

# adjustment in meaning

time what they would do with such a big place after Mark went to college.

For months she had brooded over what life would be like as an empty-nester. So much of what she considered the meaning in her life had, for 21 years, come from being so busy as a homemaker. Often she kidded about needing a computer to keep track of her duties.

Only 47, she would consider getting a job in the fall. Still she wondered, "What will life mean now?" Her husband had the same question.

Maybe it seems that professional philosophers and theologians are the ones who should talk about life's "meaning." But everyone becomes a bit of a philosopher at times. The kind of "philosophical" question that puzzled Mark's parents is common.

People inquire about "meaning" whenever they wonder if life is worthwhile:

—When chaos gets the upper hand in life, people may develop a sense of futility. They wonder: "What difference does life make? What's the use?"

—Or people get bored, bogged down by routine. They exclaim: "This can't be all there is to life!"

—Witnessing injustice or great pain among members of society, people ask: "What can life possibly

mean if this is allowed to happen?"

—Or, viewing something beautiful — the works of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, the birth of a child — one thinks: "This tells me life means more than I could imagine."

Mark's parents won't fully answer their question immediately after he departs for college. Life's meaning tends to unfold over time.

But I conjecture that during the next year Mark's parents will plan to do some new things together. Probably they'll find fresh value in friendships. A development at work may give them a renewed sense of confidence; a parish project will give them a real sense of involvement and hope.

If they're wise — I'm sure they are — they'll remember that love makes life meaningful. They'll listen more carefully to each other now; they'll take greater care of life's little things; they'll recognize that some of the increased time on their hands could be used to help others.

Finally, if they're lucky — I'm sure they are — Mark will exercise his soccer skills in college, and they can drive down for all the excitement of a weekend game or two.

(Mark's parents are a composite of parents this writer has known.)

(Gibson is editor of *Faith Today*.)

# FOOD...

## ...for thought

"Do you remember that scene at the opening of St. John's Gospel? In those days as in ours young men were looking for guides, for teachers, for masters who could show them the way to the fullest meaning of life," writes Trappist Father Basil Pennington in his new book, "The Eucharist Yesterday and Today" (Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984).

Father Pennington relates how Andrew and John left their hometown of Capernaum in search of the desert prophet — John the Baptizer — they had heard about, hoping that he would have "the answers."

But finally, following John the Baptizer's directions, they teamed up with Jesus and his followers. Still, says Father Pennington, it was "a long road before they got their answer."

Perhaps three years later Jesus said to them: "If anyone keeps my commandments, the Father and I will come and we will take up our dwelling in him."

Those words are significant since they get to the heart of how Christians are to find meaning in life — through each other. Since "Jesus — God's — favorite dwelling place is in us, in human persons," the priest writes, our "first care should be for human beings, for ourselves and others." Doing beautiful things for others is a way of doing something beautiful for God,

Father Pennington writes.

Andrew and John found strength to carry out their responsibilities through their companionship with Jesus and his followers. Christians today, as Father Pennington points out, find similar nourishment during the Eucharist — the Mass.

The Eucharist is like a family gathering at home, he thinks. In the Eucharist "we are all brothers and sisters, children of the one Father, albeit an enormous family and therefore enjoying varying degrees of intimacy."

The Eucharist has the marvelous ability to remind Christians of their own value. In fact, Father Pennington explains, the Eucharist reminds all "that they are called, called by a God of love, that they are loved and wanted, that they have the dignity of one who is wanted, wanted even by a God."

Assured of our own worth, the Eucharist becomes a "powerful force to draw together, heal and integrate our dispersed thoughts and desires, energies and projects," Father Pennington observes.

Christians, celebrating the Eucharist, have the opportunity to recall who they are and where they are going. And in doing that, they just may catch a glimpse of where life's real meaning lies.

## ...for discussion

1. Do you tend to think that discussions about life's "meaning" should be left up to the professional theologians and philosophers? What do you think David Gibson means when he writes that everyone becomes a bit of a philosopher at times?

2. Can you think of a time recently when you and a friend talked about your mutual dreams and hopes? Would you consider this an occasion when you were concerned about the meaning of your life?

3. Joe Michael Feist thinks it is important to put a little humor into our discussions of life's meaning. Do you agree?

4. Sister Prudence Allen's article tells of the three ways of finding meaning discovered by psychiatrist Victor Frankl. Which of the ways do you find most interesting? Would you add to the list?

### SECOND HELPINGS

"Storytelling, Imagination and Faith," by Father William Bausch. For some time now, books and articles have been appearing on the value of storytelling in the lives of religious people. Why is it good for people to tell the important stories from their own lives? In this book Father Bausch examines the value in many kinds of storytelling. Often people "tell stories, however unconsciously, that deal with life's meaning, life's fundamentals, life's mysteries," he writes. Sometimes people tell stories that "are reports of ways that they have been challenged to go and see beyond themselves." Their stories ask "What is life all about anyway?" Writing as a parish priest, Father Bausch says he is convinced "the parish is the space and place in which storytelling" takes place for most people. It is here that our personal stories are compared with the larger story, says Father Bausch. (Twenty-Third Publications, Box 180, Mystic, Conn. 06355, \$7.95.)

# the total picture

meaning and happiness. None satisfied his thirst for fulfillment.

He realized then that if he searched for perfect happiness in those things he would be doomed to frustration. He would have to look further.

The problem for Qoheleth was that he labored under a severe handicap. He saw value in the life of this world. What he lacked was an understanding about a happy life after death.

He was trying to figure out the meaning of life without a vision of its totality. It would be like trying to write a person's biography with a knowledge only of his infancy.

A few centuries later the author of the Old Testament book of Daniel had a much deeper insight into the whole span of human existence. As a result he held out a bright prospect, one that made life eminently worth living.

"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.... Those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever" (12:2-4).

At the end of the Old Testament

period the author of Wisdom was granted an even more penetrating vision of life: "The souls of the just are in the hand of God and no torment shall touch them... they shall be greatly blessed" (3:1-4; 5).

A strong echo of this, enriched by the teaching and example of Jesus, is heard in St. Paul's New Testament letter to the Romans: "If we are children (of God) we are heirs as well; heirs of God, heirs with Christ" (8:17-19).

To discover life's meaning, life must be seen in its totality, in its earthly and eternal, human and divine aspects.

Life here and now was given us to enjoy. This life reflects God's promise and goodness. But to complete the picture we need the prospect of the kingdom of God in all its fullness.

And hope in God's promise keeps us going. It can make sense of what otherwise might seem absurd.

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