

FAITH *alive!* Outline

Conversations on Faith in the Third Millennium 2004

The World as We Now Know It

1. The Breakneck Speed of Change: Locating Ourselves in a "New World." Change long has been our world's reality. But today we're challenged by the very speed of change. The surrounding world speaks to us. But do the words and questions seem to come too fast sometimes? One bishop said that given the pace of change, culture now "presents many areas which have never previously been lived in or reflected on by Christians." Globalization, the Internet, longer life spans, changed family life, weapons of war: These are such areas. Are Christians trapped or liberated in this context? What assessment might be made of our "position" in a constantly new world?

What gives you hope for our so rapidly changing world?

2. God Power/Human Power. A world of human making surrounds us. The achievements of human power are witnessed everywhere. Yet, we profess to believe in "God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." What is meant in professing God's almighty presence today? We have some sense of human power and how it is employed. What should be our sense of God's power?

What is a sign for you of human progress?

3. Spirituality for a Disordered World. Faith assures us God is present. Yet conflict holds sway in so many places in the world. To some, chaos or disorder might appear to be the norm today. What is at risk for us as Christ's followers in this environment? What is asked of us? Fear, even hatred, of others may threaten to overtake us. What stance might we take toward a disordered world?

Where is God in your everyday world?



Change is a constant for the world in which people of faith find themselves. We know this so well! But in the "post-modern" world of the third millennium, what people of faith encounter is their world's breakneck speed of change. Developments occur so rapidly that people feel at a loss to digest so much.

At the start of 2004, Faith Alive! sets the pace for its editions to come by asking: What assessment might be made of the position in which the church's people now find themselves — their position in a constantly new world?

The 2004 Faith Alive! Lenten series talks with the readers of Catholic newspapers about the heightened interest today's church takes in faith formation for adults. More and more adults are accepting the church's invitation to enter into a conversation about faith. But exactly what are these adults conversing about?

Third Millennium Families

4. Marriage, the Vocation. Marriage is a vocation. We may feel that we grasp why priesthood, religious life, parenthood are viewed as callings from God. But in what sense is marriage a vocation? This vocation gets lived out alongside many demands and duties. How do all these responsibilities mesh with the notion of vocation? Every Christian vocation is a path — perhaps a winding one — toward holiness.

How do busy couples find the time they need for each other?

5. Family Aptitudes, Capabilities, Limitations. Sometimes the scope of the family's role — especially that of the parents — seems so wide. What is the family's vocation? What is it not? Families fulfill many major roles for their members and others. But do parents, especially, sometimes "set themselves up" to feel inadequate? Is there a healthy Christian perspective on parental strengths AND limitations? Parents know they're not omnipotent.

As a parent, where have you sought support when you felt confused or perhaps "alone"?

6. What Parents Fear. What do parents say they fear today? Let's ask them. This is an age of significant worries — from that connected to terrorism to that of job loss, for example. Parents experience many apprehensions about aspects of the culture their children experience — at school, via the media, among peers. Children's safety is an issue, for example. How do parents approach or manage fears? Is there a place in spirituality for meditation on our fears?

As a parent, what do you fear? What has helped you handle such fears?

The big risk factors for contemporary families

By Father Nathan Weber, author of *Home*

As I look at the families in my parish, I see a lot of risk factors. The big risk factors for contemporary families are: 1. The pace of change. 2. The loss of community. 3. The loss of faith. 4. The loss of hope. 5. The loss of love. 6. The loss of respect. 7. The loss of honor. 8. The loss of dignity. 9. The loss of freedom. 10. The loss of justice. 11. The loss of peace. 12. The loss of order. 13. The loss of direction. 14. The loss of meaning. 15. The loss of purpose. 16. The loss of identity. 17. The loss of self. 18. The loss of soul. 19. The loss of God. 20. The loss of heaven.

David Wilson, Editor, Faith Alive!

7. Gift-giving; Celebrations. Rituals and celebrations in homelife aren't superfluous "extras." They're essential. Families are communities of love, seeking opportunities to express this reality. In a Christian perspective, a gift can be a way to share life. Still, celebrations and the gifts often accompanying them sometimes take a toll. Let's talk with families about the special occasions they celebrate their life together.

Share your idea of what a family celebration — birthday, baptism, graduation, etc. — should NOT be?

Lenten Reflections on Adult Faith Formation

8. Ash Wednesday: Spiritual Perspectives on the Security We Seek, the Well-Being We Need and Life's Element of Risk. We direct much effort toward achieving security — at home, at work, within our communities. Some of these efforts are directed toward eliminating this or that risk from one's life. As Lent arrives, let's examine — in Gospel light — the force exerted upon us by our quest of security and our apprehensions regarding life's potential pitfalls. Is our spirituality itself often conditioned by a desire for security, safety? How might appropriate risk-taking help to shape it?

What were your Lenten intentions last year? Did you stick to your plan?

9. Adult Times: Formation for Mature Faith. Why is adult faith formation important? We're adults the greatest part of our lives, one archbishop said recently. Adults must contend with anxiety-creating matters of

great import. The good news is, however, that it is so possible — and so beneficial — to view these issues in the light of faith. We begin this Lenten discussion by telling what adult faith formation means.

What is a real concern of yours that you need — or once needed — to learn to view in the light of the Gospel?

10. The Many Forms of Adult Faith Formation. Where is adult faith formed, and who shares in forming it? For any age group, faith formation today lacks certain forms of support it enjoyed decades ago. The environments where adult faith formation now is pursued are different; its forms often are new. What are they? And what “kind of people” seek out adult faith formation?

Tell of a beneficial adult-education or faith-sharing event you participated in.

11. Parishes and Their Faith-Forming Opportunities for Adults. Let's visit some parishes to get a close view of adult faith formation in action and the contexts in which it is offered. And let's have a conversation with parish leaders about their vision for adult faith formation: what this formation is all about and when it is fruitful.

How does your parish collaborate with other parishes in adult faith formation?

12. Inviting the Church's Adults Into Conversation. Many adults reflect in small groups on faith and its implications for their lives. In various ways, these groups respond to real needs in their members' lives. But what exactly do such people converse about? Marriage, parenthood, work, depression, Scripture, anxieties, hopes: These are a few topics of conversation for Catholic Christians today.

Tell of a parish small group in which you participated and what it did or discussed.

13. The Domestic Church's Faith-Formation Needs. Children need mature adults in their lives; children of faith need adults of mature faith. One reason many adults pursue their own faith formation is in order to participate better and more fully in their children's faith formation. Undoubtedly, the home — the domestic church — is the setting where they do this best. What real possibilities are there to share and build faith at home? What complicates this endeavor? What obstacles does it encounter?

What approach worked for you in sharing faith with children and teens at home?

14. What a Difference Baptism Makes! In Lent, all are urged to recall their baptism and to reflect on its continuing meaning for them. Why is baptism so strongly emphasized in these times? This sacrament's reality and its rich symbolism speak volumes about what the church is. How does baptism provide the underpinnings of adult faith as well as of adult faith formation?

How — and why — do you participate in the church's work?

15. Christ, the World's Light. Easter

and the Paschal Candle. The Christ of Easter is the light of the world, Scripture insists. It must have been an astonishing idea in an ancient world that believed a sun god offered all the light needed. What is implied by referring to Christ as light and symbolizing this with the paschal candle? Let's trace this symbol's history in sacramental celebrations, with special focus on the Easter Vigil.

Describe an Easter custom in your family.

Drawing Distinctions, Defining Terms

16. Reflections on Failure, Disappointment and Success. Do we define ourselves partly by our notions of failure and success — by the importance we accord instances of failure and success in our own life's story? Some of what we call failure may not really be that at all. Might it be a disappointment, challenging us to clarify priorities and make needed decisions about our life's direction? Let's seek out Gospel insights on failure and success.

Did you (or someone you know) ever experience something you first deemed a failure, only to find later it had prompted steps that allowed greater happiness to enter your life?

17. Reflections on Consumerism, Money and Providing for Your Needs. What is the difference between consumerism and the desire to earn the money needed to provide for your needs or those of your family? A desire to accumulate many possessions — a desire not to be deprived of things we want — may define consumerism. But a family indeed needs many things. What, then, is consumerism? And what's wrong with it?

How, in your experience, has consumerism caused problems for you or others you know?

18. Reflections on Narcissism, Self-Respect and the Pursuit of Good Health. How much “love” or “care” for oneself is too

much? How much is too little? Pope John Paul II recently called upon church members to give good care to themselves, fostering personal health in order to serve others better. We're called upon to respect ourselves, care for and about ourselves. But if these efforts grow excessive, will they lead us away from our betterment?

Do you ever meditate or pray while running, walking, exercising?

Serving the Common Good (Voting for It Too)

19. Discovering the Common Good. The common good is a theme of contemporary Catholic social teaching. Defending and promoting it are important responsibilities for Christ's followers. But in complex, fast-changing times, how do we identify the common good in order to act on its behalf? For voters, the church suggests, this is an essential question.

What do you do — within the church or in other contexts — that promotes social justice?

20. Eschatological Tension: Drawn Toward Eternity, Impelled to Care for This World. Pope John Paul II said in a 2003 encyclical that “the Eucharist ... reinforces our communion with the church in heaven,” at the same time increasing rather than lessening “our sense of responsibility for the world today.” He called this an eschatological tension. How can the Eucharist direct our gaze toward the great social and political issues of these times?

Do you ever pray about concrete, specific needs of this world? What is your prayer?

21. Laity: Bringing the Gospel to the Everyday World. We hear repeatedly that lay people have a major role in bringing the Gospel to the everyday worlds they inhabit. But how, in concrete terms, can this be done? Sometimes it is a question of expertise — the Christian scientist, for example, serving as a bridge between Christ and a scientific community. But all people have gifts. How do these come into play in the work of evangelization?

Can lay people really bring faith to bear in the “marketplace”? How?

Doctrinal Perspectives

22. Can We Know God's Will for Us? Surely God's will relates to each of us specifically. But how specific is God's will in terms of decisions we make — choosing careers, or spouses, or places to live, for example? When it is a matter of the commandments, knowing God's will seems clearer. But in many important instances, discerning God's will may be more complicated.

Tell of an occasion when you felt God's will for you was clear.

23. Is the Human Body a Blessing? Theologians and philosophers for centuries have sought a Christian perspective on the human body. At times, the body was viewed somewhat as a threat to the soul. But Christ's

resurrection tells us the body has a place in the fullness of time. One archbishop wrote recently that "Christianity itself cannot be understood apart from an appreciation of the body." Why?

When you are tired, run-down, how do you refresh your spirit?

24. Human Freedom's Definition: Why Does It Matter So Much? The meaning of human freedom is an intensely studied question today. This continues the age-old quest to say exactly what human freedom is and is not. It all relates not only to the good people might do but to the problem of evil in the world. How we define human freedom reveals so much about what we believe a human person is, how one person relates to another and what difference people's actions make.

What makes their freedom so important to people? What do they want to be free from or free for?

25. What Are They Saying About Guilt? A sense of guilt can be painful, an agony even. There is, of course, the risk of unwarranted guilt and shame over past actions. Another risk is that while guilt yields fear of God, it may stop there; locked up in guilt over the past, people are then unable to trust God's mercy. But is there a sense of guilt that plays a positive role in the process of conversion and reconciliation? What exactly is guilt? How is it related to sorrow or regret?

Where have you found helpful spiritual counseling or guidance?

Faith Themes for 2004

26. Why Is the Ecumenical Journey So Long? Efforts to foster unity and share faith among the world's divided Christians have progressed greatly. But significant points of division remain, as recent developments on the world stage have shown. What are ecumenism's goals at this point — both short term and long term? What would it mean if ecumenism made little or no further progress?

What joint effort has your parish undertaken with the people of a local Protestant, Anglican or Orthodox community?

27. Religion and the Religions. In a globalized world, the world's great religions are in closer contact. Perhaps this makes them see how different they are. But are they also similar? What connects Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others? The problem of religion today is, in part, that while it leads members toward the transcendent, the sense of identity it forges may forcefully divide people. What are the greatest points of stress for interreligious relations today?

Is your attitude toward Muslims different today than it once was? How, and why?

28. Pope John Paul II and the Jews. Over the years of his papacy, Pope John Paul II set forth an ever expanding body of teaching on Catholic-Jewish relations. Let's take a close look at this teaching and what it says about anti-Semitism, the Holocaust,

Israel and the Middle East, as well as about the relations of Catholics and Jews in local communities.

Give one reason why the Catholic-Jewish dialogue might matter to you?

29. Notes on Poverty and Hunger in a World of Abundance. The poverty, hunger and deprivation suffered by so many in today's world is a moral scandal, the U.S. bishops said recently. But do we know who the poor are in our communities? And what choices can any of us make that will really matter for the poor? Poverty and hunger are concerns for anyone attempting to practice a consistent ethic of life, it has been said. Part of this ethic demands that the poor be heard.

What does the church in your community do that seriously confronts the realities of poverty?

Perspectives on the Bible and Its People

30. What Can You Find in the Bible? The Scholar's Perspective. The Bible is a gold mine of information for experts in languages, or theology, or history. The Bible is a book unlike others; there's much more to it than meets the eye. What have scholars "unearthed" from the Bible over the past 50 years that has helped people to benefit more greatly from it?

Tell of a book of the Bible that fascinates you? Why is this so?

31. What Can You Find in the Bible? The Reader's Perspective. There are many reasons to open the Bible: to learn of Jesus; to draw upon it for prayer and spirituality; to stimulate one's thinking about God's role in the world or one's own place in the universe. Let's ask readers of the Bible how they use it and why — what they seek in Scripture and what they find.

Why do you read the Bible? How do you draw upon it?

32. Women of the Bible. To know the Bible is to know its people — its "cast of characters," you might say. Among them are many women. Let's get acquainted with some of them and discover why their place in the story of faith has been called to the attention of future generations by the early Christian community and the biblical writers.

Tell of someone in the Bible who perhaps is somewhat overlooked but who nonetheless stands out in your mind.

33. Prayers of Scripture: The Kind of Prayer the "Our Father" Is. We pray the "Our Father" all the time, but do we grasp all that it says and asks? Let's examine it in the context of the time when Jesus' followers first heard it. What was meant in praying "Thy kingdom come" or "Give us this day our daily bread," or in proclaiming that God's name is hallowed? We'll inquire into other great biblical prayers as well.

Describe a project you undertook in a group or alone to learn more about the Bible or one of its particular sections.

34. Disciples: A Biblical Perspective. Can we discover what a disciple is by getting to know some people who were disciples during the church's beginning days? *Discipleship* is a key term in the church's contemporary vocabulary. What were the disciples of biblical times like? Our lives today are so different from theirs, but do we resemble them in important ways too?

Does it take strength to follow Jesus? What kind of strength?

Matters of the Hearth: Connecting Parish and Domestic Church

35. A Death in the Family. How does the church envision its role at the time of terminal illness and/or death? The church and its people endeavor to accompany both the one who is dying and those who survive. And parishes are responding to the grief and sense of loss that survivors experience. How has ministry to those who grieve taken form? The church's funeral liturgy expresses a theology of death and resurrection that itself is consoling.

How does your parish/diocese serve people grieving the loss of a loved one?

36. A Birth in the Family. Great excitement and a spirit of celebration surround a child's birth. Naturally, parents and extended-family members know well that their life's agenda is now in certain important ways getting redirected and that their responsibilities are compounding greatly. For this child, a long journey in life is beginning. With all this in mind, let's focus on the church's respect for life and its desire to highlight life's dignity. And let's ask why it is that we baptize babies. From earliest times, it seems, the church baptized infants, seeking to nurture them and their families.

What activities does your parish sponsor for children (and/or their parents) under 5?

37. Violence at Home. Obviously, domestic violence is the concern of law enforcement, psychologists, doctors. But in

How to decode all the "lingo" of faith. Includes a cartoon of a man scratching his head with words like Hermeneutic, Apertorium, Koinonia, Ekklesia, and Theology. Text discusses the complexity of religious language and provides tips for understanding it.



Fourth mystery of light: Transfiguration, a world lit from within

W hat is that ultimate mystery we... The Transfiguration, as we know it... "I saw a light, I saw the light of the world, at a time when the only source of light was fire, when a whole new meaning, the disciples never will see like the same again."



The Transfiguration of Christ, as depicted in a painting by Giotto di Bondone. The scene shows Jesus in the center, surrounded by his disciples, with a bright light emanating from him.

and its importance to one's human sense of identity are well known. Work is not simply something to be endured patiently or that takes one away from "real life." Work has the potential to be an essential form of self-expression, linking people to God's ongoing creative work. Job loss can be highly painful, however. How do parishes and dioceses reach out to the unemployed? Why is this dimension of "secular life" a church concern?

What are some concrete needs of parish members that might be — or are — mentioned at Sunday Mass in your community's Prayers of the Faithful?

Advent and Christmas

41. What Is Holiness Anyway? An important teaching of Vatican Council II says that holiness is a goal for all members of the church community. What, however, defines holiness? Do our images of what a holy person "looks like" encourage or discourage us? Holiness isn't an abstraction. If it is accessible to all, it must take form in concrete ways in the lives of real people.

How do you define holiness?

42. Doing Good: A Complex Human Calling. Presumably Christians want to do good. This seems absolutely basic in Christianity. Yes, but what is the good? In a pinch, could we define the term? That's what this Faith Alive! edition is all about: describing and defining what good means. How do we know when we are doing good? Why, in trying to do good, do we sometimes do harm? And are there times when doing good means doing nothing — or waiting?

Describe two characteristics of a human action that is good.

43. Mysticism New and Old. It is well understood that spirituality and holiness are meant for all. But is there a legacy of

mysticism that could make a difference for us all? Perhaps we think of Christian mystics as rare types who related to God in ways inaccessible to most individuals and communities. But let's define the term mystic. And let's visit mystics of history such as St. Teresa of Avila, inquiring what their lifestyles actually were. Can a mystic be a model for others?

Share how you pray, whether alone or with others?

44. Christmas: Who Jesus Is Not. With the arrival of Christmas, we're prompted not only to ask who Jesus is, but who he is not. No doubt he surprised many people of biblical times who expected someone else: a worker of magic, a warrior, a worldly king, a wielder of power to manipulate and control people — especially enemies — to his ends. The incarnation entails an element of surprise. Part of the surprise is how forcefully the incarnation shapes our faith's identity and focus. What is the "shape" of the faith it invites?

In your own words, what is the message of Christmas for these unique times?

45. Transiting Wisely Into Each New Stage in Life. Life doesn't stand still for anyone. Sometimes we are motivated to take steps to develop ourselves more fully. Other times families, friends, communities — and the world itself — push us along or pull us forward into a new stage of life. Throughout the past year we've spoken of forces of change and development in our world and our lives. What can we now say about stages in adult life, how they emerge and are handled? As our experience of life lengthens and deepens, are we bound to become wiser?

What new stage of life — one that began with a child's birth, middle age, retirement — required the greatest reflection/preparation on your part? Why?

recent years dioceses and parishes also have made domestic violence a priority issue. Conferences of bishops have addressed the matter. One bishop recently asked the people of his diocese "to be aware of the scope of domestic violence and to be committed to find ways to end this nightmare." For those who experience it, domestic violence is a tragic dimension of life at home. What are the church's goals in making this an issue of Christian concern?

How can family members create an atmosphere of respect at home?

38. The Aged: Care Given, Care Received. As the average human lifespan lengthens, the number of society's aged members mounts. Their gifts and needs represent important concerns for this new millennium. Often the aged are regarded (disregarded) as mere recipients of society's services. But parishes, families and organizations testify that the aged remain important contributors to society's well-being. It is said, however, that society remains tempted to relegate "the old old" to the status of a burden. Does the biblical view of the elderly apply to these post-modern times?

How are people in their 70s or older serving in your parish or diocese?

39. Dimensions of Friendship. Both the home and the parish are centers of friendship. A nuclear family is not usually self-sufficient in terms of relationships. Its bonds of friendship with others become an important part of the family's lifeblood. Friendship, however, adds up to more than the sense of camaraderie stemming from spending time with others like oneself. Friends are characterized by strong bonds of support, concern and respect — qualities that also characterize the parish as a community and that foster human growth.

Briefly, how do you define friendship?

40. Job Loss and Work's Multidimensional Meanings. Pope John Paul II's great interest in the meaning of work

Faith Alive! is an educational service for the readers of Catholic newspapers. It benefits individual readers at home and families, as well as parish discussion groups, classes in schools and others. Published by Catholic News Service at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Faith Alive! explores what it means to live as a follower of Jesus Christ in contemporary times. Each Faith Alive! edition poses a discussion point that invites readers to reflect on an upcoming week's topic and to forward their responses for possible publication. Here are just a few topics Faith Alive! is covering in 2004: "Is the Human Body a Blessing?" "The Many Forms of Adult Faith Formation." "Can We Know God's Will for Us Specifically?" "Who Jesus Is NOT." "What Parents Fear." "Reflections on Failure, Disappointment and Success: Making the Right Distinctions." "Eschatological Tension: Drawn Toward Eternity, Impelled to Care for This World."

