

# Assent to a Lush Life

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

The problem with the faith for so many Catholics is that it seems so boring and detached from everything fun going on in the rest of the world. How is it that the most exciting human experiences on the planet — falling in love, making love, having a baby, working on an innovative project, socializing with good friends — seem to be so far removed from the life of the Church? Why is it that the dutiful religious stuff doesn't seem to relate to the lush, exciting stuff?

Perhaps we, who consider ourselves so sophisticated and interesting, are not very sophisticated and interesting after all. Perhaps the most exciting part about life on the planet is not only related to the religious stuff, but also far more lush when we allow the Lord to participate and guide us. But to get an inkling of what this could be like, we must first agree to allow it to happen. The Lord doesn't make us do anything. He waits for our assent.

## WHAT IS ASSENT?

Assent is giving yourself away to the Lord of the universe and then allowing him to move you to the most exciting life you ever thought possible. Consider the assent of Mary of Nazareth. Have you ever opened up your mind to contemplate what her life was really like?

Too many of us take the “religious box” view of the Blessed Mother as she gave her assent to God at the Annunciation. We see her as a dutiful woman, agreeing to a muted life of sacrificial motherhood, a sexless marriage, bitter sorrow and then a great reward in heaven for being good. Isn't this the way so many of us view the Blessed Mother — and really



all “devout Catholics” for that matter? Are we people who live rather subdued lives, sacrificing and fulfilling a devout duty while having our will broken by a God who often asks too much?

## A LOVE AFFAIR

By keeping the most lush, exciting human experiences far removed from the “religious stuff,” we diminish every aspect of life in the Church. The full truth about the Blessed Mother is that she was a woman in love. Her relationship with God was not some subservient duty. It was a love affair. Now don't be put off by that

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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phrase, and try not to give it its sordid 90s meaning. By love affair, I mean the excitement of having your heart captured by Another. Of being swept off your feet. Of living for another person, so much so that all your actions, thoughts and works are for them. This is the kind of love for which every human being deeply yearns — just as the Creator intended! The “original solitude of Adam,” says Pope John Paul II, is the time before the creation of Eve when he longed to “give himself away in love” to another person. This longing for union, created in us by God from the beginning, finds its fruition not only in the religious quest, but in our relationships with each other, as well. “Man can only find himself by making a sincere gift of himself,” confirmed the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 24).

In her assent to be the Mother of God, Mary was not fulfilling a duty, but freely giving herself away in love. The Blessed Mother “sets no conditions, she makes no reservations, she gives herself completely in her answer,” reflects theologian and mystic Adrienne von Speyr. Untainted by sin or any selfishness that would hold her back from the full love of the Trinity, “Mary attains a union with God that exceeds all the expectations of the human spirit,” says Pope John Paul II. This is a far cry from the shallow, subdued life we often attribute to her. This woman walked the earth in *perfect love*.

## TRUSTING SOMEONE WITH YOUR LIFE

But here is something else we need to remember about the assent of Mary at the Annunciation: her “yes” was the culmination of a

relationship that had been growing for quite some time. How could she agree with so much trust unless she was responding to a proposal from Someone she already knew — and loved?

So it is with us. We cannot fully assent to the mysterious plan of the Lord until we know him and trust him. “There is no doubt that the capacity to entrust oneself and one’s life to another person and the decision to do so are among the most significant and expressive human acts,” says the Pope in *Faith and Reason*.

## OPEN TO MYSTERY

Of course completely “entrusting oneself and one’s life to another” automatically entails a lot of unknowns. In saying yes to the Angel Gabriel, Mary opened herself up fully to a great mystery — one that took her on a path through some amazing experiences. Yet as close as her union was with the Holy Trinity, even she did not know the full plan of Revelation. When the Scripture tells us that “she pondered these things in her heart,” we know that she was observing her Beloved at work in her life, marveling at the mysterious ways he was revealing his love for her and the rest of his creatures. Yet she did not know where things were going. It was a mystery even to her.

True assent means allowing the Lord to open up his lush life to us in new ways — maybe in ways that had not occurred to us and then trusting him even in mystery. The difficulty for so many of us trying to pursue the spiritual path is that we can get stuck on the mystery part. We forget to be open like the Blessed Mother. We forget to trust

the One we love. We get into our religious boxes and allow our life with the Lord in his Church to deteriorate from love affair to duty.

When this happens, the Blessed Mother can help. The next time you see an image of her, remember that she was a woman in love, a woman who gave herself away first to the Trinity and then through that love to everyone else she encountered.

Will you? ❖

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# The Assent of A Lover

**M**ary of Nazareth gave the gift of herself to God at the Annunciation; Christ gave himself away in love for all mankind at Calvary. In this way, the assent of Jesus to the will of the Father reflected Mary's "yes." The Blessed Mother assented to union with the faithful, mysterious God of the universe. Jesus assented to union with a cowardly, fallen humanity. These were the assents of great Lovers.

The Mass celebrates this new way to love as we remember Christ's "complete gift of self" — not only his Body and Blood — but also his assent to experience all the human tragedies of pain, abandonment, death and even hell. When the Lord utters, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (*Matt: 27:46*), wrote St. John of the Cross, "this was the most extreme abandonment, sensitively, that he had suffered in this life. And by it he accomplished the most marvelous work of his whole life, surpassing all the

works and deeds and miracles that he had ever performed on earth or in heaven.

That is, he brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace." This union was made possible only through complete self-emptying love.

## THE "FOOLISHNESS" OF THIS ASSENT

In our every-man-for-himself culture, it is hard to get our minds around the seemingly foolish assent of Jesus Christ and his profound and lavish love for us. To love someone this much seems impossible. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," proclaims St. Paul, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (*1Cor 1:18*).

For Catholics, the additional foolishness is that we believe that by assenting to his presence in our midst, we can be transformed to live this self-emptying love too! In union with Christ, we can love other people to a degree never before experienced. The Sacramental life of the Church prepares us for this radically new way of human life.

## THE SACRAMENT OF LOVE

In preparation for Sunday, we try to stand before the Lord with our hearts open, ready to accept his love with no reservations. By coming to Mass "empty" of sin, distraction, grievances or anything else that would keep us



from the Lord, we offer the gift of ourselves to him. In turn, he gives himself to us at communion. This

is dramatically experienced in the Sacrament of the Eucharist where his real presence — his flesh and blood — are united with ours. After Mass, as we are cutting each other off in the parking lot, how few of us realize the miracle of union that has just taken place! "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in faith," says St. Paul, "Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" (*2Cor 13:5*).

Through the Mass, Jesus, the great Teacher, lays out the original plan of the Father: that to live fully we must give ourselves away in love, first to him and then to

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## Getting There...

Try saying this prayer of St. Ignatius Loyola before you attend Mass:

"Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess you have given me: I surrender it all to you to be disposed of according to your will. Give me only your love and your grace; with these I will be rich enough, and will desire nothing more." ❖

## The Bride & Bridegroom

Throughout Scripture, the relationship between the Lord and his people is compared to the union between a bridegroom and his bride. This image of perfect nuptial love helps us understand the nature of assent. "In the Church every human being — male and female — is the 'Bride' in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person." says Pope John Paul II in *The Dignity and Vocation of Women*. ❖

# A Father's Assent

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

Some of us may find this notion of assenting to Someone else's plan for our life a bit hard to swallow. It just doesn't fit the American cultural mold. This may be especially true for husbands and fathers. After all, real men don't even like to ask for directions when they are lost. Right? We like to figure things out for ourselves. Make our own plans. If only in the shower, we try to sing with gusto, "I did it my way!" The world tells us we shouldn't let anyone push us around or tell us how to live, especially lame churchmen. Since we work in the real world everyday, few of us have time for the spiritual world. It's hard to accommodate eternity as we concentrate all our efforts on our family needs here and now. After all, we must protect our spouse and provide for our 2.3 children. With any luck, with fate smiling upon us and armed with our "planned parenthood," our family will grow strong, live long and prosper. Right?

There's just two problems with this culturally truncated view of manhood. First, it doesn't take the fullness of human life offered to us by God seriously and second it doesn't take our own women seriously. So how does a man assent to the fullness of God's plan for human and family life? By fully embracing the heart and destiny

of his woman. Your spouse is the Lord's path to your destiny. Let me explain.

## THE ASSENT OF JOSEPH



If our plans for our life, marriage and family are not in sync with the Lord's plan for us, then we will never fulfill our destiny for mind-blowing happiness in this life or the next. Let's look at the life of a man who truly achieved his destiny as a man and a father: St. Joseph.

If Joseph had any personal designs for his marriage to Mary, he learned early on in their relationship not to take his own plans too seriously. Mary, being a wonderful woman of God, threw Joseph a knee buckling curve ball

before he even settled into the batter's box of their marriage. A child. Not his child. She was just "with child." Wow, nice pitch, Mary!

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Joseph was a "righteous man." He knew the law and he knew foul play when he saw it. His solution: slip out of the batter's box as quietly and quickly as possible. That was his plan, to divorce her "without shame." Sounds reasonable. Yet what happened? Joseph, open to the prompting of God, in his heart recognized God's plan for Mary and his family. "Do not be afraid to take Mary into

your home" (*Mt 1:20*) the angel said to him in a dream. Now I don't know about you, but it might take a bit more than a dream to change my escape plan from this situation. Yet Matthew, matter-of-factly states that "when Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took his wife into his home" (*Mt. 1:24*). From then on, Mary would be his spouse and his personal channel to experience God's love.

## ASSENT UNLOCKS THE POWER OF LOVE

This change in Joseph's plan was remarkable. He recognized that what was happening to Mary was also the Lord's plan for him. His assent to the Lord – to say in effect, "Yes, Lord, I believe she is my destiny... She is your path for me and I will take care of her and this child for you" – unlocked the amazing experience of love.

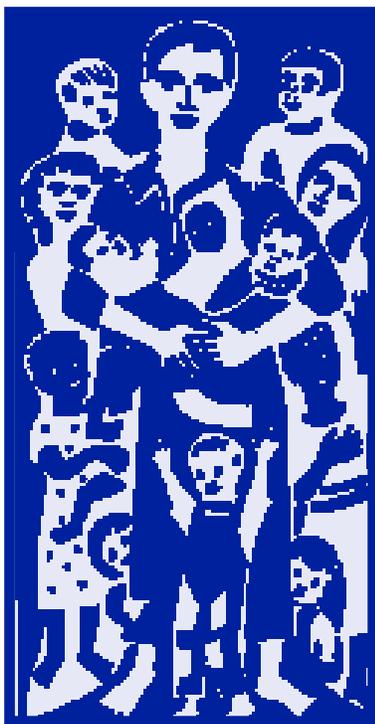
From then on, Joseph didn't have a clue where his life was going. Yet he stepped back in the batter's box and awaited the next pitch from Mary. As a prayerful man, he sought the destiny the Lord had in mind for him through his relationship with his wife. I submit that this is the key to his manhood and his fatherhood. Each step along the way, as each new pitch came down the pike (and Mary had quite an arsenal of pitches), a new opportunity to assent and explore and experience the stunning depth of a Father's plan occurred. Joseph, as a man of prayer, stood and waited

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# The Assent to “Difference”

**M**y four children are so distinct from each other in personality and appearance that I was once asked by a saleswoman if they all had the same father. (They do!) Most times this difference between them is wonderful; sometimes it drives me crazy as we live with the world view of four very unique individuals. Just negotiating the dinner menu alone can often be exhausting.

When you become a parent, you take a leap of faith and assent to “difference.” You agree to accept and love the difficult child, the gifted child, the problem child, the perfect child. You agree to nurture



the child whose personality may be very different from yours; perhaps even the child with profound behavioral, developmental or physical challenges. As Catholics, we attempt to see the presence of Christ in each person, and grow more comfortable with difference through him. But for many peo-

## Getting There...

**T**his Lent, an established routine of daily prayer is the best way to keep up a relationship with the Lord that allows for complete assent to his plan for your life and an appreciation for his plan for each member of your family. This prayer routine might be attending daily Mass, saying the Rosary or the Liturgy of the Hours, reading devotional books, reciting the Angelus, etc. For each circumstance that we find ourselves in, there is an appropriate and personal way to spend time with the Lord. However, if we rely only on Sunday Mass to keep the relationship close, the plan for our lives during the rest of the week can become overwhelming and unclear. — MBN ❖

ple in the world, “difference” is often unsettling and ultimately seen as a threat.

## PERFECT KIDS

It is heart-wrenching to watch as science becomes more adept at engineering our biology how people strive to diminish the gifts of difference. Observed one doctor in a recent *Time Magazine* article on medicating children with behavior problems, “there used to be different niches for people with differences in talent, skills and personality, but Americans are becoming more and more programmed to force their children into a mold....There is an emotional cost, and eventually there will be a physical cost of taking square and rectangular people and fitting them into round holes.”

Any parent who is truly honest with him or herself can see this tendency within their own families as we sometimes attempt to make our kids into what we want them to be instead of who they really are. By failing to see the gifts in their “difference” we, too, are guilty of stifling the very reason why the Lord made them perhaps a little slower than the rest, or a

little too introspective, or a little too willful for our taste. By assenting to the gift of difference in the individual that the Lord has given us, we become a part of his plan for both our lives and our children’s lives — and we bring our Christian peace with difference out into the rest of the world. — MBN ❖

## Each Person is the Beloved

**A** deeper experience of the union between the Lord and yourself will naturally affect the way you love the people in your family, but also overflow to the people you encounter each day. St. Therese of Lisieux gained a new appreciation for the nuns she lived with when she realized one day that Jesus loved each one of them in the same fierce way that she knew he loved her. From then on, it was impossible for her to dismiss them for their quirks and shortcomings. If the Lord strives to give himself away in love to each of us, then we, too, must see each person as the Beloved of the Lord. ❖

# Trusting the Church

**A**s members of the Church, we should live each day with the openness and assent necessary for perfect union with the Lord. But sometimes as we are working and living within our parishes, we see the Church as a structure or an institution instead of a union.

When we miss the union between Christ and his Church (and our own participation in this union), we also miss the passion and security that comes from living in this relationship. We miss the work of the Holy Spirit that animates this union. Without an appreciation of Christ and his Bride, the Church, as one mystical universal body, it is difficult to assent to trust the fullness of the Church's teachings.

## "CORPORATE CULTURE" PARISHES

Failing to see the essential link between the local community and the Universal Church impoverish-

es our parishes. It allows them to take up a kind of "corporate culture" thinking that focuses on structures, rather than relationships and union. In administration, evangelization, stewardship and the many other areas of parish life, a spiritual poverty can develop that affects the whole community.

These parishes sometimes become organizations unto themselves as they close something off to the Mystical Body, staying within their own vision of what life in the Church should be. "There is nothing more destructive than the unconsidered exaltation of the 'local' Church with respect to the 'Universal' Church," observes Italian theologian Msgr. Luigi Giussani, "because a value is either universal or it is not a value at all." The Church remains the Bride in all her splendor. When local parishes say no to some aspect of life in the Church by either ignoring or watering down her teachings, they diminish the relationship between themselves and the Lord. This loss can cause misunderstanding and a lack of clarity about fullness of life in the Church, leaving parishioners frustrated and spiritually stunted.

When this happens in our parishes (and we all get bogged down sometimes), it is good to seek out the Blessed Mother, whose strong presence within a parish can help lead the way back to the fullness of life in the Church. Mary goes before us in



faith and love, showing us the path of interior pilgrimage, assent and an amazing experi-

ence of union. She who lived in total surrender to the mysterious love of the Trinity can straighten the path for those of us to whom this is sometimes so difficult. Says Pope John Paul II, "unless one looks to the Mother of God, it is impossible to understand the mystery of the Church, her reality, her essential vitality." ❖

## Prayer for the Renewal of the Spirit

Dear Lord, you see how we become used to everything. Once, we gladly took up your service with the firm intent of being wholly surrendered to you. But, since every day brings nearly the same thing over and over again, it seems to us that our prayer has been circumscribed. We limit it to ourselves and to what seems necessary for just the task at hand so that in the end our spirit has assumed the size of this small task. We ask you not to allow us to narrow ourselves in this way; expand us again; bestow on us again some of the power of Mary's consent, which awaits in readiness the entire divine will, which is always as all-embracing as when it was first pronounced and which is daily confirmed anew."

— Adrienne von Speyr ❖



## Getting There...

What should you do if you experience the Church as a union and most of your fellow parishioners experience the Church as an organization? Bring your love of Christ and his Church to other people. You don't have to make a big plan about how you will do this. Simply open yourself up to the plan the Lord already has in place. Then allow him to bring his love to them through you. — MBN ❖

# Roadblock to Assent

Completely handing your life off to someone you don't trust is not a particularly reasonable thing to do! People who have trouble giving their lives to the Lord are usually suspicious of him and his Church.

This is a common difficulty in a world that often portrays a tyrannical, puppet-master sort of God who does not have the best interests of man at heart. "For in spite of all the witness of creation and of the salvific activity inherent in it," says Pope John Paul II, "the spirit of darkness is capable of showing God as an enemy of his own creature, and in the first place as an enemy of man, as a source of danger and threat to man. In this way, Satan manages to sow in man's soul the seed of opposition to the one who 'from the beginning' would be considered as man's enemy — and not as Father."

A God who is our enemy will take away our freedom, we fear.

He will not have our best interests at heart. He will make us suffer. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, his classic treatise on the spiritual life, St. John of the Cross observed this same distrust by many men and women of his day: "some souls, instead of abandoning themselves to God and cooperating with him, hamper him by their indiscreet activity or resistance. They resemble children who kick and cry, and struggle to walk by themselves when their mothers want to carry them; in walking by themselves they make no headway, or if they do, it is at a child's pace."

## ASSENT TO MISSION

Never has it been more important for those who know the Lord as he truly is to come forward and dispel the notion of this untrustworthy God. By bringing people the

mystical union with Jesus lived in our own hearts, we can help them experience true happiness and peace.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means occasionally speaking up about our own experiences of the Lord when someone portrays a life with Christ as a life of tyranny. It means allowing the Lord to use us as instruments in this way even when we feel unsure of ourselves or inadequate to the task. (Which for me is often!)

As we approach the millennium, each Christian is called anew

to mission: bring your life with Christ to others. Like Mary, we must increasingly be open to the possibilities and allow him to use our love to transform the face of the earth. — MBN ❖



## Our Assent Must Be Externalized

The internal union between us and the Lord must find expression in love and service to others or it becomes stifled and fruitless. In an 1998 address in Rome, The Most Rev. M.A. Gervais, Archbishop of Ottawa, Canada, urged his listeners: "Now it is time for us to 'become friends' with the poor of the world. We must try to understand not only the ways in which they have been exploited by their own people and by other nations — including our own. We, as stewards, will have to get involved and get others involved in the issue of

poverty and hunger in the world. Right now, there is a wonderful opportunity for each of us to awaken our people to the fact that everyone on earth can be fed. There is no need for poverty, no need for hunger. No necessity for starvation anywhere. Populorum Progressio has taught us that what we accomplished in our own countries in the Western world can be accomplished everywhere on the face of the earth. We need 'time and talent' to face this challenge, and this is more difficult than sharing our treasures." ❖



## The Assent of A Lover

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the other people we encounter each day in our homes, parishes, workplace, communities and world, and oh yes, even in our parish parking lots. ❖

## A Father's Assent

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and with God assessed each and every pitch. Mary must have smiled as she turned and watched her fork ball (perpetual virginity) sail over the wall in center field. They gave everything to each other through the Lord. They held nothing back. Their 100% love for each other – their assent together to the Lord's destiny for them – opened up the power of divine love in the world and gave birth to the Son of Man for all of us.

It doesn't take any time out of your day to give your own assent to the Father. It is the key to loving your spouse and being a good father to your children. When you stand with the Lord and watch as each new pitch comes down the pike, the game of life is no longer governed by fate but by destiny - the unique destiny reserved by the Lord for you, your spouse and your children. Maybe God is just waiting for you to sing with gusto "I'll do it Your way!" ❖

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## Ponder In Your Heart

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Have you given your complete "yes" to the Lord's plan for your life? (p. 1 and 2)

- Why does each human person long to fall in love?
- How do you experience your "yes" to the Lord in times of greatest mystery?

Have you ever experienced the Lord's self-emptying love? (p. 3)

- Do you recognize "foolishness" of the Lord's assent to us at Mass?
- How does the Sacrament of Love received at Mass allow us to experience the Lord's love each day?

In what ways can men fully embrace the hearts and destinies of their women? (p. 4)

- Do you think St. Joseph was satisfied with his experience of Mary as his personal channel of God's love for him?
- Why is the decision to pursue the Lord's plan through the relationship with his wife the key to Joseph's manhood and fatherhood?

Do differences in people make them more interesting or more threatening? (p. 5)

- Why should we have a deeper view of the diversity in our families?
- How can we assent to the Lord's plan for each family member and offer Christ's unconditional love?

How does the administrative structure of your parish get in the way of your assent to the work of the Spirit there? (p. 6)

- How does a "no" to certain aspects of parish life stop parishioners from giving more?
- How can your assent bring Christ to other parishioners?

What do you say to someone who lives as if God were man's enemy? (p. 7)

- Do you see your life with Christ in the world as a mission of love?
- Give some examples of "externalizing our assent" to Christ through stewardship and solidarity.