

The Kiss of Intimate Companionship

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

Like many people of our generation, my husband and I each moved away from home after college and came to the city to find work. Here we met, married and began raising our children without the comfort and support of any extended family living nearby. At times, this has been very difficult.

When my children were small, I envied friends who were having dinner at their parents' house or dropping the kids with a sister while they ran some errands. At the time, I had very few people in my life that I could call on for that kind of sustenance.

LONGING TO BE KISSED

But it wasn't just the practical support that I missed. It was the intimacy. I missed being able to walk into a familiar home and be tenderly kissed just for being myself—even with all of my faults and difficulties. And just as much as I longed to be received in love for exactly who I was, I also longed to offer this same experience to the people around me. At work and in my neighborhood, I sensed that many other people were living as restlessly as I was outside the embrace of close families and dear friends.

Every human person longs to be deeply loved and unconditionally accepted for life by another. In fact, the longing for this kind of intimate companionship is such a deep desire of the human heart that its fulfillment profoundly affects the way we live as men and women. "Man cannot live without love," wrote Pope John Paul II in the very first



encyclical of his papacy (*Redemptor Hominis* #25). "He remains a being that is incomprehensible to himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him...if he does not participate intimately in it."

The Lord who created us *knows* we cannot flourish

without relationships of intimate love—no matter what our vocation in life. Through his living Presence in the Church, he offers the way to our happiness.

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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THE KISS OF DIVINE INTIMACY

The Lord teaches us how to be intimate companions to each other by asking us to receive him into our lives. The First Commandment prompts us to love God above all other things, because we cannot have an abundant life and love—or offer it to anyone else—unless it is *through him*.

How can we participate in an intimate companionship with the mystery of God? Through the Person of Jesus Christ. The lives of the saints show that every human person is called to a living relationship where they can truly experience Christ's Presence. "It's like the experience of two persons here on earth who love each other deeply and understand each other well," explained St. Teresa of Avila. "Even without signs, just by a glance, it seems, they understand each other." This is the kiss of divine intimacy.

Through the sacramental life of the Church, Jesus accepts us with all of our failures and difficulties, then shoulders our burdens and invites us deeper into communion with his Father. Through prayer, we recognize both his movements and his touch in the everyday events of our lives. Gradually, we come to experience an astonishing companionship, where there is no aspect of our interior or exterior life that the Lord does not share. "It is this intimacy with him 'within' which has been the beautiful sun illuminating my life, making it already an anticipated Heaven," described Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity. This is the intimacy that allowed the saints to offer themselves in love to others—sometimes in the midst of profound suffering—without holding anything back.

HE KISSES THE ONE HE LOVES

Through his offer to embrace us exactly as we are, the Lord shows us the characteristics of any authentic intimacy. His quiet approach is always made with a profound respect for our desire to receive the full power of his life and love. Christ does not impose himself upon us. Nor does he try to unsettle us with an unwelcome familiarity. Instead, his gestures of love are as gentle as a proud father kissing his sleeping infant. Present in the heart of the Church, Jesus offers himself completely, with a full appreciation for our freedom to draw near—if and when we are ready.

The more deeply we enter into Christ, the more deeply we will be able to love and care for the people who surround us. Increasingly conformed to him, we will be able to embrace them exactly as they are, shouldering their burdens and inviting them into a deeper communion. Some people in our lives will welcome this offer of fully human intimacy. Others will not. Either way, Christ will help us love them with a heart that never closes off the possibility of friendship, no matter what the circumstances.

THE FRIENDS WE KISS

When the apostles were growing in their companionship with Jesus Christ, they watched in wonder as he transformed the possibilities for deep, human relationships: "Here are my mother and my brothers," he said, indicating the people who surrounded him. "For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Matt 12:49-50).

Through the years, my husband and I have discovered the truth of these words. Our life with Christ

in his Church has enabled us not only to maintain strong bonds of love and affection with the relatives who are so dear to us, but also to bring many local friends into the intimacy of our family. These are the friends who support us in our every need. These are the friends who are our kids' local "aunts" and "uncles." These are the friends who welcome us into their homes exactly as we are—and greet us with a kiss.❖

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An Encounter with His Intimate Life

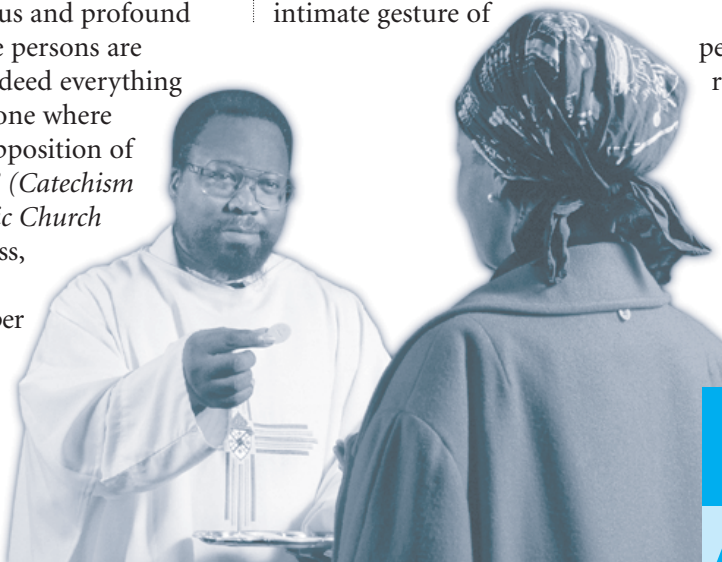
The Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a “divine unity” so mysterious and profound that the three persons are one God. “Indeed everything (in them) is one where there is no opposition of relationship,” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #255). At Mass, God invites believers deeper into this Trinitarian life. Through his living Presence in the preached Word, the Eucharist and in the hearts of those who love him, Jesus Christ is the path into this perfect intimacy between persons.

What is the nature of this relationship? In the Scripture, Christ speaks often of his filial bond with his Father. “How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ... Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn 14:7-14). Through the work of the Spirit, the Father sent his Son to gather each one of us into the life of God. Yet through this offer in freedom, God takes a great risk. As many of us have experienced, those who enter into our intimacy are also capable of inflicting the most pain.

THE JUDAS KISS

“Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Lk 22:48) Consider the depth of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus on the

night of the Last Supper. Not only does Judas betray Jesus with an intimate gesture of



human affection, but he does so after Jesus has just lovingly washed his feet and shared his Body and Blood. Judas’ betrayal is a complete turning away from the deeper communion the Son has just initiated between his Father and every human person. This fact must have made Judas’ mocking kiss all the more searing to his beloved friend.

A betrayal within intimate companionship is always heart-wrenching—even more so when the betrayal is done by someone within the Body of Christ. Yet the Son has promised that the Father will never turn us away if we are truly sorry for our trespasses. In the beautiful parable of the prodigal son, the Father, “ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20) when he saw that his penitent child had come home at last. The Father does not keep his distance, nor demand that his child become more presentable.

He kisses him immediately—while he is still filthy and poor.

When we come to Communion penitent and poor, we, too, receive the overwhelming abundance of God’s life and love in the Eucharist on Sunday. Here, through the Body of the Son, we are embraced and kissed—mercifully and completely—by the living God. ❖

RECONCILING WITH THE FATHER

At the end of her life, St. Therese of Lisieux corresponded with a young seminarian who had such a harsh image of God-the-judge that he kept his distance. In encouraging him to trust the loving Father present in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, St. Therese offered this beautiful image to the fearful young man: “I’d like to try to make you understand...how much Jesus loves even very imperfect souls, who trust in him... I’m thinking of a father who has two children who are mischievous and disobedient, and when he comes to punish them he sees one who trembles and draws away from him in fright... His brother, on the contrary, throws himself into his father’s arms... If this child asks his father to punish him with a kiss, I doubt that the heart of the happy father will be able to resist the childlike confidence of his son... He’s well aware that the child will often fall back into these same faults, but he’s always ready to forgive him, provided the boy always grasps him by the heart” (Letter to Maurice Belliere). Confident repentance in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the place where the Father awaits those who seek to grasp “him by the heart.” ❖

Image by The Crosiers ©

A Grandmother's Enduring Kiss

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

My grandmother had a special way about her. Born in the time of Pope Leo XIII, she never attended a formal school back in her hometown of Roseto, Italy. Yet she grew to become a woman of exceptional practical wisdom and a master of the human heart. She was the family matriarch. This woman of strong faith—who met Padre Pio in the confessional—shaped the faith of her family. We affectionately called her “Mamanonna.” Her advice was often sought out and her counsel was clearly respected by those who loved her.

“A GOOD PLACE FOR YOUR FAMILY”

Such was the case when my mother was approached by her brother in 1963 about an opportunity to buy an ocean front beach lot on the shore of North Carolina. Expecting her fifth child, and unable to travel the 400 miles to see the beach first hand, my mother did what any respectable and methodical property investor would do. She asked her mother! She did this because her mother had actually visited the same beach earlier that summer. My parents were understandably nervous about the speculative purchase. My father was skeptical after an initial visit. Other family members were investing and my parents didn't know if they should stretch to buy the land, much less ever be able to build a summer cottage on it. But Mamanonna, in her gentle way—with a sense of certainty—counseled my mother to buy the lot because, “it will be a good place for your family.” She calmed my

parents' fears and set a goal for their young family all with a simple, yet confident gesture. And so, sight unseen, my parents purchased an ocean front lot on an island my mother had never visited. Such was her trust and confidence in her mother's affirming kiss.

My grandmother never saw the cottage that my parents built on that lot. She passed away the following May. Her death was a difficult blow to her family who had come to rely so completely on her peaceful presence. It was the first time many of us had experienced the death of one so important in our lives. I was six years old when she died. Yet her thoughtful generosity and willingness to sacrifice for her family was a legacy she passed on to her children. As a parting inheritance, she left just enough of her lifelong savings to start a little family building project. And my parents had enough faith and confidence to know just what to do with it. Every summer since then, we have traveled to that little cottage on the beach. I never remember a summer vacation where my father did not work on it. While others wanted to relax or sun or golf, he spent a lot of his time tinkering, painting, repairing and improving the house for his family. It was his pride and joy, this little family



place named after his mother-in-law.

A GENERATION OF KISSES

Through all these years, the thing I most marvel about is how this beach cottage has become a cherished place that really has brought our family close together. Following my parents' example, it's a place where everyone can make a contribution to the family. Brothers and sisters, spouses and children, nieces, nephews and cousins all have gathered together. At different times, each brings their unique or budding talents to the work at hand. Some clean or cook or manage, while others build or paint or decorate amidst joyful companionship, attention and sacrifice. Some eagerly lead, others reluctantly follow. Some make major contributions, others minor, yet any and all efforts have helped us draw closer as one family. Working and playing together here truly remains for my mother and her five children, their spouses and her 28 grandchildren a tender gift that has lasted two generations.

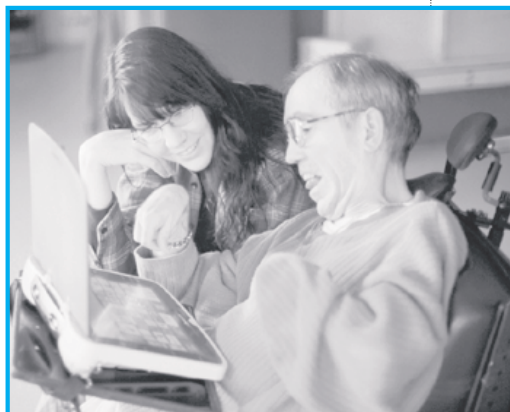
This past Spring, I stood on the front porch, admiring the new siding and roof that my college age nephews worked hard to complete this past winter. As I looked down, my own sons and their cousin, enjoying their Easter break from grade school, were busy trying to dig out—amidst much laughter—a sand fence that needed to be removed. While a gentle sea breeze blew across my face, I could not help but feel—nearly 40 years after her death—my grandmother's enduring kiss. ❖

Healed with A Kiss

A man in Spoleto was afflicted with a cancer, which had disfigured him hideously,” according to the *Lives of the Saints*. “He met St. Francis and would have thrown himself at his feet; but the saint prevented him and kissed his diseased face, which was instantly healed.” After reading the account of this miracle, St. Bonaventure observed: “I know not which I ought most to wonder at, such a kiss or such a cure.”

Sometimes when we read these stories, we don’t always see how they might apply to the people and events in our own lives. Yet, the Lord asks us to love, kiss and miraculously heal those around us in exactly the same way that St. Francis did several centuries ago.

When we love people the way Christ loves them, we get close to their serious sins, sufferings and sicknesses. This fact of human life is often daunting to many modern men and women. Sadly, some recoil from the “diseased face” of family members and friends whose problems seem so



ugly and insurmountable. Yet while the culture proposes that we keep our distance and protect ourselves from living in relation-

ship with such disturbing people, a life with Christ in his Church offers a counter-culture approach: the kiss of love.

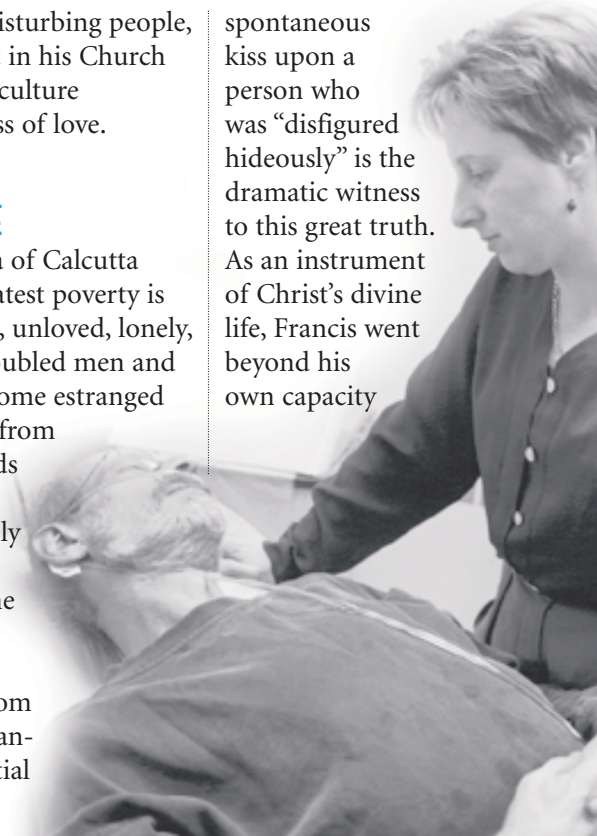
A DISEASED FACE

Mother Teresa of Calcutta said that the greatest poverty is “to be unwanted, unloved, lonely, uncared for.” Troubled men and women who become estranged or disconnected from family and friends often find their burdens extremely difficult to bear. Many suffer alone with their addiction, disorder or illness, cut off from the loving companionship so essential to their healing and happiness.

“There is not a family that does not know how selfishness, discord, tension and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion,” says Pope John Paul II. “Hence there arise the many and varied forms of division in family life. But, at the same time, every family is called by the God of peace to have the joyous and renewing experience of ‘reconciliation’, that is communion re-established, unity restored” (Familiaris Consortio, #21).

United with Christ, *one person* can begin this healing miracle by reconnecting with the troubled family member or friend who is suffering from—and often inflicting—deep wounds. St. Francis’

spontaneous kiss upon a person who was “disfigured hideously” is the dramatic witness to this great truth. As an instrument of Christ’s divine life, Francis went beyond his own capacity



to embrace someone with a “diseased face”. Among our own circle of family and friends, we are called to do the same. But like St. Francis, we can only allow Christ to heal others through us—by clinging to him. ❖

GETTING THERE...

Through prayer, allow the Lord to guide your approach toward people who are estranged from your circle of family and friends. Sometimes just a simple gesture such as a phone call or note can be the reconciling kiss for which they are longing. If they recoil, continue to keep them in your prayers and stay open to events and opportunities where you can show your love in gentle ways. ❖

Kiss of Peace

BY SHIRLEY COSTELLO

On my eightieth birthday, dear parish friends awarded me the Nobel Kiss of Peace Prize, inspired, apparently, by my behavior at the morning Mass we attend together. The gift made me think seriously about how much I have learned to value our revival of this early Church practice of exchanging before Communion this tenderly affectionate sign of our union with God and with each other. As St. Augustine said in an Easter sermon, “That which the lips show outwardly, exists in our hearts.”

My warm response to the post-Vatican II changes in our liturgical practices was slow in coming, and I remember thinking the Kiss of Peace in particular was “nonsense.” It is truly amazing to me—and surely the product of grace—that I have begun to understand so well what it signifies for the Body of Christ. It has also helped to focus my attention on my need for spiritual friendships, and to treasure the rich opportunities provided by my parish to find companions on the journey.

PRESTIGE, POWER AND POSSESSIONS

Although I did not fully realize it, I was hungry for such

opportunities. I spent most of my adult life in a very secular world, in a work environment which focused on prestige, power, and possessions. It is true that we considered ourselves “experts” at human relationships. We were ethical, committed and proactive, worked well together and were of great service to many people. Yet there was no shared awareness of God, and he was not discussed. The only public prayer I remember was at the dedication

suddenly found myself on the advisory board of our parish school. Imagine my delight at discovering that we board members were not alone in our endeavors. We actually prayed together, placed our work in God’s hands and relied on his guidance and help. I was in the company of good people, and I have been ever since.

ENDLESS SEA OF GRACE

That venture was so rewarding that it opened the spigot of my “yes” response to opportunities for work in the parish. While these innumerable “assignments” have provided a great deal of hard work, they have also been the source of a great deal of fun, love, laughter and joy. As spiritual friendships deepened and became more intimate, so also my relationship with Christ. They nourish each other in an apparently endless sea of grace.

So now you see why I love the Kiss of Peace. It gives me a frequent and dependable opportunity to express my gratitude, my love, and my union with Christ and his Body. So beware. If you do not want to be hugged and kissed, do not sit near me during Mass. ❖



of a building or in time of disaster. A respected colleague, on learning I attended Mass each day on my way to work, obviously regarded it as an aberration but was indulgent and commented only that I was a medieval personality.

And then God did me a great favor. I have no idea how this came about, but some years ago I

Image by The Crosiers ©

A Gentle Embrace

There is a musical currently playing Off-Broadway called: “I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change.” I love how the title articulates the “air kiss” that is a part of so many relationships. Yes, I love you and you are perfect. But deep down I’d like to change you into what I want you to be—whether you like it or not!

Some of us may recognize this inclination in ourselves and see the fallout in our failure to fully embrace the people in our lives. But what happens when this same tendency in our personal relationships becomes multiplied and escalated out in the world? How does the demand for change manifest itself when the other is a “stranger”—neither “loved”, nor considered “perfect”? Sadly, our

responses can range from subtle acts of manipulation to terrible acts of violence.

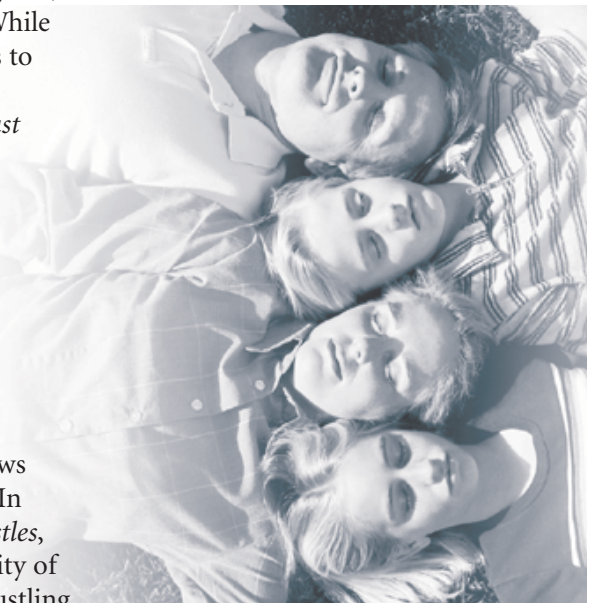
EMBRACING “STRANGERS”

I bring this up because many of us live and work with people from different religions, races and creeds. While the Church calls us to embrace Christ in these “strangers” *just as they are*, many of us still struggle with this mission of solidarity. How can we resist the temptation to force change as the condition for our friendship?

Jesus Christ shows us a practical way. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, St. Paul visits the city of Athens, which is bustling with people of different creeds. Using their mutual appreciation for an “unknown god” as a springboard, Paul talks about his own encounter with this same God, whom he has grown to know more intimately. I think both their response and his are instructive. “Some began to scoff, but others said, ‘We should like to hear you on this some other time.’ And so Paul left them. But some did join him, and became believers” (Acts 17:32-34).

In engaging people who are different from him, St. Paul does not offer a surface camaraderie with the ulterior motive to change them. Nor does he back away from the full truth about

human life, or fret that it is up to him to convince them of it. Paul depends upon Jesus Christ. With Christ “living in him” (Gal 2:20), Paul simply approaches the Greek people in friendship and solidarity, offering what he has



GETTING THERE...

The popular culture urges us to “celebrate our diversity” and “be tolerant” of each other. But this proposal also enables people to stay at arm’s length, focused on the places where they are “diverse,” instead of where they are united. By linking himself to every person (Gaudium et spes, 22), Jesus Christ is central to every human experience. The universal desires for close relationships, security, fulfillment, freedom, justice and peace are the places where we can connect with people in the workplace and neighborhood. “The more charged I am with experience,” writes Msgr. Luigi Giussani, “the more I am able to speak and communicate with you, and the more I find connections in your position — no matter how arid it may be — to what is within myself.” ❖

seen, heard and knows in his heart to be true. Many walk away. Some tolerate him. A few engage him in a deeper relationship.

In our own neighborhoods and workplaces, we, too, are called to offer our friendship with no conditions. This is the only way to transform the manipulation and violence that plague the relationships of the world. Clinging to Christ present in the Church, we can give the “strangers” in our lives that gentle embrace of human solidarity that neither forces a more intimate relationship, nor insists on change as the criteria for our charity and care.

— MBN ❖



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FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

His Kiss

A kiss is an expression in the flesh of the way God enters the world sharing his divine life through Jesus Christ. God does not want to hurt us, so his approach to us in Christ—his kiss—is not too clumsy, not too overbearing, not too much. He tenderly gives us little kisses through the Eucharist, in the Word, through a friendship with someone who loves him, to offer us access to a magnificent love that generates the stars.

With his fierce love, God could overpower and shatter us. But he is not aggressive or violent. Instead, he approaches us with an attention and gentility that is just right for each one of us. And God is happy to be appreciated, even if it is just by one person in a very crowded room. Through Christ, he accepts any kiss back from us—even the extreme kiss of Judas—which Jesus fully accepted on the Cross and the Father fully transformed by raising his Son from the dead.

In *The Risk of Education*, Msgr. Luigi Giussani writes: “Saying, ‘I believe’ is much more akin to kissing someone we love.” Some are reluctant to respond to the Lord’s kiss. Yet, certain things in life can only be expressed in just that way. ❖

—Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

*U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation,
an international movement in the Church*

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Ponder in Your Heart

How is the longing for intimate companionship fulfilled in your life? (p. 1-2)

- Who are the people who have embraced you just as you are?
- How does Jesus Christ keep you on the path to deeper intimacy with family and friends?

How close do you feel to God on Sunday? (p. 3)

- Read the story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32).
- Have you ever experienced the Father’s merciful embrace while you were the penitent, “filthy and poor”?

Does your life with Christ help you determine what is “good for your family”? If so, how? (p. 4)

- Where do you go for advice on important decisions? Why?
- Do you experience a sense of gratitude for what your ancestors have given you?

Have you ever experienced a miraculous healing among your family or friends? (p. 5)

- Re-read Mother Teresa’s description of the greatest poverty. Who are the poor in your life?
- How is Christ calling you to help him love and heal the “disfigured” people you know?

Do you have any spiritual friendships within your parish? (p. 6)

- How are they different from your friendships out in the world?
- How does Christ make himself present in the close relationships in your parish?

How does the demand “now change” destroy communion? (p. 7)

- Do you welcome the friendship of people from different cultures, religions and creeds?
- Discuss the approach of St. Paul and how it could apply to your life out in the world.

Life After Sunday is a great tool for small group discussion! For leader's guides, visit www.lifeaftersunday.com

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