

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating July 16, 2017

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.

Editorial

After the calendar, the *Third Reading* commentary is based on the gospel reading for the fifteenth Sunday in ordinary time. Tom Keene's poem is *Horrors*.

Last month the first meeting of the new San Antonio City Council passed by consent, among many others, one endorsing the Charter for Compassion (see https://www.charterforcompassion.org/images/menus/charter/pdfs/CharterFlyer10-30-2012_0.pdf). While newly-elected Mayor Ron Nirenberg seems to be aware of what it was about, it is uncertain whether all the members of the council were. Later the same day I joined members of the San Antonio Peace Center for a discussion of the day's events and the meaning of the Charter for Compassion; the essay that follows the poem is my continuation of what we discussed.

Calendar

Saturday July 15, 10:00am, Pax Christi San Antonio meeting. Residence of Maria Tobin, 8715 Starcrest Dr., Apt. 27. (Go north on Starcrest from I-410; Starcrest becomes a divided road. The apartment complex is located between Hidden Drive and Granby Court, on the south-bound side of Starcrest. It is possible to park on Hidden Drive.)

Saturday July 22, environmental film extravaganza. 1:00pm, *Green Fire: Aldo Leopold and a Land Ethic for Our Time*. 2:15pm, *Love Thy Nature*. 3:45pm, *Before the Flood*. Mabee Library Auditorium, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway.

Sunday July 23, 4:00pm-6:00pm, Michal Lemberger, Finding the Voice of the Voiceless in the Hebrew Bible. \$17. Register by July 14. For details see www.upcsa.org/classes. SoL Center, University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell (park off Shook).

Tuesday July 25-Thursday July 27, 10:30-12:00 noon, Rev. Traci Smith, "Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christian Hebrews." \$35 for 3 sessions. Register by July 17. SoL Center, University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell (park off Shook).

Saturday July 29, 10:00am, Medicare for All March. Hemisfair Park, Yanaguana Garden, 434 S. Alamo.

Saturday July 29, environmental film extravaganza. 1:00pm, *Written on Water: A Modern Tale of a Dry West*. 2:15pm, *Watershed: Exploring a New Water Ethic for the West*. 3:45pm, *Revolution*. Mabee Library Auditorium, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway.

Thursday August 10, 6:00pm-8:30pm, Dine out to support Headwaters. The mission of Headwaters, a non-profit sponsored Earth care ministry of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, is to preserve, restore, and celebrate the rich natural, cultural, historical, spiritual, and educational values of the headwaters of the San Antonio River. At The Hoppy Monk, 1010 N. Loop 1604 (east-bound service road, between Stone Oak Parkway & U.S. 281). 15% of the bill will be donated. Make reservations before August 4 at www.groupraise.com/events/33070 .

Third Reading (Mathew 13:1-27)

“On that day when leaving the house Jesus sat by the sea. And a great crowd congregated about him; so boarding a boat he sat down, and the whole crowd stood on the shore.” This is the set-up for the parable of the sowing of the seed. It would be a mistake to dismiss the set-up as interstitial material between more important passages. This “framing” distances the speaking done by Jesus and the hearing—be the latter merely hearing or engaged listening—done by the crowd. Lest the point be missed, right after the parable comes, “Someone who has ears, listen.”

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand, the evil one comes and seizes what was sown in that person’s heart.” It is obvious but frequently forgotten that this pertains to church members, who hear the word, not people who have not heard the word. One might think of medieval tales of malevolent devils when mention of the “evil one” is made, but thinking of political clergy who propagate hate fits better. “That is the one sowing on the roadway.”

“And the one sowing on rock ground, this is one hearing the word and straightway accepting it with joy. This one does not have a root within but is tentative, and when affliction or persecution on account of the word occurs, this one is straightway caused to stumble.” There is not much affliction or persecution on account of the word today, especially when the word is clothed with comfortable conventionality and feel-good verbiage. After two millennia, unrooted Christians have devised ways to avoid being afflicted or persecuted.

“And the one sowing among thorns....” Thorns, or thistles, were used in ancient Palestine to mark off property lines and repel roving animals. It was the barbed wire of the day. “And the one sowing among thorns, this is the one hearing the word, and the worry of the age and deceptions of wealth crowd out the word....” Worrying about boundaries and holding onto property ironically crowds out what is of value.

“And the one sowing on good ground, this is the one hearing the word and understanding it....” Note that the one hearing and understanding is not merely inert ground; it is the person sowing on the good ground. Hearing and understanding is an activity in itself, not a passive reception.

There is a temptation to limit hearing to our responsiveness to scripture. One also needs to be attentive to the “Book of Life,” i.e. the world around us. Is it simply there, merely sensed, or do we make it into an environment to be comprehended?

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Poem

Horrors

Rare, flashing moments
when we glimpse
our heritage of holocausts:
 of Jews and Slaves,
 native peoples of the Americas,
 zealous burnings of witches,
 pious inquisitions,
 quixotic crusades,
 our civilized empires' massacres,
 prisons, torture chambers.

Could there, nevertheless, be some
dimension of reality, extension of being,
where these deepest horrors
are rescued from our tribal amnesias,
and redeemed, in an eternity
of transcendent meaning?

Tom Keene
April 9, 2017

Compassion and Contrivance

Anthony J. Blasi

Compassion goes beyond feeling. In feeling *with*, people begin, already motivated by an engagement in the hopes, efforts, circumstances, and lives of others. Compassion begins with a recognition of who one's neighbor is. Compassion is

therefore not a prior motive, reason or purpose for action but a result of all that leads up to action. We live with others before feeling with them. More to the point we are conscious of our life with others when our living with them generates the feelings we experience along with them.

Philosophically one can propose a solipsism or a hypothetical scene about an individual marooned alone on an island, but in fact we live with others and are involved in their lives. What we do affects them, and what they do has implications for us. When they suffer, it requires some contrivance for us not to suffer with them. The drama and contests of an era center frequently on the making and unmaking of such contrivances.

The tragic racial history of the United States portrays for us the dynamics of contriving barriers against life together and consequently against compassion. A few years back, when African Americans (and seemingly too few others) were protesting the killing of young Trevon Martin in Sanford, Florida, by a neighborhood watch volunteer, any references I made to the tragedy in some circles were dismissed summarily. I could be forgiven, in many people's eyes. I had worked for seventeen years with young African Americans as a faculty member in a historically African American university; but such an off-the-beaten-track experience would not really be salient to life in the wider world. There lies a first dynamic of counter-compassionate contrivance: Some worlds that people inhabit matter more than others.

Decades before that, I had the bizarre experience of being subject to the placement policies of education authorities. All children go through that, but it was much more evident to me. For a variety of reasons—none of them related to the mischievousness of an academically unchallenged child bored by an academically unchallenging set of schools—I had attended no less than nine different schools. A Catholic high school was the ninth. In one instance, a nearby school was designated a “Mexican” school, and I was sent by bus, along an un-nerving canyon route, to a low income “white” school, even as my parents would have preferred I attend the nearby school. In another instance, despite very high scores on “standardized” achievement tests, I was placed in the second tier of “homogeneously” categorized classes, along with Jews and classmates with slanted eyes, while coincidentally the “top” tier class consisted of “whites” having English-sounding names. It was only in high school, when I was first placed in a “top” tier class, that I ever had any African American classmates. The kind of social engineering I witnessed prior to high school is a second dynamic of counter-compassionate contrivance: Engineering the steering of people into separate categories. As children, I and my classmates were not supposed to notice this dynamic.

Historians of American ethnic relations sometimes mention the pre-World War I studies of academic educational potential in selected urban American school systems. Those immigrant groups who spoke English, such as the Irish and British, ranked higher and those who spoke other languages, such as the Italians and Russian Jews, ranked lower as not educable. Half a century later some natural scientists similarly used test scores to associate intellectual ability with “races” as defined by skin color (It seems they were unaware that cognitive functioning occurs within the cranium rather than in the epidermis!). Somewhat later two journalists published a book, *The Bell Curve*, that used tendentiously selected data to advance a similar thesis. (Meanwhile, social scientists, who had developed some expertise in statistical controls, sampling, and a variety of forms of data collection and analysis, had been refuting theories of racial

intellectual superiority and inferiority since the time of the early American sociologist William Isaac Thomas.) This brings to light another dynamic of counter-compassionate contrivance: Using pseudo-scientific claims to explain the effects of social oppression in terms of the alleged attributes of its victims. Such blaming of the victims might be assumed to relieve the onlooker of any impulse to act.

More recently, we have witnessed the effort to use the force of the state to actually prevent compassionate action. In the 1980s, American foreign policy favored oppressive, murderous dictatorial governments in several Central American nations, and the resultant streams of refugees led to the United States Southwest and sometimes through the center of the nation to Canada. The federal government criminalized the offering of aid to these refugees. A sanctuary movement emerged in response. This was not unprecedented; something similar developed for escaping slaves with the “underground railroad” prior to the Civil War. Today we have a persecution of “illegal” people. Texas has a law—contested in the courts as of this writing—requiring the use of local police power to enforce a matter of civil, not criminal, federal law, once federal immigration official become aware of an “illegal” person in detention. The law also allows any law enforcement officer to profile people and investigate their immigration status. The governor of Texas has gone further, threatening to defund any non-governmental social service agency that dares to aid perfectly legal Syrian refugees. Not only can state funds not be used for such people, but state funds are denied to any agency that offers them aid out of other funds. Hence we have a fourth counter-compassionate dynamic: Compassion by some becomes a crime against all. One is reminded of the young Virginian, George Thomas—later a very effective Union general—who taught the slaves his family owned to read and write so that they could read the Bible; he knew full well it was against the law and that he was liable to criminal prosecution had he been discovered!

This catalog of dynamics of counter-compassionate contrivances is by no means exhaustive. The point, however, has been made: Life with and feeling with people come naturally; it takes effort to stifle life and feeling. To live un-compassionately is a sin of commission, not a matter of negligence, omission, or invincible unawareness.

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 San Antonio

<http://www.paxchristisa.org>

COPS / Metro Alliance

www.copsmetro.com/

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>

Interfaith Radio, (*Interfaith Voices*)

<http://www.interfaithradio.org/>

Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty

www.txccedp.org