

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating June 10, 2018

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.

Please do not respond to this newsletter's address; but 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 tenth Sunday in ordinary time. Tom Keene poem is *Holy Blasphemer*. See <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php> for more of Tom's poems. My own thoughts on the normalization of torture follow the poem section

First, however, is an open letter to U.S. Attorney General Jefferson B. Sessions about his treatment of asylum-seeking families at the southern border. Family separation may not be "torture" in a strict sense, but it is certainly a traumatization.

Anthony J. Blasi
4531 Briargrove Street
San Antonio, Texas 78217
June 1, 2018

Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III
United States Attorney General
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Sessions,

I write this appeal to you because of the troubling nature of the official treatment directed at innocent people who seek asylum as refugees to our great nation. Seeking asylum, of course, is not a crime, irrespective of the rhetoric you have directed to the press that would criminalize anyone coming to our border without a prior visa. Such rhetoric tends to lessen any sense of fairness and justice on the part of those who carry out your policy of separating asylum-seeking parents from their children. The policy itself is troubling, both because it imposes a punishment prior to and apart from any finding of guilt through due process of law, and because the punitive break-up of families violates fundamental family values.

Those of us who have formed our consciences with the Christian scriptures sometimes point out that the Gospel of Matthew describes the child Jesus as a refugee whose family sought asylum in a foreign country. While that account may be a literary device, Matthew was making a point with it. He likened Jesus, and those who follow him, to the Hebrews of old, who arrived in Egypt first in the person of a refugee from family violence and later as a group of economic migrants.

However, I prefer as an instructive lesson Matthew's account of the murder of the Holy Innocents in and around Bethlehem by the agents of King Herod the Great. Herod was moved by fear and jealousy. He was afraid that success on the part of a new king would reflect negatively on the tyranny he was carrying out on behalf of an empire. Punishing families, in advance of and absent any possible legal violation, on the basis of fear and jealousy is a misuse of law, an instance of law without justice. As you are undoubtedly aware, your office is responsible not simply for the administration of law but of justice; the word and concept are enshrined in the very name of your department.

In a way, Herod's history is our history. We have not had a king since 1781, but the governing sector of our society has known Herod's kind of fear and jealousy. Fearful and jealous resentment against Native Americans and slaves long dominated our public life. Historians report that this same kind of resentment characterized the treatment of Mexican Americans in Texas and elsewhere in the Southwest. Such resentment is irrational; successful and peaceful lives, made possible by secure family lives and unhindered education, in no way threaten the peace, prosperity, and security of Americans in general. While Herod's history has unfortunately been our history, his fear and jealousy need not be ours.

My heart aches at the anguish of mothers and fathers separated from their crying children, and my sense of justice stirs because I know these innocents, both adults and children, have done nothing to deserve such treatment. It is not unlike the breaking up of families in the former days of slavery. And there is no requirement in law that such be done, no law mandating or even allowing such treatment.

In empires of antiquity, huge statues of emperors dominated harbors. In our democracy, instead, we accepted an immense statue of Lady Liberty from the people of France, which stands in the New York waters in solidarity with those elsewhere in the world who seek freedom. Chains of bondage lie broken at her feet. The date of the Declaration of Independence marks the tablet she holds in her left hand. Her torch, raised by her right hand, is a beacon of open-mindedness. The whole figure is a welcome to humans who seek release from bondage and tyranny, who celebrate the declaration that all are created equal and endowed with rights by a Creator, and who seek enlightened intelligence rather than fearful and jealous fixations.

Mr. Sessions, do not put Lady Liberty's feet back into chains. Please do not mute the call for freedom from the tyranny of monarchs—be they political or psychological. Do not snatch that torch away from Lady Liberty, leaving an iron fist in its place.

Sincerely,

Anthony J. Blasi

Calendar

In Austin

Saturday June 9, 9:00am-5:00pm, The Nation at a Crossroads: A National Latino Policy Conference. Texas Capitol, Auditorium E1.004, 1100 Congress Ave. Free, RSVP at <https://eventbrite.com/e/the-nation-at-a-crossroads-a-national-latino-policy-conference-tickets-45084367557>.

Saturday June 23, 9:00am-5:00pm, Juneteenth Health Festival. 2018 theme: Reproductive Justice. The event is an annual celebration of Black Health and Weallness in the context of liberation. See <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/juneteenth-health-fest-2018-tickets-45395760943?aff=efbeventix>. Tickets (free) by May 30. Huston-Tillotson University, 900 Chacon St.

In Houston

Wednesday June 6, 8:00am-9:00am, Greg Cootsona (California State University at Chico), Science at a Particular Crossroads: Bringing the Religious Implications of Mainstream Science to Evangelical Christians. Rice University, Humanities Bldg. 117. Register at <http://events.rice.edu/#!/view/event/date/20180606/event-id/6295>.

In San Antonio

Saturday June 9, 10:00am, Pax Christi San Antonio meeting, home of Al Eisch, 3130 Clearfield (off Vance Jackson, north of I-410).

Monday June 18, 4:30pm to **Wednesday June 20**, 8:30pm, Summer Institute: Downward Mobility. Presentations by Shane Claiborne, Robert Elsberg, David Haas, and Sue Mosteller. Oblate School of Theology, 285 Oblate dr. \$85 registration; meal plan and lodging available. For information: <https://ost.edu/continuing-education/>, or (210) 341-1366 X 406.

Friday July 13-Sunday July 22. National Hispanic Institute Summer Conference. The Texas Lorenzo de Zavala Youth Legislative Session will be held on the St. Mary's Univrsity campus. For information, Latinx young adults may contact the National Hispanic Institute: jcotto@nhimail.com, or 512-357-6137.

Third Reading (Mark3:20-35)

Mark presents a scene in which Jesus goes to his hometown, and his own people deem him mad. Then scribes from Jerusalem arrive and suggest he had cast out evil spirits through the power of a demon named Beelzebul, the commander of evil spirits. Rather than engage the accusations directly, Jesus tells a parable that would lead one to wonder whether the charge lodged by the Jerusalemite scribes were actually self-contradictory, having an evil empire so divided against itself. The accusation by Jesus' own people was similar to that made by the visiting scribes since people in antiquity thought that madness was caused by demons. The point to all this comes in a saying of Jesus to the effect that all can be forgiven except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—a curious statement indeed.

It is difficult for us to translate the ancients' talk of demons and possession into our own thought categories, and the fact that the psychology of our own time—more or less the equivalent of the ancients' theory of spiritual forces—demands considerable faith. So allow me a little latitude.

I have long observed that generous people tend to think well of others, attributing generally good motives to people whose actions call for some explanation. Conversely, selfish and self-serving people tend to think ill of others and to attribute malicious motives to them, even when it comes to straightforward activity that can be readily understood without some conspiracy theory. Those ready to speak ill of a manifestly good motive and state of mind will never accept forgiveness because they automatically hold it suspect. One need not think of an Inspector God examining cases that a divine Person would or would not forgive; the problem lies with those who cannot accept forgiveness.

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Poem

Holy Blasphemer

He calls the Ineffable "Daddy,"
welcoming touch of a bleeding woman.

He gets tipsy with ruffians,
palsy with sex-workers,
makes instant healings seem normal.

He provokes those in power to do their worst,
daring to rise again in us his people.

Tom Keene
February 6, 2018

Torture and Hate-Based Politics

Anthony J. Blasi

Traveling in Italy recently, I became aware of the depiction of torture in art works in ancient churches. In Rome, my host brought me to sites few tourists see, one of which is a medieval church that features depictions of the tortures and executions visited upon the early Christian martyrs of Roman Imperial times. The depictions were stylized rather than naturalistic, reporting rather than reliving the terrible punishments government meted out to non-violent innocents for being unapproved of by the legal system. Some days later in Padua I visited the Basilica of St. Anthony, a church with which I was already familiar from some years ago; I noticed for the first time the depictions of the wounds of the martyrs and of the crucified Jesus were recorded pictorially for sure, but not in the life-like manner of later, Renaissance era art. Tortured Christians and the tortured presence of the divine among humans still populated Christian memory, but the point seems to have been to report rather than to create an experience on the part of an onlooker.

Resting in my hotel room, I was being informed by an English-language television news report that a nominee for the directorship of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency declined to characterize torture as immoral. She had been implicated in the use of torture in the past and promised not to do it again, but she expressed no remorse and offered no expression of the sentiment that should lead one not to engage in torturing. The news broadcast also included video clips of President Trump approving of torture and claiming it was an effective interrogation technique for obtaining accurate factual information. I listened to this, knowing that testimony obtained through torture is deemed by law enforcement and the military as unreliable and that torture is likely to result in false testimony that is given for the sole purpose of ending the pain experienced under torture. This was not the first time the lie about the effectiveness of torture has been told; government officials in the past have been known to discredit themselves rather than show remorse for having tortured. Torture elicits untrue testimony from the torturers as well as from those tortured.

It is evident that people perpetrate torture not out of some powerful desire for truth but for a desire for torture itself. The appeal for the torturer is analogous to the attraction that led the American prison staff at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq to demean, terrorize, and humiliate their captives, as well as torture them. Degradation and spectacle seem to be essential to the whole process. The pain of the torture and the angst felt by the Abu Ghraib prisoners were not experienced by the perpetrators, only by the helpless victims. The perpetrators, by way of contrast, experience a relative elevation of status in the devaluation of their victims; and they gain the enjoyment of a striking show during the performance, something like a spectator sport perverted by malice.

Politics is about the acquisition and exercise of power. Make no mistake about that. And power can be used for benevolent purposes. Those who disapprove of benevolent governmental programs in general might be anarchists or total libertarians;

that is at least theoretically possible. But the ways of exercising power while avoiding benevolence can entail instead the self-centered misuse of power for venal purposes. We know of bribery and conflicts of interest in the exercise of power, for example. Power can also be exercised for the purpose of degrading a real or imagined enemy and making a spectacle of that enemy.

Torture is illegal, and rightly so. Torture is also immoral, and that is more salient in its condemnation. The torturing of the early Christian martyrs was quite legal, but nevertheless just as immoral. The medieval depictions of those cases of torture report without degradation and spectacle, so as to instruct us of the evil thereof, without it being confounded with relative elevations in status or experiences of spectacle.

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.msic.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
www.txccedp.org

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

Climate Change

www.creation-care.com