

Dear People Whom God Loves

**The reflections of
Father John Clay**

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Acknowledgments

In the fall of 1997, several parishioners of Saint Stanislaus Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, began discussing the importance of preserving the wisdom they found in the preaching of their pastor, Father John Clay.

It wasn't long before a group of eager volunteers were diving into the tasks of researching and editing the archive of Father Clay's bulletin essays as well as transcribing audio tapes of his recorded homilies. The result, two years later, is the book of reflections you now hold in your hands: the love and compassion of Jesus Christ as expressed in the words of Father John Clay.

We wish to express our heartfelt thanks to all the parishioners who so generously gave of their time and talents in the production of this book, as well as to the man who inspired this labor of love.

The Editorial Committee

Foreword

July 3, 1999

About a year ago, the prostate cancer that had lain dormant for four years overcame the medication I was taking and migrated to my spine. Radiation and chemotherapy could not check its spread, and I was told there were no further options for treatment. I was terminally ill.

With death imminent, doubts crept in, assailing my faith—the faith I had previously taken for granted. The afterlife appeared to be wishful thinking and God an illusion. I felt alienated from God. Although I prayed and meditated, I could not seem to reach Him.

In the throes of my crisis, John Clay came to visit and I told him of my doubts. “Bill,” he said, “you don’t have to reach out to God. I believe that He is in your heart and is part of you. He knows of your need and has been with you all along.” I immediately knew and felt the truth of his words, but these were more than just words. Backing them was a deep faith, sincerely held.

Father Clay’s whole life exemplifies this sincerity of spirit. It is the cornerstone of how he lives and preaches. Everything he says, in casual conversation or from the pulpit, is stamped with the hallmark of his sincerity.

In the ensuing days, my renewed faith proved to be a most curative force. It stimulated my

will to live. Father Clay both teaches and exemplifies for me the power of love. It is a lesson that will sustain me in this life and guide me in the life beyond.

This is the wonderful gift of John Clay to all of us fortunate enough to be part of his congregation.

Bill Guelcher

Parishioner of St. Stanislaus Church

Bill passed away on July 23, 1999.

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*The church is the finger;
the stars are God.*

—*Father John Clay*

Author's Note

Dear People Whom God Loves,

This book contains insights from my personal experience of the spiritual journey. It is worth no more than that and no less than that.

While all of our journeys are somewhat similar because we all share the same humanness, each person's journey is unique. If my experience is helpful to your spiritual growth, please use it. At the same time, adapt it to your personal situation. If it doesn't work for you, throw it away. However, don't throw it away too quickly, because sometimes we resist precisely what we need.

I see two movements in the journey. They don't happen in separation, but are interwoven. There is the journey inward and the journey outward.

In the inward journey, we get to know ourselves more honestly. The illusions we have about ourselves gradually get dislodged and we get closer to the truth about who and what we are. That truth, as I see it, is that we are precious to God and loved unconditionally. At the same time, we are all screwed up. At one and the same time, we see our many sins, flaws, frailties and mistakes—and see through them to the image of God that is deep within us. We love ourselves as we really are and not for some false self-image that we have. We have compassion for ourselves.

In the outward journey, we grow in compassion for all other people and for the whole created universe. This compassion expresses itself in works of charity and justice.

In the works of charity, we respond to the needs of people. Those needs may be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. Their need touches the compassion within us.

In the works of justice, we challenge the structures of our society and church. We challenge the structures that oppress people. These are structures that do not respect the dignity of human persons, and that hinder their spiritual growth.

I am not deeply involved in the works of justice for two reasons. I am not skilled in this area and, more importantly, I don't have the guts to face all the conflict and turmoil that working for justice entails.

Throughout the whole journey we are loved by our God. Wherever we are in the process is okay. It is important not to get down on ourselves, no matter what our situation is. The Love that is God will sustain us (though we often don't know it) no matter who we are and no matter what our history has been.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Part One
The Letters

Response to Poverty

February 16, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I am going to summarize for you an article by Albert Nolan, a Dominican priest in South Africa. It is called "Spiritual Growth and the Option for the Poor." In my judgment it is spiritually profound. I encourage you to struggle with its meaning and seek how it can touch your life.

The first stage is compassion for the poor, being moved by their suffering. Compassion is helped by learning that half the world is poor and that 800 million people are starving in one way or another. This information can help us become compassionate if we don't block it by becoming callous, by saying it's none of my business and so on.

Compassion is aided by seeing people in their poverty, by having immediate contact with their pain, by seeing them freeze, by seeing children suffer from malnutrition. Compassion leads to action that is called relief work—providing food, clothes, money, blankets, etc. Another action is simplifying our lifestyle to save money to give to the poor.

The second stage begins with the gradual discovery that poverty is a structural problem. It does not come from bad luck, laziness or ignorance. It is the result of political and economic policies. Poor people are suffering a terrible injustice. This structural problem involves all of us. We are all its pawns.

The second stage of our spiritual development is indignation or, more bluntly, anger—anger against those whose policies cause poverty and suffering. Anger doesn't mean hatred. The more that we understand that the problem is structural, the more we are able to forgive the individuals involved. When we understand that poverty is a structural problem, a political problem, we want to change the structure of the systems that create poverty and not just relieve the suffering of the poor. This knowledge can, however, lead to paralysis and giving up.

The third stage develops with the discovery that the poor must and will save themselves and that they don't really need you or me. Before this discovery, we think that we must go out and rescue the poor because they are helpless. In fact, the poor are more capable of solving the political and structural problems than we are. We must learn from the poor.

The poor themselves are the people whom God is going to use to save all of us from the crazy madness of a world in which so many people are starving in the midst of so much wealth. The danger of the third stage is romanticizing the poor, thinking that all they say and do is true and good.

The fourth and final stage centers around the experience of real solidarity with the poor and oppressed. It is no longer *we* and *they*. There is no gap between us. *We* are all *us*. We discover that we all have faults and weaknesses, though we all have different ones. We can work together and struggle together against our

common enemy, the unjust policies and systems, without ever treating one another as inferior or superior. We have a mutual respect, while recognizing the limits of our own social conditioning. We are in solidarity with God's cause, which is justice. This is the fruit of a long personal struggle filled with pain, shocks, challenges, crises and dark nights.

The four stages do not follow rigidly one after the other. They do get mixed up. When we get stuck somewhere along the way, we are not able to appreciate others who have gone farther. When we don't realize that it is a process, we don't appreciate and understand those who are beginning.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

War and Justice

March 2, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We all need to repent. There is brokenness in each of us that needs healing. Personal conversion is essential. To attempt to call the world to conversion without seeing our own sins is foolishness.

At the same time, we may not neglect the big picture. War, especially nuclear war, is an indescribable evil. The evil is not only the unleashing of all that destructive power, but also the trillions of dollars spent on military weapons, equipment and personnel. Our resources are limited and military spending gobbles up the money that could be used for the poor, the education of our children, the enrichment of our culture, and countless humanitarian causes. We should not rest easy with this.

War is terribly complex, but it is never a good solution. Injustice is frequently the underlying cause of war. Weapons will bring only a false security. Only justice will make our world safe.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Mother Earth

May 11, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When we think of a mother, most of us think of giving life, nurturing, protecting and bringing to maturity. Our response to mothering is properly one of respect, love and care. To respond by destroying is gravely disordered.

I suggest that we allow the image of Mother to form our relationship with our earth. We draw our life and sustenance from the earth. Our earth is mother to the human race as surely as our mothers are mother to us as individuals.

There is no replacement for our earth. Our response to our earth is properly respect, love and care. How do we respond to our earth? Too often we pollute our land, our waters and our air. We pollute our earth for profit. Can we not properly name this prostituting our mother? Think about it.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Addiction

June 8, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Addiction makes life extremely difficult for us. It is the source of behavior that is destructive to us and to other people. It holds us in a vise-like grip. We can resolve over and over again that we will stop what we are doing, only to be unsuccessful each time. We believe that we are bad people and that no one could possibly love us the way we are. We need to be very secret so that no one will know what we are like. We believe that everyone would reject us if they really knew us. We feel isolated, alone. We are willing to lose the people and things that are most important to us.

There are different kinds of hells in life. Addiction to alcohol is one of them. Not too many years back, people who were addicted to alcohol were considered moral perverts and worthless garbage. They were to be shunned and punished. It is true that the behavior resulting from alcoholism is often very destructive. This understandably led society to reject people who are alcoholic and to have no concern for them.

Fortunately, in recent decades the realization grew that some people are addicted to alcohol, that it is a disease and that something can be done about it. People began to acknowledge that they were powerless over alcohol and that their lives were out of control. The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program is one of the bright

lights on the American scene. The number of people who have reclaimed their lives through AA is legion. The focus is on recovery. People who are alcoholic work together through the twelve steps of AA.

There is another addiction that is beginning to be recognized—it is sexual addiction. People can be compulsive with sexual behavior in a way that is destructive. The attitude of society to sexual addiction is similar to what it was to alcoholism forty years ago. Society looks at people subject to sexual addiction as moral perverts and worthless garbage. Rejection and punishment is society's customary reaction. It is, of course, a very judgmental reaction.

People must be protected from destructive sexual behavior, but we must also be concerned about the people who suffer from sexual addiction. They are powerless over their sexual addiction and their lives have become unmanageable. Help similar to that of AA is now available. The program follows the same twelve steps. Recovery is possible for sexual addiction, just as it is for alcohol addiction. Help is now possible.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Pornography

August 10, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

People's reactions are often strong on both sides of the issue of pornography. I want to offer you some of my thoughts for your consideration.

Pornography is not all the same. It is helpful to make some distinctions. Distinctions help us see complex issues more clearly and realize that we are not all right and the other side all wrong. Distinctions help us to act firmly without being fanatics.

Some pornography uses children. The main issue I see here is not the sexual orientation of the material, but the exploitation and abuse of children. If our society does not protect its children, it is certainly remiss in its duty. I see the need for law in this area. I think that the law should be strict and focus primarily on those who produce and profit from this material.

Some pornography is violent. This violence is usually directed against women. From what I have read, I judge that viewing violence increases a person's capacity for violence. Violence is a problem for our society. It tears apart our social fabric. If laws were to be made regarding violent pornography, I think that the reason would be the violence. This would also mean that movies such as *Rambo* would be banned.

This becomes very sticky in my mind. I see most portrayal of violence as evil (I see the portrayal of the destruction of war and nuclear weapons as necessary, however), but I don't know if we can cope with it through legislation. The fact that violent pornography is usually against women is an added evil. Women are still second class in our society. Violence against women reinforces that and adds to their oppression.

Some pornography uses neither children nor violence. I can see no basis for legislation here. People need to be free to make their own decisions.

Becoming sexually mature is a long, slow process. It means acknowledging our sexual feelings, needs and desires, whatever they may be. It means recognizing that sexual relations are best within love, loyalty and commitment. It means recognizing that this kind of integration is a goal toward which we constantly strive (I suspect that we reach it about fifty years after we die). It means being compassionate with ourselves and others while we are on this journey. It means recognizing that while we may be at different stages of the journey, we are all on it. It means that we are probably not as sexually mature as we think. Sexual rigidity is often confused with maturity. It means that God loves us as we are and will help us grow.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Prayer and Renewal

August 31, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Without prayer, renewal will not happen. Prayer opens us to the movement of the Spirit of God within us and without us.

We all have a tendency to stay stuck. We resist change. When we pray, we loosen our stubbornness, our self-centeredness, our ego and all of the things that prevent conversion and renewal. This provides the opening for the empowering Spirit of God to enter us and make us become what we are called to be. We need this as individual people and as the community of St. Stan's.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Virtue

September 28, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Nice is not the same as virtuous. Virtue is the result of lengthy effort and God's grace. It comes after struggles that are accompanied by both good and bad behavior. Living according to the values of Jesus is a goal toward which we strive. We cannot live this way until we have matured as human beings.

We are usually taught by our church that we are to start out living virtuously. We forget that it is a process. Guilt and other kinds of pressure are put on us to make us conform to the virtuous behavior when we are not ready inside to do so. If we respond to this pressure, we will try to act in a virtuous manner. The result is living nice. Our actions are hollow and we begin to believe that we are holy. We become judgmental and think that we are holier than those who don't live up to our standards. We become mired in our self-righteousness. We get so stuck in this that it usually takes a painful and shattering crisis for us to be converted. Our situation is destructive because we think our living is virtuous when in reality it is sinful.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Learning from Other Churches

November 2, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I believe it is valuable for churches to dialogue with one another. I believe that this dialogue is helpful to each church that participates. Not too many years ago, when we talked—as we seldom did—the wrong question was asked. The question was Which is the true church, or which church has the truth? When we ask the wrong question, our answer will never help us solve a difficulty. We learn very slowly and keep asking the wrong question over and over again.

This question is wrong because it presumes that one church has the truth and the other does not. This question neglects the obvious reality that no church has all the truth. It forgets that no church is completely faithful to the Gospel. It doesn't realize that the same truth can be expressed in different ways. It doesn't own up to the fact that all churches are flawed—and necessarily flawed—because human beings compose them.

A better question is How can we become more faithful to the Gospel of Jesus by listening to what other churches have to say? If we all ask this question and pursue it honestly, we will be enriched.

We can learn from others the necessity of listening to the word of God in the Scriptures. They can learn from us the necessity of listening to that word within the community

of our fellow believers, both present and past. We can learn from others the presence of God in the Scriptures. They can learn from us the presence of God in the sacraments. We can learn from others that it is the people who are the church. They can learn from us the need for structure that fosters unity.

Much of our trouble stems from narrow-mindedness. We need to be humble enough to recognize that only God possesses the fullness of truth. At our best we only point to the truth and keep open to further growth. We hold God's truth in earthen vessels.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

In the Search for Truth

December 14, 1986

Dear People Whom God Loves,

In the search for truth, it is important not to divide people into “good guys and bad guys.” This is tempting. We like to think of those who agree with us as good guys and the others as bad guys.

Almost all of us are reasonably good. We all have serious flaws of mind and heart, but we must assume—unless proven otherwise—that all of the actors are honorable.

It is important to me that you think. It is important that we listen to those whose viewpoints differ from our own. I don't want you to accept things just because I say them. Listen, but think for yourself.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Church and Sexual Abuse

February 15, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Priests have made the news in recent years in unflattering ways. The most difficult issue is the sexual abuse of children by priests. Here are some thoughts that I offer for your consideration.

Of first importance is protecting children. We must do all we can to prevent child abuse. The children are especially vulnerable because the priest is in a position of power and trust. The sexual abuse of children causes them grave harm, and they are in need of much support and help to work through the problems that the abuse has caused. The children must be our first concern.

Our concern must also extend to the priest. Many, or perhaps most, people who sexually abuse children were themselves abused when they were young. Priests are just as likely as any other males to suffer from this affliction. The human condition extends to everyone. Position in society does not change that. Our compassion in different forms needs to reach out to the child and the priest.

Our awareness and understanding of sexual abuse of children has grown by leaps and bounds. The atmosphere now is more conducive to dealing with the problem in a more direct and effective manner. This is a great step forward.

We need healthy sexual attitudes in our church. From my personal experience and from my experience working with thousands of people, I judge that it is difficult to grow up Catholic and have a healthy sexual outlook.

It is essential that we know and feel that being sexual is a gift from God. We must also recognize that integrating our sexuality into our whole person, so that it serves our personal maturing and healthy relationships with others, is a long and difficult task. We all do it only more or less well; perhaps I should say more or less badly.

This process is, in my judgment, often hindered by our church. From my experience and my reading, I sense a strong current in our church that thinks of sex as bad and dangerous. I sense this even when parts of official statements say that sex is good. Even the good statements ring hollow to me.

The requirement of maleness and of celibacy for priesthood, in my opinion, sends a negative message about sexuality. I think that it reflects fears that most of us do not even know are there. I think that our fear of sex and fear of women are a strong and unrecognized influence within our church.

We at times seem paranoid about homosexuality. We so often lack compassion and understanding and seem blind to the harm that we heap on people who are gay or lesbian. We have so many fears.

Our society desperately needs help in developing sexual attitudes that are positive and responsible. If our church could lead in that direction, we would be of great service to our society. I don't see that happening right now. In spite of some good things that our church has to say about sex, we continue to be part of the problem.

Please think about these matters and make up your own mind. If you have any comments, pro or con, I would be pleased to put them in future bulletins.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Roles in the Church

February 22, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The Pope and bishops (the hierarchy) as well as theologians have their different but proper roles in the church. The hierarchy speaks for the church in a special way that is not shared by others. One of the roles of theologians is to make known to the church, including the hierarchy, their theological reflections. This is part of the process by which the church improves the manner in which it teaches and corrects errors.

Silencing dissent interferes with this process. That is a great loss to our church and our world. As truth becomes more important to us than control, we lose our fear of people who disagree with us.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Suppression of Dissent

March 15, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The suppression of dissent has bad effects. When dissent is suppressed, bishops and theologians feel intimidated. Under the influence of that fear, many of them will not be able to speak and act in ways that are honest. In other words, they will be tempted to be untrue to themselves.

When religious dissent was suppressed at the beginning of this century, theology became more like a catechism class than theology. If we have all the answers, we don't have to think anymore. I think that it is essential for us who believe in open and honest discussion to remain firm. We don't want to end the century like it began.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Solution to Dissent

March 22, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves

The solution to dissent lies in the education of Catholics, not in the suppression of dissent. We are adults in the church no matter what our role or status is. Suppression is a shortcut that is self-defeating and disrespectful of persons.

I hope that in our parish we will be able to learn about our faith in a manner suitable to adults. Our church needs thinkers and challengers. All of us—the pope, the rest of the hierarchy, the clergy, the religious and the laity—must speak honestly to each other. We can't change the world overnight, but we can make a start here at St. Stan's.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Goodness out of Evil

April 19, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The feast of the resurrection reminds us that our God loves us through everything—even death. It reminds us that God can bring good out of the worst of evils. The evils are still tragic and painful, but God can make something out of them.

This is even true of the evil of sin. Some of our greatest virtues come from our sins. From sin we learn compassion for people who struggle with sin as we do. God's ways are often mysterious, but they are always good.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Ten Commandments

May 24, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Each of the Ten Commandments points to a value that is important to respect. To understand the commandments deeply, we must learn what that value is.

The people of Israel, along with other peoples in the Middle East, devised commandments that their long experience showed were necessary if those values were to be protected. The first three commandments were special to the Jewish people. The last seven they held in common with their neighbors. The genius of the Jewish people was recognizing in the first three commandments the relationship to which God calls us, and recognizing in the last seven that God cares about the way people treat each other.

There are two ways of looking at the Ten Commandments. We were brought up to look at them as laws to be obeyed. Another way is to discover the values behind the commandments and discover ways that will help us to preserve and foster these values. The second way is easier than the first insofar as it is not so rigid. It is harder than the first because it requires an ongoing growth and development that calls for more than obeying the letter of the law.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Power of Religion

June 28, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Religion is a powerful force in individuals and in society. It touches the depths of our being and causes us to ponder ultimate realities. That power has the potential of drawing out the very best in us and allowing the compassion and love of God to fill us and overflow into our world.

Like all power, it can become twisted and perverted. Because it runs so deep, religion can become the font of hatred and oppression when it gets distorted. Religion has given birth to heroic and unselfish living. It has also given birth to the kind of hatred and slaughter that can only be called diabolical.

Most of us never reach either of these extremes. We must be aware, however, that both the beauty and the perversion exist in each of us. There are signs that the perversion is very active in us. Some of these signs are:

1. an absolute certainty of being right;
2. a feeling of righteousness;
3. difficulty listening to opposing points of view;
4. classifying some people as bad and unworthy;
5. actions that are oppressive of people;
6. feeling that we are worthy of being part of God's people, but some others are not.

It is precisely when we are unaware of the perversion within us that it most dominates our lives.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Individual Rights

July 12, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We Americans place great value on winning. Sometimes it is our highest value. When there is a winner, there is also a loser. Our winning is at the expense of someone else.

There is a fundamental value in individual rights. We must never lose that. We must also remember that our own rights are limited by the rights of other people.

What we Americans are most prone to neglect is our need for bondedness, for relations with each other. This is as much a part of being fully human as individuality.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

A People of Prayer

July 17, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We all have the opportunity to commit ourselves to pray that we as individuals and as a community be open to the movement and power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is not talking God into helping us. Prayer is rather the process of becoming less resistant and more open to be influenced and changed by the loving power of God.

If we become people of prayer, we will see wonderful things occur in us and our community. We will also become channels through which the loving embrace of God will touch other people. May our hearts and minds be open.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Collective Sin

November 8, 1987

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Sin is not only present in our individual lives, but it also exists in the structures of our society. It is in our churches, our governments, our international relations, our businesses, our social patterns and our economic systems.

When we people with our sins build things together, the imprint of our sins is left on what we develop. These sinful parts of our structures take on lives of their own and oppress people in kinds of ways that we would not choose as individuals. We are challenged to resist and change these sinful parts of our structures.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Liturgy

May 22, 1988

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I use two images to express what liturgy is. The first is *praying together* before God. Although it is appropriate and indeed necessary to have some time for quiet and reflection, liturgy is something that we do together. Liturgy is the prayer of the community. If we remain isolated from each other, something is missing.

Private prayer is essential to Christian living. I don't think I could survive without it. We bring ourselves as people who are formed by private prayer to our prayer together. The formation we receive by praying together we bring back to our private prayer. The rhythm flows back and forth.

Even with this first image we have difficulties. We all pray differently. This is no problem when we pray alone; however, when we pray together it is another story. We need to strive to make our prayer together valuable to as many people as possible. This can never be done fully, so we must try to understand and accept the ways of other people just as they must try to understand and accept our ways. I believe that openness before God calls us to respect those who are different from ourselves.

The second image of liturgy is *playing together* before God. If the first image causes some tremors, the second causes a full-blown earthquake. This image is hard because

it is so different from the image in which many of us were formed. *Be quiet in church, don't talk, don't smile, don't look around, don't look at other people. Focus on God, not on each other.*

I am not going to judge that image. Perhaps it was needed at the time. It is not, however, the image of King David dancing before the ark of the covenant, or the disciples after Pentecost—people thought that they must be drunk with wine.

Even a modest movement into the second image is difficult for most of us, and for some of us seems irreverent. Music, singing, bodily gestures, including dancing, are a part of play before God. Play involves our bodies, our emotions and our minds. Our whole being is created by God; so our whole being is to be given back to God in liturgy.

The difficulties of moving into the second image are obvious. Not only do we all have different ways and intensities of playing, but the image itself of holy playing is foreign to many of us. Hence the pace of moving into the second image must be slower.

I pray that our celebrating liturgy together will open us and draw us closer to our God and each other.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Footsteps of Jesus

February 12, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Following in the footsteps of Jesus is difficult for us. We may have never seriously considered following him except in a superficial way. We may have considered it, but it recedes into the background and we forget about it. We may keep it in mind, but we don't want to let go of a way of living that is comfortable and well-known. We may not want to let go of a way of living that we recognize is harmful but that we are not ready to change.

Whatever the reason, Lent is a time of special invitation to follow Jesus more earnestly and with greater joy. Following Jesus more deeply is really more joyful than not, but we find that difficult to believe. Believe.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Resurrection

March 26, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The resurrection of Jesus reminds us that God is always for life. Even though we all suffer from brokenness and sin, even though God does not usually bring us out of that brokenness and sin except after much struggle and pain, God never rests while anyone or anything has not reached its full potential.

The brokenness and sin are necessary because it is our weaknesses that drive home to us that we are vulnerable and need God. Our weaknesses are the openings through which God can enter us.

The power and love that are God work continuously until we are made one (whole) in ourselves and with each other. My prayer is with you this Easter day.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Arrogance

April 2, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We are in danger of becoming arrogant as we try to promote good causes. We are prone to think that others need conversion, while being blind to our own need to be converted. Without that conversion we are promoting our own cause and not God's cause. This is true no matter how noble our cause seems to be or actually is.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Superstition

April 16, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Most of us have a need for something that is deeper than the things and people that are around us. We search for a deeper meaning. Sometimes we meet that need by believing that certain charms, signs and actions can bring us good fortune. We call this superstition.

Akin to superstition is the belief that we can control God by certain prayers or actions. In both cases we place ourselves at the center and God or other powers at our disposal.

Belief in a Christian sense is trusting that we and the universe are in the hands of the infinite love we call God. We cannot control this love or make Her do our bidding. All we can do is trust that the wisdom and love that are God are present even when things don't make sense and are unfair. We trust that in the end love will prevail.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Openness to the Spirit

May 14, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We celebrate today the beautiful truth that the Spirit of God lives in us and in our world. That Spirit cannot be controlled. We cooperate not by controlling the Spirit, but by being open and ready to respond to the promptings of that Spirit.

My guess is that the Spirit of God will lead us most of the time in ways we do not expect. That is why it is so important for us to be open to being changed in ways that we resist; to realize that we never have the final answer, that the ways we think and live always need improvement and transformation.

The more rigid and controlled we are as individuals and institutions, the more we will resist the improvements of the Spirit. The Spirit brings us much power, healing and creativity, but She will lead us in Her way, not in ours.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Holiness

May 28, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When I was growing up, I had the impression that the way to become holy was to be a priest or sister. We didn't hear much about brothers. Holiness seemed to be foreign to people who were involved in "worldly" things.

This thinking was radically changed by the Second Vatican Council, which reminded us that all Christian people are called to holiness. It is the call to everyone who is baptized. Holiness does not mean doing holy things. It means doing all of the ordinary things that people do, but doing them with the awareness that God is in all of our thoughts, actions and experiences.

This awareness of God allows us to engage in "worldly matters" with a new kind of power, a deeper motivation and a transparent graciousness. This, of course, unfolds in us through a slow, painful and flawed process. We don't grow in holiness by leaving "worldly things," but by entering into them with a new vision.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Patriotism

July 2, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

On July 4 many people will be flying the flag of our country. I would guess that while all are doing the outward act of displaying the flag, the reasons behind it are very different.

For some it means making our country more livable by respecting our land, air and water. For others it means protecting our privileged economic status. It can also mean that we regard ourselves as the most powerful military nation or that we value our tradition of freedom and the right to express our opinion without fear of governmental retaliation.

Why do I fly the flag? An honest look might give us a very surprising answer.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Lay Ministry

July 9, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Baptism is a more important sacrament than Holy Orders. The formal method of becoming a member of the church is to be baptized, confirmed and receive Holy Communion. Ideally, all three sacraments are received at the same liturgy. In practice this usually does not happen.

One does not become more a member by receiving the other sacraments. For example, those who receive Holy Orders or those who receive Matrimony are not better or fuller members than those who do not.

The priest is ordained to lead a Christian community and to call for the gifts and talents of the other members of the parish community. The priest's role is different from that of the other members, but it is not his community. It belongs to all the members. All members share in the rights and responsibilities of the church.

The shortage of priests is a blessing because it is forcing us out of the situation where the priests did almost all the ministries, and into the ancient way of being church where all members minister in various ways. The involvement of lay people into ministry is old-fashioned. It just seems new if we have not been aware of our history.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Really Praying

September 24, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Having trouble praying? Feeling lost about what it means to pray? If we would spend two minutes every day quietly and reflectively praying the “Our Father,” it would do wonders for many of us. Taking two minutes means taking our time, letting each word or phrase sink in.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Gratitude for All Life's Experiences

November 26, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

To be healthy we must acknowledge the negative and be grateful for the positive. There is much in life that is demanding and painful. We must face that and struggle with the challenge it presents. There are also many things that are joyful and delightful. Some may be great; most will be small.

We often forget to be grateful, especially when we are weighed down or busy, and we take our blessings for granted. Appreciation and gratitude greatly enrich us. We may even come to see the good that comes from our painful experiences and be grateful for the tough stuff.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Healthy Relationships

December 3, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

As our world moves faster and becomes more technological, the need for good personal relations grows greater. Unfortunately, these same factors make personal relationships more difficult as they become more necessary.

Relationships within a family are difficult. They can be healing or destructive and most often are a combination of the two. It is hard for us to face the unhealthy patterns that we are in—and every family has them. Facing them is the first step. Then healing can begin.

We are flawed as individuals and as families. The positive aspect is that the healing power of God's love is with us.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

God as “They”

December 17, 1989

Dear People Whom God Loves,

God is not a “He” but a “They.” We must, however, remember that God is more than any one of the terms we use. Indeed, God is more than all of them put together.

To try to box God into one image or one set of images is a form of unmeant blasphemy; it reduces God to created dimensions. This is the theological reason why speaking of God exclusively as male is wrong. There are pastoral reasons, as well, why conceiving of God as male is wrong.

We, the church, fell into this trap of a male God. Like any prejudice, it is so deeply ingrained that we have not recognized what was going on. In our time, the prejudice is breaking up. This means that our generation has the pain and excitement of a new birth in our vision of God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Jesus' Suffering and Our Sin

April 12, 1992

Dear People Whom God Loves,

On Good Friday we remember Jesus' suffering and dying on the cross. Some of us have been told that our sins nailed Jesus to the cross. I don't think that this type of religious reflection is spiritually helpful. If we are already feeling a lot of guilt and don't regard ourselves as worthwhile, this can increase our self-hate. As self-hate grows, we diminish our potential for spiritual growth.

To sin means to choose ways of acting that are destructive and harmful to ourselves and others. It is honest and healthy to reflect on the consequences of our actions and to realize that we do indeed harm ourselves and others. We reflect on this not to make ourselves think we are bad people—we are not—but to give us reason to change our lives in ways that are good for ourselves and others.

Jesus was killed because he persevered in living a life that followed his Father's will, a life that was often a challenge to powerful and important people of his time. The challenge was so threatening that they chose to kill Jesus to remove the threat.

Jesus' suffering and death on the cross are the ultimate symbols of God's love for us. In Jesus, God chose to live with us in all the twists and turns of human living and to accept the

consequences of that choice—a choice that finally led to being nailed to a cross.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Easter's Hope

April 19, 1992

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The message of Easter that I hear this year is that hope can be present in the darkest situation. Jesus' going from crucifixion and death to resurrection is the symbol that God will help us move through darkness to light.

Our lives at times feel hopeless. Easter tells us that life is often very difficult, but it is never hopeless.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Holy Communion

May 3, 1992

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When our youngsters receive Holy Communion for the first time, it is also an occasion for all of us to reflect on the value of receiving Holy Communion ourselves. We receive communion because of our need and not because of our holiness. We come to communion as people who sin and need healing and forgiveness.

God never turns us away because of what we have done, but welcomes us home as the father did to the prodigal son. God welcomes us when we are innocent as little children or mixed up as adults. Our journey through life has many twists and turns. Holy Communion is food for the journey.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

New Year's Resolutions

January 3, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We make jokes about New Year's resolutions because our common human experience is that these resolutions seldom change anything. Resolutions focus on willpower and not on inner change, which takes place in the emotions and guts. Willpower is limited. Willpower without inner change is like trying to climb a steep hill dragging several hundred pounds.

It is now recognized that ninety-five percent of people who diet to lose weight gain it back. Another approach is to get in touch with the part of us that wants to eat in a healthy manner. We can read about healthy eating, imagine healthy eating, and allow that image to enter into us. We will likely, after a while, start choosing to eat in a healthier manner. At some point something inside of us changes, and we are surprised and grateful. We will then find that it goes against the grain to eat in an unhealthy way.

I suggest that we approach spiritual growth in the same way. It won't happen quickly, but as it does, the growth will be real. Change that relies on willpower produces only superficial change. Some of our behavior may change, but we remain the same inside.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

A Vision for St. Stan's

January 10, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The reading from Isaiah today speaks of not breaking the reed that is bruised, and of establishing justice on the earth. This reading puts in capsule form the vision that I have for St. Stan's. We are all bruised reeds in need of a nurturing place. I want St. Stan's to be that place. There are unjust and destructive situations in our community. It is essential that these situations be turned around. I want St. Stan's to be a part of this process.

The inner spiritual journey focuses primarily on the nurturing places. The outer spiritual journey focuses primarily on the process of service and making justice. A complete spiritual journey has both—and in fact, they enhance each other.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Listening to the People

January 17, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Sometimes it is said that surveys of Catholic opinion are not useful because church teaching is not based on majority opinions. That is true, but it misses part of the point. What lay people believe is important. Part of the task of official teachers in our church is to listen to the voice of the people in the pews. The people in the pews are not always right, but they are not always wrong. There are sometimes disagreements between those holding teaching offices and the grass roots church members. It requires careful listening to come closer to the truth.

In the fourth century, most of the bishops believed that Jesus was not divine as well as human. The lay people believed that He was. The voice of the laity prevailed and was made the official teaching of the church in 325 A.D. In my opinion, all members of the church are both teachers and learners. Those who hold official teaching positions must also be learners, and those who do not hold such positions must also be teachers.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Be Quiet

February 28, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The invitation to allow God to be a greater influence in our life is given an extra boost during the season of Lent. A simple practice that might be helpful to you is to take two or three minutes each day to be quiet.

During those minutes, let go of the hold that your troubles and worries have on you. Allow yourself to feel God loving you and strengthening you. Let that feeling sink in, and let it rest throughout your body and mind.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Path of St. Stanislaus Kostka

March 7, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

St. Stanislaus Kostka, the patron saint of our parish, and his brother, Paul, symbolize two different paths along which God can call. Each path has its advantages and disadvantages. Stanislaus seems to have been drawn to a life of virtue at a very early age. His brother, Paul, got a rocky start as far as virtue is concerned.

A few of us are like Stanislaus. God's presence and influence in our lives seem to come rather simply and without a lot of struggle. This does not mean that we won't have a lot of hardships and heartaches in our lives, but searching for God is not one of them, though we may feel the absence of God at various periods in our life.

Many of us find God's presence only after much struggle and wandering through unhealthy and destructive ways of living. God seems to use our very sins as the instruments through which She opens us up to Her presence and teaches us gratitude and compassion. I speak with more knowledge of this path because it is the one that I have experienced.

The lesson that Stanislaus and Paul teach me is that God takes us as we are and where we are. God uses both virtue and sin to draw us to Himself. There is hope no matter what our condition is.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Authority

March 14, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Authority is a problem in almost every institution. Our church is no exception. Some of us see authority as someone in charge making the rules and the rest obeying. Some of us see authority as what is agreed upon by an institution or organization. Some of us see authority as solid and unyielding, while others of us see it as adapting to changing situations. Some of us want to give our whole selves an authority. Others of us want no infringement on our freedom.

There are also varying positions in between. Where we are in this broad spectrum is, in my judgment, determined largely by our inner personality, by the psychological needs that we have. It has little to do with moral goodness or badness.

This tension regarding authority is inevitable. It will not go away. Our task is to find creative ways to live within the tension. This tension is reflected in the Gospel of Matthew. In Chapter 16, Jesus gives the authority of binding and loosing to Peter. In Catholic tradition this is understood to mean that one person has a unique and central position within the church. The one elected to be the bishop of Rome, the Pope, has come to be recognized as the one to fill that position.

In Chapter 18 of Matthew, Jesus gives authority—the power of binding and loosing—to

the whole church. Recently, this passage is beginning to draw attention. As democratic principles become our customary way of doing things, the effect is being felt in the way our church exercises authority. Centuries ago when authority was exercised by kings and emperors, Chapter 16 was emphasized and Chapter 18 was largely forgotten. I believe that both chapters need equal attention. This introduces the tension. It can lead to creative solutions if we keep our minds open, our hearts compassionate and our spirit responsive to the Spirit of God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Road to God

March 28, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Sometimes we wish we had certain knowledge of the road to God. Then we could be in control. I believe that control keeps us from God. As long as we are in control, we don't surrender to God. Without surrender, we avoid God.

All we can do is be willing to have our minds and hearts open and allow God to lead us. Thomas Merton said that the path to God is like a field of fresh snow. After we have walked through it, we can look back and see the path. We can't see it until after we have walked it.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

God Will Not Abandon Us

April 11, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The resurrection of Jesus teaches us a truth that is often difficult to believe. Our God loves us and is with us in the most trying and tragic times. God will help us find a way through and out of anything. The trial may not be taken away, but a way through it will be offered.

My experience is that God's response to my suffering is often not the one I wanted, but in looking back, I see it is the response that produced the most good. Even Jesus had difficulty holding onto this truth. This is evidenced by his cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" I suspect that God's answer was a surprise to Jesus. We will never be abandoned by God even if we abandon Him.

HAPPY EASTER!!!

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Real Listening

April 18, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I believe that we almost never listen to anybody. We may talk back and forth with them, but we seldom hear what is in their hearts. I believe that if we truly heard, understood and felt what is going on in other people, many of our relationships would improve dramatically. If we listened with empathy to our own innermost hurts and fears, we would love ourselves far more.

I suggest that the greatest gift parents can give to their children is the time and attention it takes to understand and value what their children are feeling. That's good advice for a priest, too.

There is someone who always listens with attention, patience and love. Let us open our heart to our God. She is never too busy.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Abandoning Our Agendas

May 23, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When the reign of God enters our hearts, we lose our personal agendas. We have our personal agendas because we want the world and people to be the way we want them to be. We want people to be the way we want them to be because we don't love ourselves. We don't love ourselves because we don't think that it is okay to be who we are. We don't think that it is okay to be who we are because we learned that God doesn't love us as we are. We learned that we must become good for God to love us. To my way of thinking, that is the most damaging spiritual message there is.

When we love ourselves, we have no need to have people be a certain way. We are grateful when we can be an instrument of God working in others to help them become what God wants—that they be who they are, and not what we want them to be.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Letting Go of Pain

May 30, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Jealousies cause us pain. Anxieties cause us pain. Resentments cause us pain. Guilts cause us pain. In spite of the pain, so often we cling to those things. We cause our own pain by clinging to them. They seem like old friends, and in a way we feel comfortable with them even though they hurt.

The grace of letting go is a wonderful gift. We can't really make it happen. We can be willing to acknowledge these feelings in the presence of our God who is loving us, and willing for God to take them away. If we do this faithfully, our insides will change and one day we will realize that our clinging is lessening and we will come to an awareness that the pain is gone.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Loving Our Enemies

June 6, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Many wars have been fought over religious ideas and beliefs. When we believe that we are doing something good or for God, we are inclined to think that anything goes. Our cause is so righteous in our minds that we cease to think of the people on the other side as human. They are the enemy. When we name people as enemies, they become objects and not human persons. When we make them objects, we can do anything to them we want as long as it is seen as advancing our cause.

Perhaps this is why Jesus told us, "Love your enemies." Loving them means that they are human, that they are people, that they are daughters and sons of God, that they are our sisters and brothers. They are like us. We are to love them as we love ourselves.

It is not only war that brings out this dark side of us. Many other religious and moral issues do as well. Disputes about abortion and homosexuality bring out this darkness in an especially destructive manner. When we do not love those we oppose, we may be sure that we are not seeking (though we may think that we are) the reign of God. Rather, we are fostering something very ugly inside of us. The apparent righteousness of our cause enables us to do this and even feel holy in doing it.

This temptation exists in me and, I suspect, in every one of us. I know that I will never grow

out of it totally. I pray that I may see it more honestly and allow the grace of God to let go of the wounded, unhealthy need that urges me to hurt people in God's name.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

God Loves Me for Who I Am

June 27, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Our worth is not determined by other people's judgments or actions. This is a lesson that is still difficult for me to learn. Other people's criticism does not make me less; their praise does not make me more.

We are who we are. That is good enough for God. Our task is to learn that it is good enough for us. Once I learn that who I am, regardless of what my gifts and talents are, is what God loves, I will not be knocked over by criticism or puffed up by praise. I hope I learn this sometime before I die.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Seeing the Truth

July 4, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Believing in God is a new way of looking at things. Here are some examples:

I see someone I don't like, and I see through that to a person who is lovable and wounded just as I am.

I see myself wounded and abused as a child, and I see through that to my center full of love and power waiting to come out.

I see our church with many flaws and sins, and I see through that to a church that is made up of flawed and sinful people just like me.

I see a difficult child, and I see through that to a bundle of energy needing my respect and nurturing.

Make a list such as this for yourself. It can help us to discover God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Negative Messages

July 18, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It is important that we recognize and feel the hurts, angers and rejections that are present within us. If we are feeling these emotions and do not acknowledge that they are there, we push them back down inside of us, where they fester and turn poisonous. At some point we need to let them go.

It is good to recognize that we play a part in keeping these feelings alive by continually rehashing them. I think we do that because we start to tell ourselves the same negative messages that were told to us in a hurting way. We don't need someone else to hurt us by these messages because we are now doing it to ourselves. If I stop saying these hurtful things to myself (and we are often unaware that we are doing this), the resentment will fade. This is simple to say and hard to do, but it is well worth the effort.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Scriptures

July 25, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The Scriptures are the word of God. God is love. The Scriptures are God's love for us expressed in human words. Since the Scriptures are expressions of God's love, we must listen to them with our hearts. Our minds can't do it alone.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

God's Unknowable Love

August 8, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We need to stop putting God in a box and claiming to know what God is like. God is always a surprise. That is why we can't pin Her down. Love is a good word to describe God, but we don't know exactly what it means. That is why the traditional way of speaking about God requires three steps. First, the love that is God is like human love. Second, the love that is God is unlike human love. Third, the love that is God is infinitely greater than human love.

We at times understandably say, "If God loves us, we wouldn't suffer." We say that because we think we know what divine love is. The reality is that we don't know. It is like our human love, but it is unlike it as well. In faith, we trust that God's love is more than we can imagine. It is not easy, but we need to hang onto that trust.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Reality vs. Our Minds

August 15, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Almost all of us (myself included) cling stubbornly to our opinions. We think that what is in our minds is what Reality is like. Since I think that what is in my mind is what is real, I think that you are wrong when you disagree with me. This seems to me to be especially true when it comes to religious matters. What is in my mind may resemble reality more or less, but what is in my mind is not reality—it is the way I have put reality together in my mind. Reality stimulates me to think, but what is in my mind is what I have put together.

We need to put things together in our mind to live humanly. Being able to do this is a gift from God. Our mistake is making it more than it is. As we become aware of this, we become more humble intellectually and more open to new ideas. In fact, we welcome new insights because we realize that what we have in our minds is so far removed from what is real. We know that we don't know.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

How We Hear

August 29, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

What is meant by the speaker or writer is often not what is understood by the listener or reader. It is a good idea to check it out. What we hear is in large part determined by what we have previously experienced and is already in our minds. For example, a certain tone of voice or expression may bring back to us what we experienced with our parents. Instead of hearing what is being said now, we hear what we heard as children.

In the same way, we hear the Scriptures according to what is already in our minds. This means we may badly understand the Scriptures and use them only to confirm our already entrenched opinions.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Living Boldly

September 12, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Mistakes are a part of human living. Our choice is to learn from our mistakes or not to learn. Making good decisions comes from experience. Experience comes from making bad decisions.

I suggest that we are called by God not to live life in fear of being wrong or being misunderstood, but with energy and some boldness. If I am always passive and nice, I will probably not bother too many people, but I also will not foster growth in people.

We are called to name what we see and, when we blow it, to be big enough to admit it and learn from it. Creativity always brings some mess, but it also makes life worth living. The Pharisees lived carefully by the book, but they also couldn't hear Jesus' message of the kingdom of God. Though we may be terrified of making mistakes, making no mistakes is the biggest mistake of all—attempting nothing new.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

First Things First

October 10, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When good things that are secondary are placed first, they lose their power to lead us to the good things that are truly first. This then divides us into two camps. Some of us continue to place secondary goods first. Others of us reject them. Conservatives tend to do the first, liberals the second. Neither position leads to growth and holiness. That is why it is important to keep the secondary goods—but also to keep them secondary.

Church and religion are secondary goods. They are meant to help us be aware of the presence and movement of our compassionate God in our lives and in our world. This awareness opens us to become compassionate people as God's power works in us. When church and religion are placed first, we make them gods, and then they lead us to themselves and not to God. That is how church and religion become destructive.

When church and religion make us feel righteous or are used to beat people down, we become destructive of other people and ourselves. As we participate in church and religion, we must continually ask ourselves if this participation is nurturing compassion in us.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Rushing

October 24, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We need to be on time when we are interacting with other people. Coordination would not work well without times being set. The problem that I see for many of us is that we are rushing most of the time. Rushing keeps us from being aware of what is going on inside of us. This means that it hinders spiritual growth. Rushing keeps us from an interior attitude of living from deep inside ourselves. Rushing and prayer cannot coexist. There is an old saying, "Haste is the death of devotion."

When we don't live out of our deep center, the good work we do is greatly lessened. We make more mistakes and we respond to people in inappropriate ways; our inner wisdom doesn't get a chance to influence the way we live. To live full lives, we cannot be busy all the time; we must take time to smell the roses.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

All the Letting Go's

October 31, 1993

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Letting go is an essential element of human living and growth. Letting go is painful, but it is necessary for us to reach the fullness of life that God offers to us. When we grow, we let go of one thing to make room for another. Our human temptation is to hold on to what is familiar. That is understandable but deadly.

When we marry, we let go of being single. When we start to love, we let go of the apparent security of not allowing ourselves to be hurt. When we allow a generous spirit to enter into us, we let go of our attachment to money and material things. When we find meaning and purpose in sickness, we let go of our need for health to make us think that we are okay.

There are hundreds and thousands of “letting go's” in life—some little, some big. These are all preparations for the final letting go—death. When we die, there is nothing to hold onto except surrender to God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Married Life and Celibate Life

January 23, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Something Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee said, a personal statement that seems to come from his heart, got me to thinking. Married life and celibate life are both authentic ways for a Christian to live. One is not better than the other. They are different paths. Each has its consolations and its hardships. Some have the gifts for married life, some for celibate life. If we follow a path for which we do not have the gifts, our road will be unnecessarily rocky. We will probably not attain the spiritual growth God has in mind for us. This is detrimental to us and those around us.

If the priesthood were open to both married and celibate people, the number and quality of priests would increase. The priesthood would be enriched by the mix and our church would be better served. Two fringe benefits of this would be:

1. Our teaching that married and celibate are equally good would be affirmed instead of sounding hollow.
2. An individual person who has the gifts for priesthood and for married life would not be placed in the position of having to reject one of the gifts.

This is food for thought and prayer.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Path of Freedom

January 30, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It is very difficult to handle the gift of freedom God has given us. Freedom requires trust, creativity and taking responsibility. We would much rather have the security of following someone or some institution that claims to have the truth. We then don't have to think or take responsibility for our lives. We just obediently do what we are told. This gives us security, but in the process we lose our inner selves, our souls. It is the need for certain answers that draws us to political and religious leaders who claim to have the answers. It also keeps us from growing spiritually and becoming people of compassion.

I encourage us to take the path of freedom and compassion and put our full trust only in God. Please don't do this because I say so. This will put you right back into the trap of security. We must look inside ourselves under the loving care of our God; we must become honest and real. We are called to be free people in the midst of our mistakes and sins.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Compassion

February 27, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Compassion is central to spirituality. If we are without compassion, all of our religious practices are an empty shell. This does not mean that we are bad people, but that we have taken a wrong turn. We have religion with no soul. Compassion is difficult for us, but possible. With God's grace, we can put ourselves into the shoes of other people and see things through their eyes. If we truly see things through the eyes of another, compassion will grow.

We are all prejudiced. Our prejudices run deep and are hardened like concrete. Fortunately, the grace of God is clever. If we open ourselves just a crack, God will slip in and our prejudices will start to fall away and we will become free.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Image of the Black Madonna

March 20, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Three weeks ago in the sermon, I used the image of the “Black Madonna” to symbolize the whole person with soul, spirit and body fully developed and balanced. Two people thought that some African-American people might be offended by that. I understand how it might be understood in a way that would be offensive. I think, however, that it is a very positive symbol. We are using the symbols of light and darkness, masculine and feminine, to represent the wholeness that comes from this integration. Using these symbols, a “White Madonna” would be incomplete, remote and half human. This would symbolize how destructive we become when we are not grounded in soul and body.

The Black Madonna, according to Marian Woodman, is a symbol that is coming more and more to human consciousness. The Black Madonna is an image that can draw us to wholeness. The Black Madonna symbolizes the fully human person who is grounded in the pain and suffering of the world, who acknowledges the darkness within, who seeks truth and pursues goodness, and who is anchored in the earthiness of body. It is a good image for me.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Allowing Ourselves to be Transformed

May 1, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

A chart in the “Human Tendencies Profile,” from the book, *Discovering the Spirit* by Joseph J. McMahon, summarizes the characteristics of the three types of human thought: the Irrational, the Rational and the Supra-Rational. This is what it means to me.

The Irrational is destructive. The Rational is an obvious improvement, but keeps us caught in the ordinary conventional way of thinking. The Supra-Rational is the result of breaking out of the ordinary conventional way of thinking. We still retain some of the value of the Rational, but we leave much of it behind. This, I believe, is what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is not to be identified with the Supra-Rational, but it is a whole new way of thinking. The Scribes and Pharisees were caught in the conventional thinking of their culture and religion. Jesus’ preaching of a new vision was undermining their way of life and control. That is why Jesus was considered so dangerous and was killed.

It is good to move from confusion to order, but we are called to move on to vision. Some disorder and messiness are necessary for vision. It is also good to move from dependence to control, but we must move beyond. When we

control too much, we become trapped. We must let go of our controlling to become free. Some system must replace rebellion or we will have chaos.

However, system easily becomes locked into one way of doing things. We are called to move beyond system, to change and to grow. If we are totally skeptical, we have no anchor at home base. We need some certainty, but certainty makes us think we have the truth and the answers. This keeps us stuck. If we are going to be creative people, we must be open to new ideas and ways. To be creative, we must question.

To put it another way, to move from the Irrational to the Rational is the building of our ego. This is the task of the early part of our life. The building of our ego gives us a sense of self and value. Order, control, system, and certainty are ego-building processes. Without them, our life is chaos. The violence we see in our society is, in my judgment, the result of no sense of self developing from building our ego. This is the violence of gangs, criminals and out-of-control behavior. Without a sense of self, we despair and are violent to ourselves or others, or both.

After we have built our egos, the danger is that we cling to them and make them the center of our lives. We become addicted to order, control, system, and certainty. We become addicted because the ego is not the center of who we are. We have a deeper center, the true self. The true self is who we really are; it is the image of God within us; it

is where God touches us to transform us. Transformation is what Jesus came to bring us.

When we are addicted to order, control, system, and certainty, we become violent. This violence is sophisticated. This is white-collar violence, while the former is blue-collar violence. This is the violence which keeps other people oppressed, dependent, immature, and serving our needs. It stifles creativity and transformation. This is the violence that is often perpetrated by our churches, governments, businesses, schools, and many of our social institutions. It is a violence that often masquerades as good.

We are called to be transformed, to see life from a completely new perspective. The parables of Jesus are his way of shocking us out of our ordinary ways of thinking, so we can see from the perspective of God. The purpose of church/religion is to help us let go of our addiction to order, control, system, and certainty—to become transformed into vision, freedom, change, and creativity. Unfortunately, much of the time instead of being the solution, we are part of the problem. I don't despair, because I trust that God will find a way to transform us no matter how thick-headed or hard-hearted we are.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Idolizing Authority

May 22, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I suggest that it is harmful to the human race to give reverence and respect to persons because of their position in church or society. I believe Jesus was getting at this when he said that to be first in his kingdom meant being the servant of the rest. I see two harms that result from respecting persons because of their position.

The first harm is that people will tend to accept too readily what persons in positions of authority say. This uncritical acceptance makes us like sheep. We follow blindly. We do not seek truth when we follow blindly. The second harm is to the person holding the position. What happens to us who hold positions of authority is that we start to believe that extra respect is deserved. As we believe this more and more, we lose the ability to pursue truth and seek goodness. We lose the humility that reminds us that we are like everybody else, neither better nor worse.

If we respect people because they are human beings made in the likeness of God, we will receive an enormous amount of respect in return. I deserve respect because I am John Clay. You deserve respect because you are you. To my mind, being a priest has nothing to do with it.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Changing Others

May 29, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Wanting to change other people is almost universal. When we are honest, we admit that we want them to change for the benefit that we receive. Often, however, we fool ourselves and say that we want them to change for their own good.

This is a problem for everyone, but especially for church people like priests. We need people to change, but we say it is for their own good and that we do it for the honor and glory of God. We say it is our duty to do so. Even if the change is for another's good, we delude ourselves when we say this is why we are doing it. The irony is that the more we try to make people change, the more they stay stuck. When we walk with them and don't try to change them, change will happen more often, and it will come from within them and from the grace of God.

Letting go in this way is hard for me. I hope that someday I will be graced to do so.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Seeing Reality

June 5, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We never see reality as it really is. We look at reality through the colored glasses we call our minds. Our minds are colored and distorted by the many experiences we have had. Thinking that we see things as they really are is perhaps our greatest illusion. What we see in our minds is not what is real, but what our minds have made the real out to be. What is in our minds may be more or less what reality is, but it is never exactly the same as reality.

That is why when we say, "This is the way it is," we are in delusion. As we become aware of this, we realize that we always have something to learn about everything. This realization is humbling and valuable. It is especially valuable in religious matters.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Our Idea of God

June 12, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Our idea of God is different from what God really is. Our idea of God is only that—our idea of God. Our ideas of God are helpful, but we must remember how limited they are. Even our church's dogmatic definitions of God are not God. Our church has decided officially that they are helpful concepts of God—and they are. We must remember, however, that they are human concepts expressed in human language.

God is beyond what the definitions can express. When we do not acknowledge that God is beyond our definitions, we are guilty of idolatry. This is the primal sin—making something other than God, God. We do not worship statues, but we often worship our ideas, and we don't even realize that we are doing it. We must stand humbly, expectantly, and in awe before the Mystery who loves us.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Perpetuating Values

June 19, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

A dilemma that parents, teachers, society and church face is how to pass on traditional values in a way that speaks to a new generation. It is a daunting task, and one that requires wisdom and patience. The task is complicated by the fact that the lasting values we learn are always encased in a shell that is made up of the customary and cultural ways of the time in which we live.

When younger people seem to reject our values, it is important to ask ourselves if they are rejecting the kernel or the shell. Our task becomes impossible when we don't realize that the kernel and shell are different. We just keep complaining that they are not living the way we do. In fact, they may accept the deeper value and are only rejecting the shell. When our children become parents, they will face the same problem. They will confuse the kernel with the shell and will not understand the younger generation.

In our church, we face the same challenge. If we are to preserve for ourselves and pass on to others the values that are lasting, we must accept and value change in our cultural and customary way of doing things. This is made easier for us if we put our ultimate faith in God. With faith in God, we do not expect our church to be always wise, good and changeless. The church is us. Our church must change and

develop if the inner values are to be passed on to future generations. When we keep the shell the same, the kernel will ultimately be lost.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Making Radical Changes

June 26, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Revolution is a scary word for me. Revolution always involves a lot of conflict. I would just as soon avoid the conflict. Also, revolutions often end up substituting one set of oppressors for another. In cases like these, there has not truly been a revolution.

True revolution gets to the heart of the problem and makes the change there. Sometimes problems can be resolved by tinkering and rearranging. Sometimes the solution must be radical. That means getting to the root of the problem.

Our addictions demand a radical change. For example, if I am an alcoholic and say, "I won't drink as much, I'll try harder," change will not result. A radical shift or revolution is called for. Alcoholics Anonymous helps us to take that radical redirection.

It is hard for us to acknowledge the root of our personal and societal problems. Until we do, we will never do the radical surgery that is necessary.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Self-righteousness

July 3, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Self-righteousness has always been a problem for me. Because it is so unrecognized by me in my own self, I am bothered by self-righteousness in other people. I think that I am self-righteous because of my deep insecurities and non-acceptance of myself as I am. Being a flawed human being is hard for me to accept. I have the silly notion that I shouldn't be flawed.

I play strange games within myself. Sometimes I am just plain self-righteous. Sometimes I am self-righteous about not being self-righteous. Sometimes I am self-righteous and don't see it. Sometimes I see it and tell myself that I shouldn't be self-righteous. At other times I say to myself, "Who do you think you are—that you think you are the kind of person who shouldn't be self-righteous?" When I get that insight, I congratulate myself on being so humble about my self-righteousness—which, of course, is being self-righteous. Are you getting the picture?

I am gradually being forced to the conclusion that self-righteousness is in my bones and will only be healed by God in the next world. I am also quite self-righteous about that conclusion.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Self-love and Selfishness

July 10, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The more we love and value ourselves, the less selfish we will be. That may sound contradictory, but it is true in my experience.

When we value and love ourselves, we are not so needy. We do not need to make ourselves the center of the world and make other people revolve around us. The wounds we receive that have injured our self-valuing make us selfish. They make us self-centered. We want to dominate others or cling to them, we want praise and admiration, or we hold all our feelings inside us. In all these instances, we get locked in on ourselves in unhealthy ways. This severely limits our capacity for love and compassion. We get frozen in selfishness.

As we begin to love ourselves more, to accept ourselves as we are, the selfishness begins to melt away. This allows us to begin to love others as we love ourselves.

God loves us as we are. God accepts us as we are. As we believe this, our self-love and self-valuing will grow, and compassion will enter our lives. This is the good news that Jesus brought us. Let us begin to believe it.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Pitfalls of Religion

July 17, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Every religion runs the risk of taking itself too seriously. We forget that religion is not valuable in and of itself. Its purpose is to help us be open to experience God and to allow the love that is God to heal, convert, nurture and challenge us. When religion does this, it is extremely valuable.

The temptation for religion is to think that it is holy. It is not holy; it is to help us be open to the Holy. The more seriously religion takes itself, the more it turns the focus away from God and onto itself. In my opinion, when religion turns in on itself, it is much more destructive than atheism. It becomes a substitute for God and thus is an idol. We get into religion as a way of avoiding God.

Some signs that religion has turned in on itself are rigidity, judgmentalism, conformity, need for control, lack of dialogue, not listening, obsession with thinking right and acting right, and inability to laugh at itself.

We will never do away with these unhealthy things completely. We can, however, start to name them for what they are.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Spiritual Humility

July 31, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It will help us to be more spiritually humble if we acknowledge that when we think about God, what we have in our minds is not what God really is. Some ideas of God are more like God than others, but none is close to what God is like. We come closest when we listen to Jesus' stories and imitate his relationship with "Abba." When we use our idea of God as a weapon or to make people think like we do, we are, in my opinion, far removed from what God is.

In my experience, the more God reveals Herself in the depths of our soul, the more compassionate, understanding and tolerant we become. Experience of God is a gift. It is a humbling experience and leads to the realization that nobody is better than anybody else.

I have in my life used my idea of God as a weapon to try to convert people. I am sorry I did that, but I am not surprised that I did.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Two Journeys

August 7, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

There is a map of the two journeys in the book, *The Wild Man's Journey* by Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos. It is a book about male spirituality, but that doesn't mean that it is for men only.

All people have what our society calls feminine and masculine traits. The majority of men lean toward the masculine traits and the majority of women lean toward the feminine traits.

The map shows the journey of men with masculine traits predominating. Men are called to allow their feminine characteristics to come to the surface and influence their lives. Men are not to stop there. They must return to the masculine assertiveness, rationality and boundary-setting. Now, however, the feminine inwardness, receptivity, openness and relationship valuing are integrated. The deep masculine combines in a person the positive qualities of both the feminine and masculine energies.

Women with feminine traits predominating are called to allow their masculine characteristics to come to the surface and influence their lives. Women are not to stop there. They must return to the feminine inwardness, receptivity, openness and relationship valuing. Now, however, the masculine assertiveness, rationality and boundary-setting are integrated. The deep

feminine combines in a person the positive qualities of both the masculine and feminine energies.

When men don't journey to the feminine, they get stuck in the shallow masculine and are overly rational, macho and insensitive. When they do the journey into the feminine and remain there, they get stuck in the shallow feminine which is too inward, too open and into clinging relationships.

When women don't journey into the masculine, they get stuck in the shallow feminine. When they do journey into the masculine and remain there, they get stuck in the shallow masculine.

These journeys are not as neat as the map. Some women start with the masculine. Some men start with the feminine. The first half of the journey is not completed, when the second half starts. The two halves go on simultaneously with emphasis shifting back and forth from one half to the other. There will be as many variations as there are people. The map, however, can be a helpful guideline.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Free Will

August 14, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

“There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it behooves us not to judge the rest of us.”

I think it is true that some people's behavior is better than other people's. Most of the time, however, that just means they are behaving in a manner that society approves of, which may in fact not be better at all.

Even when it is true that one person behaves better than another person, it does not follow that the first person is better. How would the bad-behaving person act if they were put in the good-behaving person's shoes? How would the good-behaving person act if they were put in the bad-behaving person's shoes? We really don't know.

Free will has a mysterious place in God's plan. It is important to make good and constructive choices, but we really don't know what free will's place is in the big picture.

We are in for big surprises when we are all before God at the end of time and see who is where in the pecking order. Perhaps the surprise will be that there is no pecking order at all.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Seeing Things as They Really Are

August 21, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Spirituality is about becoming honest. It is about seeing things as they really are. Resting in the loving arms of God, we see ourselves as flawed and all screwed up, but precious and good underneath it all. We see other people in the same way. We see the whole world in the same light. This leads us to compassion for ourselves, other people and our universe. Compassion draws us to make our world, our communities, our families and ourselves more healthy and life-giving.

Politics is the art by which we as a society work together to make this happen. Spirituality gets distorted and politics get twisted, but when they are functioning properly, they fit well together.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Facing the Truth

August 28, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Looking at ourselves honestly is something we all (there may be a few saintly exceptions) do very imperfectly. We look through colored glasses. Some of us look at ourselves through rose-colored glasses and look at others through gray-colored glasses. Others of us look at ourselves through the gray glasses and at others through the rose ones. To make it more complicated, we switch back and forth depending on what the issue is.

Spiritual growth happens when we are willing to allow God to grace us with an honest look at reality. We resist that very strongly. We don't want to face the truth in ourselves.

It is more important to face the truth in ourselves than in others, because facing the truth in ourselves will allow us to face the truth in others. When we allow this grace of God to work in us, we will see things clearly without being judgmental.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Thinking and Loving

September 11, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The way we think largely determines how we act. In my judgment, bad actions are caused more by our bad thinking than by bad will. If we view our world and people as dangerous and threatening, we will move against others in destructive ways or we will withdraw into a self-protective shell.

In either case, love becomes impossible until we change the way we think. This change is difficult because the way we view our world was largely formed when we were little and impressionable. Change is possible. Some people are loving and nurturing. If we allow ourselves to learn from them, our thinking will change and love becomes possible.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Nourishing Our Souls

September 18, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Most of what we consider progress in our culture is superficial. In running after it, we lose what is important. Our superficial progress is not bad, but it is superficial. It does not nourish the soul. If the soul is not nourished, other things have little value.

We send people to the moon more easily than we learn compassion. We make ever more powerful computers, but do we learn to relate to one another better? The wars in our world only reflect the wars within ourselves. As our world advances technologically, we get more removed from the earthy, common things that speak to our soul.

Soul-nourishing things are all around us, but we usually miss them. Beauty is critical for soul. Pausing to drink in the natural beauty of our earth nourishes soul. Seeing the wonder of God in people (it works more easily with babies) nourishes soul. Music, when it doesn't bombard us, nourishes soul. Being quiet within ourselves, imagining ourselves resting in the love we call God, nourishes soul. A quiet good deed, without wanting any notice or repayment, nourishes soul.

As our world goes faster and becomes more external, we will lose our sanity if we do not nourish our souls.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Accepting Our Humanness

September 25, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Some of our greatest burdens are the ones we put on ourselves. Our egocentric needs are an example of this.

Instead of being satisfied with using our talents as well as we can, we want to be successful. This puts on us the burden of constant striving that is never enough. Instead of accepting that we are ordinary human beings, we think of ourselves as especially good and holy. This puts on us the burden of denying the shadow parts of ourselves. This in turn makes us judgmental and sensitive to everything that is even mildly critical. We are in frequent pain and alienate people. The examples are numerous.

We are ordinary, flawed human beings who sin. That is okay. We are loved by God for who we are—not for some magnificent image that we pretend to be. Spiritual growth is the gradual acceptance of the reality of our humanness.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Final Goal

October 9, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I wonder if we really know where we are going. If we don't, we will one day feel that our life is meaningless. We may pursue good and valuable intermediate goals like career, family and church; but at some point we are likely to ask, "Is this all there is?" We need to pursue intermediate goals, but with the final goal in the back of our minds.

The final goal is—for me—to become a full human being while being held, nurtured and challenged by our loving God. To be a full human being is mostly to become a lover. To do this, I must become more and more honest in seeing myself as I really am and accepting that. I must see all the things in me that separate me from my own self and from other people. I will never reach that goal in my lifetime. I believe that God will bring me to that fulfillment after I die.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Meditation

October 16, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Silence is in short supply for many of us. Most of us are in a hurry. Many of us talk continuously. Many of us hear talk continuously. The TV or radio is on from morning to night. Without silence we will never plumb the depths of our soul; we will remain frazzled and split; we will never rest in our center.

When we allow our minds, hearts and senses to rest quietly, when we allow the deep soul within us to center us, enliven us and create, we call it meditation. When we do it believing that we are in the arms of our loving God, we call it prayer.

I encourage you to start taking two minutes a day (even if you have to go into the bathroom and lock the door) to allow all your systems to shut down. Increase the time as you want to. Sit in a straight chair, lie on your back, do it any way you want—but do it. Learn it by doing. This may sound mysterious, but you won't understand until you do it and the experience follows. Don't give up. It could change your life.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Christian Mission

October 23, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The purpose of the Christian church is to continue the mission of Jesus. That mission is twofold—to announce and help us experience the unconditional love that God has for us, and out of that experience, to learn to love each other, which is the sign that we are loving God.

The structures of our society and church have the potential for helping or hindering that mission. To be valuable to our mission, structures in church and society must be affirming and accepting of people, and must promote justice and provide a certain amount of order. That is why seeking to make and reform structures is part of our mission as church.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Happiness

October 30, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Happiness is something we all want. We make the mistake of trying to get happiness. We think that getting something will make us happy. I will be happy, I think, if I get a new car, if I get a new house, if I get married, if my children are successful, if I get this job.

These things may be okay, but they will not make us happy. Happiness is the fruit of love. It cannot be acquired. I must learn to see myself as I really am, and accept and love myself. I must learn to see others as they really are, and accept and love them. When that happens, I will be happy.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Expectations

November 13, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Our expectations cause us a lot of pain. We expect people to act in a certain way. When they don't, we are upset and angry. We expect to get something. We don't, and we are depressed. We grow up with the unrealistic expectation that people and things should be what we want them to be.

We might ask ourselves the question Why are people and things supposed to be the way we want them to be? Underneath that question is the mistaken belief that we are the creator of the universe. This mistaken belief causes us much pain. It is good to let go of that belief.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Controlling Others

November 20, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We all have “good” reasons for controlling people. It’s for their own good. It’s for the good of the church, the good of the country, the good of the family, the good of the business. Every dictator has “good” reasons for oppressing people. The examples are endless.

Bending people to our will is rationalized by the “good” reasons we tell others and ourselves. I submit that it is all baloney. Our need to control is so great we begin to believe the baloney ourselves. The greatest rationalization is that I am doing it for God.

Ironically, the more we trust God, the less we will need to control. As we trust God more and more, the less need we have to be right, to have things our way, to be in charge.

We need the control because our woundedness makes us unsure of ourselves at a deep level. Control gives us the pretense of security. When we place our trust in God who loves us as we are, we can begin to let go. Letting go relieves us of a terrible burden.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Clinging to People

December 11, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When we cling to things, we lessen our ability to enjoy them. When we cling, we are worried about losing what we have. That fear lessens our joy.

We cling to people and are possessive of them because of our wounds from previous rejections or abandonments. We cling, not because we are bad, but because we expect, at some level, to be abandoned again. Our fear keeps us from enjoying the relationship. Our clinging can push the other away and cause the very thing we are afraid of.

The irony is that only when we allow the other person to go or to stay do we truly have them.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Honesty

December 18, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Honesty is, in my opinion, extremely rare. Most of us do fairly well at saying what we think is true. That kind of honesty is relatively common.

There is a deeper honesty that almost no one has. I don't have it, either. That honesty is being open to what is real and seeing things as they are.

What we usually do is have our minds made up as to what reality is, accept those things that confirm what we already think, and deny the rest. We look through colored glasses. We don't see things as they really are, but only as they seem to be through our colored lenses.

Here is another example. We are in the top room of a tower with a small window on each of the four sides. We look through only one window and tell ourselves that we see everything. We don't look through the other windows because we might have to change our mind. In fact, with our back to the rest of the room we deny that there are any windows besides our own.

This lack of honesty, this blindness, is a major reason why we are stubborn and are able to do very destructive things with great sincerity. We are so convinced of our rightness, that we hurt people and think we are honoring God and truth. We think we are holy, while doing very

unholy things. We are most dangerous when
we are convinced that we are right and good.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

A Christmas Message

December 25, 1994

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Imagine Mary holding baby Jesus in her arms, smiling and loving Him.

Now imagine that we are a little baby and God is holding us in Her arms, smiling and loving us. That could be a helpful way to pray. That is a little image of the even greater depth of God's love for us.

The only thing that God does is love, and that love will never end.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

To Love God, Love Others

January 1, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

“We are all members of one body; when one member suffers, all suffer as one.” We are reminded of this truth by the Apostle Paul in the early years of Christianity. It is a truth that is hard for us to grasp. The prevailing view today is that if it doesn’t hurt me, it is not my concern. We take this disinterested stance, not because we are bad, but because we don’t really see our connection with one another.

When I am unconcerned about what affects other people, I actually hurt myself. We are made in the image of God, who is love. Only to the degree that I become a lover, do I reach the fullness of my humanity. Only to the degree that I am moving toward that fullness, can I be happy. I may have lots of things and pleasures, but I will not have deep happiness. My happiness depends on the giving of myself.

When others are in need and I do not respond to that need in a way that is possible for me, I diminish myself. When I separate myself from some type or segment of human beings, I diminish myself.

The only way to love God is to love people, to love people just because they are human, and not because they are a certain kind of person. That is why when we separate ourselves from

a class of people, we separate ourselves from
our deepest self wherein God lives.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Addiction of Control

January 22, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Our need for control is so great that we use it even when it harms our goals. We recognize our addictions to alcohol and other substances. We seldom see that our need for control is an addiction.

St. Francis de Sales reminds us that we can catch a lot more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a whole barrel full of vinegar.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Feelings of Hate

February 12, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Feelings of hate are natural, human, and give us information about ourselves. When we cling to these feelings, they eat out our insides and destroy us. When I cling to and am absorbed by my feelings of hate, I hurt myself more than I hurt the one I hate.

Feelings of hate are not the same as hating. Feeling hate is wanting to do harm to another. Hating is choosing to do the harm.

We may believe that feeling hate means we are bad. That is not true. Feelings of hate are the natural result of believing that someone is harming us or someone we love. We want to hurt them back. We are all capable of hate. If someone raped and mutilated your little girl, what would you feel toward that person? What would you like to do in return?

It is important to acknowledge that we feel hate and are capable of hate. It is damaging to pretend that we don't have that ugly capability. At some point, by the grace of God, we must let go of the hate. If we don't let go of the hate, we are tied to the person we hate and they greatly influence our lives. Our lives, in a way, are determined by them. In this state, our own human and spiritual growth stagnates and indeed declines.

I find this letting-go extremely difficult. I sometimes am helped when I reflect that I am

the same as the person I hate. They are wounded and twisted like I am. Our wounds may not be identical. Our twistedness may not be exactly the same, but we are not that different. I sin, too. I cannot say that others are greater sinners. Had I walked in their shoes from the moment of conception, I probably would have done what they did. They need the mercy of God. So do I. God loves us both.

These words were easy to write, but are so hard to live.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Faulty Beliefs

February 26, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Many of my problems and frustrations come because I don't change the way I look at things. For example, if I have an underlying belief that people should do things the way I want them to, I will be angry a lot. People will not always do what I want, so I will be upset. I can ask myself, "Why should others act the way I want them to?" They don't have to do that anymore than I have to act the way they want.

Once I change that underlying expectation of mine, I will be much happier and much easier to get along with. Many times what needs changing is not our situations, but our faulty underlying beliefs. This is hard because we learned them when we were young and don't realize that they are faulty.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Ups and Downs of Life

April 9, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The life of Jesus remembered during Holy Week is a symbol of what our lives are like. Our lives are up and down. Some of us have more downs than ups. Others more ups than downs. This is remembered in the events of Palm Sunday through Good Friday.

The part that is difficult to keep in mind is that in the end, God will bring all of us to full growth and happiness. We can experience some of that in this life, but it doesn't become complete until after we die. The resurrection is God telling us that this is true.

Jesus had trouble with this also. With Jesus we say, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" With Jesus we also want to say, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Am I Holy?

April 30, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

One of the silliest questions we can ask ourselves is, "Am I holy?" When I wonder whether or not I am holy, it means that I haven't caught on; I just don't get it.

The fact that I have asked myself that question tells a lot about me. Trying to become holy doesn't work. If I strive to be holy, what I end up with will not be holiness, but likely an ego trip.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Religion and Church

May 7, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When religion and church open us up to God, they are wonderful; when religion and church are ends in themselves, they are destructive.

When we are open to God, we gradually see ourselves more and more honestly. We see the darkness and sin within us. This allows us to grow in compassion for ourselves and to value the beautiful persons we are. When we are open to God, we gradually see other people more and more honestly. We become compassionate toward them in their darkness and sin, and value the beautiful people they are.

When religion and church are ends in themselves, we become zealots. When religion and church open us up to God, we become lovers.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Letting God In

May 21, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When we allow God to enter us, our minds broaden and our hearts deepen. Yet we church people are often narrow-minded and mean-spirited—maybe because we get into religion and church, and not into God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Money's Proper Place

May 28, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Money, money, money. So necessary. So valuable for doing good. And yet, so easily destructive of human values. What place does money have in my life? How does it distort my values? Is money more important than my family? Is money more important to me than justice?

We can be so good in other areas, and yet be blinded by money. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Jesus saw the potential for money to keep us from seeing through God's eyes, from seeing all people as our sisters and brothers.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Helping the Poor

June 4, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I believe that balancing the federal budget is a good idea. I also believe that some of the plans for bringing this about do so at the expense of the poor and vulnerable of our country. Even from a self-interest point of view, this is foolish in the long run. This will intensify the gap between the rich and the poor, and the numbers of the poor and vulnerable will increase. The result will be an increase in unrest and violence.

We need to spend money wisely and eliminate waste. We also need to spend money to help people get on their feet and to help those who are unable to make it on their own.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Healing Our Hate

June 11, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Hate is one of our strongest emotions. It can mobilize us and press us into action. It can fuel us for a lifetime. In a twisted sense, it can give meaning to our life. It results in great and long-lasting deeds, the problem being that they are destructive.

The curious thing about hate is that we hurt ourselves more than we hurt the hated one. Hate poisons our life and turns us into bitter and lonely people. No wonder Jesus told us to love our enemies.

Healing hate is touchy. Hate is of two kinds. The first is the emotion of hate. Under this emotion, we want to hurt someone and to hurt them badly. The thought of causing them pain brings us pleasure. The second kind of hating is in the will. This is choosing to hurt someone. The emotion turns into willful action.

How about the healing? We may be able to choose not to turn our emotions of hate into action, but we are capable of doing this only to a limited degree. As long as the underlying emotion is not healed, harmful actions will always come out from time to time in an obvious or a disguised form.

The emotions must be healed. To do this, we need to acknowledge our feelings of hate. We must admit how dark and vicious they are.

We must find ways to vent the hate in a non-destructive fashion. We must face the source of the hate and do something about it, if possible.

We may face the hated one indirectly by writing an unmailed letter seething with all the wrath, poison and profanity we feel. We may face the hated one directly and confront them with what happened. Sometimes this is advisable and sometimes not.

We open our hearts to God and let out the hating feelings as honestly as we can, believing that God loves us as we are and will help in the healing.

It is important not to walk this terrifying journey alone. We need a trusted and wise friend or counselor. The journey is painful and difficult. Unless we make it, the hated one will continue to control our lives.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Finding Who We Really Are

June 18, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It is so difficult to be honest with ourselves, to be aware of ourselves as we truly are. As wounded people, we build up images of who we think we are. Then we begin to believe they are true. We filter out all the things that say we are not like that image. We only let in those things confirming that the image is true.

It is helpful in forming an accurate awareness of ourselves to listen to those who like us and those who don't. They both have something to say. When we think that we are noble and superior, our image needs to be brought down to earth. When we think we are bad and no good, our image needs to be raised up.

I believe that when we become more aware of ourselves as we really are, we will at the same time see ourselves as good, lovable people who have serious flaws and many ugly things inside. Growth in this awareness is one way to describe the spiritual journey.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Truth and Perception

June 25, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

When I was in school, and for a number of years into my priesthood, I thought that I could see things as they really are. I thought that what was in my mind corresponded to what was outside my mind. This had dangerous consequences. It led me to think that I was right and that other people ought to see things my way. It led me to think that people who disagreed with me were stupid. It led me to think that I could be absolutely certain.

I was fortunate to begin to realize (and this was a slow process) that I didn't have the truth and neither did anybody else. I began to realize that what I had in my mind was not the reality outside. It was the reality as my mind reworked it. Since we all have different minds and different experiences, we all rework reality somewhat differently. I began to realize that I was necessarily biased. The best I could do was to recognize my bias, so that it didn't get too large.

It is essential for those of us who are religious leaders to recognize this. Otherwise, we will speak as if we have absolute truth, and worse yet, we will think that we are doing God's will when we try to impose it on others.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Movie Review of *Priest*

July 2, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I saw the movie *Priest* and it was a great movie. I was moved to tears a number of times. The two main characters were a middle-aged straight priest (Matthew) and a young gay priest (Greg). These two priests made the spiritual journey of facing their demons and shadows. They didn't always do it successfully (I doubt that anyone does), but they did make the journey. This made them down-to-earth, compassionate people.

There were three priests who were minor characters. They did not make the journey of facing their inner shadows. One was a bishop without compassion, who used people to advance his agenda. There was no concern for them as people. A second was an elderly priest turned bitter. The third was the most pitiable. He was late middle-aged. He was ice-cold, unbelievably self-righteous, with a psychological armor around him that allowed no feeling to enter from the outside or to be generated from within.

Facing the darkness within is always a messy business, but without that journey, spiritual growth does not take place. Making the journey is risky. Not making it is even more dangerous.

In a side plot, Greg is told by a fourteen-year-old girl that her father is sexually molesting her. Greg tries to get her to tell her mother or to give him permission to help her. She refuses.

Greg is torn by his choice of either breaking the seal of confession or letting her remain in the abusive situation. This impossible choice tears him apart and makes him wrestle with God.

I have read a few critical comments about *Priest* saying that it was unbalanced and defamed the priesthood. Some of those commenting had not seen the movie. It was not a documentary that is supposed to give a balanced view of the priesthood. It was a movie about priests who made the journey to compassion, and priests who didn't.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Following Jesus

July 16, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We are called to follow truth, not individual people. The essence of being Christian is to believe in Jesus, the historical person who lived almost 2,000 years ago, and to follow him. Other people can be an inspiration to us, but we don't follow them. We follow Jesus.

Truth sometimes comes from places where we least expect it—from broken and wounded people. It is sometimes absent from places where we expect it—from wise and virtuous people.

Early in his life, St. Augustine thought that when a person spoke with eloquence and beauty, what they said was true. To his dismay, he learned that that was not always so. After being disillusioned, he thought that when a person spoke with eloquence and beauty, what they said was false. Again, to his dismay, he learned that *that* was not always so. With that insight, he realized that both truth and falsehood can be spoken in eloquent or faulty ways.

We don't follow our priest, our bishop, our pope, a charismatic leader, a saint, or anyone else. We only follow Jesus. All others will sometimes be a help and sometimes a hindrance. We do not believe in them. We believe in Jesus.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Truth in the Church

July 30, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

In the early days after ordination, I thought that as a priest I should have the answers to all of people's religious questions. I absorbed this attitude from my seminary training. It was commonly thought that the Catholic Church had the answers to everything. As a priest, I merely had to absorb these answers and give them out to people.

Churches love to be right. In this, our church takes a back seat to no one. I used to think that the need to be right was a passion for truth. Only as I started to see all the dark shadows inside myself, did I realize that the need was based on my own insecurity.

I think there is a massive undercurrent of insecurity in our church. I think this is why we preach, teach and cajole, rather than dialogue. Passion for truth involves listening far more than talking. When truth is what we want, we will listen eagerly to the voices of others to catch the truth of what they say. (I hope to be able to do this better than I do now.)

We desperately need intellectual honesty and humility as individuals and as a church.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Sexuality and Spirituality

August 6, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Sexuality and spirituality are intimately related. If one limps, the other limps.

Spiritual growth is the maturing, or integration, of the whole person.

We live in the world as sexual beings. If our sexuality is not integrated, we are not integrated.

We are spirited bodies. We are flesh-and-blood people who seek ultimate meaning.

We are embodied spirits. We seek ultimate meaning living in flesh and blood.

When our sexuality is repressed or distorted, we diminish our ability to love.

When we don't know ourselves sexually, we don't know who we are. By being female and male, we are an image of God.

When men dominate women or women dominate men, we become destructive people.

In our church, we have not yet come to terms with sexuality. This means that our spiritual vision is distorted.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Sexuality of Jesus

August 13, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

In the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews says, “We have a High Priest (Jesus), who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin.” This reminds us that Jesus had the same sexual capacities that we do. It also reminds us that Jesus did not use his sexual powers in ways that were unloving, disrespectful, or irresponsible.

We can be helped to see how we view sexuality by looking at how we feel about the question, Was Jesus ever married? The Scriptures don’t tell us whether He was or wasn’t. They are silent about it. We have a long tradition that assumes that He was never married. My point here is not to challenge the tradition. Jesus very well could have chosen not to marry. My point is, what is our reaction to the possibility that Jesus could have chosen to marry? Do we really believe in our guts that Jesus was fully human? Do we really believe that Jesus was a sexual human being?

When we believe in our guts that Jesus was fully human (He was divine too), it can help our spiritual growth. It can help us to accept and value our sexuality. When our sexuality is shamed, it leads to destructive consequences. We will tend either to get into unhealthy and unloving sexual behavior or to repress our sexuality and become distant and uncompassionate people.

Acceptance of our sexuality is essential for spiritual growth. Jesus embraced his humanness—which included his sexuality. We need to do the same.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Power

August 20, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Power is a wonderful and dangerous thing. When used to help people grow and develop, it is magnificent. When used to bend people to our will, it is destructive. Authority builds people up. Authoritarianism puts people down.

When we seek power to feel good about ourselves, we use it badly. When we are okay within ourselves, we gladly give power away. There is a song that says "Love is something when you give it away, you end up having more." I think something similar could be said about power.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Sex and Spiritual Growth

August 27, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Our church, in spite of its many unhealthy and negative sexual teachings through the centuries, says that making love is sacramental. This means it is one of the ways in which we encounter God. It is one of the ways that God touches us.

If we let this truth penetrate us, we will not be surprised by the connection of sexuality and spiritual growth.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Who We Are

September 3, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Each one of us is a masterpiece from the hand of God. All our wounds and hurts from the time we were conceived have blotched and torn the masterpiece. It may even be hard to see it as it was. That masterpiece is who we are. That is what God sees when She looks at us.

As we begin to see the beautiful precious person we are underneath all the junk, we will be drawn toward healing.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Prejudice

September 10, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

On December 28, 1969, I wrote the following column to the people of Our Lady of the Lake in Mound, Minnesota, where I was pastor at the time. A few weeks ago a lady from that parish sent a copy to me. Here is what I wrote almost 26 years ago:

Dear Parishioners,

Am I a better person, am I a better Christian than I was a year ago? Will I be a better one a year from now? Worse than getting a negative answer to these questions, is not even asking them.

There are a number of things that keep us from growing as Christians. One of these is prejudice. Prejudice is a disease that touches each one of us. We received it from our elders and others, and just as surely pass it on.

The insidious thing about prejudice is that we are usually blind to it. It causes us to act in most un-Christian ways, while we remain quite pleased with ourselves. In fact, a feeling of righteousness could be a good sign that we are prejudiced. Righteousness is a beautiful cloak that covers filth of many descriptions.

The question I should ask myself is not whether I am prejudiced, but rather how am I prejudiced. The deeper the prejudice is, the more difficult it will be to admit it even to myself. I will offer some questions that may

be of some help in uncovering our prejudices.
You can think of many more.

In asking myself these questions, I should concentrate on what kind of feelings these various people produce in me. Don't cheat!
How do I feel about:

A young man with long hair
A soldier in uniform A protester
A Catholic A hippie
The flag A politician
A black man A gay or lesbian person
A Jew A man with a beard
A church official A conscientious objector
A person on welfare A John Birch member
A rich man
A person dressed differently than I like

After I see how I feel, then I can do something about the way I act. There is no moral guilt in any of the repulsive things that I feel. There is moral guilt if I carry out my prejudices or if I refuse to see what they are.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Authentic Sex

September 17, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Sex is meant to grow and develop into an expression of and a fostering of love. That is usually a long and difficult journey, but we are called to make that journey.

The more we are open to being transformed by the love we call God, the more we become people who show that love in our actions. The more we allow God to come into us, the more loving we will be. The more loving we become, the more authentically human we are.

That is why I agree with the statement, It is impossible to have authentic sex except in God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Role of Religion

September 24, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

A danger for churches and religions is to forget that they are only a means to an end. That end is to enable us to become loving, compassionate people. All the teachings, rituals, moral codes and policies are valuable only insofar as they help us become lovers.

We are called to be one with and in God. God is Love, and as we grow in love, we become what God calls us to be. When churches and religions forget this and become ends in themselves, they become useless or worse. They must not forget their purpose—to help people become lovers.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Aggressiveness and Assertiveness

October 8,1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

There is a difference between being aggressive and being assertive.

When I am aggressive, I am acting out of my own insecurity. I attack the other person. I see the other person as a thing to be overcome and knocked out of the way. I may get my way, but my inner true self is diminished. When I put someone down, I damage myself.

When I am assertive, I recognize my value and the other's value as equal. I see the other as a brother or sister. I respect them as I respect myself. I express my opinions and needs honestly and clearly, while realizing that the other is human, too. When I am assertive, my inner true self grows.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Authentic Religion

October 15, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Religion has been a major cause of wars. Religion is meant to help us become open, to allow God to enter us and change us into the person God wants us to be. When this is happening we are developing and growing. As we grow, our religious ideas will change and grow. When religion is authentic it is always evolving, and so are we.

Religion easily becomes static. We get stuck in the same religious notions year after year. When this happens, we are threatened by religious ideas that call us to change. Then we want to make other people think as we do or we fight them. We fight with the idea that we are doing it for God or Truth. The reality is that we are resisting being open to Truth and are resisting the invitation of God to grow.

Religion can be a blessing or a curse.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay

Religion vs. religion

October 22, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Religion with a capital "R" is the experience that we belong in the universe, that we are connected to God and to all the people and things that God has made. We are loved by God and called to share that love with ourselves and everyone and everything else. The *Religious* experience is that all reality is embraced by the compassion of God.

What *religions with a small "r"* means is thinking about the *Religious* experience, living it out in daily life and celebrating it. These *religions* are essential to making the experience effective in our world.

What easily happens is that we never had, or have lost, the *Religious* experience, but continue to be active in a *religion*. Then *religion* becomes empty and legalistic. It does not give life, but rather destroys it.

I think *religions* are a means to an end. They are authentic only insofar as they are the outflowing of the *Religious* experience.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Need To Be Quiet

November 12, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I feel uncomfortable when I don't have my watch on. I am caught in the addiction of hurry. This is very common in our country today. Some of this is inevitable in our culture.

What would be your reaction if I didn't show up—or was very late—for funerals, weddings, masses and appointments? Our parish would become chaotic. When there are a lot of people to be coordinated, showing up—and on time—is essential. However, there is a price.

If our inner life is to deepen, we need time and quiet to reflect, meditate, savor, enjoy, relax, do nothing. Just be. We will drink in the meaning of life, people, and the world around us only by slowing down.

Our soul needs quiet as well as activity. We need the rhythm of being active and being quiet, just as we need to be up and to sleep. When we love, we are sometimes doing and sometimes just being.

Constant activity means doing more and more, while missing the meaning and depth of life. Constant activity keeps us from knowing and appreciating who we really are, who others are, and who God is.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Reality

December 17, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

At times there are bitter realities that we have to accept. We don't want to accept them, but we must if we are not to be eaten up inside with anger and resentment.

It helps us if we believe that God is with us and if we trust in God's love. Sometimes, we can see no answer; all we can do is trust. Hard?—yes. Necessary?—yes. Pleasant?—no.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Message of Jesus' Birth

December 24, 1995

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Christmas reminds us that God is so much in love with us that She wants to share the life we live. That love results in Jesus. God takes our wounds, hurts, sins, rejections—everything, into Herself to make us whole. That is Jesus. God takes no offense—God just loves us.

As we are graced by God to let go of our resentments, hates and grudges, we become open for God's love to grow in us. Before we can let go, we must feel, acknowledge and accept the anger and hate we feel. At some point, however, we must let go of it for our own well-being.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Religion & Politics

February 4, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Some people say that religion and politics don't mix. If by this they mean that the government should not sponsor or favor a religion, I would agree. If by this they mean that spiritual values should not be a part of politics, I would disagree.

Spirituality is living out the religious experience that we are all connected with God, with one another and with our world. Compassion flows from this experience, and we appreciate the value of people and other creatures. We appreciate the dignity of everyone and the need to live together as compassionate people. This means we want to make this a good world for everyone.

Politics is the art of making a society that is healthy for everyone, a society that makes it easier to lead good compassionate lives, a society that respects our world so that all may enjoy its resources. Politics is making concrete the values of spirituality.

Spirituality and politics are interwoven. When spiritual values are lost, politics suffers. When politics does not implement spiritual values, society becomes destructive. One does not have to believe in God to have these values. We can, in a sense, believe in God and not have them. All who share these values can be partners in politics.

Religion gets a bad name when the religious experience of compassion is lost or becomes secondary. Politics gets a bad name when it does not foster a compassionate society.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

On Illness

March 3, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The way we look at things has a lot more to do with being happy, than with the way things are. When we are sick, we may look at it as terrible. We are missing so much; there's so much we should be doing; we moan about how sick we feel and how much pain we have. This is common—I do it, too. We not only have to bear the physical illness, but we have made ourselves irritable and depressed.

On the other hand, we might see the sickness as a sign to slow down, a time to let our body recuperate, a time to let go. We will still have our physical problems (though they probably will be fewer), but we won't be adding all the emotional turmoil on top of it.

I was just thinking... it's a lot easier to think that way when I am well, than when I am sick. I've got a long way to go.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Accepting the Way Things Are

March 10, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We need to learn when to challenge and when to accept. If we are a person who believes that we can always make things be the way we want them to be, we must learn how to go with the flow. However, this belief is partially good.

There are injustices that need to be challenged, relationships that need mending; our right to be who we are needs to be asserted. These are ego-centered ways of living that need to be balanced by accepting that we must let go and let God.

Sometimes, floating downstream will get us to our destination; swimming against the current only brings frustration. We must learn to adapt to the power of life.

Smile God Loves You.

Father Clay

Made in the Image of God

March 24, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It is our beautiful and noble calling to become plain, ordinary people. As we become plain and ordinary, we become compassionate and loving. We accept our humanness with its beauty and ugliness, its virtue and sin.

In God's loving embrace, we become who we are meant to be. We usually think of ourselves as more than we are or less than we are. It is so difficult to see ourselves as we truly are. Being ordinary is beautiful, because being human is the image of God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Compassion

April 14, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

God looks at us with gentle compassion. It is essential that we learn to look at ourselves in the same way. Once we look at our wounded, flawed, beautiful self with gentle compassion, we will look at others with gentle compassion.

Compassion is extremely powerful. Compassion brings to us and others spiritual, emotional, and sometimes physical healing. Growing in compassion is the only ultimate task that we have. Everything else means little.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Our Shadows

April 28, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Every human person has a shadow. There are parts of ourselves that we don't want to look at. Our clever minds hide them from us so we don't even know they are there. To become a healthy, compassionate person, I must become aware of those hidden parts. Otherwise, I will act destructively out of my unrecognized traits.

Institutions and nations have shadows, too. As a nation we must see our national shadow or we will act destructively toward our own people, as well as toward other peoples.

If I love myself, I will begin to look into the shadow I carry. If I love my country, I will look into our national shadow.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

An “Honest” Face

May 5, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

For the most part, when we were little we tended to be ourselves and didn't put on a special face for other people. There is a certain charm and honesty in this.

As we grew older, we saw people's reactions to what we did and said. This led us to show what we wanted them to see and hide what we didn't want them to know. We learned to put on a face for the world. Some of this is necessary to fit into society, but we usually make the face too hard and too permanent. The charm and honesty is lost.

As we grow older, there is once again the opportunity to let our real face shine through as when we were children. Perhaps this is what Jesus was talking about when He said that we must become like little children, if we are to enter the kingdom of God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Materialism

May 12, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Some of us in the U.S. don't have enough to eat or a decent place to live. Some of us have more than enough. Our culture tells us that having things is the most important thing in life. It is difficult for us not to fall victim to the voices of culture. The cultural voice gets into me and, I would guess, into about everyone.

How much of our time and energy is put into having more and more things? Let us ask ourselves, "What does it mean to be successful in the United States?"

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Judgments

May 19, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Jesus tells us not to judge. Do any of us follow that?

In my opinion, we can judge actions with some accuracy. Some behaviors are obviously destructive, some are mixed, and some are obviously constructive. We need to make judgments about behaviors, while at the same time realizing that we don't understand all or even most of what is going on inside the person.

It is also my opinion that we cannot judge the goodness or badness of a person. Only God can read the depths of the heart. When we get to heaven, I believe that we are going to be surprised at how inaccurate our judgments have been.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Seeing Ourselves Truthfully

May 26, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

An essential component of the spiritual journey is honesty—the ability to see things as they really are. We must see ourselves as we really are. When we do this, we will see the rest of reality more clearly. Seeing ourselves truthfully is a great and unusual gift. God offers that gift to us, but we almost always refuse it.

When I see all those “terrible” people out there, it is a sign that I don’t know myself. When I know myself, I will see terrible things in our world, but I will see them in me. I will see that those “awful” people out there are just like me. I will understand that they—and I—are all precious to God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Left vs. Right

June 2, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Conservatives and liberals usually fight. We often fight with self-righteous fervor. We are convinced that we are right and the others are wrong. We each have a piece of the truth and blindly believe that it is the whole truth.

In our church, conservatives say that we must be about changing hearts and that the transformation of society will follow. Liberals say we must change the structures of our society to have transformation. Both are half right and half wrong. To bring about the kingdom of God, both are necessary.

When we look at each other as enemies, we hinder the coming of the kingdom. We must, instead, listen to each other and learn. Whenever I think of the other side as an enemy, I am caught in a blindness that is destructive.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Changing Opinions

June 9, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Once we form a way of looking at things, it is very difficult to change. We bend the facts to fit the way we think.

If I think that the Catholic church is right and the Lutheran church is wrong, I will turn myself inside out to keep from changing my point of view. I will not look at the Catholic church honestly. I will explain away the defects in the Catholic church in order not to change the way I think. I will focus on the defects in the Lutheran Church to prove that my thinking is right.

We are more stubbornly dishonest about religion than anything else. Politics is a close second.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Purpose of Evil

June 23, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The presence of evil in a world made by an all-good God is puzzling at best. I can see the purpose of some evil. I know that my own wounds and sins have been a great blessing for me. I think that my spirituality would be more superficial without them. While they were terribly distressing at the time, and I saw no good in them, I am now grateful for them. My sins have been a much greater grace than my virtues.

When it comes to the great evils, like millions of people slaughtered and countless children starving to death, I can make no sense out of it. I can only trust that God is there and that it will bring goodness. I have nothing rational to hang onto. I can only trust God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Narrow-Mindedness

June 30, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Narrow-mindedness is almost universal. I have a big bunch of it myself; this is why it bothers me when I see it in other people. Narrow-mindedness is behind prejudice, judgmental attitudes, violence and lack of communication.

Behind our narrow-mindedness is fear that is based on our own bad feelings about ourselves. We dare not listen to other people who think differently than we do. Their ideas and visions challenge our own and we fear that we will lose who we are if we are not right. We are narrow-minded not because we are bad, but because we are scared.

When we are able to listen to and really hear what is going on inside other people, we connect with them. We begin to lose our prejudices, turn judgments into compassion, grow less violent. As compassion grows, we become able to be intimate and have healthy relationships. I am scared; you are scared. No wonder we have so much trouble with one another.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

If You Think You're Holy...

July 14, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

As I was reflecting on the idea of holiness, it came to me... it would be impossible for holy persons to think of themselves as holy.

I think holiness includes the realization that we aren't any different from anybody else. Something for you to think about.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Our Commonness

July 21, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It is part of the human condition to tend to classify people into various categories—desirable or undesirable, good or bad, worthwhile or not worthwhile. It is difficult for us to see through all the externals to the image of God that is in all of us.

As we know ourselves more deeply, these categories break down; we see the commonness of all human beings. I am reminded of the saying, “There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it behooves us not to judge the rest of us.”

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

How God Sees Us

July 28, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

“Waking up” in the Eastern religions is similar to what we Christians mean by entering the reign of God. Entering the reign of God is seeing things through God’s eyes. This is a slow, difficult process. It also involves a gradual change in our lives as a result of waking up. The two aspects of this process are knowing and loving.

I obviously can see things only darkly. This, however, is how I see God seeing us. We are fundamentally good—and wounded. God calls us to believe in that goodness and grow. We are called to love ourselves. God sees other people just as he sees us, fundamentally good—and wounded. We are all connected to each other, not only to members of our family, but to the whole human race.

As we heal and the love that is God grows in us, our compassion broadens. This journey takes a lifetime and beyond. We are where we are. Even one step in the right direction is reason for celebration.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

What's Good for Us

August 11, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It seems that our prayers are not always answered. I think this is partly because God wants what is good for us and we often want things that are not good for us, at least not in the long run.

We don't want to get sick. There are times when sickness can bring an inner conversion that makes us better people than we would have been if we had remained healthy. When we are addicted to something, we want to keep our lives manageable, while we keep up our destructive behavior. We don't want to hit bottom, but it may be our salvation.

It is really a blessing that God doesn't do everything we want.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Finding God

August 18, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I believe that one of the prime differences between Protestantism and Catholicism is the emphasis we place on finding God in all of creation. That is the sacramental principle. We believe that God is present in every particle of the universe. Furthermore, we can find God there.

The unfolding of the universe from the fire ball (the big bang) is a magnificent story. It fills us with wonder and awe. It makes us humble. It draws us to worship the powerful love behind it.

We are not neglecting the Scriptures today. (Thanks be to God!) We are neglecting God's revelation in the story of the universe.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Spiritual Growth

August 25, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we want. Prayer is the gradual opening of ourselves to God, so that God may work in us as God chooses.

Spiritual growth is not the result of great effort. It is the result of letting God's love show us new ways of looking at things, and being willing to follow (imperfectly, of course) the new visions.

The Holy Spirit is God/Love dwelling in us, forgiving us, healing us, bringing us courage and strength, opening our minds and hearts. Our job is to give the Spirit permission to work in us any way that the Spirit chooses. That is why we call it spirituality—God's Spirit touching our spirit.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Our Private Hell

September 1, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Our minds help us get closer to the truth. They also keep us from the truth. Our minds not only let new information in, they also keep new information out.

The human tendency is to hold on to old beliefs and thoughts. Our minds then act like filters. They let in information that bolsters what we already believe, and keep out information that challenges our beliefs. The result is that we get stuck. We don't change; we don't grow. Our minds become narrow and our hearts become stony. We hurt inside (even though we try to deny it), and out of our own pain we hurt other people. This keeps others at a distance, and the pain increases.

Beneath the exterior we show to other people, we are scared to death. We are locked in our own private hell. In the midst of this private hell, we are loved by God. We just need to accept and believe it—that love will teach us our value and our goodness, that love will help bind up the wounds and make us whole. Let the love of God come in.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Inner Peace

September 8, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

For many of us, life is fast. We run all the time. We never get to know who we are. We are frazzled. There is no peace.

We need quiet to become aware of what is going on inside of us. In fact, we often keep busy so we don't have to look at what is inside of us. Some of what is inside is ugly.

If we take the time to become aware of all that is inside us—the beautiful and the ugly—and accept it without judgment and give it to God, we will become real, at peace, and grow in wholeness.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

God Brings Good Out of Evil

September 15, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Finding God in the midst of tragedies and other evils is a challenge. I believe (but I do not always understand) that God brings good out of evil. There must be a purpose for evil in the big picture.

I can make sense out of the ordinary evils. My experience that my sins have been a greater grace than my virtues tells me that. I cannot make sense out of the horrendous catastrophes. I can only trust that the Love we name God is working with wisdom and compassion. I have to trust without seeing.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Religious Leaders

September 22, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

There are two common attitudes toward religious leaders. Some of us think that religious leaders have all the answers. Some of us think that they know nothing.

This is the way I see it. Religious leaders are fellow pilgrims on the same spiritual journey as everybody else. We are not wiser or better than others on the journey. Along the way, we may or may not have picked up some wisdom. If we have picked up some wisdom, it can be helpful to others on the journey. If it is helpful, we use some of it as a guide on our journey.

Titles mean nothing. Wisdom means a lot.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Fear as Blessing

September 29, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I believe that fear is behind much of our foolish and destructive behavior. Fear is my own greatest flaw. I used to be afraid of God. That led to crazy thinking and action.

I fear conflict and that people won't like me. I fear pain and loss of reputation. I fear failure and not measuring up. I fear authority and anger. My fear is the result of my childhood wounds. These wounds are persistent and heal so slowly.

Fear has made my life much more difficult. It has also made me more understanding and compassionate. As I look back, I believe that in the long run, the curse of fear has been a blessing for me.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Grieving

October 13, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Grieving loss is a natural human process that enables us to heal the wound the loss has caused. Grieving helps our recovery.

Many of us, however, resist the grieving process. This is understandable, because grieving includes feeling the pain the loss has caused. We want to run away from the pain or seal it off. If people close to us are resisting feeling the pain, they will usually want us not to show our grief, because that brings them too close to their pain. When we don't grieve, the pain stays covered up inside of us and causes physical, emotional and spiritual damage.

We fool ourselves when we think we can avoid the pain and just get on with our lives. When we feel the pain, we need to cry. We need a place that is safe to cry. We need people who will just be with us and let us cry. The well-intentioned advice to buck up and be strong is damaging and interferes with the healing process.

We need people who will love us and be there for us. We need rituals to help us grieve. That is why wakes, funerals, burials and visiting the grave are so valuable. Severe loss is not only felt at death, but on other occasions such as the breakup of an important relationship or

a deep rejection. We need a ritual for these losses also.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Finding Peace

October 20, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We must first be at peace with ourselves, if we are to help others be at peace. If we grew up with people who were peaceful, we had a good head start.

Unfortunately, many of us grew up in an atmosphere of anger, fear and sometimes violence. This makes finding peace more difficult. To receive this peace, we must discover the good in the depths of our soul. We must look at and accept the darkness, sin and violence within us. We must acknowledge them, face them, and at the same time realize that they do not change the goodness deep within us.

It helps to say this to God and to experience that God is loving us. It also is valuable to say it to another human being who understands and cares.

Peace does not mean that we will have no trials. It does mean that there is calm underneath it all. Peace is like the depths of the ocean that remain calm in the midst of the storm.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Distraction of Money

October 27, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Money is not bad, but it is dangerous. People who are rich are not bad, but are in a vulnerable position. It is easy to become attached to money.

The more we are attached to anything, the more we lose sight of what is important. Attachment draws us away from love, friendship, enjoying simple things, generosity, inner peace—all of the things that bring us true happiness. Money is only one of the things to which we can become addicted.

Let us look at what pulls us strongly and has the power to dominate our life. Let us give it to God. Together we can be freed from the chains that pull us down and hold us fast.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Wind Beneath Our Wings

November 3, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

God is the wind beneath our wings. I am reminded of an eagle soaring on the currents of the wind. Graceful, effortless, reaching great heights.

God's love is like the wind. If we rest in it and let it have its way with us, we will receive much spiritual growth. We resist letting go. We fight, fret and complain. Hence, we remain stuck on the ground.

We resist because letting the love in to nourish us means gradually letting go of the addictions, compulsions and hates that we cling to. They destroy us, but we are stubborn about letting go. I have partially let go of a number of things, but they are still there. The pull has not vanished.

Let us put all the things that resist God's love in the hands of that love and allow it to heal us. If we can make only a tiny step, that is okay. We have our whole life and afterlife for Love to make us whole.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Everyone Is Beautiful

November 10, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Everyone is beautiful. I believe in my heart that this is true. In practice I am not able to live out that belief. There are reasons why I don't.

I look too much at the externals of physical looks and personalities. I need to realize that that is not who people are. Looks and personality influence me. That is okay to a small degree, but it is much more important that I move quickly beyond them to the inner person who is beautifully made in God's image.

I easily like or dislike some people. That is because they fit or don't fit with my own (mostly unconscious) needs. My likes and dislikes say nothing about the beauty of another person.

I am a beautiful and good person. That has little to do with my behavior or what I do. I am beautiful and good because I came from the loving hand of God. The more I believe that, the more I will realize that everyone else is beautiful and good, too.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Accepting Suffering

November 24, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Suffering can be an occasion of growth or decay. When we accept and embrace it, suffering can open our minds and hearts. We begin to see things in their proper perspective. We put first things first.

As we see things more clearly, we grow in compassion. We realize that loving is the only way to live. We begin to desire the good and happiness of ourselves and others. We see suffering, even though it still hurts, as a blessing. When we rail against our suffering, we become narrow, bitter and isolated. We poison our soul.

Joy is not the absence of suffering, but the presence of God. I can write this easily now—because I am not suffering. When I am suffering, I don't do it very well.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

“The Truth”

December 1, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We are never so ignorant as when we think we have the truth. When we think we have the truth, we close our minds. We let in only what agrees with what we already think.

We come closer to the truth when we search with open minds and humbly admit how little we know. To be a truth-seeker is to have more questions than answers.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Nothing To Fear

December 15, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Fear has a place in our lives. It encourages us to get away from things that could damage us. However, many of our problems are caused by fear. For many of us, myself included, fear gets overblown and hurts rather than helps us. For example, if we have learned to fear God, we will want to run away from God or deny God. Running away is impossible. Therefore, we will either deny God or live under the crushing weight of fear.

If we live in terror, we cannot grow into compassionate people. If we deny God, we miss the strength and security that come from friendship with God. God only loves us. There is nothing to fear.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Slowing Down

December 22, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

If we didn't have clocks, life would not be as efficient and would perhaps be impossible in our society. Yet life without clocks might be more healthy. This is not going to happen, but I believe there is something for us to learn here.

Many of us need to slow down. We run until we are frazzled. We are so busy we don't take the time for quiet prayer. We are doing so much, that we forget the people most important to us.

Advent is an opportunity for us to reflect on our busyness and ask what is important in our lives.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Judging Others

December 29, 1996

Dear People Whom God Loves,

As I get older, it becomes clearer to me how judgmental I am. It also becomes clearer how similar all human beings are.

It is true that there are great differences in our behaviors, but I wonder how much different we are underneath. The behaviors of Mother Teresa and a mass-murderer are very different. I believe that we cannot tell why that is, that we cannot say the reason is that Mother Teresa is a better person. It might be true, but we can't really know that.

We all come from the hand of God. Why some turn out "better" than others is a mystery. We might say that free will is the reason. I believe that free will is a factor, but I also believe that it is a very small part of the whole picture. I believe that we are in for some great surprises when we die.

Karl Rahner, the premier Catholic theologian of this century, says that we cannot say that everyone goes to heaven, but we can certainly hope it is true. There are so many unknowns, that we are closer to the truth when we judge only behaviors and not persons.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Healthy Self-Esteem

January 5, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

In our imperfect world, mild competition is valuable for those of us who have more talent than others. It is valuable by building up our ego strength. For the rest of us it is a negative. Ego strength, we sometimes forget, is something we must let go of as we mature. If we don't let go, we do not become fully adult. The esteem we have from our sense of ego must give way to esteem from our sense of self.

Esteem that comes from ego is a comparison of ourselves to others. We see ourselves as being more talented, more wealthy, more holy than they are. This is shallow self-esteem that leaves us broken and empty when it falls apart, as it eventually will.

Esteem that comes from self is fostered by our being loved and accepted for ourselves, and not for what we do. At some point, we then love and accept ourselves instead of what we do. As this happens, we become aware of our darkness, sins and flaws, yet still realize our basic goodness. We live out of that self as best we can, and it makes no difference how we compare to others.

When we have received little love and acceptance from others, our journey is more difficult, but still possible. When we realize

that we are loved by God just as we are,
self-love and acceptance gradually form within
us.

Everyone is loved by God in this way. The
grace is to experience that this is true. Keep
wanting that and it will happen.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Justice and Empathy

February 9, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

“I love humanity—it’s people I can’t stand.” This old saying rings true for me. It is essential that we work for justice, changing the unjust systems in our church and society that oppress people. Without this change, we will not do much to empower people and give them hope.

At the same time, there is something grounding about seeing an individual person and feeling within ourselves what is going on in their heart, feeling their pain and joy as we feel our own. We often don’t really see our own loved ones in this way, much less people not close to us. Without getting sucked into people’s unhealthy needs, we are called to feel with them.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Guilt: Negative and Positive

March 2, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Guilt is essential to spiritual growth. Guilt stunts spiritual growth. These two sentences seem contradictory, until we understand that there are two kinds of guilt.

Negative guilt overwhelms us. It makes us feel that we are bad, worthless and rotten. It keeps us stuck and closes us to the God/Love that wants to enter us and help us grow spiritually. Negative guilt keeps us from learning from our mistakes. It is the enemy of spirituality. Though it is hard, we must learn to let it go and not wallow in it. With negative guilt, we have self-hate.

Positive guilt allows us to see our limitations, our sins, and how we often miss the mark. It brings sadness and sorrow at the realization that we have harmed ourselves and others. We realize that we have not lived up to what we are called to be. It also brings a willingness to allow the love that is God to enter into us and help us live better. With positive guilt, we have self-love.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Letting Go of Anger

March 30, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Anger and vengeance are normal human emotions. It is unwise for us to hold onto them for too long. We need for our own sake to let them go. When we have suffered abuse, especially at an early age, it may take a long time.

Eventually, we must let the anger and vengeance go, so that they do not poison our lives. We may not be able to do that alone. We are not alone. God is with us. It also helps to have a human person with whom you can process your thoughts and feelings.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Self-Awareness

April 12, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I think that seeing ourselves as we really are is the greatest challenge in the spiritual journey. It is ancient in our tradition that self-knowledge is essential to spiritual growth.

Self-knowledge is difficult because we are blind to what we really are. We form images of what we think we are. We form these images from experiences of our lives. These images are almost always false. We either think too highly of ourselves or not highly enough.

As our self-image gradually becomes more accurate, we see our beauty and ugliness and embrace them both. We realize that we are neither higher nor lower than others.

Only as we see ourselves as we really are, can we love ourselves. Before that, we only love what we think we are. God loves us for ourselves just as we are. As our journey proceeds, our love blends with God's and we see ourselves and others through the eyes of God's love.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Spiritual Growth

April 20, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Trying hard to be good is not a path to holiness. We see what we think is bad in us and then we will to change it. I suggest that does not work—for two reasons. First, some of what we think is bad will have a lot of good in it. Secondly, willpower effects only superficial change. The depths of ourselves are left unchanged.

I suggest that instead of judging ourselves, we face what we are doing and look at the effects of our actions on other people and ourselves. To face some ugly realities and at the same time not beat ourselves up, that is acceptance of ourselves.

Next, we invite the love that is God to enter into our being, work in us and change us in whatever way the love chooses. We leave ourselves open.

This is the journey of spiritual growth. We can't will to become good, but we can choose to make the journey that will bring the gift of holiness.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

We Are Ordinary

April 27, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Spiritual growth depends largely on accepting the fact that we are human. This means accepting the good and the bad, the dark and the light, the beautiful and the ugly. This is extremely difficult for us. We either think of ourselves as more than human or less than human. We resist looking reality in the face. We react to our wounded upbringing by thinking that we are better than others or worse than others.

As priests, we were taught that the character imprinted in us when we were ordained made us special among God's people. In our woundedness, that message could easily become destructive. It could alienate us from ourselves and the people we serve. It could seriously interfere with being a good priest.

Being ordinary is essential to good ministry to people. Without the realization that we are ordinary, we cannot be compassionate. The best we can do is to be paternalistic. Whatever is in humanness is in me. It has taken me a lifetime to learn this.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Beliefs

May 4, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Beliefs are wonderful things. They point to the religious experiences that have been handed down to us. For us Christians, they point to the experience that Jesus had of God, people and all creation. The Scriptures testify to the way the early Christians experienced Jesus' experience. Later traditions continue the process. The Scriptures and later traditions can be a doorway through which we enter the experience that resembles the religious experience of Jesus.

Beliefs are terrible things. A better way to put it is to say that beliefs easily become terrible things. They become terrible when we no longer realize that they are doorways. We begin to think of them as valuable in themselves. Once we think of them this way, we no longer walk through them to discover the loving God who desperately wants a love relationship with us. That relationship with God moves us into a love relationship with more and more people until it includes everyone and all the creatures God made.

Beliefs are necessary, but we worship God—not the beliefs.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Spiritual Journey

May 11, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Getting to heaven means becoming loving people. This is a long, slow, difficult journey with many ups and downs. We think that we are more than we are, or we think that we are less than we are. Both egocentric evaluations make it difficult to love. We get into addictive habits that cause self-hate and other-hate. This makes loving difficult. We run after fame and fortune. This makes loving difficult. We think of God as judge and taskmaster. This makes us narrow and scared, and interferes with loving. It is no wonder that growth in love is such a long, painful journey.

Almost all of us die without the journey being complete. God does not abandon us, but helps us lovingly look at ourselves and let go of the chains that bind us. The name we give to this is purgatory. God sticks with us until we become the lovers God has called each one of us to be. The name we give to this is heaven.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Running Away

May 18, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We all run away. We run away from ourselves. We are afraid of what is in us. The fear that causes us to run away interferes with our spiritual growth.

We fear loneliness. We fear our addictions. We fear the dark, socially unacceptable part of us. We fear intimacy. We fear our insecurity. We fear the dark, shameful things we have done. We fear being poor. We fear rejection. We fear that what we are is bad. We fear losing our reputation. We fear sickness. The list is long. We even fear our fear.

All the things we fear will lead to our spiritual growth, if only we realize that. We must face our fears and stop running away. Knowing that we are held and loved by God, and another human being if possible, helps us feel our fears. Let us look slowly and piece by piece at what we fear, until we look it straight in the face. This will stop our running away, and spiritual growth will take place.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

God's Unconditional Love

June 1, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The Good News is that we are loved by God. It is a gift; it is free; we can't earn it; we don't have to earn it. The Scriptures tell us that God is Love. The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is loving relationships. Jesus told us this in the parable of the compassionate father. The father loved and accepted the prodigal son who wasted his inheritance in a wild and sinful life. The father loved and accepted the older son who was bitter and self-righteous. Both sons sinned badly, but this did not change the father's love. The news is so good that we don't believe it. We think that there must be a catch. We find it hard to believe that we are loved by God just for being ourselves.

There are, of course, consequences to our actions. If I punch someone in the nose, I may get hit back twice as hard. If I get drunk Saturday night, I will have a hangover Sunday morning. If I am dishonest, no one will trust me. If I push people aside, I will end up lonely. The more I grow in compassion, generosity, justice and love, the happier I will be. There are indeed consequences to our actions.

The mistake we make is believing that God's love, mercy, compassion and friendship depend on how we act. Our love as humans is usually conditional. God's never is.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

“God-Belief” in Politics

June 15, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I believe that God belongs in politics. By that I mean that the human values we cherish need to be an integral part of political decisions. Sometimes atheists hold these values more dearly than those of us who believe in God. The problem is that while God is who God is, our ideas of God are vastly different. That is why merely saying that my position follows from my belief in God, should carry no weight in political discussions.

I suggest a few guidelines for determining whether or not our “God-belief” should carry weight in political discussions:

1. Do we respect those with whom we disagree?
2. Do we listen to them?
3. Will this decision better humanity, our earth and our universe?
4. Do we have input from the powerless and voiceless?
5. How does this decision affect the most vulnerable?
6. Add your own guidelines.

The way we think about God says more about us than it does about God.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Healthy Self-Doubt

June 22, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

“God is on our side!” is a frequent cry. The unspoken message is that God is not on the other side. I would suggest that God is on everybody’s side. At the same time, I don’t think that God is in favor of all the actions of either side. I get nervous when someone or some group invokes the name of God.

I remember in World War II that both sides prayed for victory. I think that we invoke God to try to justify what we are doing. We very easily are deceived. I would suggest, further, that the more certain we are that God is on our side and against the other, the more likely it is that we are deceived.

Absolute certainty usually means that we haven’t seen the whole picture. Self-righteousness becomes more difficult when we see all sides. Healthy self-doubt is very valuable.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Revenge

June 29, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The jury's decision that Timothy McVeigh should be killed for his crime set me to thinking. Our cultural and personal mindsets easily cloud and mask what we are doing.

Our culture tells us that it is morally good to have our government (acting in our name) kill a criminal for a terrible crime. When our culture has a certain way of looking at things, we tend to see it that way without reflecting. It masks the fact that we are killing a human being. Society could be protected by life imprisonment without parole, so something more is behind our need to kill the criminal.

We also have a personal need for revenge. I feel revenge. I think every (or nearly every) human being has vengeful feelings. It is the blood lust that has come down from our ancestors. Vengeful feelings make us want to hurt, torture and kill. That is an ugly emotion. It is also very human. Killing a criminal allows us to give expression to our feelings of revenge and at the same time feel righteous. Our righteous feelings mask the fact that we are killing a human being.

The killing called abortion also has cultural and personal mindsets. The easy access to abortion and its prevalence give cultural approval to the killing. While pinning down the moment when the fetus is a human being is much debated (it seems clear to me that a

human being is present long, long before birth), the hiddenness of the baby and the cultural approval mask the fact that we are killing a human being.

These thoughts of mine are hard and disturbing. They are the way I think. I have no quarrel with anyone who disagrees with me. I would sit down with compassion and understanding with any juror who voted for the death penalty. I have sat down and will continue to sit down with compassion and understanding with anyone who has had an abortion. Seeing my own frailties and darkness makes it impossible to do otherwise. All of us on the human journey are very much the same.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Spiritual and Political Truths

July 13, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

The political left and right each have part of the truth and refuse to listen to the truth of the opposition. That is why we seldom improve our society. A spiritual vision cannot coincide with either the left or right. It must go deeper and thereby include the truth of both and the truth that neither can see.

For example, a deeper vision will see the need for police to protect society and at the same time see that unless we address the poverty and racism built into our society, police protection will be no answer. The still deeper truth is that all members of our society (including our outcasts and have-nots) deserve respect as human beings who bear the image of God.

When we find ourselves loyally following the right or the left, we may be sure that we are not speaking for God who loves us all equally and loves every part of the world and universe.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

The Universality of God

July 20, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

We are blessed to have the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures trace the religious struggles of the Jews and their attempt to know God and what God wanted of them. The Christian Scriptures continue this search, focusing on Jesus who for us is the ultimate revelation of God. Without the Bible, we would be immeasurably poorer religiously.

What we forget is that the Jewish/Christian story fits into the larger story of the universe. The Jewish/Christian story unfolds the dignity of people. We are made in the image of God. This focus on people is good, but we easily lose sight of the broader truth that the whole universe is from God and is sacred. I see evidence of this in the fact that we practice our religion with almost total unawareness of how we pollute and damage our earth.

We must listen to what God reveals not only in the Bible story, but also in the story of our universe.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Learning from Suffering

July 27, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Suffering is perhaps the most mysterious and frightening aspect of human life. We are not to look for suffering, but it will inevitably find us. Learning to grow from suffering is a major challenge in our spiritual life. Here are hints that I find helpful:

1. Suffering does not mean we are bad. Some suffering comes from bad choices we have made, but it doesn't mean we are bad.
2. God loves us in our suffering and is with us even when we do not realize it.
3. Suffering is never easy, although it is somewhat more bearable when we see purpose in it.
4. It is better to face suffering and enter into it than to run away.
5. Be open enough to allow the Love we name God to enter our pain.
6. Talk about it with understanding people, but don't whine.
7. Join it to Jesus' suffering for the spiritual growth of ourselves, those we love and the whole world.
8. Add your own thoughts.

I am able to use these hints better when I am not suffering, than when I am.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Trust in God

August 3, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Sincerity can be extremely dangerous. To use a horrendous example, Adolph Hitler, I'm sure, really believed in his cause. There were no doubts in his mind. This made it possible for him to close his mind to any ideas or information that could bring a change in his outlook. Hence, he could do terrible things and feel okay about it. When we think that we could not be wrong, that we are infallible, we engage in destructive actions. We want to eliminate anyone or anything that stands in the way.

Trust in God is opposed to this. When we trust in God, we can be open to mental and spiritual conversion (change) because we don't have to be right anymore. We trust that by being open to change, God will lead us to fuller truth and deeper spirituality. God's love for us does not depend on our being right and morally correct.

Church people, and especially we church leaders, very easily fall into the trap of thinking we have the answers. After all, we tell ourselves, we are doing God's work and speaking for God.

When I sound like I am infallible, run from me because then I am a danger not only to me, but to you.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Pursuit of Truth

August 10, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

St. Theresa of Avila said that she would rather have a spiritual director who was wise than one who was holy. She said this because of the foolish advice she received from holy people.

Early in his life, St. Augustine thought that if someone spoke eloquently, they must be speaking the truth. After disillusionment with this, he thought that if someone spoke eloquently, they must not be speaking the truth. This didn't work either. Finally he realized that eloquence or lack thereof was immaterial. He realized that truth and falsehood come in both forms. He had to examine what was said and not how it was said.

When church leaders or other leaders say something, examine it. It may be true or it may be false. When atheists say something, examine it. It may be true or it may be false. When everyday people say something, examine it. It may be true or it may be false.

Pursuit of truth is just that—pursuit. We reach toward it; we never have it. When we say we have the truth, we are interested not in truth but in our own convictions. When we are truly interested in truth, we are always willing to learn, to see things in a new light.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Children and Goodness

August 17, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

It is sometimes instructive for us to see what we want for our children in order to see what is good for ourselves. Our own wants, desires and fears at times get in the way of choosing what is good for us. Somewhere in the back of our minds we know what is good for us, but we dismiss it because it seems easier to dismiss it than to carry it out.

There can be good reasons why getting to mass and communion is something we really don't want to do. That is a healthy decision. Sometimes, however, we just don't get around to it. If our children asked us if it would be good for them to get to mass, we probably would say yes. That can help us realize what we truly think is good.

We need to walk the walk, if we are to help ourselves and our children.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Ego Transformation

August 24, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Sometimes we are told to root out our defects and sins. I suggest that this is not a helpful approach. Trying to root out our bad habits and behaviors will not be very successful. To the degree that we do succeed, we will think that we are better than those who have not done as well as we have. We will merely have changed from one type of sin to the more deadly sin of arrogance.

What we see as bad in us is not to be rooted out. It is to be transformed. Transformation takes place as we become clearly aware of what we are doing and how it is harmful. We open ourselves to be transformed by the power of God's love. When the transformation takes place, we do not become arrogant, because we see it as a gift. We become humble and grateful. Greed becomes delight in and sharing what we have. Lust becomes passionate love. Envy becomes enjoying another's talents and virtues.

What we think is bad in us is merely the frog waiting to be turned into a prince by the kiss of God's love.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Ecumenism

September 14, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

Reconciliation with believers of other denominations is mentioned by T. Howard Sanks as a major emphasis of Vatican II.

I remember being taught when I was young that I shouldn't enter a Protestant church. If I had to go to a Protestant church for a funeral, I should just sit there and not take part in the prayers or singing. I realize that my teachers didn't know any better, but the arrogance of that teaching astonishes me. We thought that by following that teaching, we were pleasing God.

We easily fall into such arrogance when we receive no input from groups other than our own. As Catholics we desperately need to have input from other religions, both Christian and non-Christian. That input will keep us closer to the truth.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

“Shoulds”

November 9, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I wonder how many times I have said, “You should do this,” or “You should be this way.” I think that these “should” statements hinder relationships and the spiritual growth of ourselves and others.

Shoulds are hammers. We may pound someone into submission, but they will not grow. I will not grow either, because by using control I diminish my compassion. The relationship will be damaged because use of control over a person breeds resentment.

If our relationships don't seem to be very good, we could ask ourselves if “should” is the problem.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Equality

November 16, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

For many years minority groups in our country were denied or hindered in their access to employment and educational opportunities. Because of this discrimination, large groups of people do not have an equal opportunity to take an appropriate place in our society.

To remedy this situation, affirmative action was instituted. Affirmative action means that a minority person who is qualified is to be given preference over other qualified people. It was recognized that there was not a level playing field. The hope was that this would gradually enhance the position of minority people to the point where the playing field would be level.

In recent years, there has been movement toward eliminating affirmative action. California has passed such a law. It has been upheld by the Supreme Court. I foresee many states following suit. The reasoning behind these laws is that race and gender should neither help nor hinder the person. Furthermore, people today are not responsible for what was done by previous generations.

I understand that logic. It makes sense only if we look at the rights of individual people. Deep in our tradition as Catholics is the realization that the common good must also be considered. Our rights as individual people are limited by

the common good. The good of the whole society must be considered. As a country our virtue has been to protect individual rights. We have not been equally protective of the common good. In my judgment, affirmative action should be continued until the playing field is level. It is a temporary, but necessary measure.

Let me use an imperfect, but useful example. We have two football teams. One wears white uniforms, the other black. The white team has eleven players, the black team has nine. Well into the game the white team leads 49 to 0. The referee says that this is not fair. The black team now gets eleven players and the white team nine. The black team scores a touchdown and the score is 49 to 7. The white team complains to the referee that it is not fair that they have two less players than the black team. What is the referee to do? If he says that they will wait until the score is tied and then both teams will have eleven players, he is for affirmative action. If he says that even though the score is 49 to 7, both teams get eleven players, he is against affirmative action.

I offer these thoughts for your reflection. If our society is to be healthy and less violent, we must see to it that opportunities are as equal as possible.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Working for Justice

November 30, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I invite you to reflect on the following quote:

“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” *Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967*

Working for justice is deep in our tradition. It goes back to the prophets in Israel. It is also something that we seldom do. I would guess that most of us sin by failing to do much of anything. Some of us work for justice, but do it poorly. Our minds may be clear and our wills strong, but our hearts are not soft. For others of us, our hearts are soft, but our minds are fuzzy and our wills are hesitating.

Our minds must be clear. We must name the injustice wherever we see it, no matter who is called to task. We must have the courage to face the opposition we will find.

Our hearts must be soft. We must look with compassion on those to whom we are opposed. Like ourselves, they are wounded people caught in the web of dysfunction. If we think of them as the enemy, we will become unjust ourselves.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Peace in Suffering

December 21, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

God doesn't send us suffering. God uses the suffering that we have to help us grow more deeply compassionate and generous. As compassion and generosity grow, we become more peaceful. We are then able to become more peaceful in the midst of our suffering.

We can diminish the working of God in us by excessive complaining and saying, "Why me?" Instead, it is valuable to tell God that it hurts like hell, but we want God to help us bear the cross and come through it. We still suffer and it still hurts, but we don't allow the suffering to embitter our soul.

God becoming human in Jesus is God's dramatic way of saying, *I am with you through all parts of your human journey. I hold you in the palm of my hand even when you do not know it.* That is the joy the Christmas season celebrates.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Living Simply

December 28, 1997

Dear People Whom God Loves,

During the Christmas season, many people are very generous toward those who are in difficult financial circumstances. This generosity is virtuous and shows that for the most part our hearts are in the right place. This generosity helps ease the burden that many people are carrying. I commend your generosity and invite you to begin to be generous, if you are not already.

There is a deeper call to which Jesus invites us. That is the call to be poor in spirit. This call is remembered in the first beatitude in Matthew's gospel. I understand this call to mean that we begin the slow, difficult and rewarding journey of living more and more simply. As we learn to live with fewer and fewer things, our souls will grow. When we have many things, our souls easily get filled with them and there is little room for compassion to grow.

It is important as we begin this journey that we be gentle with ourselves. We must recognize that the grace of God will enable us to live in a way that we could not manage by ourselves. As we become aware of the ways that we are stingy, it is necessary that we not judge ourselves. Let us just be aware and allow Love to draw us when and how Love chooses.

Smile, God Loves You.

Father Clay

Part Two
The Homilies

Freedom from Inner Captivity

January 21, 1989

In the Gospel story today we are reminded that Jesus came to bring us freedom—liberty to captives. I believe that we are most unfree inside of ourselves. In many ways we are prisoners, chained and trapped by what is inside us. I would like for us to reflect on this to see how Jesus can release us from the things that bind us and make our lives so unmanageable. Most of these thoughts come from Father Richard Sweeney. I would like for us to look at our loneliness, and then at how the unhelpful ways we use to cope with loneliness only make us more isolated. We become trapped; we are prisoners.

Now, there are helpful ways to cope with loneliness. Loneliness is not the problem; how we deal with it is. If we can deal with our loneliness in ways that bring us into solitude, then the loneliness can be instructive. Loneliness is part of our human condition. It's a mental and emotional anguish, a feeling caused by being separated.

I'd like us first to look at the unhelpful ways we cope with loneliness. Sometimes we cope with it by relating to people in very formal and superficial ways. For example, let's suppose I see myself as a priest and I relate to others out of my role as a priest. I may think a priest is supposed to be nice and kind, happy and all together. No doubts, no questions, no fears, no anxieties. So then I try to act out of this role. I'll only smile; I won't acknowledge any fears.

I relate to everybody in exactly the same way. My relationship is not myself needing anybody else, it's just the mask of my role of priest. And so I don't relate to you as one human being to another. But there is no such thing as a priest. There is only the person who can't relate as a priest. My inner self never really meets anybody else.

Sometimes we try to cope with loneliness by giving in to various addictive behaviors. Alcoholism is a common one. Or I throw myself into my work, overeat, or maybe I party all the time. I keep myself busy to cope with my loneliness because it hurts. I don't know who I am. I don't get in touch with these parts inside of me. I just engage in behaviors that only make me all the more miserable. We change the loneliness, which can be fruitful solitude, into isolation.

Another way we turn loneliness into isolation is to move in and out of relationships very quickly. If a relationship starts to become demanding, I just move into another one. And I won't allow a relationship to deepen when problems and difficulties arise. I run away from it. So I just get into all kinds of superficial relationships, which increases the isolation. Or I can be very possessive of people. I try to manipulate them so they will stay with me. I'm not relating from my deepest self; I'm just relating from the fear that I'm going to be all alone. All I do, when I do that, is push people away.

Sometimes we only have contact with people who are like us. What this does is keep each

other from growing. Because we're so alike, we never challenge each other to grow. So we stay stuck.

These are some of the unhelpful ways we deal with the very human loneliness that we all experience. When we do these things, we're always staying on the surface. Who we are deep down is never touched, never revealed. And most probably we're not even aware of it ourselves. We're trapped in a superficial kind of world. We need the grace of God to set us free.

Now to cope with loneliness is to develop a relationship with ourselves. That may sound strange. You see, while I'm doing all these superficial kinds of things, I'm not even relating to me. I'm kidding myself. What I need to do is take time for reflection. If we are busy all the time, this will never happen. We need to get in touch with all the different things that we feel—the pretty things, the ugly things. As we get in touch with our feelings, we become intimate not only with ourselves, but with God and eventually with others.

Loneliness, in a way, is a blessing. As we come in contact with who we really are and allow what we really want, what we really feel, what we really desire, to come forth, we will change. Although they are scary, solitude and intimacy change us.

So this is the challenge we have—to get in touch with who we really and truly are, which is the image of God. To come in contact with

that image, we must become more honest. As we do this, we begin to cooperate with God and allow God to open us up and set us free. More than freeing prisoners who are behind bars—though that has its place, too—Jesus wants to free us from the chains that hold us inside of ourselves. Freedom. It's a gift of God's love.

God bless you.

Holiness

February 10, 1990

The Gospel reading today is a very challenging one. It can bear much truth if we plumb it deeply enough, or it can be very destructive if taken superficially. Jesus is telling His disciples, “Unless your holiness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

According to certain standards, the Scribes and Pharisees were extremely holy. They obeyed the Ten Commandments, and many other traditions and laws that had been formulated since the time of Moses. As for the Ten Commandments, we believe in them, too. The other Jewish traditions would be similar to our own church laws. The Scribes and Pharisees obeyed them all very carefully, very scrupulously. Now, what is Jesus saying? “If your holiness is like that, you’ve missed what the kingdom of God is all about.”

This is kind of hard to hear, but if the Word of God is going to have any impact, we must think about it more deeply. When we focus on obedience to the law, what happens? We try to use our willpower to do what the law demands, no matter what. Then we think we’re supposed to uproot and get rid of all the things inside us that are contrary to that law—because that’s not nice, that’s not good, that’s not being holy. But when I aim for what is good, I will tend not to recognize in myself all those things that I judge to be bad. I will try to root out the

“bad” in me, but instead it goes underground and becomes a shadow.

The Scribes and Pharisees obeyed “perfectly.” Remember the story Jesus told about the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray? He said, “I thank God that I am not like the rest—thieves, adulterers, or even like this publican here; I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I possess.” But the publican humbly said, “Oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” What the shadow does, when it is repressed like that, is to make us arrogant and proud, and we think of ourselves as superior.

Jesus spoke of the Pharisees as whitened sepulchres who look good on the outside, but on the inside are dead, rotten and stinking. That is why Jesus says, “You’re told not to commit adultery, but I say to you, anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” What does that mean? Certainly there is a difference between having something inside, and doing it. I think what Jesus is trying to do is to get us to look down inside of ourselves and see what is there.

For example, the Pharisee was saying, “I am not hurting people sexually; how nice I am!” But Jesus is saying that whether you’re acting out sexually or not, if you look inside yourself, you’re going to see the same kind of lust as this person who is acting it out. Don’t think that you are so different; don’t think you are so superior, so holy. Jesus is trying to help us recognize things that exist in all of us human beings, and especially to recognize them in

ourselves. It is also good for us to acknowledge the truth about ourselves with other people who understand our journey, who care for and respect us.

So holiness is not to get rid of all of this junk, but to recognize and admit that it is there. As this happens, all of the lust that we have will become integrated with love and caring. Now that is a long, slow journey, but it is the journey we are called to take.

You see, Jesus is saying the same thing about the anger, about feeling murderous toward our brother and sister. Jesus is saying that just because I haven't gone out and shot somebody, doesn't mean I don't have hatred and revenge inside. The answer is to admit that I do have anger and resentment inside; it is to say, "Yes, that is me."

That is the journey. We see that the shadow is there, we admit it, we acknowledge it. If we can share it with somebody else, with God and with ourselves, then healing can take place. Then all of these things we think are bad become part of our whole person, and that is owning our power.

You see, those shadow things that we don't like make us compassionate, give us zeal and help us to love God. Love of God is meant to be a passionate, erotic love. St. John of the Cross writes that God is a passionate lover of us, and God wants us to be passionate lovers in return. If we get rid of all of those dark things inside of us, then we get rid of our passion, our compassion, our power that makes us real. We

become shells like the Pharisees. Jesus is saying that unless your holiness is different from that of the Pharisees, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. We don't have to be afraid to look honestly at ourselves. Seeing this stuff inside of us only means that we are the human beings God made us to be.

Salvation truly means that we are made whole. The love of God is not lifeless; it is not cold or superficial. It is deep and compassionate. When we try to imitate the holiness of the Scribes and Pharisees, that is superficial and in many ways destructive. When we move in the direction of holiness as the kingdom of God, that is deep. It penetrates our whole lives, our love of each other, our love of God. We can then truly say, "God, without your grace, this never would have happened." Holiness is a gift.

God bless you.

Nothing Can Separate Us from God's Love

August 4, 1990

This reading tells us something that is at the heart of the Gospels, but we really do not believe it. St. Paul tells us that there is absolutely nothing—not principalities or powers, evil spirits or demons—that can ever separate us from the love of God. Nothing. Life cannot. Death cannot. Paul is saying there is no way that we can ever stop God from loving us. Nothing we do, nothing we are, nothing that happens. The love of God is always constant and present. Do you believe that? It's hard to.

I'd like us to find some kind of image of how God is loving us. Here are a couple of examples. Picture a mother holding her newborn infant in her arms. Got that picture in mind? The way the mother looks at that newborn baby is a little something like the way God looks at us. Always. Even at our worst times. That is the way God is looking at each one of us, every moment of our lives. Take another image. A father takes the hand of his little child and walks across the street. The child holds tightly to his father's hand and the father squeezes back. The father looks for cars that are coming, or anything dangerous. Imagine God holding our hand through every single thing that happens to us, whether it is good or bad.

This is the foundation of all religious, spiritual and moral growth, but it is something we really do not believe. It is no wonder that we have so much trouble, that we don't blossom, that we don't develop the spiritual and moral character that is possible for us.

Understandably, lots of things that happen to us keep us from believing in God's unconditional love. Paul is trying to tell us that love is the one thing that will bring about the kingdom of God. But we don't trust that love will do it. We still have to use force and fear. That's understandable, too. There are lots of destructive things that happen in our lives, and people act very destructively as well. What we fail to understand is that when we act that way, we have been "unloved" into acting that way.

We don't come into the world bad. We come into the world good, but we run into all kinds of problems and difficulties that make us twisted and distorted. And when that happens, we say we have got to use force and fear to keep people in line. We do it in our families. We do it in our church. How many people grew up being afraid of God? *God sees everything you do. If you do something wrong, God will punish you. Not just with a spanking. God will send you to hell to burn forever and ever.* We believe we need to use that force and fear to keep people in line. We do not believe love can do it.

The words of Paul very strongly state that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. But we do not really believe it. We fail to

realize that while force and fear can control some kinds of human actions, they never will promote spiritual and moral growth. They may keep us in line, to a degree, but we will not grow inside. Only love permits that to happen.

So when we grow up with force and fear motivating us, we may develop certain kinds of inhibitions. There are consequences to the way we act, and we need to remember that. If I choose to be a very spiteful, cruel and hateful person, I will alienate everybody around me. I will grow up to be very lonely and isolated. But we need to remember that negative consequences aren't God saying, "I don't love you anymore, so I'm going to punish you." We are always loved.

I would encourage all of us to try and form some kind of image of God loving us deeply that makes sense. Every day we could spend a few moments very quietly allowing that image to enter into our hearts, our minds, the depths of our soul. If we will do that, and do it faithfully, our whole insides will change. We will become very different people—not overnight, but it will happen. There is nothing of this world or the next, of principalities or death, that can ever stop our God from loving us.

God bless you.

Joy in My Suffering

July 22, 1989

The second reading from the letter of the Colossians has a strange beginning. St. Paul makes this statement: “I find joy in my suffering.” Sounds kind of kooky. He says, “In my own flesh, I fill up what is wanting through the sufferings of Christ.” Paul finds joy because he has been able to see the hand and the finger and the presence of God in all of life, including the suffering.

That’s what religion should be all about—helping us see God’s presence in all of the ordinary things that happen to us, part of which is suffering. When we see meaning and purpose in suffering (although it doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt anymore) a transformation takes place. Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who suffered in a Nazi concentration camp, discovered that the people who survived the camps were able to find some kind of meaning in that tragic and terrible, apparently senseless, situation.

God calls us to conversion, to be new people. Wherever there is growth, there is suffering. As we are converted, we need to look at things in a different way—as the beloved of God. If we look at ourselves accurately, we will see the goodness that is the image and the likeness of God. I also believe that we will see sin, flaws, tragedy, stupidity and senselessness.

I think it is very difficult for us to look at ourselves in this way. Perhaps when I look

at myself, all that I see is bad. *Nothing is good in me. I am a loser.* But if I see my goodness, then I've got to take responsibility for my life. That also means seeing the greed, selfishness and flaws inside of me. This kind of change hurts, but it is worth it. The conversion is not only within ourselves, it is in our relationships, too.

There is pain in all relationships. Our relationships are meant to be both caring and honest. That's not easy. Some of us are very caring—and that's good—but we are not able to tell others how we really feel. Or maybe we are the opposite. Maybe we are very honest in our relationships, but we are not caring. We're so honest, we blow everybody away by telling them what jerks they are.

This kind of honesty destroys people. It gives us power. To give that up is painful, but there will never be any true friendship or real intimacy among us, unless we learn to relate with both care and honesty. We must remember that the finger of God is always present, drawing us to a deeper relationship with each other and with Her, too.

The finger of God is also present in our physical and emotional pain. God uses that pain to make us understand that we are creatures, not the Creator. When things are going well, I might think, "Who needs God?" Then the emotional pain or physical illness comes along, and how much I need God becomes very clear. "You are not in charge of everything, John Clay." The purpose of our pain is to help us realize that ultimately our

trust must be in the love and the graciousness and the goodness of our God who loves us.

If I never hurt, how could I ever understand somebody who is hurting? I would be likely to say, "Come on, just tough it out," but once we've been knocked down ourselves, we realize it doesn't work that easily. Paul understood that we are all in this together. He saw that we need to join our pain and journey, to the pain and journey of Jesus.

Your pain is worthwhile. Just as Jesus redeemed the world, so you are going to be part of that redemption. The people whom you love and people you don't even know are going to be made more whole and more holy because of how you hurt. The more we understand this, the more we can believe that Paul wasn't stupid when he said, "I find joy in my suffering." For joy is not the absence of pain, joy is the presence of God.

God bless you.

Love Is Patient; Love Does Not Insist on Its Own Way

January 31, 1998

St. Paul says, “Love is patient; love does not insist on its own way.” To put this in perspective, remember that the only way we’re going to be happy is if we love. The Scriptures are not meant to give us rules and regulations that we’ve got to fulfill to get to heaven. But they do give us directions and guidance, reminding us that until we learn to love, we will not be happy.

Love is more than just doing our duty and fulfilling our obligations. Doing those things has its place, but this isn’t love yet. Unless we move beyond this, we’ll become judgmental and righteous. *I fulfill my duties and obligations—why don’t you?* Still, this stage is better than the one before that, which is that I do what most people do. *It’s the way people in my neighborhood, community, country and church act, so it’s the way I’m gonna act.*

Now, doing our duty is a step above that because it helps us to stand up for what is right. But it’s only a step in the process. And just doing what other people do is better than the stage before that, which is just doing what we feel like. If it pleases me, if it gives me pleasure, if it’s to my advantage, I do it. Following the crowd, doing what most people do, is a step above that. Fulfilling our duties and obligations is still a further progressive step, but the Scriptures call us to move beyond

even that, to where we act out of love. And love is its own reward. There's no reason for loving except to love. And happiness will follow.

Now, this reading today says love is patient and love doesn't insist on its own way. We may look at that and say, "Well, that's nice, but how do I do that? How do I put it into practice, in the concrete?"

Love does not insist on its own way. Boy, this is a big problem for me! Without knowing all of you individually, I'd say it's a problem for ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths percent of you, and maybe one hundred percent. Insisting on our own way—that's underneath so much of the stuff and quarrels and impatience that happens between us. There's something inside of us that says, *My way is the right way and you ought to do it my way.*

Ever get mad in the car? Ever give anybody the finger? If you didn't do it, did you do it in your mind? Facing that is really hard. I was very old before I realized how insightful it was to look at what was going on inside myself. Those thoughts are in there. *This is the way it's supposed to be done. If you don't do it that way there's something wrong with you.* But love doesn't insist on its own way. Here's another example. Do you like to put the toilet paper on the roll coming out from the top or the bottom? I wonder how many marriages have broken up because of that. "Well, you know it should come from the top." "Don't be stupid—the bottom's the right way!"

This happens our whole life. We insist on our way, although Paul says love does *not* insist on its own way. No wonder we have trouble. Is it any wonder our relationships are so difficult? We're filled with anger, rage, resentment. If we could only be aware of that little voice inside that says, *You're supposed to do it my way*. Like I'm the Creator of the Universe and I make the stars go the way the stars go! So this is part of our problem.

We talk about leaders. There's usually a leader in a family. Leaders, of course, want everything done their way. Sometimes this is done sneaky; sometimes it's done very overtly and powerfully. And of course I want all those things done my way for the "good of the family." My motives are noble. *I'm really a very gracious and wonderful human being. And I insist on you doing it my way—it's for the good of the family!* And if you believe that, I've got some land in Florida for you.

This happens at all levels. Business leaders: *I'm doing it for the good of the business*. Most anything goes as long as it's for the good of the business, even though it's dishonest. Politicians: *I'm making you do what I want, for the good of the party. I have no selfish motives*. Civil officials: *It's for the good of the country; that's why I'm doing it. See how noble I am?* And then we have church leaders—we do the same thing. *My way*. But what I say to myself is, *It's for the good of the Church*. I remember a cardinal saying one time, "I would never lie, unless it's for the good of the Church."

We all do it. We want things done our way. And so when people say it's for the good of the family, or church, or whatever—stop and take a look. And I'll bet you in ninety-five percent of the cases it is, *I want it done my way—because obviously my way is God's way*. We need to look hard at that and hear all of those voices underneath.

God bless you.

Easter 1992

I welcome you on this feast of Easter, and I would like to share with you some of my reflections about part of what Easter means. When we think about what happened, Jesus went through suffering and death to resurrection. This, to me, is symbolic of something that happens in our lives. We have to embrace the darkness to get to the light. We *must* embrace the darkness to get to the light.

There are three kinds of darkness I would like for us to talk about. There is the darkness of suffering, the darkness of sin and the darkness of death.

The first darkness we must embrace is suffering. Now, embracing suffering does

itself is a bad kind of thing. Yet we need to find some meaning in suffering. Victor Frankl who survived the Nazi concentration camps wrote in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Those who were able to find meaning in the suffering of the camps, survived. Those who could not find meaning in that suffering, died." Suffering can destroy us, if we do not find meaning in it. If we do, it has the capacity to renew us, to strengthen us and enable us to become better people.

What possible meaning can there be in suffering? One of the things we learn through suffering is compassion. If we are to be full people, we must become people of compassion. And I would submit that if we have never suffered, we will never be compassionate

people. For only if my own heart has been broken, can I really enter into and have empathy with somebody else's heart that is broken.

Suffering can make us compassionate people. It can also make us hard and unfeeling. It depends. But the power is there to find the meaning that, by suffering, we will become compassionate people.

Another thing that can come from suffering is the strength to meet adversity. There are lots of things in life which are very hard. Power is in suffering, with the grace of God, for us to become strong and compassionate people.

I would guess that if there were no suffering and pain, if there were no heartaches and pains of the mind, soul and body—if we did not have any of those things, we would never become the strong, compassionate people that God wants us to be. An example is Jesus. We each have to find meaning in our own kind of way. I cannot put it in your heads. Think about that.

The second darkness we must embrace is the darkness of sin. Embrace sin? I thought I was supposed to be against it. Aren't preachers supposed to be against sin? Let's take a look at this.

We must embrace the darkness of sin. We all have within us what we call the seven capital sins. We have pride, anger, lust, greed, envy, gluttony and so on—we must embrace those. They are all inside of us and usually what happens is we think those are bad kinds of things. I don't recognize having them. I don't

admit having them. I don't get in touch with them at all.

And when all these things that I have mentioned become rejected, then they become a destructive power behind the choices that we make to do bad and terrible things to each other. And we do them. We do these terrible things to each other because we reject all these parts of us that we think we're not supposed to have. And that is where sins come from. I make these choices to hurt you, because I have not embraced this dark part of me that I think I should not have anything to do with. I should not be like that.

So we must embrace this. We must embrace and recognize our pride as part of being human. Our lust, our greed, our gluttony, our envy, our anger and our sloth—embrace them. You see, when these qualities, these things inside of us which are human, when they are embraced, they turn positive and they become in us a source of power. A power to love, a power to make justice, a power to become compassionate and strong people again.

So often we make the mistake of thinking that we are not supposed to have these things in us. Weren't most of us taught that way? I sure was. *You're not supposed to be greedy. You're not supposed to be lustful. You're not supposed to be angry.* We're not supposed to be any of these kinds of things, are we?

We are. We have to embrace that fact. We have to recognize it and embrace it and say, "Yeah, that's part of what I am." And as we

begin to do this by the power of God inside of us, these things become our friends instead of our enemies. They become the source of good. They become the source of virtue instead of the source of our choosing to act in destructive ways. Only then, will we really and truly love each other. Only then, will we be full people.

But we have to embrace the darkness. And it is darkness at first. And it is scary. Because I don't like to admit that it is inside of me. *Father Clay is such a nice priest. He couldn't have any of that stuff inside of him.* Now if you believe that, I have some land in Florida I want to talk to you about. You see, if I did not have that inside of me, it would not mean I was virtuous or good—it would mean I was not human. We must embrace the darkness of sin. Things are often the opposite of what we were taught.

Finally, we must embrace the darkness of death. Embrace death? I would like to run away from it. Embrace death? Yes, we must embrace it. Yes, it is scary, because we do not exactly know what is going to happen. And that is scary for us.

But you see, what we need to remember is that when we die, we are met by our God who loves us. We are met by our God who cares about us and loves us as we are. When we come to die, God will be there. He will take our hand and say, "I love you. I love you with everything that is in Me. I want you to come home with Me." As we start to think of that, maybe then death will not be quite so scary for us. Maybe we can embrace it. For dying is merely another

stage of living. When we die, things do not end, they just are raised to a new dimension. Just as when a child is born, that life is raised to a new dimension.

Death is naturally painful and sorrowful; we miss people who have died. We must not deny these things, but we must also recognize that there is cause for celebration, too. It is hard to do that when we are in the midst of it. It is really hard to do. And if we do not do it, that is okay. Because you see, when we die, we are not going to be whole people yet. Do you know anybody who died a perfect human being? I have not met anybody yet who was.

When we die, when God takes our hand, God is going to say to us, "You've got some more of the journey to go. You're not as full and beautiful and wonderful as I want you to be. You didn't make it that far in your life on earth. So I'm going to take you with me. We're going to learn together the things that you didn't learn before. And I won't rest and I won't be satisfied until you are just the way I want you to be, the full image of Me." Death is another stage. Only by embracing death, will we go to that complete fullness of life.

These are darkneses. The darkness of suffering, the darkness of sin, the darkness of death. We are called to embrace them. Jesus is the symbol. That is what Jesus going through the cross to resurrection is all about. It is a symbol of what happens to us in our lives. But Jesus is not only a symbol. Jesus is a sacrament. Which means that when Jesus symbolizes this for us, Jesus also, through

the power and the glory and the grace of God, gives us the capacity to embrace that darkness and so, to live.

If we believe this—and I believe it with all my heart, though it's hard to live—if we believe this, you see why on Easter Sunday we sing, “Alleluia!” Just think about that. That is why Easter is the biggest feast of the year. It wraps everything up. We embrace the darkness and come to light and sing, “Alleluia, Jesus is risen!” And so are we.

God bless you.

Acceptance and Love

October 10, 1992

The gospel story about the ten lepers had a little significance which, I would suggest, we almost always miss. Jesus says to the ten lepers, after they asked Him to have pity on them, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” What does that mean? You see, when people had leprosy in those days, they not only had to suffer the disease, they were also ostracized from other people. They had to carry a little bell. If anyone came close, they were to ring the bell and say, “Unclean, unclean. Stay away from me.” In other words, the lepers in Jesus’ time were excluded from the community. “Go and show yourselves to the priests, so the priests can say, ‘You’re cleansed, come back in.’ ” The real healing that Jesus did, more than the leprosy itself, was to bring these people back into their community.

I think sometimes we don’t understand how valuable community is, how terrible it is when we exclude people. Community begins when we are babies. A little baby has to be touched, stroked. There has to be some skin contact. In that skin contact, the little infant, although he or she cannot conceive of these kinds of things, is getting the message, *I’m accepted, I’m loved, I’m important, the world is okay.* By the touching and the stroking, the baby is brought into the community of human beings. If the baby is not touched, the baby will die. That is how essential community is. The only

way a baby can know it is loved is by the touch. Without community, we die.

As we grow up, we get our sense of who we are from the ones around us, mostly our family. When we start out, we don't know anything. We get our sense of value, our sense of importance, our sense of self-esteem, from those around us. If those around us do not give us the sense that we are somebody, that we amount to something, we get kind of crippled inside with our feelings and emotions, and it makes life very, very difficult for us. Even after we are big, mature adults, we still need people.

So we can see what an awful thing was done to these people who were lepers. They were excluded from the community. Outcasts. What Jesus did was bring them back into the community. This story gives us a chance to say, *How do I do this? How do I act just like those people did to the lepers?* I think with AIDS we do it a lot. How much ostracism is there in our human society when people have AIDS? Don't we do the same thing? I understand, too. There is fear just like the fear in the people of Jesus' time, that drove them into this terrible act of excluding the lepers.

Our fear can do the same thing. Not because we are evil or bad. Fear allows us to do terribly destructive things. We can exclude people because of the color of our skin and their skin. We need to ask ourselves, *Do I do that? In what ways do I do that? Do I really accept? Am I willing to have contact with or*

do I exclude people who are different races from my own? We do it for religion (we are getting better, I think, somewhat). I can't go into that church because that's a Lutheran church. Stop and think how we do these things and don't realize we are doing them.

I think sexual orientation is a very common basis for exclusion, too. How do we feel toward those who are gay or lesbian? Should they belong? These are hard things to look at. Unfortunately, in our church we have done some terrible things in that regard. What comes to mind is the Vatican saying that those who are gay and lesbian are disordered. Stop and think about that. Our sexuality goes down to the very core of our being. That is called being disordered? *You are being disordered from the core of your being.* See the message? *There is something fundamentally wrong with you.* See how much ostracism there is?

It gets worse. Later it was said that some people may be discriminated against because they are gay or lesbian. I think how blind we are. Why do we do it? In our churches we have these kinds of things that if people don't believe right or people don't behave right, we excommunicate them. What are we doing? We are saying, *You don't belong. Get out.* I understand this because there is a kind of thinking we can get into. *These people are bad and dangerous, so we've got to cut them out.* On the other hand, when we realize that the wrong, the evil that we do is really mostly brokenness, we see that the brokenness needs to be healed.

Suppose we think somebody is destructive in the way they act, or the way they think, or the way they believe. Would we not be following Jesus more by loving them into wholeness rather than pushing them out? The strange thing is, if we try to love them into wholeness, what we'll often find is that we are more destructive than they are.

Isn't this what Jesus did—love people into wholeness? Take the story of the prodigal son, the story of the good shepherd. What did the father in the prodigal son story do? He loved the boy back into the family. What did the good shepherd do? He carried the lamb back into the fold. Would we not be following Jesus much more by loving the brokenness and holding it? In the very process of doing this, our own brokenness would be healed.

I think what we don't understand is how much damage we do to our own selves when we put people outside, when we exclude people. I can hurt others terribly, but it's not nearly the damage that I do to my own self. You see, we are made in the image of God. God is the ultimate lover. That is God's name. God is love. That image is in us. We can imagine that. It may be kind of small to start with, but as we love and as we respect and as we live with compassion, that image of God, that power inside of us grows and grows and grows and grows.

The opposite can happen. As we are not living with compassion, as we are not living with love, as we put people out, we get smaller, smaller and smaller. This can get to the point

where we are a very tiny, cold self. It is no accident that Satan was put in hell in a block of ice. For you see, the passion and the compassion burns and warms. The contraction freezes. I end up in this little bitty knot inside myself—unhappy, bitter, righteous, miserable. That is what I do to me when I exclude you. Where is the greater damage done?

So let's just reflect about this. We need to recognize that we are loved and accepted by God just as we are. We don't need to go into the games of ostracizing people or condemning others, because we are loved and accepted by God with all our faults, with all our sins, with all the strange things about us. Gradually, when I see that I am loved and accepted by God, I begin to accept my own self. When I love my own self as I am, then I can accept you as you are.

God bless you.

Reflection on the Eucharist

May 1, 1993

Would you like God to give you a hug? Would you like God to come to you and say, “I love you,” and give you a great big squeeze? If we could imagine that—that God would do that to us—that is actually what happens in the Eucharist.

We need some imagination. We need some faith. But that really is what the Eucharist means, that God is saying I love you and is giving us the biggest hug we ever got. So anybody who needs a hug from God, I would suggest you participate in the Eucharist and receive Communion.

In the Eucharist we use bread and wine. These are symbolic. Bread fills us up. We will see how the Eucharist fills us up. Wine is something for celebrating. But first of all, how does the Eucharist fill us? Is it the same way bread fills our stomachs?

Receiving the Eucharist, having God within us, fills other kinds of emptinesses in us. One kind of emptiness is loneliness. Have you ever felt lonely? We can feel lonely with all kinds of people around us. There is a kind of loneliness which no other human being can ever fill, and when we participate in the Eucharist and when we receive Communion, God is filling that loneliness and God is saying to us, “I am with you. I love you. You will never be alone. I will always be at your side to hold you up and to encourage you. You are never, ever by yourself.

Even though everybody on the face of the earth might abandon you, I will not!" So if you ever felt lonely, I would encourage you to celebrate the Eucharist and receive Communion.

There is also the emptiness of sin. Have you ever sinned? That brings an emptiness, too, because when we sin (what we are talking about is doing things which are harmful and destructive to ourselves and other people), we not only hurt other people, we hurt ourselves. It is not possible for us to hurt other people without hurting ourselves at the very same time, because it goes against the image of God which is in us, which is meant to love. So when we are hating and doing destructive things, we not only hurt other people, we also hurt ourselves, which leaves us with an emptiness. The Eucharist is here to fill this emptiness.

God comes to us and says, "I know you sin. I know you sin pretty badly sometimes, but that doesn't change my love for you. It doesn't make me think any less of you. It doesn't make me withdraw or go away. My only concern is to help you. I wish to help you learn how to live in ways which are more fulfilling and which will bring you more happiness, bring you more peace. Sin doesn't scare me away. In fact, in some strange way, when you sin, I want to be with you more." So if you've ever sinned, I recommend that you participate in the Eucharist.

There is another emptiness, too, the emptiness which comes from failure. Have you ever tried something and failed? We've all failed—lots of times, starting when we were very little. And

with that failure, a lot of times we say, *There is something wrong with me. I am not good enough.* The failures can then weigh down on us and we think, *What is wrong with me?*, and it leaves that emptiness of thinking, *I am not okay.* In the Eucharist, God comes to us and says, “Your failures don’t make me think less of you. You are never a failure to me no matter how much you screw up. You may be a failure to other people, but you’re never a failure to me because all I want is you. You don’t have to accomplish anything for me. You don’t have to do big things for me. You don’t even have to do little things for me. All you have to be is *you*. So you see, you cannot be a failure. People may get mixed up and call you that and think you are, but you cannot be a failure to me.” So if any of you have ever failed at anything, I recommend that you take part in the Eucharist.

Not only do we have bread, we also have wine. Notice we don’t use soda pop. Why? Because the drink we use, the wine, is the drink of celebration. What are we celebrating? These truths that we have been talking about. This is the way our God is. This is the way our God loves us, so we are supposed to celebrate.

Now, we people—I suppose it’s part of our culture and our heritage and so on—we don’t know how to celebrate in a religious way. We know how to celebrate in other ways. I just heard the Twins won today. Can you believe it? The Twins won today. Let’s imagine we are at a ball game. It’s the bottom of the ninth, two outs, the count is 3 and 2. The ball game

is tied and Kirby Puckett is at the plate. He knocks one over the fence. What would we do? Say, "Oh, goody, goody, goody, goody, wasn't that nice that Kirby hit a home run, oh, I think it's magnificent." Would we do that? Why, we would be yelling, shouting and screaming and high-fiving. We would be doing all kinds of things like that, you know. We would do that for a home run.

But for something *really big*, we don't do it. If I started jumping around and high-fiving and saying, "God's here, God loves us!" I would be carried out in a straight jacket. The bishop would be here by noon. Isn't that true? You'd think, *What has gone wrong with that guy?* Yet if I did it at a ball game, you'd think it was wonderful.

I like home runs from Kirby Puckett, but it's not really quite as important as the fact that we are loved totally and unconditionally by our God, and that when we come to the Eucharist, God gives us a big hug and big love. Aren't we funny? Aren't we strange?

We think being spiritual, being religious or something like that, means being nice and quiet. And there is a place for quiet and reflection, no question about that. But the Eucharist is a celebration! See how we miss the boat?

So who should not receive the Eucharist? Let's see. If you don't want a hug from God, then don't come. No point in coming, if you don't want a hug from God. Or if you have never sinned, then you don't need the

Eucharist. If you are totally and perfectly sinless, don't bother coming. If you never failed at anything, don't bother coming. If you have never been lonely, don't bother coming. If you are not happy—and remember, God loves you and you're the apple of God's eye—now if you are not happy about that and don't want to celebrate that, then there is no point in coming either.

So who does that leave to come? EVERYBODY!

God bless you.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

June 21, 1997

The first reading is taken from the Book of Job. In this book which is like a play, the author is challenging the customary religious thinking of the time. At this time among the people of Israel, they thought that if something bad happened it meant that they'd sinned and done wrong and were being punished by God. The author of the book of Job is challenging that, and that's what we want to look at.

As the play opens, Job has all kinds of trials and difficulties and tragedies befall him. Job is wondering why this is happening. He's got three friends, quote "friends." The friends come and say, "Job, you've done something wrong. You've sinned. It's all your own fault. There must be something wrong with you, and that's why you're having all this trouble."

Job says, "No, that's really not true." And they keep after him because that's the religious thinking of the time. They keep after him, but Job resists, and so the author of the Book of Job is saying, "I do not agree with this kind of thinking—that when bad things happen and befall us, it's because we're being punished for our sins."

So we stop and ask ourselves at this point, *Do I do that to myself sometimes?* When bad things happen, when tragedies happen, do I say, "It must be my fault. I must have done something bad. God is punishing me. If I

wasn't such a miserable person, this wouldn't be happening and God wouldn't be punishing me." Get in touch with that, because some of that thinking is still around today. *When something bad happens, you're being punished, and God is the one who's doing the punishing.* Get in touch with that. If that's there, I encourage you to let it go.

Now we go back to our story. Job resists that kind of thinking, but Job is still wondering, "Why? How come all these terrible things are happening to me? I don't understand it." He asks God, "Why is this so?" There's no answer. God doesn't respond. God doesn't say to Job that it's this or that, or whatever it is. God just doesn't answer.

And Job is desolate. "I don't know why I can't get God to answer me. I'm all alone." Are we in that spot sometimes? *Where is God?* No answer. *I can't understand what's happening. All the tragedies that befall me, all the things that go on—I don't understand it.* And God is absent. That's a very desolate position to be in, when God is absent.

Sometimes God is absent for us because we think that God is a punishing and vengeful God. That's why we'd rather be without a God, than have a God that punishes and is vengeful. Sometimes for no reason we can understand, we just have no contact with God. We seem to be isolated and alone. It's like God is dead. Even if we don't deny God's existence, we just have no kind of understanding or appreciation or feeling that God is there. We've suffered

through that, too, haven't we? The absence of God. It's very painful, very hard.

Then finally God answers Job. He says, "Job, were you around when I made the world? Were you the one who figured it all out—how the universe came about? Who put the seas and the oceans where they're supposed to be, and the land where it's supposed to be? Who did all that stuff? Did you do that Job? Were you around when I did that?"

God is saying, "Job, there are some things that you can't understand. You're not able to see the whole big picture. I know you want to, but you're not able to. Job, you're just going to have to trust me." That's the response that Job gets. At least he got a response. The response is probably not what Job really wanted.

Do we face that, too? There's no answer. There are things that happen in life we can't answer. We can see some things that are bad, yet good things come out of them (we can do this to a certain extent), but there are some things that happen that don't make any sense at all. And God says, "You'll have to trust me."

And we have a choice. One choice is to believe that we're loved, that love is in the universe, that love is throughout the universe, that love is within us, around us, holds us and sustains us. That's to believe in God. The other choice is to believe we're all alone. The world and universe are a cruel joke. There's no way, no place for hope, but only despair. We've got those choices.

I much prefer to choose that love is behind it all, that love makes a difference. That the love that is God is with us, but we don't understand it. I can, to some degree, accept that I can't get it all, that I'll never know all the answers. I'll never know why certain things happen, certain things that are so unfair, so unjust, and don't make any sense. I'm just like you. I just have to trust that love is there.

That's a much better choice for me because if I choose that love is there, then there's hope. And something happens as I gradually do this. Even though we don't understand it all, there can be a realization and a kind of understanding that it's going to be okay. No proof. We can't logically figure it out. But as we start to trust ourselves to God more, and trust in the love that is God, gradually this happens.

It doesn't mean it's easy. It doesn't mean it's obvious. But there's the realization, *I can trust*. It's a slow and difficult and painful experience. And I suspect we're on that journey, to some degree, as long as we live.

As we begin to respond to the love that is in us and around us, we realize that we are called to grow in love and compassion and respect. And as we grow in that respect and compassion and love, we're happier. It doesn't mean we don't have problems. It doesn't mean we don't have suffering. It doesn't mean we don't have reversals or depressions or anything like that at all. It doesn't mean that, but we will be happier.

So that's the play from the Book of Job. The final thing that God says is, "Trust me. I am with you. Just trust me." And that's hard. I remember—I forget who it was—someone gave an example of what faith means. It's kind of like a rope hanging from the sky. And there's a knot at the end of the rope and it's swinging back and forth. And you hold on to that rope with everything you've got. You just hold on. Sometimes that's all we can do.

God bless you.

Thorns in the Flesh

July 5, 1997

The second reading is taken from one of the letters that Paul wrote to the people of Corinth. In this letter, he wrote that he was given a thorn in the flesh so Satan could torment him. So he kept asking God to take it away. God said, “Nope. My grace is sufficient for you.”

Now, I can identify with this. I’m just going to talk about some personal things. And I think what really happens is that these thorns in the flesh of one kind or another that we all have—at the time we’re going through them they seem all terrible and evil and bad, and we don’t want anything to do with them. But sometimes we can look back and see the place that they had, and that God was able to use these things to make us better people.

I’m going to talk about three thorns. Paul only had one. I’ve got three thorns. The first one is fear. Fear has been something that has plagued me all my life. I have some understanding where this came from. I remember when I was about three years old, I was scared of the vacuum cleaner. I called it the bam-bam. I remember being scared of this and I don’t know who it was, but somebody laughed at me for being scared. What happens with something like that is the emotion gets frozen.

There’s another time when I had a brother who was three years older than me. He died when I was three. Shortly after that, I was walking down the street, and I can still see

myself and my dad. I was about so big and he was real tall. And he was talking about his son, my brother Karl, who had died. And he said, "See that house over there?" He said, "If Karl Kenneth were standing on that roof and I was down below and I said, 'Karl Kenneth, jump and I'll catch you,' he would jump." I remember that I didn't say anything at all. I was saying to myself, *I'd never do that. I'd be too scared to do that.* And so I thought I wasn't as good as my brother and that my dad didn't think as much of me as he did of him. So fear has been something I've had to cope with. It's fear of failure, fear of conflict, fear that people wouldn't like me, fear of authority. All those different kinds of things.

A second thorn, integrating my sexuality, has been a real hard struggle. I don't think that's terribly unusual, but it's been a real hard struggle. And I can trace some of that back, too. I remember when I was about six years old I was sexually abused. It's very vague in my mind. I remember parts of it and then it kind of gets into a blank and I can't remember it. So I'm sure that had a big part to do with this struggle.

Also, I remember that in the parish school, sex equalled sin. I got that starting in the first grade. If it was sexual, it was sin. That put a fear inside. The idea of celibacy didn't help that any either, because remember, I would see sex as sin. So I thought if sex is bad, I guess celibacy must be good. And of course this meant that if you wanted to be a priest, you had to take the baggage along with

you. I think being celibate is a great way for some people to live. For other people it's not a good way to live. And I believe it's terribly destructive to our church, if celibacy is required for priesthood. I think it's great if there are celibate priests. It's great if there are married priests. We need them all.

So integrating my sexuality has been a hard thorn in the flesh. The last one I'll mention is depression. What I most associate with depression is feeling hopeless, helpless and lonely. The helplessness was really very hard. I couldn't do anything. I remember in one of my depressions I could hardly stand up to say Mass. And preaching was just terrible. Ohhhh. Because I felt so helpless.

So these have been things, among others, which have been very difficult for me. And going through them seemed awful and terrible at the time. I would have given anything not to go through them, because when you're in it you don't see the end. You just see the terrible stuff you're going through.

As I look back, I see that all these things had a place. They had a place. There's some way that God used these things. I don't think God gave them to me. I don't believe that. But they're part of what happened to me through the whole period of my life, and God was able to use them.

I believe the goal of the spiritual life is to become compassionate people, and I believe suffering is the instrument that engraves compassion deeply in our hearts. If we never

suffered, we would never be compassionate. And if we were never compassionate, we would miss what the goal of the spiritual life is. It's very easy for me to talk about this stuff when I'm out of it. When I'm in it, that's another story. And even though I have the experience of these kinds of things, when I'm in a tough place it still feels awful.

I would imagine this is something Paul was talking about, too. If we can be open to the grace of God—as we hit these things and suffer through them and endure them and curse at them, or whatever it's going to be—we can keep in mind that there very well could be a purpose behind them. It doesn't make it simple. It doesn't make it easy. It doesn't mean we want it. But it is some help to realize as we go through it that when we look back on it, we can see perhaps why it happened.

It's like that poem, "Footprints." *Where were you, God? See, there's only one set of footprints there. Where were you?* He says, "That was when I carried you."

God bless you.

Control and Love

August 21, 1997

This weekend we have the last of the five readings from the sixth chapter of John about the meditations on the Eucharist. This is where we celebrate Jesus, what Jesus did and what Jesus taught. Particularly, we celebrate Jesus' fundamental belief that under Abba, our God, all people are equal. Nobody's over anybody else. And then we look first of all at how in our history for the last five or six thousand years, our society has generally been organized with some people over other people, with some people in control and some people to be controlled.

Jesus said this is not right. We are all equal before God. This is not the way that we are to be structured. In fact, Jesus said if you're going to be number one in *my* kingdom, it means you've got to be a servant of the rest. So, you can't be dominant over anybody and follow what Jesus says. Jesus' teachings lasted for about twenty or thirty years, and then very quickly the church got right back into the old kinds of things. In particular, with the coming of Constantine you could hardly tell the church structure from the civil structure.

So we look at how the equality Jesus preached speaks about the equality of women and men. We also talk about children and how children need to be disciplined, nurtured and guided. Equality brings out the truth that they must be respected. The fact that they are little and

the fact that they are young does not diminish their value as human beings one iota.

Last time we talked about the images of God and how our images of God need to be both feminine and masculine, because in our society masculine traits are one-sided and feminine traits are one-sided. So, if we use only masculine traits of God, we get a one-sided view of God. If we use only feminine traits and characteristics of God, our notion of God is lopsided, too. We need to have both of them together.

Today we're going to look at how this equality that Jesus talks about is absolutely necessary, if we're going to love. When there isn't equality, love does not take place. I think we can look at this particularly from the idea of controlling. When we control, what does it mean? I get somebody to do what I want. Isn't that true? That is just the opposite of love. Love always sets people free.

What does love want? When I love someone, I want them to become who they really are. I want them to become the person God made them to be. And if I'm able to provide some kind of nurturing and helping environment for that, that is great. But you see, when I control, I do not allow freedom. And when I do not allow freedom, I am not loving. We need to think about this. This is why if one is the head of the other, it doesn't work. This is why the reading from the Ephesians, where we hear that the husband is the head of the wife, is contrary to what Jesus was talking

about. This letter was written after the teaching of Jesus no longer permeated the church.

Now, there are different ways of controlling. Some are straightforward and some are sneaky. I usually try to be sneaky. I'm too scared to be straightforward, so I usually try to control by being sneaky. There are different ways of controlling. One is by physical force. *I'm bigger, tougher and stronger than you and I can make you do what I want you to do or I'll pound you.* It's pretty obvious there's no love there. I just want you to do what I want you to do. There's no freedom allowed, no space that's allowed. Sometimes it's not the use of physical force—or maybe it is, because it's the threat of physical force. If I've got you subdued enough and I've beat you enough times, all I've got to do is look at you and you know what you're going to get. And so I control by the threat that physical force will be used.

Those are fairly obvious kinds of things. There are other ways of controlling, too, that are more subtle. These are emotional ways of controlling, like saying, *If you don't act the way I want you to act, I will leave you.* And if you fear being abandoned, you're going to conform. You see, that's not letting a person be free.

Controlling is done in another way, by using shame and guilt. This is just another way to manipulate people. If I can shame you and guilt you, that's one way that I can get you to do what I want. See, I'm over you by the use of the shame and the guilt. I'm dominating

you, even though it's a more subtle way than using my fists. But it's the same kind of thing.

When I use shame and guilt, I'm not loving you. I'm not helping you grow. Shame and guilt make it difficult or impossible to grow. The more I shame you, the less chance you have to grow in goodness. The more I make you feel guilty, the less chance you have to grow spiritually.

So when anybody in your family—and this does happen in families—shames or guilt you, don't take it on. If any church leaders shame or guilt you, don't take it on. There is no love there. It's control. And the more I control, the less I love. They are opposites. See what Jesus was talking about—why it's so important to Jesus that we be equal, that nobody be over somebody else and higher than somebody else and dominant over somebody else? Jesus says, "That is not the way it is in my kingdom. If you're going to see things through my eyes, the way Abba sees them, the way it's supposed to be, you're not going to have some people over other people."

This is very fundamental, what Jesus was talking about. So don't let anybody shame or guilt you. But it's hard not to, especially if we picked it up when we were little. If I am in a position of authority, man, if you've been shamed and guilted as a child, I can really get you. I can threaten you with hell. I can shame you that you're a bad person. I can send the message, *You're no good and you're awful and there's something wrong with you, unless you shape up and do things the way I want you to.*

That's hard to resist, because you're vulnerable. We're all especially vulnerable because we learned the shame and guilt when we were little.

I have a question that I think probably almost everybody has. *Why doesn't God do something about all the troubles and evils of the world, and the wars and the afflictions and diseases and stuff like this?* I'm going to suggest that the reason God does not change these things, does not step in and stop them, is because God is a lover and not a controller.

Controllers fix. Lovers allow freedom. Lovers walk with a person and help them know they're cared for, they're valuable, they're good. But lovers don't fix it. Lovers don't control. To the degree that we are controllers—to that degree, we are not lovers.

God is love. All that God is, is love. So God is not a controller. We can take a look at this, too. I have free will. I can do terrible things to myself and other people. Does God step in and stop it? No. God doesn't control.

It's interesting (I just learned this in the last year or so) that not only is there freedom in human beings, but there's freedom in the universe. It's not like the whole universe is planned and mapped out and going to go a certain kind of way. There's randomness in the universe, a certain amount of different kinds of possibilities. The universe does not necessarily go one way or the other. There's a kind of freedom—not the same kind of freedom we have as human beings, but a certain freedom

which again exemplifies that God is a lover, not a controller.

It's hard for us when we love somebody, not to fix things. Very, very hard. Probably hard for God, too. When God sees us getting into all kinds of messes, ruining our lives, ruining other people's lives, that must hurt God's heart and God must cry. But loving is more important, and that love will win. Not tomorrow, not next year. But that love, the most powerful thing there is in the universe, will finally win.

That's one of the reasons we say, "God is love." Love doesn't make everything nice right away, but in the long run there's nothing as powerful as love.

God bless you.

Allowing God to Enter Us

September 6, 1997

I'd like to start by reflecting on Mother Teresa a little bit. There are two ways we can look at her. One is to say she was truly a remarkable woman. And that's true. I also would suggest that Mother Teresa was very ordinary. What God accomplished in Mother Teresa, God intends to accomplish in each one of us.

All that Mother Teresa was, was someone who was willing to let God change her and transform her. And if we will allow God to change and transform us, we will all be like Mother Teresa. It's not as remarkable or unusual as we might think.

You see, the beginning of the spiritual life, the first stones, are the healing of the wounds inside of us. Because of those wounds, we resist God. We resist allowing God to enter into us and change us, to transform us. That's why we end up so much different from Mother Teresa. But if we allow God to do that—and it's painful because it means changing and letting go of some things—if we allow God to do that, what Mother Teresa has been is just an example of what all of us are called to be.

In the gospel today, Jesus gives a deaf man hearing. I think we can understand this on a deeper level than the hearing, the natural physical hearing which was cured. Deeper than this is that the power of God can help us to hear what God says. And what does God say to us? "I love you. You're beautiful. You're good.

You're holy. You're the apple of my eye.
I'm delighted in you. You are a wonderful,
beautiful person."

Now, that's what God is whispering in our ear all the time. But there's static and because there's static, we don't hear it. The static comes from the different messages we get. Those of you who are old enough to remember when we had radio—without boom boxes, you know—the static got so bad that we didn't hear what was being said. And that's exactly what happens.

Let's look at some of the static that we get. We get static from our families. We get static from our society. We get static from our religion. And these statics keep the message of God from coming into us. We don't hear it. It's drowned out and it's distorted, and so we do not begin the spiritual journey. We do not allow God to do in us what God did in Mother Teresa.

Let's take a look at some of this stuff. Maybe we got this at home. *Are you ever stupid! You're never going to amount to anything. Why don't you get good grades like your sister? Or be more like your brother? What IS the matter with you? I guess I should never have had you—we'd all be much better off.*

Those are voices that started when we were very young. And those voices pounding in our ear keep us from hearing what God is saying, so we don't hear God saying, "I love you. You're good. You're beautiful. You're holy. You're precious to me." What do we hear? Those other voices saying, *There's something*

wrong with you. You're stupid, you're no good, you're never going to amount to anything, I wish I had never had you. That's what we hear. And that wounds us extremely deeply.

Because we can't hear what God is saying, we don't get transformed. That is why it is so important, at the beginning of the spiritual life, that these wounds heal. It starts to reduce the static. And as the static is reduced, the power of God's words and love comes into us and transforms us.

There are other kinds of things, too, that hurt us. We get hurts, you know, from different kinds of beatings and slappings, from sexual abuse. We get hurts from being abandoned for various reasons. Maybe we went to the hospital when we were little. Sometimes things happen before we're out of the womb. And these abandonments, these hurts and abuses that we get, wound us. They're like static. Do you see what those wounds say to us? *There's something the matter with you. You're not okay. There's something wrong with you. You're a mixed-up, flawed person down in deep.* That's what we hear.

When we've been abandoned, we hear that we can't trust anybody. We didn't get the love we were supposed to get. We didn't get touched. When babies don't get touched, they get emotionally twisted. We need touch all through our lives, especially when we're tiny. That's the only way we get the message. What, for example, if the baby cries and cries and cries and nobody picks her up, what's the message to the baby? *This is a cruel, hostile world.*

You can't trust anybody. Your needs will never get met. And that static resounds in our ears.

I remember my mom saying to me, she said, "You know, John, when you were little, the doctors all said, 'Don't spoil the child. If the baby cries, let the baby cry it out. If you pick the baby up and comfort the baby, the baby will be spoiled, and you don't want a spoiled child.'" She said, "Well, I knew the doctors had to be right because they were smart, you know. They knew all this kind of stuff." But then she said, "Sometimes I did it anyway." How many of us went through that? We don't even remember it that much. But those messages got through. When God says, "Trust me, I love you," if we were not picked up, the voices saying, *You can't trust anybody, you can't trust anybody*, drown out the voice of God.

We get static from our society. Our society says, *If you're going to be happy, you must really be rich and you must really be successful. If you get enough money, if you have enough insurance policies, if you have all this kind of stuff and you're a successful person, then you'll be happy.*

And what happens is that these messages we get when we're older hook into the messages we got when we were little. Because there's an emptiness, a hole inside of us because of what happened, and so we think, *Oh, I can fill up the hole if I get enough money. I can fill up the hole if I'm a successful and famous person.* And so we strive for that, understandably we strive for that because the hole hurts so bad.

The pain is so deep, we'll reach out for anything. Just like a drowning person, we'll reach out for anything for survival. Only it doesn't work. These messages of our society wound us deeply, so very deeply, because they hook into the holes that were dug when we were little.

Alas, religion wounds us, too. We think, *Oh, religion will be the answer*. Baloney. It might be. It might not be. Religion can be terribly, terribly destructive. It's terribly destructive when it gives us messages of God that are false. *God is the judge, the tyrant, the policeman. God knows everything you do and everything you think. And if you're even thinking the wrong things, if you enjoy it, you're going to go to hell.* And we build guilt and we build shame. This is static. This is static that keeps us from hearing the voice of God.

When religion is destructive, run away. Run away fast. Religion can be wonderful. It can be an angel or a devil. So watch the messages that you get from religion. The message, *You're a terrible, sinful person*, means you're no good inside. And the voice of God saying, *You're wonderful and precious and good*, can't get through. Because the voice of religion is so strong and such terrible static, it interferes with the voice of God.

See all that junk we've got to go through? That's why we end up being such messes. Mother Teresa had her junk. I don't know what her childhood was, but she had her junk, too. I'm sure she was severely wounded like all

of us, but somehow she was able, at one point, to allow God to heal her. And that is the first step. That's why you hear this message from me over and over and over again. And you're going to keep hearing it for the next ten years. Because that is the first step in the spiritual life. It's the healing of the wounds, so the static is gradually lessened. And as the static is lessened, the love, the word that is God, can come into us and start to change us and transform us.

What Mother Teresa became is what God has in mind for every single one of us.

God bless you.

Intimacy with Jesus

May 6, 1990

The gospel story today has the familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This particular passage reminds us of the very close and intimate relationship to which Jesus calls us. The shepherd knows each one of the lambs by name. It's not just the whole flock—each one is an individual to him. This reminds us that Jesus thinks in this way, too. Each one of us as an individual is important and recognized by Jesus. Jesus does not want to be a stranger to us, he wants us to become close and intimate friends.

One of the dimensions of the spiritual journey is a close and intimate personal relationship with Jesus. This doesn't happen automatically. When people are friends, they have to have something to do with each other. They talk, share their hopes and dreams and fears—in other words, do things in a close, intimate fashion before they become deeper friends.

It's the same way with Jesus, too. Unless we do this, it is not likely that we will ever have that kind of intimate relationship with Jesus. There are various ways we can do it, but we each have to find our own kind of way. I'll give you some suggestions of ways to deepen that intimacy with Jesus.

Some of us might take a passage of Scripture. Let's use the example of the Good Shepherd. We often see the picture where Jesus has a little lamb over his shoulder and is carrying

him back to the flock. Maybe we can imagine that—that Jesus is holding us. We might do this, particularly at times when we feel lost or depressed. Jesus picks us up and carries us home. We might use the image of Jesus doing that for us.

We might also choose the image, particularly when we are sad or hurt, that Jesus is holding us and we cry. As we cry, Jesus holds us and says, “I love you. I understand your pain. I cannot take it all away, but I will help you through it.”

Perhaps we could say the Lord’s prayer, the “Our Father,” and imagine that we are sitting with Jesus saying this prayer together, because God is Jesus’ father, too. Maybe we also want to bring some other people into that image, people who are especially close to us. We are all saying it together.

Perhaps it would work better without images. Maybe we just want to spend some time in the presence of God, in the presence of Jesus. In whatever situation we put ourselves, we just try to be as real as we can. In the presence of Jesus we offer our hurts, our flaws and our sins, and the things that don’t make sense to us. We offer our angers, our frustrations, our resentments and our hatreds. We offer warm and fuzzy things, happy things in our lives, our joys—whatever things are in us.

For some of us, it might help if we do this as we breathe, as we are quiet. It’s like taking all that is in us, things that we think are good *and* bad, whatever they might be, and as we

breathe in, we are giving them all to Jesus. As we breathe out, we imagine that the power and the love of God is going through all these things that we have given to him, to make them well.

We all have to find our own kind of way. We have to experiment; we have to practice. It can't be done just by reading a book, but I would encourage everyone to try to find some way of doing it. As we do it, our insides become healed. It doesn't mean there are no problems, no pain or sorrow, or that all those negative things are taken away. That's not true. But we do become healed. We become deeper and more grace-filled people.

For some of us, healing may happen this way. For others, it may happen in small groups where people share their faith. But I would encourage everyone to find some way to allow this to happen to them. This is one very important element of our whole spiritual journey and growth. Jesus wants us to be on intimate terms with Him, not just someone far off in the sky.

As this healing takes place within us, as we become more graceful with the power of God within us, then we will move on to works of justice and works of peace-making. But we will do them in a different kind of way, because we are not doing them just by our own power, but more by the power of God working through us—the power of God that is formed inside of us through our intimate relationship with Jesus. That power will enable us to be very strong, but at the same time very gentle.

That power will enable us to be as wise as serpents and as simple as doves. We will be able to be very clear and honest, and at the same time respectful. We will have very strong opinions and convictions, but we will also be humble.

Our works of justice and peacemaking, when they grow out of the power of God developing and growing inside of us, have a different character. They lose none of their strength. In fact, their strength may be greater. They lose none of their clarity, honesty or conviction—those things may be even deeper. There's a change because there is humility, respect and gentleness coming from the power of God working within us.

This wraps up the spiritual journey. On the inward journey, we grow in deep intimacy. On the outward journey, we make a difference in our world.

God bless you.