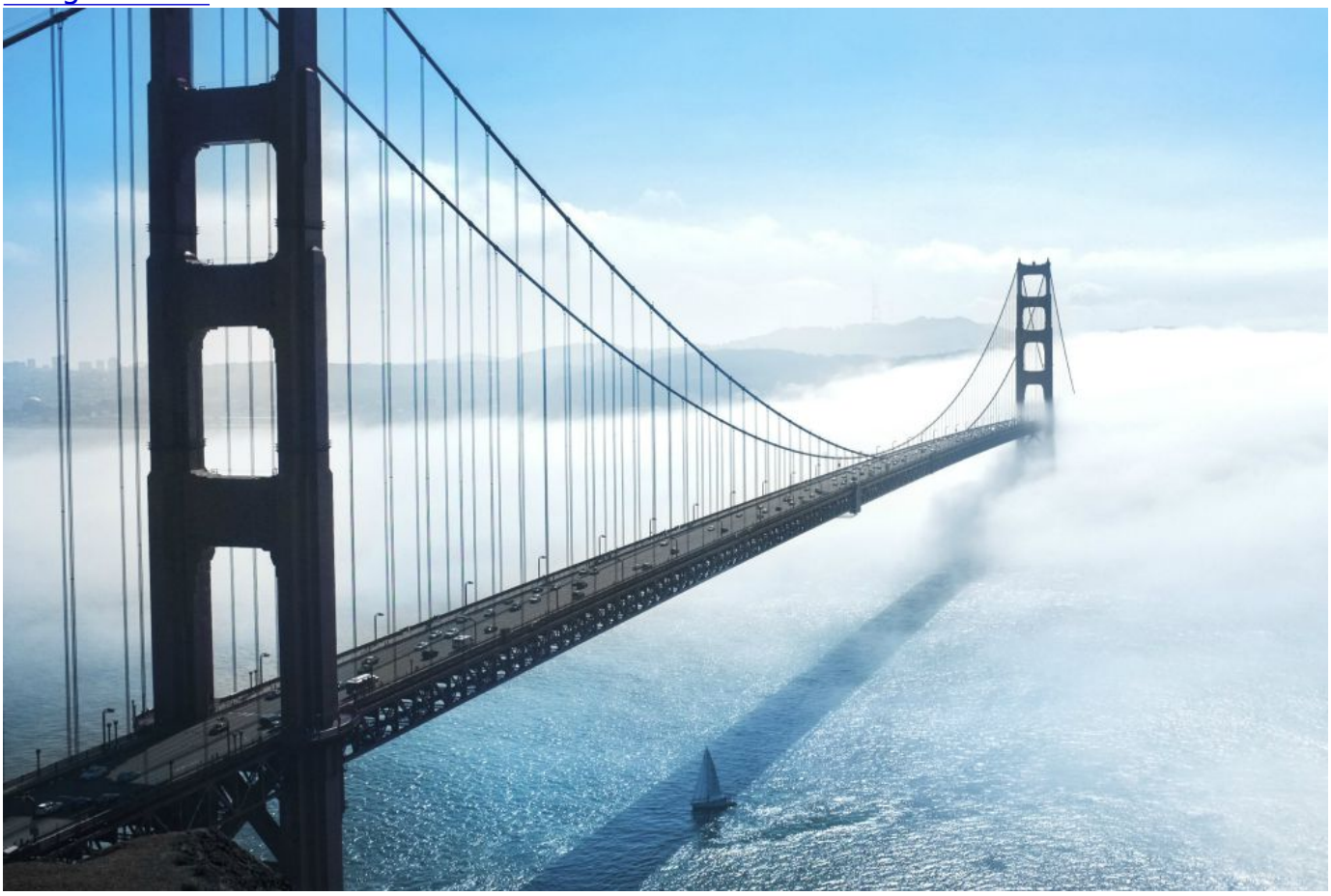
Columns
Spirituality
Religious Life



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by Sue Wilson

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January 14, 2020

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Last weekend at Mass, we were saying the Apostle's Creed, and my mind wandered. How do the people around me understand these words?

What does each person mean when they say, "I believe in God the Father almighty?" How many different understandings are operating as we all say the same words? How many people have no idea what they mean by the words?

Later, I was thinking about two young adults I know. The young woman lost both parents to cancer within the space of six months. Age-old dogma does nothing to touch her pain, doubts and anger toward God. There is a huge gulf between abstract doctrinal terminology and her need to encounter God's presence and healing in her life.

More to the point, she needs to learn to recognize and name how God is relating to her in the here and now, but nothing in her 14 years of Catholic education and Mass attendance prepared her for this, with the result that she no longer has any interest in attending Mass.

The young man was raised in a non-faith home and finds language such as "God, the Father almighty" laughable. He takes the words of faith literally and judges them to be nonsense. When he asks Christian acquaintances what they mean by this language, they seem to have little idea.

These are not isolated examples. Over the past few years, my conversations, both with people of faith and people without faith, have left me to reflect on the growing disconnect between Christian faith and everyday life. It seems Christianity is losing its grounding in the joys and struggles of life. It's becoming an affirmation of faith statements and dogma.

If this is the context, what is the call? Are Christians being called to a more radically incarnational faith?

I'm not trying to do away with the creed. I see value in pulling together the heart of our faith in words we can hold. But it needs so be a living faith. This "pulling-together" only works if we understand the human experiences, particularly the human encounters with the divine, which are behind these statements. Our faith statements need to be deeply connected to our human experience.

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Encountering the sacred is a basic human experience, albeit a graced one. If we are at all reflective in the living of our life, we discover a sacred energy present and acting in every human experience: an energy many of us name "God."

Parents, at the birth of their children, speak of "miracles," truly understanding the word for the first time. People relax at waterfalls, forests or oceans and often find themselves drawn into in a sacred stillness filled with depth and meaning.

A close friend offers forgiveness for a hurtful mistake, and a sense of new life sweeps through one's life. We see migrant workers being exploited and are moved to find and address the root causes. A fleeting but palpable sense of connection with a loved one who has died serves as an affirmation that shared love is eternal.

The tenets of our faith are meant to serve as markings that illumine the deepest meanings hidden at the core of each experience, helping us to name, appreciate and integrate the many sacred moments of life.

To serve this purpose, our faith statements need to be in dialogue with our everyday experiences, and this is where our church experience too often falls short. When there's a disconnect between faith and ordinary life experiences, we lose sight of how all experiences are graced with God's power and presence.

So, how do we reconnect?

I've had the privilege of being part of spontaneous conversations over dinner in which we end up exploring what each one understands when we use the word "God," why the Incarnation matters, how each understands heaven, and so much more. I feel my faith deepen in these conversations, particularly when I'm able to connect traditional doctrinal language with unique human experiences.

In these conversations, it matters little that others may image God differently. What matters is how the conversation takes me to that sacred inner space where I am aware of being "one-with" all others as we lean collectively into Mystery.

These meals, with their spontaneous spiritual conversations, feel just as sacramental to me as the Eucharistic meal. The power of Christ's presence is palpable: uniting us, drawing us deeper into our experiences and pulling us toward new ways of living.

As one person speaks of their desire to spend more time with people living in the park downtown, because this is where they experience community becoming communion, it kindles in me a desire to work with others to identify and remove the barriers that exclude so many from full participation in our community. I wonder if eucharistic meals were meant to be this way.

Is the church ready to be radically incarnational? To trust that any person or event can mediate God's presence and activity. To accept that all theology is an interpretation of experience. To believe that new understandings of the Christian tradition emerge as our personal and social context shift.

A radically incarnational faith wades into diversity to find unity. It encourages us to express different understandings of God, trusting that through dialogue we can land on those expressions that most authentically hold the fullness of our experience and, as a result, are most consistent with our more abstract doctrinal treasure trove.

It insists that orthodoxy is best identified by that which leads us toward fuller healing and compassion, greater justice and peace.

After years of deepening our contemplative spirituality and awareness, members of religious orders are well placed to be bridge-persons in this endeavour; to encourage people to plumb the depths of their experiences; to offer gently some spiritual and theological language for everyday experiences; to name the spiritual urgency in responding to situations of injustice; to follow polarizations to the reconciling energy at their core.

It already happens through formal relationships of spiritual companioning, but this context is calling for something far more widespread, something integrative on both a personal and public scale.

We know God is always calling to us from within the complexity of our current context. This call to nurture reconnections between faith and everyday human experience, to lay the groundwork for attuning hearts to the urgings of justice, to take church to the streets, forests and watersheds is not new — but it holds an urgency today that cannot be denied.

[Sue Wilson is a Sister of St. Joseph of Canada, from London Ontario. She has a background in teaching at all levels — elementary, secondary and university. Her graduate degree in theology with a concentration in social ethics prepared her for her ministry at the Office for Systemic Justice for the Canadian Federation of the

Sisters of St. Joseph. The main focus of this work, in which she has been engaged for close to 20 years, is political advocacy.]