

Written for “The Pastor’s Desk”

## I. A TIME TO WONDER

The mysteries of the rosary are rightly called ‘mysteries’ because we meet their meaning at a deeper level than the images and stories. They are truly ‘wonder-full’ and nurturing. What they all have in common is that they depict God’s life transforming our lives. So, this October, let’s allow ourselves to get excited about life!

The life of each of us is not just a chance in the long history of the universe. It is a calling, and has a purpose. No other person could have substituted for you. Each of us needs to come alive to the miracle of our own life and our place in the universe. And it will be easier to navigate life’s troubled waters if we understand our life as a process of becoming.

There’s adventure in the idea that the world God made is a work in progress. If it had been perfected from the start, there would have been no time-gap to allow for those things that happen over time – no scope for the exercise of freedom and responsibility; no narrative; no future awaiting things that grow from what they are to what they aren’t yet; no chance for us to make a difference....

Because our life is part of the life of the planet, our activities, our loving, smiling, laughing, making music are all made from the fibres of the planet. In a real sense, the planet finds expression in us. Each of us contributes to what the planet becomes. The choices we make and the things we do matter that much!

And because all of this is a work in progress, there are going to be lots of instances of unfinished becoming. This doesn’t mean our life can’t be fulfilling. Pope Francis recently set two teenagers on the path to canonisation. Alexia Gonzales Barros and Carlo Acutis had each been diagnosed with terminal cancer; each rose above their set-back by choosing God’s will over their own; and each offered up their suffering to help others. In that way, they lived their lives to the full; they were not defeated by the set-backs of a truncated life.

Some set-backs are life-long. Again, remember: we are all part of a creation that is still groaning in labour pains as it gradually becomes what it is not yet (Romans 8:22,23). That’s why there is no such thing as a right to satisfy every desire within our present life-time. We can afford to accept that “life’s not fair” and not be defeated by that.

Some even start life with some kind of set-back. But no condition we are born with or that later comes to us ever stands in the way of God’s love, which is unconditional and the same for each and every one. We can’t get more equal than that! Do you ever pause to wonder that you exist at all? When you were conceived, there were millions of sperm competing to fertilise a waiting ovum. One did so. Every other combination of sperm and ovum would have been a different person. The one moment in the whole history of the universe when any of them could have come into existence passed. They will never exist. And at the one moment when you could have come into existence, you did. You might well ask: “why me?” You really are one in a million.

## II COMING ALIVE

Coming alive at your conception was only the start. By the way, science has long since confirmed that the newly conceived is new human being. It is not a part of its mother's body. It is already its own self. From that moment on, for the rest of our life, we're on a journey. It's the story of coming more and more alive – in ways that needn't be blocked by our dents and kinks and set-backs.

Our coming alive gets a big lift when it strikes us that the universe might never have existed. God didn't need it, but freely chose it – out of pure love for us. This is to see the world for what it really is – gift. This makes the difference between taking life for granted, and living it with thanksgiving.

We all know experiences that point beyond themselves to 'something more'. "Look at the dance, and you will see the Dancer" (A. de Mello). It happens especially in the experience of beauty, goodness and truth. Something wonderful in nature, or in someone's life, helps us become aware of God's presence. Or, some treasured memory convinces us we are part of something much bigger than our own life-time. Or, the sudden feeling that even the good things of life (a good marriage, a successful business, good friends, good health...) still leave an empty gap somewhere inside us. Somehow, there's more.

Noticing is a way of seeing. "The profound is always within our reach, masquerading as the ordinary" (Daniel O'Leary). Pausing to notice is to live more deeply.

The opposite to "seeing" in these ways is "not noticing" – because we don't stop still long enough to notice the 'something more'. We live on the surface; we see without seeing. Some people have even narrowed their vision down to seeing only what is useful or profitable or pleasurable. Some see the world only as a kind of quarry to be exploited; or see time only for its market value. They don't notice that the planet is a precious environment that can lift our spirits, as well as provide our keep.

Our coming alive gets an even bigger lift from the experience of being loved and of loving. This, too, is an ordinary experience which points beyond itself. It can be transforming – of ourselves, our relationships, and society.

There is a loving that does not go deep enough to transform society. It works at the level of what seems fair and reasonable and deserving. This is what governments are properly concerned with. But there is a deeper kind of loving, that is not limited to what seems fair and reasonable and deserved.

As Christians, we are uniquely placed for this because in the Person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see love that is unconditional, undeserved, and unstinting. When we love as we have been loved, our love becomes a circuit breaker - precisely because it is not calculating and limited to what seems fair and reasonable and deserved. Running through family life, civic life, industrial, commercial and political life, this kind of love "changes everything". It brings about a way of living – of being human – that is true to what God made us for.

This is how faith makes a decisive difference to all of human life, while fully respecting the rightful autonomy of everything that is properly secular. In the midst of life God is drawing us towards the fulfilment of our own deepest yearnings, and wonderfully more, involving God's purpose for the whole of creation.

### III WHAT WOULD A TRANSFORMED SOCIETY LOOK LIKE?

Our economic system presupposes that “the business of business is business”! On that basis, business and industry give first priority to maximizing profits. The needs of others are addressed *afterwards*, e.g. through the various ways tax revenue is distributed. Over many years, this system has resulted in a still widening gap between rich and poor. Greed and exploitation are at the root of the terrible suffering of many people, families and nations. A root problem requires root surgery: without a vision we are only tinkering. Something other than just tweaking the present system is needed. As Pope Benedict XVI has said:

Our world has grown weary of greed, exploitation and division, of the tedium of false idols and piecemeal responses, and the pain of false promises. Our hearts and minds are yearning for a vision of life where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. (To young people, Sydney, 2008).

Something different is needed. A country’s economy needs to be strong, and there is a proper place for self-interest. But the underlying premise must be that the business of business is *people*. As the Maori proverb has it: he aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata! (What is the most important thing in the world? People, people, people.) On that premise the needs of weaker members of society would be *factored into* economic planning. That is different from giving market forces free reign and then trying to redress imbalances afterwards!

The needed alternative would have to be based on human dignity. Present policies simply take it for granted that the fruits of industry and commerce belong to those who provide the finance, and not to those who provide the human labour. The problem with this is that workers and their jobs can be perceived mainly as cost items – and costs are to be minimized or eliminated for the sake of maximizing profits. This leaves workers, their families and livelihoods vulnerable.

An alternative system, based more on human dignity, holds that by providing their personal labour, workers contribute even more significantly to the enterprise than do those who provide finance, which is impersonal. And so the fruits of the enterprise/industry/business properly belong to the workers as well. More equitable ways of sharing those fruits need to be worked out.

Similarly, trading relationships, industrial law and commercial practices would make room for what Pope Benedict called “gratuitousness”. In other words, compassion, giving, and forgiving are factored into these relationships and practices. National policies and international law would include the needs of the world’s poor, and migrants and refugees as a matter of right, not just of charity or goodwill.

But is this our concern? Well, put it this way: During Mass we contemplate God’s extraordinary love for us revealed in Christ’s sacrifice. Then at Holy Communion we receive and become the body broken for others and the blood (life) poured out for others. That’s what we commit to by our “Amen”. That’s what being “sent” means.

#### IV BECOMING YOURSELF

Our becoming is a life-long partnership with God. Every moment depends on God just as much as our first moment. God journeys with us.

We hear about “doing God’s will.” God doesn’t impose on you. In fact, your best hopes for yourself and God’s hopes for you are the same. When God chose you, God chose what you yourself most deeply want, because that’s part of who you are.

God “wrote” your personal calling into your “heart” and your talents. Your deepest longings and hopes, and even your concerns and anxieties, all point to something beyond what you already are. God has also “written” to you in the circumstances of your life. The places where God calls you are the places where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

Sometimes you can know what is the right choice by imagining yourself at the far end of your life and looking back – the choices that will give you the most gladness then are the ones that are right for you now. But don’t get paralysed trying to keep all your options open. Freedom and peace come through decision and commitment.

The wonderful thing about our journey with God is that it always starts from where we are - not from where we could or should have been! Our experience of weakness and failure and of making wrong choices does not have to weigh us down. If we know how greatly we are loved by God, and how much God wants to forgive us, it becomes easier to move on.

“Moving on” doesn’t mean disowning the negative moments of our personal history. Just the opposite: it involves accepting ourselves as the person we actually are, including our incompleteness! “I am the person who made those choices - some of them good and some bad”. We are more vulnerable to disappointment if we imagine we are supposed to “have it all together”. Even God hasn’t put that expectation on us. Becoming is an unfinished process; we are a work in progress.

Accepting reality also means not needing masks, pretences or excuses. Doing without them can take time. Shame, guilt, anger, pride or sadness can get in the way. But these are only stages on the journey. The important thing is to keep moving towards self-acceptance. If we need to be forgiven, then that is our reality. And when God forgives, that is also part of our reality – so we don’t get stuck with a sense of guilt; we gratefully and joyfully move on.

Being forgiven is a liberating experience. But so is the ability to forgive! Psychologists point out that our mental health and physical health can be harmed if we are unforgiving and harbour resentment. It’s our self who is harmed by holding on to resentment. Forgiving those who have wronged us is healing for our self as well. To forgive can take moral courage in a society that is very unforgiving, and can only think of punishment.

In all these ordinary human ways, it is the Holy Spirit who draws us into the life of the Risen Christ. This sharing – ‘communion’ – in Christ’s life, and with one another, is the new creation coming about. “Your kingdom come, your will be done...!”

## V TAKING A STAND

Helping to make the world a better place and becoming one's true self are two sides of the same coin. This often involves taking a stand in a world where some will stop at nothing for their own selfish interests. They will even shamelessly disregard scientific and historical facts. It's amazing how many are duped by them.

Scientists work hard to establish facts. They know we need to act on what is objectively true. Solving crimes, the judicial system, and research in every field are all based on the premise that truth matters. Studies and exams are based on the premise that true and false are not the same. Respect for one's self involves being open to truth from whatever source, rather than the superficiality of reducing everything to mere opinion.

The need for objective truth applies also to the big questions of life. Some activities are true to human nature and some are not. Some are consistent with human dignity, and some are not. Some actions are right and some are wrong whether the individual knows it or not.

Judgments about which activities are right and which are wrong are judgments we need to make – otherwise how could we say, for example, that rape is wrong? Not to make such judgments is ultimately not to care.

But judging people's actions is one thing; judging the person is another. They may be in good conscience or bad concerning what they are doing. They may be more blameworthy or less, or not blameworthy at all. That is why Pope Francis could say: "who am I to judge"? We need to know the difference between judging a person's actions (which we can rightly do) and judging their conscience (which we cannot.)

Taking a stand calls for character, which is not just personality or social skills; it's moral strength, and it takes practice. Its opposite is regular self-indulgence. The slogan "everybody's doing it" is an invitation to be like sheep. Those who aren't practised in self-restraint end up having less control over their own actions. NZ has one of the highest rates of domestic violence. The quality of marriage and family life depends on being used to respecting other's needs and not always insisting on getting one's own way.

Another big challenge in our time is to not let ourselves be drowned in bits and pieces of information. Information is important. But on its own information is not wisdom. It isn't even knowledge until it is properly sifted and researched. Wisdom is the ability to discern and judge how knowledge applies in ways that are right and lasting and worthwhile. "Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad." (Anon.)

The transformation of information into knowledge and wisdom is a process. It needs time, experience and reflection. It also needs silence and stillness – a break from busyness and noise. Sometimes it helps to turn off the flow of information coming into us, leaving time to think about what has already come - and chance to practise self-restraint!

Wisdom is a kind of meeting place. It is enshrined in people's experiences, histories and cultures, and so through respectful listening to one another we are able to journey together into better understandings, and explore together the bigger questions of life. It is where people's differences can belong, and through dialogue be enriching. It presupposes that "no one is an island".