

The San Antonian

Volume XXV Issue 1

Spring 2019

I Need A Hug

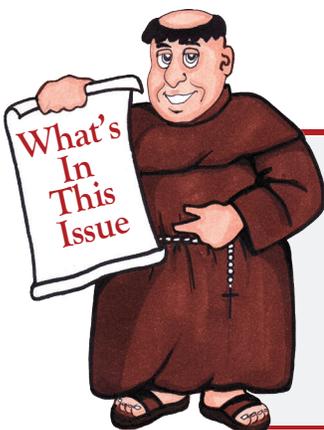
By Mary Anne Bressler

"I need a hug." What is more comforting than an embrace? To be surrounded by the arms of someone who loves us is a physical expression of love and concern.

The theme of this issue of the San Antonian grew from a conversation at a meeting of the Wild Spirits about Lent, specifically the gospel for the 4th Sunday—the story we often refer to as the Prodigal Son. The climax of this story occurs when the son, filled with regret, returns home to the father he had so callously treated. Before the son even utters a word of apology, the father runs to him, embraces him and kisses him.

Even though we name this story for the son, it is really the action of the father that is the beating heart of the parable. This is a story of unqualified love and mercy, exemplified in that embrace. This story reminds us that we do not need to beg for God's forgiveness because it is always available. We simply need to be humble enough to receive it, to allow God to embrace us in our brokenness and blindness, to return to God.

As we enter the season of Lent, the articles in this issue reflect on the many ways in which God's embrace is always available and often unexpected.



God's Embrace in the Community

By Kay Brogle

When I was asked to write something for the San Antonian describing a time when I felt God's loving embrace I immediately said yes, as I had a very recent experience that I wanted to share.

In January we were hit with some major snow events. Strangely, the storms happened over two weekends, remember?

So, the first storm dumped over 9 inches in my neighborhood, keeping me from getting out of the house, the garage and to St. Anthony for Sunday Liturgy, or anywhere else for that matter. I reflected on the readings of the day, prayed and then shoveled snow and stayed inside. I was out of sorts that day and most days that week...kind of bummed out but not sure why, couldn't remember what day it was and was just having a hard time getting in sync.

The next weekend arrived and once again...this time ice with a 3-4 inch snow cover. Once again, I was unable to get out of my neighborhood and once again I missed Liturgy at St. Anthony. The week following was even worse than the week before...I was down, no motivation, no energy, and getting crabby...more than normal my friends would say.

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Dancing in God's Arms

By Marie Schneider

The earliest memory I have of dancing at St. Anthony's was during the Taste of African American Culture. This was an event celebrating the food, art and movement of African Americans and was well attended by St. Anthony's parish and the local community. I remember the feeling of being surrounded by such a rich culture and I loved being able to praise God in my small way with a dance in His honor. This was a time when I felt God's embrace as well as feeling close to the parish community.

From there, I only grew more passionate in my love of liturgical movement as a form of prayer. While reciting a prayer or singing a song has its time, place, and advantages, liturgical movement has always had a special place in my heart. While I cannot speak for all of the liturgical movement ladies, I can safely say that dance is an important form of prayer for us, just as I assume singing is the choir's spiritual form of prayer. In this way, liturgical movement, drumming, and singing are all forms of prayer that I believe should be respected and encouraged.

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God's Healing Embrace

By Cathie Marshall

God's loving embrace has encircled me in a variety of times and situations. I can remember cycling the Malibu coast and the last ten miles to home-base seeming so far, too far, but God would provide encouragement. From a cycling partner to a cheer from a passing car. Or when I'm at work, needing the words to help a child through their care, and the right words just come from nowhere. Not 'nowhere' but from the Lord.

One of my more profound moments of knowing I was in God's loving embrace was when I woke up in an ambulance. I didn't know I was in an ambulance, I didn't know who I was, or where I was! Amazing, I didn't feel scared, I felt safe and secure! I was calm, laying there and slowly I realized who I was. I still felt safe though I was wrapped up/tied down (on the back board). I continued thinking, then remembered I was in Arkansas. It was amazing how safe I felt. At first, I thought it was the papoosing effect of the backboard, later I realized it was the Lord holding me. God walked along side me through the recovery, relatively easy, but emotional at times. Keeping me safe when I went back to cycling (2 races) and riding 5 roller coasters. During that time, we didn't know that I was 1.5 millimeters from severing my spinal cord, we learned this ten months later. It was His amazing grace that kept me safe. He continued to keep me safe through the surgery where I had a 65% chance of being paralyzed from the neck down. As I went under anesthesia there was a scary moment, but I didn't worry because I knew He was in control, it was His will.

God's Embrace in the Community *continued from page 1*

The following weekend...NO SNOW NO ICE...and I was on my way to St. Anthony's that Sunday for Liturgy. It was so good to see people at Church and many of us greeting one another and bemoaning the fact that we were snowed in for days. It was good to be anticipating celebrating Eucharist with my Church family. During the Eucharistic prayer and Consecration I experienced a sense of all-encompassing love and belonging and rightness. I was so aware of God's loving embrace, so completely wrapped in awareness of God's presence in our Church and within my Church community. I experienced the blessings of a loving God manifested in the Eucharist and in the people of my St. Anthony Church community. I was so aware of the importance of a believing and worshipping Church family and the grace this is to me.

My feeling of "out of sorts", being bummed and ungrounded and even sometimes confused cleared that Sunday...and I realized how much I need and depend on celebrating the Eucharist with my Church community and the people with whom I share my faith and worship.

God is good, all the time. And you, my sisters and brothers in this community of St. Anthony, are a reflection of God's love and care in my life. And I am so very grateful to you and for you.

The Pew

By Kathy Ryan

The heat just came on. It must be Sunday. The sun is out. The colors of the stained glass stand out so beautifully when the sun shines through. I love Sundays. The church just comes alive with the people, spirit and music. Each time there is a service and I am chosen for a seat, I feel proud, responsible, supportive and a little surprised at my new creakiness.

I hope my 8:30 family comes. The boy, Josh, hasn't been here in a while. I wonder how college is going. His parents were so excited when they were expecting him. I guess wood ages well; I even remember their wedding. When Sarah first brought Mike to church here, they were both so nervous. People kept coming up and welcoming Mike. They held hands and seemed so happy. The wedding packed the church. It was filled with people! I remember Mike's aunt and uncle sitting here reminiscing about Mike as a boy. Both of them cried when they walked down the aisle after the ceremony. It was such a joyful occasion!

Sarah and Mike prayed so hard when they found out she was expecting. I heard her whispering as she asked God for a healthy baby. Every Sunday I watched her glow and grow. Next thing I knew there was a squirming baby in a carrier. Josh sat with me and slept. As he grew, I remember many Cheerios, baby bottles and Binkies thrown down and retrieved as the service went on. Then Josh grew and there were trucks and cars as I became roads to him. He had so much trouble sitting still. As he grew older there was a sense of restlessness as he couldn't find a comfortable way to sit on me. He was growing so fast.

It seems like those days went so quickly. One weekday there was a funeral mass. Josh came with his mom and dad. All three were so sad because Sarah's mom had passed. I wish I could have comforted them. Sarah gripped the top of the seat in front of me as if she needed to hold on for strength. They sat down so heavily that day; it was like the weight of the world was on their shoulders. All I could do was provide a seat and hope that time would heal their pain.

Josh is here! He has grown so much. Sarah is sitting with her arm around him. She seems so happy to have him home from college. The parishioners are stopping by to say hello to him. It sounds like Josh has a girlfriend. Maybe a wedding is coming up?

It seems like families grow up in my seats. I have been part of so much history with this church. There was the fire, the renovation, the changes in the liturgy, concerns over the church closing, new people coming. I have been here for generations quietly supporting those who come to pray, praise, weep, atone, give thanks and ponder. How lucky I am.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.

(Luke 15: 20b)

An Unexpected Embrace

By Beth Scheid

I was angry at God. Really angry. I was “done” having kids. I was adamant I didn’t want any more. I was so grateful for the 3 we had, but three kids aged 4, 5, and 8, was all I could handle while working full time. All kids were out of diapers and were in school. No more daycare costs. And then lo and behold, at the age of 36, I surprisingly find myself pregnant with child #4...and I was visibly, emotionally, and spiritually mad. How could a loving God “do this” to me. I had had this conversation with him. A one-way conversation apparently – with God not listening. There are so many people out there that are trying endlessly to have children. It was not fair.

A few months into the pregnancy, I was still angry; I needed help. I tried counselling. I tried going on vacation. Turning to God was the last thing on my mind. Then it happened. I got suckered into going to a healing service at St. Ignatius. To say the least, going to Church was the last thing on my mind. I sat in the very last row in a church packed full of people.

During the service, people were asked to be prayed over. I knew I needed help, so I went up. A few people prayed over me and then I went back to my seat, open to healing, but impatient. Music was playing and I listened. “Here I am Lord” began and I started crying. The words moved me. Toward the end of the healing service, there was time for confession. I hadn’t been in a long time but was willing to try just about anything. I can’t tell you which priest listened to me but in the exact moment he prayed over me – I was healed. I came out of that confessional with complete peace.

I realized that the person I was mad at was myself...and in the moment of his blessing...I felt God’s unconditional love. I let go and forgave myself. All anger immediately dissipated. And in that moment, I fully accepted the amazing blessing of the child growing in me. I vowed to love and cherish her as a Gift from God. And I do. I love Annie more than I can say. She brings me so much joy!

God’s Comforting Embrace

By Karen Bulman

When I was asked to write about a time when I felt God’s loving embrace, my initial reaction was one of fear. Writing is out of my comfort zone!

But as I contemplated times in my life when I truly felt His embrace, a few immediately came to mind. Only a few, is that all? Time for reflection! And as I reflected on my past, there were many occasions where I could truly say God was there. But which one do I wish to share? I decided to share a time you have likely experienced as well, the loss of a loved one. For me, it was the first loss of someone close to me and it was a very difficult time.

I will confess I never had a great relationship with my mom. It really was not until I was pregnant that we finally had something in common and when we truly started to bond. Sadly, that bond was short lived.

Before our son was born, my husband Dave and I learned my mom was diagnosed with cancer. Treatments were going well and all were optimistic for a full recovery, but the optimism was short lived. Our son was barely a month old when I received the call, “You better get home to see Mom, we don’t think she’ll be with us long.” I was shocked. I decided I needed to make the trip with our newborn son from Cincinnati to Albany. No easy feat under the best of circumstances. It was a difficult visit, she was so sick and afterwards she hardly remembered meeting her grandson and our visit. Soon after I left, she bounced back, and felt better both physically and mentally. Dave and I decided that instead of having Nate baptized in Cincinnati, we’d do so in Albany eight weeks later.

It was Labor Day weekend. Everyone was excited for the baptism. Like a light switch, Mom went from doing ok to so ill that she was placed immediately under hospice care at the hospital. This sadly meant she was not able to attend the baptism after Mass.

On Monday, all six of my siblings were with her. She was not conscious or responsive to touch; her breathing shallow. It is a moment that will always be with me. I recall how cramped we were there. The room was so small. It was an old hospital. It seems crazy 24 years later I still remember the worn floor and the utilitarian paint on the walls. That day, all I could think of is there is no way she should die alone in this room. One by one my siblings left. My two younger brothers were numb with grief and needed to be home to help take care of Dad. My older brother had a newborn of his own and needed to get back home. My sisters’ kids all had their first day of school starting the following day. And one-by-one they said their goodbyes, and eventually I was alone with mom.

As a sleep deprived mother of a 3-month old, I was exhausted and soon fell asleep as the light faded along with my siblings’ chatter. I don’t know what caused me to suddenly awake (thank you God), and as soon as I did, I saw Mom’s eyes were wide open! I walked over to her and saw her stare through me. I knew she was not looking at me, but at something else incredibly intently. I knew God was calling her home. I am not going to lie, I was scared and a little freaked out. I was afraid to touch her. I talked to her. I said the Lord’s prayer for her. As I turned away to look out the window, the sun was setting and the sky so beautiful. I described the beautiful sky to her. The colors of the sun setting and then, a flock of geese in perfect V formation, flying toward heaven!

As I turned back to see her, she was gone from our physical world. My prayer was answered, she did not die alone. More enlightening to me as I look back, she would not have died alone, God was with her, I could see that in her gaze. Knowing my prayer that I didn’t want her to die alone, being awoken at the right moment, and seeing the geese flying toward heaven was my affirmation God was with me as much as He was with my mom.

They say God works in mysterious ways. For my siblings, each confided in me later that they could not have handled being there in the end and didn’t want to. Circumstances being what they were, we all got our wish. It is hard to put into words to explain that day and I have lost count of the tissues I went through trying to put this into words for you, even 24 years later.

As I reflected on my list of circumstances where I have felt God’s embrace, they were all what I would describe as highly emotional. Some scary, some traumatic and others extremely happy occasions. How about you.... what has your experience been when you truly felt God’s loving embrace?

The Man Who Turned the World Around

By Jody Coaston

The world was upside down. It was inside out, backwards, and so wrong in too many ways to count. I was depressed, but didn't realize it because it wasn't the sad and weepy kind of depression; it was the irritable, gloomy, mad-at-the-whole-upside-down-world kind of depression, and as I stomped to work one early spring day through Burnet Woods everything I saw confirmed my negative outlook. Ahead of me I saw an old man slowly toiling along, spearing trash on a spiked stick. His clothes were ragged, his hair unkempt and grizzled, he wore a lift on one shoe so he walked slowly, with a pronounced limp, and when I looked at him I saw pain, poverty, oppression, and suffering.

I caught up with him, and as I walked past him he pivoted on his good leg and looked me right in the face. To my astonishment he gave me an enormous, incandescent grin, flung his arms out as though to embrace all of creation, and shouted with joy, "Ain't we got a good God!"

And in that moment the world turned right side up, just as it had always been. I gasped and answered him, "Oh, yes, we do! We do! Yes!" Look! The sky is a wonderful clear blue! Look! Tiny green leaves are starting to show! Look! There are blossoms beginning to form in the trees! Look! There are ducks on the lake! Look! Look! Look! We were almost dancing around each other, pointing to the beauty that surrounded us, so right in too many ways to count. Look!

Our paths diverged, and we both went on to work, I to share a renewed spirit, and he to share God's loving embrace with the next bruised and tired soul who needed his ministry.

God's Abundant Love

By Susan Wenker, as told to John Bange

I think mothers like to reminisce about the birth of their children. Don and I have eight, four girls and four boys: Wendy, Randy, Mimi, Matt, Corrie, Tommy, Annie and Ben. There have been many times when we felt God's loving embrace throughout our marriage, especially as the time of the eight births drew near.

As the time drew near for our second child, I was at a weekend retreat. I thought I would be fine as the due date was six weeks away. But the baby and God had other plans! I called Don in the middle of the night, he came to the retreat house with little Wendy, picked us up and drove straight to Good Samaritan! And baby Randy was born.

As our fifth was on the way, I went into labor early. I knew Don was painting a yellow house in Madeira near the firehouse but I had no way of contacting him. I called the fire department but they could not see him at the house. They offered to transport me to the hospital. They kept wanting to stop along the expressway and help with delivery but I told them to drive on. We arrived at the hospital and Corrie was born within seven minutes. To this day, when I see the ambulance driver at Kroger, he yells "seven minutes!" at me. God was with me all the way during that wild and crazy ride!

We were members of the New Jerusalem Community in the 1970s and have long been friends with Fr. Richard Rohr, and are still in touch with him. On the way to the hospital when I was due to have baby number seven, we stopped to visit Fr. Richard. Fr. Jim Shapelle was also there who I knew when he was the assistant pastor at St. Anthony in the 1960's. They were both shocked to see us and encouraged us to get to the hospital! I asked for a blessing which they both gave me. I mentioned that the baby was breech (feet first). Fr. Richard said he had some experience with that and gave me some extra prayers and by the time we got to the hospital, the baby had turned around to the correct position. And Annie was born. I believe Fr. Richard, Fr. Jim and Don and myself, and maybe even the ambulance driver, all felt the loving embrace of God that day!

The Peaceful Embrace of God

By Kathy Winters

There I was, in "the big city" I'd dreamed of for years. Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, I felt restless, sensing there was much more out there in the world for me to see and do beyond the few square miles where I'd spent most of my childhood. The first day I set foot on the large, urban campus where I would spend the next four years, I felt a sense of exhilaration like never before. Soon, though, reality hit as I settled in with a hard-talking, chain-smoking roommate and an intense schedule of mostly science coursework. Shy as I was at the time, I still managed to make friends, including some fellow Catholics who lived on my dorm floor. We made a practice of attending the Saturday evening "student" Mass at a lecture hall on campus, and while I felt comfort in worshipping with others of my faith, I still found myself overwhelmed at times. One Saturday evening after Mass, I was struck by the scripture verse on that week's bulletin:

Dismiss all anxiety from your minds. Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and in petitions full of gratitude. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus.

(Phil 4: 6-7)

I immediately felt such peace and that God was speaking to me in that scripture that night. I clipped the verse from the bulletin (I still have it!), and soon had it committed to memory. Since that evening so many years ago, this verse has brought me strength and comfort on many occasions—from getting through the rest of college to worrisome times as a parent through restless nights as I think of the challenging times we face in today's world. This verse continues to serve me as a reminder of God's steadfast love and that He wants to help us through whatever trouble we face—we just need to ask!

In any situation of life, I must not forget that I will never cease to be a child of God, to be a son of the Father who loves me and awaits my return. Even in the worst situation of life, God waits for me, God wants to embrace me, God expects me.

*(Pope Francis,
General Audience, May 11, 2016)*

Finding God in the Desert

By David Huelsman

Sixteen years ago, I experienced a spiritual crisis. After spending most of my life in education and training, I had just become partner in my physician group. Instead of experiencing this as success, I felt guilty and spiritually barren. I was feeling that the effort to reach this goal was too self centered, that I had and was "spending my money for what is not bread, my wages for what fails to satisfy."

I haunted myself with the image that I was part of the seed that fell among the thorns, and that worldly anxiety and lure of money had choked off my ability to bear spiritual fruit. I feared I was a disappointment to God. Rather than lean into my relationship with God to address these feelings, I did the complete opposite. I stopped my daily prayer. I avoided God, because I thought I would hear a message of disappointment and admonition.

After spending weeks in this desert, I finally broke down and prayed. I centered myself and prayed, "Here I am, God. I am listening." I eventually felt God's loving embrace intensely and intimately. Time stood still, or was actually timeless. A sense of calm and mercy surrounded and filled me, as if a great weight was lifted from my chest. I heard a "small, still voice" that used words but didn't need words and was also beyond words. It communicated instantly and tenderly, a message that I can only roughly paraphrase: "Dave, Dave, you have it all wrong. I love you. I miss you. Come back to me. You do not earn my love. It is my gift. Come back."

This moment of embrace continues to sustain me. It does not feel like a memory, left in the past. Rather, it remains timeless, a part of my being, encompassing past, present, and future.

Listening for God's Embrace

By Jeannie Masterson, CSJ

What an interesting topic on which to reflect! I like to think that I live in that embrace, whether I'm aware of it or not, so I could probably write a book of examples. I'll just use a thread, instead.

Throughout my life, people have come to me as a listening ear. My basic belief is that each of us has all the wisdom he/she needs; often what we lack is a safe place in which to explore our options to discover that wisdom. My mother always used to tell us that God gave us two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we talk. So when people request some time, I try to listen carefully, and reflect back what I'm hearing. Sometimes that leads to questions – clarifying, probing, inviting the speaker to consider another approach. Frequently the individual comes to an "aha!" moment on his or her own, and leaves feeling empowered with new insight and a simple plan of action. Often I'm given credit, when actually the other person has done all the work!

Occasionally I'll make an observation, and what comes out of my mouth is a wisdom that is totally unpondered, often unthought before that moment. I know those aren't my words, but God's gift to both me and the other. My prayer to be the conduit of God's Spirit has been answered! I know that God is embracing both of us with a deeper appreciation of God's grace in the everydayness of our lives.

And we've both had an experience of "little e" eucharist, of encountering Christ and of thanksgiving for experiencing the loving embrace of God in a very real way.

God's Embrace for Another

By Grace Scheid

Near the end of NCYC (National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis) my youth group of two boys, myself, a mother and our leader Nathan, were standing in the crowd of 21,000 Catholic students and adults in the Lucas Oil Stadium, singing our hearts out, praising God, raising our hands and embracing the celebration of being in this family of God. I suddenly felt something tugging at my heart. I couldn't explain this feeling as anything other than God telling me to do something. I looked down at the row in front of me, and there was a girl, sitting down, not singing, her head, in her hands and shoulders trembling every now and then. I held back for a moment, because she was a stranger, and I said "God, if you want me to go to her, have her shoulders tremble one more time." Just as I had asked, she trembled again.

I got down on my knees and bending over the seats, I wrapped my arms around this stranger. I pulled her hair back from her face and simply held her. As she was sobbing I brushed her hair and whispered to her "God loves you, He is here for you. Don't be afraid, I have you. God will never let you go." As I said these words trying to calm her a bit, before I knew it, I too started to cry. I had no reason, I wasn't hurt in any way. I guess that I was saddened by those who are hurt, and for this girl.

During the trip, one of the top activities is to trade objects or trinkets throughout the weekend. I received a little metal crucifix. I pinned her hair back with my bobby pins and held her hands in mine. Embracing her with all of my heart. Letting our emotions cover us. I opened her palms and placed this little cross in her hands. And kept whispering God's love into her ears. I probably stayed bent over like that for 20 minutes. At one point I even handed my glasses back to my friends to hold, because I was crying on them.

When the celebration was over, we stood up and looked at each other for the first time. We smiled and hugged, shared names, and parted. I never knew the girl, I do not remember her name, or her appearance, we never even asked why the tears. But I remember her as God's child who may have been lost, but who was much loved. She helped me understand when God wants me to do something. That when I feel this unexplainable tugging at my heart, I have to follow through. I may not know the reasons why or the outcomes, but I have to keep my faith that God already knows the outcomes and has planned it out already. So even when I don't have an explanation for my actions, I know I am doing something right because God guides my heart.

An Usher's Embrace

By Tom Maher

This may embarrass him but I got his okay to tell you this story he recently told to some of us.

He said he'd been in a lot of different churches. He was black and not Catholic but he dared to walk through our big doors at St. Anthony's for the first time some 35 years ago. He said he was greeted by two white ushers, Mr. Gerard and Mr. Kinnmon, with such a warm welcome the likes of which he had never received before. Before long one of them asked him to help with taking up the collection. He couldn't say no. And that welcome embrace not only turned him into a regular usher it became a first step in his becoming a Catholic.

And Willie Phillips now extends that same warm embrace to all who pass through our doors at the Sunday 8:30 Mass and most other events in the church. He also shovels the snow and does many other cold and untold jobs to make our welcome warm and inviting.

A recent new member said he was searching for a new parish and when he came through our doors he was greeted by Willie, like no other he ever received, he knew St. Anthony's was different and extraordinary. The welcoming embrace keeps on reaching out.

This is one important way the embrace of God comes to us folks at St. Anthony's. Thanks to you, Willie, and all of our greeters.

The Embrace of God

By JoAnn Dragoo

I was recently asked to share a time where I experienced the "Embrace of God" in my life. I immediately thought about my wedding day where I was truly blessed with a loving marriage of 49 years (50 in July) to a wonderful caring husband and father.

I thought about the births of our four children and how incredible that made me feel. Holding a new born child and feeling the miracle from God in my arms is truly a loving blessing from God!

Then came the year of 2007, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Wow that was a tough one. Again my loving God encircled me with His merciful love. I had surgery in December followed by chemotherapy in January and ended with radiation treatment in June of 2008. I had such amazing support from my family and friends and felt so embraced by their outpouring of love.

It has now been over ten years since my treatment and thanks to His love, I am still cancer free! I feel that God has given me this gift of life so that I may share many more wonderful years with the ones I love and I gratefully feel the "Embrace of God".

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