

Chapter 4

The Fourth Secret: The Shareable Gift of God

Human beings need to know that they have contributions to make to others. We need to know that other human beings depend on the help we provide. An essential part of our sense of self-worth is that our lives serve a purpose for others.

Our benefit to others is not the whole of our purpose in life. If you were the only person in the world, you would still need to know that the answer to the question "Why did God make me?" is "To know, love and serve him and be happy with him in heaven." But you are not the only person in the world, and God has given each of us the ability and the mission to contribute to the needs of our fellows; we each have the status of being needed by others in some way. And it is essential to our sense of self-worth that we be aware that other people depend on contributions we can make.

A Catholic I know, call him Pat, had never realized that his life was important for others until he made a retreat that turned out to be a conversion experience for him. Before that time what being created to know, love and serve God meant to Pat was that Christianity was an obstacle course we had to navigate to make ourselves worthy of getting to heaven, an obstacle course to traverse out of fear of going to hell. On that retreat, he realized that Christianity was God loving him so much that God's only Son suffered and died to take away his sins and gain infinite life for him. But he also realized that God loves him so much that God allows him to participate in Jesus's ministry of giving infinite life by being a channel of infinite life for others. The fact that he shared Jesus's life meant that he shared Jesus's power of bringing divine life to his fellow human beings. What a glorious calling; what infinite importance his life had. God had created him to accomplish a mission other people needed. In fact, the contribution he could make to other people was, in the last analysis, the only thing they needed.

Of course, Pat could not earn divine life for others, as Jesus did. But since Jesus had earned divine life for him, he could help Jesus distribute that life to others. Not only did he

have the ability to do so, he also had the vocation; Jesus had given him that mission. For unless those who already have divine life share it with others, those who do not yet have it never will.

What Pat learned on that retreat is something every Christian deserves to know as a sacred re-birth right: We all have the glorious privilege and responsibility of bringing divine life to our fellow human beings and helping them grow in that life. This truth, too, comes before the institutional structure of the Church in the hierarchy of truths. To make sense of truths about the Church's structure, we must first know the truths that Jesus gave us the mission of carrying on the work of salvation and that he gave that mission, not to individuals working as individuals, but to a community of united individuals. Yet this glorious vocation is another de facto secret in today's Church, despite the fact that Paul VI's encyclical, On Evangelization in the Modern World says:

Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass (14).

And in his *Ad Limina* visit with the bishops of New Zealand, John Paul II said that the proclamation of the Great News "is a duty that no single believer can ignore," adding:

Sent by the Lord himself into the vineyard -- the home, schools, the workplace, civic organizations -- Christ's disciples find no time for "standing idle in the marketplace," nor can they be so absorbed by the internal aspects of parish life that they are distracted from the command to evangelize others actively.

Spurred on by word and strengthened by sacrament, the followers of Jesus must return to their vineyard burning with a desire to speak of Christ and to show him to the world.¹

As those who are already workers in the vineyard, all Christians have the mission of ensuring as many as possible join them and receive the same daily wage as they will, no matter

how late in the day the others join (Mt 20:1-16; but how many times do you hear the message of that parable applied to all Christians' call to work for the salvation of non-Christians, a meaning that would not likely be lost on early Christians as they kept receiving converts).

If every Christian has the privilege and responsibility of helping others get to heaven and avoid hell, the Church has the responsibility of making us continuously aware of that mission and teaching us how to accomplish it. Christians need repeated instruction and encouragement in their mission of cooperating in Jesus's salvation of others, just as they need to be repeatedly reminded of the Great News and their need to repent. This chapter will discuss some of the principal things Christians have to know to accomplish their mission and pastoral leaders, clerical and lay, have to know to help them accomplish it.

1.

Taken out of the context of other Christian truths, the fact that we have the mission of giving divine life to others could be misleading. We might be tempted to equate helping one another achieve eternal life with performing external works like door-to-door evangelism or teaching CCD, no matter how sinful our lives might be otherwise. But the same external works can be performed by those in sanctifying grace and those in mortal sin. The truth that we can perform external works that help others achieve eternal life does not replace the truth that our purpose in life is to know, love and serve God.

When the Epistle of James said that "Whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will . . . cover a multitude of sins" (Jm 5:20), it was referring to the venial sins of the one bringing the sinner back, not the mortal sins. Still, James was not denying that venial sin weakens our ability to share divine life with others. And mortal sin deprives us of that ability. For the primary thing we do to help one another get to heaven is to live the life of sanctifying grace, that is, to love God above all things and our neighbors, especially our Christian brothers and sisters, as ourselves.

Let everyone know that their first and most important obligation for the spread of the faith is this: to lead a profoundly Christian life (Vatican II, Decree on the Mission

Activity of the Church, 36).

In other words, we share divine life with others by acts motivated by God's love. Those acts should include social action, but they should also include works that are specifically evangelizing and/or sanctifying of others. "There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed" (Evangelization in the Modern World, 22).

In one way, mortal sin does not prevent our sharing divine life with others. For example, a priest in mortal sin still has his sacramental powers and can restore others to sanctifying grace in the sacrament of reconciliation. But in another way at least as important, mortal sin does prevent our sharing divine life with others. The reason a priest in mortal sin has penitents to absolve is that other Christians who are in sanctifying grace have offered prayers, sufferings and good works for the conversion of sinners out of divine love, the life of sanctifying grace. In answer to those prayers, God gave the priest's penitents the actual grace to repent and seek the sacrament, and arranged that they would be able to find a priest at the place and time when they sought to receive it.

Likewise, lay people in mortal sin can be successful door-to-door evangelists bringing people to Christ.

On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me you evildoers" (Mt 7:22-23).

The reason for the success of such evangelists is not the evangelists themselves but the prayers, sacrifices and good works of other Christians in the state of grace whose actions spring from God's love dwelling in them. God answers their prayers by sending actual graces to prepare the hearts of those who will hear the evangelists' message and by ensuring that the evangelists will be in the right place at the right time, even against their will. In fact, if an ordained or lay evangelist was determined to frustrate God's plans, that could not pre-

vent God from using them for his purposes. None of our bad intentions or bad acts can frustrate the plan of almighty God who only permits evils from which he will draw good.

The responsibility and power for giving people divine life does not belong solely to ordained ministers. All Christians share that responsibility and power by being in sanctifying grace; for all Christians are capable of the prayers, sufferings and works that bring the actual graces that make the ministries of the ordained succeed. This is another reason why it is imperative that ordained ministers understand how to teach people to respond to sacramental grace. At the ex opere operato level, the sacramental ministry of priests ensures that divine grace will always be available through the Church regardless of the sanctity of the Church's members. At the ex opere operantis level, however, that ministry just provides the occasion for the actual graces that come through the sanctity of all Christians to achieve their goal.

When the Church speaks of the cleric's ministry as being specifically sacred in contrast to the lay person's ministry which is specifically secular, it is speaking about what is distinctive of the ordained insofar as they are ordained and the laity insofar as they are laity. But what is distinctive of clerics as clerics and laity as laity, as important as that may be, is infinitely less important than what is true of both clerics and laity as Christians: they each have the sacred ministry of sharing divine life with others.² This is another truth that our post-Reformation focus on the quasi-distinctively Catholic, including what is specific to ordained ministers, can obscure. Again, the distance between those who are and who are not in sanctifying grace is infinite; the distance between those in whom grace is operative in different ways is finite. Clerics and laity have different social roles in the Christian community. But living membership in the community is infinitely more important than the role we have in it, just as the equality of the members of the Trinity is infinitely more important than the precedence of the Father's social role over the Son's, and the Father and Son's roles over the Spirit's. And with membership in the Christian community comes the sacred mission and ability of all its members to share divine life with others.

2.

Although external works of evangelization and sanctification are not sufficient for helping people get to heaven, external works that flow from the divine life in us are certainly necessary. The New Testament calls “evangelists,” not all Christians, but those who have a special ministry of evangelizing (Eph. 4:11; Acts 21:8; 1 Tm 4:5). The fact that other people do not have that as a formal ministry, however, does not mean that they should never engage in evangelizing, anymore than the fact that most of us do not have a ministry of healing the sick means that we should never pray for their healing.

Concerning the apostolate of the laity, Vatican II says:

All sons of the Church . . . should spend their forces in the work of evangelization. (The Mission Activity of the Church, 36).

They (the laity) exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 2; emphasis supplied).

The apostolate of the Church and of all its members is primarily designed to manifest Christ’s message by words and deeds and to communicate his grace to the world. This is done mainly through the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, entrusted in a special way to the clergy, wherein the laity also have their very important roles to fulfill . . . It is especially on this level that the apostolate of the laity and the pastoral ministry are mutually complementary.

There are innumerable opportunities open to the laity for the exercise of their apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. . . . An apostolate of this kind does not consist only in the witness of one’s way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening and encouraging them to a more fervent life (Apostolate of the Laity, 6; emphasis sup-

plied).

And First Peter, clearly addressing all Christians, not just those who have a special ministry of evangelizing, says "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence." (1 Pt. 3:15)

Other ways to participate in the work of evangelizing without being a card-carrying evangelist include teaching CCD, contributing to the financial support of evangelistic outreaches like the missions, etc.

Works that directly evangelize and sanctify others are not the only good works that are necessary for helping others find salvation. Our lives have to set an example, through love on the individual and social levels, that confirms the truth of our words.

Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (I Pt 2:12).

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Mt 5:16).

The whole of the Christian life should be an offering for the salvation of other human beings, just as Jesus's life was. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rm 12:1).

The fact that the whole of the Christian life should be an offering for the salvation of others is why Paul can say of his converts:

What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy (I Th 2:19-20).

My brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown (Phil 4:1).

Our crown of glory will be those whom we helped to get to heaven by our sanctity, and we will be the crown of glory of those who helped us get to heaven by their sanctity. At the judgment the saved will meet and be welcomed by those whom they helped, and those who helped them, enter God's kingdom. And the damned will meet and be "welcomed" by those

whom they helped, and those who helped them, to get to the other place.

3.

Some Catholics believe that God's goodness makes it impossible for him to allow anyone to suffer eternal damnation. God knows everything that will happen. If he knows that he will have to send someone to hell, how can his love permit him to create that person? To appreciate the importance of praying, sacrificing and working for the salvation of our fellow human beings, Catholics have to understand why the possibility of eternal damnation is compatible with God's goodness and love. To explain that, I will briefly return to the level of everyday metaphysics.

Persons are beings with freedom of choice. If we did not have freedom of choice, we would not have the capacity to receive divine life. "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3:9). But he cannot bestow sanctifying grace on a stone without first turning that stone into a living person. A loving God has no way to share divine life with other beings unless he creates beings with freedom of choice. And God knows the eternal destiny of the persons he creates only by seeing the free choices we actually make. If he had created other persons, he would know their eternal destiny only by seeing the choices they actually make. (God knows the choices we make from all eternity, however, because there is no time in God and so no sequence of acts of knowledge before and after one another, which is what knowing "from all eternity" means; time belongs only in the created world, to objects of his knowledge, not to his eternal act of knowledge itself.)

When God creates beings with freedom of choice, he obligates himself in justice to give those persons what they freely choose. It would be contradictory for him to create beings with freedom of choice and deny those beings what they choose by their final, definitive act of free choice. It would be contradictory because then there would be no point in granting them freedom of choice. To endow beings with freedom of choice only to deny them what they freely choose would just be a cruel joke.

But is it not more cruel to let someone spend eternity deprived of every good than to

deny them what they have chosen? The damned do not complain about their punishment. They do not ask God to spare them their sufferings, because their sufferings are logical consequences of their free choice of preferring themselves to God. To desire to be freed from their sufferings they would have to desire to cease loving themselves above all things and instead love God above all things. But they have made a definitive free choice not to love God above themselves. So the damned actually want to remain in the state they are in. And God would be unjust to them if, after giving them the freedom to choose what they want, he did not allow them to have it.

In fact, God would not only be unjust to them, he would be unloving to them if he did not allow them to have what they want. What makes the damned morally evil is what they lack, what is absent from their being that should be there. Everything positively present in their being is good in the metaphysical, as opposed to moral, sense of goodness. Satan is very intelligent; intelligence is something good in itself, metaphysically good; it is a perfection. Satan is very powerful; power is something good in itself. Satan's created perfections only exist because of God's love for the goodness they contain; that is the only reason any kind of created being can exist. Justice is giving things what is due them because of what they are. What is due the metaphysical perfection of Satan's nature as a person is that God give him what he freely chooses. It would be contradictory for God to be unjust. But the fact that God would be unjust to Satan if God did not let Satan have what he wants has its foundation in the fact that it would be contradictory for God not to love the metaphysical perfection of Satan's personhood endowed as it is with freedom of choice.

Some people wonder why, if God cannot grant the damned eternal happiness, he does not at least spare them eternal suffering by ceasing to hold them in existence. That too would be contradictory to what God does in creating persons and contradictory to what the damned freely choose. Immortality is part of the nature of beings with freedom of choice; God cannot create persons without making them immortal. Therefore, it is in the nature of their definitive choices that whatever persons choose they want to have forever. The

damned do not complain about their punishment being eternal for they want their suffering to go on forever. To want their sufferings to end, they would have to want to cease loving themselves above all things, but they have made a fully voluntary final choice to forever love themselves above all else. And it would be unjust of God not to give them what they freely choose. When God endows beings with freedom of choice, he obligates himself to give them what they, by their own choice, desire to have forever; for that is what it means for him to bestow freedom of choice as a gift. And unless he gave them freedom of choice, he could not offer them divine life.

That is how awesome it is to be a created person, as opposed to just a created thing: Almighty God, next to whom everything that is and everything that could conceivably be are nothing, whose authority and dominion are infinite, who accomplishes everything he wills, whose plan every other being accomplishes and cannot not accomplish, this God must give you and me what we have definitely chosen when we leave this earth. Once he freely chooses to create us, he no longer has any choice in the matter. Our decisions and our decisions alone tell him what he must do with us. That is how awesome it is to be a person — and how frightening. In effect, He Who Is is obligated to “obey” our decision and give us exactly what we ask for.

So the fact that we all depend on others to be saved does not mean that anyone is punished for the failure of others to pray, sacrifice and work for their salvation. Those who are condemned are condemned because their own free choices, and no one else’s, merit their condemnation. In giving persons free will, God obligates himself to give them the grace they need to choose good rather than evil. If they knowingly and freely choose evil, they are solely responsible for not using the grace God gave them. But until they die, people who have merited condemnation by refusing to cooperate with grace still have the ability to repent and believe. The mission and glorious privilege of those in sanctifying grace is to keep extending God’s mercy to them in the form of the actual grace through which God will move them to repent and believe, if they just let God do it.

4.

As chapter 2 explained, in creating persons God enables them to obtain a privilege that even he does not have: They can merit eternal happiness by their free choices, although this privilege remains a gift for which we are entirely dependent on God. Human beings share the privilege of earning eternal happiness with angels. In creating human persons, however, God offers us another privilege that angels do not and cannot share. He offers us the privilege of earning eternal salvation by suffering for it, by dying to ourselves. Suffering is another God-given privilege that even he cannot have; he had to become man to suffer. And except for the eternal sufferings of hell, which follow from a free choice against God, angels cannot experience suffering; they cannot experience the loss of goods called for by their natures except by having chosen against God. Only physical beings like ourselves can suffer from the loss of goods called for by our natures without having definitely chosen against God. But as a result, we are the only beings who have the privilege of meriting eternal happiness, not only by freedom of choice, but also by suffering.

In fact, Christians are called to suffer:

If when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps (1 Pt. 2:20-21).

When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rm 8:15-18).

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (1 Pt 4:12-13).

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you (1 Pt 5:8-10).

We are not called to suffer for the sake of suffering, nor as if suffering in itself glorifies God. Rather, our sufferings can help other people find salvation. Since suffering is so important to our mission of sharing eternal life with others, to fulfill that vocation, Catholics need to have the place of suffering in God's plan for them much better explained than it usually is. To enhance our willingness to bear our sufferings for the sake of others, this remainder of this section and the next section will attempt to supply some things that explanations of suffering often leave out.

Although not all suffering is evil in the strict sense of the word, principles applying to God's permission of evil apply to suffering as well. But those principles are done a disservice by the timidity with which so much contemporary preaching approaches the problem of God's permission of evil. It is true that God permits evil rather than directly willing it. Evil occurs as a side-effect, a by-product of something else that God does directly will (as when we directly choose to strip off a bandage without directly willing the accompanying sting, even though we know the sting will occur.) But just saying that does not express how mightily God draws good out of created events that have evil connected with them.

But if our wickedness serves to show the justice of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! . . . But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come? — as some people slanderously charge us with saying (Rm 3:5-8).

Paul was emphasizing the fact that God draws good out of evil so much that people were accusing him of saying that it is alright to do evil since good will come from it. How likely

would it be for a contemporary preacher to be accused of that as a result of emphasizing that God draws good out of evil as much as Paul was?

In allowing the salvation of human kind to take place by means of the passion and death of his only natural son, God was proclaiming as loudly and clearly as possible that he was drawing the greatest good out of the greatest evil. God did not cause the sin of those who put Jesus to death; he permitted it because he knew it would ultimately accomplish his plan for our salvation. The sin lay in the free choices of those who put Jesus to death; they alone were the cause of the fact that their choices lacked moral goodness.

Jesus's executioners, however, were no more sinful than were the people of Nazareth who tried to kill Jesus (Lk 4:29). Moral evil is primarily in the choice, not in the carrying out of the choice. That the Nazarenes were not successful in killing Jesus does not make them any less guilty of trying to kill him than those who succeeded. But in one case God permitted an evil choice to succeed; in the other case he did not permit an evil choice to succeed. He prevented one evil choice from being successfully carried out because Jesus's dying in that way at that time and place would not accomplish his plan for our salvation. He permitted another evil choice to be successfully carried out, but only because the carrying out of that choice would accomplish his plan for achieving the greatest good, our salvation.

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men (Ac 2:23).

We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age (probably the demons, the "principalities and powers" of the next quotation) understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Co 2:7-8).

To me . . . this grace was given, . . . to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages by God who created all things, that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places ("the world rulers of this present darkness," Eph 6:12; "the

spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places," Eph 2:2). This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph 3:8-11). So the demons did not know that the success of their plan to have men crucify Jesus would fulfill God's plan for bringing about their ultimate defeat. (Since they are defeated, why do we still have to fight them? Because in giving us the privilege of helping each other get to heaven, Jesus is letting us share in his victory over them.)

The principle illustrated by the different outcomes of the sin of Nazareth and the sin of Golgatha is at work in every event that God has ever created and ever will create. The tiniest detail of the tiniest event accomplishes the consciously willed plan of God, no matter how much suffering and evil that are not directly willed may be connected with an event. There are only two kinds of people, those who accomplish God's plan willingly and those who accomplish it unwillingly. And God's plan is designed for our greatest possible good, the salvation of all human beings from infinite, eternal suffering, if only we let God save us.

5.

More than this, however, must be said about God's permission of suffering. Not all suffering or even most can be directly traced to the causality of sinful human choices. Diseases, famines, droughts, earthquakes, floods, storms, avalanches, landslides, volcanic eruptions are rarely the direct result of human choice, the way, for example, that the scourging of Jesus was the result of Pilate's choice. How can a loving God permit all the natural and accidental suffering that takes place? We need to know that, since our suffering can be such an important means for helping others to eternal life.

Not all suffering is evil. Even the most loving of human parents would not want to shelter their children from all suffering. It is good, for example, that an infant's hand hurts when it touches a hot stove; that suffering protects the child from much greater suffering. Also, most parents would not want to shelter their children from the mild and transient kinds of suffering normally experienced during play and athletics; they do not want their children to grow up "sissies," afraid of mild pain. In other cases, however, parents permit

their children to experience suffering only as a last resort. If an extremely painful operation is necessary for a child to live, loving parents will permit the suffering for the sake of saving the child's life — but only because the parents do not have the power to save the child's life any other way. The parents do not directly will the pain, but permit it as unavoidably connected with the only way to accomplish a goal sufficiently great that it is worth the price of the pain. If the parents had the power to solve the child's problem in a way that did not require the suffering, the parents would certainly use that other way rather than permit the suffering.

Why, then, would a parent who is all powerful permit as much suffering as he does? He is powerful enough prevent the suffering; so what purpose could he have in not preventing it? In other words, why is almighty God like the human parents who permit their child to suffer because they have no other way to accomplish the goal for the sake of which they must permit the suffering? What goal could be so great as to justify God's not preventing the suffering that, all other things being equal, he could prevent? Only one goal: the eternal salvation of human beings.

How important is our salvation to God? To be most accurate theologically, our salvation is so important that God allowed his Son to become sin for our sake. (2 Co 5:21) But there is another truth about how important our salvation is to God that we all should be conscious of because of its pastoral significance: Our salvation is so important that God permits his children to undergo all the suffering that occurs on earth. God must know that no other plan would be as effective in saving us from infinite, eternal suffering as his actual plan that permits all this finite, temporary suffering. Every suffering God permits must contribute to saving human beings from eternal suffering; for that is the only conceivable purpose God can have in permitting it. Our salvation is literally the only thing God thinks about (unless somewhere in the universe there are other created persons who are at risk of eternal damnation.) So not only is God perfectly just in permitting all the suffering he does, God would not be perfectly loving if he did not permit it.

When First Peter tells us that we do not get any credit for suffering for wrongdoing (1 Pt 2:20; 4:15), it is in effect saying that such sufferings do not “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24), since Christ’s sufferings were not inflicted because of any wrongdoing on his part. But it is not saying that those sufferings do not occur as a result of God’s plan for our salvation. All things do. First Peter is talking about wrongdoers as wrongdoers, that is, as not getting any credit for suffering to the extent that they do not repent. Suffering undergone for wrongdoing can lead to a wrongdoers’ repentance. If it does not, the suffering is still part of the wrongdoer’s just punishment. But if wrongdoers do repent, as the good thief did, their suffering can complete what is lacking in Christ’s, since they can offer it up for others.

The existence of suffering is another refutation of the view, so inimical to evangelization, that there can be no eternal damnation. Unless this vale of tears is a test, it makes no sense whatsoever. And unless that test has eternal consequences, it is another cruel joke. We are going to be judged primarily on how we cope with difficulty, suffering in the broad sense, not how we handle contentment. In general, the motivation for sin is the cessation or prevention of some perceived suffering, for example, the cessation of the discomfort of fighting a temptation or the prevention of the perceived future suffering of not having, say, enough money, enough pleasure, enough alcohol to drink, or enough power. We will be judged on whether we handle suffering and its prospect in moral ways or immoral ways.

But if the failure to cope with temporary suffering in a moral way will lead only to the further temporary suffering of purgatory, little is at stake in the decisions we have to make in the midst of all this current suffering. For even if the finite sufferings of purgatory are greater than the finite sufferings we try to avoid by sinning, both kinds of suffering fall infinitely short of the eternal happiness everyone would eventually be guaranteed in heaven, if there is no possibility of damnation. For all practical purposes, the punishment for sin would amount to nothing in comparison with the destiny we were all going to enjoy anyway. So

why should God go to the trouble of permitting all this suffering, unless he likes tricking us into thinking that the way we handle it will make a difference that really matters to us in the long run (the very long run)? The only reason God can have for permitting all this suffering is to save us from eternal suffering.

It is not fashionable to focus on eternal suffering in today's pastoring. There is a good reason for that. For those who already have a relation to Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, fear of punishment should not be the main motivator our pastoring relies on to promote Christian behavior. Paul's method of motivating Christians by the glory of grace, which we looked at in Chapter 1, shows that. But there is a reason other than causing fear why Christians need to be reminded that the possibility of eternal suffering faces all human beings. They need to know why God is justified in allowing us to experience finite sufferings, not matter how great; they need to know that everything, whether willed by God directly or merely permitted, is part of his plan to save us from infinite suffering.

To say that all the suffering of human beings works, like everything else that happens to them, for their salvation does not mean that one person's suffering is for the salvation of that person. The offering up of sufferings for others' salvation shows that. In this life we will rarely if ever know exactly how the suffering we see works for human beings' salvation. Nor do we need to know. All that we need to know is that everything including suffering happens to accomplish God's plan of saving us all, if we will only let him.

But that still leaves a question Catholics deserve to have answered for them to sufficiently understand God's plan of permitting suffering for the salvation of others: How can it be just and loving for God to let innocent children with no choice in the matter suffer for the salvation of others who are not innocent? The vocation to offer sufferings for the sake of the salvation of others extends to all Christians. Those Christians who live beyond the age of reason have the conscious opportunity, and glorious privilege, of offering to God any suffering they experienced before reaching that age. Those who become Christians by baptism of desire may not do this consciously. But at the judgment they will rejoice to see how God

used their suffering and would not be able to rejoice unless an offering of their suffering for God's purposes was implicit in their baptism of desire.

What about the children, however, who die before the age of reason? God has chosen not to reveal the destiny of unbaptized children who die before that age. We can speculate, however, and the speculation I will offer will apply to both baptized and unbaptized children. But before speculating we must recognize that since God has not chosen to reveal what happens to unbaptized children, he is asking us to have faith that their destinies are compatible with his infinite love for them, a love that desires only their eternal good. Any speculation not based on that faith would not only be idle, but also idol, speculation.

The souls of all human beings are present, whole and entire, in their bodies from the moment of conception (pace Aquinas), just as Jesus's soul was. If not, Mary could not have been conceived in sanctifying grace (pace Aquinas), which resides in us because it resides in our souls. The presence of the soul means that the faculties, vegetative, sensible and rational, that it possesses necessarily are also present. In normal circumstances, the activities of the soul's higher faculties, even of the intellect and will, presuppose a certain amount of bodily development. But since intellect and will are not intrinsically physical faculties, at the moment of death God could allow a child's intellect and will to produce their acts even though the normal bodily development had not taken place. First Peter tells us that when Jesus preached the Great News to the dead, he was preaching to "spirits," (3:19). Jesus was giving spirits separated from their bodies the opportunity to accept the Great News. There is no reason he cannot do the same for the spirits of children, perhaps even while their spirits are still in their bodies. Either in or out of the body, children's souls would have the opportunity to freely offer up the sufferings the children have already experienced.

There are some things, however, for which we do not have to supplement faith with speculation. We know that, at the final judgment, the saved will praise God for the glorious things he has accomplished by his plan, which permitted so much suffering. They will praise him for what he accomplished by permitting both their own suffering and the suffering of

others, both the suffering experienced before the sufferer had reached the age of being able to freely offer it up and the suffering experienced after that age. And we know that the damned will hate God, but not because they think he was unjust and unloving in using a plan involving so much suffering. They will hate him for being just and loving in everything he did, including permitting suffering, especially if during their lifetime they believed that he could not be just and loving to permit suffering. For the damned will hate him for being what he is; and God is Justice just as "God is Love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16).

For Christian's to accept God's plan for suffering, they also need to know why the call to offer up sufferings does not make it wrong to avoid suffering. When we have a headache, for example, there is no contradiction in taking an aspirin and offering up the suffering God allows us to have before the aspirin takes effect. In fact, it would often be wrong for us not to try to avoid suffering. We are responsible for preserving our health, and as the example of an infant's hand on a hot stove shows, suffering is frequently an important signal that something should be avoided because it is unhealthy. Our responsibilities to others also frequently make it wrong to try to avoid suffering. A headache can diminish our ability to function as others depend on us to. And by making us irritable and weak, pain can interfere with our ability to conduct our personal relationships the way our Christian obligations require, including conducting them in a Christian spirit. Also, a responsibility to others that we often do not think of is the responsibility to allow them to help us, since that is essential to their purpose in life and sense of self-worth. One of the most important ways in which God gives them the privilege of helping us is by relieving our sufferings. In all normal circumstances, we should not deprive them of that privilege.

And what about our responsibility to be ready, physically and mentally, to help others at any time, since we know that we are constantly in circumstances in which others need our help? In emergencies, all of us can be required to do things that might risk our physical health. But because God calls us to serve others, no Christian should risk their health just for the sake of offering up the suffering. That is also true of our mental health. Christians

sometimes undertake sacrifices that risk disturbing the peace and joy that God wants them to have and to share with others. "When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites" (Mt. 6:16). Jesus was talking about looking dismal deliberately. But it is also true that we should not sacrifice so much that we cannot keep ourselves from projecting discomfort. If we lose our peace and joy when we think we are doing something for the Lord, that is a very good sign that he does not want us to do it; for we are probably doing it by our power instead of by God's grace.

The same mistake of forgetting our responsibilities to others when considering suffering is illustrated by a common misunderstanding of a famous part of the Sermon on the Mount. "To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt" (Lk 6:29; Mt 5:40). But what if you are wearing a borrowed shirt; do you have the right to give it away? No, and Jesus is not telling us to. Charity presupposes justice; that is, we have no right to do more than justice requires if doing so would prevent us from fulfilling our obligations to justice, such as our obligation to the person who loaned us the shirt. Similarly, when we see innocent people being attacked, does Jesus want us merely to lecture them on their obligation to turn the other cheek? No; justice obligates us to take the side of the innocent. In a just war we have the obligation to defend our fellow citizens against the unjustly attacking enemy.

The Sermon on the Mount does not call for sacrifices that deprive anyone other than the person making the sacrifice. But we all constantly carry a multitude of obligations to others that we need to be ready to fulfill. That is what life as social beings is all about; no human being is an island. The Christian call to sacrifice is not a call to disdain the good things, including rest, recreation and entertainment, God gives us to have and to share with others in order for them and for us to live fully human lives. God made us social beings because he wants us to share our lives with each other. We share our lives with each other by sharing good things with each other. To share good things with each other, we must have good things to share.

6.

Probably nothing has weakened Catholics' consciousness of their duty to help others find salvation more than the doctrine that one does not have to be a visible member of the Church to be saved. Despite that, we still have to evangelize non-Christians. I will offer an explanation why that is another of our well kept secrets; for this explanation of why we must seek to make converts differs from any other I have heard.

The fact that non-Christians can be saved does not mean that their salvation does not depend on our help. It does. They are saved by responding to whatever grace God gives them. The grace that saves anyone comes from Jesus and only from Jesus. Christians need to know that, therefore, every grace by which others are saved comes to them through the prayers, works and sufferings of Christians, the people in whom Jesus continues to live, teach and work in the world. In God's plan every Christian has specific contributions to make to the salvation of others.

So we must not stop striving to make converts, because God has a role in the salvation of others for every future convert to Christianity. Our direct evangelization of others is necessary even for the salvation of those who are not directly evangelized, because Jesus still distributes his grace to them through the prayers, sacrifices and example of Christians. People will only become Christians, however, and so make their contributions to others' salvation, if they learn about Jesus from people who already know him.

The fact that non-Christians can be saved, therefore, should never be an excuse for Christians to neglect to tell others that this life is a test for eternity and that they need Jesus to get to heaven. God has given us the sacred and salvific mission to ensure that as many human beings as possible know the truths (1) that what we do in this life has eternal consequences for good or bad, (2) that salvation comes only through the grace of Christ and (3) that anyone to whom God offers the gift of faith in Christ but who refuses it and persists in refusing it until death cannot be saved, since they have refused the grace they need to be saved. If we do not share these truths, people that God is calling to become Christians and

carry on Christ's work for the salvation of all will never hear God's call.

There is another reason why we must not stop striving to make converts, although non-Christians can be saved. Jesus distributes actual graces to others especially through the sufferings we experience for witnessing to him.

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you (1 Pt. 4:13-14).

When they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the counsel rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching that Jesus was the Christ (Ac 5:40-42).

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven (Lk 6:22-23; Mt 5:11-12).

This is a clear omen . . . of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake (Phil 1:28-29).

Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, . . . but share in suffering for the Great News in the power of God (1 Tm 1:8).

When we suffer for making the name of Christ known, we participate in sufferings that belong specifically to Jesus. Sufferings borne for that reason are particularly important in God's plan of saving human kind, since the people we are then praying for have explicitly, though perhaps inculpably, made themselves enemies of Jesus.

Even unsuccessful evangelizing is part of God's plan for saving all human kind, particularly if it leads to suffering that Christians offer up for the salvation of others. But Christians should not merit that suffering by evangelizing in ways that lack "gentleness and rever-

ence" (1 Pt. 3:15).

7.

The Christian's vocation of sharing grace with others includes bringing it to already baptized Christians; for our apostolate includes not only the evangelization but also the sanctification of humankind (see Apostolate of the Laity, 2 and 6).

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his (the sinner's) soul from death (Jm 5:19-20).

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted (Ga 6:1).

Our prayers, works and sacrifices can result in sanctifying grace being restored to Christians who have lost it and preserved and increased in those who have not.

In fact, in an important sense, our primary obligation is to the preservation and perfection of the life of sanctifying grace in Christians. Paul not only tells us to pray always but specifically tells us what to pray for:

Pray at all times in the Spirit (as opposed to praying vocally where that would be inappropriate?), with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth to boldly proclaim the mystery of the Great News (Eph 6:18-19).

And

I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church (Col 1:24).

In the last passage, Paul mentions only Christians as those for whom he suffers. But as the remainder of that chapter shows, he knows that the Church is God's instrument for saving all who are saved. And that can include those who are not visible members of the Church (Rm 2:14-16; 1 Tm 2:1-4). The grace by which non-Christians are saved comes

through the prayers, sufferings and good works of the Church. So in specifically asking us to pray always for, and offering his suffering for, the members of the Church, Paul was concerned about supporting God's instruments for saving everyone not in the Church. In these quotations, Paul is simply making another application of the principle, "Do good to all men-- but especially to those of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). As we saw in Chapter 3, we do not love Christians in spite of non-Christians; we love them for the sake of the salvation of non-Christians.

But our knowledge that those who are not visible members of the Church can be saved has not only discouraged evangelization; it has also diminished our appreciation of the importance of the spiritual union of all Christ's disciples. Chapter 3 stressed the visible aspects of the New Law against the idea that Christian unity is "spiritual" in the sense of only being an invisible unity. But in their most important meaning, the spiritual aspects of Jesus's New Law and prayer for unity are as much of a well kept secret as are the visible aspects. Chapter 1 emphasized the nature of sanctifying grace as the real presence of the Trinity in each of us. But equally important is that sanctifying grace makes us really present in God (1 Jn 4:15-16), not just in the generic way in which all creation exists in God (Acts 17:28) — although that is also a de facto secret --- but by really being members of the divine family participating in that family's infinite life. (When I use the phrase "union with God," as in "awareness of our union with God," I will be referring both to God's really dwelling within us and to our really dwelling within God.)

We become present in God by being united with Jesus's humanity in his communal body, the Church. But membership in Jesus's body does not just unite us with his sacred humanity; it makes us truly dwell in God as participants in God's own life, the life of a family eternally rejoicing in each other's infinite glory. In particular, it makes us dwell in the Second Person of the Trinity (1 Cor 12:12; Eph 1:23; Jn 14:20). (I believe more informative, and certainly less misleading, description of the Church than "mystical" body would be "communal" or "extended" body. Perhaps the best word would be "comprehensive" body, for

“the fulness of him who fills all in all [Eph 1:23]. “Mystical” is misleading in our time because of its closeness to “mysticism,” which in popular use does not have its strict theological sense and can connote something vague and subjective. The Church’s real union with Jesus is an objective fact.)

A measure of how weak is our consciousness of our real presence in Christ is the awkwardness of some common explanations of the intercession of the saints in heaven, and especially of Mary’s ministry of intercession. I have often heard us told to seek Mary’s intercession because “Jesus can’t turn her down.” Of course, it contradicts the very meaning of Christianity to imply that, because our sinfulness makes us unworthy, Jesus would want to turn us down if Mary didn’t ask for us. Our sinfulness makes us unworthy of any good thing that comes from God, but that didn’t stop our incomprehensibly merciful Father from already blessing “us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places . . . which he lavished upon us” (Eph 1:3, 8). Another way I have heard Mary’s intercession explained is no better: “Jesus is humankind’s only mediator with the Father, but Mary is our mediator with Jesus,” as if we need a mediator between ourselves and Jesus. If Mary’s son is not the direct personal mediator with the Father for each of us, we are in the wrong religion and so is Mary. The inadequacy of our teaching about the intercession of the saints is further proof of our lacking an adequate appreciation of what Christianity is.

Since we know that Jesus intercedes for us with the Father (Heb 7:25), the “He can’t turn his mother down” view asks us to imagine Mary (or another saint as the case may be) going to Jesus and presenting a request. Then, it asks us to imagine Jesus in turn presenting the request to the Father. But when a saint intercedes for us, isn’t it really Jesus interceding for us through that saint, and therefore already interceding with the Father through the saint? If not, we’ve got a problem, because sainthood must not be what it’s cracked up to be: the perfection of our real union with and dwelling within the Second Person of the Trinity. Why should we assume that Jesus wants to give us the privilege of being the ones through whom he intercedes with the Father? Because that’s what Christianity is: God giv-

ing human beings every privilege he can possibly give them, including privileges he himself does not have (see Section 3 of Chapter 2). In his great love, Jesus wants to do everything through us that it is possible to do. If it is possible for Jesus to give the saints, and especially Mary, the privilege of being those in whom he intercedes with the Father, why should we not assume that he has done that? God does not love us less than we think; he loves us infinitely more than we think.

Listen to Jesus' own words on the subject of his intercession with the Father:

I give you assurance, whatever you ask the Father, he will give you in my name.

Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. . . . On that day you will ask in my name and I do not say that I will petition the Father for you. The Father already loves you because you have loved me. (Jn 16:23-27; NAB)

Do these words only apply to the saints on earth and not those in heaven? Of course not. If they apply to the saints on earth, they must apply in spades to those in heaven. Nor do these words contradict the truth that Jesus intercedes for us in heaven. But if Jesus can do anything through us as his comprehensive body, he will do it through us.

How much does Jesus want to give human beings the privilege of doing everything it is possible for us to do? Consider a Protestant objection to a common defense of the Immaculate Conception. It is sometimes argued that it was "fitting" for Jesus to be conceived by a human being untouched by original sin. But why? So that Jesus himself would not have any association with original sin? But if God can preserve one human being, Mary, from original sin even though her parents were not preserved, he could certainly preserve Jesus from it without preserving Mary. And wouldn't it be more fitting for him to show his love for those afflicted by original sin by choosing someone herself afflicted by it to give him humanity?

Original sin is the absence of sanctifying grace. Jesus saved us by his life of sanctifying grace. Mary was able to be conceived in the state of grace because the merits of Jesus were foreseen. But what if it was possible for Jesus, in "taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men," to "empty" and "humble" (Phil 2:7-8) himself even to the

extent of receiving the sanctifying grace by which he saved us from his human parent, as standard theology used to tell us we would have received it from Adam and Eve? And what if that would require Mary's being in the state of grace from the moment of her conception? Aware of how unsettled the theology of original sin and the transmission of original justice currently is, I am not claiming to know that it was possible for Jesus to save us through grace he received from Mary. But if that was possible, why shouldn't we assume that God would have done it, not because it was fitting — it wouldn't have been — but because his love for human beings and desire to do everything he can through us are so great, and his thoughts are so far beyond ours?

(I dearly hope no one interprets this theory as a justification for the highly ambiguous title, "Co-Redemptrix," which has no basis in apostolic tradition and would be pastorally misleading. "Mediatrice" of grace need not be as misleading as long as it doesn't mean Mary stands between us and Jesus as Jesus stands between us and the Father. The "mediating" that Mary does can only mean something that Jesus himself does but through her as really present in him, his first member in glory and rank.)

In any case, though we can't understand our real presence in Christ completely, we need a much greater appreciation of it than current pastoring leads us to in order to fulfill our mission of making up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. We need to know that, like everything else about us, our sufferings no longer belong to us but truly belong to Jesus. The redemption did not take away our suffering, but it did make it Jesus's own suffering, suffering that still brings the life of sanctifying grace to, and helps to perfect it in, other human beings.

And though we can't understand this completely, we need a much greater appreciation than current pastoring gives us that our real presence in God unites us with one another in God. Whether we fulfill the spiritual obligations we have to one another in Christ's plan depends on how seriously we take the union with one another that baptism caused. How close is our union with one another in God? "We are members of one another" (Eph

4:25; Rm 12, 5). So much so that “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12: 26). But how often are we reminded — not to mention told for the first time — that the sufferings of persecuted Christians throughout the world are our own sufferings because they are Christ’s sufferings, and our dwelling in Christ makes us members of each other? During the cold war, some Jews were understandably scandalized because they knew we were not nearly as concerned about the sufferings of Christians in the Soviet Union as they were about the sufferings of their fellow Jews. How serious is that kind of scandal? It strikes at the very heart of Jesus’s plan for bringing the world to salvation: the visible loving unity of Christians with their fellow Christians.

8.

Chapter 2 offered recommendations about how to preach the Great News. Here are some further recommendations on what to tell Catholics about how to share divine life with others and how to encourage Catholics to do it.

The most important step in encouraging Catholics to work for the evangelization and sanctification of others is the same as the most important step in creating Christian brother/sisterhood: bring each Catholic to an awareness of the glory he or she received in baptism. The more I appreciate the glory I acquired in becoming Christian, the more I will be motivated to help others obtain, persevere and grow in that glory. Love must be the basis of the apostolate. Only a Christian aware of the glory he or she has received can have a love for others based on awareness of the glory to which they are called. But I cannot appreciate the awesome dignity to which you are called unless I appreciate the awesome dignity to which I am called. And if I understand the dignity I received at baptism, justice requires me to do what I can to share it with others. As with Christian brother/sisterhood, therefore, the personal evangelization of already sacramentalized and catecheticized Catholics is the basic step in motivating them to apostolic action.

We can be motivated to help others get to heaven without an awareness of the glory of being a Christian. Since a healthy fear of hell is part of the Christian life (see section 3 of

chapter 2), fear of hell for themselves can be part of evangelizers' motivation for evangelizing. But fear alone is an unbalanced motive for evangelizing. Members of Christ's body act in persona Christi, who was sent "into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). And while it is not inappropriate for fear of hell to play a greater role in motivating conversion than in motivating the already converted (see Section 5 of this chapter), we should not evangelize in a condemnatory way, but "with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pt. 3:15; Ga 6:1). That requires having an appreciation, as imperfect as it may be, of the incomprehensible love God has for those we are evangelizing, which in turn requires the appreciation of the incomprehensible love God has for us that comes from being aware of his dwelling within us. And God may not in fact be offering prospective converts the grace to believe at the very time we witness to them; he might plan to do that later. If so, we must not leave them with an idea of a vengeful God but of a God who is their loving father and wants to be their spouse.

Catholics must also understand that they are primarily witnessing to the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, and what he has done for us. Our witness must include the Church as Jesus's body through which he distributes all his grace, but must make clear that grace comes through the Church only as a result of what Jesus did for us. Of course when we are dealing with people who are already Christian, we need to be ready to help them see the place of the Church in Jesus's plan. But grace comes through the Church and the sacraments because it comes from the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Our different relations to the people we deal with call for different evangelistic approaches. To those who are closest to us, the members of our family, the example of our Christian lives is a much more important testimony to Christ than anything we can say.

You wives be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won over without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior (1 Pt. 3:1-2).

If those who know us best cannot see the fruit of faith in our behavior, they will have good

reason not to be impressed by our verbal testimony.

All Catholics should be advised not to frighten prospective converts away through excessive emotion. To repeat what was said in Chapter 2: We should not get emotionally ahead of those we evangelize. The Great News must be presented with the joy and enthusiasm of which it is worthy. But the spiritual power of our evangelizing will not come from emotion but from the Great News itself, since it “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rm 1:16). Faith in the power of the Great News means that our proclamation of it can be calm and confident as well as joyful and enthusiastic. It can often be helpful to evangelize in teams of two, but if we do, we must be particularly careful not to “gang up” on a prospective convert.

Evangelistic efforts can only succeed to the extent that the Spirit has prepared or is preparing a prospective convert to be open to them. We can often judge a person’s preparedness by how the Spirit is blessing our approach. When we engage in an evangelistic conversation, we should “go with the flow” of the Spirit. Is the conversation making evangelistic progress or not? If it is no longer making progress, perhaps the Spirit is no longer blessing it; if so, we have done enough for the time being. We have to use discernment. Sometimes a conversation may turn into an argument. That can be a sign that the Spirit wishes us to stop for now. But it may not be. The Spirit can work through arguments, and some people think and learn that way. Progress should be judged by whether the conversations, including arguments, continue to be friendly, gentle and reverent, by whether we and the prospective converts are just repeating ourselves, by the attitude they display, etc. — in other words, by the same common sense criteria we use to judge any conversation about serious matters.

Catholics can find out whether God has given them a ministry of evangelizing by whether God consistently blesses their efforts. But even if they do not have a ministry of evangelizing, Catholics should still be ready to evangelize when God is clearly creating an opportunity for them to do, especially when “calls you to account for the hope that is in you”

(1 Pt. 3:15).

Some evangelical Christians hold that God offers everyone the grace to believe the first time they hear the Great News preached, and they could be right. But that is hardly certain enough for us to teach Catholics that anyone who does not accept their testimony to Jesus has refused the grace to believe. Their testimony may have only planted a seed that God means to water at another time (1 Co 3:6-9). And as we saw earlier, some initial scoffers will come to believe only after they have seen Christians do enough good works — and only God knows how many that may be — for them to believe (Mt 5:16; 1 Pt 2:12). Above all, we know that the world coming to believe depends, not just on our evangelizing, but on our visibly loving our fellow Christians as the Father and Son love one another and us. We have a long way to go before we can claim that we have fulfilled all the scriptural conditions for the success of evangelization. At the same time, we cannot wait until we are perfect, as individual Christians or as the Christian community, before proclaiming Christ. If we did wait until we were perfect, no one else would ever hear of Christ.

These recommendations have focused on evangelization rather than on the sanctification of the already converted. The Church must also make Catholics aware of the ability and glorious vocation God has given them to help one another grow in grace, and of their responsibility to do so when God clearly creates the opportunity. But how Christians can best sanctify one another, in addition, of course, to setting good example, will to a significant extent depend on what kind of communal structures God creates in which Christian brotherhood can flourish. The ways we instruct, admonish, encourage, comfort and stir one another up outside of the natural family will differ according to the purposes of pastoral instruments like Cursillo group reunions and Ultreyas, prayer meetings, scripture study groups and whatever future communal structures God gives us.

We know from past experience, however, that such pastoral instruments cannot accomplish their goals if those goals do not have the same place on the agenda of our pastoral leaders as they do on God's. Our pastoral leaders cannot have the right agenda if we

unintentionally make what is distinctive to ordained ministries and is thought to be distinctively Catholic more important than the truths at the top of the Church's hierarchy, which once were distinctively Catholic but are no longer. The future of the Church as an institution depends on ensuring that the focus of our leaders stays off the institution and their role in it while staying on Jesus and what he has done and continues to do for all of us.

Notes

¹ Quoted on the web site Zenit.org September 13, 2004; reference number ZE04091305.

² See Ralph Martin, "The Laity in the Mission of the Church," Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly, Spring, 2004, pp. 7-9.