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Reclaiming The Common Good

ROBERT W. McELROY

Among the common misconceptions about Jesuits are the following: First, we all have multiple Ph.D.'s. (I have zero.) Second, we all speak Latin. (I do not.) Third, we have all spent many years teaching. (Not me, which I count as a loss.) Finally, we all travel to Rome frequently.

Before last week, however, I had been only three times to Catholic headquarters. All in all, then, I can't say I knew Rome very well.

During the pope's recent visit to the United States, I frequently had religion journalists mention a Vatican office and say something like, "They're right near the Porta Santa Anna." They might as well have been describing a crater on Mars.

So I was happy when our editor in chief, Matt Malone, S.J., asked me to go to Rome on behalf of America Media last month. Normally Father Malone visits various Vatican and Jesuit offices as a part of his job. But this year, because of a busy schedule (he is one of the hardest working Jesuits I know), he was unable to go.

Initially, I was worried that perhaps there wouldn't be many people who would be able to see me. Happily, though, I met with a mix of Vatican officials, Jesuit officials and coworkers at the Jesuit headquarters, journalists, bishops, lectors, priests, religious men and women, editors, students, an ambassador or two and of course many of my Jesuit brothers. It was a fun, if grueling, trip. I got lost more than once, ate too much bread and, thanks to a friend, saw the inside of the Apostolic Palace. When my guide escorted me onto a stunning loggia down which popes have strolled, I said, "I'm not even going to pretend to be blasé."

Perhaps it was the same under John Paul II and Benedict, but the pope was the center of almost every conversation in Rome. Now, I bow to no one in my

admiration for Papa Francesco, but at times I wondered if there was anything else to talk about! It reminded me of a group pilgrimage to Lourdes, when it seemed that the only names on our lips were those of Mary and St. Bernadette. After one Gospel reading at Mass, a Jesuit companion turned to me and said, "Ah, Jesus! I've missed him!"

One day I was returning from an appointment with a Vatican official to the Jesuit curia, a few hundred feet from St. Peter's Square. As I made my way to my room I passed the larger-than-life statue of Jesus which stands on a high ledge overlooking the Curia garden. Underneath the statue was the legend: "Salus Tua Ego Sum." Yes, I don't know much Latin, but this was easy: "I am your salvation." And I thought, well, yes, not the pope. It was a good reminder for someone like me, who idolizes Francis.

The second topic of conversation was the Jesuit general congregation, which begins in October. Admittedly, this topic was mainly of interest to my Jesuit confreres, but there is a great deal of anticipation for the 36th General Congregation, during which the delegates will elect a successor to Adolfo Nicolás, the current superior general of the Society of Jesus. When Father Nicolás concludes his term, he will, like all Jesuits, be missioned by his provincial. He follows the example of his predecessor, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. After Father Nicolás was elected in 2008, a reporter asked Father Kolvenbach what he would do next. "Whatever my superior asks me to do," he said. Today he works as an assistant librarian at the Université de Saint-Joseph in Beirut, Lebanon. He knows who is in charge.

So does Father Nicolás. So does Pope Francis. It's Jesus, our salvation. I was happy to be reminded of that in Rome.

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ON THE WEB

Sean Carroll, S.J., right, writes about finding God on the **U.S.-Mexico border**, and Ashley McKinless reports from the annual **March for Life** in Washington, D.C. Full digital highlights on page 27 and at americamagazine.org/webfeatures.



Immigrant Flood—Really?

“People are pouring across the southern border,” the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said in a debate in December. That image has helped to make immigration reform all but impossible in the current Congress, and it has reinforced the idea that we have lost control of migration into the United States.

In fact, the total number of undocumented migrants in the United States fell to 10.9 million in 2014, its lowest level since 2003. According to a report in January by the Center for Migration Studies, the size of the undocumented population has fallen each year since 2008; the number of Mexican-born undocumented migrants has dropped by more than 600,000 since 2010. Similarly, the Pew Research Center reported in November that “more Mexican immigrants have returned to Mexico from the U.S. than have migrated here since the end of the Great Recession.”

Tighter border security, along with the Obama administration’s surprisingly aggressive deportation policies, may be having a deterrent effect, but the C.M.S. researcher Randy Capps told *The Atlantic*, “The long-term trends in Mexico are driving a lot of this story.” That is, more jobs and a rising standard of living in Mexico are reducing the incentives to head north. So it is in the best interest of the United States to work with the Mexican government to improve economic conditions and reduce drug violence there—as opposed to building literal or figurative walls between the two nations. It is also time for a more civil discussion of legal status for the great majority of undocumented migrants who contribute to our economy and social life. The myth of people “pouring” across our borders in ever-increasing numbers should not go unchallenged in this election year.

Iran’s Juvenile Justice

In the wake of the agreement on limiting its nuclear programs, Iran has been busy trying to present itself as open to the modern world and re-establishing economic and political relations with the West. To that end, Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani has embarked on a tour of European capitals. He started with Italy and the Vatican, where on Jan. 26 he met with Pope Francis.

But according to a recent report by Amnesty International, Iran’s juvenile justice system reveals another reality. Iran is ranked among the leading countries in the world in executions of juveniles. Though Iran had pledged

over 20 years ago to eliminate the practice of applying the death penalty to juveniles under the age of 18, the evidence shows otherwise. In the 10-year period from 2005 to 2015, over 73 juveniles were executed by the state. Since ratifying the 1994 Convention of the Rights of the Child, Iran has claimed that it has “modernized” its juvenile justice system. Cynically, the Iranians claim they do not execute underage juveniles; in practice the state waits until they reach age 21 before doing so. Currently, there are 160 juveniles on death row in Iran.

According to Michael G. Bochenek, senior counsel of the children’s rights division of Human Rights Watch, Iran is a “world leader” in juvenile executions. According to Amnesty International, other countries in this “class” are China, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The United States did not eliminate the death penalty for juveniles until 2005. When will Iran do so?

Edward Glynn, S.J.

When men join the Jesuits they are reminded that few Jesuits become famous—John Courtney Murray, Pope Francis—but many will engage in unsung work in which they touch countless lives. Edward Glynn, S.J., born one of nine children in Clarks Summit, Pa., joined the Society of Jesus in 1955 and was ordained in 1967. Known early as an athlete, sports fan, intellectual and activist, he was also a natural leader.

In the early 1970s, while teaching theology at Georgetown, he also wrote for *America*. His topics included the Democratic convention of 1972, women’s liberation, just war theory, amnesty for draft resisters, Washington politics and the Watergate scandal. But his great skill was as an administrator, listener and decider. He served as superior of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus and as president of Gonzaga University in Spokane, John Carroll University in Cleveland and St. Peter’s College in Jersey City. In 2007 he established Christ the King Preparatory School in Newark, a Cristo Rey high school. Perhaps overworked, he suffered a heart attack and moved to the Jesuit infirmary St. Claude de la Columbière in Baltimore.

Father Glynn vacationed every summer in Sea Bright, N.J., with Jesuit friends. The ocean waves there once broke his neck, but he still loved to look out over the sea—symbolic of the multitudes touched by his leadership, friendship and priestly presence. His heart gave out on Jan. 24, but his spirit will be there next year.

Flint Was No Accident

The water coming out of taps in Flint, Mich., has been a frightening orange-brown for more than a year now, but the official declaration of a state of emergency was made only last month. In April 2014, under the direction of state-appointed emergency managers, the financially distressed city switched from using water purchased from Detroit to drawing its water from the Flint River to save money. Corrosive water running through old pipes caused lead to leach into the drinking water. On Jan. 27 of this year, Michigan's governor, Rick Snyder, said at least 200 children in Flint have elevated levels of lead in their blood, which can irreversibly damage developing brains.

Flint is not the only place with problems like this. Disproportionately, these places tend to be poor and black. A report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2013 found that both African-American children and poor children are almost twice as likely as white and non-poor children to have high blood lead levels. The crisis in Flint makes the question unavoidable: What went wrong, and why?

To ask that question and answer it honestly, the effects of historical and structural racism must be taken into account. Flint's water crisis, while it may be directly attributable to comprehensive bureaucratic mismanagement, also worsened while residents complained and officials made excuses. It is difficult if not impossible to imagine a government allowing water to remain that color for more than a year for people with more pull, or a bigger megaphone, than the citizens of Flint. Empirical evidence, like that gathered in the C.D.C. report, shows that lead contamination and other environmental dangers are unequally distributed along racial lines.

Asked directly whether Flint was the victim of "environmental racism," Governor Snyder denied the charge, and the emails his administration has released relating to the crisis show no discussion of race. But to conclude that the absence of overt racism means that racism has played no part in this tragedy betrays a failure of imagination. We have long since reached the point where the persistence of disparate racial impacts demands that we look for a related cause. Brentin Mock, of The Atlantic's project CityLab (Jan. 26), writes that "Flint is only the latest episode in an ongoing American saga that has consistently found people of color fighting for basic rights like clean air and water" and getting results that are broadly worse than those enjoyed by the ra-

cial majority.

The uneven playing field and historical inequities of our urban infrastructure are not natural features; they developed historically, influenced both by patterns of migration from the South starting during Reconstruction and more recently by the practice of redlining, corralling black home buyers into less-desirable neighborhoods by controlling the availability of home financing. Redlining maps for Flint are part of the historical record. The concentration of poverty, its correlation to race and the subsequent economic, social and infrastructure crises experienced in these communities do not "just happen." They may not have been deliberately planned, but they are not simply accidents of history.

If the United States hopes to grapple with these challenges and to improve the situations in these communities, then it should begin by admitting that they have significant racial components, in history, structure and effect. Environmental racism can be seen as a tragic inversion of the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized, a kind of "preferential neglect." These problems are easier to ignore, take longer to be noticed and are more difficult to fix because the people who exercise power are not linked to these communities by history or by a common life. In "Laudato Si," Pope Francis cautioned that those with power "live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population" and warned that "this lack of physical contact and encounter...can lead to a numbing of conscience" (No. 49).

Given the history of this country, that lack of solidarity and numbness of conscience is all too often found across a racial divide. While the practical steps now underway to address the crisis in Flint are a necessary first step, it is necessary also to ask how to start looking for the next similar problem that is likely to cause surprise and dismay.

One way to do that would be to focus not just on how to secure Flint's water supply but also on how to give the community the agency and resources it needs to rehabilitate itself. Also required is a careful look at how both government officials and the national media ignored the crisis as it developed, while local media and residents were sounding the alarm. Perhaps the lessons learned in Flint can be applied to help other communities as well.



REPLY ALL

The Greatest Profession

Re “Teacher, Heal Thyself,” by Raymond A. Schroth, S.J. (1/18): Father Schroth has captured the nuts and bolts of the teaching vocation and the spirit of its mission. As I read his words, I was reminded of William Watters, S.J., the founder of St. Ignatius Prep in Baltimore. As with many Jesuits, he shared first and foremost a passion for people and carried out that passion in his ministry.

Many have bemoaned the lack of value of the high school diploma, as so many with that document lack sufficient skill to read at the college level or to write persuasively. The Jesuits are again testimony to the fact that this just does not have to be so. Yes, they teach the “privileged” in a good number of schools (and there they do an unmatched job of disturbing the privileged to action on behalf of others). But the Society has also made a solid commitment to the less fortunate with its Cristo Rey program, another ministry spearheaded by Father Watters.

My experience of 40 years in Catholic schools has been one of meeting students where they are and pushing them beyond that point—all the time loving them as Father Schroth’s novice master advised. Without the “openness and sincerity” of our students this endeavor lacks all meaning. But with it—no greater profession exists.

BARRY FITZPATRICK
Online Comment

Homework Hell

In “Teacher, Heal Thyself,” Raymond Schroth, S.J., quotes a young teacher who wrote to him, “I think it is wonderful that a 17-year-old girl from the upper West Side and a 17-year-old from Bed-Stuy would both be entitled to read and explore in class a treasure like *Jane Eyre*.” Does Father Schroth seriously think Common Core is about reading *Jane Eyre*? Here is what a five-

step assignment on *Jane Eyre* would look like under the Common Core: 1) Read *Jane Eyre*; 2) Explain how you read *Jane Eyre*; 3) Calculate the number of letters in the title of *Jane Eyre*; 4) But not by counting them; 5) Explain how you calculated the number of letters in *Jane Eyre*. Common Core homework assignments are pure torture for parents. Father Schroth should have done his homework before calling on readers to “support the Common Core.”

PAUL CONLIN
Lake Zurich, Ill.

Irreverent Reference

I was reading “City Under Fire,” by Judith Valente (1/18), and was struck by the lines, “Susan Johnson, an American Baptist minister, heads Chicago Survivors. Ms. Johnson was pastor at a church....” Why does the author not refer to her as the Rev. Johnson? Is she not ordained? I wondered if it had been a reference to a Catholic priest, would **America** not have printed “Father so and so”? I only needed to read a few more lines to get my answer: “David Kelly, a Precious Blood priest, is one of those who are trying to walk that walk. Father Kelly....”

I find the references here denigrating to the Rev. Johnson. I spent four years in study after college, just like most Catholic seminarians. I am fully ordained to the ministry. Why should references to me and my fellow Lutheran colleagues be different from references to my Roman Catholic friends? When Pope Francis seems open to the possibility that all of us are headed for the same goal, and we are all members of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, this seems very backward.

(REV.) CHRISTINE MILLER
Online Comment

Substitute ‘Catholic’

In “Saudi Suffragettes?” (Current Comment, 1/4), the editors conclude,

“There is a long way to go before Saudi women can claim the rights that men have in running the affairs of their country.” It is thought-provoking how effectively that final sentence invites the reader to substitute “Catholic” for “Saudi” and “church” for “country.”

TOM KILCOYNE
Online Comment

Wife, Mother, Feminist

I enjoyed Sidney Callahan’s review of *Keeping the Vow*, by D. Paul Sullins (“For Better or Worse, 1/4). I find her definition of feminism limited, however. She states, “These marital models [priest’s wife, corporate business leader’s wife] were not much influenced by feminism.”

I can attest from personal experience that I have drawn on all my Notre Dame and Harvard education, feminism and Catholic faith in my chosen vocation to nurture my husband’s and my marriage, raise our children, manage our home and serve the community in a variety of ways. And yes, I have also supported my husband’s vocation as a lawyer, just as he has supported my vocation as described above and now, with our children grown, the second career I am building.

MICHELLE BERBERET
Online Comment

Solidarity Without Borders

In “The Rights of Refugees,” by David Hollenbach, S.J. (1/4), there is no mention of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who have fled from violence and poverty in Central America. Families and children, many unaccompanied, have made the dangerous journey from El Salvador and Honduras through Mexico and then crossed into the United States. A comprehensive, compassionate immigration policy and the closing of detention centers are responsibilities of the White House and the U.S. Congress. Solidarity has no borders and it should never be forgotten that people who are forced to cross borders because of threats to their lives

should be welcomed across the borders of the United States not as strangers but as our sisters and brothers.

ROGER YOCKEY, O.F.S.
Yakima, Wash.

Not the Worst Thing

I am grateful for “A Vibrant Vocation,” by Karl A. Schultz (1/4). My hope is that one day we in the church come to truly value the preciousness of life in everyone, not only in the married person. Marriage and procreation have been glorified and held up as examples of God’s favor far too persistently and ubiquitously to the exclusion of other states in life. The result for many single people, as well as for many married people without children, is feeling diminished, judged, condemned, unwanted. Salvation for them can be found outside the church only.

Recently, I saw a post on my Facebook page with the picture of the actor Robin Williams saying: “I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It is not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel all alone.” I can relate to his words. In my case, I have been able to listen to a God who keeps convincing me that I am wanted and loved even though I have not been able to conceive children, even though I may find myself with people “who make me feel all alone.” So I have stayed in the church and cherish it, but it is not surprising to me why so many people have left. They feel like lepers. I pray that one day we can welcome and listen to one another with love, without conditions and without expectations.

MARIA COSTA
Online Comment

Single, Not Sidelined

I want to thank Karl A. Schultz for his well-considered and timely article, “A Vibrant Vocation” (1/4). In my practice of spiritual direc-

tion, I often hear from those in the single life a desire for “more” from their local church community. These singles are not sideliners; they are well-educated, generous, contributing members looking for a missing piece. America is to be commended for noticing and affirming the too often overlooked vocation of the single life—permanent or temporary. My next step is to send this article to several of these beautiful people.

CYNTHIA SABATHIER, C.S.J.
Baton Rouge, La.

Taking Notice

Re “An Unnoticed God,” by Benjamin John Wilson (12/21/15): As I was walking once to Mass at the campus where I lived, there on a banister I spotted a praying mantis in its usual position, kneeling as if in prayer. Feeling dank because of a period of apparently fruitless prayer, and seeing the praying mantis apparently always at prayer, the following words of Jesus came to mind: “Pray always and do not lose heart.” Immediately my spirit lifted and I recognized Jesus speaking to me in my need, through a humble insect, the work of his hand! Yes, Jesus is an equal opportunity provider, clueing all to the workings of the unnoticed God, which he truly is! We all like to

be noticed—God, too—and paradoxically he does unnoticed things to catch our attention.

BRUCE SNOWDEN
Online Comment

On God’s Team

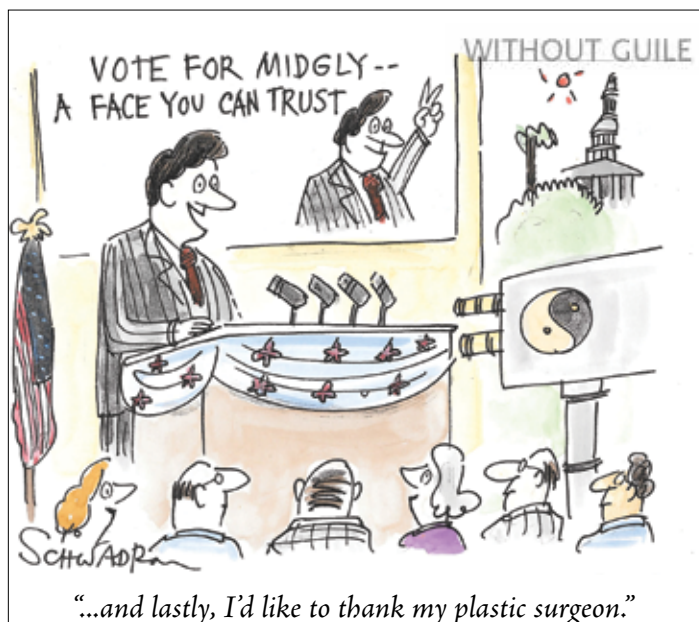
Thanks for printing “On Being and Becoming,” by William J. O’Malley, S.J. (11/16/15), an awesome article that I’ve pondered much. I would add to Father O’Malley’s parallels between natural and divine attributes that scientific discovery today is a team enterprise. For example, the Atlas and C.M.S. collaborations (experiments into the Higgs boson particle) at the Large Hadron Collider amount to medium-size universities. It is similar, I think, with discovering and understanding Yahweh. It takes at least a village, perhaps even a whole church, to approach some understanding. Could another divine attribute be that God gets, revels in and may even need such relationships?

JOHN METZLER
McLean, Va.

Disingenuous Denunciation

In “Abortion and its Critics” (Current Comment, 12/21/15) it seems highly ironic and disingenuous that the editors contend such a direct correlation between the attacks at a Planned Parenthood clinic and the “need” for additional gun regulation. The assumed correlation is no more factual than the assumed correlation between pro-life advocacy and domestic terrorism. Their advocacy for additional gun regulation may be well-intended, but they are guilty of the same blame-shifting rhetoric denounced in the comment.

PHILLIP JOHNSON
Online Comment



MIDDLE EAST

In Region's Conflicts, Hunger Becomes a Lethal Weapon

In a Middle East torn apart by conflict, fighters are increasingly using food as a weapon. Millions of people across countries like Syria, Yemen and Iraq are gripped by hunger, struggling to survive with little help from the outside world. Children suffer from malnutrition; their parents often have to beg or sell possessions to get basic commodities including water, medicine and fuel.

Aid agencies have struggled with funding shortages and growing impediments to the delivery of humanitarian assistance despite U.N. Security Council resolutions insisting on the unconditional delivery of aid across front lines. In Yemen, the Arab world's most impoverished nation, nearly half of the country's 22 provinces are ranked as one step away from famine conditions.

The biggest humanitarian catastrophe by far is in Syria, where a ruinous five-year civil war has killed a quarter of a million people and displaced half the population. The United Nations estimates that more than 400,000 people are besieged in 15 communities across Syria, roughly half of them in areas controlled by the Islamic State group. All sides in the conflict have used punishing blockades to force submission by the other side—a tactic that has proved effective particularly for government forces seeking to pacify opposition-held areas around Damascus.

Since October, Russian airstrikes and the start of winter have exacerbated the crisis. Humanitarian teams who recently entered a besieged Syrian town witnessed scenes that “haunt the soul,” said Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. He accused both the government of President Bashar Assad and the rebels fighting to oust him of using starvation as a weapon, calling it a war crime.

One of the hardest-hit blockaded areas in Syria is Madaya, a town northeast of Damascus with a population of 40,000. The town has been besieged by government and allied militiamen for months. Two convoys of humanitarian aid were delivered to the town in January. Aid workers who entered described seeing skeletal figures, children who could barely talk or walk and parents who gave their children sleeping pills to calm their hunger.

Fouaa and Kfarya, two Shiite villages in the northern province of Idlib, have been blockaded by rebels for more than a year. Pro-government fighters recently evacuated from the villages de-

scribe desperate conditions there with scarce food and medicine, saying some residents are eating grass to survive and undergoing surgery without anesthesia.

In Yemen the situation has dramatically deteriorated, nearly 300 days after the Saudi-led coalition began its air campaign to drive Yemen's Shiite rebels from cities under their control. Coalition naval ships are blockading traffic in Yemen's ports, and rebels are besieging several areas, particularly the southern city of Taiz. The United Nations reported in late December that 7.8 million of Yemen's 24 million people are in even more dire condition, “facing life-threatening rates of acute malnutrition.”

Massive population shifts in Iraq because of violence have made it more difficult for millions of people to access food, medicine and safe drinking water. More than three million Iraqis are displaced within the country by vio-



FACE OF HUNGER. A Syrian boy gets his rations in Kawergosk refugee camp in northern Iraq on Jan. 24.

lence and instability. “They’ve lost their livelihoods, their jobs, and hunger and the inability to purchase food is a reality in their everyday life,” said Marwa Awad, with the World Food Program. In total, 8.2 million Iraqis are in need of humanitarian assistance: food, water, shelter or medicine, she said.

ZEINA KARAM
Associated Press

THE POPE IN MEXICO

Remembering Don Samuel of Chiapas

Long before Pope Francis spoke of a poor church for the poor and of taking the church to the peripheries, Bishop Samuel Ruiz García of San Cristóbal de Las Casas built such a church in Mexico's southern



AP PHOTO/ALICE MARTINS

Chiapas state. Inspired by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and gatherings of the Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia, and Puebla, Mexico, he showed a preference for the poor, rubbed the rich the wrong way and ran afoul of the Vatican with his pastoral approach, especially with his ordination of married indigenous deacons.

Pope Francis will visit Chiapas on Feb. 15 and celebrate Mass for indigenous peoples, including local Mayan languages in the celebration. He also will pray at the tomb of Bishop Ruiz, who died in 2011 at age 86, in the San Cristóbal de Las Casas cathedral. This is being seen as a show of respect for a churchman often at odds with the Catholic hierarchy, though a pioneer in a pastoral approach since adopted by the pope.

Pope Francis “can’t come to Mexico without visiting Our Lady of

Guadalupe. He couldn’t visit Chiapas without saluting the legacy of Samuel Ruiz,” said Gaspar Morquecho, an anthropologist in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The trip to Chiapas—part of his six-day visit to Mexico—highlights the pope’s preoccupation with indigenous issues and a population that has abandoned the church in large numbers across the Americas.

“[Bishop Ruiz] constantly had to defend himself to the Vatican and defend his work,” said Michel Andraos, associate professor at the Chicago Theological Union and a frequent visitor to Chiapas. “He kept telling them, ‘I’m Catholic. These are the texts of the Second Vatican Council, and I am following the teachings.’”

Discrimination ran deep in Chiapas; indigenous people were even prohibited from walking on the sidewalks of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The Mexican Revolution hardly reached Chiapas, leaving large landowners who formed the local elite and enjoyed close relations with the church hierarchy.

“Don Samuel broke with this dynamic [because] he discovered the reality of the poor and saw that the Gospel could bring about change,” said Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco, a Dominican priest.

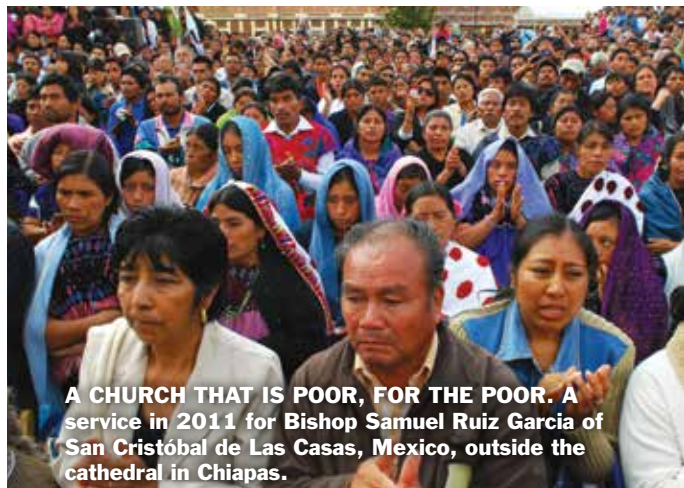
Discord with the elites was a product of Bishop Ruiz’s pastoral approach, which valued indigenous traditions, trained local leaders, spoke of social justice and emphasized participation. Father Ituarte said it organized indigenous people in ways seen as threatening by landowners, some of whom branded the bishop a communist.

“The system of domination had the indigenous only arriving at the church

door. They were baptized, but nothing more.... Don Samuel’s idea is that the indigenous must enter the church, be an active part, with all of the rights,” Father Ituarte said. “The church has been acculturated in various places, [and] we believe the indigenous of the Americas have the right that the church be theirs, too, drawing on their [culture] and identity.”

The bishop’s influence went beyond church matters. In 1974, Bishop Ruiz organized a conference of indigenous peoples, the first grass-roots gathering of its kind since the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Observers say it sparked indigenous awareness and ultimately led to the 1994 Zapatista uprising, in which the rebels took up arms against the government, using tactics of which Bishop Ruiz disapproved. Bishop Ruiz became a mediator in the dispute, despite government misgivings.

“At one point they blamed him, but they quickly realized the only person that could mediate was Don Samuel,” Father Ituarte said. “The causes pushed by the Zapatista were the same ones we had been pushing for many years—the *campesino* struggle, the indigenous struggle,” though not armed conflict, Father Ituarte added.



A CHURCH THAT IS POOR, FOR THE POOR. A service in 2011 for Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico, outside the cathedral in Chiapas.

Zimbabwe: No Money For Health Care

With poverty on the rise and a drought compounding Zimbabwe's problems, people are struggling to make ends meet, church workers said. In Zimbabwe's hospitals and other health facilities, "patients need to pay for everything: painkillers, drips, injections and scans," said Getrude Chimange, coordinator of the justice and peace commission in Mutare Diocese. "Industries have closed, leading to breadwinners losing their jobs and turning to informal trade on the streets, where they make very little money," she said on Jan. 27 by telephone from Mutare. "A stay in a general hospital in Manicaland province costs \$9 a day," Chimange said, noting that "the doctor or nurse gives the prescription and the patient needs to fill it at a pharmacy." Some patients "delay going to get the prescribed medication or having X-rays done for more than two weeks because they cannot afford it," she said. "Lives are lost this way. There are people who die on hospital operating tables when the electricity shuts down," Chimange said.

Minority Rights In Muslim Lands

Muslim leaders from around the world adopted a declaration defending the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries. Participants said the Marrakesh Declaration, developed during a conference on Jan. 25-27, was based on the Medina Charter, a constitutional contract between the Prophet Muhammad and the people of Medina. The declaration said the charter, instituted 1,400 years ago, guaranteed the religious liberty of all, regardless of faith. The conference included Muslim leaders from

NEWS BRIEFS

After nearly 27 years on the job, **Greg Erlandson** stepped down as publisher at Our Sunday Visitor Inc., on Jan. 31. + The Fiat 500L that Pope Francis used to tour Philadelphia was auctioned off for \$82,000 at a black-tie event kicking off the Philadelphia Auto Show on Jan. 29 with proceeds going to **assist local Catholic charities**, especially special education programs. + "All of us who have any power, whether it is ecclesiastical, religious, economic or political power," Pope Francis said at his chapel Mass on Jan. 29, have **a risk of becoming corrupt** "because the devil makes us feel certain 'I can do it myself.'" + The Chicago-based Thomas More Society, a nonprofit public interest law firm known for supporting pro-life causes, **will defend the Center for Medical Progress** in a federal racketeering lawsuit filed on Jan. 14 by Planned Parenthood. + The Rev. Patrick Behm of Le Mars, Iowa, became a surprise Internet sensation after he **celebrated Mass on a snow altar** on Jan. 23, after he and scores of others returning home from the March for Life were snowbound on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.



Greg Erlandson

more than 120 countries, representatives of persecuted religious communities—including Chaldean Catholics from Iraq—and government officials. The declaration said "conditions in various parts of the Muslim world have deteriorated dangerously due to the use of violence and armed struggle as a tool for settling conflicts and imposing one's point of view," which has enabled criminal groups to issue edicts that "alarmingly distort" Islam's "fundamental principles and goals. It is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggressing upon the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries," the declaration said.

Defending Refugees

Catholic bishops in Germany and Austria have urged their countries to continue accepting refugees, despite demands for new restrictions after vi-

olence on New Year's Eve in Cologne and other cities. "We need a reduction in numbers, but fixing an upper limit would be difficult," Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier told the daily paper Trierischer Volksfreund Jan. 27. "We also need flexibility. But it's up to politicians to say how this can be achieved in practice, and it can't be done only at a national level," he said. Some Germans have called for a cap on refugees, following violent incidents involving people newly arrived from Syria and other countries. Meanwhile, the German church's special representative for refugees said he believed a cap would violate the Geneva Convention and Germany's Basic Law. "Christians cannot allow people who've faced untold suffering and are needing help to encounter closed borders," Archbishop Stefan Hesse of Hamburg told German media.

From CNS, RNS and other sources.

Beyond Diversity

The Nigerian priest Benedict Chidi Nwachukwu-Udaku, V.F., pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., tells the story of the day he tried to bring a tradition from home into an American liturgy. “I was celebrating our monthly Mass with healing prayers,” he recalls. “I decided to sing a chorus at the elevation of the sacred species, which is a normal practice at charismatic liturgies in Nigeria.”

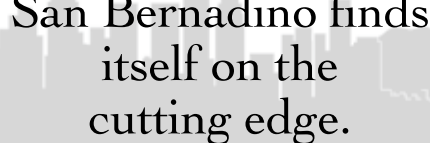
It did not go over quite as he expected. “I got an email asking me to explain why I should sing at [the] consecration.”

Elsewhere one hears complaints about priests who are hard to understand, as well as honest admissions by American and foreign-born priests and staff members about their struggles to minister to other cultures, in other languages. If you were to do a survey of American Catholics about issues in their parishes, chances are high that questions related to diversity would be at the top among them. According to a study by Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate in 2014, 25 percent of the Catholic clergy in the United States today—over 6,500 priests—come from other cultures, with their own traditions, expectations and issues.

Within parish communities, too, there are challenges, as the traditions and expectations of different cultural groups are negotiated, often without much discussion or reflection. Instead of one community of faith, in many parishes there is fragmentation—the “main” congregation and “the Spanish

Mass,” “the Vietnamese retreat.”

In this area of cultural diversity, the Diocese of San Bernardino finds itself at the cutting edge. In addition to Native Americans, different Spanish-speaking groups, Anglo-Americans and African-Americans, the diocese also includes populations of Vietnamese, Indonesians, Igbo-speaking Africans, Filipinos, Tongans, Samoans, Guamanians and other



The Diocese of San Bernardino finds itself on the cutting edge.

Mariana Islanders, Koreans and Arabic speakers. Most of its active priests are foreign-born, and only a handful of its seminarians are of European descent. All but four of its 91 parishes have Mass in Spanish.

But instead of seeing that diversity as an obstacle, Bishop Gerald Barnes, like his predecessor, Bishop Philip Straling, looks on it as an asset. “From the get-go,” explains John Andrews, the diocesan director of communications, “we’ve wanted to wear that as a badge, a strength, a blessing. So any time we have an opportunity to understand that better, we take it.”

In that spirit, in 2011 the diocese began participating in Building Intercultural Competencies for Ministers—a five-part series of workshops developed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to enable dioceses and other Catholic institutions to understand better and capitalize on the cultural dynamics within their communities.

“Why did the Titanic sink?” asks Maria Muñoz-Visoso, executive director of the U.S.C.C.B.’s Secretariat for Cultural Diversity. “Among other things, they miscalculated the size of what was under the water.” B.I.C.M., she explains, is meant to help people see beyond what they react to on the surface to the cultural traditions and assumptions that lie underneath—the prioritization of community or efficiency, relationship to authority or unconscious biases.

So far, every parish priest and staff member—an estimated 850 people—has gone through the training, plus the diocesan office’s 150 employees. That’s no small undertaking, especially in this geographically vast diocese.

For those who participated, the value has been undeniable. Father Nwachukwu-Udaku and his staff came out of the experience with a new approach to their parish. “We decided to see our ecclesial community as a family. ‘Sacred Heart, One Family: One Family, Sacred Heart’ is now our *modus salutatis* [sic],” or way of greeting before the homily, the announcements toward the end of the Mass or at any social function.

For Andrews, a deeper awareness of unconscious prejudices has been a great gift. “With all the terrible stuff that’s been going on nationally with the police, the bishop did a video about racism. ‘I am a recovering racist,’ he said.

“You have to admit these things. We’re a people of faith, but we’re not perfect. We’ve got the same problems as society at large when it comes to race.”

He adds that the B.I.C.M. program “helps you confront those things within yourself. Then you have a choice on whether to try to grow and have the heart that Christ calls you to have.”

JIM McDERMOTT

JIM McDERMOTT, S.J., a screenwriter, is *America’s Los Angeles correspondent*. Twitter: @PopCulturPriest.



Misunderstanding Al Qaeda

Osama bin Laden has been dead almost five years now, but the movement associated with him is still very much around. The Islamic State may have eclipsed Al Qaeda in the terror it holds for Americans, or the attraction it holds for young Muslims flocking to its self-proclaimed caliphate, but the terror group that the United States went to war with in 2001 is alive and well, with branches today in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa. Al Qaeda mounted attacks in Mali in November and in Burkina Faso in January. In December, it was reported that Al Qaeda training camps have reappeared in Afghanistan.

Back in 2004, the U.S. government claimed to have eviscerated Al Qaeda's leadership. Since then, U.S. leaders have periodically declared Al Qaeda neutralized, its leaders killed, its ranks decimated. But despite billions of dollars spent on destroying the group, Al Qaeda in the last three years has expanded its control and influence. A recent report on it by the American Enterprise Institute notes that it is stronger than ever, with affiliates in more than 20 countries.

If the reports of Al Qaeda's demise were greatly exaggerated, so were a number of other assertions made about it in the past, according to Flagg Miller, a professor of religious studies at the University of California, Davis. Mr. Miller translated Osama bin Laden's audio collection after it was confiscated by U.S. forces in 2002. Discovered in a house where bin Laden had lived

in Kandahar, Afghanistan, from 1997 to 2001, the tapes feature 200 speakers, ranging from bin Laden himself to other Al Qaeda members to scholars to whom militants turned for religious inspiration and instruction.

Mr. Miller spent years translating the 1,500 audio tapes, which offer a rare window into what Al Qaeda members thought and said about their actions and intentions. In his new book, *The Audacious Ascetic: What the bin Laden Tapes Reveal About Al-Qa'ida*, Mr. Miller reports that both Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden were frequently misrepresented by Western officials and media.

"There was no Al Qaeda founded by bin Laden in 1988," Mr. Miller writes. "There was a camp that was called Al Qaeda. It was Egyptian-led and they tried to marginalize bin Laden for a lot of complicated reasons."

Though Al Qaeda is associated with jihad against the West, almost never on the tapes did militants mention attacking it. Instead, their primary goal was to dislodge corrupt Muslim state leaders from power. It was bin Laden who redirected their efforts to war against the United States after his growing celebrity in the West enabled him to claim the leadership of Al Qaeda despite militants' reservations.

Ironically, bin Laden was at the nadir of his career, stateless and broke after having been exiled from Saudi Arabia and expelled from Sudan, when a CNN interview in 1997 brought him to the attention of the American public. In that interview, he was alleged to be

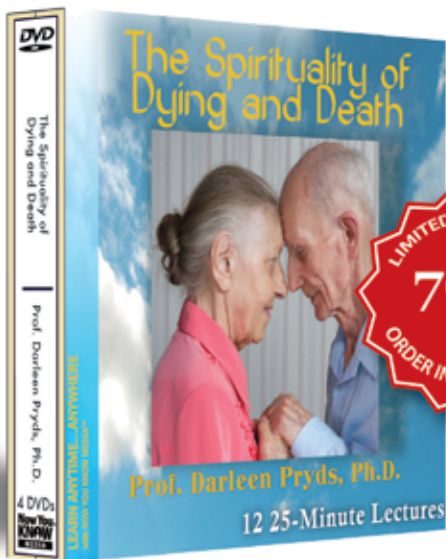
the emir of Al Qaeda, with half a billion dollars at his disposal, and the person responsible for the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing, none of which was true. About the same time the Central Intelligence Agency floated the rumor that he was the Ford Foundation of Islamic terrorism.

For Western strategists, bin Laden was a convenient enemy. "The West was looking for a controversial figure in the Middle East who could represent to American audiences the rationale for America's increasingly militarized involvement in Iraq. Iraq was behind much of the rise of bin Laden through the 1990s," Mr. Miller writes.

The word *qaeda* means "base," a term used in Islamic jurisprudence. It came up often in the Salafi militants' conversation as they discussed their actions in terms of religious law and ethics. Mr. Miller contends Al Qaeda should be perceived less as a nonstate actor or ideology and more as a discourse and tactic that challenges the legitimacy of Muslim states.

That may sound a little nebulous, but, in fact, confusion about who or what constitutes Al Qaeda now seems endemic among experts who debate whether local insurgencies are or are not Al Qaeda. What is clear is that U.S. efforts to stamp out terrorism with military strikes and drone assassinations have failed and will continue to fail. Until the repressive, dysfunctional conditions in the Middle East that give rise to terrorism change, Al Qaeda and its offshoots will have staying power.

Despite billions spent destroying it, Al Qaeda has expanded its influence.



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The Greatness of a Nation

Reclaiming our national politics for the protection of the human person

BY ROBERT W. McELROY

The contrast between the beautiful vision of politics that Pope Francis presented to the United States and the political campaigns that have unfolded in the past several months could not be more heartbreaking. In his address to Congress, Pope Francis began by comparing the fundamental responsibilities of America's political leaders to the role of Moses, emphasizing that the first call of public service is "to protect by means of the law the image and likeness fashioned by God on every human face."

Recalling the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln, Francis pointed to the foundational role that freedom plays in U.S. society and politics and noted that "building a future of freedom requires love of the common good and cooperation in a spirit of subsidiarity and solidarity." Citing the figure of Dorothy Day and her thirst for justice in the world, the pope emphatically demanded that the economic genius of the American nation must be complemented by an enduring recognition that all economies must serve justice comprehensively, with special care for the poor. Finally, invoking the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., Pope Francis urged the nation's political leaders to deepen America's heritage as a land of dreams: "Dreams which lead to action, to participation, to commitment. Dreams which awaken what is deepest and truest in the life of a people."

In Francis' message he made clear that the core of the vocation of public service, and of all politics, is to promote the integral development of every human person and of society as a whole. It is a vocation that requires special and self-sacrificial concern for the poor, the unborn, the vulnerable and the marginalized. It is a commitment to pursue the common good over that of interest groups or parties or self-aggrandizement. It is a profoundly spiritual and moral undertaking.

This same spiritual and moral identity is also emblazoned upon the most foundational act of citizenship in our society, that of voting for candidates for office. Thus, ultimately it is to the citizens of our nation as a whole that the challenge of Pope Francis is directed. Catholic teaching proclaims that voting is inherently an act of discipleship for the believer. But American political life increasingly creates a distorted culture that frames voting choices in destructive categories

that rob them of their spiritual character and content.

It is for this reason that the central foundation for an ethic of discipleship in voting for the Catholic community in the United States today lies not in the embrace of any one issue or set of issues but rather in a process of spiritual and moral conversion about the very nature of politics itself.

A Spiritual Conversion to Solidarity

Such a conversion requires deep self-scrutiny and reflection. It demands a rejection of the tribal element of politics that sees voting as the opportunity to advance the well-being of our race, our class, our religious community at the expense of others. It entails a purging of the inherent human tendency to allow anger and wedge issues to infect our voting choices. A spiritual conversion among voters demands that we reject the increasing habit in our political culture of attributing all differences of opinion to ignorance or dishonesty. And such a spiritual conversion prohibits us from framing political choice in the United States as essentially a competition between two partisan teams, one good and one bad, with all the visceral enjoyment that such a competition brings.

Most important, a spiritual political conversion requires the orientation of soul that flows from the principle of solidarity that St. John Paul II powerfully outlined as a fundamental element of Catholic social teaching. This orientation reminds us that in society we must always understand ourselves to be bound together in God's grace and committed, in the words of "On Social Concerns," "to the good of one's neighbor, with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to lose oneself for the sake of the other rather than exploiting him."

The implications of such a spiritual stance for discipleship in voting are clearly reflected in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*: "The principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become a part."

Such a spiritual conversion to solidarity is not alien to the American political tradition. The founders of the United States called it civic virtue, and they believed that it was absolutely essential for the success of the new experiment in democracy that they were launching. The founders generally believed that religious belief was one of the few foundations in the hearts of men and women that could produce enduring civic virtue and the self-sacrifice that at times it demands.

MOST REV. ROBERT W. McELROY is the bishop of San Diego.



THE AMERICAN WAY. People participate in the Democratic caucus at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, Iowa, Feb. 1, 2016.

It was their hope that a culture of civic virtue would lead to a politics of the common good.

A Moral Conversion to the Common Good

The core concept of the common good is simple. Rooted in the dignity, unity and equality of all people, the concrete common good is the set of social conditions at a given historical moment that will best allow all people in a society to attain their fulfillment as individuals and groups.

One of the greatest gifts of Catholic social teaching has been its reflection on the key elements that form the political common good in contemporary society. This reflection is anchored in an unswerving commitment to the transcendent dignity of the human person, the protection of human life, an abiding care for the poor and the marginalized, the protection of authentic human freedom and the promotion of peace.

It is particularly important to note five aspects of Catholic teaching about the nature and concrete embodiment of a nation's political common good in any particular historical moment:

1) The political common good of a nation embraces those elements of life in society that properly fall to the work of government.

2) The concrete political common good is dynamic. While the fundamental elements of Catholic moral teach-

ing about the common good are enduring, the identity of the concrete common good that should guide citizens in voting is rooted in changing social structures, laws, socio-economic challenges and historical events. Thus, for example, the political importance of immigration as a component of the common good is amplified at this time both because the world is today facing the most monumental refugee crisis since World War II and because the political process of comprehensive immigration reform has come to a complete standstill. Similarly, the incompatibility of assisted suicide with the common good has greater political salience today because of the growth in efforts to legalize assisted suicide within the past five years.

3) Structural changes in society regularly produce new developments in Catholic doctrine designed to analyze the new moral realities that processes like industrialization, secularization, globalization and climate change have produced. In a very real sense, the history of modern Catholic social teaching is a history of the development of doctrine. From the contribution of Pope Leo XIII on the rights of labor to St. John XXIII on human rights; from the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on Religious Freedom" to Pope Paul VI's doctrine of integral human development to St. John Paul II's theology of work; from Pope Benedict's seminal teachings on the stewardship of the environment to the writings of Pope Francis regarding extreme poverty,

Catholic social teaching on the common good has been characterized by a fundamental continuity maintained through a substantial dynamism, never stasis.

4) Pope Benedict observed in “Charity in Truth” that “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors, but does not make us brothers.” This penetrating insight deserves deep and sustained attention in our formulation of the concrete common good in 2016. The process of globalization has created new dimensions of the common good and new moral imperatives among nations precisely because the growing interpenetration of economic, political and cultural actions by powerful nations has enormous and sometimes very destructive impacts on vulnerable states and economies. Pope Francis addressed this very reality when he urged the bishops of the United States to witness powerfully to America’s necessary service to solidarity in the international system as a “nation whose vast material and spiritual, cultural and political, historical and human, scientific and technological resources impose significant moral responsibilities in a world which is seeking, confusedly and laboriously, new balances of peace, prosperity and integration.”

5) Finally, and most important, Catholic teaching on the nature of the political common good is increasingly focused on the needs of those most vulnerable in society.

The Political Common Good

During his address to the bishops of the United States, Pope Francis outlined the major issues that constitute the political common good in the United States at the present moment: “I encourage you, then, my brothers, to confront the challenging issues of our time. Ever present within them is life as gift and responsibility. The future freedom and dignity of our societies depends on how we face these challenges. The innocent victim of abortion, children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, war, violence and drug trafficking, the environment devastated by man’s predatory relationship with nature...the family.”

These are the elements that form the central moral claims that voters must weigh as they seek to approach their political responsibilities through a framework of discipleship. Hauntingly, Pope Francis advances these claims not as abstractions but with the human faces of the victims who suffer concretely from the failure of our society to advance specific dimensions of the common good. As voters seek-

ing to be disciples, we must maintain a focus in our political discernment on these very human faces, so as to inoculate ourselves against the powerful tendency in our culture to selectively minimize the power of any of these moral claims out of self-interest or partisanship, class or race.

The primary step of moral conversion to the common good requires an ever deeper affective understanding of how the commitment to the dignity of the human person radically embraces each of the issues that Pope Francis identified as constitutive of the common good of the United States at this moment in our history. It requires, in a very real sense, the development of “a Catholic political imagination” that sees the mutual linkages between poverty and the disintegration of families, war and the refugee crisis around the world, the economic burdens of the aging and our societal lurch toward euthanasia.

As voters seeking to be disciples, we must maintain a focus in our political discernment on these very human faces.

Setting Priorities

A second step in the moral conversion to the common good for voting requires discernment about how Catholics should prioritize the major elements of the common good in the United States today. If immigration, abortion, poverty, religious liberty, the family, war and peace, the environment, the rights of workers, trafficking in drugs and assisted suicide all constitute central elements of the common good, which issues are pre-eminent?

Many widely circulated independent Catholic voter guides propose that the concept of intrinsic evil provides an automatic process for prioritizing the elements of the political common good in the United States.

The church teaches that certain acts are incapable of being ordered to God since in their very structure they contradict the good of the person made in God’s likeness. Such actions are termed “intrinsically evil” and are morally illicit no matter what the intention or circumstances surrounding them. Those who focus primarily on intrinsic evil make two distinct but related claims: 1) that the action of voting for candidates who seek to advance an intrinsic evil in society automatically involves the voter morally in that intrinsic evil in an illicit way; and 2) Catholic teaching demands that political opposition to intrinsically evil acts, like abortion, euthanasia and embryonic experimentation, must be given automatic priority over all other issues for the purposes of voting.

The recent statement of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” shows why this argument is simplistic and thus misleading. The bishops’ statement clearly asserts the absoluteness of the

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prohibitions against concrete intrinsically evil acts, emphasizing that no circumstances or intentions can justify performing or illicitly cooperating with such acts. At the same time, “Faithful Citizenship” recognizes that voting for a candidate whose policies may advance a particular intrinsic evil is not in itself an intrinsically evil act. Voting for candidates is a complex moral action in which the voter must confront an entire array of competing candidates’ positions in a single act of voting. It is crucial that in voting for a candidate who supports the advancement of an intrinsic evil, Catholic voters not have the intention of supporting that specific evil, since such an intention would involve them directly in the evil itself. But voters will often find themselves in situations where one candidate supports an intrinsically evil position, yet the alternative realistic candidates all support even graver evils in the totality of their positions.

This is particularly true in the United States today. The list of intrinsic evils specified by Catholic teaching includes not only abortion, physician-assisted suicide and embryonic experimentation but also actions that exploit workers, create or perpetuate inhuman living conditions or advance racism. It is extremely difficult, and often completely impossible, to find candidates whose policies will not advance several of these evils in American life.

Even more important, a fatal shortcoming of the category of intrinsic evil as a foundation for prioritizing the major elements of the political common good lies in the fact that while the criterion of intrinsic evil identifies specific human acts that can never be justified, it is not a measure of the relative gravity of evil in human or political acts. Some intrinsically evil acts are less gravely evil than other intrinsically evil actions. Intrinsically evil action can also be less gravely evil than other actions that do not fall under the category of intrinsic evil. For example, telling any lie is intrinsically evil, while launching a major war is not. But it would be morally obtuse to propose that telling a minor lie to constituents should count more in the calculus of voting than a candidate’s policy to go to war. It is the gravity of evil or good present in electoral choices that is primarily determinative of their objective moral character and their contribution to or detract from the common good. Moreover, because voting is a complex moral action involving mitigating circumstances, a vote for a candidate who supports intrinsic evils often does not involve illicit cooperation in those acts. For these reasons the category of intrinsic evil cannot provide a comprehensive moral roadmap for prioritizing the elements of the common good for voting.

Intrinsic evil identifies specific human acts that can never be justified; it is not a measure of the relative gravity of evil in human or political acts.

The Four Pillars of Life

A far better guide to prioritizing the major elements of the political common good of the United States lies in the intriguing words Pope Francis used in outlining those elements for the bishops of the United States: “I encourage you, then, my brothers, to confront the challenging issues of our time. Ever present within them is life as gift and responsibility.”

At this moment there are four pre-eminent political issues facing the United States that touch upon life as gift and responsibility in a decisive way.

The first is abortion. The direct destruction of more than one million human lives every year constitutes a grievous wound upon our national soul and the common good. It touches upon the very core of our understanding of life as gift and responsibility. As Pope Francis wrote in “Laudato Si,” “How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is unwanted and creates difficulties. ‘If personal and social sensitivity toward the acceptance of the new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away.’”

The second is poverty. In a world of incredible wealth, more than five million children die every year from hunger, poor sanitation and the lack of potable water. Millions more die from a lack of the most elementary medical care. In “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis wrote: “Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.” The United States is the most powerful economic actor in the world today, and even the most basic ethic of solidarity demands that it take dramatic steps to reform the international systems of trade, finance and development assistance in order to save lives in the poorest sections of the world. Moreover, inside the United States, the realities of exclusion and inequality created by poverty are growing, menacingly sapping the solidarity that is the foundation for our national identity and accentuating the fault lines of race and class. In the richest nation in human history, homeless people live on the streets, the seriously mentally ill are all too often left without effective care, and our prisons overflow with young men who are disproportionately poor and of color.

A third pre-eminent issue centering upon life as gift and


responsibility is care of the earth, our common home. The progressive degradation of the global environment has created increased poverty and death among many of the poorest peoples on earth. Each year thousands of species are destroyed, lost forever to our children and to the earth's future. Most chillingly of all, science has clearly established the existence of dramatic climate change produced by human action, a peril that threatens the very future of human existence. Pope Francis underscored the urgency of global action saying: "Every year the problems are getting worse. We are at the limits. If I may use a strong word, I would say that we are at the limits of suicide."

The final pre-eminent question at stake in the political common good of the United States today is assisted suicide. For at its core, assisted suicide is the bridgehead of a movement to reject the foundational understanding of life as gift and responsibility when confronting end-of-life issues. In 2015 the state legislature of California passed a bill legalizing assisted suicide but would not fund palliative care for the state's suffering poor at the end of their lives. Such is the "false sense of compassion" that Pope Francis has described as lying at the heart of the movement to spread assisted suicide. As with abortion, this movement corrodes society's responsibility to secure the health of its members as an integral component of the common good.

The underlying assault upon the notion of life as gift and responsibility embodied in these four issues marks them as the four central pillars of life for the election of 2016. Each of them reflects the "throwaway culture" that Pope Francis has identified as a central cancer of our modern world. The unborn child, the poor, the sick and the elderly are all disposable; even the very planet that is vital for the continuation of human life itself has become disposable.

A Sign and a Safeguard

In his closing remarks to Congress and the American people, Pope Francis said: "A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty, as Lincoln did; when it fosters a culture that enables people to 'dream' of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work...." How different this understanding of national greatness is from the current political conversation in the United States!

Fifty years ago this past December, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council declared that the church embraces her role in the modern age of being "at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person." It is essential that every member of the church at all levels of leadership take up this responsibility to reclaim our national politics for the protection of the dignity of the human person and the advancement of the common good. 



Valley of Sorrows

Rebuilding community along the Mexican border

BY RYAN BEMIS

On my weekends while attending acupuncture school, I worked at Hooper Center, a state rehabilitation program in Portland, Ore. We used ear acupuncture to treat alcoholics and addicts, many of whom were homeless. As a counselor, I listened to story after story from junkies who embarked on their addiction after a medical doctor prescribed them Vicodin or Oxycontin or Percocet. They found a much more accessible opiate pain-killing remedy from street dealers—an irresistible high and a cheaper fix.

Black tar heroin, known as *chiva* in Spanish, is a gooey, charcoal-hard sludge derived from the husk of the poppy flower. After being cut with a potpourri of adulterants, it is cooked in a spoon, sucked into a syringe and injected into the vein. This cheap grade of heroin, the most common dope in the western United States, comes not from the opium empires of Asia but from Mexico. One of the primary routes for moving *chiva* and other illicit drugs out of Latin America is a 50-mile rural stretch running along the Rio Grande River. The pipeline begins on the outskirts of the one-time murder capital of the world—Ciudad Juárez.

In Barriales

My friend Beatrice Rodriguez meets me at a pit stop off Interstate 10 between El Paso and Fort Hancock, Tex. We drive through the small town of Fabens, weave down dirt roads through outlying fields and orchards and pass through the Mexican border crossing into the valley of Juárez. The minute we cross I see a young, armed soldier stationed behind a military camouflaged bunker off the side of the road and a street full of abandoned shops. Beatrice tells me not to worry. Only one shop shows signs of life and is obviously open: Del Rio, a chain corner store.

We drive up the valley along the dust-blown highway passing torched and abandoned ranches. Black-burnt reeds color the polluted irrigation ditches along the road as we enter a town called Barriales, Beatrice's home. Across the street from Beatrice's house stands a park, a typical Mexican town plaza with benches and bushes and trees. At the gazebo, ar-

rows from every direction point to a single dot, above which reads *punto de reunión* (meeting point).

We walk around the plaza and Beatrice reminisces about what it was like “before the violence.” Dancing. Music. *Elotes* (char-grilled corn). Neighbors peddling tamales and tacos while children played and people laughed. Flirting teenagers playing cat and mouse, circling the plaza.

Beatrice and her husband lived across the street from the family-oriented center of a tight-knit town. They raised their children here. He worked the cotton fields down the road, and she ran the mini-market attached to their home. She sold ice cream and soda and bread and tortillas and beans and rice. Her store also served as Barriales's makeshift post office. She points down a dirt road to a nearby town where she used to purchase bread from the bakery of a long-time activist family in the valley—the Reyes-Salazars. Then things changed.

In 2006, Mexico's president declared war on the drug cartels. The federal police were sent to patrol and police the valley. Beatrice watched as almost every one of her neighbors was either killed or forced to flee. Some of the Reyes-Salazar family were killed. Other members of the family sought asylum in the United States. One staged a hunger strike in front of Mexico's capital to raise awareness about the situation in the valley of Juárez. Even with the increasing violence, Beatrice kept her store open. It became more difficult after her husband died of a heart attack in 2010, but she managed to keep things afloat until Lent of the following year.

Murder rates and the level of violence in Juárez had fallen. It was an Ash Wednesday in 2011. Beatrice was preparing for the church services and the beginning of Lent. A waste disposal truck parked just outside the store. She sold the three garbagemen some bottled Cokes to wash down their lunch.

The three men sat down together on the plaza benches, relaxing in the shade of the trees and shoving food into their mouths with soiled hands. Beatrice walked back into the store and suddenly heard gunshots. She rushed to the door, secured the locks and stayed inside for an hour.

A neighbor walked by and confirmed what she already knew: “You know there are three bodies in the plaza.”

“*Uno andaba en el mal*,” she tells me. “One was in trouble. All were shot.”

That is how the neighborhood rationalized death.

RYAN BEMIS, a doctor of oriental medicine, works as a teacher and community acupuncturist and organizer in the United States/Mexico border region. He is founder of Crossroads Community Supported Healthcare in Las Cruces, N.M., and of Promotores Descalzos (Barefoot Health Promoters), a community acupuncture school in the Diocese of Ciudad Juárez.



BIENVENIDOS. An installation of Pope Francis advertising the pope's upcoming visit to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

Beatrice closed the store.

'Lagrimas y Tristeza'

Today on our walk the plaza is overgrown with weeds. A wandering street dog sniffs about for garbage scraps. Surrounding streets are empty. A basketball court, unused, remains lit each night. The hoops have been stolen—just backboards on a pole remain. The predominant sound on the block is the swamp cooler attached to a boarded-up home, spray-painted with “Tacos. Barbacoa,” advertising a home business struggling to stay alive.

Beatrice and I get into her car and leave the plaza behind, so she can show me the surrounding towns. We take the highway running parallel to the dry Rio Grande River. Beatrice points out skeletons of deserted ranches and plants. Burnt paint shards cling to cinderblock foundations of homes of residents who vanished: chased away or killed. She will never know what happened to many; most people who fled never left a trail. They were scattered and blown away like the drought-stricken earth remaining on their abandoned farmfields. Beatrice talks about the exodus of her people. Her eyes widen and with a serious but tender glance from under her wide-rounded, gold-rimmed glasses, she says, *Ahora no mas es el Valle de Juárez. Es el valle de lágrimas y tristeza.*

“This isn't any longer the valley of Juárez. This is the valley of tears and sadness.”

In 2010, Ciudad Juárez—the border city 30 miles northwest from her home—witnessed more murder than the entire country of war-torn Afghanistan. In the rural valley encompassing Barriales, however, murder rates were six times higher than those wartime rates: over 1,200 killings per 100,000 inhabitants. Unemployment, violence, extortion and insecurity drove away the majority of valley residents. Beatrice says that 90 percent of the population of Barriales has fled or been killed since 2008. Just 25 out of the former 200 families in Barriales remain. The valley's population of 60,000 fell to 5,000 in five years. Those who stayed were either too sick or too poor to find a way out, she tells me.

'Ephphatha!'

We return to Beatrice's house in Barriales to meet up with her best friend, Sister María Eugenia Escobedo, for coffee and snacks. In 2006 Sister María Eugenia worked in Portland, Ore. Then the Sisters of Our Sorrowful Mother reassigned her, 1,700 miles back, to serve where she grew up, here in the valley of Juárez. Today she and Beatrice operate a food bank at the churches, stocked by local donations of canned goods, beans and rice.

Beatrice brings us coffee, and we sit around her dining room. They both insist they are not afraid to live here or work here. Our conversation shifts to Sister María Eugenia's complaints about the dwindling church congregation, the low turnout at her catechism classes and how hard it is to

serve people in the valley. “The people who remain are too scared to come out of their homes to ask for help,” she laments.

We make a short visit to Beatrice’s only remaining family member in the valley, her sister, a block away. Beatrice’s sister lost a son two years ago. He was working at a construction site when a truckload of men pulled up, shoved him inside and stole him away. They found his body three days later; but, as for most murders in Mexico, no investigation was ever conducted.

We walk next door to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, and they take me to Benito Juárez elementary school, a block away. Over 200 students attended in 2008. Only a few remain. Sister María Eugenia says families here come and go. Kids arrive for class the first time one day, and the next, they have crossed north. The valley

is a stopping point for many immigrant families before they make the last leap across the river in search of freedom and safety and comfort.

They seek all the things people on the other side of the border have and hold dear, the things they fight for and die for in what my grandfather always called “the Good ol’ U.S.A.”

Beatrice walks me into the church. The Gospel reading is Mk 7:31-37. Jesus spit on his hand and touched the ears of a deaf and mute man and commanded “*Ephphatha!*”

“Be open, ears!” With that the man could speak and hear.

The Rev. Eliseo Ramírez preaches that this is a story about learning to open up and to ask for the help of the community—about learning how to pray. He invites the 20 parishioners in attendance to stay and receive a group ear acupuncture session afterwards, a new service launched by the diocese to aid people affected by the violence. Six stay. Sitting in the first few pews in front of the altar, Beatrice and Sister María Eugenia place three needles into points in each of their ears. They remain for 40 minutes together in silence.

Beatrice and Sister María Eugenia were some of our first students in ear acupuncture training organized by the vicar of the diocese, Msgr. René Blanco, in 2008. A charismatic Juárez native with liberation theology roots, he envisioned the ear acupuncture groups—offered free by parish volunteers—to be a part of improving the church’s efforts to promote peace and aid people affected by the trauma of war.

One of the places identified was the parish of Guadalupe in the valley. From there he invited Sister María Eugenia. She decided she would go if she could convince her friend Beatrice.

“What is acupuncture?” Beatrice asked Sister María Eugenia as they debated whether or not to attend the training.

The nun responded: “I don’t know.”

They knew nothing about oriental medicine, or ear therapy. But they knew and trusted Monsignor René.

Monsignor Blanco brought in pastoral workers, mostly women, working with the poor in far fringe *colonias* of the diocese. Some of the first students were *maquila* (factory) workers. Many were now former *maquila* workers, after being laid off short of their pensioning age of 40. Most of them were not from Juárez but from the southern states of Chiapas, Veracruz and Guerrero. They originally came north for jobs and a future. Volunteer acupuncturists from Portland pitched in to make it possible to train these workers.

Today the local priest sends Sister María Eugenia and Beatrice to treat and administer sacraments to the sick and homebound. Beatrice applies ear needles to her next-door neighbor suffering from severe pain brought on by lung cancer. The treatment takes the pain away for an hour or two. Most residents seek the service out themselves by simply knocking on the door of the mini-mart. Perhaps the encounters help with physical symptoms. Maybe they help with spiritual ones.

Port of Entry

At 4:30 a.m. eight buses will arrive from the city in the bare plaza of Barriales, and the *maquiladora* workers will descend from their night shift. Then other residents, waiting on a thin blue metal bench under a small shelter, will climb on for their ride out for the day shift. At 4:30 p.m., the buses will return again to pick up the night crew. If there is any future for residents of the valley, there will need to be more of these buses.

Beatrice hopes that multinational corporations will open up new *maquilas* that can bring jobs. However, the trends over the last two decades suggest a more sinister future. In the 1990s, after Nafta caused the price of corn to plummet, opium and other drug trafficking rose along with an increase in the number of multinational corporations in the border region. Failing farmers from throughout Mexico poured into Ciudad Juárez. Factory owners created urban slums for the workers to survive in but did not pay them a living wage.

Then in 2008, the U.S. economy crashed. The *maquilas* closed, workers lost jobs, and the industry of drugs alongside the business of trafficking people and guns across the valley

The valley is a stopping point for many immigrant families before they make the last leap across the river in search of freedom and safety and comfort.

of Juárez boomed. Today the valley's soil, fouled by fracking and upstream factories, is of little use for agriculture or life. Recently oil and natural gas have been discovered. A pipeline through the valley funded by the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim will be built next year.

After saying goodbye to Sister María Eugenia and Beatrice, I pass over the brand new, high-tech border crossing still un-

valley. She describes a recent surge in violence since January. "This was the first time I was ever really scared."

Her neighbor, one of the last farmers there, went missing and was later dug out of a hole along with other mutilated corpses. This is not the first clandestine grave to be excavated. Others like this across northern Mexico's desert have been found to contain the bodies of immigrants from Central and South America, their journey stopped just short of the border. There are reportedly many more undiscovered death pits, and there are many, many more human beings coming to the United States seeking refuge.

The late Charles Bowden, a journalist and a supporter of our project, wrote, "There is only this fact: We either find a way to make their world better or they will come to our better world."

Silent, humble and often unrecognized, people living in "their" world south of our borders, people like Beatrice, are making their broken world better day in, day out. They are saints in their region. Each time I have spoken with Beatrice since 2011 she talks about the future of the valley with an unblemished optimism. It is *mas tranquila ahora*.

"Things are calming down."

She counts three families that have returned over the past few months even with a recent spike in violence and murders in the valley. "This is a good sign, no?"

Beatrice does not have to stay in the valley of Juárez. She has dual citizenship. She has 50 nephews and nieces, eight brothers and sisters in all. All of these relatives except one sister have moved across the border. They beg her to leave her home behind and join them in the safety of the United States. She could move in with them over in Fabens at any moment.

"But how could I leave these people here alone?"

Hay que echar las ganas. ("You have to try your best.")

All that remains of Beatrice's old mini-mart is an ancient, dusty payphone booth, disconnected and out of service. A white coat of paint covers the old advertisements painted on the outside wall, hiding the store it once was. Only a telephone company sign hanging above her door is a sign to the world that the people of Barriales used to come here to make phone calls.

Neighbors knock on her door. She welcomes them in, places three needles in their ears. Some share their stories. Others just sit in silence as she holds the space.

She listens.



BE OPENED. Women rest in a church during ear acupuncture.

der construction at Caseta, a few blocks from the narrow bridge, that divides Texas from Mexico. As I pass through the rusted steel 20-foot-tall gate opening into the United States, two men hawk pirated DVD's and *chicles* (chewing gum). Ahead are a few small duck ponds surrounded by chain link fences that line the weaving road leading up to the customs station. During the routine search before I am allowed to enter my country, the agents rip out and destroy a panel in my truck searching for drugs. They do not repair it, nor do they apologize.

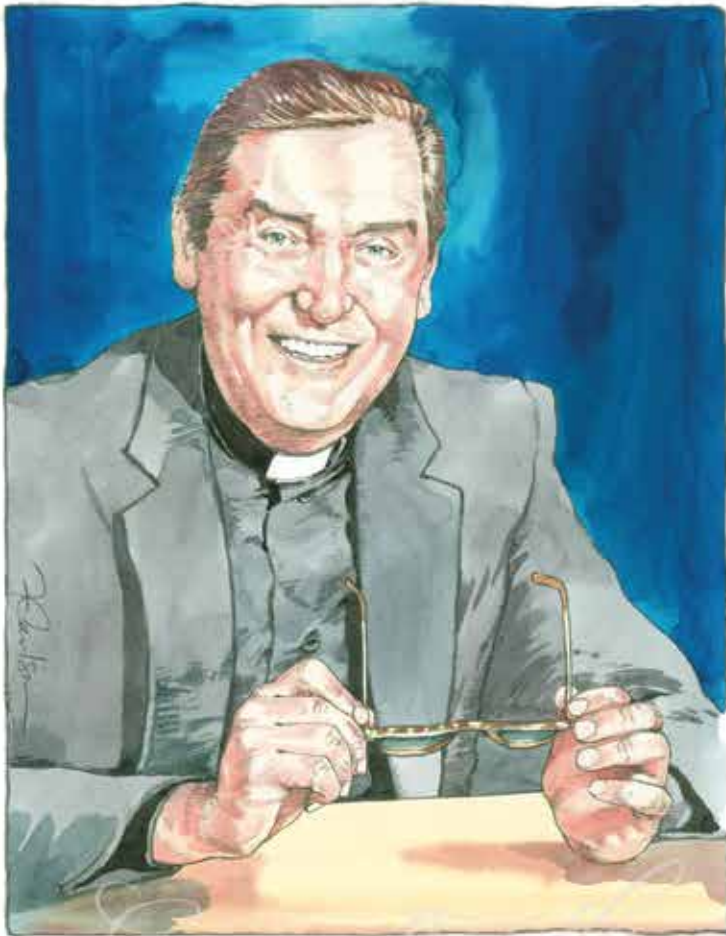
Newly mapped highways connect dots between the valley's scorched, burned and bought farms and the bridge. At a cost of more than \$130 million, this fancy port of entry—ducks included—may make it easier for *maquila* owners and oil wildcatters to cross and do their thing. It will become even easier to profit from cheap labor and land, easier to take advantage of outdated policies on worker rights. Or, as I recall Beatrice telling me, "maybe then people will come back."

'You Have to Try Your Best'

And there is yet more news of death. I return to visit Beatrice in Easter of 2015, and I see more signs of desertion in the

GEORGE W. HUNT, S.J., PRIZE

For Excellence In Journalism, Arts & Letters



MISSION OF THE \$25,000 GEORGE W. HUNT, S.J., PRIZE

The George W. Hunt, S.J., Prize for Excellence in Journalism, Arts & Letters is awarded annually by the trustees of *America* and The Saint Thomas More Chapel and Center at Yale University. The mission of the Hunt Prize is five-fold:

- To promote scholarship, the advancement of learning and the rigor of thoughtful, religious expression;
- To support and promote a new generation of journalists, authors and scholars;
- To memorialize the life and work of George W. Hunt, S.J.;
- To forge a lasting partnership between *America* and the Saint Thomas More Chapel and Center at Yale University, two places that were central to Father George Hunt's life and work;
- To support the intellectual formation, artistic innovation and civic involvement of young writers.

CRITERIA

The Hunt Prize is awarded annually to a single individual in recognition of his or her literary work. The 2016 Hunt Prize will be awarded to a journalist.

- Journalists are defined as those who generate regular written content for popular audiences and mass distribution (e.g., newspaper/magazine columnists and reporters; contributing editors/writers; editors, op-ed writers and bloggers, etc.)
- Topical areas include religion, the arts, sports, politics, economics and national/international public affairs.

Only English language works of which the nominee is the sole or principal author will be considered.

ELIGIBILITY

Applicants must devote 50 percent or more of their professional hours to their work as journalists, primarily in print and/or written digital formats. Full-time broadcast journalists are not eligible.

- He or she must be 22 years of age on the day of nomination and no older than 49 years of age by December 31, 2016.
- He or she should be familiar with the Roman Catholic tradition and should have some appreciation for the intersection of faith and journalism and/or the literary arts.
- He or she should be a person of sound moral character and reputation and must not have published works that are manifestly atheistic or morally offensive.
- A person may be nominated more than once, if otherwise eligible.
- A previous recipient is ineligible.

NOMINATIONS

Nominations for The Hunt Prize will open on George W. Hunt's birthday, at 12 a.m. on January 22, 2016 and the nomination period will close at 11:59 p.m. (EST) on March 31. All submissions may be made at: huntprize.org.

FORMAL AWARD AND CEREMONY

The winner will be announced in Spring 2016, and will be awarded \$25,000. Formal awarding will take place at the Saint Thomas More Chapel and Center at Yale University in September 2016.

The recipient of the award will deliver a lecture that is related to his or her primary works, and the lecture will be published as a cover story in *America* within three months of its delivery.

For more information: huntprize.org

The Holiness Project

Learning about marriage from the lives of Christian couples

BY BRIDGET BURKE RAVIZZA

In July 2015 Pope Francis tweeted: “The most powerful witness to marriage is the exemplary lives of Christian spouses.” No doubt this is true. In fact, this conviction—that we have much to learn about both marriage and holiness from married couples themselves—motivated a colleague, Julie Donovan Massey, and me to embark on a recently completed research project that resulted in the book *Project Holiness: Marriage as a Workshop for Everyday Saints*. We wanted to hear from (extra)ordinary folks in the pews about how their faith influences their marriage and how their marriage affects their faith, believing these married couples to be rich and largely untapped theological resources. In other words, we wanted to gain wisdom from the “powerful witness” of their “exemplary lives” in order to pass that wisdom along to others.

We began with written surveys in 20 parishes and subsequently conducted face-to-face interviews with 50 couples who had been named as “models of holiness” in those surveys. Through the testimony of these couples who are faithfully living out the vocation of marriage (we call them everyday saints), we learned about the virtues, values and practices that contribute to a flourishing marriage and to the holiness of spouses.

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These couples offer hope in a culture in which many despair about the state of marriage. We wring our hands that fewer young people are choosing to marry. Despite ebbs and flows, divorce rates continue to be surprisingly high decades after our country’s so-called divorce revolution in the 1960s. Further, we witness and lament distorted notions of marriage. For example, our culture’s overly romantic, overly gendered “soul mate” model of marriage dominates, beginning in the toddler years. (Thanks, Disney!) As a result, many view marriage as primarily about romance and self-fulfillment, a fragile model of marriage with little chance of enduring the inevitable challenges and hardships that beset even the strongest married relationships.

With so much bad news about marriage, we desperately need the good news offered by the couples in our study, who model friendship and fidelity over the long haul and who powerfully show that marriage is, indeed, a fruitful vocation that makes one holy and virtuous. Rooted in the testimony of the couples in our study, I suggest that—in order to flourish—married couples should foster friendship, practice mercy and fidelity and seek community.

The Demands of Authentic Friendship

The word *friend* is tossed around casually in our culture—befriending (or de-friending) a person is simply a click away on Facebook. In contrast, authentic friendship is lasting

COUPLES RENEW THEIR WEDDING VOWS ON FEB. 9, WORLD MARRIAGE DAY, AT THE CATHEDRAL OF OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS IN LOS ANGELES. CNS PHOTO/VICTOR ALEMAN, VIA NUESTRA

and morally demanding. It results in the development of character. Ultimately, our friends should make us better because they want what is best for us and they do what is best for us. A true friend helps us to live up to our potential as human beings and, from a Christian perspective, become closer to God. The married relationships we encountered reflect this deep kind of friendship.

The married friends in our study inspire one another to be better by modeling virtue. For example, Phil Rullo, married 52 years, praised the virtues of his wife, Jane. “I like very much her patience and her capacity for forgiveness.... She has always been very respectful of who I am and what I do. I appreciate her great capacity to love. She’s a very giving person, and I try to reciprocate that love because she is so generous with it.” Phil recognizes how his wife models particular virtues—in this case: patience, forgiveness, respect, love and generosity—that in turn, shape him and call him to be more virtuous. He noted, “Our marriage has made me a better person by helping me become a more patient person and an understanding person, and a great deal of that is a result of the kind of modeling that Jane does.”

Married friends also help one another to grow by consistently supporting and encouraging one another, naming and celebrating each other’s gifts and replenishing emotional reserves. Many times spouses are trusted conversation partners and cheerleaders, rightly reminding their partners of their many positive attributes. At other times spouses must do the dirtier work of intimacy, pointing out negative behavior and tendencies in their partner that rightly should change.

Jeff and Laura Rader—married 34 years, with three grown children and “lots of granddaughters”—illustrate the sometimes tough work of friendship. Jeff said, “She challenges me to grow and can be blunt with me sometimes—which is good.” Laura responded, “I prefer to call it caringly direct,” which was met with laughter. She added, “Jeff makes me a better person because he points out things to me as well. Not as bluntly, but...he challenges me to grow in the virtues. I can only change myself, so he can highlight those [areas of growth] for me. But I know at the end of the day, or the end of the conversation... he is going to love me through it, so I have a comfort foundation that even when I’m not perfect he loves me, and that’s good. That’s a blessing.” It is their unconditional love for each other that creates a safe space to point out certain weaknesses and opportunities for growth. The partners can offer and receive constructive criticism because they are confident that the other will “love [them] through it.”

Growth in Goodness

Rather than seeing marriage as primarily about self-fulfillment and romance, the couples in our study—like the Rullos and Raders—understand marriage as a joint lifelong

project of growth in goodness. In short, they engage marriage as a holiness project. Commitment to this project is captured beautifully in a phrase that we heard repeatedly: “Our job is to get each other to heaven.” Over a lifetime, these couples work to deepen authentic friendship with one another and, simultaneously, friendship with God. Marriage is a project meant for the good of the married couple, but also for the good of the wider world, or the common good. Kelly Brown, who is raising three young children with her husband, Frank, told us, “We want to live our life in a way that matters. [Our marriage] is about us, but it has been about more than us. The ultimate end is to bring more God into the world.”

When married couples become friends with God, they become committed to God’s ways, committed to bringing more God into the world. For Christians, this means building up the kingdom of God as Jesus preached and enacted. Margaret and Matthew Murphy, parents of three grown children, offer excellent testimony in this regard. Margaret explains, “I always tell the kids that Jesus showed us how to live. It was his loving and being true to what he knew he had to do to bring justice, to bring peace, to bring love to the world. That’s what got him in trouble. But we’re called to do the same. The whole message of social justice: How do we bring that love and healing?”

In this connection, she described the sacramental nature of her marriage: “Our marriage as sacrament...means very strongly that it cannot be, like the light under the bushel, an insular thing, a Matthew and me [thing], kind of like a me-and-Jesus kind of thinking, like it’s all about me and Jesus.” Rather, Margaret argues that the love and compassion experienced within her marriage and family must move ever outward. She explained: “Somehow that love, that compassion, it would be selfish for us just to keep it in our family and say, ‘Okay, we’re all happy. Everybody’s good.’ We always, we talk about this. That’s our challenge. ‘Are we doing enough? Are we giving enough?’ You know what I mean? It shouldn’t be this big heavy guilt thing, but it should be a bit of a challenge and nudge that, ‘Yeah, we’re blessed, so what are we doing to extend that?’ Our marriage should be a mirror of love to other people.”

The couples in our study truly inspired us by the many ways they serve as mirrors of God’s love, extending mercy to their neighbors. Couples provide hospitality to folks in need: a brother with significant disabilities; a child from the foster care system; a young, single and pregnant niece; the friend of a son who had been kicked out of his dysfunctional home, and the list goes on. Sometimes, a stay that was expected to be temporary turned into a lifetime commitment. Always, hospitality demanded adjustment and sacrifice.

Couples engage in forms of organized service—working at local food pantries, building homes for persons who are

homeless and participating in mission trips here and abroad. Couples also care for neighbors in less formal but no less meaningful ways—by grocery shopping or shoveling snow for an elderly neighbor, making rejected L.G.B.T. youth feel welcome in their home or feeding neighborhood kids who seem to regularly arrive at mealtime. Couples were frank when admitting that practicing mercy over an extended period of time can feel inconvenient, even burdensome, and therefore it must be linked to faith and fidelity.

What Faithfulness Looks Like

Although not biological parents themselves, Bob and Jeanne Mitchell have mentored many young people over the course of their marriage. In particular, one young man they have worked with “pretty steadily over the last 10 years” came out of the foster system and has been in and out of prison. Because of the demands of this relationship and the difficulty of maintaining it, Jeanne said, “It sometimes feels like we do that because of what we think faithfulness looks like.” Bob added, “Yeah, without a doubt. We’re motivated by a calling, to family in a sense; I mean he doesn’t have any family. In a sense he doesn’t have anybody. And if it weren’t for our faith and the way we understand that to be, we would not, I would not, be involved with him. Because he wouldn’t be my first choice. But having said that, I said to somebody once: ‘I think my salvation, or my redemption, is tied to him.’

I don’t know what I mean by that exactly, but it made sense to me when I said it.”

Bob’s conviction that his redemption is somehow tied to the mercy and hospitality he shows this man makes sense in light of the parable of the Last Judgment. Bob is living out the Gospel demand to welcome the stranger, which is how one inherits the kingdom. The young man he mentors is a stranger in the strictest sense of the word—disenfranchised and devoid of community. Despite the challenges of this relationship, which are many, Bob and Jeanne continue to practice hospitality and show fidelity because they believe God calls them to do so.

In a culture that too often sees relationships as temporary and as a matter of convenience, these couples practice fidelity both to Gospel values and to one another. We heard often from couples that, for them, “divorce is not an option.” Married 29 years, Jim Donlan said, “When did it become an option that you could just leave? Never. I mean, we all stood up on that altar in front of our friends and God and everybody. Those vows are not multiple choice. It isn’t ‘for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer: yes, no, yes, no.’ It is yes to all of it. So it isn’t an option.”


Having acknowledged the importance of fidelity, however, these couples readily acknowledge that fidelity “until death” is demanding. For example, Mike and Sophia Vanderbusch have faced many challenges in their 16 years of marriage: the

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loss of a child; frequent separation due to Mike's travel for work (that involves emotional hardship but also the difficulty of managing care for their three children while Sophia also maintains a career); and the death of Mike's mother, aunt and beloved sister within a matter of months. Mike explained, "[Marriage] is work. You make a marriage work to keep it strong...you have to want to make it work, and you have to put in time as well as negotiate; it's a give and take. Between living with somebody, being married to them, then the complications of bringing children into the world, everybody has to change their ways and work at it. [Since] both of us [had] a strong family and faith base growing up, it's just sort of natural that that's what you do. You're not always going to get along, but in the end you do whatever you need to do to make it work."

Indeed, the couples in our project are consciously making it work by being other-centered; learning to communicate effectively, especially by developing healthy ways to express disagreement and anger; forgiving, again and again; maintaining faith and hope and supporting one another when facing suffering and hardship; and in myriad other ways. Fidelity takes effort, but it provides security and deep joy and pride within a marriage. As one woman said, "The longer you are together, the more you are proud of that stick-to-it-iveness. And I think that's what fidelity is, even when it's not all easy and fun."

As noted above, our research took place in Catholic parishes. Perhaps it is not surprising that couples often emphasized the value of active participation in a church community as they pursue married friendship. They described the regular celebration of Mass as a kind of "compass-setting" that reminds them of what is important, and as a joyful gathering of church "family" that provides modeling and support as they try to practice the Christian way of life. In their churches, they find support in suffering as well as opportunities to reach out and care for neighbors.

It is telling that couples talked about the ways that everyday, married people in parishes minister to each other. One woman said, "You sit in church and you see the love and affection.... You know, the young couples, the middle-aged couples, the old couples—everybody in between. You can sit in church and you can see the love, the admiration, the respect, the affection that these people still have for each other. You see a husband and wife look at each other and smile or something. It's—we minister to each other in our marriages, and I think our marriage is stronger because of what surrounds us."

The meetings of the Synod of Bishops on the family and the World Meeting of Families are now over, but we must continue to find ways to honor, celebrate and learn from the everyday, married saints among us. Their profound holiness is good news, indeed. 



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'My God, My God'

When Jesus felt abandoned

BY JAMES MARTIN

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
Mk 15:33–34

Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? What are we to make of these extraordinary words of Jesus on the cross? For some Christians, they are almost unbearable. Can it be true that Jesus thought that God the Father had forsaken him? Is it possible that Jesus doubted the love of the one he called *Abba*, "Father"? Did Jesus give up hope when he was crucified? Did he despair when he was on the cross?

There are two main ways of understanding these mysterious words of Jesus, which he quotes from Psalm 22 and which would have been recognizable to any Jewish person at the time who had received religious training.

The first possibility is that Jesus' words are not an expression of abandonment but, paradoxically, an expression of hope in God. Although Psalm 22 begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" expressing the frustration of someone who feels abandoned by God, the second part of the psalm is a hymn of thanksgiving to God, who has heard the psalmist's prayer:

*For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.*

In this interpretation, Jesus is invoking the psalm in its totality as the prayer of one who cried out to God and was heard. An example based on a more well-known psalm might be someone who says, "The Lord is my shepherd," and trusts that hearers would be familiar with the rest of Psalm 23 ("Even though I walk through the darkest valley...") and its overall message.

In other words, the phrase "The Lord is my shepherd" is usually taken not just as an affirmation of God as shepherd-



but as shorthand for the entire psalm. In short, this frequent explanation of Jesus' terrible cry from the cross is that he was using that line from Psalm 22 to express his confidence in God.

But there is another possibility: Jesus really did feel abandoned. This is not to say that Jesus despaired. I do not believe that someone who had such an intimate relationship with the Father, with *Abba*, could have lost all belief in the presence of God in this dark moment. But it is not unreasonable to imagine Jesus, in this grave hour, feeling as if the Father were absent. And remember, if he is crying out to God, he is still in relationship with God.

Here we need to distinguish between a person's believing that God is absent and feeling it. The latter is common in the spiritual life. You may have had this experience yourself: believing in God, but not feeling that God is close. You ask,

JAMES MARTIN, S.J., is editor at large of *America*. This essay is excerpted from his new book *Seven Last Words: An Invitation to a Deeper Friendship With Jesus* (*HarperOne*).

“Where are you, God?” Here is an important intersection between Jesus’ life and our own.

Of all people, Jesus could be forgiven for feeling abandoned. Think of what he has gone through by this point in the Passion. First, he has witnessed his betrayal by Judas, one his closest friends, who had identified him to the authorities in exchange for 30 pieces of silver. Also, the Gospel of Mark says that by this point all but one of the apostles has fled, whether out of terror, confusion or shame.

So Jesus almost certainly feels abandoned and experiences, perhaps not for the first time in his life, human loneliness. Jesus has also been subjected to an exhausting series of late-night inquests, brutalized by Roman guards and marched through the streets of Jerusalem under a crushing weight; he is now nailed to the wood and suffering excruciating pain. So he could be forgiven for feeling abandoned. The one who abandoned himself to the Father’s will in the garden of Gethsemane the night before, who had given himself entirely to what the Father had in store for him, now wonders on the cross, “Where are you?”

These feelings were probably intensified by his having been abandoned by his followers. Until this point, if Jesus felt lonely or misunderstood by the disciples, he might have turned to the Father for comfort. Now he goes there and feels alone. It may be the loneliest any human being has ever felt.

What Do Scholars Say?

Let me turn to some contemporary biblical scholarship. One of the great 20th-century New Testament scholars, Raymond E. Brown, S.S., is the author of a study of the Passion narratives called *The Death of the Messiah*. In an essay entitled “Jesus’s Death Cry,” Father Brown says that in his view, abandonment was in fact what Jesus was experiencing.

Some Christians, says Father Brown, might want to reject the literal interpretation that would imply feelings of abandonment: “They could not attribute to Jesus such anguish in the face of death.” Yet, as Father Brown says, if we accept that Jesus in the garden could still call the Father *Abba*, then we should accept this “screamed protest against abandonment wrenched from an utterly forlorn Jesus who now is so isolated and estranged that he no longer uses ‘Father’ language but speaks as the humblest servant.”

What does Father Brown mean? When Jesus speaks to the Father in the garden, he says, “*Abba*, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me...” (Mk 14:36) *Abba* is a familiar way of speaking, something like saying “Dad.”

But on the cross, when Jesus says, “My God, my God,” he uses the Aramaic word *Eloi* (or the Hebrew *Eli*, depending on the Gospel). That is a far more formal way of speaking to God. The shift from the familiar *Abba* in the garden to the more formal *Eloi* on the cross is heartbreaking. Jesus’ feeling



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of distance, then, reveals itself not only in the scream and not only in the line of the psalm that he utters, but also in the word *Eloi*.

How could someone who had enjoyed an intimate relationship with God feel abandoned? To answer that, it may help to consider a similar situation closer to our own time.

A Contemporary Example

In her early years, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, the foundress of the Missionaries of Charity, enjoyed several mystical experiences of intense closeness with God. She also experienced that rarest of spiritual graces, a locution; she actually heard God's voice. And then—nothing. For the last 50 or so years of her life, until her death, she felt a sense of emptiness in her prayer. At one point, she wrote to her confessor, "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing."

When her journals and letters were published not long after her death in the book *Come, Be My Light*, some readers were shocked by these sentiments, finding it difficult to understand how she could continue as a believer and indeed flourish as a religious leader. But Mother Teresa was expressing some very human feelings of abandonment and speaking of what spiritual writers call the "dark night." This state of emotion moves close to, but does not accept, despair.

In time, Mother Teresa's questions about God's existence

faded, and she began to see this searing experience as an invitation to unite herself more closely with Jesus in his abandonment on the cross and with the poor, who also feel abandoned. Mother Teresa's letters do not mean that she had abandoned God or that God had abandoned her. In fact, in continuing with her ministry to the poor, she made a radical act of fidelity based on a relationship she still believed in, even if she could not sense God's presence. She trusted that earlier experience. In other words, she had faith.

Jesus does not despair. He is still in relationship with *Abba*—calling on him from the cross. In the midst of horrific physical pain, abandoned by all but a few of his friends and disciples, and facing his imminent death, when it would be almost impossible for anyone to think lucidly, he might have felt abandoned. To me this makes more sense than the proposition that the psalm he quoted was meant to refer to God's salvation.

So Jesus understands not only our bodily suffering, but also our spiritual suffering in these feelings of abandonment. He was like us in all things, except sin. And he experienced all that we do.

So when you struggle in the spiritual life, when you wonder where God is, when you pray in doubt and darkness, and even when you are close to despair, you are praying to someone who is fully human and fully divine, someone who understands you fully. ▲


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Mexico Mission

Pope Francis will set out on his 12th foreign journey on Feb. 12, this time heading for Mexico, the second most populous Catholic country in the world (after Brazil) where some 90 percent of its 125 million population are Catholic.

“The Holy Father wanted to visit the country from border to border and to meet with people who are living through difficult situations,” Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the nuncio, told Noticias MVS. He mentioned two, poverty and migration; but there are others also of great concern to Francis, like the narcotics trade, violence (much of it linked to drugs), corruption and criminality. He is expected to speak on all these.

Pope Francis comes as “a missionary of mercy and peace” on his fourth trip to Latin America, to a country that according to the nuncio is “living through a transition” and to a “secularized” society in a profound crisis. Although the culture is changing, and this inevitably affects the faith, popular religiosity is still deeply rooted, and Francis will affirm this.

Archbishop Pierre said the pope told him he desires to partake in the people’s reality: “He desires a simple, straightforward encounter.” The nuncio added: “He knows very well the fervor of the Mexican people. He is very spontaneous and will surely give us some surprises of which we are not yet aware. Much space must be given to these surprises.”

Invited to speak to Mexico’s con-

gress, Francis decided against it. Some 35 cities or towns invited him, but he opted for six localities, three on the peripheries: Mexico City (and the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe), Ecatepec (15 miles from the federal capital), Tuxtla Gutiérrez and San Cristóbal de Las Casas (in the southern state of Chiapas, bordering Guatemala), Morelia (in the western state of Michoacán, home to much violence), and Ciudad Juárez (in the northern state of Chihuahua, on the border with the United States). From there he will return to Rome.

On this physically demanding foreign trip, Francis will cover 14,641 miles (2,236 inside the country), spend five nights in Mexico City, deliver 13 speeches and celebrate five Masses.

On Feb. 13, the day after his arrival, he will pay a courtesy call to Mexico’s president, Enrique Peña Nieto, and thus become the first pope to be received at the Presidential Palace, a building directly linked to the Mexican revolution. Afterward he will address the civic authorities and diplomatic corps and then speak to the country’s 170 bishops in the cathedral. That evening he will celebrate Mass at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

On Sunday, Feb. 14, he will celebrate Mass at Ecatepec and later visit a pediatric hospital. Next day he will fly to Chiapas. His decision to come here is highly significant, as this is a state on the margins of Mexican society with a high percentage of indigenous peoples, many living in extreme poverty. The

Zapatista revolt of the late 20th century originated here. Here too, Bishop Samuel Ruiz carried out his pastoral ministry with great zeal and creativity after the Second Vatican Council, despite differences with Rome. Francis will pray at his tomb in the cathedral of San Cristóbal de Las Casas after celebrating Mass for the indigenous population in a sports center. He is expected to affirm their cultures and highlight

their care of the environment. Later he will return to the state capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, for a meeting with families.

On Feb. 16, Francis will fly to Morelia to celebrate Mass for priests, religious and seminarians. That afternoon, he will speak to young people. It will be an important talk, since 28.2 percent of Mexico’s pop-

ulation are under the age of 18 and face many problems, including unemployment, drugs and violence.

The high point of the pope’s visit comes on the last day in Ciudad Juárez. He will visit the local prison on arrival and greet 800 inmates, but the main event is the Mass on the border with the United States at which Francis is expected to speak out strongly on the immigration question. There is enormous interest in what he will say and do here.

More than 4,000 journalists from all over the world have been accredited in Mexico for his visit. Seventy-five are travelling with him on the plane, including *America’s* Vatican correspondent, who will provide on-the-spot coverage.

GERARD O’CONNELL

GERARD O’CONNELL is *America’s* Rome correspondent. *America’s* Vatican coverage is sponsored in part by the Jesuit communities of the United States. Twitter: @gerryome.



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FLAWED JUSTICE?
Steven Avery, right, in
“Making a Murderer”



BOOKS & CULTURE

TELEVISION | JAKE MARTIN

TRIAL AND ERROR

Justice, mercy and ‘Making a Murderer’

It is nearly impossible to watch *Making a Murderer* and believe in God at the same time. The viewing experience of this Netflix series perhaps was best summed up by Robert Browning nearly 200 years ago when he wrote, “And yet, God has not said a word.” If temporary atheism is too precise a descriptor of the affective wake the viewer is left to tread after viewing the series, then temporary agnosticism might do just as well. Agnosticism is the order of the day for this 10-part documentary.

“Making a Murderer” tells the story of Steven Avery, a Wisconsin man who served 18 years in prison for a crime for which he was wrongfully convicted. Then, two years after his release, he was arrested and charged with the murder of a 25-year-old photographer,

Teresa Halbach. The series focuses primarily on the Halbach murder trial from Avery’s perspective and takes to task the justice system that wrongfully imprisoned Avery on one occasion and may be doing the very same thing once more.

There will be no spoilers here—though it is nearly impossible these days with the series’s incredible popularity to go anywhere online and not come upon one. Neither will there be any verdicts, as that work is left to the myriad sites and articles in the online universe that have parsed even the most minute of minutiae with regard to the series and Avery’s case.

What can be said is that “Murderer” is must-watch television, and not for the reasons people usually associate with the true crime genre. “Murderer” is not

about voyeurism or about affirming the righteousness of its audience. Rather, at its core, “Murderer” is an uneasy meditation on those two fundamentals of the Christian tradition: justice and mercy. “Murderer” forces its audience to face (especially the audience of believers) the very messy ambiguity that is justice in the contemporary world.

The series upends our preconceived notions of who the good guys and bad guys are, while continually demanding that its audience throw away its certitude from one moment to the next, as new information is revealed throughout its 10 hour-long episodes. Indeed, it is because of its duration that “Murderer” (and its audience) are liberated from the constraints of quick cuts and pat summations that are typical of the true crime genre, and is able to allow its story to unfold with all its ups and downs and twists and turns.

The creative team behind “Murderer,” Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos, do an excellent job providing a clear narrative arc, while at the same time ensur-

ing that no stone is left unturned. They reach their viewers first through the heart—allowing the affective response of the viewer to stimulate an intellectual interrogation within. Our visceral responses to the trial of Steven Avery, which also happens to be the trial of the murder of Teresa Halbach, makes us uncomfortable as it raises in us an awareness of our innate biases and calls into question the reasons for emotional reactions.

The beauty of a well-done documentary is that it does not allow its audience off the hook. The viewer cannot detach from the story being told when it gets too uncomfortable, because the story being told is the story of real people and real people's lives. That is what makes "Murderer" so compelling. The stakes are life and death, because it really is a matter of life or death. People's lives are on the line; families are being torn apart; and most important, a young, vi-

tal woman is dead.

Though Ricciardi's and Demos's perspective is clearly slanted toward supporting Steven Avery, the very comprehensiveness of their project does not allow the story to be told in as succinct a manner as they perhaps would have hoped. Steven Avery is most certainly a victim in this story, but he is not the only one, and that cannot be forgotten. Although Teresa Halbach and her family are infrequently seen throughout the series, one cannot (and should not) forget them. In a murder trial there are no winners from the start. Regardless of outcomes and whatever is transpiring within the context of the trial—right or wrong, just or unjust—the victim cannot be erased.

While justice, however messily ambiguous it may be, is the focal point of "Murderer," mercy, like Teresa Halbach herself, imposes a robust presence by its very absence. If justice is the only

issue at stake, then we as an audience of believers are left with nothing but a handful of broken structures, systems and lives. We are left disillusioned and disheartened and in a state of despair, because seemingly nothing about the world we live in can be redeemed.

This temporary atheism (or agnosticism, take your pick) inevitably leads to questioning what is lacking, and that is where mercy comes into play. And this is not some sort of Pollyannish, wrap-it-all-up-in-a-bow panacea but rather a deeper investigation, both interiorly and in the larger context, into the necessary role mercy must play in both our daily lives and the greater world if we are going to understand our world as being created and sustained by a loving God. If God has not said a word, it is only because neither have we.

JAKE MARTIN, S.J., is studying theology at Heythrop College, London.

ST. KEVIN AND THE TEMPTRESS *after Heaney*

After that business with the blackbird, Kevin
sore-shouldered from his mortifications—
the lent-long arms reach and supplications

in service of life's mysteries and flights—
lay himself out, spread-eagled in paschal light,
cozy in a copse of alders, cones and catkins,

and slept the sleep of a child of God.
Waking to a woman fast astraddle him
in ways he'd never ere experienced

and sensing frenzy in his nether regions
so lovely that it must be mortal sin,
he strove against the ginger-haired Kathleen

pressing her private parts against his parts
whilst writhing midst her own deliriums,
the palms of her small hands warm to his heart,

like riding the tide of Love's deep river,
groaning approval and grateful te deums—
a prayer her being made entirely.

Whereupon the monk woke to his senses
and grabbing the temptress by her attributes,
in righteous warp-spasms of rectitude,

tackled her into the lough's chill waters,
the better to chasten, he thought, brute nature,
mighty as it was, please God; and that was that.

THOMAS LYNCH

THOMAS LYNCH is the author of five books of poems, four essay collections, a collection of short stories and a novella. His book *The Undertaking: Life Studies From the Dismal Trade* was a National Book Award finalist. He keeps homes in Michigan and in West Clare, Ireland.

HATING FEBRUARY

T. S. Eliot once famously wrote, “April is the cruelest month.”

If I were to revise his critique of time and its assaults upon the human spirit, I’d substitute “February.”

Yes, February. The short month, the dearth month, the pine-for-all-you’re-worth month—the relief of spring just on the horizon, but nowhere near in sight.

February, the sophomore slump of the winter months. The snow is old. It’s bleak, it’s cold. And we just don’t care.

I am not alone in my antipathy for the sorry second month. Type “I hate February” into a search engine, and you will get 108 million hits, including websites selling “I hate February” T-shirts and YouTube videos rehearsing the multitude of reasons February is so despised. These reasons are eerily familiar and all ring true.

December is redeemed by Christmas, those high holy days of feast and family, the light of the infant Christ offsetting the winter solstice, darkest day of the year.

January is redeemed by New Year’s Day, a new beginning, a fresh start, with all of its promise and possibility, as we make our resolutions and earnestly endeavor to keep them.

February is saved by no such holiday, no bright spot to illuminate the pedestrian slog through the saintless calendar of days. And so we invent faux festivals—Presidents’ Day, wherein we honor our founding fathers by furniture shopping, Groundhog Day, wherein we hope for release from winter’s purgatory with the help of a weather-wise

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rodent from Punxatawney, and, most notably, Valentine’s Day. Taking our cue from a historical saint and embellishing his story, we create an occasion to celebrate—of all things—love amid the desolation of winter. We salve our winter blues with reds—roses, candy hearts and love poems professing passion we may or may not feel. (Witness the gloomy men pillaging the shops late in the day, desperate for the expected bouquet.)

By February we have failed, our resolutions forgotten or heavily revised to make them easier to live with. Feeling more than a touch of *mea maxima culpa*, it seems fitting that February brings us Lent, the antithesis of Christmas. Commencing with Ash Wednesday, that most solemn of observances, we embark on our slow march toward crucifixion and, finally, resurrection—but for that we must wait till spring. February is sackcloth and penance, fasting and ashes, bearing the heavy burden of our mortality.

Like an insult, I take February personally. Like an Italian, I take it to heart.

February is the Month of My Mother. Born on Feb. 15, 1928, my eternally youthful mother spent a lifetime denying her birthdays, deleting the years that were piling up in everyone else’s inbox. This refusal to age culminated on her 80th birthday when her five children traveled from the far-flung cities where we live to Florida for a gala celebration. The restaurant was booked, the limos stocked with Dom Perignon, the grandchildren dressed

in satin and suits. Everyone came to the party but her. True to her code, she treated that February date as her enemy, her nemesis, a day that would live in infamy as it marked her beginning but also prophesied her end.

And she was right—almost. My mother passed away on Feb. 1, 2010. She had fallen and broken her hip in December but managed a slow recovery through January. My siblings and I counted the days, sure we would mark her next birthday together (at last)—even if in a nursing home room. But she could not countenance February. As soon as it came, she went—refusing, once and for all, to be bound by time, to be defined by that unforgiving month of her birth and, now, her death.

Like my dark eyes and my penchant for drama, perhaps I’ve inherited my distaste for February from my mother. But rather than hunker down and wait for it to pass, I try to be present to its privations and to the lessons it might teach me. Henry David Thoreau once described the discipline of “driving life into a corner, and reducing it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience.” Every 12 months I drive February into a corner. Every year I try to experience it anew.

The snow is old. It’s bleak, it’s cold. I mourn my mother all over again. Mean or sublime, it’s still February. It’s still the cruelest month.

I mourn my
mother all
over again.
Mean or
sublime, it’s
still February.



TELL IT TO ME IN PICTURES

HELLBREAK VOLUME 1

By Cullen Bunn and Dave Stewart

Cover by Brian Churilla
Oni Press. 168p \$19.99

THE BEST AMERICAN COMICS 2015

Edited by Jonathan Lethem and Bill Kartalopoulos
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 400p \$25

POETRY IS USELESS

By Anders Nilsen
Drawn & Quarterly. 224p \$29.95

BLANKETS

By Craig Thompson
Drawn & Quarterly. 592p \$39.95

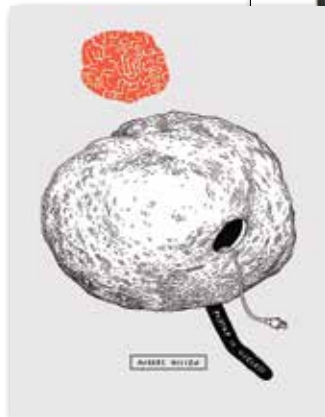
This story really begins with Will Eisner, who grew up poor and Jewish in the 1920s and in pre-War, Depression-era Brooklyn. Eisner published what's generally considered the first graphic novel, *A Contract With God*, in 1978. He also coined the term "sequential art"—which helps to explain to some of us how comic books became graphic novels. Eisner taught a course on sequential art for years at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Before that, in 1940, he wrote a syndicated newspaper comic called "The Spirit," named for its hero, a resurrected-detective-turned-superhero. Later, he created another character, Mr. Mystic. Eisner continued to tackle big subjects into his 80s in graphic novels like *Fagin the Jew*, where he expanded the character from Dickens' *Oliver Twist* beyond its anti-Semitic stereotypes. The Comic Book Hall of Fame is even named for Will Eisner. So, whether they know it or not, all of these author-artists under review are his grandchildren.

Religion remains a core subject for graphic novelists. There's a bit of madness to religion, of course, which is part

of the appeal, I'm convinced, even in a graphic novel, and even as their readership is skewed toward those under the age of 30. Many graphic novelists seem to be "working out" the ways they've been devastated by faith. The genre is good for this, since anger and frustration are easily communicated by the drawings.

Take for instance, the new book by Bunn, Churilla and Stewart, who serve as writer, illustrator, and colorer of *Hellbreak*. It features episodes of exorcism, complete with the priest-in-collar Father Gabriel Lloyd, but taking place in a dungeon torture chamber. Before priest and possessed make their way there, and Father Lloyd begins to read the rite, they meet in the patient's bedroom, where he's chained to the bed. "I'd like to know what opened the door for you. What sin was the catalyst?" asks the priest. The possessed responds, "From the moment you were dragged screaming and bloody from your cow of a mother, you start building damnation brick by brick, and you carry hell around with you for the rest of your days." There's the fury, and you can imagine how the drawings of the possessed man's facial expressions easily turn it into horror.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of faith-disillusionment in graphic novels is Anders Nilsen, born in 1973 in New Hampshire. He uses cross-outs



and blot-outs in his cartooning to demonstrate the creative process itself and to make more real his own in-

ner processing. The resulting visual is not at all like the comics you may have grown up reading in the Sunday paper. I grew up in the 1970s purchasing *Spider Man*, *Superman* and *Archie* at 7-Eleven. How interesting the evolution of the genre has been since then. But then how odd that the shelving category for these books is still most often, in libraries and bookstores, "Young Adult (YA)"—as if comic books cum graphic novels are mostly for kids. They aren't.

Anders Nilsen has his characters thinking about the death of God, even the Protestant Reformation, nihilistically. *Poetry Is Useless* is a series of

musings to demonstrate the thesis of the title. Nilsen is an angry, probably recent, atheist. One of his musings goes like this: “You are a beast, an animal,

snuffing in the dirt. This theory you have, that you were formed from the clay by the hand of God, given special attention, your life breathed into you by

his very breath: it’s a fiction. You are no different than the insects, the worms, some feral bog. In fact, the very conceit at the heart of your theory debases even this lowly status. No worm thinks it was made in the image of God.” To think that my parents were concerned about my reading *Spider Man*!

Blankets, meanwhile, is a coming-of-age story set in the American Upper Midwest, and has appealed to thousands of teenagers since it first appeared—all 600 pages of it—in 2003. It’s a memoir told like a novel, with more pictures than text. I read it in three hours, in one sitting. It is *David Copperfield* with evangelical Christian fear and adolescent self-loathing thrown in. We watch the author Craig Thompson under strict discipline at home, subject to relentless bullying at school, dreaming of running away and hearing at church that nothing about life is scary “if you are a Christian and have asked Jesus into your heart; because when you die, you’ll go to heaven.” He falls in love, lies to his parents and then loses the girl. The comparison to Dickens is apt because *Blankets* is a romantic book, designed to tug emotionally. More than any of its other qualities, this is what marks it as aimed at teenagers.

The most powerful piece of new sequential art this year is in *The Best American Comics 2015*. It’s a short story entitled “Palm Ash” by Julia Gfrorer, and I’m astonished that it made it into such an annual collection. For 16 deeply powerful pages, Gfrorer (also New Hampshire-born), depicts scenes from the martyrdom of a saint in an amphitheater of ancient Rome. We see a clandestine baptism, a duplicitous woman and virulent hatred and violence, including a brutal beating and murder. The tension, violence and blood are befitting the genre, but the genuinely spiritual overtones are not. The author writes in notes at the back of the book that she was inspired to create the story by memories of an occasion when she was “forced to witness the abuse of a

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loved one.” For this reason she used the ancient Christian theme of martyrdom as the setting “to illustrate the pain of watching helplessly when people you love are in danger, the willingness to endure or inflict pain when you believe it serves your ideals and the desire (effi-

acious or not) to intervene in the pain of others.”

JON M. SWEENEY is an author and critic living in Vermont. His next book, *The Enthusiast: How the Best Friend of Francis of Assisi Almost Destroyed What He Started*, will be published by Ave Maria Press in late March.

BOOKS | J. GREG PHELAN

LESS IS MORE

ALL DAYS ARE NIGHT

A Novel

By Peter Stamm

Translated by Michael Hofmann
Other Press. 182p \$22

More is better in the land of Trump, even in the literary world. Our novelists garnering large advances and recognition write hefty novels chock-full of virtuosic sentences, one after the next. The result can be numbing. Glimmers of truth are obscured by pyrotechnic wordplay, making readers, at least readers like me, feel they are not smart enough to keep up.

Not so reading Peter Stamm, the excellent Swiss novelist and short-story writer, who has built his well-deserved reputation crafting sentences that are extraordinary in their precision and plainness—sentences that compel you with an eerie sense of Hitchcockian dread, as seen in from the start of his crisp, evocative novel, *All Days Are Night*:

Half wake up then drift away, alternately surfacing and lapsing back into weightlessness. Gillian is lying in water with a blue luminescence. Within it her body looks yellowish, but wherever it breaks the surface, it disappears

into darkness. The only light comes from the warm water lapping her belly and breasts. It feels oily, beading on her skin. She seems to be in an enclosed room, there’s no noise, but she still has a sense of not being alone. Love is somewhere, filling her.



Gillian slowly comes to understand she is in a hospital bed after a car accident that killed her husband and horribly disfigured her. “She closed her eyes and saw the hole in her face through which she had seen inside her head.” Though her surgeon assures her that after he reconstructs her nose she will be able to resume her career as a

TV personality, Gillian wonders how she could possibly continue given her responsibility for what happened. Before the accident, her husband, Matthias, had discovered nude photos of her taken by an artist she had interviewed on her TV show. Afterward, she and her husband went to a party where they drank and fought. Gillian knew they shouldn’t drive home.

Unlike a Hitchcock film, this plot summary gives little away. Stamm doesn’t cultivate a sense of dread to heighten the suspense. On the contrary, he shuns the showy and dramatic to simply evoke the truth. “Gillian

had always known she was in danger, that she would sometime have to pay for everything. Now she had paid.” The dread Stamm writes about does not come from the fear of psychos wielding knives. It is the real, visceral dread that plagues our mortal existence—the dread that ultimately we don’t have control. And worse, that we are culpable for the tragedies that befall us.

As Gillian gets out of the hospital and heals, we learn the details of her willful flirtation with Hubert, the artist who took the photos. There is a wonderful naturalness to Stamm’s movements back in time as Gillian considers the incidents that led up to the accident, like this scene where she’s sitting naked for her portrait in Hubert’s studio:

The cane seat cut into her bottom, and the electric heater only warmed one side of her body. She tried to think of something else. She asked herself what she was doing there. If Matthias saw the painting, he was certain to make a huge scene. Of course he would recognize her, whatever Hubert said. And he would never believe that she hadn’t slept with the painter.

But she hadn’t slept with Hubert; there had been just the sittings, the nude photos and their aftermath, along with her lingering confusion and guilt.

The second section of this tripartite novel shifts to the point of view of Hubert, who is suffering from a creative crisis:

Dust was time in material form, Hubert could no longer remember who had said it, or where he had read it. At any rate, a lot of time seemed to have collected in his studio, because there was a thin, almost transparent layer of dust over everything. He didn’t bother to wipe it away...

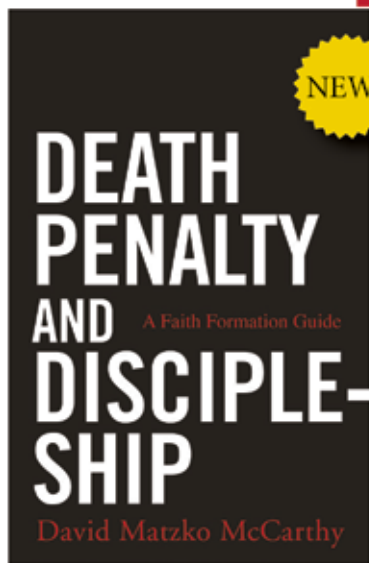
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David Matzko McCarthy

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Hubert is struggling to create a follow-up show at a mountain resort where he had a great success seven years ago exhibiting a series of life-sized photographs of naked women in everyday poses—naked housewives, his gallerist had called them. Stamm finds no glamour in the artistic journey. He depicts the isolated, often hopeless struggle of an artist groping for a subject—not necessarily one that is profound or meaningful but merely that will hold his interest.

When Hubert meets Gillian before her accident, he hopes that her presence would rekindle the sense of creative unease he felt when he'd started photographing naked women. "It wasn't so much her nakedness that interested him as the hope that she might be unsettled by it." But after his sessions with Gillian go nowhere, he reads in the paper she was in a terrible accident and forgets about her.

As the date for his show draws closer, Hubert leaves his girlfriend and young son to travel to the resort empty-handed, to, as he desperately

hopes, find inspiration in the mountains. It is painful to watch him idle his days away, drinking and chasing inane ideas, because his self-sabotage feels so real and familiar. Stamm's themes of identity and artistic purpose converge as Hubert crosses paths again with Gillian, who is head of entertainment at the resort. Their reunion is not a coincidence: Gillian has arranged Hubert's invitation, to give her a second chance to explore what drew her to the artist in the first place.

A sense of inevitability pervades the dread as Gillian and Hubert's lives come together and come apart, as real lives do, defying our grasping expectation for permanence. Stamm is no carnival barker. His stories are not larger than life. Nevertheless he demands our attention with his penetrating, artful simplicity, offering glimmers of the truth that resonate and remain.

J. GREG PHELAN has written for *The New York Times*, *The Millions* and other publications. He teaches writing at Monmouth University and is co-founder and board chair of Project Write Now (www.projectwritenow.org).

BARBARA CURTIN MILES

LAST RIGHTS

THE GOOD DEATH An Exploration of Dying in America

By Ann Neumann
Beacon Press. 232p \$26.95

As cancer ravaged her father's once-strong body, Ann Neumann did her best to at least give him a "good death." She hoped that he could exit life at home, surrounded by family, free of pain. She became his full-time caregiver in an effort to make it so. Then his pain grew so intractable that Neumann rushed him to a hospice facility. He twisted in agony until stronger drugs took hold, and then he died.

Neumann was left haunted by the belief that she had failed her father.

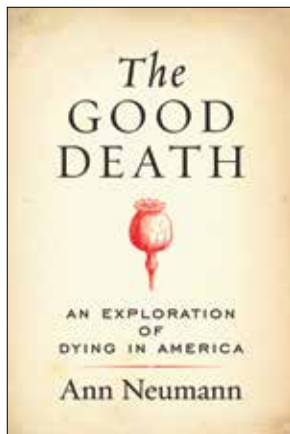
Eventually, as Neumann tells it, she sought peace by learning all she could about the experience of death in America. *The Good Death* explores how religious, legal and medical institutions dictate the death we get, even if that is not the death we want.

The Good Death does not match the power of two recent best-sellers on death and dying: *Being Mortal*, the surgeon Atul Gawande's practical guide to making the most of whatever time one has; and *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, Katy Butler's heartbreaking tale of how her father's mind gave way long before his body did. Both are better written and convey clearer, more practical messages.

The Good Death also takes a firm-

ly secular approach that differs from Catholic teachings in key ways. It may help believers understand an alternative point of view, but only if they are willing to wade through disjointed interviews, quotations and research.

Neumann is no stranger to the topic of death. She is a visiting scholar at the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, one of 10 Centers of Excellence funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts to encourage research and teaching on religion. She writes a monthly column for the N.Y.U. center's web journal *The Revealer*. Her work also has appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York Law School Law Review* and *The Guardian*, among other publications.



The Good Death covers a wide range of topics, some of which Neumann has explored in magazine and journal articles. She welcomes the spread of state laws that legalize assisted suicide; she deplores Catholic hospitals' practice of denying care that conflicts with church beliefs.

She devotes a surprising amount of attention to death in prisons, whether by execution, self-starvation or the illnesses that plague the aging inmate population in the United States. It is an interesting topic but seems tangential to this book.

The book's strongest chapter relates how Neumann worked out her grief after her dad's death: by training as a hospice volunteer. We follow her as she helps broker better pain meds for Marshall, who hesitates to complain to the nurses as he wastes away in a Manhattan H.I.V. facility. She buys guitar strings for Mr. Cortez, whose 25-year struggle with Parkinson's is nearing its end. She forms a deep friendship with Evelyn, an Upper West Side matron whose six-month

hospice term stretches to years. (The author argues that these cases testify to hospice's success; when allowed to remain home and pain-free, some patients defy doctors' predictions for how much time they have left.)

Neumann devotes a chapter to assisted suicide, which Oregon, my home state, legalized in 1997. The Death with Dignity Act sets up a framework for terminally ill adult Oregonians to request a lethal dose of medication. As of February 2015, some 1,327 people had these prescriptions written. Of that number, 859 died from ingesting the medication; the rest died from other causes.

Washington State's voters approved a similar law in 2008. The following year, Montana did so through the courts, and Neumann describes this last effort in detail.

The author frames the issue with personal interviews and quotes—even drawing on St. Thomas Aquinas, the renowned 13th century Catholic theologian. In her view, legalizing assisted

suicide is a laudable step toward respecting patients' privacy and autonomy. She laments that her 60-year-old father lacked this choice as he faced death in Pennsylvania.

Neumann also devotes considerable space to the ethics of tube feeding for unconscious patients who have no hope of recovery. She makes her case against the practice by recalling Terri Schiavo, the comatose Florida woman kept alive by a feeding tube for 15 years.

Schiavo's husband sought to have the tube removed, saying that his wife would not have wanted to live this way. Her birth family fought to continue artificial feeding, citing Catholic teachings on euthanasia. After years of state and federal challenges, Schiavo's husband prevailed; the tube was removed, and Schiavo died in March 2005.

In these and other chapters, the author creates a sort of collage through research, case histories and personal interviews. She does not state her case outright; she circles around it and lets her evidence build. The reader can be in the midst of a chapter before realizing: "She thinks assisted suicide is a good idea," or "She thinks Catholic hospitals unfairly impose their beliefs

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Translator

Luis Baudry-Simón, translator (from English into Spanish): newsletters, articles, essays, websites, pastoral letters, ministry resources, motivational conferences, spirituality material, etc. Contact: luisbaudrysimon@gmail.com (815) 694-0713.

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on the public."

Neumann briefly summarizes church teachings and even attends pro-life events in the course of her research. However, her descriptions come across as dismissive or condescending.

Catholic readers may wish to supplement this book with statements from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and with the thoughtful discussions in **America** and other publications.

Death is one experience that we share with all humanity. Yet we hesitate to tap the experiences of those who are dying. We shy from putting our own papers in order and from discussing our wishes with those who would carry them out.

It's hard to think of a topic more deserving of thought and research. *The Good Death*, however, disappoints.

BARBARA CURTIN MILES *recently retired after 40 years in journalism. She lives in Salem, Ore.*

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The Glory of Life

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (C), FEB. 21, 2016

Readings: Gn 15:5–18; Ps 27:1–14; Phil 3:17–4:1; Lk 9:28–36

“While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Lk 9:29)

Everyone’s life seems more glamorous on social media, basically a curated series of magical moments and constant achievements, but much more of our time is spent attending to the things of daily life, like making coffee, changing diapers, cleaning out the garage, commuting to work, writing out the minutes for a church committee, shoveling snow, taking the car in for repairs or tidying the house. Not much of it seems glorious.

Our daily lives are not simply drudgery. There are also moments of joy, laughter and insight, as well as pain and loss. But it is by attending to the small steps that the whole journey comes into focus. The mass of seemingly insignificant daily tasks we perform creates the bedrock of our spiritual lives, the vantage point from which we can see the glory to come.

When God established the covenant relationship with Abram, comprising the promises of descendants as numerous as the stars and a land to possess, God also set before Abram a time frame of hundreds of years in which the people of Israel would be enslaved, away from their promised land, and then wandering in the desert. This journey was not simply a time of inattentive waiting or abject yearning, but precisely the time when their spiritual path could be established through faithfulness to God and attention to the Torah.

Daily life itself is the proving ground

of the spiritual life, in whatever form it takes and wherever it takes place. And by God’s command, Abram himself responded to God’s covenant, which would not be fully realized in his own lifetime, with the fruit of his labor and life, offering his animals in sacrifice. There is no pristine spiritual path here on earth, just the constant faithful living of our lives in the realms of the sacred and the mundane as we prepare for our heavenly home.

There can be temptations both to turn away from the slog of daily life and focus only on the world to come, or to reject the world to come and focus only on daily life. The apostle Paul in the Letter to the Philippians warns against those who are “enemies of the cross of Christ,” whose “god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.” Paul instead centers the Philippians on our “citizenship” (*politeuma*) “in heaven.”

The Greek word refers to more than simply individual citizenship but to the body of those who make up a political entity—that is, a commonwealth or state of believers. Heaven is our homeland, and it is there, Paul says, that Christ “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” Glory is our destiny, the end of the spiritual path, but it is in and through the journey that we arrive home.

This is why Paul, when considering his possible death earlier in Philippians, debates what would be

better: to remain here on earth or to be with Christ. Paul says that “dying is gain” and remaining “in the flesh” is “fruitful labor” and that he does not know what he prefers (Phil 1:21–22). But Paul concludes that he has work here on earth that must be completed, and so he is convinced he will remain with the Philippians. We all have work to finish here on earth and we do not know the time of its completion, which is why it is important for us to be faithful and attentive to each of our tasks at all times,



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Meditate on Jesus’ glory and the glory promised to us in the *politeuma* of heaven. When is daily life most difficult or dreary for you? How does the reality of glory enliven you or give you hope? Do you grasp glory as the heart of our future life with God?

ART: TAD DUNNE

however dull they appear.

The glory awaits us, as Peter, John and James experienced during the transfiguration of Jesus. It is the glorious reality at the heart of our divine call and our divine future. The path to this future, however, passes through the vicissitudes of life, whether boring, exciting or suffused with suffering, as Jesus knew. For in the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about “his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” The glory passes through the paschal mystery, Jesus’ departure paving the way for our journey home.

JOHN W. MARTENS

JOHN W. MARTENS is a professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minn. Twitter: @BibleJunkies.

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