

# America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

NOV. 25, 2013 \$3.50

## Making Sense of the Supreme Court

ELLEN K. BOEGEL

MAKING IT LAW  
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# OF MANY THINGS

**T**hey say that tragedies come in threes. This was certainly the case in 1963 for **America**, by which I mean the magazine and the country. That year marked the passing of three great men, each of whom was beloved in these pages and throughout the world beyond. The Jesuit among them, Father John LaFarge, made a profound and lasting contribution to this magazine. To mark the 50th anniversary of his death, we reprint below an excerpt from "The Manner Is Extraordinary," by James T. Keane and Jim McDermott, S.J., former associate editors, published in **America** on Oct. 27, 2008.

**MATT MALONE, S.J.**

On Nov. 26, 1963, in the church of St. Ignatius Loyola in Manhattan, Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston spoke before hundreds of mourners of the "three Johns" whom the world needed so dearly and yet had lost in recent memory. The first was John F. Kennedy, 35th president of the United States, who had been assassinated four days previous and whose death the nation was still mourning. The second was "Good Pope John," John XXIII, who had died that June during the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council. The third, and the real subject of Cushing's eulogy, was John LaFarge, S.J., a famous pioneer in the field of interracial justice and an editor of **America** for 37 years, including four years as editor in chief, who had died on Nov. 24, 1963.

Almost every prominent figure in the civil rights movement during those troubled times attended LaFarge's funeral. They came to pay their respects to an unlikely crusader, a man born of the utmost privilege who by virtue of his long discernment and pastoral experience had come to see racial divides and the long history of discrimination against African-

Americans in the United States as the crucial issue of the age....

In 1934 he founded the Catholic Interracial Council of New York, which included among its goals the elimination of ignorance regarding race issues, social justice on the model of the old Catholic Action movement and a struggle against Communist inroads.... In 1937, America Press published LaFarge's most important book on race relations, *Interracial Justice: A Study of the Catholic Doctrine of Race Relations*, which...laid out a lengthy argument for rethinking American racial attitudes, particularly racist attitudes that blamed the relative lack of African-American intellectual or economic achievements on a supposed inferiority. LaFarge attributed this apparent disparity to the economic and cultural impoverishment that African-Americans had suffered at the hands of the ruling classes in America since their unhappy arrival....

LaFarge's last book, *Reflections on Growing Old*, offered him a chance to comment on his status as something of an elder statesman, both among American Jesuits and among larger circles of social progressives. "Old age is a gift," LaFarge wrote, "a very precious gift, not a calamity. Since it is a gift, I thank God for it daily." LaFarge died on Nov. 24, 1963, soon after that book's publication, at the age of 84....

**America's** editor in chief at the time, Thurston N. Davis, S.J., wrote of LaFarge's important influence on the development of the magazine: "Whatever influence [**America** has] today, what authority we can muster in the world of the press, we owe largely to this gently dogged priest whose broad sympathy for his fellow man spanned the whole world round and constantly spilled over onto our pages."

# 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  
Subscriptions: 1-800-627-9533  
[www.americamagazine.org](http://www.americamagazine.org)  
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*Cover:* People demonstrate outside the Supreme Court building in Washington on March 26, as justices hear arguments in a case challenging California's same-sex marriage ban. CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec

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www.americamagazine.org

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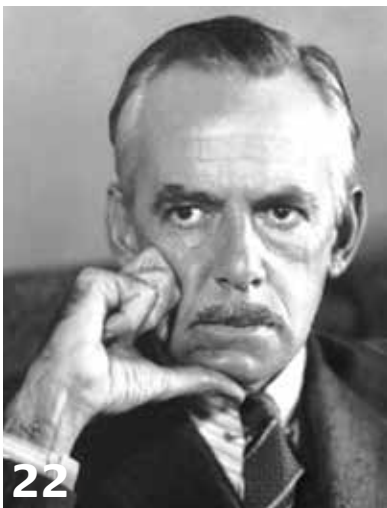
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## ON THE WEB

Veronica Mary Rolf, right, talks about her biography of **Julian of Norwich** on our podcast, and Jason Berry writes on **Albert Camus**. Plus, a slideshow on the life and work of **Eugene O'Neill**. All at [americamagazine.org](http://americamagazine.org).



### Blowing Fumes

When stars in films from the 1930s through the 1960s light up, inhale and blow smoke, many cringe. We have witnessed the millions of deaths that resulted from this behavior. We also know that 95 percent of adult smokers began before they were 21 and that the age range from 18 to 21 is the critical period when experimentation can lead to daily use. To keep tobacco out of high schools, tobacco control programs increase prices, ban smoking in public places and restrict advertising. As a result, fewer people become addicted and die of smoking-related illnesses.

As control tightens, as in New York City, where tobacco sales will be limited to those over 21, the marketplace has responded with an allegedly “safe” alternative, the electronic cigarette, a tube that looks like a cigarette but provides a nicotine fix without burning tobacco.

The industry, including top tobacco executives, has lined up celebrity endorsements to market the “benign” e-cigarette, but public health officials fear that making “vaping” acceptable will undo decades of public education. According to a survey conducted in 2011 and 2012, 10 percent of high school students have already tried e-cigarettes, and the rate of experimentation doubled in a year. The manufacturers say “wait for more evidence” before restricting the product, but public health officials know they waited too long for proof that tobacco kills and should not make a similar mistake again.

### Moderate Expectations

In an age when one gaffe—posted, tweeted and looped on the relentless 24-hour news cycle—can break a political fortune, reading the 2016 tea leaves is highly speculative business at best. But that has not deterred partisans and pundits from seeing in the results of the two big off-year gubernatorial elections a glimpse into the political future.

In New Jersey, the incumbent Gov. Chris Christie, a pragmatic Republican with bipartisan appeal, won in a solidly blue state, doing well at the polls with women, Latino and African-American voters. His decisive victory is heralded by some as the first step on a march to the White House. Robert David Sullivan, a writer at *America's* politics blog, (Un)Conventional Wisdom, is less sure about the notoriously unfiltered governor's national appeal. Outside of New Jersey, he believes, the governor's habit of responding angrily to questions he does not like may alienate more conservative voters in primary contests around the country.

In Virginia, the Democratic candidate Terry McAuliffe eked out a narrow win by painting his opponent, the Tea Party favorite Ken Cuccinelli, as “too extreme.” Democrats

portray Mr. McAuliffe's triumph as the end of the line for the Tea Party Express, calling Mr. Cuccinelli “the first political casualty of the Republican government shutdown.” Republicans, however, see the closer-than-expected outcome as a referendum on the Affordable Care Act and suggest that with more time Mr. Cuccinelli could have pulled ahead by playing up the health care law's disastrous roll-out. With the campaigns over, both victors made an appeal to bipartisanship. Given the extreme dysfunction of Washington in recent months, we hope we do not have to wait until 2016 to see Democrats and Republicans working together.

### Broken, Not Owned

In Iraq—in a single day this month—a bombing at a food tent killed four pilgrims; a car bomber killed three soldiers at an army outpost; another bomb killed two in a town just south of Baghdad; in Mosul, an explosion at an outdoor market killed two. That makes 11 deaths in a day, a tragic figure but off the previous month's brutal pace. October was the bloodiest month in Iraq since 2008. A total of 979 civilians were killed, more than 30 a day. Playgrounds and schools, markets and streets were attacked.

More than 5,500 people have been killed since April, when a security crackdown on a Sunni protest initiated this latest escalation of sectarian conflict. This round shows every sign of being the beginning of a long-feared death spiral in Iraq, as the tenuous bonds among Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds as “Iraqis” are permanently broken.

It is all very regrettable, of course, but the United States has moved on to more pressing regional concerns—Afghanistan, Syria and Iran. Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki of Iraq, whose heavy-handedness has contributed much to the crisis, was in Washington seeking new military aid in early November. He may get matériel and intelligence assistance, but Washington appears to have little appetite for any reversal of the 2011 drawdown.

The United States has acknowledged that its abandonment of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 was a huge strategic error. And in the months before the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell warned President George W. Bush, “If you break it, you own it.” But as the internecine violence in Iraq accelerates, do Americans any longer feel an obligation to fix what they broke? “Can it be fixed?” may be a better question. New vistas of possible, toxic outcomes have opened up for Washington pundits. The cantonization of Iraq? A Syria-Iraq caliphate administered by Al Qaeda? The war in Iraq, the adventure without return, now grinds on without us.

# A Renewal of Gratitude

**T**hanksgiving is becoming more and more a celebration of overconsumption—and not just of stuffing and pie, though there is still plenty of that. Major retailers chip away at the holiday by merchandising creep—opening doors to deal-hungry shoppers on Thursday evening or even earlier in the day, as many retailers have begun to do during the past decade. The shift from gratitude and thanksgiving to full-blown mall madness demeans the day.

It was not always so. Some recollection of the origins of Thanksgiving might help us to renew this wonderful, truly American “holy day.”

In 1863, in the midst of the horrendous Civil War, Abraham Lincoln made Thanksgiving a national holiday, calling in his proclamation for “humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience.” He urged repentance, a turning back to God, as well as gratitude for God’s bounty. Under Lincoln’s inspiration, a renewed Thanksgiving could be a time for families and communities to take stock. How have we discerned and acted on the grace of God in our lives this past year? What drives our lives? Is it of God?

President Lincoln also recommended that prayers include a petition “to commend to God’s tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife.” Care for the vulnerable is at the heart of the message of Jesus, which Lincoln had absorbed and practiced, although he was not an adherent of any religious denomination.

How might we reach out today—personally and civically—to families who mourn the loss of a spouse, son or daughter killed in war, to veterans suffering the perduring effects of war, to refugees displaced by war and immigrants seeking a livelihood and hope? Can we welcome them all to the bountiful table of Thanksgiving? Many families invite an elderly widow or an international student away from home or persons “down on their luck” to a Thanksgiving dinner. Many others work in a shelter or in a church to provide a Thanksgiving meal for the homeless. Food and hospitality are the theme. This is as it should be. No one in this country, no one anywhere, should go hungry.

Lincoln also urged his fellow citizens to “fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and union.”

Pondering Lincoln’s proclamation draws us deeper into the meaning of the day. Certainly widespread suffering caused by the unjust U.S. war in Iraq invites us to repentance. And we are still engaged in another war, seemingly endless, in Afghanistan with the prospect of perpetual engagement with terrorism elsewhere. The issues are so complex, the anger so ancient and the religious understandings so diverse that it sometimes seems as if only the Almighty can cut through the morass and bring peace: God’s peace.

The even earlier, mostly legendary history of Thanksgiving reminds us that we are all pilgrims, people on the way, sometimes strangers in a strange land, reliant on the good will and compassion of others.

The Plymouth settlers, who celebrated the first thanksgiving feast in America, were fleeing religious persecution in their native England when on Sept. 6, 1620, they set sail for the New World. The long trip was cold and damp, and because of the danger of fire on the wooden ship, food had to be eaten cold. Rather improvidently, the Puritans landed in December in a wintry, harsh, rocky landscape. The first winter was devastating, with exceptionally heavy snow and sleet. Only 50 of the more than 100 settlers and crew survived it.

Then in March, as the story has it, some native people stepped in to rescue them. An Indian man named Squanto, who spoke English because he had been captured by a ship captain and taken to Europe years before, taught the colonists how to tap the maple trees for sap and how to plant corn, burying decaying fish with the seeds to fertilize them. By October the newcomers had corn in abundance, fruits and vegetables, fish packed in salt, meat cured over smoky fires—and most of all, newfound friends. Gov. William Bradford of Plymouth invited the Indians to join them in feasting, which lasted three days.

The maw of consumerism threatens to swallow up the historical and spiritual meaning of Thanksgiving unless we can resist the merchandising agents, at least for a day. More positively, we can simply ignore the sales, join in interfaith celebrations, volunteer in shelters and churches to make certain the poor or the homeless have a special dinner and then join our families around tables of abundance in gratitude to God.



## REPLY ALL

### A Mixed Review

Re “Can This City Be Saved?” (11/4): Kevin Clarke did a pretty good job—quite good in the back sections—reporting on Detroit, but the back half’s more nuanced multi-perspectives do not have much of a shot at overcoming the Detroit disaster images and the first nine paragraphs of Detroit collapse clichés. The cover of the issue shows the seemingly obligatory “ruins porn” picture of an abandoned church, and the only photo on the Web is that of a “once vibrant neighborhood.”

I came to the University of Detroit in 1981 and love my life at this inner-city Jesuit university. Repeated images of disaster stripped of context get wearisome.

The article could have led with the growing and increasingly creative tension about the word “Detroit.” Instead, I nearly stopped reading. That would have been a shame because **America** has some very good stuff buried behind the lead paragraphs.

**America** is a Catholic journal, so it is no surprise that it privileges the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, the work of Cathey DeSantis, C.S.J., and Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron. But **America** is also a Jesuit journal and should not have ignored the University of Detroit Mercy’s 22 urban clinics and the School of Architecture’s Detroit Collaborative Design Center—all of which play key roles in the rebirth of the city.

I offer thanks to **America** for addressing Detroit with more complexity than many media pieces. Nonetheless, it is a mixed review.

JOHN M. STAUDENMAIER, S.J.  
*Detroit, Mich.*

### A Church for Whom?

As a Catholic in Detroit, I was disappointed that “Can This City Be Saved?” failed to address the lack of archdiocesan social services in the city. The Detroit Catholic Pastoral Alliance

and the Capuchin Bakery, which were mentioned in the article, are independent of the chancery and were founded as a response to the lack of parish-based services.

For years Catholic services have been redirected to the suburbs, contributing to economic and racial segregation. Poor, majority African-American parishes in the city have been allowed to merge only with one another, not with wealthy suburban parishes. This has accelerated financial collapse caused by unjust loan repayment schedules demanded by the chancery. Corporate decisions by the archdiocese to merge poor parishes have had disastrous effects on neighborhoods and have significantly contributed to the decline of Detroit. It was disappointing that parishioners were not approached to provide an alternative point of view to what Archbishop Vigneron is reported to have said.

There is a deeper story here, which is relevant to the larger church in the United States. If the church abandons its most vulnerable members in the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history, what does that say about us as “a church for the poor”?

JASMINE RIVERA  
*Detroit, Mich.*

### What Winning Means

“Are We Winning?” by John J. McLain, S.J. (11/4), makes a very odd assertion about the ambiguity of what “winning” a war actually means. Father McLain suggests that most times it actually means, “Are we safe again?” We should not be misled into thinking safety has anything to do with “winning” a war.

Carl von Clausewitz, from whom Father McClain takes the term “fog of war,” did not have an ambiguous understanding of what winning a war meant. He insisted that winning a war took place in “the overthrow of the enemy.” It is very easy for us to reduce warfare simply to our safety, and forget that unspeakable atrocities take place

in the killing of our enemies, whom Jesus told us to love in the Sermon on the Mount. Congratulations to the editors for reminding us of this difficult teaching in their plea for a broader respect for all human life (“Our Sacred Dead,” Editorial).

DAN COSACCHI  
*Monroe, Conn.*

### Blame Others, Too

Re “Paralysis in Washington” (Editorial, 10/21): I agree with your concern about the paralysis in Washington, but I do not agree with your laying the blame solely on the House Republicans. There is more than enough blame to go around, including the Senate and the White House.

I expect better from **America**. I thought this editorial was written by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, as it contains much of his vitriolic statements. It is time to be fair in your judgments and not echo the “party line.”

ART DUNNE  
*Rochester, Minn.*

### Obstruction Costs Dearly

Consider the economic opportunity cost of the partisanship and gridlock in Washington. Not the \$24 billion lost during the shutdown but rather the long-term failure of the United States to realize our true potential. The wrangling and threats rampant in Congress, the slashing of common purpose by the negative daily rants of media talking heads, our government’s inability to address problems with teamwork—these all stifle our ability to help each other build a better future.

As our politicians convince themselves of the righteousness of their partisan positions, will their anger and hatred become so entrenched that they become unable to compromise, unable to agree on positive outcomes for the American people and for the common good? Are we doomed to cycle after cycle of brinksmanship, ongoing uncertainty, stilted growth and loss of re-

spect for our government, both domestic and abroad, while those in poverty catch the brunt of our dysfunction and continue to lose ground?

We all have reason to be concerned. Aren't we better than that?

ART MAURER  
Penfield, N.Y.

## Words of Compassion

Re "Status Update" in Reply All (10/21): Barbara Schlumpf asked a very legitimate question about the pope's interview in *America*. She wrote: "It seems that Pope Francis is saying that the teachings have not changed, but let's not talk about them. This is very confusing to faithful Catholics. What are we supposed to say to people about some of these issues?" I have some suggestions.

To people who are homosexual, say: "I can't imagine living the rest of my life without committed, intimate love." Then offer them lifelong, committed, intimate friendship.

To transgendered individuals, say: "You are cherished children of God in tremendous pain. You are not freaks. How can I support you?" Then support them.

To people engaged in premarital sex, say: "I'm glad I waited because..." or "I wish I had waited because..."

To people who, through whatever means, have attempted to space out the births of their children for reasons that might be a tad selfish, say: "Me too."

We are all in this together. Let us always try to engage in these difficult discussions with love, empathy and compassion.

MARIA DEASY  
Arlington, Va.

## Mercy for the Remarried

Re "In Need of Mercy" (10/21), one of the many marvelous reactions to the interview with Pope Francis: Patrick J. Gilger, S.J., writes, "Being a 'sinner'... means that humans are—at root, ontologically—always in need of the living mercy of God."

As a former long-time judge in a diocesan tribunal that adjudicated marriage cases, may I recommend simply allowing "repentant" remarried divorcees to receive the sacraments. This would eliminate the canonical somersaults required of matrimonial tribunals giving "declarations of nullity," and open the door to divorcees being comforted by the tangible evidence of God's loving mercy. Ancient Orthodox discipline—and worldwide commentaries—recommend the same. New Testament teachings are the ideal, but they are obviously not lived by many today.

(REV.) RAYMOND F. BEGIN  
Venice, Fla.

## Revised Amendment

In "The Strength to Care" (Editorial, 10/14), you mention a study that demonstrates that the more guns there are in any one place, the more homicides and suicides there will be. It is unfortunate that we Americans are so stubborn that we need a study to prove the obvious. After all, the law of probability has not been rescinded.

As for the Second Amendment, has it not already repealed itself by its own wording? In modern times the words actually mean: "A well regulated militia [no longer] being necessary to the security

of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall be [regulated]."

FRANCIS P. TROWER  
Houston, Tex.

## Avenues to God

In "Where the Spirit Moves You" (10/7), James Martin, S.J., observes that some people may dismiss a spiritual practice as "too traditional" or "too progressive." Either way, he writes, we might be rejecting "spiritual practices that work for other people."

This column helped me consider the vulnerable, ill and perhaps dying. These folks are often stuck, immobilized in bed and very grateful for visitors. Those who work in these circumstances—in eucharistic ministry, hospice or faith-counseling—can benefit from Father Martin's insight. They will want to carefully discern which spiritual practices can help that special and loved "other" person, since the person is not able to walk away from a practice that does work for them. These helpers could just ask: "Do you want me to sing selections from 'The Music Man'? Or would you prefer that we say a rosary? Would you like both? Neither? Please tell us about your 'avenue' to God."

JUDY LITTLE  
Carbondale, Ill.

## BLOG TALK

*The following is an excerpt from "Complicity in Clericalism," by the Rev. Dwight Longenecker, on patheos.com (10/14). The post is in response to "Lead Us Not Into Clericalism," by Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M. (Am., 10/21).*

Instead of blaming the clergy completely, let's lay some of the blame for clericalism at the feet of the laity. Why is there no criticism of the often infantile relationship between the laity and their priests? Too often the laity fall into two extremes in their relationship with the clergy—both of them immature.

On the one hand is the fawning, "Ohhh, Fawther!" type of groveling

before the priest. The lay person puts the priest on a false pedestal and honors him too much—never criticizing and never questioning....

The other reaction among the laity is...they don't have the guts to speak to him adult-to-adult and express their views and criticisms. Instead... [they] snipe and grumble and complain. This second response also contributes to clericalism because the laity perpetuate the idea that the priest is the great Father figure—the authority figure who is there mostly to rebel against in the most petty and immature way.

(REV.) DWIGHT LONGENECKER

# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

## IMMIGRATION REFORM

### Can Congress Act? Dolan Stresses Human, Moral Costs of Inaction

In a letter on Nov. 7 to House Speaker John A. Boehner, Republican of Ohio, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said that passage of immigration reform is a matter of “great moral urgency that cannot wait any longer for action.” Cardinal Dolan cited the ongoing suffering of immigrants and their families. “As pastors, we witness each day the human consequences of a broken immigration system,” he wrote. “Families are separated through deportation, migrant workers are exploited in the workplace, and migrants die in the desert.”

Cardinal Dolan said, “In their attempts to respond to these human tragedies, our priests, religious and social service providers in many cases are unable to help these persons without changes to the law.” He added, “As a moral matter, however, our nation cannot continue to receive the benefits of the work and contributions of undocumented immigrants without extending them the protection of the law.”

“Studies have demonstrated that undocumented immigrants contribute substantially to our nation’s economy, working in industries such as service, construction, and agriculture. Keeping these human beings as a permanent underclass of workers who are unable to assert their rights or enjoy the fruits of their labor is a stain on the soul of the nation.”

Many political analysts have turned negative on the chances of comprehensive immigration reform making it through this Congress. But in a conversation with *America*, Kevin Appleby, policy director for the U.S. bishops’ Migration and Refugee Services, pointed out that there will be several more opportunities for a vote to reach the House floor over the next year. It might even be possible, he suggested, that reform could make it through during the lame-duck session of Congress following the 2014 elections, when those re-elected or heading for an early retirement will feel less partisan pressure.

Just a few months ago, immigration reform seemed to have all the momentum it needed for a final push through Congress. The Senate passed a reform bill in June. But the issue became bogged down in an intraparty dispute within the Republican conference between members of the so-called Tea

Party contingent, who are categorically opposed to immigration reform, and Republican pragmatists who want to move forward. Appleby believes if an immigration reform bill could be brought to a House vote now, it would pass, even with significant resistance from factions within the Republican Party, but Boehner so far has refused to schedule a vote.

That is why, according to Appleby, the cardinal’s letter makes a moral case for reform, highlighting the human consequences of inaction. The Republican impasse stands in the way of a new visa program that would allow low-skilled workers into the United States. Every day that program is delayed encourages more desperate and dangerous illegal border crossings through the southwest deserts, a region Appleby called “the Lampedusa of the United States.”

In his letter, Cardinal Dolan reit-

**FINAL RALLY? A Washington demonstration for immigration reform in October**



erated reform measures long sought by the bishops, including “a fair and achievable path” to citizenship for the country’s 11 million undocumented immigrants; permitting future migrant workers to enter the U.S. safely, legally “and with appropriate protections”; restoring basic due process protections to immigrants; and enhancing protections for refugees and asylum-seekers. Cardinal Dolan said any reform bill should address the root causes of migration, like “poverty and persecution.”

He called for expediting the reunification of families, but emphasized that the policy must be “based on marriage as the union of one man and one woman.” Some lawmakers have suggested that reform should allow citizens to sponsor foreign same-sex spouses for permanent U.S. residency in parity with the sponsorship of spouses in heterosexual unions.

**KEVIN CLARKE**



## U.S. POVERTY

# New Report Finds More Poor

**T**he four-year-old economic recovery plods on, but the U.S. poverty level, which escalated sharply in the aftermath of the Great Recession, hasn't budged in years. The U.S. Census Bureau had even more bad news when it released its 2012 Supplemental Poverty Measure on Nov. 6. The alternative survey suggests Americans may be even worse off than official poverty figures indicate. The S.P.M. concludes that 16 percent of all Americans, 49.7 million people, could be classified as poor—1 percent and nearly three million people more than the “official” tally of 47 million. Both tolls are well above the pre-recession level of 12.5 percent recorded in 2007.

Using the supplemental measure,

California had the highest poverty in the country between 2010 and 2012—23.8 percent—followed by the District of Columbia and Nevada. The alternative measure also shows steeper poverty among immigrants and the elderly than officially measured. In all, the new report showed that one third of Americans, 103 million people, were living in or near poverty in 2012. By either measure, the overall percentage of those in poverty remains virtually unchanged from 2011 and 2010 and is higher than that in 2009.

The supplemental measure is designed to account for the impact of anti-poverty programs, regional differences in housing costs and out-of-pocket medical and child care expenses ignored by the official survey. The current standard tracks only people who fall below a poverty threshold that is calculated by multiplying the cost of a minimum food basket by three—for example, \$23,050 for a family of four in 2012. But that rather blunt measurement has long been unsatisfactory to advocates and economists, who prefer the S.P.M.'s more comprehensive and contextualized assessment.

Medical costs remain a prime mover of poverty in America. “Without accounting for medical out-of-pocket expenses, the number of people living below the poverty line would have been 39.2 million rather than the 49.7 million people classified as poor with the supplemental poverty measure,” the bureau reported.

The impact of the adjustments vary. The S.P.M. showed lower poverty rates for children, African-Americans, renters, people living outside metropolitan areas or in the Midwest, people covered by only public health insurance and individuals

with a work disability. Most other demographic groups had higher poverty rates using the S.P.M.

Many programs now the target of political critics or budget cutters in Washington were instrumental in keeping more Americans, especially the elderly, from slipping into poverty. According to the S.P.M., Social Security has the biggest impact, keeping 26.6 million people out of poverty. Without it, the S.P.M. poverty level would be 24.5 percent.

Refundable tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit kept 9.4 million people out of poverty and lowered the rate by three percentage points. Children get an even greater benefit, as their S.P.M. rate of 18 percent would be 24.7 percent without the credits. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps, kept 5 million people out of poverty and reduced the rate by 1.6 percent in 2012. SNAP reduced the level of child poverty from 21 to 18 percent, still not exactly a showing that should make the nation proud. Unemployment insurance kept 2.4 million people from being poor and reduces the poverty rate by 0.8 percent.



**NEW CUSTOMERS.** A volunteer prepares packages at a Catholic Charities food pantry in Chicago.

## Super Typhoon Haiyan Strikes the Philippines

The death toll from Typhoon Haiyan on Nov. 10 was 1,200 and was rising quickly. Some feared as many as 10,000 people may have been killed when the historic “super typhoon” barreled across the central Philippines on Nov. 8. As the storm blasted across the island, national and international church aid officials lost contact with their local counterparts. “I’m just monitoring the news, and I’m just hoping for the best,” said Josephine Ignacio of Caritas Philippines. The government started a major push to get people out of their homes and into reinforced shelters on Nov. 5. More than a million people heeded the call. Joe Curry, Philippines country director of the U.S. bishops’ Catholic Relief Services, said the islands of Leyte and Samar on the easternmost edge of the country were pummeled by 195 m.p.h. winds. Curry said aid workers would have to go island-hopping to get to those in need. More than 9.5 million people are in need of aid and 600,000 have been forced from their homes. Father Edwin Gariguez, executive secretary of Caritas Philippines, said, “Despite the precautions, this was beyond all expectations. We couldn’t image a storm of this size hitting the Philippines.” More up-to-date information is available at [www.crs.org](http://www.crs.org).

### New Coverage Gap

The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that while more than 17 million more people are likely to be covered by the expansion of Medicaid beginning in January 2014 under the Affordable Care Act, millions of others who were intended to be reached by “Obamacare” will be left out. That is because a Supreme Court ruling in June 2012 made the expansion of

## NEWS BRIEFS

Pope Francis **urged prayers and assistance** for the Philippines on Nov. 10 and made an initial donation of \$150,000 for Typhoon Haiyan relief efforts. • A **mortar round** hit the apostolic nunciature in the Syrian capital, Damascus, on Nov. 5, causing limited damage to the building but no casualties. • A group of women religious asked the pope to raise awareness of the **problem of human trafficking** by establishing a worldwide day of prayer and fasting on Feb. 8, the feast day of St. Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese slave who found freedom in Italy in the 19th century. • A partnership between Catholic Relief Services and Special Olympics International, announced on Nov. 6, will join the development work of C.R.S. with the Special Olympics’ health services and education programs in an effort to **overcome the stigma** people with intellectual disabilities and their families face. • **Timothy R. Scully, C.S.C.**, founder of Notre Dame University’s Alliance for Catholic Education, was recognized by the Manhattan Institute with its William E. Simon Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Social Entrepreneurship on Nov. 5.



**Haiyan survivor**

Medicaid optional for states. As of October 2013, 25 states did not plan to implement the expansion. In states that do not expand Medicaid, nearly five million poor, uninsured adults have incomes above Medicaid eligibility levels but below the poverty line. Kaiser says they may fall into a “coverage gap,” earning too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to qualify for Marketplace premium tax credits. More than a fifth of people in the coverage gap reside in Texas. Sixteen percent live in Florida, 8 percent in Georgia, 7 percent in North Carolina and 6 percent in Pennsylvania.

### Iran-Vatican Detente?

Iran’s President Hassan Rohani has informally begun a dialogue between the Islamic and Christian worlds. He expressed hope for an alliance between Iran and the Holy See regarding major issues that shake humanity, like the

fight against radicalism, injustice and poverty. Rohani’s appeal was launched on the occasion of his meeting with Archbishop Leo Boccardi, the new apostolic nuncio, on Nov. 2 in Tehran. Rohani published a photo of the meeting on his Twitter account, writing, “Islam and Christianity need to dialogue more than ever today, as the basis of conflicts between religions is mainly ignorance and the lack of mutual understanding.” Rohani remarked that the Vatican and Iran have “common enemies,” like terrorism and extremism, and “similar goals,” like the defeat of injustice and poverty in the world. Archbishop Boccardi called for “closer bilateral relations between the Holy See and the Islamic Republic,” expressing the wish that the two countries can work together to resolve regional crises in the Middle East, particularly the current one in Syria.

From CNS and other sources.



# Rwanda Reimagined

**T**he experience of the Catholic Church in Rwanda, like nearly everything in the country, is divided into two parts: the time before the 1994 genocide and the time after. In the years since an estimated one million people were killed over the course of 100 days, parishes have worked to recover from the loss of their congregations, clergy have worked to redefine and repair the church's place in the public square, and everyone here has made efforts to rebuild trust among neighbors.

The process of reimagining the role of the church also has, in recent years, included efforts to look more closely not only at the place of the church in society, but at the workings of the church's own internal structures. By 2009, for example, the Diocese of Kibungo had accumulated a debt of 1.5 billion Rwandan francs, the equivalent of nearly \$2.25 million. The bishop admitted the situation to the people of his diocese, and they had one simple question: How did it get this far? The answer was simple: poor management. The remedy was more complicated and has included the implementation of new professional tools and organizational structures that have helped the church to fulfill its mission better.

"The churches had a kind of family management system, which was not accountable to anyone," said Pascasie Musabyemungu of Catholic Relief Services, which has helped several of Rwanda's dioceses to establish a new way of operating. "The dynamics of the work environment were changing and they had to adapt."

The Rev. Viateur Gitongana, general treasurer and coordinator of capacity building for the Diocese of Kibungo, has since worked with C.R.S. to help his diocese recover from financial ruin. Since February 2012, C.R.S. and the diocese have carried out workshops and training programs on management systems. They worked to make people aware of the problems and to convince priests and parish volunteers of the need for change.

The diocese worked with C.R.S. to select and adapt management tools; parishes received visits from advisors; and a manual of administrative and financial procedures was developed. The changes included the creation of inventories for parishes, the addition of lay people to church finance committees, the installation of qualified accountants, the mandating of monthly financial reports, annual budget plans and cash forecasts and even the establishment of parish bank accounts, which many parishes did not have. In addition, parishes were asked to hire paid workers, who are offered contracts, rather than rely solely on volunteers. Now multiple signatures are required for requisition forms, where before no forms existed. Parishioners have taken on greater responsibility for parish duties, and accountants now hold the checkbooks rather than the priests. In June 2012, C.R.S. and the Kibungo Diocese held a workshop for parish financial councils; later that month they had a workshop for all priests, then for chairpersons of commissions, accountants of parishes and accountants for schools and health

facilities, working to educate at every level.

The changes were not easy. "We met resistance on all fronts," said Father Gitongana, "but after one year most people can see that the change is sensible." Before the changes in management, he said, "we were losing our credibility.... But we are learning that we cannot achieve our mission without change. The church can't properly carry out its mission without both good management and pastoral work."

The changes on the diocesan level were also inspired by changes at the episcopal conference, which is in the midst of implementing a 10-year plan in collaboration with C.R.S., which has helped the conference to become more efficient, effective and professional. "They

knew they couldn't carry on as they were," the Rev. Celestin Hakizimana, secretary general of the episcopal conference, said of the bishops' conference. The bishops also realized they needed to set an example. "If the bishops themselves didn't implement these changes, why should the parishes?" said Father Hakizimana. "We tried to create a road map together."

Throughout the process of change, an emphasis on humility, community and practicality has helped the church in Rwanda to live out more fully the values it works to promote, even as it acknowledges that the process is ongoing. "We did an internal audit at the conference," said Father Hakizimana. "When we saw the results we were pleased, but we also saw that there was still work to do."

**Parishioners  
have  
taken on  
greater re-  
sponsibility  
for parish  
duties.**

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KERRY WEBER, managing editor of *America*, recently visited Rwanda as a winner of the C.R.S. Egan Journalism Fellowship.

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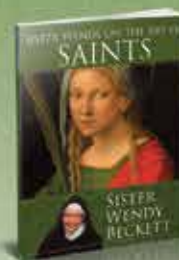


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Sister Wendy Beckett

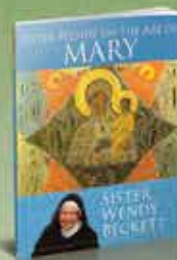
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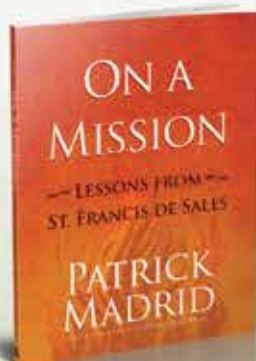
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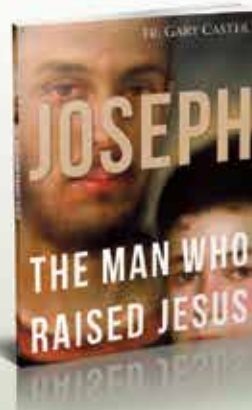


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# Final Appeals

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE REACHES THE SUPREME COURT

BY ELLEN K. BOEGEL

**O**n June 26, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court decided two cases related to same-sex marriage, *United States v. Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry*. In *Windsor*, the court determined that the definition of marriage set forth in the federal Defense of Marriage Act violated the Fifth Amendment's due process and equal protection clauses, not because the court declared a constitutional right to same-sex marriage, but because the federal law distinguished between same-sex married couples and heterosexual married couples when the states that issued their marriage licenses made no such distinction. The decision in *Perry* ends a lengthy and uniquely Californian legal case that went up, down and around all levels of the state and federal courts.

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ELLEN K. BOEGEL, an associate professor of legal studies at St. John's University in New York, clerked for the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision in this case also makes no substantive pronouncement on a constitutional right to same-sex marriage. It does, however, leave in place a federal trial court decision that held Proposition 8 unconstitutional and reinstated same-sex marriage in California.

Those who contend the primacy of traditional heterosexual marriage is essential to the well being of society clearly were disheartened by these rulings ("Tragic Day for Marriage and Our Nation," U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 26). While the Windsor decision grants significant federal benefits to couples in legally recognized same-sex marriages and, combined with the Proposition 8 decision, undoubtedly has increased the number of married same-sex couples in the United States, the long-term legal impact of these decisions remains to be seen. Two cases decided since Windsor and Perry indicate the legal battles regarding same-sex marriage are far from over. The five statements set forth here are offered as a guide to understanding the court's recent decisions and the current state of marriage laws in the United States.

1. *Marriage is a state law issue; the federal government is not empowered to issue marriage licenses.*

The U.S. Constitution creates a federal system in which power is divided between the state and national governments. Article I, for example, enumerates the powers specifically granted to Congress, while the 10th Amendment grants residual powers to the states. The power to sanction marriages is not delegated to Congress, nor is it "necessary and proper" to an enumerated Congressional power. States exercise their authority to sanction marriages as part of their general police powers. Although DOMA defined marriage for federal purposes as "a legal union between one man and one woman," it was not a federal marriage law. DOMA did not grant anyone the right to marry; it merely stated that the federal government would not acknowledge the legal status of same-sex couples who were married under state or foreign laws. Consequently, advocates on both sides of the marriage debate cannot look to Congress or the president to resolve the issue. The battleground is in the states and the courts. In *Garden State Equality v. Dow*, a New Jersey case decided after Windsor, a state trial court judge issued an order requiring New Jersey officials to permit same-sex couples to marry. The judge reasoned that because the New Jersey constitution requires different-sex and same-sex couples to be treated equally, the state must permit same-sex marriages

so that same-sex couples will be capable of reaping federal benefits bestowed on married couples as a result of Windsor.

2. *United States v. Windsor declared only part of DOMA unconstitutional.*

Section 3 of DOMA, which specifically excluded same-sex marriages from federal recognition, has been declared unconstitutional and no longer may be applied by federal agencies. The federal government's unequal treatment of state-sanctioned marriages was struck down, but no state is required to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples or give legal recognition to same-sex marriages performed in other states. Windsor specifically left intact Section 2 of DOMA, which provides, "No State... shall be required to give effect

to any [law] of any other State,...respecting a relationship between persons of the same sex that is treated as a marriage," because it was not relevant to the case and had not been challenged by the parties. A month after Windsor was decided, however, a federal trial court judge in Ohio relied on Windsor and, while not specifically addressing Section 2 of DOMA, ruled preliminarily in favor of a same-sex couple who challenged Ohio's statutory and constitutional provisions prohibiting the recognition of out-of-state same-sex marriages (*Obergefell v. Kasich*). Currently, 35 states have laws prohibiting their government's recognition of out-of-state same-sex marriages. Constitutional challenges to these prohibitions are based, in part, on Article IV's full faith and credit clause, the First Amendment's right of association and the 14th Amendment's privileges and immunities, due process and equal protection clauses.

3. *Hollingsworth v. Perry, the case arising out of California's Prop 8 ballot initiative, was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court on a procedural issue that leaves undisturbed a lower court ruling that declared a constitutional right to same-sex marriage.*

The story of California's same-sex marriage law is lengthy and convoluted. In short, the push for legal recognition of same-sex couples in California goes back at least to 1985, when a few cities implemented domestic partner registries. Proponents of equal rights for same-sex couples won various victories in the legislature by passing laws that eventually bestowed virtually all marital rights on domestic partners, but opponents of same-sex marriage won in California's unusual popular vote ballot initiatives. In 2000, one such referendum passed and created California's version

## Advocates on both sides of the marriage debate cannot look to Congress or the president to resolve the issue.

### ON THE WEB

Video reporting from  
Catholic News Service.  
[americamagazine.org/video](http://americamagazine.org/video)

of DOMA, a state statute providing, “Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.”

In May 2008, the California Supreme Court declared California’s DOMA statute in violation of the California Constitution’s equal protection clause. Opponents went to the ballot box again, but this time with a proposition amending the state Constitution. In November 2008, Proposition 8, which consisted of the same language previously declared unconstitutional—“Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California”—passed and became part of the California constitution. The case went back to the California courts, with the highest court deciding Proposition 8 was valid under state law. Not to be deterred, same-sex marriage advocates took the issue to the federal courts, claiming the U.S. Constitution protects what the California constitution does not, namely the right to a same-sex marriage. The federal trial court judge agreed.

While the people of the State of California voted for Proposition 8, their elected officials did not support the constitutional amendment and refused to defend it in court. Once the federal trial court judge struck down Proposition 8, California officials were glad to acquiesce to the court’s ruling and did not file an appeal. Usually, when one party loses at trial and chooses not to appeal, the case is over; but in this situation the intermediate appellate court (for the Ninth Circuit), relying on an advisory opinion issued by the

California Supreme Court, determined that the official proponents, California citizens who had initiated and voted for Proposition 8, were legally empowered to act on behalf of the state and bring an appeal in federal court. In legal parlance, the proponents had “standing,” a necessary element to satisfy the U.S. Constitution’s “case or controversy” jurisdictional requirement. The U.S. Supreme Court disagreed, ruling that neither the Ninth Circuit, nor it, the Supreme Court, could hear the appeal. Consequently, the trial court decision remains in effect, but it has no implications outside California.

*4. The U.S. Supreme Court has not determined that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry.*

As stated above, the U.S. Supreme Court did not rule on the trial court’s decision in Perry that the U.S. Constitution requires states to grant identical marital benefits to both different-sex and same-sex couples. The Windsor decision similarly does not reach the question of whether same-sex couples are entitled, under the U.S. Constitution, to state-issued marriage licenses. The court in Windsor merely held that when states issue marriage licenses, the federal government must honor those licenses equally for different-sex and same-sex couples. As was urged by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in its amicus curiae (friend of the court) brief in the Perry case, the court returned the battle for and against same-sex marriage to the states. The bishops’ brief said, “The Court should



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not foreclose varying judgments by the citizenry by forcing the issue into a constitutional Procrustean bed.”

Despite its desire not to intervene in state law concerning domestic relations, however, the Supreme Court eventually will be called upon to determine the constitutionality of a state’s refusal to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples or a state’s refusal to recognize an out-of-state same-sex marriage.

*5. The fate of same-sex marriage in the United States will be determined based on the U.S. Supreme Court’s understanding of due process and equal protection.*

A Supreme Court decision based on the full faith and credit and privileges and immunities clauses determining whether states must honor marriage licenses granted to same-sex couples by other states will not finally settle the same-sex marriage issue. Same-sex marriage advocates will not be satisfied until the Supreme Court determines whether the U.S. Constitution grants same-sex couples a right to marry in every state. When that day comes, the court will analyze the relevant sections of the Fifth Amendment (“No person shall...be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law”) and the 14th Amendment (No state shall “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws”). These constitutional provisions were applied to strike

down Virginia’s antimiscegenation laws. In *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), a unanimous Supreme Court held:

There can be no doubt that restricting the freedom to marry solely because of racial classifications violates the central meaning of the Equal Protection Clause. These statutes also deprive the Lovings of liberty without due process.... The freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.

Laws that effect disparate treatment based on race are always suspect and, if they can be justified at all, must withstand the strictest scrutiny. No one knows what level of scrutiny, if any, the Supreme Court will apply to disparate treatment based on the sexes of a couple. In *Baker v. Nelson* (1972), the court did not decide, and thus let stand, a Minnesota Supreme Court ruling that held there is no constitutional right to same-sex marriage. In *Romer v. Evans* (1996), however, the court declared unconstitutional a Colorado law that prohibited all government protection of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Justice Anthony Kennedy, who also wrote the majority opinion in *Windsor*, stated, “if a law neither burdens a fundamental right nor targets a suspect class, we will uphold the legislative classification so long as it bears a rational relation to some legitimate end. [The Colorado law] fails, indeed defies, even this conventional inquiry.”

More recently, in 2008, the Supreme Court held unconstitutional a Texas sodomy statute that criminalized homosexual but not heterosexual conduct (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003). The court found a due process liberty right to engage in private sexual conduct and held Texas had no legitimate interest to interfere with that right. While Justice Kennedy, again writing for the majority, acknowledged the changing nature of constitutionally protected liberty interests, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, in a concurring, and thus non-binding, opinion, recognized the distinction between protected sexual conduct and the right to marry. “That this law as applied to private, consensual conduct is unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause does not mean that other laws distinguishing between heterosexuals and homosexuals would similarly fail under rational basis review. Unlike the moral disapproval of same-sex relations—the asserted state interest in this case—other reasons exist to promote the institution of marriage beyond mere moral disapproval of an excluded group.”

While proponents of same-sex marriage celebrate the *Windsor* and *Perry* decisions, the battle over same-sex marriage continues. These decisions, with their 5-to-4 rulings and strongly worded dissenting opinions, indicate just how divided we are as a nation when it comes to who may utter those simple words, “I do.”

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# Room for Debate

When controversy comes to class

BY ANTHONY J. ZAVAGNIN

A Catholic high school where I once taught had a long-standing Friday tradition of playing songs over the public-address system as students changed classes. The ground rules that governed our Friday entertainment were clear: only appropriate music was allowed and only seniors had the privilege of being the D.J.'s. As school began to wind down this May, my ears perked up between first and second period as Macklemore's "Same Love" came across the intercom. Macklemore was popular with students for catchy, silly songs like "Thrift Shop"; but in "Same Love," the artist delved into gay rights issues, including the right to marry. After 30 seconds, the song was pulled off the air, followed by an awkward silence abruptly broken by the clanging of the bell.

It just so happened that my U.S. history class was coming in—a group of seniors that included our school D.J.'s. I had a review activity planned for the beginning of class that day, but I could tell no one was interested. Students instead voiced their frustration and downright anger at the administration for pulling the song.

As their social studies teacher, it is my job to foster active citizens and allow young people to confront controversial issues. This is much easier said than done. A perennial source of frustration among teachers is student

indifference to the important social issues of this or any day. So here I have them, in an authentic, spontaneous debate about a controversial issue in which emotions are running high and every student is engaged. How am I, as a Catholic high school teacher, to respond?

I simply let the students talk for 10 minutes, nodded my head and then turned back to the lesson. Looking back, I think I should have done things differently. I would have discussed the complexities that occur when the secular and religious realms seemingly collide. I would have responded to Macklemore's

lyric that "holy water...has been poisoned" by referring to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' publication "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care" (2006), which reminds us that all men and women are created in the likeness of God and must be "accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity." I could have done many things to further the discussion. But caught flat-footed that Friday morning, I turned back to my planned lesson and moved on without seriously entering the conversation.

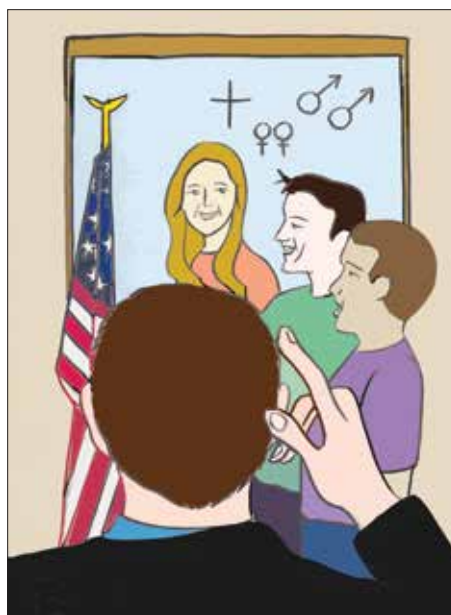
The incident nagged at me well into the summer, not only because of my missed opportunity for deeper dialogue, but because I routinely use Catholic social teaching to discuss controversial issues. I find such issues to be a perfect vehicle for students

to grapple with their faith and reach a deeper understanding of the world around them.

Just the week before, my junior U.S. history class discussed the working conditions in American factories during the 19th century. We tied our study of child labor and dangerous working conditions to the recent build-

ing collapse in Bangladesh that killed over 1,000 workers. We discussed the dignity of work and ended with the reflection question, "Would you alter your shopping because of working conditions in a faraway factory?" The resulting papers and class discussion revealed a personal connection to the cost of clothing compared to the social costs of low wages and poor working conditions. Students who hardly spoke in class wrote moving reflections.

My senior history class discussed any number of moral issues during that semester that engaged and challenged



**ANTHONY J. ZAVAGNIN**, after teaching high school social studies in Catholic schools for 10 years, recently became assistant director of the Providence Alliance for Catholic Teachers at Providence College in Rhode Island.

ART: SUSAN OGILVIE



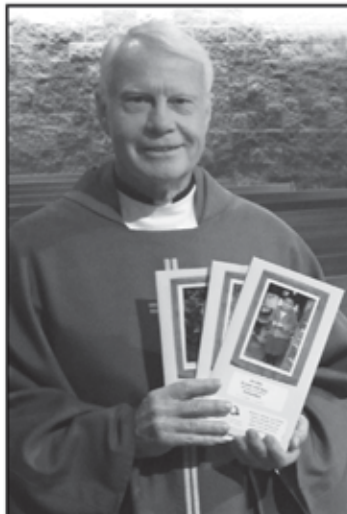
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or by email at [LarryL@cfcausa.org](mailto:LarryL@cfcausa.org).

these young citizens. With the weapons of World War II in mind, we discussed whether or not scientists and engineers are responsible for the carnage inflicted by their inventions. We debated if the targeting of a factory manned by civilians is a legitimate means of waging war. After studying the gangsters of the 1920s, we wondered if our society idolizes violence, citing any number of movies and video games in the process. Chapters on the 1920s and 1960s brought out questions of how much progress has been made in women's rights in the age of the photo-shopped, unattainable female figure and the often degrading song lyrics that were on student phones and iPods at that very moment.


While these issues may be discussed in any high school history course, the Catholic classroom provides opportunities for much deeper engagement and dialogue. Consider Catholic social teaching on the life and dignity of the human person, the dignity of workers and of workers' rights, the need for wise stewardship of God's creation, and then apply these themes to the red-hot issues of today: the treatment of immigrants, living wages, access to resources and programs for the poor. The list goes on. And, in an age where the political process seems to be broken and those who shout the loudest are given air time, what could be more civil than a policy debate that centers on the dignity of each human person, even those with whom you disagree?

I have many friends who teach in public schools and who imagine that in Catholic schools, teachers simply toe the party line. I think it is the contrary; while church teachings are presented, there always has been dialogue and genuine debate. Moreover, I can truly be myself in front of my students, discussing how my faith informs my citizenship. I am also free to bring in examples from the Gospels, like the image of Jesus as a countercultural figure. One of Henri Nouwen's prayers, from his book *With Open Hands*, occurs to me often.

It asks, "God, give me the courage to be revolutionary as your Son Jesus Christ was." It was indeed Jesus the revolutionary who dined with tax collectors, who confronted a mob set on stoning an adulterous woman and who conversed with the Samaritan woman at the well. My high school students knew what it felt like to be ostracized at times, to feel the pain of a quick or harsh judgment by another and to be categorized by the company they keep. By turning inward and examining our own vulnerabilities, the "other" in the debate—the single mother, the undocumented immigrant, the outcast of society—takes on a new, human dimension in the discussion of controversial issues.

Now, back to the song and the debate it spawned. What does a Catholic high school teacher do when the discussion unfolds into a critique of the church itself? Any good teacher knows his or her audience, and if I had simply stated the church's position and ended the discussion, I would have played right into the narrative that there is no room for debate on certain sensitive issues. Likewise, if I had said that this is a topic better discussed at home with parents, I would be avoiding the issue and going back on a successful semester of dialogue and debate. Besides, if we cannot discuss controversial issues within the confines of an academic setting, with 25 perspectives and a moderator present, then where can we do it?

Perhaps a good example for young people is a teacher who does not have all the answers, who struggles to put his faith into the context of the 21st century. Perhaps my best strategy that Friday morning would have been just to open up and say how I, as a Catholic and a citizen, sometimes feel conflicted.

Things are never that black and white when we consider them in context. I should have simply modeled how I, too, grapple with the world around us. That might have been the best lesson of all. 

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## O'NEILL'S DARK PASSAGE

*Was the playwright seeking God 'man to man'?*

In November 1931, *America's* drama critic, Elizabeth Jordan, began her review of Eugene O'Neill's play, "Mourning Becomes Electra," with the following pointed sentences:

We were seated in the Guild Theater, following Eugene O'Neill's latest and most passionate denunciation of life and living, "Mourning Becomes Electra." To his notion, seemingly, we should all be dead. There were those in the audience who almost wished they were dead. There were others who feared they might soon be.

A few years earlier, in 1928, Ms. Jordan offered the following critique after attending a five-hour performance of O'Neill's nine-act play, "Strange Interlude":

As to the play itself, it is laid in O'Neill's world, not in ours, and we go with him to the sunless planet that he inhabits because he fashions the dark and devious happenings there into such powerful, macabre plays, and shows us strange and sinister characters in them. It is always O'Neill we are shown. It is never life. Or at best, it is a cross section of real life, earthly and malignant and thrown out of focus by the playwright's extraordinary lack of proportion. He looks at humanity with jaundiced, red-rimmed, astigmatic eyes.

Other reviewers of O'Neill's plays for *America* were equally harsh. In the magazine's 1928 review of O'Neill's "All God's Chillun Got Wings," a critic concludes his remarks with an attack on the playwright that lacked Ms. Jordan's wit: "Mr. O'Neill is true to himself in choosing the most disagreeable theme and aggravating its unpleasantness."

*America's* critics were obviously hard on Eugene O'Neill. His plays were innovative and successful, but they were godless. They depicted vivid acts of violence, murder, suicide, social evils and moments of dark despair. It was not until a 1946 review of O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh" that a reviewer at least praised Eugene O'Neill for his fierce honesty, his almost quixotic intellectual integrity. Indeed, the Catholic world, while Eugene O'Neill was alive and productive, rejected O'Neill in much the same way that O'Neill had earlier rejected his Catholic faith.

Sixty years ago, on Nov. 27, 1953, Eugene O'Neill died on the fourth floor of the Hotel Shelton in Boston. Boston University acquired the building in 1954, and it remains in use today as a dormitory for upper-classmen. In 1951 O'Neill had moved to the hotel with his third wife, Carlotta Monterey, from a cottage on the north shore of Massachusetts. O'Neill needed to be closer to his doctors. After nearly 10 years of suffering from a degenerative disease that resembled Parkinson's, O'Neill died of pneumonia. He had

stipulated that no one attend his funeral—certainly no man of God.

In their biography, Arthur and Barbara Gelb quote O'Neill telling his wife, "Get me quietly and simply buried...and don't bring a priest. If there is a God and I meet Him, we'll talk things over personally, man to man." Carlotta succeeded in keeping the burial a secret. Only Carlotta, O'Neill's nurse and his doctor attended the burial at a secluded plot in Forest Hills Cemetery in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston. Nothing was said or sung. After a wreath was laid on the coffin, Carlotta turned and left the grave without shedding a tear. She would be buried next to her husband in 1970.

To some extent, Elizabeth Jordan's depiction of Eugene O'Neill's world as sunless and sinister was quite accurate. He suffered and saw the sins and suffering of others. Dorothy Day recounts the day when she and O'Neill witnessed O'Neill's friend Louis Holliday inject enough heroin to kill himself in a Greenwich Village bar in 1918. The incident affected both Day and O'Neill deeply. Soon after Holliday's death, Day left the Village and became a nursing student, and Eugene left for Provincetown. The death haunted O'Neill all his life.

Because of his illness, O'Neill was unable to grip a pen and write anything during the last seven years of his life. Having moved to Marblehead, Mass., he became isolated. He did not want to see others, nor did anyone wish to see him. In 1950, O'Neill's son, Eugene Jr., committed suicide. The event was especially gruesome; some time after his son had slashed his wrists and one of his an-

### ON THE WEB

A discussion of a new book on Julian of Norwich.  
[americamagazine.org/podcast](http://americamagazine.org/podcast)

**CLOSE TO HOME. “A Long Day’s Journey Into Night,” in Vienna**



PHOTO: REUTERS/HERWIG PRAMMER

kles in a bathtub, he tried to save himself and died on the floor of his house near the front door. O’Neill did not attend his son’s funeral. He was also estranged from his daughter, Oona, after she married Charlie Chaplin. Another son, Shane, was a heroin addict also disowned by his father. Shane O’Neill committed suicide in 1977. In the last years of his life, O’Neill made his third wife sole executor of his estate and made no mention of his children.

This was a dark world that was saturated with death and desire for death. But it is not, as Elizabeth Jordan pointed out in 1928, a world confined to Eugene O’Neill. The earthly and malignant and disproportionate world of O’Neill was familiar to many who read or attended his plays. O’Neill’s masterpiece, “Long Day’s Journey Into Night,” resonates with anyone who has experienced despair, illness and resentment in families. Shortly after the play debuted in the United States in 1956, a reviewer for *The Nation*, Harold Clurman, articulated the power of the play this way:

It is an unabashedly autobiographical statement, something torn in agonized honesty from the memory and conscience of its author—

who appears to have been compelled to set down this testament of his early home life to preserve his sanity. His chief...purpose was the revelation of himself to himself. There is something moving, even great, in the impulse of the play, and no one can witness it without reverence for the selflessness of this extremely personal act.

Indeed, O’Neill was fiercely honest in his writing, and there is one play that resonated deeply with critics at *America* for its depiction of an honest search for God. It is a play that is rarely mentioned in academic criticism of O’Neill and is rarely reprinted.



“Days Without End” is a fascinating snapshot of O’Neill’s struggle with faith in the years 1932-34. Perhaps it fails to have the impact of his other plays because the ending—the

main character’s return to faith after a terrible, decades-long crisis of faith—was ultimately disingenuous. The ending troubled O’Neill, and he later dismissed the play. It portrays the anguish of a young man who rejected his faith after his parents died. He spends his life searching for truth, embracing atheism, socialism and anarchism. Finally, he falls in love but fears his wife’s mortality. In

order to avoid the possibility of despair in the event of her death, he commits adultery, destroying his happiness on his own initiative. In the wake of his affair, his happiness shattered, he appears on the stage as two different characters, emphasizing his fractured state. In telling his story as if it were the plot of a novel, the main character offers the following remark about himself in the midst of the drama:

He ended up by becoming an atheist. But his experience had left an indelible scar on his spirit. There always remained something in him that felt itself damned by life, damned with distrust, cursed with the inability ever to reach a lasting belief in any faith, damned by a fear or the lie hiding behind the mask of truth.

Despair swirled in him and animated his plays. Yet six decades after his death, O’Neill’s plays remain powerful because of their honesty. Take another look at the work of a man who struggled mightily to grasp truth. Perhaps it will help us to become more honest about the strength of our own grasping and to have compassion on those who struggle sincerely with faith.

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# THE SACRAMENT OF STORY

**I** have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."

Herman Melville wrote these words to his fellow writer Nathaniel Hawthorne upon finishing his novel *Moby-Dick*. These are also the words I whispered to myself as I finished a memoir I have been writing for the past two years, "Mortal Blessings." Let me hasten to acknowledge the vast gulf that separates me from Melville. *Moby-Dick* is brilliant—a masterfully written tale that is larger than life. My book, on the other hand, is small, an ordinary story about ordinary people. Nevertheless, his words came to me, and I instantly recognized two elements our very different literary projects have in common—transgression and confession. For better or for worse, we have both disclosed to readers our inmost thoughts, our private histories and, ultimately, our mystery.

Melville's story is cloaked in fiction, his attitudes toward nature, society and God attributed to the characters in his tale. This is the sleight-of-hand novelists enjoy, permitting the writer the illusion of invisibility. In his remark to Hawthorne, Melville admits that he has transgressed—confessed his atheism, dared the God of the universe to show himself, blasphemed against the Christian vision—but since these fearful words emerge from the mouths of others, he escapes unscathed.

In memoir, there is no such subterfuge. The subject of my book is my mother's last illness and passing. It chronicles her final 48 days as my sisters and I tended to her, our deathbed witness, and our waking and burial of

her. Few details are left out. No names are changed to disguise identities. The book is as bald and direct as *Robert's Rules of Order*. Here is where the potential for "wickedness" enters in. In being faithful to fact, particularly our difficult relationships with our difficult mother, I have violated my family's—and especially my mother's—privacy. Granted, I have shown the book to my siblings, and they have given permission for its publication. But the person whose blessing I most desire I cannot query, for she is no longer with me. Here I think of another writer, Mary Gordon, who writes, chillingly, in her memoir, "She is my mother, and she is dead. She is at my mercy."

The genre of memoir, as we know it, is a product of our era. Just as we love reality television, we value "real" stories over invented ones. In my hopeful moments, I believe we hunger for sad facts about the lives of others because it stirs our compassion. We feel some kinship with them, and we feel less alone in dealing with disaster. In my cynical moments, I believe we are voyeurs, savoring accounts of suffering because they assure us we are not as bad off as others. Most days, I know the truth lies between these extremes. Thus, writers of memoir participate in an enterprise that is as high-minded as it is unsavory: telling our stories because they must be told, appealing to our readers' best and worst instincts.

Melville's formulation speaks to me in its clear connection between the transgressive nature of writing and its sacramental function. He admits to feeling shrived by his novel, and I have similar feelings about my memoir. The central theme of "Mortal Blessings" is the sacramental practice we unconsciously observed in my mother's final days. As we cared for her failing body,

enacting the corporal works of mercy, mundane tasks took on supernatural significance—bathing her each morning seemed a form of baptism, feeding her each evening a species of Eucharist.

We also invented sacraments: painting her fingernails celebrated the sacrament of Beauty, helping her converse with friends on her cellphone created the sacrament of Community and wheeling her through the nursing home corridors enacted a sacramental pilgrimage. We'd stop at X-ray, Imaging, Physical

Therapy—stations along the Way to Eternity. Even the act of writing the book constituted a sacramental practice—a Confession, yes, but more than that, a restitution.

"Mortal Blessings" has enabled me to compensate for my failures as a daughter and to absolve my mother for her failures as a parent. Paradoxically, it is through my "wicked" book that both of us emerge not "spotless," as Melville claims for himself—but, better than that, forgiven.

We have  
disclosed  
to readers  
our inmost  
thoughts  
and,  
ultimately,  
our mystery.



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

# JUDICIAL MODESTY?

## THE ROBERTS COURT The Struggle for the Constitution

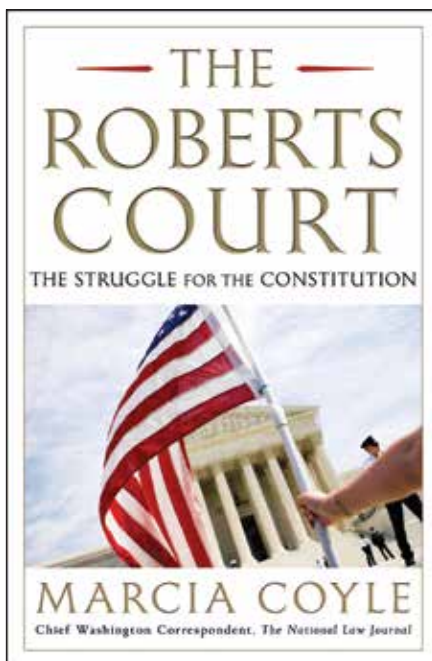
By Marcia Coyle  
Simon & Schuster. 416p. \$16

During the hearings preceding the confirmation of John Roberts as chief justice of the United States, Senator Charles Schumer asked: "What kind of justice will John Roberts be?" Roberts himself suggested that he wanted to be known as a modest judge, a judge who respected precedent and appreciated the limited role of the judge to decide the cases before him, rather than legislating from the bench. For Roberts, courts should not have "a dominant role in society and redressing society's problems. It is their job to say what the law is."

In *The Roberts Court: The Struggle for the Constitution*, the National Law Journal's chief Washington correspondent, Marcia Coyle, tells the stories of four landmark 5-to-4 Roberts court decisions. Coyle skillfully crafts engaging narratives that invite the reader to consider both what sort of justice John Roberts has been and what sort of court he has been striving to lead. Her lively descriptions of oral arguments and the scene in the courtroom as important decisions are handed down in the final days of each term, along with the personal accounts of participants in the process out of which Coyle shapes her narrative, bring a humanizing depth to our knowledge of the justices, lawyers and litigants whose interactions enliven the doctrinal disputes through which constitutional law develops. Along the way, Coyle gives readers accessible accounts of how lawsuits travel from the complaint to the court, the debate between originalists and advocates of a "living Constitution" and the genuine collegiality that exists on the doctrinally divided Roberts court. The book's focus on a

handful of 5-to-4 decisions is grounded in Coyle's conviction that these decisions help us to learn the most about the justices themselves and their often "sharply divergent views of history, approaches to interpreting the Constitution, the role of government in American lives and what makes a just society."

Coyle's presentation of the book's focal cases provokes questions about



the extent to which judicial modesty actually can be said to characterize the work of the Roberts court. In a pair of cases from 2007—*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*—the court invalidated locally enacted programs that took students' race into account in order to promote racial diversity in assignments to primary and secondary schools in Seattle and

Louisville. During oral argument, Roberts asked a question that seemed to suggest that these plans used race in a way that was indistinguishable from the use of race for the purpose of segregation, which the court struck down in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Roberts ultimately announced the judgment of the court, striking down the plans in an opinion bluntly concluding that "the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." Justice Breyer's passionate dissent argued that Roberts failed to respect past precedents giving school districts more leeway to use race in an inclusive manner, misapplied the relevant constitutional principles and undermined "Brown's promise of integrated primary and secondary education that local communities have sought to make a reality." Breyer concluded his oral summary of his dissent with words not found in the dissent's written text: "It is not often in the law that so few have so quickly changed so much." He clearly found it hard to see much modesty in this Roberts opinion.

Coyle suggests that the Roberts court acted with similar immodesty in two other landmark 5-to-4 decisions: *District of Columbia v. Heller* and *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. In *Heller*, the court held that the District of Columbia's gun regulations violated the Second Amendment rights of individuals who wish to keep handguns in their homes for self-defense. But Coyle wonders whether the Supreme Court needed to get involved in this case at all. No burning conflict had yet developed in the lower federal courts over the issue, and neither Congress nor the states seemed to be inclined to enact gun control legislation that might run afoul of an emerging understanding of Second Amendment protection for an

### ON THE WEB

The Catholic Book Club discusses  
*Someone* by Alice McDermott.  
[americamagazine.org/cbc](http://americamagazine.org/cbc)

individual right subject to reasonable regulation. Coyle concludes that Heller revealed “an aggressive conservative court taking on a long-sought objective on the conservative political agenda.”

At his confirmation hearings, Roberts noted that, because overruling a precedent constitutes a “jolt to the legal system,” simply thinking a prior case was wrongly decided is an insufficient reason to undermine the legal stability promoted by respecting precedent. Yet in *Citizens United*, the Roberts court jolted the legal system

that *Citizens United* ranked with the school and gun decisions “as the most aggressive decisions yet of the conservative court.”

A seemingly more restrained Roberts announced the court’s judgment in the 2012 decision that rejected a constitutional challenge to Congress’s power to enact the Affordable Care Act’s individual mandate. In what Coyle calls “the most remarkable opinion of his career,” Roberts joined the four conservative justices in concluding that the mandate was beyond Congress’s power to regulate interstate commerce and joined the four liberal justices in holding that Congress possessed the constitutional authority to enact the mandate as part of its power to tax. Roberts thus announced a potentially significant limit on congressional power while simultaneously upholding the individual mandate as a tax.

Coyle concludes by returning to Senator Schumer’s question: what sort of justice would John Roberts be? “Roberts has acted with a boldness that angered those on the left on issues of race, guns and campaign finance, and with restraint and modesty at times that frustrated those on the right.” The health care decision showed Roberts in his modest mode, arguing for judicial restraint: “Proper respect for a co-ordinate branch of the government’ requires that we strike down an Act of Congress only if the lack of constitutional authority to pass [the] act in question is clearly demonstrated.” Yet, as Coyle notes, “each term is a story in itself,” and the Supreme Court term that ended in June 2013 kept alive the question of how best to characterize Roberts and the court he leads. The four dissenters in *Shelby County v. Holder* clearly wondered where proper respect for a co-ordinate branch of government went in Roberts’ opinion for the court striking down a central provision of the

Voting Rights Act of 1965, which had been reauthorized by Congress in 2006. In the words of Justice Ginsburg, “the Court’s opinion can hardly be described as an example of restrained and moderate decisionmaking. Quite the opposite. Hubris is a fit word for today’s demolition of the VRA.”

An apparently more modest Roberts, however, found himself dissenting from the court’s decision striking down the Defense of Marriage Act’s exclusion of same-sex partners from the definition of “spouse” as the term is used in federal statutes. Dissenting in *United States v. Windsor*, Roberts argued that the court had no jurisdiction to decide the merits of this particular case and that DOMA was within Congress’s constitutional power to legislate in any event. The much-anticipated case challenging the use of race in college admissions, *Fisher v. University of Texas*, found Roberts joining Kennedy and five other justices in stepping back from re-examining existing precedent regarding the use of race in admissions and sending the case back to the court of appeals for further review under the standard of strict scrutiny articulated by Justice O’Connor for the court in 2003 in *Grutter v. Bollinger*.

The Roberts court will have the chance to think about that issue again in the term that began in October, in a case challenging Michigan’s state constitutional prohibition of the consideration of race in public university admissions. The court’s docket also includes potentially divisive cases involving the president’s power to make recess appointments and the constitutionality of prayers offered at the start of town board meetings. Those who read Coyle’s book will be well prepared to enter into the story of the coming term as it unfolds.

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## I TALK IN MY SLEEP OF ANGRY THINGS

I talk in my sleep of angry things,

In the early light,

Louder than I ought to speak.

As she stirs up out of sleep,

She puts over me arms and legs,

Despite the words.

Despite the worrying words.

JOHN EDWARD KEOUGH

JOHN EDWARD KEOUGH *writes from Old Colony Correctional Center, Bridgewater, Mass.*

(and the political process) by invalidating limits on corporate spending in federal elections on the ground that they violated the free speech rights of corporations. In an opinion by Justice Kennedy, the court overruled prior precedents supporting such limits, explaining that they amounted to censorship of corporate political speech that was “vast in its reach.” Roberts wrote separately to justify the court’s refusal to respect precedent in this case: “We cannot embrace a narrow ground of decision simply because it is narrow; it must also be right.” Coyle notes

# A WITNESS IN OUR TIME

## ROBERT MCAFEE BROWN Spiritual and Prophetic Writings

Selected with an Introduction  
by Paul Crowley  
Orbis Books. 272p \$22

"In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action." That claim by Dag Hammarskjöld is borne out in the books published in the series "Orbis Modern Spiritual Masters." The authors of these paperbacks are people of action whose holiness-spirituality fuses contemplation with activity. Think of Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil and scores more. Now the Protestant theologian Robert McAfee Brown joins that published cast with *Spiritual and Prophetic Writings*, edited by Paul Crowley, S.J.

Does Brown fit? He was certainly "modern," at home in his times, though he was also respectful of the past, on whose scriptures and testimonies he drew. His work is certainly "spiritual," though hardly a page of this book would be a lure for those who promote unmoored "spirituality" of the sort so popular in our era. Brown was impatient with the gauzy and gassy forms of self-contemplation so readily available on the market today. And he is a "master," as readers of this anthology of his spiritual writings will quickly find out.

Crowley sneaked the word *prophetic* into the subtitle. "Oh-oh!" readers have a right to respond: that's a dangerous word to apply in descriptions of an honored and well-traveled figure like Brown. Prophets are supposed to be

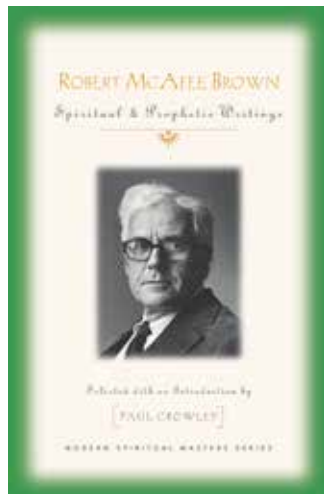
burners of bridges behind themselves, rejecters of the kind of props on which endangered high-risking humans can fall back. Suspicious when prophetic is a too casually applied appellation, I sometimes let myself be ornery enough to note that being academically tenured almost disqualifies one from being a prophet. Yet in a sense, Professor Brown (Stanford University, Union Theological Seminary) transcends the category or finds a distinctive way of fitting it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a victim of the Nazis, spoke of prophecy as "hope projected backward." Whatever else Brown the realist points to, it is hope. Prophets can be gloomy when

sure of themselves, as was the biblical Jeremiah—hence the category "Jeremiad." But they can also write Browniads, as does our author here.

Prophetic writers get right to the point. In the opening lines of the anthologized texts, "A Personal Creed," Brown had to issue a response to a request or demand of the San Jose Presbytery when

he wanted to activate his clergy papers there after several years away. Here it is: "I can summarize my faith in two words of the early church, *Kyrios Christos* (Christ is Lord), or in ten words of [hymn-writer] Samuel Crossman, 'love the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.'" Readers of the pages that follow that creed will find that these two-plus-ten words provide the *cantus firmus* for the "rich polyphony of [his] life," to cite Bonhoeffer again.

Readers may need this undertone



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or undergirding if they are first meeting Brown here, since at first glance, as his biographical sketch and the variety of topics dealt with in this collection suggest, he seems to be “all over the place,” as an example of what Robert J. Lifton named “Protean man.” The librarian Robert Benedetto, in his preface, almost gasps as he recounts Brown’s issues and involvements, and I will try to inspire more gasps by quoting him as he enumerates some highlights: “the civil rights movement and race relations, the ecumenical movement, the Holocaust and Jewish-Christian relations, liberation theology and narrative theology, Marxism, the politics and governments of Central America and Cuba, world poverty, the changing shape of Protestant theology, the Second Vatican Council and Protestant-Catholic relations, and the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement.” The many of us who were dabblers in these issues and marginal to these movements can attest: Brown was centrally engaged and made decisive contributions.

Although in this review we may concentrate on his Catholic and other Christian commitments, it would do him an injustice if we slighted his role in Christian-Jewish conversations, and we also do not do justice to him if we do not notice the esthetic writings collected here. Thus the piano- and cello- playing and occasional singer theologian Brown writes on “Beauty . . . and the Humiliated” and “Music: the Highest Form of Human Praise.” And, along the lines of more conventional “spiritual writing,” he also offers “Take Prayer,” or touches theology as he asks of an ecumenical document, “Who Is This Jesus Christ Who Frees and Unites?” Brown may not be read as much as he was several decades ago—who of his contemporaries is?—but believers and lookers-on will be poorer if they share in the neglect. This book allows a new generation to catch on and older generations to catch up.

To take a final example, slighted here because this book publishes only what has not been collected in books before, is the Robert McAfee Brown best known in Roman Catholic spheres for his earlier publications on Catholic events and modes. He was a most scrupulous and even exciting observer and chronicler of all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council. He published one book, *An Observer in Rome* (1964), which included all four sessions, and which deserves to be consulted by those who want an alternative to the polarizing writings by many Catholics and others. As late, or as recently, as 1987, in an address to a Protestant congregation in Minnesota, he did a careful and not uncritical evaluation of two documents (on the economy and on peace) issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Not given to optimism but committed to hope, he dropped his guard and closed his analysis with “*Deo Gratias* (Thanks be to God)” and, he adds, “with another salutation I am still

somewhat surprised to hear coming from my Calvinist lips: “Thanks be to the bishops.”

Brown also had many occasions after 1987 and before his death in 2001 to say “No thanks” to the bishops, but his Calvinist heart and catechisms would not let him waver in the first call, “Thanks be to God!” It does not surprise me to hear my Lutheran lips and heartbeat utter thanks to God for a witness in our time, Robert McAfee Brown. And after hearing these sounds, I would then emulate what Brown liked to do: engage in critical conversation, since the issues and movements to which Benedetto referred remain alive, if transformed, in our time, and many new ones have been added. Brown’s Christian claim, *Kyrios Christos*, and his prophetic call to “love the loveless...that they might lovely be” provide incentive and guidance still.

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J. GREG PHELAN

## THE HOLY FOOL

### SOMEONE A Novel

By Alice McDermott  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 240p \$25

In her 1963 essay “Novelist and Believer,” Flannery O’Connor lamented the difficulty of writing about man’s encounter with God and making the experience understandable and credible to a skeptical modern audience devoid of religious feeling. “Today’s reader,” she wrote, “if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift.”

Though grace suffuses Alice McDermott’s excellent new novel, *Someone*, which may very well be the

best of her long, celebrated career, there is no Instant Uplift to be found in the story of Marie, the clear-eyed, unsentimental narrator as she reflects on her life with her Irish-Catholic family in mid-20th century Brooklyn.

From the beginning, as the near-sighted, 7-year-old Marie sits on her stoop waiting for her father, McDermott defies our tendency to assume or skim ahead with the unexpected and precise rhythms of her prose, forcing us to slow down. To look.

“I pushed my glasses back on my nose. Small city birds the color of ashes rose and fell along the rooftops. In the fading evening light, the stoop beneath my thighs, as warm as breath when I first sat down, now exhaled a shallow chill.”

In McDermott's deft hands, we soon become delightfully attuned to Marie's voice as she moves between scenes from her childhood, marriage and old age gently and with purpose, as if it were the most natural way for her to share her story.

Throughout, Marie's world is, as Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote, charged with the grandeur of God, though she herself would never make this lofty allusion. It is her scholarly, pious brother, Gabe, who recites poetry to the family after dinner, while Marie gets smacked for not paying attention, distracted by "the lovely, tea-soaked dregs in the bottom of my china cup." Her parents joke that their children run the gamut: Gabe, their future priest; Marie, their little pagan.

While her brother heads to the seminary, Marie also lives up to her parents' expectations. She fights back when her mother insists she learn to cook. After secretarial school, she refuses to get a job in Manhattan. On her first date, out of fear of losing her suitor's interest, she allows him to unbutton her shirt in a brilliantly nuanced seduction scene.

Her mother eventually corners Marie into getting a job at the local funeral home, not in the basement working with the bodies, but what the funeral director, Mr. Fagin, describes as the role of "consoling angel" at wakes and funerals. She accepts the position, in part, for the five free dresses and exploits her new status to meet eligible mourners, many of them soldiers on leave during World War II. When they ask her how she could work in this kind of place, she blithely tells them the dead bodies might as well be dolls or sacks of potatoes.

After an appearance at a wake by a bishop, who with his beautiful white

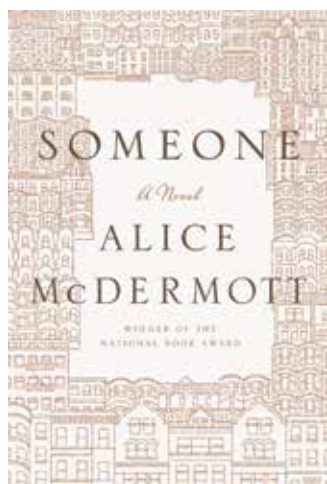
hands and the immaculate soles of his shoes, is "the cleanest-looking human being" Marie had ever seen, she is eager to share her excitement with the funeral director's mother and the nuns with whom she holds court upstairs. When she tells them about the expensive dress the bishop bought for his sister to be buried in, though, the "ladies in Fagin's upper room" looked back at her "gently sorry, as was their way, for the silly child I was and perhaps would always be, enchanted by baubles, taken in by fools."

Indeed, a muted commentary on the practical failings of the church is woven throughout the novel. When the funeral director, Mr. Fagin, for example, finds fault in the church's refusal to bury a blind war veteran who committed sui-

cide, we read: "'To tell you the truth,' he said, 'the damn Church is blind to life sometimes, blind.' And then blessed himself and begged my pardon. 'And don't dare tell anybody I said so.'"

Ultimately, though, McDermott and her narrator have more elemental concerns, expressed by the much older Marie lying in a hospital bed after an operation with both eyes bandaged, calling out into the darkness: "'Hello,' I said finally, weakly enough, feeling foolish to be speaking to an empty room in the middle of the night, or a good hour or two before they brought in breakfast, but adding, nevertheless, 'Is anyone here?' Giving in to foolishness in order to not be overtaken by fear."

Though steeped in sorrow and death, fear and foolishness, remarkably, this is not a sad story. For in among so many family losses and all the many more dead she encounters at the funeral home, Marie experiences, if not of Instant Uplift, something resembling grace, the old-fashioned kind.



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It would be futile attempt to summarize those sacramental moments, depicted by McDermott with severe kindness, exactitude and humor (without a whiff of pious self-importance), as when Marie meets the man who becomes the "someone" of the title or, through him, comes to a new understanding about her brother's failure as a priest. Only within the context of the novel itself, dwelling within the charged grandeur

evoked by McDermott's prose, can we experience them as meaningful.

Flannery O'Connor bemoaned how seldom an author and character went out "to explore a world in which the sacred is reflected." McDermott and her holy fool, Marie, have done just that in this masterful novel.

**J. GREG PHELAN** has written for *The New York Times*, *The Millions* and other publications.

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# Wastin' Time?

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A), DEC. 1, 2013

Readings: Is 2:1–5; Ps 122:1–9; Rom 13:11–14; Mt 24:37–44

*“So too, you also must be prepared” (Mt 24:44)*

There is a bittersweet gentleness to Otis Redding’s classic song “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay,” as the singer looks homeward to Georgia while “wastin’ time” on the San Francisco docks. Everyone has experienced a longing for home, whether at summer camp as a child, as a student away at university or as someone separated from home for more somber reasons—as a refugee, for example, or an economic emigrant. And everyone has had to process that longing, sometimes by whiling away the time, thinking about home or doing nothing at all. But if one gets caught in this mode for too long, the longing for home can become overwhelming and drive a person to despair or hopelessness.

This is the spiritual warning that Redding’s song brings to mind during Advent. Our true spiritual home is calling all of us, which means that wherever we are, we all feel that twinge of longing at one time or another. But that longing cannot be allowed to devolve into hopelessness, by drawing our focus away from the life we are leading now. Thinking about our eternal home is necessary, but this life is not intended to be a way of just “wastin’ time” while we wait.

When we read the prophet Isaiah, though, it is no wonder that we contemplate our future home, imagining the time when God, the king of all peoples, invites us to “the mountain of the Lord’s house” and “all the nations

shall stream to it.” It is a time when “out of Zion shall go forth instruction [Torah] and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” This instruction leads to a new ethic among the nations, which, Isaiah says, will “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” How does one not spend some time reflecting on and waiting for this glorious time?

Jesus and Paul, however, warn us that the time of advent is also to be a time of preparation. Paul says: “It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” This armor is protection against “reveling and drunkenness...debauchery and licentiousness...quarreling and jealousy.” Paul speaks of Christians not gratifying “the flesh,” by which he means not bodily desires specifically, but all that pulls us away from God’s desires for us.

Even the goods of this world can draw us away from God as they tantalize us by their very goodness, but which, when loved out of order, lead us to desire the creations instead of the creator. It is for this reason that Jesus warns us even about things that in proper order and in proper place give

great joy and meaning to life, but that out of order can distract us from the greatest good, God. Jesus, therefore, draws an analogy between “the days of Noah” and “the coming of the Son of Man.” In the time of Noah, “before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark.” Food, drink and a wedding—good things indeed; but in Jesus’ telling, these good things blinded them to the flood, which “swept them all away.”

Jesus says that the “coming of the Son of Man” presents us with an analogous situation. It is not a situation, as some read today’s Gospel passage, concerning the “Rapture”—a concept wholly unattested in Scripture, by which certain Christians are plucked



## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Reflect on Jesus’ return and your eternal home. How are you preparing to go home?

from this world as a means of bypassing time, escaping from this world—but rather of proper preparation for the God’s arrival. It is preparation that requires a proper use of time. This time, now, is not the time to despair and to forget that God is calling you home, “wastin’ time” by forgetting that there is an eternal home or turning away from God’s coming judgment by trying to forget the true home through forms of escapism, whether material or spiritual. Preparation for the arrival of the Lord determines who is ready to go home when called. What time is it? Time to get ready, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

JOHN W. MARTENS

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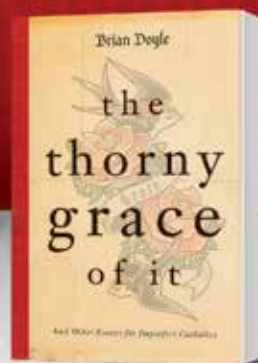


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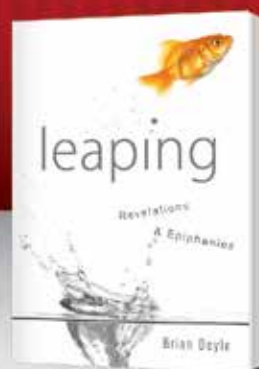
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