

CARTOONOPEDIA ARTICLES

By

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Anger Management

READ:

The following data, culled from research and experience, will be more useful in handling anger than generic exhortations or being angry at someone for being angry!

1. Anger is a normal emotion. It is neither good nor bad in itself. It helps us in some situations by making us more alert and ready for stand up for ourselves (e.g., if someone is ill-treating our child, or if we are physically attacked).
2. Anger can be triggered from within or from without. Thus, I may get angry recalling a past hurt, or because someone ill-treated me now, or because something happened that disappointed or upset me.
3. Angry outbursts generally do harm: ruin relationships, make people bitter against us; . damage our health, by increasing our blood pressure and our heart rate.
4. We can help ourselves a great deal in managing our anger. Thus, for instance, if I get angry when someone cuts in front of me in the traffic, I can ask myself: What will happen if this person gets ahead of me? Nothing much, actually.
5. Keeping pent-up anger is harmful. It will not only damage our peace of mind and our health. It may also come out as passive aggression (treating people coldly and with indifference) or cynicism. Someone who is always putting others down, or constantly criticizing, or negative about everything, has much unresolved anger.
6. So, too, in contrast to what some people used to believe, frequent or unnecessary display of anger simply strengthens the anger. Such displays do not take the anger away. "It is good to get it off the chest" is not a helpful bit of advice.
7. What helps in most cases is speak about our need and our feelings calmly to the person concerned. E.g., "I felt hurt when you shouted at me in front of others yesterday." This is being assertive. It is very different from shouting back, or going around speaking ill of the person who shouted at you.
8. A common source of anger is perfectionism: expecting the world around you or people around you to be perfect, and everything to work perfectly, according to your expectation. This is not possible in life.
9. Some people are more prone to anger than others. We differ in our "boiling point." This is partly biological and partly based on our upbringing.
10. If I cannot manage my anger myself, I will do well to get help.
11. Angry people tend to jump to conclusions, and to accuse others, without trying to understand the other's situation and limitations. Accusations and shouting, without an effort to understand the other, will not solve problems. It is a curse that has ruined many marriages, religious communities and professional relationships.
12. Like all other emotions, anger, too, it best managed by understanding and changing the way we think. May we take time during this Lent to do that!

REFLECT:

- (1) Is anger a problem for me? Am I overly critical? Do I shout at people or humiliate them without regard for their feelings? (2) Have I hurt people or broken relationships through my angry outbursts? (3) Which are the triggers for my anger: memories, events, persons, unavoidable frustrations of life? (4) Have I reflected on why I get angry? Do I try to understand the person I am angry with, and why s/he did what they did? (5) Am I expecting people and situations to be perfect? (6) Do I treat my display of anger as something I am responsible for, something I can learn to manage, or as something over which I have no control?

ACT:

- (1) *Learn relaxation techniques:* breathing, yoga, pleasant images, centering prayer. These have been found helpful in managing anger. (2) *Talk to God.* Don Bosco: "When a boy misbehaves, it is much more practical to go to God in humble prayer than to shout at the boy." (His own temperament was fiery; yet he became such a loving, patient, tender-hearted educator.) (3) *Speak out the problem directly when you are not boiling.* (4) *Just venting your anger does not help.* It only leads to more such expressions. (5) *Focus on what is going on well.* Focussing on the pleasant and loving experiences of your life will fill you with warm, loving and grateful feelings. Anger feeds on negative thoughts. (6) *Gain perspective:* many frustrations are just part of being human (different types of people, traffic, imperfect conditions, machines that break down, human limitations). (7) *Humour helps:* seeing the funny side of things, not ridiculing others. If we take everything seriously, we will have continuous reason for getting angry. (8) *Physical exercise can help* to calm us down when we are tense and getting angry. (9) *Wait:* The time-tested advice to count to ten when you are about to say something offensive, is still a very good piece of folk wisdom. We will regret most words uttered in a moment of anger. (10) If you cannot manager your anger by your own efforts, *get counseling.*
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Animation

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There is a three-month course going on at our centre (Don Bosco Renewal Centre, Bangalore) on Community Animation. The participants are experienced or new superiors of communities. While preparing new material for my sessions, I checked the Internet for information. There is a plethora of information on "animation," but it refers to 2-D or 3-D illustrations, for books, magazines or movies. We have excellent animation movies today, such as, *The Lion King* or *The Adventures of Tintin*.

In church usage, animation refers to community leadership. Bishops, priests and religious superiors are supposed to "animate" the people in their care, and not just be administrators. Animators needs to learn some administrative skills, but animation is different from administration. In fact, one of the

guidelines of the church to priests and religious is: Keep animation; delegate administration. The meaning is: Employ lay people for looking after your property, accounts, maintenance, fund-raising, purchases, dealing with the government, etc. Your main speciality should be dealing with the people in such a way as to help them become better persons, closer to God, and committed to the mission.

Animation in a community is done at three levels. The first is done for the *community as a whole*. Examples: A good conference or retreat or other programmes for the human and spiritual benefit of the members. The second level is help provided *for groups* within the whole community. Thus a parish priest may organize youth camps, marriage preparation courses, assistance to the aged, support groups for widows and widowers, etc. The third level of animation is *one-to-one help*, such as counselling, spiritual direction and confession. It is at this level that a person's deepest and most confidential needs are addressed.

A superior can get results in two ways—by giving orders or by animation. One superior tells the community: “The juniors will go to the slums Sunday afternoons.” Whether the juniors see the purpose for it, or not, they will go—at least out of fear. The job will be done, but people will not develop convictions or love for the ministry.

Another superior “animates” the group, that is, influences them from within. (Animation comes from the Latin word *anima*, which means “soul.”). For this, the superior uses five helps—*information, exposure, experience, encouragement and modelling*. Thus, a rector may tell a young religious about the needs and problems of the poor people of the neighbourhood (*information*). Or he can go with the younger members to visit the slums nearby. This can be a real eye-opener (*exposure*). Thirdly, the superior can put a junior in charge of evening classes for the children. The young religious then learn by doing ministry (*experience*). Once, when I told a young Salesian that he was doing a wonderful work for the 450 poor children who were coming for evening classes, he told me: “Fr Rector takes a lot of interest and *encourages* me.” Finally, the superior can model the behaviour expected of the community (such as, being kind to the poor, or regular for prayer, or leading a simple life), or expose the community to persons doing wonderful ministry or leading inspiring lives (*modelling*).

Animation takes more time than giving orders, but yields deeper and more lasting results. If animated well, I not only learn to do the job in a good way; I feel moved from within to do the right thing, and, in my turn, become an inspiring model for others.

So, superiors at all levels: *Delegate administration; keep animation*. Marketing or getting the buildings painted can be done by an employee. Inspiring, guiding, motivating those under you, and providing them growth-producing experiences is your real job as superior. May we never short-change that by merely giving orders!

REFLECT: Do I animate or order? Am I interested in people's growth and happiness, or only in getting a job done? Do I provide relevant information, expose (provide contact with real life), let them learn from experience (rather than merely exhort), explain reasons why (rather than give commands), model the behaviour expected and propose inspiring models ?

DO: Be with the people you are in charge of. Do not overprotect those in your care. Model the behaviour you expect from the community, rather than simply give orders. Give reasons for what you ask others to do. Learn at least the basics of counselling and spiritual direction, and be available for private, confidential chats. Provide chances for initiative. If a problem repeats itself, it probably needs structural answers (new distribution of work, change of personnel, better physical arrangements, ...).

Boredom

It happened at the end of a counselling session. We were eighteen trainees, trying to learn the basics of counselling. A 45-minute practical session was just over. We were supposed to listen, observe and learn. The trainer asked each of us about our experience. One participant replied, "I was bored."

The trainer then came up with a response that has imprinted itself on my mind all these years. He asked the bored participant, "*What were you doing to make yourself bored?*"

That is right. We make ourselves bored or interested.

Are you celebrating life, or feeling bored? How would you describe your normal day—interesting, exciting, something you look forward to, or boring, even depressing?

Boredom results when: (a) one has nothing to do, or (b) one is not interested in what is going on. It can be triggered by two types of activities—an activity that is too hard (as when a student does not understand a lecture) or too easy (as when another student already knows this stuff, and is waiting for the teacher to move on to something else).

Three settings in which a person can be more easily bored are: When we are forced to do something we do not want to do (e.g., studying or praying, against our will), or prevented from doing something which we want to do (e.g., playing or going out with friends), or not being interested in our surroundings.

Anything in life can be made interesting or boring, according to what we do "inside." Thus, if you come to talk to me, and I listen to you with genuine interest, I will not feel bored. But, if I sit there unwillingly, waiting for you to finish and go, and I see you an obstacle to what I really wanted to do (e.g., watch a movie or read a book), I will feel bored, even irritated, as you talk.

Bored or thrilled? That depends mostly on the person I am. If I love people, I will enjoy the company of most persons. If I love nature, I will take delight in trees, flowers, mountains and lakes, gorillas and bees. If I have developed a taste for reading, I will hardly ever feel bored. If I have a meaningful relationship with God, and want to cultivate it, I will see prayer as a great opportunity to deepen that relationship. If not, I will experience prayer times as boring.

So, what are YOU doing to make your life a happy celebration or a boring, monotonous sleep-walk?

One thing I noticed after I did my first Vipassana meditation course was that I did not get impatient while waiting. What do you do when you wait? What happens inside you?

Boredom can lead to depression.

Boredom can be behind sudden outburst of violence.

Boredom can make a person look for easy escapes—drugs, drinks, purposeless travel, sexual involvements with no commitment.

Children living in a stimulating environment—close to family members and friends, or to nature, or with books and games—are full of life, not bored. If they learn to rely more on gadgets than on company and their own imagination and skills, they will be easily bored when gadgets are missing or old.

Once a priest friend asked me whether teaching in the seminary wasn't boring. I told him, "No. I am never bored. I enjoy teaching, and helping students to grow up. Every evening I meet two of them for counselling or spiritual direction. If I really listen to each one with interest, it is never boring." Every human being is very interesting—provided we take an interest. Daily life can be deeply interesting if we put our heart into it—reading, teaching, research, gardening, cooking, looking after leprosy patients, physical exercise, prayer, meditation, cleaning. Any of them can be seen as boring if our heart is not in it.

A young man who worked in a disco told me, "I often take the night bus from Mangalore to Bangalore. I used to feel very bored. One day, I told a priest about this, and about my inability to pray. He told me something very simple. 'Praying,' he said, 'is like talking to your best friend.'" Now, when I travel by bus, I am talking to God the whole time, as I would chat with my best friends. The time passes fast; I am never bored." True. Chats with God are one of the best helps for never being bored.

REFLECT: Are you bored or engaged? Do you really listen, or only pretend to listen? In work, do you engage yourself heart and soul, or do it half-heartedly? Are you waiting for people or events to make life interesting for you? Is there life "inside" you, or are you mostly waiting for externals to keep you entertained? Is God real for you?

DO: Learn something new every day. * Listen, really listen when someone talks to you. * Take active interest in what goes on around you. * Talk to God in your own way. * God has gifted you with everything you need to lead a very interesting life. Genuine love, meaningful prayer, interest in people and activities, appreciation of nature, learning new things—what great tools for an exciting life, with no moment of boredom!

Call

In the movie, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, the beautiful princess of the conquered land tells the invading prince of "the purpose of my life and my sacred calling." She is ready to take risks, even die, to protect the magic dagger whose handle carries the "sands of time." When released, those sands can turn time back. Her calling is to protect the dagger and the magic sand.

Have you found something which you feel is your destiny and your sacred calling? You carry within you something far more precious than magic sand. You carry God's imprint. You are put on this earth for a

divine purpose. This purpose fills your life with tremendous energy and meaning. You are not a loafer on the planet. In fulfilling that purpose, you find your destiny. This is your sacred call.

One of my sisters often phones and tells me, "Come. Spend time with us." The reason: She loves me, and wants to spend time with me. Her grandchildren ask me over the phone, "When are you coming?"

Those who love us, call us. In love, they feel the freedom to insist. Such calls are not a burden, but a great source of joy. Wouldn't life be tragic if nobody wanted to see you, no one called you? You are truly blessed if people love you enough to call you.

Anyone who loves us, calls us, and is delighted to have us close. God does the same. He calls each of us to be close to Him, live in His love, spread His love around. This is our sacred call and our destiny. Vocational discernment means finding that setting where we will do this best.

Vocation is a call of love. It is about what appeals to our heart in depth. As an inspiring Japanese sister, who said good-bye to her wealthy home and boy friend and became a nun, told me, "I have never lost the joy of my vocation." Her initial realization when she joined ("I do not need wealth to be happy; Jesus Christ is enough for me") still rings true.

No one knows for sure what anyone's vocation is. Nor do we (celibates) have the right to deprive anyone of two of life's most beautiful, demanding and life-enhancing experiences—spousal love and parenthood. All we can (and should) do is to help each young person to see life as God's gift and the importance of living it as God wants.

Finding what one's "heart" wants—that is, finding one's deepest and truest desires—is the key to vocation discernment. We need to check when and where we are happiest and most at peace, who or what inspires us, as also when and where we work and make sacrifices enthusiastically.

The Bible carries many fascinating stories of persons being called by God—Moses, Samuel, David, Jonah, Gideon, Mary, the apostles, ... Each time, God erupts into a person's life in a surprising way. The person called feels unfit and generally afraid. (Peter to Jesus: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!").

Our task is to allow God to transform us. We may do much or little according to our collaboration with God. Don Bosco said to an admirer amazed at his achievements: "If I had more faith, how much more God would have done through me."

A humble sense of personal inadequacy, together with the conviction that everything is from God's grace, not from our smartness, marks the true apostle. Those who boast or compete, or put down others, or climb over them to reach some plum post, show little evidence of living a vocation.

Three quotes to end with:

Father Pascual Chavez, the superior general of the Salesians: "Perseverance is not the same as fidelity." Just staying in does not mean I am faithful. I can be a saint or a crook while being a Salesian.

Randy Pausch, a brilliant professor, who died of cancer three years ago at age 47. About his marriage, “I wanted to find someone whom I loved more than I loved myself, and I found her.” Vocation is about finding Someone or something you value more than your little ego and its cravings.

An unmarried lady recalls her spontaneous feeling when her childless sister adopted a baby. She said, “I instantly knew the meaning of the expression, ‘dearer than life.’ He was dearer to me than my own life.”

A call ultimately is about this—finding a love dearer than self, dearer than life, large enough to fill one’s life and deep enough to pull all one’s rich, untamed energies into a purposeful commitment.

Have you found it? You are truly blessed, if you have. If not, find out what you need to discover your true calling. Life is too precious to be wasted on what does not grip the heart.

REFLECT: Do I have a sense of being “called”? By whom? For what? Have I found enthusiasm and a high sense of purpose? Are there persons or purposes for which I work and suffer cheerfully? What attracted me to this life? What grips me? Does living in this setting make me a better (more mature, more Christ-like) person? Am I faithful, or just staying in?

ACT: List what you find inspiring about your way of life, and what you do not like. * Write what it means for you to be what you are today (religious, priest, mother, father, husband, wife). * Don’t just stay in; imitate the best, shun the worst and do good each single day.

Caste: Human Beings as “Higher” and “Lower”

Kevin, an Irish American lawyer, used an expression that I did not follow at first. “My Catholic education,” he said, “has made me colour-blind.” I asked him what he meant. His response shows the lovely and practical impact of a good Catholic school. What he meant was this: For him, a person’s race of skin colour did not matter. He was able to accept and befriend persons of different races, treating them as equals. In fact, I saw this for myself.

How much better the world would if more people were “colour-blind” like Kevin!

The same goes for caste. People differ in abilities, looks, professions. That is fine. What becomes a monstrous miscarriage of justice is when a group claims to be higher or superior, and wants to treat others as inferior, in fact unfit for human or respectful treatment. Worse still, when this discrimination is justified in the name of religious texts, as if God want some of His children to ill-treat other children of His.

We cannot analyse the origin of the caste system, nor present different theories on its origin in one page. What we do need to say clearly, both in civil society, and in a Catholic periodical like this, is this: Any vision of human beings which presents some as intrinsically superior or inferior to others, especially when such a vision leads to disrespectful or even inhuman treatment of those considered inferior, cannot be accepted by anyone who claims to believe in Jesus. Jesus taught us an ethic of relationships, not an ethic based on temple ritual. Not just of any type of relationships, but relationships based on God’s fatherhood and our basic dignity and equality as God’s children.

The way to check whether a social system is just and good is to check how it affects the weaker groups, not what the most powerful beneficiaries think of it. If I force you to kneel on all fours, and sit on your back, and then say that the situation is comfortable or peaceful, it is clear for whom the situation is comfortable. The right person to ask is the one I am sitting on. In any situation of oppression or unequal rights, the voice that needs to be heard most urgently is that of the person suffering the discrimination, not the ones who benefit from it.

Thus, women are the ones to be asked whether they receive fair and equal treatment in society; the poor are the ones who can tell us how a government policy affects them; the so-called “lower” castes and those were called “outcastes” (now called Dalits) are the ones who can say whether there is discrimination, and in what ways, and what needs to be changed.

We also need to understand the deep anger and frustration and powerlessness people have endured for centuries while being treated as less than human. Some of the so-called religious texts justifying the caste system would make any sensible human being feel deep shame and anger. What really happened is that powerful groups within society—whether by caste or race, money or gender—wrote the texts to sharpen and perpetuate their privileged position. One way to do this was to say that this is God’s will.

So, too, with caste, this typically Indian phenomenon of discrimination and inhumanity. Its main differences from racism are two: Very often there are no clear racial or physical differences between two caste groups. Secondly, caste hierarchy is given a religious sanction. Common to both is the manipulation of the complex structures of society by the most powerful groups to perpetuate their privileged position.

Caste discrimination is real. It is unjust. It has to go. The real change will come from three forces: (1) Social forces that make upward mobility more likely, such as, education, land distribution, use of technology; (2) Enlightened and courageous members of so-called “lower” groups who demand equal treatment, and refuse to be treated as inferior. Dr Ambedkar is a good model in this. (3) Enlightened and honest persons from the so-called “higher” castes who see the injustice in the system, and how it is hurting all of us, and work to create a society of mutuality, rather than hierarchy.

REFLECT: Do I see human beings as basically equal or as basically higher and lower? What is my weak or blind area of prejudice—caste, gender, language, money, race? Do I demand rights for myself or “my people,” while denying the same to others? In the way I hold authority (all of us do), do I exercise it to build a society of equals or to claim privileges for myself? Do my close friends belong to different social groups? Do I speak up when rights are violated?

ACT: Check how you treat persons who are socially “below” you—by job, education, money, caste or influence. (A good way to check whether you believe in equality or exploitation.) Invite for public functions (e.g., flag hoisting or presiding at functions) persons from disadvantaged groups, and highlight their problems and their contribution to society.

Catholicism, the “both... and...” Religion

Scripture or tradition? Faith or reason? Nature or the supernatural? Faith or good works?
Religion or science? Bible or church? Prayer or service of the poor?

To each of these questions, the Catholic answer is: *Both*. Both scripture and tradition matter. Faith and reason are both God's gifts. Care for the supernatural should not make us neglect nature. Faith without good works is dead. We would not even have a special book called the Bible, unless the church (the faith community) presented it to us as the Word of God.

The term "Catholic" means universal. By "Catholic church" we mean the family of faith spread all over the world, which people of every continent, race, nation and language can claim as their family of faith.

"Catholic" and "Christian" are not mutually exclusive terms. The Catholic church is the largest Christian denomination, with much more in common with all the other churches than the differences.

The central authority of the Pope helps Catholics around the world to be united in the same faith, and to be clear about the essentials of following Jesus. These essentials cannot change from place to place or time to time or pastor to pastor. The Christian faith is not a buffet meal from which each one picks and chooses what one likes. There are essentials which cannot be sacrificed. These essentials are found in our creed, and, in greater detail, in the Catechism.

An American scholar called Thomas E. Woods wrote a book which has received enthusiastic reviews from outside the Catholic church: *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*. With a wealth of data, Woods shows how the church promoted sciences, set up the first European universities, gave the world the doctrine of human dignity, and the concept of human rights, including rights of those outside the church.

In India, we Catholics are only 1.5 percent of the population. Yet, we are the biggest presence after the central government in social services, such as orphanages, homes for the destitute aged, leprosaria, care of street children, and a very influential presence in education and medical work. This service is not the fruit of some social theory, but in fidelity to a Master who told us, "As long as you did it to the least, you did it to me." There is a continuity between the Christ we worship in the Eucharist and the Christ we serve in the poor.

To find fault with a large and complex organization with a two-thousand-year history is easy, just as we will all know the defects of our family members. But, to be fair, look at the enormous amount of good done in and through the church.

Nicholas Kristof (not a Catholic!) wrote in *The New York Times* about his experiences in south Sudan:

“Once again, I am awed that so many of the selfless people serving the world’s neediest are lowly nuns and priests...overwhelmingly it’s at the grass roots that I find the great soul of the Catholic Church...I met Father Michael in the remote village of Nyamlell, 150 miles from any paved road... He runs four schools for children who would otherwise go without an education, and his graduates score at the top of state-wide examinations. ..To keep his schools alive, he persevered through civil war, imprisonment and beatings, and a smorgasbord of disease....There are so many more like them. There’s Father Mario Falconi, an Italian priest who refused to leave Rwanda during the genocide and bravely saved 3,000 people from being massacred...It’s because of brave souls like these that I honor the Catholic Church.”

The next time you feel like criticising priests and religious (who, like the rest of the church, are far from perfect), try visiting a leprosy colony, or a home for destitute aged, or a school for poor tribal children, or mission station with no roads or electricity, or a shelter for street children, and ask yourself: “Am I ready to do this? Or am I just a loveless critic?”

There are Catholic teachings and practices which are misunderstood by outsiders (and by some Catholics) because they are presented badly or in unloving ways by church personnel. Take the case of devotion to Mary and the saints. Catholics do not worship them, but pay them special respect. We can see in the saints how ordinary people like us took Jesus’ message seriously and lived it heroically. Just as we learn basketball or cricket by watching good players rather than by reading books, so too the saints show us how to live. Of them, Mary is the best model of discipleship.

All of us in the church, whether pope or priest, lay woman or cardinal, teacher or parent, run the risk of putting our ego rather than God’s love at the centre. Hence the saying, “The church is always in need of conversion.” The church is. Each of us is. Quoting Jesus or going to church or reading the Bible or singing hymns to Our Lady are no substitutes for living as Jesus taught. A loving Christian community, especially those who resemble Jesus most—that is, the saints—show us what the new life Christ brought us is. The church will be lovely and loving, or sadly mired in selfishness, depending on how each of us lives.

REFLECT: Am a “practising Catholic” in the sense of living according to what Jesus taught (loving, forgiving, sharing)? Is there a continuity between my going for Mass and the way I treat people (as the body of Christ)? Do I take my call to holiness seriously? Is my heart truly “Catholic” (open to all) or do I build walls excluding people according to language, caste, tribe, etc? Am a model of Christian life to my children and others in my care?

ACT: Learn more about the faith. The church is a rich treasure trove of wisdom. * Decide to be truly Catholic, not restricting your loyalty to language, caste, rite, etc. * Check whether there is a continuity between what you do in church and how you live.

Celibacy: Why give up the best things of life?

A community of Indian sisters working among Moslem women in an African country had this amusing yet instructive experience. At first the local women would visit the convent and look everywhere. Finding that there were no men in the convent, they were flabbergasted. They asked the sisters, “Do you take some special injections?” They could not believe that anyone could live without sex.

Closer home, some young sisters doing college in Chennai told me: “Our classmates from other religions tell us: ‘We don’t believe you are celibate. It is not normal. It is not possible.’ ”

We are generally reluctant to believe that others can live in ways we find too hard to think about. Look at those who have. When Clara, daughter of a rich Japanese businessman, felt the call to religious life, she already had a boy friend who wanted to marry her. To learn about religious life, she went and spent some days in a convent. Used to luxury, she wept at the inconveniences of convent life. Clara went back home, reflected, and found this truth: “I do not need any of these things to be happy. Jesus Christ is enough for me.” She joined religious life. Now, many years later, Clara says, “I have never lost the joy of my vocation.”

That joy comes from a personal relationship to Christ, and from a life of sincerity and service, not from simply staying in the convent. Celibacy, like any life-commitment, makes sense and is happy if it is chosen for love. It is not a way of being free for work. No one should be pressurized into it. It does not automatically make anyone better or holier. The simplest question to ask before one chooses celibacy is: “Do I want to base my life on love? In which way of life will I be more loving (and hence happier)?”

A Moslem colleague at Madras University said something about the Ramzan fast that makes sense about celibacy, too. When I asked him, “Don’t children find it hard to observe the fast?” he told me, “Joe, it is mostly mental. When you accept something mentally, the physical part is easy. We know from childhood that everyone in the family—in fact, all Moslems—will be keeping the fast for a month. So, we see it as good and normal. After that, the physical part is not hard.”

True. What matters is what happens in our mind and heart. When Sr. Miriam (name changed), a capable professional, went to write an advanced examination, she noticed how her married colleagues had their spouses and other family members with them right up to the door, while she was alone. “But then,” she says, “their spouses can only come up to the door. The one I have committed my life to is with me always, right in the exam hall, and wherever I am.”

From this personal sense of God flows a simplicity of life that is joyful and serene, making celibacy meaningful and inspiring. A comfort-loving or power-hungry or quarrelsome life cannot be called celibacy. It does more harm than good.

Dioceses and religious congregations should guard against any “vocation recruitment” that is simply hunting for hands for work, or desperate search for numbers whereby almost anyone is “recruited” and kept, without discernment. If truly called by God, the person will be marked by two traits: *joy* and *love*. A candidate learns that from living with loving and happy celibates.

Celibacy chosen out of right motives can lead to great fulfillment. A study by the American daily *The Los Angeles Times* on professional fulfillment compared four very visible professions in the US—medical doctors, university professors, Protestant pastors and Catholic priests. Which profession do you think showed the highest sense of satisfaction? Catholic priests. (Did you guess right?) Celibacy need not mean a loveless life of loneliness or a solitary journey without meaningful relationships.

Randy Pausch, a 47-year-old brilliant professor of computer science, knew he was dying of cancer. In his talk to students, he said: “You have to find a passion. That passion won’t come from money or from things. It comes from love.” On why he married late (at 39): “I wanted to find someone whom I loved more than I loved myself; and I found her.”

If you find a person or a cause that you put above your love of ease and comfort, then your life will be meaningful. Whether this love is for another human being (like Randy Pausch’s), or for Jesus (like Clara’s), your life will show whether you have found such love. If you have, those around you will be truly blessed. Celibacy is one such path—a different way of loving, without boundaries, and open to the needs of all, ready to go wherever God wants.

REFLECT: Do I make my decisions out of love or selfishness? Have my vocational decisions (to marry, to be a religious or priest) been made out of love and faith, or out of worldly motives? In my marriage or celibate life, am I becoming more loving and more committed, or more egoistic? Do I cultivate a meaningful relationship with God? If a celibate, am I marked by a big heart and big dreams of service—or am I wasting my life on selfish dreams, love of comfort and power games?

ACT: Decide to be loving in concrete ways during the next twenty-four hours.* Identify practical ways of keeping your God-awareness alive. * If celibate: Take time to think of the needs and difficulties of those in your care (parishioners, pupils, patients), check what you can do for them, and bring them to God in prayer. (This expands our heart in love.) * Learn from inspiring celibates and family members, not gossip, egoism and power-games from the worst!

Chapters—General, Provincial, etc

On 4 April 2012, Father Pascual Chavez Villanueva, Rector Major (=Superior General) of the Salesians of Don Bosco, announced the theme for our 27th General Chapter (GC7)—“Witnesses to a radical, gospel-informed lifestyle.”

Members of any religious order are familiar with this type of event. Chapters, whether provincial or general, are part of our life. We invest time, energy and money on them. Why? What can chapters do?

A. Chapters Matter: Why?

Chapters can serve the following useful functions:

(1) *Create awareness on important issues.* The creative thinking and radical commitment of a few can percolate to the majority through chapters. Even the mediocre and the lukewarm will get in touch with some of the issues being discussed in communities.

(2) *Involve all in the government of the order.* Such involvement increases co-responsibility. We all think of the larger issues affecting the whole order, and the whole world, instead of being concerned with just our private life or the institution where we work.

(3) *Legitimize initiative:* Initiatives (e.g., the Salesian launch into street children's work) started with the zeal of a few. Later, through chapters, they are accepted as part of the official priorities of the congregation.

(4) *Implement good decisions, and check their execution.* Chapter members can not only make good suggestions; they can question what is being done, and the ways of doing it. Responsible criticism is essential to good functioning.

(5) *Prevent or correct abuse of authority:* The religious superior is not a dictator with absolute power. When more people have a say, the quality of performance will be better. This also prevents abuse, e.g., in financial matters or policies, and remedies abuses.

B. Limitations of Chapters:

Chapters and other official meetings have also limitations which we should be aware of:

(a) *Chapters, or gatherings in general, cannot create commitment.* Religious orders are the result of the generous response of a particular man or woman to God's call, a response which inspired others. Heroism or holiness is not produced by discussions or papers. Chapters may sacrifice demanding and pioneering initiatives in favour of what is easy.

(b) *Mediocrity of the majority:* In any organization, the majority will be mediocre. Most are not enthused by the professed ideals of the group. Most Franciscans won't be other Francis of Assisi; most Salesians will not be other Don Boscós. Chapters may reflect this mediocrity rather than fidelity to the Gospels.

(c) *Destructive counter-agendas:* If there are serious divisions in a religious order (e.g., those based on language, caste, tribe, nationality, etc), the real pulls may be to get these hidden agendas through. The hidden (or not hidden) power games of the groups (e.g., in elections) will play a larger role than the official theme or nice-sounding rhetoric of the chapter.

C. Suggestions:

(1) Elect members who are committed to the goals of the order (e.g., service of the poorest), and not people who have the support of a particular group.

(2) In case of divisions (e.g., caste, language, etc), include that itself in the agenda, and have an open sharing on the issue, led by a person (a member or an outsider) who is credible.

(3) Involve communities and individuals in preparing for the chapter and in the implementation.

(4) Include a spiritual preparation for the chapter, led by a credible religious whose words carry weight. The more we are open to God, the more we will be open to each other.

(5) Use the services of outside experts, if and when required, e.g., in the election of superiors.

(6) If feedback is sought, make sure the methods used are fair, where people can express their opinion without fear, and with the confidence that their views and suggestions will be taken seriously.

(7) If your congregation is small or young, get the help of experienced religious in planning, preparing and conducting the chapter and in the follow-up.

An experienced and esteemed religious priest told me as I was leaving for a provincial chapter: "Chapters are useful and necessary. But changes for the better will only come about through personal prayer and love of the cross."

That needs no explanation. The Son of God (much smarter than all of us put together) saved us not through clever speeches and manipulation, but by being centred on God's will and ready to suffer for us. Those among us who share these traits of His more fully, are also more likely to be channels of His work in our midst.

May our Chapters—and other official encounters—be led by His Spirit, and not by human folly or clash of egos or love of comfort. Chapters create documents. It is good people led by God who change the world.

REFLECT: Were your chapters held in an atmosphere of faith in God, mutual trust and genuine love? Or were they vitiated by group rivalries or power games? Were the superiors elected/appointed in an open manner, or as a result of string-pulling or group support? Are the members actively involved in the preparation and execution of chapters? Do you contribute your share generously?

ACT: Be involved—in work, in generous encouragement, in responsible and caring criticism, in implementing common decisions. * In elections, vote for the person you think before God is the best, rather than look for someone from "your group" or someone who agrees with you. * Check how you can be a better religious and do your part more responsibly, rather than just wait for chapters to solve everything.

Christian

What does it mean to be Christian?

The best answer is not found in columns like this, but in persons who take Christ seriously, or, better still, in one's own sincere attempt to live like Jesus.

For this is the peculiarity of the Christian religion, that it is centred around a person, and judges fidelity by one's nearness to Christ's life and teachings.

For you, who is the person who best exemplifies Christ's teachings? That person can show you the meaning of being Christian better than books or ritual.

To be Christian means to have as the centre of our world a loving Abba who looks on us with tender love, cares for us every instant, and whose children all human beings are, without exception. Hence all discrimination and exclusion, all claims of superiority, all attempts to exclude or despise anyone, would

go directly against our Christian faith. As a young European who came from a racist family told me, "Once I met Jesus, I see everyone as my brother or sister. The walls have fallen."

To be Christian means to believe that the meaning of life is found in Jesus' life and death. Like him, each of us will have a time of growing up, a time of activity and acclaim, a time of rejection and suffering, our own meeting with death, and an eternal life with God. And all these stages are meaningful, not because we understand them as they happen—many things happen which we do not like or understand—but because this is how God treated his own Son.

To be Christian means to see that we are what we are by God's mercy. Everything is grace and mercy—gifts received free of charge from a supremely loving God, and hence no reason for boasting, or for putting down the less gifted. Gratitude becomes one's core attitude.

To be Christian means to believe in a Risen Lord who is alive, who walks with us on the journey of life, giving us the strength to face the new, and a peace which a worldly life cannot bring us. As the frightened and heart-broken women at the empty tomb are told, "He is alive! He is going ahead of you. You will see him!" (Mark 16:1-7)

To be Christian means to put love and compassion above ritual and doctrines, to see the sacrament that our neighbour is, to be a sacrament (a visible sign) of God's love in the world, especially to the least and the most excluded. That is why people understand Christianity better by seeing a Damien or a Mother Teresa—or any inspiring Christian—than by reading books.

To be Christian means to do our part to create a society of truth (not corruption), justice (not exploitation), inclusion (not discrimination), compassion (not vindictiveness).

To be Christian means to go through the world in gratitude and joy, because God is with us, because God's power is greater than human malice or folly.

At the trial of Inspector Van De Broek, a South African police officer who had tortured her son to death, and burnt her husband alive, the woman who had undergone these atrocities was asked: "What do you want?" Three things, she said. One, to gather some dust from the place of her husband's murder; two, that Mr Van Broek come to her home, so that she could shower on him all the love she had in her heart; three, to hug him right there in the court to assure him that, because of her faith in Jesus Christ, she truly forgave him.

This is what it means to be Christian. Does my faith make me a man or woman of compassion, forgiveness, active love? Or do I reduce my religion to ritual, dogma and external symbols?

None of us is ever fully Christian; we need constant reform and conversion, both as individuals and as a church. Hence the ancient saying, *Ecclesia semper reformanda* ("the church is always in need of reform"). At all levels in the church, from the Pope to the peon, from bishops and priests to sacristans and illiterate peasants, from mother superiors to mothers-in-law, everyone of us needs conversion of heart; we truly need to become Christian.

For the model we are called to follow is the Son of God who became one of us for our sake, and who, in living our life in fidelity and love, showed us the meaning of being human, and the meaning of walking through this world in godly love.

The world needs the simple message of that simple man. More, it needs to see people who live that simple message with their whole heart. Ultimately, being Christian boils down to this: can people see in me the loving face of Jesus?

REFLECT: Who is Jesus for me? Am I trying to be a follower of Jesus, or do I identify first with my race or language group or caste or tribe? Does my faith make me a Christ-like human being? Who are the Christ-like persons I try to imitate? How would I put the essentials of my faith in a few simple sentences?

ACT: Make a difference for the better in your setting. * Do at least three good deeds a day. When you cannot help others, at least don't harm (e.g., through cheating, or gossiping). * In making decisions, ask yourself: What would Jesus (or such-and-such a Christ-like person) do? * Train yourself and those in your care to include, not exclude, persons in their love and service.

Commandments for Leaders (parents, priests, religious, educators)

We all know the Ten Commandments by heart. Here are ten commandments for those in authority (parents, priests, religious, educators). Most of us hold authority, at one or other level.

1. **Walk the talk:** Leaders are watched, more than listened to. Those under you will take you seriously if they see you practise what you ask others to do. As Pope Paul VI would say, "contemporary people listen to witnesses more than to preachers; if they do listen to preachers, it is because they are also witnesses." In the words of a highly respected Salesian superior, "The young have a right to make mistakes; it is we superiors and older religious who should be exemplary."
2. **Demand more from yourself than you ask others:** Those in authority are not meant to sit back and get those below to do the tough job. A family will function if the parents put in more work and sacrifice than they ask children to do. Same with a parish, or religious house or school. The group must see that the leader works harder than what he/she asks followers to do.
3. **Appreciate the good subordinates do:** In a study of 2000 mid-level managers in the UK , one question was: "What do you miss most?" The answer: "Appreciation for what we do well." It is not enough that superiors or teachers or CEOs correct mistakes, make rules, or exhort. Leaders need to notice the good done, and acknowledge it, in private and in public.
4. **Be a disciple, not a boss:** There is only one leader (Jesus). Although a bishop, provincial, local superior or others who hold special responsibilities are called leaders, all of us are in the more basic task of being disciples. We all serve one Master. A church leader or religious superior, for instance, has no right to make those in one's care do what s/he likes; we are all here to do God's will—which the superior is bound to discern using all honest means at one's disposal. One part of being an honest disciple is to admit your mistakes and apologize.

5. **Obey your superiors:** Good leaders must be good followers. A superior has no right to demand obedience and respect from those “under” him/her, if they see that he/she has scant respect for those above. How will young religious respect a rector who is constantly criticising the provincial?
6. **Respect and speak well of colleagues and predecessors:** Only then will we respect you. If you put down your colleagues or those who held this post before you, that is really cheap. People are not stupid. They can see through jealousy and ambition. Large-heartedness, not mean comments, will win you our trust and respect.
7. **Make serious matters gripping, not boring:** Laity and students will, for instance, take active part in the Mass or other church activities, if the priest is evidently gripped by what he is doing. A good teacher makes the subject come alive; no need of shouting and screaming. Contagious enthusiasm and passion gets the group involved, not boring exhortations or repeated fault-finding.
8. **Don’t put down those with more initiative:** Those with more initiative and greater generosity, will do more, but also make mistakes. The one with the most initiative is the truly obedient religious. It would be a serious mistake to put down precisely such persons—especially if the put-down is prompted by jealousy. Remember Jesus’ parable of the talents.
9. **Don’t say in public what you do not believe in private:** You do not, of course, have to say in public everything you believe in private (e.g., you may know the faults or limitations of a particular individual), but what you say in public must reflect what you really believe. Do not flatter public figures or superiors. Do not use meaningless flowery language (“Our hearts are filled with joy since our beloved X is present with us this evening”).
10. **Don’t command anything against conscience:** It would be terrible if someone in authority, especially in church settings, were to ask a person to do something crooked or dishonest, like, falsifying accounts, or taking bribes, or using wrong methods to appoint or dismiss an employee. This would mean that a good person would become bad by being part of a so-called religious setting.

REFLECT: Do I see leadership more as a responsibility or as a privilege? Do I stand “with” the people in my care or “above” them? Do I see that leadership demands a more exemplary and inspiring life from me than what I expect or demand from the group? Do I admit my mistakes and apologize?

ACT: Note down the good things your group or particular members are doing. Make it a point to affirm them. * Pray for God’s guidance each day, especially before crucial decisions. * Have a good confessor or spiritual director or friend with whom you can discuss personal issues in confidence, and be encouraged and also confronted. * Use special occasions (jubilees, birthdays, etc), to highlight people’s good qualities and contribution.

Emotional Intelligence

Brilliant and confident, Mathew stood first in his class. He won scholarships and got selected to famous colleges. He married a gifted young woman from a well-to-do family. Things

seemed to going so well for him, and he was quoted as a big success. Why, then, is his marriage a mess? Why the divorce? Why the times of intense loneliness, the absence of close friends?

Clementine was considered an average student, and not outstanding in any way. She was neither a beauty, nor at the top of her class. Today, she is a major superior, much trusted by her sisters, and consulted by other superiors. When there are disputes, Clementine's word matters. When sisters need to talk over a personal problem in confidence, Clementine is one of the first names that come to their mind. She is not brilliant; but people are moved by her sincerity, attracted to her warmth and impressed by her common sense.

Matthew and Clementine are proofs of what human experience has repeatedly shown—a person of average intelligence who is emotionally balanced and good at relationships does much better in life than another who is academically brilliant but poor at managing feelings and relationships. In leadership roles, too, the "Clementine" type of person does much better than the "Matthew" type. Thus, a priest or religious who was good in studies, and hence sent for higher studies, and then is appointed a formator, can be a failure if he/she is moody or offensive or driven by jealousy.

This can happen in any walk of life. Kenneth A. Miller, a brilliant professional, describes his own sad experience. After being an outstanding student, he became a doctor, and married. His marriage ended in a messy divorce. He asked himself why. He found he had tried to be above feelings, and run his life on purely rational grounds. "When I entered professional life I started to ponder more the emotional issues in the lives of my patients, and in my own life, and I was slowly coming to terms with the importance of these issues...I reflected upon the failure of my marriage and the miserable circumstances in which I found myself..." He found that the main reason for the mess was his attempt to live a purely "rational" life, neglecting his emotions.

Miller then read the bestselling book of Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. The book changed his whole attitude to living. "Where formerly I was of the belief that the mind was the key to happiness and success in life (and the emotions merely got in the way...), I have now come to view that the true formula for success and happiness is the development of an intelligent mind surrendered to an intelligent heart...Issues of emotional intelligence (or rather, lack of it) either cause or drive numerous medical problems."

All of us can (and do) make the same mistake: seeing life as something to manage with our head, while neglecting our emotions. Clear thinking is certainly important, but it is equally necessary to pay attention to feelings—our own and others'. Here are the four aspects of managing emotions intelligently.

(a) *Perceiving emotions*: I need to be aware that I feel jealous towards another person, or angry at someone, or sexually attracted, or depressed, or moved by an experience. Some of us are out of touch with ourselves.

(b) *Understanding emotions*: Why am I feeling sad? What makes me feel jealous? Why am I afraid of speaking in public? Why do I find it hard to make friends? Why is our marriage not working out? We need to understand also how others feel when

we speak or act in particular ways, and or why they look upset. Am I aware of my facial expression, tone of voice, gestures? Do I understand others' feelings?

(c) *Expressing emotions*: We need to learn to express warmth and compassion, anger and sadness, sexual feelings and mood changes, in responsible ways. A meek person, for instance, is not one without anger, but one whose expression of anger is appropriate.

(d) *Managing emotions*: A good part of growing up, as well as a central key to good relationships, is managing our emotions. In priestly and religious training, this aspect is weak. The theoretical aspects (knowledge of a number of subjects) is given much importance. Handling our emotions is largely neglected. This is one of the aspects of what is called human formation—sadly, the weakest part of a formation plan. Training is useful for this, of course. But the best help, probably, is living with people who are emotionally alive and expressive, and whose lives show what it means to admit one's feelings honestly, understand one's own and others' feelings, and manage emotions wisely and well. No magic shortcut here; good mentors and life experience are needed.

REFLECT: Am I aware of my feelings, and of others' feelings? Do I "read" others' emotions correctly? Do I make an honest attempt to admit and understand what I feel, and why I feel this way? In dealing with others, am I aware of the effects of my words and actions? In making decisions, do I take into account the feelings of people?

ACT: Choose any emotion (fear, anger, jealousy, sexual attraction, sadness, boredom) that gives you trouble. Admit it honestly. Try to see what causes it, and what the consequences are. If you find it hard to work it out on your own, talk with a sensible person you trust. Sort out how you express your emotions and manage them.

Eucharist

There is an old saying, "The Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Church."

Meaning: It is the Church—the community of believers gathered in Jesus' name—who celebrate the Eucharist. As an individual, I can, of course, pray in my own way; but I cannot celebrate the Eucharist without the faith community.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, believers met in homes, shared meals, and helped one another. They also observed what they called "the Lord's Supper." They would recall their memories of Jesus. From these sharings, a few things would get written down, and become what we call the four Gospels. People would also bring things to share with the poor. What made it a unique form of prayer was not special buildings, robes, vessels, or books. For the first three centuries, there were no church buildings. What the earliest (and perhaps best) Christians had were the two essentials—a God-experience to share and love for one another. This loving, believing community made the Eucharist.

How does the Eucharist make the church?

Listening to God's Word and trying to live by it is central to the Christian faith. So, too, the sharing of gifts. What we celebrate in ritual, we are called to live the rest of the day. It is not only about the bread and wine that we say, "this is the Body of Christ." It is said equally truly,

though in a different way, about human beings. Every person is the body of Christ. Here is the challenge of St. Jerome to his fourth century Christians, "What is the use of adorning the walls of the church with precious stones when Christ is dying in the poor?"

In this sense, the Eucharist builds the church. What we listen to, and celebrate in ritual, we are called to live. The Word of God should be the centre of our life. The table fellowship with the Lord, which is Holy Communion, should be lived out by avoiding (and overcoming) all types of discrimination in society, based on money, race, language, caste, tribe, etc. Sharing a meal is like saying, "We belong together; we are family." In the Eucharist, we do this around Jesus. No wonder there is a continuity between, say, a community of religious attending Mass, and then spending the rest of the day serving the poor. Both the Mass and the service are about the Body of Christ.

The word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving. The most meaningful way of praying is to thank God. If I can write this article, and you can read it, if both of us have eye sight and mental health, these are God's gifts. So with thousands of other gifts, most of which we take for granted. Mr Nathan, an older man, once told me why he goes to church every day: "All my children and grand-children are normal. This is God's biggest gift. I want to thank God every day." Thank the Giver of gifts. Be Eucharistic.

The only condition Jesus gave us for approaching the altar is right relationships. Divisions, doing harm to others, or the refusal to forgive block God's grace. I have often quoted a priest who went to apologize to a colleague he had hurt, "I want to apologize; otherwise, my Eucharist tomorrow will not be meaningful."

Touching honesty. A simple and great truth. The Eucharist should not be changed into a complicated ritual requiring expensive vestments and costly buildings, or reduced to the exact execution of a well-planned public function. It is not about which rite it is celebrated in, or what gestures are used. When we Catholics lose the true and central meaning and message of the Eucharist, many will walk out, and join groups that try to go back to the simplicity and close-knit community life of early Christians. That is happening today in many places. May the way we celebrate the Eucharist not betray Christ's teaching and example. May our central concern not be rite or language, vestments or buildings, but fidelity to Jesus.

Jesus came among us, not to give us a new ritual, or to complicate our way of relating to God. He came to show us God's love, and insisted that we will be recognized as His disciples to the degree we love one another. The skeptical Romans noticed the love, joy and unity of Christians. The world needs that same witness today. The Eucharist is really about celebrating Jesus' presence in word and ritual, and sending out to the world men and women filled with the love of Christ who will treat everyone as the Body of Christ.

REFLECT: Do I listen with my whole heart to the Word proclaimed in the Eucharist? Do I come to be transformed? (The same Lord who can transform bread and wine into Jesus's presence, has enough power to transform me and my world.) Do I come out of the Eucharist eager to treat everyone as the Body of Christ? For priests: Does the way I preside over the liturgy, and preach, help the community to come closer to Christ, and live his teaching? As a priest, am I a promoter of unity or a cause of division?

ACT: If you hurt someone, apologize before the next Mass. * Forgive those who have hurt you, and pray for them in the Mass. * After Holy Communion, bring to God in humble prayer four groups of people: dear ones, those whom you find it hard to love, those who suffer more

than you do, and those you will meet today. * Before leaving, check what has been God's message to you through the day's readings.

Fear

Are you courageous or scared? Want to get rid of your fear and nervousness?

Fear is a very common emotion, perhaps the commonest. Good news: Most fears can be overcome or reduced. Why? Because most fears are learnt, not inborn.

Only two fears are natural—fear of falling and fear of loud noise. These are useful fears, given to us for our protection. All other fears are learnt—fear of the dark, fear of death, fear of strangers, fear of speaking in public, fear of rejection,...

Recall an experience of being scared and nervous. What was the situation? What frightened you? How did your body react? What exactly was your fear?

Counselling courses helped me to understand the *thinking process that causes fear*. The freeing insight was to see that *I frighten myself!* Suppose I say, "The audience makes me nervous," or "Strangers make me uncomfortable." The answer will come only when I realize that the audience is not causing the nervousness. The way we think and fantasize causes most of our fears.

There are three elements in fear: (a) the bodily element, (b) the emotion, (c) the thought or fantasy.

- (a) The *bodily element* (nervousness): A frightened person may sweat, shiver, have palpitations, go cold, lose one's voice, blush, get diarrhoea or headache or become stiff. No one gets all these physical symptoms. Write down the ones you experience. Be aware of how your body responds to fear. To tell a frightened person, "Don't be nervous!" is meaningless. We cannot switch off our nervousness.
- (b) Behind the bodily reactions lies the *emotion*, which in this case is fear. Here, too, we cannot throw off an emotion. No use your telling me, "Don't be afraid!" It helps rather to ask oneself: What is my fear? That brings us to the crux of the problem.
- (c) Our *thoughts/fantasies*: What makes me scared and nervous is not the external situation, but the way I think about it. (If the external situation is dangerous, our fear is rational and good. Thus, for instance, if my child is running into traffic, my fear that he can get hurt is rational. This is not a fear to get rid of. I need to protect my child.)

A typical case. I ask Peter, a young college student, to give a speech. He looks uncomfortable, and pleads with me to ask someone else, "Father, I can't face an audience. I am so nervous." Would it be kindness on my part to agree with him? No, that would damage him. Instead, I can ask him, "Peter, what is your fear?"

As this point, a real revelation begins to take place. Peter does not know that what goes on in his mind is nothing unique. It has occurred in the minds of millions of other human beings, paralyzing them with fear. Behind most fears lies an "I-They-I" conversation. In Peter's case, it

turns out to be: “I will make mistakes; then they will criticise (ridicule, make fun of) me; I cannot face it.”

Peter can come out of his fear if I help him to see that making mistakes is perfectly OK. The option of doing things without any mistakes does not exist. I will help him prepare the speech, rehearse it with him, show him better ways of speaking, but insist that he can and must give that speech. After the speech, I will point out to him what he did well, and some minor mistakes he may have made. This is how I help Peter overcome his fear. If I were to excuse him from giving that speech, I would be crippling him.

So, the next time you feel scared of something or someone, don't withdraw. You can help yourself. Here's how:

SEVEN STEPS: These steps have worked for others; they will help you.

- (1) Ask yourself: What really is my fear? Become aware of the thoughts going on in your mind.
- (2) Question your irrational assumptions (we all have them): E.g., “I must do a perfect job” (No one does); “Others are waiting to criticise me” (They have many other things to do!); “I can't face their criticism” (Whatever you do, you will get some criticism.)
- (3) Prepare and get help, e.g., practise a speech with someone, or get tips on how to be a good superior.
- (4) See how others are doing what you are scared of; ask them, if you like.
- (5) DO IT! (If you withdraw, you will become more and more scared.)
- (6) Get feedback from caring people. You will see that you are capable of far more than you thought.
- (7) Develop faith. The greatest antidote to fear is faith. The problem that looks huge to you is a small matter for God. With God's help, people have faced far greater obstacles than what you are facing. An average person with trust in God will do far more than a brilliant person who lacks that trust.

Fear is not a stone on your head which someone else can take away. It is largely caused by the way we think and fantasize. By learning to challenge our irrational assumptions—we may need help with this—we can learn to manage most of our fears.

You were not born shy or scared or nervous. There is no need to go to your grave a frightened, trembling weakling. There is more power in you than you imagine. Don't let irrational thoughts fool you!

REFLECT: Am I mostly confident or scared? Do I expect things to turn out well, or do I withdraw, imagining all that can go wrong? Was I brought up to face life with confidence, or to avoid people and problems? If I am in charge of a group, do I encourage initiative, or rule people through fear?

ACT: identify any fear you experience frequently. * Try the seven steps listed above. * Talk this over with a sensible person who cares about you. * Talk to God about your fears. God did not

create you to go through life as a frightened mouse, but as a courageous and happy messenger of His love. So, trust!

Gossip

Said a layman to a priest one day, "Father, I do not want you to come to my house and discuss other priests in front of my children. Please settle your differences by yourselves."

Another priest of the same community said this about the rector, "I have never heard anything negative from his mouth about anybody."

Which of the two priests do you resemble more?

When we speak ill of someone, we are not only violating a person's right to a good reputation; we are doing an evil deed which we cannot erase. If I speak ill of you to two people, those two can repeat that to ten others, and those ten to another fifty, and so on. What happens to what I say is not under my control. I cannot cancel the evil effect, nor lessen it by saying I am sorry.

Another person we damage when we gossip is ourselves. If I speak ill of Peter to Paul, Paul will realize that I am likely to speak ill of him to Peter or Andrew. People will trust me less and less. The comment about me will be, "Careful! He has a poisonous tongue."

In talks on the evil of gossip, I show the group a one thousand Rupees note. I ask the audience: Suppose I use this note to light a candle, and then crumble the damaged note and throw it away, you will think me crazy, right? They nod their heads in affirmation. It would be madness to burn aRs 1000 note to light a candle, when a match stick would cost just two paise.

Then I tell them: But when I speak ill of someone, I am doing something much worse than burning aRs 1000 note. A person's reputation is worth much more than one thousand (or ten thousand) Rupees.

Do you believe this? Or do you think it is OK to spoil others' names without scruple?

One day, in a family reunion, one person started saying something negative about another family member. Then his sister intervened, lovingly but firmly, "We can say so many nice things about each other, and be happy together. Let us not spoil it by speaking ill of others."

I have been similarly edified by religious who intervene when someone starts speaking ill of absentees. A young sister once told her community members who were beginning to speak negatively of someone, "Let us not talk ill of her. If we want to point out her mistakes, we can tell that to her directly when we meet her."

Sadly, many lack the courage to do that. In that same community was another sister, who later told the one who spoke up, "I was thinking the same, but I was afraid of saying it out."

Do you speak up when someone absent is being discussed or his/her name being tarnished?

The way we speak about others reveals much about ourselves. Kind and noble-spirited persons say good things about others. They enjoy encouraging and building up people. Mean-spirited people prefer to put down others, and speak disparagingly of them in their absence.

One reason for gossip is mental emptiness. If I have no intellectual pursuits, no serious or creative interests to engage my mind, my attention will be on people's foibles, and my speech will focus on petty things. There is much truth in the saying, "Small minds discuss people; average minds discuss events; great minds discuss issues."

Thus, it shows a small mind if much of the conversation is about people, especially finding fault with them. ("Do you know that so-and-so did such-and-such a thing?" "Did you hear that Mary and Peter are planning to divorce?" "Brother X is leaving his congregation!"). Average minds discuss sports results, elections, the weather, or the fact that someone has died, or somebody is coming tomorrow, etc. There is nothing wrong with this, except that we can spend an inordinate amount of time and energy focussed on trivialities.

Larger minds, instead, enjoy coming to grips with worthwhile issues. They enjoy meeting, talking, listening about issues that affect people: unemployment, youth problems, education, happy religious life, marriage counselling, leadership, child malnutrition. Or they can have fun. The list is endless. There is so much to learn that there is no dull moment, no time to waste on gossip or idle chitchat or long TV-watching. Our life is too short—far too short—for all the wonderful things we can learn and do.

Celibacy, in particular, is a huge waste without a big heart and big dreams. The hours and energies that one would have expended on child-rearing and doing overtime work to educate one's children, will then go into poisonous gossiping and mindless jabber. What a colossal, criminal waste!

REFLECT: Do I have enough grown-up interests to grip my mind and engage my energies? Do I engage in gossip? Do I realize its poisonous, harmful effects? Do I step in to stop the gossip around me?

ACT: Decide from today not to speak ill of others. Learn from those who never gossip. * When tempted to slander or calumniate anyone, use your mind and tongue to say something good about a person, or to start a topic worth speaking about, e.g., How to build a better community, or how to be a better family.

Growing Up

“Most people don't grow up. Most people age. They find parking spaces, honour their credit cards, get married, have children, and call that maturity. What that is, is aging.” (Maya Angelou American author, dancer and singer). Agree?

Another author, Judi Picoult: “My mother... she is beautiful, softened at the edges and tempered with a spine of steel. I want to grow old and be like her.”

Are there adults about whom you feel this way—that you would love to grow up and grow older like them?

Better still, are you an adult about whom younger people feel this way?

Growing up is very different from simply growing older. I am one day older than yesterday, one year older than twelve months ago. That is no achievement. As someone said, referring to our silver and golden jubilee celebrations, “If all we did was stay in for twenty-five or fifty years, that is nothing to celebrate. If we really used the years to grow up, and do much good, there is something to celebrate.”

Growing up involves choices. I can use my time well today, or waste it. I can speak well of people or gossip. I can be loving and helpful today, or self-centred and morose. My repeated choices make me the person I become. I either grow up, or stagnate, or become worse.

Growing up, or maturing, needs to happen in five areas: physical, mental, emotional, relational and spiritual. We need to be responsible and look after our health and growth in each of these five aspects. All of them matter, and they influence each other.

The *physical* refers to: right eating, sleeping, exercise and hygiene, as well as avoiding addictions to harmful substances, such as, alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

The *mental* refers to learning new things, and learning to learn. Like the body, the mind, too, remains lithe and strong if we exercise it. Our mind has an enormous capacity, far beyond any computer. Most of it lies unused and dormant. Do you learn something new each day? Do you know more than last month or last year? Or do you go through life simply repeating what you always said, without thinking and learning?

Emotional growth refers to learning better ways of managing our feelings. Feelings are given to us for a good purpose. They are like the electricity or petrol that drives an engine. They can energize us. But, like electricity or fuel, they can also destroy. To grow up means to look at my emotions honestly, see how they can enrich my life, and in which ways they damage my happiness and my relationships. Anger and sadness are normal, but destructive if out of control. Sexual attraction is beautiful and life-giving in appropriate settings, but leads to criminal violence if uncontrolled. Growing up means to understand and manage our anger and grief, our jealousy and our attractions, our moods and our attachments.

The *relational* side is the fourth aspect. The main source of our happiness and of our pains are relationships. Growing up includes learning to relate in positive and loving ways. We need to learn to trust the right people, encourage the weak, challenge the lazy, confront the unjust, be close to some, friendly with many, courteous and kind to all. For success in life or in a profession, our ability to relate matters much more than our IQ or our degrees.

The fifth area of growth concerns our *spiritual* life. This is the hardest to check, since it is not directly visible, and can be easily misread or misrepresented. It is very different from religious practice, although religions are supposed to be carriers of spirituality. Thus, I can be regular in religious ritual, but be very selfish or cruel or corrupt—the very opposite of a “spiritual” person. A genuine inner journey gives a person a grace and glow that those who live with them can notice. Such persons radiate goodness and peace. Their presence is healing and energizing.

Are there people who care enough about you to support and challenge you in your growth? People who are thrilled to see you grow up, and saddened if you don't? That is the best outside help you can get for growing up.

Grow up! That is my wish for you in this new year, and every day.

This is what makes life a thrilling adventure. When we stagnate, we die. May we keep growing until we die!

A writer recalls something that happened after his father's sudden death. When his dad was alive, his mother would cook, set the table and then nod to his father to say grace.

His father died suddenly. When the whole family met again for a meal, the mother turned to the eldest son, and nodded. That was the turning point in his life. He was no longer a boy to be looked after, but an adult with new responsibility. He writes, “My mother nodded to me to say the family prayer. That day, I became a man.”

When did you really become a man or woman, and stopped being a child?

REFLECT: Do I take my growth seriously, or am I stagnating? Do I take responsibility for myself in all the five areas? How have I really grown up in the past year? Where have I not grown up?

ACT: Learn from people who seem to live more fully. * Make a plan of life, with goals to achieve this year in the five areas of life. * Check this out once in three months with someone you trust.

Human Formation

Repeated studies and common sense observations point to this fact: The weakest area of priestly and religious formation seems to be human formation.

What is it? How can we improve it?

Human formation refers to six areas:

- (1) *Physical Health and Capacity for Work*: If I am always seeking exceptions in food, work, rest and travel, may be I am not suitable for this way of life.
- (2) *Emotional Balance*: If I cannot control my temper or am a prey to jealousy or very moody, it affects not only my happiness and relationships; it damages community life and ministry.
- (3) *Relationships*: Am I able to relate to men and women, adults and youth, rich and poor? Are my relationships characterized by honesty, warmth, pleasantness and appropriate humour?
- (4) *Psycho-sexual Integration*: How do I face and manage my sexual feelings? Do I behave appropriately with women and men and children? Do I seek help to grow up in this area? Do I come across as a warm and caring man/woman, avoiding cold aloofness and undue violation of boundaries?
- (5) *Responsible Use of Freedom*: Am I learning to use my opportunities responsibly? When left free to make decisions (e.g., in using time or money), am I responsible? Do I need to be watched and controlled to do what I am supposed to do?
- (6) *Contact with Reality*: Am I aware of the needs and difficulties ordinary people face to make ends meet? Am I realistic in my expenses and expectations? Am I living in a sheltered cocoon cut off from the realities of life?

How do we help young people to achieve human maturity?

Not mostly through exhortations and a series of do's and don'ts.

Formees learn best from the example of formators and from their interactions with them. It is far more important to have mature and inspiring formators than to have a systematic formation plan (which, too, is needed). People matter more than plans.

Why is human formation often neglected?

Not because of bad will, but for three other reasons:

One: Formators are often merely lecturers. They see it as their duty (especially in seminaries) to teach the subjects they are qualified in; they do not see the non-academic side as their concern.

Two: lack of competence in handling non-academic issues, like, negative emotions, sexuality, decision-making, contact with people outside the formation house, etc.

Three: The formators may not have faced themselves in these areas, received adequate help, got healed of inner wounds, and learnt to how to handle these issues in their own lives.

A formator's preparation, therefore, needs to include, not just academic training in a religious subject, but also personal counselling, training in giving and receiving feedback, supervised practice of spiritual direction, exposure to the social, economic and cultural realities their formees face.

To be a formator—to help seminarians or young religious in their personal and spiritual growth, the formator needs to have received and given spiritual direction, be a person who can relate well, shows adequate emotional balance. Academic centres generally do not provide such training.

The rector of a seminary or a novice mistress must be noted for their human maturity and spiritual depth.

Formators, like all leaders, are watched rather than listened to. There is also some hero-worship in formation houses, especially in the early stages. To have inspiring formators rich in their humanity is a must in a formation setting.

The goal of human formation is to become an innerly free, loving, responsible, faithful, joyful, life-giving, God-centred man/woman, and not end up cold, manipulative, power-hungry, self-centred, superficial, childish, or cruel.

This goal cannot be reached merely through lectures or a clever plan of formation. It depends on constant interaction with reasonably mature adults, who, without claiming to be perfect or above correction, show the way.

This journey of growth is by far the best and most lasting aspect of formation. The material taught in the class room gets outdated sooner than we think; fashions and fads change; superiors come and go. A rich and deep humanity is an abiding asset, a real treasure worth the trouble pursuing.

A warning: We refer to Jesus as the ultimate norm. It is essential, therefore, to have correct views on Jesus' person and teachings. Or else, a cruel person can justify cruelty in the name of religion, a narrow-minded person can buttress bigotry with religious texts, an immature individual can use prayer as a substitute for hard work. So, a right understanding of spirituality, including key terms like "God's will," "holiness," "imitating Jesus," "being a humble handmaid," etc, matters. A mutilated spirituality will damage our humanity, and a distorted view of the human does enormous harm to our spiritual quest.

REFLECT: How far has your seminary or religious formation helped you to mature? How far has it hindered your growth? Is the human formation our seminaries and religious houses offer adequate? Does the final "product" seem to be a mature human being? What would you suggest to improve the human formation of clergy and religious?

ACT: Take responsibility for yourself in the six areas indicated. * If you have any say in formation work, make sure the six areas are covered adequately. * Choose for formation work persons noted for human maturity, and give them further training in helping people grow up.

Be Human

What is your highest ideal in life? What would be your greatest regret if you were to die today? What is the highest compliment you can pay someone?

For me, all three questions refer to one core reality—being human.

My highest ideal is to become a good human being—the type of human being Jesus was. Since I am far from being Christ-like, I want to be at least as human as some good human beings I have known.

Bronnie Ware, an Australian nurse who worked in a hospice, speaks of the commonest regrets people have as they face death. Among them: “I wish I had been a human being first.”

The highest compliment we can pay someone is that he or she is a good human being. A Catholic layman whom I remember with deep esteem was noted for his extraordinary integrity and helpfulness. A perceptive customs officer told him, “You are the finest human being I have ever come across.”

Who are the finest human beings you have come across? Is it your deep desire to become one? Will children, pupils, younger religious or employees look at you and say, “What a fine human being!”

We Christians are used to a key theme: Incarnation. God became a human being, going through all that all humans go through—life in the womb, birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, hunger and thirst, fatigue and love, dread before suffering, the pull of temptation, admiration for goodness, an eye for the beauty of nature, and, above all, deep compassion. This is how Jesus showed us God’s face. He walked among us as one of us, showing us, above all, the face of compassion.

To be human means to be imperfect and struggling. As Father Prospero Stella, my brilliant and creative professor of medieval Western philosophy would repeatedly remind us, Thomas Aquinas would insist that there is no perfect, flawless way of being human. We did not have a trial run. This is the first time we are living this life, and we are bound to make mistakes. The only “perfect” way of being human is to be imperfect.

The same Father Stella, while being a top-notch scholar and demanding research guide, would help the sacristan to wash the bowls, or sit on the steps to listen to a troubled teenager. His conviction: His research was not more important than washing plates or being with a sick person. The only thing that mattered, he would say, was to “do the job of being a human being.”

So true.

In fact, when I ask lay people what I should tell priests and religious in seminars, I have often received this suggestion: “Tell them to be human.”

The so-called great people we admire—like founders of religious orders or other famous persons—were human, not perfect. No one is. A saint, for instance, is a human being who tries to be the best human being he or she can be, succeeds a number of times, fails at other times, is willing to admit the falls, get up and try again.

To be human means to open oneself to the extraordinary possibilities hidden within us. Life can be such an exciting adventure when we are open to give and receive, and learn from it all how to

become better human beings. When we call a person an “angel,” or “godly,” we point to the incredible potential for good each of us carries.

When we call other deeds inhuman, heinous, or even demonic, we see the other, terribly sad possibility that human beings carry—that of being more cruel than any animal, more dangerous than poisonous snakes or man-eating tigers.

When we are good, we can be extremely nice and kind, exquisitely thoughtful, caring and tender.

When we are bad, we are far worse than any animal. Humans are, for instance, the only species that commits mass murder.

Have you read the book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*? Or watched the movie? In it, Morrie, a dying professor, teaches his former student Mitch so many precious lessons about life. Mitch learns to be, not just a busy, well-employed, stressed out young professional, but a good and caring human being who has understood the central importance of love and forgiveness, family and commitments, deep relationships and facing pain.

May we, who have teaching roles—parents, priests and religious; teachers, counsellors and preachers—teach through our words and our life what it means to be human.

All other teaching matters much less.

REFLECT: Am I serious about my main job—that of being a good human being? From whom have I picked up lessons in this art? In which areas of my life do I need to become more human? Am I convinced that every person deserves to be treated with respect, for the simple reason that he or she is a human being?

ACT: In any area under your responsibility, make sure that human beings (employees, students, patients, prisoners,...) are treated as human beings. * A serious responsibility of church personnel: the young man or woman who joins the seminary or religious life should be helped to become a good and mature human being. If handled badly, formation can make people more inhuman, and more immature.

