

I AM WITH YOU
ALWAYS





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The Nearness of God in Times of Loss





I Am With You Always: The Nearness of God in Times of Loss © 2020 Chris Pelicano
Reflections on Scripture by Fred Gallagher

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PREFACE

This book was born from a desire to respond to a need to bring comfort, consolation, and hope to Catholic Christians who grieve the loss of a loved one. The intention was to speak words of truth and comfort in the form of a book that could be given as a gift to family and friends in need. We wanted to create a book that would show how the ordinary teachings, practices, and prayers of the Catholic faith address the subject of death in a comforting manner.

As the author, I gathered reliable resources, read books, articles, and sermons, highlighted, dog-eared, underlined, scribbled notes, made lists, and prayed. It became clear that the reality of death, preparation for death, and the conquest of death is central to the Catholic faith and practice. The Church focuses the faithful's attention on reality rather than on sentiment, theory, or speculation and is, therefore, rightly concerned about the reality of death, which she *calmly* teaches is the mysterious passage from this life to the fullness of eternal life. And the faithful regularly profess and look toward eternal life, to the fullness of "the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting" for themselves and their loved ones. The more I looked at the content of the Catholic faith on this matter, the more I saw the myriad of ways the Church invites her sons and daughters to learn, know, and live the reality of new life in Christ, by grace and through faith, which alone triumphs over sin and death.

As I tried to shape the central theme of this book, I came across Psalm 136 for the first time since undertaking the writing of this book. This psalm recounts the marvel-

ous deeds of the Lord in a fifty-two-line summary of God's providence, where every other line is the same: *for his mercy endures forever*. This refrain is repeated twenty-six times, which is enough for even me to get the message!

I suddenly realized the emphasis I would need to present, the vantage point I would need to convey, and the lens through which we can see death as clearly as the Church sees it: with Christ as the victor who overcomes death, *for his mercy endures forever*. Within this word of God is contained the utter gratuitousness of the Father's love, existing for all time and revealed to mankind in Jesus Christ, and which remains present in the Church through the Holy Spirit, forever abundant, active, effective, and undefeated, no matter what. The reality of God's love is truly impressive, and the message of this psalm is the true basis of all the comfort, consolation, and hope that we long for when we suffer the loss of a loved one.

Therefore, I decided to shape this book according to this psalm, to saturate the book with expressions of the love of God, thereby asking him to trace lines of relevance, meaning, and strength from himself, more than from my words, into the lives of readers.

To offer comfort—the primary goal of this book—does not always mean to make things pleasant or easy; it means to help ease someone's grief, even in a small way, and therefore to strengthen their resolve to persevere. In short, it means to offer hope that the pain has meaning, and we can know and understand that meaning, not just eventually, but even now, in the very midst of loss.

One of the heaviest burdens we face today is a pervasive notion that death is utterly meaningless. But this is not so. Christ's resurrection conquered the meaningless of death, for it is now our gateway to eternal life. Death brings us, and our loved ones, new life—that is its meaning—and through the Holy Spirit, we understand this and are strengthened (comforted) in our suffering.

It has been my experience that the truth of God's love, seen in Christ's passion and death, allows me to accept difficulties, reach out to others in times of crisis, and to heal from *within* my circumstances rather than rebel, retreat, or retaliate *against* my circumstances. I see my pain in his, and knowing that his pain was a gift to others, I am inspired to make my own agony a gift of love as well.


When I consider the reality of grief, I am reminded of the truths I learned from my own parents' death:

1. Life is always larger than our present circumstances suggest, and we benefit from this truth if we can widen our gaze beyond our immediate pain.
2. Death can only be seen accurately in relation to the fullness of life. This truth is the perspective that keeps death in its place, and only faith provides this vantage point.
3. God is always nearer than we think. In fact, he is working for our benefit in every detail of our constantly changing situations. God's method is the reality that he is present within the circumstances of our life, and it is by faith that we recognize and follow his presence.

There is a profound positivity to life, sustained by God and contained *within* our immediate circumstances, not *despite* them. But we must stay with those circumstances and see them through to the end rather than escape them. The fullness of life cannot be snuffed out by bodily death, because life is not wholly contained within the body but rather expressed through it temporarily. Ultimately, God's closeness depends on him, not on our ability to fully understand him, and *God is always with us*.

Finally, in order to realize these things, we must help ourselves by participation in the life of grace offered to us by God through his Church. Life is not a spectator sport; we are obliged to believe, to hope, and to love to the very end. In other words, we must be active participants. My own parents taught me this by the way they lived, and died.

The Church is the continuation of Christ's presence in human history, a presence that remains with us, bringing us his strength and meaning, which is our hope, and ultimately eternal life. For Jesus is the only one who said, "Behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20).



“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.’(1 Jn 4:16) These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: ‘We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.’”

Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*





INTRODUCTION

God Is Love

How kind of St. John to give us such a concise summary of God's essence: *God is Love*. We need such short, full, and memorable phrases like this upon which to rest our busy minds and even busier lives. We need a center point to which we can return, upon which we can draw, and on which we can rely.

God is Love.

This is the center point of the Christian faith; everything else revolves around it and derives from it. Love is at the center of all Catholic teaching and practice and, as such, has meaning that both comes from God and leads back to him.

God is Love.

He has loved us first—it's what he does—and by doing so calls us to respond—to love him, ourselves, and our neighbor in return. We can rightly define our very self as one who is loved by God and is able to love in return. Among all of God's earthly creatures, only the human person is able to respond freely and consciously to God. As Christians, our vocation and identity is to love and to be loved! Ironically, we have as much to learn about receiving love as we do about giving love. We must allow God to love us, and we must admit that we do not always want his generosity.

There are many tendencies in today's world to distort the reality of God, his love, and what that means for the human person and human life. It is not the purpose of this book to address such problems directly, in so far as they are largely symptoms of the many ways in which love is absent. Indeed, the presence of love solves many problems, but love, in itself, is not a mere solution to a problem. Love is rather a Person, and a person is much more than a mere solution. The truth about love can be known and has been made known by God in the person of Jesus Christ, God made man.

God Is Near

Love seeks union. The lover wants to be near the beloved. Incidentally, this is a summary of the Incarnation, of God becoming man, of *Immanuel*, God with us. Jesus is the nearness of God to man. Being both truly God and truly human, he is uniquely qualified to show us the truth about both God and man, not in separation, but in a union of genuine love. In him, we see with human eyes the mutual giving and receiving of divine and human love, not as an idea, but as a fact, gratuitously inserted into human history. We need never wonder again what real love is or looks like if we keep our eyes on Christ. Christ's words, his deeds, and his entire identity are oriented to seek us out, show us that *God is love*, raise us up, save us, and draw us into his divine life. He draws near to us to draw us near to God.

Jesus's life also shows us what human fullness looks like, that it derives from love (our deepest need) and thrives on love, including, paradoxically, self-emptying love. "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Lk 17:33). In the deep logic of God's love, fullness comes from self-emptying, and Jesus draws near to show us this, but also to give us the Way to live this love. Jesus gives us the Church as the place where God's companionship with us remains present in the world and in our lives: in his word, in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist.

Love Remains

Even as Jesus ascended bodily to his Father in heaven, he told us truly, "I am with you always," for he sent his Spirit upon the Church to be poured into our hearts. In this way, we are made a new creation in Christ, united in love for God and one another as members of his Body, which is the Church. This new life is the supernatural

life of grace given in Baptism, nourished in the Eucharist, and restored in confession. Christian life is no mere ideal; it is a concrete life of love lived amidst the reality of our ever-changing and often challenging circumstances. Jesus remains present to us, present within us, as his Spirit guides, strengthens, and sustains us in every situation and in every circumstance, if we only turn to him with all our heart, mind, and soul. As we empty ourselves in prayer to God with us, he fills us with himself, transcending and transforming our heart's capacity to be more and more like him.

Truly, God is Love.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; *for his mercy endures forever.*

