

Someone New

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

Several years ago, I started a Scripture study group in our parish. The “Church ladies,” as I fondly call these friends, are mothers of kids in our parish school. They meet at my house every Tuesday morning for prayer, study, much laughter, occasional tears and usually a juice spill on the rug by one of the many toddlers they bring with them.

It is the highlight of my week.

I will admit that when I first decided to form the group, I was a little worried about how it would go. Scripture study can carry some distorted connotations for people my age — something our mothers might have done, but a bit of a throw-back for the hip daughters of the 60s and 70s! At the time, I looked at life in the Church the same way I looked at Scripture: as something lovely, solid and old, a beautiful tradition for me and my family to “learn.” But certainly nothing that lived!

As I self-consciously proceeded with our “Church ladies” group, little did I know what would happen.

THE LIVING WORD

I had always heard the Church speak of the Scripture as the “living Word” but I never understood its true meaning until the past few years. It is fascinating to watch during our gathering how — all of a sudden — certain phrases or passages of Scripture capture people with new interest. Suddenly words that seemed abstract, or perhaps just unnoticed, a week ago now have new meaning. How does this happen? I believe it is the result of the interior activity of the Holy Spirit, an attitude of openness on the part of each woman, and the very



concrete events, encounters and experiences in each of our lives. Let

me give you an example of how

I have seen the Lord opening us up to new possibilities.

Right now we are “studying” the Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 12-23). Most of us have heard this

story several times before, but now we

are reading it together as wives, mothers, daughters and friends. On the one hand, Abraham and Sarah’s story is a personal, historical account of two people. On the other hand it is a story filled with human experiences that many of us share at this point in our lives: the fear of the unknown; a

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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mysterious, growing relationship with the Lord; a sense of mission; the give and take of human love; the yearning for a child.

The way each woman in our group comes to this beautiful story depends on what *her* life story brings to the living words *that day*. Perhaps one is struggling with her mission, another with a relationship. Depending on the way the Lord is moving her life, different parts of the Scripture text will speak to her. Words that are simply inspiring to some may have very personal meaning for others.

I have become convinced that these moments are not a matter of intellectual or personal interpretation. We don't suddenly understand these readings because we are becoming more scholarly in our faith; rather, in these moments our hearts are being captured by the Lord through his Word as he reveals himself anew to each of us. "When I found him whom my heart loves, I took hold of him and would not let him go," says the bride of her bridegroom in the Song of Songs (3:4). So it is with a soul that has suddenly experienced an encounter with the Lord.

The Lord wants us to know him not just in our heads, but deep in our hearts. Interwoven through the

not figuring this out all by ourselves. Responding to an openness from each of us, the Lord is doing the work. St. Augustine had a similar experience to ours after reading a passage of the New Testament: "You struck my heart with your Word, and I loved you," he later wrote in his famous *Confessions*.

NEWNESS

In Church ladies, we have seen that it is these constant encounters with Christ in his Word that not only make the Scriptures live but also create a "newness" about each of us, too. I don't think any of us would say that we experience the Lord the same way we did two years ago. There is newness. We have been moved not by some Thing, but by some One.

This is why the Church never ceases to proclaim the Gospel to the world, because just one encounter with Jesus Christ — either through his Word, his sacraments or one of his disciples — can suddenly make things new. Even the most hardened heart hearing the same truths over and over can one day experience life in a radically different way. When St. Paul encountered the living Jesus on the road to Damascus, his life was so

life of the Church, the Scriptures reveal how deeply the Lord loves us with his constant care and eternal commitment. But we good "Church ladies" are

completely changed that he took a new name and began a new life. "When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being," he wrote later (2 Cor 5:17).

CHRIST MAKES US NEW

Christianity has always been about newness. The study of the Acts of the Apostles is so fascinating because the apostles were beloved friends of Jesus who

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Life After Sunday

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The “Radical Newness” of Jesus Christ

Let’s face it: the Christmas season can make you numb — and not just for the obvious reasons. Sure as the mother-decorator-shopper-wrapper-baker, I get actively caught up in the whirlwind of celebrating the birth of Christ with my family and friends. But the numbness is more than that. It is the numbness experienced by the whole culture as we focus on the holiday circus. Even those of us who “keep Christ in Christmas” can allow our eyes to glaze over and become immune to what Pope John Paul II calls the “radical newness of Revelation,” of the fact that the Infinite God entered time and history 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem.

Why would God do this? To love us and offer us perfect happiness, says St. Thomas Aquinas: “God’s love for man could not be shown in a more powerful way, than that He willed to be united to man in Person. For it is characteristic of love to unite the lover with the beloved. Hence, it was necessary for man tending to perfect happiness, that God should become man.”

CHRIST IS NEW

During this holiday season of Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, how do we recognize the Incarnation — the astonishing fact of God becoming Man — as the radical act that changes everything about human life? How can we make each Christmas a time to allow Christ to transform us with “radical newness”?



Perhaps all we need to do is ask him. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, each of us can draw closer to Christ by seeking his living presence during this holiday season. “Whether we admit it or not, there comes for everyone the moment when personal existence must be anchored to a truth recognized as final, a truth which confers a certitude no longer open to doubt,” writes the Pope.

For us, this truth is Jesus Christ still present today through the fullness of life in the Church. And unless we grow in our complete dependence on the certainty of that truth we will never experience the full peace and joy of those hopeful carols and hymns sung at this time of year.

“Jesus Christ is the new beginning of everything,” reminds Pope John Paul II. “In him all things come into their own, they are taken up and given back to the Creator from whom they first came. Christ is thus the fulfillment of the yearning of all the

world’s religions and, as such, he is their sole and definitive completion.” [*Tertio Millennio Adveniente* #6] — MBN ❖

A Sacrament of Newness

At Christmas, the Church asks Catholics to reconcile with the Lord through the Sacrament of Penance. Once our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with the Father through his Son, we truly are new creatures. The depth of change that is now possible in our lives is extraordinary — but how many of us take the occasion to really delve into that grace and use it? This holiday season, attempt to reconcile with the Lord through this essential sacrament. If you have forgotten how to go to Confession, simply ask the priest to help you begin. Come back to the Lord and find peace for the deepest yearnings of your heart. ❖

A New Kind of Family

The coming of the Lord into time and history created a new kind of family — a holy family — a family filled with the presence of God. One only has to look at the family stories in the Old Testament to see that despite the struggle of many good men and women to live their covenant with the Lord, it was often difficult to maintain the relationship without evidence of his constant presence in their midst. With the Resurrection of Christ, we *do* have his constant presence in our midst. Holy families now are possible. But maybe your desire to make your family “holy” needs a spiritual makeover.

Getting There...

PRAYER MAKES FAMILIES NEW

My mother has always confidently believed that “prayer changes things.” In fact, this simple motto is displayed in her dining room. Her prayer to God is very personal and private for her children and her family and friends. What has always impressed me most was her rock solid conviction that the Lord was listening and waiting for her prayer, and that — if it was his will — he would be happy to “change things,” to make things new, if only she gently reminded him enough. I have seen that when you really trust the Lord’s will in this way, the heart of your family will change anew and grow stronger and stronger.
— JMC ❖

AREN’T WE HOLY?

For many in our culture “holy” means coldly pious, fairly humorless, and frankly, no fun. The Billy Joel line, “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints” sums up our cultural attitude towards holy, prayerful people. I know if I said to my own family of five siblings, their five spouses and 26 children — “hey, aren’t we holy?” — they’d look at me like I had stepped in something awful. Then they’d pound me! But yet, in some mysterious way, my family is holy. Every one of us has a deep love of the Church. We rely on each other, pray for, and forgive one another. We enjoy each other’s company. Each of us would say we have experienced the Lord’s kindness and grace and loving presence in our lives. Isn’t that what holiness is? If we believe the Lord is the magnificent creator of all that exists, how can we possibly look at life with him as dull, unattractive and undesirable?

The first Holy Family suffers greatly from an image of them as a remote model of pious family life that lived 2000 years ago. If this is all we see of them, then we are only scratching the spiritual surface of how they can help strengthen family life. They are not a model; they are present among us. Their life and work continues. Why not invite them to



A NEW CHRISTMAS PRESENT: TIME

In a beautiful reflection on gifts at Christmas, Archbishop James P. Keleher of Kansas City, KS, suggests that the most revered present is the gift of time: time for the Lord, time for our families, time for our friends. “Believe me,” he says, “I know that this is not easy since so much of our lives are filled with Things to do, Things to achieve, Things to finish. So it becomes harder and harder to give time to the important people in our lives. However the truth is this: nothing could be a better gift, nothing could heal our mutual misunderstandings better, nothing could forge deeper bonds of love than time spent with each other. This Christmas, buy whatever you wish for each other but most of all give Him and one another the gift of greatest value, the gift of time spent with love.”❖



be an intimate part of your family? Ask them to be present with you during your toughest times. I don’t care what the problem is, Jesus, Mary or Joseph will help you. Ask them, beg them, put them to work with you. They love making other families holy. Trust them to show you a new image of what a “holy family” is meant to be. — John M. Capobianco ❖

New Relations

What happens to your family when you don't allow yourself to become a "new person" in Christ. How many lives are affected by just one person's decision to turn away? The interconnectedness of the Body of Christ is probably not much on our minds when we sit down to Christmas dinner, but it should be. The strains in family relations are always the result of sin.

Miraculously for those who live in Christ, sin can be forgiven and reconciliation is possible, although few families arrive at this revelation all at the same time! And yet, a life with Christ authentically pursued by just one member can have a profound impact on the entire family — maybe not for a long time, maybe not in a way that you can easily measure — but nevertheless an impact that changes life for everyone.

Although the world teaches us that deep down people can never really change (it's either nature or nurture, right?!), a life with Christ constantly proclaims that new things are possible even in families that are scarred and damaged by sin. "What is Christianity if not the creation of a new man who, because of his nature becomes a *new presence* in the world?" writes Italian theologian Msgr. Luigi Guissani.

A NEW MAN

No one who knew Matt Talbot in his native 19th century Ireland would have given *him* much hope of "becoming a new presence." His family looked upon him as an embarrassing lost cause. Chronically addicted to alcohol, Matt drank away what little money he



Getting There...

THE NEW YEAR

One way to draw your family closer to the Lord this year is to begin living the liturgical year in your home. Find a liturgical calendar and mark your family calendar with important dates in the life of the Church. In our house we mark not only the obvious dates such as major feasts and other holy days of obligation, but also the dates that are special to our family. We include the feast days of everyone's patron saints, Marian feasts, the Feast of the Guardian Angels, and feasts of other favorite family saints such as Saints Nicholas, Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila. This year, try to live the liturgical life of the Church, not just on Sunday, but on every other day as well. Each season reminds us of the Father's loving care and the stages of the life, death and resurrection of his Son as he fulfilled the covenant with his people.— MBN ❖

had, embarrassed his siblings and as he would later admit, "broke my mother's heart." But on the day he finally hit rock bottom in 1884, he turned to the Lord and the Blessed Mother for a new life. The seeds of this budding dependence on Someone else had been planted years before. His sister wrote: "I heard him say (after his conversion) that even when drinking he was devout in his mind to the Blessed Virgin and used to say an odd Hail Mary, and he attributed his conversion to this."

The first three months were especially torturous for Matt as he tried to quit both drinking and cigarettes without the help of medication or support groups. He spent most of his free time in Church sitting before the presence

of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. As he grew in his dependence on life with Jesus, people noticed something about him that was different: "The men who worked with him came to realize that, by some means — some lever unknown to them — he was raising himself, infusing an element of greatness into all he did. He had an inner serenity which others recognized in him, while feeling that they themselves lacked it," according to his biographer Mary Purcell. When Matt died in 1925, he was sober, peaceful and beloved by his family and friends. His cause for sainthood is currently under investigation by the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. Many people pray to him for family members who suffer from addictions. ❖

A New Encounter

Parishes often go out of their way at this time of year to welcome friends and family members who have drifted away from a life in the Church. Yet if life in the parish is not fueled by an *authentic* encounter with the living Jesus — and people who have been moved by that encounter — then the welcome risks being marginalized and out of touch with the deepest longings of the dominant culture. When this happens, people who have left the faith become further convinced that there is nothing new or fresh about life in the Church, and faith is viewed only as the same old “scheme.”

It is easy to see how people who do not witness an authentic faith can not see anything new about the Church. This dusty view, says Italian theologian Msgr. Luigi Guissani, “is like the house in certain oriental countries where there is a corner for the ancestors which no longer has any significance.” If visitors to our parishes can only see our faith as “an orga-

nized structure of religious devotion tolerated as the answer for those who feel some religious need,” says Guissani, they will never be convinced that a life with Christ through the Church can have any impact on their lives or society.

AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN LIFE

An encounter with authentic Christian life is something that is recognizable to every human heart. Whether people are open to it or not is determined by many factors, but no one can deny the universal attraction of people like Mother Teresa or Pope John Paul II. Sometimes, people are captured by an authentic encounter with the Lord solely with their hearts — against the wishes of their heads! This was the case with John Henry Newman (1801-1890), a faithful member of the protestant Church of England.

A scholar at Oxford University well-known throughout the land for his intellect and religious leadership, Newman thought he knew everything there was to know about “Papist Catholicism.” But as he studied the heresies of the early Church and saw what had caused people to turn away, he recognized a living truth that could not be altered. Newman came to realize that Henry VIII’s establishment of his beloved Church of England was based on the precepts of man and not of God, and that the “Church of Rome” still held the only unchanging mission handed down from the Apostles through



their witness of Jesus Christ.

As he contemplated a new life with Christ within the Catholic Church, Newman was deeply aware of the risk he was taking: “I am distressing all I love, unsettling all I have instructed or aided. I am going to those whom I do not know, and of whom I expect very little. I am making myself an outcast, and that at my age -oh! what can it be but a stern necessity which causes this?” he wrote.

After resigning from the Anglican Church, a story which made headlines in newspapers all over Great Britain, Newman took two more years of inquiry and discernment before he entered the Catholic Church. He lost his prestigious job at his beloved Oxford; his friends and family were devastated. Yet “when Newman made up his mind to join the Church of Rome,” observed biographer R.H. Hutton, “his genius bloomed out with a force and freedom such as it never displayed in the Anglican communion.” Roundly criticized in public forums, Newman’s thoughtful, reasoned written defenses of his new-found life were read by thousands and continue to influence people today.

By following the path that the Lord had planned for him, Cardinal John Henry Newman experienced the deep peace of a true disciple. In 1884, Newman wrote, “For myself, now, at the end of a long life, I say from a full heart that God has never failed me, never disappointed me, has ever turned evil into good for me.” ❖

Getting There...

The challenge of the “new evangelization” programs at many parishes is how to present an authentic encounter with Christ to people who are beginning their search for God. Responding to this challenge is usually not just a matter of better materials, but rather of identifying a few parishioners who have been “moved” by the Holy Spirit into a deeper experience of the Church. Like the first Apostles, these few can provide a witness that not even the finest textbooks can match. And this is why, as Pope John Paul II says, “teachers must also be witnesses.” ❖

The Work of Redemption: Making Things New

According to a recent United Nations' Human Development Report, "the richest fifth of the world's people consumes 86 percent of all goods



Getting There...

NEWNESS DEPENDS ON YOU

Do you have a family in your neighborhood that does not celebrate Christmas? Why not include them in some aspect of your family's holiday festivities? You do not have to preach, just share your joy and friendship. As you see Jesus in them, help them to get a glimpse of him in you. ❖

and services while the poorest fifth consumes just 1.3 percent. Indeed, the richest fifth consumes 45 percent of all meat and fish, 58 percent of all energy used and 84 percent of all paper, has 74 percent of all telephone lines and owns 87 percent of all vehicles."

Statistics like these can be overwhelming and prompt a certain fatalism about the world. It's simply the "survival of the fittest," many people think to themselves. Although many "humanists" do what they can to make the world a better place, deep down they feel that nothing will ever really change. Luck and fate factor deeply into the way they look at the random events in the world — and in their own lives. Ultimately, they think, we are all just products of our biology and our circumstances.

This kind of fatalism does not recognize the newness of the presence of Christ in the world.

THE CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IS NEW

As Catholics, we must be convinced through our own encounter with Christ that the fullness of life with him can solve the problems and lift up the people of every culture in the world — not only third world nations, but the "richest fifth," too. In his encyclical, *Faith & Reason* (70-71), Pope John Paul II reminds us that "faith's encounter with different cultures has created something new....Cultures are not only not

Thought for the New Year

Christ has no body now on earth, but yours,

No hands but yours,

No feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people.

— St. Teresa of Avila



diminished by this encounter, rather, they are prompted to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel's truth and to be stirred by this truth to develop in new ways."

Catholics often discount the newness of their Christian presence in the world. Consequently, we communicate that reluctance to people we know. But we should never cease to proclaim that new things are possible. Change can happen only when we bring Christ-in-us to continue the work of redemption in the world. As St. Teresa of Avila so keenly describes in her meditation (*see above*), the Lord is counting on each of us, the members of his Body, to create a new world where resources are shared and justice is upheld for each person in the human family. What will you do this year to continue the work of redemption? ❖



Someone New

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spoke to other people with conviction and love about what they had experienced while in the presence of their Lord. There was something new about what they said because there was something new about them — about the way they were living their lives, about the way they were treating other people, about their peace and their joy.

The Christmas season and the New Year provide opportunities for us, too, to experience Someone new. The celebration of Christ's Mass should be the celebration of Someone we know, Someone who makes us ever new. If this is not the way you experience Christ, "take up and read," as St. Augustine heard a voice say on the day of his conversion. Scripture is just one of the paths available to help us in our relationship. All it takes is one moment of grace to recognize the Living Word as he truly is. From then on, assures St. Paul, "the old is gone, the new has come" (2 Cor.5:17). ❖

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Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you experience the "newness" of a living Presence at work in your life? (p. 1 and 2)

- Has a specific scripture passage ever opened up a new awareness of the Lord's passionate love and mercy for you?
- Do you know anyone whose life with Christ has made them a "new creation"?

Do you experience the "radical newness" of Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? (p. 3)

- Why is Advent an especially meaningful time to experience the Lord's mercy?
- How can Christmas preparations offer an experience of Jesus Christ as "the new beginning of everything"?

Do you believe the Lord can bring his "radical newness" into your family life? (p. 4)

- Are you confident that "prayer changes things"?
- What is your attitude about "holy people"?

Have you, or someone you know, had a conversion experience that still profoundly affects others? (p. 5)

- Do you believe that it is possible to "become new again" even in the most difficult cases such as alcoholism and other challenging illnesses?
- Do you consider your relationship with Christ strong enough to make you a new presence in your family?

Do people encounter anyone "new" in your parish? (p. 6)

- Like John Henry Newman, are you ready to leave everything behind to pursue a new life with Christ in your parish?
- What is the relationship between a new life with Christ and the new evangelization proclaimed by Pope John Paul II?

What have you done this year to continue the work of redemption? (p. 7)

- How can you change the fatalist view that we are all just products of the culture and circumstance?
- Do you underestimate the newness of your Christian presence in the world?