By Very Reverend Glennon Jones, Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

Ahh ... December. The crisper air ... the quiet beauty of snowfall ... the anticipation of Christmas and holidays with family and friends just around the corner. It's a time when those who love to go shopping revel in the quest for those perfect gifts ... and when we who hate to go shopping rejoice in Amazon.com and the choices and brevity afforded by the vast internet marketplace. And, most of all for Christians, there is the very "reason for the season": the celebration of the birth of Jesus 2000-ish years ago ... "For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon His shoulder dominion rests. They name Him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:5)

We all need hope in our lives. A news story just the other day remarked at how the suicide rate is at a historic high—a fact which itself points to a tragic and unnecessary loss of hope. For animals the survival instinct is itself enough, but not for we humans. With the ability for abstract thought of the future, if we do not immediately perceive improvement in that future, we can easily despair and, in worst case, contemplate self-destruction as a false "escape." Sadly, such an wrong "escape" will be a lifetime of agony and sorrow for family and friends left behind. Of course, many such persons have difficulties such as depression, great sorrows in their lives, etc., which may become exacerbated in a season naturally filled with joy, but a joy which they feel they cannot "tap into." But, my dear such friends ... know that time really does heal all wounds, and we are not only blessed with diminishing memory of past sorrows, but we never know what amazing and exciting opportunities the future holds.

But a key to that diminishing memory is to not keep ripping open the wound! Certainly, it is admirable to remember the love and virtues of a person we've lost—and even their faults if it helps us to improve ourselves—but to continually linger upon that which cannot return is self-defeating at very best ... self-destructive in its worst. A person who loved you would certainly not want his loved ones left behind to be constantly wasting away at his/her loss, but would rather encourage him/her: go out and live! Carpe diem! ... Seize the day! Find joy in all the
wonders and God-given things around us: friends and family, a bracing cold snowy morning, the beauty of that mountain snowfall. As the hero Gus said in the mini-series “Lonesome Dove” to young Lorie, who was lamenting her life and disappointments: “Lorie darlin’, life in San Francisco is still just life. If you want any one thing too badly, it’s likely to turn out to be a disappointment. The only healthy way to live life is to learn to like all the little everyday things, like a sip of good whiskey in the evening, a soft bed, a glass of buttermilk, or a feisty gentleman like myself!”

I often urge those who are down and depressed: Don’t take the problems of life personally! Inevitable rain falls, and “rolling with the punches” of life leads to a much greater happiness than demanding that fate always give us our own way. If a desired path is blocked, well...climb over!...or go another way! And regarding life’s difficulties and trials as challenges to be overcome rather than “unfair” tragedies gives us confidence, strength and purpose. With those, even the non-Christian, the non-religious can find hope—in conquering that next challenge coming down the pike. This isn’t just a hackneyed platitude; it’s something I have both witnessed and experienced many times.

Will there be failures? Well... yeah!! Failures are inevitable... but each is a learning experience for overcoming the next challenge... and gives each of us opportunity to pass on the knowledge we gain to help someone else get over the same obstacle just a little bit easier... a little bit quicker. That boosting of others is the joy of teachers, professors and mentors everywhere.

For example, have you ever watched a nature show on young animals learning to hunt? Early attempts are clumsy and repeated failures. But with each failure they learn a little bit more... get a little bit better... until they soon are master huntresses teaching their own little ones. This teaching of the next generation is a very duty of our existence.

And, of course, we Christians look always to Jesus Christ as guide, hope, the fulfillment of life. Yes, God longs for us to live in virtue and according to what He has taught through scripture and, we Catholics believe, through the Church. Yet some persons erroneously despair at their past, feeling unworthy to come to Him. But we need only read the Prodigal Son parable in Luke 15 to know absolutely that God waits longingly for us to come back down the road to home... to Him... by living the life He has taught us: loving Him, and loving neighbor. This is the pinnacle of joy of both Him and us... with our ultimate joy being to serve Him and each other until HE—in HIS perfect time—calls us home to Himself.

“For thou lovest all things that exist, and hast loathing for none of the things which thou hast made, for thou wouldst not have made anything if thou hadst hated it. How would anything have endured if thou hadst not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by thee have been preserved? Thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord, who lovest the living.” (Wisdom 11:24-26 RSV)