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Travel and Pilgrimage

KAREN SUE SMITH • ARTHUR PAUL BOERS



OF MANY THINGS

When I was a young Jesuit, I used to groan under the weight of exhortations to prudence. I thought prudence was an old man's virtue. My first Jesuit rector, Father Frank Fallon, was particularly given to such tiresome appeals. They always seemed to me to be counsels of caution against rocking the boat. I was not a rabble-rouser, but from the time I asked my kindergarten teacher to allow the class to take our music time outside and have a parade, I have been an innovator.

As head of a tutoring program conducted by us seminarians in inner-city schools, I was repeatedly meeting with Father Fallon to make changes in our seminary routine so that our tutoring work could be more effective—like bringing our tutees to visit on our Thursday holiday. He and other superiors rarely gave me encouragement. Most of the time, I only heard second-hand the objections they had heard or expected to hear from the older fathers. But in the end they always granted the change I requested.

For most of my classmates, the rector's cautious appeals were just one more thing to endure. For some, I fear, it represented a lost opportunity to engage their youthful idealism, and for that reason some vocations were lost. For me, it was a training in institutional change. I learned that bringing change was frequently a lonely enterprise and that expressions of appreciation would come only much later, after the work was successfully done.

Prudence, of course, is a much richer virtue than simple caution. For the Western philosophical tradition, it is a practical wisdom for making right decisions in changing circumstances. Nonetheless, it does have a restraining role. It used to be that bankers were known for their prudence. But clearly in the run-up to the current financial crisis, the heads of the major investment houses had lost their caution and their prudence, in the broader sense of

understanding the wider societal role of banking. The old gray heads were swept away by the same "irrational exuberance" that drove the clever, competitive young brokers who worked for them.

The Obama administration has begun the hard work of reviving the financial system. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner has proposed a plan for stabilizing the banking sector, and both the administration and Congress are likely to propose further reforms. But neither legal restructuring nor more effective regulation will be sufficient to prevent a cycle of crisis without a return to virtue. Economic historians argue that modern capitalism is built on accumulated reserves of virtue from previous generations: thrift in particular, but also prudence, moderation, generosity and charity. So when I hear stock brokers say limits on executive compensation will destroy incentives or that they want more reassurance from Mr. Geithner, I wonder whether greed will ever be brought into check and "irrational exuberance" tamed for the sake of a sound economy.

In his last major work, *The Laws*, Plato suggested that civilizations fell after they lost their underlying "reverence" in an orgy of excess. One way to think of reverence is as respect for limits. The civilization of late-stage capitalism was rooted in excess: excess compensation, excess consumption, excess borrowing and excess technical wizardry (whether in financial instruments or electronic gadgets). To put the financial system on a firm foundation and rebuild the economy, world civilization will need to find a new moral balance between a sense of limits and a dynamism that assures quality of life for all the world's peoples. We will need prudent adults who, as they encourage youthful innovation and the experimentation needed for economic growth, are also able to hold excess in check, beginning with their own institutions.

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The editors lead video tours to pilgrimage sites in New York City, and more images from the Camino de Santiago (right). Plus, Karen Sue Smith shares travel tales on our podcast. All at americamagazine.org.



CURRENT COMMENT

The Curious Case of Steve Jobs

Even before the advent of the iPhone, the founder and C.E.O. of Apple, Steve Jobs, was treated like a god. Macintosh computer users praised his products for their sleek design and ease of use, while techies lionized him for his pluck in taking on the Microsoft behemoth. Today Jobs is a dot-com icon, a father of the digital revolution who also somehow managed to transform the music industry with the introduction of the iPod. His annual Macworld Conference & Expo is anticipated with an excitement usually reserved for bands from Liverpool or movies that begin with the word Star.

Jobs also appears to be a sick man. Five years ago he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but he quickly returned to work after surgery and treatment. This past June, however, he appeared at an Apple event looking gaunt and pale, prompting widespread speculation that the disease had returned. At first Jobs said the weight loss was due to a hormonal imbalance, but he has since admitted the situation is more complex and has taken a leave of absence. Meanwhile, Apple investors have seen their stock prices rise and fall with each health report, and the Securities and Exchange Commission is investigating whether Apple is guilty of securities fraud for failing to report accurately Jobs's condition.

It is a strange story, to be sure, a narrative that combines the personal and the professional in a highly unusual manner. What impresses most is not Mr. Jobs's accomplishments, remarkable as they are, but the vulnerability of his company in the face of personal frailty—a stark reminder of the ephemeral nature of all of our creations.

Blessed Are the Pure of Breed

The 133rd annual Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show at New York's Madison Square Garden, held this year on Feb. 9 and 10, once again captivated huge and avid crowds. It is the second-oldest continuously running sports event in the United States (after the Kentucky Derby). More than 2,500 dogs representing over 150 breeds were brought from around the world to compete. The 2009 winner is a 10-year-old Sussex spaniel named Ch. Clussex Three D Grinchy Glee (aka Stump). He meets one of the many stiff standards put forth by the W.K.C.—no more than seven parts are allowed in the dog's name. Without question, there is great prestige attached to membership in this club; but it has set the bar so high that winning breeds quickly become the dogs of choice. This leads

to over-breeding (including inbreeding), at puppy mills as well as among “backyard breeders,” to meet demand.

The Pedigree Foundation is to be commended for its sponsorship of the event; their ads on the W.K.C. Web site promote awareness of homeless dogs—25 to 30 percent of which, according to the Humane Society of the United States, are purebreds. Still, seven million adoptable pets in shelters across the country are euthanized each year because of overpopulation. Unfortunately, overemphasis by the W.K.C. on the physical appearance of breeds has in some instances over time had a negative impact on the natural, innate abilities of certain breeds—hunting skills, for example—and posed health problems too. The perfect dog is not necessarily the pampered purebred. You can find him or her at your local animal shelter.

Lift High the Cross

Students returning to class this semester at Boston College found a surprise: crucifixes adorning their classrooms. This traditional Catholic image has been a lightning rod in many Catholic colleges and universities over the last few decades, as schools struggled to make all students, no matter what their religious belief (agnostics and atheists included), feel welcome and at the same time strove to maintain the elusive goal of “Catholic identity.” The move stirred dissent among some students and faculty at B.C. “I can hardly imagine a more effective way to denigrate the faculty of an educational institution,” said one faculty member to a campus newspaper. In response, William P. Leahy, S.J., the college's president, said, “By what logic would someone expect a Catholic college or university to be non-Catholic?”

The presence or absence of crucifixes in the classroom has too often proven a cudgel with which one side beats the other. Without them, so goes the faulty logic, a school is insufficiently Catholic; with them, it is resolutely religious. But this is too facile an understanding of the symbol. For some Jewish students, the crucifix is not simply a benign token of another faith, but a sign of centuries of Christian domination over their culture. On the other hand, for some Catholic students a crucifix is not just another symbol, but a visible reminder of a school's religious underpinnings. At B.C., the move was the culmination of a project begun in 2000 to incorporate more Christian art on campus. Despite the danger of sending a message of exclusion, Boston College deserves applause for returning a central Catholic symbol to its classrooms, and we hope that naysayers will see that the Catholic world is still truly catholic, welcoming all students of good will.

Generation S

In his inaugural address, President Obama spoke of ours as “a moment that will define a generation.” He pointed specifically to the men and women in the armed forces as those who “embody the spirit of service; a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves.” “Precisely this spirit of generosity,” the president explained, “must inhabit us all.” His is a clear call to service, quite the opposite of so much we have witnessed during the past year, which might be called the year of Generation G, for greed.

Consumerism, greed and self-centeredness have surely contributed to the economic morass in which we find ourselves. Is it time now to move to a new spirit? Can we foster a culture or civilization of service, a civic generation? Generation X produced the pop culture of the 80’s and 90’s. Then came the millennials of Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2000. What might we call the new generation? Instead of C for cellphone, I for Internet, V for virtual or D for digital, how about Generation S—for service?

This spirit is already in the air. The Peace Corps (founded in 1961), which enlists college graduates and retirees, continues to labor in 76 countries, working in education, development and care for the environment. Habitat for Humanity, begun in 1976, has built more than a million homes for the poor. Campus Compact, begun in 1985 with four universities (Georgetown among them), now includes 1,200 colleges committed to involving college students in tutoring, home building and caring for the sick and elderly. Princeton University now encourages its incoming freshmen to spend a precollege year in social service in a foreign country.

A number of educational institutions at the high school and college level encourage or even require students to dedicate a designated number of hours to community service as a prerequisite for receiving a diploma. Faculty members are encouraged to accompany and guide students on overseas visits and volunteer projects. Fraternities and sororities may take up a specific charity or need in their community. In classrooms, the concept of service-learning is growing. Staff members and students integrate community service with reflection on the experience and instruction. Students, to give just one example, assist in collecting trash and cleaning rivers and lots, and then examine what makes up the trash and study better ways to reduce waste and pollution.

Such organizations as the Jesuit and Ignatian Volunteer Corps and the Lutheran, Franciscan and Mercy Volunteer Corps are only a few of the religious-based pro-

grams that are leading the way, inspiring and enabling persons of every age to give time and energy to projects at home and abroad.

The new administration, in addition to the creation of five new service corps in the fields of teaching, health care, clean energy, veterans’ assistance and emergency preparedness, also plans a major increase in AmeriCorps to 250,000 from its current level of 75,000. This will enable adults of all ages to meet critical needs in communities by engaging with nonprofit groups in teaching, mentoring, improving health service and building housing. Those who complete a year of service are eligible to receive an education award of \$4,725 toward college tuition. Teach for America places approximately 4,000 graduating college seniors in teaching positions in needy schools. Large corporations and small businesses are also joining in. A growing sense of corporate social responsibility leads an increasing number of companies to encourage and even reward employees for community service beyond the workplace.

In the face of the economic downturn and hardships, with cutbacks in programs for the needy and for teachers, the need for Generation S becomes all the greater. Part of the economic stimulus, in addition to adequate salaries for teachers, might be to legislate tax benefits for them and for other employees who can demonstrate hours given to community service.

Some years ago, the Nobel Prize-winner Albert Schweitzer, already famous as a Scripture scholar and musician, became a medical doctor and served in Gabon, West Africa. He once addressed a group of students in the United States: “I do not know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know; the only ones among you who will really be happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

A revolution is taking place with a new set of values. This is our hope: that schools, corporations, businesses, churches and faith-based groups will take up the torch and encourage, empower and shape Generation S. In 1994 Congress declared Martin Luther King Jr. Day a National Day of Service. Such a day could lead to years of service. The label Generation S should not be reserved to persons grouped by age, but should designate multitudes of young and old Americans who are civic-minded and dedicated to serving the common good.



SIGNS OF THE TIMES

ISRAEL

Arab Christians Assess Election Results

Though former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hard-line Likud Party and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's more moderate Kadima Party both claimed victory in the Feb. 10 Israeli elections, a certain beneficiary of their virtual tie was the relative newcomer Avigdor Lieberman. Mr. Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu Party placed third, winning 15 seats in the 120-member Knesset, putting Lieberman in the position of possible parliamentary kingmaker when a new governing coalition is formed. Lieberman won votes on an ultranationalist platform that includes redrawing Israel's boundaries to transfer highly populated Arab areas to Palestinian control and the mandatory signing of an oath of loyalty by Arabs who remain in Israel.

With no political party gaining a clear majority in the elections, it is now up to Israel's President Shimon Peres to decide which of the two top parties—Likud or Kadima—will be entrusted with forming a coalition government that may require the participation of Mr. Lieberman and his followers if it is to succeed. Accordingly, neither Kadima, which according to final poll results won 29 seats in the Knesset, nor Likud, which won 28 seats, has come out against the Yisrael Beitenu Party. President Peres's decision may take weeks.

"We now have a fascist party in the Knesset and none of the large parties have spoken out against them. That is scary," said the retired journalist Atallah Mansour, a close observer of Israeli politics. "With Lieberman having influence in the government, Israel is on a collision course with the United States." Mansour noted that President Barack Obama has indicated he wants to make significant changes in the way negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians are conducted. But, he pointed out, Lieberman has taken a strong stance against the Palestinians and has been quoted as saying he wants to wipe out the Palestinian militant group Hamas, which now rules

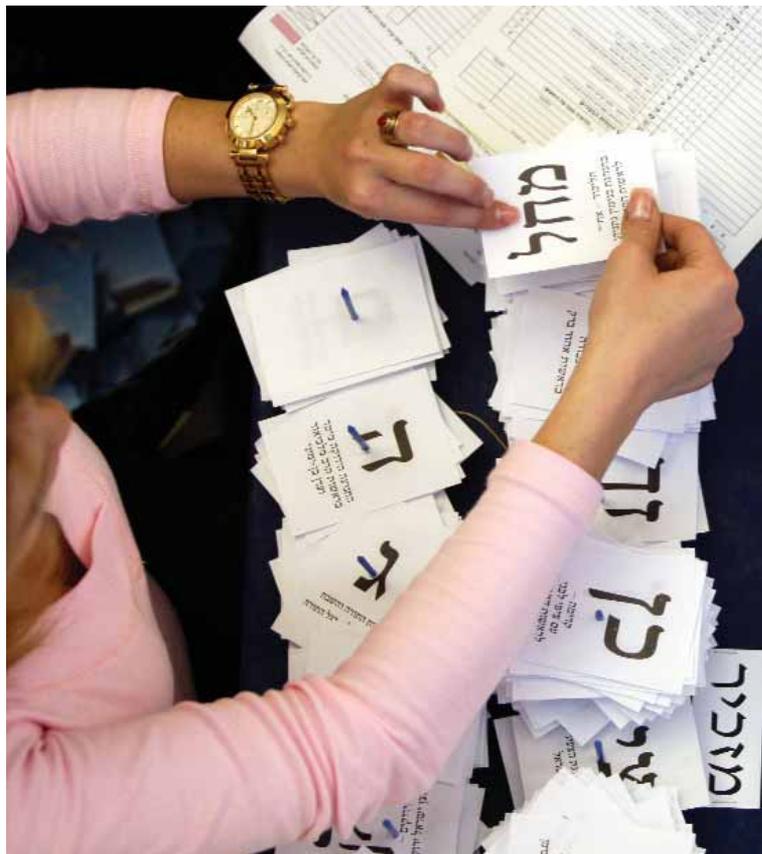
the Gaza Strip after having been separated from Fatah.

"I don't see any difference between Hamas and Lieberman," said Wadie Abunasser, an Arab Catholic Israeli who is head of the International Center of Consultations, a nonpartisan political think tank based in Haifa. Abunasser noted that both Hamas and the Yisrael Beitenu Party refuse to recognize the rights of the other; both advocate the use of violence; and both decline to accept past peace agreements. "The irony is that while everyone is proud of boycotting Hamas, no one is talking about boycotting Lieberman. The election of such a person as Lieberman, who is corrupt, who is saying such things, raises a lot of questions [about] how decisions are going to be made in Israel," he said.

Mr. Abunasser also said that the

enormous leap made by the Likud Party, from 12 seats to 28, indicates a worrisome and clear shift to the right by Israeli voters, which could endanger the peace process. "It is the largest-ever increase for any party in Israel," he said. While it is most likely that a center-right coalition will be formed, there is still the possibility of an extremely conservative coalition taking the lead, said Abunasser. Regardless, the new coalition will be highly unstable, with a single party able to topple it at any moment by withdrawing its support, he added.

Mansour said that with 12 political parties likely to have representatives in the Knesset, "the government is like a broken glass shattered into a bunch of little pieces.... Not that it was much better before, but now it is even worse."



Tallying votes in Jerusalem



BRAZIL

Religious in Amazon Face Threats

Bishop Erwin Krautler of Xingu, Brazil, remembers the first time he received a death threat. “It was the exact day I completed 25 years as a bishop,” he recalled. Later that year, a local paper even announced the day his assassination would be expected. Bishop Krautler says there are several groups unhappy with him and with his colleagues, who are fighting to save the Amazon region from environmental destruction. The bishop has recently spoken out against the construction of a hydroelectric plant along the Xingu River. He has also strongly opposed land-clearing by farmers and loggers in the Amazon forest and is one of the main figures trying to bring to justice those who killed Dorothy Stang, of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, in 2005.

“These people have formed a ‘consortium’ to murder those who speak out against what they are doing,” Bishop Krautler told Catholic News Service. “I believe that it was a consortium of landowners who got together to hire someone to murder Sister Dorothy.” Sister Dorothy Stang, a native of Ohio and a naturalized Brazilian, was 73 when she was murdered near the town of Anapu. She was known as a fierce defender of the Amazon forest.

The government was surprised by the international repercussions of Sister Dorothy’s assassination and, according to Brother Henri des Roziers, O.P., does not want to worsen its image abroad. Now the authorities provide limited police protection for Bishop Krautler and others.

Both Bishop Krautler and Brother des Roziers say the thought of leaving the region has never entered their minds. “If it were that easy, they would have eliminated me long ago,” said Bishop Krautler. “What they are doing is psycho-terrorism...trying to get me into a depressed mood so I’ll leave.” But, Bishop Krautler added, the only way he will leave is if the pope reassigns him.

ROME

Pope Meets Pelosi

Pope Benedict XVI met privately on Feb. 18 with Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and told her that all Catholics, especially those who are lawmakers, must work to protect human life at every stage. “His Holiness took the opportunity to speak of the requirements of the natural moral law and the church’s consistent teaching on the dignity of human life from conception to natural death,” said a Vatican statement. Speaker Pelosi was



Nancy Pelosi in Rome

making an official visit to Italy. The Catholic Democrat from California has been criticized by some Catholics for her support for keeping abortion legal. In a statement released by her office, Pelosi said, “In our conversation, I had the opportunity to praise the church’s leadership in fighting poverty, hunger and global warming, as

well as the Holy Father’s dedication to religious freedom and his upcoming trip and message to Israel.”

Murphy-O’Connor Addresses Anglicans

Divisions within the worldwide Anglican Communion impoverish all of Christianity, said Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor of Westminster during a speech to the General Synod of the Church of England on Feb. 9. “Let me be frank,” Murphy-O’Connor told the governing body of the Anglican Church in England. “Your struggles

with issues on communion which deeply affect the unity of the Anglican Communion affect us all. Divisions within any church or ecclesial community impoverish the communion of the whole church.” Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor added that Catholics and Anglicans “cannot give up” their goal of unity “even if it still seems so distant.” But he reiterated remarks by other Catholic leaders, including Vatican officials, that the Church of England’s decisions on such matters as the episcopal ordination of women and the priestly ordination of sexually active homosexuals would affect “how our relationship is going to develop.”

Commission Rallies Support for Zimbabwe

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe will use its nationwide network to rally support for rebuilding Zimbabwe following the recent formation of a unity government. “The new administration will need to work hard to end the human suffering” in Zimbabwe, which faces rampant inflation, a cholera epidemic and 90 percent unemployment, said Alouis Chaumba, head of the commission. Morgan Tsvangirai, 56, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, was sworn in as prime minister by Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe on Feb. 11. Mugabe has said he will cooperate in the unity government. “We are very hopeful,” Chaumba said, adding that Zimbabweans “have been isolated from the international community for many years, and now we have the chance to hold our heads high.”

Austrian Withdraws After Opposition

Bishop-designate Gerhard Wagner has asked Pope Benedict XVI to

NEWS BRIEFS

• The John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel has announced that it donated more than \$2 million last year to **fight desertification** and promote rural development in nine African countries. • Bishop Jesús González de Zarate Salas of Caracas, Venezuela, said on Feb. 15 that the removal of term limits for the country’s president, Hugo Chávez, is a **blow to democracy** in the country. • Supporters of the religious rights of detained immigrants celebrated the passage of a law requiring Illinois State and Illinois County detention facilities to **allow detained immigrants** to meet with pastoral workers. • A new Gallup Poll ranked the **top religious states** in the United States and found Southern states ranked highest, while several states in the Northeast ranked the lowest. Mississippi topped the list with 85 percent of those surveyed claiming that religion was important.

withdraw his nomination as auxiliary bishop of Linz in the face of fierce criticism. The uproar stemmed mainly from comments Wagner made implying that Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was a punishment from God for sins committed in New Orleans. The diocesan bishops of Austria issued a statement saying they supported Bishop-designate Wagner’s request to withdraw, although they also reaffirmed their belief that it is best for the church that the pope appoint bishops. If a bishop were to be elected by the faithful at large, they said, “conflicts would be inevitable.” The bishops also said, however, that the canon law procedure for choosing a bishop, which calls for consultation with other bishops, priests and lay leaders, is important. “The procedure provided for in canon law for the selection and the examination of candidates [for the office of bishop] has proved its worth, if this procedure really is followed,” they said.

From CNS and other sources.

First Korean Cardinal, Rights Advocate, Dead

Korea’s first cardinal, an outspoken defender of human rights, died in Seoul, South Korea, on Feb. 16. At the time of his death, Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-hwan was the longest-serving cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church. Born in Daegu in May 1922, the late cardinal was ordained a priest in 1951. After earning a degree in philosophy at the Catholic University of Jochi Daigaku in Tokyo, Japan, he was named bishop of Masan, Korea, in 1966. He was named archbishop of Seoul just two years later. Pope Paul VI made him Korea’s first cardinal in 1969. One of the main focuses of the cardinal’s work was pressing for reconciliation between North and South Korea and for freedom of religion in the Communist North.



KYLE T. KRAMER



Toughness and Tears

When our rural, three-parish cluster began promoting Christ Renews His Parish retreats a few years ago, it was little surprise that recruiting men was no easy task. A weekend of listening to other men give emotional witness talks was a hard sell, especially when it competed with deer hunting, local or televised football games and, of course, the never-ending responsibilities of farms, jobs and household projects. Having gone through such a renewal weekend myself last year as a way to belong more deeply to my parish (and, I admit, to appease my wife), I became part of a team that planned the next. Somehow, by much begging, pleading, prodding and cajoling from team members (and the men's wives, of course), at long last enough men signed up for the retreat, whose anagram has the unfortunate and somewhat unmasculine-sounding pronunciation, Chirp.

The participants were machinists, mechanics, farmers, night-watchmen, tree-trimmers and truck drivers, along with one or two white-collar professionals. Most came from large German-Catholic families with deep roots and long histories in the area. Like their immigrant forebears, they were hard-working, pragmatic and taciturn. As we welcomed them to the retreat, I tried to remain sanguine about how they would receive the experience.

As a newcomer to this area (I grew up two counties west and I have lived here only a decade), I have often expe-

rienced a struggle between the desire to fit in and feel part of the community, and the desire to be my true and somewhat strange self, without pretense or apology. This weekend offered me a rare opportunity to swap roles: as a team member, I reveled in the chance to welcome the participants into what was, for them, the alien territory of the retreat.

You talk a lot on C.R.H.P. retreats. Team members delivered their witness, some with eloquence, some with simple words and halting delivery, one pronouncing "Lord" as "Lard" in strong local dialect and another apologetically repeating over and over: "Ah ain't one with words." Some were brief and to the point; others rambled on and included a half-century's worth of local history. Some confessed struggles with substance abuse; others admitted to criminal acts of vengeance. With tears and sincerity more than sophistication and nuance, we shared our unvarnished stories. We spoke of wounds given and received, of healing and reconciliation, of the deep imprints of loved ones and mentors, and of our rural area and parish communities. In various ways we witnessed to the simple but powerful truth of the Gospel: God loves us sinners. I, too often a detached observer, realized how much I had come to love my fellow team members and to feel a deep if unlikely sense of belonging with them.

I have often thought that most men—myself included—are tough nuts to crack, and I considered it no

small miracle that we could open up in this way. It was the fruit of our own powerful retreat experience the previous year, but even more, of the ensuing regular meetings in which we prayed and studied Scripture together, slowly and awkwardly let down our guard and began to share our inner lives.

Or was it no miracle at all, perhaps, but simply the way of things? Nuts and seeds are not made to be cracked open from the outside. In the Creator's good time and given fertile soil and the right conditions, it is in their nature to open of their own accord—or they will die, barren. Likewise, I would like to believe that all of us—even reticent, workaholic, spade-is-a-spade men—are created for revelation, which is the seed of real belonging.

I did see participants obviously moved by the weekend, but I make no claim that their walls came tumbling down and that the retreat was awash in their catharsis. Conversion is a lifelong, Spirit-led process, and no one can manipulate or even predict how it unfolds in the great mystery of any individual's interior life—especially in the hearts of men whose emotional muscles might not get frequent exercise. Time will tell. But I can report, happily, that cracks can appear even in what might seem the toughest and thickest of shells. And through the cracks comes a light that shines like the sun: a lovely, true, image-of-God self, hungry for connection.

Most men —
myself included —
are tough
nuts to
crack.

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



ART: SHUTTERSTOCK/OLLY



THE LURE OF TRAVELLING IN PLACE

The World By Chair

BY KAREN SUE SMITH

Armchair travel no doubt began before there were either armchairs or travel, as we think of them today. The practice may have started as soon as people could communicate well enough to describe what lay on the other side of a mountain or a sea. It grew whenever an account rendered firsthand was retold by someone who remembered it and perhaps embellished what had been said; that teller traveled back on the road of imagination and language to a place he or she had never been, and took another listener there.

It seems that ever since the first couple was pushed out of Eden, humans have longed not only to regain paradise but to explore whatever lies beyond the boundary at hand. Wanderlust may be an attribute scientists will one day declare as hard-wired into the species.

Why “travel in place” embraced by an armchair today, when the world has shrunk and transportation is pervasive? Common reasons include financial constraints, reluctance to travel alone, distaste for crowds or flying, or worries about personal safety (which could be related to flying, or maybe one’s destination country is being bombed just now). Maybe one suffers a physical impediment, temporary or permanent, or maybe timing is the issue: one cannot physically go yet, but wishes to prepare for a future trip. Or one might want to delve into a place from home that one has visited only briefly. Or perhaps one went to a place years ago and wishes to become reacquainted, to see how it, and oneself, have changed. Maybe one loves a place and goes there often, but can never get enough of it. It might even be that one wishes to see one’s own hometown or city with fresh eyes and without taking leave of it. Admittedly, armchair travel is not “the real thing” and cannot fully substitute for it. But it helps one prepare for travels and savor them, and it takes one to many places where

KAREN SUE SMITH, *editorial director of America*, is a longtime armchair traveler.

an armchair is the only available vehicle.

If the mere titles of the following books start your mental juices flowing—*A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey of Cabeza de Vaca, London* (the novel) or *Paris: The Secret History*—then you may have the makings of an armchair traveler. Colin Fletcher’s classic, *The Complete Walker*, was an early influence in my case. (All these books are worth reading.)

Observation and Imagination

The distinction between direct observation of other places and populations that has been handed down or recorded and imagining them is a thin one. As every armchair traveler knows, the distinction is sometimes impossible to make. Consider two examples from history.

Great Princes, Emperors, and Kings...and People of all degrees who desire to get knowledge of the various races of mankind and of the diversities of the sundry regions of the World, take this Book.... For ye shall find therein all kinds of wonderful things...according to the description of Messer Marco Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice, as he saw them with his own eyes.... We shall set down things seen as seen, and things heard as heard only, so that no jot of falsehood may mar the

truth of our Book, and that all who shall read it or hear it read may put full faith in the truth of all its contents.

The Description of the World (also known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*) by Marco Polo (1254-1324), a son in a family of traders, was dictated by the author while he served a yearlong prison sentence. He had come back to Italy and been captured in battle. Polo claimed to be telling what he had seen during years in China and the Mongol Empire, and his book about life under the rule of Kublai Khan proved a sensation during the Middle Ages. But readers at the time considered it fiction. And Polo’s veracity is still being debated today. Even so, the book introduced Europeans to a great Asian culture vastly different from their own. (You can read it and many other copyright-expired books online at Project Gutenberg, but note that the text does not begin until page 216, after copious notes.)

The second example is a diary written by Egeria (381-84), a Spanish nun on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It describes what Christians did during the Holy Week she spent there: they re-enacted the events of Jesus’ life and Passion, beginning with a palm-waving procession into the city. Her account contributed to the spread of these customs to Spain by the fifth century and to their eventual spread through Europe. Most recently, her account (our oldest record) contributed to the revised Holy Week liturgy. Like many ancient sources, Egeria’s travelogue is fragmentary and the history surrounding it uncertain. A scholar discovered a diary segment at a residence of the Brotherhood of Arezzo in 1887; then scholars put it together with a very similar name mentioned in a seventh-century source about a fourth-century nun whose pilgrimage diary during Holy Week in Jerusalem had been known for centuries. It is thought to be the same writer. Apparently, Egeria was an educated, affluent convert to Christianity, a nun away from her cloister on pilgrimage for several years. She was also a keen communicator, whose travel writings reached not just her sisters in Spain but generations across millennia. (For an online sample of Egeria’s travel diary, go to www.christusrex.net/www1/jhs/TSeger04.html).

Many people would do well to begin with an easy, accessible genre called “travel writing” by most bookstores. “Travelers’ Tales” guides, for instance, is a series of books, each volume of which is focused on a particular country or city popular with tourists. The “tales” are actually “true stories” written by a diverse group of travelers who write well—they are not typical travel writers—and reflect on both customary and very offbeat places. The broad range of writers and the coverage of multiple regions within a country afford a satisfying overview. Such books can be read and reread, which also makes them a good investment, whether one stays home or ventures far.



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What about the accounts of imaginary places described in great literature, which also beckon an armchair traveler? Whoever Homer may have been, *The Odyssey*, his epic poem, still astounds us as a trip worth taking, and no airplane or cruise ship can take us there. Or consider other classic destinations like Thomas More's Utopia, Swift's Lilliput, Carroll's Wonderland (or did that belong to Alice?) or Dante's trips to Purgatory and Hell. Who can challenge the accuracy of such travelogues? Of course the real question is, where do you want to go?

One need not travel far. Anyone can swing by Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and get to know its residents at any time. That also holds true for time travel into the future (science fiction) as well as into the past.

Historical novels, like Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*, all three volumes of which I read while preparing for a trip to Norway, allow for an immersion in Norway's past. If you go this route, may I suggest the Tiina Nunnally translation for its beauty and modern English.

Novelists like E. M. Forster (1879-1970) have traveled widely. Forster used his experiences and his literary imagination to transport readers to Italy (*A Room With a View*), England (*Howard's End*) and India (*A Passage to India*). Ernest Hemingway, Robert Louis Stevenson and countless other writers have followed a similar course.

One person's home, however, is another's foreign fantasia. Writers who describe their own backyards or city streets, like Agatha Christie or Charles Dickens, can be read by travelers elsewhere who seek a romp through the English countryside or London's fog. For a trip to Trinidad, try V. S. Naipaul; Portugal, José Saramago; Japan, Shusaku Endo. For a traveler, the *place* is the primary draw.

Or take a personal approach. Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), an affluent, Oxford-educated British woman, became a lifelong traveler and prodigious writer on the Middle East; she was also a mountain climber, an archaeol-

ogist, a linguist, a spy and a policy advisor to the British government on Iraq and Jordan. Although her works are no longer widely read, a recent biography by Georgina Howell (*Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations*) has revived interest in Bell as a traveler extraordinaire. No tourist, Bell lived for years in the Middle East and was fluent in Arabic. Reading about her might be like holding up a mirror for the armchair traveler—the kind of mirror into which a kitten looks and sees a lion. Call it vicarious armchair traveling.

Writings by two other women who lived in out-of-the-way places in their day may also be of interest and can be reread. Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* and Beryl Markham's *West With the Night*, a memoir of growing up in Kenya, are modern classics, both made into films. Biographies and memoirs like these convey a vivid sense of place.

Finally, the world of armchair traveling cannot be confined to books; it includes photographs, films/video, art, dance and music (how could one travel to Vienna without listening to a waltz or to Turkey without seeing a whirling dervish?). Most of these are available on the Internet.

Leaving a Footprint

We have considered places where one surely can go, but where one cannot set down one's foot and leave a footprint. We must now say a word about travel today to destinations where one can.

People travel to glean information, to get the lay of the land, to meet the people, to learn a language, to understand another culture (arts, history, contemporary society and government), to enjoy spectacular scenery or some other significant site, often religious or historical (Machu Picchu in Peru, the beaches of Normandy, the Via Dolorosa, the Sacré Coeur). We also travel to learn new things about ourselves and our own culture. Or maybe you have a copy of *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* and have wisely whittled the number down to 10.

Preparing to Go

In preparing for a trip, I try to decide my destination nearly a year in advance.

After seeing online what a place offers, I go to a bookstore to peruse the guidebooks until I decide on one or two. This is a personal choice; I love comparing and narrowing down. For an immediate trip, current material is important, but armchair travelers with no plane ticket can visit a used bookstore.

Sometimes, I buy a map and a phrasebook or language tape. Then over the next few months, I work with these and listen to music specific to the place, watch pertinent videos, read novels and nonfiction books on culture, politics or some other area of interest. For a trip to Poland, for example, I read James A. Michener's *Poland*, a page-turner historical novel about three different families.

Once I have a country in mind, I look online at the main regions, the big cities, small towns and villages. Since I typically travel for just two weeks, I tend to begin in one large city, because I am not yet in real "vacation" mode. As I settle into it, I move to a smaller place, where I can drop the maps and guidebooks and focus on my language skills (scant) and taking in the sights. For this second phase, I book myself into a small town or an old-town section of a small city. Finally, I go to a village or a small resort, where I can walk to everything or take a ferry. I am resting and relaxing at this point. Then I return to the big city for the last night or two, a form of both return and re-entry. I can easily catch my flight home from there, too.

Truth is, travel has become commonplace, no longer reserved to the privileged. There are few discoveries of people or places still to be made. The Grand Tour of the wealthy and the prestigious Explorers Club gave way to the neighborhood travel clubs of the early 20th century, where ladies who lunched and traveled once or twice on the Queen Mary reported back, gave a talk and showed mementos. Expedition artists gave way to the photographer. All of this gave way to students studying abroad, retired tourists abroad, families vacationing abroad—most with cellphones, cameras, videos and blogs.

In response publishers offer a profusion of guides, which sell well despite what Eleanor Lavish, an adventure-seeking novelist, said to her timid friend, Miss Charlotte Bartlett, in E. M. Forster's *A Room With a View*: "And no, you are not, not, NOT to look at your Baedeker. Give it to me; I shan't let you carry it. We will simply drift."

Guides—still indispensable for most travelers—have changed since the 19th century, when Baedeker's and Murray's guides reigned. (Ruskin referred to Murray in his own detailed art guide, *Mornings in Florence*.) Take a simple thing like maps: online today one can find virtually every inch of the civilized world on Google Maps, and elsewhere photos of the earth and the moon taken from outer space.

ON THE WEB

The editors tour
New York City pilgrimage sites.
americamagazine.org/video

It is possible today to prepare extensively for a trip: to book what one wants to see before one sets out; to read several guidebooks, gather maps, download a free audio file for your iPod, look at hundreds of photos and videos, rent a car, set up a walking, biking or Segway tour; to contact residents by e-mail; even to explore activities at a local church or museum. Beyond making air and hotel reservations online, one can book tickets for entertainment—all in advance.

If one wants to visit Florence, for example, one can enjoy a 360-degree look around Signoria Square, where Michelangelo's David stands, and take a virtual tour (www.italyguides.it). One can learn about schools—language, cooking, art and design, photography—at (www.goitaly.about.com/od/florenceitaly). Standard guides (*Frommer's*, *Fodor's*, *Lonely Planet*) typically suggest novels and films. Learn to take these seriously. I have already mentioned *A Room With a View* (also a film) and Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence*, but one could also read or see Shakespeare's "All's Well That Ends Well" and "The Winter's Tale." Rizzoli publishes glossy guidebooks on art; National Geographic and DK Eyewitness Travel Guides are expensive and heavy if you carry them, but the layouts, cut-away graphics and emphasis on photos are especially good for armchair travelers. All one needs to begin is a destination! **A**



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Lessons of the Camino

What I learned from secular seekers on the way to Compostela

BY ARTHUR PAUL BOERS

I once walked 500 miles to attend a church service. Although I am by no means the kind of hardy person one might envision going on such a long, arduous journey, my physical achievement was not the most amazing aspect of this venture. Nor was it the fact that I, an ordained Mennonite minister, was on a pilgrimage, a practice normally associated with other parts of the church. Nor was it the fact that the route, Spain's Camino de Santiago, is rapidly growing in popularity, with tens of thousands of sojourners undertaking it annually. Nor was it even that many, if not most, of those "pilgrims" profess no religious faith or affiliation. No; the most astonishing aspect of my journey was the way these secular seekers made me think about God.

Theology came up often, but in unexpected ways. Initially I thought there would be lengthy conversations about God with the other pilgrims, but I had few such interactions. On my very first day, I met Jean-Louis, a retired engineer from France, two decades my senior. He had already walked 500 miles to get to where I began, and his blistered heels proved it. He politely inquired about my occupation. When I explained that I teach theology, he not so politely turned his head and dismissed me with a disdainful, "Phut!" Agnes, a German, volunteered to help me find a hospital when my bagel-sized blood blister required emergency room tending, and soon. As we sat and talked in the hospital hallway, she was startled to learn my occupation: "You mean you're a priest?!" Neither struck me as particularly devout, but Jean-Louis and Agnes were both Roman Catholics.

Of all the religious affiliations I encountered, Catholic was the most common. (I never encountered another Mennonite.) This is hardly surprising, since this route—

prominent since early medieval times—is most closely associated with the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet many of the pilgrims told me that their faith was nominal or nonexistent. François, a Frenchman with an impressive ability to snore, said that he was "only a little Catholic." Rosa, a bookseller from Spain, counted herself Catholic but did not attend church. Vio, also Spanish, served in a community with mentally handicapped adults and spoke regu-



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/VICENTE BARCELO VARONA

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larly of her devotion to Jesus, but she had little use for church hierarchy or institutions. To be sure, there were devout Catholics, including Brother Paul, a Dutch monk, Cindy, a nurse from Ohio, and Hisako, a Japanese surgeon. I eagerly compared notes with all these good people.

Religious, Spiritual or Other

On the Camino, it is customary to carry a special "passport." This identification establishes that you are a pilgrim, autho-

rizes you to stay in hostels and—if stamped daily—qualifies you to receive a much-coveted certificate from the Cathedral of Santiago at the end of the journey. In acquiring a passport, pilgrims designate their motives as either “religious,” “spiritual” or “other.” Pilgrims on the journey for prayer or penance fall under “religious.” I confidently claimed that category. “Spiritual” is more vague, less than traditional but more than secular. Many in the “spiritual” crowd told me they were “spiritual but not religious.” As for “other,” that catch-all included pilgrims who just wanted to hike, were looking for an economical vacation, or were at loose ends in life. It was as mixed a group of motivations and characters as those in Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales.”

The “spiritual” and “other” folks intrigued and engaged me the most, partly because they raised unexpected questions, but mostly because I heard God through them. They were the ones who most reliably pointed me Godward on my pilgrimage.

Even pilgrims who professed to be walking for secular reasons often spoke of the Camino as if it were a divine entity. Coincidences and synchronicities elicited the oft-repeated phrase, “Well, that’s the Camino!” Many alluded to the Camino’s personal qualities: “The Camino will teach you what you need to know.” When some wondered whether to undertake the journey again, the rejoinder was: “If you need to walk it more than once, then you did not get it.” Still, one Camino veteran keeps returning and says: “The Camino is not done with me yet.”

It may seem perplexing that even those who profess no belief in God mystically read spiritual forces into a simple dirt path. Yet these are vital signs of a religious longing that persists in a thoroughly modern culture.

The Camino at Work

Simon was unchurched and not a believer. A twentysomething Swiss architectural student, he was between semesters and decided on a whim to walk the Camino. He liked long-distance hiking and living with only a pack on his back. Yet everywhere he went, he was reminded of God; the closer he came to Santiago, the more he initiated conversations about faith. To his surprise, he discovered an important spiritual aspect along the way.

Such developments are not uncommon. An anonymous pilgrim who walked the Camino before me wrote: “I did not set out on a spiritual or religious journey—but it ended

being that way—accident? I don’t know.... Maybe that is just the Camino de Santiago at work.” I am reminded of T. S. Eliot’s pilgrimage poem, “Little Gidding”:

*And what you thought you came for,
is only a shell, a husk of meaning.*

The route’s rapidly growing popularity is striking. In 1986 there were 2,491 official pilgrims; 10 years later the number had jumped to 23,218. The year I walked (2005) there were 94,942. But in 2004, a Santiago Jubilee year, there were 179,944.

The Camino is a focus of religious and spiritual longing. It attracts an array of pilgrims who seek “something more,”



My fellow pilgrims and I often discussed what was missing or amiss in our own lives. A 500-mile walk, with ample periods of solitude, tends to prompt such soul-searching.

even those who express unconventional doctrinal viewpoints. Rachel, a former nun, told me that she no longer affiliates with Christianity. She rejects, for example, claims of the unique divinity of Jesus because “We are all God.” Many fellow sojourners told me that they are “beyond church” or even that they are “anti-church.” Yet here they were on a pilgrimage based in Christian tradition and sustained and promoted by churches.

Many people today believe that certain settings have extraordinary energies, like the New Age community around Sedona, Ariz. In the British Isles, Glastonbury and Iona attract multitudes because of their connection to an ancient Celtic past. In the parlance of New Age faith, these places are “thin,” because the dividing line between earthly and spiritual realities is flimsy there. God is met on the ground.

A Focal Place

The philosopher Albert Borgmann speaks of “focal realities”—a thing, place or practice that is shaped by three qualities. It has a “commanding presence” that requires effort and discipline, skills and habits. It makes wide-ranging connections with other people and with history, nature and God. Third, it emanates a “centering” or “orienting power” that helps us recognize our most important priorities.

The Camino is in every sense focal. First, it is engaged

PHOTO: CANS/MIGUEL VIDAL

only by walking hundreds of miles, taxing muscles and moving at an unaccustomed pace. Second, it connects the pilgrim with other pilgrims past and present; with Spain and its Catholicism; with the people who offer hospitality along the way; and, of course, with the geography of mountains, trees and forests. Finally, the Camino is a place where priorities are often reoriented.

Once abundant, focal places like cathedrals or vast expanses of wilderness are rapidly being displaced by lifestyles that revolve around technology and gadgets. The writer John Howard Kunstler speaks of the “geography of nowhere” and Georges Benko of “non-places” to describe landscapes dominated by retail strips, shopping malls, big-box stores and major highways. As focal places grow rarer, their power to attract becomes that much more compelling.

Borgmann contends that when existence seems shallow, focal realities can “center and illuminate our lives.” They move, teach, inspire and reassure. “Focal reality gathers and illuminates our world,” he writes. A life with focal realities at its center poses a telling contrast to the aspects of our lives today that “lead to a disconnected, disembodied and disoriented sort of life.”

We know something is missing. The theologian Eugene Peterson cautions that “the wonder has leaked out” of our lives. We are aware of a sense of hurry in our culture; and we complain of being too busy, not having enough time for the things we value most. In my last church, congregants identified busyness as their key spiritual issue and asked the elders for help. The elders agreed but then took two years to address the issue...because they had so much to do!

It is no coincidence that when people are so overworked our culture evinces a deep interest in spirituality. Evidence abounds. When I was in the seminary in the early 1980s, I wanted to write about “prayer and peacemaking,” but only two courses were offered on prayer. Now I teach at that school and one can obtain a degree in spirituality. Note the shelves of spiritual materials found in even the most secular bookstores, or television shows and films that deal with heaven, hell, angels, demons, healing and God.

Our culture of distraction, along with the scarcity of focal realities, drives people’s interest. The longing for “something more,” a sense that there must be a better way, propels individuals on spiritual quests.

Restless Hearts

Interest in spirituality reflects familiar longings: to be home, whole, integrated, centered. Christians recognize such desire as a need for God. As St. Augustine famously prayed: “You made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” There are other ways to under-

stand and interpret innate longings for God. Yet psychological or biological or cultural explanations do not fully convince, as important as these insights are. As Augustine suggests, our deep desires point to the One who created us.

The Camino is not only a place where people feel drawn to God. It is also a locus of conversion, of transformation. Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (Mt 7:16); if divine realities are true, then we can expect them to produce concrete realities, here and now.

Often my fellow pilgrims and I discussed what was missing or amiss in our lives. We raised questions about lifestyles, jobs and relationships and resolved to live differently once we returned home. We discussed vocational discernment. A 500-mile walk, with ample periods of solitude, prompts such soul-searching.

Marcus, of the Netherlands, complained that while he imagined his job would serve the needs of others, he spent most of his time dealing with red tape. Susanne of Austria considered finding new work that would allow her to live closer to family and friends. Hendrika of Belgium saw that her job did not contribute to the wider well-being of others. So the Camino became a context for pondering priorities. It was no surprise to learn of impressive changes that fellow pilgrims made after this journey.

Raul was a Spanish factory worker who took a month off to walk the Camino. Something about the journey captivated him. He quit his job, purchased an old stone building on the Camino and began refurbishing it as a place of hospitality for pilgrims. Veronika from Germany was walking one day

through a remote valley on the Camino and heard a flute playing at a nearby hostel. She parked her pack there and never left. Now she tends to passing pilgrims. When Jon returned to the United States, he took early retirement to devote himself to pursuing art. Each exemplifies the courage and clarity that can come from the Camino. Their bravery inspired me to look carefully at my own life.

I was brought up in a church community, ordained after my seminary studies, served as a pastor for years and now teach at a seminary. When I embarked on this traditional pilgrimage, I had no idea that God would speak in such unconventional ways. Yet I discovered God at work far beyond the brick and mortar of institutions, in people who have spent far less time in church than I have. Along the Camino I encountered the most convincing evidence for God I have seen in a long, long time. That was certainly worth a few blisters. **A**

ON THE WEB

A slide show of images from the Camino de Santiago.
americamagazine.org/slideshow

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LENTEN REFLECTION

Try a Little Kindness

The second in a series for Lent

BY PETER SCHINELLER

In one horrendous plane crash in December 2005, Loyola Jesuit College in Abuja, Nigeria, lost 60 students. I was president of the college. As soon as I could, I traveled to Port Harcourt to be with and to pray with the parents, siblings, relatives and friends of those who were killed. It was no easy mission. Yet because of the deep Christian faith and love of these parents, the meeting took a surprising turn. Parents who had lost one, two or, in one case, three children reached out to me with compassion and kindness. Even as I tried to console them for the loss of their precious children, many tried to console me, saying that as president of the college, I had lost 60 children! Such kindness and compassion, such an ability to reach out beyond their own grief, I will never forget.

This Lent and every Lent, we Christians profess that “the kindness and generous love of God our Savior has appeared” (Ti 3:4). Words like love, power, light, truth and justice are often employed to describe the coming of God, but the Letter to Titus uses the word kindness. Perhaps we should take this as a special challenge this season: to show more of the kindness of God. It is something the parents in Port Harcourt did even in the depths of grief. As St. John Chrysostom writes: “We must be more kind than just. Kindness alone reconciles.”

In traditional Catholic teaching, kindness is the virtue opposite the vice of envy. An envious person is unappre-

ciative, resentful, tries to tear down others and takes secret satisfaction at the misfortune of others. When tempted toward envy, what is the alternative? “Try a Little Kindness,” sang Glen Campbell. Kindness entails an ability to reach out beyond our own situation, good or bad, to show goodness and compassion to others.

Abraham Lincoln once echoed the writings of St. Francis de Sales when he said: as “a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall, so with men. If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend.” Many may recall a line by former president George H. W. Bush, who in his 1988 Republican National Convention acceptance speech called for “a kinder and gentler nation.” Today, under the leadership of a new president, we still hope to move toward this kinder, gentler nation. Yet such change begins with the individual. Where and how can we be kinder and gentler—with our family and children, with our neighbors and strangers, with fellow drivers on the highways or walking the streets of our cities?

Many times in Africa I was called up short for not properly and kindly greeting people. In my brusque U.S. manner, I would rush to the heart of the matter in making a request: “One ticket, two eggs, or how much is this?” The

response was a kinder, gentler greeting: “Good morning, Father.” Only then could we do business. Greetings are important. Might we not offer such informal greetings as a pleasant surprise

at the checkout counter, to the bus driver or bank teller or the police officer at the mall? Might we not listen to our children or a neighbor more patiently and set aside our automatic answers and solutions? When we do speak, might we heed the advice of Adolfo Nicolás, superior general of the Jesuits, who said that before speaking, you should ask

three questions about what you will say: “Is it true, is it kind and gentle, and is it good for others?”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel saw the beauty of kindness: “When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.” And St. Paul urged the Christians of Rome to “remain in his [God’s] kindness” (Rom 11:22).

Lent is the Christian’s journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. The Gospel of Matthew says of Jesus that “a bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not quench until he brings justice to victory” (12:20); Jesus is “meek and humble of heart” (11:29). This Lent let us try to put on the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. It is an appropriate time to show forth God’s kindness, and at the very least to “try a little kindness.”



ART: JULIE LONNEMAN

PETER SCHINELLER, S.J., is an associate editor of *America*.

BOOKS & CULTURE

FILM | RICHARD A. BLAKE

GRAPPLING WITH REALITY

Darren Aronofsky's 'The Wrestler'

Since President Obama's inauguration, commentators have parsed each line of his address and concluded that it somehow lacked the inspirational power of John F. Kennedy's. They are probably right. As a young man I was certainly inspired to hear that "the torch has been passed to a new generation"—that is, to mine. Forty-eight years later, I wonder about "my" generation as it listened to Obama's words and realized that the torch had passed from its hands to somebody else's. How does it

feel to learn that the bulk of one's biography is now written in the past tense? The future tense can be used only for the few concluding chapters and an epilogue.

The Wrestler provides a similar meditation on mortality, set in the improbable world of seedy sports arenas, strip bars, a shabby seaside resort and a trailer park. Randy "the Ram" Robinson (Mickey Rourke), a professional wrestler, has begun to experience the universal law of entropy. Like all things mortal, he faces the start of a

long downward trajectory, and like all things human, he may be the last to recognize the fact, or admit to it. His tragedy comes not from the realities of the life cycle, which can be ennobling or even triumphant in its later stages, but from his inability to reinvent himself, physically or spiritually, to embrace his changing universe. He inhabits a world of strong, resilient bodies, even as his own begins to crumble. He discovers that his once-imposing physique masks a terrible emptiness within. Yet in the rare moments when he realizes the truth, he can't do anything about it.

Rather than slow the narrative by filling in the back story, Darren Aronofsky, the young director, opens with a camera slowly panning across a



CNS PHOTO/FOX SEARCHLIGHT

Mickey Rourke as Randy "The Ram" Robinson in "The Wrestler"

collage of wrestling posters, as the soundtrack offers a series of ringside announcements from major arenas and championship matches from the 1980s. This was the golden time for the Ram, but as the film opens in present time, the posters have begun to fade and the voices have become muffled through the curtains of years. In near darkness, the camera reveals shadowy glimpses of the Ram as he prepares for yet another exhibition. His full face finally appears like an indecent thing we have come upon and prefer not to have seen. The face is bloated with steroids and deformed by scar tissue. At age 52, Mickey Rourke has the face of a man who has taken the worst that life can dish out and, although he is losing, is determined to come out for the final rounds.

The Ram's journey has taken him from headlining a card at Madison Square Garden to an American Legion post in suburban New Jersey, where the noise of the makeshift ply-

wood ring adds to the entertainment for the 50 or so fans who come. At least a few did come. Maybe it will be better in Utica or Wilmington. After the match, he drives his van to his home in a trailer park, only to find the door sealed by the landlord until he pays back rent. He pleads to be allowed in to get an ice pack for his injured back, but without success. Fresh from his victory in a meaningless but painful match, he is forced to sleep in the van.

The fan base for live wrestling is dwindling steadily in the age of cable television extravaganzas. He and several other wrestlers drive up to Rahway, N.J., to stir up publicity for a forthcoming exhibition. They sit at folding tables in an empty room, waiting to sign programs and posters for the fans who never come. A few children wander in to have their pictures taken with the battered celebrities.

The Ram seems comfortable with the youngsters, since in many ways, despite his hulking body, he is a child himself. In a poignant scene that captures the extent of his loneliness, he invites a boy of about 10 to come into his trailer to play video games with him. The boy soon grows bored and prepares to leave, but the Ram pleads with him to stay. Current awareness of the sexual abuse of children initially makes us uncomfortable with the situation, but as the scene develops the discomfort switches from apprehension about the boy's safety to a palpable sadness at the pathetic loneliness of a grown man's needing a child to stay with him for just a few more minutes.

The Ram seems most at home in the locker room surrounded by younger wrestlers. He adopts a fatherly role in encouraging an up-and-coming star to keep working on his routine. The conversation is touching, even as it opens a window into their bizarre world. The Ram is fresh from a stint in a beauty salon to have his shoulder-length blond hair tinted and

from a visit to a tanning parlor to work on his California complexion. The younger man wears a heavy chain dog collar and a spiky Mohawk crest across his partially shaved scalp. Yet the two cartoonish characters converse with utmost seriousness, like father and son, with the older man dispensing advice and the younger listening respectfully. Their primary responsibility, they agree, is entertaining the fans, and the young man has a talent for that. Competition has nothing to do with their profession; they choreograph the steps that will lead to a predetermined outcome.

Darren Aronofsky and Robert D. Siegel, the screenwriter, underline the show-business side of wrestling by drawing a parallel to the sex industry. Cassidy (Marisa Tomei) dances in the Ram's favorite strip bar. Both the Ram and Cassidy use and abuse their bodies to entertain customers. They create fantasy worlds for a few dollars. They both adopt alien identities and bogus names: his name is Robin, hers Pam. She supports a son with a job she despises; he has a daughter he has not seen in years. Their real identities remain hidden under the tissue of illusion they create around themselves.

As the story develops, both have reason to question whether they should find another line of work. In his terrible loneliness, the Ram deludes himself into thinking that his relationship with Cassidy consists of more than that of a paying customer to an entertainer. They have instances of genuine communication, and Cassidy briefly lets herself believe he is more than a client. In the same way, the Ram's estranged daughter, Stephanie (Evan Rachel Wood), tries to believe that she and her father can be reconciled, but her acceptance depends on his being able to change. This brief subplot leaves too many loose ends to be completely convincing, but it shows the Ram's nearly frantic attempt to establish a relation-

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ship with another human being.

A heart attack and invasive bypass surgery force the issue. The Ram announces his retirement from the ring and plans a new life: no more steroids and illegal painkillers, no more pain-filled exhibitions of brutality to please the fans. Yet without skills or connections outside the wrestling circuit, what can he do? He takes an entry-level

job as a counterman in the deli section of a supermarket where his odious supervisor (Judah Friedlander) seems determined to humiliate him. While the experiment in building a new life teeters on the edge of success, since his showmanship adds flair to his dealing with the customers, it eventually becomes clear that the Ram is a wrestler, nothing more, nothing less. He will not spend the rest of his life slicing bologna or spooning out potato salad.

Randy “the Ram” Robinson got his nickname from his signature move in the ring: whenever his stunned opponent would lie helpless on the mat, the Ram would climb to the top rope over the corner post and stand upright over his adversary and the crowd. Then he would leap toward the ring lights, soar weightless for an instant and crash down upon the other man. He

became a living ram, crushing all resistance. His fans loved it and waited for it in every match. This is a perfect image of his life: he soars, the crowd cheers, then he plunges downward to destroy his enemy. Outside the ring, however, his moment of glory ends in a crash that leaves his own life a pile of twisted wreckage.

ON THE WEB

From the archives, Richard Blake, S.J., reviews Mickey Rourke in “Diner.” americamagazine.org/pages

RICHARD A. BLAKE, S.J., is professor of fine arts and co-director of the film studies program at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Mass.

professors. “Soon it was obvious that none of the others desired to meet me.” After three semesters, he was terminated. “He is a historian,” he overheard another professor saying of him in a condescending tone at an academic conference 15 years ago, “but he is really a writer.” Lukacs’s experience can be replicated in other professions. For every prelate of the caliber of a Basil Hume, a Karol Wojtyla or a Joseph Ratzinger, there are easily a dozen priests with similar or greater gifts who languish unknown because they are too “different,” too prone to “make waves.”

Non-philosophers will find Lukacs’s opening chapter, on his philosophy of history, heavy going. I recommend starting with Chapter Five: “Intermezzo: My Churchill Saga,” in which Lukacs tells how he became fascinated with the man who, alone and by sheer force of will, forced England to fight on against Hitler when others in the inner War Cabinet wanted to ask for terms of peace. Lukacs tells the story in one of his most fascinating books, *Five Days in London: May 1940*—made possible by the opening of the British cabinet archives for that year in 1970. Churchill’s subsequent silence about those tension-filled days in which

“Hitler came close to winning the Second World War” was an example, Lukacs writes, of his magnanimity. He did not wish to embarrass the man who wanted to throw in the towel: his foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, subsequently Britain’s wartime ambassador to the United States.

Immediately following is Lukacs’s chapter titled “The World Within Me: Wives and Loves,” in which he pays tribute to the two

BOOKS | JOHN JAY HUGHES

HISTORY AND MEMORY

LAST RITES

By John Lukacs
Yale Univ. Press. 208p \$25
ISBN 9780300114386

I first encountered John Lukacs through a *New Yorker* article in which he described a hike through Switzerland, staying nightly at a hotel. This riveting article made me an instant fan of the writer. Born in Hungary in 1924, Lukacs came to this country in 1946. The author now of more than two dozen books, he could have had a chair of history at Harvard, Yale or Stanford. Instead he chose to spend his academic life teaching at Chestnut Hill, a small women’s college run by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Philadelphia.

For this decision there were, he discloses in this too short volume of reflections on history and on his life, two reasons: his attachment to the home where he has lived for over half a century, in Chester County, outside Philadelphia; and what Lukacs calls “my alienation from my profession.” Following age-mandated retirement from his college teaching position, he was invited to teach a single course at the nearby University of Pennsylvania. He knew only two of its history department’s 45



wives who have pre-deceased him, and the one to whom he is still married. Why did he not marry Hungarian women? There were none around. "But there was more than that. Beyond (or beneath?) their various charms there was my wives' Americanness that I found attractive." "Hungary [he writes in another connection] is my mother, America my wife." The reader who can finish this chapter unmoved has no soul.

A recurrent theme in the book is Lukacs's consciousness of living not at the end of an age, but beyond it. With the fall of Communism in 1989 he became aware "that an entire civilization, the European era of five hundred years, that I cherished and to which I belonged, was gone." He deplores the decline of the written and printed word, the change from a verbal to a pictorial culture; the cult of sloppiness, ugliness, even brutality; the unconcern with which our 41st president, from a

privileged background, referred to his "grandkids." (That many readers will not understand this last example merely illustrates how far we have come, as Lukacs has written elsewhere, from a world in which mothers were "Mummy" to one in which they are "Mom.") "The barbarians are now well within the—largely demolished—gates."

Lukacs lives close to a stream that feeds into a nearby reservoir. "One unforgettable evening about a dozen years ago," he decided to row downstream to friends, two miles distant. They shared a drink, and Lukacs rowed home. Alone, in the middle of the reservoir, with no light save for a sickle moon, "I was full of gratitude for what God and this country had allowed me, for this silent world where I belonged, where I had chosen to live."

In a moving personal statement of faith at the book's end Lukacs regrets the consequences of growing old: a

weakening of his appetite for life, for reading and for the past. Not weakened, however, is "my gratitude to the past, including those who loved me and whom I loved. Beneath and above them is my enduring gratitude to God, for both my past *and* my present. Will the sincerity of this gratitude suffice to escape His adverse judgment of me? I do not think so; I only hope."

Lukacs concludes with a quotation from Pope Leo XIII, who wrote when he opened the Vatican archives to historians in 1883: "In a way all history cries aloud that God is."

"Send the audience home wanting more," they say in the theater. With this beautiful book, by turns captivating, amusing and moving, John Lukacs has done just that.

JOHN JAY HUGHES is a priest of the St. Louis Archdiocese and the author, most recently, of *No Ordinary Fool: A Testimony to Grace (Tate)*; and *Columns of Light: 30 Remarkable Saints (Now You Know Media)*.

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PAUL CONTINO

FYODOR'S WORLD

DOSTOEVSKY

Language, Faith and Fiction

By Rowan Williams

Baylor Univ. Press. 285p \$24.95

ISBN 9781602581456

In the last three years or so, Rowan Williams has not only continued to lead the worldwide Anglican Communion through challenging times, but has published seven books, including two substantial contributions to the field of religion and literature. The first, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (2005) illuminates the work of three Catholic writers—Jacques Maritain, David Jones and Flannery O'Connor. With *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, Williams has written one of the very best studies of the greatest Christian novelist. In a review for the Times Literary Supplement, A. N. Wilson called it the “best book of 2008.”

Summoning a wide-ranging understanding of theology, especially of the Orthodox tradition, Williams clarifies what I call Dostoevsky's “incarnational realism.” Human persons are dependent upon the sheer “givenness” of a physical, temporal reality imbued by divine presence. Thus, Dostoevsky “is repeatedly directing us toward a pattern of divine action that is outside our heads or hearts.” This pattern is “most decisively expressed in the complete indwelling of God in human flesh in the person of Christ.” Dostoevsky's realism stands opposed to voluntarism, which claims that arbitrary assertions of the human will construct the source of all values.

This is hardly to say that Dostoevsky's realism ignores the gift and burden of free choice. His narratives present characters that pass through the human, risk-laden realities of flesh, finitude and relation—the

very realities Christ embraced in his incarnation—and are called to make choices and to be lovingly attentive to others, within that reality. Thus, the ordinary, the prosaic—not the dramatic or dreamy—proves the graced locus of the Christian life. To skirt or reject willfully this reality is to tear the *imago Dei* each of us bears; in the worst cases, it is to court the demonic.

Williams's analysis of the demonic in Dostoevsky—especially in *The Devils*—illuminates the murky motivations of his characters. The diabolic “seeks to end history and speech.” Pyotor Verkhovensky, for example, the leader of the revolutionary cell, offers nothing to the others who look to him because his “stream of empty words that seek nothing except power.” Stavrogin, his mirror-image, “cease[s] to choose” and thus becomes “the ideal vehicle for the campaign against self-aware freedom” and an emblem of self-enclosed annihilation. Williams's discussion of *The Idiot* will unsettle yet edify any reader who may see Prince Myshkin as a Christ-figure. In fact, Myshkin's own inability to make concrete choices, or to recognize the responsibility of others in making their own, aligns him with the destructive and demonic.

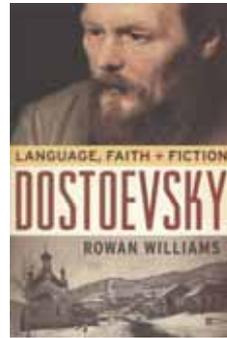
Dostoevsky knew the terrain of evil but struggled with the novelist's perennial challenge: How do you make goodness interesting? Through a decades-long process of trial and error, he succeeded most capaciously in *The Brothers Karamazov*, his “mature essay in imaging the holy” (and the novel from which at least one contemporary saint, Dorothy Day, drew so much of her inspiration, especially in Father Zosima's words about active love being

“a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams”). Central to Dostoevsky's conception of goodness is the acceptance of our creaturely responsibility for one another, within the limited contours of time, space and our particular gifts. Father Zosima, Alyosha, Mitya and Grushenka emerge as iconic—but as *narrative* icons, imaged over time, through all the temporal indeterminacies and disruptions that narrative represents.

In their best moments with each other, such characters reflect the narrative practice of their author. In a pattern analogous to Christ's *kenosis*, as described by Paul in his letter to the

Philippians (2:5-11), Dostoevsky does not loom above his characters like a puppet master. The author empties himself of any controlling omniscience, descends, and stands, in Mikhail Bakhtin's word—“alongside” his creations. He respects their freedom and gives them the open, indeterminate “space” to exercise that freedom over time. The author's kenotic position in relation to others is reflected in Dostoevsky's most saintly characters; their lives present a “structure of moral life authoritatively shaped by the central icon that is the narrative and presence of Christ.” (Williams's recurring insistence that goodness and holiness entail “an immersion in the matter and interrelation that is the finite world” recalls the remarkable *Christ and Apollo* by William F. Lynch, S.J., recently returned to print and ripe for rediscovery.)

Williams is an attentive and responsible scholar. He considers almost all of the major Dostoevsky criticism (although I wish he had considered just a few more, especially Robert Jackson and Robin Miller), and deftly weaves his research into clear and cogent prose. The ordinary reader of Dostoevsky—and there are



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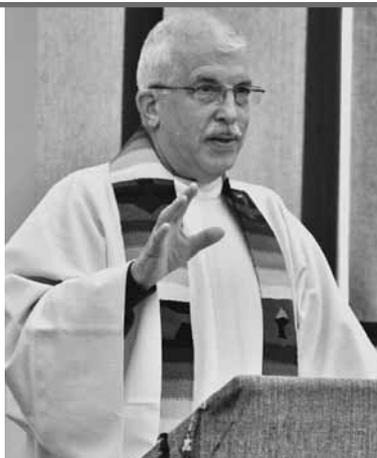
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many (if only Oprah Winfrey would grant her imprimatur to *The Brothers* as she did to *Anna Karenina!*)—will find Williams's book to be deeply thoughtful, subtle yet accessible, and quite relevant to contemporary debates on the viability of faith (especially in the prophetic tones of his conclusion). The book is well edited—although, in a rare lapse, Caryl Emerson's eloquent reflections on "the assumption of plenitude" are misattributed to Gary Saul Morrison. Of course (invoking Bakhtin once more), all of our words rely upon the presence and help of others. Readers of *America* will be pleased to know that during this book's writing, such help, in the form of hospitality, was extended to Archbishop Williams by the Georgetown Jesuit Community, to whom he has dedicated his splendid work.

PAUL CONTINO is Professor of Great Books at Pepperdine University, Malibu, Calif.

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LETTERS

Obama's First Days

Vincent Rougeau's essay, "Real Americans, Real Catholics" (2/16), raises the question of how we can build common ground with those who are visibly angry over having lost the election and the Catholic vote on Nov. 4. I believe that the majority of Catholic voters recognized that there was a powerful Catholic social justice case for President Obama. That promise has been at least partially fulfilled by, among other things, the president's spending priorities in the stimulus measure.

The majority of Catholic voters are also likely pleased that the president in his first weeks has highlighted, not the signing of the Freedom of Choice Act, but the creation of a subsidiarity-focused Office of Neighborhood and Faith-Based Partnerships, which the president hopes will play an important role in his abortion-reduction efforts. I hope that all Catholics, whether they

voted for the president or not, will come together to rejoice over these matters and give them encouragement.

DOUG KMIETC
Malibu, Calif.

Abortion Reduction?

Vincent Rougeau argues that President Obama's plan to increase social spending is a strategy for "abortion reduction." Yet one of Obama's first acts as president was to rescind the Mexico City policy, first implemented by Ronald Reagan, which prohibited federal funding for groups that promote abortion as a method of birth control in poorer countries. We must not congratulate ourselves for (as yet unseen) efforts to reduce abortion in this country while promoting it in others.

CHRISTOPHER THIGPEN
Chicago, Ill.

Human Dignity

Thank you for "Real Americans, Real Catholics" by Vincent D. Rougeau. Far

too often, Catholics choose the political candidate who parrots the language of the U.S. bishops concerning the dignity of life rather than demanding concrete action to ensure that dignity. The pro-life cause is much more expansive than stopping abortion—our youth also die in the inner cities every day, or die a slow death in our worst schools, and often they are ignored by Catholics who profess a commitment to the dignity of human life.

TIMOTHY E. TILGHMAN
Greenbelt, Md.

House of Cards

Re Paul Louisell's contention (Letters, 2/2) that deregulation played no role in the present financial fiasco: Let me note the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman's observation that the termination of the Glass-Steagall Act, which separated commercial and investment banking, was key to creating the "casino mentality" at the root of the insane leveraging that we are now all paying for.

The additional contention that "the crisis was caused by Congress's decision to ignore regulators who warned" about risky mortgage loans is absurd. It was the banks, not Congress, that wantonly and aggressively hyped adjustable-rate mortgages to anyone with a pulse. Congress did not bundle those mortgages into collateralized debt obligations or invent credit default swaps. It did not erect a financial house of cards so complicated that even the C.E.O.'s who ran it did not understand what was involved.

The notion that "more regulation is not the answer" echoes the mantra that Alan Greenspan repeated over and over during his tenure as Federal

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Reserve chairman. He now expresses “shocked disbelief” at the results. The truth is that along with better regulation and stricter enforcement, we need more regulation, and I cannot think of a better place to start than with the hedge fund industry.

PETER QUINN
Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.

Call to Conversion

In “Finding Renewal,” by James R. Kelly (2/16), I heard a much-needed appeal for consistency. I abhor abortion and have preached against it on many occasions, and I have supported and encouraged pro-life efforts in my parish and diocese. But to separate human lives into groups—some that we should value and protect, others that are dispensable or to whom we are permitted to be indifferent—is to create a false distinction that, I fear, is based on political expediency.

Kelly’s point is well taken: “Going back to the roots of the movement” could largely neutralize the liberal-conservative rift in the pro-life movement by energizing the movement with some much-needed consistency, rather than artificially separating abortion from other life issues which may be less palatable in certain political circles.

What is called for here by all people of good will on any side of these complex issues is no less than conversion; and as we know, such conversion is rarely easy or painless.

(REV.) MICHAEL J. FLYNN
Washington, D.C.

All the Answers

I hope that every theologian, bishop, homilist and catechist will read Rabbi Daniel F. Polish’s reflection on belief and atheism (“When a Little Unbelief Is Not a Bad Thing,” 2/2) and take it completely to heart. If there is any fundamental thing we should understand about God before we teach about him/her, it is that God is above all a mystery that we can never adequately understand

or express in human terms.

We do not have all the answers; otherwise, we would not need faith. Since our Scriptures and dogmas are expressed in human terms, they are not distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given epoch. Polish puts it well: the book of Job leaves us with a God we worship but know we will never understand.

ANDY GALLIGAN
Tracy, Calif.

From an Atheist

The calmly considered, cautionary essay by Daniel F. Polish is a welcome respite from those who profess more certainty about everything than I usually have about anything. We are all atheists about some god or another. In fact, out of all of humanity’s many tens of thousands of gods, Rabbi Polish and I are atheists on just about all of them; I’m thinking we are separated by just one more.

Perhaps Katharine Hepburn said it most succinctly: “If there is a God and I try to live a good life, then fine. If

there is no God and I try to lead a good life, then fine.”

DAVE HUNTSMAN
Cleveland, Ohio

Price Wars

“The Food on Our Tables,” by Bob Peace (1/26) was confusing to me. It seemed a knowledgeable treatise on migrant labor and its associated problems, but the sweeping generalizations and broad conclusions about American agriculture were not supported by relevant data.

Peace’s premise that American farmers sell crops abroad at “below world food prices,” thereby causing hunger in Central America, is not supported by any evidence I can find, and I am a sixth-generation miller and farmer who is involved in American agriculture. My missionary friends in that part of the world are more likely to blame the corrupt governments of the region than American farmers for high food prices.

DANIEL G. THOMAS
Thomas Mills, Pa.

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Faithfulness

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (B), MARCH 8, 2009

Readings: Gn 22:1–2, 9–18; Ps 116:10, 15–19; Rom 8:31–34; Mk 9:2–10

“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31)

What kind of parents would meekly comply with an order to kill their only child? What kind of God would ask such a thing? Disturbing questions arise from today’s first reading, which opens: “God put Abraham to the test.”

In what follows, the narrative is more like a call story. God calls Abraham by name, and, just as Samuel did (1 Sm 3:3), twice Abraham responds “Here I am!” Call stories emphasize the eagerness of a person to respond to God, as well as the great sacrifices they are asked to make for the sake of the mission. Genesis 12 records the call of Abraham and his willingness, even at the age of 75, to leave his home in Haran to journey into the unknown. Already Abraham has shown himself responsive to all that God asks; he has committed himself fully to God in a covenant (Gn 15:1–21). Unsettling questions arise as we ponder why God would demand that Abraham sacrifice his precious son, an act that would seem to make impossible the fulfillment of God’s promise of numerous descendants.

Might it be that the biblical writer is relating how Abraham continued to experience trials and tribulations, even as he tried his best to follow God’s call? Having a mindset that whatever happens is God’s doing, the writer attributes the “testing” of Abraham to

God’s intent. Did Abraham find, as we do, that even when we try to be most faithful, tragic things still happen? Or did there come a time when Isaac’s life was in jeopardy and Abraham felt responsible and helpless to protect him? What parent has not had such frightening experiences? Parents also know that loving their children demands that they be willing to let them go. All love relationships flourish only when there is freedom to let go what is most precious, so as to receive it back as a gift. Even if Abraham had lost Isaac, that would not have nullified God’s covenant of love.

The story of Abraham and Isaac invites us to reflect on times when, even though we try to be faithful, we do not hear correctly what God is saying. In rabbinic tradition, some sages have interpreted this text not as a test of Abraham, but of his misunderstanding; “What, do you think I meant for you to slay him? No! I said only to take him up...and now I say take him down” (Gen. Rab. 56:8). Practices of communal discernment offer an alternative model to that of relying on the decisions of one person who might misunderstand what God has said.

A different image of “trial” is found in the second reading. Paul paints a courtroom scene, where despite our shortcomings God acts as our advo-

cate, the one who is on our side, arguing our case. This is a God who does not need payment or any proof of our loyalty. Instead, it is God who proves how much we are loved by freely “handing over” the Son and everything else for us all. God does not “hand over” Jesus to death; rather, God “handed over” the Son to embody in human flesh God’s love for us. Paul knows that there is nothing we can do to earn or prove our love in return. He knows that charges of unfaithfulness can be brought against any of us.

Paul then shifts the image: God takes the position of judge, and the risen Christ becomes our advocate. God knows we are guilty, but always acquits us.

A love like this endures even beyond death; it is not disproved by death, as today’s



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- When you are willing to let go what is most precious to you, how does God give it back to you as gift?
- Reflect on how God is always “for us” and how divine fidelity to us enables us to be faithful.

Gospel shows. But love is costly. Today’s psalm speaks of God’s distress at the death of anyone. “Too costly in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful” (N.A.B.) renders better the connotation of “weightiness” that the Hebrew adjective *yqr* (v. 15) has than does “precious” (N.R.S.V.). A glimpse of the fullness of God’s transformative and costly love is depicted in the Gospel as Jesus continues to choose faithfulness to the divine mission, even though it will lead to his death. By listening to and following Jesus, God’s faithfulness becomes our own.

BARBARA E. REID

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