

Attention!

BY MARY BETH
NEWKUMET

I won't mention any names, but there are certain members of my immediate family who are annoyed with me. I am not paying enough attention to the meals that are served in this house. At 4:45PM, the kids ask, "What's for dinner?" and all too often my response is, "I don't know..."

Since I am the parent who is home during the dinner preparation hours, my lack of interest has become a problem! I am supposed to be the keeper of the hearth. Yet, I am not thinking through the meals. I don't know what's in the pantry. I don't plan ahead when I go to the grocery store.

The members of my family want me to take better care of this aspect of our life together. And although these accusations naturally put me on the defensive, if I am honest with myself, I can see that *everything that is being said is true.*

Now, on the surface this may seem like a mundane problem, until you understand that it is not easily solved. I have absolutely no interest in cooking. Nor do I have any interest in learning. "If a certain thing does not interest me, then I do not look at it; if I do not look at it, then I cannot know it," says Italian theologian Msgr. Luigi Giussani. "In order to know it, I need to give my attention to it."

What can possibly spark my interest? What can draw me in to pay more attention? Only the promise of some kind of fulfillment. For me it

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will not be the fulfillment of mastering the domestic arts—but the fulfillment that will come from taking better care of my family.

PASSIONATE INTEREST

We will always pay the most attention to the people or things in which we are most passionately interested. Our hearts can't lie. If we are really interested, if we really want to know someone or something,

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Mary, the first
Steward of Christ

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we will pay attention! We will delve, study, explore, search and discover. Why? *Because the people or things that will always be the most interesting to us will be the ones we believe can bring us the most fulfillment.*

What does this fact about human life have to do with Christ and his Church? Everything! A genuine relationship with the Risen Jesus follows the same steps as every other intimate relationship. Therefore, if we have no passionate interest in the person of Jesus Christ, we do not pay attention to him. And if we do not pay attention to him, it is because we do not yet believe that he can bring the most fulfillment to our daily lives.

What can suddenly spark our interest? Christ's call into a deeper relationship usually comes through some kind of an event. An encounter. A confrontation. An illness. A trauma. A death. The more challenging the event, the more opportunity there is for serious introspection, a wide-eyed examination of where we have been directing our focus. Gradually, some of us come to the realization that the people (spouses, family and friends) or things (money, work, clothes, leisure) we have been most interested in up until that time *cannot bring us a deeper happiness and fulfillment on their own.* Not only that, but it has been unreasonable to expect them to provide us with everything our hearts desire.

For some, the fruit of this introspection is a sudden interest in a life with Christ in the Church. *And with this interest comes a new attention.* "In its Latin root, attention means 'to be

tensed toward,'" says Msgr. Giussani. "If it interests me, strikes me, I will be 'tensed toward' it when faced with it."

TENSED TOWARD THE CHURCH

Attention to Christ in the life of the Church often starts with a greater participation in the Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For some of us, this attention may also mean a new routine of personal prayer, perhaps Scripture reading or the recitation of the Rosary. For others, it may mean the desire for additional formation on the Church's teachings, a new interest in serving the least among us, or participation in a small prayer group.

No matter the path, if we stay open and attentive, we will be drawn deeper into the Church's mystery. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, old preconceptions will be shattered. The Church will become less of a sterile someTHING, and more of a mutually attentive relationship with a living SomeONE. With eyes of love, we will start recognizing the living Presence of Jesus Christ in the Word, in the Eucharist and in the people with whom he is united, especially the poorest of the poor. And the deeper we grow in our interest in him and his life, the more dramatically we will recognize his attention to the desires of our hearts.

The great news is that this attention will include all the people and things that have always interested us. The Risen Jesus will bring his divine truth and vibrant passion to every area of our lives. United with him, we can then love our families and neighbors *with his love.* United with him, we can

then pursue our work, security and pastimes *with his truth,* ensuring that these things never again become the place where we find a reduced notion of fulfillment.

The Church is this place of encounter with Jesus Christ and his truth about all of the mysteries of human life. Interested in knowing more? Perhaps now is the time to start paying attention. ❖

Life After Sunday

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An Attentive Father

Consider a father at his baby's first visit to the pediatrician. Oblivious to the cranky toddlers and sullen teens in the busy waiting room around him, the father sits and stares at the baby's face for a full half-hour, completely focused on whether his child is happy and content. He caresses his cheek and inspects his tiny fingers. He is mesmerized. When it is time for them to see the doctor, the nurse has to call the man's name three times to bring him out of his stupor.

SOUND FAMILIAR?

Yet why is it that those of us who remember paying this much attention to our own newborns find it so difficult to believe that God the Father is paying *even more attention* to us? At Mass on Sunday, many still experience a God who is so remote, they can't imagine such an intimate focus.

Yet, when Jesus Christ told his disciples about his heavenly Father, he assured them of his Father's closest, personal attention. This is a Father who not only knows exactly what we need, but also wants to provide it (Matt 6:32); a Father who is so focused on us individually that he has counted every hair on our heads (Matt 10:30); a Father who is "perfect" (Matt 5:48).

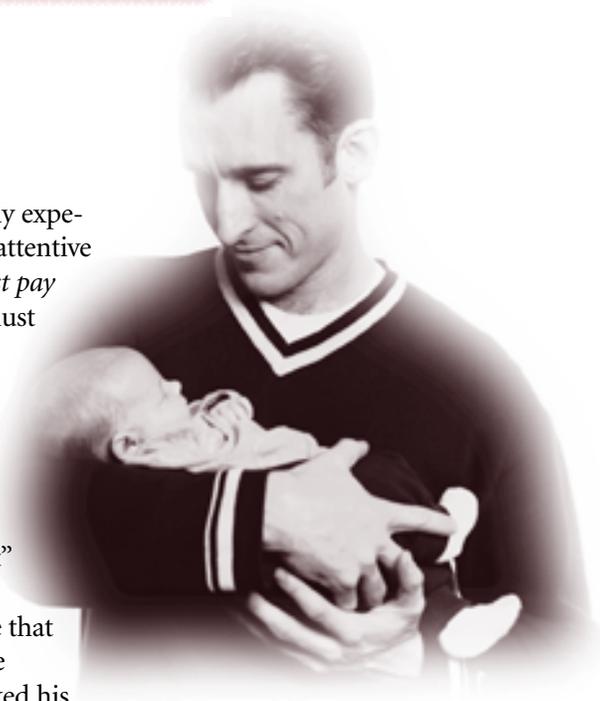
GO THROUGH THE SON

How can we grow in relationship with such a glorious God? The path is very clear. "No one can come to the Father except through me," proclaimed Jesus

Christ (John 14:6). To fully experience the divine life and attentive love of the Father, *we must pay attention to his Son*. We must draw near to his Son; we must pursue an intimate relationship with his Son. Then when the attentive Father looks at us he will "see and love in us what you see and love in Christ" (Preface, Ordinary Time VII). "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" Jesus asked his followers (Jn 14:10).

Since the way to the Father is through the Son, the Church asks the faithful to focus their attention on the places where the Risen Jesus can be encountered. At the celebration of the Mass, "Christ is present in the celebrant who renews at the altar the one and only Sacrifice of the Cross," teaches Pope John Paul II. "He is present in the Sacraments through which he exercises his efficacious power. When his word is proclaimed, it is he himself who speaks to us. He is also present in the community, by virtue of his promise that 'where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Mt 18:20). He is present 'especially under the Eucharistic species'" (*Ecclesia in America*, #10).

At these times and places at Mass on Sunday, the Risen Christ comes to offer a deeper experience of our eternal destiny with his Father. So don't be surprised when he reveals himself to you personally. Even if you *are* paying atten-



tion, the "revelation" of Jesus Christ is so unexpected and so concrete, that you will remember the time and place—like the apostles who first encountered Jesus at "four in the afternoon" (Jn 1:39).

Like them, he will invite you to "come and see" the glory of human life lived with an attentive Father. ❖

ATTENTION TO THE TRUTH

Since many of us have had no formal catechetical instruction since Confirmation, it can become easy to listen to secular voices that overlook, misinterpret or dismiss many of the Church's teachings. Do you own a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church? Do you have a Bible, Liturgy of the Hours, or prayer book? Have you ever read the lives of the saints or writings by the Doctors of the Church? The pursuit of truth is a quest of every attentive person. A focus on Christ's truth expressed in the life of his Church is essential. ❖

Marian Attention

American boys are in crisis, according to the popular culture. Sociologists have observed that boys today are increasingly unruly, uncooperative, hard to educate and depressed. The speculated reasons for this crisis range from lack of parental presence to an over-emphasis on education for girls. Boys, many experts say, are getting lost in the shuffle of modern life. If only they had stronger male role models, or were exposed to less sex and violence in the media....

I am not an expert, just the mother of two young boys. But I would like to propose another way to help both little and not-so-little-boys who seem to have lost their way to a secure, fulfilled life. I suggest helping them appreciate and love the Blessed Mother.

Now you may think that boys in need of strong male role models would be better off with male saints—and I’m certainly not discouraging that! I am just speaking from my own experience. The most attractive, masculine men I know are men who have fallen in love with Mary. Why? Because through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mother brings men to appreciate the fullness of the feminine person.

ATTENTIVE TO WOMEN

In my experience, men who are devoted to Mary are more attentive to women. They tend to honor their mothers, love their wives, cherish their daughters and appreciate their sisters, women friends and colleagues. “In the light of Mary,” says Pope

John Paul II, they see “in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the



University of Notre Dame photo

ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement” (Mother of the Redeemer, #46).

Men who appreciate these feminine gifts will never stay in crisis for long because *they will be deeply loved by the women in*

their lives. And with all that feminine attention, they will tend to be happy, fulfilled and secure. By confidently loving the feminine, they become the best of men. This is true whether they become husbands, fathers or priests.

BEHOLD, YOUR MOTHER

When Jesus gave his Mother into the care of St. John at the foot of the Cross, he knew that a relationship with her was a glorious way for men and women to plumb the depths of his divine life and love.

It is never too late for a “boy” of any age to turn to Mary—especially if he is confounded by the women who surround him! The rosary is an especially powerful way to walk in her feminine presence. “The rosary is a way of contemplating the face of Christ seeing him—we may say—through the eyes of Mary,” says the Pope. By pondering the mysteries of the life of Christ in companionship *with her*, a man can begin to recognize the true path to the life of sustaining love the Father has intended for him.

—MBN ❖

ATTENTIVE FOR LIFE

When children are little, begin their relationship with the Blessed Mother by teaching them the Hail Mary and telling them how much the Blessed Mother loved and cared for Jesus throughout his life. When children receive the sacraments, the gift of a Marian statue or medal can become a precious reminder of Mary’s presence on their journey with Christ. Teach them to say the rosary and suggest they confide in Mary when they are afraid, tempted or having trouble sleeping. As they get older, send them to Mary when they are fighting with their siblings or wildly attracted to the young men or women they meet. Through prayer, the Virgin Mother will help them cling to Christ and begin to take the people who surround them into their attentive care. ❖

Attentive Friends

BY NICOLE LAWN

Faith is something that I've always had in my life. As I grow older, my faith grows stronger. I believe now I have a great relationship with God. I love going to church. When I walk in I get this feeling inside me. I love the solemn look about it. To me it is so welcoming. I tend to like to go to church alone, because I feel I get the most out of it. No distractions.

I was the president of my Catholic girls' high school my senior year. By being a part of the student council, and other activities I got to meet and become friends with a lot of girls. I thought going to a Catholic school, I would find a lot of girls who were just as into their faith as I was; I mean, almost all the girls had gone to a Catholic grammar school. I was wrong. Most of my friends were the Christmas, Easter churchgoers. Almost none of them would talk about their faith or anything religious. It wasn't the cool thing to do. Everything was about boys and alcohol. Now I'm not saying that I wasn't interested in that, too, but no one really had the same connection with God like I had. During my freshmen and sophomore years, I didn't really talk about my faith to others; no one seemed very interested in it.

NOT AFRAID TO SHARE

By the time junior and senior year rolled around I realized that my faith was something very important to me, and I'm not going to be afraid to share it with anyone. When I would hear my friends talk about something that was wrong, I would throw in the

comment "Pray, God will help!" and when my friends and I would fail our tests, I would say, "Okay, this happened for a reason, God is trying to tell us something." (I think He was telling us to get off AOL and the telephone, and study.) And one day, I got the nickname that stuck all throughout my senior year....Dork Lawn. The friends I hung out with just didn't think church or praying was the thing to do. So when I would start saying something about my faith, I got the comment, "You're such a dork." At first I couldn't understand why they always called me that. Now I realize that it wasn't something they were calling me to put me down, but it was just something to say back. They didn't know what to say, they didn't want to admit that praying could be the solution to their problem, or going to church was a cool thing to do.

As the months went by I actually started to gain better relationships with some of my friends. I got more phone calls, with friends asking me for advice on a problem they had either at home, school, or with boys. And in almost all of the conversations I've had with them, I always told them that "everything is happening for a reason. There's a reason why that boy hasn't asked you out, maybe God's got a better boy waiting for you." When I gave advice like that, my friends would pause, think about it, and say, "Yeah you could be right....you're such a dork." Now having a name like Dork wasn't always the greatest. When I got up to speak at



school assemblies, I would hear someone yelling Dork. The worst was when my English teacher actually called me Dork!

DEEP FRIENDSHIPS

We all need friends. We look to friends, as people we can count on, people who are always there to either help us out, or to make us laugh. We have the surface friends, which are friends who you hang out with, you like, can make you laugh, but they aren't the ones that you call to tell your deepest secrets, or can trust the most. Those are your real friendships. Those are your greatest friends. I had a lot of surface friends that would always call me up for advice and when it came down to when I needed the advice, they didn't have much to say. My good attentive friends were also the ones that were starting to realize that I did have a strong connection with God and my church community.

Right now as a freshman in college, I'm looking back at who were the friends I wish I had spent more time with, and I'm realizing which friends are the ones that really cared. I have lost friends since high school, but I've found out who my best friends are. The degree to which we know ourselves and are willing to be ourselves reflects in our relationships with others. ❖

Does Your Parish Have Your Attention?

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

Sometimes your parish can be the hardest place to focus your attention. It is so easy for personalities to get in the way of stewarding the love of Christ to the very people you have come to know just well enough to recognize that you don't want to spend any more time with them! You know the ones I'm thinking of: Tom is just a grumpy pain. Meetings are unbearable with him. Harriet is set in her ways and always sings the same old songs. Mary is too conservative. Billy is too liberal. Harry has been running the clam bake forever, and who wants to work with him? And the CYO basketball coach, oh dear God, don't get me started! There's only one thing worse than the sports people in parish life and that's the people at bingo! Sound familiar? Sometimes you wonder if sitting on the couch and watching another episode of "Everybody

Loves Raymond" isn't much more tranquil for your spiritual health! At least there, when you get agitated or just plain bored, you can use the remote.

And yet, I submit that it is at just this moment—when you notice those irritating flaws in your fellow parishioners—that you have been given a special gift. If you notice that someone or something is not quite right in your parish, like it or not, you are starting to pay attention. Your response at this point is critical. These "flaws" in parish life can become excuses for you to dismiss everyone and everything the parish has to offer. Alas, after all, it's not perfect, so why waste your precious time? So many people spend their entire spiritual lives right here, griping about or discarding the problem people in their path, and they go no further. And yet, if you follow the path of attention, and begin to focus more closely, you will notice that Christ is asking something of you *through them*. Maybe he simply wants you to pay particular attention to his presence in them. Or maybe he is simply using them to prompt you to go beyond your own all-consuming needs and desires.

CONSISTENTLY PREFERRED

To pay attention to another in your parish in this way influences a beautiful interior growth in charity. "Charity simply means that in human relationships another is consistently preferred to oneself," says Msgr. Luigi Giussani, in his book, *Morality*,



Illustration by Richard Cook

Memory and Desire. "To affirm others in this fashion is to grow, to increase. In practice, charity develops as attention given to the person of another, with the intention of providing whatever is necessary to that other person and of assuming upon one's own shoulders the needs and requirements of that person. The community that arises from such a situation is a community of initiatives, of initiatives without limits. These initiatives, in turn, produce a society that is more humanly desirable."

The attractive beauty of a parish begins to shine when this kind of community flows from the attention lived by many charitable parishioners. When this happens, Harry might even let another parishioner steward that clam bake. Mary and Billy might start thinking and acting beyond their narrow political categories. Harriet might sing a new song. In this way, together, our parishes might become the breeding ground for that "more humanly desirable" world. This only leaves me with one question: This doesn't mean I have to volunteer for bingo, does it? ❖

PRAYER

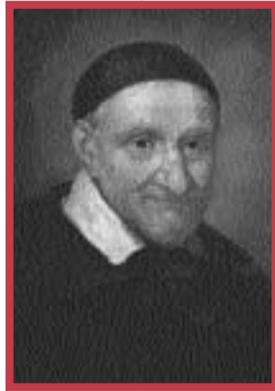
O Blessed Lord, you have commanded us to love one another; give us the grace that, as we have received your unmerited favors, we may love all persons in you and for you. We implore your clemency for all people, but particularly for our friends whom you have given us. Love them, Source of Love, and instill in them a thorough love for yourself, that they may seek, utter and do nothing save what is pleasing to you. Amen. ❖

— St. Anselm of Canterbury

Recognizing Places That Need His Attention

Once you have begun to pay more attention to life with Christ in his Church, your life out in the world will never be the same! You will begin to see things with new eyes. In your work, volunteer activities and civic organizations, you will notice the places where there is very little love, very little solidarity, very little peace. Recognizing this fact is an important step in the life of a believer.

Consider the path of St. Vincent de Paul. Like many of us, St. Vincent began his life with Christ in the Church with a focus on his own personal concerns. “Among his chief reasons for becoming a priest,” writes biographer Edward R. Udovic, C.M., “was his desire to get an office in the Church from which he could obtain enough money to retire early, return home and provide for his family.” But when St. Vincent de Paul arrived in the city



of Paris in 1608, his path took a different turn. St. Vincent was assigned as tutor and chaplain to the wealthy Gondi family and their children. This would have seemed like a perfect assignment given his personal goals. Yet St.

Vincent began to focus his attention outward, looking more carefully at the realities of the society around him.

As he traveled the Gondi estates with his patrons, St. Vincent became keenly aware of the severe spiritual and material poverty of

the peasants who worked the Gondi land. St. Vincent “paid close attention to events and even closer attention to the people who gave meaning to the events.” This process took some time. It would be a few more years before St. Vincent was ready to fully respond to Jesus truly present in the poorest of the poor who surrounded him.

THOSE THINGS HE LETS US SEE, HE ASKS OF US

“Let us remain within the bounds of our vocation. Let us labor to become interior men, to conceive great and holy affections for the service of God. Let us do the good that presents itself to be done and let us do it in the ways we have said. I do not say that it is necessary to proceed to infinity and to undertake all things without distinction, but those things which God lets us see, he asks of us.” ❖

—St. Vincent de Paul to the Congregation of the Mission, 1658

ATTENTION FIRST

Before he could act, St. Vincent de Paul had to focus on—and therefore, recognize—the places where Christ’s love and care was not evident in the world around him.

In the same way today, we cannot begin an authentic mission of social justice, evangelization, right to life, or stewardship unless we pay close attention first to the people, events and organizations where the Lord’s love is wanting around us. Once we have recognized this fact in our own surroundings, we can proceed confidently as an instrument—not of his rhetoric—but of his presence and love.

Where is the Lord asking *you* to be his attentive Presence in a world longing for his life and love? ❖

ATTENTION AND RESPECT

“The fourth commandment illuminates other relationships in society. In our brothers and sisters we see the children of our parents; in our cousins, the descendants of our ancestors; in our fellow citizens, the children of our country; in the baptized, the children of our mother the Church; in every human person, a son or daughter of the One who wants to be called ‘our Father.’ In this way our relationships with our neighbors are recognized as personal in character. The neighbor is not a ‘unit’ in the human collective; he is ‘someone’ who by his known origins deserves particular attention and respect.” ❖

—Catechism of the Catholic Church #2212.

Attention

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FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

“Attention!”

The process of growth and maturity is the process of being able to distinguish the Other from you. The first moment in that distinguishing is a sense of wonder. You don't just wonder and stop. Openness is the capacity for wonder, isn't it? Attention, then, is staying with it. I think attention is tied to endurance. I mean, you stay with the wonder until you have exhausted all the implications of its reality and presence. It's like a professor I know. It's very funny because when he gives a lecture, when he's about to make an important point, he always precedes it with “Attention!” He warns you that if you're going to grasp this, you're going to have to look at it. Don't be swayed by distractions. Attention, in the spiritual sense, is just as it's used in the military. “Ten-hut!” It means something important is coming, be ready.

When you play catch with your dog and you have the ball in your hand, try faking a throw and hiding the ball in your other hand. What happens? The dog knows and he waits. He's ready for the game. You can show him your empty hand or fake more throws, but if then you don't throw it; how long will the dog not just say, “Get out of here, you're not going to do it, I've had enough.” When the dog has had enough, attention disappears. *So attention is tied to not having enough.* To knowing that there is more, and being ready. The first two steps, the wonder and the openness, have communicated to you that there is more to come. And attention is the result, therefore the third step toward the Other. Now I propose to you that the whole moral life is the morality of attention. What is immoral is what distracts your attention.

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

Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

To whom or to what do you pay the most attention? (p. 1 and 2)

- Why have those people or things captured your interest?
- Discuss the encounters, events or crises that have drawn you to become more interested in a life with Christ in his Church.

Do you believe that God the Father pays attention to you personally? (p. 3)

- Why does the Father give us Christ and ask that we go “through him” to come to know and love the mystery of God?
- Where do you find it easiest to pay attention to the Lord: in the Scriptures, the Blessed Sacrament or in the faces of the least among us?

Do you know any men who have “fallen in love” with Mary? (p. 4)

- How does the Blessed Mother help men appreciate the gifts of women?
- How does a focus on the mysteries of the rosary naturally lead us closer to Jesus Christ?

How does a life with Christ in the Church offer us the opportunity for deeper friendships? (p. 5)

- How can we bring Christ's love to our friends who do not appreciate his companionship?
- How can we support young people who are trying to live in a culture that does not recognize the beauty of a life with Christ in his Church?

Does your parish have your attention? (p. 6)

- Read 2 Thessalonians 5:12-24.
- How does St. Paul urge us to focus our attention?

How has your life with Christ in his Church helped you to see the world around you “with new eyes”? (p. 7)

- Where are the places in your world he is asking you to focus your attention?
- Why is it so important to allow the Lord to focus our attention before we are sent out on our mission?

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.