



Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

**FAITH FEEDS GUEST GUIDE
GRATITUDE**



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The C21 Center Presents

FAITH FEEDS

The **FAITH FEEDS** program is designed for individuals who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host facilitates conversation using the C21 Center's biannual magazine, *C21 Resources*.

The **FAITH FEEDS GUIDE** offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It's as simple as deciding to host the gathering wherever your community is found and spreading the word.

All selected articles have been taken from material produced by the C21 Center.



CONVERSATION STARTERS

“Sanctity has to do with gratitude. To be a saint it to be fueled by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less.”
—Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

Here are three articles to guide your **FAITH FEEDS** conversation. We suggest that you select two that will work best for your group, and if time permits, add in a third. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads.

This guide’s theme is: **Gratitude**

WHY MENTORS MATTER

By Fr. Ken Himes, OFM

It's the fall of 1968. I'm a sophomore in college. That academic year is a tough year. Martin Luther King is shot in April of '68. Bobby Kennedy is shot two months later in early June.

By now, I'm politically engaged, and I'd become absolutely cynical about making change through the system. The system is corrupt. The slogan that a lot of us had back then was, "Don't trust anybody over 30." Dylan used to sing about it.

So here I am, this cynical guy who doesn't think much of anybody but people in my own generation. I'm convinced I know more than any adult in my family, and probably know more than some of my professors. They don't get it. They don't know what's really going on.

And this guy, Noel Fitzpatrick, a young priest, moves into the dorm where I'm living. Noel is this incredibly charismatic guy. He wasn't particularly good-looking, but he was smart enough. But he just had an energy about him. When Noel walked into a room, you would have noticed him right away. There

was a vitality there you could not overlook or ignore.

Noel would sit up with us at night. We'd be sitting around in dorm rooms drinking beer -- back in those days in New York, you could drink at 18. We're talking with Noel, and finally, at a certain point, I'm one of the last guys to leave the room one night. He said to me, "Himes, I got a question for you." I said, "Father, what's up?" He said, "Why are you so sarcastic?"

And I looked at him and asked, "What do you mean?" He said, "You're very funny, but all your humor is at other people's expense. All your humor is mocking. All your humor is putting other people down. You're better than that, or at least, you should be better than that."

So I thought to myself, maybe I should do something different. He gives me a little book on St. Francis of Assisi. Noel was a Franciscan.

He said to me, "Read this, it will be good for you." So I read this little book on St. Francis that's a reflection on his life.



Chesterton was this famous British Catholic writer in the middle of the 20th century. And he has this one passage talking about how Francis sees the world differently. Francis used to go up into the mountains of the Umbrian Valley in Central Italy to be alone and pray.

Francis is up there, on one side of the Umbrian Valley, and he is looking back on the other side of it at Assisi, his hometown, the city that he loved so much: a solid, massive, walled, thick, heavy city.

Francis was something of a street performer. Chesterton says Francis may have done tumblersaults.

And all of a sudden, in one of his tumblersaults, he sees the world upside-down. And now, this city that was so strong and solid, now upside-down, it's hanging over the abyss. And the very thing that made it seem solid and strong now makes it seem terribly precarious: its weight and its mass.

Francis looked at this and he comes to the insight that all of existence is like this. All the things that we think make us strong, make us solid, make us safe, that all of that seen the other way makes us incredibly precarious.

What Francis comes to experience is that life is incredibly and radically contingent, meaning it need not be. Every human being is radically unnecessary. You and I need not exist. There's nothing about us that makes us necessary.

So what do you do once you come to that awareness?

Chesterton says you've got two choices. One option is to say that it's all random. It's all an accident. Someone rolled the cosmic dice and it came up snake eyes -- I exist! I am, but I don't have to be. It's just by chance.

That was one option open to Francis. He doesn't take it. The other option, Chesterton says, is that the only reason that we exist is because somebody willed to us into existence. The only reason I am is because somebody loved me into being. And what Francis comes to realize is that at the heart of it all is love. There is no other reason why any of us exist except for love. There is a divine lover who holds it all in place,

who makes it all happen.

And all of sudden, the vision of Francis gives me another take on things. Noel Fitzpatrick introduces me to another way of thinking about the world.

The reason I bring this up is because in my own life, I think not only about Noel but of four other specific individuals who at certain points in my life saved me. I was screwing up my life.

I had a crappy attitude, a crappy frame of mind. I had no particular ambitions, I was angry in a sort of undifferentiated way, I didn't know what the heck I thought anything was about. And at different points in my life, an adult came into it and said, "Himes, think about this. Himes, let me show you something. Have you ever experienced this? Have you ever thought about that?"

The point is, people came into my life that didn't have to come into my life. These weren't relatives, these weren't people who owed me anything. But they took some time, they exerted some energy, they thought, "This guy's worth talking to." Mentors are one of the great gifts of life.

I hope you've had a few by now. They may pass through for a period of time. They're there for a certain moment when you need them.

To have those kinds of people step into your life is a rich grace. That people would come along into your own life, tap you on the shoulder, and say, "Let me show you around a little bit. Let me maybe point out a few things you're overlooking. Or some truth that maybe you are forgetting. Or some relationship that you need to straighten out."

When I think about mentors, it leads me to thinking about gratitude.

We are, I am, you are because of a gracious God. Wake up every day and say, "Thank you, God. Thank you for this day. I hope I do something with it that's worthwhile. I hope someone will touch my life or I'll touch theirs."

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WHY MENTORS MATTER

“Our chief want in life is somebody who will make us do what we can.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Summary

In this excerpt from an Agape Latte talk, Fr. Ken Himes, OFM, shares how he encountered mentors at pivotal moments during his life. He recounts the role that one priest played in helping him to see the world – and himself – differently, which ultimately changed the course of his life.

Questions for Conversation

1. Have you had any mentors in your life who have helped you think about the world or your own life in a different way? Who are they and how did they shape you?
2. Himes says that the gift of mentors led him to gratitude. What unexpected gifts has God given to you in your life?
3. Do you include the Ignatian practice of the Examen in your daily routine in which you review the blessings God has given to you each day? What effect does that/might that have on your life?
4. What do you think about St. Francis’s conclusion that our dependency and contingency reveals God’s love for us?



JESUS IN THE MIDST

By Kevin Dowd

At the age of four, having just returned home from the doctor's office, I deftly climbed onto the bathroom sink, opened the medicine cabinet, and absconded to my bedroom with a bottle of pills. Like many children, I loved playing roles, and today I was the doctor and my younger brother, Mike, the patient. Behind the closed doors of our bedroom, while my mother prepared dinner downstairs, Mike and I consumed the entire bottle of medicine. The haunting silence that ensued prompted my mother to investigate, and what she found was a two-year old on the verge of death and a four-year old not far behind. She and my dad rushed us to the hospital—only a couple of blocks away—where I was induced to vomit; but Mike was in much more serious trouble. Only years later did I learn that my mother was in tears as she asked the doctor, “Is my baby going to die?” In my toddler's mind, on the other hand, I found the entire affair pretty exciting. I still remember seeing Mike in a crib with all sorts of equipment and lights, and wondering why he got “the cool bed.” In the end, the doctors saved Mike's life. It was a defining event in the life of my family.

As the years went by, “The Time Kevin Poisoned Mike” became a regular story in the family's repertoire. It might have been a story that shamed me—a tale about a mischievous child almost killing his baby brother. Instead, my parents told the story as the writers of Scripture told theirs: a compelling human drama that included a decisive role for God. From their perspective, the key was to be found in this critical fact: at the hospital that day was a visiting team of nationally acclaimed drug-overdose specialists giving a

lecture. When my brother and I arrived, those specialists were whisked from the lecture hall to the Emergency Room, and their expertise is the unmistakable factor in Mike's full recovery. In my parents' telling of the story, this was no accident, no mere stroke of luck. It was a manifestation of God's ever-present and active love. What others might have seen as a fortunate coincidence, my parents unequivocally interpreted as the grace of God. (I still do.)

When our house burnt down in 1986, however, leaving my parents and their eight young sons homeless at Christmastime, the argument for God's blessing seemed weak. By this time, I was in middle school and was beginning to think more critically about God. How would my parents explain this one? Where was God's grace now? Very simply, they told us not to worry, that God would provide. I know they were telling themselves this, too—they were understandably very anxious and unsure of the future. Still, “hope that sees for itself is not hope” (Rom. 8:24), and the lesson they both lived and conveyed was to trust in God in all circumstances. That night, my Uncle Paul moved in with my grandparents so that we would have a place to stay—ten of us living in his two-bedroom apartment! Some of our teachers accused us of fabricating a terrible excuse for not having our homework, but eventually they all came around and helped us out. At Church, people made donations to help get us back on our feet. Friends took turns bringing dinner to ease the burden on my folks. Christmas was the best ever! We had more gifts than I can even remember. Through all of it, God did provide. When I later learned St. Teresa

of Avila's expression that we are the hands and feet of Christ on earth, I knew exactly what she meant.

These two stories embody the twin hermeneutics of my childhood. Through the example of my parents, I learned to "see God in all things" as the Jesuits say, and to trust God even when I fail to see or understand. Where we discerned God's grace, the appropriate response was gratitude, and the best way to show gratitude was to tell the story. On the other hand, when bad things happened, my parents demonstrated (in their own humble way) the faith of Christ on the cross: God will provide, even when everything seems so unjust and senseless.

These many years later, my brothers and I have kept the faith, each in his own way, and not one of us perfectly. Faith is a gift—it is primarily God's loving offer in God's own time—and that invitation came to me through the witness of my parents and through the Christian community that surrounded my childhood, including grandparents and godparents, religious education teachers and youth ministers, parish priests and the parish community. Above all, though, my parents "made" me a Catholic by imbuing our daily lives with an awareness of God's presence. In short, they did what Thomas Groome advises all Christians, as sharers in the evangelical mission of the Church, to do: they put our quotidian story in conversation with the Christian Story so that it was ordinary no more. Our family narrative became "scripture" of sorts—part of the continuing saga of God's revelation of God's own deep love for the world.

My mother has never read Johann Baptist Metz, but she understands better than anyone I know the "apocalyptic goad." The stories that she shared with us were not all sunshine and cupcakes—she knew that being Catholic meant having responsibilities in a fallen world. Without ever becoming a Jonathan Edwards, she nonetheless conveyed that we would be judged by whether we had served Jesus in the person of our neighbor in need. My dad, a police officer, told us he was "doing the work of Jesus" on his patrol each day, and his exciting stories of police work—rife with acts of caring and courageous service—convinced us

it was true. All of this took place in a decidedly Catholic framework: we never missed Sunday Mass, and we were taught that the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist would "strengthen us in all things" (Phil. 4:13). We even tried to do some "Catholic" things at home, like praying the Rosary together daily or using an Advent candle. Most often, though, this never really worked out. We would get a day or two into it and something would—often to the kids' delight!—keep us from persisting. The one practice, though, that was nonnegotiable was family dinner together; and that's where the stories—and The Story—were most often told.

Handing on the faith is primarily an act of generosity in which we give access to the Story of the Faith by taking the time to tell our own faith stories as well; and we give credence to the Faith by the credibility of our own, everyday witness as disciples. I have come to embrace the Emmaus Story (Luke 24:13ff.) as a paradigm of effective evangelization. The manner in which faith in the Risen Christ was spread back then—made possible always and only by the call of the Father and the gift of the Holy Spirit—is the same today. The disciples on that Emmaus road, having come to see the Risen Christ "in the breaking of the bread," immediately sought out the other disciples and listened to their proclamation of The Story before "recounting what had taken place [to them] on the way." Significantly, at the very moment that they were sharing their experience, indeed, "While they were still speaking," Jesus appeared "in their midst." If we, too, have met the Risen One in the daily, ordinary journey of our lives, then our hearts should be "burning within us" to share this most precious of gifts. We should be eager to hand on the Faith not only by telling The Story, but also—and very significantly—by telling our own stories of faith as well, and by opening a space for others to share theirs. When we do, Jesus stands in our midst, and the Faith is surely handed on as new disciples experience the presence of the Lord.

Kevin Dowd is pursuing his doctoral degree in theology and education at Boston College.

JESUS IN THE MIDST

“In all created things discern the providence and wisdom of God, and in all things give Him thanks.”
—St. Teresa of Avila

Summary

Author Kevin Dowd reflects on the importance of being attentive to God’s presence and blessings, even during life’s most difficult moments. Cultivating this awareness, particularly through the practice of gratitude, connects us to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus who recognized Jesus in their midst.

Questions for Conversation

1. The author recounts the miraculous “coincidence” that the day his brother needed specific medical help, experts in the exact field were nearby and able to help. Do you have any stories in which God’s timing or plan seemed to be perfectly designed? Have you heard of any such stories?
2. Dowd writes about finding God’s blessings in one of the most challenging episodes of his family’s life, when their home burned down. Cultivating gratitude in those times is a deliberate choice. Are there times in your life when you have sought hard to find God’s hand in something or His blessings? What did you discover?
3. One of the greatest gifts that we are given is our faith. Who was responsible for nurturing that gift? Are you handing it on to others?



PRACTICING JOY IN A FRACTURED WORLD

By Paul Melley

There is no mistaking that we are living through deeply troubling times. The long line of disturbing news and social media headlines are too many to enumerate. We are inundated with grim daily reports of increasing violence and strains of nationalism, sexual scandal, divisive and alienating rhetoric. It's difficult to even create the space to ask: What is the meaning of all this suffering? What is the focal point of God's activity in our lives? Yet, as people of faith, these are the very questions we are obliged to ask.

I remember a conversation with a parishioner at a parish where I used to work. He was an expert in Gestalt based organization and leadership development. We were discussing leadership in a time of uncertainty, and he suggested that I "bring to the system what it lacks." In other words, if there's tension, bring peace. If there's heightened emotion, bring calm. If there's complacency, bring enthusiasm; despair, bring hope. So how do we "bring the system what it lacks" in our time as people of faith? I propose that we should strive to be practitioners of joy—joy, as the

Jesuit philosopher Teilhard de Chardin put it, which "is the infallible sign of the presence of God."

Let's be clear that authentic joy is not a blissful naiveté—there is real pain and suffering in this world. To live in this world is to also notice rust and rot, endings, injustice, and scarcity. It is to know that moments and things do not go on forever, and there is a limited supply to everything. But joy exists at the level of our deepest desires and God's desires for us. Joy can exist alongside feelings of great sorrow and loss. Pope Francis thinks along these lines when he writes in the Joy of the Gospel:

"I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest

distress..." (no. 6).

To bring this "infallible sign" of God's presence to our time, we need to practice joy through wonder, prayer, gratitude, and service.

WONDER:

In her poem "Good Morning," Mary Oliver plunges us into wonder: "The multiplicity of forms! The hummingbird, the fox, the raven, the sparrow hawk, the otter, the dragonfly, the water lily! And on and on. It must be a great disappointment to God if we are not dazzled at least ten times a day." A unique and essential feature of the human species is our questioning, our wondering. Wonder for Aristotle, and later for Thomas Aquinas, was the beginning of wisdom—a state which beckoned to us to marvel and come to understand the world around us. Aquinas notes that the wonder of the philosopher is like the wonder revealed by the poet. Wonder, invites us to have a psalmist's heart. The psalms are the poetry of our faith: wonder at the world with hope, lament, sorrow, desire, gratitude, and a yearning for justice. Practicing wonder rouses us to ask "What if?" and helps to fashion us into prophets of God's joy.

PRAYER:

Prayer was a necessary part of Jesus' relationship with God. It may seem obvious, but anything that was integral to Jesus' life should be part of our own lives and practice as well. Prayer is a condition for the possibility of faith—the forerunner of hope and joy. It enables us to freely choose to apprentice ourselves to see the world the way God sees it. Through prayer we can decipher our innermost longings and place them before God. Through prayer, God gives us the wisdom, the courage to choose the way of joy, even amidst suffering. St. John Chrysostom wrote of prayer, "Prayer is an all-sufficient panoply, a mind which is never diminished, a treasure which is never exhausted, a sky unobscured by the clouds, and a heaven unruffled by the storm. It is the root, the fountain and the mother of a thousand blessings."

GRATITUDE:

In the Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis writes about gratitude as a practice calling it "a spiritual gaze born

of deep faith which acknowledges what God is doing in the lives of others. At the same time, it is the gratitude which flows from a heart attentive to others" (no 282). Wonder and prayer lead us to gratitude. Writing to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul links joy to gratitude even in a time of unrest encouraging them to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances..." A practice of gratitude can discipline our hearts and shape our vision from noticing only privation and despair to seeing possibility and hope.

SERVICE:

Mr. Rogers famously gave advice for times of trouble: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' ... I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world." Being a helper means giving of ourselves to knowing and loving each other, and in return, we are mutually changed and enriched. It is an embodiment of "bringing to the system what it lacks." Our faith lays claims on us to be those helpers, and enables us to address the needs, challenges, and questions of our age. Our service to others is part of God's loving response and gift to the world. This is a startling idea and profound mystery. God chooses us to serve, and in God's Spirit, we become part of God's work for the transformation of the world. We become the helpers others look for amidst the scariness in the news. In loving as Jesus loved, we help to show that He has not abandoned the world.

Joy, then, far from anything resembling naiveté, is a prophetic sign. It decries the status quo and points to an unrealized hope. Practicing joy is an intentional way of living in a world that so often seems to reject it. In our world, joy is ever in the process of becoming. It strives to realize in the present what we are ultimately to know in fullness. Through wonder, prayer, gratitude, and service, we can help to bring to the world what it appears to lack—a sign of joy—the infallible sign of God's presence to our fractured world.

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PRACTICING JOY IN A FRACTURED WORLD

“A Christian brings peace to others. Not only peace, but also love, kindness, faithfulness and joy.”
—Pope Francis

Summary

Paul Melley writes about how challenging it can be to have hope in today’s world, when “we are inundated with grim daily reports of...violence, nationalism, sexual scandal, divisive and alienating rhetoric.” Yet Pope Francis urges Christian disciples to be joyful. Melley proposes that wonder, prayer, gratitude, and service can help us to be joyful signs of Jesus presence, even in our fractured world.

Questions for Conversation

1. Melley says that joy is neither naivete nor fleeting happiness. What is joy? Who or what are sources of joy in your life?
2. What methods of prayer or individual prayers bring you peace in the midst of trials or periods of anxiety?
3. Melley says that service benefits both the receiver and the giver. Who might God be calling you to reach out to in service in order to share God’s joy?

A background photograph showing the lower bodies and legs of several people sitting on the ground in a field of tulips. One person on the left wears a red and white striped shirt and blue jeans. Another person in the center wears a light blue denim jacket and jeans. The scene is outdoors with many red tulips visible in the background.

GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today

St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.

Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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