

Testimony



A Pamphlet from Pax Christi Texas

Anticipating August 22, 2021

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 the readings for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time. Tom Keene's poem is *The Rabbi Said*. For more of Tom's poems, see <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php>. Following the poem are some thoughts on the language of prayer.

Calendar

[Times are given for the Central Time Zone.]

Wednesday August 18, 12:00pm-2:45pm (1:00pm-3:45pm ET) White Christian Nationalism in the United States. First panel: Anthea Butler (University of Pennsylvania), Caroline Mala Corbin (University of Miami), Kristin Kabes du Mez (Calvin University), Samuel Perry (University of Oklahoma), and Andrew Whitehead (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis). Second panel: Angela Denker (Lutheran pastor), Jack Jenkins (Religious News Service), Jemar Tisby (historian), Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove (author), and Amanda Tyler (University of California). Register at: <https://raac.iupui.edu/programs/events/white-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-an-online-mini-conference/>

Thursday August 19, 12:00pm, online panel discussion "Understanding Systematic Racism in Education," Roby Chatterji (American Progress), Cherry Steinwender (Center for the Healing of Racism), and Jordan Starck (Stanford University), moderated by Jillian Bontka (Anti-Defamation League). Register at: https://adl.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_MN2p0o8ET56AlqEsHucP8A

Tuesday August 24, 6:30pm, Courageous Conversation on Racism, Holy Cross Parish, Austin. Rev. Bryan's Massingale's acceptance speech of the Pax Christi USA 2021 Teacher of Peace Award, followed by conversation. Access at: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82394101930?pwd=bE9VZHRMRERzS1dQYi8yZUNtQ0VtQT09>

Wednesday August 25, 6:30pm, online "Sensory Pollution in the Anthropocene: Effect of Light and Noise Pollution on Birds in the 'Age of Humans,'" Jennifer N. Phillips (Texas A & M, San Antonio). Access at: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86042962207?pwd=VnJ5cDY1SDhzMVhkZlFXNysxcDY4dz09#success>

Thursday August 26, 4:00pm (5:00pmET), webinar "Voices from the K-12 schools on the Impact of Critical Race Theory." The webinar, presented by the Anti-Defamation League's Central and Southern Divisions, will clarify what critical race theory really means, hear from people affected by the movement and learn how to resist resolutions and bills seeking to misconstrue history. Register at: https://adl.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_IHa72PyjSlidkD1c6BSRIQ

Saturday August 28, 11:30am webinar "Politics and the death Penalty," with the Republican majority whip of the Wyoming legislature and the district attorneys of Austin, Texas; Los Angeles, California; Tucson, Arizona; St. Louis, Missouri; and Athens, Georgia. Register at: https://amnestyusa-org.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_4wfEcQBtXO3eFAG2Smqbg

In Dallas

Thursday September 16, 8:15am-3:30pm, Jno Owens Conference: Impact of Migration on Economic and Human Development, at Federal Reserve Bank, Dallas. Information and registration: <https://calendar.smu.edu/site/centersinstitutes/event/owens-conference-2020/>

First Reading (Josue 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b)

Chapter 24 of the *Book of Josue* retains some very ancient material pertaining to an inter-tribal covenant prior to the Jerusalem covenant; the site is

Shechem. The Lectionary editors have selected passages from the chapter that have references to the Jerusalem covenant, which has the Mount Sinai theophany narrative behind it. Obviously, the editors wish to refer to a covenant between the Lord and the people of God, without complicating the matter with the fact that there are historical traces of other covenants in the biblical materials.

The fact that there were more than one historical covenant merits some consideration. The basis for a relationship with the divine is not something contained within any one national story but rests on a human condition that is also present among many nations. This presents a theological foundation for interfaith cooperation.

Second Reading (Ephesians 5:21-32)

As translated, this is a reading that many people find dated, or at least inconvenient in our time. This is in part because the translation is faulty, even tendentious. What will be heard at mass reads as follows: “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.” That rendering, with the subjunctive “should”, is not the worst version; a widely used translation uses the imperative: “Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as to the Lord” (RSV). What the Greek actually says does not have that imperative, but quite a quite different one, earlier in the passage: “...but be filled with the spirit, giving voice to psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs among one another and singing praise to the Lord in your hearts, always giving thanks for everything to God and Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, submitting to one another, with fear of the Messiah: Wives to your husbands as to the Lord...”

The force of the imperative, “be filled with the spirit,” carries to what people do in the spirit—singing in thanksgiving prayer when with one another and in the heart when not with one another. The later participle, “submitting,” pertains to “when,” when “submitting to one another...” What follows that is a typical first century household code. The household in the Hellenistic and Roman framework of the first century was a mini-monarchy consisting of a monarchical father, with wife, children, and slaves as subordinates. The household head would be in turn subordinate to a local political influential and answerable to the latter for the behavior of his subordinates. This context is presupposed, with household subordinates submitting to the household head also presupposed, as a descriptive account of daily life, not as a prescriptive Christian ordinance.

What the author of Ephesians adds to the typical household code of the time are the parallels with the Messiah's devotion to the church of disciples, and a new imperative: "Husbands, love the wives...", which is in the imperative rather than embodied in a participle. The fact that the author had to insist upon it with an imperative is evidence that such was not the normal cultural prescription of the time.

Why are the translations tendentiously faulty? It is not some difficulty of the original; a participle is manifestly not a subjunctive or an imperative. Submission is manifestly not an aspect of signing thanksgiving among others or in the heart. One can assume that the description of household submission no longer reflected daily reality by the time of the printing press and was therefore read as a prescription.

Third Reading (John 6.60-69)

This section, which follows an inserted discourse, appears to resume the narrative in the Johannine Gospel from verses 6.48-50: "I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert and died. This bread is what is coming down from heaven, so that anyone who would eat of it would not also die."

Anyone? Life without death? "This statement is hard; who can listen to it?" Jesus was speaking of spiritual life, but even many of his disciples were listening for physical life. Faith, which would move one to listen for words of spiritual life, comes from God, and not everyone listens for those kinds of word. So many disciples left Jesus and no longer traveled with him.

"Do you wish to go too?" Simon Peter says he would not leave: "You have words of eternal life."

It is not a matter of a wiser investment. Peter's insight is not that those who left hoped for bread for its physical benefits while he was astute enough to hope for spiritual benefit. He does not mention the benefit at all; he wants to stay with Jesus because his *words* were spiritually alive. It was not that they were words *about* spiritual rewards in heaven but that the words themselves were "words of eternal life." In one sense, those who listen for words of spiritual life will certainly die, but Peter grasped the reality that the words were not means to some reward but were themselves intrinsically valuable.

Faith is as much about doubt as about assurance. First it would have us doubt the sufficiency of earthly rewards. Then it would have us doubt the value of reward as such. What faith leads us to is the discourse of eternal life. To be genuinely eternal, such life cannot be absent in the present and only promised for the future.

The image is that of bread, which has value when consumed and when shared. When stored up for a distant future, it only becomes stale. The image is about life, activity. We can be vivacious, we can be the occasion for others to be vivacious. It is easy to persuade ourselves not to deny ourselves too much, but it is a hard saying when it comes to persuading ourselves not to deny others too much.

Poem

The Rabbi Said

The rabbi said:

Do this to remember me.
By this bread, this wine,
I become you as you become me.

By this, we model for all
how illusions of separation
dissolve in the Oneness of life,
drenching this unique Universe,
yet transcending even that
into the utterness of
Being, Being, Being.

Tom Keene and Muse
April 8, 2021

The Language of Prayer

Anthony J. Blasi

The language used in prayer can be an object of controversy. Some among us remember when the language of the mass changed from Latin to the vernacular; some people protested, some joined schismatic Catholic groups, and some still look around for the rare parish that offers a Latin mass. A series of revised English translations followed the change to the vernacular, and these also occasioned conflict, especially when they were not marked improvements. "The Lord be with you—and with your spirit": I still do not understand what this exchange is supposed to mean. They say the predecessor, "and also with you," was too much like a greeting. So... At least greetings have meaning, transforming the context from individual religiosity to collective worship. Bypassing the whole person and referring to a spirit seems more than a little strange to me, but I do not want to direct arguments about words to an international bureaucracy that does not listen anyway.

There is something to be said for the preservative nature of ritual language. The Latin mass not only featured the Latin language, albeit a baroque version of Latin borrowed from European court life, but also Greek. The Church in Rome began with a membership of non-elite immigrants who spoke Greek, but when high society adopted Christianity the service was carried on in Latin, which the common people did not understand. The solution was to start up a litany among the common people while the official liturgy was going on in the sanctuary. As with litanies in general, the commoners' litany began with "Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy..." This was not in Latin, which would have been "Domine, misere nobis; Christe, misere nobis..." but Greek: "Kurie eleison; Christe eleison..." The litany progressed through the list of the saints and culminated in divine names, which in Latin for some reason were: "Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi" (Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world). Then the Communion Service followed, which occurs largely as a gesture and transcends words and languages. For some reason, the Tridentine Liturgy, which was known as the Latin mass, had the end of the litany in Latin even though the beginning had been left in Greek and the recitation in between was deleted. This retention of the Greek reminds us that the intent was to include the people somehow, that the liturgy was not simply for the clergy. Prior to the last revision of the English translation of the liturgy, musicians used to insert a number of divine names at the time before the Communion Service as a way of maintaining the people's

participation while the celebrants were still preparing the species of the real presence. The Vatican officials who put an end to that practice seemed to be wary of too much participation among the common people.

I mention these details to point out that the importance of the language of prayer is not limited to the lexical meanings of translated texts. Whether the language is the actual language of the people is important. Whether the language elicits or discourages participation is also important.

It is also the case that changes that take place in the languages into which ancient texts are rendered are also important. English is a remarkably precise language, compared to, for example, Hebrew. Consequently, one may translate a Hebrew text several different ways, and they would all be correct lexically. The precise nature of English has been enhanced since the middle of the last century, so that such terms as *man*, *men*, and *mankind* no longer refer to humans in general but to male humans only. The translation used in the readings at mass fail to reflect this fact for the most part, thereby excluding females from many of the references. The laity in general has been humoring the higher clergy by listening to such a bad translation. The problem is not the lexical meaning of gender exclusive language; people are intelligent enough to accommodate that. The problem is the fact of ignoring more than half of the people in attendance at services. One may comprehend the lexical meaning of a gender exclusive text, even while understanding also the fact that one is not deemed important enough to be taken into consideration.

I mention these things to bring up the matter of peace and war, justice and oppression, as reflected in the language of prayer. Consider the relatively short psalm, Psalm 149:

Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
Let Israel be glad in its maker,
the people of Zion rejoice in their king.
Let them praise his name in dance,
make music with tambourine and lyre.
For the LORD takes delight in his people,
honors the poor with victory.
Let the faithful rejoice in their glory,
cry out for joy on their couches,
With the praise of God in their mouths,

and a two-edged sword in their hands,
To bring retribution on the nations,
 punishment on the peoples,
To bind their kings in shackles,
 their nobles in chains of iron,
To execute the judgments decreed for them—
 such is the glory of all God's faithful.

The venomous language of militant warfare against other nations or peoples, the endorsement of weaponry, and the nationalism (Israeli in this case) are commonplace in the psalms. This particular psalm is used in the Sunday Morning Prayer in Week I of the Liturgy of the Hours, a text used not only every fourth Sunday morning but also on major feasts. It begins without any major problem, but from "and a two-edged sword" goes downhill. Clergy and members of most religious communities are expected to pray this prayer and ones like it.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, a reform of the Liturgy of the Hours (termed *Divine Office*) was in progress. The Council recognized the Liturgy of the Hours as the public prayer of the Church, the purpose of which is to sanctify the day.¹ There is a reference to clergy leading the laity in praying the office, as well as the clergy and the religious orders and congregations praying it. Praying the Liturgy of the Hours has not caught on among those not required to do it, and for good reason. Reciting the warlike and nationalistic sentiments found in the psalms, which comprise the better part of the office, does not sanctify the day and does not lend an acceptable public face of the Church.

There is much of value in the Liturgy of the Hours, and I certainly do not propose doing away with it. However, it is necessary to be much more selective of which psalms and which other texts are included. I also find that the translations of the psalms are frequently awkward and beset with gender exclusive language. Moreover, Hebrew has only two time aspects in its grammar—action completed and action continuing—and the translations mechanically translate them with past and future tenses. Consequently, continuing actions, which should often be translated with *ing* verb forms, can be read by the unwary as prophetic predictions. Are the faithful really to believe that the Davidic dynasty remains forever? So not only is greater selectivity of texts necessary, but more nuanced translation.

¹ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, ch. 4.

The proper reform of the Liturgy of the Hours is not simply another case where better translation is called for. The Liturgy of the Hours is the public prayer of the Church that is for the lay people; it need not be limited to the clergy and people led by clergy. It should not be left in an inaccessible state, wherein one needs an education in Hebrew to understand passages properly, left encased in clumsy wording, and left coupled to thoroughly objectionable warlike and nationalistic sentiments.

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

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