First Place
CASSELS

Steven Nantz
Everett (Wash) Herald
Last Monday, a young Lake Stevens boy was struck by a school bus and critically injured as he skated home from school.

On Tuesday, a Snohomish teenager was killed in an Everett car accident. Two of her classmates were badly hurt.

And on Thursday, preliminary testimony began in the Roxanne Doll murder trial, starkly reminding the county of the little girl's brutal rape and murder in March of 1995.

Family members and friends, schoolmates and neighbors and countless total strangers may find themselves asking a question in the wake of such tragedy: "How could a loving, compassionate, all-powerful God allow this suffering to occur?"

The question has been asked a million times, of course, in anger and in sorrow, as a prayer and as a curse, in every language by believers of every faith. It has been uttered at funerals, whispered at deathbeds, shouted on battlefields and screamed in gas chambers.

It is no less than an indictment of God, a statement that touches at the very heart of belief.

How do we begin to explain it? Does suffering fulfill some mysterious divine plan? Can it have some intelligible purpose? Or does the question, in its innumerable variations, reverberate into a godless universe?

What began with Job continues today, as people struggle with the meaning of suffering.

Sylvia Horsch is a chaplain with Providence Home Health Care in Everett. She has spent many hours talking with dying people, chronically ill people, severely injured people of all ages and their families. She admits to struggling with the question as well.

"Sometimes it is difficult to think of a just, compassionate God allowing such suffering to occur in the world," she says. "And yet, God didn't say these things wouldn't happen to us. What He did say was that He will be with us on the journey."

Historically, some religious traditions have viewed the divine role differently. They saw demanding, capricious gods, merciless gods, or gods that meted out righteous punishment, the bitter fruit of a people's ethical or religious transgressions.

In Christianity, the doctrine of Original Sin added a new dimension. It says that all humans inherit the sin of the first parents, Adam and Eve, whose violation against the commandments of God brought death and suffering into the world. The consequence is the misery we see so often.

For some, this was still inadequate. The dilemma remained. In response, philosopher-theologians like Augustine and Aquinas developed what is sometimes called the "free will defense" of divine justice.

According to this explanation, God wants the world to achieve the highest possible degree of goodness, a world in which human beings can grow closer to God by choosing freely. In other words, God steps back and just lets things unfold.
All this is little consolation to the parents of a dying child, a man with mental illness, a woman with multiple sclerosis.

For Christians, solace and comfort are usually found in the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Archbishop Thomas Murphy, who leads western Washington's Roman Catholic community, is currently being treated for a life-threatening form of leukemia.

Holy Week, he says, promises that joy and new life wait beyond mankind's suffering.

"Whatever the tragedy -- cancer, AIDS or some other serious disease, a baby dying of SIDS, genocide or starvation in a foreign land... It's so important to look beyond Good Friday, to remember the Easter promise of joy and hope."

Horsch finds that the idea of life after death implicit in the Resurrection holds great promise for her clients and their families.

"The majority of people I see express some kind of belief in an afterlife," she says. "They really believe it, even if they're not religious... They say, 'I'll get to see my loved ones.'"

"One woman -- a young woman in her 30's -- was dying of cancer. She said 'I don't know how it works, but I know that we continue to live on... There's something waiting for me.'"

Recent studies of "Near Death Experiences," or "NDE's" only reinforce a widely-shared perception that there is a "heaven."

In fact, a recent Times/CNN poll found that 81% of American believe in an afterlife.

"We have hope beyond the grave," says Pastor Darcy Haisley of Everett's Viewridge Community Church. "We'll be reunited with our loved ones; we'll be with the Lord."

Pat Howell, a Jesuit priest, author, and professor at Seattle University has written a book about dealing with a severe crisis. "As Sure as the Dawn: A Spirit Guide Through Times of Darkness" gives particular attention to chronic disabilities and mental illness (at one time, Howell himself suffered from a serious mental illness).

The book draws in part on the theories of Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor, who taught that "To live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in the suffering."

Howell describes how Frankl found meaning in the obscene depravity of the death camp. He says that others can find meaning as well, and reasons to live fruitful, satisfying lives, despite their personal tragedies.

"This points to a certain response to suffering," Howell says. "Our pain... of whatever kind... can lead us to experience grace in a transfiguring way."

Horsch, too, speaks of pain -- not physical pain, which she says can almost always be controlled by a competent physician. She refers to the misery of loneliness -- of not feeling connected to a community.

"For some people, such as the elderly folks who've lost their friends and family, the pain of loneliness is much worse than any physical suffering," she says.

Others confirm the importance of community.

For Haisley's late brother, it was a blessing.
"I he was dying of cancer of the esophagus," says Haisley. "About two weeks before he died, he said 'Darcy, the last two years have been the happiest years of my life.'

"I think that a paradigm shift occurs in a crisis... People reach out to each other... They really connect.

"My brother loved, and was loved, during those last two years. It's what we were all made for, what we so seldom taste in this broken world."

Murphy has found similar rewards.

"What comes through to me in my experience is the opportunity to encounter compassion... a compassion that invites people to really be a part of your life.

"It's been a tremendously good experience in this regard... People I haven't heard from in years have gotten in touch... it means so much to me."

Howell says that one name for the early followers of Christ was "ekklesia" -- The Gathering. It was only in The Gathering, in community, that they could "recognize, interpret, and celebrate" their spiritual path.

It is in The Gathering, in each of our respective communities, that healing occurs, he says.

"The beginning of our journey lies in saying, 'I can't do this on my own.'" Within the consolation and hopefulness of Easter, however, those troubling questions remain: "How can God allow this? Why doesn't He do something? Where is He?"

When Haisley looks back on the first two funerals he performed as a pastor -- each was for an infant -- he pauses, shakes his head.

"When it comes to things like that... I don't know. I really don't know.

"You want to ask why, but God doesn't always answer our questions. He just says 'Trust me.' He calls us to trust Him in the absence of blessing..."

"What I do know is that he loves me, cares for me. For all of us."

Howell says that the answer, ultimately, lies deep in mystery. For those who insist on looking for God, however, he offers a story:

The scene is a Nazi death camp, late at night, in the dead of Winter. Several prisoners try to escape. They are spotted at the perimeter, and shot by the guards. All lie dead on the ground, except for a young boy of 16 who hangs, lifeless and bleeding, on the barbed wire fence.

Another group of other prisoners stare out their barracks window at the scene, now brightly illuminated by searchlights.

"Where is God? Where is God?" mutters one.

A man next to him points to the boy's body hanging on the barbed wire.

"He's there."
Easter '97 — Addiction, Hope and Renewal

In his own way, Greg Bauer has risen from the dead. It was 1984, and his body, mind and soul were disintegrating in a storm of drug addiction.

When he wasn't suicidal, he was sick — vomiting, coughing, racked by seizures. His liver was failing, his hair falling out in patches, his weight plummeting. He lost "everything in life that he valued," admits that he was toppling into his grave.

It was then, he says, that God reached out and pulled him back.

"My selfish pride was suddenly burned away. I fell to my knees, surrendered...

"Until that point I had thought that God viewed me as a throw-away person. But there, at rock-bottom, I felt His love."

As Christians around the world gather to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, some, like Bauer, also pause to consider the restoration and renewal of their own lives — lives nearly lost to drug and alcohol abuse.

Some credit Jesus Christ, others a "higher power." All, however, testify to the healing, revitalizing power of hope — a hope that can transcend suffering.

And all describe the journey as beginning in profound despair.

"It was as if I had a hole in my soul," says a Mukilteo woman who credits Alcoholics Anonymous with giving her new life. The organization's spiritual focus has fostered a sense of healing, of grace freely given, she says.

"Before, the depression was so deep... The deeper it went, the more I drank... the more I drank, the bigger the hole became," says the mother of two, who asks that her name not be used.

It was threatening to swallow her up, she says, when she finally decided to seek treatment, part of which involved joining Alcoholics Anonymous.

"At our meetings, you frequently hear people talk about 'rebirth' and their 'second chance,'" she says. "That's what it was like for me. I'm a totally different person than I was then. Happier, healthier... almost literally 'reborn.'"

For Darcy Haisley, hope and rebirth are made manifest in the new church he opens today in South Everett.

"I like to celebrate the Resurrection in every day of my life, but yes, this Easter is special," says Haisley, whose broad shoulders and goatee make him look more like a logger or linebacker than a pastor.

Although he grew up only a couple of blocks from the new Viewridge Community Church building, Haisley didn't have much exposure to religion as a child. His spiritual journey began, he says, in the jungles of Vietnam, where he served a hitch in the infantry.

He saw friends die in the war, their bodies cut to ribbons by mines or riddled by machine gun fire.

Haisley, too, was almost killed on one occasion. A man directly in front of him tripped a mine.

The man's legs were blown off. Haisley took a load of shrapnel in the chest.
He says that God saved his life.
"Earlier that morning, right after I woke up, I felt an overwhelming urge to wear a flak jacket... And I didn't even have one. I had to borrow a flak jacket from the motor pool.
"None of us wore flak jackets... My buddies really teased me about it, because I had this 'tough guy' image. It just wasn't my style. It wasn't 'cool.' But that day I just had to wear one."
Without it, he says, he would have been killed instantly. As it was, he spent a month in the hospital before returning to action with a Purple Heart.
"I didn't realize it at the time, but God was speaking to me then," he says. "God saved me from death, saved me for a purpose."
That purpose, however, didn't become clear for many years.
Coming home to what he calls a "broken, dysfunctional family," Haisley returned to the drugs and alcohol he'd experimented with as a teenager.
"There had always been a lot of craziness going on at home," he says. "I was pretty much on my own from around age 12.
"I got even deeper into drugs and drinking after I returned from 'Nam... I was a wild, woolly, party-animal kind of guy."
Memories of war continued to haunt him, however. And there were other problems -- his father was evicted from the family home. A friend committed suicide in Haisley's trailer. Jobs came and went.
Drugs became his way of running from the pain.
"I used drugs to deal with it all," he says.
One day, while sitting doing drugs with a friend, Haisley says he had a spiritual experience -- not unlike the one that had compelled him to wear the flak jacket.
He felt a sudden certainty that there was something more, that he had to find out what it was.
"I began an almost frantic search for meaning and truth," he says.
"I found it in Jesus Christ."
Like Bauer, Haisley had to hit bottom, to fall deep into darkness before experiencing his turnaround, his "transforming grace" in therapy and spiritual community.
Today, both men have dedicated themselves to helping other drug and alcohol abusers find renewal.
As a pastor, Haisley wants to invite them -- along with other "wounded people" -- into his new church. He wants to show them how God can help ease their pain, help them face reality honestly.
"Pain cannot be avoided," he says. "God invites us to face it, grieve over it, and with His help, move beyond it."
Today Bauer is a counselor who specializes in drug and alcohol abuse. His experience teaches him that suffering -- deep suffering -- can be a catalyst for change, a means of achieving clarity and hope.
"It seems as though people have to hit rock-bottom to see the light. In that darkness, hope somehow manages to break through."
They let go of self-centeredness, selfishness, and pride, he says. They finally admit to despair, to not being able to survive alone.

In this state of brokenness and pain the transformation can begin, he says. As it did with him.

When he was in treatment in '84, Bauer told his counselor -- "a very wise man" -- that the pain was overwhelming, that he couldn't stand it.

"My counselor told me to look at my suffering as a process akin to the purification of gold," says Bauer. "To get pure gold, clean gold, you have to subject it to heat, melting it down, boiling out the impurities, working it slowly towards perfection. In the end, you have something much more precious -- pure gold.

"The same is true with the human spirit," he told me.

"In the end, after the suffering, you have something precious."
Evangelical Church Becomes Orthodox

It wasn't so long ago that a few simple changes brought lasting joy and lingering sorrow to an Arlington church.

Changes, like putting a cloth cover and candles on the altar for the first time, or the pastor donning vestments over his standard shirt and tie.

Changes, like hanging an image of the Virgin Mary on a bare church wall.

Each brought sadness, even pain, because when they were introduced to the Rev. David Hovik's Evangelical Christian congregation, some people walked away.

People he'd known for years. People he loved.

Most would never return.

"It was agonizing to see them go," he says. "It was like losing part of my family."

And yet for Hovik and those members who remained, these actions and practices came to feel natural, appropriate, inevitable.

Joyful.

In time, they saw them as small but necessary steps on a journey to find a more reverent, worshipful, God-focused faith, a search worth even the painful loss of friends.

This morning, Hovik and his congregation will celebrate the end of this journey, as the entire community is converting to Orthodox Christianity. Hovik, the former Protestant pastor, will become an Orthodox priest.

37 families -- former Evangelicals all -- will be officially received into the Antiochian Orthodox Church in a ceremony known as Chrismation; several Orthodox dignitaries from throughout the Western United States will attend.

They will gather at St. Andrew Antiochian Orthodox Church -- formerly Grace Community Church -- in Arlington.

For church member Marianne Carlson, it's a day she's looked forward to for over five years.

"We've studied and searched for so long to get here," she says. "We feel so blessed to have completed the journey."

It was never clear that their searching would lead to Orthodoxy. In the beginning, the only certainty was that a group of sincere Christians were dissatisfied with the way they approached the worship of God.

"There was no concrete end or goal in mind," says Hovik. "We just felt that there had to be more to Christian faith, more to Christian worship than we had previously experienced."

Hovik remembers the beginnings: He had started an evangelical church from scratch, and his congregation met in the Lakewood High School gym in Smoky Point.

People came for different reasons. Some came to hear the pastor's sermons -- Hovik was gaining a bit of small-scale, Snohomish County renown for his, and they helped his church grow. At one point, over a hundred families sat in folded chairs on the hardwood floors.

Others came and stayed because they sensed a kinship in the words. They realized that Hovik, too, was a seeker, someone looking for something deeper.
Most of these members were uneasy with certain characteristics of Evangelical worship. Sandi Meier was one.

"We asked ourselves why people were going to a certain church," she says. "Often the answers were 'Because it's entertaining,' or 'The sermons are good,' or 'The people are nice.'

Carlson was increasingly concerned about stability, about churches adrift in the ebb and flow of culture. She was beginning to feel that some Christians were looking for something other than Christ.

"It's a common practice in the United States for people to 'church hop,'" she says. "If they become dissatisfied with some aspect of one church, they go down the block to another.

"To me, that sort of thing says that an important element is missing... When people are just going for a sermon, or fellowship, or a certain kind of music, it suggests that they're rather rootless, not firmly planted.

"I was looking for something deeper."

Hovik, too, had often felt a rickety foundation to his faith. He knew that for him, something wasn't right.

"In some churches, what is presented as Christian worship would be utterly unrecognizable to someone from the early church," he says. "Everything had been thrown out."

Under Hovik's guidance, church members soon found themselves experimenting with tangible symbols of Christian tradition -- things as simple as candles on the altar. Changes were introduced one at a time, and then only after considerable study and reflection. Hovik tried to keep every member "in the loop."

"Every time we made one of these moves, we tried to do it together, as a community," he says. "Nothing was 'imposed.' We stressed teaching people, educating them, engaging their minds in the process.

"We wanted them to understand that we had serious, sensible reasons for what we were proposing."

With each new practice, people trickled out.

"They usually thought that we were becoming 'Too Catholic,' or 'Too Lutheran,' " Hovik says, emphasizing that these traditions were only explored, not embraced.

"It hurt us all to see them go."

The process accelerated in 1991, when Hovik announced that he would teach a church history course. Virtually the entire congregation turned out, and he decided to do as thorough a job as possible. He read the works of the church fathers, studied the history and practice of ancient, apostolic Christianity.

He didn't realize it at the time, but he was sowing the seeds of conversion.

Not long after, Meier gave him a book called "Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Faith." It was written by Peter Gillquist, one of the founders of the Evangelical organization Campus Crusade for Christ. It detailed the wholesale conversion of 17 Evangelical churches to Orthodoxy.

"When I read this book I was flabbergasted," says Hovik.

"I was moved to tears. It was literally life-transforming."
"My world was turned upside down. I saw that the ancient ways were preserved in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church."

Orthodoxy wasn't yet a goal, but it had become an option.

Over the next three years, Hovik gradually moved to the realization that he needed to leave the Evangelical community. Bits and pieces of "authentic faith" weren't enough, he recalls; it was time "to become whole" by joining an established, traditional Christian church.

He wasn't sure where he and his followers would end up -- Lutheranism, Anglicanism, and Orthodoxy were leading contenders -- only that it would be within a sacramental, liturgical tradition.

In 1994 his church had settled into its new Arlington location. He soon decided it was time to share his vision with the entire congregation.

Hovik made an announcement that he knew would fracture his church.

"The question I had to answer for myself was whether it was my primary responsibility to keep this group of people together, or to ask them to join me in my understanding of church history... of Christian authenticity.

"I was prepared to go it alone if necessary."

Over a third of his congregation did, in fact, leave -- those who could accept a few trappings of tradition, but not a full-scale liturgical commitment.

"That was difficult in so many ways," says Hovik. "The financial impact alone was very serious... This is how I make my living, support my family.

The split forced the remaining members to focus intensely on the issues. Hovik encouraged them.

"What I did was say, 'Just trust me. As we accept these things, you'll fall in love with them... You'll fall in love with the Eucharist, with the liturgical experience.'"

Hovik continued to read and reflect on which direction to take his church, and met with several local pastors and priests from a number of denominations.

One was Fr. James Bernstein of Lynnwood's St. Paul Antiochian Orthodox Church. With Bernstein as a guide, Hovik finally decided to embrace Orthodoxy.

"There was really no other choice," he says.

More people left. But many stayed. And others trickled in, attracted by what Hovik was trying to do.

Among them were Rick and Helen Robinson. Rick heard Hovik speak at an old friend's funeral, and was taken by the sermon. They have fallen in love, they say, with Orthodoxy's liturgical structure, it's "deep roots in Christ."

"This was the sort of church we were looking for," says Helen. "Coming here was a wonderful feeling... like coming home."

Carlson says that today will offer an opportunity to look back on her congregation's painful, joyful spiritual journey, and to look ahead as well.

"We've been through the fire, and we've coalesced into a real family," she says.

"The cohesiveness and love we've developed for each other is wonderful...

"We've found something special, something that will lead us all deeper and deeper into Christ."
With all the care and tenderness of a mother holding a newborn, Amy Boles takes the small Torah from the ark at Everett's Temple Beth Or, and places it on the table that sits under the ner tamid, the "lamp of eternal light."

A gentle tug removes the protective covering, revealing an unpretentious scroll of plain wood and stained parchment.

"You can see the smoke damage from the fire," she says, unrolling the Torah with delicate reverence.

"You can see how close it came to being totally destroyed."

Boles tells how her great-uncle saved this Torah from its German synagogue on a cold November night 59 years ago, as the building burned down around it in the frenzy of shattered glass, fire, and grim foreshadowing known as Kristallnacht.

Many Jews died on this Nazi-orchestrated night of terror. Hundreds of synagogues and countless Jewish businesses were destroyed. Innumerable Torahs were lost.

Not this one. Scarred, it survived.

Now it has come to Everett, on loan from the family in honor of Boles' forthcoming bat mitzvah. As long as it remains, it will be cherished by the Temple Beth Or congregation, says Rabbi David Fine.

"It's sad... that the Torah had to make this journey (out of Europe) in the first place. But it shows us that although the Nazis could break the crystal, break the glass, they could not break us.

"Now, almost 60 years later, we continue to thrive."

Boles brought the Torah from Palo Alto, California, on September 20. She remembers it as something of a harrowing journey, given her concern for the Torah's safety.

"Usually we take a leisurely drive up," she says. "...Not this trip. I think we made it in record time. And we kept it with us constantly. We never left it alone in the car, never left it alone in the motel. If we left, it left, too."

One of her concerns was that the Torah -- which had survived both the Nazis and the ravages of time -- might not survive her young children in the cramped minivan.

"I kept it as far away from them as possible," she laughs.

Laughter, in fact, comes easily to Boles, who acknowledges the sharp contrast between her life today and that of her forebears.

Her family was originally from Breslau, Germany, now part of Poland. For generations, they weathered the simmering anti-Semitism that finally exploded under the Nazis.

Her great-uncle's role in the Kristallnacht tragedy is slightly muddled, says Boles. It's not clear whether Fritz Sandberger actually entered the burning synagogue to retrieve this and one other Torah, or took them from the sidewalk in front of the building. Either way, he saved them, and hid them in his home.
Soon thereafter he gave them to Boles' aunt Stephanie and her fiancée, Max, as a wedding gift, in part because Max was an ordained rabbi with a rare set of travel documents. Together they made their way to England with the Torahs buried in suitcases.

The Gestapo raided Stephanie's apartment shortly after they left. The secret police actually stopped the couple at one point on their journey, even inspecting the Torahs. Luck and the correct papers saved their lives, and the unadorned simplicity of the scrolls saved them from being confiscated.

At roughly the same time, Boles' mother, who was several years younger than her older sister, managed to get out of Germany as well on a "Kindertransport" to England. Every other member of the family died in the Holocaust.

One came painfully, tragically close to freedom. Boles' grandmother Kate, who ran a school for orphaned Jewish girls in Germany was -- with her girls -- within sight of England when their ship was turned away. The British government had only just decided to stop accepting Jewish immigrants, and Kate and her orphans were sent back to Germany.

All perished at Auschwitz.

Today, one of the family Torahs sits in the ark of an Orthodox synagogue in San Diego. Boles is proud to have the other, however briefly, with her family in Everett.

She is happy that she is able to share it with her congregation, with her community.

"It's such an honor," she says.

Like many family members of Holocaust victims, Boles and her relatives are interested in discovering whether any of her Grandparent's assets are hidden in one of the recently revealed "Holocaust victim" bank accounts in Switzerland. Her grandfather, after all, owned a textile mill and a coal mine.

But in the end, she says, "it really doesn't matter."

Boles smiles, and describes the joy her mother takes from simple family gatherings, her grandchildren at her knee, alive today because she and her sister managed to get out of Germany alive.

There is an appreciation here, an understanding born of loss and nurtured in restoration. Priorities are clear.

"After losing everything and everyone, she now has this great big extended family. She's gone from having no one to being surrounded by loved ones.

"That's what this says more than anything else. There is nothing so important as family."

---
Music of the Season: Xmas '97 (1A Story)

With a handkerchief in one hand and a rosary in the other, Ellen Paschal shakes her head and smiles, convinced that she has just been touched by God.

"Look at me, I'm a mess," she says, dabbing at eye-rimming tears.
She is standing in front of St. Mary of the Valley Catholic Church in Monroe, where the Seattle Girls' Choir has just performed a program of traditional holiday carols.
Paschal is one of the last to leave.
"There's something mysterious and divine at work in that music," she says.
"On paper, it's just notes. But when you hear it and feel it, all the mystery and joy of the Nativity comes alive.
"It reminds me what the season is really about. I need that. I think we all need that."

For Paschal and others, sacred music helps maintain a sense of deeper purpose in the glittery bustle of an all-too secular holiday. It lifts tired spirits, nurtures and sustains faith, gives meaning where meaning is increasingly hard to find.
At its best, such music can achieve something rare, something transcendent, as it did for many in this church today. What seems little more than a beautiful melody becomes a bridge to the sacred, perhaps even an encounter with God.

There is no doubting music's power to move the human heart.
Less evident, perhaps, is the dedication and sacrifice of those who make it.
For its composers and directors, singers and players, music is a path of disciplined, sometimes arduous devotion. It is also a gift, to be shared.

***

Eleanor Pachaud of Bothell is one of several Snohomish County girls who sing with the renowned Seattle Girls' Choir. As with the other members, she gives up countless dances, dates, and movies, foregoes football games and pizza parties, to be a member of this elite troupe. She has little time for anything other than studies, sleep, and singing.
It's worth it, she says.
"It makes life really hectic, really busy. But I love it. The rewards are so great.
"I have a true passion for it, a serious commitment. All of us do, I think."

Such dedication is the rule. Dr. Jerome Wright, the founder and director of the choir, is a demanding taskmaster. In rehearsal he's more football coach than maestro, shouting at inattention, barking at imperfection, sometimes singling out girls for verbal lashings that could peel paint off a wall.
Those who survive, however, appreciate it.
"He's tough as nails, but he's great," says Erin McNamee of Sultan. "He can be rough, and act like a real so-and-so at times, but there's a reason for it.
"You can either run away scared -- and believe me, I've seen lots of girls run away scared -- or you can tough it out."
Lauren Schroff of Edmonds agrees.
"He yells at us a lot, but he's terrific," she says. "He could be teaching at Cambridge if he wanted to, but he's here, with us. His style reflects his passion for the music. He cares about it, and he cares about us.

"We give up a lot. But it's more than worth it."

All the girls undergo a rigorous audition process, and many spend years in the preparatory and training choirs that lead to the "prime voce," or advanced choir.

Over time, they come to acknowledge the mysterious power and energy that can, when everything "clicks," emanate from their music. Paschal's experience, in fact, doesn't surprise them. They've seen it many times, often felt it themselves.

"I've had some of the most incredible, moving, spiritual experiences in this choir," says Gina Barone of Lynnwood. "I can't really put those feelings into words, but it's incredible.

"We have people coming up to us all the time, crying, thanking us, telling us how the music has touched them.

"It's profoundly moving to have that kind of effect on people. It's like, 'Wow, we did that!'"

***

This holiday season, Mark Henry and Madeline Renkins of Snohomish drive 31 miles, several times a week, to rehearse and perform with the choir at Seattle's St. James Cathedral. Then they drive the 31 miles home.

Another choir member, Shelda Bernat of Camano Island, makes a 130 mile round-trip to join them.

For most Puget Sounders, such long hauls on I-5 are about as appealing as a double root canal; they find an on-ramp only when absolutely necessary. It's only natural, therefore, that the commute time and gas money involved here begs a question — Why not join the choir at that church down the street?

Each gives essentially the same answer. First, they don't have any problem with that "choir down the street." They have nothing but respect for those in churches large and small who labor to bring the gift of music to their congregations.

These three, however, have a distinct focus. They want to sing in one of the nation's great choirs, under the direction of one its finest teachers, in a near-perfect setting.

They have that at St. James.

"It's definitely worth the sacrifice to be in a choir of this quality," says Henry.

"People come from all over to appreciate the liturgy and music at St. James. It's an amazing place... truly an amazing place."

"The drive is nothing compared to what we get out of it," says Renkins.

"Something is created there that I've never experienced anywhere else."

The Cathedral has won a dozen architectural and music awards for its restoration, completed in 1994. Performers marvel at its acoustics.

Bernat, who doubles as the choir's chaplain, says that quality of sound is only part of the St. James story, only one of the reasons they spend much time on the road.

"There's a combination of things that make it extraordinary," she says. "The stained glass, the treatment and use of color, form, and symmetry, the use of symbols. It
all pulls together perfectly ...making St. James one of the most incredible churches to
sing or worship in."

Cathedral choir members should know. Theirs is one of a handful of American
choral groups ever invited to sing in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel -- and they've done it
twice. The choir has performed in many of Europe's other renowned settings as well,
including St. Mark's in Venice and the recently-destroyed chapel in Assisi. In the early
'90's, they were among the first choirs to sing in Russia after the fall of Communism,
helping to reinvigorate that country's sacred music traditions.

These experiences have led members to appreciate St. James all the more.

Much of the credit for the St. James success story goes to music director Dr.
James Savage, who recently retired from the Cornish School after 32 years of teaching.
He now works full-time at the Cathedral.

"He's a genius," says Henry. "One of the best choral directors in the country."

Bernat says that Savage is much more than just technically competent and
knowledgeable.

"He's a deeply spiritual person," she says. "That comes out in his direction. It has
a serious influence on all of us."

***

Barone of the Seattle Girls' Choir recalls an atheist friend who came to one of
their concerts. She describes him as experiencing something of an epiphany.

"After hearing us sing, he was clearly moved. He said, 'That music really reached
out to me, really grabbed me.'"

"He said that it gave him a sense of order in the universe, of a cause and purpose
to existence that he didn't have before. I think it really changed his life."

Pachaud, too, has seen the music touch people in extraordinary, almost
inexplicable ways, and most often with the music of Christmas and Easter. She has felt it
herself on several occasions, experiencing something while singing that she describes as
"transcending the physical world."

"I've been so moved at times," she says. "And it's wonderful, absolutely
wonderful, to see that replicated in others."

"You don't have to believe to sing in the choir. But when you sing this material,
when you do work like we do for Christmas, how can you doubt that there is a creator?"

***

Renkins says that her experiences with the cathedral and its music have changed
her profoundly.

She moved to Seattle in 1984, working for a law firm that had her "traveling all
over the place."

One place she didn't go, however, was to church. Renkins had fallen away, had
not attended mass for over two years.

"I had really stopped communicating with God. There were lots of rough things
going on in my life then... I had really lost hope."

Fate, luck, or something else altogether led Renkins to move into a condo near the
cathedral. She thought she'd give the church one more try.
At the Cathedral, Renkins says, she experienced the presence of God, of Christ, as she never had before. She found her lost faith, found hope again.

Renkins moved to Snohomish in 1986, but found herself always drawn to St. James. When work allowed it, she auditioned for the choir, finally joining in 1993. She remembers singing in her first Christmas Eve service that same year.

"I couldn't believe the joy that was brought forth," she says. "The combination of music and spirituality seemed to be ...bringing God right down to earth.

"...It was such a powerful literalization and actualization of Christ coming into the world."

For Renkins, considerations like drive time and gas money are afterthoughts, pale details against the power of St. James.

"What happens there is extraordinary," she says. "Deeply spiritual. Even miraculous."

***

Where does music, especially sacred music, get its undeniable power?

For the Seattle Girls Choirs' McNamee, much of music's energy comes from deep emotional and spiritual sources.

"Everything I am comes out in my voice," she says. "All my anger, all my love. It all comes out."

"It's the most spiritual, beautiful expression I can possibly imagine."

Barone agrees.

"I'm sharing my soul with others when I sing," she says. "I'm giving them this fundamental part of who I am."

St. James' Bernat says that the scriptural text forming the basis for most sacred music is itself a source of power. She describes the music as something which flows from -- and back into -- the divine.

"Being able to sing or play is a gift from God. To have this gift, and to share it with others, to give it back to God through his people, is incredibly moving."

"He who sings, prays twice," she says, quoting St. Augustine. "That says it very well."