Hildegard of Bingen

This prophet of Easter found God’s love everywhere in creation

By RICH HEFFERN

On October 7, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI officially named two new doctors of the church. The title is given to Catholics in history whose theological body of work remains relevant, informative and inspiring for the ages. Thousands of people gathered in St. Peter’s Square as St. Hildegard of Bingen — formally canonized early in 2012, though venerated as a saint for centuries — was officially given this title; the other doctorate was given to St. John of Avila.

Hildegard was a brilliant and sage woman from 12th-century Germany. The pope said that her life and work reflect our natural human desire to connect with God.

She was first a writer, theologian and preacher, and also a musician, composing liturgical music and Gregorian chants that are still used and performed. She believed that by singing words, we could fully comprehend their deepest meaning in our body. She was also a natural leader and founded a monastery. People sought after her wise counsel. She railed to authority against abuses in church and religious life. She corresponded with some of the most important people of her time — with Bernard of Clairvaux, Elizabeth of Schönau, Thomas à Becket, Frederick Barbarossa.

A natural scientist with a wide-ranging curiosity, Hildegard wrote treatises on subjects such as botany, linguistics, cosmology and medicine. She even invented an international language, similar to Esperanto. She saw no conflict at all between science and religion.

Though as a vowed religious she believed celibacy to be the highest vocation, she wrote the first-ever description of the female orgasm in Causae et Curae, one of her medical texts, based on her experience counseling married folk. The workings and processes of the human body interested her; and, she believed, revealed God, so she looked at every aspect with deep awareness, discussing them all forthrightly.

She felt called by God and trusted that call, valuing her own instincts and the visions she was visited with from an early age. She wrote to St. Bernard: “I have seen great miracles.” Her visions informed and guided her preaching and her interpretations of scripture. She called her own voice “a small sound of the trumpet from the living Light.”

A good portion of her writings offer imaginative imagery about the church, priests, the Trinity, the anti-Christ and humankind’s “last days.” She wrote against the heresies of her time. A significant amount contains meditations on the cosmos, on nature, the place of humans on the Earth.

In fact, Hildegard is regarded as one of the church’s great ecological prophets. She expressed the concept of Earth’s interconnectedness centuries ahead of her time: “God has arranged all things in the world in consideration of everything else.”

In her writings, she often praised the divine greening power, what she called God’s viriditas. This concept was a guiding image in all her works; she called it “most noble.”

To her, every flower, leaf or badger participated in the divine nature through this greening power. As a breaking wave is the same as the source ocean itself, Hildegard believed that a medicinal herb or a mountain was a good deal short of the completeness of God but surely shared in the divine essence. Creation directly reveals the transcendent One’s face. She describes God’s transcendence: “I am the day that does not shine by the sun; rather by me the sun is ignited.”

‘Holy greening power’

Hildegard’s life work was a celebration of the sacred in nature and in the human. She wrote: “In the beginning all creatures were green and vital. They flourished amidst flowers. … There is no creature that does not have a radiance. Be it greenness, or seed, blossom or beauty, it could not be in creation without it.”

In poetry she expressed the concept of viriditas in even more eloquent phrases:

I am the rain coming from the dew
That causes the grasses to laugh
with the joy of life.
I call forth tears, the aroma of holy work
I am the yearning for the good.
(“The Greening of God”)

In Green Mars, the second book of his Mars trilogy, science-fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson describes the
place of viriditas in nature’s overarching scheme:

Look at the pattern this seashell makes: the dappled whorl, curving inward to infinity. That’s the shape of the universe itself. There’s a constant pressure, pushing toward pattern, a tendency in matter to evolve into ever more complex forms. It’s a kind of pattern gravity, a holy greening power we call viriditas, and it is the driving force in the cosmos. Life, you see.

Hildegard’s was a buoyant, jubilant and optimistic theology of panentheism — God transcendent to creation but also found squarely within it. She had the greatest respect for those myriad aspects of creation in which God could be found by anyone with the vision to discern.

“Do not mock anything God has created,” she wrote. “All creation is simple, plain and good. And God is present throughout his creation. Why do you ever consider things beneath your notice?”

Versatile Hildegard had a practical knowledge of the healing properties of plants and herbs. She became a health guru, prescribing regimens for her own sisters and leaving behind works that have informed healers ever since.

Physician Victoria Sweet studied Hildegard’s medicine and wrote a doctoral dissertation on it, going on to use Hildegard’s healing methods in her own clinical practice at Laguna Honda public hospital in San Francisco.

Hildegard’s idea was that the body was more like a plant than a machine. “It is quite a different approach,” writes Dr. Sweet. “A plant grows, develops, and heals. A machine doesn’t. When a machine breaks down, someone has to fix it. But when a plant is injured, it repairs itself.

“Diseases that come on slowly — chronic infections, complex medical conditions, the aftermath of the appendectomy, the heart attack, the chemotherapy — are best approached like a gardener; asking myself: as Hildegard would have done, not what is broken but what is working? What are my patient’s strengths and how can I support them? What can I do to nurture viriditas, the natural power of healing?”

Meaningful mysticism

As Hildegard’s whole life was a discovery and celebration of that holy greening power, it seems to me that Hildegard could aptly be named the patron saint of the Easter liturgical season, when life triumphs with finality over death. As the darkness of Lent and winter give way to light and good news, this is the season of renewal. This is the eternally recurring season when the power of viriditas utterly transforms the world from barren to green. It’s the nature of this power to spread, rise, reverberate and grow.

And as the love of God shines out of every object in creation with renewed vigor; the Easter season’s alleluias praise something new in the order of things — the mystery of Jesus’ bodily resurrection.

The risen Jesus is indeed the revelation of God’s loving heart. “We see in Jesus the divine being who is also the perfect human being,” says Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr: “Jesus comes in a human body to show us the face of God, the One who is eternally compassionate and eternally joyous.”

Hildegard’s concept of the greening deep within everything is at the core of the Catholic incarnational, sacramental vision and spiritual tradition. We humans are as much a part of creation, of the natural world, as any plant, rock or star. The flourishing of the viriditas within us is our wholeness. “The soul is kissed by God in its innermost regions,” Hildegard wrote, “with interior yearning, grace and blessing are bestowed.”

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that “being a Christian is not to be a religious human being: it is to be a wholehuman being.” For Bonhoeffer, Jesus himself is the portrait of that wholeness, the ultimate expression of God.

Jesus is a human who represents wholeness not only for himself but also for the rest of ‘us. In the words of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong: “God is not a heavenly judge, but a life force expanding inside humanity until humanity becomes barrier-free. This was the God revealed in the fullness of Jesus’ humanity. ... The being of this God calls us to be; the life of this God calls us to live, the love of this God calls us to love.”

Jesus is not about perfection but rather about what it means to be fully human; God indeed wants to be alive within us. Christian life after
the risen Jesus is one of thriving and flourishing.

The way to human wholeness is a path of what Fr. Diarmuid O’Murchu calls “meaningful mysticism.” “The human spirit,” he says, “was never meant to live with a lot of fear and helplessness. So mysticism — the idea that we can directly access the divine in our human experience — haunts our imagination. “I would define meaningful mysticism or spirituality as a capacity for mystery within a longing for the infinite.”

Such mysticism is not elitist or esoteric. “It happens in real ways,” says O’Murchu, “grounded in real life. Whenever the values of the Gospels are lived out in real ways, that’s mysticism. Denied our capacity for mystery and God’s glory shining within things, we shrivel and end up turning to all sorts of compensations to feed our deep desires, creating a culture of addiction and consumerism. Mysticism is an enduring resource that delivers liberating hope and creative possibility.”

Human wholeness is achieved as well by our deep participation in the Paschal Mystery. The dying and rising experiences life brings us are the cauldrons of growth and transformation. When we experience the mystery of our faith, a dying within that leads to wondrous new life; when we find our way to the lived experience that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God, we live our wholeness with vigor.

Richard Rohr puts it this way: “The mysterium fidei ... dares to define reality correctly and honestly, against all philosophies of progress, fatalism and gnostic enlightenment. It says truthfully that the only reality available to us is inherently glorious and inherently tragic. To trust and live that reality, to find God in both sides of everything, is to live the agony and ecstasy of God.”

Fr. Thomas Berry was asked once what he considered the primary fruit of our human quest for wholeness, of viriditas flourishing within us. “Enchantment,” he said, meaning an enhanced capacity for awe and wonder and a renewed sense of the ultimate value of the created world and the dance of life itself, over against the old, tired dualism that has separated spirit from matter, devaluing the material world.

One of our culture’s favorite parables about how enchantment works has been “The Wizard of Oz.” It’s chock-full of towering tornadoes, witches sporting striped socks, officious munchkins, fanged flying monkeys and bad puns. With its open-eyed gaze at aspects of nature that don’t dance in goody two-shoes, some tots watch it stiff with fright. As every kid knows, the larger-than-life figures over the rainbow turn out to be the same people found at home, out in our backyard, in the neighborhood. When you know down in your joints and up in your straw-filled head that you live in a sacred cosmos ... well, the ordinary is always extraordinary.

The way to the Emerald City is an adventure-filled enterprise that tests our courage, compassion, steadfastness and wit — as good a definition of spirituality as any I’ve heard. Oz the Great and Powerful is revealed to be a bamboozling snake-oil salesman toying with smoke and mirrors. Yet the quest is not in vain, for the real wizardry of Oz turns out to be the plain insight that our feet are shod with the magic of our heart’s desire, always have been.

On our feet are the ruby slippers; the pearl of great price is down tangled in our pocket lint. The wild world around us is an irresistibly holy place. This is St. Hildegard’s message, so important today as we struggle to re-knit the fabric of Earth’s life.

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Further reading:
¿Con quién nos paramos?

El culto y la vida para el mes de marzo 2013

PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ y RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ ALONSO

Hace cincuenta años el Papa Juan XXIII congregó un concilio para que los creyentes renovaran su compromiso con el evangelio y con el mundo. El verdadero espíritu de Cuaresma también iba a ser renovado. Por eso hoy no basta la renuncia; ésta debe ser acompañada y complementada con dones generosos, poniendo nuestro sacrificio al servicio de quienes están más necesitados. En el pasado no fue siempre así.

Para muchos de nosotros y por mucho tiempo, la Cuaresma era un tiempo de privaciones. Para preparar con reverencia a celebrar dignamente nuestra fe en la resurrección de Jesucristo, nos dedicábamos a hacer penitencia, a orar y a renunciar a algo que nos gustaba. Para algunos, era no comer dulces o postres; para otros, era dejar de fumar; o no beber alcohol, o no ver la televisión, o no ir al cine, o no jugar al golf. Para esas personas, perseverar en su sacrificio les permitía comenzar el Triduo Santo con cierta sensación de victoria. Como Dios no escogió estar con los santos y asociarse con ellos, Jesús nos invita a su lado, a tomar su mano y a encontrarnos, no con los justos que estaban seguros de su propia bondad, sino con los pobres y los pecadores humildes en cuyo vacío Jesús fue bienvenido y pudo obrar maravillas.

Hoy estamos invitados a unirnos a Moisés, ante la zarza ardiente, y reconocer nuestros pecados. Como Moisés, debemos alegrarnos de que Dios nos llama a ser ministros de liberación, los unos a los otros (3 de marzo). En vez de hallar culpa en los demás, como los Galileos del evangelio de San Lucas, debemos concentrarnos en nuestros propios pecados y arrepentimiento. Así, habiendo experimentado el perdón de Dios, debemos también nosotros ser misericordiosos hacia los demás.

Al escuchar en San Lucas el relato del hijo pródigo (10 de marzo), pongámonos en tres lugares. Con el hijo perdido aprenderemos que Dios está siempre dispuesto a perdonar. Poniéndonos junto al padre que perdonaba, aprenderemos que el amor va muy lejos para curar una relación que ha sido arruinada. Y junto al lado del hijo mayor, nos veremos forzados a enfrentar nuestros propios resentimientos y prejuicios.

El 17 de marzo tendremos la ocasión de escoger a nuestros compañeros. ¿Aceptaremos, como la mujer atrapada en adulterio, que también nosotros necesitamos de la misericordia de Jesús? ¿O vamos a ponernos del lado de sus acusadores y condenarla sin ni siquiera pensar en nuestros propios pecados? Es un verdadero desafío que Jesús nos hace para que humildemente dejemos caer esas piedras acusadoras y nos marchemos. Aquellos cegados por su soberbia y arrogancia, tendrán que guardarse las piedras en el bolsillo esperando que llegue otra ocasión menos visible y más propicia.

El domingo de Ramos (24 de marzo) nos hallaremos en medio de esa multitud que había venido con alegría a saludar a Jesús y a proclamarlo rey. Esas mismas voces se oirán unos días más tarde pidiendo su crucifixión. Entonces, ¿de qué lado nos ponemos? ¿Estaremos coligados a su lado, como el buen ladrón, pidiendo a Jesús que nos recuerde cuando entre en su reino, o nos quedaremos alejados, mirando desde lejos, o habremos huido y escindido?

Sin duda ya sabemos en donde vamos a estar el día de Pascua de Resurrección (31 de marzo). Somos pecadores y hemos vivido con los pecadores. Hemos juzgado y condenado a otros. Hemos roto nuestras relaciones con Dios y con los demás. Hemos cerrado los ojos ante el sufrimiento de otros. Hemos sido egositas, tacaños, apáticos y hemos estado demasiado ocupados para preocuparnos en aliviar sus cargas. Sin embargo y a pesar de nosotros mismos y de nuestras debilidades, Dios nos ha escogido para estar con nosotros en la persona de Jesús, participando en su misión. Así como Jesús fue levantado en la cruz, y así como Jesús resucitó a la vida gloriosa, así también nosotros, mediante la misericordia de Dios, seremos levantados a una nueva vida en Jesús. Tres siglos antes de Jesús, Arquímedes de Siracusa dijo: “Denme un lugar en donde pararme y moveré la tierra.” Jesús nos ha dado un lugar en donde pararnos. Con Él podremos mover corazones al bien, a la verdad y a la justicia. Con Él podremos cambiar el mundo.

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez y Rafael Sánchez Alonso han provisto de comentarios y homilías a Celebración desde 1979.
With Whom Will We Stand?

Lectionary themes for March 2013

PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ and RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ ALONSO

It has been 50 years since Pope John XXIII called for a council so that believers might be renewed in their commitment to the Gospel and the world. Since that time, our sense of the true spirit of Lent has also been renewed. Renunciation is no longer sufficient. Rather, we are to complement our “giving up” with service and almsgiving, allowing our sacrifice to go toward the needs of others less fortunate. But it was not always this way.

For many of us, and for too long a time, Lent was about deprivation. In order to prepare to celebrate our belief in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, we devoted ourselves to penance, to prayer and to the renunciation of something we enjoyed. Some gave up candy or dessert; for others, it was smoking or alcohol, television or the movies or golf. The ability to persevere in their sacrifice let people feel they could enter into the Holy Triduum with a certain sense of victory. They had done well. They did what they had promised. This was, in a sense, the same attitude exhibited by some of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day: They regarded their spiritual achievements as gifts for God, gifts that merited God’s favor and blessing.

But when Jesus came to live among us, it wasn’t the holy and victorious with whom he chose to associate. Jesus, God-made-flesh in our midst, reached out with healing to people whom others had long since written off as lost: sinners, outcasts, the sick, the disenfranchised, foreigners, women, children, the poor; the unloved and the unwanted. These knew their need, and in that need, Jesus found an opportunity to draw them to God. In their need, the seeds of faith could find root and grow, and Jesus pronounced them free, forgiven and saved.

Three centuries before Jesus, Archimedes of Syracuse said, “Give me somewhere to stand and I will move the earth.”

The lives of these needy ones challenge our pride, our self-sufficiency and our self-absorption. When we look for figures in the Gospels with whom to associate, Jesus invites us to stand beside them, to hold hands with them — to find ourselves not in the righteous who were sure of their own goodness, but in the poor and humble sinners in whose emptiness Jesus could find a welcome and work his wonders.

Today we are invited to stand with Moses at the burning bush and acknowledge our sinfulness. God calls us, like Moses, to be ministers of liberation for one another (March 3). Instead of assigning fault to others, as did the Galileans in Luke’s Gospel, we are to concentrate on our own sins and repent. Having experienced God’s mercy, we are to be merciful to others.

As Luke offers his unique account of the lost son on March 10, we stand in three places. With the lost son, we learn that God is ever eager to forgive. Standing with the forgiving father, we learn that love goes a long way toward healing a wrecked relationship. Standing with the elder brother, we are forced to face our own resentments and judgmental attitudes.

On March 17, we have a choice of companions. Do we accept, like the woman caught in adultery, that we are in need of the mercy of Jesus? Or will we line up with her accusers and condemn her; without a thought to our own sinfulness? A truthful challenge from Jesus causes the humble among us to drop our stones and walk away. Those of us who are blinded by pride and arrogance may keep the stone in our pocket, waiting for another, less conspicuous occasion to throw it.

Palm Sunday (March 24) will find us moving with the crowds who have come to greet Jesus with shouts of joy. Acclaiming him as king, these same voices will be heard later in the week calling for his crucifixion. Then, where will we stand? Will we hang beside him, like the criminal, and ask to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom? Will we stand at a distance, or run away and hide?

Surely on Easter Day (March 31), we know where we will be. We are sinners, and we have stood with sinners. We have judged and condemned others. We have breached our relationships with God and with one another. We have turned a blind eye to the sufferings of others. We have been too selfish, too cheap, too apathetic, too busy to bear their burdens. Nevertheless, despite ourselves and our weaknesses, God has chosen to stand with us in the person of Jesus. Just as Jesus was raised on the cross, and just as Jesus has risen to life and glory, so are we, through the mercies of God, raised to new life in Jesus.

Three centuries before Jesus, Archimedes of Syracuse said, “Give me somewhere to stand and I will move the earth.” Jesus has given us a place to stand. With him we can move hearts to goodness, truth and justice; with him we can change the world.

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez and Rafael Sánchez Alonso have been collaborating to provide Lectionary commentaries and homilies for Celebration since 1979.
Seven out of 10 people in the world have no Internet access. Just because we swim in a sea of media and are increasingly unaware of this sea, we tend to think everyone is, or should be, swimming with us.

Fingers move up and down screens or press here and there. Where did all the newspapers and books go?

Conversations with machines. A young friend was telling me about his work. His team at a software corporation works on ways to reduce your chances of ever reaching a human being when you call a government office, a commercial firm, even a company selling services. We now also have the machines that call our machines, selling insurance, taking surveys, spreading someone’s gospel.

We need a bigger family entertainment room! Those screens! Did you ever read Fahrenheit 451? In the 1950s, Ray Bradbury imagined whole walls of our rooms as screens.

Andnowthis! Twenty years ago Neil Postman wrote his blistering and still valid critique of television with a title that said it all: Entertaining Ourselves to Death. He used “And now … this” — what TV newscasters would say when they switched to a commercial — to talk about how the lines between news reporting and commercials were being blurred. In the process, the whole notion of “news” was being lost as everything from sports to weather to styles to stock reports to wars to floods to politics became one thing: entertainment. Infotainment has a growing hold on newspapers, too. The Newseum in Washington D.C. posts the front pages from 50 newspapers in the United States along the sidewalk each day. The day I looked at these, everyone had ads and oversized headlines and promos for inside features that crowded out actual news.

24/7. Screens in living rooms and kitchens as well as shops, bars and restaurants grow in size and number and they are never turned off. Televisions have become like pictures hanging on the wall. Even when visitors come, the sound may be turned down, but the picture stays. And the pictures aren’t simple, but are crowded with streaming lines at the bottom of the picture: weather, stocks, headlines.

City as film set. The lines between real and pretend blur. This is a city street. But, especially in New York, you see those trucks over there and those laden tables for the film crew? It probably isn’t next year’s finest film but next week’s new commercial.

Proliferating passwords. I didn’t need any password to get through my first 50 or so years. Now I need lots of them. I have to write them down to remember them and then remember where I wrote them down. And those questions: My pet. My mother’s maiden name. My first-grade teacher.

Someone wants to friend me. Another English noun has been reborn as a verb. (Poor Cicero and his De Amicitia.) Facebook will fade, but something will replace it. The system is insatiable for new content. But it has no need whatsoever for real friendship.

I’m being judgmental, but the point here is that our economic system spins this stuff out faster and faster because that’s the nature of the beast. There is nothing foisted on us out of interest in true communication, interest in friendship, interest in peace. Rather, there must be something new so the old can be discarded. There must be the illusion of happiness-through-entertainment, more and more entertainment, more and more happiness.

If you feel a quote from Henry David Thoreau coming, you are right.
Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.

... We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the new, but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough. After all, the man whose horse trots a mile in a minute does not carry the most important messages; he is not an evangelist, nor does he come round eating locusts and wild honey ...

“What!” exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land, “is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?” Yes, I answer, comparatively good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you are better than digging in this dirt.

Inter Mirifica praised “marvelous technical inventions” and expressed interest in those which directly touch the human spirit and which have opened up new avenues of easy communication of all kinds of news, ideas and directives. Chief among them are those means of communication which of their nature can reach and influence not just single individuals but the very masses and even the whole of human society. These are the press, the cinema, radio, television and others of like nature. These can rightly be called the means of social communication. (1)

The document notes the obvious: These can be used for good or evil.

If however, this is to be more profitable than harmful to souls, the moral law must be faithfully observed, especially when dealing with matters best treated with reserve or with matters which easily arouse people’s base desires, wounded as they are by original sin. (7)

And later:

The civil authorities, who by law are committed to ensuring the well-being of the citizens, are also bound to ensure — by promulgating laws and rigorously enforcing them, thus combining justice with vigilance — that public morality and social progress are not gravely endangered by the misuse of the media. (12)

Unfortunately, “the civil authorities” have little vision in this regard. Neither do the ecclesiastical authorities. And the “public morality” that the media could serve? That kind of morality would engage citizens in a commonweal where questions of a just economy are raised, questions of tolerance, of distributive justice, of a justice that confronts military budgets, imperial fears, and the harm done to the planet itself. A church speaking of mass media should be helping all of us take our place in the midst of this complex world.

Finally, we who are concerned with liturgy should note that the Catholic church did embrace the telecasting of liturgy, often known as the “Mass for Shut-ins.” Many churches also display television screens that show the Mass in which you are actually present and perhaps participating. This latter practice, used prominently at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City, is no doubt a spinoff of sports stadiums where immense screens show you what you could see with your own eyes live in front of you.

And the televised Mass has a second cousin also: the turning of our assemblies, especially those gathered for celebrations of marriage or for other sacraments or even for burial, into photo opportunities, with the image gleaned, it seems, being of far more importance to people than the actual deed. We follow the larger culture, in which the filming of person, place, thing or activity has superseded our actual gazing at the person, place, thing or activity. So we expect, even welcome, those who are present to photograph and film rather than to engage in anything resembling full and active participation in the deed itself.

Years ago I wrote much against any televising of our liturgy. A few took offense, and many wondered why all the fuss. The problem is: To televising the liturgy, and to show it live or later, is to take liturgy as something one “attends.” But liturgy is something we do, not something we attend. Should we be photographed or filmed or televised while we are doing it? Doing that conveys to those being filmed and those watching that liturgy is something that few do in the gaze of the many. In practice, televised liturgy has focused on the presider, lector, cantor. The assembly is audience. But since the council, we have recovered, here and there, what #14 of the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” called the right and duty of all the baptized when assembled: full and conscious and active participation.

Neither the assembly nor the shut-in should be led to think that televised liturgy is any replacement for bodily presence and participation. We should miss those who are not present. And they should miss us. Was the church of 19 centuries somehow handicapped because it lacked the technology to televise? Better to miss one another. Better to use the Sundays we can to build the assembly as the doer of its liturgy. Better to go and visit the sick! The challenge remains: We still have precious few parishes where the assembly comes Sunday by Sunday hungry to do the deeds together that rehearse them for bringing abundant life to the world God so loves. Only then does filming seem absurd.

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A Challenge and a Plea

This Lent, we are to decide how we will live

By MELISSA MUSICK NUSSBAUM

My granddaughter Lucy turned 3 a few days before the Feast of All Saints. She was in a mood to keep the party going.

On the feast day I made a dinner with Lucy and her baby sister, Bess, in mind: macaroni and cheese, bran muffins and a spinach salad heavier on the blueberries and sliced pears than the actual spinach.

And for dessert? Why, fudge-covered, cherry-topped ice cream sundaes, of course, the very food of heaven.

I wrote a simple grace for the girls to sing at dinner. Sung to the tune of “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” it goes:

Lord, for the saints,
We sing your praise.
We thank you all our days.
Lord, help us so to follow you,
That we might be saints, too.

We went around the table, telling the stories of our patrons and our favorites. We retold the story of her grandfather’s patron, Martin, who would be obedient to his commanding officer and follow him into battle. But, like his supreme commander, Christ, Martin would not take up arms against another man. He would go without his sword, depending upon God alone.

I read aloud “Paterfamilias,” Phyllis McGinley’s poem about St. Thomas More, the man whose life and death have guided her grandfather:

Of all the saints who have won their charter —
Holy man, hero, hermit, martyr;
Mystic, missioner; sage or wit —
Saint Thomas More is my favorite.
For he loved these bounties with might and main:
God and his house and his little wife, Jane,
And four fair children his heart throven on,
Margaret, Elizabeth, Cecily and John.

We recalled the many stories of her father’s patron, Nicholas, the bishop whose care was always with the small: children, the condemned, sailors in danger on the sea.

We talked of her baby sister, who, like their mother, bears the name of the Virgin Mary and, like their dear Tia, the name of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. Lucy knows about having cousins as friends and she likes the story of Mary going to Elizabeth for shelter and help.

We spoke of the courage of young Lucy and young Cecilia, whose names are her own, first and middle. Lucy is happy when the priest prays from the Roman canon at Mass, because it means she will hear her names spoken aloud before the whole community.

One of our daughters claims that we fitted our children for lives only as theologians or caterers, so I was delighted to eat and pray and tell stories.

But Lucy, her chin resting in her hands, looked at me and asked, “Well, what are we going to do about it?”

“How about what?” I asked.
“The saints,” Lucy said. “What are we going to do about the saints?”

Lucy has a shaky sense of time and no sense at all of history, which began — just ask her — on the day she was born.

She wasn’t hearing stories from long ago. She wasn’t hearing stories of people in odd dress, adorned with halos and bearing palm fronds or platters heaped with eyeballs. She was hearing about a welcoming cousin and a young, pregnant woman in need of a place to stay and rest and consider the changes in her body and her life.

She was hearing about a saint who loves God and his wife and his family and all the good gifts of the earth.

She was hearing about a saint whose work is for the least and lost.

She was hearing about a saint who is willing to face his own death, but not to bring death to others.

She was hearing about girls who, though young and powerless, find their strength in Christ, and stand firm.

She was hearing about people who are living in faith, now, and dying in faith, now. She was hearing about people in need, now.

March is the month of Lent, when we are asked to rebuild the foundations of our lives on the solid rock of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

We pray that God will open our eyes to the glory and the needs all around us, the abundance and the lack. We fast to remember how good are the gifts of the earth. We fast to remember those whose share in that goodness has been stripped from them and destroyed. We give alms to help those in need, to restore — to them and to us — creation’s harmony and balance.

“What are we going to do about the saints?”

I hear Lucy’s question as a challenge and a plea. I hear in her question an echo of the coming Easter Lectionary and its demand, “How then shall we live?” With what we know, what our eyes have seen and our ears have heard, with what we have received, what we have tasted and touched — how then shall we live? What are we going to do about the saints?

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Remembering Heaven

The scrutinies shine light on our lives

By BARBARA O’NEILL

Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every bush afire with God. But only he who sees, takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries. —Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Have you ever felt powerless? Other people are making decisions that directly affect your life, yet you have no say in the matter. Situations like this are unpleasant, confusing and painful, fraught with worry and anxiety. There’s lack of communication, misunderstanding — someone says something, but the other party hears it completely different from what the first person intended. The light goes out, and it becomes difficult to see our way through the situation at hand.

As the season of Lent intensifies, drawing nearer to the most sacred time of the liturgical year, we journey with the elect toward the font. The elect are counting down the days to the moment of baptism and full incorporation into this community, the body of Christ. The call to conversion deepens as much for us as it does for them. The last three Sundays of Lent, we celebrate the scrutinies, honestly facing sin, seeing it for what it is, supported by God’s love and grace.

These Sundays call us to look beyond just a laundry list of sins committed in daily life to examine the intentions, motives and patterns of behavior that keep us from being our best selves. The gift of sight is offered to everyone who is open and ready to receive it. The scrutinies shine light into the areas of darkness we’d rather just leave be; the journey inward can be frightening.

If we were alone this might be daunting, but together, as God’s people, we find strength, courage, love and support as we resolve to do better. For most people, I think, sin is not about deliberately setting out to do something destructive or evil. Rather, sin presents itself as something good. We often fail to see the potential consequences of choices we are making; we think something is good, yet it turns out to cause pain. For example, someone might lie or cheat — not because they intentionally want to do what is wrong, but to cover up a failure, to make themselves look better, or to get ahead in some way. The scrutinies are designed to shine a spotlight on those areas of our lives most in need of healing and forgiveness.

For parishes with candidates and catechumens, the last three Sundays of Lent use the Gospels from John instead of Luke. In them we encounter the woman at the well (John 4), who hastily faces her inner demons; the man born blind (John 9), who goes from darkness to the radiance of sight; and finally (John 11), the raising of Lazarus, who dances in the freedom and joy of life restored. We stand with them, asking for their courage. We share the same intimate relationship with Jesus as they did. Together we encounter Jesus, and we are never the same.

Is your parish celebrating the scrutinies? Careful preparation on the part of the presider, homilist, formation team and music directors, under the guidance of the parish liturgist, will serve to impact your entire assembly in ways we cannot predict. This preparation ought to involve the entire parish with the elect. Be creative. The possibilities are endless.

The following, taken from the introduction to the initiation rite, applies to all of us:

The scrutinies, which are solemnly celebrated on Sundays and are reinforced by an exorcism, are rites for self-searching and repentance and have above all a spiritual purpose. The scrutinies are meant to uncover, and then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good. For the scrutinies are celebrated in order to deliver the elect from the power of sin and Satan, to protect them against temptation, and to give them strength in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. These rites, therefore, should complete the conversion of the elect and deepen their resolve to hold fast to Christ and to carry out their decision to love God above all.” (#141, Rite of Christian Initiation)

The scrutinies are all about remembering heaven — where we came from and where we are going. In the meantime, heaven is all around us and within us. God’s grace is being poured out in every moment, enabling us to face our own demons courageously and honestly so we can move from the darkness into light, with new vision of the goodness that is ours and new freedom from the bondage of deadly sin.

Together with our elect, we are all called to trust anew in God’s love, to see what Moses saw in the burning bush, God present in the moment and in the lives of all those around us.

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Yes ... Dammit!

Light is on the other side of darkness

By PEG EKERDT

Every year, our parish creates a Lenten prayer book with 46 parishioner essays that take their cue from the daily scriptures. This year’s due date for submission had come and gone and the Good Friday reflection was still out. The writer said he had looked at the Passion narrative and found it so overwhelming that he couldn’t figure out what to write.

I wanted to respect his decision, but I had a sense that this man did know what to write. So I called and asked if there had been a time in his life when he carried a cross and faith was his guide. “Oh yes,” he said. “Then could you write about that?” I asked. “Sure, I can do that.”

That phone exchange was a moment of grace that triggered memories of other conversations with parishioners: “My dad just suffered a heart attack. Can you put him on the parish prayer list?” “I’m feeling really anxious; can I come and talk to you today?” “My spouse’s addiction is threatening our marriage, our family and our future.” “I come every Sunday but I don’t receive Communion — my second marriage isn’t recognized by the church.” “My son is gay and I want him to have what my daughters have — the grace of a sacramental marriage.” “I’m watching cancer claim my husband’s body — I don’t know if he feels God’s presence.” “I just lost my job and I don’t think I can do this again.”

All these conversations bear witness to the fact that, indeed, we do know what it means to carry the cross. And in the midst of suffering, it is faith that is our hope and our strength.

I have a painted rock that sits on my desk with the cryptic message: Yes ... dammit! Many years ago, these were the words a college classmate used to share the news of her father’s sudden death. Yes to new life — but dammit, it’s hard.

I gave this rock to a friend as he began a final retreat to determine if religious life was his true vocation. The rock was on the altar when I married that friend and it was in the birthing room when our daughters were born. Over time, I painted more rocks and gave them to friends as we moved from Boston to make a new home in Kansas City. Our daughters left for college with Yes ... dammit rocks packed among their belongings.

Through the years, I marked other life transitions with some version of this little rock. I gave one to a friend who married a widower with five children and to another friend whose daughter’s life was consumed by the ravages of cystic fibrosis. I have given rocks to young couples as they begin their married lives, to runners who prepare for marathons and to departing members of a parish leadership team whose hours of selfless service brought new life to our community.

In the midst of job losses and family illnesses, in the midst of incomprehensible pain as well as everyday challenges, this little rock has preached the good news: Yes, there is light on the other side of darkness, the Light of Christ. The walk may be difficult and pain is real. But dammit, keep going. You are not alone. You will get to the other side.

As the days of Lent unfold, we are invited into a deeper relationship with the Lord through a multitude of variations on the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Given time each day, these practices will strengthen our faith and renew our hearts for the journey. We will know the freedom that is to be found when we surrender anxiety and in the consolation of unconditional love. We will know that there are times when the cross cannot be avoided. But we will also know that the cross is not the end, and we do not carry it alone.

Jesus came to live among us, and in doing so he taught us that just as the cross of Calvary led to resurrection, the crosses we bear hold the promise of new life.

Therein lies the mystery of our faith, the Paschal Mystery to be precise, a mystery quite clearly described in this year’s Lenten booklet’s Good Friday reflection: “While contemplating the news that I had cancer that had possibly spread ... I confronted my cross to carry. And I also re-found my faith. I spent that weekend with a surprising calm and an almost unnatural lack of worry. ... And then I realized that it was my faith ... lightening the load of my cross, and bringing me comfort and strength.”

May there be surrender in the dying this Lenten season and trust in Easter’s promise of new life.

Many years ago, these were the words a college classmate used to share the news of her father’s sudden death.

Yes to new life — but dammit, it’s hard.

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