Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.

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Advancing God's Kingdom in a Turbulent World

In this issue
We live in a time of massive change - technical, cultural, and spiritual change to name a few. We are globally connected like no other age and yet we witness almost daily the sweeping storms of division, war, conflict, persecution, and genocide. Some call it a clash of civilizations and the way people have lived for many centuries. Others see it as a decline and dying of an age - like the decline of the Roman empire in the early centuries of the first millenium.

While there are a number of ways for viewing these turbulent times, the Lord Jesus has given his disciples a perspective and orientation to the age in which we live. In the Gospel of Matthew we hear the words which Jesus addresses to his disciples:

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:6-14)

How does the Lord Jesus want Christians to respond to the troubles, challenges, and turmoil going on in our world today? Jesus first says "do not be alarmed" (Matthew 24:6) and then calls his disciples to stand firm in their faith and not yield to despair or hopelessness. And in the same breath, he calls his disciples to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God in the whole world as a testimony to all nations (Matthew 24:14).

Our role in spiritual warfare and mission
We are in a spiritual battle that has been going on for a long time - ever since the fall of the angels who rebelled against God (Revelation 12:7-12, Isaiah 14:12-15) and the fall of humankind who were deceived by the devil and disobeyed God. God's plan from the beginning was to share his glory and reign with those who would believe in him and serve his kingdom of
righteousness, peace, and joy. That is why the Father in heaven sent his only begotten Son to heal and restore a broken human race. There are ultimately only two kingdoms in conflict - the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. The Lord calls us to serve his kingdom and to let the light of Christ shine through us so that many may come to know him, love him, and serve his kingdom of peace and righteousness.

This issue explores our role as individual disciples and as communities of disciples who aim "to fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12) and win as many people as we can for the kingdom of God which endures forever.

Don't miss the inspiring testimonies of Christians in war-torn Aleppo who daily witness the miracles of God in the midst of bombing raids, constant fear, danger, and threats to their survival as a Christian community. May we rise up and take our place in the battle with the armour of God and the spiritual weapons of prayer, intercession, and the "sword of the Spirit which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:10, 17-20).

Sincerely in Christ,
Don Schwager
editor
Winning the Battle in the Long Humdrum Process of Life

Why is a distinctive Christian way of life so vital for families and communities?

by Bob Tedesco

Introduction
Christianity can be described and discussed in many different ways: elements, practices, theology, etc. We can also question: “What is being saved by the work of Christ?” I would say LIFE and all that it means: this life and eternal life. It’s not just a ‘practices’ sort of thing but life and all of its power, its energy, its creativity and inspiration...this life and the next.

We can also say Christianity is a way of life. It looks different from life in the world and people can well recognize it as different; they may mock it or persecute it but they’ll recognize it as different.

Much, indeed most of Christianity is a process. The process is sometimes started by an event. A retreat can be the event. Conversion is such an event. As a parent, I took my children to as many events as possible; and sure enough, at one of our university retreats, my son heard the Lord call him and responded. He has been serving the Lord ever since in the process of Christian life and service. Some of my grandchildren’s lives have been saved by the Lord using the Sword of the Spirit evangelistic “YES” retreats for young people.

So, Christianity is a way of life, and, for this discussion, a way of life made up of events and PROCESS.

Some Definitions and Descriptions

Events are somewhat singular; they can be milestones. We often celebrate events and remember them: birth, baptism, etc.
Process often has elements of maintenance: nourishment, hygiene, improvement, etc. Prayer, sacrifice, tithing are all part of the ongoing process of the Christian way of life.

Repentance and starting over are a part of the process.

The battle is won in the long, boring process of life. If you are a member of a church that has two hours of high worship every week: you raise the roof with praise and singing, the gospel is proclaimed, all is wonderful...you still will have one hundred and sixty-six hours to live the Christian life before you can do it all again. One eighty-fourth of your weekly life is in the event; the battle, the perseverance; the victories are very much in the process. This is not meant to be a “downer,” but good news: Christ has saved everyday life... we can have and experience victory in it!

Scripture often compares the Christian life to a race.

Hebrews 12:1 –“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

1Corinthians 9:24 –“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run so that you may obtain it.”

2 Timothy 4:7 –“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Life can be scary; life can be painful; life can be disappointing; but we must stay focused. We have to: 1) fight the good fight; 2) run to obtain the prize; and 3) keep the faith.

Scriptural Examples

Mark 9:2-8 (the Transfiguration...an event)

After six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them . And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And suddenly looking around they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

Peter wants to “freeze” the event and stay there. That’s not how it works. Jesus leads the three back down the mountaintop. There’s work to be done and there is victory in a life that is lived for others.

Process

Luke 10: 38-42

Now as they were on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his
Living Bulwark

But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing alone is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.”

The Martha & Mary story is a nice example of both process and event and we’ll discuss it more in the “dangers” section.

Matthew 13: 1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow, and as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.

Conversion is an event...an event that can be endangered by the daily life process (not the Christian way of life process). This can be seen by observing each person’s response in the “seeds” story.

Daily life examples (side by side comparison)

A wedding is an event and the married life and family life is the resulting process. No amount of grandiosity lavished onto the wedding event can guarantee the success of the process. It might even be the case that excessive spending on the event endangers the process or might at least reflect a leading cause of divorce: irresponsible financial patterns.
The first day of school is a bit of an event that begins the long, tedious process of education which is celebrated by graduation. In this example you have a process bracketed by two events.

Getting a job is an event. *Doing* a job is the resulting process. Sometimes milestones in the process are celebrated. You might get a 25 year watch and a free lunch.

**Dangers**

There is a danger in trying to turn the Christian life into a *series of charged events* (e.g. expecting every worship service to be an exciting, high energy launch pad for living the daily life). It can be a similar danger to expect every teaching to be an inspired preaching of the Word that stirs the soul.

There is a corresponding personal danger to expect every personal prayer time to be a mountaintop experience. We are just setting ourselves up for disappointments with these unrealistic expectations.

Another danger is **not realizing that an event is happening**. Martha was so invested in the process (providing hospitality) that she didn’t realize that an event was happening: Jesus wanted to talk. Most of us would consider it an event if Jesus dropped in and wanted to talk. Some of us would start dusting the woodwork or defrost the steaks that we were saving for just such an event.

**The challenging nun...**

In 1972, I had a privileged invitation to speak to a gathering of nuns at a convent. My assignment was to share what the Holy Spirit was doing among lay people and “non-churched” people with the Pentecostal experience. After thirty or forty minutes of testimony about “Jesus people,” people being healed, delivered from evil spirits, speaking in tongues, prophesying, conversions, and vocations saved, I opened it up for questions (note: I was feeling quite satisfied that I had done a nice job witnessing to this wonderful, outrageous renewal).

One of the questions put me in my place. A little old nun questioned: “Do you mean to tell me that after serving the Lord faithfully for my entire life, there are lay people and street people having experiences that I have never had?” I mumbled something like, “Sister, I know that it’s strange for a young engineer to be speaking to a set of nuns about spiritual things, but stuff is happening!”

I believe that her firm, lifelong dedication to process may have kept her from seeing that God is sovereign. He loves street people and lay people and the undeserving. Are any of us “deserving?”
Retreats, Conferences and other Events

The Lord often speaks to us through events and by teachings, prophecies, ministry, prayer times, etc. He wants us to take Him seriously. Events are meant to change process: to grow us, improve us, and challenge us. At a retreat, we should write down what we’ve heard; these words are called to bring reforms to our daily life. Review them Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Get a friend or pastoral leader to help with accountability to get them to happen. Reforms are often practiced. We work them into our process.

We might start by saying, “I’m going to pray ten minutes more each day.” “I’m going to say something encouraging to my spouse each day.” “I’m going to increase my tithe by 1% next payday.” “I’m going to lead prayers at mealtimes.” Don’t be the seeds that fell onto the path and were eaten, those that fell on rocky ground, or those that fell among the thorns. Don’t lose what you are given. The Christian way of life is lived mostly in the process.

Matthew 7:16-20 (NKJV)

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them.

Good children come from families with good process. Great children usually come from families with great process: great commitment to Christ and His kingdom...commitment in the heart, in the speech, in the actions, at meal times, and at play times. Your children know you in the process. Your event face is not mainly what they know or what they think of you.

1 Kings 19:11-12

And he said, “Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the
Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice.

Earthquakes, fires and winds that can break rocks are events. The still, small voice is almost as common as a gentle breeze...he speaks volumes to us in the gentle breeze of everyday life!

Matthew 7:24-27

“Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”

Choose the Rock! (Event)

Build your house upon Him (Process).
Blessed is the wise man who builds his house upon the rock!

> See other articles by Bob Tedesco

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I could easily find a replacement for the broken part, but no – the tool was obsolete and no replacement parts were available. It was a valuable device one moment and a useless piece of junk the next. *If I had known it was fragile, I would have taken better care of it.* Now, if you really think of it, the lives that we live are fragile like that gadget – like glass, crystal and fine china. They can be here one day and gone the next. The same is true with our families and relationships. We live with an illusion that everything is just fine and dandy. The truth is, all of us live on borrowed time – and a disease, accident or something else can end our fragile lives – and relationships – in a moment. If you know you are living a fragile life, would you care better for it? How?

**So How Do You Live a "Fragile" Life?**

1. Take good care of your physical body – your body needs regular exercise for it to work well. You need...
to habitually relax and rest your body, mind and soul. Take time for holidays and to celebrate special occasions in your life and those close to you. Develop good hobbies too – they help you relax your mind and soul.

2. Take good care of your spiritual self – you need to take spiritual nourishment through prayer, teaching and reading the Word of God. … Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. [1 Timothy 4:7-8 ESV]. Develop good and holy habits and grow in becoming more like Jesus – more loving, patient, joyful, self-controlled, etc. – day by day. Take time during the year to have a personal retreat. Seek God in all situations.

3. Make the most out of your relationships – do not take people, especially those close to you, for granted. Make sure you love them, appreciate them and make peace with them. You will never know when your fragile life – or theirs – will come to an end. As much as you can, try to live with peace with everyone around you.

4. Forgive and let go of the past. This is probably the hardest thing to do – but is also the most important one in living a fragile life. Do not let any ‘root of bitterness,’ resentment or anger fester in your heart. These things can affect our physical well-being but more so our spiritual well-being. Jesus clearly said, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” [Matthew 18:35 ESV]

5. Live a life with no regret. This is not about carefree, careless, foolish ‘you only live once’ things – rather, these are major life decisions you would not want to be ashamed of in the future. If you already have some mistakes and regrets in life, do not add to them but rather correct them if you can. See if you reclaim those things. Live a fully abundant life that Jesus came for [John 10:10]. One day, when your fragile life comes to its conclusion, [and it will!] may you hear these words: “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” [Matthew 25:21 ESV]

**Other Scripture passages:**

1. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. [1 Corinthians 9:24-27 ESV]

2. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. [1 Corinthians 6:19-20 ESV]

3. … What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. [James 4:14 ESV]

4. Other references: 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 12:1-2; Philippians 3:20.

**For personal reflection or group sharing**

1. What do I need to do to take better care of my fragile life? Who do I need to reconcile with? What do I need to do to have greater peace in my relationships, especially those close to me?

2. Are there areas in my life that I have been careless in the past? Have I thought of living with a motto: “Fragile Life – Handle with Care?”
Tom Caballes is the National Senior Administrator and a National Coordinator of the Lamb of God, a community of the Sword of the Spirit with 7 branches located throughout New Zealand. Tom also leads Kairos New Zealand, an outreach program for high school, university, and post-university aged people.

Tom and his wife Mhel and their two daughters live in Wellington, New Zealand.
Standing for the Truth in an Age of Unbelief

by Michael Shaughnessy

Do you believe?

- Absolute moral truth exists?
- The Bible is true in the principles it teaches?
- Satan really exists, he is not just symbolic?
- “Doing good to others” will not be enough to get you to heaven?
- Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth?
- God is the all-knowing, all-powerful being who rules the universe?

What percent of American adults believe all the above statements are true?

1%  9%  27%  40%

How about among youth aged 18-23? What percent believe all six of these statements of faith?

1%  9%  27%  40%

Americans overwhelmingly believe in God. Most polls put the number of believers at 85% or more. Less than
half of the believers believe enough to show up in church on Sunday. (40% of Americans go to church weekly, this has been the case for nearly 200 years.)

The change that is happening is not in church attendance. It is in what the churchgoers believe and how they behave.

**Believe what?**
If you believe the six statements above are true, you are among the 9% of Americans who do, at least according to a study done by the Barna Group. Among American youth the results are far worse. Less than 1% believe them all.

**Behave how?**
On moral issues there is a similar decline among the young. Particularly noteworthy is what is going on among young, committed Christians. Regular church-goers under 30 are twice as likely as those over 40 to approve of abortion, the use of illegal drugs, pornography, sexual fantasy, same sex marriage and adultery. They are also twice as likely to lie, to use profanity in public, to seek revenge, to steal, to abuse someone physically or to fight. Their views closely resemble those of their peer group, not those of their elder Christians.

**Now what?**
We live in a post-Christian world. Many of those who would say they are Christian do not believe even basic Christian doctrine nor do they accept the basic morality of the Christian faith. And the situation is getting worse among youth.

One temptation is to surrender, to throw up our hands and say it is hopeless. There is another option and that is to recognize that we have been put here by the Lord at exactly this time because he intends for us to make a difference. Our call and the call on our youth is for exactly this age and exactly these times. We are here for a purpose, and part of that purpose is to believe the truth and stand for it in an age of unbelief and apostasy. Like Queen Esther, a Jewish woman of faith and courage who risked her life before the Persian King in order to intervene and spare her people, we were born “for such a time as this” (Book of Esther, Chapter 8)!

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Living Entirely by the Truth of God’s Word

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

The Word of Christ comes daily and anew

Christians live entirely by the truth of God’s Word in Jesus Christ. If they are asked “where is your salvation, your blessedness, your righteousness?,” they can never point to themselves. Instead, they point to the Word of God in Jesus Christ that grants them salvation, blessedness, and righteousness. They watch for this Word wherever they can. Because they daily hunger and thirst for righteousness, they long for the redeeming Word again and again. It can only come from the outside. In themselves they are destitute and dead. Help must come from the outside; and it has come and comes daily and anew in the Word of Jesus Christ, bringing us redemption, righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. But God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others. When people are deeply affected by the Word, they tell it to other people.

God has willed that we should seek and find God’s living Word in the testimony of other Christians, in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves without cheating themselves out of the truth. They need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation. They need them solely for the sake of Jesus Christ. The Christ in their own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians. Their own hearts are uncertain; those of their brothers and sisters are sure. At the same time, this also clarifies that the goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God allows Christians to come together and grants them community. (from Chapter One)

Speaking God’s Word to our brothers and sisters in Christ
Wherever the service of listening, active helpfulness, and bearing with others is being faithfully performed, the ultimate and highest ministry can also be offered, the service of the Word of God. This service has to do with the free word from person to person, not the word bound to a particular pastoral office, time, and place. It is a matter of that unique situation in which one person bears witness in human words to another person regarding all the comfort, the admonition, the kindness, and the firmness of God. This word is threatened all about by endless dangers. If proper listening does not precede it, how can it really be the right word for the other? If it is contradicted by one’s own lack of active helpfulness, how can it be a credible and truthful word? If it does not flow from the act of bearing with others, but from impatience and the spirit of violence against others, how can it be the liberating and healing word? …who wants to accept the responsibility for having been silent when we should have spoken? The orderly word spoken in the pulpit is so much easier than this totally free word, standing responsibly between silence and speech…

We talk to one another about the help we both need. We admonish one another to go the way Christ bids us to go. We warn one another against the disobedience that is our undoing. We are gentle and we are firm with one another, for we know both God’s kindness and God’s firmness. Why should we be afraid of one another since both of us have only God to fear? Why should we think that another Christian would not understand us when we understood very well what was meant when somebody spoke God’s comfort or God’s admonition to us, even in words that were inept and awkward? Or do we really believe there is a single person in this world who does not need either comfort or admonition? If so, then why has God given us the gift of Christian community?

The servant of the word of Jesus
The community of faith will place its confidence only in the simple servant of the word of Jesus, because it knows that it will then be guided not by human wisdom and human conceit, but by the word of the good shepherd. The question of spiritual trust, which is so closely connected with the question of authority, is decided by the faithfulness with which people serve Jesus Christ, never by the extraordinary gifts they possess. Authority in pastoral care can be found only in the servants of Jesus who seek no authority of their own, but who are Christians one to another, obedient to the authority of the Word.  (from Chapter 5)


Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor and a founding member of the Confessing Church. He was the first of the German theologians to speak out clearly against the persecution of the Jews and the evils of the Nazi ideology. In spring of 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was called by the Confessing Church in Germany to take charge of an “illegal,” underground seminary at Finkenwalde, Germany (now Poland). He served as pastor, administrator, and teacher there until the seminary was closed down by Hitler's Gestapo in September, 1937.

In the seminary at Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer taught the importance of shared life together as disciples of Christ. He was convinced that the renewal of the church would depend upon recovering the biblical understanding of the communal practices of Christian obedience and shared life. This is where true formation of
Bonhoeffer’s teaching led to the formation of a community house for the seminarians to help them enter into and learn the practical disciplines of the Christian faith in community. In 1937 Bonhoeffer completed two books, *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. They were first published in German in 1939. Both books encompass Bonhoeffer’s theological understanding of what it means to live as a Christian community in the Body of Christ.

He was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo in April 1943. On April 8, 1945 he was hanged as a traitor in the Flossenbürg concentration camp. As he left his cell on his way to execution he said to his companion, "This is the end – but for me, the beginning of life."

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Returns to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2016 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)
400 leaders (young and older) from 75 communities world-wide were present at the International Coordinators Meeting in late May 2016

**Introduction**

Over the last 12 years the Lord has spoken strongly to the Sword of the Spirit about an open door for mission and a special season of grace, especially for the young people in Sword of the Spirit. Given the increasing difficulties and challenges which Christians face around the world – religious persecution, drift from Christian morality, and breakdown of marriage and family life – there has been a growing sense of urgency among Sword of the Spirit leaders to work more closely together internationally to strengthen the work of building Christian communities and preparing community members to be fully engaged in mission.

God spoke to me strongly in three areas: The first area is the unity God wants for his people and how much I should strive for building and maintaining unity at all levels in my personal life, and in my work and service. The second area that God showed me where I can grow more is in doing spiritual warfare. Lastly, God revealed me how blessed and fortunate that I am in the midst, and at the cutting edge, of a work of ecumenism which the Lord is doing among his people at this time and age. Indeed, I now appreciate more the time I live in where I can

In keeping with that sense, the coordinators from all of the communities in the Sword of the Spirit have gathered every four years since 2004 to seek the Lord together. This past May 27-30, 2016, some 400 coordinators and main Kairos leaders met for four days in Lansing, Michigan. They came from the 75 communities located in Asia, the South Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Central and South America.
A Dubliner at the International Coordinators Meeting

Dominic Perrem, coordinator in training in the Community of Nazareth, in Dublin, recounts his experience as a first-timer at the conference.

It’s 28 degrees Celsius (82°F) in East Lansing, but the most pleasant warmth for us Irishmen as we arrive are the team smiling at us when we get off a bus or turn another corner on our way to Michigan State University. An old friend, John McKeone, is sporting a yellow jersey as we arrive at the airport. He’s a Michigan native who visited us in Dublin and, since there’ll be nearly 400 men at the conference, it’s nice to start there with one we know.

The fellow in the yellow jersey is the first of many smiling faces of the service and transport teams – they were mainly wearing Hawaiian shirts so we could recognise them – who made the event so seamlessly hospitable. I’d never been to an International Coordinators Meeting (ICM), but for four days I walked around Michigan State’s campus from accommodation to amazing cafeteria to conference hall, hearing talks, praying, meeting brothers and realising how big this calling is, to be a member of the Sword of the Spirit.

Wider Horizons

I grew up in community, and spent my early adult life in London and travelled to several other communities, so I always thought I had a pretty good feel for the Sword of the Spirit. As I trundle the campus for this conference and meet men from Florida and Ohio in the US, then Honduras, and India – all places I’ve never been to or met community members from – I see that my knowledge is small. ‘I have a Mexican wife too!’ exclaims one of my new friends – we give each other a high five. I feel nervous with this many new faces, but I have a natural connection to all these guys – as we greet each other and introduce one another, it’s obvious we are all one people. My new friend from India that I just met in a corridor tells me about his community, and it sounds a lot like home – just hotter, and with some more amazing foods for Lord’s Day meals – not that I’m craving spice in the Michigan heat.

Ken Noecker is the conference director and he opens up the time in our vast meeting room, starting with a powerful worship time. It’s great to pray with so many brothers – it’s like being caught up in the rapids of a
Living Bulwark

On most mornings, we have prayer and meditation. Day one has the theme of holiness. On subsequent days, we will cover unity, spiritual warfare and mission.

This first morning we read 1 Thessalonians 1:4, “You imitated us (Paul and Timothy), so be good examples.” As we hear from Andy Juan, a coordinator from the Philippines, we are challenged to reflect on God’s call to holiness and his concurrent asking us to be on mission and to be examples. John Yocum, regional elder of the Servants of the Word in North America, asks us to pray for the community in Aleppo, Syria, and, as we are introduced to leaders of new communities in Costa Rica, Poland and Israel, we are reminded that God, as ever, is on the move. Holiness, as we hear in Andy’s talk, is linked to mission and faithfulness. It’s encouraging to see communities lasting and new ones being added.

On Friday, the first afternoon, the president of the Sword of the Spirit, Jean Barbara, addressed us, reminding us that we are called to be bulwark builders and to see our mission clearly – to make mission our first priority, especially to the young. He compare our mission to the defence raised by Malta in the famous siege of Malta in 1565. An island of 12,000 resisted the might of the over 30,000 Ottoman Turks, by the leadership of a few hundred knights. Jean’s talk lays the groundwork for our thinking of the Sword of the Spirit as a people in the midst of a changing world.

In Adversity, Be Courageous

Later on Friday, Bruce Yocum, a founding member of the Sword of the Spirit, addresses us and illustrates how the moral core of society, it’s very foundations, have been shaken and that this has thrust us as the Lord’s spiritual warriors into a great battle for him. That we need to take courage and hold fast. The prayer meeting is then led en español by David Mijares, a Mexican and a key leader in Latin America.

As we pray together the Lord speaks to us about embracing his calling, not asking for suffering to be taken away but asking him to open our eyes so we can see and understand the battle. It is encouraging to have the Lord address himself to us so powerfully. Also to have a prayer meeting in Spanish (with the help of simultaneous translation through our headsets), allowing us to share life with one another. We frequently hear prophetic words and prayers in English and Spanish, and it is wonderful to live out that international reality on the spot with bilingual worship. I am even able to follow the Spanish (well…most of it), which would have made my darling Mexican wife proud.

On Saturday morning, we moved to the theme of unity. I am reminded how connected we are – an Irishman can learn a lot from a Filipino – or from a native Kansan who is building community in his hometown. Luisma Bravo, a charming and gifted leader in Latin America, shares about unity in God – a love that only God can supply us with. His sharing comes after we have meditated on Psalm 133 – on “how good and pleasant it is to dwell in unity with brothers.” We then hear from Dave Hughes, senior coordinator in Word of Life, the community in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and international leader, on the topic of unity. He reminded us of God’s own love of unity. I had never thought about regional unity as well as denominational unity. We Europeans live in division, East and West, North and South – division between denominations but also between countries, and have much to work on. What strikes me most in the talk is the idea of serving other brothers as part of my own responsibility, something that seems obvious when we consider ourselves as one community.

Strengthening Ecumenism

On Saturday afternoon, we heard about the new Ecumenical Commission and a change from the Christ the King Association of Catholic communities to a new approach – fellowships of Catholics who are members of
the communities within the whole Sword of the Spirit. It’s hoped that some day the Vatican will formally approve this arrangement for Catholic members, but for now the focus is to work on receiving approval from local dioceses, while helping all of our communities to be ecumenical at heart. It’s a long and technical session, we all feel grateful for the hard work brothers are doing, while we consider the challenges we will face in the days ahead to build on this ecumenical vision.

On Saturday evening, six communities publicly make their covenant as full members of the Sword of the Spirit (Jerusalem in Belgium; Buheing Pulong in Malaybalay, Philippines; Illuminator’s Lamp in Beirut, Lebanon; Incienso de Dios in Xalapa, Mexico; Emmanuel in Cali, Colombia; and Cuerpo de Cristo in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic). All the hard work that goes into forming a community in a way of life, pastoring our people, forming leaders and building every aspect of our life – within the communities and the work of outside coordinators, as well. It all leads to a moment like that, and the moment is really about the many, many people who follow God’s call in our communities.

On Sunday morning, we celebrate a common prayer service – emphasising the gift of unity we have, worshipping, thanking God and interceding for the needs of the body of Christ. We then separate and attend our denominational Sunday services.

In the afternoon we move into a joint session about ‘succession planning’ with John Keating, vice president of the Sword of the Spirit. On this topic we hear from brothers who encourage us to change our culture and think about investing in people rather than just making sure certain leadership roles get filled. Tony Panajon, who has retired from being senior coordinator of the huge community in Manila, points out that if our communities increase by 100 members, at least 10 of those will need to be pastoral leaders. This means growth, but it must go hand in hand with a vision for training. The presentations prompt much interesting discussion as we meet in small groups, this time by community. We talk about how we in Dublin can develop more opportunities for youth to engage in our work and be trained.

The Under 40s

The ICM is attended by brothers who are coordinators in training and younger brothers who are serving at the next level down, senior leaders. At a certain point in the conference, all of us who are under 40 are asked to up, and it is pleasing to see how many of us there are. And the organisers of the conference were obviously keen to get us involved in service. For instance, even though I was the youngest member of my small group, I had been asked to lead it. A group including four nationalities from various communities is a wonderful reminder that all of us live in one body. We meet four times during the conference and immediately build a strong bond together which will last for all of us, I am sure. One of the goals of the ICM is for us all to express unity in fellowship, and I realise that, despite our national differences, we face the same challenges and are able to speak into one another’s lives, even though we’ve never met before.

God’s Help

On Sunday evening we pray and seek the Lord for words of knowledge, revelation. The next day brothers share about the Lord wanting to heal us. There are dozens of words of knowledge about specific areas of personal need, and hundreds of us received prayer. It’s encouraging to see so many brothers put their hand up and ask for prayer for specific needs – it reminds me of the hardships we have faced as a people – it’s a true testament to our universal need for God’s grace, and an encouragement that guys are ready to seek the strength of the Holy Spirit, not rest on their own abilities.

A word is given to me about a treasure, with light shining out from underneath it. God was speaking to me powerfully on Monday morning about this word, and his true treasure which is himself. My conviction as a
member of my community and the Sword of the Spirit is revitalised.

**Mission from Start to Finish**

Anton Colella, a coordinator in Glasgow, leads the charge on Monday with an excellent call to mission, which is the day’s theme. He encourages us to ‘know and be known’ and points us to the prayer ‘Use me!’ reminding us leaders that we have to live this out in practice, and as we do so God will open door after door for us. One brother in my small group shares how he has been convicted to ‘rediscover who he was’ when in his younger years he used to share the Gospel with many people. Others realise that their schedules are obstacles to God using them – and are convicted to grow in openness to God’s call to mission. Since I’m a radio presenter by profession, I share with the brothers that I need to pray ‘Use me!’ before each show, not just see my work as a task.

Anton reminds us that young men and women these days are looking for fathers and grandfathers. This word in particular seems to open many of our hearts to go forth and share our lives with more of those we know, especially young people.

In this session about mission, we also hear a testimony from Andrew Kebe of St Paul’s Outreach, a student mission of the Sword of the Spirit, reminding us that if we start to see evangelism as a burden, we are spiritually off-centre.

**Stand Up and Be Counted!**

On the final evening, everyone is feeling tired, so Jean Barbara promises to make our prayer short and sweet. We hear some short prophecies from brothers by way of encouragement, and then a very powerful word is spoken regarding the young men standing among us, that they should go forth in strength. As I stand with the young men from other communities, especially friends of mine from the European and other regions, I’m deeply encouraged about the future.

During the session on leadership succession, we had heard from John Keating that there are few of us in the 35-45 age range, but as I stood with other men in their 30s, I am strengthened by the resolve each of them shows in being there and, more than that, by the ownership and responsibility each of them carries. There may be few of us, but it seems clear the vision for unity, brotherhood, mission and spiritual warfare are going to be tackled head on by these men.

**The Cafeteria, an Image of Us**

In addition to the excellent dry wit of Ken Noecker and his directing us so well, the brilliant service team, the translators into English and Spanish, the worship band – in addition to all these, the one aspect of the conference that impressed many was the cafeteria on the Michigan State campus. It contains counters offering a dozen different cuisines, and it is apparently one of the largest non-military cafeterias in the USA. As we feast, the variety on offer in the cafeteria remind me of the many gifts that God has given the Sword of the Spirit. Among all these men, be they Latin American, European, Asian, from the Middle East or Australia, there is a common offering of lives to God through building the bulwark of God’s kingdom.

We have different languages and attitudes, but have received the same call, living it out in our separate cities, but with the power and authority of God’s unity of vision. As I caught up with old friends and made new ones, I was constantly impressed by God’s faithfulness, manifested in the lives of these men, their families and all the members of the communities back home.

I am going to remember those prayer times, the seamless service of the admin team, and the superb vision of
the International Executive Committee for inviting us all. All of us from Nazareth Community in Dublin came home full of hope that the Spirit is alive in our call, ready to lead us into holiness, unity, and through spiritual warfare on into mission.

See related article > Personal Reflections from the 2016 Sword of the Spirit International Coordinators Meeting

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The Lord is Our Refuge and Shelter: An Update on “Emmanuel” in Aleppo

“Every day we are seeing the miracles of God!”

24 July 2016

Report by André J. Codouni

The woman with vivid eyes and with an enthusiasm that cannot but reveal deep courage and confidence, exclaimed: “Every day we are seeing the miracles of God”. Her husband, a successful business man and a community leader with a big shepherd’s heart nodded his head in agreement.

Stories of God's protection

They both went on to tell story after story of God’s protection to the members of Emmanuel and in their family: On three instances of bombing and despite the strong deflagrations around them, their two sons were completely covered with shattered glass and they had come out unharmed. Even the well-made fabric of a polo shirt had stopped the minute shrapnel that would have killed or permanently maimed in an instant.

Other members had experienced protection, here are a few examples.

- An explosion happens nearby and the shrapnel goes to nest in one member’s cell phone attached to his belt, saving him from a near fatal injury.

- Members sitting outside were surprised by a missile shell that caused heavy destruction and debris nearby. They came out unharmed thanking God for being saved.
• A father having to “have a talk” with his young unhappy son takes him to a room next door. They both escape when the explosion goes off in the room they just left.

• Four o’clock one morning a hand grenade is thrown near the young man who was away from home. The grenade lands burning like a hot coal near his feet, then extinguishes itself. He, at that moment, had felt completely immobilized. The hand grenade did not explode. A hundred miles away his mother is awakened at that very moment and sees him as in a dream and starts praying for him. She calls him a couple of hours later. He was fully surprised that she was calling to specifically ask if he was okay wondering how she knew. He told her then what had happened and that he was safe.

And on and on…

Only two days before I met my two friends I had run into another young community member. A gifted and bright university student, his story completely amazed me. His eyes glistening, he said: "I was crossing the street when something in me froze my step, so I stopped, at that moment the bullet whizzed past my face. I was saved!" He went on to tell how he even felt the heat of the bullet speeding down to the ground in front of his eyes. Now he wants to dedicate his whole life to God.

**The Lord is our refuge and shelter**

As I was hearing these stories I kept recalling what I learned as a child about each of us having a guardian angel and of the beautiful words of the Psalmist telling of the promise of God's protection for those who seek His shelter.

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### Psalm 91

1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,

2 will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

4 he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

5 You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

6 nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand; but it will...
Going back to my two friends and concerning the situation in Aleppo in general, I inquire:

- It seems like necessary material things are being provided - at least for the community members we are in contact with. During the frequent power outages, they have secured the extra services of a local neighborhood “generator” for at least turning on the refrigerator and the lights in their homes.

- The local churches are providing financial and material help. One church is giving families a stipend that increases with the number of children in each home.

- Melkite Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart tirelessly works for his people’s survival and encourages them to stay at any cost in war torn Aleppo. He is a well-known and frequent traveler to fund raise in the USA and backs his words into action in the greatest expressions of charitable giving, personal courage, generosity and sacrifice. He is making a big difference even beyond his own flock and for the members of Emmanuel.

- Hospital clinics are working and many of them are providing free services. Within the community, members help each other freely and generously - for medical help, and others types of care, and especially for securing basic supplies for daily survival.

- Water, electricity and gasoline are hard to come by and add to the increasing cost of living. The Syrian government has dug water wells some 18 months ago and then haul water in cisterns to homes.

- Some churches are providing meals - similar to soup kitchens, and they are serving homemade cooking that beneficiaries describe as “very fine and nutritious to eat”. Many also express gratitude for rations provided by international aid organizations.

**Other related afflictions and dangers**

It was heart wrenching to hear that our brothers and sisters are at their ends’ wit concerning the violence and danger that they are from time to time subjected to both day and night. Any kind of sudden loud noises, like the sound of fireworks or doors slamming, make people jump with great alarm. Parents are especially fearful for their young kids.

A lot of people in the city are suffering from mental health problems. Caring for people who want to join the community and grow closer to God can be challenging and difficult because of the stress and temptations they face.

The other problem that is clearly increasing is the spreading of prostitution caused by the poverty that most people are under. It is one thing to receive rations and food packages and quite another to undergo the humility of “begging” or paying for higher priced items. Note: there is a lot of property (including cars paid by someone’s life savings) that have gone up in smoke in one instant. How do you replace your home or apartment that has collapsed in a rubble? It is totally destroyed and beyond repair.

**Daily challenges for young and old**

It is a very difficult thing to discern and decide how to exercise faith and go about your day believing in God’s
protection on the one hand, and on the other, not to be careless and negligent.

Leaving the city out of fear and despair is a daily temptation and is very challenging for people who want to maintain community life together, such as Emmanuel community. Let us continue to pray for them for strengthening in great faith, hope, and courage in this difficult time.

Thank you all for your support!

André J. Codouni is a member of the People of God community in Beirut, Lebanon.

photo source above: Vatican Radio News
Why does God put up with evil in the world?

by John Chrysostom (354-407 AD)

Why does error have a free rein and why does God allow the wicked to disturb the existence of so many people?

First of all, before trying to understand, we need to put ourselves in front of the incomprehensible wisdom of God. One who is firmly anchored in God does not suffer any loss, even if attacked by a thousand waves and a thousand storms. On the contrary, he emerges stronger.

There is a reason, however, which I can venture to suggest.

In the first place, scandals are permitted so that the rewards of the righteous may not be diminished. That is why God said to Job:

'Do you not understand that I have treated you in this fashion so that your righteousness may be made manifest?' (Job 40:8).

But there is another reason why the wicked are left at large: so that they may not be deprived of the advantages of conversion from their evil ways, which certainly could not happen if they had been rendered incapable of doing evil. In this way, St Paul, the penitent thief, the prostitute, the tax collector and many others were saved.

You may speak to me about those who have been scandalized. Well and good. But I then speak to you about
those who have benefited from the scandal by winning glory, and I repeat my point: the existence of careless and lazy people would not justify leaving in a state of inferiority keen and wide-awake people who are capable of richly deserving their eternal recompense. A great wrong would be done to them if they were not given the chance to strive.

[Excerpt from *On Providence*, 12, I (SC79, pp.I83ff.)]

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**God has created nothing evil**

*by John Cassian (360-430 AD)*

Never let us try to maintain that God has created anything that is intrinsically bad. We read in Scripture: 'And God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good.' (Genesis 1:31)

Perhaps someone is asserting that God created the devils as they are, or that right from the beginning he assigned them their role of deceiving and ruining human beings? If so, he is contradicting Scripture and insulting God by thinking of him as the inventor and creator of evil.

In reality, before forming the visible world, God made the spiritual powers of heaven so that they might unceasingly give thanks and praise to their Creator, knowing that they had been made from nothing and were destined for the glory of heavenly felicity.

In fact, the Lord himself says of these powers: 'When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.' (Job 38:71)

The beginning of every thing is Christ in whom the Father has created all that exists. We read in Scripture: 'All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.' (John 1:3) And again: 'In Christ all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things were created through him and for him.' (Colossians 1:16)

[excerpt from *Conferences* by Cassian, 8, 6ff. (SC54, PP.I4ff.)]

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**Why does God allow testing and temptation?**

*by Maximus the Confessor (580-682 AD)*

One can distinguish five reasons why God allows the devils to attack us: first, so that from attack and counter-attack we may become practised in discerning good from evil.

Second, so that our virtue may be maintained in the heat of the struggle and so be confirmed in an impregnable position.

Third, so that as we advance in virtue we may avoid presumption and learn humility.

Fourth, to inspire in us an unreserved hatred for evil through the experience we thus have of it.

Fifth, and above all, that we may attain inner freedom and remain convinced both of our own weakness and of the strength of him who has come to our aid.
The devil does not have full power

by John Damascene (675-749 AD)

Among the angelic powers the chief of the terrestrial order, the one to whom God had entrusted the task of looking after the earth, was not evil by nature, he had not received any trace of evil from his Creator. He was good.

However, he did not maintain the light and the honor that God had given him. By a deliberate act of his own free will he rebelled against the Creator. He turned his face away from goodness and fell into evil. Evil in fact is merely the absence of good, as darkness is the absence of light.

A host of angels placed under his command followed him in the fall. Despite their angelic nature, they also freely plunged from goodness down to evil and became wicked.

The devils cannot do anything against us without God's permission. But with God's permission they are powerful. All wickedness, all the passions are inspired by them. But listen: God allows them to suggest sin to a person, but they cannot force him to do it. We ourselves are responsible for accepting or rejecting their seductive suggestions.

The devil's strategy

by Ambrose of Milan (339-397 AD)

The devil demonstrates simultaneously his weakness and his wickedness.

He is unable to harm anyone who does not harm himself. In fact, anyone who denies heaven and chooses the earth is, as it were, rushing towards a precipice, even though running of his own accord.

The devil, however, starts working as soon as he sees someone living up to faith's commitments, someone who has a reputation for virtue, who does good works.

He tries to worm vanity into him, to make it possible for him to be puffed up with pride, become presumptuous, lose trust in prayer and not attribute to God the good that he does but to take all the credit himself.
Let us be wholly absorbed by grace

by Pseudo-Macarius (4th century)

Inside us evil is at work suggesting unworthy inclinations. However, it is not in us in the same way as, to take an example, water mixes with wine. Evil is in us without being mixed with good.

We are a field in which wheat and weeds are growing separately. We are a house in which there is a thief, but also the owner. We are a spring which rises from the middle of the mud, but pours out pure water.

All the same, it is enough to stir up the mud and the spring is fouled. It is the same with the soul. If the evil is spread, it forms a unity with the soul and makes it dirty. With our consent, evil is united with the soul; they become accomplices.

Yet there comes a moment when the soul can free itself and remain separate again: in repentance, contrition, prayer, recourse to God. The soul could not benefit from these habits if it were always sunk in evil.

It is like marriage. A woman is united with a man and they become one flesh. But when one of them dies, the other is left alone.

But union with the Holy Spirit is complete. So let us become a single spirit with him. Let us be wholly absorbed by grace.

[Excerpt from Homily by Pseudo-Marcarius, 16, I (PG34, 613)]

We conquer the enemy by conquering ourselves

by Leo the Great (400-461 AD)

In the days of Saul and David, it was when the Israelites fell into sin that the Lord allowed the Philistines to oppress them. In order to regain the ascendancy over their enemies, the people were ordered to fast. The Israelites understood very well that they deserved all they had to endure at the hands of the Philistines because they had neglected God's commands and given themselves over to evil practices. It was no use for them to try to win their freedom by taking up arms; they first had to get rid of their sins. And so they began to discipline themselves and to conquer the desires of the flesh in order to be able to conquer their opponents. When they fasted their oppressors gave way before them, whereas when they indulged all their appetites the enemy held them in subjection.

It is the same with us today. We have our own struggles and conflicts, and we can win by using the same tactics. The Israelites were attacked by human beings; we are attacked by spiritual enemies. We can conquer by bringing our lives into line with God's will for us; then our enemies will give way before us. It is not their power but our lack of self-discipline that makes them a threat to us, and we shall weaken them by overcoming ourselves.

We must ask God's help in this warfare, because our only means of conquering the enemy is to conquer ourselves. How often we come into conflict with our own lower nature, with those unspiritual, unregenerate.
attitudes that Scripture calls the flesh! What the flesh wants is opposed to what the spirit wants, and what the spirit wants is opposed to what the flesh wants. If the desires of the flesh are the stronger, then our spiritual faculties will be dragged down to the level of our lower nature and will be enslaved where they ought to be masters. But if we are determined to serve the Lord and find our joy in his gifts, if we trample underfoot our instinctive tendency to gratify ourselves and refuse to allow sin to rule in our mortal bodies, then our spirit will be in control and no strategy of the Evil One will be able to overthrow us. True peace and freedom can only be ours when the flesh is ruled by the spirit and the spirit is guided by the will of God.

The spark of divine love within you

by Basil the Great (330-379 AD)

Love of God is not something that we can be taught. We did not learn from someone else how to rejoice in light or want to live, or to love our parents or guardians. It is the same, perhaps even more so, with our love for God: it does not come by another’s teaching. As soon as the living creature (that is, man) comes to be, a power of reason is implanted in us like a seed, containing within it the ability and the need to love. When the school of God’s law admits this power of reason, it cultivates it diligently, skillfully nurtures it, and with God’s help brings it to perfection.

For this reason, as by God’s gift, I find you with the zeal necessary to attain this end, and you on your part help me with your prayers. I will try to fan into flame the spark of divine love that is hidden within you, as far as I am able through the power of the Holy Spirit.

First, let me say that we have already received from God the ability to fulfill all his commands. We have then no reason to resent them, as if something beyond our capacity were being asked of us. We have no reason either to be angry, as if we had to pay back more than we had received. When we use this ability in a right and fitting way, we lead a life of virtue and holiness. But if we misuse it, we fall into sin.

This is the definition of sin: the misuse of powers given us by God for doing good, a use contrary to God's commandments. On the other hand, the virtue that God asks of us is the use of the same powers based on a good conscience in accordance with God's command.

Since this is so, we can say the same about love. Since we received a command to love God, we possess from the first moment of our existence an innate power and ability to love. The proof of this is not to be sought outside ourselves, but each one can learn this from himself and in himself. It is natural for us to want things that are good and pleasing to the eye, even though at first different things seem beautiful and good to different people. In the same way, we love what is related to us or near to us, though we have not been taught to do so, and we spontaneously feel well disposed to our benefactors.

What, I ask, is more wonderful than the beauty of God? What thought is more pleasing and satisfying than God's majesty? What desire is as urgent and overpowering as the desire implanted by God in a soul that is completely purified of sin and cries out in its love: I am wounded by love? The radiance of the divine beauty is altogether beyond the power of words to describe.

[Excerpt from the Longer Rules of Basil the Great (Resp. 2,1: PG 31, 908-910)]
Every Christian needs protection from enemy attacks, especially those engaged in violent spiritual warfare. The history of how man has gone to war down the centuries is largely a story of weapons improving in their potency, and armour increasing in its protectiveness. And Christians are vulnerable to attacks from the enemy, and need the means to protect themselves. There are places and situations which Christians should not enter into recklessly or without the proper safeguards. In cases where exorcism is necessary, it is best to work with a partner. It is significant that Jesus always sent His disciples out in pairs, and the apostles mostly had a partner with them on their missionary journeys.

The armour of God

The classic chapter on protection is Ephesians 6. Paul uses the armour that the Roman legionaries used to illustrate the means of protection that God has provided for the Christian. It is very important at the outset to grasp the fact that this is not our armour, but God's, given to us to protect us. It is not our righteousness, or our faith, or our gospel which can stand in the evil day. It is God's provision alone which will give us adequate protection. If we see this simple but profound fact it could well make all the difference between victory and defeat. And in a sense all the pieces of armour, when combined together, are Christ Himself. Elsewhere Paul does urge his readers to "put on Christ" (Galatians 3: 27). He is our Protector.

Notice too that we need to put on this armour before the battle. A fairly elementary point, but sometimes overlooked. It is no good waiting until the dart is on its way before holding up the shield of faith.

One of the best ways of considering the pieces of armour is to see them as protecting us from various points of attack, thus enabling the enemy's blows to glance off us and not penetrate. So with each piece we shall list the particular form of attack, from which the armour protects us.
The girdle of truth

**Form of attack - lies and errors.** Satan has been a liar from the beginning and is the father of lies, Jesus tells us (John 8: 44). The first attack he made on man took the form of a lie" you shall not die", Satan said, in defiance of the fact that God had clearly said they would if they took the forbidden fruit. Someone has helpfully summarised the truth as-"God is what He says He is; I am what God says I am; God does what He says He will do; I can do what God says I can do." Satan is always causing us to doubt these statements. "God can't be a God of love"; "God can't really be in control of the universe"; "I'm too sinful to be a child of God"; "My old nature can't possibly be dead"; "God can't save me from this predicament I'm in"; "I can't do it", and so on. And Satan has always twisted and perverted the word of God.

One of the favourite forms of attacks on Christians is false accusation. He is called in Revelation "the accuser of the brethren", and he accuses us continuously before God (Rev 12: 10). He will never get God to believe these lies about us, but it is surprising how many of God's children are taken in. One of the most common complaints amongst Christians is self-despair, and far too often it comes from believing what Satan says about us rather than God. The armour to meet this attack is "the girdle of truth". When falsely condemned we declare the truth - "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8: I). But we need to discern between the pricks of conscience, given to us by the Holy Spirit, and the nagging accusations of Satan. Here a "good and honest heart" is needed. Whilst we should always be open to correction by the Holy Spirit, let us not hold the door open so wide that we let Satan's accusations in too.

Equally powerful these days seems to be the maligning of God's character by Satan. How many Christians one meets who do not believe that God really loves them! As Job won through, when all the circumstances pointed in the opposite direction, and was able to say "blessed be the name of the Lord", so we too will be helped to see disasters when they come as "blessings", rather than listen to the slander of the devil. In a very subtle way the serpent in the garden of Eden represented God to Eve as One who did not really care for her or her husband. As Satan continuously works against us so we must put on "the girdle of God's truth".

The breast-plate of righteousness

**Form of attack - evil and sinful desires.** If Satan cannot pierce our armour by lies, he will try evil. He will bombard our minds with evil thoughts; he will try to influence our motives and sway our wills. The answer to this is - God's righteousness, not our own! How many have tried to ward off these blows with the flimsy armour of their own goodness. Satan's arrows pierce it immediately. But, if we are Christians, we have God's righteousness to defend ourselves with. Then let us wear it like a piece of armour. Evil thoughts are not sin until they are entertained. They are like gate-crashers at a party; we can accept them and let them stay, or firmly show them where the door is. That is what we must do when Satan attacks us with evil - show Satan the door. That is enough. Satan cannot pierce the armour of God's righteousness. He may bruise us, but he cannot wound us.

The sandals of the gospel of peace

**Form of attack an easy and lazy life.** If Satan cannot disturb us, then he will try to make us as comfortable and cosy as possible – so that we won't disturb him I He will stop his attacks and sue for peace, but on completely unacceptable terms for a Christian. "Leave me alone," he will say, "and I will leave you alone." We dare not parley with Satan. The early Christians would not have been persecuted had they stopped their evangelism. But they suffered at the hands of the Jewish authorities because they refused to do so.

It is all too easy to fall for this subtle attack of the enemy, and go along with "carpet slipper Christianity". Some today are "at ease in Zion", journeying to heaven in first-class comfort. Satan has seen to it that such Christians have laid down their arms, and are no longer concerned to attack and invade enemy-held territory.

The answer to this form of temptation is to get our shoes on, leave the comforts of home, and go out after those
who are Satan's captives. This is probably what Paul means here. Ronald Knox translates these words, "in readiness to publish the gospel". And it is the gospel of peace – for the only real peace that can be found in this world is through surrender to Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. And this is what the devil will do all in his power to stop. We need to remember that Jesus showed us that God's love is so great that He will always leave 99 per cent of the flock to rescue the 1 per cent. Should we not leave the 1 per cent to rescue the 99 per cent?

The shield of faith

**Form of attack – unbelief.** Paul himself wants his readers to be especially careful to have this protection. "Above all", he writes. For unbelief in its various guises is the most formidable kind of attack, and the shield of faith is the most important part of the gospel armour. The tense of the verb implies a constant and unflinching attitude of faith. Martin Luther knew this vicious form of attack on many occasions, and knew that the only protection was through faith in the promises of God. He writes somewhere out of deep conviction:

> The soul that clings to the promises of God with a firm faith is so united with them, altogether taken up into them, that it not only shares in all their power, but is saturated and made drunk with it ... If a touch of Christ healed, how much more will this tender touch of the Spirit, this absorbing of the word, communicate to the soul all things that are the word's.

This is where our faith needs to be placed – firmly in the promises of God. In the epistle to the Hebrews the writer refers to the sin which "clings so closely". It is very likely from the context that the writer has in mind the sin of unbelief, for the previous chapter is taken up with the theme of faith, and the great men and women who so truly exemplified it. Christians are to "lay aside" this besetting sin. No wonder Paul describes these attacks as "flaming darts". We all know what it is to be wounded by these fearful weapons of Satan. We know the doubts that assail us, and the fear of failure that cripples action.

"Is God really hearing me?" "Has He forgotten me?" "Has it worked?" "Will it last?" and so on. Easy isn't it to have 90 per cent faith and only 10 per cent doubt!

An excellent example of the word of God being spoken aloud, and so bringing someone to faith, may be seen in the life of Barclay Buxton. During his missionary work in Japan he was attacked by fear in this way. So he said repeatedly aloud the words from Hebrews 13:5-6, "he has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake you'. Hence we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?'" He said these words until by faith he had made them his own, and so can we.

The only answer is the shield of faith. And remember this is not our puny faith, but God's strong faith. Paul calls it "the faith of the son of God" in Galatians 2:20. We are holding up the faith of Christ between ourselves and those fiery darts. Such faith is inpenetrable armour. The shield that Paul is probably thinking of here was the one the Roman legions carried into battle. It covered them from head to foot—but not their backs. There was no allowance made for deserters, says Corrie ten Boom.

The helmet of salvation

**Form of attack – calamity and accident.** The word salvation (soteria) is used in the New Testament to describe physical as well as spiritual well-being. For instance, it is used to describe the strength gained from eating in Acts 27: 34, when Paul urged the sailors to have a meal before their ship came ashore on the island of Malta. In Hebrews 11:7 it is used to describe how Noah and his family were saved from drowning in the flood. According to Souter it was commonly used of "deliverance from every calamity, and victory over enemies".

Satan will not stop at anything to destroy the work of God. He will make Christians ill. How often we read in the Journals of John Wesley how nausea and faintness came upon that great man before he was to preach. But
he would carry on, sometimes barely able to climb the steps of the pulpit. But the moment he began to speak, the sickness would pass away. The enemy was defeated in his attempt to prevent the gospel from being preached. How often Christians languish ill in bed, when they should be resisting the devil's attacks and about their Master's business!

Satan will sometimes try to kill God's servants. Jesus said of him, "he was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8: 44). He tried to kill Jesus on several occasions before the divinely appointed time for that death. Once He was miraculously saved from mob violence, and on another occasion from drowning in the lake of Galilee. But Jesus survived in order to finish the work that the Father had sent Him to do. And we should expect the same protection until the moment comes when we can echo the words of Jesus, "I have finished the work which you gave me to do."

Of course there will be times when God allows death by violence. There was the case of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, whose career seemed to be so full of promise. Satan must have been glad to see him removed so quickly from the scene of his triumphs. But little did he realise that standing by was Saul of Tarsus, who was so obviously deeply affected by what he saw of the sufferings of Stephen, and who was before long to become an even more effective evangelist. But we need to beware of the attacks of Satan. The roads, for instance, are becoming increasingly dangerous. We should always pray before setting out, claiming the protection of the name of Jesus - and also that our driving will be skilful and unselfish. So let us put on the "crash-helmet" of salvation as well as our seat-belts.

The name of Jesus
We have already seen in the chapter "Our Weapons", how Christ's name is a real power in spiritual warfare. We noticed that the name of a person in the Bible means the entire person. When, therefore, we talk about the protection of the name of Jesus, we do not mean that there is something magical about the word, and that it is protective in itself. No, the name of Jesus means the protective power of His presence and all that He is today because of all that He did on the Cross. As Proverbs expresses it, "the name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe" (18: 10).

This form of protection was bequeathed to us by our Lord, when He prayed for the Church before He went into the garden of Gethsemane. "Holy Father, protect by the power of thy name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are one. When I was with them, I protected by the power of thy name those whom thou hast given me, and kept them safe" (John 17: 11-12 NEB). And our Lord still keeps us safe through His powerful name.

There are some who regard the blood of Christ as protective. But in the Bible the blood always answers to the guilt of sin - that is why it is always Godward. The two scriptures, which some use as the basis for the protective nature of the blood, also bear this out. In the story of the escape from Egypt, the blood which was daubed on the door-posts and lintels of the Israelites was for God to see, not the devil! "I will pass over you" says God (Exodus 12:13). The other reference is Revelation 12:11. "They conquered him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Here Satan appears in the context as "the accuser of the brethren". The blood, therefore, in this verse is protective against guilt.

The value of the name of Jesus is that it combines the efficacy of His death with His resurrection life. It means "Saviour" – and refers to One who is alive for ever, and raised "far above all". It is the living Christ who protects His people – standing by them and working with them. But it is Christ who shed His blood and died on the Cross. Without the shedding of blood there would have been no remission of sins or power over Satan. In this sense, the blood of Christ is an indispensable part of our salvation, and, therefore, of our protection.

The angelic hosts
In the general scepticism within the Church today, in which the supernatural has been debunked, the presence and value of angels is seldom if ever recognised. Like the servant of the prophet Elisha, we need to have our eyes opened to the protective ring of angels, which is at all times around God's people. As the Psalmist says, "the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and delivers them" (34: 7).

In the Acts of the Apostles angels seem to be as much in evidence as their satanic counterparts, the evil spirits. They seem to be specialists in jail-breaking, for twice they manage to get the apostles and Peter out of prison. They also helped in directing God's plans in evangelism. It was an angel, for example, who directed Philip to the desert of Gaza to contact the Ethiopian eunuch. When Paul was in danger of losing his life in a storm at sea, it was an angel that reassured him. If the demonic powers have not given up the struggle and returned to hell since New Testament days, are we to imagine that the angels are less powerfully present than they were in the days of the apostles of our Lord?

In the epistle to the Hebrews we are told about people who have "entertained angels unawares" (13:2). Much of our thinking about angels is conditioned by artists' impressions of them. One would not have thought there was much chance of modern man entertaining such angels (wings and all) without being aware of it I We may never know whether or not we have actually seen such angels, but the fact of their presence should be comforting. We are not to attempt to communicate with them, and should remember that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light.

With God's protection, and wielding His weapons, we can enter confidently into warfare with Satan.


Archpriest Father Michael Harper (1931-2010) was a world-renown leader in the charismatic renewal movement. He was a minister in the Anglican Church for 40 years. He joined the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1995, and was appointed Archpriest of the Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of the UK and Ireland.

He and his wife Jeanne formed the Fountain Trust in 1964, which organized charismatic conferences all over the world at which he addressed thousands of people. Jeanne co-edited the songbook, Sound of Living Waters, which is still used by many charismatic churches today. Harper also founded Soma (Sharing of Ministries Abroad), which was committed to sharing ministries between the developed and developing world.

He was involved for many years with the World Council of Churches. He spoke at several Catholic meetings. He met Popes Paul VI, John Paul and John Paul II.

He also edited Renewal, the longest-established charismatic magazine in the world. He wrote 18 books, including the bestseller Equal and Different, which set out his views on women's ordination and the gender debate. Colleagues remember him as a man with the ability to build friendships across the Christian traditions. A gentle and humble man, Harper was nevertheless a dynamic speaker and networker, able to draw people in, whatever their background or differences from himself. He is survived by his wife, Jeanne.

Some of his books and articles are available online at: http://www.harperfoundation.com/books.html.
Prayer Watch: Soldiers of Christ Arise
Fight the Good Fight of Faith

by Alan McKenzie

*Reinforce the guard, station the watchmen, prepare an ambush! The Lord will carry out his purpose.*

- *Jeremiah 51:12 NIV*

**Characteristics of Soldiers of Christ**

Over the last few months I have looked at the role of soldiers in the Old Testament - mainly in battles where faith in God our Father was important and often dictated the outcome as larger, overwhelming armies were overcome by smaller armies.

In the New Testament Christians are called to engage in spiritual battle with the forces of Satan, sin, and evil. Disciples of Christ fight with spiritual weapons, such as prayer and intercession, and the spiritual armour of God mentioned by Paul the Apostle in Ephesians 6. Paul called Timothy to be a good soldier of Christ and urged all Christians to fight the good fight of the faith.

“Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus … Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer.” (2 Timothy 2: 1, 3-4)

These words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy apply just as much today as they did to Timothy some 2000 years
ago. The distractions of the world such as long involved hours in daily work and travel, time engaged in sports and other attractive things to watch and do, travel to exotic places, etc. constantly challenge our commitment to our call to be a ‘community of disciples on mission’. The immorality and spiritual immaturity of today’s post Christian society is a constant temptation for the believer who wants to live as a disciple of Christ. We are a new creation in Jesus Christ and the way we live now should be different from the world which does not know Christ. We must choose with God's grace to live Christ-centered, blameless, disciplined, and loving lives that make a difference for God.

The costs of discipleship and the price of being a soldier of Christ are seldom mentioned today. The world’s emphasis on self-centeredness in all endeavours and on monetary success, and combined with easy access to entertainment through various media outlets can prevent us from satisfying our commanding officer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of the attributes of a good soldier, like discipline, commitment, sacrifice, service and self-control are less prized in today’s society. We can make a difference for God.

Soldiers of Christ, Arise, and put your armour on!

Alan McKenzie is the National Prayer Coordinator of the Lamb of God, a community of the Sword of the Spirit with 7 branches located throughout New Zealand.
Only Live Armies Win Battles

Pastoral Priorities in a Secular Age

by Steve Clark

How can pastoral leaders and pastoral workers help Christians stay alive spiritually as Christians in an increasingly hostile culture? Steve Clark, a leader in the Sword of the Spirit, considers pastoral priorities in a secular age.

This article is adapted from his presentation at the 1986 Allies for Faith and Renewal Conference. Valuable wisdom at that time, urgently needed today.

At the beginning of 1812, Napoleon ruled most of Europe. He had defeated all the armies that had opposed him. He had provoked the resignation of the last Holy Roman Emperor and had then married his daughter. He held the pope captive. He had everything he wanted, except for three “details”: Britain, Spain, and Russia. In that year, he decided to invade Russia.

Napoleon gathered an army, marched into Russia, and trounced the Russians in a couple of major battles. The tsar’s army made a last stand before Moscow but suffered a major defeat. By October 1812 Napoleon sat in Moscow surrounded by an undefeated army, the most powerful man the world had seen for a very long time.

Then a fire broke out in Moscow. No one knows how the fire started, although most think a Russian deliberately set it. The fire burned much of the city. By the time it was out, the army’s food supplies and
winter quarters were gone. Napoleon was forced to abandon the city. Heading west through the Russian winter with the tsar’s troops at his heels, Napoleon’s grand army disintegrated. Within two months of his greatest victory, his army, the most powerful in Europe, had virtually ceased to exist. Napoleon struggled on for two more years, but after Moscow he was a defeated man. The reason was not a loss on a battlefield, but the fact that he had been unable to keep his army alive.

**A lesson for today**

There is a moral here for us. My subject is “pastoral priorities in a secular age.” The word “pastoral” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd” – a person who cares for the sheep. The simplest way to describe the care a shepherd gives his sheep is to say that he keeps them alive. This is also the simplest way of saying what a pastoral leader does for people: he cares for them so that they stay alive as Christians. If they do not stay alive as Christians, there is nothing they can accomplish.

Many of us in Christian leadership are intent on affecting society with Christian values. If we are to do this, we must first pay attention to pastoral priorities. How will our efforts at social influence do any good if, while we are trying to affect society, Christians themselves are losing their Christian life? How can we have a Christian impact on society if we are unable to keep the people of God alive as Christians?

A few years ago Roman Catholics in the United States were pleased about the growing Catholic vote and the number of Catholics winning political positions. The assumption was that Catholics’ understanding of social justice would be better represented in government. How ironic, then, a couple of years later, to see the Cardinal Archbishop of New York confronting the Catholic governor of New York and also a Catholic candidate for vice-president who did not quite line up with the Roman Catholic positions on abortion. It is fine to have Christians in political positions – if they take Christian stands and act in a Christian way. But if they have been “evangelized” by the secular culture, their presence will not matter very much.

**What does the goal mean?**

“Keeping Christians alive”: what does this pastoral goal mean? First and foremost, it means helping men and women to be alive spiritually, to have spiritual life, divine life. They need to be united with God in Christ, living the life of grace.

It also means helping people follow the Christian way of life day by day. A Christian cannot live any way he chooses. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Paul saw an intrinsic connection between the way Christians live and their eligibility to inherit the kingdom of God. He identified observable kinds of behavior as indicators of whether people were alive in Christ: how were they living, what were they doing, what were they avoiding?

Finally, “keeping Christians alive” means seeing that they are able to pass on the Christian way of life to their children.

If we do not keep the Christian people alive in these ways, then all our efforts at evangelistic outreach and social influence will be buildings without foundations. If Christians do not have spiritual life, do not follow the Christian way of life day by day, and do not succeed at handing on that way of life to their children, then the Christian people will be like Napoleon’s grand army – no matter how vigorous and successful some of our
Losing our way of life

There is evidence that many good Christian things are happening in the United States: a growth of interest in Christianity, a small growth in Sunday morning attendance, vitality of varying degrees in the more theologically conservative Christian groups. But statistics clearly show a serious decline in people’s living the Christian way of life in regard to acquiring and using material wealth, in regard to sexuality and family life (fornication, divorce, abortion, and the rest), and in many other ways, Christians are increasingly indistinguishable in the secular culture they live in. Less and less are they living the way of life that is integral to what they are as Christians.

In this light, what should our pastoral priorities be? What is most important for us to do to help the Christian people stay alive as Christians in the midst of an increasingly secular culture? I would propose six priorities. The first three are familiar to all of us, and I will merely mention them in order to keep the right perspective before us. I will comment on the latter three at greater length.

The first priority is bringing people, including those who are Christians in little more than name, to full and complete conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second priority is a spiritual renewal, that is, leading people into a lively, worshipful relationship with God, into a spiritual experience of him, into the life and power of the Spirit.

The third priority is giving people teaching that grounds them in historic Christian belief and protects them from the unsound ideas flowing out in the world and through the churches as well.

Every pastoral leader needs to see that these needs are met in the people he is caring for, if they are to have and maintain life as Christians.

Less familiar dynamics

The other priorities have to do with what we might call “underlying dynamics.”

The value of identifying underlying dynamics was illustrated by an attempt I made a couple of years ago at landscaping. I have had a little experience in gardening. My father made me weed, mow the lawn, and so on. So I thought I knew something about transplanting. Several shrubs had to be moved from one side of the yard to another; I dug new holes for them, carried them over, put dirt on them, and gave them a little water.

A friend of mine, whose father is a nurseryman and who actually knows something about transplanting, took a look at my efforts and told me, “They aren’t going to live.” He offered to help. He did things that it never occurred to me to do. He waited until the proper time to transplant the shrubs. Then he did something with the roots to prepare them. He fertilized them. After he transplanted them, he doused them with water day after day. Needless to say, my friend’s transplants are doing fine, while mine have turned to orange skeletons. I did the obvious things, but my transplants did not live. My friend was successful because he understood the underlying dynamics of maintaining life.

Those of us with pastoral responsibilities often do not see underlying dynamics. We fail to notice what is undermining the Christian life of people in our care. In recent years, for instance, many of us have watched middle-aged couples in our churches and communities who have raised their children, and who seem to be
happy enough, suddenly get divorced. Why? we wonder. In the past, such couples would not have gotten divorced. Something must have been going on that did not appear on the surface. If we had been able to spot it, we might have helped them, and they might still be married. Now they have become part of the divorce statistics, and it is too late to do anything.

Let us look at three underlying dynamics of Christian living and the pastoral priorities that they lead to.

**Environments**

The first dynamic is the influence of social environments. An environment is simply a group of people who are together in some way. To use sociological terms, an environment is a stable social situation. In the Acts of the Apostles we are told of the church in Jerusalem that “All who believed were together” and “The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 2:44; 4:32). One of the reasons the early Christians stayed alive as Christians was that they were together, one in heart and soul, mind and spirit. They formed a Christian environment.

Consider the effects of a non-Christian social environment today – the university. We might think of virtually any university, secular or even religious.

What happens when Christian students come to the university? For the most part (although not in the case of every individual) in terms of Christian sexual morality, they will become less faithful. From the point of view of politics, they will become more liberal. In their views on social roles, they will become more feminist. Their preferences in clothing and recreation will tend to reflect current fashions on campuses across the country.

Why does this happen? Is it because of the courses the students take? The courses are a factor, but not the chief factor; the changes happen to students who study mathematics as well as to those who study psychology. The changes in outlook occur mainly through the young people’s interaction with an environment where certain values, attitudes, and behavior are accepted. The consequences of their being in such an environment are generally predictable. They tend to absorb what is accepted.

We can all verify this dynamic from our own experience. We have all been in environments – a school, a job, a platoon, a club – in which we have begun to notice that we are getting changed.

**“These are my people”**

Sociologists have discovered that we tend to adopt the values, attitudes, and behavior of a social environment to the degree to which we identify with it. We are open to being affected by a group to the extent that we say, “I am one of these people. This is my group. I belong here.”

This is an important insight. By and large, most people who consider themselves Christians do not belong to Christian churches or groups that function as social environments for them. Or, if their church or group does function as an environment for them, they identify with it solely for religious purposes. They do not say, “This is my group. These are the kind of people I want to be with.” Rather they say, “For religious activities I identify with these people.” But for the values and attitudes that shape their lives, they identify with other groups of people.

It was not always this way for Christians in the United States. For instance, the urban Catholic immigrant parishes and the rural Southern Baptist congregations of the past were social environments with which members strongly identified and which, therefore, had a powerful influence on their whole lives. But as ethnic,
Living Bulwark

Regional and other loyalties have weakened, especially since World War II. Protestant and Catholic churches have lost their place as the focus of Americans’ social identification. Most local church bodies function largely as service centers offering specialized religious activities and assistance rather than as centers of members’ relationships and way of life. Fewer Christians have Christian social environments with which they strongly identify; instead, they are affected by the increasingly secular social environments in which they live, study, work, and recreate.

If pastoral leaders are to help their people stay alive as Christians, one of their highest priorities should be to create effective Christian environments for them. They should bring Christians together in such a way that they identify with one another. “I belong to this group. These Christians are my people. I want to be like them.” This kind of Christian social environment needs to be strengthened where it is weak and restored where it has been lost.

**Customs versus commandments**

The second underlying dynamic has to do with the effect of patterns of social behavior on basic morality. Certain ways of doing things help us to be moral.

Orthodox Christians generally see the importance of keeping the Ten Commandments. They know that there are some things that they absolutely cannot do: murder, commit adultery, steal. But they do not see the connection between social customs and keeping the commandments. As a result they adopt social patterns that are not conducive to being moral. They do not realize that there needs to be a consistency between their fundamental moral principles and the way they live. Because they are not concerned with being consistent, they get to a point where it becomes virtually impossible for them to remain faithful to basic moral precepts. They do not know where to draw the line, and so they get themselves into trouble.

Let us take the example of the sexual revolution. In its post-1960 phase, Americans’ sexual attitudes and behavior had changed drastically. The studies indicate that sexual morality has been eroding for everybody, Christians included. Research shows that young Christians, even junior-high children from intact, churchgoing families, are joining the sexual revolution.

One reason for widespread sexual immorality among Christians is that pastors, single people, and parents accept social patterns that are inconsistent with Christian morality. They do not start the battle for sexual morality soon enough. By the time they get to the place where they make a stand for basic morality, they have already conceded so much ground that it is too late.

A hundred years ago Christians of every description would have been in complete agreement that sexual morality requires certain social customs. For example, Christians would have been united in the view that unmarried men and women should not spend much time together unless they are chaperoned. And they would have agreed that single men and women should not touch one another sexually.

Christians of a century ago would have said that these social patterns were necessary in order to keep the Ten Commandments. Therefore, they would have said these patterns were a part of sexual morality. A single man and woman spending time un-chaperoned, for example, would not have been seen as committing the most serious kind of wrongdoing, but their behavior would have been considered wrong because of its inconsistency with living a chaste life. It was crystal clear to Christians of the last century that if young, single people are allowed to spend a lot of time together, are not supervised, and are allowed to do all sorts of things in the way of touching one another, sooner or later they are going to “go all the way,” as it is sometimes termed. Social survey statistics tell us that that is exactly what happens nowadays.
The lesson is that if we draw up our battle line at the last possible point, we are likely to lose the war. We have to start much further back. We need consistency between our social patterns and our moral principles.

The same point applies to every area of morality. For example, we recognize spouses’ permanent moral responsibility to raise their children in the Christian faith. But if we also accept the self-seeking patterns of life that go along with materialistic acquisition in our increasingly secular society, then we will find that marriages disintegrate and children are not given adequate discipline and care. We will also find that Christians are having a difficult time keeping the commandments against lying and stealing.

Thus one of our pastoral priorities should be to see that in the various areas of their lives Christians are consistent, not just trying to avoid behavior that is most clearly forbidden, but keeping away from the social patterns that lead to it and are, in fact, shaped by un-Christian values. Our pastoral concern has to be not only to create Christian environments, but also to form in those environments a way of life consistent with essential moral principles.

**Anti-Christian carriers**

Finally, there are the underlying dynamics of what we might call “carriers” of anti-Christian values and attitudes. The term refers to contagious diseases. Some diseases can be caught by touching things that carry the infection. If we handle them, we start getting sick. This is often predictable. If we want to stay healthy, we need to stay away from such carriers.

When I began to do pastoral work, a couple of men who had been involved in homosexual activities came to me for help. They wanted to make a break with their homosexual activities. I did not know exactly what to do, and I did some reading on the subject and listened to some talks on tape. In one of the talks the speaker made a valuable point. He said, “Whatever you do, impress upon such people that they cannot go back to their gay friends. If they do, they will resume their gay way of life.” He even gave a predictable period of time – several weeks – by the end of which a person struggling against homosexual practice who returned to the gay world would succumb again.

I told these two then that particular truth. One listened and, during the time I continued to have contact with him, he was able to reorient his life. The other ignored this advice, went back to his gay friends, and within the time period mentioned by the speaker he was back into homosexual activities. He made contact with the carrier that eroded Christian commitment and way of life, and fell victim to the disease.

**Major carriers**

I suggest the following list as the most important carriers of anti-Christian values and attitudes today. It is impossible here to give each the attention it deserves, but it may be helpful at least to present them.

1. **Friends and acquaintances.** Who are your friends? Who do you hang around with? These are the people who affect you.
2. **Models and authorities that a person accepts.** If a football player who lives an immoral life is your son’s great hero, odds are that he is going to have an effect on him. If your authority is a college professor with anti-Christian views, or you think Dr. So-and-So is one of the world’s greatest experts on child-rearing, even though his advice does not square with a Christian approach, you will be affected by him.
3. **Entertainment.** The time we spend in entertainment is not just time-off as Christians. Movies and music that glorify immorality can spread infection most quickly.
4. **The mass media.** Television and recordings are crucial. [Now, of course, the internet as well.]
5. **Education.** What is taught in the courses? What is given in the programs?
6. **Work settings.** Our work settings, especially those with training that is designed to teach us how to do things, impart certain kinds of values to us.

Given the power of these carriers and given the anti-Christian views of life that they often carry in our increasingly secular society, it should be a pastoral priority for us to examine them closely. We need to open our eyes to how people in our care are using these carriers and how they are being affected by them. We need to help our people understand what is going on and teach them to avoid some things, control some things, counteract some things. This seems crucial in our current cultural situation.

**A blessing disguised**

I would say that if we neglect these three dynamics – environments, consistency and carriers – if we do not have a pastoral approach for dealing with these things, then the Christian way of life tends to disappear among the people we are leading, unless there are some special circumstances. This is not, however, a reason for losing hope.

Some years ago I was living in an old house in which water began to seep into the basement. We were distressed at this and called in a workman to correct the problem. After a couple of days he came upstairs and said, “You know, you’re lucky to have water in your basement.” This was puzzling. Why were we lucky to have water in the basement? The reason, he explained, was that in order to find the source of the problem he had to uncover the foundations, which were not usually exposed to view. When he did this he discovered that the mortar between the stones was crumbling. Where a hundred years ago there had been hard mortar, there was now a gravelly material. This had caused the water problem. But if the water problem had not occurred, we would not have known that the foundations were disintegrating. “If you don’t do something about it now,” the workman told us, “pretty soon there will be no mortar between your stones, you won’t have a foundation, and you won’t have a house.” So we were blessed to have water coming in the basement. It gave us a chance to save the house.

As we look around and notice “water” coming in among the Christian people – secular values and behavior – we might count it a blessing. Perhaps the Lord is telling us that we need to look more carefully at the foundations to see if all the mortar is there. If not, we need to seek his guidance and help to begin to remedy the situation.

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Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2016 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)
Introduction
We were wrong to believe that the danger was over, that when the Marxist regime disappeared, our children’s faith was no longer in jeopardy. But the old methods emerge again under new masks and with new names.

I want to address the topic of the resurgence of methods we thought had disappeared, but which we are now seeing once again, with amazement, in some Catholic schools. In order to unmask them, I have deemed timely to revive a talk I wrote back in the 1980’s, which I then called “Why Young People Lose their Faith.”

Difference between faith and religiosity
I’m not going to waste time in pointing out the seriousness of the problem. If just one person loses his faith, this is serious enough in the eyes of Christ, since each of those persons has cost all of his blood. Faith, therefore, is not a cheap or superfluous item. If we are saved by faith, then it is salvation itself that is at stake, though this does not mean that all those people who, in our opinion, have lost their faith, are necessarily condemned, because, thanks to God, our Lord regards things in a very different way than we do.

But if faith is lost through the fault of somebody else, I think the words of the Lord apply:

> Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:6).

Before getting into the core topic of the talk, however, I would like to clarify a couple of concepts:
1) First I would like to make a differentiation between faith and religiosity, because some people who have faith often grow cold in their religiosity, and this does not mean that they have lost their faith. On the other end, we can come across people with a great religiosity whose faith is highly childish and fragile.

**Accepting Christ and what he has done for us**
Religiosity is what man does to come closer to God. What our faith tells us, on the other hand, is what God has done to come closer to man. And having faith is to accept what God has done and does for us, and above all, to accept the God who has done such things.

Having faith in Christ, therefore, consists of accepting the person of Christ, the Christ-person. I trust in him, I believe the things he has said because it is he who has said them, without my necessarily understanding them; I accept what he has done and wants to do for me, and I am willing to respond and to correspond by doing the things he wants me to do.

Sanctimonious people and those who pretend to be very pious are, in fact, religious people. Their lives can be full of medals, novenas, rites and prayers which are not necessarily backed up by a deep acceptance of the person of Christ, by trust in him, by an acceptance of what Christ has done and wants to do for us, and, to be sure, without an acceptance of what he wants us to do for him with others.

I state this clarification because we sometimes think that someone has lost his faith, when in fact he has just lost his religiosity. I don’t know if my assertion sounds stupid, but I think it is conceivable for our religiosity sometimes to diminish precisely because our faith has increased.

For instance, for many people, discovering that God is Father and that Christ Jesus is our brother involved leaving behind many novenas and devotions to the saints, because they discovered that Christ does not need any go-betweens, and they even neglected attending the temples, because they discovered that they are living temples of the Holy Spirit themselves. Their confidence in the Lord’s response almost did away with the recitation of those endless petitions, in order to replace that with confident prayers of thanksgiving or of a perfect union with the Lord in contemplation.

May I make clear, then, that religiosity is not the same as faith, and that we can have great faith and relatively little religiosity, or a lot of religiosity and little faith.

**Consequences of losing one’s faith in Christ**
2) The second point I wanted to clarify is that having lost the faith is something much more serious than not having ever had it at all. A pagan does not have faith because he has never had it. He does not know the Lord, and does not accept him because he doesn’t know him; but he can come to know and accept him. Instead, someone who has lost his faith is a person who has renounced, denied or abandoned Christ, and this is something very different and much more serious.

It is more serious because, in general, faith is like virginity – once you lose it you can’t have it back. I don’t want to assert this in an absolute way. There are exceptions. But, usually, a person who loses his faith is someone who had known Christ, or thought he knew him; someone who accepted Christ, or said he had accepted him, and then left him, usually due to disappointment. Christ was not what he thought, or Christianity was not useful for what he thought it ought to be useful. He tasted it and didn’t like it, he experienced it and was not satisfied.

The difference is similar to the difference between the pagan era and the post-Christian era. The pagan era corresponds to a time when many nations had not known Jesus. The post-Christian era, instead, is the age of a world that thinks it has known Christianity and has rejected it as obsolete, as belonging to the Dark Ages, or
simply as ineffective for its own purposes. This is no longer lack of knowledge, but deliberate abandonment or rejection.

Once this two points are clear, let us get to the point. I have tried to make as simple an outline as possible, for all of us to understand it.

**Why young people lose their faith**

In general, we could say that young people lose their faith for the same reasons why people lose their homes, which are often four:

1) Because it crumbles down or falls at the first shaking;
2) Because they exchange it;
3) Because they sell it;
4) Because it is taken away from them.

The same happens with faith.

If faith crumbles down or falls at the first shaking, then it has never been a solid faith. It was not made of the materials our faith is supposed to be made of. Or else it was not built on solid rock but on sand.

Perhaps the simplest example of faith built on sand is a faith based on the behavior of men and not on the living rock of the person of Jesus. I’m talking about the convert who lost his faith because the leader who had preached Jesus to him has now fallen into scandal. Or about the son who rejects Christ because the lives of his parents are not in agreement with the Lord’s teaching. Or about the elderly man who has ceased to practice the faith because he no longer believes in the priests, or in the bishops, or who says that the Pope is a Communist, or even just complains that the mass is no longer in Latin.

I’m also referring to foundations built with mortar. A person’s faith fades away because he has lost joy. Or a person’s faith fades away because we no longer have the warm friendship we used to have, or whatever.

Concerning materials, a faith that crumbles down was usually a faith made with half-truths, or a childish, superstitious faith. The person was taught the Commandments, but there was never anyone to tell him that God loves him. They talked to him about hell, but he never experienced that being in heaven is walking with Christ on earth. It was a faith built with fear, not with love; or a faith (or, I would rather say, a religiosity) made with rites and amulets for protection or good luck, which reached its end with the first tribulation, or with the death of a child, or with the loss of his possessions.

Or else it is the childish faith of someone who, while attending a retreat, closes his heart to the Word because he just can’t accept the story of Adam and the apple, or insists on arguing about whether the flood actually happened, or about whether Jonah was actually swallowed by a whale, or about how can it be possible for Mary to be Virgin and Mother at once.

A faith built with that kind of materials is not able to undergo the weight of faith as a vital response to God. These people succumb to every wind of doctrine. But I don’t want to dwell too long on this point.

**A childish faith that is too small**

In the second case, a person exchanges his faith for the same reason why one would exchange his house: (a) because he finds it too small; (b) because he feels uncomfortable.

The first reason has a lot to do with the childish faith that was mentioned earlier. It is that faith based on a doctrine that was tailored to the size of our First Communion suit. And it is obviously too small. It didn’t grow
with us, and we have continued to understand the realities of what the Lord has done for us in a childlike way, as they were taught to us in our first few Catechism lessons. The life of an adult, committed Christian can never be grounded on First Communion truths.

Christianity has become too small for many people today, but for a very different reason. It has become small because it is inadequate for solving, and for solving immediately, all the problems people think ought to be solved immediately; or because Christianity doesn’t seem to be an effective tool for eradicating hunger from the world; or because Christianity doesn’t seem effective for overthrowing governments and liberating peoples, or for ensuring health for the great mass of population, or for educating all the illiterates. Some people see it only as a solution to the problem of death; others, as an apt solution but only at the level of small groups which they regard with contempt and charge with elitism.

Rejecting the root of the problem
These people see the problem, but reject the root of the problem. They don’t discern the root in the heart of man, but in circumstances, structures and systems. But even those who accept sin as the root of all problems, reject Christianity as a solution, because it is a solution at an extremely long range, while the world demands answers and solutions that are immediate. Let’s first solve this whole thing, and then we will have time to think about Christ and his doctrine.

Christianity has become far too small to them, so they exchange it for things that are even smaller, which have not been able either to solve at a short or medium range, or at any range at all, the problems that it seemed so urgent to solve. Let Communism suffice as an example – it never worked anywhere since the days of the Bolshevik Revolution, but it continued to win followers while other millions of people were trying to escape the famous Paradise.

Refusing the cross of Christ
The other reason why we usually exchange our home or our faith is because it has become uncomfortable.

Following Christ involves accepting a cross. Following Christ involves forsaking many appeals of the world, and involves the fact that the world will reject us as crazy and fool people. Christianity is uncomfortable, and the Christian is a fool in the world’s eyes, not only because he speaks about turning the other cheek, or about walking the second mile, or about giving the cloak when someone wants to take his coat. It is uncomfortable and it is foolishness, because it involves renouncing certain sexual pleasures and all kinds of excess. It is uncomfortable because it involves a vocation to poverty, a vocation to meekness, a renunciation to independence and an acceptance of interdependence. It is uncomfortable because it demands subordination, and sometimes obedience.

It is uncomfortable because God has a law which accuses us. It is uncomfortable even because, unfortunately, it is feasible; and those who live it out have a joy that I don’t have. And it is uncomfortable because it is not possible for me, and I don’t have the joy or the peace these people have. It is uncomfortable because it opposes contraceptive means that I can but at any drugstore. It is uncomfortable because it asks us to accept the poor and ignorant as our brother, and to love him and serve him. It is uncomfortable because it often requires me to act in ridiculous ways. It is uncomfortable because many people think it is alienating. It is uncomfortable because I have to believe things I don’t understand, things I can’t prove in a laboratory. It is uncomfortable for many other reasons, but above all it is uncomfortable because I can’t just practice it in my leisure time, or when I am very old, but I am willing to carry it with me all the days of my life.

Not willing to pay the price
The third large group is the group of those who sell their faith. I do not know how large this group can be, but it has existed from the very beginning of the history of the Church. It is the story of apostates.
Faith is sometimes sold at a high price. The price to pay to keep your faith was life itself. Or the price for life involved forsaking the faith. Your life would be forgiven and you need not go to the circus, if you were willing to renounce your faith in exchange. Many people chose martyrdom, others chose their lives. I don’t want to judge, but they might have been wrong in the price, and exchanged bodily life for eternal life. They exchanged what they could not preserve and were bound to lose soon anyway, for something they could not lose anymore. A bad deal.

But other times the price is lower. You renounce your faith or replace it with a different one in exchange for a position in Government, or a position in a Board of Directors, or a good job. In exchange for a business which is usually dirty, or in exchange for a woman I have fallen in love with, and I now need to renounce my faith that forbids divorce, so I can marry her. I may need to renounce my faith in order to gain my children’s acceptance, or the acceptance of friends that now reject me.

I don’t mean at any point that someone who is divorced, or a priest who got married, or those who accommodate new winds of doctrine in order to stay in government positions are necessarily people who have lost their faith. But I do believe that they are in serious danger of losing it, and the reason is very simple. It is that kind of situation in which, when you cannot adjust your life to the Gospel, you always end up adjusting the Gospel to your life. It is then that we begin to say that all of that was mere nonsense, that his enthusiasm was the result of something emotional, or that these other people are crazy when they think that the Lord has a mission for them.

None of these has sold his faith, but they have placed a mortgage on it, and they can lose it if they can’t pay the price of the mortgage afterwards. They have made a loan on it which at this time brings benefit, but if the price is just too high they will end up losing their faith, just as many people lose their homes because their debt is so big. It is very hard to spend your whole life struggling with your faith. Sooner or later we will change our faith, or else we will change our lives.

**A recipe for taking away the faith**

The reason I have gone quickly through the preceding three causes is that I want to place all the stress of this talk on the fourth reason why young people lose their faith, which is that it is taken away from them.

We have already seen that many of such losses of faith are simply due to the fact that the faith was built on sand or with materials that were far too fragile. But this time, on referring to those who lose their faith because it is taken away from them, I’m talking about techniques which are much more subtle, perfectly planned and deliberate. I’m talking about a process that is carried out patiently, systematically, and with extremely subtle and clever means that make up a true art. Not that they are new either. Throughout history, every age has met similar processes. I’m going to talk about some things we saw happen among us.

About fifteen years ago, a friend of mine wrote a story. I want to make clear that it was written fifteen years ago, because it’s been a long time now since Nicaraguan young people have been undergoing this process of faith being taken away from them. The title my friend gave to it was, “The Herbalist, A Tale Which May Be No Tale.” I would add: “Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is merely deliberate.”

**The Herbalist**

*He was a strange fellow. I knew him because I often saw him as I walked past his apothecary shop, one of those old, dusty drugstores full of porcelain vessels with golden rims, and with the names of the drugs in Latin.*
He was not exactly a pharmacist, but a herbalist, who kept his old-fashioned drugstore open I don’t know for what purpose, for I never saw any customer come in.

The neighbors asserted that late in the night the shop witnessed an intense traffic of people who came in muffled up, taking refuge in darkness, to have the herbalist deliver to them his strange prescriptions.

I would walk daily past the drugstore as I came back from work, and behind the counter I could always see the herbalist – a tall, lean man with an ironic smile that betrayed his sharp teeth.

One of those days the drugstore was found open at dawn, but the owner was not there. Two days went by like that, and the neighbors were alarmed. Since I was the only attorney in town, they called me to make an inventory of the herbalist’s possessions and go over his papers. The inventory was quite easy, since, apart from the shelves, the counter and the old vessels that contained just a few dried herbs, there was nothing worthwhile in the whole shop.

As far as papers are concerned, I only found one, written in black letter by the hand of the strange character.

I took this paper to my office, and kept it for several days in the lowest drawer of my desk, without even thinking about it.

During one of those tidy-ups that you do when there is no better business to occupy yourself with, I found it again, and, thinking it might be something that would shed light on the fate of the mysterious herbalist, I read it. The paper read as follows:

“The Unfailing Recipe to Make Christian Youth Lose Their Faith

The success of this recipe is guaranteed if directions are carefully followed.

Take a Christian adolescent who is enthusiastic, healthy in body and spirit. It is better if he is about to be graduated from an expensive high-school directed by religious, or in the early years of a Catholic university.

All or almost all young people at this age believe in God, are acceptably sure about their parents’ honesty and affection, believe in their country, and are planning to get training in order to serve their country well as adults, by following a professional career.

You must carefully avoid attacking or denying God, as the recipe would be spoiled. Quite the opposite, you must extol in them the notion of God, but helping them to see that the only (this must be forcefully stressed), the only way to find him is through human beings.

Afterwards, you have to demonstrate to them that in their country there exists a situation of complete injustice. (This is quite easy, as it is usually true and clearly demonstrable in any country in the world and in any age.)

A skillful handling of economic statistics will be very helpful in persuading the young man about this thesis. The more generous the individual, the easier it will be to get his assent. (See “Social Mathematics and Their Handling”, by Numberhoax.)

When the boy considers himself a master in evaluating his country’s injustice, that’s the right time for the second step.

This step consists of demonstrating to him that his parents have been or are active or passive contributors to this situation of injustice, that they are therefore completely wrong in their actions and in the principles they hold, and have always been so.

From this point to the point of getting the young man to the certainty that even in those principles his
parents are insincere and dishonest there is but one step, which the young man will usually take by himself, without the need of any external stimulus.

"Once love for his country and respect for his parents have been done away with, you instill in the mind of the individual the idea that his parents not only don’t love each other but have never loved him, and that all his problems as an adolescent have as their first cause this lack of love and understanding from his parents. This stage is important for the final success of the recipe, and you must insist through multiple examples and illustrations, as well as good psychological arguments. (See “Directed Anti-Parental Psychology”, by Guatussi.)

"During these first few steps with the recipe, you must never allow the individual to remain at home for too long, as the influence of direct contact with his parents can mess up the result of the whole operation. If you can persuade him to leave his home and his usual clothing in order to live in community or work with other people who are undergoing the same treatment, so much the better. (See “Group Therapy”, by Atheowsky.)

"When the mixing mortar shows evident signs that the individual now despises his former notions about country and parents, this is the moment to work seriously on his religious mentality.

"For this purpose, you must eliminate everything that relates his idea of God to God’s divine fatherhood. God must be presented as completely human, and as concerned only to have the individual act on his socioeconomic milieu in order to destroy the unjust structures. When referring to God you must always mention justice, never love.

"You must not propose systems of replacement, as the individual could come to think about the need for evolution. It is necessary to insist exclusively on the need to destroy the structures through revolution.

"In fact, psychologically, every adolescent likes the idea of destroying, as he has just come out of the age in which one of his great pleasures was to destroy his toys, and this idea moves the treatment forward. (See “Youth Psychology”, by Guatussi.)

"You must undertake an ironic analysis of things such as prayer and every form of respect to religious symbols such as images and the like. Religious practices must be questioned with a biting, festive style.

"The attack on the deviations and immorality of the traditional Catholic hierarchy and clergy must be consistently kept, until the individual has gained actual disgust for every assertion made by the Church, except for those that defend the socially marginalized and the need to change the structures. The latter statements must always be praised, while discreetly showing the individual that there is a gap between the ideas stated therein and the personal behavior of many clergymen, as well as stressing the wealth of the Vatican and its involvement in or absolute ownership of business companies that exploit human beings. (See The Economist.)

"You must carefully avoid references to the person of Christ. Instead, always talk about Christianity and about the commitment involved in being a Christian, making it clear that this commitment is of a political and socioeconomic nature.

"Once all of these notions have been safely instilled in the individual’s mind, by mixing them in a fit mortar where the whole can be seasoned with the persuasion that an unclearly defined socialism contains the big solution, it will just be a matter of waiting for the results, which will lead without failure to the young man losing his faith.

"Some inputs that will be very helpful for attaining this result are youth encounters with round-table discussions for examining injustice, sexual promiscuity, and social protest songs that are easy to learn and to hum. (See “Group Therapy”, by Atheowsky.)

"The method is valid even for use with Catholic priests. The best candidates are those who have abandoned prayer and who devote most of their time to meetings and discussions.

"The success of this recipe is guaranteed."

The signature was illegible. The text of the document ended here. At the end, a funny note was written which said:

“Make one thousand copies and distribute among people who are acquainted with young, liberated
priests, especially those who teach in seminaries or who work with Christian students.”

I was never able to find out who the herbalist was, or whether this whole thing is a tale or not.

So much for the story.

I have been tempted sometimes to complete this story by updating it with practices that are far more sophisticated. If you study the methodology closely, you will realize that the procedure is based on a few fundamental principles.

The first principle is not to skip stages. You must always point to the next step, without ever showing where it is that you want to lead him. If the young person knew the final point where you will take him, he would never take the first step, because a step will inevitably lead to the next, and the steps are taken imperceptibly.

The second principle is: Begin by challenging the ideas, values, affections and principles that currently sustain his life and his faith.

In a child or young person, these might have been his parents’ values and affection. In the case of priests and religious sisters, the process is much more subtle – question the authority of the Magisterium of the Church, the infallibility of the Pope, the authority of Scripture; tell them that the bishops are partisans to the reactionary movements and that the Bishops’ Conferences are manipulated by the Rockefeller group; mock at the great theologians who oppose liberation theology, and so on.

Third: Learn to use half-truths. Never say plain lies. A half-truth attracts because of the truth it contains, and poisons because of the lie it carries. Never attack a truth upfront. Present it, but present it mutilated and mingled with some lie, so that on accepting the truth they will also swallow the lie.

Fourth: Involve their emotions. We know that most people’s lives are governed by their emotions and not by their brains. Talk to them about the riches of the Vatican, the Borgia Pope, the Inquisition; take them to the slums for them to experience poverty, disease and oppression, but never allow them to do anything to alleviate that immediately, for that would only strengthen them in the effectiveness of their faith and in the power of love. What they need to fight is the structures and systems that cause this, even if the present generation must continue to suffer from hunger, disease and death.

Fifth: Place him in an environment that is contrary to his faith, where he feels forced everyday to release a bit of his faith in order to gain a little more acceptance from his peers.

Sixth: Involve him emotionally with his peers of the opposite sex. A girl friend or boy friend is far more effective than any book or teaching.

Seventh: Require him to show outward manifestations of his process of change, whether through public testimony, or by entering commitments in the presence of witnesses, or by getting involved in concrete actions. If somebody does these things, he will hardly step back. It is difficult to deny something that has been asserted in a solemn way, or to step back when he has become involved in an action that will by itself identify him with the group or band you want to have him join. Stepping back is regarded as betrayal or cowardice, and very few people have the courage to right their wrongs or mistakes.

Eighth: If the person still resists, make sure he will feel rejected. If necessary, humiliate him, or use any of the adjectives available: backward, reactionary, bourgeois, medieval, alienated, fundamentalist, verticalist, angelist, quietist, elitist, etc.
The number of techniques is infinite, because new, more sophisticated techniques are invented everyday.

**Conclusions**

On the topic of modern education as an enemy of the faith, I want to say two things:

1) That we cannot accept by any means the premise, now general in the schools, that an adolescent, much less a child, can and must discover by himself what is good and helpful, with the pretext that pointing out to him what he is supposed to believe or do constitutes a paternalistic, authoritarian imposition that restrict his freedom and his ability to decide.

According to this premise, we ought to leave highway signs blank in order to give drivers the chance to discover by themselves what awaits them ahead.

The function of highway signs is for the driver to know that there is a road that leads to Miami and a different one that leads to New York. Signs do not in any way limit the freedom of anyone who wants to get off at Orlando or take a detour towards Buenos Aires. But it is good and necessary for a traveler to know where different roads will take him.

Let me give three reasons that explain our position.

   a) Proverbs 29:15. *A child left to himself brings shame to his mother.*
   b) Proverbs 22.6. *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.*
   c) Deuteronomy 6:20-25. *When you son asks you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your son: “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand... And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.”*

We are not allowed, then, to let our children discover and choose by themselves the way they will follow.

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand... and you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

2) The second thing I would like to say about modern education:

Modern methods of education, the best and most modern we know, even those that are not manipulated, often take place in a context of relativism, which many of them foster and instill in young people by the mere fact of presenting various choices with nothing to qualify them or set a hierarchy of them, or without resorting to a higher authority. Nothing is intrinsically good or bad—what you have is choices.

This is the road that has been followed to attain the generalized conception that homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, promiscuity and so on are mere choices or lifestyles, which each person can and must take according to his or her own liking, and that they are in fact an inalienable right no one can transgress.

The topic of modern education has become of interest to us in the context of the use that can be given to it in order to turn our children away from the Christian faith.
I would like to end with something which is very sad but which intends to encourage us to struggle for defending the faith of our children.

There are many things a young person can come back from. Almost by himself or herself, a young person will at some time in his life go through that stage of carelessness and dispersion that many undergo in their adolescence. At some point, the love for a woman, the need to form a family, the duties and needs of life, lead him to get established, and many of them become useful, honest citizens. With great difficulty some manage to leave behind alcohol and drugs, promiscuity, and many other things that we worry about in their lives.

My experience with dozens of young people I have had the opportunity to work with and with whom I have dealt closely tells me, however, that those who lose their faith will very rarely get it back. And this is true about any kind of faith.

We sometimes think that disappointment at being betrayed by their idols, or their outrage at those who enticed them with promises of a better world and who led to their death others that were not as lucky as them, or their contempt for the plunderers and abusers who looted the country, will perhaps lead them to come to their senses and return to their former faith.

Unfortunately, it is not so. What I have seen happen is as if something had died inside them, which no longer allows them to believe in anything or anyone. They do not go on with their search, because they sought and thought they had found. But when they uncovered what they found, what happened to them was similar to what we Nicaraguans have summed up in the legend of the Bird of the Sweet Enchantment. This is a bird with the sweetest song, that attracts you but always escapes whenever you try to catch it. A peasant managed to catch one under his hat, but as he lifted the hat to grab it, the bird became dung. Yet we Nicaraguans insist on going after the Bird of the Sweet Enchantment.

It’s different with Christ. We have said many times that the early members of our community were people who were in their return trip from the world of dreams and ambition, and even from the world of vice. We had tasted everything, and, like these young people, we were disappointed by the world and its mermaid songs.

We were looking for truth and happiness, and we found both in Christ. He is the only one who cannot disappoint us, who will never forsake us, and who will remain faithful even if we are unfaithful. And he is the only true dead who will never die, because he already died for us but has risen again in order to be with us everyday till the end of time, and to reign at the right hand of the Father for all eternity.

We want our children, who are still on their way to the world of dreams, to find him too. Only God knows the time for that encounter. If our children don’t know him yet, they can find him one day. But let us not allow those who have known him to lose him, to sell him, to exchange him or to be robbed of him. Because choosing Christ is is a lot better than choosing the Bird of the Sweet Enchantment.

> See related articles by Carlos Mantica

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and 1995.
Serving Young People Around the World

a report by Servants of the Word brothers

The Servants of the Word is an international ecumenical brotherhood of men living single for the Lord. This coming September will mark their 45th anniversary as a missionary brotherhood in the Sword of the Spirit. They serve in several locations around the world - including the Philippines, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Lebanon, Mexico, Costa Rica, and North America. From its beginnings, the Servants of the Word have dedicated themselves to "evangelize and disciple young people" to help them grow in Christian maturity and fruitful service and mission.

The following articles from the recent Servants of the Word Newsletter highlight two particular areas of mission - Youth Link in London and Youth Initiatives in Northern Ireland. If you would like to subscribe to their free Newsletter, signup online here.

An Expression of Our Mission to Young People

by Ken Noecker, presiding elder of Servants of the Word

According to a 2012 U.S. Census, there were 41,844,000 young people age 10-19 in the United States – 14% of the population. In other countries where we work, the statistics are even higher for similar young age groups: in Mexico, 45% of its population is younger than 25 and for the Philippines this number is 53%.

If you look at the Servants of the Word across the world you would see that the greatest part of our mission efforts is
expended among young people. We believe that the young people of our world hold the great potential for good but are also in grave danger of not actually moving into adult maturity where they can make a positive difference in their families, neighborhoods and countries.

One of our key objectives as a brotherhood, therefore, is to work with young people. In our brotherhood ideal, our mission statement if you will, says, “With great hope and confidence in the God who called us, and recognizing the challenges of our times, we aim to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and foster spiritual maturity, especially among young people”. We feel that work among young people is one of the primary contributions we can make to the church. We therefore desire (quoting again from our ideal) “to evangelize and disciple young people and to bring those who are called into a full integration with our life and mission.”

In this edition of our newsletter you will read about two important expressions of our mission among youth—Youth Initiatives in Northern Ireland and Youth:link in London.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Please join with us in praying for effectiveness in this wonderful work the Lord has called us to. Pray as well that other more laborers will be called into the harvest!

Ken Noecker is a lifelong committed brother in The Servants of the Word, currently serving as the Presiding Elder. He spent 25 years (1986 to 2011) as a member of the Asian Region of The Servants of the Word based in Manila, Philippines. Ken was born and raised in Nebraska. He completed his university studies in Minnesota and his graduate studies in the Philippines. In addition to his role in The Servants of the Word, Ken is also involved extensively in community building efforts in Asia as a missionary coordinator of The Sword of the Spirit.

Andy Pettman (front center) with young men in Antioch Community

Helping Teenagers Grow in Personal Faith

by Martin Steinbereithner

As long as most of us in Servants of the Word remember, Andy Pettman has been involved in youth work: in his church, during his Gap year in Honduras many years ago, and in Antioch - his local Sword of the Spirit community in London, England. Two things have always motivated him: sharing the good news with those who have not come to personal faith yet, and helping those who believe make that faith real by reaching out to their friends. He had also seen how especially some “community kids,” young people who have grown up in...
intentional community, can find it hard to step up and get excited about their faith: some suppose they have seen it all their life and at times have learned to walk the path of least resistance.

In 1998 Andy started a meeting for the oldest youth of two Anglican Sunday school groups in West London. The group grew and started to incorporate teenagers from Antioch, the local Sword of the Spirit community, and today anywhere from 40 to 60 youth meet every other Friday for a time of worship, spiritual input and fun together. The mixture of church youth, community kids, and their friends of has been deeply dynamic, each group bringing their own strengths and calling each other on. **Youth:link**, as it is now called, has also added another event for the off-weeks – for the younger and newer participants.

Andy passed on the leadership a number of years ago, but he is still closely involved in supervising the work. Over the years many of the younger Servants of the Word in the London household have been serving on Youth:link’s staff. “Their life as brothers is different and radical enough that it calls the youth on to live more wholeheartedly as disciples,” Andy says. In turn serving with teenagers often provides a more visible impact than university mission. “It is very rewarding to pass on skills to an age group which is very eager to learn and constantly asking for input.”

Of course the service is not without its challenges: London is a busy place and many of the youth live full lives. Some spend two hours a day commuting to and from school, and most of them are involved in extra-curricular activities, so time is at a premium. Most of the staff are volunteers, so they also juggle many different responsibilities, and sometimes it is not easy to accommodate the various expectations of parents. But on the whole it is not hard to recruit staff for Youth:link.
Dr. Martin Steinbereithner is a lifelong brother of the Servants of the Word. He is the director of Communications and Development for the Servants of the Word. Previously he worked for twenty years in campus ministry in North America, Lebanon and England and for over the last ten years with Christian communities in the Middle East, Poland, Russia, Belgium, Germany, Austria, France, the UK and Africa.

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The Youth Initiatives Story

by Jamie Treadwell

Youth Initiatives (YI) had a miraculous birth. It grew out of a series of parish missions in West Belfast between 1988 and 1990, where many young people took first steps toward conversion. Some of our staff and YI graduates can trace their marriages, careers and vocations back to those early missions. Those were heady and exciting times, but our success also led to problems. Complaints increased, for instance, when students wanted to have prayer meetings during school hours. And opposition grew: people were getting suspicious of this new phenomenon of radical conversion to Christ by young people. It took years to gain some people’s trust.

In 1991 we officially became a charity called Youth Initiatives. About 30 volunteers started meeting regularly, and a vision began to take shape. One big question was how to fund this work. We felt called to find a way for faith-based Christian ministries to link with government-funded work, something revolutionary at that time in Northern Ireland. Over the next 10 years, we partnered with government entities and charities, resulting in a ministry which met the exacting government standards while keeping its Christian ethos.

We had a very small core team, and in those early days the Scripture of the feeding of the 5,000 spoke to us: God could multiply the little we had to offer.

Over the years YI has become an environment that encourages youth to shed their fears and step out in confidence. One example was “Belfast Born”: two young Belfasters (Jim Keenan and Paul Jordan) had the idea of a play, and others came alongside them. The result was an award-winning cross-community drama (that is, with both Catholics and Protestants involved) that performed in front of sold-out audiences across Belfast, in Catholic and in Protestant areas. Other projects followed, such as mission trips to Rumania and the U.S.A.

A lot has happened in YI in the intervening years. We have developed as a professional youth organization with paid staff and many volunteers. We run many projects and try to keep our policies and procedures in good order to make sure that young people are safe among us. But we have not strayed from our roots. We still relate one-to-one and in small groups with the young people who hear about us and come along to see what’s up. And we continue to engage them in helping to lead the programs and give them a vision for looking out for one another – to make it a place where young people can flourish. The God who brings hope, life, and transformation is still very much at the heart of our work.

Jamie Treadwell is a lifelong committed brother in The Servants of the Word. He lives in the brotherhood household in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. He works professionally as an executive coach and as a fine...
Serving Young People in Northern Ireland

An Interview with Doug Smith, Director of Youth Initiatives (YI)

Why are Servants of the Word involved in YI and what is their unique contribution?
We are reaching young people in great need and see amazing transformations: this is very rewarding, but it also deeply impacts those who work alongside us. So while this is primarily a youth work and not a Christian community, many of those we have worked with have gone on to discover intentional community within the Sword of the Spirit.

Given our experience and our denominational make-up, we are uniquely placed to work in YI. And I think our life also serves as a prophetic witness.

In a nutshell, what does Youth Initiatives (YI) do?
As our tagline says, we seek to “awaken hope, inspire initiative and mobilize youth” especially in areas of urban poverty and social needs. We do that by reaching out to young people who are not connected to any youth clubs or other parts of their local community and getting them involved in creative activities, be it sports, arts or the like. Many of them then get involved in our programs and projects where we foster a positive culture that allows them to flourish. Once they turn 15 they can start volunteering, thus giving back to their community and becoming leaders in their families, work places, communities and churches.

Tell us a bit more about Belfast and Northern Ireland.
The whole region has a long history of “The Troubles” (i.e. religious and paramilitary conflict) and even now that the armed conflict is over, 90% of people still grow up in segregated areas. There are 74 “peace walls” in Belfast alone, separating religious communities. Doing ecumenical and cross-community youth work remains cutting edge in what we do, with some people appreciating us, others looking at us suspiciously.

What are the main challenges and the main joys of your work?
Family and natural community continue to break down, with devastating effects. In the 90s, if a teenage girl became pregnant, there was always a grandparent to help raise her child; now the grandparents are only 31 years old. Mental health issues are on the rise, some putting the number as high as 20% of the population.

Maybe because of this backdrop, personal and social transformation stories are all the more poignant. And it is satisfying to see that we are making a real contribution in Northern Ireland.

What are your plans, hopes and dreams?
Over the years we have learned a lot and have developed a proven youth work methodology, so we feel that our time has come and we have something to offer. This is why we would like to continue to grow and expand across more centers in Northern Ireland. At the same time we want to keep our ethos clear and our charism strong.

See also > Part 1 - Serving Young People Around the World, by Servant of the Word brothers
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Testimonies from YouthWorks-Detroit

“I have never seen the Lord working so clearly before”

Testimony from Antonio Leiva

Hey! My name is Antonio Leiva and I just finished my sophomore year of college at The Ohio State University. While I grew up in a faithful and practicing Christian home, it wasn’t really until I started college that I decided to pursue my faith more seriously. Needless to say, God didn’t waste any time reaching out to me. I quickly got connected with a Catholic organization on campus. I joined a Men’s Group freshman year and eventually committed to living in a Men’s Household during my sophomore year. While the journey has definitely been worth it, I can also say it hasn’t been easy. This is probably my fault though, as I am stubborn and have insisted on holding on to my worldly desires and securities for comfort instead of relying on the Lord.

Detroit Summer Outreach (DSO) has given me an opportunity to change that. After I was unable to find the internship in engineering I was originally looking for, I realized this gave me the freedom to use my summer for a new and different experience. This reminded me of DSO, which my sister participated in a couple years ago. Everyone who I mentioned DSO to said Detroit is amazing and changes lives, so I decided to apply to the program. Now I’m here and I’m glad to say it was the best decision I could have made for the summer. Being in Detroit has definitely put me out of my comfort zone, which has pushed me to grow as a person and has allowed me to give of myself like I never have before. I’ve had the chance to see all the amazing things
God is doing here in Detroit, and I can definitely say I have never seen Him working so clearly before. The best part is that this has all been during training. I can’t wait to see what’s in store for the rest of the summer.

Born and raised in Costa Rica, Antonio is now about to start his Junior year in Industrial and Systems Engineering at The Ohio State University.

“Being in DSO has shown me the endless mercy the Lord has”

Testimony from Elisha Miranda

It wasn’t too long ago when a sixteen year old Elisha found herself in the middle of Detroit awaiting who-knows-what during a mission trip. During that mission trip the Lord showed me a lot of things about service and what it means to love. A part of that was opening my eyes to Detroit Summer Outreach. My team worked with some of the people doing DSO that year and some of the young women really connected with me and encouraged me to do this program one day.

At sixteen I already knew there was something exciting that these people were experiencing that was other worldly. Their lifestyle was different. Their summer was different. Their love for one another was different. I came off of that mission trip with fond memories and a decision: I was going to do DSO.

Fast forward to July 2016 after I’ve spent a year of service in Lansing, Michigan with its share of surprises, hardships, and grace. I find myself in the Youthworks Detroit Office at the halfway point of DSO feeling absolutely content. There’s no other way to describe the feeling of knowing that you’re right where you’re meant to be.

Detroit Summer Outreach has changed me for the better. It stretched me to the point of breaking. It gave me relationships with people that I didn’t know I could get along with let alone love. And it showed me how the Lord wants to continue to work in my life.
Being in DSO has shown me the endless mercy the Lord has. No matter how many times I screw up or feel sorry for me, the Lord has never abandoned me. He gave me his heart, given me people who love me, and experiences that will be with me forever.

Detroit Summer Outreach has not been a bed of roses. There’s been times when I’ve wanted to curl up in a ball and sleep or other times when I would rather not stand under the blazing sun pulling weeds. But it’s been all worth it. Every single harsh moment this summer, the Lord has remained faithful by giving me grace to withstand anything.

Elisha recently finished a year of service in Lansing, Michigan. She will be a freshman in a community college in California in the fall of 2016.

"What true unconditional love looks like"

Testimony from Jake Stoll

Hi my name is Jake Stoll, I am a community kid from Lansing Michigan (USA) and I just finished my freshmen year at Lansing Community College.
One of the first days here, some of us went to help Sister Judy hand out lunches to the homeless. For those of you who know Sister Judy is a Nun who hands out 130-150 lunches almost every day for the past 10 years. Seeing the way, she loves each and every one of them is amazing. She knows them all by name and is really involved in their lives, she could talk for hours about each and every one of the people she cares for. Seeing the way their faces lit up when she talked to them really highlighted the joy that she brings to their lives. She doesn’t just hand out lunches, she loves and cares for each and every one of them. She is the most Christ-like person I have ever met: she truly loves like Christ loves. She shows what true unconditional love looks like and if anyone I know becomes a Saint it will be her. God has already worked a lot in me in me and has only been two Weeks! I can’t wait to see what he has in store for the rest of the summer!

I'm a Work of Christ community kid from Lansing and I am attending Lansing community college pursuing an associates in construction management.

"Embracing woundedness and healing"

Testimony from Emily Schafer

During my internship year in Detroit right I worked as the Bezalel Project Director for YouthWorks-Detroit. I was also a preschool aid at Sacred Heart School and a volleyball coach. I found a lot of life, joy and opportunities to rely on the Lord through all of these. I do believe that Jesus called me here to do these particular things. Even more than this Jesus called me here to Detroit to be healed, restored and freed. Last summer during Detroit Summer Outreach as I served on staff Jesus started to slowly but surely bring to light areas of brokenness and woundedness in my heart and life. And as He has called me here to live and
work in this city He continued to show me these areas but also has begun to bring healing and freedom in these areas. I have experienced a freedom to be broken. Each of us has some brokenness but sometimes because of fear of judgement, our own pride, or other factors we can’t or we choose not to see it and to engage it. I have found here in Detroit a city with its own share of brokenness a freedom to see and embrace my own brokenness and woundedness. This freedom to be broken and wounded is not so we can stay in it though. It is so as our brokenness lies open we can invite our Lord into it and so hand in hand with Him, with His redeeming blood poured into these wounds, these broken places, we can walk into and live in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

So as I continue on this journey of brokenness and woundedness, I have begun to taste that healing, freedom and restoration that Jesus has brought me here to bring me to. I am so excited to see how he continues to use the concrete everyday realities of my life here in Detroit and working with our kids in Bezalel to bring about this work He is doing and to use me as a vessel to bring this healing, freedom and restoration to others as they too are to see and embrace their own brokenness. For we all are earthen vessels, fragile and broken, but in these earthen vessels we hold a treasure, the treasure of God in us! (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Emily is originally from Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. She graduated from Ohio Dominican University in Columbus, Ohio with a BSE in early childhood education and minor in Theology. She also participated with Saint Paul's Outreach in College. She has been a part of Youthworks-Detroit Summer program in 2011, Summer 2015, School year 2015-2016, and Summer 2016. She will start a Candidacy Program with the Daughters of Holy Mary of the Heart of Jesus this August in Steubanville, Ohio.

Photos by Yvette Rock

See past related stories from Detroit Summer Outreach and YouthWorks-Detroit:

- **Freedom Through Service and Trust**, by Michael Davis
- **Broken and Beautiful**, by Chelsea Duff
- **Finding Peace Through Christ**, by Jerel Merrill
- **Called**, by Fran Dunlop
- **He Ain't Done With Me**, by Ryan Corr
- **God Is Enough For Me**, by Grace Fahd
- **God Is My Rock**, by Peter Mayoros

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Where to Get the Time to Read and Study the Word?

a reflection by Roger Foley

I can recognise many seasons in my reading of the Word [the Bible]. I was baptised in the Spirit in September 1974 and that’s where it all started. I recall setting to the task of reading the Bible, and for me, this meant starting at page one, then page after page after page. And that I have never regretted. Every day, every page, the understandable, the confusing, the exciting, the genealogies, the begot this, and the begot that … indeed the whole nine yards as the saying goes. It was wonderful and it was worth it.

God was establishing an ‘invisible’ foundation through His Word [the Bible] and slowly building it into His work [me, a sinner] and I am forever grateful. I pray I will never lose my passion for the Bible. Indeed it is life for those who dare try living it.

How did I ‘find the time?’ We had three young children, a mortgage and debt, a single income family, and I worked around sixty hours a week for a multi-national, and very demanding, company. So where did I find the time? Most in the Christchurch Branch of the Lamb of God know the answer. I deliberately cut down on sleep and gave that time to study. And ever since I have maintained that discipline. I am just not a person who ever ‘has a lie in.’ Those years built a foundation. Then followed many years, and still, of not just reading the Bible, but studying it. This included a four-year course, immediately followed by a two year Diploma and Examination Course, followed by at least ten years of disciplined home study.

Why did I do all of this, was it necessary? I guess not, but I did it because I loved the Word, simply loved it. I did not understand a foundation was being built, I did not know I would need a foundation. But I sure did.

Veronica and I needed to enter a desolate and barren wilderness. We needed to ‘survive’ and hold onto sanity as our son Danny [aged 21] then Glen and his new bride Louise [25 and 23], plus two babies by miscarriage, all died within a short period of time. In this darkness, I found the Pentateuch spoke back to me, it came alive. I could identify with the Scripture speaking of a ‘vast and terrible wilderness’, I could identify with the struggles in the Book of Job ‘… though he slay me, yet will I hope in him,’ and I words declared by Zophar: ‘if you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand.
and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame, you will stand firm and without fear …’ That was many years ago, but it remains vivid for me.

My seasons have changed again. Now I do not use my NIV Study Bible so much, and I am not doing any courses. But I rather sit with my Basic slim-line NIV with no fancy notes. I now more meander through the Scriptures and my pace is dictated by ‘my discussions with God’. We have lots of ‘discussions’ and there is no particular hurry, and every day I am enriched.

I have been around long enough to be aware that many Christians are not strong on Scripture. They just do not set aside time to read and enjoy the richness of the Word of God, and sadly there are a good number of men and women in this category who get raised into leadership service. They will struggle as time goes by. A basic requirement if we are to serve God’s people needs to be our love for, and familiarity with, the Word of God. If we do not have that, we have little to ‘give.’

To those who have a hunger but not a discipline, to those who do not know how to begin or where to begin, to those who want to start the journey of study, to those perhaps in leadership but knowing they are a bit of a "hollow gong" - seek out a seasoned Bible reader and lover of God's Word who can offer you some personal help and support.

Roger Foley is the senior coordinator of the Lamb of God, a community of the Sword of the Spirit with 7 branches located throughout New Zealand. He and his wife Veronica live in Christchurch, New Zealand.
Only God Can Fill Our Emptiness with an Appetite for His Word

by J.I. Packer

The biggest thing that keeps us from getting the full benefit of Scripture is simply that we do not feel needy enough. One of the problems of the pastoral role is that it encourages leaders to think that they are full of competence; they have got it made; they know it all. This self-sufficiency is a satanic temptation. A moment of realistic thought will remind us that we are as needy as the next person.

I find it most helpful to remind myself at the beginning of my devotional period [daily time of personal prayer] who God is and what I am. That is to say, I remind myself that God is great, transcendent, that he loves me and he wants to speak to me right now. And I recall that I am the original sinner, the perverse and stupid oaf who misses God’s way constantly. I have made any number of mistakes in my life up to this point and will make a lot more today if I don’t keep in touch with God, and with Christ, my Lord and savior, as I should.

There is nothing like a sense of hunger to give one an appetite for a meal, and there is nothing like a sense of spiritual emptiness and need to give me an appetite for the word of God. Let that be the theme of our first minute or two of prayer as we come to our devotional times, and then we will be tuned in right. God says, “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Psalm 81:10).

The quantity of theological notions in one’s mind, even correct notions, doesn’t say anything about one’s relationship with God. The fact that one knows a lot of theology doesn’t mean that one’s relationship with God is right or is going to be right. The two things are quite distinct. As a professional theologian I find it both helpful and needful to focus this truth to myself by saying to myself over and over again, “What a difference there is between knowing notions, even true notions, and knowing God.” My times with the Bible, like those of all pastoral leaders, indeed all Christians, are meant to be times for knowing God.
[Excerpt from *Encountering God in Scripture: An Interview with J.I. Packer*, published by the Alliance for Faith and Renewal, Ann Arbor 1990]
Hearing God in Conversation: Learning How to Recognize His Voice

by Sam Williamson

Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying, but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?
—Lily Tomlin

The First Time I Heard God’s Voice

I was ten years old the first time I heard God speak. It was autumn, a new school year had just begun, and a new fad was spreading among my adolescent classmates.

Cussing.

I was raised in a conservative Christian church where Sunday school teachers taught us the Ten Commandments. The teachers were vague about the meaning of adultery, and I didn’t feel concerned. They weren’t very clear about coveting either, so I felt safe.

They made up for their ambiguity when it came to cussing. Instead of an elusive “Don’t take the name of the Lord in vain,” they precisely taught, “Don’t swear.” And when they said, “Don’t swear,” they meant, “Don’t cuss.” For us, cussing was a sin on the order of mass genocide.

One day while playing schoolyard tag, I tagged my girlfriend, Diane, and she shouted, “Shit!” I felt a horrible shockwave race through my body, as though I’d been hit in the gut with a sledgehammer. Forty-five years later, I still feel that visceral punch, and I can exactly picture the playground gate where Diane cussed.
gasped for air but nothing came.

Looking back, it seems silly that a cuss word could cause such a shock, but it did. I expected God to cast down a lightning bolt and burn Diane to ash. The thought almost paralyzed me.

But not quite. I leaped back seven feet in case the bolt went wide.

And then…. nothing happened. Not one thing. The game continued. No lightning bolt. Not even a firefly. I felt as shocked by the absence of righteous retribution as I had been by the cuss. The shock might have even been greater.

My juvenile understanding of Christianity was simple: God blesses good people and he punishes bad people. In my unsophisticated ten-year-old mind, blessing meant being cool and punishment meant being un-cool. But that’s not what happened. Instead, the foul-mouthed kids became cooler while the clean-speaking kids grew un-cool.

The wicked flourished and the righteous were trampled.

I decided that God could not exist. Oh, it took a week or so of watching the wicked prosper, but there was no doubt in my mind. God didn’t exist. It was all a cruel hoax.

The next day I unleashed the filthiest mouth in the city of Detroit on my classmates. I said things even the wicked feared to say. (They still harbored some fear of God, but I knew better.) The “shit” word was cussing for kids; I dropped F-bombs like hardwood forests drop autumn leaves—and I didn’t even know what the F-word meant.

I was a poet in profanity.

Then, at the end of that day, alone in my bedroom, God spoke to me with a fierce, undeniable, and certain clarity. But all he said was, “Sam, I am real, and you don’t understand.”

**Knowing God**

Above all else, God wants us to know him personally—he wants a personal relationship. But we mostly want to know direction: “Should I take this job or that job?” We want information; God wants a conversation. We want to know answers; God wants us to know him.

When God spoke to me, I was deeply moved, but not by his answer to my question, *Why do the wicked flourish?* God never even hinted at an answer. I was moved because I had actually heard his voice. I had begun to know the person of God, not just the facts of God; I had met him.

God always gives us what we most need, but he doesn’t always give us what we *think* we most need. Our deepest need is to know God. More than answers, inspiration, information, or guidance, we simply need to know God. That’s why Paul wrote, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:8).

Before my first date with my wife, I knew a lot about her: she was a farmer’s daughter, she studied social work, and she had attended Hope College. And she was cute. But on our first date, over a glass of wine, she
told me of a secret longing. And I fell in love. My informational knowledge had just been trumped by a personal connection.

Knowing about God isn’t enough. Paul prayed, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (Ephesians 1:16–17 par).

**God Wants Us to Hear Him**

God is always speaking to us, and he wants us to hear him. The first time I heard him in my bedroom—and I really did hear him—I wasn’t looking to hear from God. I thought he was a hoax. But he spoke anyway, because he longs—God himself longs!—for conversations with his family and friends.

I am amazed, dumbfounded even, at modern Christian teaching. We hear leaders claim that Christianity is about a personal relationship with God, but their teaching is limited to abstract doctrine, principles for good behavior, or devotional inspiration. In other words, most modern Christian teaching addresses our intellect, our will, or our emotions. Few are the credible teachers who teach us about hearing God—though they should—or about knowing him personally. Yet that is what the Bible says he desires.

Scripture is filled with metaphors for the nature of God’s relationship with us. We are his sheep, his friends, his children, and—breathtakingly intimate—his spouse. These are relational metaphors. And the essence of relationship is communication.

Communication is so important to the human soul that many countries have outlawed solitary confinement as cruel and unusual punishment. Yet we Christians teach Christianity as though it’s a philosophy class or a code of ethics. We treat the Bible as though it’s an auto repair manual instead of a personal letter from God.

Christians are great at doing clinical, detached dissections of biblical metaphors, exegeting the essence of their meanings. But God wants us to wear those metaphors like clothes—to put them on, live in them, and make them real. He wants us to begin to hear his voice.

Yes, it’s helpful to understand the exegetical meanings of scriptural metaphors. It’s better to meet their Author.

**He Really Does Speak to Us**

Our Father wants conversation. He wants us to learn to recognize his voice. He literally speaks so we can literally hear. He doesn’t always say what we want him to say; he often doesn’t speak in the manner we expect; and hearing his voice requires us to learn to listen. But he is always speaking.

Scripture is filled with passages that teach us God speaks today. Here are a few for the skeptical (emphases mine):

- The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name. (John 10:3)
- Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. (Jeremiah 33:3)
- Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)
- When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for . . . whatever he hears he... will declare to you.... (John 16:13)
- Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. (Isaiah 30:21)
Whoever is of God hears the words of God. (John 8:47)
I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. (Psalm 32:8)

God’s Word overflows with his longing to converse with us; he wants us to hear him, speak with him, and have a discussion.

Hearing God Isn’t Reserved for Spiritual Giants
Most of us are nurses, mechanics, office workers, clerks, engineers, teachers, maybe mid-level managers, or stay-at-home moms or dads. We feel like spiritual Pygmies. Of course God doesn’t speak with us, we tell ourselves, we don’t have the spiritual stature of Mother Teresa.

While that humble self-opinion is a terrific place to start, it is a terrible place to stop. God never speaks to us (or others) because of our (or their) greatness. He speaks because of his greatness. He loves to speak with spiritual adolescents. Paul writes, “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the surpassing power is of God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7 par).

It sounds spiritually humble to be like the people of Israel who said to Moses, “You speak with us, but do not let God speak with us.” But such prayers only reveal spiritual shallowness on our part. It’s as though we prefer to listen to God’s servants rather than hear God himself.

It is God’s glory to speak with us nurses, mechanics, and clerks. That way it’s clear that the greatness belongs to God and not us. Humility is the key. Think of whom God spoke with in the past:

- Abraham was a heathen called out of idol worship when God invited him on a journey.
- Moses was a murderer who fled justice.
- Gideon was a coward hiding in the back recesses of a cave.
- Samuel was a child.
- Jonah was an intolerant, insensitive, grace-lacking bigot.
- The disciples often acted like buffoons, and every one of them abandoned Jesus.
- Paul persecuted the disciples of Jesus.
- Balaam was a wicked man whom God spoke to through a mere beast of burden, his ass.
- And I was a ten-year-old atheist.

Each story is different except for one thing: God didn’t choose to speak with any of these people on the basis of their maturity, goodness, or spiritual giftedness. Many of them were less mature, more rebellious, and had fewer spiritual gifts than you.

“Oh,” you might think, “but God chose them (even the rebels) because he saw their natural gifts. He knew he could do great things through them.” That kind of thinking—and we all think that way occasionally—is contrary to the gospel. The gospel is always about God working with people who are completely unworthy of his attention. (That’s why it’s called the gospel.) He doesn’t use our greatness as much as he uses his own greatness to bring about something great in us.

God can make the littlest among us great, but he can’t use the greatest among us until we become little. God wants to speak to you (O little men and women!) words of comfort, love, conviction, and hope. Yes, you.

How Do We Recognize His Voice?
When I heard God as a ten-year-old, it wasn’t through an audible voice. There was no handwriting on the wall (except perhaps what I had crayoned on it when my mom wasn’t looking), nor was there a burning bush or a levitating tablespoon. I wasn’t even reading the Bible. (Remember, I was a recent convert to atheism.)

Yet something stirred in my soul. It was as clear as an audible voice and as powerful as a thunderclap. Somehow I knew God had spoken real words to me personally. There was an inner resonance, a quickening in my heart. And I knew it was God.

When the Emmaus disciples reminisced about their unexpected discussion with Jesus, they said, “Were not our hearts burning within us?” I too experienced a voice burning in my heart. It thrilled and delighted me. And changed my life.

Methods and Moments
We are imperfect creatures, so we miss the diverse ways and multiple occasions through which a perfect God speaks to us. The book of Job declares, “God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it” (Job 33:14). God is infinite, and he speaks in countless ways and settings.

Yet we finite creature impose on God our limited expectations for how he speaks, in manners we’re familiar and comfortable with, or perhaps the only ways we know. Certainly God speaks to us through those means, through Scripture study and Sunday sermons. He’s just not confined to them. He is, after all, the most creative Being in the universe, and he communicates with us through an infinitely imaginative mixture of methods and moments.

Throughout this book, I’ll reinforce those two principles of methods and moments. It’s vital to keep them in mind if we want to grow in our ability to hear God’s voice clearly. Let’s look at them more closely.

Methods
Part of the reason we fail to perceive God’s personal word to us arises from false expectations constructed when other people recount their experiences. We too often hear people share descriptions of God speaking as though they happened like a scripted dialogue:

I asked God: *What should I do with my life?*
God replied: *Are you willing to take a risk?*
I said: *Yes, but I don’t know what to do.*
God said: *Move to Timbuktu.*

When friends tell stories like this, we think, *I never hear God converse with me that clearly.* Let me tell you a secret: *they don’t either.* At least not most of the time. Those reports are shorthand summaries of hours spent thinking, praying, hearing nudges, getting senses, and recognizing God’s voice.

God employs multiple methods to communicate with us; he is not a paint-by-number God. If we limit his voice to just, say, the scripted dialogue or biblical studies, then we will miss his voice when he speaks in other ways. Below are his more common methods.

A Responsive Resonance
God often speaks by nudging our hearts in response to an external circumstance. The nudge may be described as a burning in our heart or a sense of the weightiness of a particular moment. Perhaps a Scripture passage jumps out at us in prayer, or we overhear a chance comment by someone at the next table, and our hearts know
something significant is going on.

For example, “While Paul was waiting [in] Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16, emphasis added). Now think with me: idols filled every city Paul visited, but something in that moment stirred him.

**A Spontaneous Nudging**

Sometimes God unexpectedly nudges our heart to pray for a friend or to act on an issue. It comes not so much as a direct word as a general perception, an inner detection of a movement of God, unprompted by any event.

I once had a sense to pray for a friend. I wasn’t sure what to pray, so I phoned him. He had been just been let go from his job that day. We prayed on the phone. He was touched by my concern, only I hadn’t been concerned—I hadn’t even known. It was God who was concerned and who spontaneously nudged me.

**Direct Words**

Occasionally God speaks a direct word—usually just a sentence or two, or perhaps just a phrase. This chapter opens with the story of God speaking to me in my childhood atheism: “I am real, and you don’t understand.” God has spoken directly to me at other times too, to leave the mission field or repent to my spouse.

I would guess, though, that most direct words don’t come to us out of the blue; at least not as much as they come to us after sensing a resonance in our heart. Only as we follow that resonance in prayer and reflection do we hear direct words.

**Unbidden Memories**

God will often bring past events to mind. Sometimes he surfaces a memory so we can deal with its grip on our lives, and sometimes he recalls it so we can take appropriate action. A few years ago, I remembered my twelve-year-old self saying something harsh to a neighborhood kid. A short while later I bumped into that kid, now grown. I reminded him of the story, and I repented. He too remembered it, and he wept as I repented. That occasion began an eighteen-month journey of repenting to people from my past, and every repentance, though embarrassing, brought new life to both the repentee and the repenter.

**Planted Pictures**

The voice of God is not limited to nudges or even words. Sometimes God plants pictures in our mind. Around 1915, my grandfather received a mental picture in which the letters KWANGSI were spelled in red letters across the sky. He visited the local library to discover that the letters spelled a province of China (now spelled GuangXi). He prayed and felt called to be a missionary. He spent the next two decades living in that very province, and he founded four inland China churches with new believers. God speaks in many and various ways. Sometimes he even paints pictures.

**Recalled Passages**

Past generations encouraged Scripture memorization. I was always a miserable student of memorization, but I find that God frequently brings passages to mind at just the right moment.

Once, talking with a man in deep trouble, I found no wisdom or words to offer. Then out of nowhere a verse came to mind: “We comfort others with the comfort we’ve been given” (a rough paraphrase of 2 Cor. 1:4). I sensed God telling me to comfort my friend with the comfort God had given me. Nothing wise, just comfort.

Since my Bible verse memorization is abysmal, it simply had to be God!
Visions and Dreams
I’ve never had a divinely inspired dream or a vision, but people whom I know and respect get them, and in them God can speak. Visions are different from images; they are more akin to short video stories, such as when Paul was directed in his sleep: “A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). There’s no reason to believe God cannot give us such visions today.

God-Shaped Thoughts
This is perhaps the hardest to recognize, because these thoughts feel so much a part of us. Yet God-shaped thoughts influence the thinking life of every believer on earth. Not only can God’s Spirit in us speak a direct word to us, but he can also shape our very thoughts. How many times have you felt utterly empty, no words to pray with and no ideas to act on? Then, unexpectedly, a brilliant and obvious thought streaks through your mind. C. S. Lewis believed this to be one of the most common ways God speaks to us:

Then, seeing me empty, you forsake
The listener’s role and through
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake
The thoughts I never knew.

God speaks in many and various ways. Who are we to limit him?

Moments
God speaks with more methods than we normally attribute to him, but he also speaks in more moments that we imagine. I believe he wants to speak in every moment. He doesn’t limit himself to Sunday sermons or personal prayer times.

Many chapters in this book describe how to recognize God’s voice in various situations, but it’s worth remembering that his many moments include times of scriptural meditation, watching a movie, counseling with friends, brainstorming, driving your car, sitting at the coffee shop, moments of curiosity, and even times when God seems silent.

God mixes his many methods of speaking with the limitless variety of moments in our lives; he creates an infinite assortment of opportunities to recognize his voice. For example, take the one “moment” of reading the verse “God is my shepherd, I shall not want.” God may remind you of another verse, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves”; or he may stir within you, in response, a resonance of his great care for you; or he may speak a direct word, “You are not coming to me to get your wants fulfilled”; or he may give you an image of a contented child.

Our lives are filled with multiple moments—from waking at 2:00 a.m., to an afternoon walk, to an unpleasant meeting with your boss—and into each of those many moments, God can speak through his many methods.

God Is Always Speaking
God invites us to walk with him even in—maybe especially in—our ordinary moments. When we learn to recognize that inner quickening, that burning in the heart, we begin to hear God speaking all the time.

Flying to New York to speak at a conference, a stranger said something about public speaking. I heard God convict me of the purposeless life I was living.

I attended a weekend retreat with fifteen men to discuss the possibility of working together. I
heard God flesh out details about his dream for my life.

While watching the movie *The Fisher King*, a pretty grim film, I heard God say that he sees me to the bottom and loves me to the top.

On a long walk last week, God interrupted my thoughts about finances to think about the creep of modern culture into modern Christians’ beliefs.

And forty-five years ago, my girlfriend cussed, God spoke in the absence of lightning, and it changed the life of this ten-year-old reprobate.

This article is excerpted from the book, *Hearing God in Conversation - How to Recognize His Voice Everywhere*, chapter one (c) 2016 by Samuel C. Williamson. Used with permission.

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**Praise for Hearing God in Conversation**

“In this book, Sam Williamson shares his deep spiritual wisdom with a kind of disarming humility that will help readers hear God’s extraordinary voice as an ordinary life experience.”

– Jean Barbara, president of Sword of the Spirit

“I’ve just finished reading Sam Williamson’s compelling book on hearing God. Sam treats this crucial subject with wisdom, humor, and deep conviction. His highly readable personal stories and spiritual insights will surely inspire many to pursue with greater confidence the life-changing experience of daily conversation with God. Hearing God in Conversation is a helpful and well-balanced spiritual guide which I would not hesitate to recommend to men and women from all the Christian traditions who hunger to walk more closely with God.”

– John Keating, Servants of the Word elder

It is a tragedy that so many Christians believe that God does not speak to them. This book is one of the best I’ve seen at equipping ordinary people to listen to God in everyday life. I especially loved the description of how to “brainstorm with God” – what a wonderful way to demystify the process of seeking guidance. Most importantly, the author puts the emphasis where it should be: on a biblically grounded, conversational relationship with God in which we let God take the lead. If you’ve ever secretly longed for your friendship with God to be much more interactive than it is and you are finally ready to do something about it, read this book.

– Thomas E. Bergler, Professor of Ministry and Missions

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"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"

edited by Don Schwager

Scripture passage: Colossians 3:16-17

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Reflection on verse 16: “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”

Slowly repeat and speak out loud to yourself the first verse of Colossians 3:16: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Pause and reflect on each of the key words in this verse:

- The word let here means to allow, to give permission. Do I daily give the Lord permission to form and change my way of thinking, judging, speaking, and acting according to his word, his mind, his heart, and will for my life?

- The word of Christ isn’t merely a printed word, but a personal living word. It is Christ himself, the
Word of God, who speaks to us. To follow and serve the word is first to listen to Christ and to be taught by Christ. A disciple never stops listening, learning, and growing in the mind of Christ. “Morning by morning he opens (awakens) my ear to hear as those who are taught” (Isaiah 50:4). Do I ask the Lord to open my ears to hear him speak to me and guide me in prayer and in study and meditation of his word – especially when distracted or preoccupied?

- The expression dwell in you means to be your constant companion whom you never leave or set aside. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Galatians 2:20). Is the word of Christ my constant companion – my life-line and my daily bread (nourishment)? Do I relate to it as if my life depended on it?

- The expression richly means to make our treasure, our portion, and the joy of our heart and work. Give me life, O Lord, according to your word! Your testimonies are my heritage for ever; yes, they are the joy of my heart (Psalm 119:107, 111). How might the Lord want me to grow in love of his word and find joy in living it and speaking it to my brothers and others as well?

Don Schwager is a member of the Servants of the Word and author of the Daily Scripture Readings and Meditations website.

Illustration by Igor Kovalchuk from Shutterstock
“A Mother for All”
Mother Maria Skobtsova

By Jeanne Kun

“The way to God lies through love of people” - Mother Skobtsova

Born into a family of aristocratic Russian landowners in 1891, Elizaveta (Liza) Iur’evna Pilenko trod a long and difficult path from her birthplace near the Black Sea to her martyr’s death in one of Hitler’s concentration camps. During her adolescence, Liza rejected her Orthodox religious faith. While at the university in St. Petersburg, she was involved with an avant-garde literary circle and later published two volumes of poetry. She married impetuously at eighteen and soon divorced. During the turmoil following the Bolshevik Revolution, Liza, with her mother, her daughter Gaiana, and her second husband Daniil Skobtsov, fled Russia and eventually settled in Paris in 1922.

With the death of Liza’s youngest daughter Nastia in 1926, she rediscovered faith in God and saw a “new road before me and a new meaning in life... to be a mother for all.” She sought out destitute Russian refugees in hospitals and mental asylums and in the slums to help them, saying, “They have no need of sermons; they need the most basic thing of all, compassion.”

In 1932, when she was forty-one years old, Liza received a marital separation, which was authorized by the Orthodox Church because of her decision to enter the monastic life. She made her profession as an Orthodox
nun under the guidance of Metropolitan Evlogii, who gave her her new name, Maria, in memory of St. Mary of Egypt. “Like this Mary, who lived a life of penitence in the desert,” Evlogii told her, “go and act and speak in the desert of human hearts.” Later he wrote of her: “When she took the veil she brought as a gift to Jesus all her talents. Among them, a true gift of God, was the knowledge how to approach those who had lost the right path without despising their weaknesses and faults.”

After visiting Orthodox convents in Estonia and Latvia, Mother Maria was convinced that a new form of monasticism was required to meet the needs and circumstances of the Russian émigrés in France. Back in Paris, she lived as a “monastic in the world,” pushing the borders of monasticism past their former limits—and sometimes disturbing the more traditionally-minded as she did. Her monastery was the world around her, where she sought to soothe human suffering in any way that she encountered it, recognizing that “each person is the very icon of God incarnate in the world.”

Soon Mother Skobtsova opened a small house of hospitality for the needy, trusting God to provide the funds for it. In 1934, the work was transferred to a larger house at 77 rue de Lourmel, where she provided meals and a place to sleep for the hungry and homeless. The house, with its drawing room and a chapel adorned with embroidery and icons from Maria’s talented hand, also served as a meeting place for intellectual Russian Orthodox. Over the following years, she opened another hostel for the destitute and a sanatorium for the ill while she herself lived in a small, unheated room.

On June 14, 1940, Paris fell to the Nazis. Mother Maria joined some colleagues in preparing and dispatching food parcels and funds to families of more than 1,000 Russian émigrés who were imprisoned by the Nazis. She also hid Jews at Lourmel and forged documents for them. In 1942, 6,900 Jews were rounded up and kept for five days in the Velodrome d’Hiver, Paris’ sports stadium, with only one water faucet and ten latrines.
She managed to enter the stadium and, assisted by garbage collectors, smuggled out several Jewish children in garbage bins.

In February 1943 Mother Maria, her son Iura, and Lourmel’s chaplain, Father Klepinin, were arrested. In response to the accusation that Maria was helping “yids,” her mother Sophia told the Gestapo agent: “My daughter is a genuine Christian, and for her there is neither Greek nor Jew, only individuals in distress. If you were threatened by some disaster, she would help you too.”

Klepinin and Iura died in Dora concentration camp. Mother Maria was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp. There, as prisoner Number 19263, she continued her ministry among her companions, with the strength of her faith giving them encouragement and love in the midst of hopelessness and despair. Finally, Maria, her health broken, could no longer pass the roll call on Good Friday 1945. She stepped into the line with those women condemned to die, hoping to inspire them to meet their fate with faith in God. As one witness wrote, “She offered herself consciously to the holocaust . . . thus assisting each one of us to accept the cross . . . She radiated the peace of God and communicated it to us.”

Mother Maria Skobtsova was gassed on Holy Saturday. Ravensbrück’s women prisoners from France were liberated through the auspices of the International Red Cross on Easter Sunday.

Anthony Bloom, Orthodox Metropolitan of Sourozh and Great Britain, noted that Mother Maria is remembered in the context of her times—the Russian Emigration, the French Resistance, and the Nazi concentration camps. However, he added, “her achievement extends beyond the circumstances of her life, and it outlives them. Since her life was completely interwoven with the destiny of her contemporaries, their turmoil was hers, their tragedy was hers. And yet she was not swept away by it. She was anchored in God and her feet rested on the Rock.”
From the writings of Mother Maria

What is most essential, most determining in the image of the cross is the necessity of freely and voluntarily accepting it and taking it up. Christ freely, voluntarily took upon Himself the sins of the world, and raised them up on the cross, and thereby redeemed them and defeated hell and death. To accept the endeavor and responsibility voluntarily, to freely crucify your sins - that is the meaning of the cross, when we speak of bearing it on our human paths. Freedom is the inseparable sister of responsibility. The cross is this freely accepted responsibility, clear-sighted and sober.

(Essential Writings, p. 64)

The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked, Did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says "I:"

"I was hungry, and thirsty, I was sick and in prison." To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need... I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe.

This article is adapted from the book, Even Unto Death: Wisdom from Modern Martyrs, edited by Jeanne Kun, The Word Among Us Press, © 2002. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the Word of Life Community, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

See > other articles by Jeanne Kun
**Even Unto Death: Wisdom from Modern Martyrs**

by Jeanne Kun

*“The blood of martyrs is in the church a force for renewal and of unity” - John Paul II*

Tertullian, a second-century church father, expressed a profound and enduring reality when he said, “The blood of Christians is seed.” As he looked beyond the suffering of the early Christian martyrs, he could see that their brutal deaths were not in vain. They would be like the mustard seed spoken of by Jesus (Matthew 13:31). From their sacrifice, the kingdom of God would blossom, strengthening the church and the faith of countless Christian believers.

Nearly two thousand years later, John Paul II made a similar observation. “Be certain of this,” he said. “The blood of martyrs is in the church a force for renewal and of unity.” His words were contained in a 1996 message to the Trappist monks worldwide in response to the slaying of seven monks by a militant Islamic group in Algeria.

Since the resurrection of Jesus, Christians have witnessed boldly to their faith in him as the Son of God. Millions of men and women have willingly suffered and died rather than deny their Savior. They believed that in death, they were not losers but victors, for “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

Reflecting this truth, Clement of Alexandria wrote: “Martyrdom is fullness, not because it finishes a human life but because it brings love to the fullest point.” The night before the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich
Bonhoeffer was to be executed by the Nazis, he told another prisoner: “This is the end – but for me, the beginning of life.” Anticipating his murder in Tibet in 1949, Maurice Tornay declared, “When we die, we have conquered.”

**A life of witness**
The Christian calling is to a life of *martyria*, which means “witness.” The word was first used by Christians to describe a life lived in conformity to Christ, in imitation of his holiness and obedience to the Father. However, over time the meaning was narrowed to denote “red” martyrdom or the shedding of one's blood, as Christ had done on the cross. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death.

The risk of martyrdom has always accompanied the proclamation of the gospel. Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned because his preaching and testimony to Jesus as the Son of God angered some of the Jews (Acts 6:8–8:1). Luke the evangelist tells us that on “that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem” (Luke 8:1). Peter the apostle was crucified head downward during the reign of the emperor Nero in Rome (probably in A.D. 64), where he had gone to spread the gospel. Church historians believe that Paul the apostle was also in Rome when he was beheaded several years later.

**A wave of persecution**
Following Nero, emperors of the pagan Roman Empire unleashed a series of official persecutions that reached their height at the beginning of the fourth century. Religions other than the state religion of the empire were tolerated. However, when Christians refused to offer sacrifice or pay homage to Roman emperors who claimed to be divine, many of them were beheaded, burned, or made the sport of wild beasts in the arena.

Martyrs young and old attested to Christ living in them as they imitated him in death. Ignatius of Antioch, who was martyred in 107, wrote that persecuted believers are “with the help of Christ, to run to death, to imitate his passion.” Just before Felicity was to face the wild beasts in the arena in Carthage early in the third century, she told her jailer: “Another will be in me, who will suffer for me because I also am about to suffer for him.”

The Roman persecutions came to an end in 313 through an edict issued by the emperor Constantine, and Christianity flourished. Moreover, it grew into a force that shaped the civilization and moral life of the Western world. However, in many countries, Christian missionaries continued to be martyred, along with many indigenous people who had been converted. For example, in 1597, native converts were executed in Nagasaki, Japan, and thousands of Japanese believers were killed throughout the seventeenth century. In the 1640s, Jesuit priests and Christian Hurons were killed by the Iroquois in North America.
**Modern challenges to Christianity**

In the last few centuries, tremendous social and political upheavals have resulted in a ruthless wave of martyrdom in lands all around the globe. Thousands of Christians have been killed because their faith conflicted directly with the political leaders in power. Unfortunately, in many places around the world today, it is considered a crime to be a Christian. Freedom of religion and basic human rights are denied in some countries with totalitarian governments and brutally repressive regimes.

In addition, as the churches have responded to the gospel call to protect the rights of the poor, uphold the sanctity of life, and promote just economic practices, Christians have often found themselves involved in social or political actions. Sometimes these actions have cost them their lives.

A Christian martyr is someone who has willingly died for refusing to deny the faith or perform an act inconsistent with Christian faith or morals, typically at the hands of someone with a hatred for Christianity. In contemporary times, it is sometimes difficult to determine precisely what factors – ethnic animosities, political ideologies, economic advantage, or hatred for religious faith – motivated those who were responsible for these deaths. Churches worldwide cherish the testimony of all believers who, by their deeds in life and sacrifice in death, give courageous witness to Christ and his truth.

In 2000, John Paul II gathered leaders from many Christian denominations at the ancient Colosseum in Rome to celebrate the witness of the martyrs. “The example of the heroic witnesses to the faith is truly precious for all Christians,” he reminded them. “It is a heritage that speaks more powerfully than all the causes of division. The ecumenism of the martyrs and the witnesses of the faith are the most convincing of all. To the Christians of the twenty-first century, this shows the path to unity.”
The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out. I read about the execution of those twenty-one or twenty-two Coptic Christians. Their only words were: 'Jesus, help me! They were killed simply for the fact that they were Christians... The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard. It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ. As we recall these brothers and sisters who died only because they confessed Christ, I ask that we encourage each another to go forward with this ecumenism which is giving us strength, the ecumenism of blood. The martyrs belong to all Christians.

- Pope Francis

The global nature of martyrdom
Recent studies have opened a window on the vast number of martyrs of the past century. The stories it has thus far been able to document represent only a fraction of the actual number of Christians martyred in the twentieth century. Many of these martyrs were members of local churches, communities, or families who suffered collectively for their loyalty to Christ and to the gospel. In the Soviet Union alone, it is estimated that over one million Christians went to their deaths, many of whom will remain nameless. Even today Christians are still persecuted.

The first years of the new millennium have already produced considerable testimony about Christians of various denominations martyred in countries such as China, the Sudan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Pakistan, India, and Colombia.

Not to be forgotten
During Lent 2000, John Paul II asked Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, who spent thirteen years in a Vietnamese prison – nine of them in solitary confinement – to present meditations based on his own experiences.

The cardinal related that, when he was in prison, the police who were interrogating him provided sheets of paper so that he could write answers to their questions. Some of this paper he was able to keep secretly for himself. “So, little by little,” he explained, “I managed to make a tiny notebook. Day by day, I was able to write in Latin the more than three hundred sentences of Sacred Scripture that I recalled from memory. The Word of God, thus reconstructed ... was my precious jewel-case from which I drew strength and nourishment” (Testimony of Hope, 2000, Pauline Books, pp. 62-63).

At this very moment, many of our brothers and sisters are experiencing the same discrimination, suffering, and persecution that Cardinal Van Thuan endured. Some are also dying for witnessing to their faith in Christ. Let us remember that, in the body of Christ, “if one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). May we speak out and work in their defense, and may we lift up these Christians in prayer, asking for
our Father's mercy on them. May we help sustain them through our constant intercession. The witness of the martyrs – past and present – must not be forgotten.

See > other articles by Jeanne Kun

This article is adapted from the book, *Even Unto Death: Wisdom from Modern Martyrs*, edited by Jeanne Kun, The Word Among Us Press, © 2002. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the Word of Life Community, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Jeanne Kun is also an active member and past president of Bethany Association.
The Cedar Forests in Lebanon

A new watercolour series by David Kurani

From the artist

There is something about the cedar forests in Lebanon that is not easy to define: an atmosphere of history, of resonance with the past, our spiritual heritage, a type of grandeur that causes one, when facing them, to draw a deep breath and feel like one is in touch with the ages. With the Divine.

This is most true with the grove that is the highest and the oldest. Situated at more than 2000 meters altitude it is still called by the Lebanese, "Arz el Rabb" - the "Cedars of the Lord!" And indeed to walk through these groves of majestic trees is a spiritual experience. The shafts of light coming through to light up the path give a cathedral-like atmosphere to the walkway. The smell of the resin is like incense and the wide sweep of the branches give shelter and shade so welcomed by the pilgrim.
This particular grove was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998. Some of its trees were there in the time of Christ and their ancient 'look' inspires meditation and connection with Bible verses such as,

"The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon which he planted... " (Psalm 104:16).

"The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord" (Psalm 92:12)

"I have grown tall as a cedar in Lebanon" (Ecclesiasticus 24:17)

"The glory (cedars) of Lebanon will come to you... " (Isaiah 60:13)

There is also a very lengthy description of a great towering "cedar of Lebanon" in chapter 31 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Here is a brief quote from the chapter:

"To what shall I compare you in your greatness: surely to a cedar of Lebanon with noble branches, thick-set needles and lofty trunk... most beautiful in its size and the span of its branches... I had made it lovely with branching green... the envy of every tree in Eden, in the garden of God." (Ezekiel 31:2,7,9)
Cedar Rhythms in Lebanon, watercolor, by David Kurani
Lone Cedar, watercolor, by David Kurani
David Kurani is a noted Lebanese landscape artist. He teaches classes in art and theater at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. David has exhibited widely in art galleries and private collections throughout Lebanon, Europe, and the USA. He and his wife Gisele are active members of the People of God in Lebanon, a member community of the Sword of the Spirit.

Also see previous art works by David Kurani