



Continuing Spiritual Reflections

2009-2011

By Father Vince O'Brien



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Cover Painting of Father Vince O’Brien (1995) by Judy Werking from a photograph taken by John Stewart [used with permission of the artist]

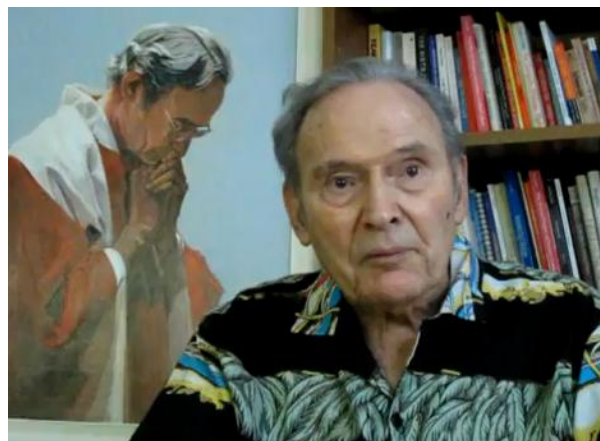
Foreword

Father Vince O'Brien, S.J., has been the beloved Chaplain for Separated and Divorced Catholics (SDC) of the Archdiocese of Washington for over thirty-five years. He has been a part of the recovery and renewal in the lives of many of our members over the years. His *Grief to Growth* lectures are classics to all who participated. In the late nineties, Father Vince found out that he had Parkinson's Disease and in 2004 after a Parkinson's related accident, he was transferred from the Washington Area to the Jesuit Manresa facility at Saint Joseph University in Philadelphia. However, although he is distant from us in terms of miles, he is always close to our hearts. His Spiritual Reflections had always been a part of our monthly newsletter, but in recent years it has been the most direct connection that he has had with us.

This book of Reflections is a follow-on e-book to *Spiritual Reflections 2003-2009* which was published in 2009. Due to the large online size of the PDF file of the 75-page first volume, this update is published separately for ease in downloading and forwarding as opposed to simply publishing a larger version of the original volume. This e-book covers the period from September of 2009 to August of 2011 and all reflections it contains have appeared in the SDC Monthly Newsletters. It is the intention of this editor that this volume be updated annually.

For those of you who have never met Father Vince, we hope that this volume and its predecessor will help you through your own experience of separation and divorce or whatever other challenges you find in your spiritual journey.

Greg Becker
Editor



"Peace and Joy Always" - Father Vince

September, 2009 -- Begin Each Day with This Awareness

These words speak especially to all you who are struggling to deal with your life issues. May you grow in hope and confidence that the Lord walk with you. May you begin each day with this awareness. At days end, put it to rest. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could, some blunders, and absurdities, no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day." As dawn approaches each morning with a new heart, listen to the words of Cardinal Josef Suenens, "I believe God is new each morning. I believe God is creating the world today, at this very moment, not long ago, once and for all, I believe God's promise manifests itself in the unexpected and liberates us and saves us from our gloomy state of affairs.

I am hopeful each morning, not for human reasons, or because I am naturally optimistic. I am still hopeful for the Spirit is still present the Church, creating a new world -- even if people don't know his name.

I believe each morning that the Holy Spirit gives us fresh freedom and new hope if we hope in our hearts. I believe that hope is a way of making dreams become a reality. Happy are those who dream dreams and pay the price to see them through."

October, 2009 -- My Morning Meditations

As I pondered what to say to you this month, I said to myself, “Why not share with my friends at SDC, my morning meditations. This material springs from the writings of James Dolan, S.J.

“If you are not here now, you will not be there then. We have actually been taught how not to be happy. For example, I am happy only when I am financially secure, with sound investments and a secure retirement -- Yet we truly have arrived because we have been created, loved and redeemed. Yet by living in the future we miss the present. Wealth, rest, retirement, heaven. We have just arrived. We are already created, redeemed. Yet we are missing it. We are perfect just as we are now. We are infinitely and eternally loved by God. Don't change, just be aware. See how often we set ourselves up for disappointment. People actually stop living in the present, when they make life a means to an end. When they are future oriented. Washing the cup is living; life will not begin after the cup is washed. Be aware of the rising and falling of your diaphragm while breathing. Be aware of anything. Buddha was searching, finally he stopped. He noticed the morning star and lost himself. There is no method; no secret, seeing with the eye in your heart is mystical seeing. When you talk with someone, beyond the words, in the silence of the self, the self disappears. Be friendly with your self. Have a non-violent view of your self. For example, let us say you are spending too much time watching TV, do not condemn yourself. Instead, see if you can find the real reason that you are spending so much time on this activity or nonactivity.”

Fr. Jim Dolan continues about forgiveness, “Understanding permits forgiveness. Once you understand, you realize there is nothing to forgive, and strangely enough you realize you don't need to forgive, you realize you would have done the same thing under those circumstances. Understanding is the very best form of forgiveness. People think they have been deprived, are frequently angry. I am angry that you talk when I am talking. Maybe what I am really angry about is that you don't find my ideas interesting. So I am angry that you do not pay attention. Why is forgiveness such a difficult experience? While forgiveness is a positive word, it is frequently associated with uncomfortable feelings. If one has not forgiven another, its strong residual feelings of distaste and resentment or connectedness undermine the effectiveness of forgiveness. Be aware that there is a danger in forgiveness being seen as an act of condescension. To avoid this pitfall, be aware of this possibility. This can be humiliating for both parties. “

As you can see there is much material for reflection. I will continue to share this with you next month.

November, 2009 - God's Unconditional Love

The Lord loves you unconditionally. Do you really believe that? Yes, that is the challenge! Yet if you really believe that, your sacramental life can take on a whole new meaning. You realize that your sins are forgiven before they are committed. The whole purpose of Christ on earth is to free us from sin. This insight has tremendous application in our life with the sacraments.

Take for example the Sacrament of Penance, known now more as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Since reconciliation is primarily a divine action, in which Christ has reconciled us to the Father. We are created, loved and redeemed. So what is the point of going to confession, since we have already been forgiven? The point of confession would be to celebrate the fact of what is already there, namely, the Lord's unconditional love. Love can exist in a relationship without the kiss, but the kiss makes effective what is already there.

Perhaps the experience of confession can be a healing experience where you work your confessor to grow in healing.

Another example can be found in the experience of a friend who was in the hospital who asked a priest if he could go to confession. He saw confession as an act of forgiveness. Through the middle ages, confession was seen as atonement, to appease an angry god. Today it is seen more as a cause of experiencing unconditional love.

So there is no need today for discouragement, by reminding yourself of this over and over. Healing takes time. The Lord walks with you and develops you with unconditional love. You are created, loved and redeemed by the Lord. May you grow in the awareness of this truth.

December, 2009 - Fall in Love with God at Christmas

Spiritual insights and challenges often come wrapped in humor. The following 21 things I suggest you need to remember in order for you to see how our spirituality is enhanced through humor.

Christmas is gift sharing time. As Catholics, we especially celebrate the gift the Father gave to us of his Son; consequently every gift you exchange can be seen as a human reflection of God's gift to us. So the gift I would like to give you this Christmas, is a prayer composed by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., the late General of the Society of Jesus.

LOVE

“Nothing is more practical than finding God,
That is, falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination,
Will affect everything.
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning,
What you will do with your evenings,
How you will spend your weekends,
What you read,
Who you know,
What breaks your heart,
What amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”

May this prayer be experienced not only during the Christmas season, but each day of your lives. Isn't that the theme of this prayer? That you are called upon to fall in love with God. Isn't that what you experience each time we attend Mass?

January, 2010 -- The Law of Love

During my many years of ministry to Separated and Divorced Catholics, I have always been impressed with the sincerity you exhibited in wanting to follow the Rules and Laws of the church. Often I have heard Divorced Catholics say they would not consider Remarriage without getting an Annulment. They wanted to do it right; however, what Catholics need to be aware of is that the clear and hard teachings of Jesus need to be pastorally interpreted and applied to the reality of the human situation at hand. Divorced Catholics need to be aware that obeying all the rules and laws of the Church is not normative for one's spiritual growth. Human rules and laws are secondary to the law of love. Scratch the rule that conflicts with love because God wants your happiness and peace.

Christ Himself is your example of how to apply the rules and laws to your unique situation. Jesus was a conscientious observer of Jewish laws and practices, but He realized in order to serve the needs of the people, those laws needed to be flexible and able to bend. He wants your happiness. Christ was a "People Person".

Jesus placed people's needs above rules and laws. An example of this approach occurred in the story of the Woman at the Well (John 4: 7-15). Jewish law did not allow Jews to talk to any Samaritan. Yet when Jesus encountered the woman at the well, he broke the law by reaching out to her. They entered into a dialogue that Jesus might bring her to new life; she responded by becoming Jesus' first Samaritan Apostle. She brought the Good News to those around her. There are other examples in Scripture that indicate that Jesus placed the needs of the people before the observances of the human law. A second example was when Jesus allowed the disciples to pluck corn on the Sabbath to satisfy the human hunger needs, even though Jewish law prohibited any work on the Sabbath (Mt. 12: 1-8). A third example occurred when Paul realized that the teachings of Christ needed to be applied to the reality of the situation (1 Cor. 7: 1-16). This occurred when one of the partners of a pagan couple becomes a Catholic and the pagan spouse cannot live with that situation and divorces his wife. The Catholic person is then FREE, meaning free to remarry. God wants your happiness. He realizes that the ideal of Permanent marriage needs to be adapted according to the reality of the situation. Laws and rules are important in the church, but the Law of Love takes precedence. So as you reflect on your life as a divorced Catholic, you need to feel the Lord accepts your decision.

In conclusion, you are called to respond in a mature manner in the concrete circumstances of your life as a Catholic and to trust the Lord will accept your decision. Before Vatican II, all that was required of you is that you obeyed the rules and laws and submit. Since Vatican II, your challenge is to make responsible choices in your life. There is change in the air, so trust that the Lord walks with you.

February, 2010 - The New Spirit Of Confession

As a young priest one of my joys was hearing confessions on my weekend calls to various parishes. At that time in the late 50's and 60's, weekly confessions were common for Catholics. But no more.

Catholics began experiencing Christ's healing presence through other forms. For example, individual counseling or therapy, talking it over with a friend, and using the confessional parts of the Mass.

A story will illustrate a new spirit of Confession. A friend of mine was in the hospital and a nun came to visit him. On her arrival she was asked to see a priest for confession. The nun said "I will be glad to get a priest for you, but first let's talk." Because of her ability to be able to listen to my friend, he revealed his soul to this person. When the visit was over, the nun said she would get a priest and my friend told her there was no need to do that since he had made his confession through her.

But she objected since this was not the Sacrament. Technically speaking that may be true, but my friend experienced the healing and forgiving touch of Christ through his contact. Aren't the Sacraments designed to bring you in contact with the healing power of Christ? So in some mysterious way this nun may have provided the atmosphere, the mood that was Christ. Remember that the Sacraments were given by Christ as a sign of unconditional love. This story illustrates the true healing power of God.

Now that we are in the season of Lent, we have the unique opportunity to experience the healing presence of the Lord either through the Sacraments or other human experiences. Hopefully you will be able to experience this Sacrament through an understanding priest who listens to your story without judgment and you can go forward always with new hope.

March, 2010 - Spiritual Nuggets

I would like to share with you some spiritual reflections called “nuggets” that have sustained me over the years, especially when my formal prayer doesn’t seem to be working. God wants you to be happy. Are you? God loves you unconditionally. Do you believe that? Unless you are free, you cannot say “yes”. The only message of the Gospel is that God loves us; there are no strings, just joy in the Good News. God’s love is a completely free gift; accept the gift now or later. Can you imagine a loving God demanding you come to Mass every Sunday under pain of mortal sin? No one has seen God, so how can we reject a God we have not seen? He can’t recall your least failure; love keeps no records; there are no books in heaven. Nothing can separate my love from you. We can be absolutely certain of God’s love. Moments of pain challenge, and moments of joy celebrate. You can be certain of your children’s love, if you observe the two following precepts: Never abandon them and accept their freedom. Understanding is the very best form of forgiveness.

When I understand the programming and conditioning of the person offending me, I realize that there is nothing to forgive, because I would have responded the same way given the circumstances. Understanding permits forgiveness. Once you understand, you realize there is nothing to forgive.

I can continue to mention more Nuggets to you. They are from the tapes of Jim Dolan, SJ. I have used these nuggets as a springboard in my prayer life. I use these nuggets to revitalize my prayer life. I have found so often, that my prayer life has been too intellectual, but listening to these nuggets, I have learned to trust my own intuition, and live in the now, by simply learning to trust.

So I invite you to see what are your insights and what are your nuggets when you take time out to be present in the Lord. Your annual retreat is approaching in May and that may be a good time to practice this new style of prayer, to reexamine your prayer life and find a style of prayer that works for you.

April, 2010 - Celtic Quilt

I told you I would share some of my thoughts on the role humor plays on my spiritual journey. I would like to hold off on that subject for now because of some dominant forces in my life.

One of those forces centers on the wee hours of the morning, specifically from about 2:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. when I get up to answer nature's call. More often I simply wake up and then can't get back to sleep. In that early morning span of time I feel the Lord's presence more intensely than at any other part of the day. I express feelings suppressed during the day, recall images of persons and events, either from the past or present, which flood my imagination. The experience leaves me with a profound sense of God's presence.

Frequently, I'm surprised by the flood of tears that spring up from the depth of my subconscious. I recall images of SDC persons who have shared their stories of pain because their dream of a permanent marriage will probably never be realized, the loneliness of a future without a mate, the ache of a lonely woman facing the pain of terminal cancer, the anger of a man who experiences the church only as an enforcer of rules, rather than as a witness of the compassion of Christ; rules are experienced as being more important than peoples needs. Images of persons facing life's joys as well as pain float in and out of my awareness.

Listening to the soothing music of Daniel Kobialka's Celtic Quilt album sets the mood for getting in touch with the Lord speaking to me in the human experiences of daily life that come into focus in those wee hours of the morning.

So be aware of the Lord's presence during those very human moments of the night. Listen to what He wants to tell you. It's amazing what you will hear.

May, 2010 - God Loves You Unconditionally

Basic to your sound spirituality is the conviction that you are a good person and that God loves you unconditionally. This conviction is so important that if it is missing, you are unable to forgive yourself and to risk new relationships.

Grounded in this conviction, you are more able to face the many moral issues in your life. Recall that obedience to the rules, laws and regulations prior to Vatican II in the early Church was a primary virtue. You may not have liked this but it was accepted by many Catholics. But after Vatican II the primary virtue was honesty and integrity and you make your decisions based on those virtues. As a consequence, you make decisions based on that virtue of honesty and integrity which requires you take more responsibility for your behavior. Because this new approach takes so much responsibility, many Catholics think it is harder to move from the old model to the new. Just pray, pay and obey and know you are doing the right thing. Some may say you're only kidding yourself by taking this approach and making decisions this way since it is the easy way out.

Hopefully as you face your moral issues, you have a good confessor to support you in your decision making process. Most often you won't have the time to make these decisions. Look at the pros and cons of your decision, you are aware what is for your peace, and you are convinced that God accepts your decision and then make your decision and go for it.

This requires a person who truly believes in his basic goodness, who is not cheating himself or herself, to make the decision honestly. My prayer is that you sincerely believe that God accepts your decision. You also evaluate the voices of those who disagree when you make your decision, but you make your decisions based on the fact that you are a good person and that you trust in God. You have the courage to make the decisions in view of your trust in God. Always trust in God as you journey forward in your spiritual life.

June, 2010 - Act From Your Authentic Self

“You don’t get over divorce, you get used to it.” These are the words of the late Fr. Jim Young, Founder of the Divorced Ministry in the United States. In my ministry to all of you, I have found that to be true.

Often after the pain of divorce is somewhat lessened, there is a reaching out to new life, and an experiencing of new love. This experience of new life is reflected in many ways. One way is the conviction that although your marriage failed, you are not a failed person. So often in your life experiences you have a hard time loving yourself and others. You made mistakes in your marriage, but you are not a failed person. But now you realize that you are sound spiritually and emotionally. When you are convinced that you are a good person, you see that Christ loves you unconditionally and all your sins are forgiven. The message of the New Testament is welcome and forgiveness. But to continue this notion that you are a sound person, I think a good thing to remember is that you grew up a Catholic. You come to the realization that you have to take responsibility for your actions. Prior to Vatican II was the virtue of obedience and now the message is honesty and integrity and how you live your life. The document of Vatican II speaks very well to the idea of you acting responsibly. “Every human has in his or her heart a law written by God. To obey that law is the very dignity of the human person. According to that law in your heart, you will be judged. Conscience is the most secret accord and sanctuary of the human. There we are alone with God.”

So that you may act responsibly, I invoke for you the prayer of the Holy Spirit: Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful with the courage and wisdom to always act from their authentic self. I wish this prayer to be yours: *“Say yes to the past, for you are a forgiven sinner. Say yes to the present, for Christ loves you as you are. Say yes to the future, because Christ never abandons you.”* So you see your challenge to act from your authentic self and the conviction that Christ accepts you and walks with you. I wish you peace and joy as you march with confidence into your future

July, 2010 - Grow Up As a Catholic

We have recently celebrated the early workings of the Holy Spirit through the Feast of Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles provide us with a rich treasure of insights into the inner working of the Holy Spirit in the early community that challenge us today as Catholics. We see how the Feast of Pentecost is a challenge for today's Catholic. Why is that so? Because the Lord tells the Apostles that He will replace His physical presence with His inner presence, namely the Holy Spirit, manifested by Catholic struggles to make moral decisions. He will give them a new heart. So that in the making of choices that spring from the innermost part of the person, because Christ will not be there physically as an authority figure and they will be forced to go inward for the answers instead of relying on the physical presence of Christ. The point is that when Christ leaves them physically, they will not be abandoned. They will have to rely on His Spirit inwardly in determining God's will for them. They will not have consolation of His physical presence, so they will be forced to go inward and trust their inner heart as the presence of God speaking to them.

We see in Acts how the Lord tells today's apostles that unless He sends the Holy Spirit, He will not be present to them because now His physical presence is leaving them. The departure of the Lord's physical presence is very important, because they will have to rely upon the inner heart. They will no longer have the consolation of his physical presence to rely on, they will have to rely on his spirit. But with His leaving them they have to trust that the Lord is leaving on their hearts the avenue for them to follow. The Lord is leaving their physical presence but will remain in their heart.

So in making a decision in regards to your moral life, the Lord, because He believes in your goodness, challenges you to rely on your basic goodness and to make your decision to rely on your authentic self. That is the Lord speaking to you. Go for it. You see how important it is for you to trust in yourself that you are a good person. When you are in touch with the deepest part of yourself that is the Lord speaking to you. When you read the document of the second Vatican Council, the constitution of the Church in the modern world, you see that the Lord believes in you and trusts in you that you deal with your life issues that you will make good decisions. Go with the confidence of what the Lord is calling you to do. Often times you may feel that your decisions conflict with the laws and rules of the Church. Remember that they are to be guidelines and aides that will help you to live out the life of the Spirit. They are not to be Idols. They are aides to help you nourish your spiritual life. "They are to be aides but not normative of your Spiritual Life". Be careful that you don't take them to the letter of the law. Use your own common sense in understanding them. They will be there for you in the coming year.

Through all this process you grow up and mature as a Catholic. You have to take responsibility to make these choices and to grow up as a Catholic. Before Vatican II the decisions were made for you by Authority. After Vatican II you were responsible for making your own decisions. You are responsible for your honesty and integrity. Walk confidently into your future, knowing that the Lord walks with you.

August, 2010 - Only When the Heart Is Touched

I am extending this Prayer to all in SDC. The image of the Lord speaking to us is as follows: “Dear Lord, may all my brothers and sisters in SDC hear the Lord speak to them in the following way.”

First-- be convinced that you truly believe that the Lord loves you unconditionally and that you don't have to change for Him to love you although the awareness of this acceptance can be of great importance on your personal journey to change.

Second-- I feel that your prayer style needs to be very simple. The Breathing Prayer is that for me right now. The style I use is as follows: Imagine the Lord's love surrounding you. When you breathe in that love you heal yourself and when you breathe out you send His love to others. Simply rest in the rhythm of your breathing and you will experience God's healing love in a very concrete way.

Third-- in regards to your relationship with others, some suggestions may be helpful. These suggestions stem from the experience of a relationship. My human experience of relationship is merely a reflection of the Lord's presence to me.

1. In relationship it's normal to hurt one another from time to time. Your challenge then is to say you are sorry and to get on with your relationship.

2: You did a fine job; you need to praise one another more often.

3: What is your opinion? Asking another's opinion is a sign of respect for the other person.

4: Thanks. We need to thank people for the many ways they show their care for me.

5: Say often “I Love You.”

So as you reflect on these insights, bring to them a listening heart. Because only when the heart is touched, will change occur. Rest in the Lord and listen to the beat of your heart; that too is God speaking to you.

September, 2010 - God Trusts You

As you move through your divorce experience you are aware that as you face your future, you will be called upon to act responsibly as you deal with life issues, especially your sexuality. Before Vatican II all that was required of you was to be obedient to authority. To doubt or question any of the teachings of the church was not allowed. Since Vatican II, the emphasis is on the human person, acting freely and responsibly with an informed conscience. You will be called upon to make decisions based upon a number of factors. First, be aware of the teaching of the Church. Second, be mindful of the gifts of common sense and intelligence that the Lord has given you to aid you in your decision making process. Third, listen to the movements of your heart; it speaks of your authentic self. Fourth, pray over your decision. Fifth and finally, when you feel at peace with your decision, GO FOR IT.

The Lord wants you to trust in yourself and your approval of your decision, because you are basically a good person. You are called upon to trust in your basic goodness and make your decision. And God trusts you. When all these things are in place, you are then moving in the direction provided by the Holy Spirit. Peace and joy and happiness will be there. Make your decision and go for it.

October, 2010 - Listen with Your Heart

I am grateful that many of you have shared with me your awareness that though your divorce was a painful experience it enabled you to discover yourself for the first time. As you face the issues of your personal life, you take responsibility for your actions. In the challenges of your life, you realize the importance of prayer. But the prayer that speaks the most is not the prayer of concepts or ideas but of feelings. You become aware that what God is calling you to do by tuning into your feelings.

Last month you saw the challenges that you face by being an adult responsible Catholic; namely you have to take responsibility for your decision-making as a Catholic. The Holy Spirit will be present to you as you face this challenge. You realize that you cannot meet this challenge on your own. Fortunately the Holy Spirit comes to you and abides in your heart and by heart I mean those innermost feelings that define you as a person. You must tune into those prayers that spring from the heart because that is the presence of God speaking to you.

In sharing these thoughts with you, I recall the words of the President of Czechoslovakia, "There is danger of our becoming Eichman Christians. Eichman, a general in the German army, was responsible for gassing millions of Jews. He would not take responsibility for his actions, because he was trained in the school of the obedience to authority. So his superiors were responsible but not him. Keep the quotation alive, in other words don't let it end there. His superiors were responsible but not him."

So we have had the danger of our adopting and questioning obedience, rules and laws that we experience in the Church. Being a responsible Catholic requires that we be men and women of prayer. A prayer that springs from your innermost self. That is God speaking to you. God speaks mainly to you through your heart and mind. The Ancients put this challenge to you simply as follows - "It is by listening with your heart that God speaks to us. You can grasp God with your mind - Never. You can grasp God with your heart - Ever." If a decision springs from your heart enables you to experience joy and peace, that is God speaking to you. But if you experience depression, sadness and turmoil, then God is telling you that your course of action is not correct.

A European Catholic Philosopher offers enlightenment. "Our God lives within us, within our feelings. Our God dwells within us, and the only way we can know God, be one with God, is to place actions that come from our authentic self. A CCD teacher describes a responsible decision making process.

1. Know clearly the teaching of the church on the issue.
2. Pray over your decision.
3. Go for it. Make the decision for you and God together.

To conclude my reflection with you, I would like to extend this Blessing of the Holy Spirit with you:

**Come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of all your people.
Fill your people with the Spirit of Christ's divine love.**

November, 2010 - Listen with Your Heart

I would like to extend to you now the following blessing which I received as a gift to celebrate my 55th anniversary of my Ordination to the Priesthood. Let this Blessing be a Prayer of Thanksgiving for all of you for your presence in my life.

A Blessing from Father Vince

May the blessings released through your hands
Cause windows to open in darkened minds.

May the sufferings your calling brings
Be but winter before the spring.

May the companionship of your doubt
Restore what your beliefs leave out.

May the secret hungers of your heart
Harvest from the emptiness its sacred fruit.

May your solitude be a voyage
Into the wilderness and wonder of God.

May your words have the prophetic edge
To enable the heart to hear itself.

May the silence where your calling dwells
Foster your freedom in all you do and feel.

May you find words full of divine warmth
To clothe the dying in the language of the dawn.

May the slow light of the Eucharist
Be a shelter around your future.

--- John O'Donohue

I send you this poem as a Thanksgiving gift to you.

December, 2010 - My Christmas Gift to You

The following meditation from an unknown author is my Christmas Gift to you:

“It’s a comfort to know that you are sitting in the palm of God’s hand; you can jump as high as you would like and you would never be harmed and you could never escape the love of God. You might picture God as a gentle parent; God has no further desires or expectations than to be near you. Can you picture God speaking to you? I am calm that you may have life. When you were young you were the apple of my eye. When you were growing up, clumsily searching and getting lost I delighted in your every move. When someone taught you about judgment, and you learned about good and evil, I recalled you felt guilty and inadequate. I wanted to pick you up and squeeze my love into you. When you fell in love you were so excited. You danced for joy. I danced with you. When you had some hard knocks, and felt rejected I wanted to support you with a physical presence but I knew you would make it. I knew what I had created and I had no doubts about you. I felt disappointed when you were taught that you could offend me or hurt me or lose my love. I was so sad when someone convinced you that I might punish you or embarrass you. I guess I want to tell you that you and I are one. One in mind heart and spirit. Nothing you could ever say or do could separate us. No sin, no judgment, no failure, nothing outside you or inside you; no evil, nothing in the future or the past. If you could have possibly rejected me, I would still love you just as much as I love Mary. With all your limitations and selfishness self-righteousness, I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have loved you when you were sad, jealous or depressed. I would love to spend one day with you than with all the queens in history. I would rather spend one day at your side than a thousand years with saints and popes and kings. I would give my life for you I would give my Son for you. I already have. Do you know that my love has no bounds? I am so silly to be in love with you. Yes, I am always at your side and by your side. I am trying to think of an example to erase the last bit of doubt or fear in you. I even prefer your denial of me your rejection of me to receiving the whole worlds praise. How is that? Now can you believe that my love has no bounds and no restrictions. I would like to wave away any fear that you could possibly have. I am with you and I am yours always. I want to have now joy, fullness of life, and a deep peace that the world cannot take away. I have the same affection for you that I have for my son Jesus. My covenant with you was made before you were born.”

So I hope that this meditation prayer, my gift to you, will be a prayer that you will draw on as you deal with your life challenges. Merry Christmas!

January, 2011 - He is with us still

“All the ways divorced Catholics reach out to shake and help and urge each other along to build new lives and become new people - all this is the pathway to holiness. Good friends who reach out to sustain and care for each other and help people through the worst are the best spiritual guides. Priests and religious are important partners to this process of spiritual healing and recovery, teaching, praying with the group, and celebrating the sacraments, but those special ministries of word and sacrament are most effective when they build on solid soil prepared by the hard work of human recovery. God invites us all to place ourselves and our anxieties in His hands, but He also gives us the necessary energy to do something about those things. He doesn't usually provide overnight miracles; He respects us too much for that. He reverences the slow but sure ways we grow and change and recover, and He is with us all throughout that process. He is with us to bear us up at the lowest points and fill our hearts with joy at the highest points. There is a true but very mysterious way in which He is our partner in recovery, all the while working through our own decisions and our own gritty courage in the ways that enable us to feel that our recovery has been truly our own, in our own way, in our own time. In the recovery process God helps draw us out of the tortured, growing, changing people we are, our best selves - our holiest selves.” (James J. Young, Divorcing, Believing, Belonging, Paulist Press, 1984)

These words were written by my guest columnist, Father Jim Young, in 1984. Father Young is acknowledged as the founder of our modern ministry to separated and divorced Catholics. The words are as true today as they were over twenty-six years ago when he wrote them. He passed on to Glory shortly afterwards. He left us but in so many ways he is with us still...and always will be.

February, 2011 -The Lord Walks With You

With the beginning of the New Year, I thought I'd like to review some hopes that I have for you.

First, be convinced of your basic goodness and that the Lord loves you unconditionally. Though your marriage failed, you are not a failed person.

Second be aware of the past but do not be controlled by it and learn from it. Don't pitch your tent in the past.

Third, celebrate life and realize that the kingdom of God is present through your generosity to others. The kingdom of God is present in a myriad of ways. For example, a meal enjoyed with a friend, a trip, the beauty of a sunset, the laughter of friends, a movie enjoyed - all these examples take you beyond the present moment and transcend it. When you hear yourself say "I don't know where the time went" that is a taste of God present in the Human form.

Fourth, be aware of your call to be a responsible Catholic; reflected in your personal decision making process. Common sense combined with prayer and a desire to do God's will, will enable you to come out on top. Always ask yourself this question when in doubt: "What would Christ do?"

Fifth, be grateful for the gift of faith you have in the Church. The Church is not only a hierarchal structure but is described as people of God. All are brothers and sisters in Christ in that community. Your relationship with God is where your opinions are important. Do not be stuck in the past, always be open to the new. Knowing that without risk there is no growth. Take courage and express your opinions. As divorced Catholics you need to familiarize yourselves with the divorced sayings of Jesus in the scripture, for they provide the basis against divorce and remarriage. For example, St. Paul's work with the Church of Corinth, saw the need of taking the Lords absolute statements and be applied pastorally which allows for exception. Paul for example, took the absolute stigmas against divorce and remarriage and realized that they needed to be adapted to the circumstances of the time. St. Paul faced the challenges of his time, namely in dealing with people of various backgrounds as Christ was dealing with the Jews. St. Paul saw Jesus in the concrete example of his life, and so allowed divorce and remarriage in the Church. Namely when a pagan became a convert and the one in the marriage could not live with the Christian, and left the marriage, then the convert is free to leave the marriage because Christ is calling them to peace. Recall then that you are a gift to the Church. You are a great gift to the Church for how you deal with your life issues.

Sixth, as responsible Catholics you need to be informed and keep a record of good reading material. Do reading of periodicals of Catholic events like America, NCR, Catholic World Report, Catholic Register & US Catholic. Some are more liberal and some more conservative. These are just a few of the suggestions that I have for you, but they do not exhaust the list, just some to get you started. The year is before you, and know that the Lord walks with you.

So in conclusion, I think of you all very often and miss being with you. I hope that you have the desire to grow very much. I am trying to take advantage of the many opportunities to be close to you. Have a great new year.

March, 2011 - My Prayer

Recently I experienced a few of my fellow Jesuits pass to their eternal home. I had the privilege of experiencing their last breaths. Coincidentally my prayer life has centered mainly around my breathing since I find it difficult to pray at night. So in the morning I come up with more prayers that are focused on experiencing breathing than on words or concepts.

Breathing is a reminder of God's presence in my life. God gave me my first breath. And His Presence makes me ready to greet my final journey. So I am aware of God's presence through my breathing and this focus enables me on my prayer journey. I breathe in God's life and love and it heals me where I need to be healed, hears me where I need to be heard, strengthens me where I am weak and encourages me when I am discouraged. As I rise in the morning, I offer my day for some special intention, and my breathing exercises enable me to carry this intention throughout my day. So, I go about my day and I am aware of God's presence and I am full of hope.

Throughout the day I encounter many challenges to my life of faith. For example, I am aware that I no longer have control of my life; I am in the hands of other people. They may not meet my expectations of them. When I focus on my breathing, I am immersed in God's healing power. My breathing prayer becomes an action prayer. It not only energizes me but others who have touched my life and for whom I pray.

May I conclude with my prayer. "Dear Lord, help me to be aware always of Your presence in my life. You become very concrete through my breathing. Help me to be aware that You gave me life, and You have been with me throughout my life through my breathing and my life is in You."

April, 2011 - Father, Forgive Them

After a Mass at which he had preached a homily on forgiveness, a woman came up to Father Jim Young and said, “Father, I knew just what you were talking about. My husband, Joseph, left me after 22 years of marriage for another woman. He still hasn’t married her. I hated him; I was tied up in knots of bitterness and anger. I don’t think I realized how sour I had become. One morning I went to Mass on my way to work as I often do. It was the feast of Saint Joseph, and so I stopped at St. Joseph’s altar after Mass and lit a candle. I was praying for peace and health, and all of a sudden I heard a voice. ‘Forgive Joseph.’ That’s right. I heard a voice as clear as if it was you talking. ‘Forgive Joseph.’ So I did, and everything changed for the better. I felt as though I had turned it all around. I felt free. The burden of the past seemed lifted off my shoulders. Over the coming months I began to find new energy for myself and my kids. He hasn’t been any easier to relate to, but I feel differently toward him, more patient, more understanding. He still bugs me at times, but he can’t upset me the way he could before I’d forgiven him.”

“... Jesus had to forgive too. Remember when He was in His final agony...and all His friends ran for the hills. Even on Easter Sunday...they were still afraid...Then Jesus came and stood in their midst...He could have rubbed it in, but He didn’t. He said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven.’ His message was: ‘You know that you are forgiven—wasn’t that what My ministry was all about? Now that you’ve experienced the meaning of forgiveness, go and announce My forgiveness to others. Share with others the love and acceptance you have received from Me.’”...Jesus even put the best interpretation on their abandonment when He said from the cross, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ ” .” (James J. Young, Divorcing, Believing, Belonging, Paulist Press, 1984)

These words were written by my returning guest columnist, Father Jim Young, in 1984. Easter is the time of forgiveness. One day we will meet Jesus and He will say, “You showed Me that you loved Me when You forgave Me.” And we will say, “When did I forgive You, Lord?” And He will say, “When you forgave the one who hurt you the most, you forgave Me for the pain that you suffered.”

May, 2011 - My Body Is Broken But My Spirit Isn't

As I continue to deal with the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, I am aware that I am not able to do all that I would like to do; I tire quickly, & I cannot guarantee that I can do a certain amount of work each day. I have a reliable secretary who types my spiritual reflections and forwards them to Greg for the newsletter. I am slow in responding to gifts and letters, but eventually I get it done. The symptoms of the disease are different in each person. In my case, two prominent symptoms are freezing of the muscles so that I cannot move, and dyskinesia which is the thrust of unwanted energy and it forces things from my hands. Short term memory lapses, sleepless nights are a few of the other symptoms but I recall the words of a Jesuit friend of mine who is having serious back problems, and when he was called upon by an associate for Mass, he said "My body is broken but my spirit isn't." Such is my intention. I want to be in touch with all of you as much as I can as I struggle to carry on my new ministry assigned by the Province: namely to pray for the Province and the Society. So please keep up with the letters and phone calls.

So as I look at my present situation, I am reminded that God really does all of the work and I am merely his agent. Each morning on rising, I greet the day with my intentions so that my prayers are directed with energy and intention.

A good laugh and a fine joke keep me in touch with the human parts of my life. In the words of the late Father General, Pedro Arrupe S.J., ring true in my life: "Now more than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have wanted all my life from my youth. But now there is a difference; the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in God's hands."

As I recall your pain as a result of your lost marriage, I think the words of Isaiah keep us in touch with each other "See I will not forget you. I have carved you in the palm of my hand." Isaiah 40:15. So let us continue our journey and know that the Lord walks with us.

June, 2011 - Have the Courage to Make the Right Choice

“Choices” mark those challenging points which reflect your response to the Lord. As you reflect on the scriptures in your life, notice the important role Christ played in choices. For example, when the disciples did not understand His message, or when they abandoned him in the agony of the garden. Christ had a choice to make. He could reject his disciples for abandoning him or he could accept them as they are because he saw their basic goodness. Here Christ did not allow a person’s behavior to determine His response.

So too in your spiritual life. You will face moments when people who hurt you or treat you poorly, shock you -- you wonder how this can happen. You face the choice of rejecting this person, or you can choose to stay connected in your relationship, realizing that if you understood all the facets in their background, you would have acted the same way. And when you are feeling hurt before you retaliate in anger, pause, take a deep breath and realize that you can choose to move on with your relationship or reject that person. You are in charge of your response, not controlled by another person. Perhaps this model can help you as you deal with your former spouse or anyone who has hurt you. As you face concrete struggles in your life, realize that Christ models for you for your response. I often ask the Lord to give you the strength to make the choices to bring you closer to Him. Basic to the idea of choice is the determination of not letting another person’s behavior determine how you act. You are in charge. Though you are in charge you realize that your strength comes from the Lord. May you have the courage to make the right choice.

July, 2011 - Christ is the Great Healer

Catholics don't seem to seek Confession as they once did. They turn to substitutes such as therapy, counseling, and the opinion of friends. Furthermore, they feel that since they keep doing the same things over and over again, and nothing seems to work. So why bother going to Confession?

I would like to suggest to you a fresh approach that would enable you to seek Confession in a new light. Confession is mainly seen in this light as a healing experience. Since Christ has already redeemed us, He has taken away our sins. So in a sense our sins have been forgiven before they have been committed. We are all aware of our own weakness, yet we still commit the same thing over and over again. The words of St. Paul come to mind, "I see the good, but I do the evil." We keep repeating the experience of the human weakness, and we rely upon ourselves, so when we fail to move in the direction we would like, it is God reminding us that we need him. For example, when you see your former spouse in another relationship, your old anger comes back, so Confession is a way of continuing to work on an issue. So when you go to confession, you go in an effort to be whole.

In the pursuit of healing it is important to find an understanding confessor who is patient with you as you struggle with your human limitations. Confession is not as much a matter of forgiving sins, yet it is clearly the confession of sin and the person conscious of the sin, to be more focused on healing. Again Christ is the great healer. Believe that He walks with you on your journey.

As you experience the healing power of Christ in the compassionate understanding of a confessor who senses your struggle and supports you on your journey. So through confession you experience the compassion of Christ.

August, 2011 - Spirit Of New Life

I would like to share with you a story with which you can identify. One afternoon, my phone rang in my room --a young lady wanted to see a priest. When I met her she shared with me the story of a broken marriage. The experience of that loss compounded with the loss of her job, threw that young lady into the pit of depression. She felt her life had no purpose, she had invested all of her life into her marriage, and the realization that her husband left her for another woman, was too much to bear. She thought of suicide. She looked in the mirror and saw how awful she looked. She then realized that her neighbor would be the first to discover her in that condition and that she didn't want to look this way. So she decided to make herself presentable by redoing her hair, applying her makeup, putting on her best robe, and when she looked back in the mirror, she looked really smashing. She soon broke out into laughter, and realized that she no longer wanted to die, but wanted to live.

I hope that all of you will catch that spirit of new life. Your divorce is not the end of your life, but can be the beginning of new life that you will find most satisfying. And remember that as you reflect on the loss of your marriage, the loss can be the beginning to new life. Go for it! The Lord wants your peace and happiness. He walks with you on this journey of new life.