



Face to face with...

HEATHER KING!

A dialogue led by Monsignor Lorenzo ALBACETE with Heather KING, commentator for National Public Radio, Catholic, sober alcoholic, and author of *Redeemed: Stumbling Toward God, Marginal Sanity, and the Peace That Passes All Understanding*

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The American Bible Society Conference Center
1865 Broadway, New York, NY

Paredes: Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of Dr. Lamar Vest, President and CEO of The American Bible Society, I am delighted to welcome the Crossroads Cultural Center Board, members and friends to ABS and to our newly renovated conference center.

We are living in an environment that challenges us to continually evaluate what it means to live the Christian life. So, how do we respond? The answer begins for us with the Bible. Our view of culture must include Biblical insights. Scripture is not silent regarding culture. It contains much by way of example.

The work of the Bible House leads us to say that in some measure God is responsible for the presence of culture, for He created human beings in such a way that they are culture-producing beings. God holds us responsible for cultural stewardship. We should not fear the surrounding culture. Instead, we should strive to contribute to it through God given creativity and transform it through dialogue and proclamation. We should practice discernment while living within culture. The products of culture should be judged on the basis of intent and not form.

We acknowledge the theory that God's basic attitude towards culture is that which the Apostle Paul articulates in I Corinthians 9: 19-22. That is, he views human culture primarily as a vehicle to be used by Him and his people for Christian purposes rather than as an enemy to be combated and shunned. Let us use the vehicle for the glory of God.

Thank you to Crossroads Culture Center for their dialogue on culture.

Crossroads: Thank you, Mario. Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. A special thanks to the American Bible Society who has organized this event with us. It is a great pleasure to have here with us tonight Ms. Heather King.

Heather King is the author of three memoirs: *Parched* (New American Library 2005); *Redeemed: Stumbling Toward God, Marginal Sanity, and the Peace That Passes All Understanding* (Viking 2008); and the forthcoming *Shirt of Flame: A Year with St. Thérèse of*

Lisieux (Paraclete). A sober alcoholic and Catholic convert, she lives in Los Angeles and recently completed a six-month cross-country road trip/sabbatical/retreat. Her second book, *Redeemed* is without a doubt one of the most captivating memoirs of a religious conversion to have appeared during the last few years. The most striking aspect of the story is her deep humanity, her deep, realistic awareness that to be human means to be needy. It reminds us of a remark by Msgr. Luigi Giussani who once stated that the protagonist of history is the beggar, both Christ begging for man's heart and man's heart begging for Christ. People who think they have their act together cannot recognize Christ, because Christ comes to answer a wounded heart, a deep human longing. Those who have read the book know that it is also rich with deep human insights on many subjects. However, no matter what she discusses, Ms. King is a writer who always remains very close to the heart, so to speak. Nothing is analyzed in the abstract, everything is judged according to her elementary human experience, which is what makes her comments so intelligent. Indeed, her story is remarkable in the sense that it is not primarily an intellectual or a sentimental journey: it is first of all a true exercise in human reason in an age when reason has been so thoroughly reduced and cut off from affection.

Thus, we are delighted to have the opportunity to host Ms. King in our “*Face to Face*” series of events. I will now ask Msgr. Albacete to begin the conversation.

Albacete: I don't have anything to say. I want to hear what she has to say. Everything you say is fine. Anything anybody could say about the book *Redeemed* is fine—anything positive, that is. That's one thing. Another thing is reading it, and not only reading it, but opening your life to it. For me this was a moment of a recognition. We have completely different life stories, but there is a recognition experience. I feel, yes, she knows, she's one of us. The whole idea of the membership in the same Body of Christ, being at the same time irreplaceable individuals, but also part of each other, this is what reading your book led me to recognize. I have some questions and some suggestions, and then we'll see what the people have in mind, but if you don't buy this book and read it you will be perhaps in danger of eternal damnation.

King: At least.

Albacete: At least.

King: What's with this “one of the best conversion books of the last few years”?

Albacete: Centuries!

King: Come on! Of all time!

Albacete: When St. Augustine eliminated the humor from *The Confessions* it became number two; you're number one!

King: I just want to say I'm just humbled to the ground to be here, period, and especially with Msgr. Albacete. Your wonderful book *God at the Ritz* I just reread and we're both Dennis Potter fans. You mentioned that in that incredible interview with Robert Wright, that very smart British guy. And Rita had given me these very erudite questions from Msgr. that—

Albacete: It was just a joke.

King: Oh, you were just kidding? Because I spent two days—these questions are like, “Christ stood before Pilate and Pilate said, ‘What is truth?’ What do you think truth is?” I mean, questions like that. I’m just a drunk. I was a terrible alcoholic, and that’s all I can give to Christ.

Albacete: I asked the questions, but part of it was, you know, this is really absurd writing these questions, but part of it because I could recognize...Ten years ago I had to begin to relearn everything I thought I knew. I’ve been a Catholic—in my culture anything that moves gets baptized a Catholic! Anyway, I was a scientist, and I became a priest. A big jump. Well, it really wasn’t a big jump. I was somewhat certain of my vocation by then. But the point is, it was when I met Fr. Giussani, and even then it was a whole ten years ago that a journey began. And it’s still going on. Fr. Giussani says that when Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,” the order is not arbitrary. There is a concrete path. First the *Way*, he is discovered as *Way*. Maybe you stay there the rest of your life, but then it moves to *Truth*. I understand *Way*, but *Truth*? *Truth* of what? *Truth* that is real, reality; it has to do with reality. He is the *Way* so that I can know what is real. And then finally, through sheer grace, he is my *Life*. What I found is that you follow that path. That’s what I recognize the most. When I read your book, although those things are not that organized—but I wish I could know whether I’m understood or not. That is why this thing means so much to me, and so anything you want to say, say. If you want to say, “I have no idea what the truth is,” fine.

King: No, thank you. That was one of the questions, and I thought about it. And I think I should briefly tell my story which was or is: born and raised on the coast of New Hampshire, small town, big family, eight kids in my family, my father was a brick layer, my mother was a housewife, we didn’t have a lot of money, but there was a big emphasis on books and on music. We had a piano and they scrimped and saved to give us all music lessons. We lived across from the Congregational Church, so we went to Sunday School. My position in the family was I was the oldest of my parents’ six kids. My father, it turned out had been married before and been divorced and gotten custody of the kids, which was this huge, scandalous, shameful secret. And so I really did not know where my older half-brother and half-sister came from for quite a while. They didn’t really tell me. My mother finally whispered the heinous word *divorce*, and so I had a real sense as I look back of original sin and the sense of having inherited generations of melancholy, mentally compromised emotional state. There was a lot of depression. There was a lot of alcoholism in my family on both sides, and I, as the oldest of my parents’ six kids from a very young age just sensed something is wrong. I had a deep sense of existential exile from the age of six. And my position in my family was that I didn’t really have a peer. The next oldest kid was seven years older than me, and the next youngest was five, so I was in this big family, but I had no peer, and I had to take care of the younger ones. So I had this whole, I am alone in the world and something’s wrong; I don’t know what it is, but I want to fix it. Particularly my father I wanted to fix. He had terrible financial anxiety. He had this really wonderful black sense of humor and he was just always nervous about money. And I wanted to make that okay for him.

I think that for a lot of us this is where it all starts. We sense this, I think it’s from Jeremiah, the beautiful quote about “the parents eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” I just

felt that very keenly. Sort of over the top emotions and wanting everyone to get along and to connect, which is actually a religious impulse. Of course I didn't know that then.

Anyway, we grew up across the street from the Congregational Church, we went to church, and my whole idea of God had to do with coldness—cold New England winters, our house was cold. They were way too cheap to jack up the heat. Our house was 55 degrees all winter. It was just freezing. I would sort of lie on hearth like a reptile from October through May. We waited for the bus on the steps of the church, and in the church there was no body on the cross; there was no Person. So my sense was, God is the high school principal, and you get straight A's, which I did, and you win the spelling bee, which I did, and that's how you earn love. You earn love by doing well in school and not making a mistake ever, and then being inside totally resentful and rebellious with low-grade, petty irritation at all times.

So that was the set up, and when I discovered alcohol when I was thirteen, as many of my sober alcoholic friends say, "By the time I had that first drink, I really needed it!" I did. Again, the first time I drank was really a religious experience. Unfortunately for an alcoholic who has this neurological mis-wiring, neurological glitch such that when you take a drink you've ceded all free will. Eventually this mental obsession, physical craving (it might take a while) is going to set up, and it progresses. But the very first time I drank, it was that feeling I'd looked for my whole life—I love everybody; everybody loves me. And it lasted a very short period of time before I had a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde personality. I would love you and then I would turn on you on a dime, and blackout and get sick, and all the very negative repercussions. But I just remembered that initial ecstatic feeling of being connected, and I chased that for twenty years. "Almost to the gates of insanity or death," as they say will happen. I went to law school somehow, some time during that...don't ask. A very ill-conceived idea. I'm so NOT cut out to be a lawyer. I'm always the one who is off looking for a place in a corner to read Emily Dickinson or listen to some mournful fugue. I also am terrified of confrontation.

The point is I had to tell that to get to "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." So when I sobered up finally—my family sent me to rehab. They had an intervention for me back in 1986. It wasn't cool; it wasn't a reality show then; it was nothing. It was really horrible. What was particularly horrifying about mine is that most of my brothers and sisters are also alcoholics and/or drug addicts and they were at my intervention saying, "Maybe you should slow down." My crack head brother Joe was guarding the door and I was just kind of, "Et tu, Brute?" "Things aren't looking too good, sis." From a serious standpoint, I look back and I see how incredibly lucky I was. I mean, I'll be an alcoholic till the day I die; I haven't had a drink in many, many years now, but I came up against something and it was alcoholism, against which my intelligence, my humor, my charm, my whatever—we all have our little arsenal stuff that we think gets us through, and none of that mattered; it did not avail me anything. I was absolutely powerless. And just before my parents had the intervention, I had had a moment where I fell to my knees and prayed the Lord's Prayer because I had realized if I keep drinking like this I'm going to die, and I always thought, oh evil, that's some kind of medieval...maybe Hitler is evil. And I realized, no, what you are doing is evil; what's taken over you is evil. This is absolutely anti-life; it is toward death; you're being pulled down to the Netherworld. And I prayed sincerely, which I looked up later means *without decay*, I prayed, "Deliver me from evil," because I just knew I can't stop drinking and I'm going to die.

I went to this rehab and I had an experience there. It wasn't a white light, blinding, burning bush, but what happened, it was in Minnesota they sent me away to, and what happened was some time during that thirty days, I still can't pinpoint the moment, the obsession to drink was lifted. To this day (I've been sober twenty-three years) that is the central fact of my existence, that "I was a wretch, I was lost and now I'm found." And that this thing happened to me; I experienced it physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. If you've ever been in the grip of an illness like alcoholism or know anyone who has, you know it is literally equivalent to the moving of a mountain. I just knew, there is no way this thing that has been on me for twenty years could be lifted. And it was lifted.

So when the time came, I absolutely got, oh! things happen in another realm. Something had happened to me that could not have been measured by any scientific...something had happened that no logic, no rationale...and also, it was an experience of completely unmerited mercy. I had the worst track record. I had been a bar fly, I'd had sexual wreckage that was so painful, I had so much guilt, stealing, and it was a prodigal daughter experience. Again, I didn't have the Gospel backing to even recognize that, but I realized, oh, this is interesting! I haven't done anything to deserve this and I have received and I've been invited back to the table with no questions asked! And so that was the beginning of...I got really, really grateful very quickly. And I also became curious. I just sensed something's afoot. This is interesting what's happened to me. What is it? What's behind it? What is this thing? What is this movement? And I had no language to put to it.

And then I got sober, I got married, I moved to Los Angeles and started working as a lawyer and I hated it. But I believed in God at least by this time, so I began searching. I began going to churches. I had a deep, instinctive need to worship. When you're grateful, you want to thank somebody. You want somebody to thank. My heart was so full, I didn't have a place to put it. Now mind you, I have no one except my mother who is still going to Congregational Church, but I was a child of the 60s and 70s, sexual revolution, peace, love, the whole nine yards of only stupid people believe in God, not sophisticated, not people like me who read Kafka and Dostoevsky (completely skipping Dostoevsky's a huge, total Catholic).

Anyway, so I start looking and I start reading very eclectically, and I find, oh! I'll be darned! The Catholics! They're the smart ones. They've been pondering for two thousand years these same questions that were coming up for me, and they were questions about, what was I put here for? How can I be called to my very highest self? I was lucky to have had this experience of being brought to my knees by something showing me my own complete feebleness and weakness and brokenness. And I was also lucky because I had had something, however misguided the impulse was, that I was willing to die for. I was willing to die for alcohol. Again, however misguided. I was like Rip Van Winkle. I had been out of the world for twenty years, and so even though I was completely corrupt in one way, in another way I hadn't had it together enough to amass any kind of material things, and so they weren't that important to me. Not because I'm so virtuous or so detached, but I just never had anything. I had never had insurance; I didn't know how to balance a check- book. But in a way that was a good thing because it gave me a certain kind of freedom.

Anyway, I finally found my way to mass one day, but I had done this whole thing by myself. My husband was not interested at all. Everyone I knew who had been to Catholic school hated

Catholicism, and scorned Catholicism, and ridiculed the Pope, and “Oh, they hate gays”—everything that we hear and are inundated with. But something in me...really what happened was I went to mass by myself, noon mass. If you’re a non-Catholic and you’ve never been to mass and you go to a daily mass, you really do not know what’s going on. And there’s the little book in the pew and you’re just madly going through it. Okay, Sunday, they’ve got Sunday in here. If you’re lucky, if you really look hard you find Monday and you see an entrance or a communion antiphon. You’re like, how do they all know? They’ve like memorized! And I really thought, they’re going to kick me out, they’re going to know, obviously, about my track record. They’re going to just know it all. And to this day that the churches are open! I just stopped in at Blessed Sacrament on West 71st Street, this beautiful church. I didn’t quite make it on time for 5:30 mass, but I was there before they closed. And I’m still so struck as I was the first time I went to mass. I went to St. Basil’s on Wilshire Boulevard in L.A., and this whole phenomenon that we see with churches in the city where this world of finance and commerce and advertising and money and sex is going on, and then you go in to church and there are people kneeling. And that really got my attention because I said, ah, there’s something afoot here too. This is where the real stuff is.

So my experience is that the *Way* was suffering, that the *Way* was death and resurrection, (the central experience for me having had twenty hideous years as an active alcoholic), and yet this resurrection of having been relieved of that. I also saw right away that the resurrection was very patchy and very ephemeral. I think there’s a reason in the Gospels they have a huge build up and the big passion story, and then the resurrection takes up very little room. Not because everything is all suffering, but because the resurrection is, you know, we recognize him, and then he vanishes from our sight, and then we have to kind of go through it again, you know, realize oh! I’m still completely broken; I still bear the wounds. So I saw the resurrection wasn’t that I was going to be relieved of all my hideous character defects, but that was the *Way*.

And then the *Truth*. I began to see this culture that encourages us to anesthetize all pain. You’re depressed? Take a pill. You’re pregnant? Have an abortion. That might cause you suffering. You may have to raise the child. You feel lustful? Sleep around. You’re depressed? You feel tension? Immediately go buy something, go sleep with somebody, go use somebody as an object, go get drunk, shop, smoke, whatever your thing is. And I came from this really hard-core Yankee family. We were so cheap, my mother once went twenty-nine years without seeing a doctor. She had her last kid and then she never went to the doctor again until she was in her seventies. And we would break our leg and they’d give us ginger ale. I mean, we just never went to the doctor. So this again prepared me for the Great Physician. It was very virtuous in our family to be able to bear a lot of pain. There’s a good side to that. I’m not a hypochondriac. And I know there’s a dark side to that as well. But I really was very, very distrustful, I began to be very distrustful of anything...I started to think, why is it that these women who are so rabidly feminist are so willing to say, “Take birth control pills.” Who do you think owns the pharmaceutical companies? I began to see these huge inconsistencies in what I’d always learned from the culture and what my actual experience was. And so I began to see, oh, there’s actually value in not anesthetizing yourself, in becoming awake.

By this time I’m reading the Gospels, and really the Gospels and the Eucharist are how I came to Christ (I mean how else would you?), but I really caught fire with the Person of Christ—this

astounding, confounding, always surprising, tender and yet fierce, this man of total, total integrity, never a doormat, but also never stoops to the other person's fearful desire to become an adversary. The way he walks this middle I just found fascinating, because I'm one or the other. I'm girded for battle or I'm a complete, pathetic doormat who will just do anything to try to get you to love me. So I began to see these truths and to really want to be called to something higher. Because I had such a terrible sexual track record, when it came time, again, the truth that the Church teaches about our sexuality and about the sacraments and that marriage is ordered to children, I was like, oh, absolutely! Oh, thank God someone is telling us the truth about this.

And then as you say, Msgr., (I could go on forever) eventually, bit by bit by bit...I always thought that God was outside somehow. And then you begin to see, oh, no, he really wants to satisfy all of you—your sexuality, your capacity for love, your money. So I began to see he's in the bathroom, he's in the bedroom, he's in the checkbook. You begin to see that no, you don't have little compartmentalized places. He is everything, the ground of everything, and so bit by bit...Okay, I'm going to be quiet.

Albacete: No, please, go on.

King: Okay, so what happened was I was working as a lawyer; I'm working a litigation; I have a job in Beverly Hills—a total fish out of water, and I'm in real existential anguish now because I've got everything that the culture tells me I should have: I'm married, I'm a lawyer—I have this prestigious job and I'm making money for the first time in my life. (I'd been a waitress all my life, by the way, before I went to law school. I was a terrible waitress, hateful waitress, no concept of service, drunk on the job, surly, not a good waitress!) So I've got this, and I'm sober, and I'm really getting marriage—I'm not a Catholic yet, so we got married by a Justice of the Peace, but I really intuitively understood that this is a sacrament, it is life-long, you take the vow. I so wanted to be a woman of my word, and I really wanted to join up and start contributing something. So I've got this job that is just killing me that I feel this huge conflict with; I feel morally ambivalent about the whole adversarial system which artificially separates people. Once you have a lawyer, you're not allowed to communicate with that person face to face; you can only communicate through the lawyer. That just rubbed me the wrong way because my own experience was transformation takes place only face to face. By this time I'm trying to make amends for the wrongs I've done. So I've had the experience of sitting down with someone, looking them in the eye and saying, "I'm sorry I stole that money from you." "Mom, I'm sorry I worried you for so many years." "Dad, I'm sorry I took your hard-earned money that you gave me to get through law school with and spent it on booze." And I saw, oh, this again is really a physical as well as spiritual transformation. It's a transformation when you sit down with someone, so I just hated that about the law. And the people seemed really unhappy.

But more to the point, I had this deep call of my heart to be a writer, which I had had since the age of six. I learned to read, and that like my first drink, was a religious experience. I mean, I was an avid, voracious reader from a very young age, and just loved books. Books kept me alive. Even at the very worst of my drinking, which by the way was in a single room occupancy, cockroach-infested loft in Boston with a bathroom at the end of the hall—basically a skid-row welfare hotel, except I had this huge space in there. And I went to law school living in that loft, and I passed the Massachusetts Bar living in that loft, and I was just a falling-down drunk.

So now I'm a lawyer and I'm starting to step up to the plate as a human being, and I had this huge crisis because I'm thinking: Who are you? You're so lucky. People would give their right arm to be a lawyer, and look at you! You've squandered your education and now you're turning your nose up at it. You have a law degree, so God must want you to be a lawyer.

This is one of our central problems, when we think that God wants me to do this terrible, hard, grim thing that we're not in any way equipped for or made for. And again this Yankee—I don't want to be a quitter. I really do not want to be a quitter. I wanted to make my parents proud, but this thing was just killing me, and it was a huge crisis because at this point I was in my early forties and I thought: Oh right, you're going to give up seventy-something thousand per year, which was a huge amount of money. I never had any money, ever in my life, and I was married, contributing to the household—you're going to give this up and start writing? Everyone knows you never make any money writing, which in fact is true, as it's turned out. You're too old; you'll fail; you'll make a fool of yourself; this is a pipe dream; you've always had your head in the clouds and now you're going to do it again!

But I was really anguished and I started going into churches. I remember I went into this Episcopal church one day in Pasadena after arguing a motion in court. My hands would just be bloody; I was so full of anxiety that I would just pick at my hands till they bled; I just hated being a lawyer so much. And I went in and I just prayed, "Please show me what I'm supposed to do." And this is the huge place where the fall...you know, once you want to do the right thing, then you find that you either can't do it even if you know what it is, or you don't know and you just can't see that one step ahead. It was really like a Garden of Gethsemane experience. I so wanted to be good, to do God proud.

I read this thing by Flannery O'Connor shortly after (who I just love) and I think it was in one of her letters, and she said, "God cares nothing for gracefulness, nor for success. He only cares that we do the best that we can with what we've been given." And somehow that gave me permission. And I also saw that would be the sin of all sins to not...I just kept thinking, if I am on my deathbed and I think, you never tried to do this thing that you...I just thought, that is the fires of hell, and I just did not want that to happen.

So I quit my job. I really thought I was going to be a bag lady, but I was willing to do that. It's like Abraham and Isaac—when you're willing to sacrifice your kid, or whatever the equivalent of that is—if you're willing to be a bag lady; I'll be a bag lady if that's what it takes, and it seems like you never have to if you're willing to. And so I began to write and Flannery O'Connor was a huge model for me. She wrote through terrible, terrible illness and suffering and pain, and I'm sure excruciating loneliness. In a way she had no peers; she was really a genius. Obviously she had no partner, and she wrote for three or four hours every day. And I thought, that's what I'm going to do.

So I put all my obsessive-compulsiveness, take all your neurosis and make them work for you! That's what I did. So I took all my driven, will power, which I had consistently misused, and for once in my life put it toward the light. And so I started. And my actual conversion in the sense of going through RCIA and being confirmed and my first communion at the Church of the Blessed

Sacrament in Hollywood, California, I'm proud to say—my coming into the Church and my beginning to write took place almost simultaneously. And I always have viewed my writing as a religious vocation because books literally saved my life, and I so wanted to pay homage to those people who I realized have just burnt their lives out in front of a page, or a Beethoven who burnt his life out in front of writing music, because I saw those were my friends when I was drinking; they were the people who literally had that connection, that heart-to-heart, soul-to-soul. They let me know that other people suffered. They let me know I wasn't alone. They let me know that humanity, the flame of civilization was burning, and that maybe it was still burning in me.

So I have gotten to write for fourteen years. It is the only life that I ever wanted. It absolutely suits me down to the ground. I spend hours and hours a day alone, which I love because I'm just an extreme introvert. I love people, I love to be the life of the party, but it drains me. I don't get energy. I have to then go and re- (you know, all you introverts!) you have to recharge after that.

So what else? I could just go on forever.

Albacete: I could hear it forever.

King: One of the questions that you wrote was about the sacraments.

Albacete: Yes. Okay, go ahead.

King: Okay, this is one of the questions: (Because I've got to tell you about my incandescent, unrequited love—Dante and Beatrice struggle of the last ten years) Can you expand for us your experience of the sacraments as essential reminders of the physical dimension of faith in Christ?

Albacete: That's not bad.

King: It's pretty good, right? Look at these.

Albacete: I might have to answer that myself!

King: Go! You go!

Albacete: No, forget it. I ask you now.

King: Well, I find the spiritual journey, you know you get on board and there's this big burst at the beginning where you realize, oh, finally I'm on the right path. It's wonderful and things begin to fall into place. And I think you get that so that you won't leave because right after that things get really, really awful, and they seem to stay that way forever, or actually get worse because you're getting older all the while too. I've had lots of challenges. I mean, who doesn't? I had breast cancer; I had divorce—my marriage of fourteen years where we both gave it everything we had, simply didn't work out, and this again was a huge crisis because by this time I'm a convert and, you know, you can't get divorced, you can't get divorced, you took the vow, and that was again many years of agonizing, going to priests, going to confession, and I finally got divorced, annulled. And I watched my father, my beloved father die a terrible, long, drawn

out death. And so my idea of God, the point is, has to undergo this constant, constant change because it's always, oh, I thought God was this; I thought God and I have a deal. When I got cancer I really thought, not only because I thought I was going to die, but I really thought God had given me good physical health as compensation for my compromised, fragile emotional health. I really thought, oh, how kind of Him. And so it threw me off as it always does. Why does it? We're so egotistical. We always think, oh, other people's parents die, but mine don't, or other people get cancer, but not me, or other people get divorced...

So I had three pretty big things: I got divorced, I got cancer, and my father died, and then right on the heels of that, I was fifty at the time, I had literally the Dante experience when he laid eyes on Beatrice, and just said, "From henceforward my life will be misery." This incandescent falling in love just cataclysmic, blew my life apart. It was the type of thing where you see the person and then literally I would have to pull over by the side of the road after I saw him. I would just be shaking with whatever it was; you can't describe it; you know it's insane, but it's also absolutely real. And that was before I knew he didn't feel the same way about me. I knew I was going to be in for an unbelievable amount of pain, even if he too were in love with me, but he wasn't. What he said was, "I'm too sick to have a relationship." And I, of course, heard, "I want you to heal me and then I will marry you." And all the religious imagery—you've got to have had this—on the birth of Mary: Oh Mary, I've been called by the angel to bring love into the world... Oh my God! It really will be the central experience, other than getting sober, because it was so painful and yet I also realized, this too is a religious experience. And the thing is, it was obsession, although it would drive me crazy when people said, "Oh, you're just obsessed." I would think, no, you could burn me at the stake. I love him. And I did and I do, but it was also obsessive. And so I underwent this just conflicted on a zillion different levels because it was a kind of addiction/obsession. I felt like if I were more mature, if I were a good disciple of Christ, I would be able to accept this and just love him as the friend that he wanted me to be. I went to confession, I went to the Twelve Step Program for help for the romantic, I'm reading Dante, I'm reading Jung, I'm reading Helen Luke, just the mid-life, and it was really terrible suffering because I'm fifty and I'm realizing I never had kids, never really totally wanted them, but it was this whole procreative insane urge that desperately wanted to settle on this guy, and was not going to. It was absolutely so NOT returned or responded to that I just could not get my mind around a universe where I just didn't think it was possible that you could feel that way about someone and not have them feel the same way about you. And I just kept trying to tweak it. I thought he loved me but he just wouldn't admit it. If you've ever been on the receiving end of that, I'm sure it's excruciating.

I had run out of ideas and I finally got into my 96 Celica and drove across country. I decided I was going to make this ritual trip back to the coast of New Hampshire to Mom who at this point had early stage Alzheimer's; we knew she was going to have to go into the home, and I knew it was the last year that I would have a physical home, like a childhood home. You know, you go to Mom's house and you get to rifle through the refrigerator and make a mess and whatever. So I said, I'm going to take this pilgrimage. I'm going to drive home and back and I'm going to go to mass every single day. That's what's going to make it a pilgrimage. I didn't want to go to holy shrines or anything. I didn't know what else to do. I just wanted to get as close to Christ as you possibly can, and that's the only way I knew how to do it. And I also wanted to do something that was a little bit hard. I could've gone, and I often do go to daily mass at home, but I had this

pilgrim's urge to travel and so I went all the way across country, and I went to mass every single day for seven weeks. It's kind of a task because you have to get up early. Most daily mass is at eight. I'd always be tired. And you have to find a Motel 6 and find your way to the church, and lots of places don't have daily mass, so I could only stop (that ordered my trip) wherever there was a church.

So the point is the sacraments—the mass and confession as well, this other realm of our knowledge that we have this God who is incarnate, who has taken on human flesh, has pitched his tent among us, has come to earth, this confluence of the human and the divine, what we can see and what we can't see. So we have this in our midst, and why would you not want to constantly be as close to that as you possibly can? And also, that even though you want to be close to it, it doesn't necessarily console you, it doesn't necessarily make you feel good, make you feel better. In other words, you go out of love. You realize you don't get anything out of it in the worldly sense. We're so geared toward results, but I just knew there is value in making this effort to get as close to Jesus as possible. And I always find that with confession too. There's always this huge resistance of, Awww! Especially with confession, this huge shame. Oh, this is silly to go to confession. What's an impure thought or two? But you begin to see we're so closely connected that every thought and action affects the whole of the Body. Anyway, those are some of my thoughts on the sacraments.

Albacete: Listen, I'm going to write my story. When you get back to L.A., go to the Disney Studios and see if they want to do my book, *Mickey Mouse Spirituality*. After this story, what are you going to say? Come on! And this person has now written about spending a year with St. Therese of Lisieux? Who can read that book and live? When is it coming out?

King: Well, if my editor would get them to read the manuscript. You know how it goes.

Albacete: Oh, I see.

King: We hope next year.

Albacete: Oh, I can't wait.

Look, and then you ask questions. I think this is awesome. I recognize everything. There's one last point that I worry about in me, and I wonder how you deal with it, and that is to become fascinated by the story itself. I'm thinking of what...is of grace, and what is of grace is pure grace. It is something that is fascinating—I don't know how to describe it. And you have reached such points and described how you've stumbled along to them, and that is what we all do...stumbled on to that path, and at the end you've had that glimpse of something like that. I think that whenever that has happened, our biggest fear is the next day I almost have to start all over again. So I was thinking, I don't know how to phrase this question. You talk about *disinterested gaze*. In the encyclical on *God is Charity*, the Pope has said, (and we follow this with Fr. Giussani too), that in the end this is the arrival point at which you conclude, no matter what, that God is charity, the Trinitarian God, that God is absolute love. But this disinterested love that is overwhelming, and I am afraid that we may become too enamored of how we got to it.

Anyway, I was thinking about it when I read this passage from *Redeemed* and I thought, this is it; this is what I want her to say. You're talking about all the books:

These books on prayers and meditation are sacred texts. Too often my depression consists of an almost frank lack of acceptance, a sullen resistance to what simply is. "Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I Am," Christ said. I am the ground of all existence. In other words, I am reality itself. I am reality itself. What might be the effect on the world of a single heightened consciousness, the consciousness in utter accord with Christ? I don't have to try harder. I have to resist less.

These were awesome words. I don't know if you want to add anything to it, but to be there I see that you're in no danger, but it's something we have to do every day. But in any case, it's fun. There was something else, but forget it. People want to ask questions.

Q: In your story you went very quickly through a period in your life when you both converted to Catholicism and discovered your vocation as a writer. Those are two things that are very close to my heart, so I wonder if you could expand on whether there's any connection, not just to invent something, but what was happening at that point in your life that you did both of these things?

King: As I said, I was working as a lawyer, so I had this big conflict, this vocational conflict of thinking, am I supposed to be a lawyer? Am I supposed to follow this call of my heart? So to discover Christ was to also discover my vocation because once you understand or you see...I mean, the Gospel is just filled with, "Sell what you have and follow me." It became clear that I wanted to direct my energies in a direction away from the law. But this agony over which way I should go took place over a period of years. So to me, Christ is very much...it's the deepest call of our heart, and I don't mean that in any way sentimental. I'd again have to read a beautiful quote from Flannery O'Connor where she says, "The Catholic writer insofar as he has the mind of the Church will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery that it has for all its horror been found by God to be worth dying for." So that's our truth. And when you see that other people have died, you just think, of course, it is my way of laying down my life for my friends. But as Msgr. said, I don't mean to in any way imply, oh, so this is my story. And I think you can get too enamored of the story. It's all glory to God that I just kind of found my way to this home in the Church to writing. But it's just an ongoing struggle. There's joy in there, but it's an ongoing struggle. It's exactly every day that we have to get our own begging bowl again. We don't exactly start from scratch, but every day I'm still bereft, I'm still broken, I'm still jealous, I'm still all of it, so the ongoing...I mean, we have a Savior who is not ascending above the altar; He's nailed to the cross. He's dying along with us. It's our central dilemma. We're going to die. We wake up with that every day. To keep my death before me and try to stay in joy anyway is to hold that tension not to succumb to despair, not to think, what does any of this matter? But to just really believe, no, it matters absolutely even if we can't feel any particular sense of relief from that at any given moment.

Albacete: I want to make it clear that I am not denouncing the telling of the story to other people, nor, for that matter, to oneself because that is in fact what we do—witness. We have a story. The Gospels are stories of Christ indicating the experience of His followers. So I'm not

saying that. But I was saying something like your friend St. Therese of Lisieux about everything being grace, or like you described running into this guy, you had to park the car to look at him. At that point you do not begin to analyze the reasons why you may have found this person, and had it proceeded, then there was the time to tell the story of how I found him, etc...So there's nothing wrong. But the grace is beyond stories, and I wanted to underline that point because I think you do a number of times in the book stunningly reach it and say it and I found it to be one of the reasons I found *Redeemed* to be so awesome. So that's what I wanted to clarify.

Someone else, come on...to the throne of mercy...

King: The judgment seat...

Q: I was wondering if you could speak to this fact of suffering which your story, like many others even Dostoevsky, Flannery O'Connor revealed that our conversion is catapulted forward by suffering that we embrace, as the place of affection call for more...What would you say to the fact that we may really want more of the same, but we don't really relish the cross, we don't look for that suffering even if it's the place of affection? I once asked a Russian scholar, "Would Dostoevsky say that conversion is possible without the suffering?" She said, "Categorically not." This is something I'm interested in hearing about.

King: Go ahead.

Albacete: No, no, I'm totally against suffering.

King: Nobody wants to suffer. I've brought a lot of suffering upon myself and that was not a good thing. It was kind of neurotic suffering, but I think that life is designed, there's tons of suffering to go around already just by virtue of being a human, so I don't think we ever have to look for it. And actually that first time I went to mass I had this huge realization. I've been inculcated by this idea that Catholics are pro-suffering, and I saw Christ came not to say we should suffer more, but to be in solidarity with the suffering that we're already in. So I think it's more of a matter of being awake to my own reaction, even on a good day, just the thousands of petty irritations or little judgments of other people, or why can't the train come on time? Life is just a continual not-going-your-way experience, and sometimes in small ways. It just never goes your way, or hardly ever, and then when it does, it's not enough! You just want it to go your way again. So I think that's the tension of the cross, bearing it, noticing it, and starting to notice, oh, this is what I get upset about..., oh, this is interesting...what is the matter with me that this upsets me so much? So it's this huge matter of ongoing examination of conscience and taking the beam out of my own eye.

And how do I do that? I personally need tons of help and I feel very grateful that I found my way to a huge group of alcoholics and drug addicts, the last people who you would think would be able to help heal me, but they have. It's kind of this loaves and fishes...I've had to learn practical ways to navigate my way through the world to relate, to connect with other human beings. It's not a strong suit of mine. And then there's really heavy duty suffering of illness and death and broken hearts and all of that, and again, I just feel if we can go through that un-anesthetized, to consent to go through, not because the suffering is good in and of itself, but because it seems to

help us come more awake. In a way, that's the oil that we get to put in our lamps. Our lamps are in oil because we are awake enough to see what's going on.

Q: What is the actual practical way of getting through what you have to get through?

King: You let everyone else have their way. No, seriously. There's a daily Decalogue of Pope John XXIII. He talks about how you don't try to improve or regulate anyone but yourself; for instance, you keep your voice low, you dress becomingly...

Q: Blah, blah, blah...

King: Maybe "blah, blah, blah," but I have spent a lot of my life trying to improve or regulate you. I know how you should act, and if you would, you'd feel better, and I'd really feel better. And so I think this is very Gospel-based. Christ never tried to improve or regulate anyone. He said, "Are you ready?" He healed people who were just dying to be healed, who had demonstrated some deep hunger to have things be different, for themselves to be different...

Q: And so how do you personally, on a daily basis, heal yourself?

King: Well, I don't heal myself at all.

Q: How are you trying?

King: Just everything...prayer, do my little Office, stumblingly, distractedly. I say *The Jesus Prayer* a lot. I write in my journal, and that's a kind of examination of conscience. I have various spiritual director-type people, guides in my life, people who are walking the path with me who I run things by before I send the email or open my big mouth or explain to someone why they're wrong. You find this is what love is. It's not fixing people; it's not rescuing people; it's not doing for people what they can do for themselves. It's really sort of minding your own business a lot, asking yourself, Why am I so obsessed with someone else's business? What am I not doing for myself? What am I not looking at? How am I not fully living my own life? Why am I so focused on somebody else? Which constitutes a lot of my daily pain, or did more so. Maybe I'm getting a teeny bit better at it. And then as soon as you think, now I've got a foothold, there's always some huge thing that comes up which makes you realize you're just a pathetic, needy, sinner.

Q: Thank you.

King: Thank you.

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about St. Therese of Lisieux and what could you have possibly written a whole book about?

King: I was drawn to St. Therese, as many of us are. Her life was weird, in a way. I was very interested in the fact that she died without pain medication this terrible, excruciating gangrene of the intestine, crying, "I love Him," as she died. I was drawn to her seeming simplicity and obviously this profound, profound depth, that I, for one, am never going to remotely plumb. But

I liked the strange juxtaposition of this virginal, died a virgin at twenty-four, bourgeois, French cloistered nun, who went to Pope Leo XVI and begged him, begged him, “Let me enter the convent at fifteen.” I had a very different kind of life. So St. Therese of Lisieux and middle-aged, ex-drunk, existentially tormented, curmudgeonly...

Albacete: But don’t you recognize in her, through and maybe because of all that radical difference, a sister?

King: Yes! Exactly. I thought, let me walk through Koreatown, Los Angeles, which is filled with Salvadorian gangs...It’s very colorful, like East Harlem where I’m staying now. But I saw absolutely there’s a point that’s huge where we’re sisters, absolutely. So I went with her, I was reflecting on her and reading her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, and her letters and so forth, and just reflecting on them as I met the homeless person, Gene, the crazy, psychotic guy behind the library who I love, and the person I yelled at in the store, just kind of seeing Christ in our smallest encounter and then all the stuff of our daily life, and reflecting with St. Therese, how can I too in some very small way...how do you also make yourself as a holocaust victim of love? She’s really something. When she was on her deathbed, (I really knew she had to be a saint) all the nuns kept crowding around her bed and plying her with the most mundane, horrible questions because they kind of knew, finally by the end, that she was a little saintly, so they were asking her, “Do you smell roses?” “Do you think the end is near?” “When do you think the hour will be?” “Do you love me best?” Oh my God! How could she not just say, “Get away from me!” or “Bring me some morphine and be gone with you!”? Her patience was just beyond anything I could possibly imagine. Even if I were feeling *good*—and she was dying...

Q: She’s going to get us through Obama-care.

Albacete: Through any care. I would like to read it in order to pray that the same thing that happened to her NOT happen to me! When I was a little kid I was once reading a prayer book that my mother or my grandmother had left around. I began to look at it, and my mother caught me and took it from my hand and said, “Don’t read that!” That was all I needed to hear. I spent my life searching for the damn book. I thought it had to do with sex, but it wasn’t. It was an offering of your life to the Sacred Heart. You accept any kind of death that he wants to send you. Well, I don’t. But my mother said, “Don’t say that prayer. You’re not...Don’t say that prayer.” She was afraid that it sounded so “Give me any kind of death!” And you know my mother had Alzheimer’s eventually for eleven years. Very, very, very painful. And once I went to a bookstore and they had this picture of the Sacred Heart, and under it was the quote, “In spite of whatever you may send me, I could always say, ‘Thank you.’” I bought the thing, took it to her, and said, “Forget it; I’m not coming to visit again for a while. It’s your affair; you asked for it. I am not asking for this kind of thing.” But St. Therese inspires me that way. It’s good to find out all these horrible things so that you can pray that they NOT happen to you.

King: Exactly.

Albacete: One last question. Well, we’ll take two.

Q: Giussani teaches us that we don’t need more evidence to have faith. The evidence is there.

The miracles have been done. What we need is to be open to our humanity. We need to be aware of our own neediness and to be open to reality. It seems to me that you have a great gift of being open to reality. It seems to me that you're special in that way. I don't have that gift because I'm not that open. What do you think sets you apart in that way?

King: It's a beautiful, beautiful compliment. I don't think of myself as particularly open or special in any way.

Q: Well, you see things.

King: I really thank you very much. I don't really have an answer to that except that I've always had this pondering, questing heart. I've been graced to spend a lot of time by myself. I'm drawn to solitude. I spend a lot of time. I'm always at some remote monastery or remote hermitage or something. I don't know. I talk a lot about loneliness. None of this is making any sense. I guess what I'm trying to say is insofar as possible I have... You know that line that says, "This Jesus is the cornerstone which rejected by all you builders has become the chief cornerstone supporting all the rest."? I think that whatever makes me alive or allows me to be alive at all is just seeing again and again, wanting to throw... oh my God, I was drunk for twenty years, let's excise that; let's get that out of the way. Then you realize, no, that's the thing; that's what got you... And then, oh I'm in love with this guy; he doesn't love me. Get that out of the way! That's sick. It's neurotic. And then you realize, no, don't. My God, that's the heart. Let it be open. Let it bleed no matter how much it hurts. That's the way to Christ. That pain is what makes us human, what makes us individuals, the capacity to bear that and realize THAT is the gift; that's not the thing that you try to get rid of, to excise. So it's a very different, a totally different way of viewing the world. And that's not to say that I still don't at any time the smallest painful thing happens I just immediately want to change, move, get rid of it, leave the country, whatever. But that's been my experience over and over. The wound that is most shameful, that I feel most frustrated that I can't heal, that I can't get over, turns out to be the thing that is bringing me even closer to Christ and it makes me more compassionate. It makes me more able to forgive. I think that inability to forgive, it's no accident that he talks so much about that. Your sins are forgiven and now go and sin no more, and forgive your brother, because that resentment that we feel is really the almost number one thing that blocks us and it's a ton of work and continual work. Again, as Msgr. said, we have to just pick that up every day and say, "Oh, wow," consent to be disappointed that the resentment is still there, but consent to keep working on it. But for me I feel that I get to live my life at this intensity that is very appealing to me. Not hopefully this terrible, neurotic, wide-eyed-imposing-it-upon-you, but just great joy. Oh, the leaves come out in spring. Oh, the sun, look at the sun! It comes up every morning. How amazing. I mean, I'm not there all the time by any means.

And again I think it comes from being a drunk for so long. I can't believe I wake up without a hangover. I can't believe that I don't have to suffer in that way anymore. It's just made me very, very grateful.

Albacete: *Felix culpa*.

King: *Felix culpa*, the happy fault, yes.

Albacete: Also, suffering, the way of suffering, again. You know that it says that somewhere, “The Holy Spirit will convict you of sin.” Jesus said it. I always read that in a depressing way. The Spirit will come and expose me as sinful. But I’ve since come to understand it in reading other people that what happens is the Holy Spirit makes you realize your sin by giving you an experience of forgiveness. It is from the experience of mercy that you say, “Oh my God, I have sinned.”

King: Yes!

Albacete: Prior to that experience of mercy, you do not even know what sin is.

King: Exactly.

Albacete: Well, the same thing I believe is for suffering. It isn’t that suffering is the path to love; love comes first. It is that suffering is the conflict between this love and the fallen world, and in that sense they are inseparable. But one doesn’t cause the other. Do you agree with that? Do you think I’m right?

King: Yes, of course you are. I think it’s very interesting.

Albacete: One last question from back there.

Q: I thought you made an incredible point about the American culture being anaesthetized. How can we help people see that they’re anaesthetizing themselves? How can we shed light on the truly real and help people’s eyes be open. I know we can’t argue people into that. Is it just something we have to pray about? Is it just that we have to live our lives? I’m curious about your perspective on that.

King: My way is to tell my story. I think we help each other by telling our stories. I went to this literary salon one time and the guest of honor was Robert Wright, who interviewed you, Msgr. Albacete, for that wonderful meaning of life TV. And you may be the only person that ever made Robert Wright almost laugh.

Albacete: Well, that’s a great achievement. Not that I in any case advanced his path to faith. I made him laugh. Well, that’s an advance.

King: No, that’s a total advance. But anyway, someone at this literary salon made a very good point. They were basically very virulently anti-God, anti-religion, but this one person said, “Atheists have no story.” And I thought that was really, really profound because no story versus *the greatest story ever told*. We have major, major story. We have nothing but story in a way. But I think there’s something very deep about that. People tend to not be converted by being preached to or told that they’re wrong, or improved or regulated. They are moved. Our hearts are moved where we identify with another person’s, not the specifics of a story necessarily, but how their transformation came about. I like this PR policy of attraction not promotion. I think we do our best proselytizing, if that’s the goal, by some kind of light that people see. You always hear these kids who’ve been to Catholic school say, “Oh, the priest with the twinkle in his eye,” or

“the nun with the twinkle in her eye.” These are the people, something’s afoot, they’re on to something, we see they believe what they are talking about, and I think that is a huge attraction and in order to have that twinkle it requires decades of literally hanging on a cross. But that’s our job, to have joyful participation in the sorrows of the world, as Mother Teresa said. It’s just an ongoing...that’s what makes it exciting, though. And every day it’s a new, huge set of challenges. But I think that’s what people are drawn to. It’s what anyone is drawn to—joy, some kind of light, a spark, a vitality of life that has truth at the center of it, and therefore has, in some sense, suffering, again at the center of it. It seems like joy always arises...always has some pain in there somewhere. So I think we just let our little flame, such as it is, shine.

Albacete: The suffering is born of the joy, I would say. It is not the other way around.

King: Can you extrapolate on that just a teeny bit?

Albacete: And reveal everything I think? It’s what I said before, it’s the same point—the awareness of sin because you’ve been forgiven. It’s because you have known the other side that you recognize...If you can walk around sleepwalking, as Fr. Giussani says, or completely blind, you have nothing to lose; you’ve never seen anything. Why was the man who ran into Jesus fully blind, or Jesus ran into him, or whatever? He’s not upset. He doesn’t even ask to be cured because he doesn’t know what it means to see. So his being blind, at least for him, is a normal condition. He has never seen. But after you see is when the being blinded really hurts. You recognize, I was blind and I could not see. At the end, isn’t the man born blind...before he encounters Christ a second time and finally sees? He finally says, “I don’t know anything about it. I don’t know if he’s from God or whether he’s a prophet. I only know one thing: I was blind and now I see. I know that,” he says, “because I know now what it means to be blind. I know what it means to see.”

It’s the same thing. I find the same pattern again and again. It reverses this so that suffering is born of joy, not joy of suffering.

Okay, that’s it. We’ve got to go.