

For Each Life, A Mission

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

My dear friend, Maureen, and I often chuckle about the conversations we used to have during our senior year in college over gross ice cream drinks in a lounge in South Bend, Indiana. At the time, Maureen was engaged and being pursued by a number of companies anxious to hire a brainy chemistry major. Her life seemed to have a defined path. She and her fiancé, Jim, just had to decide which great job offers they wanted to take and then go from there. I was deeply envious, coveting every aspect of her life. At the time, I was unattached and unpursued. My life after college was a big blank slate and the uncertainty of my future was driving me crazy. For Maureen, the endless possibilities open to me were thrilling. Go figure.

Now I realize that each of us was struggling with a deep sense of mission. I couldn't figure out what mine was; Maureen was secretly worried that her's was set in stone at age 21. As good Catholic girls, we were praying about our futures, but our prayers consisted mostly of petitions based on our own agendas. "Please help me get this job." "Please help me meet a good man." Because we were young in our faith, the Lord was still merely an intercessor, a helper to get us to where we wanted to go.

DISCERNING HIS MISSION

What we were discounting, I realize now, is the Lord's personal mission for each of us through the movement of his Spirit. Few of us realize that each event and encounter in our lives is deeply woven into this mission. In what area of his world does he need you to reside? Whose lives are you meant to change? Whose lives will change you? What kind of work will fully invest the talents and



treasures that he has provided to you alone?

"Only in the unfolding of the history of our lives and its events is the eternal plan of God revealed to each of us," says Pope John Paul II. "Every human life, every personal vocation, is unique."

It has taken me many years to experience my mission in life in this way. I find that mission is a daily experience of mysterious twists and turns guided by concrete signs of the Lord's presence. Through prayer, the words and presence of family and friends and the life of the Church, I can usually discern which path my life needs to take. My mission is always open to many possibilities and it never stays lifeless or set in stone. And most impor-

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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tantly, it is always just right for me — even when it is very difficult.

I look at the way I was brought to the Washington, D.C., area and can't imagine living anywhere else. After graduation, my job hunt frustrated me for six hot summer weeks ending with an impossibly low salary in a profession I did not like. Yet, the end result of this uncertain time was marriage to the cute Catholic boy four cubicles over and the skills of the journalism profession I still utilize today. I look at the first house Chris and I lost out on, and marvel at the gift of this "second choice" starter house that has become our home in a neighborhood of wonderful friends. These and other events and people too numerous to mention have provided me with the abundant life I experience with true joy today at age 40.

"I believe that nothing is merely an accident when seen in the light of God," said Blessed Edith Stein, who will be canonized this month by Pope John Paul II. "I believe that my whole life has been marked out for me in the plan of divine Providence and has a completely coherent meaning in God's all-seeing eye."

A PEACEFUL MISSION

Looking back, I experience a deep peace now and recognize a pattern of events in my life that once seemed so random. And since I have seen the Lord's presence in the astonishing path he has laid out for me, I no longer worry as much about the future. (Although I do have my moments!) When I am afraid, I try to see adversity as nothing more than a mysterious turn in the path.

Prayer helps me during these times of uncertainty. Scripture is a

source of peace, too. Consider the lesson in discernment from Gamaliel, a Pharisee who experienced the deep mystery of God. When confronted with the apostles of Jesus of Nazareth, he told his angry colleagues, "Leave them alone! If what they have planned and done is of human origin, it will disappear, but if it comes from God, you cannot possibly defeat them." (Acts 5:38-39.)

For me, recognizing my mission in this way is a source of comfort. Usually within a short period, I can discern whether the event conforms with the path the Lord has laid out for me or whether I need to try a different way.

Sometimes, the Lord is silent and I wonder if he is really listening. During these times, my prayers usually grow more frequent; I participate in the Sacraments in a deeper way. Usually when I look back I see that I had been drifting off into my own plans and agendas. In going to find him, he had been searching for me, too.

TAKE HIM ON YOUR MISSION

"Take nothing for the journey," Jesus told his disciples, as he sent his friends out on their missions with nothing but his love and friendship to sustain them (Lk 9:3). While this seems like a scary, almost reckless way to live, the detachment of each disciple from his own plans and resources leads to complete reliance on the Lord for our life's work, our relationships, our material goods and our destiny. This reliance becomes our lifeline. "Do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing" (Lk 13:22-23). This radical

view of mission has taken me a long time to experience personally. And yet, it is the only way.

So here is how Maureen and I have turned out so far: We both have wonderful husbands and four kids apiece, satisfying work, great families and many dear friends. We have grown not only in faith, but in taste. Now when we gather once a year for our college friends' reunion, we drink good wine instead of kahlua and creme de menthe. Thank God. ❖

Life After Sunday

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Sunday Sustains Our Mission

So many of us think of our mission in life as a job, a task, or a defined vocation. But the Lord asks us to go deeper than that — to look at the mission of each day. What events, what encounters take place that allow us to bring Christ to the people we meet on a day-to-day basis?

THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

“You encounter Christianity through coming into contact with people who have already had this encounter and whose lives have in some way been changed by it...By encounter, I do not mean that you hear someone quoting from the Gospel or that you listen for hours to someone’s

From Mass to Mission

“Receiving the Bread of Life, the disciples of Christ ready themselves to undertake the strength of the risen Lord and his Spirit to the tasks which await them in their ordinary life. For the faithful who have understood the meaning of what they have done, the Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door. Like the first witnesses of the resurrection, Christians who gather each Sunday to experience and proclaim the presence of the risen Lord are called to evangelize and bear witness in their daily lives.”

— Pope John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, #45 ❖



reflections on it....No, the encounter is with something that strikes you, it may well be someone giving a talk, but what strikes you is not so much the words said as the change which has occurred in the person who speaks,” says Italian theologian Msgr. Luigi Giussani.

This is our mission, to bring this encounter with Jesus Christ — living in each one of us — to the people that the Father has placed in our lives. Our mission is to show that because we have “put on Christ” through baptism, we have been changed. The story of our lives has joined Christ’s story and from now on, those stories must be joyfully merged together.

CHRISTIAN JOY

As a follower of Christ, have you lost the sheer joy you should experience by living your life in and through the Church? When this happens, it is hard for other people to see that a change has occurred in you. In his recent apostolic letter, “The Day of the

Lord,” Pope John Paul II exhorts us, “If we wish to rediscover the full meaning of Sunday, we must rediscover this aspect of the life of faith. Certainly Christian joy must mark the whole of life and not just one day of the week. But in virtue of its significance as the day of the risen Lord, celebrating God’s work of creation and

‘new creation,’ Sunday is the day of joy in a very special way, indeed the day most suitable for learning how to rejoice and to rediscover the true nature and deep roots of joy.”

Our mission in life — to live in Christ and bring him to others — can never be experienced as a millstone around our necks if it is authentic and true. If you are still struggling with your mission, ask the Lord during your prayers at Mass to guide you more closely. And then watch for signs of his grace at work in your life. ❖

Getting There...

Don’t let Sunday get bogged down as just another day to do isolated, mundane activities and chores. Try to do something to bring extra joy to the day such as bagels after Mass, a special meal or a family walk after dinner. Put the kids in charge of making sure there is one thing special about every Sunday — even if it’s just Slurpees for everyone after the soccer game. ❖

Missionaries at Home

Consider the impact of a recent speech by Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) before the Senate about President Clinton's moral life. The Washington Post reported that "colleagues of both parties said Lieberman commands attention mainly because of who he is." An Orthodox Jew, Lieberman is a man trying to live his life with God. "His words truly reflect his intellect, his morality, his soul," said Senate Republican Conference Chairman Connie Mack of Florida. It seems that, politics aside, members of Congress, the press, and other public commentators recognized an authentic voice in their midst.

I personally do not know much about Sen. Lieberman, but it intrigued me that of all the speeches and public commentary

about the President's troubles, this one was highlighted not so much by what was said but by the way a man was living his life — and that this fact was both recognized and reported.

This is interesting in view of our concept of mission. "My mission as a parent," "my mission as a teacher of values," etc., must not be seen as a single aspect of our personalities, but rather as our whole life's work. "Our Lord considers not so much the greatness of our actions nor the difficulty that accompanies them. He has no need of our works, but craves only our love," said St. Therese of Lisieux.

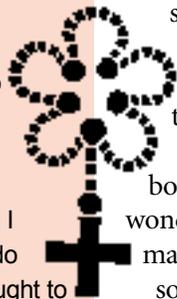


Missionaries in the Kitchen

Unfortunately our view of missionaries has been tarnished by their portrayal in the media as dour, serious people who disrespect the native culture by teaching an unreasonable ideology. (Think of Robert Morley's portrayal of Grace's brother in the movie, "African Queen." Am I right?!) Who is an authentic Catholic missionary? Men and women who are in love with Jesus Christ, and animated by that love, bring his presence to the people they meet. As missionaries in our homes, we can only really "pass on the faith" to our children if — like the great saints — we are speaking about Someone we love. If you don't know Christ in this way, begin today by setting aside half an hour for prayer, Scripture study or daily Mass. Ask him to reveal himself to you. Remember that all great relationships are sustained by friendship and food! — MBN ❖

Which Way Should I Go?

The rosary is a beautiful prayer for discernment. Whenever I feel like I've hit a crossroads in my life and am standing befuddled not knowing which direction to go in, I bring my mad-house-wife-self to Mary in the rosary. She has never abandoned or disappointed me. Before long, I always know exactly what to do about the question I have brought to her. If you are having trouble discerning the path your life should take, go to Mary in prayer and meditate on the life of her Son. During October, the Month of the Holy Rosary, let the riches of this beautiful prayer ritual inspire your mission. — MBN ❖



DIFFICULTIES WITH THE FAITH

Unfortunately, many Catholic parents have difficulty embracing the full life of the Church, and since this resistance is also part of how they live their lives, the life of the Church they pass on is often incomplete and inadequate. The book, *Mission 2000*, relates a wonderful analogy of the way so many of us view our faith: "For some people religion is like an artificial limb. It has neither warmth nor life; and although it helps them stumble along, it never becomes a part of them. It must be strapped on each day."

Children are not fools. They can easily see whether the life with

Christ lived through his Church has touched our hearts. As they grow, they will take notice whether the faith as we "practice it" gives us much joy or peace.

Because of this fundamental truth, the best thing parents can do for their offspring is not to concentrate so much on "teaching the right things" but on deepening their own relationship with the Lord. Through an increased prayer life, participation in the Sacraments and friendships with other disciples of Christ, perhaps you can begin to ask the questions and get the answers to the stumbling blocks that keep you away. It is not so much the words of our faith that are important, but the way they live in you. — MBN ❖

The Mission of Education

When Chris and I announced that I was pregnant with Patrick, the first response from a number of people was, “Wow, how are you going to send four kids to college?” I’ll confess that this is something we thought about ourselves. Catholic education in the primary and secondary schools where we live is already pretty pricey, so the financial implications of properly educating this new life was definitely on our minds.

I confess this to assure you that I implicate myself heavily in the group of parents who often lose sight of the goals for our children’s lives. For so many of us, it is all about education. Yet if you read a book about life even one hundred years ago, you can easily see that this extreme emphasis was not always the case. Besides “book learning” children also learned about other facets of a full life — faith in God, community customs, work in the home, etiquette, handicrafts and the natural world. Granted a more agrarian society left less time for children to be sitting with their school books, but less emphasis also provided more opportunity for time to develop relationships with other people.

Now don’t get me wrong, I want my kids to go to good uni-

versities and colleges. I want them to go to the best high schools and thrive in whatever profession they feel called to. Yet, I also cringe when I find myself blinded by the education worries that derail me from providing them with the vision of life I ultimately hope for them.

EDUCATING FOR AN ABUNDANT LIFE

My oldest daughter, Kate, is in eighth grade, so we are in the midst of evaluating several Catholic high schools for next year. So here is my struggle: Will the school with better technology and the most computer stations give her the vision of life that the Lord offers her? What will the “best teachers” be teaching? Will the things Kate learns in high school enable her to enjoy eternal life? And is this too lofty a goal for education? It can’t be.

I want my children to have abundant, secure lives full of good friends and work that uses talents that are uniquely theirs. I want them to experience the peace and love of the living presence of Christ as someone they know, and be part of a community that experiences him this way, too.



Mother and Educator

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity, had an important personal mission when she founded her schools — she wanted to make sure her own children got to heaven. As a mother of five, she watched the way the Lord moved her life when she found herself widowed and a recent convert trying to make ends meet. She wanted to educate them in the ways of the Lord, in addition to their reading and arithmetic. So, when events unfolded that enabled her to begin the first Catholic free school for girls, her daughters were among the pupils. Her sons were taught at the nearby Mount Saint Mary’s in Emmitsburg, MD. St. Elizabeth Ann’s faithfulness to the mission the Lord had for her life enabled her not only to bring Christ to her own children, but also to found an order of nuns who still run hospitals, schools, colleges, day care centers and other works of mercy and education, enabling them to bring Christ to others. ❖

As a parent, the best I can do for Kate and her siblings is to find educational opportunities that most closely match my goals for their lives, not just their minds. And if I can’t find the perfect fit? Then we’ll have to watch and see what the Lord has in mind. After all, just one person can bring Christ to high school through friendship and participation in the life of the school.

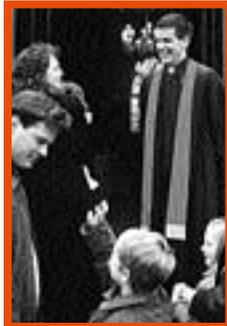
After that, plenty of computers and good student/teacher ratios are gravy. — MBN ❖

Getting There...

In many parishes, the school is a natural gateway into parish life for young families. As parents and children begin to feel like they belong, they tend to become more active in the life of the Church. Still others stay on the sidelines simply because they have never been invited in. If you know of a family that is active in the school, but not the parish, make an effort to invite them to a parish activity or committee. Perhaps an invitation from you is all a family member needs to ignite the spark burning within them. Offer your friendship and bring them into the life of the community. ❖

The Mission to Sustain Our Priests

While growing up in a Catholic home and parish, my most enduring impression of the parish priest was not of him on the altar, or in the confessional, or on youth group retreats, or even in the parish



grade school classroom. Certainly all of these essential priestly acts shaped my religious faith, but the image that sticks in my mind is that same priest at our family dinner table. There at our table, sitting down to share a meal in our home, his priestly presence truly touched our family. My mother had to ask this young, shy priest a few times before he actually agreed to join our family for dinner. But she persisted and eventually he became a regular family guest and to this day a wonderful reassuring influence on our family.

In the past 35 years of parish

Getting There...

Every family should have a priest who is like a member of the family. Someone to call upon for guidance and strength; someone to include in family gatherings, both happy and sad. If you don't experience a relationship with a priest that can grow into friendship, ask the Lord to send a priest to your family. Invite a priest to your home for a meal or if his schedule is too full, try to get to know him in another way. Although the Church always encourages vocations, our children will rarely consider one if they don't know any priests and religious personally. ❖

life, the presence of the laity as a source of strength and hope in the Church has borne great fruit. Yet how many parishioners seem to know their priests? While there are many reasons why we may not know each other as well as we

should, it is essential in the life of today's parish, that the priest be close to the hearts of the people he serves. He is not just an administrator, or presider, but the real, living Sacramental presence of Christ among us. Without his priestly presence in the life of our families and community, the Christian heart of the parish somehow misses a beat.

St. John Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests, made the essential connection between the parish priest and the Sacrament of the Eucharist when he wrote: "Everything has come to us through the priest; yes, all happiness, all graces, all heavenly gifts. If we had not the Sacrament of Orders, we should not have our Lord. Who placed Him there, in that tabernacle? It was the priest." What better way to recognize and help strengthen the priest who brings us the bread of life than to feed him at our own tables?

MISSIONARIES FOR PRIESTS

Sustaining our priests in friendship and love is essential, especially when the light of Christ has grown dim in them. When that happens, especially in our parishes, it is easy to despair or ask

A Prayer for Priests

O Jesus, I pray for your faithful and fervent priests; for the unfaithful and tepid priests; for the priests laboring at home or abroad in distant mission fields; for the tempted priests; for the lonely and desolate priests; for the young priests, for the aged priests; for the sick priests, for the dying priests; for the souls of the priests in purgatory. But above all I commend to you the priests dearest to me: the priest who baptized me; the priests who absolved me from my sins; the priests at whose Masses I assisted and who gave me the Body and Blood of Christ; the priests who taught and instructed me or helped me and encouraged me; all the priests to whom I am indebted in any other way. O Jesus, keep them all close to your heart, and bless them abundantly in time and in eternity. Amen. ❖



the Lord to reassign the man; harder still to bring the power of Christ's love and presence back to him through our own faith and friendship. Yet, as missionaries, this is what we are called to do. Says Italian theologian Msgr. Luigi Giussani: "In a society such as ours that is strongly secularized, Christians are called above all to live their identity and to communicate it to others. This is so true that even the presence of the priest and religious, if they are not missionary in their image and outlook, ultimately become at the end of it all an object of curiosity and thus they marginalize themselves from others. This, I believe, leads us back to the roots of Christianity which is to bear witness to Christ. It is only this that matters!" — *John M. Capobianco* ❖

Global Solidarity

During the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr., observed that “history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the clamor of bad people, but the appalling silence of good people.” Indeed, as the good people of God, our mission *requires* us to reach out to our fellow human beings, especially those who are suffering from poverty, oppression, disease and injustice.

STEWARDSHIP OUR GIFTS

“God wishes human beings to be his collaborators in the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification; and such collaboration involves stewardship in its most profound sense,” teach the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter, *Stewardship, A Disciples Response*.

Getting There...

How believers invest and consume and the choices we make as voters and citizens can shape a world of greater or lesser justice, more or less peace,” wrote the bishops in their letter on global solidarity. In his first encyclical, *The Redeemer of Man*, Pope John Paul II offered the following criteria in which to guide the progress of man in the world: the priority of ethics over technology; the primacy of the person over things; the superiority of spirit over matter. During November, when we vote on representatives and issues that affect our own communities and other parts of the world, let us consider this three-fold examination of human progress. ❖

This means that everything we have been given by the Father — our time, our talent, our treasure — are unique gifts for us to use while we walk this earth. As disciples of Christ, we are called to steward these gifts well to build up the Kingdom and renew the face of the earth.

“As all this suggests,” teach the bishops, “our individual lives as disciples and stewards must be seen in relation to God’s larger purposes.”

Many Catholics do not realize that the Church offers her works of charity and mercy to everyone, both believers and unbelievers alike. Mother Teresa of Calcutta did not ask people dying in the streets of India whether they believed in Christ before she took them back to her simple house to care for them. But her deep love of each poor, sick person made her a missionary. “The missionary task implies a respectful dialogue with those who do not yet accept the Gospel,” teaches the Catechism. “Believers can profit from this dialogue by learning to appreciate better those elements of truth and grace which are found among people, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of God.” CCC#856.

In our own lives, the task of mission must encompass not only remote parts of the world, but the United States as well. In his letter on the millennium, Pope John Paul II remarks, “the more the West is becoming estranged from its Christian roots, the more it is becoming missionary territory.”

Patron Saint of Missionaries

St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, never left the convent until her death of tuberculosis at age 24, yet she was deeply involved in missionary work through her prayers and letters to priests living in far off parts of the world. According to a biographer, “Therese realized that by praying for priests, she was laboring for a much wider field.” You can contribute to the radiating power of missionary priests, members of religious communities and lay ministers by providing both prayers and material resources to sustain their presence in parts of the world that still do not know Christ. ❖



A MISSIONARY CHURCH

By her nature, the Church is a missionary church — not the vast institution we often image. In our parishes, it is often difficult to think of ourselves as missionaries, but we must. Not only are we called to bring Christ to people who do not know him in our own families and communities, but in other parts of the world as well. “At the parish level, where the Church lives,” write the U.S. bishops in *Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Parishes*, “we need to integrate more fully the international dimensions of Catholic discipleship within a truly universal church.” This means not only listening to missionaries from other parts of the world, but also focusing parish life on both neighborhood and global missionary work. “A parish reaching beyond its own members and beyond national boundaries is a truly *catholic* parish,” the bishops remind us. ❖



FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

The Hidden Mission

When someone dies young, or even as a child (not to mention in the womb, or at birth), we face the question: *What was the purpose of her or his existence?*

The faith of the Church tells us that every single human being has been predestined to exist in Christ Jesus from all eternity, so that He, the Incarnate Son of the Father, could be the first of many brothers and sisters, as He would be the firstborn among the dead. That is the purpose of each human life, however long, however short: to contribute, *simply by existing*, to the great Mystery of the preparation of a humanity for the Eternal Son, a humanity that would be his Body, and thus, in Him, to glorify the living Triune God.

He, Christ, is the *One sent* to manifest and realize this secret plan of the Triune God, this Mystery, this revelation Love. The purpose of each human life, *the mission of each human person*, the mission that defines what it means to be a human person, is to exist thus “for the praise of His glory,” that is, the absolute beauty of divine Love. The Cross — which is sheer purposelessness to the wisdom of this world — is indeed the manifestation of God’s wisdom, of the purpose and mission of Christ, and of all human beings.

I commend to you a very beautiful prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours: “O God, who in an admirable way, have manifested your hidden wisdom through the scandal of the Cross, grant us to contemplate the glory of your Son’s passion with such plenitude of faith, that we might always glory ourselves trustfully in the Cross. Amen.”

—Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

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

Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you think the Lord has given you a mission? If so, what is it? (p. 1 and 2)

- Describe some turns in your path that confirmed the mission was the Lord’s and not your own.
- What are the challenges to taking “nothing for the journey” as you pursue the Lord’s mission for you (cf. Lk 9:3)?

How does the encounter with Christ at Mass determine our mission? (p. 3)

- Do you experience the Christian mission as a gift or a burden?
- List some ways that you can retrieve Sunday as “a day of joy”.

Who are the missionaries who have brought Christ to you? (p. 4)

- What are some of the “stumbling blocks” that keep you from your mission in Christ?
- Have you ever gone to the Blessed Mother in prayer when you were having trouble discerning your mission?

What is the mission of Catholic education? (p. 5)

- How does the culture narrow the mission of education for each human person?
- What can you do to invite school families deeper into the mission of Christ in his Church?

How have priests touched your life and contributed to your sense of mission? (p. 6)

- What can you do to encourage and sustain the priests you know?
- Do you pray for priests and their mission in the life of the Church?

How do you unite yourself to the global mission of the Church? (p. 7)

- In what part of your world do you find “missionary territory”?
- How can your prayers and sacrifices have an impact on global peace and justice?

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