H O R I Z O N

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

VOLUME 30 NUMBER 2 WINTER 2005

Convocation 2004

Fidelity to Jesus: a paradigm of hope

Riding toward hope in a broken down van

When I heard the tremendous clunk, I knew we were stuck. The heavy metal thud might well have been my stomach the instant I figured out our van had broken an axle. It was Saturday night, and our entire family was sitting in church clothes in a collapsed van 90 miles from home.

After a quick roadside powwow, my husband decided to jog back to the church reception we had just left, hoping that a Toledo friend might still be there. It was a longer run than he anticipated. He arrived to find the last priest turning out the lights. After a full day hosting a special diocesan event, no doubt this priest was ready to crack open a beer and catch a game on TV. He had the 6:00 Mass next morning.

Instead he drove to the site of our breakdown and immediately offered to spend the next three hours driving us to our home and back. We hesitated and then gratefully accepted.

As I sat in the car looking out over darkened corn fields, it occurred to me that this priest's single act of generosity might count for more than all the vocation talks my kids would ever hear. But that was some time in the future perhaps. Sitting there knee to shoulder in his small sedan I realized that this stranger-priest had given me a more immediate gift: hope. I was moved by his sacrifice. It was a small matter, I suppose, but it was a self-giving that he didn't need to perform. An act of goodness without any possible payback. We would have appreciated help just getting to a motel. But he went the extra mile out of the goodness of his heart.

It's that very generosity of spirit that gives me hope for the church. I had been harboring dark thoughts about priests who've let others down, church structures that seem unchristian … and then like the clouds parting and a ray of sun shooting over the gloom came this good deed.

If our church harbors people like this—capable of pure acts of selflessness on small matters—maybe the Spirit is alive and kicking and reminding me of her presence. And that spells hope.

Hope was a central theme in the 2004 Convocation. Those who attended were renewed by the sense of hope in the presentations, the discussions, the liturgies and most of all in the energy stirred up by a room full of spirited vocation ministers. We hope this record of Convocation 2004 captures a little of that spirit that looks toward grace and light.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor

Let's look to our Savior, remember our heroes in the faith, and keep a grateful heart.

Nurturing a hope rooted in Jesus

by Paul Bednarczyk, CSC

Those who know me know that I am a sucker for a good story. I admit that I will stay up until 2 a.m. turning the pages of the latest John Grisham novel, or on a rainy Saturday afternoon, I will be in the community room watching an old Humphrey Bogart film on the Turner Classics station. I am certain that for all of us stories easily work their magic by providing us with the necessary mindless distraction and escape we need at times. But then there are other times when stories penetrate our inner realities and touch our hearts, enabling us to discover eternal truths which rise above time and differences and which unite us as a human family.

All good storytellers know that what makes an effective story is its ending. Because the storyteller knows where it is going to end up, he or she carefully and strategically arranges the sequence of happenings by identifying a beginning which leads to an end. Think of the many times you told your own vocation story. "It all began with…" or, "It all began when…." We tell our vocation stories in retrospect, knowing that it will end with our commitment to religious life, marriage or priesthood. In other words, it is the end that determines and reveals the meaning of our story, and ultimately our life.

In the reading that we just heard from the Philippians, St. Paul illustrates the universal story of all people—the journey of the soul, and in particular for Christians, our journey to God through Jesus Christ. Like any master storyteller, St. Paul knows that this sacred journey can only make sense and have meaning if we look at it within the context of its end, which as he says is "the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus." While enticing us with the goal that is ahead in the distance, Paul reminds us that our journey is far from complete, and that we, like he, must continue to run our race on a complicated course riddled with twists, turns and dangerous pitfalls. What is unusual though about this story, this journey, is that it ends where it all began—in Jesus Christ.

Paul Bednarczyk, CSC

Maintaining hope

Earlier in the year, I went for my annual check-up to a new doctor near where I live. Through the course of our initial conversation, he asked me what I did, and after I explained it, he simply said, "I can't imagine doing what you are doing. It must be so difficult, and so discouraging. How do you maintain your hope?"

It is true. As we all know, vocation work is hard and is no simple task. We promote a way of life based on Gospel values contrary to our cultural values in a hostile climate. Some people look at us and our church with suspicion, if not outright derision. Where religious and clergy once held a privileged and revered status in society, our present situation in the church has challenged our former credibility and influence.

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Combine this with a painful polarization resulting from conflicting ideologies, ecclesiologies, and christologies, and we are left with, for all appearance's sake, a hopeless situation.

We can easily say with St. Paul, whatever gains we had, we have come to regard them as loss. But as we know, the story of our faith does not end in loss. Paul reminds us that by suffering the loss of all things, we gain Christ and can be found in him. In other words, it is exactly in these moments of suffering that we need to look beyond the present reality so that we can see the exciting possibilities that lie before us.

It is exactly in these moments of suffering that we need to look beyond the present reality so that we can see the exciting possibilities that lie before us.

Dr. Robert Wicks, in his book, *Riding the Dragons*, tells a marvelously poignant story of one of his former students who returns to Ireland during a personally difficult time. This woman writes:

> I visited with my aunt on her small farm. We walked together and came to a particular field. It was winter and frost covered the land. The ground beneath our feet was winter dark and hard.
>
> She looked over at me, smiled and asked me to kneel down, close my eyes, and place my hands on the earth. I did so and she said almost in a deep whisper, "Feel the life." I couldn't feel anything and told her so. She then told me to put my ear close to the earth and whispered hoarsely again, "Listen to the life." In response I put my head close to the earth and listened intently. But I heard nothing.
>
> When I got up and told her that I could neither feel nor hear "the life," she took my face between her hands and said, "*alanna mo chroi* (child of my heart), it is often when the land is most barren, cold, and dark that life is quietly growing!" When she said that, I knew she was speaking to my inner pain and the need for hope during the winter I was experiencing at such a young age.[1]

As vocation ministers in the church, we know too well the barrenness of this ministry, yet we gather at this Convocation, hoping to feel and hear the future life of our church and of our religious communities that is buried within the cold darkness of our present winter reality. We come here to Chicago knowing the potential of this life, because we have experienced hope and joy even when our own journeys presented us with the occasional twists, turns and pitfalls. While we have been hurt and have sometimes imposed hurts on our brothers and sisters in community, we have also been the grateful recipients of their loving companionship and consolation in times of loneliness and grief. While we have all known the frustration and exhaustion which results from ministry, our faith has also been rejuvenated by the transformation and conversion in others we have witnessed in our ministry. While we struggle to be faithful to a God who can appear to be elusive and absent, we remember those times when our hearts were burning inside of us as we experienced our own Emmaus meetings with the Risen Christ.

"Straining forward to what lies ahead"

Whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things, and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]. Brothers and sisters, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus. Let us, then, who are "perfectly mature" adopt this attitude. And if you have a different attitude, this too God will reveal to you. Only, with regard to what we have attained, continue on the same course.

—Philippians 3, 7-16

We know that this life is good, but we also know what this life in Christ entails, and the suffering and joy that it brings. And yet like my doctor, there are times when we pause and wonder, how can I be hopeful when the situation seems so hopeless?

Jesus: source and sustenance of hope

Paul faced the same reality. He faced terrible dissension in the church of Corinth. He was literally run out of Ephesus, was almost stoned, only to be chained, then imprisoned and finally martyred. And we thought we had problems! How did St. Paul maintain his hope? How did he feel and hear the life within?

Paul makes it perfectly clear in this reading from the Philippians. First, his hope originates in his desire for Jesus Christ. Secondly, he sustains his hope by his faithfulness to that desire and by his gratitude for the journey on which his desire has led him.

We cannot dispute the clarity of Paul's heart's desire. He wants, to know Christ "and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming conformed to his death…." Paul knows who he is and he knows where he wants to go. He is a Christian, and he knows that the way to the goal ahead of him is the way of Calvary. His desire to fulfill his personal needs of success and fulfillment are secondary to his desire for Christ. Because of this, he is free to forsake everything for Christ, including his suffering. As Thomas Merton says, "holiness in Christ is…to completely abandon ourselves with confident joy to the apparent madness of the cross."

I do believe that at some point, as vocation directors, we need to ask ourselves, what is our own heart's desire in this ministry? Is it to fill up our formation houses with people to continue our community charisms and missions? Is it to bring about deeper conversion in the hearts and souls of our community members? What sufferings and obstacles in our ministry impede our own desire for a deeper life in Jesus Christ? Where is the journey of our desire leading, and do we exercise this ministry with the same confident joy of St. Paul?

As difficult as these questions are, nevertheless, their answers are necessary for us to live this life and to do this ministry faithfully and with integrity. St. Paul emptied himself for the sake of Christ and found the strength to endure and the freedom to pursue his ministry of preaching with joy and conviction. He began his race in Christ, keeping his eyes on the finish line, not looking back, but straining and pressing ahead to the ultimate goal. His secret was in the beginning and in the end of the story. It was Jesus Christ who gave him life, and it was Christ who saw it through to its completion. It was Jesus Christ who gave him hope, and it was Jesus Christ who sustained his hope.

Our hope needs to be nurtured through the inspiration of the heroines and heroes of our church and congregations, those who endured hardships, rejection, betrayal, and desolation and yet remained faithful to the course, never losing sight of the goal that awaited them.

Recalling our heroes

But for us, the difficulty is not in the beginning or in the end, as much as it is in the in-between. It is precisely in these "in-between times" that we encounter our struggles and doubts which weigh us down and prevent us from moving forward. This is when our hope for the future dims and our fidelity wavers.

These are the moments when we need the power and the magic of the story—not to distract us, but to inspire us. Our hope needs to be nurtured through the inspiration of the stories of those who have lived the faith yesterday and of those who continue to live the faith today, the great women and men, the heroines and heroes of our church and congregations, those who endured hardships, rejection, betrayal, and desolation and yet remained faithful to the course, never losing sight of the goal that awaited them.

How can you resist applauding Mother Theodore Guerin, who after several bizarre encounters with the dictatorial Bishop of Vincennes, was literally locked in a room and not allowed to leave until she resigned as superior. She not only walked out of that room with her head held high, but she had the opportunity to see the bishop resign as she continued her champion leadership of the Sisters of Providence in America. On the other side of the world, I am sure Mary Mackillop, foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Australia, could easily have empathized with

her. She was excommunicated by her bishop after she refused in conscience to leave her sisters, knowing that he was trying to push her out so he could overtake the community. All of this was in direct violation of the very constitutions that he himself had approved! Ironically, the holiness of these two women was officially recognized by the church in their beatification by Pope John Paul II.

St. Peter Claver, whose feast we celebrate today, also knew rejection. Because of his ministry to the newly arrived slaves in Spain, he was continually ostracized and accused by his contemporaries of defaming the sacraments because he gave them to a people who "barely had a soul."

Giving thanks is fundamental to being a Christian. Without a grateful heart, we simply cannot be the people of hope whom we aspire to be.

Then there are the heartrending stories of the sufferings of those who battled their own demons. Even though he is esteemed as one of our great contemporary spiritual writers, Henri Nouwen wrestled repeatedly with his own sexuality and frequent bouts of loneliness and insecurity. Likewise, all of us were surprised to learn recently that despite her reputation for being a living saint, for decades Mother Teresa's prayer life suffered from darkness and barrenness. It reminds me of my own founder, the Venerable Basil Moreau, who being faced with painful conflict and abandonment in the early stages of our Congregation of Holy Cross, literally knocked on the tabernacle door to see if anybody was home!

In a similar fashion, we can tell equally inspiring, dramatic stories of men and women today with like conviction, who show us that it is possible to run this race with fidelity, confidence and joy. Like them, as religious, we need to be beacons of hope so that we can inspire one another in this life, and possibly inspire others to take up the course and run with us.

Attitude of gratitude

St. Paul knows, though, that it is not only fidelity that sustains him; it is gratitude. Despite his many difficulties, St. Paul tells the Philippians to be glad and rejoice with him. He asks his followers to share in his gratitude for the journey on which his faith has led him.

Giving thanks is fundamental to being a Christian. Without a grateful heart, we simply cannot be the people of hope whom we aspire to be. Gratitude is concomitant with hope. But before we can experience pure gratitude, like Mother Guerrin, Mary Mackillop, Peter Claver, Henri Nouwen, Mother Teresa, Basil Moreau and countless other faith-filled people, we need to penetrate the depths of our own darkness first, be it within ourselves, within our church or within our own religious communities. By opening up our hearts to our vulnerabilities, we open up ourselves to grace, and our stories then take on their real magic. Our suffering and joy suddenly become united in gratitude, and then we begin in a most profound way to feel and to hear the life and hope that awaits us. As shameful as her excommunication was, Mary Mackillop was able to thank God for it, for as she later wrote of the experience, "I was intensely happy and felt nearer to God than I had ever felt before…I cannot describe the calm, beautiful something that was near." Again, the telling of the story can only make sense in light of its ending.[2]

I would like to conclude this reflection with a quote from Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic and human rights activist during his country's communist regime. Because his own integrity and convictions led him to proclaim the truth, Mr. Havel confronted many things about himself and his beliefs while he was imprisoned for his public speaking and writing. In the book, *Disturbing the Peace*, he reflects on the transcendental mystery of hope.

> Hope…is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart.…It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons…. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather, it is an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is…. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to do good works…is something

> we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.[3]

These words could have been written for St. Paul as much as they could have been written for us.

If we are to parallel our experience with Havel's words, I would assume that all of us know that the vocation we have chosen makes sense and the work that we do is good, even though at times we may not feel so successful. Our own stories prove it, for we have not given up on the race. But the story and the race are far from over. As religious, whether we are newly professed, major superiors or vocation directors, now more than ever, we must remain faithful to the beginning of the story just as much as we must never lose sight of its end. I believe that if we do this, then we will be grateful for these unsettling "in-between" times and we will be empowered to look forward with hope to the future and to the new stories still waiting to be told by those who have yet chosen to run with us. So as we with St. Paul "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus," let us prayerfully pause on this holy ground and feel and listen to the life and hope that lies within. And let us always be thankful, for "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" *(Hebrews 13:8)*. ✚

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1. Wicks, Robert J. *Riding the Dragon*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Sorin Books, 2003, p. 62-63.
2. As quoted by Robert McClory in *Faithful Dissenters,* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 152.
3. Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990, pp. 181-182.

Our church and our communities are often divided when it comes to our vision of Jesus. In this postmodern world of multiple truths, how do we remain faithful?

Following Jesus: a journey out far and in deep[1]

by Mary V. Maher, SSND

I want to thank the National Religious Vocation Conference for the invitation to spend these days with you and to share some thoughts on your theme: "Fidelity to Jesus: A Paradigm of Hope." I must say it is refreshing to attend a conference that does not shy away from focusing on Jesus and calling us to grapple with the historical ground of our faith. From the outset, there has been a boldness about the goals of the gathering. More than a year ago in the *NRVC News* it was promised that, at this Convocation, Timothy Radcliffe and I would "address how a close personal relationship with Jesus not only sustains us in ministry but creates an atmosphere of authenticity in our communities." [2]

And, in his letter of invitation to us as speakers, your Executive Director spoke for the planning committee when he wrote: "We believe that through fidelity to our call and through a close personal relationship with Jesus, we will be transformed. That transformation will impact our communities which, in turn, hopefully will attract new members to our religious congregations. In other words, our hope lies in getting back to the basics of Jesus."

Not as simple as it sounds.

I have to confess I found this theme quite challenging personally. I would have found it easier had the theme been "Fidelity to Jesus Christ" or "Following Christ: Paradigm of Hope." Then I might have been able to avoid some of the stickier questions plaguing us today—questions such as: who is Jesus and what did he stand for? Does the maleness of Jesus lock the Christian tradition into patriarchy with not much hope of being freed from it? How can an historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, be (or become) the universal savior of all peoples and of all created reality from the "big bang" to the end of time?

Mary Maher, SSND

Somehow I feel that if we had started with Jesus as the Christ, I could have taken a different tack. I could have explored the Wisdom tradition (Jesus as the personification of the feminine figure for God) or mystical universality (the created world itself as the body of Christ)...and so on. It would have been lovely. But, here we are faced with the challenging theme: fidelity to *Jesus*.

I surmise that most of us, when we use the name "Jesus," intend to refer to the one whom John Meier

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and Luke Timothy Johnson call "the real Jesus," that is, the glorified Jesus who sits at the right hand of the Father, is present to us in the Spirit, is mediated to us through the Scriptures and tradition, and experienced by us in prayer, liturgy and our life of discipleship.[3] But that is more than a mouthful of assumptions, and we cannot take it for granted that the name "Jesus" has this meaning (Jesus as the Christ) for everyone. So, I want to get into our theme by a very practical route. Let's start with our contemporary experience, in all its ambiguity, and examine some issues we encounter.

Irreconcilable differences among Christians?

Here's my question: Hearing from Christians in our society and world today, are we not saturated with *irreconcilably* different opinions as to what constitutes fidelity to Jesus? How is it that such diversity of political and social convictions can arise from believing that one is being faithful to Jesus?

Consider this randomly-put-together list of convictions held by individuals and groups who believe that, in holding these views and acting on them, they are being faithful to Jesus:

- Opposition to homosexuality as a disorder of nature.
- Conviction, based on an understanding of the complexity of human sexuality, that gay persons have the full rights, benefits and privileges of all human persons in terms of social relationships, health care, partnering, marriage, and so forth.

- Obligation to preach the Gospel of conversion in any and every context because no one can be saved without explicit, personal connection with Jesus as savior.
- Need to promote harmony and dialogue among the world religions as mutually beneficial and necessary for peace in a pluralistic world.

- Opposition to women's ordination on the grounds that women were not present at the Last Supper and, therefore, it is not the intention of Jesus to ordain women.
- Conviction—based on a belief that inclusiveness, and an openness to women which was unique for his day and age, were central characteristics of Jesus' ministry—that working for the full flourishing of women, including access to all ministries in the church, is intended by Jesus and part of fidelity to him.

- Duty to fight the just war to promote democracy.
- Obligation to oppose war, especially in light of the uniquely destructive weapons possessed by the human community in our time.

I could go on and on, as could you, I am sure. These convictions concerning what actions and beliefs flow from fidelity to Jesus are not reconcilable. One has to decide between and among them. On what basis does one decide? Who is Jesus that one may be faithful to him? And how do we know Jesus?

Some basic theological questions

These are the concerns I would like to address in my time with you today: **Who is Jesus? How do we know Jesus? What does it mean in our day to "faithfully follow Jesus"? What kind of a journey is it?** Addressing these questions will take us into theology, to a place beyond ideology and unexamined assumptions. A place we need to visit more frequently than I feel we sometimes do.

I have to confess that, as a theologian and a life-long believer, the "what-would-Jesus-do?" movement feels empty and holds no comfort or challenge for me. If anything close to an answer to that question is possible, it is not easily arrived at and holds no assurance of certitude. We have to be wary of easy answers. If following in the footsteps of Jesus means anything, it has to call us to grapple with what it means to be human. It has to demand that we give ourselves over to such questions as: "What is it all about?" "Who am I?" and "Who is my neighbor?" Answers to these questions are not easily arrived at. The search itself is what it means to be human. It is messy. And it takes a lifetime to answer these most basic and important questions.

It seems to me that the discipline required to live a lifetime in face of the deepest questions concerning human life is important to young people today. And even if such discipline is not important to young people, it should at least be important to vocation directors and to all of us interested in the future of religious life, because the same discipline is necessary to address the life-defining question from Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?"

Some evidence is beginning to surface of a possible surge in vocations as sociologists look at the demographics of upcoming generations. We all find ourselves examining intensely the attraction that some

so-called "traditional" congregations seem to have for young people these days. We also see many different kinds of contemplative groups steadily growing in numbers of newer members. And we all have our opinions about the reasons undergirding the trends we are seeing.

What I am willing to say at this point is this: the call of the National Religious Vocation Conference to "get back to basics" is exceedingly important. It is necessary if we are to find our way to the future of religious life. But we should not be duped into thinking that getting to basics is uncomplicated or easy. We are talking about getting to the *heart* of it all. And we all know from experience that getting to our hearts requires effort, courage and the willingness to be vulnerable. It is not easy.

Another example of Christian divisions

Last week as I was worrying that my approach to this topic may not be the best, a document emailed to me provided a wonderful example of my point that there are vast differences over what fidelity to Jesus means today. This document seemed to confirm that I was on the right track. (Either that or I was desperately searching for a confirmation that I was on the right track!) It was a petition for an advertisement to be placed in newspapers around the country by Sojourners, a self-described "Christian ministry" in Washington, D.C., "whose mission is to proclaim and practice the biblical call to integrate spiritual renewal and social justice."[4]

The headline at the top of the ad reads: "God is not a Republican. Or a Democrat." Then the ad quotes two members of the so-called "religious right" who, by their statements, obviously feel they are being faithful to Jesus. First, Jerry Falwell is quoted from the *New York Times*, July 16, 2004, as saying: "It is the responsibility of every political conservative, every evangelical Christian, every pro-life Catholic...to get serious about re-electing President Bush." And, then, Pat Robertson, as reported by Associated Press/Fox News on January 2, 2004, said: "I think George Bush is going to win in a walk. I really believe I am hearing from the Lord it's going to be a blowout election in 2004. The Lord has just blessed him…. It doesn't make any difference what he does, good or bad…."

I want to quote this ad because it is a wonderful example of two irreconcilable viewpoints on what being a faithful Christian means. After quoting these Christian ministers, Sojourners then gives its position:

> These leaders of the Religious Right mistakenly claim that God has taken a side in this election, and that Christians should only vote for George W. Bush.
>
> We believe that claims of divine appointment for the President, uncritical affirmation of his policies, and assertions that all Christians must vote for his re-election constitute bad theology and dangerous religion.
>
> We believe that sincere Christians and other people of faith can choose to vote for President Bush or Senator Kerry—*for reasons deeply rooted in their faith*.
>
> We believe all candidates should be examined by measuring their policies against the complete range of Christian ethics and values.
>
> We will measure the candidates by whether they enhance human life, human dignity, and human rights; whether they strengthen family life and protect children; whether they promote racial reconciliation and support gender equality; whether they serve peace and social justice; and whether they advance the common good rather than only individual, national and special interests.

The final paragraph just quoted gives Sojourners' list of what constitutes fidelity to Christian responsibility. Where did this list come from and how do we assess it? How do we assess *any* description of criteria for

making decisions "for reasons deeply rooted in our faith?" Answering that takes effort, thought, reflection, reading, study, conversation and decision-making. It is not easy.

So, to enter into our reflection on fidelity to Jesus, I want to pause here for a few minutes and ask you to reflect on your answers to a series of questions. These are to enable you join the conversation today from the place of your own deep truth.

- How would you describe your relationship with Jesus? Is it personal? Or more of an abstract faith in Jesus as the Christ? How do you connect with Jesus? Do you think of yourself as following Jesus or imitating Christ or neither?
- What are your earliest memories of knowing *about* Jesus? What are your earliest memories of *knowing Jesus*?
- How has your relationship with Jesus changed over time? What have been your struggles with this?
- Is there a particular symbol or image through which you relate to Jesus?
- To whom do you pray? To Jesus? To God? (To get at this, ask yourself how you pray in times of great stress or grief or anxiety.)

The key issue: historical consciousness

The question, "Who do you say that I am?" has been around since the earliest followers of Jesus. However, with the advent of modernity in the 17th century, the contours of the question changed irrevocably. The most important feature of modern Western culture as it relates to the question about knowing Jesus is **historical consciousness**.

I really believe that this feature of Western culture helps us understand a good deal about the polarizations in our church and world. For in terms of assessing what fidelity to Jesus means, a clear dividing line is formed by where one stands with regard to historical consciousness. Fundamentalists are on one side and other Christian believers are on the other side. Across this chasm, dialogue is nearly impossible. In fact it should be noted that modern historical consciousness represents such a shift in perspective that the question as to whether or not Christianity can survive the shift has been seriously considered by scholars for more than a century. It is no exaggeration to say that one cannot overestimate the impact of historical consciousness on our faith-life. And, before we take issue with other denominations for their lack of awareness of this impact, we need to acknowledge that we are nowhere near dealing with it successfully or completely in our church.

That said, I would like to structure my reflections today by addressing four questions:

The most important feature of modern Western culture as it relates to the question about knowing Jesus is *historical consciousness.*

I. What is historical consciousness, and how does it constitute a radical shift in our view of the world? It's a major feature of the modern world, and it only intensifies in the postmodern world; it does not get changed.

II. What contribution has historical consciousness made to our knowledge of Jesus?

III. How has our understanding of fidelity to Jesus shifted under the impact of historical consciousness?

IV. Faithfully following Jesus today: What kind of a journey is it?

I. What is historical consciousness, and how does it constitute a radical shift in our view of the world?

Although I identified historical consciousness as a distinctly modern development, I am very aware of the fact that in many ways we have shifted to a postmodern world in our thinking and perceptions. However, as I hope to make clear, postmodernity has only heightened our grasp of the historical conditioning and the relative character of all our knowing and perceiving. The contemporary postmodern world—marked as it is by ambiguity, relativism, flux, meaninglessness and disillusionment—makes understanding historical consciousness all the more important if we are to ad-

dress the question of what fidelity to Jesus means today.

Premodern, modern, postmodern worldviews

To situate ourselves, let us identify the chronology to which we are referring by the labels *premodern*, *modern* and *postmodern* worldviews. To do that we have to begin with the premodern.

- Although it had several significant movements within itself, the premodern (or classical) worldview nevertheless obtained as a commonly shared perspective from shortly after the beginning of Christianity up to the beginning of the 17th century. So for more than 1600 years we had a commonly shared perspective of truth and value, of who runs the world, of how it's structured and what our place is.

- The modern worldview emerged in the second half of the 17th century with the rise of science and scientific method, with the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. It lasted to about the end of the 19th century, although we still have the effects of it and still must deal with it.

- The postmodern worldview is really, the postmodern pluriformity of perspectives. There is no *uni*verse in postmodernity. Indeed people speak of a *multi*verse. This dominated the 20th century principally in the form of a disillusionment with progress and with modernity in the face of the World Wars, the Holocaust, and massive atrocities inflicted by atomic and conventional warfare.

Shifts in how we know what is true and important

Very significant for us in the church and in religious life are the shifts which have occurred regarding truth and value and how we human beings know what is true and important. In the **premodern** worldview truth *corresponds to reality*. Truth is known by "seeing," by looking carefully enough and thinking clearly enough. Tradition comes to be seen as a source of authoritative knowledge of the truth because it is understood as the passing on of the clear and careful "seeing" of previous generations. Hence, truth, once seen and recognized, is understood as eternal, unchanging and absolute.

This view of truth shifts in **modernity** with the emergence of the scientific method and the Age of Reason. This is the time of the Enlightenment, which had as its motto: *sapere aude*, "dare to know." The implication of the motto is: figure it out for yourself. Don't rely on others, on authority or tradition to tell you. Trust in reason and in your own capacity to know. This primacy of reason is an important development and constitutes a defining characteristic of the modern age.

Equally defining of the modern spirit and its sense of truth is the development of the methods of historical research or the discovery of the "science of history." Of course, I am not suggesting that it is only in the modern era that people discovered history. Humankind has always had a sense of the past, an understanding that events took place a long time ago, and could be remembered or preserved in writings and in art and in folklore, and so on. What is new in the modern age is a radical historical consciousness, the recognition that events of long ago carry with them a particular set of political, social, economic, linguistic, religious and cultural characteristics not shared by the present age. In other words, truth in the modern worldview is recognized as *historically conditioned*.

When we read the Bible, for instance, we cannot read it as if it were written yesterday in contemporary English or French as spoken in the U.S. or Canada. Rather, we must recognize that it was written in another historical period with cultural, religious, social, political and linguistic characteristics very different from our own.

Let me give an example. At Christmas many of the cards we give or receive depict magnificent Renaissance or medieval paintings of the Madonna with child or the Adoration of the Magi or another scene from the birth of Jesus. What we notice about some of these is the magnificent medieval or Renaissance regalia in which Mary and Joseph and the three kings are clothed. Now it is not that the artists who painted these did not realize that the birth of Jesus took place a very long time ago. What is not recognized in placing Mary and Joseph and the kings in that dress is the *difference*

in the historical, political, religious, cultural and linguistic characteristics in the time of Jesus as they differ from the time in which the artists lived. That recognition represents a powerful shift in consciousness! We have not recovered from that recognition.

Think about the implications of this for the understanding of *religious* truth. When we read the Bible, for instance, we cannot read it as if it were written yesterday in contemporary English or French as spoken in the U.S. or Canada. Rather, we must recognize that it was written in another historical period with cultural, religious, social, political and linguistic characteristics very different from our own. To understand what it means now, we need to try to grasp as much as we can of what it meant then.

A task is imposed on us when we encounter "the other," whether it is in the form of a text from the distant past or a person from another culture. There is a task imposed on us. We must build bridges across the differences if we are to link the different horizons of understanding and of viewing the world and living in it. The polarizations in our church and world come from our refusal to build those bridges of understanding, of mutual interpretation, of getting to know "the other."

As I said before, it is difficult to overestimate the impact of historical consciousness on our faith-life. Who of us is not aware of the struggles of some theologians when they engage in the critical study of the Bible and doctrinal traditions of the church from the point of view of the historical contexts that produced them? We Christians continue to experience tension over making the move to historical consciousness, contending with premodern literalist interpretations and attempts to universalize certain historical circumstances into unreformable dogmas.

Postmodernism intensifies historical consciousness

The impact of the historical conditioning of knowledge is only intensified when we move to the **postmodern** era wherein truth is understood as *relative to changing circumstances*.

Let me give an example or two. Consider the reply that would be given today to one who says clearly: 2 + 2 = 4; this is so, absolutely and unchangeably! The reply would be: Yes, that is so, relative to base 10. Change the base, which is your frame of reference, the circumstances of the question, then 2 + 2 is not necessarily 4 anymore.

The point is, the postmodern world requires that we be aware of our perspective, our point of view or our frame of reference. Contingent upon this set of circumstances, thus and so is true. Relative to this set of facts, thus and so is true, etc. In this worldview, then, truth is an act of judgment, as Bernard Lonergan said so well. Truth is not simply a matter of seeing, as it was in the classical world. For example if I look at an x-ray of my lungs, I see only various shades of gray. However, if a trained technician looks at the same x-ray, with her perspective she is able to recognize, to know, whether my tissue is healthy or diseased.[5] Without that perspective which allows me to judge, I can look all I want and never really know.

What results from historical consciousness? What has us all in a knot? What is polarizing the Christian community as well as our religious communities? Relativism and pluralism. These conflicts are the consequence of the modern and postmodern views of truth clashing with the old. What do we have a most difficult time with in theology and in the church today? Relativism and pluralism.

And what is one thing crucifying the world today? The

fundamentalist reaction to relativism and pluralism—the refusal to engage in conversation at all. All the great faiths are struggling with this today. *Time* magazine in early September 2004 has a special report on "The Struggle Within Islam." One Muslim gentleman is quoted there as saying that there is no way to interpret the Koran other than literally, and therefore there is no room for moderation. Historical consciousness has had a tremendous impact on our view of the world, and we're still dealing with it.

II. WHAT CONTRIBUTION HAS HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS MADE TO OUR KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS?

Since this historical, critical approach to the Bible has been undertaken, first by Protestant scholars in the 18th century, there have been three scholarly quests for the historical Jesus. We will not deal with these in detail. Rather, I would like to mention the most startling contribution, and the most fruitful one for deepening our knowledge of Jesus, which these quests, these historical studies, have produced.

Historical consciousness helped us recognize the genre of a Gospel—that it is not a biography but a faith document, not a photograph of Jesus but a portrait of Jesus Christ.

I suppose the most **startling contribution** which resulted from the first use of modern historical research on the New Testament—and with which we still grapple today—*is the distinction between the Jesus of history* (the man from Nazareth who lived in Palestine in the first part of the first century, as recovered by using tools of modern historical research) *and the Christ of faith* (the risen Jesus who, crucified and raised, is presently reigning in his church and is accessible to all believers).[6] We need to understand this distinction because connecting Jesus of history with the Christ of faith is, in the opinion of many scholars, including myself, an indispensable guide to correctly interpreting the diversity of Christologies we encounter among the disciples of Jesus today as well as the diversity of opinions regarding what constitutes "fidelity to Jesus."[7] Some attention paid to the recovery of the church's memory of Jesus helps to make sure that what we say about the Christ of faith does not go off in fanciful directions disconnected from the historical ground of our faith.

Understanding what a Gospel is

To help us in that we turn to the most fruitful contribution made by historical consciousness to our faith, and that is: *it gave us an understanding of what a Gospel is*. It helped us recognize the genre of a Gospel—that it is not a biography but a faith document, not a photograph of Jesus but a portrait of Jesus Christ. We have four of these Gospels, all of them completely written from the point of view of the end of the story and not as a modern biography. They were written completely from the point of view of the resurrection, completely with the eyes of faith. In fact, we have in the New Testament four portraits of Jesus, four different interpretations of his meaning as the Christ of God.

Let us pause to take in the significance of knowing what kind of document a Gospel is. The Gospels, after all, are our main source for knowing Jesus. Then, in the third part I will indicate how fruitful this understanding has been for our grasp of what fidelity to Jesus should mean.

The best way to understand what the Gospels are is to understand the process by which they came to be written. The first century can be divided into thirds. Most scholars would agree that 4 B.C. is approximately when Jesus was born, and he lived to approximately the year 30. The historical Jesus lived during the first third of the first century.

Shortly after his death we have the apostolic witness to his resurrection, men and women who preached that he, Jesus, had been raised from the dead. This leads to 35 years of preaching and praying and serving in witness to Jesus on the part of the apostles and the early church. Theirs was an oral culture, a culture in which story and memory played a critical role.

The letters of St. Paul were written during this time. His letters are not preoccupied with the life of the historical Jesus; they are preoccupied with the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. They're preoccupied with the paschal event, the kerygma: Jesus is risen. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the Christ of God.

Finally the Gospels were written down in the last third

of the first century. Mark's gospel was likely the first written, around the year 65. John, the last, was in the final decade of the first century. The gospels are four portraits of Jesus, addressing four very different communities, with four very different sets of theological questions that their communities were facing at the time they were written.

One could ask: what happened to the stories and traditions about Jesus during 35 years of oral tradition? Naturally, some things about Jesus were simply forgotten. His exact words were not remembered, except perhaps some short, pithy quotations which are most memorable. The sequence of events likely shifted in the retelling. What found its way into the Gospels was the memory of Jesus filtered through the faith of the early church. We have the message of salvation recorded.

We religious of the Catholic Church have tried to do in some 35 years what Western culture has been doing for the past 350 years. We have been called upon to shift from a premodern to a modern to a postmodern worldview, stretching across all three worldviews in every aspect of our lives.

Scholars have approached the Gospels asking, how can we reconstruct the memory of the levels of that tradition that go back to Jesus? After decades and decades of this sort of scholarship, there is an emerging consensus among scholars of what we can say about the historical Jesus.

I quote here Elizabeth Johnson's version of the contemporary reconstructed image of the historical Jesus:

> In bare outline, it includes knowledge that Jesus was a member of the Jewish race, hailing from the town of Nazareth, who in his adult life started a ministry of preaching and healing centered in Galilee. He proclaimed the nearness of the reign of God and called for conversion of heart in the light of the coming of that reign. He taught in parables; addressed God as "Abba"; gathered a group of disciples; chose the marginalized people of society as the particular recipients of his ministering activity. The freedom of his behavior and the authority with which he taught raised at least implicitly a claim as to his own agency in the coming of the reign of God. Although his own perceptions were shaped by contemporary Jewish ethical and religious thought, he came into conflict with other Jewish teachers, particularly with regard to interpretations of the Law and its traditions. Going to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover he was arrested, tried, crucified and buried. Some time later, his followers began to proclaim that he had been raised from the dead.[8]

The value of this reconstructed image scholars have given us is that it offers something of an interpretive key. It is *Jesus* who is raised. It is *Jesus* who is Lord. It is *Jesus* who is the Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is not anything you want him to be. Tethering Jesus back to the ground with an historical understanding of Jesus of Nazareth helps in our interpretation.

III. How has our understanding of "fidelity to Jesus" shifted under the impact of historical consciousness?

In order to look at the impact of historical consciousness on the faithful following of Jesus (or on what we used to call the "imitation of Christ"), I want to go back to the chronology of premodern, modern and postmodern. Chronologically speaking we have all lived our entire lives in the emerging postmodern world. Yet do we not also know it to be true that, in terms of what matters most to us, (our faith-life, our prayer, our understanding of the vows and ministry, of the church and of doctrine), the majority of the members of religious orders in the United States today were raised in what can only be described as a premodern worldview? In fact, it can be said that the form of religious life which most of us have known only really began to engage the modern world when the church itself did at Vatican II. And, of course, we now realize that when the church at that time finally critically embraced the modern world, modernity itself was already giving way to postmodern pluralism and relativity.

In terms of the ways in which we actually live our lives, we religious of the Catholic Church have tried to do in some 35 years what Western culture has been doing for the past 350 years. We have been called upon to shift from a premodern to a modern to a postmodern worldview, stretching across all three world-

views in every aspect of our lives: our dress, our daily order, our ministries and community life, our understanding of the ideal of holiness and our images of God. We still find ourselves stretching from one worldview to the other, going forward and backward, backward and forward, living in all three at once, as we try to find our way.

As we look at the following of Jesus from the various perspectives, we need to remember that we and the members of our communities are most likely living out of various combinations of premodern, modern and postmodern worldviews, living eclectically out of all of them at once. It should come as no shock, then, that we share life in our congregations with sisters and confreres who have profoundly differing views about what is important, about how the world works, about what our work should be, how we should live, pray and decide on the future. To the extent that these differences are irreconcilable our congregations will experience paralysis in moving into the future.

From the "imitation of Christ" to "following Jesus"

Some religious live very directly out of what might be called a **premodern** or **classical** notion of or experience of God. We might also use the word "traditional" here. This is an experience that is comfortable with the mystical tradition. It emphasizes the transcendence and holiness of God and focuses on imitating Christ's virtues. It may be lived out by focusing on the action of the Holy Spirit in one's life, or on the intercession of Mary or another of the particular saints, novenas or some other devotional practices. But the important point about this model is that it understands "fidelity to Jesus" as the effort to imitate the virtues Christ exercised in his life, and so forth.

Most of the men and women we have known throughout our religious lives have achieved holiness in this understanding. It is the ideal of religious life with which many of us were raised. It has a tremendous potential for opening us to the transcendence and awesomeness of the Divine Mystery. It deserves the label "mystical" in that, as Janet Ruffing has put it so well, this way of understanding Jesus draws us into the lifelong effort "to seek the one thing necessary, progressive contemplative assimilation to the Christ mystery."[9]

However, it must also be said that this model deserves the label "ahistorical," or "non-historical" particularly in the sense that the concrete circumstances in which one lives (where one is, what one is doing, with whom and for whom one is doing it) are not elements that factor necessarily into what really counts for the achievement of holiness. The point is that *whatever* one is doing or *wherever* one is doing it, one must have the proper attitudes (the attitudes Christ had).

Under the influence of modern scholarship, some of us have shifted to a profound sense of Jesus' mission to bring the reign of God to our world. You might say we have shifted to an historical notion of "fidelity to Jesus" in the sense that we have different experiences of God because of a focus on the life and ministry of Jesus. So, our action on behalf of justice, our ministries, our prayer, may all evolve out of the prophetic and contemplative grasp of our identity as religious in terms of the mission to serve the coming of the reign of God. It is not necessarily that we have left the classical experience completely behind in this shift. Rather, it is the case that we have come to experience the imitation of Christ so differently that our basic intuitions about what is most important have shifted to this justice-making, kingdom-building emphasis.

We and the members of our communities are most likely living out of various combinations of premodern, modern and postmodern worldviews, living eclectically out of all of them at once. It should come as no shock, then, that we share life in our congregations with sisters and confreres who have profoundly differing views.

This shift has its origins in modern Protestant scholarship of historical study of the Bible in the late 18th century, but it really affects Catholic theology only in our century. In fact, it has only been since the Second Vatican Council (where the critical method of studying the Gospels was explicitly affirmed and taught) that a renewed understanding of "fidelity to Jesus" becomes operative in the spirituality of the faithful. Only recently, then, has historical consciousness come into play as a factor in our way of knowing Jesus.

In the historical model, the genuine humanity of Jesus is much more accessible. I am thinking here of the greater attention we have been able to pay to the ministry of Jesus, in contrast to the classical model, where, as in the words of the Apostles' Creed, we move from "born of the virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate." In an historical model, we pause over the concrete content, style, manner and meaning of the life of Jesus: what he said and to whom, how he behaved, who he favored, what made him angry, how he prayed, what his experience of God was.

Every New Testament scholar would agree (there are very few ways one can complete a sentence which begins with this phrase) that Jesus' whole life—what he said and did, what made him tick—all revolved around the coming reign of God which Jesus made present.

This consensus has unlocked tremendous richness in our prayer lives and in liberating praxis in a variety of ministries. It has enabled us to articulate such phrases as "the preferential option for the poor," and "action on behalf of justice is constitutive of the Gospel," and so forth. Where did that come from? The historical reading of the Gospels. And, perhaps most profoundly of all, it has given us a perceptive grasp into the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not as something abstractly willed by God from all eternity, but as evolving out of the concrete decisions and behavior of his life.

Jesus as liberator

I think it is fair to say that the very richness of the second model contained within it some of seeds of the move to a third understanding of "fidelity to Jesus"—the liberation, feminist model of the **postmodern** situation. Here we experience what happens when we attend to the concrete meanings of Jesus and of the Christ-event. The Christology of the second (historical) model gave us a way of dealing with what Edward Schillebeeckx calls "contrast experiences," those experiences of negativity, of evil, of injustice and inhumanity which plague human history in every age and place. In our encounter with these situations, the ministry of Jesus gives the ground and foundation and grace for the necessary protest: "No, this should not be!"

But in the postmodern situation something else becomes apparent to us as well. We begin to recognize the ways in which the Christian tradition itself, the institutionalized following of Christ, has supported and undergirded some of the structures which support or enable situations of negativity, evil, injustice and inhumanity. This, too, calls for protest, for critique, for purification. Only then does it become possible for the faithful believer (and the theologian) to search the tradition more thoroughly, imaginatively and authentically to discover elements that have been forgotten or lost or lie hidden, but which have the potential (the grace) to be instruments of conversion and liberation and a fuller realization of the reign of God in the world.[10]

It is in this way that the focus of Latin American liberation theology on Jesus Christ as "liberator" emerged, a focus which "evokes," in the words of Elizabeth Johnson,

> a new image of God, who is on the side of the oppressed with the aim to free them. It also lifts up a new image of the oppressed, [as]of great worth, the privileged focus of God's own care. Finally, it gives us a new image of discipleship, entering into the way of Jesus with the poor, a way which has a paschal character. It carries a new answer to the question, 'Who do you say I am?' Neither passive victim nor dominating Lord, Jesus is the liberating Word of God in solidarity with the poor.[11]

Similarly, feminist theologians have recognized in some of the buried and forgotten or glossed-over traditions of Christian tradition, many resources for the full flowering of women's humanity, for the real liberation of women from deep-seated cultural, social, and religious prejudices. We are all familiar, I think, with the efforts by feminist scholars to recover meanings of the Gospel stories involving women, meanings that have been suppressed or interpreted for centuries through a male-centered lens. We are also familiar with how unsettling and jarring these new interpretations and images can be for some among us.

These various theologies—mission-centered, liberationist, feminist—show clearly how historical consciousness has affected our understanding of what fidelity to Jesus might mean.

IV. Faithfully following Jesus today: What kind of a journey is it?

If Jesus is the exegesis of God, if Jesus reveals God, then the historical Jesus has to be important as the interpretive key to judge what is claimed about him—that he is the Christ of God. Let's look again at the re-

constructed image of the historical Jesus. He proclaimed the nearness of the reign of God, called for conversion of heart in the coming of that reign, addressed God as "Abba," chose the marginalized. The freedom of his behavior and the authority with which he taught raised at least implicitly the claim that the kingdom was coming in him. A faithful Jew, he came into conflict with other Jewish leaders, particularly in regard to the most important things regarding the interpretation of the law. He was crucified. Where did he get the proclamation of the nearness of God? Where did he get the freedom to declare that people's sins were forgiven? To teach in such a way that he de-

clared, "You have heard it said, but I say unto you?..." Where did he get that? From his own experience of God, from Abba, from of the unconditional love of God for him.

I guarantee you that if you go to the *authentic* life of any saint you know, you will find at the center of his or her life the experience of God's unconditional personal love. That imitation, that following of Jesus, means that Jesus' God becomes ours. We must experience the unconditional love of God.

Look hard at the death of Jesus

Following Jesus today means we need to repeat the experience of the early disciples and apostles. We need to go back to where it all began, trying to grasp the death and resurrection of Jesus and his life in that light.

It is very important how the death of Jesus is presented in the Gospels not as a stoic event. He does not go to it stoically like St. Stephen. There is no superman here. He agonizes over it; he's terrified of it. It is "a death endured screaming to God," in fidelity to his call.

The beloved of God, the prophet who proclaimed the nearness of God, the one who healed and assured others of God's forgiveness and love—was seemingly left in the lurch by his God. Jesus died a God-forsaken death, crying out the prayer, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" A few sentences later, he's raised from the dead and everything is wonderful, but the Gospel writers couldn't suppress the negativity of the death of Jesus. To his friends as well as his enemies, it had to seem that he failed. When he came into conflict with Temple law, it had to be proven who was right. If Jesus was right, then the world of the religious leaders had to be turned upside down. The Jewish authorities either had to prove him a blasphemer, a seducer of the people, a false prophet and get rid of him, or they had to get with the program. His death had to seem like he had been proven wrong. He had had nothing to do with the true God.[12]

The first step to resurrection faith is to grasp the violent negativity of the death of Jesus. Unless he (not merely his ideas, not merely what he stood for, but he himself) is raised by God from his death, our faith is in vain. We are still in our sins, as the early church says.

Resurrection speaks of God, Jesus and us

The resurrection has something to say about God, about Jesus and about us. It has something to say about God. Resurrection is an act of the power of God, it reveals who God is. What the early church grasped so clearly is not that we believe in God and then we preach that God raised Jesus from the dead. No, the God we believe in is the God that raised Jesus from the dead.

St. Paul declares, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation." The same power that began creation from the beginning out of nothing begins it all over again in the dead body of Jesus. Who do you believe in? You believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection reveals who God is. God is the one who is with us when all human power collapses. There is nothing more powerless than a dead body. God is the one who makes a way when there is no way.

Resurrection has something to say about Jesus. It is God's confirmation of Jesus. At the time it happened, Jesus' death meant that he was a false prophet, that he had had nothing to do with the true God who abandoned him in the end. The resurrection proclaims that Jesus had everything to do with God! He is the exegesis of God. He is the true revealer of God's heart. And God confirms that by raising Jesus from death. Jesus is taken into glory, his whole person is with God in a glorified way, and he can be with us in a way that he couldn't be when he was bound by time and space. Resurrected, Jesus is with us in the Spirit and through the church.

And finally the resurrection has something to say about us. As Karl Rahner would put it, "A piece of our earth, real to the core, is now with God in glory." And this begins the new creation for the rest of us.

What I'm trying to say is that in following Jesus, we need to start with the death and resurrection. We have to begin there—grappling with the negativity of his death and opening our hearts to the hope of resurrection. From there we journey to the meaning of Jesus' life and, in turn, the meaning of our life in following him.

In these postmodern times, we can take some comfort, challenge and guidance from the story of Jesus and his disciples out fishing on Lake Gennesaret. Jesus says, go out deep and lower your nets for the catch. Peter says to him, "Lord we've been at it all night and we've caught nothing. But at your word, we'll lower our nets again."

Three ways to respond to the call of Jesus

What kind of a journey is this following of Jesus? Launch out in the deep, Jesus says. It's a journey out far and in deep. In light of that, what should vocation ministers look for in candidates? I suggest asking, can they follow Jesus? Can they live the questions? Can they struggle to do God's will in the face of evidence that the kingdom is very long in coming, that the right responses are not always clear, and when it seems as if God has forsaken you? Can they agonize over what is the will of God?

What is their attitude toward this challenge from Jesus to put out into the deep water and not be afraid to go where the questions lead? There are three possible responses they (and we) can take. They can stay on the shore and dabble here and there on the edges of the water, show up at things and learn to sound as if they've been way out in the deep. But all the while, there are depths to life, to themselves and to the search for God that never touch them, never reach them, never wrench their hearts and make them into persons. They may choose that path and still become religious, but I'll tell you this, what the life is all about will always elude them, because the life is about being out far and in deep. They may choose that path and not become religious, but their time with us will largely have been wasted.

The second path is that they may choose to go out far and in deep. They may choose to go where the questions lead. But at their first experience of going under, of feeling they may drown, they grab for the shore and never venture out again. They may choose that path and become religious, but I tell you, their religious life will always be limited by anyone or anything that would take them out into the deep. They will then

Put out into deep water

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets." When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men and women." When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him.

—Luke 5, 1-11

need to get their answers from outside themselves because they themselves have backed off from the questions. They may choose that path and not become a religious, but their lives and relationships will always know that fear.

And finally our deepest prayer for our candidates and ourselves is that they choose the path of out far and in deep. They engage their hearts and minds and all their strength, tossing about in the depths of the search for God, for what it means to be human and follow God's call in company with Jesus. May they be willing to surrender their false images of God and of themselves, plunging into the waters with that kind of all or nothing abandon that is the hallmark of any true love. If they choose that path, whether they become religious or not, they will be human persons. And if they do become religious, they will be the only kind the church needs, those who are willing to pay the price to become human beings, who know how to lead others from the depths of fear and despair to faith and hope. Welcome them into that journey, to this business of headlong plunges into risky waters, the unknown reaches of human existence and into the awesome mystery of God. And they and you can take comfort in this—that their self gift is already bathed in, already made possible by, already snatched up in God's love. God already has them. The power that propels, that draws them in their headlong plunge is the power of God's love in which the whole universe is drowning.

Develop in them and in yourselves the eyes and heart to see things that far out and that in deep. For in this is all wisdom, everything that the Christian tradition—premodern, modern and postmodern—has to offer the world: that the crucial thing in giving ourselves over to a mysterious God is that it requires all the courage a human heart can have, and yet there is nothing to fear, for that Mystery is Love. The bottomlessness into which we go is the merciful arms of God. This is where Jesus leads. Let us hurry up then and follow. ✚

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1. The text has been edited from the spoken version delivered at the Convocation.
2. Vol. 16, No. 3, Spring, 2003, p. 2.
3. See Thomas P. Rausch, *Who Is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology.* Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003, p. 7.
4. Mission statement taken from their Web site: www.sojo.net. The ad/petition can also be accessed at that site.
5. Bernard Lonergan offers this example. As Lonergan makes clear, taking the position that truth is an act of the judgment is not a simple declaration. Among the great achievements of his theology is to show the deeply human and rigorous contours of striving to live authentically. His statement that "genuine objectivity [with regard to truth and value] is the fruit of authentic subjectivity" is far from reductive relativism. See *Method in Theology*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, p. 292, and his seminal work, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1957.
6. John P. Meier is very helpful here. See "The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts," *Theological Studies,* 51, 1990, p. 15ff.
7. Johnson, Elizabeth A. "The Theological Relevance of the Historical Jesus: A Debate and a Thesis." *The Thomist* 48, 1984, pp. 1-43.
8. Ibid, pp. 7-8.
9. Talk for Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Region 2, on models of Christology and their relation to spirituality, 10/26/93, p. 4, manuscript copy. My categories differ from Ruffing's in that I place the liberation and feminist perspectives in the same model because I feel they both are "postmodern" in the sense in which I develop the term.
10. Mary Catherine Hilkert, in her work, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*, New York: Continuum, 1997, offers a profound and helpful description of the deep pattern of a postmodern hearing, preaching and living the Word of God.
11. Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. New York: Crossroad, 1990, p. 93.
12. Hans Küng makes these points powerfully in his work, *On Being a Christian*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966, pp. 339-342.

We trust in a Savior who will lead us on an unpredictable journey. Faithfulness to the journey means our individual stories are shaped by our community stories, which ultimately rest in the story of the paschal mystery.

Journey into the future

by Timothy Radcliffe, OP

I am very happy to be with you for this conference. I have never been a vocation director. In fact I only once ever succeeded in bringing someone into my order. Once when I was visiting in the United States, I met a young Dominican student, and I asked him why he became a Dominican. He replied, "Because a Dominican invited me to join the order." So I said, "Well done. Who was it?" And he replied: "It was you." And then I realized what had happened. A few years before, I went out to lunch with a cousin of mine and an American friend of hers. I asked this man about his children. And he told me that one of them was going to become a Jesuit. I was, of course, deeply shocked. And on the spot, during lunch, I wrote a postcard to this young man, whom I had never met, saying: "What is this about joining the Jesuits? Join the Dominicans!" And he did! So if there are any Jesuits present, you might like to know that you lost a fine Biblical scholar!

That is my only experience of vocation promotion. I did not want to spoil my record. And so I have no great expertise. But at least I hope to show my support for your profoundly important service to religious life.

In these two lectures I wish to look at what it might mean to have a vocation to religious life, and what are the challenges we face in presenting this vocation to people today. And at the end you will be able to say, "Well, you can see that he has never been a vocation director!" But I console myself, as so often when I lecture, by remembering an American brother of mine. He gave a lecture, and when he sat down, the applause was rather tepid. So he turned to the man beside him and said, "I hope it wasn't that bad." And the man replied, "Don't worry. I don't blame you. I just blame the people who invited you to come and speak."

Timothy Radcliffe, OP

Society's loss of a sense of vocation

I wish to start by taking us through a particular little drama, which is the calling of Peter in Luke's Gospel. (See this Gospel passage on page 19.)

Luke tells us that Jesus "saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets." Peter was a fisherman. This was not just a job that he did for a few hours every day. It was a skill, a craft. He probably came from a family of

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fishermen. His cousins fished in the other boats. He probably grew up, as people still do in poor rural areas today, knowing that this was to be his future. He learned how to make nets and repair them, how to read the weather, sail his boat, know what sorts of fish could be found where. It was more than a job. It shaped his whole life. One might say that it was his life. It was his calling.

Nowadays there are few fishermen in this sense. There are giant factory ships, which indiscriminately scoop up tons of fish, process and freeze them. Satellites tell the captain where to find the fish. Of course these people need technological skills, factory skills, but no longer the skills of a fisherman. It is just a job and not a vocation. Usually most of the crew are poor immigrants from the Philippines or Thailand or Eastern Europe. They have few rights and are often treated with cruelty and separated from their families. They are not fishermen or fisher women. They are people who just happen to fish and might do something else if they got the chance.

The crisis in religious vocations is partly rooted in the loss of the sense that it matters much what you do.

This is symptomatic of a transformation of what it means to work today. Since the Industrial Revolution, work has structured most people's lives from youth until retirement. Being a fisherman or a plumber or a business executive was profoundly part of who one was. It gave one a sense of value, a place in society. It defined how you contributed to the progress of society, how you built a better world.

This was even more the case if you had what we used to call a vocational job, such as a nurse, a doctor, a teacher or an academic. There was a shared sense that this was a calling. In England, though I suspect not in the States, this meant that you did not have to pay these people much money. They were following their vocation, like religious and priests. In fact the idea of a *religious* vocation was nourished and strengthened by the shared idea that what you did was significant. It shaped your life. It was at the heart of the story that you might tell about yourself.

The crisis in religious vocations is partly rooted in the loss of the sense that it matters much what you do. And this crisis has at least two roots. One is that our jobs, and especially vocational work like teaching or nursing, went with a deep sense of belonging. To be a fisherman was to belong to the community of people who lived from fishing. To be a nurse was to belong to the nursing profession. This sense of belonging has been profoundly weakened for all sorts of reasons. We individualistic Westerners are very suspicious of all institutions, whether the government, the media or the church. We are wary of belonging to institutions. So it would seem strange and even threatening that one might have a vocation to belong to a religious institution for life—the Franciscans, the Salesians or even a diocese. In the second lecture I will look at the challenge of how belonging may be good news: the liberation of learning to say "we."

No sense of being part of a bigger story

But now in this lecture, I want to look at the other crisis that is undermining our sense of a vocation. We have lost the sense that the meaning of our lives is to be found in a long narrative that reaches out to a future. Until recently one's job was a central part of that longer narrative. It shaped the story that said who we are. One might begin as a junior nurse, but one could imagine climbing the ladder of promotion until one became that most terrifying of all human beings, a matron! One might start as a junior lecturer at the university but hope one day to sit in the president's office and fire all one's enemies. One might start in the army as a sergeant and dream of being a general. That sense of one's life as a whole was deeply important in sustaining the idea of a religious vocation, in which you gave your whole life, not just until retirement but until death.

But we have largely lost that sense of the longer story of our lives, and especially of the role of work in them. I think there are two reasons why. First, work has ceased to be for life. The average American has 11 jobs in a working life. Companies no longer depend upon a stable work force. They hire and fire. They keep people on short-term contracts, or even no contracts. You must adapt and find new jobs as the needs of the market change.

Zygmunt Bauman wrote, "Secure jobs in secure com-

panies seem to be the yarn of grandfathers' nostalgia; nor are there many skills and experiences which, once acquired, would guarantee that the job will be offered, and once offered, will prove lasting. No one may reasonably assume to be insured against the next round of 'downsizing,' 'streamlining' or 'rationalizing,' against erratic shifts of market demand and whimsical yet irresistible, indomitable pressures of 'competitiveness,' 'productivity' and 'effectiveness.' Flexibility is the catchword of the day. It augurs jobs without inbuilt security, firm commitments or future entitlements, offering no more than fixed-term or rolling contracts, dismissal without notice and no right to compensation."[1]

We have lost the sense of having a shared future. We have lost our dreams of a better humanity. The utopias are gone.

People are disposable, spare parts that can be fitted in and out of jobs as are the spare parts of a car or a washing machine. We live in a society of weak and temporary ties, whether in marriage or the work place. And so, as Nicholas Boyle has written, we can still just about say "he is a printer" or "she is a teacher," but increasingly this is not who they are but what they just happen to be doing at the moment. In such a society it is hard to appropriate a sense that I am a Dominican or that I am a priest. The temptation is to think of these as things that one happens to be doing right now. Who knows what I will do tomorrow?

Lost belief in a better tomorrow

This loss of a sense of having a whole life is rooted in a deeper crisis. We have lost the sense of having a shared future. We have lost our dreams of a better humanity. The utopias are gone. Oliver Bennet argues that as we begin this new millennium, Western culture is suffering from a collective depression. We seem to be destined toward disaster, the growth of violence in our cities, the spread of AIDS, increasing poverty, terrorism, clashes between religions and ecological disaster.

Most people until the late 80s did live by a longer story. It was called progress. Every year the planes and cars got faster; there were new inventions; countries were liberated from the British Empire. Even the food in England improved. It became possible to eat snails and frog legs. My mother put garlic in the cooking when my father was not looking. The kingdom of God must be nigh! It is the last echo of the confidence of our Victorian ancestors. As Charles Dickens wrote, "Time is rolling for an end, and the world is, in all great essentials, better, gentler, more forbearing and more hopeful, as it rolls." [2]

We lost that sense of a future some time around the end of the Cold War. As Fukuyama famously said, history is ended. Our society is living through a crisis of despair. This does not necessarily mean that everyone is miserable, though there is an epidemic of suicides of young people all over the globe, from Ireland to Japan. Rather we have lost confidence that humanity is going anywhere. Our utopias have fallen.

Only two public narratives offer a vision of the future. One is scientific. It tells of how we live between the Big Bang and the Big Chill, when all the universe will grow cold. Humanity has never lived with such a vast sense of time before. But it is a story that holds no promise for humanity. We have no special role within this story, except maybe to cause the occasional ecological disaster on our unimportant little planet. We are also beginning to live within another narrative, which is that of the so-called "war on terrorism." And it is producing more and more violence and bloodshed by the day. What would ever count as winning it?

So our society suffers from a deep crisis of hope. This is not because people are necessarily miserable, but because it has lost the promise of a future. There is only today. So it is now that we must live. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. This sort of a society may find it hard to wrap its head around the idea of a vocation which is *usque ad mortem*. It is full of generous people who care deeply about humanity, and long for a just world. But that is not the same thing as understanding a vocation which may structure and form a whole life.

In fact the idea of religious vocation has been dealt a double whammy. Many religious lived their vocation by practicing some secular vocation. They were religious nurses or teachers or doctors or academics. But if there are no secular vocations, then their sense of vocation is doubly undermined. I wonder if this is one reason for the massive exodus of religious from vocational work and into parish ministry in the last few

years. Of course shortage of the numbers to run hospitals and schools was one reason. Maybe we also shared in our society's loss of confidence in secular vocations.

So in a society that has lost any sense of a secular vocation, a religious vocation is doubly hard to understand. It is like trying to understand the Eucharist when you have never seen bread. What on earth can "the bread of life" mean if you do not know what ordinary bread is? Even more profoundly, a society which has lost its sense of the future will find it hard to grasp what it means to give one's whole life to the Lord. What can it possibly mean in the Now Generation to give one's life away *usque ad mortem*?

A religious vocation is a dramatic and sometimes painful moment in this calling of us by name, which will go on and on until we are fully alive.

Religious life should be a sign of hope

So this is why your role as vocation directors is so hard but also so exciting and important. What is at issue is not ultimately recruitment so that we can keep our orders and congregations from extinction. What is at issue is the wonderful challenge of discovering signs of hope. In a society that is tempted to despair of the future, then religious life, with our crazy vows, is an expression of our hope for humanity. It says to people, "You can find a way of being alive that gives meaning to your whole life and beyond." The religious vocation has only any interest or importance in so far as it expresses something of the human vocation. Religious life says something about what it means to be a human being. Other vocations, such as marriage, also do this in other ways, but that is not our concern this morning. And at this moment our vocation is called to show what it means to live with hope.

We seem to have forgotten Peter and his cousins washing their nets. So let's get back to them and see what they teach us about hope.

"Depart from me for I am a sinful man."

In Luke we read: "Jesus saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets." So these are fishers who have already stopped fishing. They are washing their nets because their fishing is over. Peter thinks that it is over for the day. Tomorrow will be another day of fishing and so on until the end of his life. In fact, except for one last glorious catch, it is over forever. And when Peter does haul in the great catch, it almost sinks the boat. His new life will indeed sink his life as a fisherman. This first little phrase anticipates the last phrase of this section, "When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him." Peter's life as a fisher of fish is already finished, even if he does not know it.

Jesus says to them, in the Greek, "From now onwards you will be catching people alive." To the Now Generation, Jesus bursts in with, "From now onwards!" Jesus invites Peter to embark on a journey to the future. However Peter does not seem to be at all enthusiastic. Instead of standing up to walk, he falls onto his knees and says, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." He resists his new calling. He wishes to be left alone.

This lovely little story turns upon the word of Jesus. The people are hungry for Jesus' word, and press around Jesus. He has to use Peter's boat to get a bit of space. Peter cannot see the point of going fishing again, but he does it at the word of Jesus. And finally he hears the word which says, "From now onwards, you will be catching people alive." So we see an ambiguity in our relationship to that word. It is a word for which we hunger. It is a word that Peter trusts enough for him to go fishing again. But it is also a word that he resists, because it will change who he is.

The word of God does not primarily give us information. It is the call to be. It called the world into existence in the beginning. It calls each of us into being too. Just as God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. So he says, "Let there be Timothy," and Timothy was. But God does not just leave it there. God goes on speaking the word which summons each human being to be. God speaks that word through our parents as they open our minds. God speaks that word through the people whom we love, and in the Scriptures. A religious vocation is a dramatic and sometimes painful moment in this calling of us by name, which will go on and on until we are fully alive.
This call is always a break and a continuity. Peter goes on being a fisherman, but not of dead fish, rather of live people. In a similar way God called Francis of As-

sisi, the wild young troubadour who sang of love, to become the troubadour of God's love. He called Ignatius the soldier to become Christ's solider. One of our brethren who was a lawyer in Paris, now is a lawyer for those caught by slavery in the Amazon. Or I think of a brother who used to teach ballet at Washington University who now dances for the Lord. He danced at our General Chapter three years ago, to the delight of many and the alarm of a few!

Peter resists at first. He wants Jesus to go away and leave him alone. He is contented to be a fisher of fish. He resists transformation. It is a sort of dying that is part of God's bringing us to flourish. We resist because we are reluctant to let go of what we know and are. When I joined the order as a novice in 1965, I found myself with a group of novices who came from incredibly different backgrounds. I came from a relatively privileged background. I had never lived or even spoken to people like this. I was glad to leave behind my old privileged world. I was excited at finding a new identity with these people who were so unlike the old world in which I had lived. And yet part of me resisted. My elder brothers used to hand on their second-hand clothes, which I loved, not because they were second-hand but because they reminded me of the life I had left and who I had been.

Peter says, "Depart from me. I am a sinful man." One of my brethren, Richard Finn, OP wrote, "To be forgiven, to become a disciple, is necessarily to abandon those sins that have been part of our lives. Think, for example, what it takes in terms of personal and social identity to abandon sectarianism, homophobia, or nationalism…. But Jesus tells Simon not to be afraid. What we fear as disintegration, our loss of who we are, is not our undoing, but our making."[3] Joining the order will mean giving up being a consumer, defined by one's purchasing power, giving up a sort of sexual identity. In the States our novitiates are increasingly multi-ethnic. One has to move beyond too tight an identification with one's own ethnic roots.

When someone gives up an old way of life and decides to try a religious vocation, their friends are often astonished. They are doing something odd. It can almost seem inhuman. "How can a nice young woman like you give up marriage and a career and wealth and freedom and become a nun?" But I believe that a religious vocation is just an explicit sign of what is the vocation of every human being: responding to the God who calls us from the day that we are born until we die, and who goes on honing and varnishing us, and chipping away until we are as God intended us to be in Christ. To be human is to become. It is to be someone who is just on the way to flourishing. It is to be a pilgrim.
When Michael Moore received the *Palme d'Or* this year in Cannes for "Fahrenheit 9/11," he said that a Jesuit education had taught him always to ask how he might become a better person. Somehow these religious men had embodied a question that always remains, a hope, an invitation to carry on walking. They had expressed something about what it is to be a human being.

Religious are part of a bigger story

How might we, as religious, be signs that to be human is to be on the way? Last time I tried to answer that question was for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men of the U.S. in 1996. Then I did it in terms of religious life as leaving behind the usual signs of identity. Our vows liberate us from the usual ways in which people have identity in this world and so point to the kingdom. I still think that for me that is the best way of putting it. But given that that lecture has been published, I have to find another way to answer the question this time, otherwise you might ask for your money back. And so I shall use a slightly different approach this time. I shall suggest that our religious lives point

to the kingdom because we live a story whose end is beyond our grasp! To be a religious is to live a story whose conclusion we cannot articulate. It is to vow to be open to surprises.

"Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men and women."

Our society is suffering from a crisis of hope because we have lost a sense of the future. Who could have a facile confidence in humanity's progress after Auschwitz? The last century was crucified by those who thought that they knew where humanity was headed

Our odd way of life is a sort of sign of the open-ended story of the human vocation. It subverts any facile understanding of where we might be headed. It is a lived question mark for everyone who thinks that they have the plot worked out.

and tried to frogmarch us in the right direction. Tens of millions of people died in the Soviet gulags on the way to a Communist paradise; six million Jews and millions of other people died in the march to an Aryan paradise. Rampant capitalism is killing millions more. A few months ago I visited the Tuol Sleng genocide center in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This was one of dozens of places where the Pol Pot regime purified Cambodia of those who stood in the way of his road map. The bishop, who lived through all this, said to me, "Everyone who spoke a foreign language, wore glasses, was educated or had soft hands died." A third of all the population was killed. Every single Cambodian priest was murdered. In the last century we saw that those who know where we are going and how to get there often end up building the killing fields. Many people are deeply fearful that the "war on terrorism" may be in the process of becoming another attempt to impose a road map on humanity that will lead to yet more slaughter.

We Christians hope for the kingdom. But we have no idea how we shall get there. We cannot look at the book of Revelation and say, "Hey guys, five plagues down and just two to go." Our hope is that we shall attain God's promise, but we have no more idea than anyone else how we shall arrive.

Our community finds its origins in the Last Supper. This is our foundational story. Paradoxically, it is the story of the time when the disciples lost any story of the future. On the road to Jerusalem they had been sustained surely by some story of what was going to happen. We are not sure what it was: The rebellion against Rome? The restoration of Israel? Jesus as a Warrior King? As the disciples on the road to Emmaus confessed to Jesus: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). Whatever story they told now collapsed. Judas had sold Jesus; Peter was about to betray him. The other disciples would flee in fear. Faced with his passion and death they had no story to tell. In this moment in which this fragile community broke down, then Jesus took bread, blessed it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, given for you." And likewise with the wine.

Here is a paradox. The Eucharist is our sacrament of hope, but hope does not mean having a story about the future. The Last Supper was the moment when there was no story to tell, when the community disintegrated and everyone ran away. Our founding story is of the collapse of any adequate story.

Embracing the unknown

So one might say that it is the vocation of every Christian disciple to go forward bravely toward the kingdom, without the foggiest idea of how he or she will get there. Peter was called from his regular life of fishing, from that daily routine, in order to fish people alive. But he had no idea what that might mean or where it might take him. This is not an accident. It was not that Jesus could have told him but preferred not to. It is because as Christians we believe that we are on the way to what is beyond description and imagination. As St. Paul wrote, quoting Isaiah more or less, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). Our hope is for what is beyond words. Our odd way of life is a sort of sign of the open-ended story of the human vocation. It subverts any facile understanding of where we might be headed. It is a lived question mark for everyone who thinks that they have the plot worked out.

Think of obedience for a moment. Later we shall look at what obedience means in terms of belonging. It also says something of what it means to be someone who does not know what his or her future is going to be. There is the old saying, "If you want to make God laugh, then tell him your plans." One might also add,

tell your brethren and sisters too. Obedience is not a servile and blind submission of the will. It is a vow to never stop letting oneself be surprised.

One of my close friends in the order is a French Dominican called Jean Jacques. He was trained as an economist, went to Algeria to study irrigation, learned Arabic and taught in the university there. It was tough, but he was profoundly content. And then one day his provincial phoned to ask him to come back to France to teach economics in the University of Lyons. He was utterly thrown; he grieved, and then he remembered the joy of having given his life away without condition. So he went and bought a bottle of champagne to celebrate with his friends. A few years later I was elected to be master of the order and I was desperate to have someone in the General Council whom I knew. I tracked down Jean Jacques and asked him to come. He asked if he could think about it. So I said yes. He asked if he could take a month. I asked him to take a day. He said yes. More champagne. Obedience is the freedom of not knowing what is coming.

It is obedience not just to our brethren and sisters. It is obedience to the people. I remember another French Dominican called Jean. He had been a worker-priest, working in a car factory in Paris. After some 20 years, he decided that he needed to move to an even poorer community. He decided to go to India and live with the poorest. He came to Oxford to learn Bengali. I asked him what he was going to do when he arrived there. "What is your plan?" He confessed that he did not know. It was for the people to tell him what to do. He must be attentive to the Lord who spoke through his people. Obedience means that you dare not to know beforehand.

Of course it is not only religious who practice this obedience. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a Methodist minister in Kansas who stood up against the segregation of his parish. He stood by the door to make sure anyone of any color could enter. So it was on that door that they nailed an effigy of him and drove him out of town. She wrote, "That was when I began to understand that God's call was not only wonderful but also terrible…. It had sharp edges to it. It was capable of cutting deep, and those who reached out to grasp it had best be prepared to bleed."[4] No wonder Peter resists.
What is distinctive about our vows is not that we are obedient to the Lord. Every Christian disciple is called to be this. But our vow is a sort of public expression that all human beings are summoned toward what is beyond all imagination. We are the strip artists of obedience. Everyone takes their clothes off at night. We publicly expose the unpredictability of God's summons. Religious life offers no career structure. We embrace a future that is unknowable; not because our superiors are unpredictable but as a sign of the God who calls us beyond all that we might ever imagine.

And this is so of poverty and chastity as well. I shall say a word just about chastity, since it may be less obvious. Herbert McCabe, OP wrote that chastity which is not a manifestation of love "is merely the corpse of true chastity."[5] Married love speaks of the love that is God in one way. It does this by having an implied plot, an ideal story of mutual commitment and a shared life. The hope is that the married couple will live happily ever after. No marriage follows the plot exactly of

We embrace a future that is unknowable; not because our superiors are unpredictable but as a sign of the God who calls us beyond all that we might ever imagine.

course. But the vow of chastity speaks of the God who is love in another way, as an adventure into the unknown. To take the vow of chastity is to embrace our ignorance of whom we shall be called to love and who shall love us. We think that we are indeed going to live happily ever after, and then we are assigned to another community, maybe far from our friends.

When I went to Rome, my biggest worry was whom I would find to love and who would love me. In England I had a close network of friendship and love upon which I depended. Now I was setting off to this big Dominican curia, with all these important sounding people: The procurator general, the postulator general, the treasurer of the order and so on. I had no idea what they did and even worse, whether I might find the love that I needed so much. But I did, "in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over" (Luke 6.8). One cannot be sure. One might be locked up in a cell by one's brethren, like St. John of the Cross. Yet somehow the Lord will provide the love for the journey, as he fed Elijah trekking across the wilderness to the mountain.

Disciples follow an unpredictable journey

Because religious life speaks of our hope for an unknown future, I believe that it will always necessarily involve people who make vows until death. Because it is a sign of the God who goes on calling humanity until we are all fully alive in the kingdom, then fidelity for life is part of the sign.

It makes visible how we embark on an unpredictable journey, summoned beyond all that we know and can imagine. And this embraces death, the doorway into the unknown through which we must all pass. The way

The trouble is that we do not just entrust ourselves into the hands of God. We do this by placing ourselves in the hands of our brothers and sisters. And you have no idea what they will do with you. This is scary.

in which we religious die is often a true martyrdom, which is to say a witness to hope. We entrust ourselves to the darkness, with confidence. I remember a famous and eccentric English Dominican called Gervase Matthew, who summoned me to his deathbed in the hospital. He told me that he was dying and that I must go to the shops and buy two tins of beer so that we could drink to the kingdom of God. A nurse was passing by, pursuing her vocation, and she said, "Father Gervase, you know that you are not allowed to drink with your pills." And he replied, "Don't be a silly old thing. I am going to die tomorrow morning." I told him that I must cancel a lecture that evening in London. And he told me not to, since he had never stopped any of his brethren teaching, and that he would hold on until I got back the next day, which he did.

A well-known and excellent spiritual writer called John O'Donohue wrote that the best decision that he ever made was to be a priest, and the second best decision was to leave the ministry. He may be right. But in that case I believe that one must either say that he never had a vocation to be a priest or else that he gave it up. Maybe he had a vocation to be a spiritual writer, and that was nourished by his time as a priest. But one's vocation is what speaks of the meaning of the whole of one's life.

Every Christian has a vocation to be a disciple, and their discipleship might involve a sharing in our life for a while, collaboration with our ministry. Associates are a wonderful part of most religious families. But as I understand it, and I may well be wrong, to be a professed religious is to embrace a life and a death that speaks of God's fidelity. God gives us his word, and we give our word back. This happens in marriage too, but differently.

For this path we need two things, courage and joy. Jesus says to Peter, "Do not be afraid. From now onwards you will be catching people alive." We need the courage to set out into the deep. As the Pope wrote in "Novo Millennio Ineunte," *"Duc in altum*!" We have to form each other as courageous men and women for this journey into the unknown. This is especially our role in our beloved church, which is often lacking in real courage, in which people are often afraid of every shadow in the dark. Courage does not mean that we are without fear, but that we are not ruled by fear. Peter was often afraid, but he carried on until the end.

And we walk with joy. Our lives will only point to the fulfillment of every human vocation if they are marked already by the joy that is our destiny. I was drawn to religious life because I saw the joy of the religious whom I loved. Already on the road we are touched by the joy of arrival: "They are happy whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the roads to Zion" (Psalm 83). So we have to be signs of the courage and joy of those who do not know what lies around the corner. We promise to let God go on surprising us.

Surrender to God through community

So far we've seen that Peter's vocation was to set off for an unknown future. He gave up the security of a known way of life as a fisher of fish, and embraced a life full of surprises. By our vows, we promise to go on letting God surprise us, until we reach the kingdom, which is beyond all that we can imagine. We entrust ourselves into God's hands. This is terrifying. But, as D.H. Lawrence, wrote, it is terrible to fall into the hands of the living God. But it is far worse to fall out of them.

I am reminded of the story of the man who was driving along a cliff one day, wondering whether he believed in God or not. In fact he got so distracted that he drove over the edge. He fell out of the car and got tangled in a tree, suspended over the abyss. Suddenly

belief became a practical and urgent issue. He called out, "Help! Is there anyone there?" And a voice was heard crying, "Yes, my child, I am here. Do not worry." "Save me please." And the voice replied, "Let go of the branch, drop into the air, and I will save you." And he thought for a while and cried out, "Is there anyone else there?"

The trouble is that we do not just entrust ourselves into the hands of God. We do this by placing ourselves in the hands of our brothers and sisters. And you have no idea what they will do with you. This is scary. They may send you on a dangerous mission when you want to stay at home or the other way around. When I was examined for solemn profession, I said that I would be happy to do virtually anything, as long as I never had to be a superior. I then had almost 20 uninterrupted years in that role. At least they never made me vocation director!

For our contemporaries it is not just scary but incomprehensible. It runs directly contrary to our modern understanding of what it means to be a free, autonomous adult, which is to have control over one's life. It looks infantile and oppressive, as if religious are immature people who dare not grow up and take hold of their own lives. Western society is marked by a profound distrust of institutions. This is true of all institutions—the government, business administrations, the police—including the church. Institutions are seen as imprisoning us in their own agenda. Freedom is freedom from constraint by anyone. It is an infringement of our liberty for anyone to tell us what to do, whether it is government, the church or even one's husband or wife. So how can one promise to belong forever?

And let's be honest, many religious congregations did have a tradition of obedience that was infantile. Superiors in some communities did treat their brethren and sisters as if they were children. I never experienced this myself, but I have heard horror stories, especially of what happened in some congregations of sisters. And this must surely be why many older religious find it hard to belong in community. Vast numbers of religious have left their communities and live in flats alone. Sometimes this is for good apostolic reasons. Sometimes it is because they suffered so much from a suffocating understanding of community life, that they still hurt too much to cope with it. But we shall never attract young people unless we build community. How can we invite them to belong to us, unless we dare to belong to each other? In a world that is scared of commitment, we religious should be a sign of the freedom to belong. It is the freedom of Jesus, who placed himself in the hands of his disciples, knowing what they would do. This is my body, and I give it to you. Do with me what you will.

So we can think of a vocation as having a double dimension. We place ourselves in God's hands, promising to let ourselves go on being surprised. And we place ourselves in our brothers' and sisters' hands, daring to belong.

Our three intersecting stories

Let me put it another way. Richard Rohr wrote a book in which he argues that in the Bible there are three sorts of story, "my story," "our story" and "The story." I confess that I have never read the book and so I do not know what he does with this idea, but I find it helpful for understanding the meaning of a vocation.

There is "my story," the story that I tell about my life and which gives me a sense of identity and meaning. There is "our story," the story which any group—a nation, a family or a religious order—tells which says who we are, and what it means to be one of us. To be an American, one must know something of the story of the United States and of its tragically mistaken choice of independence from the mother country. (Come back, all is forgiven!) Or to be a Franciscan is to learn the stories of Francis and his early brethren and sisters. Finally there is "The story," which is the story of creation and redemption, which takes us from the alpha to the omega. A vocation to be a religious is one way of living the dynamic relationship between these three

sorts of story. We find our home in the interplay between them.

Earlier I discussed the relationship between "my story" and "The story." We saw how Peter the fisherman found his regular life disrupted. He was caught up into something bigger. He became part of the Gospel story, which wrenched him out of Galilee and propelled him to Jerusalem and on to Rome. His story became part of the story of redemption. The important story is no longer his autobiography but this larger story in which he discovered who he was. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). The real story of Peter's life does not go from his birth to his death. It is part of a story that goes from creation to the kingdom. As religious we try to be signs of that longer narrative, the pilgrimage of humanity, with all its surprises and its hope. So that's the relationship between "my story" and "The story."

When Peter left his nets and followed Jesus, he had to learn to say "we" in a new way. He was no longer a member of the fishing community. He was one of the disciples. He embraced a new sort of belonging.

Now I want to look at another dynamic, which is that between "my story" and "our story." When Peter left his nets and followed Jesus, he had to learn to say "we" in a new way. He was no longer a member of the fishing community. He was one of the disciples. He embraced a new sort of belonging. In fact he did more than that. He was part of making a story in which we could belong too. It is a story which tells of the birth of our home in the church, where we can all belong.

So what sort of stories do we tell so that people may join our communities and learn to say "we," we Mercy Sisters, we Carmelites, we Redemptorists? Is it a "we" that extinguishes the story that I might tell of myself? Does it turn me into an identical friar, just a member of the Dominican pack of hounds, or does it free me into a belonging in which I am strong and free? What sort of home do our stories offer?

The first life story of St. Dominic, written shortly after his death, was part of a volume called the *Vitae Fratrum*, "The Lives of the Brethren." When the earliest brethren began to die, we had to tell the stories of our origins. It was a way of securing our identity. We did not do this with a biography of the founder, above and apart from his followers. There was no life of Dominic. Brother Dominic was just one of the first brothers. It was his genius to create brotherhood around him. He did not want disciples but brethren. So to have written his biography would have betrayed what he was all about, one of the brethren.

So, what are the sorts of stories that we tell now? Do they create a space in which new brothers and sisters may find a home? I know that with the Dominicans we sometimes fall into the temptation to tell stories of the great and glorious. We tell stories of Dominic, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, Martin de Porres, Fra Angelico, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Chenu, Congar and so on. It looks as if these are the *real* Dominicans. But this can have two unintended side effects. The young might wonder whether they can be the heirs of such a tradition. What space is there here for the ordinary, the mediocre, the fragile and fallible friar or sister, with struggles and victories and defeats? Can I belong with these heroes?

When I announced to my Benedictine great uncle that I was going to become a Dominican, he asked me whether it was a good idea. Weren't Dominicans all supposed to be frightfully intelligent? Would I be accepted? But then he thought for a while and said that I should not worry. He had come across some stupid Dominicans and so I might have a chance. We need stories not just of the friars who thrived and became famous but those who struggled on, failed and picked themselves up again, ordinary people. The best vocation promoter I ever knew was a rather ordinary friar. He was not a star, we all teased him, but young people met him and they could imagine being his brother.

Mind you, it can work the other way around. When I was provincial I remember noticing that we were receiving lots of vocations from Glasgow, and I suggested to the provincial council that maybe we ought to strengthen our presence there so as to attract even more people. And a wise old friar replied, "That is the very last thing we should do. If they were to meet some real Dominicans, then they might be put off from joining altogether."

Transformation starts with self-forgetfulness

Becoming "one of us" requires a slow travail, a rebirth at a deep level. I will suggest just three elements in this process of transformation. I am sure that you will think of others. First of all we have to learn a self-forgetfulness that leads to a self-discovery; secondly we need to learn how to engage in conversation with those who are different from us and yet the same. Finally our brethren or sisters help us to discover who we are. They are the co-authors of any story that I may tell of myself.

A vocation is always being called to leave the center of the stage, to give up being the still point at the middle of the universe and to join humanity. One has to dare to let go of the branch of selfhood and drop off.

Let us begin with self-forgetfulness. Almost the first words of Peter in Luke are, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord." His last words, at the Council of Jerusalem are, ''We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, just as [the Gentiles] will" (Acts 15:11). He begins with himself, focused on his sinfulness, and he ends with the grace that makes possible a new "we." This is a passage that passes through crisis, failure and forgiveness. It passes through that awful moment in which he says, "I do not know the man." The passage from "I" to "we" passes through a terrible moment of forgetfulness, when he forgets both who he is and who is his Lord.

Self-forgetfulness is extremely hard in our culture because of the way our culture consecrates a particular sort of individualism. The modern understanding of self, starting from Descartes, is founded on self-consciousness. *Cogito ergo sum*. I can think of myself thinking and so I exist. Self-consciousness is where we start from, and so self-forgetfulness might almost feel like mental suicide. Forget yourself and you might cease to exist at all.

Yet the profound insecurity of modernity means that we need all the assurance that we can get that we really do exist. We have to go on pinching ourselves, as it were, to be assured that there is someone there. So much modern spirituality is the cultivation of the self. New Age spirituality is sometimes called "self spirituality." The self is sacred, and I must tend it with care. Meditation, gurus, Eastern wisdom all may be called upon to make me the sort of person that I would like to be. The self is stuck at the center. As Noel Coward once said when he met a friend after many years, "I am afraid that there is not enough time to talk about both of us. Let's talk about me."

Someone once wrote to a famous Rabbi, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, saying that he was deeply unhappy. He wrote, "I would like the Rebbe's help. I wake up each day sad and apprehensive. I can't concentrate. I find it hard to pray. I keep the commandments, but I find no spiritual satisfaction. I go to the synagogue but I feel alone. I begin to wonder what life is about. I need help." And the Rebbe just sent the letter back underlining the first word of each sentence. And it is always the same one, "I."[6]

A vocation is always being called to leave the center of the stage, to give up being the still point at the middle of the universe and to join humanity. One has to dare to let go of the branch of selfhood and drop off. But how can I do that? The more that I command myself to stop thinking about myself, the more I am aware of myself doing so. Many of Jesus' parables are designed to do just that. They liberate us from narcissism. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" There he is, smack in the middle. He wants to know who is neighbor to him. But the parable turns him inside out. It concludes with Jesus asking, "Who proved neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?" It is the wounded man who is now the focus.

This self-forgetfulness is true humility. Humility is not thinking ill of oneself, considering oneself a worm and no man. In Rome sometimes I used to get driven crazy when I received endless letters from Spanish nuns—don't tell them—ending always with the words, "the least of all your sisters, the most unworthy of all your Dominican sisters, etc." There was hot competition in the humility stakes! I notice that the brethren never wrote like this! For St. Thomas, humility is having a true estimation of one's value. Jean-Louis Bruges, a French Dominican and the Bishop of Angers wrote that humility is the Christian name for self-esteem. "Thanks to humility I rest in myself," content to be who I am. It is a self-acceptance that is not self-satisfaction. And having accepted who one is, then one is free to forget oneself.

Passion takes us beyond self

According to Buddhism, of which I know very little, one of the ways in which we break the bonds of narcissism is through the extinction of the passions. We still the desires that bind us to the self. And maybe Christianity has something to learn here. But it also the case that it is our passions which can liberate us from self-preoccupation. When I examined candidates for the order, one of the things that I always looked for was some spark of passion. If they wanted to do something crazy like joining an order, then I hoped that it was because of some passion, rather than to find refuge from a dangerous world. It almost does not matter what they are passionate about as long as they are passionate!

There are forms of eucalyptus tree in Australia which have seeds that can only break open and germinate if there is a forest fire that cracks the shell. A vocation needs to be germinated by some fire. A brother might be brought beyond himself by a passion for study. Vincent McNabb, of my province in the 20s, used to say to the novices, "Think of anything, but for God's sake think!"[7] Langrage said of his Biblical study, "*Sciens et prudens,* Knowingly and prudently, I put my hand in the fire." The search can be a passion that drives one to take risks, and carries one where one does not expect. It may be a passion for justice and peace. One may be so touched by the pain of others and the injustice that they suffer that the carapace of self-preoccupation is cracked open. Graham Greene wrote that we discover we have a soul when we are made sorrowful by the sorrow of another.

Ultimately, of course, it is that love of others that breaks open our self-containment. As an Irish Benedictine called Mark Patrick Hederman wrote, "Love is the only impetus that is sufficiently overwhelming to force us to leave the comfortable shelter of our well-armed individuality, shed the impregnable shell of self-sufficiency, and crawl out nakedly into the danger zone beyond, the melting pot where individuality is purified into personhood."[8]

Somehow we must stoke up the fires of a humble ambition. Our young should grow in the passionate ambition to do great things for the Lord. Each vespers we sing the Magnificat, which tells how, through a young girl, the Lord did marvelous things. We should expect that the Lord will do marvelous things through our young, things that you or I could never do. For St. Thomas, hope and humility go together. Hope teaches one to dream of great deeds. Humility ensures that they are the great things that the Lord may wish *me* to do and not the great deeds of some imaginary superfriar.

Sharing life with those who are different

So a vocation is a summons to belong. It is the freedom to say "we." And the first step into this freedom is liberation from self-preoccupation, letting go the center of the stage. The second step is learning to share my life with those who are different. Peter is summoned out of the secure and familiar world of the fishing community, and invited to belong to a community of people who are very different from himself. In Luke and Acts the whole narrative carries him toward encounter with Paul. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast and tension than between the Galilean fisherman and the sophisticated Rabbi from Tarsus. One feels that Peter must have oscillated between loving Paul and hating him. And yet both will end up by taking the same road to Rome and die as martyrs. Rome evolved as the center of Christianity because it was the burial place of these two such different people. No community of the likeminded would be a sacrament of the kingdom. Acts gives us a glimpse of the birth pains of the church, in which Peter and Paul could both say "we."

Are our religious communities signs of the kingdom?

Do we try to recruit people who are like us, people with whom we are at ease because we agree? Do we wish to live in communities of the likeminded? The church in the Americas is profoundly polarized, perhaps more so than in any other part of the world. One senses a deep division between progressives and liberals. Each side has their own theologians and gurus, newspapers and periodicals, seminaries and faculties. In this polarized church, religious life should be a prophetic sign, a sign of contradiction. Often religious see this as meaning that we should be the party of opposition. And this is often our role. But at this moment might we dare to be a real sign of something new, a place in which polarization is transcended? Might we have a new prophetic vocation now, to be a place in which the wall of hostility is broken down, and the church learns to again say "we"? A community of the likeminded, whether of the left or the right, is a sign of nothing but itself. To be prophetic is sometimes to be against. That was the great saying in France in the good old sixties, "Moi, Je suis contre." But maybe what is really prophetic in the new millennium is to labor to create new spaces in the church in which divisions are transcended.

Maybe what is really prophetic in the new millennium is to labor to create new spaces in the church in which divisions are transcended.

My most dramatic experience of the pain and beauty of this, as I have often recounted, was in Burundi. I went there during the civil war, when two ethnic groups—Hutus and Tutsis—were engaged in massacring each other. I drove around the country for a few days with two of the brethren, my assistant for Africa who was Hutu, and the local superior who was Tutsi. Both of them had lost many members of their families. The land was almost empty except for the occasional armed group. We saw only one car in all that time, which had a chain-smoking bishop in it. When we visited a Hutu encampment, then the two of us had to protect the Tutsi from being killed, and the other way around. Every evening we celebrated the Eucharist together. Sometimes the atmosphere was tense between the two of them. But it was a Eucharist that pointed beyond all this present tragedy to the peace of the kingdom. It pointed to an identity that we could not yet understand, a belonging that we could only glimpse.

Alike and yet separated

The most intense pain is to be one with those who are simultaneously like me and unlike me, part of my identity and yet people who are against what I see as central to my identity. This is why tensions are most painful within the family. One can be intolerant and upset if a sibling holds views that one would happily tolerate in a friend. Think of the bitterness of relationships between Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants.

Michael Ignatieff tells a story about the war zone in the former Yugoslavia in 1993. Right up on the front line, he asks a Serbian why the Croats are so different. "The man I am talking to takes a cigarette pack from his khaki jacket. 'See this? These are Serbian cigarettes. Over there they smoke Croat cigarettes.' 'But they are both cigarettes, right?' 'You foreigners don't understand anything,' he shrugs and begins to clean his Zastovo machine pistol. But the question I've asked bothers him, and so a couple of minutes later he tosses the weapon on the bunk between us and says, 'Look, here's how it is. Those Croats, they think they're better than us. They think they're fancy Europeans and everything. I tell you something. We're all just Balkan rubbish.'"[9] This little story is full of pain. It is the pain of sameness and difference.

This is often the major drama of the novitiate! I break with my past and join this community. I look to find brothers who will be like me, and who will share my dreams, who will think and talk like me, and damn it, look at the other novices! I come as a young liberal Catholic, with intellectual openness, and Brother X believes that no one can be a true Dominican or Catholic unless they accept every word of the CDF. I come to the order passionate for justice and peace, and here is my brother who votes Republican and supports the war in Iraq. I come to the order to find a home, and there in the center of my home is this viper.

Acts of intellectual charity

So central to becoming a brother or sister is learning to engage in conversation with those whose convictions and identities are different. This requires an act of the imagination. One has to imagine how someone to whom one belongs, and who agrees with so much that

one holds dear, and shares one's life, may yet hold views which seem wrong and even absurd. One has to project oneself beyond the framework of one's way of seeing the world, and enter the skin of another, and see through their eyes. This is an act of intellectual charity. One has to learn to love if one is to see. This cracks open the ego.

Iris Murdoch wrote, "The great artist sees his objects (and this is true whether they are sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil) in a light of justice and mercy. The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from the self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love."[10]

They are believers, but not necessarily belongers to a particular church. Spirituality is important, but the emphasis is on the spiritual journey, rather than on organized religion.

Becoming one of us, one of the brethren or sisters, is a work of the imagination. We have to imagine who the other person might be, see through their eyes, listen with their ears. But the paradox is that when we do love them, then we discover that they are beyond imagination. We shall always go on being surprised by them. Imagination leads us to its limits, the unimaginable other. We saw in the first lecture, that the vows are promises to go on letting God surprise us. They are also the promise to go on letting our brothers and sisters surprise us too.

One way to protect oneself from the other is to decide that one always knows what they are about to say, and who they are. They are typical 60s lefties or 90s conservatives, a California hippie or a New York liberal. We make ourselves invulnerable to surprise. Becoming one of the brethren means being deeply bound up with people who remain surprises, and whose views one cannot anticipate or even comprehend. This means living in what Buber calls "holy insecurity."[11] If the young really talk to each other and to us, then they will have to learn to abide in this insecurity and not run away. They must endure not being able to encompass the complexity of their brethren within easy categories. They must talk to each other and to us and be able to go away at the end of the conversation unafraid of remaining puzzled. We must learn to go to sleep unafraid by so much that is unresolved and unclear.

Give our lives to the community

So a religious vocation is the summons to belong. I must learn to say "we." I can say, "We Dominicans arrived in Oxford in 1221." The fact that I was not alive then does not matter. I have entered a new identity. I can say, "We have just founded a new project in Ethiopia." The fact that it is another province does not matter. I belong to people of other cultures. I have suggested that we enter this freedom to belong by self-forgetfulness and by learning to belong to those who are different. I will just glance at a final step, which is that we are not the sole authors of our lives. Each of us does not alone decide who he or she is. Embracing a vocation is letting our brothers and sisters be co-authors of our stories.

Once again we can see this with Peter. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the apostles sing:

> Always hoped that I'd be an apostle
> Knew that I would make it if I tried
> Then when we retire we can write the Gospels
> So they'll still talk about us when we've died.

The trouble is that Peter did not write any of the Gospels. He was written about! The moment that Peter follows Jesus, he surrenders control over his story. Other people will have a part in writing it for him. He gets cast in roles that he may not have chosen and may not like much. Four Gospel writers will sharpen their pens and tell us who he is. I wonder whether Peter had a sharp word with them in heaven. "Now John, this bit in the Resurrection scene when you describe me as lumbering along, puffing and blowing, in the race to the tomb is not exactly how I remember it."

When we give our lives to our communities, then we no longer decide exactly who we are. I may come to the order thinking that I am Thomas Aquinas reborn, a new St. Dominic, or the latest incarnation of Bartolomé de Las Casas. But my brethren may gently, or not so gently, show me that I am not. I am just Timothy Radcliffe. My brethren will discern that I have talents and skills that I had not myself spotted or believed in, and maybe that I do not have the gifts that I thought that I had. I will have to trust the brethren's perceptions.

When we become religious, we place our lives in the

hands of the brothers and sisters. And their hands will write our stories with us. I may hope to become a teacher of theology and find myself in a parish or the other way around. I am not the sole narrator of our story. I am not the sole writer even of "my story." This does not mean that we should simply accept in passivity the identity that others may give us. There is an interplay. If I were to be proposed as provincial syndic, then I would be right to vigorously resist. Anyone who thought that I had that talent would be simply wrong. You may think that sometimes about being named directors of vocations.

Our story may at times even demand that I do not always do what I may do best. At the moment we have a very gifted young friar, an American as it happens, who is provincial syndic. He is supposed to be doing a doctorate on French literature. He has all the gifts. In a sense it is a waste that he be the syndic. And yet it is true that at this moment the story of the province requires a sacrifice. Our story has a prior claim. But if this were to lead to the crushing of a friar, and the utter quenching of his gifts, then would not our story have become somehow corrupt and unacceptable, not a story of the Gospel?

When we become religious, we place our lives in the hands of the brothers and sisters. And their hands will write our stories with us.

Peter is not purely passive. He is called by Jesus to become a fisher of people alive. Jesus calls him to call other people. This little story of Peter tells not just of how Peter receives his vocation, but also how he will summon other people to their vocation. Peter is the first vocation director. He is your patron saint! This calling is not just the invitation to enter religious life. It is the summons that we give to each other within religious life. We call each other to be brave, to keep alive the adventure, to carry on walking. A vocation is not just something that happens at the beginning. We are called all the way along, and like Peter, we take our turns to be the one who calls and the one who is called.

I once went on holiday with some of my brethren on the Isle of Skye, off the coast of Scotland. One day, after a long day climbing the mountains, we were walking back along the cliffs and we came to a stretch where there was no path. One had to slip one's feet into a crack and wiggle along until the path resumed. Last of all came one of the brethren called Gareth Moore. When we got to the end, there was no sign of Gareth. So one of us had to wiggle back, and there he was paralyzed, shaking. We did not know that he suffered from acute vertigo. He had to be summoned by name. "Gareth; it's OK. Move your right hand along a bit. And now your foot. Gareth, there is a hold six inches to the right now. Move along Gareth." Gareth was brave and so the next day he said, "Lead me to a high cliff." Every one of us may at some time be the voice that calls, or the one who is called.

Our little dramas pale next to Christ's

I must stop now. Let me summarize and make one last brief point. In the first part of this presentation I talked about "my story" and "The story." I suggested that a vocation is a call to find oneself in the big story that goes from creation to redemption. We promise to be open to all the surprises that God will offer us.

Then I talked about "my story" and "our story." A vocation is the call to belong. We dare to place ourselves in the hands of our brothers and sisters and discover who we are with them.

If I were to be complete, I would have to give a third lecture on the relationship between "our story" and "The story." I would have to explore the relationship between the story that we tell of our communities and the big story of redemption. Fortunately you will be spared this last lecture! I will just make one simple point.

Living in this longest story puts in perspective all the little dramas that we live through, as individuals or as religious communities. Religious communities, and especially formation communities, are inclined to dramas and even melodramas! That was why it was such a relief to become provincial after 23 years of living in houses of formation. And now I am back again! Religious life is itself living through a dramatic moment in the West. Many congregations have few or no vocations and are facing extinction. There have been all the dramas of scandal, of abuse.

But the story which stretches from creation to the kingdom robs our communal dramas of their sting. They are not so dramatic after all. One of the main functions of anyone with responsibility in an order is surely to be the calm center in the emotional turbulence. Christ has died, Christ is risen and

Christ will come again, and so it is not all quite as exciting as one might have thought. When one pledges one's life to a particular order or congregation, then one promises that the death and the resurrection of Christ is the drama which illuminates all the other crises we may live.

When I was a young Dominican student at Blackfriars, Oxford, the priory was attacked by a right wing group who disliked the Dominicans' engagement in various issues of justice and peace. They set off on different nights two small explosives that made a lot of noise and blew in the windows. It woke up the whole community except the prior, Fergus Kerr. The police and the fire brigade came around. Finally I went to wake the prior. "Fergus, the priory has been attacked, wake up." "Is anyone dead?" "No." "Is anybody wounded?" "No." "Well, let me sleep and we will think about it in the morning."

Shortly before Dietrich Bonhoeffer was shot by the Gestapo he sent a message to his friend Bishop Bell of Chichester saying, "The victory is certain." Even being assassinated is not such a big deal within this longer story of death and resurrection. ✚

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1. *Liquid Modernity,* p. 161.
2. Quoted in Wilson, A.N., *The Victorians,* p. 85.
3. Unpublished sermon.
4. *The Preaching Life.* Boston: 1993, p. 15.
5. *Law, Love and Language,* p. 22.
6. Sacks, Jonathan. *Celebrating Life: Finding happiness in unexpected places.* London, 2000, p. 47.
7. "Anniversary Sermon for Fr. Vincent McNabb," by Carpenter, Hilary, OP in *A Vincent McNabb Anthology: Selections from the Writings of Vincent McNabb O.P*. editor, Nugent., F.E. London: 1955 p. ix.
8. *Manikon Eros: Mad Crazy Love.* Dublin: 2000 p. 66.
9. Ignatieff, Michael. *The Narcissism of Minor Differences.* The Open University, 1994, p. 1f.
10. *The Sovereignty of Good.* London: 1985, p. 66.
11. I owe this quote to Nicholas Coloff.

An unprecedented study of the nature and scope of sex abuse by Catholic clergy provides important data for understanding and addressing a devastating problem.

New knowledge about sexual abuse by Catholic clergy: a blessing or a curse?

by Kathleen L. McChesney

Kathleen L. McChesney addressed the National Religious Vocation Conference during its September 2004 Convocation. This article from Seminary Journal*, captures much of what she presented to NRVC.*

In the two short years since the potential magnitude of sexual abuse of minors by some members of the Catholic clergy became widely known, much has been learned about the problem. Efforts have been made to determine the nature and scope of the problem, to discover what must be done to heal the emotional and spiritual wounds of those who have been abused, and to find ways to prevent such abuse from occurring in the future. In the near future, further investigation will begin to determine, insofar as possible, why some who are ordained and represent the holiness of the Catholic Church commit such offenses. Structures and practices will be studied in attempts to identify the type of environment in which such activity was able to take place and, in some instances, be repeated.

Kathleen McChesney

What exactly is this new knowledge? And how, after so many years of confidentially dealing with reports of abuse, was the Catholic Church able to provide this credibly?

To answer these questions, some history is necessary. In the early 1990s, in response to two significant cases of serial sexual predator priests, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) developed five "principles" for dealing with accusations of sexual abuse and to provide for healing for those who had been abused. The concepts were logical and strong. But, while some bishops were interested in determining the full range of abuse by clergy in the United States at that time, others were not. Thus, no studies were conducted, leaving the data gathering to academics, journalists, and a growing network of abuse survivors.

The January 2002 revelations by the *Boston Globe* and other media characterized a crisis that the Catho-

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lic Church could neither refute nor accurately describe. The USCCB was poised to address, arguably, the largest problem in its history without knowing its dimensions or root causes. Recognizing that without better knowledge attempts to deal with the crisis might fall woefully short, the bishops set out to fill in the missing pieces.

In adopting the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*[1] in June 2002, the bishops included a promise to determine both the extent and reasons for the crisis. Importantly, the bishops turned to a lay group, the National Review Board, asking the board to commission this unprecedented research. With great sense of purpose, the board readily identified the John Jay College of Criminal Justice as an institution able to develop and complete a timely study on the "nature and scope" of the problem of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy. That study, "The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002"[2] was conducted with the cooperation of 97 percent of the United States Catholic bishops and 60 percent of the men's religious orders. It was completed and published in February 2004.

How, then, after so many years of confidentially dealing with reports of abuse, was the Catholic Church able to provide data in a credible way? First, the diligence, thoroughness, and honesty of the hundreds of diocesan employees, attorneys, and major superiors of men who completed the surveys proved critical. In addition, the John Jay College research team crafted a survey instrument that was able to capture and compare responses to determine if a concerted effort to color these data were to be made. Based on the types of responses received from dioceses, eparchies, and orders of various sizes, populations, and locations no such effort was indicated. And, despite the many types of record-keeping and archival systems where the underlying data were maintained, a substantial amount of significant information was obtained that became the genesis of this "new knowledge."

What is this new knowledge?
Nature and scope of the problem

The new knowledge gained from the "nature and scope" study is voluminous and complex. Until the report was completed, the number of priests and deacons accused of sexual abuse of minors between 1950 and 2002 was the subject of much speculation. Through this research, it was found that *at least* 4,392 priests and deacons, representing 4.3 percent of those in service to the church during this period, were accused of acts of abuse by 10,667 boys and girls.

New knowledge about victims
Of those boys and girls, 50.9 percent were between the ages of 11 and 14; 27.3 percent were between the ages of 15 and 17; 16 percent between the ages of 8 and 10, and 6 percent were under age 7. Most of the victims were boys (81 percent), and 40 percent of all victims were boys between the ages of 11 and 14. Seventeen percent of the victims had brothers and sisters who were also abused.

New knowledge about reporting
Some believed that church leaders did not know the full extent of the problem until 2002, and the data support this belief. Only one-third of the 10,667 allegations were known to the church prior to January 2002. The study also found that only 12 percent of the incidents were reported within the first year after they occurred, while 50 percent were reported more than 20 years later. The reports received after January 2002 mirror the substance of the earlier reports with regard to decade of occurrence. Specifically, most acts of abuse began in the 1970s, with the highest number of acts occurring in any one year being in 1980. It is important to note that nearly 50 percent of the abuse occurred over a duration of from one to four years.

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New knowledge about offenders
Most of the offenders, 68 percent, were ordained between 1950 and 1970, usually between the ages of 25 and 29. Most were in their 30s when the first reported instance of abuse occurred, although 17 percent were over 50 years old. The assignment of the offender at the time of the incident was primarily associate pastor (42.3 percent); however 10.4 percent were resident priests and 7.2 percent were teachers.

Although 56 percent of the offenders had but one accuser, most of the abuse was repeated over time. 149 priests (3.5 percent) were responsible for the abuse of 2,960 victims, indicating that a small percentage of accused priests comprised a substantial percentage of the allegations.

Detailed information normally found in personnel or medical files was not available about most of the offenders. However, some information pertaining to offender histories was located that indicated that at least 7 percent of the offenders had been abused physically, sexually, or emotionally as children. 17 percent of the offenders had a history of substance abuse problems, although 80 percent of those accused were sent for substance abuse intervention.

New knowledge about the offenses
The offenses occurred most often in the offender's residence (40.9 percent). Acts also took place in churches (16.3 percent); the victim's home (12.4 percent); and in vacation homes, schoolrooms, and automobiles. The abuse sometimes occurred during a social event, when the victim was visiting or working in the priest's home, or when traveling with the offender. Many families of victims socialized with the offenders.

New knowledge about criminal charges
Law enforcement authorities were contacted in 1,021 of the cases. Criminal charges were filed in 384 of the cases, and 252 priests or deacons were convicted as a result. Prison sentences were given to 100 of those convicted.

New knowledge about expenses
The costs to the church have been enormous. As of December 2003, over $500,000,000 had been spent for therapy for victims and offenders, for settlements, and for attorney's fees. Not measurable is the impact of the crisis on the families of the victims, the perception by some of the faithful that the church has lost its moral authority, and the impact on the priesthood and diaconate.

The National Review Board Report: more new knowledge

As dioceses, eparchies and religious orders were participating in the "nature and scope" study, the National Review Board prepared a report that now serves as a predicate for the planned, broader study on the "causes" of the crisis. The board's report, "Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States,"[3] was also issued in February 2004. Although not based on an empirical study, this report provides keen insights into the problem of sexual abuse of minors within the Catholic Church, and contributes much new and actionable knowledge for the protection of children.

Like the "nature and scope" study, the board's report was dependent upon the assistance and cooperation of many individuals. Church officials, lay leaders, persons who had been abused, medical experts, and academicians willingly described their experiences or shared their perspectives on the issues. The candor and sincerity of those who worked with the board is reflected in the thoughtful commentary of the report.

On reflection, the new information must be considered a blessing. By having a clearer picture of what occurred, it will be easier to determine many of the causes. This new knowledge suggests ways in which abuse can be prevented.

The report's major premise is that the offenders, first and foremost, failed to abide by church teachings. Poor screening in the selection of candidates for the priesthood, the sexual dysfunction of the offenders, and insufficient seminary formation cited by the board form the hypotheses for the next study. Extensive study of the offenders will be required to determine if these hypotheses are correct.

The National Review also characterizes the church's response to this crisis as inadequate. Leading to this response may be the confluence of eight key factors. Traditional research regarding of all of these factors may not be possible, but each factor is likely to be contributory and should be considered.

Eight key factors leading to the church's response

1. Church officials did not understand the broad nature of the problem and treated allegations as sporadic and isolated.

2. Church officials put institutional concerns first out of fear of scandal.
3. Litigation caused bishops to act in adversarial, rather than pastoral, ways.
4. Many in the church did not understand the pain of the victims.
5. Church leaders over-relied on the advice of psychiatrists.
6. Fraternal correction among bishops was limited.
7. Some bishops placed the interests of the priests above those of the victims.
8. Difficulties with the existent canonical processes precluded the necessary trials from occurring.

From this study the board made 32 recommendations in six areas: further study and analysis; enhanced screening, formation, and oversight; increased sensitivity and effectiveness in responding to allegations of abuse; greater accountability of bishops and other church leaders; improved interaction with civil authorities; and meaningful participation by the Christian faithful in the church.

A blessing or a curse?

Some may consider the new knowledge from the report and the study to be a curse. Without a doubt, this information is shocking, painful and sad. The knowledge will very likely help some victims to heal, prevent future victimization, and regain public trust in those who represent the church. Others may be suffering from issue fatigue and believe that what is known thus far is sufficient.

On reflection, the new information must be considered a blessing. By having a clearer picture of what occurred, it will be easier to determine many of the causes. This new knowledge suggests ways in which abuse can be prevented. It reassures victims that they were not alone in their anguish. The information also will provide ways to measure the church's progress in eliminating the evil that existed in its darkest corners.

Perhaps, too, the initiatives of the Catholic Church in the United States to determine the nature and scope of this problem and its causes will lead other institutions to do the same. Additional studies will enhance the knowledge gained thus far, allowing for even greater success in reducing the scourge of child sexual abuse in American society. That, too, would be a blessing. ✚

1. "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 2002.

2. "The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002." John Jay College of Criminal Justice, February 2004.

3. "A Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States." National Review Board, February, 2004.

Peter gets criticized for his lack of faith, but, after all, he was the only one who took the risk of getting out of the boat.

Peter, too, walks on the water

by Deborah Suddarth, OSF

There was once a farmer who wanted to impress his hunting buddies. So he went out and bought the smartest, most expensive hunting dog he could find. He trained this dog to do things no other dog on earth could do—impossible feats that would surely amaze anyone. Then he invited his neighbors to go duck hunting with him. After a long, patient wait in the boat a group of ducks flew over, and the hunters were able to shoot a few of them down. Several ducks fell in the water. The farmer looked at the dog and said, "Go get 'em!" The dog leaped out of the boat, walked on the water, picked up a bird and returned to the boat. As soon as he dropped the duck in the boat he trotted off across the water again and grabbed another duck and brought it back to the boat. The owner swelled up with pride as his dog walked across the water and retrieved each of the birds one by one. He looked smugly at one of his buddies and asked, "Do you notice anything unusual about my dog?" One of them sat back and rubbed his chin and thought about it for a little while and finally said, "Yeah, come to think of it, I do! That stupid dog doesn't know how to swim, does he?"

In hearing tonight's reading, many give Peter the same reaction. Instead of recognizing that he was the only disciple who even got out of the boat, he's criticized for his lack of faith.

Yet in many ways this story is about Peter as a person of courage and of hope. Let's look at the scene. Jesus and his disciples have just received the terrible news: John the Baptist has been executed. John was killed because of a promise King Herod made to his wife. News of John's execution would have surely sent a chill down the spine of every one of Jesus' disciples. Suddenly, what they had all been doing together sounded dangerous. Who could say which of their heads might soon be resting on a platter?

Deborah Suddarth, OSF

The disciples had gone from anxiety to jubilation. With five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus somehow fed that very day a crowd of 5,000 (not counting women and children. Somehow I always like to imagine there were too many women and children to count!). How had he done it? Not one of them could say. But they were beginning to realize that this man they called master and teacher was powerful in ways they could scarcely imagine.

On the heels of the feeding of the multitudes comes this story about Jesus sending the disciples out ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, at which point he finally gets the alone time he had wanted. He goes to the mountain to pray by himself, and then during the night sets out to meet the disciples whose boat has been unable to reach the shore because the wind is against them, and the boat is being battered by the

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waves. Suddenly they're fighting for their lives, bailing for all they're worth. Whoever's hand is on the tiller is struggling to keep the little craft pointed into the wind.

By 3 a.m. the storm was getting really bad. I imagine at that point they weren't worried about making it to the other side; they just wanted to stay alive. The disciples were in distress. It is about this time that Jesus decides to come toward them.

It's interesting…he wasn't in a boat and the disciples didn't recognize him. It's also interesting…being boatless didn't seem to slow Jesus down at all. The disciples were convinced he was a ghost, so they were terrified and cried out in fear. But Matthew wants us to know that sometimes it takes eyes of faith to recognize when Jesus is around.

"Take heart," he says, "it is I; do not be afraid."

Then Peter says the strangest thing: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Why does Matthew include this detail? Why doesn't Peter just plunge into the water? I think it's for a very important reason. This is not just a story about risk taking; it is primarily a story about openness, faith, hope and seeing the world in a totally different way. That means I will have to discern between an authentic call from God and what might simply be a foolish impulse on my part. Courage alone is not enough; it must be accompanied by wisdom and discernment.

I also want to ask us this evening to engage with this story as a story that is far more significant than some magical miracle story about Jesus walking on water just to prove to everyone that he could do supernatural things. I suggest that what Matthew is conveying here is something that is startlingly transformative and that has profound implications for how you and I live our lives in this world, something, in fact, that is shouting at us as men and women religious today to hear its message.

Jesus, as he had demonstrated with the crowds in the wilderness, was operating out of a different way of seeing the world than the people around him. He lived in a reality which he called the reign of God, and it was this reality he was trying to convey to the people, it was the reality he was inviting them to step into.

In the feeding of the multitudes Jesus was doing nothing less than redefining reality for the people. He was bringing the people with him into this new way of seeing and living, this new world, this reign of God which is based upon abundance. What Jesus was up to was nothing less than rewriting the script that guides human interactions.

Jesus rewrites the rules

And then comes this walking on water scene, which is an extension of what Jesus did with the multitudes in the wilderness. This story of Jesus walking on water, I believe, is a story meant to convey the profound implications of what Jesus was doing in his ministry: rewriting the rules. Jesus was defining his own reality that was not subject to the "rules" that had kept the people in bondage for so long about how things are supposed to be.

That is why I believe we must heed this story. We are caught, you see, in a particular script, a narrative, that is tearing this world apart. It is a script that has us playing out its plot line of destruction of the environ-

Jesus walks on water and, with him, Peter

Directly after this he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side while he would send the crowds away. After sending the crowds away, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, while the boat, by now far out on the lake, was battling with a heavy sea, for there was a head wind. In the fourth watch of the night, he went toward them, walking on the lake, and when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It is a ghost!" they said and cried out in fear. But at once Jesus called out to them, saying, "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid." It was Peter who answered, "Lord," he said, "if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water." "Come," said Jesus. Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus across the water, but as soon as he felt the force of the wind, he took fright and began to sink. "Lord! Save me!" he cried. Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. "Man of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And as they got into the boat the wind dropped. The men in the boat bowed down before him and said, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

— Matthew 14: 22-36

ment, its values of materialism and consumerism, its modus operandi of violence and domination. At this very moment this narrative, this paradigm, these "rules" for how the world has to operate, are plummeting us further and further into a plot line of mutual devastation. It is the narrative that insists that violence be met with violence, that insists upon the use of power to dominate others, it is the narrative that insists that we grab all the resources we can get with no concern for what will happen to the Earth and to the generations that follow. Throughout the centuries, countless men and women, priests and religious, have given up their lives in reacting against this narrative.

It is as though we find ourselves on a little boat out in the middle of a violent sea, at the mercy of the wind and the waves that seem so powerful and over which we have so little control. The text says the boat was "battered by the waves." But the Greek puts it much more emphatically. It conveys the sense that the boat was being tortured by the waves.

Does that resonate with anyone else here? Do any of you feel, as I have felt, that I, we, humankind, the world, are being tortured by the waves of the historical circumstances we find ourselves in? That we can't make it to safe ground because the wind is so strong and against so many in our world today? That so many of our brothers and sisters in the world are helplessly caught in a story that could be destining us all for catastrophe?

I ask you to hear this story from that perspective. The point of this story, you see, is not about Jesus walking on water. It is about Jesus walking on water, redefining the rules, breaking out of the trajectory of the dominant narrative and pointing to a new and different way. It is a story about generations of men and women who have been courageous like Peter and been willing to step out of the boat. They have been willing to step into their fears and uncertainty to walk toward Jesus and bring the world a little closer to God.

I have felt a strong sense of late that those of us who are concerned about the course of the human story have to take back our imaginations, to move from being passive participants to become active authors in today's story. We have to disengage from the plot lines of destruction. We must refuse to follow the script we've been handed by the world around us and embrace the deepest meaning of our call to be "counter-cultural." We have to re-write the Story. Rather than give ourselves over to helplessness in the face of the wind, we have to do something totally unexpected. We have to be persons of hope—to step out of the boat, out of the script, and walk out on the water.

Peter jumpstarts the kingdom, then falters

For a brief moment, Matthew's gospel has Peter doing just that. He sees Jesus living in this new norm, defining this new reality, and he wants to come, too. So Jesus tells him to come.

Most Bibles have subheadings, short descriptions of what's happening in each section we read. Headings like, "Jesus and Nicodemus," "The Canaanite Woman's Faith."

The subheading for this story is usually something like, "Jesus Walks on the Water." Well, if you'll forgive the pun, I think the editors missed the boat. The most astonishing thing of all is that *Peter* walks on water. Jesus was always doing amazing things in the Gospel stories, but here we see one of the disciples doing an amazing thing. For a moment Peter was able to live this new reality that Jesus was embodying. He stepped out into the storm to meet him on the water, until something happened….

The most astonishing thing of all is that *Peter* walks on water. Jesus was always doing amazing things in the Gospel stories, but here we see one of the disciples doing an amazing thing. For a moment Peter was able to live this new reality that Jesus was embodying.

Do any of you remember the Roadrunner cartoons? If so, you will recall that a typical scene in one of those cartoons would go like this: Wily E. Coyote, having been tricked again in his pursuit of the Roadrunner, goes racing off the edge of a canyon. He keeps running momentarily on thin air until he looks down and it dawns on him what he is doing. He then throws a look of distress at the viewers and plummets through the bottom of the TV screen. Somehow I always had the sense that if only Wily E. hadn't looked down he could have reached the other side of the canyon.

Peter's mistake is that he looked down. He let the seeming impossibility of what he was attempting to do get the best of him. He started to believe more in the waves than in the new reality Jesus was calling him into. He became convinced that the storm was what was real, and he began to doubt that he could do this, step into this new story. He believed it was impossible, and so it did become impossible for him. Jesus had faith in Peter. The problem was that Peter didn't have faith in Peter. And you know the rest of the story. Jesus had to rescue him, and when the two of them returned to the boat, the disciples worshipped Jesus. I believe the Christian tradition never recovered from Peter's faltering. Through the centuries we have taken to worshipping Jesus, just as all those disciples did in that boat on that stormy night, because it is so much easier to worship him than it is to step out with him into this new way of living that he was calling the people into.

I believe the Christian tradition never recovered from Peter's faltering. Through the centuries we have taken to worshipping Jesus, just as all those disciples did in that boat on that stormy night, because it is so much easier to worship him than it is to step out with him into this new way of living.

What Jesus was doing, in his life and ministry, was taking back the human story from the narrative of destruction. He was offering us a way out of the box in which we are trapped, he was inviting us to step out of the boat, out of the script, refusing to let the wind and waves dictate our destiny. He was a proactive player, engaged with the world on his own terms. And by his radical freedom to be in this world in his own way, he forced the prevailing powers of his time to respond to his script. Indeed, they are still being forced to respond to his script. The Story for humankind that was envisioned by Jesus was set loose in the world, and the world can never be the same.

The reality is that life—or at least, any sort of life worth living—is a risky business that needs to build on hope. As one anonymous writer put it, "To laugh is to risk appearing the fool. To weep is to risk appearing sentimental. To reach out to another is to risk involvement. To express feeling is to risk exposing your true self. To place ideas and dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss. To love is to risk being loved in return. To live is to risk dying. To hope is to risk despair. To try is to risk failure. But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who asks nothing, does nothing, has nothing and is nothing. Such a person may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he or she cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love, live. Chained by his or her attitudes, this person is a slave. He or she forfeits freedom. Only a person who risks is free." (Posted by Ralph Milton, in his e-newsletter, *Rumors,* October, 2000.)

When it comes right down to it, there's only one way to learn faith and live hope: by doing it.

We are the inheritors of the story lived in the life of Jesus, the stewards of that vision of hope he shares each day. It is time for us to understand and claim its power, to live into its narrative and engage with our times out of a radically free imagination that refuses to let our congregations sit back in a painful world that can dictate what is normal or possible. It's time for us to undertake what Peter had the courage to try, to step out into the storm, to step out of the boat. It's time for us to participate in a new Story, step into a new vision, write a new script, witness to new possibilities that are inviting to the young people of our world today. The youth of today are eager to step out of the boat and dare to walk on the water—to leave the comfort of routine existence and abandon themselves to the high adventure of following God, for they realize that it is Jesus waiting on the waves. It is Jesus who grasps their hands and hearts with faith and hope. Through the storms and darkness it is truly the Son shining through. Will we be there to walk and even dance with them on the waves with new hope? ✚