Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

FAITH FEEDS GUEST GUIDE
OUR FAITH, OUR STORIES

C21
THE CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY CENTER

BOSTON COLLEGE
The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals in Catholic parishes who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host parishioner facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s bi-annual magazine, *C21 Resources*.

This FAITH FEEDS themed conversation will be on **Our Faith, Our Stories**. Selected articles have been taken from the Fall 2015 issue of *C21 Resources*. 
A PROMISE TO A FRIEND

by Jack Dunn

I went over to Greece to visit with Nick, and on my last day there I said to him, “There’s something I need to tell you: I love you, and I’ve cherished every day of my 30-year friendship with you.” He said to me, “I love you, too, and I know I’m going to die, but I need you to know that I’m happy, I’m at peace, and I believe that we’ll see each other again in the Kingdom.”

His words were the most profoundly beautiful thing a friend had ever said to me. Here I was angry at the world and feeling sorry for myself, and here he was confronting the cruelest of illnesses, and somehow he was happy, he was at peace, and he was thinking about God’s Kingdom.

I left him that day and promised that I would be back to see him as soon as I could. I fulfilled my promise and returned around six months later. Upon arriving, I noticed how much he had declined. He was confined to a bed and a chair, and his speech was now slurred. On the last day of my visit I said to him, “I can’t explain this, but I need you to tell me what I can do for you. It would do me wonders to do something for you.” He said, “There is something that I’d like you to do.” I said, Anything, anything at all.” And he said, “I want you to go to Confession.”

Confession? I was shocked. I thought he was going to ask me to run a marathon in his honor, start a scholarship, find a cure, paint his house, anything. But Confession? I had not been to Confession in years. I guess I just could not go there. I went to Mass faithfully every Sunday and offered my sins up to God, but I could not embrace the sacrament of reconciliation. I was hurt and angry over the losses I had endured, and I selfishly felt that I was owed more than I was getting in return.

So I returned home, having made a deathbed promise to a dying friend that I would go to Confession. And I did what guys always do: I put it off. I put it off until the week before I was scheduled to return to Greece to see my friend. That Sunday before my trip, the priest talked at Mass about an Archdiocesan initiative called The Light Is On for You, where local parishes offer the sacrament of reconciliation on Wednesday evenings from 6:30 to 8 p.m.

The Wednesday evening before my Thursday flight, I set out to fulfill my promise. I went to my parish in the town where I live. I walked up the stairs, still not embracing the concept, but knowing what I had to do. I entered the church and saw my pastor entering into the confessional to hear confessions. I said, “Time out. I know him. He knows me. This is too personal. This won’t work for me.”
So I left and went to a different church on the other side of my town. The format in this parish is to go into a small room, shut the door, and sit face-to-face across from the priest for an open confession. I did not like it. I thought, “This is too informal. I’m out of here.” So I left and I drove to a different town.

I went into a church in a neighboring town and was sitting in the pew, awaiting my turn to go into the confessional, when I looked to my right and suddenly saw the mother of an ex-girlfriend - a girl I had dated in college - enter the church. I thought, “I have 20 years’ worth of sins, and the mother of my ex is going to see me in Confession for a half hour!” All I could picture was her calling my ex-girlfriend and saying, “I saw that no-good former boyfriend of yours at Confession last night, and he was in there for 30 minutes! Thirty minutes’ worth of sins. It’s a good thing you dumped him when you did!”

I got in my car, drove down the street, and eventually came to St. Anne’s Parish - St. Anne, the mother of the Blessed Mother. I walked into St. Anne’s and as I was going up the stairs, the church lights were suddenly turned off. I looked at my watch. It was 8:30. I had blown my chance. I could not believe it. I had reneged on a promise to my dying friend. I was furious with myself. Then, amazingly, the parish priest looked out and realized that I was standing on the steps. So he turned the church lights back on, unlocked the door, and went into the confessional, illuminating the light above. I entered the confessional, knelt down and said, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It’s been 20 years since my last Confession, and I’m here only because I promised my best friend that I’d do this. So please forgive me. Here are my sins…”

I let it all out - 20 years’ worth of sins, regrets, mistakes, everything. And when I finished, in the kindest of voices, the priest said to me:

“You have to understand that God loves you. He loves you unconditionally and He forgives your transgressions because He made you and He understands you. God wants more than anything for you to be happy. So all this baggage that you’ve been carrying around for 20 years, let it go. Let it go, because God wants you to be free to live your life to the fullest. All He asks is that you go forth and do your best to sin no more.”

Overcome with emotion, I thanked him, and as I got up to leave, he said, “And one more thing: You have a hell of a friend.”

I cannot explain it in any other way, but I felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I felt joyous. I felt liberated from the burdens I had carried in my heart for years. I went home, and the next day I kissed my wife and my kids and flew to Greece to see my dying friend. Upon arriving, it was clear that he had worsened. He was very thin, and could no longer speak, but his eyes lit up when I walked in. I said, “Nick, I have something to share with you. I went to Confession as you asked and I feel wonderful. I have never felt better. I will never be able to thank you for what you did for me.”

And he burst into tears.

Jack Dunn is Associate Vice President for University Communications at Boston College.
“Stories shape who we are, where we come from, how we understand ourselves.”
—Brian Braman, Professor of the Practice of Philosophy, Boston College

Summary:
Jack Dunn recounts a pivotal moment in his own faith journey in which he makes a promise to a dying friend that he will return to the sacrament of Confession. Despite facing internal and external roadblocks, Jack is ultimately able to make good on his word. In the end, he shares that he gained more than he gave in the process.

Questions for Reflection:
1. What have been the pivotal moments in your own faith journey?
2. What are the friendships and relationships that have shaped your faith?
3. Are there aspects of faith that you’d like to reintroduce into your routine or revisit?
4. Have you had a similar, life-changing experience with Confession or the Eucharist?
I have become aware in my travels as an “author” — as opposed to my travels as a writer, which all take place at my desk — that many readers are more interested in acquiring a lesson from a serious novel than they are in participating in the “magic” of it, the magic of art. I suspect this is the reason that novelists are more often invited to “give talks” rather than to read from their work. I also suspect this is why the most frequent questions we hear are variations of “what were you trying to say . . . “ or “. . . is that what you intended?”

I have nothing against hidden meaning, or any kind of meaning. I have been known, in fact, to quote T.S. Eliot’s lament to both my students and to my children, “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” But I would argue that the experience, the experience of the conjured world, how a novel happens, is primary . . .

So what then of the idea of the sacramental imagination?
ination, or better yet, as the phrase seems to imply, what of the sacramental imagination of the Catholic writer? Doesn’t the very notion of a story told by an author with a sacramental imagination imply that the author begins with a conviction, a motive – in this case, that God reveals himself through the physical world - and then attempts to create just such a world by telling a story that upholds, or illustrates, this conviction?

If the sacramental imagination is something that exists prior to the storytelling, if it is part of some conviction, some belief, then doesn’t the motive for the story constitute its reason for being? Isn’t the novel’s world merely secondary, a cartoon that runs beside the editorial, a picture meant to convey an idea?

In the early days of my writing career, I allowed myself one motive, one goal, for the fiction I would write. I would, as Joseph Conrad put it, seek “to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe.”… It is the motive I continue to serve, thirty years on.

Of course, I am not unique in this. I daresay Conrad’s injunction operates to some degree in all of us who write. Flannery O’Connor agreed with it, but then added, with all the conviction of her great faith: “For me the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe . . . The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.”

Personally, I am in no way certain that the Divine Light shines through the things of this world—not with the kind of certainty that would sustain a thirty year career dedicated to demonstrating this through fiction... I am a born and bred Catholic, even a somewhat public Catholic, a “practicing Catholic,” – if “practicing” means still working at it, still not doing it very well, certainly not yet ready to take the stage. I approach my faith with none of O’Connor’s breathtaking certainty.

But what I am certain of, through long experience, is the validity of the conjured world, of a universe made visible by the magic of art.

And if in the course of delineating this fictional world, of making you see, I should discover, even as my narrator discovers, as my reader discovers, something absolutely astonishing: that love is redemptive, for instance, that love is a mystery that outruns time, physical change, mortality—much as our Christian faith tells us it does—well, I’m as surprised at this as you are. This is not a message or a meaning I set out to discover, or to illustrate, or to confirm. It’s simply what happened—what happens—when, through the magic of art, through the grace of that holy trinity of writer/narrator/reader a world is conjured via the written word, a world where the concrete shimmers with the light of the unseen, where life conquers death, where love redeems us.

“Is that what you meant to say?” the chattering classes well may ask. “As a practicing Catholic, do you think this is true? Is that what you were trying to prove?”

I repeat my disclaimer. I set out to prove nothing. I know nothing about the real world. I cannot speak with certainty about what the Creator does or does not do in it.

But as one part of that holy trio that constitutes the necessary and silent confluence of minds that transforms marks on a page into a world, I can point to what we see together, in all its vividness and clarity, and say, as astonished as narrator and reader alike, by love, by grace, by God in all things, “Look, it is there.”

ALICE MCDERMOTT is an American writer and the Richard A. Macksey Professor of Humanities at Johns Hopkins University.
STORYTELLING AND THE SACRAMENTAL IMAGINATION

“Such is the Christian life, a love story with God.”
—Pope Francis

Summary
Alice McDermott shares that as a Catholic writer, she understands that the sacramental imagination is a key part of her vocation. This means that she writes with the conviction that the invisible God reveals himself through the visible world. Stories — fictional or otherwise — convey the Catholic, Ignatian claim that God can be found in all things.

Questions for Reflection
1. McDermott says that writers and readers can discover things which are “astonishing,” like the fact that “love is redemptive,” and that “love outruns time, physical change, mortality.” How has God astonished you in your life? What do you marvel at when you think about your experiences and relationships?
2. What books, films, or works of art have helped you to grow in your faith? What did they reveal to you?
3. Has God revealed himself to you in a particular place or in nature? Where was it and what did you learn?
BORN ON THIRD BASE

by William B. Neenan, S.J.

William B. Neenan, S.J. spoke to the students about some of the lessons he learned in life, and he passed away two months later. Here’s an excerpt for the Agape Latte talk:

I’ve learned that there’s nothing to be learned from losing a game twice. When you lose once, you learn something. The second time around, you ain’t learned nothing. That’s one thing.

The second thing I’ve learned is the longest river in the United States is the Missouri River. Not the Mississippi River, which all of you people that somehow sneaked into Boston College erroneously thinking that the Mississippi River was the longest – you are dead wrong. Google it when you get back to your apartment. So those are two things I’ve learned.

The third thing I’ve learned is you were born on third base – all of us. We have people here of a lot of different traditions. Whether you’re Catholic, Jewish, Unitarian, Methodist, Muslim – whatever you are, this has been passed on to you. It’s been passed on to you. And here we are.

John Bapst was a Jesuit in 1855-ish. He used to come down from Canada and celebrate Mass with the French Canadian Catholics. Maine, at that time, had very few Catholics. In fact, there was a lot of anti-Catholic prejudice against the French Canadians. He came down to this French Canadian family, and he was celebrating Mass in the home. And this family had three kids in the Ellsworth public schools.

In those days, you had to read the Bible, and you had to have the King James translation of the Bible. The King James is named after King James of England. I grew up as a little boy – that was the Protestant translation. Well, this was a Catholic family, and they had the Catholic translation, which was called Douay-Rheims – two towns in Europe where the Bible was translated. They had that. But they wouldn’t allow this family to use the Catholic translation. Father Bapst said, “No, you got a right to do it.” Use it. Well, he got in trouble. And the people in Ellsworth, Maine, drove him out of town and said, don’t come back, because if you come back, you’re in real trouble.

Well, he came back about six months later. And he was celebrating Mass in this house, and the people of Ellsworth knew he was there. They got him. They dragged him out. They tarred and feathered him. Now tar – you know what tar is? It’s that hot black stuff. They poured that hot black stuff on him. Then they took feathers. You guys know what chickens are – you’ve seen a chicken – that’s feathers. They stuck the feathers on him. And they tied him to a tree, and they started a fire at his feet. They were going to burn him to death. And the Presbyterian minister in Ellsworth intervened and saved his life.

That’s Bapst – John Bapst. He was the first president of Boston College. We are here today, all of us, on third base because people like Bapst did what they did and founded Boston College.

WILLIAM B. NEENAN, S.J. (1929-2014) was Vice President and Special Assistant to the President at Boston College.
“Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope...”
—1 Peter 3:15

Summary
In an essay adapted from his 2015 Agape Latte talk, the late William B. Neenan, S.J., explores the idea that we are, in many ways, the sum of the stories and sacrifices of those who came before us. Our own story is shaped by the faith lives of others and the points of intersection between their lives and ours.

Questions for Reflection:
1. Many of us have a lot of people to thank for helping us to get to where we are today. Who are some of the people God has put in your life who have helped shape your story?
2. Father Neenan shares that life has a lot of lessons to teach us. Can you share some of the lessons that you’ve learned through your faith life?
3. What lessons do you want to pass down to future generations? Whose story might God be calling you to shape?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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