In the mid-1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev (1931-) became the leader of the former Soviet Union (1985-91). He introduced a Restructuring (or Perestroika in Russian) and an “Openness” (or Glasnost) into that country which, as it turned out, was the precursor to the fall of communism in Europe and of fall of the Soviet Union itself in 1991. In the spirit of glasnost, an unusual film was permitted to be shown in Moscow during Gorbachev’s tenure entitled “Repentance.” It was such a popular film that it opened in seventeen Moscow theaters and the lines for tickets were even longer than the lines for the theaters where Russian ballet was performed. There was a review of the film in The Christian Century magazine of that day which described it as very searing, very poignant, very touching, and made all the more so by being set within the horrific era of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin (1878-1953).

In one episode of that surrealistic film, the people line up at the prison gate to get letters from relatives, and often on many of these letters are scribbled the words, “Left no forwarding address.” The people look knowingly at each other. They all know what that means, and they weep. In another episode, the women are shown in a muddy timber yard, desperately picking up logs one by one and examining the ends of them. One woman finds her husband’s name carved on one and weeping she caresses the log as if she were caressing her husband’s face. The reviewer said he commented to a friend of his, “I suppose this is a kind of surrealistic statement.” But the friend who was Russian replied that no, it was not. It was no statement, no dream. It was reality. “You see,” he said, “it was common for people to search for the names on the end of logs because the prisoners who worked in
the forests would carve their names and the last date as a sign that, until at least that date, they were still alive.”

And the film goes on to make of the women’s insistent search for their husbands in a muddy timber yard a powerful parable of the Russian peoples’ search for God in a muddy society. In the midst of devastating and unrelenting horror, torture, and death they continued to look for God--and found God--even though the search was officially forbidden. And, finally, after that terrible era and with the fall of Communism, these same people and their children have been flocking to the now open churches in Russia for over twenty years. No wonder the film was so popular for a people who, until then, could not seek the Lord openly. How real and alive did they make today’s first reading from Isaiah, “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near.”

These people in a repressed society sought the Lord in their need for freedom and simple human dignity. Others in a free and open society like our own seek God because they discover that freedom and dignity without God are fragile things. I am thinking of an interesting man whose spiritual journey was inspiring to me at one time. He is the author, novelist, and screenwriter, Dan Wakefield (1932- ). Dan, by his own admission, was a former Christian, baptized a Presbyterian as a baby but fallen-away, leading the very dissolute life of celebrity high society and traveling the fast lanes of the New York-Hollywood jet setters. But one day he found himself, much to his surprise, seeking the Lord quite by accident. He happened to be in Boston and went to a church there called King’s Chapel for no other reason than it was Christmas and on Christmas this is what people do: go to church. So he stumbled into church because he had nothing better to do and, besides, he wrote, all the bars were closed.

But, in spite of himself, in the quiet of that chapel, seeing the Christ Child there, that gentle God-in-the-flesh, he was caught by old
memories and a new emptiness in his life. Something resonated in his soul. And it wasn’t too long before he returned to his roots, returned to Christ. And in 1988 he wrote a beautiful book about that experience called *Returning: A Spiritual Journey* which has been compared to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. He sought and he found. The crib and its memories had captivated him – had seduced him.

For Wakefield it was the crib that converted him. But for others it is the cross or the crucifix. How many times have I given the Last Rites to folks? And quite a few of those innumerable times I have heard someone’s “death-bed confession.” These people who got in under the wire, so to speak, were like the men in today’s parable from the Gospel of St. Like who were sent out to work in the vineyard at 5:00 in the evening at the end of the day. Unlike most of us, they did not bear the heat of the day as did those who went into that vineyard at dawn. But also unlike those who toiled all day, I hope that none of us would be unhappy about the ones who accepted God’s grace at the last hour. For me, it has always been a thrilling experience to minister on these occasions. And what has struck me so often is that those who are dying and who are open at last to God’s mercy are focused on the crucifix where Mercy itself died so that we might have life. They gaze at the cross on the wall or finger the crucifix on their rosary and they rightly hope in the infinite compassion of Christ. I am reminded of the saying “the wood of the crib is the wood of the cross.”

The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) once wrote that “religion is essentially the act of holding fast to God.” Someone else added to Buber’s insight this phrase: “and church-going is merely one way to tighten the grip.”

The famous American-English poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) has these lines in his poem “The Rock:”

Why should men love the church?
Why should they love her laws?
She tells them of life and death
and all they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard
and hard where they would like to be soft,
She tells them of evil and sin
and other unpleasant facts.

Dan Wakefield was captured by the crib and others by the cross and
still others by various symbols or statues or holy words which stir up
memories. And I want to give hope to those whose family or friends
have left the church. And almost every family has been touched by
those who have left despite the good example of parents and other
loved ones. But remember this: people like Dan Wakefield and your
children and grandchildren, for example, are able to return precisely
because someone had in their young years laid a foundation. There
were pictures and prayers and Bible school and stained glass windows
and family church-going and all the rest – especially the Holy Mass.
Later on, it is true, they left all that; but it did not leave them. Grace
was but dormant, merely waiting to be resurrected at another time by
the crib or the cross or something else. The grace was always there,
put there with the help of someone significant – someone like you who
have been so faithful to Christ and his church. When a person comes
to confession after many years, I always say: I am just curious, why
did you return today. Often the answer is: my Mom or Dad or maybe a
grandparent said I have been praying for you.

So there is tremendous importance in laying good foundations. There
is something so right about your being here Sunday after Sunday and
about the praise you are giving God at this moment and about the
worship that we do together at Mass and about the sacrifices you made
to build this church and there is something so right especially about
the example and witness you give – in short, never underestimate the
memories you are creating for this community, this parish, this family.
Never underestimate the power of memories. (The Russians treasured their memories.) Whether you teach others the gentleness and nearness of the crib or the demands and cost of the cross, do it early, do it often, do it faithfully, do it with your own lives. Never forget Isaiah’s message, “Seek the Lord while he may be found, and call him while he is near.” If you don’t forget, someone, someday, will remember.