

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating December 24 & 25, 2017

Pax Christi San Antonio does not solicit donations; however, anyone wishing to join should make a donation to Pax Christi U.S.A. and notify Maria Tobin, matob@aol.com, to receive email messages sent to members. Pax Christi International was founded in 1945 with the encouragement of Bishop Pierre Marie Théas of Montauban, France, by Marthe Dortel Claudot, as a Christian lay organization dedicated to preventing a repetition of the savagery of the twentieth century's world wars. Send comments on the newsletter to J6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com.

Editorial

After the calendar, the *Third Reading* commentary is based on the gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 24) and the four masses for the Feast of the Nativity (December 24-25). Tom Keene's poem is *Nativity Scene*. See <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php> for more of Tom's poems.

Since this issue encompasses both the Fourth Sunday of Advent and the Feast of the Nativity, there are two essays. The first, by Tom Keene, is for the Advent Sunday. The second, representing a concern for the human world into which Jesus came, is a letter sent by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to Congress as it debated a major change in the federal income tax regime. As I write, the debate is continuing in Congress. The bishops' critique is based on the original House version of the bill; it is particularly important because it does not stop with general principles or simply present objections from a charities perspective. Rather, the bishops' statement presents an array of middle-level analyses that show how the provisions in the original version of the bill would work injustices.

Calendar

Thursday December 21, 7:00pm, 11th Annual Homeless Persons' Memorial Service. Milam Park, 500 W. Commerce St.

Tuesday January 2, 3:30pm, film on western photographer Ansel Adams. This Spring the video series at Christus Heritage Hall will feature artists who promoted ecological consciousness through their works. Christus Heritage hall, The Village at Incarnate Word, 4707 Broadway.

There are numerous events during Dream Week in San Antonio. Consult the 2018 Dreamweek Schedule at Dreamweek.org/events

Friday January 5, 6:30pm-8:30pm, Religion and Its Relationship to the Trans Community—A Conversation. SoL Center, University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell (park off Shook). RSVP at dreamweek.org/events/

Saturday January 6, 10:00am, Pax Christi San Antonio meeting, residence of Maria Tobin, 8715 Starcrest Dr., #27. (Go north on Starcrest from I-410; Starcrest becomes a divided road. The apartment complex is located between Hidden Drive and Granby Court, on the south-bound side of Starcrest. (It is possible to park at a church across the street.)

Monday January 8, 4:00pm-9:00pm, SoL Center, Building Bridges: Naming & Negotiating Differences. Economic and Socio-Cultural Divides Panel, 4:00-6:00; Sol Reception 6-7; Religious Differences Panel 7:00-9:00. University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell (Park off Shook). Register at www.upcsa.org/registration/. The title needed in the online form is Building Bridges: Naming & Negotiating Differences.

Thursday January 11, 7:00pm-8:30pm, MLK Jr. Commemorative Lecture, Kathleen Neal Cleaver, human rights activist. Laurie Auditorium, Trinity University, One Trinity Place. Park at Alamo Stadium, off Stadium Drive.

Thursday January 11, 7:00pm, to **Saturday January 13**, 12:00pm, From Conflict to Communion: 500 Years of Christian Reform. Multiple speakers. Whitley Theological Center, Oblate School of Theology, 285 Oblate Dr. \$40 + \$10 box lunch for Friday. For complete schedule: <https://ost.edu/events/conflict-communion-500-years-christian-reform/>. Register with Brenda Reyna at breyne@ost.edu or 210-341-1366, ext. 212.

Sunday January 14, 2:00pm, Wreath-Laying Ceremony in honor of the life and struggles of Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Plaza, intersection of E. Houston and N. New Braunfels.

Sunday January 14, 4:00pm, Citywide Interfaith Worship Service. San Fernando Cathedral, 115 Main Plaza.

Monday January 15, 8:00am, Early Morning Worship Program. MLK Academy, 3101 Martin Luther King Drive.

Monday January 15, 10:00am, 50th Anniversary MLK March, begins at 3101 MLK Drive and ends at Pittman-Sullivan Park, 1101 Iowa (3 mile route). Information at sanantonio.gov/mlk.

Monday January 15, 11:30am-3:30pm, MLK Commemoration Program. Pittman-Sullivan Park, 1101 Iowa.

Thursday January 18, 6:00pm-8:00pm, film about the death penalty: "The Last 40 Miles," followed by dialogue with film maker Alex Hannaford and with Kristin Houlé,

Executive Director, Texas Coalition Against the Death Penalty. Chapel Auditorium, Our Lady of the Lake University, 411 SW 24th St. More information from cwcs@ollusa.edu.

Thursday January 25, 2:00pm-3:30pm, **in Austin**, Kimberly D. Russaw, Ph.D., “What Shall We Tell our Sons and Daughters,” addressing violence against women as narrated in the Bible. Agard-Lovinggood Auditorium, 900 Chicon St., Huston-Tillotson University. Parking available on Chalmers Avenue. Information: Rev. Donald E. Brewington, debrewington@htu.edu.

Sunday January 28, 3:00pm-5:00pm, Annual Blessing of the Peacemakers and Announcing 2018 San Antonio Peace Laureates. Whitley Theological Center, Oblate School of Theology, 285 Oblate.

Tuesday January 30, 4:00pm. Laurie Brink, O.P., Ph.D., “Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44): Interpreting gospel ethics in an age of polarization.” Reinbolt Hall, Assumption Chapel, St. Mary’s University, One Camino Santa Maria. Park in Lot D near the NW 36th St. entrance, or in Lot H near the Culebra Rd. entrance.

Third Readings

Fourth Sunday of Advent (Luke 1:26-38)

Unlike the *Gospel of Mark*, Luke’s gospel has a nativity narrative. Like the earlier gospel that Mark had written, however, Luke wanted to start with the prophet John the Baptizer. So he begins by presenting the legends pertaining to the birth of the prophet. Only after that does he begin the story of Jesus. God sends a messenger to a young woman in the obscure village of Nazareth; the messenger addresses her formally: “Hail Gifted Lady! The Lord is with you!” After dealing with her perplexity, the messenger goes on to say that Holy Spirit will overpower her and that she will conceive and bear a son who will be named *Jesus* and that great things will be said about him.

He will be called “son of the Most High.” The text is not itself a theological claim but a historical one about how a public will regard this yet unborn Jesus.

“God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.” There was no such throne at the time; the allusion to the ancient king of Judah and Israel, wrapped in legend, was more a statement about the chosen nature of God’s people than a political kingdom. And “he shall rule over the house of Jacob for eternity....” This allusion goes even further back into legendary ties. Moreover, unlike the kingdom of the Davidic dynasty this new one will have no end.

For sure, statements about an eternal kingdom are not about a resumed political and military dynasty. Luke was writing late in the first century, and he knew that Caesar’s kingdom had crushed the Jewish revolt and burned Jerusalem to the ground. He knew and would even report that the Romans had executed Jesus because they thought he represented a negative reflection on Caesar, if not a political or military threat to Caesar’s kingdom. Yet in another sense the messenger from God was indeed

making a statement about the powers of this world; Jesus would indeed be a negative reflection on the pretensions of dynasties—of seized power and wealthy lineages. What the promised kingdom would be was, and is, as important for its being a kingdom as for its not being a kingdom. Interestingly, we still pray that this kingdom come.

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Vigil Mass, Feast of the Nativity (Matthew 1.1-25)

The third reading for the vigil mass is Chapter One of the Gospel of Matthew, much of it consisting of a genealogy: “Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob...” The *Lectionary* provides the option of skipping the genealogy and taking up the narrative at verse 18: “And the birth of Jesus the Messiah was thus...” But the genealogy is actually quite interesting, going back only as far as Abraham, not all the way to Adam, and following a lineage through David. It concludes, “...Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus, called the Messiah, was born.”

Why did Matthew emphasize the lineage from Abraham to Joseph? Jesus, after all, was “begotten by the holy spirit” (verse 20). One reason would be that Abraham is the father in the Faith, recognized by Jews and Christians, and later Muslims. Joseph carries the tradition of the faith up to the time of the Messiah. It is not particularly important who one’s biological ancestors were but whose historical faith one has.

It is well known that Matthew’s gospel is grounded in Jewish tradition, but it clearly broke with any tribalism. Jesus was begotten from outside the tribe, and Matthew belies no interest in the ancestry of Mary. The tradition of Matthew’s nation—and Joseph’s—led outside the nation to a peoplehood that included that nation, for sure, but was not limited to it, not morally imprisoned in a tribe. The implication is that faith should not be used to define a tribe.

Mass during the Night, Feast of the Nativity (Luke 2.1-14)

Caesar Augustus wanted all the wealth in his “world” registered for “taxation”—not taxing for public purposes as in modern governance but for the private margin that went to the Caesar household. Mr. Octavian Caesar’s governor of the region, Quirinius, took an inventory of the properties of the deposed Herodian operative, Archelaus, in 6-7 CE. Writing about eighty years later, Luke was evidently mistaken about the dates of the birth of Jesus and of the inventory. Luke was therefore also mistaken about the reason Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. Joseph may well have had a share in some income property near Bethlehem, perhaps occupied by relatives or renters. There was no room where the people lodged (translations that speak of a commercial inn read too much into the Greek). The suggestion is that while Caesar Augustus and his governor are tallying up properties to be taxed, Joseph’s property near Bethlehem was so modest that he and Mary had to spend the night where the animals were kept, and when Jesus was born they had to place him in a feed bin.

Having set the contrast, Luke provides a chorus to comment on the narrative, a host of God’s messengers, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased.” Somehow, translators have missed the point! With whom is God pleased? Caesars and governors, or commoners so poor that they

have to tend their animals in the open country and make do with an animal shelter when travelling?

Mass at Dawn, Feast of the Nativity (Luke 2.15-20)

The shepherds seek out Mary, Joseph, and the newborn, and after seeing them they returned to their flocks, all the while praising God over what they heard. And Mary tried to understand in her heart what the shepherds had said—that a messenger of God told of a savior being born for them and lying in a feed bin. According to Luke's narrative, Mary had some sense that something momentous was happening:

"...Because He looked upon the lowliness of His handmaid / For behold all generations will bless me from now / Because the Mighty wrought great things for me...." But what did it mean, when they had to stay with the animals and lay the child in a feed bin?

Mass during the Day, Feast of the Nativity (John 1.1-18)

This is the well-known Prologue to the Johannine (or Fourth) Gospel. Side notes linking the text to the tradition of John the Baptist have come to be interpolated into the text itself, thereby obscuring what the author was originally saying. Moreover, using the word *beginning* to translate the opening words obscures an allusion to the Greek translation of the opening of Genesis, and while using the term *Word* links the passage to the Logos Theology of the Wisdom books of the Bible, it obscures the fact that the Word is presented as spoken *to* God, thereby making a reference to a conversation within God. The passage anticipates Trinitarian theology in a remarkable way. Hence:

"In Genesis there was speaking, and the speaking was to God, and the speech was God. This was to God in the beginning. Through him (i.e. through the speech—AB) all things came to be, and apart from him nothing came to be that has come about. In him was life, and the life was people's light. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

"...He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, and the world did not know him. He came into his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to those who accepted him he gave the ability to become children of God—to those believing in his name—those who were born not from blood, from the will of flesh, or from the will of a man, but from God. And the speech became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. ...For we all received from his fullness one gift in place of another. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came about through Jesus, the Messiah."

In the commercial carnival of seasonal merchandising and the righteous violence that is oblivious of sacred seasons, the world still does not know or accept him.

Poem

Nativity Scene

It haunts us still,
that long ago
oft told story.

A woman, a man,
far from home,
their villages, their families.

Just arrived in a town
full of strangers.
A birth at the edge of happening.

The woman's womb-waters already flushed,
her rhythmic pangs quicken,
no time to find a midwife.

Between her deep gasps,
the woman whispers:
Help us.

Through the man
thunderous thoughts
race as lightning:
:

This is no work for men.
Women's blood forbidden.
A forever shame to touch.

Holy Mother Eve,
who might midwife her, but Adam?
Where was the taboo then?

The woman tells him what to do.
Tells him what she learned
helping other mothers.

The man kneels.
He waits between her thighs,
at last receives the baby.

He washes its warm body,
the woman, himself.
Water from the animals' trough.

The woman
takes from him the baby,
puts it to her breast.

Soon they sleep.
The man steps from the shelter
into crisp night air.

He stands under stars to wonder.

Tom Keene
January 3, 2012

Ego and Soul: A Love Story Tom Keene

“Who am I?” That may be one of the most important questions we can ever ask ourselves. One of the great insights into that question comes from distinguishing our ego, or what we take to be our personal identity, from the deeper dimensions of what it is to be human, to be a person.

Many have yet to realize that there is more to being human than just looking out for one's **separate** ego-identity. What is that more? Some call it the Higher Self, the Deeper Self, the soul/spirit, even God. For now, let's call it soul. Some of us sense its presence when we look up into a star filled night, when we behold a single instance of beauty, truth or goodness. Something dear, that is somehow us yet more than our mere egos.

This leads us to ask, “What is the ego-soul relationship about? What do they do for each other?” To answer deep questions like this it is best to start with a story.

I find such a story in Chapter One of the Gospel according to Luke. An angel asks a young woman, Mary, to let herself become pregnant for the sake of God and her people. She hesitates, considers, decides and then responds, “Behold the handmaid/servant of the Lord. Let it be. Do to me as you say.”

We can consider that story in terms of ego-soul. Mary puts her ego (and its expectations) aside to attend to a greater concern: the healing of her people. In that very act she models for us what may be, if we so choose, our ego's role for helping soul realize its destiny.

As with Mary, so with us. In some sense we are, according to the nature of ego-soul relationship, called to realize, to make real, to incarnate, to flesh out in our live bodies our own “Let it be.” A happy happening for our people. Every day we engage in

opportunities to put our own ego-energies to work. To work for what? That is the crucial choice.

Ego's characteristic flaw is an inclination to always choose its own **separate** agenda independent of others. Not only that but also independent of ego's own soul: the source out of which ego evolved: the soul that formed the ego as a blank slate on which to write a new story of life. To the extent that our egos prioritize ego expectations over our own soul-stories, we miss out on the discovery of our own possibilities as healers of our people.

Ego and soul were not meant for **separate** agendas. They were meant to recognize each other and begin a beautiful friendship built around a **common** destiny: A love story of two dancers doing follow and lead to music that takes them to new horizons.

We find that music in Mary's story and our own stories. It is echoed in the lives of people like Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Gandhi and King. It is echoed in our own lives whenever we set aside our surface expectations for what is more important. From that point on the trick is to sharpen our discernment about what is more important. Might that be the ultimate question as we consider and decide?

U.S. Bishops to the House of Representatives on the Proposed Tax Changes

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November 9, 2017

United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

Decisions about taxation involve fundamental concerns of "justice and equity", with the goal of taxes and public spending "becoming an instrument of development and solidarity" (*Mater et Magistra*, 132; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 355). On October 27, the USCCB offered six moral principles to guide debate on tax

reform, centered on care for the poor and concern for families. The *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017* contains many fundamental structural flaws that must be corrected. As currently written, the proposal is unacceptable.

Care for the Poor. Doubling the standard deduction will help some of those in poverty to avoid tax liability, and this is a positive good contained in the bill. **However, as written, this proposal appears to be the first federal income tax modification in American history that will raise income taxes on the working poor while simultaneously providing a large tax cut to the wealthy.** This is simply unconscionable. The nonpartisan congressional Joint Committee on Taxation (JCT) indicates that by 2023 this tax plan will raise taxes on average tax payers making between \$20,000 and \$40,000 per year. Taxes for this group will be raised again in 2025, and again in 2027. Taxes will also increase on average taxpayers earning between \$10,000 and \$20,000 in 2025. The federal poverty line is \$12,228 for one person, and \$24,339 for a two-parent family with two children. Nearly one in three Americans live in a family with income below 200% of the poverty line. Meanwhile, average taxpayers who make over \$1 million experience dramatic tax cuts for the same periods. **No tax reform proposal is acceptable that increases taxes for those living in poverty to help pay for benefits to wealthy citizens.**

Several other tax provisions that assist the working poor and others who may struggle economically are also eliminated, including:

- the **Work Opportunity Tax Credit**, which incentivizes hiring of the disabled, veterans, those who have been unemployed for long periods, and individuals receiving federal poverty-related assistance;
- the tax deductions to reduce the burdens of **tuition and student loans**;
- the income tax credit to persons who **retire on disability**;
- **the deduction for state and local income and sales taxes**, which may impact people in higher tax states;
- the tax deduction for **employee business expenses**;
- and tax incentives to employers and employees to help with **moving expenses** for a new job.

Strengthening Families. Society, in Pope Francis' words, is in "debt" to the family. The family is the most important institution in society because education, formation, and care for the human person, especially children, take place more in the family than anywhere else. Expanded access to schools of choice is a positive step in this legislation, and we would encourage Congress to go even further by empowering more parents in directing their child's education. We also appreciate that the legislation recognizes unborn children as eligible beneficiaries for parents' 529 education savings account contributions.

However, this tax plan places new and unreasonable burdens on families, especially those who welcome life or experience serious hardships:

- It removes the **adoption tax credit** which provides important and life-affirming assistance for families to adopt children desperately in need of love

and support.

The plan also repeals the exclusion for adoption assistance programs, which allows a family to exclude money paid by an employer for adoption costs up to the amount of the adoption tax credit as an alternative. This exclusion also allows those who adopt a **child with special needs** to receive the full value of the exclusion regardless of actual adoption costs.

Eliminating the credit and exclusion sends the wrong message about our national priorities, which ought to protect life, strengthen families, and affirm the value of every human being. The savings to society from children finding loving homes is well beyond any revenue lost due to the credit and exclusion.

- **It eliminates the personal exemption.** Even with the doubling of the standard deduction, **some larger families will pay more**, including many two-parent families with more than three children, and single-parent families with more than one child. It is laudable that **the child tax credit has been expanded and removes the marriage penalty**. However, the modest increase in the credit does not fully compensate for the elimination of the personal exemption for some larger families. Moreover, because the child tax credit only remains refundable up to \$1,000, *lower income families will get no additional benefits* from the child tax credit, while suffering the full loss of the personal exemption.

- It eliminates the **out-of-pocket medical expenses deduction** for families facing serious or chronic illness.

- **It eliminates tax incentives to employers to provide dependent care assistance or child care.** The family flexibility credit, at \$300 per taxpayer, is some help, but is set to expire after five years and does not offset the greater losses.

- **It eliminates the qualified tuition reduction for children of teachers**, which will raise taxes on educational institutions and disrupt family arrangements.

- **It repeals mortgage tax credit certificates**, which are only available for first-time home buyers under certain income thresholds.

Other aspects of the plan also have consequences for families. By creating stricter rules around parents' social security numbers, the plan makes it more difficult for immigrant taxpayers to receive the Child Tax Credit or the Earned Income Tax Credit for their families, or to receive assistance in seeking advancement through education.

Progressivity of the Tax Code. Pope St. John XXIII wrote that a progressive tax code is required by "justice and equity." The "Unified Framework," upon which this tax plan was based, promised that any new tax code would be "at least" as progressive as the present code. This plan breaks that promise. It raises taxes on the working poor, while simultaneously providing large tax breaks to high-income taxpayers. It also **repeals the estate tax** (which applies to the estates of single people valued at more than \$5.5 million and married couples valued greater than \$11 million), and eliminates the **Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT)** which was designed to prevent high-income earners from avoiding tax liability through loopholes. In the years that the working poor suffer a tax increase under this bill, millionaires and billionaires will see significant tax decreases. This must be fixed. Those who stand to benefit the most from proposed tax

policies ought to be the ones to bear most of the risk associated with them, rather than those who are struggling and in need.

Adequate Revenue for the Common Good and Avoiding Future Cuts to Poverty Programs.

The state has a legitimate role in promoting the common good, and a legitimate interest in collecting taxes to do so. This tax plan, by design, will result in a nearly \$1.5 trillion deficit over ten years. Even with the potential benefits of economic growth from individual and corporate tax cuts—which cannot be guaranteed—the poor should not be the ones to finance these changes. Undoubtedly, the deficit will be used as an argument to further restrict or end programs that help those in need, programs which are investments to help pull struggling families out of poverty. Repeal of the AMT and estate tax alone comprise a good portion of the deficit that is built into the plan. Rather than exploring even modest reductions to these dramatic cuts for the wealthiest, the bill raises taxes on the vulnerable and creates a strong incentive to cut the social safety net.

Incentive for Charitable Giving and Development. Doubling the standard deduction will bring tax relief to many people. However, for those who give to charity, it will make the charitable deduction increasingly a benefit only available to high income families. An "above-the-line" deduction would incentivize and assist charitable giving at all income levels, and increase the amounts people can give. It would also guard against a multi-billion-dollar decrease in charitable giving that this plan would otherwise cause, shrinking civil society and cutting income to nonprofits that help the poor, just as government aid to the poor is jeopardized, as noted above. By and large, money given to charity helps those in need. The tax code should encourage voluntary association, mutual aid, and a culture of giving, helping rather than hurting groups that will be asked to do more for the poor in the days ahead. Similarly, this plan will lower the value of affordable housing and community revitalization incentives. Public-private partnerships that benefit the poor and the greater community should not be discouraged.

Because tax policy is far-reaching, Congress must provide ample time for Americans to discuss the complexities of these reforms and fully understand their effects. The current timetable does not provide adequate time for that discussion. In many ways, this legislation is unacceptable in its present form and requires amendment. It must be changed for the sake of families—the bedrock of our country—and for those struggling on the peripheries of society who have a claim on our national conscience.

Sincerely,
Most Reverend Frank J. Dewane
Bishop of Venice
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace

Most Rev. George V. Murry, S.J.
Bishop of Youngstown
Chairman, Committee on Catholic Education

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Marianist Social Justice Collaborative
www.msjc.net

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, International JPIC Committee
<http://saccvi.blogspot.com/>

San Antonio Peace Center
<http://www.sanantoniopeace.center>

Interfaith Radio, (*Interfaith Voices*)
<http://www.interfaithradio.org/>

Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty
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