

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating July 8, 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

This newsletter began three years ago. The gospel commentaries have gone through the entire liturgical cycle of Sundays. Some readers will have received all of them, a few only those from the past few Sundays. After the calendar section, a new commentary on the second Sunday reading follows, and then the previously published commentary on the gospel reading. The readings in this issue are for the fourteenth Sunday in ordinary time. As usual, a poem by Tom Keene follows; this issue it is *Child of Empires*. See <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php> for more of Tom's poems.

Last May 24 a church service in Washington, D.C., led to a silent ninety-minute candlelight procession to the White House. There, over 1,000 people held up candles and prayed aloud in multiple languages. Then they listened to leaders of many faiths read a moving proclamation, "Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis." The text of the proclamation follows the poem.

A week ago (Sunday, June 24) hundreds of people held a vigil for compassion, for the refugees being turned away at the southern border and for the families being separated when they cross the border to seek asylum (incidentally, not a crime under American and international law); they prayed and meditated at Main Plaza, in front of San Fernando Cathedral. Two days later a rally of people concerned with the same issue occurred outside Senator Cruz's office near Interstate 10; some young people asked to address the rally and proved to be very eloquent and on point; they were particularly upset by the practice of taking children away from parents. The next day a picket against the death penalty appeared on Dolorosa Street, across from the Bexar County Justice Center, within yards of San Fernando Cathedral. On Thursday, what was planned as a committee meeting for organizing a political campaign at the County Democratic Office drew such a big crowd of people eager to do something about the present state of the nation that the meeting had to be moved out-of-doors. Friday Main Plaza saw a rally called in protest against the "Muslim travel ban." Saturday, June 30, a huge crowd formed again on Main Plaza, in front of our historic San Fernando Cathedral, a larger gathering than that of the previous Sunday, with the theme, "Families Belong Together." This morning, hours before this issue goes out, Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller presided at a mass in the Cathedral, at which women who have

had to deal with the government's "zero tolerance" policy described their experiences. (Apparently the government wants to be intolerant of refugees fleeing violence and injustice.)

Meanwhile, 35,000 people joined a demonstration at the White House yesterday in Washington, D.C. 30,000 more demonstrated in New York City, 60,000 in Chicago, and 70,000 in Los Angeles. There were rallies in over 750 cities in all fifty states. But I think the fact that our San Fernando Cathedral was in the middle of yesterday's rally and made room for the justice mass was particularly significant in its own way. Patched and refurbished since its opening in 1750, it signifies the long-developing unity of the people of a shared land, quietly witnessing from a time before there were any borders and transcending all times and borders, embracing the Native Americans who were already here and who helped build it, the Canary Islanders who first worshiped in it, the Spanish who merged into its congregation from the Alamo, the revolutionaries who were buried in it, the many ethnic groups who shared its space until they formed their own churches, and the people of all descriptions who come to it now. Some worship in it, some wonder at the history it has seen, some ponder the unity it embraces. That unity is important; it is what is the root from which the Golden Rule springs.

Calendar

In Austin

Monday July 30, 9:30am-1:30PM, adult formation class on ecumenism. Diocesan Pastoral Center, St. Joseph classroom, 6225 E. Highway 290. Register at www.austindiocese.org or call (512) 949-2492.

In Houston

Friday July 20, 1:00pm, "No Northern or Southern Religion: Cumberland Presbyterians and the Christian Nation, 1800-1877," William R. Black (History Dept. thesis defense). Rice University, Humanities Bldg. 315.

In San Antonio

Saturday July 7, **Pax Christi San Antonio meeting. Maria Tobin's, 8715 Starcrest, Apt. 27.** Call 210 238-0067 to arrange parking. Some park across Starcrest in a church parking lot.

Tuesday July 10, 11:00am, anti-death penalty event, with a release of letter from faith leaders concerning the case of Christopher Young, at whose trial a potential juror was dismissed on the grounds of religious affiliation. Bexar County Courthouse, 100 Dolorosa.

Thursday July 12, 9:00 a.m. – noon, Faith-Based Initiative tech day. "Website Content Management and Design," by Stefanie Young, CEO, Innov8 Place; "Website Security," by Isaac Castillo, CEO, Founder, Echo Design Solutions; "Simple, Reliable, Inexpensive

Website Hosting Options,” by Chris Turner, CEO, Turner Logic. Central Library Auditorium, 600 Soledad.

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 University campus. For information, Latinx young adults may contact the National Hispanic Institute: jcotto@nhimail.com, or 512-357-6137.

Second Reading (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Second Corinthians is a composite of several letters of Paul. The sequence of letters and pages were out of order by the time the authentic Pauline letters were collected. Chapters 10-13, a section that includes today’s reading, followed upon a visit to Corinth by Paul that did not go well. In what was unorthodox behavior in that era, Paul had not become a client of some important personage in Corinth and thereby associate himself with high status networks in the community; instead during the time of his earlier visits to the city he chose to work for a living, engaging in the working class business of tent-making.

Other missionaries who had come to town, including one named Apollo, played the influence game in the approved of manner. So when a difficulty arose, involving some misconduct on the part of an important personage, some in the community distanced themselves from Paul and cited their affiliation with the Christian movement through the other missionaries including Apollo, reportedly an impressive individual.

Paul’s response was not to compare himself favorably to the others but to affirm that it was not he who was preached but the Messiah, Jesus. He wanted to get himself out of the way. “So, lest I be too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given me, a messenger of Satan, to cuff me on the ear, lest I be too elated.” Powerful people in ancient Roman imperial society humiliated people who crossed them by having them beaten, so that the scars of being put down showed in their flesh the rest of their lives. That had happened to Paul more than once. Just as well, as he saw it—“So I am content with weaknesses, insults, pain, persecution and difficulties over the Messiah; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

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Third Reading (Mark 6.1-6)

“Is this not the builder, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Jude, and Simon?” And, “Are not his sisters here among us?” The problem was not what Jesus was saying or how he was saying it, but that he was nobody important.

A county judge in Texas, open-minded and moderate, did not match the image of the typical Texas politician. Experts in economics had told him that pay levels in town were too low for people to have a decent standard of living. They even told him retail business could not grow unless the minimum wage became a living wage. Interest groups had their facts. Such claims were more such facts.

He stepped out his private door into the hall of the county executive building. The afternoon sun streaming through the window at the end of the hall made a silhouette of the janitor who was emptying waste baskets into a big barrel on a cart. "How ya doin', Sam?"

"All right, your honor. Anything you need?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. How much do you get paid?"

After an awkward pause, "Minimum wage."

"Is it enough?"

"I get by, with my weekend job at the parking lot and the wife's waitress work. This month is a little tight, adding my son to the car insurance."

"Yes," said the judge, "It adds up."

Back in the office, the judge had no more facts than before, but he saw them differently. Arguments for and against a "living wage policy" for county employees became arguments for and against the living people who were working for those wages. He decided to persuade the county commissioners to adopt a living wage policy.

Faith is not a matter of facts and arguments, though it may well deal with such. We do not see first and then have faith but have faith first and then begin to see. Unfortunately, faith is optional. Sometimes evidence may even be unavoidable, but understanding the evidence is not. After all, Sam the janitor is busy in the hallway five afternoons a week.

"Is this not the builder, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Jude, and Simon?" And, "Are not his sisters here among us?" So we know, factually, who he is, where he is from, how he is doing.

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Poem

Child of Empires

She knew and felt herself a child of empire:

Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, Greece,
China, Rome, Aztecs, Incas, Spain,
France, Britain, Russia and now us,

all with armies and navies, soldiers and sailors,

herded by kings and queens, Caesars and Czars,
corporate powers, frantic for land to own,
control of women and men,
the ones who work land and factories,
for from that is squeezed power and wealth for us few
and servitude for the rest:
 empire's quintessence.

She knew and felt herself a child of hope:

in her clarity that, as with all parasites, empires die,
she sensed her inner spark ready to flame,
how the dignity of all will make us a working kindred,
knowing power, not over, but with others
to make ourselves, our world, worthy of trust.

Tom Keene
October 5, 2017

Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis

We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. **We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.**

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography—our identity in Christ precedes every other identity. We pray that our nation will see Jesus' words in us. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church's role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government's role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace, rewarding good behavior while restraining bad behavior (Romans 13). When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."

It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them. We do so here with humility, prayer, and a deep dependency on the grace and Holy Spirit of God.

This letter comes from a retreat on Ash Wednesday, 2018. In this season of Lent, we feel deep lamentations for the state of our nation, and our own hearts are filled with

confession for the sins we feel called to address. The true meaning of the word repentance is to turn around. It is time to lament, confess, repent, and turn. In times of crisis, the church has historically learned to return to Jesus Christ.

Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian's first loyalty, above all others. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth.

The question we face is this: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What does our loyalty to Christ, as disciples, require at this moment in our history? We believe it is time to renew our theology of public discipleship and witness. Applying what "Jesus is Lord" means today is the message we commend as elders to our churches.

What we believe leads us to what we must reject. Our "Yes" is the foundation for our "No." What we confess as our faith leads to what we confront. Therefore, we offer the following six affirmations of what we believe, and the resulting rejections of practices and policies by political leaders which dangerously corrode the soul of the nation and deeply threaten the public integrity of our faith. We pray that we, as followers of Jesus, will find the depth of faith to match the danger of our political crisis.

I. WE BELIEVE each human being is made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). That image and likeness confers a divinely decreed dignity, worth, and God-given equality to all of us as children of the one God who is the Creator of all things. Racial bigotry is a brutal denial of the image of God (the *imago dei*) in some of the children of God. Our participation in the global community of Christ absolutely prevents any toleration of racial bigotry. Racial justice and healing are biblical and theological issues for us, and are central to the mission of the body of Christ in the world. We give thanks for the prophetic role of the historic black churches in America when they have called for a more faithful gospel.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership. We, as followers of Jesus, must clearly reject the use of racial bigotry for political gain that we have seen. In the face of such bigotry, silence is complicity. In particular, we reject white supremacy and commit ourselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage. Further, any doctrines or political strategies that use racist resentments, fears, or language must be named as public sin—one that goes back to the foundation of our nation and lingers on. Racial bigotry must be antithetical for those belonging to the body of Christ, because it denies the truth of the gospel we profess.

II. WE BELIEVE we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class (Galatians 3:28). The body of Christ, where those great human divisions are to be overcome, is meant to be an example for the rest of society. When we fail to overcome these oppressive obstacles, and even perpetuate them, we have failed in our vocation to the world—to proclaim and live the reconciling gospel of Christ.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women that has been further revealed in our culture and politics, including our churches, and the oppression of any other child of God. We lament when such practices seem publicly ignored, and thus privately condoned, by those in high positions of leadership. We stand for the respect, protection, and affirmation of women in our families, communities, workplaces, politics, and churches. We support the courageous truth-telling voices of women, who have helped the nation recognize these abuses. We confess sexism as a sin, requiring our repentance and resistance.

III. WE BELIEVE how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25: 31-46) “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” God calls us to protect and seek justice for those who are poor and vulnerable, and our treatment of people who are “oppressed,” “strangers,” “outsiders,” or otherwise considered “marginal” is a test of our relationship to God, who made us all equal in divine dignity and love. Our proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ is at stake in our solidarity with the most vulnerable. If our gospel is not “good news to the poor,” it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ (Luke 4:18).

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees, who are being made into cultural and political targets, and we need to remind our churches that God makes the treatment of the “strangers” among us a test of faith (Leviticus 19:33-34). We won’t accept the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children, and we will resist repeated attempts to deny health care to those who most need it. We confess our growing national sin of putting the rich over the poor. We reject the immoral logic of cutting services and programs for the poor while cutting taxes for the rich. Budgets are moral documents. We commit ourselves to opposing and reversing those policies and finding solutions that reflect the wisdom of people from different political parties and philosophies to seek the common good. Protecting the poor is a central commitment of Christian discipleship, to which 2,000 verses in the Bible attest.

IV. WE BELIEVE that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition, whose vocation includes speaking the Word of God into their societies and speaking the truth to power. A commitment to speaking truth, the ninth commandment of the Decalogue, “You shall not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:16), is foundational to shared trust in society. Falsehood can enslave us, but Jesus promises, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32). The search and respect for truth is crucial to anyone who follows Christ.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life. Politicians, like the rest of us, are human, fallible, sinful, and mortal. But when public lying becomes so persistent that it deliberately tries to change facts for ideological, political, or personal gain, the public accountability to truth is undermined. The regular purveying of falsehoods and consistent lying by the nation’s highest leaders can change the moral expectations within a culture, the accountability for a civil society, and even the behavior of families and children. The normalization of

lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society. In the face of lies that bring darkness, Jesus is our truth and our light.

V. WE BELIEVE that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles (the world) lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-26). We believe our elected officials are called to public service, not public tyranny, so we must protect the limits, checks, and balances of democracy and encourage humility and civility on the part of elected officials. We support democracy, not because we believe in human perfection, but because we do not. The authority of government is instituted by God to order an unredeemed society for the sake of justice and peace, but ultimate authority belongs only to God.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule. We believe authoritarian political leadership is a theological danger that threatens democracy and the common good—and we will resist it. Disrespect for the rule of law, not recognizing the equal importance of our three branches of government, and replacing civility with dehumanizing hostility toward opponents are of great concern to us. Neglecting the ethic of public service and accountability, in favor of personal recognition and gain often characterized by offensive arrogance, are not just political issues for us. They raise deeper concerns about political idolatry, accompanied by false and unconstitutional notions of authority.

VI. WE BELIEVE Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples (Matthew 28:18). Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. The most well-known verse in the New Testament starts with "For God so loved the world" (John 3:16). We, in turn, should love and serve the world and all its inhabitants, rather than seek first narrow, nationalistic prerogatives.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT "America first" as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal. We reject domination rather than stewardship of the earth's resources, toward genuine global development that brings human flourishing for all of God's children. Serving our own communities is essential, but the global connections between us are undeniable. Global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflict, weapons of mass destruction, and deadly diseases in some places ultimately affect all places, and we need wise political leadership to deal with each of these.

WE ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED for the soul of our nation, but also for our churches and the integrity of our faith. The present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; deeper into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; deeper into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.

The church is always subject to temptations to power, to cultural conformity, and to racial, class, and gender divides, as Galatians 3:28 teaches us. But our answer is to be "in Christ," and to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable, and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)

The best response to our political, material, cultural, racial, or national idolatries is the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Jesus summarizes the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:38). As to loving our neighbors, we would add “no exceptions.”

We commend this letter to pastors, local churches, and young people who are watching and waiting to see what the churches will say and do at such a time as this.

Our urgent need, in a time of moral and political crisis, is to recover the power of confessing our faith. Lament, repent, and then repair. If Jesus is Lord, there is always space for grace. We believe it is time to speak and to act in faith and conscience, not because of politics, but because we are disciples of Jesus Christ—to whom be all authority, honor, and glory. It is time for a fresh confession of faith. Jesus is Lord. He is the light in our darkness. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

- Bishop Carroll A. Baltimore, President and CEO, Global Alliance Interfaith Network
- Rev. Dr. Peter Borgdorff, Executive Director Emeritus, Christian Reformed Church in North America
- Dr. Amos Brown, Chair, Social Justice Commission, National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.
- Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus, Columbia Theological Seminary
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- Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, Director, NCC Truth and Racial Justice Initiative
- Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, Co-Convener, National African American Clergy Network; President, Skinner Leadership Institute
- Bishop Will Willimon, Bishop, The United Methodist Church, retired, Professor of the Practice of Ministry, Duke Divinity School

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