

I believe

MEDITATIONS
ON THE CREED

MK 9:24

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INTRODUCTION: TO SAY "I BELIEVE..."

We live in an age of doubt, when many people seem to thrive on conflict and negativity. It can get you down. One of the worst features of our 24/7 media cycles and the information and opinion overload that we all experience is the insidious way it dulls our sensitivity to faith in God and others.

Often we simply miss seeing the 'miracles' of faith, grace and kindness that are happening all around us! Instead, ideology rules in our culture and Church. That can be so tiresome, even boring, if you are truly seeking the Spirit of the Risen Jesus.

Little things can build up and make us lose ground momentarily. Add fatigue, a seemingly cold remark, someone's inability to hear you, someone's innocent forgetfulness that feels like rejection ... and the presence of God can seem to evade us.

We can even grow used to reading the Word of God, and stories from believers throughout history can become infected by a cynicism that quietly wonders whether the 'Age of Miracles', and indeed the mission of the Church, is over. We become doubting Thomases so easily.

But if we open our eyes to the Spirit we can indeed affirm, like Thomas the Apostle, 'I believe'.

That journey of faith and belief will, of course, take different shapes as we grow in life. In the first half of life, we need to get rid of our first naivete (to borrow a famous phrase of Paul Ricoeur). In the second half, we perhaps move towards a second simplicity, a *docta ignorantia* (more aware of how much we do not know and never can, and being comfortable with that). In the second part of life, we are invited to a 'bright sadness'. There is something egalitarian about growing older. We learn that we are all equally naked underneath our clothes; we are all sinners, all on a journey.

To say 'I believe' is, nonetheless, still a challenge in this world. That is why Cardinal Carlo Martini SJ used to recommend that believers take risks. Faith is the great risk of life. 'Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but the one who loses his life for my sake will save it' (Mt 16:25). Everything has to be given up for Christ and his Gospel.

Cardinal Martini also insisted that a vibrant faith meant disciples must befriend the poor. We put the poor at the centre of our lives because they are the friends of Jesus, who made himself one of them.

Finally, the late Milanese Cardinal urged believers to practise humility. We should never think that it is up to us to solve the great problems of our times or still less act as if we can make others believe. Faith is first a gift from God. We need to leave room for the Holy Spirit, who works better than we do and more deeply.

Yes, doubt is something we all experience. But with the Spirit's help, like Thomas, we can move through this 'desert' and say with him: 'My Lord and My God'.

We can begin to pray the first words of our Credo, 'I believe'! ■



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource is an opportunity to reflect on the words of our Creed. The articles within were written by Br Mark O'Connor FMS and previously published as part of the 'Spirit is Moving' in *Kairos Catholic Journal* (Vol. 24, Nos. 1-23). Each article is followed by a number of questions for personal enrichment in a variety of parish and school settings. They are suitable for use individually or collectively, with small or large groups, within one or over several sessions or as an opening prayer reflection. They may also be used as a 'take home sheet' or bulletin/website activity at any time. A few notes pages have been included for journaling.

I believe

IN GOD THE FATHER



The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt: Harmenszoon van Rijn (1669)

Several years ago, Fr Edward Farrell, the noted spiritual writer of Detroit, took his two-week summer vacation to Ireland to celebrate his favourite uncle's 80th birthday.

On the morning of the great day, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn, dressed in silence, and went for a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney. Just as the sun rose, his uncle turned and stared straight at the rising orb. Ed stood beside him for 20 minutes with not a single word exchanged. Then the elderly uncle began to skip along the shoreline, a radiant smile on his face. After catching up with him, Ed commented: 'Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Do you want to tell me why?' 'Yes, lad,' the old man said, tears washing down his face. 'You see, the Father is very fond of me. Ah, my Father is so very fond of me.'

It is wonderful when we can each come to realise (usually very slowly) how much 'the Father is very fond' of each of us. And yet, in our culture it is not so easy for some to pray to the 'Father'.

Pope Benedict XVI himself spoke of the very real difficulties that some contemporary people have with prayer to 'God the Father Almighty':

Even imagining God as a father becomes problematic, not having had adequate models of reference. For those who have had the experience of an overly authoritarian and inflexible father, or an indifferent father lacking in affection, or even an absent father, it is not easy to think of God as Father and trustingly surrender oneself to him.

Some pastoral psychologists call this 'the father wound' and argue that it may be the most ubiquitous wound on this earth. Indeed, prison chaplains often in their pastoral work note that it is rare to find a prisoner who had a father who loved and validated him.

No wonder then that Jesus calls God 'Abba', or 'Daddy'. Of course, God is beyond gender, but perhaps Jesus used this term because of the 'father wound' so common around the earth and over the centuries. Perhaps Jesus wanted us to know that the masculine side of God, his 'Father-ness' was trustworthy and good.

Pastoral theologian Henri Nouwen often reflected about this 'father wound'. The *Return of the Prodigal Son* was

the very last book he wrote before his early death in 1996.

Nouwen noticed in Rembrandt's image that the father's right hand is feminine and the left hand is masculine. The feminine hand is on the unshod, vulnerable side of the son. The masculine hand on the shod, protected side. Rembrandt knew we need both a mother's and a father's love.

Otherwise, we are in danger of becoming the elder brother. He is the one who never comes to the celebration feast. He never enters the embrace. He represents religion as legalistic, harsh and stone-faced.

In the prodigal son story, the elder brother refuses to acknowledge that he too is wounded. The elder brother struggles with accepting the mercy of the father's love for sinners like his brother.

As we pray the Creed to 'God the Father Almighty' each week, it is good to remember that we are not praying to earn the 'approval' of an authoritarian, remote and patriarchal figure. Rather, we are praying to be like Seamus and experience in our hearts the great truth of our faith: 'the Father is very fond of me'. ■

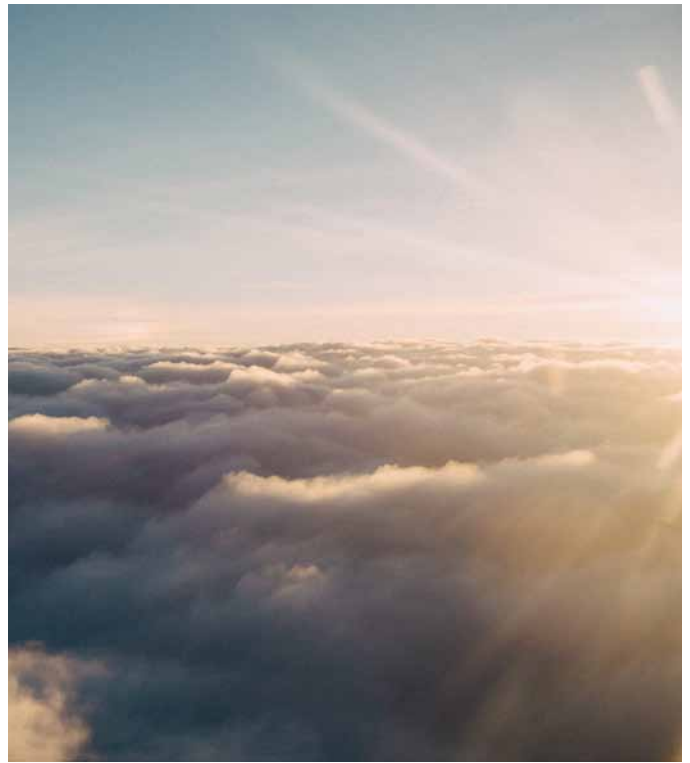


THINK ABOUT IT

- Is imagining God as a loving Father easy for you? If so, give thanks and then broaden that image to the feminine dimension of God, as expressed in Rembrandt's work. Does this assist your perception of God? If so, how? If not, why?
- Do you carry a 'Father Wound' that impacts your relationship with God? Can you revisit that relationship within and through the eyes of Jesus, calling with deep trust and fidelity to a beloved 'Abba'? Perhaps the feminine dimension of God is more accessible for you? Ask our loving God for healing and peace.
- Spend some quiet time here and now in the presence of 'God the Father Almighty' (not distant, absent, authoritarian or inflexible) who is so very fond of you. Trustingly surrender yourself into his loving care.

I believe IN ONE GOD, THE MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

There is a design of the world that is born from ... the Spirit Creator. Believing that this is at the basis of all things, illuminates every aspect of life and gives us the courage to face the adventure of life with confidence and hope. —POPE BENEDICT XVI



We are not here by accident! A mysterious Love has created a universe where human beings can rejoice and celebrate the divine imagination. And what wonders of love and imagination our God has. We know very little of the depths of the Trinity's divine plan. But the little that we do know is mind-blowing!

It begins approximately 14.7 billion years ago with the Big Bang, a massive explosion that produced our rapidly expanding universe. After about a billion years of expanding and cooling, galaxies began to form, eventually numbering in the billions, each with hundreds of millions of stars. About 4.6 billion years ago, an explosion of a great star in the Milky Way galaxy produced our solar system, which includes our planet, Earth. It took billions of years for life to develop on our Earth, and we can trace back our human ancestors one and a half million years.

It takes effort to even imagine such an immense, spatial-temporal universe. The Earth's place in our galaxy is like a grain of sand in an area the size of Australia. If the history of humans on earth is fitted into a one-year period, the birth of Jesus occurs on 31 December at noon. Even limited attempts to reflect on the immensity of the universe, therefore, can foster in us disciples a deeper sense of awe and wonder before the One who created and sustains it.

One theologian has suggested we should simply take a good look at our hand, while reminding ourselves that it is the product of a 14 billion-year evolutionary process! We are stardust that has become conscious.

All of creation and God's 'evolutionary' plan of salvation reaches its ultimate climax in the Incarnation. The Word made flesh reveals it is not just some massive mystery far away in the darkness of outer space. No, it is close by, in a tiny Jewish baby. The Spirit that guides creation overshadowed Mary of Nazareth and she conceived this baby. The divine presence that continually transforms chaos into order achieved its purpose despite a Roman census and crowded inn. The infant

in the manger grown to adulthood is the fullness of humanity. The multitude of angels suggests that this birth has cosmic significance. The outcast shepherds remind us that divine love embraces all the members of the human family, including those on the margins.

Which should lead us to conclude: if the creation and incarnation are so wonderful, just imagine how much more wonderful our Trinitarian God is! We Catholics join with the early Christians and cry out: 'Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!' The past is prologue. The best is yet to come! No wonder the saints cannot wait to encounter the Trinity fully, the maker of heaven and earth. ■

THINK ABOUT IT

Sit in silence and revisit what you have just read/heard. Reflect on the 'awesomeness' of the Creator. Receive again the mind-blowing concept that 'we are stardust that has become conscious.' Savour the mystery of it all.





I believe IN THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE

When you deal with God, you deal with mystery. For this reason, it is not surprising that there are differences in our perceptions, in our theologies and in our spiritualities.

The Bible itself opens with two variant perceptions. In Genesis 1, the author thinks of God as transcendent, above and beyond creation; a God who says, 'Let it be', and it happens.

In Genesis 2, a different author thinks of God as immanent, with us, in the world, with human qualities. God reaches into the soil to form the body of man and then breathes into the body the breath of life.

Two stories of how God created human beings, two differing perceptions of God. Similarly, we pray in the Creed to our God, whom we joyfully proclaim makes *both* the visible and invisible. Which is true? The transcendent or the immanent? The visible or the invisible? In reality, we Catholics say *both*. It is the paradox of our faith.

Because we are dealing with God, we are dealing with mystery, and successful dealing with mystery requires what is often called today 'non-dualistic thinking'. Instead of black-and-white, either-or thinking, we are necessarily led to a 'both-and' faith acceptance.

Those most advanced in the spiritual life, those experienced in contemplation and mysticism, come to an acceptance of this ambiguity, 'seeing through a glass darkly' and the mystery all around us.

Being open to *both* God's transcendence and immanence, to the Church's holiness *and* sinfulness, indeed to the very bewildering variety of opinions and schools of thought in today's world and Church, is no easy matter.

Most of us want certainty and answers, and we want them now. The wait, the uncertainty, the poverty of nonresolution threaten our spiritual equilibrium and peace of mind.

But, in truth, we must be hesitant to resolve every issue with an immediate and often one-sided response.

To jump to a conclusion too quickly militates against one of the major beliefs of our faith, namely that Jesus is both God and man, divine and human. Jesus is the invisible God made visible. If that paradoxical central belief of Catholic faith causes us to puzzle and then to pray and contemplate further—good.

That is precisely what faith is all about. For, after 2000 years, we are still wrestling with the consequences of this revelation!

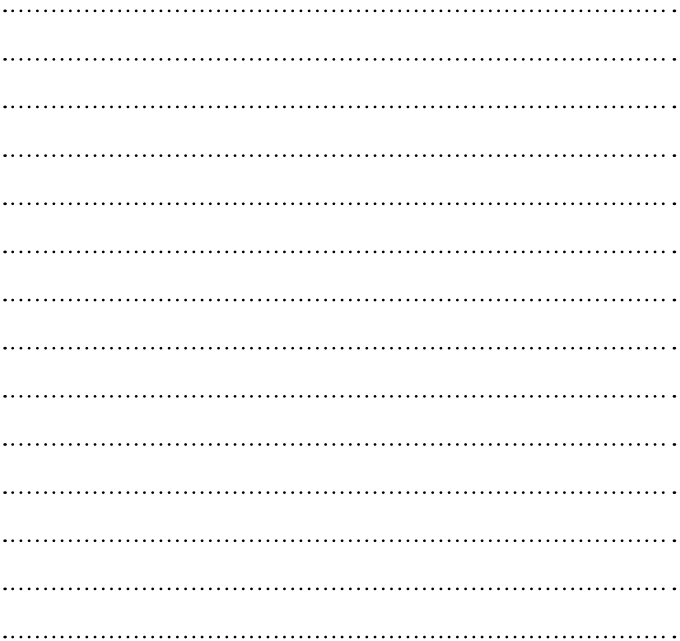
That is why the wisdom of our Tradition emphasises the centrality of the sacraments and a sacramental imagination for our faith journey. In a time of ritual deprivation, the Christian sacramental road is our way forward. For, in the sacraments, the invisible is made visible.

Catholic faith is precisely about this type of 'seeing' what the eyes cannot see—the *visible and the invisible*—and understanding what is at the heart of things: truth, love, mercy, goodness, beauty, harmony, humility and compassion. It is about seeing the ordinary and perceiving the extraordinary at the same time.

We are, in truth, surrounded by a thousand points of light. We are given great sacraments of grace, the Word of God, the stories of saints, the saga of sinners, and the rumours of angels that inspire and heal us.

'It is only with the heart that one sees rightly,' wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupery in *The Little Prince*. 'What is essential is invisible to the eye.'

That is the Catholic sacramental imagination in a nutshell—I believe in God who makes all things, the visible and invisible. ■



- 'Being open to both God's transcendence (beyond) and immanence (closeness) and the Church's holiness and sinfulness in today's world is no easy matter.' *Consider some of the challenges and name those most relevant to your life/parish circumstance. How do you/might you meet these challenges?*
- The sacramental life of the Church gives us direct access to the 'invisible' God in plain view. The signs, symbols, words and actions of the priest and people express this sacred mystery so profoundly. *Reflect on your own participation in the sacramental life and when you have personally experienced this mystery. How did it make you feel? Make an intentional plan to regularly encounter our invisible God through the sacraments.*

This image shows a vertical rectangular sheet of white paper. It features approximately 30 horizontal dotted lines spaced evenly apart, resembling a page from a notebook or a template for handwriting practice. The lines are light gray and extend across the full width of the page. There is no text, handwriting, or other markings on the paper.



I believe IN ONE GOD

A common question non-believers ask Catholics is something along the lines of 'Why do you believe in God?' But a more important question, it seems to me, is, 'What kind of God do we believe in?'

Some may assume this is a ridiculous question. In our Catholic tradition, God is truth, life and love. This is indeed the case, even as we do not claim to know the inner recesses and mystery of God as Trinity.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has long argued instead that the real problem of belief today is not so much about atheism as idolatry. We *all* believe in 'gods'. The critical question is, 'Which one?'

Do we believe in the one true God definitively revealed in Jesus of Nazareth or mere idols that we use to substitute for the living God?

Contemporary idols are everywhere in our culture. From the cinema screen to the federal budget, we bow to the power and sovereignty of the 'god' of money, just as the Babylonians bowed to the sword and its master, Marduk.

Witness our love affairs with large shopping centres in Australia these days. Here, the idol is the consumption of goods. We place our pride, worth, and identity in stuff and gadgets.

Even sport can be a 'god' for some people. We can talk more about last weekend's football game than we do about our faith. We obsess about this team or that team's performance.

When we are young, we devote ourselves to honing our own skills and physique. The body can be the idol of vanity and sexual consumerism. Airbrushed magazine figures become our obsession; gratification and fleeting pleasure come across in nearly every movie, book and television series.

The television can make an idol of entertainment. We can get our identity, our care and our hopes caught up in this or that media production.

The computer and the internet threaten to become the idol of communication and information. We long not so much to

encounter Christ in our lives, but for another update, another email message, another blog post to satisfy our need for superficial connectedness and talking-head ideology.

Many more idols could be added to the list.

Perhaps we need to listen to Genesis 1 through the ears of ancient Israel; to hear again that to the extent that these things testify to the sovereignty and power of the one true Creator God, they may have some place in our lives. But when we give our heart to them, they need to be named as false competitors to the one true God.

When we put our faith in other 'gods', we find ourselves on many different tracks, moving apart and occasionally colliding. But if there is one true God, then everything is created and related, and we have hope and reason to seek peace with one another.

I believe in One God. I do not believe in idols. The risk of faith insists that we choose. ■

THINK ABOUT IT



- Walter Brueggemann says, 'the real problem of belief today is not so much about atheism as idolatry.' As believers, we too can get caught up in the many 'idols' of today's world. *Can you name some 'false competitors to the one true God' in your life? How might you go about changing this?*
- 'If there is one true God then everything is created and related, and we have hope and reason to seek peace with one another.' *Does this statement resonate with you? If so, how might you put it into action in your daily life? If not, why?*

I believe IN ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST

‘Jesus is Lord’ (Rom 10:10) was proclaimed by the early Church as its most concise creedal statement.

Rather than some pious cliché, this was, for the early Christians, a radical political and subversive statement. To say ‘Jesus is Lord’ was testing and provoking the Roman pledge of allegiance that every Roman citizen had to shout when they raised their hand to the Roman insignia: ‘Caesar is Lord’.

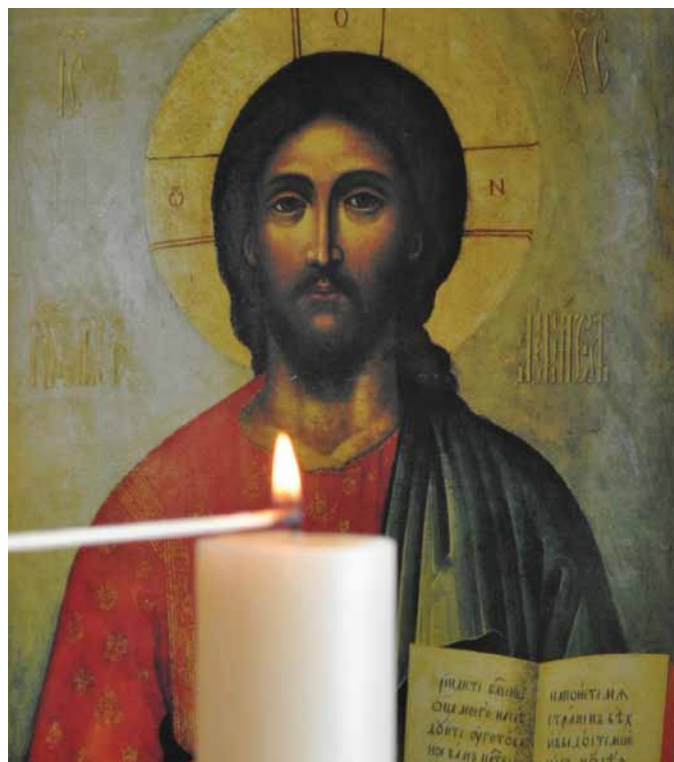
Early Christians were quite aware that their ‘citizenship’ was in a new universal kingdom, announced by Jesus (Phil 3:20), and that the kingdoms of this world were not their primary loyalty systems. Our Lord—Jesus—showed no undue loyalty either to his Jewish religion or to his Romanoccupied Jewish country. Instead, he radically critiqued them both, and in that he revealed and warned against the idolatrous relationships that many people have with today’s idols, like excessive nationalism or obsessive devotion to money.

Furthermore, the words we pledge each Sunday are not just some otherworldly ‘churchy’ language.

We should never forget when we solemnly recite the Creed—‘I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ’—that Jesus was a layman! He was not a priest or scribe, or in any way an established person. He is called a priest in the New Testament on theological grounds, but, socially, he was not part of the religious establishment. Sometimes, we tend to think he was, and so miss the scandalous edge to his behaviour. In other words, the founder of our religion, and the source of our holiness, is inextricably connected to the real world and lives of lay people.

Of course, Jesus of Nazareth is not just some figure from history. In some mysterious way, beyond our understanding but not beyond our belief, he is still with us. Jesus promised to be so until the end of time. He keeps his promise. Not a mere memory or influence, not merely living on through his followers in the movement he founded (as Marx or Mohammed does), not a vague spiritual presence, but corporeally with us; the whole Risen Christ with us, invisible, but really present. This is the Christian belief. It is an enormous claim. Nevertheless, with a leap of faith, we make the claim as we pray the Credo.

For we are baptised into an ongoing and intense union with Christ. It is that permanent union with Jesus which achieves our required surrender of faith. We do it ‘in Christ’. The bus driver going about his work, the nurse caring for the patients in hospital, because they are baptised Christians, do



all they do in Jesus Christ and for God the Father. They are bathed in the presence and energy of God.

Perhaps only poetry helps us, as disciples, to express this sublime truth:

*I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Our personal relationship to this living Christ, Jesus—Our Lord—is our most precious treasure of faith. ‘Jesus is Lord’ (Rom 10:10) and faith in him is our only way forward, in season and out. ■

THINK ABOUT IT



Our faith claims Jesus is our Lord, ‘not a vague spiritual presence, but corporeally with us; the whole Risen Christ with us, invisible, but really present!’ *How well does this statement sit with you at this time in your faith journey? Does it bring you comfort, energy and purpose? If so why? If not, how might you deepen your understanding?*

I believe

...BORN OF THE FATHER

The Creed that we recite is, above all, an experience of praying. It is not meant to be a 'proof' of anything. It is something we disciples must do—simply because we believe in Jesus of Nazareth. It is an act of praise because our hearts are burning with the love of Jesus.

Yes, it is a prayer. And what is prayer?

I love C. S. Lewis' description:

I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I am helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking or sleeping ... it doesn't change God. It changes me.

So, in praying the Credo, the first thing we must start with understanding is that something extraordinary and life-changing happened to the first followers of Jesus; something unique and beautiful. They were not trying to 'philosophise' as such. They were praying from this 'need that flows' out of the hearts of all lovers of Jesus. It was precisely their transforming, amazing experience of this salvation in Jesus that led early Christian thinkers towards a doctrine of the Trinity.

From the earliest days, Christians were convinced that in Jesus Christ they had experienced God's saving self-revelation. And if Jesus Christ reveals God—if, looking at Jesus, you find yourself looking at God—then Christ must somehow be said to share in God's divinity. That is why he is said to be 'born of the Father'.

Otherwise, we would not really have met God in Christ, and God would remain unknown. The doctrine of the Trinity and such phrases as 'born of the Father' were formulated as a way of safeguarding their basic convictions about salvation and revelation.

But in reality, it simply means that God is love. Jesus revealed to his startled hearers that he and God were most deeply one in the way a family is one. And we are invited to participate in this 'dance' of love. Perhaps poets like Malcolm Guite say it best:

TRINITY SUNDAY

*In the Beginning, not in time or space,
But in the quick before both space and time,
In Life, in Love, in co-inherent Grace,
In three in one and one in three, in rhyme,
In music, in the whole creation story,
In His own image, His imagination,*



*The Triune Poet makes us for His glory,
And makes us each the other's inspiration.
He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,
To improvise a music of our own,
To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,
Three notes resounding from a single tone,
To sing the End in whom we all begin;
Our God beyond, beside us and within. ■*

First published in *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*, Canterbury Press, 2012. Reprinted with permission.

THINK ABOUT IT



C.S. Lewis writes, 'I pray because I can't help myself ... It doesn't change God, it changes me.'

Does this statement reflect your experience of prayer? If so how? If not, how might you seek to deepen and enrich your 'quality' time with the God of the Universe who constantly waits to welcome you? Talk to Jesus as a loving friend, for guidance. Be still and contemplate your own participation in the 'dance' of love to which we are all invited.

I believe

...GOD FROM GOD, LIGHT FROM LIGHT

Recently, I was talking to some people at a wedding. One friendly soul said to me emphatically: 'I don't believe in God'. I replied, 'Oh, that's interesting; which god don't you believe in?'

For 'God' is such a misused and overused word. Some people just assume 'God' is a concept that always means the same thing. So, they stumble out a few phrases about the god they say they do not believe in: a being who lives up there in the sky, looking down disapprovingly at the world, occasionally 'intervening' to do miracles, sending bad people to hell, while allowing good people to share his heaven.

I am not surprised they do not believe in that god. Neither do I. No, I believe in the God I see revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.

My point: what most people mean by 'God' in late-modern Western culture is simply not the mainstream Christian meaning.

That is why one should always approach praying the Creed each Sunday with this in mind. We simply do not understand what the word 'God' means and manage, somehow, to fit Jesus into that. It is the other way around!

Instead, we must pray and think about a young Jew, possessed of a desperately risky—indeed, apparently crazy—vocation, riding into Jerusalem in tears, denouncing the Temple, and dying on a Roman cross, and somehow allow our meaning for the word 'God' to be shaped around that point.

The Gospels invite us to look at this Jesus—the earthly Jesus, the proclaimer of the kingdom, the parabolic teacher, the healer, the man who wept over Jerusalem and then sweated drops of blood in Gethsemane—to look at this Jesus and to say with wonder and gratitude, not only 'Ecce Homo', but 'Ecce Deus'.

It is this God who became human, whom we paint and describe in the Creed with such words as 'Light from Light, True God from True God ...' Such 'portraits' of God, like the Nicene Creed, are a bit like icons. They invite us not just to say philosophically complicated words, but rather to worship with all our minds, hearts and souls.

Take, for example, the famous Rublev icon of the Trinity with three men visiting Abraham. The focal point of the painting is not at the back of the painting but on the viewer. And so, once we have glimpsed the true portrait of God, the onus is on us to reflect it: to reflect it as a Catholic community, to reflect it as individuals.



Trinity by Andrei Rublev (1370-1430)

Praise, prayer and doxology therefore lead to mission! That is why the mission of the Church can be summed up in the phrase 'reflected glory'.

When we see, as Paul says, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, described so beautifully in the Creed, we see this not for our own benefit! It is not all about us!

The 'glory' must shine in us and through us to bring light to the world. As Pope John XXIII pointed out, a cynical world does not need men 'prophets of doom', but disciples who help people discover our God is very near. Pentecost is now! ■



THINK ABOUT IT

- Take some time to pray and think about 'a young Jew, possessed of a desperately risky vocation, riding into Jerusalem in tears, denouncing the Temple, and dying on a Roman cross'. *How does this reflection affect your understanding of the word 'God'?*
- The words of the Creed 'Light from Light, True God from True God' invite us to worship in 'full, active and conscious' awareness of the claim we state. *Next time you pray these words at mass, use them with a renewed vision and fervour.*
- Through Baptism we are called and gifted to 'reflect the Glory of God' in our world. *Consider the ways you have done this in the past week. Give humble thanks to God for the privilege! If you are struggling to identify examples, pray for enlightenment and wait for the answer.*

I believe ...BEGOTTEN, NOT MADE



Remember that intriguing Gospel story (Lk 2:41-52) where Jesus, as a 12 year-old boy, went with his parents to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover?

After the festival was over, his parents began their trip home, confident that Jesus was with relatives and friends. Discovering that Jesus was missing, his parents returned to Jerusalem only to find him in the Temple expounding Torah with teachers, who were amazed at his understanding.

Mary was upset with Jesus. She was astonished, not only by his ability to hold his own with the teachers in the Temple, but because he seemed to care so little about how Mary and Joseph would feel once they discovered he was not with relatives and friends.

Jesus does not seem the least bit ashamed, telling his mother that he must be in the house of his Father, that is, the God of Israel. It was an extraordinary claim that they failed to understand at the time, although we are told that Mary treasured 'all these things in her heart'.

Early Christians, in their communities, also pondered and treasured stories like this in their hearts and minds. They wanted to know how Christ, whom Paul claimed was with God before there was a 'was', could be the same Jesus who thought it more important to interact with the teachers in the Temple than to join Mary and Joseph as they made their way back to Nazareth.

Gradually, the early Church came to see that Jesus Christ is not some afterthought God might have had. Unlike us, there was, or is, no time when Christ was not.

This reality—that is, that there was never a time when Christ was not—forced the Church to say what we say when we say God is three in one. That is why, Sunday after Sunday, we say phrases like: 'We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God: begotten, not made ...'

These early Christian communities also affirmed that Jesus was not 50 per cent God here and 50 per cent human there, but in everything he was 100 per cent God and 100 per cent human. How extraordinary the ordinary is—a 12-year-old is God's son!

How wondrous. Jesus was a boy who had to grow up like any child. Yet the love that moves the sun and the stars is fully present in this boy. And we too are now 'insiders'—for this

same Trinitarian God lives and is being 'born' within each of us baptised disciples. Glory be to God the Father, Son and Spirit! ■

Do you want to know what goes on in the heart of the Trinity?

I will tell you.

*In the heart of the Trinity
the Father laughs and gives
birth to the Son.*

*The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to
the Spirit.*

*The whole Trinity laughs and
gives birth to us.*

*When God laughs at the soul and the soul laughs back
at God, the persons of the Trinity are begotten.*

*When the Father laughs at the Son and the Son laughs
back at the Father, that laughter gives pleasure,
that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and that is the
Holy Spirit.*

Meister Eckhart



THINK ABOUT IT

'The love that moves the moon, the sun and the stars is fully present' in the person of Jesus even as a boy. *How aware of the divine presence within yourself are you? Is it easier to identify in others? How might a refreshed awareness of the Trinitarian God within you show outwardly and be evident to others? Make a commitment to 'hold that thought' and take it to prayer...*



I believe ...THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS WERE MADE

Is there intelligent life on any other planets in our vast universe? Could the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Logos, even as I write these words, be creating, redeeming other parts of God's galaxies?

Who knows? Theologians speculate but we just do not have answers.

But what we do believe with faith's certainty is that Jesus of Nazareth is planet Earth's Redeemer. We should also never forget that, as the Word of God, he is also the Creator, the one 'through whom all things were made'.

These days, people are very aware of ecology. A healthy spirituality in these times of environmental and economic upheaval will, therefore, be steeped in a renewed awareness of both aspects of Christ.

As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put it in a talk he gave to priests and deacons in 2008: *The Redeemer is the Creator; and if we do not proclaim God in his total grandeur, as Creator and Redeemer, then we also debase Redemption. If God has nothing to do with Creation, when he is present only in some part of history, then how can he encompass our life? How can he bring healing to man in his wholeness and to the world in its totality?*

It is he, the Creator himself, who entered into history and can still enter into history and act in it, because he is the God of the whole and not just of a part.

We know from Genesis that everything God makes is holy and is good. There is a sacramental aspect to creation: it is a constant, living sign of God's presence and love, and therefore a source of countless graces. 'Grace is everywhere.'

That is perhaps why many theologians speak of our need for a recovery of 'everyday mysticism'; for it is based on awe, wonder, mystery, a sense of the sacred, gratitude, and reverence. Karl Rahner SJ went so far as to claim that the Christian of the future will be a mystic, or there will be no Christians at all!

In our Sunday Creed, through the mystical 'eyes of faith', we recognise Christ as the Word, 'through whom all things were made'.

Every creature, every part of creation, is a word spoken by the Word, and therefore to be treated with great care and respect. Saints like St Francis of Assisi have called us to this awareness continually.

In his inauguration homily as Pope, our Holy Father Francis reiterated this: 'It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us, and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. ... In the end, everything has been entrusted to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it. Be protectors of God's gifts!'

As Catholics, we are used to being encouraged to see and protect the face of Christ in every person we meet. Pope Francis (as did his predecessor, Benedict) encourages us to remember a complementary part of our Tradition—in which we see the face of Christ not only in people, but in everything. ■

CANTICLE OF THE SUN

*Most high, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
All praise is yours, all glory, honour and blessings.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong;
no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name.
We praise you, Lord, for all your creatures,
especially for Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom you give us light.
and he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
of you, Most High, he bears your likeness.
We praise you, Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars,
in the heavens you have made them bright, precious
and fair.*



- Consider your aptitude as an 'everyday mystic'. *Reflect on the past week and try to name moments of awe, wonder, awareness of the sacred, deep gratitude and reverence. Cultivate an appreciation of the grace that is everywhere.*
- 'In the end, everything has to be entrusted to our protection.' *Reflect on the ways you exercise, your co-responsibility to care for the poorest of the poor and stewardship of the earth. Are you happy with your efforts? If not, what might you do in the future?*

[illegible]

I believe ...FOR OUR SALVATION

Do you remember the story of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus? (Mk 10:46-52)

Bartimaeus is desperate to get to the feet of Jesus. He shouts out: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' He is rebuked and told to be quiet. But he shouts all the more. Jesus stops and asks him what he wants.

Throwing off his cloak, he springs up and comes to Jesus. He says that he wants to see. Jesus says to him: 'your faith has healed you.' Immediately, he receives his sight and follows Jesus along the road.

At the time of Jesus, a cloak represented security for a blind man. Blind people were considered to be cursed by God. Their only protection against the elements was their cloak. The blind man dropped his cloak. In doing so, he dropped all the security he had ever known to follow the one named Jesus.

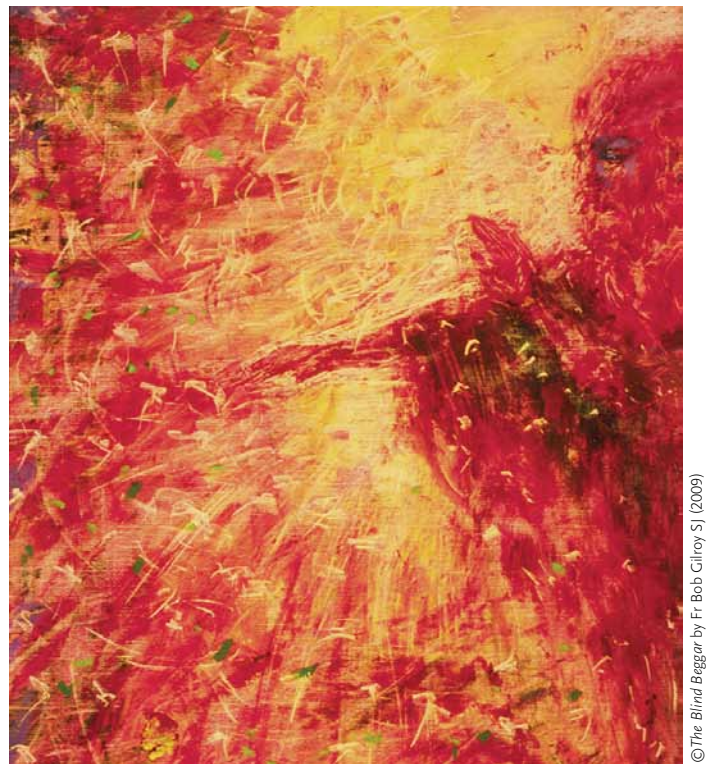
I wonder what our 'security blankets' are as Catholics today? I suppose it will vary for each of us. But certainly our 'security blankets' bring us a sense of the familiar and some sense of assurance that we can protect ourselves.

Why do we have 'security blankets'? Part of the reason is that we find it hard to admit and face our hidden fears. I know when I think of my own 'security blanket', I have to acknowledge there is something inside me that is afraid that I will not be understood. I especially begin to have these feelings when I am threatened or misunderstood. There are moments when I reach for my 'security blanket' to provide protection from what I consider to be a cruel world that does not seem to understand. This is the response of someone who has not let go and accepted that they need to be 'saved'.

And if we are all to deeply accept that Jesus came, as the Creed proclaims, 'for our salvation', we must experience this urgent need for liberation. A basic truth of the Gospel is that if one does not feel in desperate need of salvation, it is impossible to receive that gift from Jesus. If everything is fine and comfortable for us, then Jesus has no way of reaching us.

It is quite good for us and normal to be in a mess. Perfect people need not apply for membership in the Body of Christ. As Dorothy Day once exclaimed: 'Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.'

What an example Bartimaeus can be to us in that regard. He wants to see. He is willing to risk his only security to have the opportunity to come before Jesus. First, he had to have faith that it was going to be OK to leave his security. Second, he wanted very badly to receive his sight. Even when he was told to be quiet, he kept on calling out to Jesus. Third, his cry



©The Blind Beggar by Fr. Bob Gilroy SJ (2009)

was for mercy. He had nothing to offer Jesus. He was totally dependent on Jesus to help him.

Like Bartimaeus, we too have to set aside our 'security blankets', whatever they may be. They prevent us from coming to Jesus. We, like Bartimaeus, have to be somewhat 'desperate' as we follow Jesus in our culture, which so avoids discomfort and insecurity. If we can gather the courage to do so, then our prayer becomes like that of Bartimaeus—heartfelt. It is short and to the point.

We cannot move towards Jesus until we believe that he will take care of us. We have to get up, throw off the blanket that we hide behind, cry out in desperation, and come to Jesus. He will receive us. We will never be denied when we come in such simple, heartfelt faith. For that is why he came—for our salvation. ■

*Bartimaeus cries out and Jesus asks:
'What do you want me to do for you?'*

*Isn't it obvious!
Can't you see!
Dare you look in my eyes
and see what I cannot?
I know I am blind.
I have never seen the dawning day,
nor the trees swaying in the breeze,
birds soaring in the sky
or even the pity in my own parents' eyes.*

*My need is great.
I need you.
I will not sit silent by the roadside
hearing your footsteps pass by.
I will call out to you,
even though they muffle my cries*



I want to see.
Not just my own hands, or those who
sneer at me.
Not just the bread I eat or the flowers
on the wayside.
It is your face I want to see.
I need to see the love that is possible,
the compassion that is tangible.
I know I am blind.
I want to see—and then no choice
will I have
but to follow.

THINK ABOUT IT

- In the Gospel story (Mk 10:46-52), Bartimaeus the blind beggar throws off his cloak in order to reach Jesus. *Recall a time in your life when you have ever been as desperate as Bartimaeus. Was your faith helpful? If so, how? If not, why?*
- Consider some of the security blankets we wrap around ourselves – individually and communally – e.g. consumerism, anonymity, wealth, tunnel vision ... *What might 'throwing off' these cloaks look, taste, feel, sound and smell like in reality, for ourselves and for others?*
- 'We will never be denied when we come in simple, heartfelt faith to Jesus.' *How does this make you feel? Be still now and share your deepest needs and desires with Jesus, the friend who loves and accepts you just as you are and wants to heal your hurts.*

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©CNS photo

I believe

HE CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN

God never forces himself on us. He never makes us listen. He leaves us free. He comes to us as one of us. He 'came down from heaven'.

Jesus left his glory behind, the glory that he had with his Father. He 'emptied himself'—we call this the kenosis or 'emptying of himself'—to assume the form of a servant, taking on our human condition.

Jesus came down from heaven to become one of us. Like any immigrant, he brought with him the culture, language and lifestyle of his home in heaven. And what is at the core of the language and culture of the 'immigrant' Son of God, who comes from the very heart of the mystery of the Trinity?

Quite simply, that God is a lover who gives himself to us totally with boundless self-sacrifice. That to be divine is to become a servant of others.

As the great Anglican New Testament scholar and bishop, N. T. Wright, has noted: God became flesh not to stop being divine. It was a decision about what it means to be divine!

This decision has enormous implications for our discipleship. As Pope Francis has eloquently shown, in his pastoral ministry, washing the feet of those who are in need is an imperative and a test of our being authentic and true to our Credo. It is our way of imitating him who 'came down from heaven'.

For Jesus chose to come as one of us. He chose to come as one of the working poor, living in an occupied territory, surrounded by scandal and accusation, living in relative obscurity in the middle of nowhere.

You could say the Credo is therefore calling us to a spirituality of emptiness and service. Jesus emptied himself to serve humanity and, as Paul says in Philippians, we therefore have to empty ourselves of all rivalry and conceit and all thinking of ourselves as better than others.

Such a spirituality of emptiness prompts us to think of what is inside us that we need to empty out. Is it being

judgemental? Is it a tendency to sidestep the call of the Gospel to share generously with others? Could it be an arrogance which looks down and refuses to accept others in all their difference? Might it be a subtle racism?

Whatever it is for each of us personally, this spirituality of emptiness demands our inner conversion.

Being close to God is not about going up the 'escalator' of life. Rather, it is all about following a God who is always 'descending' and constantly bending down to serve. That is how we live our way into the mystery of God. ■



THINK ABOUT IT

- 'He came down from heaven'. Jesus showed by his life, death and resurrection that to be divine is to become a servant of others.' *As a disciple of Jesus, how do you currently live out this call to serve others? Is this service a way of life for you, or an 'action' that you factor in? What does a spirituality of emptiness look and feel like in your life, in the life of your community, school or parish?*
- Inner conversion requires change and letting go. *Pause for reflection to consider those actions and attitudes that may be holding you back from embracing a full and joyful expressing of your Christian discipleship.*

I believe

...BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

It is helpful to remind ourselves as we pray the Creed that the images of God's transforming Holy Spirit are wind and fire.

That is the incredible personal presence we have inside each of us. This is the power through which God became one of us in Palestine and then fills the disciples' hearts at Pentecost with courage and creativity.

Since our baptism, it is the same powerful force that, like a wind, blows all the cobwebs of sin and selfishness away and that burns down all barriers we erect against living our Christian life.

It is worth recalling that, in modern life, wind and fire are two of the very things we take insurance against! No wonder then that we often conveniently forget the critical role the Spirit must have in our lives as disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. Most of us prefer to protect ourselves, with great stubbornness, from such change and conversion.

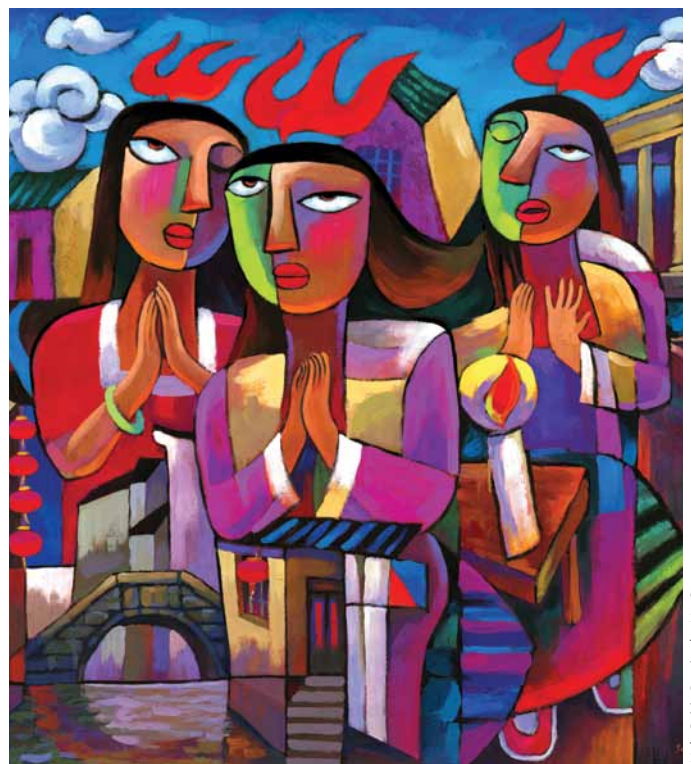
Christians, however, were alive to this sense of the power of the Spirit in the first century. Their joy and enthusiasm can often seem missing in the contemporary Church. Sometimes it seems we have lost our nerve and our sense of direction and have turned the divine initiative into a human enterprise.

Thank God it does not all depend on us! Rather it depends on our openness/receptivity to what the Holy Spirit is already doing among us.

That is why I like J.V. Taylor's book on the Holy Spirit, *The Go-Between God*. It is the best I have ever read on the Holy Spirit. For Taylor, the Spirit is literally the 'Go-Between God', the bond between the Father and the Son, and the One through whom they are present to us.

Taylor makes the Spirit come alive through describing how the Holy Spirit works in the 'nitty-gritty' of personal relationships in daily life. The Spirit does this by helping people to see other individuals as entirely 'other' from them; by helping people to realise that the other persons they encounter see the world through entirely different lenses shaped by their own experiences.

Drawing heavily on Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Taylor's main point is that the Holy Spirit primarily works as a 'go-between'. In other words, when individuals meet and converse, the Spirit is not merely 'in' each of the individuals, but is his own personality working between them. If life were a drama, the Holy Spirit would be a separate character with his own personality. To use Taylor's analogy, if a conversation between two people were represented by the equation 1+1, the Holy Spirit would be the '+'.



Holy Spirit Coming by He Qi

Taylor explains: 'To live in prayer, therefore, is to live in the Spirit; and to live in the Spirit is to live in Christ ... to live in Christ is to live in prayer. Prayer is not something you do; it is a style of living.'

A 'style of living' that Taylor illustrates in one ordinary but very beautiful experience of the Holy Spirit. He describes a West Indian woman in London, who in her flat had just received the news that her husband had been killed in a street accident. She sat in the corner of the sofa, paralysed. Nobody could get near to her; it was as if she were in a trance. And then the teacher of one of her children came in, saw the situation in a moment and sat down beside her, and put her arm across her shoulders and held her tightly. The white face was pressed to the brown one. And as the intolerable pain of this seeped through to the visitor, her tears began to fall, on to their hands clasped in the woman's lap. This went on until the grieving woman herself began to weep, and their tears were mingled, and the healing began.

Taylor's comments: 'That is the embrace of God. That is his kiss of life. That is the embrace of his mission with our intercession. And the Holy Spirit is the force in the straining muscles of an arm; the Holy Spirit is in the thin film of perspiration between a white cheek and a brown one. The Holy Spirit is in those mingled tears falling on to those clasped hands. He is as close and as unobtrusive as that, and as irresistibly strong.'

The Holy Spirit then is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware. He opens our eyes to Christ. But he also opens our eyes to our brothers and sisters in Christ—especially the poor.

More than ever, inside and outside the Church, we all need to be on the lookout for the presence of this 'Go-Between God'.

Come Holy Spirit! ■



THINK ABOUT IT

- The powerful force of the Holy Spirit is aptly portrayed through the Pentecostal images of wind and fire. *Can you recall times during your own journey you have noticed or been affected by such a strong and searing presence? i.e. In times of chaos and conflict through which you later matured.*
- In the early Church, others were attracted to the first Christian communities due to the obvious joy and enthusiasm of the members. *Can you name such spirit-filled people in your school or parish community? Do you know how they sustain their joy? If not make a note to ask them? If so, make a plan to do the same.*
- 'The Holy Spirit is in those mingled tears falling on to those clasped hands. He is as close and unobtrusive as that and as irresistibly strong.' *Can you recall a similar experience of the presence of the 'go-between God' in your life? Rest with gratitude in the memory of that encounter.*

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The Newborn by Georges de La Tour (1640)

I believe HE BECAME MAN

The great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner SJ once recounted a conversation with a colleague whom he identified as 'a modern Protestant theologian'. He says:

At one point I had to say to him, 'Yes, you see, you're actually only dealing with Jesus when you throw your arms around him and realise right down to the bottom of your being that this is something you can still do today.' And the theologian replied, 'Yes, you're right, of course—if you don't mean it too pietistically.'

Rahner responded: *I think one can and must love Jesus, in all immediacy and concreteness, with a love that transcends space and time, in virtue of the nature of love in general and by the power of the Holy Spirit of God.*

As we pray the Creed and affirm that God 'became man', we are actually saying that this loving encounter with Jesus is possible to us today. As Rahner affirmed: 'On condition that we want to love him, that we have the courage to throw our arms around him.'

The Jesus we 'throw our arms around' did not come flinging lightning bolts from a mountaintop, or playing politics in Rome. He came to live in a typical Middle Eastern village called Nazareth that was home to a couple of hundred 'country' people. He did not decide to brandish his power, but to spend most of his time with the powerless and disenfranchised.

And what is more, he was born, like all of us, to a mother, Mary of Nazareth. A human woman is the mother of God, and God is the son of a human mother!

In the Incarnation we are given a very human image of a poor woman and her husband with a newly born child. No wonder the Madonna is by far the most painted image in

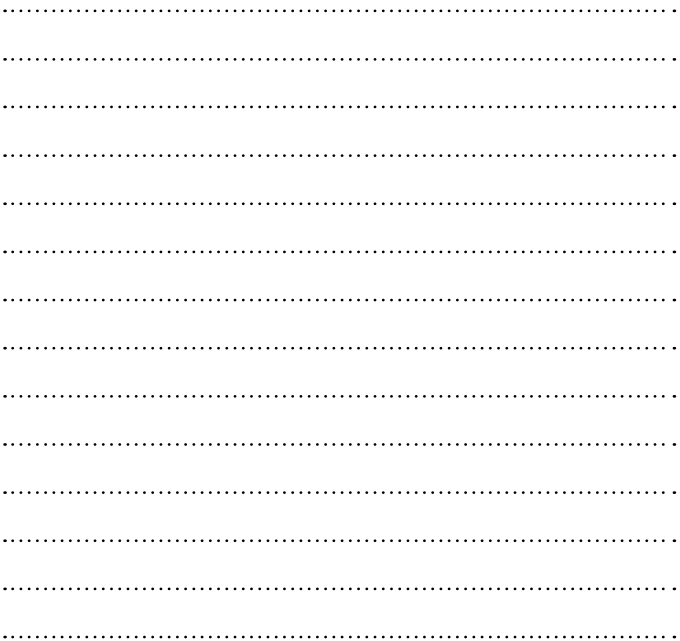
Western civilisation. It heals all mothers and all children of mothers, if we can only look deeply and softly.

That healing power of God becoming flesh extends even further and ever outwards. If God became flesh in Jesus, then it is in the world, the physical, the animal, in the natural elements, in human sexuality that God must be found. This is how Christianity was supposed to change everything. Most of us just kept looking up, when God in Jesus had, in fact, come down ... for us to 'throw our arms around'.

Because 'he became man' and carried his obedience and love to the point of accepting destruction (not just the torture of the cross but death, an ending, a total failure), because of this, he has been raised up beyond death to love, which is the life of God.

The risen Jesus did not just enter paradise. He is paradise. Heaven is not a place beyond the sky. It is the risen Christ, the Body of Christ living by love, the beginning of risen humankind, the ultimate future of humanity.

In reciting the Creed we too take this great risk of faith: that is, we 'throw our arms around Jesus', the 'Word made flesh'. We pledge to seek him in the real material and spiritual worlds that we live in—because God in Christ is now forever our brother and close friend. We are all now 'insiders' with him. ■



- ‘He became man’... one of us. We daily throw our arms to embrace and hold our close friend and brother, Jesus Christ. To ‘throw our arms’ around someone is to enthusiastically and warmly embrace the whole person to express love and unity, with an expectation and hope of a like response. *Can you describe your relationship with Jesus in these terms? If so, how does this intimacy impact on your life? If not, settle into an imaginative contemplation of such an encounter with Jesus who seeks to be your friend and brother.*
- *What does being an ‘insider’ with him mean to you? How might you share this knowledge and experience with others?*

[illegible]

I believe

FOR OUR SAKE HE WAS CRUCIFIED

Renowned Nobel laureate and Jewish writer Elie Wiesel once wrote a short memoir entitled *Night* about his experience with his father in the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald in 1944–45, at the height of the Holocaust and towards the end of World War II.

In that heartbreaking memoir, overflowing with so much innocent suffering, Wiesel recounts a story that is deeply moving. During the hanging of a child, which the camp is forced to watch, he hears someone ask: ‘Where is God? Where is he?’ Not heavy enough for the weight of his body to break his neck, the boy dies slowly and in agony. Wiesel files past him, sees his tongue still pink and his eyes clear, and weeps.

‘Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Here he is—he is hanging here on this gallows.”’

It is important we Christians admit we have no easy response to evil. Like Job, we first fall silent before its full horror. We certainly do not have pat answers. We can only simply point to the person of Jesus on the Cross. We too puzzle over the mystery of innocent suffering. Yet somehow we remember that God has entered into solidarity with us, even to the point of a shameful, humiliating death.

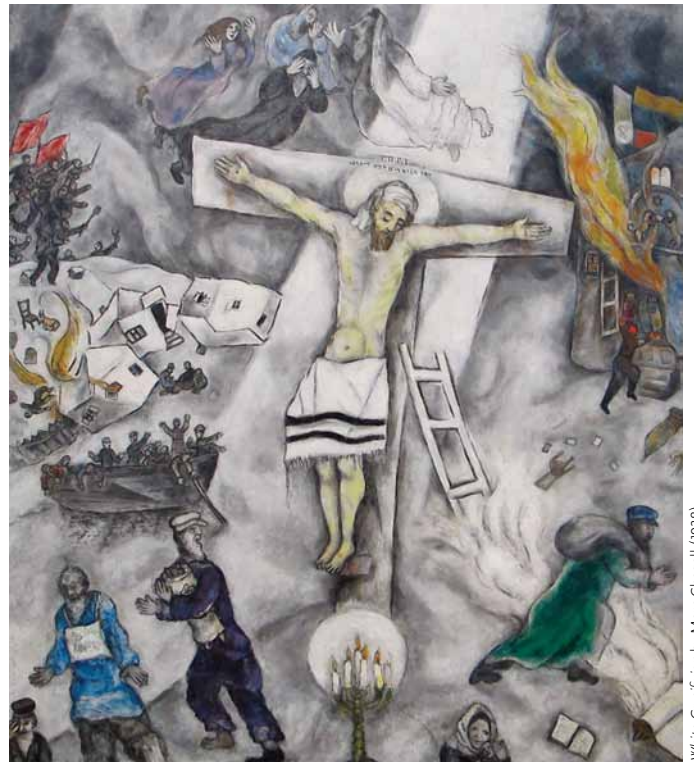
For in the Cross, Christ identifies and unites with all humanity and identifies with every victim (crying, ‘my God, my God’ with all who have experienced abandonment) and perpetrator (‘he numbered himself with the transgressors’).

The Cross is not the violent retribution of God who demands satisfaction for our sins. That would make God into some type of sadistic monster. No! As early Church Father Irenaeus noted, God ‘does not use violent means to obtain what he desires’.

It is we people who are violent. The Bible is very clear that it is not God who is crucifying Jesus, it is humanity!

Instead the Cross mysteriously reveals God’s immense love and compassion for us. Jesus, our brother, died in solidarity with—and in loving communion with—all human failure, mistakes, and absurdity, and thus made them non-absurd. All human suffering and even our failures can henceforth be seen as part of the entire mystery of transformation into God.

As we meditate before the crucified Jesus, we recognise that he became what we are all afraid of and what we all deny: nakedness, exposure, vulnerability and failure. He became ‘sin’ (Rom 8:3) to free us from repeating that sin (ignorant killing of anything, thinking it will solve our problem); Jesus became



White Crucifixion by Marc Chagall (1938)

the cosmic scapegoat who reveals our very worst and our very best to those who will gaze on the Crucified long enough. Jesus became what humanity hates—to tell us to stop hating, to love what we fear, and how wrong we can be about who is good and who is bad.

Jesus became the pleading image of what humans do to creation so we could see it in stark outline, with the curtain of denial and illusion withdrawn. ‘For our sake he was crucified’, so we would stop crucifying. He became the crucified, who refused to crucify back, and thus stopped the universal pattern of death.

As Sebastian Moore wrote many years ago: ‘The crucified Jesus is no stranger.’ He is no stranger to anyone who has lived and loved, no stranger to the universal experience of suffering, despair, and loneliness. In that, he saves us. ■

THINK ABOUT IT

Spend some quiet time in meditation before the cross. Consider the times of exposure, vulnerability and failure in your own life. Seek forgiveness and healing from the one who became ‘sin’ (Rom 8:3) to liberate us.



I believe

HE SUFFERED DEATH AND WAS BURIED

When someone close to us dies and is buried it can be overwhelming. One woman I know said after her mother's death that she fantasised about going off by herself to a cave where she could be alone, and people could just show up a couple of times a day and leave some food at the entrance and then leave without saying a word to her. She just wanted to escape into silence.

Instead, she felt she had to continue at her job as though nothing had happened, even though her heart was not in it. Her heart was broken in grief. Her heart, shall we say, was going through Holy Saturday. But nobody knew what to do for her or even with her.

The first followers of Jesus had the same experience. Jesus really died and was buried. There is nothing more certain. It was not a 'pretend' moment. Grief filled his disciples' hearts.

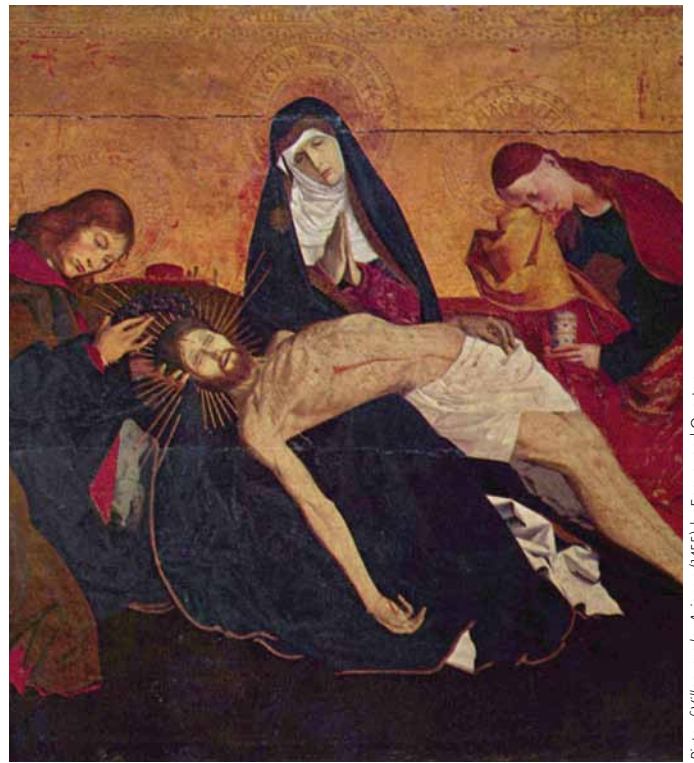
In the Apostolic witness, the first Holy Saturday is remembered by its absence. Some of the first disciples saw the body in the tomb late in the day immediately before the Sabbath, then some of his disciples saw the tomb without his body, early in the day immediately after the Sabbath. The actual Sabbath day is missing in the narrative.

What Jesus experienced during that time we can only imagine. He had suffered humiliation, brutal physical abuse and even physical death, all this after having had the most extraordinary success as a teacher and healer, with such a large following of disciples and others who believed that he was 'the chosen one of God' whom the Jewish community had expected. What a reversal. And in the tomb, what then, on Holy Saturday? How did the transformation occur? We are not told. Some aspects of our transitions are and remain mysterious, even to us.

Mostly, it seems to me, our lives are lived precisely in this type of Holy Saturday, where joy and sorrow, bondage and liberation, life and death tangle; a day that unfolds forever between the cross and the rising Son.

Holy Saturday is simply the day when nothing happens. Holy Saturday, that in-between day, is the day we know best.

When we are in our own internal Holy Saturday experiences, we know we need to be still and to trust in the Spirit to get us through to the other side of whatever is happening. Remembering the mystery of Holy Saturday, remembering that somehow, beneath the surface of what we know or can imagine, hidden from our ego's sight, miracles can happen. We can be transformed.



Pietà of Villeneuve-les-Avignon (1455) by Enguerrand Quarton

We all have seasons in our lives when there is nothing we can 'do' except choose to lie ourselves down in the tomb next to Jesus and trust, however blindly, that something mysterious, beyond our current capacity to describe or define, will bring about a new future.

We follow the way of Jesus when we choose to become his disciples, and this means we follow him through the grave.

In all of this we need the healing power of silence.

'There is nothing in this world that resembles God as much as silence,' wrote Meister Eckhart. Holy Saturday is a day of rest, of silence. Even God—or especially God, it seems—was silent that day.

We live in a noisy world where mercy and tenderness are in short supply. A conflict-driven and often sensationalist mass media are attempting to bombard us with their 'spin'.

More than ever we Catholics need to live the Creed, entering into the mystery that God in Jesus really died and was buried. We are called to live with the holy silence of our God, whose Spirit will never abandon us. ■

THINK ABOUT IT



- 'Mostly ... we live our lives precisely in a type of Holy Saturday, where joy and sorrow, bondage and liberation, life and death tangle.' *Does this analogy ring true for you? Recall a recent time in your life when this was especially so ... the day when nothing happens...*
- We are called to live in the holy silence of our God – to be still and trust in the Spirit to get us through. *Take some time to reflect and give thanks for the times you have experienced the comfort of your faith.*

I believe

HE ROSE AGAIN

There are times when some people can lose hope. Certainly one meets people these days whose faith and hope in the Church have been severely dented. They seem embarrassed that they are Catholics, apparently accepting the view that the sinfulness of the Church (especially of some of its ministers), somehow ‘cancels out’ the ocean of goodness that can be found in our living Church both past and present.

‘Why stay a Catholic?’ these people ask, given all that has been done wrong? The only real reason is because Jesus is risen! And I firmly believe that the Church—for all its fragility and unfaithfulness—is a key witness to that Resurrection in this world.

Recently, I was greatly helped in understanding more of this mystery by reading a sermon by the wonderful theologian John Hull. Hull, who became blind in 1980, has been a luminary in religious education in Britain for decades. Hull points out that in the Gospel of Mark the Resurrection takes place in silence. There is almost something modest and ordinary about it. There was a quiet, with a stillness that only love and fear can create.

In Matthew there is an earthquake, a flash of lightning as a mighty angel descends, the heavy stone is rolled back with force, the crash of armour as the frightened guards fall to the ground. But in Mark, there is none of this. Instead, there is silence.

Inside the tomb is a young man wearing the white robe of the martyr. His voice breaks the silence. ‘Do not be afraid! You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter he is going ahead of you into Galilee.’

There you will see him, just as he told you.’ Hull perceptively notes that most Christians have found this silence difficult. We are so keen on ‘winning’, on triumph. We should not be surprised at hostility. Jesus told us to love those who hate us. He never promised us that we would be loved in return by them.

But as it was with the first followers of Jesus, so it is with us. After the apparent defeat of Jesus by the Roman and Jewish authorities, there is something in our human nature that cries out for a victory and a huge celebration. We want to clap and cheer as the hero, our hero, returns. But the Evangelist Mark does not seem to want to allow us this very human pleasure.

It is very understandable that many in the early Church had difficulty with this ‘silence’ of Mark. The ending was too sharp



Resurrection of Jesus (icon located in Moscow)

and abrupt. How could the Resurrection, which had begun in fear, not end in joy? How could it end in silence and even fear? Maybe we too can agree with their puzzlement.

But Mark has his point. According to John Hull, the Evangelist places us, as his readers, inside the Resurrection story, caught midway between the empty tomb and the Resurrection appearances. It is as if the Resurrection story is incomplete without us.

Listen again to the young martyr: ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee’. The angel is telling us something beautiful about how we experience the Risen Jesus even today in silence. He is telling us: ‘You will find him when you refuse to allow his death to be final; when you make his work live, he will live with you. You will find him when you go on to whatever is your Galilee.’ And yes, this is our Galilee now, as we live in the present-day realities of Australian society and the Church.

The key message is clear. The appearances of the risen Christ also take place through us. The story of the Risen Jesus is incomplete until it is completed in us. For as St Teresa of Avila prayed: ‘Christ has no body now on earth but yours.’

As we ‘break bread’ for the life of others, we encounter the Risen Jesus in the amazing explosive victory of the God of Life that we call Resurrection. Even in the silence of our lives and especially in difficult times, he is still with us. Listen to the poet Emily Dickinson, who says it so well: ‘Love is the person of the Resurrection, scooping up the dust and chanting, Live.’ ■

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he
blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.



- The Resurrection narrative in the Gospel of Mark places us inside the event: 'You will find him when you refuse to allow his death to be final; when you make his work live, he will live with you. You will find him when you go on to whatever is your Galilee.' *How does this insight inform your understanding of the Resurrection story for the disciples then and also now, in your own life?*
- 'Christ has no body on earth but yours...' *Reflect on the ways you have brought Christ into the world in recent times. Identify the means by which you did this: hands, feet, eyes, etc.*

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal dotted lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a guide for handwriting practice. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.



I believe HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

Before his Crucifixion/Resurrection/Ascension, Jesus was limited by time and space. If he was in Capernaum, that is where he was, not in Nazareth. If he was in Jerusalem, that is where he was, not Cana. Our Lord could not be in all those places at the same time.

Let us say, for example, that instead of passing through death to the other side and to a new and different kind of life ... let us say that instead Jesus died and then miraculously came back to life on this side of death, and miraculously continued to live without ageing until the end of time. He would be present in his earthly form for every generation. In this modern age he could travel around the world by jet, be on television, even the internet.

But that presence—sporadic visits to different areas of the globe, appearances ‘from a distance’ on TV—could not compare to his intimate and constant presence with each of us through his Spirit. In his Spirit Jesus is able to be with us in a fuller, closer presence than before his death. The Ascension is not about absence; it is about presence, much more presence!

That is why Jesus ascended into heaven. The rising of Jesus was not simply a matter of coming out of the tomb and walking around in familiar places as a hero who made a crossing no one else had accomplished, making appearances here and there. Jesus went to ‘the right hand of the Father’. A human being, one of us, is now at the centre of the Trinity. The Ascension is the other half of the Resurrection.

So, in the Creed we say: ‘We believe in Jesus Christ ... he died, and was buried ... rose again, ascended into heaven ... I believe in the Holy Spirit.’ These elements all make up one single event, and each is essential to what Jesus accomplished through the cross.

Jesus died a full, complete, and total human death. He was beyond resuscitation, the this-side-of-death stage of his human existence terminated, forever (just as, when he grew up, his boyhood stage permanently ended).

Jesus was buried. Jesus was placed in an identifiable tomb (not a common grave), and placed there by an identifiable person (Joseph of Arimathea).

Jesus went through death and rose again to a new and different kind of human life. Jesus did not simply survive the crossing over to life on the other side, and then return to assure us that he was successful. He was raised to a different, higher form of human existence.

Jesus ascended into Heaven. He has brought ‘flesh’ into the realm where we thought only spirits and angels could dwell—into the realm where God lives. From now on, we all ‘belong there’.

Jesus sent his Spirit upon us. By dying, rising, and ascending into a transformed human existence, Jesus can send his Spirit upon us and be with us in a new and better way. He is closer to us than ever before.

Christ’s Ascension is about presence, not absence! ■

THINK ABOUT IT



‘The Ascension is the other half of the Resurrection.’

‘Christ’s Ascension is about presence, not absence.’

Take some prayerful time to ponder the significance of these two statements. Call on the full and close presence of the Resurrected and Ascended Jesus Christ, your personal friend and confidante. Praise God for the mystery and grace of this relationship.



Consolation (Detail sculpture) by Joe Rosenthal in Odette Sculpture Park

I believe ...TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

In the not too distant past, Catholics had a reputation for being preoccupied with sin. The typical Catholic, supposedly, was miserable, anxious and guilt-ridden.

Whether this reputation was deserved or not, the Creed is certainly not encouraging Catholics to develop a self-conscious preoccupation with neurotic guilt.

Rather it is simply stressing that genuine closeness to God can only be achieved through conversion—with an honest confrontation with one's real soul.

That is actually Good News for us! For thank God—Our God is infinite Mercy! Hence we should not imagine judgement, repentance and conversion in exclusively negative terms. Must it necessarily be something we are to be afraid of? The great truth of our judgement has often been given a bad name by fundamentalists and Calvinist zealots like the Jansenists among us.

No. Judgement is what we Christians hope for; not what we fear! We even begin to experience such judgement in the here and now and not just after our death.

Consider the following lovely Zen story:

A big, tough samurai once went to see a little monk. 'Monk!' he barked, in a voice accustomed to instant obedience. 'Teach me about heaven and hell!'

The monk looked up at the mighty warrior and replied with utter disdain: 'Teach you about heaven and hell? I couldn't teach you about anything. You're dumb. You're dirty. You're a disgrace, an embarrassment to the samurai class. Get out of my sight. I can't stand you.'

The samurai got furious. He shook, red in the face, speechless with rage. He pulled out his sword, and prepared to slay the monk.

Looking straight into the samurai's eyes, the monk said softly: 'That's hell.'

The samurai froze, realising the compassion of the monk who had risked his life to show him hell! He put down his sword and fell to his knees, filled with gratitude. The monk said softly: 'And that's heaven.'

So, yes, we are 'judged' during as well as at the end of our lives. But think of who our judge is!

Hence the beautiful statement of Cardinal Basil Hume OSB: 'Judgement is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life which I had never been able to tell.'

Cardinal Hume goes on to say: Many of us have a story, or part of one at any rate, about which we have never been able to speak to anyone. Fear of being misunderstood, inability to understand ourselves, ignorance of the darker side of our hidden lives, or just shame, make it very difficult for many people ... What a relief it will be to be able to whisper freely and fully into that merciful and compassionate ear. After all that is what he has always wanted.

Cardinal Hume's stunningly beautiful insight makes our personal 'judgement' not something to fear but something to look forward to!

When that day comes, most of us, I pray, will be very pleasantly surprised at how fond our judge is of us, his precious children! ■

THINK ABOUT IT

Judgement is what we Christians hope for; not what we fear! *Does the anticipation of a loving and merciful God waiting to welcome us home to gently receive our life story, affect your 'judgement' of others in the here and now? If so how? If not, why?*



I believe THE KINGDOM WILL HAVE NO END



Picture courtesy of www.movieposterdb.com

It is said that one of Pope Francis' favourite films is *Babette's Feast*. I think I know why. It is a wonderful tale of how the Kingdom of God is lived in our ordinary lives.

The story tells of a group of good people who are trapped in a prison of their own making. The joy and love has gone out of the lives of their small community of Christians in an isolated fishing village in Denmark. The Kingdom of God seems far away from them.

A French woman, Babette, who has come as an exile and refugee to their community, decides to cook a special meal for them all. When the time of the feast comes Babette has lived for years within the tiny village, serving the people there. She has been humble. It is realised after the feast that Babette has not given just from her surplus but rather she has spent the entirety of her recent lottery winnings on the feast. She has given her all.

The beauty of life and community is what overcomes the conspiracy of silence on the part of the diners. Babette does not preach at them, rather she invites them to the beauty of the feast and it is this lived enjoyment that melts away their distrust and even enables them to find healing and forgiveness in their lives. They experience the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached!

In this wondrous meal, the isolated and lonely are initiated into the delights of enjoying the pleasures of life. Babette's gifts break down their distrust and superstitions, elevating them physically and spiritually. Old wrongs are forgotten, ancient loves are rekindled, and a mystical redemption of the human spirit settles over the table. The colour palette of the movie changes to warmer hues as the taste palates of these grace-starved people are delighted and they are transformed into a new community.

In the movie *Babette's Feast*, Gabriel Axel creates a human and moving image of the Kingdom of God we speak of in our Credo. We are shown how the Kingdom of God sometimes breaks into this fragmented world of ours.

Such a feast (intimately linked symbolically to the Eucharist) is a very appropriate image of God's Kingdom for us today.

It is an event which necessarily requires community; it is an occasion of abundance, even extravagance; and it is also a time when the demands of daily existence are temporarily suspended, and one is given the opportunity to relax in the

grace of the world. To feast is to be re-oriented. To feast is to experience simultaneously intimacy, community and divinity.

It is one way we live out our faith in the Kingdom that will have no end. ■

*It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

R.S. THOMAS 'The Kingdom' from *H'm* R.S. Thomas, MacMillan 1972.
© Kunjana Thomas 2001. Reprinted with permission.

THINK ABOUT IT



- Have you witnessed times when the 'Kingdom of God' has seemingly broken into our world? Can you identify the impact and effect of this experience?
- The 'source and summit' of our faith is meant to be the celebration of the Eucharist. Can you recall times in your personal or communal life when a liturgy has truly reflected a joyful banquet? Give thanks for the community of believers with whom this banquet was shared.

I believe IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE GIVER OF LIFE



Nothing is more important than experiencing the grace and beauty of the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ, who breathes on us every day afresh.

Yet talk of the Holy Spirit—the Giver of life—in our culture can sound a little strange!

We should never forget, however, that in many other cultures, such language about the Spirit's reality is more ordinary. In those cultures, if you ask if God exists—not a remote deity in the sky, but God, the really real, the wholly gracious One—the answer is yes, of course!

In our sceptical and pragmatic Australian culture, we can more easily be agnostic about the Holy Spirit, but be dead sure about the material world around us, even though modern physics sounds more and more like mysticism!

Many of us often neglect or fear the life of the Holy Spirit. But if there is a God, then certainly experiencing the grace of the Holy Spirit is the only realism.

Everything in the cosmos is finite and unable to explain itself. Everything is sustained in the depths of its existence by something greater: the Holy Spirit of grace that suffuses everything.

In this regard I love the famous sermon of Paul Tillich, 'You Are Accepted!', where he explains this gracious dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in our existence:

Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It can happen when, after years of longing, perfection of life does not appear, when old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes, at that moment, a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!'

May we accept this grace of the Holy Spirit close by; especially in this the great Southern Land of the Holy Spirit. ■

*Without the Holy Spirit God is far away.
Christ stays in the past,
The Gospel is simply an organisation,
Authority is a matter of propaganda,
The liturgy is no more than an evolution,
Christian loving a slave mentality.
But in the Holy Spirit
The cosmos is resurrected and grows with the
Birth pangs of the kingdom.
The Risen Christ is there,
The Gospel is the power of life,
The Church shows forth the life of the Trinity,
Authority is a liberating science,
Mission is a Pentecost,
The liturgy is both renewal and anticipation,
Human action is deified.*

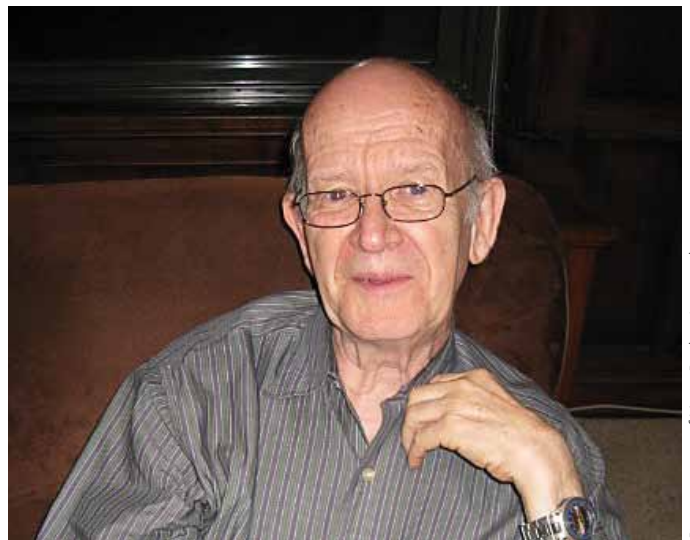
Patriarch Ignatius, Metropolitan of Latakia, addressing the Assembly of the World Council of Churches.

THINK ABOUT IT



- 'Nothing is more important than experiencing the grace and beauty of the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ, who breathes on us every day afresh.' Does this statement sit well with you? If so why? If not, try to identify the challenges.
- Take some time to consider the inter-connectedness of all things in the cosmos sustained and nourished by the grace of God's spirit. Envisage yourself included ... savour and rest in this reality.
- Recall a time when you have been 'struck by grace'. An 'aha' moment or experience when you suddenly knew the Spirit's gracious, dynamic presence in our world. Remember how you felt. Give thanks. Ask for an increased awareness of 'the giver of life'.

I believe HE HAS SPOKEN THROUGH THE PROPHETS



Prophecy did not end with the Apostolic age. As our Creed affirms, the Holy Spirit keeps on raising up prophets for our Church and world. Revelation, therefore, is in one sense ongoing—because of this dynamic presence of the risen Jesus in our daily lives.

One such ‘prophet’ in my life, was Fr Joe Donders—a Missionaries of Africa priest and teacher. On many occasions over 25 years he was a guest of the Marist Brothers and the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Joe was certainly a great pastor of vision and gracious hospitality. But above all, he spoke prophetically of our mission as Catholic Christians in contemporary culture.

Fr Joseph Donders, widely known as ‘Sjef’, died unexpectedly on 7 March 2013 in hospital in Maastricht, Holland, aged 83. Born in 1929 in Tilburg, the eldest of thirteen children, he began his training with the White Fathers (later called Missionaries of Africa) in 1952 and was ordained a priest in 1957 in Galashiels, Scotland.

Everything about Joseph Donders spoke of a man who was open to the Spirit.

Sent to Rome for further studies, he started a doctorate on Teilhard de Chardin but midway through was made to change, since a young priest was not allowed to read his books in those days—especially when Teilhard’s books were then on the Index of the Holy Office! Times do change!

Nonetheless, despite this ‘blip’, Teilhard’s thinking had a lasting effect on Joe. It helps explain his infectious sense of joy and hope that God was indeed actively at work in this world. For Joe, history was not a vicious circle nor were restorationist fantasies of returning the Church to a so called ‘golden age’ the real way forward.

Rather, for Joe the pastoral strategy was very simple. He just preached the Good News of Jesus, where the pilgrim people of God are always on a journey towards fulfilment, despite the realities of evil and sin.

And it was as a preacher that he really shone. Joe’s weekly Sunday homilies at St Paul’s University Chapel in Nairobi (where he was based for nearly 20 years) were justly famous. That’s because Joe told stories and linked them to the Gospel. Joe was utterly convinced that storytelling was a key means of reaching people with the Good News of Jesus.

Sjef Donders—the ‘prophet’ and wonderful storyteller—reminded us, as prophets do, that the Holy Spirit is given to everyone. He constantly spoke about the straightforward human goodness that is the daily experience of ordinary people. No doubt he learned this truth first from his parents, who saved many Jewish families during World War II and are honoured today as ‘righteous gentiles’ in the famous Washington DC Holocaust museum.

Jesus, before sending us His Spirit, first had to equip his people with the imagination to believe in that possibility. He had to create room for wonder and amazement.

I thank God for the life of this good man and holy prophet—Fr Joe Donders. Like Jesus, he created room for wonder and amazement in his ministry. May we too become prophets of hope as we journey towards the Kingdom. ■

THINK ABOUT IT



- Fr Joe Donders is described as a ‘prophet’ and wonderful storyteller who simply preached the Good News of Jesus. *Consider your own faith journey and the ‘prophets’ who have spoken in to your life? Share their story with someone this week.*
- *Do you see yourself as a prophet of hope in our world? If so, how? If not, why? How might you embrace this idea for the future?*

I believe IN AN APOSTOLIC CHURCH



Picture by CNS/Alessia Giullani, Catholic Press

We believe in an Apostolic Church. We pray that we are always closely connected to the witness of the first Apostles and their successors.

Mary Magdalene was considered in the early Church as an 'apostle' because she was the first to testify to the Good News that 'Jesus is risen!' And of course, bishops are apostles. And yes, so are all of us baptised into Christ Jesus!

Pope Francis has shown us eloquently, in the way he is exercising his special apostolic ministry, that this is not some superficial matter of titles, privileges or being treated as a 'special' person.

Sadly, throughout history there has always been a tendency for some called to be apostles to be tempted to abuses of power and privilege. Today we would call it the temptation to 'clericalism'.

However, being an apostle is primarily about becoming a servant-witness.

Careerism and arrogance can have no authentic part in being part of an Apostolic Church. No one really can be 'promoted' in the Church. Only one who is pastorally present with people can be called to be an apostle of service.

I thought of this when someone recently reminded me of the difference in context between the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew, Jesus 'went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them'. In Luke, Jesus 'went down with them and stood on a level place ... Then, raising his eyes to his disciples, he said ...'

Jesus 'went down'. Those simple words of Luke the Evangelist say so much to us as an Apostolic Church.

For apostolic ministry is not about being promoted, taking the higher place and 'succeeding'. When apostles of the Gospel become 'pedestalised'—when others exalt or adulate them beyond who they really are—the Holy Spirit has a way of teaching us in the Church, usually through humiliation and pain, that we are all merely servants, not masters.

Growth, the mystical tradition of the Church tells us, comes from 'falling downwards'; from failing and from reversal. And apostolic 'perfection' is echoed best in the person who can forgive and include imperfection, not the one who thinks he or she is totally above it.

On his 54th birthday, six months before settling in to his new-found home at L'Arche Daybreak, the great pastoral priest Henri Nouwen reflected upon his life and the restlessness that beset him still: 'Very little, if anything, has changed with regard to my search for inner unity and peace. I am still the restless, nervous, intense, distracted, and impulse-driven person I was when I set out on this spiritual journey.'

Nouwen's honesty is refreshing for all of us on the journey of being Christian apostles. None of us is whole, at least not yet. We are a damaged, broken and wounded lot. At our best we are 'saints with wounds'. We are 'wounded healers' and are all 'falling downwards'—for 'the eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms' (Deut 33:27).

We are all very ordinary; most of us are not celebrities nor particularly gifted. Yet we are indeed blessed to serve Christ Jesus as his apostles. ■

TO BE FAMOUS

*Creation calls for self-surrender,
Not loud noise and cheap success.
Life must be lived without false face,
Lived so that in the final count
We draw unto ourselves love from space.
So plunge yourself into obscurity
And conceal there your tracks.
But be alive, alive your full share,
Alive until the end.*

Boris Pasternak (1890–1960)

THINK ABOUT IT

As the head of our Apostolic Church, Pope Francis provides daily examples in word and action of what 'servant-witness' looks and sounds like. *Recall your favourite Gospel story of Jesus modelling servant-witness. Contemplate how you might replicate this in your own sphere of reference this week.*



I believe

"The Word of God is simple and seeks as its companion a heart that is listening... All the external rules, the laws, the dogmas were given to us in order to clarify the inner voice and to discern spirits."

CARDINAL CARLO MARIA MARTINI SJ

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Cover image:
The Incredulity of Saint Thomas by Caravaggio



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