

A message for new parents

My dear parents,

You hold your newborn infant for the first time. "Whose eyes does he have? I think he has your father's expression! He definitely has your mouth!" And so the inventory begins. Your child has inherited so many of the physical characteristics of both mom and dad, and it gives you great joy to discover the resemblance. "This child belongs to us!"

Of course, this is just the beginning. Your child will inherit or absorb so much from the two of you over the course of his or her lifetime: attitudes, prejudices, ways of handling stress, work-habits, intelligence, skills, talents, etc. Of course, there will be times you will see your child as so incredibly unique (where did he get that trait from? Who's kid is he?). But, for the most part, we see how many characteristics we do pass on to our children.

This booklet is about two things in particular that we pass onto children: shame and religion. At first, the two categories seem to have nothing to do with each other. Shame relates to how we feel about ourselves and religion has to do with our response to a supreme Deity. Yet, the two categories are very much connected. Let's start with religion. You will be told in the celebration of your child's baptism that "you are the primary teachers of your child in the ways of faith." Concretely what that means is that you will be passing your religion on to your children. However, it is important to realize that our understanding of God is passed on by how we behave more so than by what we say. A child sees you as God-like; how you treat this child will teach him or her more about what God is like than any catechism lesson you will ever give.

Unfortunately, there are times we behave in very shaming ways toward our children. This booklet will explore how we have passed on some of that shame that we ourselves have received as children. Shaming behavior has two consequences: our children are hurt and, at the same time, they receive a very distorted understanding of God (since you as parent are so god-like in the eyes of your child). The good news is, however, that as we grow in our own understanding and image of God, we can free ourselves from some of that shame-based core of our own wounded past. We will no longer need to control our children through shaming tactics and we will be passing onto them a rich treasure indeed -- the God of unconditional, nurturing love.

Obviously, I am not a parent, but I am a person who has tried to come to terms with my own understanding of who God is; the more I have tried to listen to the Lord, the more I find myself being freed from those obstacles that prevent me from giving and receiving love. However, in another sense, I am a father (at least I have the title!). And so, as parent to this beautiful Christian family of Holy Spirit Church, I want to pass on to you my own understanding of the God of salvation -- a God who calls us to freedom and real life.

Father Tony

The Experience of Being Shamed

A while ago, while shopping at a local K-Mart, I witnessed the following scene. A mother was shopping with her two children. The youngest of the children, a child of about ten months, was sitting in the baby-seat of the shopping cart. While the mother was sorting through items on one of the shelves, her other four-year-old daughter was climbing on the front end of the shopping cart. Her weight caused the shopping cart to tip forward. The mother turned away from the shelf to notice in horror that the shopping cart was about to flip over with her infant still in the baby-seat. Wrenching the older daughter away from the shopping cart, the mother began to scream at her child: "How can you be so stupid! You almost killed your sister! What's gotten into you?" When the daughter, frightened and sobbing, started to apologize to her mom, the woman said, "Get away from me! I don't want anything to do with you."

I'm not quite sure how I would have dealt with the scene described above, but I am all the more convinced that parenting is an incredibly difficult task. The world is filled with all kinds of perils that threaten the well being of our kids. Beyond the obvious dangers of drugs, alcohol, gangs, child-molesters, there are the ordinary unsuspected hazards that are present in day-to-day life. The fear is that unless we are ever-vigilant, something horrible is going to happen to my child!

The way in which we usually respond to the things that threaten us is control. Certain methods of control are good and necessary: child-proofing your house, putting up safety gates, keeping medicines or toxins out of reach. However, there is one form of control that is never permissible (at least in the eyes of this non-parent), and that is *shaming*. Shaming is a term that describes those tactics that tear down someone's self-esteem by making them feel defective, worthless, "rotten to the core." In the incident described above, the mother's first reaction to her older daughter is to shame her into the proper behavior: "How can you be so stupid! You almost killed your sister! What's gotten into you? Get away from me! I don't want anything to do with you."

Shame-producing tactics are so subtle! No parent is overtly motivated with a desire to tear down their child's self-esteem. No parent would say to their child, "I want you to know and believe in the depths of your heart and soul that you are a piece of garbage!" Our motivation is not to destroy our children but to *control* them, to "teach them a lesson that they'll never forget!" However, this is not an issue of looking at our motives, but looking at the serious *mortal* consequences that shaming produces. In effect, shame murders the soul!

We live in a day and age which has become so keenly aware of the many forms of child-abuse. We would never want to see our children exposed to physical or sexual abuse, and we are so horrified when we read stories of such forms of abuse taking place in our society. While not belittling the tremendous harm that those obvious forms of abuse inflict, I don't believe that we are as sensitive to the soul-murdering that takes place each and every single day by our shame-producing tactics. Shaming is such a subtle form of abuse because there are no visible scars, no cigarette burns, no welts, no broken limbs. Shame makes its mark on the soul; the wounds are

not visible to the eye, but the soul is being harmed nonetheless.

Perhaps it sounds so dramatic to speak about the soul as being damaged as the consequence of having been shamed. But, when you think about the soul as the seat of who I am at the very core of my being, that precious priceless daughter or son of God, you can see how shame pierces us to the soul. For a child, their "I-amness" is the experience of their feelings and needs. Their sense of value and worth is communicated to them when those feelings and needs are *honored and listened to*. I am not talking about indulgence here -- I am not saying that we must give into every need or whim of a child. Limits and healthy boundaries need to be created; it's O.K. to say "no!" Some authors speak of this limit setting as creating "healthy shame," that is, helping a child to come to a realistic awareness of his or her limits. This kind of boundary setting is essential to create a safe environment for your child. Surely then there is such a thing as *healthy* shame; however, here I wish to address those controlling tactics that create an unhealthy state of low self-esteem in our children and rob them of their God-given sense of self-worth and value.

Look at the situation from your own experience of children. Hold an infant in your arms. You are holding a bundle of feelings and needs, and, for the most part, you are O.K. with that fact. His majesty (her majesty) the infant says "It is now time for my 2:00 a.m. feeding." She (he) summons the servants to rise from their state of slumber and warm up the formula. And all those around gladly obey! Of course, the infant grows up and the monarch is dethroned and the child learns to become more self-reliant in that world of feelings and needs. For the sake of the child's growth (and admittedly for the sake of our own sanity), we teach the child how properly to deal with certain feelings and needs. However, our patience is worn thin, and our efforts to teach soon become tactics that control through the damaging arsenal of shaming.



First of all, feelings are shamed. While the crying, fearful infant is so readily held and reassured, the whining toddler is more easily controlled through put-downs that shame the child for feeling what he or she feels. "Don't be such a baby! There's nothing to be afraid of! I'll give you something to *really* cry about!" Feelings of fear or anger or frustration can no longer have a voice; they are *bad* feelings, and, the natural conclusion is that we are somehow bad or defective because we feel what we feel. Bring that child into adulthood and you have a person who can no longer speak about the most intimate part of their soul. Of course the feelings are still there, but they are expressed in all kinds of indirect forms of communication and activity (sarcasm, passive aggressive activity, resistance, procrastination). Lose the natural language of the soul (I feel angry, afraid, hurt) and an unhealthy language takes its place which makes intimacy almost impossible. And so our soul and spirit is damaged.

Another wound dealt to the soul occurs when our needs are shamed. In the adult world, we learn how to negotiate with other adult members of the community so that everyone's needs can be adequately met in a healthy way. However, teaching a child how to negotiate is a long, painstaking process. It is a lot easier to control a child's needs by shaming them. "You are so

selfish. All you think of is yourself! Quit bothering me. I can't stand you! You're driving me crazy!" When my needs are so shamed, I can develop in one of two ways. I become either a caretaker or the narcissist. The caretaker feels self-worth only to the degree that he or she can fulfill another's needs. Affirmations come when I can be "mommy's little helper." However, parental wrath and scorn are triggered when I begin to think (or even whine) about my own needs. So, even as a toddler I learn quickly: My needs are not important -- they don't even exist! All that matters is what you need and how I can make you happy. There is no soul; I am defined by what *you* need.

On the other hand, the narcissist learns that needs are met not through the healthy dialogue of compromise but through the direct or indirect manipulation of others. I learn the language of shame and can use it now to my advantage to get my needs met. After all, if my parents ultimately got their way by shaming me into submission and compliance, I can bully others in the same way to get my needs met. Once again, there is no possibility for adult intimacy and the soul is murdered.

Ultimately, the soul-murdering consequence of shaming is that I judge myself to be defective. A child is immersed in that pre-verbal world of needs and feelings, and when feelings and needs are shamed, then there is no other conclusion but to say I am defective. I am rotten to the core! Those feelings of being defective are further confirmed by other shaming judgments that continue through the growing-up years: "Why can't you be like your brother (or sister or cousin)? What's taking you so long? You are so stupid. No wonder why no one wants to play with you. Here -- give me that -- you're taking too long!"

Some points to consider:

- Can you remember times in your own growing up years when you felt that your feelings were shamed? Specifically, which feelings did you not have a right to have? Do you still struggle expressing these feelings honestly to the people whom you love?
- Who are some of the people in your life today that bring about the experience of shame? How are some of the ways you deal with that shame today? Run away? Hide? Deny? Blame? Accuse? Confront?
- Can you remember times in your past when your needs were shamed? Is it difficult for you to express your needs through methods of communication that are direct and honest?



The Shamed Child Becomes the Shaming Parent

We could spend much time examining *why* parents end up raising their children in such a soul-murdering way. Fundamentally, the problem is that we are not aware of our own shame-based state out of which we pass on the shame to others. Having been shamed as children, we now pass that shame on to the next generation. That shame-based state carries with it certain false beliefs -- beliefs about ourselves and our world which are absolutely false but which we have come to accept as true because of our own childhood wounds. Here are some of the false

beliefs produced by our own shame-based state:

- ⊗ There is something wrong with me. I fear that I am incapable of doing this work of parenting *right*. People will judge me as to how well I control my children.
- ⊗ Children (or any person outside ourselves) are going to give us the sense of esteem, value and respect that we crave.
- ⊗ Children (or any person outside ourselves) are responsible for the way we feel about ourselves and our surroundings.
- ⊗ Life is a power struggle; I always need to show who's the boss.

And so we begin to see the endless cycle: victims of shame become shameful victimizers. What we have noticed in the more overt forms of child abuse, namely that child abusers were often themselves abused as children, holds true in this more subtle form of abuse. The shame is passed on and on in an endless cycle.

As we begin to look at all these shame-producing control tactics, we realize how difficult it is to break the cycle and develop into a parent who nurtures and gives life to the souls of our children. There are many books that have been written about parenting, teaching us the proper skills that will enable us to be real life-givers. Most of those valuable resources are written from the point of view of developmental psychology. I defer to those good and valuable resources, but would like to add a **spiritual** perspective to good parenting. I believe that the insights gained from psychology can be both supported and even enhanced by a healthy relationship with God. In this pamphlet, I wish to suggest that the relationship we have with our God can help us to become non-shaming parents. Furthermore, a healthy relationship with God can free us from our own shame-based core out of which we too often seek to control our children.

Some points to consider:

- Have you ever experienced power struggles with your children? What are the feelings you experience when you cannot "control" your children? What are the underlying fears?
- When you were a child, did you ever feel that you had to make your parents proud of you? Were you ever told never to be a source of disgrace to them?



False Religion and the Shame Game

Sadly, not all religion frees us from the shame game. Unfortunately, there are moments when religion reinforces that shame state. Such religion is not the will of our Creator, and hence we can rightly say these brands of religion are *false*. What is false religion all about? False religion, like bad parenting, is an attempt to control through shame tactics. False religion, furthermore, produces false images of God -- images which reinforce the shame state. Let's look at some of these false images of God, especially those images of God which shame our feelings and our

needs:

The "I'll-Give-You-Something-to-Cry-About" God

As a priest, I have heard many people squash their real feelings in their relationship with God. Since God is all powerful, we fear the consequences of revealing our disappointments and hurts, our angers and tears. We believe that God wants us to accept all of life with a kind of stoical indifference. For whatever reason, we perceive God as being emotionally unavailable to us (indeed if we were even to conceive of God as *possessing* emotions in the first place). According to this image of God, God judges our human emotions with a certain impatience: "I don't have time to hear your whining." Immersed in powerful feelings, we will either try to bury those feelings, telling ourselves that we shouldn't feel this way, or we become more distant from God because I can no longer connect with him at that feeling level which is so close to my heart and soul. Of course, if we were to sense that these powerful feelings are preventing us from having a relationship with God, we would never feel that the problem is God's -- we feel that *we* are the problem. "I just don't have enough faith." Faith, then, is seen as the magic antidote that will free us from the powerful emotions of disappointment, hurt, anger, etc.

I feel that many people who have suffered a tremendous loss in their life through sickness, death or divorce, find that there is a wall between themselves and God. They can no longer pray because they feel they "*should*" be feeling the approved, acceptable feelings (such as faith, hope, confidence) and that they are not allowed to feel the unacceptable feelings of anger or disappointment. Since it is nearly impossible to change my feelings at will, and since I don't experience a particular feeling that comes from the "approved list," I may go through the motions of prayer but I will not have that soul-to-soul contact with God.

A point to consider:

If you have ever felt this way in your relationship with God, you might ask yourself: Where do you think this image of God comes from in your life?

The "You-Ought-to-Know-Better" God

This is a God who doesn't tolerate our mistakes. We ought to know better because we have learned the "right way" to behave. After all, God has given us all these commandments -- we ought to know better! Here, human knowledge is seen as a head trip -- as facts gained through indoctrination, not as lessons learned through experience. Instead of allowing our mistakes to become opportunities to learn, we feel that God expects us to get it right the first time around. Children, entering into the socializing world of school, ought to know automatically how to play fair, share, and get along with classmates. Adolescents, experiencing for the first time the biochemical changes of puberty, ought to know instinctively how to handle their sexuality. Adults, coming into their first real relationship, ought to know how to communicate feelings. Parents ought to know how to raise children. Somehow, we have come to believe that we should know the "facts of life" before the very "experience of life" itself.

Of course, the image of God that emerges is the intolerant God who demands perfection. I can remember being taught that, even if you lived a perfect life, that one slip-up which could occur immediately before death would invalidate all the good that was ever done. One mortal

sin would send you straight to hell -- and there would be no excuses. After all, *you* of all people, ought to know better!

A point to consider:

If you have ever felt this way in your relationship with God, you might ask yourself: Where do you think this image of God comes from in your life?

The "Say-the-Magic-Word" God.

Sometimes we don't always get what we ask for in life. When we were children, we learned that there was a "magic" word that our parents were looking for in order for us to get what we wanted. Our parents held back the cookie or the treat until we said "*please*"! In our relationship with God, we come to believe that there must be a set of magic formulas that will enable us to get what we want from God. Our language of prayer has to have the right words -- or maybe we have to go through powerful intermediaries to get our needs met. If I say this novena prayer to St. Jude nine times each day for nine days and leave nine copies of this prayer in nine Churches during the course of the nine days, then I will get what I want. The prayer guarantees that "*this novena has never been known to fail.*"

But what happens when we don't find the magic words? What happens when the novena prayers don't work? We can conclude that maybe I'm not praying (asking) right -- I haven't found the right magic words to say. Or perhaps I may conclude that "God knows what is best for me and he has decided not to give me what I want." In either case, my relationship with God becomes somewhat complex. It no longer possesses a simplicity of merely asking and seeking from the heart. The prayer becomes a head-game of trying to figure out how I am going to get my needs met the next time that I go into prayer.

A point to consider:

If you have ever felt this way in your relationship with God, you might ask yourself: Where do you think this image of God comes from in your life?

The "After-All-I-Have-Done-for-You" God

When we start to consider all that God has done for us, and all the ways that God continues to sustain us and help us in times of need, we are overwhelmed with a sense of *obligation*. There is no possible way I can pay God back for all that he gives me, but I feel horribly guilty if I don't even pay back the minimum. After all, is it so hard to give God forty-five minutes a week in payment of all that he so generously bestows upon me? Furthermore, if I want to keep on the good side of God and make sure that he is going to bless me, maybe I better think twice before I renege on my side of the deal; I will certainly feel horribly guilty if I sleep in one Sunday, thereby *not* paying back the minimum what is due to God.

Seeing our relationship with God in terms of obligations is to make this relationship like some kind of business transaction. There is no love -- just pay backs. Love is measured by objects given and received, by duties and obligations fulfilled. Doing the bare minimum in meeting these requirements is like making the minimum payments for insurance -- you better pay

up or the policy may be canceled!

A point to consider:

If you have ever felt this way in your relationship with God, you might ask yourself: Where do you think this image of God comes from in your life?



Maybe It's Time to Be Born Again



As we begin to look at some of these images of God that arise from false religion, it is easy to see how our understanding of God is merely a transferral of attitudes and ideas that we possess in our relationships with parents who shamed us. A parent who tries to control their child by shaming their feelings and needs will say things like, "I'll give you something to cry about" or "what's the matter with you anyway -- your ought to know better!" or "say the magic word" or "is this how you treat me after all I have done for you?" It is no surprise that our images of God come to us from the ways our own parents treated us -- after all, they looked pretty God-like to us as infants! After all, a thirty-pound toddler looks into the face of a giant -- five times their height and their weight! Imagine yourself walking down the street and seeing someone who was 27 feet tall and weighed over 800 pounds. Wouldn't you say, "Oh my God!" It is only natural that our image of God is shaped by our image of our parents. If our parents shamed us, so too will we expect God to control us with the same shaming tactics. If, on the other hand, our parents were courageously caring and life-giving, so too will be our God. In his work *The Road Less Traveled* (pp. 190-191), Dr. M. Scott Peck writes:

"Our first (and sadly, often our only) notion of God's nature is a simple extrapolation of our parents' natures, a simple blending of the characters of our mothers and fathers or their substitutes. If we have loving, forgiving parents, we are likely to believe in a loving, forgiving, God. And in our adult view, the world is likely to seem as nurturing a place as our childhood was. If our parents were harsh and punitive, we are likely to mature with a concept of a harsh and punitive monster-god. And if they failed to care for us, we are likely to envision the universe as similarly uncaring."

Perhaps at this point you might feel somewhat hopeless if not totally frustrated. After all, your parents couldn't help it if they themselves were shame-based and if they happen to pass on to you that same soul-murdering shame. And, if indeed our image of God does arise from the very methods by which we ourselves were parented, then is there any real hope in coming to know the true God? After all, we can't "go back" and have ourselves be reparented, can we?

A similar question was once asked by one of the leading Pharisees in the days of Jesus. Perhaps you might remember this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the kingdom

of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother's womb and be born again, can he?"

Jesus answered, "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."
(John 3:1 - 5)

This passage has come down to us as one of the classic texts describing the sacrament of baptism -- that baptism is a *rebirth* to a new innocence through water and the Holy Spirit. As we come to celebrate the rebirth of our own children in the sacrament of baptism, maybe we can begin to enter into a spiritual rebirthing process ourselves, to allow God to enter into a more intimate relationship with us, to raise up our own murdered souls and to break the endless cycle of passing on the shame that was handed down to us. In other words, it may very well be the case that the inadequate ways in which we were parented by our mothers and fathers gave us a distorted notion of God, but the God of true religion can enter into our souls and free us in that shame-based state so that we can pass on life (and a healthier image of God) to our children.

To be born again -- that's the only hope that we can receive the love and sense of our true worth and dignity that we so desperately need in our lives. One of my favorite "birthing" stories comes from the animated cartoon produced by Walt Disney *The Lion King*. At the beginning of the movie, all of the animals of the savannah come to the central meeting point of Pride Rock. You sense from the music and from the ways in which all the animals are spurred and driven forward with some common purpose that an important event is about to take place. Indeed, it is an important event -- Mufassa, the lion king of Pride Rock, announces the birth of his cub son, Simba. When Simba is held aloft before all the animals of the savannah, they immediately cheer and stomp about in ecstasy, and then, one by one, each species bows down in reverence and worship.

See if you could you imagine a similar scene taking place in heaven above: Picture the day when you were first fashioned as an idea in the mind and heart of God. Imagine this creator Father having made you so unique -- so special -- so beautiful. A combination of the talents and giftedness of generations long past. There is nobody else like you -- there is no one who will ever come along this world who will be like you. No one quite has your smile, or that glint of divinity that sparkles in your eyes. No one can wrinkle their nose quite like you. You are incredibly unique. Now, on the day when God shaped you as an idea in his mind and heart, picture if you will that he made you sort of as a three-dimensional blueprint, and he now holds you aloft before all the angels and saints in heaven above. And as God holds you aloft, millions upon millions of angels bow down, the saints break out into spontaneous songs of praise. There is a chorus of "Alleluia, Praise God!"



If the picture is hard to imagine, it may be because we are more shame-based than we are willing to admit! Yet, there is a truth to this scene that is borne witness to in the scriptures. With your heart *and with all the*

longing in your soul listen to the following passages:

But now, thus says the Lord,
 who created you, O Jacob, and formed you, O Israel:
Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name: you are mine. (*Isaiah 43:1*)

You shall be a glorious crown in the hand of the Lord,
 a royal diadem held by your God. (*Isaiah 62:3*)

I will espouse you to me forever:
 I will espouse you in right and in justice,
 in love and in mercy;
I will espouse you in fidelity,
 and you shall know the Lord. (*Hosea 2:21-22*)

How precious is your love, O God!
We take refuge in the shadow of your wings. (*Psalms 36:8*)

But I shall sing of your strength,
 extol your love at dawn,
For you are my fortress,
 my refuge in time of trouble.
My strength, your praise I will sing;
 you, God, are my fortress, my loving God.
 (*Psalms 59:17-18*)

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger and abounding in love. (*Psalms 145:8*)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (*John 3:16-17*)

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (*Romans 8:31-39*)

If we have any hope of being freed from those chains of the shame that has bound us in the past, if there is any hope of a new rebirth, then we need to immerse ourselves in the radical unconditional love that God has for us. The ministry of Jesus was a ministry of preaching the *good* news of salvation. Any image of God that distorts the good news, that puts conditions or makes restrictions upon that love, is not good news, it is not the gospel of salvation.

A point to consider:

Re-read the scripture passages of this section. Do any of these resonate in your heart as you read them?



Jesus: the Face of God Who Does Not Shame



We turn to Jesus as the image of the true God, for our faith professes him to be the very image of God himself in the flesh. The God whom Jesus revealed in the flesh is a God of compassion, not a God who heaps shame upon us. Let us look at some of the images of God that we developed under the idea of "false religion" and compare that God to the merciful Father whom we meet in Jesus.

We spoke above about the "You-Ought-to-Know-Better" God, the God who demands perfection; mistakes are not opportunities to learn but transgressions to be punished. Jesus reveals a radically different kind of God in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the familiar story, a man has two sons, the younger of whom asks for his share of his Father's inheritance. Imagine asking your own parent for the inheritance right now -- it would be like saying, "I don't want to wait until you die -- I want it *now*." The younger son is really saying to his Father that he wants nothing to do with him any more. The father gives the son his portion, and the boy goes off, soon squandering the money in dissolute living. When the son "bottoms out," penniless and feeding pigs, he comes to his senses and decides to go back to his father with a little speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I no longer deserve to be treated like one of your sons. Treat me like one of your servants."

The father, meanwhile, has been on the lookout for his son from the very beginning. Seeing him at a distance, he runs out to meet him. Before the son can even grovel, *and even before the son says "I'm sorry,"* the father restores the son to his rightful status, gives him a ring (an object which only a son would receive) and throws a party in his honor. There are no lectures, no "I told you so's," just mercy and forgiveness and a restoration of dignity. This is the God of Jesus Christ.

We spoke above of the "I'll-Give-You-Something-to-Cry-About" God, the God who expects us to stoically bear our sufferings and to stuff our feelings. According to this image, we have no right to those feelings, and we certainly ought not to express those feelings honestly to God. However, Jesus accepted where his friends were at and allowed them to express all kinds of feelings. Hear the fear in Peter's voice when he cries out in the storm-tossed boat, "Lord, do you not care if we perish?" Similarly, listen to the disappointment and anger in Martha and Mary when they finally catch up with Jesus after the death of their brother Lazarus. When Lazarus fell

ill, they summoned their good friend to come to their aid. Jesus delayed his coming for a number of days, and when he finally arrives on the scene (much too late), both Martha and Mary say, "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would never have died."

The beautiful doctrine of our faith is that Jesus himself, fully human and like us in all things, embraced a full range of human emotions. He too wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He got angry at the money changers in the Temple, he even experienced fear in Gethsemane. The author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence." (*Hebrews 5:7*) In our Catholic piety, we are drawn to the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In effect, what we are saying in this piety is that through Jesus, God has a human heart -- a heart that breaks, a heart that loves, a heart that can be one with our own human heart. There need not be the wall of shame between us when it comes to our honestly expressing our feelings before our God. God *feels* and can enter into that depth of intimacy with us, heart to heart.

We spoke also of the "Say-the-Magic-Word" God, the God that will not come to our bidding unless we phrase our requests in the proper way. Yet, Jesus bids us to seek, ask and knock. He tells us that in our praying we need not "rattle on like the pagans who think that they will win a hearing through the mere multiplication of words." Rather, he says, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (*Matthew 6:7-8*) In many of the miracles which Jesus worked in his public ministry, Jesus brings about healing in the lives of people even *before* there was evidence of faith or trust. Certainly in the exorcisms which Jesus performed, we see Jesus responding with compassion to the situation of someone's bondage by Satan. Sometimes we too are so bound up -- in anger, hatred, jealousy -- that we are no longer capable of praying or asking for help. Jesus doesn't wait for the magic word to be said before he will free us.

Sometimes we are even incapable of knowing exactly what it is we need! We are so out of touch with our needs (because they have been shamed over a lifetime) that we do not know what it is that we truly need in order to experience health and wholeness. Certainly in these instances God does not wait for us to say the magic word, to formulate our needs with perfect clarity, before he will act. Consider the story of the paralytic being lowered from the roof into the midst of the crowded house where Jesus was teaching. Jesus sees into the heart of the matter and sees the real need that is there; he proclaims that the man's sins are forgiven. Now, no one asked Jesus to forgive this man's sins -- certainly the paralyzed man did not make the request -- but Jesus sees the more dire need and responds with love.

Not only are we *not* shamed for asking, seeking and knocking, God gives us the *power* to ask! St. Paul writes, "In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will." (*Romans 8:26-27*) God's very power, his Holy Spirit, is at work within us making intercession for us when we are not very sure what it is that we need!

Finally we spoke about the "After-All-I-Have-Done-for-You" God; this is the image of the God who holds onto a record of credits and debits. It is the image of a God who keeps reminding us that we are always in his debt. According to this image, if we even think of not paying back the debt, he may very well take back the good things that he has given us. God is a sort of toll collector along the road of life; he'll let you drive on the highway of life but you have to periodically stop and pay the toll. Perhaps at this point we might want to ask, "why in the world would we want to hold onto the image of a God who keeps record?" After all, there is no one alive who can possibly pay back all that we have received from the hands of God. I believe that this image of God is fueled by the need of the pious to feel a certain moral and spiritual superiority to those whom we judge as sinners. Making comparisons is an unfortunate consequence of shame. I may not be perfect, but at least I'm not as bad as that person who sleeps in on Sunday. I have a little more in the credit column of my ledger than that other person. Shame-based people often need to feel a sense of superiority to *someone* as a way of covering their shame!

But Jesus reveals a kind of God who doesn't keep good accounting records. There are times when Jesus speaks about the entire debt as canceled. There is the parable of the master who cancels the entire debt of one of his officials because he is unable to pay. As a matter of fact, the God whom Jesus reveals is a pretty poor accountant altogether. Remember the story of the master of a vineyard who hires laborers at various times of the day? The workers who worked only one hour receive the same pay as those who worked all day. It would be as if Jesus were to say that the Catholics who go to Mass only on Christmas and Easter will get the same reward as the Catholics who go to Mass each Sunday. That message might not go over big with those Catholics who have a need to feel morally superior to their neighbor who doesn't show the same religiosity. Shame drives us to make comparisons; the unconditionally loving God bids us to let go of those comparisons and realize that we all share a dignity and worth not by what we are able to put into the credit column of the ledger but by the very fact of our spiritual adoption as his children.

Points to consider:

- Have you ever had the experience of being forgiven by someone in your life? Did you ever experience that forgiveness as unconditional (no lectures, no "I-told-you-so's," etc.)?
- What are some of the obstacles in being totally honest in your feelings with God?
- Do you ever feel that your needs are not all that important to God? Do you ever find yourself saying to God, "Maybe I shouldn't be asking for this, but. . . .?"



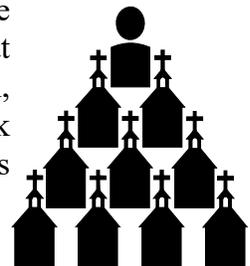
The Non-Shaming Face of God in His Family, the Church

It should be obvious from all that I have said thus far that this non-shaming all-embracing God has a face -- *Jesus Christ*. Jesus has wanted his face to be seen, not just once-and-for-all-time, two thousand years ago, but for all time -- in the community of the Church. This family of God, the church, claims to be the face of Jesus for all time. Certainly that truth is brought out in the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism. When a child receives the white garment, the

celebrant says, "You have become a new creation and clothed yourself in Christ." Baptized members of the Christian family claim to have "put on" Christ -- that compassionate, non-shaming face of unconditional love. No matter how shaming our own families-of-origin may have been, it is within this Christian family that we have the hope of allowing our souls to be reborn again.

Practically speaking, however, it is one thing to say that the Church is the non-shaming face of Jesus in the world; it is another thing altogether to experience that acceptance within a parish community at any given time. For some people, it may have been years since they have felt or experienced a real connection with the Church. There may be fears in coming back home -- specifically fears of being shamed. Sadly, that experience of shame is connected to the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. Speaking as a priest-confessor, I want the celebration of that particular sacrament to be an experience of healing, not shaming. However, I know that this is not always the case with people who have gone to confession in the past. Just as there are shaming and controlling parents, there are shaming and controlling priest-confessors. *This is not what God wants for you -- ever!* Yes, there is a healthy shame where we recognize our limits -- but no human being, most especially a priest, is ever allowed to shame another human being. Therefore, if you are seeking that re-connection with your Christian family through the sacrament of reconciliation (and, believe me, there is no substitute for that particular channel of healing in our lives) then *seek out* a shepherd of our Christian community who can minister that healing to you. *If there is ever a time that you believe that you are being shamed in the experience of the sacrament of Reconciliation, walk out! Say to the priest confessor: "I refuse to be shamed!"* But, above all, please don't give up on this grace-filled opportunity for healing and forgiveness in our Christian family.

My desire for you as parents is that you can feel a real life-giving connection that comes through belonging to this family of faith, the Catholic Church. Has the Church shamed people in the past? Has the Church uncritically accepted or even promoted shaming images of God? Of course it has! But families do grow and mature, and the members of the family can help one another come to a healthier understanding of who we truly are as beloved children of the Father. But our growth and maturation depends upon *you!* The Church universal is a collection of smaller churches, and the smallest and most important unit of this collection is the family. In the Second Vatican Council, the family is called the *domestic Church*. Raising your children in a shame-free Church begins in the smallest church -- the home. Your home is the first place where the non-shaming face of God will be revealed. Hopefully, that connection with a loving God is supported and enhanced in the larger Church, the local parish community and the universal Church worldwide. We never walk alone, but together as a family connected to each other in the power of God's Spirit.



"So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also

are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22)

You are not a stranger -- there is nothing for you to be ashamed of! You are fellow citizens of the holiest people who have ever walked on the face of the earth! And if you are ever afraid of not doing this "parenting" thing right, just remember that you stand on the shoulders of prophets, saints and, most importantly, Jesus Christ Himself!