

The Risk of Doing the Father's Will

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

In recent years, I have become particularly fond of the writings of the 20th century Catholic mystic Adrienne von Speyr. I suppose I relate to her because she was a wife, mother and professional whose search for God often mirrors my own. For Adrienne, the search began as an intellectual exercise and quickly became so much more. Yet she still kept part of herself in check. Like so many of us, she just couldn't take the risk of fully abandoning herself to a life with the Lord — she felt he asked too much. Here's the story of how she finally accepted his grace, changing her mind, her heart and, of course, her life.

When Adrienne was in her early 30s, her husband, Emil, became very ill. Although still outside the Catholic Church, Adrienne was experiencing a profound conversion at the time and prayed that her husband would be cured. Instead, he died. This tragedy not only shook Adrienne's faith but also made her aware of the most essential element of discipleship — that *a life lived fully with Christ requires total abandonment to the will of the Father*. Needless to say, she was not pleased with the implications of this plan: Just look at how the Father had ignored her prayers. Look at how he had treated her husband (and his own Son, for that matter!) How could his will be trusted? He simply asked too much.

THY WILL BE DONE

We hear these words of our faith so often that we lose sight of what they really mean. Not Adrienne. Just as Mary had done at the Annunciation (“be it done unto me according to your word”) and Christ had done through his whole life (“but let not my will be done, but yours, Father”) Adrienne under-



stood the risk of saying, “thy will be done.” Yet, unlike them, she could not say it. For several years after Emil's death, she refused to recite the Our Father prayer, afraid of what the Lord's will for her might be. She would not take the risk because she perceived the Father's will as counter to her own.

We see this same fear in many manifestations of our life in the Church. We, too, hold back a part of ourselves, afraid that the Lord might ask too much. Instead of fully pursuing the Father's will, many of us recoil from fully opening ourselves up to the people in our lives, resist living all the teachings of the

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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Church and reject the call to take our life with Christ out into the world. “Every day we ask Him that His will may be done,” wrote St. Francis de Sales, “and when it comes to the doing, we have such difficulty! We offer ourselves to God so often; we say to Him at every step, ‘Lord, I am yours, here is my heart; and when He wants to make use of us, we are so cowardly! How can we say we are His, if we are unwilling to accommodate our will to His?’” The challenges for Christians in the 16th century still ring true for us at the brink of a new millennium.

ADRIENNE DISCOVERS GRACE

So, how did Adrienne reconcile her difficulty? By overcoming a stumbling block that many of us share. Adrienne discounted the gift of sheer grace. For all her insight into the risk of abandoning herself, Adrienne thought success was all up to her, that it required all her effort and strength, and that if she could do it, she would be rewarded in heaven for “being good,” for “being strong.” It is easy to see how the enormity of this much work seemed overwhelming to her after going through the sickness and death of her husband.

Through a conversation with a priest friend, Adrienne finally experienced the truth. “A mutual acquaintance of ours had arranged the meeting,” writes theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar. “[Adrienne] gathered up enough courage to tell me that she, too, would like to become a Catholic. Before long we were speaking about her prayer [life]. When I showed her that our saying ‘thy will be done’ does not mean we offer God what we are able to do of ourselves, but rather

that we offer him our willingness to let what *he* does take over our lives and move us anywhere at will, it was as though I had inadvertently touched a light switch that at one flick turned on all the lights in the hall. Adrienne seemed to be freed from chains of restraint and was carried away on a flood of prayer as though a dam had burst.”

Later Adrienne told Hans that “the decisive moment in my conversion occurred when you told me, ‘Pray the entire Our Father.’ What you were actually saying was, do not count on *your* ability but on grace.” Adrienne finally realized it was not up to her alone. By yielding to the grace of the Holy Spirit, she was able to say “yes” to the will of the Father because now it was her will, too.

AMAZING GRACE

In a recent analysis of why the generation that received catechesis after Vatican Council II has often had such a difficult time fully embracing the faith, the U.S. bishops concluded that one of the things we adults missed was an appreciation of sheer grace. Anything is possible if we walk in the Lord’s presence. Abandoning ourselves to God’s will is considered a risk only if we consider our will more important. Instead, by uniting ourselves with Christ and living this life through the Church, we allow him to live in us. *He* is the one who embraces our risk, walks with us every day and brings us into the inner life of the Trinity, a life that is complete and filled with an overwhelming love.

Adrienne von Speyr was blessed to experience the great fruits of abandoning herself to the Lord. In fact, this assent — her “yes” to the Lord’s will — became

an important theme in many of her writings. “Only after her assent is spoken will she help to give it form; then she will persevere in this assent, not as if she were now locked up in a prison but, on the contrary, as one contained within the liberating form that from now on stamps her entire being.” The Lord seeks to liberate us so we can experience his will, the same full, rich, abundant life that we want for ourselves. So how does this happen? Read on. ❖

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The Risk of Creation

So often we are given the impression that the world was created, man sinned and then the Father had to send Jesus to redeem us. Yet, the Church teaches that this “Mr. Fix-It” image that so many people have of Christ is not the primary reason why God became Man. And because, as our theological advisor Msgr. Albacete says, “this is not a cheap newsletter,” we are going to tell you what the primary reason is:

Through an act of sheer generosity and love, God the Father created the heavens and earth for his Son. The Son, in turn, came to bring all of this creation into a relationship with his Father.

As people who live in relation-

Getting There

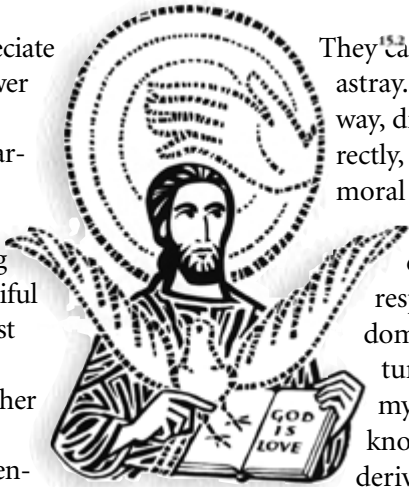
On the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary — a heart that was pierced by the sword of sorrow — look to the risk taken by Mary, who took on the hopes of all of mankind when she gave the angel her “yes.” For us, writes Caryll Houselander, “‘Be it done unto me, according to thy word’ surrenders yourself and all that is dear to you to God, and the trust which it implies does not mean trusting God to look after you and yours, to keep you and them in health and prosperity and honor. It means so much more — it means trusting that whatever God does with you and yours is the act of an infinitely loving Father.” Ask the Blessed Mother to help you discern the Father’s will in your life by growing closer to his Son in the Sacrament of the Eucharist at Mass. ❖

ships, we can appreciate the motivating power of this no-holds-barred love. As a parent, I often experience the yearning to create something outrageously beautiful for my children. Just because. And as a daughter, I want other people to come to know my loving, generous parents as I do.

Creation, then, is the story of a relationship. Pope John II writes that “Christianity has its starting point in the Incarnation of Word. Here, it is not simply a case of man seeking God, but of God who comes in Person to speak to man of himself and to show him the path by which he may be reached.” Participating in the life of the Trinity through the Son is the original intention, the original destiny of every human life. It’s the reason why we are here—created out of love by God to share in this divine relationship. Yet in generously offering us a share in this life, the Lord takes a great risk.

THE FATHER RISKS OUR “NO”

By creating us in the image and likeness of his Son, the Father gives us the freedom to say “no” to him and his love. This is the risk of creation. “Angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice and preferential love.



They can therefore go astray...God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil. He permits it, however, because he respects the freedom of his creatures and mysteriously knows how to derive good from it”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church #311).

This ability to say “no” to God — which culminated in the death of his own Son at the hands of men — was the event that showed his willingness to risk everything. By dying on the cross for us, Jesus takes on the ultimate result of our “no” to love God and offers it back to the Father as a “yes.” This great mystery is celebrated each time we participate in the Mass. The Father’s great risk of creation is redeemed by the will of the Son to risk his life to link us to the Father.

In the Mass, as we commemorate the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, “we ask our Father to unite our will to his Son’s, in order to fulfill his will, his plan of salvation for the life of the world. We are radically incapable of this, but united with Jesus and with the power of his Holy Spirit, we can surrender our will to him and decide to choose what his Son has always chosen: to do what is pleasing to the Father” CCC#2825.— MBN ❖

The Risk of Love

Sometimes it is difficult in our culture to teach children the meaning of true love. Television, movies and videos offer many proposals, many versions of what love should be: romantic love, sexual love, love with strings attached. Consequently, it is difficult for young men and women to learn the strength and depth of true human love created for us by God. “Our society has broken away from the full truth about man, from the truth about what man and woman really are as persons. Thus it cannot adequately comprehend the real meaning of the gift of persons in marriage, responsible love at the service of fatherhood and motherhood, and the true grandeur of procreation and education,” wrote John Paul II in a 1994 *Letter to Families*.



True love involves risk, a total surrender to the other person. This risk includes embracing not only the wonder and attributes of that person, but also his or her quirks, problems, sufferings and history. It means traveling the path the Lord has prepared for that person and for the marriage as a whole.

This much risk, of course, is scary to many people. These days, we have prenuptial agreements, quickie divorces and other ways of wrenching free in case the path of the other person is just too much for us. But without abandoning ourselves totally to the life and destiny of another, we can never reach the depths of intimacy and love that the Lord intends for us.

THE RISK OF UNHAPPINESS

But what does the Lord expect of us if the marriage is unhappy? What happens when a spouse becomes a total bore, or so self-centered that he or she causes deep pain to the whole family? What if a spouse has no interest in leading a life in Christ? “Have a great love for those who contradict and fail to love you,” St. John of the Cross once counseled an unhappy spouse, “for in this way love is begotten in a heart that has no love. God so acts with us, for He loves us that we might love by means of the very love He bears toward us.”

A Generation Raised With Risk Tries to Avoid It

“My generation, those Boomers, born with the nuclear gun to its head, raised with it cocked in Cuba and Berlin, saw love and death like cartoons on TV. We watched the sky. We watched the news. We played in bomb-shelters....Wary of being caught unawares, we planned our parenthood, committed to trial marriages with pre-nuptials, and pre-arranged our parents’ funerals — convinced we could pre-feel the feelings that we have heard attend new life, true love and death. And for all our planning, for all our micromanagement, for all our yammering about our parents’ mistakes, we abort more, divorce more, and soon will kevoork [assisted suicide ala Jack Kevorkian] more than any twenty generations on the globe before us.” — Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking*. ❖

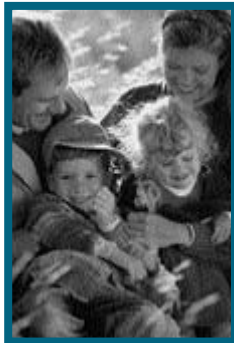
In an unhappy marriage, our most basic instinct is to recoil from the one who has hurt us. Or to make them pay for their insensitivity by inflicting our own. Yet Christ wants us to embrace those who hurt us (or just simply bore us) as if we were embracing *him* with a love that transcends, heals and takes a risk even when we feel abandoned. This is the power of love — that mysterious power within that can resurrect even a marriage that appears to be dead. The Father has proven that he will never abandon us even in situations that seem hopeless. For just as the sufferings, problems and heartaches of one family member are felt by everyone so, too, the power of love revealed and lived by those who cling to Jesus Christ can have a transforming effect upon the rest. ❖

Getting There

Our body-conscious culture gives kids a distorted view of the role that physical perfection plays in a mature, deep love between two people. Consequently, many young people (and unfortunately some older people, too) can lose sight of what happens in a true loving relationship when one spouse gets sick, disabled, wrinkled, bald or gray. As they watch today’s movies, sitcoms and music videos, ask kids which couples they think have a deep enough care and regard for each other to grow their love through the inevitable joys and sorrows of real married life. Their answers may surprise you! ❖

The Risk of Too Many Children

It is difficult to embrace the Church's teachings on generously accepting children into our families if we have no experience of Christ's living presence (see *Presence Issue*). Why? Because without the Lord's presence in our lives everyday, it is too scary to abandon ourselves to the will of the Father and allow him to create new life through our cooperation. What if he sends too many? What if some of them are sick or disabled? What if their emotional, spiritual and material needs are too overwhelming? And why does the Church have to meddle in this area anyway?



Unfortunately, many of us have such a confused understanding of the Church's teaching on family planning because we grew up experiencing the "remote Jesus." Who is the remote Jesus? He is the Son, living faraway in heaven. The remote Jesus does not get bogged down in the minutia of our lives such as houses that are too small, escalating tuition costs, the heartache of estranged relationships, the fear of not being able to provide for our families. The remote Jesus remains benevo-

lent, but detached. The remote Jesus is a "model" and "example" for how we must live. But can a "model" ever love us? Can the risk taken by an "example" mean anything for us today? Sadly, this remote deity is the Jesus many of us grew up experiencing. Yet this is not the Jesus we come to know through the scriptures, the sacraments and our encounters with others through life in the Church. The Lord, who is truly present and intimately involved in each of the smallest details of our lives, is the *only* Lord who can help us with the difficult questions about planning our parenthood.

LORD'S PLAN FOR EACH MARRIAGE

By asking us to cooperate with the Father responsibly and accept new life if it is his will, the Church asks us to abandon ourselves to the Lord's unique and loving plan for each of us. For many, this seems like an enormous risk. Instead of allowing the Lord to do what he wants for our marriage — which is *always* happier, more peaceful and abundant than anything we can come up with

Prayer

God our creator, by your love the world is filled with life, through your generosity one generation gives life to another, and so are your wonders told and your praises sung. Loving God, be close to us as we pray to love and do your will. You are our God, nourishing us for ever and ever. Amen. ❖



ourselves — instead, some of us autonomously plot our own course, humanly trying to determine our destiny with little thought of him.

The Lord understands what a risk all of this is for us. But he has shown time and again that if we accept his grace and experience his love and care, he will provide, for us abundantly. "We must walk faithfully in the way of the Lord and remain in peace as much in the winter of sterility as in the autumn of fruitfulness," St. Francis de Sales once wrote to a childless woman. Whether childless, overwhelmed with children, or somewhere in between, the Lord has something in mind for each couple that gives their life to him. ❖

Getting There

In the late 1960s, the introduction of the birth control pill seems to have coincided with a tandem public education campaign warning us about the dangers of overpopulation. Consider this: the author of the 1968 best-selling book *The Population Bomb* appeared on the Johnny Carson show 25 times during the late 1960s and early 1970s to sell the idea that "we are breeding ourselves into oblivion." (All those reminders at bedtime could not help but have an effect!) Now the U.N. Population Division is seeing that "never before have birthrates fallen so far, so fast, so low, for so long all around the world," reports Ben Wattenberg of the American Enterprise Institute, creating what he calls a

birth dearth. Suddenly, millions of people will never be born, affecting human relationships around the world. "There is likely to be a lot more personal sadness ahead," predicts Wattenberg in a *New York Times* article. "We may live in a world in which the only biological relatives for many people — perhaps most people — will be their ancestors. Lots of people without brothers or sisters, uncles, aunts or cousins, children or grandchildren — lonelier people." Consider how this drumbeat of overpopulation warnings affected your views on planning your family. Why do so many of us secretly trust the "authority" of the secular culture more than our loving Lord through the life of his Church? ❖

The Risk of Ann Nalls

So often in parish life we feel like we should have our lives in pretty good shape before we can jump in and really participate. If we are troubled or in sorrow, we don't feel like we have much to offer anyone. In many cases, it is easier to remain on the fringe of parish life. Here is a story of how one suffering parishioner decided to walk into the heart of our parish and took the risk that the rest of us would not only love her, but also share in her terrible sorrow.

A few years ago, no one would have called Ann Nalls a pillar of our parish community. And yet her short, intense journey of faith over the past two years made her the Lord's spiritual magnet for our parish. Ann was one of those friendly faces that you see now and then at church. Her husband, Tom, toddler Eileen and newborn Lottie had just joined our parish when Ann, after enduring a year of confounding swallowing problems, was diagnosed with cancer.

Getting There

Unlike Ann, many sick and troubled parishioners withdraw from parish life. Perhaps your parish has a ministry for visiting isolated parishioners who are in need of friendship. Don't be afraid of their suffering or troubles. Try to see the presence of Christ in them, too. ❖



Ann Nalls on pilgrimage to Lourdes, France

The prospect of being stricken with this disease as a 36-year-old mom may have sent other women into profound isolation. Not Ann. She not only decided to undergo the most aggressive form of medical treatment, but she also began to reach out to others in the parish with a new attraction. People were drawn to her. She made new friends. She cherished a growing devotion to the Blessed Mother. She joined a budding parish "Church Ladies" prayer group and grew closer to the people in her neighborhood. As she and Tom enrolled Eileen in the parish pre-school program for 3-year-olds, they became more involved in the life of the school and parish. And people who had not known her before began to pray for her and started to help.

As the cancer spread and her strength drained, parishioners began to prepare meals for Ann's family. For nearly two years, three or four times a week, the food came in. And the prayers intensified. A new rosary group was

formed by young mothers in the neighborhood, many of whom had not prayed the rosary in years, some of whom were not even Catholic! They believed the Lord would answer them — because if anyone deserved a miracle, it was Ann Nalls.

A PEACE NOT HER OWN

As Ann traveled through the perils of chemotherapy and the ensuing emotional and spiritual roller coaster; she sought out her neighbor and friend, Mary Beth. Ann had noticed the improvements we were attempting with *Life After Sunday* and was enthusiastic about our progress. Her spiritual energy and insight seemed to pump us all up. She asked Mary Beth if she could volunteer as our Circulation Manager. What does one say to a woman dying of cancer?

I saw her only on her good days. Once or twice a week when she had enough strength, she would come in to our office for a few hours. The first time she appeared with her gentle smile was an image I will always remember. She seemed so frail, yet so determined not to be crushed by what was happening to her body. She was a woman at peace. In that moment, I understood why people were so attracted to her. Mother Teresa's famous expression of seeing Jesus in disguise in the poorest of the poor smacked me in the face. Standing in front of me that day, Ann Nalls was the suffering Christ nailed to the cross

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The Risk of Discipleship

Friends dying of a terminal illness, handicapped children, tidal waves in New Guinea, starvation in Africa. What kind of a God lets these things happen? Is all this death and suffering really his will? Why would we want to risk being disciples of a Lord like this? Is this the kind of kingdom we want to wish on the world?

ON THE CONTRARY.

In the Our Father prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” means “let your reign begin.” First in our hearts, then in the world. Right now, contrary to popular opinion, things are not going the Lord’s way. The poverty, sickness, greed, war and disasters of a fallen world are not in his ultimate plan, although he is often implicated in them like some giant puppet master (“It must be God’s will”; “I guess he’s trying to send those people a message,” etc.). Yet any injustice is not God’s will. Bad things do not come from him. He created us to be with him in love forever: *this* is our destiny offered to us in Jesus Christ. His will — and our will — for justice, for goodness, for an end to evil are not at odds. They are the same. His will always mysteriously fulfills the deepest desires of our hearts.

MERE DISCIPLES

In a world afraid of spiritual risk, the Lord’s will is constantly misunderstood. Therefore, those who follow Jesus are often looked upon as foolish. Let’s face it. It is risky business to acknowledge in

this culture that you are a disciple of Christ. Sometimes it is even risky to acknowledge the depth of your discipleship among other Catholics. Who among us hasn’t “toned down” our love of Christ to suit our audience? How often do we reveal the depth of our love and the courage of our convictions?

Sadly, even within our own Church there is division about the meaning of discipleship. Many Catholics confuse the political stances they take on public issues with the life of the Church. Thus we have conservative Catholics, liberal Catholics, ultra orthodox, moderates, etc. How about mere disciples, willing to follow the Lord’s will instead of their own?

“To be disciples — to follow Christ and try to live his life as our own — *is* the common vocation of Christians; discipleship in this sense *is* Christian life,” wrote the U.S. Bishops in their 1993 *Pastoral Letter on Stewardship*. “Jesus’ call is urgent. He does not tell people to follow him at some time in the future but here and now — at *this* moment, in *these* circumstances. There can be no delay.”

Mere discipleship means following him each day especially when there is mystery. And a great part of this mystery is how the Lord acts in concert with our hearts and hands to overcome evil in the world. We need to pay



attention to his will and not be afraid to let him work through us. “Let us be what God likes, so long as we are His,” St. Francis de Sales gently reminded his friends, “and let us not be what we want to be, if it is against His intention.” ❖

Getting There



THE CROSS: SYMBOL OF RISK

September is the month of the Holy Cross. Everyone fears their cross. It may be illness or a lonely heart, a broken marriage or an unfulfilling job. Bring your cross to Christ and allow him to make it his own. The Lord wants us to come to him freely, without coercion or restraint. Pray this month to draw closer to him as a true, authentic disciple, a beloved friend. Maybe together with him, your cross can help resurrect a little corner of your world. ❖



THE RISK OF ANN NALLS

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of a horrible disease. And she came not to seek pity, but to be with us, to help us, to strengthen us, to work alongside of us as long as her strength held out. She emanated a peace that was not her own. That kind of spiritual determination in the face of such suffering only comes as a grace for those willing to risk real attachment to Christ. For so many of our parishioners, Ann became the real, tangible personal presence of the suffering Christ. If we had never met him before, we came to know him by meeting and loving Ann. In this way, she became an instrument where Christ spiritually awakened many parents and touched their families.

In April as she and Tom traveled to Lourdes, France, as special guests of the Knights of Malta, Ann continued to pray for and expect a miracle. Yet, a cure for her body was not to be. Delivering her eulogy at her Mass of Christian Burial on June 26, 1998 Ann's brother talked about a different kind of miracle, one where a parish becomes a family of strong spiritual friends because one woman was willing to allow Christ to live in her, suffering not in isolation, but openly among us. Ann took a risk and a family of friends blossomed. Ann Nalls has made an enormous impact on our parish. — *John M. Capobianco*. ❖

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Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Are you ever afraid that the Lord might ask too much of you? (p. 1 and 2)

- Do you feel as though “being good” is “all up to you” or the result of God’s grace?
- Do you consider your own will more important than God’s will?

Do you feel that the Father took a risk when he created you? (p. 3)

- Give an example of loving someone enough to want to sacrifice everything for them.
- How does the holy sacrifice of the Mass inspire you to this kind of “risky” love?

Why are so many people in today’s culture afraid of the total risk of true love? (p. 4)

- How is the ardent and faithful love of the Lord for each of us reflected in sacramental marriage?
- Do you automatically try to avoid the risk of the radical love of Christ so that you or those you love won’t be hurt?

What is your understanding of the Church’s teaching to accept children “generously”? (p. 5)

- Why is it so difficult for many in our culture to cooperate with the Father in this way?
- When it comes to “planning our parenthood”, why do so many trust the “authority” of the secular culture more than our loving Lord through his Church?

Do you have anyone in your lifetime who affected you the way Ann Nalls affected her fellow parishioners, friends and family? (p. 6)

- Why does another person’s spiritual determination in the face of suffering inspire us?
- Within your own parish community, how can you carry the love of Jesus Christ to help keep the sick from being isolated?

Why are those who follow Jesus looked upon as foolish by the world? (p. 7)

- How can you explore what being a “mere disciple” means for you in a more personal way?
- In what ways has the Lord mysteriously fulfilled the deepest desires of your heart?