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Festival of Encounter

THE POPE'S HISTORIC VISIT
DREW CHRISTIANSEN

For the 63rd consecutive year, the nation's political nobility assembled beneath the Romanesque dome of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, D.C., for the liturgical rite that marks the start of a new term for the U.S. Supreme Court. Sponsored by the John Carroll Society, the Red Mass (known as such because the priests wear red vestments), is a rare moment when leaders of church and state gather as one to invoke the blessing of God on those responsible for the administration of justice.

The first Red Mass was held in Washington in 1953. In succeeding years, the congregation has frequently included the president, the chief justice, associate justices, other leading jurists and members of Congress.

This year, in what some lightheartedly referred to as another five-to-four decision, five members of the U.S. Supreme Court took their seats in the first pew: Chief Justice Roberts was joined by Justices Scalia, Thomas, Breyer and Kennedy.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta delivered the homily, telling the at-capacity congregation that their work must effect a "greater spirit of understanding and unity" and that "during the course of this coming year—whether you are a judge, legislator, agency official, or citizen—you will be faced with many perplexing issues that will demand your careful attention and discernment."

That is an understatement. As Ellen K. Boegel recently wrote for **America**: "Potential blockbusters already are on the docket and others are in the pipeline. The court is scheduled to hear cases regarding the death penalty, redistricting, free speech, affirmative action, tribal court jurisdiction and state water rights. The court also may take on appeals related to abortion rights and religious exemptions to the Affordable Care Act and same-sex marriage."

That docket is politically turbo-

charged, especially in light of the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court in recent decades has assumed a more robust presence in our national politics than was originally envisioned by our founders. If Justice Antonin Scalia and I were legislators, we would rarely vote the same way. But I have a great deal more sympathy for Mr. Scalia as a jurist, mainly because he has called our attention to the fact that the current *modus operandi* of constitutional interpretation can subvert the democratic process. The U.S. Supreme Court, says Justice Scalia, has extended its prerogative well beyond the power "to say what the law is" to include the power to say what the law should be, a power formerly enjoyed exclusively by the legislative department of government. "To allow the policy question of same-sex marriage to be considered and resolved by a select, patrician, highly unrepresentative panel of nine," Justice Scalia wrote in his dissent in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, "is to violate a principle even more fundamental than no taxation without representation: no social transformation without representation."

Let me be clear: Both supporters and opponents of same-sex civil marriage should be concerned about how the matter was settled. As **America's** editors wrote in a recent editorial: "There is a serious constitutional principle at stake: We the people must consider whether we want major public policy questions like the definition of civil marriage settled by judicial fiat, rather than by our elected representatives or by direct vote of the people." We need to change this trajectory if we aspire to be a democracy in more than name. But in order to change the system, we first need the courage to say that the process is flawed. More important, we need the courage to admit as much even when, especially when the process produces an outcome we might personally favor.

MATT MALONE, S.J.

106 West 56th Street
New York, NY 10019-3803
Ph: (212) 581-4640; Fax: (212) 399-3596
Subscriptions: (800) 627-9533
www.americamedia.org
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Kevin Spinale, S.J.

EDITOR, THE JESUIT POST Michael Rossmann, S.J.

EDITORIAL E-MAIL
america@americamedia.org

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Cover: Young people cheer as Pope Francis arrives to celebrate Mass and the canonization of Junipero Serra outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Sept. 23. CNS photo/Matthew Barrick

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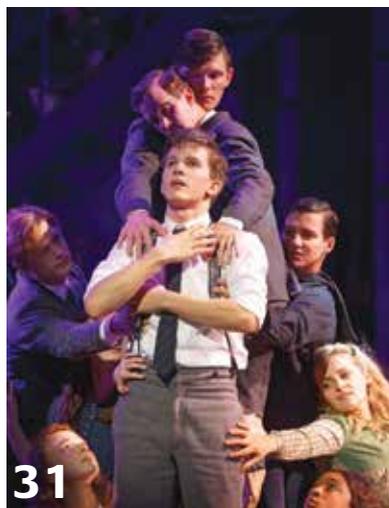
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ON THE WEB

James Martin, S.J., offers the top spiritual takeaways from **Pope Francis' visit to the United States**. Plus, video reports from **Washington, D.C., New York and Philadelphia**. Full digital highlights on page 25 and at americamagazine.org/webfeatures.



The People's Car Company?

The German auto manufacturer Volkswagen has been found guilty of a particularly noxious kind of duplicity. While marketing the line of diesel-powered cars as environmentally “clean,” they had rigged the cars’ computer systems to reduce the emissions output only while being inspected. So while these cars routinely passed state-mandated tests, they were spewing 30 to 40 times the allowed level of pollutants into the atmosphere while on the road. One statistical analysis estimated that this added pollution could be responsible for as many as 100 deaths in the United States over a seven-year period.

Perhaps consumers should have been more suspicious of a car marketed as fuel-efficient, environmentally friendly and peppy to drive. But the real guilt here lies with a company that devoted its technical expertise to cheating the system instead of developing a truly clean engine. While other auto manufacturers were investing in hybrid technology, Volkswagen doubled down on diesel, though they knew it posed risks. The company will pay dearly for its deception. It now faces billions of dollars in fines from the Environmental Protection Agency. But somehow the threat of penalties and a public relations nightmare did not deter them.

It may not be possible to prevent similar scandals in the future, especially on cars with sophisticated computer systems that can hide all manner of sins. Still, Volkswagen must be held to account, and not just for the financial and environmental costs of its deception. If it survives this scandal, the German automaker has a moral duty to make good on its original promise and develop truly clean engine technology for the next generation of car owners.

Boehner's Exit

John Boehner's resignation as speaker and member of the House of Representatives, which came just one day after Pope Francis' historic speech to Congress, seemed abrupt. But in reality, it was a long time coming, and the reasons for it have far more to do with Mr. Boehner's own colleagues than with Pope Francis.

In an interview on CBS's “Face the Nation” on Sept. 27, Mr. Boehner said that some Republican legislators were “unrealistic” about what is possible in government and linked them to the biblical warning against “false prophets,” because they are “spreading noise about how much can get done.” In 2013, hardliners in his party forced a 16-day shutdown of the government in an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate funding for the Affordable Care Act. A similar game of brinkmanship loomed over defunding Planned

Parenthood during the most recent budget negotiations. By announcing his resignation, Mr. Boehner freed himself to cooperate with Democrats and avoid another shutdown. Considered from that perspective, his stepping down seems as much a choice for freedom as one made out of frustration. He is walking away from a situation in which his own party prevented him from doing his job.

Speaking to Congress, Pope Francis addressed the vocation of legislators, saying that their activity “is always based on care for the people. To this you have been invited, called and convened by those who elected you.” We need more legislators to honor that call. For helping to highlight it, even by his resignation, Mr. Boehner deserves our thanks.

Too Many Lofty Words

The United Nations approved a new blueprint for global development at the close of its 70th General Assembly in September—a follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals that expire this year. The U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals, which have been under discussion in one way or another since 2012, include 17 goals and 169 targets.

The deeply ambitious plan seeks to amend a global economic order that too frequently promotes political and economic inequities while exploiting both people and the environment. Attempting to tackle both injustice and ecological sustainability suggests that the S.D.G. are a step toward the “integral development” Pope Francis called for in his encyclical letter “*Laudato Si'*.” The U.N. document itself, however, could have used tighter focus. The document's great breadth threatens to dissipate the attention of the international community and diminish its intended real-world outcomes. Is this agenda the “declarationist nominalism” meant to “assuage our consciences” that Pope Francis tried to warn U.N. members against during his September address? In the same speech he urged that global leaders make real commitments and avoid a “bureaucratic exercise of drawing up long lists of good proposals.”

Blessings upon those advocates, public officials and specialists tasked with translating this agenda into practice and policy. Fewer goals and more practical action steps drawn from real-world experience and accompanied by realistic cost estimates would improve the chances that at least some of these lofty goals may be realized by 2030. If the document could bear yet another rewrite, downsizing the agenda to Pope Francis' “three Ls” for the future—labor, lodging and land—would make a good edit.

Inmate Nation

On Sept. 26, while visiting inmates at the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia, Pope Francis addressed the topic of mass incarceration in the United States, one of the most devastating crises in our nation's history. He said, "Any society, any family, which cannot share or take seriously the pain of its children, and views that pain as something normal, or to be expected, is a society condemned to remain a hostage to itself." In the United States there are over two million inmates in prisons and jails. As a nation, we must reflect on how and why this crisis became the norm.

Since 1980, the number of inmates in U.S. prisons and jails has grown from roughly 500,000 to over two million. Today the United States jails a higher number of its citizens than the top 35 countries in Europe combined. This has shattering effects on people of color, particularly African-Americans. Today, there are nearly a million African-Americans in our prisons and jails. One in every 35 black men is currently serving time. (A recent report has also found that while juvenile arrest rates have declined, African-American girls have become the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population.) For Latinos, the rate is one in 88. While making up only 30 percent of the U.S. population, African-Americans and Latinos account for 60 percent of the prison population.

In July, President Obama, in an attempt to further examine the prison system, visited El Reno Correctional Institution in El Reno, Okla., where he met with six inmates, including 24-year-old Jesús Chávez. Mr. Chávez, who was imprisoned at age 20 for dealing in ecstasy pills, describes losing everything at the time of his arrest, including his family. His mother and brother add that it has been painful dealing with Jesús' absence. Sadly, Mr. Chávez's case is not an exception.

A recent bipartisan deal reached by Senate leaders shows promise. The legislation would give prisoners with good behavior an opportunity for reduced sentences, in turn lowering the time served by low-level drug offenders. The Coalition for Public Safety is another bipartisan initiative that seeks to make the criminal justice system fairer by creating policies to provide repeat offenders and low-income communities with better resources, like increased funds for rehabilitation programs.

A true reform of our prison system, however, also de-

mands that we question the way we treat violent offenders, who make up a majority of the prison population. All too often, violent offenders are locked away in maximum-security prisons, with little to no human interaction, or worse, sentenced to death. Pope Francis reminds us that while the onus must be placed upon inmates, a just society must also take part in their rehabilitation. He emphasizes that true recovery "benefits and elevates the morale of the entire community."

How can we begin to deal with this crisis? It is encouraging that both Democrats and Republicans recognize the problem. But some of the proposed measures do not go far enough. We need to reflect more deeply on the purpose of our correctional institutions. The Heidering Prison in Berlin focuses on the redemption of prisoners rather than on their punishment. Wardens there are often psychologists, who provide therapy to inmates. Prisoners are allowed to wear their own clothes, cook their own meals and visit with family. They are given a sense of independence and self. The emphasis, according to Gero Meinin, director of the Berlin Ministry of Justice, is on helping prepare them for re-entry into their communities.

We can also better allocate government funds. Right now the United States spends over \$80 billion annually to keep people incarcerated. Surely some of these funds can be allocated into programs that would help reintegrate released prisoners into society. Currently, the welfare reform law of 1996 prevents anyone convicted of a felony or state drug-related crime from receiving federally funded food stamps. Yet studies show that providing released inmates with resources, like food and shelter, lowers recidivism rates. Funds can also be allotted to companies that hire former prisoners. Research shows that only 40 percent of employers surveyed would consider hiring job applicants with criminal histories.

Finally, as Christians, we cannot forget the imprisoned, as if they were no longer part of our society. Pope Francis reminds us that we must see ourselves through the eyes of those behind bars and must see others through Christ's eyes, adding that we must "create new opportunities: for inmates, for their families, for correctional authorities, and for society as a whole."



REPLY ALL

Exposing Euthanasia

"Tired of Living" (9/21), by John Conley, S.J., regarding euthanasia in the Netherlands, is on target. But there's trouble here in the United States as well. Dr. William Toffler, a physician in Portland, Ore., in a Wall Street Journal op-ed (8/18), recently exposed the dark side of the Oregon Death with Dignity Act, which has been put forward as a model for other states.

Dr. Toffler pointed out the scanty attention given to depression and psychological disorders in those requesting prescriptions for lethal sedatives. He noted that a dual death certificate provision in the Oregon statute labels physician-assisted suicide as a naturally caused death and makes it difficult for outsiders to verify the statistics claimed

by the Oregon Health Division. The California version, passed by the state legislature on Sept. 11, contains the same provisions, specifying that physician-assisted suicide isn't legally suicide. If right-to-die legislators feel they have to hide facts, what does that say about these laws as public policy?

KEVIN P. GLYNN
La Jolla, Calif.

More to Tell

Thanks to Ed Block for "A Grace-Filled Light" (9/14), his fine article about Jon Hassler and his novels. Because I lived and worked on the Saint John's University campus in Collegeville, Minn., I came to know Jon as a good friend and excellent writer. I often invited him to the Ecumenical Institute at Saint John's to speak to the resident scholars about a forthcoming book. He

would read a chapter of the book and then answer questions and visit with the scholars. He told us that he came up with characters' names by walking through cemeteries. When asked about some of the subplots in his stories, he said he would sit in greasy spoon cafes and eavesdrop on the conversation in the adjoining booth! I read all of Jon's books but always considered *Staggerford* my favorite. I was so sorry Jon left us so soon, as I know he had many good stories he still wanted to put on paper.

DOLORES SCHUH, C.H.M.
Davenport, Iowa

More Show, Less Tell

Re "Having the God Talk," by Helen Alvaré (9/21): It seems to me that our children—and all the other people who pass through the orbits of our

f STATUS UPDATE

On Sept. 24 Pope Francis became the first pontiff to address the U.S. Congress. Readers respond to his speech.

The speech was tremendous, and completely Catholic—from environmental stewardship to pro-life issues to upholding traditional marriage. As someone involved in the marriage debate, I especially appreciated his defense of marriage: "I can not hide my concern for the family, which is threatened perhaps as never before from within and without. Fundamental relations have been called into question as the very basis of marriage and the family."

DAVID PLITT

I'm less enamored with the pope's speech, but it most certainly was a hopeful one. What stood out for me most was his advocacy of personalism, of personal encounter, one human being to another. Dorothy Day was all about personalism, and this pope lives his life that way, so the deeds match the words. That is cer-

tainly a countercultural message that is worth hearing.

BILL DUFFIELD

Fantastic speech. I am so happy to be Catholic. It wasn't always that way. Was moved to tears at different times in the past two days, thanking God for the gift of faith and my rich heritage, given to me through my Irish and German parents, grandparents and ancestors who came to this country as immigrants.

EDWARD SELLNER

It was stunning indeed. Pope Francis never fails to surprise and to deliver. Knowing the history of the slighting of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton by the powers that be, I could not help but get so excited when he placed them beside the great late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as people who exemplify the very truest leadership qualities. He had me weeping with joy.

CHRISTINA COOMBE

His speech was very balanced and encouraging, as opposed to lecturing

or scolding. I appreciate his effort at being balanced and cordial. I am highly disappointed at the Supreme Court justices who refused to listen to him—especially the Catholic ones: Justices Thomas, Scalia and Alito. I guess they like to be the ones doing the preaching. My deep gratitude to Ruth Bader Ginsberg who was willing to at least listen to him. Justices Breyer and Kagan could not be bothered, I guess.

I do wish that the pope had mentioned St. Kateri Tekakwitha, to balance the canonization of St. Junípero Serra, which is a bit controversial among Native Americans.

MARIA MEDEROS

Why no outcry over abortion? The pope called for the abolition of the death penalty but not for abortion in this land. A great disappointment for me and other Catholics.

MARGE CAMAIONI PETROSKI

He was truly inspiring! Now let's hope Congress heeds some of his advice!

NANCY NITTEBERG-DUNN

lives—will come to know Jesus more through the way we live than through any talks we have. Though it may take a lifetime to show Jesus, the message will shine as a lamp in the dark night, sure and clear.

CAROLANN CIRBEE
Online Comment

A Polarized Problem

Re “Our Armed Society,” by Firmin DeBrabander (9/14): Gun violence is often spoken of through the filter of our differences. Gun owners see any attempt at resolving the issues of gun violence as an attempt to diminish this civil right. Anti-gun forces seem to believe if you diminish the access to guns, gun violence will go away. Neither side is willing to look at alternatives, and articles like this one just continue the knee-jerk responses.

There are plenty of reasons why law-abiding citizens own guns in this country. Focusing only on the violence puts a false face on gun owners in general. What is not acceptable is guns in the hands of psychotic killers, guns in the hands of violent criminals or unmonitored children, all of whom are restricted from owning firearms (sort of) by federal and state laws. And no gun owner objects to these restrictions.

So we can continue to blame each other for this problem, we can offer solutions that are not really solutions and are impractical or impose on the civil rights of others—or we can sit down and look for the difficult and complex (and probably imperfect) answers to this problem. Each side needs to understand what is going on with the other and to work with the very large convergence of opinion that is hidden by the polarized dialogue that exists now.

MICHAEL KEYES
Online Comment

Shroud Studies

Re “Is the Shroud Genuine?” by James Martin, S.J. (9/14): While my faith doesn’t turn on the authenticity of

the shroud, after more than 35 years of reading and studying about this cloth—one of the most studied artifacts in all of history—I think it is highly likely the shroud is the burial cloth of Jesus. Reasonable explanations have been posited for the inaccuracy of the radiocarbon dating that placed the cloth’s age as more than a millennium after the crucifixion. In any event, delving into the large and varied writings and resources about the shroud is a pleasurable effort in and of itself. It’s hard to imagine any other inquiry that combines such disparate research areas as pathology, botany, geology, textiles science, biochemistry, hematology, photography, Jewish burial customs and art history (just to name a few).

BILL COLLIER
Online Comment

Person-Centered Classroom

“Unplugged but Connected,” by Mike St. Thomas (8/31), is an outstanding piece that offers a most needed focus in this “connected” age. Enduring personal relationships are the centerpiece of good Catholic schools, often lost in the rush to “keep up.” S.T.E.M. and other initiatives can become all-consuming distractions from the basic message Catholic schools were meant to convey. If I had a child, how lucky he or she would be to have Mr. St. Thomas as a teacher. Keep the human person at the center, and all else follows in service to that person’s well-being. Yes, the technology helps us to do some things better; but it does not and cannot replace the soul-to-soul, heart-to-heart, face-to-face

encounter that is at the core of what Catholic education is at its best.

BARRY FITZPATRICK
Online Comment

Methods of Transformation

I read with interest “Progress Report” (8/31), by Joe Paprocki. I agree that the current mainstream model of catechesis for adults is unattractive and unproductive. But it seems to me that other means of catechesis exist and have existed for years. This article failed to make any reference to them. For example, the Cursillo Movement (its name means “short course”) has existed worldwide for well over 50 years and has been the inspiration of many people, including myself, to continue learning and to serve the Lord. In addition, the Charismatic Movement, the Saint Vincent De Paul Society, Kairos Prison Ministry, Kenosis, Christ Life, Marriage Encounter and Gennesaret (to name a few) are all wonderful means of adult learning.

I believe that the article is correct in noting “catechesis needs to be less about information and primarily about transformation.” But it fell short, for me, in that it left out reference to these key and proven methods of transformation.

GORDON REINOLD
Abdeen, N.J.



CARTOON: HARLEY SCHWADRON

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SIGNS OF THE TIMES

SYNOD ON THE FAMILY

Pope Francis Seeks To Open Church Doors to All



OPENING MASS. Synod of Bishops on the family.

A church with closed doors betrays herself and her mission, and, instead of being a bridge, becomes a roadblock,” Pope Francis said in his homily during a concelebrated Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica on Oct. 4, as he opened the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on the family.

Francis is a pope who starts from the real, lived experience of people, not from ideas, and this was reflected clearly in the homily. Addressing the 270 synod fathers from all continents and the 48 other participants (including 18 married couples) at this important assembly, he began by offering a depiction of the contemporary world around three themes drawn from the Mass’s Scripture readings: solitude, love between man and woman and the family.

He analyzed the real and often dramatic situation of people in today’s globalized world, marked by “a growing loneliness and vulnerability,” the image of which is “the family.”

Then speaking of marriage and the family, he explained that “for God, marriage is not some adolescent utopia, but a dream without which his creatures will be doomed to solitude” and said that “being afraid to accept this plan paralyzes the human heart.”

He noted that “paradoxically, people today—who often ridicule this plan—continue to be attracted and fascinated by every authentic love, by every steadfast love, by every fruitful love, by every faithful and enduring love.” And he emphasized that “the goal of conjugal love is not simply to live together for life, but to love

one another for life.”

In the face of what he described as an “extremely difficult social and marital context” in the contemporary world, Pope Francis said the church “is called to carry out her mission in fidelity, truth and love.”

The church must carry out her mission “in fidelity to her Master as a voice crying out in the desert,” he said. This means “defending faithful love and encouraging the many families that live married life as an experience that reveals God’s love.” It also entails “defending the sacredness of life, of every life” and “defending the unity and indissolubility of the conjugal bond as a sign of God’s grace and of the human person’s ability to love seriously.”

Next, the church must carry out her mission “in truth,” that is “the truth which is not changed by passing fads or popular opinions.” She must present “the truth which

protects individuals and humanity as a whole from the temptation of self-centeredness and from turning fruitful love into sterile selfishness, faithful union into temporary bonds.”

Finally, the church must carry out her mission “in charity.” This means “not pointing a finger in judgment of others, but—faithful to her nature as a mother—conscious of her duty to seek out and care for hurting couples with the balm of acceptance and mercy.”

The church must be “a ‘field hospital’ with doors wide open to whoever knocks in search of help and support; to reach out to others with true love, to walk with our fellow men and women who suffer, to include them and guide them to the wellspring of salvation.”

Francis insisted that the church

must teach “authentic love, which is capable of taking loneliness away, without neglecting her mission to be a Good Samaritan to wounded humanity.” In support of his stance, Francis recalled what St. John Paul II said in

1978: “Error and evil must always be condemned and opposed; but the one who falls or who errs must be understood and loved.... We must love our time and help the people of our time.”

GERARD O’CONNELL

GUN VIOLENCE

Another Mass Shooting Incident Wounds a Northwest Community

St. Joseph Parish in Roseburg, Ore., hosted an emotional Mass the evening of Oct. 1 to remember 10 people who died in a shooting that morning at Umpqua Community College. Authorities in Roseburg, a small town in green rolling hills 180 miles south of Portland, report that nine others were wounded.

F.B.I. investigators say the gunman, identified as 26-year-old Chris Harper Mercer, brought six legally purchased weapons to the small college. One student at the college and the sister of a second student told news organizations that Mercer told people in classrooms to stand up and declare if they were Christian. If they responded yes, he shot them in the head. If they answered no or gave some other answer, they were shot elsewhere. As law enforcement converged, Mercer apparently took his own life.

At a news conference in Roseburg on Oct. 2, after Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin refused to answer more questions, a foreign reporter called out, “Why does this keep happening in America?”

Archbishop Alexander K. Sample of Portland rushed a letter to the people of Roseburg hours after the shooting. “I am saddened beyond words

over the tragedy that has struck your local community,” he wrote. “We are one body in Christ, and when even one member suffers, we all suffer with them.”

“Why such shooting tragedies continue to happen is hard to understand,” he wrote. “Sadly, we live in the midst of



OREGON SORROW. A candlelit vigil followed a mass shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Ore., on Oct. 1.

a culture that does not value the dignity and sacredness of every human life as it once did.”

The archbishop told Catholics in Roseburg to “unite their suffering” with those directly affected and to pray for healing and strength for those who lost loved ones.

On the afternoon after the shooting, the Rev. José Manuel Campos García, pastor of St. Joseph’s, was out at the local hospital, ministering as he could to the families of the victims.

The parish administrator, Pauline Schulze, could not say if any of the people gunned down were members of St. Joseph’s; but, she said, “Roseburg is a small community”—26,000 people. “People may not go to church here, but they are all part of our community.

“It has been a chaotic day here,” said Ms. Schulze. “Lots of people calling, wondering what they can do. This is a community that wants to come together to help.... I just told them to tell everybody about the prayer service tonight and to keep the families in their prayers.”

Responding for the 15th time during his two terms to a mass shooting incident, a visibly frustrated President Obama said, “There’s another community stunned with grief, and communities across the country forced to relieve their own anguish, and parents across the country who are scared because they know it might have been their families or their children.”

“It cannot be this easy for somebody who wants to inflict harm on other people to get his or her hands on a gun,” the president said, pointing out that the United States is the only advanced state where such incidents have become “routine.”

“I’d ask the American people to think about how they can get our government to change these [gun] laws and to save lives and to let young people grow up,” Obama said, adding, “that will require a change of politics.”

Pax Christi USA said it was “a profoundly sad reality that gun violence... is now so commonplace that it is difficult to remember and recall all of the mass shootings which have taken place in our nation over the past few years.

“It is time that we shake off our col-

lective lethargy and root ourselves in a deep, sustaining and holy anger which will fuel a movement to end this insanity once and for all.”

Kim Davis Fallout

Attempting to stamp out a controversy that threatened to overshadow the many historic moments of the pope’s first visit to the United States, the Vatican issued a statement on Oct. 2 to clarify the circumstances of the pope’s meeting with embattled Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis. According to the statement, the meeting with Davis “should not be considered a form of support of her position in all of its particular and complex aspects.” Davis had been jailed for contempt of court for refusing to issue marriage licenses for same-sex couples. The Vatican spokesman, Federico Lombardi, S.J., confirmed that “the brief meeting” between Pope Francis and Davis took place at the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington, D.C., “as he prepared to depart for New York.” At that same time, he said, Pope Francis also “met with several dozen persons who had been invited by the nunciature to greet him as he prepared to leave Washington for New York City.” He explained that “such brief greetings occur on all papal visits and are due to the pope’s characteristic kindness and availability.”

Dangers of Austerity

Concerned that Puerto Rico’s debt crisis is inflicting hardship on poor and middle-class households, Archbishop Robert González Nieves of San Juan met with congressional leaders and the White House to push for a resolution in September. The crisis has led to school closings, cuts in social services and health care and job layoffs and reductions in employee benefits as Puerto

NEWS BRIEFS

An Ethiopian priest, **Tesfaye Tadesse Gebresilasie**, became the first African to be elected superior general of the Comboni Missionaries on Sept. 30. • The Vatican denounced the decision by **Msr. Krzysztof Charamsa** of Poland on the eve of the Synod of Bishops’ meeting on the family to announce that he is gay and in a relationship and removed him from teaching positions in Rome and from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. • Bishops in the Central African Republic worried that the pope’s November visit might be canceled after a **resurgence of violence** in the capital Bangui in late September left scores dead. • During a pastoral visit to the Detroit area on Sept. 19-21, the **Syriac Patriarch Ignatius Joseph III Younan** issued a plea to preserve the lives and culture of Iraqi and Syrian Christians, describing conditions as “devastating and tragic...with no hope on the horizon.” • Doctors Without Borders described an **errant U.S. aerial attack** on Oct. 2, which struck its hospital near Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing 22 and wounding 37, as a “war crime” and demanded an independent investigation. • The House of Representatives on Sept. 29 passed the **Women’s Health and Public Safety Act** to give states the authority to defund Planned Parenthood.



Patriarch Younan

Rico struggles to make payments on the \$72 billion in debt the U.S. territory holds. After meeting with congressional leaders on Sept. 30, Archbishop González said, “We want to create more awareness of the urgency of the situation in Puerto Rico and the dangers that more austerity measures would create.” He added, “In terms affecting human lives, especially the poor, we already have approximately 50 percent of our people living under the poverty level and obviously the impact of the current situation is creating unemployment and a new exodus of people.”

Mining Crimes

Church leaders in the southern Philippines said the killing of tribal leaders and the harassment suffered by indigenous peoples in Mindanao are related to mining operations in the area. The tribal people “who firm-

ly stand against mining activities were the ones being intimidated by paramilitary forces,” said the Rev. Bong Galela, social action director of the Diocese of Tandag. In Surigao del Sur province, indigenous peoples, collectively known as Lumads, have been under attack by gunmen of the Magahat-Bagani paramilitary force. Human rights groups alleged that the Philippine military trained and funded the group to go after Communist rebels in the hinterlands of Mindanao. The allegation was supported by diocesan clergy. “We call for the disarming and arrest of the members of the Magahat-Bagani group,” Father Galela told a Philippine Senate panel inquiry on Oct. 1. “We also demand the government to ensure that there will be no cover-up in the investigation of these gruesome murders,” the priest said.

From CNS, RNS and other sources.

DISPATCH | BEIJING

U.S. and China Get to Work

President Obama and President Xi Jinping of China owe Pope Francis a debt of gratitude. With Mr. Xi's and the pontiff's U.S. visits overlapping, the pope was expected to be the geopolitical undercard for what is likely to be the last Sino-American summit of the Obama presidency. Instead, the pope stole the show and kept the spotlight off the visiting Chinese leader—allowing the two presidents to get some real work done.

Both presidents went into the late September meeting in awkward positions, domestically and in their countries' relations with each other. But Mr. Obama was still basking in the success of re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba. The U.S. economy continues to improve, and Mr. Obama seems emboldened to continue working on issues where he knows he can effect change without Congressional approval.

Mr. Xi had just hosted a huge parade of military hardware in early September, including missiles designed to neutralize American aircraft carriers, in yet another move designed to solidify his place as China's strongest leader since Deng Xiaoping.

Mr. Xi's campaign against corruption, considered by both domestic and foreign observers to be a purge as much as a clean-up, continues, having most recently ensnared the head of China's largest oil refining company. But Mr. Xi's visit came as his leader-

ship of China's economy is increasingly being questioned. A Chinese stock market tumble in August gave investors the jitters. His predecessor, Hu Jintao, was seen as a lackluster statesman, but China's growth curve continued upward, which was good enough for most of the 1.4 billion people Hu's leadership affected.

China's Communist Party hitched its train to the engine of econom-

Mr. Xi's visit came as his leadership of China's economy is increasingly being questioned.

ic growth more than three decades ago, and it views social stability as its number one priority at all times. How it maintains that control during the country's first major economic slowdown in more than a generation will determine Mr. Xi's ultimate success.

That economic uncertainty put China on the back foot for the first time in years. In the past the United States needed China to buy more U.S. goods—even American debt. Now it is China that is facing a slowdown and could benefit from a better trade relationship with the United States.

But geopolitics threaten to stand in the way. Mr. Xi is adamant about enforcing China's territorial claims, and the building of three airstrips on disputed atolls and islands in the South China Sea is a direct thumb in the eye to the Obama administration. At a time when the two countries could and should have better relations, China's Great Wall of Sand remains a signifi-

cant barrier, though it did not prevent meaningful action during the summit.

The two sides agreed to work together on cybercrimes, which the United States accuses China of committing against it. Perhaps most important was an agreement to work more closely on climate change.

They agreed to do more to restrict wildlife trafficking, especially in elephant ivory, for which China has re-emerged as a major market. Mr. Xi also met with U.S. technology leaders, most awkwardly with Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and chief executive officer of Facebook, to whom access is blocked in China.

Progress on any issue should be viewed as a victory, especially by the Obama administration. With just over a year left in his term, China is already looking to whoever will come next, knowing it could be dealing with Hillary Clinton, a former secretary of state, who gave a strident women's rights speech in Beijing just 20 years ago; Joseph Biden, if he chooses to run; or perhaps even Donald Trump.

That is because Mr. Xi, who will almost certainly remain in the big chair until 2023, will outlast even a two-term successor to President Obama. As such, he had no particular need to offer Mr. Obama any long-term concession at what may have been their last official meeting.

One issue received only a little play during the two countries' discussions: religious freedom. "Even as we recognize Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China, we continue to encourage Chinese authorities to preserve the religious and cultural identity of the Tibetan people, and to engage the Dalai Lama and his representatives," Mr. Obama said. It was a standard statement that will likely receive the standard response.

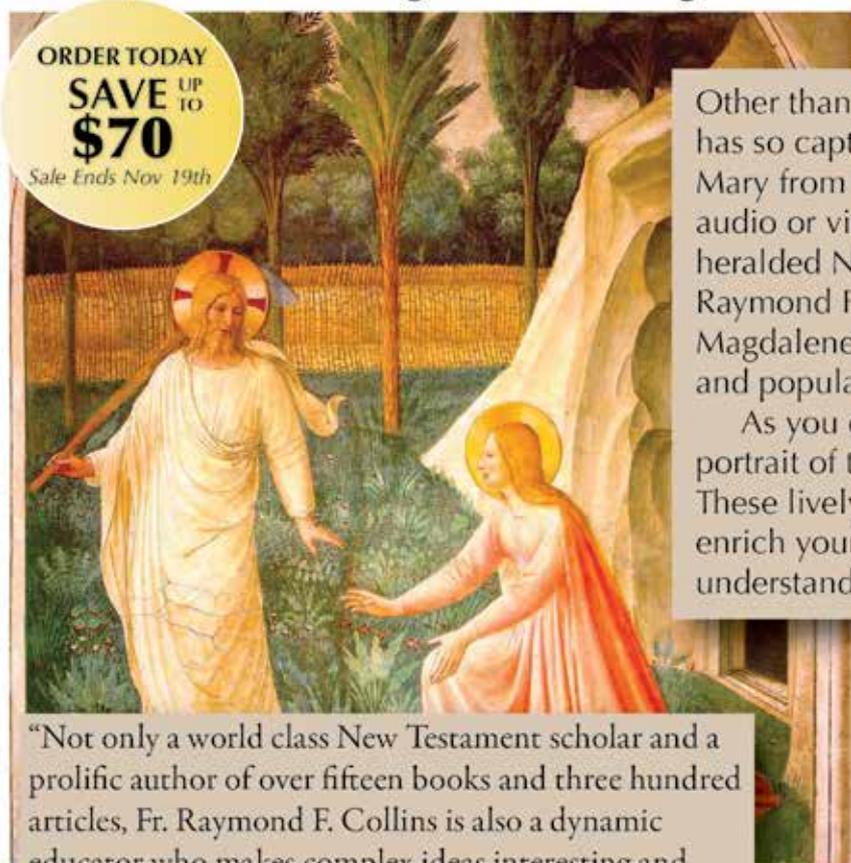
STEVEN SCHWANKERT, author of *Poseidon: China's Secret Salvage of Britain's Lost Submarine* (Hong Kong University Press), is *America's Beijing correspondent*. Twitter: @greatwriteshark.

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An End in Sight?

It was a news story I've never forgotten: a Japanese soldier discovered on an island in the Philippines who still thought Japan was at war 29 years after World War II had ended. He and other soldiers on the island had seen leaflets that the war was over but thought the news was enemy propaganda. Over the years his fellow soldiers died or deserted and only he was left to wage a war that everyone but him knew was lost.

His story comes to mind when I hear American politicians insist that the 50-year embargo on trade with Cuba should continue.

Most Americans probably view the economic embargo as chiefly a symbolic gesture by the United States. But the embargo continues to have a real effect on Cubans' lives. President Raúl Castro called the embargo "cruel, immoral and illegal" in his speech welcoming Pope Francis to Cuba last month. Days later, in a speech to the United Nations, he described the embargo as "the main obstacle" to Cuba's economic development. One estimate by the Cuban government, reported in 2009 in the magazine *Dollars & Sense*, puts the costs of the embargo to Cuba at \$685 million annually. The costs to the United States are actually greater. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce reported that the embargo costs the United States \$1.2 billion each year. Others have put the estimate as high as \$4 billion.

After more than 50 years, the longest-running trade embargo in modern history has manifestly failed to achieve its intended purpose of dis-

lodging the Communist government in Cuba. Its main effect has been to create hardship for the Cuban people and, some say, to perpetuate the regime it aimed to overthrow. It is easy for Havana to blame all its economic problems on its neighbor, the oppressive colossus to the north bent on destroying it, when that neighbor really is bent on destroying it.

Whatever credibility the embargo initially had when President Kennedy imposed it has long since expired. Since 1992 overwhelming majorities in the U.N. General Assembly have condemned the embargo and called for it to be lifted. Last year only the United States and Israel voted against the nonbinding resolution, Israel more as payback for the many times the United States has used its veto power to shield it from U.N. censure than out of genuine enthusiasm, one suspects.

In Cuba, Pope Francis spoke of the need to lift the embargo and to further reconciliation between Cuba and the United States. President Obama has eased those aspects of the embargo he can, but it takes an act of Congress to lift it. Some in Congress would like to, but the Cuban-American lobby exerts powerful influence there. With the exception of Rand Paul and John Kasich, most of the Republican presidential candidates oppose lifting the embargo.

In August, a Gallup poll reported that 72 percent of the American public support ending the trade embargo of Cuba. But trying to persuade Americans to lobby Congress on the issue is tough. They've become inured

to the injustice it represents to Cubans and other people around the world.

Sometimes it takes an outsider to persuade a person or party to give up a fight. It was leaders from Latin America, including the pope, who put pressure on the United States to end its long diplomatic isolation of Cuba. The Vatican brokered the secret 18-month talks between the two countries that resulted in the full resumption of diplomatic ties in July. At the 2012 Summit of the Americas in Colombia, long-time allies of the United States like Mexico and Colombia joined with more leftist governments to insist that Cuba be invited to the next summit in three years' time. If not, many nations made clear they would not attend either.

While his two predecessors also called for an end to the embargo of Cuba, the issue seems particularly important to Pope Francis. Austen Ivereigh, author of a recent biography of Francis, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*, commented, "What the Berlin Wall was to John Paul II, the sea between Miami and Cuba is to this pope."

Twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, can the United States finally abandon the last outpost of battle and remove sanctions both vindictive and pointless? U.S. policy towards Cuba has exemplified the worst aspects of our politics and even of our character. Normalizing trade would free both countries to turn the page on a painful history.

The longest-running embargo in modern history has manifestly failed.

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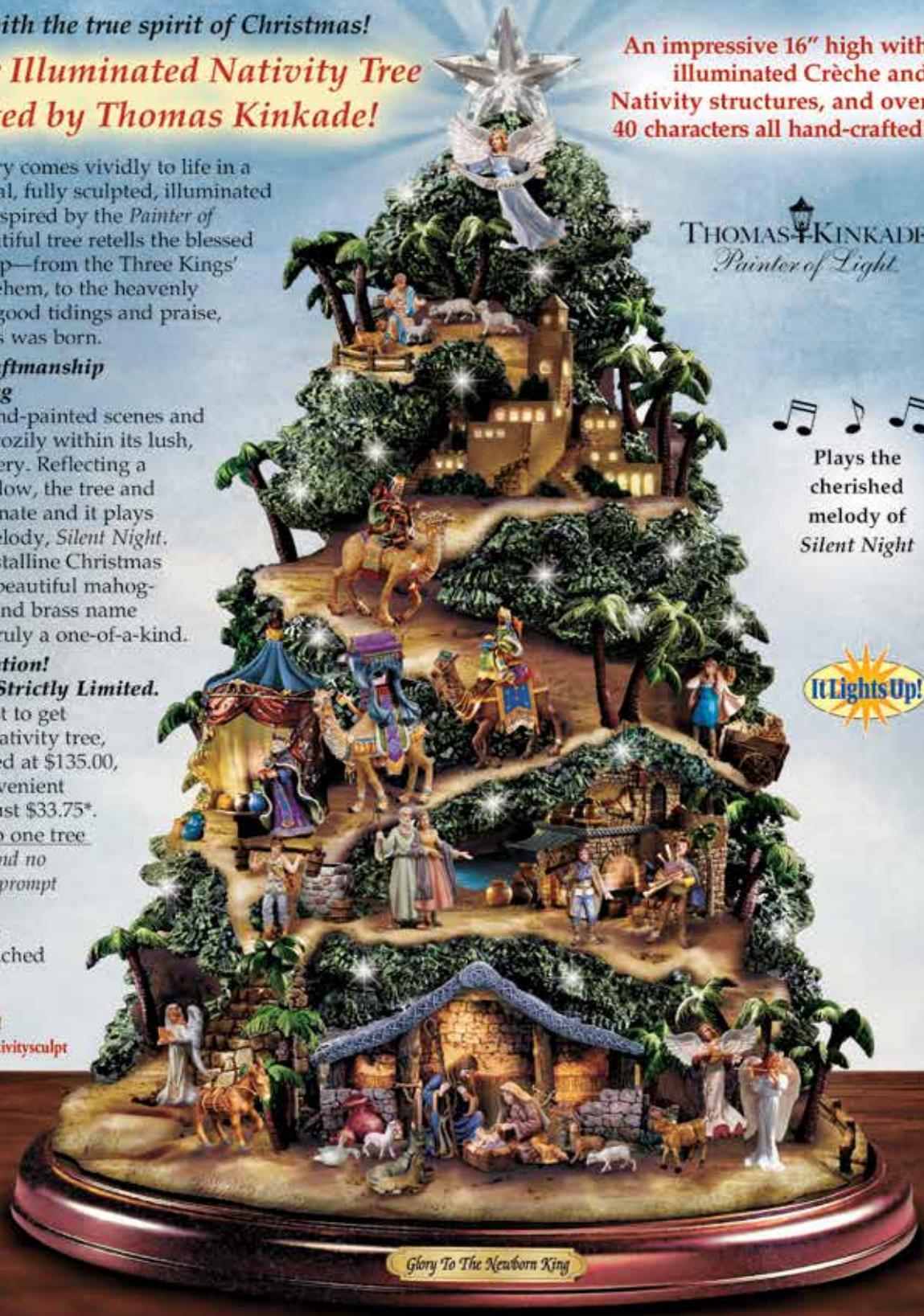
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Papal Healing

Pope Francis' U.S. visit may mark a farewell to factions.

BY DREW CHRISTIANSEN

Ron Murphy, S. J., a Georgetown University German professor, was returning from the Catholic University of America, where Pope Francis had celebrated the canonization of St. Junípero Serra, when a woman approached him. “Father, Father,” she exclaimed, “this pope is wonderful. This city has never been as happy.” Her attitude was indicative of the euphoria that swept across Washington, D.C., during Pope Francis’ visit, a feeling shared even by many hard-boiled journalists in the nation’s capital.

In New York, too, broadcasters commented on the uniqueness of the day, on how people felt united, how they were smiling and kind to one another. In the long (ticketed!) lines waiting outside Central Park, New Yorkers often known for their sharp elbows waited amicably to pass security to get a glimpse of the pope as he rode by.

CNN’s Don Lemon, among the first television anchors to come out about his sexuality and an activist on L.G.B.T. issues, had not been very public about his Catholic schooling—until the pope came to town. In the excitement attached to Pope Francis’ visit, as he interviewed a Catholic high school student who had met the pope, he appeared free to speak on air of his Catholic years without apology and with some glee.

House Speaker John Boehner, a one-time altar boy, is known to weep publicly, but he surprised the nation by resigning his office the day after he had realized a decades-long dream of hosting a pope at a joint meeting of Congress. Soon to be free of the burdens of office, he sang “Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah” as he entered the room to meet with reporters and announce his resignation.

Two days earlier at the White House, it seemed Pope Francis and President Obama had a very special rapport with one another after Pope Francis helped broker the U.S. rapprochement with Cuba, as did the pope and Secretary of

State John Kerry. Everywhere Francis went men and women felt better about themselves and freer to follow “the better angels of our nature.”

These few names were among the many who shared just a little in the spiritual freedom that, since the night of his election, has made Pope Francis unique even in an age of remarkable popes.

Festivity and Communion

“Festivity,” Charles Taylor tells us in his book *A Secular Age*, is one of the characteristic religious experiences of our day. It occurs in mass events like World Youth Day and, of course, the huge crowds at the World Meeting of Families. It is manifest, too, in the rise of pilgrimage among secular as well as religious people on journeys like the Camino de Santiago de Compostela and in the youth gatherings at contemporary shrines like the ecumenical monastery of Taizé.

“What is happening,” Taylor wrote, “is that we are all being touched together, moved as one, sensing ourselves fused in our contact with something greater, deeply moving or admirable; whose power to move us has been immensely magnified by the fusion.” During the pope’s apostolic visit, we Americans have been sharing, in other words, in a spiritual communion with the pope and one another. For many Americans, the papal visit was a prolonged and intense experience of festivity.

Pope Francis’ charisma runs deeper than the stature of his office. It derives from the exceptional conformity of his life to the central Gospel demand to minister to the little ones of this world. From dining to traveling, from dramatic events like his trip to meet refugees in Lampedusa to small gestures like visiting with a transgender man in the Vatican, in the busy round of his day he attends unceasingly to the world’s forgotten ones.

“I’m a Muslim,” Mostafa El Sehamy told the New York Times reporter Vivian Yee. “But I believe that maybe God sent this guy to unite everybody together.” Ilyse Shapiro, a Jewish volunteer for the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, told Yee she had replied to her husband’s skepticism about her enthusiasm for Francis this way. “[The papal visit] transcends



HOUSE CALL. Pope Francis and Mr. Obama at the White House

DREW CHRISTIANSEN, S.J., a former editor in chief of *America*, holds the title *Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Global Human Development* and is senior research fellow at the *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs* at Georgetown University.



BUMPER TO BUMPER MASS. The World Meeting of Families closing celebration along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia.



Catholicism. It transcends religion.” She explained, “This pope is speaking for the poor and the powerless. That is beyond religion.”

Longing for Holiness

Deep down people understand, as David Brooks writes in *The Road to Character*, “We don’t live for happiness; we live for holiness.” Holiness consists in an integrity of life, which people of every sort, believers and nonbelievers, Jews and Christians, Muslims and Sikhs, find palpable in Pope Francis. The pope’s presence was like the sun and rain. It came in such abundance that it uncovered the longings for holiness and community long buried within too many American hearts.

In Pope Francis’ theology of encounter, we find God in the face of the stranger. No line in his speech to Congress, a body divided over immigration reform, received louder and longer applause than his invocation of the Golden Rule. He told legislators with masterly rhetorical jujitsu, “The rule points in a definite direction,” that is, to welcoming migrants and refugees. “Let us seek for others,” he urged, “the same possibilities we seek for ourselves. Let us help others grow as we would like to be helped ourselves.”

The pope built attention to society’s outsiders into his trip, with visits in Washington to a Catholic Charities soup kitchen, where people struggling with homelessness or addiction or with criminal records dine; in New York’s East Harlem, with a diverse group of schoolchildren at Our Lady

Queen of Angels elementary school; and in Philadelphia, with men in prison and, later, victims of sexual abuse.

Ideally, one of the outcomes of festive events is to break down differences between groups. When skeptics ask what the lasting effect of these six days will be, they are asking whether, when Francis returns to Rome, people will continue to reach across the divisions in our society and the borders of our nation to those in need. Will we ask ourselves, as he said at St. Patrick’s Church in Washington: “Why do these, our brothers and sisters, have no place to live? Why are these brothers and sisters of ours homeless?”

In one of his most eloquent passages, he evoked for a congregation at Madison Square Garden in New York the dark shadows of the metropolis where so many of God’s faceless ones dwell:

In big cities, beneath the roar of traffic, beneath “the rapid pace of change,” so many faces pass by unnoticed because they have no “right” to be there, no right to be part of the city. They are the foreigners, the children who go without schooling, those deprived of medical insurance, the homeless, the forgotten elderly. These people stand at the edges of our great avenues, in our streets, in deafening anonymity. They become part of an urban landscape which is more and more taken for granted, in our eyes, and especially in our hearts.

In the midst of the darkness, he told his listeners, “God’s faithful people can see, discern and contemplate his living

presence in the midst of life, in the midst of the city.” Again and again, Pope Francis asked us to make the communion we enjoyed with one another in his presence real and effective in encounter with “the others” in our midst.

The End of Sectarian Catholicism

When Pope Francis explained his choice of name on becoming pope, he revealed an agenda based on the passions of his namesake: the poor, peace and the environment. But that did not quite tell the whole story. St. Francis’ overriding vocation was to renew the church.

While praying before the now familiar San Damiano crucifix near Assisi, he heard the Lord call, “Francis, rebuild my church,” and for some time he took that commission literally, repairing the dilapidated San Damiano Chapel and then other ruined churches and shrines around his native Umbria. In time, however, he realized that the call was to renew the church by recommitting it to the Gospel.

Legend has it that Pope Innocent III, one of the most imperious popes of the Middle Ages, dreamt that the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the mother church of Rome, like those churches in Umbria, was collapsing but was held up by a little man in a brown tunic. Soon after the dream, legend

has it, Innocent granted Francis and his “little brothers,” the Friars Minor, approval for their way of life, and they began to revitalize the Western church.

What we experienced last week was the Franciscan re-birth of the church—especially in the United States. Like his namesake, Francis puts the Gospel before everything, and living the Gospel life dramatically has been central to this reform. For

Francis spiritual renewal must precede institutional reform. He has told us again and again what we must do, that we must go to “the peripheries,” embrace the poor, the migrant and the homeless and befriend them as Christ among us. He has made journeying to the peripheries as attractive to our contemporaries as the Poverello did in his day. He has shown us how to be “a church of and for the poor.”

Responding to the

NewsHour anchor Judy Woodruff’s question about the lasting impact of the pope’s visit, David Brooks said: “For some large number of people, this will be a turning point in their lives. And that’s sort of worth celebrating. In Philadelphia, or in Madison Square Garden tonight, [for] some people this will be the moment something very fundamental shifts in their lives. And politics rarely achieves that.”

Mr. Brooks, for whom humility is a key human virtue but one demeaned in this age of the self, went on to observe: “We emphasize the man so much, but what he’s saying is the product of 2,000 years of teaching, of thought, of prayer. And he’s the current exemplar. We sort of overemphasize the individual and underemphasize the institution, I think, throughout this visit.” The pope’s Gospel message is essentially the church’s message. What had people so excited was the joy of the Gospel.

The insightful church historian Massimo Faggioli also understood the ecclesial dimension of the visit. Writing in Huffington Post Italy, he noted that the most important context for assessing the outcome of the papal visit is intra-ecclesiastical. “Francis is facing a church that is among the most vital and energetic in the world,” he wrote, “but also one that is experiencing a state of schism.” As one who has “declared an end to the ‘culture wars’” in Catholicism, he explained, Pope Francis’ toughest job was to function as a *pontifex*, a bridge-builder, between people across generations and political ideologies.

Meeting with bishops, he pleaded, as he did with members of Congress, for an end to polarization and a commitment to dialogue. “Harsh and divisive language,” he told the bishops gathered in Washington, “does not befit the tongue



GARDEN PARTY. Long lines and security sweeps did not dampen enthusiasm at papal Masses. Above, Madison Square Garden, New York City.

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of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing.”

“Dialogue is our method,” he affirmed, “not as a shrewd strategy but out of fidelity to the One who never wearies of visiting the marketplace, even at the eleventh hour, to propose his offer of love” (Mt 20:1-16). The address used the word *dialogue* no fewer than 12 times.

Remember, he told the bishops, “Jesus’ church is kept whole not by ‘consuming fire from heaven’ (Lk 9:54), but by the secret warmth of the Spirit, who ‘heals what is wounded, bends what is rigid, straightens what is crooked.’”

The dramatic opening of his homily the next day in Philadelphia painted his vision of a post-culture-wars U.S. church. On his arrival in the City of Brotherly Love, he told the congregation at the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, he had learned “the story behind the church’s high walls and windows,” built in the 19th century to defend the faithful against nativist rioters. Then, with another jujitsu throw, he announced, “[T]he story of this church in this city and state is really not about building walls, but about breaking them down.”

“It is a story,” he continued, “about generation after generation of committed Catholics going out to the peripheries, and building communities of worship, education, charity and service to the larger society.” Invoking the example of Philadelphia’s native daughter St. Katharine Drexel, he asked the whole church, women especially, to take up their responsibility to “transmit the joy of the Gospel” to the world. The future of the church, he insisted, would require “a much more active engagement on the part of the laity.”

With a final bit of spiritual skill, he asked the ordained not to be threatened by the charisms of the faithful. “This does not mean,” he told them, “relinquishing the spiritual authority with which we have been entrusted; rather, it means discerning and employing wisely the manifold gifts which the Spirit pours out upon the church. In a particular way, it means valuing the immense contribution which women, lay and religious, have made and continue to make, to the life of our communities.”

At Independence Hall, where he addressed by name the bishops’ conference’s signature issue of recent years, religious liberty, he boldly resisted making a fuss about a scruple of law. Instead, he endorsed “a healthy pluralism which respects differences and values them as such,” and he praised Philadelphia’s founding Quakers for modeling religious freedom and tolerance.

With ecumenical largeness of heart, he thanked “all those, of whatever religion, who have sought to serve the God of peace by building cities of brotherly love.” He departed too, I would think, with a prayer in his heart, that this church, “among the most vital and energetic in the world” but too long riven by bitter division, would become the effective sign and sacrament of unity it is called by Christ to be. 

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Vermeer's Window

An artist's meditation on living in the present

BY JEROME A. MILLER

It has become a commonplace of spirituality that we are meant to live in the present. Thoreau, whose spirituality is so widely revered today, aspired to “toe that line,” and found support for his aspiration in the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most ancient spiritual classics. Today, countless spiritual writers echo this sentiment. But a much beloved painting completed by Vermeer around 1662 and now hanging in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art suggests that this is only a partial truth. “Young Woman With a Water Pitcher” is a meditation on what is not present in it.

We cannot say with any assurance what the young woman pictured in this painting is doing. We may surmise that she is completing her morning ablutions, since the linen mantle she is wearing was used for these. But whatever she is doing, it is unlikely that even the most detailed diary would mention it. What is it, then, that draws Vermeer to this passing moment, and us to his painting of it?

I, for one, am fascinated by the incongruity between the apparent unimportance of this woman's action and her contemplative absorption in it. There is a quiet deliberateness to her small deed, as if it is governed by some unscripted etiquette of patience. The painter has not produced this woman's stillness by staying her movement. The stillness comes from the attuned attentiveness, the meditative heeding, given to her act by her way of performing it. In her eyes, what she is doing is not servile or inconsequential. She is not doing it to be done with it. Her manner gives it a kind of a liturgical import.

Our culture inclines us to think that the worth of a deed depends on the results it produces. Hence, we tend to keep one eye on the act we are doing and the other on the goal we are intending to achieve. But spiritual sages from a wide variety of traditions insist that focusing our lives on getting results is a sure way of wasting them. Fixated on a goal, one hurries to get past the present to the future one wants. This may seem innocuous. But if one treats every present as a means to the future, one is continuously postponing one's life instead of living it.

Vermeer finds in this woman, young as she is, a profound



practical wisdom. She has freed her action from a menial relationship to a goal beyond it. This has allowed it to become a tactile exercise in contemplation. Her act is informed by the elusive influence of grace and the tactful ardor of appreciative love. This ardor is wholly intent on, entirely attentive to, the singularity of the present. It lives this always passing tense without the tension it ordinarily induces. The passing moment, in its very inconsequence, becomes a sacrament. Its importance is not announced by a thunderclap but by an unaffected etiquette of moving stillness. From where does this stillness come?

JEROME A. MILLER, professor emeritus of philosophy at Salisbury University, is the editor of *Sobering Wisdom: Philosophical Explorations of Twelve-Step Spirituality*.

The Contemplative Touch

This painting is not a still-life. But the action it portrays—the touch of the woman's hands—brings quietude to the scene. Her tactile sensitivity is both irenic and enlivening.

According to most spiritual traditions, touch is the least aesthetic, most carnal of the senses and hardly receptive to



This young
woman is not
taking her time.
She is giving
herself to time.
She is allowing
the present to be
instead of trying
to move it along.

temperance. The young woman in this painting helps us see that it can be otherwise. Here, touch is contemplation reaching out to what it loves. In so doing, it brings temperance into the world. Temperance, as Vermeer portrays it, is not achieved through coercion; it is not an exercise of willpower that makes flesh obey the dictates of reason. It is something like a radiating gentleness that flows into the world from the depths of appreciative ardor. Temperance makes the tactile a careful, irenic etiquette. Looking at this painting, we see how touch can be the handmaiden of the discerning eye. The young woman brings touching careful-

ness into the space she inhabits.

The woman does not occupy this space. She dwells in it. Her dark blue, bell-like gown helps bring this home. It has the shape and color of a constancy that moves without wavering and changes without losing its stillness. There is a depth in the blue that suggests a fidelity that will not tire or lose its hue of patience and quiet passion. The white shoulder linen is a kind of cupola or lantern. It echos and lightens the shape of the gown, even as the gown gives the light above it a place in which it can abide. The cap does not confine the woman's face. It provides her a place of contemplative reserve that helps her to focus her attentiveness solely on what is before her. It turns with her, as she turns her face to the changing world. But it also steadies her gaze so that, as she turns, she remains in the place that is her abode.

By virtue of the fact that the young woman dwells in it, this space is enlivened by the act of appreciative love she is performing. Tactile in her hands, and moving on the axis of her stillness, this love is the unifying agency in the painting. It brings the pitcher into communion with the window. It opens the interior, visible space of the room to the exterior that is invisible to us. It is introducing the things of this world, lying on the right side, to the influence of a luminosity that comes from beyond it. We sense that there is a deep, intense intimacy, between the young woman and this light whose modesty keeps it in the background. Her stillness seems to be informed by and in some way dependent on it. It is as if this self-effacing light lies behind all she does. Her composure seems to derive from the same source as the light in which the room is bathed.

Every painting, simply by virtue of its stillness, encourages us to come to a standstill before it—to become present to it and let it become present to us. But this work of Vermeer's does something more; it pictures the very stillness it creates. It is a meditation on living in the present. The young woman in it who embodies this way of living is, of course, oblivious to us. But there is something profoundly hospitable about her tact. We are drawn by it into the present of which she is patiently mindful.

A common idiom would have us say that patient mind-ing involves taking one's time. But this young woman is not taking her time. She is giving herself to time. She is allowing the present to be instead of trying to move it along so she can get to what's coming after it. There is a generosity in her patience. She is not withholding herself from the passing moment as she would if she were expecting or waiting for something more important. She is concentrating on the present as if she is privy to some profound, even inexhaustible significance hidden in it. The present in which she abides radiates into mystery. It is a kind of portal—a kind of window—opening upon what is beyond it.

In this painting, the young woman is in the process of

opening this window, but she is doing so with a profound contemplative tact. At the moment, the window is preventing her and the painter and us from seeing what is outside it. Common sense tells us that if we wait a few moments and improve our angle of vision, we will be able to see what is presently blocked from our view—the source of the light in the room. But the woman in the painting is practicing a different kind of minding. She is already in accord, already in a kind of covenant, with the light behind her. She is entirely patient with and patient upon its reticence. We sense that she is caught in the thrall of, and has entrusted her life to, the mystery to which the light in the room alludes. This mystery, the source of all benediction, is beyond her. It is beyond the window. It is beyond Vermeer's painting. It is beyond wherever we are, whatever present we occupy. Our inability to make this beyond present to us is not due to present circumstances. It is a congenital impotence. The present itself is caught in the throes of a mystery that transcends it.

The Open Window

The window, like the painting that depicts it, is turning toward this mystery. Like the painting, it reveals—and conceals. It promises—and defers. It is not open or closed. It is not transparent or opaque. It is translucent—and colored the hue of human constancy. The woman is opening it with a contemplative tenderness that seems to come from her realization that the present moment signifies the whole of time itself. Her life in its entirety is this act of opening the window—opening time—to the eternity that hails her.

There is something painfully poignant about the muted, self-effacing manner in which light creates an ambience

of grace in Vermeer's painting. As he portrays it, light is an unexpected, unearned blessing. Under the influence of this light, the woman gratefully receives the present as a present—a gift bestowed on her by a mystery that transcends it.

This mystery comes to us from and as the unprecedented future. From inception, we are caught in the throe of a beyond that we cannot escape and cannot master. We cannot ever know what the mystery going to spring on us. The great spiritual masters counsel us to live in the present. But when we do, we find that the present is always opening, like a window, upon a beyond that transcends it. The pitcher and the bowl in Vermeer's painting are brilliant. They make the present radiant with light. But it's not the bowl that fascinates us; it is not the pitcher that we find riveting. As soon as we see their glory, we realize that it is borrowed. What draws and holds us is the more reticent light behind them. Brilliance dazzles and saturates. But the poignancy of retiring light is more compelling to us. This is a deep truth of our spirit. The elusive play of light is the gift given us, in our impotence and frailties. We are moved all the way down by it and must be drawn to it. We see all the things in this world only by its providence. It provides by placing us in the middle of the surprise that deepens the mystery it reveals. This mystery turns the present into an enigma of grace we cannot deny or explain. When we live in the present, we find ourselves borne toward a future that eclipses it. Time, it seems, is the throe of eternity.

Vermeer's painting is itself a kind of window, modeled after the one depicted in it. The modesty of the light in it breathes a kind of holiness. In this life, we come closest to eternity in such hushed intimations of it. It is time itself that lets grace through—and withholds its secret. The window

cannot be shut or pushed opened more quickly. The surprise of eternity cannot be put off—and will not be hurried. What we see of it we see only through colored glass—and sometimes in the virtual space of a painting. The light that reaches us is the effulgence of divine shyness. God is the mystery who is always arriving and never present. Hurrying to get to the end of it leads us away from it. We are always already where we are called to be—in between here and beyond, now and eternity, the painting and all it intimates. Time is not a trap. The window is always opening. The beyond is beyond us—but we are not cut off from it. We are caught irretrievably in the throe of it. To live in the present is to entrust oneself to the mystery that transcends it. 

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Church-Shopping

Why is it so hard for young Catholics to find the right parish?

BY KAYA OAKES



A HOMECOMING. People sing during a Mass for young adults at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, Dec. 10.

In the fall of 2013, gentrification arrived in my working-class North Oakland neighborhood. The rent ticked up month after month. Then one day, the landlord called to notify us he was putting the house on the market. Because of an influx of highly paid tech workers into the Bay Area, the house listed for \$600,000. This was out of range for this writer/academic and her musician spouse. So we packed up and moved 45 minutes away.

At first, I remained active at my old neighborhood parish. But between being a team leader for the parish's adult Christian initiation program, going to Mass, work and the gym, and running errands, I was behind the wheel two or more hours a day, seven days a week. Burning that much gas was a thorn in the side of someone who worries about climate change, but my remote neighborhood has no public transit options. And a change in leadership at the parish also left me asking some hard questions about what all that commuting was for. A sense of disengagement began to creep through our community, and a push mandated by the diocese to focus on student ministry caused adults who were not students to feel left out. The 45-minute drive to church did not make things any easier.

So with discernment and talk with my spiritual director, I started church shopping. In an urban area, this should be easy—there are dozens of Catholic churches in the East Bay Area, and even more in San Francisco. I started at one within walking distance, figuring saving gas would assuage my guilty conscience. When I arrived for the Sunday morning Mass, nobody was at the front door greeting people, so I wandered around for five minutes looking for a bulletin or a hymnal. By the time I found both, some 40 people were in the pews. The choir was good, but the homily lasted 35 minutes (I confess that I timed it) and seemed to have no central message. When it came time for singing, I was the only person within several pews pitching in—and I do not have a good singing voice. Other than one or two families with children, I was the youngest person in attendance by a

KAYA OAKES, who teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of the new book *The Nones Are Alright*.

CNS PHOTO/GREGORY A. SHEMITZ

couple of decades. Passing the peace was cursory, there were no social justice activities listed in the bulletin, and the priest shook one or two hands outside before disappearing.

Perhaps, like many Catholics, I had been spoiled by thoughtful preaching, good music and beautiful liturgies. My non-negotiables seemed minimal: good preaching, decent music and social justice activities. Living in a multicultural area and teaching at a multicultural school, I would prefer a parish with some ethnic diversity and would really like it to be welcoming to my L.G.B.T. friends and my family. I am in my early 40s, and I would like to see someone my age occasionally. I also do not want to feel ostracized for being married to a non-Catholic or for not having children and therefore attending Mass alone. But even as I tried parish after parish, I was not finding those things in combination. Was I just asking for too much?

The Church Compromise

A study by the Pew Research Center in 2014 found that for every adult who is received into the church, six Catholics leave. How much does what we find when we arrive at a church have to do with our dissatisfaction? I put together a questionnaire that asked people under 50 what they were looking for in a church and what their church-shopping experiences have been like and distributed it to people on Twitter and Facebook.

The predominant feature found lacking by those who responded was good preaching. Tom says that he is so fatigued by “culture warrior” homilies that he has “given up on there actually being good preaching anywhere consistently.” One man replied that he wanted preaching that was “substantive and meaningful,” coupled with beautiful liturgy. “I guess I

want what doesn’t exist,” he added. Justine said of preaching, “Who wants to be bored? Or worse, angry or offended?” Ashley prefers “intellectually stimulating homilies,” and Justin says that after years of mediocre preaching, he feels lucky to have found preaching from a theology professor and priest that is “theologically informed.” Christopher says he looks for “homilies that are thought-provoking but also provide complex theological themes.”

How people are received when they arrive at a church not only sets the tone but can also cause problems. Most people said they were not greeted at all—not even with a cursory hello. Those who went out of their way to introduce themselves to priests and get involved in parishes found that once this hurdle was surmounted, things sometimes got a bit better. Parents of young children also found that participating in family activities helped them to get networked. But single people, those married to non-Catholics and those without children all said that there was almost no outreach. “So many young adults have given up on religion,” said one man, “that churches just focus on the people who are already there.” Needless to say, that, too, can be alienating.

Justin, who describes himself as introverted, says he doesn’t like “being blitzed by the greeter ministry” but found that with time the priest reached out to him to get involved. But he was the exception among the people who replied. Most of the people I spoke to listed community as one of the things they most longed to find at a parish. Only a few had actually found it. Of these young adults, very few wanted specifically to be part of young adult activities, with one man saying most young adult activities feel like “forced awkward socializing,” and others describing them as “hokey” and “trite.” A space for “organic socialization,” if possible, would be preferable. They also on the whole preferred a multigenerational parish to one that specifically targets young adults.

When asked if they had eventually found a parish they loved, most people said no. Instead, they compromised. Of his closest church, one man says, “The liturgy is terrible, the homilies are worse, and there is little to no racial diversity. But I feel like there’s a possibility of fostering greater community in this parish simply because it is so close to my house and most of the parishioners are my neighbors.” Ashley says that she “grudgingly” attends her childhood parish but finds the young adult activities wanting: “[They] don’t offer any nourishment to me. They focus more on socializing—beer night and ball games (I don’t drink, and sports are boring)—and less on in-

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tellectual spiritual stimulation.” One man said that his parish “only makes sense for Catholics once they’re married and have kids to plug into the programs.” And another says he likes his parish, but it is “aging and shrinking and doesn’t offer a lot of opportunities for fellowship.”

Liturgy, too, can make it hard to find a parish one can really love. The tastes of those who responded to my survey range from the traditional (a few preferred the Latin Mass and organ music) to the contemporary, with every possible combination in between. But reverence and attention to theology came up again and again, from both Catholics who self-identified as progressive and those who self-identified as traditional. Yet many reported that perfunctory liturgies or disorganized ones had driven them to continue seeking a better parish. The “we’ve always done it this way” factor also comes into play here: those who tried to join liturgy or music committees and pitch in with suggestions were often rebuffed.

Searching for Community

Doing research for this essay and for my forthcoming book on the increasing number of religiously unaffiliated young adults, I found many people described themselves as “picky” and indicated that their pickiness might be why they had given up on finding a church. But pickiness may also mean that people are searching but do not feel welcomed or in-

cluded by churches when they arrive. As one man put it, “Why devote time and energy to a community that can’t seem to find a way to make you feel as if you are valued and necessary?” And in a financially difficult time, when young adults often have to balance the demands of multiple jobs, the time spent at church means giving up time with family and friends. If that church experience is disappointing or alienating, the question arises: Why bother?

My spiritual director had an answer to my frustrated tales of bad homilies, cold and detached congregations and turgid music: Focus on the Eucharist. That, after all, is what Mass is for. Although this advice may help those with a disappointing church experience, it does not by itself create the sense of community that is so hard to find in our increasingly fragmented era. So I am still searching for a parish with a real sense of community, and it is hard work. Perhaps, like many people I spoke to, I will always be searching. But perhaps, as a group, we have a precedent. Jesus, after all, did not worship in the same place every week and his friends, like many Gen-Xers and millennials, were itinerant and just trying to make ends meet. But they occasionally found a place to gather. Finding it involved wandering, confusion and even fear. Who met them when they arrived, and what did that person offer them? Fellowship, safety, acceptance. Perhaps churches worried about the absence of younger adults would do well to offer them the same. ▲

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Rhythm and Beads

Finding the music in praying the rosary

BY JEFFREY ESSMANN

My grandmother's rosary was of amethyst-colored beads and a small silver crucifix, gray-black with tarnish. She kept it on the bureau in her bedroom near a holy card of St. Jude and a talcum powder box made of imitation satin. She'd put it in a special pouch—an old change purse, actually—when she was heading out for Mass or had a reasonably long bus ride ahead of her. When she would visit us out in the suburbs—she still lived fairly deep in the city, not all the way downtown but close enough that you could smell the breweries—she'd say her rosary in the living room, in an easy chair by the picture window, looking out at the lawn.

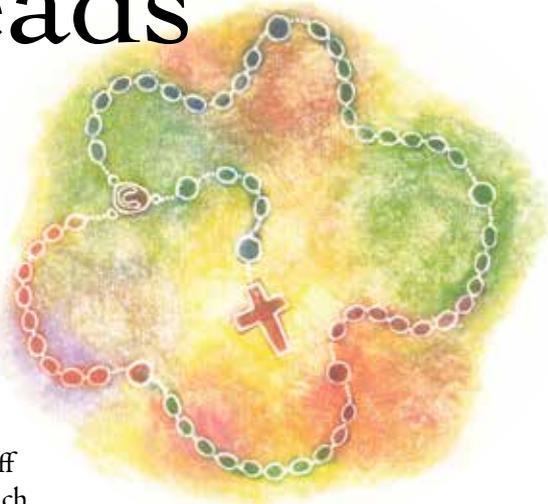
We kids knew we weren't supposed to disturb her when she was praying, but I would watch her from the dining room, her lips moving softly with the rhythm of the prayer, her eyes remote yet focused, looking at the lawn, lifting to an occasional passing car, looking and not really looking at all, there and not there. And I would get a little scared watching her, a little off-kilter. Because in the depth of prayer, at the heart of it, Grandma wasn't just beyond herself, she was beyond everything: beyond the rosary, beyond lawns, beyond families, grandchildren. When Grandma was in prayer, I wasn't quite sure who I was anymore, who anyone was.

JEFFREY ESSMANN is a writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *U.S. Catholic*, *Commonweal* and numerous other magazines and literary journals. He lives in New York.

My mother also prayed the rosary daily, kneeling by the bed, her arms resting on the white chenille spread, the beads moving softly, steadily between her fingers as she stared out the window or occasionally lowered her head. She'd slip off to the bedroom right after the lunch dishes, and when she came back into the kitchen a while later, as she was putting on her apron you'd see the little inverted bumps on her forearms from the chenille. She also still bore the impression of whatever mysteries she'd been praying that day and would resume the housework with an aspect more joyous, sorrowful or glorious. At least for a while.

My first rosary was all of blue plastic on waxy string. We were given rosaries in the first grade; and once we knew the requisite prayers, our homework assignment one night was to say a complete rosary on our own. But 6-year-olds aren't really wired for saying the same prayer 50 times, and while I approached the first decade with admirable fervor, by the second I was getting squirmy. What saved me were the beads. I loved the beads. The blue was a sharp turquoise, like swimming pools. Or a dress my mother wore at a picnic one summer. The turquoise became my bridge. I don't recall what mysteries I was supposed to be meditating on, but they had been superseded by my own: the mysteries of swimming pools and picnics, of charcoal briquettes and marshmallows.

And once I was a little older, I liked occasions that included the ro-



sary: Marian feasts, Forty Hours' devotion, all-school rosaries during May (and Lent), though I don't know that I liked the rosary so much as the rhythm of people praying together. I thought of the rosary as a drum and the people praying as the drumbeat. But it couldn't survive that charming moment in my adolescence when everything became just too boring and corny for words, and it was many years later before I re-encountered it in any meaningful way.

The Texture of Prayer

One afternoon I stopped in at the upper church of St. Francis of Assisi near Penn Station in New York. I needed quiet—or so I thought. Instead, as soon as I walked in I was greeted by the soft drone of 20 or 30 people, most of them women, in the final stretch of a Hail Mary, led by a woman up front with a tinny microphone. I figured I would ignore them, that I would pray in spite of the rosary. But within moments my reflection wasn't so much disturbed as absorbed by the steady tread of prayer wending its way into mystery. It turned out they were doing the Joyfuls; I had just caught the end of the Annunciation (a personal favorite).

ART: JULIE LONNEMAN

I prayed the Visitation with them (another favorite). And of course I had to stay for Christmas.

The last time I visited my aunt in the nursing home we said a rosary. She was, by that time, essentially nonverbal. The Alzheimer's had so dismantled her language that she was reduced to a roiling pool of dissolved syntax and random phonemes—though this in no way precluded her from saying a rosary, nor anyone else in the 40 or so wheelchairs crammed into the chapel. I had done volunteer work in an advanced-stage Alzheimer's unit, so I had seen this miracle before: nonverbal residents, people who couldn't remember who you were from one minute to the next, would know all the words to "Bicycle Built for Two" when the music therapist came in. Old classics, Christmas carols, childhood songs; music seems to be stored somewhere else, somewhere beyond memory. Music, poetry, prayer. At the sound of the Sign of the Cross heads around the chapel lifted, eyes straining through a fog, and people who hadn't said anything in days, in weeks, began praying along. They may have gotten a little lost in the Creed, but the Our Father set them at ease, and with the first Hail

Mary they were home free. The Hail Mary had nothing to do with memory. It was in their blood, their breath, the fulfillment of a wonderful promise: that prayer, pursued long enough, cherished long enough, could actually become part of your biology, a marvelous incarnation. Even my aunt's verbal *mélange* had taken on the pattern, the rhythm, the texture of prayer. Once I even thought I heard a "Hail."

It was a very moving experience that in no way prompted me to start praying the rosary on my own. No, what brought me back to the rosary was my second graders. (I'm the catechist for the second graders at my parish.) When we hit the unit on the rosary in May, I realized, to my shame, that I didn't even own one. It was the first time that year I felt I wasn't qualified to teach a unit. We pray a lot in class, and anything I teach them about prayer I want to be from lived experience. I owe them that. So in order to honor the covenant with my catechism kids, I had to have a lived experience of the rosary. I had to be able to tell them firsthand why this is part of the tradition. I had to be able to talk about the beads.

So last summer I bought a simple

rosary (plain brown beads on hand-wound string, very Franciscan) and said my first rosary in many years. And yes, the first one back felt a little long, but I also experienced within it moments of profound consolation. I focused on my breath as I meditated on the mystery and let the rhythm of my breathing draw me into the rhythm of the rosary till breath and prayer became so organic, so one, that at times I felt I was praying from that place beyond memory the nursing home people had prayed from. That place in my blood.

I committed to saying one rosary a week, a commitment I've come to cherish. I very often say my rosary on the subway. At first I found the scene in the car itself too distracting and would look out the window at the forest of steel supports sweeping by. But as I grew more focused, I paid greater attention to the people around me as I prayed, and found that in fact the Sorrowful Mysteries and the A train are in perfect sync: the Agony in the Garden at 145th Street, the Scourging at the Pillar at Columbus Circle, agony and scourging in every car. And as I speed beneath the city I often think of my grandmother on her longer bus rides, the ones out to us in the suburbs, telling her beads as she moved toward a world of lawns.

This year I'm looking forward to teaching the rosary unit to my second graders. I think they'll like the rosary, at least parts of it. They'll like the call and response of the prayer, they'll like taking turns as prayer leader and of course they'll love the beads. (I googled it: they still have blue plastic starter sets.) Still, I suspect they'll find it dull. No matter. If God can't work in dullness, most of us are doomed. But if we trust to the rhythm of our prayer together, our lives together, trust to the repetition and the rote, to what we call the dullness, within that rhythm we may begin to sense the mysterious pulse of grace. **A**



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- Pope Francis*

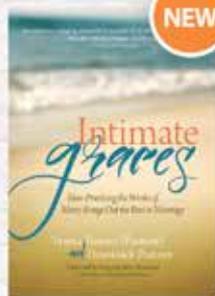
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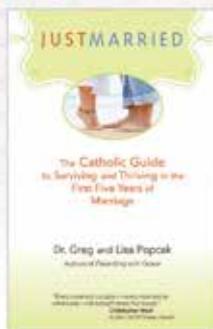
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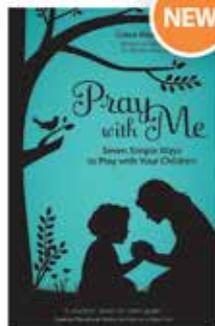
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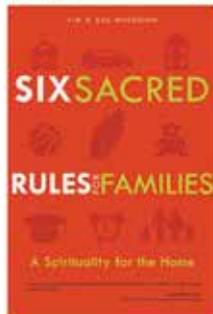
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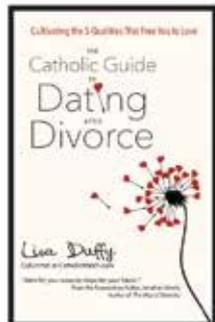
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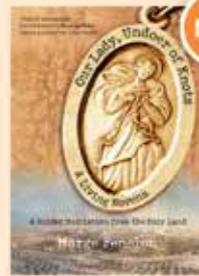
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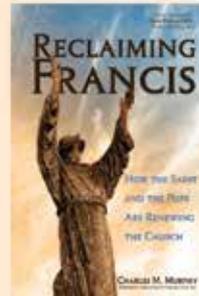


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A New Subordinationism

It's not about the relationship between the divine persons in the Trinity. It's about the contemporary effort to subordinate the church to the state in our nation.

The subordinationist signs of the times continue to multiply. Through the Department of Health and Human Services' mandate to cooperate in the provision of contraceptives, sterilization and abortifacients, the government is pressing religious employers to violate core beliefs concerning human life. It is a strange spectacle to watch federal agents threaten the Little Sisters of the Poor with ruinous fines, as if the nuns had suddenly become a criminal organization.

Outraged state legislators are moving to block religious schools from imposing morals clauses in contracts with their employees. (Morals clauses in Hollywood film contracts remain intact.) Catholic hospitals face intensified pressure to violate certain moral principles if they are to receive state funds or even to survive. In 2009 the Judiciary Committee of the State of Connecticut endorsed a law that would force all religious denominations to adopt a congregationalist model of church organization. Although the initiative failed, new state efforts to interfere with the basic ecclesiology of religious groups will resurface. Once dismissed as the fevered rants of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, calls to abolish civil religious exemptions and religious tax exemptions have suddenly become the received wisdom for fashionable legal theorists.

JOHN J. CONLEY, S.J., holds the Knott Chair in Philosophy and Theology at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore, Md.

This expanded intervention of the state in the internal life of religious institutions not only weakens personal freedom and the freedom of the church; it is wounding the national American character. Much nonsense has been written about American exceptionalism, but there is one exceptional trait of which Americans have rightly boasted: our promotion of a robust "free exercise of religion," with its allied reverence for the conscience of the religious believer. We fail to appreciate how rare in world history is the conscientious objection to military service we have honored during times of military conscription.

When state action diminished religious freedom, federal courts often reversed the damage. The Supreme Court's decisions in *Pierce* (1925) and *Yoder* (1972) affirmed the right of parents to educate children according to their religious convictions against the state efforts to enforce educational uniformity.

When the Supreme Court downgraded the import of the "free exercise" clause in the *Smith* (1990) decision, which declared that the State of Oregon had to demonstrate only a "rational interest" in banning the peyote used by a group of Native Americans in their religious rituals, Congress promptly passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993) by a virtually unanimous vote. The act restored the older legal test of "strict scrutiny" for religious freedom cases. Any state action placing a substantial burden on the citizen's

exercise of religious freedom must serve a "compelling" interest and must do so in a manner that is the least restrictive of religious freedom. Only a generation ago, a virtually unanimous consensus accorded religious freedom a near-absolute value in the national hierarchy of goods. But the hysteria over Indiana's state version of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act this past spring indicates how

rapidly that esteem has disappeared. Religious liberty is suddenly dismissed as nothing but a mask for bias and hate.

Gallicanism and Josephism were once quaint heresies reserved for a paragraph in seminary textbooks. They represented ancient efforts to subordinate church to state in vanished monarchies. But

the specter of Cardinal Richelieu is once again abroad.

The American bishops have nobly led the good fight against the new assaults on religious freedom. During his recent speech at the White House, Pope Francis praised "the United States bishops, [who] have called us to be vigilant, precisely as good citizens, to preserve and defend that [religious] freedom from everything that would threaten or compromise it." To illustrate his point, he paid an impromptu visit to the Little Sisters of the Poor, the current group on the firing line of state encroachment on religious freedom. As our once-robust free exercise of religion dwindles to a wan "freedom of worship," our first duty is to be lucid.

This expanded intervention of the state weakens personal freedom.

JOHN J. CONLEY

THEATER | ROB WEINERT-KENDT

A DREAMY 'AWAKENING'

A 'deaf musical' on Broadway

The term “deaf musical” may sound like an especially odd oxymoron, but for those who have been paying attention, it has become something of a miraculous hybrid art form unto itself, developed over the past 15 years by the small Los Angeles company Deaf West Theatre. In their groundbreaking staging of the Huck Finn musical “Big River” in 2001, which made its way triumphantly to Broadway in 2003, a mixed cast of deaf and hearing performers fused sign language and song into an utterly convincing whole. When Huck and Jim sang and signed the bittersweet waltz “Worlds Apart,” the audiological divide subtly but un-

mistakably overlaid and complemented the tale’s original racial one.

With its new staging of **Spring Awakening** on Broadway, Deaf West has conjured this unique alchemy again and applied it to a story with communication breakdowns at its pulsing heart. The 2006 musical is based on Frank Wedekind’s 1891 German play, a work often banned or censored for its sexual frankness and its withering attack on what Wedekind diagnosed as the hypocritical, soul-crushing mores of his day. At its dramatic crux is the tragic ignorance of a young teenage girl, Wendla (here played sunnily by Sandra Mae Frank), about sex, which

of course leaves her vulnerable to its consequences. These come chiefly at the hands of the swaggering Melchior (Austin P. McKenzie), one of the more precociously worldly and confident of the show’s many hormone-addled teen boys. In the new production, poor Wendla is at an extra disadvantage. She is deaf, and though she has a guitar-slinging avatar (Katie Boeck) to voice her lines and songs, the characters in her life who possess the information she desperately needs about the birds and the bees—her mother (Camryn Manheim), for one, but also Melchior—are able to hear, and their failure to speak the plain truth to her, despite their professed love, has an added sting in this telling.

Deafness also compounds the plight of Melchior’s other lost friend, Moritz (Daniel Durant), whose failure in his studies is engineered by disapproving



PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS

teachers who do not like his attitude. This injustice is painfully amplified in the Broadway staging as it becomes clear that Moritz, on top of any native deficiencies or distractions, is also for-

(small places)

as a child

I dreamed of small places
sleeping in dresser drawers
hiding in cabinets
thinking about tunnels

I loved the story of Moses
how he hid in
a cleft in the rock
behind the hollow
of God's hand

now

in the city
I lose myself in thought
standing on the subway platform

wondering if I would fit
into the niche
in the tunnel wall

covered by
an unseen hand
while the fury passes by

MARK REIMER

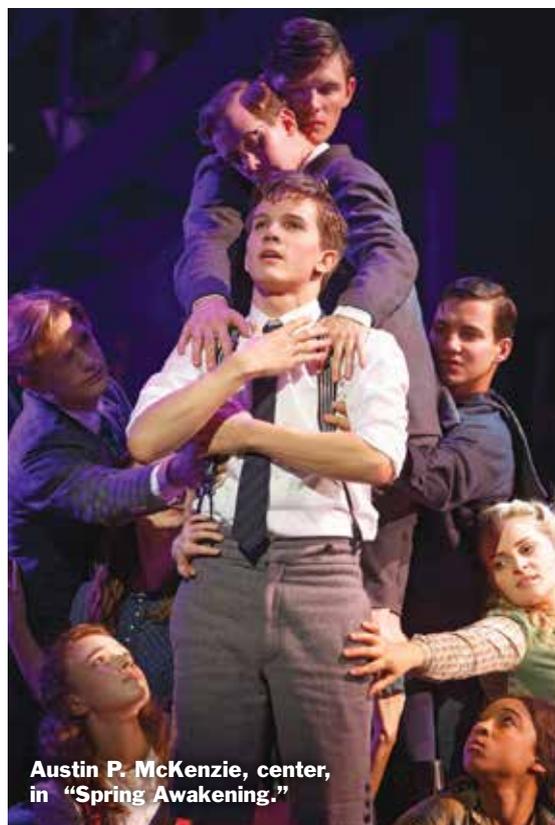
MARK REIMER is a community college administrator who lives in New Hampshire. His work has been published in Christianity and Literature; still: a journal of short verse; and Pontoon: an Anthology of Washington State Poets.

bidden from using sign language in class. Good thing he has a spiky-haired, Billie Joe Armstrong-esque double around (Alex Boniello) to voice his inner torment.

Throughout, Michael Arden's direction swirls relentlessly around a set resembling an old church under renovation, with tall scaffolding in front of sconce-like niches and the show's chamber-rock band variously perched or roving the perimeter. As with previous Deaf West musicals, Spencer Liff's choreography unleashes the full-body theatricality of sign language in a series of sinuous and stunning tableaux. This chimerical movement-and-sound stage language proves remarkably simpatico with the two basic registers of Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater's score, pop-punk and swoony ballad.

But if this "Spring Awakening" does not feel like a home run, it is not because of an inherent mismatch between the material and the telling. There are simply too many layers here, and the result is a lovely muddle. The central conceit of Sheik and Sater's musical, and Michael Mayer's original staging, was its sharp contrast between the britches-and-skirts antiquity of the original setting and the colloquial teen emo of the score. There were essentially two realities and modes of speech, with conjugated Latin in one and lyrics like "we've all got our junk" in the other, and that frisson was the show's main selling point.

Here that contrast is considerably blurred, as the entire show takes place in an unreal, heightened stage world. Characters change costumes onstage, deaf actors acknowledge their singing counterparts, set pieces come and go, actors prowl the catwalks and gath-



er in Greek-chorus-like communion around even intimate scenes. Though this gives nearly the entire show the feeling of a dream and lends many of the musical numbers a hypnotic power, there is a danger in too much mesmerism, particularly with songs that function more as internal monologues and dialogues than as story-advancing scenes. There are a lot of unmoored, free-floating feelings on offer, in other words, and not enough of them stick.

Some of the most affecting moments, then, are tiny gestures that stand out against the general onslaught. There is a hauntingly silent scene of intense discord between Moritz and his father, played by the deaf actor Russell Harvard, that is later punctuated by the father's open weeping at Moritz's death—one of the few moments in which the show's mostly cartoonishly stern adults are allowed a shred of humanity. There is also the shattering image of Moritz straightening his hair and tie just before aiming a gun at his temple, as if

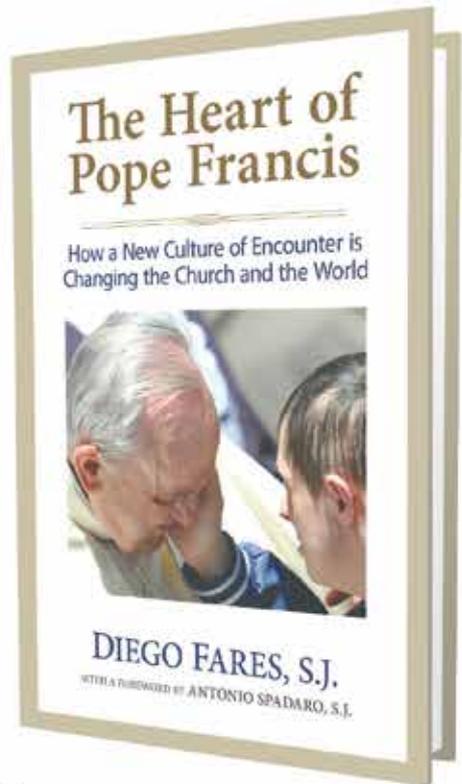
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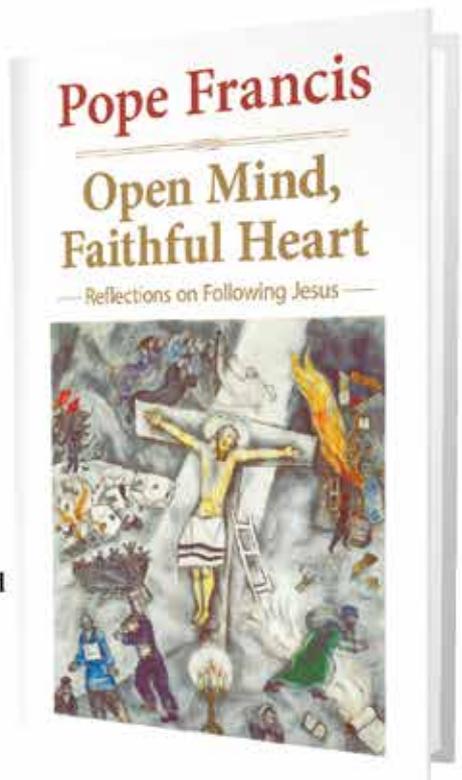
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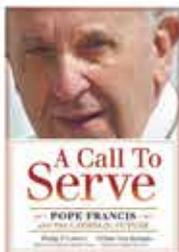
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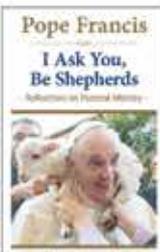
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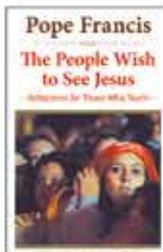
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putting on his best face for the next world.

But the net effect of this otherworldly “Spring Awakening” is that of a well-sung, extravagantly produced concert version; it moves plenty but fails to move us. This emotional deficit does not do the material any favors. If Wedekind’s original play was a blistering critique of establishment mores and the musical version a kind of ironic pop-punk commentary on the similarities between then and now, this new production might be snarkily summed up as a two-hour commercial for sex

education—now with sign language! That is not fair, of course, to the passion and talent fairly overflowing from the stage of the Brooks Atkinson Theatre. Durant, in particular, seems like a bona fide star in the making. A more succinct, less dismissive capsule review of this beautiful but overwrought “Spring Awakening” would be: too much dreaming, not enough awakening.

ROB WEINERT-KENDT, an arts journalist and associate editor of *American Theater* magazine, has written for *The New York Times* and *Time Out New York*. He writes a blog called *The Wicked Stage*.

BOOKS | BILL WILLIAMS

AT A CROSSROADS

HERETIC

Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now

By Ayaan Hirsi Ali
HarperCollins. 272p \$27.99

Almost daily we read about atrocities carried out in the name of Islam, which raises the question: Is Islam a religion of peace and brotherhood or a system of oppression and violence that endorses beheadings, honor killings, stoning and suicide bombings?

In her urgent new book, *Heretic*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali argues persuasively that extremists have seized control of Islam by citing passages in Islam’s holy books that sanction violence.

Hirsi Ali grew up in Somalia as a practicing Muslim who witnessed the application of strict Shariah law. “In the public squares, every Friday, after the ritual prayers, men were beheaded or flogged, women were stoned, and thieves had their hands cut off.”

As a teenager, Hirsi Ali embraced jihad, or holy war, but eventually began to question a system that marginalized and persecuted women. When her father tried to force her into an arranged

marriage, she fled to the Netherlands and later moved to the United States, where she is a fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She left Islam and now considers herself an atheist.

Hirsi Ali continues to fear for her life, knowing that many Muslims believe she should die because she has defamed Islam.

She advocates five reforms: aban-

don Muhammad’s semi-divine and infallible status; focus on life on earth instead of life after death; overhaul Shariah laws, which are derived from the Koran; review the practice of allowing individuals to enforce Islamic law; and challenge the imperative to wage jihad.

As the subtitle of this book suggests, Hirsi Ali believes that just as Christianity went through a Reformation centuries ago, Islam must do the same today.

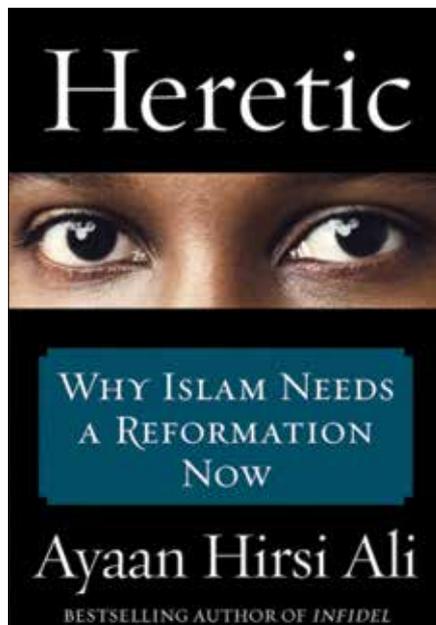
The author sharply criticizes Western liberals who contend that atrocities like the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, have nothing to do with Islam. Westerners wear blinders, she says, fearing that any criticism of Islam would be denounced as Islamophobia.

In a brief history of Islam, Hirsi Ali notes that Mohammad initially advocated peaceful co-existence with non-Muslims, but when he moved from Mecca to Medina, his message changed radically. Hirsi Ali says that many passages in the Quran, which Muslims regard as the final word of God, endorse violence. When Mohammad defeated unbelievers in battle, they were given the choice of conversion or death.

Seventeen Muslim-majority nations declare Islam the official state religion and require that the head of state be a practicing Muslim. Many Muslims reject any notion of separation of mosque and state.

The Quran stresses the importance of the afterlife. Children are taught that they will go directly to heaven if they die as martyrs in suicide attacks. Parents express pride in children who end their lives on suicide missions. Hirsi Ali describes a Palestinian woman who encouraged three of her sons to become suicide bombers against Israel. “Mothers of suicide bombers talk as if their sons had gone off to get married.

The author cites passages in Shariah law that authorize beheadings, crucifixions, amputations, stoning and lash-



ings. At least 15 Muslim nations allow or require death by stoning for adultery or other sex-related prohibitions. After Friday prayers in Saudi Arabia, men flock to nearby squares to watch the implementation of Islamic justice by cutting off hands, stonings and beheadings.

In the Middle Ages, Catholics launched the Crusades and burned heretics at the stake. While this violence is part of church history, similar atrocities occur today in Muslim nations.

Hirsi Ali expresses outrage that Muslim women are treated as second-class citizens. Men may take up to four wives, while women are limited to one husband. "The inequality of the sexes, in short, is central to Shariah."

At least 5,000 women are put to death in so-called honor killings each year. The author cites the case of a 25-year-old Pakistani woman who married against her father's wishes and was then stoned to death outside a courthouse.

Hirsi Ali previously wrote *Infidel*, a best-selling memoir of her early years. Next, in *Nomad*, she described her efforts to build a new life. Now, in *Heretic*, she says an Islamic reforma-

tion is possible, although the evidence she cites belies her optimism.

The author is on solid ground when she writes that the West has spent trillions of dollars waging war against terrorism without much success. She argues that Western nations need to fight ideas with better ideas, not with bombs.

"Islam is at a crossroads," Hirsi Ali argues. "Muslims...by the tens of millions and eventually hundreds of millions, need to make a conscious decision to confront, debate, and ultimately reject the violent elements within their religion."

Heretic is not light reading. Many will likely feel revulsion at the extreme punishments and slaughter carried out in the name of Islam, with suicide bombers shouting, "God is great."

The questions raised in this provocative book deserve a wide readership, especially at a time when radical Muslims are actively recruiting suicide bombers in the United States and Europe.

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

The book centers on The Picayune's transformation to digital delivery, begun in 2012—the newspaper's 175th anniversary year as an institutional pillar of the city. A unique and protracted public uproar (2012-13) followed a (short-lived) plan to end daily distribution of the newspaper's print editions. The mass layoff of the paper's skilled workers endured. The book jacket reports: "More than 200 employees, including half the newsroom, were laid off in one of the poorest U.S. cities with among the lowest literacy rates and percentages of households with Internet access." Unfortunately, the city's ignominious indices receive short shrift in the book.

Transformation does not present a clear "big picture" describing why The Picayune's change of technology is important to the future of journalism and New Orleans, a city nearly destroyed by the destructive floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina on Aug. 29, 2005—10 years ago. There is also no central argument, no single "take-away."

Unlike the parable of the blind investigators and the elephant, there are no disagreements among the four authors to stimulate critical thinking about their individual conclusions about disparate topics on other transformative periods in the newspaper's history.

The lack of cohesive analysis is an obvious flaw, albeit not fatal. Once addressed, one can easily envision future editions of *Transformation* as a textbook case of American journalism.

To their credit, the authors undertook the unenviable task of both describing and analyzing the value to the public weal of a privately held newspaper at a time when The Picayune's transformation was still a dramatic, "developing story."

Instead of attempting to fully analyze the newspaper's transformation before completion, the authors offer generous helpings of the paper's rich history and colorful descriptions of the unique public outcry that greeted The

ALLEN M. JOHNSON JR.

PAPER CHASE

THE TIMES-PICAYUNE IN A CHANGING MEDIA WORLD The Transformation of an American Newspaper

By S. L. Alexander, Frank D. Durham, Alfred Lawrence Lorenz and Vicki Mayer
Lexington Books. 154p \$75

This lean, ambitious examination of the digital transformation of The Times-Picayune, New Orleans's oldest daily newspaper, evokes the Indian parable of the four blind men and the elephant.

Assembled by a commendable team of four media scholars, *The Transformation of an American Newspaper* (the subtitle is more serviceable as a title) is a worthwhile read, though more for its parts than for the sum of its 131 pages.

The book provides an overview of the history of The Times-Picayune, leading up to the announcement in 2012 of a bold plan by the newspaper's corporate parents to enter the digital age—in part by abandoning its 30-year "monopoly" as New Orleans's only daily newspaper.

Picayune's otherwise banal restructuring plans.

The book's highly technical "content analysis" of news coverage—before and after the "digital decision of 2012"—conducted by Vicki Mayer, an associate professor of communications at Tulane University, completes the book.

What emerges from the book as a whole is the image of a major metropolitan newspaper as a veritable mastodon—a commanding, once-dominant figure suddenly struggling to change with the times, new technology and a restive readership.

The "gutting" of American newsrooms is a grim and familiar story, according to C. W. Anderson, author of *Rebuilding the News: Metropolitan Journalism in the Digital Age* (2013). Anderson prepares readers with an insightful introduction into the bleak future of metropolitan newspapers like The Picayune.

He counts the casualties of the "free" information age, including closed newspapers and thousands of lost jobs. He speculates on the immeasurable effect of low-quality news on an informed democracy. He describes how changing technologies, routines and economic downturns all converge to "create a system of stress," resulting in "demoralization, burnout and cynicism" of reporters and editors.

The proliferation of bloggers (and other citizen-journalists), the omniscience of social networks and the ubiquity of hand-held devices all compound a "cultural crisis" facing newsroom workers. Journalists may no longer feel a clear sense of purpose, "despite their increasingly desperate claims to be sentinels of democracy."

Anderson says The Times-Picayune

is one example of a "local" news outlet's vulnerability to larger forces. "We can understand the current state of American newspapers only by zeroing in on the cities in which this future of journalism is playing out. Each story of every news outlet is a local one, but every local paper in every local city is also subject to far wider economic, organizational and technological forces that have created a sense of crisis across the American news industry."

Alfred E. Lorenz, a historian of journalism at Loyola University New Orleans sets the stage for The Picayune's transformation, describing how the paper was "scooped" on its own restructuring plans. "On May 23, 2012, media critic David Carr of The New York Times reported that sources at The Times-Picayune had told him that the newspaper was going to begin massive layoffs and cut publication to two or three days a week. Carr's story

pushed executives of the newspaper and the Newhouse family's Advance Publications, its owner, to make the announcement earlier than they had planned," even as The Times-Picayune celebrated the 175th anniversary of its founding."

Lorenz then takes a deep dive into the paper's history. Beginning with the founding by two journeymen printers in 1837, he describes a changing cast of owners, operators and technologies in painstaking detail. Lorenz lulls the reader into an expectation of longevity for The Times-Picayune.

We expect The Picayune to survive journalism's current uncertain future because it has endured so much in the past: Union occupation during the Civil War; yellow fever epidemics, financial downturns, an antitrust

suit brought by the United States Department of Justice in the 1950s and hurricanes like Katrina.

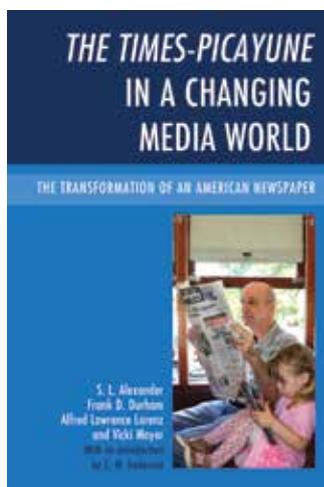
In terms of technology, the paper is no stranger to innovation. During the Mexican War of 1846, for example, the co-founders, George Kendall and Francis Lumsden, collaborated with The Baltimore Sun to use the Pony Express to relay dispatches, scooping competitors and even the federal government in Washington, D.C., on major developments in the conflict.

Lorenz's "Historical View" lays a durable foundation for future research by other media scholars.

Frank D. Durham's chapter, "Inescapable Reality," explores The Picayune's lack of leadership during another era of historical transformation, the New Orleans school integration crisis (1960-61).

Drawing heavily on the classic work by the British historian Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972*, Durham describes The Times-Picayune under the "ardent segregationist" leadership of its president, John F. "Jack" Tims, and its editor, George W. Healy. Facing the "unprecedented crises" of the civil rights era, The Times-Picayune abandoned its long-held loyalty to racial segregation without acknowledging the harsh, discriminatory laws designed to repress African-Americans. The Picayune joined "business-led" pragmatists who either favored or bowed to the constitutionally mandated integration of public schools—opposed by Louisiana's pro-segregation governor, Jimmy Davis.

Durham's emphasis on the press's "framing" of the racial crisis may annoy or intrigue the reader. "Framing" is an often-used analytical tool for this media scholar, an associate professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Washington, Madison. In *Transformation*, "framing" sometimes, ironically, gets in the way



of Durham's interesting roll-out of historical evidence.

Sherry Lee Alexander, a professor of mass communications at Loyola University, New Orleans, ushers the reader into a more liberal, progressive era at *The Picayune* under the editor Jim Amoss and its publisher Ashton Phelps Jr. Under Amoss, a former investigative reporter who became editor in 1990, the paper won all four of its Pulitzer Prizes, including two in 2006 for its coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The newspaper also won critical community support that no doubt helped to sustain news operations, despite a 42 percent drop in advertising between 2009 to 2012, according to fellow scholar Vicki Mayer.

Advance Publications, the corporate parents of *The Times-Picayune* (and some two dozen other media markets nationwide) responded to the downturn in ad-supported revenue at the New Orleans paper with a "slow downsizing of the workforce."

In 2012, Advance announced its "digital first" strategy for *The Picayune*. The plan called for reducing print publication to three days a week, redirecting readers to a website affiliate (www.nola.com) and carrying out a major reorganization that will put at least 200 people out of work. (Another 100 were laid off after the *Picayune* printing plant closed in January 2015.)

First implemented at Advance newspapers in Michigan in 2009, the "digital first" strategy later guts Advance newsrooms from New York to Oregon and Pennsylvania to Alabama by 2013 with little public outcry. The response in New Orleans is quite different.

In a city with a colorful history, live music and proud cultural traditions, local resistance to Advance's decision to downsize and digitize the daily newspaper, appears to spread—or "pixilate." "New Orleanians were talking about the announcement as if it were a hurricane heading towards the Gulf (of

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Contact Brian Smith, CHA senior director, mission integration and leadership formation, at bsmith@chausa.org or (314) 253-3503.

Mexico),” Professor Alexander writes.

The Advance plan, briefly, left tourism-dependent New Orleans as the first major city without a daily newspaper. The Newhouse family ignored attempts by prominent civic and business leaders, including the owner of the New Orleans Saints, Tom Benson, who offered to buy The Times-Picayune. Advance’s disinterest only fueled public protests. A prominent civic activist started a web site, Save The Picayune. Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans, head of the nation’s second-oldest Roman Catholic diocese (after Baltimore), joined the presidents of the city’s colleges and universities in signing letters of protest. In a uniquely local sop, Mardi Gras parade floats ridiculed Advance executives by name.

A Baton Rouge publishing family launched The New Orleans Advocate to fill the daily void. The Picayune responded by increasing its print editions, albeit with confusing delivery schedules and format changes. The New Orleans Advocate hires laid-off Times-Picayune workers and star reporters.

Unlike what happened in other American cities, the digital transformation in New Orleans spawned an old-fashioned “newspaper war” that continues to play out today.

The book closes with an intriguing technical examination of Picayune news coverage by Professor Mayer and her Tulane students. The chapter is provocatively titled “More but Softer: Before and After the Digital Decision at The Times-Picayune, 2012.”

The editor Jim Amoss succeeds in finding flaws in Mayer’s methodology for measuring the quality and quantity of digital news content. Amoss invokes the “ebb and flow of the news cycle,” a standard defense journalists use to remind their own business executives that news production is not like making widgets or baking cookies. Professor Mayer succeeds in discounting the Picayune’s editorial promise

that its transformation will “significantly increase its online news-gathering efforts” 24 hours daily and result in “enhanced printed newspapers” with “richer and deeper” news, sports and entertainment. “We might say that these claims are not altogether false, but neither are they completely true,” Mayer says.

Amoss’s response is an obvious coup for the Tulane communication

students. The only criticism I would make here is of the absence of a glossary for journalism’s new “click economy.”

If other readers don’t reach the same conclusions about *Transformation* as this reviewer, they are clearly focusing on different parts of the same proverbial “elephant.”

ALLEN M. JOHNSON JR., a freelance journalist, has covered the New Orleans area since 1981.

EDWIN BLOCK

DEALING WITH GRIEF

THE ABBEY

By James Martin, S.J.
HarperOne. 224p \$24.99

James Martin, S.J., is the author or editor of over a dozen books on the Jesuits and a variety of other topics. Commended by a fellow Catholic novelist, Ron Hansen, and the well-known memoirist Kathleen Norris, *The Abbey* is his first work of fiction.

The novel begins in a Philadelphia suburb in late spring. Mark Matthews, in whose perspective the novel begins, is a laid-off 30-something architect. He moved from Boston to take a full-time handyman’s job at the Trappist Abbey of Saints Philip and John.

Mark rents a house from Anne, a 40-year-old single mother whose son Jeremiah died in a car-bike accident when he was 13. That was three years ago, and she is still grieving. Anne is the child of a Catholic couple, both deceased. Her father, an accountant, had done the abbey’s books, but Anne “wasn’t a believer” and, except for an anomalous fact or two, seems

to know little about Catholicism.

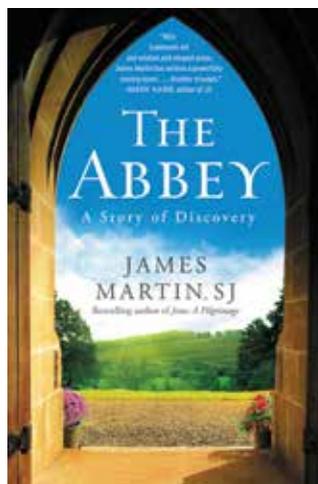
When Anne’s car breaks down, Mark takes her to the abbey while he retrieves his cell phone. Momentarily left alone in a hallway, Anne smells incense and hears the monks chanting compline, ending with a “hymn”—the “Salve Regina”—that she remembers her father humming. She breaks down thinking of Jeremiah.

After compline, a tall, thin monk with Buddy Holly glasses and Birkenstocks comforts her. Leaving the abbey, Anne sees an icon of the Mother and Child. The monk, who is Father Paul the abbot, gives her a picture of

the icon. Later, Anne discovers the “Stabat Mater” on the reverse.

Returning to the abbey, she meets Father Edward, the priest her father had asked to baptize her. Some days later, Anne ends up speaking to the abbot again. Over the course of several conversations she comes to acknowledge her grief, realizes the narrowness of her images of God and tries

to pray. Father Paul’s counsels come right out of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Read in the spirit of the



novel's best parts, those counsels and Anne's responses are genuinely moving.

Late in the novel we learn of Anne's love for gardening and its special link to her past. Wearing her mother's hat and her father's gloves, she plants flowers, "gently tamping down the soil" around them. "Then she had a strange feeling—almost as if God was patting down the soil around her life. She felt comforted. Calm."

Mark's character grows more slowly in complexity. To Anne he is just her tenant and a "frat boy," and she rebuffs his offers of a closer friendship, leaving the reader to wonder what might become of the relationship. Only when Mark begins to talk with the abbot about his vocation as a carpenter does his character become more genuine.

The last chapter begins as the monks enter the chapel for compline. The narrator identifies a priest with thick glasses, an old priest with a walker and a handful of lay participants at the back of the chapel. They include a woman of 40 and the monastery carpenter. Anne does not see Mark, and Mark is too far back to recognize Anne. Both, however, join in singing the "Salve Regina."

In his Acknowledgments, Father Martin says the novel is "based on a dream." The subtitle, "A Story of Discovery," is accurate. Anne does discover the healing power of prayer, memory and the experience of sharing the story of her grief. The icon, the "Stabat Mater, the "Salve Regina" and Anne's gardening are all threads from which the author weaves a cloak of healing that finally enwraps Anne.

For whom is this novel written? One answer comes when Anne says she isn't sure God exists, and if he does, she's not sure she wants to know him. That, the age of the chief characters and some age-specific language suggest the novel will appeal to those Gen-Xers who are hesitant to express

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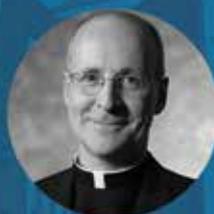
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belief and who keep religion at arm's length.

The author handles his characters, even the minor ones, with gentleness and care: Father Edward, even Maddy, the "guest mistress" for the abbey's retreat center. Jeremiah's friend, Brad, for instance, becomes more real when, late in the novel, Anne embraces him, shares tears for Jeremiah with him and gives him Jeremiah's baseball glove.

A genuine religious motive drives the plot of *The Abbey*, but the author has his hands full conveying the agony of Anne's grief, Mark's search for his vocation and the the abbot's experience of his vocation. The style is sometimes closer to popular fiction than what one might find in something by Ron Hansen or Tobias Wolff, though both are much more experienced fiction writers than Father Martin.

There is nothing particularly Trappist about the abbey of Sts. Philip and John, unless the blueberry jam they make and the horarium that one character describes, are meant to suggest the order's charism. Even with post-Vatican II reforms, the atmosphere of the abbey seems more generically Benedictine.

Father Paul's musings about love, marriage and sex enlarge and complicate his character, but they distract from Anne's experience of loss. Still, her progress in acknowledging her feelings and starting to talk to God about her love for Jeremiah brings moments of deep feeling.

The Abbey is, finally, a competent first novel, whose greatest strength is the seriousness and sensitivity with which it explores three deeply human themes.

EDWIN BLOCK is an emeritus journalism professor at Marquette University.

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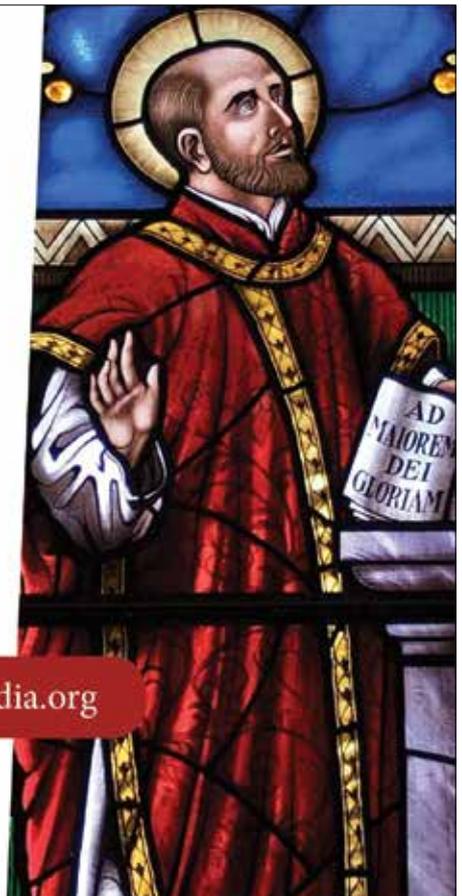
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The Sum of Mercy

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), OCT. 25, 2015

Readings: Jer 31:7–9; Ps 126:1–6; Heb 5:1–6; Mk 10:46–52

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mk 10:47)

When Jesus encounters the blind man Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, in Mark’s Gospel, he has just unveiled the last of the three Passion predictions, in which he explains the suffering and death that await him in Jerusalem. Jesus is leaving Jericho on the way to his destiny in Jerusalem, and Bartimaeus is begging on the roadside. The identification of Bartimaeus by not only his given name but his father’s name as well is unusually precise and detailed for Mark. It marks, therefore, an important encounter in Mark’s narrative, though it might seem Jesus has more significant things on his mind.

The use of Bartimaeus’s name and his father’s indicate the historical dimension of this encounter and suggests that Bartimaeus became a disciple after his healing, since he “followed him on the way.” The memory of the healing on the way to Jerusalem might also have remained especially significant in the minds of the disciples because of its timing, since in Mark it is the last of Jesus’ healings during his ministry. But there is more to it than these convincing historical and narrative explanations. The importance of this encounter has to do with mercy.

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is on the road, “he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’” Bartimaeus understands Jesus’ identity, for it is the first time in the Gospel that anyone has identified

Jesus as “the son of David,” one of the most significant of the Messianic titles, connecting its bearer to the historical David and the Davidic kingship.

The response of the disciples is telling. “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet,” and these many included Jesus’ apostles and other followers. The verb used here, *epitimaō*, has the sense of scolding, rebuking or censuring with contempt. People told him, basically, to shut up.

To Bartimaeus’s credit, he would not listen, “but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” Why would you shut up if the son of David is walking by? One wonders whether the fact that at this point, long into Jesus’ ministry, disciples are still telling blind men who call to Jesus to leave him alone offers us a glimpse into their stubborn lack of understanding of Jesus’ mission of mercy and the nature of their Messiah.

Bartimaeus has something these followers of Jesus’ lack: the understanding that even if he is physically (and spiritually?) blind, he knows where to go for the cure. He has faith in the mercy of Jesus and he will not be put off by disciples shooing him away as a nuisance.

Jesus stops and tells his disciples to “call him here,” so they go to the blind beggar saying, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” Bartimaeus needs no further invitation, and “throwing off his

cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?” is more powerful when you imagine it visually rather than simply as words on the page. Remember, Bartimaeus has twice called out to the “son of David” to “have mercy on me.” What exactly could this blind man begging at the side of the road want?

Jesus knows exactly what he wants, what the sum of mercy is in this context, but he wants Bartimaeus to say it again, not for Jesus’ sake or to exasperate Bartimaeus but for the sake of the disciples and the crowd, some of whom moments ago were telling him to be quiet, shut up, leave the great man alone. Bartimaeus simply asks, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus’ response is just as direct, “Go; your faith



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Picture yourself as Bartimaeus at the side of the road calling out to Jesus. What mercy do you want Jesus to do for you? What mercy are you being called upon to show others? How can we live out Jesus’ mercy more completely?

has made you well.” Bartimaeus’s faith leads to Jesus’ mercy, but Jesus’ mercy leads to spiritual discipleship, not just physical sight, as Bartimaeus does not “go” but “followed him on the way.”

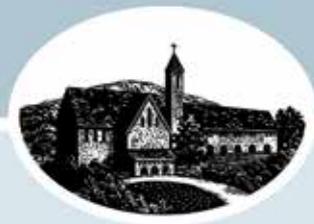
Bartimaeus’ discipleship is the result of Jesus’ mercy and the reason why mercy must be at the heart of the church’s mission. Who do we tell today to shut up, to quit bothering the Messiah? Bartimaeus at the side of the road is an example for all those at the margins of the church calling out to be heard: Do not give up on Jesus; he will listen and heal those who call out to him. **JOHN W. MARTENS**

ART: TAD A. DUNNE

JOHN W. MARTENS is a professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minn. Twitter: @Biblejunkies.

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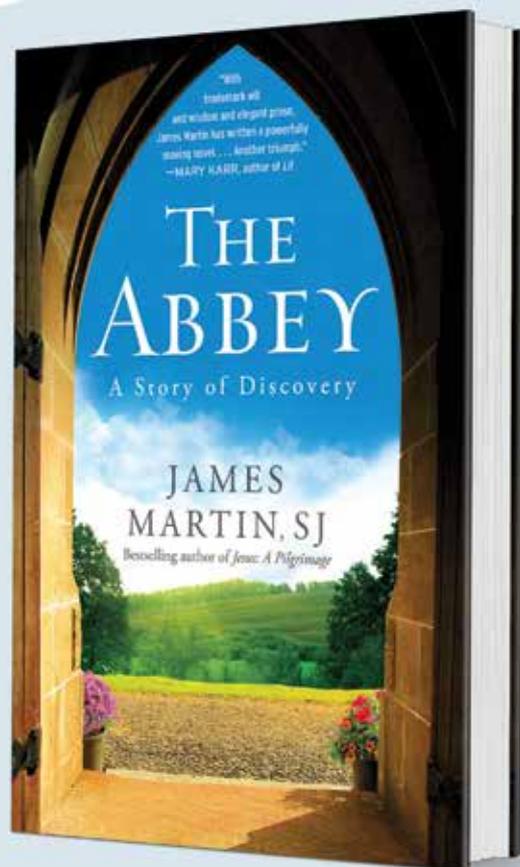
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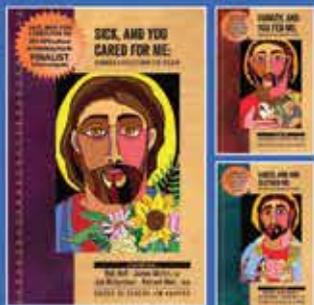
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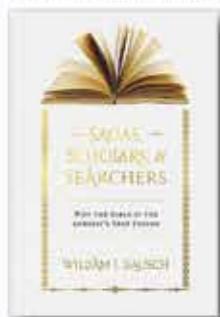
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