

Introductory Workshop on Healing in Family Systems by Fr. Bob Sears, SJ
(Expansion of one page *Outline for Family Healing*)

Prayer: Eph 3:14-21: “For this reason I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen”

We are made in the image of God’s family (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and our healing will be to restore that image – a unity of total openness, sharing, self-giving love. We lost this image through the original sin of Adam and Eve. It has been restored through the death/resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit to Mary and the Church. What I want to present is how we can apply this restoration to our families and individuals today.

Introduction: With the emergence of Family systems therapy in the 1960s, we have become more and more aware of the influence of families on individuals. Murray Bowen, one of the initiators of family systems therapy, discovered that his clients would act differently when with their family from when they were alone. They responded to how the parents acted. For example, when the parents would begin to fight, the child would act out, as though to distract the parents from their fight. Bowen began to look at issues of the children in light of the parents’ interaction. He found with experience that the child would often get better if the parents could resolve their issues. This is a sobering insight. It means that in many cases, the person who is brought to the counselor with a problem is only a symptom of a systemic problem. Bowen found that when the parents were unaware of their issues or didn’t address them, the unconscious conflict would affect the children, who would then get entangled and carry on the pattern. He found that if he could address each parent individually, with the other present, they could begin to differentiate – could identify and express their feelings and concerns and be heard by the other. With greater differentiation and ability to work out differences, the child often got better without being directly treated!

This caught my interest as a theologian and student of Scripture. For Scripture speaks of the sins of the parents being visited on their children unto four generations – very much like what family therapists found. Alcoholism would run in families, divorces, uncontrolled anger, chronic conflicts, various illnesses like cancer, heart attacks, etc. But Scripture also stated that early covenant was abrogated during the Exile, since they did not keep it. God would make a “new covenant”, would give them His Spirit, so that all would know Him from the least to the greatest. It would no longer be said that “the fathers have eaten green grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” (Ez 18). There was great hope in that. If we open to this “new covenant” in God’s Spirit,

we are no longer predetermined to carry on the patterns of our parents. You could say we have a “new birth” into a “new family,” so we are freed to live by God’s principles. We would still be influenced and experience tendencies in the direction of ancestral patterns, but would be freed to choose differently. Bowen had said differentiation in relationship frees the system from destructive patterns. Scripture gives the key to this differentiation – a breakthrough into the Spirit of God. This is the healing process that many family therapists are discovering without the spiritual background. I want to present that spiritual background today, and then show its implications for family healing.

I. Brief look at salvation history: In an article I wrote on “Healing and Family Spiritual/Emotional Systems,” (click on *Articles*) which condensed in a chart with faith development characteristics and relevant scripture texts (click on *Other Resources*), I present a view of salvation history that grounds this spiritual perspective. I came upon this view of God’s work in history through my own experience, but also through the work of Heribert Muehlen, a German theologian who specialized in the theology of the Holy Spirit.

When studying theology in Germany I experienced a depression. I studied depth psychology and did a self-evaluation to find its roots but only became more depressed. I realized then that knowledge is not what heals. It only made me an “enlightened neurotic.” It was at that point that I was referred to Is 43:18-21 by an author I read: “Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? . . .” The Spirit made that text come alive for me. I saw that I had been trying to “remember the past” in order to find out the cause of my depression, but God was saying “See, I make something new!” I had looked on God’s creativity as working in the past. We would not have to believe that. We could argue to it philosophically. It takes faith to believe God is creating new NOW! And I saw that that “new creation” is what would bring me healing from depression. In fact, it was in Israel’s depression (in the Exile where they felt abandoned by God) that Second Isaiah (Is 40-55) was written. In their depressed state they were not to look at the problem but to God creating anew! I called that state “spiritual breakthrough” at first, but later “individuating faith” because other texts from the same exilic period (Ez 18:1ff ; Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36:26f ; The Book of Job) indicated a break from need to carry on ancestral patterns. God would put his Spirit in us to start anew with God’s way of living. This would involve “innocent suffering” like Job, but would ultimately be a “new beginning.”

In light of that breakthrough, I began to see the “familial stage” in a new light. That was the stage of “reward/punishment.” If you did well you would be rewarded, if you abandoned God’s law you would die (Dt 30:19). I called this stage “familial faith” because Scripture says of this stage that “the sins of the fathers will be visited upon their offspring to the fourth generation,” even though the blessings would remain for a “thousand generations.” (see Ex 34:6-7/Ex 20:5-6; Num 14:18 and Dt 5:9-10. The Elohist and Deuteronomist are writers known for this stage (see “Healing and Family Spiritual/Emotional Systems”). These prophetic writers were critical of the kings and the

way Israel had adopted the practices of the indigenous people. They highlighted the need to clearly identify with Yahweh and to separate from non-believers.

What the Elohist seems most to oppose is the openness of a previous writer, whom scholars call the Yahwist. I came to call the Yahwist's stage, "Initial Faith." He wrote in the time of David, and is responsible for Gn 2-3 (the creation and fall of Adam and Eve) which is written in light of the call of Abraham (Gn 12:1-5). The focus of the Yahwist is on trust of God and obedience to God's directives. Adam was forbidden to eat of the tree of the "knowledge of good and evil," that is, to decide from his experience alone what was good and evil. Only God really knows what is good and evil, and our call is to stay connected to God. By abandoning God, Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness and defensively blamed each other and the snake. Their distrust in being loved led to the sibling rivalry of Cain and Abel, and the evil proliferated. The solution, beginning in chapter 12, began with Abraham who was to trust God so that the "Promised Land" could eventually be restored, whereas Paradise was lost by Adam and Eve's distrust. Still there was not enough precision. Solomon married 700 wives and built temples to other gods. Yahweh was not just "any god" according to the Elohist, but was only known by Israel after Moses. All else must be sacrificed for Yahweh, as Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac (an Elohist text).

So the Elohist/Deuteronomist made the Yahwist position more precise and conditional, but Israel didn't fulfill the condition of obeying Yahweh's law. So that covenant was "abrogated," and a "new covenant" promised (Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36:26f). Still spiritual growth is not linear. We don't just go forward, but cycle back to previous levels when faced with too great a challenge. When the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem they did not live by the promised Spirit but actually increased their dependence on the Law for fear of being exiled again. They scoured their Scriptures and found 613 laws (some positive like "be fruitful and multiply") which they tried to keep and make others keep. Out of this perspective grew the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time who were so zealous for the law. Israel didn't progress beyond the "individuating stage" till the time of Jesus.

Jesus introduced a new stage that I have called "communitarian faith." It is a stage of forgiving enemies, even enemies who were non-Jews and sinners (unheard of before Jesus). For God "lets his sun shine on the good and bad alike." What Jesus advocated, to reach out to sinners and even be open to the non-Jew, was the direct opposite of the "familial" emphasis on separation from sinners and non-believers. Hence Israel's growing opposition to Jesus. The story of the "Good Samaritan" (Lk 10:25-37) shows this shift. The scribe asked "who is my neighbor?" (i.e., who is "family" to me and to be included). Jesus told the parable and concluded with the question: "who was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?" (i.e., who created neighborliness to the one in need). The communitarian stages looks to what one can give (so it looks for sinners and non-believers). Those in this stage forgive sinners and enemies, not because they deserve it, but because God has forgiven them. It builds on "individuating faith" which is grounded in the gift of God's Spirit.

I have added a final stage, “mission faith,” which goes beyond even forgiving enemies to the ultimate ground of union with God’s unconditional love. For on the cross Jesus wasn’t healing or ministering to anyone. What he was doing was trusting in God’s love no matter what – despite feeling abandoned (as Adam and Eve abandoned God and felt abandoned), and despite being betrayed (our deepest hurt). His ultimate mission, then, was not simply to make converts (though he wanted all to “repent and believe the Good News”). It was to create again the possibility of union with God, to breakthrough the wall of original sin and open the possibility of redeeming faith through faith in him.

These stages were lived by Jesus. He was born of Mary who Catholics believe was freed from original sin (see book on Mary in *Books*). So he received her total trust and obedience to God’s will. He learned the tradition in his hidden life (till 30!) and so grew in “familial faith.” His baptism and temptations show a transition to “individuating faith” where he could trust God and not take his needs into his own hands, and on the basis of that trust he could teach the beatitudes (Mt 5-7) which deepened the law to the inner heart and opened us to forgiving enemies and all. And finally, he made the ultimate self-gift on the cross, expressing God’s self-gift in freely saving us. In Jesus we are empowered to go through the same stages as we get healed in families and cultural patterns.

II. Relating these stages to Family Systems:

A. Murray Bowen: As I mentioned in the Introduction, Bowen is a major proponent of intergenerational family systems therapy. He found that children really are influenced by immature patterns stemming from the undifferentiated relationships of their parents and ancestors. By differentiation (maturity) he meant that the parents could maintain their point of view at the same time as being open to their spouse’s point of view. They could “differentiate **in** relationship.” They wouldn’t jump in and finish the other’s sentences, or interrupt and correct them. They would listen appreciatively and be able to mirror the reasons and feelings of the other before again clarifying their position, reasons and feelings. Those who were not differentiated (were immature emotionally) would either dominate (insist on their position and discount the other), get caught in unenlightened fighting (when neither would give in) or withdraw (either by moving away physically to another part of the country or emotionally by not communicating). If those responses were used, the person would stay immature at the very point of disconnection. Divorces, for instance, would not be healed simply by disconnecting. There needs to be forgiveness and reconciliation or the wound will be fixated at the point of break. As I put it, “The only reason for divorce is love.” Divorce in some cases is the most loving thing to do for both parties. Love never ends, but perhaps God was not calling for the marriage in the first place, or they weren’t mature enough to marry so growth was hindered rather than helped by the relationship. Then love, however difficult, would lead one to “let go” of the other. What is important is that the good will be maintained (by a will act, not necessarily feeling) despite the divorce. Jesus showed this maturity when he stayed back in the temple (“to be about my Father’s business”) but then went down “and was subject to them.” (Lk 2:41-52) He differentiated (by following God) yet in relationship (by being subject because of God).

B. Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy: Nagy gives us another perspective that is extremely important. He also is an intergenerational family therapist with a clinic in Philadelphia. He has written a book called *Invisible Loyalties* which shows how a major reason for not differentiating is not that we don't have the courage to do it, but that we have an "invisible loyalty" that prevents us from disconnecting. For example, a woman who reacts against her perfectionistic mother finds herself compulsively cleaning her house – just like her mother. Her compulsive cleaning is an unconscious bond to her mother whom she has consciously rejected. Or my case, I was not able to take final vows as a Jesuit until I had chosen my father. I learned later that choosing to take final vows would be choosing a substitute father (a disloyalty) until I had chosen my father. We gain freedom to be different to the extent that we connect in gratitude with our parents (gain "positive entitlement" as Nagy would say). So in retreats of family healing, I pray for participants to "choose" their fathers/mothers (out of all possible fathers/mothers). When that loyalty is respected, then it is a higher loyalty to be all that one should be (that is, to differentiate).

III. Diagramming your family: With those understandings in mind, let us now diagram our families, keeping in mind family patterns that have influenced you. (see *Genogram Format* in *Other Resources*). Men are squares and put on the left, women circles on the right. The marriage line is underneath and the children underneath from left to right beginning with the oldest. Twins are indicated by two lines from the same point on the marriage line. Identical twins are connected with a third line. If one is not married but in a stable relationship, a dotted line is used. Miscarriages, still births and abortions (where the gender is not known) are indicated by a black dot with MC, SB or AB on the line connecting them to the marriage line. They are put where they would have been had they lived. Deaths are and X with an indication of date. Marriage dates are put above the marriage line. Separations (one slash through the marriage line) and divorces (two parallel slashes) are also given dates. Adoptions are indicated by a dotted line connecting to the marriage line with AD across it. The one whose genogram it is marked by a double circle (female) or a double square (male). Diagram at least three generations (grandparents, parents, children) to get a sense of recurring patterns. These are basic directions. For a more complete analysis see *Genograms in Family Assessment*, by Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson (N.Y.: Norton, 1985).

Finding Gifts, Biases, Hurts, Evil, God image. Once I have diagrammed a family, which I quickly do with everyone who comes for spiritual direction or counseling, I recommend looking for the following:

Gifts: I begin with gifts in order to build on gratitude and offset a negating "invisible loyalty." When we are grateful, we connect in appreciation and gain "positive entitlement" to look at more negative things. I often use my own family as an example. My mother was Irish, Scotch and Welsh and my Dad puritan English (who came to America on the 4th pilgrim boat in 1638). My Dad's gift was honor and loyalty, my Mom's was hospitality and play. I look for gifts from the culture, the family, and the individual. (see *Outline for Family Healing* in *Other Resources*)

Biases: The opposite of a gift is a bias (a “shadow side” as Jung might say). Those who are extraverted usually are weak in introversion, etc.). My Dad’s loyalty and honor became “stubbornness” on the shadow side. My Mom’s fun became an inability to talk about painful things on the shadow side. Everyone’s gift has a shadow side and vice versa, even criminals can be kind to the weak. Biases also can be cultural (like the Irish depression of repressed pain), familial (particular to your family) and individual (everyone has a different relationship to their family of origin).

Hurts: Cancers run in families as do addictions (to alcohol, eating, relationships), divorces, heart attacks, depression and mental illness, suicides and just about everything else. You will begin to see these patterns as soon as you diagram your family tree and mark out some of these characteristics. There are also cultural hurts (like the Irish famine and oppression by the English) that affect everyone in the culture.

Evil: Beyond hurts is evil – murder, lying, stealing, abuse of children, etc. etc. Hurts need healing, evil needs repentance (conversion) and the decision to change one’s life. There can be cultural evil – patterns of evil like the Mafia, Satanism, etc. – as well as familial and individual.

God image: Essential to healing is trust in God, but our God-image (as judge, “Grand depriver,” distant, etc.) may prevent one from opening to God’s healing. This also needs to be noted and brought to Jesus for possible conversion and healing. It also can be lodged in the culture, the family and/or the individual.

IV. Nine Steps in healing. I have found at least nine basic steps in the process of healing (there are surely others). I help people to identify the issue they are dealing with (depression, anger, failure to bond, etc.) and then pray their way through these steps:

- 1) Identify Present Issue:** Every one comes with a different issue for counseling, sometimes a different issue each week. We cannot heal everything so it is important to address the issue that is surfacing. As an example I often take my experience of depression when I was studying in Germany. Others consider a sense of disconnection, anger, shame, guilt, or patterns of physical illness. What is surfacing at present?
- 2) Own your feelings around it:** Everyone’s depression is different. It might stem from abandonment, or being overwhelmed, or a sense of inadequacy with feelings of hopelessness, anger, or disconnection. Every issue will be different for different people. When we “own our feelings” we take responsibility for the issue rather than trying to escape from it. We listen to it to find its meaning. My depression came from a sense of inadequacy to meet life issues with the isolation and shame that brought.
- 3) Who influenced it?** Begin with your parents and your family of origin. In my case, my mother also had a depression, as did her mother. In both cases it was from a sense of being overwhelmed by life demands and unable to meet them. In this step we look at the issue in the context of the whole family system. It is not just an individual problem but has been handed down generationally.

4) Distribute responsibility: In each of these steps we pray for God's light and guidance. Here we ask, what is my responsibility, what is someone else's. I am not responsible for my mother's depression, even though children before three tend to feel responsible for their parents unhappiness, etc. One can have a bad self-image and lack of self-confidence simply because one could not make one's mother happy. So ask God to show you what really is your responsibility and what is not. I was responsible for deciding in the womb "I won't be a burden." That awareness came when I was being prayed for for inner freedom. The word "burden" came to light and I realized then that I had said, "I won't be a burden." already in my mother's womb. We know now that this is possible and that babies in the womb are affected by parental attitudes (see *Remembering our Home: Receiving Gifts and Healing Hurts from Conception to Birth* by Matthew, Dennis and Sheila Linn and Dr. Emerson).

5) Repent: Repent comes from the Greek word, *metanoia* -- "change your belief/decision." Again, it is not our initiative that heals, but our openness to have God change us, to ask the Holy Spirit to do it. So I let go of my decision and asked God to change it. I was no burden to God and I would not have been a burden to my mother if she had not already felt overburdened. I needed to let go of my defense from experiencing the pain of not being received and to let God deal with the pain, not my decision not to need mothering.

6) Ask Healing: When we let go of the defense, our effort to deal with some pain, the pain will surface. I began to realize it hurt not to have a mother who had room for you. I let go of the pretense I didn't need a mother and simply put it in God's hands. God has infinite resources. God can personally fill that need or, as in my case, can use others to supply that need. In an Association of Christian Therapists (ACT) conference, someone sitting next to me told me she thought I needed healing, and I immediately agreed. God had raised someone up for my need. That was the beginning and others followed. God wants our healing more than we do. God only needs our permission to supply it because God won't act against our freedom. That is why we are told to "ask" (Jn 16:24).

7) Forgive: Notice how far down the steps forgiveness comes. We need to be willing to forgive from the beginning, but it doesn't really take hold until we begin to receive what we had hoped to receive from the person(s) who hurt us. I can't really "forgive" my mother until I have begun to receive the mothering I hoped to receive from her. Otherwise the hurt just keeps coming back and we forgive over and over again. "I've forgiven her. I just don't talk to her anymore!" is not really repairing a relationship. Now that I was beginning to be healed, I knew the pain of not being mothered and I realized my mother had that pain as well. Forgiveness was natural.

We need to forgive in 5 ways: 1) forgive God, 2) ask forgiveness of God, 3) forgive the other, 4) ask forgiveness of the other, 5) forgive yourself. We don't usually think of forgiving God, yet deep down we know that God gave us that mother, spouse, "friend," etc. or at least allowed us to have that experience. And we know we have also thought badly of God because of it and need to ask God's forgiveness. And even as we forgive the other (my mother, friend, ex-spouse, etc.), we know we need their forgiveness for shutting them out, etc. What we often don't think of is that we need to forgive ourselves, to have compassion for that needy part that explodes in anger or hides in shame. And perhaps we even need to be open to that part forgiving us (our manager

side). Forgiveness is the most basic key to healing for it opens reintegration and relationship and that is what heals.

8) Intercede After forgiving it is natural to want to intercede for the other person that he/she would receive the healing you are receiving. As I received mothering, I naturally prayed that my mother also would receive God's mothering love. In fact, intercession can open us further to healing. I suggest to people that when they want to pray that another (like their husband or wife) would change to be a better listener or more loving, that they should pray that the other *receive* someone to listen to them or love them, and then to ask God to give those things to oneself. For they don't listen or love because they have been listened to or loved. We cannot give what we haven't received. Intercession presupposes that I will love the other whether or not they change. Otherwise it is spiritual manipulation or control, which God won't do. God always respects our freedom. We can only change ourselves so pray that you can love them whether or not they change, and then your intercession will be a free gift. My experience is that when we let go of trying to change someone, then they change. Carl Rogers once said, "When I accept myself as I am, then I change!" That is also true of the other.

9) Developing grateful mutuality: The ultimate sign of healing is gratitude. What before was a wound is now seen as a blessing. God cannot allow anything to happen to us that cannot be turned into a blessing since "God is love." (1 Jn 4:8) And since nothing happens that God does not at least permit since God is all-powerful, the ultimate healing is to see everything as gift. God has allowed the trials in my life – my depression and other issues – to equip me to help others through their depressions. When I have a compassion for them, I begin to be thankful for that experience and for my mother and grandmother who struggled with similar experiences. Healing then goes back through the generations. "Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more" (Rom 5:20)

Each of these steps moves us forward in the stages of spiritual development. Steps 1-3 (seeing our issue in context) pertain to the familial faith stage. Steps 4-6 (finding our responsibility, repenting and seeking healing) are individuating faith. Steps 7-9 (forgiving, interceding and developing grateful mutuality) open us to communitarian and mission faith. Each issue can help us grow spirituality and that growth will bring change to our family system back through the generations.

V. Healing Across Generations: Love goes beyond death.

A. What warrants this prayer? The deeper one's healing gets, the more we link into patterns that are generational, and some issues that we experience can be appeals from past generations for prayer. Our healing service will include praying for ancestors and we need to understand its grounding in Scripture. Many examples could be given. Dr. Kenneth McAll had a patient named Edward, who experienced many symptoms – he felt a yellow band around his head and smelled sulphur and heard explosions that made him feel split in two and waves crashing. He had had thirty years of psychiatric treatment from other doctors including ECT, antidepressants and drugs for schizophrenia. The most troublesome symptom was sweating attacks for several nights climaxing on November 11. Dr. McAll concluded it sounded like pirates. Edwards last name was Hawkins and Sir John Hawkins, a famous pirate chief, had died, he found out, on Nov 11,

1595 of a tropical fever while trying to rescue his son, Richard. After having Eucharists said for the pirate chiefs and pirates and victims, Edward was freed of all symptoms he had struggled with for twenty years. Not only that but his wife conceived a child and his father, who suffered from depression for many years finally began to laugh at jokes.¹

Another example was a paper I was to review for the *Journal of Christian Healing* by Brenda Bochenek. Brenda had a strange symptom. She would turn beet red from a line above her breasts in public situations where she had to present something. Physical and emotional therapy had not helped. When Dr. McAll was in town, she consulted with him and found that one of her ancestors was a Indian maiden who had married a French trapper. Her tribe, in retribution, had buried her alive up to that line and set her on fire. They had also killed the trapper. This symptom broke out in Brenda when she was in grade school and the teacher criticized her pronunciation. After having a Eucharist and asking that the maiden and trapper could forgive her tribe, and that she could forgive the teacher, her symptom went away. Again it was a call for prayer.

This form of prayer is controversial for Protestants, who often are taught that the dead remain asleep till the last judgment (Heb 9:27), and that we are taught in Scripture not relate to them.² It is also unusual for Catholics, who pray for the souls in purgatory, but not in this particular way. What warrants us to pray this way?

In the first place, prayer for the dead is not a discovery of Roman Catholics. It was already performed by the Maccabees (see 2 Mac 12:43-46). True, this book is in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) and not in the Hebrew Bible that is used by the Protestants, but till the Reformation it was accepted as inspired and it witnesses to Jewish practices that later developed in the Pharisaic party. Judas took up a collection to have sacrifices performed for those who died in battle. The writer says, "In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death." (12:43-44). Even now, Jewish families "pray the ancient *Yizkor* or memorial service for the departed in the synagogue four times a year and make a charitable offering."³ Daniel (9:20) and Baruch (3:1-8) also pray for themselves and their ancestors.

In the New Testament, there is clear faith that Jesus' victorious cross/resurrection affected the dead as well as the living. 1 Pt 3:18-22 says that Jesus "went to preach to the spirits in prison who had disobeyed. . . in the days of Noah" (souls?, or fallen spirits? Gn 6:1-4) and 1 Pt 3:18-22 says, "the reason the Gospel was preached even to the dead that, though condemned in the flesh in human estimation, they might live in the spirit in the estimation of God." It is not clear in this passage who preached the Gospel. It seems to be saints who died (a different case from 1 Pt 3:18). In any case, though dead, they can respond to the Gospel. In Mt 27:51-53, tombs were opened at Jesus' death and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

Was this a one-time event, as Connor states, or the beginning of a new state of the world? We see that Paul prays for Onesiphorus, who presumably has died, “May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day.” (2 Tim 1:18) And the Corinthians had a practice of being baptized on behalf of the dead (1 Cor 15:29), a practice Paul presupposes and does not condemn. Paul, as a learned Pharisee, would have been used to praying for the dead.

Further, there is indication that Jesus’ resurrection is the ground of this new possibility of risen life. John 5:25 says, “The hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear it will live.” Those are not just words, for Lazarus, who is dead four days (beyond the three days when the soul stays near the body in Jewish thought), hears Jesus call his name and comes forth alive. That this new life is an eternal NOW is indicated in Luke 23:43 where Jesus tells the good thief: “This day you will be with me in paradise.” The resurrected life is NOW in his case.

Theologically, we believe that Jesus’ resurrection establishes him as Lord of the living and the dead (the Creed) in an eternal now. Since Christian prayer is in union with Jesus, we stand in that “eternal now,” interceding for those who have died that they might enter into the forgiveness of Jesus -- whose forgiveness is all-embracing. “Father forgive them (all of us) for they know not what they are doing.” (Lk 23:34)

This is not mediumistic. We do not encourage immediate contact with those who have died unless the Lord allows that for some reason. We pray in and through Jesus, asking him to mediate anything we want to communicate to the person as well as our prayers for forgiveness and healing, and we ask Jesus to mediate what he allows the other to communicate to us.

B. What areas need special prayer?

The areas that need prayer depend on one’s family. Any cut-off or unforgiven sin or unhealed wound would need prayer. In general, whatever among the living needs prayer would also need prayer for the dead if it had not been dealt with. We always start with a thankful heart and all prayer is done in that loving context. I also start a healing process in the Mass by renewing our baptism and praying that we be regrounded in Jesus, for it is only with Jesus and his timeless resurrection victory that we can pray for those who have gone before us. With that presupposition, I always include the following needs in prayer services:

1) Occult Bondage: Prayer will be blocked if a person or family is under the influence of curses, or occult practices, witchcraft, Satanism, Masonry, etc. I begin the prayer by breaking those bondages three times (with a Trinitarian prayer) and praying that the family be renewed in their Baptismal promises. If ancestors were involved in those practices, I also pray for their forgiveness and deliverance “on condition they repent and are open to forgiveness.” God wants to forgive all, but forgiveness depends on the willingness of the recipient.

2) Abortions, Stillbirths, Miscarriages: A second area I always include has to do with babies who have not been baptized or named. This is a powerful area for healing since the sacrament of reconciliation doesn’t usually include prayer for the baby. From a

family systems point of view, there is a relationship between mother and child that needs healing. We have learned from prenatal studies that the child in the womb is affected by attitudes of the parents, and abortion attempts or actual abortions are a most serious rejection. We pray that the baby be freed from the spirit of rejection, and we pray for the name God has picked out for him/her (see Is 49:1). I then with Jesus baptize the baby into Jesus' family, using the baptismal formula but realizing it is only analogously the same as a baptism of a present infant – "I baptize you, (name), in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." -- and I pray that the infant be received with joy into Jesus' family. I also pray for forgiveness of the mother and father and reconciliation between parents and infant. Finally, I pray that the baby be anointed with the Holy Spirit to become an intercessor for the family. It also helps if a plant or bush is planted in the name of the child afterwards to remind the family to pray for the child.⁴

3. Black sheep: (those cut off from family, the unremembered). We noted that any cut-off keeps the wound unhealed and unresolved. This is also true from those who have died. We may think that if we forget about someone, that is all we can do. What happens then is that the wound goes into the unconscious ready to be triggered by any similar event. We need to unite in order to differentiate. I ask forgiveness on behalf of the family for not reaching out sooner, and I ask Jesus to help the person forgive his/her family. I then pray for reconciliation and release of the life Jesus meant to be experienced between the person and their family.

4. Cruel deaths: Some who have died through suicide, as war dead or murder victims, have not been prayed for. The ancestors of Edward Hawkins, for example, had not been prayed for. In the past Catholics considered suicides beyond help and didn't pray for them. Now we hope that all these have not permanently rejected God and may be open to Jesus' gift of forgiveness from the cross. We ask forgiveness for not remembering them sooner, then ask God to give them the grace to accept forgiveness for their sins, and I extend forgiveness in the name of Jesus to the extent they receive it.

5. Those unfulfilled: A final group I especially remember are those who feel they have failed in life and who therefore cling, control and can't seem to release themselves to Jesus. They need to know that Jesus will make up for what they have failed to do if they will let him. I pray that they will receive the gift of trust in the all sufficiency of Jesus' self-gift on the cross. I offer forgiveness to the extent they receive it and pray that they will be anointed by the Holy Spirit to become intercessors for their families and those they have disappointed.

6. Other intentions: I give some time after those intentions for people to remember particular needs they have in their families – addictions, failures in relationships (divorces, separations), depressions, etc. We pray that God will forgive any whose issues continue to influence our family negatively. We pray also that these patterns will be broken for our offspring and that they will experience the blessings promised by Our Lord to those turn from evil and do good. (Ez 18)

VI. Questions.

VII. Conclude with a service for healing the family tree.

Notes:

¹ See Matthew, Dennis and Sheila Linn, *Healing the Greatest Hurt* (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 91-92. Many other stories are in Dr. Kenneth McAll, *Healing the Family Tree*, (London, Sheldon Press, 1982).

² See the objections of Clinton Conner, MA, ACSW “Praying for Departed Loved Ones: A Critique,” and the responses by Douglas Schoeninger, PhD and Robert Sears, SJ, PhD in *Journal of Christian Healing*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1985), pp. 50-57.

³ See Linns, *Healing the Greatest Hurt*, pp. 196-7.

⁴ See Linns, *Healing the Greatest Hurt*, pp. 138-39. Also see Serafina Anfuso, “Abuse and Abortion: Spiritual Dimensions,” in *Journal of Christian Healing*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spring, 1991, 3-13.