

Homilies for the Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time:

- [Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B - Don L. Fischer](#)
 - [I'm Falling in Love with God - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
 - [Whoever Welcomes One Such Child... - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
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Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

The Judeo-Christian tradition is a rich source in understanding the human condition, understanding the world we live in, and understanding the God who has created us. One of the things we sense from the book of Genesis all the way to the book of Revelation, as the books of the Bible unfold, is that in the New Testament particularly we get a clearer and clearer image of who this God really is and what he is trying to do for us. From the beginning, we know that this God exists, that he created the world, and that he is the source of everything. At the end of the whole set of readings and the thousands of years of experience with this God, we see him not just as a powerful creator but the most fascinating thing is that we see him as an intimate lover. God moves from a distant, powerful creator to an intimate lover who wants to show us how to live, which ultimately is to show us how to love. Of all the things we are asked to deal with in this world, one of the great paradoxes we have to struggle with is evil. Why is evil here? What is evil for? How do we deal with evil? Let's look at that last statement primarily: How do we deal with evil?

From the very beginning in the stories, we recognize that evil entered in and that it wasn't something God forced on people. Rather, evil was something that people seemed prone to. As God gave us free will, we recognize that we made choices we would not necessarily have made had we been able to see more. We end up choosing things that are very painful and destructive. When we look at the human condition, we see human beings struggling with good and evil, making choices between the two, and always being profoundly affected by those choices. We are changed by these choices. We are led more into the truth by them or led more into illusion. We see, in the whole process, our struggle between the two issues of goodness and evil. I would say that so much of the Old Testament is geared to make us aware of the negative impact of evil. When people choose evil, when a whole community gets engaged in it, there is great catastrophe. There is great trauma, calamity, and destruction. We see over and over again that evil does not work; it is not a good choice. It is a choice that ultimately leads to death. But human beings are not very good at staying away from it. We just keep going back to it, over and over again. Let's just say that one of the conditions we recognize when Jesus came into the world was a great sense of evil's power. The best thing we could do was stay away from it, cut ourselves out from anything that was like it. Avoid it. Then, the irony is that the more we try to stay away from evil, the more it seems to come around. I would say it's impossible to stay away from it. We never find a group of people who simply never had to deal with

evil after disciplining themselves to weed it out, getting rid of all the bad characters, all of the bad habits. We never find a community that ended up being squeaky clean that was really honest. If there were a few groups who pretended to be that way, we know that it didn't last long. There was a crack, and the whole thing fell apart.

Let's look at this figure Jesus, who came into the world to show us how to deal with evil. The way he taught us most is learning how to deal with the effects of evil, because the effects of evil are always negative, painful, destructive. What do we do with those things? How do we respond to them? I would think that throughout the Old Testament we see a system, a sacrificial system, where if people did something wrong and they experienced something painful by breaking their covenant with God, there was one way they got back to God: They would go through some sort of purification process, and that process of purification often entailed sacrifice. They would make sacrifices for their sins. They had an entire sacramental system, a system of ritual, where they made up for sins by giving up something. When Jesus comes into the world, he wants to work with that image. He says something extraordinary. He's trying to teach people that they should learn there is going to be a shift in his teaching: He wants to make sure people know it is not sacrifice God has wanted for our sins. What Jesus really asks for in dealing with our sin is mercy. "Not sacrifice, but learn what I mean when I say, 'I want mercy.'" The sacrificial system has gotten into our imaginations, and I certainly think it was in my mind as a young man growing up. The way I understood sacrifice was something like this: I would commit a sin, God would then punish me for that sin, and as I went through that punishment, that was the sacrifice I was asked to make. Usually it would mean that if I chose some evil, I lost something. I had to give up something. If I lied to all my friends, I had to give up that friendship. I realized that this was what I had to pay for. I had to endure it. You pay for your sins.

One of the things that happens with this kind of theology of punishment is that we are always making up for our sins. Ultimately, we can take this way of thinking into the New Testament and we can look at Jesus on the cross, and we can hear the words, "This death of Jesus on the cross is the ransom for our sins. He is paying for our sins." It's obvious we might then fall into the trap of thinking that this God of ours is so hungry for revenge, he is so anxious for people to make up for their sins, to be in pain for what they have done, and what gives God pleasure is that the people who have sinned are now in pain. As they experience the pain, then the relationship is repaired. This would make God someone who is bloodthirsty for revenge. That just cannot be. That is not the God of the Old Testament or the New Testament. This is not the God who hates the sinner and seeks to make them pay by writhing in pain. Somehow my own image of Jesus on the cross in my upbringing was God asking a human being to make up for all of the sins of humanity. So he went through the most excruciating, humiliating, awful experience. I want you to follow through with me on something just to shift this, so you can understand something about who Jesus truly is. In our tradition, we do not believe Jesus was simply a human being. He was human, but he was also God. He was also divinity. What we see on the cross is also God. It gets tricky, but stay with me. If this God is in pain, in suffering, because of his desire to give life and speak the truth, and he is in the human condition trying to do what is good and right, then it means we often find those people who suffer like he did are the people who suffer the most. They suffer because there is this evil power in the world that wants to destroy them. Here is God experiencing pain and suffering because he is simply doing what he is supposed to do: He is loving. He is trying to give life. He is there for the good. When he goes through this experience, we see him do the most extraordinary thing. On the cross, this God, this man, this man-God hanging there, looks around at what is

happening to him, and he says the most extraordinary thing, “Father, don’t hurt these people for what they’re doing. Don’t do anything to them because they really don’t know what they’re doing. I want to love them still, even though they have done all this negative to me.” That is an image of who God is — and the best of what humanity is. Merciful, forgiving, understanding, not demanding any payback.

Could it be that what Jesus is doing on the cross more than anything else is explaining to us how God responds to evil. And simply inviting us to respond in the same way. How do you respond to evil in the most effective way? Forgiving it. Not demanding that somebody pay. Not demanding revenge. Not demanding that people be punished. Somehow, if evil, when it causes sin also causes pain and suffering (and that’s the most excruciating part of it) then how could there be a God who would then insist on pain and suffering being given back, because pain and suffering have been given initially? Doesn’t that sound like creating more evil? Creating more pain? Creating more suffering? Don’t confuse the normal way in which, if we do something negative, others need to be protected from that. If we have lost our ability to make the right choices, society and human beings have the right to protect themselves. I’m not talking about that. That’s not the punishment I am talking about. I am talking about that bloodthirsty revenge that if you have caused me pain, I want you to be in pain, because that’s the only way I am going to get past my pain. If I inflict my pain on you. Isn’t it amazing that we could somehow think this is who God is? That God sees in Jesus, not himself, not his Son, but that he sees humanity — and humanity is writhing in pain. God is finally satisfied that humanity is writhing in all this pain, so he says, “Okay, now I’ll forgive.” It’s just the opposite. In the Old Testament, we see the image of a suffering servant. Why is God so interested in making the image of who is really good and righteous in his sight — that is the servant — suffer? When we listen to the words of the Scripture, “The Lord was pleased to crush the servant with infirmity,” we think, “Oh, great.”

Here is the servant of God, working for God, and he says, “I want you to be crushed.” Why? Unless he says that the service of the servant is to give people an understanding of how they are to deal with evil. If the servant is crushed and refuses to crush back, then the servant is really serving, the servant is really giving life. Notice in the gospel of Mark, that each time Jesus describes the suffering he will endure, there is a very interesting reaction on the part of the disciples. The first time in Mark, when Jesus says he will have to go to Jerusalem, he will have to give himself over to evil, he will suffer and die, Peter looks at him and says, “This is the dumbest idea I have ever heard. This doesn’t make any sense. This is totally wrong. Why should the Son of Man, this Messiah of ours, have to go through anything negative? We want you to crush all of those terrible, rotten people. We want you up there demanding blood. We don’t want you up there bleeding.” Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.” The next time Jesus brings this up in Mark, the disciples are confused. He is trying to explain what it means to be a suffering servant. The disciples get into an argument. They talk about who is the greatest. Who is the best. I guarantee that their criteria was not over who suffered patiently the best. But probably who was the strongest, much in the way we think of strength in the world. Who has the most authority. Who has the most power. Who gets the most things done. Who is the most protected. Who is the most favored by God, by having the best life. In the gospel today, Jesus has just again spoken about the suffering he has to go through, the model he is going to be for them and for the world. How he wants us to see that there is a God who patiently loves us as we do these horrible things to him, as sin impacts this figure of God-man. If we could see what he is trying to say, maybe then we could have a chance of doing it. He’s just explained it again. James and John come up to Jesus, in the gospel of Mark. In the gospel

of Matthew, the mother of James and John comes up to Jesus to ask him to give her sons a place on either side of him in the kingdom. In both cases, here's the deal: "We (James and John) are going through this with you. It's pretty difficult and we want to make sure we have a position of power and authority when we get to the other side." They were not thinking about the suffering they would have to go through, even though Jesus tells them: "Do you realize the cup you are going to have to drink?"

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, "Father, if you could just let this cup pass by. I don't want to do this." Jesus is saying that if we can ultimately say yes to the way evil impacts us and still come back with love and forgiveness then we are going to be able to see this. The disciples turn around and say, "What kind of position are we going to have when all of this is over? Could we be at your right side and your left side, meaning the most powerful positions in the kingdom?" Jesus shakes his head and realizes that they don't understand. They don't get it. So he goes on to say very clearly, "What I want you to understand about authority is that the authority I want to give you is not the authority of power over. The real authority, the real power I am giving you, is the power to give in. The power to suffer. The power to be a part of the plan, without turning around. And when evil is in the plan, not returning evil for evil. Not making someone pay for what they have done to you." Imagine if every single offense against every single person tomorrow was responded to with love, understanding, and forgiveness. If someone else felt that if someone else made them suffer, they didn't blame them, they didn't make them suffer, they didn't make them pay. They simply understood this was part of the whole human condition. And they continued to love and to trust in the goodness that must be buried inside that person! Imagine what that would do to the world! Imagine that that's the way all relationships work. Imagine that this is the way that is modeled in every experience. Isn't it true that we are mimetic people. We imitate. One of the things we most likely imitate is people's reaction to things. If everybody today talks about something bad that has happened to them and talks about how they are going to get back, that's what we are taught. The worst part is when we see God as the one who is asking humanity to suffer in order to win his friendship. Then we're in deep trouble. That can't be who God truly is.

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I'm Falling in Love with God

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Two weeks ago a nun I do not know wrote me I'm glad I did. Not for the obvious reason. Rather because at the end our thoughtful sister told a swift, touching story. A sister in her community is 86. One day this aging sister stopped my correspondent and said very simply: "Please pray for me. I'm falling in love with God."

"I'm falling in love with God." Not a gurgle from the geriatrics ward; not a mewling from Medicare. A vibrant message for all of us—your homilist included. Hence this homily. Three stages to my song and dance. Stage 1 is a word from your Creator: How important is it to fall in love with God? Stages 2 and 3 are words from your not so humble servant: How in point of fact can you fall in love with God?

I

First, how important is it to fall in love with God? The 86-year-old sister of my introduction was not whistling in the dark. She was echoing a very ancient and surely the most significant command the world's Creator ever thundered to us earthlings. It goes back to that motley mob of unruly, runaway slaves God chose to be His people—culturally undistinguished, often rebellious, frequently unfaithful, unpredictable, unreliable. As Moses told them, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you ... that the Lord ... redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut 7:7—8).

On this people of His predilection the Lord enjoined a solemn command: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4). And lest you be tempted to consign this command to a dead history, God's Son-in-flesh, when asked by a lawyer for "the first commandment of all," responded in almost identical words: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk 12:30).

This is not a polite request: "If you feel like it, would you be so kind as to love me?" This is an order—the most important command God will ever give you. You can keep all God's other orders perfectly—respect parents, sanctify Sunday, keep from killing, never lust after another's wealth or wife—but if you don't love God, sure as hell you're in deep trouble.

And the love God demands of you is not an ordinary love, not a matter of words, not something you act out on Sunday, fulfill by listening to a three-point homily. Have you ever loved anyone—man, woman, or child—"with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength"? Then you have a fair idea of the kind of love God wants from you. Not simply a head trip, an act of faith, recitation of a creed; rather a love that burns you, consumes you, makes for ecstasy and agony, dark nights of the soul and self-surrender to whatever God asks.

II

But if love is God's command to all who believe, how in fact do you fall in love with God? Like all loving, the ways are beyond counting. Many of you, I'm sure, could tell me your own story of divine love. For those still searching or skeptical, still puzzled or confused, I suggest two avenues to love. Each should surprise you, may make you wonder whether your homilist is finally off his rocker.

One avenue I call contemplation. Not the popular sense of "contemplate," which you might instantly associate with "navel." Contemplation in its profound sense is just as real as your navel but immeasurably more exciting. My Carmelite friend William McNamara once called contemplation

experiential awareness of reality...a way of entering into immediate communion with reality. Reality? Why, that means people, trees, lakes, mountains...You can study things, but unless you enter into this intuitive communion with them, you can only know *about* them, you don't *know* them. To take a long loving look at something—a child, a glass of wine, a beautiful meal—this is a natural act of contemplation, of loving

admiration...To be able to do that, there's the rub. All the way through school we are taught to abstract; we are not taught loving awareness.

Never have I heard contemplation more engagingly defined: a long loving look at the real. It's simply a different way of knowing. Whether it's Beethoven's *Mass in D* or a ruddy glass of Burgundy, the Mona Lisa smiling in the Louvre or Patrick Ewing soaring to the hoop, an infant rising to birth from a womb or Christ Jesus descending to death in a tomb—whatever or whoever, you no longer analyze it or argue it, no longer describe or define it; you are one with it. You do not move around it; you enter into it. Dip your hand into Potomac's waters: You can say "Ah yes, H₂O," or you can simply let the water trickle through your fingers in loving awareness. To contemplate is to rest in the real. Not lifelessly or languidly, not sluggishly or inertly. Your whole being is alive, incredibly responsive, vibrating to every throb of the real. Most of you experience it without realizing it—as you watch a burning sun sink behind the hills, sit entranced before *Swan Lake* or sway with Springsteen, meet the eyes of someone with whom you are wildly one. It's not study, not cold examination, not a computer. To contemplate is to be in love.

So should you regard your God. Theology, organized study about God, is good indeed; I make my living at it. But better still is contemplation. I am reminded of Eric Gill's outraged protest: "Good Lord! The thing was a mystery and we measured it!"

But how realize your capacity for contemplation? Four ways. First, some sort of desert experience. Not necessarily the physical desert of the Bible, but any experience that brings you face to face with solitude, with vastness, with powers of life and death beyond your control; some experience—like illness or mid-life crisis—where you opt for living or life destroys you.

Second, develop a feeling for festivity. I mean activity that is not tied to other goals, to "so that" and "in order to." You take usable time and withdraw it from utility. You simply enjoy. You reject the 20th century American article of faith: "Only useful activity is valuable, meaningful, moral."¹ You don't feel guilty if you have nothing to "do." You admit with delight that you took yesterday "off," that you "did" nothing, that you just enjoyed. You raise eyebrows at a party by asking not "What do you do?" but "Who are you?" You remember Darwin's regret: "if I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week."²

Third, don't try to "possess" the object of your delight—whether God or a human you love, imprisoned marble or free-flowing rivulet. With Walter Kerr you have to reverse an adage:

A bird in the hand is *not* worth two in the bush—unless one is an ornithologist, the curator of the Museum of Natural History, or one of those Italian vendors who supply restaurants with larks. A bird in the hand is no longer a bird at all: it is a specimen; it may be dinner. Birds are birds only when they are in the bush or on the wing; their worth as birds can only be known at a discreet and generous distance.³

Fourth, read, make friends with, remarkable men and women who have themselves looked long and lovingly at the real: Augustine of Hippo and Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Antoine de Saint Exupery and Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Thomas Merton and Thomas More, Mother Teresa and Teilhard de Chardin—hundreds of women and men who have smashed through boundaries and touched the very face of God.

Try it, good friends. Beyond sheer study, loving awareness: a long loving look at the real. For a change, let science be silent. Let your whole being—spirit and senses—revel in the real: in the things of God, the people of God, God's very self. Don't analyze the orchid; smell it! Don't dissect your sisters and brothers; enjoy them! Above all, don't misspend your life proving God exists; open yourself to God in love!

III

This leads into my third point, my second avenue to love of God: God's images, people. And here I mean the most unlikely images of God. It is a story of terror and hope.

In the Times Square area of New York, amid the porno theaters and massage parlors, surrounded by pimps and prostitutes, drug dealers and speed freaks, stands Covenant House, invention of Franciscan Bruce Ritter. Through its doors each year troop boys and girls by the thousands. Runaway kids. Street kids. Used-up, burned-out kids. Kids who had to keep from crying, however much it hurt, while they were sold like so much meat, forced to pose naked for filthy films, give their bodies to nice married men out on the town, smile while pimps and johns wasted their flesh and their spirit.

Father Ritter has written a small book with a profound title: *Sometimes God Has a Kid's Face*.⁴ Listen to just one of the book's poignant episodes. Ritter is about to be filmed in a documentary about Covenant House; he gets into conversation with an 18-yearold street kid helping out with the documentary.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks for starting Covenant House."

"Thank God," I said.

"No," he said. "Thank you."

"Don't you believe in God?" I said.

Rick shrugged slightly. "Why should I?" he said. "God *never* did anything for me.... It's been pretty bad for me, Bruce. I'm a drifter—four years.... Have been since I was 14. There's not much about me that you would want to know. God either." He gave a grim little hurting smile.

"You're *here*," I said, "and that's enough," I said. "We don't have to start anywhere else. I think God sent you here."

"No, he didn't," Rick said. "I needed a place to stay. That's all. A john dropped me off. Not God. Why should God care about what happens to me? Why should I care about God?"

"Did you ever fall in love with somebody?" I said. "Really in love?"

He nodded slightly.

"Did they ever ask you why you loved them? Did you have a reason? Did you need a reason?"

"No," he said.

"Neither does God," I said. "He doesn't need to have you love him back."

"That's good," he said, "because I don't."

... And then he gave me a rib-crunching hug. I hugged him back.

"Thanks," he said.

"Thank God," I said. "No," he said, "thank you."

"Maybe thank God?" I said.

"Maybe," he said. "It's easier to trust you, Bruce. You're here. I never saw God and I never will."

"Don't be so sure," I said. "You will," I said. "If *I* will you will," I said. At the end [of the filming], the reporter asked me why I do what I do. "I do what I do because of God," I answered. "And sometimes, God has a kid's face." It wasn't hard to play that scene. I just kept thinking of God and seeing Rick's face.⁵

That, good friends, is contemplation: a long loving look at the real.

"And so what?" you ask. Just a passionate prayer on my part. I pray that you may discover the delights of contemplation long before you retire; for at 65 it's easier to start jogging than to begin contemplating. I pray that if you have trouble finding God—in God's Word and works, in God's Bread—you will find God in kids. Not only in the gifted and the beautiful, but especially in the beaten and abused, the deflowered and the fearful, the sinful and the cynical, the raped and the restless, the defeated and despairing.

The problem, I fear, is that you and I will not find God there unless we meet God where they are—and that's not very pretty. It need not be Times Square, but neither is it the Kennedy Center. It's more likely to be the homes where GU students tutor, the street corners of the impoverished, the alleys where love is lust, the schools where crack is king, the jails for juveniles. Not easy places to crash, but that's where the image of God is defaced and disfigured, hidden beneath the grime and the grit.

It's not Disneyland, not Wonderland; but it's where God's chosen children are, and so it's where God is—by preference, as with Jesus. It's worth looking into, wouldn't you say? You'd not only be helping a crucified Christ; you'd be helping yourself. For you might end up pleading "Please pray for me. I'm falling in love with God."

From *To Christ I Look* © 1989 Paulist Press.

Whoever Welcomes One Such Child...

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Today's Gospel scene is packed with insights. Insights into what it means to be a Christian. Specifically, what it means to be a Christian leader. James and John, who should have known better, are startlingly blunt with Jesus: "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (Mk 10:35). And what is it they want? Status in the kingdom to come. "When you, Jesus, preside at the messianic banquet at the end of time, we want to sit at your right and at your left; we want the seats of power, where people will wait on us, serve us, bow before us." Jesus' response? "Can you suffer and die as I shall?" Their confident answer: "Why, of course we can." Then comes the lesson in leadership. "Yes, you will suffer and die as I do; but seats of power? What earthly rulers and lords, despots and tyrants have? This is not for you. Why not? Because it is not for me. I took your flesh not to be served but to serve, to die for others. If you want to be great in my kingdom, if you want to be first where I reign, you become a slave of everyone." Notice the Greek word: not just a servant; a slave. Total self-giving.

It is in this context that on this Sunday we focus on children. For as we search the signs of our times, as we struggle to understand what this moment in history demands of us, as we seek to discover urgent Christian service, as we ask of Jesus not what he can do for us but what we can do for him, the most vulnerable of humans loom before us. So then, three

stages to today's homily: (1) today's child; (2) today's Christian; (3) today's service.

I

First, today's child. Look at our own dear "land of the free." An America where the infant mortality rate is higher than that of 19 other industrialized nations. An America where in 1990, in one year alone, 407,000 minors were placed in foster homes. An America where each day at least three children die of injuries inflicted by abusive parents. An America where each day over 500 children 10 to 14 begin using illegal drugs, over a thousand start on alcohol. An America where one child in eight has an alcoholic parent. An America where each day over 1400 teenage girls become mothers—two thirds of them unmarried. An America where among teens 15 to 19 the third-leading cause of death is firearms. An America whose capital city starts school with a weapons check. An America where the rate of teenage suicide has tripled in 30 years, where a million youngsters sleep on our streets each night. An America where HIV infection is a national disaster. An America where each year 1.6 million children are forcibly prevented from ever seeing the light of day. An America where there are greater tax benefits for breeding horses than for raising children. An America where one of every four youngsters you see is living in some sort of hell.

I look at my own back yard. In the District of Columbia a dismaying trend has recently come to light. Children in Washington are planning their own funerals: how they want to look, how be dressed, where be waked. Not out of curiosity, playacting; not from a Christian consciousness of death's significance. They simply do not believe they will be around very long, have every reason to suspect they will not grow up. Where they play, coke and crack are homicidal kings. In a five-year period, 224 of their childhood friends died from gunfire. Some were deliberate targets, others just bystanders, at least one lying in a cradle. And so the living little ones have begun planning for the worst, as if their own murders are inevitable, as if their own dreams will surely be just as cruelly cut short. Children...

Now cast your eyes across the world. Do you know how many children may well die this decade alone, the 90s, most from diseases we have learned to cure? One hundred and fifty million.

II

Second, what is a Christian reaction to all this? Sympathy? Tears? Get that bloated stomach off my TV? Things are tough all over? Pope John Paul II phrased it bluntly: "In the Christian view, our treatment of children becomes a measure of our fidelity to the Lord himself," the Lord who asserted, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Mt 18:5). Today's Christian must echo the United Nations Children's Fund that phrased the pertinent moral principle in 1990 with devastating clarity:

...whether a child survives or not, whether a child is well-nourished or not; whether a child is immunized or not, whether a child has a school to go to or not, should not have to depend on whether interest rates rise or fall, on whether commodity prices go up or down, on whether a particular political party is in power, on whether the economy has been well managed or not, on whether a country is at war or not, or on any other trough or crest in the endless and inevitable undulations [of] political and economic life in the modern nation state.²

But we echo UNICEF not primarily because we share its milk of human kindness, its admirable awareness that the world's treatment of children is ethically unjust. Indeed it is. We are not simply giving to children what they have a right to expect, a right that can be proven from philosophy and has often been written into law. Good as such motivation is, the Christian approach rises above the sheerly ethical. Our motivation is biblical justice.

And what is biblical justice? Fidelity to relationships, to responsibilities, especially as these stem from our covenant with God in Christ. What relationships, what responsibilities? To God, whom we simply must love above all else, with all our mind and heart and soul and strength. To every brother and sister shaped in God's own image, loving them not merely as much or as little as we love ourselves, but as if we were standing in their shoes. To the very earth on which we dance so lightly, the earth that nourishes us with its life, the earth we ravage and rape as if we owned it, as if there is to be no tomorrow.

In our relationships with sisters and brothers, a preferential option must go to the poor. Not because they are better or holier than the well-to-do, but because they are in greater need. This is the way our God comes through to us in the pages of God's own Book. This is what the God of the Prior Testament demanded of the kings that served God's people. And the "poor" are not only those who are economically disadvantaged. The poor are all those who weep and bleed under oppression. The poor are those of whom Yahweh spoke through the prophet Isaiah (Isa 58:6—7):

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

The poor are those of whom Jesus spoke when he told us on what basis we will ultimately be judged: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt 25:35—36). In Christian service it is Christ whom we serve in his images.

III

These principles that undergird all Christian service lead into my third point: today's service. If it is the greater need that summons us more urgently, then our children, the most vulnerable, the most defenseless, of our sisters and brothers, have a special claim on our service. But what sort of service? Concretely, what are we to do?

Actually, no homilist can spell out what any given Christian must do. All of us must ask with Saul hurled from his horse, "What am I to do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10). So much depends on who I am, where I am, the gifts with which God has graced me. But this much can be said: We need not fly to Bosnia or the sub-Sahara to find that there is "no room in the inn" for the world's children. Our "inns" stare us in the face. Some suggestions may prove practical.

First, the children within our own families. It is not only the physically and sexually abused that cry out to us. All our children do: cry loudly or mutely for attention, for love, for good example, for parents who live their baptism, their consecration to Christ, who have not been caught up in the rugged individualism that has captured our culture, the race that is to the swift, the shrewd, the savage. Are our children, for all practical purposes, latchkey children—children who rarely see their parents, spend more time with TV than with mother and father? Early Christians called the family a small church, a domestic church. It should be the Church in miniature, a community of love. Is mine?

Second, what are the children's issues within my parish limits? Where do they hurt? Hunger? One-parent families? Inferior education? Drug dealers on the streets? Violence against or among children? Not only the Catholic children; all children. I believe it was James Cardinal Hickey of Washington D.C. who was asked by a devout Catholic why we help so many people who are not Catholic, and replied, "We don't help them because *they* are Catholic but because we are Catholic." Is there anything I do within the parish? Am I personally active? Do I visit the children's wards in hospitals, homes for the orphaned? Am I involved in the schools? Does my parish have special events, social and liturgical, for children, for youth? Do I ever look into the vacant, hopeless eyes of a child unloved?

Third, beyond the parish boundaries: community outreach. The day of the Lone Ranger is gone. To get things done on a large scale, we have to organize, become part of something larger, more influential than the individual. Am I involved in any civic organizations that focus on children? Have I ever written to my representatives in Congress on children's issues, complimented them, challenged them? Do I support Bread for the World, Covenant House, the Children's Defense Fund? Am I even aware of the remarkable work they do? What do I know about the bishops' long-term campaign Putting Children and Families First?

I too have a dream. A dream that would transfigure the face of America. I dream that between now and the birthday of the Christ Child each Christian will look into the eyes of one child, a single child abused or neglected, homeless or hungry, unloved or unwanted, be moved to anguish at the experience, and resolve to change that child's life, give him or her a tiny but real hope that tomorrow will be different, worth living for, worth waiting for. One child. But in that one child...always the Christ Child.

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