DONALD WUERL: THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY FEB. 28, 2011 $3.50

Defining Feminism

M. CATHLEEN KAVENY

OF MANY THINGS

Last fall (11/15) I recommended in these pages that since the negotiations for a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine were failing, it was time to consider the one-state solution, a proposal that has a history among Jewish intellectuals. The one-state Israel-Palestine, with a new constitution guaranteeing equal rights for all, would make Palestinians equal citizens. And both sides would have to learn to forgive and live in peace.

This inspired an orchestrated avalanche (about 90 letters) of condemnation. The writers had been instructed to accuse me of not knowing that all Arabs want to kill all Jews. And since I was a Catholic priest, they held me responsible for the Holocaust.

The letters brought back childhood memories. My father's best friend from World War I and the Trenton American Legion was Lester Block, whose Navy sweater from 1917 I am wearing as I write this. For my brother David and me, he was our Uncle Lester. When he visited, he would pick us up and swing us around; he brought us matzos for the holidays; and his wife fed us kosher hot dogs in their home. When I was 10, I joined the Jewish Cub Scout troop across the street from Blessed Sacrament Church, and in our early teens we went to a summer riding camp with Jewish boys. Once when we were planning our family vacation, a New England inn asked for letters of recommendation; our last name suggested we might be Jews. We went somewhere else. In short, I grew up identifying with Jewish people, and as a priest I see Christianity's roots in the Hebrew Scriptures.

As a student and journalist I have marveled that Jews, with 3 percent of the American population (Catholics are over 20 percent), have led the nation's intellectual discourse, particularly on social justice issues. The Catholic intellectual tradition in this country, for many reasons, just does not compare.

In the 1980s and '90s I traveled in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Iraq to get a better sense of the Middle East. In Jordan I encountered a politician at a briefing who said he wanted to drive Israel into the sea and a young man in a Palestinian refugee camp who suddenly pleaded with me to take him to America.

Today I support J Street, the new Jewish lobby that loves both Israel and peace, and read widely, including reports from Israeli newspapers. But with sadness I also see Arab homes bulldozed to make way for Israelis, between 1,100 and 1,400 citizens of Gaza killed in the invasion of 2008, the Wall, highways on which Arabs may not drive, Palestinians humiliated at checkpoints and beaten by mobs of settlers, the Christian population evaporating, illegal Jewish settlements dominating the water supply and the West Bank. Conservative voices in Israel call for bans on Jews renting property to Arabs and on dating between Arab boys and Jewish girls and want a loyalty oath for citizenship. Is this democracy?

Most Israelis say they want peace, and the conditions that would create it are clear, but as Gideon Levy wrote in Haaretz, "The Israelis don't really want peace; they prefer real estate." Those who mention this are branded anti-Semites; Jews in both Israel and America who cannot morally support Israeli policies are labeled "Not real Jews."

In Dt 4:5-8 Moses addresses the Israelites about to enter the promised land. The Lord has said that this land must be distinguished by the justice of its laws. When other nations see Israel's just laws they will say, "Surely this great nation is a wide and discerning people. For what other nation has a god so near it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?"

Is that Israel today?

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America

Published by Jesuits of the United States

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New York, NY 10019-3803

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Web site: www.americamagazine.org.
Customer Service: 1-800-627-9533

Cover: Shutterstock/Vesnam

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Jobs, Anyone?

Surveys show that a Republican majority in the House was swept into Congress by voters concerned about the federal deficit, confused about health care reform and angry about the economy, but most especially about the lack of jobs. Repeatedly, they said their top priority was jobs. If that was a mandate, the next election may well be decided by the voters' perceptions of who is more likely to create jobs.

Job creation certainly has not been the new majority's first priority. That was to repeal the health care reform. By putting the adjective *job-killing* in front of the repeal bill's name, some may have hoped that voters would mistake their ideological mission of destruction for an idea to create jobs. But it would have created not one job. And even the adjective was false. Health care, in fact, is the only sector of the U.S. economy that has steadily created jobs throughout the recession; and the reform, which will bring some 30 million new customers to insurance companies and into doctors' care, would surely create jobs, not kill them.

How will the 112th Congress create jobs? It is hard to say, but it will take more than merely "undoing" the initiatives of the last Congress. Already some lawmakers are taking the Environmental Protection Agency to task, even though the agency saves lives by working to ensure that corporations do not foul the atmosphere or the nation's waters and land. The assault will do nothing to create jobs and could impede job creation efforts already in motion.

The government already has sponsored clean-energy initiatives for entrepreneurs; has begun to woo the auto industry away from its oil dependence and toward higher-mileage vehicles, hybrids and electric cars; and has budgeted for public transportation initiatives like high-speed rail projects and other infrastructure improvements. All of these initiatives will put Americans to work. The 111th Congress saw to that. But where are the job creation strategies of the 112th Congress?

Enter the Lists

President Obama's State of the Union address included a call to compete with China by raising our educational standards, and he challenged the rising generation to enter the lists. "To every young person tonight who's contemplating their career choice.... If you want to make a difference...become a teacher."

According to recent studies, the president has underestimated the shabby state of learning in both the high schools and colleges of the country. In New York State only half the high school graduates—in New York City only 23 percent—are ready for college or careers. A new book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, reports that according to a study of 2,000 students in 24 four-year colleges across the country, U.S. colleges are falling behind world competition because the students cannot write.

It is possible to get a degree in business or education, the two most popular majors, without doing much writing. In 10 selected public four-year colleges, out of 41 courses required for an education degree, fewer than four courses required future teachers to write 10 to 19 pages a semester, or at most 1.3 pages week.

Nationally, students spend on average about 12 hours a week studying outside the classroom, and one-third spend under five. Teachers who answer President Obama's challenge must enter the classroom armed with Thoreau, Hemingway, Joan Didion and E. B. White. They must risk displeasing their own students and require them to read and write.

An Overdue Apology

The 2-year-old boy was baptized Antoine Joseph on May 6, 1798. On that day his godparents, Marie Joseph and Antonio, accompanied his mother, a slave woman known only as Manon, to St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. These names were recorded in ink in the baptismal records of the archdiocese. On Feb. 1 the name of Antoine Joseph was among those made available in another format—the online records of the Archdiocesan Office of Archives. The first five registers, written in Spanish, now on the office's Web site include the baptismal records of slaves and free people of color in New Orleans from 1777 to 1801. They can be accessed by anyone from anywhere.

The pages are difficult to decipher without the help of additional records, and the process of scanning and preserving the pages was an expensive, painstaking and time-consuming endeavor. Despite this, the project is a worthy one, and not simply for research purposes. The archdiocese saw the launch as an opportunity to recognize the integral role of African-American Catholics in building the city of New Orleans and the church, and to recognize by name some of the thousands of otherwise anonymous slaves. It was also a chance for Archbishop Gregory Aymond to offer an apology on behalf of the church for the fact that the church and some religious orders owned slaves at the time. The publication of these records is also a small but worthwhile step toward the transparency many long for in today's church. It is a reminder that, though the church may move slowly, it is also an institution capable of admitting its wrongs, learning from its history and moving forward with grace.

Saving the Neighborhood

While Americans were trying to make sense of the mass shooting in Tucson last month, public debate was renewed on the ban of automatic weapons, the need for improved mental health referral and the vitriolic political atmosphere. Philip Rucker of The Washington Post, however, pointed in a different direction. "He didn't know most of his neighbors," Mr. Rucker wrote in a description that could apply just as much to Jared Loughner, the loner who took six lives, as to the resident Mr. Rucker was interviewing. "Socially, everyone keeps to themselves," the neighbor of Loughner's admitted.

Individualism has always been prized in the United States for the blessings it confers: freedom for persons to define themselves as they wish and to explore the world on their own terms. But there is also a serious downside, never as vividly evident as it was in Tucson when one individual ran wild a few weeks ago, or in the 24 other mass shootings that have taken place in the past decade, or the 43 during the 1990s, or the 32 during the 1980s.

If the Constitution enshrines the rights of the individual, the history of this nation qualified them by building in a social dimension. Every New England village had a town hall in which people met to debate local issues, and there were clubs and organizations that people joined to educate or entertain themselves. These affiliations did not cancel the American pursuit of individuality, but they modified it by generating a sense of the social self—an understanding that each person is in part a product of society and is also responsible to society.

Even as the United States evolved from a nation of farmsteads and rural communities into a network of large cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Americans did not lose a sense of the social self. The grange halls may have vanished, but people somehow found a sense of community within the large urban setting. In the early postwar years, the neighborhood was a buffer against the anonymity of the metropolis. Stickball games in the street, conversations with neighbors sitting on their front porches or stoops, butcher shops in which customers were on a first-name basis with the man behind the counter, a policeman who greeted everyone as he walked his beat and gossips who took the measure of everyone—all were familiar features of the old neighborhood. It was a time when people in the neighborhood had a claim on, even if not a high regard for, one another.

The neighborhood and the sense of social self that it nourished survived the rise of technology, the development of new means of transportation and communication, the migration from rural farms, the growth of large cities and the shrinking size of the family. The decline of the social self, then, is not the direct result of technology or the changes it wrought.

Sometime after World War II the neighborhood began its long decline. The exposed front porch looking out on the street gave way to the sheltered backyard enclosed by a chain-link fence. The sociologist Robert Putnam documents the phenomenon, in his best-selling book *Bowling Alone*. The author shows how Americans have drifted away from neighborhood associations, participation in local clubs and organizations and even the type of social visiting that once was a major recreational outlet. Putnam discounts many of the standard explanations for this phenomenon: family changes, the growing number of working wives, suburban sprawl and the mounting pressures of work. In the end, the author can assert only that the loss of the social self is the result of a generational change whose cause remains a mystery.

Whatever the explanation, the gradual decline of the neighborhood has left residents without a safety net that served important purposes. The old neighborhood provided support for people in need—not always the penniless, but certainly the friendless. Jared Loughner seemed to be one of those. So were many of the others responsible for the number of mass shootings that has increased dramatically: 22 in six decades before 1960; 119 in the five decades since 1960.

Recouping the neighborhood is not an exercise in nostalgia, but a protective strategy looking to the future. It is a means of affording loners the help they may need or, at the very least, of guarding others against the damage the worst of them can inflict. Even the government behemoth Department of Homeland Security, with its sophisticated spyware and its budget of billions, has admitted that the most effective means to forestall terrorist plots is community watchfulness. Six would-be terrorists in Lackawanna, N.Y., were arrested in 2002 after they were reported by suspicious neighbors. Imagine what sharp-eyed neighbors might have reported about Jared Loughner. Perhaps they might have been able to help him before he picked up his Glock.

AFRICA

Vast Biofuel Demand Drives 'Land Grabs'

Representatives of Catholic organizations at the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal, said that massive foreign investment in large tracts of land across Africa—"land grabbing," according to detractors—is pushing small farmers off their land and threatening another worldwide food crisis.

Martin Brockelman-Simon, executive director of Misereor, the German bishops' development agency, estimated that up to 48 million arable acres have been bought by interests outside of Africa since 2006. Foreign investors are using fertile or resource-rich African land to grow crops that can be exported to other countries or used for biofuel production, or for mining interests. "These deals are causing loss of food supply, social conflicts, depletion of water supplies, loss of jobs and ecological damage," Brockelman-Simon said.

"Food crops, such as jatropha, that can now be used for agro-fuels have become a very valuable commodity," said Rene Segbenou, president of the Benin-based National Network for Sustainable Management of Genetic Resources. "This is driving the push by foreign investors to buy up more and more land for the production of agro-fuels, as this has become a very lucrative business."

"Recent massive land grabs targeting tens of millions of acres for the benefit of private interests or third states...violate human rights by depriving peasants, pastoralists and fishermen of their means of production, by restricting their access to natural resources or by removing their freedom to produce as they wish," said a draft statement prepared by delegates at the six-day conference that ended on Feb. 11. Among those working on the statement were representatives of Misereor, Caritas Senegal, the Senegal bishops' Justice and Peace Commission and the Food First Information and Action Network.

Would-be private investors in Africa often suggest that Africa has huge swathes of unused and vacant lands that can be turned into easy profits, said Ruth Hall, a senior researcher at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies in Cape Town, South Africa. She said one company even claims that the purchase of African land is socially responsible, but Hall called Africa's purported land overabundance a marketing myth. Land that sometimes appears vacant is usually used by tribes or nomadic cattle herders, who need access to land to survive, she said.

Land-grabbing is relatively easy in Africa because few traditional communities maintain formal title to land that has often been used communally for generations. The Rev. Alphonse Seck, vicar general of the Diocese of Dakar and executive secretary of the Senegal bishops' Justice and Peace Commission, said customary land tenure systems must be given greater recognition. "We must not allow a new form of impoverishment of the masses that tramples on the rights of people to land," he said. The delegates' statement calls for national governments in Africa to cease what amounts to collusion with land-grabbers and to "implement an effective framework for the recognition and regulation of land rights for users through consultation with all stakeholders."

Placide Mukebo, coordinator of the Office of Development in the Diocese of Lubumbashi, Congo, said that land-grabbing by foreign mining companies is causing an exodus of small farmers to the cities. "The farmers are either forced off the lands, or they agree to go, but they don't get adequate compensation," he said. Mukebo said that 34 of the 51 farming communities the diocese has worked with have been displaced from their land in the last 10 years. Only seven communities held legal titles to land.

At work on a cooperative farming project in Southern Sudan

CATHOLIC HOSPITALS

Union Struggles Persist

The issuance of a joint statement in 2009 by Catholic hospitals and labor unions about the right of workers to organize is still waiting for its first application, according to a participant in the drafting of the document. The statement, "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers: Guidance and Options for Catholic Health Care and Unions," was prepared by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Health Association, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and the Service Employees International Union. Jerry Shea, assistant to the president at the A.F.L.-C.I.O., said the document first became sidetracked when participants agreed to hold back its release until closer to Labor Day 2009. By then, Shea added, the initiative was further sidelined as the nation—and some of the key participants in crafting the statement—became embroiled in a debate on the merits of health care reform legislation.

The document calls on unions and employers to respect "each other's mission and legitimacy" and to pledge not to "demean or undermine each other's institutions, leaders, representatives, effectiveness or motives." Both sides also must be "dedicated to ensuring that organizing campaigns will not disturb patients or interfere with the delivery of patient care."

Shea said that "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers" may yet prove to be useful. "Unions complained about it because it didn't go far enough. Hospitals complained because it went too far. So we must have done something right," he said.

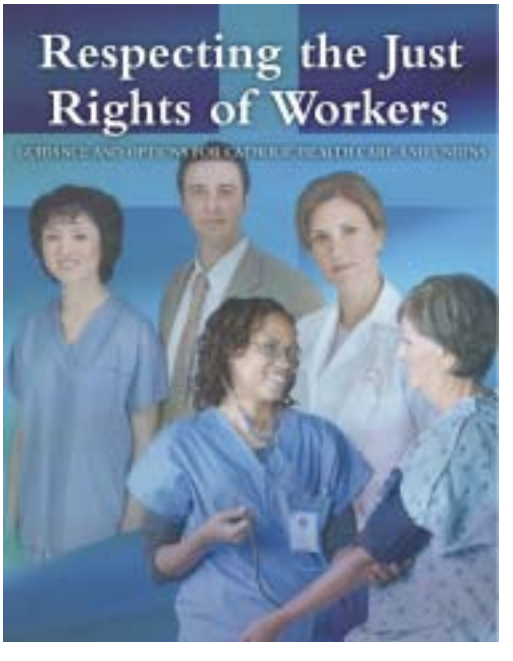
At the annual meeting of the Catholic Labor Network in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 12, participants were told that health care organizing continues at Catholic institutions, although not necessarily under the tenets laid out by "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers."

Marie Puleo, a Franciscan sister who is senior vice president of mission for Steward Healthcare System, a for-profit chain that runs six Catholic hospitals in Massachusetts, outlined the positive working relationship the chain has with S.E.I.U. Both the hospitals and the union consider as the enemy not each other but the current health care system, she said.

Relations are not as stable at other health care sites around the country where management and labor square off. Nina Bugbee, a staff representative for a Teamsters local representing hospital workers at Genesys Regional Medical Center in Flint, Mich., and a former nurse at the hospital, said workers and management enjoyed a good relationship for about six years until executives at Ascension Health, the nation's largest Catholic hospital chain, "decided two things: The profits weren't big enough at Genesys, and they were going to put the unions in their proper place."

That set off, according to Bugbee, a series of anti-union moves by hospital management, which in turn brought a series of countermoves by the union and its allies, including the publication last year by Interfaith Worker Justice of "Ascension Health: A Fall From Grace—Workers' Rights Abuses at Ascension Health's Michigan Hospitals."

Bugbee said the tactic that finally got management's attention was the Teamsters' backing of a rival hospital's building bid. Both parties came back to the bargaining table. The nurses eventually agreed to concessions that led to a new contract, but Bugbee claimed that even with the contract, "morale is the lowest it's ever been."



Budget Priorities

The federal budget crunch should not be eased by cutting programs that help the poor, refugees and the unemployed in the United States or those struggling in developing nations, warned church leaders. "In a time of economic crisis, the poor and vulnerable are in greater need of assistance, not less," said Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, in a letter to Congress on Feb. 14. A second letter from Ken Hackett, president of Catholic Relief Services, and Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, noted cuts of up to 26 percent of funding in programs for international assistance this year, but only 2.6 percent in cuts for the overall budget. "Shared sacrifice is one thing," said Hackett and Bishop Hubbard; "it is another to make disproportionate cuts in programs that serve the most vulnerable." The Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, urged policymakers to improve government efficiency before resorting to cuts.

Lost Youth in Egypt?

Two priests with strong ties to Egypt said they feared young Egyptian Catholics will turn away from the church because it did not back protests that led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. The Rev. Makarios Isaac, an Egyptian-born priest of the Archdiocese of Toronto and an associate of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, said the main Muslim and Orthodox leaders forbade participation in the protests and the Coptic Catholic patriarch of Alexandria, Cardinal Antonios Naguib, told protesters to go home. He feared Egyptian young people will now "turn their backs on the church" and say, "You never stood with us...you never taught us to stand up for our rights." The Rev. Douglas May of Maryknoll, who worked in Egypt for 18 years of Mubarak's nearly 30-year rule, said Christian leaders in Egypt played it safe. "I'm afraid that the church leadership has lost its credibility with the Christian youth over this," he said.

Arizona Defends Its Immigration Law

Gov. Jan Brewer said she was prepared to defend S.B. 1070, a controversial law aimed at curbing illegal immigration, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Brewer spoke at a news conference on Feb. 10 announcing five counterclaims against the federal government, which has attempted to block the full enactment of S.B. 1070. The first counterclaim cites failure to achieve and maintain operational control of Arizona's border with Mexico, as called for in a trio of acts dating to 2006. Other counts include failure to protect Arizona from "invasion" and failure to enforce or follow immigration laws. José Robles, director of the Office of Hispanic Ministries for the Diocese of Phoenix, said the governor's counterclaims were "poorly timed and counterproductive to efforts already in place to resolve this issue." Robles also said Arizona has more pressing issues, most notably a budget deficit, high unemployment and "widespread human suffering."

From CNS and other sources.

NEWS BRIEFS

John Sweeney

The San Antonio executive **Al J. Notzon III** has been appointed chair of the U.S. Conference of Bishops' National Review Board. His term begins in June. ✦ New York's Archbishop **Timothy Dolan** has denied that as bishop of Milwaukee he attempted to hide $130 million in diocesan funds from lawsuits by victims of sexual abuse. ✦ John Sweeney, former president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., was honored along with Stan Musial and Jean Kennedy Smith with a **Medal of Freedom** at a White House ceremony on Feb. 15. ✦ Masses have resumed on **Yeonpyeong**, the South Korean island shelled by North Korean artillery in November. Its population of 1,700 included 450 Catholics. ✦ Archbishop **Michael Fitzgerald**, the Vatican's ambassador to Egypt, said on Feb. 11 that he hoped the country's future would include greater social justice and freedom. "The events of recent weeks have produced a feeling of solidarity among Christians and Muslims," he said, "a good basis for increased dialogue and cooperation in society." ✦ A U.K. judge, in a decision on Feb. 14 of London's High Court, has turned back an attempt to reinterpret **Britain's 1967 Abortion Act** to allow so-called "D.I.Y." or "bedroom" abortions.

KYLE T. KRAMER

Radical Hospitality

The shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Ariz., on Jan. 8 sparked a national conversation about the need for civility in our public discourse. It is a much-needed virtue in ecclesial circles as well, where polarized, shrill voices so often dominate.

The graduate lay ministry formation program I direct at St. John's College in St. Cloud, Minn., deals with these tensions in microcosm. Students span the theological spectrum, but this mix of perspectives has worked in the classroom—until recently. In one course, however, ideological fault lines became painfully apparent. The atmosphere grew increasingly hostile and tense, with plenty of "passionate intensity," to borrow a phrase from Yeats's "The Second Coming."

Through some intervention by the professor, the school's president-rector and me, however, the class was able to pull back from the brink. I worried that some of the more vocal students would either drop out or feel so shut down that they no longer would participate, and that the tension would continue to fester underground. But to my surprise, and to the great credit of the professor and the class, all the students remained. The temperature cooled, intimidated students felt more at ease to speak, and all went on to have a meaningful engagement with the course content and one another's ideas.

I will not claim that there was a marvelous meeting and melding of minds or that all tensions faded. But civility and charity did finally carry the day, and what seemed doomed to disaster ended in détente. Many students even confided in me that, as difficult as it had been, they were grateful for the experience.

I have thought a great deal about what enabled that course to end as well as it did. I believe one reason is that it took place in a context of what I call radical hospitality.

Hospitality is a primary charism of the Benedictine monks who conduct the school. The *Rule* of St. Benedict, which has wisely guided Benedictine communities for 15 centuries, urges that "all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ." Hospitality is a fierce discipline; the monastery's namesake, St. Meinrad, was a ninth-century hermit monk who became known as the martyr of hospitality because he was killed by two thieves he had invited into his cabin in the woods of the Swiss Alps. I would like to think that the students' experience of Benedictine hospitality played a part in dampening the heated rhetoric of their class.

> We are all part of the same God-given belonging, and we need each other.

To welcome others as Christ is to recognize that despite vast differences, the diverse human family is part of the same God-given belonging, and we need one another to survive and thrive. Hospitality is simply a practical working out of this truth. The monks' hospitality means not only welcoming people with their concrete needs but also making a safe space for the expression of their differing perspectives and ideas.

Such an open-minded and open-hearted stance is radical, first of all, in its fearlessness. Fear bolts the gate, hunkers down and hurls epithets over the fortress walls. Courageous hospitality, on the other hand, flings open the door and discerns Christ in the strange and the stranger—even when, as St. Meinrad learned at the cost of his life, what we admit is threatening. Welcoming others and their opinions requires facing the fear that something in us may have to die, perhaps even the certitude to which we cling.

Hospitality can be fearless when it is rooted, as the word *radical* denotes. Saint Meinrad Archabbey has deep roots in a rich tradition, with a thick Catholic identity that is not overtly evangelical nor encrusted with excessive trappings of traditionalism but grounded in everyday habits of prayer and community life honed by 1,500 years of practice. And it is rooted in love: the alpha and omega of the entire creation, the force that pulls everyone and everything toward a center that can hold.

Our ecclesial and popular cultures seem lately to favor strident, uncompromising voices and to dismiss moderate stances, like that of the Benedictines, as lacking strong conviction. But what I have seen of fearless, rooted Benedictine hospitality looks less like the muddle of the middle and more like the golden-mean possibility of reconciliation—in a theology classroom, within the church and amid pressing issues of the global commons. It makes me suspect that such moderation, like love, might be the most radical stance of all.

KYLE T. KRAMER *is the author of* A Time to Plant: Life Lessons in Work, Prayer, and Dirt *(Sorin Books, 2010).*

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK; COMPOSITE: AMERICA

Renewing one's own faith is the first step to evangelizing others.

Pass It On

BY DONALD WUERL

Not long ago, a parishioner shared a story about an incident that deeply troubled him. His nephew, a Catholic and a junior at a well-regarded liberal arts college, had written a research paper on physician-assisted suicide. He told his uncle and a group of about 15 others, all Catholic, that he had concluded that it is good for people with handicaps and certain illnesses to be able to end their misery whenever they want. It was obvious to him that their quality of life is so minimal that they need that option.

No one said anything. Finally, the parishioner spoke up. He was not willing to let this go by without discussion. He gently challenged the young man to think about the issues of human dignity, the value of life and the reality of truth. The nephew and a niece responded that they believed there is no such thing as absolute truth and that everyone has a right to determine his or her own destiny. The only other person entering the conversation, the young man's father, proposed they resolve the disagreement by letting people vote on whether assisted suicide should be permitted.

Everyone present was highly educated. Most had attended Catholic colleges. All considered themselves practicing Catholics except one, who had left the Catholic Church while attending a Catholic university because the church's views differed from her political and social views. Yet none spoke up in defense of the vulnerable.

This conversation could have happened anywhere today, and likely some variation of it has taken place in other Catholic families. Even Catholics raised in Catholic families, who were educated at Catholic institutions and who attend Mass regularly, do not necessarily know or understand their faith or believe it. Many others have left the church altogether. In fact, if the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life is correct, approximately 10 percent of all Americans are "former" Catholics.

In spite of the genuine and sometimes heroic efforts of parents and teachers in Catholic schools and parish religious education programs,

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sometimes the message simply is not heard the first time around. In today's culture, it cannot be assumed that baptized Catholics will embrace discipleship and become active followers of Christ. Many Catholics are affected by the secularism, materialism and individualism of our society, as are many of their friends, families and neighbors who do not profess the faith. It is difficult for the church to be heard through the pervasive noise.

Many Catholics have embraced a postmodern mentality that rejects belief in a universal and objective truth, leading to a rise in relativism. Many mistrust institutions, including the church, and do not turn to her for guidance. A self-referencing individualism evaluates in terms of what is best for the self rather than what is best for the common good. There may be an interest in spirituality, but it is often without humble submission to truth beyond the self. The sense of individuality is so strong that many have lost a desire for community and living in solidarity with others.

Clearly, many Catholics do not know their faith well, nor have they accepted the invitation from Christ to follow him as disciples. So what can be done? In a recent pastoral letter, *Disciples of the Lord: Sharing the Vision*, I wrote that Christ still calls us to conversion and discipleship, "but, for many, the invitation has lost its appeal." It seems that "for some who initially heard this incredible proclamation, the message has become stale. The vision has faded. The promises seem empty or unconnected to their lives."

A recent survey conducted by the Archdiocese of Washington concluded that nearly 50 percent of Catholics between the ages of 25 and 34 attend Mass no more than a few times a year, if at all. Nearly as many, however, consider prayer and spirituality to be very important in their lives. The hunger is there, but the message of the Gospel has been eclipsed.

ON THE WEB
The editors blog
at "In All Things."
americamagazine.org/things

At the other end of the spectrum, one sees great signs of vitality. In the past year, as I have met and talked with pastoral leaders across the archdiocese, I can see that the church in Washington, D.C., is doing many things right and well, or at least it is making strides in a positive direction. There is room for improvement and growth, but the spark is there. Each January, for example, 20,000 young people from across the United States gather at the Verizon Center in Washington for a Rally and Mass for Life. This year we added a second venue with space for an additional 10,000 young people to cheer, pray and stand up for the culture of life. The free tickets for both locations—30,000 seats—were claimed within minutes, and requests continued to pour in. School enrollment has stabilized as communities become more engaged with their Catholic schools; a new archdiocesan seminary will open in the fall to accommodate an increased interest in vocations to the priesthood; and groups ranging from those who are a part of the new movements to those with special needs are increasingly engaged with their church. The archdiocese held its first White Mass recently to celebrate the giftedness to our church and society of those who have special needs. At the same time, parishes have started to actively embrace evangelization efforts, including door-to-door invitations to Invite-A-Friend Sunday and visits by parishioners to those members who have stopped coming to Mass, to invite them back.

Reproposing the Gospel

But is this enough? Last year, it became clear that we needed a focus, something to tie all these good things together and to inspire more, to bring back that 50 percent of young adults not in the pews every week. It became apparent that the call of Pope John Paul II and recently Pope Benedict XVI for a "new evangelization" was what we were trying to do already. But by focusing on this in a more intentional and deliberate way, through what Pope Benedict calls a "reproposing" of the faith, we could gain much-needed momentum.

The Holy Spirit is working in our age, as in every age, but there is much to do. I wrote the pastoral letter to awaken anew in the hearts of Catholics that the church exists to evangelize. The Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" quotes Pius XI: "It is necessary never to lose sight of the fact that the objective of the church is to evangelize, not to civilize. If it civilizes, it is for the sake of evangelization."

The transformation of society begins with conversion, not with another new program. The antidote to our spiritual malaise is for each of us to know and deepen our knowledge of the crucified and risen Jesus. For people to hear the Gospel, the tellers must be credible and alive in their experience of Christ.

This conversion essentially involves discernment. Each of us Catholics must stop and see where the Lord is working and where there is room for growth. Following this basic principle, and understanding that parish life is at the heart of the church experience, the Archdiocese of Washington is introducing a new tool to help parishes discern where they are most vital and where the Spirit is calling them to grow. The "Indicators of Vitality" make up a self-assessment tool that gives pastors and parish leaders a way to plan for the future by looking at the health and vitality of their parishes in five areas: worship, education, community life, service and administration (which includes the leadership, stewardship, management and decision-making processes of the parish).

The process of parish self-assessment brings pastoral planning to a level where it is going to be lived. Parishes self-identify their vision and their needs. The staff of the arch-

diocese is available to help the parishes achieve their goals, not to impose a new program. This vision implicitly recognizes that the people and their pastors are the experts on their parish, and diocesan support must be oriented to supporting pastors, not the other way around.

This vision of evangelization recognizes that listening is inherent to preaching. When those who preach know how the world is listening, they can, in the words of Pope John Paul II, preach the unchanging truth with "new ardor, new methods and new expression." That truth needs to be proclaimed in a way that the world can comprehend, whether from the pulpit, in conversation or through contemporary music or social media.

Encounter With the Risen Christ

Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI teach that, especially in this culture, the faith must still be taught in all its fullness, richness and transforming power. Entry into this truth brings entry into the life and love of God.

If there is anything we Christians should know, it is that human beings yearn for life and love and will turn just about anywhere to find it. The church ministers this life and love in the most beautiful and complete way. Many today are not open to the message the church teaches because it is often presented in a way that does not penetrate the postmodern mentality. But there is and has always been power to transform lives in the love of God, the truth of Christ and the gentle work of the Holy Spirit. This is the heart of our message, and it does not change.

An encounter with Christ makes all the difference, which we cannot forget. This is the ageless message of the saints, and it continues to inspire and challenge in our own day. In encountering Christ, we share in God's life and love in a dynamic way and are enlivened by the Holy Spirit to share this message with others. Our primary encounters with Christ come in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, especially the sacrament of reconciliation. We meet him, too, in reading Scripture, in our prayer and in the community of believers, including when we reach out to those around us, especially the poor and vulnerable, through works of charity and justice.

That is why, as we repropose the Gospel through the new evangelization, we are called to do even better what we already do. Good liturgy is important. Prayer is important. Reading Scripture is important. Our life in community is important, especially as manifested in our social ministries. As Pope John Paul taught, "Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves; they must proclaim him" ("Novo Millennio Ineunte," No. 49).

This is the heart and challenge of the new evangelization: reinvigorating our own faith so we then can invite others to rediscover Christ. A

Defining Feminism

Can the church and the world agree on the role of women?

BY M. CATHLEEN KAVENY

About 13 years ago, I presented a paper at a conference on "Women's Health and Human Rights" at the Vatican. A highlight of the event was a special audience for the conference participants with Pope John Paul II. To the surprise and delight of his listeners, he benignly proclaimed, "Io sono il Papa feminista," "I am the feminist pope."

He meant it. In 1988, Pope John Paul II issued the apostolic letter "Mulieris Dignitatem" or "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women." Repeatedly he called for the development of a "new feminism" designed to honor and celebrate the "feminine genius" in all walks of life, in the world of work as well as the domestic world.

If feminism is ultimately about affirming the dignity and well-being of women, the Roman Catholic Church as a whole is a feminist church in many crucial ways. It has done an enormous amount of good for women, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, in precarious circumstances throughout the world. To take only one example, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Gender & Women runs programs around the world that help women organize into cooperatives for the production and marketing of goods; it also provides shelters for basic needs, educational programs in literacy and training in business knowledge and empowerment.

At the same time, it is safe to say that many people do not share the late pope's easy association of feminism and the papacy. In fact, there are some—among both secular feminists and Catholic feminists—who would bristle at the association. Secular feminists have frequently decried Catholicism as being opposed to the flourishing of women, particularly by its opposition to contraception and abortion. And officials in the Vatican have regularly published broad denunciations of feminism, castigating its destructive effects on society and the family, particularly upon children, both born and unborn.

Catholic women can sometimes find themselves caught in the middle, loving their church and their faith but dispirited by occasional statements that suggest that the Vatican views them as disordered or defiled simply because they are women. Last July the Vatican caused a public relations firestorm after its announcement of two grave crimes under canon law: sexual abuse by members of the clergy and the attempt to ordain a woman. Even women who support the church's restriction of the priesthood to males winced at the decision to group these two acts in the same document.

In order to sort out the convergences and divergences between Catholicism and secular feminism, there must be

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nuanced historical, cultural and geographic studies. The tensions between the two are not the same in the United States as they are in sub-Saharan Africa, for example. At the same time, nuanced, rigorous, comparative analysis of the normative frameworks of Catholicism and feminism sorely needs to be undertaken.

Consideration must be given to three normative polarities within the Roman Catholic framework itself, polarities that help illuminate Pope John Paul II's claim, even while significant tensions remain between Catholicism and feminism. These three polarities are: equality and difference, nature and nurture and complementarity and collaboration.

Catholic women can find themselves caught in the middle, loving their church but dispirited by Vatican statements.

Many Catholics and many feminists see these tensions as creative and affirm the importance of holding onto both poles in each polarity. But there is also antagonism. Each party fears that the other is in danger of letting go of one pole, to the detriment of women and, indeed, to the detriment of all of society. An examination of the fears of each group will facilitate a better mutual understanding.

Equality and Difference

On the one hand, the Catholic tradition has long held that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, equal in dignity, no matter their sex, race, ethnicity or social status (Gal 3:28). On the other hand, the church does not see human persons as purely spiritual bundles of reason and will. We humans do not merely *have* bodies, we *are* embodied, and that embodiment is part of the goodness of God's creation. In particular, our different embodiment as either male or female is a divinely ordained aspect of the created order, which needs to be respected if humanity is to flourish.

The Vatican worries that some strands of secular, Western feminism are emphasizing equality to the detriment of difference. It suspects that this unbalanced emphasis obscures the ontological difference between men and women and the goodness of that difference for both individuals and society. In particular, the Vatican fears that an insufficient appreciation of difference will denigrate women's unique power as mothers, who shape and nurture the next generation.

Feminists are worried too. The way in which some Vatican documents—and some supporters of John Paul II-style feminism—try to specify these differences between men and women concerns feminists, because it can seem as if certain character traits are being defined and imposed as either male or female without any regard for empirical study or individual difference. And that definition and imposition, they believe, contributes to inequality.

Consider, for example, the position of Gloria Conde, a feminist in the John Paul II style, in her book *New Woman* (Circle Press). Quoting Judith M. Bardwick, she writes: "The 'masculine' is equivalent to the objective, analytical, active, inclined to thought, rational, indomitable, interfering, one who obstructs, independent, self-sufficient, emotionally controlled, and self-assured. With his mind, the man distinguishes, analyzes, separates, and perfects. The 'feminine' corresponds to the subjective, intuitive, passive, tender, sensitive, easily influenced, docile, receptive, empathetic, dependent, emotional, and conservative. Her mind picks up relations, she possesses intuitive perception of sentiments, and she tends to unite rather than divide."

The trouble with this sort of sharply dichotomous understanding of the difference between men and women is that it undermines women whose personalities or jobs do not correspond in every respect to the traditional feminine virtues. Here is an example. In the beginning of my teaching career a young man came to me about a grade; he was upset that he got a B plus in my class. Could I not see how he was really an A student, how the low grade I gave him marred the perfection of his transcript? I told him I could see—but I still could not change the grade. It would not be fair to his classmates. As he left the office in frustration, he offered a final reproach: "But you're a woman. You're supposed to be nice!" For any professor grading an exam, male or female, fairness has to trump niceness.

PHOTO: CNS/NANCY WIECHEC

Nature and Nurture

Where do these differences between men and women come from, anyway? This question points to a second flash point: the polarity between nature and nurture.

On the one hand, the Catholic tradition recognizes that human beings are essentially social; our understandings of our place in the world are shaped and transmitted by the languages, cultures and societies in which we live. On the other hand, that tradition also proclaims that there is some irreducible core of "human nature" that remains constant across time, place and culture. The church is committed to the notion of a common human nature. This commitment forms the basis not only for the proclamation of equal human dignity but also for the tradition's confidence in the possibility of articulating some basis for a universal morality that transcends particular religious and cultural traditions. In this cosmopolitan and fractious world, belief in a common human nature will be increasingly indispensable.

ON THE WEB
A conversation with M. Cathleen Kaveny.
americamagazine.org/podcast

The Vatican believes that the secular West has gone too far in endorsing nurture to the detriment of nature. The idea that human nature, including sex and gender, is completely malleable worries the Vatican, because the idea does not give enough weight to the created order, whose intricate pattern is imprinted upon the physical and psychic structure of human beings.

The Vatican is making an important point. Nature matters. Some differences between males and females seem ingrained, not imposed, as anyone might suspect who has ever watched an 18-month-old boy cheerfully repurposing a Barbie doll as a hammer. More scientifically, endocrinologists are making great strides in understanding the way male and female hormones, like testosterone and estrogen, affect our brains and therefore influence our ability to reason and to choose. It is a serious anthropological mistake to think of human beings as androgynous minds encased in male or female bodies.

For their part, however, feminists worry that what some people view as the designs of nature are not natural at all but are, in fact, the deceptive mask worn by ingrained patterns of sexism.

Consider, for example, the article on "Woman" in the 1914 Catholic Encyclopedia, in which one of the authors maintains that the education of women should be directed toward their roles as wives and mothers. The author hastens to observe that "the Catholic Church places here no barriers that have not already been established by nature." While a few women might go on to earn higher degrees, the author asserts, "the sexes can never be on an equality as regards studies pursued at a university." Ironically, that assertion may be correct—just not in the way the author supposed. A recent study showed that women outnumber men as students at every degree level in higher education in the United States. Men still outnumber women in some fields, but overall the educational gap between men and woman has closed and even begun to reverse itself.

Complementarity and Collaboration

With women flooding the educational system, men find themselves competing with them for advancement and academic honors. Pope Benedict XVI, when he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, expressed concern about such competition between men and women and called instead for a collaborative relationship between the sexes ("On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World," 2004).

His view is this: The basis of a collaborative relationship is the recognition of the complementary gifts and skills of men and women. Women in particular should not aim to emulate the strengths of men but should instead nurture their own distinct gifts. Complementarity is most clearly visible in the roles that men and women play in marriage and family life but should be visible in other contexts as well. One of the hallmarks of John Paul II-style feminism, in

fact, is an effort to define the "feminine genius" in all spheres of women's existence in terms of the virtues of motherhood.

For their part, many other feminists are worried about the call to complementarity, not necessarily because they are opposed to the idea that both men and women bring some distinct and important gifts to human society but because of the way that idea tends to work out in practice. In fact, they fear it undermines collaboration, because it tends to promote separation and practical inequality.

The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth explicated male-female complementarity in terms of A and B—one need not be a psychic to guess which sex is which. The way the concept of complementarity works in geometry also reveals the potential problem: Two angles are complementary if they add up to 90 degrees, so a complementary angle is *all* and *only* that which the primary angle is not. Analogously, if one begins with a man, then a woman must be all and only that which a man is not—her role is to fill in the gaps. If complementarity is taken too far, then, it does not facilitate collaboration but rather fosters entirely separate spheres of interest and specialization.

The concept of complementarity rightly affirms the importance—and unique demands—of motherhood on women. But how does it account for the gifts, ambitions and concerns that men and women have in common, even in parenting? For men and women to strive for excellence—together—in the many areas and interests they share ought not to be considered a destructive form of competition. The common pursuit of excellence, or virtue, is a key element of the classical definition of friendship.

Toward a Better Conversation

How to begin bridging the tensions between Catholicism and feminism? In my view, more attention must be paid to the concrete circumstances in which women live their lives. Pope John Paul II observed that many working women carry out their jobs with a maternal spirit. Turning that observation around, I suggest that many mothers around the world must deploy a broad range of skills in working to raise their children. The church offers an important iconic ideal of motherhood: the Virgin Mary peacefully cradling a newborn baby. But mothers in war-torn lands, for example, do not have that opportunity; they must tirelessly labor to feed and protect their children. Even in peaceful countries, babies grow up; dealing with a teenager in crisis because of drugs or alcohol requires steely resolve more than maternal sweetness.

Life is complicated. Allowing the actual circumstances—and struggles—of women around the globe to take center stage may enable many feminists and many Catholics to move past an either/or understanding of the three polarities. A

Exit Interviews

GRAPHIC: CNS/EMILY THOMPSON

In "On Their Way Out," (1/3) William J. Byron, S.J., applying a business management principle, suggested that it would be profitable to interview people who are leaving the church in order to learn what is driving so many away. ***America*** *received an unusually high number of replies, particularly on its Web site. The following is a representative selection from those letters, edited and condensed for space.*

Almost Leaving

I've considered leaving many times: when I have to fill out questionnaires, as if I were a common criminal, in order to work with children, because some priests can't control themselves; when a bishop suggests that dissenters not receive Communion; when a nun is excommunicated for making a difficult bioethical decision necessary to save a woman's life; when women aspiring to the priesthood are linked with sexual abusers as guilty of a "grave delict"; when at each election I'm handed a diocesan voting guide which might as well be stamped "Vote Republican."

But I remain, because the priests in my parish don't think respectful dissent is a sin and do think that social sins like racism and war-making are more important than masturbation and condom use.

ANITA GARRICK
Arlington, Va.

Eucharist Lived, Not Rationed

I left in 2004 when a few bishops declared that John Kerry and anyone who voted for him should not receive Holy Communion because of his pro-choice position on abortion. I personally believe that abortion is just about the worst thing any woman can do to herself and her unborn child, but the audacity of Catholic bishops interfering in presidential elections by politicizing the Eucharist was the last straw. Around that time I attended a funeral in an Episcopal church and heard the priest say, "In the Episcopal Church all baptized Christians can receive the Eucharist." After an eight-day retreat, I began to receive the Eucharist in that church and continue to do so today. In politics I'm an independent and refuse to allow anyone to diminish my ability to hear the Gospel or deprive me of the "peace of Christ." The Eucharist is a sacrament to be lived, not rationed or used as a weapon.

EILEEN M. FORD
Rockport, Mass.

It Never Happened

In the 1950s and until the mid-'60s, the abbot of the Trappist monastery I had entered in 1959 was recruiting barely legal colts for his stable. Boys 17 to 23, considered too young by the order's standards elsewhere, often became the abbot's lovers. He was discreet and dropped them as they got older, but eventually there was a row over how the place was governed. In 1964 a team of abbots came to investigate, and four of us went together to tell what we had seen and heard. We signed notarized affidavits after being promised immunity from retaliation, assured that the Congregation for Religious was monitoring the investigation and guaranteed our immunity.

The investigators thanked us for sticking our necks out, fired the abbot and his friends at once and brought in a new superior. But within a year the whistleblowers were separately told that we had never had an authentic calling to the monastic life, and one-by-one advised to leave because we had a problem with authority and were ill-suited for the tranquil discipline of monasticism. One had been in the order for 18 years, another for 30.

Six weeks later at a family dinner attended by a prominent foreign Jesuit and a monsignor, my aunt asked why I had left. When I told the group, the Jesuit erupted in rage. "It never happened," he shouted. "I forbid you to ever say it happened. Or even to believe that it happened." I swore that night I would never again allow myself to be humiliated and silenced. My parents took the Jesuit's side, and they and their cronies treated me as an enemy of the church for the rest of their lives.

JOHN CAVANAGH
Plymouth, N.H.

No Old Age Apathy Here

A striking feature of the articulate comments appearing on the **America** Web site is the number from readers in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Some have thoughtfully and painfully gone, some are in the process, and some are staying in spite of what they know. These are not the young nonparticipants usually heard about with lamentation or criticism in the news. These have lived with the church in parishes and dioceses, and with the Vatican as it went through its

legalistic Latin stage, its Vatican II stage, and its current reform of the reform, child-abuse-cover-up stage. Those worrying about "apathy" among the "lapsed" ignore the overwhelming reality in front of them. Passion is the opposite of apathy. It is found in the remarkable abundance of those who might be expected to have cooled down a bit with the wisdom of age.

JACK BARRY
Columbus, Md.

New Liturgy, More Losses

Father Byron's article has a note of despair in it that I share. A while ago I left the church for three years. It was ridiculously easy. You just stop. At the time I had just fulfilled a term on the parish council, was active in local politics and had taught C.C.D. classes. In short, I was known. No one, cleric or lay, approached me in any way. Perhaps it was because my wife continued to attend Mass, and she kept the weekly envelopes coming in. If those stop, you get noticed. I'm back thanks to a wonderful priest I met in Seattle. I'm in a different parish and again alive.

But we are about to launch a new liturgy that will have only one effect—more losses. The reasons for leaving in Father Byron's article will remain. Losses will continue, if not accelerate. And the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults seems more aimed at weeding out all but the most committed. We continue to bleed but inhibit new blood.

HARRY DEMAIO
Cincinnati, Ohio

Help!

The arrival of a new parish priest has made me a stranger in my church. He has established an ultra-retro-orthodox liturgy and says the Latin Mass every day. When he is not available to say Mass in English, he abolished the word and Communion ceremony and substituted prayer and the rosary. The fact that few attend and the daily churchgoers no longer see one another does not trouble him. The furniture has been rearranged and the lace "edging" of the alb now begins at the hip. The choir has had to learn plainchant, the parish council has been abolished, the priest's sermons dwell on minutiae, indulgences, priestly authority and 16th-century martyrs—never on Scripture. Mass-going, with his flamboyance, is painful. He refuses to meet with other Christian clergy, asserts his "otherness" by wearing his biretta and cassock even while shopping on Main Street. Why do I stay? I'm over 70, love the other parishioners, fear causing scandal if I go to the Anglican church and have no car to drive to another Catholic parish. But I am on the brink.

MARY WOODHOUSE
Atlanta, Ga.

Hanging on by the Fingertips

We are not becoming the smaller, purer church that Pope Benedict had wished on us, but a meaner, cramped and narrower church. My parish, at the moment, is lucky to have a religious order that espouses the Vatican II reforms and offers liturgies that meet all age groups. One dear friend in Florida saw everything changed when the bishop, a law and order man, moved in a former Episcopal priest given to the Latin Mass and retro vestments, who delivered a rant against gays in his homily. She has fled to a small Spanish parish where she can't stand the music, but the atmosphere is warm. She is an example of disenchanted Catholics hanging on by their fingertips. I worry about my children and grandchildren.

WINIFRED HOLLOWAY
Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

To Leave Is to Search

I am an 82-year-old former priest who left after 16 years of priestly and academic ministry. No one asked me why, and only my wife and my Jesuit spiritual director know the reasons. The failure in church leadership today is the effect of their not wanting to know the reasons. Reasons are disturbing, but the comfortable must be disturbed—and the disturbed comforted—if our church is to change and thrive. Since the Reformation and Enlightenment, the leadership has put Christian doctrine and practice in the deep freeze and dogmatized what should be mere policy. Exit interviews would disclose the irrelevancy of the Liturgy of the Word, especially the homily, and that religious education, including seminaries, is academic but not transformative of the heart. Those who drift away are searching for what they cannot find here—a personal relationship with God.

JAMES J. FLYNN
Spokane, Wash.

I'm Still Here

I am the researcher identified in Father Byron's article as author of a 1971 study on why Catholics leave the church. I was a Jesuit seminarian for six years but had problems with the Catholic tradition. Three years ago, during a recitation of the Creed at Mass, I found myself saying, "I'm not a Catholic anymore." I couldn't keep mumbling my way through the Creed. It was not about the way shown by Jesus. My journey brought me to a small Anabaptist group of Mennonites and Brethren. The only creed was, "Continue the work of Jesus." I wept. But when I returned on a Sunday to my Catholic church, I wept again. I am now both Catholic and Anabaptist.

What keeps me apart from the church? The bishops are always in the room with you. What keeps me a part of the church? My local parish, the contemplative tradition (Merton, Rohr, Keating), the "new story" people (Teilhard, Berry), the witness of women religious. My favorite Catholic recollection is an empty, dark church with a flickering red light.

JOHN KOTRE
Ann Arbor, Mich.

MUSIC | KERRY WEBER

A STILL, SMALL VOICE

Faith and doubt in the music of Josh Ritter

The singer-songwriter Josh Ritter has opened for an Irish rock band, held sold-out shows with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and graced the stage at a number of New York City's most popular venues. But the first place I saw Ritter perform live in concert was a church.

In 2007 he performed a solo show in the Christ & Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Westport, Conn., apparently the only local venue with space to accommodate the fans. Filling the pews, they refused to let the stained-glass surroundings or the lack of alcohol sales dampen their enthusiasm for Ritter, who, beneath a mop of red-brown curls and dressed in a white suit, cheerfully crossed in front of the pulpit to take the so-called stage.

While the venue was unusual for rock and roll, it seemed fitting for Ritter, given that so much of his song catalog deals with faith—keeping faith in oneself, finding it in others or in the natural world and, with regard to God, questioning whether it's worth having at all.

O'Connor Meets Dylan

An Idaho native and son of two neuroscientists, Ritter attended Oberlin College with the intention of following in his parents' footsteps but eventually settled on a self-designed degree in "American history through narrative folk music." This focus, not to mention years of practice and grueling tour schedules, has paid off. Today he is a vital force shaping the very tradition he studied.

Ritter, 34, started singing in coffee houses in New England and found his

PHOTO: SAM KASSIRER

big break in Ireland, gaining notoriety while touring with the Irish rock band, the Frames. Always rock and roll, often folk-inspired and with some country twang, Ritter's music is melodically and lyrically rich, influenced as much by Flannery O'Connor and Muriel Spark as by Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan. Ritter's songs tell stories of love and fear, grace and redemption, of busting out, journeying and returning.

Ritter demonstrates apparently effortless ability to weave spiritual and biblical allusions into his lyrics in a way that is more literary than religious, subtle yet still meaningful. His fourth studio album, "The Animal Years," was a broken-hearted love song for America, with tracks about doubt, war, love of country and peace—not uncommon themes, but masterfully nuanced—the kind of songs Thomas Merton might have written had he embarked on a rock career instead of a monastic one.

But the faith present in Ritter's songs is Jeffersonian: we make our own happiness; the focus is more on how we behave than what we say we believe. At times, Ritter describes a world in which religion is distorted by humanity, where things are not always as they seem, where "lost sheep grow teeth" and "forsake their lambs and lie down with the lions"; eyes are as green "as the grass that might grow in the 23rd Psalm"; and "the garden of Eden/ was burned to make way for a train." Yet in that world Ritter provides a surprising amount of hope. It's just that we must look to each other to find it.

In "So Runs the World Away," his sixth and most recent album, Ritter presents a world on the cusp of change; forward momentum is embodied in the energy of his songs. On his Web site, Ritter wrote about "a new feeling" he experienced prior to writing and recording the album, an emptiness that settled on him "like a cold shadow." This sort of pain, wondering and longing can be heard in many of his latest songs. But so can the hope that followed.

God as Black Hole?

Ritter's music does not present a world without God but rather a world that cannot figure out whether the Creator got back to work after resting on the seventh day. The biggest question in Ritter's music is not "Does God exist?" but "Does God care?" "Rattling Locks," with its pounding drumbeats and haunting minor chords, shakes its fist at a God-as-black-hole, who takes and consumes without giving back and without explanation, without answer. This is the kind of god who allows soldiers to die at war, men to kill men and hearts to be broken; there is no hint that the same god might also be capable of offering comfort.

In "Folk Bloodbath," a song in which several characters meet violent, untimely ends, Ritter sings, "I'm hoping it ain't true that the same God that looks out for them looks out for me and you." And if it is? Well, as he sings in "Lantern," it's time to take things into our own hands, to "throw away those lamentations" in favor of "a book of jubilations," even if "we'll have to write it for ourselves."

In "So Runs," Ritter serves as a Thomistic troubadour, posing questions and providing answers, unafraid of either. Again, in "Lantern," he sings:

> *For every cry in the night*
> *Somebody says, "Have faith!"*
> *"Be content inside your questions"*
> *"Minotaurs inside a maze"*
> *Tell me what's the point of light*
> *That you have to strike a match to find?*

Why get lost, Ritter wonders, when we have one another to offer light? So he sings to those who love him, asks others to walk with him through darkness and shadows, and promises to do the same. Ritter sings of a world where love always wins out, even when faith and reason fail us.

Along the way, Ritter strives to balance the apparent contradictions between faith and science; he has no problem pairing the mystical experience with the scientific one, filtering each through the other. In this balance, this interconnectedness, Ritter finds the greatest sense of peace.

In "Lark" images of shells, trees, larks, heartbeats, oxygen and "priestly greens" swim together in a world where there are "telescopes atop the

Abundance

See this piece
of crystal
how the light
fractures?

It's the fracturing
of beauty
so there is more
to go around

to admire.
The earth opens
each day
that way

each time
a deer leaps
each time
you smile.

WILLIAM J. REWAK

WILLIAM J. REWAK, S.J., *is interim director of the Jesuit Retreat Center at Los Altos, Calif.*

mountains of ecstatic vision." It is a world where faith is sometimes lacking but where doubt sounds a lot like hope. He sings: "I am assured, yes, peace will come to me/ a peace that can, yes/ surpass the speed, yes/ of my understanding and my need."

A Wandering Faith

In Ritter's songs, God is often distant but there, somewhere. Despite shadows and doubts, the search for this God, and a possible connection, is not over. At a time when life sometimes seems filled with noise, confusion and emptiness, Ritter sings of shutting out that din and trying to decipher what remains. Like Elijah standing by the mouth of his cave, Ritter sings of finding a place where one might hear that "still, small voice" as it "comes in blazing from some vast horizon." But it is up to the listener to determine the source.

The faith in Ritter's songs is active, searching, wandering. It is a journey made better in the company of loved ones. In "Long Shadows," the final song on "So Runs," Ritter pledges to stand by those who stand by him in the dark; he sings of the need to provide light for one another along the way, the need to help each other to see the good, the hope and maybe the divine in this world. The voice in the song is not afraid anymore. He's got love. He's got friends. With them, he'll keep searching for a way forward, a new light and, as Ritter puts it in the title of one song, "Another New World." You get the sense that he is willing to explore the kingdom of God, even if he doesn't quite believe in it.

ON THE WEB
Reviews of select Oscar-contender films.
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KERRY WEBER *is associate editor of* ***America****.*

BOOKS | RAYMOND A. SCHROTH

OUT OF THE FOG

THE GOOD SOLDIERS

By David Finkel
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 304p $26

WAR

By Sebastian Junger
Twelve. 287p $26.99

> "If the exhibition of the most brilliant valor, of the excess of courage, and of a daring which would have reflected luster on the best days of chivalry can afford full consolation for the disaster of today, we can have no reason to regret the melancholy loss which we sustained in a contest with a savage and barbarian enemy."
>
> —The London Times
> Nov. 13, 1854

In his report on the slaughter of the Light Brigade at the battle of Balaclava, William Howard Russell, the first of the great war correspondents, identifies the basic elements of the best war-reporting as respect for the heroic dead and a suggestion that something is seriously wrong.

In World War I the romantic hero Richard Harding Davis added moral outrage when the German army burned Louvain. In World War II Ernie Pyle, the G.I.'s friend, brought readers into the foxholes to admire and to mourn.

Today's "embedded generation"—including Dexter Filkins, David Finkel and Sebastian Junger—build on this tradition. But they write on two wars, Iraq and Afghanistan, widely regarded as unjust and futile exercises of American power. As at Balaclava, if all that matters is the display of valor, we have nothing to regret.

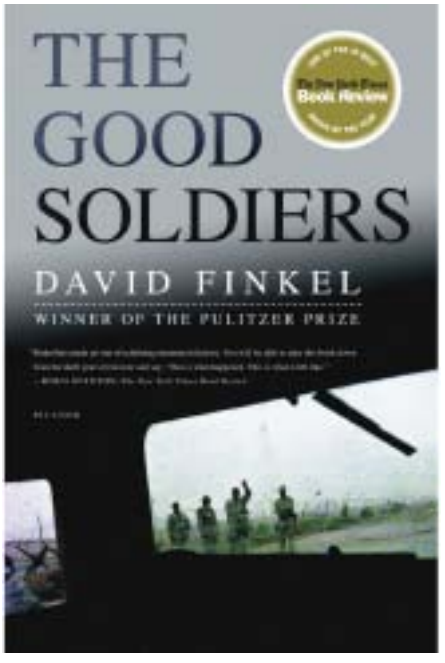
Filkins's *The Forever War* (Knopf) has already been reviewed in these pages (11/3/08), but it warrants another mention because the author exemplifies so many of the best qualities of the modern correspondent: courage—exemplified not just by facing fire but in those long solitary runs through a Baghdad park along the Tigris, risking his life in order to maintain his psychic balance—and personal tenderness and compassion in the face of chaos and bloodshed.

His four years on urban battlefields zip by in scenes of dismembered corpses and severed heads, in frank discussions with Iraqis who lie to the Americans to get their money while hating them and wishing them gone. There are sensitive moments, as when Tommy Smith, the blond-haired, boyish medic, bleeding from his own wounds, picks up eight wounded comrades in the middle of a firefight. Smith's voice is so gentle that Filkins, twice his age, feels the urge to hug him as if he were a child; but instead he lends Smith his cell phone to call his mother in Brooklyn.

Later a photographer needs a picture of a dead insurgent. He and Filkins, with a dozen marine guards, go to climb a minaret where an insurgent had been killed the day before. But two marines insist that they go up first. The leader, Cpl. William L. Miller, is immediately killed. Filkins, crushed, holds himself responsible. A few months later Filkins spots Miller's parents at the memorial service in North Carolina. After the service, in fear, the guilty war correspondent approaches them. The father greets him: "We're so grateful to you. If it weren't for you, we would never have known how our son died."

The Washington Post's David Finkel methodically structures *The Good Soldiers*, an account of his eight months with the 2-16 Infantry

Battalion in the midst of the Baghdad "surge." Each chapter of his book centers on one day, is introduced by a quotation from President Bush—for example: "We're kicking ass, Sept. 4, 2007." Each chapter tells a story that may or may not support the introductory quotation. For the most part Finkel keeps his opinions to himself and focuses on a West Point graduate, 40-year-old Lieut. Col. Ralph Kauzlarich, a Mass-going Catholic from Kansas with a Bible next to his bed. Each day the



commander finds a reason to say, "It's all good"—whether it is or not.

The troops' average age is 19; they have been told by their chaplain to be ready to die; and their new home is Rusamiyah on the eastern edge of Baghdad, where everything is the color of dirt and stinks of raw sewage and burning trash. Soon after arrival Kauzlarich gives the locals a show of force as his nervous men march for 10 hours through the town. But on April 6 an IED blows up a Humvee, which in turn crashes into an ambulance, and the ammunition explodes. The driver burns to death, his body charred beyond recognition.

The casualty list grows. By October, 11 are dead, another 44 injured—missing hands, arms, legs, an eye. The troops had brought some of their problems into the army with them. In 2006 15 percent of all recruits had criminal records, from drug use to manslaughter. Kauzlarich skimmed off 10 percent of them as unsuitable before deployment. Depressed by defeats, soldiers start referring to their commander as Lost Kauz. The day General Petraeus visits, hears their optimistic report and praises them as he leaves, they are hit with another bomb.

Some of Finkel's most powerful scenes are from his visits to the men in their hospitals in the States. Sergeant Michael Emory, a long scar across his misshapen head, diapered, barely mobile, a tube in his throat, hears his wife say, "I love you," and starts to cry. The president comes to visit and tells her, "Thank you for your husband's service to his country." She starts to cry, and Bush hugs her and says, "Everything's going to be okay." But she is crying in anger at Bush. Her husband is ruined. Bush does not understand. Nothing is okay.

If Filkins embodies Richard Harding Davis and Finkel Ernie Pyle, in *War* Sebastian Junger combines both and adds a psychological appreciation of the men he affectionately portrays. When I was in officers' basic training in 1955, I wrote home expressing my dismay at the manners and morals of some of my fellow officers. My father, who had won the Distinguished Service Cross in World War I, admonished me to withhold judgment: my survival in battle would depend upon these men. That is Junger's theme.

Junger, known for *The Perfect Storm*, and Tim Hetherington, with whom he would make the documentary film "Restrepo," based on their experiences, made five trips over the course of 15 months to live with the Second Platoon of Battle Company in a remote Korengal Valley outpost north of the Khyber Pass. Its men are considered among the worst disciplined; they drink a lot and fight shirtless, but they fight well, as if bonded "to one another by hoops of steel." Their mission is to walk out into the six-mile-long valley at night, draw fire and engage the enemy who might be only 50 yards away, then to raid villages in search of weapons. Juan Restrepo was a beloved medic who played classical guitar and who died with two bullets to the face; for him they named a remote mountain outpost where there is no electricity, running water or hot food, and where some spend most of the year exchanging gunfire with the Taliban.

As in Iraq, the military in Afghanistan are susceptible to the illusion of progress when the country is actually coming apart at the seams. Some commanders fall into the Vietnam fallacy of imagining they are winning if 50 Taliban are killed and "we" lose only a few. While keeping this valley under control, nearly 50 American soldiers have died. As this is written 1,420 have died in the war.

Junger entitles his chapters "Fear," "Killing" and "Love," and while the love among fighting men is a theme in all three books, Junger's research makes the case that the behavior described by

Chris Hedges in *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* as mere comradeship rises to the level of love as well. Junger is upset one night when the men cheer the news that a single enemy soldier, who had lost his leg and was desperately crawling around the mountainside, had died. Where was their compassion for another man their age?

But the men were thinking corporately. If that one enemy survived he might kill you or your buddy. When their new lieutenant, Steve Gillespie, is appointed, the enlisted men rush him, pin him down, pull up his shirt and pound his stomach red and raw. This is love. They show their affection by beating one another. They no longer exist as individuals but as a platoon; in combat every detail, even a loose shoelace, determines the survival of the group.

In the fog of combat, says Junger, not knowing when or where you might die, the desperate bond between men is born. He says "the willingness to die for another person is a form of love that even religions fail to inspire, and the experience of it changes a person profoundly." Apparently he has not read John's Gospel: "Greater love than this no man has, than to lay down his life for his friend."

But Filkins, Finkel and Junger have all achieved three noble goals: They have written journalistic classics, deepened our love for every man and woman in uniform and helped us see the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as not just tragedies but follies, for which history will hold their architects responsible.

Update: In April 2010, after three years of sacrifice, the American forces pulled out of the Korengal Valley and left it to the Afghans. In November one member of Battle Company, Sgt. Salvatore Giunta, received the first Congressional Medal of Honor awarded since Vietnam for his courage in trying to rescue his buddies under fire three years before.

RAYMOND A. SCHROTH, S.J., *an associate editor of* ***America****, is the author of* Bob Drinan: The Controversial Life of the First Catholic Priest Elected to Congress *(Fordham Univ. Press).*

APRIL LINDNER

AT PLAY WITH MYTH AND FORM

ANTEROOMS
New Poems and Translations

By Richard Wilbur
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 80p $20 (hardcover)

Arguably America's greatest living poet, Richard Wilbur is, beyond doubt, our most skilled contemporary practitioner of traditional forms. A two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner and a former poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, he has had a long and auspicious career, publishing his first volume of poetry at age 26 and his most recent at 89. In the intervening decades, Wilbur also established himself as an accomplished translator, producing definitive translations of Racine and Voltaire, as well as a librettist, working with the composer Leonard Bernstein and the playwright Lillian Hellman on "Candide," the popular operetta based on Voltaire's novel. To round out his résumé, Wilbur also authored several delightful collections of poetry for children. *Anterooms* provides a sampling of this impressive range by a poet still working in peak form.

Though rhyme and regular meter fell out of fashion in the latter half of the 20th century, Wilbur never abandoned received poetic forms. His poems have long been known for their elegance and their attention to craft, and *Anterooms* is no exception. The volume opens with a selection of original lyrics, marvels of compression and clarity, touching on the very human longing for immortality and transcendence. A prime example is the volume's opening poem, "The House," in which a widower recalls his late wife's recurring dream of a white house glimpsed only from the outside. The poem ends with a haunting image—the speaker searching desperately in his own dreams for the house, which has come to represent the possibility of an afterlife in which he might be reunited with his beloved:

Is she now there, wherever there
may be?
Only a foolish man would hope to
find
That haven fashioned by her
dreaming mind.
Night after night, my love, I put to
sea.

The longing for transcendence takes another form in "Young Orchard," in which saplings "Rise against their rootedness/ On a gusty day," an image that stands for the ways in which terrestrial beings—trees and humans alike—chafe at the constrictions of our earthly incarnations. Another fine poem, "The Measuring Worm," uses a tiny, closely observed detail—the movements of an inch worm—to touch on the mature poet's fear of death:

It's as if he sent
By a sort of semaphore
Dark omegas meant

To warn of Last Things.

If those lines seem ominous, Wilbur manages in this slender poem to also convey hope:

Although he doesn't know it,
He will soon have wings,

And I too don't know
Toward what undreamt condition
Inch by inch I go.

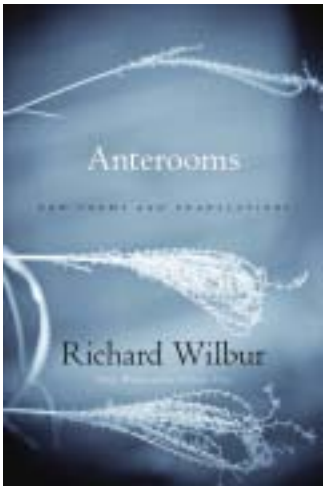
Later, in the volume's third section, the poet tallies his own foibles and failings. In "Out Here," a snow shovel left leaning against a house in July becomes a small affectation of Yankee ruggedness. "A Reckoning" finds the speaker recalling "Fatuities that I/ Have uttered, drunk or dry" and realizing that his real failings are not those small human errors but instead the sin of pride that makes him feel them so fully.

Anterooms intersperses sections of Wilbur's original lyric poems with his deft translations from Stephen Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Horace and Joseph Brodsky, as well as a sampling of 37 verse riddles from the Latin poet Symphosius. In particular, "Presepio," the first of Brodsky's "Two Nativity Poems," feels thematically tied to Wilbur's own original poems, its description of the relationship between a small clay crèche and the humans who gaze down at it evoking a touching loneliness:

Now you are huge compared to
them, and high
Beyond their ken. Like a midnight
passerby
Who finds the pane of some small
hut aglow,
You peer from the cosmos at this
little show.

There is something haunting and mysterious in the inversion depicted here, with the holy nativity scene shrunk by time almost out of the viewer's reach. The onlooker longs for a spark of divinity, for "A different galaxy, in whose wastes there shine/ More lights than there are sands in Palestine."

Within this slender volume, Wilbur's tonal range extends from the sublime to the silly. Like formal poetry, light verse has fallen out of fashion, but Wilbur continues to write it, and *Anterooms* contains a sampling of rhymes intended "for children and others." "Some Words Inside of Words" offers up playful musings on the relationship between words like "homeowner" and "meow," or "ice cube" and "cub." *Anterooms* also includes a smidgeon of satire, "The President's Song to the Baron," written for a musical version of Jean Giraudoux's *La Folle de Chaillot*. In it, powerful characters fantasize about an ideal workforce made up of automatons: "What a luscious conception, far sweeter than babas or tarts!/ A standardized laboring man with replaceable parts!" Tying together the volume's humorous poems with its serious ones is the crisp intelligence that runs through both.



The witty, meticulously crafted poems of *Anterooms* amply illustrate why Wilbur has long been a poet's poet. Unlike most contemporary verse, Wilbur's poems are worth rereading not because they—in the words of Wallace Stevens—"resist the intelligence/ Almost successfully" and call for effortful decodings. Sparkling and transparent, Wilbur's poems yield their meanings on a first reading, but nonetheless contain depths worth diving into again and again.

APRIL LINDNER *is an associate professor of English at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and the author, most recently, of* Jane *(Poppy/Little Brown).*

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LETTERS

Hit the Road

Ginny Daly's "Cycles of Life" (1/31) on bike riding is great. I too can attest to the value of bike riding. Several years ago and several tens of pounds overweight and approaching diabetes caused by obesity, I got back on the bike. Now, many tens of pounds lighter and with my cholesterol level much reduced, bike rides have become an important part of my life. Long solo rides are times to share and enjoy the beauty of God's creation. Besides, the beauty of our land is much better at bike speeds than at interstate highway speeds. I recommend, as an example of this, the Road to the Sun in Glacier National Park.

JIM LACASSE, S.J.
Bakersfield, Calif.

Lost in Translation

In response to Steven P. Millies in "Bringing Liturgy to Life" (2/7): Has someone suggested that Jesus spoke in some arcane "sacral" way different from everyday speech? I don't think so. The best translations reflect his clarity and directness. But some of the new revision wording seems "precious" in a way that smacks of religious jargon that merely obfuscates. The insertion of unfamiliar words into well-known passages works like linguistic speed-bumps. As a sociologist, I notice that shifting demographics show a disproportionate aging population ahead. Even those with dementia respond well to the current liturgies, but the catechesis for these thousands of aging and infirm faithful may become frustrating all around.

(REV.) ROBERT J. MAHONEY
Kansas City, Mo.

A Ritual Gone Stale

The new translation of the liturgy discussed in Steven P. Millies's "Bringing Liturgy to Life" (2/7) is a great opportunity to explain the Mass. Given what we believe is happening in the eucharistic liturgy, is it wrong to use language that we would not hear on the street, in a bus terminal or at a sporting event? More precious language is exactly what is called for. As challenging as the new translation may seem to some, Professor Millies is right; it will soon be here. The attitude of those responsible for the translation will translate into the attitude of those who receive it. It is an opportunity to engage in catechesis that will not only increase our own faith, but will also—simply because it is a change—increase appreciation of that which for some has become mechanical and stale.

MIKE CURREN
Boston, Mass.

Holding On to Hope

Introduced to **America** while visiting a friend, I read with surprise "Two People, One State" (11/15) by Raymond A. Schroth, S.J. I am Jewish and lived in Israel a number of years, and I compliment the author on his underlying tone of hope.

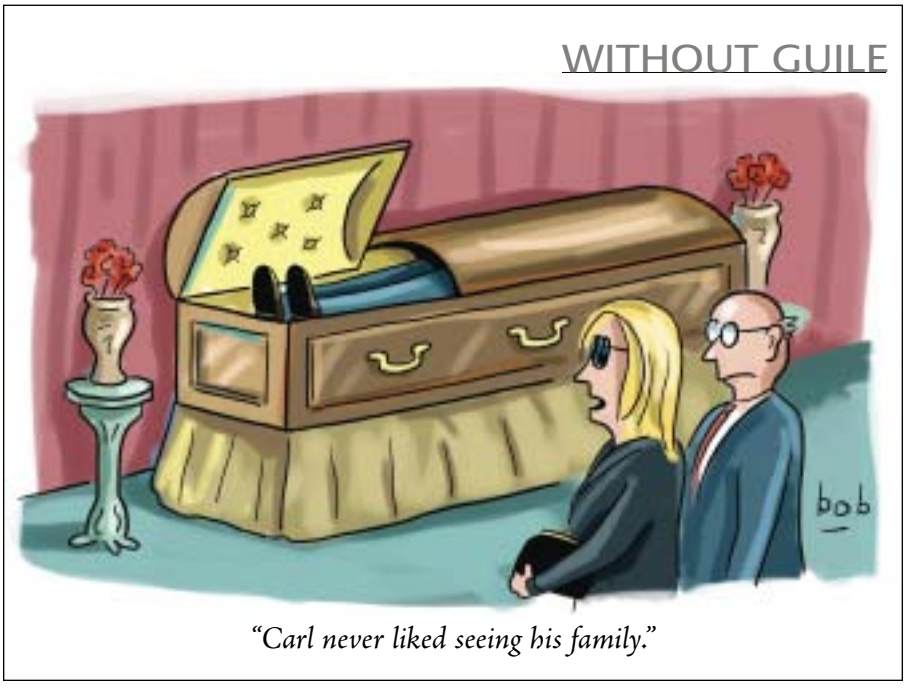
The argument for the one state solution has a creditable history, lost in the sectarianism that consumes us today. The voices in favor—Judah Magnes, founder of Hebrew University, Buber and Arendt— were shouted down. But imagine Gaza and what's left of the West Bank in a two state solution and you have a "bantamized" construction so impractical and have perpetuated the inequalities of today. Those who propose the one state in essence focus on the ethical question of equality. If you have a religious state and you are not of that religion, what becomes of you? Integration can work. They don't have to love each other at first, but let's get them to stop killing each other.

In Tunisia and Egypt, I am buoyed by the optimism in the streets. The United States has placed itself on the side of human rights in Egypt, but we have given Mubarak $1.3 billion dollars a year and Israel $4 billion a year, both mostly for military equipment. If the changes we hope for are going to happen, the unconditional flow of dollars to Israel will have to be altered.

IRA SPIEGEL
Nyack, N.Y.

Some Know It All

Reading "Tomorrow's Theologians," by Paul Crowley, S.J. (2/7), it



"Carl never liked seeing his family."

CARTOON BY BOB ECKSTEIN

occurred to me that theology, as the study of the nature of God, must be a developing and open-ended study. When I studied at a Franciscan college years ago, theology was presented as "facts" taught by the Catholic Church. As I grew in grace, I learned to understand better the first grade catechism question, Why did God make us? It is an ongoing process, in which we humans can never know God completely. Our "knowing" is greater than the knowledge of mind alone. Perhaps the expression "relationship in faith" comes close to describing what happens. I sometimes wonder why scientific studies acknowledge that there is more to learn, while some "theologians" give the impression that all theology has already been learned.

GERMAINE WEIMAN
Houston, Tex.

Lost in the Present

I deeply appreciate Father Crowley's insights in "Tomorrow's Theologians" (2/7), and I know he writes from the point of view of a Jesuit in higher studies theology. As an Asian student, I recognize what he describes, but my greatest concern is that the "integral" perspective he espouses may mean a nonengagement with the theological heritage of the past.

JACOB MOH
Kuching, Malaysia

Languages Change Behavior

Re your report in Signs of the Times on the open letter of Anthony Ruff, O.S.B., to the U.S. bishops (2/14): I have retired to Ireland, where the priests have asked the Vatican to include them out, as in Germany. My own dislikes for the new translations include the following: The imposition and the straitjacket of a dead language, Latin, on living modern cultures is ridiculous; and the Latin is low Latin, later than the Greek and not as beautiful. The lack of inclusive language is outrageous in this day and age. About 30 years ago, bishops in Minnesota declared sexism a sin in the same way that racism is sinful. We deal with racism by changing the language so that we can change the behavior. This should be the ideal time to use inclusive language. The whole point of the vernacular was to allow the poetry, imagery and beauty of each national language to be part of the country's faith and prayer.

(REV.) HARRY BEHAN
St. Peter, Minn.

I Know the Spirit Works

In response to Father Ruff's letter (2/14), one might ask, Who cares about this new translation? Check out the over 20,000 signatures on "What If We Just Said Wait?" (whatifwejustsaidwait.org). Perhaps top-down decision making in Rome worked in the Middle Ages, but it does not work for American churchgoers in the 21st century. We are the church. As a theologian and a baptized Catholic, I know the Spirit works through me and the laity. It would be a shame if the American Catholic church was losing financial contributors to other denominations, but that is happening more and more. This archaic, self-selecting, celibate male club has proven its dysfunction in many ways, especially recently. It is time for a change. Let us pray for God's grace to do it.

NICHOLAS NARLOCH
Waukesha, Wis.

Lock the Barn Door

Father Ruff's letter (2/14) comes too late; the horse is already out of the barn. I wonder how much money has been and will be spent preparing for the new English missal translation. Could it be better spent providing homes and shelters for pregnant women who do not wish to abort their babies but who live in abusive situations? Cared for, and with parenting and career counseling, these women could put a new and most welcome face on the pro-life scene. Will a more literal translation of the missal bring Christ into our world?

JOSEPHINE A. DALEY
Flushing, Mich.

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America (ISSN 0002-7049) is published weekly (except for 12 combined issues: Jan. 3-10-17, 24-31, May 2-9, June 6-13, 20-27, July 4-11, 18-25, Aug. 1-8, 15-22, Aug. 29-Sept. 5, Nov. 28-Dec. 5, Dec. 19-26) by America Press, Inc., 106 West 56th Street, New York, NY 10019. Periodicals postage is paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. Business Manager: Lisa Pope; Circulation: Judith Palmer, (212) 581-4640. Subscriptions: United States, $56 per year; add U.S. $30 postage and GST (#131870719) for Canada; or add U.S. $54 per year for international priority airmail. Postmaster: Send address changes to: America, 106 West 56th St. New York, NY 10019. Printed in U.S.A.

Set on Rock

NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), MARCH 6, 2011

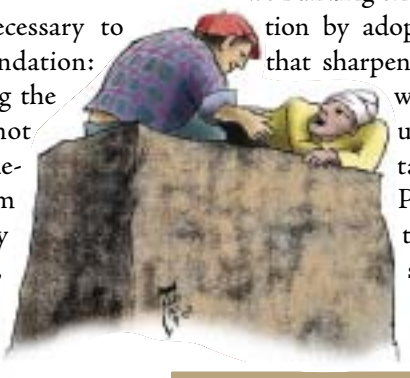
Readings: Dt 11:18-32; Ps 31:2-25; Rom 3:21-28; Mt 7:21-27

"The house…did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock" (Mt 7:25)

It is certain that the rain, floods and winds will come. Images of devastating floods in Haiti, Chiapas, New Orleans, Malaysia, Pakistan and, most recently, Sri Lanka, fill our news. When many of the places hardest hit are where the world's poorest people reside, the pleas to God in today's psalm to be a "rock of safety" take on a literalness and an urgency. Sometimes preachers declare these disasters to be punishments from God, and they urge people to repent of their sinfulness. These preachers espouse the kind of theology found in the Wisdom literature: that good things come to those who act uprightly and that punishment awaits those who do not. The story of Job, of course, like that of Jesus, proves the inadequacy of this approach.

In the Gospel today, Jesus presumes that rain, floods and winds will occur, both literally and metaphorically. What he offers is not a theology about why these things happen but a manner of life that enables believers to withstand all of life's challenges and to be found upright when the final reckoning occurs (signaled by the phrase "on that day" in verse 22). The Gospel is the concluding section of the Sermon on the Mount, on which we have been reflecting for the past several weeks. Jesus sums it up by saying that anyone who listens to "these words of mine"—that is, the way he interprets the Torah—and acts on them will be "set solidly on rock."

Two things are necessary to build this firm foundation: both hearing and doing the word. Listening is not enough. Nor is it adequate simply to proclaim Jesus as "Lord." Many times in the Gospel, people in need cry out to Jesus as Lord to save them. "Jesus is Lord" was also an acclamation used in early Christian liturgies (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11). More is needed than calling on Jesus at times of crisis or acclaiming his power in liturgical gatherings. Doing the will of God by putting Jesus' words into action is also essential.



At the same time, Paul reminds us in today's second reading that being in right relation with God, self and all creation does not depend on our own actions but on God's grace. This, Paul insists, is a free gift already accomplished by Christ. Our part is to believe. This faith is both having the conviction that God can and does accomplish in us the transformation wrought in and by Christ and also acting in accord with the gift offered us.

To hear the words of Jesus and put them into action requires an active choice, just as it did for the Israelites, as we hear in today's first reading, in which Moses puts the choice to them concerning God's commandments. As the season of Lent approaches, it is an apt time to examine our choices. Are we building on a rock-solid foundation by adopting daily practices that sharpen our hearing of the word and that impel us to act on it? Do we take a lesson from Peter, named "Rock": that, as for him, our surety can be a rock of stumbling, as when he rejected Jesus' hard words about his own suffering and death?

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- How has God been a rock of safety for you in a time of need?
- In what spiritual practices do you engage in an effort to build your rock foundation?
- How do your prayer, fasting and almsgiving provide a rock of refuge for others in need?

ART: TAD DUNNE

Three concrete actions for building our house on rock are given by Jesus in the Gospel for Ash Wednesday: almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Mt 6:1-18). In prayer, we allow God to attune our ears to the divine voice echoed in all of creation, both in floods and calm. In fasting, we empty ourselves of our own desires, so as to hear the cries of those who hunger not by choice. In almsgiving, rather than shore up our own individual rocky perches, we become a rock of safety for those who are buffeted hardest by life's storms.

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

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