

Open to an Other

BY MARY BETH
NEW KUMET

When I was in college, my religion class went on a field trip to the

Trappist monastery in Kentucky. The group included some students, the nun who taught the class and a priest who was particularly well-loved on campus. His Masses were always packed. His soulful observations about life with Christ in his regular column in the campus newspaper touched many hearts.

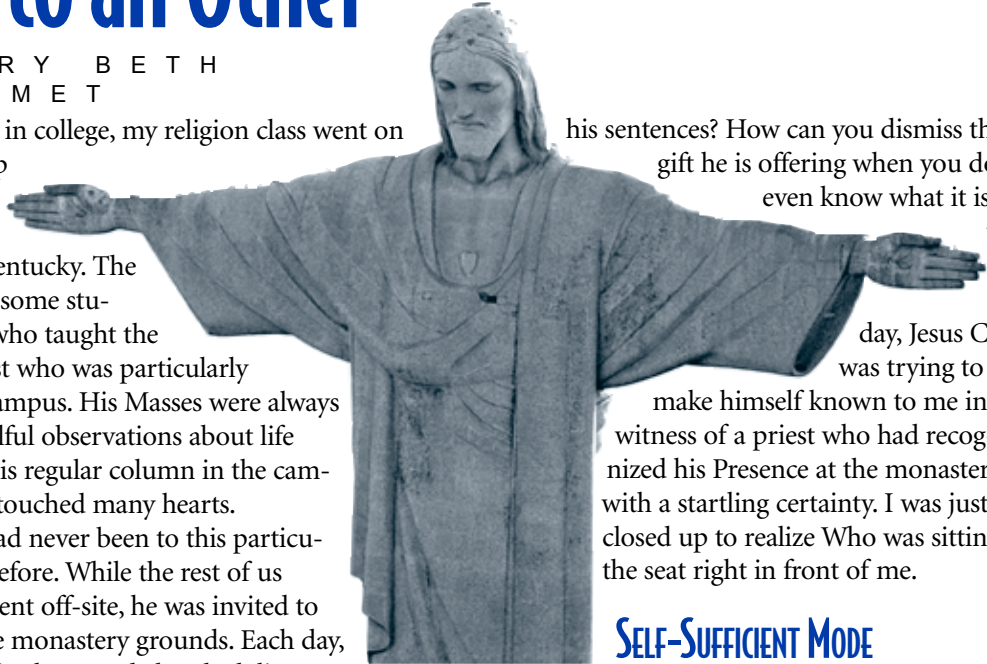
The priest had never been to this particular monastery before. While the rest of us stayed in a convent off-site, he was invited to stay right on the monastery grounds. Each day, he participated in the round-the-clock liturgy of the hours, Mass and the rest of the monks' simple routine. Looking back on it now, I realize how moved he was during his short visit. "I've been to the mountain top," he said in all sincerity to the Abbot as we were leaving.

HUMBLE PIE

On the long drive back to school, we chatted about the visit. The priest began telling us how profound the experience had been for him. Apparently, I was trying to help him express himself. Midway through our conversation, he finally turned to me and said, "Do you always finish other people's sentences?"

I don't remember being particularly hurt by his comment, just taken aback. I hadn't even realized what I was doing. Twenty years later, I am sorry that I missed hearing the fullness of his experience and insight. Instead, I have only his gentle criticism. But perhaps that was the Lord's point!

How can you be open to what the Creator of the universe is trying to tell you when you are finishing



his sentences? How can you dismiss the gift he is offering when you don't even know what it is? In the car that day, Jesus Christ was trying to make himself known to me in the witness of a priest who had recognized his Presence at the monastery with a startling certainty. I was just too closed up to realize Who was sitting in the seat right in front of me.

SELF-SUFFICIENT MODE

I wish I could tell you that I don't finish people's sentences anymore, but that wouldn't be true. Ask

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Mary, the first
Steward of Christ

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my family and friends. There are days when I still run through conversations like a bull in a china shop.

It is all too easy to fall back into this closed stance. For me, it usually happens when I am in self-sufficient mode. By self-sufficient, I mean “so sufficient unto your self” that you stop being open to anyone or anything. You are an island.

Here in self-sufficient America, we see this posture reinforced in a common mentality that pervades our culture. With all the answers to life’s questions seemingly worked out, self-sufficient people and institutions don’t think they need to be open to the reality around them. It seems safer to stay in a world of your own making.

Here is the problem with this stance: if you have decided the truth of things yourself, you really don’t know what’s going on around you at all. In your blindness, you miss everything! You have probably experienced the effects of this when someone misses *you*. (Think of every cocktail party you’ve ever attended.) The person in front of you is walking away after determining his or her own truth about you based on your appearance and several sentences. “Hey, wait a minute,” you think to yourself in frustration, “you don’t know me at all!”

AN OPEN STANCE

If we don’t stay open to everyone and everything that we encounter each day, we can miss some pretty amazing stuff. Like genuine newness. Like spine-tingling wonder. Like the Presence of a mystery that is not of this world.

“The method of knowing an

object is dictated by the object itself and cannot be defined by me,” says Msgr. Luigi Giussani in his beautiful book, *The Religious Sense*. In other words, I cannot truly know the fullness of anyone or anything if my knowledge is solely up to me. Revelation must always come from outside my self!

If we are not open to a revelation outside of our selves, then we will never know Jesus Christ, the One who reveals himself in the encounters and events of our daily lives. How do we live a lush life in him that is glorious, boundless and free? We must do the creative, hard work of keeping an open posture in the face of reality. “Being wholly human, lies in an openness that calls a spade a spade,” says Msgr. Giussani. “It is the attitude of the poor in spirit, those who, before reality, have absolutely nothing to defend, who seize everything as it is, and follow the attraction of reality according to its total implications.”

THE HEART OF MARY

This was the open stance of Mary of Nazareth. The Blessed Virgin Mother lived her whole life with a humble, watchful heart. In this way, she was able to recognize the Presence of her Beloved in every person, event and circumstance. Her truth was determined by an Other, but it was a truth about herself that she could cling to with certainty. Everywhere she looked with the eyes of her heart, she saw his ardent love focused personally on her.

How can we “see” this, too? How can we recognize the existence of a Presence who longs to reveal his passionate love for us in our own time and circumstances?

“Open the eyes of our heart to know You!” implored St. Clement of Rome. Perhaps the Lord is trying to make himself known to you today. Try not to finish his sentences. Get out of your self-sufficient box. “Ask God to open the eyes of your heart,” St. John Vianney advised. “If you say to our Lord sincerely, like the blind man in Jericho: ‘O Lord, make me to see!’, you will certainly obtain what you desire.” ❖

Life After Sunday

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Open to His Attention

On Sunday, we may try to come to Mass open, but sometimes even the smallest things can close us right up. Consider the last time you walked into your parish church and encountered the priest, lector, cantor, choir or parishioner you dislike. Suddenly you are less open to the amazing Mystery that is about to take place. Before the first song has even begun, you may have closed yourself off from the full offer of the Lord's boundless love.

"I stand at the door and knock, says the Lord. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper with him, and he with me"

(Rv 3:20). The Lord does not force his way in. It is up to each one of us to freely determine his entry.

OPENING PRAYERS

To help us invite him into our hearts, the Church begins her Mass with "opening prayers"—prayers to open us up! Perhaps it is sin that keeps us closed off and estranged from the Lord's life and love. Perhaps in our self-sufficiency, we don't think we really need the gifts he longs to give us. The penitential rite at the beginning of Mass is meant to place our hearts in an open stance. We acknowledge our sins before God and each other. We humble ourselves and ask for the Lord's forgiveness and mercy.

Once we have opened up—once we have acknowledged our emptiness—we are ready to receive the Lord's full attention. This begins with the Liturgy of the Word. The Lord speaks to us through the Scriptures and the homily of the priest. Listening carefully, open to what he is trying to say to us at that moment, we can come away with a new experience of the Father's wisdom

and love for each of us personally.

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we receive Christ's

very life as we eat his Body and drink his Blood.

The more open we are to

him, the more he lives in us. The more he lives in us, the more we can bring him to others.



COMPLETELY FILLED

Why should we let down our guard and open our hearts? Because when we receive the Lord at Mass with complete openness, we will be filled with his gifts: his passionate love, his security and peace, his truth and complete

Closed Off from Life

The Catechism teaches that refusing to go to Mass on Sunday closes us off from the Lord's life and love [ref.#]. It is an act that dismisses the gift the Lord is trying to offer. "Let us open our time to Christ that he may cast light upon it and give it direction," urges Pope John Paul II. "He is the one who knows the secret of time and the secret of eternity, and he gives us 'his day' as an ever new gift of his love. The rediscovery of his day is a grace which we must implore, not only so that we may live the demands of faith to the full, but also so that we may respond concretely to the deepest human yearnings. Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human" (Dies Domini #7). ❖

certainty about all of reality. All of this is available to each one of us if we simply allow ourselves to be the object of the Lord's total attention.

"O tender Father, you gave me more, much more than I ever thought to ask for," said St. Catherine of Siena in wonder. "I realize that our human desires can never really match what you long to give us." ❖

Open the Eyes of the Soul in Communion

After having received the Lord, since you have the Person Himself present, strive to close the eyes of the body and open those of the soul and look into your own heart. For I tell you, and tell you again, and would like to tell you many times that you should acquire the habit of doing this every time you receive Communion.

— St. Teresa of Avila ❖

Open Arms

Imagine a man and a woman in a city park. He is standing with his arms outstretched ready to embrace her. She is turned away from him with her face toward the street. Before long, he feels foolish. His arms hurt. People nearby can see that his open stance is being rejected. In his sorrow, his instinct is to put down his arms and walk away, defeated. But he cannot stop what he is doing. He loves her.

How can he stand that way without help? After awhile he may feel like he needs poles to prop his arms up. Yet he is determined to maintain his open stance. She will never be able to receive his embrace if he stops offering it.

STAYING OPEN

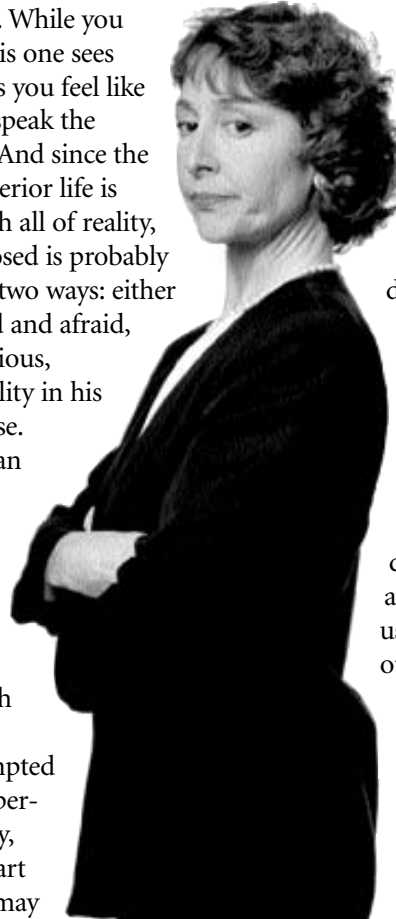
If you are living life wildly open to Christ in the Church, it can be tough to love someone whose heart is closed and turned away from you and Christ. This someone may be a spouse, child,

in-law or friend. While you see so much, this one sees little. Sometimes you feel like you don't even speak the same language! And since the stance of the interior life is reflected through all of reality, a person this closed is probably living in one of two ways: either angry, depressed and afraid, or happily oblivious, ignoring the reality in his or her own house. Either way, not an easy person to turn around!

After awhile, loving family members can get so discouraged with this closed one, they may be tempted to walk away—perhaps not in body, but in mind, heart and soul. They may feel foolish for continuing to lavish their love on this one who does not seem to appreciate their attention.

CHRIST HOLDS OUR ARMS

Who will hold up our arms when we are exhausted from loving someone whom everyone sees is not loving us back? Who will sustain our open stance? Jesus Christ, the One whose arms stay perpetually open, nailed to the Cross by those who were closed. Only the living Presence of this great mystery of boundless love can sustain our open hearts so that they will never close. Only



this One can make sure that we are never left standing alone.

Christ's presence in the life of the Church, in the company of his disciples, is the place to find sustenance, refreshment and rest in the challenge of staying this open. Friends who know Christ can lighten our burden still by encouraging and caring for us as we maintain our open stance of love. Do not be afraid to stay open—even when your efforts seem futile. The Lord will never abandon you in your tender

response to this closed one whom both of you love. ❖

The Open House of Self

In the Scriptures, Mary of Bethany was the personification of openness as she sat captivated in watchful attention at the feet of Jesus Christ (Lk 10:38-42). Mary "not only wants to hear the word; by listening she wants to receive the Lord into herself, she wants to be his vessel. Martha received him into her house externally. Mary receives him into the house of her own self. This space is free and available within her because her love makes it so," observed 20th century mystic Adrienne Von Speyr. ❖

Prayer Keeps Us Open

Daily personal prayer can help us stay open to the Lord and the people in our lives. It can also help you bolster friends and family members who are trying to love someone who is closed. Even if we can't get to daily Mass, meditating on the readings of the day can help us experience Christ through his Word. The rosary is also a powerful prayer as we open ourselves up to the mysteries of Christ's life in the companionship of his Blessed Mother. ❖

Open Minds

Before sending his priests out to educate the faithful, Society of Jesus founder St. Ignatius Loyola “admonished them to be humble in all their disputations, to shun contentiousness and empty displays of learning,” says the *Lives of the Saints*. St. Ignatius wanted to make sure that in opening up the minds and hearts of people who did not know Christ, his priests did not become closed off from the very Mystery they were trying to offer. So he urged them to cling to Christ, focus on the Catechism and keep themselves always in close allegiance to the Pope. In this way, their open stance would be rooted in the truth of Jesus Christ.

Today, the discussion of how to advance the culture by remaining fully Catholic continues, especially in the field of education. Those of us who have children in Catholic schools can see this struggle on a daily basis, especially in our high schools, colleges and universities. In some places, the closing off that St. Ignatius feared seems to have reduced the place of Christ in the quest for truth. In the name of academic freedom, of “open minds,” some educators have disconnected the pursuit of intelligence from the hope of faith. This bow to an educational

Prayer for an Open Mind

Grant me, I beseech Thee, O merciful God! Ardentlly to desire, prudently to investigate, truly to acknowledge, and perfectly to fulfill that which is pleasing to Thee, to the praise and glory of Thy Name. Amen. — St. Thomas Aquinas ❖



life adopted by the secular world diminishes our ability to advance our culture.

DIVORCING MIND FROM SPIRIT

“The result is what may be called a divorce of the mind from the life of the spirit,” writes Dr. David L. Schindler in *Communio*. The fallout of this separation is “a mind that is without love and a love that is without a mind.” In many Catholic schools, religion stays within religion class. Biology, mathematics, physics, art and literature are worked out separately. Trying to stay open to the culture, some educators have missed the link between their particular discipline and the Mystery that encompasses all of reality—a Mystery that goes right to the heart of the most intriguing aspects of Shakespeare, DNA strands and infinite numbers!

Instead of opening up their students’ minds, Catholic educators who teach this way can unwittingly close young people up with ideologies of conventional wisdom. Religion is for Sundays; biology and literature are for the rest of the week. Closed up in this box, it becomes more difficult for students to be struck by the beauty and love evoked only by the Presence of a divine Mystery at work in every aspect of reality.

Catholic educators that see the

Church only as an institution can easily get caught up in this closed stance. This is why it is important to help them recognize that the Church is not an institution but a relationship that is always open to the Other. As Catholic teachers become more convinced of this

truth upon which all other truths are based, they will be better able to open up and bring this good news to students from all races and creeds. “The more the Church has to keep herself Catholic, open to all, dialogical, dramatic, in the modern world, the more profoundly she must comprehend and live her intimate essence as Body and Bride of Christ,” said theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar. ❖

A Reduced Presence

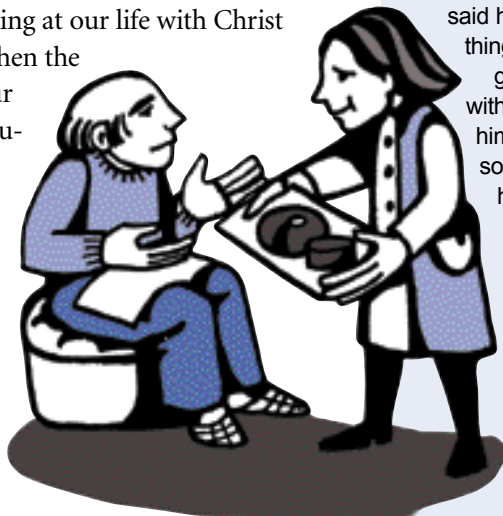
Catholic high schools, colleges and universities that have reduced their open, fully Catholic stance lose their attraction. Sadly, their leaders flounder around trying to figure out why they are off track. Is it because they don’t have enough teachers, computers or buildings for student life? While these may be real, practical concerns, the loss of attraction runs deeper than that. It is a closing off from a living Presence—a Presence that can become so reduced that Jesus Christ is no longer startling and recognizable to the young people on campus. If your child attends a school like this, ask the great Teacher in prayer to show you how to present him to someone there who might be open to his living Presence. ❖

Preferential Openness to the Poor

Staying open to the needs of every person created by the Father is an important part of the mission of the whole Body of Christ, his Church. Yet, we need to be careful not to pigeonhole this essential part of our life with Christ into simply “social justice issues.” By looking at needy people in categories (the homeless, the poor), we can sometimes lose our sense of each one as a unique and unrepeatable person.

People in need are not always docile and thankful for our efforts. People who help them can sometimes close up in the face of the complexity of their needs. If we are closed in on a set of criteria as to what makes a person “poor” or “hungry”, we can miss the poverty right in our own neighborhoods. We can miss the “hungry” right down the hall.

If we try looking at our life with Christ as all of life, then the mission in our parish communities to help people in need can bear tremendous fruit. ❖



SHOCKED OPEN

Let us look at our own shortcomings and leave other people's alone; for those who live carefully ordered lives are apt to be shocked at everything and we might well learn very important lessons from the persons who shock us.

—St. Teresa of Avila ❖

Open Hunger

For the past 11 years, I have been collecting sandwiches and fruit made by folks in my parish to be distributed to the homeless who live on the streets of Washington, D.C. It is not really a noble thing that I do. When my husband, Bill, our three little children and I moved into our parish, I thought it might be a good way to meet my fellow parishioners. I settled into a monthly Sunday morning routine, in the basement of the church—a little quiet time away from the kids. I got to know a few faithful people who provided scores of sandwiches each month and taught me about generosity and compassion. Most would just drop off the sandwiches and run. Others felt comfortable enough after seeing me month after month to stay and chat. Those that stayed told me about life during the Depression, being without food as children and vowing to never let people go hungry when they could help.

One Sunday morning, a man whom I didn't recognize came in. He seemed to be looking for anything he could walk away with. I was immediately suspicious. He asked me for some sandwiches. When I told him that the sandwiches were for a shelter downtown, he said that he was homeless. When I offered him some sandwiches, he said he didn't like what I was offering and wanted to find something that suited his taste. Well, forget it, I thought! On any given Sunday, I can have up to eight large coolers filled with sandwiches. I told him he could just take what I gave him. “Okay,” he said, “forget the sandwiches and give me some oranges.” I picked out some nice, loose ones. But no, he didn't want the oranges I offered. He picked up a 10 lb. sealed bag and said he wanted me to open it so he could choose the ones he wanted. “They look better in the bag,” he said. I told him he was welcome to have any of the loose fruit, but I was not about to open the bag. I was now truly annoyed. I have no idea why I was so protective of that food, but there was no way this guy was going to take advantage of me. After all, I thought, if he was really hungry, he'd take what he could get.

Well, he walked away from me and across the hall to a Tupperware sale table set up by the Legion of Mary. I could see that he wanted their display products. Unable to get any Tupperware, he returned to me. By now he was clearly angry. When he asked me again to open the bag of oranges and I refused, there was a look of utter hatred in his eyes. I thought my life was in danger, but I stood up to him anyway. Finally, he moved toward me, his face close to mine, hesitated and stammered, “Forgive me.” He quickly turned and hurried away. His words hit me like a blow to my face. My legs were shaking so badly that I almost fell to the floor. I wanted to ask for his forgiveness, too, but it was too late. He was gone.

—Regina O. McDermott, Silver Spring, Maryland ❖

Be Open in the World

BY JOHN M CAPOBIANCO

Have you found your openness to Christ gradually closed by the recurrence of intimidating worldly voices? Responding to the call of Christ to be his open presence in our world everyday amidst relentless belittlement can be a very difficult posture to sustain. If you are not closely joined to him, sustained by the power of his Spirit living within you, it becomes very easy to close yourself off in fear and frustration. This scenario diminishes the way Christ can work through you to touch your finite world with his infinite presence. So how can you continually remain open to being his presence week after week?

STARTING YOUR DAY

The best answer to this question is that, if you cannot prayerfully attend daily Mass, at least make sure that you read scripture everyday as you seek to be with and serve Christ's body in this world. For a long time, I have tried to start my day by reading the liturgy of the day. This has allowed God's Word—expressed in the scripture selections proclaimed and pondered by the Church throughout the world at daily Mass—to form my heart and mind as I embark on my day. After a few years, this time with God's Word profoundly shaped my view of reality, my openness to others and willingness to see Christ in them. The cumulative effect of reading the Bible with the Church day after day, week after week, year after year is the formation of a worldview that begins to unite the harsh fleeting demands

of this world with the endless dividends of God's glorious grace. *This is the eternal view of human life.* It flows unbelievably wide open in personal and social love, generosity and diversity. It lifts your spirit and gives you the strength to believe that there is no human problem insurmountable for those who trust in the Father's plan. This comprehensive "eternal worldview" is beautifully captured in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The very first scriptural quote of the Catechism sets the goal and tone for our call to an astonishing human enterprise. "FATHER, ... this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3, CCC Prologue).

THE CATECHISM OF THE POST?

Of course, beginning my morning reading scripture had one immediate benefit. As soon as I opened my front door and fetched my newspaper, I was better prepared to confront an assault on my spiritual openness from a very different worldview, expressing a very different "catechism." This worldview pounds the doorstep day after day, year after year, dwarfing the impact of the Church's proposal for human life. In my neighborhood, I call it "the Catechism of *The Washington Post*." You can insert the name of your own newspaper here. The political differences between papers are secondary. The *Post's* subtle and attractive lure is



WHICH CATECHISM FORMS YOUR HEART?

Are you initially more suspicious of the motives and actions of international, national and local Church leaders than secular leaders? Do you consider the life of the Church outdated and unworthy of your full openness and participation? If you answered yes, consider a more open posture. "What the Church needs most is to show that Christ not only can be present in life, but that, if He is present, He makes the life of the individual and of society more human. We need to witness to the fact that people who live in this way—following Christ—feel better than those who do not live in this way, realizing a humanity that is more intense, more charged with intelligence of the aim and of affectivity, more open to others and more constructive than that of others," says Msgr. Luigi Giussani. ❖

expressed quite well in its cleverly arrogant motto: "*The Washington Post*: if you don't get it, you don't get it."

While I really want to "get it," the eternal perspective provided by daily scriptural reading has helped me recognize that the reduction of the human proposal expressed by the *Post* through a "this world only" political paradigm clearly doesn't capture the fulfillment of all it means to be human. Doesn't this limited paradigm place the human spirit under a kind of latex ceiling that prohibits one from spiritually maturing and soaring? Personally, my heart desires much more than this "worldly catechism" proposes. Yet it's helpful to be aware of and recognize its influence and limitations if we are to remain open and faithful to our destiny as the Lord's presence in the world.

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From the Mystical Monsignor.....

To be open is to provide space for something. An interior openness means creating within your self a space, a willingness to receive a gift. This openness should be encouraged—but with an important condition. Not everyone you meet bears good gifts. You keep your house locked. If you kept your house open all the time, you might be attacked by robbers or have your things stolen. It is important to care for your house so that it does not come to any harm.

Only some people have the key to your house. How do you know the right person? Someone you have met in love. Someone who fulfills you. For them the house is always open. The same is true with the keys to your heart.

To whom do you give the ultimate key to your very self? Jesus Christ. But, before you can do this you must first be certain that he has loved you. This is only reasonable. You can't give the key to your inner life to friends or even the Church unless you know to Whom they are linked!

Defend the authentic openness that can only come through a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. That which does not fulfill you—you cannot be open to. You must be reasonable in your openness just as you give the key to someone who loves you.—*Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation, an international movement in the Church* ❖

Be Open in the World

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Let's set aside the belittling attitude towards believers in general and towards the Catholic faith in particular (usually expressed by *Catholic* journalists who just "don't get" the Catechism of the Catholic Church) in our national newspapers. Let's not be distracted by that. Rather, let's ask whether this "worldly catechism" shapes the size and openness of our hearts more than the "eternal catechism"? If we, too, remain blind to eternal life in the midst of the world, Christ will have a difficult time using us to say "be open" to those who are trapped in darkness in our world. ❖

Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This feature of Life After Sunday has been developed at the request of small groups that want to explore the theme of each issue. —The Editor

What does "being open" mean to you? (p. 1 and 2)

- Describe a time when you were closed off.
- How does the cultural drumbeat of self-sufficiency affect your open stance?

Do you come to Mass open to receive the full gift that Christ has to offer? (p. 3)

- What situations close you up in Church?
- Describe a time when the Presence of Christ opened you up during Mass.

Do you have a loved one who is closed? (p. 4)

- Read Matt. 13:1-15.
- How do you stay open to someone who remains "blind" and "deaf" to you and Christ?

Do you consider the Catholic education you've experienced to be open or closed? (p. 5)

- Describe the teacher whose open stance affected you most.
- What can you do personally to help open up a place of Catholic learning that seems closed to the Mystery manifested in the Presence of Jesus Christ?

Do the people in your parish have a preferential openness to poor people? (p. 6)

- How do you define the "poor", "hungry" and "homeless."
- How do we stay open to the needs that are right in front of your eyes?

How can you stay open with the Church in the world? (p.7)

- Do you spend more time with the newspaper everyday than you do with God's Word?
- Do you judge the Church and her teachings according to political categories like liberal vs. conservative?

Looking for ways to bring *Life After Sunday* into parish programs already in place? Visit www.lifeaftersunday.com/parishlife.html for suggestions, or call us for personal assistance.