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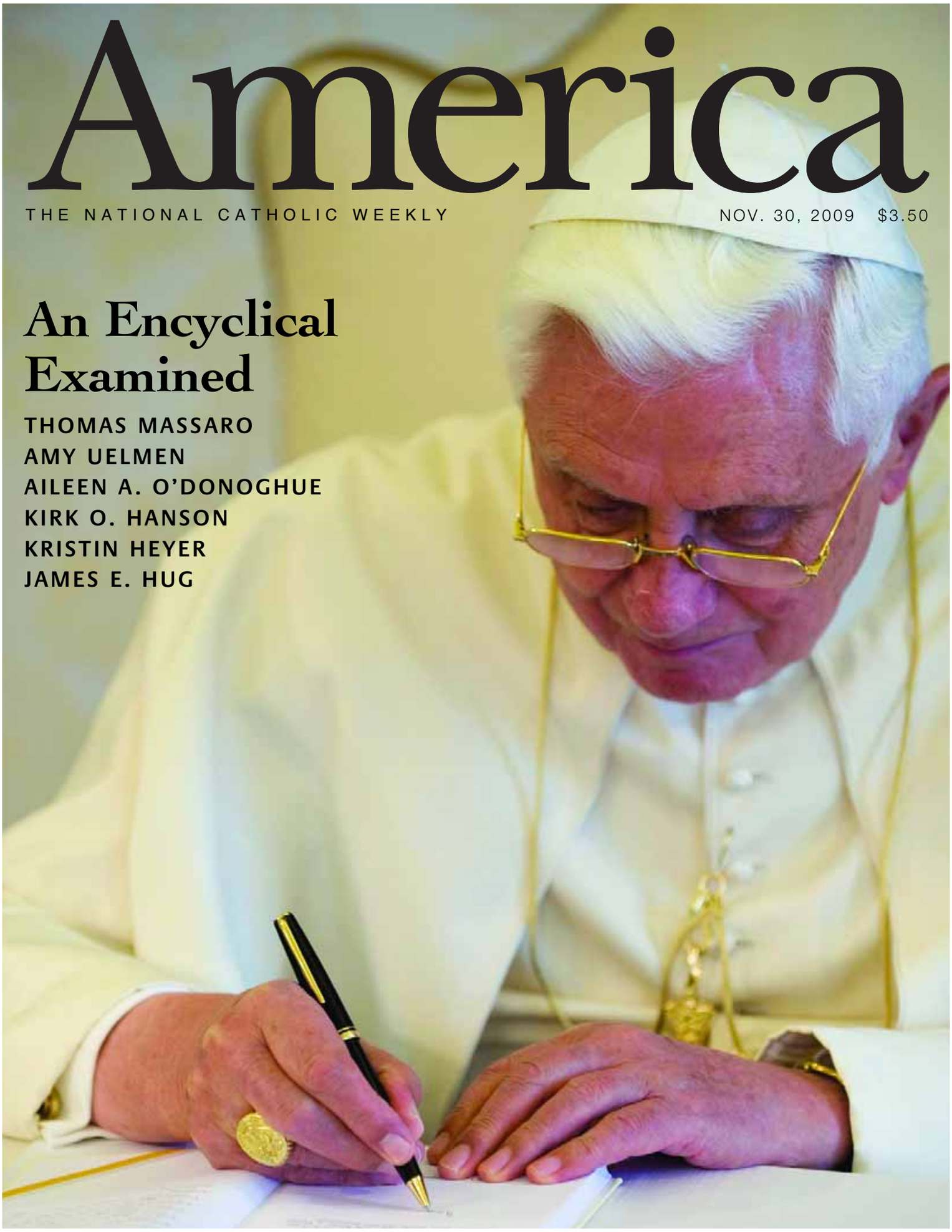

An Encyclical Examined

THOMAS MASSARO
AMY UELMEN
AILEEN A. O'DONOGHUE
KIRK O. HANSON
KRISTIN HEYER
JAMES E. HUG

OF MANY THINGS

"Next stop, Dobbs Ferry," the amiable conductor says, so I'll know when to get off the train. It is odd to be back in New York after 22 years (can it be?) in Chicago. The last time I lived in the area I was a young man of five and twenty and if not completely without a care, then with a remarkably light burden to shoulder. Now I am not so young; the wrinkles and gray hairs gang up on me in the bathroom mirror. There are mornings I don't recognize the middle-aged grump looking back at me.

It is hardly original to note the shocking passage of time, particularly when it is wrenched into focus by a move as dramatic as the one I've made from the Great Plains to the gritty urbanity of New York. But my recent "Go East, old man" routine has been accompanied by the pop phenomenon of "Mad Men" and the retrieval of Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* from an encroaching obscurity. These two minor cultural artifacts have made my resettlement in John Cheever's suburban landscape feel even more dislocating. Am I one of those guys? Where did I sign up for this? Where have gone my youthful dreams of glory? Beats me. I gave up looking for my Ramones T-shirt a long time ago. I may not be the man in the grey flannel suit waiting for the next Croton-Harmon train, but I have to squint pretty hard to see the difference.

Though I don't miss an episode of "Mad Men," I have not had the heart to read Yates's searing novel or even to see Sam Mendes's recent cinematic interpretation. I can't even get through the trailer on iTunes before Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet's unquiet desperation feels too close-to-homey for my middle-class comfort.

It was only a few weeks ago that I did a double-take, driving down Saw Mill River Road past Ardsley, New York's real-life Revolutionary Road. I have since discovered other scattered Revolutionary Roads winding their way among the villages of Westchester County.

I am become "Mad Men's" Don Draper, destroyer of...what exactly? While Don and the *Road*'s Frank Wheeler attempt to resolve their angst and anxieties in boozy womanizing, like most other middle-aged guys of my generation I find myself on a slightly less self-indulgent and self-destructive path. That's not to say I don't wake up some mornings humming the Talking Heads and wondering how I got this beautiful house, with this beautiful wife. But really, who has time for that?

It is possible that I have let the days go by without much consciousness of the direction they are flowing. Maybe my wife and I are both too busy to devote much attention to examining this life of ours. It's true four mouths and minds and spirits to feed at home do not leave a lot of philosophical downtime, but if I haven't had the courage or the energy to flag off a path for myself in life, if my always inchoate ambition has only become more dissipated over the years, I can only acknowledge that it is my family, my wife and children, who provide all the direction and purpose in my life now as I wait on that train platform in Dobbs Ferry every working morn. And for this I am deeply grateful. I am reminded of the words I told my wife at our rehearsal dinner, "Thank you for saving me."

Maybe despite my new zip code I can simply forego the Draperish desperation and Leonardian angst. Maybe it is good enough to remember the soft words my kindly conductor intones as I reach my station. Of the many times he's encouraged me off the train and aimed me toward my home, it is always the "next stop" he's urging me toward. I've never once heard him say, "Last stop, Dobbs Ferry."

KEVIN CLARKE

America

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Cover: Pope Benedict XVI signs a copy of his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* at the Vatican July 6. (CNS photo/ L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

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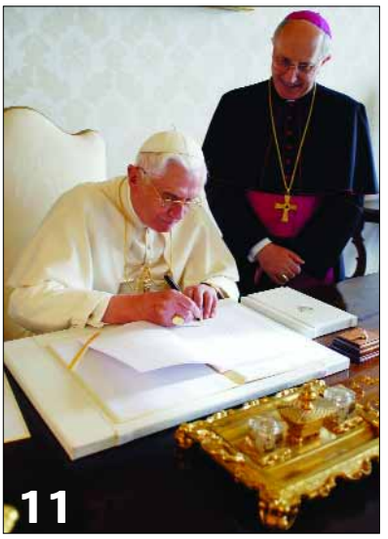

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ON THE WEB

Amy Uelmen talks about **'Charity in Truth'** and the **Focolare** movement on our podcast; and from the archives, Thomas J. Reese, S.J., on the history of the **greeting of peace**. Plus, Kerry Weber reviews the film **"Fantastic Mr. Fox."** All at americamagazine.org.

Downsizing the Man-Eaters

At the end of the 19th century, two animals halted the progress of empire. Near Tsavo, in Kenya, two lions closed down the building of the British East African Railway, intended to open the interior of the continent to trade. For months the lions, nicknamed Ghost and Darkness, later the subject of a 1997 film, snatched workers from the camps, mainly at night but often during the day, reputedly killing 135 workers. Nothing could stop them—not even "lion-proof" fences made of thorn trees. Finally, an intrepid hunter, Lt. Col. J. H. Patterson, brought the two man-eaters down, wrote a book called (what else?) *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* and donated their skins to the Field Museum in Chicago, where they, stuffed, have stood sentry ever since.

That story has just changed. According to Science Daily, scientists analyzing the bone and hair of the lions with "stable isotope analysis" have determined they killed "only" 35 humans. "The rather extravagant claims Colonel Patterson made can now be pretty much dismissed," said Nathaniel J. Dominy, a professor of anthropology. Similar debunking, or downsizing of stories, has become common. The Vikings, we are told, never wore those operatic hats with horns. (Horns would have provided enemies with a way to grab hold of their opponents.)

Even religious stories are subject to downsizing. The parting of the Red Sea was recently ascribed not to God's awesome power but a natural occurrence of wind. But, as with the story of the Exodus, even scientifically downsized stories convey lasting truths. God led his people out of Egypt. And you still wouldn't want to meet up with Ghost and Darkness on a moonless night in East Africa.

Wonderful Copenhagen?

In the U.S. Congress, legislation aimed at responding to climate change has been shelved until 2010. India, for its part, has already ruled out carbon emission limits, arguing not unreasonably that since the planet's advanced economies got spaceship Earth into this choking hazard, it is their responsibility to get it out.

This is the political climate of deadlock and denial that challenges the organizers of this December's U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, Denmark. While some climatologists have been spinning doomsday scenarios like something out of the Book of Revelation, even moderates among them worry that world powers must soberly confront their carbon problem before it is too late. President Obama says he is ready to visit Copenhagen personally, if that might charm conference members into meaningful commitments.

Unfortunately it is not just a recalcitrant carbon-spewers-of-the-future club—Brazil, China and India—that he has to deal with, but a U.S. Congress that still carries its fair load of climate change deniers. Obama's dialogue in mid-November with Chinese leaders should set the tone for Copenhagen. If he is able to work out a verifiable, practical carbon reduction strategy that the world's economic behemoths can live with, that should provide a significant running start to Copenhagen. Closer to home President Obama may have to bypass the "Don't worry, be happy" gang in Washington and set the Environmental Protection Agency to doing what Congress will not. The E.P.A. can reset industry standards to reduce the nation's gigantic carbon footprint. We wish him luck. All that hot air Congress is generating on climate change is becoming stifling.

Chalets and Minarets

Swiss voters will go to the polls on the last Sunday of November to vote on whether the government should ban the construction of minarets, slender towers that stand next to mosques. Muslims around the world use the balconies of minarets for the daily call to worship. Switzerland already bans loudspeakers on the balconies because of noise pollution.

Behind the referendum is the right-wing Swiss People's Party. It has used ugly tactics to underscore its anti-Muslim views, claiming that minarets are symbols of Islamic intolerance. Posters have appeared with a woman in a burqa in front of missile-shaped minarets. Though some cities, like Basel, have outlawed the posters, others, like Zurich, have allowed them in the name of free speech.

Only 5 percent of Swiss residents are Muslim, and of the roughly 150 mosques in the country, just four have minarets. Some businesses are concerned, though, that a ban could harm sales in Muslim parts of the world. The watch company Swatch Group Ltd., for instance, worries about a possible backlash. Others see far deeper implications in a ban. The Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan, who was born and raised in Switzerland, blames racism for the initiative. He told an interviewer that voters "should not vote with their fears, but with their principles...which comprise freedom of conscience and freedom of religion." Open-minded observers might agree that anti-Muslim bigotry, whether in Switzerland or elsewhere, is contrary to the functioning of any free society.

EDITORIAL

A Lasting Victory?

The Affordable Health Care for America Act, passed by the House of Representatives on Nov. 7, is both an achievement and a mere first step. It is an achievement because no other administration has moved this far toward universal health care, although many presidents and candidates aspired to this, beginning with Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. The passage of the House bill by a vote of 220 to 215 could become more than a transitory victory, but its lasting significance depends on what is learned from the 11th-hour effort to win passage of the reform bill. It will also depend on the contents of the Senate bill and the final House-Senate conference bill.

Should it become law, H.R. 3962 would offer the nation benefits historic in scope:

- mandated coverage for 96 percent of American citizens, including 36 million of those currently uninsured;
- federal subsidies to help persons with low-incomes afford the premiums;
- an employer mandate to provide health insurance for workers, with an exemption for small businesses (currently 160 million workers have employer-sponsored plans);
- limitations on insurers, who could sell only policies that meet government standards and could no longer refuse coverage to persons with pre-existing conditions, cap lifetime coverage, drop policyholders who become seriously ill or charge co-pays for preventive care; and parents' policies could cover children up to age 27.

The bill would also expand Medicaid and streamline Medicare. It would be funded by a "millionaire's tax," reducing the deficit by millions over 10 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office. A public option would be one of many choices in a government-sponsored marketplace set up for small businesses and others without insurance. But the public option and government-subsidized plans in the marketplace would not pay for or subsidize elective abortions.

Ironically, it was an amendment to prohibit taxpayer funding for elective abortions, sponsored by Representative Bart Stupak, Democrat of Michigan, and Joseph R. Pitts, Republican of Pennsylvania, that secured the bill's passage and provided its most bipartisan moment. The amendment passed 240 to 194, with support from 176 Republicans and 64 Democrats. At the last roll call, however, a single Republican voted for the bill: Anh Cao of New Orleans, who said restrictions on abortion were essential to his vote.

One lesson to be learned is that Democrats and Republicans can work together to continue to limit federal financing for elective abortion, though it is not easy.

A second lesson is that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Health Association can accomplish much by working behind the scenes with legislators. This is a more constructive, successful approach than public attacks questioning the faith of Catholic lawmakers. According to published reports, personal calls by Cardinal Francis George to the Senate minority leader, John Boehner, and by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi appear to have been well timed and effective. The bishops "command respect because they have a good social-justice record," said Representative Michael F. Doyle, a Pennsylvania Democrat and one of several Catholic leaders behind the amendment. "They actually wanted to pass the bill. That's why they had status."

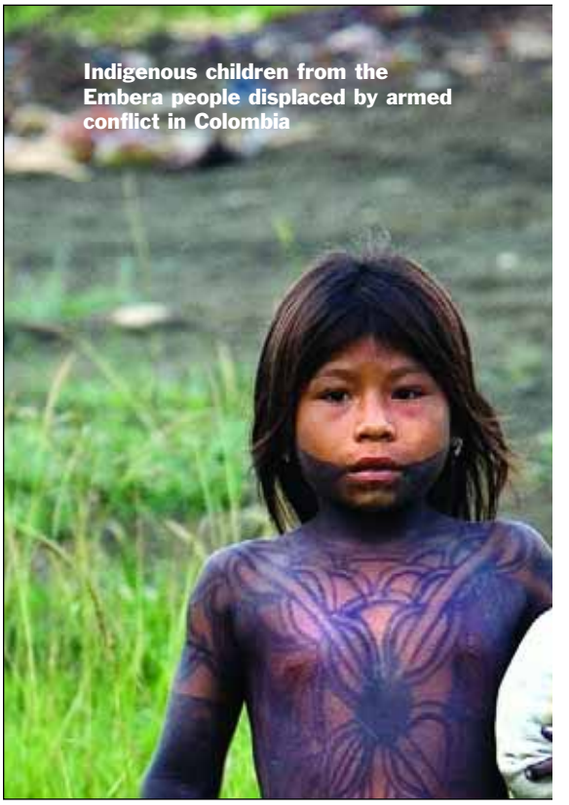
Yet the bishops' ultimatum to lawmakers—"If the final legislation does not meet our principles, we will have no choice but to oppose the bill"—succeeded only after legislators prepared an amendment that secured votes, and after Speaker Pelosi allowed the amendment on the floor once she saw there were too few votes to pass the bill without it.

Now opponents claim erroneously that the amendment violates "abortion neutrality" by keeping women from buying even a private policy with abortion coverage on the exchange. Not so. H.R. 3962 would allow insurers to offer supplemental abortion coverage, which women could buy without support from taxpayers. Nor is the financing ban unprecedented. It already applies to Medicare, Medicaid, S-chip and health insurance for federal employees, including members of Congress. Still, a group of legislators threatens to oppose the final bill if the amendment is retained. Lesson three: Brinkmanship is a two-edged sword.

For supporters of health care reform, the next step is crucial: passage of a strong Senate bill. Given that 60 votes are needed to prevent a filibuster, it is reasonable to assume the Senate bill too will exclude federal funding for abortion. Building bipartisan support will take at least as much time, energy, money and attention from Catholic leaders as passage of the House bill did. That commitment could finally achieve near-universal health coverage and major improvement in health care for generations of Americans.

SPECIAL REPORT

Can Colombia's Displaced People Get on the U.N. Agenda?


Indigenous children from the Embera people displaced by armed conflict in Colombia

It hosts by most accounts the world's second largest population of internally displaced people—3.4 million dislocated by civil war and violence related to drug trafficking. Its internal conflict, now in its fourth decade, has led to the deaths of thousands and created border tensions with many of its neighbors even as it has made its own citizens miserable. So why does Colombia's endless civil war and the regional effects it provokes remain an internal matter? When will the problem of its dislocated citizens, many of them indigenous people, and their struggle to meet basic needs get the attention it deserves at the U.N. Security Council?

Those are two questions that have long troubled Joseph Donnelly, permanent delegate of Caritas Internationalis to the United Nations, especially as he participated in the World Council of Churches' annual U.N. Advocacy Week in mid-November. Raising awareness of Colombia's problems, especially its crisis of internally displaced persons, was one of the week's three target themes this year, joining climate change and advocacy for the rights of indigenous people. For Donnelly, the advocacy week provides an annual opportunity for members of civil society to attempt to set the U.N. agenda rather than have global priorities dictated by the Security Council. Outside of obvious humanitarian crises, Donnelly said, "It's probably a false premise that what's on the Security Council agenda is really the most important global problem.... Colombia has never been on the Security Council agenda as far as I'm aware."

Donnelly declined to speculate why that oversight might have occurred, but one permanent member of the Security Council, the United States, has been a long-term supporter of the Colombian government in its efforts to conclude its long-running conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. The United States has spent billions over the years through its Plan Colombia in military aid and drug trafficking interdiction and coca crop eradication campaigns.

Donnelly said relief and advocacy groups like Caritas should be doing a better job of highlighting the humanitarian crisis in Colombia. "How come this isn't on the global agenda?" he asked. And even if the advocacy week is not successful in elevating Colombia's ongoing humanitarian crisis to a Security Council priority, Donnelly asked, "Why isn't it on our agenda?"

"How could so much be so wrong for so many people for so long" without provoking more outrage and concern from global civil society?

According to Caritas, in addition to the millions internally displaced, as many as 500,000 refugees from the complicated conflict in Colombia, which now involves right-wing militias, the revolutionary forces, the Colombian military and drug traffickers, have escaped into neighboring countries. Further complicating the conflict is the increasing footprint of the U.S. military. On Oct. 30 U.S. and Colombian officials signed the controversial Defense Cooperation Agreement, which grants U.S. armed forces access to seven Colombian military bases for the next 10 years.

Extrajudicial killings, land seizures and other human rights violations have long typified the conflict in Colombia. Caritas reports that the women and children within Colombia's displaced populations face sexual abuse, forced recruitment and exploitation as cheap laborers. According to the National Reparation and Reconciliation Commission, the "typical" victim of the conflict in Colombia is a poor woman, single-head of household, who has been displaced by violence. She has only a primary school education and earns Colombia's minimum wage. In short, her position and prospects are precarious. Women and children make up more than 70 percent of the internally displaced population.

BALTIMORE

C.C.H.D. Says Grantees Follow Church Teaching

Members of the U.S. bishops' subcommittee overseeing the Catholic Campaign for Human Development reassured their fellow bishops and donors that grant recipients in the antipoverty campaign comply with Catholic precepts.

"We pledge our ongoing efforts to ensure that all C.C.H.D. funds are used faithfully, effectively and in accord with Catholic social and moral teaching," said Bishop Roger P. Morin of Biloxi, Miss., subcommittee chairman, and the five other bishops who sit on the subcommittee in a statement to the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Nov. 17.

The campaign has come under attack from a coalition of Catholic groups pushing for a boycott of this year's C.C.H.D. collection, the weekend of Nov. 21-22. They claim some groups that receive funding are not in line with church teaching.

The group, online at www.reformcchdnow.com, is urging Catholics to place a specially designed coupon in the collection basket instead of contributions during the C.C.H.D. appeal. The coupon explains that the user's financial support will be withheld because of concern that some C.C.H.D.-sponsored programs do not fully support church teaching.

In their statement, Bishop Morin and his fellow bishops said all grants are "carefully reviewed at both the national and diocesan levels and are approved by the local diocesan bishop.... No group that opposed Catholic social or moral teaching is eligible for C.C.H.D. funding."

The statement said that funding is terminated immediately for any group that violates the conditions of a grant and "acts in conflict with Catholic teaching." The statement cited three cases during the last year—out of 250 funded groups—in which funding was terminated and the groups were asked to repay grant funds.

"However, one case is one too many and we are committed to strengthening C.C.H.D.'s review and monitoring processes," the statement continued. The bishops pledged to "seek to strengthen C.C.H.D.'s unique and essential efforts to practice charity, seek justice and pursue the common good as taught in the social encyclicals of the church, most recently by our current Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI in 'God Is Love' and 'Charity in Truth.'"

In an interview with **America**, Bishop Morin emphasized that no campaign money has been used to fund directly any activity or advocacy contrary to church teaching. He said C.C.H.D.'s small national staff relies on local recommendations, since "we don't have the wherewithal to be a presence nationwide."

The hundreds of community organizations that receive C.C.H.D. grants are often engaged in a variety of activities. Despite C.C.H.D.'s local review, Bishop Morin said, "It's quite possible for a local group to do something they are not supposed to do, and when that comes to our attention, we cut off funding."

Despite such instances, Bishop Morin remains confident that taken as a whole "the system works well." He called C.C.H.D.'s role in promoting self-sufficiency among the nation's low-income communities a "vital and critical piece of the overall work the church is doing for the poor."

Bishop Roger P. Morin of Biloxi, Miss., (center) at the U.S.C.C.B.'s general meeting in Baltimore

Rob Gasper, president of Bellarmine Veritas Ministry, one of the groups calling for a reform of C.C.H.D., said on Oct. 28 that he was trying to shed light "not only on the C.C.H.D." but to also promote groups that serve the poor "in a way that is consistent with Catholic teaching."

Close Guantánamo, Says Anti-torture Group

Religious leaders have renewed their call to Congress seeking the immediate closure of the U.S. military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The prison "is the symbol of our country's violation of our deepest values" and must be closed immediately, the group of more than 40 religious leaders said in a letter of Nov. 12 to congressional leaders from the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. The Guantánamo Bay prison "stands in the minds of hundreds of millions of people in our nation and around the globe as a place where America broke faith with itself and used torture as an interrogation technique," the letter said. Closing the prison now rather than later will allow the country to begin to heal spiritually and "put an end to this dark and errant chapter in our history," the leaders wrote.

Detained Migrants Deserve Spiritual Care

Migrants and refugees in prisons and detention centers have the same right to spiritual assistance as any other person, a U.S. bishop told a Vatican meeting. Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration, told the Vatican's World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees that Catholic dioceses and other groups have had difficulty gaining access to detainees for pastoral purposes. The growing number of people in U.S. detention centers has made the issue of access even more urgent. Since the 2001 terrorist attacks, Bishop Wester said, "The U.S. government has turned to the detention of immigrants as another weapon in the 'war on terrorism.'" The government "detains over 280,000 persons a year, more than triple the number of those detained just nine years ago." Because of increased security concerns, combined with an "onerous law" on immigration passed in 1996, the government in effect presumes undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers "should be incarcerated rather than released" while awaiting hearings on their status, Bishop Wester said.

Vatican to U.S.: Lift Cuba Embargo

The Vatican consistently has criticized the U.S. embargo against Cuba and hopes the Obama administration will lift the restrictions, recognizing the fact that they cause untold suffering for the Cuban people, a Vatican official said. Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, visited Cuba on Nov. 4-8. The embargo "undeniably has a negative influence on the life of the people," Archbishop Celli told Vatican Radio Nov. 13. Asked whether he expects U.S. President Barack Obama to change U.S. policy, Archbishop Celli said, "I hope this can occur because, undeniably, it is the population that suffers most." He said that while the Catholic Church in Cuba has few resources and extremely limited access to the media, its communications efforts are having an impact.

From CNS and other sources.

NEWS BRIEFS

A captured drug cartel hitman on display in Monterrey, Mexico

In a letter on Nov. 12, the Mexican bishops' conference rebuked **narcotics-trafficking cartels** for their murderous ways and demanded that Mexico's politicians crack down on corruption and impunity. ✦ Bishop **Francis An Shuxin**, who spent 10 years under house arrest for refusing to join the Beijing-approved Catholic Church, said he decided to join China's Catholic Patriotic Association to foster unity in the church. ✦ Rabbi David Dalin called a recent, best-selling book that portrayed **Pope Pius XII** as a collaborator with Adolf Hitler "historically false and malicious" on Nov. 5. ✦ **Opulence and waste are unacceptable,** especially when hunger continues to rise, Pope Benedict XVI said at a United Nations' food summit in Rome on Nov. 16. ✦ More than 20 months after the killing of Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, Iraq, Pope Benedict XVI approved the election of a **new archbishop for Mosul**, the Rev. Emil Shimoun Nona, on Nov. 13. ✦ Commemorating the 20th anniversary on Nov. 16 of the killing of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, the U.S. bishops called on the U.S. and Salvadoran governments to renew **efforts to reduce poverty** and hunger and to promote educational opportunity, human rights and the rule of law for the people of El Salvador.

KYLE T. KRAMER

A Climate of Compassion

I have been thinking a great deal about climate change—maybe too much. Climate change may be the defining global challenge of this century, but only when it compels our minds and hearts will we Americans begin to address it in a meaningful way.

We do not lack information or even exhortation. The myriad scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have published reams of solid data that show the urgency and scale of the problem. In *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*, the U.S. bishops "call on our people and government to recognize the seriousness of the global warming threat and to develop effective policies that will diminish the possible consequences of global climate change." Perhaps most important, they point out that this is fundamentally an issue of justice, since it disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable who live in what Pope Benedict calls "the weakest regions of the planet" ("Caritas in Veritate," No. 50).

Moral issue or not, climate change still seems abstract, speculative and cerebral. For most of us, the science is hopelessly complex, and the effects of climate change do not immediately affect most of us. They may be too subtle or too far away. A rise in sea level may cause Maldive Islanders to lose their entire homeland; but most of us have never been there, nor do we know any Maldivians or victims of drought in Africa or Inuit whale hunters in the Arctic.

Fear and love are the only two proven, gut-level cures for abstraction, apathy and inaction, but each entails risk. With climate change, appealing to fear is a perilous strategy. Human beings evolved to respond to clear and present danger, and by the time climate effects are generally tangible enough to instill widespread fear, the warming trend may be irreversible.

That leaves us with love or, more accurately, compassion. When we practice loving compassion, we risk letting ourselves feel the suffering of others, even when we do not suffer in the same way ourselves. But only compassion can transcend national borders and economic or political self-interest. Only compassion is broad and strong enough to cope effectively with a daunting global problem like climate change.

> I don't want my children or any children to inherit a degraded planet.

Compassion cannot be conjured by argument, exhortation or legislation. Its seeds are a divine gift, and they grow only through cultivation and practice, beginning with the near-at-hand. Compassion guided the father to embrace both the prodigal son and his curmudgeonly older brother. Jesus knew that children teach compassion best.

With a clarity of emotion unencumbered by guile or mature reason, my 2-year-old son, Eli, has leveled me any number of times simply by giving me an affectionate hug and saying, "I love you, Papa." To love and feel myself loved by this child offers, like a sacrament, a glimpse into a far-reaching love that extends beyond the bounds of mere parental instinct.

My children have helped me see that vulnerability binds us all to one another. Not long after our surprise twins were born, when we were overwhelmed with changing at least a dozen diapers a day, I experienced an epiphany during a visit to a local mall. It occurred to me that every single person I saw in that mall—the too-cool teenage girl, the exasperated young mother, the macho weight lifter, the bent-backed elderly man—had once been a small, helpless child, whose backside someone had the task of wiping. Forget the great cloud of witnesses; I realized that we all belong together in a marvelous fraternity of dirty diapers.

I want to protect my children from harm and bequeathe to them a just, habitable, beautiful world. From that heart-felt desire, I am learning to wish health and well-being for all children, of current and future generations. "Which one of you," asks Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, "would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish?" I do not want my children or their children or any children to inherit stones and snakes in the form of a degraded planet.

Providing them loaves and fishes will mean reducing my personal carbon footprint and lobbying for larger-scale change, like a price on greenhouse gas emissions. My individual efforts are fraught with compromise and ambiguity, and they are but a drop in the ocean. But with compassion, loaves and fishes have been known to multiply.

KYLE T. KRAMER *is the director of lay degree programs at Saint Meinrad School of Theology in Saint Meinrad, Ind., and an organic farmer.*

Six experts interpret what 'Charity in Truth' says about issues of our times.

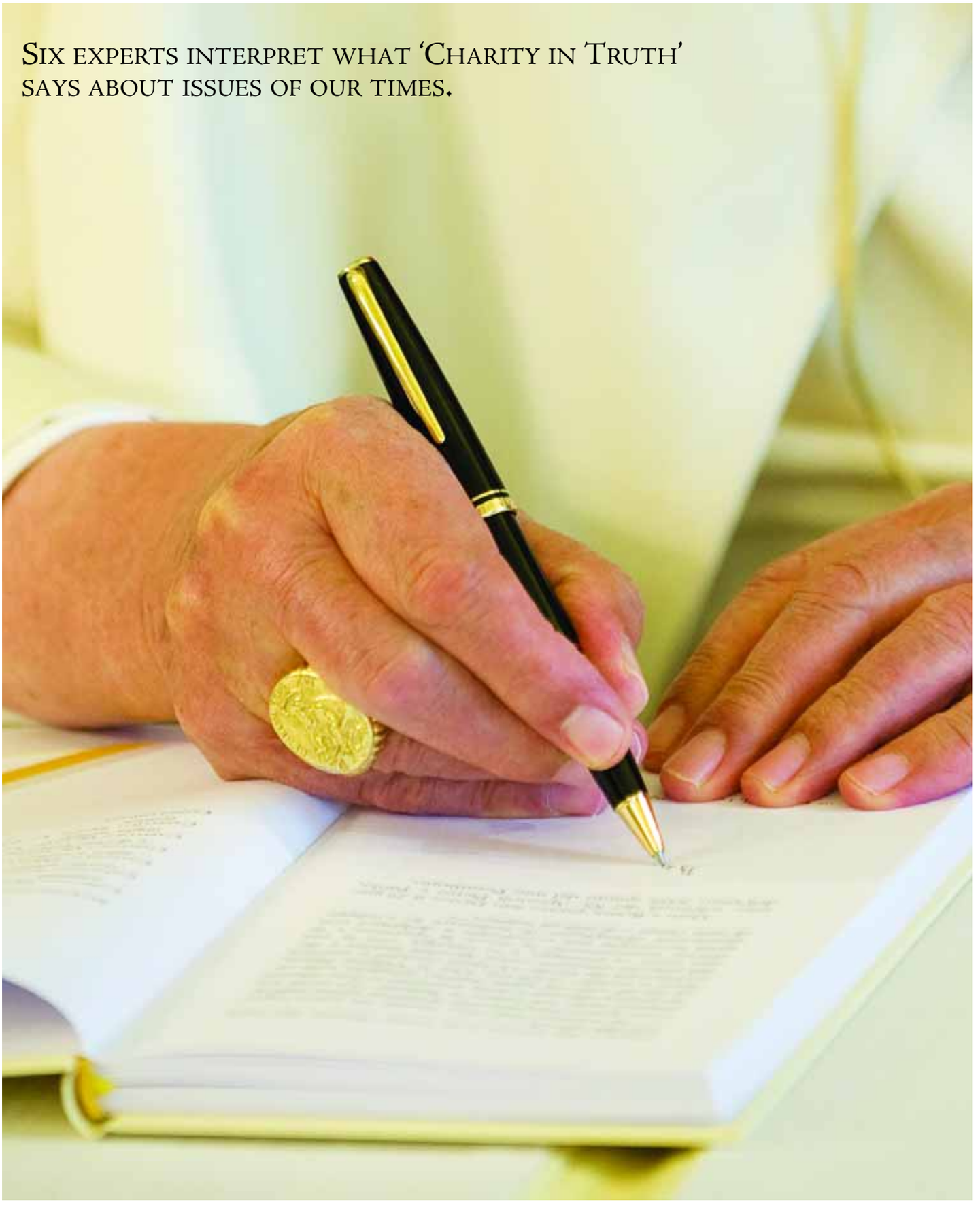


PHOTO: CNS/L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO VIA CATHOLIC PRESS PHOTO

Papal Correspondence

In July, Pope Benedict XVI issued his first social encyclical "Caritas in Veritate," or "Charity in Truth." It takes major leaps in articulating the pope's social vision, moving well beyond the link between charity and service in his first encyclical "Deus Caritas Est," ("God Is Love," 2006), articulating the institutional role of Christian love across society. He placed his own social teaching in line with Paul VI's "Populorum Progessio," ("On the Development of Peoples," 1967) and John Paul II's "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis," ("The Social Concerns of the Church," 1987), high-water marks in postconciliar Catholic liberalism. Pope Benedict's own teaching on "gratuity and communion" may represent the most radical Catholic economic teaching to date. It promotes a stakeholder society in which business works at one and the same time for profit and the common good.

The letter opens and weaves throughout rich threads of theological and metaphysical reflection. In addition, it covers a wide range of issues, including globalization, the financial crisis, labor, technology and the environment. America has invited a half dozen scholars to offer their reflections on topics treated in the encyclical or required for its implementation. We hope this theme issue will serve as a sampler inviting our readers to take up the original text themselves. While some have complained about the letter's heaviness in content and style, we believe it is very much worth reading and studying. Just take it slowly and savor each bit, one section at a time.

THE EDITORS

All in the Family

BY THOMAS MASSARO

It is thus becoming a social and even economic necessity once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person (No. 44).

Pope Benedict's latest contribution to the social encyclical tradition situates family life in the vital web of social relations without which no human person can truly thrive.

"Caritas in Veritate" will be remembered for its earnest appeal for a renewed commitment to social responsibility in our age of truly global

capitalism. The pope deliberately published the document at the height of concerns about failures of business ethics that contributed to the current disastrous economic downturn. Yet behind its exhortations for practical reforms lies an entire worldview, in which the reality of family life turns out to be surprisingly closely connected to political and economic matters. The deeper we probe the underlying vision of Catholic social thought, the more tenuous and artificial the distinction appears that we customarily use to separate the supposedly private world of family life and the supposedly public world of money and power.

A Catholic Defense of Marriage meeting at a parish in Boston

Both realms depend on an underlying moral order. Virtues developed in one sphere apply equally to the other. Character traits like honesty, generosity and solidarity promote harmony within households as well as in the wider social world. Thus, in one way or another, every social encyclical has taken up the task of promoting proper moral as well as social order. How may employers or public officials shape work arrangements to ensure a living wage and personal dignity for hard-pressed workers? What institutions of domestic and international society will encourage peace and social justice and discourage exploitation of the poor? What genuine ethical reforms are needed to protect the disadvantaged and to promote the human rights of all? These are the questions that have occupied social encyclicals for over a century now, and they all boil down to Gospel-based ethical concern about social order.

While the human imagination hastens to jump to the highest levels of social organization (governments, corporations, entire cultures) when sweeping questions of social order arise, Pope Benedict reminds us that family life is a basic building block that must never be neglected. In No. 44 of "Caritas in Veritate," the section featuring the only sustained treatment of the topics of marriage and family life, Benedict calls family "the primary vital cell of society." This vivid image reaffirms the family's place in the social order as it has been portrayed in many recent church documents. Social relations on the largest of scales will not fare very well unless the basic building block of family life is healthy and well ordered.

Pope Benedict fills in only a few details regarding the shape of healthy family, but he expresses deep concern about falling birthrates in certain regions, complaining that too many families these days are "minuscule." While emphasizing "the primary competence of the family in the area of sexuality," he nevertheless calls upon states to "enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman." Veterans of legal battles over same-sex marriage need not expend too much effort reading between the lines on this point.

As ever, Pope Benedict is not afraid to be unfashionable. He spills much ink marking the achievements of Paul VI's 1967 encyclical on economic development, "Populorum Progressio," but he does not shy away from reviving the pro-life and pro-family messages of Pope Paul's subsequent (and, notably, his last) encyclical, "Humanae Vitae," of 1968. I hope that history will not repeat itself in terms of the new encyclical's reception. A pope's insightful encouragement of healthy family life as an indispensible part of proper order within human society ought not be eclipsed by juicier, more controversial messages in other sections of an important encyclical.

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In the Market for Humanity

BY AMY UELMEN

In recent decades a broad intermediate area has emerged between the two types of enterprise. It is made up of traditional companies which nonetheless subscribe to social aid agreements in support of underdeveloped countries, charitable foundations associated with individual companies, groups of companies oriented towards social welfare, and the diversified world of the so-called 'civil economy' and the 'economy of communion' (No. 46).

It is rare for a specific project to be given a favorable mention in a papal encyclical, but "Caritas in Veritate" seems to present an exception. When Pope Benedict XVI described the "broad intermediate area" between nonprofit and for-profit sectors with the buzz-phrase "economy of communion," some connected the dots with the Focolare movement's network of businesses in which profit serves as "a means for achieving human and social ends" (No. 46).

The Economy of Communion in Freedom project (edc-info.org) was launched in 1991, when Chiara Lubich, the

ON THE WEB
An interview with Amy Uelmen.
americamagazine.org/podcast

PHOTO: CNS/GREGORY L. TRACY, THE PILOT

founder of Focolare, visited the communities in Brazil. Focolare is a movement with origins in war-torn Trent, Italy, inspired by the example of the first Christians (Acts 2:44-45). Focolare communities practice a "communion of goods" aimed at meeting the basic needs of all of their participants. But as was evident from the shantytowns surrounding the large metropolis of São Paulo, Brazil, where Focolare people also lived, the needs were outweighing the shared resources.

Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare movement, in 2000

As Ms. Lubich brainstormed with the community in light of the then-recent encyclical "Centesimus Annus," an idea emerged: to form for-profit businesses that could generate additional jobs and voluntarily allot profits in three parts: 1) for direct aid to those in need, 2) for educational programs that foster what Lubich described as a "culture of giving" and 3) for the continued development of the business.

The response was immediate. The materially poor of the community were among the first to sell their chickens and other livestock in order to purchase shares in the initial businesses. The initiative now embraces more than 750 businesses throughout the globe, in various sectors of production and service, mostly small and medium-sized, but some with more than 100 employees. All are committed to fostering a "person-centered" life of communion in both the internal operations and external impact of the business.

Inspired by the prayer of Jesus for unity, "that they may be one even as we are one" (Jn 17:22), the Economy of Communion project gains particular strength from being embedded in a thick international network that is deeply committed to the larger cultural project of building, as Pope Benedict puts it in "Caritas in Veritate," "the one community of the human family" (No. 54). Within this vision, openness to the needs of others is experienced not as a call to arduous sacrifice, but as an opportunity to welcome the "astonishing experience of gift" (No. 34).

As the pope explains, the life of the Trinity—"even as we are one"—can serve as a model for social relationships in which "true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration" (No. 54). As Chiara Lubich described the dynamic, "I am myself not when I close myself off from the other, but rather when I give myself, when out of love I lose myself in the other."

Within this vision, distribution of direct aid to those with material needs involves not merely assessing concrete concerns and priorities, but also helping to create a dynamic that fosters a true sense of reciprocal love and the full participation of "free subjects in favor of an assumption of shared responsibility" (No. 17).

For all who participate in the project, the primary protagonist is neither the generous business owners nor those who courageously work to improve their living conditions, but God's loving intervention in their lives. A "culture of giving" is also expressed in how the participants renounce the help they receive as soon as they are able. As soon as he secured a job, a young man from the Dominican Republic wrote: "Now I do not need the help anymore, and I am happy that someone else will be able to experience as I have the concrete love of this family."

The Economy of Communion project extends a broader and more profound invitation to delve into all the ways in which we are "made for gift" (No. 34) in our personal, social and economic life.

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Climate Check

BY AILEEN A. O'DONOGHUE

The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole (No. 48).

The Arctic is melting. In this young century, the summer Arctic ice cap has shrunk to its smallest size in recorded history. In Alaska and Siberia expanding melt-water lakes over onetime bogs bubble with methane, a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, which escapes from the reawakened biological decay of the thawing permafrost. In the tropics, where millions of people depend on alpine ice melt for drinking water, crop irrigation and hydroelectric power, the glaciers are shrinking at an alarming pace, recently revealing a plant hidden for 50,000 years in Peruvian ice.

I have taught about climate change for over a decade, so I read "Caritas in Veritate" with these developments in mind. I was heartened to read Pope Benedict's arguments that our care for the environment and use of technology are matters not only of personal virtue but of justice. In particular, Pope Benedict makes the point that it is "incumbent upon the competent authorities to make every effort to ensure that the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peo-

ples or future generations" (No. 50).

The developed world has made extensive use of natural resources and in so doing has sought to reduce poverty and human suffering and has had some success. Famine, for example, does not sweep through populations as it did in the past, except when warring factions get in the way. But economic development also produces unintended consequences, like the melting ice cap, that threaten both the poor of the world and future generations in the industrialized West. Though many in the United States are still skeptical of the idea of climate change, data revealing how humans contribute to climate change and the serious impact of these climate distortions continue to pile up. The rest of the developed world already has recognized the threat and begun the work of reducing carbon emissions. It is time for the United States to join these efforts.

Greenpeace volunteers build an ark in the foothills of Mount Ararat in Turkey.

Throughout the 20th century, the United States and Western Europe developed into industrial and economic engines aided greatly by their unrestrained use of the world's environmental "commons." This development, we now realize, has nearly exhausted the earth's capacity for dissipation and absorption of carbon dioxide. Though the annual carbon contributions of China and India are catching up—indeed now surpassing—those of the United States, we are the ones who filled the atmospheric trash bin nearly to capacity. It is primarily our responsibility, therefore, to make the serious review of our lifestyle called for by "Caritas in Veritate" and to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions for the common good of the entire human family. Adding to our moral burden is the fact that we who have contributed most to the problem will be the least affected by it.

According to the World Health Organization: "Overall, the effects of global climate change are predicted to be heavily concentrated in poorer populations at low latitudes, where the most important climate-sensitive health outcomes (malnutrition, diarrhea and malaria) are already common, and where vulnerability to climate effects is greatest. These diseases mainly affect younger age groups, so that the total burden of disease due to climate change appears to be borne mainly by children in developing countries."

Pope Benedict insists that the world "must not be bequeathed to future generations depleted of its resources" (No. 50). The decisions and actions we take this year and this decade will significantly affect the world our grandchildren inherit. As the primary contributors to this problem and as followers of Christ, we Catholics must make every effort to reduce our nonrenewable energy consumption.

The Catholic community is now challenged to demonstrate boldly its commitment to international and intergenerational justice in practical ways—by abstaining from driving two days each month, for example. Families might consider pairing up to carpool to Mass and errands on Sundays. For 60 million Catholics in the United States driving an average 25 miles per day in cars that average 20 miles per gallon, each day of not driving would be the equivalent of removing 150,000 cars from the road for a year. A single year of two such driving abstentions per month would be the equivalent of taking 3.6 million cars from the road. This small effort, "inspired and sustained by charity," would make a difference, contributing "to the building of the universal city of God, which is the goal of the history of the human family" (No. 7).

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What's the Business Plan?

BY KIRK O. HANSON

There is...a growing conviction that business management cannot concern itself only with the interests of the proprietors, but must also assume responsibility for all the other stakeholders who contribute to the life of the business: the workers, the clients, the suppliers of various elements of production, the community of reference (No. 40).

For a business ethicist, "Caritas in Veritate" demonstrates both the promise and the limitations of papal and church pronouncements on economic ethics. The promise is that Pope Benedict XVI explicitly mentions business ethics and goes beyond previous statements to address it. Whatever the pope says about business ethics will be heard around the world, a voice of ethical reason desperately needed amid the secular and self-interested concerns of our global economy.

The limitation is that while the Vatican could have access to the best advice in the world regarding practical economic and business affairs, it rarely takes advantage of it. This encyclical, like other church statements on economic matters—including the 1986 U.S. bishops' pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All"—reflects only the most limited

PHOTO: CNS/FATIH SARIBAS, REUTERS

insight into the practical moral problems of people in large and small businesses.

Business ethicists are concerned about practical moral questions that arise at three levels: the systemic level of government and public policy; the organizational level of corporate decisions and policy; and the individual level of managers and business people working in economic organizations and of consumers making decisions regarding what products and services to purchase in the economy. At the systemic level, the pope calls for a global regulatory structure, even a "world political authority," as a counterforce to market incentives that can induce businesses to take on excessive financial risk, to weaken the rights and employment stability of workers or to abuse the environment.

Religious leaders from Interfaith Worker Justice gather in Detroit.

The pope speaks to and about the leaders of global businesses, commenting critically on the business elite that the global regulation is designed to control. He laments the emergence of a business elite in both rich and poor countries who consider their wealth a "right." He argues instead for a principle of gratuitousness or giftedness, whereby all who have wealth understand it as a free gift from God that must be put to work for the welfare of all people. While this message is an important one, it lacks a more compelling and practical vision of what constitutes ethical behavior for business enterprises of all sizes and for managers and employees in those businesses.

In "Caritas in Veritate," Pope Benedict takes positive note of for-profit and nonprofit institutions that demonstrate "hybrid forms of commercial behavior" operated for specifically social purposes. He mentions, for example, institutions engaged in microlending. While he hopes these will have a role in "civilizing the economy," he tacitly acknowledges these will never be the most important economic institutions of today's global society. The pope also gives a brief endorsement of "stakeholder theory," the important but ill-defined notion that a business must be responsible to more than its shareholders' interests; it must be accountable to other stakeholders, like its employees or the communities where it operates.

Beyond this, the Catholic business leader—or any business person of good will—is left with little guidance from the pope. Benedict reiterates recurring themes from Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers but offers no further counsel on how to resolve the difficult employment, sourcing, safety and environmental challenges business executives face.

At the individual level, Benedict calls on consumers to understand that "purchasing is always a moral—and not simply economic—act." By every purchase decision, the consumer rewards a firm for its environmental, labor and safety record and creates incentives for responsible behavior. However, the pope acknowledges that the power of ethical purchasing will always be limited by "the intrinsic economic rationality" of purchasing decisions (that is, consumers will always be drawn to the cheapest goods).

I suspect the failure to address moral decisions at other than the systemic level reflects the fact that the Vatican has little expertise and few resources to draw on in constructing such practical moral guidance. What dialogue with real business owners and managers does take place, I fear, is between Vatican officials and the most elite business leaders, who are too often part of the problem. A richer and continuing engagement is critically needed. Sadly, too, the failure to engage in such a dialogue may be related to the church's hesitance to consult broadly and talk openly and respectfully with the laity.

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Communion, Not Commodification

BY KRISTIN HEYER

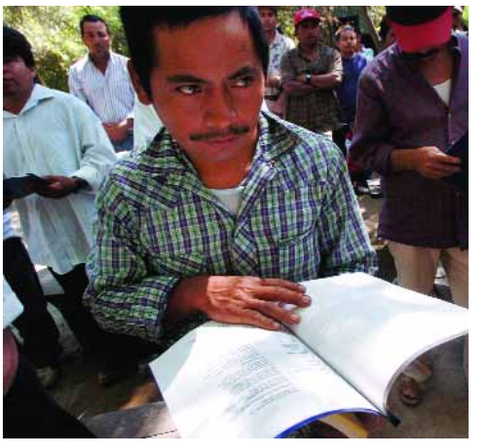
Economic, social and political development, if it is to be authentically human, needs to make room for the principle of gratuitousness as an expression of fraternity (No. 34).

In his first social encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI grounds his analysis of the exploitative consequences of global capitalism in his theology of Christian love. Following his development of love in "Deus Caritas Est," Pope Benedict connects the authentic love embodied by Jesus to the Christian responsibility to humanize economic and political activity. As he addresses contemporary realities from outsourcing to energy consumption, the pope gives sustained attention to theological reflection. He offers two particularly fruitful theological resources that flow from charity: a Christian vision of the human person and the experience of gift.

First, the pope's view of the person grounds his arguments regarding human development and globalization. In contrast to worldly measures of worth like power, wealth or expertise,

PHOTO: CNS/JIM WEST

the Christian perspective insists upon the unconditional value of every person. This intrinsic dignity is essential to Pope Benedict's holistic vision of human development, whether he is critiquing cultural effects of commercialization, the commodification of migrant workers or population control measures. His underlying anthropology is also relational, reminding Christians that to be a human being is to be in relationship, given our creation in God's Trinitarian image. Hence in the face of dehumanizing trends, he calls readers to steer global trade and development in ways that reflect this vision of all persons as sisters and brothers through policies marked by "communion and the sharing of goods."



A migrant worker at Mass in a chapel in the hills near San Diego

The importance of relationship plays a significant role in Pope Benedict's assessment of the "scandal of glaring inequalities" that persists today. He argues that the absence of adequate institutional relationships—evinced, for example, in the detachment of economic activity from sufficient regulation or distributive mechanisms—has significantly contributed to the present financial and moral crisis we face. The pope's consequent advocacy of wealth redistribution (in seven separate instances) and stronger international governance reflect his conviction that diverse "stakeholders" remain equal members of one human family.

A second theological resource Pope Benedict mines is the experience and theology of gift. In contrast to some capitalistic narratives of the self-made person, a Christian understanding of our selves as freely "gifted" can motivate actions that enact gratuity in response. This "astonishing experience of gift" grounds the pope's insights about how love animates, guarantees and exceeds justice. Recent history highlights the fact that contractual justice has proven inadequate for redressing both the privations of underdevelopment and the excesses of "super-development." Hence Pope Benedict's charge surpasses a merit-based or a legal sense of justice to demand practices and institutions marked by reciprocity, friendship, even mercy. He contends that "without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfill its proper economic function" (No. 35).

We might envision this effusive *caritas* evident in social enterprises like fair trade cooperatives and microfinance or in conflict transformation initiatives that go beyond mere retribution and focus on restoring broken relationships. Flowing from the experience of gift, the pope insists that policies and ventures that foster not only justice but communion are essential for genuinely human development.

Pope Benedict's discussion of the human person and gift are but two of many theological themes he explores in light of economic and ecological challenges. Omitted, however, are references to the option for the poor and social sin, even within discussions of distributive injustices or dangerous ideologies and sinful effects evident in the economy. Missed opportunities to name explicitly and develop these categories may reflect the pope's past encounters with liberation theology.

The theological methodology of "Caritas in Veritate" is to be hailed for further aligning social doctrine with the core of the church's mission. Pope Benedict's approach deepens and sharpens more philosophical approaches in light of the riches of the Catholic tradition, even as it raises the question of the role for natural law argumentation in public religious engagement. On the one hand, the pope's Christocentric understanding of truth set largely against a "logic of power" could deter interreligious engagement. On the other hand, his articulations of truth in terms of genuine human flourishing and development in solidarity with others present fertile opportunities for meaningful dialogue and bold action across communities to meet urgent challenges.

PHOTO: CNS/DAVID MAUNG

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The Educator's Mission

BY JAMES E. HUG

"The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side" (No. 53).

Our world is caught at this time in a series of converging global crises of economy and finance, food and hunger, migration, climate change and ecological disaster. Solutions that try to get us back on the track we were on before the crises hit will guarantee only greater upheaval in the future.

Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" addresses this troubled world and offers an insightful and challenging blueprint for a more authentically human, sustainable and secure future. Turning that blueprint into a practical reality implies a reorientation and refocusing of the whole educational enterprise in this country.

The stakes are high for educators who have the challenge of making "Caritas in Veritate" understandable while promoting the new direction it introduces. That is no easy task, since its vision conflicts head-on with many American cultural assumptions.

Children donate money to help earthquake victims in China's Shandong Province.

PHOTO: CNS/REUTERS

Most would agree that the purpose of education is to guide students to discover and develop their own gifts, finding their vocation to serve the community. Globalization has revealed an interdependence that calls us to turn economic, social, political and cultural forces toward the creation of a global community of love, a single human family united in solidarity and peace. For Pope Benedict a complete education requires service of the global community. Curricula, from kindergarten through doctoral studies, therefore, need to be suffused with this global vision, shaping people who think of themselves as part of one global human family. Are we ready to instill the vision that the pope outlines of a single human community living in solidarity and peace?

Pope Benedict also calls for a transformation of the market, business and politics. The market must integrate more relational principles into its workings. Trust and a sense of gift or gratuity in the relationships between producers and consumers need to replace cutthroat competition and a philosophy of caveat emptor. Creation of wealth is not businesses' only responsibility. Every business must recognize its responsibilities to all its stakeholders, including workers, clients, suppliers, consumers, local communities and the environment. Pope Benedict's vision of a well-ordered global economy implies a revolution in business education and economics courses. Will our business schools work seriously with these themes? To do so they must introduce students to the schools of alternative economics that are trying to integrate family and community values and environmental concerns into traditional economics programs. They will have to focus their curricula on a renewed economic order in which economic development serves human dignity and ecological sustainability.

The pope offers a vision of global commerce, directed by Catholic social teaching, that promotes rather than repels global solidarity and that serves the common good. In fact, he claims, if globalization is well managed politically it will open the possibility of redistribution of wealth on a global scale. Will our economists and political scientists educate new generations in this vision and help develop it as a practical, if challenging, direction that the world needs to embrace?

Politicians and citizens alike need to recognize that if there ever was some kind of absolute national sovereignty, it no longer exists. But there is still an important role for the nation state as well as for democratically participatory governing institutions at all levels. That role is not to compete ruthlessly to secure the future for its own people. It is to work together with all other political actors to build a workable global governance system that serves the common good of the whole human family. Can our researchers and educators open up those concepts, counter knee-jerk reactions of fear and suspicion and help to develop systems that serve the common good of the whole human family?

Pope Benedict defines the solidarity we are all created to seek as a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone for everyone. To educate our nation in this vision and instill in it this motivation is truly the "love in truth" that defines authentic human development and our shared vocation. In our culture today, this is a sharply prophetic mission for educators of every kind.

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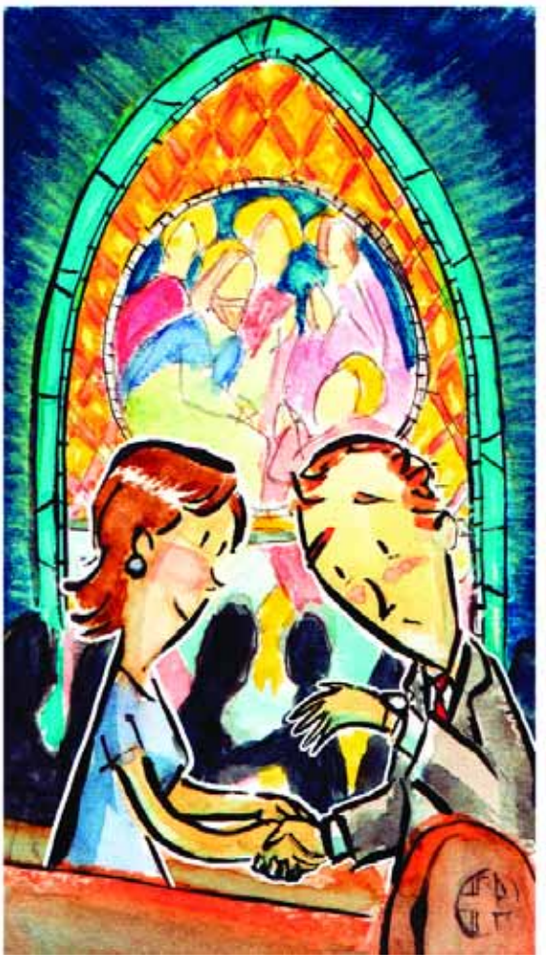
FAITH IN FOCUS

Together in Prayer

Holding hands, not holding back

BY JEANNINE M. JACOBS

I have marveled lately at how often we sit next to people at Mass without ever learning much about them. It is clear that we are called to "love our neighbor," but are we called to take the initiative to *know* our neighbor? Can we even remember those with whom we have sat at Mass over the last year? We may say "Good morning," share a greeting or offer a "Peace be with you," but few of us make a serious effort to know them.



Some of that reluctance comes from a healthy awareness that our presence in church should be prayerful and respectful. We keep a distance, allowing our neighbor time for prayer or quiet reflection. We allow families to tend to themselves. We allow ourselves time for prayer.

Before Mass begins, I pray for my children, my husband, my family, my friends. I pray for God's grace and continued presence in my life. I pray for those who are suffering in the world. Yet I do not automatically pray for the neighbors sitting next to me. It never crosses my mind.

As we glance at those beside us, we may be failing to see them as God wants us to see them.

At times we may even draw conclusions and render judgment on these fellow worshippers. I have harshly judged the neighbor who tries to fit tardy family members into an already crowded pew, the neighbor who talks incessantly through the Mass, the neighbor whose children are out of control, the loud singer, the terrible singer, the neighbor who is a better singer than I am, the neighbor who might recognize me but never says hello, the neighbor who does not really know me or why my own children are out of control today. I have developed the bad habit of judging the neighbor I do not know.

Just before Mass is about to begin in our parish, the presider asks us to greet each other *as friends*. This we typically do by extending a smile, a handshake and "Good morning!" Most parishioners comply cheerfully, and their compliance creates a momentary buzz of fellowship that echoes throughout the church. Others appear to go through the motions to fulfill an obligation.

I look forward to this practice, which underscores the concept of coming together as a community to celebrate the Mass. It has even become a bit of a game for me to see how people react to the priest's request.

Looking around, I think of the people I know who have limited tolerance for such social engagement. For a moment I worry about falling into that category myself but decide that both my fondness for chitchat and my search for real and lasting friendships keep me engaged and a willing participant. Sometimes I find it hard to quell a giggle when I think I have spotted an unwilling participant who, glancing at a wristwatch, already may be calculating the number of minutes this greeting adds to the total Mass time.

It is also a parish tradition for the congregation to hold hands as we pray the Our Father. Many people seem

ART: DAN SALAMIDA

JEANNINE M. JACOBS *lives in Allen, Tex., with her husband and two sons.*

uncomfortable holding the hand of the person on either side of them. My guess is that this is because they do not know them.

Many people hesitate. I have witnessed moments of fear, squirming, panic, cringing, avoidance and even refusal. These are not only the reactions of children, but of adults as well. Some react visibly to their realization that the rite of "hand-holding with a stranger" is imminent, hand-holding with a fellow parishioner, a nonfamily member. Does this put us in danger? Why can some of us accept this practice while others are so uncomfortable with it?

One day during this moment of prayer, I learned a little more about the woman next to me. I learned about her faith and strength, her struggle and courage. I learned about her love, her prayer life and her journey with God. And I learned about her without any conversation between us. I learned through God's grace, which I felt strongly at the moment.

After holding her hand in prayer, I knew something about her; I knew it with my heart. I learned about her through God's presence during the Mass. With my eyes looking forward, with my voice focused on the words of the Our Father, with my ears filled with hundreds of voices gathered in prayer as a community, I saw her clearly.

ON THE WEB

Thomas J. Reese, S.J., on the history of the kiss of peace.
americamagazine.org/pages.

It was not until after she released my hand that I turned and took a good look at her—a really good look. With my eyes I saw a middle-aged woman. Being even more curious, I looked to see who was beside her. Was it someone she knew? It was her husband, afflicted by a neurological condition, perhaps a stroke, or merely by age.

Until then, I had not looked farther down the pew and had failed to notice my neighbor's neighbor. Earlier, I had failed to notice the woman right beside me—failed to notice the strength, determination and resounding faith of my humble neighbor. I had failed to notice her struggle, her hope and her commitment.

During the Our Father, I held the hand of love manifested in the faith of a woman, a wife, a parishioner, a neighbor. I can only describe the experience as God's way of teaching me how to pray. I now know it is through the gift of prayer that we learn to love our neighbors and perhaps even to know them.

Are we called to know our neighbor? I believe we are. At the very least, I think we are called to be open to the possibility. I also think we are called to trust that God will guide us in everything we do, that God will reveal his plan for us and his wisdom about those around us. It is only through God that we will learn to greet and to know each other *as friends*. A

FILM | JON ANDERSON

LOOKING BEYOND REDEMPTION

'Precious: Based on the Novel Push *by Sapphire'*

Searching for a way to understand the success of **Precious**, the remarkable and rather unlikely urban drama by director Lee Daniels, is so fraught with peril that one may as well begin with the film's most banal aspect: the opinion of critics.

When the film debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in January, the reaction was favorable bordering on hysterical. But even the more starry-eyed optimists among the critics could consider the film's commercial potential only with a dropped jaw: The story of a mountainous African-American 16-year-old? Who is pregnant for the second time by her own father? Who cannot read, barely speaks and is treated literally as a slave—with all the attendant and obvious racial echoes—by her monster of a mother? Who, if not for a miraculous portrayal by the comedian Mo'Nique, might have been a caricaturish affirmation of every racist, Reagan-era slur against publicly assisted African-American women and their children? Box-office success? Not in their wildest dreams. The film would be lucky to get out of Utah.

How wrong can one be? When "Precious" opened on Nov. 6, it earned an almost unprecedented $100,000 per screen in its limited release. Anointed by Oprah, bearing the imprimatur of the black-comedy mogul Tyler Perry and crowned by a New York Times Magazine cover, the Little Film That Couldn't Possibly was wearing so much media bling it could barely move.

This doesn't change the film, although it does change the perception

PHOTO: ANNE MARIE FOX

Lenny Kravitz as Nurse John and Gabourey Sidibe as Precious.

of people (yes, critics are people) toward a movie that, at its very heart, is about what we see and how we see it, especially if what we are looking at is ourselves. That "Precious" would morph from critics' darling to "mall movie" couldn't have been Daniels's strategy, but it adds an ironic twist to a film about a large black woman who, as she looks at herself in a mirror, fantasizes about herself as a skinny white girl—one of the screenwriter Geoffrey Fletcher's more fearless adornments to the poet Sapphire's book.

It also tests the capacity of the viewer for forgiveness: Who among us does not imagine him- or herself charitable, tolerant and willing to consider, in our ersatz-divine imaginations, redemption for even the most heinous among us? Mo'Nique's Mary, guilty of the slow crucifixion of her own offspring, is the kind of character who pushes the envelope of empathy to the point of shredding.

The season of "Precious" has also seen the adaptation of "Where the Wild Things Are," a movie based on a children's book that upon its publication was critically attacked—don't laugh—because its little hero was sent to bed without his supper. It is noteworthy how far movies have come in their delivery of "justice." Crimes, including illicit sex, once demanded of the malefactors either redemption or death. The horror movie genre, in fact, still operates largely by that yardstick, especially if the crime comes early in the film. Traditionally, however, those who have grievously sinned are either dead or penitent by the time the end credits roll and, more important, the worldview of the survivors has been realigned and the moral universe set back in a comfortable spin.

Not so with "Precious." The film resists being a fable, but can't help it. Claireece Precious Jones is given a marvelously nuanced performance by newcomer Gabourey Sidibe, whose previous acting experience consisted of playing extras in college productions (a "Peter Pan" pirate at New York City's Lehman College, for instance). But Precious is also a symbol in a movie that is as much a religious allegory as, say, Robert Bresson's 1966 film "Au Hasard Balthazar." In that classic, a donkey and a girl are, over many years, both cruelly and casually abused; in the case of the girl, a good man is rejected, and the girl actually chooses her abuser.

What Precious embraces, with echoes of Bresson, is the temporal world's view of her, a view warped and refracted not by what's she's done, but because she's a natural, acquiescing target. Her mother's chief sin is a kind of moral sloth. Mary vents her own disappointments and grievances on her daughter, as if the daughter were no more than a donkey. One of the lessons of the profoundly Catholic Bresson was that there is room in God's love for all creatures. Daniels's message isn't exactly the same; it is when Precious learns the lesson of self-worth that her fortunes and perspective change.

Her salvation comes through a teacher—movies love teachers far more than taxpayers do—with the heavy-duty name Blu Rain (Paula Patton). Ms. Rain is understanding, beautiful and a lesbian, perhaps in keeping with the movie's understandably unfriendly attitude toward men, ameliorated somewhat by the appearance of the rocker Lenny Kravitz as a nurse in the hospital where Precious delivers her second child. In the narrative machinery of "Precious," Ms. Rain is a weak cog, but Patton provides a welcome downpour of charisma onto the seared landscape of the film.

And Mary? It is tempting to say Mo'Nique gives one of the most wrenching, unnerving performances in the history of cinema, but such a dec-

God's Brother

We walked downhill
from school; he was
older than I
was by ages. The hill
was a runnel of shade
and the great trees discarded
their leprous bark down
along the asphalt, curling
and trod into dust. I told him
of a boy who'd misbehaved
at school again. What
makes you think
you're better than he is?
he asked me.

We walked
in silence after that, wet leaves
under our feet like water . . .

Then as if to remind us both
he said, You're not God,
you know.

DAN O'BRIEN

DAN O'BRIEN *is a playwright with many productions to his credit. He has been playwriting fellow at Princeton, Sewanee and the University of Wisconsin.*

laration would expire of its own hyperbole. She lays bare a personality almost beyond the reach of common decency, adrift in a septic soullessness, but who can still exhibit enough of a glimmer of moral awareness that her pleas of innocence ring with a bilious hypocrisy. In the powerful soliloquy that serves as the film's eerily subdued crescendo, Precious and her social worker, Mrs. Weiss, a virtually unrecognizable, pitch-perfect Mariah Carey, listen as Mary delivers her personal apologia. It is the kind of gut-wrenching confession that during an earlier time in movie history would have terminated in a storm of forgiving tears or the character dying on the spot.

ON THE WEB
Kerry Weber reviews
the film "Fantastic Mr. Fox."
americamagazine.org/culture

"Precious" is, instead, a portrait of a soul poised on the edge of perdition and a universe with no reason not to give her a push. Given the easy righteousness we've come to expect at the movies, it is Mary—not Precious, for all her suffering—who represents the real horror of "Precious," and who will haunt us, far beyond the palimpsest of her stricken image.

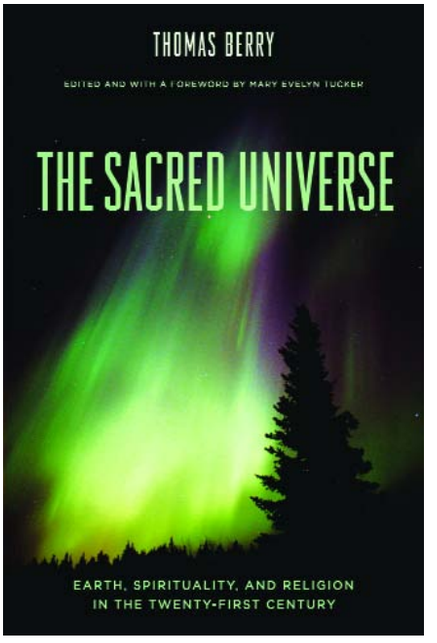
JON ANDERSON *is a film critic for Variety and The Washington Post and a regular contributor to The New York Times' Arts & Leisure section.*

BOOKINGS | STEPHEN B. SCHARPER

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO BERRY

As I write this, I can hear the windswept, white-capped waters of Lake Huron's Georgian Bay as they tumble upon the rocky shore of Ontario's stunning Bruce Peninsula. It was to these crystalline waters roughly a quarter century ago that the cultural historian and Passionist priest Thomas Berry turned for direction before addressing a group of Native Canadians at the Cape Croker Native Reserve. After he asked the waters, "What can I tell them?" Berry once recounted, "the waters said, 'Tell them the story'"—the story of what we are learning, scientifically and psychically, of our awe-inspiring, emerging universe and of our place within it. After his presentation, one of the elders remarked that Berry must have "native blood" coursing through his veins in order to have told such a story—a comment of solidarity across the scarred human and geographical landscape of colonization.

For Thomas Berry—who slipped from this life last June after 94 trips around the sun—water, plants, rocks,



trees, stars and sky are not ancillary to his thought, but constitutive. It was in part for this reason that he dedicated his important work *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club Books) to the "great red oak" that shaded his study on the banks of the Hudson in Riverdale, N.Y., where he affirmed that the human species had to rediscover how to "listen" to the voices of nature if it hoped to escape a ravaged, soul-effaced ecological future.

Awesome Wonder

The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality and Religion in the Twenty-First Century (Columbia Univ. Press, $22.95) is carefully edited and constructively introduced by Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-founder of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, based at Yale University. It contains many of the ruminations Berry crafted beneath the spreading oak at his Riverdale Center for Religious Research that he mimeographed and distributed to friends and members of the American Teilhard Association, which he served as president from 1975 to 1987.

The essays, 13 in all, represent the evolution in Berry's thought as he grew from a scholar with a particular expertise in Asian thought and the history of religions ("Traditional Religion in the Modern World," 1972) into a world-renowned interpreter of the spiritual dimensions of our current ecological morass ("The World of Wonder," 2001.)

These essays, it is worth noting, were not written for peer-reviewed, academic journals. Thomas Berry creatively and deliberately described himself as a "geologian," not a theologian. His intellectual arrows were not aimed directly at the doors of theological schools and seminaries. They sought a wider arc—the curve of the cosmos—to help engender a sense of awesome wonder at the unfolding of the universe, as was being dramatically manifested in recent discoveries of astronomy and physics. As this collection demonstrates, Berry tried to weave these scientific insights with

the mystical and cosmological insights of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. His purpose in part was to help fashion a new wisdom tradition, uniting the empirical and the empyrean while skirting the chasm opened up during the modern period between scientific and religious imaginations, into which so many great minds—and great ecosystems—had tumbled.

In his penetrating essay "Alienation" (1974), Berry contextualizes both the Marxist alienation of labor and the religious understanding of human alienation from the divine in the vast cosmos, striking a theme that would vibrate through his subsequent writings—that we have culturally succumbed to a worldview of consumerism, in which the universe becomes not a "communion of subjects," but a "collection of objects" to be bought, sold, used and discarded. He writes:

> In becoming a commerce-dependent consumer society, we have ignored the essential elements and ideals necessary to sustain any viable human community. For example, by enclosing ourselves in automobiles, we have isolated people from one another and destroyed a certain sense of community. Moreover, we find that the distance between the affluent and the less well-off and from the impoverished is constantly increasing. We are isolated and alienated…held together mainly by...an industrial, commercial, consumer society.

For Berry, such a commercial worldview lacks the "psychic energy" needed to respond dynamically to our present environmental moment, which, he claims, is leading to the greatest species eclipse "since the extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago." While Berry's work has been criticized for lacking a well-developed sense of political economy and a clear plan of social action, such reflections, linking corporate capitalism's consumerist "wonderworld" to increasing fissures between rich and poor, reveal a sensitivity to social justice not always noted by his critics.

In some sense, Berry, like Gustavo Gutiérrez, is engaged in a critique of economic schemas that make broader religious and cosmological claims. For Gutiérrez, it was the first world "developmentalist" paradigm of the 1960s, with its promise of universal prosperity and top-down agenda to create "modern" persons, that prompted him in part to proffer a different term—liberation—as an alternative worldview. For Berry, seeing a rapacious neoliberal economy create a "Technozoic" era of ecological despoliation, offers the prospect of an

"Ecozoic" era where humans learn to "befriend the Earth" and live within, rather than against, the life-systems of the planet.

At Home in the Cosmos

One of the benefits for readers of these selected cairns is to follow the intellectual journey of an extremely erudite and magnanimous Catholic scholar, from a bedrock theological grounding in patristic and Thomistic thought, through an expansion into Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist worldviews, to an embrace of the emerging ecological crisis and a deeply informed metaphysical critique of the "cosmology" of consumerism. For example, the essay "The Cosmology of Religions (1994, 1998)," in which Berry describes in detail the shift from the more parochial, scriptural focus of the world religions to a more cosmological focus, in many ways reflects his own story, leading to his assertion—and abiding belief—that the "universe is the primary sacred community."

In the 1996 essay "An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality," one of the most evocative and compelling of the collection, Berry surveys the arrogance and violence with which Europeans approached the North American continent, a posture that he claims leads to spiritual death. Just as Bartolomé de las Casas, the 16th-century "defender of the Indians" claimed the European conquistadors were losing their souls in the enslavement of the new world's aboriginal peoples, Berry argues that the destruction of the outer world leads to a razing of our inner world:

> For the stars in the night sky over our cities to be blocked from view by particle and light pollution is not simply the loss of a passing visual experience, it is a loss of soul. This is especially a loss for children, for it is

from the stars, the planets, and the moon in the heavens as well as from the flowers, birds, forests and woodland creatures that some of their most profound inner experiences originate. To devastate…the natural world is to distort the sublime experiences that provide fulfillment.

The Sacred Universe is an important, inspiring compendium of the thought of a great soul and spiritually profound seeker, who cogently and consistently reminds us, even after his death, that we must learn to feel at home in the universe.

STEPHEN B. SCHARPER, *co-author of* The Green Bible, *is associate professor of religion and environment at the University of Toronto.*

BOOK BRIEFS

SPIRITUAL GIANTS; THRIFT REBORN

The genius of Michael Ford's new book, **Spiritual Masters for All Seasons** (paperback, Hidden Spring) is not that it tells the stories and limns the theologies of four great contemporary Catholic spiritual masters—Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Anthony de Mello and John O'Donohue. The genius is how the book ties these together, finding echoes and resonances in the common project of the four—helping men and women of the modern age come to know God. Ford, a religious broadcaster for the BBC and author of a superb biography of Nouwen called *Wounded Prophet*, also offers insightful comments from a host of scholars, experts and—most helpfully—men and women who knew each of these four well. Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, dilates eloquently (can the archbishop ever do otherwise?) on what Merton meant to him as a young man and now as an older prelate. Jim Forest, the peace activist, relates how generous Nouwen was as a friend during a rough patch in Forest's life. Two of Nouwen's disciples engage in a lively debate over how "Catholic" their teacher was. And Ford himself tells of his multiple visits to the Irish home of John O'Donohue, the author of *Anam Cara*, who did so much to promote Celtic spirituality. The book is not without its flaws (I could have done with less emphasis on the spiritual meaning of Barack Obama's election), but it is an inviting, knowledgeable, accessible and inspiring introduction to four of the great Catholics of our time.

J.M.

"It is imperative that all societies learn to save, not just spend. I started out poor, but through the principles of thrift and hard work, I was able to get ahead." So writes Sir John Templeton in the foreword to **Thrift: Rebirth of a Forgotten Virtue**, by Theodore Roosevelt Malloch (paperback, Encounter Books). The author traces the history of this lost virtue from its Calvinist roots to the present time of financial crisis, arguing that greater discipline and accountability are "natural products of thrift."

As might be expected, the book's overlapping themes include prudence and temperance, the wise use of assets, avoiding waste, giving to strangers and, above all, good stewardship. The author debunks up front the notion that thrift means "cheap" or "miserly" as he calls for a new vision of economic development. "How are economic growth and social progress linked to

spiritual capital?" he asks. "Is saving—a key component in thrift—lost forever? If not, how can we make saving and conservation a part of sustainability, so as to end the consumption ethic?"

ON THE WEB
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Malloch, who has worked in capital markets, held positions at the United Nations and served in senior policy positions in the U.S. Senate and the State Department, draws compellingly from Scripture's parables, characters from literature, presidents, economists and other sources to provide readers with a thoughtful, often jolting analysis of the essential place of thrift in private as well as corporate life. The underlying motive of spending wisely, he writes, "is not greed but gratitude: gratitude to God for the gifts he has bestowed…." The book deserves a wide and attentive readership.

Continuing the theme, I would be remiss if I did not call your attention to **Franklin's Thrift: The Lost History of an American Virtue**, by David Blankenhorn, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Sorcha Brophy-Warren (hardcover, Templeton Press). Unlike the previous book, though, this is an edited collection of essays, by the aforementioned authors/experts as well as others—including Clifford N. Rosenthal, president and chief executive officer of the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions, and Sara Butler Nardo, former research associate at the Institute for American Values. It is structured in three parts: "Franklin's Thrift: The Creation of an American Value," which explores Benjamin Franklin's way to wealth; "Thrift After Franklin: Institutions and Movements," which looks at mutual savings banks, thrift shops, credit unions; and "For a New Thrift: Meeting the Twenty-First Century Challenge," which confronts, among other things, America's debt culture and private enterprise's role in increasing savings.

In some respects, this is a sturdier book than Malloch's, with scholarly vigor—yet quite accessible to the general reader. Engaging the changing legacy of thrift from the 18th century to the present, the contributors to this volume write energetically and with a grounded conviction on a subject of deep cultural significance as they challenge and confound "reductive and unappealing" views of thrift. We owe thanks to "Poor Richard" as well. P.A.K.

Book Briefs is written by James Martin, S.J., culture editor, and Patricia A. Kossmann, literary editor, of ***America****.*

"As my predecessors have often told you, the Church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to reach."

His Holiness Benedict XVI
Address to the 35th General Congregation
of the Society of Jesus, February 2008

Jesuit scholastic Travis Stoops celebrates Vow Day with his parents.

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LETTERS

Ecumenism in the Classroom

I was excited to read the excellent article "Basketball Diary," by B. G. Kelley (11/16). When I first came to the evangelical school where I teach English, I was the only Catholic. Now, in my 10th year, I have three Catholic colleagues. I too have felt a strong sense of belonging to my little school. I have always felt accepted as a sister in Christ. Until the last three years or so, I would feel guilty (true to my Catholic heritage as I am) about not serving in a Catholic school, but we have such a strong dedication to our students that I could not leave. In addition, I trust that God is using me to contribute to a spirit of openness and fellowship with fellow Christians of other denominations.

MARY ANN MILLIGAN
Shreveport, La.

Facing the Wall

Re "U.S. Cardinal Questions Israel's Security Barrier" (Signs of the Times, 11/9): I believe that the Vatican and Christians from all around the world try to help, but they are unable to stop our tears when we face daily the separation wall directly opposite our windows and front door.

GEORGE ANASTAS
Bethlehem, West Bank

Sharing Good News

Tears spontaneously came as I read "Birth Plan," by John J. Hardt (11/16). The wonder and beauty of birth, parenting and the support of the Christian community simply rise up in the account. I shall share this story with the students in my moral theology class at my high school.

RHETT SEGALL
Troy, N.Y.

Seeing Is Believing

Re "Of Many Things," by Drew Christiansen, S.J. (11/16): Having just returned from an eight-day "witness" trip to Palestine, I deeply appreciate this article. The theme of my visit, which was sponsored by Sabeel (an Anglican group working for peace and reconciliation) was to "show, not tell." Basically, I saw the five horrid things that the Israeli government is doing to the Palestinians: 1) the wall that imprisons them; 2) the settlements that expropriate their land; 3) the occupation that restricts their freedom; 4) the demolition of their homes; and 5) the prisons that incarcerate whomever they will. I returned with sadness in my heart and without a clear idea of what we can do to change this horrible situation. Articles like yours are a start.

JOHN McCARTHY
Weston, Mass.

In the Book of Life

"Birth Plan" is the most poignant pro-life tribute I have ever read. This essay ought to be distributed in all Catholic churches throughout the country and also sent to every member of the U.S. Congress. Close to 40 years ago, my wife and I lost our third child in the third month of pregnancy through miscarriage. The experience was then and still remains traumatic, but not nearly the wrenching loss experienced by the parents in "Birth Plan." In our case, an attending nurse told us she held the tiny baby in the palm of her hand and baptized it. Sad to say, at the time I didn't have the presence of mind to ask for the baby's body, so as to give it a proper Catholic burial. Apart from its mother's womb, the surgical garbage can was the only cradle our child ever knew. Fortunately, however,

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later on we had him/her enrolled in the "Book of Life" at a special shrine dedicated to all children aborted, miscarried or stillborn, at Holy Innocents Church, in New York City. We named our child Michael if a boy and Michelle if a girl, and it was so recorded in the "Book of Life."

BRUCE SNOWDEN
Bronx, N.Y.

The Mission Is the Message

Re "A Survivor's Story," by George Anderson, S.J. (11/23): I had the great blessing of coming to know Immaculée Ilibagiza through her writings, hearing her speak and going on a pilgrimage she led to the shrine of Our Lady of Kibeho. She was left to tell not only of her survival of the 1994 genocide through prayer and the grace of God, but also of her mission to spread the message of Our Lady. That message is that the world has abandoned God. It must come back now. Immaculée is Mary's gift to us.

(REV.) JOHN McHALE
White Haven, Pa.

Forgiveness in Rwanda

I was very moved in reading Immaculée Ilibagiza's account of her journey in faith to Christian forgiveness. I recall my own experiences visiting Rwanda several times shortly after the genocide. I spent some time with a good friend, a newly ordained diocesan priest, whose whole family had been killed except for his younger sister. He was the first priest assigned to a parish where thousands had been killed. It was just before Christmas, when the Hutu refugees were returning from Tanzania by the thousands. Seeing the hundreds of returnees streaming into his parish, he said to me: "How these people have suffered. Now I am their pastor, and I must bring them together"—an inspiring insight into his deep understanding of his own priesthood. Visiting his home village, an old family friend hugged him, saying, "Father Emmanuel, we are so happy to see you." He told me the old man was trembling, for Father Emmanuel knew the old man was the one who had killed his father. I witnessed many instances of deep Christian faith among the people of Rwanda. More should tell their stories.

CAL POULIN, S.J.
Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines

No New Legislation

Re "The Iron Pipeline," (Editorial, 11/16): We are saddened to see, once again, **America** editors buy into the rhetoric of the amalgam of anti-gun organizations.

Mayor Daley and his family have had the power for years to confiscate illegal guns in Chicago. Why haven't they done so? As Mayor Bloomberg's private forays claim to prove, any crimes that may be occurring at gun shows are readily apparent to casual investigators and ought to be prosecuted by the appropriate authorities. No new legislation is required. All that is needed is political backbone to follow the law and do their jobs as prosecutors everywhere. If these politicos really want illegal guns to be gone, they have the legal means to make that happen. But what they really want are all guns—yours and mine, not just the illegal guns.

VINCE KOERS
Danville, Ill.

Wishful Thinking

America's editors are astonishingly naïve. To suggest that smuggling handguns from outside the country or within can be effectively controlled, when many tons of cocaine and other hard drugs cannot, indicates fuzzy analysis and a disconnection from the real world of large cities today. Liberal wishful thinking has, sadly, been a trait of Jesuit leadership, which has undermined so much of the good done by Jesuit fathers on the ground around the world. Outlawing handguns altogether, except for the incompetent and convicted criminals, will leave plenty of them solely in the hands of people who threaten the innocent while disarming those law-abiding citizens who need such weapons for self-defense.

BILL JAENIKE
Ossining, N.Y.

Food for Thought

Thank you for this very sane, very Catholic and very Christian comment by John Kavanaugh, S.J. ("Slandering the President," 11/23). I will forward it to as many of my fellow parishioners as possible as food for thought.

LIVIA FIORDELISI
Woodbury, Conn.

Silence of Leadership

The real damage of the widespread calumny Father Kavanaugh criticizes is the divisive effect it is having on family and social relationships. Many are using calumny to destroy an opponent. Unfortunately, the days of "loyal and respected opposition" are gone from our public square. What makes it even more tragic is that religious persons are exponents of this method of public conversation. Unfortunately, it is behavior common amongst persons who claim to be spokespersons for religious communities. The silence of the leadership in this area is saddening. Allowing this issue to continue without comment by the leaders of religious groups is one of the main reasons many people do not become active members in churches. The leadership of all religious groups should be condemning this calumny, not just Father Kavanaugh. Thank you for your brilliant work and the work of **America**.

BERNARD CAMPBELL
Manchester, N.H.

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Rough Ways Made Smooth

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 6, 2009

Readings: Bar 5:1-9; Ps 126:1-6; Ph 1:4-11; Lk 3:1-6

"The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy" (Ps 126:3)

In some cultures, a woman who has been widowed or who loses a child wears black for a year or more, signaling her mourning. Her face, too, wears the marks of grief. The sparkle in her eyes gives way to ready tears and her gait becomes heavy from sorrow. Such is the image of the city of Jerusalem in today's first reading.

Baruch, a disciple of Jeremiah, characterizes the devastated city as a woman in mourning for her exiled children, who have been forcibly taken away from her. The prophet declares that it is now time for Jerusalem to exchange her robe of mourning and misery for a brilliant new mantle. Her new cloak is spun from justice and glory from God. If she despaired for her children, thinking God had forgotten them, the prophet insists that "they are remembered by God."

The humiliation of their forced march into exile on foot will be undone by their being carried back aloft, as if they were royalty. The heights of despair and the depths of depression will be leveled out. It is not that the suffering is forgotten, or that anything could go back to being the way it was before the tragedy, but now the divine gift of joy settles over the grieving mother as rebuilding life out of the ruins begins. The returnees are led by God's light, and their companions are mercy and justice.

Divine mercy embodies God's motherly care, as she grieves with all who mourn and acts with compassion to bring relief for all who suffer. Divine justice is the setting aright of all relationships: with God, self, others and the whole of the cosmos. With these two companions come healing, restoration and the chance for a new beginning.

In the Gospel, there is a similar invitation to a new beginning announced by John the Baptist. The narrative starts on an ominous note, as John's ministry is set against the backdrop of the Roman imperial rulers. By listing Tiberius Caesar, the emperor; Pontius Pilate, the governor; Herod, Philip and Lysanias, the tetrarchs; and, finally, Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests who colluded with the Roman authorities, Luke is not simply displaying an interest in history. He is reminding his hearers of the omnipresent imperial power that kept the inhabitants of Palestine in fear and grief at many levels. He foreshadows the terror of John's execution and of Jesus' crucifixion by introducing Herod and Pilate before these two prophets have even spoken their opening words.

Luke's hearers already know the end of the story. It is in this context that we hear John's invitation not only to turn away from personal choices that impede God's coming, but also to collective repentance and a turn toward divine mercy. Any desire for revenge, any attempts to try to retaliate with violence must give way to forgiveness on the part of the victims. This forgiveness invites repentance on the part of the offenders. Using Isaiah's words, John first speaks in imperatives: prepare and make straight the way. But then the verbs shift to the passive voice, implying that it will be the coming one himself who will do the filling in of the valleys and leveling of the mountains, straightening out winding roads and smoothing the rough ways.

For them and for us, his coming does not eliminate these challenges along life's path but fills us with saving joy, justice, forgiveness and mercy as we open ourselves to the great things God has done and continues to do for us.

BARBARA E. REID

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- What robe of mourning does God wish to take away from you in order to clothe you with joy and splendor?
- How has God's compassion carried you over the rough places of your journey?
- What is being healed, forgiven and restored in you as you prepare the way this Advent?

ART: TAD DUNNE

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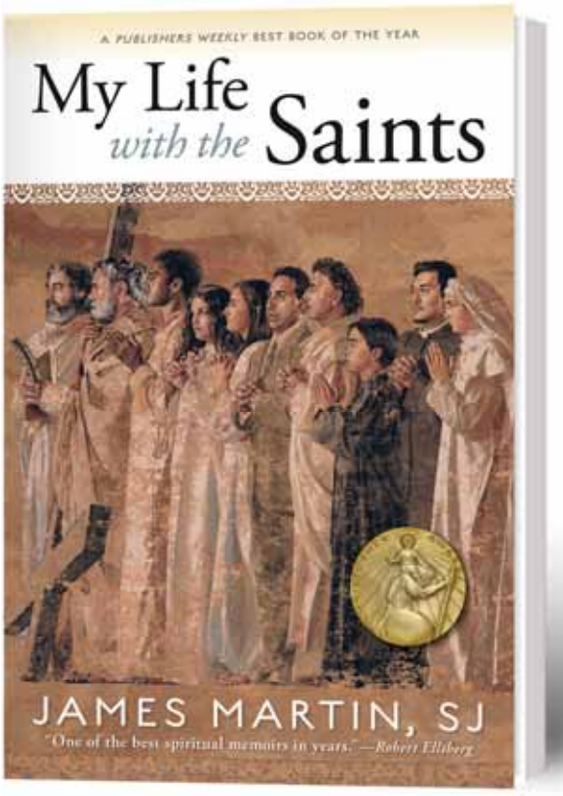

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