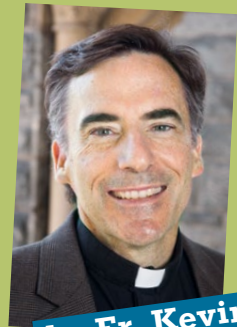


WHERE Do I Fit In?

At the heart of our vocation, whatever it may be, is responding to the needs of others by using the gifts that we have been given. Fr. Kevin O'Brien, S.J., like Saint Francis of Assisi, had an experience that helped him realize his true vocation.



by Fr. Kevin
O'Brien, S.J.

How Do We Know What God Wants of Us?

Great adventures often have the most unexpected beginnings. For me, the adventure that would lead me to become a Jesuit priest began on a hot day outside a courthouse in southern Florida, in the company of an 80-year-old Jewish woman from Brooklyn.

I was a junior lawyer working on a big case that involved some tragic family history. The stakes were high, and the facts were deeply personal for my client, Miriam. She was immensely kind and gracious. At this stage of her life, the last place she wanted to be was in a courtroom in a long-drawn-out fight over a will. But she knew that in this case it was the right thing to do.

As the junior lawyer, my job was to take care of the client. During the court hearings, recounting some of the painful family history, Miriam sometimes would leave the courtroom, and I would walk with her. She would tell me stories about her family, her dear friends, and about growing up in Brooklyn. She would tell me about her hopes for her future. One day, as we walked outside the courthouse, it hit me: I would rather be outside talking with Miriam than inside the courtroom. There was no blinding light, no thunderbolt from Heaven, just an insight that cut to the heart of the matter.

The thought was not entirely new. I went to law school not intending to practice law but to lay the foundation for a career in politics. From an early age, my family and my faith taught me that, whatever I did in life, I needed to

give back to the community. The truth of the Gospel message became part of me: to whom much is given, much is expected. Admittedly, public service fed my ego and my desire for power and prestige, but God works with our mixed motivations, refining over time ambitions that are too self-directed.

That day with Miriam outside the courthouse was a moment when God broke through my cluttered thinking and clearly got my attention. It was a call to figure out what I really wanted to do with my life. I started to pray more regularly, inviting God into the conversation, and the way became clearer from that moment on.

Listen to God

Take a moment to reflect on how you can continue to invite God into your life so that you can hear his call. Then write a prayer that you can pray to help you know the vocation to which God is calling you.

FR. KEVIN O'BRIEN, S.J., is a priest and professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. This essay was excerpted from his book *The Ignatian Adventure*.

WHERE Do I Fit In?

The ability to see God in the world around us is an important part of the Catholic tradition. Here, author Margaret Silf reflects on how an ordinary event—turning on a light switch—can remind others of the truth of God’s love.



by Margaret Silf

Let There Be Light!

Can one little light make any difference in the darkness?

On my first visit to New York City, I decided to go to the top of the Empire State Building late one dark night. When the elevator reached the topmost viewing platform, I stepped out and gazed down on a breathtakingly beautiful view. I wasn't the only one to be awed by the sight. A group of youngsters who chattered all the way up immediately fell into a wide-eyed silence as they stepped onto the platform. Everyone was blown away by the sea of beauty sparkling at our feet. New York City was alive with light.

But exactly how did this spectacle come about? It wasn't some lavish Hollywood show put on to draw the crowds. It was simply the result of millions of ordinary people switching on the lights right where they live. None of them thought for a moment that they were contributing to a vision that can take your breath away.

One small light can kindle a fire that changes the world. God's vast visions always begin with the *anawim*, which is Hebrew for "the poor seeking the Lord for deliverance." The Gospel keeps reminding us that we are the poor, the little ones. The light of life is given to us.

When we light a candle, we say to the darkness,
"I beg to differ."

MARGARET SILF is the author of *Inner Compass*, *The Other Side of Chaos*, and *Simple Faith*. She lives in Scotland, United Kingdom.

Revealing God's Presence

Reflect on an experience in your life that has served as a source of God's Revelation. On the lines below, write what the event was and what it revealed to you about God's presence in the world today.

[illegible]

Reflect

WHERE Do I Fit In?

Jesus has given us a special gift: his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Sometimes we take Jesus' Real Presence for granted. In this reflection, Tom McGrath reminds us that the Real Presence is both a gift and the primary source of spiritual nourishment in our lives.



by Tom McGrath

Jesus Is There for You

My family moved the day after I graduated from eighth grade. I eventually came to like my new neighborhood, but until high school started, I felt isolated and alone.

Halfway through that long summer, my best friend from the old neighborhood spent the weekend at my house. I was nervous as that weekend approached, wondering how the visit would go. What would we do? Would we still get along?

At first it was awkward, but as we sat on the back porch, Billy asked, "How have you been, Tom? Was it hard moving away from our neighborhood?" Having broken the ice, we were instantly buddies again. We talked and laughed about all the crazy things we did in grammar school. We remembered the good times, and we even shared our fears about what the world of high school would be like.

I felt like I was myself again.

The gift of a person's honest presence is one of the most precious human experiences we can have. When someone is present to us, we, too, become more present. We don't have to hide who we are or what we feel. We begin to learn more about who we most truly are—the person we are down deep, the person God created us to be.

Jesus, who is both human and divine, understood the power of one person being present to another. He knew how being present can transform someone by calling and strengthening him or her to be the person he or she was meant to be. On the night before he died, Jesus gave his disciples the greatest gift, the gift of his own Real Presence. He said, "Take and eat, for this is my body, given up for you."

He said we should do this in memory of him. Jesus gives us that same gift of himself every time we go to Mass and receive him in the Eucharist.

It amazes me that, at Mass, I can go through the motions of receiving Holy Communion without realizing what I'm really doing. At those times, I need to practice noticing and appreciating Jesus' Real Presence and offering my own real presence in return. There are many ways that help me practice the presence of Jesus at Mass.

Here Are Three:

1. Get to know Jesus in the Gospels. The more I know about Jesus—how he saw people's needs, healed them, and freed them from their sins—the better able I am to recognize him in the breaking of the bread at Mass.
2. Practice gratefulness. Jesus told his disciples that all good gifts around us come from Heaven above. Our job is to recognize those gifts and thank the Lord.
3. Look for Jesus during the week in the people that I meet. Jesus said when we are loving to those who are in need, we are also caring for him. Practice recognizing him in those around you who are in need.

At Mass, Jesus promises to always be truly present to us. Let us respond to that great gift by being present to him as well.

TOM MCGRATH is a writer, an editor, and a spiritual director who thinks the Eucharist is the best part of being Catholic.

Session 13 > Nourished by the Eucharist

WHERE Do I Fit In?

We are members of the Church, a community of believers who are called to serve the needs of others. We do this by loving people just as they are, not as we wish them to be. We share with all people the love we have received through Jesus so that others can grow in their relationship with him.



by Jim Balmer

I Am Not Alone

I was a smart, creative kid, but I always felt like an outsider. It seemed like other kids were comfortable in their skin, but I was not. As far back as I can remember, I felt that there was something wrong with me and that I would always be alone.

I was unhappy in high school. I got into trouble and did poorly in class. After I graduated, I made some changes. I began to work harder, but I was still alone. I had been raised without any real faith, and frankly, I was embarrassed to be thought of as religious.

Then I met a couple of Catholic priests at a parish who talked with me and shared with me their love of the Church. The priests were completely welcoming to me, which surprised me in light of my background. Despite being clean and sober for a couple of years, I was still pretty rough, and I was very wary of people. These priests didn't seem afraid of me at all.

One of them suggested that I read the four Gospels. Reluctantly, I went to a local bookstore and bought the smallest New Testament I could find. I was worried someone might see me with it.

I sat down to read the Gospels, and I was amazed. This was not a religion of judgment. Here was a Jesus I had never imagined, eating with tax collectors and hanging around with the lowlifes of society. I began to imagine that if he were here, Jesus might want to have lunch with me. With me!

JIM BALMER is the president of Dawn Farm, an organization that helps addicts and alcoholics find recovery.

Could this be real? I went back to the parish and asked for more help finding this Jesus. They helped me come to know him better, and at the Easter Vigil the following year, I joined the Church.

I have never been alone since. Thirty-four years later, my Catholic community and that accessible Jesus still excite me.

Reflect

The Life of Jesus

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short biography of Jesus that you could give to someone who knows little about him. Be sure to include the stories about Jesus that you find most welcoming.

WHERE Do I Fit In



Lent provides time for us to reflect on our lives and the choices we have made. In reflection, we realize that our actions not only have an impact on us, but they also affect our relationships with God and with others.



by David Rizzo

How Am I Healed?

In the eighth grade, my friends and I made fun of John, a boy in our class. There was something about him. For starters he had short hair and always wore a sweater vest. This was the 1970s. Long hair, concert T-shirts, and blue jeans were the unofficial uniform of my generation. John stuck out like a sore thumb. He just didn't fit in at all.

As I grew older, I began to regret the way I had treated John. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had done something wrong. I began to realize that when you treat other people badly, you also hurt yourself. Before long I knew I was in need of healing too.

Healing doesn't come easily. Usually it is a long process that takes time. We need time to reflect on our experiences and come to a deeper understanding of our responsibility to God and to others. This is the kind of thing we think about in Lent. It's a time to sit in silence and experience God's healing power.

The season of Lent allows us to step outside our ordinary lives and immerse ourselves in a sacred time and place where we can deepen our understanding of God. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. When we receive ashes, the priest says, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This always reminds me of the story in the Bible when God fashions the first human being out of clay and breathes his spirit into him. The Church teaches that our inherent dignity and worth as human beings comes from God, who has made each one of us in his image and likeness.

DAVID RIZZO is the author of *Faith, Family and Children with Special Needs*. Along with his wife, Mercedes, he codeveloped the *Adaptive First Eucharist Preparation Kit*.

It took me years to see that all people, including John, share the same divine image and have an inherent dignity and worth. Thinking about things this way helped me understand why what we did to John was so wrong and why I felt so badly about it. I wish I could run into John again so I could tell him I'm sorry. Lenten experiences like these help to heal us. They help us to feel God's love and become more caring persons as a result.

Reflect

Turn Toward God

Read Joel 2:12–14. Then, on the lines below, write a prayer to pray throughout Lent that can help you turn your mind and heart to God more fully.

Session 15 > Celebrating Lent