

I Know You are Near



a Journey to Faith
Alan Roberts

I Know You Are Near

A Journey to Faith

Alan Roberts

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the many years I have spent writing and rewriting this book, I wish to acknowledge the support I have received from those who have used this work for the Catechumenate. I am indebted to Bishop Peter Cullinane and Cardinal Tom Williams who took time to review this script and make many invaluable suggestions, all of which I have taken on board. Thanks also to the parishioners of St Patrick's Wainuiomata, St Joseph's Levin and St Theresa's Plimmerton. In each of these parishes I have devoted considerable time either to the writing or rewriting of the material. Without their assistance and comments the work would not have been possible.

Naturally there are many sources of influence for this work which I happily acknowledge. However, in an effort to explain as simply as possible, I put away the text books when writing, to explain in my own words. I believe we must always internalise another's insight before delivering it by way of instruction. I hope I have been faithful to this.

PHOTOGRAPHS

With one exception on page 44, all photographs within the book were taken by Michael Walker, Morrow Productions, Levin. My sincere thanks to a true artist.

Cover photo: Mt Ruapehu, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Taken by Alan Roberts.

SCRIPTURE QUOTES

The Jerusalem Bible, with permission from Darton, Longman and Todd, London. Adaptations are those of the author.

Imprimi Potest

+Thomas S. Williams, Wellington.

New Zealand. August, 2002.

Copyright.

**I dedicate this book to the many
wonderful people I have met
making their journey to faith.**

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO PASTORS

This book is not meant to be a catechism or a complete treatise on Catholic teaching. Neither is it an attempt to provide all the information someone may need before committing themselves to life as a Catholic. It is designed for the early part of the catechumenate process, after the Call of the Elect, when the candidates come together with their sponsors and friends to study, pray and reflect. It is aimed at helping develop the spirituality and attitudes which ought to be present as a result of our beliefs. The Church's official catechism is there for anyone who requires a more precise outline of Catholic teaching.

The design of this book is to help the catechumen learn from everyday Catholics who will act as sponsors. At the same time they will participate in the course for their own renewal.

While writing, I have worked on the basis of less is more and tried to avoid too much information at this stage.

Catechists should be people who can read intelligently and who have group leadership skills. Sponsors should be chosen from among the community and be committed Catholics.

The material presented here requires the participants to read the gospels. I urge you to give them this encouragement from the outset. Teaching from the lectionary and Sunday readings can only be positively encouraged.

Prior to Easter, the Lenten readings need to be studied and explained at length. The gospel readings for this period will fill out their understanding of Jesus.

Time should also be made to explain the readings for the Easter Vigil, along with the Liturgy. Some lengthy explanation needs to be given about the readings from the book of Genesis and the book of Exodus.

Finally, a word about the prayer session at the completion of each lesson; care must be taken with this. An atmosphere should be set and the people introduced to various ways of praying. Common Catholic prayers can be used, as well as an introduction to more reflective ways of praying. Music, candles, icons, lights all help. The prayer session is a time for your own creativity. Hymns such as Strong and Constant, Come to the Water and Be Not Afraid have obvious places for many of the sessions.

Thank you for using this book. It was first written in 1983. This is the fifth time I have revised it. It will be the last! Over the years, I have had a lot of affirmation from participants, so if the book proves helpful, I will be glad.

Alan Roberts

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	9
2	Experiencing God	15
3	Images of God	23
4	Jesus	33
5	The Suffering and Death of Jesus	43
6	The Resurrection	53
7	The Holy Spirit and Birth of the Church	61
8	Attending to the Spiritual Life	71
9	Baptism	79
10	Confirmation	87
11	The Mass Part 1	97
12	The Mass Part 2	107
13	Marriage	117
14	Penance	125
15	Anointing of the Sick	139
16	Priesthood	149



1

Introduction

**We are declaring to you
What we have seen and heard,
So you too may share our life.**

(1Jn 1:3)

Dear Friends,

Welcome to this time of study and reflection. It is going to be a fairly long journey from now until Easter, but I hope an enjoyable one. Preparing these notes has been for me a pleasure and a challenge. They are an attempt to simplify some of what we need to be aware of before making a commitment to join the Catholic Church.

Most of these notes are designed to develop your spirituality as you discover the essential teachings of the Church. My hope is they will challenge you to think and ask questions. How does the Christian faith relate to my life? That is such an important question, for faith must transform and make us more God-like in our everyday living.

Some parts of the course may appear difficult to understand at first. Be assured you will receive every help from your sponsor and catechist. Don't panic if you feel confused in the early stages. Allow yourself time for God's Spirit to make things clear to you.

It will be important to go over these notes outside your weekly session. Our experience has been most come to understand the material more fully when a second study takes place.

These notes are based on passages from our sacred writings, The Scriptures. The entire group of writings, or the Bible as we commonly know it, provides the basis for your study.

I give you every encouragement to begin reading the gospel stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. During your course, develop a habit of reading the gospels, a little each day. Through this you will grow to understand why Jesus is so central to Christian life.

As you journey, I ask Christ to bless you abundantly, so that God may achieve through you infinitely more than you can ask for or imagine."

(Eph 3:20)

Sincerely,

Alan Roberts

YOUR GROUP IS STRUCTURED AS FOLLOWS:

Catechist	The one who co-ordinates and leads the meetings.
Catechumen	<p>The one considering the Catholic faith, with a view to becoming a Catholic next Easter. Easter is when the Church celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the most important time of the Church's year.</p> <p>A catechumen is one who has never been baptised. Others may be baptised, but wish to make the Catholic Church their spiritual home. These are called candidates. However, for the sake of simplicity, we will use the word catechumen when referring to both categories.</p>
Sponsor	The sponsor's role is to participate in the course with their designated catechumen. He or she is present to renew their faith, as well as offering support for the catechumen. It is the sponsor's duty to arrange a suitable time to repeat the session at some stage during the week. The sponsor should also accompany the catechumen to Mass on Sunday, and be present with them at the ceremonies that mark the Journey to Faith. When the catechumen has questions or needs, the sponsor should ensure these are catered for.
Spouse	<p>We encourage your spouse to be present with you for this course. If this is not possible, you may be able to include your partner in a revision session during the week.</p> <p>Ideally, a group should consist of 3 catechumens, their sponsors, spouses or friends and a catechist. This makes for about 9 or 10 people. All are present to deepen their own faith. Together you form a little community to accompany you towards Easter.</p>
The Bible	To save time during the sessions, scripture quotes are given in these notes. To become familiar with the bible it is recommended you look these up at some other time. All participants should have a modern translation of the bible.
Prayer Session	At the end of each session there will be a period of prayer. This is left for each parish catechumenate team to arrange. It should not be excluded. It is the time for introducing various forms of prayer.

Promptness

For practical reasons the sessions will start and finish as scheduled. Sessions are designed to last an hour and a quarter. It is helpful if you try and arrive 10 minutes early.

Enquiries

If you require information not given in these notes, please don't hesitate to ask sponsor, catechist or priest. Extra reading is easily provided.

A Word about

Sharing

During the sessions you will be asked to share your reactions to the material presented. Share only when you feel comfortable. The sharing will normally consist of something from the notes that has struck you as significant or worthwhile. There is no need to say *why*. It is enough it seems worthwhile to you. When another shares there is no right or wrong. The only response is *thank you*. Needless to say, all sharing must be treated confidentially. It stays within the group.

Sometimes the following question will be asked: *How do you feel about...?* In reply, try to find a *feeling* word, e.g.:

I feel

warm	secure
threatened	uncertain

Test: How do you feel about beginning this course?

Discussion

Discussion can lead to irrelevant talk. The catechist will determine when the conversation is relevant. It is im-portant to keep to the topic. We are not here to prove any-thing to anyone, but to learn from each other. Always re-spect the viewpoint of another.

Introductions

Beginning with the catechist, please give the group your name and state whether you are here as sponsor, catechumen, spouse or friend.

Cuppa

A cuppa follows each session to enable you to chat further and meet other groups. Please introduce yourselves and let a friendly community develop over the next few months. May you enjoy the journey.

PRESENTATION OF THE BIBLES

At this point bibles should be presented to all participating and a brief explanation about how this book has come to be, its importance, structure, and the difference between the Old and New Testament.

NOTES



2

Experiencing God

Come to the water
All you who are thirsty. (1s 55:1)

INTRODUCTION - the inward journey.

For many years we have been observing the efforts of humankind to explore the world beyond our own. We have been to the moon, and our scientific achievement is so great, we are no longer surprised when fiction becomes reality. Our fascination with outer space is well documented and most of us would jump at the chance of a journey to that other world.

But what of our journey to inner space? This journey can make us fully human, yet it is neglected by so many.

In the Christian faith, we believe that God, through Jesus Christ, dwells within us. What a mystery this is! While God is everywhere, God has also made our bodies God's dwelling place. We know this much - we are loved!

The faith journey is about awakening to God's love and to this divine presence. As we awaken, our spirit unites with the Spirit of God and we become one. This awakening is a life-long process of discovery, one that doesn't leave us with just memories, as the journey to outer space would do.

There is a popular line from one of the psalms,

Be still and know that I am God. (Ps 46: 10)

These words call us to take a break from our usual activity to listen to that Voice within.

Have you ever entered into some place where no one else is around, and the only noises are natural ones? You stand there and become inwardly still. Your ears listen, your eyes see and your thoughts flow. You become aware of the force of nature and you enter the world of wonder. Then, in all of this you become aware of God the Creator. Perhaps too, you experience a deep yearning to become one with God.

Such moments are special. They are the moments when God is inviting us to enter the mystery of divine Presence. God, our Creator, desires a relationship with us. To respond, we need to create the opportunity to listen. Let us begin by doing just that and set out on our inward journey.

**When you call to me,
And come to plead with me,
I will listen to you.
When you seek me you will find me.
When you seek me with all your heart -
I will let you find me. (Jer 29:12-13)**

SHARING

1. Underline a phrase from the above that speaks to you.
2. Do you have a place that leads you into God? Describe it.

AN INVITATION

As the following scripture is read, try to imagine it as a call from God to yourself. Catechist, please read this passage slowly, so that each may have the opportunity to listen.

**Oh, come to the water
All you who are thirsty:
Though you have no money,
Come!
Buy corn without money,
And eat,
And at no cost, wine and milk.
Why spend money
On what is not bread,
Your wages
On what fails to satisfy?
Listen, listen to me,
And you will have good things to eat
And rich food to enjoy.
Pay attention, Come to me;
Listen,
And your soul will live.**
(Is 55:1-3)

SHARING

1. Underline any word or phrase which appeals to you in the above scripture.
2. Reflect for a few moments on what God is saying to you in the scripture quote. Below, write your understanding in one sentence.

COMMENTARY

After each of the sections is read, pause for a few minutes and underline a phrase or a sentence that appeals to you.

Oh, come to the water!
All you who are thirsty

Notice the repetition of the word *come* in this scripture. It is a common word in the bible, reassuring us of God's invitation to experience divine hospitality. This word may be all you hear in the whole reading. Somehow, the word is heard in the very depths of your inner-self. When this happens to you after reading a piece of scripture, it probably means God wishes to say something to you. In this case, God is calling.

Remember, you are invited, not forced into union with God. It is essential to know this. It is up to you to respond. Love does not force and the invitation will always remain.

This beautiful piece of scripture poetically expresses humankind's search for meaning. The *water* represents *God's presence*. Water refreshes and restores. It renews and brings growth. In the same way, God refreshes and renews our lives, because we discover that we are loved at the very core of our being. This brings peace and enables us to grow in love. Love is what makes us fully human. It makes us more like God. God is love.

All people have two great questions:

Who am I?
What is life all about?

Unless we have a satisfactory answer to the meaning of life, there will always be a longing within us. It can be likened to the thirst of someone wandering in the desert. That person longs for water just as we long for answers. If, when the water is found they refuse to drink it, then obviously they are not thirsty.

So I must ask myself: *do I really want to find God?* Is there a thirst in me for this kind of knowledge?

**Though you have no money,
Come!**

St Augustine, who lived in the 3rd century was, in the earlier part of his life, a great sinner. He used to pray: *Lord, change me, but not yet!* In contrast, when he later found God, he regretted delaying and prayed:

*O Beauty ever ancient,
Ever new,
Late have I loved you.
You have made us for yourself,
O Lord,
And our hearts are restless,
Until they rest in you!*

Knowing God and responding to God's call is the essence of our faith journey. We live in God's presence. However, we have awoken to this in varying degrees. Many are asleep and remain in that state all their lives.

Knowing God is gift. This is given to all who seek with openness and are ready to respond with a generous heart. Our response does not depend on education or back- ground. All you need is a desire for God.

**Buy corn without money,
And eat
And at no cost
Wine and milk.**

Grain, wine and milk - these are symbols of the riches of life. In this scripture they refer to the real riches: *love, joy and peace*. These qualities belong to those who keep material things in perspective. Those who make riches their god can be desperately lonely and unhappy.

The phrase *at no cost*, is telling us to *come as we are*. The gift is there for us to receive. Many think they aren't worthy of God. They will say: *if I went to church the roof would fall in!* They forget the church is for everyone, saint and sinner. No one has to be worthy. The whole point of faith is to become worthy, and this is a life-long journey. In the meantime, God accepts us as we are. When we give ourselves to God, our lives are gently transformed.

**Why spend money on what is not bread,
Your wages on what fails to satisfy?**

Everyone whether they realise it or not, must have a god. People make gods out of many things: fashion, money, revolution, power and reputation. Everything is good in itself. It is the way we use such things that makes them harmful for us. Wealth and power can never satisfy the inner self - the part that yearns to love and be loved. Only God, who is perfect love, can do this. One of the effects of union with God is that we keep life in perspective. If we let God go, then trivia begins to rule us. We become overly concerned about unimportant matters.

**Listen, listen to me,
And you will have good things to eat
And rich food to enjoy.**

Many think life with God will be dull, but our God is a God of surprises. We will understand what this means when we surrender to God. The first step is to develop a relationship with God and become an intimate and familiar friend. Most people who find God in later life, often make mention of the emptiness that existed within them previously. That is why we use the phrase *born again*. Here is the testimony of one such person:

*I was 35 years old before I turned to God. Married with 5 children, successful in business, I had everything going for me. I had what I thought was a good marriage. But a number of events came my way and I began to search for God. I could see something in the people who knew God, and I knew I needed that. My conversion was no earthshaking event. It came after a gentle and gradual unveiling of a secret - **Presence!** God was there all the time.*

The day of my baptism was a new beginning for me. The past 8 years have been a wonder-filled time. I don't know how I managed without God. Had I never come to this, I think eventually my life would have fallen apart. I know I have been born again. There was an emptiness within me I wasn't always conscious of I used to think my career was tops. As I look back I can see the false gods that were part of my everyday life.

**Pay attention,
Come to me,
Listen
And your soul will live.**

Living in the presence of God enables us to discover life. Life is meant to be enjoyed and full of wonder. There are many who have life but just aren't alive. They are weighed down with things like fear, anxiety, resentment and greed. Later, we will see how Christ came to set us free from all this. In the meantime, you must consciously start your search for God, even if you think you already know. Prayer is the key to developing a sense of God's presence. Words from the heart make the best prayers.

SHARING

1. On a scale of 1-10, how seriously am I looking for God?
2. Do I consider I already have a personal relationship with God?
3. Share with each other, one or two of the phrases or sentences you underlined in the previous paragraphs.
4. What is my greatest fear when I think of giving myself to God?
Failure - I can't do it. I'm not good enough.
Destruction - I won't be myself any more. I might become a Holy Joe.
Rejection - People will laugh at me. Those important to me will no longer accept me
Pain - This will hurt. It will cost me a great deal.
5. Where do you experience God best of all?
in the quiet of home
in nature
in a busy street
in people
in prayer
in church
while reading the bible
6. Write down a single word that describes your feeling to the following:
God calls us to come home
God calls us to belong
God calls us to be fully human
7. Discuss the phrase *fully human* and what you think it might mean.

PRAYER SESSION



3

Images of God

**I have taken you by the hand
And formed you. (Is 42:6)**

INTRODUCTION

You have probably had the experience of hearing all about someone you have never met, and after a meeting found they didn't fit the image you had formed. It can be the same with our image of God. How do you imagine God to be?

Many will say they don't believe in God. Often, what they are rejecting is a false image of God - one who doesn't exist anyway - e.g. an old man with a beard, sitting on a cloud, noting your every wrongdoing and punishing all the sinners! People reject images like this, but, would they be so unwilling to believe if they knew the real God?

If we have a God who scares us, or, if we embrace a God who is anything less than love, then eventually anxiety, fear and guilt will overwhelm us. Instead of giving us inner freedom, God will become a burden.

It is almost impossible to describe God. However, we can say God is love and we have been invited to love God in return. We exist for this. Our faith journey is a love affair with God. When our spirits meet we are refreshed and we increase our capacity to love others.

We know too, God loves us as we are. This is the foundation stone on which all is built. Human beings are sinners struggling to become one with God. We can't do this if we have a God who is a conditional lover - one who loves us only because we are good.

Real love inspires because it understands and does not judge. This doesn't mean we have no responsibility. We are simply saying, when we make mistakes God will not condemn. It may be we condemn ourselves by refusing to acknowledge our frailty, and the more stubborn we are about that, the greater the hell.

Today we are conscious of the need for inclusive language in our relating to God. After all, why should we always address God in male terms? There are certain difficulties to overcome, but we need to know God is father, mother, friend, companion and lover. Any single word falls short. It is through intimacy with God that our understanding matures. Through this we realise there are no words or images to describe God, other than to say with St John: ·

**God is love
And anyone who lives in love lives in God,
And God lives in them. (1 Jn 4:16)**

SHARING

1. Underline a sentence or concept in the above essay which is significant for you.

COMING TO KNOW THE TRUE GOD

In the image of God we are created, male and female. (Gen 1:27)

The first point we need to grasp is, we have been created *in the image of God*. Later, we will reflect more on sin, but it is sufficient for now to know that at some point in human history the image was shattered. Humanity became a stranger to God. This estrangement creates problems for us. Salvation is about becoming one with God again.

Only God could reveal God to the world. The bible is about this revelation. In the Old Testament the people conclude there is only one God, who is creator and source of all life and all things. Given the times, this conclusion is extraordinary, but even more amazing is their realisation that human beings are created in God's image!

Ultimately, the Christian faith understands God through the life of Jesus. He was raised in the spirituality of the Jewish faith. Prior to his life, the people were so in awe of God they considered it irreverent to address God by name. You will sometimes hear the term *Yahweh*. It means *I am the one present among you*. They spoke in a way that described God in relation to the community. It wasn't right to be overly familiar.

Jesus addressed God by using the word ABBA. *Abba* literally means *Daddy* - the same word Jewish children use in everyday language to address their father! Because Jesus addressed God using this word, it is safe to conclude God does want to be intimate with us. We are designed to be in relationship with God and can never be satisfied until this is fulfilled.

What we know is, we are created for God. God is our destiny, our arrival point. Faith is about living in such a way that we open ourselves to find God in every aspect of life. As we learn to live in God, we are gently and gradually transformed, and restored to our true natures, people made in the image and likeness of God.

This knowledge should help in our search for answers to those two great questions: *who am I, where am I going?*

The discovery of God is a gradual process. We find God through prayer and by reflecting on life's events as they occur. Prayer places us in the presence of God. The more we are with someone, the more we know them.

Reflecting on life's events completes our prayer, because each person, each happening, each moment of every day is gift. *All is gift!* Mostly we never see it, but the more we train ourselves to loom, the greater our realisation that the God who created the universe, is the same God who desires to share divine life with us. Soon our prayer becomes one of thanksgiving for this enormous love.

SHARING

1. Do you find it strange speaking about intimacy with God?

GOD IS NEAR

The following psalm speaks of God's infinite knowledge and loving care for us. It is the psalm which inspires the hymn 'I Know You Are Near' - the title of this book. Underline significant phrases as it is read.

**God, you examine me and know me,
You know if I am standing or sitting.
You read my thoughts from far away,
Whether I walk or lie down, you are watching.
You know every detail of my conduct.**

**The word is not even on my tongue,
God, before you know all about it;
Close behind and close in front you fence me round,
Shielding me with your hand.
Such knowledge is beyond my understanding,
A height to which my mind cannot attain.**

**Where could I go to escape your spirit?
Where could I flee from your presence?
If I climb to the heavens you are there,
There too, if I lie in the underworld.**

**If I flew to the point of sunrise,
Or westward across the sea,
Your hand would still be guiding me,
Your right hand holding me...**

**It was you who created my inmost self,
And put me together in my mother's womb;
For all these mysteries I thank you;
For the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works.**

**You know me through and through,
From having watched my bones take shape
When I was being formed in secret,
Knitted together in the limbo of the womb.**

**God, how hard it is to grasp your thoughts!
How impossible to count them!
I could no more count them than I could the sand,
And suppose I could, you would still be with me.**

(Adapted from Ps 139)

SHARING

1. Share a phrase you have underlined.

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

The Jewish people considered their relationship with God in terms of a covenant - a binding agreement. For them, this was something initiated by God, but binding for both parties. It is summed up in these words:

You will be my people, and I will be your God. (Jer 7:23)

Throughout Old Testament history, the people wandered away from God time and again. They were unable to be constantly faithful to their covenant agreement. This is the human condition. We share a sinful nature - one that has been separated from God. In this life we are only learning to trust God and live according to God's law. What we see when the Old Testament people return to God is not rejection but welcome. God would always be there, waiting patiently, leaving them free to make a response from their hearts.

As a rock remains standing, unchanged after many years, bearing up to all kinds of weather, so too does God's love for us remain constant.

You will probably hear the following hymn at Sunday Mass. The composer of this hymn clearly reflects the Jewish understanding of God's loyalty to us:

**I will be Yahweh who walks with you
You will be always within my hand.
Take your heart and give it all to me.
Strong and constant is my love.**

**Should you wander far away from me
I will search for you in every land.
Should you call then you will truly know.
Strong and constant is my love.**

**When you know sorrow within your life
I will come. I will embrace your heart.
Through your pain you will discover me
Strong and constant is my love.**

(Frank Anderson)

SHARING

1. Underline a phrase in the hymn above that speaks to you. Why do you think it appeals?

AN IMAGE FOR PRAYER

There are many ways we can imagine God. A favourite image from the Old Testament is that of *shepherd*. In biblical lands, the shepherd was one who literally accompanied his sheep and kept an eye on each of them. Farming in those times was different. A farmer would have owned only a few sheep by our standards. Each was precious. There weren't the boundaries we know, so it was up to the shepherd to ensure the flock had water, grass and were kept free from constant danger.

**The Lord is my Shepherd
There is nothing I shall want.**

**In fields of green grass I lie.
I am led to restful waters
And there my soul revives.**

**I am guided in paths of right
For the sake of God's name.**

**If I should walk in the valleys of darkness
I fear no harm,
You are there beside me,
Your rod and your staff protect me.**

**You prepare a table for me
In the sight of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil,
My cup is overflowing.**

**Ah, how goodness and kindness follow me,
Every day of my life;
My home will be the house of God
As long as I live. (Ps 23)**

We all need to work at developing a living relationship with God. If you feel distant, I recommend the following: take the 23rd Psalm printed above, and carry it with you for the next week. Pray it through 5 times each day. Make a conscious effort to be faithful to this resolution. As the week progresses observe the development of your friendship with God.

SHARING

1. What word comes to mind when you pray the above psalm?

God is _____

TRACKING DOWN THE FALSE IMAGE

**God is watching us,
But only in the sense of a lover
Who longs to be with us.**

Our image of God often falls well short of what is true. The first image that comes to mind for many, stems from the words: *God is watching!* The words can be made to sound as though God is a policeman. Nothing could be more false. It is true, God is watching, but only as someone might focus on their lover.

For some, God does exist but is irrelevant. It is as though life has been set in motion but they are left alone. They laugh at the idea of trusting God in times of stress or difficulty and fail to see how this could make any difference.

You have probably heard parents say to their children: *Santa won't come if you don't behave yourself.* Some have a Santa Claus god. This is the god who is a conditional lover. They forget that God loves them *as they are*.

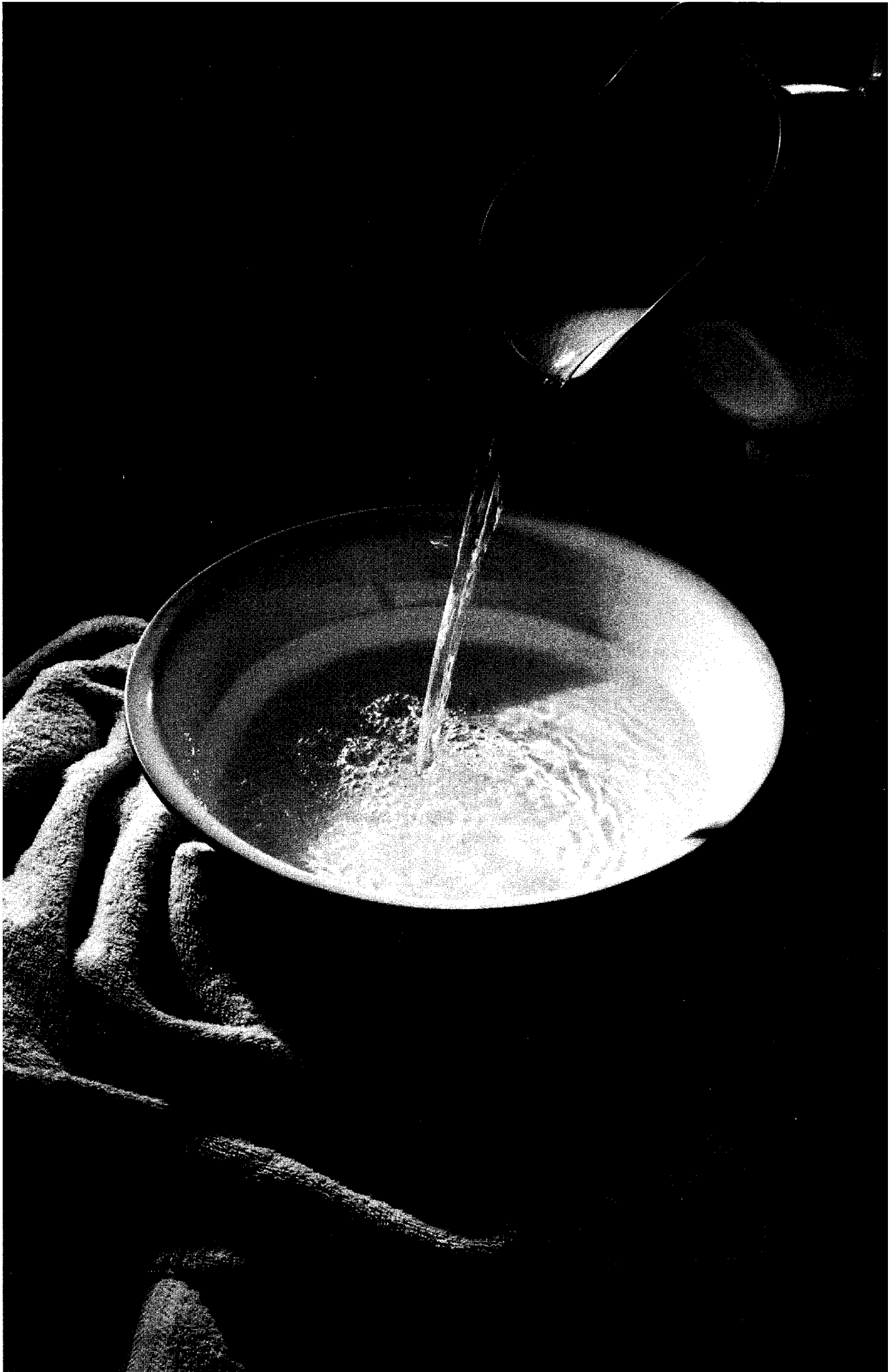
For others, God is very demanding. Such people do not appear to live with any freedom. If they make resolutions and fail to live up to them, they become anxious and feel they have let God down. Their god leads them to be constantly looking at themselves. Because they are imperfect they see little to be pleased about. They tend to trade with God and cannot grasp the idea of God delighting in their existence, as we delight in the freedom of little children.

What we have to remember is, God does want us to be perfect, but, it is the trick of the devil to make us think we must be perfect NOW! When we fail, God understands. We need to acknowledge our mistakes, but then we move on and learn from them. When we do this, we realise **God is near**.

SHARING

1. Underline one statement from the above that is helpful to you.
2. Can you give an example from earlier life, where either a positive or false image of God was handed on to you?

NOTES



4

Jesus Saviour of the World.

**God so loved the world,
That he gave his only Son,
So everyone who believes in him
May not perish
But may have eternal life. (Jn 3:16)**

INTRODUCTION

About 2000 years ago, a person called Jesus was born to Jewish parents, Joseph and Mary, in the town of Bethlehem. He was raised in a place called Nazareth and grew up in the Jewish faith. Little is known of his early life. At about the age of 30, Jesus began three years of preaching the kingdom of God throughout Israel. This ended with his death by crucifixion, a form of punishment for criminals at that time. Three days later, reports of his resurrection were spread around Jerusalem.

The Christian faith begins with Jesus. It stands or falls on the truth that Jesus is risen from the dead, and, Jesus is God made flesh.

The Jewish people had an expectation that God would one day send someone special, *an anointed one*. The word *Christ* or *Messiah* means *Anointed, the One who is to come*.

During his lifetime until now, there have been those who have accepted Jesus as the Christ, the Anointed One of God. The term *Jesus Christ* soon came to be used. A Christian is one who follows Christ.

After the Resurrection, the first believers in Jesus were Jews. Initially, those first Christians thought they could be followers of Christ, and, at the same time remain members of the Jewish faith. They distinguished themselves by the belief that Jesus was:

With God from the beginning and was God...

and through Jesus

God became flesh and dwelt among us. (see Jn 1:1-14)

Although many thousands of Jews did accept Jesus, this belief was bigger and more wonderful than the official Jewish faith could contain. The followers of Christ had to become a distinctive body. Christianity was born and now exists throughout the world.

The Jewish faith is part of our spiritual tradition. It has given birth to Christianity. The revelation of God to the world comes to us through Judaism and is completed in Jesus Christ. The name *Jesus* means *Yahweh is salvation*.

We speak of Jesus as *Saviour of the World*. We saw earlier, we are made for God alone and we are made in God's image. When sin entered our world we lost sight of God. Our wholeness was destroyed, but it has been restored by Jesus Christ. This is what we mean by the word *salvation*.

We also speak of Jesus as being the *Good News*. This is because God entered our world in the person of Jesus.

Although he was God, Jesus had to grapple with life in the same way as we do. Jesus did not experience himself as God. He wanted to share our lives completely. He let

go of that part of his nature and was tempted in every way we are, but did not sin. As a member of the human race Jesus was always totally open to God. The scripture says:

**Jesus increased in wisdom,
in stature and in favour with God and people. (Lk 2:52)**

Through love, he was always one with God, and, so complete was this unity we say: *Jesus is God*. This means, we look at God when we look at Jesus. What Jesus does is what God would do. God is revealed in Jesus. Through our union with Christ, we also grow into God in the same way. That is why we say:

**We shall become like God,
because we shall see God as he really is. (1 Jn 3:2)**

At the time of Jesus' life, Rome governed Israel and the Israelites resented this. They had come to expect God's Messiah would soon be among them and would free Israel from outside interference. Jesus would have grown up in the midst of this expectation but he knew God was calling him, not to establish a political reign, but God's reign here on earth.

This reign exists when we see a desire for goodness and people living unselfishly. It exists when there is a deep concern for the poor and oppressed of society.

We belong to this kingdom, when we choose to follow Jesus, when we love as God loves us, when we forgive our enemies as God has forgiven us, when we share our world as God has shared his entire self with us.

A term we use for Jesus is *Son of God*. For the Jewish people everyone is a son or daughter of God, but Jesus is **the** Son of God. He knows God in a way that no other human does. We have certainty with Jesus, who says in St John's gospel:

I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. (Jn 14:6)

Jesus gives vision and hope to the world.

SHARING

1. Underline two phrases from the above which speaks to you.
2. What do you think the quote above means? Jn 14.6
3. Do you have any questions about Jesus you might like to ask right

THE WISDOM OF JESUS

**I have come that you may life
and have it more abundantly. (Jn 10:10)**

To embrace Jesus is to enrich life. A person of faith is one who lives fully, who enjoys the gift of each day. If it doesn't do this we are missing something important. Faith ought to transform so others can see God in us.

Much of what Jesus teaches is the wisdom we need to live fully.

TRUST

Then he said to his disciples: "That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. For life means more than food, and the body more than clothing. Think of the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have no storehouses and no barns; yet God feeds them. And how much more are you worth than the birds! If the smallest things, therefore, are outside your control, why worry about the rest? Think of the flowers; they never have to spin or weave; yet, I assure you, not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed like one of these. Now if that is how God clothes the grass in the field which is there today and thrown in the furnace tomorrow, how much more will you be cared for, you people of little faith! But you, you must not set your hearts on things to eat and things to drink; nor must you worry. It is the pagans of this world who set their hearts on all these things. Your Father well knows you need them. No; set your hearts on the kingdom of God and these other things will be given you as well. There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your father to give you the kingdom of God." (Luke 12:22-32)

SHARING

Trust in God is vital in faith. If we trust, we don't use our energies in useless fear and worry.

1. What is your inner attitude about 'riches'?
detached moderately satisfied wanting more
2. How would you rate yourself as a worrier?
always worrying not too bad generally accepting
3. Recall difficult times when you worried and everything turned out okay.

FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS

Then Peter went up to him and said, “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?” Jesus answered, “not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.”
(Mt 18: 21-22)

COMMENTARY

Nobody enjoys the company of one who is bitter and resentful. If God is to reign in our hearts, we cannot allow resentment or the desire for revenge to dominate. Prayer is impossible if we hang on to resentment.

When we discuss forgiveness the question invariably arises: *what if something really evil is done to you or to someone close to you?* Are you expected to forgive in circumstances like that?

The short answer is *yes*, but we must bear in mind, reaching a state of forgiveness can take time. What is just as important is the decision to work towards this state. Sometimes, prayer needs to express our inability to forgive. When we own our weakness and ask for help, God will give us what we need to let go.

In times of great hurt, we can feel it will take a miracle to forgive. Perhaps this is because forgiveness is a miracle.

We have a great modern example in the life of Nelson Mandela who forgave his persecutors. Upon release from prison he called his people to reconciliation. There would have been no point in demanding revenge. Forgiveness sets us free. If we demand revenge, it becomes a cancer which will destroy not only the individual, it becomes a cancer which will destroy not only individual, but whole communities as well. Revenge means choosing to live in the past. This results in missing the present opportunities to build a better future.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Are you the kind of person who easily hangs on to resentment?
2. I can forgive but I can't forget! This can mean no forgiveness at all! To be in a state of forgiveness does not mean you will have no memory of the hurt. It will mean you are not ruled by an obsession for revenge. Also, forgiveness does not mean forgiving offensive behaviour. We forgive offenders. When they express remorse for offensive behaviour they are freed by our forgiveness.

SHARING

1. In your upbringing, were you taught to say 'sorry'? Do you find that difficult?
2. Can you readily accept the apology of another?

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

A parable is a story with a hidden meaning. Jesus used parables to make us think deeply. Here is one such parable. It contains an important lesson:

He said, 'Imagine a sower going out to sow. As he sowed, some seeds fell on the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on patches of rock where they found little soil and sprang up straight away, because there was no depth of earth; but as soon as the sun came up they were scorched and, not having any roots, they withered away. Others fell amongst thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Others fell on rich soil and produced their crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Listen, anyone who has ears. (Mt 13:1-9)

COMMENTARY

The *sower* is *God*. Only God can give faith. The *seed* is the *gift of faith*, our love for God. The ground the seed falls upon is our life. If we want to live a life of faith we need to be like rich soil.

In the context of Christian faith, good soil exists when a person is:

- open - really wants to know God
- humble - doesn't presume to know and goes in search of God
- honest - can acknowledge limitations
- faithful - won't give up when the going gets tough or the novelty wears off.

SHARING

1. From the above commentary what might be one thing you should take note of?

JESUS - an image of God

What is God like? In our previous session we reflected on the importance of having a healthy image of God. We noted that Jesus addressed God as *Abba*, the word Jewish children would use to address their father. This was a radical thing for Jesus to do, and, we could say the whole of his life tells us we must never be afraid to approach God.

When Jesus lived on earth, there was a custom among the people which he used to show us the nature of God's love. When a guest arrived at someone's house, they first of all had their feet washed by the servant. In the following story, Jesus becomes the servant and commands we be likewise to one another.

“He had always loved those who were his own in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was. They were at supper and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father put everything into his hands, and he had come from God and was returning to God. He got up from the table, removed his outer garment and taking a towel, wrapped it around his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

Jesus answered, “At the moment you do not understand what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

“Never,” said Peter, “You shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus replied, “If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.”

“Then, Lord,” said Simon Peter, “not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well.”

When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes he went back to the table.

“Do you understand what I have done to you?” he said. “You call me Master and Lord, and rightly, so I am. If I then, the Lord and Master have washed your feet, then you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.” (Jn 13:2-15)

COMMENTARY

There are three factors in this story which deserve our attention:

1. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. In this action he shows God wants to be our servant.
2. We must allow God to be our servant. Notice the reply Jesus gives to Peter: *If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.*
3. We must become servants to one another - serve and be served. If we do this we become like God. Salvation is found by being servants to each other.

**Brother, sister let me serve you
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant too.** (Richard Gillard)

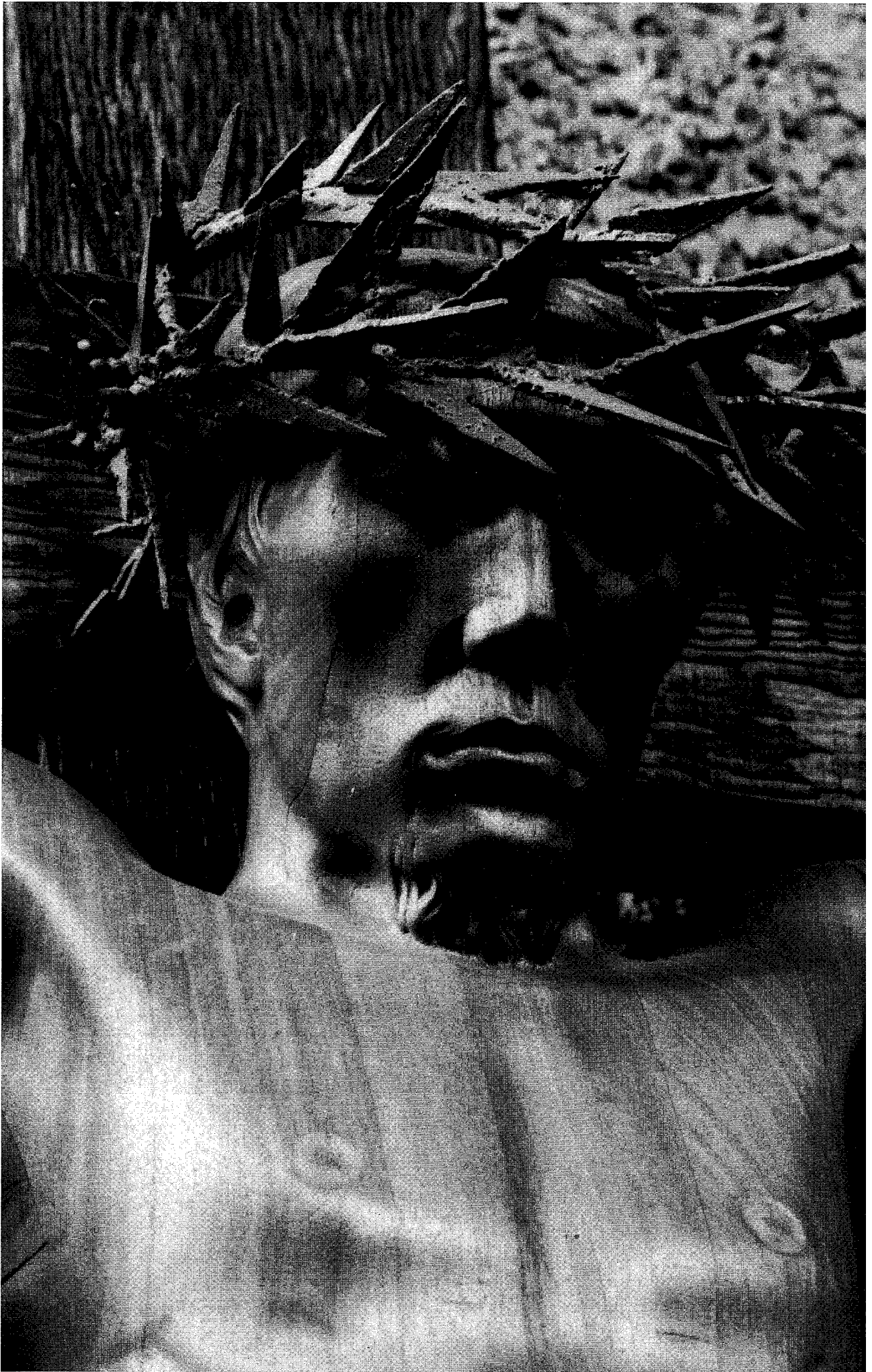
SHARING

1. How do you feel about God being your servant?
2. Can you easily let others serve you?
3. How can you best express yourself as a servant, at this particular time in your life? List 3 ways that this is possible:

4. There is a saying, let God be God. How do you interpret this, in light of Jesus washing the of his disciples?

PRAYER SESSION

NOTES



5

The suffering and death of Jesus

**Should you walk through the fire
You will not suffer,
And the flames will not burn you.
For I am Yahweh your God ...
Do not be afraid for I am with you.**

(Is 43:2-3.5)

INTRODUCTION -the importance of dying.

In his popular book, *The Road Less Travelled*, W. Scott Peck begins by saying: *Life is difficult*. He then explains that only those who know and accept this are able to find happiness. Such people face their difficulties and transcend them. We can say they die to themselves and then rise to a new life. The difficulties turn out to be a blessing. They become better people for them.

Such wisdom was very present in the teaching of Jesus. When he was tempted to abandon what God wanted him to do, he realised:

We do not live on bread alone

but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. (Mt 4:4)

We saw earlier, *all is gift*. However, some gifts are easy to receive, others, not so easy. A person of faith knows there is wisdom in accepting both. The temptation is to turn the stones into bread.

The great advantage of faith is in knowing, God is with us. No matter what life brings, we need not be afraid. Human fear may be present, but faith enables us to deal with the issue and transcend it.

When Jesus came into our world, he let go of his God-ness to become a human being like us. Because he loved us, he chose to serve rather than be served. His giving was total. He gave until he could no longer take. His teaching, his compassion for sinners, his taking the side of the poor all caused a stir among the people. It led to humiliation, misunderstanding and eventually his death.

Instead of running from this, Jesus saw his death as an opportunity.

The Jewish people were accustomed to offering sacrifice for their sins. They would take an animal from their flock, slaughter it and sprinkle the blood on their altar, a sign of offering to God. Through this, they hoped God would forgive them and bring them back into favour.

All this provides the background for Jesus to offer his death as a once and for all sacrifice for sin. The essence of his sacrifice is faithfulness.

Just prior to his death, the Jewish people were celebrating the Passover Meal - a major celebration to recall God's goodness in delivering them from their slavery in Egypt. It was at this Passover Meal that Jesus, knowing he was about to be put to death, formally offered himself to God as a once and for all sacrifice for our sins:

**As they were eating, Jesus took bread,
and when he had said the blessing
he broke it and gave it to his disciples.
"Take it and eat," he said, "this is my body."**

**Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks
he handed it to them saying,
“Drink from this, all of you,
for this is my blood,
the blood of the covenant,
poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”.**

(Mt 26:26-29)

This offering of Jesus brought about a new beginning. There is no longer a need for any other sacrifice for sin. No greater offering could be made for us. It is made by one who has chosen to be totally faithful to God and to us.

Human beings have an innate need to reconcile, which is partly why the whole concept of sacrifice began in the first place. The sacrifice of Jesus, though, has a new depth. Jesus knows God loves us, and his offering, made for us, is a reassurance our reconciliation to God is permanent. We live in the state of forgiveness.

Today, when you enter a Catholic church, you will see a crucifix or cross in a prominent position. It is there as a reminder of God's perfect love:

**Persons can have no greater love
than when they lay down their life for their friends.** (Jn 15:13)

The crucifix also points out we are followers of the way of Jesus. Christianity calls us to face life's difficulties rather than run from them. The cross is to be embraced. In reality, this means letting go of our selfishness. When the Catholic Church teaches about Christian morality, it is motivated by a desire to keep us close to Christ and to the wisdom of Jesus. Then we don't become lost in self:

**Anyone who does not take up his cross
and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me.
Anyone who finds his life will lose it;
anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.** (Mt 10:38-39)

SHARING

1. What insight do you gain from the above?
2. Can you think of an event in your life which was difficult to accept? Has this event enriched you in any way?
3. Can you think of an example whereby people try to save their life but end up losing it?

THE DEATH OF JESUS

The life of Jesus was a prophetic one. Prophets are those who call us to truth. For this reason they are rarely popular. Like the prophets who went before him, persecution soon comes to Jesus - a person full of Truth. This led to him being put to death as a criminal.

The intention here is to provide you with an opportunity of entering into the events leading up to and including the suffering and death of Jesus. The story is broken up so the various characters can stand out. It is suggested you take one of these characters and read the story as a play.

CHARACTERS

N Narrator

J Jesus

Pi Pilate

CR Crowd

P Peter

S Servant-girl

B Bystander

L Leader

S1 Soldier

T1 Thief

T2 Good Thief

CE Centurion

THE DENIAL OF PETER (Matt 14:26-31)

N After psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives. Jesus said to them:

J You will all lose faith, for the scripture says: "I shall strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. However, after my resurrection I shall go before you to Galilee."

P Even if all lose faith, I will not.

J I tell you solemnly, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times.

P If I have to die with you, I will never disown you.

N And they all said the same. While Peter was down below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's servant-girls came up. She saw Peter warming himself there, stared at him and said:

S You too were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth. N But he denied it saying:

P I do not know, I do not understand what you are talking about.

N And he went out into the courtyard. The servant-girl saw him and again started telling the bystanders:

S This fellow is one of them.

N But again he denied it. A little later the bystanders themselves said to Peter:

B You are one of them for sure! Why, you are Galilean!

N But he started calling down curses on himself and swearing.

P I do not know the man you are speaking of.

N At that moment the cock crowed for the second time and Peter recalled how Jesus had said to him. *Before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times.* And he burst into tears.

JESUS IN GETHSEMANE (Mark 4:32-42)

N They came to a small estate called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples:

J Stay here while I pray.

N Then he took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. He said to them:

J My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here and keep awake.

N And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that if it were possible, this hour might pass by.

J Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. **But let it be as you, not I, would have it.**

N He came back and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter,

J Simon, are you asleep? Had you not the strength to keep awake with me for one hour? You should be awake and praying not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

N Again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came back and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy; and they could find no answer for him. He came back a third time and said to them,

J You can sleep on now and take your rest. It is all over. The hour has come. Now the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up! Let us go! My betrayer is already close at hand.

THE CRUCIFIXION (Luke 23:13-46)

N Pilate then summoned the chief priests and the leading men and the people. He said to them:

Pi You brought this man before me as a political agitator. Now I have gone into the matter myself in your presence and found no case against him. Nor has Herod either, since he has sent him back to us. As you can see, the man has done nothing that deserves death, so I shall have him flogged and then let him go.

N But as one people they howled:

CR Away with him. Give us Barrabas.

N Barrabas had been thrown into prison for causing a riot in the city and for murder. Pilate was anxious to set Jesus free and addressed them again, but they shouted back.

- CR Crucify him, crucify him.
- N And for the third time he spoke to them.
- Pi Why? What harm has this man done? I have found no case against him that deserves death, so I shall have him punished and then let him go.
- N But they kept on shouting at the top of their voices, demanding that he should be crucified. And their shout was growing louder. Pilate then gave his verdict: their demand was granted. He released the man they asked for, who had been imprisoned for rioting and murder, and handed Jesus over to them to deal with as they pleased. As they were leading him away they seized on a man, Simon from Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and made him shoulder the cross and carry it behind Jesus. Now with him they were also leading out two other criminals to be executed.
- N When they reached the place called The Skull, they crucified him and the two criminals also, one on the right, the other on the left. Jesus said,
- J Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.**
- N Then they cast lots to share out his clothing. The people stayed there watching him. As for the leaders, they jeered at him. He saved others. Let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.
- N The soldiers mocked him too, and when they approached to offer him vinegar, they said:
- SI If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.
- N Above him there was an inscription: "This is the king of the Jews". One of the criminals hanging there abused him. He said,
- T1 Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well.
- N But the other spoke up and rebuked him:
- T2 Have you no fear of God at all? We got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.
- N Then turning to Jesus he said:
- T2 Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.
- N Jesus replied:
- J Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise.

- N It was about the sixth hour and, with the sun eclipsed, a darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. **The veil of the Temple was torn right down the middle;** and when Jesus had cried out in a loud voice, he said,
- J Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.
- N With these words he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he gave praise to God and said:
- CE This was a great and good man.
- N And when all the people who had gathered for the spectacle saw what had happened, they went home beating their breasts. All his friends stood at a distance; so also did the women who had accompanied him from Galilee, and they saw all this happen. Then a member of the council arrived, an upright and virtuous man named Joseph. He had not consented to what the others had planned and carried out. He came from Arimathea, a Jewish town, and he lived in the hope of seeing the Kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. He then took it down and wrapped it in a shroud and put it in a tomb hewn in stone, in which no one had yet been laid. It was preparation day and the Sabbath was imminent. Meanwhile, the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus were following behind. They took note of the tomb and of the position of the body. Then they returned and prepared the spices and ointments. And on the Sabbath day they rested, as the Law required.

COMMENTARY

But let it be as you, not I, would have it.

Jesus surrenders to the Father. We notice the struggle Jesus has to arrive at this point. He goes to pray because he is afraid. There is enormous trust here. Surrender to God is the essence of faith. We are in this world for God alone.

Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.

With these words, Jesus puts into practice what he had preached so often: forgive your enemies. The establishing of God's kingdom is impossible without forgiveness.

The veil of the temple was torn right down the middle.

In Jewish worship, the sanctuary of the temple was separated from the main body of the building by a veil. Only the High Priest was able to enter the sanctuary, for here one could *look on the face of God*. By this is meant *very near to God* and out of the question for the ordinary person. Jesus puts an end to this mentality. The torn veil indicates that God is approachable. The temple of God will now be Christ, and because he lives in us, our bodies are living temples. In John's gospel we read:

**Make your home in me
As I make mine in you. (Jn 15:4)**

PERSONAL REFLECTION (not for sharing)

1. The human nature of Jesus is very evident in the story. He was afraid of his forthcoming death. Are there situations in your life difficult for you to accept?
2. Jesus experienced the inner pain which comes from being mocked and ignored. Identify the people in your life who need your affirmation, e.g. spouse, children, workmates etc.
3. Are you normally in the habit of affirming people?

SHARING

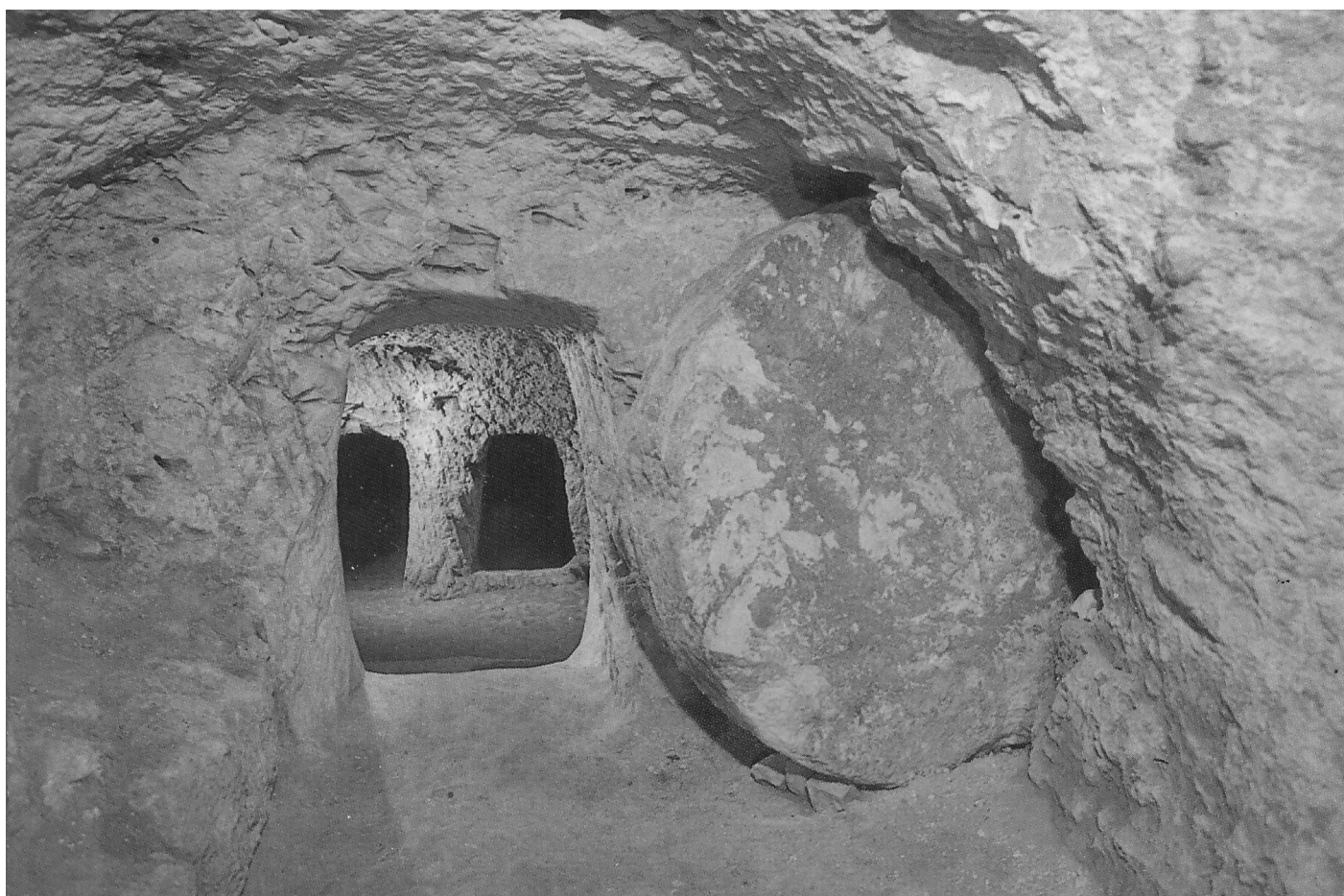
1. Taking up the cross means

- Asking what can I give rather than what can I take
- Forgiving when I am hurt or offended
- Facing difficulties
- Trusting in God
- Standing up for what is right

Which of the above speaks most strongly to you right now?

2. What has been your most significant learning in this session?

PRAYER SESSION



6

The Resurrection

Why look among the dead

For someone who is alive?

He is not here. He is risen. (Lk 24:6)

INTRODUCTION

Central to the Christian faith is the belief that Jesus is risen from the dead. If this were not true, then the most we could say about Jesus is he was a very good and wise person. St Paul tells us:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ himself cannot have been raised, and if Christ has not been raised then our preaching is without purpose and your believing it is useless.

(1 Cor 15:14)

At Easter the Church celebrates the resurrection. This is a time of great joy - *alleluia, rejoice!* This event announces the love of God in a dramatic way. It means, because he is risen from the dead, we now proclaim *Jesus is Lord*, or, *Jesus is God!*

The resurrection brings us HOPE. Hope means believing God is still with us, even when our world has fallen apart. Jesus, for example, would have been tempted to believe his life had been a disaster, but he entrusted everything to the Father. He was a person of Hope. He trusted in God and God raised him from the dead. We now have certainty, something much more than theory or guesswork.

In light of the resurrection, the cross teaches there is only gift in life. When we lose our life to be faithful to God, we find it. Jesus lost his life in this way, but found his true life - life with the Father, from whom he had come. So we say: *we are an Easter people, alleluia is our song!* At some time you may hear the following hymn:

**He is Lord, he is Lord,
He is risen from the dead and he is Lord.
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord.**

(based on Phil 2:5-11)

So it is with the knowledge Jesus is risen, we take seriously the words:

I am the way, the truth and the life. (Jn 14:6)

This saying tells us, when we follow Jesus we are on a certain path towards God. Jesus shows too, our spirituality is a love relationship:

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

SHARING

1. Underline any significant phrases in the introduction.
2. Do you find it strange to talk in terms of loving God? Can you pray from this perspective?

THE EMPTY TOMB

At the place where he had been crucified there was a garden, and in this garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been buried. Since it was the Jewish Day of Preparation and the tomb was near at hand they laid Jesus there. (Jn 19:41-42)

It was very early on the first day of the week and still dark when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been moved away from the tomb and came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved. 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb', she said, 'and we don't know where they have put him.'

So Peter set out with the other disciple to go to the tomb. They ran together but the other disciple, running faster than Peter, reached the tomb first; he bent down and saw the linen cloths lying on the ground, but did not go in. Simon Peter who was following now came up, went right into the tomb, saw the linen cloths on the ground and also the cloth that had been over his head; this was not with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in; he saw and he believed. Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of scripture, that he must rise from the dead. The disciples then went home again.

Meanwhile, Mary stayed outside, near the tomb, weeping. Then, still weeping, she stooped to look inside, and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head, the other at the feet. They said, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She replied, 'They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him.'

As she said this she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not recognise him. Jesus said, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?'

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him.'

Jesus said, 'Mary!'

She knew then and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbuni!' - which means, Master. Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the one from whom I came, but go to the others and tell them: I am ascending to my God and your God - my father, and your father.'

So Mary of Magdala went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her. (Jn 20: 1-19)

SHARING

1. Underline a phrase in the story that speaks to you.
2. The phrase do not cling to me tells us now it is time to move on. Mary of Magdala rejoices. Jesus is alive and she wants to hang on to what she has known. But things are different. Jesus must return to the Father, and then it will be the Risen Jesus she will encounter. To you, what is the most difficult thing about becoming Catholic?
3. In the scripture, darkness represents confusion. Mary of Magdala experienced this feeling. After the death of Jesus, it was dark. Recall an occasion when you felt totally alone, abandoned and confused. At that time, where was your faith in God's presence?
4. He saw and he believed. We know Jesus is risen because we see him with the inner eye of faith. Discuss why this is not just your imagination at work.

ENCOUNTERING THE RISEN JESUS

The following scripture quotes are selected from the Gospels. If we take any one and pray with it during the day, to allow it become a prayer within us, we will soon realise the nearness of God. We now meet God through the Risen Jesus.

The God who invites

**Come to me,
all you who labour and are overburdened,
and I will give you rest. (Mt 11:28)**

The God who is love

**I am the good shepherd;
I know my own and my own know me. (Jn 10:14)**

The life giving God

**I am the resurrection.
Anyone who believes in me,
even though that person dies, will live,
and whoever lives and believes in me
will never die.
Do you believe this? (Jn 11:25-26)**

Our union with God

I am the vine, you are the branches. (Jn 15:5)

The reassuring God

**Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.
(Jn 14:27)**

The presence

Remain in me, as I remain in you. (Jn 15:4)

SHARING

1. Which quote has the greatest appeal for use as a frequent prayer?

NOW EVEN DEATH CANNOT HARM US

We all wonder about death. We don't know exactly what happens, but the promise of life after death is central to Christian belief. Because we share God's life, we can be certain that, after death, our journey into God will continue. St John says:

**We shall become like God,
because we shall see God as he really is. (1 Jn 3:2)**

When someone dies who is close to us, grief is a sound and natural emotion. We must allow sadness and tears and not be afraid to grieve. Just as it is healthy to feel sadness, so too is it healthy, after a certain time, to move on and let that person go. Faith enables us to do this, for, beyond our grief is the deep belief the one we love is with God.

At a Requiem Mass we say: *Lord, for your faithful people, life is changed not ended.* The following scripture says it very clearly:

**We want you to be quite certain brothers and sisters,
about those who have died, to make sure you do not
grieve about them like the other people who have no
hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and**

SHARING

1. What has been your concept of life after death?
2. How do you feel about dying?
3. What experience have you had with the death of close friends? What feelings and thoughts did you experience?
4. Does the thought of continued life with God help you to face your death?

NOTE

Today in our society, abortion is a widespread reality. It strikes at the very core of our conscience and can create much shame and guilt. In order to deal with this kind of grief, one will find helpful the words of Pope John Paul II, who reassures women who have had an abortion that “their little ones are with God”.

PRAYER SESSION

NOTES



7

The Holy Spirit and Birth of the Church

**I shall ask the Father,
And he will give you another Helper
To be with you forever,
That Spirit of truth
Whom the world can never receive
Since it neither sees nor knows him;
But you know him,
Because he is with you, he is in you.
I will not leave you orphans;
I will come back to you. (Jn 14:14-18)**

INTRODUCTION

You may be wondering: how can we be so certain Jesus is risen from the dead, and is the way to God. The answer is in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**When the Spirit of truth comes
he will lead you to the complete truth. (Jn 16:13)**

Who is the Holy Spirit? We know how charismatic people can have a strong influence on the thinking and behaviour of others. They pass their spirit on. This spirit may be an influence for good or bad.

You find a spirit in various forms of community gatherings. When you join a group you will observe their spirit. You may come away and say: *they're really friendly* or *they don't seem to care about you*.

The gospels tell us, after his resurrection Jesus made several appearances to his followers, but then he had to return to his Father. (see Acts 1:6-11) Obviously he could not stay around forever, but he wanted his vision and work to continue. This could only be done by those who had the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who possessed the life of Jesus. This Spirit is distinct from Jesus, but one with him. In John's gospel, we find Jesus speaking these words to his followers about the future:

**I will not leave you orphans;
I will come back to you.
In a short time the world will no longer see me;
but you will see me,
because I live and you will live.
On that day (when the Spirit comes)
you will understand that I am in my Father
and you in me and I in you. (Jn 14:18-20)**

Jesus is present among us now by the power of the Holy Spirit.

While on earth Jesus chose 12 people to be his Apostles. These are the ones who would establish the Church. Our faith is their faith. Even though they spent three years with Jesus, listening to and being taught by him, it was only after receiving the Holy Spirit they were freed of doubt and confusion. Then, with absolute conviction and courage they went about preaching the great truth, Jesus is risen from the dead. They now had the courage of their master. They were becoming like him.

So to have someone's spirit is to be like that person. Today, the Holy Spirit still works among us. Every time we desire God, act in love or speak the truth, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. That you are here seeking a deeper understanding of God is a sign the Spirit is at work in your life. If you feel you can truly say: *Jesus is Lord*, then it is the Holy Spirit opening you to truth:

**No one can say 'Jesus is Lord'
unless they are under the influence of the Holy Spirit.**

(1Cor 12:3)

SHARING

1. Underline a significant sentence in the previous page.
2. Can you recall a time when you felt strongly drawn to God? Can you see that that was the Holy Spirit?

THE TRINITY

The word *trinity* means three in one. You have probably noticed that we refer to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Christian faith understands that there is only one God but three persons in God. Each person is separate but they live in complete harmony with each other, so much so, they are *One*. We only know this because it has been revealed to us. This understanding of three distinct persons, yet only one God, is mystery.

In our spiritual journey our arrival point is God. We go to God the Father, through Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is perfectly valid to pray to either person, but it helps if you are conscious of the role each one plays in bringing us salvation:

- **God the *Father* is the source and giver of all life.**
- **God the *Son* is sent by the Father so we can be brought into divine life.**
- **God the *Holy Spirit* is sent by the Father so we may become one with Christ and bring God's kingdom into our world.**

THE PROMISE FULFILLED

When *Pentecost* day came round, they *had all met together*, when suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of a *violent wind* which filled the entire house in which they were sitting, and there appeared to them *tongues as of fire*; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to *speak different languages* as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves.

Now there were devout people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled, and each one was bewildered to hear these men speaking their own language. They were amazed and astonished. Surely, they said, all these speaking are Galileans? How does it happen that each of us hears them in our own native language? (Acts 2:1-9)

COMMENTARY

Pentecost

In *Greek* *pente* means *fifty*. This event takes place 50 days after the Resurrection.

Had all met together

Here is the beginning of the Church. This particular assembly is like an unborn baby. Something has to happen for the next stage of life to begin.

Violent wind

Scripture likens the Spirit to a violent wind. Wind is the breath of the earth. It re-freshes and clears the air. The Holy Spirit clears away doubt and confusion so we can be free to commit ourselves to the Risen Lord.

Tongues as of fire

Fire represents passion. After this event the apostles proclaim the Resurrection with conviction. This becomes their love. Jesus now becomes the Lord of their lives.

Speak in different languages

This tells us the whole world is called to hear the word of God. If we believe the message and proclaim it, not even another language can prevent the hearer from understanding.

SHARING

1. Can you recall fear or confusion from your thoughts of wanting to grow closer to God?
2. If someone asks you about your faith, can you speak about it without feeling embarrassed?

THE CHURCH - the body of Christ.

The Christian Church was born when the apostles received the Holy Spirit. It is now time to reflect on what it means to belong to the Church.

Put simply, we can say the Church is a group of people who belong to Jesus Christ. They are a people who commit their lives to Jesus and to each other. Together, they share Christ's longing for God to reign in the world.

We can also say the Church is Jesus here on earth. Imagine a circle of people holding hands. In the centre is the Risen Christ, and his life, his power stems out to each. Jesus lives in each individual, but, we are one body, the body of Christ. So, if all her members were able to love perfectly, the world would be able to say: *there is God's Kingdom*. We are not perfect of course, but God will work through us; in spite of our sinfulness.

What is important to understand is: *belonging to the Church is a natural part of belonging to Christ*. You can't be a private Christian. Jesus saved humanity, not individuals.

When we talk about belonging to Christ, we are in the realm of mysticism. We do not see Jesus, except with the inner eye of faith. In our scriptures, we have wonderful mystical images to explain the nature of the Church. In St John's gospel Jesus puts it this way:

**I am the vine,
you are branches.
Whoever remains in me, with me in them,
bears fruit in plenty;
for cut off from me you can do nothing.** (Jn 15:5)

The above scripture is saying the followers of Jesus have work to do, and to be successful in it they must remain close to Christ. We are not given faith just for ourselves, but to make use of it in the world. We discover the nature of this work when we read the gospels. What Jesus did there is what the Church is called to do now.

While on earth, Jesus observed suffering and injustice in so many forms. He saw many who were lost because they were trapped in their own sinfulness. Even religious leaders seemed to be emphasising things wrongly. They called for obedience to their religious laws, God's Will, but they lacked compassion and understanding.

Jesus was immersed in the scriptures of the Old Testament, so he knew of God's longing for a better world, a world which might reflect what it is like in heaven. His oneness with God the Father meant that God's desire for the world would also be his desire. When the apostles came to Jesus and asked he teach them to pray, his prayer revealed his vision:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father, in heaven,
May your name be held holy,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth,
As it is in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread
And forgive us our sins,
As we forgive those
Who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
And deliver us from evil. (Mt 6:13)**

COMMENTARY

(Underline significant sentences as the following is read)

Our Father

Jesus calls God *Father*. As we saw in session two, intimacy and trust are essential to our relationship with God. Also, God is *our* Father. There can be no distinction among peoples. The Church's mission is to the whole world. All are God's children.

In heaven

This affirms the connection between the divine and the human. We exist in relationship to and with our Creator.

Hallowed be your name

Jesus knows the importance of keeping a place for God in our lives. The words reveal reverence for the Creator. All worship is motivated by this kind of respect. Here, Jesus is praying for the world to recognise God.

Your kingdom come

Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven

This is the essence of Jesus' vision. He observed injustice in the world. He noticed the tyranny of political rulers, their greed and corruption. This is not what God intended. His compassion makes him long for attitudes to change, so we might provide for those in need and treat all with dignity and respect.

Give us this day our daily bread

We all have cares and concerns in life. Jesus does not become so anxious that he makes long and tedious prayers to God. This prayer is a simple act of trust. God will bless the Church with whatever she needs, so the vision can become reality.

Forgive us our sins

These words install in us the confidence to believe in a merciful God. Make no mistake, the Church is made up of sinners. However, we also know, once we recognise our wrongdoing, God calls us to get on with it.

As we forgive those who sin against us

This prayer is a powerful reminder: we cannot move towards God if we harbour resentment and the desire for revenge. These are the things which destroy our efforts to bring the kingdom of God into our world. Love and hate cannot co-exist.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil

Because human beings possess a nature which has lost its awareness of belonging to God, we are frequently tested in life. We might be tempted to ignore the call to justice and rest in the arrogance of materialism, prejudice or selfishness. We live in a world that likes us to conform. As followers of Christ, we will be tempted to water down the challenge of creating the kingdom of God. Only God can keep us faithful.

SHARING

1. Which phrase from the Lord's Prayer explains the purpose of the Church? Why?
2. At this point in time, which phrase appeals most for your prayer?

KEEPING THE VISION ALIVE

It is the work of the Church to keep the vision of Jesus alive. Everything in the Church has to exist for this. So, becoming a Catholic means not only do we accept Jesus as the way to God, but we also join with other believers in helping the vision become reality. Can we create the kingdom of God here on earth?

The Catholic Church does have a hierarchy of leadership - pope, bishops, priests. However, these roles exist for *service* and *leadership*. No one is more important than another. Our vision can only be achieved if we all participate. You will be able to do this by growing close to Christ, by being faithful in your marriages, by caring for your children, by helping your parish community grow in the ways of Jesus, by caring for those in need, by standing up for truth. It is ordinary people who take Jesus into the many paths of life. Those in exalted positions can be more confined.

You will recall the story in session 3, where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. In doing this, Jesus teaches he is there to serve and we must be servants to each other. He said:

**I have given you an example so that
you may copy what I have done to you.** (Jn 13:15)

Only with this mentality can the kingdom of God be established. Your parish community will be extremely important. This is where you will be nourished; it is where you will have the opportunity of joining with others to build a warm and loving community - a family united in Christ. The Church is a worldwide community, but, it is in parish where you join with others to create the reign of God. When this is the case Jesus says to us, just as he said to his disciples:

You are the light of the world. (Mt 5:13-14)

SHARING

1. Do you like being involved in things? What do you find difficult about it?
2. How do you feel about sharing your talents with your parish? e.g. music, time, art, skills.
3. What evidence do you have to show that your parish community reflects the reality of Jesus' presence?

PRAYER SESSION

NOTES



8

Attending to the Spiritual Life

**The call of God is a gentle voice within.
It persists until I realise
God does indeed
Want me as friend and partner
To create a reign of Justice in this world.**

INTRODUCTION - Prayer and Worship

Since your first meeting you have probably noticed your own spiritual growth. Perhaps you are beginning to feel more comfortable with prayer, more personal with God. If this is true, then, in a way unique to you, God has called and you have listened.

The secret you have discovered will continue deepening within you for the rest of your life. On the one hand you know, but on the other, a great cloud prevents you from seeing clearly. It will always be like that. The journey into God is infinite. We must continue our search for:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field. (Mt 13:44)

When the seed of faith is placed within you, it needs nurturing. As soil needs to be nourished for seeds to grow and flower, so does the seed of faith need prayer and worship. We have to take responsibility for ourselves. God respects our freedom and only invites a response.

In Catholic life there are two aspects to help our response - *personal prayer* and the *Liturgy of the Church*. Personal prayer comes in many forms. You must explore, seek guidance if necessary and discover for yourself. However, we are not individuals making our way to God. We are a people. We belong to each other. That is why we come together with others for worship.

Liturgy is our worship as a community. *Liturgy* means *work*. The Church's work is to provide opportunities for Jesus to minister to us, not only as individuals, but as a community. He is our Saviour and we are a people in need.

Liturgy also enables us to give thanks as a community and to express our commitment to one another.

SHARING

1. Discuss the concept of seeking God. What is it like for you?
2. Do you enjoy praying with others?

PERSONAL PRAYER

Any two people who want to deepen their relationship won't leave their meetings to chance. They will plan and put other matters aside to be together. Gradually, as they come to know one another, their love grows. This happens because they have been present to each other.

Our message then is simple: *make time for prayer*. If you neglect prayer, that sense of God's presence will cease to exist. You may go to God when there are difficulties, but this reduces God to a Mr. Fix-it! One great command Jesus gave his friends was:

Remain in my love. (Jn 15:9)

Prayer enables us to practise the presence of God and remain in his love. We can do this anywhere — waiting for a train, walking, jogging or doing some easily performed task. On the other hand, we might go off alone to a quiet spot. This may be at home, an outside setting or your parish church.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the ancient practice of meditation. The idea differs from non-religious meditation practices, because our faith is about a personal relationship with God.

In meditation practices, such as transcendental meditation, the meditator is given a word (mantra) to recite in time with the breathing. In Christian meditation, we use a short phrase or word to place ourselves into the presence of God, e.g. *My Lord and my God*. We are encouraged to pray this in time with our breathing.

There are no rules for prayer. All methods are suggestions only. You must experiment and when meditating find your own mantra. A phrase from scripture is always enriching.

Mantra prayer is helpful because

- It keeps us focused on Jesus
- It is very healing and refreshing
- It develops prayer of the heart
- It teaches us the language of silence

We must never be afraid to be real in prayer. We can be before God as we are. Everything in life speaks of God and leads us to God. If we are full of doubt, confused and struggling to cope we can present this to God in prayer. Also, don't be afraid to seek guidance. It is helpful to confide in another who has trodden the road ahead of us.

At the conclusion of this session, an exercise will be given to help you begin the practice of meditation.

SHARING

1. What have you found useful for prayer?

THE LITURGY OF THE CHURCH

Church provides us with opportunities to worship as one body. Sunday Mass is probably our most common reason for gathering.

It is the work of the Church to ensure Christ is made relevant to us. In her worship, the Church constantly recalls Christ's life. This helps us grow in identifying with him. That is why we have:

THE LITURGICAL SEASONS

Catholic worship is usually fairly structured. The readings at Sunday Mass relate to the aspect of Christ's life we celebrate at the present time. The priest wears different coloured vestments for the seasons. The structure for this is as follows:

Advent

Advent means *the Coming*. It is a period of 4 weeks to prepare for Christmas, the birth of Christ. Conversion is an ongoing process. Each conversion takes us deeper into Christ. Advent is a time to search as though we have never found. The colour used is *purple*, symbolising repentance.

Christmas

This celebrates the birth of Jesus and the surrounding events. (refer Mt Chs 1&2) The colour is *white*, symbolising joy.

Lent

Lent begins 6 weeks prior to Easter. It stems from the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert, preparing for his public ministry. (refer Mt Ch 4) This season is a time for us to focus on the way we live. It is a time to renew our prayer life, to fast and to give alms. The season focuses especially on Justice. The *purple* symbolises repentance. The last week of the Lenten season is known as Holy Week. It concludes with the Good Friday ceremony to remember the Death of Jesus. On Good Friday, *red* is worn, the colour of blood.

Easter

We celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus. While we are always an Easter people, we focus on the Resurrection for six weeks. The colour *white* is used symbolising joy.

Pentecost

This celebration is about the gift of the Spirit and the birth of the Church - the body of Christ. The colour *red* symbolises fire or passion.

Ordinary time

This continues until advent and is made up of about 36 weeks of the year. The colour *green* is used, symbolising growth. During this time, we allow the Christ life take root within us, and we are nourished by a constant returning to him.

SHARING

1. When you attend Mass, does it lead you into a sense of God's presence?

THE SACRAMENTS

The Church appeals to our senses when we worship - *sight, taste, touch, hearing, smell*. It helps to create a sense of Presence. That is why we have rituals and use things like water, oil, fire, incense, bread, wine and various gestures such as bowing, laying on of hands, the sign of the Cross and so on. You will come across all of these when you celebrate the Sacraments.

The Catholic Church places a lot of emphasis on Sacraments - rituals and prayers which help us embrace Jesus at various points in our lives. They have come into existence as the result of the Church's reflection on the ministry of Jesus.

There are seven Sacraments. We will study each of them in greater depth over the next few weeks. They are briefly described below:

THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

Baptism

Brings us into the life of Christ and the Christian community.

Confirmation

Affirms our baptism with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit

Eucharist

Invites us to be nourished by the Word of God (scripture) and by sharing the Lord's supper

The above three are the initiation for full belonging to the Church.

Priesthood

Priests are official representatives of Christ in the ministry of the Church.

Marriage

Married couples unite in God's love and reveal this to others.

The above are the sacraments of service.

Penance

When my inner self is torn apart because of sin, I have a means of being made whole again. This sacrament is about being reconciled to God.

Anointing of the sick

This is about bringing the loving concern of Jesus to a person suffering illness in body, mind or soul. It is particularly appropriate prior to our final healing, death. The Last Rites are administered to a person who is thought to be dying or in danger of death. They usually consist of the sacraments of Reconciliation, Anointing, and Eucharist.

These last two are sacraments of healing.

Three points need to be remembered in order to understand the purpose of sacraments:

1. They provide us with the opportunity to MEET the Risen Christ so he can minister to us at various points in our lives.
2. They are a SIGN of Christ working among us. Signs point to something. In the sacraments they point to Christ at work, e.g. in baptism, *water* symbolises *God's life*. Jesus is living water. We find God in the Risen Christ.
3. The sacraments are celebrated with *symbol* and *ritual*. These help explain what is happening. Whatever is symbolised is taking place. When the sacraments are celebrated prayerfully and with openness, we can say with Mary of Magdala, *I have seen the Lord*. (Jn 20:18)

SHARING

1. Are there questions you might like to ask for clarification at this point?

PRAYER SESSION — A meditation

Being relaxed when you meditate is extremely important. There are many ways to do this but three rules might help you:

Focus on your breathing. *Your breath is your greatest friend when trying to relax. Breathe consciously, deeply and rhythmically.*

Listen to the sounds, *both outside and inside the room, until they cease to become a distraction.*

Use a good posture. *It is important for concentration. A comfortable, supportive chair with a straight back will help. For those familiar with yoga, the lotus or semi-lotus positions are excellent aids.*

Before beginning, choose a word or phrase you feel attracted to using: *Jesus I love you; Jesus I believe in you.* When the relaxation is finished, bring this prayer to mind.

Now:

Be seated firmly and comfortably in your chair... legs uncrossed and feet firmly on the floor... close your eyes...

Breathe deeply and consciously... relax... notice your breathing... listen to the sounds outside the room... inside the room... listen to them... draw them in... let them go... Focus on your breathing... the sounds... distinguish them... really hear them... let them go...

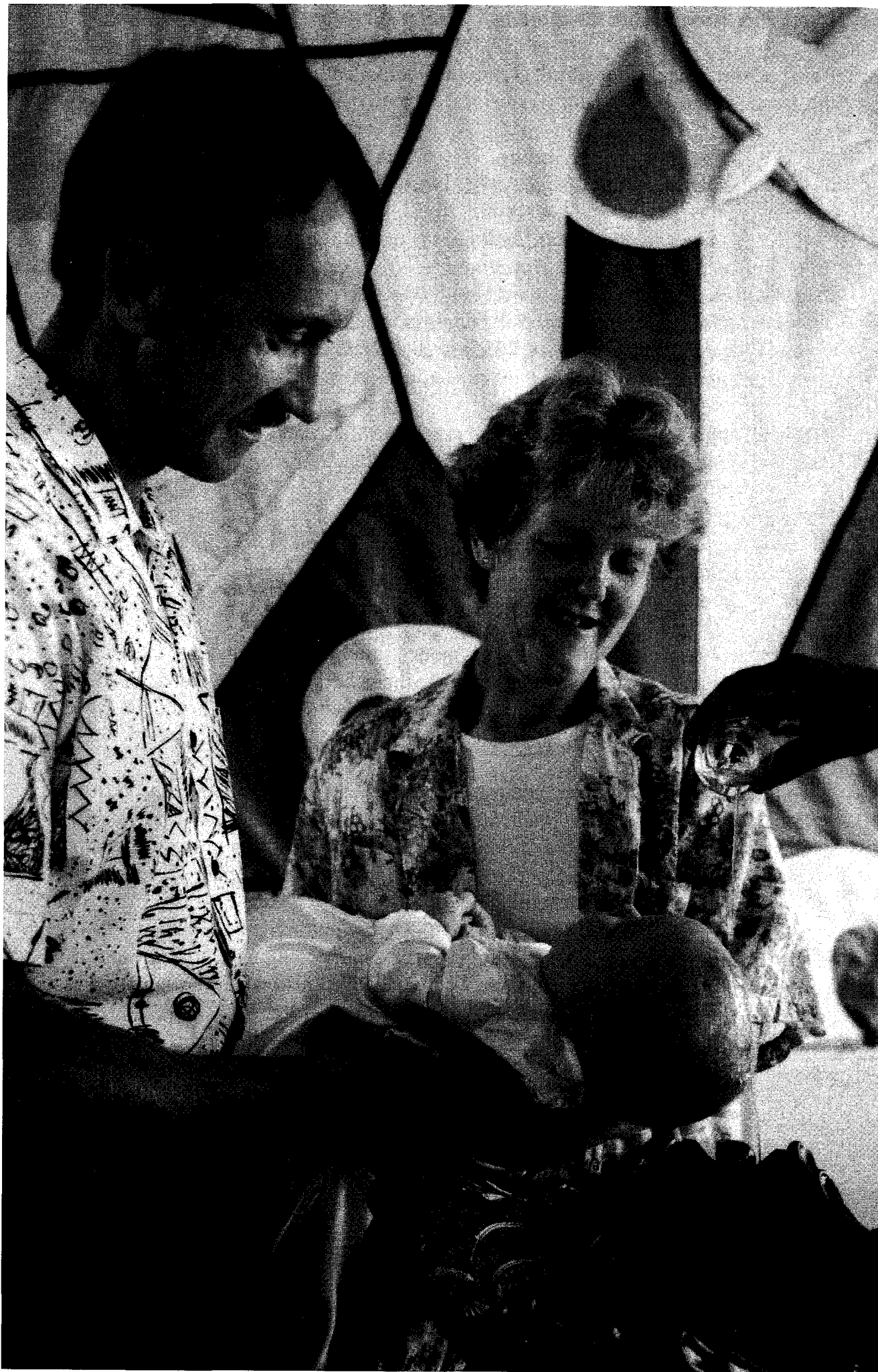
Become aware of your body... notice your posture.... focus for about 5 seconds on each part of your body... forehead... eyes... jaws... let the facial area relax... notice any tension in your body... back of the neck... shoulders... observe the part where your back touches the chair... backs of your thighs against the chair... your right arm... left arm... right leg... left leg...

Return to the soundsyour breathingnow gently imagine Christ present to you... and begin to pray in time with your breathing... use whatever words seem natural to you. Spend about 5 minutes praying as you feel led.

SHARING

1. Talk about your experience of this kind of praying.

Note: There are many books on the modern contemplative prayer/meditation movement. In addition, there are people willing to guide you. It is suggested you ask your local parish priest or pastoral council for help.



9

Baptism

Put on the Lord, Jesus Christ.

(Rom 13:14)

INTRODUCTION - Our broken human nature and original sin

Chapters 2 and 3 in the first book of the bible (Genesis), tell the well-known Adam and Eve story. (*Adam* means *man*, *Eve*, woman) This is a story that attempts to explain the mystery of evil in the world. How is it that man and woman, created in the image of God, have this dark side to their nature? We all know how evil can take over a person's life.

The Genesis story tells us in the Garden of Eden (paradise), man and woman are given freedom to eat from all the trees with one exception. They are not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The command is disobeyed and they are cast out of the garden, the place where they are fulfilled. We call their disobedience the *original sin*. God's command indicates there are fundamental rules in life to obey. Put simply: we need to recognise our Creator and reverence the gift of life.

If we look closely, we will see whenever evil or sin is present, this recognition of God and reverence for life is missing. In the Genesis story, man and woman are not cast out of paradise just because they broke a law, but because they broke a law needing to be obeyed for their happiness. They could no longer live in paradise, that is, in harmony with the world around them. A law which kept their natural existence intact was ignored. It is like refusing food. You cannot live if you disobey certain natural laws.

Once sin entered the world it remained and humankind became a stranger to God. We were lost. Jesus came to show us the way back. Every human being experiences the power of sin, because it is there. At varying levels therefore, we find certain immoral behaviour attractive. This attraction is an illusion. It appears to fulfil but leaves us empty.

Jesus took on this sinful human nature. He was tempted in every way we are, but did not sin. His love for the Father and compassion for the world enabled him to rise above the powers of darkness.

Our call is to walk with Jesus to know the love of God. This motivates us to transcend sin. Love of God enables us to lose interest in darkness. The attraction may still be there but love is the greater force. If a couple genuinely love one another, they may still find themselves attracted to someone else, but their love enables them to choose what is right.

When we are baptised we are given Christ. He makes his home within us. We are now on the road to becoming one with God again. We are no longer strangers. We have the potential to rise above evil.

SHARING

1. Discuss any concept of interest or concern arising from the above.

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The Sacraments of Initiation into the life of Christ, and therefore into the Church, begin with Baptism. To help our understanding, we need to reflect on the phrase *Communion of Saints*.

In our Creed at Sunday Mass we profess these words:

....we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Holy Catholic Church, *the communion of saints*,
the forgiveness of sins.
the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

The term is used for all who belong to Christ, both living and dead. When we are baptised, we are brought into the life of Christ and into a body of people who share this life. This body we know as the Church. All members of the Church throughout the world are united by their life in Christ:

I am the vine, you are the branches. (Jn 15:5)

This understanding is so real, that the Church describes herself as *The Body of Christ*.

We use the word *saint* because it means *holy*. Our human nature has been wounded by sin and made unholy. We became strangers to God. Christ has restored us to wholeness and enables us again to move towards God. In this world we struggle with darkness but Jesus is our hope:

**He is the light that shines in the dark
that darkness cannot overpower.** (Jn 1:5)

Baptism calls for a decision to live in the light of Christ. When we are baptised, we are welcomed into a body of people who share a common union, the life of the Risen Jesus. Sometimes, the Church is referred to as *The Mystical Body of Christ*.

This mystical union we have with each other is a wonderful gift. It means we are able to support one another. We even have a union with the baptised who live on the other side of the world. This is why we pray for one another. We even pray for those who have died, so they might enter fully into eternal life. Furthermore, we know that those who are already in heaven are praying for us who still journey through life. The chief among these is Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church.

The baptised, living and dead, are brothers and sisters in Christ. The Church throughout the world is one body in Christ. This is not to say those who don't share our faith, don't belong to God. All who follow their conscience are moving towards God. In this way, they too share the fruits of Christ's life.

SHARING

1. Underline a significant phrase in the above.

THE SYMBOLISM AND RITUAL OF BAPTISM

Water

Water is the principal symbol for baptism. It speaks of new life and is important for growth. When poured on barren land, new life emerges. When applied to impurities, water cleanses and the surface is made new.

When a person is plunged into large amounts of water, such as the sea, they become surrounded by it. Should they be overwhelmed by the sea and drown, they leave behind the old life to enter something new.

You will recall our first session, *Come to the water*. We saw there that water represents our life with God. The Risen Jesus builds on this theme in a way we could never imagine:

**The water that I shall give
will become a spring of water within,
welling up to eternal life. (Jn 4:14)**

Baptism marks the beginning of our life in Christ. It is as though a little spring of life-giving water is placed within us. It is released, day by day, as we realise the nearness of God.

At Baptism we are placed into the life of God. Living water falls upon our barrenness, the flower of the Christ-life emerges, the impurity of a sinful nature is cleansed. We are placed into the sea of God's infinite life. This overwhelms the old and a new person emerges: *God in me, and I in God. I in the Body of Christ.*

For Baptism we choose either of two rituals to convey the inner meaning:

1. Pour water over the head of the person.
2. Plunge the person into the water (baptism by total immersion).

**I baptise you in the name of the
Father And of the Son
And the Holy Spirit**

For the Jewish people, to mention the name of another is a weighty thing. It effectively brings the person into your presence. You then act on their behalf. At baptism, we act in God's name and immerse a person into divine life. We could be saying: "I place you *into* the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit". A way of living is marked by this ceremony.

SHARING

1. If you were not baptized in childhood, do you regret this, or, will you be glad to be aware of the moment of your baptism?

REALISING OUR IDENTITY

Anointing with the oil of Chrism

After the baptism, the person is anointed on the crown of the head, with the blessed oil of chrism. These words are prayed:

**As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King,
so may you live always as a member of Christ's body
and come to share eternal life.**

Priests of the Old Testament offered sacrifice on behalf of the people. Jesus offered his life as a sacrifice for us. He is the supreme High Priest and we share his priesthood because we share his life.

Prophets are those who call us to truth. In the Old Testament they called the people of Israel back to the ways of God. Jesus is the ultimate Prophet — full of truth. When we witness to God's kingdom, we too are prophets.

Kings of the Old Testament were in a sacred role as leaders of God's people. Jesus is a descendant of King David but establishes God's Kingdom. When we accept Christ we become a royal people.

As people who share Christ's life, we are called to share his mission. Through the sacrifices we lovingly make for each other, we pour out our lives - **priest**. We stand for the ways of God - **prophet**. We live as members of a royal family - **king**.

We saw earlier, when we forget our life in Christ, our behaviour tends to fall short of what ought to be. The following scripture quotes may help us in our understanding:

**It is no longer I who live,
but it is Christ who lives in me. (Gal 2:20)**

**We are God's work of art
created in Christ Jesus for the good works
which God has already designated
to make up our way of life. (Eph 2:10)**

**Wake up sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph 5: 14)**

**Glory be to God whose power,
working in us,
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine. (Eph 3:20)**

SHARING

1. It is suggested you take one of the above quotes to memorise and use often in prayer. Which has most appeal?

INFANT BAPTISM

It has been the tradition of the Catholic Church to baptise infants soon after their birth. Some have problems with this. They want to know why we are baptising one who isn't aware of what is happening.

Firstly, we only baptise infants when parents request it.

As an explanation, we know the child is born into a world where sin exists. This means, pathways through life will be offered which lead to emptiness and confusion. At infant baptism, it is as though we are saying: *here is a path leading you safely to the fullness of life.*

When children mature, they will have to decide whether or not they accept what has been given. Parents' work is to point the way to salvation. They cannot make the response for their child.

ADULT BAPTISM

When an adult is baptised, it is usually preceded by some kind of search, and now the Spirit has brought this person to a defining moment.

For some, baptism may mark the beginning of a radical change - from a life without reference to God, to a life with God. Perhaps an inner emptiness has prompted deeper questions and has led to this change. Such a one would identify with the following:

**I once was lost, but now I'm found,
was blind but now I see.**

(Hymn: Amazing Grace)

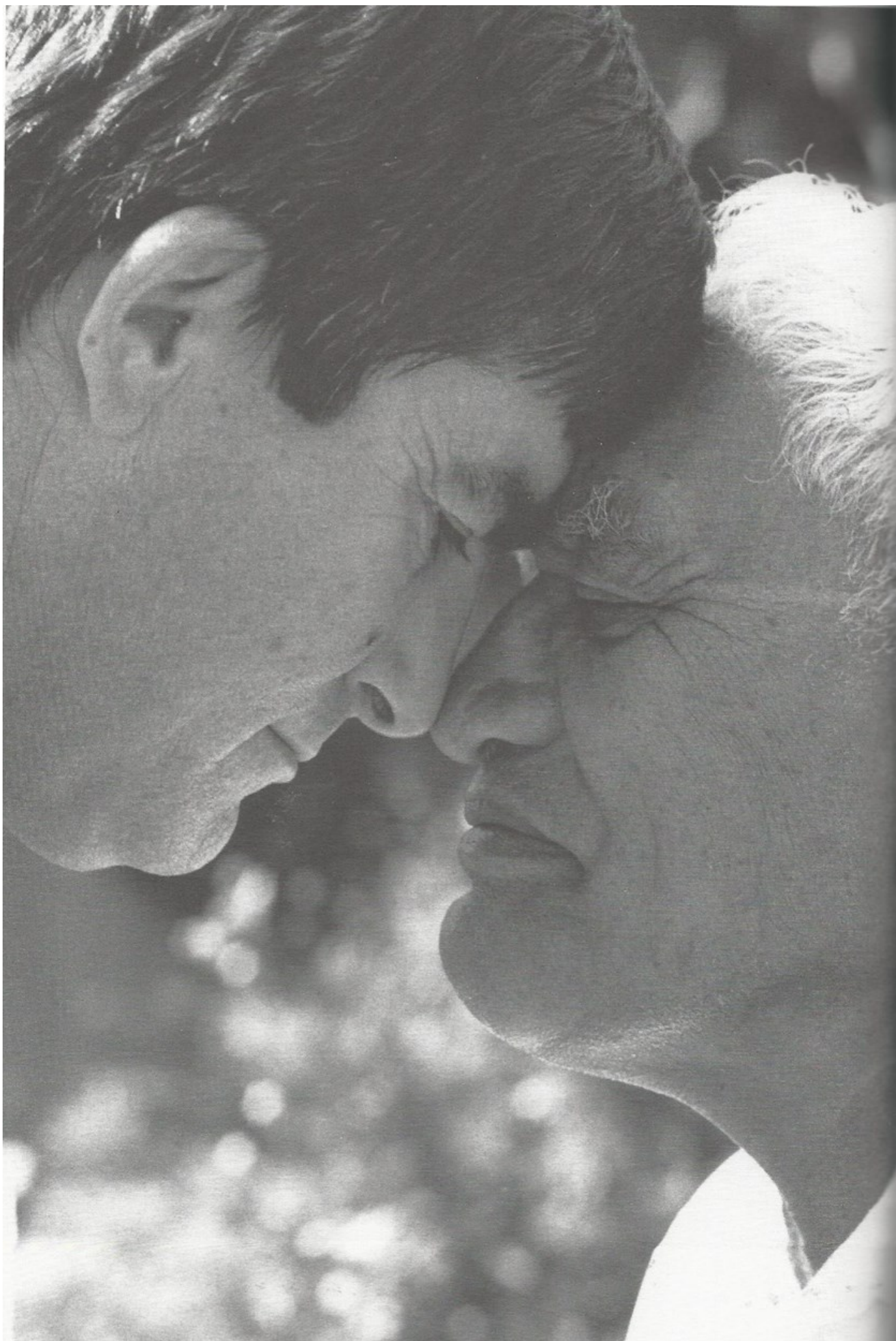
For others, baptism is just the next step on their journey. After a time of questioning and reflection, the time has arrived to step out into the deep. So the decision is made.

SHARING

1. If you have already been baptized, do you think it was more than a social event for your parents?
2. It is common for parents who rarely attend Church to want their child baptized. Do you think they should do this?
3. If you are hoping to be baptized next Easter, would you like to speak about your journey? Where have the influences come from?

PRAYER SESSION

NOTES



10

Confirmation

Come, know the richness of my spirit.

INTRODUCTION

Confirmation is the second sacrament which initiates us into the Body of Christ, the Church. It calls on the Holy Spirit to bring us the gifts we need to be mature followers of Jesus.

The picture heading this session is the *hongi*. In Maori custom the hongi is a form of greeting. The noses meet and the breath of life passes through the nose, one to another. The Maori explanation is: *Give me your nose, that our spirits might be one*. In Confirmation, Christ is bending close to us, inviting us to share his Spirit.

In session six, we reflected on the Holy Spirit and saw the power of this Spirit transform the Apostles. As a result, they were able to go out and proclaim the Resurrection with clarity and conviction. They did not keep what they had discovered to themselves. Such an attitude would prove a lack of understanding.

The Church exists to realise the vision of Jesus for the world:

**Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.** (Mt 6.10)

When we enter new situations we might find ourselves labelled *beginners*. Inevitably though, there comes a time when we can no longer remain novices. Life calls us into maturity and human dignity demands people be given responsibility. Jesus treated his followers this way, and he treats us likewise:

You are the salt of the earth. (Mt 5:13)

Salt makes a difference to food. It brings out the full flavour. Jesus saw the potential in his disciples to be like this in the world. As his followers today, we can make a difference to the world and bring out its full beauty. The gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on us at Confirmation are for this purpose.

On a practical level, we must first cooperate with our own parish. We can express our goals as follows:

- become a people committed to God through prayer and worship.
- express commitment by forming a thoughtful community, committed to the principles of justice.
- invite others to experience the life we have found in Christ.

SHARING

1. Share one sentence from the above that is significant for you.

THE SYMBOL AND RITUAL OF CONFIRMATION

The laying of hands

From earliest times in the Church, the laying of hands on the head has been used as a symbol of passing on the power of Christ. At Confirmation, the priest will lay his hands on your head to pass on the Holy Spirit. Just prior to this gesture he will pray:

**All powerful God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water
and the Holy Spirit,
you freed your children from sin and gave
them a Helper and Guide.**

**Give them the
*Spirit of Wisdom***

**and
*Understanding***

**the
*Spirit of Right Judgement***

**and
*Courage,***

**the
*Spirit of Knowledge***

**and
*Reverence.***

**Fill them with the
Spirit of Wonder and Awe
In your presence.**

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Anointing with Oil

In the celebration of this sacrament, oil is used as a symbol of sealing. The Spirit of God is sealed within us. As we invoke the Holy Spirit, the sign of the cross is made on the forehead. The words are prayed:

Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

The gifts we pray for at Confirmation are taken from the prophet Isaiah, 11:1-4. They are qualities easily seen in Jesus. The accompanying scripture shows how each gift might be applicable to our lives. Let us study them individually.

Wisdom

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let them renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save their life will lose it; but anyone who loses their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it. (Mk 8:34-35)

Understanding

These are the very things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God. After all, the depths of a person can only be known by their own spirit, not by any other person. In the same way, the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God. (1Cor 2:10-12)

Right Judgment

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways. (Is 55:8)

Courage

“My Father” he said, “if this cup cannot pass me by without my drinking it, your will be done!” (Mt 26:42)

Knowledge

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Mt 16:16)

Reverence

Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord' and not do what I say? (Lk 6:46)

Wonder and Awe

**I look up at the heavens, made by your hands,
at the moon and the stars you set firm —
what are human beings that you spare a thought for them,
or the children of Adam that you care for them?
Yet you have made them little less than a god,
you have crowned them with beauty and glory. (Ps 8:3-5)**

SHARING

1. Choose one of the gifts and discuss how the scripture might relate to it.
2. From the above scriptures, is there one that might be confusing to a non-believer?
3. Put a tick beside the gift you need most of all.

THE WAY OF COMPASSION

**You have already been told what is right
And what God wants of you.
Only this, to live justly, To love faithfully
And to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)**

Christianity is a religion which invites others to discover what we have discovered. However, we are never believed unless our lives witness to what we proclaim. Preaching is one way of spreading the Good News, but we preach most powerfully by living the way of Christ - the way of compassion. We can never claim maturity as a Christian unless we have a compassionate spirit.

When we look at the preaching of Jesus in the gospels, it seems the only time he condemned others, was when they ignored those in need. He chose to stand alongside the poor. If the Kingdom of God is to exist in this world, then those who are oppressed in life must be set free. Let us reflect on the following:

There was a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day. And at his gate there lay a poor man called Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even came and licked his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to the bosom of Abraham. The man also died and was buried.

In his torment in Hades (Hell) he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his bosom. So he cried out, "Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames." "My son," Abraham replied, "remember that during your life good things came your way, just as bad things came the way of Lazarus. Now he is being comforted here while you are in agony. But that is not: between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, to stop anyone, if he wanted to, crossing from our side to yours, and to stop any crossing from your side to ours. (Lk 16:19-26)

SHARING

1. What do you think is meant by the great gulf separating Lazarus and the rich man?

COMMENTARY

- **The rich man is condemned, not because he is rich, but because he ignores the poor man.**

The kingdom of God cannot have both greed and compassion. We have to make a choice. We understand Christian spirituality, when we realise everything we have is only entrusted to us. We are mere stewards of our wealth.

**To love as God,
We should know
That the earth is a gift to be shared.
Just as the sun, rain and air
Are given to all in common,
So each person has the right
To food,
Shelter,
Clothing,
And everything needed
To keep their dignity intact.
When we have more than we need,
Justice demands we share.**

Greed, selfishness and thoughtlessness are perhaps our greatest sins. We cannot live claiming to belong to Christ, while ignoring the gross suffering in our world.

To help us develop a compassionate spirit, the Church emphasises Justice during the season of Lent, a six week period of repentance prior to the celebration of Easter. In this time we are invited to participate in three practices important to the spiritual life: **prayer, fasting, almsgiving.**

- **Prayer** - empowers us to share generously and focus on others.
- **Fasting** - helps us put life in perspective.
- **Almsgiving** (giving money or goods to those in need) - breeds a sharing spirit. A recommended practice is to fast from the luxuries of life, and, what would have been spent helps make up our contribution.

A PRACTICAL EXPRESSION

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate people one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me." Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?" And the king will answer, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." (Mt 25:31-40)

SHARING

1. What organisations exist in your parish to assist in feeding the hungry etc.
2. *As cold as charity*. Why do you think this expression exists? What can we learn from it?

THE PROPHETIC ASPECT OF JUSTICE

There are three ways of working to create a just world. One is to ensure we ourselves don't become trapped in a world of materialism, greed and revenge. The second is to share with those in need. And the third is to ask *why* injustice exists in the first place.

Today, because of improved communications we are quickly informed. We know that for peace to result in certain areas of the world, forgiveness is the only option. We also have a growing consciousness of the unjust structures which create many of our problems. It can take a brave person to stand up and point them out. Such people are the modern day prophets. We must listen with open minds and examine the issues.

Issues which create injustice might relate to:

- respect for all races
- rights of indigenous people
- respect for minority groups
- protection of workers' rights
- adequate provision for the unemployed
- adequate provision for the solo parent
- care of planet earth
- reverence for life - the unborn, the handi-capped, the aged
- equality of women
- treatment of prisoners
- the stockpiling of nuclear weapons

SHARING

1. What would you consider to be a social injustice in this country today?

THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

Every tree is known by the fruit it bears. (Lk 6:44)

It is the fruit we bear that enables the Church achieve its mission. St Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit as follows:

Love

Joy

Peace

Patience

Kindness

Goodness

Trustfulness

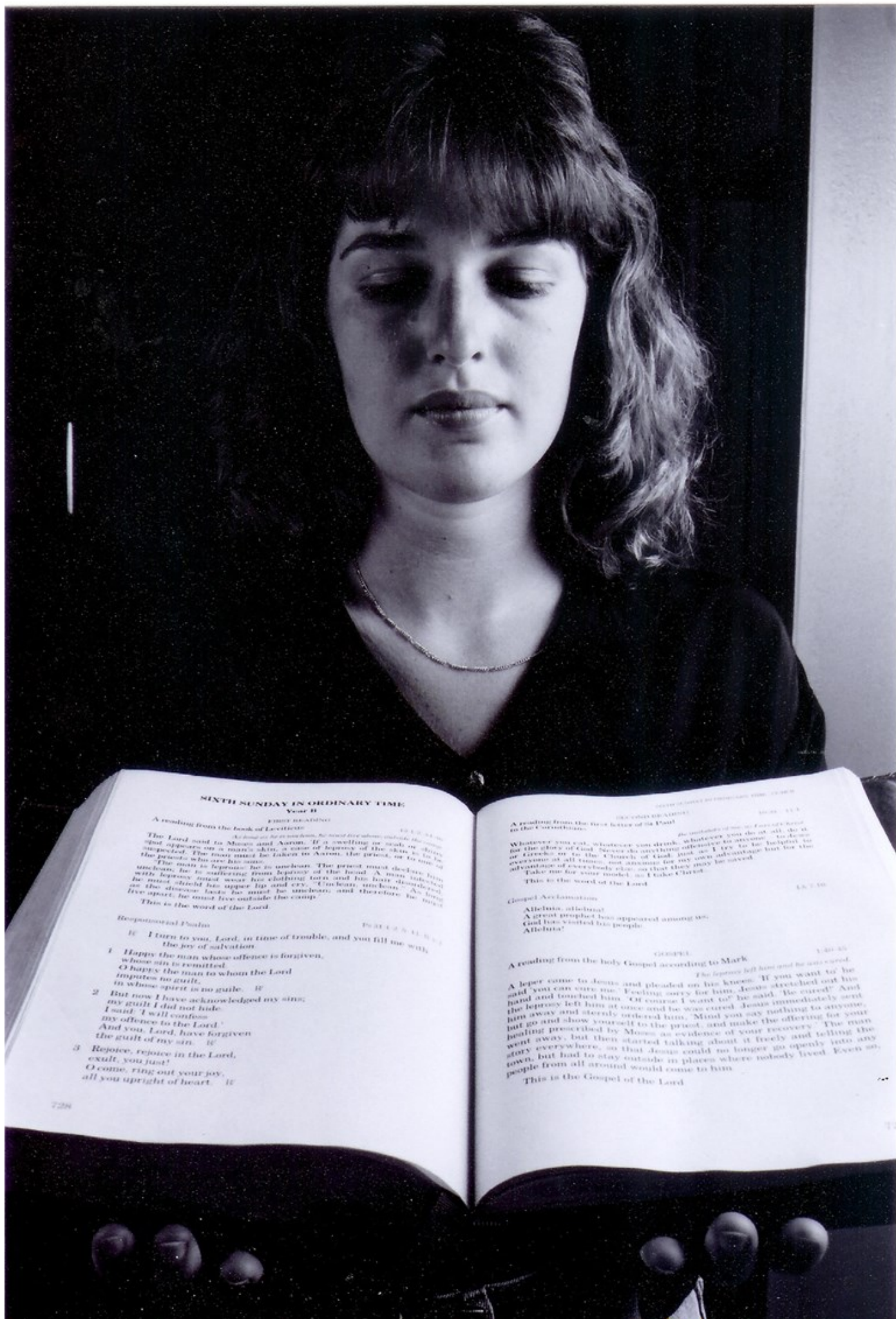
Gentleness

Self-control (Gal 5:22)

SHARING

1. Why do you think we have emphasised justice in this reflection on the Sacrament of Confirmation?
2. Which of the fruits do you feel most inclined to ask God for?
3. Why do you think we should bother being compassionate towards criminals?
4. Can you name a person who preaches to you by the way they live?
5. How do you feel about asking *why* social problems exist?

PRAYER SESSION



SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year B

A reading from the book of Leviticus

As though all his members were clean, he must live alone, outside the camp, and appears on a man's skin, a case of leprosy of the skin as the priests who are his sons.
The man is leprous; he is unclean. The priest must declare, "Leprous, he is suffering from leprosy of the head. A man infected with leprosy must wear his clothing torn and his hair disheveled; he must shield his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' As long as the disease lasts he must be unclean, and therefore he must live apart; he must live outside the camp."
This is the word of the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 138
R I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

1 Happy the man whose offense is forgiven,
whose sin is remitted.
O happy the man to whom the Lord
imputes no guilt,
in whose spirit is no guile. R

2 But now I have acknowledged my sins;
my guilt I did not hide.
I said, "I will confess
my offense to the Lord."
And you, Lord, have forgiven
the guilt of my sin. R

3 Rejoice, rejoice in the Lord,
exult, you just!
O come, ring out your joy,
all you upright of heart. R

A reading from the first letter of St Paul

the apostle of Jesus Christ, to the Corinthians
Whatever you eat, whatever you drink, whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God. Never do anything offensively to anyone, to Jews or Greeks or to the Church of God, just as I try to be helpful to everyone at all times, not anxious for my own advantage but for the advantage of everybody else, so that they may be saved.
Take me for your model, so I take Christ.

This is the word of the Lord

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia, alleluia!
A great prophet has appeared among us;
God has visited his people.
Alleluia!

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

The leprosy left him and he was cured.
A leper came to Jesus and pleaded on his knees, "If you want to, he said, 'You can cure me.' Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. 'Of course I want to,' he said. 'Be cured!' And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured. Jesus immediately sent him away and sternly ordered him, 'Mind you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery.' The man went away, but then started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him.
This is the Gospel of the Lord

11

The Mass

Part One

The Word

**The Word of God
Is something
Alive and active.
It can slip through the place
Where the soul is divided
From the spirit.
It can judge the secret
Emotions and thoughts.**

(Hebrews 4:12-13)

INTRODUCTION

For Catholics, Mass is the central act of worship. If you are to become Catholic, you will need a good understanding of what the Mass is about. The practice of attending Mass each Sunday will need to become a natural part of your life. This practice has been in existence from the very beginning of the Christian faith. It is our community coming together as one body to celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In a real sense, each Sunday is an Easter Sunday.

Worship reminds us of our dependence upon God. It nourishes the soul and creates a greater response. It also leads us to gratitude - a quality essential for our continued growth in Christ.

The Mass is made up of two main parts:

The Liturgy of the Word **The Liturgy of the Eucharist.**

The Liturgy of the Word takes us to one of our greatest treasures, The Scriptures. The writing of the scriptures has been inspired by the Holy Spirit, so they contain the power to help us listen to God at the deepest level - the heart.

The Eucharist is the third and final sacrament of initiation into the Church. Rich in symbolism and mystery, we have taken from the life of Jesus the ritual of sharing bread and wine, and we do it, according to his command, to remember him.

In both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist we are being fed by God.

Being with our brothers and sisters in Christ reminds us, we journey towards God as a people. Having others at our side is supportive, particularly if the community makes an effort to be hospitable and work together for the sake of the poor.

Being present at Sunday Mass is an obligation we have, if we accept Christ within the Catholic understanding. How could it be otherwise? It is up to us to ensure there is space in our lives for this. At times, work or family needs might mean we are unable to attend, but often a radical decision is called for, so this obligation can be fulfilled. Continued absence means we lose contact with the community, its faith and its vision.

SHARING

1. What are the difficulties you might experience in attending Mass each Sunday?

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

When you become more familiar with the scriptures, you will come to understand what God has done for his people through the ages, and what he is doing right now in our lives.

People often quote the scriptures to prove a point. It is true we can learn truth from them, but, it is more important we see what God is capable of doing for us. When we know the mentality of God, we will naturally want to do the right thing. It is a matter of recognising God's style. The scriptures help me make God relevant to my life.

At Sunday Mass, the Liturgy of the Word consists of a reading from:

- The Old Testament
- The Psalms -usually sung as a response to the reading
- The New Testament - the Letters or Acts of the Apostles
- The Gospels.

When we learn to read scripture prayerfully, we begin to listen with our hearts, e.g. *come to the water*. If you repeat that phrase many times, soon you will hear it at heart level.

The readings prepare us for the great prayer of the Eucharist. Scripture nourishes, heals, motivates, calls, challenges and consoles. Because scripture is real food for our souls, the book containing the readings for the day is placed on a table.

Scripture is inspired by God. This means the human beings who wrote these documents were guided by the Holy Spirit. As we become familiar with scripture, we realise their power to enable us to pray in a way that no other book can. We conclude our readings with the phrase: *This is the Word of the Lord*. That is: *This is God speaking to you*.

Sometimes, through lack of attention or preparation on our part, the full impact of the readings is lost. It helps if we take an interest in the readings by reflecting on them before we go to Mass. Using them for daily prayer, family or group prayer, is an excellent support.

SHARING

1. Are the readings well presented in your parish?
2. Do you prepare them before going to Mass?
3. Do you sometimes find that you haven't heard a word? Comment.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament contains the scriptures of the Jewish people. This literature reveals their discovery of God and the depth of their spirituality. Jesus was raised in this faith.

Clearly, the salvation Jesus brings is to be offered to the whole world, but Jesus came first of all to his own people. The official Jewish faith does not accept Jesus as we do, but as we have already seen, our spiritual roots are in this faith.

Those who did follow Jesus brought with them the treasure of their scriptures. These we refer to now as the Old Testament. We can say this is the story of God revealing himself to us, up to the arrival of his Anointed One, Jesus Christ. The writings concerning the significance of Jesus are known as the New Testament.

Readings from the Old Testament are still used at Mass. They contain many insights into the nature of God's relationship with us. They especially teach us about God's faithfulness.

The Old Testament reveals God as the source of all life. Humankind is called into relationship with God and commissioned to shape the world:

**Listen to my voice,
then I will be your God and you will be my people.**
(Jer 7:23)

Also, revealed in this literature is the God of Justice who takes the side of the oppressed. God's compassion is highlighted in the book of Exodus, where the people of Israel became enslaved to the Egyptians:

**The children of Israel, groaning in their slavery, cried
out for help and from the depths of their slavery their
cry came up to God.**
(Exodus 2:23)

The God who liberates is revealed through the events that led to their freedom.

Like all of humanity, the Israelites were a people affected by sin. When freed, they wandered into idolatry - the worship of false gods - but when repentant they came to know the God who is rich in forgiving. They learned that God invites them into relationship but leaves them free to respond.

SHARING

1. How do you think we worship false gods today?

THE PSALMS

As a response to the first reading a psalm is read, or sung. The psalms are prayers from the Old Testament and would have been prayed by Jesus. They are very rich, gut-type prayers and worth exploring. We learn much about prayer from these. With prayer, a word or phrase is often sufficient. Committing a phrase to memory and reciting it often is a healthy way to pray.

Petition

**Yahweh, make your ways known to me,
teach me your paths. (Ps 25:4)**

Love

**I love you Yahweh, my strength...
Yahweh is my rock and my bastion,
my deliverer is my God. (Ps 18:1-2)**

Thanks and praise

**Give thanks to Yahweh, for he is good,
for his love endures forever. (Ps 136:1)**

Suffering

**My God, my God, why have you deserted me?
I call all day, my God, but you never answer,
All night long I call and cannot rest. (Ps 22:1-2)**

Wonder

**I look up at the heavens,
shaped by your fingers,
at the moon and stars you set in place -
Ah, who are we that you should spare a thought for us? (Ps 25:4)**

Longing

**As a deer longs for running streams,
so my soul longs for you my God. (Ps 42:1)**

Repentance

**Have mercy on me, O God,
In your goodness, wash me clean of my guilt. (Ps 51: 1)**

Wisdom

**Every human being that stands on earth
is a mere puff of wind...
a mere puff of wind is the wealth stored away -
no knowing who will profit from it. (Ps 39:6)**

SHARING

1. Under a phrase that appeals to you as a prayer.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Second reading - from the Letters, or Acts of the Apostles.

The letters of the New Testament were mostly written by Paul. The others were written by the apostles James, Peter, John and Jude. They are written to the early Christian communities to support and encourage them. The letters, especially those written by St Paul, reveal a wonderful depth of understanding of our life in Christ. He says in his letter to the people at Ephesus:

Glory be to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. (Eph 3:20)

The apostle Paul was a Roman citizen and a devout Jew. His original name was Saul. He was not one of the 12 apostles and in Ch 9 of Acts we read of his extraordinary conversion to Christ. Until then, he persecuted those who believed in Jesus. They were to be stamped out, because he couldn't see how God was now to be interpreted through Jesus Christ, and not according to the Jewish law he had always known.

After his awakening to Jesus, Paul took the message to many countries and formed Christian communities within pagan cities. His writings show his concern for them.

Because of his extraordinary missionary career, and because of his understanding of the mystery of Christ among us, he holds a special place in the scriptures of the New Testament. His writings are saturated with our life in Christ, and he uses the phrase *in Christ* many times.

The Acts of the Apostles records the story of the Church's beginnings. We read of the persecution and difficulties the apostles experienced while they continued the ministry of Jesus.

SHARING

1. Are you enjoying the scriptures used in this course? What has been one passage that has had special meaning for you?

THE GOSPEL – climax to the Liturgy of the Word

In addition to the Letters, the New Testament contains the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The word *gospel* means *good news*. Jesus is the Good News. The Kingdom of God is found when we commit ourselves to the Risen Jesus. Take this out and you destroy the whole of Christianity.

While all scripture is important, the Gospels take us to the heart of Jesus' life and teaching. In a real way, we are able to accompany Jesus and allow him minister to us, as he ministered while on earth.

The Gospels are *not* a biography of Jesus, written to give us a history of his life, but rather, *documents that explain the relevance of Jesus to our salvation*.

The Gospels are written in light of the knowledge Jesus is risen from the dead. They are also written with the knowledge that Jesus is God. It was only after the resurrection the apostles realised Jesus is God. He had let go of his divinity to share our human life.

When we read the Gospel stories, it is important to find the meaning of the story or the detail included. For example, in John's Gospel, just before he died, Jesus says:

I am thirsty. (Jn 19:28)

Surely, it is more important to understand that here, we learn of the thirst Jesus has for our love, rather than limit ourselves to the fact he was literally thirsty. Try to find the deeper truth.

Often in the Gospels, Jesus teaches using parables. A parable is a story with a hidden meaning. We come to understand them when we know who Jesus is. Here is an example:

The kingdom of heaven is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through. (Mt 13:33)

When you read the Gospels the important question to ask is: *what is this story telling me to help me on my journey towards God?*

SHARING

1. Discuss the quote, Mt 13:33. What does it mean? How might it help in

The next two pages for reflection during the week.

PRAYER SESSION

A LITURGY OF THE WORD - Christmas night

This is given to help you see how The Liturgy of the Word is set out and to note what was said in the previous page about the Gospels. Note the link between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel. This is normally the case.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah. (9:1-5)

**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; on
those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone.
You have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy
increase;
they rejoice in your presence as people rejoice at harvest time....**

**For there is a child born for us, a son given to us and dominion is
laid on his shoulders;
and this is the name they give him:
Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal Father, Prince of
Peace. Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end,
for the throne of David and for his royal power,
which he establishes and makes secure in justice and integrity.
From this time onwards and forever,
the jealous love of the Lord of hosts will do this.**

Psalm 95

A reading from the letter of St Paul to Titus 2:11-14

**The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,
training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions,
and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled,
upright and godly,
while we wait for the blessed hope
and the manifestation of the glory
of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.**

**He it is who gave himself for us
that he might redeem us from all iniquity
and purify for himself a people of his own
who are zealous for good deeds.**

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke 2:1-14

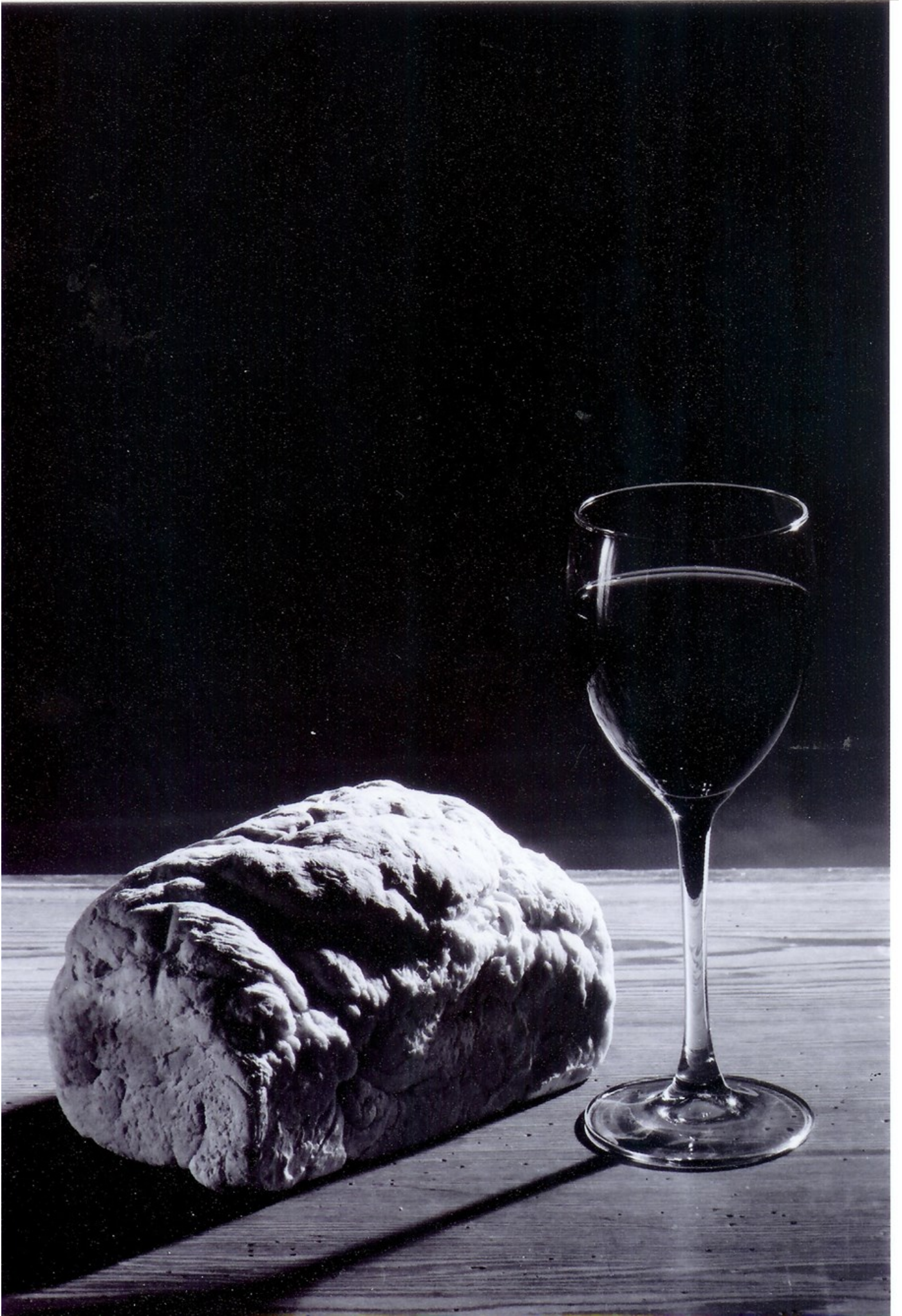
Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This census - the first - took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's house and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in *swaddling clothes*, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn.

In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were terrified, but the angel said: 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you; you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger'. And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to all who enjoy God's favour.

SHARING

1. What do the details in italics, in paragraph two of the Gospel, tell you about Jesus?
2. For you, what sentence in the Gospel is the most important?
3. From the readings, what is happening here?



12

The Mass

Part Two

The Eucharist

**Gratitude is at the heart of Christian prayer.
So that we may develop grateful hearts,
Jesus has said to us, *Remember me.***

INTRODUCTION

The second part of the Mass is the Eucharist. It means *thanksgiving*. At the Eucharist a person is fully initiated into the Church by receiving Communion for the first time. The Eucharist is when we gather, as commanded by Christ, to share a meal in his memory. In this we call to mind the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and give thanks for the salvation he has made possible for us.

To understand Eucharist we need to remember there is a direct connection between:

- **the Last Supper**
- **the death of Jesus**
- **our Eucharist today.**

The Last Supper is the meal Jesus shared with his Apostles on the night before he died. It was at this meal Jesus formally offered his approaching death to God. He did this as a once and for all sacrifice for sin.

**And as they were eating, he took some bread,
and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them.
Take it, he said, *this is my body.***

**Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks
he gave it to them, and all drank from it,
and he said to them,
this is my blood.
The blood of the new covenant which is to be poured out for many.
Do this in memory of me. (Lk 22:19)**

The death of Jesus takes place the next day (Good Friday). His body is broken from the scourging and crucifixion. As a result his blood is drained from his body. We symbolise this by placing bread and wine on the altar separately.

The idea for Jesus to offer his death as a sacrifice for sin, stems from the Jewish tradition of offering a blood sacrifice for sin, in the hope they would be brought back into God's favour. Jesus wants all to know God does indeed forgive, so he offered his death as a once and for all sacrifice. He was without sin, motivated purely by love and his offering was perfect. There is no longer a need for anything more. We are a forgiven people.

Our Eucharist today. At Mass we gather as one family in Christ, to share this meal and to remember Jesus - his life, death and resurrection. In this we are reminded of the salvation that comes to us through him. We gather in a spirit of thanksgiving.

In scriptural language, *to remember* is something dynamic. It is much more than a mere recalling. It implies bringing something out of the past and making it pre-sent. At the Eucharist, it is as though we are present at the Last Supper and the death of Jesus. When those at the Last Supper consumed the bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus, they became united with him. From that moment, what belonged to

Jesus belonged to them. It is the same for us. His offering is our offering. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection.

The Eucharist invites all followers of Jesus to come together as one family. When we consume the body and blood of Christ we accept the offering made for us.

Jesus is the food and drink we need for our journey. Sharing this meal means we acknowledge the sacredness of each person, and long for the vision of Jesus to be fulfilled: *Father, your kingdom come.*

SHARING

1. Underline a phrase in the above which speaks to you.
2. Can you accept that for Catholics, the bread and wine is Christ? It is an emphatic way of Jesus saying to us: *it is me you receive.*

SUMMARY

Three words help us reflect on the richness of the Eucharist. We can say at this celebration we are taken to the Sacrament of Christ's:

Meal

Christ is the host and invites his friends to share this meal. It implies belonging. The Christian family gather as one.

Presence

Jesus is really and truly here in the form of bread and wine. He is the food and drink we need for our journey through life.

Sacrifice

This meal reminds us we are a forgiven people. Christ has offered his death as a once and for all sacrifice for sin.

SHARING

1. We are a forgiven people. How does this help you on your journey?

THE RITUAL AND SYMBOLS OF THE EUCHARIST

Bread and wine

These are common foods in most cultures. They symbolise nourishment - daily food and drink.

Bread is made from wheat, wine from grapes. Both elements must be crushed before they reach their full potential.

The body of Jesus was crushed in his sacrifice. Then he rose from the dead to be with us as our daily spiritual food and drink.

Table or Altar

As a family, we gather around this table and share the meal in memory of Jesus, celebrating our salvation. Meals imply *intimacy, honour, friendship, belonging*. The Eucharist summarises the relationship we have with God.

To emphasise the sacrifice of Jesus, the *table* is called an *altar*. When the Jews placed their offering on an altar, they were giving it to God. With the sacrifice of Jesus in mind, we place our gifts of bread and wine on the altar.

Offertory

You may have noticed parishioners putting bread and wine on the table at Sunday Mass. In this they indicate our willingness to belong to the sacrifice of Jesus. On our behalf, the priest raises the bread and wine in offering to God. He says a prayer of blessing:

Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread to offer which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.

Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation, through your goodness we have this wine to offer. Fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink.

SHARING

1. When the bread and wine are placed on the altar, we unite our whole lives with the sacrifice of Jesus. Have I consciously placed my life into God's hands? That is, I am prepared to live according to the way of Jesus?

Marriage	children	work	wealth	home
Talents	health	friends	possessions	

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

After the Offertory the Eucharistic prayer begins. During this, the most important aspects of ritual and symbol take place. There are several Eucharistic prayers, but for our study we will take one that is commonly used. It is suggested one person read the prayer in the left hand column, and someone else read the commentary on the right hand side.

*Father, you are holy indeed
and all creation
rightly gives you praise.
All life, all holiness comes from you
through your Son, Our Lord Jesus
Christ,
by the working of the Holy Spirit.*

*From age to age you gather a people
to yourself,
so that from east to west
a perfect offering may be made to the
glory of your name.*

*And so Father we bring you these
gifts. We ask you to make them holy
by the power of the Holy Spirit
that they may become the body and
blood of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, at
whose command we celebrate this
Eucharist.*

*On the night he was betrayed,
he took some bread and gave you
thanks and praise. He broke the
bread, gave it to his disciples and
said*

***Take this all of you and eat it: this is
my body which will be given up for
you.***

*When supper was ended, he took the
cup. Again he gave you thanks and
praise, gave the cup to his disciples
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 for-
given.
Do this in memory of me.***

Eucharist means thanksgiving. The love of God explains all we have.

ALL IS GIFT!

It is said that every two seconds, someone, somewhere is beginning the Eucharist. This is like a vapour of praise going before God in an act of gratitude.

While saying the words opposite, the priest places his hands over the bread and wine, calling on the Holy Spirit to transform our gifts into this spiritual food.

This is a reference to the Last Supper where Jesus instituted the Eucharist. While the whole prayer is sacred, these words constitute a special moment. The bread and wine are blessed separately to symbolise that Jesus' blood was separated from his body.

To *remember* in biblical understanding means to *bring the past to the present*. It is a dynamic word and implies more than a mere recalling.

Let us proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again.

Father, calling to mind the death Jesus endured for our salvation, his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven, and ready to greet him when he comes again, we offer you this holy and living sacrifice.

Look with favour on your Church's offering, and see the victim whose death has reconciled us to yourself. Grant that we who are nourished by the body and blood of Christ may be filled with the Holy Spirit and become one body, one spirit in Christ.

May he make us an everlasting gift to you and enable us to share in the inheritance of your saints, with Mary, the virgin Mother of God; with the apostles, the martyrs, and all your saints, on whose constant intercession we rely for help.

Lord, may this sacrifice which has made our peace with you, advance the peace and salvation of the whole world. Strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim Church on earth; your servant, Pope ... our Bishop ... the clergy and the entire people your Son has gained for you.

Father, hear the prayers of the family you have gathered here before you. In mercy and love unite all your children, wherever they may be.

Here we proclaim Christ. He is our focus as we journey towards God.

This prayer is about remembering - we will continue to do this until the end of time, when Christ will come again and reveal the fullness of God's love.

Our offering is perfect because it is made by one who is without sin. We have every reason to believe that God would want to fill us with the Holy Spirit and become like Christ.

We are a communion of saints. Mary is held in a special position because she has co-operated with God in bringing salvation to the world. So too, the Apostles, whose faith we share, and all who have lived faith-filled lives.

As Church, we share the vision of Jesus to bring God's kingdom into the world. We are at our best when working together as agents of love. Church leaders bear a special responsibility.

Our prayer is not just for us but for the whole world. That is our mission field.

Welcome into your home our departed brothers and sisters, and all who have left this world in your friendship.

We hope to enjoy forever the vision of your glory, through Christ our Lord from whom all good things come.

*Through him,
with him,
in him,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory
and honour is yours, almighty Father,
for ever and ever,
AMEN.*

We keep a special place in prayer for the dead. Before they can fully enter the fullness of God, the dead must freely leave all imperfection behind.

Hope means having faith in something you cannot see.

The priest holds up the body and blood of Christ to proclaim the mystery.

The word *Amen* is a way of giving assent: *Yes, I believe.*

SHARING

Underline a significant phrase or sentence in the Eucharistic prayer.

COMMUNION

The next stage of our celebration is Communion. We come forward to receive the body and blood of Christ. We share a common food, and so we are in union with each other. In preparation, the congregation recites the Lord's Prayer and offers a sign of peace to each other. This is to remind us we are one family in Christ. There must be no bitterness or resentment as we come to share this meal.

Next, each comes forward to receive Communion. First, one receives the body of Christ and then goes to drink from the cup, the blood of Christ:

**For my flesh is real food
and my blood is real drink.** (Jn 6: 55)

When we do this we are identifying with Jesus and saying: *Yes, I will live as you have lived. I will be your servant and allow my life to be drained from me. I will become one with your sacrifice.*

To receive Communion worthily, we need to remember that in God's sight there is no class system. Respect for all is an absolute.

When the distribution of Communion is finished, there comes a time of silence for personal thanksgiving. We sit together in God's presence - a blessed people. In this silence we pray as we feel led. Gratitude, praise, love - these should be the sentiments we express at this time:

**Let us give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ.
Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ,
to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence.**

(Eph 1:3-4)

Sharing this meal has consequences. Mass is not over until the next time, rather, it lives on in us throughout the week. We come to be nourished, but we are *sent* out to nourish others. We are what we eat and Christ is our food. It is we who make Christ present in the world. If I am doctor, driver, publican, nurse, teacher, parent, husband, wife, homemaker, it is there I make Christ present. We are partners with Christ in redeeming the world.

SHARING

1. Thanksgiving time should be a prolonged period of silence at Mass. It is an ideal time for mantra type of prayer. Can you cope with silence or are you still getting used to it?
2. What would you say to someone who says: *I don't need to go to Mass, I can get close to God at home.*

PRAYER SESSION

NOTES



13

Marriage

Servants in love

**Brother, sister let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant too.**

(Dave Gillard)

INTRODUCTION

Because marriage is the primary vocation of most people, there can be a tendency to downplay its sacredness. Properly lived, it leads us to experience God in a unique way. We are told in the scriptures:

God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them. (1 Jn 4:16)

Marriage is the union of two people committed to mutual faithfulness. In this kind of love, a love which will encourage, forgive, understand and affirm, a couple bring God who is love to each other, to their children and the wider community. For these reasons, the Church teaches that the marriage vows must be honoured for life.

Marriage is a sacrament - a way of meeting God - and when we reflect on the nature of the marriage commitment, we see how relevant a life of faith really is. The concepts which make up Christian spirituality - being called, losing my life to find it, giving until I can no longer take, dying that I might rise - are fully relevant to the marriage vows. We can be confident marriage offers a unique opportunity to experience God and become fully human.

Marriage is, in every respect, part of the divine plan for us to share in the creating and healing love of God. Couples united in marriage should regard themselves as called by God to be partners and gift to each other.

Usually within this calling, husband and wife extend their love by having children. Here, they work as co-creators with God. A family comes into being and another dimension to the gift of marriage unfolds. Family life offers us the intimacy we all need. Love created humankind and love brought about their redemption. In marriage, husband and wife imitate the love of God through their power to conceive and raise children.

Marriage will only reach its full potential if entered into with the mentality of Christ, and if the couple are conscious of the need for *commitment*. Without this, they will be powerless in the difficult phases of married life - those opportunities for new growth.

We have seen repeatedly, the Church exists to realise the vision of Jesus who prayed: *Father, your kingdom come, you will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. If this vision can be realised, the family is perhaps the first place we should look to find it. The Church is God's family, made up of many families. Her mission can never be achieved unless married couples are aware of their calling.

SHARING

1. Underline any significant sentence or phrase from the above.

DESIGNED BY GOD

“Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate.’ So from the soil Yahweh God fashioned all the wild beasts and all the birds of heaven. These were brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all the wild beasts. But no help-mate suitable for man was found for him. So Yahweh God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And while he slept, he took one of his ribs and enclosed it in flesh. Yahweh God built the rib he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man. The man exclaimed: ‘this at last is bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh! This is to be called woman, for this was taken from man.’ This is why a man and woman leave their father and mother and join together to become one body.”

(Gen 2:18-25)

COMMENTARY

The creation stories in the book of Genesis are myth. This means, we do not interpret them literally, but look for the spiritual truth contained in the story. The bible is not a scientific book. What we can take from this story is that God has designed man and woman to complement one another. Clearly, the last sentence in the above quote points to the unique gift of marriage.

SHARING

1. Probably few people ask God to guide them to the right person for marriage. Do you think God does this anyway?
2. Do you consider marriage to be a special call in the same way a priest might feel called?

THE SYMBOL AND RITUAL IN THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY

In Christian marriage, husband and wife live in imitation of Christ. The faithfulness of Christ is reflected in the marriage vows. The rings symbolise the unending nature of this bond.

The vows

*I ...take you... to be my wife/husband.
I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.
I will love you and honour you all the days of my life.*

Exchange of rings

*...take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity.
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Before the altar

Today, people like to marry in the pleasant settings of nature. The Church asks Christians to marry before the altar. It is not just a matter of marrying in *the presence of God*, who is after all everywhere, but of standing before the altar - that symbol of Christ's total giving until death.

We saw in our study of the Eucharist, that on the altar we make present the *sacrifice, meal* and *presence* of Jesus. Christian marriage is a challenge to imitate Christ in his:

Sacrifice - The sacrifice of Jesus speaks of his total giving that we might have the fullness of life. In marriage, husband and wife imitate Christ by letting go of self and committing themselves to one another, spiritually, physically, emotionally. They will be faithful until death.

Meal - At the Last Supper, Jesus shared himself in the form of bread and wine and became one with his followers. In marriage, a couple share their lives and become one with each other. Their total giving is symbolised in sexual intercourse, when they are *no longer two but one flesh*. This is a time of real prayer.

Presence - In the Eucharist, Jesus becomes present and reminds us he is *the bread of life*. We journey at his side and allow him to nourish, strengthen and heal us. In marriage, a couple journey side by side. Through mutual love they nourish, strengthen and heal each other. They are instruments of God to one another.

Those who are married will only find fulfilment if they live with the mentality of Christ, who shows us the nature of God's love. It is well explained in the following scripture:

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. Love does not come to an end.

HOW GOD'S LOVE IS REFLECTED WITHIN MARRIAGE

*God invites us into a covenant relation - ship: **I will be your God and you will be my people.** Love is the only explanation for this.*

*Our covenant with God is sealed with the words of Jesus: **This is my body, given for you.** Jesus sees his life to be lived as a sacrifice for us. His death climaxes his life but it is no isolated act of self-giving. It was an expression of the way he lived the whole of life. On the Cross Jesus is saying: *I love you!**

God constantly calls us to deepen our love by being present to him through prayer and worship. This constant turning to God in love increases our awareness of God's love and encourages us to respond accordingly.

*Jesus is risen and has returned to us. His presence brings us peace, healing, and tells us again: **'do not be afraid. I am with you.'** A person of faith is one who knows this truth. A faith-filled person is one who receives life gratefully.*

Man and woman invite each other into the covenant of marriage: ***I will be your husband, you will be my wife.*** They agree to this because they love one another.

The marriage covenant is sealed with the union of bodies in sexual intercourse, which says in effect: **This is my body, given to you in love.** A sexual relationship only has meaning when mutual love is expressed through daily acts of tenderness, self-sacrifice, and affirmation. When constant reassurance is present, sexual intercourse then says: *I love you.*

When a couple make time to be pre-sent to each other in a way that listens and reassures, they become convinced of the reality of being loved. Then, the concept *God is love* is able to be believed.

The companionship husband and wife enjoy helps them grow in the midst of warmth and reassurance. This enables them to work together, and gratefully accept all that life may bring.

SHARING

1. Underline one significant sentence from the above and comment on why it appeals to you.
2. Have you been aware that one experiences Christ's love through the love of a partner?

A SPACE FOR GOD

In marriage we are called to love our partner as God loves us. We give God to one another in a unique way. However, it would be a mistake to think we could rise to this kind of loving without the help that comes from prayer. What individuals can offer each other is limited, but the more we are aware of God within us, the more complete we will be in our faithfulness.

Sometimes we can be threatened by our partner's attention to God. It can appear I am not sufficient for him or her. If I let my partner go, I will find that when they return there is new life. Prayer strengthens and renews. It sends us back into life with a renewed energy to love.

It can be that couples find it difficult to pray together. This may have to be learned. By all means use formal prayers such as the Rosary or recitation of Psalms. Some may just take a piece of scripture and reflect on it together. Using the readings for Sunday Mass is an excellent practice.

We have already reflected in a small way on meditation. This is an easy and fruitful way for couples to pray together. A suggested practice is to sit in silence, light a candle and just be there in the presence of God. Doing this each day for about ten minutes will soon bear fruit and become a time that is eagerly awaited.

However you do it, praying together will enrich your relationship and strengthen you in your desire to become one with each other. Then you make the greatest contribution possible to the reign of God in our world:

**I give you a new commandment:
Love one another;
Just as I have loved you,
You also must love one another.
By this love you have for one another,
Everyone will know you are my disciples. (Jn 13:34-35)**

SHARING

1. Sometimes couples find it difficult to pray together? Discuss.

FAMILY LIFE

The Catholic faith places great emphasis on family life. Family is the Church in miniature. Children are the fruit of parents' love, called into a particular family, just as we are the fruit of God's love, called to belong to the Body of Christ.

Parents are co-creators of human life with God. This is a sacred calling. In family planning, couples should be conscious of their vocation. When determining the size of family, perhaps the most important question is *what is God calling us to do?* Through prayer, reflection and discussing the issue together, taking into account finances, health and the overall picture, each couple can make a responsible decision concerning the size of their family.

Within the structure of family, parents are the first and best teachers for their children in the ways of faith. The love of husband and wife for each other is the most effective way of saying to a child: *God loves you!*

Within family, parents imitate Christ because they are servants to their children. Family life is their primary mission field. It is their work to provide the security so needed to help children to maturity.

In family life, children can discover a gospel centred spirituality. They learn what it means to belong, to share, reconcile and care. The opportunities are there to teach children how to live gratefully and with a sense of justice.

For this to come to be, Christ must be the foundation of the home. Family prayer creates a spirit of gentleness. God is revealed in parental love and the loving environment they create. It is from such homes that great saints have emerged. Such a home raised Jesus, Saviour of the World.

SHARING

1. Where was the centre of warmth in your home when you were 10 years old?
2. Discuss the value of family meals.
3. Families often develop a unique sense of humour. Can you speak about yours?
4. What suggestions do you have for family prayer?
5. Do you think people generally regard as sacred the things parents do for their children – changing nappies, reading a story, playing a game?

PRAYER SESSION



14

Penance **A Path to Reconciliation**

**Something beautiful, something good,
All my confusion God understood.
All I had to offer
Was brokenness and strife, But God made
Something beautiful of my life.**

(Adapted from hymn by Bill Gaither)

INTRODUCTION

One would think that once we know Christ, we would have enough insight to remain on the straight and narrow. However, we share a human nature which is only learning to claim our salvation in Christ. Our lives often fall short of the mark because we find it difficult to claim our true identity. We are easily distracted. The Old Testament prophet, Hosea, expresses it like this:

What am I to do with you Ephraim?

What am I to do with you Judah?

This love of yours is like a morning cloud,

Like the dew that quickly disappears. (Hosea 6:4)

At the root of sin is worship of self and the refusal to love. Sin is described as behaviour that is off the mark. If one fires an arrow at a target, they may hit the bull's eye, or they may miss in varying degrees. Human behaviour is similar. Sometimes we are well off the mark. We call this *mortal sin* because it deadens our relationship with God.

Other behaviour may be less serious. This is called *venial sin*. However, all sin is serious because of where it can lead. If we don't take control in the early stages, sinful behaviour will fester and eventually become a problem. Sin has the power to cut asunder the unity we enjoy with God and with others. It will also destroy the peace we have with ourselves.

We need to distinguish between *committing sin*, *being in a state of sin* and *being a sinner*.

I *commit sin* when I knowingly and deliberately do something wrong. I also sin if I neglect to do something that should be done for the sake of justice.

I am in a *state of sin* when I refuse to take responsibility for my sinful actions.

When I acknowledge *I am a sinner*, I own my need for Christ and admit a part of me is not yet given over to God.

Sometimes people use guilt to determine correct behaviour. Guilt is a good warning something is wrong, but this can depend upon conditioning. Some behaviour may be quite wrong and the person feels little guilt.

We know what is right by measuring our behaviour against the law of love - love for God, self and others. In the Catholic faith, because the bishops are entrusted to teach in the name of Christ, we ultimately determine what is right by referring to the official teaching of the Church. We must listen carefully to this and try to find the wisdom behind the teaching. We have a serious responsibility to do our best to fulfil the moral teaching of the Church.

However, failure to live up to our teachings doesn't mean we are condemned. We're all sinners, struggling to respond to God. St Paul expresses it this way:

I cannot understand my own behaviour. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate. When I act against my own will, that means I have a self that acknowledges that the Law is good, and so the thing behaving in that way is not my self but sin living in me. The fact is, I know of nothing good living in me - living, that is, in my unspiritual self - for though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want. When I act against my will, then, it is not my true self doing it, but sin which lives in me.

In fact, this seems to be the rule, that every single time I want to do good it is something evil that comes to hand. In my inmost self I dearly love God's Law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates. This is what makes me a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

(Rom 7: 14-24)

Frequently, when people fall short of the mark, they give up, reject the Church and walk away to journey alone. They either forget, or are ignorant of the fact that by staying close to Jesus, we eventually find the strength to rise above our sinfulness. This is what Paul is telling us in the concluding lines of the above quote. Paul is aware sin has invaded human nature. Everyone has the right to Christ, particularly when they become aware of their sin. Staying away when they need him doesn't make sense. You move towards the fire when you are cold. Jesus puts it this way:

It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick.

I did not come to call the virtuous to repentance, but sinners. (Mk 2: 15-17)

In our personal prayer, it is so important to practise the prayer of love. *Jesus, I love you* may seem like simple words to pray, but, when uttered frequently from the heart, we cement our relationship with God. Should we find it difficult to be faithful, eventually our love for Gd will outweigh our attraction to sin and we will instinctively know it is an illusion. Should we commit serious sin, we will have the faith to turn to a forgiving God.

SHARINGS

1. In the scripture quote, Hosea 6:4, replace your own name with the names of Ephraim and Judah. How does that feel?
2. Are you somewhat surprised by the quote from St. Paul? Discuss.
3. What has been significant for you in the above?

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE - Reconciliation.

When we realise we have committed sin, we should turn immediately to God to acknowledge our wrong and express our sorrow. This can take place simply and quietly within our hearts. Why then do we need a special sacrament with this Catholic practice of confession? Surely, God forgives as soon as I express my sorrow?

To understand, we need to discover the richness of this sacrament and the potential it contains. The sacrament of Penance is a ritual which ensures our reconciliation is complete. It is about forgiveness, healing and peace.

A sacrament is a meeting with Christ. We come into his presence so he can lead us to our truth. We then acknowledge it, express our sorrow and let it go:

**If you make my word your home
You will indeed be my disciples,
You will learn the truth
And the truth will make you free. (Jn 7:31-32)**

When a person does something seriously wrong, it is usually accompanied by much inner turmoil. Depending upon the seriousness of their actions, sinners often despise themselves and tend to believe they are locked into this pattern of behaviour. The sacrament of Penance provides us with a way out.

The word *penance* means *about turn*. Doing penance is about listening to God call us out of a pattern of life which destroys our relationship with God, others and self.

The word *reconciliation* is used, because we need to make peace. If we offend someone and wish to restore the relationship, there is a process to go through. We must examine our behaviour, acknowledge our wrongdoing, approach the person to offer apologies and seek forgiveness. In the sacrament of Penance, we are given the opportunity of ensuring our reconciliation with God and the Church.

If my sin concerns hurting another in some way, it is necessary to repair the damage I have caused, before receiving this sacrament. I cannot use the sacrament to hide from the responsibility I have towards others.

I am forgiven as soon as I express my sorrow, but the ritual exists because it caters to a human need. It provides the opportunity for confession and thereby ensures my darkness comes into the light. Then, I clearly see my truth.

The ritual also provides me with the assurance that I am forgiven. It comes from someone acting in the name of Christ.



**Come now, let us talk this over,
Though your sins are like scarlet
They shall be white as snow. (Is 1:18)**

APPROACHES TO RECONCILIATION

There are two common ways of celebrating this Sacrament:

1. As an individual with the priest.

When a person approaches this sacrament as an individual, he or she lays out the personal issues they consider sinful. Serious sin should always be acknowledged. If you are troubled by sins of the past and have never confessed them before, you will find it freeing to do so. In this setting you may want to talk about your dark side, especially if you are experiencing powerful temptation to sin.

Most parishes these days make the sacrament available by appointment, as well as at set times. Making an appointment enables the sacrament to be celebrated prayerfully and without hurry. Through talking openly the solutions become clear, and then authentic reconciliation can take place.

2. Coming together as a community for individual confession and absolution.

Coming together with others helps us realise our sinfulness harms the Body of Christ. We each have a responsibility to our communities. By being present with others, we realise we are seeking forgiveness from our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as from God. Each person makes a simple confession to the priest, who then absolves us on behalf of the community, and, as the representative of Christ.

APPROACHING THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

The Sacrament of Penance consists of the following:

- an examination of conscience - *an honest look at life*
- confession - *bringing my darkness into the light*
- sorrow - *a recognition of the damage sin causes*
- penance - *an undertaking to heal the wounds caused by sin*
- absolution - *a restoration to wholeness.*

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Examining our lives is important for spiritual growth. I cannot be set free, unless I first of all know where I need to be freed.

This examining of our lives should be assisted by prayer and the prayerful reading of scripture. It is not something we do in a short time. It may take several days. When we come into the presence of Jesus through prayer, we begin to see ourselves more honestly. We might find our sinfulness has been denied because we haven't given ourselves the opportunity to look deeply.

Sin may be committed in *thought, word or action*: e.g.

harbouring resentment - *thought*
lying - *word*
stealing - *action.*

Where we must look most deeply is in the heart. That is where the root of sin is found.

CONFESSION

I am asked to confess specific sins, only because this is a healthy thing to do. Confession helps me clarify, see my truth and own my behaviour. The priest who hears your confession is there to receive your story. It is not his role to condemn, but to encourage and remind you, God understands and forgives.

Everyone has a dark side. It is the part of us that finds sin attractive. The trick of the devil is to get us to keep this to ourselves. Then, instead of exposing it to the light, it stays in the dark. We must learn to befriend our darkness and not be afraid to talk about it. If we don't, it will overtake us.

SORROW FOR SIN

Sorrow will naturally present itself when we acknowledge our sin. In the Sacrament of Penance, we stand, as we are, before the mercy of God. In scripture, asking for mercy is not a plea for leniency. It is a cry to God to show us *love and kindness*. Experiencing this is what brings healing. For us a prayer of sorrow might be:

**My God, I have chosen to do wrong and failed to do good.
For this I am sorry.
I place myself in your mercy
And rely on your faithful love. Amen.**

PENANCE

Before the ritual of this sacrament is completed, the priest will give the person a penance. This is meant as a spiritual aid to help the healing process. Sin does tend to tear us apart. In order to let it go completely, one needs to be properly motivated. The penance might well be a piece of scripture to reflect on, or some specific action or prayer that may be useful.

ABSOLUTION

To be absolved by God is to be totally forgiven. In Catholic understanding, when we sin, we not only destroy our communion with God, but with the family of the Church as well. When a person approaches a priest seeking forgiveness, the priest represents both God and the Church and forgives in their name.

During the Absolution, the priest lays hands and the ritual prayer used is as follows

**God the Father of mercies,
through the death and
resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to
Himself
and sent the Holy Spirit
among us for the
forgiveness of sins.
Through the ministry
of the Church
may God give you
pardon and peace,
and I absolve you
from your sins
in the name of the Father,**

SHARING

1. We once knew this sacrament as Confession. It is the Sacrament of Penance but is commonly called Reconciliation. This puts the emphasis on what God is doing for us and takes the emphasis off the confession. Many once thought confession was what the sacrament was all about.

What has been your reaction to this session, and how do you feel about confessing to a priest.

The next 4 pages for private reflection before receiving this sacrament for the first time.

PRAYER SESSION

A GOSPEL REFLECTION

The prodigal son story is an excellent teaching aid to explain sin and what is needed for reconciliation. It is a story you will find helpful for many years to come.

Jesus also said, ‘A man had two sons. The younger said to his father, “Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me.” So the father divided the property between them.

A few days later the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch, so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything.

Then he came to his senses and said, “How many of my father’s paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you: I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.” So he left the place and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly.

Then his son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.” But the father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it. We are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found”. And they began to celebrate.

Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. “Your brother has come” replied the servant “and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound.” He was very angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him; but he answered his father:

“Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once dis-obeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his women - you kill the calf we had been fattening.”

The father said, ‘“My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right that we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.”’ (Lk 15:12-32)

DISCUSSION

There are 3 characters in the story. The father clearly represents God. The brothers are two kinds of sinful human beings. See if you can answer the following questions before looking at the suggested answers on the next page.

- 1. What redeeming qualities does the younger brother have?**
- 2. What details in the story show us that the elder brother is not so perfect?**
- 3. The younger brother had probably lost respect for his father long before he set off. He was in a state of sin then. Would you say that the elder brother was also in a state of sin? If so, why?**
- 4. From the story, explain the destructive nature of sin.**
- 5. What details in the story give us a healthy image of God?**
- 6. What do we learn about God’s forgiveness from the story?**

SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PREVIOUS PAGE.

- 1. He is humble and honest. He knows his own truth and doesn't try to blame anyone for his predicament.**
- 2. He is judgmental. No one mentions women till he comes along. Perhaps he sees the brother doing the things he himself would like to do! When the brother returns he is a total contrast to the father.**
- 3. Yes, the elder brother gives himself away with the words: 'Look, all these years I have slaved for you.' Where is his heart? He is not in a love relationship with his father. He hasn't done what the younger brother has done, but perhaps that's only a matter of time.**
- 4. Sin alienates us from our true selves. The son doesn't belong anywhere now. He is totally empty. His family relationships are destroyed. The attraction of sin has been an illusion.**
- 5. The father is watching from *a long way off*. He celebrates the son's return. He has never stopped loving the son.**
- 6. It is total. There is no question of the son just being a servant. He is dressed in all the clothing of a full member of the house – sandals, ring and robe.**
- 7. We commit sin in the heart before we commit it in deed.**

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Towards God

Is my heart set on God? Is my commitment to God a priority in my life or does it take second place to other "more important things"?

Has my negligence of prayer let me lose sight of God?

Do I lack trust in God? Am I constantly worrying, especially about unimportant things?

Am I excessively materialistic - making false gods for myself?

Towards self

Am I at peace with myself, or am I running from my truth? Am I moderate in regard to pleasure?

Do I try to control lust, greed?

Am I jealous of what others might have? Do I respect my sexuality?

Do I take time to examine my life and be honest with myself?

Am I humble enough to ask another for help when I am troubled or do I just bottle things up within myself?

Towards others

Am I at peace with others? Do I carry bitterness and resentment?

Am I constantly losing my temper? Have I dealt with the causes of this?

Do I affirm others or am I constantly critical?

Do I remember to share with those in need?

Do I ever stop to think that others may need me?

Do I respect others sexually?

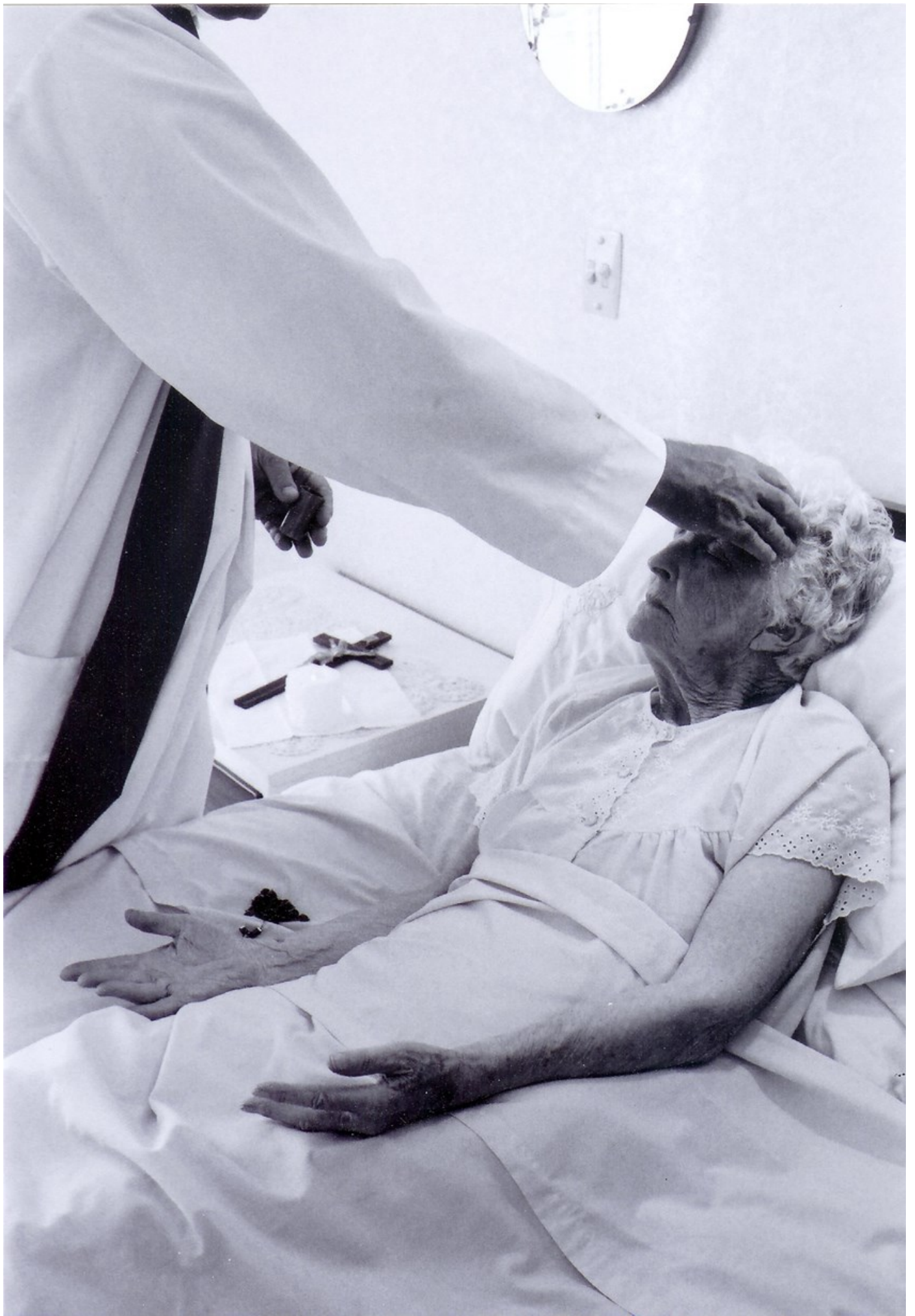
Am I honest in my dealings with others?

Am I in the habit of stealing, because "everyone else does"?

Am I sympathetic and supportive to those who fight for justice and peace, or do I turn away without trying to understand?

Would I stand up for others when they are harshly treated or oppressed?

When people ask me for help, do I just find an excuse?



15

Anointing of the Sick

**Listen to me, Jacob,
Israel whom I have called:
I am the first,
I am also the last.
My hand laid the foundations of earth.**

(Is 48:12)

INTRODUCTION

Sickness is something most of us experience at some time or other. It seems a fairly large number of people are destined to suffer quite seriously for a part of their lives. Others are even called to a lifetime of suffering. We do not understand the mystery or why of this. At times, the pain and illness experienced may seem quite pointless. It is at such times we can be tempted to throw away even the thought of God.

What do we know that can help us come to terms with what seems to be so destructive to human life? Very much at the core of our faith is the belief that God-is-with-us:

**Do not be afraid...
I have called you by name, you are mine...
Should you walk through the fire,
you will not be scorched
and the flames will not burn you...
For I am Yahweh, your God. (Is 43:2-3)**

We are called to share in every part of God's being. Reflect for a moment on the fact that we are co-creators with God. We are called to give birth to children, to assist in the healing of the world's wounds and to be partners with Christ in bringing the reign of God into our world.

Jesus offered his suffering and death as a sacrifice to God for the forgiveness of sin. But we are not excluded from this offering of Jesus. When suffering comes to us, we associate with the suffering of Jesus and offer it to God for the work of Je-sus to become complete. Then, just as God was pleased with Jesus, so too is he pleased with us.

However, sickness can bring a marked lack of enthusiasm for the spiritual life, and even for life itself. In this sacrament a person is taken to the loving concern of Jesus. In the letter from St James we read of the following practice in the early church:

If people are ill they should send for the elders of the church, and they must anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over them. The prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up again; and if they be in sin they will be forgiven.
(James 5:13-16)

SHARING

1. Underline anything significant in the above.

THE BLESSING OF THE OIL

When we are blessing the oil, which is used as a symbol of healing in this sacrament, we make the following prayer:

**God our Father, you bring healing to the sick
Through your Son, Jesus Christ.
Hear us we pray to you in faith,
And send the Holy Spirit,
Our helper and friend,
Upon this oil,
Which nature has provided to serve the needs of your people.**

**May your blessing come upon all who are anointed with this oil,
That they may be well again in *body, mind and soul*.
Father, may this oil be blessed for our use in the name of Jesus
Christ Who lives and reigns with you
Forever and ever. Amen.**

Notice, we pray for those who are sick in *body, mind and soul*. This tells us sickness can be *physical, emotional or spiritual*.

THE SYMBOL AND RITUAL OF THE SACRAMENT

The Laying-on of Hands (*this takes place in silence*)

After prayer, invoking God as Father, Son and Spirit, the priest lays hands on the head of the sick person, once again symbolising the power of the Holy Spirit, whose presence brings healing.

The Anointing with Oil

Oil symbolises soothing and the healing of wounds. In this sacrament we take the sick person to the loving concern of Jesus.

The person is anointed with oil on the forehead and the palms of the hands. The prayer made during that time is as follows:

**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.**

SHARING

1. Can you see why oil is used as a symbol of healing in the sacrament?

SPIRITUAL SICKNESS

Spiritual sickness is manifest when there is an absolute lack of interest in anything spiritual. Even the will to live may be absent. The inner self is confused and needs to come to terms with the issues brought about by physical sickness.

We should never be afraid to ask the help of another competent person, such as a priest, spiritual director or counsellor. The great temptation is to think I can manage alone. When we bring our darkness into the light, it loses power. Then, the Sacrament of Anointing is a great consolation. The warmth of the Spirit's presence helps us reach out to God and come into a state of acceptance. The resulting peace brings about a new will to live, or, should the illness be terminal or incurable, a readiness to accept what God permits.

EMOTIONAL OR MENTAL ILLNESS

This may appear in the form of a psychiatric disorder due to a chemical imbalance in your body or other unknown reasons. Today, medication can right many conditions and a normal life is lived. As the wonder of God is revealed in everything, we accept the gift of medical science as part of God's concern and desire to bring healing to the sick.

At another level, a person may be living with deep fear, doubt or the inability to believe in self. Addictions connected with alcohol, drugs, gambling, compulsive buying or inappropriate sexual behaviour may be evident. All of these affect the quality of life and the lives of those around us. Clearly, the need for therapy is obvious.

The danger is we might use the spiritual to escape the pain of facing our inner turmoil. We want to run from very life-giving therapy." For example, a person suffering from alcoholism is hardly likely to get better just by saying prayers or receiving the sacraments. They need the assistance of counselling, group support and so forth.

However, we have a powerful tool for healing when we combine the therapeutic world with our spiritual tradition. Ideally, we need to make use of both.

Where prayer and the sacraments can be useful is in helping us face our truth. Denial is a disease in itself. When we are in denial our inner life becomes chaotic. Healthy prayer requires us to stand in the presence of God *as we are*, not as we would like to be. Here is one man's story:

For years I prayed to overcome my alcoholism. At the same time I avoided AA meetings like the plague. Then one day, after a heavy bout of drinking I went to Mass and prayed once more. That day I realised I didn't want to be well. My prayer changed: 'God, make me want to give up drinking.' I saw the truth and my healing began. (Told to the author: Printed with permission)

PHYSICAL SICKNESS

Physical sickness is the most common reason for administering the Sacrament of Anointing. Illness comes to most of us at some stage or other. Some illnesses last only a short time, and most of the time we expect to get well. Sometimes sickness is diagnosed as terminal or incurable.

Frequently enough, physical sickness can be related to either the emotional or spiritual side of life. There is evidence to show that people who resolve their emotional or spiritual difficulties find their physical health improves. However, this does not mean every time someone is physically sick they have an unresolved spiritual or emotional problem!

When physical sickness comes along we make use of what medical science offers. When we anoint a sick person, we are not bypassing science but merely helping a person meet the Risen Jesus, to reassure them they are not alone.

At times there appears to be quite a miraculous recovery after an anointing, or steady progress towards recovery begins at that point. On the other hand, the anointing can appear to have no effect. This is not a sign of lack of faith. It is good to surrender to God and trust God will do what is best. If the illness remains, perhaps acceptance is the miracle.

When a person is diagnosed with a terminal illness, we may pray for healing, but when it is obvious death is near, it is best to pray for the inner peace of the patient. When this is seen, one certainly knows God is around.

If death results, life has simply changed, not ended. A person of faith accepts what life brings and knows:

**We do not live on bread alone,
but on every word
that comes from the mouth of God. (Mt 4:4)**

SHARING

1. What is the most helpful for you in the above?
2. Have you experienced serious physical sickness? What thoughts about God came to you?

STORIES OF SUFFERING

KATE

Kate was born with dislocation of the hips. As well, the top of the femur and the hip-socket were missing. The doctors did not pick this up until Kate was five months old.

Treatment was eventually successful for the left hip, but things looked very grim for the right. After three weeks in traction, Kate was put into plaster for three months. It was during this time we invited some friends to come and pray with us while Kate was anointed. After seven months, the left hip was secure-ly in place, but the right was still out and Kate had little control in the right foot. Doctors' reports were always very pessimistic. We were told that the chances of her walking were slim.

After 17 months, Kate took her first steps, dragging her right foot for the first few days. Now she walks normally. As her mother, I feel quite sure that God has been present, assisting in a mighty way the healing work of the doctors concerned. (by Kate's mother)

SHARING

1. The above story cannot be proved to be a miracle. What conclusions do you draw about God's involvement in this case?

MARY

I was very ill after major surgery for the second time. Everything was falling apart. I feared this was the end. I was tempted to let go and give up, so I asked that a priest be sent. From the moment of being anointed I progressed, and, even though my recovery is slow, I am day by day getting well again. (Told to the author)

SHARING

1. The above story is typical of many who have been anointed while seriously ill. Do you know of other similar stories? What do you think happens?

CATHY

Cathy was born with cerebral palsy. Her intellect is normal but her ability to speak is not more than a few sounds.

Confined to a wheelchair, she is completely dependent on those who care for her. She has been loved into life. Her joy and happiness make her a very valued member of our parish. Without speaking, she speaks of God.

Her love, her humour, her presence radiate a warmth and a peace that can only be from God. There is no doubt that our parish community would be so much the poorer if she were not present.

(by Cathy's mother and the author of this book)

SHARING

1. What lesson do you learn about suffering from the above story?

LES

Ten years ago, I developed an illness known as cerebella. This led to my becoming almost completely immobile, and soon I will be confined to a wheelchair.

When asked what meaning I find in my suffering, I immediately think of the word "patience."

I had always been a terribly impatient person. I couldn't bear to wait five minutes for anyone. My illness has taught me so much about what is and what is not important in life. I think I have learned to surrender. (by Les himself)

SHARING

1. Can you see how the healing Christ has been at work in this story?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION

Now there was a woman suffering from a haemorrhage for twelve years, whom no one had been able to cure. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak; and the haemorrhage stopped at that instant.

Jesus said, “Who touched me?”

When they all denied that they had, Peter and his companions said, “Master, it is the crowds round you, pushing.”

But Jesus said, “Somebody touched me. I felt that power had gone out from me.”

Seeing herself discovered, the woman came forward trembling, and falling at his feet explained in front of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been cured at that very moment.

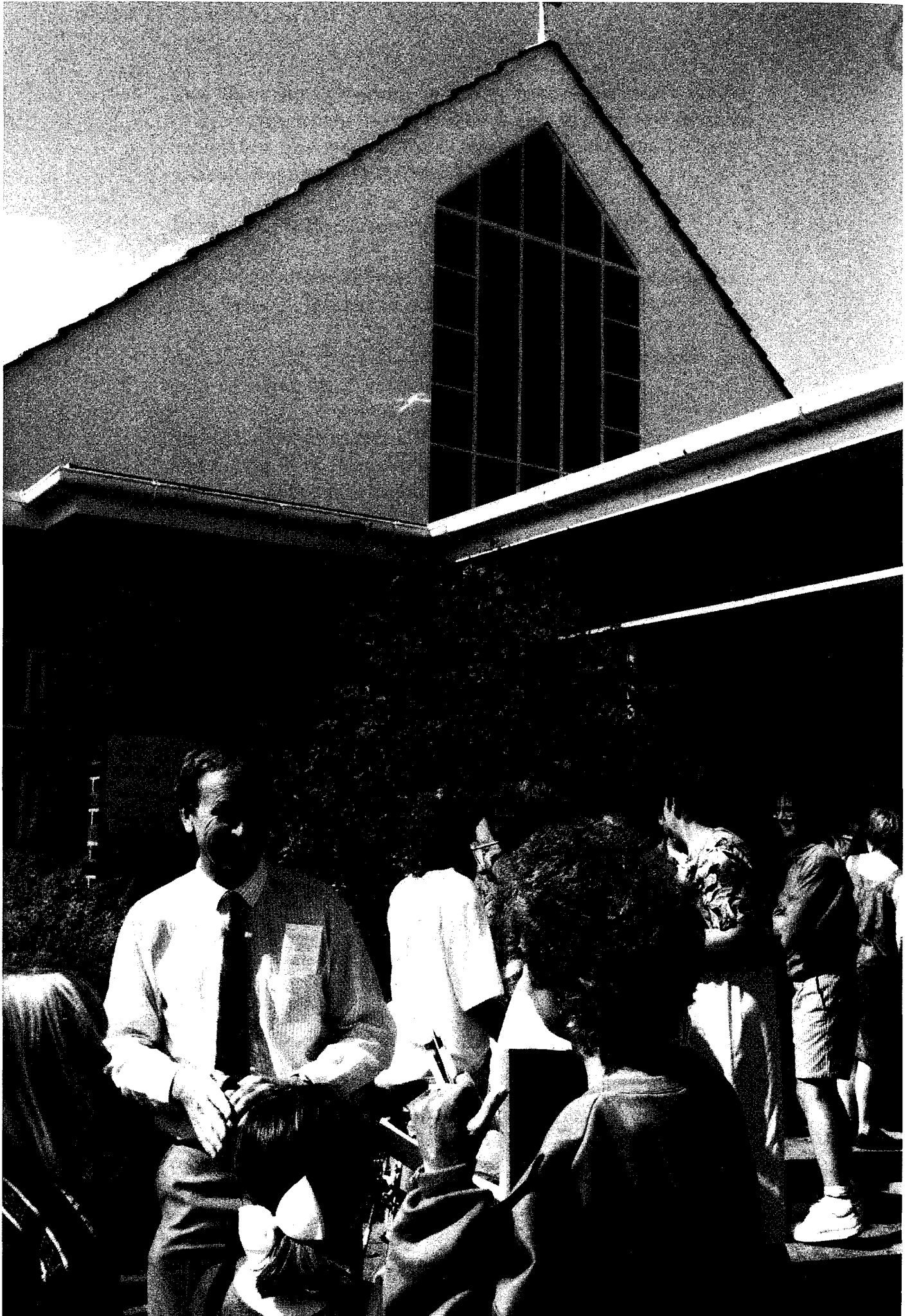
“My daughter,” he said, “your faith has restored you to health; go in peace.” (Luke 8:43-48)

SHARING

1. Jesus does not say, “I have restored you to health”. Rather, “your faith has restored you to health”. Discuss the difference. What are we meant to learn from this? If it is our faith that does the healing, how is Jesus the healer?
2. How do we explain the fact that some people pray earnestly for physical healing, but do not go well? Discuss.
3. What does the gospel story tell us about the Sacrament of Anointing?

PRAYER SESSION

NOTES



16

The Priesthood and Lay Ministry

**You did not choose me,
No, I chose you;
And I commissioned you
To go out and bear fruit,
Fruit that will last;
And then the Father will give you
Anything you ask in my name.
What I command you
Is to love one another. (Jn 15:16-17)**

INTRODUCTION

The final sacrament for our reflection is priesthood. Because baptism joins us to Christ, we all share the priesthood of Jesus. However, the Catholic Church follows the tradition of ordaining (commissioning) certain individuals to carry out specific roles in each community. From your study of the other sacraments, and from your observations of a Catholic community, you will have noticed something of the place the ordained priest has in Church life.

From the beginning, our parishes or Christian communities have always had leaders, individuals commissioned by those in authority. In Catholic tradition, *bishops* are those who have ultimate responsibility for each parish. Priests are people called to assist them.

To understand how this has come to be, we need to know that Jesus called twelve people to follow him. We know them as the apostles. They were the ones commissioned by Jesus to lead in establishing his saving work after he had gone.

**These are the names of the twelve apostles:
first Simon who is called Peter,
and his brother Andrew;
James the son of Zebedee,
and his brother John;
Philip and Bartholomew;
Thomas, and Matthew the tax collector;
James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;
Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the one who was to
betray him. (Mt 10:2-5)**

Jesus founded the Church on the faith of the apostles, but obviously they could not remain on earth forever. Others had to be appointed to succeed them. Then, as Christianity began to spread and new communities formed, those judged suitable would be commissioned to lead. This process has continued down through the centuries.

Today, the successors of the apostles are called *bishops*. Throughout the world the Church is divided into various areas. Each area is called a *diocese* and a bishop is responsible for its pastoral care. The essential role of a bishop is to carry on the work entrusted to the apostles by Jesus.

Bishops have the fullness of Christ's priesthood, but, in order to assist them, individuals come forward and, after a period of training are ordained. Your parish priest is an assistant of your local bishop and is mandated by him to care for a particular parish.

In Catholic tradition, the way of life for an ordained priest is a vocation.

SHARING

1. What do you find significant in the above?

THE NATURE OF THE PRIEST'S VOCATION

In scriptural language a priest is a *shepherd*. He is given the role of overseeing a particular group of believers, so that with their co-operation they will work together to build a community that reflects the kingdom of God.

In order to understand the nature of an ordained priest's vocation, we only need to reflect on the call of the apostles and the commands Jesus gave them:

Here is an account of the call of the first two apostles:

As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew; they were making a cast in the lake with their net, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people". And they left their nets at once and followed him. (see Mt 4:18-22, Mt 9: 9, Mk 3:13-19)

The ordained priest is called by God to lead to ensure the salvation Jesus brings is made available to others.

In the following account of Jesus' appearance to the apostles after his resurrection, he commissions them to forgive sin. Clearly, this aspect of Christ's life is a major part of the Church's work:

The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again,

'Peace be with you.

As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.' After saying this he breathed on them and said: *'Receive the Holy Spirit.*

For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.' (Jn 20:19-23)

The ordained priest forgives sins in Christ's name.

We read the following in Matthew's gospel:

Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.' (Mtt 28:20)

The priest is a preacher of God's word. The purpose of preaching is to lead people to Christ so they can become immersed into the life of God – Father, Son and Spirit. This is then ritualized with the sacrament of Baptism.

We use the word *priest* because the calling is so intimately linked with Jesus Christ - our high priest. In the Jewish faith it was the High Priest who offered sacrifice to God on behalf of the people. Jesus offered his death as a sacrifice on our behalf. He is our priest.

At Mass, the sacrifice of Jesus is symbolically re-enacted on our altar. This enables us to embrace it as our own. The priest represents Christ and the people unite with him. After offering the bread and wine to God, you will hear this prayer recited by the people:

May the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and for the good of all his Church.

The priest represents the people in uniting them with the sacrifice of Jesus.

In summary, the priest's work is to pastor a Christian community, to build it up so the community becomes a place where the reign of God can be seen by all.

Because his work is so intimately linked with the work of Jesus, the priest certainly has a privileged role in the community. However, the mentality of the priest must be that of *servant* to the community. In a special way, the words of the apostle Paul apply:

People must think of us as Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God. (1 Cor 4:1)

A priest is a servant of the Christian community

SHARING

1. What is significant for you from the above descriptions of a priest?

THE SYMBOL AND RITUAL OF THE ORDINATION OF A PRIEST

The Laying-on of hands

At his ordination, the one being ordained kneels before his bishop, who then lays hands on his head. This is a symbol of handing on the power of Christ. Bishops are successors to the Apostles. They have the authority to commission others to carry on the work of Christ entrusted to them.

The Anointing of hands

The Bishop will then anoint the hands of the priest with the oil of Chrism. Hands symbolise work and these hands are set aside to do the work of Christ. At the Eucharist they will be extended over the bread and wine as the Holy Spirit changes them into the Body and Blood of Christ. They will be extended in blessing as the priest absolves the sinner or anoints the sick.

Putting on the vestments

Our custom is that priests wear symbolic clothes during liturgy. At his ordination the new priest dresses in an *alb*, a long white garment representing the purity of Christ. The *stole*, symbolising leadership, is placed around his neck. He then he puts on the *chasuble*, a large garment representing our entering the temple of God. He is now ready to lead the Church in the celebration of the Eucharist.

THE LAITY

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praise of God who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

The Church exists to continue the saving work of Christ. All her members are called to share in this work. All share the priesthood of Jesus. The ordained priest exists for the sake of order and leadership in the Church and to support the laity. His ministry can never be complete unless the laity share in it. The term *layperson* often implies *inferior*. In the Church this is *not* the case. The word *laity* comes from the Greek *laos* and means *people*. In this case *the people of God*. We are all part of the Body of Christ and we all share the priesthood of Jesus. It is just a question of how. If we believe in Jesus, we are his disciples and called to shepherd and lead others towards salvation.

Let us consider the following from St Paul:

Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit, because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink.

Nor is the body to be identified with any one of its many parts. If the foot were to say, 'I am not a hand and so I do not belong to the body', would that mean it stopped being part of the body? If the ear were to say, 'I am not an eye, and so I do not belong to the body', would that mean that it was not a part of the body? If your whole body was just one eye, how would you hear anything? If it was just one ear, how would you smell anything? Instead of that, God put all the separate parts into the body on purpose. If all the parts were the same, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you', nor can the head say to the feet, 'I do not need you'...

Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it. (1 Cor 11:12-21, 27)

SHARING

1. In your parish community, do you think there is a sense of collective responsibility for sharing in the work of Christ?

SHARING THE MINISTRIES

One only has to attend Mass, to realise how a layperson shares in the ministry of priesthood. The Mass, our chief form of worship, involves many people.

First, there are *Ministers of the Word*. Their task is to assist the priest in proclaiming the scriptures. This is not just a matter of getting up to read. The reader must know how to reflect on and pray with the chosen passage of scripture. Only when the message has been born within the reader, can the scripture be proclaimed in such a way, that the congregation will hear it and take it to heart.

Secondly, we have *Eucharistic Ministers*. These come forward to distribute the body and blood of Christ. After Mass, some will take Communion to the sick or elderly who are unable to be present with their community. Jesus gave us his food to eat. As Christ's representatives, Eucharistic Ministers distribute this life-giving food.

Then there are those involved in *Music Ministry*. Their role is to put body into the congregation's singing, to lift the spirits of the people and move them to a sense of Presence. We all know the power of good music.

The healing ministry of the priest is also shared with others. The vocation of doctor, nurse and counsellor should always be seen as a vital part of Christ's healing ministry.

In the Sacrament of Penance it is the priest who officially forgives the sinner, but it may be a counsellor who helps a person understand their behaviour, or, it may be the influence of a close friend that helps another to repentance.

Likewise in regard to the sick, it is the priest who performs the anointing, but it is the laity who visit, pray with and cares for them. Without this, healing of any sort would be unlikely.

Then, in a parish community people assist in all sorts of roles — teaching, administration, hospitality, youth ministry, care of the poor:, working for justice. The list is endless and obviously a parish needs the talents of all her members:

There are all sorts of service to carried out, but always to the same Lord. (1 Cor 12:4)

Jesus raised the dead to life. The Christian community is called to do the same. We share the priesthood of Jesus when we work for this end.

SHARING

1. List the roles which are under the care of a lay person in your parish. What might be one way you can serve your community?
2. What do you think is meant by the final paragraph in the above essay?

THE EXAMPLE OF MARY

In order to understand how we bring about the Kingdom of God, we need to know something about Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Let us read the following story:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you'. She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him *Jesus*. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob forever and his reign will have no end. Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin'? 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you', the angel answered, 'and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God'. 'I am the servant of the Lord', said Mary, 'let what you have said be done to me.' And the angel left her. (Lk 1:26-38)

COMMENTARY

I am the servant of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.

At the beginning of our course we reflected on the need to surrender to God, that we are made for God and returning to God. Surrender is proof of faith.

In the story above, Mary is confused because she is a virgin. She must trust. Her virginity indicates Jesus is a direct gift from God, and, God is our destiny. We could give much more space to Mary in this study. For now it is enough to realise that in this woman we have a model of faith.

Mary knows we are partners with God in building God's reign here on earth. All we need to do is co-operate. Mary co-operates and gives Christ to the world. We do the same. Mary's cooperation with God is why we give her a special place of honour in our Church. She is Mother of Christ, Mother of God and Mother of the Church.

SHARING

1. What has been your perception of Mary?

PRAYER SESSION

THE FOLLOWING FOR EXTRA REFLECTION ON MARY

Mary is held up in the Church as a model of faith because surrender is the essence of a genuine response to God. It calls for trust, openness and humility. Mary was aware of what God was doing in her life and in the life of her people. As you prepare for the celebration of Christmas, read frequently the scriptures connected with Mary and notice her response.

Matthew	1: 18-25	What gift would Mary have needed at this time?
Luke	1: 26 – 56	Learn to pray and make your own, verses 46 and following.
John	2: 1-12	Note the words <i>do whatever he tells you</i> .
John	19: 25-27	Here, <i>the disciple he loved</i> is John, but he represents us, the Church. The text is interpreted as Mary being given to the Church. She is our Mother. John (the Church) is asked to make a place for her in his home. This means we keep a place of honour for Mary, for she reminds us of the need to surrender to her son: <i>Do whatever he tells you</i> .

A common prayer to Mary is the Rosary. When we pray such prayers we are not worshipping Mary as we worship God. We are simply honouring the part she played in bringing about our salvation, and asking her to pray for us. The Rosary is a prayer that takes us to the mystery of the Incarnation, God made flesh. It consists mainly of the following prayer being repeated in a mantra like way:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

The first part is based on the Luke, 1:26-45. See if you can find the relevant sentences that compose the prayer.

The second part of the prayer is composed by the Church. It explains the role of Mary today. She is one who continually prays for the Body of Christ, the Church. If Mary loved her son, she must surely love the Church.

TERMS TO BE FAMILIAR WITH

The Nativity	The birth of Jesus
The Incarnation	Jesus is God become man
The Passion	The suffering and death of Jesus
The Resurrection	The rising of Jesus from the dead
Easter	Celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus
The Trinity	God is a community of 3 persons, Father, Son and Spirit
Pentecost	The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles
Ascension	Jesus returns to the Father after the Resurrection
The Annunciation	The Angel Gabriel appears to Mary to announce that she is to be mother of the Christ.
The Immaculate Conception	Mary is kept free from sin from the moment of her conception.
The Virgin Birth	Mary conceived Jesus by the power of God and not by sexual intercourse
The Assumption	At her death, Mary was taken body and soul into heaven.
Canonised	Certain individuals who lead outstandingly holy lives are, after their death, given the title <i>Saint</i> . We are all saints but their holiness is recognised by the Church as being worthy of imitation.
Patron saint	Parishes, religious communities and individuals often take the name of a particular saint and ask that saint to pray for and protect them.
Religious Order	If a person wishes to dedicate their life to God through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, they can join a particular group of men or women. There are numerous such groups (religious orders) throughout the Church. The vows are an emphatic way of witnessing to the meaning of baptism.

Thank you for participating.

It is recommended that between now and recommencing, you read the first two books of the bible, Genesis and Exodus.

Sincerely in the Risen Lord,

Alan Roberts.

© 1986 By Alan Roberts

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without permission in writing from the publisher. All inquiries should be addressed to the author.

February 2003 6th printing, revised addition.

I want to sincerely congratulate you on what you have written.

This book is instructive but, more importantly, inspiring. It is comprehensive but simply presented. It is practical but with an underlying sense of the Christian life. And, it is focused around the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. I'm sure it will be a big help to catechumens and those who walk with them.

Bishop Peter Cullinane, Palmerston North.

You have done a fine job on the revision. My warm congratulations on the text.

Cardinal Willams, Wellington.

Fr Alan's work speaks deeply to the heart of the enquirer, asking simple but searching questions. It also encourages an early start on the easiest forms of prayer. At the end of the course I was a different person.

Jenny McLeod, Enquirer

**This book is sponsored by
The Catholic Inquiry Centre,
Wellington**

**Available from
St. Theresa's Parish,
210 St. Andrews Road,
Plimmerton,
Porirua, New Zealand.
Ph (04) 233 1279**