

2008 March

3. A MOUSE-TRAP IN THE HOUSE Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Little Mickey Mouse seemed all excited as he scuttled around the dark alleys of the massive farm house telling all his companions how, unobserved, he had spied the Master install a new mouse-trap in the kitchen that evening. Knowing that he was the only one directly endangered by this treacherous acquisition, he looked for a sympathetic, supportive and encouraging word from his friends, but none seemed to be in the mood to listen to his fear filled woes. He thought mother hen would be most sympathetic as she clucked and fussed around her brood, but she was too busy caring for her own little ones' safety. After all, it wasn't really her problem and certainly not one that concerned her immediately. The harried mouse scurried off to the cow who gave a long sonorous moo in sympathy but then promptly returned to chewing the cud. Next he made a dash towards the pig who he surmised would be most concerned as he usually was – but to his dismay, even he was totally unmoved. Not receiving any encouragement or support, the little mouse retreated to his hiding place and decided to be extremely careful about his movements, and to leave his predicament into the hands of his protective gods. At dead of night there was a loud thud as the trap snapped onto its first victim which made the little mouse shudder wondering who the unlucky victim was. However, he was startled to hear the farmer's wife cry out in the dark seeking for help. Hearing the trap door slam shut, she eagerly went towards it in the dark to investigate and was savagely bitten by the venomous snake whose tail had got caught in the trap. Hearing her wails the farmer came running and promptly killed the snake before rushing his wailing wife to the hospital.

Caring Remedies

She was evidently in a critical condition and so to help her gain strength, the farmer returned home and each day carried away all the eggs laid by the hen and the milk yielded by the cow to feed his ailing wife. However, her condition grew steadily worse till she eventually died. Heart broken and inconsolable, the farmer was greatly comforted by his several family

members who came from far and wide to be with him in his hour of sorrow. But he had to feed them all and so one by one he killed first the hen, then the pig and finally the cow as well – while the lucky mouse feasted on delicious tidbits and leftovers all along. He often reflected in his solitude, “If only my friends the hen, the cow and the pig had seen the mousetrap as their concern too, they would not have suffered this plight today.”

My Brother's Keeper?

Anyone who stops to reflect a while on this charming little story realizes that no one can live as an island in today's world. Our lives and destinies are all intertwined in some form or other and whatever one does, no matter where and how, it inexorably impacts on the well-being or destruction of the rest. We cannot afford under any circumstances, to live in isolation unconcerned about the good of the other. But if we all did combine and collaborate to create a safe and productive world, everyone would benefit and live happily ever after. Jesus emphasized this truth when he said: “I am the vine and you are the branches. No branch can live if it is cut off from the vine for if it is not united with the vine it withers and dies. But when it remains in the vine it produces a bountiful harvest...” We usually understand this text as applying personally and individually to our vertical relationship with Jesus. But surely no tree has only one branch nor does the stem cater to the needs of one branch only. The more healthy and vigorous each of the numerous branches is, the better is the condition of the entire tree including all the other branches as well. If even one branch is infected with parasites or attacked by insects, the entire tree yields less fruit, both in quantity and in quality too.

Eucharist Builds Caring Communities

We require this kind of community or corporate thinking most especially as we gather round the Eucharistic table each Sunday. Yet, most of us still persist in thinking individualistically, seeking forgiveness only for ‘my’ sins, praying only for my family and its needs, preoccupied only with my little world and its concerns. Even when we receive the Lord in Holy Communion our perception is that ‘he has come into my heart and it is time for me to seek

favours that I alone receive the grace of my reception of Communion.’ In fact, the great saints insisted that there is no such thing as ‘I’ in the Eucharist but only a ‘WE.’ In truth, we are a ‘body’ right from the time of our Baptism when we are inserted into Christ and Paul emphasizes this repeatedly as he writes to his various communities. Among the Corinthians he had to stress this pretty forcefully telling them that what they celebrated looked like a Eucharist externally, but in fact wasn’t - because they were divided one against the other. What would Paul have to say if he were to visit any of our parishes in Mumbai where almost every Eucharist and every other Sacrament too, every devotion and prayer session, in fact almost every activity in the parish, has a predominantly individualistic or self-oriented thrust? Even though on paper there is a fairly heavy accent placed on ‘community’ yet the basic ‘I-me-my’ thinking still remains firmly entrenched in our hearts – that I go to heaven by my own efforts! In our minds, the Church is there mainly to help me get to heaven safely. Church, for us, is still seen largely as a collection of individual Christians who happen to be in the one place for worship. It has still not penetrated our thinking and living that ‘what affects me, affects you and every other person in the community.’ The analogy of the human body has yet to become part of our thinking – and as long as this remains, all our efforts to build Christian communities (or human communities for that matter) will continue to be ineffective.

Experience the Best Teacher

How does one bring about the much-needed paradigm shift in this area of our lives – from individualistic to communitarian thinking? One very effective means is our own personal experience of being alone, especially in times of suffering. Not long ago, several young college-goers were involved in a minor car accident on one of the main thoroughfares of Mumbai. Their companions who were following not far behind, noticed the accident as they passed by, but did not stop to help. On returning home they immediately informed the parents of the hapless victims. In the meantime, however, an elderly Parsi gentleman who was driving past, saw that these young people were

stranded and wounded, stopped and took the injured to the nearest hospital. Later, when thanked by the friends and relatives of the victims he remarked: “Please don’t thank me. I intervened because I had made a solemn vow to myself always to help all accident victims needing emergency medical help. I too was once a victim of a railway accident and being badly wounded pleaded desperately with the onlookers to assist me. But no one wanted to ‘get involved.’ Instead of helping, they robbed me of my possessions and left me to fend for myself. I was fortunate to have survived that tragedy but vowed never to allow that to happen to any unfortunate person, known or unknown. So, I simply did what I would have liked others to do for me.” But if experience is going to teach us something valuable for life, we need to frequently reflect on our experiences. Often we do experience some very rich instructive events in our lives, but let them pass without so much as a second thought – in which case we profit little or nothing. But if we form the habit of reflecting each day on the salient features of that day and the lessons we learn from them, we are preparing ourselves for a truly full life – the kind of life that Jesus came to give us. “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full!”

Live What We Celebrate

Do we each need to wait for such experiences to awaken us to the truth that we are all parts of the same body of Christ? Or would each Eucharist be inspiration and motivation enough for us to break out of our selfish little worlds and reach out to others as our brothers and sisters? The least we can do is to smile, offer a handshake or a kind word of encouragement. We need not ‘poke our noses’ into the affairs of others, nor pretend to be busybodies having no work of our own. Yet we can express our care and concern in a thousand different effective ways – the least we can do is to put the concerned person in contact with someone else or with an NGO if needed. How exactly we actually reach out to the needy is of little importance. What matters is that ‘I was hungry and you gave me to eat ...’ Our greatest joy on our deathbed will be to hear from the lips of those whom we reached out to, how their lives have been enriched

by our kindness, thoughtfulness and compassionate action. If we have internalized the command of Jesus to love one another ‘as I have loved you’ then there will be so many whom we have supported in their trials that we too would spontaneously say: ‘But when did I do that for you? I don’t remember the incident ...’ And yet they will remember very vividly, nor will the Lord forget it either! So, would “Am I my brother’s keeper?” or “whatever you do to the least of my brothers you do to me” be our guiding principle in life? For, we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord... and we’ll pray that our oneness may someday be restored!

2008 April

4. THE STORY OF A PENCIL Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

A very long time ago, the Pencil Maker spoke to the pencil he had just invented saying, “There are five things you need to understand well before I send you out into the world as one of the great inventions of our time. If you always remember them and abide by them you will become the best pencil that ever was.” The first is that by design you will be able to do many great things, but only if you allow yourself to be held in that ‘Someone’s’ hand and let yourself be guided as to where to leave a mark. By yourself you can do nothing, but in the hand of a skilled artist, you will work marvels. Artists generally are temperamental, but stay united with your master always, and learn to work in coordination with his plans and designs no matter how bizarre they seem to you. Second, for you to function at your best, you will need to experience a painful sharpening from time to time, but this is the only way you can operate as a pencil. Third, you have the ability to correct any mistakes you might make. But again for this you need to be totally at the disposal of the one directing and guiding you. Fourth, the most important part of you will always be what is inside and invisible. And fifth, wherever you work you will leave an indelible mark and all future generations could benefit from what you do. Now the pencil took its time to understand deeply the principles by which it could be the great invention it was designed to be, promising to remember and abide by these

fundamental rules. It meekly entered the box fully determined to live up to its Maker’s dream.

Abide in Me

We may not have realized how very much like the Pencil each of us is. When Jesus told us: “I am the Vine and you are the branches”, how many of us would have realized that without a vital and living link between the two, the branch would be totally useless and ineffective, exactly like the pencil? Of what use is a pencil if it lies in the box untouched? And yet, ‘they also serve who stand and wait’ said the Poet. And so, the Pencil, like us, needs to wait till the Master has need of us. But then, how often would we believe that when we are sent across the path of someone in need, it is God who is really choosing us for a mighty deed, to leave behind an indelible mark for the rest of humanity to read in the life of this person? Every inspiration to do good that crosses our minds, is actually the Master inviting us to come into his grasp that he may use us for the good of others. I guess that if we did realize this, we would have cooperated a lot more enthusiastically with everyone and in everything that ever happened to us. Again, the quality and also quantity of work we do depends not just on our skill and capacity, but primarily on the skill of the One who wields us. The real creativity and genius come from him and not from us. Ours it is only to give material shape to what is in the Master’s mind. He it is who runs the Universe and we are only his instruments. Also, the more pliant and flexible we are in his hands the better will be the result. Our will has to be completely surrendered into his hands – only then can the two partners work as one. Any time we try even indirectly to assert our own will over against his, the results would be disastrous. Further, all of us experience that some days are full while other days are boring and lifeless. Yet, if we did understand that we are like the Pencil called upon to work only when there is a need, we would not grudge ourselves those idle moments, nor feel that we are useless except when we are productive and at work.

Dying Is Rising

Perhaps the second rule seems the most painful and difficult of all – the need of periodical sharpening. And yet, it stands to reason that without this

sharpening and losing of oneself, the productivity of the Pencil diminishes... and so does ours. What makes things really difficult is that this sharpening happens through the instrumentality of different people and in various, often unexpected, ways. Basically it involves a divesting of Self or of our Ego and our innate desire not to be touched or interfered with by anyone. We like to be masters of our own destinies. This would possibly be the most difficult element or requisite for our happy functioning as instruments in God's hands. And yet, there is no way we can operate at our optimum without a thorough periodical overhauling. In his parable of the Vine and the branches, Jesus spoke of a pruning that the Father does in order that the branches may produce more and better fruit. The secret here seems to lie in understanding the positive purpose behind this pain and inconvenience and accepting it with faith in the Father's love. Once we understand this inexorable Law of Life and also learn how to flow with it, without resisting it and breaking ourselves against it, Life becomes quite smooth and productive. What we need to do is to keep focused on the end result. Knowing that only when the pencil point has been sharpened to perfection that its mark is clear, sharp and legible would help us want to produce such an impression and be ready to pay the full price for it.

Human it is to Err

What stands out with regard to the mistakes that we make is that they don't really matter at all. It takes the Master just a flourish of his highly skilled hand to do away with all the mess we may have created and to re-work that part to greater perfection. In fact, while we are most embarrassed by our mistakes and failures, the Master doesn't pay much attention to them; rather, he takes them in his stride and has the required skill to move on. For him, it is part of the process of creating something new and worthwhile while for us these same shortcomings seem to be major hurdles and blunders. Another difficult aspect is the realization that the part that is visible outside, the glittering, colourful and showy exterior is actually of not much worth or value and obviously, the least important as far as the purpose of the pencil goes! In fact, this wooden covering has to be totally lost and shed if at

all the lead is to be accessible and the pencil is to leave a mark behind. Should the pencil resist the sharpening process because it was averse to losing its shiny outside, it would be totally useless as a writing tool. Here too the paradox applies: 'He who seeks to save his life will lose it but he who loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel (the Truth) will keep it!' For us too, the most precious part of us is hidden deep within the recesses of our being – the image and likeness of God that we carry within us. This is not generally visible to others except through the effects of our work. The visible part of us, our looks, physique, hairstyle, clothing, diction and the rest is not of great consequence. And yet, it would shock us to realize how much time and effort we spend attending only to these external, dispensable characteristics! Proportionately, how much time do we give to the interior development of ourselves, to the disciplining of our minds and spiritual faculties? We feel that what most impresses people is the exterior and that is all that matters. The Pencil has a lot to teach us in these matters.

Your Contribution?

Finally, our work itself is to leave an indelible mark behind – for better or for worse. Whether we are aware of this law or not, and also whether it is good we do or evil, we leave something behind for posterity to enjoy or suffer! So, when we depart from this world, we are going to leave it as either a better or a worse place to live in – only future generations can tell. Think of some of the amenities we are so accustomed to now-a-days, like electricity, a plentiful water supply, modern medical facilities, air-conditioning and the like; we bless all those who have contributed towards the invention of these facilities which make life so much easier and pleasant, especially in big cities. But these very blessings question us: 'What about your contribution to society? Are you one who only receives but does not give in return? We need to remember that each of us is sufficiently equipped to leave an indelible and unique mark for all generations to admire. We recall Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite who, realizing one day with a jolt that the world would always remember him for this destructive invention only, turned

everything around by placing all the royalties he obtained from this creation of his at the service of those who use their talents for the betterment of society - in the now famous and well known Nobel prizes. Today most people remember Alfred Nobel only for the prizes that promote the welfare of Society. What is going to be your contribution to society and to the world? Can you learn some of the basic laws of success from the simple pencil? Every one of us is like a pencil... created by the Maker for a unique and special purpose. By understanding and remembering this purpose constantly and by placing ourselves confidently in the hands of our Maker, we can ensure that our lives on earth fulfill the meaningful purpose God keeps secretly in his heart. You were made to do several great things – but for which of these would you want to be remembered?

2008 May

5. THE COW AND THE PIG Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Pugnacious piggy was in a belligerent mood when he went up one day to visit his dear and faithful friend, Cathy the cow. As he poured out his complaints in an unending series of woes, the bottom line seemed to be: how ungrateful human beings can be – they extract everything they can from me, but don't respect or reward me at all, not even with a good name! He even dared to compare himself with Cathy who was also very self-giving but earned proverbial respect from all. Why, she was treated almost like a goddess! No sooner had the pig completed his tale of woes than with a gentle swish of her tail Cathy retorted: 'The one difference that I can see between the two of us is that I contribute most of what I give while I am still alive whereas all your contributions pour in only after you are dead. There is no soul in your giving! You give only what is of no use to you anymore.'

Self-giving is the Best Giving

What wisdom in this retort of the holy cow! It isn't as if the contributions of the pig in terms of pork, bacon, sausages and the rest are unimportant, but there is something praise-worthy to be said for contributions made when one is alive. The giving becomes almost a personal gesture of love. These seem to embody the

'self gift' a lot more meaningfully than all that is given impersonally after death. Even among human beings, no one really appreciates a person who lives a thoroughly self-centered life all throughout his existence, but leaves a huge legacy to others after his death. Maybe we have seldom paid attention to the difference between 'giving away' and 'sharing'. We generally give away what we do not need, something that is surplus or of not much use to us. This does not necessarily make the giving less valuable, because it can still benefit the receiver immensely. However, it is apparent that in such cases, even after giving away all that one chooses to give, one still remains self-sufficient, or basically untouched, as it were. The giver hasn't given a 'part of himself' but something other than, or outside of himself.

Sharing, Not Giving-away

Contrast this with sharing. This term often seems to imply that the person doing the sharing has just enough for himself or a little more perhaps to spare, but out of that little he gives a portion to another who is in need. Both perhaps end up having a little less than they would have liked to possess, but the plus point here is the joy that is shared between them both. There is here evident a true self-giving, a giving of oneself to the other and this element brings about a greater and more lasting bond between the giver and receiver. Another important characteristic is that when giving away, the giver always remains a notch higher than the receiver. The recipient is somehow made to feel like a beggar, an indigent; his self worth is not acknowledged or maybe even further demeaned. Whereas in sharing, the two remain on the same level of equality and the giver also receives from the one helped; he is humble enough to accept from the needy one. Thus, the dignity of the recipient is maintained or acknowledged – may be even heightened. It is worth noting that when we come to the Eucharist we are told that Jesus took the bread, and having said the blessing, he broke it and gave it to his disciples to share among themselves. Jesus broke the bread and it is in and through a piece of broken bread that he gives us his eternal and marvelous presence. Most Christians seem to have missed this point altogether. For them Jesus is present in bread – which is not true at all. It is not

bread as such, but broken bread that is the vehicle of Christ's real presence to us today. Eucharist is bread broken to be shared. So, each Eucharist we celebrate inculcates in us this virtue of sharing our blessings with others.

True Christian Concern

The early Christians belonged mostly to the lower economic rung of society, though there were also several rich among them. When we are told in the Acts of the Apostles that these well-to-do Christians went and sold their houses and other property and gave the proceeds to the Apostles, we often conjure up the wrong picture in our minds. We imagine them selling each and every thing they possessed in order to help the needy. But a little deeper thought makes us realize that if they sold even the houses in which they lived, where would they themselves live then? It was obviously the extras, their holiday villas and bungalows that they sold; while they could make good use of these extra dwellings, they chose to surrender these for the benefit of their poorer brethren. Their gesture, in a sense, could be understood as a 'giving away' but what made the difference is that they brought the entire proceeds and handed it over to the Apostles who then distributed it to any who had need. In such a transaction, there isn't much room for the Self to operate. Often the recipients wouldn't even have known from whom the donation came and so the level of relationship in the community always remained one of equality. There was never a subtle seeking for gratitude, for acknowledgment, for return favors and so on – all of which are signs of self-seeking. Jesus expressed all this very graphically when he advised his followers never to allow their left hand know what the right is doing. And if we are genuine as we look into ourselves when we choose to reach out to others, we realize how difficult it is to do this – to be totally bereft of all desire to be acknowledged, or noticed... even by the Lord. One effective way to catch oneself on this point is to check our reaction when we have gone out of our way to help another in need and the person just takes our kindness for granted – not a word of gratitude or appreciation comes our way. On the contrary, the next time s/he is in need, s/he comes and demands the help

almost as if it were his/her right to receive. If we can keep calm and self-possessed in such circumstances and be ever ready to help this time too, that speaks of a fairly close assimilation unto Christ.

Give of Your-self Now

There is a particular area which we need to look at against the background of the wise comment of the Cow: 'It is better to give of oneself while still alive rather than have others take what they can of our self or belongings after we die.' It is not common in India for people to donate their bodily organs for the benefit of anyone in need – and yet what a fruitful and powerful gesture of self-giving this is – right in line with what Jesus himself did. "On the night before he suffered and died, he took the bread ... take and eat, this is my body which is given for you!" Organ donation has to be done while one is still alive, (the intention of gifting organs cannot obviously be expressed after the person is dead!) and in the event of death, the donation is to be done as quickly as possible if at all the organ is to be any use to the recipient. How many lives could be saved or made more productive if more healthy people thought in terms of organ donation! Are you like the cow or like the pig in this matter? Is there anything in your life or even in your possession that you could make good use of by donating it to someone in need – now, while you are still alive? Don't wait till it is too late – for as St. Peter Julian Eymard said regarding his own departure from being a diocesan priest to enter religious life: 'Tomorrow will be too late, indeed!'

2008 June

6. THE LITTLE FISH AND THE OCEAN Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

An energetic and enterprising little fish was frantically searching for the Ocean which he desired to experience at least once before he died. He had heard others speak glowingly about the vagaries of the great ocean currents, the myriads of varieties of marine animals and plants, the stretches of clear water plunging to depths unheard of – but where was he to find it? Finally he decided to enquire of others who

might know better. Stopping a great big fish he enquired: 'Where, O great fish, where would I be able to find the Ocean?' Startled the big fish responded, 'Why, this is the ocean; right here where you are! You don't need to go anywhere else!' But, of course, the little fish was disappointed with the answer and felt somewhat cheated! How could this be the Ocean – this was nothing but water, as far as he was concerned.

The Living One in the Tomb?

This delightful little story reminds us of what we read in the Resurrection narratives concluding each of the four Gospels. But Luke is the one evangelist who puts the point most dramatically. He has the two men dressed in white ask the startled women: 'Why look for the Living One among the dead?' Little realizing that the Living One (the risen Lord) is not to be found in the tomb among the dead, but among the living, they had come very early in the morning, leaving aside all their other preoccupations, in order to anoint him. Presuming that they were really serious about meeting the Risen Lord, Luke proceeds to point out seven different situations in which the Christians of his community could meet the Risen One if their faith was strong enough – and right where they were, in the midst of their day-to-day living!

Seven Different Ways – Present to Us

Proceeding to recount the Emmaus story, Luke indicates that the Risen One can be encountered in the 'breaking of the Word.' (1) He opened the Scriptures to them, and beginning with Moses and going through the whole of the Law and the Prophets, he showed them how it was necessary for the Christ to have suffered and thus enter into his glory. Later that evening, after they had gathered around the table, the same 'Stranger' who had traveled with them the whole day, took the bread, said the blessing ... and in the breaking of the bread (2) showed them that he was alive, for their eyes were opened and they recognized him. These two re-juvenated disciples ran all the way back to Jerusalem to share this good news with the rest and 'while they were yet speaking (sharing their faith in his presence) Jesus stood in their midst and said, 'Peace be with you!' (3) Sharing our faith in the Risen One with others, this effort itself make him

more alive and present to us. Seeing that they were still incredulous, though, he asked them for something to eat and 'they gave him a piece of broiled fish which he ate in their presence.' In this sharing of a meal with the community (4) the risen Lord once again made himself present and visible to them. He then went on to open the Scriptures to the entire community gathered there (5), as he had done for the two on the road to Emmaus. The message here too was the same: 'It was necessary for the Christ to have suffered and thus enter into his glory.' 'You are witnesses of all this,' he reminded them as he commissioned them to go and preach repentance for the forgiveness of sin, assuring them of the gift of the Spirit who would come as promised by the Father. This 'apostolate' of theirs, their witnessing to his risen presence would again put them in touch with the Risen One (6). And finally, he led them out as far as Bethany and having laid hands on them, he blessed them and departed from their sight. A very intriguing detail no doubt, but self evident to those who remember that it is at Bethany that Jesus had begun his Passion with the triumphant entry into Jerusalem as the first step. Suffering had been the bug-bear of the apostles who chose to follow Jesus. They just could not understand why the Messiah would have had need to suffer. But now that he had demonstrated this clearly enough, both to the pair of disciples and to the entire community at Jerusalem and that too from the Scriptures about himself, Jesus led them all to the start of his own Passion journey, and empowering them with his understanding and Spirit, he left them to make that journey in faith and love. And as they gladly embraced all their crosses they would experience his risen presence anew. (7)

Living One Among the Living

So, while all along the disciples had these seven ways in which they could encounter the Risen Lord in their day-to-day lives, they were yet searching for him in the empty tomb! Not unlike the little fish we too will be thoroughly disappointed with our losing him ('him they did not see!') until we realize that he is very much with us; in fact, he dwells within us, not only in these seven avenues, but in innumerable ways open to anyone who has faith to see and hear what reason

cannot fathom. Would the parable of the little fish have any implications for us Christians of today? What seems to characterize Christian life today is a multiplicity of novenas, devotions, prayers, pilgrimages and the like, most of them pointing outwards to a presence of the Lord 'out there!' Think of the number of people who will happily make an arduous and expensive pilgrimage all the way to Pota in Kerala to seek the Lord there, failing all the while to notice his presence deep within their very being, right where they are! It never strikes them that they will not find the Lord there unless they first learn to find him within themselves. Again, many seem to find great relief in reciting prayers like novenas – even when these prayers are recited at such breakneck speed that it is hard to follow what exactly is being said. These Christians would not even dream that even a few genuine words that come straight from the heart (maybe not even articulated aloud or formulated in correct grammatical speech) would be more precious and acceptable to the Father than these beautiful formulae recited by heart but with little heart in it. Even when some choose to spend quiet personal time before the Blessed Sacrament exposed in our Prayer Chapels that characterize every parish in Mumbai, they seem to be at a loss knowing not what to do there; and so they revert to reciting the Rosary or other prayers from a book oblivious of the fact that a personal dialogue with the Lord is what is really called for. Even in the Adoration Chapel, often their attention is diverted from the risen presence to pictures and statues of the Sacred Heart or Divine Mercy; they delight in kissing or touching these images as if it is this touch that establishes a true contact between us and the divinity. Searching In Empty Tombs? Why is it that Christians find it so easy and convenient to look for the Risen Lord outside of themselves rather than within? Perhaps it is the ingrained idea that we are basically unworthy sinful people all our lives. It is unimaginable how deeply ingrained in us is the doctrine of 'original sin' – that each and every one of us comes into the world as an enemy of God. And this primal sin seems to cling to us all our lives making us abhorrent (in our view of things) to the Almighty. Even Jesus wasn't

able to dislodge this kind of thinking from the people of his times. We recall how they asked him concerning the man born blind – whether it was he who sinned or his parents (Jn. ch. 9)? From the story it appears that Jesus' answer (that this was not because of sin, but an occasion to manifest the glory of God) did not really go down with the people – and perhaps does not satisfy us either. We need to realize that we actually come into this world with an 'original blessing', God's invitation to enter into a deep personal oneness of life with him in Covenant. And until we consciously repudiate or reject this invitation, it remains open to us always. So the truth that Jesus dins into us is that God is more within us than without. We need to train ourselves to recognize his loving presence within the fabric of our daily lives and only then would we 'live and move and have our being in him.' When will our simple ordinary Catholics realize that God is not to be found in a multiplicity of external rituals or things, but in the depth of one's own heart and life? That's when he will know that the Ocean is all around us – Emmanuel means, God is with us! %o

God is with us, let us celebrate!

2008 July

7. THE GURU'S CAT Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

In a certain ashram several years ago, the ashram pet cat made a considerable nuisance of itself each time the community gathered for prayer. She would like to fuss after the Guru seeking his attention and expecting a morsel of food. Unable to take this disturbance any longer, the Guru ordered his disciples to tie up the cat before they began their community prayer, and she was to be kept tied for the entire duration of the prayer. The eager disciples were faithful to this little ritual ever since. If the appointed disciple was distracted and forgot to tie the cat before services began, others dutifully reminded him of this sacred observance. Several months later when this particular cat died, the inmates promptly procured another one to replace it and even though the new replacement did not interfere with their devotions, they religiously kept up the tradition of tying the cat before community

prayers began, just in order that they may never be unfaithful to the Guru's command.

Religious Routine

Ridiculous as this might seem, we have several instances of even learned people doing exactly the same in different areas of their lives, but especially in the religious sphere. The story reveals many important truths – the first is the power of habit. Once a person or a group gets habituated to a certain behavioural pattern, the pattern itself takes over and literally dominates the life of the individuals. Second, to break an established pattern of behaviour, several important steps would need to be taken. In the first place, the behaviour pattern needs to be questioned either by oneself or by someone else – more in the form of a challenge to see what would happen if one did not follow the routine pattern. This leads to an enquiry into the reason behind doing this particular action in this fashion. Then follows a search for alternative ways: is there an alternative way of doing things, maybe even a better, shorter or faster one? Once the myth behind the tyrannical pattern has been exploded, a new and better way becomes possible and also meaningful. Yet, in actual life, how many such habitual actions are really challenged and eventually changed for better ones? Further, such habitual actions or rituals originate because of the unquestioned authority of some great figure. Or, perhaps it comes about because of a practical necessity. And so, it would take an equally great authority to realize that now circumstances have changed and the original reasons for initiating this action do not any longer exist. Great courage is called for to be able to break the established pattern and start something different or new. In several situations it is fear or maybe even laziness or convenience that leads to establishing a particular pattern for our actions. When this happens the underlying reasons would possibly take longer to be questioned or dislodged and the pattern would take much longer to break and be replaced. However, we must recognize that habits can be very useful in our lives. But it is when we become slaves of any given habit that we lose our very dignity as human beings.

Several Examples

Religious services generally abound in such 'meaningless' rituals: some such rituals also exist in the Eucharistic liturgy even today almost fifty years after the Vatican reform. Way back in the early Church, out of their generosity people brought all kinds of foodstuffs and presented them at the altar – for use during the Eucharist and also for distribution to the poor after Eucharist. Now the Celebrant who received all these personally would obviously soil his hands requiring that he wash them before proceeding to the next action. This very practical necessity soon became an established ritual and in later years, even when the practice of bringing gifts of any kind was totally abandoned, the celebrant still continued to wash his hands at this point of the Eucharist – in fact, elaborate prayers linked with interior purification were also recited very religiously. Besides, the ritual gradually got so truncated that it became almost mandatory for the Celebrant to wash merely the tips of his thumbs and forefingers – a far cry from the original washing of hands to rid them of dirt! Towards the eleventh century we see another glaring example arise: in those days, Eucharist was still celebrated in Latin even though most Christians, including the celebrant did not understand it all that much. Several other reasons combined to make the Eucharistic celebration an almost totally foreign ritual for most Christians. Add to that a warped theology that gave tremendous importance to merely 'gazing' at the sacred host, especially after the words of consecration had 'transformed' it bringing Jesus down from heaven to take the place of the substance of bread/wine. With all these factors combined, the Church had this curious situation on its hands. The common Christian came for Eucharist but since s/he could not follow anything that happened there, they remained outside until the most important part arrived – the Consecration. To alert those standing outside, a bell was rung at the appropriate time, at which all rushed in eager to gaze at the sacred Host. No sooner was the Consecration completed than they all trooped out and hastened to the next Church to catch the next consecration-elevation. Today, when everyone celebrating Eucharist is already inside the bell is still rung just before the Institution Narrative – reason? Is

it because people are inside, yet outside, with their minds wandering or wool-gathering?

Servant Eats Before the Master?

The next example might be considered as pedantic by some. For centuries now the celebrant is the one who receives Holy Communion first (both the sacred bread and the cup) and only then does he proceed to distribute Communion to the faithful. Why is it that the minister should receive first especially if he represents the 'servant Church'? In all other situations, the servants do not eat before the master and guests have finished their meal. Way back in the Middle Ages very few Catholics partook of the sacred body and blood of Jesus so much so that the rule of receiving Communion at least once a year had to be introduced. The real problem is that if no one shares in the banquet, eating and drinking of the Lord's body and blood, the entire process and significance of meal would be incomplete. And so to ensure that the completeness was maintained, the Celebrant was required to receive first, so that if no one followed it would not matter as far as the integrity of the Sacrament is concerned! Today when almost everyone present comes up for reception of Communion, is there still need for the Celebrant to receive first? What would happen if he did receive last, befitting his status there as minister (servant) of the Lord? Maybe on closer investigation we could point out quite a few more. And the same would hold good for other areas of our lives – in the way in which we cook or sew clothes, arrange the décor of our homes or plan our holidays. The point really is that particularly in all matters of worship and religion it helps to question why, at least from time to time, because in this field the stakes are so high. This need not always be done with a view to eliminating some ritual or gesture, but could be an incentive to understanding what one does better and so be encouraged to do it more meaningfully. Vatican II requires of Christians that they participate in the Liturgy, actively, intelligently and fruitfully! When communicating with another human being, and so even much more when communing with God, every word and gesture must come from the heart, as much as this is possible for us mortals whose span of attention is so limited. Could

we develop the habit of questioning everything that we do, so that more and more of our actions are done more consciously and meaningfully?

2008 August

8. ELIMINATING ALL THE DANDELIONS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

A gardening enthusiast who took great pride in his lawn found himself saddled with a huge vexing problem: an uncontrollable crop of dandelions. No matter what he did to eliminate them, they continued to plague him. At his wits end, he wrote to the Department of Agriculture seeking their assistance. He listed all that he had done and enquired if there were still something he could try because he had to get rid of them at all cost. He just could not enjoy his gardening until that was accomplished. In due course he got the following reply: 'We suggest that you learn to love them.'

Love Your Enemies?

Some might wonder what we humans could learn from this lesson of Nature – yet there is enough in it to keep us busy our whole life long. As we go through the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, nowhere do we find him insisting that we should be perfect before we can be lovable to the Father. Rather, all his teachings emphasize merely this one point – that the Father accepts us just as we are, warts and all! Rather than wait for us to be perfect and then love us, he says to us that it is his unconditional love freely given that will provide us with the strength and motivation to be better and better each day. St. Paul puts this so powerfully when he says: 'and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For, while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:5-8). And yet somehow in the course of the Church's history the notion of perfection as an absolutely essential element

has crept into our concept of the spiritual life. We have been told in no uncertain terms, and that too in season and out of season, that the goal of Christian striving is to become perfect, understood as ‘sinless’ – especially in matters of love and forgiveness. It was for this purpose that from around the fourth century onwards Christians fled the ‘world’ and retreated into the desert to live heroically austere lives seeking to master their evil habits even to the least detail. Their goal was ‘Christian perfection.’ Experience however, shows us that it is not possible for human beings to be faultless, at least not by our own efforts. Mother Teresa is well known internationally as a great saint and soon will be canonized. What she did for the dying destitute all over the world was proverbial indeed! And yet those who knew her intimately confessed that she was ‘difficult to live with’ – and that was putting it mildly. Did this trait which remained with her till her dying day make her less lovable to God or even to people?

Faultless = Lovable?

Nonetheless, most of us have it ingrained in our thinking that we must not be caught with faults or shortcomings, especially if we wish to live the spiritual life seriously. Now we do not in any way wish to insinuate that it doesn’t matter whether we sin or not, or that how sinful we really are doesn’t count because God continues to love us. If we understand truly the meaning and extent of God’s love for us, we would never want to sin even once. Yet our desire to avoid sin should not end up as an obsession making us feel guilty or unworthy if and when we do fall because of our innate weakness. The tendency to focus on our spiritual purity actually speaks a lot about our preoccupation with the ‘Self’ which still lurks in the innermost recesses of our being. If our attention were wholly focused on God, where would we have the time to worry about our petty failings? The only sin that matters before God is our conscious rejection of his love and forgiveness. Further, when we do focus on God and his love, wouldn’t we also be a lot more aware of goodness, purity, love, kindness and other Godlike qualities all around us? Our paradigms are what govern our perceptions. So, when all that our paradigms portray for us is imperfection in ourselves,

we are more likely to see the same or worse defects in other people and in every situation around us. But it works the other way around too. The more we focus on the faults in people around us, the more we become obsessed with our own failings too.

Remedies

But we may ask: Isn’t it a good thing to be without sin? Shouldn’t we strive to become more like God our Father? How then are we to get rid of our sins and failings? Perhaps the first thing we need to do is to realize that these do not make any difference in our relationship with the Father. While he does want us to be and act like him, the Father is not at all surprised that we fail or sometimes even consciously sin against his love. He knows our weakness, but in his unbelievable love and tender mercy, he pursues us with his love and will continue to do so until one day we finally wake up to the reality of his stupendous love and learn to respond generously to it. That will be the day of great triumph and rejoicing for the Father – for he will exclaim: ‘This child of mine was dead and has come back to life, was lost and is now found – Come, let us celebrate!’ Once we get rid of our phobia that our sins are going to bring us eternal punishment, or that God is simply waiting to catch us out at sin and then mercilessly punish us, it becomes easier to relate to God out of love. In this connection we look again at the injunction in St. Matthew’s gospel: ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.’ This is perhaps the sentence that has led so many to make perfection their goal, their ‘impossible dream’. However, we must realize that the statement is given to us as an ideal towards which we move – knowing all the while that we will never really attain it, certainly not on our own steam and by our own efforts. Besides, once we realize deeply that God has poured out his own inner nature into our beings through his Spirit, it becomes obvious that our behaviour will be like his, even if it takes a long time. Further, the original could be translated in different ways, and Luke puts it rather as ‘be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful. And in any case, the word “perfect” simply means ‘complete’, lacking nothing. Now, we can lack nothing either because we strive to obtain all that is necessary or even by our

accepting as gifts all that we would ever need! Never should we read this text as meaning: ‘Unless you become perfect (through your own individual striving) you will not be acceptable to the Father!’ The second help would, of course, be an enlightened reading of Sacred Scripture. We say enlightened because even in the Scriptures, we could focus only on the punitive aspects that are copiously mentioned there. These are certainly part of the Scriptures but distinctly the approach of the Ancient Testament. Jesus came with a totally different message and attitude. His inaugural speech was simply this: “I have come to announce to you all, that this is the year of the Lord’s favour in which all your transgressions have been unilaterally forgiven – repent and believe the Good News!’ But then, if we hear even this message with the mindset of the Ancient Testament (like that of John the Baptist), we will still stand in mortal fear of God. This inaugural statement of Jesus must be the foundation of our relationship with the Father and with one another. We need to focus more on parables like the Wheat and Cockle – notice that in this parable, the Master is confident of his approach when he orders his servants to let both grow side by side. He is positively convinced that he will be able to handle the issue of weeds or cockle at the time of the harvest. No sin or ours is too great for God to cope with and eradicate from our lives – though sometimes he lets the cockle remain, and that too quite prominently to keep us from getting proud and self-reliant.

Genuine Love of Self

Thirdly, we need to train ourselves to ‘love our dandelions’, meaning that we learn to love ourselves imperfect as we are. We see our failings as reminders of how much more we need to experience God’s forgiving, healing and transforming love. When we deliberately choose to sin (refuse God’s love) we certainly will experience the evil consequences of this choice, but never as a punishment from God; rather we must learn to see our negative consequences as a result of our own stupidity in abandoning God’s love. Once we accept that we are not perfect and that it doesn’t really matter whether we are or not, as far as God is concerned, we will find ourselves more at peace – with God, with ourselves and with everyone

around us. All that matters in life is that we love in the best way we can, or as closely as the way in which Jesus loved... then we can even laugh at our foibles and they will no longer disturb us. Then will we have come to truly love our dandelions. Only then will we be able to enjoy life here on earth to the full.‰

“Happy the person who eats bread in the Kingdom of God”

2008 September

9. THE DISABLED FOX Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Sa’di the Arab mystic tells the story of a man who was one day walking through a dense forest. He unexpectedly came upon a fox that had lost its legs and as he saw the poor animal struggle even to move a little, he wondered how the disabled fox managed to survive in that condition. Curious to find out for himself, he hid among the branches of a nearby tree. He was there only a few minutes when he spied a lion come along with game in its mouth. Having had his fill, he left the substantial remains at the side of the hungry fox who gratefully availed himself of the generosity of his benefactor. The man saw this happen day after day, and could not but marvel at the greatness and providence of God who provided for all his creatures, especially the unfortunate ones, with tender loving care. Wishing to avail himself also of this great love of God, he decided to lie in a corner of his house and call upon God to fulfill all his needs. More than a month elapsed with nothing spectacular happening and our friend who was growing thinner and thinner now reached almost at death’s door. When he began complaining to God about his plight, he heard a voice say distinctly: “You fool, imitate the lion and not the fox!”

Beggars or Princes?

As you read the story, did you discern a similarity between yourself and the man, the fox or the lion? I guess most of us would easily identify ourselves with the man and his foolish way of thinking. Isn’t our attitude generally like that of the people whom Jesus fed with the miraculous bread in the desert? All they

could think of the next day was: ‘Sir give us this bread always!’ (Jn. 6:34) St. Paul tells us in Eph. 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...” The text tells us plainly that God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing, which really means that there is nothing more that God can give us, which he hasn’t already given. Besides, he tells us in another context: ‘Do not be afraid little flock, for it has pleased your Father to grant you the kingdom... Ask and you will receive ... whatever you ask the Father in my name, I will obtain for you...!’ If we really believed these words and promises of Jesus, we certainly would be able to identify ourselves easily with the lion, not only in his confidence that he would always find enough game for himself and for his incapacitated brother, but also in his generosity and thoughtfulness. Yet, most of us find it so easy to see ourselves as beggars denuded of all resources and means of caring for ourselves. We are so obsessed with our petty little sins that we see ourselves as perpetually unworthy of God’s loving kindness. Hence, most of our prayer consists of petitions: a continuous and unending litany of ‘gimme, gimme, gimme!’ It isn’t any wonder that we don’t then have the freedom to even see or notice the needs of our neighbours and much less do we have the inclination to reach out to them. The spirituality of the majority of Christians today all over the world consists simply in a selfcentred approach of obtaining salvation of their own ‘souls’. This stems from the fact that they do not yet believe that Jesus has made any difference in their lives; they still see themselves as ‘outsiders’ as regards the kingdom and they see salvation as something that they attain only after death. That the Father has already gifted them with the kingdom hasn’t even crossed their minds and so they continue to see themselves as indigent and despicable beggars needing to constantly plead with the Father. And even in this the understanding seems to be that they have to ‘drag’ or coax these gifts out of the hands of a miserly and parsimonious Father-God. That he waits and ardently longs to be generous to his beloved children, (Give me a chance to wash your feet), that it is his good pleasure to grant them the kingdom is way

beyond their mental horizon. The gratuitousness of God’s forgiven love is a mystery, undoubtedly – but a foundational mystery on which is based our entire spiritual life’s journey. This must be a response of love, stemming from an initial exclamation: ‘Wow, God, our Father – it never dawned on me that You could love me so much... that You gave Your only Son to us, to die for us!’ How utterly unbelievable is Your love, Lord!

Example of Early Christians

The early Christians thought otherwise and hence we see in them two attitudes refreshingly different from what we see in ourselves today: first, like us they too prayed to the Father to ‘give us each day our daily bread’ – but in their minds this bread (standing for everything that sustains life) is asked for and received primarily with the idea of sharing it with others. That is what the Eucharist meant for them – bread that was broken to be shared. Secondly, realizing that whatever they had, has actually come from the Father and was meant to be shared, they gave generously of their belongings to anyone in need. They even went and sold their property and gave the money to the apostles. “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses, sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:33-36). We hardly ever hear of such lavish generosity in the Christian community today. We do have many Christians who are generous in giving to the needy – but the all important question is: what is their understanding behind all that giving? Many still give in order to get – they believe that if they give, the Lord will bless them with more (there is absolutely no doubt that he will, but we do not give in order to get!) – or at least, that they will gain extra merit in heaven because of their giving. The key defect or deficiency that Jesus came to save us from is a ‘preoccupation with the Self’ even when that preoccupation is with spiritual gain. And when our selfimage is a poor or miserable one, it is almost impossible for us to think of anyone else but ourselves! A person experiencing a severe

toothache can think of nobody else except him/herself. If s/he does think of another, it would be the dentist who can relieve him of his pain. Similarly, if we see ourselves as totally indigent and helpless, how could we possibly think of others and their needs?

Inflated Self-image Repels

The same is true when our image is an overly inflated one; as Jesus warned: “I tell you, it is far easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, ‘Then who can be saved?’” Here, the apostles seemed to be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: damned if you do and damned if you don’t! But Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible’ (Mt 19:24 – 20:1). True life then lies in the middle and only God can work out a proper balance between a poor self-image and an unduly bloated one. In general most people would lean towards a negative selfimage and so if we do realize the need to work in this area of improving our self-image it would need to be in the direction of developing a healthy positive selfimage. Here again, we receive what we give. If we can train ourselves to reflect more the positive that we see in others and in every situation, then we will find others also being positive towards ourselves too. But ultimately it is God who provides us with opportunities to strengthen our positive selfimage. And to make it possible for him to do this for us, we need to leave everything into his hands through a totally loving and obedient surrender. God loves the cheerful giver – it is more blessed to give than to receive! Imitate the lion and not the disabled fox!

2008 October

10. THE EAGLE AND THE CHICKENS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

By chance a farmer one day found an eagle’s egg and placed it under a brooding hen for hatching. Not many weeks later an eaglet was seen proudly strutting among the little chickens: it grew with them and lived like them in every way. It clucked and cackled, scratched for worms and roamed the yard with the other chickens. It even managed to flap its heavy wings and fly a few feet into the air, much to the

consternation of all his ‘brethren’. Years passed with the eagle continuing to live like a chicken till one day a royal eagle happened to pass overhead. The domesticated one gazed at the huge majestic bird as he soared effortlessly in the sky - and it wondered who that was. The giant bird glided gracefully not one bit deterred by the powerful wind. Spellbound, the eagle who lived like a chicken watched it for hours till suddenly, it heard a voice say deep within itself: ‘You are an eagle too and are meant to fly like that! You are not a chicken destined to scratch the earth for a measly morsel the whole day long.’ The eagle pondered these words and as they echoed in his heart – the confused eagle felt something stir within his inmost being. He deeply sensed its true nature and secretly longed to fly like a real eagle. He even made a few timid attempts when no one was looking. But, he was mortally frightened at the prospect of getting off the ground: how would he face those raging winds and the vast expanse of the deep blue sky?

Chickened Out

So he sat back to reflect and finally came to a momentous decision: he was born among chickens and among chickens he would stay till he died. So the eagle continued living among chickens and behaved like any one of them for that is what he believed he really was, no matter what his inner nature told him. To its consternation, however, not long after that fateful day the farmer’s son picked him up in his hands and said almost the very words he had heard in its heart: ‘You are an eagle – you are meant to fly.’ Saying this, he hurled the bird up in the air, but trembling with fear, he soon returned to the safety of the coop. The following day and for many days thereafter, the boy would keep reminding the bird that he was meant for greater things – but each time, after a feeble attempt, he would return to the calm and quiet of the farmyard. Finally one day the boy took the eagle up a high mountain and with a mighty heave hurled him high up in the air shouting: ‘Go, eagle go – conquer the sky and rule it as the king of birds!’ Fired by some strange emotion, the eagle flapped its mighty wings enthusiastically and lo and behold it was able to fly like a real eagle. The rushing winds only increased

his zest for flying and he never ever came back to the chicken yard again.

The Giant Within

This is a great discovery and achievement this but the dynamics involved here can take on colossal proportions when a human being who is truly a child of God decides to live and die like a mere exiled mortal. There is no doubting that the majority of people, Catholics included, have taken exactly this same painful decision. They might think that they are beloved children of God because they have heard others say this, they might even profess it openly before others to sound learned and modern, but deep in their hearts, they firmly believe that they are no better than 'poor banished children of Eve, sending up sighs, weeping and mourning in this valley of tears.' It is interesting to note that only recently (April 2007) when the International Theological Commission met to review the doctrine of Limbo, the group finally came up with a statement to this effect: 'that although the teaching of Limbo has been part of the official Church teaching, yet they were convinced that God in his goodness would not permit newborn unbaptized children to be eternally separated from him!' This statement itself is a very progressive step and must have cost these theologians many a qualm of conscience. Great courage would they have needed to go against several centuries of Church teaching, which in truth does not seem to appear anywhere in the Gospels, nor resonate with the mind of Jesus and his teaching. But the ultimate question still remains: How many, in practice, would really believe this statement and make the needed effort to remodel their lives accordingly?

Costly, Yet Rewarding

Change is always difficult and costly. But when it is a question of changing from a phony self to one's true self, no matter what the cost, it must be achieved. God in his great love for us sent us his own Son Jesus, to show us who we really are. All we need to do is to accept our son-ship in Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to enable us to live as Jesus did. Is it any wonder that towards the end of his life Jesus summed up everything for us in just one command: 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It is only in loving and

living as Jesus did that we would be able to realize our true nature as children of God. Today even the behavioural and other sciences tell us that a human being's true nature is to love, to live in harmony with others, to collaborate, to be compassionate to the weak. These other-like qualities come naturally to most persons. When people do not act in this way, it is because they have somehow, somewhere been deeply hurt; their true nature has been warped. And when a person acts out of his warped nature, he cannot but go about hurting others too. Yet, herein lies the challenge for a true Christian: having accepted healing and wholeness from the Father through Jesus, he can truly undertake the mission of healing others. For this, he does not even have to say that he wishes to heal others; his very behaviour, for example, will be soothing and calming in times of distress. Daniel Goleman tells of how during the recent Iraq War, a group of armed US soldiers approached a mosque to ask the religious leader for help in organizing the distribution of relief supplies. To their surprise, they were met by an advancing mob of Muslims shouting and gesticulating wildly, since they interpreted the advance of the armed troops as an attack. Realizing the dangerous level of hostility in this situation, the Commander immediately ordered his troops to get down on one knee with their guns pointing to the ground. Giving the lead himself, he commanded all his men to smile. Seeing this sudden unbelievable change, the angry mob kept advancing but now many were smiling in return. They were ultimately able to achieve their peace mission with exemplary amicable co-operation. This was no doubt a dramatic situation, but each day presents us with innumerable occasions when each of us can act as a child of God without needing to flaunt our own strengths or qualities. And that Christ-like behaviour would have a tremendous influence on those around us. What a different world would we not have if we all believed that we are no longer children of Eve weeping and mourning in the valley of tears, but true children of a loving Father sent into our surroundings on a mission of love. Rather than be chicken-hearted when faced with evil situations or people, we can conquer and transform the world, because Jesus our risen Saviour has

overcome all evil. 'Do not be afraid,' he assures us, 'I am with you always, even till the end of the world.'

Release the true eagle in you and soar to new heights of love!

2008 November

11. THE COCONUT MISSILE Fr. Erasto Fernandez, SSS

In a fit of playfulness, a monkey perched on a tall swaying coconut tree, hurled a coconut at the head of a Sufi passing by. Having miraculously escaped any hurt, the man quietly picked up the coconut, shelled it, drank its refreshing water, enjoyed every bit of its kernel and ended up making a couple of ladles with its shell. What might have been a painful disaster was turned into a positive blessing in disguise by the resourcefulness and inner strength of the Sufi.

Verbal Missiles

There isn't a single person who has not had things hurled at him by others all through life: insults, accusations, criticisms, rejection and the like. But perhaps not many would have acted like the Sufi – taking what is good and valuable in the missile and emerging as a better person, without bothering too much about the offender or his intentions. What a different world would we not have if everyone could follow this teaching, articulated so forcefully by Jesus: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'." (Mt. 5:43-48).

Supportive Suppositions

But of course, if a person would want to act in this manner, he would first have to believe that s/ he is truly a child of God, someone precious in the eyes of

the Father, someone whom the Father will never abandon no matter how faithful or not s/he has been. Once this conviction is firmly entrenched in a person's mind, then it will not be difficult to persevere in doing good even when the other is obviously out to hurt and destroy. However, all this sounds very interesting and fanciful when spoken of in the safe and cozy atmosphere of a Church or prayer house. Most people would be cynical of this attitude in actual practical day-to-day life. The general opinion is that this is good and noble theory but one that doesn't work in practice. Out in the world, one needs to be tough in order to survive. And yet, it is only the one who has dared to practice this, even in the face of great odds, who will know from experience that what Jesus teaches is the true way to happiness and peace. Most of Jesus' sayings are paradoxical and appear foolish to the rational mind: think of the 'turn the other cheek' principle. Or again, 'If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you' (Prov. 25:21-22). What could be more cowardly and disastrous in real life... how could this principle be applied e.g. in the ongoing conflicts between India and Pakistan regarding Kashmir? It takes a man of super-human courage and moral strength like a Mahatma Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, or a Nelson Mandela to show us that this approach does work – even if slowly and unobtrusively. However, one needs to have the strength of one's convictions and persevere in the approach. It certainly calls for great moral fibre, but isn't this what the Holy Spirit assures us of? 'Do not be afraid, I am with you ... not a hair of your head falls without your Father knowing it. St. Paul adds not just as theory but as something that he himself lived: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." (Rom 13:8-10)

Eucharist Paves the Way

Where does Eucharist come into this kind of a picture? Each time we listen to the Word of God, the gist of the reading is always a message of love from

our Father. When we train ourselves to pick this up, and relish it till it becomes part of our habitual thinking, it inevitably deepens our conviction of God's personal love of each one of us. As we enter into the Table of the Bread/Eucharist, we are invited to surrender ourselves, our lives, our plans, our successes and failures – in short, everything that concerns us into the hands of this loving Father. If we can do this consciously and at some depth, it would certainly take the strain out of our inner battles and enable us to practice all that Jesus has taught us... even to the point of being ready to give our very lives for others, be they friend or foe. It would be worth recalling, when was the last time that we had succeeded in transforming an insult into something precious and valuable? The gain would certainly have been far greater than the intended injury. What is most precious is the peace that reigns within ourselves, a peace that no one can disturb unless we give them permission to do so. This approach does not imply that we live in a fool's paradise. It demands that we look and evaluate whether there is any wrong that we might have done unwittingly or unknowingly. If that is the case, we certainly benefit by acknowledging our faults, taking responsibility for them and working to eliminate what was wrong. The criticism or accusation gives us cause to look deeper into ourselves, to trace our hidden agendas and motivations which others pick up much faster than we normally do. Once we become adept at doing this, we have the key to our own happiness with us always, and no one could then really disturb us. Again, it helps if we can genuinely give thanks for the insults and injuries we suffer, as these provide us with precious opportunities for conquest of ourselves. We could also pray for those through whom we receive these opportunities, together with Jesus on the Cross when he said: 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they do.' It takes great inner emotional strength to be able to do this consistently and joyously. Another requisite which is a great help is the conviction that what others think of us doesn't really matter in the long run. When we become slaves to what others think of us, there is no possibility of ever attaining true peace of mind. For then, we become extremely vulnerable to everybody's

passing whims and fancies. And yet, detaching ourselves from the opinion of others is not easy at all. Further, if we have a clear grasp of what the Father thinks of us and of how much he values us, then the inconstant opinion of others wouldn't matter much. And of course, God's estimation of us is more genuine, authentic and accurate when compared to the biased opinion that people generally have. So, hold your head high and invite one and all to throw as many brick-bats and coconuts at you as they please. The more the better, since you are the one who stands to gain and become richer and more human!

2008 December

2009 January

1. GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY Fr. Erasto Fernandez, SSS

One of the fall-outs of the global culture that which grips us all in its tentacles is that there is less and less room for senior citizens in our big cities, especially the aged and the sick. Yet, when today even secular Governments have felt the need to move in with protective laws and regulations to support this senior bracket of human life especially in our metropolitan cities, we have before us one of the 'signs of the times' that demand our urgent attention. We would all agree that life is not just for existing or surviving, but for enjoying, for sharing and for enriching others even to the very end. Realizing the plight of senior citizens in his parish of St. Anne's, Mazgaon, Colin D'Souza, himself an ex-school teacher of Mazgaon's St. Mary's SSC searched for a meaningful way to make them count as worthwhile human beings and citizens. The youth, the women, the children – almost every age bracket had a club in the parish, but not the elderly. They were conspicuous by their absence in all parish activities. So he shared his vision for these neglected seniors with the Parish Priest who generously offered him a room on the church grounds. Soon others rallied round and a few items like a television set, carom boards, playing cards and a table tennis set were assembled. A simple constitution was drawn up, an appealing announcement made in church, and thus the Senior Parishioners Club sprang into being. Numbers steadily grew from 10 to 250. In no time eight focus

groups mushroomed, picnics and pilgrimages were planned, spiritual and health discourses judiciously organized, a reading library installed, yoga exercises scheduled, social service groups set up, and lively social gatherings routinely interspersed these activities. Realizing that no blessing is meant only for one's own selfcentred consumption, the Seniors then decided to reach out to others in the parish. Providing senior people with an outlet for their creative though depleting energies, "We set up a basic computer training facility for those who need computer skills to secure a job, with donated machines," adds Colin with a proud smile adorning his happy face. Having acquired a sense of belonging and purpose, the seniors of this Club will never miss a programme for anything in the world. They provide encouragement and inspiration for younger people and enjoy the sunset years of the lives having found something worthwhile and constructive to do.

Eucharist – Bread of Life

Nothing extraordinary, one might say, regarding Colin's efforts, yet what a difference he has made in these few lonely hearts. While he could have settled into a cozy way of life centred round his own needs, thanking God for the blessings he himself had received, he rather spent his time and energy getting others to also share these blessings. That is what the Eucharist, properly celebrated, is meant to do. "The bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world," Jesus told the people he had fed in the desert. And elsewhere he reminded them: "I came that you may have life and have it to the full." There are two little reflections that emerge from these texts. The first is that we cannot have the fullness of life unless, at times, another person in his generosity helps us. It is said that 'even eagles need a push' meaning thereby that even this great bird, the king of the skies, would not learn to fly unless the mother eagle pushes the young one out of the nest - a seemingly cruel and heartless act, but so necessary to get the young one ready to face life to the fullest! The young offspring hurtles to its grave but at the very last second the mother dives underneath the falling eaglet and bears it up on its powerful protective wings. Soaring far above the clouds, it once again drops the young one for yet

another round of flying experience and the pattern continues till the little one gains strength and confidence enough to venture out on its own. Now it is free and rules the skies on its own – something that would have been unthinkable had the mother eagle not initiated it so lovingly and painstakingly. Each one of us too, including senior citizens, is like that little eaglet in some area of our life. Unless someone spots the talent, the enthusiasm, the zest for life buried deep within us and has the courage and generosity to help us realize these gifts, they would be buried like the proverbial one talent received by the third servant in the Gospel. The second reflection is that 'fullness of life' is a relative term and can be experienced even up to one's dying day. There is no age at which one can say 'I have had enough – all I need now is to wait patiently for the day of my final departure!' When a person discovers something relevant or significant yet to happen, s/he finds purpose in life and will live it energetically. Viktor Frankl showed us in his Logotherapy that what people need most is a 'purpose' in life. Now some people are able to find this purpose, or to generate it for themselves, whilst most others look to someone for a helping hand, especially as they grow old and infirm. While the mother eagle's initiation of her young one is instinctive, in our case especially when dealing with the elderly, it would need to be done out of genuine love and concern. In today's fast moving globalized world where the motto seems to be: 'Each one for himself and God for all', but, every person is precious in God's eyes, and even if s/he hasn't achieved anything great in life, yet there is no saying how many blessings could accrue to the wider community through these seemingly useless people.

Eucharistic Inspiration

The Sunday Eucharist reminds us that we are one family, rather one body in Christ. Just as we care for every part of our body, and especially for those that are weak and delicate like the eye, the ear, the heart – to name only a few, so those who have reached the closing years of life need the love and attention of the younger generation. In so many places, not just in the western 'first-world' culture, but in almost every part of the world, the old and infirm are seen as readily

disposable. They are regarded as a burden, a nuisance, as a deadweight that hampers one's own enjoyment of life. What when they cannot hear nor see too clearly, nor move swiftly because of arthritic limbs, what with their endless tales of pain and woe, repeated ever so often? But these too are God's beloved children and part of our family in Christ – and they too appreciate it when someone cares to make life a little interesting and less monotonous for them. I still remember vividly a Christmas season Eucharist we organized in our little parish substation for the 'oldies.' These were men and women who had lived for years in the same vicinity, but were now homebound and hence hardly able to meet their old companions for a good old gossip session. At this Eucharist we lined up the wheelchairs close to the sanctuary thinking that they would want to celebrate this Eucharist with full gutsy participation. But to our surprise, what interested them most was the fact that they saw their former companions and friends – they kept talking to one another right through the Eucharist. The thought that crossed my mind on seeing this was: 'Would God be offended by this lack of respect for the great Sacrament of his love? I like to think that he would have been smiling from his throne of glory saying: "I was lonely and you cared to make me feel wanted and loved... as long as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me."

Inspiration to Imitate?

Would it be preposterous to imagine that such Senior Citizens Clubs could be organized in every parish – and run by the young and able-bodied? But it is not just a question of handing out goodies to the seniors, rather the ideal should be to get them sufficiently involved as well in projects aimed at reaching out to others in need. Without a doubt, they would enjoy giving while they too receive in return! After all, what they want most, even though they may not know how to express it, is the feeling that they are still useful to society. The gifts we bring to the Eucharistic table are simply what 'earth has given and human hands have made!' This kind of venture would indeed be a case of human energy and love recycled. Again, could this effort be linked with other parish associations too e.g.

each zone taking its turn in providing something profitable and challenging to the seniors of the entire parish? Or again, each zone could be allotted a month in which to work out something creative and engaging for the seniors of the entire parish! Colin's venture could be seen as a start, an eye-opener, providing inspiration for a number of improvements and additions. Would you allow the Lord to stir your imagination and heart the next time you attend the Eucharist? And should you hear his voice, 'harden not your heart' but let it respond with generosity and love. "The measure in which you give will be the measure in which you receive!"

2009 February

2. REMAIN IN MY LOVE! Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

John and I strained forward,' recalls TF, 'as if to assist his rickety dilapidated Jeep, climbing precariously up a steep hill dirt road strewn with loose sliding rock.' A throbbing heartbeat later, they were suddenly catapulted to the ground, the Jeep's wheels spinning dizzily pointed skyward. She screamed repeatedly and frantically for John but her cries were met with a deafening silence. As a result of this devastating accident, TF became a paraplegic but her spirit wasn't yet beaten – she worked feverishly for several weeks in physical therapy. Every muscle and bone in her upper body screamed, but she would not stop. Struggling to hold herself upright on parallel bars, she swung her legs ahead or dragged them behind her, refusing to accept their nagging numbness. But before long she was told by her doctor: "You've given it all you've got, TF, but you've not shown the slightest improvement. I'm going to have to discharge you tomorrow."

An Uncertain Future

"I will walk. I know it," she resolutely and stout-heartedly prophesied to herself. Cradling her head in her hands, with misty eyes she recalled the sequence of events of her now shattered life. 'We had first become acquainted as pen pals. I so admired John's struggle to become a doctor and to serve his people with no thought of personal gain. It was not just a profession for him, it was a God given mission. So

when he invited me to spend the summer with him as an assistant and traveling teacher on vacation from my regular teaching job, I could barely contain my excitement. Many of the families he treated lived in remote areas that often lacked roads, and the small children had no benefit of schooling... 'While we were on one of these 'good-Samaritan' trips, abruptly, I cried out: "Stop, John! Stop!" Alarmed but calm, he listened to my excited cries. "Look up there!" I shouted. "Look, an eagle! Oh! It's my very first one." Overcome by its beauty and majesty, I wept. With quiet admiration he had said. "From this moment on, you shall be known as Little Eagle." In that moment we fell in love. Each morning after that, John would call, "Come, Little Eagle, it's time to soar. The children need you." John and I had cared for them totally, their bodies, minds and spirits. Our recompense was at best a shared poor man's meal, a sincere heartfelt hug or a warm expressive handshake. Grateful women sometimes offered to patch our threadbare jeans with bits of colorful cloth. With the meager stipend we received from the government, we procured upgraded medical supplies and nourishing treats for the children... And then came that terrible accident in which he was no more and I myself was rendered a helpless paraplegic!

What Next?

These are the memories that sustained and tortured her once her dreams were shattered. John was dead and her personal career was over because none of the city schools provided wheelchair facilities. The principal of her last school had offered to build a ramp, but his request to have her return was denied by the authorities... In the hospital, she cried herself to sleep. And then a strange thing happened: she awoke one night only to see John sitting on her bed, and she heard his gentle voice as if he were whispering in her ear: "The Little Eagle that I know and love would not give up so easily," he seemed to chide her. "You have to help yourself soar again - the city children need you. Imprisoned in their concrete jungle, they know nothing of the joys of nature. Share your bubbling joy with them; bring it into the classroom. You have this God-given gift, Little Eagle. Don't squander it away." Then he was gone.

Reality or Dream!

Brought back to the doctor's decision with a sickening thud, she repeated to herself softly: "I will walk. I know it," to which the doctor replied decisively: "Sweetie, you're in denial; at some point you'll be better off accepting the reality of your situation." Reality, she mused, as she drifted to sleep that night. But then, it happened again! In her own words: 'About 3 a.m. a voice awakened me. "Come, Little Eagle - it's time to soar." John was once more standing over my bed, smiling. "Push your legs over the edge and stand up." He knelt at my feet and gently rubbed my legs until they tingled. I swear I could feel his hands touching me. Then he stood with hands outstretched and backed away. "Walk with me now." With hesitant, shuffling steps, I followed him out of my room and into the hall. My eyes were riveted on John, coaxing every step. A stairway loomed ahead. "One step at a time, Little Eagle; you can do it." The sensation in my legs was almost unbearable as I clambered one painful step after another. Suddenly, from the stairwell door, the excited voices of the resident intern and head nurse carried up the stairs. "I'll always be with you," John whispered and with a kiss on my cheek, he was gone...'

A Miracle of Love

For the next two hours, doctors poked and prodded; they mumbled to each other about 'a February 2009 6 Don Bosco's Madonna spontaneous something or other,' and finally left. When all was quiet, a nurse came in and sat on her bed. "I saw the young man leading you up the stairs," she said quietly. "Is he your guardian angel?" "Yes, he is" was the confident and serene response! Two months later, she returned to her teaching job with a gait sorely lacking in feminine grace, but carrying her forward nonetheless. Her classroom is now filled to bursting with all the wonders of nature. The walls are covered from ceiling to floor with colorful sights from the wild. Many teachers take pride in shepherding their charges to her room to view live creatures firsthand. In each child's eyes, wide with wonder, TF still sees her beloved John, smiling.

Love Endures Forever

A dreamlike story true, yet one that baffled medical science, though not the logic of love. This story is so much reminiscent of what Jesus himself does for each one of us. In his case though, he was aware that he was 'going to the Father' and so before he left his beloved disciples, he assured them of this abiding presence. Realizing how the shocking events of his passion and death would demoralize every one of his timid followers, he returned to reassure them: 'Do not be afraid, it is I... I am with you till the end of time.' Further, Christ's risen presence among us today is not a mere static presence, although we tend to understand it precisely in those terms: 'Jesus is there – everyone to him!' However, in the abiding sacrament of his love, he is not merely there, passively as it were; he is much more 'there-for-you/ us.' The Risen Lord is the Son of God and so shares in the attributes of God himself. One of the outstanding qualities of God that Israel picked up way back during their desert journey, was that God is 'Yahweh', (I am who I am) the God who is always present, whose love cannot allow him to be absent to any given situation. And wherever he is present, he is actively present to save his chosen people. Our God and likewise his beloved son Jesus, our Risen Lord, is not like other deities that are the mere work of human hands: 'They have eyes but they cannot see, ears but they cannot hear... but our God is in the heavens, he does whatever he wills!' (Ps. 115:3-11). With this powerful God as our friend and traveling companion, is there anything we would not be able to do if our faith in his presence is strong and alive? With God nothing is impossible and this would be our daily experience as often as we give him a chance! When we truly seek to belong to him, and he knows the sincerity with which we come to him, he will not let us down. 'Come to Me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you strength!' (Mt 11:28-30).%

2009 March

3. A NEW-FOUND VOCATION by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Our Lady of Good Health High School raises its modest yet proud structure in the centre of a low-income settlement in Saki Naka, one of the suburbs of

Mumbai. Catering to some 1,200 children, from kindergarten to Standard X it is housed in the former lodgings of its director, Dr. Janet Hendricks. What is unusual about this school is that it grew by a steady and constant accretion not only to its student body, but also to its faculty and its material size. Way back in 1984, Dr. Hendricks, a medical general practitioner in the area, was distressed by a common complaint of many of her patients: they could not afford the steep donations demanded by English-medium schools to which they aspired to send their budding ambitious children. Determined to do something concrete and tangible to meet this aspiration of theirs, she moved her family upstairs converting the ground floor of her sprawling bungalow into a school of sorts. The fifteen students who dared to accept the challenge of being the pioneers didn't take up all that much room either. Little did Dr. Janet count on word spreading like wildfire that the director at Good Health School was a Principal with a difference: she was loving, committed, considerate, and capable of giving children a sound English education. More enterprising youngsters began to pour in forcing Hendricks to improvise...and that led them to move to Marol, the neighbouring suburb.

Humble Beginnings

The school soon acquired an additional building and today boasts of even a pocket-sized computer lab fitted with secondhand machines. Good Health School doesn't receive any government funding because it is classified as a private, independent English-medium school. Undeterred, Dr. Hendricks runs the school like she would a large and economically constrained household. Despite having to work perpetually with only a shoe-string budget, education is offered gratis or subsidized for those who can't afford it. This means that she has to walk a tight-rope – not a hair out of place, not a decibel too loud, not a scrap on the floor. The outcome of these unavoidable hardships is that the children learn more than the three 'Rs' – they imbibe habits of thrift and cleanliness, of taking responsibility for their school and its belongings, of lending a helping hand to anyone in need and also of maintaining tidiness of the school surroundings – no wonder that these students are better mannered than

most other school children in the vicinity. They are encouraged to speak in English when at school, and even the lower grades are improving their grasp of the language as they speak it with pride and confidence. “This is the first year we were able to achieve a hundred percent result,” Hendricks says with legitimate pride. Most of the teachers are products of this same institution, and so they work with an enviable sense of dedication, staying on late into the evenings tutoring ‘special’ students who are in need. Hendricks and her daughter Vanessa, who is now the principal, invest almost all their time and energies in the integral growth of their charges thus eliminating the need for that crutch or curse of modern education in India, whichever way one chooses to see it – the coaching class or tuitions. It is a school that has literally been built on the back of the founder. She knows the students like she knows her family. After all, this is home for one and all.

Lessons Learnt in this School

Most people do not taste the love of God directly, but only through another human being who shares in God’s compassion for his needy children. One of the places specifically designed for us to experience God’s personal love for each person is the Eucharistic celebration – provided, of course, one has grasped its central truth: the paschal mystery! This fundamental mystery reminds us that all human beings are called to live creatively which is possible only when three fundamental steps are taken generously yet courageously: letting-go in faith, letting-be in hope and letting grow in love. As Dr. Hendricks’ school began burgeoning, especially in those first few months of its existence, she was several times challenged to ‘let-go in faith’ at quite a few levels. First of all there was the letting-go of her established profession as a medical practitioner. With admission offered to each new child, her worries and anxieties mounted steadily yet menacingly, challenging her to believe first of all in herself and in the merit of the choice she had made, and then also in Divine Providence who was leading her step by step into the unknown! Dealing with these simple children all day long also necessitated a letting-go of her social status and dignity in the eyes of at least some of her friends and relatives. And what

about letting-go of her own comforts and conveniences, especially as she tied herself down to providing her charges with the very best, day-in and day-out? An institution of the magnitude that caters to 1200 children today does not grow overnight or effortlessly like grass springing up after the first monsoon showers. Similar too, in the nurturing of a child from a tentative toddler to a self-confident teenager which calls for many a sleepless night, Dr. Hendricks would have had to let-be in hope – holding on to her dream of seeing her children grow up to be responsible citizens with a sense of mission, able to make a significant difference wherever they are placed. Many would have been the occasions when she would have been tempted to ask herself: ‘Why am I going through all this struggle – what is there in this for ‘me’?’ Hoping against hope like Abraham, she would have held on tenaciously – her God-given vision was authentic and would one day be realized! But, of course, it would take its own time and unfold according to God’s inscrutable plan. After seeing some of her protégés returning to share in her vision and dream, would come the next and perhaps most difficult of her challenges – to let-grow in love. Hers was a venture not just to make money, to achieve worldly renown or to work out a career. Her predominant concerns were not about herself or her family. Hers was a labour of love and unless each child in her care truly experienced that love, their education would ultimately come to nothing. What seems to have sustained her all these many years could be summed up in the prayer of St. Francis: ‘Lord grant that I may never seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love with all my soul.’ She has tasted the depth of truth in St. Paul’s words to the elders at Ephesus: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:25) and so the Eucharist has led her to a blessedness that very few indeed have the privilege to experience during their earthly journey.

Eucharistic Path to Fullness

All of this is what we celebrate each Sunday in our Eucharist. We come to the Eucharist because we are convinced that we have been singularly blessed by the Father. Deep down in each Christian heart is the

burning desire to give back to God in some measure what we ourselves have received so lavishly. And this is so because the Eucharist makes present again the supreme example of Jesus' own self-gift of himself. Undaunted by the insults and ignominies heaped upon him, he lovingly broke of his very life and shared it with those who rejected him. Truly, 'greater love no one has than when a person lays down his life for his enemies!' (Jn 15:13). If it is true that 'he loved me and gave himself up for me' (Gal 2:20) how can we go through life, and especially show up at the judgment seat, empty-handed? And that too after hearing almost daily the Eucharistic command: 'Do this as a memorial of Me!' The fullness of life Jesus came to bring us can be ours only when we sincerely empty ourselves of all self-seeking and step out in faith to make others happy. For 'it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned and in dying that we are born to eternal life!'"%

2009 April

4. A MODERN INDIAN ZACCHAEUS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

We are all familiar with the story of Zacchaeus and how Jesus transformed his life during a simple meal together. Reading an account of the life of Mukesh Ambani, I couldn't resist comparing him to good old Zacchaeus, the man who discovered an alternative way of living – no longer just selfishly for himself, but as a channel of blessings for thousands of others. In the last century, M. K. Gandhi was India's most famous and powerful private citizen. Today, Mr. Ambani is widely regarded as playing that role, though differently. Mr. Ambani champions the cause of the city, has buried the past and deftly though sometimes ruthlessly wields unlimited financial power. He is the richest Indian and is envisaged by many to be the richest person on earth before long.

Vision for a Better India

Detailing his vision and goals he professes they are for India's benefit as much as for Reliance Industries. "Can we really banish abject poverty in this country?" he muses aloud. "Yes, in ten, maybe fifteen years we

can say we would have done that substantially. Can we make sure that we create a social structure where we remove untouchability? We're fast moving to a new India where you don't think about this caste and that caste." Mr. Ambani is committed to channeling money from the affluent cities into the struggling backward agricultural heartland. He foresees that Reliance will provide incomes to around 30 million Indians within the next five years by buying from farmers and employing new workers in its stores. And since Mumbai, Mr. Ambani's hometown and the commercial and entertainment capital of India, has grown ever more populous and ever less habitable, he projects that Reliance simply build a new, improved city across the harbor. Ticking off one Indian problem after another, Mukesh proposes for each a Reliance solution. While India was once largely self-sufficient in oil and gas, it is now an energy importer. So he is building a world-class oil refining and petrochemical complex in Jamnagar. It is already one of the most profitable refineries in the world, and Mr. Ambani plans to double its capacity. Two-thirds of India's 1.1 billion people still live off the land, and to combat the cycle of poverty that ensnares most rural dwellers, while making a handsome profit for his company, he also wants to stir up an agricultural revolution. He has begun building a nationwide network of over 700 western-style supermarkets and other retail outlets, aiming to connect them directly with farmers who have traditionally sold only to middlemen. Through this scheme the poor backward farmers stand to profit enormously, while growing also in status and self-respect! Even as these challenges are resolved one by one, some affirm that Mr. Ambani has already established himself as India's great transformer, with a legacy that has much in common with many of the American industrialists of the 19th century. "When we talk about Rockefeller and Carnegie and others, they really each changed only one industry," observed Mr. Nilekani, the Infosys co-chairman. "But if you look at Ambani, he's really changing three or four industries."

Tough and Disciplined Upbringing

Mr. Ambani, 51, took control after their father died and maintained his family's dominance in its

petrochemical, oil and gas and textile manufacturing businesses. He keeps a very low public profile; even those close to him describe him as inscrutable. On the one hand, he is recognized as a man whose heart bleeds for India. He is motivated by “the ability to change the face of the country,” said K. V. Kamath, of ICICI Bank. “That is the biggest kick anybody would get today — that they could touch the lives of a large number of these billion people and make things better for them.” On the other hand, Mr. Ambani is also known as someone who lets little stand in his or Reliance’s way. The Ambanis always see life as, ‘Oh God, better not miss an opportunity.’ “When they were growing up,” added the friend, “you didn’t get a second chance!” Times were tough in his youth, and Mukesh often went without an allowance. Friends say that growing up as he did gave him an edge over many of his business peers: while he would one day enjoy all the privileges of a second generation billionaire, his early childhood instilled in him the combative mentality of an outsider typically found among first generation entrepreneurs. “The important thing which I’ve really learned is how not to give up, because you never succeed in the first attempt.” His greatest talent is to be “in the clouds as well as in the details. In my life, I’ve only met a few people who are able to think on a staggering scale and take the risks to match it...” observes a close friend.

Breaking Barriers Unconventionally

Over the years, Reliance was gradually transformed from a small family business into a publicly traded empire, adopting new standards of corporate governance. “They set up world-class companies and facilities in spite of the restricting regulations of the times. By exceeding the limits and restrictions, they created the case for scrapping those regulations. They made it into a case for reforms.” Some observe critically though that the company routinely engages in political lobbying and covert monitoring to gain ascendancy over its rivals. To be sure, such practices are widely and ruthlessly practiced in India. And people in the Indian business scene say few companies match Reliance’s record of having laws changed in its favor and of protecting itself from extensive outside scrutiny. What is a critical success

factor for Reliance is “relationships,” a word that Mr. Ambani and his players relish. “We believe in relationships,” he observes. If someone helpful to Reliance needs an introduction, consider it done. If they need to use the private jet or gain access to a coveted temple to pray, consider it done. What most distinguishes Reliance from its rivals is his “intelligence agency,” a network of lobbyists and informers in New Delhi who, it is said, collect data about the vulnerabilities of the powerful, about the minutiae of bureaucrats’ schedules, about the activities of their competitors. Critics further allege that Reliance has been especially effective at managing the press. Although India’s raucous news media have brought down many a powerful person and institution, Mr. Ambani and Reliance are rarely the subjects of hard-hitting Indian reporting.

A Brighter Future

But Mr. Ambani also thinks beyond his current portfolio. One of their more intriguing projects is an ambitious plan he has for making India a rival to China in manufacturing. Mr. Ambani’s vision is to turn India’s weakness on its head. If manufacturing in India remains small-scale and fragmented, let it stay that way, he says. “The next big thing is how does one create manufacturing with decentralized employment?” he enquires. “The Chinese have got very disciplined top-down systems. We have our bottom-up creative systems.” “In a country of more than a billion people how do you really bring about the individuality of every single person?” Mr. Ambani queries. “How do you make sure that you create systems that empower everybody and bring them to their true potential? This is what Gandhi actually taught us... The optimistic part to me,” he adds, “is that now these goals look achievable.” Given such passions, why not enter the political arena? He is sometimes asked. “I think I can do much, much more in my particular job,” he replies confidently.

Refreshing Reflections

It is encouraging to see how this thorough businessman thinks not just of himself but equally of the country at large. This is the kind of vision that the Eucharist fosters in a person of goodwill. Therefore maintaining the balance between self and others is

something we learn only from Jesus as he breaks of himself for others. When our celebrations of the Eucharist produce such a change of attitude in many of us we shall come to 'love our neighbour as we love ourselves!' While India is a nation that is surging ahead particularly on the economic front, for the country as a whole to benefit from this growth and advancement, we would need many more people with the Ambani mindset. Nothing short of a nation-wide revolution in thinking – from 'what's in this for me' to 'what can I concretely do for my poor unfortunate brethren so that all enjoy God's abundant blessings showered on us as a nation' would transform our nation making it the leading nation in the world. Is this mere wishful thinking? Not really, given the vast religious and cultural heritage of our Indian population. Where the majority believe that each human being is a part of God's self or household, why should it be difficult to share God's blessings more liberally with one another? What we need most is many more persons who will show the way by practical example! Could we who celebrate Eucharist frequently rise to the occasion?

2009 May

5. LIZARDLY LOVE Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

This is a true story that reportedly occurred in Japan some years ago. In an attempt to renovate his house, a man broke open the wall of one of the rooms since Japanese houses normally have a hollow space between the wooden walls for fear of sudden earthquakes. To his surprise, he found a lizard alive but stuck within because a nail from outside had been hammered into one of its feet. Filled with pity for the unfortunate creature but at the same time puzzled and curious, he inspected the nail only to discover that it had been nailed ten years back - when the house was first built. He was astonished to think a lizard could survive in just one position in a dark wall partition without moving for ten long years; this was impossible and mindboggling! Wondering how this creature could have survived for so long without moving a single step he interrupted his work and instead patiently observed the lizard from a distance. It wasn't long before he found the answer he so

eagerly sought: as if out of nowhere he noticed another lizard appear with food in its mouth; lovingly it fed the imprisoned one, waiting by its side till it had finished its meal. He was stunned and touched deeply to think that, responsive to the plight of the nailed lizard, another compassionate companion took upon itself the onerous duty of feeding it for ten torturous years.

Love's Creative Ways

What an inspiring and faithful commitment of love! Love can work miracles among all of God's creatures! Reading of this example of the two lizards, one cannot but recall St. Paul's hymn to love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends..." (1 Cor 13:4-8). With untiring hope in its partner's eventual release, that insignificant creature lived out a whole life-time's 'sacrifice' with love - which often other creatures blessed with brilliant and inventive minds would not care to offer their very own! Besides would it be too farfetched to think that it is the love of its fellow-creature that sustained the 'crucified one' to continue hoping that some day it would be released from its painful imprisonment? Love offered freely, generously and consistently is a rare tonic indeed! It has power to sustain even the most desperate person and see him through the greatest difficulties in life. This seems to have been the secret that inspired Mother Teresa to reach out to dying destitutes with all the love she could muster. Again, didn't Viktor Frankl show us that even concentration camp prisoners could hold on to life with an unbelievable tenacity when they were convinced that someone was out there waiting for their return, or even that they themselves had something significant yet to accomplish? We have all heard innumerable stories of how someone has held on to life even when in a coma until the loved one arrived and they bid farewell to each other!

Respectful Reflections

A strange unusual story indeed, but what a number of lessons we can learn from it! Much of this 'lizardly

love' is instinctive, of course, but aren't human intelligence and free-will much higher gifts than mere instinct? And perhaps because it was instinctive, it lasted for so long; instinct does not reason out that a certain period of selfless service is all that could be asked of anyone in a given case. It just continues to love and hope to the end! We certainly have innumerable examples of such selfless dedication among human beings too as when loving parents look after their mentally or physically challenged children for years on end, or when a brother or sister sacrifices marriage and other normal advancements in life for the sake of a dependent sibling, or when children sacrifice their future for the sake of aged and infirm parents! But the real test is when someone can do the same or more for a total stranger simply because s/he is a child of God beloved and precious to our heavenly Father. Jesus told us that 'I came that you may have and have it to the full' but he also alerted us to the fact that 'in him was life, and the life was the light of all people' (Jn 1:4). The drive for this fullness of life in and through Jesus is present not only in human beings, but in all creatures, because we are all made in the image of God and in him was life! God is life itself and all that comes from his creative energy must tend towards life. How much passionate are we about life in all its fullness? This has two dimensions, the first being that each person must foster in himself this thrust towards the fullness of life. It is a question not only of avoiding all that harms life, but equally of fostering all that promotes life in all its fullness. This includes attention given to a proper diet, to regular physical exercise, healthy habits of resting and rising and a host of other things often taken for granted. Human life does not comprise only the physical aspect. A person fully alive is one who has developed all the various facets or dimensions of human life: intellectual, social, emotional, religious, cultural, financial and the rest. The unspoken trend nowadays is for persons to 'specialize' in only one, or at most two or three, such areas. The wizard at mathematics or some such speculative science could end up being a mere infant emotionally because this area has been totally neglected in the pursuit of intellectual goals. One area which most people tend to neglect, or better,

take for granted is the spiritual or mystical. Perhaps they don't find the time to indulge in spiritual activity like meditation and contemplation, reading of spiritual classics or even of poetry, discussions on such matters with others more learned in the field... The important point is that human beings must see their life's goal as being not mere existence, but a zest for living, the experience of the thrill and joy of being alive on as many fronts as possible. Unfortunately the life-style adopted by many people today militates against such a zest for life. And paradoxically, this approach is adopted precisely in the name of seeking a fuller life. The majority of people in our big cities spend the greater part of the day in either working at several jobs, one after another, or in commuting to their place of work and back. In their pursuit of money which people imagine will provide them with amenities promoting the fullness of life, they end up being so worn out or having developed ulcers and other debilitating illnesses that they no longer enjoy life, but sadly wait for it to mercifully end their pain and anxiety.

Shared Happiness

The second reflection is that as life unfolds, no one can attain the fullness of life all by oneself – we need to interact and more, network with others who are like-minded. However, here too there is a catch 22: should we first seek our own development and fulfillment and once that has been achieved, then reach out to others, or should we 'sacrifice' our own good in order to reach out to others first! Most people choose the first alternative but Jesus recommends the second: he invites us at each Eucharist to join him in saying (and living): 'My brothers and sisters, take and eat – this is my body (very self) given for you!' Your needs and expectations come before my own. While this might seem foolish and self-defeating, yet, doesn't every mother proclaim and live this truth in relation to her children? Don't we all admire and praise the mother who sacrifices her sleep, nourishment, personal growth, well-being, future - in fact her very life itself for the sake of her children? Isn't Mother Teresa admired and respected by all precisely for this kind of selfless and persistent self giving? She and her Missionaries of Charity too reach

out to the poor unfortunate ones trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, physical defects, social and racial prejudices and the like. And in doing so, they develop very deep human qualities in themselves, like compassion, tenderness, thoughtfulness of others, forgiveness, acceptance of others in their weakness and so on. And yet, when it comes to ourselves adopting this selfless lifestyle towards all others, we tend to feel it is foolish and unpractical. What would have been lost if that one lizard trapped in the hollow wall casing had died of starvation? Nothing much, perhaps; but yet we all admire the sense of solidarity, fellowship, self-sacrifice, tenacity, love and a host of other 'virtues' in the second lizard that felt it simply had to come to the rescue of its companion! Our reaching out to the deformed, underprivileged, marginalized and outcasts will certainly not eradicate these evils for as Jesus reminded us: 'You will always have the poor with you!' But our efforts would certainly make a difference to the ones we reach out to! For them at least, life will be a little more worth living. And in their turn, they too would possibly reach out to still others, thus maintaining the chain of selfless good deeds in a world engulfed by selfishness and greed. Help is an act, do it, let it go. Love is a gift, accept it, let it flow. Patience is a sign we should wear, exercise it, let it show. A human being is not just a spineless self-seeking individual, but a spark of divine love – let all scoffers know! %

2009 June

6. BE DIFFERENT AND NEW Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

We were a typical singleparent family," began JT, a severely physically handicapped person, in her interview with Patricia. "You know, busy all the time. Life was so good, in fact, that I was seriously thinking about adopting another child – the third! One Sunday in November of 1989, I was playing my trumpet at the front of my church when I suddenly felt weak, dizzy and nauseous." JT then continued to explain in a matter-of-fact manner, that by the time she arrived at the hospital she was dangerously comatose. Her blood pressure had dropped so much that various functions of her body were already beginning to quietly shut

down. She had been felled by a lethal attack of pneumococcal pneumonia. One of the disastrous side effects of this killer disease is the activation of the body's clotting mechanism, which causes the blood vessels to plug up. Because there was suddenly no vital blood flow to her hands or feet, she quickly developed gangrene in all four extremities. Two weeks after being admitted to the hospital, JT's arms had to be amputated at midforearm and her legs at mid-shin. Just before the surgery, she recalled that she had desperately cried out, "Oh God, no – not this! How can one live without arms and legs, feet or hands? Never walk again? Never play the trumpet, guitar, piano or any of the instruments one would so dedicatedly teach? Besides, I'll never be able to hug my children or take adequate care of them. Oh God, don't let me end up a hopeless, dependent on others for the rest of my life!" Six weeks after the amputations as her dangling limbs healed, a doctor talked to JT about prosthetics. She said JT could learn to walk, drive a car, go back to school, even go back to teaching. JT found that hard to believe so she picked up her Bible. It fell open to Romans, chapter twelve, verse two: "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but be a new and different person with a fresh newness in all you do and think. Then you will learn from your own experience how his ways will really satisfy you."

Journey Towards Newness

As she struggled with the prosthetics JT reminded herself repeatedly yet firmly: Take it slowly. Be a new person in all that you do and think, but take it one step at a time. Although the beginnings were excruciatingly painful and difficult, yet within a few months, JT learned she could do almost everything she used to do - only in a new and different way. "Still, when I finally got to go home after four months of physical and occupational therapy, I was terribly nervous about what life would be like with my boys and me alone in the house. But when I got there, I got out of the car, walked up the steps to our house, hugged my boys with all my might, and we haven't looked back since." As JT continued to talk to Patricia who had come to interview her, she often laughed like a woman who is blessed with tremendous happiness,

contentment and unswerving faith in God. Since that interview, JT has taken giant strides in several directions: she has completed a second college degree, this one in communications, and she is now an announcer for the local radio station. She also studied theology and has been ordained as the children's pastor at her church, the Triumphant Life Church. Simply put, JT says, "I'm a new and different person, triumphant because of God's unending love and wisdom." After meeting JT, Pat who later wrote about her dramatic discovery of a new and different kind of life, was herself a new and different person as well. She learned to praise God for everything in her life that makes her new and different, whether it is struggling through one more part-time job to keep the kids in college, learning to be a grandmother for the first time or having the courage to end a relationship with a wonderful friend who just wasn't the right one for her. Jan may not have real flesh-and-blood arms, legs, hands or feet, but she has more heart and soul than anyone you've ever met before or since. She teaches us to grab on to every 'new and different' thing that comes into our lives with all the gusto we can muster . . . to live life triumphantly.

Jesus – Risen to Newness

Through his own dying-rising, Jesus has obtained the fullness of life in God's presence. But he also shares that new life with anyone who is courageous enough to cast off the old skins of tradition and habit, and put his new wine into new wineskins. That is exactly what a person does through baptism: s/he symbolically casts off the old way of life by throwing away his/her old garments. After descending into the pool of water and rising to a Christ-like life, the newly baptized person dons the new white baptismal robe befitting a child of God, indicative of his new status as a member of the household of God. It is in this context that Paul's advice to the Romans makes most sense: 'be a new and different person with a fresh newness in all you do and think' (12:2). This new beginning is so important for Paul that he returns to this theme again in his letter to the Galatians: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is

anything; but a new creation is everything!" (Gal 6:14-16). Having wiped out the old unChristian paradigms from one's existence, the Christian adopts a new stance to life, a consciously chosen, more loving way of relating to all people and every situation in life. Unfortunately, in actual practice, we hardly see this kind of effort being made by most people – the result of the now universal practice of infant baptism. Ideally, this is the new kind of life that prevails in a Christian family. And so, from infancy the infant Christian should be picking up only the new Christian paradigms of behaviour. Even when s/he encounters un-Christian attitudes among people of other faiths, s/he is quick to recognize where these come from and resolutely puts them aside as unbecoming of children of God. We recall what Paul reminded his Christians of: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving" (Eph 5:1-4).

Christian – A New Creation

Had we Christians been more diligent in practicing this newness of life in every aspect, what a powerful example would we not be able to give to those around us? Recalling Paul again: "Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live... They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ! You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away false hood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is

need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear... Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph 4:17- 5:1). We would truly be like stars shining in a dark and corrupt world! One way to ensure that we are continually being renewed, is to consciously choose to do at least one thing or action each day in a different way. By way of example, habituated as we are to using only the right hand for all important activities, could we try using the left hand on some occasions? E.g. we could one day choose to brush our teeth, or write a letter or sweep the floor with the left hand rather than with the right. The initial attempts to do this might be disastrous and difficult, besides being embarrassing to some extent. But not only will it make us new, but would also develop greater skills which would come in handy some day. This attitude of being new and different could be extended in different directions: warmly greeting a person whom I usually do not associate with, delaying the angry or harsh word or criticism, attempting gardening or driving or any other activity which I habitually shun or avoid. Once we have taken on this habit, then life would no longer be dull or boring; rather each hour, each minute would have us looking forward to something new, something challenging – and how much of hidden potential would it not release in us? “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52).

2009 July

7. UNEARTHING HIDDEN TALENT Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Lata Das was travelling in pouring rain one wet monsoon day. She shared the autorickshaw together with 27- year old Chetna, one of her protégés, and her mother. Traversing a stretch dotted with treacherous potholes, suddenly the rickshaw lurched and Lata almost fell out. But to her amazement Chetna, a mentally challenged person, instinctively put her hand out and held on tightly to Lata to prevent her from

harm. What was amazing to Lata was that Chetna, because of her mental challenge, was incapable of personally attending to even normal daily functions like bathing or using the toilet. Besides, it is rare for such challenged persons to exhibit any emotions at all. But that short bumpy journey over the hazardous road enlightened Lata about the fact that deep inside even mentally-challenged persons there are latent emotions that can surface at any moment. “I was touched that she cared so much for me. I still can’t get over it,” she remarked, tears of wonder and pride filling her eyes.

Destined to Serve?

Lata entered the field of voluntary service after her own children had grown up and become independent – she now discovered that she had a lot of time on her hands. She had always desired to teach children and her search about how to use her extra time profitably, brought her to SOSVA, an NGO that places volunteers in different organizations depending on their skills, experience and liking. Asked whether she would be willing to teach ‘special children’ at the MBA Foundation School at Powai, she gladly volunteered not knowing what she was letting herself into. Overcoming initial depression at the difficulties of her assigned work, she buckled down to teaching vocational skills like candle making as also meditation, painting and even English when needed. The MBA Foundation was started by the parents and relatives of special children who are challenged mentally and otherwise, and currently has around 45 children, some of whom are boarders. The original idea was to train these disabled children in various vocations and empower them to earn a living. Having committed herself to care for such ‘children’ most of whom are well into their thirties, Lata found herself experiencing more and more fulfillment. She has discovered the hidden wealth of love and compassion in them, as happened in the case of Chetna all by accident, and believes that besides earning a living, they could possibly be helped to even live a more or less normal emotional life. Considering them as her very own, she toils to bring out the best in each of those entrusted to her care. Her family too is very

supportive and she keeps them abreast of developments in her activity there through emails and periodic sharings. As for the future, Lata feels she would like to continue teaching and taking care of the inmates as long as they need her.

Genesis of a Vocation

Reflecting on Lata's experience we notice several important steps that need to fall in place like a jigsaw puzzle for such generous service of the needy to materialize and be productive and fruitful. First of all, there was in her the desire to reach out to others, even if she had not been able to concretely spell out all the details. Having harboured this desire for several years during which she could not do anything specific because of her own commitments to family, this ambition which was dormant in her, sprang to life again at the appropriate moment. But while most others might have felt that freedom from pressing family commitments was really the time to sit back and relax, enjoying life for oneself, Lata wisely used it to launch herself into her second career. Her desire to serve was no empty wishful thinking. She was ready to venture into something new and different, realizing that initially it could be hard and demanding. Next too she took another vital step in the process, perhaps without consciously figuring out its value and importance at the moment of deciding. Asked whether she would like to teach mentally challenged persons, she promptly said yes, not realizing what this would entail. And even after she got first-hand experience of the difficulties involved, she did not back out because of the unpleasantness of the task at hand. Could we say that there is always an extra joy and fulfillment in every service that forces one to break out of one's comfort zone? And yet, how often do people venture into an area that they are totally unfamiliar with? It calls for the spirit of enterprise and adventure – which has its own rewards and blessings.

Inner Inspiration

It may be worth asking from where does one get that little extra push at the critical juncture to take a really challenging and difficult step along life's arduous journey! Can we trace it back to merely the spirit of adventure, a desire to try out something new, an

attempt to reach out beyond one's present horizon, an inner restlessness that spurs one to action, any action perhaps? While all these and several others might be certainly present, faith in oneself and in the Creator beyond, is what enables one to see the hand of destiny leading to one's 'God-given' task in life. Has God not always acted in this way? Why would he have commanded an ageing Abraham in centuries gone by to 'leave your country and your father's house and come into the land that I will show you?' And again, why challenge the decrepit patriarch to 'go up to the mountain and there sacrifice your son, your only son, the son whom you love very much?' Why bulldoze a timorous and hesitant Moses into going back to Egypt and leading his people into freedom; or why compel a youthful Jeremiah to take up the task of prophesying to a stubborn and faithless nation? In each case cited above and in every other in the Bible, the basic challenge is for the person to break out of her/his comfort zone and step out in faith. "I shall be with you, do not be afraid," is a promise accompanying almost every single one of them. And the persons chosen seem to have that something extra which energized them to at least give it a try!

Why am I Different?

Almost every one of us is at some point or other, challenged to break out of our comfortable routine. Perhaps the reason why so few of us actually do that is the fact that we are circumscribed by fear: fear of the unknown, fear of the future, fear of making mistakes and being punished or ridiculed for them, fear stemming from past unpleasant experiences; there is no end to our fears! And so, we settle for routine, the safe and the tried, for a drab unfulfilling schedule – but the saddest part of this approach is that while all are called to the fullness of life, most choose rather the staid and the proven, going round and round the grinding stone like the bullock or donkey at a mill or a bunch of ants endlessly marching round the rim of a flower-pot, holding on to the rear of the one ahead. But our Eucharistic celebrations when entered into meaningfully, will not allow us to remain for long in this cocoon of safety. So, if we haven't yet stepped out at least sometimes to do something which is difficult and daring, it could be simply because we are

basically timid or sorely in need of constant reassurance. If at all we actively participate in the Eucharistic celebration, we cannot but be struck by the example of Jesus which we recall at the heart of each Eucharist in the Institution Narrative: ‘On the night before he suffered Jesus took the bread ... “Take and eat this is myself given for you!...This is the cup of my blood which is poured out for you.” How can one keep on hearing these words day after day and week after week, and not be touched by the disturbing question: ‘And what are you doing with your life? When will you begin to break of it and share with the needy? How long will it be before you start pouring out your life-blood for others in need?’

Our Response

Maybe some will answer: ‘Yes, Lord, I am ready and willing, but not yet! Tomorrow, or maybe after my children grow up and leave home to begin on their own, or when I retire and my earnings are no longer needed for the family...’ Against this background we cannot but recall the words of Jesus to some of his prospective followers: ‘He who puts his hand to the plough and then looks back is not worthy of me... leave the dead to bury their dead – you come follow me!’ And what would our response be if we add to this the deep realization of how much the Lord has done for us, and continues to do for us each day? When Jesus decided to pour out his life-blood for us, he did not measure out how much he would offer and how much he would keep for himself. He gave even unto the last drop – when just one drop would have sufficed to redeem the entire universe a thousand times over. In the face of such a magnanimous gift, how can one be calculating and miserly? Eucharist is for living and not for mere celebration only! Every Eucharist meaningfully celebrated must include a certain amount of genuine self-giving. Of course, this self-giving can be done even within the family – but somehow seeing what the Lord does for us, we realize that we cannot stop there; we need to cross barriers, most of which are erected by ourselves only, because of our fears and doubts. Eucharistic faith overcomes all such obstacles and sends us out energetically: ‘Go (your celebration has ended) now to love and serve the Lord in his needy brethren, for as long as you did

it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me.’ As we look back on some of the daring steps we have taken in our lives when we did reach out to those in need, we would be surprised to realize that these were taken almost ‘on the hop’ as it were, without too much of conscious deliberation. It was the Spirit moving within us who would have goaded us onto action – and for some reason, we were recklessly open to his promptings. If only we would be open and vulnerable in that fashion more often in our lives! But the wonderful part of this process is that once we do risk giving of ourselves spontaneously to the action of God’s Spirit, we find ourselves carried along the way, from one generous act of selfgiving to another before we realize what is happening. We are then well on the way to fulfilling what Jesus has commanded: ‘Do this as a memorial of Me... freely have you received, freely give...’

2009 August

8. THE HEART OF THE MATTER Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Gujarat has been in the news on several occasions in the recent past; once again it takes the lead, this time in the field of education. The ground-plan of this non-formal, unorthodox model of education is the brainchild of Ganesh Devy, a litterateur, freewheeler, and social reformist. Goaded on by his own experience in education, he critically examined the practical worth of the script in the index of learning. His belief that gradually grew as a result of this research is that ‘scripts have nothing to do with knowledge; they have been an organized means used by the state to institutionalize language.’ Many tribals, however, have absolutely no coded equivalent of their language – but that does not imply that they are by any means less intelligent than literate individuals. In most minds, illiteracy is equated with ignorance and this is a social stigma many tribals are unjustly saddled with.

Inadequate Educational System

And so Devy began his own approach to education beginning with learning instead of character recognition and found that a unified focus on learning is arrived at when scripts are avoided for a while. In

the schools he has established for tribals in the Gujarat belt, script enters in at a much later date. Here the knowledge of things inspires the students with a desire to learn how to spell them. And unlike other village schools where only Gujarati is the medium of instruction, here the teachers speak Gujarati, Hindi and also Rathwi and Dungri Bhili, the two primary languages the tribals are familiar with. Added to these is a software programme teaching them to read English phonetically. And once they are excited about speaking English they then want to learn its meaning and later move to the level of spelling. The education of tribal children in government schools is very poor all over India. This leads to an unremitting cycle of illiteracy and migration to cities as cheap labour, taking their children with them. 'What is the practical use of education?' these tribals and others like them ask; 'it does nothing to improve our earning capacity,' they argue. But over the years, seeing the success of this new venture, numbers in Devy's special schools have risen to around 60. Not only that, but this academy has received a citation from the ministry of tribal affairs; besides the district primary education department sent fifty of its coordinators to the academy to be oriented in tribal culture and language complexities. Last year 2008 around 35 students sat for the 6th standard entrance exam and one among them scored 59% where 60% was the cut off percentage – and that too after only two years of schooling. While they certainly have not yet got on a par with other students, they are well on the way to achieving this and one can confidently look to the future when these tribal children will demonstrate that they are no less than others simply because they come from a different background.

Out of the Mouth of Babes

The lessons to be learnt from this venture are several. For one thing, because tribals are not all the same in their approach to learning as children in other schools, they cannot be condemned as unteachable. God has distributed his gifts differently to different people and no one has the right to say that 'there is only one method of education, the one we use' or that 'only my method is the best.' The point is not the method, but the results. One of the fall-outs of the industrial age is

that people want everything and everyone to be the same. Uniformity creates fewer complications when dealing with the assembly line approach which demands that the continuity and movement of the assembly line should never be interrupted by questioning or wanting to try other approaches! The result is that one's individuality and creativity are left far behind in the name of progress. In all spheres, mass production is the only answer! Yet, in God's world, 'there are a variety of gifts, but all coming from the same Spirit.' What is needed is to discover and invent where necessary, different ways to tap the resources of each particular group. It is much easier to write off such 'unorthodox' groups as backward or primitive and discard them altogether, or at most settle for giving them a hand-out from time to time to ease our guilty conscience. To accompany them patiently while they work at their own pace and in their own way needs godlike patience and faith in their innate abilities! And what is said about the method of education could be extended to the manner of worship, of communal living and sharing, of respecting elders and ancestors and a host of other aspects of life which we have systematized and propagated simply because it fits in well with our vested interests of globalization and economic colonization. When the United States is on the verge of having their first Afro-american President, a revolution hardly imaginable about fifty years ago, could we still hang on to the belief that one race of people is superior to another? That they are different is without a doubt, but that does not make them necessarily less respectable and productive!

Gospel Message of Jesus

At the heart of his message is the fact that Jesus proclaimed an alternative way of living life to the full. He quite deliberately paid little attention to the established and traditional life-style the Jews had adopted by the time he came on the scene. And his advocated approach envelopes almost every aspect of human living. With regard to material goods, while the prevailing system was one of free, individual enterprise and private possession, which often led to oppression of the weak and powerless, Jesus advocated the view that all of Nature's gifts were

given by God to the whole human race, to be shared with one another out of love. Earth's goods belong first and foremost to the entire community of people. Jesus first got his listeners to realize that God the Father does distribute his gifts unequally – not all the servants are given the same number of talents in Matthew's parable. But this fact only provides all with the opportunity to transcend themselves: those having more by sharing their blessings with others, and those having less by trusting in God's loving providence and his ability to touch the hearts of people making them generous in sharing not only of their goods, but also of themselves, of their very lives. Jesus did the same with regard to other aspects of our lives, e.g. social stratification, authority to rule or govern, ways of treating the upright and the public sinner – in fact, no aspect of human life was left untouched by his 'kingdom ethics'. Beginning with the truth that God is a loving Father to all (human beings and the rest of creation), the guiding principle then becomes: living in love and fellowship with all, or as Paul puts it: "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Eph 4:15-16).

The Real Followers of Jesus

The fact that a stranger to Christ's revolutionary approach stops to think deeply about the lot of tribals and their children's education, should put Christians to shame. Unfortunately, so often we allow ourselves to get sucked into the prevailing system when Jesus our Lord and Master was revolutionary through and through. "I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it" he proclaimed. His approach was not just to take pleasure in knocking down prevailing systems, but rather he consciously chose to go to the heart of the question; in the case under consideration the key point is: 'what is education all about?' Or again, when we realize that, in general, tribals do not fit into our education system in a way that others do, instead of concluding that this means that they are defective, we should be asking: Is there anything we can change in our system of education, as Devy has done, so that the

tribals too achieve the same results even though by another route? Isn't this approach simply another application of Jesus' famous dictum: 'The Sabbath is for man and not man for the Sabbath?!' All human beings must be seen as the apple of God's loving eye – Jesus died for all mankind, for every single human being. And so, his love must be made available to all, not necessarily in the same way or by using the same means. Are there any applications of this lesson closer home to us other than to tribals? To discover this, all we need to do is to listen deeply to what the Lord says to us as we celebrate Eucharist or spend time in prayer before the Sacrament. Both of these are oriented first and foremost towards transformation of the human heart more deeply and questioningly, or better train ourselves. Maybe we would also need to look around more deeply and questioningly, or better train ourselves to think 'out of the box' or engage in de Bono's brand of 'lateral thinking.' Like blind Bartimaeus we need to humbly yet insistently cry out to him: 'Lord, grant that we may see – the plight of our brothers and sisters waiting for your redemptive touch!' And we can be sure that when we ask with faith, our prayer will be granted. Then comes the toughest part of the job: to make the new vision operative in our own surroundings and in our own little way. Demanding as all this is, it will one day lead us to hear the encouraging words of the Father: 'I was neglected and illiterate and you came to my rescue... come, enter into the joy of the kingdom prepared for you...!' This blessedness can well be ours only if we move out of our comfort zone and dare to think and act differently. There is every likelihood that we will be considered as fools by our neighbours and relatives, but we recall that God chooses the weak things of this world to confound the strong, the simple and humble to put to shame the wise and the learned. Jesus even thanked the Father for hiding these things from the learned and the wise and revealing them to little ones! That blessedness is ours for the asking! Could the Eucharist we celebrate make us dare to think and act differently?

2009 September

9. INSATIABLE THIRST FOR SERVING Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Way back in 1988, Vaman Kadam then a BARC scientist, earned the distinction of becoming the first living liver donor in Mumbai when he donated a portion of his liver to his ailing daughter Pallavi. This transplant increased her lifespan by four years but after she died, he retired with the resolve to spend the rest of his life helping the ill and needy. Kadam describes Pallavi's death as the 'low point' of his life, but having experienced the problems of others he has realized that "very often, our problems are tiny compared to the enormous tribulations and difficulties that scores of families go through. A woman from Nashik I know of, has a 10-year-old child suffering from cancer. She leaves home at 4 am, to visit Tata Memorial 2-3 times a week, so that her child can undergo chemotherapy... Children suffer undoubtedly, but very often the pain of parents goes unnoticed," he says. Kadam, now around 66, launched into his helping career by assisting the Jeet Association for Support to Cancer Patients (JASCAP), an NGO that helps educate cancer patients and their families. JASCAP was set up by Neera and Prabhakar Rao after they lost their 30-year-old son Satyajit, a software professional, to cancer. The booklets published by JASCAP are priced between Rs 10 and 20 and the proceeds are used for the benefit of cancer victims. This literature is primarily a ready-reckoner on the various forms of cancer, on how they affect humans and what can be done medically to combat the disease. Those benefiting most from these booklets are poor patients coming to Tata Memorial Hospital; often, their families have not the slightest clue about the complexities of the disease, observes Kadam, who personally guides such people.

More Besides

His daughter's death and his love for children also led the scientist to volunteer some of his time at the 'Make A Wish Foundation.' Twice a week, he visits KEM and Tata Memorial hospitals after his work at JASCAP and interacts with children suffering from cancer. "We befriend them, try to win their confidence and strive to be their buddies. We seek to understand what the children like, what motivates them and what

makes them really happy. There was this 16-year-old boy from Thane in an advanced stage of cancer. But when I became friends with him, I realized that he wanted a cycle so that he could go to school and then college. We got him a bicycle as a gift." Not satisfied with these two already sufficiently demanding assignments, Kadam also volunteers two or three times a week at the Narayan Seva Sangh in Mulund where needy patients are given free medicines. His primary job at the Sangh is to liaise between patients, hospital authorities and donors. He further helps out at the Zonal Transplantation Coordination Committee, which works in the area of cadaver organ transplantation in Maharashtra. Added to all this, Kadam makes time to explore the country as an avid trekker. He has been on trekking trips to several places, including the enchanting NorthEast. Quietly supportive of Kadam is his wife who, he gauges, is more spiritually inclined than he.

Source of Inspiration

It is not hard to guess the source of Kadam's indefatigable service of the sick and needy. One's own personal tragedy (untimely loss of his own daughter) often releases a fund of generous giving in the hope that, what one would have wished most to get but did not get in one's own hour of need, may be made available to others. Characteristic of such people is their almost reckless giving, an insatiable thirst to keep on reaching out to whoever is in need. While it could be said that even with such generous giving, the ocean of suffering will never be emptied, yet to those who do receive timely help and guidance, it makes a big and unforgettable difference. How wonderful would it not be if a life like that of Kadam's relentless selfgiving would spark off a chain reaction among the many people he helps, or even among those who read about it. Even if a small fraction of those assisted by him imbibe in a small way the attitude of the 'good samaritan' in their own neighbourhood, our world would certainly be a far better place to live in.

Christian Inspiration

Against the background of Kadam's untiring self-giving, for the Christian celebrating Eucharist frequently, the words of Jesus' Eucharistic command would burn into his consciousness: 'Do this as a

memorial of me.’ Jesus invites each of his disciples to remember him, not just in an empty, fleeting sort of way, but rather by setting up a memorial, something lasting for all to see and remember him! A drinking water fountain erected as a Gandhi memorial in a village sorely deprived of this precious commodity, would remind people of how the father of the nation worked hard and even sacrificed his life so that the life of the simple poor Indian would be radically different and infinitely better. Everyone drinking from that fountain would be drawn to recall the high ideals of Gandhiji and perhaps be inspired to carry his example further – reaching out to others in newer and more creative ways. The same should happen each time we celebrate Eucharist. Jesus’ ideal was ‘that you may have life and have it to the full’ which offers a wide scope or range of activities, in fact, any and everything that can provide a fuller life for people. To provide this fuller life, Jesus was ready and eager to surrender even the last drop of his precious blood. All one needs to do is just look around to see and empathize with the suffering majority, linking it with any similar suffering one has personally undergone. Besides this, of course, one needs to be convinced also that s/he has been blessed with the requirements for such a reaching out. If one sees her/ himself in the category of the indigent, certainly the urge to help others wouldn’t even dawn on one’s troubled mind. The Christian, however, is no navel gazer; his/her eyes are fixed on the Cross, the source of all life and selfless love.

Eucharist: Word and Bread of Life

In the Liturgy of the Word where excerpts from the Bible are placed before the worshipping community, one is shown the ‘length and the breadth, the height and the depth’ of the love God has for us. Unfortunately, most participants in the Eucharist are not trained to hear this message as the readings are proclaimed in the Eucharist. All they seem to catch invariably is that they are sinners needing to be punished unless they reform their lives at the earliest possible moment. But had they been alerted and assisted to hear God telling them how much he loves them and every other human being, even in their sinful condition, they would certainly be inspired to

step out with their heads held high, ready to volunteer wherever the Lord has need of them. Like the prophet Isaiah they would exclaim: ‘Here am I, send me!’ (Is 6:1-8). The other aspect that one needs to keep firmly in mind is that in this reaching out to others, it is not we, mere humans, who are expected to do all the work by ourselves. In fact, Jesus has reminded us in the strongest terms, ‘without Me you can do nothing... unless the branch remains in the vine, it produces nothing, but withers and dies...’ So, all we are called to do is to offer ourselves merely as instruments in his hands – and united with him nothing is impossible even for the weakest human being: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). It is when we set out to achieve on our own steam, as it were, that we tend to get discouraged when we fail or meet with opposition; or we wear out with fatigue when the going gets tough; or we crave for gratitude when we have helped someone successfully. Like Peter on the morning after the fruitless night of fishing, we ought to be able to say to the Lord, ‘We have worked all night and caught nothing, but if you say so, we shall let down the nets for a catch!’ (Lk 5:5) – and what a catch that will be! A Christian is a fearless person because he has seen what the Lord has done through the lives of even timorous people like a Gideon, through a youth like David before the mighty Goliath, through a frail woman like a Deborah or a Judith or an Esther. Even an erstwhile demoniac became his ardent apostle to the people of the Decapolis, the ten towns, to which Jesus sent him. If they could do great things because they worked with the power of the Risen Lord, why can’t we? Time and again Jesus reminds us: ‘Do not be afraid ... I am with you, even till the end of time’ (Mt 28:20). Which will be the specially chosen area of work in which the Lord seeks your collaboration today? It must be not just one that you choose by yourself, but rather one in which he asks you to collaborate! ‘Not my will but yours be done’ is the catch phrase in all fruitful apostolate!

2009 October

10. A GOD-SEND EDUCATION by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

It was during a deluge one exceptionally wet July that her maid brought Nandini Mehta news that two street children were playing in the rain outside her Malabar Hill bungalow. They had recently lost their father. Without more ado, Mehta brought them home, caressed their cheeks, and offered them food. They turned out to be the first wards at Bal Anand, which became for others who followed, a place of nurture and nourishment. Here, they play, paint, sing, eat and are instructed in letters, ethics and a way of life aligned with the principles of J. Krishnamoorthy, Mehta's own philosophical teacher. When the Mehta family had to relocate to an apartment next door, Nandini shifted Bal Anand to a row of garages she purchased especially for the 'school'. "It was not modelled on a blueprint, or on some grandiose ideals of education, or even on an elaborate manifesto," says Devi Mangaldas, Mehta's daughter, who has built on her mother's foundations ever since she took over the project. "It was conceived as a place of care and refuge, where children would be taught to observe, listen and question." Bal Anand is something of a home-school and baalwadi, where children aged 2 ½ to 14, from the shanties of Malabar Hill, get a wholesome meal of fruits, sprouts or brown bread sandwiches, a glass of milk and a calcium tablet, before or after they return from their day at the local municipal school. For a couple of hours, they are tutored, especially in English and Maths, and taught basic conversational skills by four paid teachers (two of whom grew up at Bal Anand) and a few volunteers. Medical attention is provided when a child falls ill, and monetary relief readily offered to an indigent parent. Compassion is instilled in them by having the children visit the terminally ill, or contribute to victims of a catastrophe. "We encouraged them to make small donations, even as little as 50 paise, to the Tsunami-hit," says Mangaldas, a counsellor at J.B. Petit High School, who believes the children must be taught to be grateful for their lot, no matter how bad, knowing there's always someone more unfortunate. But if Bal Anand has cultivated kindness in these street children, it has, in a smaller measure, done the same for the more fortunate girls of J.B. Petit, who visit occasionally with parcels and other gifts. "Living

as our children do in cramped quarters, with the TV blaring, or parents arguing... being witnesses to drunken brawls, we teach them to carve out an inner space where they can find peace. At Bal Anand we try to open up new dimensions for the child, of laughter and joy where s/he can find security, comfort and dignity," she says.

Blessings in Disguise

What began as an attempt to help poor helpless children ended up being a full-scale holistic education for the affluent residents of Malabar Hill, Mumbai. For when one opens one's heart to the needy, it is not only the indigent who benefit but the donors as well. But for this to happen, one needs to approach the situation in the right manner. Generally, when people reach out to the poor, they tend to be moved emotionally by pity or sympathy, and 'give' generously to the adversely affected, but this generally comes out of the surplus they have. While this is good and commendable and certainly a great help to the indigent, it still leaves the recipients exactly where they were, having attended to their numerous pressing needs only temporarily. The generous gestures of their well-wishers fill their empty stomachs but do little for their sense of dignity and self-worth. The indigent children would still continue to see themselves as a class apart, different from those others who live in posh flats and have everything and everyone at their beck and call. Whatever help they get, it leaves them envying what the others have and what they could never ever dream of possessing, no matter how lucky they may be. As the saying goes, 'Give a person a fish, and you have relieved his hunger for a day or an hour! Teach him to fish and you have set him on his feet for life!' What the Eucharist meaningfully celebrated inculcates in its participants is largely different, even though externally it might look somewhat alike. Eucharist invites us to share as equals, as brothers and sisters of the same heavenly Father, at the one table that the Lord sets for all his beloved children. Ideally, at the Eucharist there is no distinction of any kind - between rich and poor, educated and illiterate, cultured and uncouth! At the Lord's table all present are stripped of peripherals and unessentials, like what they might have or possess,

and are made to value themselves for what they are in themselves – God’s children, equal in his sight and each one worthy of the infinitely precious death of his only Son, Jesus.

Self-gift is the Key

Further, the Eucharist invites us to love and give till it hurts; the challenge is to be able to truthfully say to the needy person: ‘Brother, sister, take and eat: this is my body, my very life, in fact all I have to live on, which is given for you! I am here for you.’ Doing something like this is really difficult, though not impossible. The Gospel story of the poor widow putting two little copper coins into the treasury box is a shining example of how Eucharist (the spirit of giving thanks for all of God’s blessings) shapes a person’s thinking. The key to such total selfless giving is the experience of what one has oneself received from the Lord. A true Christian lives not for her/himself, but for others. This simply means that the good of the other ranks even above one’s own good. ‘Greater love a person cannot have than when s/he lays down his/her life for a friend.’ So, for one who celebrates the Eucharist meaningfully and wishes to live it out in daily life, it is not merely a question of giving the extras one possesses to others, (though we cannot repeat sufficiently that even this is difficult in most cases and is tremendously beneficial to those at the receiving end), but of even depriving oneself in favour of the other. ‘You must increase, I must decrease’ becomes the guiding principle in such situations! Experience shows us that this kind of giving brings its own special joy and peace in its wake. It involves a true overcoming of the Self in us. One literally feels free and light within – something which needs to be experienced to be believed – it doesn’t make much sense theoretically or when one sits on the fence cogitating but not yet acting to commit oneself! There is besides, the joy of seeing another human being come up and prosper in life. There is a saying that ‘even eagles need a push’ which means that even the great king of the skies would never learn to fly unless and until its mother pushed it out of the nest and closely monitored its first few timorous attempts to soar as only eagles can. The eagle is such a heavy bird that it cannot take off from

ground level – it has to be thrown into the air and that too with considerable leeway to obviate any fatal falls! How much more do we human beings not need an encouraging word, a selfless gesture, an opportunity made available generously, a fault or mistake magnanimously forgiven - to set us on the path to progress and innovation. This is exactly what Jesus has done for every one of us through his dying-rising, whether we follow him publicly or not – he lovingly goads us on, adding a challenge for us to ‘pass it on.’

Throw Your Hat

Some would perhaps want to know how one arrives at a safe and wise discernment about the right choice of the event or person in whose life one is to get involved. While there is no ready-made answer to this question, there are a few common-sense pointers and road-signs: the initial inspiration comes unsolicited, almost ‘out of the blue’, when one least expects it or even wants it. It is less an answer to a prayer than a God-given mission in life. It could be that this initial thought frightens the person, but at the same time there is an accompanying beckoning silver lining which prompts: ‘Why not? Maybe I should give it a try!’ Further, as one sets out in faith, little details seem to fall into place almost by themselves one after another, giving one an inner sense of assurance that one is on the right track. One can, of course, always consult a more experienced person, or someone who is already successful in the field of generous self-giving. Perhaps the most important step is to move from mere thought to some concrete action. It is like the person who for days has been thinking to himself, ‘I should visit the new neighbours who have moved in recently!’ but has done nothing about the visit so far. So, one bright morning he throws his hat across the fence onto the neighbour’s front lawn – now he has to go across, at least in order to fetch his hat; and moving out into the neighbour’s yard becomes all that much easier, and so does the visit. The first small step taken, things generally will snowball and before we know what is happening, we are well on the way to something really good and rewarding. There are countless opportunities for everyone in our sprawling cities: almost every person one meets represents some

particular need or other and poses a specific challenge. For Christians, the Small Christian Community one belongs to in the parish is itself a fantastic but realistic arena in which to try out such experiments in selfless giving. But wherever one attempts this kind of reaching out, what is really happening is that the Eucharist celebrated is coming alive – it is really transforming our lives. After all the greatest miracle at Eucharist is not so much the transformation of bread and wine into Jesus, but rather the transformation of self-centred hearts into the Body of Christ – waiting to be broken and shared: ‘Take and eat ... take and drink! This is myself given for you!’

2009 November

11. THE CROSS TRANSFORMS LIFE Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Gene D’Silva is a familiar, almost household, figure in the now famous or infamous Chitah Camp at Chembur, a suburb of north Mumbai. He stumbled across his life’s mission there as he took to assisting a HIV infected woman and her children monetarily and in other ways. Having contracted the virus unwittingly from her husband, she and her hapless children were grappling both with the disease and also with the stigma he bequeathed them. “I learnt of her through an infected eunuch at Asha Daan – the Mother Teresa relief centre at Byculla, where I volunteered my services regularly. After her husband’s death, she became an untouchable to all in the area; in fact, soon after her husband’s death and cremation the neighbours all congregated and unceremoniously sprinkled phenyl down the lane,” he recalls. Thus Gene began a new chapter in his life, with a long haul to Chembur everyday, carrying for his friends the food he cooked himself. Earlier, he had been catering home-cooked meals to the starving slum-dwellers of Reay Road and Wadi Bunder for quite some time. The astonished neighbours at Chitah Camp watched him eat out of her plates and play with her children, and wondered how he hadn’t yet contracted HIV. Unabashed, they asked and he explained in a straightforward manner - thus began his vocation in community development at Chitah Camp!

Life’s Energizing Misfortunes

Gene’s conscription into community service was the outcome of a personal battle. A right arm stricken with palsy cost Gene who was then a strapping athlete, a steady job and a place and name in corporate football teams. But his greatest disappointment was his rejection at the 1984 Olympics for the differently abled. His hopes and ambitions shattered, he progressively slithered down the drug and alcohol gradient only to recover two long and painful years later. “All this while, my mother never stopped praying and urging me to get out of it,” he reminisces. But he credits his eventual turnaround to his daily morning visits to the Church for spiritual sustenance. Backed by his own personal experience of the numerous insidious paths to evil so readily available to the dispirited vulnerable, he took to providing social relief to unfortunate victims with a missionary zeal: as he continues to search for a permanent solution to alcoholism and chemical dependence, he offers his friends at least a little interim aid. “I have to,” he observes nonchalantly, as if summing up his life’s mission in that pithy phrase!

Towards Fullness of Life

“I don’t just want to eradicate one evil and turn away from the scene, while the other evils continue their ravaging spree; but like UNICEF, I need to approach all associated issues in a given area,” he professes as he goes down the by-ways of his work at Chitah Camp. “You can’t sustain welfare without development” – is one of the bedrocks of his belief system. He began with AIDS awareness and went on to children’s education by renting a tiny room, hiring three local teachers and gathering an eager student body of 90. With every new venture he took on – drug abuse, alcoholism, unemployment, women’s oppression, crime-prone youth – he realised more acutely the need for more hands. “One needs to work with affiliated organisations to achieve something substantial,” he philosophises. So World Vision, Sankalp Rehabilitation Trust, Salvation Army and Don Bosco Shelter all were harnessed to lend their own expertise to Chitah Camp. In 2005, he formalised and streamlined his varied activities through Jeevan Dhara, an organisation he founded, through sponsors like PN Writer, Lotus Trust, HDFC Bank, Don Bosco,

Kripa Foundation including several generous individuals. Even his sister in Canada raises charity for Chietah Camp, but she tries to downplay the name – its reputation for schooling terrorism has evidently travelled far and wide.

Eucharistic Stimulus

The amount of moral strength and purpose a person of high ideals like Gene can draw from the core of the Eucharistic celebration is plain for all to see! His is an almost lone road to personal and social redemption which should be by now familiar to those who celebrate Eucharist frequently. Time and again he would have heard during the Eucharist the life-giving words of Jesus: ‘Take and eat, this is My body which is given for you!’ But after having eaten of this life-giving bread and the saving Cup, and refreshed himself into a new way of life, he would have understood better the words that follow: ‘Do this as a memorial of Me!’ And what he has set out to do is precisely ‘this’ – in imitation of his divine Master, to break of himself as Jesus did, and give to the hungering multitudes around him.

Hungering for Love

It is significant and noteworthy that in his initial gracious gesture of love, he carried food daily to his HIV infected friends at Chitah Camp. Wasn't he literary saying to this ill-fated victim and the family: ‘Take and eat – this is myself, my very life, given for you?’ To that unfortunate woman he brought not only physical nourishment, but also a sense of dignity and worth in the eyes of a scoffing and condemning Society. To those conversant with the Gospels, this story inevitably provides a flashback of Jesus' unique way of dealing with the woman taken in adultery – Jesus too gave the sinner woman a new reason to live by his compassionate approach. Another Eucharistic trait visible in Gene is his insatiable love for his luckless and doomed brethren. Did not Jesus explain: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! (Lk 12:49-50). It is this inner fire that drives him to extend his helping hand to so many afflicted in different ways. He does not limit himself to just one malady – he will not rest until all evils in

the chosen area are either eliminated or at least mitigated. A further Eucharistic dimension visible in this story is the humility and simplicity with which Gene networks with others. There is little pride or selfseeking visible in his ventures, but rather the focus is on the immensity of the task at hand. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ‘For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:4-7). When even highly respected and well trained clergy often find it difficult to collaborate with other persons of goodwill, Gene's mission is an outstanding example of how Jesus would go about his work of saving people today.

My Contribution

The inevitable question that comes to mind on reading such a story is: ‘What does our Sunday/ daily Eucharist inspire us to do for others? Why is it that we can celebrate Eucharist so often and yet be unmoved by the plight of those around us? What is missing in our life that makes us so uncaring and self-centred? How can we remain unmoved by the plight of so many suffering people around us?’ Possibly what is missing is the Cross of personal suffering which has not yet entered our lives in a sufficiently redemptive manner. It has not yet shaken us to the roots of our being, leading to the all-important question: ‘What is life all about?’ A possible remedy would be that the next time we celebrate Eucharist, we stare hard at the Crucifix above the altar till the words of Paul burn into our consciousness: “He loved me and gave himself up for me!” Is there anyone whom we love to the point of giving our life for them? We recall the words all of us will hear as we stand before the judgment seat of the Father: “I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink ... or you did not give me anything because you were too busy looking after yourself only!” How would we feel then about the innumerable times we celebrated Eucharist so piously and devoutly but without even a fleeting thought of the plight of others? Would it help

then to plead: ‘But Lord, we ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets ...’ to which the Master will reply: ‘Away from me all you evildoers... I do not know where you come from! (Lk. 13:25-27). What do we need to change while there is still time? ‘The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind!’ It is written in the very fabric of your life – you don’t need to look far and wide for the answer. But look you must – and that too, today, for tomorrow would be too late!

2009 December

2010 January

CAST YOUR BREAD UPON THE WATERS (INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW SERIES)

Fr. Erasto Fernandez, SSS

We begin yet another series of reflections on the Eucharist based on an incident which has the potential of illustrating how the Eucharist could be lived in daily life. Most of these are true to life stories and so what they teach us is pretty much within the grasp of even the most ordinary person. The important point always seems to be the openness to listen to the Spirit guiding and inspiring us to launch into action which will prove beneficial to others. One possible help in this direction is to reflect frequently on how we ourselves feel when caught in a desperate situation. What a relief to find that someone is selfless enough to set aside his/her own agenda and assist us in our need! After all, it takes so little to reach out to the other. And we often notice that once we take the very first step, every other step follows so effortlessly that we wonder why we had hesitated so long to take the plunge. One reason could very well be that the Self still predominates in our lives forcing us always to think of ourselves first. This is where the Eucharist comes in – for with the inspiring example of Jesus’ total self-giving made present for us on our altars in a very real, though sacramental fashion, who could resist following in his footsteps? And that, not just for the sake of a reward, but perhaps for the sheer thrill of passing on a blessing to a neighbour in need. Our hope is that this series of reflections will help as much

as previous ones have, to bring about God’s kingdom of love and peace, justice and freedom in our midst and through our humble efforts. For, wherever anyone has the courage to let go of Self and sacrifice something for the sake of others, the kingdom comes alive and begins to flourish. This kind of altruistic behaviour somehow is contagious – it literally spreads like wildfire – once someone has generously lit the first spark! “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Lk 12:49)

1. IF HE COULD, WHY CAN'T I? by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, SSS

A young soldier, assigned to a supply division during World War II, found himself together with several of his companions called to supplement the heavy losses suffered while spearheading the Allied advance through France. Their assigned task was to flush out the enemy from French occupied territory and the going was really slow and agonizing. With the German soldiers at their best even in retreat and their artillery fire deadly accurate, the otherwise intrepid American soldiers were in constant dread of being the next casualty to be carried out. Hope of survival and a safe return home was a slim prospect for most of them.

Victory Almost Gained

Approaching the German border after months of relentless fighting, only one last nameless French village lay in their path to total victory. This village too was a mass of smoking ruins and as they hopefully inched forward winding their way through the smoking wreckage of a recent artillery attack, Charlillo glimpsed the contours of a bombed out Catholic Church. On approaching a little closer he noticed that on the only standing wall of the Church, there stood a crucifix with the tortured image of Christ, arms still outstretched, eyes piercing the heavens, serenely surveying the destruction all around it. Even from a distance, he could clearly see the wounds the Crucified had received at the merciless hands of another enemy, but he had miraculously been left totally untouched so far in this battle. Charlillo instinctively made a devout sign of the cross, felt a surge of adrenalin rush through his aching body and gripped his rifle even more resolutely. The thought

flashing through his mind was: 'If Christ had made it through that crisis, I too could possibly endure through the present one.' Although almost shattered by the harsh reality of the raging war, from then on he was able to persevere till the bitter end. Carrying this vision deeply etched within his heart and mind into many more battles through the war, he finally reached home safely several months later. But the image has never left him since – staying with him all through life, seeing him safely through life's varied struggles and hurdles.

Those Who Believe

Jesus had announced solemnly that he had come not to condemn the world but that anyone who believed in him might have eternal life (Jn 3:16-17). For most people, the term 'eternal life' conjures up only the idea of an unending life after death. But a little reflection discloses that this could never be the full meaning that Jesus had in mind. No matter who the person concerned is, his/ her present life on earth is not what God would like it to be – fraught with uncertainties and difficulties, failures and unfulfilled hopes and aspirations, no sane person would want this kind of a life to go on endlessly, 'eternally!' So eternal life must mean something more - a higher quality of life, a life far superior to what we experience here on earth, or even better than the very best we could live on earth! Further what most think is that this eternal life will begin only once we leave this world! Little would they imagine that even while going through this 'valley of tears' a higher quality of life can and should be ours! This is what Charlillo seems to have experienced as he caught a glimpse of the crucified figure of Christ - and he was a different and better person from then on.

Gifted - Yet of our own Making

Another misconception clouding the minds of most Catholics is that this eternal life will be just poured into our laps abundantly, without calling for any effort on our part. This is far from the truth. Jesus offers us only a glimpse of what is possible; he gives us, as it were, only the raw materials needed to work out the final product: the rest is left to us. Given all that is needed, each one has to decide what s/he will make of it – and that decision is generally made in the secret of

our hearts, often without even our adverting to it. There are some who decide that they will work only in ideal circumstances – anything short of that will draw only complaints and grumbling from such persons. These are the ones who live with a perpetual groan on their lips: 'I wish I had...' And of course, since ideal circumstances never come our way, at least not for long, these people end up like the third servant in the Gospel parable, who only returns to the Master the one talent he had received at the start (Mt 25:14-29). Others are more enterprising and enjoy grappling with every challenging opportunity. They don't take anything lying down, as it were! Their slogan is: 'Every problem is a God-given opportunity for growth' – for greater creativity and pro-activity on their part. They take it as a chance to see where they are lacking, and without assigning the blame to anyone else, they do what is in their power to change the situation from within. These are like the four leprous men faced with sure death; theirs was only the choice of how and when! If they entered the enemy camp they would definitely be killed by the enemy, and if they remained in the city they would die of famine like the rest. Unfazed, they ingeniously decided on a way to circumvent this difficulty! They chose to enter the enemy camp, only to find what they couldn't have dreamt of, even in their wildest dreams – enough food for the entire starving population! (2 Kgs 7:3-20). These are the sort whose lives are fulfilled, for they achieve a lot, even blessing others in the bargain. And there are the others, perhaps the larger section of humanity, who drift along in between the two extremes – availing themselves of the chances given sometimes, but at other times succumbing to their adversities. Their lives are adorned with a few successes, but more often it is anxiety, worry, disappointment and the like that forms the greater part of their preoccupation, with very little achievement to show for all their efforts and goodwill.

Eucharistic Encouragement

Actually, the way a person goes through life is not only described for us in the Scriptures, but it also forms the raw material of the Eucharist we celebrate. In each Eucharist Jesus is present and he transforms the bread and wine (our gifts symbolizing ourselves)

into himself, in-spiriting them with his own vision and power. But how much power and strength we really take back with us from the Eucharistic celebration depends on how much we truly mean what we do at Eucharist - specifically, how much personal meaning we put into the symbols will decide how much 'fruit' we derive from it. Here again, most seem to be satisfied with a 'generalized and impersonal presence' at the Eucharist. What occurs at and on the altar doesn't seem to resonate with what transpires in their lives and so it happens that even after celebrating Eucharist for years on end, they still remain the same as before, absolutely untouched, with very little practical difference in their lives. The Eucharist is geared for transformation, but it does not produce any automatic results either; it certainly makes Jesus present to us, perhaps even without our conscious cooperation. But how much this life-giving presence of Jesus will change our lives depends on how much of the real dying-rising of Jesus we incorporate into our lives. If just a glance at a Crucifix enabled Charlillo to face his difficulties with a new burst of verve and courage for the rest of his life, what a difference could we not experience for ourselves, if we only came to the Eucharist each time with a more enlightened approach? What riches we forego, what power we waste, what newness we sacrifice just because we do not recognize the hour of our visitation (Mt 23:27-33)! Truly our situation too would possibly make Jesus weep as he wept over Jerusalem! What is the one thing I need to do, practically, to make my life on earth more purposeful and meaningful? If others could do it, why can't I?

2010 February

2. GOD REVEALED IN SUFFERING Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

It is often surprising how the Lord leads his beloved children to discover his goodness and love. It is not always through the Bible stories that one discovers God in a meaningful and practical manner. Perhaps the most effective way to discover God's presence in a striking and indelible manner is through a personal crisis of some sort, as is described in the following story. "When I was growing up, I knew about God," muses 15-year old Marissa, "but I naively believed

that the only reason why people prayed to God was that they needed his help. It never dawned on me that one could just pray to the Almighty for any reason at all - if one was having a bad day and needed someone with a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on! I would often pray about things like making up with friends after a fight or finding a lost article. Now, since I always made up with friends and I always found my lost treasure, I thought that God was simply marvelous. "Then came the real upheaval when death struck my beloved mother down all of a sudden about four years ago; I was mad at God mainly because I just couldn't understand why he had to take away my mother, of all the people around me. It wasn't fair that all my school companions had adorable mothers and I was deprived of mine. I soon stopped thinking that God was the greatest, and gradually I found that I didn't pray anymore. "Recently, I started to talk to a trusted friend about my mother's death because I was having a gruelling time coping with it. This wise and experienced counselor asked me to share a little about my faith, and to my dismay, I could find no worthwhile answer to give her, no matter how much I racked my tired brains. I mean, I still believed in God and heaven, but it wasn't the same as when I was growing. I think I was still pretty furious with him for snatching away my mother on whom I depended so much. The counselor brought up this question of faith several times, though, and I always felt ill at ease because I hadn't thought about it purposefully at all. Then one day when she said she would pray for me, it made me think: Why don't I pray for myself? I started to pray to God and asked him to come to my rescue. And strangely enough, I felt a bit more reassured and comforted. That encouraged me, and so I started to pray more often. I gradually started to feel a greater peace, serenity and a sense of belonging. I soon noticed that I had stopped praying to God only for help and would rather approach him just to talk and tell him as to a friend what was going on in my life. Although I still miss my mother, I find that I am not angry anymore because now I know from deep within that God is really the greatest!"

Personal Discovery

This personal experience of Marissa calls to mind a saying of St. Augustine: 'We are made for You, O God, and we will be restless until we rest in You!' As long as we approach God as unreflecting little children, seeking only personal favours from God, we do not discover the beauty and marvelous love of the Father for each one of us. With infinite love and patience, he sometimes hides his face from us, and that is when we search frantically for something or someone else to fill our lives. But nothing and no one can really take his place. Inch by painful inch he draws us nearer to himself and once we glimpse his loving countenance again, the sun begins shining in our lives anew! How different things would be if we could speed up the process of transformation by listening carefully to what God himself tells us about his love for us, particularly in the Scriptures! Unfortunately most people read or listen to the Word of God only to find instruction or warning to avoid straying onto the forbidden path. Rarely do we discover even a trace of God's unfathomable love in the Bible narratives. Take as an example the passage in Isaiah 40 where God says: 'A voice cries, in the wilderness: prepare a way for the Lord... make the winding paths straight...' This passage is familiar to all as it occurs several times every Advent. Yet, if asked: 'Who is being asked to 'prepare the way'? our spontaneous answer invariably is, 'Why, I/we, of course!' Little do we stop to think that this admonition is being given at a time when the people of God are in exile, suffering under the yoke of foreigners. Nor do we attend to the opening words of the chapter: 'Comfort, comfort My people,' says the Lord... 'for they have already received double punishment for their iniquities... I will now lead them back to their homeland... carrying the weak and the wounded as a shepherd ...' Only when we stop to look deeper do we realize to our consternation that here God speaks to the foreign nations ordering them to prepare the way so that his people may return without any further inconvenience or pain. And to think that he did this precisely when his Chosen people were still rebellious and disobedient! Isn't his love for them really marvelous and unbelievable? This kind of altruistic love doesn't easily register in our twisted minds, even

after we have heard St. Paul say to us: "...and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For, while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God! For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life (Rom 5:5-10).

Year of the Word of God

Having been given a whole year recently in which to appreciate God's Word, having had a special Synod on the Word of God (and the document on this will soon be promulgated), can we say that we are any nearer to a personal discovery of the Father's love in the Scriptures? How much do we not lose through our very casual and self-centred approach to the Word? Could we not turn our approach around and first look for what the Scripture passage tells us about God and his love for us? Once we have figured this out, we could then concentrate on what our response should be! Psychology tells us that there are two kinds of love: acquisitive love which seeks mainly to get – in order to satisfy our urgent needs, and that too mostly for material things. This love is restless and keeps growing till the need is met. Once we get what we want, we lose interest in God! The other kind is appreciative love which rejoices in the beauty, goodness and other qualities of the person loved! It is selfless and also keeps growing but in gratitude, appreciation and praise. If our approach to God is of the acquisitive type, then obviously we will merely use this relationship for our own benefit and forget God once we are satisfied. What a difference when we come to God with an appreciative kind of love – that is when we truly grow into a deep relationship with him. In the story of Marisa we can see clearly these two types of love operating with predictable results.

On-going Discovery

Once we ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ (Ps. 34:8) through the Scriptures, we will find ourselves discovering signs of God’s love for us everywhere, and in every person. Having learnt how to live within the ‘intention’ of God we will personally discern how ‘for those who love God, everything works for their good’ (Rom 8:28). God wants us to be happy and has arranged everything around us so that this might be our felt experience all through life. If we do not have this kind of an experience or have it only rarely, it is because we choose rather to place ourselves outside the circle of God’s intention or approach him only with an acquisitive love! We are then like the Executive who has his desktop computer unplugged but yet expects it to function. Unless we plug in to the source of power, our computer cannot work! As it is much easier to discover God in pleasant happenings could we focus a little more on the unpleasant events of our lives and seek more consciously to discover the hidden meaning behind them? We would certainly benefit from the help of more experienced persons around us, but it would have to be our decision to seek and obtain that ‘push’ when we need it. With so many helps readily available all around us, why remain in uncertainty and pain? Why not launch into the adventure of the hidden reality of our lives and be happy now and hereafter?

2010 March

3. HOPE - WHEN ALL SEEMS LOST by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

The 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens looked highly promising for Paul Hamm who did end up as the reigning world champion – the first U.S. athlete ever to win a world all-around title. But it wasn’t ‘roses, roses, all the way!’ At that meet Hamm began well in the first three events and held a first place lead in the all-around by .038 points. Then, unexpectedly disaster struck. During his pole vault performance, having under-rotated and missed his landing, he found himself sitting down and almost fallen off the platform! This was a ‘cardinal sin’ in gymnastics and Hamm paid for it dearly by being pushed down to the twelfth place. It was pretty clear to all from his reaction to this misfortune that he knew he had blown his chance of making history! Undaunted, Paul Hamm

saw his uncalled-for blunder as a chance to demonstrate the difference between mediocrity and genius. He decided that the most sensible thing to do in that situation was to put his fall behind him and move forward, giving his best effort to what was left and to finish strong. In the next event, his great performance on the parallel bars coupled with the struggles of his competitors, helped him to move into fourth place in the all-around, with his last and strongest event left to play out – the high bar. Paul calmly determined to capitalize on this positive turn of events. Convinced that he was a master of the high bar, he worked out a highly technical routine so as to earn the most points possible. In this final event Paul was the last to perform and all eyes were glued to him as he approached the bar. One could not help palpably sense his purposeful energy, focus and determination as he drew near it and when he had finished, his accomplishment was electrifying indeed! Even before his score was revealed, one could see on his face that in his own mind Paul knew that he had won, regardless of the outcome. He came back from a crushing mishap on the vault and proved to himself that he could execute beyond obstacles and setbacks. In one of the most dramatic comebacks in sports history he won the gold medal in the men’s all-around by 0.012 points, becoming the first U.S. athlete to ever win the Olympic title. He showed the world what it means to finish strong!

Lesson from Life and for Life

Have you ever noticed in your own life and perhaps in that of others too, that no sooner a person sets out to do something positive and beneficial he meets with innumerable and sometimes insuperable obstacles? Actually these difficulties only serve to highlight one’s faith in oneself and deepen it, for if at this juncture one does not really believe in oneself or lacks a firm strength of purpose, the negative outcome can well nigh be predicted. The Gospels give us the classic case of the four friends who bring a paralytic friend on a stretcher hoping to plead with Jesus for his cure (Mk 2:1-12). Imagine their surprise, disappointment and frustration when they reach the place only to find it impossible to get the paralytic in before Jesus. What would you have done in such a

situation? Many in such circumstances would perhaps have decided to wait outside until the session indoors had ended and then attract Jesus' attention as he left the place. After all, he would not remain in that house for ever, would he? All they needed to do was to position themselves in a strategic spot and ensure that they did grab the first opportunity that came their way. Some others might have decided to return some other day, or meet Jesus at another location. But recalling Jesus' track record of moving around frequently and having large crowds around him, they would probably have concluded that this would be a pretty risky decision – they might end up never meeting him and indefinitely forfeiting their chance of a cure. Still others might have just sat there and cursed their luck or fate, or blamed their failure on others while a few perhaps might even have opted to return home dejected and beaten. But not these four – they were made of sterner stuff and were more resourceful, as the story reveals. And weren't they amply rewarded by the gift Jesus gave their friend: not only healing, but also forgiveness! Blind Bartimaeus is another example: strongly chided by all around for calling out aloud after Jesus, he is asked to keep quiet, possibly because he wasn't one who was 'on the way' like the others. Whatever it be, having lost his eyesight perhaps due to his own fault, he was not one who would let this golden opportunity slip by - he might never again get the chance of meeting with Jesus who, he was convinced, was the only one who could cure him of his blindness. His perseverance obtained for him the desired reward!

Obstacles in our Lives!

How do we handle the obstacles that we come across in our own life's journey? Do we treat them as stepping stones to glory, or merely as immovable mountains blocking our way to success? These blocks could be a power failure just when we have something urgent to complete, or a puncture precisely when we are already late and rushing to catch up with an appointment. In this connection we need to recall the experience of the women in St. Mark's gospel. Desiring to anoint the body of Jesus, they go to the tomb taking with them the spices they had prepared. But, their one big preoccupation along the way was:

'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?!?' Yet, on arriving at the tomb they found that the stone, which was a large one, had already been rolled away posing no obstacle at all for them to enter in! (Mk. 16:1-4). Who else could have done them that favour except the Risen Lord himself? And isn't he present in our lives too rolling away the obstacles that we presume are in our path preventing us from experiencing the fullness of life that he brought us? To proceed unhesitatingly in life towards the goal set for us by the Lord, we need first of all to believe in the power of Christ's resurrection. He himself reminds us 'Do not be afraid, I have overcome the world ... behold, I make all things new!' How often have we claimed this victory that Jesus has obtained for us, and actually placed within our reach? Most of us behave as if we are Jews, still waiting for the Messiah to come into our lives.

Faith in Oneself Too

But besides having faith in the resurrection and victory of Jesus, we also need to have faith in ourselves. Here again we recall the words of Jesus: 'If you have faith even if it be the size of a mustard seed, and say to this mulberry tree, 'move and fall into the sea', it will obey you! (Mt 17:20).' Why then don't we have faith that we can do it? Perhaps it is because we still see ourselves as sinners, displeasing and distant from God, having to earn his love and forgiveness by dint of self-denial. How often do we not still see people, and sometimes even priests too, praying desperately as if God's forgiveness of our sins is still something that will be received only in the future? Theoretically they would affirm that Jesus has obtained the forgiveness of all our sins through his dying-rising (Eph 1:3-10), but in practice, that is for them yet a distant dream, and not a reality. Is it surprising then that we still do not possess the 'faith of God'? What many of us have, if we do have any faith at all, is 'faith in God.' This simply means that we believe that God can do all things. And so we pray to him requesting God to do the job for us. But notice the words of Jesus: 'You could say to this mulberry tree and it would obey you.' This approach becomes possible only when we actually live the Covenant through which we become one with God: 'God is

dwelling in my heart, he and I are one!' Like Peter and John, we could then say to the crippled beggar at the Temple gate: 'In the name of Jesus, I say to you, stand up and walk'. Most of us do not venture to go that far, again because we don't believe or realize that this is what the victory of Jesus really means in practice – 'that you who were aliens and sojourners are now members of the household of God!' (Eph 2:1-22)

Applied to all of Life

The victory of Christ spans the entire gamut or range of events in our lives, applying not only to spiritual matters, but also to our conquest over Self at every level. It enables us to achieve victory not only over our own failures and human limitations, but also over the obstacles placed in our path by the malice or vindictiveness of others around us or even by Nature itself. No matter what the response of others is, there is no reason for anyone to be reactive. One can choose a proactive stance and respond to the events of one's life very positively. As Paul put it, 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me' (Phil 4:13). What a different kind of life would we not have if we believed in the ultimate, total and final victory of Jesus, our Saviour and brother! Would not the new world that he established be a visible reality around us? Rather, we have allowed the forces of evil to dominate us and have remained like the people of the Old Testament still awaiting the coming of the Messiah, simply because we do not have the courage to believe all that Jesus tells us! Could things be different from now on? It is worth remembering that this is a personal choice that each person needs to make. No one else can step into our shoes and do it for us! Wake up – and take the plunge!

2010 April

4. SENT ON A MISSION Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Reflecting on the readings of the early Sundays in the Ordinary of the year, it struck me that there are two ways in which the Lord generally calls people to his service. In the first, he gives them no choice about accepting the mission entrusted to them: examples of these are Moses, Gideon, Elijah, Jeremiah, the

mythical Jonah, and perhaps also Simon Peter among others. In the second way, people are called undoubtedly, but the response is left entirely up to them – and in this category we have Isaiah, the bulk of the apostles, the rich young man and several others down the centuries. The difference between these two approaches seems to lie in the purpose of the call – the first being a call to mission (and here through his intransigence God expresses his love for his suffering or abandoned children), while the second is a more personal call to intimacy with God and a consequent or derivative call to mission. Hence in the case of the personal call, there is room for a very personal choice, but not in the other, since it concerns the good primarily of others. However, it is worth noting that these two ways of being called are not mutually exclusive. More importantly though, is the fact that the Lord's ways of calling us today remain the same. The following account adapted from a story shared by a member of the Metro Denver Hospice could be an example of being called and driven on a mission:

Unusual Experience One Evening

"I recently had one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I was driving home from a meeting one evening about 5, stuck in heavy traffic, when my car started to choke and splutter, and not long after completely died out on me. I barely managed to coast into a gas station, glad only that I wasn't blocking traffic and would have a somewhat warm spot to wait for the tow truck. Before I could make the call, I saw a woman walking out of the building, and it looked like she slipped on some ice and fell into a Gas pump, so I got out to see if everything was okay with her. When I got there I realized she was a young woman who looked really haggard with dark circles under her eyes. She dropped something as I helped her up, and I picked it up to give it to her. It was a nickel. At that moment, everything came into focus for me: the crying woman, the ancient Suburban crammed full of stuff with 3 kids in the back (1 in a car seat), and the gas pump reading \$4.95... She said amidst sobs that she was driving to California and that things were very hard for her right now. I said, 'So the Lord heard your prayer and sent me to help.' I attended to her immediate needs while she told me her name, that her

parents lived in California, that she was going down to live with them and try to get on her feet there. As I was walking over to my car, she observed, 'I guess you are like an angel or something!?' To which I shyly retorted: 'At this time of the year angels are really busy, so sometimes God uses regular people.' It was so incredible yet exhilarating to be a part of someone else's miracle. And of course, when I got to my car it started right away and got me home with no further trouble. I felt sure that when I got to the mechanic the next day to check he wouldn't find anything wrong with it! I couldn't help recalling the text "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Ps 55:22), nor marvel at the truth that, had I not stopped to investigate what was wrong with the woman who had fallen, things would have been quite different both for her and her children and also for me!

Mysterious but Real

This little incident reminds us that God's call missioning us need not, nor does, always come while we are in Church or at prayer. His SMS comes to us anywhere, anytime He finds someone who is in need and we are around and ready to help. The important point seems to be that we are eager and open to listen to his call, even if it means re-arranging our own schedules to accommodate the new task. It is true that we do not always respond positively to his strange calls to mission, but when we do, we certainly leave the world a far better place than it was before. In some mysterious way we become the 'good samaritans' of the modern world!

Obstacles

What seems to prevent people from collaborating with the Lord more generously is their preoccupation with their own agendas and needs. These are not necessarily selfish or self-centred in the sense that they crowd out other possibilities. It is just that one can get so caught up with one's present 'business' that one fails to recognize the opportunity to reach out to another. Possibly another related reason would be that we believe that we are alone, having to fend for and take care of our needs all by ourselves... or that if we don't take care of ourselves, we will be stranded and

out on a limb. Often we would realize though, that deferring our own satisfaction in order to reach out to someone in trouble (even when and especially when not specifically asked) is the surest way to enlist God's help in our own most pressing needs. The man in the story mentioned above does not tell us how he himself was rewarded for being a 'samaritan' to the lady in need, yet we can be quite sure that he would have been most handsomely rewarded by the Lord, who does not allow himself to be outdone in generosity, especially when it comes to helping one of the 'least of these my brethren!' The help we are called to render again need not always be financial or material. It could also be spiritual in the sense of advising someone who finds him/herself at a crossroad in life or career, consoling or befriending a person teetering on the brink of life deluged by suicidal thoughts, inviting another to a change of life that is more in keeping with God's designs – the possibilities are endless; what is most important is that we see ourselves called and also equipped for the job.

Preparing for Eventualities

One way to make the most of the calls the Lord gives us would be to equip ourselves to the full by taking an active interest in any and every matter that comes our way. One would not need to be an expert in every field, but knowing enough to be able to get on to the wavelength of the needy person is all that it takes. What is important is that the beleaguered person needs to have confidence in the helper if he is going to open up and accept help. There are so many people today who ostensibly come forward to help another in need, but actually end up taking advantage of the person in distress that, in general, most people are wary to expose their need to a stranger. Further, when one is reasonably close to the Lord, one will not only be directed (often in strange ways, like the car refusing to budge in the story above) to the person in need, but also the Lord will himself create the openness and trust needed for effective help. When the intended 'helper' is totally at God's disposal, all the preliminaries are worked out by him in seemingly simple yet marvelous ways. It is as if the virgin Mary were being told all over again: 'Do not be afraid, Mary for the holy Spirit will come upon you and the

power of the Most High will overshadow you...’ (Lk. 1:35- 37).

For the Recipient

While all that is said above applies more to the person called to render help, we could also find a message in it for the one in need. Often when in a desperate situation, fear and helplessness can almost paralyze us into believing that we have been abandoned by all, even by God (as when Jesus himself cried out on the Cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’). Yet that is when we need to recall that God ‘does not crush the bruised reed, nor snuff out the smouldering wick’ (Is 42:3), that ‘He did not create us in order to destroy us, for we are the work of his hands....’, that he is the God of the oppressed and that the more difficult the situation, the more ready he is to help us come out of it. That is when we need to turn to him in faith and allow him to work things out his way. Our fear-inspired desperate attempts often only make things more difficult. It is bewildering in such situations to know from which direction our help would come. Like the psalmist we need to cry and wait: “I lift up my eyes to the mountains, whence shall help come to me? (Ps. 121:1). The psalmist goes on to pray: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore (2-8). Such faith will certainly pull us out of whatever difficulties we encounter as we journey along through life. “May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Num 6:25-26)

2010 May

5. DOWN BUT NOT OUT Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

When knocked down by a crippling illness, one often turns to God accusingly screaming: ‘Why me? Why

this? Why now!’ And yet the set-back could turn out to be the biggest blessing the Lord sends us – in a strange kind of packaging, no doubt, yet with a message of his infinite love and concern. Much depends on the way we handle the situation – with deep and genuine faith or with self-seeking cynicism! Read on to learn how one individual without a tremendously encouraging background rose to the occasion and made a real success of his life by surrendering totally into the hands of his Creator.

God’s Plan for Me

“Naga Naresh Karuturi had just passed out of IIT Madras in Computer Science and had joined Google in Bangalore. One would be tempted to ask cynically: ‘what’s so special about this 21- year-old when there are hundreds of students passing out from various IITs and joining big companies like Google?’ But Naresh is special, in a sense. His parents are illiterate. He has no legs and moves around in a powered wheel chair. In fact, when his interviewer could not locate his lab, he told her over the mobile phone, ‘I will come and pick you up’. And in no time, he was there to guide her to the place set up for the interview. Ever smiling, optimistic and full of spirit - that is Naresh. He says, “God has always been planning things for me. That is why I feel I am so lucky.”

Childhood in a Village

He continues: “I spent the first seven years of my life in Teeparu, a small village in Andhra Pradesh, on the banks of the river Godavari. My father Prasad was a lorry driver and my mother Kumari, a house wife. Though they were illiterate my parents instilled in me and my elder sister (Sirisha) the importance and benefits of studying. Looking back, one thing that surprises me now is the way my father taught me when I was in the 1st and 2nd standards. He would ask me questions from the text book, and I would answer them. At that time, I didn’t know he could not read or write but to make me happy, he helped me in my studies! “Another memory that doesn’t go away is the floods in the village and how I was carried on top of a buffalo by my uncle. I also remember plucking fruits from a tree that was full of thorns. I used to be very naughty, running around and playing all the time with my friends. I used to get a lot of scolding for

disturbing the elders who slept in the afternoon. The moment they started scolding me, I would run away to the fields! I also remember finishing my school work fast in class itself and sleeping on the teacher's lap!

The Fateful Day

“On the January 11, 1993 when we had the Sankranti holidays, my mother took my sister and me to a nearby village for a family function. From there we were to go with our grandmother to our native place. But my grandmother did not come there. As there were no buses that day, my mother took a lift in my father's friend's lorry. As there were many people in the lorry, the driver made me sit next to him, close to the door. “It was my fault; I playfully fiddled with the door latch and it suddenly opened wide throwing me out. As I fell, my legs got cut by the iron rods protruding from the lorry. Nothing happened to me except scratches on my legs. “As the accident had happened just in front of a big private hospital I was rushed into it, but they refused to treat me saying that it was an accident case. Then a police constable who was passing by took us to a government hospital. In no time, both my legs were amputated up to the hips. I remember waking up and asking my mother, ‘where are my legs?’ I also remember that my mother cried when I asked the question. I was in the hospital for three months.

Life Without Legs

“I don't think my life changed dramatically after I lost both my legs. All at home doted on me, and I enjoyed all their fond attention which helped me avoid self-pity. I was happy but still restless: ‘could I yet achieve anything worthwhile in life?’ I pondered. That is when I decided that I would take charge of my life and make of it something to be proud of. It was quite an uphill task, but I needed to remind myself each day, one day at a time, that my life would end up being what I made of it, for God had not deprived me of anything I needed to succeed in life! With this philosophy of life I am now where I am and my greatest joy is that my life-story could help another human being struggle to make his/her life all that it can be!” As we struggle through life, each of us realizes that we are without some element or ingredient that would have ideally made our lives

happy and successful. For some it would be health, for others sufficient resources to obtain a sound education, a physical defect or a broken family! Faced with this deficiency we either could sit back moaning our inability all through our lives, or taking a more proactive approach, we could step out and make the best of what is still within our grasp. Ultimately it is only those who believe that their life is in their hands who end up making of it all that it could be! This approach is, of course, based on the rocklike belief that God who loves us infinitely has promised to be with us in every situation, if only we place our weakness into his powerful and mighty hands, and allow him to guide us step by painful step. “There is nothing I cannot do with the help of him who supports me!” (Phil. 4:13) is the motto of such people and it is this faith that carries them through thick and thin. However it is worth recalling that no one ever made it to the top without unflagging efforts, especially in the face of insurmountable odds! Yet the tougher the obstacles in their path the stronger their determination to face them head on. Failures were seen only as a temporary setback, providing a pause to reassess the situation and find another more effective way out. Thomas Edison, it is said, failed about five thousand times in his efforts to produce the light bulb before he finally succeeded. But he took all these failures positively, seeing them as so many ways in which one just would not be able to produce the electric bulb!

Benefitting from Crippling Circumstances

Could you sit back and fearlessly face what you have so far been considering to be the crippling deficiencies of your life? Lack of a proper education, missed opportunities, dearth of advice and encouragement at the right moment... the list could be endless. Take the key ones and turn them around – view them rather as a challenge to overcome that obstacle with God's power. The Lord who resides in the depths of your being assures you of his strength: ‘With him I can do all things!’ It is said that God never closes a door without at the same time opening at least a window, without showing us alternatives that could be even better than our original approach. Robert Clive and the story of the ant readily comes to mind: he observed an intrepid ant making repeated efforts to

climb a wall, only to fall back again and again. Eventually it did succeed and in the bargain put new zest and enthusiasm into its admiring observer enabling him too to overcome the difficulties he faced in life! The Eucharist we celebrate each Sunday is a reminder that our attempts to love others may not always ‘succeed.’ Yet to love even to the end is our greatest privilege as we seek to follow in the footsteps of our Master who loved us and gave his life for us saying, ‘Take and eat/drink, this is myself given for you... the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world’ (Jn. 6:51). As long as we stay close to him, we can never fail, even if it takes us the whole of our lifetime to make it to the top. We all praise a person who has finally made it to the finishing tape, even if last in the race, but we should not forget that Eucharist is food for the journey – it is given us precisely so that we can reach our Father’s home in heaven. Yet, our heaven is what we make of it, beginning here on earth. “Come to me all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest!” (Mt. 11:28-30)

2010 June

6. ONE DAY AT A TIME Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Which regular Church-goer hasn’t heard the song ‘One Day at a Time’ and perhaps drawn inspiration from it sometime or other in her/his life? Little would we realize though, that many of the songs that have been so inspirational to millions were actually born out of intense human pain and struggle! The author of “One Day at a Time”, Marijohn Wilkin, went from one mountaintop of joy and success to another, but between those peaks were deep valleys filled with excruciating mental suffering.

Unusually Gifted

Marijohn’s father, Ernest, used to play the violin and piano, and often led the singing at First Baptist Church of Sanger, Texas, and Marijohn quickly followed in her father’s musical footsteps. By age five, she could play the piano by ear, and not long after could immediately repeat the songs she heard her father play. When Ernest was stricken with cancer

Marijohn, then only fourteen, was thrust into the family business, Melson’s Veribest Bread. Before his death three years later Ernest made Marijohn promise that she would go on to college to study music, and that she would take care of her mother. And she did both admirably. She excelled in college as a musician and a singer at the Hardin-Simmons University, where she was granted a full scholarship and was invited to join the University Cowboy Band as the only female member ever. Here she was given numerous unusual opportunities to travel and perform with the Cowboy Band. When her husband, Bedford Russell was killed during World War II in South Africa, where he was a pilot, she found strength to rise above the sorrow and continued as a schoolteacher. She sang as an alto soloist in her Church choir and also tried her hand at writing songs yet thought so little of her efforts that she didn’t keep the manuscripts. But, by age thirty-seven, she had moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where she became one of the leading songwriters in the country music industry and founded ‘Buckhorn Music Publishers’. She re-married and had a young son named John Buck. She wrote more than four hundred country songs, and many of them rose to the top of the charts. Amid the acclaim, money, and success she enjoyed as a country music songwriter, Marijohn unfortunately stopped attending Church and eventually became a victim of alcohol abuse. On more than one occasion during this period, she attempted suicide. But God had other plans for her!

The Supreme Effort

At about age fifty-three, Marijohn recalls: “one day I stopped by a small church and asked a young minister if I could talk with him. As the conversation progressed, the minister asked what at that time, seemed a funny question - but it worked. He asked, ‘Did you ever think about thanking God for your problems?’ (Eph 5:20). I left his office and drove back home. “When I reached the house, I found it was empty, and I somehow felt inspired. I sat down at the piano and began to play and sing—out loud—the entire chorus to ‘One Day at a Time.’ ‘That’s all I’m asking from You. Just give me the strength to do every day, what I have to do.’ It just dropped into my heart... and I realized that the song was actually a

prayer—and I got some relief. “I wrote the chorus on the back of an envelope as fast as I could write. I then continued to sing, ‘Do You remember when You walked among men? Well, Jesus, You know, if You’re looking below, it’s worse now than then.’ I wasn’t quite sure the Lord knew where I was. I’d never quit believing in Him... “The following morning, my mind went back to the song. I had the second verse and the chorus, but somehow wasn’t satisfied with the beginning. Kris Kristofferson and Rita Coolidge, who were married at the time, were in town. They had just had a huge hit, ‘Why Me, Lord?’ written by Kris. Their recording had won a Dove Award for them. I called Kris and asked him to help me with the first verse. He had written songs for my company, Buckhorn Music, and we’d had some pretty big hits as a publisher. “When I showed him how I started the song, ‘I’m just a mortal...’ he looked at me and said, ‘Why don’t you say, “I’m only human, I’m just a man . . .” I said, ‘That’s good! That’s what I need.’ We finished the first verse in about twenty minutes. The lines just flew out from each of us.”

A Great Hit: Reflections

The song, first recorded by Marilyn Sellers, rose to become the number one song in several categories. In this country, it was first a hit on the country charts and then it crossed over to the pop charts. It was the number one pop song in England, the number one country song in Ireland, and among the top ten in two other countries. Each recording has been by a different artist in that particular country. It has long since passed the six hundred mark in artist recordings and has crossed over into the Southern Gospel Music genre. Though each day of our lives can bring seemingly insurmountable challenges, we can never afford to forget that God has a definite plan for good for each one of us. Besides, he has categorically affirmed that he will never forsake us especially when we reach the end of our tether, as it were. This truth is brought home to us in so many different ways, yet at the most crucial moment, we tend to forget. Most of us have undoubtedly heard the story of “Footprints in the Sand” with its punch line: ‘When you were in trouble there appears only one set of footprints because it is at that time that I carry you in My arms,

My child! And those footprints are Mine, not yours!’ In fact, we could almost say that God often sends us adversity to keep us reminded of his closeness because somehow we have strayed from his loving embrace or taken his love for granted. Doesn’t prosperity and success have the uncanny power of luring us into believing that we can manage our lives by ourselves? How often at such times have we not behaved as if we were a ‘god’ unto ourselves, only to come crashing down at the first obstacle we encountered, realizing that we too have feet of clay - and then back again to the more familiar groping for God’s reliable help! A quick glance over your life would reveal the biggest obstacle you currently face! Hidden within this problem is the greatest opportunity of your life! “Do not be afraid - I hold you in the palm of my hands... I will never forget you!” whispers the Lord of life, reassuringly! Realizing his closeness and positive desire that we grow, could we respond with a heartfelt ‘Thank-you’ to him who never fails us, no matter what?!? Make the best of each opportunity while it lasts and for all you know something great may be in the making! Like Marijohn, you might just be able to bequeath to future generations a real masterpiece of inspiration. How much do you not lose by merely succumbing to the temptation to take the easy way out – to let yourself sink down under and drown in your own negativity! Jesus assures all of us: “I have come that you may have life in all its fullness!” (Jn. 10:10). And that promise remains true even today. Jesus abides in the Sacrament of love, the Eucharist, not just to receive our praise and thanks, but precisely to raise us up from destructive moments and send us out as ambassadors of life and love. When last did you spend a few pregnant moments of silence in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament? Why not decide to make some time for this today and maybe every day of your life? Visit your parish Church and the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and just remain there in deep silence. You can be sure you will return a changed person! Listen deeply, and you just might find yourself called to turn over a new Marijohn with Kris Kristofferson leaf!

2010 July

7. ROME WAS NOT BUILT IN A DAY Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Struggling with the aches and pains of a second pregnancy coming on the heels of an ectopic conception which had to be aborted, the not-so-young mother-to-be battled on valiantly. But she seemed to be heading towards a losing battle...and then one particularly difficult gloomy day, she decided to quit... The strong religious upbringing she had received from God-fearing parents, however, would not let her quit all that easily. She found herself fighting with God: "Can you give me one good reason not to quit?" What flashed through her perplexed mind as God's answer surprised her – the story of the fern and the bamboo! Briefly put, it goes like this: Planted at about the same time, the fern quickly grew from the earth. Its brilliant green covered the floor. Yet absolutely nothing came from the bamboo seed. But I God did not quit on the bamboo. In the second year the fern grew even more vibrant and plentiful. And again, as yet nothing came from the bamboo seed. But I did not quit on the bamboo, he whispered. 'In year three there was still nothing from the bamboo seed. But I would not quit. 'In year four, again, there was nothing worth mentioning from the bamboo seed. And still, I would not quit – not yet. Then in the fifth year a tiny sprout emerged from the earth. Compared to the fern it was seemingly small and insignificant... and perhaps without much promise! But just six months later the bamboo rose to over a hundred feet tall. It had spent the first five years growing roots. Those roots made it strong and gave it what it needed to survive. God concluded: 'I would not give any of My creations a challenge it could not handle.' He asked me. 'Did you know, my child, that all this time you have been struggling, you have actually been growing roots?' 'Just as I would not quit on the bamboo, I will never quit on you even if nothing great seems to be happening!'

Each According to its Capacity

'Don't compare yourself to others,' He continued. 'The bamboo had a different purpose than that of the

fern. Yet they both make the forest beautiful. God said to her... Your time will come,' 'You will rise high.' 'How high should I rise?' she asked quivering with curiosity. 'How high does the bamboo rise?' God asked in return. 'As high as it can!' she observed tentatively. 'Yes.' He mused, 'You will give Me great glory by rising as high as you can.' With this amazing story buzzing in her head, she got back to reflecting on the matter at hand – her difficult and painful pregnancy! After a little reflection, she realized that God will never give up on anyone of his children, Never, Never, Never Give up! The problem, though, is that we humans give up all too easily. The slightest burden seems too heavy to bear even when we have a host of friends and well-wishers rallying round us to share that burden. Further, at such moments we usually feel that we are the only ones saddled with such misery while all the others around us seem to be so happy and contented! Or, perhaps even brave and strong in the face of all difficulties! If only we could listen to the tale of woe each one silently bears within his/her breast!

Eucharist: Unite Your Cross with His

When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper, he knew reasonably clearly what awaited him in the days, or maybe hours to follow! And so, he consciously gathered his disciples around him so that they would share that crucial experience with him and ensure that they learnt the lessons of life! While at table, having taken the bread in his hands he blessed God, then he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, 'Take and eat... this is My body which is given up for you!' Later he did the same with the Cup as he passed it round saying, 'This cup is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins of the many! In this magnanimous set of gestures, he showed them the secret of how to accept suffering in their lives, not just with stoic resignation, but with love and hope. We need to remember that no suffering comes our way unless given us by the Father, and that too for a beautiful purpose – it not only purifies us but also obtains untold blessings for others. As he approached the end of that historic Supper, Jesus gave his disciples the Eucharistic command: 'You my disciples, Do this as a Memorial of Me' – and with

this he asked them to imitate and continue his self-giving for the benefit of others. While he engaged in this giving with tremendous generosity, emptying himself even to the last drop of his blood, we are asked to give in small little ways which all add up, 'completing what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ!' (Col. 1:24). Once we are able to glimpse meaning in our sufferings, it becomes a lot easier to carry our crosses cheerfully and purposefully. History gives us numerous examples of how even young children bear immense suffering gladly and heroically once they can see some meaning in it. Often they put adults to shame with their bravery, even when their faith isn't as strong as that of an adult who has had so much more experience of life. However, faith and meaning do not come to us automatically; we have to struggle to make sense of all that happens each day of our lives. More importantly, we need to 'listen' deeply to what the Lord says to us through the events constituting our lives. It could be just the sight of another person suffering valiantly that gives us the courage to put up with our lot. When recently I myself was battling with the excruciating pain of a slipped disc, it was the sight of a young adult with multiple fractures in the rib cage patiently yet cheerfully filling out forms and waiting her turn to enter into the MRI scanning machine that snapped me out of my self-pity and brought about a dramatic change in my attitude. How much more then would not the remembrance of Christ's sufferings do for us? 'He loved me and gave himself up for me!' is Paul's summing up of Christ's powerful message to each one of us? We would be a lot more and better equipped to handle life's crosses if each time we celebrated Eucharist, we had something concrete to place on the paten together with the host and drop into the chalice together with the wine – as our concrete contribution to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ! Unfortunately most of us do nothing of the kind when we celebrate Eucharist, yet Christ waits patiently for each one's 'mite' because that is what will tilt the scales and make our world not just a 'valley of tears' in which we mourn and weep, but the very antechamber of heaven, full of delightful surprises for us. Incidentally, isn't that what we promised at the time of our Baptism – that we commit

ourselves to die with Christ and rise with him to a new way of life? (Rom. 6:2-8). That again is what we repeat in each Eucharist through the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the Cup – an effective sharing in the dying-rising of Christ.

Christ's Commitment to us

Whenever we recall our Baptism and Eucharist we tend to emphasize the demands of the commitment that we make to be faithful to the Lord. We focus on the numerous times we fail to live up to that commitment. However, we must not forget that the Covenantal contract is mutual or bi-lateral, in the sense that God too makes a commitment to us, that he will be ever faithful to us. And he never goes back on his promises! Paul reminds his favourite disciple Timothy, 'The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself.' (2 Tim 2:11-13). Further in the context of the Last Supper itself, Jesus himself solemnly promises us, 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you"' (Jn 14:12-18). So when crosses come our way, especially when they dog our steps like ants in procession one following on the heels of the other, that's when we shouldn't run to tell the Lord how big the problem is, but rather face the problem squarely and tell the intimidating problem how great the Lord is! Already of old the psalmist prayed: 'Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God... As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God establishes forever. We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the

midst of your temple. Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with victory. Let Mount Zion be glad, let the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments. Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever' (Ps 48:1-14).

2010 August

8. TRANSFORMING LIFE'S DISASTERS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

On a wintry December night, we are told that a fire broke out in the film room of Thomas Edison's laboratory. Anyone would have surmised that as he saw his assets go up in smoke, this sixty-seven-year-old man's spirit would certainly be crushed. Instead, to everyone surprise, the moment he saw the fire he shouted to his son, "Where's Mom? Go get her! Tell her to get her friends! They'll never see a fire like this again!" Later, he said, "One can always make capital out of disaster. We've just cleared out a bunch of old rubbish. We'll build bigger and better on the ruins." Strange man he certainly was, but stranger still was his reaction in this disastrous situation! What we actually see here is that Thomas Edison like all of us, could not control the circumstances of his life. But, his philosophy of life was such that rather than be heartbroken at seeing his life's work go up in flames, he chose to welcome the opportunity to start all over again, making a fresh new start. Edison, known for his overwhelming optimism anyway, is indeed a tremendous inspiration for many of us today.

Facing Life's Struggles

Much as we would like it to be different, Life cannot and will not be 'roses, roses all the way' for any of us. The Cross has to come our way, in some form or other, sooner or later. Even when one takes the greatest precautions, one cannot always prevent terrorist attacks or earthquakes or tsunamis every now and then, with perhaps several innocent people becoming hapless victims, who are then laid up in hospital beds the rest of their lives! It is not what happens to us that matters, though, as much as how

we take what happens to us. Especially for those who have understood something of the power of the Resurrection of Jesus, there can be no tragedy that beats them to the dust completely. Encouraged by well-known contemporary examples like that of a Helen Keller or a Christopher Reeves, they discover what life still offers them generously and somehow make the best of it. What often happens in a person's life is that s/he launches out on a path which s/he thinks is what s/ he is called to. But if that path is not really what God has destined him/ her for to bring out the best in him/ her, s/he is bound to be dissatisfied travelling down that road. And so God takes the matter in hand and gets it out of the way for us, in ways best known to him alone. Unaware of his positive purposes we could often cling to our own dream trying to get back to it, by hook or by crook. And the more stubbornly a person clings to his/her own self-designed plan of life, the more does s/he set him herself up for a great crash – at times that is the only way the Lord can tear us away from those disastrous self-opinionated dreams and bring us to the path of true success. In the aftermath of such a crash in life, if the person can sit back and allow God's still gentle voice to get to him/her, s/he would perhaps discover something really beautiful blossoming from within. There would inevitably be some period, more or less extended, in which the person grieves over the loss and gropes for a new path. But the sooner s/he finds one, the better for everyone. And the sign that this new-found direction is from God is that even in the midst of excruciating pain and disappointment on the surface, a deep inner peace pervades his/her entire being. In spite of darkness all around, there is at least a faint glow of light at the end of the tunnel.

One Step At a Time

What is important at this stage is not that we have the entire process clearly mapped out before us, but that we are prepared to take things 'one step at a time.' Each little success builds up one's inner self-confidence and awareness of God's protective presence. It opens up greater possibilities for the next day. But perhaps the point worth noticing most is that during this entire process, one would need to focus away from the Self, turning one's gaze either on to

God, or on to a significant other. That other person could be someone needing help, or a person in some deeper trouble than oneself. As the Chinese proverb has it: "I complained because I had no shoes, until I saw a man who had no feet!" The very effort to reach out and help such a person takes one's mind off one's own crosses releasing unknown resources from deep within one's being. The ultimate result is actually what Edison predicted: 'We will build something bigger and better on the ruins!' It takes only a brief reflection to realize that some of the greatest works of art and inspiration were born out of deep suffering and pain. But for this to happen what is crucial is a vision that enables the suffering person to transcend the pain and gradually emerge as a success. Thus, it is not pain and suffering as such that bring out the best in us – but the Spirit of God residing in the recesses of our hearts who makes use of these negative events inspiring us to allow him to mould and shape us in these moments of crisis.

Resources Available

Another angle worth exploring is that this transformation generally does not happen instantaneously – it usually takes a painfully long time, during which there could be several options available, numerous starts and stops, some backslidings and wrong turns in the road. At such moments what sustains us is patience with ourselves and a deep belief that in the end all will be well not only for us, but for everyone around us too. Often it is this tenacity in holding on in spite of everything that sees a person through the deepest crisis no matter what its origin. The slightest positive sign should be held on to as a stepping stone to the next. Besides, if one has trained oneself to be selfless, this habit will be priceless in moments like these. For, the more we focus on the Self, the more we tend to wallow in self-pity and remain where we are, or even get worse. The man who has lost both his hands in an accident could well ask, 'What can I still do with my legs and mouth, perhaps?' A Filipino young man does just this: he fixes a punctured bicycle tyre all by himself although he has no hands and only stumps for legs! He makes a handsome living in this way, as people tend to be

generous with one who courageously helps himself no matter what the odds against him!

Resurrection is Real

When we say that Jesus has shared his Resurrection with us already now, it means, among other things - that we will never give up. Paul reminds us, 'We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies' (2 Cor. 4:7-10). However, it is only when this doctrine is lived that we have the opportunity to see heroic examples in our lives and in the lives of others around us. Is there something in your life that you need to turn around? In our day we see a slightly different version of this truth being lived out. Several people today who have lived their lives following their regular avowed profession, no sooner do they retire than they take up another career which all along they had nurtured as a hobby. Thus, a teacher by profession who specialized in Geography and History took up to being a tourist guide to places in Russia, because this was her favourite subject. Not only was she good at this new profession and got several opportunities to visit places of interest, but the people she guided on their tours also benefited a lot more from her professional help. Besides, she was able to use her period of retirement much more profitably since by then her children had all grown up and could fend for themselves. Her active presence wasn't really needed in the home very much and what is more the money kept rolling in too! It is said of the great J.R.D. Tata who eventually retired from active service around the age of 78 – ever since official retirement, he worked as a consultant to various allied services till finally at 78 he chose to pull out completely. But it is at this stage that he got himself a computer and decided to learn the intricacies of working at it and becoming computer savvy. His argument to others and also to himself was: all along no one ever allowed me to do my own work on a computer, with the result that I could never learn how

to master it. Someone or other would chip in and do the work for me, meaning to be of help no doubt, but at the same time effectively cutting out all possibility of my learning the art. Now that I have no secretaries to thwart my desire, I can work freely at it - and soon he was pretty good at it. He excelled in a new art at the age of 78! Wasn't he also building something better and new on the ruins of the past? Resurrection is new life bursting into our limited earthly frames but manifesting itself in ever new ways of self-giving. It is amazing how much creativity we are capable of once we allow God's Spirit free play in our lives. The more we exercise ourselves physically, mentally, emotionally and otherwise, the more novel ways we discover to break of ourselves for others. Then we are truly free from within; we are no longer afraid to leave behind what we have been attached to, nor to fearlessly launch into something new. For we know that the Lord is ever faithful to his promise: 'Do not be afraid for I am with you always, even till the end of time!' (Mt. 28:20).%

'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near' (Is 55:6)

2010 September

9. SHARE YOUR BLESSINGS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

There would hardly be any Christian who is unaware that the core of the Eucharist is the call to share of one's blessings with anyone in need. This is precisely the 'Eucharistic command' which the Lord gave to his followers on the night he was betrayed - and this sharing of our very selves with one another is the way we make Jesus continue to be present in our midst. But, often the problem tends to be, 'how exactly am I called to share, and what do I share with others?' In general the answer will always be something like, 'share whatever costs you most - even your very life itself!' The following story gives us one shining example of the call to share what could be considered by some as something more precious even than life itself. There was a farmer who grew superior quality and award winning corn. Each year he entered his corn in the state fair where it won honour and prizes. When interviewed by a newspaper reporter he

revealed something interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered, to his great surprise, that the unconventional yet wily farmer actually shared his seed corn with his neighbouring cultivators. "How can you possibly afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbours when you know they will enter the corn they grow in competition with yours each year?" the reporter asked in amazement! "Why, sir," the farmer answered nonchalantly, "didn't you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and carries it around from field to field. If all that my neighbours grow around me is inferior, sub-standard and poor quality corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my own corn-fields. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbours grow good corn too." Thus, this simple farmer provides us with a superb example of the win-win philosophy of life born out of common-sense, maybe, but also based on solid Eucharistic principles. Hasn't Jesus told us, 'give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back' (Lk 6:38). Yet how few of us really trust this principle and act on it in our day-to-day living!?!

No Man is an Island

The farmer and his approach to life also jolts us into a deep realization of the connectedness of life. His corn cannot improve unless his neighbour's corn also improves. If we are to grow good quality corn, we must help our neighbours grow good quality corn too. And so it is in other dimensions of life as well! I cannot imagine that I will make progress on my own and without reference to anyone else around me. Instead, 'the more we are together, the better it shall be!' Thus if I wish that honesty prevails in our neighbourhood, then it is not enough for me alone to seek to be honest; I would need in some way to help others also to appreciate and live by the same principle of honesty. Unfortunately, isolation is the order of the day. Sociologists use the term "anomie" to indicate the feeling a person nurtures of 'not belonging', of 'isolation', of 'disconnectedness'. The level of anomie is on the rise in our cities the world around to an alarming degree. The gaping hole in our

security in times of natural disasters or man-made calamities like terrorist attacks is born out of our disconnectedness from what goes on in our neighbourhoods. We need a resurrection of a true and deep community spirit. There are three pillars upon which a civic rebirth or comeback is possible: individual commitment from and by every single member, the spirit of volunteerism and a deep sense of community. If we are to bring this about we would first need a dramatic change in our collective mentality. We would need to train ourselves to think not just in terms of 'I-Me-Myself' but of a 'We-Us-Ourselves!' But, difficult and almost impossible as this is, if and when this happens we will find ourselves stopping to help the next time we witness an accident on our crowded roads, a fallen tree obstructing traffic, a stranger in our neighbourhood moving around suspiciously, or an unusual object lying unattended in an isolated corner. When this kind of thinking is a reality among us, the next time a terrorist lands on our shores and someone happens to ask them, 'what are you doing?', we will not take 'Mind your own business' for an answer and turn away. We will be committed enough to respond, 'It is my business' both in word and in action. This transformation in our mindsets is not going to come easily. It will first of all require that each of us learns from the Lord to break of oneself and share with the other. We would need to heed the great Eucharistic command he gave us: 'Do this as a memorial of me; as often as you do this (break yourselves for the other) you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes!' (1 Cor. 11:26-28). Unless we all stand together, we will fall together in a heap, as happens so often today.

Begin Today - Now

So while we rightfully express our fury with protests, petitions and prayer, we also need to invest in important long-term results. Each of us has to move beyond the romantic idea of democracy as a 'they-will-do-it' agreement and put our shoulders to the hard work of building our democracy - through values of citizenship, volunteerism and community. The world is made strong by its populace. It is people who build a resilient society that rallies round with courage and leadership during times of crisis. The best

response to the divisions and disconnectedness in our world is a better understanding and living of what we celebrate in each Eucharist. It is not as if we do not have any evidence of these three qualities among us today. The real problem is that we do not have enough of them to make a noticeable difference. We do have heroic examples of courageous young people who wouldn't think twice about risking their very lives in order to prevent a woman from being raped or a senior citizen from being waylaid and robbed! But, these tend to be the exceptions to the rule of lethargy and apathy that characterize our approach to life. As long as our own boat is not rocked and our own personal lives aren't at risk, we couldn't care less what happens around us, and who does what doesn't strike us as our business too!

Eucharist Makes the Church

It is said that the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church. This simply means in practice that the way we celebrate Eucharist shapes the kind of Church we eventually become. If our celebrations are basically self-centred and self-oriented, then why wouldn't we tend to be self-centred the rest of our lives? And when all is said and done, isn't almost all our worship basically to ensure our own happiness now and here-after? The degree of self-concern stands out clearly when any Christian present at Eucharist is asked this simple question: 'When you receive Jesus in Holy Communion, who gets the grace of this sacramental encounter?' Promptly comes the answer, without even the batting of an eyelid, 'Why, me, of course!' They might even think that the one asking such a question is out of his mind! When these same people are invited to reflect how things work out on the natural level, gradually they begin to see the truth. When one has a meal, the parts of the body directly involved with the act of eating are mainly the eyes, hands, mouth and stomach. Yet, two or three hours after the meal, no one dare say that only these limbs get the nourishment or strength that the food eaten provides - it seems quite natural that the entire body should derive this nourishment. And the reason for this way of thinking too is plain for all to see - the human person is one organic unity and hence what affects one part naturally affects the rest

of the body, for better or for worse! But this kind of thinking would hardly be applied to society as a body or unity! If this corporate unity does not apply to the whole of mankind, should it not at least apply to the Church which is rightly called 'the mystical Body of Christ?' Hadn't Jesus told us emphatically, 'What you do to the least of my brethren you do to me?' And hasn't the Poet admonished us that 'When the bell tolls do not ask for whom it tolls! For when anyone dies, a part of you dies too!' But in the hurly burly of life, all this seems to be nice rhetoric with little practical consequence. And that is why we pay dearly for our gross negligence every now and then, only to wake up with wails and moans that 'they' into whose hands we invested our security and wellbeing have failed us again! And after a veritable storm in a teacup, we settle back again to our self-contained living, without having learnt anything worthwhile. Our Eucharists too will continue to be the same – basically petitions that we be granted various material favours which will make our life on earth a heaven. But Eucharist is a call to action. The heart of the Eucharist is a wake-up call reminding us that the salvation of the world will depend on how much each of us is prepared to 'take the bread' of our daily lives, 'give thanks' for all the blessings we already possess, 'break the bread' of our talents and gifts and offer them to those in need saying 'take and eat this is myself, broken and given for you!' And further, our saying and doing this during the Eucharist doesn't end it all – rather this is only the beginning, the ritual expression of what we commit ourselves to do in life and the pattern of our daily living. And so it is that we step out of the Church, to build the church in our neighbourhood, to be a light to all around us of how people can live in peace and harmony because each of us cares about the quality of life we experience. 'Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back' (Lk 6:38).

2010 October

10. HOW TO DANCE IN THE RAIN by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

It was a busy morning, about 8:30 and the place was just being opened up, when an elderly gentleman in his 80s arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He said he was in a hurry, as he had an appointment at 9:00 am. The nurse whom he approached for help saw him looking nervously at his watch every now and then, and decided, since she wasn't really busy with another patient, that she would attend to his wound first. On examining it she saw that it was well healed, so she talked to one of the doctors, got the needed supplies to remove his sutures and re-dress his wound. While attending to his wound she entered into casual conversation with him, enquiring if he had another doctor's appointment that morning since he was in such a hurry. He mumbled something to the effect that he needed to go to the Nursing Home nearby to share breakfast with his wife. When the nurse inquired about her health he nonchalantly confided that she had been there for a while as she was a victim of Alzheimer's Disease. As the conversation continued, she asked if the wife would be upset if he was a bit late that day. To which he replied candidly that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now. Surprised, the nurse continued 'And you still go faithfully every morning, even though she doesn't know who you are?' He smiled as he patted her hand and said, 'She doesn't know me, but I still know who she is.' Deeply touched, the nurse had to hold back tears as he left. She had goose bumps on her arms and thought, 'That is the kind of love I want in my life.' True love is neither largely physical nor purely romantic. True love is acceptance of all that is, has been, will be, and will not be. But how rare to find that kind of love anywhere in the world! Love is perhaps the most talked of thing in our lives, one sees it bandied about everywhere, on hoarding advertisements, in short stories, in films – you name it and yet everyone seems to be hungering for it, as there is such a short fall of the genuine product! Strangely enough, that is the one commandment which Jesus felt he had to give his disciples before he sent them out on their own, and he called it 'the new commandment' because it had something to do with the way he himself had loved us. 'Love one another as I have

loved you!’ The “as I have loved” is what makes all the novelty, difference and difficulty. Most of us love others the way we feel like, ‘doing what comes naturally,’ and believe that we are all pretty good at it. Nevertheless if genuine love is to last, and if it is to be the way Jesus loved us, then it must have at least these three sterling qualities in large quantities: Intimacy, Passion and Commitment. It is only when all these three qualities are present and in the right proportion and balance that love will last and fulfill all who engage in it as did the love of this elderly gentleman. If any one of the three is missing or not present in the right proportion, then there is really no love worth talking about.

Intimacy, Passion and Commitment

Intimacy is born out of the time spent with another person seeking to plumb the depths of the mystery which is the other. Each person is a mystery and in spite of the millions of people who have walked this earth, we can say with a measure of certainty that no two are absolutely alike. Hence, a mere superficial knowledge of the other will not suffice, as each one is unique. It is when two people have spent a long time together, and held on to each other through thick and thin that this kind of intimate knowledge develops. We often see this quality of love in elderly couples who have spent well nigh fifty years or more in each other’s company. They know each other like the back of their own hands! Or in a more scriptural way of putting it, one needs to have eaten several bushels of salt with another before one can be called his/her true friend! The implication here is that life shared together, especially round the table brings about an intimacy which bonds people together at great depth. However, in this kind of exchange there has to be both speaking and listening, sharing and understanding, give and take on both sides in more or less equal measure. We need to approach the other not with acquisitive love but appreciative love – the kind that takes the time and the trouble to appreciate the beauty of the other, not just use the other for one’s own gain! Passion is the fiery aspect of love, that element of ‘madness’ that makes one ready even to lay down one’s life for the other – not because the other is highly qualified, worthy or superhuman, or because

one is infatuated with the other, but simply because that is how genuine love behaves. It is this aspect that makes love a thrilling experience, brings joy to both when they are in each other’s presence, makes them blind to the faults and limitations of the other, renders one capable of forgiving the very same fault even seventy times seven, enables one to hope always for the best even if what one actually sees is the worst, makes it possible to forget past hurts and cause them to disappear altogether, rejoices in the good that befalls the beloved and works to bring out the best in the other! Commitment needs no explanation – the story given above about the elderly gentleman exemplifies what it involves. It issues a statement in action saying that “I am there for you, no matter what!” Again, this commitment is not based on what the other does or doesn’t do for me, it has nothing to do with panscale love which measures out one’s response according to the behaviour of the other. It flows from the richness of one’s character and the emotional strength that one has within and is present even when the romance and emotional thrill of love have eventually dried up. No wonder this man could love his wife and be present for breakfast with her come rain or sunshine, day after day! What strength of character it reveals in such cases when it is not duty or pity for the other that prompts the response, but an inner necessity of wanting to be faithful to the other. One of the ‘best love stories of the year’ in China is that of a man who married a widow ten years his senior. Since the village would not accept such a union, they left the place and found refuge on a mountain range far away from all civilization. Over the next fifty years and more, the man handcarved all by himself more than five thousand steps along the entire slope of that mountain so that his wife could go up and down in comfort whenever she needed to. Eventually when he expired, he passed away holding her hand in his and for days nothing could release his grip on his beloved wife’s hand! Truly, love is stronger than death!

Eucharist, the Source

How does one cultivate such marvelous qualities in one’s relationships with others, especially in the home? We need to go back to the source which is the

Last Supper and Calvary in which Jesus ‘showed the depth of his love – he loved his own unto the very end!’ (Jn. 13:1-12). That is where we hear the encouraging and inspiring words of Jesus, ‘Take and eat/drink – this is Myself given for you, poured out for you; Do this as a memorial of Me.’ We come to the Eucharist to be filled with this love, to recharge our spiritual batteries, as it were, so that we can go back and begin to love again, no matter how often we have failed in the past. The Lord is prepared to give us as much of his love as we are ready to take, and what is more to use in the rest of the day. Unfortunately most of us are interested in so little, and don’t even realize that in this instance, the ball is in our court. What we mean is that if we bring five hosts to the altar at the time of the presentation of gifts, Jesus will be able to transform only those five. If the next day we bring five hundred, he will likewise transform those five hundred only – even though this time there are five thousand hosts on the side table nearby. These he will not transform simply because they have not been brought or presented at the altar. The lesson then is: whatever we present to the Lord, only that much will he be able to transform and give back to us. So, if we come to the Eucharist with a miserly little measure, Jesus will fill it to the brim for us, yet we go back with a very weak impetus to love. But if we were to bring our entire selves and generously place them all at his service, what would he not be able to do with us? The more we give away of this love, the more room we make in ourselves to be replenished. And incidentally, the more we share such love with everyone we meet, the happier would the Lord be too, for this is why he came into our world, and this is the reason he chose and called us, to transform the whole world into a place where all live happily as brothers and sisters, as children of the one Father in heaven. The happiest people don’t necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything they have. “Life isn’t about how to survive the storm, but how to dance in the rain”. The genuine love which the Lord provides for us not only enables us to endure all the storms of life, but it also helps us enjoy life in all its dimensions. “I came that you may have and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10).

2010 November

11. GRATITUDE IN ACTION Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

The melodic strains of a violin heard one Friday evening from a lobby at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, was the heartfelt gratitude of a former patient who had almost lost the ability to play the instrument again. “I suppose it is a beautiful way of saying ‘thank you’ to the hospital and its staff, but it’s a lot of other things as well,” mused Ken Wollberg. “It’s a way to share a beautiful thing.”

The Violin – His Passion

Wollberg, 58, began playing the violin in a fourth-grade music class in Omaha, Nebraska, and became ‘almost addicted to it, in a way.’ His love for the instrument eventually led to a master’s degree in viola performance from the University of Iowa. Although he was passionately fond of playing professionally, his real delight was teaching the viola and violin to enthusiastic young students. Besides, he performed with various music groups and symphonies, but it was hard to make a living off his music, as everyone in the profession knows only too well. So he and his wife, Peggy, decided to launch careers as truck drivers and in 2002 began hauling rigs cross-country. Eventually, they bought a truck for themselves and leased their services. Wollberg and his wife were hauling three flatbeds, piled up on the back of their truck on Dec. 27, 2007, when it struck a patch of ice in Montana and before they knew what was happening, they found themselves slithering across the length of about four football fields before toppling to one side. The driver’s side window had shattered, and Wollberg’s left elbow took a beating. His triceps muscle detached, and bone scraped away from his elbow. Surveying the damage, the orthopedic surgeon Dr. Jay Keener who attended on him observed, “I told him from the get-go that it was uncertain if he would ever be able to play the violin again, depending on the amount of nerve damage, weakness and stiffness he had sustained.” Keener re-attached Wollberg’s triceps muscle to the bone. Plastic surgeon Dr. Ida Fox performed a skin graft to cover the outside of the wound. A second operation last July released scar tissue and stretched

the elbow. But it was only after several months of painful gruelling exercises and therapy visits that Wollberg gradually returned to teaching music as before. “That whole time, I didn’t realize how serious it was,” Wollberg reminisces. “My hand worked, but it was a struggle to play the violin again. It took a month, maybe, to reach the bottom string.” He complains that his arm is still weak, but nevertheless, last fall he performed with the Paducah Symphony Orchestra in Kentucky. When Wollberg returned to Barnes-Jewish Hospital recently for a checkup, he brought along his violin. “My desire was to show that I had my violin-playing back under control. I wanted them to see the work they had done with such loving dedication and care was eminently successful,” he reflected. The doctors were immensely impressed and grateful and the hospital staff asked the patient to schedule another appointment - but this time as a performer. Wollberg and his friend, guitarist Jim Stieren, appeared that Friday at the hospital’s Centre for Advanced Medicine in St. Louis. Peggy Wollberg joined them and sang a few songs, including ‘Amazing Grace.’ Cherry Brown, 58, paused after a vascular test to join the crowd in the lobby and enjoy the music. “The fact that he is able to play after the accident is a wonderful thing,” she remarked. “That’s a God-given talent well used.”

Gratitude Meaningfully Shown

Most people express gratitude with a casual ‘Thank-you’ or sometimes with a heartfelt expression accompanied by a gift of some kind. However, gratitude is best shown by a change of life-style as did Wollberg. How many of us pay heed to this aspect of gratitude? Take the example of the gift of forgiveness which God gives us so graciously through the dying-rising of Jesus, his Son. The ideal way to show one’s gratitude for this gift is to avoid repeating the sin ever again in one’s life, and at the same time to share one’s forgiveness with another, especially when the person has hurt us beyond our expectations. Only when our gratitude for forgiveness includes these two aspects can we say that it is genuine and complete – gratitude shown in action and not just in words alone. The express need of passing on forgiveness to others is brought home to us through the parable of the

unforgiving servant. However, what most seem to miss in their understanding of this parable is that when the first servant fails to extend forgiveness to his fellow-servant, he loses the very gift that he had received earlier – he is thrown into prison until he had paid the entire debt. And considering the amount he owed (ten thousand talents, the equivalent in modern currency being several thousands of crores of rupees!) that would mean an extremely long sentence! And what about gratitude for the gift of life, experienced through recovery from a fatal illness, or when we escaped a near-death accident? Does that ever really make us begin life on a fresh page, with a deeper trust in the Lord’s providence and a greater readiness to reach out to others, especially those for whom life is a burden in some way? How often does good health and physical vigour move us to go out of our way to work for the physically challenged and less gifted, polio patients, accident victims and the like? We would all acknowledge that it is fairly easy (even though meaningful) to say a verbal ‘thankyou’ for a favour received. But to make that favour the springboard for a new level of living is something out of the ordinary! In 2 Cor. 5:14-15 Paul reminds us that Jesus loved each of us so much that he literally identified himself with us, taking the penalty of death on himself (one man died for all!). And so, he concludes, living persons should no longer live for themselves for him who for their sakes died and was raised. He not only taught this truth, but actually lived it. ‘For me,’ he avowed, ‘to live is Christ and to die a gain!’ What a difference it would make if each Christian were to realize this truth to the very marrow of his/her bones! Would we not thank the Lord for all that he has done for us?!? “What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord” (Ps 116:12-13).

Other Inspiring Examples

A young Indian couple living in America, own a Restaurant doing pretty brisk business all week. They decided one day to launch into a novel scheme. Every Sunday they serve their guests as usual, but when presenting the bill, the amount is always \$0.00. When the surprised patrons seek an explanation wondering

whether there is some kind of mistake or other, their answer is: 'The previous guests who had a meal here have paid for your meal! They wanted you to enjoy your Sunday meal and remember it for a long long time! It is absolutely free for you!' Taken aback the guests would be tongue tied for a while, but invariably would offer to pay for those coming after them. It has been noticed that Sunday is their busiest day – and never once have they got less than what they would have, had they charged their clients the full fare. Rather, it was always way above their expectations. Not only that, several people offer their services, some as waiters, cooks and in other capacities, all wanting to join in this novel way of sharing and bringing joy to others. And that is what the couple originally had in mind – to provide people with the opportunity to think of others and to share their blessings with them generously. Their hope is that this experience will enable the people who go through it to extend it to other spheres of their lives. The 'Joy of Giving Week' was celebrated in India from September 27 to October 3, 2009 in a nationwide outreach, spearheaded by the NGO Give India. The theme of the week is 'giving' – whatever you can to some needy person: a glass of water, a smile, a hug or even a hot meal, in short an act of kindness extended to anyone, including family members too. This appeal goes out to each individual to do his/her best during the week – and already thousands have responded generously. One can give personally or even through the NGO. Those interested could even organize fund-raisers in the office, neighbourhood or through Church and other organizations. The idea is simply to dedicate the week to thinking less of oneself and more of others around us and in this way bringing joy to others. Professionals like doctors, lawyers, accountants and others are encouraged to donate a few hours each day of the week helping others in need of their professional competence. Besides, the NGO has developed several programmes designed to empower the poor and disadvantaged, giving people the skills, confidence and support they need to improve their lives as part of their work in the city. They work across areas including childcare, women empowerment, youth empowerment and HIV-AIDS

among others. Here too the experience cannot but be that those who receive will also vie with their benefactors to pass on some of their blessings to others in return. Thus, the chain would hopefully extend well beyond the stipulated week and possibly circle the whole world. As we remember Wollberg and his almost childlike candidness in wanting to thank the doctors who helped him get back the use of his left hand, could we take a serious look at our lives and pick out one area in which we feel (or even ought to feel) this kind of gratitude to the Lord? How could we express this more meaningfully not just in words, but in actions that will reveal the glory of what God has done for us? Maybe we too could come up with a novel idea to encourage all to share, emulating the "Joy of Giving Week" and doing even better!

2010 December

2011 January

1. A BUS RIDE WITH A DIFFERENCE by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

In this fresh series I would like to present examples of how the presence of the Risen Lord can make a difference in our lives and world, provided we acquire the skill of tuning in to his chosen wave-length. As I have done previously, in this series too I start with a story and weave around it a few reflections which bring out the power of Christ's resurrection for us today.

What Life is all About!

"A few years ago as an employee of an international company selling computer devices, I had to travel a lot as part of my work. My attitude at that time was typical of most young employees viz. 'how to make more money by solving technical problems.' My life was a closed circuit system enveloping only my own world and I lived very much like a robot that worked in a purely mechanical way. On one of my work trips, I sensed that for some strange reason, everything was different that day. For no understandable motive, at the airport I decided to take the stairs down to a different exit and walked out. What met my gaze stunned me: a beautiful landscaped space that I had never noticed before. I let go a couple of buses as I

was fascinated and wanted to enjoy the scenery. Finally I got on to a bus that would extend this 'difference' all through my life! Choosing to sit somewhere in the middle of the coach, I found myself next to a young boy, a strange fellow carrying an unusual pile of suitcases and bags, as if he was moving. Not wanting to be disturbed, I relaxed silently in my seat but in the twinkle of an eye, the lad turned to me with one of the most authentic smiles I had ever seen from a stranger, while extending his hand in a friendly greeting. Inevitably we got to talking and I soon learnt more about my friend. "You can call me John. I'm 20 years old and I'm here because I want to achieve my biggest dream ever," he confided calmly. Having lost his dad ten years ago his mother re-married and then began the most harrowing part of his life-story. "Since then," he continued nonchalantly, "I've been living all over the country for the last ten years. I've lived on the street, I've eaten frequently out of garbage bins but have also known many people who have been wonderful and kind to me. I have been lucky, and learned a lot from life through these years." After a short respite, he continued, "My grandpa was a general of the army. He left me this," he said proudly pointing to a long knife with a gold handle. This was the best memory of his childhood and was priceless to him because every time he was faced with something difficult in life, he would touch the knife and feel better and know that no matter what, he could face that adversity successfully. Finally, he came to the reason he was on that bus! For the last ten years, all the time, every moment of every day, he had only one thing on his mind, to join the army like his grandpa. He was on his way to the army school where his grandfather studied a long time ago and he swore that he would persist until he succeeded. "I vowed to follow this dream and be happy every day of my life," he asserted, beaming with confidence. As the bus reached his stop, he stood up, took all his bags, extended his hand again to shake mine and with a big smile on his face told me, "it has been a pleasure, I hope to see you again" and disappeared in a second. I shook his hands tightly, unable to say much at this point. I was choked up with emotion. As I mused silently the rest of my journey, I could not but

realize that from then on my life would be different and a young homeless man of 20 years was the miracle worker. It didn't take me long to understand what a great person he was because of his unwavering faith all this time: faith in himself and in Life's assignment to him in spite of such a poor start!

Behold, I Make All Things New

Following on the cruel and shameful death of Jesus on a forlorn cross at Calvary, the disciples were all huddled together in the Upper Room, feeling pretty much sorry for themselves! "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," they reminisced. But that was all a matter of the past – they had deemed it best to return to their former way of life and pick up the shattered remnants of their lives before it was too late! This attitude of the early disciples is so typical of Christians even today. The slightest set-back or adversity is enough to send them scuttling from novena to novena – and they will not give up until the ominous clouds of suffering have dissipated. How refreshingly different it is to meet with someone who believes in Life's plans picks up his cross and marches to a different drum! All down the ages, the general human pattern of behaviour seems to be somewhat like this: most people like to see themselves as helpless and powerless or even find themselves behaving like that in situations that highlight their inadequacy. No sooner this happens than they immediately turn to God pleading for his powerful help. And their expectations are that they will receive the complete solution on a platter, presented to them as a gratuitous gift from the Almighty! Theirs is only to pray and to await the gift! However, having conquered sin and death through his dying-rising Jesus has ushered in another kind of spiritual world order. In this new approach, he provides us with all the power and tools capable of handling every possible situation we could find ourselves in. In Luke's Gospel, he reminds us, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk. 11:13). Now, the Holy Spirit is to be understood in terms of power, energy and not as a readymade solution to any and every problem we encounter.

Endemic to Human Nature

We notice this same attitude very clearly in the lives of the first disciples. The two who were on their way to Emmaus complain to ‘the Stranger’, “Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him” (Lk 24:21-24). Their reference to the ‘third day’ seems to indicate that they believed that ‘on the third day’ God would reverse the negative situation of Christ’s death and restore him to them – in the same way as he was before! Had it happened ‘their way’ the women should have met Jesus (whole and entire) in the tomb – but ‘him they did not see!’ (v. 24). Although they do not express it in exactly those terms, their hope was similar to what Thomas expressed much more boldly and perhaps ‘crudely’ - “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (Jn 20:25). They were looking for a ‘ready-made’ revived Jesus who would then continue with them as before and they would from then on experience no more ‘problems.’ Hence, Jesus decided to take them through the entire Scriptures and show them the real meaning of his risen Presence to his disciples!

Our Collaboration Needed

So today when we face difficulties big or small, the Lord does not promise us more than the gift of the Holy Spirit who will lead us to the full truth. He it is who will tell us what is to be done so that God’s kingdom may flourish in the midst of that painful crisis. This means that we would need to listen carefully to the instructions of the Spirit, and venture out into the deep, as some of those early disciples actually did when the Risen Lord suggested that they cast their nets to the right (Jn. 21). At times, we will need to ‘fill in’ the details of our course of action using our own intelligence, experience and skills. Were we to adopt such an approach, how different would not our lives be! Adversity would be seen more

as an opportunity to overcome obstacles than as a setback or calamity. Lack of cooperation from others would only mean that we need to search for and discover more resources within ourselves or elsewhere. Our relationship and closeness to God’s Spirit would be a living one, constantly being strengthened with each wave of difficulties. Would we not also be like the apostles, who “rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name”? (Acts 5:41). Our Christian lives, rather than being filled with petitionary prayer mostly centred round our own material and worldly needs, would be much more praise-filled and joyous and oriented towards others in need.

Conclusion

These are some of the valuable lessons we could learn from this young lad who had a dream and was confident that one day he would see it converted into reality. If each of us had a dream that entailed making at least a small portion of our world into a better place for all, what a difference would we not see in ourselves and in others! Wouldn’t we have a lot more to smile about each day of our lives? And wouldn’t the Risen Lord be very much a part of our lives and meet us even in the most trying circumstances in which we live? And further, wouldn’t some of these realized dreams of ours really be ‘miracles’ not so much in the sense of being situations that go against the laws of Nature, but rather as ‘signs’ that the Risen Lord is very much part of our human existence, that the Kingdom of God has indeed come amongst us and that it moves inexorably towards its final fulfillment at the End times. But will that be a reality for us, or would it remain mere wishful thinking? The answer my friend, is blowing in the wind – it will depend on how much we consciously choose to take the resurrection of Jesus seriously and make it a vital part of our earthly existence. Having chosen to live in this way, the Lord would then have a very challenging mission for us, saying to us, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Mt 28:10). What would your choice be: to live life with a perpetual moan and groan, or rather like the young man in our story, with a smile that proclaims the victory of the Risen Christ?

2011 February

2. DANCING IN THE RAIN by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

“ Scheduled to speak at 7:00 pm, I had been invited to be present at six to see a performance they said I would enjoy. Filled with curiosity, I was in the auditorium at 6 pm sharp in time to hear the young musician of the evening, Mr. Patrick Henry Hughes, being introduced. Hardly had the welcoming applause died down when he was rolled onto the stage in his wheelchair, and began to play the piano. His fingers skimmed over the keys as he made beautiful intricate music. Later he began to sing as he played, and that was even more enthralling. Unable to clearly pinpoint the real reason, however, I knew that I was seeing something out of this world. There was this aura about him and the smile...his smile was simply magic! After that brief taste of what this gifted youngster had to offer, we were invited to watch a 7-minute video titled, “The Patrick Henry Hughes story” which left us all dumbfounded. Born with no eyes, and a tightening of the joints which left him crippled for life, Patrick, already as a child, was fitted with artificial eyes and placed in a wheelchair. Before his first birthday, he discovered the piano. His mother reports, “You could hit any note on the piano, and within one or two tries, he’d unflinchingly get it.” By his second birthday, he was even playing requests. Today, Patrick is a junior at the University of Louisville. His father attends classes with him and he has done creditably in almost all subjects. He’s also a part of the 214 member marching band, only, he, the trumpet player ‘marches’ wheelchair-bound and he and his father do it together. But even more than his unbelievable musical talent, it was Patrick’s “attitude of gratitude” that most touched the audience. On stage, between songs, he talked to us about his life and about how blessed he was. He said, “God made me blind and unable to walk. No BIG DEAL! But He gave me the ability...the musical gifts I have... and provides me with great opportunities to meet new people.” His performance over, Patrick and his father were on the stage together. The crowd rose to their feet and cheered for over five minutes. I personally was at a juncture in life where I was ready

to meet someone like Patrick Henry Hughes. I needed a hero, and I found one instantly. I’ll never forget that night, that smile, that music, but most importantly, that wonderful simple, joyful ‘attitude of gratitude.’ On sharing Patrick’s story with several others over the next few weeks, I received a letter from a friend saying, “I think you’ll love this quote: “Life is not about waiting for the storms to pass...it’s about learning to dance in the rain!” - Vivian Greene. That really summed it all for me: We all face adversity in our lives. However, it is not the adversity by itself that matters, but how we respond to it that determines the measure of joy and happiness in our life. How wonderful if we could all with gratitude learn how to dance in the rain! Another friend, Sarah Breathnach said it even more admirably: ‘When we choose not to focus on what is missing from our lives but are grateful for the abundance that’s present – we experience heaven on earth.’”

Take up Your Cross

Isn’t it strange that almost the first thing that Jesus requires of a prospective disciple is that he pick up his cross and follow him! And Luke, with wisdom born out of practical experience adds, ‘each day’ to this daunting demand! Some of our daily crosses are just that, little pin-pricks that come and go, but others like that of Patrick are life-long and with very little chance of them going away. Yet, how often we see that God closes one door only to open another, or at least a window, so that the person is not totally swamped by adversity! What then is it that enables some people to take their crosses in their stride and even perhaps conquer them to a large extent while others seem to be crushed by almost every passing cross that rests on their shoulders?

The Attitude That Matters

It is the way one looks at a cross that seems to be at the root of the different ways people handle their problems. It seems to be like the proverbial ‘half-empty/half full’ approach to life. Some choose to look at the emptiness that fills half the glass, meaning that they are deprived of so much (underneath of course, is the belief that a full glass is one’s due, that somehow one deserves to have that full glass!) that should’ve or

could've been one's lot in life. And the more we focus on what seems missing, the more miserable we get – and this can lead to all kinds of other complications, like envying others their good fortune, becoming bitter and pessimistic, of seeking to get what 'is our due' by hook or by crook and landing ourselves into greater problems. We are all familiar with the long list that follows, and yet when we find ourselves trapped in this kind of thinking, there seems to be no way out! Ours seems to be a downward spiral into greater and greater misery – and the worst part is that with this negative attitude towards life, we drag everyone around us into the vortex making the entire surroundings depressing and crippling. Others, like Patrick, choose to look at the brighter side of their difficulties and find so many ways out, surely without the comforts and conveniences that others have. It isn't surprising that what struck the speaker in the story above is Patrick's attitude of gratitude. It seems to begin with the assumption that as creatures, God does not really owe us anything – that whatever we have is sheer gift, given out of gratuitous love. When one is convinced that one could have had a lot less than one is blessed with, the urge to grumble, to compare, to sulk and wallow in negativity seems to vanish miraculously. Then one is free to focus on what one does have and make the best use of it.

Risen Christ with Us Always

Some have lived this positive approach and encouraged themselves with the adage: 'It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness!' But isn't this also the most sensible way to face life and its burdens? Besides, hasn't Jesus come down and immersed himself totally into our sinful situation, showing us how to love even to the end? He certainly was disappointed that not too many chose to follow his path of total trust in God's love for his creation, choosing rather the way of self-determination, and ending up in the depths of the whirlpool. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Mt 23:37). So one thing seems to be sure - The Lord invites us to 'rise higher' and waits for our response.

That is the least that he expects of us. Once we put our shoulders to the wheel and decide to keep moving, no matter how slowly or laboriously the scenario begins to change. What seems to help in making this decision to start on a new track is the practice of looking at the larger picture. It is said that if one took a tiny pebble and held it close enough to the eye, while closing the other, it would block out all vision. But if that same pebble was held at an arm's length (framing it against the larger background), one would be able to see not only the pebble but also the background! It often seems to be as simple as that – simply the way one chooses to look at a difficulty or obstacle.

Lesson for Life

In fact, even as we page through the Gospels, we notice that no sooner a person decides to plunge into a good and profitable action, than s/he is confronted with an almost insurmountable obstacle. The classic example is that of the paralyzed man brought by four of his friends to Jesus. They undoubtedly would have set out with great enthusiasm, but on reaching the house where Jesus was they find that the huge crowd made it impossible for them to get the man in front of Jesus. Undaunted by this difficulty, they find a novel way of solving their problem. Laboriously making a hole in the roof and let him down in front of Jesus. Perhaps a disgusting solution - at least from the point of view of the others around, nevertheless an effective and proactive one from their standpoint! The bottom line is of course that they got what they were looking for. And as Jesus pointed out, it was their faith that made the difference! Faith reminds us always that there is another viewpoint, one that is literally 'out of the box'! We need to climb to the ceiling to view the situation from God's point of view. And his view is very simple and appealing too. Had there been no obstacles in the way, would we have ever realized that what we did get finally was a sheer gift from our loving Father?! No, most likely we would have attributed our success to our own efforts. And so Jesus reminds us forcefully, "Without me you can do nothing... remain in my love!" (Jn 15). Once we learn to look on life as a partnership with the Almighty, we

soon realize that just as we are called to ‘complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ’ (Col. 1:24), so Jesus is ever ready to make up for what is lacking in our lives too! “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” he reminds us (Rev. 3:20). Is it too much trouble to open the door and let him into our lives, he who has so much that he wants to give us?! Before you complete this little article, toss the magazine aside and get involved in other activity, stop and reflect for a while on how you face your adversities. Has the Resurrection of Jesus made any difference in your approach? Or are you also one of his ‘Good Friday fans’, one who prefers to sit at the foot of the Cross and moan away for something better to come your way? “Do you want to be healed?” Jesus asks you as he asked the paralyzed man who waited for thirty-eight long years for his turn to come (Jn. 5). Jesus of Nazareth is passing by! There is a new life awaiting you right at your doorstep. He never comes to us empty-handed! Would you let this opportunity pass by or grab it to your advantage as blind Bartimaeus did? (Mk. 10).

2011 March

3. HOPE: A CHANCE AND A DECISION by Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

By now, Hurricane Katrina is well-known to all as one of the most devastating tragedies in recent American history. When Katrina swallowed the Gulf Coast and ravaged particularly the city of New Orleans in August of 2005, Christy Johnson was working for HUD in Oklahoma City. Katrina hit precisely when she had her own personal pressing issues, adding to the chaos and confusion she faced in the office. ‘How could I help others when I was struggling myself?’ was her main concern. Yet, the office phone lines never quit ringing. She and her associates spoke with numberless victims who desperately kept trying to locate family members lost in the flood. They all urgently needed assistance with housing, food and clothing. The monumental task of immediate relocation was overwhelming. Very few had jobs they could return to which meant that paychecks would quit coming and money inevitably run out. Devastation set everywhere like blocks of solid concrete. It took weeks before any federal assistance

was available to the majority. Some received none at all! Even though several agencies were there to help, the trauma made some callers demanding, others rude or even belligerent. Most were impatient and hysterical. Some were even openly suicidal. The going was tough, but just when Christy thought she had heard it all, she got a call from Brenda, a single woman in her early fifties with no children. Brenda was all alone and had been sheltering in a crowded home in Houston for the past month. When asked how she was coping she calmly replied: “I’ve heard that my house is still underwater and at this point, I have no idea if rebuilding is even a possibility. The hardest part of all of this, though, is seeing the elderly suffer. The young have longer to recover, but many of the elderly have no other resources.” She had been hit hard but her heart still overflowed with compassion for others, especially the elderly. “I know that recovery lies ahead,” she continued placidly. “I believe that if we were the ones chosen to endure this hardship, then God will give us the grace to endure. The destruction of our city has given birth to a spirit of unity... My hope isn’t based on my circumstances,” she added, “my hope is based on my decision to hope. Hope is a choice.” Wow, thought Christy. Never had she heard such rocklike faith in the midst of a near total loss. Brenda had been storing trust and confidence in her spiritual pantry for a rainy day... and what a rainy day it was! Moments later, as she got back to her computer, the realization hit Christy like a thunderbolt: Brenda couldn’t edit her past. Her tragedy was impossible to revise. There was no delete button, no escape key to press. The only thing Brenda could change was her attitude. She had been involuntarily transplanted, but she made a decision to thrive, not just survive! Silently Christy ventured a heartfelt ‘thank you’ to Brenda hundreds of miles away. ‘Thank you for showing me how to maintain hope — even in the face of adversity.’

Attitudes Make All the Difference

The faithful and the faithless face the same vicissitudes of life, but the faithful at least have the assurance that their lives are in the hands of a caring God – thus goes a paraphrase of Ps. 32:10-11. Or as Marian Zimmer Bradley put it, “The road that is built

in hope is more pleasant to the traveller than the road built in despair, even though they both lead to the same destination!” The calamities of life hit all of us at some point or other, but what a difference in the way different people face these calamities! To the unbeliever or the one who subscribes to Reincarnation, disasters natural or otherwise are but the result of the whims and fancies of the gods, or the outcome of our own sinful past life. To believers whose faith is but skin deep, suffering of this kind is no more than a punishment for one’s present sins – divine justice catching up with our sinful escapades. To people with a deeper faith, adversities are God’s way of testing our endurance – there will, of course, be a reward for the persevering, but right now that is not too much of a solace. It is only those whose faith in God’s loving providence is unshakable who will see it as none of the above, but as an expression, mysterious though it be, of the loving providence and care of a personal God. They see it as the opportunity for God to manifest his tremendous, unbelievable love for his own. As Paul put it, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose... If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Rom 8:28-32). As Brenda herself pointed out in the story above, Katrina helped to bring people closer in that city of New Orleans!

The Power of his Risen Presence

The coming of Jesus as Saviour, and especially his redemptive dying and rising, will not change Nature’s vagaries but his unshakable trust in the Father’s love as demonstrated in his peace-filled death on the Cross makes it possible for us to adopt a more positive attitude towards every unpleasant occurrence. And the greater the depth of our grasp of this mystery of God’s love, the more outstanding will be our way of accepting it and benefiting from it. To some it is at best something to be taken with a philosophical shrug saying, ‘From the time we are born till we ride in a hearse, there is nothing so bad that it could not be worse!’ To others it is a time to prove one’s spiritual

growth, to perhaps grit one’s teeth and hang on for dear life till the storm rides by. To very few, however, would it be the occasion to say a heartfelt ‘thank-you’ to God or to bless God for the gift! But strangely, it is only these last who come out of the most scathing difficulties joyful and triumphant or as the apostles did, “rejoicing that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name” (Acts 5:41).

Average Christian Attitude

Most Christians, however, seem to have chosen to adopt the attitude of ‘fight or flight’ with regard to the crosses that come their way as they journey through life. Unfortunately, with such an attitude all that they finally get is more suffering or mental agony – with no reduction in the actual painful situation. But what they really miss out on is the thrill of meeting the Risen Lord in the midst of the suffering and sharing also in his triumph. Only once they have experienced the thrill of sharing the Cross with Jesus and because of that sharing also the glory of his resurrection, will they consciously choose to opt for a change of attitude. However, we need to remember that even this change of attitude is not something we achieve through our own skill and ingenuity. That too is a gift from the Father and he has already poured it out on all of us in abundance through the Spirit he has sent to us. The power to change our approach to life’s problems is already within us, if only we care to search for it. Unfortunately it is only found by those who start off by not placing any obstacles to all that the Lord ordains for us. When we start off with a conscious or unconscious aversion for suffering, strangely enough we seem to bring more of it upon our-selves. On the other hand, when we can trustfully say to the Lord that we are ready to accept whatever his infinite love prescribes for us, we allow his divine power of surge within our spiritual veins and what a difference we experience. The peace and joy we receive are unbelievable, yet palpable enough for all to see!

Eucharist – the School of Loving Acceptance

It is for this reason that we need to understand better what we are called to do in each Eucharist we celebrate. In the Early Church, the Eucharist was commonly known as ‘the breaking of the bread.’ But

this breaking was not done just in view of the meal that was to follow. The breaking signified precisely the readiness of those celebrating Eucharist to break of themselves, of their convenience and comfort particularly in favour of their poorer brethren. In symbol, that of breaking the bread and sharing the Cup, participants in the Eucharist signify their total readiness to accept lovingly and joyfully all the crosses the Father has planned for them. Having expressed this readiness of theirs in symbolic fashion, they then go out and live it in their daily lives. Thus, rather than be surprised at adversities dogging their steps throughout the day, the Christian actually anticipates their being a part of his/her daily schedule; spiritually prepared for them s/he grabs them by the horns, thus transforming them into occasions for sharing in the glory of the Risen Lord. Having lived this positive approach for a short while, the dedicated Christian is also able to pick up the signs of the presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of this suffering. This could be a tiny little kindness by an unknown person coming at the right moment and most unexpectedly or a suggestion that changes the course of the entire situation making it shorter and lighter. Or it could be a stranger offering to share the burden with us, even without our suggesting it. Whatever it be, the best part is that we do recognize with a thrill perhaps even saying within ourselves, "It is the Lord" as John did nudging Peter when they began to haul the nets in with the huge catch of fish! The Risen Lord does not hide from his chosen ones; rather he reveals himself plainly but generally in a challenging manner, offering us the added joy of discovering his presence. One of the unmistakable signs that we have met the Risen Lord is that we cannot be at peace until we have shared the 'good news' with those who are close to us. And in the very sharing we further experience his presence for he here uses us as his witnesses, offering the Kingdom blessings to many more persons. Conclusion Whether we like it or not, calamities are going to be very much a part of our lives. But the next time we are hit by one, could we consciously choose to remain silent and still – listening deeply for signs of the presence of the Risen Jesus? Having caught at least a few examples of these, we find ourselves calm

and serene, enjoying the marvelous goodness of the Lord. "I am with you even till the end of time" (Mt. 28:20).

2011 April

4. IT IS BEST PASSED ON Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

One weekend when all their four grown children were home visiting, the grandparents decided to take the entire family out for brunch mainly because of their youngest grand-daughter. She had never eaten pancakes before and so all were excited about seeing her reactions as she tried them for the first time. At the restaurant when all were seated round a large table, they decided to order every kind of pancake available and requested that they be served on one big family-style platter!

Occasion Seized

As this delectable family meal was in progress, the grandmother, even while enjoying the antics of her favourite little granddaughter, noticed from the corner of her eye, a gentleman at a nearby table. Relishing his own breakfast alone quietly, he frequently looked over and smiled as the toddler entertained the entire family with her antics. As the grandmother too enjoyed the scene, she suddenly was struck by a novel idea: digging out a Smile Card from the stack she always carried with her, she called for the waitress and explained to her that she wished to pay that man's bill anonymously and asked whether instead of the usual bill she could give him the Smile Card. After a while, as the gentleman was leaving the waitress came over to say that he was very grateful for the gift and had passed the Smile Card on, paying for another table before he left. That was just the tip of a very pleasant surprise. Not many minutes later, the waitress returned with another message: the second table had now paid for someone else and passed the Smile Card on too! Unbelievably, this pattern was repeated at the third table. And what was really amazing was that by the time the original family left, half the room had ended up paying for a different table! What an unbelievable chain reaction of kindness and fellow-feeling! That would surely have cheered quite a number of loveless and love-filled lives!

Chosen for Apostleship

When people are enlightened that the primary reason why Jesus chose his disciples was that they may act in a manner similar to the way these people in the restaurant had done, they seem more than surprised. After the first few centuries of Christianity, it has somehow been presumed that Jesus called people to discipleship, or that a person becomes a Christian, for one's own individual benefit only. Yet, a closer look at the call narratives will convince anyone of the opposite. Almost all the Gospels note Jesus' words: 'Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of (men) people!' Doesn't this mean that each is called precisely to be a tiny link in an endless chain, each passing on the blessing s/ he has received to another only to have it passed on again, till there is a huge catch of "fish" – all enjoying their little act of sharing God's goodness with those around them!

Self-oriented Christianity

How simple the process, and yet how rarely done! All it takes is one selfless person who thinks of others and is prepared to start the ball rolling, by making a small sacrifice so that someone else might be the happier for it. What is so heartwarming in this story is that each of the participants consciously chose to remain anonymous – which simply means that Self was not all that prominent in at least the one who started the chain. How often do we not see persons making generous donations of fairly large sums of money, but with the condition attached that the donor's name be mentioned, at least discreetly! Yet Jesus advises us that when we give alms, we take care not to let the left hand know what the right is doing! (Mt. 6:3). Or else, we will have received our reward already, with nothing awaiting us on the Last Day. Why then have we Christians become so self-preoccupied? Why do our Christian lives revolve only round ourselves, or at most around those closely connected with us? And even then, it is mostly about our material needs that we show great concern – becoming apostles of God's good news to us hardly ever enters our mental horizon. And yet, that is the primary reason why we are Christians in the first place!

Example of Our Master

When Jesus himself chose to give us not just the cost of a meal or some such ephemeral thing, but his very Self, he did not ask that his name be mentioned. He did add, though, that the recipients should continue to "do this in memory" of him. And that is what Eucharist is all about. Yet, how often does it happen that we receive the greatest gift possible from God himself in person (the gift of himself as a piece of broken bread) but don't feel the least inspired to pass it on even to our loved ones at home! It should make us stop and ask: 'why is it that the chain reaction of paying for another's meal and passing on the Smile Card caught on so easily and rapidly, but the mighty example of Jesus' self-giving at Eucharist doesn't ignite our minds and hearts to do the same? The reasons could be several: first, that we have never stopped to reflect that this is actually what the core of the Eucharist is, that Jesus gifts himself to us with the explicit command (not suggestion or recommendation; it is even called 'the Eucharistic Command') that we pass it on to someone else – and that too in a manner that would keep the chain of self-giving unbroken and lengthening. Second, it could be that we have not fully appreciated Jesus' gift to us in the Eucharist, partly because it is given in symbolic fashion. Most of us find it difficult to figure out this whole question of 'symbolism' in our lives. We fail to appreciate that symbolic language and expressions can be far more powerful, spurring one to action, than straight-forward speech! Further, our minds could have been so blocked with habitual self-centred attitudes – (like that of wanting to 'save my soul', or to derive the maximum spiritual benefits for one's self for the entire week ahead, or to personally thank the Lord for his blessings of the past week and a host of others), that we have no time to think of anyone else but ourselves and our well planned out agendas. But perhaps the greatest reason could be that we have totally misunderstood the purpose of our calling to be Christians. If we were to see our very Christian life in terms of passing on God's gifts to others with as little of the Self as possible involved in all these actions, our behaviour would have been radically different in that our attention would be more on others than on ourselves. However, experience shows us that it isn't

sufficient to merely know what the purpose of the Christian calling is; we need to be reminded of it fairly frequently before it becomes our habitual way of thinking and acting. Yet, hardly anyone reminds us of this apostolic angle precisely because from the highest authority to the lowest in the Church, the vast majority seem to be obsessed with securing only their own eternal salvation. And even that we find extremely difficult and challenging; for the majority of Christians this path takes the shape of a broken arrow – three steps forward and two backward; then again a few forward with a retracing of more than half of the ground gained!

A Good Start is What Matters

Strangely enough, in this matter of sharing the Good News with others, be it in words or especially through example, it is the first few attempts that are crucial and decisive. If we approach the matter with determination, courage and reliance on the Risen Lord always present to us, we soon gain the confidence needed to make this our habitual attitude. However, if we could have a support group around us, all attempting the same basic technique, the venture cannot but be a success! We cannot afford to forget that Jesus has assured us of his victorious presence, and so, given our goodwill and genuine effort, we can- not really fail. From another angle we could say that all this boils down to how seriously we take our Baptism. For, in this sacrament of Christian initiation we commit ourselves to die to Self and live for Christ in three distinct symbolic expressions. There is first the symbolic divesting of one's garments standing for the 'old, sinful self'. Then comes the verbal commitment to renounce Satan and all his empty promises and finally the immersion in the water, expressive of a total dying to oneself. Had these been meant consciously in that baptismal ceremony, the chances are that our Christian living would take on a different expression altogether.

Daily Exercise at Home

Our task would be a lot easier if each day we could make a determined effort to practise this kind of altruistic giving in our very own families. In one sense it is even more difficult doing this at home than practising it among outsiders because, naturally

speaking we tend to take one another for granted in the intimacy of the family. But with the daily opportunities every family offers us, coupled with the correction and encouragement that we support one another with at home, we would soon be experts at the game, growing in self-confidence day by passing day. But for our families to be formation centres of true Christian living, we would need to make a conscious effort to break out of the consumerist pattern set for us by the un-Christian Society around us. We would have to be like the leaven in the dough, or salt of the earth and light of the world, if we are going to do this successfully. But if we ourselves succumb worldly pressures around us, then instead of leading others, we would find ourselves being led to places and situations we would rather not go (Jn 21:18) – to the detriment of the Kingdom of Jesus and its values. Coming back to our original story, Smile Card or not, we need to train ourselves to grab every opportunity that presents itself to pass on the positive power of Christ's resurrection, his triumph over everything evil and sinful. With this approach, we can be sure that every single Christian can make a difference in the world, or at least in the little world around one! The Risen Lord waits for our response and collaboration – when will we answer and what will it be?

2011 May

5. LEARNING FROM CREATION Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Most people would believe that cooperation by which individuals work together in order to create a benefit for the entire group, is an utopian dream, especially if they are conversant with the basic forces of evolution. After all, isn't it a jungle out there and only the strongest survive? aren't human beings naturally selfish? And hasn't one heard of the theory of the 'selfish gene' and so on? Yet most scientists today don't share that view of evolution and collaboration. "The role of unbridled violence in evolution is greatly overestimated," claims Danny Grunbaum, a pioneer in revealing the ways that ocean life cooperates in order to survive. "When we see animals like elephant seals fighting each other, as we do in Nature documentaries, we are really seeing only a very thin small slice of

time. Most of the time they are accommodating towards one another and respectful of where the boundaries are - and that is cooperation. There is a tremendous amount of cooperation in nature.” Across several fields, scientists like Grunbaum have come up with exciting new discoveries about the nature of cooperation - progress which, they say, is enabled and made easy by new observational and computational technologies. This has resulted in a small but exciting revival in the science of cooperation, which reveals that collaboration is not unique to humans. It is not even unique to animals. Cooperation is part of Nature, down to even the cellular level. And the reason is quite simple, according to evolutionary biologists: “Cooperation is one of the most important and beneficial behaviors on Earth. We literally would not be here without it.”

Live and Let Live!

Humans, plants, and animals are made up of cells that learned to cooperate centuries ago. Together they formed multicellular organisms, increasing each individual cell's chances of replication and survival in the process. From these biological blocks, cooperation prevails at every level of the animal kingdom. And so, ants that march to the same drummer move faster. Besides, has anyone ever seen an ant stuck in traffic? Intricate studies show that ants have evolved a three-lane, two-way traffic system: As many as two lakh ants pour out of their nest once a day in search of food, splitting into two groups to form two outgoing lanes; they return in a single centre lane, sometimes carrying more than thirty thousand edible grasshoppers and such insects. Scientists theorize that the ultra-cooperative ability of these simplistic organisms stems from their living in large groups for millions of years. Among fish, cooperation is motivated by a simple trade off: food for cleanliness. “Cleaner” fish swim into the mouths of the bigger fish called “clients”: their mission is to eat parasites and harmful bacteria. The cleaners get a meal, and the clients get a healthier mouth. Why don't predators eat cleaners? Cleaners are small, hardly a satisfying meal, and a good, trustworthy cleaner is difficult to find. Once they've established trust between themselves, predators want to keep their

cleaners around. Small birds protect one another from predators. When a predator enters the area of a sparrow-like bird called the pied flycatcher, the flycatcher will alert others by screeching at the top of its voice. It is a risky and costly approach certainly, for screeching draws the predator's attention all the more surely. However, risks can have their benefits too. Thus, when other flycatchers hear the distress call, they ‘mob’ together around the predator, chasing it away. Further, it was discovered that flycatchers engage in a typical ‘titfor-tat’ behavior. They only answer the battle calls of birds that have come to fight for them in the past. They don't answer the calls of birds that heard their call but chose to ignore it. For some animals, cooperation seems absolutely essential. Biologist Gerald Wilkinson has shown that groups of vampire bats have a system of food sharing that helps ensure their survival as a species. Bats die if they are forced to go two nights without a meal, and hunting for blood, which is their only source of food, is a risky business. Yet hunger is rare among them because bats that find blood share it with others that don't. But they do this only as long as the favour is someday returned. If a colony didn't share food at all, four out of every five bats would die each year. But by cooperating, the death rate is slashed down to one in four. Of course, ‘cheaters,’ who receive blood but never share it, also abound but bats that cheat eventually build up a reputation for doing so, and others stop sharing with them. In the long run, cheating isn't profitable at all, something that research suggests is also true in human society.

Are Human Beings Different?

Most human beings don't share food that directly and openly, at least not any more, but people do cooperate in innumerable ways, from writing Wikipedia articles to forming lines for buses, toilets, at paying counters and other facilities. Still, as is clear to anyone who has ever been stuck in rushhour traffic or tried to do some last minute Christmas shopping, human cooperation can break down, sometimes suddenly and ruthlessly. To foster cooperative success in human organizations, some scientist-philosophers believe that we should look to Nature for inspiration. “Nature nurtures life through communities,” observes physicist and best-

selling author Fritjof Capra. “This is a process that started with the first singlecelled organisms. Life, from its beginning more than three billion years ago, took over the planet by networking, not combat.” To Capra and several others, this calls for cooperative social organization that nurtures networks of communication, encourages sharing and experimentation, and fosters a climate of mutual support. This doesn’t mean that cooperation eliminates conflict altogether. “Cooperation never means the absence of conflict of interest,” notes Grunbaum. “It means a set of rules is in place for negotiating a conflict of interests in a way that resolves them.” In the 21st century, argue both Grunbaum and Capra, learning to cooperate is more critical than ever before in human history. “That is in part true because our society is becoming so much more integrated and communication is happening much more rapidly all over the world,” confides Grunbaum. Grunbaum suggests that people look to Science as an example of a human community in which cooperation works. “Cooperation in general is a very good strategy in Science,” he concedes. “It is exceedingly rare for someone to take advantage of you if you choose to share your work in an unguarded way. I’d say that human beings are extraordinarily cooperative, and we’re getting more cooperative all the time.”

Speeding Up the Process

While it is true that we can learn from Nature, given our condition today especially in the large sprawling and ever-expanding cities, one would hardly have the time or the inclination to learn from Nature. Rather, we have an easier way to learn the much needed lesson of cooperation, and that is to celebrate each Eucharist with meaning and purpose. Paul wrote to the Corinthians to say, “When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have

nothing?... Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Cor 11:18-22). After recalling the inspiring example of Jesus who broke of himself and gave his very lifeblood for the salvation of mankind, Paul suggests that each celebrant at Eucharist should examine the motives for which s/ he celebrates – else s/he could be eating and drinking condemnation unto her/himself. News News News While it is true that there is a lot of sharing among human beings, yet, the ruthless taking advantage of others, especially of the weak and poor gets greater publicity in the mass Media. And so, unconsciously we begin to feel that ‘the law of the jungle’ is here to stay, and is, after all, the best and surest way to make a profitable living today. One need only take any newspaper and skim through its pages to realize that reports of evil deeds generally get front page extensive coverage. But, one would have to search hard, literally with a magnifying glass to find even a brief fine-print report of some heroic good deed done at the risk of losing one’s own life! Why is evil generally more attractive than good? Have we, as a human family opted for a return to the Jungle while the rest of Nature continues to work in splendid collaboration with others effecting a better harmony? What do all our spiritual practices, devotions, prayers and the like achieve? Are these only skin-deep, or have these too been sucked into the general pattern of seeking one’s own gain at the expense of others? Every single person has the power to turn the tide – beginning with life in one’s own family! How long shall we ‘leave it to George’ and be content with only applauding someone else’s efforts? Once we put our minds to it, there is no gainsaying how much we would be able to achieve by way of cooperation with others. Examples abound and are plain for all to see. If, for example each of us were able to reduce the wastage of electricity and water in our daily consumption of these amenities, what a difference it would make to our present generation and those of the future as well? And what about the indiscriminate use of plastics, the deliberate rape of Nature in terms of illegal mining, despoliation of forests, criminal waste of paper for which acres of trees have to be felled each day? When God commanded human beings to

master and subdue the earth, it was so that with the use of their intelligence and free-will, they could guide the rest of Creation in making this world a place where all live in peace and harmony and happiness. But when selfish motives are given free rein and that too by deliberate choice, one can expect the worst! The irony of the situation is that we can make our world into a beautiful place for all, if only we choose to forego a little of our selfcentred interests! We can't have our cake and eat it too! Could the example of Jesus in his totally selfless giving which we celebrate in the Eucharist spur us to action? And also, could the example of Creatures with lesser intelligence like birds, bats and ants teach us this valuable lesson, not only of the necessity and advantage of collaboration, but also of the process of ostracizing of offenders so that an equitable balance is always maintained? All it takes is a genuine listening to our truest selves!

2011 June

6. HOW DO RISEN CHRISTIANS PRAY Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

A sea captain who in his retirement plied a boat taking day-trippers to Shetland Islands tells this story. On one particular trip with the boat packed with young people, he devoutly said a prayer as was his custom, before sailing out. But the boatful of youngsters derisively laughed at him because the day was fine, the sea was calm, and there was no evident sign of impending danger! However they weren't long at sea when a storm suddenly broke out and the boat began to pitch and roll violently. The terrified passengers hurried to the Captain to request him to join them in prayer, but he calmly replied, "I say my prayers when it is calm. When it gets rough I attend to my ship."

God - at our Beck and Call?

This charming little story poses for us the question, "Why do people pray?" and also more importantly perhaps, "How does a risen Christian pray?" Since prayer is familiar to every Christian and all of us do pray at regular intervals, it would be good to reflect on some of the issues concerning prayer. Most people pray only when they are in need as did the youngsters on this trip. This stems from an image of God as being primarily a Benevolent Helper, a Fire-fighter or a

Problem Solver whose interventions come into play only when his creatures find themselves in dire straits. Others see God as a 'spare tyre' that is available in every vehicle – no one thinks of it until there is a puncture. Once the damaged wheel has been repaired and replaced, the old spare is conveniently forgotten until the next crisis strikes! A little deeper reflection reveals that this approach to God does him grave dishonour and is in fact an insult to who He really is! People who harbour this vision of God actually place themselves at the centre of Life; everything else has to revolve around them, including God, who is basically considered as being at their service, meant only to rescue them from crises! So many of the psalms that the Israelites pray frequently, are of this kind! They are actually a SOS sent out in times of acute distress. Now without a doubt, God does come to the aid of his loving children at all times and not only when they are in need, but for us to think of him only in such circumstances speaks of a very commercial attitude towards God.

Only Petitionary Prayer?

Further, when the major part of our prayer consists of petitions again we spot a faulty conception of God's nature and of our own identity. If we are his beloved children as Scripture repeatedly informs us, then speaking to our gracious Father should come naturally to us at all times, especially when good things come our way. Wouldn't God be the first Person we would want to share our good fortune with, no sooner we find ourselves blessed? If our relationship with God was correct, then the prayer of praise and thanksgiving would form a large part of our spiritual arsenal, wouldn't it? Strangely enough, even when we do choose to thank God have we noticed how brief and fleeting these payers of praise and thanksgiving are? We seem to run out of words when dealing with this kind of prayer, while with petitions we are adept enough to go on for hours! There are besides other faulty assumptions behind such an approach. Is it true that we are sure that God thinks of us only when good things happen or that bad things befall us because He has somehow forgotten us? For that matter, can God ever forget us, even for a fleeting moment? "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no

compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands..." (Is 49:15-16). So, God does not need to be reminded that we are in trouble. Jesus alerts us: "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt 6:7-8).

Will be - or Already Granted?

Since it is true that the Father does not need to be reminded of our needs, it is equally true that He does not wait for us to ask in order to give us what we require to live life happily. In fact, Paul in Ephesians provides us with a very compelling reason to bless God in all circumstances, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..." (Eph 1:3). This simply means that every possible blessing we could ever need has already been granted to us! So, all we require to do is to align ourselves with God's plans, ascertain his will for this particular moment and do what he commands us. If our constant concern is the building of the Kingdom, 'all the rest will be added unto you...' (Mt. 6:33). Our prayer in no way changes God, but is rather directed towards changing us petitioners. Particularly, it aims at making us ask ourselves more clearly whether we are in line with God's designs for his kingdom. It stands June to reason that God cannot grant us anything that goes against his kingdom, for then we would have a kingdom divided against itself! Besides, so often even while we think we are in line with God's designs that may not be true at all – the Self/Ego invariably surreptitiously creeps into everything we do. And so, our prayer is directed more towards purifying our intentions, for Jesus assures us that whatever we ask for "in his name" has already been granted to us. To ask in the name of Jesus is to ask as He did, especially at Gethsemane – "Father take this cup away, but not as I will; let your will be done!" If we can make this stance of doing God's will not ours, as explicit as possible each time we pray then we need not fear any trial or trouble - He will always be with us, even till the end of time.

A Risen Christian Prays

A Christian who shares in the risen-ness of Christ is on a different plane from the one who does not in practice attend to this fundamental truth of Christianity. The Resurrection has ushered in the definitive "kingdom" that Jesus came to establish. As Scripture puts it, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away'" (Rev 21:1-4). Reflecting on this St. Paul says, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor 5:16-19). So, to share in the risen-ness of Christ means to adopt a new attitude and approach towards everything, prayer included. Putting it briefly, we do not pray in order to inform God, or to cajole Him into favouring us in some way. Especially the adversity facing us should make us pause and ask ourselves, "Am I going in the right direction? Does this obstacle seek to tell me something?" Our prayer then becomes a seeking for the right direction, as Jesus sought at Gethsemane. Having asked God for directions, we then listen attentively and do all he tell us, as the servants did at Cana (Jn. 2:5-7). The focus, we notice, is not on ourselves and our problems, but on God and his Kingdom. Further, asking for directions is of no use unless we are genuinely prepared to follow the

suggestions given. And so we never ask unless we are consciously ready to do God's will unquestioningly! Again, we don't seek ready-made answers, but rather offer to work to obtain what we prayed for!

Listening, a Major Element in Prayer

This approach makes us realize that in prayer we need to listen more than give suggestions to God. Hence it is that great teachers of prayer recommend that we very simply place our difficulty before the Lord and then remain in silence and stillness, allowing God a free hand in our lives. We place ourselves in His hands like clay in the hands of a potter, (Jer. 18:6-12) or like a surgery patient in the skillful hands of the surgeon. In fact, during surgery we are on purpose 'knocked out' before the surgeon even begins, so that he can work uninterruptedly. We don't give any suggestions to the surgeon but with total faith accept all that he does for us believing that we will be the better for it. And in prayer it should be the same. Now we would certainly have realized that this kind of prayer is different and difficult too! We generally tend to act as if we know what is best for us and hence rattle off a string of suggestions to the Father while all He says to us is, "Be still and know that I am God...(Ps. 46:10). Once we accept the practical meaning of the Resurrection of Christ, we notice that our approach to prayer changes automatically – less petitions and much more of praise, blessing and thanksgiving! We need to also realize that this kind of shift in our method of praying will not happen automatically or easily for that matter! It takes repeated conscious efforts for us to remember the background and meaning of the Resurrection for us: 'This is all God's work; we are a new creation; the purpose of our lives is to establish God's kingdom and not so much to somehow make our way into heaven; everything around us works for our good when we are aligned with God's will! (Rom. 8:28). Maybe we could sum up the powerful lesson of this simple skipper's response to the youngsters he ferried across: "If we cannot seek God in the quiet moments of our lives we are not likely to find him when trouble strikes. We are more likely to panic. But if we have learnt to seek him and trust him in quiet moments, then most certainly we will find him when the going

gets rough." Prayer is not a panacea for all evils, prayer is a daily vital necessity if we wish to live our Christian lives more effectively. It is almost as vital as breathing – stop it (consciously or otherwise) and you are dead! How would you want to pray from now?

2011 July

7. HELPING OTHERS MAKES YOU PROFICIENT Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Recently I came across a story of a true life experience with plenty of lessons for everyone: "Last winter I was going through a rough and arid patch in my life. I had heaps of unpleasant things dogging my steps each day! I felt very distant from everyone and found I had become quite selfish in the bargain. I was aware that deep down, I hated the way I was feeling and the feeling kept growing in intensity by the hour! Then, one bright morning I suddenly felt as if 'enough is enough!' I woke up and told myself, "You are above all this. Stop feeling sorry for yourself!" I next tried out an experiment with myself, and it has decidedly changed me for the better! I determined that every day I would do at least one act of kindness to anyone who came across the path of my life - It could be anything... and just about anyone who cared to receive some kindness!

Recipients in Plenty

I soon discovered that there were plenty of people needing help strewn all around me: Bringing the trash down to the trash compactor for my eighty year old neighbour, going into the store to buy something for myself and coming out with something for someone else, sitting down with my sister or a friend and just simply listening. Each day brought a whole new range of needy people and experiences reaching out to them, and pretty soon I was enjoying life which certainly seemed worth living. The part I enjoyed most was doing all these kind actions without even being asked and often anonymously! I watched myself graduate from self discipline, something that I actively made sure I did everyday, to something I looked forward to and even enjoyed on occasions – and finally on to something much greater than that - I find that now I am sincerely all gaga about this novel idea! I try to do something for everybody I can think of in a day! It

really does feel great. “The most recent experience was of my close friend who has been going through a very tough time and has been quite miserable. I have really exhausted my repertoire trying every possible way to be creatively present for him, intensely listening to everything he said, waiting for the tiniest hints to see where I could assist with something small or big, helping him out with a place to stay or just stocking up with plenty of movies, candy, sunflower seeds, a new calculator, a hat, or a book waiting for him. As I sit back and review the effort, I now find that it all comes so automatically and it feels great to make someone smile. Even if, at first, it was not natural in me, it pays to just go out and do it, and I promise it will soon become a part of you and it will feel fantastic and funtastic too!”

Reaching Out – A Universal Remedy

What is described here is really a truth that many individuals have discovered for themselves, over the years, often by trial and error. Down in the dumps themselves they found that the best way to get out of it is to forget oneself and genuinely reach out to another in greater distress. The person in need gets help and in the bargain the helper is blessed with a deep sense of fulfillment! In fact, a group of gifted teenagers have worked out ingenious ways of doing just this when caught in deep distress. Accounts of their stories are published in *Teens With the Courage to Give* – by Jackie Waldman; a previous series in *Madonna* actually featured several of these. But the truth works for anyone who dares to try it out; all s/he needs to do is to stop feeling sorry for him/herself and launch into helping another, whoever that person may be, and pronto, the depression and sadness disappear. In fact, Jesus himself has told us this when he said, ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets’ (Mt 7:12). But, the one condition for this to work effectively is that we genuinely forget ourselves as we make the others’ need our own. If we somehow decide to reach out to others only in order that in return we might be blessed ourselves, we would possibly find that we are left high and dry. And the reason is not difficult to ascertain: the focus is still very much on ourselves!

When this is our approach what we basically seek is our own good and we actually use the other person’s distress only as a stepping stone to achieve our own ends. And whether we are aware of this orientation or not, the scheme just will not work! Here again we have Jesus’ own warning, “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it... For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done’” (Mt 16:24-27). The question of losing one’s life simply means that we have to place others before ourselves, their good before our own, their welfare above our own needs... only then will the principle work.

Applies in All Situations

The advice of Jesus applies in all areas of life. The more we focus on ourselves, the more restricted does our life become: it can span only the area covered by ‘I – Me – Myself’ which is very narrow indeed! It is only when we have the courage and generosity to break out of the circle circumscribed by Self that we begin to discover new horizons – and what a wealth we then possess! In fact, once we launch into this way of living we find that ‘the more we give, the more we receive,’ for as St. Francis of Assisi put it so powerfully: “It is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned and in dying that we are born to eternal life!” In fact, in most cases we could say that our ability to forget Self precisely when we are most in need and reach out to others is the test of the genuineness of our Christian commitment. When a tooth hurts, it is difficult to think of anyone else except the dentist! Unfortunately so many people are Christians today without a thorough understanding of the demands of their Christian vocation. They seem to have accepted Christianity more as a spiritual ‘Life Insurance policy’ – an automatic guarantee that obtains heaven by the mere fact of going through the Baptismal ceremony. They fail to realize that getting to heaven is not really the point at all. For in his great love for us, the Father has chosen to shower all his blessings on us even now while here in this world.

But, all he asks of us is "... strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." (Mt 6:33).

Example of Jesus Himself

We extend God's kingdom precisely to the extent that we lose ourselves and think of others. In this effort, we have the supreme example of Jesus himself. As the letter to the Philippians has it, 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. "Those among you who will be truly happy are the ones who have sought and found how to serve" - Albert Schweitzer. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Phil 2:5-11). If he, the Son of God, could divest himself so completely for the sake of us, sinners, and he did this out of his tremendous love for each one of us, how much more should we not feel ourselves privileged to follow his example. After all, did he not choose us (from among so many other possible candidates) to follow in his steps, to be associated with him in the extension and fulfillment of the Kingdom the Father sent him to establish? And even when we do follow him one hundred percent, what we would be called to lose is but an iota, a paltry fraction, compared to what he sacrificed for our sake - his very divinity and intimacy with the Father!

In Practice

Given our endemic self centredness, if we are to venture on to this path of self-forgetfulness, we would need real discipline, at least at the beginning. Each morning as we wake up, we would need to spend a few moments blessing God for keeping us still in his service, and then visualize the different persons we could reach out to during the coming day. When we begin to see this as our daily 'assignment' with regard to the kingdom, we would soon find ourselves

rejoicing at every opportunity we get as our allotted quota for the day, and act on it with a sense of pride and gratitude. It takes no more than a fortnight to discover that our daily conscious application has produced a new habitual selfless way of thinking and responding. What seemed so difficult and demanding has become a joyful welcome blessing! When we can link all this effort to the Eucharist we celebrate we would find that it acquires an even greater value and attractiveness. We then see our little efforts as joined to the mighty salvific work of Jesus, the Saviour of the world. We would find ourselves standing at the foot of the Cross together with Mary the mother of Jesus and St. John his beloved disciple, uniting our little bit for the benefit of all mankind. We would also notice that our Eucharist is no longer routine, but that each day has a certain freshness about it, because each time we would have something different and special to present at the time of the Presentation of the Gifts. Then as we begin to live out our commitment, the sense of adventure and purposeful living will fill our day and no matter how many adversities cross our path that day, they will not succeed in depriving us of a sense of fulfillment and triumph of God's grace. Our life will have a purpose and a mission; our journey through life will be meaningful and we would no longer feel ourselves deprived, depressed or wanting in any way. Come what may, we would have something to contribute towards the well-being of our world; we live not like parasites, off someone else's labours and sufferings, but as positive contributors. And when our time comes to stand before the Father's throne, we can be sure we will hear his consoling words, 'Come, ye blessed ... I was hungry ...' And in typical fashion we too will say in wonder, 'But Lord, when did I see you hungry and thirsty...' because there will have been so many who benefited from our little efforts that we would hardly remember who they all are! And in the bargain, we will have had no time to worry about our own little pin-pricks - these will have been drowned in the ocean of joy and contentment the Lord provides for his faithful ones!

2011 August

8. THE LEAST SHALL BE THE GREATEST Fr.

Erasto Fernandez, sss

Many people seem to think that in our times the teachings of Jesus are outdated, having no relevance in our post-modern age of prolific technological growth and advancement. We recall here some of the findings of worldfamous corporate leaders who share with us some of their own personal findings in the matter of advancement and success in the corporate world.

Fear or Inner Strength?

“In chaotic times, an executive’s instinct may be to strive for greater efficiency by tightening control. But the truth is that relinquishing authority and giving employees considerable autonomy can boost innovation and success at knowledge firms, even during crises. Our research provides hard evidence that leaders who give in to the urge to clamp down can end up doing their companies a serious disservice.” When one views the above situation dispassionately, what we notice is that the tendency in critical times to clamp down and introduce greater control and restrictions actually stems from a sense of fear, of loss of control, of finding oneself out of depth and eager to press the panic button. This inner fear, even if unexpressed, is instinctively conveyed to all down the line, and inevitably they too begin to panic resulting in a greater tendency to err and increase the sense of loss of control even more. The end result of this is predictable: a total breakdown sooner or later! The opposite line of action which is being suggested could be seen as better sense prevailing over the instinctive reaction. However, it presumes certain basic principles – at least for the believing Christian. With the Resurrection of Jesus, all forms of evil have been conquered and he has shared his victory with all his followers, to the extent that they care to receive! He desires that we benefit from this victory already here and now, even though this can be done to a certain degree only. Nevertheless, for anyone sharing in the Resurrection of Jesus, there is no question of capitulating to the forces of evil or negativity. The power of the positive is shown in our belief that the Spirit of God works through every person of goodwill, even when this person does not explicitly subscribe to

the Christian faith! Thus, when the leader shows trust and confidence in his subordinates, seeks their advice and contribution, he somehow taps into a fund of positive energy which will certainly produce much better results than would a flood of negativity! However, this approach must not be seen as just another strategy that is guaranteed to infallibly bring success. Those in authority must themselves believe deep within their beings in what Jesus has said, “Do not be afraid... and remember I am with you even till the end of the age!” (Mt. 28:10-20). For this, it is not absolutely necessary that they subscribe to all that Jesus stands for. If they can believe in the goodness of their own persons and genuinely and wholeheartedly align themselves with ‘a higher power’ not seeking their own selfish ends, they can be sure that a higher divine power for good is at work in their activity.

Lead From the Front

“Although business thinkers have long proposed that companies can engage workers and stimulate innovation by abdicating control in times of crisis, guidance on implementing such a policy is lacking. So is evidence of its consequences. Indeed, companies that actually practice abdication of control are rare.” Such guidance can come only from persons who possess a deep inner strength of character and who firmly believe in themselves. One of the misconceptions of most people is that the leader must have superior knowledge, expertise and skills. However, time and again it has been proven that leadership is not about professional authority and control, but about creating an atmosphere of confidence and trust at all levels. The leader is responsible for making every member feel part of the entire enterprise. Each must feel that he contributes positively to the benefit of the whole, that no one is a mere cog in the wheel and ultimately that God’s Spirit can speak through any member no matter how high or low he be on the hierarchical ladder. Leaders sometimes feel that they would lose respect if they consult their subordinates or accept their suggestions as coming from equals. They believe that every good and beneficial idea can come only from the top. However, for almost fifty years now, Japanese Corporate companies have been promoting the idea of

“kaizen” and reaping the benefits in plenty. As it is said, “you can buy a person’s back but you can’t buy his mind!” It is only when he freely and with a sense of pride participates in the thinking of the well-being of the entire company that a man will give of his best, even to the point of sacrificing his own personal welfare for the benefit of the entire group. Trying to clamp down rather than open up in such crisis situations is like driving a car with one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake. Most people try to control this difficult situation by depressing the accelerator more instead of removing the foot that is on the brake! They try to apply more pressure, use more eloquence, and supply more logical information to strengthen their own position. They fear listening to others because they want to dominate and manipulate while emphasizing that they are in charge. But the situation will only change when there is synergy - and that cannot thrive in such a centralized atmosphere! So, leaders will themselves have to learn from their personal experience how they can capitalize on the strengths of each employee. This is what the experts say was true at least in some instances, “In response to poor financial performance in 2007, CSC Germany, a division of the \$17 billion worldwide IT consulting and services firm, at first took the usual approach of increasing control and efficiency. The result was a further decline. When the division’s leaders did the opposite—relaxed control and gave employees the freedom to do things as they saw fit—the outcome was resounding success.”

A Sense of Belonging

“Furthermore, it has been discovered that contrary to what many CEOs assume, leadership is not really about delegating tasks and monitoring results; it is primarily about infusing the entire workforce with a sense of responsibility for the business. Each employee must come to see the entire organization as his very own! This applies mainly to knowledge organizations, no doubt, but others, even production-oriented companies can benefit from having employees who feel more empowered and engaged because of a deep and personal sense of belonging.” If decentralization of authority is to provide value for the corporation, however, individuals must be self

motivated. For this they must feel wanted, respected and valued for their particular skills and aptitudes. CSC Germany tried this out by allowing employees to work on the one of five topics that best utilizes their talents and excites their interest. This involved joining a topic community, such as the one focusing on strategy and innovation. Issues were discussed in these groups until all participants came to an agreement, and leadership within the groups shifted frequently, settling on individuals who had the most competence in the areas of focus and were accepted by others as leaders. “We call such practices “mutualism.” It involves measuring workers not against revenue or other numerical goals, which we have observed to be ineffective as motivational tools, but against qualitative values such as trust, responsibility, and innovation. And it implies that leaders don’t dictate vision or strategy; instead, they enable employees to create a common vision through, for example, offsites for discussion of strategic issues and regular feedback and education. Hitting numerical goals has been the natural outcome.” Evidently, all these approaches work because of a fundamental trust and bonding that evolves among employees at all levels. But none of this happens effortlessly or in the twinkle of an eye! It takes years and constant effort to build up the level of trust among every single worker and calls for personal integrity and high moral standards among the leaders. Returning to our spiritual reflection, it is no wonder that Jesus personally undertook the training of his chosen Twelve and taught them more by his own personal example than by theoretical principles.

Every Problem is an Opportunity

Relaxation of control can benefit any knowledge company, but particularly in certain circumstances: when the organization begins to miss opportunities because it can’t understand or respond to market demands; when work is impaired because employees feel excessively pressured and harbor dissatisfaction; and when crises imperil the business. Then mutualism is the best way to unleash the power of employees’ creativity. And so, difficulties and obstacles need not be seen as hindrances but rather as an opportunity to revise one’s own approach, to deepen one’s faith in

oneself and in the others who collaborate, to work at bringing all on board as partners in the enterprise. Wherever this happens, isn't that a sign that the triumph of the Risen Lord is at work? Typically enough, this approach works when each individual decides that s/he is going to live by the age old principles of honesty, integrity, respect for all people, and the like. Where Self is allowed to run wild, cracks of division, competitiveness, jealousy, back-biting and the like will show. If we can bring ourselves to collaborate during the Eucharist itself making of it a true community action, we will be well on the road to learning how to sink our egos and work for the good of the whole Enterprise not only at the place of work, but almost anywhere. Besides, to move faster in this direction of being able to handle a crisis situation while respecting each member's contribution, it would be helpful if we could mean each Eucharist we celebrate. There has to be some conscious, deliberate 'dying-to-self' in each celebration, else it is very difficult to build up a solid habit of working selflessly. But when approached with courage and disciples, it can be done and quite effectively too! Where there is a will, there is a way – because He has risen indeed!

2011 September

9. AN UNUSUAL BUS RIDE Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

As usual, after work Jacinda took the bus home. But what a ride it was that evening! There was nothing very unusual except that a blind lady who usually got on at the same stop as Jacinda was noticed to be missing by some of the regulars. A brief search revealed that she was still sitting over in the corner all by herself, waiting for the bus. One lady passenger smartly jumped off the bus and ran to help and guide this blind lady to her usual seat. Not far down the road, a young girl in her twenties tentatively got on at one stop and asked the bus driver how much the ride would cost to her destination. When to her dismay she heard that it would cost her \$3, she mumbled something about having less than \$2 and then with a "Don't worry," as if to herself, got off the bus deciding to walk the entire distance. Had she really done that it would have taken her about 7 to 8 hours of brisk walking – and in the dark for a good part of the

way! As she started striding decisively down the road, suddenly there were voices of concern from every passenger on board. Everyone was speaking at the same time to one another, "Oh no, didn't she have enough money?" All on the bus, without exception, volunteered to readily pay her fare.

Charity in Action

Without much ado, being the nearest, Jacinda jumped up and was about to hand over \$3 to the driver for the girl's fare. But before anyone else could get up and do the same, the driver called out cheerfully, "It doesn't matter even if she didn't have any money, I wouldn't let her walk all that way home!" Hearing these words, the entire bus-load was dumbfounded! That certainly wasn't the usual approach on these buses, for normally anyone who didn't have the correct fare wouldn't be allowed to ride on the bus. But this lady driver was different – she just exuded kindness and confidence with her charming ways! The bus driver drove to where the girl was walking in the distance and cheerfully told her she was welcome to get on, free of charge. The poor girl was more than a little embarrassed and for a moment didn't know what to do, but a smile slowly emerged across her face and she was profusely thankful to all on that bus, but particularly to the driver! The cheerful bus driver, real apostle of charity that she was, made sure that everyone got home safely including the blind lady. Jacinda couldn't but reflect as she got off: 'That bus ride was really something different; it touched my heart because everyone was so kind to one another, even to complete strangers!' She decided that on her next bus ride home, she would give a Smile Card to that lady driver and tip her a little extra if she was driving that day!

A New Vision of Others

One of the signs that we have risen with the Risen Lord at Easter is that we begin to look on people, all people no matter what they look like or behave like, as the Lord himself in disguise. This applies particularly to those in distress as happened on this bus. The regulars noticed the absence of the blind lady and decided to do something about it, at least to enquire and make sure that she was not left behind because of negligence. And right enough that is what

would have happened had someone not enquired! The general attitude, especially in our big cities is to mind one's own business, and particularly not to interfere with strangers or get entangled with situations that would require a lot of effort. Had that somewhat self-centred attitude prevailed on that fateful evening, not just the blind lady but also the unfortunate girl who ran short of her bus fare would have been left out in the cold. At that hour almost everyone is tired and weary and all they want is to get back home to a hot meal and a cosy bed as soon as possible. To think of the convenience of others at that part of the day is rather demanding. Yet, that is what this bus load of people was able to do – was that not a sign that the Risen Lord was very much active in their midst? They need not have been Christians committed to following Jesus, yet the Risen Lord works in the hearts and lives of every person of goodwill. All it needs is a realization of one's own desire in a similar situation. Jesus summed this up so beautifully when he said: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Mt 7:12). Another way of expressing the same truth is that in the Old Testament the law was: "love your neighbour as yourself!" But Jesus changed that considerably when he said that the only commandment he would give us his followers is to "love one another as I have loved you!" So the argument underneath all this is that the neighbour is as precious to God as each one of us is, and so should be precious to us too. For when we show kindness and love towards others, we acknowledge God's own kindness and care for ourselves.

Obstacles to Christ-like Loving

In actual practice, though, many of us find it difficult to love others as Jesus loves them. And perhaps the most obvious reason for this is that somehow we have been programmed to see 'perfection' as the prerequisite for our love for others. We find it easy to love those who are good, particularly if we are the recipients of that goodness. We tend to distance ourselves from those who have shortcomings by sticking out like porcupine quills. Our tendency then is to save ourselves from getting hurt, little realizing that that is not the way Jesus loves us. He came

precisely into a sinful world where not one person was righteous, the way he could have expected them to be. Further, he went out of his way to show love and acceptance precisely to those whom Society ostracized, the taxcollectors, murderers, sinners and the like. So, we see that Jesus loves us not because we are good, but because he sees in us the image of the Father who is the only one who is good. Now it is precisely the power of the Risen Lord that enables us to rise to the level where we can habitually see the face of the Father in every person we meet. This is what produced among us a Mother Teresa who cared for the scum of Society, for people whom no one else had any regard. The Church's history is filled with people like Mother Teresa in whom the Risen Lord was at work. But one need not be a great saint to be an effective instrument of the Lord. All it takes is a readiness to be open – open enough to see and feel the sufferings of others around us; to listen to the inner voice of love urging us to reach out with whatever we have; to recall the thrill and joy we experienced when we did overcome our self centredness and finally did something for others! Like the prophet Isaiah we have to be able to say, "Here I am, send me!" And the Lord will provide us with several instances in which we can bring his light and peace to others.

Going Beyond the Law

We recall that Jesus told his disciples that "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). Now this is a strange thing we notice in Christian living. We are to respect and keep the laws God gives us, for there again he tells us, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21). So we need to keep the Law. Yet, it is not merely keeping the law that is important in the sense that we make of ourselves slaves of the Law. Rather we need to so imbibe the spirit of the Law so that we almost habitually go well beyond it. To take a simple example, Christians have the law of Sunday obligation requiring them to celebrate Eucharist on a Sunday. What we mean to say then is that it is not enough merely to celebrate Eucharist on Sundays imagining

that with that all is over! Our Sunday celebrations should engender within us such a love for the Eucharist that we would be delighted to celebrate Eucharist even on weekdays, according to the measure of our generosity. If Eucharist is reserved only for Sunday, and we do that mainly to fulfill the requirements of the law, then there would not be much difference between ourselves and the Pharisees. This is the approach that should characterize Christians, that schooled in and by the law they are free to go beyond it (not against it!). Now isn't this also true of all great art? A student learning to play the piano has to initially stick to the correct fingering and play the piece exactly as it is written. But as he gains fluency he is permitted to interpret the piece he plays putting a lot more of feeling into it – which could mean that he lengthens a particular note a fraction or two, adds a little bit here or subtracts something elsewhere, keeping always within what the composer wishes to convey. Those kinds of liberties can be taken only by advanced students and not by beginners and that because they have by then mastered the art of playing the piano. The same applies to driving a car or operating a machine or gadget. The bus driver in the story would certainly have needed to abide by the laws of the company she worked for. Yet, at her discretion she could accommodate a needy person or two according to circumstances. What guides her in this is the love that fills her life, the awareness of the blessings she herself has received from the Lord through so many others. It could be that she also was fully aware of her mission as a Christian to pass on God's blessings to others, especially to those in need. Or again, she could have been inspired by the spontaneous generosity and goodwill of so many other passengers who immediately volunteered to pay the person's fare. What is important is that she allowed God's Spirit to work through her, whatever might have been the initial impulse.

Conclusion

When every Christian is convinced that s/he has a place in God's plans for the smooth functioning of the entire planet and that each person's contribution is indispensable, and then sets out to make his/her contribution freely and generously, what a different

place would our world not be? Who is to bring about this change? Jesus has already begun the process through his marvelous self-gift on the Cross. Today, what we lack chiefly is the living out of all these symbolic gestures we do in our Church ceremonies. "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance." Could you start the ball rolling from your corner of the earth?

2011 October

10. BLESS, AND YOU WILL BE BLESSED Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

We generally imagine that only the blessed, powerful and favoured ones are those who need to reach out to help the poor and unfortunate. As a matter of fact, experience shows that it is those who have the least who are perhaps the most eager and ready to help, even out of the little they have, sometimes giving all that they have to live on! We cannot but recall the Gospel story of the widow who put in two little copper coins into the Temple treasury – all that she had to live on! This example was so striking that Jesus himself noted it and drew the attention of his disciples to the widow's extraordinarily generous gift – that they might learn a lesson or two for their own lives. The following story is a similar instance – it makes inspiring reading indeed.

Open to the Inner Voice

"Last fall, a little before Thanksgiving, as alone in my car I made my way out of the shopping centre parking lot, I noticed a woman laden with several heavy shopping bags and her two young boys, one carrying a huge pumpkin and the other weighed down under another massive bag. Seeing them trudge along, I naturally assumed that they were heading in the direction of the bus stop across the major road. I knew the place well and realized that it was too far to walk

with all those purchases to any of the nearby apartment communities. On a sudden and inexplicable impulse, I rolled down my car window and enquired if they were indeed headed to the bus stop. ‘Yes,’ the mother responded shyly. When I further offered ‘Would you like a ride?’ all three burst out spontaneously, ‘Oh yes, Thank you!’ I was delighted to be of some help, and so, after a while of deft manoeuvring over to the side, out of the way of other shopping traffic, I stopped and the boys gleefully piled into the back seat. The mother started to push in beside them but I quickly invited her to sit in front as I was alone in the front seat. And so after a couple of minutes of noisy adjustment, we took off to the obvious delight of the two boys. I had already decided that rather than drop them off at the bus stop not too far away, I could afford to take them the mile and a half to their home. I had the time and they had all those bundles to negotiate with, over that long distance. The boys were friendly and communicative, and chattered away telling me about themselves, their hobbies and friends, and I had such a pleasant time listening and talking with all of them. It felt so good to be able to do this little trip even if it meant a small detour from my usual shopping route, and know that with such a small effort I could make a big difference to a tired mother. I’m not sure who got the most out of that eventful journey – they or I!

A Handicapped Benefactor

Incidentally, this trip was extra special for me and possibly for them too because, as a handicapped person, I’m almost always on the receiving end of help. This was the one time I realized how especially good it feels to be useful, giving of your little to someone more deprived than you! As the three got off the car, their gratitude was obviously sincere and heartfelt in the numerous Thank-you's they mumbled and the joy written all over their faces. I could tell too by that stunned look on their countenances that they just couldn’t believe that a disadvantaged person would go out of her way to make life a little easier for them!” But as I contentedly drove off home feeling happy for myself, I couldn’t but recall what I had heard a few days earlier in one of the Church services I attended. The Scripture reading that day was that of

the Feeding of the five thousand and the preacher recalled how, knowing full well that they had only five loaves and two fish, Jesus asked the disciples to make the multitude (of altogether around forty thousand or so – there were five thousand ‘men – not counting women and children!’) to sit down on the green grass. The disciples had desperately tried to dissuade the Master from getting involved in that potentially disastrous situation – what if the little they had didn’t really suffice and the mob began to get unruly?! Yet, the disciples marvelled with bated breath as He took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them to distribute to the people. And without them fully realizing what was happening, as their minds were engrossed in seeing that no one was left out, each in that massive crowd seemed to get as much as s/he wanted and yet there was still more. And what was even more surprising, when told to gather up all the fragments of broken bread and fish, the disciples collected five huge baskets full of broken pieces! The secret of this marvel seems to have been the spirit of selfless generosity that pervaded the entire group. The majority in the group were obviously aware of what was happening – that so little somehow sufficed for such a large crowd... and there was evidently such a lot left over!

Applications to Other Areas of Life

I continued to muse on various other possibilities. What would happen among us today if we were able to apply this principle to all the areas of our lives – involving, e.g. our time. So often it happens that precisely on the day when one is hard pressed for time, that someone comes to us with a request for help, and that too a time consuming demand! One’s instinctive answer in such a situation is to say, “Of course I shall help you, but first allow me to complete this urgent task – then I shall be totally at your disposal.” But of course, their need is greater than ours and cannot wait till I’ve completed my task. It is only after we have grudgingly or not, set aside our urgent mission in order to attend to their more urgent one that we realize that are in for a repeat of the ‘Feeding’ episode in Jesus’ life. It is often said that the more we give, the more we get, but often this seems to be true only in theory. In practice, it seems

foolishness to give when one has so little for oneself. Yet, God's ways are not our ways and when we can lose ourselves with sincere generosity the miracle of the Feeding does take place again and again. We find that we not only manage to help the ones in need, but have enough time and some to spare as well after finishing our own assignments to satisfaction.

Eucharist, the Key

It is perhaps no coincidence that the example of the Feeding story from the Gospels came to mind, for this story is an obvious prefiguring of the Eucharist that we celebrate so often. The bread Jesus broke and shared is a symbol of his very life which he gave for the benefit of the whole of mankind. In those circumstances, he did not stop to ask whether those for whose sake he was pouring out his life would appreciate his sacrifice and benefit from it, or whether they too would be inspired to do the same for the sake of others. He knew that if he were really giving us a gift it would have to be one with no strings attached. He gave because he believed that was the right and the best thing to do! Genuine love would do nothing less! In actual fact, the example of Jesus' self-giving remembered in each Eucharist is the source and inspiration of so many other little acts of kindness to others, the world over, all down the centuries. It is true that not everyone who celebrates Eucharist is caught up in this chain of self-giving, but where it does catch entering the person's very life-pattern, the results are stupefying. There is something basically good at the core of every human being and they tend to respond with generosity when they are treated generously. Similarly it is said, trust inevitably begets trust! "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Lk 6:37-38). Sometimes the joy and thrill a person gets out of selfless giving to others comes well after the generous deed has been done, and is perhaps even forgotten. It might come weeks later and through a totally unknown person. Yet, the best part of the event is that one immediately recognizes that what is

now received comes as a response to what was given freely and joyfully some time ago. The connection is unmistakable, for example, when the amount given tallies to the penny with what is now received! At other times, it is a better and more appropriate gift we receive for a tiny little favour thoughtfully and deliberately done, especially when done anonymously.

Paul's Experience

Paul shares his own experience regarding the collection he made for the poorer churches: "We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints... Now as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you - so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking... For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich... For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has - not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need... As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little'" (2 Cor 8:1-16). This kind of sharing seems rare nowadays, but if one cared to look there are far more examples of selfless giving than we would imagine. Practices like the "Smile Card" that have become so popular simply go to show that at heart most people are good. The recent period of economic recession has brought to light so many wonderful examples of people who gave even when it hurt - and as can be expected, the Lord does not allow himself to be outdone in generosity!

2011 November

11. SELF-RESPECT THE GREATEST GIFT Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

It seems pretty presumptuous and un-ambitious, to say the least, when a young MBA from Oxford quits his promising career and starts a courier service with just one delivery boy and an investment capital in the form of savings of Rs 10,000 only. But Dhruv Lakra's "Mirakle Couriers" claims to be the only courier company in the world today that employs only the hearing impaired. Today, with a staff of 55 employees, the company offers both domestic and international services on a competitive basis and a honest and self-respecting source of income to the marginalized. The tsunami in 2004 was the cause of this sweeping change in Lakra's life. He turned his back on his cushy job as an investment banker to help a tsunami-affected fisherman community in Nagapatinam, South India, for five months. "I realized with a deep inner conviction that this is what I wanted to do with my life," says the 28-year-old, who had previously worked with several NGOs. In 2008, Lakra launched "Mirakle Couriers" as his ambition was to offer the hearing impaired community something better than candle making as a vocation. He says, 'My dream was to give them a regular employment which somehow uses their disability to their advantage.' With special training sessions, Lakra ensures his boys deliver efficiently while his office work is handled mainly by hearing impaired women. They receive the minimum wage and have their own bank accounts. With plenty of bulk orders coming their way, Lakra hopes to break even by the end of the year. "I treat it like any other business," he observes. "What I want to achieve is that the idea of charity in India should undergo a change; a paradigm shift needs to be effected in the minds of most people. Disabled people may do things differently, but they should be treated as equals." Evidently, whether the enterprise is a success financially or not, what Lakra has set out to achieve is a grand ideal and would take quite some time to effect. People's mind-sets do not change easily, especially when it concerns those who are disadvantaged. Most people tend to look on them as poor, helpless, inefficient' and so on. To treat them as

equals when one has never experienced any set-backs in life, is itself a mighty challenge! Besides changing the paradigm of society with regard to all challenged persons, Lakra would also have given the hearing impaired group themselves a marvelous opportunity to live their lives with dignity and pride – making a big difference in their own lives, enabling some to even shine and stand out among those with no impediments or lesser ones. One does not usually understand the plight of handicapped people until one actually lives with them in one's own family. Then the situation begins to be viewed from a totally different angle. The problem then is not 'out there' but at one's very doorstep! And that forces a different approach on one – whether one likes it or not.

Lessons Learnt from Adversity

A passage in Luke's Gospel forces upon us the reflection about why there are inequalities among people in this world. The story goes that a man comes up to Jesus imploring him to intervene with his brother who has deprived him of his share of the family inheritance. Jesus' answer to the man is puzzling. He says, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions' (Lk 12:14-15). It seems as if Jesus rebukes the unfortunate man for making that request. Actually what he indicates is that while undergoing this injustice is understandably painful, yet it is not altogether a useless exercise. Jesus reminds us all that God does not distribute his gifts equally to everyone. Even in the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30) we see that one servant gets five, another two and third person gets only one. Does this unequal distribution imply that God loves the third person less? By no means! God's love for all is the same – he loves all equally, but yet distributes his gifts and talents in different measure to different people. And the reason seems to be that this unequal situation provides both parties with the challenge they need to enter into the Kingdom of God. The one having less, whether it is by God's decree or by unjust behaviour on the part of some other people around him, the deprived person is challenged to trust totally in God's personal love for

him. Having made what efforts he could to correct the situation, either by himself or even through third-party interventions, and seeing that he has failed, he then places the problem before God leaving it to God to work out as He feels best. Trusting in God's love for him he continues to do his best, being content with what is, and also sharing his meager resources with those in greater need! God's assurance, "I will be with you" is his strength!

Challenge to Those Blessed

The challenge for one who has more is to share his blessings with others. This is incumbent on all, but much more on the one who has more because he has wrongfully deprived others of their proper share! In such cases, there is first of all the injustice to be dealt with. "And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!'" (Gen 4:10-11). Even though the injustice goes unnoticed or no one does anything about righting the wrong, yet God's justice will not allow such flagrant violations to go unattended. Then the law of sharing one's blessings with the needy comes into play as well. Oppressing one's own kindred was a sign among the Israelites of total disfavour with God (Is. 49:26); it is the kind of punishment the Lord would impose on the foreign nations for their harassment of his people. Thus it is that the same adverse situation poses challenges to both sides and provides both with the opportunity to truly listen to the Lord's voice calling from deep within them. When they act on his suggestions, the outcome will be a greater blessing than the earlier problem. And that is because besides the more equitable distribution of goods, there now exists also a deep bond of fellowship between the two parties. This approach therefore makes allowance for the fact that people often err in their behaviour. But it requires them to listen to their consciences and follow the Lord's rulings so that all can live amicably and happily in the land.

Death to Self – Pre-requisite!

All this is easily said but we know that things just do not work out all that easily in practice. Very few would be ready to truly listen to the Lord's gentle suggestions especially when it means losing one's

grip of a large amount of wealth. With our myopic view of life, we fail to see beyond our noses, even though every single person would vociferously proclaim that no one can take all his wealth with him into the grave; some day or other he will have to leave it for others to enjoy. Why not heed the Lord's suggestion then when he says, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes!" (Lk 16:9). The only way to make friends through dishonest wealth is to give it away lavishly – as long as we keep it for ourselves it is a liability, but when given away, it becomes a real asset, productive of eternal life. Again Jesus warns us, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' "**The more material wealth we possess the more fear we have to carry along with us wherever we go: fear that we might one day lose all that wealth...**" Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk 10:24-30). In spite of all this advice and these warnings, we still are loathe to give up our material possessions!

Lure of Wealth

Especially in our modern consumerist world we are bombarded from all sides with advertisements regarding various commercial goods which are projected as not only making life a lot easier, but also as guaranteed to obtain for us a high rating in Society. While all this is true up to a point, we know from experience that it does not really go very far. For one thing, the more material wealth we possess the more fear we have to carry along with us wherever we go:

fear that we might one day lose all that wealth, fear that someone may rob us of it, fear of being pestered by the poor who constantly ask for help! There is besides the strange inner craving within us which somehow never leaves us satisfied and contented with what we have. There is a charming little story told of a King who was blessed with plenty but yet remained very unhappy. As he traveled through his kingdom he came across a poor farmer who possessed next to nothing; yet his greatest treasure was his happy contented life. Seeing this, the King was puzzled and sought the reason for this from his wise men. One volunteered this explanation. He suggested to the King that he be given ninety-nine gold coins which he took and hid strategically in the field of the poor farmer. Within a few days the farmer managed to unearth every single one of the ninety-nine coins and was grateful to God for this great blessing. Yet, a nagging inner voice kept repeatedly reminding him that no one would give him ninety-nine coins leaving him one short of the coveted number, hundred. There must be that last coin somewhere on the premises. So he began to search frantically day and night and with each day's unsuccessful hunt, he grew more and more desperate – he was no longer happy and contented but extremely miserable. He was convinced that he could not be happy until he had found that one last gold coin – which of course he never did. Are we also in search of that 'one missing blessing' which, if we had our lives would be complete? Turned around, this same missing one could be just what could lead us back into the arms of our loving Father, who has prepared for us everything that can really satisfy us. Yet, to believe in him and trust him is in practice very difficult. And this is what provides the Devil with a foothold!

2011 December

2012 January

Yet Another Series

We have reached the threshold of yet another series of Eucharistic articles in the Madonna. With this series we will have completed twenty-five years of continued service to the readers of this esteemed spiritual magazine. We are always encouraged by the enthusiastic response to these Eucharistic articles not merely because they make good reading but mainly because indirectly they offer valuable insights into how the Eucharist can truly become the "source and summit of our Christian living." The Eucharist is indeed an unfathomable mine of spiritual energy and dynamism, yet one would need to know how to tap its wealth with a minimum of wastage. This is what we aimed at making clear so that even the simple reader of any age could benefit from the message. Our hope is that this new series will be like the previous ones, a pleasure to read and an inspiration to follow while celebrating Eucharist. Coming as they do once each month, each insight gets enough time to be worked out carefully if the reader is genuinely interested in growing spiritually, so that the message becomes really a part and parcel of our daily Christian living. We pray that all who read these articles will slowly but surely become effective instruments in the Lord's hands to bring many more people into the sphere of his redemptive love! Happy reading, Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

LISTENING TO GOD'S STILL VOICE Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

A classmate from twenty years ago was one of my Facebook friends," writes a Facebook enthusiast. "A few random comments he made one day gave me the faint impression that something was wrong so I prodded him to call me. When he did call I found out that that the entire family of husband, wife and eight children had just moved into a cheap motel room. He had used the very last of their savings to pay for a week's stay there. With no job they had just lost their home – but not their hope! "Hearing of his plight, I was stumped! What could I do in a situation like that? Burdened with my own worries, I had not enough money to bail them out and not enough room in my own home to offer them shelter... but I decided that I would not let these deficiencies defeat my desire to help. After a few minutes of reflection, I confided in

my sister and the two of us bought a few groceries and took them to the motel room. She even made them a spaghetti dinner and took it along on one of our visits. During those times I decided to do something a bit extreme... I messaged all of our mutual Facebook friends from our graduating class.

An Avalanche

“What happened next was just miraculous! I had listed all the major things this family needed; a job, a home, money, food, clothes - and happiness! Soon responses came pouring in. Classmates, who had previously been distant and barely cordial started calling me for details or sending donations for the family. One messaged me they knew someone else in a nearby town with an empty house. My protégé and family were soon to take up residence there. Homeless on Saturday, a new home on Tuesday! Incredible! The home owners donated the house rent free, only asking for them to pay utilities and mow the lawn when it needed to be done. Soon this family had volunteers from our class delivering furniture, groceries, toys, even job applications! There are still many things we are hoping to provide for this family. They have yet to get a vehicle for work and he hasn't found a job as yet, but everyone is wearing smiles now... And, would you believe it, the hugs from his lovely children speak louder than any words ever could! I became the bridge over troubled waters, between this family's needs and people who could help them. It still amazes me how wonderfully it all worked out, just because of little old me and my Facebook friends! God works his wonders through us, even when we may not have any idea what we are doing!”

Lessons to be learnt

Perhaps the first important lesson to be learnt from this sharing is that there is no telling what the Spirit will lead us to once we are totally open to his action in our lives! This openness is called for not only at the beginning, but at every step of the eventful journey. With this kind of openness, we find ourselves being exactly like the Good Samaritan who perhaps initially stopped only to enquire how the wounded man was, but soon found himself drawn into being God's generous ambassador to the hapless victim. Yet, what a manifestation of God's infinite care for every one of

his beloved children! One cannot but marvel at what the Lord does in and through us, if only we can be selfless enough to trust in his presence and action. How can we inculcate these background qualities, or better, how can we prepare ourselves to become pliable instruments in God's hands so as to reach out to the numerous people who need our ministrations? Possibly the easiest way is the daily celebration of the Eucharist. But possibly most people would say that they have been celebrating Eucharist almost every day and yet there doesn't seem to be such exciting miracles happening in their lives. One of the reasons for this could be that our way of participating is not yet the most effective one.

Survey Results

Our Blessed Sacrament students were sent out to collect data on why people celebrate the Eucharist both on a Sunday and also the daily Eucharist. The results could be tabulated as follows: a) Teresa never misses her Sunday Eucharist. When asked by a friend why she celebrates Eucharist, her answer was, “To ask for special graces during the week, peace, God's blessings on the family, a good job for her son Peter Paul ...” b) Francis, a daily Church go-er, is generally distracted during the readings and other parts of the Eucharist, but makes sure he is absolutely attentive and reverent during the Consecration... c) Mary who hasn't missed even one weekday Eucharist since her First Communion picks up a word or two from the Readings, but is all attention during the Communion rite and after ... d) Reginald has a love for Scripture and pays full attention to the Word of God and finds deep strength from the day's readings. That makes him appreciate the rest of the Eucharist in a more than ordinary manner e) Jennifer brings to the Eucharist her efforts to spread God's love. She listens to the Word of God to learn how further she could spread the message of love, focuses on Christ's gift of himself at the Institution Narrative and seeks to be deeply united with the Lord in Communion as the branch in the Vine so that her efforts at spreading the Kingdom become more fruitful... She is particularly attentive at the dismissal rite searching for where God wants to send her out each day to accomplish his

mission. Which of these responses corresponds to the way you generally celebrate Eucharist?

Reap What You Sow

There is a theological saying which says, “The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church!” In simple terms this means that the kind of Church (Christians) we are will decide what kind of Eucharist we celebrate; and the way we celebrate the Eucharist will further make us into exactly that brand of Christians! Or, if we come to the Eucharist with a self-centred attitude (Christians who come only for personal gain – see Teresa above), then we will go from such a Eucharist much more self-oriented than when we came in! And the same for the other attitudes we bring to our Eucharist. Is it surprising then that although we celebrate Eucharist frequently, maybe even daily, our inner selfish and un-Christian attitudes hardly register any change, even marginal? The result naturally is that in our life transactions, it is only our own interests that we care for, or even if we do reach out to others, it will be only in a given predetermined measure, or when it suits us, or when it doesn’t really demand too much from us. Our excuses, of course, can be countless as the stars – but with such an attitude there is no way that we can experience the kind of miracles mentioned here. The point is not that we seek to become selfless so that we can witness miracles, but rather that we become more pliable instruments in the hands of God, for the benefit of suffering humanity.

Jennifer’s Example

The “Facebook community” in the story narrated above might not even comprise of Catholics celebrating Eucharist regularly. Yet, somehow those people were January 2012 7 Don Bosco's Madonna News genuine human beings able to resonate with others desperately in need. The point is that whenever a person is ready to forego self-centred interests and place oneself in the shoes of those suffering, great things can happen. It is basically our self-interest that keeps us locked and imprisoned within our limited worlds – for our world is as big and broad as we care to make it! We could go further and say with equal truth that our world will be as exciting and full of

miracles as we care to make of it! All we need to do to put on the attitude similar to that of Jennifer in the above survey responses and to sincerely pray to God’s Spirit to take hold of us and propel us into a situation where we are challenged to break out of our comfort zones. However, it is worth noting that such a prayer should not be made if we do not sincerely mean to honour it. For the Spirit will take us literally and pretty soon we will find ourselves facing some pretty tough situations! One would know that it is God’s Spirit leading and guiding us by the inner peace and enthusiasm we experience; also by the flow of ideas and possibilities which will be like an ever-flowing stream, one leading to another. What is more, we discover an inner enthusiasm to follow the lead of the Spirit without worrying too much about where it will land us. Love takes over our actions, casting out all fear!

Spiritual Thermometer

A further offshoot of this cultivated attitude is that we go from strength to strength, tackling more and more difficult tasks, enterprises which demand greater self-giving, even to the point of losing one’s very life for the sake of the other. It is precisely through this growing selflessness that we can gauge the power and effect of our celebration of the Eucharist. One thing is sure, that where the giving is sincere and wholehearted, the Spirit will waste no time in using such a person for great things. The obvious reason for this is that there are so few such selfless and generous persons while the number of those in need is a million times more, and so every willing volunteer will find his/ her hands full almost all the time. Nevertheless, we need not worry that our selfless giving will leave us dry and empty. For the more generously we give, the more does the Spirit ensure that we are filled. As Paul recounts, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.” (5:22-26).

2012 February

UNEDUCATED YET LARGE-HEARTED Fr.

Erasto Fernandez, sss

Not having had the privilege of an education herself, Tulasi Munda, already as a teenager was inspired by a social worker to become self-reliant along Gandhian lines. The enterprising young lass reasoned to herself that poverty and ignorance would perennially dog their steps unless people were educated. So she decided to remain unmarried and work to educate the children of her native place. She herself had to remain illiterate because there were no schools in the surrounding villages. Nor could her family afford to send her to one, even if there were one available close by. This noble decision of hers resulted in her crossing swords with her own family – but she remained firm in her resolve. Her first school, which is reckoned as a model in Serenda in Keonjhar district is today a High School sporting also a hostel for children. Single-handed she has ensured that every single one of the twenty odd schools she has started so far is adequately funded. She herself goes pleading with people in different villages asking for both funds and materials and gratefully accepts whatever they mete out to her. She firmly believes that no community can bring about positive results without the direct involvement of people, as many of them as possible. The teachers she employs get a meager salary but, she proudly says of them, dedication is the key! While these teachers need the salaries to maintain their families, they are nevertheless motivated and committed – two qualities which are a must for such humanitarian work. Before crossing even 65 years of age, she has established around twenty schools most of which are located in inaccessible hilly areas in Orissa's tribal belt which had no schools at all before this humble effort of Tulasi. Many of these are conducted under trees or in verandahs of homes and working hours vary according to the convenience of the parents.

Efforts Recognized

Decorated with a Padma Shri (2001) Tulasi has resolutely warded off all overtures from politicians to canvass for them, and even refused a nomination to the Rajya Sabha. Her greatest joy is that, “my humble effort in starting these schools has saved many poor children from ending up as beggars!”

Born with a Mission

When one reads of such a selfless life, one cannot but ask, ‘how is it that some people can rise to such Tulasi Munda noble heights that even though they themselves don't enjoy the benefits of education, they work tirelessly that others might be blessed with them – but so many other educated people use their education and other gifts only to line their own pockets and that too often by unethical means?’ It is not just that some people are endowed with pluck and courage and would dare even the impossible. It generally begins with a stray suggestion made by one who fires the imagination of a basically generous doer. Once the idea takes hold of the person, it is but a matter of time before things begin to happen and an effective plan is evolved. In Tulasi's case all this came about because of inspiration from the social worker who himself was inspired by Gandhi and his passion for the uplift of the average Indian. If a Gandhi could inspire people several years after his demise, much more would Jesus be the inspiration for a host of projects all over the world emanating from his followers and others alike. For had he not proclaimed, “I have come that you may have life and that too abundantly”? (Jn. 10:10). Besides on the night before he offered his life for sinners, he left for his followers an unforgettable sign of his love, and asked them to “do this as a memorial of Me!”

Self-sacrifice Needed

The important point of this Self gift of Jesus is that “as often as you do this” you do the memorial, which is a real, making present again, the very original sacrifice of Jesus, though in sacramental form. So, the Eucharistic celebration has the very same power to inspire and draw people as did Calvary – provided the faithful enter into it with an active, intelligent and fruitful participation! For who can ‘see’ the total selfless self-gift of Jesus - even to the last drop of his precious blood “for the redemption of the many” and not be moved to do something that makes that same redemption present once again in the world of today? So, the inspiration for doing good is very much present in our midst.

Lack of Opportunities?

Could it be then, that there are not enough challenging opportunities around to grab? Or does one even have to wait for the right opportunity to crop up? Could one not create an opportunity as Tulasī did in an area which had not seen a school in all its history?! What seems to be lacking in our celebration of the Eucharist is the ‘fire’ that comes from a genuine encounter with the Risen Lord. For, as the Gospels portray it, no one can meet the Risen Lord in truth and remain the same old person as before. A clear case in view is that of the two disciples returning gloomily to their village at Emmaus. They had trudged along the entire day, but only as they gathered round the table for their night meal were their eyes opened and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread! Not stopping to enjoy and savour their good fortune of encountering Jesus, nor even to rest their weary limbs, they ran all the way back to Jerusalem to share this good news with the rest of the community. And there they, together with the emboldened others, received their definitive mission – “you are witnesses to these things” (Lk. 24:48). With these and several other examples before us, why is it that the Christian community is by and large so depressingly inward-looking and preoccupied mainly with receiving material benefits, healings, witnessing miracles and the like – all of which are somewhat peripheral to the real Christian calling? Jesus has chosen us Christians, primarily ‘to be sent’ on a mission of sharing God’s love with those in need. One does not need to go far to accomplish this mission, for there are opportunities right at our doorstep. The key point seems to be that we are open enough to see what God does for us and be ready to become instruments to bless others.

Different Varieties of Seeing

As we scan the Gospel of St. Luke we come across a strange combination of statements – all sequences to the death of Jesus on the Cross. Luke observes: “When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’ And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance,

watching these things” (23:47-49). All saw the very same spectacle, but the Centurion, a Roman officer knowing perhaps nothing of the background of Jesus, saw what happened and he made an act of faith! The Jewish crowds who in some way were involved in the death of Jesus, saw the same events and went home beating their breasts – they made an act of contrition!! But Jesus’ own friends stood at a distance watching all that happened – and they did absolutely nothing!!! They seem to have been simply overwhelmed by what they saw. Today too, it is often the non-Christians who reach out more spontaneously and generously to the needs of suffering humanity. Yet it is the Christian who will be addressed on Judgment Day with the chilling truth: “I was hungry and you did not give me to eat, thirsty and you did not give me to drink, in need and you did not reach out to me...” We certainly would not want to have such a scathing accusation thrust at us, now or ever, and so we need to ask: “Lord, is there some way in which we can share our blessings with the less fortunate?” We need to listen deeply to the call of the Almighty given to us in the simplest of ways – yet always leaving us free to respond generously and get involved or remain on the periphery and watch others chip in their mite making of their world a far better place to live in.

Lift Up Your Hearts

One of the reasons why we often find ourselves lethargic in reaching out to others is that we do not take our responses at the Eucharist seriously. What exactly do we do e.g. when we say, ‘We have lifted them up to the Lord?’ What do we really lift up and why? Were we to take these responses seriously, our world would certainly be turned upside down! The simple ‘Amen’ e.g. at the end of the Doxology really means that we will ‘make it to be so!’ We have just sung ‘through him... (may) all glory and honour be yours... for ever and ever.’ Coming at the end of this statement, it means that ‘we will actively see that all glory is actually given to God always and everywhere! And if we really did set about fulfilling this promise, how self-obsessed could we be? Would we not be thinking constantly of how we could be of service to others? Could we be a little more open at the very next Eucharist we celebrate, listening attentively to

what the Lord inspires us to be and to do? It need not be a full-blown project that we launch into, for a journey of even a thousand miles begins with but a tiny 'first' step! "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? The cup of blessing I shall take and call on the Lord's name." (Ps. 116:12-13). May each of us be inspired to become a blessing for others in return for all that the Lord does for us!

2012 March

DELAYED BUT NOT FORGOTTEN Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

My grandfather was the head of his village for nearly twenty years," so the story goes, "until we moved to a different city. Nearly a month back, my grandfather was out for his usual evening walk to a nearby garden and failed to return home. Worried we searched frantically for him everywhere but in vain. Later in the morning, we got a call from a hospital from an unknown person who said that he had remembered my grandfather very well, at least by his peculiar childhood nickname. Arriving out of breath at the hospital we found that my grandfather had been hit by a vehicle and it was this person from 35 years ago who helped him reach the hospital. This modern Good Samaritan had stayed with him the whole night and paid for all his hospital bills (for the system there was that no one gets treatment unless bills are paid first). All this, and he only knew my grandfather with his childhood nickname. My grandfather was not even able to recognize that person! While thanking him profusely we offered him the money he had paid towards the hospital bills, but he wouldn't accept any. He simply said: "He was a good father to me when I needed him, today I was able to play the role of a good son to him." We were dumbfounded that a stranger could do such a kind act, but more so that my grandfather's kindness could have stayed vivid and alive with someone for 35 years!"

The Secret?

Reading of an occurrence like this cannot but force us to ask, 'What is it that touches the hearts of people to such an extent that they will never forget a selfless act

of kindness?' Amidst the ocean of emotionally wounded and needy persons we find that it is only a selfless and limitless love that will make them feel truly loved and valued for what they are. Almost every person on earth receives a fair share of love, but most often what s/he does receive is only a limited, faltering, 'self-centred' love, a love that is in fact a travesty of love and in reality a self-seeking love. This is not because people are intrinsically evil, but simply that the human heart cannot offer truly selfless love, when left to itself. Even when a person reaches out to another with genuine selflessness, his/her love cannot really 'satisfy' the other or meet his/her needs completely! There will always be something missing, something not quite according to his/her taste, which leaves the recipient feeling unfulfilled and searching for more.

The Solution?

Left to our own resources, we would inevitably offer one another only an unsatisfying love as the remedy for the ills all around us. That is why God sent his only Son Jesus in human form so that he could show us the way " March 2012 5 Don Bosco's Madonna to truly 'sacrifice' ourselves for others, so that they may be healed and live a genuinely human and humane life. It is this selfless and limitless love that Jesus showed for us sinners when he accepted to die for our sake on the Cross at Calvary. And that too when we hardly appreciated his gift to us! As Paul reminds us, "...and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For, while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:5-8).

Transformation Effected

Now, when a person realizes that God loves 'me' with such an extravagant love, he cannot but choose to respond in like measure because this unlimited love of God is of the kind that heals all the negative thoughts and feelings we harbour against ourselves. Because of Christ's concern for us and his readiness to 'pay the

price' of our return back to the Father, we feel good about ourselves - for we reason to ourselves, 'if I were totally useless, Jesus would not have died for me, or shed the very last drop of his blood for me, would he?!' This experience is however, only the beginning of the change in our lives. We would still need to deepen it through repeated and regular reflection along the same lines. The more we reinforce the fact that basically 'I am good' though some of my actions are certainly not good, the more we will be open to lending ourselves as instruments to allow God's Spirit to reach out others through us. Further, the fact that God blesses others perhaps even more than we ourselves are blessed will not rankle or make us jealous because we are grateful for what we have received, knowing that every bit of it is sheer gift, totally undeserved and unmerited. That is also another reason why we are ever ready to share our blessings with others. In short, it is only unmerited, unlimited and selfless love that makes even a deeply scarred, emotionally wounded person to become whole and an asset to humanity.

Eucharistic Thrust

Where do we find this unlimited, unmerited love of Jesus for us shown more clearly than in the Eucharist? It is true that Jesus' love for us shines more brightly at Calvary. But liturgically we contemplate this 'Calvary' love only once a year for about a month of so - during Lent. And that would not be sufficient to turn things around in our distorted lives. We need a daily dose, if possible, to keep us ever reminded of this truth. The reason for this is that it has been dinned into our heads so often that we are useless, sinful and so on, that this kind of negative thinking has become part and parcel of our very lives. Besides, once this mind-set has taken root, then every little negative experience reinforces the basic unhealthy message we get about ourselves. So, it is only through an equally strong, or better still, much stronger positive message that the negatives will be either totally removed or at least reduced to the point that they do not have too much of an influence in our lives. Further, at each Eucharist we are reminded of what Jesus did: he took the bread, said the blessing ... We too are called to 'bless' God for all his goodness towards us. When we

can do this sincerely and in some detail then we realize more clearly how much we have been favoured by God. Again, when we see others around us who are in some way deficient, we appreciate our own blessings much more. Besides, the very word 'Eucharist' means thanksgiving and so we learn at each Eucharist how we ought to give praise and thanks to God, always and everywhere. Merely saying 'Thank-you' to God is insufficient. The best thanks is given first of all, by making the maximum use of the gifts we have received and secondly by sharing these gifts with others. So, the more we use God's gifts for our benefit and also for that of others, the more grateful we show ourselves to be. And obviously, this approach enables us to be more open to receive all the further gifts God has in store for us. One further suggestion would be in place. When it is a question of expressing gratitude for God's gifts to us, the best approach would be to do that as soon as is possible. This is not just because if not done immediately it is likely that we will forget, or that the intensity or fervor of our giving thanks would diminish, but also because the more promptly and genuinely we thank God, the more likely are we to receive even more blessings.

Never Outdone in Generosity

In his goodness, God wants to shower his blessings on us in abundance. It is always we who in some way place restrictions on God's goodness because we are unable to receive his good gifts with the right dispositions. In this matter, it is precisely our 'passing it on' that makes all the difference. We soon learn the allimportant truth is that we see ourselves as channels more than as receptacles of God's graces. Besides, God cannot see us empty of all his blessings. No sooner does he see some 'space' in our lives than he rushes to fill it up. However it would be worth remembering at the same time that if we did give only in order to receive more from the Lord, then probably we would receive nothing. The fact remains that God cannot be outdone in generosity and will always repay us a hundred times over all that we do for him. And isn't it Jesus himself who reminds us: "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren you do it to me?" And so, when we lend our faculties, our energy, our

talents, our time, in fact, our very selves, would he not bless us in marvelous ways so that we March 2012 7 Don Bosco's Madonna News The Meaning of Lent From St. Martin's Messenger, Ireland ourselves enjoy his life to the full while at the same time becoming instruments to bring that life and love to so many others around us? The key then is to bring our self-centredness and place it together with the bread and wine on the altar for Jesus not only to transform into himself but also to make of ourselves bread broken for others! What a beautiful world would we not have if many more Christians could live in this way giving to others more than receiving themselves! When this begins to happen we will find ourselves living the Eucharist more than merely celebrating it – which is the way things should be in our Christian lives! Through his marvelous death and resurrection Jesus has already conquered the world and all the evil in it. The challenge he places before us is to make that victory of his more clearly visible and palpable as we lend ourselves to be his living instruments in our world!

2012 April

BECOMING GOD'S INSTRUMENT Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

It was a quiet Sunday morning at Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church in Callahan, Florida. Seated among other worshippers waiting for the Mass to begin was Jackie Hall who despite her calm exterior, was severely tormented within. She was thinking seriously of committing suicide and this was to be her last outing. Plagued by a prolonged depression which clung to her for several months, “I felt useless,” she confesses. Her husband and children were at a loss to help her change from a morose and withdrawn woman back into the gracious, outgoing person they remembered. Now the emotional pain was closing in on her with a vice-like grip. She could bear it no longer, and there seemed no other way out.

Last Desperate Plea

“When we arrived at church, I knelt and prayed with all my heart. I told God how much I loved him and begged him to guard me against whatever was happening to me.” She prayed for a sign, just a little

hint of reassurance or comfort. Once again, God seemed lost in a cold stony silence. Several pews back and across the aisle, Judy Davies also knelt in prayer. She usually attended Sunday Mass at another church. However, this morning Judy noticed a woman just within her line of sight. She didn't know her, but as Mass began, something about the woman caught Judy's attention. “I sensed a presence there which was hard to describe, but the longer I looked, the more I seemed to see a light around her, like an aura.” The cloudlike glow was particularly strong behind the woman, as if some kind of force was protecting her... But, from what?! There was no danger in this peaceful church. Judy was even more astonished when she realized that no one else was reacting to this strange light. Was she the only one who could see it? “I struggled to keep my thoughts on the Gospel and the homily as my eyes kept drifting to her, to see if the aura was still there. It was.” By the time Mass ended, the apparition had faded which threw Judy into a quandary. Should she stop the woman and tell her about it? ...”a pretty hard thing to do,” Judy says. “But I felt that I had to tell her.” Judy followed the woman out and tapped her on the shoulder. When the woman turned, Judy plunged into her message. “You are truly blessed,” she said all afire. “I saw a glow all around you during Mass. It looked like an angel was looking over your shoulder, protecting you. I just had to tell you!” A Stitch in Time...? An angel! Jackie was almost speechless as she stared at the woman. “Well, thank you,” she murmured politely and watched as Judy turned away. But her thoughts were racing. An angel, watching over me, caring for me? Could this be the sign she had asked God for? Suddenly, she felt an enormous weight begin to lift and a small stirring of hope. Tears filled her eyes. She turned to her husband. “I need help. I want to live.”

New Life

Jackie's life changed quickly. She found an effective medication and began to feel more like herself. One day at a meeting, she heard herself volunteering to visit a cancer patient in her parish, something unlike any activity she had ever participated in. It was the start of what would become a visitor programme, ministering to the sick and the shut-ins in the

neighbourhood. The programme became extremely popular, and after some consideration, Jackie agreed to become its director. Gradually, she came to understand that her own suffering had prepared her for this kind of ministry; in God's eyes, there had been a purpose for it all! She had developed a wellspring of patience and tenderness for others in need, and she was constantly amazed and grateful when her work bore fruit. There was just one mystery left: who was the woman who had brought her the reassuring news that critical morning in church? And would she even recognize her if they were to meet again?

Mystery Solved!

One evening, Jackie attended a parish meeting, and a visitor asked the group a question about the Catholic Church's teaching on angels. The host answered the question, and then Jackie spoke up. "I have an angel story. In fact, I think an angel saved my life!" As the audience sat mesmerized as Jackie described her illness and that desperate morning when she almost gave up. "I haven't seen that woman since, even though our parish is small. I sometimes wonder if she was an angel in disguise." From the back of the room, someone broke the silence. "No," she said hesitantly, "I think it was me!" Jackie gasped as Judy stood up. Both recognized each other and then embraced as the rest of the group wiped away tears. How had they failed to become acquainted during the last several years? Neither had an answer! God's timing is perfect. Judy is enormously grateful that she took a risk and reached out to Jackie on that important morning. "Call it instinct, intuition, or a sign from God, but if someone feels the presence of the Lord - through his angel messengers - that person should share it."

God Needs You

What seems like a rare or strange miracle is actually pretty normal after God's momentous decision to send his Son in human form, so that anyone who believes in Him may be saved. While on earth Jesus went about making God's love and compassion visible in human form, even unto his cruel death on the Cross. But after his Resurrection, was that visible, tangible expression of God's love to cease? Not if other human beings, inspired by the example of his Son Jesus, would come forward to offer their enfleshed persons

to become His instruments so that He could continue to show people in need His compassion and love. Now, isn't this exactly what Judy had done for Jackie that fateful Sunday morning? She allowed herself to be alerted by God's Spirit that right in front of her was a desperately hurting person. Somewhat hesitant, Judy reached out to Jackie with perhaps just a sentence or two - but what a miracle ensued! How does all this happen? It stands to reason that the Holy Spirit would not have much success had he to try alerting a person who by conscious choice was habitually thoroughly self centred! It is because Judy was in the habit of availing herself of small opportunities to be aware of the needs of others and reach out to them, that she was able to literally 'save a life' without her even realizing it. Judy had achieved the very purpose of the Eucharist and of her coming to Church that Sunday. For after all is said and done, why do we celebrate Eucharist on a Sunday? Not merely to pray for our own personal needs, nor to obtain peace, a job or whatever. We come in obedience to the call of Jesus, "Do this as a Memorial of me!" The 'this' of this command is further elaborated in the words of the Institution Narrative: 'On the night before he suffered, Jesus took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples ...' After which is added, "Do this ..." And wasn't this exactly what Judy did, broke of her very self by making the effort to stop Jackie and share her inner message, mysterious though it was?

Living More than Celebrating

It is almost a cliché now to say that the Eucharist is not so much for celebrating as for living! This simply means that unless we are authentic in what we do at the Eucharist viz. 'take the bread of our lives, and after giving thanks to God, breaking ourselves and sharing with our needy neighbours' our Eucharist remains truncated and incomplete. So, the major part of our Eucharist is what we do 'at the altar of the world' rather than at the altar in the Church. What marvelous opportunities do we not have all through the day to make God's care and compassion for his beloved children visible for those who are in need, sometimes desperately in need? However, it is the symbolism of 'breaking the bread' that must be

realized in our day-to-day lives. That bread stands for each minute of our lives in which we have the power to choose ‘Self’ over everything else. Yet, there is an excess of self all over the world and that is why our Universe is drowning in an ocean of pain and suffering. It is only when those who celebrate Eucharist meaningfully live out their self-gift to the Lord and his brethren that the total amount of selfishness in the world will be substantially reduced, making the entire world a much better place to live in. While this seems a daunting task, in actual practice it can be very invigorating and transforming. Sometimes we might even ‘see’ the difference we make in the lives of others when we ‘turn the other cheek and go the extra mile!’ At other times, we might not, but even then, our faith assures us that our positive Christ-like attitude does make a difference at least in sowing a tiny mustard seed which will one day grow into a great shrub. Could we decide then never to celebrate the Eucharist without breaking at least one visible, tangible aspect of our selfcentredness in favour of the others around us? Try it out and see the difference it makes primarily for yourself and for so many others!

2012 May

YOU ARE WHAT YOU MAKE OF YOURSELF
Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Taking charge of your body can help you take charge of your life. And that power can help you go wherever you want to go, every single day. ~Cheryl Bridges Treworgy, member of five U.S. World Cross-Country teams

Struggling to put on my favourite pair of trousers I was confronted with a very unsavoury truth about myself: ‘I’m fat!’ I caught a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror and I positively didn’t like the person I saw! A few pounds here, a few pounds there, and the scales continued to climb higher each year. The problem was I hated the word ‘diet’ and even more I hated the thought of saying ‘I can’t or shouldn’t’ every time I wanted something. Not long after, I met with a friend at my favorite restaurant for lunch. “I’m tired of denying myself,” I complained. “I can’t have cake, ice cream, fries. Is there anything I can have?” “You can have lots of things,” she said encouragingly. “Yeah, right. You’re not the one trying to lose

weight.” I sulked in my chair and I closed my eyes for a few seconds. When I opened them, my thoughts were finally clear. There was something I could have. Control! ... Control over my own decisions. I could pick something I knew would be good for me, or I could pick something that wasn’t in line with my goals. It was all a matter of choice. And that’s how I started in right earnest!

Slow and Steady

The weight came off slowly and my husband began to get anxious. “You’ll get sick if you don’t eat more. It’s not good for you. Later that night, we talked. “I’m doing this to feel better about myself,” I emphasized. “I can’t go back to the way I was. I won’t. But it hurts when you don’t support me in what I’m trying to do.” He apologized profusely for his lack of sensitivity and promised to do better. And by gosh, he stuck to his word! I added exercise by peddling for thirty minutes after dinner. And I continued to make changes. One night, several weeks after this, my husband commented with a joyous smile on his face: “You really look great,” as he put his arms around me. “Thanks,” I said. Just that morning I’d tried on my favourite trousers again and they fitted perfectly. A year later I was in the doctor’s office for a checkup. I’d shed fifteen pounds. She confirmed that my blood pressure was normal. Two years later, I’ve still kept off the weight. I like how I look in the mirror, but more so how I feel on the inside. No more “I can’t” talk for me. I can lose weight, and keep it off. With the power that comes from wise choices, I know I’ll have no trouble sticking to the lifestyle I choose.

It’s All in the Mind

Knocking off unwanted pounds is a battle that many people have to wage nowadays but with the majority it seems to always end up as a losing battle that they wage. The negative outcome seems to stem from a confusion that arises in the person’s mind – a confusion between two similar realities: pleasure and happiness. Happiness is what we are all made for, and even Jesus in his final discourse encouraged his disciples saying, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be

complete” (Jn 15:11) and again, “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete (Jn 16:24). Further Jesus observes, “But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves” (Jn 17:13). Because of this inner mental confusion, we fail to see that while there are a few similarities between the two, they are as different as chalk is from cheese. Pleasure is generally localized at some point in the human body, is intense but fleeting and shortlived and hence leaves behind a feeling of dissatisfaction and a craving for more. Again pleasure is experienced mainly when we get something for ourselves. Happiness is more spiritual and can last much longer than does pleasure and is generally associated with giving to others, making them happy, meeting their needs and helping to solve their difficulties. No wonder Jesus could say in his famous ‘Sermon on the Mount’: “Blessed (How happy) are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5:3-12). Another strange fact with regard to chasing after pleasure is that the more we taste of it the more insistently do we go after it; we never seem to be satisfied! While with genuine happiness it does remain with us sometimes even with a mingling of some painful aspects and no matter how long or short its duration it somehow makes us glow from within. Adapting the line from the psalm (84:10) we could say, ‘One moment of true happiness is better than a thousand fleeting moments of pleasure!’ Applying all

this to the question of losing weight, we see that while this exercise does not often bring us pleasure, rather we have to forego a lot of pleasure if we are to truly lose weight and keep it down, but there is a lot of genuine happiness in being a person who is fit and totally in control of one’s life.

Eucharistic Support

When Jesus walked this earth, he told his disciples several times, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full!” (Jn. 10:10). But to attain that fullness of life, one would need to ‘take up one’s cross and follow Jesus!’ In fact, one of the key reasons why we celebrate Eucharist each Sunday is precisely to bring our own little sufferings and unite them with the suffering of Jesus as he offers them to the Father. United with his redemptive suffering, our little aches and pains take on a tremendous value and become redemptive too ‘for the life of the world.’ But this is true only if we do unite our crosses consciously to the sufferings of Christ. That is one of the reasons why the liturgical rubrics at the time of the presentation of Gifts suggests that if at all there is singing it should be only while the gifts are brought up in procession. Once they reach the altar, the singing should stop. Or, if there is no substantial procession, then preferably there should be no singing. This is to allow the people enough silence to figure out what exactly they mean to unite with the gifts of Jesus as the second part of the Eucharist begins. The more clearly we think this out the better would be the “fruit” of our celebration.

Real Offering After Consecration

It is worth noting also that while the gifts are presented, there is no real ‘offering’ as our gifts by themselves have no great value. It is only after the Institution Narrative in which our gifts are transformed into ‘the body and blood of Jesus’ that they are offered to the Father (see Eucharistic Prayer III where the word ‘offer’ and ‘offering’ come only after the Consecration). Unfortunately, most Christians are accustomed to singing a hymn at this time – in fact they feel that if they do not sing at this point, they do something wrong! But the unfortunate effect is that they have neither the freedom nor the atmosphere to quietly reflect on what really do they present to God as symbols of themselves!

A Simile

If we place ten hosts on the altar at the Presentation, Jesus would be able to transform only those ten while if we did place a hundred, it is a hundred that he would transform. The principle then is, that Jesus can transform only what we consciously place before him on the altar. So, if we place only 2% of our lives together with the bread and wine on the altar, Jesus will be able to transform nothing more than those 2% of our lives because that is all that we have surrendered. Even if the rest of ourselves is present before the altar, he will not forcibly transform that which hasn't been freely and lovingly surrendered. So, by our unnecessary singing we could be reducing the effectiveness of our participation in the Eucharist. Returning to our initial story, the more deeply we are conscious of how much we are blessed the more heartfelt and sincere (and lasting) our gratitude. How deeply do we appreciate God's blessings showered on us so lavishly that we often take them for granted? How deeply do we value the freedom God gives us to take charge of our lives and become the kind of persons we freely choose to be?!?

2012 June

**EMPATHIC BONDING - LIVE IN LOVE!
EMPATHIC BONDING - LIVE IN LOVE! Fr.
Erasto Fernandez, sss**

"It was barely 5:30 in the early morning and I was in line at the local Starbucks watching the lady ahead putting together what seemed to be an enormously large order. Curiosity peaked to breaking point as I listened attentively to her exclaiming to the attendant loud enough to be heard a mile down the road, "Thank you, the order is for the nurses at Sloan-Kettering Cancer Society because they have been doing a marvelous job taking care of my Dad." Realizing in a flash that she was actually struggling to get some deep emotion off her chest, seeking to share a deep fear within the cave of her heart, I asked her how her father was doing, in a tone expressing genuine concern! "He fell into a coma yesterday and my sister and I have been taking turns being there with him and liaising with the nurses and doctors," she blurted, trying hard to hold the bubbling emotions together,

while balancing her precious cargo piled on a large tray. In a second my mind raced back to a month ago when my own Dad had been in the Emergency Room. Anyone who has had a loved one suddenly slip into unconsciousness would easily recall the feeling of helplessness and fear of loss that grips one in such a situation! "I sat down with my coffee, trying to free my watch strap which got caught on my bag strap....and couldn't help realizing that it wasn't about fixing the strap at all, but rather not knowing myself what to say to someone who's shared something so dear. Bonded with human experience, compelled to make a connection, I realized how I, too, was 'holding it in.' Diverting my sense of helplessness I couldn't help thinking, what if one of my loved ones slipped into a coma... "It's not about me," I realized as I caught myself walking up to the counter and telling the guy I wanted to pay for her order. She hastily intervened, "Oh you don't have to...it's okay." I looked into her eyes gently, and told her that, "I would be happy if this could be the last thing you have to worry about - just keep praying. Be in a space of deeply desiring his positive health. It's okay, let someone else get this." Her eyes welled up in tears and she finally started pouring it out, " with 'thank you's' punctuating almost every sentence. "We hug, both filled with emotion, then, walk over to the milk & sugar station and talk about his condition. I turned to her saying as empathically as I could, "He's going to be okay, he will come out of this, just keep reinforcing him with touch, his body memory will start jogging his mental memory. He's going to be okay." She then tells me her name is Christine, while I respond with - mine is 'Anon'. She gets it, smiles, and releases the rest of her pent up strength. We hug, exchange thank you's and wish each other a good day. "All this happened in less than twenty minutes, sparked off by an inner urge to reach out to a person in need, letting go of whatever considerations hinder connection. As I watched her leave with her heavy tray I couldn't help reflecting, 'Why, this is love, when there is no rhyme or reason nor any elaborate 'figuring it out' - but just spontaneous connection and a willingness to contribute and share in another's plight!

He Comes, He Comes, He Ever Comes

Doesn't the Lord come to us in very strange ways when we least expect it? But he has warned us that in answer to our surprised query 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ...' his answer will be, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Mt 25:37-40). The catch seems to lie in being able to spot these 'members of my family' in the fleeting seconds we are sometimes allowed before we miss the golden opportunity! For it is very easy to trot out the lame excuse, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' (Mt 25:44) and expect to hear a lighter sentence as we plead our innocence.

Training Needed

How then can we train ourselves to be quick in picking up the all-important clues that will earn us the great reward of heaven? The entire matter becomes so simple when we stop to realize that what keeps us engrossed in our own little (or big) problems is our selfcentredness and lack of faith. Some of us specialize in 'minding our own business' and 'not interfering' with the problems of others, thinking that we ourselves are burdened with more than we can handle! However, suppose we look at such situations in this way: it is the Lord himself who sends this needy person across the path of our lives, while he very gently requests of us, 'Can you be my instrument in reaching out to this my family member?' What we are direly in need of at such moments is "respect" for the other. The word 're-spect' is derived from two Latin words amounting to 'look again' – review your instant assessment of the situation! Spicere (spectacles) means to look, to see - while 're' tells us to look again or properly. What might we not 'see' if we did make it a habit to 'look again' from another perspective, that of what the Lord asks of us? For isn't each one of us created and sent here on earth with a mission? How often do we stop to think about a truth that is common knowledge - that out of all the human foetuses nurtured, only 30% are born alive – and that too without any outside intervention which

purposefully terminates their lives. So, the very fact that one is alive says that one belongs to that thirty percent; so is it so very difficult to believe that one is here on earth for a definite purpose – else one would have been among the remaining 70%!? Further, one does not usually discover one's life purpose right at the start, but it seems to unfold gradually and with each opportunity grabbed positively. This simply means that each opportunity lost makes it that much more difficult to discover what our life's mission really is – because our inner eyes can get so clouded by constantly focusing on ourselves that we no longer see what is right there before our very eyes ... we have become spiritually blind!

Limitless Opportunities

However, in his goodness, the Lord will not reject us because we have failed a few times. He provides us with plenty of opportunities. Besides he has a strange way of giving us a 'wake-up' call in these matters. One familiar approach he avails of is to use someone, often a total stranger to come to our rescue when we are in a desperate need. Realizing what we felt when someone totally unconnected with us, went out of his/her way to assist us would then shame us into doing the same for others.

Eucharist – the Training Ground

But we don't have to wait for such things to happen. Each time we celebrate Eucharist we could listen more attentively to the Institution Narrative reminding us of what Jesus himself did: "...Jesus took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, 'Take and eat...' And then added: 'Do this as a memorial of me!'" It is this last phrase that we need to hear – that Jesus calls us to continue his mission each day by breaking of ourselves and sharing our blessings with others. It is at these sacred moments that we need to attend deeply to Jesus pointing out the strangers and others in need of our compassion and love. If we did, we would be surprised how much we actually hear. He never assigns us a task that is beyond our strength, and assures us, "Do not be afraid, I am with you – even till the end of time!" Why worry then? Why not trust Him and launch into the deep? Winston Churchill has said it so powerfully, "There comes a special moment in

everyone's life, a moment for which that person was born. That special opportunity, when he seizes it, will fulfill his mission — a mission for which he is uniquely qualified. In that moment, he finds greatness. It is his finest hour.” But what if we were to miss that ‘special opportunity’ just because we have rendered ourselves blind by a self-centred way of living? Wouldn't we be caught up in eternal regret that we could have made a difference if we were a little more generous and other-centred. Another way to put it could be: every single day each of us is gifted with 86,400 seconds of precious time. However, only what we utilize productively out of these will stand us in good stead when we appear before the Judgment seat of God – the rest will have been frittered away, but with us having to give an account for those wasted moments! Would there be a better way of spending our time allotted here on earth than in serving others out of love? The Eucharist certainly challenges us to think again and perhaps introduce a change while there is still time and opportunity!

2012 July

PRECIOUS LESSONS FOR LIFE Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

A young academically brilliant person applied for a managerial position in a big company. He passed the first interview and the Director reserved the last interview for himself. In a few seconds he discovered that everything about the youth's academic achievements were excellent all the way, never had he gone through a year when he did not score. However, on learning that the candidate had not received any scholarships, the Director was intrigued to know who had paid his fees all through - it was his mother, by working as a laundry woman! So he asked the young man to go home and clean his mother's hands and return to meet him the next day. The young man did as he was told, cleaned his mother's hands slowly as tears fell all through the task. For the first time he noticed his mother's hands wrinkled, with so many bruises, some so painful that she shivered as he cleaned them. This was the pair of hands that washed the clothes everyday to enable him to pay the school fees! After completing the task, he silently washed all

the remaining clothes for his mother. That night, mother and son talked for a very long time. Next morning, when he entered the Director's office, there were tears in his eyes as he answered the question: “Can you tell me what have you done and learned yesterday at home?” With lowered head he confessed, “I cleaned my mother's hands and also finished cleaning all the remaining clothes. I know now what appreciation is. Without my mother, there would not have been the successful me today. By working together and helping my mother, only now I realize how difficult and tough it is to get something done. I have come to appreciate the importance and value of family relationships! “This is what I am looking for in my managers,” exclaimed the Director. “I want to recruit a person who can appreciate the help of others, one who knows the sufferings of others to get things done, and one who will not put money above people in life. You are hired.”

Important Insights

A child, who has been protected habitually and given whatever he wants, as is often the case nowadays, will develop an ‘entitlement mentality’ and will always put himself first before all others, even the most deserving ones. He will be ignorant of his parent's efforts and struggles to provide him at times with even the bare necessities. When he starts work, he will assume that every person must listen to him, and when he reaches the level of a manager, he will find it hard to resonate with the sufferings of his employees and will always blame others. While such a person may be good academically and successful for a while, it is almost impossible for him to feel a sense of achievement! He will constantly grumble and be full of hatred, always fighting for more. If we are this kind of protective parents, are we really showing love or are we destroying our children instead? The most important thing children should learn is how to appreciate the effort and experience the difficulty parents undergo and discover how to work with others to get things done.

Today's Problem With Children

The problem that parents face with children nowadays is that it is so easy to pamper them mainly because they seem to be so much a ‘rare commodity’ in our

times. What with nuclear families, planned parenthood, Government and other incentives and the rest?! Add to this the fact that generally most parents are over-worked in their effort to make both ends meet – spiraling prices, the generally high cost of living in almost any part of the world, the enticements of consumerism, peer pressure and the like that make children so demanding and difficult to cope with! There is also the other side of the coin. Busy with all that they need to do to keep the always needed cash flowing in, parents hardly get enough quality time to spend with their children. And so the endless hunger in the hearts of children for parental love and acceptance drives them further and further into substituting ‘having’ for ‘being.’ It is not surprising that only a few children today deeply realize what parents have to go through to educate their children the right way, until they themselves reach the age of parenthood. And if the scene is so pathetic in our day, we can be sure that it will be even more so as one generation follows another. Our problems would grow in arithmetic proportion while our resources keep diminishing in equal measure!

Stemming the Rot

Allowing such a situation to escalate only increases the scope and areas of damage done! No wonder then that the prospective employer in the true story above sought for leaders who would really care for their subordinates as people and work to bring out their full potential as they go along! But how and where could we bring in a paradigm shift? Once again, it is perhaps only the Eucharist that can make people realize the infinite value of each single individual. For if Jesus was prepared to die for each and every person, if he portrayed himself as the Good Shepherd going in search of even the one lost sheep while risking the wellbeing of the other ninety-nine, wouldn't we begin to realize the value of the persons around us as we recall his Self-gift to us? Further, since the Eucharist strikes at the very root of our egotistic self-absorption, we should realize that “I/Me/ Myself” am not the only person in the world. The Eucharist teaches us to ‘sacrifice’ ourselves for others, to break of ourselves and share our resources and gifts with others who are less fortunate and so if and when we enter into this

dynamic more personally and meaningfully, something must happen to turn the tide. But why does this not happen in spite of most Christians being regular Church-goers, celebrating Eucharist ever so often even on weekdays? Could the deeper reason be that even when celebrating Eucharist, we think primarily of ourselves and our own well-being? As a matter of fact, if as they enter Church we were to ask people what is their reason for celebrating Eucharist, we would be pleasantly surprised to see that almost 90% have no more than a self-centred reason for being there: peace in my family, a good job for someone and so on. Another way to gauge where the problem lies is to ask people which part of the Eucharist they consider as the climactic one, the one towards which all the others are directed and flow? Here again, the answers come as a surprise: most would place their preference in the Consecration, or the Communion – but hardly would we hear anyone say that it is the dismissal rite on which Jesus has his eyes fixed. He calls us to Eucharist primarily to remind us of his choice and undying love for each of us; he chose us not only because he loves us, but also because he wants to make us his ambassadors (Mk. 3:13-17). Having come to us through his powerful Word and the sacramental elements of bread and wine, he then penetrates our very lives as we lovingly receive him in Holy Communion – but here again, this deep interpersonal union is not just for our own sakes. He wants us to experience what such a union means and feels like, so that we can go out and share it with others, and bring them too into his loving, saving embrace.

Eucharist Makes the Church

We have often heard it said that it is the Eucharist that builds the Church, meaning thereby that the attitudes that we bring with us to the Eucharist are what will determine the way we celebrate, control the level and quality of our participation all through, and finally end up reinforcing those same selfcentred attitudes as we go back to our work-a-day lives. While this way of celebrating is a kind of spiritual ‘ego-mania’ it is egoism nevertheless and does nothing to spread God's kingdom of light and love in the midst of our world that is plunged in the darkness of

consumerism and globalization which thrive on our selfish attitudes! But if we did come to Eucharist to do what Jesus commanded us to do, namely to take the bread of our lives, to give thanks for all our blessings and then courageously to break of our lives and give to one another saying, 'Take and eat this is my very self given for you!' – what a different world would we not have? Would we have such a heavy outlay of scams, murders, rapes and the like as our daily diet in the news bulletins while we have to minutely scan the least frequented pages to pick up tidbits of the few heroic deeds of selfless service of the needy which are quickly forgotten? How happy would the Risen Lord not be to see that there are so many of his followers who are ready to live out their baptismal commitment courageously: in baptism we had committed ourselves to die to our old sinful, self-seeking Self – but that seems to have remained only on paper, or as a quaint theory meant for the old-fashioned and backward populace! What we need today desperately is a Copernican revolution in the direction of selfless and limitless love of others – an attitude and way of life we can learn only from Jesus our Saviour and from those who energetically follow him as the Way, the Truth and the Life! Each Eucharist we celebrate meaningfully should result in us becoming more appreciative of others around us, more ready to place ourselves at their service saying in action more than in words, 'You must increase, I must decrease!' And this is best begun in the family circle itself moving out from there in ever widening circles till the Psalm which says, "All the ends of the earth, have seen the saving power of God!" (98:3) comes true.

2012 August

A FRIEND IN NEED Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Only one act of kindness that British writer, Bernard Hare, experienced on a fateful night changed him profoundly! Then a student living just north of London, he tells the story of how the police called at his student hovel one night. Remembering that his mother hadn't been too good recently he rang home without any delay only to learn that his mother was in fact in hospital and was not expected to survive the night. "Get home, son," his dad pleaded. Having

rushed to the railway station he found that he had missed the last train. Another train was going as far as Peterborough, but he would miss the connecting Leeds train by twenty minutes. Anyway he bought a ticket home and got on. He was then a struggling student and didn't have the money for a taxi the whole way. Yet, he just knew from his dad's tone of voice that mother was going to die that night and he intended to get home even if it killed him. Once on the train, he found himself wandering, half dazed. "Tickets, please!" he heard, as he stared blankly out of the window at the darkness whizzing past. Fumbling for the ticket he gave it to the guard who stamped it, but then just stood there looking at him. He realized that he had been crying, had red eyes and must have looked a fright.

Angel in Disguise

"You look awful," the guard said. "Is there anything I can do?" Not at all in the mood for talking, the guard got a rude reply. Undaunted he continued, "If there's a problem, I'm here to help. That's what I'm paid for." The only other thing the distressed young man could think of to get rid of the guard was to tell him his story. "Look, my mum's in hospital, dying, she won't survive the night, I'm going to miss the connection to Leeds at Peterborough, I'm not sure how I'm going to get home. It's tonight or never, I won't get another chance, I'm a bit upset, I don't really feel like talking, I'd be grateful if you'd leave me alone. Okay?" "Okay," he said, as he began to withdraw. "Sorry to hear that, son. I'll leave you alone then. Hope you make it home in time." Then he wandered off down the carriage back the way he came. Thinking that he had got rid of the man for good, the lad was surprised a short while later to see him touch his arm saying, "Listen, when we get to Peterborough, shoot straight over to Platform One as quick as you can. The Leeds train'll be there." The distressed young man looked at him dumbfounded. It hadn't really registered. "Come again," he said, stupidly. "What do you mean? Is it late, or something?" "No, it isn't late," he said, defensively. "No, I've just radioed Peterborough. They're going to hold the train up for you. As soon as you get on, it goes. Everyone will be complaining about how late it is, but let's not worry about that on

this occasion. You'll get home and that's the main thing. Good luck and God bless." Then he was off down the train again. As if awakened from a stupor, the young man chased after him and blurted, "Oh, er, I just wanted to..." He was suddenly speechless. "I, erm..." "It's okay," he said. "Not a problem. If you feel the need to thank me, the next time you see someone in trouble, you help them out. That will pay me back amply. Tell them to pay you back the same way and soon the world will be a better place." He was at his mother's side when she died in the early hours of the morning. Ever after that he cannot think of her without remembering the Good Conductor on that late-night train to Peterborough. His meeting with that Good Conductor changed him permanently from a selfish, potentially violent hedonist into a decent human being - but it took time. "I've paid him back a thousand times since then," he tells the young people he works with, "and I'd give you the same advice the Good Conductor gave me. 'Pass it down the line'."

Important Truth

One thing that strikes us as we listen to this story is that people who are deeply wounded emotionally generally follow a downward spiral spewing out more and more hatred and violence as they go along, unless, of course, they are stopped short in their tracks by a show of genuine unselfish and extraordinary love. And isn't this exactly what the Conductor had done in his own simple way – unasked and without looking for as much as a decent 'Thank you' in return. We would have to admit that the number of people who would have acted in the way he did could literally be counted on the fingers of one hand! Recognizing the genuine and urgent need of the young man, the Conductor was able to use his influence to bend the rules a little to make it possible for him to satisfy his urgent need. And this is what touched the young man to the core and changed his otherwise aggressive nature. As we reflect on the life of Jesus we see that this is exactly the strategy he followed when working out the redemption of mankind. Realizing mankind's need, Jesus realized that just an ordinary show of love and compassion would do mighty little to transform humanity from inside out. And so, all through his Passion, he offered an extraordinary measure of

selfless love – uncomplainingly and even to the last drop of his precious blood. No wonder then that the Centurion who stood face to face with Jesus on the Cross and seeing the manner in which he died exclaimed, 'Truly this was the Son of God!' The thief on the right too surrendered to the power of such love when he cried out, 'Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom!' And he was assured of a place in Paradise that very day. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who hitherto had been afraid to manifest their loyalty to Jesus openly, now come forward and do what not even the devoted Apostles were prepared to do – give Jesus a decent burial. Do we not see numerous examples of how heroic, selfless love triumphs in the end, even when it is a question of a slithery wily customer like an Augustine. His mother Monica's persevering love triumphed in the end – and what a triumph that was! Captured totally for a mission by Christ, Augustine rose to become a Bishop and more than that a Saint who brought so many others back to Christ. The religious congregations he started and animated are witness to the power of such unselfish love that Augustine received and passed on.

Starting a Chain of Love

The Conductor showed one more praiseworthy trait. Not only did he not crave for any recognition or gratitude, but he asked the young man to pass it on to others, thus training him also to be a channel of God's love and one more link in a great chain of love. Such a chain brings about an increase in arithmetic proportion. For if one person who receives such love passes it on to a hundred others and each of those hundred to another hundred, what a huge unbroken chain results! But as the story goes, our young man who was transformed not only passed on the practice to several others, but also exhorted them to follow this path which would have borne even greater fruits. Did not Jesus himself do the same when he said to his disciples at the Last Supper, 'Do this as a memorial of me' or in St. John's version... 'If I your Lord and Master have washed your feet, then you too must wash one another's feet; I have given you an example that you may do the same!' How many would not have followed the example of the Master all down the

centuries? And yet, somehow we see that we still run short of the real avalanche of good deeds needed to change the world from the abyss of evil that it is, to the ocean of goodness and love that it ought to be! Perhaps the reason for this is that somehow evil spreads much faster than good for as Jesus reminded us, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt 7:13-14). As a matter of fact, the more often we celebrate Eucharist the easier should it be for us to be persons who spread goodness and love all around us. But this will be true only if we consciously enter into the dynamic of the Eucharist, which is that Jesus took the bread in his sacred hands, and identifying it as his very own person (my body) he freely and lovingly broke of it and gave it to his disciples to eat! The power of selfless love lies in its being given consciously and freely, without any need or compulsion; only then does it have the inner vitality to change people’s hearts. The story of the Good Samaritan is an outstanding story precisely because there was no need for the Samaritan to have gone out of his way to help the wounded man. But he did – not out of a sense of duty or compulsion, but from an inner necessity arising out of a common vulnerable humanity in need! While the outpouring of such love is extraordinary, the occasions for its use are ordinary and innumerable. This simply means that any and every one of us would have countless opportunities to manifest such redemptive love – if only we dare to step out of our comfort zone and reach out to our needy neighbor. However, the force is all the greater when we ourselves have received such generous love unasked and undeservedly! Such love awaits our approach each day in the Eucharist – it is ours for the taking! Take and eat ... and pass it on!

2012 September

??

2012 October

THE ART OF GIVING Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Indian sages have a wealth of knowledge often expressed in poetic form or through their hymns and other compositions. Sant Kabir, a well-known Indian saint has many gems of wisdom out of which we cull only one theme – the Art of Giving. This is what he has to say in connection with the often forgotten Art of Giving. “Rivers do not drink their own water, trees nor do eat their own fruit, nor do rain clouds eat the grains reared by them. The wealth of the noble is used solely for the benefit of others!” Even after conceding that giving is a good and worthy practice, and that one must learn to give, several practical questions need to be answered.

Q. The first question that comes to mind when we are confronted with giving is when should one give? We are all familiar with the famous incident from the Mahabharata. Yudhisthir asks a beggar seeking alms to come the next day. On hearing this, Bhim rejoices that Yudhisthir his brother, has conquered death! Bhim argues that if Yudhisthir is sure that he will be around tomorrow to give alms to the beggar then he has conquered death! Yudhisthir was sharp enough to pick up the message. One does not know really whether one will be there tomorrow to give! So the answer is: The time to give therefore is now!

Q. The next question that is pretty much at the top of the list is ‘how much to give?’ We recall the time when Rana Pratap was reeling after defeat from the Moghals. He had lost his army, his wealth, and most important of all, he had lost hope, his will to fight. At that his darkest hour, his erstwhile minister Bhamasha came seeking him and placed his entire fortune at the disposal of Rana Pratap. With this, Rana Pratap raised an army and lived to fight another day. Hence, the answer to this question how much to give is ‘Give as much as you can’!

Q. The third question is what to give? It is not only money that can be given. It could be a flower or even a smile. It is not how much one gives but how one gives that really matters. When you give a smile to a stranger that may be the only good thing received by him in days and weeks! And so we learn that one can give anything but the key point is that it must be given with one’s heart!

Q. One also needs to know to whom to give? Many times we avoid giving because we find fault with the person who asks. Or we are caught up with our own prejudices and preferences. For example, we often take for granted that all who beg in moving trains and at road junctions are bogus, or out to make a fast buck. But, there could be just once in a blue moon, a stray genuine person in need. However, our outlook implies that we are judgmental and reject a person on the presumption that he may not be the most deserving – an assessment that is in some way justified but would benefit from a closer scrutiny. Hence it is more praiseworthy to give without being judgmental!

Q. Further there are times when we have to ask 'How should one give? Here we touch upon the real crux of the Art of giving: whenever one gives, one has to ensure that the receiver does not feel humiliated, nor the giver feels proud by giving. When giving it is best to follow the advice of Jesus, 'Let not your left hand know what your right hand gives?' Charity without publicity and fanfare is the highest form of charity as it leaves very little room for the Self. Hence, give quietly and without seeking any return, not even a word of thanks! While giving we must not make the recipient feel small or humiliated in any way. After all what we give never really belonged to us. We come to this world with nothing and will go with nothing. The thing gifted was only with us for a temporary period. Why then take pride in giving away something which really did not belong to us? Give with grace and with a feeling of gratitude.

Q. The sequel to the previous question obviously is, What should one feel after giving? Most Indians know the story of Eklavya. When Dronacharya asked him for his right thumb as part of "Guru Dakshina", he unhesitatingly and generously cut off the thumb and gave it to Dronacharya. But there is a little known sequel to this story. Eklavya was one day asked whether he ever regretted giving away his thumb. He replied, and the reply has to be believed to be true, as it was asked to him when he was dying. His reply was "Yes! I regretted this only once in my life. It was when the Pandavas were closing in to kill Dronacharya who was broken-hearted on the false

news of death of his son Ashwathama and had stopped fighting. It was then that I regretted the loss of my thumb. If I had the use of my thumb no one could have dared hurt my Guru! The message: Give and never regret giving!

Q. And the final one is: How much should we provide for our heirs? Here the crucial question to oneself should be 'am I taking away from them the gift of work'? A source of happiness! The answer then is "Leave your offspring enough to do anything, but not enough to do nothing!" We can sum up the Art of Giving, following the thought of Sant Kabir, as follows: **"When the wealth in the house increases or when water fills a boat - Throw it out with both hands!"**

Money, Greed – Root of all Evil?

Many wise people will warn us that money is the root of all evil. The more money or self-sufficiency we have, the greater is the danger that we will end up becoming victims of greed. That somehow seems to be the tremendous power that wealth October 2012 6 Don Bosco's Madonna has over human beings: the more they possess, the more they want to have! But is the real problem in wealth by itself or rather in the people who desire to possess it? The answer seems to lie in the way we see or appreciate riches. To most of us, riches are something that give us a higher standing in society, the more rich we are the more we can enjoy the creature-comforts that money can buy and the more people around us admire our 'power' and good fortune. Soon we have several persons kow-towing to us and giving us all kinds of signs of respect. We can obtain almost anything we wish, simply by the force of the money we possess. What does all this say about ourselves? Anyone with a modicum of self-awareness would soon realize that what is really happening inside of ourselves is that we are horribly empty of self-worth, we seem hollow to ourselves and so we seek to cover that emptiness with the wealth we acquire. However, the major problem with the approach of using wealth as a cover-up is that we can never be sure that our wealth will last. We read or hear of innumerable stories of how a person stashes up great wealth hiding it in places where he thinks it is

absolutely safe – only to discover one fine day that someone has broken into his safe place and helped himself to all that wealth! No wealth stored anywhere in the world is really safe, and there is no guarantee that we who store it all up will be the ones who will finally benefit from it. Hence, this approach generates a lot of fear and suspicion in our lives. The acclaim and acceptance our wealth brings us is superficial – and even we can sense that as we go strutting about – our minds and spirits are never at rest! No wonder Jesus reminds us, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:19-21).

A Sign of Strength

For most of us, giving means losing, or better, ‘giving up.’ We see giving to others as an eventual loss to ourselves and that is perhaps the main reason why we seem to be so reluctant to share our good fortune with others. But there is another way of looking at riches – as a sign of our potential. From this angle, we reason with ourselves saying, “If I can give, it is because I have; and so the very act of giving to others proclaims my greater power!” Besides, the more I empty myself, the more space there is that can be filled up. And perhaps most important of all, no matter how lavishly we have lived while on earth, once we have departed from here, we will be remembered not so much for how much wealth and fame we had, but for how many hearts and lives we were able to transform through our kindness and empathy for the needy and the poor. It would be most fitting to conclude this reflection with the marvelous parable of Jesus ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will

they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” ... your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well’ (Lk 12:15-31).

A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather a person with a certain set of attitudes ~ Hugh Downs

2012 November

THE LEADERSHIP LESSON FROM ANTS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Ndubuisi Ekekwe, the founder of non-profit African Institution of Technology writes, “A few years back, I planned to build a networked digital library where theses from African universities could be stored. I was looking for a way to make these contributions visible to the whole world. It was a hobby, not a job, and so I took the time to personally craft it to my taste. The project took weeks, then months, and years. Finally, I gave up: no time! “Then, while resting on a road trip to New York, I noticed some ants in action. What crossed my mind as I stared at them staggered me. I noticed that when one finds food, others immediately gathered to help pull the food to their storage. When I disturbed their pattern they quickly re-grouped and evacuated it. Next they reorganized and continued on the line they had created. I was amazed at the total lack of supervision, yet they accomplished tremendous tasks moving pieces of food that were about 30 times their individual sizes. As I watched them dumbfounded, the theses project flashed to my mind. Couldn’t I trust others to help me and thus together we could achieve a lot more than I did alone? Right there, I made notes on my observations that led to the following decisions on the project:

The ants worked as a team: I will form a team, bringing professionals together.

The ants trusted one another: I must abandon the notion that ensuring quality means working alone.

The ants were open: I will share the idea with like-minded people. When ants discovered food, they informed others, who came along and helped.

The ants were partners and of different sizes: I will bring help and make the task our project, not mine. As

much as possible, each team member will be assigned based on his capability.

The ants were diligent and focused: The team must keep working, even slowly. Deadlines will give us focus.

The ants regrouped: I will be open to try new ideas if present ones are not working. In less than a month the project picked up and began progressing well. We hope to launch it soon from Ethiopia, the seat of the African Union. Peter Miller observed that swarming animals, like ants, can teach us a lot about planning, military strategy, and business management. Their specialty: they make decisions as a group and depend on one another to survive. Samuel Haldeman had already noted that these small creatures live in unity, are hard-working, prudent and disciplined. It is no wonder the wise King Solomon rebuked the lazy man: “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!” Particularly for small business owners, there is a major lesson here. By engaging everyone in the organization and learning to trust people, one can achieve more success. One cannot afford to assume that only one person can close the sales, install the products, and fine-tune the design all by himself. It is much wiser to give others opportunities to fail or succeed, and regularly ask for help. For one thing, I have learnt to forward emails on the projects to others immediately, instead of hoarding them for days. I also share project progress and challenges to all team members. The more people know where we are, the more they come up with solutions. You never know which member of your staff can come up with vital information or networks that can unlock future growth opportunities unless you share and communicate with the team. It means understanding like my ancestors that “The anthills are not built by elephants, but by the collective efforts of the little rejected ants.”

Communion Not Competition

Perhaps the insights of Ekekwe could be further strengthened by our experience at Eucharist. The whole point of coming for the Eucharistic celebration is to deepen our realization that we are ‘one body, one spirit in Christ’ from the moment of our Baptism. Unfortunately, even at Eucharist we are filled with a totally individualistic attitude. We come to get ‘my’

personal problems solved, to obtain peace for ‘my’ family and so on. Even that beautiful prayer which many pray after receiving Holy Communion seems to emphasize our personal concerns only: “Soul of Christ, sanctify me, Body of Christ, save me...! Is it any wonder then that we do not achieve much even when it comes to furthering God’s kingdom in this world? When we read Paul’s comments on the way the Corinthian community celebrated the Eucharist, we would possibly be shocked at our individualistic concerns. He chides them in these scathing words, “Now... when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. To begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! ...” (1 Cor. 11:17-34). He then goes on to recall the message and example of Jesus himself, “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’”. Paul’s frightening remarks that follow remind us that the problem of self-centredness is as old as Adam and Eve and does not die out simply because one has received Baptism. Unfortunately, while the entire baptismal rite is geared towards expressing our ‘well-considered and conscious choice of’ renouncing of Self, there is hardly any attention paid to this aspect of the baptismal commitment all through life. Even the Eucharist which is primarily ‘the breaking of the bread’ (which signifies the breaking of our very selves, our egos) hardly touches this aspect even in the most devout Christians and regular Massgoers.

Understand What You Do

At the ordination ceremony the ordaining Prelate reminds the candidate in words similar to these,

‘understand what you do, do what you say and imitate what you celebrate!’ warning him that mere ritual actions do not bring about our redemption from the vice-like grip of self centredness. It is only conscious renouncing of the Self deeply rooted in everyone’s lives that the kingdom of God has a chance of being implanted. The Eucharist does not automatically transform anything in our self-centred lives. But when we consciously bring the areas of concern and place them together with the bread and wine on the altar, only then can Jesus transform them into his own self sacrificing attitudes and hand them back to us when we receive him in Holy Communion. Just as a wound on our hand cannot heal unless we first remove the harmful microbes infecting it by some powerful antibiotic, so too our spiritual wounds will not heal without conscious and careful attention being paid to the different ways in which we continue to be self centred. On the other hand what marvels would we not see in our daily lives when we begin to trust one another and work in collaboration rather than competition. However, we are all aware that the culture in which we live foster and promote competition rather than collaboration and so it is a herculean task to even think in this Christ-like and Eucharistic fashion. Yet, this very practice can be a revolutionary contribution of Christians who celebrate the Eucharist frequently and wish to make it the springboard of a social transformation all around them.

Eucharist for Living, Not Merely For Celebrating

In order to achieve this kind of unity, we would need to learn from ants and other creatures all about us, for Mother Nature herself trains them in the best methods for survival and success. This idea of collaborating is one of the key pillars of the entire effort to build Small Christian Communities in our parishes – building SCCs is incidentally the decision of the entire hierarchy of the whole of India. Yet, although this decision was taken years ago and some efforts are made in different dioceses, everyone would have to admit, to our shame, that we are miles away from anything like genuine Christian sharing, at least such as is characterized by the early Church and presented to them as the ideal of Christian living (Acts 4:32-35).

In Acts we read, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” The next time we have an opportunity it would be worth gazing at a line of ants at work and observing what kind of reflections fill our minds. Maybe we too would learn a lesson or two about how we could contribute more effectively in our own little SCC gatherings. And since nothing succeeds like success, we would need to be bold enough to take the plunge and dare to do something different – but for that we need the inspiration and example of Jesus himself who said, as he broke the bread and shared it (this is MY body) – Do this as a remembrance of Me!

2012 December

2013 January

INTRODUCTION TO A NEW SERIES

Dear Readers,

Going by the comments we hear ever so often, we hope that you have profited from the series that has just ended. Like those that preceded it, the main theme has been the Eucharist and how we are challenged by it in ever new ways to live out the Covenant with the Father it inserts us into. This Covenant is indeed the mystery of God’s faithful and steadfast love for us, in spite of our repeated backslidings. However, if at all we seek to benefit from God’s gracious and never ending offers to us, we need some recurring help and inspiration to goad us onto the path of generosity in our response. And so, we begin another series having basically the same theme: Eucharist, the source and summit of the life of the Church! Realizing that

concrete examples of the success of others make a far greater impact than mere theory, we have again tried to capture in each article for the month, one facet of Eucharistic teaching in a real-life story of a person of our own times. Trusting that this effort will enable you to respond more generously to the call of Love, infinite, Incarnate Love, we place before you this series : do spend some time reflecting on its message, and if possible discuss some of its implications with family, friends and neighbours – I assure you it would immensely help all who do take part in this energetically. Could this group sharing occasionally take the place of the family rosary or evening prayer in the family?!? Also the example reviewed could be the subject of petitions in our family prayer from time to time! Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

FROM SELLING TO SERVING Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

When a group of business owners and entrepreneurs were asked ‘What are you doing to keep your business going in these post 2008 crazy-making economic times?’ They came up with a variety of answers. Some spoke of the creative ways in which they were using social networking to market themselves; others told of how they had revamped their web sites and blogs while still others had tried exploring various new business ideas. When the author, B. J. Gallagher, began to chip in with his contribution, he observed that the audience was enveloped in deep silence: “I’ve stopped making sales calls”, he began. “I make service calls instead.” The look on the faces of others ranged from confusion to curiosity, from disbelief to disdain. So he patiently explained what he had learned from Chuck Chamberlain who some years ago had given a series of lectures entitled ‘A New Pair of Glasses’. Chuck had explained how he had become highly successful in his business... and very wealthy by replacing sales calls with service calls. Chuck had developed the strategy that whenever he called on a potential customer, he approached it as if he were helping a neighbour with a project, or visiting a friend in the hospital, or even reaching out to someone struggling with a serious personal problem - in short, as an opportunity to be of service. He also related how, in some isolated instances, he had a completely

different motivation in calling on prospective customers ... on these occasions he was actually broke and desperate to make a sale. But, he soon realized that ‘whenever I went on a call feeling like ‘I NEED this sale; I HAVE to make some money today; I HAVE to close this deal’ - he came away empty-handed. ‘I never once made a sale that way’, he concluded! Invariably, when Chuck called on people in order to get something from them, he ended up a failure. When he called on people in order to serve them, he always clinched a deal. That was his ‘secret’ of success!

Sincere to the Core

He also learnt that this gesture of offering help rather than selling a product called for absolute sincerity on his part. It was not just another sales gimmick aimed at softening the client! He would have to listen with no pre-set, self-centred agenda. Rather he would listen with an open mind and an open heart - with a genuine desire to help the other person build his business. And if he could help the other he would. If he himself didn’t have the right service at hand, he would call in anyone he knew who could refer the prospective customer to that other person. People generally are smart and intuitive and can pick up on another’s energy; they know when the other is out to get something from them. When people resist sales pitches, it is usually because they know what the real agenda is all about - YOU. And ... people also know when your intent is to help, to be of service, to contribute, to assist them in achieving their goals. When you approach them with that intent, they welcome you. They trust you ... and they give you their business. This practical lesson Chuck learnt reminds us of what St. Luke recounts in Acts 5:1-11. When Ananias and Saphira sold a plot of land with the intention of helping their needy Christian brethren, they decided to keep a part of the proceeds for themselves. Their intended generosity was a double-header! But St. Peter picked up the game pretty smartly and the upshot is worth noticing – both are reported as having died instantaneously! If this death is mainly a ‘spiritual’ death, it simply says that they had ceased existing as Christians – chosen ones to

whom Jesus had addressed his Eucharistic command: “Do this as a memorial of me!”

Gift of Oneself

What Jesus had just done before issuing this command was, “he took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this all of you and eat of it. For this is my body which is given up for you! And then he added, ‘Do this as a memorial of Me!’” In the context of the Last Supper then every Christian is invited to continue the selfless giving of oneself to the needy neighbour – it is only in this way that the Kingdom of God can be built among people. For as long as there is even a trace of self-seeking, people will remain divided one from the other, each seeking to take advantage of the other as often as the occasion presents itself. And there were innumerable examples of such total selfless giving in the early Church – Barnabas is cited as an outstanding example! The result of such pure altruism among the group was that ‘there was not a single needy person among them!’ (Acts 5:34). What a glowing picture of Jesus’ alternative way of living in society – one that the world today needs desperately.

Contemporary Expressions

There were quite a few such generous and selfless persons in the early Church just as there are several among us today as well. Many who generously choose to follow this altruistic way of life may not even profess to be followers of Jesus, yet they practice this principle inspired perhaps by a modern-day expression of it : the ‘100/0 Principle’. This principle states that whenever we give to another who is in need, we seek to give the maximum (100%) without even for a moment counting the cost – all the while expecting nothing (0%) in return for ourselves except the joy of giving in gratitude for what we ourselves have received abundantly! Of course, this principle demands a lot more than is expressed in the simple title, yet invariably the one who follows this principle experiences something out of the ordinary! S/he doesn’t have to go around announcing that s/he gives 100% while expecting nothing – s/ he simply practices it at every instance and others pick it up in no time, often desiring to follow their example when they come across a fitting opportunity! And experience

shows that quite a number of people spontaneously choose to follow this same path of selfless giving in response to the stimulating example they have witnessed. How different life in a family would become when all the members are committed to this way of living. This is particularly significant in a Christian family, because by definition a Christian is “one who lives not for himself but for others,” (Eucharistic Prayer IV, §3) and that not just Chuck Chamberlain when he is rolling in excess wealth, but precisely when he himself lacks the wherewithal for his own frugal existence! Families where this principle prevails are generally happy and well adjusted families and they are the most sought after in the entire neighbourhood or parish.

Source and Inspiration

That such an altruistic way of life is not possible without God’s superhuman grace goes without saying. For, the natural tendency of humans is to first seek their own well-being and comfort, and only then reach out to others who have less or nothing! It is only when one reflects dispassionately on how much God has blessed one with that one is capable of relating to others in this way. Unfortunately, most Christians are either not fully aware of what Jesus has gifted them with or don’t realize its importance yet. And so it is worth refreshing our memories with Paul’s assertion in his letter to the Ephesians, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will...” (1:3-10). Further, during the Last Supper itself, Jesus gave us his new commandment, ‘that you love one another as I have loved you!’ (Jn. 13:34). Jesus would never expect us to climb to these heights of selfless love without empowering us adequately for the task! And so, on the same occasion he promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit who would lead us to the whole truth and empower us from within! St. Paul too bases most of his moral teaching regarding the daily living out of our Christian commitment precisely on this principle:

“In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud - and believers at that” (1 Cor. 6:7-8). To crown all his teaching he gives us his own example when he says, “and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him” (2 Tim 1:12).

Conclusion

With this kind of an approach to life, one cannot but wonder: What would our regular day-to-day business be like if everyone made service calls instead of sales calls? What would happen if all business people adopted an attitude of ‘How can I serve?’ instead of ‘What can I get out of this transaction?’ What would Wall Street be like? What would Main Street be like? What would the world be like? Wouldn’t we then be witnessing the “new heaven and the new earth” which Jesus has established through his painful death on the Cross and its glorious sequel, the Resurrection? Would we not all be ‘the salt of the earth and light of the world’ and the true leaven which transforms the entire universe from within!?

2013 February

THE FIVE KEY REGRETS OF THE DYING Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

People grow a lot when they are faced with their own mortality’ says Bronnie Ware who works in palliative care. ‘I learnt never to underestimate someone’s capacity for growth. Some changes were phenomenal. Each experienced a variety of emotions, as expected: denial, fear, anger, remorse, more denial and eventually acceptance. Every single patient found their peace before they departed though, every single one of them. But when questioned about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently, common themes surfaced again and again.’ She goes on to list the most common five:

1. I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. This was by far the most common regret of all. When people realise that their life is almost over and look back

clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled or only partially realized. Most people had not honoured even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they themselves had made, or not made. This taught me that it is of paramount importance to try and honour at least some of our dreams along the way. From the moment that a person loses his/her health, it is too late. Health brings a freedom very few realise, until they no longer have it.

2. I wish I didn’t work so hard Preoccupation with work, primarily an almost desperate struggle to make both ends meet, invariably results in missing the children’s youth and the spouse’s companionship. Women also spoke of this regret, even though they are generally more at home. By simplifying one’s lifestyle and making conscious choices along the way, it is possible to make do with a lesser income. This extra freedom or space in one’s life, makes one happier and more open to new opportunities, especially those more suited to the new lifestyle.

3. I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings. Quite a few people are in the habit of suppressing their feelings almost totally to maintain at least a semblance of peace with others. As a result, they inevitably settle for a mediocre existence and never become who they are truly capable of becoming. Several develop illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they nurtured as a result. No one can control the reactions of others. However, although some may initially react when one changes the way one is by speaking honestly, in the end this inevitably raises the relationship to a whole new and healthier level. Even more it could release and even eliminate altogether the unhealthy relationship from one’s life. But either way, one who takes the bold step to share feelings is the undoubted winner over a period of time!

4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends. This regret plagues those who did almost nothing to truly realise the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks and then it was not always possible to track them down after a long gap. Generally most people become so caught up in their own lives that they foolishly let golden friendships slip by over the

years. Almost everyone misses their true friends when they are dying. As death creeps up close, people do want to get their affairs in order as much as possible. But they sadly realize that now it is not money or status that holds the greatest importance for them. When the chips are down, it all boils down to love and relationships in the end. That is all that remains in the final weeks: loving relationships!

5. I wish that I had allowed myself to be happier. Surprisingly this is a very common near-death regret. Many fail to realise until almost the end that happiness is a choice. They had remained stuck in and grown accustomed to old patterns and habits. The ‘comfort-zones’ of familiarity built around them initially more for security gradually overflowed into their emotions as well as their physical lives. But deep down, the fear of change had led them to pretend to themselves and to others that they were serenely content with their lot. But when one is on one’s deathbed, what others think of anyone is hardly the uppermost thought that plagues one’s mind. How wonderful instead if one were able to let go the perceptions of others and smile again, long before one is already at death’s door. ‘Life is a choice’, concludes Bronnie. ‘It is your life. Choose consciously, choose wisely, choose honestly. Choose happiness,’ she sagaciously advises!

Jesus Teaches the Same

Inviting us to decide on our priorities in life prudently, Jesus told his listeners the parable of the rich fool: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (Lk. 12:16-21). Luke is the one evangelist who stresses the truth that riches are best used as means not so much to obtain personal satisfaction and enjoyment, but rather they serve their

purpose when we use them to ensure our eternal destiny. He envisages a great reversal of fortunes when riches are used only for one’s personal pleasure and gain. The poignant case of Dives and Lazarus is a story told to bring home precisely this point (Lk. 16:19-31). Luke in this story further emphasizes the fact that once a man grows rich, he seems to lose his balance as regards his priorities; he becomes blind to even ordinary common sense and will not pay heed even if someone rises from the dead to warn him of the futility of a self-centred ephemeral life.

People – our Greatest Treasure

Both Bronnie and long before her Jesus himself, as well as the great sages of humanity all down the centuries have stressed the fact that if we wish to be happy and successful in life, we need to ‘love people and use money’ and not the other way round as most seem to choose! Yet, even a cursory glance over the entire world, both of history and of the contemporary age, shows us that most people choose the opposite philosophy of life which is to love and amass wealth even when it implies sacrificing friends and other people, at times even members of one’s own family. A little genuine experience, however, suffices to convince us that touching the heart of even one person is far more precious and rewarding than all the transitory corruptible wealth a person can amass. Some great spiritual teachers tell us that people veer off the path of true happiness because fundamentally their problem is that they confuse real happiness with pleasure. These wise persons point out how pleasure, which can be very intense at certain times and in some circumstances, is nevertheless essentially momentary, lasting for but a few fleeting seconds. It is also largely localized to the physical and material level and satisfies primarily only that one aspect of our lives. Hence the fulfillment it brings is at most partial and never truly capable of fulfilling a person at the very core of his/her being. Happiness, on the other hand, is often not as intense as pleasure but it does truly fulfill the person from deep within and extends to almost every aspect of his life; it is reflected even on the physical plane. Thus, the happiness that floods our being when we genuinely and selflessly serve another brings us ecstasy and contentment that easily suffuses

the giver as much as the receiver. And this can last for a far greater length of time than a flash of intense sensual gratification. Besides, pleasure is basically enjoyable by one person at a time, and that too alone whereas happiness can be and is generally shared by even a large group. Another significant difference between the two is that pleasure tends to make us concentrate on ourselves and the long-term outcome is that we become thoroughly self-centred, thinking ultimately of no one else but ourselves. Happiness, however, is basically diffusive and tends to automatically include others. Thus, when we are filled with real happiness, we instinctively want to share it with others and in the sharing we ourselves are further blessed. A typical case in view would be the moment when the two disciples of Emmaus discovered that the Crucified Jesus has truly risen! Though exhausted after the long day's journey, they nevertheless ran all the way back to Jerusalem just in order to share their discovery with the rest of the community who also grieved the death of Jesus. And, precisely while they were sharing their experience of meeting with the Risen Lord, they encounter him again, this time at a much deeper level, and receive their commission to go out and share him in ever wider circles (Lk. 24:36-53).

Eucharist: School of Selfless Service

It is precisely in the context of the Last Supper that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and then alerted them to the fact that he had set them an example for them to imitate. Jesus went on to say, "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). So, as often as we participate meaningfully and wholeheartedly in the Eucharist we align our priorities more and more to those of Jesus and all this ensures that we would not have the kind of regrets that several have as they approach their dying moments. Rather, at that crucial 'moment of truth' would be radiant and eager to meet our Lord and Master like St. Paul who wrote, "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge,

will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim 4:6-8). %o

- **Adapted from an article by Bronnie Ware, entitled, Top Five Regrets of the Dying**

2013 March

%o FOSTERING GENEROSITY Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

It is a well-known fact that gift giving is an integral part of every festive season or of happy occasions in one's life. Now that we are better informed that giftgiving actually activates parts of the brain associated with pleasure and social connection; releases endorphins in the brain, producing a "helper's high"; and provides many other long-term health benefits, temporal and also spiritual, wouldn't it be a good idea to see how we can foster this habit in ourselves so that not only do we gain from practicing it, but that others also could benefit from it!? But we aren't always as giving as we could be. Greater Good has published dozens of articles on how to foster generosity in children, institutions, society - and within ourselves. We list here the seven top tips, culled from the archives - notably from Jeremy Adam Smith, for encouraging people to give all the year round.

1. Communicate the value of giving. As Christine Carter writes in her Raising Happiness blog, "Research suggests that altruistic children have at least one parent ... who deliberately communicates altruistic values to their kids." The same observation applies to political, business, and non-profit leaders, who can make a difference by talking about the value of giving and sharing. Yet this kind of communication need not always be verbal. Researchers tell us that even small visual cues can help children act on their natural inclination to help other people. And we all know that example speaks much louder than words, in the case of every human being. "What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say!" sums up this principle. Many studies have shown conclusively that 'priming' people with a single word, concept, or image can affect their behaviour in positive ways.

2. Provide models of giving. It may come as a surprise to us to learn that a great deal of research points to the fact that kindness is highly contagious. One such recent study found that around 15 percent of people in a given group emerge as “consistent contributors” who donate to non-profit enterprises. Now it is these people who inspire others to give more than they would otherwise. In another such study, participants read articles and watched videos about both extraordinary and ordinary acts of kindness—and were then given the opportunity to give money to others or to keep it for themselves. “The results show that hearing about these good deeds made the participants more likely to give away their money,” writes Carmen Sobczak, “but only if they had been exposed to an extraordinary good deed, not just an everyday act of kindness.” In his essay for Greater Good, “Wired to be Inspired,” psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls this feeling “elevation...a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness, courage or compassion.”

3. Get Personal. When natural or man-made disasters occur, we are often confronted by staggering numbers of dead, injured or persons who have lost everything except their lives. Here again research shows that when abstract figures are offered, they can actually suppress the instinct to provide humanitarian gifts. Instead, when the loss is somehow made personal by giving the disaster a face and an individual story, the results are dramatically better! “A pitch from a charity or a news article that personalizes suffering or tragedy is the most effective way to get people to care,” says Small. “Finding a way to make people feel a personal connection to victims should increase giving.” We must be further reminded that children particularly should not be shielded from people who need help. Too often we tend to protect our children from pain and suffering, but in so doing we shelter them from the needs and sufferings of others. If it is true that compassion is a positive emotion strongly correlated to happiness we would do well to provide them with opportunities to feel compassion. We benefit from teaching even little children that compassion is a gift,

a human and humane way to give of their time, attention and energy to another.

4. Be reasonably status conscious. Giving generally confers prestige and social rank. That is why museums, hospitals and other non-profit organizations make sure that they publicly thank their benefactors, even to the point of naming rooms and buildings after the most generous among them. Thus it always helps to make giving look good for the donor’s social status. But we must be careful not to subscribe to the belief that the high status rich give more than the low status poor. In fact, experience shows that people who have less money or less rank are more likely to share with others, even of the little they have. And that is an important point to drive home when dealing with our children. The Bible provides us with several examples of extraordinary generosity shown by the very poor – the classic cases being that of the widow who, before taking care of herself, first offered the last of her food supply to the prophet Elijah during the famine! (1 Kgs. 17:8-16). And who has not heard the story of the ‘Widow’s Mite’ as told by the evangelists? (Mk. 12:41-44)

5. Make people feel that they’re connected both locally and globally. In general, people tend to give more freely and generously to members of their own kin group, tribe, clan, ethnicity, or nationality—they’re even more likely to help fans of their favourite team over fans of a rival. But the tricky question often is: who belongs to this “in-group”. One 2009 study found that people from countries with higher levels of economic globalization were more likely to give money to international groups and causes— but so were individuals who made a point of watching foreign films or had international friends and experiences. The implication of this is that it is important to frequently remind ourselves of our global inter-connectedness—a task that starts at home with raising our children to embrace other cultures and connect with their neighbours.

6. Volunteer in the neighborhood. An important study analyzed the relationship between a neighbourhood’s support structures, like religious institutions and parks, and the amount of kind, helpful behaviour among teens in that area. Not surprisingly,

they found that individual altruism is directly correlated to neighbourhood quality. That is another good and effective way to increase the amount of giving in one's community: Volunteer at youth centres, schools, and churches. One not only feels good engaging in such altruistic activity but one will also help build a more giving neighbourhood.

7. Express gratitude and indebtedness! Probably the best thing one can do to foster generosity is to never let a gift go unacknowledged. "Gratitude serves as a key link between receiving and giving: It moves recipients to share and increase the very good they have received," writes Robert Emmons, who is currently working on a new gratitude project. "Because so much of human life is about giving, receiving, and repaying, gratitude is a pivotal concept for our social interactions." The bottom line then is: If you want to foster generosity, be generous in your gratitude!

Core Teaching of Christianity

When we review the cream of Jesus' teachings we find that what is special is precisely that the Christian needs to go beyond what the Old Testament prescribed. "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20) and again, a little later, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." Now we can say with absolute certitude that when Jesus gave us this teaching he was not merely indicating what we need to do merely to get to heaven. Rather he pointed out what is the true nature of a Christian and hence what is his/her characteristic way of acting when dealing with others, especially in difficult circumstances. When we follow this teaching in our interactions with others, the results cannot but be beneficial all round. Consistent practice of this teaching presumes that one is deeply conscious of God's own generosity to us his beloved

adopted children. It also assumes that like St. Francis of Assisi one is convinced that 'it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, and in dying we are born to eternal life!' Without this conviction being deeply embedded in our Christian consciousness, all we would be capable of is to secure our own selves in the best way we know and that is what leads to widespread discontent and misery for all. But in this area as in all others, 'many are called but few are chosen' – it takes a full blooded Christian to practice this fearlessly to everyone's advantage!

2013 April

FOUND A TREASURE THEN RETURNED IT Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Riding on Cloud Nine, Ferrin procured the keys of his new house and decided to check it out in the Salt Lake City suburb of Bountiful before the family moved in. He was greatly excited to have finally acquired a place they could call their own but no sooner had he entered the garage than a piece of cloth that seemed stuck to an attic door caught his eye. Opening the hatch cautiously he climbed up the ladder and pulled out a strange-looking metal box. He almost fainted on seeing its contents! Hurriedly he called his wife to tell her she wouldn't believe what he had found. Further investigations revealed seven more boxes, all stuffed full with tightly wound rolls of cash bundled together with twine — more than \$40,000 in all! When Ferrin and family had calmed down a bit, he instantly started surveying in his mind how such a large sum of money like that could go a long way, especially since they were still in the process of setting up this new house. "I'm not perfect, and I wish I could say there was never any doubt in my mind," he reported later. "We knew we had to give it back, but it doesn't mean I didn't think about our car in need of repairs, how we would love to adopt a child and aren't able to do that right now or fix up our outdated house that we had just bought," Ferrin confessed. "But the money wasn't ours to keep and I don't believe one gets a chance very often to do something radically honest, to do something ridiculously awesome for someone else and, what is more, that is a lesson I always hoped to teach to my children." Before anyone could come up

with other bright ideas, he contacted the previous owner who had died a few months earlier and had left the house to his children. He had purchased the home in 1966 and lived there with his wife, who died some years earlier. Having spoken to the eldest son, Ferrin learnt that the old man was in the habit of hiding away money because the son had once found a bundle of cash taped beneath a drawer in their home, but had never dreamt that his father had stored such a huge treasure. "He grew up in hard times and people that survived that era didn't have anything when they came out of it unless they saved it themselves," the flabbergasted young man confessed! "He was a saver, not a spender." The grateful young man called the money's return "a story that will outlast our generation and probably yours as well." Commenting on his unprecedented honest gesture, Ferrin reminisced, almost philosophically, "I'm a father too, and I also often worry about the future for my kids," Ferrin said. "I can see him putting that money away for a rainy day and it would have been wrong of me to deny him that thing he worked on for years. I felt like I got to write a chapter in his life, a chapter he wasn't able to finish and see it through to its conclusion."

Honesty: Always the Best Policy

We instinctively admire the great honesty of Ferrin and family perhaps because such heroic behaviour is so rare in our day. Maybe a good number of us would have to admit that somehow we would have tried to justify our keeping the great find, without even sharing the secret with our own family lest someone inadvertently spill the beans and the family return to square one. Some might even try to rationalize the find as a God-given gift to be received gratefully and used in part at least for the benefit of others. As we delve enquiringly deep into the mind and heart of Ferrin, what we notice is an inborn sense of fairness: he recognized that the money was the hard-earned wages of a man who struggled all through life to make ends meet for the family he would eventually leave behind when he died. Ferrin seems to have entered into the feelings and got into the shoes of the previous owner appreciating his sentiments, respecting them even though he had never met the man. If we were to express all this in Gospel terminology, he practiced

the Golden Rule which says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:31). At times, this rule is expressed negatively as 'Do not do unto others what you would not want them to do to you! which is rather a pale version of what Jesus teaches. For it is not enough to merely avoid hurting others – the Christian is encouraged to positively seek the good of others just as he would want others to treat him!

Eucharistic to the Core

Such an altruistic attitude flows from the Eucharist we celebrate every Sunday, if not more often. The Eucharistic Command which is at the heart of the Eucharistic celebration places before us the supreme example of Jesus himself. Taken both in its synoptic form as also in the Johannine version of the washing of the feet of the disciples Jesus enjoined this kind of selfless behaviour on his disciples – 'Do this as a memorial of me' (Lk. 22:19-20) and 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you' (Jn 13:12-15). So, it would be expected of one who celebrates the Eucharist regularly that he would positively seek the good of his neighbour in every way and on every occasion. All this would happen almost naturally in a Christian's life if and when one starts off by believing that Eucharist is not meant primarily for celebration only – but that whatever is done at Eucharist in a symbolic gesture needs to be enlivened throughout the rest of the day! Unfortunately, there seems to be a big gap between what happens in the Church and what is our habitual Christian behaviour outside! Which again is not what Jesus himself did on the night before he suffered and died! No sooner had the Passover ceremony in the Cenacle ended and the concluding psalms sung, than he set out for the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples. It was precisely at the end of this passionate prayer that Jesus was arrested and eventually led to the Cross to be crucified outside the city! Calvary followed and completed the Cenacle. And this is what should happen in our lives too!

What Matters is the Interior

Again, many Christians labour under the misconception that as long as others do not witness our wrongful behaviour, we may act as we please. Actually, as David acknowledges in his psalm, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:1-12). Adam and Eve too realized pretty soon after their sin that they could not in any way hide from God who sees everything (Gen. 3:8-11). Jesus himself reminds us forcefully that it is not only the external action that can be sinful and displeasing to God, but also the very desire we cherish in our hearts to do it, even if nothing really happens externally. To quote only one example, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:26-28). And so what we need to look at carefully is what happens within our hearts, for “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person...” (Mt 15:18-20). And so, it is the interior that we need to cultivate more assiduously ensuring that we are faithful to the Lord from within. “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the

hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:1-5). When we seek to be faithful to the Lord from deep within, we can be sure that not only will we be blessed, but that our behaviour will promote unity, love, peace and true fellowship, qualities that all of us deeply want to experience in our lives. It would be the best reward we could get for our life here on earth if we could be remembered, at least by our children, for qualities such as these

2013 May

JAMIE'S STORY Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Having worked for several years as a reporter, with five of those years covering an affluent community,” says the author, “I took up something radically different – ‘Becoming Jamie’ the story of a seven year old girl, born a boy, but aware of her own transgender status. I veiled the family’s identity for their safety. The photographer created an image that illustrated the girl’s journey thus far to herself. We featured the story, and it was one that somehow got etched in my memory. Month after month of little girl beauty contests, conservative politics and people calling for the extermination of prairie dogs had bored me with its routine. But after this refreshingly different kind of anecdote, I went back to the lifeless routine of the daily story, the details of government and sustainable business, and the thousand other stories swirling through a community.

A Pleasant Surprise

Not many months later, I got a pleasant surprise: I received an email to say that I had won a prize with the Press Association. I had entered only one story and so I knew it had to be “Becoming Jamie” that had hit the jackpot! To be on the safe side, I called the family concerned, to tell them that the story was up for an award, and so it could resurface, and that they should be ready for some pleasant or unpleasant limelight, without allowing themselves to get too much disturbed by it! ‘Jamie’s’ mother laughed aloud as she countered light-heartedly, “let me tell you a

story.” The vivacious mother reported how the week after ‘Jamie’s’ article appeared, a woman from the neighbourhood knocked on the front door of her house. She stood there, with tears running down both cheeks, and haltingly confessed she had been part of the group that worked hard to keep ‘Jamie’ out of public school. “I had no idea what your life was like until I read the featured article. Can you ever forgive me?” she pleaded. As we got talking, she promised to talk to her church group, and her friends about what they had done to the girl and the family, even though well intentioned! As can well be imagined, both ‘Jamie’s’ mother and I were crying by the end of her tale. A single news article had been instrumental in changing one woman’s outlook on transgendered people. What is more, the offender’s direct talk with the girl’s mother further transformed “Jamie’s mom’s” point of view about her conservative neighbours! And above all, I realized that through my routine reporting, I too was blessed to be the channel for “Jamie’s” voice and for initiating a chain reaction of better understanding and harmony in the entire community!

Invaluable Lessons for All

It is not too often that a chance occurrence like this turns out to be a rich blessing to so many, yet there are invaluable lessons that we can learn from it if we care to ponder over it for a while. First of all, we often fail to enter into the feelings of others and tend to judge them off-hand according to our own standards of what is right or wrong! Living in a highly pluralistic society as we do, it would be good to remember that different people have different goals and aspirations for their lives and for those of their children. Besides, modern technology has rendered perfectly feasible several things which seemed impossible only a decade ago! What we may at most say when we see someone adopt something that we find odd or unusual is that we would not prefer to do such a thing – but that if it suits the other, they certainly have a right to do it. Further, we would need to consider what the other person would go through in the face of our opposition or stringent criticism – and that too offered without first investigating the event/deed thoroughly. Besides, it is always better to keep one’s opinions to oneself at

most sharing it with a trusted few, unless, of course, explicitly asked to share! This holds good particularly when our opinion might tend to be somewhat negative or derogatory and end up hurting the other more than helping.

Eucharistic Culture

Especially if we are in the habit of celebrating the Eucharist daily, that practice should gradually yet definitively shape our daily attitudes, in general making them more positive, appreciative, encouraging, forgiving and the like. Our life-style and behaviour flowing from the Eucharist should be such that we build community rather than set people up one against another. We recall how Jesus specifically prayed for unity among his followers – a unity that replicates the total oneness that exists in the Trinity: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:20- 23). Besides, in the world around us we see so much of division and disunity that we would readily agree that we have no need to add to it. As far as possible a genuine follower of Christ seeks always to be more a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem. Racism, casteism, communalism and the like riddle our society all over the world with the result that we find ourselves fairly divided one from another. To add to all this, there is an ingrained individualism that plagues every person which further cuts us off one from another. All these symptoms are the result of sin and if it is true that Jesus has ‘taken away the sin of the world’ the evidence should be seen in the fact that more and more people work together harmoniously – at every possible level. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon,

which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore!" (Ps 133:1-3).

Specific Work of the Spirit

Just as the special role of the Spirit within the Blessed Trinity is to seal the love that ceaselessly flows between the Father and the Son (through a genuine Personal bond) so also a major part of the Spirit's work among human beings is to bring them together in unity and love. So, within the Body of Christ which is the Church, too, it is the Holy Spirit who draws people together and keeps them united among themselves. At the very start of the Eucharist, the faithful gather together through the Entrance rite. This is not something they can do by their own power and initiative. It is precisely because the 'sin of the world' has been conquered - its backbone has been broken - at least to a large extent, that they can even come together as one worshipping community in the name of Jesus. Having brought them together, the Spirit further invites them to allow Jesus to purify them through a fruitful participation in the Penitential rite and then inspires them to be open to the Word of God proclaimed for them. And if it is true that 'no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 12:3) then how much more would we need the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit to understand the message of the Word? Yet, in the Liturgy of the Word, it is not just a question of understanding God's message to us, but also the further question of having the strength to practice it consistently in one's life – and that certainly cannot happen except with the constant guidance and help of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, the main project of our lives is not so much our personal sanctification, but rather that we lend ourselves to becoming disciples and apostles of the Lord to work for his kingdom of love, peace, justice and fellowship. The high-point of the Eucharistic celebration is the dismissal rite wherein, energized by our special union with Jesus through Holy Communion, we are sent forth as heralds of the Good News to everyone in the world. The effectiveness of our celebration is gauged precisely by the extent to which we then spread the Good News through our words and actions. This task extends to

the end of our lives – and for the success of this we and also our ministerial endeavours need the regular empowerment of the Spirit of God – for only he has the master-plan in view as also the power needed to put it into effect. Nevertheless, what marvels can the Spirit not work in a person who is a totally selfless instrument in his hands, seeking only the spread of God's reign of love and the good of his/her neighbour. Such a person, like Mary of Nazareth, is a blessing for all mankind. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Lk 1:45).

2013 June

SELFLESS LOVE: THE ONLY ADEQUATE ANSWER TO HUMAN PROBLEMS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

I've learned from bitter experience that remaining positive is the most effective way to cope with life's mysteries, because there is really not much left to give once you have given up on hope, observes a wellknown writer.

A Dash of Hope

The author of the poem, "The Dash" which by now is famous, says that that exquisite poem is based on the tiny stroke on a tombstone, between the dates of a person's birth and death! Ultimately, that dash is a symbol which represents every day a person spends alive on earth. Therefore, how a person spends his/her 'dash' is all that really matters. While there are numerous stories of how several people have lived their lives in a way that continues to inspire millions of others long after they have left the scene and moved on, the following is an amazingly simple story about someone whose dash, albeit brief and in fact tiny, truly made a tremendous difference to quite a few. "Recently I heard about a little girl named Hope Stout" – continues the author. "No sooner I learnt a little more about her life, I couldn't help but feel it was definitely not by coincidence that she had been named Hope. It had to be attributed to fate or destiny, or better to the hidden yet compassionate God we know as 'Our Father'. The compassion and generosity cradled in her young heart etched a lasting impression on me and countless others, and I keep learning how

her legacy of love continues to bless lives every day. Though I never had the opportunity of meeting my little heroine, I often wish I had. It seems as though she was wise beyond her tender years and someone very, very special. When I tell people her story, I always add, ‘if this doesn’t inspire you, I don’t think there’s much that could ...’

Favoured Recipient

Hope was a twelve-year-old girl who was gifted a ‘wish’ in early December 2003 by the “Make-A-Wish” Foundation after being informed that she had a rare type of fatal bone cancer. However, when she figured out that more than 150 children in her area were already in line, waiting for their wishes to be granted, she decided magnanimously that she would use her wish in a very novel and ingenious way; she made a wish that every one of those children should have their wishes granted by January 16, 2004 (within about a month!). Unfortunately, however, the organization was forced to inform her that her noble request may not be granted as their funds were running desperately low. They calculated that they would need to raise more than one million dollars in thirty days in order to grant her wish. Disappointed, but not discouraged, little Hope converted her dismay into an enthusiasm that fired the hearts of caring individuals to spearhead fundraising to help grant the wishes of the other children, and eventually hers as well. Newspaper columnists and reporters for radio and TV stations broadcasted the story of this caring young girl and as word spread, the entire community was challenged as never before. In a jiffy, serious and determined action had sparked off powerful ripples of loving concern and things began to move. Committees were formed and schools, corporations and various organizations assisted in raising money to help bring Hope’s dream to fruition. Though she lost her battle in 2004, confident that her wish was going to come true, Hope lives on in the minds and hearts of so many. Her selfless efforts were not in vain as they continue to help others, not only physically, but spiritually and emotionally as well. At the initial fundraiser and gathering to celebrate her life, “A Celebration of Hope” on January 16, 2004, the unprecedented announcement was made that the Foundation had

indeed collected donations totaling more than one million dollars on behalf of Hope Stout. Her wish had been granted and she had succeeded in making those 150 unfortunate children happy and eager to take off for eternity with a smile on their little pain-ridden faces!

The Power of Selfless Love

Little Hope Stout demonstrated again in her own simple childlike way that love is stronger than death. She had also proved what psychologists and behavioural scientists claim as true, viz. that a human being is naturally oriented towards good more than towards evil. Although daily evidence all over the planet earth seems to proclaim the opposite message, yet she showed that deep down in each human person’s being, there is a fund of goodness, waiting to be tapped! However, it sometimes happens to be true that this deep fund of goodness can be tapped only against the specter of death in the background. As long as life unfolds smoothly people tend to believe that each one is truly the centre of the Universe, and that everything should revolve round that centre. It may be just a coincidence that Jesus too gave us his great commandment of love, precisely on the eve of his own hapless death! And yet, this was his priceless teaching all through his life. St. Luke reports in his version of the Sermon on the Mount, “Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return, be measured out to you” (Lk 6:38). And a little further, “A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For people do not pick figs from thorn bushes, nor do they gather grapes from brambles. A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks. ‘Why do you call me, “Lord, Lord,” but not do what I command? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words, and acts on them. That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but

could not shake it because it had been well built. But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed” (Lk 6:43-49).

Led by Personal Example

Having been sent by the Father to show mankind the true path of happiness, Jesus contributed to our wellbeing not by teaching only – he actually practiced what he preached – his was a ‘walk the talk’ show! He literally prayed for his torturous and executioners pleading, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” When they went so far as to divide his garments by casting lots while other people stood by and watched, and the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said, ‘He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God’...; When even the soldiers jeered at him as they approached to offer him wine calling out defiantly, ‘If you are King of the Jews, save yourself,’ Jesus’ only rejoinder was a humble prayer on their behalf! Granted that we lesser mortals would not be able to rise to such heights, nevertheless what a difference would there not be in our world today, overflowing with evils or every description, if at least the followers of Jesus were able to live up to the description of their name. For, a ‘Christian’ is one who lives not for himself but for others. This is Paul’s conclusion evolved from a deep personal experience. “For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:14-15). While our world situation today seems desperately low on such attitudes, the likes of the little child, Hope Stout, remind us that all is not lost – there are, perhaps, numberless people who are ready to rally round a charismatic leader who dares to lead the way! Would we be ready to undertake to train ourselves to become such leaders by daily doing little acts of kindness, especially of the variety that places the self totally in the background and works solely for the benefit of others? And here too the answer Jesus foresees is a resounding Yes, not merely said, but actually lived!

That is why there is a stout hope for humankind – good inevitably triumphs over evil in the end!

2013 July

TO A CHILD LOVE IS SPELLED T-I-M-E Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

Mac Anderson and Lance Wubbels tell the story of a shattering discovery made by an elderly man on a bright summer day. In the faint light of the attic, the old man, tall and stooped, bent laboriously as he made his way to some boxes that were stacked near one of the little half-windows. Tilting the top box toward the light he carefully lifted out one old photograph album after another. Eyes once bright but now dim searched longingly for the source that had drawn him here. This expedition had begun with the fond recollection of the love of his life, long gone, and somewhere in those old dusty albums was a cherished photograph of her that he hoped to rediscover. Silent as a thief, he patiently opened the long buried treasures and soon was drowned in a tumultuous ocean of memories. Although his world had not stopped its routine daily swirling when his wife suddenly exited it, yet the past was more alive in his heart than his present nagging loneliness. Setting aside one of the ancient albums, he tugged at what appeared to be a journal from his grown son’s childhood. Unable to recall ever having seen it before, or that his son had ever kept a journal, he mused to himself, ‘Why did Liz always save the children’s old junk? Curiosity getting the better of him, he opened the yellowed pages one by one when suddenly, his gaze was riveted over a short entry, and his lips curved in an unconscious smile. His dimming eyes brightened as he read the words that spoke clear and sweet to his soul. It was the voice of the little boy who had grown up far too fast in that very house, and whose voice had grown fainter and fainter with each passing year. In the deafening silence of the attic, the words of a guileless six-year-old spun a magic web around him, carrying the old man back to a time almost totally forgotten. Fascinated by that one entry, he realized that it had inevitably brought back vividly the memory of that day. He was surprised to realize that his own memories of that day seemed to be so different from his son’s recording. Reminded that he

too had kept a daily journal of his business activities over the years, he closed his son's journal and headed down hurriedly a carpeted stairway that led to the den. Opening a glass cabinet door, he reached in and pulled out an old business journal. Turning, he sat down at his desk and placed the two journals alongside each other. His was leather-bound and engraved neatly with his name in gold, while his son's was tattered and the name Jimmy had been nearly effaced from its surface. He ran a long skinny finger over the letters, as though he could restore what had been worn away with time and use. As he opened his journal, his already dimming eyes fell upon a brief inscription that stood out because of its brevity in comparison to other days. In his own neat handwriting were these words: Wasted the whole day fishing with Jimmy. Didn't catch a thing! With a deep sigh and a trembling hand, he took Jimmy's journal and found the boy's entry for the same day, June 4. Large scrawling letters, pressed deeply into the paper, read: Went fishing with my Dad. Best day of my life! A refreshingly different perspective altogether!

Achievement or Fruitfulness?

It is not surprising at all that in his teaching Jesus seems to prefer the perspective and attitudes of little children to those of ambitious elders as far as the Kingdom of God is concerned. For he warned his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Mt 18:3-6). Especially for people of our times, life seems to be measured in terms of achievements, conquests, goals attained and projects completed. In fact, we even measure our self-worth in keeping with our achievements and conquests. And generally these all lie on the material or terrestrial plain – attainments that do not really serve us when we seek to fulfill our God-given purpose in life. And underneath it all is seen the masked domination of the Ego deeply

entrenched in our beings. This Ego is the driving force that keeps us working relentlessly all through the day and often well into the night. For hardly has one project been accomplished than the next pops up almost magically, demanding again our full attention and energies. In the bargain more important (though often taken as being unimportant and not urgent at all) commitments generally involving persons near and dear to us are callously neglected! How often does it not happen that while one gives the best of one's time and energy to office work, matters on the home front are relegated to the back burner till, as full-blown problems they demand one's full, immediate and serious attention! While numberless books and articles have been written and will continue to be written on the subject of how important people and healthy relationships are in our human lives, yet the daily experience of most people is the opposite. Our involvement with Nature and Mother Earth, with the more aesthetic pursuits of art, literature, the fine arts and the like are consigned to the 'odd person' who seems to have a flair for these kinds of things, while we busy ourselves with more mundane pursuits. Many though are waking up to this serious imbalance in the way we live as cultured human beings and are making heroic efforts to achieve a minimal balanced approach to the various facets of human living. Many more in our day have woken up to the hazardous way in which we neglect our physical well-being, making do with a minimum of physical exercise, fresh air and a healthy balanced diet.

Qualities of Children

Not all qualities possessed by children are in keeping with the ideal of the Kingdom. One key gift of little children, though, is their sense of admiration and wonder at almost everything they come across. To the little child, everything appears as so big and powerful. Linked with this is their readiness to believe and accept everything that elders tell them. Further, because the world around is full of mysteries, children are more often than not full of questions. And when an elder offers him some kind of an explanation, the trusting child accepts it as unquestionably true. Again, linked with its innate ability to trust others, the child generally does not hold grudges, though fear of the

other might make him keep his distance. Generally s/he soon forgets the pain received from that particular person, and he is back in the relationship as if nothing had happened. It is usually these wonderful qualities of little children that adults tend to shed as they grow up into more realistic and hardheaded grown-ups. Nevertheless, Jesus asks us to retain at least some of these basic childlike qualities if we are to belong to the Kingdom of God. The main reason for this could be that God's world is full of mysteries. Unable to solve all these, what we humans can do at most is to stand in awe before them, marveling at God's greatness. It is generally the person who has experienced God's goodness deeply and consistently, who is secure within him/herself that is capable of retaining these childlike assets well into adult life without becoming cynical.

Eucharist, School of Selfless Giving

However, if we wish to imbibe the prime quality of Jimmy as he made that entry in his diary, we would need to learn to be grateful people. Gratitude is not just a question of saying a 'thank-you' or of returning the favour received. It means forging a deep bond with the giver, because one has experienced the love behind the gift. Once this happens, the receiver is ready to become the giver. Love thrives only in an atmosphere of mutuality – if one chooses to remain always on the receiving end only, that relationship cannot last for a long time. There seems to be too much of self-centredness and insecurity in the receiver with little or no thoughtfulness of the other. And this kind of mutuality is what we need to learn from the Eucharist when we approach it in a deeply contemplative mood or atmosphere. As has been said several times, the entire purpose of the Liturgy of the Word is simply that we answer honestly and deeply the question God puts to us when it has ended: "Have you seen how much I love you?" If one can regularly answer this question in the affirmative and that too sincerely and preferably on the emotional level, then one is ready for the next level: and now "will you give yourself to Me as I have given Myself to you... totally, lovingly and mutually"? There is undoubtedly something terrifying in the idea of letting our entire life go into the hands of the Almighty and All-

powerful God. Yet, when time and time again, he shows us how madly he is in love with us, personally and individually, that fear has to evaporate, leading us to a reciprocal and total self-giving. The beauty of this kind of a relationship with God is that it takes only a few instances of trusting God totally for us to realize how utterly faithful he really is. It seems as if recognizing our innate distrust that God gives us so many examples of his absolute trustworthiness when dealing with us. Returning to Jimmy's comment on his fishing trip, it seems to me that he interpreted it like this: "In spite of not catching a single fish, Dad was ready to spend the entire day out with me, just for my sake!" Doesn't that view make it sound great, even if that was not totally Dad's idea and intention? That is the greatness and the trustful attitude of a child – and incidentally it is the same of any lover as well. Could we learn how to develop this important yet difficult quality from the way we celebrate the Eucharist each day?

2013 August

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AFTER WALKING 900 KMS Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

It is a wonderful thing when a person makes it a habit to reflect deeply after completing a task set for oneself, or even after finishing a task assigned to him/her. There are valuable lessons to be learnt from such a practice, and so we take up here the reflections of Guri Mehta made on completing a walk of nine hundred kilometres, a task she set for herself as a challenge and educative experience. "Taking the first step with full conviction almost always guarantees that the destination will be reached, provided one perseveres through the middle part with full sincerity." This follows the line of the famous adage, 'Well begun is half done!' Everyone knows from experience that the toughest part of any assignment is the beginning. For one thing, there are numerous fears that seem to make one hesitate to take the step. It recalls the experience of the man who wanted to be a genuine welcoming neighbour to the family that just moved into the house next to his. But at the end of two weeks, he had still not crossed the threshold of the neighbour's front gate. So, he decided that he

would throw his hat across the fence dividing the two properties – this would force him to go over, at least to retrieve his hat and also while there, to say a ‘hello’ and extend a warm welcome to the neighbouring family! “After the longest day of the entire walk — 38 kilometers — my feet finally touch what the Romans thought was the end of the world. It’s been a long and interesting journey from St. Jean Pied de Port in France to Cape Finisterre, the western-most tip of Spain. One can never imagine the impact of such pilgrimages on our lives. Sitting on a rock by the lighthouse watching the most glorious sunset of my life, it seems like a perfect ending to a journey of 900 kilometres.” It has often been said that life itself is a journey. In fact, St. Luke portrays the life of Jesus as a great journey which began in heaven. Leaving his heavenly abode, Jesus came down to earth and grew up in the northern part of Galilee. But all through his public life and ministry he sojourned southwards towards his final destination - Jerusalem where he met with his untimely and cruel death! This beckoned him to the last part of his journey: from Jerusalem back to the Father! “There’s so much that I’ve learned from walking the thirty-seven days. I’ve learned that if you take the first step, and keep going no matter how slowly you go, limping or crawling, rain or shine, sick or healthy, happy or sad.— you will get there. The distance might seem long and wide at first, but step-by-step, day by-day, you slowly bridge the gap between the beginning and end. This is indeed a good remark to remember when setting out to build a useful habit like desisting from gossip! While taking the first step is of paramount importance, keeping up one’s decision to undertake the task is equally crucial. Invariably, one temptation after another will crop up as if from nowhere. Experience shows that if one were to try and argue with the Tempter, the battle would inevitably be lost. If one wants to succeed, one must say a firm No right from the start – that is relatively easier than struggling to resist after entertaining the temptation for a while. Each passing second makes it that much more difficult to resist and more often than not, the encounter will end disastrously for you! “I also learned that one needs to have clarity about where one is going. There should be no doubt in one’s

mind, so when distractions crop up along the path, they won’t last for long because one knows exactly where one wishes to go. One is grounded on one’s path. Also, once the clarity of vision is present, nothing can stop one from enjoying the journey. The destination is never as sweet as the journey. The focus always has to be on each day, each moment. There’s no improving tomorrow, it’s all largely in the now. Life is taking birth right now. This principle of ‘one day at a time’ has proved highly effective in the lives of those who made themselves into victims of chemical and drug abuse. When seeking to beat the habit, they find that they cannot guarantee that they will remain sober once they have initially kicked the habit. One hears of ‘slips’ ever so often – and so with them the effort is simply to remain sober just for this one day – one day at a time! And this remains true even years after they have begun to taste victory! At no point of their reconstructed lives can they say that they have totally beaten the habit, so that they are completely free of it. “Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic” they keep reminding themselves frequently. “And if you wander off the path, don’t ignore the signs. Don’t try to take the easy way out, don’t look for shortcuts. You will have to face the path at some point. There’s no difference between uphill and downhill. They’re both critical to the journey, two identical wings of the same bird. Remember that sometimes the path will be full of beauty, nature, and rivers that flow effortlessly. And sometimes you will find yourself walking on the highway going against traffic; trying not to get run-over and just hoping to make it through the day. It’s all the same, neither of the roads is permanent – the terrain will keep changing. The most important thing is to keep going in the same direction.” A great help at this time of turning over a new leaf is to believe in oneself, particularly that the Lord stands by us as we take our faltering steps towards final and complete freedom from the tyranny of our death-dealing habit. “Each day has its surprises; it is essential to remember to embrace the good and the bad. Take moments to enjoy the beauty around you. And always stop and lend a helping hand. It’s more important to arrive in good spirits than to arrive on time” This practice ensures

that one does not miss on our rich experiences like the priest and levite in the Story of the Good Samaritan! Making provisional plans for the day is very important as the Lord could call us in different directions as we move along. The important point is to be alert and ready to do his bidding because he leads us in mysterious ways along the path of life! “Be good to your body and mind. You will get from it what you put into it. Don’t over-indulge in food, but make sure you nurture the body enough. Never underestimate the power of a good night’s sleep. And for the mind – don’t for any great length of time hang around the naysayers and the gossipers. Don’t let the mind get habituated to that. It’s much better to be silent and alone.” In our day we are much more conscious of the need of a holistic approach to life – and we realize too that integrating all the various dimensions of our life is not an easy task, nor one to be taken lightly. “Don’t try to walk at the speed of others; if you walk faster than your legs can go, you’ll quickly burn out. If you walk slower, you will tire of that too. Find your own pace in life. And walk to the rhythm that allows you to hear the beat of your own heart, and keep yourself tuned into the quiet songs coming from your soul.” It is important to realize that each person is unique and that each one has to live life at the level at which s/he is called. The challenge before each person is to become the unique person that God has planned us to be, not a carbon copy of another person called to another level and way of life! “Have focus, but be flexible. Being rigid can make you brittle. Flexibility in the mind makes life more durable. Let the negative things pass through you quickly and be grateful for all the good in life — for that is the magic formula to multiply it. Try to remember that when you have blisters on your feet, pain in your knees, and your back aches — your lips still hold the capacity to turn into a smile.” We need to look on our bodily contribution as an ally who supports the general thrust of our life, and not as an onlooker or worse still, an enemy. While commitment and consistency are important, so is adaptability. As was said above, each day tends to be different from the previous one, and so we need to learn how to adapt to the demands of the moment, but keeping the goal in mind, we work

towards achieving it as best we can. “Above all, the answer is always — love. Always.” It is interesting to read this final comment of the author. It links up beautifully with what our founder, St. Peter Julian Eymard himself discovered and taught, viz. love is the answer to all our human problems. Undoubtedly, his conclusions were based on St. Paul’s insights where he asserts, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing! If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:1- 13). Every success to you on your life’s journey – one day at a time

2013 September

A REWARDING ACT OF PAY IT FORWARD Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

The author of this charming story avers: “I truly believe in the power of paying-it-forward and I have always gotten enjoyment and fulfilment from it. “A few months ago, I was stationary at the traffic lights on my routine trek to work, when I was jolted by a loud thud! My car was rammed from behind. No sooner did we pull over than a flustered young man haltingly admitted his fault and proceeded to apologise profusely. He laboriously explained why he had been distracted whilst driving: he had just been evicted and to make matters worse his insurance had just run out. His genuine stress and heartfelt regret were palpable, and as he gave me his details and promised to find a way to pay for it as soon as possible, I sought to comfort him telling him to not worry too much... things would sort themselves out; and as we parted I wished him have a great day. “At work, my colleagues gave me no rest till I promised to get a quote quickly; they were amazed that I had not even collected his registration details. At home it was a continuation of the same story: here my sister chided me in a similar strain! She was aware that I had only a

meagre sum in the bank (saved primarily for dental work) and was worried that I would not pursue damages. With everyone pressuring me to chase up compensation, I was utterly confused, unsure of what to do. Acting as if by instinct, I finally made my decision and sent him this sms: “Hi Joe, A few weeks back you hit the back of my car. I have managed to pick up another, so things are back to normal. I want to let you know that I am not going to seek any payment from you. If in future you could help someone in need that would be reward enough for me. Wishing you a wonderful Christmas and hope next year is better and brighter!” The young man was grateful beyond measure in his reply, and I felt that finally a weight had been shifted from my shoulders. If only I had trusted my own heart earlier we both could have been spared some unnecessary stress!

Trustful Instinct

There are a lot of people who take undue advantage of the kindhearted people around them. Some glibly come up with every kind of excuse to escape incurring any painful consequences of their hurtful actions – with the result that it does become difficult to really believe even the genuinely needy person in a moment of crisis. One cannot help recalling the sob stories heard on most railway platforms in the big metropolitan cities: ‘while travelling, I was robbed of all my belongings, including my wallet and ticket; I have no way of returning home. Could you, please help me purchase my ticket back home?!’ Realizing that such a predicament is an ever present possibility, what does one do? What makes matters worse is that some days later one meets the same person giving one the same sob story (of course, he does not recognize you nor remember the fact that he had approached you the last time with the same request!) Most of us have come across persons using this strategy against you to extract a few rupees from you. But then, how does one distinguish between the genuine person stranded because of theft (for such things can and do happen every so often!) and the fake professional liar out to relieve you of some of your hard-earned money? In situations such as these, one has to learn to trust one’s heart more than one’s head, but not ignoring a few other commonsense principles. The first is that if I

help this person in his real or feigned predicament it is out of my free will and not because his story is genuine or not. If I can assure myself that I act freely, out of my own conscious choice, then what I tell myself is: I take responsibility for parting with my money and even if I have been taken for a ride, I accept it and have only myself to blame for it! Hence, I will have no regrets if I later come to know that I have been cheated. Next, I ensure that I check out the story as far as is possible before deciding to give or not. However, I need to remember that some of these people are ‘professionals’ and make good use of their grasp of the psychology of human behaviour. Besides, they have nothing to lose if I refuse to help them - they will try elsewhere for they are sure that someone or other will fall for the bait. Sometimes persons approached in this manner take the time and trouble to go with the ‘victim’ to purchase a ticket for him/her to his alleged destination, actually put him on the train and see him off – only to learn some time later from a friend that he got off at the very next station, returned and had the ticket refunded, pocketing your hard-earned money that remained. Yet, it will happen from time to time that you do meet the genuine person who is in trouble and the sincere gratitude and appreciation expressed more than compensates for the times when you have been cheated. However, when you start off by taking responsibility for your action irrespective of the other person’s bad faith or otherwise, then you don’t feel the hurt as much!

Pass it On

One other point we pick up from the story above is the donor’s request that the recipient pass on the good deed to another whom he finds in need. This approach keeps the good deed moving forward, with the possibility of touching the hearts of so many persons along the way. At times the results are mind-boggling. The practice of using Smile Cards and the like is an example in view. It is amazing how even little children pick up the principle of doing good anonymously and getting others to pass it on. While they might approach this as a bit of fun, yet the good is done and their generous hearts become more conscious of the needs of others. Besides, there is a sharing of one’s blessings and an expression of

gratitude to the Lord and Father of us all, for his generous blessings towards ourselves.

Condition for Entering into Eternal Life

We cannot but recall here the Gospel account of the Rich Young Man who came to Jesus to find out what he needed to do to gain eternal life. Having learnt that he had been meticulously observing all the commandments prescribed right from his early days, Jesus ingeniously spotted his real weak point, asking him to 'go sell all that you have, give it to the poor and come follow me!' At which, the man turned and walked away but sad and unfulfilled! He had come so close to enjoying real happiness and that too for ever, but balked at the suggestion that he part with his precious wealth. The problem here seems to be that when one has wealth at one's command, one is totally in control of one's life. Besides, other people do respect a wealthy man unlike his poor neighbour. So, to deliberately part with one's wealth is courting a great risk of becoming a 'nobody' overnight! And that is something difficult to accept. Yet, it shows that one has not understood the meaning of the 'eternal life' that Jesus speaks about. When God invites us into Covenant with him, he says in effect: Once you seal this Covenant with Me, I shall be your God and you shall be my people. All that is yours in mine, but equally, all that is mine is yours! So, in fact, one ends up with an infinite amount of riches; such a person cannot lack anything, because God undertakes to provide him with everything, on condition that he likewise denies God nothing that he asks of him. But when we realize that what we give to God is really nothing compared to what we get in return, one would need to be a real fool to miss the opportunity for such an exchange. We see the fulfilment of this exchange in every Eucharist we celebrate: what we bring to the altar are our paltry gifts of bread and wine – but what we receive a few minutes later is nothing less than the Son of God himself, though in sacramental form! Shouldn't our daily experience of this convince us of this truth and thus make us generous in sharing our gifts with our needy neighbours? Hopefully, you will be able to approach this kind of a challenge the next time the Lord offers you one, with greater confidence and with renewed vigour and conviction. It is worth

recalling the words of Jesus, "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward" (Mt 10:41-42).

2013 october

AN UNUSUAL PIONEER Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

At a time when women are coming into their own, showing conclusively that whatever a man can do they can perhaps do even better, we have the story of a novel way in which a woman chose her life's career. As we go through it we cannot but reflect: 'If one person could do this much, why can't many more take up the challenge and bring about a better world in which both men and women work as partners and as equals – an ideal which has been present from the very inception of human life on planet Earth - but hardly ever achieved to satisfaction!

A Rare Decision

Aside from a thin coat of powder, there is nothing superficial about 32-year-old Sarah 'Bogi' Lateiner. Big-hearted and brilliant, Bogi graduated Phi Beta Kappa and did it in three years with a double major in pre-law and women's studies. Her plan was to go to law school and become a champion for women on a global scale. However, in the end, she decided to go with her plan B, instead. "I had in my mind that this was a different way to save the world," she mused... "In other words, fix the world - by fixing cars. She enrolled in technical school right after graduation." Who doesn't go on to become a mechanic after prelaw?" she queried with a broad smile. Today, she has her own shop in Phoenix called "180 Degree Automotive". Beyond quality service for all, she has taken on the added mission to educate women specifically about cars and thus empower them for the rest of their lives. The concept arose out of Bogi's first car experience - at age 16 she bought an old VW bug that needed a lot of work. She soon realized that mechanics were taking advantage of her ignorance regarding the working of cars, so she learned how to

fix things herself. “And really,” she says, “that’s what empowered her more than anything else!” “I got over my fear of this big piece of metal and plastic that is our cars,” she said. “And it became my passion for me to take that empowerment I got from learning about cars to teach it to other women eager to feel the thrill of breaking out of male domination.” To that end, Bogi works all through the week and on weekends teaches basic car maintenance classes. She also started a scholarship for women who want to go on to technical school - and hires mostly women mechanics. Bogi says she knows from experience that for a woman, getting into law school is easier than breaking into this business. “When I was applying for jobs,” she recalls, “I literally walked in once and he yelled back, ‘Hey, Joe, we got a little girl here wants to be a technician, you’ve got to see this.’” Bogi says she discovered then that she picked the absolutely right path. She has remembered that almost daily - whether it is a grateful customer bringing in a gift of home-baked bread, or a 77-year-old student breaking loose her first lug bolt. Bogi says she’s more convinced than ever that she is making a difference - and that, if you (especially a woman) really want to change the world, you better first know how to change your oil!

Learning from Experience

Time and again it has proven to be true that Life’s call to people comes through their ordinary daily experiences. The point is to be sufficiently disturbed by what one goes through currently, enough at least to impel one to want to remedy the situation. Too often, people just sit back and grouse about the lousy deal they get from others around them. But why should Life or others or the Universe for that matter, owe anyone an existence? Why should solutions to problems or other difficulties be given to anyone on a platter? The command God gave to Adam and Eve (to both equally) was: “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon

the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:28-31). So, in many cases the rule would well be, not so much ‘what cannot be cured must be endured’ but rather, ‘what cannot be endured must be cured!’ It is only those who dare to venture to make things different (better) for themselves and for others, who stand out as the real benefactors of humanity – in every situation, necessity is the mother of invention! And this is true equally of women as of men. Both possess the Spirit of God in equal measure, though each is endowed with a different set of gifts and talents. As we go through the Gospels, we notice that the evangelists were not only aware of this fundamental equality between the sexes as far as blessings and opportunities go, but actually set out to emphasize it, though in their own subtle and ingenious manner.

Scriptural Examples

If we take only the Gospel of Mark as an example, we see that those who wished to benefit from God’s generosity in sending Jesus into our midst had to take a leap of faith. This is shown powerfully in the case of Jairus, a synagogue official, who approached Jesus for the cure of his dying daughter (Mk. 5:21-43). But interrupting his story almost in the middle St. Mark narrates the experience of a woman suffering from hemorrhage for twelve years who dares to come up behind Jesus in the crowd and merely touch the hem of his garment – and instantly felt herself cured of her ailment. On that one occasion Jesus favoured both the woman with the hemorrhage as also, the synagogue official! At times the two sexes are shown up by way of contrast, and here invariably the woman steals the limelight. Dining in the house of Simon the Leper, Jesus experiences an unusually challenging situation! “A woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, ‘Why was the

ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.’ And they scolded her. But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her’ (Mk. 14:3-9). In this passage St. Mark emphasizes the contrast between the uncalculating generosity of the woman in giving not only the precious ointment to prepare Jesus for his burial, but also the costly alabaster jar; (for once broken it could serve no other useful human purpose!) and the self-interested calculating approach of Judas and the rest of the apostolic band who suggested that it could have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor! It is quite obvious that Mark presents the simple guileless woman as a counterfoil to the shrewd and double-minded Judas. The post-resurrection narratives also present the women who followed Jesus in the role of unofficial disciples in a far better light than the timid and incredulous apostles. It is the women who are constituted as the first heralds of the Good News of the Resurrection of Jesus and of his living presence among his people in a new and marvelous way! These are only a few stray examples randomly chosen to show that Jesus seemed to prefer women for the great work of evangelization more than the chosen apostles, though it was to the apostles that he gave authority in his Church. Unfortunately, as the Church journeyed down the centuries, women seem to have been relegated only to doing minor, odd jobs in the great work of redemption. Gradually, their valuable contribution to the life of the Church was almost totally lost – though at crucial moments in the Church’s history they rose to the occasion and once again helped the Risen Lord to bring the Church back onto the rails. We look forward to the time when, as in the early decades of the Church’s missionary life, women worked alongside men at this task, people like

Priscilla and Aquila, (Acts 18), Paul who accepted to work and even stay with Lydia (Acts 16) and several others. For as Paul himself emphasized, “in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith! As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26-28). What needs to stand out in this kind of a set up is that both men and women are regarded as equals; no trace of competition or rivalry should exist in their dealings, particularly where Kingdom work is concerned. Each has his/her own set of gifts and talents that equip them for the work, and they need to complement each other’s contributions. Where competition and domination prevail one can question whether the transforming and redeeming grace of Jesus has effected any change at all among us! “For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each: I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor 3:4-9).

2013 November

DISCOVERING ONE'S VOCATION Fr. Erasto Fernandez, sss

After finishing high school in Mendham, N.J., Maggie Doyne wasn’t sure what she wanted to do. She had been an ambitious and driven student (the editor of her school yearbook, a varsity athlete, and the class treasurer) but as she weighed her options for college, she felt increasingly burnt out, and decided that she should take some time off. “I took what is called a gap year,” she ruminated, speaking to The Huffington Post from her family’s home in Mendham. “I was about to make this investment in my life, but I didn’t have a strong direction. I wanted to figure that out more

leisurely.” So, for the first semester of her sabbatical, Maggie travelled with a backpacking expedition programme called Leap Now, which leads students on service missions and cultural projects across the globe for a semester. And when it came time to decide on her Spring plans, Maggie asked a mentor how she could best ‘make an impact on others!’ “I insisted that I wanted to be of use and I wished to work with kids,” Maggie recalls. “So I headed off to India, the first place that appealed to me, to work for an organization there.” Arriving one bright summer’s day in Northeast India, she met countless young Nepalese refugees who had fled the country after the recent Maoist uprising and civil war. One teenage girl she met had escaped Nepal six or seven years earlier, and hadn’t returned home since. So she and Maggie decided to take a trip together - back to Nepal, to look for the girl’s family. “We sat on a bus for two and a half days,” Maggie recounted. “At the end of the trip, we just came to a stop on the road, and the bus driver quipped, ‘Alright girls, you can’t go any further.’” The two beleaguered teenagers then trekked for two more days through the Himalayas, ultimately finding the girl’s former village. They received details about her dispersed family and where many of her relatives had ended up.

More Challenging Experiences

“The devastating effects of human neglect on the whole area were very, very disconcerting,” Maggie reported, remembering the experience. “But mysteriously I immediately felt attached to the region, as if I were destined to be there.” She soon grew enamoured of Nepal’s natural beauty, as well as the sense of community and optimism that stood out in its people, but she was also deeply affected by the orphans she met in the villages. She often saw one young Nepalese girl, Hema, breaking rocks on the side of a dry river bed. She had no school, no family; she had literally nothing, but she still smiled and waved every time Maggie walked by...” “It was really this rude awakening that decided my future” Maggie recalls. “I thought to myself, it only takes \$5 for admission and \$5 for a uniform to put her into school. Why can’t I do that?” And that is what Maggie did. And then she put a few other young girls into school, too. And she realized she could do so much more by

staying in Nepal and dealing with the refugee problem at its source, rather than waiting for these kids to flee to India, or, worse, get stuck at the border and find themselves victims of human trafficking or domestic servitude. She realized she wanted to give these kids a real, permanent home. That was when Maggie reached the turning point in her life; calling her parents from a ‘rickety phone booth in the middle of nowhere’ she asked them to wire her life savings - \$5000 she’d earned from babysitting in High School - over to Nepal. After a lengthy conversation (in which they made every effort to dissuade their young and inexperienced daughter) her parents finally agreed to send the money.

A New Home and Life

Maggie bought a piece of property in Surkhet, Nepal, and formed a team from the local community to help her dig the initial foundation for an orphanage that would double as a home for herself. But it didn’t take long for her to realize that she would need more resources if she actually wanted to get it built. So she flew back to New Jersey and worked. She babysat, dogsat, house-sat, held garage sales, bake sales, and anything else she could possibly do to raise more money. Local papers eventually picked up her story, and soon cheques from admirers started pouring in. In the brief space of just five months, Maggie succeeded in raising close to \$60,000. With this added financial support, Maggie and her team in Surkhet were able to continue the construction and finish the home. She next formed a Nepali board of directors and established her orphanage, which she called the Kopila Valley Children’s Project and it was eventually registered as an NGO. She was only 22 years old then. Her school in Surkhet — the Kopila Valley Primary School, currently enrolls 230 students and 14 full-time teachers. The kids eat a full, nutritious lunch every day, sometimes their only daily meal, given that they live in an area where 50% of children under five are malnourished and malnutrition is the cause of 70% of deaths under the age of five. Maggie’s work is all done under the banner of her nonprofit, BlinkNow. Its mission is to “Empower young people to become pioneers in developing their own solutions to world poverty... I feel there is a big

shift going on in the world, and people are not comfortable with the way kids are living... I think they are really starving for hope.” Barely 25 years old Maggie has formal custody of 40 Nepalese children, all of whom originally came to her with no family, no money, and no education. Several were abused. She has provided all of them with basic medical care and food, and she has taught them to read and write. “The first little girl I took in is a genius,” Maggie confides with obvious pride showing clearly on her happy face. “She learned English in only a couple of months and she reads every book I give her. I could see her going to Harvard or something like that.”

Genuine Gratitude

In the case of Maggie as with so many others, the discovery of her life’s challenge came step by uncertain step, almost as if by accident or chance. And yet, in hindsight we could say that the Almighty had a very definite plan both for her and also for the children she espoused. In fact, we can say with absolute certitude that the Lord wants every one of his beloved children to be happy even while here on earth. However, his approach seems to be that those whom he, in his providence, has blessed abundantly would share their blessings with the less fortunate, and in this way not only would every single person be cared for, but they would all be bonded together into one big family! However, for this marvellous plan of the Father to see the light of day, it is important that certain ground rules be followed. First of all, there has to be a general acknowledgement that people are here on this earth not permanently, but as sojourners. Once this principle is accepted, then the temptation to hoard the blessings showered on us becomes less attractive and dangerous. Secondly, perhaps the harder principle to accept is that no matter what our background of colour, language, race or religion be, we are truly children of the one Father and so need to live in love and fellowship. If we cannot see ourselves as equals, then all kinds of artificial divisions and barriers get erected and mankind is doomed to self-destruction. Again, if we could “remember the words of the Lord Jesus, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35-36) as being the solution to all our interpersonal problems, there would inevitably be a lot

more of happiness all around. Of course, there will be the odd person/s who chooses to act in a lazy fashion, doing no work, but claiming the lion’s share of the earth’s blessings, and this could lead to a lot of unpleasantness, yet our presumption is that all would want to sacrifice themselves at least a little for the benefit of others less fortunate.

Utopia or Ground Reality?

Perhaps all that we have outlined above would seem to most people as mere ‘wishful thinking’ or dreaming of an Utopia or a Shangri-la! That could very well be the case, but perhaps the more challenging thought is that our God and Father has left it to us to make of the world the kind of heaven or hell we choose to make of it! He has already provided us with all the possible materials we need to build our heaven here on earth itself and that too with our own limited gifts and talents. And isn’t that what Maggie has done and shown us in a small little way? If we are courageous enough to take up the challenge, there is no reason why our world cannot be a far better place than it is at present. The numberless Maggies who have responded positively so far show us that it is possible for all to live peaceably in this world. And especially, that it is not only the select few who are prepared to make sacrifices for the other, but even the vast majority of humans who are ready to give it a reasonable try – if someone can only give them the lead! All this fund of goodness seen in millions of ordinary people around us gives us hope for a self-centred world like ours.

A Shot in the Arm

But the movement of blessing one another by our sharing would receive a much greater impetus if examples of such positive goodness are shared freely. Most people seem to be fascinated more with stories of negative actions, selfish exploitation of the poor and the needy. It is not that there are fewer and less appealing examples of such goodness, but simply that we don’t care to make them as widely known as the evil that is around us. Besides, of course, together with this encouraging example of others, if we could also avail ourselves of the extra spiritual impetus that

the God and Father of us all grants us through the Eucharist, our enthusiasm would know no bounds. Would you care to help? Remember, it is far better to be “a part of the solution than to be a part of the problem”.

-----End-----

--

Ousia (/ˈuːziə, ˈuːsiə, ˈuːzə, ˈuːʃə/; Greek: οὐσία) is analogous to the English concepts of *being* and *ontic* used in *contemporary philosophy*. *Ousia* is often translated (sometimes incorrectly) to *Latin* as *substantia* and *essentia*, and to English as *substance* and *essence*.^[1]