

Learn to Dance Again

BY MARY BETH
NEWKUMET

During the summer months in the Nation's Capital, the Marine and Navy Bands offer free concerts on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial at twilight. The music is rousing, toe-tapping, John Philip Sousa glorious. The concerts are especially popular with families who have come to town to see the sites. My favorite part about these evenings is watching the small children. It is a great lesson in humanity to see how they respond.

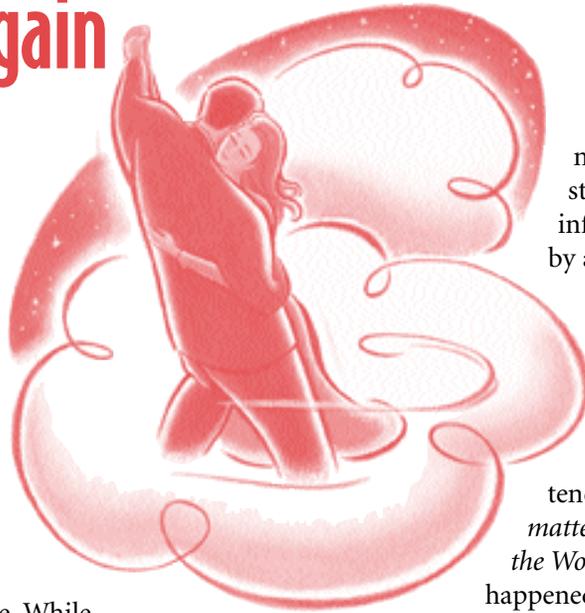
For the two- and three-year olds, the boisterous music is an invitation to dance. While the rest of the crowd sits and listens, the little ones jump up spontaneously. They swing their hips and clap their hands. They smile and laugh and dance with joy.

The four- and five-years olds often dance, too, but they have become social enough to be aware of how the people around them will react. Rather than fully respond, they have begun to temper their movements. This holding back continues as they grow up a bit more. By the time they have reached the age of six or seven, many of them are so self-conscious that they will not dance at all.

How quickly their natural receptivity and pure hearts are lost! How easily their spontaneous joy for life can be shut down. This same reality is mirrored in the relationship between the Lord and each human person.

AGAINST THE GYM WALL

Each of us is born with a heart that longs to fully respond—to dance—to the Lord's music of life and love. Yet, for some reason, many of us have stopped moving. Yearly polls consistently show that the majority of Americans believe in a higher Power. Yet despite this vague admission of faith,



many are still deeply influenced by a cultural mentality that acknowledges God's existence, but *lives* as if that existence *does not matter* [See *Life in the World*]. Has this happened to you?

Do you push God to the margins of every aspect of human life, and then stand against the gym wall—refusing to dance—fretting alone about your relationships, health, finances, career and future? Although you may

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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believe that God is out there somewhere, do you embrace his living Presence in your surroundings? Do you see his offered hand?

For Christians, this is the glorious invitation to an intense interior human life. We say we believe in God. We say we trust him. But Someone is actually beckoning us to move from an experience of a remote, far away God to a living Presence who is personally loving us through every aspect of daily life. How do we learn to dance with the Risen One who longs to live in intimate relationship with each one of us here and now?

THE FIRST STEPS

The great saints of the Church have written extensively about the classical path of the interior life. In the first “purgative” stage, you begin to go back to your origins: to an awareness that you were created to live in relationship with the Mystery of God. It is like hearing the band music again as an adult and recognizing your natural desire to fully respond.

[Editor’s note—We have explored the first steps of the purgative stage in these past issues of Life After Sunday: Wonder, Open, Trust, Assent.]

In wonder and awe, you are drawn to the One True God. If there is an openness in your heart, you follow the attraction! You start paying attention. But this intriguing Mystery will still seem distressingly removed from your daily life. Don’t stop moving! Follow your desire to go further. As you pursue the Mystery in the life of the Church, this remote Presence will become more and more specific. You will become increasingly receptive to the promptings of the Spirit of

love between the Father and Son and trust how this initiative is transforming you personally. Gradually, the purity of your heart will be restored: the Presence for you will become concrete. You will recognize his Body in the family members, friends and strangers who surround you. You will recognize his invitation to love them as he loves them. You will be ready to dance.

DANCE WITH A BODY

In the next stage of the interior life, you will realize that your whole life and all human life becomes a divine dance of love. St. John of the Cross calls this the “illuminative” phase. In love, you are lit up inside. With a childlike gaze at your surroundings, the Lord who was once so remote is intimately near. “I will live with them and move among them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people,” says the Lord (2 Cor 6:16).

The people and circumstances of your life are now the way you encounter the Body of Jesus Christ. Suddenly, household crises, health problems, financial worries and the way you take care of everyone in your life are all part of the dance with this One who holds you securely—and knows all the steps.

The fruit of this deep companionship is genuine Christian joy. Now nothing in life can crush you with sorrow or fear. Even suffering is just another part of the dance. Through the Spirit in the life of the Church, the Lord gently prompts you, gauges the depth of your response back, and then leads you further, deeper still along the path created just for you.

LET THE LORD LEAD

If you have begun to experience your life as an intimate dance with the Lord of love, do not be afraid of the places he wants to take you. You are called to something that you are not leading, and you are not going there alone! Growing in union with Jesus is the only way to the intensity and passion of a fully human life.

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Life After Sunday

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Two Move As One

Some Christians come to Mass on Sunday and wonder why they don't get much out of the liturgy. Perhaps it is because they are dancing with a stranger, instead of with Someone they love. While dancing with a stranger can be awkward and unsettling, dancing with a Spouse is a completely different experience. The two are intimately known to each other, so their bodies move as one. Even couples with little rhythm can anticipate each other's movements with real passion and joy.

The life of Christ, the Bridegroom, and his Church, the Bride, is not meant to be a dance of strangers. This is why the Church



asks the faithful to pursue the encounter with Christ through daily prayer, frequent Confession and the Mass. These and other exterior practices offer each one of us an opportunity to enter more deeply into relationship and become participants in this intimate dance of love.

GIVING AND RECEIVING

On Sunday, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Son pours his divine life and love into us by offering himself in the sacrifice

to his Father. The depth of our receptivity to his living Presence lies in the childlike purity of our hearts, minds, bodies and souls. If you are

having trouble seeing the Risen Jesus in your daily life, perhaps it is because you still do not fully recognize his Presence in the Word, the Eucharist and your fellow parishioners on Sunday. If this is the case, allow your heart to be purified through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, penitential prayer and sacrifice. This is why every Mass begins from this penitential posture, "I confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault..." With this grace, with this admission, the Holy Spirit will help you become more receptive to an encounter with the living Jesus. Christ's full offering of himself—and our full reception of that offering on Sunday—is the essence of the divinely human dance.

Getting There

The Church first offers the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation to children at age seven, commonly known as the "age of reason." At seven, children are capable of a tremendous receptivity to Christ in the Eucharist. But the simultaneous opportunity for confession acknowledges the fact that even at this young age, they have begun to shut out the Lord through sin and the burdens of earthly life. How can adults help them keep their natural receptivity? Sharing your affection for the Blessed Mother is an especially effective way to help children continue to dance with Christ. If you have a child in your life, provide him or her with sacramentals such as Marian statues, rosaries and medals. These tangible signs of a relationship with the Mother of God can remind growing children of her maternal love and care throughout their lives. ❖

Prayer of a Receptive Dancer

Lord, grant that I may always allow myself to be guided by you, always follow your plans and perfectly accomplish your holy will. Grant that in all things, great and small, today and all the days of my life, I may do whatever you require of me. Help me respond to the slightest prompting of your grace so that I may be your trustworthy instrument for your honor. May your will be done in time and in eternity—by me, in me and through me. Amen. —St. Teresa of Avila ❖

"We shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person," proclaims Pope John Paul II, "and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* #29). The life of the Church, nourished on Sunday and lived each day of the week, is where we engage in a dance of love, *completely dependent* on the movements of this One who has promised to remain united with his Bride until the end of time. The joy that springs from this fact must become the gift we bring into every aspect of human life, allowing us to remain forever young. ❖



Shall We Dance?

The “childlike” family member who has learned how to dance with the Lord—yielding to *his* promptings and movements instead of their own—can sometimes drive less responsive family members crazy. In the most practical household matters, the “childlike” one always looks for the Lord’s guidance through personal prayer and grace from the sacramental life of the Church. This one has learned to appreciate the way that the Lord provides—as he always does. But, this expectant outlook can often seem too innocent and impractical to family members who are not dancing.

The glorious fact is that the family member dependent on the living Jesus is not shirking serious adult responsibilities at all. Rather, this one experiences even the most practical aspects of daily life in a deeper way. The lover of Christ

sees the bigger picture, so he or she doesn’t get bogged down in the fears and insecurities of the uncertain path of everyday life. Sadly, those same fears and insecurities rule the lives of those who are attempting to dance alone.

When scorned by the family members around them, “childlike” believers should find joy in the fact that their witness brings Christ into burdened hearts longing to be joyful and free! This is the privileged path of the saints of the Church. These great dancers *also* confounded the people around them with a dependence and joy that was not of this world. But they also lovingly persevered in bringing his Presence—living in them—to the reluctant ones around them.

DANCE PARTNERS

Is this what the Lord is asking you to do in your own family? Are you the one he is calling to teach the others how to dance? If you have two left feet, don’t worry! All you have to do is act, and he will guide your movements.

The lives of the saints show us many examples of how the Lord uses his dance partners to teach others to live in joyful expectation of the Lord’s practical guidance and real support. St. Maximilian Kolbe and his friars had a publication dedicated to devotion to the Blessed Mother called *The Knight*. Although St. Maximilian wasn’t sure where all the resources would come from, he still felt deeply called to act. And so he did: “I

remember a certain fact that happened in 1922, when the

first issue of *The Knight* was ready to be sent to the printers. We had to make a down payment of 500 marks. I had not been allowed to contract debts nor to ask for a loan; I was, therefore, seriously embarrassed. To get to the printing shop I had to pass through the church. There on the Immaculate’s altar I found an envelope with ‘For the Immaculate’ written on the outside. When I opened it, I found exactly 500 marks. Can one say that only by mere chance the offering happened to be just the amount I needed and had prayed for with such fervor? As for me, I cannot at all affirm that this was a case of pure chance. We call ‘chance’ those happenings of which we don’t know the cause. But God knows all and directs all; that is why I honestly confess that in this case it was not a question of a miracle, but of a favor, a real favor, from the Immaculate. And for this favor granted me I still thank her with all my heart.”

St. Maximilian saw the hand of the Lord and his Mother in the very practical way his printer bill was paid. These same financial concerns have everything to do with how you and your family learn to dance with the Lord. With a childlike expectation and love, keep going along the path he has set for you and then watch his amazing moves! Just one open heart can ease the burdened hearts of the others and get the whole family dancing. ❖

Getting There

Every family can greatly benefit from reading the lives of the saints. These “most responsive” dancers recognized a living

Presence at work in their lives, and pursued a life with him to eternity in complete trust and surrender. The intercession of the saints is one of the great treasures of the Church.

This treasure is yours! Include a petition to the patrons of everyone in your family during nightly prayers. Substitute a saint’s story once in a while in place of your usual nightly reading. The saints’ stories are full of their humanity, sufferings, frustrations and joys. But at the heart of the ebb and flow of their lives is a startling relationship with Jesus Christ. ❖



Dancing Through Suffering

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

If you are thinking “What are these people talking about? How could I possibly know when God is asking me to dance? I pray and I get no response... nothing! Not even a thanks for stopping by... much less an invitation to dance!” Well, one sure way you know that God is asking you to walk out on that dance floor is when you have a personal brush with suffering, any kind of suffering. Has an illness, a tragedy, or an affliction ever hit you or your family? Well then, rest assured, you’ve been asked to dance.

OH GOD, NOT ME

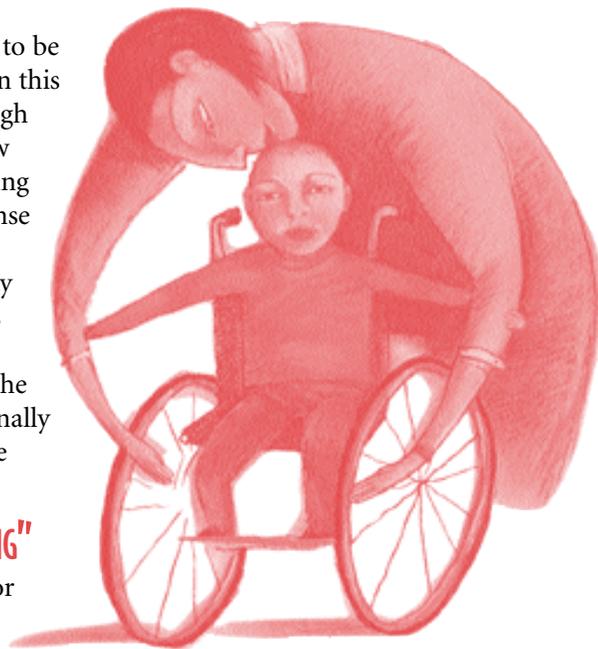
When illness strikes the human person, the presence of the suffering Christ becomes almost palpable. What is your first reaction when you get that first inkling that illness looms? “Oh God, not me!” may be your first thought as you plaster yourself against the dance hall wall. Many people stay right there and become bitter. As the reality of suffering sets in, however, the question may also change to “Oh God, *why* me?” God’s answer to this very personal question may be so simple that most people don’t see it. “Because I want to be near you,” is his unrelenting

reply. “I want my love alone to be more than enough for you in this world, I want to shine through you so that others may know the power and the joy of living in me.” Your personal response to this invitation—to the plain hard reality of everyday human suffering—indicates your willingness to dance with the Lord. Will you let the fear of this embrace emotionally harden you or will you place your hand in his?

“HAPPY ALTHOUGH SUFFERING”

Can you retain your joy for life, even through suffering?

He gives you all the grace you need to respond. But he will not force you out on that dance floor. He will simply stand and beckon. “Only those who are saved, only children of grace, can in fact be bearers of Christ’s cross,” says Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross). “To suffer and to be happy although suffering, to have one’s feet on the earth, to walk on the dirty and rough paths of this earth and yet to be enthroned with Christ at the Father’s right hand, to laugh and cry with the children of this world and ceaselessly sing the



praises of God with the choirs of angels—this is the life of the Christian until the morning of eternity breaks forth.”

In the Congregation of the Causes of the Saints, one thing that the “saintmakers” look for—especially in men and women who experienced great suffering in life—is the presence of Christian joy. If there is no joy, they are not declared saints. The only way you can keep your joy through suffering is by taking his hand and allowing his grace to lead your dance. Then your life will become an intimate dance with this One who has much more than this life to offer. Then like the psalm—even in the midst of suffering—you will be transformed into a living song of praise: “For me you have changed my mourning into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and girded me with joy. So my soul sings psalms to you unceasingly, O Lord my God, I will thank you for ever” (Psalm 30). ❖

The Church Relies on Those Who Suffer

“The Church relies heavily on the support of those who are tried by illness: their sacrifice is sometimes little understood, but, when combined with intense prayer, it has a mysterious efficacy for the propagation of the Gospel and the welfare of the whole People of God.”
—John Paul II on the Ninth World Day of the Sick (Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes)

“Never let anything so fill you with sorrow as to make you forget the joy of the risen Christ.” —Mother Teresa of Calcutta ❖

How Should We Respond?

Editors Note: The parish is the place where the Lord provides his joyful Presence to the local community. Through the offer of friendship, services and resources, the parish community strives to ensure that no one has to settle for less than a fully human life. But before parishioners can dance with the neighbors, the parish family must continually ask themselves how the Lord is leading them to respond to the needs of his people. Through prayerful reflection, the offerings of each parishioner can ensure that no one is left out on the sidelines.

Have you ever had the experience of planning to go to dinner with some friends and one of them asks, “Where would you like to go” and you respond, “It doesn’t make any difference.” This should be our mind set before God. Our attitude should be one of detachment from ourselves and of surrender to God’s will. The attitude should be “It doesn’t make any difference. Whatever you want God. If you want me to use my gifts in this way, then that is fine. If you want something else, that is fine as well.” In other words

our response to God should flow from a total giving over of our will, mind and heart to God. We are called to let go of our preferences before God. This should be true if we are talking about prayer or a fasting or almsgiving. It should be true if we are talking about giving of our time or talent or treasure. Whatever you want God. It doesn’t make any difference to me.

Almsgiving is a spiritual discipline that relates directly to the gift of our treasure, as well as our time and talent. If we recognize that everything we have is borrowed, then I believe that one of the first questions that we must ask ourselves about our treasure is, “How much or what percentage of my treasure, my money, is the Lord leading me to give away? How much do I give away?” And only after this question is answered do we then ask the next question: “Where does God want

me to give this money? To which need is God inviting me to respond? What are God’s priorities in my giving? What is God’s will for me?”

PRAY OVER YOUR GIVING

If you and I give alms to a charity without praying about it then there is a good chance that we are in control of our giving rather than God, that we are at the center of our giving, rather than God. If you or I fast based solely on our personal decision to do something nice for the Lord, then we are at the center of our lives, rather than God. The same

is true for prayer. If we spend our entire prayer time on our own agenda, with out surrendering to God’s agenda, then we are at the center even of our prayer time with God.

God wants to have center stage in our lives. If we want to do something for the Lord then we should let the Lord be Lord in our lives. We should do whatever the Lord wants us to do. This is the conversion of the heart that we all must experience. This is, I believe, what it means to “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.” Let us pray for one another that with God’s grace, we may respond to God’s call and to God’s love. — Msgr. William English, Pastor, St. John the Evangelist Church, Silver Spring, Maryland ❖



A Stewardship Parish

The Risen Jesus wants to move in the world with our cooperation. This requires a real understanding of how our gifts are to be used in practical ways to bring Christ’s love and care into the communities that surround us. “God wishes human beings to be his collaborators in the work of creation, redemption and sanctification,” wrote the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter, Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response, “and such collaboration involves stewardship in its most profound sense.” For more about stewardship as a way of life in your parish, contact the International Catholic Stewardship Council at (202) 289-1093 or visit www.catholicstewardship.org ❖

The Dance Floor

Today, many Americans are reluctant to bring their faith out into the world. “Many people, including many who regularly attend services, seem to see religion as a strictly private matter that has no place in the public square, especially in a country that is becoming more religiously diverse by the day,” writes Luis Lugo, director of the religion program at The Pew Charitable Trusts.

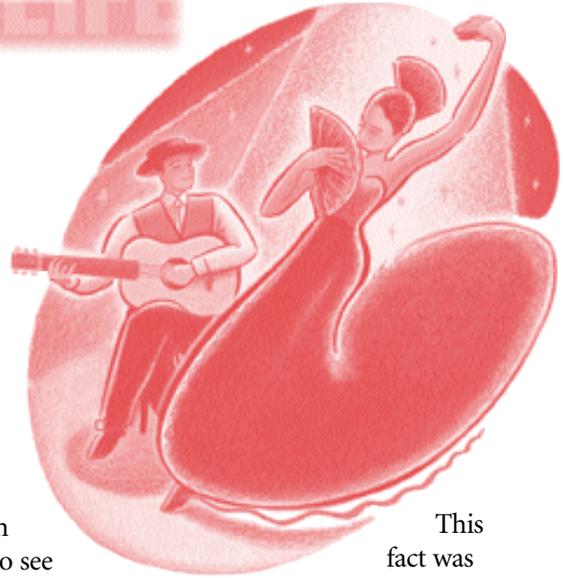
Yet in their attempt to be “kind and respectful,” Christians who keep their faith “a strictly private matter” stop the Lord’s intimate dance of life and love from bringing about a fully human culture.

FULLY RESPONDING

In every age, the Lord uses those who have fully responded to him to be a recognizable sign of his Presence in the world. During the American Depression of the 1930s, Christ used the complete receptivity of Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, co-founders of the Catholic Worker movement. Some critics have missed the primacy of Christ in Maurin and Day’s radical social activism. But for them—and for all

his other great lovers—recognizing his Risen Presence was the first step in their dance out into the world. According to Day, their’s was a life of “seeing Christ in others, loving the Christ you saw in others. Greater than this, it was having faith in the Christ in others without being able to see him. Blessed is he that believes without seeing.”

What was particularly radical about the earliest days of the Catholic Worker movement was that Maurin and Day did not try to force belief on the people they served. Instead, they welcomed Jesus in love. They set up houses in the New York Bowery and provided hospitality to the hungry and homeless people they saw around them. In Christ’s name, they also brought the Gospel message of social justice and peace through *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. This is how they offered to teach the people around them how to dance. The heart of their mission was Christ, not politics or activism for their own sake.



This fact was recognized by Mother Theresa of Calcutta “who once pinned on Day’s dress the cross worn only by fully professed members of the Missionary Sisters of Charity,” according to her biography.

GETTING CLOSE

Peter Maurin was “opposed to the idea that Christians should take care only of their friends and leave care of strangers to impersonal charitable agencies,” writes Jim Forest, former managing editor of *The Catholic Worker*. “Every home should have its ‘Christ Room’ and every parish a house of hospitality ready to receive the ‘ambassadors of God.’” This same personal outpouring is called for by Pope John Paul II, as well: “Now is the time for a new ‘creativity’ in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by ‘getting close’ to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters” (Novo Millennio Ineunte, #50).

Don’t allow the Lord to wait on the sidelines. Bring him—living in you—into the dance of human life! ❖

A Beautiful Dancer

According to Catholic Worker biography of Dorothy Day: “A visiting social worker asked Day how long the ‘clients’ were permitted to stay. ‘We let them stay forever,’ Day answered with a fierce look in her eye. ‘They live with us, they die with us, and we give them a Christian burial. We pray for them after they are dead. Once they are taken in, they become members of the family. Or rather they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.’”

“If I have achieved anything in my life,” she once remarked, “it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God.” What a beautiful dancer! ❖



photo: Marquette University Archives



FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

DANCE LIKE DAVID

In the Old Testament, King David at his most kingly, strips down to just his “linen apron” and begins “leaping and dancing before the Lord” as the Ark of the Lord is brought into Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:11-23). Why would he do such a thing? Because the One he loves is present, dwelling with his chosen people. This fact, and this fact alone, enables David to live with dramatic joy. Therefore, he dances “before the Lord with abandon.”

The daughter of the former king Saul sees David’s joyful dance and “despise[s] him in her heart.” She is burdened by sorrow and regret and can find no joy in the presence before her. Unable to see anything more than the king’s human action, she criticizes David for the way he has “exposed” himself before the people. But David tells her: “Not only will I make merry before the Lord, but I will demean myself even more. I will be lowly in your esteem...”

Dependent on the One he loves, David does not worry about the common mentality of the culture around him. He experiences a joy that dances above the wisdom of the wise. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom,” says St. Paul, “and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:25).

Jesus Christ is the living Presence who dwells among us here and now. He is the reason for our dramatic human joy. Dance. With Abandon. ❖

--Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

*U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation,
an international movement in the Church*

LEARN TO DANCE AGAIN

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If you have only just begun your pursuit of a deeper experience of God, remember the smallest children at the concert. “Amen, I say to you,” said Jesus of Nazareth, “unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 18:3). Dance. You were born knowing how! ❖

Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you believe the Lord has ever asked you to dance? (p. 1 and 2)

- Give some examples of how our culture “lives” as if God does not matter.
- Do you experience God as a remote presence or as an intimate companion?

Are you fully receptive to the Lord’s life and love on Sunday? (p. 3)

- What keeps you from allowing the Lord to lead the movements of your life?
- How can companionship with the Blessed Mother help her children become more receptive to the dance with Christ?

Who is the most joyful, “childlike” member in your family? (p. 4)

- Are you being asked to help other family members learn to dance with the Lord?
- Give some practical examples of how the Lord has taken care of your family.

Do you recognize the Presence of Christ in human suffering? (p.5)

- Read Psalm 30.
- How has the Lord responded?

Do you have a sense whether your parish’s plans are the parish-ioners or the Lord’s? (p. 6)

- Give examples of how your parish brings the Presence of Christ into the local community.
- In what ways can you personally respond to the Lord’s invitation to build up his kingdom in your local neighborhood?

Why are so many Christians reluctant to bring their life with Christ into the public square? (p.7)

- Contrast the personal approach of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin with the impersonal approach of a Christian political action committee.
- What can you do personally to “see Christ” in the world you move in each day?

Life After Sunday is a great tool for small group discussion!
For leader’s guides, visit www.lifeaftersunday.com