

**Of Nuns, Networks and Justice: What does this mean for the future of the church?**

*By Mary Whelan*

In April of this year American Catholics were rocked when the Vatican announced that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the largest and most influential group of Catholic nuns in the U.S., was found to have “serious doctrinal problems” as a result of Rome’s investigation. Specifically, they said the nuns have focused too heavily on issues of social justice, while failing to speak out enough on “issues of crucial importance,” such as abortion and same-sex marriage and accused the nuns of promoting “radical feminist” ideas and challenging key teachings on homosexuality and male-only priesthood. LCWR, founded in 1956 at the Vatican’s request, was placed under the guidance of three bishops who will oversee the nuns in the next five years as they revise their statutes, obtain approval on all public speakers and replace the handbook they use to facilitate dialogue on matters that the Vatican says should be settled doctrine.

The American Catholic laity responded quickly. Nunjustice, an online group, was formed and a petition drive launched, with more than 64,000 individuals signing on. SEPAWOC is one of the 15 organizations that support the movement. May was a month of public witnessing to support the sisters across the country, including our own here in Philadelphia at 18<sup>th</sup> and Race, strategically located near the Cathedral.

When the ink was barely dry on the Vatican pronouncement, we heard that Network, the 40 year old Catholic social justice lobby based in Washington, D.C. and strangely singled out and harshly rebuked by the Vatican in the April document, announced its brilliantly conceived Nuns on the Bus tour. Supporters in Philadelphia “participated” in their journey by attending a bus stop “revival” of sorts at Chestnut Hill College on June 29<sup>th</sup>. One of the key elements of this tour was the promotion of The Faithful Budget, developed by Network as a response to Senator Paul Ryan’s budget proposal.

The drama continued over the summer as Paul Ryan was chosen by Mitt Romney, Republican presidential nominee, as his running mate, bringing the budget debate into even greater prominence. We watched Sister Simone Campbell, Executive Director of Network and new media star (what else could you be after appearing on The Colbert Report?) address the Democratic National Convention. The stars converged because Vatican made its pronouncement in an election year!

At our SEPAWOC retreat in August we pondered the meaning of these auspicious events and the idea was conceived of an evening where we could discuss them in light of the current state of affairs in the Roman Catholic Church. What do they mean? What is the Holy Spirit saying? We were delighted when 8 other progressive groups were willing to sponsor such an evening with us. Along with the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church (ARCC), Call to Action- Philadelphia (CTA-Philadelphia), Community of the Christian Spirit (CCS), Dignity/Philadelphia, The Grail, Sanctuary of Peace, Voice of the Faithful of Greater Philadelphia (VoTF) and Women of Faith Small Faith group we sponsored “What Does Nun Justice Mean for the Future of the Church? A Panel and Discussion” at the new Cranaleith Spiritual Center on October 9, 2012. Approximately 130 men and women gathered for a prayerful, thoughtful evening of listening, discussion and reflection.

Our panelists were Sister Carol Zinn, SSJ, and Jamie L. Manson. Sister Carol, currently a member of the Congregational Leadership team for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, just completed her role as the NGO representative of the Congregations of St. Joseph to the United Nations, and is President Elect of LCWR. Jamie Manson received her Master of Divinity from Yale Divinity School and writes the weekly column Grace in the Margins, in the *National Catholic Reporter*. She has served on the board of national WOC, has won numerous awards for her writing and has worked extensively with New York City’s homeless and poor populations. Marisa Guerin, a board member of Cranaleith, served as moderator.



Sister Carol shared her personal history with us: attending Catholic schools in Philadelphia and her Catholic upbringing. “It’s my Church. I don’t know anything else. What does it mean to be Catholic for us today in the Church we love?” She sketched the events of the past months and asked, “What is the impact?” Without a sense of history, we cannot assess that.

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She touched on Vatican II saying it was an anomaly in Church history in the long view; it was a “vision”. When the U.S. bishops returned home, there was a readiness among the laity in this country who embraced the vision as nowhere else in the world. She connected this readiness to the fact that, in the U.S. especially, there existed an adult-educated laity. “But we may be riding at the crest of the wave regarding the impact of Vatican II changes.”

After the Vatican announcement in April, LCWR had to stand back and see the bigger picture. “Because of the sea changes around the world, including social changes and transformation of consciousness, the ground is shifting beneath us—all of us. In the institutions of the Western world something is happening. Women have changed and experienced change, though not all women’s situations have changed, in the past 50 years. We see women’s impact on world culture and their potential and their yearning for greater participation. What is the impact of the sisters in the U.S.? “It’s remarkable. Nuns came to this country, saw human needs and addressed them. It’s not surprising they’d address the changes proposed by Vatican II. In the recent Vatican visitation what was really being asked? Was it a response to the Roman Catholic Women Priests’ Ordination in 2002? Was it the Vatican perceiving the signals from secularism, feminism, relativism, consumerism, activism?”

She continued, “The solidarity of the 57,000 women religious in LCWR as a result of the Vatican visitation is creating a new expression of what it means to be women religious. LCWR has been asking for a dialogue, with Rome. If the sisters can create a dialogue, they will feel they have been faithful to the vision of what they believe is happening. But what is the deeper issue? It is not about LCWR but about educated adults and the future of the Church.”

The LCWR is very conscious of not responding in kind to Rome. Instead, they model the change they want to see. In the last issue of *EqualwRites* the statement from the LCWR response to the Vatican in April was quoted: “As the church and society face tumultuous times, the board believes it is imperative that these matters be addressed by the entire church community in an atmosphere of openness, honesty, and integrity.”

The second speaker, Jamie Manson, had been a featured speaker at LCWR in August and specifically addressed issues of young adult women. She had extensively studied the lives of religious women, but she wondered about all the young adult women who have theological degrees and are engaged in theological and social justice work, also doing the work of the women who belong to religious orders. These young women do not have a community or a parish behind them, no safety net, and, therefore, lack the sustenance that comes with belonging to a prayer community. They are called by God in a way similar to nuns, but grew up in a different culture, post-communal and individualistic. Many grew up in nontraditional families and have lived through the sex abuse crisis. How can they even trust the Church? Many look to a partner/spouse for identity and support rather than community, but community is crucial, too. Individualism, loneliness, and rootlessness have caused adolescence to be a prolonged stage in our culture. Delayed marriage, developing self iden-

tity and fulfillment have made it difficult for nuns recruiting. She pointed out, “Something new is emerging, but we do not know what it is.” She urges nuns to include young women in their discussions.

“Nuns exemplify what is best in the Catholic Church with their faith based social justice organizing and their deep friendships,” said Ms. Manson. She believes the hierarchical treatment of women religious will only further distance the young from the Church: “It will shut down the minds and hearts and even the voice of God. Perhaps they think the nuns have become too ‘empowered’, but, with their deep intellectual curiosity and spiritual longings, why wouldn’t they be seeking? They are not wayward, but wise. Is there no place for prophets who dwell in their own land? The Vatican behaviors threaten everyone who believes or benefits from the nuns’ work. We must have solidarity.”

She went on to say, “The Church is on its way to being a sect with its stranglehold on its idea of truth, insistence on orthodoxy, and obedience as opposed to the here-comes-everyone church of the past. It’s a fundamentalism that has become prominent in all religions.”



Ms. Manson questions what leaving church really means today. “God can emerge to us anywhere and any way, not just in sacramental theology. We recognize the church we already are and being church for those in our lives. We recognize when being in church is often not a ‘safe’ place for us anymore. Grace is on the margins; that’s where God is. God is revealing the Godself in all ways.”

In her closing remarks, Sister Carol reflected that she had heard the pain, anger, suffering and sense of betrayal in the audience’s comments. “It is difficult to look in the eyes of the older nuns who ask, ‘Is the Church really saying we are unfaithful?’ I have chosen not to live out of the pain and suffering, but I identify with the pain and suffering of the laity. We nuns are the Church within the Church and invite the ordained brothers to be with us. We have decided out of discernment to give a spiritual response to the Vatican assessment, there is never a situation beyond God’s grace. Vatican II took the sisters from the center to the margins, bringing the Gospel to the edge, and now it is time to include the edge in illuminating the Gospel, to have a conversation about the Gospel, for the Church is not the Gospel. Sister Carol encouraged us to continue to “Be the Church. If we leave the Church, we leave one another. Pray for each other and for our brothers. We are all the image and likeness of God.”

*Mary Whelan* is a co-editor of *EqualwRites*.

## WHY DO THEY STAY? By Ellie Harty and Mary Whelan

*We wondered, in light of everything negative that has happened over the last decade or more in the Catholic Church and that continues to happen, why people stay. Perhaps hearing the answers would help some of us understand why we ourselves stay, or leave, or vacillate between staying and leaving. We were especially interested in listening to those who have been most personally affected by the past and present Vatican declarations or actions. We spoke with Jack DiFeo, a gay man who, as a child, was abused by a priest, and Mary Ellen Norpel who has two sisters who are nuns and who, herself, had once entered the convent, and asked them, 'Why do you stay?'*

### Jack's Story

As a young Catholic boy, I was an altar server. I felt it was a privilege and an honor to be up on the altar, to serve God and to stand close and assist a priest. Having attended Catholic school and being raised in a Catholic home I had come to think of a priest as god-like. I remember a neighbor describe one of our priests in this way: "It's as if God himself had come down from the cross and was on our altar." Forty years later, I clearly remember that comment and that conversation. What that neighbor didn't know, and what I did not comprehend at that time, was that this same priest was abusing me. It did not occur to me at that time that this was wrong. It felt a little strange and yet it also felt good on some level. I recall being told I was one of father's special boys. If I ever considered it to be wrong, I would quickly excuse this thought knowing how pious and well loved and respected this priest was. And so for 35 years or so I buried all this deep, deep inside of me. It wasn't until the Philadelphia cases were publicized and I saw his picture in the newspaper that I could acknowledge what had happened to me.

I am staying in the church for reasons I will mention later, but I did not always make that decision. In my early twenties, I slowly started to vocalize things that didn't sit right for me with the church long before the sex crimes were addressed. I had, in fact, always felt alienated from the church. For many of those years, it was something I shared with no one. I couldn't speak the words, "I am a gay Catholic man." I learned quickly as a child that was to be kept quiet if I expected to be a part of the Catholic church and my own family. I had heard homilies in church and been taught in school, and even told by my family, that being gay meant being sick, sinful, and evil. During that time, I physically attended church. But I had left the church spiritually and emotionally. I was dead inside.

I even left the church entirely for a while but eventually found my way to St. Vincent's Catholic Church in the Germantown area of Philadelphia. From the first warm welcome, I saw a faith community making a genuine attempt to put the teachings of Jesus into action. After attending for a year, I visited the pastor to discuss joining the parish. While filling out the membership form, he added to my response "single" when we came to "marital status" by adding quickly "but only in the eyes of the church"—thus recognizing and affirming my relationship with my partner. With his affirmation, he helped me to begin a long needed healing process. Not only the community, but the clergy, embraced me. My reactions to life began to change and my attitude was uplifted. For the first time in thirty

years, I did not need to hide who I was. I was embraced, loved and accepted. I have been a member of this community for about twenty years.

Lately, however, I have been especially sad and angry. For a while I couldn't figure out why. Of course, there was the obvious – a lack of justice, a continuation of secrecy, an abuse of power, thinly veiled promises, an arrogant, pompous attitude on the part of the Catholic hierarchy. Yet there was more for me. My wonderful and caring therapist Jay has helped me pinpoint where more of my anger was coming from. As a child I had lost my innocence, my ability to trust, hence, my continuous inner struggle with those in authority. However, now I felt as if more was and is - still being taken from me, and that something is my community, my church family. In a very real sense I have lost much of that, too. Many have left our community, and I completely understand why. In good conscience I can't defend the church or expect others to return while I myself am struggling to hang on. While I am grateful for the newest grand jury verdicts, it also feels like another possible loss. The mistrust I have is pushing me away from the very people who care for me and I for them.

I needed healing, as we all do, to feel more whole. Healing is a transformation. Sometimes we can help with the process of healing and at times we must allow it to follow to its own course. To be healed, we must experience and embrace life as it is. Once again, for me healing has become synonymous with St. Vincent's. It is here that I have seen how healing can transform my life. Throughout my life's journey, I have accumulated my share of spiritual bruises. These experiences have occasionally led me to think about leaving the church, but my relationship with others at St Vincent's who also face challenges help me to choose healing within community.

That healing is ongoing. Thanks to the Gay and Lesbian Spirituality group that was formed in the parish, a group of us who were struggling to find our place as gay and lesbian Catholics could share our struggles—and perhaps more importantly—our successes as we tried to understand our experiences and our reactions to them. No longer alone, but embraced by those with similar problems, I continue to heal.

The clergy sex abuse controversy was obviously extremely difficult for me. Ultimately, I filed charges against my abuser, and I am receiving counseling—but that was only a part of the process. It was in the company of my St Vincent's community—the JustFaith group—that I shared this *publicly* for the first time. As in the past, my St. Vincent's friends listened to me, cried with me, embraced me and encouraged me. The parish pastor acknowledged my faith for staying in the church and expressed his regret for what a fellow priest had done. Later, I spoke to the whole congregation about my abuse. What other Catholic church would have allowed that? I was told I was the first to do so. Recently, I testified before the Grand Jury about my experience as part of a pattern of abuse in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. I had found my voice.

JustFaith was another part of the healing. As a JustFaith group, we were seeking enlightenment about the injustices

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of the world and how we as individuals could address them. The amazing thing is that sometimes the healing we need comes from the experience of giving to others, and the social justice outreach at St. Vincent's offered rich opportunities. I learned that it is by helping others to become whole, that we become whole ourselves. We are each wounded in many ways. It is simply a part of life. What we actually *do* with our wounds is the central element of healing. We have a choice. Do we allow our wounds to work internally and wreak havoc in our spiritual lives and our relations with others? Or do we move towards a greater intentionality and purpose in our lives?

The recent liturgical changes imposed upon our faith community have been a challenge for me. I have been distressed by them—even angry. I have since realized that mourning loss is essential to healing. We mourn because the things that we have lost are important to us. I have prayed for guidance as I have dealt with these recent wounds. I wanted to leave, but I have been given the strength to remain to deal with the pain and the uncertainty I feel even about where St. Vincent's is headed. Recently we began to form new small faith groups in the parish. Our group is another place under the umbrella of St. Vincent's that will provide us with the safety and support we need to deal with our spiritual challenges.

The healing I have found at St. Vincent's has spread to other aspects of my life. The healing grace of God has taught me to like myself and has given me confidence to trust in myself, to accept the hand of friendship when it is offered, and to offer the hand of friendship when it is needed. I thank God for this community which embodies Christ himself. It is healing to stand before such a community with my wounds exposed. It is this kind of community that enables me to continue to be a part of the Catholic church. We are all hurting and we all need one another. In the words of Joyce Rupp:

You are a tall sturdy oak.  
You have much courage within you.  
You can meet suffering in yourself and others and not be destroyed by its ravages.  
You will have strength to do what you need to do.  
Your sorrow is my sorrow.  
You are not alone.

### **Mary Ellen's Story**

"I often wonder why I do stay!" she began only half-jokingly, and then continued seriously, "The Catholic Church is my heritage; it's part of my family's tradition. I think all in our lives is gift, and Catholicism was the gift given to me. Even the upheaval in the church has been a gift, for it made me decide what I actually believe in and it made me focus more and more on Jesus." When asked to clarify, she replied, "With Jesus as the center, I saw my faith as embracing non-violence, compassion, inclusivity. I grew up learning God is always watching you. Now I believe that God is looking out for me, not out looking for me."

Attending a Catholic church is still important to her. "I believe in celebrating the significant events in our lives with ritual, and I know in the Catholic church there are people who understand how this happens and are celebrating with

me." She is questioning, however, some of what she was taught about the meaning of those rituals: "I learned that Jesus is present in His Word, in the bread and wine, and in the people, and I recognized my emphasis shifts from one to another constantly. Right now, the bread and wine are less important than the Word and the people. I've come to see the Eucharist less as the belief in the passion and death happening again and again and more as a way of remembering. I think of Eucharist now more in terms of transsignification than transubstantiation. I participate because Jesus said, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. Other long held beliefs matter less to me. Whether Mary was a virgin or Jesus had a wife doesn't change the example they gave us. What I do know about Jesus makes me care deeply about others and about life. That is what matters."

One other aspect of her growing up in the Catholic tradition is especially meaningful to her today, the focus on the saints. "Now that I look back on what was said about them, I question their ways of living their lives. But the experience of learning about them led me to look to modern saints for inspiration, like Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They are our modern companions on the journey. I am also so glad to be associated with the Sisters of St. Joseph. They and my fellow Associates help me see that so many of us are living religious lives every day."

Her early life was certainly populated by those living the religious life. "My father's sisters, two cousins, my own two sisters and my brother were all nuns or priests. We were a very traditional Catholic family." Mary Ellen even went into the convent herself: "I felt if I went into the convent, I could leave; if I married, I couldn't leave!" Leave the convent she did and marry she did, and has no intentions of ever leaving. She also attended Catholic schools all the way to college. She recalls telling this to the Bryn Mawr College admissions officer (where she earned her degree in social work) who remarked, "Well, I guess you're finally ready to face the big bad world."

Mary Ellen, however, had already faced that world. "Two aspects of my life that had meant the most to me (besides her family) were my church and my country. I thought we were the right, the good, the honorable. Then the Sixties happened and the Vietnam War and *Humanae Vitae* (with its reaffirmed prohibition of artificial birth control). The day the news broke, I literally marched up to the local rectory with a baby in my arms to give the pastor my opinion. I had already had four kids and the eldest wasn't four yet! Something in me responded strongly to the injustice," and this response to injustice – in her country and in her church – has continued tenfold. "I am a peace worker willing to be arrested and I have been many times. I protest at Fort Benning (against the School of the Americas), at Lockheed Martin on Good Friday and August 6. I am part of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, Voice of the Faithful, Women's Ordination Conference, and many other progressive Catholic groups."

Her most recent response has been to Nun Justice – or, more aptly, injustice. As an Associate of the Sisters of St. Joseph herself and with two sisters who are nuns, she should be particularly outraged by the recent attack, and is, but with a twist. "Sr. Simone Campbell said recently that the attack on the nuns was a gift, and it is. The sisters of various congrega-

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tions are now more in union and communion than ever. Everything the Vatican does that is that stupid and outrageous just makes us freer to care less about what they say. When they talk about excommunication, I answer, "You can't tell me who's in my community and who's out!"

"And so," she summarized, "I persevere. Reform is going to happen," and not just for those with gray hair. "Young people and their families who are attending church sooner or later will start asking questions." She is optimistic: "We may still be in the beginning, but transition is happening in the entire universe."

*One final note from the editors: We, as hopefully you, were both moved and inspired by the courage of Jack and Mary Ellen who stay within, but still work to transform, the Catholic church so many of us once loved or still love. We also admire those who are taking other paths and think columnist, Jamie Manson (guest speaker at our Nun Justice event), described their journey so well in the June 27 National Catholic Reporter: "So while there are some who can still manage to be prophetic voices within their parishes or church-based institutions, we must accept that authentic, prophetic, Catholic work is also being done in intentional eucharistic communities, in Catholic communities led by Roman Catholic Womenpriests or ordained members of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, and in groups that have been ejected by the institutional church, like Spiritus Christi or Dignity USA. Although these groups technically stand outside of the institutional church, they still maintain their Catholic identity through their love of Catholicism's sacramental life, social justice teachings, and mystical and spiritual tradition. They are "working out" in the present what an inclusive, Catholic community might look like in a reformed church in the future."*

**We Thank You**

The word "solidarity" comes to mind as we express our gratitude to you who support the SEPAWOC mission to work for "church renewal and ...the transformation of a structure which uses gender rather than gifts as its criterion for ministry." Your financial gifts, your presence at our events and the publication of the newsletter you are reading show that we live our mission in solidarity. Thank you. We are so grateful to be part of the change that we want to see. If you have not contributed we have enclosed an envelope for your convenience.

**DARK**

**An Advent Reflection by Sharon Browning**

*Note: This article was first published in the December 2007 Catholic Peace Fellowship Newsletter. (Its editor enthusiastically supports this reprinting!) For this reason, you will notice several references to the 2008 election. Although not currently interested in the 'regime change' mentioned in the second paragraph, the editors believe the other ideas presented here are especially timely, powerful, and inspirational.*

As we move ever deeper into seasonal darkness, it's tempting to get even more discouraged than usual by the dark, depressing news greeting us daily: the wrenching reality of human suffering all over the globe, the horror of Iraq, escalating violence at home, and dire warnings about our fragile climate, all against the backdrop of official incompetence and seeming indifference. I recently read Laurence W. Britt's list of the early warning signs of creeping fascism. As a nation, we are clearly manifesting most, and arguably, all of them.

So I've been giving a lot of thought to 'regime change' recently. The old ways aren't working and never really did; we know we need a new approach, and so we preoccupy ourselves with wishful thinking about the already-numbing '08 elections. I'm weary and it isn't even 2008 yet.

One of our many problems is that we humans are a muddled and confused bunch, much more comfortable with replacing our temporal rulers than with doing the hard, radical work of **interior** regime change, an overthrow of the gods of our own manufacture and design in whom we obstinately place our trust and faith and hope. We can all fill in the blank, naming our personal gods of choice: politics, self, security, family, whatever absorbs much of our thinking and energy. Who or what rules our hearts and dictates our priorities and actions on a daily basis? Even we who profess to be people of faith continue to act as if salvation will come if we can just get rid of the current President, or Congress, or whoever is the target of our angst and dismay. And we fervently and fearfully pray that our 401(k)s survive the turmoil intact, if not enhanced. But first steps first: We are sorely in need of a revolution of the heart, and Advent is the perfect season in which to deepen this interior journey. We need the nourishing dark to see more clearly.

The Dark has gotten a bad reputation. We think of it as so sinister and scary that we have covered the planet with arti-

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## Book Reviews

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***No Closure: Catholic Practice and Boston's Parish Shutdowns* by John C. Seitz. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011. Hardback, \$39.95; e-book, \$30.44. 248 pp. plus back matter.**

*Reviewed by Marian Ronan*

Much has been written about the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to the “modern world.” One stream of conversation has it that the church “entered the modern world” at Vatican II. But the church helped to create the modern world as well. The Spanish monarchs who sent Columbus off, for example, were Franciscan tertiaryaries, while Michel Foucault argues that the Catholic practice of private confession was fundamental to the construction of the individual, that lynchpin of modernity. It’s closer to the truth to say that the church decided to exit the modern world when the liberal revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made evident the high cost of participating in that world. But exiting an era in which you’ve played a major role for five hundred years is tricky. Even the reintroduction of the “perennial philosophy” of St. Thomas Aquinas was as much a mimicking of the clarity of the Scientific Revolution as it was a return to Aquinas’s work which had been both ground-breaking and controversial in its time.

Reviewers will tend, I suspect, to portray John C. Seitz’s book, *No Closure: Catholic Practice and Boston's Parish Shutdowns*, as a study of the laypeople who resisted the closure of a number of churches by the Archdiocese of Boston beginning in 2004. Indeed, the ethnographic interviews Seitz conducted with a range of former parishioners serves as the foundation of the study. Yet even the ethnographic nature of the book, as Seitz acknowledges, is complicated, since he not only interviewed the occupiers, (or vigilers, or resisters, as they are also called) but participated in the occupations—sometimes sleeping all night in the churches and taking part in tasks like cleaning the churches and fixing broken objects.

Like the nature of Seitz’s ethnographic role, *No Closure’s* argument itself is not a simple one, though it is well worth the effort required to comprehend it. By situating the Boston church occupations within the very changes and continuities of post-war Catholicism, Seitz offers one of the most valuable readings yet published of the complex nature of the relationship between the church and “the modern world.” As he writes in his introductory chapter, his project “intends to understand resisters as they carried...the imprint of wider struggles related to changes in the church and society across the twentieth century” (17).

Seitz accomplishes this by “braiding” together what readers might expect to be highly divergent actions, motivations and beliefs on the part of occupiers and representatives of the archdiocese as well. While some might assume the refusal to give up two different Italian parishes, in North and East Boston, to be motivated by traditional or conservative beliefs in saints, statues, and relics, for example, Seitz shows that the occupiers were equally motivated by a Vatican II sense of themselves as “the people of God.”

On the other hand, it may seem that the archdiocese’s demand that people leave their parishes behind is a classic in-

stance of episcopal authoritarianism based in traditional, pre-Vatican II theology. Drawing on a nuanced comparison of pre- and post-Vatican II texts for the ritual dedication of a church, however, Seitz shows that the authorities intent on shutting down the churches had shifted from centuries-old Catholic language about the sacredness of places and objects to a distinctly modern, post-Vatican II emphasis on the primarily symbolic nature of those places and things. The authorities then used this “modern” framework to justify their call for what may be construed as highly traditional obedience and sacrifice. One of the most revealing parts of *No Closure* involves the discovery, by the occupiers of one of the churches, of altar relics consecrated at the dedication of the church but discarded in a sacristy drawer as the church was being “closed.” The recent return to traditional reverence ostensibly expressed by kneeling during the canon of the Mass is not terribly evident in this apparent dismissal of the communion of saints.

Seitz’s interpretation of the vigilers’ practice of bringing consecrated hosts supplied by anonymous priests into the occupied churches for legitimate lay-led communion services also embodies the complexity of the resisters’ Catholicism. In a review in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Kathleen L. Sullivan quotes Seitz in such a way as to suggest that practices like this were really tactics by the occupiers to appear “more Catholic” than archdiocesan authorities. (<http://ncronline.org/node/28706>). But in the context of the book’s larger argument, this importation of the Body and Blood of Christ was also a genuine expression of devout Catholicism, against the archbishop’s cavalier closing of what the occupiers had longed believed to be the center of their faith, the parish. Seitz’s reading here suggests that Catholic reform groups who base their claims to legitimacy on apostolic succession, or who allow only officially ordained but married priests to celebrate the Eucharist, are also, in some respects, adhering to traditional Catholic beliefs.

It’s not possible in a review of this length to do justice to Seitz’s nuanced reading of the interrelationships between continuity and change, between tradition and modernity, in the beliefs and practices of the Catholics who occupied Boston Catholic churches, and, for that matter, in the beliefs and practices of the archdiocesan authorities who ordered those closings and the parishioners who accepted them. Considering the ways in which the title of the book itself embodies such Catholic “braiding” may be a good way to bring these brief reflections to a conclusion, however.

At the simplest level, of course, *No Closure* communicates the fact that some Boston Catholics did not allow their parish churches to be closed. Yet Seitz knows well and acknowledges that while a few of the churches survived, sometimes with diminished status, others did close, or would eventually; indeed, one of them, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in East Boston, saw its occupation ended in April, 2012, seven years after it began.

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But *No Closure* means more than this. It even means more than that some of the occupiers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel have continued vigiling outside their recently closed church. As Seitz details in his moving epilogue, there is also “no closure” for those who moved, either promptly or eventually, from their closed parishes to new parishes, to Protestant churches, or to no churches at all. Their complex, braided, modern-premodern-postmodern Catholic experiences are never again going to fold neatly into some clear, essentialized Catholic identity, if in fact they ever did.

This leads to a final meaning of *No Closure*, the one that is, for me, most moving. From time to time we encounter in the media suggestions that indictment or execution of or even apology from those responsible will bring “closure” to families who have lost loved ones. Such references too often make mourning sound quick and easy, which, of course, it’s not. Neither will some quick and easy closure bring an end to the mourning of American Catholics, whose losses since Vatican II have been profound, as John Seitz’s fine book makes abundantly evident.

**Marian Ronan** is the author of *Tracing the Sign of the Cross: Sexuality, Mourning and the Future of American Catholicism* (Columbia 2009). *You can subscribe to her blog at <http://marianronan.wordpress.com/>*, scrolling down to the bottom of the right hand side of the page, clicking “Follow” and entering your email address.

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ficial light in an effort to banish the dark. In “The Dark Side,” an article by David Owen in the August 20, 2007, issue of *The New Yorker*, the author documented the resulting problems of light pollution. He pointed out that it is now rare for humans to experience total darkness. Due to the pervasiveness of light diffusion, there are only two places left on earth that have ‘true dark’ nights: the mountains of Peru, and the outback of Australia. From my own urban perch, I cannot see the stars clearly, and I long for the dark nights remembered from a mid-western childhood: sky as dome, horizon to horizon, so vast, so mysterious, so holy. We have blanketed ourselves with so many glaring lights that we’re losing the gift of darkness. And as mystics have pointed out for millennia, darkness is a great place to encounter God.

“O Guiding Night!” wrote John of the Cross. “O Night more lovely than the dawn!” Lovely and guiding because, when all is dark and still, we can more clearly recognize the only Light that matters, the Fire that is God, that is Love. This paradox of the illuminating darkness is at the core of both our spiritual and physical capacity for creativity and growth; there is great ferment and generative possibility in the dark. As Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and others have pointed out so beau-

tifully, the dark is the most fertile place in the universe. It is in darkness that everything is created and born. But in order to savor and experience this ourselves, we must be still. Contemporary culture militates against this, however, with the accelerated pace of life, the constant background light, noise, and distraction of electronic media, and the near-total absence of stillness. No wonder we continue to find peace illu-

About 9 years ago, on a cold, dark day, my oldest daughter, then a sophomore in college, called home to speak to her Dad. She was feeling sad, unmotivated, slightly depressed and restless, and hoped that he might have some words of wisdom for her. “Look outside your window,” he said. “Tell me what you see.” She reported on the bleak winter sky, bare trees, brown plants and withered vines; all seemed very dark indeed. “Yes,” he replied. “But remember what’s hidden out there, too: all of the seeds, resting in the darkness of the earth, gathering their energy, just waiting for the light. Maybe this is your seed time. Just rest, be still, and wait for the Light.”

Advent is like that, a seed time, time to be quiet, rest in the dark, discern, gather our energies, be still, and wait for the Light. This liturgical season, designed so intentionally to correlate to the Northern Hemisphere’s simultaneous seasonal movement into both greater darkness and the coming of Light, is a perfect opportunity to explore the mystery and meaning of the dark. December 21, Winter Solstice, is, after all, the fullness of darkness. When my children were younger, we marked the Solstice in pre-Christmas darkness, using only candles to light our way, celebrating both the deep, deep dark, and the illuminating power of a single candle. No premature Christmas lights, only the guiding night to focus us on the impending birth of Light and Love, to evoke the wonder of a long gestation ending in the birth of the Sun/Son of Justice.

What is gestating in each of us this Advent? What manifestation of the Divine is seeded only in our heart, waiting to be born through the uniqueness of our life, our giftedness? Can we let ourselves be enfolded by the darkness and stillness necessary to recognize and enthrone Love in our hearts this Advent? Everything, absolutely everything, can be transformed by Love. Most people know first-hand the impact of love on their own lives; can we even imagine this power magnified, unleashed, moving through the world? Jesus saw it this way: “I have come to set the world on fire, and how I wish it were ablaze already.” And Teilhard de Chardin observed that when humans “harness for God the energies of Love,” we will “for the second time.... discover fire.”

We are the sparks, capable of being fanned into flame. Why not experiment this Advent? Turn off the lights, both literally and figuratively. Cultivate darkness. Befriend it. Foreswear the frenzy of pre-Christmas consumer craziness and choose instead to rest in the fertile womb of deep December. Incarnation is stirring, gathering energy, in the depths of each of our souls. Let’s embrace the nourishing dark, obey the angelic invitation to “fear not,” and answer the call to birth God into a weary world wanting so desperately to rejoice. The dark just might show us the more significant and transformative regime change we need.

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## SCRIPTURE REFLECTIONS

Advent/Christmas 2012

**Is.61:6** The Spirit of God is upon me, to bring glad tidings to the poor.

**Is.7:14** The Promised One will be Emmanuel, God with us.

**Is.9:1-6** The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...he is Prince of Peace.

By *Judith A. Heffernan, M.Div.*

As Christmas approaches, we will read Isaiah's words again, though, as always, in a new way while reading the signs of the times. We are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Vatican II; Hildegard has just been declared a Doctor of the Church, and the messages of 'Nuns on the Bus' and the 'Nun-Justice Project' have gifted and moved us. John XXIII prayed for a new Pentecost. Trusting the Holy Spirit, John threw open the windows of the Church and opened us to the fresh breeze of renewal. Remembering that we are the people of God, Robert Kaiser invites us to take on Vatican II issues with new vision: peace, economic justice, interfaith relations, the environment, racism and sexism. Miriam Therese Winter, M.M. reminds us to have an endless supply of hope!

Hildegard wrote that we are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God and that the holy person welcomes all the

creatures of the world with grace. Jane Johnson Lewis tells my favorite story of Hildegard: as abbess, Hildegard allowed a nobleman who had been excommunicated to be buried at the convent, seeing that he had last rites. Church authorities intervened and ordered the body exhumed. Hildegard, however, hid the grave, and the authorities excommunicated the entire convent community! Hildegard complied with the interdict forbidding her to receive Communion or even to sing but did not comply with the command to exhume the body. She appealed the interdict to higher authorities and the interdict was lifted!

Sister Simone Campbell, Carol Zinn, SSJ, and Jamie Manson have reminded us that we are called to stand in solidarity with one another, for and with the poor, the hungry, and the vulnerable. We are called to implement Vatican II, believing there is never a situation beyond the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

As we travel together on the journey for justice and equality, Sr. Simone reminds us that Hildegard was *the* most annoying person to the hierarchy—and here it is a thousand years later and she has been canonized and is a Doctor of the Church! Simone adds: "BE BOLD—we don't know what awaits us a thousand years from now!"

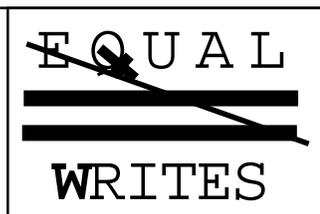
*Judy Heffernan* is a member of the Community of the Christian Spirit and the SEPAWOC Core Committee.

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