MINISTRY ISSUE

# America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

JULY 4-11, 2011 $3.50

## Status Update

### The church in the digital age

JAMES MARTIN


## A Guy Thing

KERRY WEBER

# OF MANY THINGS

Nickel City is what they called it years ago, when the image of the buffalo distinguished the coin. It was an image the city proudly embraced. For decades a shaggy, stuffed bison was on display in the city's New York Central railroad terminal, once a grand place but long since boarded up, like so many other famous landmarks in Buffalo.

As I drove through the old neighborhood, the apartments in the low-income housing project in which I was raised seemed much smaller, so alien to me now. I looked for the familiar old markers: the A&P store where we shopped, the meat market that once provided sliced liverwurst, the Freddy's Donuts store—all gone now. With a touch of nostalgia, I slowly drove along the route I had once walked to our parochial school. The streets, lined with two-story houses, hadn't changed much; the trimmed shrubs suggested that the property was still well cared for. Yet the signs advertising each street's "Block Club" seemed less a proud proclamation of social identity than a warning to would-be troublemakers not to mess with the residents because they are watching one another's back.

As I drove toward downtown, I passed the detritus of a Catholic city I had known in its glory days. Most of the Catholic high schools, which once numbered two dozen, have long since been closed, their buildings converted into health care centers. Those magnificent ethnic churches, their splendid pipe organs silenced, had become either evangelical churches or just another piece of blight in the city. The few that remained open seemed a shadow of what they had been. The Sunday congregation might number 60 or 70, many of the people as old as I.

My drive was intended to recapture the spirit of the past, but at the end I felt cheated. Where were the familiar features of my childhood? The streets were still there and some of the buildings—the skeleton of the past—but not the warm features that I would have liked to revisit. Everywhere I looked there was decay and loss. I should have known that there is no going home, despite the emotional tug to recapture our past and comfort ourselves in it. A sentimental journey like mine may be natural, but it is doomed to frustration.

I remember meeting, years ago, a woman then in her late 30s who had been raised a Catholic but had strayed too far to win a reputation for saintliness. She said that when she eventually returned she hoped to find the same church that she had left. Her eyes moistened when she spoke of the Latin Mass, the bells rung at the consecration and the smell of incense. She was looking for the sights and sounds and smells of the old church, just as I was looking for the features of my old neighborhood. If she ever returned to the church, she may have felt cheated by what she found there even as I had in returning to my home.

There are many of us who would gladly freeze time, if we could only enjoy the warmth and security of the past. The Latin prayers, benediction, the exposition of the sacrament were all part of our comforting ecclesial neighborhood once upon a time. Many grumble, as I did, that everything has changed so much that it no longer even reminds us of the home we once knew.

I caught myself contemplating an urban renewal program, when I might better have simply cherished those fond memories of childhood without trying to recreate the past. Those who have remained in Buffalo, less than half of its population 50 years ago, hold on to the hope that their city, for all the loss and blight, is in a constant state of rebirth. I'd like to believe the same about the church, even if the Latin prayers and incense remain no more than fond memories.

**FRANCIS X. HEZEL, S.J.**


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*Cover:* An Apple iPod user views the Vatican Internet news portal recently launched by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Photo: Reuters/Alessandro Bianchi

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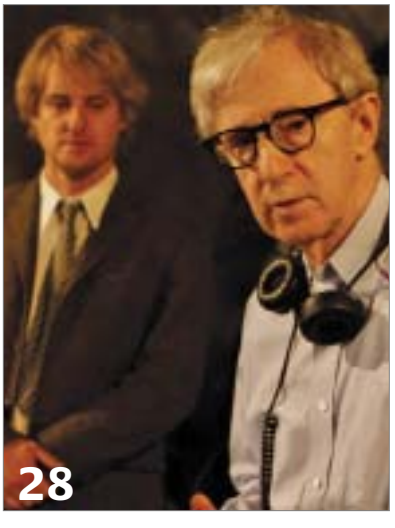


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## BOOKS & CULTURE



## ON THE WEB

James Martin, S.J., visits the the shrine of **Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini** and answers questions about ministering on Twitter. Plus, John P. McCarthy reviews **"The Last Mountain."** All at americamagazine.org.

## The Republic at War

Probably everyone knows by now that 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War. This year has already seen a wave of commemorations at Fort Sumter and elsewhere, along with the inevitable re-enactments of key battles. The sesquicentennial has even occasioned an iPad app. For $7.99 you can receive daily reports of the events of the war as they happened 150 years ago.

Most anniversaries receive more news attention than they deserve, but the Civil War is different. The events of 1861 were as important to the future of the republic as the events of 1776. It was by no means inevitable that the United States would do away with slavery. One prominent senator proposed enshrining it as a constitutional right in order to keep the peace. Abolitionists in the North were perhaps too eager for war, but their campaign against slavery still stands as a pre-eminent example of moral witness. There were other heroes too, many now forgotten.

In California Thomas Starr King, a Unitarian preacher, argued eloquently in favor of the Union cause as the state teetered on the edge of secession. German immigrant soldiers in St. Louis helped defeat pro-secession forces at a key moment at the start of the war. Gen. Benjamin Butler emerged as an unlikely defender of runaway slaves when hundreds of them fled to Fort Monroe in Virginia seeking asylum.

These events, masterfully recounted in Adam Goodheart's new book, *1861: The Civil War Awakening*, offer a glimpse of a patchwork nation that rallied together at a time of unprecedented division. The rest of the war would be uncommonly brutal, and some of the divisions remain to this day. Yet the road taken was the right one, and that has made all the difference.

## Love One Another

The church's stance on same-sex marriage is very well known. It has been made well known by the Vatican; and it has been made clear by many bishops in this country. The church teaches, in short, that same-sex marriage is not permissible because it promotes homosexual activity and redefines the traditional concept of marriage. There can be few Catholics, and non-Catholics, who do not know this.

What is less well known is the church's teaching on gay and lesbian people themselves. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that gays and lesbians are to be accepted with "respect, compassion and sensitivity." Jesus Christ asks us to love everyone, not simply those with whom we agree, not simply those in our churches and not simply those who "follow the rules." But the church's message on gays and lesbians is often obscured by its vocal opposition to same-sex marriage. Gays and lesbians hear about little else in church circles. And with no other group does the church speak almost exclusively the language of prohibition, rather than that of welcome.

That is why bishops who speak of love and acceptance should be praised, like Joseph M. Sullivan, a retired auxiliary bishop of Brooklyn, who wrote in the Buffalo News on June 2: "For most Catholics, there can be no statement that better summarizes an attitude of welcoming of our LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] brothers and sisters than those of Jesus, 'Love one another as I have loved you.'" There is nothing wrong with telling people that they are loved and lovable. And that all are, indeed, welcome.

## Friend Request

There was a time when most people could name the exact number of friends they had, not because Facebook kept track for them but because the number was small enough to actually remember each person by name. Although the number of active Facebook users in the United States is not growing as rapidly as it once did, the social networking site still claims almost 700 million active users worldwide, and the term *friend* has taken on a much broader meaning. The popularity of such sites, and of the Internet in general, has led some, Pope Benedict XVI among them, to warn that the Internet can lead to a "sense of solitude and disorientation."

But a new study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project may ease these concerns. The study reports: "Americans have more close social ties than they did two years ago. And they are less socially isolated. We found that the frequent use of Facebook is associated with having more overall close ties." In addition, Facebook users are more trusting and more politically engaged. This is good news considering that nearly half of American adults belong to some sort of social network, a 26 percent increase since 2008. And these sites are not just for college students anymore: More than half of this group are over 35. Fifty-six percent are female.

The study also found that "a deficit of overall social ties, social support, trust, and community engagement is much more likely to result from traditional factors, such as lower educational attainment." Facebook can be a complement to real-life connections, not a replacement for them.

# After Fukushima

Twenty-five years after the world's worst nuclear disaster took place at Chernobyl, in Ukraine, that reactor's molten core is still leaking. The radiation released there equaled 400 times that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and radioactive emissions remain high locally. Since Chernobyl, all reactors are built with a containment shell to minimize possible damage. But the destructive power and half-life of radiation have not changed. The world's second-worst nuclear disaster took place in March, when three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan melted down. There has been no explosion, and the initial release of radiation was a fraction of that at Chernobyl. But the multiple leaks continue to flow into land, air and ocean and will likely do so for decades.

Nuclear energy has been promoted not only as a cost-effective source of power but also as a safer and environmentally cleaner option than fossil fuels. But is it? Proponents tout the industry's international safety record: Out of 33 nuclear accidents of varying impact since 1952, according to The Guardian, a British newspaper, only the one at Chernobyl in 1986 resulted in mass deaths—31 people died immediately. Yet because cancer and leukemia cells take time to multiply, no one knows how many survivors did or will contract a fatal disease. Projections range from 4,000 to one million disease-related deaths.

Can nuclear power still be described as safe and clean if one factors in the harm to life and planet from reactor meltdowns and hazardous waste? Is nuclear energy "cost effective" if one calculates the full cost, including regular and thorough plant inspections, preventive maintenance, the retirement of outdated reactors and the disposal of radioactive waste? The accident-related costs are now borne mostly by taxpayers, not the nuclear industry. The full costs of nuclear energy are seldom spelled out. That must change. Sound energy policies must be based on accurate cost-benefit analysis and risk assessment.

Fukushima may be a game-changer. Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Japan just scrapped their plans to expand nuclear power. Switzerland and Germany also plan to retire their aged reactors without replacing them, phasing out nuclear power entirely. Instead, Germany will increase conservation and investments in solar and wind power.

After Fukushima, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission reviewed facilities and monitoring procedures at this country's 66 nuclear power plants. A commission report is expected in August. That information will help policymakers and the public to evaluate the nation's energy policy, much of which has been stalled in Congress. The public should learn how well many reactors are aging; which plants have a history of safety violations; which are located near major population centers (like the Indian Point power plant, 35 miles from New York City); which are vulnerable to an earthquake, hurricane or combination of natural disasters; and what can be done to enhance the safety of nuclear reactors, especially the 23 that use the same cooling vent design by General Electric that failed at Fukushima. What do the industry and government propose to do? And what would improvements actually cost?

Convening a conference in June to discuss nuclear safety and security, Yukiya Amano, head of the U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency, urged countries to conduct a thorough risk assessment of their nuclear operations. He also outlined a plan to separate regulators from the nuclear industry. "National nuclear regulatory bodies must be genuinely independent, adequately funded and staffed by well-trained people," he said. Two controversial issues were raised: whether U.N. experts should conduct random inspections of all 440 nuclear plants; and whether international safety standards, which now are nonbinding, should be made compulsory.

Even so, radiation poses extreme risks. The consequences of an accident, a natural disaster or sabotage are grave and far-reaching. And as more reactors are built, these risks increase. The old comparison between nuclear energy and fossil fuels is becoming obsolete as renewable energy sources become practical alternatives. Forward-looking nations should reduce their dependence on nuclear power while converting to less risky, renewable alternatives.

Given the urgency of reducing emissions and oil dependency, U.S. presidential candidates should be asked to state in some detail their energy plans. The case for increasing renewable sources is strong. Consider: What are the risks to health, planet and peace of renewable energy, like that powered by the sun and the wind? What are the gains, political and economic, from using safe, available sources? What are the costs of aggressively developing renewable energy now, so that it can replace nuclear power when the last reactor is retired? Any other course of action would be a waste of this year's disastrous warnings.

SYRIA

# 'We Are Dying And the World Is Watching'

As Turkey's foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited one of the impromptu refugee camps that have cropped up along the border with Syria, refugee children held up a cardboard sign that pretty much says it all: "We are dying and the world is watching." More than 1,400 people have been killed since the regime of Bashar al-Assad began its brutal clampdown on dissent in Syria; thousands have been driven from their homes and, according to some reports, one city razed; in Syria the Arab Spring may be coming to a bloody conclusion.

Many nations have condemned the brutal crackdown, and there is movement for a further condemnation by the United Nations of the increasingly isolated Assad government. But a more vigorous global response to the violence does not appear likely. The principle of international responsibility to protect defenseless civilians from their own governments has already been called into play in Libya, draining international resources and fortitude.

Naomi Kikoler, senior advisor at New York's Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, did not anticipate any major military intervention in Syria. She noted, however, that the global community had other options it could put to use in an effort to stop the violence. Last week, for instance, the Obama administration was considering economic sanctions on Syria and discussing whether President Assad could be accused of war crimes. Whether or not the "third pillar" of the responsibility to protect, the military option, was practical, "what's important now," said Kikoler, "is the Security Council's failure to condemn the Assad regime." She complained that a draft resolution circulating on June 17 condemning Syria's actions against its own citizens had been "substantially watered down." Two Security Council member states, Russia and China, were continuing obstacles to an effective U.N. condemnation, but Kikoler said it had also proved difficult to convince Brazil and India to take a harder line.

Kikoler said that judging by reports emerging from Syrian communities devastated by army reprisals, the Assad regime appeared guilty of crimes against humanity. She suggested that a firmer international stance now could put the Assads and their supporters on notice about the possible future repercussions of their acts. That might discourage further bloodshed.

Kikoler worried that some nations were drawing an unintended lesson from the air campaign over Libya, inspired by the responsibility to protect, that is now dragging on far longer than N.A.T.O. strategists had anticipated and is proving a serious drain on European military resources. "What is the end game in Libya?" she asked. The campaign "has exposed a lot of questions and created a lot of misgivings" about what it means to accept the implications of an R2P commitment, at least militarily.

But another reason for hesitancy in responding to the Syria crisis is worry about what comes next. "Even amongst those who support [a stronger U.N.] resolution," she said, "I sense that people still have a lot of concerns about what a Syria post-Assad would look like."

While the West recoils from the persisting outrages committed by forces loyal to the Assad clan, the Chaldean Catholic Bishop of Aleppo, Syria, a Jesuit, defended the regime on June 13. The Syrian government must resist the "uprising," said Bishop Antoine Audo. In quelling forces of "destabilization and Islamization," he said, it has the people's backing.

Like church leaders caught off guard in other nations affected by the Arab Spring, Bishop Audo worries about the outcome of all the social upheaval and the possibility of ethnic and religious-based reprisals in the aftermath of a presumed regime collapse, preferring the devil he knows in Assad to whatever religious furies might be unleashed by a widespread

Children and women, fleeing conflict in Syria, arrive in Dabbabieh, in northern Lebanon, May 16.

destabilization of Syria. "The fanatics speak about freedom and democracy for Syria, but this is not their goal," he said; "They want to divide the Arab countries, control them, seize petrol and sell arms. They seek destabilization and Islamization.... Syria must resist—will resist. Eighty percent of the people are behind the government, as are all the Christians."

U.S. BISHOPS

## Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide

Taking on the issue of physician-assisted suicide in the state where voters most recently approved it, the U.S. bishops declared suicide "a terrible tragedy, one that a compassionate society should work to prevent." Approved 191 to 1 on June 16 at the bishops' spring general assembly near Seattle, the policy statement, *To Live Each Day With Dignity*, is the first document by the bishops as a body on the topic of assisted suicide.

Introducing the statement, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, said he hoped it would counter the recent "strong resurgence" in activity by the assisted suicide movement. "With expanded funding from wealthy donors, assisted suicide proponents have renewed their aggressive nationwide campaign through legislation, litigation and public advertising, targeting states they see as most susceptible to their message," the document says. "If they succeed, society will undergo a radical change."

Physician-assisted suicide was approved by voters in Washington state in November 2008. It is also legal in Oregon, where voters approved it in 1994, and Montana, where a state court has ruled it is not against public policy.

As Cardinal DiNardo was making his preliminary presentation of the document, representatives of Compassion & Choices, previously the Hemlock Society, held a news conference in the same hotel where the bishops were meeting. Barbara Coombs Lee, president of the organization, said the bishops' document represented an attempt to impose Catholic beliefs on the entire U.S. population.

"While we respect religious instruction to those of the Catholic faith, we find it unacceptable to impose the teachings of one religion on everyone in a pluralistic society," she said. "We believe end-of-life care should follow the patient's values and beliefs, and good medical practice, but not be restricted against the patient's will by Catholic Church doctrine."

Responding to that charge at a later news conference, Cardinal DiNardo said the bishops were making a contribution to a "fundamental public debate" based on "our moral tradition and sense of solidarity with people."

"The compassionate way is to bring assistance to people," not to encourage their deaths, he said. According to the new document, "one cannot uphold human freedom and dignity by devaluing human life.

"A choice to take one's life is a supreme contradiction of freedom, a choice to eliminate all choices," the document says. "And a society that devalues some people's lives, by hastening and facilitating their deaths, will ultimately lose respect for their other rights and freedoms."

The document also criticizes the idea of involving physicians in helping their patients commit suicide, calling it "a corruption of the healing arts."

Daniel N. DiNardo

## Churches Unprotected in Indonesia

Dozens of churches in Indonesia come under attack every year, and the country's president is failing to take action to stop it, according to a leading Catholic peace activist. Since 2006 more than 200 attacks on churches have been recorded by the Indonesian Committee on Religion and Peace, said Theophilus Bela, president of the Jakarta Christian community forum. Bela said that in the first five months of this year there were 14 attacks on churches and 46 in 2010 as a whole. Bela blamed Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his government for not doing enough to tackle Islamist anti-Christian violence. Bela said that although attacks on churches have declined somewhat in 2011, Indonesia's 28.5 million Christian community remains the most persecuted religious group in the country.

## NEWS BRIEFS

Alois Andritzki

On June 15 Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican's representative to U.N. organizations in Geneva, called for a U.N. human rights investigation into the case of **Farah Hatim**, a 24-year-old Pakistani Christian woman who had been kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and marry. ✦ The Rev. **Alois Andritzki**, a German priest who was killed by lethal injection at Dachau, was beatified on June 13 in a service at Dresden Cathedral. ✦ The Mennonite-affiliated Goshen College of Indiana has again prohibited the **national anthem at sporting events**, reversing a decision last year to allow it, as some Mennonites consider its lyrics too militaristic for their pacifist tradition. ✦ Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, England, said on June 11 that **traditional marriage** was a "public good," vitally important for the "whole of society" to support at a time when more British couples than ever were choosing to live and have children together outside of marriage. ✦ The Vatican confirmed that the planned **illicit ordination** of the Rev. Joseph Shen Guoan as bishop of Hankou was postponed indefinitely, adding that it hoped the decision marks the end to all ordinations without papal approval in China.

## Church-Building Law Denounced in Egypt

Christian leaders and human rights groups in Egypt are raising serious concerns about a law that would govern the construction of churches and mosques. The proposed law would place the power to permit or deny building in the hands of local communities, a decentralized system that critics argue places the Christian minority at a distinct disadvantage. "The bill before us now utterly fails to dispel the foundations of prejudice experienced by religious minorities, particularly Copts, who had hoped to see the institution of licensing procedures...made identical to those governing construction by their Muslim peers," the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies wrote in a statement calling for the bill to be withdrawn. In a joint statement, the Egyptian Coptic, Anglican and Catholic Churches also expressed their disapproval of the current draft. Among the bill's controversial items is a stipulation that a new church or mosque could not be built within one kilometer of an existing place of worship, a requirement that Christians say would make it nearly impossible to build in densely populated neighborhoods.

## Italy's Water Works

A referendum in Italy has spotlighted an emerging social justice issue: access to safe water as a basic human right. Italians went to the polls on June 12-13 and voted overwhelmingly to revoke the proposed privatization of Italy's water systems. The issue stirred an unusually intense debate, with church leaders arguing that water is the archetypal "gift from God" that should not be polluted by the profit motive. On June 9 a group of more than 100 missionary priests and nuns fasted and prayed in St. Peter's Square to underline their support for the referendum and their opposition to the privatization of water. Beneath Pope Benedict XVI's windows, they unfurled a giant banner reading: "Lord, help us save the water!" The next day, Cardinal Peter Turkson, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said water distribution should be a service provided by governments to their citizens as part of their role in protecting the common good.

From CNS and other sources.

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# Governed by Greed

The Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 became law last July. Its first words promised "to promote… accountability and transparency in the financial system, to end 'too big to fail,' to protect the American taxpayer by ending bailouts, to protect consumers from abusive financial services practices." But to get the bill passed, its well-meaning congressional sponsors had to compromise away toothy provisions like those requiring a strict separation between depository banking and financial trading.

The history behind that lame law is sadly relevant to understanding how some among corporate America's super-wealthy now dominate American politics and policymaking in ways that make yesteryear's Gilded-Age capitalists and robber barons look like simon-pure civic do-gooders by comparison.

The Banking Act of 1933 strictly separated investment banking from commercial banking and imposed many other restrictions on what today we would call "financial services" firms. In every decade thereafter, assorted corporate interests pushed to repeal the law in whole or in part. In the early 1980s, as the number of members of Congress for whom the Great Depression was no mere chapter of a history book decreased, the lobbyists in Gucci loafers almost got their way. But in 1986 President Ronald Reagan's unexpected support for a major bipartisan corporate-loophole-plugging tax reform law, the sudden October 1987 stock market plunge and the scandals surrounding the savings and loan industry temporarily broke big business's political momentum.

In 1999, however, Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed the Orwellian-named Financial Services Modernization Act. The law's "modernization" provisions begat financial mega-businesses different in form but identical in consumer-exploiting function to those 19th-century corporate conglomerates that Teddy Roosevelt had broken up through vigorous use of the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890.

The 2010 law did not come close to undoing the 1999 act. Worse, for almost a year now, President Barack Obama has left many key federal financial regulation jobs entirely vacant.

> The church stands against all who exploit people for profits.

How did it come to this? I will leave the deeper explanations to theologians, philosophers and social critics. My answer centers on the fact that lobbying to influence public policy has become ever more supremely lopsided in ways that favor business interests.

For example, as the political scientists Kay Lehrman Schlozman, Lee Drutman and others have documented, between 1981 and 2006 the ratio of business lobbyists to union and public interest lobbyists working in Washington, D.C., rose to 16:1 from 12:1, including nearly 2,800 lobbyists (up from about 1,500) representing just the Standard & Poor's 500 corporations.

According to the Federal Election Commission, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the single biggest spender on lobbying, with no close second. Between 1998 and 2010 the chamber spent nearly $750 million. Its recent expenditures have shattered all records: $91 million in 2008, $144 million in 2009 and $132 million in 2010.

Many of the other biggest spenders on lobbying are business interests like big oil companies. By contrast, the union membership rate for private sector workers is now below 7 percent (it was nearly 12 percent in 1983) and falling. Public employee unions now claim about 7.6 million workers, but even the American Federation of Teachers' Political Action Committee ranked only 26th on the F.E.C.'s 2009 list of the top 50 PAC contributors. And public employee unions are now under political assault in many state capitals.

In 2010, in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, the Supreme Court removed the last remaining legal barriers to corporate "electioneering communications" and related political "independent expenditures."

By doctrine and tradition, the Catholic Church stands against all who selfishly exploit people for profits. But if Catholic bishops hope to be any real political counterweight to the worst elements in U.S. big business today, they need to pick up their game, speak out far more and pressure Catholics in Congress to fight for working families and to protect the needy from the greedy. Labor Day 2011 would not be too soon.

**JOHN J. DIIULIO JR.** *is the author of* Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future *(Univ. of California Press, 2007).*


PHOTO: ALESSANDRO BIANCHI / REUTERS


How well is the church reaching out to people in the digital age?

# Status Update

BY JAMES MARTIN

The industry term for the appeal of a Web site is "sticky." Visitors (or "eyeballs") stick to a site if it is interesting, lively, useful, provocative and generally appealing. Conversely, the "bounce rate" refers to how frequently initial visitors navigate away from a page to a different site. Sticky is good; bouncy is bad.

How bouncy or sticky are Catholic Web sites? More broadly, how well is the church using social and digital media in its mission to spread the Gospel? Since "the church" can mean many things, let's narrow the topic down: How well are those who work in church organizations in this country using social and digital media?

First, the good news. These days almost every Catholic organization and diocese and most parishes have a firm Web presence. Available to both the devout and the doubtful, these sites are repositories of useful information. One can check out editorials in the diocesan newspaper, follow the pastor's blog (and read his latest homily), make donations to a favorite Catholic charity, and check on Mass times. An up-to-date Web site is as much a necessity today as a weekly parish bulletin is (or used to be).

More good news: The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has found great success in the world of social media. It has over 29,000 "fans" on Facebook, where the conference sometimes sponsors trivia contests and where fans use the page for lively discussions. The conference also maintains its own YouTube channel and frequently updates its Twitter feed. Sample tweet: "Are you ready to spend some behind-the-scenes time w/Pope Benedict XVI at the Apostolic Palace? The grand tour." (Note 4 tweeters: 2 save space drop XVI).

The bad news is that more than a few Catholic sites are unimaginative, difficult to navigate, full of dead links and look like they have not been redesigned since the Clinton administration. In the print world, magazine

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**JAMES MARTIN, S.J.,** *is culture editor of* ***America****. This essay is adapted from an address given at the 2010 World Communications Day, sponsored by the Diocese of Brooklyn.*

editors are encouraged to redesign every five years. On the Web, reinvention happens more frequently. If the medium is the message, then the message is that the church is often a laggard. More lamentable than the appearance is the content: while church sites are repositories for information, they are often nothing more than that. While Mass times and donor information are important, a good Web site requires more than just raw facts. As philosophers might say, these are a necessary but not sufficient condition for stickiness.

Most good Web sites are updated daily. If they want young eyeballs, then this is done several times a day. And good Web administrators post not just text but video, podcasts, slideshows and interactive conversations. If not, he or she should not be surprised by a lack of visitors. Those who wonder whether it is really possible to update sites daily would do well to remember that there is plenty going on in our church, so it is not hard to be creative: point viewers to international church news they might not otherwise see; upload videos of Catholic speakers; link to articles from your favorite Catholic magazines (hint); point to new (or old) Catholic art; and post the latest Vatican press release.

## Too Busy?

Many church employees might say: "Are you nuts? I'm too busy!" But not updating is like having a microphone in the parish that is not working. A priest or deacon could deliver homilies that would put St. John Chrysostom to shame, but if no one can hear them, what is the point? Likewise, if church organizations do not maintain a fresh Web site or blog, fewer people—especially the young, who get their information digitally—are going to visit these sites and hear the church's message, or even care if the church is speaking.

Back to the good news: The official church has hit its stride in the blogosphere. Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York blogs religiously (pun intended). So does Cardinal Sean O'Malley, O.F.M.Cap., of Boston, who supplements his blog with photos. The blogosphere is a natural place for articulate communicators, and there are many in the church. But blogs present significant challenges, like encouraging dialogue among readers and building a sort of virtual community. Take a look at a few diocesan blogs and note how many comments there are: often the number is zero.

Why zero? Too often it is because the blogger posts and then walks away. To paraphrase Truman Capote's comment about Jack Kerouac, that's not blogging, that's publishing. Responding to commenters encourages more people to read, post and discuss. This practice is not without its own dangers; it is easy to get bogged down in arcane theological e-battles.

Accepting and publishing comments, even those not in line with church teaching, is another challenge that demands, besides patient catechesis, constant charity. Still more charity is required when the comments become *ad hominem*. "In omnibus caritas," as Blessed John XXIII liked to say. Easy to say, but harder to do when someone says you are an idiot, a heretic (or both) or that one should be, as someone recently said of yours truly, summarily laicized.

## Doubting the Haters

One area where the institutional church's relationship with digital media is doing poorly is in its own reading of blogs; one can pay too much attention to those who are called "haters." Not a few Catholic bishops, administrators, theologians, thinkers, writers, priests, brothers and sisters have been vilified for no good reason on Catholic blogs whose raison d'être is to police, condemn and attack. Some sites seem to have set themselves up as a Web-based magisterium, even when the inquisitors have little to no theological acumen. After all, on the Web no one knows that

### 10 DOS AND DON'TS FOR WEB-SAVVY ORGANIZATIONS

**Do Engage.** Maintain an active presence in the digital world, including on Facebook and YouTube. It is easy to set up accounts on both. Facebook features "fan pages" for public organizations that anyone can join or "like." Think about newer modes, too, like mobile phone apps.

**Do Update.** Frequently. If you are in need of new content, link to news items that people might otherwise overlook. Think sticky.

**Do Tweet.** It is easy to write 140-character tweets (on Scripture, spirituality, prayer, books, church news) that will help the people of God.

**Do Redesign.** At least every few years upgrade your Web site.

**Do Scout.** Look at popular Web sites, blogs, Facebook "fan pages," YouTube videos and Twitter feeds. What are they posting that makes them successful?

**Don't Foster Link Rot.** Leaving up dead links, (a k a "link rot") will frustrate visitors and give the impression your organization is inattentive or just clueless.

**Don't Be a Hater.** Don't respond to hateful comments with more hate, no matter how tempting it is to "get" the other person. Remember: In all things charity.

**Don't Despair.** If you question the need for this kind of evangelization, remember the growing power of social and digital media to reach the young and the not-so-young.

**Don't Be Gullible.** Be very discerning when you stumble upon outright attacks on other Catholics. Before you jump to conclusions, find out what is actually going on.

**Don't Be Proud.** No medium is beneath us when it comes to spreading the Gospel. Remember Jesus used any and all means to reach people.

you are not Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Sometimes these attacks ping around the Web and find their way to the Catholic school where the targets of the attacks work, the university where they teach or the diocese in which they minister. So a caveat: Don't believe everything you read in the blogosphere. Remember that the authors of some so-called Catholic blogs are not always reliable. It is better to check with the subject of the attack.

## Languages and Modalities

Back to how the church can better use digital media to spread the Gospel. As for the (somewhat) newer media, the church is still playing catch-up. That is understandable: church workers are busy folks. But the lack of attention may give the unwitting impression that the church considers Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as beneath them or inherently risible. "You *tweet*?" said a priest to me recently. "Whatever for?" When I told him that I post 140-character homilies every morning, he rolled his eyes.

My response was this: Does the church seriously want to reach young people? I mean people who are really young—not just under 50, but under 25—young men and women in college or high school. The church longs to reach the young, but is it willing to speak not only in the language of young people, but in the modes they use? Or does the church expect them to come to it and speak, as it were, in its own language?

Jesus, after all, asked his followers to go to the ends of the earth, not just to places where they felt comfortable. And Jesus did not sit around in Capernaum waiting for people to come to him. Sometimes people came to the house where he was staying; more often, he went to them. And more important, Jesus spoke in a language that people understood and used media that people found accessible.

Using a mode of communication specifically designed to reach his audience, Jesus' parables were vivid stories that drew from everyday life—simple tales about farmers planting seeds, women sweeping their houses, a man being beaten by robbers—and easily understood stories from nature—a mustard seed, lilies, birds, clouds. Jesus spoke the language of the people of his time, used examples from their daily lives and offered it all in a mode they appreciated. He was not afraid of being seen as undignified by talking about commonplaces like mustard seeds or sheep. The Son of God did not see that as beneath him. And if he did not consider speaking in familiar styles as undignified, then why should we?

The truly creative church administrator, pastor or bishop might even think beyond current modes and into the fastest emerging field of digital opportunity: mobile communications, mobile app development and apps specifically designed for tablet computers (like the iPad).

## The Birds of the Air

In every age the church has used whatever media were available to spread the good news. Jesus used parables drawn from nature and everyday life; St. Paul used letters to reach out to the early Christians; St. Augustine practically invented the form of the autobiography; the builders of the great medieval cathedrals used stone and stained glass; the Renaissance popes used not only papal bulls but colorful frescoes; Hildegard of Bingen, some say, wrote one of the first operas; St. Ignatius Loyola encouraged the early Jesuits to write and publish pamphlets, and the early Jesuits used theater and stagecraft to put on morality plays for entire towns; Dorothy Day founded a newspaper; Daniel Lord, S.J., jumped into radio; Bishop Fulton Sheen used television to stunning effect; and now we have bishops and priests, sisters and brothers and Catholic lay leaders who blog and tweet.

ON THE WEB
James Martin, S.J., answers questions on social media media and ministry.
twitter.com/jamesmartinsj

No medium is beneath us when it comes to proclaiming the Gospel, especially to the young. This includes Web sites, but also all social and digital media. How sad it would be if we did not use the latest tools available to us to communicate the word of God. If Jesus could talk about the birds of the air, then we can surely tweet. A

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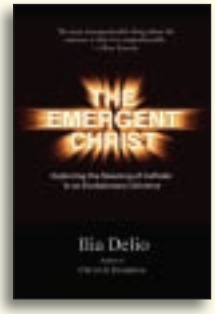


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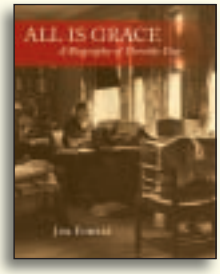


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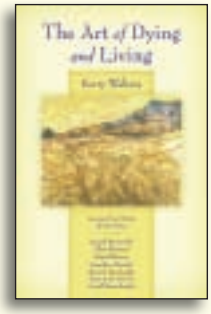


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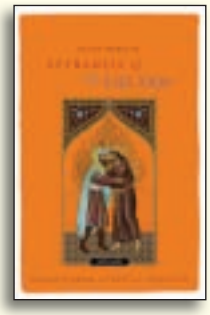

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# A Guy Thing

## An extraordinary leadership program for men on campus

**BY KERRY WEBER**

Josh Noem tried rustic retreats in the woods. He tried combining workouts and prayer. He even tried holding discussions at the local pub. But much to his chagrin, nothing worked. When Mr. Noem was hired as a campus minster at the University of Portland in 2005, he was asked to involve a larger number of young men on campus, but his programs failed to engage more than a handful of students, and many of those who did show up were already regulars.

All that changed in 2007 when Mr. Noem and Thomas Bruketta, then a part-time campus minister at the university, came across an article called "Men, Spirituality, and the Collegiate Experience" by W. Merle Longwood, Mark W. Muesse, and William Schipper, O.S.B., that detailed the origins of a successful men's discussion group at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn. Mr. Noem and Mr. Bruketta adapted the plan for their own students. They gathered 11 freshmen recommended by hall directors or professors and pitched the following: A small group would meet regularly for the next four years; each year, the men would discuss a different theme, keeping in mind the concepts of truth, brotherhood, justice and authentic masculinity. The freshmen were intrigued. They called themselves the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, in a playful homage to the comic book series.

"By the end of the fall there was a different energy about this group," Mr. Noem said. "They were asking when the next meeting was. Getting them to attend wasn't like pulling teeth. They were willing to take on leadership roles."

The group at Portland, which goes by the nickname LXG, has since grown to include more than 70 young men engaged in nine small groups at the college. For many, LXG was their first contact with campus ministry. Here is how it works: In the first year the men meet regularly—usually every week or every other week—to answer the question, "Who am I, and what do I believe?" In the second year, they discuss relationships. Year three covers resiliency, which Mr. Noem describes as a "code word for suffering." In the final year they discuss their vocations. The discussions are facilitated by two members of the college faculty or staff, including laypeople and religious. The members also help to organize service opportunities and campuswide events that reach out to other men. Mr. Noem estimates a 75-percent retention rate overall since 2007.

The purpose of the discussion groups, Mr. Noem said, is to provide a safe, confidential environment in which the participants can build core relationships and talk about those things that are "deeper and more authentic" than the stereotypically male topics of sports or women or video games. Spirituality may play a role in these discussions but it is not necessarily the focus, and students of all faiths or no faith are welcome. Mr. Noem said that listening to other men describe their beliefs enables participants to open up to one another in new ways.

"For them to just name their experience puts that experience in the open, and there's a solidarity that supports them," Mr. Noem said. "They realize they're not alone, and it's O.K. to rely on other people." Mr. Noem serves as a facilitator for a group and has accompanied those first 11 members through to their graduation this past May. "The big conclusion we had was [that] we're all dealing with things, and the general tendency was to keep it inside, and they were realizing that that wasn't healthy."

### A Model to Replicate

Last November, LXG was named an "exemplary program" for "facilitating personal development" by the Catholic Campus Ministry Association, meaning that the program offers a successful model that can be imitated by other colleges.

Gar Kellom, a researcher who served as the executive director of the Men's Center at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., for nearly two decades, was one of the founders of the student discussion groups on which LXG was based. In 2008 he obtained a grant from the Lilly Endowment and awarded funds to 14 U.S. colleges to help them identify the best practices for increasing male engagement in vocational discernment activities. Some institutions, like the University of Portland and Siena College used some the funds to assist with men's discussion groups, while others sought to motivate male athletes to spend time volunteering or to train faculty members for new courses or to conduct research.

Mr. Kellom knew that college men needed a bit of motivation. According to a study from the Higher Education Research Institute, 68 percent of male college students are interested in spirituality, but men were less likely than women to demonstrate that interest. Women are also more likely to take part in service learning opportunities. "Men are socialized not to be in touch with feelings or emotions or inner

**KERRY WEBER** *is an associate editor of* ***America****.*


Three men from the University of Portland's League of Extraordinary Gentlemen on a hiking trip at Silver Falls State Park, Ore., in 2008

lives," Mr. Kellom said. "You hear people say, 'man up,' in other words, 'Don't show emotions or feelings,' and that includes a spiritual side."

Through approximately 1,000 interviews with men at the colleges that received grants from the Lilly Endowment, Mr. Kellom and his fellow researchers found that the college-aged men perceived their friends as being committed to traditional masculinity, even while they saw themselves as able to go against those stereotypes. "We asked them about participating in men's groups and they said, 'I'd be interested in spirituality groups, but my friends wouldn't,'" he said. "The biggest inhibitor is the misperception of the socially constructed masculinity. Guys are willing to talk, contrary to what others say. They need to get past the inhibitor that it's not cool to do it."

Creede Caldwell, 21, of Helena, Mont., was one of the founding members of LXG at the University of Portland. He graduated this year and will serve as a full-time volunteer at a L'Arche community in Syracuse, N.Y., through the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Mr. Caldwell said that his small group forced him to be more thoughtful about what it means to be a man. "I had a really good role model for what a man is in my father, but I hadn't necessarily spent a lot of time in my own life contemplating it," he said. "What LXG did was give me room to explore the specifics, the basic principles and the actions and gestures a real man would use, rather than fitting into the stereotypical."

## Seeking Out Stereotypes

Sometimes, however, the stereotype comes in handy. One of LXG's yearly events is called the Manquisition, a kind of mock trial involving cartoonishly macho judges who demand explanations from those men who do not conform to similarly macho stereotypes. The list of defendants at the event (the tone of which is described by Caldwell as "Stephen Colbert meets Monty Python") has included a priest, a male student majoring in education, a student engaged to be married and a senior who made a quilt for his girlfriend for Christmas. Amid the humor, "defendants" offer moving testaments to their atypical choices and lifestyles.

But, according to Mr. Noem, for the event to be successful it had to attract the kind of college men who might not consider attending the discussion groups. So the posters advertising the event depicted a man fighting a grizzly bear with a chainsaw. "We don't want to be speaking only to guys who are well adjusted and integrated," Mr. Noem said. "We want to speak to guys who take this stereotype seriously, so we use that stereotype but always as an invitation to transcend."

This intention was not immediately clear, however, to some members of a feminist discussion group on campus, who objected to the event and, in general, questioned the need for the men's discussion groups. So Mr. Noem invited a representative from the feminist group to an LXG planning meeting, which he said has led to a fruitful, ongoing discussion. "We realized we were on the same page about authentic human development and the need to transcend those gender roles that society puts upon us," he said. "It's not just women who are oppressed by the false masculine. Men are too, and it's important to keep that dialogue open."

Eric Grussing, 22, of Lakefield, Minn., a recent graduate of St. John's, said that remaining with his small group for four years helped him to feel comfortable discussing issues of relationships and masculinity in a way that was different

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSH NOEM

from the communication style he used with his closest friends. He found he was more open about his own thoughts and opinions and of those around him. "It's made me more empathetic toward the lives of others," he said. "The majority of experiences I had before were basically guys just relating to each other on a sports basis or something. When guys are good buddies they can give each other a hard time and be comfortable making fun of one another. But this experience was an opportunity to have more thoughtful conversations about the things we normally bottle up."

ON THE WEB
Additional resources on male ministry.
americamagazine.org.

Men who restrict themselves to macho male stereotypes often suffer from it, said William Schipper, O.S.B., the director of campus ministry at St. John's University. "The male script is that you're only supposed to be strong and independent, but that's not always a healthy script," he said. Father Schipper has helped to organize and facilitate the men's discussion groups at St. John's since 1997. "Men can also be very restrictive when it comes to physical touch with other men," he said. "Often it has to do with homophobia and the desire to convey the message: 'I'm not gay.'" Father Schipper said this fear can rob men of the fulfillment of the "basic human need for human touch that is sustaining and positive that doesn't have to be sexual."

The confidential discussion groups can help young men to gain a personal perspective on larger social issues. "Human beings in general, when they see a face and they look someone in the eye, are much more accepting than when it's in the theoretical," Father Schipper said. "I've had students at various stages of the discussion come out to the group and talk about their experience of being gay," he said, adding that he has witnessed only acceptance and support in the students' reactions. "You have to realize they're in a group that has become close," he said. "In this context, the students have more of a personal investment."

The effects of these discussion groups can extend beyond the regular meetings. Brandon Morgan, 19, a sophomore at the University of Portland, is in his second year of LXG. He has become close friends with the other men in his group, and he says they often discuss the issues and experiences they have had through LXG, outside the group setting. He said that one friend who had not been a part of LXG during his freshman year has decided to join one of the groups in the fall. "We didn't try to convince him," said Mr. Morgan. "He just saw how close we'd become and all the fun we were having and he didn't want to miss out on that experience." Mr. Morgan hopes his friend will find the program as beneficial as he has thus far. "It's been an enlightening experience to see who I actually am instead of who I think I am or who I show to the world." A

# Course Correction

## My journey from journalism to campus ministry

BY CLARISSA V. ALJENTERA


Tired and worn down, I gave in to the call.

There is no easy way to explain the winding road I took through eight years of journalism, eight newspapers and five states before I arrived in college campus ministry.

But I know that every interview with an athlete, grieving family member and pushy school superintendent helped prepare me for my job today as a campus minister for law and medical students at Northwestern University.

Back then, I lived a hectic life with constant deadlines. When I was not writing stories, I was on the phone conducting interviews, sometimes for more than an hour at a time, or responding to angry readers. Now, in my first year of ministry, my conversations center on exams and summer plans. I ask questions about companionship and faith. They are not probing questions asked in a way to elicit hidden information. They are questions that show I care.

A great journalist, John C. Quinn, known as "Chips," had this advice for reporters: "Care. Care. Care. Take it and show it." Quinn was an editor at The Poughkeepsie Journal in New York when he was killed in a car accident at the age of 34. As a reporter, I tried to heed his counsel. In a way, his words may have helped lead me to my chosen path.

Working in ministry allows me to care about students in ways that would have seemed artificial as a newspaper reporter. My work is not recognized in another byline but in a student's spiritual life and in the choices he or she makes. Seeing my name in print did provide a charge of sorts, but the relationships I have forged in ministry have proved far more rewarding in the long run.

As a young adult, I can understand the pain that students experience. I know what it is like to leave your family to follow your passion, to live thousands of miles away from home. They wonder why I decided to settle in a city where I had no close friends or professional connections. I tell them I bring to my job the same stubbornness and sense of adventure that made me a decent reporter. I am determined to make it work.

I decided to leave journalism in 2007 because newspapers were struggling and I could not see a future in the profession. It was a very difficult decision. Night after night I cried while kneeling in front of my Santo Niño, a wooden statue of Jesus as a child, a popular image among Filipino Americans. That same image inspired me as a teenager when I first considered ministry. At the time, my parents persuaded me to find a better-paying job, though journalism was not the lucrative career they envisioned.

A life in ministry offers many rewards, though they cannot easily be measured. Helping a student find stillness on a busy afternoon, guiding a student in prayer as she ponders a life-changing decision—these are graced moments that I take part in almost every day.

Witnessing the transformation of students' lives makes me want to work harder on my own faith life. One young woman, whom I will call

**CLARISSA V. ALJENTERA** *is a campus minister at Sheil Catholic Center at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.*

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Samantha, told me about her desire to find a spouse whose cultural background and faith tradition matched hers. She was born in India and brought up in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. Our conversations revolved around her Catholic identity and how it was important for her professionally and personally within the medical profession. Samantha asked me to pray for her the weekend she broke up with her boyfriend because the relationship was no longer moving in the direction she had hoped.

Journeying with students through ministry can be a rich experience as each story unfolds in its own time. To truly be an effective minister, I have to think beyond weekend retreats, social events and weeklong service trips. I have to dig deeper. One day, I may find myself researching St. Dominic's nine ways of prayer; on another, looking up stories about end-of-life care. I do my best to help students navigate stressful professions that routinely push their work-life boundaries and test their morals.

The shift to campus ministry has been a tough and sometimes lonely road for me. Along the way, I have drawn strength from the students I have met. Consider Rich (not his real name), who also began in daily journalism but now is pursuing a career in law. He is struggling to find community and a place to be centered. Through a series of monthly conversations, we worked together to place this desire in the context of his daily life. We talked about sports, current events and legal writing assignments but always returned to the subject of how Rich could best be himself.



Like Rich, I have struggled to find a professional community and a community of faith. This journey has led me away from the majestic California coastline to a city known for skyscrapers. The change has been difficult, but I have grown more comfortable with my solitude. I no longer push back but accept this unknown path that creates fleeting moments of beauty amid long stretches of loneliness.

Finding a healthy work-life balance has been easier in ministry than it was in journalism. Not everything has to be done by a 6 p.m. deadline. I live life at a more subdued pace. I try not to become overwhelmed. There is no 24-hour news cycle in campus ministry, though my tenure in journalism has helped me to guide students in their own moments of stress, when they burrow into their study caves to prepare for final exams.

Settling in to my new life was more challenging than I had imagined, but I now celebrate a wonderful freshman year in ministry. This journey continues to surprise me and leaves me wanting more. A

# Life Choices

## A barrage of questions surrounds my first pregnancy.

BY ANNA NUSSBAUM KEATING

My husband and I are expecting our first child this summer—a boy. For the first few months we kept the pregnancy a secret. It felt right to protect it somehow. But I have never been good at keeping secrets, especially joyful ones, so eventually we told our family and then co-workers and friends.

After we made the announcement at a New Year's Eve party, one of my male friends half-jokingly said to me and also to the room: "You're going to do natural childbirth, right? You're not one of those women who goes in for drugs and hospitals." Having been present at a number of labors and deliveries, I had to confess that I was not sure what kind of woman I was. I told him that I would really like to do a natural childbirth, but it might depend on the size of the baby's head and how long I am in labor. I felt that I had let him down.

That was only the beginning. No one could have prepared me for the nonstop series of questions asked of pregnant women. From the moment I announced I was expecting, it seems that everyone wanted me to choose a side. Will you be the "kind of woman" who uses cloth diapers or disposable, who delivers at home or in a hospital, who works full time or stays home? Are you going to co-sleep or put the baby in a bassinet by the bed? Are you going to vaccinate, or do you think it is dangerous? Another friend told me I should allow the baby to play only with unpainted wooden blocks, because plastic toys and stuffed animals would ruin his untrammeled imagination.

All of these details were enough to overwhelm me. Some days I wanted to tell everyone: "This is my first child. Ask me again in three years." Other days, I was not even sure that I cared about finding the answers to these questions. Sure, I have my own hang-ups and preferences: I've always hoped to breastfeed, and I plan to ban video games in the house because I despise them. After all, we all want a sense of control. But while the choice of sleeping arrangements or toys can be important, neither is important enough to create a divide between me and other women whose choices may differ from mine.

All this choosing of sides right at the start felt strange, like making my child a little extension of myself, a little project before he was even born, as if the type of sling I carry him in or the type of trucks he plays with will project my brand, or his value, into the world.

Mostly these discussions of details do not begin to touch the sheer terror, wonder or delight of being pregnant for the first time. More than anything, I just need to be with *that* for a while.

My husband and I went to the doctor's office for an ultrasound test at five months. We sat in a dark room and stared at real-time pictures of our son's squirming body on a large overhead screen. We could hardly believe he existed, yet there he was, moving his arms and legs, opening and closing his mouth, practicing swallowing. We had never before marveled at the action of swallowing, at the perfect fit of each white vertebra in a human spine, at the hemispheres of the brain, the latticework of tiny bones in hands and feet and ankles. It was beautiful. It made all the discomfort seem purposeful—women's bodies a holy and living sacrifice. It was like falling in love. The ultrasound tech tried to make polite conversation, pointing out the baby's organs and asking us about the nursery or lack thereof. We tried to be courteous and talk back, but we could barely speak.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/ANAT-OLI

This little being had been called forth, and we had been entrusted with his care. For the first time, Psalm 139 read less like poetry and more like a

**ANNA NUSSBAUM KEATING** *writes and teaches in South Bend, Ind.*

simple description of what was happening beneath my heart: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

There was so much to marvel at, so many changes: the first surprisingly strong kick of a baby beneath my taut skin, and my body, once composed of so many lines, becoming all circles like Picasso's "Girl Before a Mirror." Expecting a baby made me think of my own parents in glad ways. I marveled at the fact that we all enter the world unable to do anything for ourselves and that people feed us, clothe us and change our diapers not because they always feel like it but because it is the right thing to do.

A memory of my own mother comes back to me. It is 20 years ago and she is sitting on the floor next to my brother's bunk bed in the dark singing lullabies. My little brother is on the bottom bunk, and I am on the top; we are making requests. It was always the same few songs—"Softly and Tenderly" or "Birmingham Jail"—but we wanted to keep her singing. These songs signaled the end of every day and the beginning of every night. I remember every word of these nighttime rituals, though the words themselves were not particularly important. Maybe it was enough that someone cared to sing to us at all and to do it again and again. In the end, it is not the particular decisions—pacifier or no pacifier, co-sleeper or bassinet—that make the biggest impact. It is the things we do again and again that convey to children that they themselves are a gift.

My husband and I are deciding on diapers and work schedules and collecting secondhand clothes. But mostly we are just waiting, waiting to meet our son and kiss his little feet, waiting to bless him, to welcome him home and carry on the lifelong work of loving him. A

**FILM** | MICHAEL V. TUETH

# MOVEABLE FEAST

*Woody Allen's 'Midnight in Paris'*

Woody Allen's latest film, **Midnight in Paris,** follows the adventures of a successful Hollywood screenwriter named Gil (Owen Wilson), who longs to publish a novel, or anything more serious than the screenplays that have made him rich and famous. Gil is the latest version of the typical "Woody character," whom Richard A. Blake, S.J., **America**'s longtime film critic, described in his book *Woody Allen: Profane and Sacred* as one who "stutters and stumbles...through life, insecure, threatened, and desperately unhappy."

Not quite desperate, but getting there, Gil and his fiancée, Inez (Rachel McAdams), have come to Paris to accompany her parents on their business trip. As early as the couple's first day of sightseeing, Gil waxes nostalgic about the Paris of the 1920s, when "real writers," like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein and other American expatriates, mingled with the likes of Freud, Picasso and Dalí. By a horrible coincidence, they meet an old flame of Inez's, Paul (Michael Sheen), who adds to Gil's misery with his pedantic observations on French art and architectural sites. By the end of the first day, Gil breaks away from the group and wanders aimlessly through the streets at night.

As he sits on the steps of a church, the steeple bell strikes midnight and a taxi pulls up. Gil is lured into the car and taken to a party where Cole Porter is playing the piano, and the first guests he meets are F. Scott himself and Zelda. The Fitzgeralds persuade

PHOTO: ROGER ARPAJOU © 2011 MEDIAPRO, VERSATIL CINEMA & GRAVIER PRODUCTIONS, COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

**Left to Right: Marion Cotillard, Alison Pill, Owen Wilson and Woody Allen on the set of "Midnight in Paris."**

him to join them and their pal Ernest Hemingway for late-night revelry at a café where Josephine Baker is dancing; and the group ends the evening at Gertrude Stein's salon, where she passes the time arguing with Picasso. Astounded (naturally), Gil nonetheless finds a way to return every night to continue the party and, as a bonus, to enjoy the company of Picasso's current mistress, Adriana (Marion Cotillard), a free-spirited fashion designer who came to Paris to work with Coco Chanel.

Allen has been reported to have called this film his "love song to Paris." And he knows how to do love songs. Many moviegoers can happily recall his ongoing love affair with New York. Beginning with "Take the Money and Run" in 1969, on through the '70s and '80s with "Annie Hall," "Hannah and Her Sisters," "Crimes and Misdemeanors" and "Broadway Danny Rose," and as recently as "Anything Else" in 2003, Allen's images, characters and plotlines expertly captured the city's unique combination of goofy energy, intellectual vitality and romantic possibilities. His romance with Gotham peaked in the opening scenes of "Manhattan" (1979), which offered a montage of New York's loveliest landmarks, accompanied by the New York Philharmonic's hyper-lush rendition of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."

In recent years, though, Allen has occasionally traded New York for London, the setting for "Match Point" and "Scoop," and for Spain in "Vicky Cristina Barcelona," investing both locales with a similar mix of frantic energy, erotic conflicts and romantic elegance. Now he enters Paris. But this is not his first visit to the City of Light. In 1996 his romantic farce "Everyone Says I Love You" spent a little time in Venice but most of its time in the French capital.

"Midnight in Paris" begins as "Manhattan" does, with a collage of the famous sights of the city. The

## some things won't be stopped

a man came in the door
to see a doctor about his breathing

his hands were wrinkled and tanned
i imagined them patting the head of a good dog

his wife wandered the house while he was here
confused
because he's not there

she set the table for two
and then four and then ten

i took the man's history, asked him what his allergies were

she took off the sheets from their bed
because she supposed
she left him there

the man coughed violently, i put oxygen under his nose

she cried
and moved the dresser in front of the window

the doctor wanted the man to stay
pneumonia had settled in his frail lungs

she hid in the closet
tasted her salty tears
held his scratchy flannel shirt to her cheek

the man smiled at me, patted my hand
he must go
he must go home to his wife
she is alone
she does not like to be alone

he took small steps to the door
he paused to cough
this i cannot stop

JENNIFER LYNN WILLS

**JENNIFER LYNN WILLS** *is an emergency room nurse in St. Louis. This poem was the first runner-up in this year's Foley Poetry Contest.*

sequence, however, is less dewy-eyed. Instead of the Gershwin rhapsody, the soundtrack is a brassy jazz tune; instead of the moody chiaroscuro, the images resemble touristy snapshots. The pedestrian daylight shots of the Arc de Triomphe, the Paris Opera, Notre Dame Cathedral and Montmartre gradually shift, however, into evening scenes along the Seine and, finally, into a nighttime portrait of the brilliantly illuminated Eiffel Tower, a preview of the allure that the Paris nights will hold for Gil.

Gil's novel-in-progress focuses on the owner of a "nostalgia shop." Inez and her friends accuse Gil of engaging in nostalgia simply as "an escape from the pain of the present" and describe his problem as "Golden Age thinking." But his nightly visits to the "moveable feast" of 1920s Paris show why a writer might prefer to have lived in that place and time. The casual name-dropping—Modigliani, Jean Cocteau, Braque, Archibald MacLeish, Djuna Barnes—provokes the same zeitgeist chuckles that many of Allen's New Yorker magazine pieces have earned.

But the cinematic appearance of some of the literary and artistic greats is even more delightful. Hemingway (Corey Stoll), with his unsmiling and aggressive stare, converses exactly as he writes, in sharp simple or compound sentences that refer frequently to "bravery," "death" and "grace under pressure." In addition, he regularly invites people to a round of boxing. Kathy Bates reincarnates Gertrude Stein, delivering her critical opinions while sitting beneath Picasso's portrait of her. Later on, Adrien Brody is even more outlandish as a hyper-enthusiastic Salvador Dalí. The lovely Alison Pill exhibits all of Zelda Fitzgerald's Southern charm as well as her incipient madness. Add to this the brief appearances of Luis Buñuel, Man Ray and, for a few seconds, T. S. Eliot; and one can sympathize with Gil's preference for this era over his current life

with a bland fiancée and her hostile parents.

The contrast is so strong that one might wonder how Gil ever ended up engaged to Inez. She has no appreciation of his literary ambitions, contradicts and criticizes him at every turn and is happy to spend time shopping and sightseeing with her parents or dancing (and doing other activities) with her old flame. Gil admits to an occasional panic attack at the thought of their engagement and confesses to Adriana that he and Inez have a "disconnect with the big things" in life. Meanwhile, Allen, framing Cotillard in the golden glow of bistro lighting or the violet hue of a Parisian evening, offers Gil a sensuous alternative. Adriana's only failing is that she, an inhabitant of the Paris of the Lost Generation, finds her own situation "prosaic and vulgar" and wishes that she had lived in the real "golden age" of Paris, the Belle Époque of the 1890s.

Lest time-travel strike one as too fantastical for Woody Allen, one need only recall those of his other films that also played with such flights of fancy. As far back as 1972, one of the cleverest segments of "Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)" was set in medieval times, with Allen as the court jester-cum-stand-up comic. That same year, in "Play It Again, Sam," a 1940s-era Humphrey Bogart coached Allen's character on the best (and politically incorrect) ways to "treat a dame." In "Sleeper" (1973) Allen's cryogenically preserved main character traveled 200 years into the future. Two years later, "Love and Death" was set in czarist Russia but loaded with anachronistic one-liners. "Zelig" (1983) placed its protagonist in various historical moments, appearing in newsreels with Woodrow Wilson, Babe Ruth, Pope Pius XI, Hitler and at a garden party hosted by F. Scott Fitzgerald. "The Purple Rose of Cairo" (1985) explored the ultimate moviegoer fantasy, as a Hollywood leading man stepped out of the film and into the real Depression-era life of his lovelorn fan, eventually being forced to decide whether to stay in her world or return to his filmic existence. Allen's "nostalgia" films usually included a satirical view of the contemporary world.

"Midnight in Paris," however, offers a significant twist on the formula. At the film's conclusion, Gil admits that his nostalgic imagination may indeed serve as a "denial of the painful present." But as he learns from Adriana's dissatisfaction with her present age and from his encounters with the artists of the Belle Époque who, in turn, wish they had lived in the Renaissance, many people—especially artists—find the present, as Gil phrases it, "a little unsatisfying." But, he argues, life is "always unsatisfying."

ON THE WEB
Jake Martin, S.J., reviews the film "Bridesmaids."
americamagazine.org/culture

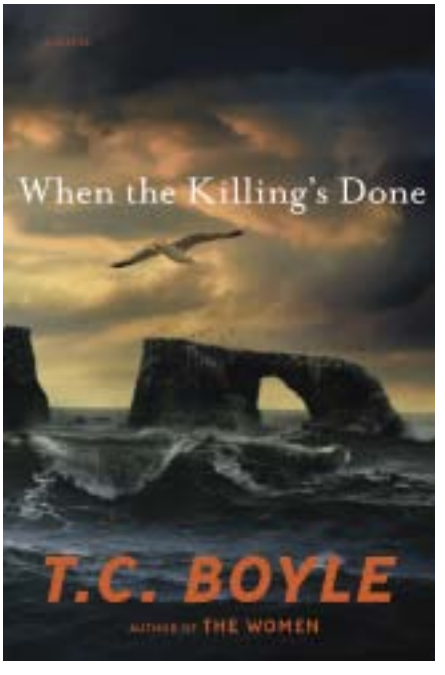
This is a far cry from many of Allen's earlier films that suggested a preference for art over life: the true meaning of life found only in watching Marx Brothers films at the end of "Hannah and Her Sisters," or in writing a play about romance rather than wallowing in his personal romantic failures in "Annie Hall," or in accepting that the "perfect ending" is found only in movies, not in real life, as he philosophizes at the end of "Crimes and Misdemeanors."

To call life "unsatisfying" seems far more positive than calling it absurd and meaningless. Woody Allen seems almost in danger of enjoying life—who knew?—but maybe only if he's living in Paris.

**MICHAEL V. TUETH, S.J.,** *is associate chairperson of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University in New York.*

**BOOKS** | ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL

# WILD THINGS




## WHEN THE KILLING'S DONE

By T. C. Boyle
Viking. 384p $26.95

T. C. Boyle's new novel offers all that his readers have come to expect: compelling narrative, exhilarating writing and vigorous engagement of issues that preoccupy the American imagination. The author of 13 novels and nine collections of short stories, Boyle is both prolific and accomplished, a recipient of the Pen/Faulkner Award and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His last novel, *The Women*, a fictional account of the real-life amours of Frank Lloyd Wright, was a New York Times best-seller, demonstrating once again that

intelligent, historically based novels can prove popular with contemporary readers.

This latest offering takes on a more urgent subject: the disastrous effects of human encroachment upon the natural world and its fragile ecosystems and the things we can or cannot do to remedy the cataclysms we create. In the wake of global warming, nuclear meltdown and species endangerment, Boyle's novel arrives in the nick of time. We are worried about the earth we seem to be systematically ruining, and the story identifies, dramatizes and perhaps even exploits our fears.

Yet Boyle's book is no tale of Chicken Little. Instead, it is a knowing satire on the warring factions of environmental crusaders whose ostensible aim is to save the earth but whose hidden desire is to claim ownership of it and keep it to themselves, thank you. Readers learn much about the dire consequences of environmental meddling, both intentional and accidental, that has taken place on the California Channel Islands off the coast of Santa Barbara. Bird species teeter on the brink of extinction because egg-eating rats have been shipwrecked on Ana Capa; domestic sheep introduced by ranchers devour the vegetation that keeps the island of Santa Cruz from disintegrating into the Pacific; and feral hogs drive off the dwarf foxes that have roamed the island hills from time immemorial.

Alma Boyd Takesue comes to the rescue of these threatened eco-outposts, motivated by scientific imperative but also by personal attachment. (We learn early on, in the tour-de-force opening chapter, that her shipwrecked grandmother was saved from death by coming aground on Ana Capa when pregnant with Alma's mother. So in a very real sense, Alma owes her life to these islands.) Dr. Takesue's methods, however, are harsh: outright extermination of the invasive species through a variety of less-than-humane means, ranging from poisoning-by-airdrop to the hiring of Outback bounty hunters.

Enter her nemesis, a PETA-obsessed brute with the unlikely name of Dave LaJoy, whose love of animals far outstrips any affection he might have harbored for members of the human species. LaJoy's misanthropy is Swiftian in ferocity and breadth, his

hatred toward people generalized and liberally dispensed. No one—with the exception of his girlfriend, Anise—escapes his disdain, including the blameless waitress who serves him breakfast every morning at the diner he ritually patronizes. In this locale, where we first meet him and encounter him repeatedly in the book, the reader cannot help but wonder why the man doesn't find another restaurant to eat his morning eggs—until one realizes that he loves to hate people.

LaJoy's conversion to animal-rights activism—and a conversion it is, since he is as faithful to the movement as any religious devotee—is treated with similar wry comedy, as the result of his randomly receiving a pamphlet one day featuring big-eyed animals caught in the maw of the meat industry rather than as the conclusion of his exercise of rational deliberation. LaJoy's rage, previously diffuse and undirected, happily finds a target, and he aims it, as all bullies do, at a single person who represents what he thinks he hates most, the murderous (to his mind) Alma Takesue.

Just as the reader settles in for a Let-the-Games-Begin genre of plot and envisions the predictable A plague-on-both-your-houses conclusion, however, the novel (like all good art) defies expectations. Irritating as she may be, Alma gradually emerges as the heroine of the novel, despite her control-freakiness and her own bouts of anger and ritual obsessions—the latter focused primarily on food she places in her mouth and on the sound (and unseen emissions) of engines that slide along the freeway outside her apartment building. Alma may be as anxiety-ridden and zealous as LaJoy, but her zeal is grounded in real knowledge of what is happening to the planet and in genuine love of the islands she is trying to save. Her devotion to the cause is signaled by her willingness to engage the unpleas-

ant but unchangeable paradox that governs the natural world: the death of one creature preserves and sustains the life of another. This is a reality LaJoy rejects (supposedly) on principle, even as he downs his runny eggs, much to the disgust of his vegan girlfriend, a concession to the necessity of maintaining his gym-toned muscle mass.

It is telling that amid so much dark adumbration of extinction, the overriding emotion governing these characters is not fear but anger. Gradually we come to realize that Boyle's true subject is not the pitfalls of environmental activism but the endless human capacity for self-righteous indignation and our perverse drive to destroy what we love most in our rage to save it. The extended battle between Alma and LaJoy takes surprising and even outrageous turns, features scenes of cold killing and sensuous sex and incorporates clever narrative jokes and allusions along the way. One, in particular, involves snakes, a creature whose introduction into the tale is all but inevitable, given the Edenic paradise both activists are futilely trying to regain.

In the end, *When the Killing's Done* serves as a sign of the times, faithfully portraying the obsessions of our era, but also as a timeless reminder of the flaws and frailties that have characterized human beings from the beginning of our history. This latter grim fact actually provides a strange source of solace by the end of the novel. It is perversely comforting to know that even as our world is irrevocably changing—as species disappear from the earth forever, as our oceans run dark with spilled oil and radioactive contamination and as our air thickens with carbon-emissions—at least human nature remains the same.

**ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL** *is a professor of English and associate director of the Curran Center for American Studies at Fordham University in New York City.*

RICHARD M. GULA

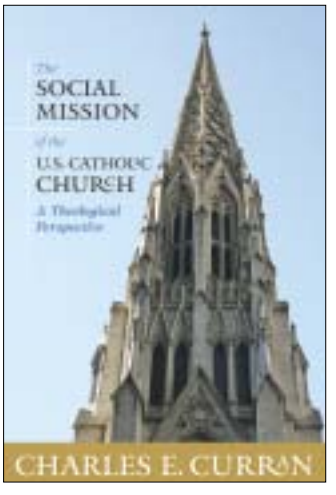
# SHIFTING REALITIES

## THE SOCIAL MISSION OF THE U.S. CATHOLIC CHURCH

### A Theological Perspective

By Charles E. Curran
Georgetown Univ. Press. 196p $26.95 (paperback)

Conversion has been a central theme in the writings of the Rev. Charles Curran from the beginning of his career. It is with him still as the backstory of his interpretation of the social mission of the Catholic Church. The theological framework that prevailed before the Second Vatican Council not only distinguished but also separated the supernatural from the natural, the spiritual from the temporal, the hierarchy from the laity, the church from the world and the mission to sanctify from the mission to humanize. Curran spells out how the conversion of this theological vision yields one social mission for the church, namely, to make action for justice and the transformation of the world a constitutive dimension of the church and of what it means to be Catholic.




Charles E. Curran, the Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University, is one of our pre-eminent American Catholic moral theologians of the post-Vatican II era. He has been at the forefront of the renewal of Catholic moral theology and has carried the torch for at least two generations of moral theologians. To this day he continues to produce substantial volumes with the insight and comprehensive scope of a seasoned veteran but also with the freshness of a pioneer.

In 2002 Curran published *Catholic Social Teaching: 1891–Present*, an exposition and analysis of the Catholic social justice tradition. We now have a follow-up and equally strong work. In his new book Curran points out that our teaching on social justice is not coextensive with our social mission. As he sees it, clergy, religious and laity have not yet tapped the potential of our tradition of social teaching to bring about a much-needed conversion of social structures, personal attitudes and the cultural environment. The theological, ethical and pastoral dimensions of this volume light the way to such a transformation.

The central aim of this work is to spell out the challenges we face when we take seriously the notion that promoting the church's social mission is constitutive of proclaiming the Gospel. Like the prophets of Israel, Curran draws power for his proposals from his sense of history. The first two chapters lay out our historical inheritance of a social mission. They show that the ecclesiological vision of the immigrant church too narrowly construed the church and its mission by focusing more on taking care of its own poor than on converting social structures.

Curran is most poignant in the two chapters that develop his ecclesiology and pastoral proposals for participating in the social mission. He is one of our best witnesses to the vitality and promise of the distinctively Catholic features of the church. Inclusivity (the small "c" catholic character of the church) shapes our openness to diver-

sity and legitimate pluralism, even on the prudential judgments we make when applying universal moral principles. While the bishops can speak for the church, the hierarchy does not have a monopoly on truth. The "both-and" approach of Catholicism makes it possible for both the hierarchy and the laity to share responsibility for the mission. In approaching social issues, our unity and diversity make room both for those whose vocation is to witness through nonviolent protest and for those who are called to work through political and economic processes to bring about change.

In addition to learning from the past, the good moral theologian also looks around at what is going on now. The heart of this book is Curran's look around at three influences on our understanding and structuring of the social mission. The first is ecclesiology. The ecclesiological vision of Vatican II undercut the bifurcation of the temporal and spiritual orders by recognizing that the cooperation of the clergy, religious and laity to better the world is constitutive of the church's mission to transform the world.

The second influence is the sociological situation of the church. The social mission of an immigrant church that took care of its own by supporting schools, hospitals and labor unions to protect the rights of workers gave way to working with others and for others as the church became assimilated into the American culture. Today's sociological challenges for carrying out our social mission arise from the new social situation of the Hispanic majority in the church and from the significant loss of church membership.

The third influence is the historical situation in the United States. The poverty of the immigrants gave way to the issues of just wages and working conditions for our farmworkers, of a stable peace in a nuclear age and of abortion in a culture of choice. Today's historical situation serves up issues of corporate power overwhelming politics, of ecological devastation and of lingering racism and sexism that poisons our political and economic structures.

ON THE WEB
David Cortright discusses his book *Ending Obama's War.*
americamagazine.org/podcast

For Curran, the formation, education and motivation of all Catholics to work for the common good are most urgent. We have our tradition of social teaching that gives us goals to which we aspire, but we also need practical steps: bishops consulting with the faithful in articulating our vision, schools incorporating social teaching across the curriculum, parishes forming socially conscious disciples through liturgical life and outreach services, and charitable institutions (like Catholic Relief Services) meeting immediate needs.

Curran has given us a book to motivate and guide us in this mission. Anyone who wants to see how the social teaching of the church can come to life ought to read it.

**RICHARD M. GULA, S.S.,** *is director of personnel for the Society of St. Sulpice, Baltimore, Md.*

# LETTERS

## The Kids Ruined Everything.

In response to your editorial "How Old Is Old Enough?" (5/30): Massachusetts lowered the drinking age to 18 in the early 1970s. It was a disaster. Instead of 18- to 21-year-olds drinking moderately, they drank more and bought it for those under 18. Night clubs that people over 21 used to frequent were taken over by teens, who were hostile to older couples just looking for a night to socialize with other adults. Night club owners saw a decrease in revenue because teens would buy less and just hang out, while adults bought drinks individually. And the amount of damage by teens ran the costs up. Things were so bad the state ran a referendum and voters voted 5 to 1 to return the drinking age to 21.

JAMES RICHARD
*Boston Mass.*

## The Bishops 'Took Care of It.'

The story "John Jay Report Depicts Progress" (Signs of the Times, 5/30) reminds me of when I was a New York City transit police officer in the 1960s and early '70s and learned that clerics were not arrested for sex offenses in the subways.

My partner and I arrested a rabbi for exposing himself to a group of children, and I was asked by my sergeant, "How would you feel if all those priests hanging around the men's toilets were arrested?" Being a Catholic, I responded, "I'd arrest the pope if he was doing this." I was then informed that instead of arresting rabbis, ministers and priests, "we inform their superiors and they take care of it."

Many years later everyone knows how the bishops "took care of it." They didn't help these priests or their victims. Instead they protected themselves and the institution—and the law enforcement community helped. Celibacy was not responsible for the clergy's abuse of children, but when celibate priests were caught looking for sex in public toilets, the church knew it had a problem but ignored it until The Boston Globe exposed the crimes in 2002.

EILEEN M. FORD
*Rockport, Mass.*

## Brace for Change

Bishop Blase J. Cupich's "The Bishops' Priorities" (5/30) in response to the John Jay Report is disappointing and troubling. In its tone it suggests a church put on lockdown. Who would want to be a priest in this environment of "rigorous screening" and scrutiny? It is like running a prison or penal colony. Where will the community find warmth, friendship and love without fear?

Michael Higgins, co-author of *Suffer the Children Unto Me: An Open Inquiry Into the Clerical Abuse Scandal,* observed in a related article in The Globe and Mail (Toronto) that it is not enough for the church to lament. Reform is necessary, and we must brace for it.

The reform is not achieved by posturing or legal gamesmanship but by an examination of clerical culture and its secrecy and entitlement. This reform involves addressing celibacy for parochial clergy, the narrow rules for selecting bishops and applying collegiality and subsidiarity to church governance. The answer is not a system of policing but de-establishing the pathologies that make the abuse possible.

VIRGINIA EDMAN
*Toronto, Ont.*

## I'm Scared

Re "Reform of the Reform" (Signs of the Times, 5/30): The pope says that the old Latin Mass should be promoted even for small groups of people requesting it. That is fine if all parishes have four active priests once again.

But there is a priest shortage around the world. In many places priests already celebrate three Masses on Sunday, and some places have no Mass. Does Pope Benedict understand the stress most priests are under these days, that many priests are pastor of more than one parish? Does he really want burned-out priests to capitulate to the requests of a small group of parishioners?

As for seminarians, they need more training in pastoral care and homiletics. Without these skills our church will keep hemorrhaging members. Should Latin training take priority? Pope Benedict is an academic and Vatican bureaucrat. I am not sure he knows what's going on in parishes. That is scary.

JAMES SHEEHAN
*Hicksville, N.Y.*

## 'I Phoned You in Spurts'

As I read "Calling Collect," by Heather Angell (5/30), I am pretty sure I understand why your poetry editor picked it for publication. It is a thoughtful and painfully honest account of what so many people go through in college. It is an intimate account of the struggle to become who you are and of the people whom you count on along the way. Well done, Heather!

QUINTON NELSON
*Haverhill, Mass.*

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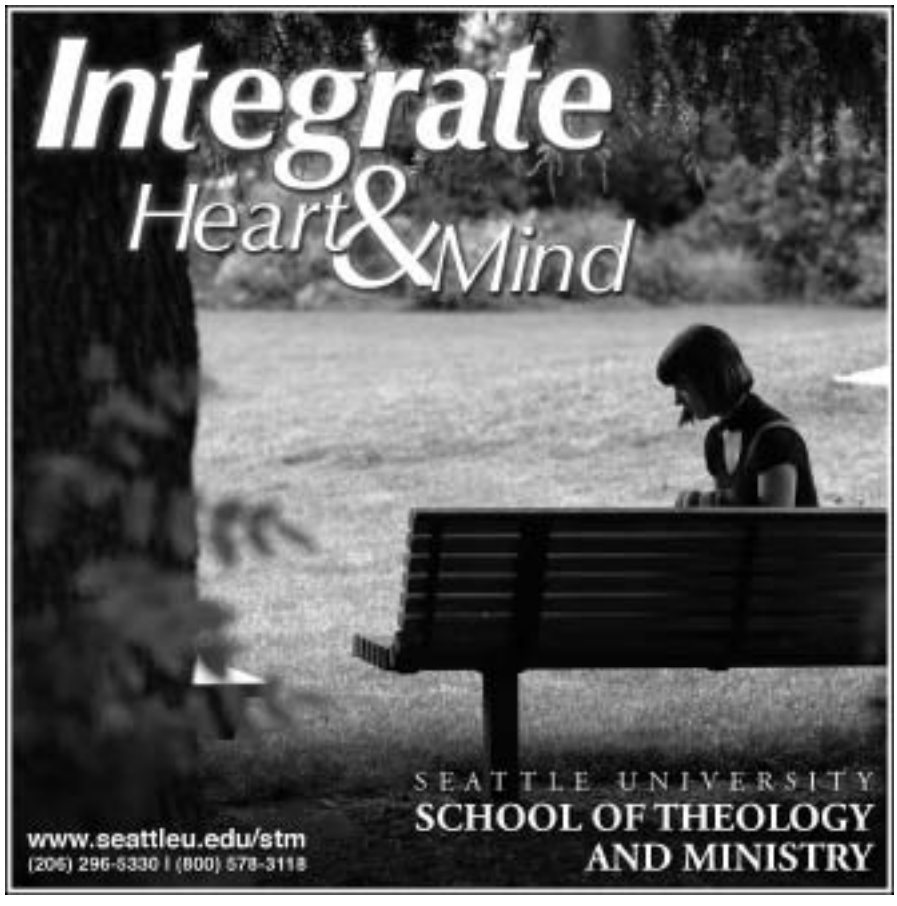


# Mysterious Gift

**FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JULY 10, 2011**

Readings: Is 55:10-11; Ps 65:10, 11, 12-13, 14; Rom 8:18-23; Mt 13:1-23

*"Knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you" (Mt 13:11)*

The *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2008, reports that the fastest growing religious denomination is "none." Among the 16.1 percent who do not identify themselves with any religion, approximately half had been affiliated with a religion as children. One in four young adults, ages 18 to 29, claims no religious affiliation. The study prompts important questions: Why is this happening, and what can be done about it? The Matthean community asked similar questions, as reflected in today's Gospel. Why do some accept Jesus' interpretation of the law while others do not?

Like all of Jesus' parables, the one in today's Gospel is open to a variety of interpretations. If we take the sower as the focus, the parable invites us to reflect on the boundless generosity of God, who offers the word, in the person of Jesus, to all in the hope of a fruitful response, no matter how poorly prepared to receive it some may seem to be. If we zero in on the seed, the parable assures us of the efficacy of the word. No matter what the yield, the seed itself is good, and it will bear fruit. If we take the harvest as the focus, the explosive return propels us into reflection on eschatological fulfilment of hopes beyond our wildest dreams. Finally, if the different types of soil are our focus, the parable urges effort to do everything possible to cull out obstacles and cultivate maximum receptivity to the word.


As Jesus' first followers struggled to understand why others did not respond as they did to Jesus' teaching, they turned to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah articulates that this experience is repeated in the life of every prophet. Some people are disposed to see and hear and respond positively to the prophet's message, while others close themselves off to the challenging word that could bring healing and that could free them to live life more fully in God's love. To explain the negative response by the latter, Isaiah puts the onus not on the prophet, nor on the message, but on those who deliberately close themselves off to the prophet's words and actions.

In the Gospel, Jesus explains that the ability to accept his teaching is a gift from God. What is given is "knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11). This is the only time the word *mysteries* appears in the Gospels (Mt 13:11 and parallels). In other Jewish sources, the term mystery is associated with God's purposes for the end times (e.g., Dn 2:27-28; 1 Enoch 68:5; 4 Ezr 10:38). Here the mystery is the presence of God's realm in Jesus and his ministry.

While verses 11 and 12 explain that knowledge of the mysteries is God's gift, verses 13 to 17 emphasize human responsibility to cultivate receptivity so as to be able to respond as fully as possible to the gift. Some let the gift be snatched from them; some toss it aside in favor of something else that seems more alluring. Work must be done to root out whatever might stand in the way of allowing the gift to unfold all its riches.

## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Ask the divine sower how you might share the word with someone who is not a churchgoer.
- Let Jesus clear away the rocks and thorns in your soil.
- Give thanks for the rich harvest produced in you.

ART: TAD DUNNE

The parable and its allegorical interpretation undercut any smugness or complacency on the part of those who have received the gift. The Gospel invites us to shift our focus from wondering whether the "seed" is effective—it is!—or why others' soil is unreceptive, to the question of how those who have received the gift can be intent on helping prepare receptive soil and to continue the profligate and indiscriminate work of the divine sower, who eagerly shares the mysteries far and wide.

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# Wisdom About Weeds

**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JULY 17, 2011**

Readings: Wis 12:13-19; Ps 86:5-16; Rom 8:26-27; Mt 13:24-33

*"Let them grow together until the harvest" (Mt 13:30)*

What is one to do when an enemy who has been the mastermind behind thousands of deaths is discovered hiding within the territory of a friendly nation? What to do when weeds are discovered sprouting among the good grain? Do you pull out the destructive intruders or let them grow? How did they get there?

Who or what were the "weeds" in the minds of Matthew's Christians? Were they Gentiles who were infiltrating with their corrosive influences, like pesky, pungent mustard that violated the set boundaries and spread uncontrollably into well-defined Jewish fields? Were they evildoers in general or persecutors of the followers of Jesus, who in the minds of the latter should have been already permanently defeated now that the Messiah had come? Why is the evil one still exercising power?

Today's Gospel opens myriad questions and gives helpful directions toward finding answers. The householder who sowed the good seed first acknowledges that the weeds are the work of an enemy and takes the onus off the worried slaves who might have been blamed for not tending the field well or for sowing inferior seed. The parable focuses more on what to do next than on explaining how it happened.

One line of response proposed by the slaves is to pull up all the weeds immediately. The landowner decides against this course of action. Pulling up the weeds might uproot the wheat along with them. The separation can happen later, at harvest time.

Is this a wise decision? Are the ones who actually work the land thinking that this absentee landlord does not know anything about farming? Will his approach be shown to be unrealistic when his wheat has been choked out by the weeds and when it proves impossible to sort out darnel from wheat by winnowing?

Authoritative voices in the early church agreed with the householder and urged forbearance toward sinners. St. Augustine, for example, used this parable to argue that heretics or the lapsed should not be cut off from the church, contrary to the position of the Donatists. According to Hippolytus (Haer. 9.12.22), Bishop Callistus of Rome likewise interpreted "Let the tares grow along with the wheat" as "Let sinners remain in the church."

If the parable proper (vv. 24-30) reflects struggles of the early Christians to include as full participants Gentiles and other "sinners," the allegorical explanation (vv. 36-43) points outside the Christian community to "the world" (v. 38) as the ground of conflict. In these verses, the patient forbearance of the householder is gone as the end-time reapers throw all the evildoers into a fiery furnace. There is a distinct difference from the situation in vv. 24-30. Now it is harvest time, a metaphor for end-time judgment, and the action is carried out by God's angels, not human beings. There is an implicit warning to us not to impetuously assume the role of the divine judge, who alone sorts out good from evil.

The nonretaliatory reproach of the householder who has been humiliated by his enemy can seem weak. When read with the parable of the leaven, it speaks instead of the womanly strength of God, whose transformative work is hidden in the agitating action of kneading the bread. With the first reading from Wisdom, it points to divine justice and might manifest itself in leniency, clemency and kindness. It is this paradoxical approach to rooting out evil, exemplified in Jesus' boundless forgiveness and inclusive table practices, to which we are invited.

**BARBARA E. REID**

## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Pray for the grace of forbearance.
- Reflect on how goodness grows only through struggle with its opposite.
- Let the Spirit's "groanings" (Rom 8:26) intercede through you when you do not know how to pray.

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