

# Testimony

## A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating December 9, 2018

Pax Christi San Antonio does not solicit donations. Thoughtful comments, however, may be sent to the editor at [j6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com](mailto:j6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com), with the understanding that permission to publish them is implied. 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 Second and Third Reading sections are inspired by the readings for the Second Sunday of Advent. Tom Keene's poem is *The Bastard Messiah*. For more of Tom's poems, see <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php>. Following the poem is an essay by Molly Worthen, posted last month by the *New York Times*, *The Misguided Drive to Measure "Learning Outcomes."* The essay merits a read first because it highlights the modern problem of inequality affecting the conduct of higher education, and second because powers of observation and analysis are essential to moral decision making—something emphasized in traditional Catholic moral theology.

A file archiving the Gospel reflections, poems by Tom Keene, and selected essays by members of Pax Christi San Antonio has been posted on the Pax Christi San Antonio website. The file has a table of contents and indices for ease of use. See <http://www.paxchristisa.org>.

### Calendar

#### In Austin

**Thursday January 17**, 5:00pm-6:30pm, Dr. Eric Winsberg on climate science chaos, and unpredictability. Fleck Hall 305, St. Edward's University, 3001 S. Congress. For parking permit: <https://www.stedwards.edu/contact-us/main-campus-united-states>.

Refreshments served. Register: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/cel-speaker-series-eric-wisberg-on-philosophy-and-climate-science-tickets-46804971931> .

#### In Houston

**Sunday December 2**, 7:00pm-8:30pm, Climate Change & Laudato Si. Jones Hall, St. Thomas University, 3910 Yoakum Blvd. Information: Nicole Labadie, [driscond@stthom.edu](mailto:driscond@stthom.edu) .

**Thursday December 6**, 7:00pm, film, *The Refuge*, on the resistance to oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by the Gwich'in People of Alaska and Northern Canada. Rice Media Center (building #37 on the Rice University campus map).

**Friday December 7**, 10:00am-5:30pm, symposium, “Waste: Histories and Futures.” Information: Joseph Campana, [jac4@rice.edu](mailto:jac4@rice.edu). Moody Center for the Fine Arts, double classroom, Rice University, 6100 Main St.

### **In San Antonio**

**Thursday December 6**, 6:30-8:00, Wine & Cheese fundraising reception to benefit NOWCastSA. NOWCastSA’s mission is to promote and facilitate an inclusive civic conversation by empowering neighbors to identify common issues and share information through education, training, community news, events, and multimedia. 112 W. Magnolia Avenue. See [nowcastsa.com](http://nowcastsa.com).

**Monday December 10**, 6:30-8:30, Interreligious Council Monthly Meeting, “The upcoming festive season: How does it impact your faith community?” Jewish Community Campus, upper level, Federation Board Room, 12500 NW Military. RSVP: 210-787-8802 or [icos2018@gmail.com](mailto:icos2018@gmail.com).

**Tuesday December 11**, 9:00am-12:00pm, San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller, “The Church in America: A Conversation on Immigration,” responses by Sr. Norma Pimentel and Fr. Sean Carroll, SJ, followed by mass. Mexican American Catholic College, 3115 W. Ashby. Send RSVP to [events@americamedia.org](mailto:events@americamedia.org).

**Saturday December 15**, 4:00pm-7:00pm, Deely Coal Plant Shutdown Celebration. Celebration of the closing of San Antonio’s oldest and dirtiest coal plant, and the leaders who helped make the closure happen. Galeria Guadalupe, 723 S. Brazos.

**Friday December 21**, 7:00pm, SAMMinistries Annual Homeless Persons’ Memorial Service. Milan Park, 500 W. Commerce.

### **Second Reading (Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11)**

This is a part of Paul’s Letter to the Philippian church that expresses joy over a donation the church made to his ministry. He goes on to pray “that your love overflows more and more with full knowledge and all discernment, so that you assay what is superior, so that you would be uncorrupted and without offense on the day of the Messiah....”

Paul does not pray for a mechanical compliance with rules and regulations but love being expressed by knowledge and discernment. This is consistent with a “natural law” approach to moral decision-making, which accords individuals the freedom and obligation to look into matters and judge accordingly. At least that is what natural law was in the writings of the medieval saint and genius Thomas Aquinas. Later writers have ironically attempted to bypass the individual person and impose “official” decisions of natural law. The original meaning has been re-emphasized in recent time with the principle of the primacy of conscience.

Last month a local San Antonio radio program had a well-intentioned interviewer asking two guests from Call to Action about Catholic activism for social justice. He pursued what he thought was a dilemma between Catholicism and agitation. The guests

handled that question easily, citing the Catholic tradition of social teachings. Then a caller, saying he had left Catholicism because it was about rules and regulations on moral issues. The interviewer presented the caller's statement as an opposition between traditional Catholic morality and making a resort to one's own conscience. The two guests were sidetracked onto other issues. I called in to the program—something I generally do not do—to greet one of the Call to Action guests, whom I know, to make a pitch for Pax Christi San Antonio as an advocacy group, and to stress that the primacy of conscience *is* in fact the traditional Catholic, and Christian, approach.

### **Third Reading (Luke 3.1-6)**

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Caesar Tiberius...”: Was Luke simply being a historian? He went on to mention Pontius Pilate, the tetrarch Herod (Antipas), the tetrarch Philip, the tetrarch Lysanias, and the high priests Annas and Caiphaz. The references should not be dismissed so readily. Rather, Luke is setting the scene for the mission of the prophetic figure, John the Baptist. He uses the words of Isaiah 40: “Prepare the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.” Prophets speak truth to power, questioning the ways of the holders of power. Caesar Tiberius was governing in a way that obstructed truth. Pilate and the tetrarchs, serving Tiberius as a god, were making the straightforward presence of the divine into something requiring circuitous inquiry. The very Jerusalem priesthood too was an obstacle.

The wording from Isaiah is undoubtedly metaphorical; it is not about engineering roads. In fact, the Caesars, their underlings, and their allies were accomplished at highway construction. But the more effectively they implemented the authoritarian ways of the world, the more they troubled the coming of the Lord. Caesar claimed not only to be a civil authority, but also a deity. The priesthood was not only about prayer, but governance as well. Luke and the Baptist were not advocating the separation of religion and government, but they were making way for the ways of the Lord in both kinds of authority and responsibility. They would unsettle what had beforehand been settled and settle upon what beforehand had not been so much as imagined.

In one sense, Luke was in fact being a historian—not merely chronicling but giving voice to what was of historical significance.

Incidentally, are there not rulers today who are better at road building than clearing the way for truth?

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### **Poem**

#### **The Bastard Messiah**

In the minds of his Nazarene neighbors  
he was a conceived-out-of-wedlock bastard.  
He was not the son of Joseph,  
they called him son of Mary.

In the minds of his friends and followers,  
he was a messiah, a gift of God to the people,  
to Israel, to the world.

Two mindsets.  
How to reconcile, bring them together?

A story! A virgin, an angel, a decision, a yes, a birth.

Handed down from one generation to the next  
and the next to this our day,  
a story of how rejected rocks become cornerstones.

It is the story of ourselves.

Tom Keene  
May 19, 2017

### **The Misguided Drive to Measure “Learning Outcomes”<sup>1</sup>**

By Molly Worthen

I teach at a big state university, and I often receive emails from software companies offering to help me do a basic part of my job: figuring out what my students have learned.

If you thought this task required only low-tech materials like a pile of final exams and a red pen, you’re stuck in the 20th century. In 2018, more and more university administrators want campuswide, quantifiable data that reveal what skills students are learning. Their desire has fed a bureaucratic behemoth known as learning outcomes assessment. This elaborate, expensive, supposedly data-driven analysis seeks to translate the subtleties of the classroom into PowerPoint slides packed with statistics — in the hope of deflecting the charge that students pay too much for degrees that mean too little.

It’s true that old-fashioned course grades, skewed by grade inflation and inconsistency among schools and disciplines, can’t tell us everything about what students have learned. But the ballooning assessment industry — including the tech companies and consulting firms that profit from assessment — is a symptom of higher education’s crisis, not a solution to it. It preys especially on less prestigious schools and contributes to the system’s deepening divide into a narrow tier of elite institutions primarily serving the rich and a vast landscape of glorified trade schools for everyone else.

Without thoughtful reconsideration, learning assessment will continue to devour a lot of money for meager results. The movement’s focus on quantifying classroom

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<sup>1</sup> Online New York *Times* posting, February 23, 2018.

experience makes it easy to shift blame for student failure wholly onto universities, ignoring deeper socio-economic reasons that cause many students to struggle with college-level work. Worse, when the effort to reduce learning to a list of job-ready skills goes too far, it misses the point of a university education.

The regional accrediting agencies that certify the quality of education an institution provides — and its fitness to receive federal student financial aid — now require some form of student learning assessment. That means most American colleges and universities have to do it. According to a recent survey, schools deploy an average of four methods for evaluating learning, which include testing software and rubrics to standardize examinations, e-portfolio platforms to display student projects, surveys and other tools.

No intellectual characteristic is too ineffable for assessment. Some schools use lengthy surveys like the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory, which claims to test for qualities like “truthseeking” and “analyticity.” The Global Perspective Inventory, *administered* and sold by Iowa State University, asks students to rate their agreement with statements like “I do not feel threatened emotionally when presented with multiple perspectives” and scores them on metrics like the “intrapersonal affect scale.”

Surveys can't tell you everything. So universities assemble committees of faculty members, arm them with rubrics and assign them piles of student essays culled from across the school (often called “student products,” as if they are tubes of undergraduate Soylent Green). Assessment has invaded the classroom, too: On many campuses, professors must include a list of skills-based “learning outcomes” on every syllabus and assess them throughout the semester.

All this assessing requires a lot of labor, time and cash. Yet even its proponents have struggled to produce much evidence — beyond occasional anecdotes — that it improves student learning. “I think assessment practices are ripe for re-examining,” said David Eubanks, assistant vice president for assessment and institutional effectiveness at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., who has worked in assessment for years and now *speaks out* about its problems. “It has forced academic departments to use data that's not very good,” he added. “And the process of getting this data that's not very good can be very painful.”

The push to quantify undergraduate learning is about a century old, but the movement really took off in the 1980s. The assessment boom coincided — not, I think, by accident — with the decision of state legislatures all over the country to reduce spending on public universities and other social services. That divestment continued, moving more of the cost of higher education onto students. (These students are often graduates of underfunded high schools that can't prepare them for college in the first place.) It was politically convenient to hold universities accountable for all this, rather than to scrutinize neoliberal austerity measures.

In 2006, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, convened by Margaret Spellings, the secretary of education at the time, issued a scathing critique of universities. “Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces,” the commission's report complained.

Educators scrambled to ensure that students graduate with these skills — and to prove it with data. The obsession with testing that dominates primary education invaded universities, bringing with it a large support staff. Here is the first irony of learning assessment: Faced with outrage over the high cost of higher education, universities responded by encouraging expensive administrative bloat.

Many of the professionals who work in learning assessment are former faculty members who care deeply about access to quality education. Pat Hutchings, a senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (and former English professor), told me: “Good assessment begins with real, genuine questions that educators have about their students, and right now for many educators those are questions about equity. We’re doing pretty well with 18- to 22-year-olds from upper-middle-class families, but what about — well, fill in the blank.”

It seems that the pressure to assess student learning outcomes has grown most quickly at poorly funded regional universities that have absorbed a large proportion of financially disadvantaged students, where profound deficits in preparation and resources hamper achievement. Research indicates that the more selective a university, the less likely it is to embrace assessment. Learning outcomes assessment has become one way to answer the question, “If you get unprepared students in your class and they don’t do well, how does that get explained?” Mr. Eubanks at Furman University told me.

When Erik Gilbert, a professor of history at Arkansas State University, reached the end of his World Civilization course last fall, he dutifully imposed the required assessment: an extra question on the final exam that asked students to read a document about Samurai culture and answer questions using knowledge of Japanese history. Yet his course focused on “cross-cultural connections, trade, travel, empire, migration and bigger-scale questions, rather than area studies,” Mr. Gilbert told me. His students had not studied Japanese domestic history. “We do it this way because it satisfies what the assessment office wants, not because it addresses concerns that we as a department have.”

Mr. Gilbert became an outspoken assessment *skeptic* after years of watching the process fail to capture what happens in his classes — and seeing it miss the real reasons students struggle. “Maybe all your students have full-time jobs, but that’s something you can’t fix, even though that’s really the core problem,” he said. “Instead, you’re expected to find some small problem, like students don’t understand historical chronology, so you might add a reading to address that. You’re supposed to make something up every semester, then write up a narrative” explaining your solution to administrators.

Here is the second irony: Learning assessment has not spurred discussion of the deep structural problems that send so many students to college unprepared to succeed. Instead, it lets politicians and accreditors ignore these problems as long as bureaucratic mechanisms appear to be holding someone — usually a professor — accountable for student performance.

All professors could benefit from serious conversations about what is and is not working in their classes. But instead they end up preoccupied with feeding the bureaucratic beast. “It’s a bit like the old Soviet Union. You speak two languages,” said Frank Furedi, an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Kent in Britain,

which has a booming assessment culture. “You do a performance for the sake of the auditors, but in reality, you carry on.”

Yet bureaucratic jargon subtly shapes the expectations of students and teachers alike. On the first day of class, my colleagues and I — especially in the humanities, where professors are perpetually anxious about falling enrollment — find ourselves rattling off the skills our courses offer (“Critical thinking! Clear writing!”), hyping our products like Apple Store clerks.

I teach intellectual history. Of course that includes skills: learning to read a historical source, interpret evidence and build an argument. But cultivating historical consciousness is more than that: It means helping students immerse themselves in a body of knowledge, question assumptions about memory and orient themselves toward current events in a new way.

If we describe college courses as mainly delivery mechanisms for skills to please a future employer, if we imply that history, literature and linguistics are more or less interchangeable “content” that convey the same mental tools, we oversimplify the intellectual complexity that makes a university education worthwhile in the first place. We end up using the language of the capitalist marketplace and speak to our students as customers rather than fellow thinkers. They deserve better.

“When kids come from backgrounds where they’re the first in their families to go to college, we have to take them seriously, and not flatter them and give them third-rate ideas,” Mr. Furedi told me. “They need to be challenged and inspired by the idea of our disciplines.” Assessment culture is dumbing down universities, he said: “One of the horrible things is that many universities think that giving access to nontraditional students means turning a university into a high school. That’s not giving them access to higher education.”

Here is the third irony: The value of universities to a capitalist society depends on their ability to resist capitalism, to carve out space for intellectual endeavors that don’t have obvious metrics or market value.

Consider that holy grail of learning outcomes, critical thinking — what the philosopher John Dewey called the ability “to maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry.” Teaching it is not a cheap or efficient process. It does not come from trying to educate the most students at the lowest possible cost or from emphasizing short, quantifiable, standardized assignments at the expense of meandering, creative and difficult investigation.

Producing thoughtful, talented graduates is not a matter of focusing on market-ready skills. It’s about giving students an opportunity that most of them will never have again in their lives: the chance for serious exploration of complicated intellectual problems, the gift of time in an institution where curiosity and discovery are the source of meaning.

That’s how we produce the critical thinkers American employers want to hire. And there’s just no app for that.

## 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](http://www.msjc.net)

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, International JPIC Committee  
<http://sacvvi.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](http://www.txccedp.org)

Dialogue Institute of San Antonio  
[www.thedialoginstitute.org/san-antonio/](http://www.thedialoginstitute.org/san-antonio/)

Climate Change  
[www.creation-care.com](http://www.creation-care.com)