

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating October 22, 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. 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 twenty-ninth Sunday in ordinary time. Tom Keene's poem is *We See At Last*.

See <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php> for more of Tom's poems. My review/reflection on Devery S. Anderson's history of the Emmett Till murder case follows.

Calendar

Monday October 16, 5:00pm: Educators are invited to a house party in connection with COPS-Metro to develop issues for future action, including participation in a November 16 COPS-Metro Action Assembly. 1810 Oakline Drive, 78232 (US 281 or Henderson Pass to Brook Hollow, going southeast; right onto Oakline Drive going southwest). RSVP Bob Comeaux: bobtheunionguy@aol.com or 210-326-2655.

Tuesday October 17, 11:20am-12:35pm, Dr. Ashanté Reese, "Mapping Injustice: Race, Redlines, and Unequal Food Access." Stieren Theatre (in the Ruth Taylor Fine Arts Center), Trinity University, One Trinity Place. Park at Alamo Stadium.

Tuesday October 17, 7:00pm-9:00pm, St. Mary's University History Department, Latino Catholicism: San Antonio and the Transformation of the U.S. Church. Rev. David Garcia; Timothy Matovina. Conference Room A, University Center, St. Mary's University, One Camino Santa Maria.

Wednesday October 18, 6:30pm-8:00pm, panel discussion, "Climate Change in San Antonio." Bill Sinkin Eco Centro, 1802 N. Main.

Thursday October 19, 4:30pm-6:00pm, **in Austin**, Angela Stroud, "Gun Culture in America." Fleck Hall 305, St. Edward's University, 3002 S. Congress Avenue, Austin.

Thursday October 19, 6:00pm-7:30pm: Cory Dolgon, Ph.D., "Kill It to Save It: An Autopsy of Capitalism's Triumph over Democracy" (Dr. Dolgon argues that the public accepts the destruction of the public sector and accepts arguments that "feel right" without regard for facts). University of Texas at San Antonio, downtown campus, Buena Vista Street Building, Aula Canaria (BV 1.328). 501 W. Cesar Chavez Blvd.

Friday October 20, 4:30pm-7:00pm; **Saturday October 21**, 9:00am-4:45pm, Iran in the World. Presentations by experts on the historic 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the U.S., China, Russia, France, Germany, U.K., and European Union. Chapman Auditorium, Trinity University, One Trinity Place. Park at Alamo Stadium.

Saturday October 21, 10:00am, Pax Christi San Antonio meeting. Residence of Maria Tobin, 8715 Starcrest Dr., #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.)

Monday October 23, 6:00pm-9:00pm, Catholic Relief Services Solidarity Event: Global Migration seminar. 6:00 rosary; 6:30-7:30 Nahren Anweya presentation on the Syrian refugee crisis; 7:30-7:45 Q & A. Our Lady's Chapel, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway.

Wednesday October 25, 4:30pm-6:00pm, Dr. Neomi DeAula, "Immigrants and Social Justice: A Theological Response." Mabee Library Auditorium, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway.

Wednesday October 25, 7:00pm-9:00pm, film, "Out of Reach," on deportations and SB4. Santikos Bijou Theater, 4522 Fredricksburg Rd., Free but rsvp at <https://outofreachsanantonio.eventbrite.com>.

Thursday October 26, 5:00pm-6:00pm, **in Austin**, Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., "Pope Francis: reclaiming the vision of Vatican II." Jones Global Events Center, Ragsdale Center building, Saint Edward's University, 3001 S. Congress Ave., Austin, 78704.

Tuesday November 7, 6:00pm-8:30pm, Community Conversation with San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg. Foyer and Conference Room A, University Center, Saint Mary's University, One Camino Santa Maria.

Friday November 10, 7:30pm-9:30pm, **in Seguin**, film, *(Re)Formation*. A group of artists renovate a transition home for discarded youth and explore the meaning of church, holy ground, and Jesus' mission. Studio Theatre at Weston Center, Texas Lutheran University, 1000 West Court St., Seguin.

Third Reading (Matthew 22:15-21)

“Then render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus by bringing along Roman allies—“Herodians,” presumably agents from Galilee since there was no Herod in power in Jerusalem—and asking Jesus about paying a census tax to the Roman emperor, “Caesar.” They were trying to have Jesus reported to the Romans as an anti-government agitator. It turned out that Jesus was not opposed to government: “then render to Caesar what is Caesar’s....” Nevertheless, he was not going to buy in to the divinization of the emperor—“and to God what is God’s.”

If he wanted to, Jesus could have made an issue about the census tax, a tax exacted from slave and free persons aged 12 or 14 to 65, to be paid in Roman currency. The denarius coin that would be used, bearing an image of Emperor Tiberius, bore an inscription as well: “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” Was the late emperor Augustus divine? Was the current emperor, Tiberius, really a high priest in the eyes of Jesus and his followers? However, Jesus was not looking for an argument with the government.

There are church officials who object to filling out a form for their agencies’ employees to be exempted from medical insurance coverages for birth control pills, on the theory that contraception is irreligious and that furthermore some such pills are abortifacients. The latter presupposes the conclusion that a conceptus is a living human prior to its attachment to the uterine wall. This appears to be a quest for an argument with government.

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Poem

We See At Last

(Peter muses: Luke 9:28-43)

On ascending,

we sit in a circle.

We see ourselves brilliant,

a gazing into sun without going blind.

Elijah, Moses, Jesus, John, James, me.

Hard to tell us apart,
blurring bleeding into one corona,
where notions of each other
make sense no more.

On descending,
we find the man,
screaming blather,
flailing futility,
begging to burst his prison.

Our common gut
seized by a loathing,
a panic to flee, to cast out.
Then, as in a sudden dawn,
he's struck with calm.

We see at last,
from heady highs
to feet-in-the-dirt hurt,
the Healing Wholeness.

Tom Keene

Reflection/Review of Devery S. Anderson, *Emmett Till. The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2015, slightly revised paperback edition 2017).

Anthony J. Blasi

The author, Devery S. Anderson, presented a lecture on the murder of Emmett Till and its importance for the Civil Rights Movement at the University of the Incarnate Word last September 13. I was able to chat with him briefly after his presentation, comparing notes with him on the difficulty of getting people to talk about significant events in the Civil Rights Movement. Over forty years ago I poured over old news reports, wrote to numerous people, and interviewed others about events in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, concerning the 1956 attempt to integrate the University of Alabama, the successful 1964 integration of that institution, which included the “governor’s stand in the schoolhouse door,” the attack by an officially deputized mob on an African American Church, and other such events in the city. Some of the business community, whites, were reluctant to talk because their efforts to keep the inevitable integration process peaceful were controversial and not appreciated. Some of the African American activists were fearful of retaliation and questioned my intentions. Dr. Anderson, a gifted historian, met with similar difficulties.

I mention this because of the motive of one valuable activist but reluctant informant in my study; after helping rescue Autherine Lucy, who had attempted to attend the University of Alabama in 1956, he formed a protective force for activists who were more public than himself. What led him to do that? He had witnessed the lynching of a childhood friend and two others in 1933; remarkably, the friend survived the noose. In a similar way in 2004, Chicago Alderman Ed Smith, as reported in Anderson’s book, sponsored a Chicago City Council resolution calling upon the federal government to reopen the Emmitt Till murder case:

For Smith, who was raised in Mississippi, the Till case was personal. He spoke of his cousin Eddie, and a friend, Henry, the latter of whom years earlier had been accused of staring at a white woman. “And when they found them walking down the road, they took both of ‘em because they couldn’t kill Henry and leave Eddie.’ The vigilantes ‘took the two of them. Took these kids and beat them all night. Tied them to a barn and went to work. The next day, they came back and continued to beat them and kill them. And then they cut them up with a chain saw and dropped them in the Mississippi River.’” The resolution passed. (p. 310)

A sanitized history of the Civil Rights Movement might focus on demonstrations, speeches, laws, landmark court decisions, and registering minority voters. These comprised the “how” of the Movement; the practice of lynching with impunity and the failure of the system of justice is a dramatic aspect of the “why” of the Movement.

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old child in Chicago who had survived polio, with a mild speech defect resulting from the disease. He liked being the center of attention and was something of a prankster. Some summers he visited relatives near Money, Mississippi, and he did so again in August 1955. One night in Money, showing off for a group of cousins and friends, he went into a small grocery, bought some bubble gum, and grabbed the hand of the white woman at the counter, asking her for a date. He said “Goodbye” on the way out and whistled at her. Juvenile behavior—of course. Cause for torture and murder?

In the dark of early morning several days later, there was a rap on the door of the modest house of Preacher Mose Wright, Emmett’s uncle. Two white men, one of them holding a flashlight and a gun, wanted Emmett. A third man, possibly black, stayed out in the darkness. They left with Emmett, and Mose heard what seemed to be a woman’s voice in a car say, “Yes, that’s the one.” Some days later, someone saw knees in the Tallahatchie River. Emmett could hardly be identified, but a keepsake ring that had belonged to his deceased father was still on a finger. Authorities arranged to have him buried quickly and locally, but the family had him embalmed and shipped to Chicago. His mother, Mamie, insisted upon seeing the corpse, which had a terrible odor despite the morticians’ treatments, and was shocked at the disfigured corpse. Never before an activist, she demanded an open casket funeral. Photographs of the body were and still are hard to look at, and the corpse itself, under glass in the coffin, even more so. Thousands had to see, however hard to look at.

The kidnapping of Emmett Till occurred in one county, and the sheriff there had little difficulty in identifying the kidnappers—the owner of the small grocery in Money, who was the husband of the woman working there, and his step brother. But the body had been found in another county, and the sheriff there went out of his way to create doubt that the body was that of Emmett Till. The beating that so disfigured Emmett Till and the fatal shooting of a bullet into his head occurred in a third county, but witnesses who could provide that information were reluctant to talk and had to be rounded up by an African American physician with the help of reporters from the black press. The trial of the two kidnappers for murder was conducted under the gavel of a fair judge and with competent prosecutors in the county in which the body was found, with the witnesses from the third county being added in the course of the trial itself. The entire bar of the trial county served as counsel for the defendants; they made much of the sheriff’s theory that the body was not connected to the kidnapping and argued that the evidence of the beating was similarly not connected to the case at hand. The jury consisted entirely of white men since it was drawn from voter registration lists, and no African American had voted in the county and, moreover, women did not serve on juries yet in Mississippi. The two defendants were acquitted.

The reaction to the Emmett Till case was considerable, in the North, in the black press, in the major newspapers outside the South, and even in foreign lands. Mamie Till-Mobley and Mose Wright spoke at numerous events organized by churches, labor unions, and the NAACP. In fact Mrs. Till-Mobley raised considerable funds for the NAACP with her speeches. African American members of Congress helped keep the issue alive. Sixty-nine days after the verdict, Dr. T.R.M. Howard, who had helped collect the fearful witnesses for the trial, spoke about that and similar cases of violence at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The new pastor of the church,

a young Martin Luther King, was the host. Rosa Parks, who within days was to spark the famous Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott by refusing to give up her bus seat for a white man, was in the audience.

It took almost fifty years for the case to be reopened. A few journalists and documentary film makers were troubled not only by the event itself but by the inconsistencies of fact in the press and in what was reported to have been said by witnesses at the trial. Anderson describes the efforts of these people to set the record straight, noting some untruths introduced by the two defendants, by the woman from the store, and others whom the journalists and documentary film makers interviewed. It was not until 2004 that congressional approval allowed the federal justice department to investigate criminal cases that fall under state jurisdiction, but by then most of those involved in perpetrating the kidnapping, torture, and killing of Emmett Till had died. The FBI had the body exhumed and arranged for an autopsy and uncovered new evidence, and even recovered most of the long-lost trial transcript from 1955. The FBI report clarified the narrative of the event, separating fact from fiction. There was insufficient evidence for a grand jury to indict the woman from the grocery, who was still living.

What was the ordinary content of the “way of life” that the murderers (there appear to be three rather than two) were “defending” so violently? Why did they put a fourteen-year-old boy through two rounds of beating, breaking bones and disfiguring his head, before shooting him? Why did a “jury of their peers” let them get away with it? Consider these incidents:

Michigan Congressman Charles Diggs, Jr., came from Detroit to witness the trial. However, a deputy would not let him enter the courthouse. The congressman gave his card to an African American member of the press, who brought it to the bailiff to present to the judge.

“What did you say his name was?” asked the bailiff, even though the card clearly identified Diggs....

“He is Congressman Diggs, and he is one of three colored congressmen of the United States.”

The bailiff then turned to a court attendance standing close by.

“This Nigger here says that there is a Nigger outside who says that he is a congressman and he wants to get in.”

“A Nigger congressman?” asked the surprised attendant.

“That’s what this Nigger says,” replied the bewildered bailiff.

The attendant more confused than before, wondered out loud, “Is that legal?” (p. 99)

“Spectators were flabbergasted to see white reporters shake hands with [Congressman] Diggs and address him as ‘Mr. Congressman.’” (p. 97)

When Emmett Till’s mother arrived at the courthouse, the newsmen surrounded her and asked questions. As they were taking down every word she said, spectators and jury members stared in amazement. Northern reporters addressed her as “Mrs. Bradley,” while those from the south avoided addressing her at all, “thus dodging their suddenly awkward tradition of calling blacks by their first name.” (p. 98)

We like to think we live in a different time now, but there are parallels between 1955 and the present. The year 1955 was marked by political bigotry; the United States Supreme Court had found the segregation of public schools unconstitutional the year before, and politicians were campaigning on a platform to keep the schools segregated. Conservative activists were organizing what they called “Citizens’ Councils” to keep the politicians in line with the segregationist ideology. Today we have anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim political bigotry; meanwhile, the “tea party” movement has gone well beyond its initial issue of opposing government-supported medical insurance. In 1955, voter suppression took the form of “literacy” tests and a poll tax, as well as all-white primaries. Today voter suppression takes the form of gerrymandered legislative districts, photo identification requirements, shortened early-voting terms, and reductions in the number of voting stations in order to create longer lines in selected precincts. In 1955 some Mississippi law enforcement officials arranged for white-on-black crime to go unpunished; today we have a problem of white police officers profiling minority motorists and shooting unarmed African American males.

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.sanantoniopeace.center>

Interfaith Radio, (*Interfaith Voices*)

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

Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty

www.txccedp.org