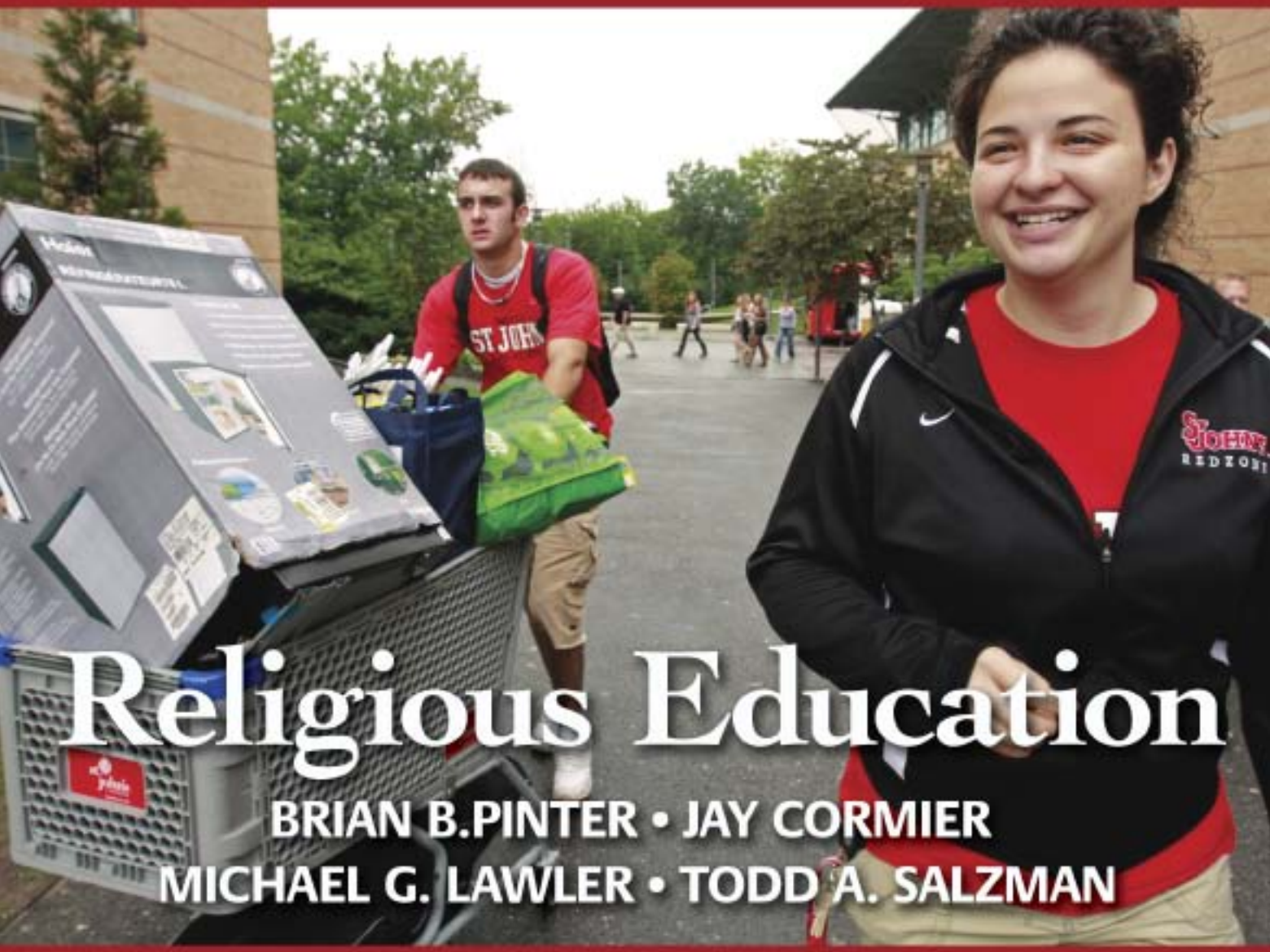
America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

SEPT. 12, 2011 $3.50



Religious Education

BRIAN B. PINTER • JAY CORMIER
MICHAEL G. LAWLER • TODD A. SALZMAN

Michael V. Tueth reviews 'The Help'

OF MANY THINGS

After 9/11 fear of Islam and of Muslims took deep hold of the American psyche. The echo chamber of our 24/7 media feeds this hostility, but as M. J. Rosenberg pointed out in a blog post last week, there is also a network of defense intellectuals and conservative funders that has been fomenting fear and hatred of Muslims (http://huff.to/o4EMXj). Without them, the summer of 2010 might have lacked major protests over the so-called ground zero mosque or legislative campaigns against Shariah law.

By chance I recently encountered what may be the best antidote to Islamophobia, *Rock the Casbah*, by the journalist Robin Wright, an account of the anti-jihadist cultural and social currents running through the Muslim world. To those who ask, "Where are the moderate Muslims?" Wright's answer is: everywhere—in countries from Morocco to Indonesia—and in every medium: in hip-hop music, among pink-hijab feminists, among poets, dramatists, comedians, satellite sheikhs and YouTube imams.

In one field after another, Wright's stories demonstrate that the world's Muslims, especially the young, want to be part of the new global village. Most of all, they reject jihadism, violence and extremist interpretations of their faith. Even as they seek to seize their rights and dignity from authoritarian rulers, they also want to find their own way as Muslims in the modern world.

For me, the eye-opening essay was Wright's chapter "Hip-Hop Islam." I am no fan of hip-hop, but I can't ignore its popularity as a musical form. Wright acknowledges, moreover, that rap has had a hard time escaping the violent, sexist, street-gang culture from which it arose. While they too have grown up amid violence, Muslim hip-hop artists are using the music to spread a message of nonviolence. "Hip-hop," she writes, "is the counter-jihad in a nimble cadence." The Palestinian group DAM sings:

Keep asking for a life full of equality.
And if someone asks you to hate,
say no.
I am the child of today, the trans-
formation of tomorrow.

The Somali-born rapper K'naan, Wright reports, has become a "rapper-philosopher." In "Take a Minute," he explores how redemption may be found in the most desperate of situations. Meditating on the selfless examples of Mandela and Gandhi, he sings:

Tell 'em the truth is what my dead
homies told me,
I take inspiration from the most
heinous situations,
Creating medications out of my
own tribulations.
Dear Africa, you helped me write
this,
By showing that to give is priceless.

Muslim hip-hop is a success because poetry is still a valued mode of expression in Arab-speaking lands. One of Wright's heroes is the Saudi poet Hissa Hilal, who came to prominence on a televised poetry slam, "The Millions' Poet." Dressed from head to foot in a highly conservative black niqab, she shocked an approving audience with radical criticism of the intolerance of Muslim clerics:

I have seen evil from the eyes
Of the subversive fatwas
In a time when what is permitted
Is confused with what is forbidden.

Challenging the imams' support for suicide bombers, she declaimed:

When I unveiled the truth,
A monster appears from his hiding
place;
Barbaric in thinking and action,
Angry and blind;
Wearing death and a dress
And covering it with a suicide belt.

If you read one book this year on Islam, let it be *Rock the Casbah*.

DREW CHRISTIANSEN, S.J.

America

Published by Jesuits of the United States

106 West 56th Street
New York, NY 10019-3803

Ph: 212-581-4640; Fax: 212-399-3596

E-mail: america@americamagazine.org;
letters@americamagazine.org
Web site: www.americamagazine.org.
Customer Service: 1-800-627-9533

Cover: The vice president of student government at St. John's University in Jamaica, N.Y., Christina Zaccarelli, right, helps a new student during freshman move-in day. CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz.

Contents

www.americamagazine.org VOL. 205 NO. 6, WHOLE NO. 4943 SEPTEMBER 12, 2011


16


23


26

ARTICLES

COLUMNS & DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS & CULTURE

ON THE WEB

Christopher Pramuk revisits the album "The Rising," by **Bruce Springsteen,** right, on the anniversary of Sept. 11. Plus, **bishops and theologians** discuss the role of theology, and Brian B. Pinter talks about **youth ministry** on our podcast. All at americamagazine.org.

Art and Toil

This month, in which the nation honors working men and women, the American worker, whose skills and sweat have built this country, seems especially vulnerable. Not only has organized labor run up against governors in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio and New Hampshire determined to weaken collective bargaining, but 25 million Americans cannot find full-time jobs.

An 11-panel, 36-foot-wide mural painted by Judy Taylor could inspire them with its ennobling depictions of Maine's workers, including its children before the enactment of child labor laws. Since 2008 the mural graced the lobby of the state's Department of Labor, but last spring the governor, Paul LePage, had it removed. He said he received complaints that the mural was "pro-union" and "propaganda." And his administration has a pro-business agenda.

Removal of the mural brought federal litigation, still unresolved, over the public's access to the art. Because of Internet attention, millions outside Maine have now seen photos of the mural. One panel depicts Frances Perkins, the U.S. secretary of labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt and the first female cabinet member in American history. The president and Ms. Perkins (who is buried in Maine) have been beloved by millions for creating millions of jobs during the Depression and for setting up other protections for workers: Social Security, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, the 40-hour work week and the right to organize.

Catholic support for workers and organized labor became bedrock social teaching with "Rerum Novarum," Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical. Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., head of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, quoted it in his Labor Day statement. The encyclical "lifted up the inherent dignity of the worker in the midst of massive economic changes," he said, adding that the pope issued a "prophetic call for the church to support workers' associations for the protection of workers and the advancement of the common good." Workers need to hear Pope Leo's words and to see art like Judy Taylor's mural.

Time of the Preacher

Eight minutes, tops. That is how long an average Sunday sermon should last, according to the Rev. Roy Shelly of the Loyola Institute for Ministry in New Orleans. On weekdays, sermons should be even shorter: three to five minutes. The goal is not to shorten the liturgy, as some restless pew sitters may wish, but to be succinct and stay on point. It is much more difficult to speak for eight minutes, Shelly says, than to preach for 20. In the words of Archbishop Fulton Sheen: "If you want me to speak for an hour, I'm ready. If you want me to speak for 10 minutes, I'll need a week."

In workshops with preachers, Father Shelly employs a neat teaching tool. First he asks the preacher to summarize his message in one sentence. After the sermon is delivered, parishioners are asked to write down a one-sentence summary of what they heard. These are collected and reviewed later by the preacher.

In addition to brevity, preachers should be persuaded to stay focused on the week's readings. Avoid using the pulpit to speak about service trips or the March for Life. There are other times and places to address such subjects. Well-prepared, Scripturally grounded sermons are essential to a good liturgy. They could both satisfy a spiritual thirst and bring disaffected Catholics back to the pews.

Competitive Conservation

Two dozen states have spent federal stimulus dollars to upgrade the energy efficiency of their public schools. So high are the returns on these investments that other states are making loans to their school districts so they, too, can conserve energy.

Conservation pays. According to recent news reports, New York City schools have reduced their energy expenses by 11 percent since 2008. The schools installed motion detectors in classrooms to turn lights on and off, unplugged refrigerators and freezers in summer and used long-lasting light bulbs. With more than 1,000 schools in the city, the savings are significant. On Long Island, a single school district saved $350,000 on energy last year; using sticky notes, an energy manager placed a message to turn out the lights on every light switch and "ticketed" those who failed to comply. Nearly half the school districts on Long Island have hired energy consultants.

Ways to save energy should be widely broadcast, imitated and improved by others. The Environmental Protection Agency has already thought of one way and is now sponsoring its second national contest among commercial buildings (hospitals, banks, schools and churches), which waste some $300 million in energy each year. Called the Battle of the Buildings, the contest has attracted 245 contenders, who have saved $3.7 million at the halfway mark. Winners will be announced in November.

Surely private foundations, environmental organizations and corporations could also sponsor energy-saving competitions.

Libyan Freedom

The unexpectedly rapid fall of Tripoli revealed one unambiguous winner: the Libyan people. Armed sometimes only with hope and frustration, they set in motion a sometimes haphazard resistance that brought an end to Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's 42-year regime. Media speculation about whether President Obama's Libyan policy counts now as a political victory for him is beside the point. The relatively quick collapse of the loyalist forces in the capital city, accelerated by the active participation of its residents, made clear, were there any doubts, that this uprising was a mass revolt of the Libyan people. Their heroism in vindicating their own rights should not be demeaned.

Another "victor" in the conflict has been the case for multilateralism. President Obama's decision to approve a limited role for U.S. forces in the international effort to oust the colonel was much derided by critics from the left and the right as simultaneously too much and too little. Confidence in multilateralism may be restored by the outcome in Libya. The patience and effort to put together a real coalition not only saved U.S. face and finances; it also spread the risk and the burden of the use of force in a manner that was deemed acceptable to all parties.

And the success of the Libyan uprising is more than another flower in the Arab Spring. It is a palm of achievement for the novel international doctrine of the responsibility to protect. Endorsed by major powers, including the United States, at the 2005 U.N. World Summit, R2P still lacks full support from politicians and policymakers in some countries. It proposes that the world community has an obligation to intervene when a state fails to respond appropriately to a humanitarian catastrophe or, worse, is itself an agent of genocide or crimes against humanity within its own borders. The doctrine has emerged in recent years out of abject failures to intervene in Rwanda, the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Colonel Qaddafi's threat to reduce Benghazi to the Stone Age was the R2P-based justification for the NATO air campaign. (It was pretty clear from the beginning, however, that NATO was inclined to put an end to Qaddafi's rule.) Until now the enforcement provisions of R2P had not been applied. Emphasis has been instead, appropriately, on prevention and on reconstruction after conflict. Now the utility of a limited use of force as part of R2P has been vindicated in the skies over Tripoli, and the ability of NATO to play a useful international role, even without U.S. leadership, has been demonstrated.

Still, the success in Libya of the doctrine of the responsibility to protect presents two dangers. The air campaign was costly and hazardous both to service members put in harm's way and to the reputations of politicians and republics alike that participated. The air campaign also took significantly longer than anticipated. Qaddafi proved more durable than expected; but so, too, did NATO's ad hoc Libyan coalition. The length of the air campaign contributed both to its expense and to the risk that it would turn ugly and thus diplomatically damaging. Those concerns may still cause hesitation in the face of the obligations of R2P when the next humanitarian crisis arises.

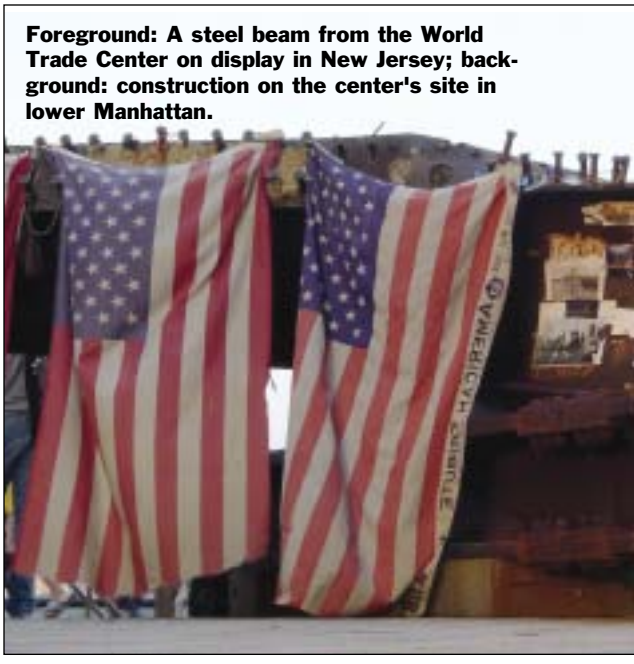
A related danger is that success may prove intoxicating to some, who may rush into the next intervention without properly assessing the risks and possible outcomes. Some may come to see R2P as an international obligation to be met merely or most effectively through a military response. But the doctrine remains best served by proactive, nonlethal diplomatic persuasion, economic pressure and peacebuilding initiatives.

The outcome in Libya remains far from certain. It is no longer in danger of becoming another Syria, where government forces repress dissent. But will it become like Iraq, riven with sectarian and tribal violence, or like Turkey, where a moderate Muslim government exercises power in a democratic state? The character of the new Libyan state will depend only in part on the political will and practical commitments of the world community to the Libyan people. By opening up frozen Libyan assets, the United Nations has made it possible for Libyans to avoid a humanitarian disaster in the wake of the conflict. Libya will have the means to procure what the nation needs. Returning expatriates and a restored civil service, however, can bring the nation only so far. A new constitution must be drafted and the rule of law established. In addition, measures need to be taken to reestablish trade with its neighbors and to diversify an economy too reliant on oil exports. Winning the armed struggle was the easy part; securing the peace and building a nation will be harder. In this new effort, it will befit the United States to maintain the reduced profile that President Obama set during the armed struggle.

LIBYAN YOUTHS CELEBRATE NEAR TRIPOLI, AUG. 23. CNS PHOTO/ISMAIL ZITOUNY, REUTERS

SEPTEMBER 11

Tenth Anniversary Prompts Spiritual Reflection



Foreground: A steel beam from the World Trade Center on display in New Jersey; background: construction on the center's site in lower Manhattan.

As Chief Joseph W. Pfeifer of the New York City Fire Department sees it, the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, provides a transformative opportunity for the world community to pause and think about the tragedy's spiritual dimension and its aftermath. On Sept. 11, 2001, Pfeifer was chief of the 1st Battalion, one of the first on the scene and in charge of directing firefighter response in the north tower of the World Trade Center.

"People were angry at God and they had every right to be, but that was not my experience," Pfeifer said. His brother, Lt. Kevin Pfeifer of the F.D.N.Y., died at the World Trade Center that day. "I was walking back to the firehouse from the site on the second day, when we knew there would be no more survivors. It was completely dark except for the lights we had brought in. There was no power and there was smoke everywhere.

"Instead of anger, I felt an encounter, as if I were coming back to an old friend, or putting on an old sweatshirt," he remembered. "How do you encounter spirituality and what is your personal experience of God? Mine was very much on West Street, walking back in complete sadness, but it was a place I'd been to before."

Pfeifer is currently the fire department's chief of counterterrorism and emergency preparedness and addresses groups of people in many parts of the world. "We used to think the 9/11 attacks were just New York and D.C.,

U.S. BISHOPS

Annual Statement Seeks Common Ground on Labor Day

The annual Labor Day statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops may prove notable this year because of observations that in the past would hardly raise an eyebrow. It includes a thorough reiteration of the U.S. church's historical support of organized labor and an acknowledgment of the American labor movement's intricate relationship with the U.S church.

Penned by Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., "Human Costs and Moral Challenges of a Broken Economy" notes the long tradition of support for organized labor in Catholic social teaching. Since "Rerum Novarum" in 1891, "the Church has consistently supported efforts of workers to join together to defend their rights and protect their dignity," Bishop Blaire writes.

The tension surrounding the issue of the collective bargaining rights of public sector workers across the country was an obvious focus of the statement. Bishop Blaire notes "some efforts, as part of broader disputes over state budgets, to remove or restrict the rights of workers to collective bargaining as well as limit the role of unions in the workplace." He commends bishops in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere who outlined Catholic teaching on worker rights, "suggesting that difficult times should not lead us to ignore the legitimate rights of workers."

Although the church did not endorse "every tactic of unions or every outcome of collective bargaining," Bishop Blaire writes that it still affirms "the rights of workers in public and private employment to choose to come together to form and join unions, to bargain collectively, and to have an effective voice in the workplace."

Perhaps anticipating an outburst of criticism from certain quarters of the church that have become doubtful about the legitimacy of the social role of organized labor, Bishop Blaire adds, "This does not mean every outcome of

and Pennsylvania, but they were more than that," he said. "It was a global trauma; an entire world-encounter and transformation occurred" when people could see that all local acts of terrorism, whether in Ireland or Israel or Afghanistan, were represented at the World Trade Center. "It gave the victims of terrorism an international voice and showed that terrorism is a crime against humanity," he said.

People encounter spirituality in different ways, he said, and the 10th anniversary will allow people to connect their individual experiences with those of people in a larger group. One such larger group devastated by the Sept. 11 attacks lives in Rockaway Peninsula, at the southwest tip of the Diocese of Brooklyn, home to firefighters, police officers, emergency responders and financiers. Seventy residents were killed in the disaster.

Msgr. Martin T. Geraghty was pastor of St. Francis de Sales in Belle Harbor in 2001. Twelve of the World Trade Center victims were buried from that church. On Nov. 12, three days after the last funeral, Msgr. Geraghty was celebrating the 9 a.m. Mass when an American Airlines flight bound for the Dominican Republic crashed one block from the church, killing all 260 people on the plane and five on the ground, including parishioners.

"At Christmas 2001, a friend from Michigan asked if I was 'over it yet,'" Msgr. Geraghty said. "I told him it'll never be over for us. It has been a defining moment in the lives of families here." He said, "There is an ongoing role for people. The message of the Gospel didn't become irrelevant that day. We're just at the beginning; 2,000 years hasn't been long enough for our tribal human hearts to absorb the message of Jesus Christ."

"We're at the beginning of this. God is calling us out of tribalism into a different understanding," he said.

bargaining is responsible or that all actions of particular unions—or for that matter employers—merit support. Unions, like other human institutions, can be misused or can abuse their role."

The annual message arrives at a difficult time for organized labor in the United States. The pensions, health benefits and collective bargaining rights of public sector workers are being challenged across the country during a period of continuing union decline. While they may still represent a little over 32 percent of public sector workers, unions represent just 6.9 percent of the private workforce and altogether just about 11 percent of the total U.S. workforce, far below their historic highs.

Bishop Blaire's qualified renewal of vows with organized labor will no doubt be welcomed by unionized laypeople, even if it promotes teeth-grinding elsewhere. But further along in the statement is Bishop Blaire's perhaps most poignant insight into the nation's recent dilemmas related to the economy. "Sometimes economic troubles bring out the worst in us," he wrote. "Uncertainty and fear compel us to fight for our own interests and to preserve our own advantages."

How can Catholics interrupt such dysfunctional cycles? Bishop Blaire writes: "We can understand and act like we are part of one economy, one nation, and one human family.... We can clearly respect the legitimacy and roles of others in economic life: business and labor, private enterprise and public institutions, for-profit and nonprofit, religious and academic, community and government.... We can look for common ground and seek the common good."

Public sector workers on the job during Hurricane Irene in Asbury Park, N.J., on Aug. 28.

U.S. Childhood Gets Poor Grades

The Anne E. Casey Foundation released its "2011 Kids Count Data Book" on Aug. 17, and it did not make for encouraging reading. According to the report, after showing historic improvement in the period 1996 to 2000, when the child poverty rate fell by nearly 30 percent, the condition of children in the United States has been in significant decline. The cause is not hard to identify: growing national poverty. Anne E. Casey's researchers report: "The economic recession of the past few years effectively wiped out all of the gains we made in cutting child poverty in the late 1990s." In 2009, 20 percent of children (14.7 million) were growing up poor, up from 17 percent in 2000. As the jobless recovery continues, just about every state in the nation recorded increasing numbers of children growing up in households without a breadwinner, a startling 31 percent of U.S. families in 2008.

Be Not Afraid, Middle East Christians

"There is great uncertainty and great fear" among Christians in Egypt and Syria, said Pierbattista Pizzaballa, O.F.M., on Aug. 24. But Christians should take courage. "We must not be afraid...to say how things really are with clarity, but also maintaining a Christian attitude of witness, openness, welcome and trying in every case to reconstruct dialogue and relationships," he said, speaking during a conference sponsored by the Communion and Liberation movement in Rimini, Italy. The changes sweeping through countries across North Africa and extending to Syria obviously give rise to hopes, but also concerns, he said. "Right now in Egypt there is much fear and uncertainty because, after a period of euphoria" and unity after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, "it seems that the more fundamentalist parties are prevailing," he said. In Syria, "Christians were and still are treated with great respect," but the protest movements against the government have led to concerns that the respect they were guaranteed for decades may be threatened.

Church Membership Trends Downward

A brief report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., offers some statistics worth worrying over. For only the second time period since 1947, the annual number of people entering the church has dropped below one million. The Great Recession appears to have had a significant effect on U.S. fertility, and infant baptisms have tracked that overall decline. And now hastening the descent below one million has been a still unexplained collapse of "non-infant entries" (teens and adults) into the church that began in 2001. A CARA researcher noted that "something happened" the following year, beginning the decline. That something may not have been the crisis of sexual abuse by clergy, because numbers of non-infant entries actually went up briefly during the height of that trauma in 2002 and 2004. But the decline has been just about constant since then.

From CNS and other sources.

NEWS BRIEFS

Damage at the National Cathedral

The National Cathedral in Washington and St. Patrick's Church in Baltimore, Md., were among the structures left with the most serious damage after a **5.8 magnitude earthquake** struck Virginia on Aug. 23. ✦ Church leaders in southern India who hoped to "curb the flow of liquor in Kerala" opposed the state's liberalized liquor policy with a **24-hour fast** on Aug. 24. ✦ The retired auxiliary bishop of Hartford, **Peter A. Rosazza,** warned in an opinion piece published on Aug. 21 that "budget cuts that negate assistance to our cities" could make U.S. urban areas "ripe for explosive riots such as those we saw in the 1960s." ✦ Zambia's **President Rupiah Banda**, for years criticized by retired Bishop Paul Duffy for neglecting the nation's poor, expressed sorrow upon hearing of the bishop's death on Aug. 23. ✦ After a tour of the new Republic of South Sudan, **Janice McLaughlin, M.M.**, president of the U.S.-based Maryknoll Sisters, urged its leaders to set as its priorities peacemaking, reconciliation and efforts to disarm and demobilize ex-combatants.

To My Dear Daughter

My Daughter, My Heart, My Love 3-Diamond Pendant

Inscribed with "My Daughter, My Heart, My Love"

Solid Sterling Silver Heart with 3 Genuine Diamonds suspends from an 18" Sterling Silver Chain

She's the greatest blessing of your life. Share with her the words that are in your heart along with a precious gift of silver and diamonds! This exclusively designed pendant is sure to be treasured forever by your wonderful daughter. Available at the remarkable price of just $99*, you can pay in 4 easy installments of just $24.75 each. The pendant comes with a Certificate of Authenticity and is backed by our 120-day guarantee. To reserve, send no money now; just fill out and mail the Reservation Application today.

My Daughter, My Heart, My Love

You bring me such joy
in so many ways,
like a warm, radiant sun
That brightens my days
Your beauty, your confidence
your spirit so strong,
all shine from within
like a wonderful song.
Your talent, your grace
the gifts that you share,
with faith and with wisdom,
show the way that you care.
Your plans and your dreams
for what's yet to be...
your ideas for the future,
are the hopes shared with me
So I'll love you forever
because right from the start
you filled me with love
and put a smile on my heart.
You're my beautiful Daughter—
a promise come true
God gave me a miracle
when He gave me you.

Comes in a custom-designed keepsake case that includes the touching poem shown above

A Fine Jewelry Exclusive from The Bradford Exchange

LIMITED-TIME OFFER

*Reservations will be accepted on a **first-come, first-served basis**. Respond as soon as possible to reserve your "My Daughter, My Love" 3-Diamond Pendant.*

Shown actual size

*Plus $8.98 shipping and service. Please allow 4-6 weeks after initial payment for shipment of your jewelry. Sales subject to product availability and order acceptance.

RESERVATION APPLICATION **SEND NO MONEY NOW**

THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE JEWELRY

9345 Milwaukee Avenue · Niles, IL 60714-1393

YES. Please reserve the **"My Daughter, My Heart, My Love" 3-Diamond Pendant** for me as described in this announcement.

Signature _____

Mrs. Mr. Ms. _____
Name (Please Print Clearly)

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

E-Mail (optional) _____

01-12297-001-E39411

www.bradfordexchange.com

MARGARET SILF

Risking the Darkness

A Sufi story tells about a man who lost his keys one night in the street outside his house. Desperate to find them, he made for the nearest lamppost, which shed a small pool of light on the ground. A long time passed, and the man had no success. Eventually a passerby joined him.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"I have lost my keys," came the reply.

"I'll help you," offered the passerby. Soon others joined the search until quite a crowd was there, circling the lamppost. Time wore on and still no keys.

"I don't think your keys are here. Are you sure you lost them here?" asked one of the helpers.

"Oh, no," the man replied. "I lost them over there in that dark corner."

"So why are you searching for them here?" his helper asked.

The man answered: "Because this is where the light is."

Ten years ago on a bright sunny, September morning, we lost something very precious. We lost our sense of security. We lost our trust in one another, in our world, perhaps even in God. We lost a great deal of tolerance and willingness to be present to the "other." We lost these things in a very dark and painful place. And perhaps we have been searching for them ever since. Like the people in the story, we walk around in desperate circles within a patch of light, and yet we will find what we seek only by daring to go beyond the narrow circle of light into the deep dark.

The darkness continues to sneak away with our lost pearls of great price. It stalks through the Middle East, concealing our humanity and our compassion. It slithers through the corridors of power, wearing its beguiling disguise of market forces and easy credit and wreaks havoc in the lives of the poorest among us.

And still we walk in circles around the tiny pool of light that our inadequate minds and hearts can shed. We will not find what we are looking for in these narrow circles of flickering light. But what would it mean to go and look for what is lost in the place where we lost it—in the darkness?

Ten years ago this September we lost something very precious.

If I find myself in conflict with someone, how do I get to the root of the problem? I might complain to my friends or try to gather support for my side of the argument. I will have an armory of excuses to justify my own behavior, and because I am human I will exercise my unlimited ability to delude myself. I am searching in the light of my very small lamppost for a harmony that I actually lost in the dark, when what I really need to do is approach my adversary and genuinely listen to another point of view. I do not want to go there!

If I have lost my peace of mind by surrendering to the seductions of a "spend now, pay later" culture, I might try to search for it by taking out yet another loan and surrendering even more of my freedom to my creditors. My little pool of light offers me this apparently easy way to keep going along this primrose path. Meanwhile my real freedom lies where I first lost it—in the darkness. To regain it, I will have to go there and discover what I do not want to know—that my freedom lies in living within my means, repaying what I owe and adjusting my lifestyle accordingly.

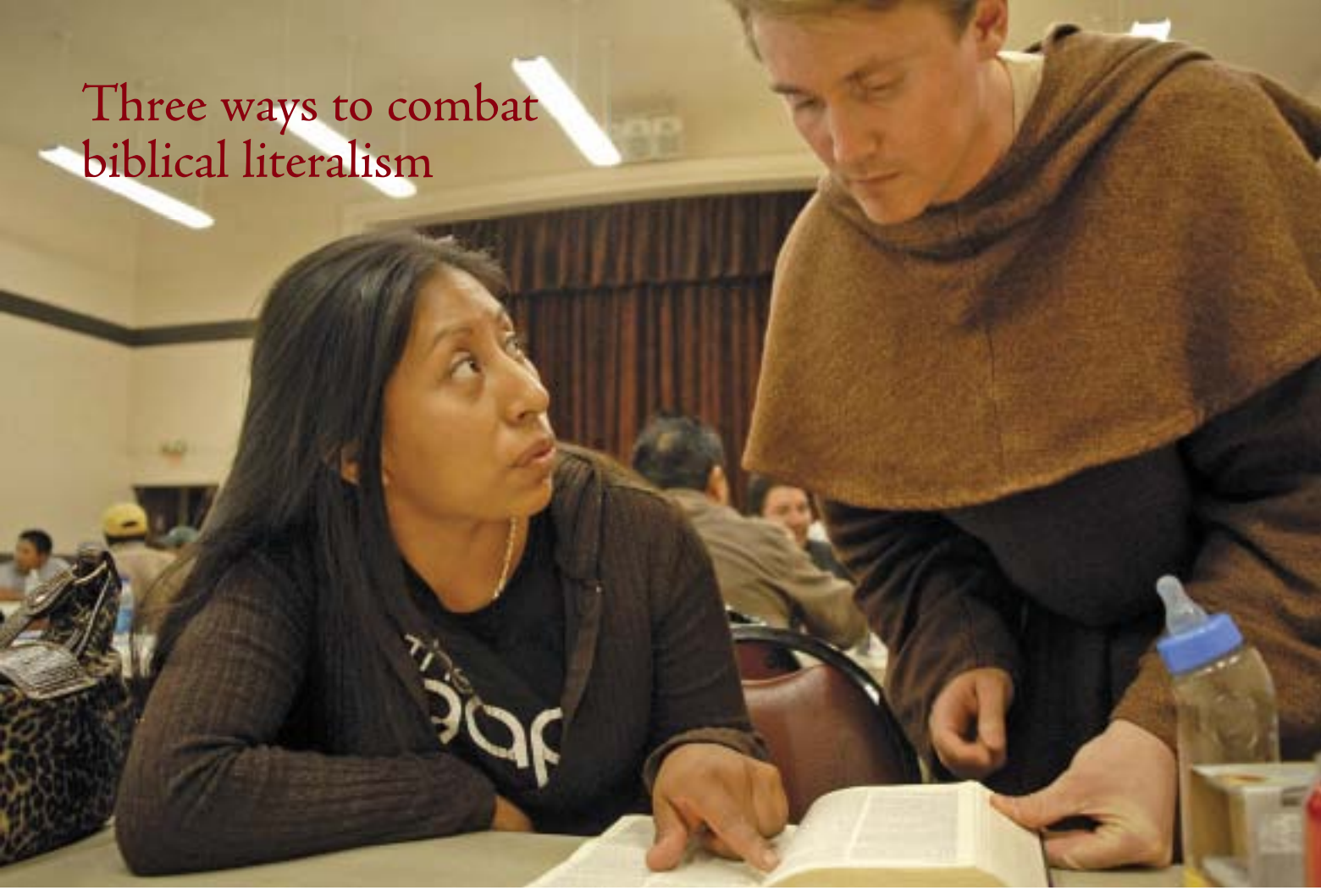
If I have lost my health and my shape through over-indulgence, I might search for it by spending money I cannot afford on easy "cures," special diets and books that promise to melt away my pounds in days. But to find what I have lost, I will have to go into the dark place where I lost it and discover that it can be recovered only through self-discipline and exercise. And I do not want to go there either!

No one wants to go into the dark. How would we begin to search for that lost treasure where there is no light? God's answer is clear. God offers us a light that shines in the darkness and that the darkness can never extinguish. All that is asked of us is the courage to take that first step into the darkness we dread, to make the first phone call suggesting a conciliatory meeting, to make that first resolve to reverse the process of unbridled acquisition.

And, for myself, I can say that I find the key into this necessary darkness only when I withdraw to a quiet place, stop the frenzied searching and listen, instead, for the still small voice of God.

MARGARET SILF *lives in Scotland. Her latest books are* Roots and Wings, The Way of Wisdom *and* Compass Points.

Three ways to combat biblical literalism



A Fundamental Challenge

BY BRIAN B. PINTER

Above: Christopher Loyek, a Franciscan brother, helps Maria Pascual study the Bible.

I led a Bible study series recently at a parish in Manhattan, where most of the participants were hip, advanced-degree-holding professionals. I worked hard to prepare for the classes, and during my presentations on the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis I used the best of historical-critical exegesis by respected Catholic scholars. We explored the differences among various literary forms, examined the historical contexts in which the Genesis accounts took shape and considered the function of foundation myths in ancient Near Eastern cultures. When the participants raised questions about scientific theories concerning the origins of the universe and humankind, I made reference to the 2004 statement by the Vatican-sponsored International Theological Commission, which spoke positively about the Big Bang theory. I also quoted Pope John Paul II's affirming remarks on the theory of evolution.

Nonetheless, a number of individuals were shocked at the suggestion that the first and second chapters of Genesis did not contain literal, historically accurate accounts of creation. One woman protested, saying, "How do you know the world wasn't made that way? You

PHOTO: CNS PHOTO/DAVID MAUNG

BRIAN B. PINTER *is the director of campus ministry at Regis High School in New York and a graduate student in Bible at The General Theological Seminary in New York City.*

can't prove otherwise!" Another was flabbergasted that I did not affirm the historicity of the talking serpent in Genesis 3: "Are you saying that God can't create a talking snake?" Finally, an irate young man sent me e-mail to tell me, among other things, that my treatment of Genesis had no place in a Catholic parish and that I should consider becoming Protestant.

I attempted to reassure those who took exception to my nonliteralist approach by emphasizing that the ideas I taught were based not on my personal opinions but on the best of contemporary Catholic scholarship and on the tradition of the church. A few asked me, "If this is Catholic teaching, how come I've never heard it before?"

The Catholic Literalists

While Catholic scholarship has moved beyond literalism in its interpretation of the Bible, many of the faithful have not. Familiarizing Catholics with the Bible and its interpretation is a contining challenge. According to many studies, Catholics are among the most biblically illiterate Americans. While teaching Bible basics remains a major task, a more pressing and troublesome concern is the growth among Catholics of biblical literalism, also known as biblical fundamentalism. Fundamentalists assert that the Bible is without historical or scientific error and should be read literally in all its details. According to a 2007 Gallup survey, 21 percent of U.S. Catholics identify themselves as biblical literalists. Considering that the Pontifical Biblical Commission pointed out in 1993 that "fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide," this percentage is not insignificant.

The fundamentalist positions assumed by many Catholics today could be described as unconscious or naïve. Most Catholics who are literal readers of the Bible do not realize that this method is not a part of their faith tradition and that such interpretations have been repeatedly discouraged by Catholic scholars, pastors and bishops.

Three causes for this "unconscious fundamentalism" deserve attention: the association of religiosity with biblical literalism in American culture, a failure to explore the question: "What is the Bible?" and, finally, ignorance of the Catholic tradition's reason-based approach to biblical interpretation.

Consider the first cause: the culture. Nearly one-third of the U.S. population holds that the Bible is the literal word of God. In the public square, one's religiosity is often judged by how well one knows the Bible. The media are fond of pitting biblical fundamentalists who defend the "truth" of Scripture against those who see the Bible as nothing more than a collection of ancient fables and myths. One need only recall the publicity surrounding the case of Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District, which challenged a school's policy of teaching intelligent design in science classes, or Alabama gubernatorial candidate Bradley Byrne, who was lambasted by his opponents for suggesting that not all the Bible was meant to be read literally. Many Catholics, fearing a secular attack on the inerrancy of Scripture, see literalism as the only way to protect the sanctity of the Bible.

Since most Catholics have very little experience reading and interpreting the Bible, they default to inadequate notions of what Scripture is. Many Americans, Catholics among them, see the Bible as a rule book, a play book or a user's manual for life. These designations lead one to believe that the Bible has all or most of the answers to life's questions. But as Prof. Dale B. Martin of Yale University, author of *Pedagogy of the Bible*, notes, if the Bible is a rule book, "it is an awfully confusing and incomplete one." As for the Bible as user's manual, says Martin, "it needed a better author and editor. And unlike really useful owner's manuals, our Bible came to us without illustrations." People of mature faith require a more nuanced approach to Scripture than these popular but simplistic definitions can provide.

A former student of mine now studying at St. Louis University had this to say about the problem of biblical literalism: "It's sad that fundamentalism still persists among some Catholics. Reading the Bible that way misses out on so much of the church's rich tradition of biblical interpretation." For Catholics, reading the Bible has always been an exercise of both head and heart.

While we Catholics believe that God is speaking to us through the words of Scripture, we recognize that we must use our powers of reason to discern the meaning of those words. Contemporary methods of Catholic biblical interpretation, for example, are informed by the findings of archaeology, historical and cultural studies of the biblical periods and the analysis of the texts in their original Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic languages.

Complementing this scientific approach are the spiritual insights into the Bible given us by the patristic writers as well as the saints and mystics. This tradition of scholarship and spirituality serves as a rich resource in our quest to unlock the meaning of Scripture. Unfortunately, many Catholics remain unaware of it.

What Is the Bible?

Religious educators, Bible-study leaders and preachers can counter the three causes of fundamentalism by keeping in mind a few principles and strategies.

First, those who are responsible for teaching the Bible to children and adults must be well qualified and trained. Too often biblical literalism is promoted by inadequately prepared catechists. By second grade, for example, most children know that *The Cat in the Hat* is a different kind of

book than *Who Was Abraham Lincoln?* Yet too few adults are taught that the creation accounts of Genesis are to be read differently than the Gospels, which in turn cannot be read in the same way as the Book of Revelation. Unnuanced, uncritical reading of Scripture is what in part defines the literalist approach. While it would be unwise to try to teach contextual methods of biblical interpretation to children, they still must be given a foundation in interpreting the Bible on which they can build later, not faulty or misleading information they will have to correct later on.

Toward the goal of improving the quality of Bible instruction, some dioceses have instituted comprehensive, multi-year training programs that cover every book of the Old and New Testaments as well as methods of interpretation. This type of preparation is invaluable. Strong formation does more than head off problems. It equips those who teach the Bible to address the challenging questions about biblical texts that both children and adults are sure to raise. Students can easily become frustrated with Bible study if teachers consistently respond to questions with the stock answer: "It's a mystery." Proper training can help to avoid this unsatisfying and often unnecessary bromide.

Second, Catholics must be invited to engage the question, "What is the Bible?" Professor Martin has proposed that we think of Scripture as a sacred space we enter, like a church or cathedral. The Bible functions in much the same way as a sacred building: its very presence orients us toward God; and once we enter, we find many things inside to contemplate. A church building communicates the story of the Christian experience of God, past and present, through a variety of media—stained glass, statuary, paintings and icons. Likewise Scripture invites us to contemplate God's communication to us through such methods as historical narratives, poetry, wisdom sayings, prophecy, apocalypse and letters. As with our experience of a beautiful worship space, encountering the Bible alone will be different than when the community is gathered to hear it.

When we encounter Scripture as a sacred space, says Martin, we are "moving around in its communicative richness, allowing our imaginations, our very selves, to be changed by the experience." This model can also accommodate the variety of interpretive methods that are a part of the Catholic tradition. Like artwork in a cathedral, the individual or community is free to interpret Scripture through historical and spiritual lenses. In this way the words of the Bible, like a piece of religious art, can say something about the original author's intention as well as the meaning being discerned by contemporary readers.

ON THE WEB
A conversation with Brian B. Pinter.
americamagazine.org/podcast

Third, Catholic leaders and teachers must work proactively to engage the faithful with the Scripture texts of the Lectionary. The liturgical reforms derived from the Second Vatican Council have brought more of the word of God to the people; but many preachers still shy away from using the Lectionary as a biblical teaching tool. Instead, sermons are more often used for expounding on points of doctrine or addressing contemporary moral issues. As an alternative, preachers might use their exegetical skills to connect the themes of the readings of a particular day or of the liturgical season. In this way the Lectionary could be used to nourish the life of the congregation and help the faithful to see that the Bible has much to say about everyday living as a disciple of Jesus.

The Bible has an undeniable appeal—even non-Christians find it enriching and fascinating. The church can capitalize on this. We must remember, however, that there is a Catholic way of reading the Bible, and it is not literalism. Above all, our church wants people to read the Bible in a way that encourages them to "grow in grace and knowledge" while avoiding "distorted" and "destructive" interpretations (2 Pt 3:16, 18). The Catholic tradition of biblical interpretation invites us to engage Scripture critically and spiritually. This approach allows us to encounter the Bible in a manner that respects both its complexity and the challenge of applying God's word to modern life. A

Beyond Catechesis

What is the proper role of theology?

BY MICHAEL G. LAWLER AND TODD A. SALZMAN

When Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix accused St. Joseph's Hospital of performing a direct abortion to save the life of a mother and withdrew its status as a Catholic hospital, a question was raised: Could any such perceived lack of fidelity to Catholic teaching be applied to Catholic universities as well? The question is especially pertinent because the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is approaching its 10-year review of the application of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution on the Catholic university. What if the U.S. bishops were to apply the Phoenix standards to the teaching and research of Catholic theologians?

If it comes to this, bishops and presidents of Catholic colleges and universities may want to keep in mind an essential distinction between catechesis (as in catechism) and the academic discipline of theology.

The tendency among members of the hierarchy is not to make this distinction, a tendency evident in a recent statement by the U.S.C.C.B. Committee on Doctrine that evaluated *Quest for the Living God*, a book by Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J. The committee concluded that the book "contains misrepresentations, ambiguities, and errors that bear upon the faith of the Catholic Church…." In support of Sister Johnson, the board of directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America issued a brief response: While the bishops' statement recognizes "the complementary but distinct vocations of the theologian and the Magisterium," the C.T.S.A. was troubled that the statement "seems to reflect a very narrow understanding of the theological task." This narrow understanding appears to reduce the theological task of the theologian to catechesis. This same understanding of the theologian's role is present in the "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1990, the same year as "Ex Corde Ecclesiae."

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE C.T.S.A.

Faces of theology: Peter Phan, Maria Pilar Aquino and Bryan Massingale at a C.T.S.A. convention

The Charism of the Theologian

The instruction begins by emphasizing that the discipline of theology is "important for the church in every age" as a means

MICHAEL G. LAWLER *is professor emeritus and* **TODD A. SALZMAN** *is a professor of Catholic theology at Creighton University, Omaha, Neb.*

to a deeper "understanding of the realities and the words handed on" in Catholic tradition. The document refers vaguely to "moments of crisis and tension" and never specifies the nature of the theologian's charism until it addresses dissent, but it does note that theology "offers its contribution so that the faith might be communicated" (No. 7).

It is easy to conclude that the instruction identifies the theologian's charism, as did Pope Pius XII, with catechesis. The great 20th-century ecclesiologist Yves Congar, O.P., agrees that the charism of *didaskalos*, or teacher, in the primitive church was more like catechesis than scientific theology. But he also points out that the theological schools that developed and flourished in the second and third centuries and thereafter moved away from catechesis to speculative thought on the nature of the faith and salvation. Tension developed between the theologians' speculation and statements that were traced to apostolic succession. Defining the charism of the theologian in terms of catechesis in the instruction and locating this definition in the section on dissent appear to send a message: To avoid conflicts with the magisterium that may lead to investigation and censure, the theologian should focus his or her efforts on explaining and defending magisterial positions.

Nevertheless, the distinction remains important. "Catechesis is an education in the faith…which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted…in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 5). Theology may include catechesis, but it is also more than that. Theology uses scholarly principles not only to communicate the truths of faith but also to explore the meanings of those truths and contemporary ways of articulating them.

Theologians as Mediators

Theologians play a mediating role between the magisterium and the faithful. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., explains that this two-way mediation is "from the faith, culture and questionings of the people toward the magisterium; and from the pronouncements of the magisterium back to the people." The first mediation takes place before magisterial pronouncements are issued; it requires theologians to do the preparatory work to elucidate the questions, issues and concerns of the faithful. The magisterium relies on this theological work to address any concerns in its pronouncements. The second mediation comes after magisterial pronouncements; it requires theologians to interpret those pronouncements for the faithful in terms that are culturally and developmentally appropriate.

The instruction, however, clearly emphasizes the second mediation, which it highlights in its treatment of the canonical mission or *mandatum* required of "those who teach theological disciplines in any institute of higher studies" (Can. 812). In "Ex Corde" "the theologian is officially charged with the task of presenting and illustrating the doctrine of the faith in its integrity and with full accuracy" (No. 22). This charge is part of the theologian's vocation, but it does not exhaust that vocation.

'Unsafe' Dissenters

In the first phase of mediation, the magisterium relies more heavily on what could be called safe theologians for consultation—that is, those who hold a single, Roman theology and serve as methodological and theological apologists for the magisterium. As a result, other theological voices are silenced or ignored, and the two-way mediation is short-circuited.

Many theologians are classified as dissenters because they were deprived of a consultative voice.

Theologians considered unsafe—those whose positions differ from the magisterium's on open or noninfallible questions—are discounted. This procedure is a double-edged sword. One edge permits the magisterium to claim that the pronouncement has been made with theological consultation and agreement; the other edge provokes a response from theologians who have not been consulted. Determining whether a pronouncement communicates the faith of the entire church is settled ahead of time by safe theologians, leaving those excluded with no option but to offer a critique after the pronouncement has been made. If their response is critical, these theologians are unfairly labeled dissenters.

This biased process serves no one well. For the magisterium, it creates polarization between itself and both the faithful who disagree with the doctrinal pronouncements and the theologians who articulate this disagreement. Since theological reflections are restricted to either affirming or critiquing magisterial pronouncements arrived at without broad consultation, the process makes it appear that dissent among theologians and faithful is not "limited and occasional" but rampant ("Veritatis Splendor," No. 4).

In fact, however, many theologians are forced into the inaccurate classification of dissenters because they have been deprived of a consultative voice that might have been helpful in the beginning. Basing pronouncements on the arguments of only those who hold a single Roman theology oversimplifies the complexity of a doctrine that would be better clarified by open debate. This oversimplification may

result in pronouncements that rely more on ideology than on sound theological reasoning.

Polarization permeates the theological community as well. The magisterium, by consulting only those it expects to agree with it, implicitly endorses one school of theology over another and provides a quasi-sanction for that school's work. Then debates are settled by a claim of authority, as when Bishop Olmsted ruled that St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix was no longer Catholic and the U.S.C.C.B. issued "rebukes" of Sister Johnson's book instead of using logical argument.

The lack of broad theological consultation, which freezes out the "unsafe," also damages the entire body of the faithful who detect the tension between the magisterium and a large majority of theologians. These tensions are frequently aired in the media and often escalate into outright hostility. One need only peruse online blogs about church-related stories to see the level of acrimony between "traditionalist" and "revisionist" Catholics. In this hostile climate of charge and countercharge, complex issues are seldom presented accurately or fairly, serving neither side well and leading to suspicion, distrust and cynicism among the faithful. Since many lay theologians are not consulted, magisterial pronouncements can appear detached from the lived reality of the laity. This has been noticeably true on women's issues and issues of sexuality.

Lay and Third World Theologians

There is yet another consideration: Both the demographics of theologians and the nature of their enterprise have evolved. Until the Second Vatican Council, almost all theologians were clerics who taught primarily in seminaries. Since the council, however, theology has become largely a lay profession exercised predominantly in both Catholic and non-Catholic colleges and universities. This change has introduced voices, especially women's and third world voices, that had never before been part of the conversation. These new voices challenge the traditional, male, hierarchical and Eurocentric voices that historically dominated Catholic tradition. They demand that the magisterium take seriously both the fullness of that tradition and the commitment to human experience as an essential component of theological reflection espoused by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. The reflected-upon experiences of the lay faithful and theologians are a Spirit-breath that requires communal and charitable discernment to decide whether it confirms or challenges magisterial pronouncements.

Roughly 100 years before Vatican II, Cardinal John Henry Newman published a famous essay, "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine," in which he discussed the *sensus fidelium* and proposed a "conspiracy theory" for exercising authority within the church. In a recent address to the annual gathering of the Association of Catholic Colleges

and Universities, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., claimed that in this essay Newman "asserted that the faith comes to us and is received by us through a dialectical relationship between the authority of the magisterium and the *Sensus Fidelium*, the teacher and the taught are in communication." Bishop Kicanas implied that the magisterium is the teacher and the *sensus fidelium* results from the faithful being taught. But Paul Crowley's definition of this relationship, which Bishop Kicanas cites approvingly in his address, is a more accurate reading of Newman. Professor Crowley describes *sensus fidelium* as "the mutual inspiration by the Holy Spirit of teachers and learners in the Church, the *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*...the delicately balanced relationship between the teaching function of the church and the role of the laity in arriving at an explicit knowledge of the content of faith." True dialogue recognizes that both are gifted with "the charism of learner-teacher," the charism that is available to the whole communion—church, bishops, theologians and the entire body of the faithful alike.

ON THE WEB
Responses to Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman.
americamagazine.org

The collective responsibility of theologians as teachers from and of the whole church has profound implications for them and their relationship with the magisterium. For their part, theologians must be prudent in their presentation of open, controversial, theological issues to Catholic laypeople. For its part, the magisterium must be patient in allowing open debate on open, controversial topics among theologians and slow to intervene prematurely to close debates. That patience requires what John Paul II called a "dialogue of charity" between the magisterium and theologians, without threat of disciplinary or punitive action ("Ut Unum Sint," Nos. 17, 51 and 60).

"Ex Corde Ecclesiae" does emphasize community and dialogue, but unfortunately these values have not always been realized in practice. Bishop Kicanas asserts: "Clearly there needs to be room in an academic community for disagreement, debate, and a clash of ideas even in theology. Such debate and engagement can clarify and advance our understanding. In discussions with local bishops, faculty need to be able to disagree and question with mutual respect." There remains, however, a great deal of suspicion among Catholic theologians that patience and charity are extended only to "safe" theologians to promote catechesis over theology.

We hope that as the bishops' conference reviews the application of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," they will strike a balance between Pope Benedict's call for "intellectual charity" in the reform of Catholic higher education and the academic freedom of all. A

The Catholic Univ

School of Theology a

WARMLY WELCOM

Wilhelmus Valkenberg, M.Div., Ph.D.
Interreligious Dialogue

Rev. Nicholas Lombardo, C
Systematic

AN EXCEPTIONAL SCHOOL WI

Rev. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., Ph.D.
William A. Barbieri Jr., Ph.D.
Rev. Christopher Begg, S.T.D., Ph.B., Ph.D.
Joshua Benson, Ph.D.
David Bosworth, Ph.D.
Joseph Capizzi, Ph.D.
William Dinges, Ph.D.
Rev. John T. Ford, C.S.C., S.T.D.
Rev. John P. Galvin, Dr. Theol.
Rev. Francis T. Gignac, S.J., Dr. Phil.
John S. Grabowski, Ph.D.
Rev. Jacques M. Gres-Gayer, S.T.D., Ph.D.
Rev. John Paul Heil, S.S.D.
Monsignor Kevin W. Irwin, M.Div., S.T.D.
Rev. Brian V. Johnstone, C.Ss.R., S.T.D.
Charles B. Jones, Ph.D.
Sister Margaret Mary Kelleher, O.S.U., Ph.D.
William P. Loewe, Ph.D.
Hellen Mardaga, Ph.D.
Rev. Frank Matera, Ph.D.

For more information on the specializatio

REASON. FAI

THE CATHOLIC UNIV

Washingt

versity of America
and Religious Studies

IES NEW FACULTY

O.P., M.Div., S.T.B., Ph.D.
c Theology

Michael Root, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Systematic Theology

ITH DISTINGUISHED FACULTY

William C. Mattison III, Ph.D.
Monsignor Paul McPartlan, S.T.L., D.Phil.
Rev. Romuald Meogrossi, O.F.M. Conv., Ph.D.
Robert Miller II, S.F.O., Ph.D.
Nelson H. Minnich, Ph.D.
Rev. Mark Morozowich, S.E.O.D.
Chad C. Pecknold, Ph.D.
Monsignor Stephen Rossetti, D.Min., Ph.D.
Christopher Ruddy, Ph.D.
Sister Margaret Schreiber, O.P., S.T.D.

Rev. Dominic Serra, S.L.D.
Rev. Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B., Ph.D.
Tarmo Toom, Ph.D.
Susan Wessel, Ph.D.
Joseph M. White, M.L.S., Ph.D.
Rev. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., S.T.D.
Rev. Michael Witczak, S.L.D.

ons of our faculty, visit **trs.cua.edu/about**.

TH. SERVICE.

ERSITY OF AMERICA
on, D.C.

Student Teachers

What I learned from my class about the faith

BY JAY CORMIER

A few springs ago, the dean of a nearby Catholic college called and asked if I could take over a section of the school's required freshman religion seminar. On paper it looked great: a twice-a-week seminar on such topics as the Trinity, the Eucharist, forgiveness, justice. It seemed like an interesting challenge, an opportunity to engage students in meaningful dialogue about faith, to stimulate mature consideration of the things of God.

I was wrong.

At the first meeting it was clear that these freshmen were neither prepared for nor interested in such a dialogue. They were parked in their chairs only because the course was required. Religion was barely on their radar screens. Most students had no experience of church, and those who did had very negative feelings about it.

So I did something that I had never done in 30 years of teaching: At the second class, I announced that I was throwing out the syllabus (anathema to a control freak like me). Instead, I made it up as we went along. We did a highlight reel of the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, David. We read the Gospel of Luke together. We discussed essays by writers like Kathleen Norris and Anne Lamott.

I also threw out the term paper requirement; instead, I had the students write 100 words on a question I distributed at every class, and everyone would share their couple of paragraphs at the next class.

Oh, it was a struggle. Handing in the final grades was a relief. I was never happier to see a semester end. It was a sad and humbling experience.

I do not even know if any of the students got anything from the course. But looking back, I realized that those students had taught me a great deal about faith. I learned more from that course than from any earlier classroom experience—whether as a teacher or as a student. In fact, I was the student and they were my teachers. They taught me some hard but valuable lessons.

ART: DAN SALAMIDA

Welcome Before Dogma

Religion is not so much about believing as it is about belonging. These young adults were not as interested in dogma as in understanding.

I assigned a reflection paper on Luke's Gospel: What parable of Jesus did you find most meaningful? I expected most essays to name the stories about the good Samaritan or the prodigal son, but more than half wrote about Jesus' admonitions on not judging others, verses that barely registered in my consciousness. This generation can teach us a great deal about tolerance and understanding, acceptance and respect.

I also asked the students to design the "perfect" church setting. I steeled myself for demands for cooler art and entertainment. But what the students valued above all else was being welcomed, feeling that they had something valuable to contribute. They also wanted liturgy that engaged them, prayer that enabled them to participate. And they wanted sermons that made sense on Monday morning.

The class gave me a new appreciation for hospitality and the importance of celebrants and ministers to help people become fully engaged participants in prayer.

Being in Love With God

I used to think that believers first dis-

JAY CORMIER *teaches communications and humanities at St. Anselm College and edits the homiletics resource Connections. His latest book,* Table Talk: Beginning the Conversation on the Gospel of Mark, *will be published this fall by New City Press.*

cover God in nature, what one theologian I read not long ago called "the footprint of God." But we really cannot understand or encounter God until we fall in love.

Love calls us beyond ourselves, pulls us out of our self-centered orbit and into the orbit of another. We discover God in the joy of loving someone else, in the gratitude we feel in the assurance that we are loved—despite ourselves. As Thomas Merton writes in *The New Man*, we grow up only when we discover that we are not the center of the universe, that the world is bigger than we are.

The reality is that we have become so used to getting what we want when we want it that we cannot see beyond our own needs to the greater and more desperate needs of others. The students in my seminar were just beginning to find that out. They were beginning to realize the great technological irony of our time: that the Internet has not united us but has fractured us according to interests, skills, politics, values, gender and so on.

We can encounter God only once we move beyond ourselves. Once we realize our ability to love another and the complete joy of the experience, we can then begin to conceive the idea of God. Love is irrational, unreasonable—and irrational, unreasonable love is God. Many of these students could not relate to a theoretical concept of God. They helped me understand that God is not so much a noun as a verb—the verb *to love*. I will forever be grateful to these students for teaching me how to be a more compassionate teacher.

Most of these young people were working full-time jobs to pay for school. They did not have the grades in high school that win scholarships and merit grants. A few were trying to escape horrible family situations. It is sobering when a student apologizes for her term paper being late because the night before she had to run from her apartment because her abusive boyfriend started to hit her—again. Or an embarrassed student asks for a make-up assignment because she could not come up with $10 to see the movie I had assigned. They reminded me that I am not teaching a subject, I am teaching human beings.

In Luke's Gospel, note how many times Jesus acts out of pure compassion: He feels someone's hurt and pain and says or does the right thing. Even on his way to his own execution, Jesus exhibits compassion and extends forgiveness.

These students seek a faith, a spirituality that challenges them to embrace the values of Jesus. They want to be part of a church that speaks to their better angels. They take very seriously Jesus' command: "Love one another." It is not a suggestion, not a key to better living. It is "my commandment."

Revealing the Unseen God

The group's most enthusiastic response to any of the things we did was to Martin Doblmeier's film "The Power of Forgiveness," stories of people who forgave and were forgiven under most extraordinary circumstances. The students were stunned by the very idea that people could forgive so completely and so generously, that it was possible to rebuild the train wrecks of their lives and find happiness and fulfillment, meaning and joy in forgiving with such outrageous selflessness. That was a new idea for most of them—that religion could be joyful, that church could be affirming, that faith could be humble without being self-denigrating.

That is our challenge as a church. M. Craig Barnes put it beautifully in his book *The Pastor as Minor Poet:* whether we are pastors, teachers, ministers or congregants, we are called to point to the God who "is always present but not usually apparent." Any preacher can go on and on about how terrible things are; any homilist can point to the evil in our midst—that is easy. The harder challenge is to find good in the midst of evil, to point to God's presence when God seems to be totally absent. We are called to witness as John the Baptist does in the beginning of John's Gospel, "There—there is the Lamb of God!" John calls us to behold Christ's presence in every act of generosity that challenges selfishness and injustice, in love offered unconditionally in response to anger and hatred, in hope that perseveres despite fear and despair.

It was a hard semester. And frankly, I would not want to go through it again. But in these students I had the chance to see the future church. It will be a humbler and more welcoming church, a more engaged and engaging church and, as a result, a more faithful and faith-filled church. Whether we realize it or not, that future church begins in our own church—now, here, today. A

FILM | MICHAEL V. TUETH

THE SONG OF AIBILEEN

What 'The Help' has to say

Above: Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer; below: Emma Stone, center, in "The Help."

The Help is a film adaptation of Kathryn Stockett's best-selling first novel about telling stories and the impact such tellings can have. The story is good; the telling of it, not so much.

After her graduation from the University of Mississippi in the fateful year of 1963, Skeeter Phelan (Emma Stone) moves back into the family mansion and finds a job writing a homemakers advice column for the local newspaper, a typical assignment for a college-educated white woman at that time. Skeeter sees the job as a first step toward her dream of becoming "a journalist or a novelist, or both," as she describes it. She decides to draw on the "housemaking" experiences of a friend's black maid, Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis). But she soon realizes that she would rather write about how Aibileen and other maids see and feel about their lives and work in Mississippi in the 60s.

Interracial contact, however, is dangerous for African-Americans. It is legally punishable by imprisonment, though more likely to spark vigilante violence or even murder by the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klan. Aibileen enlists her best friend, Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer), to join her in talking to Skeeter, who takes notes. Eventually, as abuses against the maids multiply in the town, more than a dozen domestics meet with Skeeter to tell their stories.

The upper-class society to which Skeeter has returned is ruled by Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard), an active segregationist. Hilly's major project is the promotion of what she calls her Home Health Sanitation Initiative, which aims at legally requiring black workers to use separate bathrooms in the homes of their

employers. One white woman, the vivacious Celia Foote (Jessica Chastain from "The Tree of Life"), a newcomer to the town who has married a wealthy plantation owner, is ostracized by Hilly and her ladies but adds comic relief and poignancy to the story.

The two-and-a-half-hour film chronicles the oppression of the maids, the alienation of Skeeter from the attitudes of her social circle and, finally, the publication of Skeeter's book, *The Help*, and its consequences.

While racial segregation and the Jim Crow laws are the film's focus, it also portrays the segregation of genders in genteel Southern society. Men appear only on the outskirts of the narrative and have no significant influence on its action. Skeeter's father and her brother, the newspaper editor, the other husbands, the preacher in the black church, the waiter at the diner, a couple of brutal policeman, a racist bus driver and one of Minny's children are the only men in the film. A few of the maids' sons are mentioned but never appear on screen. Male presence in the film amounts to 12 minutes, tops.

And that is the point. The novel and the film succeed in creating a totally female universe. All action is initiated and endured by women. The maids, who do the housework, cooking and cleaning, also care for the children. Skeeter acknowledges that a black maid, Constantine (Cicely Tyson), raised her. One little girl even tells Aibileen, "You are my real mother." The white mothers' lack of parental involvement almost defies belief. They live in a cosseted world of bridge parties, charity benefits and gossip, depending on Hilly for guidance, especially on race relations.

Viewers see that women can be as prejudiced and unjust as their male counterparts. The portrayals of these society women show the delicate, helpless, "ultrafeminine" white

women described by Eldridge Cleaver in his 1968 work, *Soul on Ice*. The film shows these women alongside smart, independent and courageous young women like Skeeter (who comes to the rescue) and hard-working, gifted and dignified women like the maids.

Perhaps the most touching injustice occurs when Skeeter's mother is pressured by her luncheon guest, the national chairwoman of the Daughters of America, to fire Constantine. Such tyranny among women can be seen in hindsight in the larger context of their imprisonment in the "feminine mystique," which would not be given that name until a few years later, by Betty Friedan.

Several episodes point out the pervasive violence that hovered over the lives of black people at the time. Minny recounts how her cousin's car was set on fire because she dared to walk up to a voting registration booth. Another maid, desperate to find $75 to send her sons to college, steals a ring, only to be arrested and publicly beaten with a policeman's nightstick. As a contemporary backdrop, the brutal murder of Medgar Evers emphasizes the possible consequences to Skeeter and the others if their illegal conversations are discovered.

Yet the story could have been stronger had several significant details been explained. Where, for example, did our heroine acquire her liberal views? A university education might have raised her consciousness, but "Ole Miss" was hardly a hotbed of civil rights or feminism in the early 1960s. Why is only one of the many black people in the film—Minny's husband, Leroy—presented as less than noble?

Much attention is paid to bathroom matters. The changing of children's diapers becomes symbolic of the maids' work. Use of racially separated bathrooms is the most consistently

vivid issue of racial injustice in the film. Skeeter rebels against Hilly Holbrook's Home Health Sanitation Initiative by inviting people to plant toilets on Hilly's front lawn. The bathroom motif becomes a central plot element in an episode involving human excrement. But while the crude action is arguably funny, the multiple references to the event become tiresome and unworthy of the film.

Many episodes tug at the heartstrings. The last half hour, though, shifts into emotional overdrive. The firing of Constantine and the lingering portrayal of her heartbroken reaction will remind viewers of Tyson's iconic television role as Miss Jane Pittman. In this film, though, Tyson's tearful scene is followed by a triumph: the publishing of *The Help* and the conscience-stricken reactions of many of the book's readers. In a tender reconciliation scene, Skeeter's mother tells her daughter, "I have never been more proud of you." In another reversal Celia and her husband, Johnny, invite Minny into their dining room to feast on all the food Minny has taught Celia to cook. And at the black church, the preacher presents Minny and Aibileen with a copy of the book, which the congregation has signed.

When Minny and Aibileen visit Skeeter to show her the signed book, they, as wisdom figures, urge her to take a publishing job she has been offered in New York. "Go find yourself" is their solemn mandate. The specter of "spoiler alert" prevents me from recounting the film's final sequence. It involves abundant tears shed by Aibileen, her white employer and the white family's little girl. Still, one wonders how much will change for these characters.

Viola Davis's portrayal of Aibileen—her overflowing affection for the children in her care, her burden of bitterness and pain, her consistently noble reactions to threats and insults

and her courageous decision to tell her story—is as affecting as that of her Oscar-nominated five-minute appearance in the film "Doubt" three years ago and of her Tony-winning performance in August Wilson's "Fences" on Broadway last season. Davis is one of our generation's most admirable actresses, whose every gesture and remark registers sincerity and integrity. The film's cast includes some of Hollywood's brightest newcomers and most distinguished veterans.

ON THE WEB
John P. McCarthy reviews "Seven Days in Utopia."
americamagazine.org/culture

The film has a great cast and inspiring story, but how many tugs can one's heartstrings take? Time, and the box-office receipts, will tell.

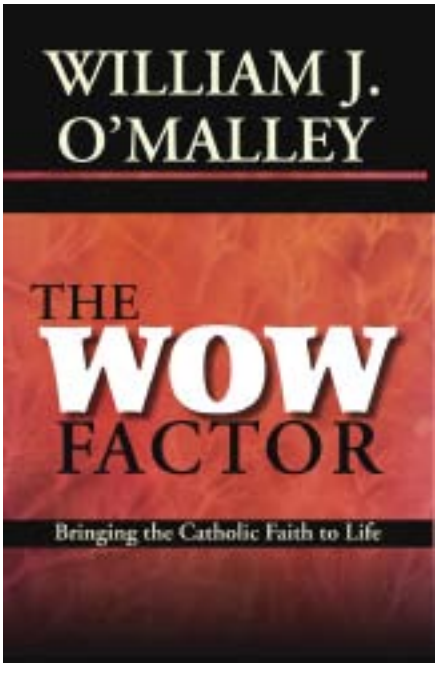
MICHAEL V. TUETH, S.J., *is associate professor of communication and media studies at Fordham University in New York.*

SUSAN LANG ABBOTT

HELPLESSLY EXUBERANT

THE WOW FACTOR
Bringing the Catholic Faith To Life

By William J. O'Malley, S.J.
Orbis Books. 180p $16



The Jesuit priest and educator William O'Malley has long poked, prodded, cajoled and inspired his readers. *The Wow Factor* is vintage O'Malley but also new and timely. It offers challenges and caveats as well as inspiration and hope. His initial challenge: "We're educated. And Catholic. But probably very few are educated Catholics." Ouch. O'Malley declares, "This book is about all the things that should have happened at confirmation and almost certainly *didn't*." It is a book for "people who have spent a lot of time looking for *causes*." Causes as in Why?, not causes as a reason for protest. Always in touch with popular culture, O'Malley mentions reality TV, noting that we live in a world "where instant gratification takes too long." Consider, then, the paradox of the Christian who follows a book called *The Good News*, which promises resurrection but only after Calvary. How do these worldviews co-exist? By page six the author puts his cards on the table: "I'm trying to sell a very unpopular attitude: surrender." We're off and running.

Lack of wonder is rampant today, in our spiritual lives and in the world. Not even moon landings excite us. Having been warned that "pondering God is an adult activity," we are challenged again: "Can we be grown-up enough to surrender at least in part our hard-won knowledge and sophistication to re-grasp the imagination, surprise, and wonder of children in order to come at the Truth afresh?" O'Malley helps us tackle this challenge but not before asking, "Is it just possible you've been treating your 'soul' no differently from the way an atheist would?"

In good Ignatian fashion the author encourages his readers to read Scripture with all of their senses, but cautions not to settle for a false image of God. God is neither a micromanager nor the "dewy-eyed Jesus of our cowboy hymns who just wants us to 'be not afraid' and leave the driving to him." Jesus cherishes us, but don't ignore the Jesus who also challenges us. Here is the promise: "Something exhilarating could happen to your living if you ever owned the truth that the Unspeakable Holy One, the Architect of infinite quasars and infinitesimal quanta—the Ultimate Wow—knows you by name, calls you his, finds you precious."

How do we come to own that truth? Much of the book examines how we understand and teach the sacraments of reconciliation and confirmation. This dimension of the book makes it essential reading for all engaged in sacrament programs.

Like many involved in adolescent catechesis, O'Malley takes issue with celebrating confirmation before or at puberty. We're just not ready to comprehend the enormity of the sacrament. Citing Prof. Monica Hellwig, O'Malley tells us that baptism is an Easter event—an experience of resurrection. But confirmation is a Pentecost event—missioning. It cannot be perceived as just a commissioning; it must be a felt commitment. Most of us at the time of our confirmation, and adolescents today, are incapable of grasping what it means to be adult Christians. We have not internalized the gifts of the Holy Spirit even though we recite them facilely. This critical observation is followed by a warning that sacraments

"almost always come with an unsettling challenge attached." With empowerment comes God's insistence that we put the gift of the sacrament to good use—there is no backing out. No excuses. Moses, O'Malley asserts, was more like Elmer Fudd than Charlton Heston. "God is notoriously on the prowl for dullards to inspire."

As for the sacrament of penance, the author's examination is both encouraging and nettlesome. O'Malley reminds us that "sin isn't a debt to a Banker, but an insult to a Friend and Benefactor." Jesus did not come to make us feel guilty but to offer us freedom. Caveat: don't be lulled into a fuzzy security. Indeed, Jesus does talk about punishment. The God who offers us unconditional love is not a "Cosmic Patsy." Bland indifference, smug complacency, arrogance, self-absorption and ingratitude are the sins that will be our undoing.

Any book on the spiritual life worth its salt helps readers take the next steps. As this one draws to a close, "…we leave the theoretical for the down-to-earth…practical ways to bring ungraspable truth into our everyday hands…." O'Malley suggests nine exercises toward that end. They are wonderful, helpful and rich. In justice, they cannot be summarized; they must be read and pondered.

O'Malley is "helplessly exuberant" about being Christian, admitting, "It is difficult to ponder a crucifix and still content oneself with being 'reserved.'" Throughout the book readers get a glimpse into the author's unreserved faith. Jesus and the real presence in the Eucharist have been the "bulwarks" of his nearly 80 years, what he calls "my validation, and my incentive to keep going."

This is a lovely book, even in, or perhaps because of, its challenges and taunts.

SUSAN LANG ABBOTT *is the director of the Office of Religious Education for the Archdiocese of Boston.*

CLASSIFIED

Parish Missions

INSPIRING, DYNAMIC PREACHING: parish missions, retreats, days of recollection; www.sabbathretreats.org.

Positions

THE ART OF GIVING A DIRECTED RETREAT. This internship is designed to complement and deepen the skills of spiritual directors, pastoral ministers, chaplains and formation directors. The practicum is intended for persons who have made an individually directed retreat and completed a training program in spiritual direction. Feb. 12-18, March 2-4, 2012. Ph: (845) 876-4178 ext. 305; kdonnelly@st-ursula.org

THE DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE is currently recruiting for a DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT/STEWARDSHIP. This new position will be responsible for implementing the Bishop's vision of stewardship throughout the diocese. It will also provide leadership to enhance the long-term financial stability of the diocese through major campaigns, appeals, grants and planned giving. Qualified candidates will possess a college degree, three to five years of demonstrated success in major fundraising efforts, proficiency with a development database and a personal commitment to the concept of stewardship within the Catholic faith. The position will be based at the Catholic Center in Jacksonville, Fla., and will include a comprehensive package of employee benefits. Interested candidates should mail a cover letter, "Employment Application" and résumé to: Office of Human Resources, 11625 Old St. Augustine Road, Jacksonville, FL 32258. The "Employment Application" can be found on our diocesan Web site (www.dosafl.com) under "Employment."

Retreats

BETHANY RETREAT HOUSE, East Chicago, Ind., offers private and individually directed silent retreats, including dreamwork and Ignatian 30 days, year-round in a prayerful home setting. Contact Joyce Diltz, P.H.J.C.; Ph: (219) 398-5047; bethanyrh@sbcglobal.net; bethanyretreathouse.org.

Translator

SPANISH TRANSLATOR. Luis Baudry-Simon, specialized in religion/human sciences, will translate into Spanish any book, article, essay, blog or Web site. Also available for Spanish copywriting/editing and S.E.O. Contact: luisbaudrysimon@gmail.com, (815) 461-0321.

Wedding Planner

SMART, EASY WAY for clergy and engaged couples to plan wedding liturgies collaboratively online. Engaged couples choose U.S.C.C.B. and ICEL nuptial liturgy texts. Clergy configure couple

Are you experiencing problems with the on-time delivery of your issues of America?

Postal regulations require that there be at least 3 instances of late or no mail delivery before requesting a publication watch.

You should notify your local post office and make a complaint and/or request a publication watch. You may also notify us at 212-581-4640 ext 118 or by email at subscriptions@america-magazines.org and we will contact the USPS.

options, receive complete ceremony printout. Integrates new Missal. Watch video overview at CatholicWeddingPlanner.com.

Wills

Please remember ***America*** *in your will. Our legal title is: America Press Inc., 106 West 56th Street, New York, N.Y. 10019.*

America *classified. Classified advertisements are accepted for publication in either the print version of* ***America*** *or on our Web site, www.americamagazine.org. Ten-word minimum. Rates are per word per issue. 1-5 times: $1.50; 6-11 times: $1.28; 12-23 times: $1.23; 24-41 times: $1.17; 42 times or more: $1.12. For an additional $30, your print ad will be posted on* ***America****'s Web site for one week. The flat rate for a Web-only classified ad is $150 for 30 days. Ads may be submitted by e-mail to: ads@americamagazine.org; by fax to (928) 222-2107; by postal mail to: Classified Department,* ***America****, 106 West 56th St., New York, NY 10019. To post a classified ad online, go to our home page and click on "Advertising" at the top of the page. We do not accept ad copy over the phone. MasterCard and Visa accepted. For more information call: (212) 515-0102.*

LETTERS

The Deficit's Real Cause

Wow! I am glad someone said it, and I am not surprised that it was your editorial, "The New Americanism" (8/1). I have noticed the disturbing presence of Catholics lining up on the side of privilege entrenchment—that is what this whole manufactured "crisis" is all about. The deficit was caused in large measure not by spending on welfare programs and Pell Grants but by two wars, an unfunded drug mandate and irresponsible tax cuts. And it is an extension of those privilege-entrenching tax cuts that are the true objective of Congressman Paul Ryan. Thanks to **America** for bringing Catholic social justice to shine its light on the debate.

JOHN D. FITZMORRIS
New Orleans, La.

Bishops, Rethink the Policy

In "Rights of Conscience" (8/1) Kevin O'Rourke, O.P., speaks of individual conscience, but is there not a community conscience? The community at large instinctively understands that saving the life of the mother in the case of a non-viable fetus is the only moral option. I believe that this intuitive sense of right and wrong rests on "objective...theological reasoning." The church's prohibition of abortion stems from an underlying imperative to protect human life. In a medical emergency when the life of an 11-week-old fetus cannot be saved, the written prohibition against abortion cannot apply. Saving the child's life is medically impossible. Then saving the mother's life emerges as the only relevant moral imperative.

Were the administrators of Catholic hospitals to allow the deaths of both the mother and the fetus the human, moral and legal consequences would be enormous. The U.S. bishops and the Committee on Doctrine would do well to re-examine the absolute prohibition in similar cases.

JACK KEHOE
Sugar Land, Tex.

Considering the Whole Picture

My thanks to Nicholas Cafardi for "Keep Holy Election Day" (7/18). For several years I lived in Philadelphia where Catholics were mentally hounded by priests and bishops on the abortion issue at voting time. I oppose abortion. I feel, however, that the voter needs to look at the whole picture when deciding on a candidate. While abortion is not the only issue, it is also not the only moral issue. The voter has to pick the candidate best suited for the office for which he or she is running. If my candidate is pro-life, I rejoice. If not, I hope for the best. I should not have to vote against my conscience in order to avoid a pro-choice candidate.

ROSE CUVA, S.N.D.
Baltimore, Md.

Be My Friend, Please

I have just finished "Forgive Us Our Debts" (6/20), by William O'Malley, S.J., who taught me at McQuaid High

School in Rochester, N.Y. Father O'Malley not only taught us well, he lives life with gusto. He told our 1978 senior class, "As soon as you leave this room seek out your classmates who are not popular, athletic or scholarly and make them your friends! Do what Jesus would do. Bring friendship to them now. Otherwise in 20 years you will regret it."

I immediately sought out one who had borne the brunt of four years of mocking and chastisement, rolled up my sleeves and let him know he was a "good guy." We remain friends to this day, though I do not believe he is any more popular now than he was then. I do not regret befriending him, even though as a result I too then had to submit to weeks of mockery from the "popular" guys.

BRETT HUTHER
Webster, N.Y.

When Abby Met Greeley

Thank you for Michael Leach's "People of the Book" (8/1) with its recollection of the Thomas More Book Store, where I worked for a year while matriculating at Loyola Universty Chicago. Shall I ever forget the bags and bags of mail orders we had to process, by hand, for weeks after "Dear Abby" recommended one of Andrew Greeley's titles? *Quelle Joie*!

CRAIG B. McKEE
Daytona Beach, Fla.

Why I Cannot Serve

Re your editorial "Ahead of the Story" (8/15): As a priest and a victim of sexual abuse by a clergyman, I consider myself a victim, not a "survivor." I can become a survivor only when the hierarchy of the church faces up to its wrongdoings.

An "apostle" is one who is sent and actually "becomes" the sender. In this case, when I was ordained in May 1971, I was "sent" by Cardinal Humberto Medeiros to preach the good word. But I had been raped in August 1970 while stationed as a deacon at Sacred Heart Parish, Roslindale, Mass.

The nine months between rape and ordination saw a lot of soul-searching. All the doubts and fears of the previous seven years of seminary training were revisited. Should I be a priest? Of course, since I had no idea that the bishops had been covering up all these abuse cases, that did not enter into my decision. In my naïveté, I reasoned that the little good that I could do as a priest would offset the evil that I had encountered.

Shortly after my ordination, the American Psychiatric Association said that "those who were abused could become abusers." What I heard, however, was that I *would* become an abuser. I then started building walls around me so I would not be hurt again—or hurt others.

I ministered until 2001, when I had a flashback. I continued in ministry until 2006, but by that time I was so overwhelmed with the betrayal of the hierarchy that I could no longer in conscience be an "apostle." In short, the only way I can find healing is for all the hierarchy who had any input into the coverup to step down and let the church pick up the pieces and begin again.

JAMES F. MORAN
Alexandria, Va.

To send a letter to the editor we recommend using the link that appears below articles on **America**'s Web site, www.americamagazine.org. This allows us to consider your letter for publication in both print and online versions of the magazine. Letters may also be sent to **America**'s editorial office (address on page 2) or by e-mail to: letters@americamagazine.org. They should be brief and include the writer's name, postal address and daytime phone number. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

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

Justice in the Reign of God

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), SEPT. 18, 2011

Readings: Is 55:6-9; Ps 145:2–18; Phil 1:20–27; Mt 20:1–16

"Friend, I am doing you no injustice" (Mt 20:13)

The parable in today's Gospel seems so unfair. Don't people who work longer and harder deserve more pay? How can it be just that the vineyard owner pays all the laborers the same when they have not worked the same amount of time?

These troublesome questions arise when we stand in the place of those who were hired first and who worked the whole long day in the sun.

It was at my grandfather's funeral that I first heard an interpretation of this parable that made sense to me. The priest spoke about how my grandfather, who converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, was like those who were hired last in the parable. He talked about how some people, when they are going on a train trip, buy their tickets far in advance, ensuring their reserved seat. Others rush into the station at the very last moment, buy their ticket and reach the same destination at the same time as those who planned ahead. The assurance that my grandpa had arrived at the same heavenly destination that all of us were striving for was very comforting to me as a youngster.

I thought the key for those first hired was to love the ones who got in just under the wire. But how to foster that love for everyone was a question that still stumped me.

BARBARA E. REID, O.P., *a member of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, Mich., is a professor of New Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Ill., where she is vice president and academic dean. Her latest book is* Abiding Word: Sunday Reflections for Year B *(Liturgical Press).*

A woman at a Bible study workshop many years later helped me understand this parable from a whole other angle. She was a single mother raising three children alone after her husband deserted them. She had little education and few marketable skills. Day after day she stood in line at the unemployment office, hoping against hope for a job.

As she read the parable, she remarked that the ones standing idle all day long in the marketplace were not lazy. They would gladly work if anyone would hire them. But they were always left behind because they were old, infirm and unskilled, unable to work as hard as the more robust. They were like her and the people who thronged to the unemployment lines these days, she said.

As she reflected on the ending of the parable, she observed that if the landowner had given the laborers that were hired last anything other than one day's wage, what good would that do? How would they feed their children? Sure, she admitted, the first hired had worked all day in the hot sun, but they also had the satisfaction of knowing all day long that at the end of the day they would be able to feed their family.

Justice, in God's reign, she proposed, is about everybody being able to eat at the end of the day, no matter what each one's capacity to work. God's justice cannot be earned and does not depend on how much you work.

This explanation seems to be much closer to what Jesus' original audience of people struggling to survive would have understood. The assertion of the vineyard owner that he is doing no injustice to the earlier hired workers challenges those in privileged positions to examine their sense of entitlement. Does it take anything away from the first hired if the last hired receive the same wage?

The vineyard owner's question in verse 15 points out the destructiveness of evil-eye envy in a community. The owner asks, literally, "Is your eye evil [*poneros*] because I am good [*agathos*]?" The question is about God's goodness, which is extended equally to all, and how difficult it is for us not to look enviously on goodness poured out on others, even as it has been lavished upon ourselves. Is it not, however, a great relief that God's justice does not mean that people get what they deserve?

BARBARA E. REID

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- What does this parable say to us about treatment of immigrants and migrant laborers?
- Pray to be able to look with the eyes of God, desiring good for all persons.
- Reflect on how there are no degrees of salvation; in the eternal vineyard, all receive the full reward.

ART: TAD DUNNE

UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS
School of Ministry

Enhance Your Ministry
Deepen Your Faith

School of Ministry students, **immersed** in the Catholic **theological** tradition, receive the necessary **formation and develop the critical skills for theological** reflection, **personal** growth, **professional ministry, and transformative** service **to the Catholic Church**, the broader **Christian community, and** the wider world.

- Graduate Programs
- Undergraduate Degree
- Adult Continuing Education
- Rome Program
- Annual Ministry Conference

Classes & programs available ONLINE!

udallas.edu/ministry