

America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

FEB. 27, 2012 \$3.50



Keeping Kids Catholic

ELIZABETH KIRKLAND CAHILL

Pro-Life Pressure
RONNIE D. RUBIT

Out of Palestine
ELIZABETH G. BURR

OF MANY THINGS

I'm not a jock —if by that we mean a muscled guy who watches every Superbowl and never misses a World Series game. People like that can throw a forward pass, sink a set shot from center court, hit a golf ball straight and remember the statistics on Tom Brady and Enos Slaughter. In grammar school, when we chose sides for basketball or touch football, I was the last guy chosen. In high school at St. Joseph's Prep in Philadelphia, I was cut from the swimming team. I was slow. In the 1962 basketball game between the students and faculty at McQuaid High School in Rochester, where I was teaching, one of my Jesuit teammates advised me, when they finally put me into the game, that if I ever got the ball, I should get rid of it quickly. Somehow the ball bounced into my hands, and I threw it right away to the first adult I saw on the court. It was the ref.

My father, a World War I hero and journalist, was determined that my brother Dave and I would be able to "take care of ourselves." So beginning when we were 3, he put us on horseback, taught us to swim in the ocean and to paddle a canoe. He knelt down to be our size and had us put on the boxing gloves and fight him. Life Lesson No. 1: Don't let anyone push you around. Our parents sent us to a summer camp with 35 horses, tennis and fencing lessons, boxing, campfires and a Saturday morning ritual where the whole camp soaped up and bathed in the lake.

At St. Joe's I went out for crew. Every day the eight of us would run the mile or so from the Prep down to the Schuylkill River, row up and down under the great bridges, then run a few extra miles before jogging home. At 17 I was in the best shape of my life. That summer I went to Alaska to work on the railroad but was fired after two weeks for being too young.

That year I began to understand what it means to be at home in one's

body. By competitive standards, unlike Dave, I was not an athlete; but I swam better than most people I knew, and when I got out of the army and joined the Jesuits, I began to take running seriously. It was a double grace: running alone helped me pray; running with a companion formed friendships that endure today.

At McQuaid I hung around track practice and, at 30, trained enough to run a mile in seven minutes. But my breakthrough came when college students, whom I had challenged to read more books, challenged me to push myself physically. When I was dean at Rockhurst College in Kansas City, a student signed me up for a half-marathon.

At Holy Cross, where I was also dean, a student in the residence where I was prefect tackled me in the hall, pinned me down and ordered me to run in the New York Marathon with him. So we did it. I had heard there were two kinds of people in the world: those who had run a marathon and those who had not. I ran four more in Boston and Jersey City.

One night 12 years ago I woke up with a sharp pain in my arm and chest. Two discs were impinging on my spinal cord. Within days I was on the operating table. I miss running terribly. I take hourlong walks every morning from America House to Times Square or Central Park; and when young men and women go running by, I ache. I swim a few minutes almost daily and take long bike rides along the Hudson River on warm weekends.

If I had my wish, every student in a Jesuit school would have to learn to swim 100 yards and be able to run a mile in 10 minutes. That way fewer young people would drown or suffer the damage that comes with being overweight. And all would know the joy of diving into an ocean wave or a long run along the beach.

RAYMOND A. SCHROTH, S.J.

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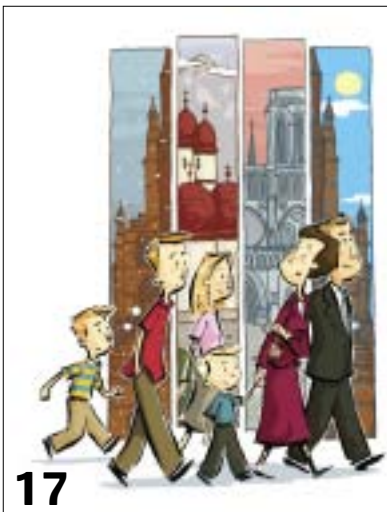
Cover: A family at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.
Photo: CNS/Nancy Wiechec

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Whither Syria?

A double veto by Russia and China on Feb. 5 defeated a weak U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's repression of the yearlong popular uprising against his autocratic rule. "A couple of members of this council," said Susan Rice, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, "remain steadfast in their willingness to sell out the Syrian people and shield a craven tyrant." Russia claimed it would broker talks between the two sides, and the Arab League pledged to help advance a political transition. Meanwhile, the Syrian army launched its heaviest artillery attacks yet on civilian apartment blocks in Homs. Barring outside assistance, the Syrian people are destined to suffer even more cruelly.

The Free Syrian Army is under pressure to abandon its defensive posture; and in response to a yearlong assault by Mr. Assad, the population has begun to consider renouncing nonviolence in favor of outright civil war. Western defense experts are urging arms shipments and training for the rebels; and some Arab countries, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are expected to supply such aid. An international consensus exists for defending the Syrian people, beginning with 13 Security Council members supporting the vetoed resolution. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton is organizing a group called Friends of Syria not only to apply increased diplomatic and economic pressure but also to unite the Syrian opposition to prepare for "the morning after." Given the prolonged, lethal attacks by the military on nonthreatening civilian populations, another step might be an International Criminal Court indictment of Mr. Assad and leading members of his regime for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Transparent and Accountable

Ten years after the height of the sexual abuse crisis, Catholics may be inured to stories about scandal. A spate of recent events, however, demonstrates that Catholics must continue to hold church officials accountable in order to ensure the integrity of the institution.

In the Archdiocese of New York, a bookkeeper was recently charged with embezzling \$1 million from church accounts. Anita Collins had been convicted of similar crimes in the past, but the archdiocese never conducted a background check. In Philadelphia, the archdiocese fired its chief financial officer after it was discovered that she was paying personal credit card bills, which included large charges from casinos, with church checks. Meanwhile,

Vatican officials are scrambling to counter assertions by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, now the papal nuncio to the United States, that the management of Vatican City State is rife with corruption and waste.

These stories hint at what could be a much larger problem. For too long, church officials failed to follow professional business practices. Parishioners trusted their pastor or bishop to use their donations wisely. Fortunately, many dioceses now make their financial statements available online; but the large majority do not include data on parishes, and only a handful have been officially audited. Further controls could be put in place. For example, while background checks are now required for all church employees in the United States who work with children, similar mandates do not exist for other church staff.

To be proper stewards of the financial resources they have been given, church officials must adopt transparent and fiscally responsible practices at all levels. A national mandate may be the only way to ensure that all dioceses follow the same standards.

Help From Our Friends

Christians who are hoping to become more active in their church communities this Lent might do well to seek a little help from their friends. A new study by Samuel Stroope, a sociology researcher at Baylor University, found that individuals with many friendships in a faith community show higher levels of religiosity. But sharing a worship space does not mean these friends spend their free time discussing doctrine. The study also showed that church-based friendships had greater impact on individuals' religious behavior than on their beliefs. Of the 1,600 adults surveyed, 42 percent said that they had "a few" friends who attended their place of worship, and 32 percent said "none."

The effect of church-based friendships among Catholics and Protestants also differs. Stroope said that "Catholic congregations received diminishing participation returns for the congregational friendships of their members" when compared with Protestant congregations. Many Protestants see their churches as a main facet of their social life. Catholics, on the other hand, often attend Mass more for sacraments than for socializing. But the relative sizes of the respective church communities may also be a factor.

The study serves as a reminder that faith communities must foster a welcoming environment. Building friendships within a parish can help Catholics feel supported living out their faith in the world, and it could help heal divisions within the church as well.

A War Worth Fighting

The Republican candidate Mitt Romney got into hot water recently when he said he was so focused on restoring the nation's middle class that he was "not concerned about the very poor." He reasoned that they are covered by the country's social service safety net. But he is wrong to disregard poverty and wrong to think the human dignity of the poor has been adequately protected. But he at least said the "P" word out loud, if inadvertently. So poll-determined is political rhetoric these days, one could be forgiven for thinking the nation consists entirely of struggling members of the middle class. That is not exactly the case, of course.

Decades of not-so-benign neglect have allowed poverty to molder in America's cultural basement even as the bad news on poverty has been unremitting since 2008. The nation currently endures the highest rate of poverty since 1993, at 15.1 percent. Child poverty is particularly bad, at over 20 percent; and within the nation's African-American community, poverty has hit crisis levels, approaching percentages last seen in the late 1960s. Add in the near poor, people who are just above the poverty threshold, and the picture becomes even more depressing—and more accurate—knowing that almost 50 percent of the nation is in a daily struggle to get by.

Despite the gravity of the crisis, there is little enthusiasm in austerity-addled Washington for a redeclaration of the old war on poverty, though much has been said about income disparity and saving the nation's middle class. The church cannot be accused of remaining silent. The U.S. bishops and Catholic Charities USA have repeatedly spoken up for the least among us as the economy has soured.

The problem of poverty has been showing up with greater frequency in the U.S. media, but the issue has not been received by the public with the fervency aroused in past times of economic crisis. It may be that this era still awaits its Michael Harrington, Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange to bring the issue more vividly before the public conscience.

Combating poverty was a big issue in the 1960s and endured, at least as a talking point, into the 1970s, when deindustrialization ravaged the American working class. In the ensuing decades, however, poverty became the fault of the poverty-stricken, too lazy or drug- and alcohol-addicted to take personal responsibility and pull themselves up by those mythological bootstraps. Welfare reform and the boom time that began in the mid-90s knocked poverty off

the front pages as the nation enjoyed record levels of job growth. Unemployment plummeted from more than 7 percent in 1993 to just 4 percent in November 2000.



Those better economic times may have contributed to the hardening of an ideological slogan into a cornerstone of contemporary received wisdom—that government programs "can't beat" poverty, and it is a waste of money even to try. But it should be recalled that President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty generated perhaps the greatest movement out of poverty in the nation's history, cutting the level of national poverty in half, from 22 percent in 1962 to just above 11 percent in 1973. The impact on the African-American community was also dramatic, reducing poverty from 55 percent in 1959 to 33 percent by 1970. And in our own time various measures taken by the federal government since the great collapse of 2008—like preserving Medicaid and S-chip, the payroll tax cut and extensions of unemployment payments—have saved millions from falling into a deep poverty from which they and their children might never have recovered.

It was refreshing to hear President Obama acknowledge America's poor and the biblical injunction to respond to their cry at the National Prayer Breakfast on Feb. 2. And it is encouraging that poverty in the United States is once again making it above the fold in print and digital media. Can the renewed coverage shame enough people in power in both the public and private sectors to do more to respond to the nation's poverty crisis?

Americans may not be able to work up the cultural or fiscal energy for another effort on the scale of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, but more specific attention to the plight of the poor by maintaining social lifelines and redoubled efforts at job creation and retraining seem warranted. In 1986 President Reagan famously noted that the nation had declared war on poverty and "poverty won." But that is not exactly how it went, in fact. The nation enjoyed then, as it does now, a peace dividend generated by the War on Poverty that has prevented a return to the high levels of poverty last seen in the oft-presumed golden era of the 1950s. One thing is certain: defeat will always be a dependable outcome if U.S. policymakers surrender the field without firing a shot.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Bishops Say No to Accommodation On Contraceptive Services

The Obama administration announced a “common sense accommodation,” seeking to end a public dispute with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and others over new requirements for contraceptive services in health insurance plans. Under revised guidelines offered on Feb. 10, a religious exemption from those new requirements will still apply to church entities such as parishes and dioceses. Nonprofit religious employers—universities, hospitals, social service providers—will no longer be required to offer contraception, pay for it through insurance premiums or refer employees to contraception benefits outside their plans. A senior White House official said the administration believes the changes reflect “a health care policy that accommodates religious liberty while protecting women.”

“Whether you’re a teacher or a small-business woman or a nurse or a janitor,” President Obama said, announcing the policy modification at the White House, “no woman’s health should depend on who she is or where she works or how much money she makes. Every woman should be in control of the decisions that affect her own health. Period.”

But, the president said, his administration has been mindful of “another principle at stake here—and that’s the principle of religious liberty, an inalienable right that is enshrined in our Constitution. As a citizen and as a

Christian,” he said, “I cherish this right.”

Under the new plan, the president said, “If a woman’s employer is a charity or a hospital that has a religious objection to providing contraceptive services as part of their health plan, the insurance company—not the hospital, not the charity—will be required to



With Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, U.S. President Barack Obama details the new position on contraception during a statement at the White House on Feb. 10.

reach out and offer the woman contraceptive care free of charge, without co-pays and without hassles.”

The president personally briefed Cardinal-designate Timothy Dolan of New York, the president of the bishops’ conference, on the policy change during a phone call on Feb. 10. The president

SYRIA

Carnage Continues in Homs

The United Nations and the League of Arab States are considering sending a joint observer mission to Syria to try to end the crisis engulfing that Middle East country, with U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warning on Feb. 9 that recent attacks against civilians in the city of Homs were a bad omen. Ban reported that well over 5,000 people have been killed as a result of a government crackdown since a pro-democracy uprising began in March last year.

“For too many months, we have watched this crisis deepen,” Ban told journalists at U.N. headquarters, following a closed-door Security Council briefing on conditions in Syria. “We have seen escalating violence, brutal crackdowns and tremendous suffering by the Syrian people.”

According to local sources, the Syrian army has sharply increased the use of tanks, helicopters, mortars, rockets and artillery fire to attack civilian areas, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights said.

With one million residents, Homs is Syria’s third-largest city. “I am appalled by the Syrian government’s willful assault on Homs, and its use of artillery and other heavy weaponry in what appear to be indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas in the city,” said High Commissioner Navanethem Pillay.

On Feb. 4 Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution supported by the Security Council’s 13 other members. The draft text had endorsed an Arab League plan to resolve the crisis. Ban said the council’s failure to agree on collective action was “disastrous for the people of Syria. It has encouraged the Syrian government to step up its war on its own people,” he said. “I fear that



acknowledged that this policy adjustment may still not satisfy all critics.

After first suggesting on the morning of Feb. 10 that the president's "accommodation" represented a "first step in the right direction," the U.S.C.C.B. after further study of the proposal quickly came to a different

conclusion. Noting that the revision still retained the nationwide contraception mandate, described as "unsupported in the law" and "a grave moral concern," a statement from the bishops said that "the only complete solution to this religious liberty problem is for H.H.S. to rescind the mandate of these objectionable services."

The bishops argued that the revised language still lacked protections for "key stakeholders," which they now argue should include not just Catholic institutional employers but essentially any employer who finds the mandated coverage morally objectionable, including self-insured religious employers; religious and secular for-profit employers; secular nonprofit employers and religious insurers. The statement also seemed to reject the president's position that religious employers would not be put in the position of financing contraception coverage. According to the statement: "In the case where the employee and insurer agree to add the objectionable coverage, that coverage is still provided as a

part of the objecting employer's plan, financed in the same way as the rest of the coverage offered by the objecting employer."

The bishops pledged to "continue—with no less vigor, no less sense of urgency—our efforts to correct this problem through the other two branches of government."

Senior administration officials say the additional contraception services are cost-neutral, so no additional premium is required to pay for them.

After announcing the policy revision, the White House quickly circulated a statement from Carol Keehan, S.C., the president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association, supporting the new position. "The framework developed has responded to the issues we identified that needed to be fixed," said Sister Keehan. "We are pleased and grateful that the religious liberty and conscience protection needs of so many ministries that serve our country were appreciated enough that an early resolution of this issue was accomplished."

the appalling brutality we are witnessing in Homs, with heavy weapons firing into civilian neighborhoods, is a grim harbinger of worse to come."

The secretary general asked, "How many deaths will it take to halt this dangerous slide toward civil war and sectarian strife?"

As the government bombardment of Homs entered its fifth day on Feb. 9, most Christian families fled the city. Some priests have decided to stay, even as government forces intensified their strikes against the heart of the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad, said the Vatican's nuncio to Syria, Archbishop Mario Zenari.

Archbishop Zenari said the Vatican

has no plans to close its operations in Damascus, the Syrian capital, and church officials still hoped for a peaceful outcome that preserved order.

"Within the region, Syria is a model of religious tolerance, above all with respect to relations between Christians and Muslims," he said. "Till now, Christians in

Syria have enjoyed great respect from every side in the conflict."



Homes damaged by shelling in Homs, Syria.

Vatican Suit Dropped

A federal court in Mississippi on Feb. 2 dismissed a 10-year-old lawsuit accusing the Vatican of complicity in a scheme to bilk insurance companies for more than \$200 million. The state insurance commissioners of Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas had filed the lawsuit in 2002, charging the Vatican and Msgr. Emilio Colagiovanni of racketeering and fraud. The commissioners claimed that Monsignor Colagiovanni and the Holy See had aided financier Martin Frankel in purchasing small, ailing insurance companies, whose assets he then siphoned off, leaving them unable to pay claims. Jeffrey S. Lena, an attorney for the Holy See, said the dismissal “was not the result of any settlement agreement” and that the insurance commissioners had requested the court’s action “of their own accord.”

Anti-Poverty Efforts Should Continue

As they negotiate the details of the Temporary Payroll Tax Cut Continuation Act, members of Congress should find ways to continue unemployment benefits and reject proposals to exclude children of immigrant families from the Child Tax Credit, said Bishop Stephen E. Blaize of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “The economy is still leaving too many people without work,” wrote Bishop Blaize in a letter to Congress on Feb. 9. “When the economy fails to generate sufficient jobs, there is a moral obligation to help protect the life and dignity of unemployed workers and their families. We also must protect those

NEWS BRIEFS

Archbishop Murilo Krieger of Salvador, Brazil, is mediating a **military police officer strike** that has caused havoc and left at least 95 people dead in Bahia State. + The Irish government has decided to cut special grants to Irish families meant to cover the **cost of first Communion** and confirmation expenses, which “could include a white dress, veil, shoes and bag,” from 242 euros to 110 euros.



Police on strike in Brazil

+ In a debate on **assisted dying** at the Church of England Synod on Feb. 6, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, warned that legal moves to allow assisted suicide would be a “disaster” and reduce English society’s attitude toward the sanctity of life. + The government does not have the competence or authority to “redefine” marriage or ‘expand’ its definition,” said Archbishop José H. Gómez of Los Angeles on Feb. 7, criticizing a court decision that overturned California’s **Proposition 8**, a 2008 initiative forbidding same-sex marriage. + Students from groups affiliated with religious denominations at Vanderbilt University protested the school’s new **nondiscrimination policy**, which requires that membership and leadership positions in any registered student organization be open to any applicant.

programs that help low-income workers escape poverty and raise their children in dignity.”

Corruption Charges ‘Unfounded’

In an unusually public rebuke of a high-ranking colleague, Vatican officials dismissed as baseless the accusations of “corruption and abuse of power” made in letters by the archbishop who is now apostolic nuncio to the United States. In a statement released by the Vatican on Feb. 4, Cardinal-designate Giuseppe Bertello and Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, the current and immediate past presidents of the Governorate of Vatican City State, described as a “cause of great sadness” the recent “unlawful publication” by

Italian journalists of two letters addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state.

The letters, written by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò when he was the governorate’s secretary general, contained assertions based on “erroneous evaluations” or “fears unsupported by proof,” the statement said. Archbishop Viganò’s letter to the pope, dated March 27, 2011, lamented “so many situations of corruption and abuse of power long rooted in the various departments” of the governorate and warned that the archbishop’s removal “would provoke profound confusion and dejection” among all those supporting his efforts at reform.

From CNS and other sources.



A Broken System

No other democracy in the world has anything even vaguely resembling the presidential selection process that the United States has developed over the last four decades.

Lucky for them, because American democracy's existing presidential selection process is a civic and moral train wreck.

As of this writing, with a Democratic incumbent cruising to a second nomination, we are four states into the 2012 Republican presidential selection season. Per usual, the season started in earnest with the Iowa caucuses. In Iowa, Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney beat Ron Paul but lost to Ron Donatucci.

You are probably wondering: Ron Paul is the libertarian congressman from Texas, but who is Ron Donatucci?

Donatucci is Philadelphia's Register of Wills. In 2011, he was elected to that office with 121,374 votes. In the 2011 Iowa caucuses, the six Republican presidential contenders—Santorum, Romney and Paul, plus Newt Gingrich, Rick Perry and Michelle Bachmann—received a combined total of 114,446 votes.

Next up, as always, was New Hampshire. There Romney led the pack with 95,669 votes. If you add that to the nearly 30,000 votes Romney got in Iowa, the Republican presidential frontrunner would outpoll Donatucci, but he would still be in a virtual dead heat with Christine Solomon. She

holds the office of Judge of the Philadelphia Traffic Court. In 2011 she won that post with 125,434 votes.

So we start our presidential selection sweepstakes by expending ungodly amounts of money and media time on two small-state contests that we know will be won with vote totals that could not even get you elected to down-ballot offices in any big city.

Then we move on to the Nevada caucuses (prior to the Nevada primary) and, of course, South Carolina, a mid-sized state with a primary electorate that is not exactly a demographic and ideological cross-section of the country. Though the television talking heads feign suspense, in South Carolina the most conservative major candidate unfailingly wins (as Gingrich did this year) or comes in a close second (as Mike Huckabee did behind John McCain in 2008).

Finally, it's four down and only 46 more to go, with Florida, a big state that tests each candidate's presidential timber in two ways. First, does he or she have what it takes to spend—or to have ostensibly independent "super PACs" spend—untold millions of dollars on hyper-negative ads that tear remaining opponents to pieces? (And here, I mean literally untold, since the super PACs need not report their sources until much later.) And second, can he or she pander shamelessly to Floridians age 65 and older?

Thereafter, the bizarre process by which we pick people to compete for the presidency only goes on longer, gets ever more expensive, becomes ever

more negative and fosters ever deeper political polarization.

Our present-day presidential selection process reflects the perverse and unintended byproducts of successive attempts to reform and improve it. That began with well-meaning changes in each party's rules that prevented any candidate from doing what, for example, Democratic Vice President Hubert Humphrey did in

Our presidential selection process is a civic and moral train wreck.

1968, namely, win a party's presidential nomination without running in and winning a single presidential primary. In both parties, the party bosses exited, and the pollsters and the campaign consultants and hyper-ideological activists entered. The process pushed the Republicans

ever farther to the right and the Democratic Party ever farther to the left.

I see no solution, but I would favor having a single "Super-Super Tuesday" national primary that permits equal participation by all states and presents a fair compromise with the increased number of delegates that larger states send to the national conventions, much like the compromises during the original constitutional convention. Among other arguable drawbacks, that one-day drama would favor candidates with high name recognition and put at a disadvantage lesser-known candidates within each party. But it would, I believe, be better than the present system, and I have yet to hear any better ideas.

JOHN J. DIJULIO JR. is the co-author of *American Government: Institutions and Policies* (2012) and other books on politics, religion and public administration.



NATIONAL MARCH FOR LIFE

ABORTION KILLS MANKIND
CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

Justice for the Unborn
Just pour l'enfant Un à naitre

Men Regret Lost Fatherhood

EXODUS 2009
A Future Without Abortion

EXODUS 2009
A Future Without Abortion
40 YEARS OF ABORTIONS 1969 - 2009

Abortion (with a red prohibition sign over the word)

Let Them Live

Women Do Regret Abortion
SilentNoMoreAwareness.org
1-800-395-HELP

DEFENDING LIFE

A NEW CATHOLIC WONDERS HOW TO
BE PRO-LIFE.

Peer Pressure

BY RONNIE D. RUBIT

As a Christian only recently received into the Catholic Church, I am frequently invited by other parishioners to take part in pro-life activities. I have been asked to participate in pro-life rallies, organized protests in front of local Planned Parenthood clinics and processions through the city in “marches for life.” Before I even completed the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, I was pressured to lend my signature to pro-life petitions and solicited to join the Respect Life committee. Often during discussion forums with other Catholics, the topic turned to abortion, a subject that superseded dialogue on all other important issues. The constant barrage of invitations to such ambitious activism was overwhelming—a little too much too soon.

At that time in my Catholic journey, I wanted to focus exclusively on personal piety and devotion to fundamental church teaching, history and Christology. There would be time for social action later.

My pre-Catholic religious life was deeply influenced in adolescence by Southern Baptist theology and conservative Bible teaching. While in college, I became a member of the Churches of Christ, a loving and rewarding affiliation. The Churches of Christ is an extremely conservative denomination, however, so much so that mechanical instruments are not allowed in the worship services, and women have few outlets for expression and service. The religious instruction included staunch opposition to abortion from the lectern.

I was affiliated with the Churches of Christ for almost 20 years. During these decades, I took part in evangelical and neoconservative politics in opposition to perceived “liberal” threats to Christian culture, like that embodied in *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision. In defense against purported threats to our Judeo-Christian way of life, I was an enthusiastic soldier in the “culture wars.” In short, I can hardly be labeled “soft” on abortion.

COMPOSITE PHOTO: AMERICA MAGAZINE

RONNIE D. RUBIT, a former high school teacher, lives in Houston, Tex., where he is a parishioner of the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart.

Pro-Life Activism and Piety

Let me be clear: my visceral reaction to abortion is an emphatic no. Nevertheless, my personal opposition to the procedure is not what defines my virtue as a Christian. This is something that concerns me about my Catholic peers. It seems from where I sit (literally, in a wheelchair), that for many devoted Catholics and Protestants alike, the authenticity of a religious commitment is measured by the decibel level of one's outrage over abortion.

I often get the impression that abortion politics permeates the religious devotion of many—and shame on anyone who does not share their enthusiasm for activism in pro-life causes. Unfortunately, many young people and new Catholics are subjected to an unwelcome kind of peer pressure to demonstrate their commitment as a Christian. For some, a willingness to join in the street activism against abortion is considered a litmus test for genuine Christian morality.

The nonconformist in me refuses to allow anyone to characterize me or scrutinize the legitimacy of my Christian

experience. I refuse to have my “tires kicked” to prove my Catholic bona fides, and I place no such burden of proof on anyone else. The act of inducing shame to persuade someone to take part in a pro-life rally bears a strong resemblance to the practice in late antiquity of mandatory annual devotions to the local Roman deity—a public observance to which early Christians objected. Many embraced martyrdom in an effort to end it.

Are Catholics now required to produce public affidavits to verify their profession of faith? If so, must it address only the issue of abortion? Are depositions necessary to confirm my private fasting and almsgiving? Often

peer pressure to engage in activism veils a particular political ideology. The holy Roman Catholic Church is no place for political factions or proselytizing for either political party.

For many, the authenticity of a religious commitment is measured by the decibel level of one's outrage over abortion.

A Distortion of Values?

In my short time as a Catholic, I have never been called upon to assemble on a cold Saturday morning to join in the distribution of blankets and hot soup with sandwiches to the homeless; I have never been urged to participate in weekend home repairs and yard cleaning for any disabled and elderly widows in the parish. Maybe that is because it takes more of a commitment to push a lawn mower than to hold up a sign.

This distortion of values among comfortable American Catholics is an aspect of my new faith that I find distressing. On the surface, it strikes me as superficial and self-righteous. I understand a desire not to stand idly by in the face of injustice, but I am concerned that many of my co-religionists channel their religious impulses more toward how they are publicly perceived and less toward personal piety.

I once heard, on a major cable television network, testimony from a well-known Washington, D.C., journalist and political pundit, who proudly stated that his personal religious renewal was informed by his late pro-life activism. While I applaud his newfound religious zeal, I believe faith should spring from a desire to know God through the fundamental teachings of Christ and the apostles, not from political impulses or a single act of merit.

True, our Scriptures and faith do teach that murder is sin. And the *Didache*, a widely circulated second-century Christian document, does specifically warn against aborting a fetus. But it is filled with additional wisdom and instruction: it charges Christians with the duties to keep the commandments and participate in the Eucharist. It calls them to engage in fasting and prayer, charity, virtuous behavior, car-

Chaplain for Ministry Center



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ing for the afflicted and a host of other injunctions compatible with the New Testament.

Joining a Great Tradition

My disquiet about pro-life activism is not meant to indict the Catholic Church, of which I am now a part. On the contrary, one of the features that drew me to this church is its luminous history of social activism, from building homes and schools for orphans to openly supporting the civil rights movement to opposition to unjust wars and political oppression. The lives of the saints down through the ages speak loudly and help to shine the light of understanding on service. American Catholic luminaries also inspire me. Mother Katharine Drexel used her considerable fortune to finance over 60 schools and missions for poor African-Americans and American Indians around the country. Henriette DeLille devoted her life to nursing care and built homes and schools for orphans in Louisiana. The exemplary devotion of saints like these is not singular or exclusionary; it testifies to the all-inclusive love of Christ for the poor and the hungry, the orphan and the widow, the prisoner and the exploited, the unborn and the immigrant.

The church's many worldwide charities have proved a powerful attraction; their importance to my conversion cannot be overstated. I am very proud to be a part now of that

noble Catholic tradition. It is my goal to find my rightful place in the church and live out my faith profession by piety, service to society and the practice of good works—works that, the Scriptures teach, “God has prepared for us to walk in” (Eph 2:10).

That activity may include working toward a solution to the problem of abortion; but this will be a deliberate act of conscience on my part, not a surrender to the coercion of other parishioners. Those who confess faith in Christ must reconcile church teaching and their own conscience to determine their inclination to activity or inactivity with respect to the practice of true religion.

Since the pontificate of John Paul II, I witnessed as an outsider a revival in the American Catholic community. Catholics in the United States, unlike many elsewhere in the world, have the freedom and

the means to minister to the needs of the afflicted. To limit ourselves and to focus so much energy on the single issue of abortion not only diminishes our efforts but also sets a poor precedent for new converts. Many of them are eager to engage their lives in service to God, humankind and local parish life. We ought not discourage their spiritual progress through excessive attention to one particular evil. Let's show them and teach them to heal “all manner of sickness” in the human condition. **A**

ON THE WEB

A discussion of pro-life ministry.
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Out of Palestine

Solidarity with a displaced people

BY ELIZABETH G. BURR

Recently I asked Dominique Najjar, a Palestinian Christian who lives with his wife and children in Minneapolis, why so many Palestinians are leaving Palestine. He told me the story of how he and two of his three brothers, all aspiring professionals, immigrated to the United States from East Jerusalem out of “economic necessity,” starting in the early 1970s. “My parents needed support,” he said, explaining that economic advancement was impossible under Israeli control. This took place within the first decade of the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, which began after the 1967 war and is illegal under international law.

But there is more to Mr. Najjar’s story. He and one of his brothers did not intend to emigrate permanently from their homeland. After they had moved to the United States, however, Israel revoked their Jerusalem residency status. Now they are given 90-day tourist visas when they return to their hometown, where their 89-year-old mother lives alone. Since none of her seven adult children enjoys residency status in Jerusalem any longer, none can do more than visit her. She receives daily “compassion and attention” from her Muslim neighbors next door. Najjar remarked that the revocation of his residency status is “all part of the Israeli effort to minimize the number of non-Jews in Jerusalem.”

It is difficult for citizens of other countries to appreciate what the occupation means for Palestinians who are not citizens of the country that rules them (unlike Israeli Palestinians who live in the recognized State of Israel). A reading of the 30 articles of the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) reveals that very few of these rights are applied to occupied Palestinians. Directly relevant to Mr. Najjar’s story, for example, Article 13 (2) states, “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.” People of conscience are faced with the oppression of an indigenous population in their own homeland, and Christians worldwide must confront the truth that Palestinian Christians are walking down a long Via Dolorosa from which, without international intervention, the only exit is exile.

ELIZABETH G. BURR, who teaches part-time at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minn., has been concerned with the Israel-Palestine issue for more than 40 years.

Indigenous Christians have lived in Palestine since the origins of Christianity about 2,000 years ago. Over the centuries other Christians immigrated to Palestine. Palestinian Christians comprised at least 15 percent of the Palestinian population in the late 19th century, under Ottoman Muslim rule, and about 7.5 percent by 1944, in the final years of the British Mandate. During the 1948 war, which resulted in the establishment of the State of Israel in much of historic Palestine, more than a third of Palestinian Christians were among the 750,000 to 800,000 refugees forced to flee their homes in Palestine. The Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has described Israel’s “war of independence,” which Palestinians call the *nakba* (catastrophe), as “the ethnic cleansing of Palestine” in his book by that title published in 2006.

The Lydda Death March

Audeh Rantisi, a Palestinian Christian, has written in *The Link*, a journal published by Americans for Middle East Understanding, about his family’s expulsion from Lydda, near Tel Aviv, in July 1948, along with that of thousands of other residents. An 11-year-old at the time, Rantisi witnessed: an infant being crushed to death by a cart after his mother lost hold of him, an Israeli soldier shooting to death a newly married young man who would not hand over his money, people dying of thirst and many more horrors. He reports that “scores of women miscarried, their babies left for jackals to eat.” On the fourth day of the “Lydda death march,” his 13-member family reached Ramallah, in the West Bank, “carrying nothing but the clothes we wore.” His father also took with him the key to their house. Generations of the Rantisi family had lived in Lydda for some 1,600 years.

Mr. Pappé is not alone among scholars who have identified a Zionist ideology of exclusion as the engine driving the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 or who have interpreted Israeli policy since then as a continuing campaign of ethnic cleansing. By 2011 the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip had reached its 44th year. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the occupation has brought the construction of scores of “settlements” in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which currently house at least half a million Israeli settlers. Five years ago Israel had already expropriated 87 percent of East Jerusalem and 75 percent of the West Bank for settlements, parks and military areas. Thus less and less Palestinian land is available for

A Christian Palestinian woman leaves the Erez checkpoint in the northern Gaza Strip on Dec. 22 on her way to Bethlehem in the West Bank.



Palestinian housing, agriculture or other uses. Human rights abuses of Palestinians abound under the occupation, which appears designed to make their lives so unbearable that they will “voluntarily” leave.

The emigration of Palestinian Christians from the occupied territories to the West since 1967 has also reduced their number to the point where Christians currently account for less than 2 percent of the Palestinian population under occupation. And the rate of population growth for Palestinian Christians in the West Bank amounts to just half of their emigration rate. Without a stabilization or reversal of the net decline, the extinction of Palestinian Christians in the territories is conceivable. Even in 2006 only about 50,000 Palestinian Christians were living in the West Bank and Gaza.

What explains the ongoing exodus of Christians from Palestine? Some attempts at an explanation are misleading. In line with the Islamophobia notable in Europe and in the United States, Israeli propaganda points to tension and conflict with Palestinian Muslims, who comprise more than 98 percent of the Palestinian population under occupation, as the key reason for Palestinian Christian emigration. Israel has long encouraged political and religious division among Palestinians. Yet

when I interviewed the Christian Palestinian secretary general of the East Jerusalem Y.W.C.A. in June 2009, she said that relations between Palestinian Muslims and Christians have been and remain largely positive. In her view “religious extremism” has been fostered by the environment of stress, chaos and conflict produced by the Israeli occupation. Indeed, there is a long history of good relations between Palestinian Muslims and Christians. Palestinians of both faiths experienced the catastrophe of 1948 together, and since 1967 those in the West Bank and Gaza have experienced the catastrophe of the Israeli occupation together.

‘Pull’ and ‘Push’ Factors

Palestinian Christians have tended to be well educated, relatively advantaged economically and more likely than their Muslim counterparts to have contacts in the West. Those could be considered “pull” factors behind the Palestinian Christian exodus. The “push” factors are the economic, political and social consequences of the Israeli occupation, with its “apartheid wall,” checkpoints and segregated road system; its ever-expanding settlements, destruction of Palestinian agriculture and demolition of Palestinian homes; its lawless, weapon-toting settlers; and its incarceration, with systemat-

ON THE WEB

A slideshow of
Palestinian Christian life.
americamagazine.org/slideshow

ic torture, of thousands of Palestinians.

A 2006 survey of Palestinian Christians conducted by the Palestinian Christian peace organization Sabeel confirms the decisive influence of these “push” factors. Romell Soudah, a faculty member in business administration at Bethlehem University, a Catholic institution, writes that “the continuous confiscation of land...coupled with restrictions on mobility and access, give the impression that people are living in a cage, dehumanized, with little hope for freedom and normal living. This situation...is the primary factor...forcing Christian Palestinians to leave.” These Israeli actions, plus water confiscation and economic strangulation, which drive unemployment and poverty levels upward, are seen as calculated means of emptying the land of Palestinians. Thus Christian Palestinian emigration is the most visible effect of Israel’s deliberate, if gradual, ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population.

Why Care?

Why should Americans care if Palestinian Christians in the West Bank are leaving their homeland twice as fast as their population there is growing? The erasure of native Christians from Palestine should be unthinkable. Palestine is where Christianity originated, and Palestinian Christians have a unique status in the worldwide Christian community. Americans should be outraged that U.S. policy, buttressed by generous funding from their tax dollars, makes possible the Israeli occupation and its discriminatory policies.

These policies include a campaign to revoke the time-honored tax-exempt status of Christian churches and other Christian institutions, like the Lutheran Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives, and prohibition of access to holy sites (for example, barring West Bank Christians from visiting the Holy Sepulcher, traditionally regarded as the burial place of Jesus, in Jerusalem’s Old City). Orthodox Jewish harassment of Christian clergy in the Old City is commonplace. Hanan Chehata, a journalist, reports that “numerous churches have been destroyed during Israeli mil-

itary incursions, divided from their congregations by the wall, and exposed to dilapidation.” Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity suffered physical damage during the Israeli incursion and siege of 2002. The wall now encircles Bethlehem, separating it from nearby Jerusalem; residents of Bethlehem are prevented from entering Jerusalem and vice versa. A majority of Bethlehem’s Christians hold Israel responsible for the departure of record numbers of Palestinian Christians from their city.

Yet Western Christians often fail to recognize the imperiled existence of their Palestinian co-religionists. Moreover, there are millions of Christian Zionists whose interpretation of New Testament prophecies allies them with Israeli Zionism and against the Christians of Palestine. They imagine that there is serious division between Palestinian Muslims and Christians, whereas the far more prevalent tension is between Palestinian Christians and some Israeli Jews (settlers, military and government leaders or those who represent them). The continued presence of Palestinian Christians in Palestine offsets the misperception that the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict” is really about religion—a conflict between Muslims and Jews, rather than one about land, human rights and international law.

A Palestinian Christian friend wrote to me recently regarding the typical pattern of Muslims and Christians working together cooperatively and harmoniously within Palestinian institutions and organizations. Among the examples she mentioned is the Rawdat El-Zuhur (Garden of Flowers) elementary school in East Jerusalem, which has a Christian principal, a Muslim accountant, a mixed teaching staff and a mixed student body. Rawdat El-Zuhur, she wrote, “serves the community irrespective of [the members’] faith.” Likewise at Birzeit University, north of Ramallah, the president is Muslim and the chairman of the board is Christian; the board members are mixed, as are the staff and the student body.

To their credit, Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, are prominent among church leaders who have advocated worldwide Christian solidarity with

Palestinian Christians. Informed American Christians committed to peace with justice are called to stand up both to Christian Zionism and to U.S. government underwriting of the illegal Israeli military occupation that is driving Palestinian Christians, and disproportionately Christian Palestinians, out of their native country. In the prophetic words of the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

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Children of God

Raising faithful Catholics in an imperfect church

BY ELIZABETH KIRKLAND CAHILL

There is a well-known (and probably apocryphal) saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Proclaim the Gospel always. If necessary, use words.” It is an apt summation of how my husband and I have approached the transmission of faith to our four children, who now range in age from 11 to 19. Although I would like to say we had a master plan, it is not so. We never sat down and mapped out a strategy. We have just tried to live lives of faith as well as we could, which means often imperfectly, and hope that our witness rubs off.

As I look back over the past two decades, I can identify four practices we have engaged in to proclaim the Gospel within our own little domestic church.

Constancy. Meal after meal, we begin with grace. Night after night, we sit on the side of the bed and say prayers (until the inevitable moment, usually somewhere around the dawn of the teenage years, when we are gently told: “Mom, Dad, I think I’ll say prayers by myself”). Perhaps most important, Sunday after Sunday we go to Mass. It is not optional; we go always and everywhere, whether the roads are icy or it is 99 degrees outside or people are tired.

Of course there are the usual sarto-

rial arguments (the definition of a nanosecond is the amount of time it takes my oldest son’s shirt to be untucked when Mass is over) and

was a wonderful embodiment of the church’s universality.

Such regular churchgoing does not feel glamorous or heroic. It does not qualify us for sainthood or even a parenting award. Rather, it demonstrates in concrete terms that commitment is important even, or perhaps especially, when practicing the faith seems boring. Some things you just keep doing, even when you would rather be doing something else, because that is part of the deal.

Involvement. This entails deepening the commitment and investing time and energy. In our current parish, I have given a series of talks on Scripture and with my husband have lent support to both the music program and various building projects.

In our last parish, I was both a eucharistic minister and a lector (and got regular critiques on the latter: “Mom, you were too quiet” or “Mom, good job”). I established a Christmas pageant and founded a Bible study group, both of which are going strong nearly 15 years on. Perhaps most important, for several years (until we moved away) I took Communion each Sunday to a group of older Catholics in a nearby assisted-living facility. My children almost always accompanied me. They prayed with us, stood by quietly while I distributed Communion, then handed



grousing about the length of the homily, but somehow, complaints notwithstanding, we persevere. We have had to juggle Mass times to accommodate travel schedules, sports events, even sleepovers, but somehow we have managed to keep everyone going. Even when we are traveling during a vacation, we find a church; this summer my children heard Masses on successive Sundays in French and German. It

ELIZABETH KIRKLAND CAHILL, co-author, with Joseph Papp, of *Shakespeare Alive!*, is a 2010 graduate of the Yale Divinity School.

ART: DAN SALAMIDA

out bulletins and chatted with the small, predominantly female congregation. We visited the rooms of those who could not make it downstairs for the group Communion service. The kids said hello to Camilla, who wept easily and often; happily visited Frances, who was liberal with the candy; and enjoyed seeing kind Mildred, who loved to read. They saw tired, old eyes light up when they entered the room on a Sunday morning. And they witnessed the profound gratitude of these older Catholics both for the human connection with us and for the gift of Christ in Communion.

Intellectual engagement. Although embarrassing to admit, as a one-time Episcopalian who converted to Catholicism in her mid-30s, I was once something of an intellectual-religious snob, assuming that Catholics did not think for themselves but just mindlessly obeyed whatever Rome said. Then I became friends with a few

Jesuits and quickly learned otherwise.

Since that time, and throughout my continuing spiritual journey, I have been irresistibly drawn toward engagement with ecclesiological, theological and spiritual questions. My kids watched me pursue deeper understanding of these during the four years I recently spent earning a master's degree at the Yale Divinity School. They know that I think hard about issues of church and faith. They expect that I will query them over Sunday lunch about the Gospel reading or mention a prayer that especially struck me. And while they may roll their eyes when I launch another screed about the role of the laity, I hope they are getting the subliminal message that such questions matter.

Honesty. As a corollary to intellectual engagement, I share my views on matters ranging from liturgy to the role of women. I have been known to explain, expand upon or take issue

with statements made in a homily. Although I try to offer a balanced view, I will also be forthright about how important I think it is for priests and bishops, as well as the rest of us, to follow the Gospel.

I love the Catholic faith. When I was confirmed as a Catholic, I felt I was joining in on a great starry conversation that started in the early church and has been carried on by the likes of Augustine, Teresa of Ávila and Thomas Merton. But I do not always love the actions of the institutional church. I do not pretend to my kids that I agree with the church's continued opposition to women's ordination or that I am not angry about the continued obfuscation surrounding the sexual abuse scandal. I want them to engage with these issues, not just shrug their shoulders and drift away.

My Children's Church

So far, my children have not only toed

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the line but appear to be Christ's own. My two older children have kept up regular Mass attendance even while going to an Episcopal boarding school. The younger two have faithfully gone to Mass with us, received the age-appropriate sacraments and tucked in their shirts.

But my oldest child is off to college this fall, and I am newly aware of the contingency built into the raising of children. Like all parents, I do not know which of my efforts will actually pay off, how many of my lessons will stick, whether my kids will resent me for the tucked-in shirts or thank me for instilling habits of faithfulness. How can we predict which aspects of their upbringing our children will remember, which they will jettison?

My expectation, based on experience from my own life, is that each one of my kids will journey forward from the same starting point on a unique and different path. One of them may turn out to be more of a mystic, one a

skeptic. Maybe one of them will even be a saint. I simply have no idea, and after nearly 20 years of parenting, I have learned enough to know that I have no real control over it. I suspect that more than one of them will end up at some point in a spiritual wilderness as they go through the process of making their faith their own. I pray that they will find their way back. After all, I did my time in the desert in my early 20s, and it ultimately led me to Catholicism. So I can be patient if they wander.

My concern as the century wears on is that the church may be losing its identity as the Promised Land. Its own lack of internal justice (regarding the treatment of women, among other things), its disproportionate focus on what a late friend of mine called "pelvic orthodoxy" and the encroaching clericalism that can strain relationships between pulpit and pew are among the factors that may render the church either irrelevant or repellant to

my children's generation. Is the great beacon still going to be shining if my kids need to be led back home from the wilderness? I hope so, I pray so. I will do what I can to help.

I remember talking to an Episcopal priest who was a friend and mentor to me during my desert period, afflicted with true spiritual anomie. I finally mustered up the courage to confess to him that I was not sure God existed. This wise fellow replied with a smile, "That's okay; he doesn't mind." With this gentle reply he conveyed to me that doubt was permissible while also reassuring me that it lacked any actual external destructive power. My struggling faith did not mean that God was dead. I think about that comment now as I watch what is happening in the church and try to imagine what the church of my children's future will look like. I trust that the Holy Spirit, operating at a level far above my own worries, is at work in ways that transcend human thought. **A**



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FILM | ROBERT E. LAUDER

HIS CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE

Sin and grace in the work of Martin Scorsese

In the opening moments of Martin Scorsese's HBO documentary "George Harrison: Living in a Material World," there is a brief but important montage. Scorsese uses a shot from a home movie in which the former Beatles' lead guitarist, as an infant, is being baptized a Catholic; he follows it with a shot of World War II fighter planes flying over Europe. The montage, a revealing contrast of sacred and profane, the holy and the violent, vividly depicts Harrison's essential quest: how to be spiritual in a material world. The montage also summarizes

the distinguished director's career.

I remember well my first experience of a Scorsese film; it was the third one he directed, "Mean Streets" (1973). Though at the time I was unable to articulate clearly what struck me about it, I understood that I was having a special cinematic experience. Never had I seen a film that presented such a unique mixture of Catholicism and crime. In a gangster movie like "Little Caesar"

(1930), Edward G. Robinson's character might cry out while dying, "Mother of God, is this the end of Rico?" or James Cagney's might have a conversion experience as he approaches the electric chair in "Angels With Dirty Faces" (1938). But these were isolated religious moments rather than examples of criminal consciences caught in the Catholic mystery.

The "Godfather" films make it clear that the Italian Mafia leaders were not religious believers.

Recall the powerful baptism scene at the end of "The Godfather" (1972) in which Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) claims to reject Satan and sin

ON THE WEB

A review of a new play on St. Catherine of Siena.
americamagazine.org/culture



Martin Scorsese, far right, directs Cesare Danova, left, and Harvey Keitel during the filming of "Mean Streets."

while at that very moment his henchmen are committing murders he has personally ordered. And while in “The Road to Perdition” (2002) the Irish Mafia members (Tom Hanks and Paul Newman) are believing Catholics, their faith does not interfere with their criminal lives.

In Scorsese’s “Mean Streets,” however, the small-time hoodlum, Charlie (Harvey Keitel), is tortured by his Catholic conscience. In the film’s opening line he expresses the central religious credo of just about every Scorsese film: “You don’t make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets.” In Peter Occhiogrosso’s oral history *Once a Catholic*, Scorsese comments:

The first, most important film to me was “Mean Streets,” which had the...theme: How do you lead a good life, a good, moral, ethical life, when everything around you works the absolutely opposite way?... That’s why the opening line is “You don’t make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets”.... You gotta live amongst the people and change life that way or help people reach salvation in the street, through day-to-day contact, meeting by meeting. “In the street” could mean Hollywood, you know what I’m saying? It’s like a religious vocation.

A Filmmaking Passion

An asthmatic child, not physically strong, growing up in a rough section of New York’s Little Italy and exposed to both small- and big-time hoodlums, Scorsese found refuge in two places, each within walking distance of his family’s crowded apartment: Old St. Patrick’s church and the local movie house. From grammar school through high school, one year of which he spent in a minor seminary, Marty wanted to be a priest. But his vocation

to priesthood disappeared, or was transformed, when he entered New York University and studied film. There he transferred his passion for the priesthood to filmmaking, as he noted in a book of interviews called *Do You Believe?* “I became a director in order to express my whole self, and also my relationship with religion, which is crucial,” he said. His films proclaim a kind of gospel, though they are anything but preachy.

The film critic Richard Schickel, after spending many hours talking with Scorsese, confessed almost apologetically that he had to comment on Scorsese’s spirituality because in every film of his there are traces of yearning

for belief. In *Conversations with Scorsese*, Schickel wrote:

But just as the kind of violence he observed as a kid is present in his movies, so are his youthful longings for belief. It’s obvious, of course, in pictures like “Kundun.” But there are hints of those aspirations, a longing for some kind of transcendence, or, at the least, relief from reality’s harsher limits, in so many of his secular films. It’s obvious in such early films as “Mean Streets,” less so in films like “The King of Comedy,” “Goodfellas” and “The Age of Innocence.” But in one

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your body with the earth, your flitting mind
with all that flies, and welcome, in the One
in whom you live and move and have your being,
things as they are: this chair, this you, this time.

MARY O’CONNOR

MARY O’CONNOR, R.S.M., has taught literature and writing in the San Francisco Bay Area and in South Dakota. She now conducts writing retreats.

form or another, in small ways and large, his concern with matters of belief is nearly always present in his work.

Every Scorsese film is deeply personal. The kid from Little Italy is presenting his outlook on life, his deepest concerns and values. In “Kundun,” a film about the life of the Dalai Lama, Marty the moralist is looking at the possibility of living a completely spiritual life in a material world, the same problem, I surmise, that moved him 30 years later to make a film about George Harrison. When asked why he wanted to make “The Last Temptation of Christ” (1988), Scorsese replied, “Because I want to know Jesus better.”

In “Raging Bull” (1980) the boxer Jake LaMotta (Robert De Niro) is depicted as a masochistic self-hater who almost wants to be beaten up in the ring because of the bad things he has done. Referring to a line from “The Diary of a Country Priest,” that God is not a torturer, Scorsese sees Jake’s eventual redemption in the boxer’s affirmation of his humanity: “I’m not an animal. I’m still human. I’m still human.”

In “The King of Comedy” (1987), Scorsese attacks the shallowness of celebrity culture. He bluntly summed up “The Color of Money” (1986) to Schickel in this way: “I wanted it to be a story of an older person who corrupts a young person, like a serpent in the garden of innocence.” And in *Do You Believe?*, Scorsese describes a character in “The Age of Innocence” (1993), Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), as “a woman on whom a world of Pharisees has placed a crown of thorns.” Victorian society is crucifying her.

Not Enough Easter?

For years the violence in such Scorsese films as “Goodfellas,” “Casino” (1991), “The Gangs of New York” (2002) and “The Departed” (2006) prevented me

from spotting the presence of grace or the appearance of transcendence. I am not alone. After viewing Scorsese’s first film, “Who’s That Knocking at My Door” (1967), his teacher at N.Y.U., Haig Manoogian, summed up the film, “Too much Good Friday, not enough Easter Sunday.” That is an excellent criticism, not only of the first film, but of the corpus of Scorsese’s work. The dimension of transcendence is present, but it is not expressed as powerfully as is the sin-stained “material world.”

In interviews Scorsese leaves the impression that he thinks of himself as excommunicated because of his divorces and no longer receives the sacraments. Yet his work illustrates the saying, “It is easier to get the Catholic out of the church than it is to get the church out of the Catholic.” The interaction between artistic vision, religious faith and conscience is deeply mysterious.

Anyone who doubts Scorsese’s enormous skills should see his latest

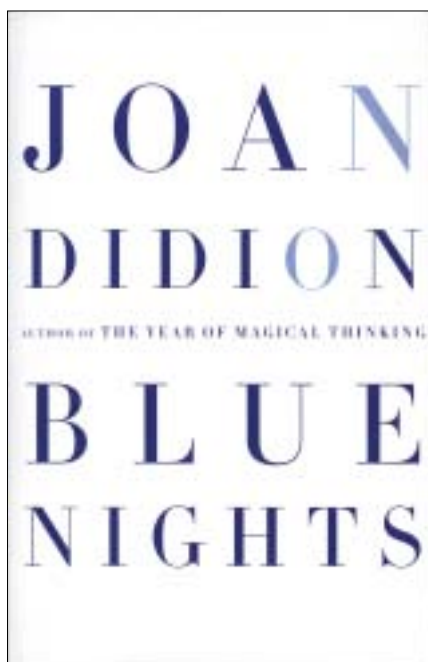
film, “Hugo,” a children’s story turned into a visually stunning and cinematically brilliant hymn to the process of making movies. His list of future projects includes the filming of Shusako Endo’s *Silence*, a novel about the persecution of Jesuits in Japan. While I have no doubt that his cinematic skill will searingly portray the torture inflicted on the Jesuits, I am not sure how effectively he will depict their faith.

If Scorsese could see in the world more powerful evidence of Easter Sunday than of Good Friday, or if St. Paul’s proclamation that “where sin did abound, grace does more abound” could color his conscience more, this exceptionally gifted artist might create films even greater than those he already has made. Might he then produce the masterpiece that so far has eluded him? I cannot help but wonder.

REV. ROBERT E. LAUDER is professor of philosophy at St. John’s University in New York. His most recent book is *Love and Hope: Pope Benedict’s Spirituality of Communion* (Resurrection Press).

BOOKS | BILL WILLIAMS

LOSING QUINTANA



BLUE NIGHTS

By Joan Didion
Knopf. 208p \$25

Several years ago Joan Didion wrote about the death of her husband, the novelist John Gregory Dunne, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. But before the book was published, the couple’s 39-year-old adopted daughter, Quintana Roo, also died.

In her new book, *Blue Nights*, Didion ponders Quintana’s life and death in spare prose that is at once insightful, depressing and random. The book is as much a meditation on the author’s own fear of aging and illness as it is a lament about the loss of an only child.

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The text skips back and forth in time as Didion describes Quintana's unusual childhood—staying at fancy hotels with her parents on book tours and meeting the couple's celebrity friends. Quintana showed early signs of depression and seemed determined to skip over childhood. At age 5 she called a mental hospital to inquire what she should do if she were "going crazy." About the same time she dialed Twentieth Century Fox to ask how she could become a star.

As an adult, Quintana was diagnosed variously with manic depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and borderline personality disorder. She died of acute pancreatitis following a "cascade of medical crises."

The book's back cover features a captivating picture of Quintana with a serious expression, sitting on a large chair, leaning forward toward the camera, with hands clasping her cheeks.

Didion describes the mutual fear of abandonment by adoptees and their adoptive parents. "Once she was born," Didion writes, "I was never not afraid. I was afraid of swimming pools, high-tension wires, lye under the sink, aspirin in the medicine cabinet...rattlesnakes, riptides, landslides, strangers who appeared at the door, unexplained fevers...."

The author also was tormented by doubts: "*What if I fail to take care of this baby? What if this baby fails to thrive, what if this baby fails to love me?*" (The italics are hers). She was wracked with guilt and wondered if she were a good enough parent.

"Blue Nights" refers to a period around the summer solstice when the twilight is "long and blue." Didion chose the book's title because "I found

my mind turning increasingly to illness, to the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness."

Critics have studied Didion's writing to determine what makes her voice so distinctive. She liberally sprinkles in two- and three-word paragraphs, rhetorical questions, italics and repetition of key phrases to drive home her message.

Although reviewers have praised Didion for her honesty and directness in *Blue Nights*, the pervasive tone of fear, anxiety and guilt soon leads to melancholy.

The author, who recently turned 77, seems to live in constant fear of aging and decline in health. The pages brim with her maladies and frailties. She has suffered from shingles, sun-induced skin damage and falls. She once collapsed on the street and spent days in a hospital. On another occasion she fell in her Manhattan apartment. She remembers lying on the floor bleeding, unable to reach any of her 13 telephones.

Didion concedes she has spent much of her life in denial of aging, despite its obvious evidence. "Only yesterday," she writes, "I could still do arithmetic, remember telephone numbers, rent a car at the airport and drive it out of the lot without freezing, stopping at the key moment, feet already on the pedals but immobilized by the question of which is the accelerator and which the brake."

She resents frequent references to her frail appearance, and at age 75 experienced "a revived sense of the possible" after viewing a picture of Sophia Loren arriving at a publicity event, noting that Loren and she are the same age.

In an admission that is surprisingly frank for a famous writer, Didion says her "cognitive confidence seems to have vanished altogether. Even the cor-

ON THE WEB

James Martin, S.J., and Bill McGarvey analyze the Oscar nominees. americamagazine.org/podcast

POETRY CONTEST

Poems are being accepted for the 2012 Foley Poetry Award.

Each entrant is asked to submit only one typed, unpublished poem of 30 lines or fewer that is not under consideration elsewhere. Include contact information on the same page as the poem. Poems will not be returned. Please do not submit poems by e-mail or fax. Submissions must be post-marked between Jan. 1 and March 31, 2012.

Poems received outside the designated period will be treated as regular poetry submissions, and are not eligible for the prize.

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rect stance for telling you this, the ways to describe what is happening to me, the attitude, the tone, the very words, now elude my grasp.”

Readers cannot help but notice that Didion’s reflections on aging, illness and death are devoid of anything resembling spirituality. If she has pondered the big questions of creation, purpose, meaning and afterlife, there is no evidence of it in *Blue Nights*.

Countless other memoir writers have faced similar physical and mental losses and yet have found joy and pur-

pose in life, but their wisdom seems to have eluded Didion.

One finishes this pain-filled memoir feeling sad for Didion because she has suffered so much and because she seems unable—or unwilling—to connect with friends, nature, gratitude, transcendence and other sources of joy and happiness that can give life meaning even in the midst of great loss and pain.

BILL WILLIAMS is a freelance writer in West Hartford, Conn., and a former editorial writer for *The Hartford Courant*. He is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

DIANE SCHARPER

YOUTHFUL INDISCRETIONS

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

A Novel

By Julian Barnes
Knopf. 176p \$23.95

Winner of this year’s Man Booker Prize, Britain’s most prestigious fiction award, *The Sense of an Ending*, by Julian Barnes, is a philosophical mystery story that morphs into a morality tale. The mystery is not so much about “who done it” as it is about what really happened and why.

One of the most highly regarded British writers working today, Barnes was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for three previous novels. He has also received numerous other awards, among them the William Somerset Maugham Prize for an outstanding first book, *Metroland*, (1980), a novel that, like this one, focuses on coming of age, sexual initiation, responsibility and philosophical angst. Barnes has published extensively, including several well-received detective novels (under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh.) Of the novels published under his own name, those best known in the United States are *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) and *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984).

Much of the pleasure of *The Sense of an Ending* lies in watching Tony Webster, an obtuse and unreliable narrator, try to unravel the mysteries of his youth and so remove the blinders from his adult eyes. The novel feels less like a story and more like a discursive memoir, which gives the book a sense of authenticity. But it also makes the reading slow going. Readers should know, however, that the sluggishness of the first half of the novel speeds up to a crescendo of galvanizing, page-turning events that more than reward a reader’s patience.

The novel brims with metaphysical musings and striking details. Long, breathless sentences are followed by short, punchy sentences, sometimes single words, adding an ironic commentary and a kind of poetry to the text. Barnes impeccably melds dialogue with description to drive the story line forward, generating suspense with an off-handed remark or an odd comment that takes on meaning

as the story develops.

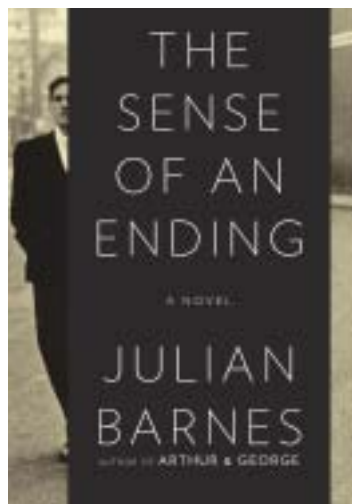
Tony is the hero who is not a hero so much as a survivor. Looking back on his Prufrockian life, he decides that he has never actually lived. Nor has he understood his past—starting with his relationship with his boyhood friend, Adrian Finn, and his college girlfriend, the manipulative Veronica Ford. Veronica alternately seduced and scorned Tony, a pattern he found—and still finds—both enticing and repellant.

The narrative follows characters who are elitist but not necessarily elite. Coming of age in the 1960s, they want to be different. They worry that they will grow up to be ordinary like their parents and that, as Tony puts it, “Life wouldn’t turn out to be like Literature.... The things Literature was all about [were]: love, sex, morality, friendship, happiness, suffering,

betrayal, adultery, good and evil, heroes and villains, guilt and innocence...murder, suicide, death, God.” Adulthood was the opposite. It was spent lost in vague shadows. And that is where Tony finds himself as the story opens.

Retired and in his late 60s, Tony is shaking off the torpor of late middle age and returning to the weighty questions that marked his adolescence. He has received a mysterious bequest that involves his college sweetheart and a boyhood friend who committed suicide.

In the years since college, he has married, had a child, divorced on friendly terms and is settling into a bourgeois life of volunteer activities and lowered expectations. Tony feels that life has rushed by him and sees himself a passive observer of the past four decades.



As Tony pieces together dim memories of his days at a London boys' prep school replete with debates about the meaning of life, so do we. Like Tony, we think we understand what happened, only to learn that reality is not always what it seems. As best as he can half-remember, he and his friends had disdained sports, school and middle-class values. They "grasped life—and truth, and morality, and art—far more clearly than our compromised elders," as Tony put it. Adrian, who went to Cambridge while Tony and the others went to lesser regarded schools, was especially discerning.

Reflecting on his youthful idealism, Tony recalls the philosophical discussions that occurred in his classes—primarily his history and literature courses. He remembers discussions about subjective as opposed to objective interpretations of the past.

The boys discussed existentialism and the morality or immorality of suicide when a classmate killed himself after he had gotten a girl pregnant. Adrian—influenced by Camus—contended that suicide was the expression of one's ultimate freedom. The others were not so sure and concluded that killing oneself was wrong. The irony became evident when Adrian later committed suicide in college after he took up with Tony's former girlfriend, Veronica.

Tension builds when Tony receives an unexpected surprise in the form of a financial bequest from Mrs. Ford, Veronica's mother. She has also left Tony Adrian's diary as well as a letter Tony had written to Adrian in a fit of jealousy many years earlier. But Veronica has the diary and refuses to give it up.

Although not overtly religious, the narrative turns on the conflict between good and evil. The implied questions that drive the story are these: What happens if I curse my neighbor and that curse is fulfilled? Does the fact that I was young and foolish mitigate

my guilt? Should it? As Tony puts it, "But the very action of naming something that subsequently happens—of wishing specific evil, and that evil coming to pass—this still has a shiver of the otherworldly about it."

What actually happens in *The Sense of an Ending* does not matter so much as how the characters perceive

PAUL WILKES

NON-TRIVIAL PURSUITS

CALLED TO HAPPINESS Where Faith and Psychology Meet

By Sidney Callahan
Orbis. 208p \$20

On the highway to happiness, Sidney Callahan may well be thankful she has an intersection called faith to duck into, where she can pause and catch her breath as the traffic roars by.

Summoned to serve on Emory University's four-year interdisciplinary Pursuit of Happiness Project, Dr. Callahan, a psychologist by training, mother of six and Catholic by choice, bravely takes on the subject of some 43,000 Amazon.com listings and carefully weaves her way through a consideration of our national obsession: happiness.

Am I? Should I be? Can I be? How would I know if I am not? Most important, how do I get it?

In today's so-called secular society (I personally do not believe it is), what we have is a struggle between the bright promises of positive psychology (like the little engine that could, we "think we can, think we can"...be happy) and the murkier quest of faith, which sees the pursuit of happiness for its own sake a puerile and ultimately unsatisfactory venture.

I was reading Dr. Callahan's book on a recent flight, and when I stopped to change planes, I browsed through

what happens. One thing our hero ultimately learns is that a quick and barely remembered action has the power to permanently mar many lives.

DIANE SCHARPER, the author of *Radiant: Prayer Poems*, teaches English at Towson University in Maryland.

the newsstand offerings. Indeed, there were dozens of titles assuring happiness. As I paged through a few of them, I could see the harried traveler going through a list:

- + Check e-mail
- + Pick up laundry
- + Organize dinner party
- + Get happiness

Positive psychology, run out to its logical conclusion, devoid of a faith life, would enshrine Eat, Pray, Love as the three deities of a New Trinity. But Dr. Callahan carefully and with appropriate scholarly detachment (she is also a distinguished scholar at the Hastings Center, in company with her husband, Daniel Callahan) describes in detail the premises of positive psychology without ever, at least to this reader's mind, completely giving herself over to it.

She states her position:

Clearly I am also endorsing a very optimistic view of the potential of theology, psychology and science to help human beings change their views about themselves.... I am also a convinced Christian believer, and so I argue that religious and spiritual wisdom can bring happiness or blessedness [I liked that usage] in this life as well as the

next.... Yet in a secular age, religious good news and other positive signs of the time can easily be discounted.

While seeking to define and dissect happiness, a slippery subject under anyone's knife, the author adroitly points to other ways to approach the subject. She quotes the simple approach of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker, who advocated the creation of a societal structure where it would naturally be "easy for people to be good," with happiness naturally flowing from actions that would result from such an outlook.

She looks closer to home, to her own upbringing in a southern military and Calvinist family. "Fortunately, the outcome of generations of southern piety provided an unnoticed positive character... While not consciously stressed, the moral and religious virtues inculcated produced happiness."

And Dr. Callahan looks to her own faith life: "Jesus Christ embodies the truth that God's loving forgiveness and healing are offered to all: the foreigner, the tax collector, the leper and the lunatic, outcast women, mothers and children, and the exploited poor.... Christ's disciples are told to extend God's love and mercy to everyone, with no exceptions...."

She tells a lovely story of her Navy captain father visiting the young Callahans, with three young children, in a shabby slum apartment, under the influence of the Worker's belief that the external requirements of the intentional life were few, the internal rewards great. "Sidney, Sidney," he kept saying. "You can't really be happy like this."

"But, yes, in fact, I really was happy.... We were fighting the good

fight for God and survival.... I felt like a warrior queen on crusade or at least an enthusiastic pilgrim in Jerusalem."

Aha! That's it! Seek not happiness directly, and it will be your reward, provided.... Of course, the "provided" is the problem. Will it be dogmatic adherence to religious beliefs? Sorry, no. Will it be poverty? No, as many of us who gallantly lived the Worker life only to slowly morph into middle class statistics would find out. The answer? Ready, so you need not wade through those 43,000 volumes?

Yes, human happiness is a reality that comes from God and can be successfully pursued here and now. Yes, individuals can become happy, and they and the world will be better for it. These core affirmations, much elaborated and argued for here, are such complicated issues that they will

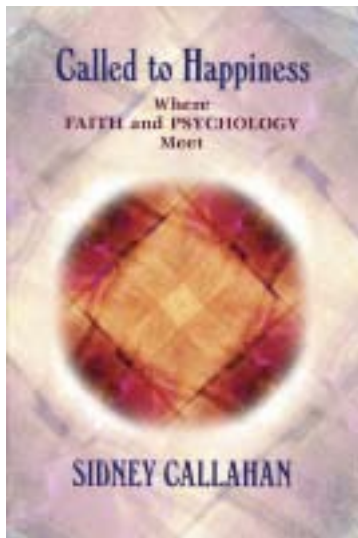
demand decades more research and work. Be prepared; many, many more books, studies, and research projects on all facets of happiness are on their way. We hear only the opening bars of the overture of a very long symphony consisting of many movements.

Alas, Dr. Callahan seems to perpetuate the field of happiness studies. Check your iPhone; it may be coming to a university department near you. But in my heart I have a sense that she could find no other way to end this book, which, if my instincts are correct, was no fun to write. After all, three of the chapter headings ended up as questions.

A few of her closing words come closer to saying what has been danced around for 154 pages: "Will it come to pass in the near future that God's authorship of the drama of human happiness will receive its rightful thanks and praise? I devoutly hope so."

Not so complicated, after all.

PAUL WILKES is the author of many books on spirituality, religious belief and practice, most recently *The Art of Confession: Renewing Yourself Through the Practice of Personal Honesty (Workman)*.




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LETTERS

A Terrible Irony Is Born

In "The Ethical Traveler," by Tim Padgett (1/30), there is a terrible irony. The author's calls to abstain from condescension are themselves thoroughly condescending. His pedantic assertions fail to reach beyond the same tired narrative that everyone who has read a guidebook knows. Worst of all, Mr. Padgett's words have a whiff of an unpleasant bias against his own fellow citizens.

Personally, I find that there are balances to be found between esteeming and denigrating one's own country and the one you are visiting. While traveling with an open mind is important, this includes a mind open to embracing the parts of your own culture that you like better than those elsewhere. Yes, we should be polite and try to fit in as possible, but not at the expense of our identity.

EDWARD VISEL
Iwate, Japan

Cantina Wisdom

It is refreshing to read an article like "The Ethical Traveler" (1/30), which reminds us about the importance of openness to other cultures and discovering their diversity and enjoyment through local food and drink. I particularly enjoyed the Mexican *cantina* stories, which reminded me of the chicken feet appetizer I was served once with my tequila. On the wall was inscribed a quaint proverb, "Si el agua destruye a los caminos, que no hara a los intestinos" (If water destroys roads, imagine what it can do to your intestines). Another *cantina* was named La Oficina (the Office), so hus-

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bands could avoid lying when asked by their spouses where they were.

CHARLES A. HAMMOND
Sandusky, Mich.

Well Done!

I really enjoyed Kerry Weber's article "Writing Home" (1/30). I know Andalusia well, but I learned a lot about Gethsemane and Margaret Mitchell's house, which I have never visited, and I also enjoyed seeing in the online slideshow that accompanied the article the hometown and school of Graham Greene. The whole thing was well done!

FRANCES FLORENCOURT
Arlington, Mass.

Children of Adam

Re Maurice Timothy Reidy's review of Alan Payne's film "The Descendants" ("Family Circles," 1/30): "Descend-ants" can also refer to the children of Adam. In that light, I read the film as an exploration of human life after the fall. It is, to be

sure, a secular exploration (perhaps a secular parable), but I wonder if faulting it for not mentioning God is somewhat beside the point.

Payne appears to be reversing the old idea in Christian theology that we steal Egyptian gold (that is, the wisdom of the pagans) and use it to render Christian wisdom more intelligible. Payne has stolen biblical gold and used it effectively to render secular humanism more intelligent. That entails bringing it to the realization that, yes, we are fallen, that we are all in this together and that only something like a love that has the capacity to withstand rejection and pain stands a chance of getting us out of this mess. And while God is not mentioned, the film does reject many false gods along the way, leaving the viewer to wonder about the real source of our salvation. Not bad for a Hollywood film.

STEVE MILES
Immaculata, Pa.

CLASSIFIED

Positions

CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY, a Jesuit Catholic University in Omaha, Neb., is seeking a Director for its Creighton Center for Service and Justice (C.C.S.J.). The Director will oversee and direct the work of engaging students in community service, reflection and action on behalf of justice and sustainability as an integral part of their Jesuit Catholic university education. The Director must possess knowledge of Catholic social teaching and Ignatian spirituality with skill leading ministry teams of professionals and/or university students. The Director will be expected to work collaboratively across a variety of cultures and in a multifaith environment. The ideal candidate will have: 1) Experience of community service, 2) Experience with Jesuit/Ignatian spirituality, 3) Knowledge of Catholic social teaching, 4) A minimum of two years' experience leading college students in faith-justice ministry, 5) A minimum of two years' experience in supervision/administration, 6) Master's of Divinity, M.A. in theology/ministry, social work, social justice or related discipline. To apply: <http://careers.creighton.edu>. To locate C.C.S.J. information: <http://blogs.creighton.edu/ccsj/>.

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Best Foot Forward

Best wishes, Patricia Kossmann, as you hang up your tap shoes (*Of Many Things*, 1/30), but try to keep your feet nimble as you serve others in future chosen volunteer work. What a wonderful tribute to the co-workers you have met, thought with and I'm sure prayed with over these years. May many more delightful encounters with many new friends bless your new beginnings.

PAT CUDDIHY, R.H.S.J.
Kingston, Ont., Canada

Christian Enforcers?

Re "In Harm's Way" by Mary Meehan (1/16): We have become what and who we said we were going to destroy. We are not a Christian nation as we enforce justice and peace according to our terms. We protect our national material interests, then go to church on Sunday and pray for the soldiers we put in harm's way. We need to own this and require just wars, if they exist, to be the only ones waged. The fiasco of President Bush's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has been sanctioned and supported by our 535 representatives.

We become alarmed only when our financial fortune is severely threatened.

MIKE SCHLACTER
Nashville, Tenn.

Work Ethics

Re "The Continuing Mission," by Kevin Clarke (1/16): Catholic Relief Services is one of the church's true treasures. Ken Hackett provided excellent stewardship at C.R.S., and we hope and pray that Carolyn Woo will do the same. I already like her work ethic: "Blessed Mother, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, today is a workday, and we all have to show up for work."

BILL COLLIER
Ivoryton, Conn.

Big Step Backward

Re your editorial, "The Way of Life" (1/16): We took a big step backward when we cut welfare benefits. The group that would now be receiving such benefits has the highest abortion rate. Private, small group and individual help is needed, yes, but it will always be insufficient. Public programs are also needed, but more cuts in these programs seem on the way, including nutrition programs like W.I.C. This is

literally taking milk from babies to help solve the debt crisis caused mainly by big investment banks. Yet it seems to me (I hope I'm mistaken) that many who call themselves pro-life are lined up with those favoring these cuts.

One thing we can all do, regardless of our political labels, is pray the Rosary, especially the first joyful mystery, for all troubled pregnant women. Mary, after all, was comforted by the angel before she said her big yes.

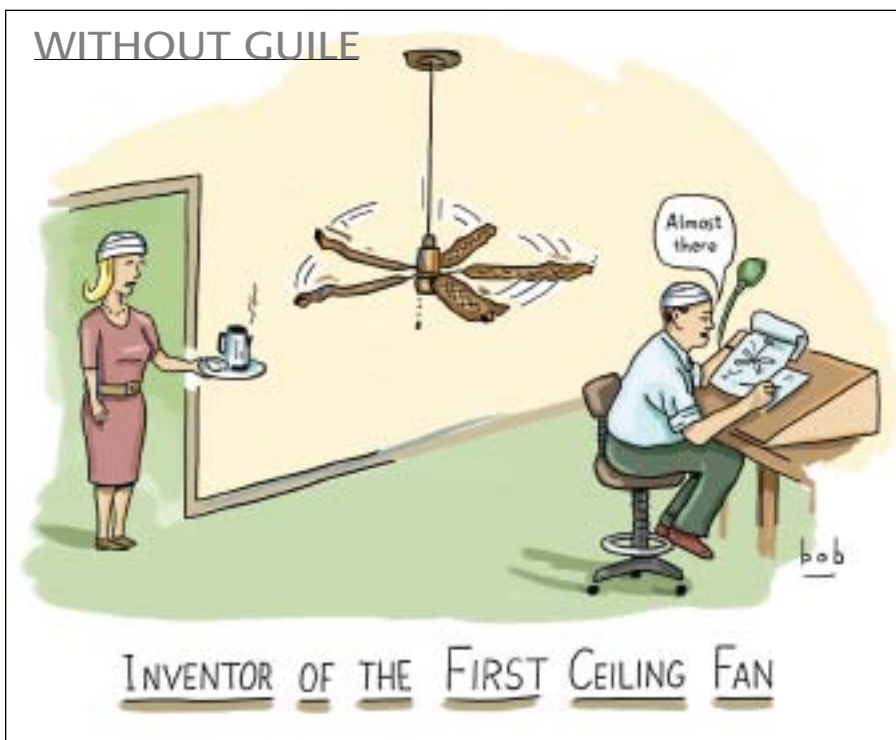
JIM LEIN
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A Campaign Elephant

In "What We Must Face" (1/16), John Kavanaugh, S.J., launches a campaign to reach the third largest religious group in America, ex-Catholics; but he appeals to nostalgia instead of addressing the elephants in the room: the paternalism, sexism and homophobia that undermine the credibility of the leadership of the church. Church leaders have become managers focused on power and control rather than on modeling the behavior of Christ, who scandalized his culture when he ate with "sinners" and healed on the Sabbath.

Many ex-Catholics know that to be Catholic means to be all-embracing, to appreciate all sources of revelation as paths to truth. We have an obligation to form a right conscience as adults and know that we will be judged not by our sins, but by how our actions witness to the impartial and boundless compassion of God. The church seems to have adopted a fortress mentality; the leadership protects the followers from the corruptions of "secular" culture. My Jesuit Catholic education taught me to find God in all things.

BARBARA DECOURSEY ROY
St. Albans, Mont.



CARTOON BY BOB ECKSTEIN

To send a letter to the editor we recommend using the link that appears below articles on **America's** Web site, americamagazine.org. Letters may also be sent to **America's** editorial office (address on page 2) or by e-mail to: letters@americamagazine.org.

A Faith That Binds Us

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (B), MARCH 4, 2012

Readings: Gn 22:1-18; Ps 116:10-19; Rom 8:31-34; Mk 9:2-10

“This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him” (Mk 9:7)

Today’s Scripture readings are challenging, to say the least. The first recounts God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac to him as a holocaust. Abraham takes the unsuspecting Isaac on a three-day journey and then ties him up. In the instant before Abraham is about to kill his son, his hand is stayed by an angel, who declares God’s pleasure: “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly...”

Making sense of all this has taxed both Jewish and Christian traditions. Several interpretations seem less than fruitful. One poses God as an ultimate tester: “I wonder how far I can push Abraham?” Another sees in the story a contrast between Israel and her neighbors, who practiced child sacrifice. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard offers a third view: Faith is absurd from a mere ethical stance. All three interpretations are unsatisfying. The first seems to depict God as one who tests to the level of torture. And the story does not suggest any contrasts at all. Finally, I urge the reader not to consider Christian faith as ethically absurd. (If you think God has ordered you to kill an innocent person, call 911. That isn’t God.)

What do we make of this confounding story? Consider the Jewish practice of referring to the episode not

as the sacrifice of Abraham, but as the binding (or submission) of Isaac, as Abraham radically binds his progeny to God and his promises. This approach does not solve everything, but it leads in a more promising direction. We can also remember that as we bind and submit ourselves to God, God also binds and submits himself to us in covenantal fidelity.

Paul’s message in the second reading reflects this dual binding. Paul begins, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” He then leads us through a wonderful medley of rhetorical questions and possible tribulations. He ends his meditation—not part of Sunday’s Lectionary passage—with the words: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities...nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

The Gospel takes us to the transfiguration of Jesus. Here Peter, James and John discover Jesus radiantly transformed and conversing with Moses and Elijah, who represent, as the Preface of today’s Mass suggests, the law and the prophets respectively. There are certainly associations. For instance, it is illuminating to recall that both Moses and Elijah directly encountered the Lord on Mount Sinai (Ex 24; 1 Kgs 19), and both were linked with the coming of the messiah.

Elijah was specifically prophesied to usher in the messiah (Mal 4:5). In

Jesus’ day, there was also a tradition that, like Elijah, Moses had been assumed into heaven awaiting the messiah. Thus, what we have now is an eschatological moment and a revelation that eclipses Sinai on this mountain of transfiguration.

The message the disciples receive from the Father in an enveloping cloud is: “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” Those



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- What in your life binds you most closely to Christ?
- Consider ways by which this relationship is compromised.
- What might you do to remove those obstacles and deepen your love?

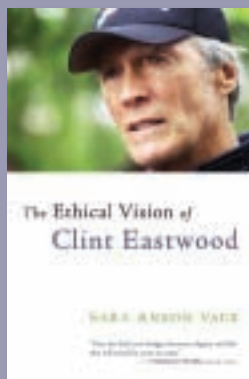
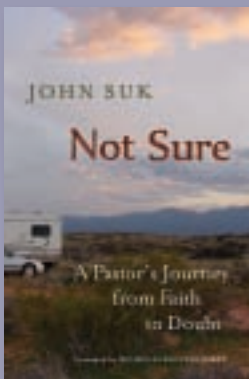
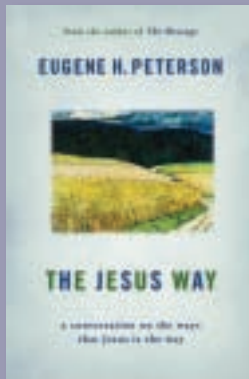
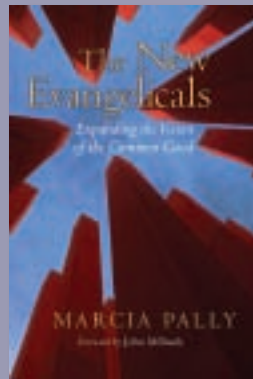
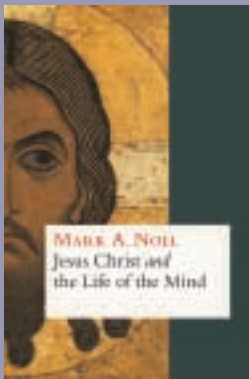
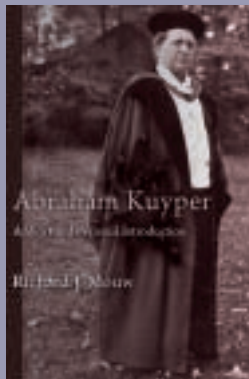
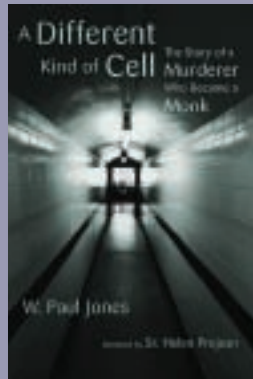
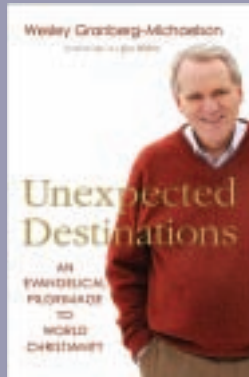
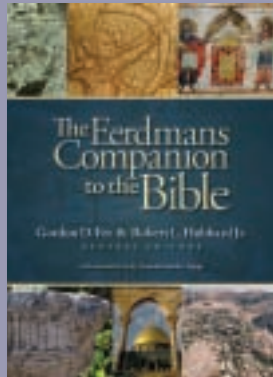
heroes and guides of the past from Abraham on, those whose lives anticipated the fulfillment of God’s blessings, now fade into the background. There is no one but Jesus. Our submission of faith is to him alone. We bind ourselves to him even as that means going to Jerusalem and witnessing his passion. Moreover, as Paul reminds us, we bind ourselves to him in the midst of our own tribulations. And we do so knowing that he has also irrevocably bound himself to us.

The Transfiguration offers striking insight into Christ’s authority, mission and nature. The journey begins and ends with Jesus. **PETER FELDMEIER**

PETER FELDMEIER is the Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo.

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