

Testimony



A Pamphlet from Pax Christi Texas

Anticipating December 20, 2020

Communications with the editor should be sent to j6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com. 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.

Editorial

After the calendar, the Sunday Liturgical Reading reflections are based on readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Tom Keene's poem is *Power Story*. Following the poem is an Op Ed by Pope Francis that appeared in the *New York Times* on November 26: "A Crisis Reveals What Is in Our Hearts."

The University of San Francisco's Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Social Thought and the Ignatian Tradition is named for a couple who came upon a fortune upon the passing of Joan's brother. The Lane's endeavored to devote it to the promotion of social justice at the University, where Ralph taught. I knew the late Ralph Lane as a sociologist and raconteur. Since there are few events during the holidays, even online, I call attention to the Center's annual published volumes, which can be accessed online. This year's volume is *Integrating Ecology and Justice in a Changing Climate*. You can access any of the volumes at: <https://www.usfca.edu/lane-center/lane-center-series>

Finally, since the Feast of the Nativity (Christmas) comes between this Sunday and the following Sunday, I am placing reflections on the liturgical readings for the Nativity at the end of this issue of the newsletter, following the usual list of links.

Calendar

Monday December 14, 3:30pm-5:00pm, "Division in Our Nation, Division in Our Congregations," Melissa Rogers (Delta Companies; former special assistant to President Obama), \$5.00. RSVP at: <https://www.faithcommons.org/event/division-in-our-nation-division-in-our-congregations/>

Wednesday December 16, 12:00pm-1:00pm, Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty webinar on death penalty developments in the past year. Register at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfdCv4or9fHDDO1dxODmA8YQcKuqDrVONly_49Z4P9J-Gm6KQ/viewform

Notices

Sr. Norma Pimentel, M.J., “Justice at the Border: The Dignity of Human Life at the Core of Our Faith,” (Oct. 14, 2020). 2020 Annual Rev. Bernie Clark, C.S.C., Lecture. Access at <https://socialconcerns.nd.edu/bernieclark>

Border Realities and Migrant Protection Webinar

On Monday, November 30th, Justice for Immigrants hosted a webinar with a panel of experts who all work along the US/Mexico Border speaking about migrant protection. Ashley Feasley served as the moderator, and those on the panel included:

Fr. Sean Carroll, Executive Director, Kino Border Initiative

Teresa Cavendish, Director of Operations, Casa Alitas/Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona, Inc.

Dylan Corbett, Executive Director, Hope Border Institute

Sr. Norma Pimentel, Executive Director, Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley

Access the webinar at: <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/webinars/border-realities-and-migrant-protection-webinar/>

Online Resource for families or small groups: If you’re needing some social interaction with depth, more than just listening to zoom webinars, longing for the social time that used to happen before and after Mass, consider using the *Maryknoll Weekly Reflection Guides*. Gather as family or small group and use these guides in Facetime, Skype, Zoom etc. This an easy online structure with prayer, an introductory theme, a link to the Sunday Readings and some reflection questions to guide group conversation. Using the SeeJudgeAct methodology, you will be led as a group to consider where, in light of the shared reflection, the Spirit is calling you this week. The Global Solidarity charism of the Maryknoll family will

feed you spiritually for these challenging times. Find the Guides in both Spanish and English at:

<https://mission.maryknoll.us/reflection-guides-ordinary-time>

Second Reading (Romans 16:25-27)

The letter that Paul wrote to the Roman churches ends at chapter 15, verse 33: “But the God of peace be with all of you. Amen.” Paul did not know the followers of Jesus in Rome; so this concluding greeting is not as elaborate as those found in the other authentic Pauline letters. Following the conclusion is a separate letter of recommendation that he wrote on behalf of the deacon Phoebe (Romans 16:1-24). Following the brief letter for Phoebe is the reading for this Sunday, a few concluding lines of unknown authorship, in the form of a doxology.

The passage expresses a hope in Paul’s name that the reader be strengthened by what he had written, and by the preaching of Jesus, “according to the revelation of the mystery that has been concealed through the ages but now manifested...,” “made known among all the nations...” Glory be to the God working through all these!

Third Reading (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 refers even further back into the legendary life and times of Jacob. 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.

Poem

Power Story

A certain centurion loved
his slave-servant-friend.
He could not help it.

They shared a newly found
power, freedom, meaning
expressing themselves

in touch, glance,
being and breathing
together as one.

It was beyond anything
with the troops he cared for
whose marshalled power

could force things

to happen just by
making heard his word.

But now, his friend's loved body
turned sick and rushed
to the finality of death.

He considers: My hundred-man-power
to command and kill comes to empty air,
a dead-wrong tool to make life new.

He turned to a passing healer for help.
The ready healer said: Take me to him.
The centurion said: No need.

I honor power when I see it.
Just say the word
and my friend will be healed.

And he was.

Tom Keene and Muse
October 28, 2020

A Crisis Reveals What Is in Our Hearts

[Op Ed in the *New York Times*]

By Pope Francis

Nov. 26, 2020

In this past year of change, my mind and heart have overflowed with people. People I think of and pray for, and sometimes cry with, people with names and faces, people who died without saying goodbye to those they loved, families in difficulty, even going hungry, because there's no work.

Sometimes, when you think globally, you can be paralyzed: There are so many places of apparently ceaseless conflict; there's so much suffering and need.

I find it helps to focus on concrete situations: You see faces looking for life and love in the reality of each person, of each people. You see hope written in the story of every nation, glorious because it's a story of daily struggle, of lives broken in self-sacrifice. So rather than overwhelm you, it invites you to ponder and to respond with hope.

These are moments in life that can be ripe for change and conversion. Each of us has had our own "stoppage," or if we haven't yet, we will someday: illness, the failure of a marriage or a business, some great disappointment or betrayal. As in the Covid-19 lockdown, those moments generate a tension, a crisis that reveals what is in our hearts.

In every personal "Covid," so to speak, in every "stoppage," what is revealed is what needs to change: our lack of internal freedom, the idols we have been serving, the ideologies we have tried to live by, the relationships we have neglected.

When I got really sick at the age of 21, I had my first experience of limit, of pain and loneliness. It changed the way I saw life. For months, I didn't know who I was or whether I would live or die. The doctors had no idea whether I'd make it either. I remember hugging my mother and saying, "Just tell me if I'm going to die." I was in the second year of training for the priesthood in the diocesan seminary of Buenos Aires.

I remember the date: Aug. 13, 1957. I got taken to a hospital by a prefect who realized mine was not the kind of flu you treat with aspirin. Straightaway they took a liter and a half of water out of my lungs, and I remained there fighting for my life. The following November they operated to take out the upper right lobe of one of the lungs. I have some sense of how people with Covid-19 feel as they struggle to breathe on a ventilator.

I remember especially two nurses from this time. One was the senior ward matron, a Dominican sister who had been a teacher in Athens before being sent to Buenos Aires. I learned later that following the first examination by the doctor, after he left she told the nurses to double the dose of medication he had prescribed — basically penicillin and streptomycin — because she knew from experience I was dying. Sister Cornelia Caraglio saved my life. Because of her regular contact with sick people, she understood better than the doctor what they needed, and she had the courage to act on her knowledge.

Another nurse, Micaela, did the same when I was in intense pain, secretly prescribing me extra doses of painkillers outside my due times. Cornelia and Micaela are in heaven now, but I'll always owe them so much. They fought for me

to the end, until my eventual recovery. They taught me what it is to use science but also to know when to go beyond it to meet particular needs. And the serious illness I lived through taught me to depend on the goodness and wisdom of others.

This theme of helping others has stayed with me these past months. In lockdown I've often gone in prayer to those who sought all means to save the lives of others. So many of the nurses, doctors and caregivers paid that price of love, together with priests, and religious and ordinary people whose vocations were service. We return their love by grieving for them and honoring them.

Whether or not they were conscious of it, their choice testified to a belief: that it is better to live a shorter life serving others than a longer one resisting that call. That's why, in many countries, people stood at their windows or on their doorsteps to applaud them in gratitude and awe. They are the saints next door, who have awakened something important in our hearts, making credible once more what we desire to instill by our preaching.

They are the antibodies to the virus of indifference. They remind us that our lives are a gift and we grow by giving of ourselves, not preserving ourselves but losing ourselves in service.

With some exceptions, governments have made great efforts to put the well-being of their people first, acting decisively to protect health and to save lives. The exceptions have been some governments that shrugged off the painful evidence of mounting deaths, with inevitable, grievous consequences. But most governments acted responsibly, imposing strict measures to contain the outbreak.

Yet some groups protested, refusing to keep their distance, marching against travel restrictions — as if measures that governments must impose for the good of their people constitute some kind of political assault on autonomy or personal freedom! Looking to the common good is much more than the sum of what is good for individuals. It means having a regard for all citizens and seeking to respond effectively to the needs of the least fortunate.

It is all too easy for some to take an idea — in this case, for example, personal freedom — and turn it into an ideology, creating a prism through which they judge everything.

The coronavirus crisis may seem special because it affects most of humankind. But it is special only in how visible it is. There are a thousand other crises that are just as dire, but are just far enough from some of us that we can act as if they don't exist. Think, for example, of the wars scattered across different

parts of the world; of the production and trade in weapons; of the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing poverty, hunger and lack of opportunity; of climate change. These tragedies may seem distant from us, as part of the daily news that, sadly, fails to move us to change our agendas and priorities. But like the Covid-19 crisis, they affect the whole of humanity.

Look at us now: We put on face masks to protect ourselves and others from a virus we can't see. But what about all those other unseen viruses we need to protect ourselves from? How will we deal with the hidden pandemics of this world, the pandemics of hunger and violence and climate change?

If we are to come out of this crisis less selfish than when we went in, we have to let ourselves be touched by others' pain. There's a line in Friedrich Hölderlin's "Patmos" that speaks to me, about how the danger that threatens in a crisis is never total; there's always a way out: "Where the danger is, also grows the saving power." That's the genius in the human story: There's always a way to escape destruction. Where humankind has to act is precisely there, in the threat itself; that's where the door opens.

This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities — what we value, what we want, what we seek — and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of.

God asks us to dare to create something new. We cannot return to the false securities of the political and economic systems we had before the crisis. We need economies that give to all access to the fruits of creation, to the basic needs of life: to land, lodging and labor. We need a politics that can integrate and dialogue with the poor, the excluded and the vulnerable, that gives people a say in the decisions that affect their lives. We need to slow down, take stock and design better ways of living together on this earth.

The pandemic has exposed the paradox that while we are more connected, we are also more divided. Feverish consumerism breaks the bonds of belonging. It causes us to focus on our self-preservation and makes us anxious. Our fears are exacerbated and exploited by a certain kind of populist politics that seeks power over society. It is hard to build a culture of encounter, in which we meet as people with a shared dignity, within a throwaway culture that regards the well-being of the elderly, the unemployed, the disabled and the unborn as peripheral to our own well-being.

To come out of this crisis better, we have to recover the knowledge that as a people we have a shared destination. The pandemic has reminded us that no one is saved alone. What ties us to one another is what we commonly call

solidarity. Solidarity is more than acts of generosity, important as they are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity. On this solid foundation we can build a better, different, human future.

Links

Pax Christi International

<http://www.paxchristi.net/>

Pax Christi U.S.A.

<http://www.paxchristiusa.org>

Pax Christi Texas

<http://www.paxchristitexas.org>

Pax Christi Dallas

<http://www.Paxchristidallastx.org>

Pax Christi San Antonio

<http://www.paxchristisa.org>

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.sanantoniopace.center>

Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty

www.txccedp.org

Dialogue Institute of San Antonio
www.thedialoginstitute.org/san-antonio/

Climate Change
www.creation-care.com

Migrant Center for Human Rights
<https://Migrantcenter.org>

Catholic Books Review
<http://catholicbooksreview.org>

Feast of the Nativity

Second Reading

Vigil Mass Acts 13:16-17, 22-25)

The Acts of the Apostles tells of Paul arriving in a city named Pisidian Antioch and going to a meeting of the synagogue. He is asked to speak, and he gives a brief history of the Hebrew nations, up to the time of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. In this part of the speech that Luke attributed to him, Paul was intent upon the Jews of the synagogue knowing that Jesus was one of them, just as today we need to recognize that he was a human and a member of a nation, as are we.

Mass during the Night (Titus 2:11-14)

“For the grace of the savior God appeared to all people, instructing us so that, rejecting the impiety and worldly passions of humanity, we may also live in the present age with justice and piety...” Thus begins a very brief reading. It is clearly a statement of generic Christianity, part of which is living “with justice” as well as piety.

Mass at Dawn (Titus 3:4-7)

According to this reading, Christians are not people who are “just” and by virtue of that are saved but are people made just by the gift of mercy and by virtue of that action have hope. The author of the Pastoral Epistles, from which this reading is taken, says that it is a reliable statement, but that Christians should be concerned about good works. Having hope from the Messiah does not imply that how one acts or does not act in this life is inconsequential.

Mass during the Day (Hebrews 1:1-6)

The reading consists of the opening of the *Letter to the Hebrews*: “In the past God spoke to the patriarchs through the prophets in many ways and in many places. In the last of these days He has spoken to us through a son, whom He designated heir of everything, through whom He also made the ages. Being a reflection of The Glory and an impression of His nature, and bringing forth all things by the articulation of His power, and having been made a purification for sins, the Son sat to the right of the Majesty on High.” This is a very early statement of the Christian creed that resonates with a much later statement in the Prologue to the *Johannine Gospel*. Jesus of Nazareth, who lived without holding office or commanding armies, was “a reflection of the glory” and an “impression” of the nature of the Creator. It is all about a different kind of glory and force-of-nature.

Third Reading

Vigil Mass (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 *Lectioary* 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, even today recognized by Jews, Christians, and

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—leads 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 (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, and he had to register that for taxation. There was no room where the people lodged on the property (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 (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 (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.