

America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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NO EXCUSES FOR TORTURE

STEPHEN M. COLECCHI

BISHOPS REIMAGINED

MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS

'THE HOLY FAMILY'

WENDY BECKETT



OF MANY THINGS

Calls and e-mail messages have been coming in asking whether the cover photo of our last issue was done tongue-in-cheek. I regret to inform suspicious readers that the photo of a northern cardinal perched on a branch and fluffed out for warmth, as the credit on page 2 says, was simply the most colorful option given me for a seasonal cover to mark the onset of winter.

As I look out from my office on the grey stone and asphalt of West 56th Street, the countryman in me resists losing touch with the land and the cycle of the seasons. I wanted to share my now very limited enjoyment of the stark beauty of winter with those of our readers who also draw delight from seasonal change, to break up our string of newsy cover photos and, in a small way, to acknowledge that there is more to record than political and ecclesiastical controversies or even personal journeys of faith. Sometimes in winter a bird appears out of the dim light to our delight and should be enjoyed as the apparition of beauty it is.

When I was a boy, our family's primary vantage point for bird-watching was the casement window over the kitchen sink. Outside stood a very full pussy willow bush, so hardy my father cut it to the ground at least twice only to have it grow even larger. Before I hung a bird feeder on it when I was a scout, the bush was a favorite perch for songbirds, just as bushes, tangled vines, woody, short trees and the celebrated mustard "tree" of the parable are favorite cover for birds even in the desert. Mom would call me to the window to teach me my birds. There I saw my first cardinal and birds whose sightings would later become more rare, like orioles and tanagers. If memory doesn't play me tricks, once or twice Mom may have even pointed out an elusive bluebird.

In those early years, Mom used to cut suet and hang it from the bush for

birds to feed on. I used to walk on the wall alongside the pussy willow bush to place the fat on the branches. We never had problems in those days. The birds came, fed on the suet, to return again to perch in our special aviary. Problems came later when I thought it would be good to feed the birds with seed. One of our friends, Henry Anderson, managed a garden products plant where they made bird feeders from redwood. I hung a feeder from the bush and proceeded to fill it. Suddenly the songbirds disappeared. Squirrels that rarely migrated from the acorn-rich pin oaks across the street raided the feeder and scared off the birds. Sometimes then our only visitors were the noisy, mean blue jays who were equally discouraging of our hospitality to other birds.

Our other disappointment over bird feeding came with ringnecked pheasants. The woods nearby always had a brood or two. We would watch them from bedroom windows in back of the house as they moved yard by yard from the woods to my grandfather's vegetable garden and down the rock garden near the house. Their behavior was marvelous. The males would wait on guard while the hens and chicks fed.

One snowy winter we began to feed the pheasants corn. When spring came, we stopped putting out the corn, but the birds still expected to be fed. So at first light they would come under the windows to rouse us with their crowing. Eventually they wandered to our neighbor's yard, where he fed them. When after a time he fell ill and died, they would still arrive in the morning and peck at his basement windows as if to grab his attention.

Neither those pleasures nor those disappointments are to be had on West 56th Street. We have only pigeons. That is why you found a fluffy cardinal on your last cover.

DREW CHRISTIANSEN, S.J.

America

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Drew Christiansen, S.J.

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Eryk Krysztofciak

ADVERTISING
Julia Sosa

106 West 56th Street
New York, NY 10019-3803

Ph: 212-581-4640; Fax: 212-399-3596

E-mail: america@americamagazine.org;
letters@americamagazine.org
Web site: www.americamagazine.org.
Customer Service: 1-800-627-9533

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ON THE WEB

Drew Christiansen, S.J., talks about the real **Reinhold Niebuhr** on our podcast, and from the archives, Paul Farmer, right, on "**Medicine and Social Justice.**" Plus, reviews of "The Lovely Bones" and other **holiday films.** All at americamagazine.org.



Grace-Optimism

“Extra mundum nulla salus—There is no salvation outside the world.” That was the final message of Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., to his theological colleagues at a symposium held in his honor in Leuven, Belgium, in December 2008. That conviction captures the love of the world and the “grace-optimism” that characterized the life’s work of this Flemish Dominican, who died at the age of 95 on Dec. 23, 2009.

From his groundbreaking first book, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter With God*, to the final volume of his Christological trilogy, *Church, the Human Story of God*, Father Schillebeeckx helped readers grasp the core sacramental insight disclosed by the Incarnation: The mystery of God is to be encountered in human life and creation. Throughout his teaching career and in his writing, Father Schillebeeckx emphasized that we experience God’s love, the creative and saving presence of God’s grace, wherever human persons minister to one another, especially to the neighbor in need. Human love is an embodiment, a sacrament, of God’s love. These human “fragments of salvation,” as he called them, are a share in the final triumph of God’s grace, which was promised in a definitive way in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Christians are called to participate in the living story of Jesus by “writing a fifth Gospel with their lives.”

This sacramental view of the world, and of the church’s role within the world, remained at the heart of Father Schillebeeckx’s writing, preaching and teaching for over seven decades. It was also central to the vision of the Second Vatican Council, which he helped to shape as an advisor to Cardinal Bernard Alfrink and the Dutch bishops.

In the decades following the council, Father Schillebeeckx was acutely aware of how difficult it had become for many to believe that God holds open a future full of hope amid a world of radical suffering, especially when the church’s own witness had been compromised. In the face of those real stumbling blocks, Father Schillebeeckx reminded his readers that “God is new each moment” and that in situations of injustice (whether in the world or in the church) the Spirit of God is actively at work, prompting resistance, hope, courage and change.

May this gifted theologian and preacher of the Gospel now enjoy the fullness of life that he once described as “God’s eternal surprise.”

MARY CATHERINE HILKERT, O.P.

Not-So-Secret Archives

The Vatican Secret Archives have that appellation not because they are secret (in the sense that no one may see them) but because of the Latin word *secretum*, meaning “personal” or “private.” Still, any mention of them in the media (or Dan Brown’s novels) is catnip to the curious, critical and conspiracy-minded. Perhaps as a sop to those folks, the Vatican has published selections from the archives. Included in *The Vatican Secret Archives* is a tart note, dated 1550, from Michelangelo Buonarroti, demanding payment for his outstanding expenses and complaining that a papal conclave has interrupted work on the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica. A missive to Leo XIII from the Ojibway people, dated “where there is much grass, in the month of the flowers,” thanks the pontiff, or the “Grand Master of Prayer,” for providing lands in northern Ontario and a “custodian of prayer,” that is, a bishop. It was written on birch bark. The illustrated book is already a hot seller at \$99.50—a mysterious number that surely carries a hidden meaning known only to the Knights Templar. Sadly, shortly after it appeared on Amazon, all available copies were sold, so some secrets may remain secret until a reprinting.

A Deadly Year

A record number of Catholic men and women religious and members of the clergy were killed around the world in 2009. According to Fides, at least 37 Catholic missionaries died violently last year, nearly double the number reported in 2008 and a record high for the decade. The death toll included 30 priests, two religious sisters, two seminarians and two lay volunteers. Most were murdered in the Americas, where 23 pastoral workers were killed, followed by Africa, where 11 lost their lives. In Asia two priests were killed, and in Europe one priest was killed.

What is contributing to the sudden upsurge in violence against Catholic missionaries? Economic and political instability whipped up by the world’s Great Recession may be factors. Many of the missionaries lived in developing world communities, where a perception that they had some relative wealth made them targets of common criminals.

But another factor may be the advancing average age of Catholic clergy and religious. Most of the victims of violence in 2009 were in retirement, many older than 70. In societies throughout the world it is unfortunately the elderly who are especially vulnerable to crime. The 2009 figures could signal a trend, unless the church takes stronger measures to protect its aging and often isolated retirees in the developing world.

Weakened by Defense

Another year and another unchallenged Pentagon budget goes by. This year the nation is officially committing \$636 billion to its defense budget with \$128 billion allocated for “overseas contingency operations”—the military campaigns formerly known as the global war on terror—assumed into the official budget for the first time. The 2010 and proposed 2011 Pentagon budgets continue the escalation of the nation’s defense spending initiated after the terrorist attacks that began the 21st century. The United States is currently spending more than 10 times the amount of the world’s other big spenders, the United Kingdom and China, which each commit about \$60 billion a year to defense, and accounts for about half of all defense spending in the world.

And let’s remember that the nation’s total defense spending includes much more than the amounts allocated to the Pentagon. A comprehensive listing of defense costs would also include defense contributions from the federal departments of energy (nuclear weapons development and clean-up of weapons sites), justice (F.B.I. counterterrorism), state (military aid programs), homeland security, and treasury (military retirements); the Veterans Administration; NASA’s counterterrorism programs; and the military share of the nation’s annual debt servicing. All together, the total defense tab quickly approaches \$1 trillion a year or more. There comes a point when one must ask whether this is not a sinful misallocation of the nation’s limited fiscal resources.

While the Obama administration has made some small efforts to contain defense spending—cutting back missile defense, killing the F-22 fighter program—the nation’s ongoing confrontation with worldwide Islamic terrorism since 2001 has basically meant carte blanche for the Pentagon. Few legislators challenge the bloating of the budget or the strategic and economic assumptions underlying it for fear of seeming soft on terrorism or vaguely unpatriotic. This is a poor understanding of patriotism, just as our reliance on defense is a poor substitute for real security. It

has been the historic fate of empires to diminish themselves through overspending on military might while their rivals and allies allow themselves more judicious investments of their resources. It is unfortunate that the United States seems set on this familiar course.

While Washington wonks are aware of the danger of a global strategy and foreign policy over-determined by military force, few U.S. citizens can calculate the profound opportunity costs of our current and projected defense spending. Will we have the discipline to roll back this budget expansion as our military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq is eventually concluded?

One can argue endlessly about the proper role of the federal government in responding to the economic and social challenges menacing the country. But defense spending sets severe limits on what the government can and cannot

do: in terms of saving failing states, paying down the national debt, creating employment, patching our social safety net, making creative investments in human capital and bankrolling infrastructure maintenance and expansion.

The way to put ourselves on a sustainable path to true strength and security is to reassess our international responsibilities and focus on reducing our debt, investing in our people and rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure. We cannot alter the maximalist mentality of Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists through force, though we can surely still protect ourselves and our national interests with more sensible allocations for defense.

The United States cannot afford to be the world’s biggest defense spender. While our nation continues to make dead-end commitments, the world’s rising nations are investing in their own future. Weighed down by its defense allocations, the United States may be shaping for itself a future of complaint, lamenting its falling standard of living and overwhelming debt. In such a future we may reach a point where we will no longer be free to choose between guns and butter. Both will be denied us by our debt holders.

DEFENSE TRADE-OFFS

\$1 billion, the amount required to put one U.S. soldier into the field in Afghanistan for one year.

\$3.6 billion, the cost of one month of war in Afghanistan.

\$8 billion, the “reduced” amount committed to missile defense.

\$7 billion, the amount the Navy will receive for seven vessels.

\$7 billion, the amount the U.S. Air Force will spend to acquire 30 new fighters.

\$5.7 billion, the unallocated price tag for sending every at-risk 4-year-old in the United States to quality pre-school.

\$3 billion, the unallocated cost of preventing 59 million children in the developing world from going to school hungry.

\$10 billion, the annual amount still needed to ensure that those same children have a classroom to go to.

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SIGNS OF THE TIMES

LATIN AMERICA

Arms Race, U.S. Inattention Promote Rising Tension

A renewed Latin American arms race and the United States' lack of attention to it has some international policy experts worried. Spending on arms in the region doubled from \$24 billion in 2003 to \$47 billion in 2008. Latin American nations are purchasing tanks, fighter jets and other military equipment better suited to waging war on their neighbors than the fighting domestic threats like drug trafficking and organized crime.

While Catholic bishops in Guatemala and Mexico have warned about the imminent threat of drug-related violence, little has been said about the military buildup. Underlying the purchases is "profound mistrust and political tension" among Latin American nations, said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at the nonprofit organization Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, D.C., and a professor at Georgetown University, partly because economic globalization, technology and migration spur countries to defend their national interests. "Compared to 10 or 15 years ago, each country is turning inward more, and each country is more concerned about its national priorities," he said.

After economic crises in the 1980s and 1990s, many Latin American coun-

tries saw unprecedented growth in the past decade and can afford to replace obsolete equipment, said Adam Isacson of the Washington-based Center for International Policy. Nevertheless,

Isacson notes, most of the weapons being purchased, from tanks to fighter jets to automatic weapons, "are for scenarios of interstate conflict."

Isacson said that as events in the



A Venezuelan soldier rests near the Colombian border during a flare-up of tension between the two nations in March 2008.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Bishops Battle Over Spiritual Worth of Medjugorje Pilgrimages

After visiting Medjugorje, the site of reported Marian apparitions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna said the church must recognize that private pilgrimages to the village result in prayer and reconciliation.

But Bishop Ratko Peric of the Diocese of Mostar-Duvno, which includes Medjugorje, said the cardinal's very public pilgrimage "has added new sufferings" to those already present in his diocese and did "not contribute to its much

needed peace and unity."

Cardinal Schönborn visited Medjugorje from Dec. 29 to Jan. 1 in what his office described as a "private pilgrimage." He visited one of the young adults who claimed they began receiving messages from Mary in 1981, and he celebrated Mass in local parishes. He told Vatican Radio's German language program on Jan. 4 that it was up to the universal church to determine whether or not the alleged apparitions at Medjugorje are supernatural, but he also said it was clear that Medjugorje is a place of

prayer, reconciliation and faith-based acts of charity.

"The pilgrims do one thing above all: They pray," he said during the broadcast. Each day thousands of people recite psalms together, spend time adoring the Eucharist, meditate on the Stations of the Cross and pray the rosary, he said. Medjugorje also is "a place where people have rediscovered confession," he said.

Cardinal Schönborn told Vatican Radio he believed that until the church issues an official judgment on the apparitions, it is wise not to permit formal pilgrimages, a policy adopted by the bishops of the former Yugoslavia in 1991 and confirmed by the Vatican. But he said it was also important to provide pastoral care to



Middle East distracted U.S. attention from Latin America, Brazil has emerged as a regional leader and is trying to position itself as a world power. The country has signed a deal with

France that includes the purchase of submarines, fighter planes, tanks, missiles and radar equipment. Brazilian politicians have said the country must protect large offshore oil deposits, but President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva also expressed concern over a U.S.-Colombian agreement allowing the United States to use military bases in that Andean country.

While past U.S. military actions in the region focused on drug interdiction, “the mission is completely broad now,” Isacson said. He noted that the “vague language, secrecy and leaks” that marked the signing of the U.S.-Colombia agreement “were the biggest gift you could give” Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez. Chávez has, predictably, cited the U.S.-Colombia deal to justify beefing up his country’s arsenal.

President Alan García of Peru called on South American countries to avoid an arms race, sending cabinet members to urge other governments to spend funds to reduce poverty instead of for

weapons. But Peru is also negotiating the purchase of naval frigates, and at a military parade in December, it showed off new tanks from China.

With U.S. attention focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, other countries are stepping in to build closer relations with the region, analysts say. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran has visited Venezuela, Brazil and Bolivia, and China is striking deals not only to sell military hardware, but also to prospect for minerals and oil.

Isacson said the United States is also paying too little attention to the greatest threat of violence in the region, which he said comes from drug trafficking and organized crime. “I am worried about the next five years in Latin America,” he said. “You’re seeing organized crime taking over governments.” The United States “has to do everything it can to reduce its own demand [for illegal drugs], stop the flow of weapons into the region, and crack down on money laundering.”

Medjugorje visitors, which the same policy recommended.

In an interview on Jan. 4 with Vercernji List, a daily newspaper, Cardinal Schönborn said, “Jesus said that the bad tree doesn’t bear any fruits, which means if the fruits are good then the tree is good as well.”

Bishop Peric, who repeatedly has questioned the authenticity of the apparitions and struggled to limit the influence of religious living in the diocese without permission, issued a statement on Jan. 2 saying that while he recognized the right of a cardinal to celebrate Mass anywhere in the world, “there also exists a certain etiquette in the church” that encourages a visiting cardinal to discuss a visit with the local bishop. He said neither the cardinal

nor anyone from his office contacted him.

In addition, Cardinal Schönborn’s visits to unauthorized religious communities “could be interpreted as supportive,” Bishop Peric said.

The bishop also said that in his diocese the phenomenon of many faithful going to confession is not unique to the churches in Medjugorje. “We believe that the mercy of the heavenly Father is perceptible in Medjugorje, just as in each and every parish of this diocese,” he said. If long lines of faithful wait-

ing to go to confession are seen as a sign that Mary is appearing, he said, then some could argue that she is appearing in every parish in the diocese.



Pilgrims pray at the site where the Virgin Mary reportedly appeared in Medjugorje.

2010: Two Dozen U.S. Bishops Could Retire

Up to 24 U.S. bishops, including two cardinals, could retire in 2010. There are 11 active U.S. bishops, including one cardinal, who have already turned 75. Thirteen more will celebrate their 75th birthday in 2010. At age 75 bishops are requested to submit their resignation to the pope. Turning 75 on April 19 this year is Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, where he has served since 2003. He was elevated to the College of Cardinals that same year. Pope Benedict XVI, like his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, has often asked cardinals to stay on the job after age 75. Even when a cardinal retires in his 70s, he remains an active member of the College of Cardinals, eligible to enter a conclave and vote for a new pope, until age 80. Cardinal Bernard F. Law, for example, turned 75 on Nov. 4, 2006 and still serves on the Congregation for Bishops. Cardinal Law was archbishop of Boston from 1984 until his resignation in 2002 because of his handling of cases of sexual abuse by members of the clergy.

Jesus-era House Brings Joy to Nazareth

Auxiliary Bishop Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo of Jerusalem said the Christian community in Nazareth was joyful at the recent discovery of the remains of a first-century dwelling. "This belongs to the time of Jesus and we can now see how [people lived]," said Bishop Marcuzzo, noting that the dwelling had remained largely intact throughout the ages. "The ruins...were not destroyed during history. There were lots of [wars and battles] which destroyed buildings, but that house was kept safe. Why? We don't know why, but certainly there is a reason why that

NEWS BRIEFS

Thailand's Catholic aid agency was refused access to more than 4,000 ethnic **Hmong asylum seekers** in the northern part of the country as Thai soldiers arrived to deport them to Laos on Dec. 27. • Catholic aid officials from the Diocese of Gizo joined relief efforts on Jan. 4 in the **Solomon Islands** after a magnitude 7.2 earthquake and a resulting tsunami left at least 1,000 people homeless. • The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has given a five-year, \$5.9 million grant to the New York-based **Catholic Medical Mission Board** to fight the spread of H.I.V. and AIDS in southern Sudan. • **Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta** will be among the subjects depicted on U.S. stamps debuting in 2010. • The **Malaysian High Court** in Kuala Lumpur ruled on Dec. 31 that a national Catholic weekly could use the word Allah to refer to God and that the Home Ministry's order banning certain uses of Allah was illegal. • The veteran astronomer **George V. Coyne, S.J.**, was honored on Jan. 4 by the American Astronomical Society for his work in building up a Vatican-sponsored summer school for young astronomers and promoting discussions on the intersection of religion and science.



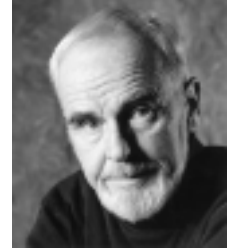
A Thai policewoman holds a Hmong child.

house was kept safe." The remains are of "utmost importance" and reveal new information about how people lived during Jesus' lifetime, said Yardena Alexandre, excavation director at the Israel Antiquities Authority. Earlier digs had revealed several tombs from the time period, but until the discovery of this house, no evidence of a human settlement had been uncovered. The structure was found next to the Basilica of the Annunciation, where the floor of a former convent was being removed to prepare for the construction of the International Marian Center of Nazareth.

A Push for Executive Accountability

The effort to give stockholders a "say on pay"—determining the compensation packages of companies' top executives—gained traction in 2009 as 38 publicly traded companies said they would address compensation issues. While some companies saw the writing on the wall regarding executive pay in the slumping economy of 2009 and pledged to adjust pay packages, others still resisted. At Cisco Systems, the technology corporation, shareholders forced a vote on the issue for the second year in a row in 2009. They prevailed this time, garnering 51.4 percent of all shares voted. The issue has also picked up steam in Washington, where government officials rescued financial firms through its Troubled Assets Relief Program and joined the outcry when some bailed-out firms still produced hefty bonuses for top executives.

From CNS and other sources.



A Turbulent Decade

Time magazine called it the “decade from hell.” I would not go quite that far, but the first 10 years of the new century surely signaled an erosion of confidence not only in institutions, but perhaps also in our very selves. Casting a glance at each year, I am struck not so much by the top news story as by harbingers of opportunity and threat for the new century.

The year 2000 was marked by the delayed election of President George W. Bush after intervention by the Supreme Court. The peaceful transition despite electoral chaos proved for many once again that democracy works. It could also be seen, however, as the beginning of a mounting distrust of the political system we relied on.

The atrocities of September 2001 were not only the beginning of a war on terrorism; they also marked the beginning of our nationwide feeling of terror. The assault on symbols of two things so close to our national identity—great wealth and great power—exposed us to a vulnerability that would be intensified each year as our wealth and power failed to provide the security we thought they had insured.

The year 2002 revealed the full range of scandal in the Catholic Church. The scandal of sexual abuse by priests and the coverup by some bishops continued to haunt the decade with lawsuits, the outlay of millions in settlements and the departure of many members of the laity wounded by a sense of betrayal and angered by ecclesial priorities. We are still faced with a daunting choice. Do we retrench or do we reform?

In 2003 the United States, having taken on the Taliban the previous year, invaded Iraq. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and our tenuous claim of victory will likely cost over a trillion dollars. The terrible cost to life and limb for America’s soldiers and Iraq’s civilians may yet weigh more heavily on us if we have opened the way not for peace in the Persian Gulf but for a 100-year war.

The years 2004, 2005 and 2006, though marked by images of torture at Abu Ghraib or terrorism in Madrid and London, are inextricably bound together as testimonials to our seeming powerlessness before great physical and moral evil. A tsunami killed 200,000 people in a flash. A hurricane devastated a great American city. Thugs slaughtered 200,000 in Darfur.

In November 2007 the journals *Science* and *Cell* revealed that researchers in Japan and Wisconsin had successfully derived pluripotent stem cells from adult skin cells. Although most people still think of embryos when they hear about stem cells, this new procedure offers the most promising breakthrough in regenerative medicine. The mapping of the human genome early in the decade has opened previously unknown paths to human healing. It has also raised the specter of genetic manipulation, enhancement and modification of our species.

The year 2008 was the year of financial collapse. Earlier rumblings from the ethical failures of Enron and its accounting firm, Arthur Andersen, erupted into a full-blown earthquake.

An almost dogmatic faith in the market and blind reliance on financiers dissolved in a decade when stocks would fall 25 percent, median family income would drop, millions of jobs would disappear, and huge corporations would go bankrupt.

Amazon, at the end of 2009, reported that for the first time, electronic books for its Kindle device outsold physical books during the Christmas season. Ray Kurzweil, a creative computer zealot who thinks that artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence by mid-century, has himself unveiled an e-reader program that will be available for personal computers, the iPod Touch and the iPhone. The exponential growth in computer technology

points to a revolution in journalism, medicine, politics, communication and life itself. While most of us celebrate the change, critics like Lee Siegel, in *Against the Machine*, warn us that we are already becoming an electronic mob, bereft of personal substance and any interior life.

Whether Siegel is right or not, his worry about the loss of personhood, it seems to me, is well founded. But that problem is not new. Perhaps the very fault and fall in Eden turned on the acceptance or rejection of our vulnerability as only human persons. In the present day, it is just that the stakes are so much higher. An unchecked human longing for control, whether in geo-politics, money, power, religion or the domination of nature, makes every new opportunity a treacherous new temptation.

Confidence
has eroded
not only in
institutions,
but perhaps
also in our
very selves.

JOHN F. KAVANAUGH, S.J., is a professor of philosophy at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Mo.



Members of the New York City Catholic Worker pray near the U.S. Naval Base in Guantánamo, Cuba.

PHOTO: REUTERS/HO NEW



TORTURE DEGRADES BOTH THE VICTIM
AND THE PERPETRATOR.

No Excuses For Torture

BY STEPHEN M. COLECCHI

Catholic teaching on torture is both simple and richly complex. On the one hand, the church's teaching seems straightforward: Torture is fundamentally incompatible with the dignity of the human person, and its practice is absolutely prohibited in all circumstances. On the other hand, both historically and existentially, the Catholic Church has more than a passing acquaintance with torture. Leaders and members of the church have been both victims and perpetrators. The church looks to the cross of Christ and to the witness of Christian martyrs throughout the centuries in whose torturous sufferings it finds meaning and inspiration. At the time of the Inquisition and in many other historical circumstances in the past, however, the leaders of the church have tolerated and even supported the use of torture to achieve so-called higher purposes.

One of the great strengths of the Catholic tradition is the church's ability, under the inspiration of God, to repent of past errors and to seek the fullness of God's truth—a truth fully revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but grasped only partially in each age by the sons and daughters of the church. Ours is a church of both saints and sinners, a dualism that offers insight into a complex ethical problem like the use of torture.

Torture is an issue of particular concern in the United States today because of ethically questionable practices tolerated under the exigencies of the "global war on terror." These practices include the waterboarding, or simulated drowning, of Al Qaeda detainees and "extreme rendition," the capture, detention and deportation of terror suspects, often to nations where the use of torture is common.

STEPHEN M. COLECCHI is the director of the Office of International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Tortured Body

The church's contemporary prohibition of torture reflects a deep understanding of the human person and a profound vision of human society. In 1998 Pope John Paul II offered a reflection on the Shroud of Turin in which he connected the suffering of Christ to the inhumanity of torture. Pope John Paul said: "The imprint left by the tortured body of the Crucified One, which attests to the tremendous human capacity for causing pain and death to one's fellow man, stands as an icon of the suffering of the innocent in every age: of the countless tragedies that have marked past history and the dramas that continue to unfold in the world." The pope went on to ask: "How can we not recall with dismay and pity those who do not enjoy basic civil rights, the victims of torture and terrorism, the slaves of criminal organizations?"

Pope Benedict XVI made a similar association of the tragedy of torture with the suffering of Christ when he visited Lourdes in 2008. In a homily, the pope made a connection between the cross of Christ and those who suffer torture in his name:

By his cross we are saved. The instrument of torture which, on Good Friday, manifested God's judgment on the world, has become a source of life, pardon, mercy, a sign of reconciliation and peace. For on this cross, Jesus took upon himself the weight of all the sufferings and injustices of our humanity. He bore the humiliation and the discrimination, the torture suffered in many parts of the world by so many of our brothers and sisters for love of Christ.

In the teaching of the church, the suffering of Christ and of the saints, especially that imposed by torture, testifies to the reality of evil in the world. This testimony is not an acceptance of evil, but rather a call to overcome it. Catholics believe the cross leads to resurrection. Death does not have the final word. The victim on the cross was ultimately the victor. Life triumphed over death, good over evil.

Yet the followers of Christ have not consistently applied the lessons of the cross throughout the centuries. In a remarkably candid passage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges: "In times past, cruel practices were commonly used by legitimate governments to maintain law and order, often without protest from the Pastors of the Church, who themselves adopted in their own tribunals the prescriptions of Roman law concerning torture" (No. 2298). The catechism includes a compelling critique of the practice: "In recent times it has become evident that these cruel practices were neither necessary for public order, nor in conformity with the legitimate rights of the human person. On the contrary, these practices led to ones even more degrading."

A Threat to Human Dignity

The basis for the church's current total rejection of torture is its teaching on the life and dignity of the human person. The human person is created in the image of God. In Christ all are offered redemption without exception. In Catholic teaching, human dignity does not come from any human quality or accomplishment; it comes from God. For this reason, the catechism teaches, "It is also blasphemous to make use of God's name to cover up criminal practices, to reduce peoples to servitude, to torture persons or put them to death" (No. 2148).

The catechism later declares: "Torture which uses physical or moral violence to extract confessions, punish the guilty, frighten opponents, or satisfy hatred is contrary to respect for the person and for human dignity" (No. 2298). The use of torture dishonors the Creator in whose image every human person is created and disfigures the human person who is worthy of respect.

In Catholic teaching, there is more than one victim of an act of torture. First there is, of course, a profound concern for the immediate victim of torture, whose body and mind suffer assault. But the church is also concerned for the human dignity of the perpetrator of torture, who is debased by the act itself. This is why the catechism, as it calls for the abolition of torture, also asks Catholics to "pray for the victims and their tormentors."

Catholic teaching on torture sits within a broader body of teaching on a wide range of threats to human life and dignity. The Second Vatican Council taught in the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (No. 27):

Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit...all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator.

Torture attacks the human dignity of its direct victims, but it also victimizes the perpetrators and any society that tolerates its practice. Torture contaminates society and debases it. This is true because the human person is not only sacred but also social. What we do to one another we ultimately do to ourselves, because as social beings our fates are bound together. A society that tolerates torture threatens the common good of all persons because it undermines respect for human dignity and basic human rights. These rights should find expression in laws that protect human dignity and prohibit torture and other actions that assault

this dignity. For these and other reasons, the Catholic Church supports international humanitarian law that prohibits torture.

No Justification Under Any Circumstances

The church views torture as an “intrinsic evil” that can never be justified. The inevitable harm it does to individuals and to society as a whole allows no exceptions. To those who would advance arguments for the exceptional use of torture to protect public safety, the Catholic Church argues that we cannot do something intrinsically evil and expect good to come of it. In 2007 Pope Benedict reiterated the teaching found in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* “that the prohibition against torture ‘cannot be contravened under any circumstances.’”

In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the statement on political responsibility that the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued in November 2007 in preparation for the 2008 national elections, the bishops referred to the issue of torture five times. Echoing the catechism, they declared plainly that torture is “intrinsic evil” and “can never be justified” and stated categorically: “The use of torture must be rejected as fundamentally incompatible with the dignity of the human person and ultimately counterproductive in the effort to combat terrorism.” It is counterproductive not only because experts tell us that it does not work, but also because it undermines the very good it hopes to achieve: the common good of all.

In his encyclical letter “The Splendor of Truth” (“Veritatis Splendor”), Pope John Paul II indicated that we cannot make moral exceptions and perform “intrinsic evil” acts, even when our intentions may be good. He noted the Second Vatican Council’s absolute rejection of intrinsically evil acts that “infect human civilization and contaminate those who inflict them.” U.S. culture sometimes fails to grasp the insidious nature of intrinsic evil. It has not understood the corrosive effect of the acceptance of torture, abortion and other such acts on U.S. society. For example, in the television series “24,” the character Jack Bauer, whom some U.S. military personnel have stated they took as a role model, is presented as an entertaining hero, but his character is no social or moral hero. Jack Bauer’s use of torture undermines what he seeks to preserve and protect—the lives and dignity of ordinary people.

In a church of both saints and sinners, victims and perpetrators, Catholic social teaching on torture has special authenticity and credibility. In its service to the human family as it seeks the full truth of the human person, the church has come to understand and teach with honesty and clarity that the prohibition against torture is absolute. The act of torture is utterly incompatible with the dignity of the human person, and the practice of torture wounds the victim, the perpetrator and the common good of all. **A**

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Collegiality Made Visible

Three ways to revitalize the apostolic character of the episcopacy

BY MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS

In the 40 years since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, observers and journalists have highlighted the changes the council wrought. It is easy to see why: Change is news and captures the media's attention in a way that continuity does not. Pope Benedict XVI has tried to correct this interpretation by arguing that the council should also be seen in terms of how it carried on the early traditions of the church. In the words of the pope, a "hermeneutics of discontinuity" must be countered with a "hermeneutics of reform."

This hermeneutic of reform is advisable for both theological and historical reasons. Vatican II's reforms were not plucked out of thin air. The *ressourcement* theology that informed much of the council's texts looked back to the first centuries of Christendom to reclaim insights that had been lost. We can now see that the liturgical reforms begun by Pope Pius X and the biblical scholarship blessed by Pope Pius XII also prepared the way for Vatican II in essential and meaningful ways.

One of the more contentious issues at the council was that of episcopal collegiality, the idea that all the bishops, united with the pope, are responsible for the governance of the universal church. This, too, was an idea the council fathers sought to rescue from the practices of the early church—and they succeeded, despite significant curial opposition. The council's doctrine of collegiality presented bishops less as branch managers for the Vatican and more as successors of the Apostles in their own right.

Unfortunately, Vatican II did not choose to reclaim three earlier church practices that could have helped to fulfill its goals regarding the episcopacy. One such practice is liturgical, a second is canonical and a third might be called managerial. Rediscovering these older practices could help to reinvigorate the council's teaching on collegiality and help to re-emphasize the role of the bishop as a successor of the Apostles.

Removing the Blessed Sacrament

The book of rubrics for episcopal liturgies (the *Ceremoniale Episcoporum*) includes in its discussion of cathedral

churches the recommendation that "when, in a particular case, there is a tabernacle on the altar at which the bishop is to celebrate, the Blessed Sacrament should be transferred to another fitting place." Today the rubric is now observed only in the breach. Rarely is the Blessed Sacrament removed from the central altar when the bishop comes to a parish church, apart from the celebration of the Tridentine rite.

The original reasons for this practice are cloaked in the mist of history. The rubric could be a practical holdover from the days of the Tridentine high Mass, when the bishop would vest in the sanctuary, his vestments laid out on the altar. Yet the practice also had a theological purpose that remains central to the role of the bishop today.

Removing the Blessed Sacrament during a pontifical Mass is a symbolic reminder that the bishop is the font of the sacramental life of his diocese. By placing the Blessed Sacrament elsewhere, it becomes clear that the bishop is at the center of the liturgical celebration. "The bishop is the chief priest of the local church and as such carries out an irreplaceable role in the celebration of the sacred liturgy that some today may find unsettling," says the Rev. G. Dennis Gil, director of the Office of Worship for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. "He is the sacramental centerpiece of the celebration."

The centrality of the bishop to the liturgy is echoed in Vatican II's "Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church": "Bishops are the principal dispensers of the mysteries of God, as well as being the governors, promoters, and guardians of the entire liturgical life in the church committed to them." Removing the Blessed Sacrament during a pontifical Mass could help to bring this teaching to life for Catholics in the congregation. As Father Gil said, "A recovery of this unique liturgical understanding of the bishop in the celebration of the sacred liturgy re-establishes his simultaneous duties to teach and shepherd the local church."

This is a profound theological claim and demonstrates a much more sacramental view of the relationship between the bishop and his flock than does the administrative—chief executive officer model often deployed. It also shows that the church is, in essence, a communion of persons, united sacramentally, not the "organized religion" much derided by cynics.

MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS, a regular contributor to *America's* blog "In All Things," is writing a biography of the Rev. Jerry Falwell.



The pope celebrates Mass at the opening of the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist in 2005.

The Selection of Bishops

Today the selection of new bishops is largely the responsibility of the papal nuncio. Every three years, bishops send in the names of priests they think would make good bishops. When a see becomes vacant, the nuncio consults with both priests and bishops and draws up the *terna*—a list of three names—of candidates to become the bishop. This *terna* goes to the Congregation for Bishops in Rome, which can accept, reject or modify it. It then goes to the pope, who makes the final selection.

It was not always this way. There was no nuncio or apostolic delegate in the United States until 1893. At that time when a see became vacant, canon law required the “irremovable rectors of the diocese,” usually priests who served as pastors of key parishes, to meet and draw up a *terna*. After the process was completed, the bishops of the ecclesiastical province—a larger grouping of dioceses in a geographical region—would gather and draw up a separate *terna*. If an archdiocesan seat were vacant, then all the archbishops would meet and draw up their own *terna* or send in their comments on the other two. Rome had the authority to call for new *ternas*, but throughout the 19th century the Vatican sought more involvement by priests in the nomination of bishops, not less.

An episode in 1901 led eventually to the centralization of this power in Rome. With an episcopal seat open in

Portland, Me., the priests of the diocese and the bishops of the larger ecclesiastical province drew up their *ternas*, settling on the same three names. The Vatican’s apostolic delegate voiced concerns about two of the candidates’ drinking habits, and the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, sometimes called simply Propaganda—the Vatican office in charge of the United States and other “mission” territories—rejected all three candidates and instead appointed the rector of the North American College in Rome, the Rev. William O’Connell, a rising star with influential friends in Rome. “Conflicting reports, a poor choice of candidates, and fear of scandal in the American Church provided the Vatican with the opportunity to take episcopal appointments solely into its own hands,” writes the historian Gerald Fogarty, S.J.

Three years later, when the archbishop of Boston sought a coadjutor, similar intrigues erupted, and in 1906 Propaganda once again ignored the *ternas* they received and appointed the same William O’Connell as coadjutor. Archbishop Patrick Riordan of San Francisco called the appointment “the most disastrous thing that has happened to religion in a century.” In 1908, the United States was removed from the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and in 1917 Pope Benedict XV issued the Code of Canon Law that placed the nomination

of bishops firmly in the hands of the nuncios and Vatican congregations.

It is unlikely that the church will return to the system employed in the 19th century, nor would it be advisable. That process often led to politicking for posts, just as the secrecy of the process today invites alternate intrigues. Any process has the potential to promote cliquishness, with the 19th-century model fostering local grandees and the current system leaning toward candidates who attended the North American College in Rome. In the United States we have been blessed with a string of excellent nuncios, but the current system puts an enormous amount of power in the nuncio's hands, which could lead to serious problems in the long term.

A proposal: Restore the practice by which local priests and the bishops of the province draw up their own *ternas*. This would provide useful information for the nuncio and for the Congregation for Bishops in Rome. If there were a significant difference between the *terna* of the presbyters and that of the provincial bishops, it would indicate deeper divisions that might need to be examined and addressed. Conversely, since the *ternas* would be only advisory, the politicking would be less vociferous than it often was in the 19th century. More information is always better; it would help the pope select bishops suited to their dioceses.

Stop Transferring Bishops

It is now common practice for Rome to appoint as the diocesan bishop of larger sees bishops who have cut their teeth as heads of smaller dioceses or who have served as auxiliaries in large ones. The rationale is obvious: the tasks confronting a bishop today are many and varied, and experience on the job may be the best indicator that a candidate will perform as needed.

The problem with this method is twofold, one theological and the other practical. The theological difficulty is that bishops are supposed to be wedded to their diocese the way a man is wedded to one wife. The rite of ordination includes the giving of an episcopal ring to the newly ordained bishop as the principal consecrator says: "Take this ring, the seal of your fidelity. With faith and love protect the bride of God, his holy Church." Indeed, when a bishop is transferred from one diocese to another, the papal bull of appointment speaks of the candidate's being freed from his bond to the previous diocese. Yet if a bishop is to be wedded to his diocese, should he not be joined to his flock for life?

The practical difficulty is that current practices too often lead to careerism. A young bishop might be tempted to make a decision based on how it will be perceived by those with the power to "promote" him. If instead a bishop knew he would have to live with the consequences of his decision because advancement was not a possibility, he would be more likely to take the long view. If a man wants to be the bishop of one town, let him be the bishop of that place, but it does not help that church to have a bishop who sees his assignment there as a steppingstone.

Certain circumstances might require the occasional transfer of a bishop from one diocese to another. Take Boston. With the scandal of sexual abuse by clerics still boiling and the first-ever resignation of an American cardinal from his diocese, then-Bishop Sean O'Malley had a unique combination of administrative gifts and personal authenticity needed at a moment of crisis. A bishop with the necessary experience might return to his home diocese to fix a large financial or other challenge. Yet these would be the exceptions, not the rule. Careerism would be dealt a fatal blow.

These three changes are not likely to be adopted anytime soon. Yet even thinking about them can help Catholics to reimagine the role of the bishop in the faith and life of his diocese. There are other ways, to be sure, to renew appreciation for the sacramental quality of the bishops' relationship to his flock or to put an end to careerism. The point is to remain focused on the call of the council to see the bishop "as the high priest of his flock, the faithful's life in Christ in some way deriving from and depending on him" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 41). Sometimes this becomes obscured. It should be made clearer. **A**

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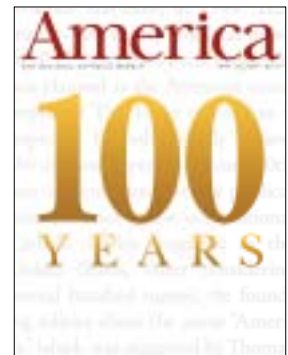
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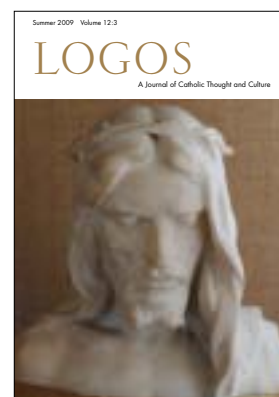
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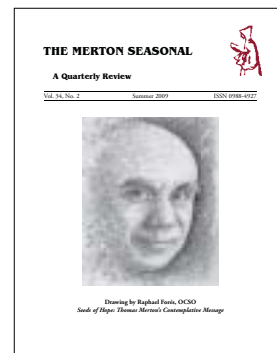
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How a physician returned to God

BY PAT FOSARELLI

It must be hard for you," the eighth grader said to me with sympathy. "Isn't a doctor supposed to be an atheist?"

His words did not shock me. I had heard such an assumption numerous times before. The first time occurred when I was working in a clinic that provided medical care for H.I.V.-infected and H.I.V.-affected infants, children and teens. A foster mother was rocking an inconsolable infant whose tiny body was wracked with withdrawal symptoms because of his birth mother's drug addiction. While I recorded the results of his physical exam, the foster mother crooned softly to comfort him. She stopped her singing to say, "Jesus loves you, and so do I." Then she blurted out, "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Looking up, I asked, "Why not?"

"Aren't you doctors all atheists?" she asked. "I don't want to offend you. You've been so good to the baby."

I grew up in a Catholic, Italian-American family where going to Mass every Sunday (and even on weekdays) was expected. I attended Catholic schools from first grade through college. This Catholic upbringing enlivened in me a robust spirituality. God was very real to me. Even in college, I spoke to God in prayer regularly throughout each day.

In medical school, however, I was surrounded by classmates who spent



Sunday mornings sleeping in. God had no place in their lives. More important, I encountered the enormous suffering of the truly innocent: premature infants struggling to breathe; children with vicious malignancies, the treatments for which subjected them to prolonged misery; and children with horrible congenital defects. My Catholic education had taught me the good are rewarded, the evil are punished. As a 21-year-old previously unexposed to much suffering, I struggled to make sense of what I was experiencing. What evil had these children done?

I concluded that I had been duped for 16 years. The only intelligent thing to do was to jettison my uncritical belief in God. Not courageous enough to be an atheist, I chose agnosticism. "Give me the proof," I said to all who would listen, "and I will believe." So as not to be a hypocrite, I refused to go to church even on Christmas and Easter.

That lasted nine long, painful years. I missed the intimacy of prayer, even as I doubted that there was anyone to whom I could pray. Medical school, internship and residency can be very difficult years: one is exposed to some of the hardest moments in the lives of others. I could have used someone in whom to confide. Once that had been God, but now it was my colleagues. They could not answer my questions about why bad things happened to innocent people.

Why was I so disappointed in my faith? I reasoned that if God had permitted such horrible things to happen to young children, then the least God could do was to fix things. If God is omnipotent and loving, doing right by children should be a no-brainer. Ignorant of the fullness of the Catholic tradition, I had no idea that many saints had struggled with such issues. I thought I was one of an enlightened few who had exposed the ruse of a loving, all-powerful God in a world filled with the suffering of innocents. Full of myself, there was no room for God.

Children's Questions

No sudden flash of insight led my return to God. It was the children who ultimately brought me back—the same group of suffering individuals who had caused me to doubt God's existence. They buffeted me with questions: Why would God let them be so sick? Why didn't God make them better? Why weren't their prayers working? Why did God let their mom and dad break up? Abused children asked me why God had not

PAT FOSARELLI, M.D., is the associate dean of The Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Md.

stepped in to stop their torture: Why wasn't God on their side?

In the beginning I fled the children's questions by hastily leaving their rooms, but soon realized I was meant to hear them and respond. Instead of expecting God to make their lives better, I decided to assume my own role. I sat with children and teenagers when their family members were nowhere to be found—being present with them in their fear, confusion, anger and sorrow. I acknowledged how little I really knew about God's ways, while exploring what I could do to help. To their never-ending questions, I often said, I don't know. My refusal to be a know-it-all comforted them. They could see I was in solidarity with them in their suffering.

Suddenly God became very real to me. In the suffering children, the "little ones," I met the suffering Christ. When I rocked a child in pain, I comforted the suffering God. I remember looking into the faces of young children and asking myself, "Who is this—really—whom I am comforting?" Instead of an impassive, supremely independent God, I met a God who needed me to make a difference in the lives of suffering people.

Doctors, Science and Belief

I decided to seek graduate theological education to learn how people of different times, places and cultures understood God, especially amid suffering; I felt this would make me a better doctor. My medical colleagues were scandalized. "You are on the faculty of a school of medicine and write for medical journals, and you are going to be a student again? Why would a doctor need a theological education?"

My colleagues' questions were based on a modern view of medicine, one in which doctors restricted themselves to science and did not entertain philosophy or theology. Yet my young patients and their families did not permit me to remain aloof from the exist-

tential questions they faced. To stand with them, I had to understand them better. My science had to come to terms with their beliefs and dreams. In so doing, I became an heir to a proud tradition that did not find God superfluous in the art of healing. In some cultures, doctors and spiritual healers are one and the same.

As a physician, theologian and pastoral minister, I find that most suffering people speak about God when their lives are in turmoil. Some are respectful; some are repentant; others are hostile and very angry at God and the people who claim to represent God. When faced with finitude, all sorts of people find God very real, even those who had no time for God before.

Although some skeptics might explain this appeal to God as a human need for a Big Daddy to mop up the hazardous spills in life, the words of patients and their family members impress me as too profound to attribute to wishful thinking.

Before the Enlightenment, physicians accepted God-talk as part of the art of healing. To them, God dwelt in the recesses of human misery as much as in the peaks of human joy. Physicians understood both the magnificence and frailty of the human body, although they could never have imagined its delicate cellular structures and exquisite biochemical balance. They attributed the body's magnificence to God and understood themselves as "chosen" by God to care for human illness wherever they found it. It was a divine calling, but they never mistook themselves for God. A physician's job was to work with the Divine Physician.

Nowadays, by contrast, it is popular to call patients "clients," as if they are party to an economic transaction. Physicians and patients are partners,

but only in the crassest sense is their relationship predominantly an economic one. Rather, physicians and patients are partners in the entire healing enterprise, which includes the spiritual and the physical.

God as Healer

Physicians today distinguish disease from illness: disease is the defined condition someone has; illness is the disease and its effects on person, family, friends and social roles. In another time, it was all illness, which was not

private, especially when one was suffering or dying. Illnesses are messier than diseases because one must deal with much

more than an organ or an individual. Yet when one can facilitate healing of a person, one has made a major impact, not only on the life of the ill person but also on the lives of those around him or her.

Enter God.

Only God can heal because only God can affect people profoundly on both microscopic and macroscopic levels. We human beings do our part, but the project is much larger than we are. In life, especially during illness, our human abilities often fall short. Yet extraordinary events happen. Conflicted relationships are healed. Hopeless situations are resolved. Seemingly impossible events take place before our eyes. Are these coincidences or moments of grace?

Healing is always possible even when cure is not. Cures are usually restricted to the resolution of adverse physical conditions, and sometimes a cure is not possible. Healing is more holistic in that it encompasses the physical, psychological, social and spiritual. Although a dying person will not be cured, he or she can be healed. In the end, cure will elude every one of us, but healing need not.

ON THE WEB



From the archives, Paul Farmer on "Medicine and Social Justice."
americamagazine.org/pages

Jesus was a healer. He looked into the hearts and minds of those who sought his aid in recovering their sight or ability to walk. He restored them to wholeness, not just to physical well-being. Their problems were larger than eyes that could not see or legs that could not move. Jesus saw their illness as well as their physical condition. He was open to the divine, which made all the difference. It still does. When human beings open themselves to a power greater than their own, extraordinary things can happen. They can see illness as well as disease. They can see the human being before them and, in that person, see God.

Consider selfless service to others. What explanation for it suffices? From an evolutionary perspective, it makes no sense. Why risk one's life to save a person who is not even kin? Yet fire-fighters and emergency care workers do it all the time. Doing such jobs well means risking one's life. Where does the desire for such self-giving come from, since it is of no practical benefit to themselves? To put it in theological language: What is the origin of agape love? There is but one answer.

God is in the midst of tragedies, in the persons who need assistance and in the persons who willingly give themselves to help others. Although rescuers are merely human beings even at their finest moments, that is too limited a descriptor. Just as suffering people can serve as an image of the God who suffers with them, so people who give selfless service to others show forth the God who sustains and gives. Those who give freely reflect something of the divine in the midst of their own flawed humanity.

It is no longer possible for me to be an agnostic. To doubt God's existence, I would have to deny the totality of my experiences. I would have to deny the divine spark present in the individuals to whom I give and in the individuals who give to me. **A**

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ART | WENDY BECKETT

WE CAN BELIEVE THIS

A meditation on Janet McKenzie's 'The Holy Family'

It is impossible to paint the Holy Family realistically. We do not know what they looked like. Their contemporaries left us no record of their appearance, and the four great theologians who wrote the Gospels were completely uninterested in the personal details that we long to know. Their minds were wholly set on what Jesus was, his significance. He was fully man but also fully God; he offered humanity the truth of his Father, and no externals could be allowed to clutter up the strong, deep lines of this message.

Artists, though, are forced to imagine for us the appearance of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and over the centuries they have done so with great enthusiasm. Yet when we look at these pictures from the Middle Ages on, beautiful as they are, we may not realize their relative untruth. They all show us a fair-skinned Jesus with a fair-skinned mother. If St. Joseph is in the picture, he is hovering shyly in the background, usually aged, heavily bearded and fair. These are European families, usually rather aristocratic of aspect (except for poor Joseph), whereas the true Holy Family were Jewish peasants. The jolt many will feel when they look at Janet McKenzie's painting "The Holy Family" forces us to recognize the vast stretches of time and culture that lie between us.

The people in McKenzie's painting, which hangs in the chapel of Loyola School, a co-educational high school in New York City, are not Palestinian. She shows us a group of poor people

who have the features of the African or perhaps the Mexican or Peruvian. Jesus, Mary and Joseph did not look like this. But this is a wonderful equivalence, forcing us to recognize both difference and similarity. The whole painting is a marvelous interplay of realism and symbolism. We are compelled to think again and to look twice. All three have dark skin, a flat nose, dark, short curled hair (though Mary's is longer) and full lips.

It is as if the unknown reality of those first-century peasants has been transposed into another key, one to which we can genuinely respond. We are aware of their poverty. The couch on which Mary sits is patched, but its realism is set in an abstract context. Behind the family arises a geometrical patterning of lattice, palest pink in color and decorated with a flamboyant pink lily. The same touch of pink is visible behind Joseph's shoulder. Where are they? It would seem they are in some symbolic setting, where the lattice subtly suggests the cross, a theme picked up in the larger of the patches on Mary's couch. I am calling it a "couch" because its true definition is deliberately obscure. Mary is seated aslant, which inevitably recalls the side-saddled journeys that we know the family took together. The family vehicle, the donkey, seems to be present, even if only in subliminal fashion.

It is with these journeys that the Holy Family is most associated. On the first, when they traveled to Bethlehem, Jesus was only present in his mother's womb, as secure and warm as he appears to us in the paint-

ing. But he will sit on her lap, as here, when they flee Herod and they travel to Egypt, and when they return after Herod's death and live in Nazareth. Always Mary sits sidesaddle, holding the child to her heart, while Joseph either leads the donkey or walks beside her, a protecting presence.

When next we see the Holy Family, they are in Jerusalem, and we are about to have a demonstration of the impossibility of parents and children ever fully understanding one another. We know the story, one with which many parents will empathize. When they leave Jerusalem, Joseph thinks the child is with Mary, Mary thinks he is with Joseph, and it is only when they gather around the fire in the evening that they realize to their horror that Jesus is missing. It takes them three days of frantic search before they find him in the Temple, talking about his heavenly Father. Even in this closest and most loving of relationships, the parents are wounded at what seems their child's thoughtlessness. (Thoughtlessness? Jesus, the Son of God? Yes, but a human Jesus who could make innocent mistakes.)

Mary reproaches him: "Did you not know your father and I have sought you, sorrowing?" The 12-year-old Jesus is astonished. How could they have sought him? Where could he have been except in the house of his heavenly Father?

No matter how deep the love, every human being is essentially a mystery. Here we see, for our comfort, Mary and Joseph accepting the disappointment that all parents must feel on realizing the unknowability of their child. Jesus, too, must experience the sadness of coming to terms with the truth of the human condition.

But if the Holy Family did not

always understand one another, their mutual love and dependence was unshaken. McKenzie makes it beautifully clear that here is a family unit, three individuals bound together. We notice that both Mary and Joseph look not at us or at each other, but at Jesus. Highlighted by the glancing sunlight, Joseph's body language makes it unmistakably clear that he is devoted, body and soul, to the support of his beautiful wife, resolute to share with her the extraordinary responsibility of raising the child Jesus to manhood. This was most definitely not a one-parent family.

It took the church a long time to understand the significance of St. Joseph. In the very early church it was only Mary who was shown with Jesus, and she appeared very much as merely the means by which he comes to us. For centuries she was not seen as a person in her own right. To safeguard the doctrine of her virginity, St. Joseph was relegated even more to a background figure. Perhaps not until Murillo in the 17th century, devoted believer that he was, do we have an artist who understood that a family needs a father—a role model, to use modern jargon—and St. Joseph was the man God had especially picked for this.

We can believe this of McKenzie's Joseph. We notice his sturdy shoulders, his lack of interest in anything but the mother and child. We see how gently and tenderly his broad workman's hand touches Mary's veil. (The veil itself, diaphanous and white, subtly recalls the bridal veil of a virgin.) Mary does not touch him—there is no physical contact—but there is emotional contact, beautifully understated. We see Joseph's fingers on the veil, but not his thumb; we see Mary's thumb but not her fingers. It is as if together they form a hand.

If Mary and Joseph have eyes only for



Jesus, Jesus has eyes for us. Like any child who is completely secure in love, he looks out with an eager and innocent curiosity to an unknown world. Snuggled up in his warm jacket, he cannot imagine threats or danger. This, of course, is how it should be with every child, and a striking feature of this painting is how it appeals to the ordinary experience of a young family. The silent awe that Joseph feels is that of any young father faced with the wonder

of raising a child. Mary's immense dignity, her majestic inwardness, is surely that of a young mother holding her gift from God. The closeness and the sense of unexpressed devotion, which gives any family its stability, are here made visible. The artist wants us to see the Holy Family as writing large for us the holiness of the family, any family, our family.

The halos of the Holy Family, as McKenzie depicts them, are not the traditional gold, but rather a very pale

ON THE WEB

Terence W. Klein
reviews "Men of a Certain Age."
americamagazine.org/culture

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purple that fits in unobtrusively with the subdued pinks and browns of the background. The dominant impression is of warmth, a deep and glowing inner radiance, at its brightest in the face of the small Jesus. Although McKenzie does not set herself to teach, still less to preach, this painting has a special relevance for our contemporary world. So many of our tragedies and discontents seem to stem from the decline of family life. All too often there is no father, or there is an absent father, and the child suffers from insecurity. Here we

see the ideal: a man who loves his wife and her child and will devote himself to their protection; a woman who is secure in her husband's affection and in their joint responsibility for her baby; a baby who feels completely safe. The family is holy.

WENDY BECKETT, a hermit who lives near a Carmelite monastery in Quidenham, Norfolk, England, is best known for her television documentaries on art. Her most recent book is *Sister Wendy on Prayer*. This essay is adapted from the new book *Holiness & the Feminine Spirit: The Art of Janet McKenzie*, edited by Susan Perry (Orbis).

BOOKS | ANGELO STAGNARO

CELESTIAL GUIDANCE

ANGEL TIME A Novel

By Anne Rice
Knopf. 288p \$25.95

Anne Rice's mesmerizing new novel, *Angel Time*, is about a young man who witnesses his young siblings' murders at the hands of his alcoholic mother and her own subsequent suicide, goes to New York City with the intention of becoming an internationally famous lute player but instead gets sidetracked and becomes an accomplished and financially successful assassin. He is ultimately confronted by his guardian angel, who helps him travel back in time to 13th-century England in order to save a village of Jews.

I know what you are thinking right now: "Ah! *That* old chestnut!"

Despite the far-fetched plot, *Angel Time* is in fact a good read. The book, however, marks a departure from the author's previous bloody, sometimes sadistic, frightening and macabre books. As a result of her return to Catholicism, Rice refuses to devote any more time or energy to writing about vampires, witches and demons. The author explains:



The entire body of my earlier work reflects a movement towards Jesus Christ. In 2002, I consecrated my work to Jesus Christ. This did not involve a denunciation of works that reflected the journey. It was rather a statement that from then on I would write directly for Jesus Christ. I would write

works about salvation, as opposed to alienation; I would write books about reconciliation in Christ, rather than books about the struggle for answers in a post World War II seemingly atheistic world.

Readers more accustomed to Rice's gorier, eldritch literature will see that her skillful storytelling and character development are still in evidence. The slow, pedantic and choppy style in the first 12 pages initially made me despair that Rice had lost her touch. But, slowly, almost imperceptibly, the reader is drawn into the characters of her book—especially the lead antihero assassin, Toby “Lucky” O’Dare, aide-de-camp to the rather hands-off angel Malchiah, who needs Toby to interact with humans on a more “human level.”

Though *Angel Time's* plot is unbelievable, it is easy for the reader to suspend disbelief. Rice weaves a compelling, suspenseful and even sordid tale.

Considering this is a foray into a new genre and the topic of this particular book, she has a weighty task before her. Readers of Dante's *Divine Comedy* might remember that *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* are riveting because all of us want to know how the bad guy gets it in the fullness of time. The crimes and the corresponding suffering and pain of the damned souls fascinate us, whereas the beatific existence of souls floating blissfully in *Paradiso* is a bit less compelling. It is more entertaining to talk of evil things and their effect upon the soul and upon the world in general. Holiness is harder to sell, so Rice has her hands full trying to make holy seem hip.

Certainly all art is autobiographical to some degree, but *Angel Time* is more personal than Rice's previous fiction. It seems that intentionally or not, Rice has written a roman à clef. I suggest that the hidden drama in this book is her recent return to Catholicism. Fans will recall that Rice

delved into her spiritual awakening in her autobiographical *Called Out of Darkness: A Spiritual Confession* (Knopf, 2008). *Angel Time* is the first fictionalized account of her coming back to the fold. It is about the titanic struggle between good and evil as played out in the confines of a single human soul and how that struggle affects the world around that soul—specifically, Anne Rice's soul.

The story's assassin protagonist is not merely “sad” at his predicament in life. He is a spiritually empty, embittered, self-centered atheist, who sees others as means to his own end. The only thing that seems to fill that emptiness is his dedication to destroying all vestiges of human emotional attachments. By her own admission, this is the state in which Rice found herself before her conversion of heart.

It should be noted that Rice's convoluted use of relativistic ethics as a plot device is a point of concern. The author spends a quarter of the book

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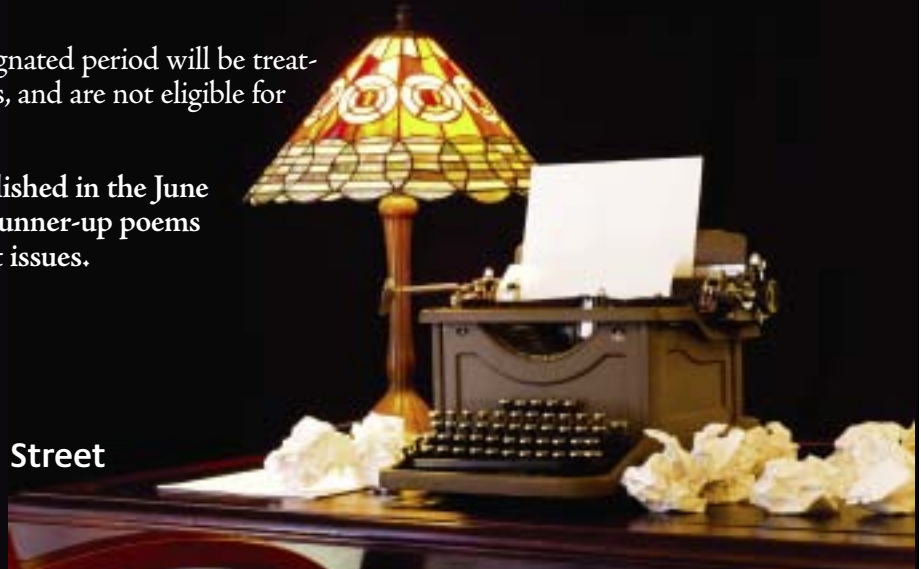
Each entrant is asked to submit only one typed, unpublished poem of 30 lines or fewer that is not under consideration elsewhere. Include contact information on the same page as the poem. Poems will not be returned. Please do not submit poems by e-mail or fax. Submissions must be postmarked between Jan.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

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

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detailing a complex plan to deceive a bishop and his ecclesiastical court by passing off a live Christian sister as her dead Jewish twin in order to save a town's Jewish community. It is the classic moral question everyone considers at one time or another: "Would you lie to Nazis in order to save the Jews hiding in your attic?" Toby, the assassin-turned-time-traveling-superhero, has to make the same decision, but sans the Nazis.

I did not find the time-traveling sequence as hard to believe as the idea that God and Toby's guardian angel Malchiah wanted the erstwhile assassin to lie under *any* circumstances, even if that lie resulted in saving many others from death. I find it difficult to

accept the idea that God is encouraging an end-justifies-the-means style of ethics. If we found ourselves in such a situation, as certainly many European Christians who saved Jews persecuted by Nazis did, we should lie because it would save lives, not because lying is good in and of itself.

But despite the confused ethical system, and the angelically assisted time-traveling assassin, Anne Rice has written a highly entertaining book that shows the world the very real spiritual results of intentionally separating oneself from God and refusing his grace.

ANGELO STAGNARO, *the author of six books on mentalism, has written for many Catholic journals and is a correspondent for Catholic News Service.*

MARY DONNARUMMA SHARNICK

SLOWLY DOWN THE SLOPE

THE LAST OF HIS MIND A Year in the Shadow of Alzheimer's

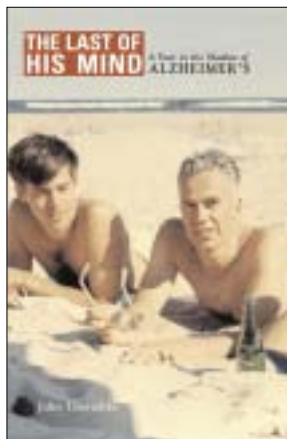
By John Thorndike
Swallow Press. 248p \$24.95

John Thorndike's wrenching, detailed and affecting memoir chronicling the year he cared for his Alzheimer's-beset father is at its core a story about touch.

The son's yearning for touch was never sated. His parents—Lois, a physician who suffered from depression and committed suicide in 1972; Joe, an editor at *Life* magazine under Henry Luce, an intellectual among intellectuals—loved and cared for him, he knew. But apart from his toddler's experience of being "buzzed" or "flown" around the living room by his dad, John Thorndike never received the physical comfort he sought: "He [Joe Thorndike] can't be emotional or affectionate. This seemed normal when I was growing up: weren't all fathers the same? But looking back as

an adult, I see how much warmth I didn't get from him, and how much I needed."

Less emotionally and physically inhibited than her husband, Lois Thorndike satisfied her sexual desires in a series of affairs that her son researched and narrates in these pages. Bravely asking his son not to blame his mother for her betrayals, Joe reveals a "hurt" he caused his wife, insisting to his son that it was he who breached their marriage vows first. John likewise acknowledges some self-destructive choices in his own life. His salvation came about, he says, by caring for his only child, his son, Janir, whose mother (John's ex-wife) suffered severe psychological problems. Winning sole custody of Janir, John was determined to give his son what he himself desired.



"When was I happiest?" he asks himself:

...it was the years with my son on our farm in Ohio, years of volleyball and soccer in the living room, baseball in the meadow, board games at night and wasted hours with the rain falling outside and the two of us lying around on the sofa. It was a simple life—just as life with my dad is now simple and repetitive—but I was never more engaged than in those childhood years when Janir and I lived together.

When he becomes responsible for his father's very survival, John Thorndike finds a similar satisfaction. Despite the tedium, long silences, spilled food, soiled diapers, despite the loneliness, fear and regrets, despite the encroaching inevitability, John craves his father's continued presence in his life.

Even as Joe Thorndike "loses nouns" and suffers the indignities of incontinence, he retains for quite some time the laconic, correct and distant manner of speech that has pained John since he could help himself articulate his desire for paternal intimacy. No matter the gentle service John willingly offers and provides his father, Joe responds with a startling consistency: "For the past few days, he's been thanking me constantly. When I serve him a meal, when I bring him his coat, when I open a door for him, he thanks me. The formality of it has started to get on my nerves. He never says *Thanks* or *Great* or *Okay*, it's always a precise *Thank you*. It makes me feel like an attendant."

But over the course of his 92nd

year, as Alzheimer's lays claim to Joe's mind, the touch so long denied to his son becomes for John both burden and gift. While others—the nurse Harriet, the psychologist Gerry Elovitz, John's brothers, Al and Joe, friends from Ohio, home hospice staff members—offer respite care, advice both sought and unsought, humor, financial compensation and respect for the man who honors his father's plea not to be placed in a nursing home, none of them experiences the anguished intimacy John at last shares with his father:

I'm going to move into the living room and stay there, because if he starts to go I don't want one of the sitters to be here in the house. I don't want anyone here, not even Harriet, maybe not even Al. Of course I'll call him, and Joe in Virginia—but what I really want is to be alone with my father when he dies.

And so he was.
He had arrived on Cape Cod, suit-

case in hand, when Joe Thorndike still knew what was happening to him, when he posted notes to himself all over the house: "I already ate breakfast"; when he could, like a wonderful surprise, correctly use the word "prong"; when he could ask to go to the ocean, eat ice cream, visit with his granddaughter.

He was there when Dr. Elovitz listed Alzheimer's encroachments: "Aphasia is language impairment, agnosia the failure to understand the source or meaning of pain, anosognosia the loss of self-awareness, and dressing apraxia the inability to dress himself according to the usual norms...."

And he is there when Joe Thorndike breathes his last. His loss and his love indistinguishable, John Thorndike takes his father "fully in [his] arms."

Readers, too, will respond to the touch of his daring, deft embrace.

MARY DONNARUMMA SHARNICK *chairs the English department at Chase Collegiate School, Waterbury, Conn. She is a founding editor of The Litchfield Review.*

tion of the animal and plant kingdoms. One can read Ackerman for the pure pleasure of encountering her felicitous writing. In spring, "A howling-bright moon floats below a coal scuttle full of stars." And in summer, "Voice-dueling birds keep winding their springs, buzzing their kazoos, whistling, warbling, and chattering in a divine ruckus of warring songs."

The book's exquisite prose and keen observations about the natural world likely will remind readers of Mary Oliver and Henry David Thoreau.

In describing the habits and lifestyles of doves, whooping cranes, mockingbirds, woodpeckers and squirrels, Ackerman exudes curiosity, appreciation and respect for all living things.

Cranes can solve problems, experience feelings, hold grudges, recognize human faces and perform "many other tricks we regard as solely human." The brown thrasher has a repertoire of more than 2,000 songs. The mockingbird "trills and warbles, yodels and sighs, buzzes and caws in a single ribbon of magically changing song." And when it rains, squirrels fold their tails over their heads as umbrellas.

Throughout the book, Ackerman returns to the magic of dawn, which has enjoyed a special significance in culture and religion throughout history. Religious rites, prayers and festivals often take place at dawn. Ackerman cites the morning prayers known as Lauds, a practice that can be traced back to the Apostles.

She mourns the loss of dark, star-filled nights and cites the work of the Dark Sky Society, which seeks to restore "the grandeur of star-loaded night skies" by dimming lights and placing curfews on illuminated advertising signs.

BILL WILLIAMS

BIRDSONG AND EARLY MORN

DAWN LIGHT

Dancing With Cranes and Other Ways to Start the Day

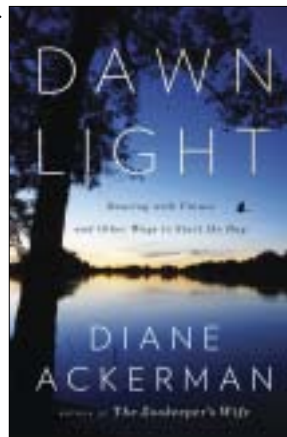
By Diane Ackerman
W. W. Norton. 256p \$24.95

One cannot help but smile at Diane Ackerman's contagious exuberance for the natural world. Her childlike enthusiasm leaps off the pages of this poetic tribute to hummingbirds, whooping cranes, squirrels, flowers, seasons and, yes, the coming of dawn.

Perhaps best known for her 1990 book, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Ackerman has long been a prolific

observer of the myriad wonders of nature. In this latest gem she invites us to turn off our cellphones and open our ears, eyes and hearts to the beauty that surrounds us. She finds it "eye-poppingly wonderful...to live on a planet in space, and to be alive with intelligence...to remember how lucky and fleeting it is just being alive."

Dawn Light draws on the Bible, ancient myths, science and poetry in a joyful celebra-



The book celebrates the art of Claude Monet and the poetry of the late John O'Donohue. Ackerman marvels at Monet's painting titled "Mornings on the Seine." "Rising

early," she writes, "he would climb into the boat he'd transformed into a floating studio, and set out on the river, painting the sensations of dawn in thick, voluptuous swirls of color rid-

dled with light."

And in a lovely tribute to her friend O'Donohue, Ackerman notes that the famed Irish writer found in poetry "a form of endless rebirth, a mystical path to the divine."

Lamentably, clocks, deadlines and noise have replaced the rhythms of nature. "Few," Ackerman tells us, "wake to birdsong or watch the sunrise anymore." But the author sits quietly in her yard in Ithaca, N.Y., in "data-free time, time away from clocks, e-mail, cell phones, computers, newspapers, televisions, radios and all the other purveyors of information that plug us in and plug us up."

She mourns the social cost, believing that children today suffer from a "nature deficit disorder" that may affect their nervous systems and ability to handle stress.

While reading this enchanting book, I found myself paying closer attention to nature. On the back deck of my house one day, I stopped to watch a tiny bug climb a pole, wondering where it was headed and what it was doing. On another day, walking near a field in the early morning semi-darkness, I observed a fox 10 feet in front of me, perhaps looking for breakfast.

"Born into a world of light," Ackerman writes, "my senses will mature and will decay. But until they do they are the gateways to the mysterious kingdom in which I find myself, one I could not have imagined, a land not entirely of hope and glory, yet no less beautiful for that."

And, finally, she offers this sage advice: "Just show up, that's all we have to do, that's all I do when I am fully present, for good or bad, right here, right now, without thinking about work or recess."

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.

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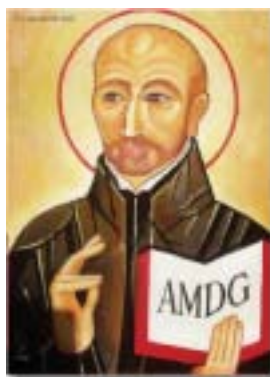


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Interested and qualified candidates are asked to submit electronically a letter of introduction; a résumé; names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of five professional references; and a statement describing the importance of Catholic secondary education for young women, based on their personal experiences, to: Saint Dominic Academy, Head of School Search, Catholic School Management Inc., Attn.: Jennifer C. Kensel, at office@catholicschoolmgmt.com. Review of applications will begin Feb. 15, 2010, and continue until the position is filled. Position is available July 1, 2010.

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LETTERS

The More the Merrier

Re *Of Many Things* by Maurice Timothy Reidy (1/4): Thank you for the podcasts. I look forward to them. It is good to sit back and listen to a favorite author, get acquainted with a new personality and just plain enjoy it all. And these podcasts can easily be downloaded, burned to a CD and passed on to a person with limited physical vision. In addition, they make for great listening on a long drive. The more the better.

Laura Dulude
Warwick, R.I.

Holy Mothers and Fathers

I could not agree more with "Venerabile Subito!" (Current Comment, 12/14). We need more lay people canonized. As a priest, I am humbled by the example of our good people who day in and day out live the Gospel. As a religious living in com-

munity, I need only walk down the hall to be in the chapel, and yet so many of our lay people make incredible sacrifices to go to daily Mass. They visit the Blessed Sacrament, read the Scriptures and make great financial contributions to the church. I second the nominations of those great men and women you mentioned.

Paul Wierichs, C.P.
North Palm Beach, Fla.

Catholic Continuity

Your article "Parish Revival," by Bruce Cecil (12/21), was enlightening. It shows what a certain Protestant pastor can do to bring in a crowd. On the other hand, when my parish in Seattle applied for a huge loan to replace our little wooden church, the bank made the loan immediately.

A prominent local Protestant church complained to the bank for not loaning funds to complete their building. The bank replied: "With a Catholic parish, no matter who the pastor is, the parish car-

ries on, generation after generation. But with Protestant parishes it depends mainly on who the pastor is, whether he can attract a large following."

Dan Lyons
Bloomsbury, N.J.

The Word Never Fails

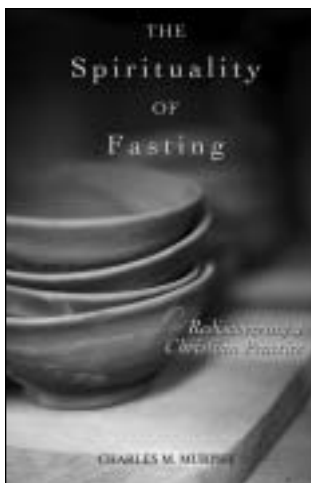
Re "God's Family Reunion" (The Word, 12/21): Just a note to express my appreciation for Sister Barbara Reid's help in my understanding of the Sunday readings. She never fails to prompt thoughts for my meditation. Just wish I could be as brief as she!

Michael R. Braun
Bakersfield, Calif.

War Totally Unacceptable

Re "Another War President?" by John DiJulio (12/21): We might recall the homily of Pope John Paul II in May 1982 at Coventry Cathedral in England. As Britain prepared for a major aerial bombardment of the Falkland Islands, an assault that eventu-

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ally would kill over 600 Argentine soldiers, the pope had the courage to say to his hosts the following: "Today, the scale and the horror of modern warfare—whether nuclear or not—makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations. War should belong to the tragic past, to history; it should find no place on humanity's agenda for the future."

I think it is safe to assume, given this statement, that Pope John Paul would not support our country's actions in Afghanistan and would see it as the unjust war that it is.

TIM BROYLES
Phoenix, Ariz.

No Need to Worry

It seems to me that the Rev. Michael G. Ryan ("What If We Said, 'Wait?'" 12/14) is setting us up to hate the new translations even before we've experienced them. I've read those parts of the new translations avail-

able on the Internet and nothing struck me as so horrible. I do not mean to be too harsh, but why would anyone seriously consider the opinion of a liturgical theologian or liturgy commission? Aren't they the ones who have contributed so much to making the mess of worship that afflicts so many parishes today?

In any case, Father Ryan should not worry too much. If any priest does not care for the new translation, I am sure he will just make the prayers up as he goes, as so many do today, confident that he is doing his people a favor by sparing them the horrible new translations.

BOB HUNT
Knoxville, Tenn.

A Question of Control

The church is experiencing much more than a translation problem. The problem is one of governance. The Vatican under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI has been showing

an appetite for control that is nothing less than indecent. The Second Vatican Council's accomplishments in the way of collegiality, so specific in allocating translation authority to regional bishops, is now openly jettisoned. In 2002 the Vatican replaced leadership in ICEL with bishops dramatically aligned with Vatican views. Now the naked grasp for total control! Our U.S. bishops have shown inappropriate surrender of their proper role.

(MSGR.) HARRY J. BYRNE
Bronx, N.Y.

Growing Up Catholic

Thank you for your thoughtful, genuine and insightful article ("This Boy's Life," by Gerald Schiffhorst, 12/21). I have much gratitude for those who offer the whole, concrete experience of growing up Catholic. As one who wandered away from the church for a number of years, finding my way back has often been through illustrative



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reflections such as yours. You have put into words what I have felt in my heart but had not yet given a voice.

LINDA GODDARD
Winter Springs, Fla.

The Divine Feminine

Praying the rosary ("Beads of Power," by Thomas Shelley, 1/4) appears to be another example that belief matters more than history. Personally, I am thrilled with Marian devotions because they do tend to be "bottom-up" instead of "top-down." And just when scholars and wise clergy think these irrational devotions are under control, doesn't Mary end up appearing to some peasant somewhere! The message seems always to include, "Pray the rosary." Popular devotions are popular because they touch souls, souls that long for the divine feminine. No matter how loved and adored our

fathers are, in deepest need we all cry out for our mothers.

EVELYN BALDWIN
Bear, Del.

Expanding Vouchers

Re "Opening School Doors to Hispanics," (Signs of the Times, 1/4): What do the current minority members of the Supreme Court, Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Clarence Thomas, as well as the current surgeon general of the United States have in common? One is a female Hispanic, the others male and female African-Americans, yet all came from humble backgrounds. They are not all of the same race, sex or political viewpoint, but all three of them had parents or grandparents who made the extra effort to enroll their children in the parochial school system.

Right now some 1,700 students of inner-city families in the Washington,

D.C., area have had the good fortune of receiving vouchers to enable them to escape the underperforming public school system there. But teachers' unions are fighting to end this opportunity for the most needy.

Nothing would help the less-fortunate minorities in the United States more than an expansion of the voucher program, with two Supreme Court justices and a surgeon general at the pinnacle of their professions living proof of the result. All Catholics concerned for social justice for our poorest citizens should support the effort to extend and expand vouchers across the nation, especially for needy inner-city residents. They will perform the same uplifting service they did earlier for impoverished Irish and Italian immigrants only a few generations ago.

WALTER MATTINGLY
New Orleans, La.

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God Inside-Out

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), JAN. 24, 2010

Readings: Neh 8:2-10; Ps 19:8-10, 15; 1 Cor 12:12-30; Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to bring glad tidings to the poor”
(Lk 4:18)

Many organizations have a mission statement that succinctly defines their purpose. The idea is to be able to state clearly to those on the outside what is the aim of the organization. A mission statement helps as well to keep those within the group focused on their purpose. Luke begins his Gospel with his own brief mission statement, telling Theophilus, probably his patron, that he intends to set forth for him an accurate account to give him assurance about the teaching he has received. Today’s Gospel then jumps ahead to Jesus’ declaration of his mission in his hometown synagogue.

Jesus begins by saying that the power of the Holy Spirit is upon him. The Spirit is actually God’s mission statement to the world, since prior to Jesus’ coming, God’s love in mission is first revealed by the Spirit’s activity in creation. We can only know the “inside” mystery of God through the “outside” manifestation of the action and presence of the holy in the world and in human experience.

My colleague Stephen Bevans has elaborated a missionary theology of the Spirit, naming it “God inside-out.” Today’s Gospel says that this Spirit

now rests upon Jesus, who makes humanly visible and outwardly tangible the inner heart of God, who desires healing, wholeness and jubilee justice. Luke says that “the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently” at Jesus when he read from the prophet Isaiah. Could they see “God inside-out” as he interpreted the Scripture passage as fulfilled in their hearing?

Similarly, in the first reading, Nehemiah stresses that all the people listened attentively as Ezra read forth the law and interpreted it for them. For our ancestors in the faith, it was through the law that the Spirit made known the inner heart of God. Nehemiah says that “all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.” He urges them not to be sad or weep, but does not explain what caused their weeping.

Were they tears of joy to have returned home from exile in Babylon to their own homeland, with their own temple being rebuilt and their own customs restored? Were they tears of grief over all that had been lost in the intervening years: those who had died or who had not returned with them, the land despoiled, the Temple in shambles? Maybe they were tears of

repentance. Or were they tears of gratitude for the gift of the law from a God whose words of undeserved love and mercy rained down upon them from the mouth of Ezra?

Perhaps the tears were for all of the above. When God reveals outwardly the bounteous heart of divine love, our first response is often to be overwhelmed to the point of tears.

It is easy to imagine that as Jesus announced his embodiment of this divine mission there may have been a similar reaction, as those who felt exiled in body or spirit heard a new promise of restoration and release, a new time of jubilation.

Paul uses a vivid metaphor to describe the way the Christian community continues the mission of being “God inside-out.” The



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- How does your faith community reveal “God inside-out”?
- How does the Spirit counter any sense of inferiority or superiority in the exercise of the gifts for mission?
...
- Pray with gratitude for having been called to mission, at whatever stage of your life you accepted it.
- How does the sense of being called by God fortify you for the difficulties involved in following Jesus?

Spirit, as love in mission, creates unity and harmony within the very diverse body, where the many parts are all unique, precious and equally important. The mission is especially focused on attending to those members who are the most vulnerable. As within the divine being, so within the united community of believers: Every joy felt by one is shared by all, and every suffering is borne by all.

BARBARA E. REID, O.P., a member of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, Mich., is a professor of New Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Ill., where she is vice president and academic dean.

Fulfilled in Our Hearing

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY

TIME (C), JAN. 31, 2010

Readings: Jer 1:4-5; 17-19; Ps 71:1-17; 1 Cor 12:31-13:13; Lk 4:21-30

“Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum” (Lk 4:23)

Some people know what they want to be when they grow up from the time they are very young. Others discover their vocation as young adults. Still others never seem to find their real mission in life. Jeremiah apparently knew as a very

young man what were God’s designs for him. Not only does Jeremiah perceive his calling very early, but he understands that it is not something he dreamed up on his own. Rather, it was God who appointed him as prophet before he was even formed in his mother’s womb. Similarly, Luke began his account with the annunciation to Jesus’ mother of her child’s prophetic mission even before he is conceived in her womb.

One can always resist such a calling, especially since prophets always experience suffering in carrying out their mission. People who are lifted up by the prophet’s liberating words react with enthusiastic welcome. But for those whose power, privilege or status is threatened by the prophet’s chal-

lenges to live justly, the reaction can become even murderous. To Jeremiah God gives assurance of divine strength to withstand whatever opposition he experiences. Similarly, when the crowd in Nazareth turns on Jesus, he is given the strength to pass unharmed through their midst.

Today’s Gospel picks up from last Sunday’s, in which Jesus first announced his mission to reveal God’s liberating and re-creating Spirit through the healing and freeing of any who were bound. Jesus’ neighbors and friends are familiar with the passage from Isaiah that he quotes. At first they marvel when he says that it is fulfilled in their hearing. Jesus, as if reading their thoughts, exposes what is on their minds: “Let’s see what you can do.” These thoughts seem very close to what the devil says to Jesus in the previous Gospel episode. They want him to do a flashy miracle to show off his powers to cure. Instead, Jesus retells stories with which they are well acquainted, stories about earlier prophets who used their healing powers to cure foreign outsiders.

What kind of response is that? One of the implications of Jesus’ answer is that the mission he has embraced is, in some ways, not a new one. God’s healing Spirit has been revealing the divine intent to heal, restore and bring all inside into God’s loving embrace, even beyond the reach of those to whom God has revealed the law. What is new is the way the Spirit is now embodied in Jesus to bring this revelation to completion.

What Jesus’ audience may not have liked is that he is also inviting them to participate in this same saving mission. Jesus’ powerful words and deeds are not just something to watch and by which to be impressed. Rather, his mission of jubilee justice is to be taken up and continued by all who hear. Thus it is fulfilled today in our hearing.

BARBARA E. REID

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