TWA brought me from Champaign-Urbana to St. Louis Lambert two hours early for the flight to Mexico City on Nov. 5, 1999. Fifteen minutes would have been sufficient: Only two dozen passengers wanted to make the flight in an aircraft that could have carried 150 people. The evening was clear and mild as I began a pilgrimage of Rosaries in a window seat up front. The lights of St. Louis, Little Rock, Houston, Corpus Christi, and the Valley passed below; in the distance one could locate Memphis and San Antonio. The time passed quickly and anticipation mounted for this first trip to the capital of Mexico and a long-awaited appointment with the Mother of the Americas at the Villa of Guadalupe.

Crossing the border, I followed the precedent of Bl. Josemaria in 1970, and his successor in 1988: three Hail Marys and “Reina de Mexico, ruega por nosotros.” The night continued cloudless; fewer lights on the ground made the stars more brilliant. Another hour passed before the glow of what may be the world’s largest city began to brighten the sky. As we descended, I could hardly believe the extent of the lights below; they covered virtually the entire horizon.

We had filled out entry cards on the plane, and I had been told to expect little delay at customs. Wrong. After waiting in the “extranjeros” line for 15 or 20 minutes, I was able to turn in the card and show the passport, but the official looked at them and then at me, and motioned me to a table where another, longer form needed to be filled out in duplicate. When that was finished the “extranjeros” line was five or six times longer than before, but I found a way to bypass it and return to the official. He recognized me, nodded in satisfaction, stamped the form, and pointed to the exit. People were passing their luggage through a huge X-ray machine. As in the Myth of Book X of The Republic, if some piece looked suspicious, a red light flashed, and the passenger was sent back to a table for a search. As I approached this “judgment gate,” a polite young lady asked for my original entry card (which by now I had misplaced; it was probably back on the table). She made it clear that my luggage could not even be “judged” without it. Fortunately, someone had left a blank card (in French) on a nearby post. I quickly filled it out, the young lady was pleased to accept it, and let me proceed. Apparently nothing in my two carry-ons aroused suspicion, a green light flashed, and I was free at last to enter Mexico.

Expecting it to be a penitential pilgrimage, I took all of this in stride, and so had my two young escorts who patiently awaited my arrival, holding aloft (for at least an hour) in the sea of waiting relatives a big “JOHN GUEGUEN” sign. They carried my bags what seemed a short distance, as we chatted in broken Spanish and broken English. These were two college students from the Center of Studies, and their mission was to drive me to an Opus Dei residence for “older people” on Iztaccihuatl Street (named for a nearby volcano; it took me two days to master its pronunciation--ees-tahk-SEE-what’ll). I was surprised to find out that one of these fellows had attended two summer camps at Wentworth Military Academy in my hometown of Lexington, Mo. Small world, eh?

It was right at 11 p.m. on this Saturday night (the plane had arrived at 9:15) when we pulled up to a townhouse on a narrow, dimly lighted street with high walls on both sides. We approached the door and rang the bell--again and again--and began to knock loudly. No response. (A penitential trip, remember.) I was about to ask if I could stay at the Center of Studies when the Wentworth boy (Al...
Fredo pulled out his pocket telephone (everyone here seems to have one) and I gave him the phone number. When the door was quickly opened, everyone was at home, but they were watching a movie and couldn’t hear the doorbell. Happy greetings were exchanged, and the boys withdrew. I joined the “older people”--a dozen or so professors and other professionals--for the end of the movie, more absorbed by the Spanish subtitles than the English dialogue. When it was over, I received a warm welcome home for my few days in the city, we went down to the chapel for night prayers, and I was shown to the guest room--smallish, but well-appointed, including its own bathroom with shower.

Sunday morning daylight awakened me before the knock came at 7:30. After prayer and Mass, we went to the dining room for quite a fancy breakfast--fruit cup, egg and cheese omelet, coffee-cake, and hot chocolate. Seasoned Mexico travelers had assured me that it would be safe to eat and drink everything served at table, but I brought along some small bottles of spring water to use at other times. As I struggled with the conversation, it turned out that some of the residents welcomed this opportunity to practice their English--which was much better than my Spanish. The important thing is that I WAS IN MEXICO on a cloudy, chilly day (sweater weather--both outside and inside, as the houses are unheated). After breakfast I browsed through the Sunday paper in the family room, looking for yesterday’s college football scores (they were there) and the weather map (it wasn’t). A teacher was watching some high-quality experimental videos made by his students. Then the director (headmaster of Cedros, a boys’ high school) and I discussed my plans for the coming days.

My home away from home occupies two floors. Like most houses in the City, it hides behind a 12-foot wall (without windows and surmounted by a railing). Mexicans, like their Spanish ancestors, love security and privacy--an odd contrast to their openness, friendliness, and simplicity of spirit. Their politeness I had already experienced among our Mexican students at home: their carefulness to open car and house doors for others, for example. The residents park their small cars (five of them) inside, between the wall and the facade of the house, which has an abundance of windows. On one side and in the rear there are small patios with beautifully sculptured gardens and basins, also within the walls. The women who keep the house and prepare the meals (my sisters in Opus Dei) are evidently in love with their work; everything is tastefully furnished and decorated--clean to the point of gleaming. I especially appreciated the many flower vases and plants. I know enough about Mexico, of course, to realize that there is an enormous gap between wealth and poverty. The fellows who go down every summer for the different service projects see the other side, but they are invariably impressed with the cheerfulness, humanity, and faith of those who have very little of what I was seeing, and their readiness to avail themselves of the assistance we can offer them (our boys always say that they receive far more than they give).

At 1:15, a former resident of our house in Urbana--Luis Lalieu--came to take me to his home in one of the south suburbs for the mid-day meal. This year he is completing his degree in industrial engineering at the Panamerican University. He lives with his parents and four brothers and sisters, along with a big, friendly dog, in a beautiful home with an incredible tropical garden. The appetizer and meal were outstanding; his mother was assisted by a young maid (which is common in Mexican homes) and the older daughter. The lively conversation was all in English; my reception could not have been more gracious. Photos were viewed and taken, and at 4 Luis and I headed for an Opus Dei residence about 20 miles away on the north side of the city--Lindavista. There lives Father Peter de la Garza, whom I had not seen since the early days of Windmoor, which together we helped to launch. I enjoyed the drive through the heart of the city, and we prayed the first part of the Rosary on the way. It was a joyful reunion, and the 38 years since our last visit seemed to melt away in a few minutes. Father Peter was eager for news of all the “old-timers” he had known up north in the early days. Photos were taken,
and when a young couple came to see him for marriage preparation at 5, Luis and I continued our pilgrimage at my long-awaited destination, the Villa of Guadalupe, just a few minutes away.

As it would still be light for another hour, down here at the 19th parallel, we first crossed the plaza, which was crowded with families, vendors, and musicians, and climbed the hill of Tepeyac (where Our Mother’s visits with Bl. Juan Diego took place in December, 1531, and she gave him the roses and her self-portrait on the inside of his cloak). Now the hill is a terraced rose garden (still in full bloom) with an ancient chapel on top. In the distance a splendid panorama of the City unfolds, as days are clear here this time of year. Coming down we passed the two earlier basilicas (now closed) and a large statue of John Paul II which commemorates his visit in 1978.

Segunda Parte: La Romeria

At long last, after all the years I have kept her waiting, the time came; we approached the new basilica, arena-like and circular very plain outside and inside. Our Mother’s brightly illuminated picture can already be seen through the glass walls as one approaches across the plaza. Inside, a thousand people were attending the 5 o’clock Mass, and another would follow at 6, with a mariachi procession in between. The atmosphere was respectful solemnity mingled with lively touches of the local culture. Presumably this is how it has been for centuries. Just being there, I felt a joyful gratitude that she is always so well accompanied, along with a reassuring confidence that her recourse is constantly sought. It was not an emotionally over-powering experience, as some might expect, at least not for me. Maybe this is because I have been accompanying her and invoking her for decades, constantly seeing reproductions of this famous picture. But here, high up on the rear wall, was the original. It seemed as if I had been there many times before, presenting my petitions and offering thanks.

I had come on behalf of many other people, too, taking care of an obligation of love, of service. My conversation with Mary began gradually and continued for an hour; besides the mental petitions, I was carrying a number of written ones, including a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving which one friend had composed. All of these were deposited in a box beneath the image simply marked “Sus Milagros.” The first and last stop was a large Eucharistic chapel off to one side; the golden Tabernacle was enormous. Then Luis and I passed beneath the image—which is as close as one can get—along with many pilgrims not attending the Mass, which we also did before leaving. The prayer of Bl. Josemaria, when he came here in May and June, 1970, came to mind: “Aquí estoy, porque !tu puedes!; porque !tu ames!...Que me veas, que me mires....No dejes de escucharnos pronto: !corre prisa! [Here I am because you can, because you love! You see me; you look upon me. Don’t fail to hear us, and soon: Come quickly!]” He had come with very heavy burdens, and feeling the burdens of the world and the Church in those painful years of rebellion following the Council, he spoke to her with childlike familiarity and confidence. His successor came in 1988 to thank Mary for having heard those prayers, and added his own: “Madre nuestra: ayudanos, bendicenos, protegenos [Mother of ours, help us, bless us, protect us!]” These pleas I now made my own--and yours.

Luis and I began to pray the main Rosary of the day (the Glorious Mysteries); there seemed to be a low murmur all around us as the people followed the Mass; above it rose the amplified voices of the celebrant and the cantor. The people--of all ages and sizes, but mostly with the dark features and short stature of the majority of the Mexican population--were plainly and warmly dressed. There were many babies and small children. After the Rosary we made the afternoon prayer, not wanting to leave this holy place. When it came time to make our farewell, we obtained some small copies of the picture to bring back in remembrance. In the car again, we completed the pilgrimage on the way out to the far northwest suburbs to visit the family of another former resident of Lincoln Green. This was another
exquisite split-level home with a large outside garden. The homes I visited here use a lot of light woods and ornately patterned tiles, all highly polished. Each room was bright and airy, with live plants everywhere. They all seemed like candidates for the pages of Better Homes and Gardens. I delivered a package from their son (Pablo) and we had some refreshments before returning to my residence 45 minutes away to the southeast, and once again through the central city. It was nearly 9 when we arrived; everyone was at table this time, so we had to repeat yesterday’s ritual of repeated rings and finally a phone call from the car. I was in time to have some chocolate birthday cake (it was the 77th birthday of the priest of the house) at the conclusion of supper. Luis returned home to make last minute preparations for an exam the next day. He had given me 8 hours of his study time.

After the Visit to the Blessed Sacrament, I was asked to talk in the get-together about life at Lincoln Green and the Univ. of Illinois. I brought along some photos to illustrate. They found it easier to listen to me in English than in broken Spanish, and I was happy to oblige. I also brought along as a gift from Illinois a picture book of typical scenes on the prairie. At 9:30 we went to the chapel to finish the day. Even after such an eventful day, I felt light and fresh (maybe because of the 7,000-foot elevation). But some “intestinal symptoms” that not all was right with me had begun ever so gently on the ride home. These increased during the get-together and became quite a rumble after I reached my room. Let’s just say that I was glad to have a bathroom there. About midnight I was able to get to sleep, hoping this is all there would be to the gastrointestinal part of my entrance to Mexico (which it was; and it wasn’t too penitential either!).

A sound sleep preceded Monday morning prayer and Mass; by coincidence, it was the 64th anniversary of the day when a student named Pedro Casciaro had asked Bl. Josemaria to be admitted to Opus Dei. Fourteen years later--by then a priest--it was who led the opening of the Work in Mexico. After another “feast-day” breakfast (watermelon bits, a platter of tamales, coffee and pastries), I spent a while reading in the chapel until time to walk over to the University campus in the company of a professor of science and humanities. The streets and sidewalks were full to overflowing with traffic; it was still cloudy and chilly.

After 20 minutes we entered a quiet enclave, an 18th-century hacienda whose 20 or so colonial style buildings are connected with passage ways and interspersed with gardens and fountains. Now they house the classrooms, libraries, labs, and offices of Universidad Panamericana, an apostolic initiative of Opus Dei which began with a first-rate business school back in the 1960s. About 3500 professors and students work there; those I saw were surprisingly well dressed and groomed--especially the women. In the four hours I spent walking around the campus, I was favorably impressed by their evident dedication to make this a school of high quality. Fairly soon the clouds dissipated and gave way to a bright blue sky; the temperature rose quickly. I could hear Latin American music in the distance. Now I was REALLY IN MEXICO. One reason I felt at home on the campus was that several people recognized me, and my walking pilgrimage was pleasantly interrupted by brief conversations and exchanges of addresses. Luis’ brother, Mauricio, who is hoping to spend next year with us in Urbana, was pleased to spend an hour showing me around. The director of study-abroad programs (they have 35 students from the U. of Illinois this year) had been in our house in 1996 when she came with two others to work out the exchange.

In the campus chapel, at the outdoor shrine of Our Lady, and before the ancient patroness of the hacienda, I prayed the three parts of the Rosary--mainly for the women’s apostolate to come quickly to downstate Illinois, and for the university Opus Dei is to have some day in the United States. At 2 I went to the college of law to get a ride home with the dean (who was just back from a meeting in Canada). Another “feast-day meal” awaited us, and the table was graced with a center-piece of fresh flow-
ers. This was followed by coffee in the living room and half an hour of conversation. Everyone was wearing business suits. I was surprised to find no smokers in the house, and had seen few students smoking on the campus. Like the newspapers and table conversation, the chief topic was the presidential primary elections which had begun the previous day.

During the rest of the afternoon I relaxed at home and began writing this account. In Mexico “afternoon” (tarde) runs from 3:30 until 8:30, during which time most people are back at their ordinary work. On this particular afternoon, about 40 members of Opus Dei who live in their own homes with their families were in the meeting rooms adjoining the chapel for theology classes—a program which runs for two years along with all their regular duties at home and at work. (We don’t have enough people yet to be able to start this program in the U.S.—but we will, some day.)

Tercera Parte: La Reunión

The principal reason for the trip (and what got it paid for) was the annual meeting of the board of directors of an educational trust to which I was appointed about a dozen years ago. (Last year the meeting was in Pamplona, Spain, at the University of Navarre.) We met between 1 and 2 p.m. on Tuesday at the first conference center of Opus Dei in Mexico—Montefalco—which is on a ranch in a warm and sunny valley reached by a winding 2-hour drive south of the City. The meeting was preceded by Mass, shortly after we arrived in the large 18th-century church which was the heart of the original hacienda—a sugar plantation in colonial times. (There is still a refinery nearby.) The other buildings were destroyed in the revolutionary uprising that preceded Mexican independence in the early 19th century, and when we acquired the ranch in the 1950s, it was a heap of ruins. (Speaking of the revolution, principal place names in the capital keep it in fresh memory: Resurgentes; Revolucion; Independencia; Reforma.)

After the meeting we were given a tour of the excellently restored and furnished buildings, which include schools for the children of surrounding farm families, athletic fields, a training center for agricultural workers, a home economics center, and the usual conference and retreat facilities large enough to accommodate 80 guests. Because of the tropical climate, everything is open and spacious. The day we were there the sky was deep blue and it felt like the low 80s. I was especially impressed to see the rooms Bl. Josemaría had occupied when he visited in 1970. Since our trust funds the girls’ elementary and high school, that was the main part of our tour. The students were all in uniform (dark plaid skirts; white blouses). In English class, about 40 of them were learning proper pronunciation; I couldn’t resist telling the teacher to encourage them to think about coming north! She replied, in so many words, “They don’t need any encouragement.”

After the tour, we entered one of the garden courts where an appetizer was waiting (Mexican beer and mini tacos with guacamole). Then the staff served us a fancy dinner inside; the dishes were nothing I could recognize (and I didn’t ask); they were so artistically presented. The Rioja wine was exquisite (a 1991 private reserve). There were ten of us at table: our elderly patron and his wife (who live in a suburb of the City), the widow of the original president of the trust, the current president, and his wife (all from Madrid, its headquarters). These five arrived by helicopter. The five others were two Mexicans, a Spaniard, a German—all well known from previous meetings—and myself. One of the Mexicans, an early member of the Work here, was ordained to the priesthood several years ago; it was he who celebrated our Mass (for the deceased members of the board) and had picked me up for the ride out to the country. On the way, we visited the oldest colonial church in the metro area (mid-16th century)—San Jacinto—which stands at the center of a quaint colonial village.
The meeting itself consisted of a report of the financial transactions of the year, which we all signed in accord with the by-laws. I tried to stay alert and interested, but kept wondering (as I do every year) why they wanted a philosopher on board. I had nothing whatever to contribute except my presence and signature. After dinner and a family-style get-together outside once more, we all departed for the City--each carrying a box of cookies which the students had made for us. It was dusk as the drive back up into the mountains and the City ended. The tallest one, the famous volcano Popocatepetl, was shrouded in clouds. Both out and back, the countryside was interesting; neither there nor driving through the City did I see any signs of poverty. I was dropped at the residence to rest awhile before supper (for the third time, the ritual of unanswered doorbell and cell phone was repeated). This time I was very tired and had a hard time staying awake in the get-together after the meal. Once in bed, the night sounds of the neighborhood, barking dogs and all, faded away.

Wednesday was the last day in Mexico City; it was sunny and warm, and there were plenty of touristy places I would have gone out to see in my younger life. But I opted to stay quietly at home to do some research in their fine collection of materials on the history of Opus Dei. I was especially eager to reread the account of Bl. Josemaria’s pilgrimage to Mexico in 1970, which I first read shortly after the event. The more I got into this (with the usual mid-day break between 2:30 and 3:30 for dinner and get-together), the more I began to appreciate the deeper dimension of my own pilgrimage; I realized better why our Founder had wanted his American sons and daughters to visit Mexico and learn from its people how to have “heart.” In meetings he had with some Americans who had come to Mexico to see him in 1970, he said: “I have learned from the Mexicans piety, charity, love, a great faith, and detachment....You Americans live in a cold environment and you work too much; you must create a family spirit through the warmth of your affection....Don’t let you heart grow cold!...That is the testament that I want you to bring to the United States: that you have heart!”

I spent most of that last evening in the chapel, thanking the Lord and His Mother, and trying to fix some impressions in my head and in my heart--something to take home and to keep always fresh. Part of that time I was joined by 20 men who were there to make an evening of recollection, including the father of Luis. After packing and going to bed, the night passed with patches of sleep interspersed with lucid moments, during which the makings of a reflective poem drifted through my mind as the product of those four days of rich experiences. The poem (in the style of the French writer of the early 20th century, Charles Peguy) is titled “Reorientation.” It was put together, along with the last pages of this account, on the return flight, Thursday, the 11th.

I had to be up at 5:45--before the rest--and waiting at the outer door for Luis to pick me up as the morning light was beginning to find its way through a cloud cover. Traffic was no problem and we had plenty of time to get me to the boarding gate. Again, only about 20 people were waiting. The 3-hour flight to St. Louis was mostly clear, and afforded great views of the mouth of the Rio Grande and South Padre, the city of Houston and then Shreveport, La. directly below. At Lambert, the customs agents made no fuss over us, and there was no problem catching the little commuter plane back to Champaign--a most “un-penitential” re-entry for the work that now lies ahead.

!Hasta la vista!
December 1999

BLESSINGS TO YOU ON THIS JUBILEE CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR

When this reaches your house, the chances are that I'll be in deep silence and recollection at a retreat house in snow-covered northern Indiana. For many years I used to get my grades in and head for Shellbourne. There are no more grades to turn in, but I still need that end of the year pause; this year, end of a century and end of a millennium. I've been urging all the people I know to make a retreat at this momentous juncture in all our lives, so I'm just practicing what I preach. Every one of you will be foremost in my thoughts these days.

A few months from now the occasion will come for my “annual letter”—probably some kind of follow-up on last year’s, since it produced a large response. In the meantime, a few words to answer the questions you would be asking me if we were face to face.

The glow has not gone off of my new life of “retirement” surrounded by numerous young lives on a university campus. Probably I am “slowing down” a bit, but every day, every hour is filled with productive activities of one kind or another, mostly having to do with our large student residence and continuing professional work in the form of daily dispatches and queries from colleagues, former students, and family. This fall I lectured twice on natural law at Valparaiso Univ. Law School, spoke to the participants in two conferences (Notre Dame and Steubenville) and to a faculty-student group here at the Univ. of Illinois, and updated a long paper on the modern escape from political responsibility. It will be part of a book due out next year. If you're interested in any of this, you can find it on http://lilt.ilstu.edu/jguesgu/.

But “how are you doing?” I still hear you asking. Soaring spiritually on the wings of the Jubilee (especially after that pilgrimage to Rome in September); declining physically (especially arthritic discomfort) and getting ready for further eye work in January. Hearing loss still uncorrected. Nothing alarming showed up at my annual check-up; blood pressure well under control (140/80); sleep on and off at night, but never exhausted in the daytime. Exercise is mostly walking around the block.

General disposition: the usual cheerful serenity and considerable tolerance for the ways of the young people I live with. They seem to appreciate having a mentor around, and my time is always flexible and at their disposition. I lead a Sunday afternoon reading circle—Dostoevsky and Flannery O’Connor (sherry is served) and a Saturday morning review of Christian doctrine. I try to ignore the madness of our declining culture and the increasing insanity of the media and the people they love to dote on. There is so much more to life, and I prefer to LIVE (as Mother would say) than pay too much attention to the way so many folks seem to be bent on destroying their lives. (I DO pray for them, of course.)
And for you and yours, as well. Please DO stay healthy and sane and as holy as you can. Really, nothing else matters! Let’s have ourselves a great new millennium by living as well as we can each of the 365,250 days of it—or as many of them as still remain to us. OK? (If you are still interesting in counting, that’s 8,766,000 hours.)

Thanks for your prayers, cards, and family letters. I’ll read them all on Christmas Day, spent here in Urbana with seven others in the house, and the Baby Jesus (in the flesh) in our Tabernacle. (I’ll speak to him for you.) Last night we had our festive gathering for the men who attend our monthly evening of recollection, and tonight is our Christmas meditation and party for the students (we expect between 25 and 30). Our kitchen staff is great on occasions like this!

We’ll be talking…or conversing via johngueguen@home.com.
4 July 2000

THE ANNUAL LETTER FOR THE YEAR MM:

“An Attempt at Meaning”

One’s perspective begins to change with the realization that more years have passed into the record than are still on the way. For me that line was crossed some time ago, but there is a necessary lag until consciousness catches up with chronology. A major part of the reason for this lag is that we have to see death take out of our midst enough of the persons we expected always to “be there” to make us start noticing that something truly significant is happening to us.

Philosophers know that meaning is far more important—and certainly more interesting—than the mere passing of time. Since it is no longer presumptuous (given the age of this philosopher) for me to reflect on meaning with some authority, here are some thoughts on the subject—along with the ardent hope that you will be moved to respond!

What does it all mean?

For a starter, it has become clearer and clearer (especially after our amazing family reunion last week) that people are vastly more meaningful than things. (I see you nodding in agreement, but what does this mean?) By people I mean real, actual, live, individualized, personalized human beings—the very ones we live, work, and worship with side by side, whom we are always trying to understand and respect, but so often misunderstand and mistreat even without intending to.

And by things I mean (along with the obvious furniture of our lives) every kind of theory and abstraction about people—such as “the people,” or “people say.” Just about everything folks do and say these days concerns nothing more interesting than “things.” Do you need some examples? Here are a few, to show you what I mean: politics, religion, sports, the weather, women, the family, men, money, the market, the economy, television, “news,” the government, law, the church, art, music….All of those things (as things) are absolutely meaningless abstractions. They aren’t worth spending any time on…unless it’s just for amusement. What? you may say. I say that most of the conversation these days, is just empty chatter.

Dare we ask why?

Maybe it’s because we’ve gotten so frightened of real life that we dodge it by hiding behind things. That’s safer; nothing much to lose—but also nothing much to gain. Why would we be afraid of what is inherently more interesting and holds the most meaning?

It could be due to a huge sense of inadequacy. One needs a lot of self-respect and self-confidence in order to run the risk of making contact with the real world, with real human beings. They might object, we think; they might resent invasion of their “privacy.”

Or it could be due to exhaustion brought on by the futile running around, the chasing back and forth that we persuade ourselves is really what is necessary. How else can we keep up with our “duties,” our “responsibilities”?
I challenge you to test yourself by dropping out of that conventional “life” just to see what would happen if you really engaged another person face to face, eye to eye,…mind to mind, soul to soul. It could even be a delivery person at the door, even a “perfect stranger” (are there such people?). Maybe I should say especially a perfect stranger, somebody who just happens to come into range. Just a few minutes will be enough to burst the bubble of artificiality and evasion. You’ll have the element of surprise on your side. What a refreshing treat this will be for both of you! A light will come on to illuminate the darkness. A fresh breeze will blow. And you’ll be on your way to finding the hidden meaning.

When you have built up a bit of confidence, extend the time period (when circumstances permit) and try it more often. This can become a fascinating “game”—except that it’s not a game, it’s real life (the bubble is really the game—a charade). Maybe you are one of my kind who discovered this trick long ago (Socratic teaching did it), but bear with me; we all have more to learn.

Here’s a second area in which to find the meaning (it’s another lesson that grows more convincing the further I get into the second half): Contemplating is much more worth doing than “doing.” What do I mean by “contemplating”? Exactly what it says: CON-TEM-PLARE—getting “with it” on entering a temple; that is, being quiet and going deeper. This helps to notice what lies beyond what merely meets the eye or the ear (which gets less and less as the faculties blur!). It makes us direct our gaze upward and inward—where the meaning is.

But this takes “effort,” you say. It does if you’re not used to it—but really far less effort than “going places and doing things”—getting “with it” in a shopping mall, for instance (CON-SU-MARE). What is so hard about sitting still and doing nothing? (I admit that it could take concentrated effort if you’re usually in constant motion.) But really, all it comes down to is not doing something that gets in the way of thinking, something that does nothing but distract us from reflecting on what we’re doing.

The real question is: If we are thinking beings, by nature, why do we let that happen to us? Again, many possible reasons come to mind, but I’ll bet that the root cause is again, fear—fear of what a moment of reflection might do to some pet project or plan. If I think for a moment and consider carefully what I’m about to do, I might suspect that doing it will be rather silly or futile or useless—a plain waste of time. Well, good! Think even further! You’re taking some steps toward finding the meaning. You will be amazed (unless you’ve already discovered this trick) at how contemplation purifies, simplifies, cleanses us of griminess.

To begin this real-life “game,” start off tomorrow (or why not this very evening) with five minutes of contemplation. Just sit still, close your eyes, talk to your Guardian Angel (a great accomplice) and see what comes to mind. I already know what will happen, you say. It will be something I’m always worrying about. Well, if that’s what comes to mind, think a bit further about that, and then simply banish it for the moment. Let Somebody else take care of it! Five minutes of this can save you 50 minutes (even 5 hours) of useless spinning. “See how the lilies grow? They neither toil nor spin…” Just be a lily for a moment. Your life will fill with a new fragrance. (Or be a rose if you can’t do without a thorn or two.)

After this, you’ll be ready to leap into all kinds of “forbidden” territories, and the barriers to meaning will fall one by one. I mean: Contemplate a person! This will change you so much for the better that for a moment you won’t be able to recognize your old self. No matter. Let it go! New meaning, new life. Imagine: contemplating the truth in the company of people. What more could anyone want out of life? (I mean really want).
It might be easier as a starter, however, to observe what happens when contemplation is absent. The “pro-life” movement comes to mind, as one instance of this. It hasn’t even begun to achieve its goal—and can’t achieve it—because most “pro-lifers” (and there are some elegant exceptions) are activists who subscribe, without even thinking about it, to the very same philosophical and cultural errors that have molded the opposition: a pragmatic individualism, a utilitarian instrumentalism which assumes that all problems have to be result-oriented, that people are not linked by a permanent common nature, but by artificial contracts whose terms are constantly changing, that successfully dealing with adversaries is all a matter of power, influence, money.

It just takes some quiet (and educated) reflection—contemplation—to see that it is futile to deal with external symptoms (pornography, abortion, contraception) when the underlying mentality goes unchallenged. If all pro-lifers stopped to reflect about this, they could discover that the only way to replace the prevailing culture of death with a culture of life is to change people—the minds of people—as to what is ultimately true. That is, to achieve meaning.

You can think of other instances yourself. This exercise can’t go on forever. It’s time for me to start waiting for your reply. You can tap it out in e-mail language, if you like [gueguen@net66.com]—provided that it’s a contemplative tapping (some thought behind it).

I suppose you need to know something about me before I disappear for another year. These past months of the Jubilee Year at Lincoln Green have been so rich, so full of joyful and painful experiences with people, almost all of them a third my age, and speaking an English dialect that gets harder and harder to comprehend. I have the great advantage of viewing them objectively from an older and slower planet, trying to bridge the intervening space with a knowing or an inquisitive smile that usually gets a tentative response. That’s a start, anyway. You, too, are always in my thoughts (otherwise you wouldn’t still be on my list).

The outer fringe (what people call “the world,” but really is a fraud) dims into more and more meaningless nonsense (a context that makes the real world all the more full of meaning). That real world continues to be a university campus where all kinds of people are spending a little time together on their way into life. How exciting! I’m spending more and more time in the library-archive, serving as a consultant to many colleagues, new and old, working at a number of small writing projects, and preparing to put together an anthology of short pieces. Have you taken a look lately at what’s listed on my I.S.U. home page?—http://lilt.ilstu.edu/guegu

Occasionally I do wander off the lawn to attend a conference (in Chicago, Ann Arbor, Steubenville) or teach a summer course (in Florida, Massachusetts, and next month in Indiana) or to visit family, in parts or all together (New England, Kansas City). The richest trip of the year was to Mexico City for a meeting (an excuse to spend a couple of hours with the Mother of the Americas at Guadalupe). Coming up in early September is the Jubilee of Professors in the Capital of the World and of History, one of the centers of all meaning in our universe, to visit the wisest one of all who presides there in his withering body. Really, from Rome you can see forever, and I’ll be looking at you from there.

We’ll be in touch.

As always,
JUBILEE PILGRIMAGE TO ROME
1-11 September 2000

Some Preliminaries:

1. The main purpose of this trip is prayer and penance, in the spirit of the Pilgrimage as described by the Pope. It means that we’ll try to gain the Jubilee Indulgence each day by visiting one of the major basilicas or catacombs, passing through the holy doors, saying the Creed, praying for the Pope, making visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and receiving Communion at Mass. It should also be possible to pray the Rosary each day, maybe on our walks, or in some quiet cloister. The second purpose of the trip is “to see Peter” and to hear him in the person of his successor. The third purpose is to see as many of the hallowed places as we can. (I also have a fourth purpose: to attend the Jubilee of Professors, a university congress.)

2. There are, of course, thousands of such places (churches, masterpieces of painting and sculpture, museums, palaces, tombs, monuments), so we have to make a selection, which I will try to do below, in outlining each day (tentatively). The whole City is a museum, so for the most part we just have to look around wherever we happen to be, and try to take it all in.

3. You will feel right at home in Rome, even if it is a foreign city. Everybody in the world will be there, in representative samples, and all will have the same feeling of “home.” You’ll hear every language spoken all around you. The Romans somehow sense this, too. As a result, if you get separated and really don’t know where you are, go up to anyone and use plenty of sign language. You’ll get back on course in a hurry; somebody may even take you where you want to be. Naturally, Italians are honored when you try to speak their language, even badly. You can make up your own list of short phrases frequently used, like “grazie” and “prego” [thank you; you’re welcome]; “buon giorno,” “buona sera” [good morning, good evening]; “per favore” [please]; “scusi” [excuse me]; “Cos’è questo?” [What’s this?]; “Dov’è il gabinetto?” [Where’s the restroom?]. Also, you can be anywhere, anytime and feel safe. But always and everywhere be extra alert for the ubiquitous pick-pockets. Some are even “disguised” as Gypsy children (who need to be brushed aside with a smile and a prayer, but quite firmly).

3. Besides being everybody’s home town, Rome is also the stomping grounds of myriads of famous folk—saints and sinners—over the ages. We want to be especially mindful of the saints, some of whose homes and tombs we’ll be visiting to beg their intercession for ourselves and families.
4. About money: The dollar is currently strong, and is worth about 2,000 lire. Even so, it might cost 4,000 for an ice cream cone (gellato), but it’s worth every lick. We want to carry around with us only what we think we might need on a given day (plus a well-guarded credit card, for any larger purchases, including meals). I’ve never used traveler’s checks because they are a nuisance to redeem. It’s quite easy to exchange dollars for lire, as necessary in the course of the week.

5. The Romans eat a skimpy breakfast (colazione), and follow it with a noon-hour snack (caffe); the main meal (pranzo) is between 2 and 4, with supper (cena) as late as 8 or 9. This means that you will often find things closed between 1:30 and 4:30. The normal hours for being out and about are 9:30 to 1:30 and 4:30 to 8:30. Thus we are dining someplace cool (or out in the open, if it’s nice) during the warmest part of the day. That’s also the best time to make a “pit stop” in a clean restroom. We will also see many portable toilets all over, set up especially for the big crowds this year.

6. I’m bringing some selected materials along for us to use the day we get there for orientation. Some easy English-to-Italian sheets; a couple of brief articles (“What Is Rome?” “Learning from Rome”); brief guides to St. Peter’s and traditional prayers that are said there; special Jubilee inserts I’ve clipped from the magazine, “Inside the Vatican;” brief guides to each of the principal churches and catacombs, and a guide book to Assisi, for the day trip there. I’m also bringing some outline maps for us to use in working out morning and afternoon excursions to different parts of the city.

A Tentative Itinerary:

1. Saturday (sabato), Sept. 2 (Leah’s birthday). Assuming that we all find each other in the Aeroporto di Roma by 11, we’ll head for noon Mass at the tomb of Bl. Josemaria in the Central House of Opus Dei. One of my former students, Father Tom Bohlin, will be waiting for us, and after Mass will show us some of the principal things to see there (including the image of Our Lady of Fair Love, on this First Saturday of the month). Then we’ll check in at Domus Aurelia and find a nice restaurant in the neighborhood. By then (if not before) we’ll be noticing that we lost a night of sleep, and may want to rest in the afternoon. For those who have the stamina (Loretta and I?), it will be tempting to hop on the 49 bus and ride down to St. Peter’s for our first visit.
2. Sunday (domenica), Sept. 3 (Pope St. Gregory the Great). The morning is reserved for a gigantic Mass in St. Peter’s Square (it begins at 10, but anyone who wants to attend has to be there at 9) for the Beatification of Pope Pius IX and Pope John XXIII. It will be standing room only for about 3 hours, whoever is up to it. At the conclusion, the Pope will lead the Angelus and give a brief address. Then Communion is distributed at many altars inside the Basilica, which we can visit (especially the tomb of today’s saint) until dinner time (2:30). There are many nearby alternate locations for Mass, for those who prefer not to get into such a huge throng of people. After dinner we could get in line to make the 3-hour tour of the Vatican Museum, which features the Sistine Chapel. There are many places to sit down and rest along the way. Time permitting, we can also visit the Castel Sant’Angelo before supper.

3. Monday (lunedì), Sept. 4 (Labor Day at home; in Europe it is May 1). Since we may still be recovering from jet lag, I planned a fairly low-energy day. In the morning I need to check in at the congress office next to St. Peter’s square and pick up our badges and whatever else they give us. Then I thought we could head for one of the other major basilicas—probably St. Mary Major. We could begin at Piazza del Popolo (visit Santa Maria del Popolo), walk over to the Spanish Steps, and then on to the Trevi Fountain. In the vicinity of St. Mary Major there are a couple of ancient churches, one of which has relics of the Passion of Our Lord. We’ll have dinner in one of the fine restaurants in that neighborhood after attending Mass and seeing the main things in St. Mary Major (St. Luke’s portrait of Mary; fragments of the Crib of Bethlehem). After our mid-day rest, we’ll start back to Domus, passing through the Roman Forum area, with stops at the Colosseum, church of SS. Cosmas and Damian, and the Mammerine Prison (where St. Peter was held). We’ll wind up in the Piazza Venezia at the other side of the Forum and visit the church of S. Marco (where the 2nd Gospel was written). There is also a special exhibit of items of interest to women—costumes of previous jubilees—there in Venezia. Depending on how our time is running, there are two other famous churches nearby: St. Peter’s Chains (Michaelangelo’s “Moses”) and Holy Apostles (tombs of SS. Philip and James). Then supper and home. By the way, much of this is hopping on and off buses, which are very cheap, so as not to walk too much. [I may have a 7:30 p.m. meeting at the house I’ll be staying at.]

4. Tuesday (martedì), Sept. 5 (Little Harry’s 45th anniv. and Mother Teresa’s 3rd; Mark Ramsey’s birthday). Jerry arrives this morning and will go to Domus Aurelia to check in; we’ll leave a message about our whereabouts. Tentatively: We’ll start off in Trastevere, a very picturesque neighborhood near St. Peter’s. There we’ll find within a few blocks of each other the homes of St. Francis, St. Benedict, and St.
Cecelia. We can catch the first Mass we happen upon. About noon, a snack, and a short walk across the Tiber to the Opus Dei pontifical university next to Piazza Navona (it’s called Santa Croce—Holy Cross). In the immediate neighborhood we’ll find St. Monica’s tomb in the Church of St. Augustine; the Pantheon (St. Mary of the Martyrs); the home of St. Catherine of Siena, and her church (St. Mary above Minerva). The Piazza Navona is one of the most interesting of all public areas in Rome, with excellent restaurants. After dinner, we’ll seek out a car rental agency, for an afternoon trip to the famous Benedictine shrine of Subi-aco, which is about an hour east of the City in the hills. [I may stay behind to prepare for the Congress; we’ll see.] Back home about 9.

5. Wednesday (mercoledi), Sept. 6. St. Peter’s in the morning—Mass and a careful scrutiny of the interior, including Michaelangelo’s Pieta, after which Loretta and Jerry may want to climb to the top of the Dome; followed by the weekly Papal audience. There will be about 50,000 in the square for that (only an hour). After the audience, we may want to check out the Vatican Press Bookstore, or explore some of the environs. After dinner, a bus to St. John Lateran, our 3rd Jubilee basilica. My congress begins at 4 in the auditorium of the adjoining Lateran University; you might like to attend the informal reception between 5:30 and 6:30. Among the important things to see in and around San Giovanni in Laterano are the Baptistry; the Holy Staircase (Scala Santa); the relics of the True Cross and Passion in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme; the ancient church of St. Clement (maintained by Irish Dominicans whose humor is proverbial). Supper thereabouts, and then home.

6. Thursday (giovedì), Sept. 7. This is the day for a visit to the Franciscan shrines in Assisi. Easy: Bus to the train station (Termini) for the 2-hour ride through the countryside. (Unless you feel confident of driving by then and want to keep the rental car another day.) Spend the afternoon visiting the holy places there, including Mass and Rosary in the Portiuncula—Our Lady of the Angels—and train (or car) back in the evening. We could ask our hosts, the good nuns, to check train times and details for us a couple of days in advance. I’ll stay behind to attend my Congress all day, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. I will have found a few colleagues to hang around with and have meals with. There is a rumor that he will actually present a paper at the morning or afternoon session. Anyway, I’ll see you back at Domus upon your return from Assisi.

7. Friday (venerdì), Sept. 8 (Birthday of Our Lady). I’ll probably skip the closing session of the Congress at 9:30 a.m. at the Univ. of St. Thomas (Angelicum, where Fr. Basil Cole sometimes teaches) so as to be on time for our 10:30 appointment to tour the ancient cemetery (Scavi) which lies beneath the main altar of St. Peter’s. After
that, Mass upstairs, and then a religious articles store nearby where we can order a Papal Blessing for Joyce and Joe’s 40th anniv. (and any other anniversaries), and pick up any desired articles. After dinner, we can spend the afternoon exploring one of the Catacombs—whichever you select. The top three are Priscilla, Callistus, and Sebastian. I find them all equally interesting. This may require a cab ride, since they are out a ways. We’ll want to get back to St. Peter’s by 5 p.m. to take our seats in the Papal audience hall for a special Jubilee concert (we’ll have tickets). Most likely the Pope will be there with us, as it is the official opening of the Jubilee of Professors. When it’s over we’ll have supper and return home.

8. Saturday (sabato), Sept. 9. We’ll have to get up earlier than usual in order to be on time for our special audience with the Holy Father (must be in our seats by 9). I expect it will be inside, probably in the audience hall. It is just for the professors and their guests. Afterwards, Mass and dinner in the neighborhood (or we may want to venture into an adjoining neighborhood that we really liked, earlier in the week). Jerry will have to leave us for his flight to Copenhagen. I thought this afternoon would be perfect for our visit to the fourth Jubilee basilica, St. Paul outside the walls (a subway ride). I may let you do that without me, pending an invitation to our Central House for a reception for the families and friends of the 30-some Opus Dei men who are to be ordained to the priesthood on Sunday; most likely, I’ll know one or two of them, although we have no Americans this time. It will also be my best chance to visit with our Prelate Bishop, whom Mary and Loretta met in St. Louis at the visit of his predecessor, Don Alvaro. If this does materialize and anyone wants to join me, you’ll be welcome. The Jubilee event of the afternoon or evening is called a Penitential Celebration. I won’t know what or where that is, until we get the official program at the beginning of the week. You may or may not want to attend it. (Most likely we’ll have had our share of penance by then.)

9. Sunday (domenica), Sept. 10 (Anniv. of the Pope’s arrival in the U.S., Miami, 1987). Another early riser to get to St. Peter’s by 9 for the large Mass; we jubilarians are supposed to have seats up front for the 3-hour event, which closes with the Angelus. I’m leaving the afternoon unscheduled in case there is anything we didn’t get to do in the City or there is someplace we want to return to. It might also be a good time for a stroll through Villa Borghese, and a magnificent view of the City from there. Once again, I may be involved in our ordination activities and you may want to return with me to Villa Tevere (Opus Dei hq., which is right behind Borghese) for a last visit to Bl. Josemaria. Or you may just want to rest and “do nothing” in preparation for the trip home. Also, we may be out of money!
10. Monday (lunedì), Sept. 11 (Dan’s birthday). This will be the longest day of your life. In exchange for giving up a night on the way over, we get two “days” going back. Depending on flight times, there may need to be an early cab and a later cab. My flight is at 1:30 p.m., meaning I won’t need to be at the airport until noon, allowing time for one last visit to St. Peter’s. And so, to Domus Aurelia: “Arrivederci, e stato per me un vero piacere”—Goodbye; I had a wonderful time!

**In Conclusion:** I think I’ve said quite enough for now. We’ll be subjecting the plan to review all through the week, and it will probably turn out to be different in actuality. (Last week when we were discussing what to bring, I forgot to suggest bringing a washcloth—an unknown item in Mediterranean countries.)
December 31, 2000 / January 1, 2001 – What a night, this one! Few people in history have been able to experience the transition from one millennium to the next. We are saying “goodbye” to a century of awesome tragedies and achievements as we look forward to a century which will leave the world even more unrecognizable by us, the new “old timers”—for the better, we can only hope and pray.

What better way to begin than to ask for us all the courage we shall need. Reflecting on the messages you sent me in the past few weeks, there is already among you an abundance of optimism and good cheer which now needs to be supported by a solid foundation of fortitude.

Recently, while on retreat at Shellbourne, I came across an old memo which seems appropriate in this context: “Everything is going from bad to worse, you say. Well, even if that’s true, if you accept it with serene patience, says the Lord, you will go from good to better—and that’s all that matters to you. Let Me take care of everything else (which I am quite capable of doing, don’t you think?). What I want is for you to get better, and that is the main thing, says the Lord.”

That was written in the literary style of my favorite French writer, Charles Péguy, who said that courage is “essentially made of calm and clarity.” I have taken the following piece of clarity from the new year greeting he sent his friends a century ago (you must supply the calm):

Following the custom of our fathers, let us exchange “la bonne année.” Friends, let us exchange a “bonne année et bonne santé” at the beginning of this year of fortune..., whether it be good or ill.
If we were like the old people we might content ourselves with wishing that this year, new today, be happy and healthy (and the wine good). But as we are new people...heirs of the old culture...(even a little more than we deserve), let us wish this year to be a happy and bountiful one. But let us wish it without any pride, without any presumption, without any anticipation, without any arrogation.

[At this point Péguy asks his friends to accept four truths inherited from the old people:] that we are citizens of a nation which has an intrinsic, an eminent value; that the temporal salvation of humanity is of infinite price; that eternal salvation is of an infinitely infinite worth; and that the virtue we need to put all that into practice is courage.
There is nothing in the world better than the life of an honest man. There is nothing better than the baked bread of daily duties. Above all, let us cling to this treasure of the humble, to this sort of implied joy which is the flower of life, this kind of healthy gaiety which is virtue itself and more virtuous than virtue itself. But it rests with us to do our duty.

That was Péguy: Bonne année et bon courage! May we accept it as a program of life proportionate to a millennium and more. If we do, we will be a credit to our ancestors, who have brought us to this summit of history, and to those who will look back upon us as their ancestors—with deep gratitude, if we are faithful to our responsibility. Meanwhile, I look forward to a continuation and an expansion of our friendship. It will be so much easier when we help each other!

It gets easier, too, for us to keep in touch as we advance from postage to telephone to fax to e-mail to ????. I depend upon your occasional greetings and messages to be sure that I’m not off on some philosophical tangent. Don’t let me down!

Best, as always, to you and yours.
CHRISTMAS 2002

No Christmas Card from me this year; the stamp is beautiful enough. But I do have a few thoughts to share. With every passing Christmas the chasm seems to widen between the true meaning of this season and what actually happens all around us. You know the reasons for this discrepancy as well as I. In part, my sense that something valuable has seeped out of our culture may be due to “growing old.” But the words of Christ about his own times still seem so relevant: “O unbelieving and perverse generation! How far do I have to go in putting up with you?” Even many “good” people I meet seem to be in a kind of coma of the spirit as they busy themselves conforming to the prevailing dictates of how the season is to be observed.

This isn’t to imply that my own very different observance of Advent and Christmas is darkened by such thoughts. It doesn’t bother me that my life has little in common with the lives of most Americans, even fellow American Catholics. Rather, it gives me more reason to persist in being “unconventional.” My sources of enrichment reach far beyond any of the alternatives, and the deep happiness they produce leads me to be smiling and singing all the time. You probably have a good idea what I am referring to, and I pray daily that you and I share in at least some of those sources.

As in most years, I’m spending Christmas with my younger brothers in Opus Dei here at the university residence we call Lincoln Green. Our festive mood is greater than ever as we look back on the marvels of 2002—the centennial year of our Founder who was canonized a couple of months ago. Already last week lights were in place around the front and side of the house. During the final student gathering the tree was decorated, as well as the living room and dining room. Presents are beginning to pile up under the tree, and I’m helping with the shopping and wrapping. There will be eight of us here for Christmas Mass, dinner, Benediction, and “Santa.” I’m saving the mound of cards and family letters to read in the chapel on Christmas day. I can’t think of a better way to spend the day than with all of you and in His company.

The 170 Christmas Cards our house sent out this year portray a traditional Madonna and Child from the Vatican collection. The residents joined us in signing the cards. My greeting to our friends and supporters was simple: “New eyes; new ears; same old tricks.” This refers to the cataract surgery in spring (lens implants provide near perfect vision), the “hearing enhancers” I got last fall, and my distinctive way of practicing the art of teaching (all year in the house and in the summer and fall at Shellbourne conference center in Indiana).

My Christmas prayer is that you have the courage to “just say no” to our “unbelieving and perverse” contemporaries who want you to join in their frivolities and distractions. Instead, try some of those “alternative sources.” This way we can sustain each other’s hope in the great promises we entertain for the rest of our lives and beyond.
Dear Loyal Philosophers,

It’s a year since I last wrote you with an update on the scholarship fund you former students started upon my departure from the active faculty, along with a little jingling of the bell. So far, six ISU students with distinguished records in political philosophy have benefited from the annual Thomas More Scholarship. Last May it was the turn of Jennifer Kindred of Taylorville, Illinois. Our new scholar resembles More in his large reading appetite; I fed it a little by giving her a copy of Gerard Wegemer’s *Thomas More: A Portrait in Courage*. (You would like it, too.) This year she’s embarking upon law study. I keep in touch with five of the six scholars; all are living up to the ideals of our patron.

This year the ISU Foundation is not releasing any scholarship money from funds such as ours so that the principal can rebuild after several lean years of investment income. I’ve been in touch with department chairman Jamal Nassar and my successor, Manfred Steger (recently promoted to Professor), to see if we could make sure that this year’s top student in our field could still get a Thomas More scholarship of modest size ($500). They authorized me to invite ten of my most loyal and generous former students (you are among them), to provide a $50 contribution each. If you want to do so, your check should be made out to and sent to me, and I’ll forward it to Dr. Nassar for the grant, which the department will award in May. Don’t send it to the Foundation if you want it to go to this year’s top student. The department will handle it.

So there’s the plan, and my chief reason for this holiday greeting. You don’t need an annual reminder that you are always “close” to this old prof. As he is somewhat forgetful, however, he likes to get updates now and then! As for me, I keep thinking, reading, talking, and writing. Next talk is on: “Is America Becoming an Empire?” I keep doing book reviews, and have a couple of manuscripts in the works. The new electronic media enable me to respond to a multitude of requests for scholarly assistance. I teach a monthly philosophy seminar to local computer geeks (What *is* the world coming to?) and continue my summer teaching in the history of philosophy. I don’t get around as nimbly as I used to, but I really think my teaching is getting better.

Best, as always, from my Urbana perch,

John Gueguen
Anybody who hangs around with me knows what a fan of the Pope I am. As far as I’m concerned, anybody who can’t see that John Paul II is far and away our most significant contemporary is suffering from the worst kind of blindness. We shouldn’t need to have God the Father descend again in a cloud to thunder His message: “This is My beloved Son’s vicar on earth; listen to him!” I had been debating whether and how to respond to the wonderful letters I’ve been receiving from family members and friends during Christmas season. I was waiting for some kind of “inspiration.” It hit yesterday when I finally worked through a riddle in the Pope’s frequent remarks to the people he is depending on to help him care for the world—especially young people (like us).

So what’s the riddle? On the one hand, John Paul insists that we stand on the threshold of a great new era of evangelization—truly a “new Pentecost”—and that we ought to look forward to it with hope and optimism. On the other hand, he says that the most urgent thing to do in the meantime is prepare ourselves and our children for martyrdom!—even the blood-red kind. Yesterday I finally figured out how those apparently inconsistent statements mesh.

It happened as I was sitting quietly in front of our Nativity scene, pondering something I just read in one of St. Bernard’s Christmas sermons: “The Son of God refutes the judgment of the world; He opposes and confounds it in everything” by making His entrance that way—surrounded by dirt and foul odors, “on a cold winter’s night in silent darkness so deep” (a little improvising there).

If you’ve been able to free yourself from “the holiday season” long enough to sit still in front of a Crib to let its message penetrate, some such thought might also have come to you: That way is not the way we would have done it, had we been in charge. But if you think about it, it doesn’t take long to see why it had to be that way. “Your ways are not My ways, says the Lord of hosts.” His own people had been reminded of that over and over for centuries. His Son made that message a lot more pointed. Would-be followers were constantly reminded that it meant taking up His cross and carrying it with Him. That’s the purchase price of a seat in the Kingdom. You’ve got to be willing to let go of everything—even your life. In the words of His vicar: Prepare yourself for martyrdom! Because what passes for “the world,” we know well, doesn’t like to be rejected like that. You have to choose between God and Mammon. (I hope you won’t choose Mammon; its wages are infinitely worse.)

But what happened to that exciting future ahead of us in the third millennium—the rebirth of Christianity, a “re-Christianization” of the world? Well, you must have gotten the point by now: No Pentecost without Calvary. The first time, it took several centuries of beastly persecution—the blood of countless martyrs, men, women, and children—to purify the world and prepare it for a great new civilization to benefit vast multitudes—even converted “barbarians.” The historians used to call it “Christendom.” Only the most obstinate politicians in the new European Parliament can fail to see the tremendous uplift it gave to every aspect of human life. It set the pace for a thousand years; without it we’d be back to scrawling crude pictures on the walls of caves. (Aside: I know I’m exaggerating; don’t I always? Let’s call it poetic license!)
So it’s simple: Better than anybody else, John Paul is able to see and accept the fact that “the world” is rapidly deconstructing itself as a result of losing its patrimony. But he has great faith in mankind to recover by rediscovering the true world, and that’s why he is so certain of the bright future that awaits us. How different this interpretation is from those rosy expectations so many people (including me) found in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. We forgot about the martyrdom part that stands between us and that future.

To see where we Americans come in, turn to the Manger in your living room again. It might even be surrounded still by glittering gift-wrappings.

Now that I’ve made it to 70, I’ve come to a few conclusions about our history—both secular and sacred—and my own experiences. (Another aside: *I was only 26 when the president of a Catholic women’s college in northern Indiana reached 70 and published a little book of poetry entitled, “My First Seventy Years” [still $8.95 on the internet]. Such presumption made us laugh: Are you expecting another 70, Sister? But of course the deep wisdom of that title lay beyond the grasp of most 20-somethings.*) And so I conclude these reflections with something I’ve learned about “the world” in “my first seventy years.”

The first big “learning moment” followed World War II when we found the path to world peace blocked by world communism and decided to pursue prosperity instead—a relentless quest for material abundance and all the pleasures it could buy. My second learning moment came 25 years later at the onset of a cultural revolution whose bitter fruits we still reap as the old common sense, a sense of right and wrong, come crashing down all around us. You really have to be deaf not to hear the noise of demolition, and blind not to see the dust.

What both learning moments have in common is rejection of God and His plan for human life. Nietzsche called God’s “death” the “trans-valuation of all values.” It’s finally here, as the daily “newspaper” and TV “news” remind us.

Well, my life isn’t complete yet (there’s still that “next 70”), and neither will I bring this to completion; it would be far too “preachy” for comfort. So you complete it however you want—and let me know how it comes out. Anyway, Happy Martyrdom!—and convert a few barbarians along the way. *The Old Prof*
The Annual Letter, Advent 2004

First, a statement of this year’s theme (which has personal and political dimensions); then its development; and lastly a brief commentary:

Catherine de Heuck Doherty was born in Russia (1896) and emigrated to Canada, where she founded Madonna House, a center of social justice. She died in 1985, and her cause of canonization began recently. Following is an excerpt from a collection of her meditations, *Donkey Bells: Advent and Christmas* (1994):

The theme: “Nothing less than repentance can lead the world out of disaster today…. Ours is the day when the coming judgment cannot only be seen but felt…. Repentance is a moral and spiritual revolution; to repent is one of the hardest things in the world; yet it is basic to all spiritual progress. It calls for a complete breakdown of our prideful self-assurance, a stripping away of the cloak of prestige that is woven from our petty successes, a breaching of the innermost citadel of our self-will.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was born in Russia in 1918; he was expelled by the Soviet authorities because of his forthright novels, but returned to Russia from exile in the West in 1992. Following is an excerpt from “Repentance and Self Limitation in the Life of Nations,” From under the Rubble, 1975:

His development of our theme: “We start from what seems to us beyond doubt: that true repentance and self-limitation will shortly reappear in the personal and the social sphere, that a hollow place in modern man is ready to receive them….

“There is a glimmer of hope that we now long to go forward at last into a just, clean, honest society. How else can we do so except by shedding the burden of our past, except by repentance, for we are all guilty, all besmirched? We cannot convert the kingdom of universal falsehood into a kingdom of universal truth by even the cleverest and most skillfully contrived economic and social reforms: these are the wrong building blocks….

“As we understand it, patriotism means unqualified and unwavering love for the nation, which implies frank assessment of its vices and sins, and penitence for them. We ought to get used to the idea that no people is eternally great or eternally noble (such titles are hard won and easily lost). The greatness of a people is to be sought not in the blare of trumpets but in the level of its inner development, in its breadth of soul….

“The gift of repentance, which perhaps more than anything else distinguishes man from the animal world, is particularly difficult for modern men to recover. We have, every last one of us, grown ashamed of this feeling: and its effect on social life anywhere on earth is less and less easy to discern. The habit of repentance is lost to our whole callous and chaotic age….

“Whatever feelings predominate in the members of a given society at a given moment in time, they will serve to color the whole of that society and determine its moral character. If there is nothing good there to pervade that society, it will destroy itself, or be brutalized by the triumph of evil instincts….

“Given the white-hot tension between nations and races, we can say without suspicion of overstatement that without repentance it is in any case doubtful if we can survive. It is by now all too obvious how dearly mankind has paid for the fact that we have throughout the ages preferred to censured, denounce and hate others, instead of censuring, denouncing and hating ourselves. But obvious though it may be, we are even now reluctant to recognize that the universal dividing line between good and evil runs not between countries, not between nations, not between parties, not between classes, not even between good and bad men: it divides the heart of everyman and fluctuates with the passage of time and according to a man’s behavior…. Repentance is the first bit of firm ground underfoot, the
only one from which we can go forward not to fresh hatreds but to concord. **Repentance is the only starting point for spiritual growth.**

“How can the nation as a whole express its repentance? Surely only through the mouths and by the pens of individuals? The man who takes it upon himself to express the repentance, the genuine change of heart, of a nation will always be exposed to weighty dissuasions, reproaches, and warnings not to bring shame upon his country or give comfort to its enemies.…

“The repentance of a nation expresses itself most surely and palpably in its actions. We all bear responsibility for the quality of our government, the campaigns of our military leaders, the deeds of our soldiers in the line of duty, the songs of our young people. The nation is mystically welded together in a community of guilt, and its inescapable destiny is collective repentance.…

“It is not easy to convince our fellow countrymen that we are not traversing the heavens in a blaze of glory but sitting forlornly on a heap of spiritual cinders. But **unless we recover the gift of repentance, our country will perish and will drag down the whole world with it.**

“Only through the repentance of a multitude of people can the air and the soil be cleansed so that a new, healthy national life can grow up. We cannot raise a clean crop on a false, unsound, obdurate soil.…

“This article is written with faith in the natural proclivity of Russians to repent, to find the penitential impulse in ourselves and set the whole world an example. But will it be easy for us honestly to remember it, when we have lost all feeling for truth? …”

*My commentary:* Reminiscent of the prophetic wisdom of the past, two Russian “John the Baptists” remind us what Advent is about. Their message is my message to you because I think it applies to our nation even more than it does to Russia. **It is within the womb of every woman, within the chest of every man that repentance for the crimes committed there—and the many others we have perpetrated and continue to perpetrate in our society and in other nations—must begin.** Even if it is doubtful that “the habit of repentance” can be found in America’s soul, I am certain that it can be found in your soul. (Otherwise, you wouldn’t be receiving this letter.) So let us begin, you and I, to heed the Advent call to repent of “the vices and sins” of our nation—and our own. If not us, then who will?

*The old prof*
The Annual Letter, Epiphany 2005

“Let us make a compact that we will never forget each other. Whatever happens to us later in life, let us always remember how good it was when we were all together, united by a good and kind feeling which made us perhaps better than we are. You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and better for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk a great deal about education, but some good, sacred memory preserved from childhood is perhaps the best education. If one carries many such memories into later life, he is safe to the end of his days. And if only one good memory is left in our heart, even that may be the means of saving us. Perhaps we may even grow wicked later on, but however bad we may become, we may recall how we have been talking like friends, all together. What’s more, that one memory may perhaps keep us from great evil. So let us never forget….”—Alyosha, in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov.

Above all, let us never forget Christmas 2004—“all together” at home, as family. Today I re-read the forty family letters that arrived over the past few weeks; how grateful we all are that so many families are willing to “take a moment to reflect and give thanks.” May they never forget what they have written to us about, what they and theirs experienced “all together” at home, as family. The pundits say “the family” is falling apart. I don’t believe a word of it! Every hour, every minute, you are at work building a bright new culture of the family. Forty letters, forty homes, populated by two or three hundred people who suffer and rejoice and love together: a “village” like that in the middle of this world is all it takes to revolutionize our country. For me it was an exhilarating and a humbling experience to reflect on God’s ways in our midst.

This year’s family letters and photos speak simply of the beautiful sacrifices of family life: “If what I write sounds too good to be true, it probably was;” “We joyfully bring to your attention some new faces in the picture;” “Getting that picture taken was quite an accomplishment.” The longest letter had five pages of photos—a pictorial family letter. Another was completely in verse. All the letters (one was in Italian) are searching “for the common threads that will bring us together.” How to recognize them? “Through temperance, historical perspective, prayer, and forgiveness.” Each letter could be headed: “This is a ‘Faith Letter’ about how God has led this wonderful family through so many things.” “This past year was one of unbelievable struggle and great joy.” Everybody could “go on and on, just so proud,…just so hopeful,…just so happy,…just so thankful.” And finally this: “I hope you haven’t read this far and are still trying to figure out who the heck we are, but even if you can’t remember us, we remember you!” And that is the main thing, isn’t it?

“Under the influence” of those remarkable documents of true family life, I am writing back simply to encourage you not to abandon or slacken your family apostolate. But I know you won’t! A month ago, in Advent, I wrote another “annual letter” inspired by some quotations from two Russian “John the Baptists.” The quotation that heads this Epiphany letter is also from a Russian, an “Isaiah figure” of modern times. All three are prophets who discovered in suffering what we need to attend to today, as always. And what’s that? An easy question to answer: Advent anticipates; Epiphany celebrates. Advent is purple—penitential. Epiphany is gold—reverential. What we were anticipating has come, and now it’s time to celebrate. That’s what all family letters do: celebrate God’s ways in their midst. All we need is to anticipate so we can celebrate.

We could laugh together for a long time if I quoted from those forty letters. All are upbeat, full of hope, witty—like this one from “the father of the bride”: “Well, we did it. We got through our first wedding and we only have 6 more to go!” Learning from the experience, he composes some “guidelines for living with the father of the bride.” Here’s a sample: “Whenever he complains about money, immediately start crying.” I can’t resist appending some other quotations at the end. (That way, I get credit for this as a “scholarly paper.”)
The letters I received came from pastors and poets, nurses and nurses. All are about family, about what everybody has been up to these past twelve months, and that’s what you must never forget: sleepless nights, births (some premature, after “pregnancy complications”), NFP workshops, first babies, schools, teachers and coaches, majors, minors, and degrees (MBA, JD, MA, PhD, DDS, MD); graduations, internships, accomplishments—in music, in sports; allergies, injuries, accidents, emergency rooms, surgeries; ball games of every sort; new friends, new jobs, new responsibilities, new drivers; bountiful harvests; engagements, weddings and anniversaries (35th, 40th, 45th); rehearsals, plays, concerts, choirs, choruses, chorales, and parades; retreats, first Communions and Confirmations, farewells to dear departed; 40th birthdays, reunions (a 50th), vacation trips, road construction, airport nightmares, three hurricanes, and travels to exotic places (one couple “did” Egypt, Argentina, Uruguay, Hungary, Germany—twice, and many U.S. cities).

Everything—even “an astronomy weekend”—experienced “all together.” The letters came from mountains, seashores, and prairies; farms, little towns, suburbs, big cities in the North, South, East, and West; from new houses and old. Most came from big families, from people in the military, people at work, people at play, people worshiping together. Always together! Sewing, designing, home-building, adding on, re-paneling, hunting, fishing, bumming, surfing, snorkeling, skiing, touring, managing property, volunteering, welcoming, dozing, commuting, counseling, ministering, planting, landscaping, chain-sawing pine trees and palm trees, writing books, publishing and taping, moving into new houses and offices, searching for colleges, cheerleading, training, learning Spanish, German, clarinet, and candle making, babysitting, begging (for dogs, cats, horses), camping, fixing, fumbling, regrouping, and even reading. A few are “fading into retirement;” others eager to get started. The life cycle. (No canonizations, yet, but we’re working on it!)

In short, the letters portray LIFE, real LIFE, FAMILY LIFE—rich blessings for us all to celebrate and remember together. This year, on the very feast of the Holy Family, Dec. 26, thousands of other families who perhaps considered themselves blessed, too, as they played or worshipped serenely and confidently on the beaches of the Indian Ocean—celebrating life in their age-old ways. In less than an hour, those families were plunged into unspeakable grief. That, too, is life, real life. But no walls of water can wipe out the precious memories parents have of their children who are no more, children’s memories of parents who are no more, the memories of little homes that are no more.

Our Russian prophet’s moral? Only this: No matter what evil may befall you in the future, or has already befallen you in the past, don’t lose those precious memories you have passed along about the year 2004 in your home! Not many of us still remember the first John Paul, the smiling Pope who died only a month into his pontificate. I’d like to close these thoughts with some of his.

After quoting my favorite poet, Charles Péguy—“Every cradle is the meeting place of the Magi,” not just the one in Bethlehem—J.P. I comments: “Husband and wife themselves are Magi, who deposit their gifts at the foot of their child’s cradle every day: privations, anxieties, vigils, detachment. They receive other gifts in return—new impulses to live and become holy, a joy purified by sacrifice, the renewal of their mutual affection, and a fuller communion of souls.” Most of your children have been out of the cradle for years—or haven’t yet arrived to occupy it. But wherever your children (and grandchildren) are today, I think you’ll get the message. It’s all about remembering.

And with that, I’ll await you until next Advent and Epiphany. May you have as great a year as is GOOD for you to have. And while you are remembering important things day by day, remember this “member” of your family, too!
The years keep passing faster, and we seem to be standing still in the whirlwind of time.
I indulged my strong nesting tendencies and did some writing and gardening as I worked on what kind of old person I really want to be…since I’ve always believed I will be a better old person than I was young person.
It’s no easy task when they visit now, dragging out all of the necessary items for a baby. (Aah, the good ole days!)
He’s always pulling chairs up to the kitchen counter, getting out spoons and spatulas, and finding whatever he can to stir in pots and pans! All the knobs are off the stove and dishwasher. Nevertheless, he’s an absolutely delightful boy!
We had great seats, and the boys got to experience what it’s like to be with 110,000 people in one place.
He was the first one to the bathroom; he couldn’t find the stool to stand on, so he yells, Where’s the stool? The answer comes, In the pantry. A few minutes go by, and we wonder where he went. I find him in the living room behind a plant…: ‘Mom said the stool was in the plant-tree.’
She and I are best friends despite the business partnership.
With great reluctance they informed her that she had a $28,000 budget and did not have to buy paste and rubber bands out of her lunch money.
I still had time to get my two rounds of golf in this summer; just can’t figure out how my handicap has jumped to 20.
Grandpa was surprised to find as the Democratic candidate for a number of offices the same person by the name of ‘No Candidate.’ He was amazed that he was allowed to vote for the same Democrat so many times. [Obviously, he grew up in Chicago.] Grandpa is considering running for office next election just to make it interesting. (And I’m wondering if I can still change my name.)
I have no idea how she juggles the schedules, squeezes in time to go to the gym, participates in a couple of Bible studies, and helps maintain order in the house, but she does.
He loves what he does, and at our age one can’t ask for more than that. He even got the doctor to give him permission to continue his quest for the absolutely best chicken-fried steak in the U.S.
I’m still at the county health department tracing infectious diseases. The best I can say to you is: Please wash your hands and stay healthy!
The mastermind of theories culled from books of finest minds, great passions he exudes!… Our fitness freak eats dozen eggs, then runs and lifts with might.
We’re not quite sure if he knows that the coming of a new arrival means his days of ruling the roost are over!
Signs of the times: The new challenge this year was that we had to take on an extra parish.
Walking from the commuter train, I keep an eye on the angle of flight as planes take off from the airport.
How she manages to study is a puzzle to all of us.
I am amazed how many times I ask Mary to watch over my girls while I let go. It helps when you look at your children and really, really like the people they are becoming; still, I’ve come to think God made teenagers so the transition of separation is easier.
Her teacher says she’s the funniest and most talkative one in the class. Hmmm!! She is also a lady with definite preferences. She has to drink everything with a straw—not just any straw; it has to match the color of her cup!
Walking home from Church, with ‘Down in Adoration Falling’ in my thoughts, down I went on the sidewalk, and broke my right arm. After therapy, it is better than ever. But Monsignor gave me a windshield sign so I can use a handicapped space: ‘Just a Closer Walk to Thee.’
“After one of the hurricanes, a sign outside a destroyed hotel read: ‘Having an affair? Have it here with us.’ In Orlando there was a ripped up billboard with the newest sign stripped off. The one underneath read: ‘This is a message from God!’”

“At a school Mass, Father asked the children, ‘Where is Jesus?’ There came a loud answer: ‘Everywhere!’ And so he is, and often appears at the most inopportune moments! Still, it’s a gift and a blessing to recognize him!”

“I don’t know how to ‘run like Jesus’ or how to ‘keep the faith,’ but I think I know how to be grateful every day for life and its blessings, and for all of you, and for this beautiful world.”

“At midnight Christmas Eve I was alone with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, giving thanks for all the goodesses and prayers, and united with all my family, on earth and in spirit—at peace and at rest.”
“HUMANKIND CANNOT BEAR VERY MUCH REALITY”
The Annual Letter
St. Louis, January 5, 2006—The Twelfth Day of Christmas

The title of this year’s letter is taken from a well-known play by a St. Louis native, T. S. Eliot (1888). He wrote it in 1935, in the depths of the Great Depression. Don’t you agree that it explains a lot about popular reactions to recent events in our country and the world? Are we, perhaps, passing through another kind of “great depression”? Many would say they’ve had quite enough of “reality” for a while. One reason so many are “depressed” is that they’ve lost touch with our native culture, which the same Eliot studied in “Notes toward the Definition of Culture” (1948, the year he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature). The “culture” Eliot meant was quite able to help “humankind” bear any dose of reality. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* he traced the meaning of “culture” to 1483: It is “the setting of bounds; limitation.” We can “cultivate” what lies within those boundaries. It is the space in which we can peacefully live, work, rest—and deal with “reality” however it touches us.

If I had to give a short answer to the question, Why are so many people depressed—or confused, or uneasy, or otherwise having problems with “reality”—I would say: Because they don’t know where the limits are. Apply this to anything you like (eating, drinking, studying, working...), and see if it isn’t so. They aren’t sure where their living space is, or whether they have to make up their own limits (a game many “intellectuals” like to play as little disciples of Nietzsche). This notion of limitation (as we saw in last year’s letter) implies an objective reality the same for all, and so an objective truth about everything. Let’s see if we can take this a bit further.

Reading this year’s Christmas letters, I came across the idea of “Christmas as a state of mind.” This gave me pause, and on reflection I decided that it is more “a state of heart” than of mind. Another letter said that retirement is “a state of mind,” but that, too, is more a “state of heart” in my limited experience, in my “culture” (that is, my touches with reality). Isn’t what we keep safe in the heart more “ours” than the mind’s storehouse? A person might “lose his mind” without dire consequences for humankind (unless, perhaps, he is a genius like John Paul II). But woe to the world if somebody loses his heart. Terrible consequences can follow—for him and for everyone he touches. What is confusion, what is depression if not letting the heart run wild?

So let’s resolve to cultivate the “heart” this year. Our own peace and to some extent the peace of the world depends on knowing when and how to open the heart to others. As always, “practice makes perfect.” So let’s be sure to practice it every day.

I can’t help a timely reference to the newborn Babe who is about to flee from a king who let a mad craving for power settle in his heart. That little Son of Man will have to learn all about human reality, about how to be human (even though He created human nature and every nature). Just as the eternal Word had to learn to talk, so He had to learn how the human heart works. Didn’t He have a wonderful Mom to teach him all about that? And what a Heart his became!—able to love billions of his fellow human beings—every one of them—and madly, as if each one was his “one and only.” If we resolve in this new year to let him teach us how to be more human, especially how to cultivate our hearts, how can we
possibly find a better Teacher? This year, every time you conclude a letter with “Love,” think about all that’s riding on it!

Getting back to T. S. Eliot, if you are genuinely concerned about Peace and Justice, as we all profess to be, you need to concentrate on the indispensable middle term: Truth—the Truth of reality: No peace without truth; no justice without peace. May you have the most truthful, the most peaceful, the most just year you’ve ever had!
New Year’s Eve 2006

The first year back in Missouri has been devoted to things an emeritus professor can do to help with the activities that occur in our Study Center. If you’re interested in the details, go to www.wespine.org. And if you’re quick enough to check out this week’s www.websterkirkwoodtimes.com you’ll see a feature article that just appeared in the suburban newspaper, with my picture next to our new yard sign. It mentions that infamous book and movie that so many of you enjoyed and the harvest we continue to reap from it. As the designated correspondent I’ve received many requests for information about Opus Dei from all around our area—people like the baseball coach at a Chattanooga public high school, a golf instructor in Louisville, a retired grain elevator operator in north-central Kansas, a law student at the Univ. of Mississippi, and several other students; one of them (doing his doctorate in Spanish at M.U.) came over from Columbia with 4 others to the last evening of recollection.

While the married men take up most of my time, Wespine’s main clientele consists of high school and college boys who are here Wed. and Fri. evenings. Once again I’m giving my “famous” study skills course to freshmen and sophomores. (That started 45 years ago in Chicago.) In the first half of the year we had a young adult study group on the revival of Christian culture and a Sunday afternoon coffee house great books discussion. I’m pleased to tell you that one of these young men will start grad school at the Univ. of Dallas next month to study philosophy and literature; he wants to be a creative writer.

In between times I work on the history of Opus Dei in the U.S., city by city. The first half of the year it was St. Louis, and I did a 30-page study of our first decade (1956-66). I can send it as an attachment if you’re interested. The observance of our 50th anniversary consisted of a Mass in the Cathedral celebrated by the Archbishop, a lawn social for the neighbors, and a formal dinner (600-plus, mainly younger couples); the speakers were Kimberly and Scott Hahn. (I recommend his new book: Ordinary Work, Extraordinary Grace, the story of his life in Opus Dei). In mid-year I started on San Francisco (1958-68); the research is a most enjoyable way of reliving those “unusual” times in California.

So there’s no “typical” day for me; it’s like being on call all the time. I love it, and so far the physical deterioration isn’t a major concern: I exercise up and down stairs, following the routine prescribed by a therapist, and taking the pills prescribed by internist, orthopedist, and chiropractor. When the Opus Dei prelate visited Houston in September, he told me that I’m still “the youngest” one of all. So I suppose it’s what occupies the mind and the heart that counts.

Besides that trip to Texas (a fine Opus Dei family reunion), I’ve been to Shellbourne Conference Center in n. Indiana several times this year, stopping midway at my old home in Urbana (Lincoln Green) for a meal or to pick up books; while at Shellbourne for 3 weeks in July (a theology course) a motorized 3-wheeler enabled me to get all over
the place with ease. One beautiful Sunday we took it to Notre Dame for a nostalgic 50th anniversary visit to the campus (I had missed the class reunion in June). In August I spent 3 weeks at Lincoln Green teaching a mini-course in ethics (character formation, the moral law, conscience, and virtue) to 3 groups of married members of Opus Dei. (I repeated it in November and enjoyed a visit from a former student and his family.) The course uses the writings of Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict. I keep current with what that amazing man is asking us to think about, and will be glad to correspond with anyone who wants my views on how he is treating key issues in the church and the world.

Life in suburban Kirkwood is an interesting mix of big city and small town. Even if I can't get around much, it's a fine environment for an emeritus professor to spend his "retirement." I'm glad to have part of the family (Russ and Sarah) close by, too. Over the past few months 3 of my 4 sisters and several nieces and nephews from Kansas City and New Braunfels have come to visit. For much of the year a dozen members of the family and I have indulged in stimulating e-mail conversations on topical issues—always mind and soul expanding for all of us. Fifteen former ISU students and I have had an intermittent e-mail "seminar" going. Their writing keeps improving along with the matured wisdom life experience brings. Maybe it's that kind of follow-up that is the most satisfying part of being a teacher, a fellow-inquirer into the truth of all things open to us limited creatures. I also managed to get a book chapter and a journal article placed this year.

Among recent visitors were 2 high school classmates who had just attended a 55th reunion in Lexington, an old friend from Normal, and several distant relatives who live in the Kansas City area. We had a fine get-together with Father Bud Murphy, who is observing his 60th anniv. as a Jesuit and 50th as a priest.

These golden anniversaries have formed the sub-plot of our Christmas chat this year. It's a reminder that life is moving along and that one day in the not-too-distant future we'll be joining Aunt Clemie and my Godmother Frances who left this world in recent months.

The coming year promises some exciting developments, like opening the first Opus Dei centers in Russia (Moscow and St. Petersburg) and here in St. Louis the initial steps in planning an activity building and Shrine of the Holy Family on 40 acres donated to us—about an hour west (wooded, rolling country with a small lake).

I'm eager to hear all that's going on with you. Be sure that you have my prayers that the new year treat you well!
“LIVING TIME”—Advent 2007

The years rush by. We keep turning the calendar pages with less and less living time in between—so it seems. Is it running out? Where is it going? We want somehow to “bank it” as a kind of investment, as if it could accrue “interest.” That’s really not a bad analogy, come to think of it. Some people keep journals so they can “look back” and see where they’ve been, what they may have learned (not just what they earned), what got done and what didn’t.

Since I wrote you a year ago—so short a time ago—you and I have occupied the same intervals day by day. Each day has brought people into our lives, some for the first time (and yes, some for the last time). Many have been lifetime companions. But all are the companions of this time, of this day, of this real living time. We live it together: sometimes face-to-face, but more often through electronic voices and spaces. It all seems more and more compressed until we find ourselves in danger of missing so much.

Have you ever tried to “let it out”…slowly, let it assume its natural length and depth? This could be the most valuable exercise of the day. Try it. Just stop the flow; cut through all its dimensions from top to bottom; examine them. Stop all the coming and going. Sit still, as if you had entered some magic chamber, some inner sanctum. Take a moment to look around at all these people who belong to your life today. Look into them. Appreciate them.

Porch swings used to be so good for this exercise. The back and forth motion seemed to help “let out” the moments of the day, to let them stretch out and sink in. New year’s resolution: Get yourself a porch swing, or if you have one, use it! If you don’t have a porch, or if it’s too cold there, that’s no excuse! Find a good substitute. It may be the only way you can master the time that wants to sweep you away with it, to keep you from really living it.

Time is nothing but a brief interval between the eternity before and the eternity after. For eternity to be what it is, you have to experience time for what it is, a connector between before and after. What’s it for? To live in: it is living time. If you can’t live properly in time, however do you expect to live properly in eternity? Advent is the perfect season to practice this exercise: thousands of years between two eternities compressed into a little over three weeks. Steal a pinch of eternity each of these days to squeeze out all the time that’s in them.

I wanted to live with you this Advent moment of brief conversation as a way of thanking you for all the moments we’ve had together, one way or another, since last Christmas. Maybe we didn’t live them as well as we might have, but we did our best, didn’t we? Well, if we didn’t, we will in the new year, won’t we! If we are to stay connected, though, we have to stop now and then for a little swing on the porch—yours and mine. See you there!