lord, I am nothing," is indeed a special grace.

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Let me conclude this chapter with a few practical considerations. When someone close to you is thought to be seriously ill or perhaps is simply very old, you should encourage them to be open to a visit from a priest. Flawed though we may be, we are God's chosen ministers, and He wants us to be with those who are hurting and afraid. Some people are slow to call a priest because they are convinced that the mere suggestion will frighten the patient. The image is one of the black-robed cleric of sombre demeanour bringing with him the LAST SACRAMENTS. It just doesn't work that way! Some seriously-ill people do not want a priest anywhere near them. That is their right. Most, however, welcome his visit and are eager to share with him all the concerns with which they do not want to burden their families. How often I have entered a sickroom with an anxious family member reminding me, for the third time, that the patient has no idea of how sick he or she really is, only to find out that everyone knows but no one wants to talk about it. Facilitating honest, emotional, loving communication is a valuable service that we try to perform. In this way an atmosphere of faith and acceptance is often created which in turn encourages a more realistic attitude and provides the ideal atmosphere for the reception and administration of the sacrament of Anointing, in which everyone present participates. It is usual for Holy Communion to be shared at the same

time. My biggest problem in such privileged moments is to keep my own emotions under control and not let my voice betray the depth of my feelings. Some would say, "So what?! Let it all hang out!" Perhaps they are right. I guess its all tied up in image, pride and the proverbial stiff-upper-lip. Whatever the case, I have sometimes found myself reading those beautiful prayers and at the same time, trying to distract myself with mental images of my dog chasing a groundhog or some such nonsense. How is that for a confession??

There are countless good books and articles on the subject of how to cope with the mourning process. I will content myself with saying that you should share it. Share it with someone who cares and is able and willing to listen. Share your hurt, your anger, your relief, your insecurity, your guilt. Share it all.

Wakes and funerals are a part of our culture. They are meant to bring comfort to the bereaved and to direct the prayers of the community toward the eternal well-being of the soul of the deceased. For the dead, life is changed but not ended, and so our prayers are not wasted. Our funeral liturgy is rich in its message of hope and comfort. The words of Scripture, especially of Jesus Himself, as well as the words of well-prepared, non-eulogistic homilies of reasonable duration, provide an ideal backdrop against which to celebrate the Eucharist and to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, whose promise assures us that He is the God of the dead as well as of the living.

I do not believe that the funeral should be used by members of the family or old friends to publicly affirm their love and respect for the deceased. The time for that is when they are still alive. In my view, the mourners at the church do not need to be told how much and for what reason the appointed speaker loved his mother, uncle or colleague. I do think that if the person who died was one of extraordinary virtue, then the homilist should make illustrative use of this in his or her liturgi-

cally-based remarks. The fact that more and more families are asking for a series of eulogies at the end of the Mass suggests to me that they believe the funeral liturgy to be too impersonal and that it should relate much more to the deceased and his or her virtues and accomplishments. To this I respond that the purpose of the funeral liturgy is to celebrate NOT the deceased but the RISEN Jesus in whom is our hope for salvation. The opportunity to celebrate someone has largely passed with that person's death, but there is certainly a time and place for fond remembrances at the funeral parlor or at home, prior to or after the funeral itself. I am afraid that many of these post-Eucharistic eulogies are the result of feelings of guilt over missed opportunities and although I am prepared to accept that they can be of positive value, to the extent that they bring relief and healing to those involved, I remain convinced that the focal point of every funeral Mass must remain the risen Christ in whose action we are participating. Any kind of personalized appendage, however well intentioned, is, in my view, out of place. I am the first to admit that it is a delicate situation when a grieving family member in the midst of making arrangements suggests that Uncle Charlie and Cousin Helen would like to say a few words at a suitable time. Sometimes it is clear that the only charitable thing to do is to go along, but surely there are times when we should at least remind people that there is a time and a place for everything and that liturgical actions have a unique quality which ought to be preserved. Perhaps some additional format is required to help satisfy the often legitimate need to "say a few words". Perhaps, as is the case with weddings, the speeches should be part of some kind of reception after or before the funeral Mass and burial. Maybe, as I suggested a moment ago, that should be the function of the Wake, which could be held on an evening for a specific time during which some designated persons could address the gathered family and friends. Refreshments

could be served and reminiscences shared. But it is not right, for the sake of expediency, to try to fit everything into the funeral.

Speaking of Wakes, there is no obligation to have one. This decision, as well as whether to cremate or bury and other related matters, should be made in such a way as to respect the peace of mind of those closest to the person who has died. No widow, for example, should feel that she MUST have a Wake in order to show respect for her husband, or an open casket to please the family, nor should she be pushed to opt for cremation if she finds the concept somewhat distasteful. The vast majority of funeral directors can be depended upon for solid advice based upon a variety of options. One final word on this subject. I strongly advise that when feasible, funeral arrangements be made by a family member ahead of time, so that when a person dies, everything can fall into place with a minimum of stress.

None of us likes to think about death, whether it be our own death or that of our loved ones, but this fear can be taken to extremes, for example, by foolishly avoiding making a valid will, thereby causing all sorts of problems for survivors. It is good to be conscious of our mortality, of the fragility and uncertainty of life. Several people, when dying, have advised me to live my life to the fullest while I am able to do so. I would add to that, give of yourself to the fullest as well, and let those you love and appreciate know it before it's too late.

So many people put all their efforts into providing for a future that does not exist. One should not be profligate to the point of ignoring the requirements of a possible old age, but neither should one go to the other extreme, like the man Jesus spoke of, who spent all his adult life filling his barns so as to be secure in his old age only to die in the process. There is no need for us to be preoccupied with death. Prayerfully conscious of it, yes, but not preoccupied. One way or another, it is going to happen, but in the meantime God has given us a

life to be LIVED. And beyond that? Beyond that, inevitably, is death. Death is not a big black endless hole, not a white skeleton with a dark hood and a huge scythe. Death, like birth, is a passage, a passage, in this case, from temporal life to eternal life.

In spite of all of the above, I have no doubt that if given the opportunity, I will face death with some degree of fear and uncertainty. VERY few reach that level of sanctity wherein they can be completely at peace in their last hours. We are all sinners, we are all doubters and we are all children of this world, who cling to its familiar flesh and comforts. But having said that, I also believe in the promises of Jesus Christ, for I am not only a child of this world, but of God, and Jesus' promise is synonymous with the Word of God. And the Word of God is the source of all that is. So when the time comes, and a brother-priest anoints MY forehead and hands with oil and signs me with the Cross, I hope that I will be grateful for the gift of life, whether for a little longer on this earth or in the company of the saints for all eternity. And so dear friends, "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord, in His love and mercy, help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up."

CHAPTER IX

ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC

I began this book with my earliest experience of church and then went on to highlight some elements of Church history as reflected in our sacramental life. Throughout these pages I have endeavoured to share with you some of my personal experiences as an ordained minister of these sacraments in the hope that, in so doing, I will have breathed some lightness and life into what can, at times, be a somewhat heavy subject. And so now, in this final chapter, I would like to help tie it all together by sharing some thoughts which, though related, have a broader focus.

The Church is both human and divine. It is divine in its origin, its sustenance and its goal. But as we all know so well, it is very human in its membership and no less so in its leadership. The Church is the people of God. It is an association like no other, for it has Jesus, the risen, living Jesus, as its head and the Holy Spirit, the

very essence of divine love and wisdom, as its energizer. It is a mystery in the sense that none of us fully grasps its potential, our potential. The Church is God functioning in and through us. It can never be a democracy, because it was founded by Christ, not by the apostles. But it was founded "upon" Peter and the other apostles who were given the authority to teach and minister in His name and appoint successors to do the same. Some of them were really good at it, others less so. Nothing has changed. Let me underline right here something which I believe to be very important and which I will restate frequently in the course of the next few pages. When I say that the Church is not a democracy, this does not mean that authentic insight is thereby restricted to the Pope and other bishops. On the contrary, the rest of us must be heard and listened to, men and women alike, and our experience, wisdom and vision must be taken into account in the formulation of all positions with the exception of those directly and firmly based on revealed truth. Thus, for example, it is not for us to question the content or the official interpretation of our two major creeds, the Nicene and the Apostles', but we have every right to read with a respectful but critical eye such documents as papal encyclicals and episcopal pastoral letters.

From generation to generation the people of God continue along the path toward maturity. We no longer need to be led by a cloud by day or a pillar of fire by night, as was the case with the ancient Hebrews as they crossed the desert in search of the Promised Land. We are expected to be able to walk without God holding our hand and we are called upon to accept the intellectual and moral responsibility which has come with increasing maturity. This does not mean that God has abandoned us to our own devices. He simply gives us more freedom and thus greater dignity, but He never ceases to inspire our search for truth and goodness. Through His teaching Church, He places before us moral ideals, the practical interpretation and implemen-

tation of which, in today's complex world, is no longer achieved through simply acting in accordance with some manual of instruction. We need input, we need leadership, but the ultimate choice of direction is ours. Sometimes in our foolishness, selfishness and pride, not to mention ignorance, we ignore the leadership of the Church and in so doing, risk ignoring the vital inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the leadership loses touch with the rest of us and must be reminded that, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, recently observed, "Christianity is not outside of time. It lives and is made actual in the present day." Pope John Paul II was making much the same point when he said that, "The Church must speak to today's people in their language and always in the light of their social environment." If we, the people, sense a failure to do so, we must make ourselves heard. Loyalty demands no less. In many cases, it will be we who are wrong, or at least not as close to the ideal or the truth as we might think. Whatever the case, let no one, on that account, brand us disloyal Catholics.

Being a Catholic also demands that we be prepared to use the Gospel to confront the rest of the world when necessary. We know this and yet today, most of us feel much more like the challenged than the challenger. We are indeed challenged by most of society to accommodate, compromise and "get with it". This is a demand which calls for a cool and balanced response. It is a throwing down of the gauntlet, which, I suggest, is not always uncalled for. Let me explain.

Jesus did not come into the world with the intention of accommodating to it. The Church must clearly reflect this. Jesus worked within a very short time span, just a few years. The Church, on the other hand, functions within the context of centuries and must remain, as Cardinal Ratzinger suggests, "au courant" or "of today". This means that we must learn the lessons of history and integrate the latest scientific discoveries into

our world view. Clearly this, in turn, means change, at times, major change. It should go without saying that in the midst of this change, we ought constantly to guard against the danger of accommodating to the values and demands of an essentially pagan society. This is why we need a balanced, strong, faithful leadership, which stands ready to confront us when we show signs of currying favour with the makers of public opinion. But I repeat, this leadership must, in its turn, be challenged if it exhibits attitudes and defends disciplines which, although ancient, are nevertheless demonstrably rooted in misconception. Of course, we must be certain that we are indeed dealing with fallacy and not just with something that is in conflict with the latest popular philosophy. As a united church, we must also be sure that when we do accept a moral position, we are not asking too much of some of our members, placing burdens upon them that the rest of us could never carry. Once again I am thinking about the wide abyss between the ideal and the real, as reflected in some "here and now" scenarios which demand an uncomplicated, immediate and effective response to overpopulation. It is good to hold up the ideal. John the Baptizer's voice must always be heard crying in the wilderness, but we have a concurrent obligation to ensure a stable environment within which that ideal can be reasonably attained. The two go together and the one cannot be insisted upon unless the other is present. It is a little like the obligation to assist at Sunday Mass. It only makes sense if priest and altar are provided and maintained.

When Pope Paul VI released his encyclical letter entitled "Humane Vitae", I found myself, as I mentioned earlier, in a most uncomfortable position. Like so many other priests, bishops, religious and lay men and women, I simply could not reconcile his position on contraception with the realities of my ministry. I read the document over and over in a vain effort to find convincing arguments. It was a time of genuine personal crisis. I

had always taken it for granted that I would be able to accept any and all papal teaching; after all, is the Pope not the Vicar of Christ on earth? But that was twenty-five years ago; today I am more comfortable with my dissent. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council have sufficiently permeated my thinking to allow me to distinguish between Christ and His Vicar. History has shown me that popes have been wrong in the past and I have no reason to believe that they will not be wrong in the future. Divine Revelation is one thing, the magisterium, the general authority of the Church is quite another. Under this authority, things have been done in contradiction to Revelation. We have but to mention witchhunts, the burning of heretics, and the more recent silencing of honest, loyal, respected theologians who dared to exercise the right guaranteed them by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council to express dissent in matters not defined as being integral to Revelation. It has often been pointed out that some of the brightest and most talented members of our Church have been disciplined by Rome for failing to respect the magisterium when, in fact, they were exercising a right so recently guaranteed them by that same magisterium. And so, many people are asking the logical question: Can it be that the leadership in the Church today is in fact fighting the spirit of Vatican II? And if so, what does that tell us about THEIR respect for the magisterium of the Church?

Some of you are probably a little confused by what I am saying, given that I have already affirmed my love and respect for the Church and my loyalty to its leadership. However, I am convinced that there is no contradiction. The Council taught me that in today's Church, unity is more important than uniformity. It reminded me of the primacy of the well-informed conscience and how the Spirit infuses all members of the Church, which means that all of us are called upon to make responsible decisions. Responsible decisions are not decisions based

upon personal preference. They are decisions based upon prayerful reflection, upon the opinion of the Holy Father and that of our bishops and theologians, as well as other members of our community, and last but not least, our own and our community's experience. Sometimes we find strong opposing arguments. It becomes impossible to equally respect all values, so we establish our own priorities. Some people do not want to go through this demanding exercise. They want an authority figure to give them a black-or-white answer to every moral question. They believe that this is what the institutional Church is all about. I do not agree with them.

All that I have said in the last few pages can be distilled into the basic fact that we are one church from pope to peasant and that we need each other's cooperation. We are incomplete without each other. The Church is not a democracy, but neither is it an absolute monarchy. Furthermore, it is called upon to confront this world and in turn to respond to challenges presented by this world.

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The Church into which I was born and for which I was ordained was a church that emphasized structures, power structures. Today's Church, although necessarily still reliant on sound and basic structure, is more inclined to put the emphasis on relationships. This is healthy because, as most psychiatrists will agree, the antithesis of love is not hatred or indifference, but rather, the abuse of power. By putting the emphasis on relationships, the bishops emerge not as papal vassals, but as colleagues without whom the papal voice would lose much of its significance. I mean, what use is a "rock" without a "church"? In exactly the same manner, pastors are called upon to become responsible colleagues of each other, their bishops and those who share in the priestly ministry through Baptism. There is simply no

room in today's Church for the almighty and isolated pope, the almighty and isolated bishop, the almighty and isolated pastor, the almighty and isolated Mother Superior, nor, for that matter, the almighty and isolated president of this or that diocesan or parish organization. The quality of our humanity is measured by the degree to which we relate. The more extensively we relate to others, the more human we are.

In my first appointment as a priest, I was the junior of four assistants. There was a central message board upon which the right reverend pastor would post his instructions - his daily orders, so to speak. Those addressed to me were not marked Father Timmins or Peter, but rather, "No.4". That is who I was. I was Number 4. And when I went down to the cavernous sacristy to prepare for Mass, on my vestments was a beautifully crafted brass medallion bearing a number 4. That medallion and those bearing the numbers 1, 2, and 3 are now exhibits in a museum. Times have changed and for the better.

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For the average Catholic, Sunday Mass and "church" are synonymous terms. They go to church. The liturgy is what happens in church. The Mass and the sacraments...that's about it. Even for those who are more involved, the Sunday celebration remains the focal point of their Catholic life, and rightly so. In a previous chapter, we considered the sacrament of the Eucharist. I will not repeat myself here, but I would like to share some thoughts with you on Sunday liturgies and let those thoughts lead us wherever they will.

When we were baptized, we became members of the believing community which we call "the Church". That community, through its corporate, prayerful celebration, in other words, its liturgy, speaks with one voice in praise of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In so

doing, it fulfils what the bishops of Vatican II referred to as the most sacred function of the Church. In article VII of the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy we read, "In the liturgy, full public worship is performed by the mystical body of Christ; that is, by the Head and His members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and His body, the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others."

The primary purpose of Christ and thus, of the whole Christian apostolate, is the glorification of the Father. Thus, in article X, we read that, "the goal of all apostolic works is that all who are sons and daughters of God by faith and Baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church; to take part in her sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper". The liturgy is the primary EXPRESSION of our faith, but it is more than that. It is also the primary SOURCE of our faith because it is as a worshipping body that we can, through word and Eucharist, be drawn into the compelling love of Christ and be moved while in His presence to live in DEED what we believe in CREED.

As Jesus tells us, "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, there I am in your midst." Liturgy is, then, a community function which, by definition, cannot be carried out alone, whether totally alone or, as may happen in our churches, alone in a crowd. The Church, in its collective wisdom, knows that even though we grasp this basic notion of community and worship accordingly, a community remains a collection of individuals, who come together periodically to express and strengthen their common unity. And so the endurance of this unity is dependent upon well-disposed individuals. Article XI of the Constitution states this explicitly: "In order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions...that their thoughts match their words." The fact that we are expected to approach the liturgy

with the right dispositions implies a prayerful preparation. As Matthew tells us in the 6th chapter of his gospel, "Christians are assuredly called to pray together, but must also enter into their chamber to pray to the Father in secret." St. Ambrose reminds us that this does not refer to a four-walled room but rather to the privacy of our inner selves. The person whose prayer life is limited to the liturgy, and particularly Sunday liturgy, is likely to expect too much from it and thus feel frustrated and dissatisfied. Far from being an isolated island in our week, the Sunday liturgy should be a celebration OF that week; a celebration of insights and blessings received, of good works accomplished, of relationships established, renewed and healed; a celebration in which we communicate with Christ and each other in what we rightly term, Holy Communion; a celebration through which we are regenerated in preparation for the week to come. Clearly such a celebration requires prayerful, reflective preparation.

In its purest form, all liturgy, including that of the Mass, is the celebration of Jesus, and what He has done and is doing through us. Therefore, the focal point must always be God and our response to Him. Nothing should be allowed to obscure, complicate or in any other way distort this fundamental activity. Article 34 of the Constitution on the Liturgy should, I believe, be nailed to the wall of every sacristy in the world. It reads as follows: "The rites should be marked by a noble simplicity. They should be short, clear and unencumbered by useless repetitions. They should be within the people's powers of comprehension and, as a rule, not require much explanation."

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The Mass, as we know it today, is divided into two main parts: the liturgy of the Word and that of the Eucharist. Much has already been said about the Eucharist, both in this volume and in "Nothing for Granted",

so I will now share with you one or two reflections on the liturgy of the Word.

The liturgy of the Word is that part of the Mass during which the altar girls and boys sit down and swing their little legs back and forth, while twirling their cincture cords. Both activities are conducted at a speed commensurate with the degree of their boredom. And then there is the celebrant, God bless us all, who sits on the biggest chair of all and whose legs don't swing because they usually reach the floor. Sometimes alert to every latecomer's arrival, and sometimes more or less asleep, he sits or sprawls in a way that could not fail to irritate his mother, while Mr. or Ms. lector reads a letter from Paul to the "Philippines". There are good readers, bad readers, pompous, loud readers, timorous, whispering readers, but each one of them, like the celebrant behind them and the altar servers beside them, is treasured by God, whose word, however awkwardly, is being communicated. It is a word which, like no other, has the power to create. The word of scripture, even when mumbled by an inept reader or sung by a screechy choir, can still work miracles, still bring fresh insight and a change of heart to those who have the humility to listen. And then to the pulpit comes the celebrant or another priest or deacon to proclaim the Gospel and preach the homily. Serious research has shown that the quality of Sunday preaching is second only to the religious attitude of one's spouse when it comes to what motivates people towards or away from the Church. Ask a group of people what they consider to be their pastor's most critical activity and they will unanimously agree that it is preaching. I also agree that nothing is more important than a humbly and clearly delivered commentary on the word of God, a commentary which, in its clarity, relevance and brevity, reflects a serious and prayerful effort to involve those who hear it. Hard though it may be to believe, most of us had very little training in this field when we were first ordained. And yet, the difference between an

inept preacher and an effective one is most often a question of acquirable skills, namely, the ability to perform in public with some degree of competency and good judgement, and to write creatively. These two skills come only with a lot of effort and practice. Very few priests can preach effectively from a hastily scribbled set of headlines. Those who try tend to be very hard to follow as, in their search for an ending, they go off in one direction after another following a trail for which even they do not have the scent. It is too bad that most of us were not taught these skills in the seminary, but that is no excuse for going through life without at least making a conscious effort to acquire them on the job. As Andrew Greeley expressed it, "Great preachers may well be born, not made. Effective preachers, however, can be made with effort and practice. The people in the pews have every right to demand the latter."

When speaking of preaching, I think it important to stress the virtue of humility. Preachers who alternately growl and bellow, speak to people as though they were witless and show no respect for their hearers' time and attention are bound to drive away all but the most devout. Preaching to a congregation is a privilege and a responsibility and must be approached with the greatest respect, tact, and I repeat, humility. A homily which is well-prepared, well-composed and well-delivered is always appreciated. People come to be fed, to be encouraged, to be consoled, to be refreshed, motivated and challenged. Our role as preachers is to meet these needs and stir up a response of faith and trust. Mediating the word of God to the people of God is not easy. Sometimes it takes a long time for a preacher to develop a theme in his own mind which reflects both the liturgy of the day and the spiritual needs of his parishioners on that particular day. It is essential to present the scriptures as being their story as well as the story of Jesus, the apostles and all the others. This all takes time and prayerful reflection. Sometimes we are successful and

sometimes not. But like the readers before us, as long as we give of our best and are always ready to improve, we need not despair.

Sometimes the unexpected happens. For example, public address systems are famous for causing problems. Especially prone to malfunction are the wireless variety which involve the preacher wearing a small micro-transmitter which sends a radio signal to the amplifier and out to the church via the speakers. These have been around for many years, but they still tend to be unpredictable. A number of years ago, I was hearing confessions while the bishop-pastor was preaching from the pulpit. He finished proclaiming the Gospel and was about to begin his homily when radio interference, the main bugaboo of these systems, caused a local radio broadcast to be relayed via the sacristy amplifier. Before the bishop could open his mouth, the congregation was treated to a rundown on the betting odds for the next horse race. Cooly, the bishop turned off his microphone and, adjusting his voice to reach the last pew unaided, announced, without missing a beat, that since there was no lineup at my confessional, now was the time to place a bet.

Another situation involved a pastor with severe abdominal flu symptoms who struggled to get through his homily and, upon leaving the pulpit, headed at best speed for the nearest bathroom. The handy portable microphone was of course still attached to his person and so during the creed, the entire congregation was treated to the full audio of how he found relief.

Once while I was in the pulpit, a dog came down the main aisle and straight up into the sanctuary. He was a large spaniel of fairly advanced age. Upon reaching the sanctuary floor, he turned to face the pulpit and sat down. His eyes remained fixed on me. Everyone in the church was laughing. I ground to a halt, looked him in the eye and suggested that he had ruined my act. I kid you not, the dog turned and faced the people and

opened his mouth in the widest most contagious yawn imaginable. That brought the house down and me back to the altar. The dog, alerted by his master's voice, trotted out a side door and into history, unaware that he had accomplished what my parishioners could only dream of doing.

As is the case with repeated acts, a person who preaches week after week, as well as at funerals, weddings and other celebrations, develops certain idiosyncracies; sometimes it's a voice which, like the tide, runs in and out; sometimes, it's a matter of using the same phrase or expression ad nauseam; sometimes, it's a question of posture or the lack of it and sometimes it's a gesture or even an annoying grunting sound which is, in fact, a form of audio question mark. But if you are nodding in gleeful identification, let me point out that the people in the pews can be just as irritating. I have been tempted to hurl the lectionary at people who keep looking at their watches when I have been speaking for no more than three or four minutes, or carry on an animated conversation, complete with chuckles, right under my nose. And then there are those who use the homily as a chance to read the parish bulletin. On the other hand, most people obviously try to concentrate on what you are saying, and they more than make up for the thoughtlessness of others.

When God's words and God's action are interpreted, transmitted and performed by some of us, the results are not always ideal. As I mentioned earlier, our Church is divine in its origin, sustenance and goal, but oh so human in its leadership and membership. But without it, life would be empty . It would be like living from one episode to the next without being aware of any storyline. For the Church, as with any living organism, the process of maturation brings with it changes in many areas. Outward appearances are altered, new strengths and capabilities emerge, as do ways of relating to each other and the world at large. But roots and

origins remain vital. There can be no real progress unless it is based on a knowledge of and a respect for history. Our liturgies help keep us in touch with who we are, where we have come from.

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There is always an element of challenge in the celebration of the liturgy. God challenges us and we challenge each other to be what we celebrate, i.e. Christ to the world. We are called upon to maintain the world in a state of constant transformation. As far as we are concerned, this is a never-ending process, for it means that we believe that we can change the world one person at a time. Theologian Reinhold Niebur expressed it, "Nothing worth achieving can be achieved in our lifetime". The basis for this Christian transformation of society must be the promotion of the common good through personal virtue rooted in our relationship to God. As Catholics, we must never lose sight of the fact that this relationship is nurtured and celebrated through liturgy. Good liturgy, then, celebrates right relationships first with God and then with other people, which means it must be rooted in the virtues of religion and justice. Now justice, as we all know, demands a relationship within which there is no place for violence, inequality, discrimination or exploitation. That does not mean that we are simply obliged to pray for the oppressed in the prayer of the faithful. Remember, we are talking about a responsible relationship, so we are at our most authentic when we pray for insight and courage in order to respond personally. This means that implicit to our vocation as worshipping Christians is a determination not to fail society by accommodating to it rather than challenging it when necessary. This brings to mind the words of Pope John Paul II, who said during his Canadian visit, "Poor people and poor nations - poor in different ways, not only lacking, but also deprived of freedom and other

human rights - will sit in judgement on those people who take away these goods, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expense of others."

These are indeed challenging words, words which must be carefully considered by any worshipping community in the western world which seeks to be honest and real. Of the many related questions that worshipping Christians are obliged to address, the following are but a sample: Why, in what we recall as the boom years of the 1980's, did the forty least developed countries in the world lose ground in terms of social and economic development? What will be the effect upon these nations of the emergence of new major trading blocs among the most powerful nations? To what extent are we responsible for the huge increase in refugees, who are the victims of population explosion, environmental destruction and well-supplied militarized predators? What do we worshipping Christians say to our political leaders, many of whom are fellow worshippers, about our national priorities?

"Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come!..." Thy kingdom come! Is this to be a kingdom based upon justice and equal opportunity, or a kingdom based upon survival of the richest at the expense of the poorest? What are we saying? What are we praying for? To what are we committed by our own words?

I am not criticizing you; I am reflecting with you. I am as guilty as anyone else. I pray to become imbued with that true spirit of poverty which reminds me constantly that without God I am nothing. To the extent that I am blind to this fact, I will be self-centred; to the extent that I accept and understand it, I will be other-centred. It is hard for those of us who live under the umbrella of economic power to appreciate just how dependent upon God we are and yet until we do, our liturgies will be largely hollow celebrations of ideals to which we are

not wholly committed.

I believe that in today's parishes there can be no more important activity than that which serves the cause of social justice. For countries like Canada to be demanding interest on loans to third-world countries is as much a disgrace as is the abuse of those funds by unscrupulous third-world governments. The problems are huge, but not unsolvable. If our nation and other developed nations, in conjunction with the United Nations, were to make social justice a priority, great strides could be made in the right direction. The only way this will ever happen is for the tax-paying electors of democratic nations to accept their responsibility and instruct their representatives accordingly. I am convinced that such a movement can have but one cradle, and that is the combined religious communities within the developed democracies. Once more I take the liberty of quoting from what Pope John Paul II said to us when he visited Canada. "The needs of the poor must take priority over the desires of the rich; the rights of workers over the maximization of profits; the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion; and production to meet social needs over production for military purposes."

And so our discussion of liturgical matters, limited and incomplete though it has been, has logically led us into the arena of social justice, where the Lord Himself invites us to "put-up or shut-up." But there is one extremely important step in our quest for the Christian ideal which, although it remains logically the first step, I have chosen to leave until now for the sake of emphasis. Put into a nutshell, it is this: Everything that we seek to know and live ought first of all to be encountered in the home. I wish, therefore, to share a few thoughts with you on the family as sacrament, as a sign which points to the divine reality, as an encounter with God. A wife and husband closely united in a balanced expression of Gospel values is as important to the Church as is soil to the

garden. At the risk of overworking the analogy, let me say that it is equally vital for motivating those of us who are called to be full-time gardeners. In order for priests to minister and preach, we need the often silent but always eloquent example of those we are ordained to serve. We need to be encouraged by examples of self-sacrificing other-centredness, examples of patience, devotion to one's calling and faithfulness to prayer.

Parents who influence, educate and encourage each other become uniquely qualified teachers of their own children. In days gone by, parents brought their children to church on Sunday in order to pay their respects to the omnipotent God. Today's parents bring their children to the home of the eternal Father. What is happening is that the emphasis has swung from fear to affection, just as it has within many families. Children today are more likely to be taught that prayer is an expression of loving dependence rather than a way to get what they want. Today's parents are becoming acutely aware of the fact that advances in technology and science can, in the minds of many, render God obsolete. They know that as their children grow up, their values and priorities will be challenged by those for whom God is a relic of a naive past. For these young people, the unfailing example of their parents' faith becomes more important than ever. Peer pressure and a healthy drive to evolve into an individual may well conspire to alienate, or I should say, apparently alienate, them from Church and sacrament and even from family, but the positive, non-judgemental, consistent example of two hurting yet still caring parents provides the stability so necessary for the painful process of growing up in a world of multiple and conflicting options. Young people rarely set an irreversible course or make a statement that can never be retracted. Even suicide, the most tragic statement of all, is only apparent in its finality as the sought-after response is found in the embrace of our ultimate parent.

Parents who are actively concerned with the better-

ment of society will inevitably sensitize their children. It may take years for that sensitization to produce results, but the odds are that sooner or later it will. And that is the way, the only way, that the cause of social justice will be served. The home is where the action really is. The home is, then, the essential foundation of both the parish and the school. It is the Church in its principle form. There are no ministries in the Church more important or more deserving of support than parenthood. The love that is experienced in relating to each other and to children is nothing less than an experience of God.

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It has been suggested that the institutional Church remains overly concerned with rules and regulations and the power to make and enforce them, and that it might be well advised to trust a little more in the vitality of the Holy Spirit, alive and at work and yet, so often silenced and stifled by overbearing jurisdiction and a complexity of structures. I suppose that it is obvious by now that I tend to agree with that view. At the same time, like so many of my profession, I remain optimistic. Pope John XXIII opened the windows and they can never be completely shut again. The winds of change have reached into every corner of Church life. As the average person becomes better educated, he or she becomes less fearful of radical thinking and consequent change and more concerned with truth, justice and authenticity. People sense the difference between dogma and discipline, as well as between tradition and cultural inheritance. The Spirit remains alive and well. Step by arduous step, women are assuming their rightful places as theologians, diocesan administrators, canon lawyers and perhaps very soon, permanent deacons. When will we see women priests? I don't know. It seems to me that so many other changes will have to come first, such as the ordination of mature married men and optional celi-

bacy. Perhaps the ordination of women to the priesthood is not the direction in which the Spirit is moving us. Maybe there IS such a thing as male roles and female roles. And then again, maybe the essence of priesthood will someday be seen to be complete only in the complementary combination of a man and wife, both exercising their priesthood in a synergistic manner as they do their parenthood. Wouldn't it be something if someday men and women would HAVE to be married in order to be ordained; would HAVE to be ordained precisely as "couple"?! Jesus, remember, was unique and embodied all of that which is best in both men AND women. I sometimes think it takes one of each of us interacting to truly reflect Him. In other words, could it be that Jesus was the only complete person in history and that for the rest of us, the essence of completeness lies in a marriage of intellect, body and will? I am sure that what I am saying could be pulled apart and perhaps even justly ridiculed by those whose intellects are far superior to mine, and yet, is God not father AND mother to us all? I can also imagine the day when chasubles and albs and mitres and crosiers will be seen only in museums, which will be tended by the last of the monsignori????! All signs of triumphalism and legal and regal splendour will give way to a new image of simplicity. Many of the ancient symbols will remain and many new ones will emerge. Some form of simple vestment will lend dignity to the office of those who preside over future liturgical celebrations and the rooms and buildings chosen for such celebrations will hopefully reflect the best we have to offer in expressive, awe-inspiring, reverential architecture. So much for my personal crystal ball! Whether or not these predictions bear any similarity to what will come in the distant future, I can assure you that doubtlessly, there will be some scandals, which will be blamed on the life-styles of the day and abuses of authority. But as is the case with today's bruised and battered community, the vast majority of bishops,

priests, religious and laity will strive with all their being to serve, with honour and loyalty, the Church they love. Our Church. The one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.

Additional copies

Additional copies of “The Candle and the Flame” or “Nothing for Granted” may be obtained by writing to:

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