



**Spiritual Reflections**  
**2003-2009**  
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*

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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 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. The Reflections collected here are for the most part from the period of our separation from each other. They run from September of 2003 to August of 2009 and have all appeared in the SDC Monthly Newsletters.

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

*Greg Becker*  
Editor

## *September, 2003 -- God's Presence in Your Life*

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God: silent. Financial worries, ache of loneliness, urgent needs unmet, believed values not lived, humbling weaknesses dominate, body's demands paramount. Spirit: dead. Future: uncertain. Friends: gone. Faith: flat. I simply don't experience God's presence in my life. Sound familiar?

Look again! He is there! See Him! Experience the Lord in all the events of life. Imagine you see Jesus standing there before you. Notice Him looking at you.

Many find it hard to imagine Jesus looking at them lovingly. Their image of Jesus is the image of someone who is harsh and demanding—someone who, even if He loves them, loves them only if they are good! But that is not the Lord of the Gospels. The Lord of the Gospels is the risen Lord who is present in all your human struggles as His words remind us, “Behold, I am with you always.”

Furthermore, He loves and accepts you just as you are. You don't have to change to merit His love. Nowhere in scripture does Christ say, “I'll love you only if you live my way.” He loves and accepts you just as you are. You do not have to become better. He obviously wants you to give up your sins. But such a conversion isn't a prerequisite to get His love and acceptance. That you have already, right now, just as you are, even before you decide to change or not.

Do you believe this? If you do, then Christ is very present to you as you are and where you are, no matter what the circumstances of life. The great turning point of your life then comes not when you realize that you love the Lord, but when you realize and fully accept the fact that the Lord loves you unconditionally. Do you believe that? If not, take the challenge to prayer. See what happens! Perhaps your experience might be that of one of St. Teresa's nuns. When asked what she did in prayer, she replied, “I just allow myself to be loved.” (Sadhana: A Way to God, A. de Mello, 1978)

## *October, 2003 -- Integrate Prayer with Experience*

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In experiencing life as a divorced Catholic, are you integrating your prayer life with your life experiences? This integration brings the Lord into your kitchen, bedroom, office, social life and relationships with your family. How you pray and what prayer forms you use hopefully reflect your life experiences! Look around your kitchen, bedroom, living room, and den. What banners, posters, quotations, and symbols reflect the experiences that root you in the Lord?

Authentic prayers reflect the experiences that generate them! Take “Linda” for example. On a shelf in her kitchen is a piece of oak that bears the words, “The mothering air, the hollows, nests of birds, these things remind me always of a God who holds us in herself as in a womb.” Linda’s prayer reflects her conviction, her life experience as a woman dwelling within a nurturing God who is bringing her to birth. Dag Hammarskjöld’s prayer, “For all that has been-thanks. To all that shall be-yes (U.S. Catholic, April 1979), reflects his life of praise, commitment, and courage. If you make that prayer your own, it is because it speaks of your conviction, of your experience, of how you see God operating in your life.

My room is sprinkled with banners, posters, and postcards that are my prayers, reflecting my experience of God. One stands out. “God has become man and man need no longer become God, only man.” Another, “The main thing in life is not to be afraid to be human” and “You have touched me. I have grown.” My prayerful experience of God is that He is found in all that is truly human.

So look closely through your home. Would a visitor recognize it as a Catholic home by the symbols it displays? What are the prayer reminders of how you experience God? They tell you of your basic spiritual convictions and experiences that anchor your life. Give them meaning and direction. Unless the prayers you speak are tightly linked to your life experiences, they will be babblings you hide behind rather than words reflecting how you see God operating in your life.

## ***November, 2003 -- Accepting Pain***

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**“No more pain! That’s it!” Familiar words! Divorced Catholics, your pain is acute. If you are the leaver, the pain of guilt. If you are the leaver, the pain of wounded self-image—anger!**

**Escape from pain consumes your energy, especially during the first months. Healthy pain relievers help: friends exercise, support groups, prayer, etc. Yet the pain lingers! Your challenge then becomes acceptance, an ability to enter into the pain, feel it, acknowledge it, accepting it as normal. This “bending without yielding,” this entering into and acceptance of normal pain, leads to transformation into new life.**

**The Lord points the way. In the Agony in the Garden His “yes” to the Father’s will became His “yes” to His murder on Calvary. He entered into His pain, trusting the Father would see Him through. His resurrection far exceeded His wildest expectations. The Lord chided the disciples during His lifetime for their reluctance to see the role of pain in their life with Him. “Get thee behind me Satan.” Spoke the Lord to His disciples when they felt the Lord could triumph the easy way.**

**You hurt! Your agony is learning to live with the gnawing pain that comes with having to give up something you want very much. Pain is the consequences of being human, no matter what your state! As one psychotherapist said, “I tell my patients that there is pain in being single, in being married, and in being alive!” (Psychology Today, 5/81, p., 17)**

**A psychologist, a veteran of Vietnam, in commenting on this need to enter into acceptance of pain as part of the healing process, said the following: “Marlon Brando delivers a wonderful line in *Apocalypse Now*—‘You have to make a friend of horror.’ To me it means that if I had tried to run from my feelings, I’d have remained a prisoner of them. Now I feel like a broken bone that has healed in a way that makes me more whole. I’ve been tremendously strengthened by those experiences.” (People, 4/13, p. 97)**

**So with the Lord as your model and fortified by the data and experiences of behavioral scientists, acceptance of your pain is essential for healing and transformation. Cardinal Suenens’ words echo this point: “Dawn begins at midnight.”**

## *December, 2003 -- Your Roots at Christmas*

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Christmas connects me with my roots! I relive the memories that seldom surface during the year. Christmas for me now is especially poignant because I'm the last of the O'Briens. I thank the Lord for the gift of the past. I recall how my sister always liked to tell the story of how she stood guard over me as I cried my heart out when the barber cut my black locks for my first haircut. I laugh as I recall the memory and silently thank the Lord for what once was. I reflect and remind myself that the past will always somehow be a part of me. Accept it! This acceptance somehow frees me to accept the positive, loving part of the past and that this acceptance helps me move into my now.

Perhaps Christmas works the same way for you. You recall what Christmas meant in your married life that is no more. Yet your former spouse will always have a place in your heart. Accept that reality. Get into those memories for a time. All those experiences somehow have led to your now. They too are a part of you. As you continue your journey, you can carry the joys and pain of your past. From this past, a new you emerges.

The Lord's birthday is a fitting time to connect with your roots. God as man entered history on Christmas. This Baby who was God would grow, change, and become daily more conscious of who He was. The Infant did not have a full consciousness of Who He was—that He was God. He came to that awareness gradually through time, change, and by sharing the joys and pains of life. His life was a journey of growing awareness that led to death and resurrection. Each succeeding event grew out of what went before.

Isn't that your like and mine? So as you thank the Father on Christmas for the gift He gave to us of His Son, thank Him too for your roots, all those past experiences and memories that helped bring you to your now. This acceptance will free you to continue your journey of growth and discovery in the years ahead.

On my desk in my room is a picture plaque of the seashore, given to me by one of my clients when I was working as an addictions counselor for Prince George's County. Its message sums up the interconnection of our past with the present and future:

I am not afraid to face tomorrow  
For I have seen yesterday  
And I love today.

This is my Christmas prayer for you all. MERRY CHRISTMAS!

## *January, 2004 -- Dedicate the New Year*

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As you move into the New Year, be aware of two aspects of the spiritual life that can enrich your life with the Lord.

First, be doers of the Word, not just listeners. Make it a practice as you read the paper, listen to the news, go to work and greet people, to be mindful of someone or something that needs your attention. Offer a prayer, lend a hand, or speak encouragement.

Second, recall that the time the Lord gives you to “be doers of the Word” is limited. As the New Year begins, you wonder where the last year went. Life is so short! So every day of your life is a gift from God—a gift that is filled with equal amounts of joy, terror, failure, and greatness. But by taking up the challenge of living your life as a single parent, the Lord promises that the journey will end in ultimate triumph. That’s the conviction of your faith.

Two anchors provide a rock foundation for this faith. The first is the awareness that the Lord is not apart from your life in some far distant heaven, but He walks with you. He is intermingled in the nitty-gritty stuff of your life. That awareness can be a great source of strength as you face the daily challenges of being a single parent.

The second anchor of Christian hope is a rock-like certitude that “all things work for good,” that nothing “will separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:28,35). This faith conviction doesn’t mean that all pain will disappear like magic. Still, while not exempt from suffering, believers possess a treasured insight captured by 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich who said, “All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

So it’s New Years, full of hope and promise:

...365 days to enjoy, celebrate.

...365 days to live, give.

...365 days to hold the door for the next person.

...365 days to keep my word as well as to really hear the words and sounds and silence of those around me.

...365 days to pray—not just in time of need but to offer daily prayers of thanks and praise for all our daily gifts and blessings You keep on surrounding me with, O Lord.

...365 days a year, Amen!

—from Andrew Costello

Happy New Year!

## *February, 2004 -- Others Need You*

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One of the great challenges of the divorced person is to avoid being stuck indefinitely in the “poor me” role. Whose pain could be greater than my pain?

True, all of us—no matter what our emotional, spiritual, or financial need—feel at times the cold climate of isolation, arrogance, indifference, loneliness, and distraction. Our talk and news shows bristle with hostility. Hate volumes about Presidents Clinton and Bush abound. Our populations of the poor and the imprisoned have grown. Abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and war making are hallmarks of our culture (America, December 22-29, 2003, p. 6). The pain of the divorced is especially poignant as you come to experience the fact that you don’t get over divorce—you get used to it.

But you can’t afford the luxury of feeling sorry for yourself when you look around and see the people who need you, especially your children. You can be so caught up in your own pain that you are unaware of how deeply your children hurt. They need to experience your strength in coping with the pain so they in turn can really believe that life will get better. There is a new tomorrow. Others need you as well: a neighbor who appreciates your silent presence as he tries to cope with the sudden death of his spouse; a friend who loses his job after 25 years of faithful service and needs you to listen to his pain; a new member of SDC who calls you in the middle of the night because she can’t sleep, her depression overwhelms her, and she needs to hear from you that her feelings are normal and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Life will get better.

Through these gestures of love and action, you make Christ’s healing presence very real. St. John tells us that God is love and where love is, God is present. So when you love one another in this down to earth way, Christ’s love becomes visible through you. You no longer become stuck in the “poor me” role. You have too much living to do for others who need you. As you become an instrument of healing for others, you realize that in experiencing your role as a healer, you become healed yourself. You truly are a wounded healer.

## *March, 2004 -- A Prayer for Lent*

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Though Christmas seems like yesterday, the challenges of Lent now stretch ahead, e.g. Look at what you need to let go of to live more fully ... Christ's values, struggle for liberation from all that enslaves. To have the strength, wisdom, to live these values, let us go before the Lord in prayer:

Lord, guide me

Through these 40 days of Lent.

Protect me and direct me:

Be a cloud above me this day

And a pillar of fire above me this night.

Remind me to take some moments today to go

With you into the mountains of prayer,

Where I might see you transfigured before me.

Enter into my temple this day; walk around;

Remind me when I'm too busy buying and selling;

Cleanse me of my idols.

Lord, help me this day to be like you:

A grain of wheat willing to die

So that others might live.

----Andrew Costello

## *April, 2004 -- A Resurrection People*

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Death transformed into new life is not the resuscitation of the old body but a transformation into the new spirit-filled existence. That's the wonder of the Lord's resurrection. That's Easter! That too is your calling. Resurrection is not just the Lord's. Your resurrection can begin now for the Lord said, "I have come that you may have life in abundance."

You see the mystery of transformation mirrored in your world: The seed is transformed into the buds of spring, the moth into the butterfly. As divorced Catholics, your new life that is emerging from the pain and aches of a lost dream to a fuller, more aware individual life is more than the resuscitation of the old. There is a transformation of sorts. Your verging on new, loving relationships testifies to the reality that you are a hope-filled person, a transformed person. The Lord's resurrection is your model. From the fears and pain comes new life. No growth without conflict, crisis, and death, but in all deaths there is the seed of transformed new life. So life always has hope, meaning!

Frederico Fellini, an Italian and one of the most profound film makers of our time, captures this spirit of man as hope-filled when his characters portray the pain and agony of human failures yet never lose hope. They are human resurrections—life transformed. At the end of his film, *The Nights of Cabiria*, Fellini captured one of the loveliest and most touching moments of film history. Prostitute Cabiria has just been robbed of her life savings by her fiancé, a man she loved and trusted. She is penniless and homeless. As she walks along a road just after her fiancé robbed and abandoned her, she is suddenly surrounded by a group of people playing musical instruments. With tears in her eyes, Cabiria begins to smile at the musicians and allows the music to lift her spirits. While smiling, she too looks directly into the camera as if to say, "I'll be all right!" The mystery of life continues.

Many of you live this reality: "I'll be all right!" The mystery of life continues. You are a hope-filled people, a resurrection people! Happy Easter! Enjoy the life of spring.

## *May, 2004 -- Dealing With the Want God Gives Us*

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“What is God’s will for me?” How often this question surfaces in our daily experiences! Many possible answers come to mind, namely: 1) To do the better thing, 2) To do the harder thing, 3) To listen and God in time will speak to you, 4) To read Scripture prayerfully—the Lord then will tell you His will, 5) To pray in your own way, 6) To obey the teaching authority of the Church. All of these answers bear some weight. There is, however, one very real answer to this question that we often overlook: Look at what I really want, not my surface or trivial needs, but those deepest aspirations that sum up “me.” Since it is God who gives us the grace to want, our wants then are God’s gifts. To be in touch with these wants, to have the faith to see God’s will there and the then to act courageously on these want describes the mature Catholic. These wants may not be immediately evident. But if you stick with it, you will have reasonable certitude that if they are followed when known, you are doing God’s will.

But a natural response at this time might arise: namely, isn’t that being selfish? Isn’t that kidding yourself? Isn’t that taking the easy way out? Of course there are real dangers Yet not to act on what you convincingly feel is right for you is to discount your own dignity and ability to make mature decisions. And this is an affront to the living God Who has called you to freedom. Furthermore, I feel very strongly that you have to give up the need for absolute certitude in discerning God’s will. Such certitudes are pertinent to historical data and mathematical relationships, not to the ambiguity of faith and love decisions. Scripture presents to us a loving God. A truly loving person respects the individuality and freedom of the loved one. And so the Lord is present to you as you activate the deepest part of your humanness: the ability to take responsibility for your actions after a reasonable period of prayer and consultation, knowing you are in the hands of a loving God. Do you truly believe that? If not, that would be a great grace to ask for in prayer!

## *June, 2004 -- Deal With Your Hurt*

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“I can’t forgive! I never will! The hurt is too deep!” And “priests speak too glibly of forgiveness, especially in pious sermons.”

These cries shouted the pain of two different women—real and honest feelings! All of us need to avoid telling people who hurt that they shouldn’t feel that way. The fact is, they do. Never discount the feelings of another, the most authentic \_expression of a person’s individuality.

Yet forgiveness is the call of all those who have been hurt by another in a personal relationship. In the process of grief to growth, it’s one of the last stages resolved. Some arrive at forgiveness sooner than others. It’s a personal thing. Sometimes individuals forgive too quickly, before they have worked through their feelings. So in the guise of being the understanding person, the good Catholic, honest feelings are denied. Unfortunately, these repressed feelings will surface in more destructive ways. Though forgiveness for most is not an instant thing, hopefully it will be a process you grow into. Be patient with yourself! I would like to offer three suggestions that might be helpful as you deal with your unforgiving heart.

First, unless you eventually forgive, you will never be free to live and love again because the person who hurt you still controls your life now. Consequently, you will never find your place of sunlight and joy.

Second, only when you can get inside the other person and realize the individual handled the situation the best way s/he could, considering the person’s resources and temperament, will you truly forgive. You come to see that the person wasn’t evil—just limited and weak. Letting go of your unrealistic expectations of the other to meet your needs is your constant challenge.

Third, when all human effort fails, ask the Lord to heal you. His miracles aren’t just in Scripture, they can be now, provided you want to be healed and really believe the Lord can do it.

This is the season of the Resurrection. In His post-resurrection life, the Lord forgave His disciples for their denials and desertion of Him when He needed them most. He looked beyond their limitations, accepted them as they were, and gently invited them to grow into a new love relationship with Him. When you reach your moment of letting go, you will experience your resurrection.

Humanly speaking, you can never overlook what happened and pretend that you don’t hurt. But you can make the decision to change your thinking, to live in the now, and to risk again, to trust again, and to let the Lord’s healing power into your life.

## *July, 2004 -- You are a Resurrection People!*

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And the Resurrection is to be experienced now—not only in soul but also in body. But ruts and routines mute your resurrection cry: “Rejoice in the glory that is yours and give thanks to God Who called you to His Kingdom.” (Ezr. 2/36-7) Perhaps that’s where summer comes in—the sun, beach, outdoor cafes, picnics, and vacations all invite you to get out of your ruts, to refresh the spirit so you can give the Lord’s Resurrection spirit a chance to glow through you! If you do your part, the Lord will do His, but give Him a chance as the following story indicates:

“A good and pious man fell on hard times. As he way saying his prayers one night, he beseeched God to let him win the lottery in exchange for his years of devout faith. The next day he was optimistic, but after nothing happened, he pleaded his cause in prayer once again. Still, God was silent. Finally, the man got back down on his knees and complained, ‘Why don’t You give me a break, God?’ Suddenly, the voice of the Almighty was heard: ‘Why don’t You give me a break ? Why don’t you at least buy a ticket?’”(Reader’s Digest, p. 149, April, 1983.)

So give the Lord a break by being good to yourself during the summer in whatever ways fit your time and pocketbook. Then you cooperate with the Lord in this human way in mirroring throughout the spirit of Resurrection -- new transformed life! Enjoy the summer!

## *August, 2004 -- Offer It to God*

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Well, it's good to be back with all of you again. I'd like to reflect with you on my religious experience during these days. The fundamental feeling that I had during these days was emptiness. I was finding it hard to conceptualize God's presence in prayer. Yet, deep down I knew He was present. It made my experience of emptiness itself a prayer. I'd like to say to the community that your prayers and your kindness carried me through those days.

Perhaps your experience with your divorce was so traumatic that God appeared to be absent or silent. There are three insights that I kept coming back to that helped me. If any of these insights appeal to you, place them in your heart and ponder their inner meaning. This will cause inner truth to germinate and grow. Do not force it open with your mind. That will only kill the seed. Sew it where the soil is rich. Sew it in your heart and give it time. The following are the three insights:

-You do not have to change for God to love you.

-Be grateful for your sins, they are carriers of grace.

-Say goodbye to golden yesterdays— or your heart will never learn to love the present. (From *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits.*)

I'm not quite sure about the third insight, because frankly I find that memories of the past remind me of God's presence. So, I'll continue to reflect with you in the months ahead in how I experience God in these difficult moments. Perhaps you can identify with them from your own experience. So, if your prayer is dry, do not despair. The dryness itself can be a prayer. Offer it to God with courage and love and hope.

September, 2004 [No Spiritual Reflection due to Father Vince's hospitalization]

## *October, 2004 -- A Prayer Experience*

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As you know, this has been a very difficult time for me as I struggle with my physical limitations. However, because of this, I can more clearly identify with you and your struggle as you face the life changing challenges of separation, divorce or widowhood. As we mutually struggle with life's difficult problems, I want to emphasize the importance of your time praying to God. Give your problems to God, He is listening.

I want to offer to you a different kind of prayer experience. I am going to suggest that we pray in a less traditional way. At times, you may feel like giving up with praying, because you do not feel the emotional consolation, from the reflective, traditional prayer experience. You may even feel an emptiness or dryness in your prayers. I would like to offer you something different. I want you to move from the wordy, intellectual prayer to a more imaginative prayer. This meditative, prayer experience may be helpful. You may feel overwhelmed with life's struggles and may even feel distant from the Lord, but through this process of visualization you will be energized.

In a quiet, comfortable place, visualize the strength of the Lord as you breathe deeply in. Imagine that you are inhaling the Lord's strength -- filling your entire body with Him, as you breathe in. As you exhale, I want you to imagine that you are directing the strength of the Lord to those around you who may be in need of His strength. As you inhale, you are becoming stronger, you are empowering yourself. As you exhale, you are sharing His strength with others.

Remember always that the Lord is present in you. The Lord is there with you sharing all the human events and circumstances of your life. Let his strength consume you. This is my prayer experience that I wish to share with you.

I have found as I deal with my issues that the traditional forms of prayer often don't speak to me. Consequently, with this approach, I am more able to rest in the Lord. The focus is more in the Lord doing the work than myself. I suggest that you may all try this and see if your prayer life can be energized in a new way.

## *November, 2004 -- Let Us Be Thankful*

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As I experienced my pain, both physical and emotional, these past months, I thought often of all of you. You have so many issues to deal with, e.g., how to be present to my children when I'm struggling to keep afloat financially in lieu of their father's failure to share in the costs of what it takes to clothe, feed, etc. any typical teenager. And now as the holiday season approaches, you may ask, how do I cope with my anger and resentment when I'm supposed to be the pillar of strength to everyone else?

You may find that you're totally absorbed in your own needs. Yet, Thanksgiving Day reminds you to broaden your self awareness to see the many reasons why, in spite of the pain and uncertainty of life, you do have reason to be grateful. We all face the same challenge - you face the challenges of divorce, and I must deal with some lost freedoms, like no driver's license and physical limitations that keep me from doing what I want. Sometimes it's hard to be grateful when we feel overwhelmed by life's stresses. So we go to the Lord for strength to be grateful.

Let us pray together a "thank you" card to the Lord for all He has given us:

"Lord I thank You

For everything You have given me

for my family, my friends, my country

for my talents and the physical, intellectual and spiritual gifts You've granted me

for my general health, my eyes, my hands and my feet

for the many opportunities You've put on my way

for the possibility to grow Your way

for opening my eyes to detect You in the events and circumstances that encompass my life,

and in my brother and sister where you also dwell

and for allowing me through my job or retirement to make a contribution to the wonderful work

You have started in the act of creation.

Thank You, Lord, thank You for everything You've given me."

(Bold Prayers from the Heart, p. 30)

Remember: the past is history, the future is mystery and the present is now, that is why it is called the present."

## *December, 2004 -- A Christmas Reflection*

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The Christmas Season reminds us that God became man. As St. Paul says: "Christ pitched His tent among us." Our God is not an outside God, but an inside God. The Christmas story gives us our first awareness of the great mystery of God's love for us.

One of the highlights of my Christmas Season occurs when I see a parent take their child to the Christmas Creche and hear the parent retell the story of Christ's birth, all the while taking in the awe of the child's reaction—a truly magic moment.

As you reflect on your own private Christmas moment, I pray this Christmas prayer for all of you:

"May the Christmas season neither rush nor crush you.  
May it snow only when you want it to.  
May Christ's peace be the best gift you receive this Christmas.  
May your children be surprised by at least one amazing Christmas gift,  
but get what they need and enjoy what they get.  
And may the Lord Jesus be born again under your tree,  
in your heart and in the lives of all those you meet  
greet this Christmas. Amen". (Andrew Costello)

## *January, 2005 -- Be Positive! ... Not Negative.*

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January is the month of “new” resolutions made and soon broken, reminding you of how limited and fragile you can sometimes be. Does that mean you give up, knowing all along that such resolutions are unrealistic? Of course not! You just need to be more realistic and let the Lord work with you.

Perhaps the following prayer model can be helpful:

“Lord, this year I only have one resolution; TO BE POSITIVE INSTEAD OF BEING NEGATIVE that’s it, that’s all.

Now I need your help in keeping this resolution. Remind me to see the smiles instead of the yawn. Help me to enjoy the rain, the snow, the cool refreshing breeze, instead of seeing only the cloudy skies that bring them.

When I walk into a room, let me start off with something like, 'It’s good to see you!' instead of: 'Did you get the job done yet?'

Let me see attempts, what works, and stop spotting what doesn’t work.

Lord, help me with this New Year’s resolution of trying to be positive, to build people up, instead of being negative and wearing people out.”

So this could be your prayer:

God, here I am, as I am.

God, here You are, as You are.

So God, what’s preventing me from praying? (Andrew Costello)

## *February, 2005 -- Listening to God*

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I know all of you are deeply concerned about your spiritual life. Most of you need to be aware of the distinction between "talking about God" as opposed to "listening to God" if your spiritual life is to mature.

So I would like to share with all of you my spiritual journey these past ten months. It has enabled me to become more attuned to "listening to God." I have found that growth in the spiritual life is a process of learning how to "listen to God." "Talking about God" keeps your relationship on the surface, whereas "listening to God" is a form of prayer that touches the inner you.

This month, I'd like to tell you about my favorite prayer form of "listening to God." All of my subsequent reflections stem from my present stay at Manresa Hall, a Jesuit community here in Philadelphia, comprised of men who are in various stages of a terminal illness. I don't see myself at that stage yet, though one fellow Jesuit told me: "Vince, you still have some rubber left on those tires." But remember we are all terminal; some of us are just a little further along on our journey home.

This prayer form of "listening to God" reminds me that you all are very present to me. You, the Lord and I have quite an intimate bonding. This prayer form brings me right into the middle of your life with all its pain, struggles, joys and challenges. The following is the prayer style of "listening to God" to which I am referring. It stems from my recent experience of sleeplessness. I awaken at 2:00 a.m., unable to get back to sleep. I have used this time to root myself in this prayer form and find it to be every helpful.

This listening is rooted in my imagination by focusing on my breathing. I imagine I am breathing in the Lord's life and I exhale that life and love out to people who are hurting. Knowing how so many of you are hurting, I find this prayer a practical way of drawing closer to the Lord and to you. In this way we are bonded to God and to one another, thus enabling me to embrace all of you.

This is a very simple yet powerful prayer form. I don't intend to minimize the intellectual side in favor of the emotional. I just want to bring to your attention the use of the imagination in bringing us closer to God and to one another.

See you next month for another leg on my journey.

## *March, 2005 -- Praying With The Imagination*

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Last month I invited you to join me on my spiritual journey. Central to any journey is an active prayer life

As you recall, I described to you my prayer style: PRAYING WITH THE IMAGINATION. In this form of prayer, I imaged Christ's life flowing into me with each inhale. Then as I exhaled, I imaged Christ's life flowing through me in a healing fashion or letting His life flow out to all of you, especially to those of you who are hurting.

Now for the application of this prayer style to my daily life. My wake up call is at 6:00 a.m. because I must take medication every two hours or, in some cases, every hour. Since I have Parkinson's disease, regular and prompt use of medication is necessary to control the symptoms.

As I cast my legs out of bed to crawl into a new day, I think of and pray for several of my Jesuit classmates who have completed their journey home to the Lord this past year. Monsignor Ed Manalis and Paulist Father Jim Young, both of whom gave so much of themselves to the Divorce Ministry also come into this prayer. As I dress, I'm aware of what a struggle it is to dress myself in a normal manner because my left foot does not conform with what I'm telling it to do. So it now takes me 45 minutes to dress instead of my previous 15!

When I begin to feel sorry for myself, I recall the pictures of young men returning from the war without legs or arms. The moment of prayer that occurs at that time puts my inconvenience into proper perspective and becomes a gift to the Lord. The awareness that occurs at this time can lead to a moment of prayer and is furthered when I think how you have courageously dealt with the pain of divorce and how so many of you have grown greatly into a new life.

So, all our setbacks and pains can be used as prayer forms for ourselves and others. In consequence, I can move gently from meditation to breakfast to begin my day. All I'm trying to say is that our pains, if we're simply aware of their potential, can be used as prayer experiences for ourselves and others. So what began as a "poor me" experience is transformed into a prayer experience.

Next month, when I share with you, I'd like to highlight the role of humor in our prayer experience. See you then...

## *April, 2005 -- A Profound Sense of God's Presence*

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Last month 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 Kobiarka'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, 2005 -- Dealing with the Loss of Freedom*

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As I share with you my spiritual journey over this past year, perhaps you will see as I do that the spiritual is rooted in the human or is reflected in the human. One of the losses I especially feel is the loss of many of my freedoms. I can't just jump in my car and head off to a Deanery meeting, go to a movie, or browse at Borders. Someone is always with me. As my doctor recently told me: "Father, you need to accept the fact that your walker will be your constant companion for the rest of your life." All of us have to deal with the fact of losses. What are yours? How are you handling them?

These losses are the Lord's way of preparing us for the final loss of everything we hold dear when we complete our journey to our permanent home. I recall the response someone once had to the question "I wonder how much money John Paul Getty left behind when he died? The answer was: "All of it, all of it, dearie." Which is to say, that familiar old adage "You can't take it with you" is quite literally true! We have to learn to let go in order to move on. Otherwise we remain stuck and might need spiritual or psychological help to become unstuck, i.e., free!

As you deal with the pain of your losses, reflect often on the following words: "Say goodbye to golden yesterdays or your heart will never learn to love the present." Embrace the sacrament of the present moment as you move on to a new and hopeful stage of your life.

Hopefully you all will attend the coming Memorial Day Weekend Retreat, designed especially for SDC to help you move on from your losses to a challenging new future. I hope to be there myself – see you then.

## *June, 2005 -- Humor For Your Spiritual Journey*

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During these months I've been happy to share with you my spiritual journey. I've talked about how to pray effectively in time of stress and reminded you of my struggle with the loss of freedoms. At this point I must be careful not to see this spiritual journey as solely serious. Oftentimes we focus too much on what we don't have in the struggles of our life that we forget to see the fun side of life. As a consequence, we experience depression and discouragement.

One attitude that helps me break away from this negative force is the dynamic of humor. Humor is a great emotional icebreaker that opens up the positive in our lives and helps us lead a more balance life.

I have in mind a particular type of humor: jokes. Throughout my life I've amassed a storehouse of jokes that I could go to when I'm discouraged - and they would break the mood for me. Unfortunately that treasure trove was lost in my move here, but I still recall some that nurture me. I'm referring especially to jokes that hit right in the gut, that make you break out in spontaneous laughter that often alarms the people around you and is an especially joyous experience when I can share it with someone.

Let me give you an example. After a man had taken a physical, his doctor called him in to give him the results. After sitting down in his office the doctor said: "John, I've got some good news and some bad news for you. What do you want first?" John says, "Give me the good news first, Doc." Whereupon the doctor says "The good news is you have two days to live." "Geez, if that's the good news, what's the bad news?" "Well, the bad news is ... 'two days to live' was what I was originally supposed to have told you yesterday" the doctor says. At this point I broke down in uncontrollable laughter, tears streaming down my face. My laughter was so loud that it was contagious, causing the people around me to break out in laughter too.

Another humorous joke that broke me up also centers on a man again going in for a physical exam. After he had finished the physical, the doctor asked to see his spouse and told her that her husband had only a year to live but if she did the following things for him he would live on indefinitely: namely, if she would cook him a gourmet meal everyday, have uninhibited sex at least daily and never criticize him, then he would live a long time. On the way home there was silence in the car, until the husband finally asked her what did the doctor say.

"Oh, you're not going to make it!" That too brought me great guffaws of laughter.

So hopefully, humor can be as much a part of your spiritual journey as it is mine. By the way, give me your favorite jokes that bring tears to your eyes. Through humor we can always remain connected.

## July, 2005 -- “Behold I make all things new!”

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Let’s continue our spiritual journey together. From the moment life begins to our final breath, our spiritual journey consist of a series of *little deaths* that prepare us for our ultimate death that leads to our final transformation into Christ. For example, your divorce recovery illustrates this death-to-life transformation.

As you reflect on this journey, it’s important to be aware that Christ journeys *with* you, not you journeying to Christ. Most of you went through a terrible loss with the end of your marriage, and all too often the most tragic loss of all was your own sense of self: knowing who you really are. As you become more aware of Christ within you He enables you to not merely survive, but grow to a new sense of self. Our Lord said: “Behold I make all things new!” If you’ll just let him, He will remake you a new creation in Him. Remember however that hard work and the struggle are still there; life does not suddenly become a bed of roses. But the difference is the peace of knowing that you don’t have to struggle to get to God. He’s already there!

The truth is that in my life I will never be more present to God than RIGHT NOW. God loves me just as I am now. No matter what sins I might commit or great things I might accomplish, God’s love will not change. You do not have to change for God to love you, but your awareness of Christ’s loving presence leads you to become the person God calls you to be. So as you experience your human limitations, even sin, be grateful to God for they can be carriers of grace if you let them. Do you really believe that? How you answer that question will determine your inner peace.

## August, 2005 -- "I haven't deserted you!"

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I am writing to all of you because you may be wondering what happened to me. When you asked the Georgetown Prep switchboard operator where I was or how you could contact me, you were told that they didn't know where I was or how I could be contacted. I felt sad that you were unable to reach me. I know you felt frustrated and sad as well.

Here's the story. You may or may not know that I had a painful fall as a result of an inward force over which I had no control. I learned later that such a force was another sign of my Parkinson's disease. The subsequent effect of my fall was a broken hip. Following intensive therapy at two local medical facilities, I was shipped off to the Jesuit Health Care Center, located on the campus of St. Joseph's University in the northernmost part of Philadelphia. This Center is the final assignment for most Jesuits who are assigned there. Though I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in '95, the symptoms were controllable. Since it is a progressive illness, I needed to be a realist, yet I still felt that I had some rubber left on my tires. I continue to keep involved in the divorce ministry. I had hoped to go to Notre Dame at the end of June for the International Conference. No luck. Since the material used in repairing my hip was defective, I still experience some pain. Because of a combination of factors, stemming from the accident and the Parkinson's diagnosis, my constant companion is a walker or a walking stick if I have a companion. Overall, I'm doing well. My neurologist said that he wouldn't know that I had Parkinson's disease if he hadn't seen my medical records. I will admit that the hardest loss for me is my loss of freedom of movement. That lack of privacy is a pain.

I wanted you to have this brief history so you would know that I haven't deserted you. You are important to me and I feel so enriched by your stories and Masses. I do apologize for not writing sooner. I just didn't want to explain. Perhaps, if I didn't talk about it, the reality would pass away – we call that, "denial." Though you haven't heard from me, know you have been and always will be in my prayers. You played an important part in my life as you *privileged* me with the story of your life and struggles. Seeing you face your issues with such courage helped me face my struggles.

So whether in my community prayer or private prayer, you are present to me. I daily thank the Lord for your presence in my life. So let us continue to be present to one another by card, letter, prayer, e-mail, or even a visit.

## *September, 2005 -- The Silent Presence*

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As I reflect on my spiritual journey, I realize the Lord challenges me to see Him in the concrete human experiences of daily life. For example, when I pick up a book, a nurses aide wants to talk about her son who uses drugs or a happy wife who likes to brag about how wonderful is her husband even after 30 years of marriage, while my mind and imagination are flooded with images of a man's anger and pain when his wife tells him that she doesn't love him and wants a divorce. How is there an awareness of Christ's presence in those tragedies? Christ is asking you and me to bring His loving presence to those people in pain when in respectful silence we just "listen." In that listening posture, we become healers. I think all too often we miss this invitation to be there for others because we like to give advice and be the answer person for that "poor" soul.

In these interruptions, the Lord is reminding us to let go our planned style to be there for another to remind us that He is the healer and we are his instrument. Our role is not to raise obstacles blocking His presence from taking root in hearts and minds.

Another example centers on our presence with those who are dying. The other night I was in my room watching an episode of the Law and Order television show when a nurse came to my door asking me to pray for a Jesuit who was dying. On my way to his bedside I became aware all too often our prayers are verbal and too intellectual. I decided therefore to be present in a nonverbal way. When I arrived at his bedside, I stroked his forehead, cheeks and hands without saying a word. I looked into his eyes and made contact. For twenty minutes I sat there peering into his eyes and continued stroking him gently. During this time he gradually became calmer and soon fell asleep. The nurse came back to me later on to say that for the first time in a long while he slept very well. That silent presence prepared him to meet the Lord, for at breakfast time we were told he had died.

So in all these examples and stories, you and I see how we can meet the Lord in the ordinary experiences of human life. Lord helps us!

## October, 2005 -- "Do this in memory of Me."

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For both of us, our spiritual journey is central to our life as Catholics. This spiritual experience isn't just some vague, pious feeling, but is rooted in the gritty experiences of life: jobs, children, worries, concerns, etc.

This journey offers us constant challenges to go beyond ourselves, so that our journey is not just a private "I-me" relationship with the Lord but is rooted in the concrete challenges of our relationships and responsibilities. For us, Our Lord is primarily found in human relationships or He is not found at all, e.g. to forgive, to risk, and to trust. That's why divorce is such a traumatic experience: It shatters your dream of a permanent relationship.

The recent tragedy of Hurricane Katrina's devastation gives concrete expression to our concern for others. We can't withdraw into a cocoon of self absorption about family, jobs, home, possessions, memories, etc. As divorced Catholics you know personally what terrible losses mean. You can imagine from your own experience what their horrific losses must mean for Katrina's victims in Louisiana and Mississippi. This tragedy pulls us out of ourselves to others. So this is not merely a humanitarian concern but finds its origin in the Mass and the Eucharist: this concern for others. We look upon the Eucharist as not just Christ's Body and Blood, but we place this sacrament in the context of the Last Supper. Christ was really saying this is my body broken for you, this is my blood poured out for the world. And then he said "Do this in memory of Me." This remembrance is not merely a reflection of the past but is rooted in *action*: Now go break your body and shed your blood and sweat in the service of others. Eucharist is not a thing but an *action*.

As members of SDC you have heard me over and over again our spiritual foundation is rooted in the Eucharist, namely because the Mass is the ritualized realization of Our Lord's passion and resurrection. So each time we gather for Eucharist, e.g. in our home Masses and installation Mass, we are challenged to be Eucharist to one another: to be broken and given to one another in service.

So as we encounter such massive devastation of life and property on the TV screen and newspapers, we are challenged by the question: What can we do to alleviate the sufferings of our brothers and sisters in Christ? Perhaps the upcoming installation Mass could be the occasion to make an offering to be sent via Catholic Charities in the name of SDC. Or we have a former member of SDC who badly needs assistance. Madaline recently relocated back to New Orleans only to lose her home there.

## November, 2005 -- Thanksgiving

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50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee? 50 years a priest! Wow, that's half a century !!!

What's all this about, anyway?

It's all about *thanksgiving*: Thank you, one and all, for joining me as fellow pilgrims on our journey. Well, what do I have to be thankful for? Perhaps the two illustrations in my 50th Jubilee invitation brochure contain hints to the answer.

The first is from a painting of me in prayer during the liturgy. That gesture should remind all of you that the Mass celebrates the paschal mystery of Our Lord's Last Supper, the very first Mass, which preceded His passion, death and resurrection. The Mass relives the central act of salvation by which Christ won our redemption and the universal salvific action of the Holy Spirit given to us at the birth of His Church on Pentecost. When you connect your life with this dynamic, it takes on a whole new dimension! We are privileged to worship Our Father in spirit and truth with this perfect offering, a Holy Sacrifice: His only Son, whose body and blood we receive in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

The upcoming SDC installation Mass is not just for the installation of officers, but time for all of you to renew your connection to Christ in the Mass and Eucharist. Does the Mass mean that much to you? If not, why not?

The second illustration, a drawing, sketches me with mixed expressions of surprise, joy and wonderment reflecting on those 50 years of ministry which included: teaching high school students at Gonzaga, Drug and alcohol addiction counseling and my SDC Ministry to Separated & Divorced Catholics.

Sharing these experience brought me into living contact with all of you whereby you invited me to share your journey in life. I feel so blessed that you've invited me along on your journey. Thank you.

## *December, 2005 - Christmas - God With Skin On*

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A young mother asked her four-year-old daughter if she had finished her bedtime prayers. And her reply was NO! The mother said: "But why?" The little girl said: "I like God with skin on." For her, God was an abstraction. Up until the Incarnation, God seemed distant. Now He has become one of us!

The Christmas season reminds us that God has skin on. He entered our world to experience and share our joys and sorrows, our failures and temptations. So Christmastime is a season of goodwill and peace because Christ has become one with us.

"Oh yeah!" For separated and divorced Catholics it can be a bummer with memories and lost dreams overwhelming you. Just when you thought you had closed the doors to the past, you experience the holiday blues - a normal reaction. It doesn't mean you aren't doing well. Go easy on yourself!

Along with the specter of past Christmases, the pressure to spend beyond your means is insidious. Isn't Christmas a season of giving? So I'd better get with it! A Christmas card arrives from Joe who hasn't been on my mailing list. Perhaps I can get one in the mail to him before the 25th. Or a surprise gift from an unexpected person generates guilt feelings for your neglect.

So if Christmas, the season of goodwill, eludes you, try a new focus by letting yourself be loved and given to this Christmas. A nun companion of St. Teresa of Avila, in describing how the saint spent her time in prayer, put it well: "I just allow myself to be loved." Isn't that one of the mysteries of the Christ child? Look at the Holy Infant in the crib with outstretched arms. He is the recipient of Mary and Joseph's attention and love. The shepherds and magi came to give. God incarnate allowed Himself to be loved and given to.

Relax ! By all means give this Christmas, especially of yourself, to those who touch your life and to those in need. But focus also on a new dimension - - - learn to receive. Accept with no false pressure to give back just to expiate that "good guy" feeling. If you hurt, then by all means, let your self to be ministered to. Allow your friends and loved ones a chance to give to you and receive graciously. Allow yourself to experience the peace and goodwill of Christmas that comes not just from generous giving but also from being a gracious recipient.

Allow yourself to be loved. Enjoy the holidays.

## January, 2006 - New Year, New Prayer Life

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The New Year invites us to examine our prayer life. Do you pray? If not, why not? I'd like to share with you two aspects of prayer. First, what is and isn't a prayer and, secondly, give you an example of prayer which I've found helpful and you may find helpful too.

First, what is prayer? "Prayer is not asking things from God, but receiving what he gives you. It is not being heard by God, but hearing God praying to you. It is not asking God's forgiveness, but opening yourself to his loving forgiveness. It is not offering yourself to God, but welcoming God offering Himself to you in the ups and downs of life's struggles." (Author unknown)

Now the second point, seeing prayer as an *experience*, showing a concrete experience of the above ideas. My prayer experience begins with my going to my favorite place, in my home or outdoors, someplace quiet and comfortable, conducive to prayer. For some this could be walking or in a car or even in bed. Lately I have found most of my praying takes place when I'm on my back, fighting insomnia at night. And I simply remain in that position for as long as I find helpful.

I often begin my prayer session by lighting a candle. For me, that candle is a symbol of the Lord's presence. As I experience this form of prayer, I resist temptations to let my mind wander or to go to a book to get ideas. I simply rest in the awareness of God's loving presence and this awareness intensifies as I focus on my breathing. As I breathe in or inhale, I imagine God's strength and power and healing coming into me. Then, as I exhale, I imagine God's love flowing out from me to my friends, family, church country - or to whoever is in most need. And I let that life energy fill their lives with the Lord's listening presence.

So as the New Year begins I invite you to examine your prayer life, and to begin or intensify it according to a style that could be helpful. I suggest this prayer style as an example of how you can pray simply.

You are all very much of my prayer experience. As I inhale I take in your pain and joys and struggles and exhaling I give it to the Lord. To communicate to you our Lord's presence, I often then place my hand over a letter (or card or phone call or visit) that has been painful or joyful to you and give it to the Lord in this form.

This is my prayer for you: May the Lord bless you and walk with you in the good times and the bad. May His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May He look upon you with kindness and give you His peace. And may God bless you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## *February, 2006 - In God's Hands*

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Most of you now know that I suffered a second broken hip, induced by Parkinson's disease, just two days before Christmas; I'm now out of the hospital and on the mend – a slow process.

As the ambulance sped me to the hospital for surgery, I kept saying "No, not again." I was so preoccupied with getting some relief for the pain, that the whole notion of prayer escaped me. As the hours melted away, every so often I heard myself say "In the recent issues of the Newsletter you laid down some practical ways of bringing prayer into the struggles and challenges of your daily life, use them now."

I realize now what a tremendous thing Christ did for us: He became man that He might more fully identify with our human condition, with its pain and suffering.

To cope with the pain, I used pain as a vehicle for my prayer. I prayed my pain for all of you, especially for those of you who are in extraordinary pain at the present time. So I let my pain float into the center of your lives for healing and for growth. I often recall the words the poet Paul Caudell: "Jesus did not come to do away with suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with His presence." Therefore I felt His presence not only in my pain but also in some of the compassionate human experiences that sustained me. For example the strong nurse's aide who accepted me in my half-crazed state and stood by me. As for the Church, every so often I would look up to see the parish priest was there to give me Holy Communion.

And so I realize now that I did not want to be there in the hospital, but apparently the Lord wanted His presence to be filled through me. I recall the words of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J. (former superior general of the Jesuits) as he lay with a fatal stroke for the last decade of his life: "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."

And that feeling of being in God's hands sustained me in the most difficult two weeks of my life. Perhaps someday you too will experience the Lord's saving presence in ways that fit your experience.

## *March, 2006 - Given A Lemon -- Make Lemonade*

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You are all familiar with the adage: "Given a lemon -- make lemonade." You are called to see Christ present and active in all aspects your life, not merely settling for the consoling aspects of your faith.

Your life as divorced Catholics gives flesh and concreteness to this saying. For example, your lemons could be a lost dream, an angry ex-spouse and children, the deterioration of your financial status or an uncertain future. For this concoction, your lemonade brings forth new life. The lost dream of your marriage forces you to rediscover yourself. Life becomes exciting in view of the challenges that must be faced. Your faith, reexamined in light of contemporary stresses and tensions, becomes a vital part of who you are. Reflecting on this lemons-to-lemonade image of transformation, you are aware that Christ himself had more than his share of lemons: among them, the hostility of the Scribes and Pharisees to His message and the flight of his apostles in time of danger and his terrible passion and death on the cross, but culminating in His glorious Resurrection. All these lemons in His life led him to victory over sin and death - and to our own redemption.

So you see that you and Christ walk a similar path. Your lemons and Christ's lemons all lead to radical transformation. As you reflect on these challenges of life through this image, you may feel discouragement and a sense of failure. But it is in your perseverance through daily struggles that this challenge becomes real and redemptive. You can handle this challenge of transforming lemons into lemonade by living life one day at a time, not letting yourself become discouraged. The great poet, Ralph Walter Emerson, wrote "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; you should begin it well and serenely."

So be confident that your lemons can make good lemonade provided you and Christ work together. Keep in mind the prayer: "Lord, help me to remember that nothing is going to happen today that you and I together can't handle."

## *April, 2006 - Live Life - It's Your Choice*

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I like to be in control of my life. Perhaps you can identify with that. I remember I always wanted to do God's will - but on MY own terms! I prided myself that I was a pretty holy guy. And especially during Lent I was a very holy guy, fasting and abstaining from meat, not going to movies or eating candy, etc. I felt I was doing God's will by doing these holy activities as a blueprint for holiness. I was in charge!

Now, in my maturing years, in light of the changing circumstances of my life, e.g. two broken hips, quintuple bypass surgery and dealing with the effects of Parkinson disease, I realize I'm not in control of my life. God chooses to reveal His will in the painful parts of my life. It seems we grow more through adversity than through success. I'm reminded here of the prayer of Father Pedro Arrupe (the former superior general of the Jesuits) who suffered a debilitating stroke but lingered on for another ten years until his death in 1991. His prayer was "More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I 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."

So, in the early morning hours when I awaken, I begin a day which invites me to say, "Yes" to what I'd previously said "No" to. For instance, I was quite capable of giving myself a shower but now, because of my infirmity, I must depend on others to do this for me.

This journey to awareness is a slow (and often painful) process, so be patient with yourself. Celebrate the here and now, but know that the Cross is central in your life and will manifest itself in unfamiliar forms through both the little and the momentous events of life. Your divorce is a good example. These many little (and not so little) deaths lead to new life, so your life is a living out of the Pascal mystery: the passage from death to new life. So saying, "Yes" to these uninvited intimacies can make my acts redemptive because they are joined to Christ's redemptive act. You are valuable. Your marriage might have failed, but you have not failed personally. Live life - it's your choice.

## May, 2006 -The Challenge Of A New Life

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Alleluia! Alleluia is our song because you are a Resurrection people. You have traveled from the reality of Ash Wednesday that reminds you of our brokenness and your need for change to the hope of the Resurrection that reminds you that all the deaths you experience ultimately lead to new life.

So, I miss you. For you really are a Resurrection people. You model well for me your passage from death to life - from the death of a dream to the challenge of a new life. You have often heard me say that because of your journey from death to life in the loss of your marriage, that you concretize what the Pascal mystery is in the real world.

All that I have said makes sense but the real challenge is in living this journey in the concrete human experience of life. You have privileged me to share in your journey which until...[*Text truncated*].

Because of my recent medical problems I have come to experience in a very real way what you've experienced. Two examples illustrate my point. The first example is found in the prayer that every Jesuit makes on his first vow day. I remember arriving at the Jesuit novitiate on the afternoon of September 7th, 1942 when the new novices pronounced their first vows in the Society. I was very touch then and it remains an emotional experience every time I hear it. The following is the prayer:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,  
My memory, my understanding  
And my entire will,  
All I have and calmly own.  
You have given all to me.  
To you, Lord, I return it.  
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.  
Give me only your love and your grace.  
That is enough for me.               -St. Ignatius Loyola

Can you make this prayer? If not, why not? Such emotionally charged words took on a further meaning for me when I heard Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the late Jesuit superior general, recite the following prayer he composed to deal with his lost health, which I first told you about last month but is worth repeating. "More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I 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."

These two examples remind you and me that the road to resurrection is rooted in the hope that, no matter how painful life can be, we are a Resurrection people. To put a humorous touch to your challenge, the following words of an anonymous writer may help: "Do not cry because it's over, smile because it's now".

## *June, 2006 - A Plan To Please The Lord*

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You all have a great desire to please the Lord. Your presence at Mass, at least every Sunday, bears witness to your desire to please Him.

The question arises: How? That's a scary question because if the answer is too concrete, you avert our eyes to it, i.e. you distract yourselves by watching TV, going shopping or engaging in other recreational pursuits. So I would like to suggest a plan for each of you that is concrete, challenging and workable. The spiritual writings of Anthony de Mello inspired these suggestions:

First, you don't have to change for God to love you! Do you believe that? So often you tend to think of your God as a conditional God who loves you only when you are perfect. Do you trust God enough to believe you really don't have to change for Him to love you? Rest for a few moments and let that message sink in. Walk, pray and reflect on this. If your God is a conditional Lover, ask Him for the gift of change. This awareness that God loves unconditionally paradoxically helps you to want to want to change yourself.

Second, your sins are carriers of grace. Be thankful for your sins, as strange as that may seem, because they are actually carriers of divine grace. They illuminate your brokenness, which can be healed only by Christ's healing love. Do you really believe that? After you've experienced your weakness, being human, go back to the Lord and ask Him to let you see you're past sins as an invitation to growth. Don't tear yourself down, but build yourself up to a new life in Him.

Third, say "goodbye" to your golden yesterdays; otherwise, your heart will never learn to love and embrace the present moment. Do you believe that? Perhaps you say to yourself there be some memories I will never let go of because they enrich my personal growth. True, but there are other memories that just keep you stuck! Are you willing to let go of these memories - to let go and let God?

At the end of May SDC will hold its annual Memorial Day weekend retreat, which will give you the time and opportunity to take the pause that refreshes. This will be an excellent time to reflect on the points just given. May that pause be filled by God's invitation to change?

See you there!

## *July, 2006 - What Will You Do for SDC?*

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“Because of SDC I was able to not only survive my divorce, but the support I received from SDC enabled me to grow through the pain to a new life.” Comments such as these were common. SDC continued to be a beacon of light and energy. With the passage of time, I sense that this experience has lessened as evidenced by the gradual disconnection from some of the spiritual activities of SDC. For example, the annual Spring Conference in Columbia and the Memorial Day retreat both showed a decreased enrollment. My question now is “Where do divorced Catholics experience the light and energy to help them on their way?”

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost. This great feast day reminded me that the Holy Spirit is a source of our energy and strength. This energy and strength often comes to you in human form. In the case of SDC, this energy of Pentecost is found in the life of SDC - a human example of the Holy Spirit at work. With that light extinguished, where can you go? Some therapists tell me that half their clientele are divorced Catholics who found no support in the Catholic Church. Some also say they moved on from SDC to new support systems. People tell me the main reason they joined SDC was its spiritual dimension. Where do you receive that spiritual nourishment now? From your faith experience, you came away with a unique awareness that, although your marriage failed, you didn't fail. And SDC has reinforced that message.

How often have you heard me say you offer a model to the Catholic Church of what the Paschal mystery is in the concrete? The pain and recovery in your life therefore offer hope to divorced Catholics that they are not alone and they experience their pain and resurrection as models for the entire Christian community. The challenge and hope is that ministries like SDC remain alive and active. What will you do to ensure that SDC will continue as a vital, faith-filled community?

Here's the prayer of the late Paulist Father Jim Young, founder of the Catholic separated & divorced ministry: “Jesus Christ invites us, His followers, to walk the same path He walked - - a path of rejection, suffering and death. He promises us that if we too believe in a loving Father and remain faithful to Him whatever befalls us, wounded as we are, we will be raised to new life like Jesus, and our wounds will shine.”

## *August, 2006 - Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind*

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“Out of sight, out of mind.” How often we hear this expression used to describe the end of a relationship because of spatial separation. However, I don’t intend to let distance interfere with my relationship with all of you.

As a Jesuit assigned to Manresa for health reasons, my assignment is very permanent, and very clear. I have made a commitment to pray for the Church and the Society of Jesus that is quite a change from my ministry up to this point. I find this new mission a challenge because of the radical lifestyle change it entails. I think my reaction is similar to your reactions when you were newly out of your marriage. I smile when I reflect on this because one of the key stages of the growth process in your life is denial of what is happening. Denial can be comfortable initially when it gives you time to adjust to reality, but the problem is it can hinder you and keep you stuck and it becomes permanent. As Tony de Mello says, “We need to say goodbye to golden yesterdays or your heart will never learn to love for the present.”

So how am I going to avoid out of sight out of mind? Primarily, through my prayer practice, I have difficulty sleeping, so in the waking moments I experience God in a real and loving way. You are in my thoughts. So I will always be very present to you. I imagine God’s life comes to me through my breathing experience. I breathe in God’s love and when I breathe out I send that on to you. I picture my hands placed upon your head as I say these words “May God the Father, May God the Son and may God the Holy Spirit always console you,” and I say the following, “May you always be aware of God’s blessing in your life through this touch and experience.”

To quote a fellow Jesuit as he encounters pain in his life: “I do not share the view of those who want to enter into a debate with God on how an all-loving God can allow someone, particularly a person of prayer, to be in pain. I accept pain as part of the human condition. I want to use every opportunity I can to get in touch with God and tell God that I am grateful for the pains I experience as an opportunity to talk to God.” (Frank Moan, S.J.)

I can only say WOW for all of us to be in touch through our prayer life. You are part of my journey, helping me understand that through you I am beginning to realize the mission that’s assigned to me: to pray for the Church and the Society.

## *September, 2006 - Where Two or Three Are Gathered*

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“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Mt. 18:20 (NAB) The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass has been the primary source of this gathering. But it is not the only source. For SDC, the monthly Mass has been a nurturing source of the spiritual life.

Since priests are increasingly unavailable, there is the danger of losing the spiritual moment of the monthly Mass. However, that spiritual presence of Christ is realized in other ways. For you, taking your responsibility as a layperson, come to experience Christ in your own special way. So the loss of the priest can be the discovery of your own gifts as spiritual source.

How can this be done? Keep your monthly listing of the spiritual segment. Where the Mass was once celebrated, now you can celebrate the Lord’s presence in your own special way through a prepared prayer service. Here is an example: One of you accepts the responsibility of being the leader, beginning the prayer service by saying “We are gathered in Jesus’ name” and making the Sign of the Cross.

1. Everyone will be invited to a few moments of silence, recalling Christ’s presence within.
2. The leader will read the Gospel for the coming Sunday, or perhaps from some other significant passage of spiritual reading, followed again by silence.
3. Go back and reread the same passage over again, followed by silence and personal reflection on its meaning to you. Then after a few minutes you are all invited to share your reflections.
4. Then Prayers of the Faithful, similar to those public intercessions said after the Gospel reading at Sunday Mass, in which we place our needs before the Lord.
5. Concluding prayer.

## *October, 2006 - "Breathing Prayer"*

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For those of you who received my Jubilee celebration memento, look inside. There is a page with several of my quotations on it. But the main part of the page is blank! Why? I wanted to give you a chance to express your favorite biblical passage or personal experience.

Just write down a scripture reference or some special experience that nurtures you. Then take these experiences and passages and let your breathing pray. By that I mean, when you're tired or having problems, this is a great way of praying. I here want to describe for you this "breathing prayer" technique.

1<sup>st</sup>. Be quiet! In the silence you become aware of the presence of God all around you and in you. As you breathe in you take in the Lord's energy and life. Let it flow through you and energize you in that awareness.

2<sup>nd</sup>. Then you are ready to send that energy out to others you know who are experiencing problems and difficulties. Stay with that rhythm. You take in that energy for yourself and then for others who are needy.

3<sup>rd</sup>. Now when you breathe in you let your breathing pray for you. Joined with the Lord's Salvific act in the Mass, you let your prayer become redemptive, like the Mass itself, which transcends time and space, making us present at the act of Christ's Redemption—the Sacrifice of Calvary.

You rest in that awareness and breathing, staying with it as long as you need to. Sometimes it can be helpful to do this by candlelight or while listening to quiet appropriate music in the background. So your life as a layperson and my life as a priest are brought together.

Now every morning I pray that awareness, this "breathing prayer" for all of you:

"May God bless you (I place my hand on you) and may you always be aware of His presence in your life, no matter what the circumstances. And may you truly believe, as I touch you, by making the Sign of the Cross, that the Lord's healing life flows into you."

## November, 2006 - "Your Spirituality Of Choice"

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For What spiritual principle or insight has enabled you to deal with your new lifestyle as a divorced Catholic?

I would call that principle the "principle of choice." Each day I'm faced with decisions as how to respond to the Lord's invitation to see Him in the concrete events of my daily life. For example: Life here at Manresa involves living together with men of different temperaments. If someone is insensitive or uncaring, I can let myself become annoyed and withdrawn. I can say "Why bother?" However, I can choose another approach. I can choose to walk in their moccasins, so I can better understand who they are as individuals. However, I cannot let their behavior determine how I respond. I can be forgiving, but again the question is choice. When I realize how much I miss you, I can feel sorry for myself for not having my desires realized or I can choose to see in the present circumstances of my life the chance to grow in another direction. It's all a question of choice! Another question would be the following: Could my prayer life be better? I recall the words from scripture: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Mt. 7: 7) If I pray with that intention, my prayers will be answered. However my prayer life seems to be an echo in the dark. Or I come to the awareness that what I ask for will not be the right thing. The seed grows slowly. The knock shall be answered, but might not be what I wanted. So my brothers and sisters in Christ, I am trying to put concrete principle to the prayers of St. Ignatius. I recall his words as adapted by the rock musical Godspell: "Oh, dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly; love thee more dearly; follow thee more nearly - day by day." When we do live that prayer, like John the Baptist said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

Finally, I recall the image in the prayer of Father Arupe. "More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have wanted all my life from 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."

So I leave you with a challenge of living your spirituality of choice. What would it be? What do you think?

## *December, 2006 - " Christ being reborn in us "*

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As we enter the Advent Christmas season, the challenge to all of you is how Christ can be reborn in to your life each day. Let me suggest, three answers to that challenge.

First is the gift giving spirit of Christmas. So often we are focused on the material aspects of gift giving. We feel the pressure of "I have to shop"; "I have to give gift". This pressure is a source of cynical rejection. So a change of attitude can be a moment of rebirth. You can convert that cynical attitude and choose that challenge of gift purchasing as an experience of Christ being reborn, of thinking of another person. We are bombarded by the material culture of our society, that we may have a cynical attitude of gift giving. That would be sad, because every gift you give is a way of Christ being reborn in the person who receives. The face of Christ is found in the Human expression. The gifts we give each other are the echoes of God's eternal gift. (US Catholic).

The second form or way of Christ being reborn in us is the simple greeting of "Merry Christmas". Not Happy Holidays. In Merry Christmas you are wishing Christ's peace to another. You can become a messenger of Christ's' peace.

The third way in which Christ can be reborn in you is when you take time away from your busy life, in prayer or reading or in reflection, you take away the obstacles e.g. an unforgiving spirit, hardness of heart, despair, anger that will prevent Christ being reborn in your life.

Finally, a suggestion I would make would be in the suggestion of the gift you will give. Let me suggest as you look around the homes of your friends you can observe Catholic symbols, and use that observation to make your choice for a gift. That statue or picture is a remembrance of Christ and your faith, and the rebirth of Christ's peace.

In conclusion, as you prepare for Advent and the Christmas season, may you look forward to the gifts you are to give, as a way of enabling Christ to be reborn in your life and that of your friends. The Advent season can be a time and opportunity to see how you can be this message of peace. So "Merry Christmas" is not just a greeting but also a challenge.

## *January, 2007 - A Successful Relationship*

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When I was working with Carrie Hansen, in the program for preparing couples exploring possible remarriage, time and again I found myself repeating what I consider are four characteristics of a successful marriage or any close relationship.

The first characteristic is to say "I am sorry" when you hurt one another. There is a great myth that says if you love me you will never hurt me. But that is erroneous when you are dealing with two different individuals each with their two distinct personalities, and there is bound to be some conflict there. You need to be able to express forgiveness when you realize you hurt someone.

The second characteristic is to be able to tell the other person that they did a good job. Whenever they do anything to please you, a compliment is in order. In praising another there's a focus on the other rather than you. Somehow we wrongly think that, in praising another, our own ego is diminished and the other person becomes the center of our focus.

The third characteristic of solid relationship is to ask the other person what their opinion is on a subject. It's important to be able to express your opinion; otherwise a lot of issues will go underground. Your relationship and honesty will never be achieved, if you become a "yes man" and lose your identity. When you ask for another's opinion, it shows that you value the opinion. Because of our own pride, we hesitate to do this, as we do not want to appear weak. We would acknowledge that we don't have all the answers.

The fourth and final part of this formula is to tell the person you are involved with, "I love you". How often during the course of a week do you say this? You may take for granted that the other person knows this, but there is power and beauty in the spoken word. We take so much for granted. Unfortunately, just because we are so close with the other person that we forget to say "I love you" and "I value you".

In conclusion, as you look over the framework, what does it have to do with your spiritual life? I think it has a great deal to do with it. We can mirror Christ in our relationships; we need to value ourselves in order to be able to value another. We can't do this without the Lord's help. In my opinion to nourish the spirituality of marriage is a challenge. As the New Year begins reflect on your relationship, and its challenges.

## *February, 2007 - "Spiritual Jumper Cables"*

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Many of you make sure your car is equipped with Jumper Cables in case your battery runs out. These Jumper Cables communicate new life to your battery, so your car can start to move again.

So to in your spiritual life, you need spiritual Jumper Cables to help you realize that you are not alone; others in your situation share your pain. It helps you to also be aware that the Lord walks with you. One of the great dangers of our society is that we are separated from each other. And as a consequence we tend to focus on ourselves. But ministry to the divorced makes you realize the importance of one another. They are people who have gone through the same experience, so they make you realize you are not alone. Your grief, sadness, depression, anger, and your guilt are all normal feelings. You are not less a Catholic for having them. The institutional church may not be as present to you as you would like, and may not help you along. That is why you share your life experience with others. In a very real sense you are Jumper Cables to each other.

In the late 70's I introduced SDC to rap sessions, which were weekly gatherings to those who needed to be with others who experienced the same sadness of divorce. Carrie Hanson provided her home for these sessions and that purpose. These gatherings were not formal, just a group of people coming together to share. So in a very real sense you are all jumper cables to each other. I sometimes need Jumper Cables for myself. Recently, I was feeling low and someone at SDC recently said to me, "Fr. practice what you preach. When you have lemons, make lemonade!" I smiled and laughed and said, "you are right and we need one another."

Without your life experiences, the church will be less without you. So as you begin the New Year, see how you can be Jumper Cable to those who are in your world. You need one another. When you pray together, when you share life experience together, when you joke together, Christ's visibility becomes apparent. So what are the spiritual jumper cables you have that will bring people to new life? When you determine what that is, realize that is God's gift to you to use for others. So Christ becomes visible through you. You can use Jumper Cables for wisdom, care and love.

## *March, 2007 - "Experience Christ In A New Way"*

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"What are you giving up for Lent?" That was our approach to Lent as youngsters. We would pride ourselves in not going to the movies. That would be a sign of being a perfect Catholic. We were spiritually smug in our thoughts about Lent.

But as we mature, we realize we can give up something and put on something at the same time. Consequently, I think a good model to follow is in the words from Godspell: May I know Christ more intimately, more orderly and follow more closely. First let us look at knowing Christ. To know the gospels is to experience that kind of relationship with Christ. This may be the time to open you up to know more about the Scripture and Christ. During lent, you learn about Christ's life in the commentary by Mark or increase your knowledge of Christ by reading sources like America, or Commonweal. Secondly, you want to grow in your effective love for him. In loving him, you may grow in your experience with time and the experiences of life, and you learn from the experiences as you go. The true knowledge stays constant despite the lack of feelings. The real love is still there. Here we acknowledge the married love. The glow of the honeymoon may not last, but when the reality of life settles in, there must be the willingness to stay the course. So too with Christ. One technique to try to test this is the empty chair technique. Place an empty chair across from you and pretend it is Christ. Talk to him as if he is there with you and respond to him.

The third goal, to serve him more faithfully, begins with love and action. Prayer does not end with more feelings, it must extend itself. In all the gospels, Christ is portrayed as a healer. Christ is portrayed either as having healing, coming to healing or doing healing. So as you enter into lent let's make it a positive experience for Christ. It's not so much a question of giving up, but putting on - Putting on the values of Christ. You are challenged to experience Christ this Lent in a new way.

## April, 2007 - "Hang It On The Cross"

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As the Lenten season winds down, it would be helpful to reflect on how well you carried out your Lenten challenges. Hopefully your efforts were positive. One example that we talked about of meeting your Lenten challenges was to deepen your prayer life. I encourage you to choose your spiritual icon (any object, person, place or thing that brings you in touch with the transcendent) that will help you with your spiritual growth. The icon might be the crucifixion, a painting, an experience or a passage from scripture or a candle. I suggest that you reconnect with the crucifix as your icon as the center point of your prayer life. The image of it will be a dialogue between you and the Lord. The crucifixion can remind you that as you deal with your sufferings and disappointments, they can be redemptive provided they are united to Christ's redemptive actions.

I hope the spiritual exercise can be used in a effective way when you experience your pain, you can share with the Lord these thoughts: Carrying your cross, if you have a secret sorrow, burden or loss, an aching need for healing, then *hang it on the cross*. If worry steals your sleep, and makes you turn and toss, if your heart is feeling heavy, then *hang it on the cross*. Every obstacle to faith or doubt you come across, every prayer unanswered, you can *hang it on the cross*. (Lisa O. Engelhardt) For Christ has born your brokenness and dearly paid the price, Christ has become your promise and want you to turn and *hang your trials on the cross*. To be able to connect your life to His, you become a coworker with Christ and do productive work.

All of you in one way or another experience the cross in the pains of your divorce. Your challenge is to use those pains effectively for your spiritual growth. Hopefully by uniting them with Christ, your life has meaning and direction because they are joined to Christ's redemptive actions.

The rainbow smiles on your face and in your heart, you tell the world "I feel like life has meaning."

## *May, 2007 - Say "Yes" to a New Life*

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At social gatherings I often experience the following comments about my work with separated and divorced Catholics. My first experience is of the person who quickly tries to change the subject. This person feels that separating or divorcing is a disease that they can catch. The second experience is a concern that compassion shown by the church indicates that the church is changing its teachings. And the third experience is that sometimes a person feels that individuals lack the sense of commitment a in marriage and bail out easily.

I find such attitudes tragic and unfortunate, because the divorced believe most of all in the permanence of marriage because they keenly suffer from their lost dream. Sometimes the divorced buy into these attitudes themselves, taking on total responsibility of the failed marriage. Yet the divorced community is very much a part of the Church community. They have a very valuable contribution to make. Recently you completed the three very busy days of the Holy Easter Season. This movement from death to life is very important for the divorced community. They can realize that it is possible to move from death to life as well. Once having worked through the issues of a lost marriage, and having acknowledged their role in that loss, they are then able to say "Yes" to a new life. Their Resurrection results. So the Passion, death and resurrection results. One of the most forceful ways this dynamic can be lived is through the separated and divorced community. So they become a gift to the church really. So the Resurrection is not just a doctrine to be believed but a life to be lived.

There are many human experiences that reflect you as a resurrected person :To let go of anger towards a former spouse is your resurrection, to pray for your former spouse is your resurrection, to work at your job in a new and dedicated way is your resurrection, to risk intimacy again is your resurrection. Easter, therefore, is your time because it reflects the hope that is yours.

The hope that is yours based on Christ's because your time mirrors Christ victory, the basis of your hope. Let me quote Fr. Jim Young, Founder of the Separated and divorced Catholic movement: "Jesus Christ invites you his followers to walk the same path that he walks. He promises you that you too leave a loving father and remain faithful to him. Wholeness befalls you, own it as you are. You walk and will be raised to new life like Jesus and your wounds will shine."

## *June, 2007 - The Lord Had Other Plans*

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I felt sad that I was not with you at the conference on Saturday the 28th of April. I consider the Conference and the Retreat two very important events for divorced Catholics to attend because they offer spiritual and psychological and social support. I always enjoy sharing those experiences with you.

I found that the words of Matthew 7:7 “Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you”, to be truly inspiring words. I asked the Lord that I might be able to attend the conference, but it was not to be. My faith challenges me to see that my prayers were answered, but perhaps not in the way I was asking because as it turned out on two different occasions, I was present to people who were suffering emotional pressures. I was present to them in their crisis situations and offered them the support they needed. So in not being able to attend the conference, I was able to help others. I then realized the reason that I was not able to attend the conference. The Lord had other plans. So Matthews words were realized but not in the way that I had intended.

As you look over your life right now, perhaps you may see many new occasions that the words of Matthew take on new meaning for you. In experiencing the failure of your marriage, you can ask the Lord that your relationship may be resumed. Your prayers were not answered, but with the passage of time, you open yourselves to new experiences and new people, and you realize that your life has taken on new meaning. Then you realize that your prayers were answered but not in the way you originally intended.

I pray that you realize through prayer that the words of Matthew offer solace and comfort and hope for you for the future.

## *July, 2007 - Your Spiritual Wisdom*

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My daily meditations center on the Scriptures. However when I experience a dry spell, I let my eyes scan my room, a gallery of significant icons, pictures, cards that reflect spiritual wisdom. Let me share with you some of the ways I experience the divine in my life. 1st kernel of wisdom comes from the following words - "Lord help me to remember that nothing is going to happen me today that you and I can't handle together." This quotation makes me realize that I am not alone in my life's struggles.

The second kernel stems from the writings of Anthony DeMello, SJ, the following quotes especially strike me when I deal with my limitations, my sinfulness and failures. The first quote is "You do not have to change for God to love you." Do I really believe that? And if not I still have a long spiritual journey to make. The second quote is "Be grateful for your sins for they are carriers of grace." I smile at this quotation as I realize how challenging is the need for perfection. For I see that my weaknesses and sins are not so much a rejection of God but an indicator of my need for healing which takes time so I need to be patient with my humanness. And this awareness leads me to be more patient and understanding with others.

The 4th kernel of wisdom is from a plaque on my wall given to me by one of my clients in addictions program. When I have one of those days when everything seems to go wrong and the day comes to an end, the words of the plaque give me hope for tomorrow. Those words from Ralph Waldo Emerson are as follows: "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it well and serenely." The final experience that I would like to share with you is the challenge to do God's will. Again in my room, I have treasured words from Bishop Thomas Gumbleton that I find very helpful. "You have to come to terms with who you are in the presence of God, and when you are at peace with that I am not about to make a judgment that only God can make." So as I gaze about my room I am fed with fresh insights that revive my spirits. You also can use one of those objects, quotations or icons that speak to you when you need a pick up. I act as though it all depends on me but I pray as though it all depends upon God. These words remind me that it is all in God's hands, and I have to do my part. So those are mine, what are yours? If you like you can let me know what is your spiritual wisdom.

## *August, 2007 - Signs in Miracles*

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Sometimes we muse about how it might have been to live in Jesus' own day. We could look at him, hear him preach, touch him and even ask him to perform a miracle. But as far as Jesus is concerned miracles are highly over rated. The healings that occurred at Jesus' hands were signs that God was at work in him. The purpose of these signs was to evoke faith. Apparently there were miracles left and right at the towns that Jesus visited. But faith did not always follow. What is needed today is not another miracle but eyes to see the signs to see God's healing in our life here and now. (Weekday Homily Helps July 17, 2007)

Let me suggest 2 signs that challenge us to faith. First sign of God's healing presence is the community gathered in faith to celebrate in the mass his passage from death to life. But with the absence of the priest, the mass is not possible. I have always enjoyed celebrating the Eucharist with you. I miss our Eucharistic celebrations together. But remember faith challenges you to believe that the community in prayer is still a beautiful sign of Christ's presence. "Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, so I am there present." So I urge you to continue your monthly gathering in the home of one of the SDC members. One person would lead the group in sharing the gospel readings for the coming Sunday. So that you bring your experiences to the word and the word gives meaning to your experiences. Such sharing enables you to enrich each other's faith.

Another sign of God's presence, more on the lighter side, is humor. Sometimes, by experiencing a good joke it can break the atmosphere and mood, and laughter follows. You enjoy new life, and experience a lighter mood. An example of a joke: 2 eagles are soaring in the sky enjoying the quietness of the morning. When a jet plane flies by, one eagle turns to the other and says "Boy that bird is flying fast". The other eagle says, "You would too if your ass was on fire." Every time I tell that joke, the person and I both laugh and in that laughter there is experience of rejuvenated life. That experience to me is God's presence in the human parts of life. So be open to the humor in life, and in that opening I challenge you to see the presence of God calling you to new life.

## *September, 2007 - Be An Instrument Of Healing*

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“Do not ask what your country can do for you. Rather ask what you can do for your country.” I suggest you ask yourself that question as you reflect back on what SDC has done for you.

I often receive phone calls or letters from SDC members, telling me how much SDC has helped them as they journeyed through the pain of losing the dream of a lasting marriage. What did they receive that was so special? Certainly the Deanery Meetings which presented talks on Divorce were significant, Home Masses, combined with Potluck meals, the Weekly Rap Sessions which offered a supportive atmosphere where you shared your life with its past and present problems, the yearly Installation Mass for new officers, the Yearly Spring Conference on divorce issues the annual Memorial Day Weekend Retreat, that gives a spiritual depth to the Divorce Ministry, and the summer attendance at the national conference at the University of Notre Dame brought fellow members of the divorced community together from all parts of the United States. These reasons and more provided the reason to join SDC. A member of SDC once told me that the main reason she sought our SDC was the religious aspect. If she had wanted the social aspect, she would have gone elsewhere. Yet in recent years, there has been a steady decline in leadership personnel and membership, though Greg Becker has done an outstanding job in serving overtime as president.

Such decline is presently puzzling since divorced Catholics are still seeking help. A minister friend of mine tells me half of his congregation is composed of divorced Catholics who felt they didn't belong in the church because of their failed marriage. Another friend who is a family therapist tells me that half of her couples' group membership is composed of divorced Catholics who are unable to find support or help from their church.

In the divorced ministry, you need people to volunteer to see it happen. That's you. Since the divorced ministry is mainly a ministry of the Laity, you need to come forward with your talents and time to be present to others. Fr. Jim Young, founder of SDC, said you have a responsibility to reach out to others that come after you in the same situation of pain. So, in applying former president John F. Kennedy's words to you, you might say, “I don't want to only focus on what I am receiving, but I want to be an instrument of healing for others. Christ will shine to them through you. That's compassion. So that they may realize that even though their marriage failed, they are not failed persons. Christ walks with them.

## *October, 2007 - Christ, the Divine Healer*

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Divorce leaves scars of numbness, shock, anger, denial and guilt. As you move towards acceptance and the opening to new life, you realize that though your marriage may have failed you are not a failed person. Once you take responsibility for your role in the breakup of your marriage, you know you are on the road to healing so that you can live and love again

Hopefully you realize that your journey to new life demands the presence of Christ, the Divine Healer. As He walked the fields of Galilee He healed all those he met. Women in particular felt His healing touch. The woman at the Well who had five husbands experienced a conversion the woman caught in adultery and the woman who dried Jesus' feet with her hair, all experienced a healing. Jesus wants to heal you today. What is your pain that needs healing?—bring it to Jesus. Then having experienced your own healing, you become a healer - Do you believe that? If not, pray to believe.

As you know, the early morning hours pose a difficulty for me, so during that time I do a lot of praying. I suggest the following two prayer forms when you have difficulty praying:

### I The Breathing Prayer

The first part is be silent for a few moments.  
Then be aware of God's love surrounding you.  
Next breathe in that love to heal your pain,  
Then breathe out to heal others.  
Finally thank the Lord for your time with Him in prayer.

### II The Image Prayer

First step, be silent.  
Be aware of God's presence in and around you.  
Breathe in that love to heal you.  
Next, figuratively place your hands on the person you want to heal.  
Exhale the Lord's love and become an instrument of God's healing.

In Conclusion, be a healer as you are healed.

## *November, 2007 - Death Changes into Resurrection*

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Recently I received a phone call from my girl friend of grade school and high school days, informing me of her husband's death. As she reflected on her loss, she asked me: "Vincent, what happens at death?" My response to her was simply "At death, life is not ended but is changed."

That question raised the issue of how often we neglect preparing for death. For example the smile of the loved one that you enjoyed is still there but is intensified...It will be experienced in a more enriching manner, so as you go through the memories and experiences that enriched your life we believe *they* will be enriched and intensified. The change ushers us into a transformation into an eternal union with God. When you break that explanation down, you begin to see the meaning of the "little deaths" that surround us each day. The loss of a friendship is a death, the experience of divorce is a death; the diminishing health that you experience over time is a death. These are all those death experiences that point us to our final death, ushering us into an eternal union with the Lord.

The following prayer speaks to our heart about death's meaning:

### Prayer for Our Dead by Andrew Costello

Lift up our dead  
Strong Son of God;  
You are the god of the living  
And not the God of the dead.

Remember their goodness,  
Their acts of kindness,  
All the many ways they  
Have lifted up our life with their love.

Come into our upper rooms  
With words of "Peace,"  
When we feel dead  
Because of our dead.

Lift up our dead  
Strong Son of God;  
You are the God of the living  
And not the God of the dead.

As you enter into the month of November, take your loved ones into your prayer. Remember that death is not the end but it changes into the form of the resurrection. So all of us are on a journey towards our final destiny. Some have arrived before us so our family and friends need our prayers as we need theirs. Remember them in special ways during this month of November.

## *December, 2007 - Accepting the Humanness of Christ*

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Christmas is a scary Feast Day. Once you get beneath the warmth and gentleness of the Baby, and the merriment of the Christmas Season, you begin to realize the terrible reality of what it means when we say that God has become visible for us in the mystery of the Incarnation. God truly shares with us in these feelings of limitations. He can easily identify with the human spirit. He can understand the joys and sadness of what we experience.

One aspect of the humanness of Christ is the realization that He struggles with the belief that God is truly human as we do. He too experiences human weakness and failure. This means Christ would have moments of weakness like us. For instance in the Temple, Christ was angry. Like us he too could be angry. He too could lose His cool. We keep making the same mistakes over and over again. That's what it means to be human. And to accept those limitations, and to realize that Christ can identify with us gives concrete meaning to Paul's words that Christ came and pitched his tent among us. We learn that the magic notion of God is a way of isolating God from the human condition. This inability to accept the humanness of Christ reflects itself in our inability of accepting others and ourselves. We have unrealistic expectations of both and Christ.

We find that we commit the same sins over and over, so why bother to forgive ourselves. The growth in the spiritual life is not an easy journey, but requires us to be patient with our limitations, and realize that the healing will come in due time.

So as you prepare for the holidays and look forward to Christmas day, ask the Lord to give you an awareness of what it means to be truly human, to accept that humanness, and realize that God himself became one of us to accompany us on our journey of faith. May you continue your journey to your heavenly home.

Merry Christmas - enjoy the holidays.

## *January, 2008 - Christ Has Come to Give Us Peace*

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One of the many gifts that Christ has come to give us is the gift of peace. We are reminded during the Mass that Christ has come to give us peace. As you deal with the different issues of divorce recovery, it will help to think of this. Here is a peace wish; I would like you to carry with you into the new year:

I have come to bring you peace.  
Not the peace of the season, for it is too fleeting,  
Not the peace of the carol, for it is nostalgic,  
Not the peace of the greeting card, for it is too slick,  
Not the peace of the crib, for it is too wistful.

Rather, I have come to bring you peace,  
Peace of the ordinary, the daily, the homely,  
Peace for the worker, the driver, the student,  
Peace in the office, the kitchen, the farm.

I have come to bring you peace,  
The peace of accepting yourself as I fashioned you.  
The peace of knowing yourself as I know you,  
The peace of loving yourself as I love you,  
The peace of being yourself as I am who I am.

I have come to bring you peace,  
The peace that warms you at the completion of the task,  
The peace that invades you at the close of the day,  
The peace that sustains you at the beginning of the day,  
The peace that reinforces you when you are reconciled with one another,  
The peace that touches you when your family is in order.

Without peace, my coming is unfulfilled.  
Without peace, my birth is forgettable.  
Without peace, Christmas is a contradiction.  
I have come to bring you peace.

(Liguori Publications - Excerpt from Advent - A quality Store Cupboard, The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer)

Best wishes for a peaceful and happy new year.

## February, 2008 - Menu of Spiritual Insights

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Your cards, letters and notes during the Christmas Season gave me a spiritual pick-up with its menu of spiritual insights. I thought I would share with you the ones that meant the most to me. Perhaps you might find a few spiritually helpful to you

- “God is close to the brokenhearted.” Psalm 34
- “Let not your heart be troubled. Praying you will know God’s peace at this difficult time. You are precious to me, you are mine.” Isaiah 43
- “Death is not extinguishing light. It is putting out the lamp because dawn has come.” Tagore
- “Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questioning themselves. The point is, to live everything, to live the questioning now. Perhaps then you will gradually without even noticing live your way into the answer.” Rainer Maria Rilke
- “O God, you alone are my hope and my refuge and my strength.” Psalm 62
- “May the grace and peace of God be with you.” 2 Cor. 13
- “Those we hold dearest to our hearts never truly leave us. They live on in the kindness they shared and the love they brought into our lives.” Anonymous
- “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” Plato
- “Sure the world breeds monsters, but kindness grows just as well. What is your choice?” Mary Karr
- “Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God. Only he who sees takes off his shoes. Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- “Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it, He came to fill us with his presence.” Paul Claudel
- “The Lord to Moses: ”You are my friend you are my friend.” Exodus 33
- “Do you believe that the Lord is an intimate friend? Is this true in your case?” Vince O’Brien, SJ
- “The sun must not go down on your wrath.” Ephesians 4 25-32
- “It is time wasted with the rose that makes the rose so important.” Antoine De Saint Exeurey
- “Perhaps my most important prayer at this time is a prayer of silent presence.” Mark Thibodeaux, SJ
- “Jesus says you would not search for me if I had not already found you.” Anonymous
- “Those who walk in the dark see the stars.” Anonymous
- “I pray for the desire for the desire. Now that’s a prayer I can always handle.” Thibodeaux
- “God is the great humorist. It’s just that He has a slow audience to work with.” Garrison Kellor
- “Life is a bridge. Cross over it but build no house on it.” Indian proverb
- “To grow is to change. To be perfect is to change often. Do one thing everyday that scares.” Baz Lermin
- “More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I wanted all my life from my youth. But now there is a difference. The initiative is entirely with God. Indeed a profound spiritual experience to feel myself so totally in God’s hand.” P.Arrupe, S J

The above spiritual insights nourish me when I take one at a time and sit with it and let the Lord nourish me in silence. Perhaps that is an experience you might like.

## *March, 2008 - Lent: An Inner Transformation*

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In pre-Vatican II days, Lent measured the depth of our spirituality and external observances. For example, abstaining from eating candy during Lent, not going to the movies, daily Mass, volunteering for the overnight 24-hour vigil on Holy Thursday, all were signs that we were very holy. These practices generated within us a certain “Holier than thou” attitude. The focus therefore, for the most part, in pre-Vatican II time was on the externals.

In the advent of Vatican II the focus shifted more to inner transformation, and so the focus was more positive. This positive focus manifested itself in the form of forgiveness, compassion, and kindness for others. As you continue your journey in Lent, you might look to see if your focus is mainly on the internal or external transformation. I recall an example that illustrates these two different Lenten styles. A certain small group attended Mass daily. One day the pastor received a call from a person who needed medicine immediately, and the pastor asked the parishioners in the small group, if someone could pick up the medicine. No one volunteered because no one wanted to miss Mass. The tragedy was this group failed to understand that missing Mass in favor of the act of charity was really the Eucharist in action.

Do you still harbor anger towards your former spouse? If you do, ask the Lord for the desire to forgive. Do you reach out to others who are in need? If not, perhaps you can make a promise of doing some charitable act. In my case, there is one particular Jesuit with whom I have a hard time with. I made a promise during Lent to visit this Jesuit each day and pray with him.

So each of us has a call for some kind of internal transformation of new life. Remember the Lord calls you to interior transformation rather than external observance of rules and laws and regulations. Be aware of the Lord’s call to you so that you greet Easter with a transformed heart.

## *April, 2008 - The Lord Walks Along with You*

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With the completion of the Lenten season, with its high point being the solemnization of Holy Week celebrations, ending with the triumphant celebration of the Lord's resurrection, all of you need to grow in awareness that your life mirrors in a human way that same process of the passion that the resurrection known as the Pascal Mystery.

The emotional crosses that you dealt with in the initial process of your divorce, was your crucifixion. The numbness of unacceptance, the denial of the pain, the anger at the rejection, the disbelief that this could really be happening to me, the depression of being first with no one, the emptiness and loneliness of life, all speak of your pain, your crosses from the realizations of a lost dream.

You have often asked me "will I ever get over this pain?" My response was "You never get over it, you get used to it". But, life does not end there. It's important to work through the pain, and see the role you may have played in the breakup of your marriage. By doing the homework of this reflection, you avoid escaping into a new relationship. The time will come then for a decision: Do I want to remain stuck in the victim role or move onto a new life? The sign that you have been moving on is the willingness to risk again. Unless you are willing to be hurt over and over again, you will never have another intimate relationship. Anger at your spouse for deserting you, needs to blend into forgiveness; otherwise your negative emotions overwhelm you and you remain stuck.

As you move on in your life, you risk new opportunities, new jobs, new relationships; all these are signs of progress and growth. So you see that pain that you must go through leads to new life. That's why your new life is so important to your growth in the church. The passion, death and resurrection of the Lord are mirrored in your human struggles and triumphs so you celebrate life as you reflect on your life at the present time, so you are able to live at the present time in peace.

I recall a story of a young woman named Anne, (not her real name) was on the verge of suicide because of divorce and depression. When she looked in the mirror and saw how bad she looked, she wanted to fix her self up and look smashing for a neighbor who was coming over. After she completed her make up job, she started laughing and thought she wanted to live because she looked so smashing. That is my hope for you this Easter season. You nurture hope for the future as you move on to a new life. The retreat in May, for the Separated and Divorced Catholics in Faulkner, Maryland will reinforce the spiritual dimension of your life. I urge you all to attend this retreat. As you deepen your spiritual life you will realize that the Lord walks along with you.

## *May, 2008 - What are your "Choices"?*

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We all like stories. I have one I would like to share with you that illustrates the importance of making the right choice in lives for our happiness. The scene of the story is a nursing home, where a 92-year old, petite, well poised man was waiting to be admitted to a nursing home even though he was legally blind. His wife of 70 years recently passed away, making this move necessary. He smiled as 2 people passed by. As he maneuvered his way to the elevator that would take him to his room, he provided a description of the room including the linen sheets hanging out the window. "I love it," he stated with the enthusiasm of an 8-year old boy having been just presented with a new puppy. "Mr. Jones you haven't even seen the room yet. " It doesn't matter; my happiness doesn't depend on what the room is like, I have already pictured it in my mind. I can make up my mind to like it or not, it doesn't matter how the furniture is arranged, I have already decided to like it. It's how you choose reality. I already decided to love it. It's a decision I make every morning."

Every morning, I have a choice. I can spend the rest of the day in bed, moaning over the parts of my body that don't work or I can get out of bed and be thankful for those parts of my body that do work instead of focusing on those that don't. I have decided to be positive. That energizes me what choices energize you?

My challenge is to realize the role of choice in my life. What are your "Choices"? You can chose to live in the past or you can risk for the future .You can choose to focus on the good qualities of your work companion or his/her faults. You can chose to focus on the weakness of SDC or you can chose to work toward its renewal, calling to mind the words of Fr. Jim Young, founder of the Divorce Ministry: "those that have gone before you for healing have a responsibility for those who come after them."

## *June, 2008 - The Mass: Life, Death, and Resurrection*

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The Mass is a spiritual addiction of the elderly is a comment I heard recently by a young person. The comment made me realize how little many Catholics know about the Mass. I think an understanding of the history of the Mass would be helpful.

There are two traditions that can help us to correct this disbelief by understanding how the Mass as a table gathering has evolved. The first tradition was centered on the Mass as a gathering of the faithful in small groups. All were welcome to the table. Those that were carrying woundedness through sin or human frailty were welcome. Change of conversion to Christ occurred within the celebration itself. When you see Christ, the meal seen in the gospel, you see people as they were and the acceptance that surrounded them and His acceptance led to change. The focus was more on the people changing.

As time moved on, this led to the second tradition which we are more familiar with. The focus of the Mass was on the sacrifice of Christ where Christ was sent by the Father to atone for our sins. This form of atonement stressed the Lord's passion and death, where Christ was seen as making atonement for our sins to please an angry God. This notion was counter to John's gospel message (John 3: 16) that God sent his only son to give us eternal life. Many of the Resurrection stories were centered on the meal motif. As Christ experienced the resurrection so can we too experience the resurrection in the same manner. What happened to Christ can happen to us. The focus is on the joy and happiness of the Lord's resurrection that we celebrate in the Mass. In the second tradition, the focus was on the repentance of sin, the change that occurred in a person before they would go to receive communion. Whereas in the first tradition, people were accepted as they were. And in that acceptance, the conversion took place. The Church today is trying to recapture that earlier tradition.

So for the divorced community, Christ's Resurrection gives strength and hope in the Mass which is a celebration of life, death and resurrection. A strong reason why the divorced should have a strong devotion to the Mass and search for those liturgies that show them hope and joy. Life does not end in death, but rather life begins in death.

## *July, 2008 - Find God in the Ordinary*

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We fail to see the presence of God in our lives because we look for Him in the exceptional rather than the ordinary things in life. The news of the weeping Madonna draw crowds from all parts of the country because they expect to find God in the exceptional, yet fail to see him in the ordinary events of life. In the ordinary events of our life we can expect the Pascal mystery-that dying leads to resurrection. Each day of our lives marks the experience of the dying process that leads to new life. In your case, one example would be that divorce represents the dying process that leads to new life. Christ is with you in this march. Many of you can testify to the fact that pain leads to a new life. And hopefully you will find that the Lord walks with you in your life, and that he is with you in your dying process. The loss of a loved one through death reminds you that life is not over but is changed. This conviction is sometimes hard to come by. To live this conviction means death of cynicism that life ends at death. To accept this reality in our lives, means the dying are letting go.

On a lesser level, the human experience preaches too many human experiences reflecting the dying process. When you continue to be friendly to a person who is mean to you, to forgive another who has hurt you deeply, letting go of the need for retaliation, to live as the sun is shining even though it is dark is a dying process, the loss of a friendship, a sudden injury, a blanket of loneliness, all lead us to say "I know you are here God even though I don't see you."

As you reflect on your life today, sharpen your vision for seeing the ordinary as the avenue to take you to God's presence in your life. Find him, in the ordinary and not only the exceptional.

Summertime is a time to review of your life. The sun, beach, vacation time, all enriches your life of God's presence among you. So enjoy the summer.

I like to also take this opportunity to thank those of you who remembered me at the retreat, I appreciate that. I especially enjoyed receiving the signed card and my gift to you is to pray for you daily. I would like to ask you all think of one another each day.

## *August, 2008 - Daily Prayers*

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My day begins at 5:00 AM after a sleepless night. “Prayer on my Back” has been the most meaningful form of prayer. Before I get into my day, I offer a prayer of Thanksgiving for a safe night; mention all my friends, loved ones, and SDC members in my prayer for their well being. Now I would like to share with you three prayer experiences/styles that center my day.

### Number 1: Breathing Prayer

I imagine that I am surrounded by God’s love.  
I breathe in that for my own being and  
I breathe out for those that need the Lord’s compassion.  
I rest with an awareness of my prayer experience for as long as I find helpful.  
Then I conclude my meditation with a very brief prayer as follows: “Be with me during the coming day Lord, and may I offer my day for those who are most in need.”

### Number 2: Blessing Prayer

I imagine myself surrounded by the Lord’s blessing.  
I breathe in and take in the Lord’s blessing for myself.  
I exhale I think of all those in need of the Lord’s blessing.  
I think of this quotation: “May God bless you in all the circumstances of your life and may this blessing accompany you. This is my blessing prayer for you and you can share with each other and may you carry this blessing with you to your heavenly home. - May God the Father bless you, May God the Son bless you and may God the Holy Spirit bless you.”

### Number 3: Healing Prayer

Our Lord is a healing Lord. In Scripture Christ is seen as performing a healing, coming from a healing or going to perform a healing. You share in this healing power today. Imagine God’s healing love surrounding you as you feel that love and as you breathe in that love for yourself. As you take that healing, I ask the Lord for healing. When I exhale I send that healing power to all those who are in most need of it.

Here is my healing prayer for you. I place my hands on your head and say the following words: “May you be healed of your infirmity by the Lord’s healing power.” As you deepen your faith in the conviction that you can be a healer, Christ’s healing power can be realized through you. -Be a Healer!

## *September, 2008 -A Nurse's Letter from Iraq*

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I am currently in Mosul, Iraq pending transfer to Tikrit...probably by the end of the week.... It is hot, as high as 150 degrees but mostly 120s with sandstorms/sand everywhere... It is true, I wasn't a happy camper because I hated the sweating and facilities situation (everything was outdoors from showers to porta johns). What I would do for my own bathroom, indoors, right now. Boy do I appreciate the things we take for granted back home....especially cold water. On a personal note, I have also had a lot of time to think about life and what it means. One would not realize, at least it didn't for me until now, how much you reflect on what you've had and have in life....until you don't or are at risk of never having it ever again...to the degree that you do when in a war zone. To those I have hurt in the past or not shown the love or attention or possible took advantage of your kindness....I am so very sorry. For those who always stood by me...I never loved you more than I do now. .God grant me peace in my heart for both of these situations....this is what I pray everyday....not to regret but to move on but never forget the memories. Well, can't do much more of that...as it brings tears to the eyes. So, to let you all know....I am doing okay. Looking forward to doing everything in my power to help my comrades as much as I am able. I believe and trust that God has me here for a reason and has graced me with a skill to help them. It is this faith that keeps my fears and anxieties in check when it comes to the "war outside". Bombs, IEDs, suicide and vehicle detonations etc. are things of the "norm" that you just learn to deal with ....like NY traffic with horns blowing and driving in the city with those crazy drivers...not much different...at least this is what I tell myself to deal with them...Don't worry about me, thanks for the prayers, keep the faith as I do. I "trust and believe" that God will see me through this part of my life and it's his will to be done ....whatever that might be. I really had no idea I'd be here, at least not this soon, but I am... Anyway, I live life everyday now, as if it were my last. This is not to sound morbid, but even when I return, I realized this is how I should be everyday...even at home and intend to do just that on my return. I try to be positive, love every moment and person every minute of my life no matter the circumstances. You're in my thoughts and prayers always. I love what I'm doing right now and I'm anticipating/looking forward to the next day to make a positive influence, and possible difference, in someone's life. Well, don't have much time now but will talk with you soon. Don't worry about me man, take care of yourself, but know someone...in IRAQ...loves you and always will. God Bless!!! - a Nurse stationed in Iraq

*Living through times of trial strengthens our spirits; helping others heals our souls. Jesus knows this about us for He has walked that road before us and walks it with us still.*

## *October, 2008 - Three Spiritual Reflections*

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These are three reflections that will make your spiritual life more concrete and practical.

### **#1 The Blessing Prayer**

Recall God's love surrounding you. Inhale that love, enable it to heal you and then exhale that love to the person of your choice. You might say the following prayer:

May God bless you, and may you carry this blessing with you as you continue your journey to your heavenly home. May God the Father bless you, may God the Son bless you and may God the Holy Spirit bless you. Amen.

### **#2 A Smile or Joke that elicits a smile reflects the human face of God**

I offer the following suggestion—to go through the Scripture and look for the passages that reflect Christ smiling or laughing. This humor style reflects the human side of Christ among you. The Lord must have had many a smile over the Apostle's behavior.

A smile reveals the hidden presence of God among you. For example, to forgive is to love and to love mirrors the hidden presence of Christ within you. In concrete expression of that love in a smile, a joke or human story. A smile can lighten up your day, and that smile is the hidden expression of God's presence in your life.

### **#3 Guidelines for a happy relationship**

1. From time to time you may hurt one another, it is important to say "I'm sorry" and get on with your relationship.

It's a myth to believe that you won't hurt another from time to time.

2. Practice the art of Praise- "You did a good job."

3. "What is your opinion?" When you ask a person their opinion, you show them your respect.

4. Thanks -love the art of thanking people for gifts.

5. Say "I love you". To verbalize this brings the relationship to another level.

These are 3 steps I have found helpful in my Spiritual Life, perhaps you will find them helpful as well.

## *November, 2008 - What is God's will for me?*

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"What is God's will for me?" That is the question I often ask of myself and others ask of me. As you deal with this question remember that you are all sincere Catholics trying to live your faith in a difficult world. For example: Do I place my parent in a nursing home or do I resign my job to spend more time with them? Do I leave a destructive marriage or stay for the sake of the children? Should I follow my conscience in my decision to be married in a second marriage with or without an annulment?

Prior to Vatican II, the virtue that the lay person was encouraged to practice was obedience to the rules, laws and regulations of the church. If this norm was followed you were assured God's will was being followed.

After Vatican II, the stress moved to honesty and integrity. This new focus puts a great deal of responsibility on the conscience of the individual. Remember that as you enter the process of deciding what God's will for you is, operate on the conviction that God sees you as a good person as you struggle to make your decision. When you make this choice, God accepts your decision. After praying on the decisions that you have to make, and whatever reading you get a hold of, you are able to make the right decision. Trust that when you look inward, God will give you the peace to make the right one. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians supports your position. When one person in a pagan marriage becomes a convert, the person is free to remarry if that pagan does not stay in the marriage.

Recently I read a comment by Bishop Gumbleton, which may help your understanding: "You have to come to terms with who you are in the presence of God in the depths of your spirit and you are at peace with that, I am not about to make a judgment only God can make."

The above reflection indicates not only how difficult but also how important it is to follow in trust your convictions God accepts your decision. But whatever decision you make, know that God walks with you and knows your heart. Peace.

## December, 2008 - My Gift to You

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Christmas is gift-sharing time. The following meditation prayer is my gift to you. When I heard it, I was deeply moved and wanted to share it with you.

### Meditation Prayer from Fr. Jim Dolan, SJ:

*"There is a great power in you. It is brand new, yet it has always been there. You know you have it, but you have not discovered it fully. When you used it in the past you weren't sure what it was. The power that God has created in you is as true as real and as mighty as all the virtue in the world. Your power is majestic. Many times during your lifetime, you could have used this power, but something stopped you. Some people find majesty in trees, flowers and sunsets, others see it more clearly in people. Look at the marvelous places where children find it. In India, I met a boy named Angus who played with a collapsed bicycle tire. When he hit it with a stick it would become circular and roll down the street. He brought it to life and he made it walk with him wherever he went. Whether on grassy plains or bumpy paths. Because of him this moving object was far more than a piece of rubber, he brought life to it and that made my heart dance. When he let his baby brother hit the tire, it would bounce, flop and fall. More power sparkled around him as his generosity showed forth. When was the last time you brought something to life or helped it walk or a heart dance? Maybe you are unaware that you are doing it. You have a power in you that is usable anytime you want whose consequences are immeasurable whose goodness is endless. People who do not believe in their inner power. No one would willingly exchange the gift of grace for external powers of a superstitious, monetary, political or religious nature. People who have not discovered this interior liberating power often assume that their life is powerless and dull. Often they turn to the power of conscientious the privacy of isolation or the vindication of righteousness. These people look to authority as if the power is in the office rather than in one's heart. These deprived persons look for praise as if they can find sufficient affirmation by acts of submission. They actually are giving power to another so that they can receive praise in exchange -what an empty feeling. If they only knew who they were and what power lived within them. Just picture yourself with an old bicycle tire running around the grounds beating it with a stick. What would people think at your age? Are you in control of people's thoughts? The real question, the divine question is what do you think? Each moment is given to us as gift. Opportunity after opportunity comes our way and often its fear that blinds us that from a personal response. If you could ever let your mind and heart join forces without fear, the resulting graces would bring good news to many. Maybe you assume your heart would have miraculous power. Who told you that? Who was it that implied that you were not a unique force in the world? Did you believe them? How foolish you were not to believe the good news. Oh ye of little faith, it is not a stick that brings a tire to life. Your life can bring life."*

Since I said it was gift-sharing time, and I gave you my gift of Jim Dolan's meditation prayer of calling you to new life, your gift to me would be living in the spirit of his message. May this Holy Season be filled with God's peace and love for you. Merry Christmas!

## *January, 2009 - Home Masses*

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Recently, I received a letter from a former SDC member, who recently remarried. As she experiences new life, she looks back on the wonderful help SDC gave her which supported her on her journey to growth and new life. She recalls the many supportive opportunities that helped her in her journey: The Rap sessions carried out for both groups, the Deanery meeting Lectures on Sunday evenings, the Spring Conference in Columbia, and Memorial Weekend retreats, work on Annulments, the Summer Program at Notre Dame for Spiritual Growth, and Home Mass. All these experiences sustained her as she entered her new life- she felt very well prepared. She placed a special emphasis on the Home Mass that enabled her to see how her journey from grief to growth mirrored in the human reflection of the Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection.

Because of the lack of priests, the Home Mass is not as common as it used to be. The Home Mass is a spiritual gathering to celebrate the Eucharist in a unique setting. The Eucharist is a concrete reminder of a oneness with each other through Christ. However this lack of priests has a hidden blessing in it. It reminds you that through your Baptism you can minister in many ways.

In the early Church's history, small groups of Christians gathered for Liturgies. So there is no reason why the folks in SDC can't return to that practice. In Paul Claudel's play, "The Tidings Brought to Mary", there is a scene where the father of the family takes the bread, breaks it and gives it to each member of the family. Then they all give thanks. This scene clearly has the overtones of Eucharistic celebration. No reason why SDC members can't do this as well.

So I feel sad that the Home Mass, the unique experience for SDC, is not as common as it once was. Still you have the ability to practice in the spirit of the early communities. So I recommend that you have your own little service in the following manner. One person volunteers to lead the group by doing the following. Begin with a short prayer, a reading from Sunday's scripture, a period of sharing, and a final prayer. And go on with the rest of your evening.

Know that you are always in my heart and prayers. May you live love and experience peace in the New Year.

## *February, 2009 - Pray Where You Are*

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With the beginning of the New Year, I would like to share with you a few spiritual reflections that you might find helpful for your spiritual life.

1. See each day is a fresh start. You may have shared my experience with a bad day where everything went wrong: you lost your temper with a friend, your boss is irritating you, you ran out of gas, etc. When you awoke the next day, you find a new day and the resurrection is alive in you and you are hopeful. Embrace your day with humor and a smile. That's the Resurrection mirrored in your behavior.
2. Choose how you will act according to your values. Don't let other people's behavior determine your behavior. You are in charge. A friend of mine, living with his wife for 35 years, was nagged every day yet he never ceases to be friendly and in good cheer. Another friend of mine tells me that he greets the newspaper man on the corner with a smile, even though the newspaper man ignores him. His friend who walks with him asked him, "how can you be so cheerful when the man is so indifferent to you?" My friend said, "I determine my behavior not anyone else."

In these suggestions, I see the Resurrection of Christ bringing new life to your behavior. The central mystery of our Catholic Faith is the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord. The Paschal Mystery gives depth to your human experience and your human experience gives the Paschal Mystery concrete expression.

In conclusion, I would suggest also that you allow 5 minutes a day for Complete Silence to become aware of Christ's unconditional love for you. 5 minutes is manageable. Perhaps you will be able to increase the time to pray and dwell on your relationship with the Lord over time. But above all pray where you are. May you have a happy, blessed New Year as you grow in your relationship with Christ.

## *March, 2009 - Christ Calls You to Trust*

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Perhaps you have a relative or friend who has been married a second time without an annulment. Either because one was refused or the person doesn't believe in the annulment process. This person experiences a sense of alienation from the Church. Hopefully you can be a source of encouragement for this person by keeping in mind the following suggestions.

1. Even though a person is not married according to the laws of the Church, this individual is married in God's eyes. The Church could choose to bless this marriage, but hasn't granted the blessing so far because by doing so the Church would seem to show a weakening for its teachings of the permanency of marriage.
2. My experience with you has been that you are very loyal and conscientious in the observance of the Church's teachings, laws and regulations. So I know that you find it very hard to go contrary to the Church's laws here. However laws and regulations are not absolutely normative in determining the authenticity of one's spiritual life. By acting according to your reformed conscience, know that God accepts your decision. God wants you to live in peace. You know from experiences of married life the importance of relationships. God realizes how important that is to you. So if you follow the laws of the Church and you cannot remarry in the Church. Do you think God is calling you to do that?
3. Remember Christ will always be your model. For him people are always more important than laws and regulations. For example, even though it was against the law for Jews to make contact with Samaritans, Jesus spoke to the woman at the well hoping to have a dialogue with her. Another example is when Christ saw that human needs are more important than laws. He allowed disciples to pick corn on the Sabbath to satisfy the human needs.

There is no question that Christ is very strong in his teaching on the permanence of marriage. But this ideal was not always realizable. In the early Church, there is no question that Christ is very strong on this teaching on permanency of marriage. Yet in the early church this new ideal would accommodate the circumstances that would allow a second marriage so there was remarriage in the early church. In conclusion, you can be a source of great hope to your friends and family. You can remind them that God loves them unconditionally and that He accepts their decision. Christ calls you to trust in that belief.

## *April, 2009 - "What It Means to Be a Catholic"*

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As Lent draws to a close, hopefully you are deepening your awareness as to what it means to be a Catholic in today's world. You realize that your Catholic identity is not found only in externals such as attending Mass, saying the rosary, abstaining from food or receiving the ashes on Ash Wednesday. You're called to a change of heart. The externals are a reminder of what your challenge is. You see that the time spent fasting, i.e. no candy, movies, are all externals. So often we think if we follow these externals, we are good Catholics as we start to realize that a change of heart is much more important. We come to realize that the Eucharist is not an object just to be adored but a life to be lived in service of others. Prayer is not just a recitation of words, but a quiet listening of the Spirit within you. Imagine the Lord's presence within you. Breathing brings life to us and becomes a holy action, taking in Christ's life. As you breathe in you take in God's presence, and as you breathe out you pass God's presence to others.

In your divorce experience, you need to look at whether you've forgiven yourself and your spouse for the breakup of your marriage. Do you pray for your former spouse? Can you be in his/her presence without anger? Can you be compassionate to someone you don't like? Saying "yes" to these challenges means a growth in your spiritual life. Move on to new life and new relationships, that's the growth. Are you willing to listen to the pain of another, putting your pain aside? You see the Eucharist challenges us to become what we receive. All of these examples point to a loving heart that floats out to a hurting world. By taking a role in SDC ministry, you can be a light to those who are hurting. You may have moved on in your own personal life, but you can still minister to those who come after you.

So your Catholic faith is not something culturally oriented, "born a Catholic always a Catholic", but a sign of how you live your life. I pray that your Lenten season may increase your awareness in how to live your life and what it means to be a Catholic. As you approach this coming Holy Week, may your Liturgical celebrations that reenact the Death and Resurrection of Christ, be mirrored in your own life as you move from lost marriage to a new life.

## *May, 2009 - "You are an 'Alleluia' People"*

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The Lord's Resurrection is SDC's special feast. Why? Because the Lord's Resurrection offers hope for all those who journey on their own path of crucifixion. A story will help.

Some years ago, I talked to a woman whose husband had just left her after 30 years of marriage. No warning was given, just a letter saying, "I'm out of here." A feeling of desolation overwhelmed her. Her dream of a permanent marriage -shattered. The future frightened her and the present scared her. Her children felt abandoned. This woman's plight mirrored Christ's crucifixion. Initially she felt all alone, but in time she drew strength and support from a number of sources: SDC's community support a series of Growth Groups, Home Masses, and various workshops, weekly counseling. All these helps and opportunities helped her move forward one step at a time. Even though her church was not helpful, she knew that God supported her on her journey. After all, in Scripture God tells us that He came for the wounded. I continued to see her on a regular basis as she marched on her route of crucifixion. I could see a change in her as she moved forward. Her tears gave way to smiles, her weariness yielded to energy. We went out to the various SDC meetings, where she met new people who helped her. She even qualified for a new job, confident that she would do the work. Her appearance took on a glow of success. Her new hairstyle reflected her new energy. She came to realize that even though her marriage failed, she was not a failed person. She was a good person. As time moved forward, she grew in her faith and her emotional stability and her ability to cope. She saw that what appeared to be an incredible tragedy became the occasion to new growth.

What this person has experienced, I have seen many times over in my experience with SDC. It confirms my conviction that you all are a gift to the Church because as you cope with the losses and life's tragedies, you mirror the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord. You move from death to life. New life—isn't that the very journey that Christ experienced in Holy Week and then climaxed by the joy and triumph of Easter? So you are an "Alleluia" People. Welcome Easter into your life.

## *June, 2009 - "Christ can perform miracles through you"*

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One of the stories I like best in the Sacred Scriptures is from Acts 2: 1-10. The scene is the temple where Jews come in the afternoon to worship. At the Temple's gate is a beggar who regularly asks for coins. As Peter and John approach, he expected to receive coins from them. To his surprise, Peter said, "I have neither silver nor gold to offer you, but what I do have I will give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarean, walk." Then Peter took him by the hand and raised him up. Immediately the beggar's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped up and stood for a moment and then began to walk about and jumped around in the Temple praising God.

What Jesus then did, He continues to do through you and me. He relies upon us, his followers. After the Resurrection, Jesus is never again seen performing a miracle. His followers carry on his work. The implication is clear; He wants us to do his work. Do you really believe that Christ can perform miracles through you? If you are doubtful about this, ask the Lord for the grace to really believe.

You can be Christ for somebody in SDC through this healing ministry. For example, I will offer you a brief prayer ritual style, which you can use as a vehicle in your ministry.: Stand or sit by the person you are praying for; imagine yourself surrounded by Christ's healing power. As you breathe in, you take in that healing power. As you exhale, you channel that power to the person you are praying for. With your hand, trace the sign of the cross on their forehead and say the words: "Through the power of Jesus Christ, may you be healed." Conclude with the words "Go in peace If for some reason the person you are praying over is not there physically, just imagine the person's presence and perform the ritual.

So the stories in Scripture are not just stories limited to Christ's time. They inspire us through time to carry on Christ's work. Pray for the grace to really believe that.

## *July, 2009 - The Wisdom of Father Pedro Arrupe*

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I would like to share with you two Spiritual insights from the life of the late Father General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe, S.J. I think this will help your Spiritual Life.

The first gift that Fr. Arrupe gave me was a quote from his life: “More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. This is what I wanted all my life from my youth. But now more than ever there is a difference; the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound Spiritual experience when I find myself so totally in God’s hands.” This quotation follows Fr. Arrupe’s stroke, which left him bedridden for 10 years. He thought he had control over his life prior to this time. But now he realizes that his life rests in God’s hands. Perhaps that experience could be your experience as you face life’s tasks. You feel God being in control instead of you being in control.

The second gift is the insight in Fr. Arrupe’s understanding of *love*. Again quoting Fr. Arrupe: “Nothing is more practical than a person 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, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”

That is my prayer for you, that you may experience love, a love that will energize you through life in such a way that when we say the kingdom of God is now, that now will be made manifest in your present life situation. My prayer for you is that you grow in awareness that the kingdom of God is realized in your life situation.

## August, 2009 - Spirituality through Humor

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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 spirituality is enhanced through humor.

1. Faith is the ability to not panic.
2. If you worry, you didn't pray. If you prayed, don't worry.
3. As a child of God, prayer is like calling home every day.
4. Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape,
5. When we get tangled up in our problems, be still. He can untangle the knot.
6. Do the math. Count your blessings.
7. God wants Spiritual fruit, not religious nuts.
8. Dear God: I have a problem. It's me.
9. Silence is often misinterpreted, but never misquoted.
10. Laugh every day - it's like inner jogging.
11. The most important things in your home are the people.
12. Growing old is inevitable, growing up is optional.
13. There is no key to happiness. The door is always open, come on in.
14. A grudge is a heavy thing to carry.
15. He who dies with the most toys is still dead.
16. We do not remember days, but moments. Life moves too fast, so enjoy your precious moments.
17. Nothing is real to you until you experience it; other wise it's just hearsay.
18. It's still all right to sit on your pity pot now and again, just be sure to flush when you are done.
19. Surviving and living your life successfully requires courage. The goals and dreams you're seeking require risk-taking. Learn from the turtle. It only makes progress when it sticks out its neck.
20. Be more concerned with your character than your reputation. Your character is really what you are, but your reputation is merely what others think you are. No matter the storm, when you are with God, there is always a rainbow waiting.
21. *Leave gentle fingerprints on the soul of another for the angels to read.*

"I don't want to get to the end of my life and find that I lived just the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well." (from: *The Other Side of the Colts*.) Hopefully the above suggestions can provide a fruitful source of meditation and prayer. These remembrances should provide a rich source of sharing and meditation for your Spiritual Growth. May you be so entwined with your Spiritual growth, that the two of you are inseparable. Hope you are enjoying your summer.