

# COURIER-JOURNAL

• September 19, 1984 •

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. All contents copyright © 1984 by NC News Service.

## Faith Today

### Three paths to MEANING

By Sister Prudence Allen, RSM  
NC News Service

"It is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way," concluded psychiatrist Victor Frankl in a remarkable book called "Man's Search for Meaning."

Instead, Frankl believed that each person discovers the meaning of life in the specific circumstances of life. "Life does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life's tasks are also very real and concrete," he explained.

During World War II, Frankl was imprisoned for three years in Auschwitz and other concentration camps. It was then that he developed his concepts about the source of life's meaning.

□ □ □

As a psychiatrist, Frankl was a student of human behavior. Observing his own struggle to maintain hope in the difficult circumstances of prison, he came to believe that the human need to find meaning in life was more fundamental than the need to eat, sleep or find sexual fulfillment.

After his lib-



eration from prison, Frankl interviewed countless survivors of the concentration camps, hoping to discover what gave them the will to keep alive. How did they manage to maintain hope in the future?

He reached this conclusion: "We can discover meaning in life in three different ways: by doing a deed, by experiencing a value and by suffering."

"Doing a deed." That is Frankl's first path to meaning. It may involve creating something through our work. Or it may simply involve acting in some way which changes the world ever so slightly for the better.

Frankl described a turning point in his own search for meaning while in prison:

"Suddenly I saw myself standing on the platform of a pleasant lecture room...I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp...By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation."

By imagining something he would do, an action he would take in the future, Frankl found some meaning for his life while imprisoned.

□ □ □

The second way to find meaning is by "experiencing a value," says Frankl. This experience could come through loving another person. Frankl described how the deep love he and his wife shared helped him to survive a cold and painful day at hard labor.

He wrote: "A thought crossed



my mind: I didn't even know if she were still alive. I knew only one thing. Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self."

Moreover, music, art or nature provide ways of "experiencing a value"; they help to give meaning to life.

But what about people who are deprived of satisfying work and have never experienced a value which gives meaning to their life? Frankl knew that the prison camp experience was one of great deprivation, so he spoke in great detail about his third path to meaning.

He said: "Whenever one is confronted with an inescapable, unavoidable situation, whenever one has to face a fate that cannot be changed, e.g., an incurable disease, such as inoperable cancer, just then is one given a last chance to actualize the highest value, the deepest meaning, the meaning of suffering."

Suffering calls on people to make a decision. As Frankl explains it: "One could make a victory of these experiences (of suffering), turning life into an in-

ner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate."

□ □ □

Frankl's discovery of three basic ways to give life meaning is helpful as a general guideline. I find it interesting that in his own writings, Pope John Paul II has explored the same three pathways to meaning.

The pope discussed the significance found in "doing a deed" in his encyclical, "On Human Work." There he pointed out how individuals can find dignity and realize their self-worth through the work of their hands and minds.

The pope studied the Christian significance of love earlier in his life in a play he wrote, "The Jeweler's Shop." But this theme also was examined in a collection of the pope's sermons on the Book of Genesis titled "The Original Unity of Woman and Man."

And suffering — a third path to meaning — was explored by the pope in a 1984 apostolic letter on suffering. He emphasized that suffering is always a mystery. But he noted that part of the mystery of suffering is the way it can transform human beings.

(Sister Allen teaches philosophy at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.)

For as long as human beings have walked this earth we have pondered the meaning of life. Mercy Sister Prudence Allen writes about psychiatrist Victor Frankl, who believes that finding meaning is a basic human need. And, he says, the search for meaning can lead in three very different directions.