

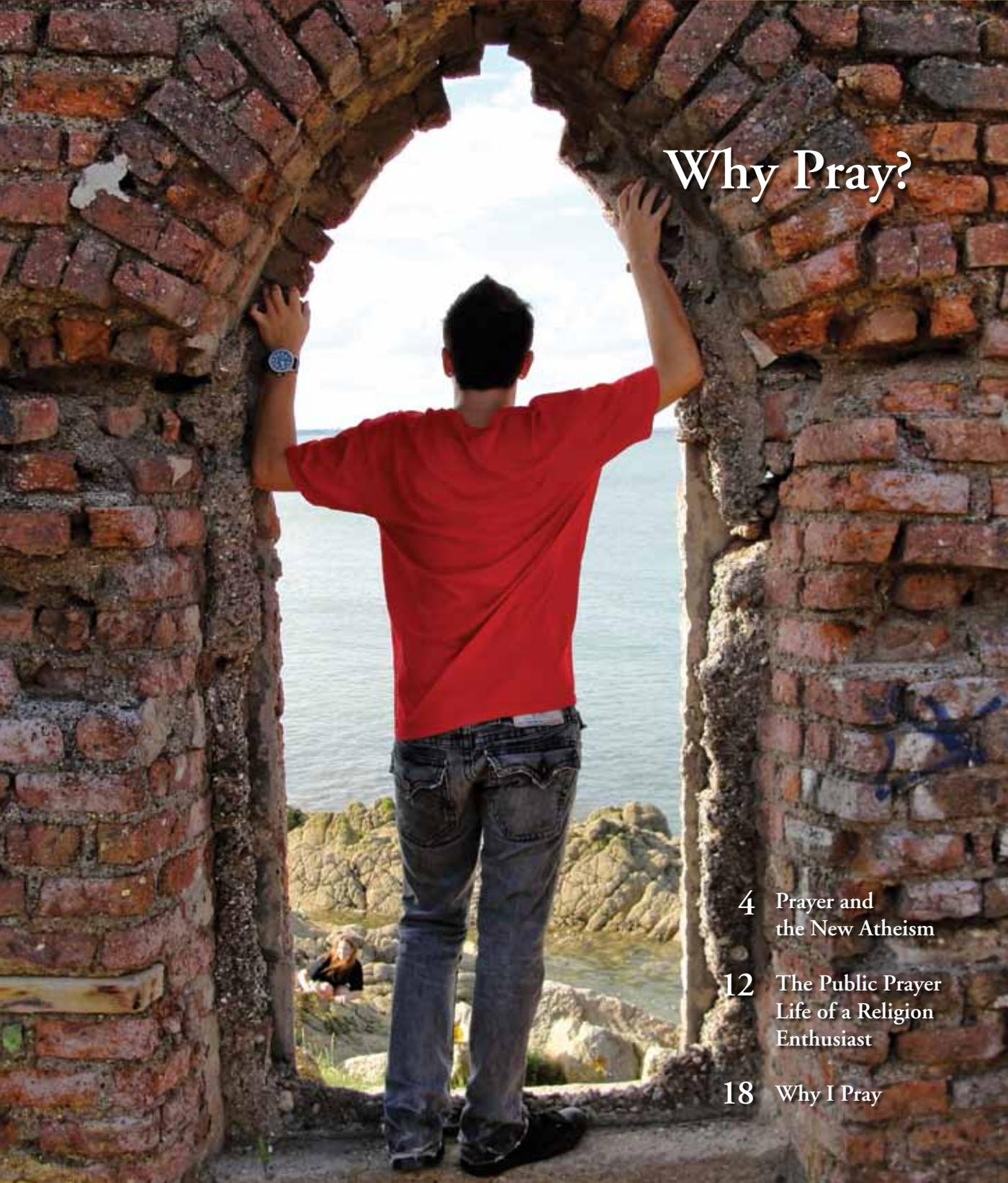
# explore

PUBLISHED BY THE IGNATIAN CENTER AT SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

AN EXAMINATION  
OF CATHOLIC  
IDENTITY AND  
IGNATIAN  
CHARACTER IN  
JESUIT HIGHER  
EDUCATION

SPRING 2010 VOL. 13 NO. 2

## Why Pray?

- 
- 4 Prayer and the New Atheism
  - 12 The Public Prayer Life of a Religion Enthusiast
  - 18 Why I Pray



# contents

## Why Pray?



ABOVE  
“Bluebells” (18w x 24h x 3d) painted by Addi McClure '10, studio art major, Santa Clara University; from series “Hanakotoba—Language of Flowers.” These flowers are painted to mimic the flat graphic style of traditional Japanese art, and are a metaphorical representation of gratitude.

ON THE COVER  
“Pensive over the Irish Sea,” photograph by Troy Vander Hulst '10, finance major, studio art minor, Santa Clara University. Pictured: Daniel Silva.

### 4 Prayer and the New Atheism

BY MICHAEL C. MCCARTHY, S.J. What is the new atheism and how does it challenge the ancient practices of prayer?

### 12 The Public Prayer Life of a Religion Enthusiast

BY PHILIP BOO RILEY A professor of religious studies at SCU examines what he and his students learn from interactions they have with local faith communities and interfaith groups.

### Why I Pray

These personal essays, by four people from very different backgrounds, explore the motivations and benefits of prayer.

18 BY AGNIESZKA WINKLER

22 BY PAULA HUSTON

26 BY REV. AIMEE MOISO

29 BY ANDREW J. GARAVEL, S.J.

### 32 BANNAN GRANT REPORT

#### A Seat at the Table: Conversations on Clare of Assisi

BY JEAN MOLESKY-POZ This Santa Clara University group examined the charism of Clare of Assisi through various activities including the St. Clare Reflection Group, meetings with Poor Clare Sisters, and a retreat at which they studied the House of Clare.

### 35 The Cup BY PAUL MARIANI

Why Pray?



# Prayer and the New Atheism



BY MICHAEL C. MCCARTHY, S.J.

*Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Department of Classics,  
Director, Catholic Studies Program, Santa Clara University*

**SHORTLY AFTER I CAME TO SANTA CLARA, I HAD A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.** It was spring break, and I had planned to spend a few days with a good friend. We would meet halfway down the California coast in a town called Cayucos. Leaving campus after dinner, I drove south on Highway 101 and at 10 p.m. found myself somewhere between King City and Paso Robles. I had been on that stretch hundreds of times in my life, and it is unremarkable terrain. Usually that leg of the journey is the part I wish could pass faster.

On that night though, the moon was full, the car's sunroof was open, and the dry, flat landscape was utterly luminous. On that ordinary road (of all places!) for about 10 or 15 minutes I felt I was traveling within the heart of beauty itself. And I felt this powerful, unexpected joy. Nor did I feel alone in any way. Spontaneously, I found myself saying words that I use infrequently, but in that moment they seemed right. In fact, I cannot think of a more natural way for me to respond to such

experience than the expression that came unbidden from my heart: "Praise you, God! Thank you, God!"

In this issue of *explore* various members of the community answer the question, "Why do I pray?" Today ancient practices of prayer face unique challenges posed by recent proponents of what has been called the new atheism. Writers such as the British biologist Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), journalist Christopher Hitchens (*god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), and neuroscientist Sam Harris (*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*) have introduced to the reading public best-selling critiques of religion, faith, and belief in God.<sup>1</sup> In a campaign that has even more direct public exposure, groups such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation have posted billboards in several cities with the messages, "Millions are good without God," "Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds," or (in December) "Reason's Greetings."

Why do we pray in light of such messages?

## TWO OBJECTIONS TO RELIGION AND A RESPONSE

Although these thinkers reflect a variety of attitudes and arguments, throughout their writings two themes reappear that ground their opposition to religion and their resistance to the idea of what others call, under various names, God.

First, the new atheists note just how much violence, misery, and sheer brutality has attended religion throughout the history of the world. Christopher Hitchens' chapter titled "Religion Kills" catalogues only a few examples of stupidity and cruelty inflicted by adherents of multiple traditions, from Christian anti-Semites to Taliban thugs. Sadly, our species has provided too much raw material for these authors to use in their florid accounts of atrocities committed out of devotional zeal. Their conclusion is that religion is inherently flawed. We would do better to free ourselves from anything that would valorize madness by calling it holy. On balance, a humanism that makes no reference to God provides a better way for the world. Thus Richard Dawkins concludes a chapter by observing: "Religious wars really are fought in the name of religion, and they have been horribly frequent in history. I cannot think of any war that has been fought in the name of atheism."<sup>2</sup>

Second, the new atheists find religious people incapable of offering a sufficient justification for their core beliefs. Whereas scientists prize evidence and hold themselves to standards of verification based on open observation, religionists rarely attempt to offer sufficient proof for what they believe, but instead resort to a kind of dogmatism. Religious authority—it is alleged—whether derived from a sacred text or holy persons, gives rise to beliefs that are intrinsically dangerous because they cannot be questioned. Dawkins holds that, whether in Christianity or Islam, "What is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument."<sup>3</sup> The alleged irrationality of faith not only seems disreputable in an age that can explain so many things scientifically, but it generates the kind of

intolerance that stonewalls against reasonable inquiry and challenge. At its worst, this closed-mindedness leads to the violence and repressive ideologies that have marked history. In our own time, moreover, it has also legitimized ignorant resistance to the theory of evolution, for which there is strong evidence and scientific consensus.

As someone who has often struggled with my own faith, I feel considerable sympathy and agreement with many of the complaints of the new atheists. Yet these same struggles have led me to a different place. What I understand by "faith" and "God" always feels more complex than the atheists seem to concede. "If that's what is meant by 'God,'" I frequently think, "then I too am an atheist. If that's all religion does, then neither do I want any part in it." At their best, atheists stretch me to reconsider parts of my intellectual and spiritual landscape, and the challenge is a serious one. Sometimes, however, I feel as if I am listening to a critique of Mozart by someone who has never heard a good orchestra. For one thing, it seems as if faith in God connotes to them a wager on a big, invisible creature with lots of power, rather than a committed disposition of trust, even love, in a holy mystery revealed in the apprehension of good, beauty, truth.<sup>4</sup> I do not deny that many believers have immature or even dangerous ideas about God. But one of the principal functions of a religious tradition is to help people correct false images and grow in spiritual maturity and responsibility.

Nor can I deny the immense violence that human beings have exacted on one another out of religious motivations and claims. Yet if, hypothetically, we did away with religion or belief in God, we would still have other massive human institutions that are just as prone to violence: nationhood, for instance, or property or economy or family. I doubt that we would wish to dissolve them. Even science itself (as we saw when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima) must be applied by people capable of extraordinary generosity as well as massive destruction. As the essayist Richard Rodriguez soberly observed, the real problem with religion or science is the human race.<sup>5</sup> If we could learn to pray authentically for forgiveness and teach our children to pray (as Jesus taught us) to

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“deliver us from evil,” we would be leaving the world a more hopeful legacy than if we were simply to abolish religion or the idea of God.

#### IS FAITH UNREASONABLE?

Of the new atheists’ objections, the less credible to me is the claim that faith requires no justification, or brooks no argument, or that somehow it is the opposite of reason. My whole life and training as a Jesuit runs so counter to that idea that it strikes me as a gross caricature. Surely there are religious people who feel threatened by questions they cannot answer and criticisms they cannot rebut. There may even be many such people. My experience as a priest, however, has led me to believe that people’s faith is most robust and trustworthy precisely when it attempts to address hard questions and applies reason honestly. That will include the acknowledgement that there is much we do not know and that we feel conflicted about many things. As a professor who teaches at a Jesuit university, I feel it is part of my mission to help students to discover what these important questions are, so that they can answer them with ever greater sensitivity and intelligence. But I do not promise certainty.

It is to be expected that religious claims about God will fail to satisfy the norms of scientific proof because science and religion operate out of different conceptual schemes.

But human beings operate out of different conceptual schemes all the time, with a fair degree of success.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the most credible justification for faith of any kind lies in the quality of its adherents’ lives. The reason I am a Catholic, finally, is because of the deep holiness I have encountered in other Catholics. That does not make religion irrational or unreasonable or lacking justification for its ideas: it just presumes (quite reasonably) that, in the end, reason itself does not exhaust what is most important to us as human beings. Commitment to values such as truth, justice, goodness, peace making, and love are not reducible to scientific propositions.

The claim that I love you nearly always has reasons leading to the assertion. The reasons themselves can be articulated in a variety of ways: in language, for instance, that is clinical (“When you enter my visual field my hormones act up”) or practical (“You bring in my dry cleaning”). The expression may be ethical (“You care for me when I am sick”), poetic (“The smell of your hair is the freshest wind”), or romantic (“Every time I kiss you I remember the first time we kissed”). All those sentences can be true, and yet the expression, “I love you,” surpasses the reasons that can be given as explanations. It is a communication in which speakers reveal and give themselves freely to others, even when the “I” who gives and the “you” who receives remain deep mysteries to

*It would be a great loss if we lived in a world where we did not risk loving and believing because we cannot offer a scientific account for it. It would be a less beautiful world if we did not offer prayers of thanksgiving for wonders we cannot explain.*

each other. That exchange creates a new reality and a deepened commitment that did not exist before. Furthermore, even though the sentence, “I love you,” is not scientifically verifiable, one can test whether it is said “in good faith” with a variety of other indicators, such as fulfilling duties, expectations, or promises associated with that relationship. It would be a great loss if we lived in a world where we did not risk loving and believing because we cannot offer a scientific account for it. It would be a less beautiful world if we did not offer prayers of thanksgiving for wonders we cannot explain. The future of our planet and the world’s communities would be significantly more hopeful if we taught our children how to pray with authentic gratitude and an attitude of intense care.

#### LOVE, GRATUITY, AND GRATITUDE

One of my favorite writers, Wendell Berry, frequently speaks of his love for his family, his community, and the farm he cultivates. His later writing especially refers to his own sense of the gratuity of what has been given. At the end of one poem about his experience of aging, for example, he turns to address his wife:

...And you, who are as old  
almost as I am, I love as I loved you  
young, except that, old, I am astonished  
at such a possibility, and am duly grateful.<sup>7</sup>

The years he spent with her gave him plenty of reasons to love her, but in retrospect what strikes him is that what he loved most in life did not have to happen. What he loved in life happened, not as if by necessity or sheer luck,

but as if by gift, for which the natural response is gratitude.

At the end of Berry’s novel *Hannah Coulter*, we find a similar idea. The protagonist, Hannah, has led a life filled with deep joys as well as tragedies. Her first husband, Virgil, was killed in the Second World War, and her second husband, Nathan, who survived the Battle of Okinawa, experiences post-traumatic stress throughout his life, even as he tries to settle into a farmer’s ordinary life. By the last chapter, Hannah is a widow and remembers what it was like when Nathan held her at the end of the day. She knows, she says, “the entire touch of him. He looks at me with a look I know. The shiver of the altogether given passes over me from head to foot.”<sup>8</sup>

Hannah’s experience reflects what I have frequently felt to be at the heart of religious consciousness—an awareness that there is something where there could have been nothing. That awareness is the soul of prayer, and if cultivated it can yield a habit—even a discipline—of gratitude. That awareness grounds mystical experience, which is far more ordinary than we think.

A student of mine who is a surfer once related to me why he must go out to the waves at least once a week. He did not go just because he liked surfing a great deal; rather, his regular practice on the waves put him into a deep encounter with “the altogether given.” I have heard similar moments in the stories students have told me about time in a rain forest, or under the wisteria in the Mission Gardens, or in a village in El Salvador, or reflecting in gratitude for their time here. I have seen it in the faces

of parents walking their child down the aisle to be married. For a moment the aisle represents the whole history of “the altogether given,” from the birth of that child, through the deep pains they suffered together, to this occasion of supreme fulfillment in their lives as parents. If we could put such moments into words, we might say something like this: “This is what I live for. Right now, this is where I want to be and nowhere else. At this moment, everything connects. To this moment, I give myself wholly, freely, and without reservation.” As Berry says: “I am astonished at such a possibility, and am duly grateful.”

Such moments no more constitute proof of the existence of God than they negate the pains, the tragedies, the evils that we also endure. Nor can they be detached from other explicable causes. Undoubtedly my experience of joy driving down Highway 101 was triggered by my anticipation of a few days of vacation with a friend, as well as whatever physiological thrill comes with going fast in a car, feeling the warm wind through the sunroof, and sensing the effects of a full moon. I would

love to have a neurologist explain to me what was happening to my brain at that moment. Religious experience is every bit as compatible with natural causes as the Christian doctrine of creation is compatible with the theory of evolution. But the spontaneous shift to praising and thanking God for what is good (or conversely, lamenting and complaining to God for what is rotten) does not happen automatically from the antecedent conditions. It includes a choice and/or a habit of shifting to a different way of imagining things.

At a very deep level I want to thank someone when I experience goodness; I want to lament to someone when I face terrible things; I want to ask someone for help when I am in trouble or when someone I love is in serious need. Although my desires have been cultivated through my own upbringing and may very well reflect what Freud described as an impulse toward wish fulfillment, it still seems very credible to me to think that humans are constituted in such a way that some, if not most, of us want to look for what lies beyond what we can account for in terms of hard data alone. To



Troy Vander Hulst '10

“Healing,” photograph by Troy Vander Hulst '10, finance major, studio art minor, Santa Clara University.

me, the words of St. Augustine to God express it so well. Toward the very start of his *Confessions*, he prays: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in thee.”<sup>9</sup>

#### HUMAN BEINGS, GOD, AND PRAYER

Very recently I was teaching a class on the Council of Chalcedon. This pivotal event in the history of Christianity took place in 451, and it produced a famous definition held by most churches that Jesus Christ is “truly God and truly human.” As our class struggled together with that formulation, one very perceptive student (I’ll call him Andy) noted that when we use terms like “God” and “human” we frequently don’t know what we mean by them. People usually grant that “God” refers to a reality we cannot fully describe, but (as Andy pointed out) what we mean by “human” is not always easy to determine either. An evolutionary biologist may offer very good indicators of what constitutes a human, but even in this case the reality is ever emerging.

Although a science major himself, Andy noted there are sometimes good reasons to shift our frameworks and talk about ourselves in nonscientific ways. So he offered the following: “Being a human, ultimately, is being a very deep mystery who, while finite, also possesses a radical capacity for openness. Somehow that radical openness corresponds to another, even deeper mystery, who transcends the sum of finite objects. We may or may not call that mystery God, and we may or may not be able to talk about it or even be conscious of it. At a profound level, however, I feel that reaching out for that God is at the core of who I am as a person.”

Andy’s insight echoes the thoughts of many theologians throughout the ages, and it also (frankly) explains quite eloquently why I pray. I cannot *not* pray. Like Andy, I feel that reaching out for God is central to who I am. The great Jesuit theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner, understood God to be a holy mystery who communicated to us, not



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abstract propositions about divinity, but indeed God's very *self*: the way, when you tell your children you love them, you're not articulating an idea but offering your *self* to them, making a commitment to share your life with them. To be human, for Rahner, is to be someone to whom that divine self-offering is constantly being made in countless, ordinary ways. We only have to notice. To pray is nothing else than intentionally being open to that offer in whatever form it may take at any moment of our lives.<sup>10</sup>

As I say, I cannot *not* pray, because at times I am simply so grateful for the offer that everything in me leans forward in thanks and praise. As grateful as I am, however, I am also profoundly aware of the vast difference between the way I want my life to be and the way it is, between the way the world should be and the way it is. I feel deep dissatisfaction at multiple levels, so at times I lean forward in anger, fear, sadness, need, or in preparation for decision. Lamentation, petition, and discernment are also key elements in the repertoire of those who pray. Even the experiences of dissatisfaction that prompt us to these kinds of prayer, however, stem from an awareness that nothing finite can satisfy us. Again and again, we reach out for the self-offering of God, who alone can fill our longings. That is who we are.

As challenging as the new atheists can be, I am less and less sure that they really address what I (and many others whom I trust) hope to convey with words such as "faith," "God," "prayer." Surely, whenever we use such words our speech is an instance of stammering rather than eloquence. Anyone who prays does well to confess in humility what great mystics

have called a "learned ignorance" or "ways of unknowing." Even in the twenty-first century, however, it makes immense good sense to me—and amazingly to many of the young people I teach as well!—to utter haltingly with Augustine: "You have made us for yourself; and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." 

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).
- 2 Dawkins, 278.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 307–08.
- 4 On this and various theological presumptions implicit in the new atheists' writings, see Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 5 Richard Rodriguez, "Atheism is Wasted on the Nonbeliever," *Image* 55 (Fall 2007): 68–70.
- 6 For a fascinating study on the complexity of human cognition and its relation to the debate, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Natural Reflections: Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 7 Wendell Berry, "Sabbaths, VII," in *Leavings* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 40.
- 8 Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004), 186.
- 9 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.1.1.
- 10 For a theologically rich set of essays on prayer, see Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*, trans. Bruce W. Gillette (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).

# The Public Prayer Life of a Religion Enthusiast



BY PHILIP BOO RILEY  
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A PRIMARY TARGET OF THE NEW ATHEISTS LIKE RICHARD DAWKINS AND SAM HARRIS IS ORGANIZED RELIGION, WHICH THEY CLAIM BREEDS INTOLERANCE, MEAN-SPIRITED INCIVILITY, AND VIOLENCE. THINKERS WITH VARYING HISTORIES ON ORGANIZED RELIGION—FOR EXAMPLE, KAREN ARMSTRONG’S *THE CASE FOR GOD*, MICHAEL NOVAK’S *NO ONE SEES GOD: THE DARK NIGHT OF ATHEISTS AND BELIEVERS*, OR TERRY EAGLETON’S *REASON, FAITH AND REVOLUTION: REFLECTIONS ON THE GOD DEBATE*<sup>1</sup>—DRAW ON PHILOSOPHIC ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL RETRIEVALS OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION TO SUGGEST THAT THE NEW ATHEISTS’ ARGUMENTS LACK INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY AND RIGOR. In this essay I pursue a different and certainly more modest response by posing a question: Do the interactions my students and I

have with local faith communities and interfaith groups—particularly in those settings where prayer is involved—reveal something that is overlooked by the new atheists, as well as by the increasing number of Americans who appear leery of religion in its institutional forms?

## NEW ATHEISTS, NONAFFILIATED, ET AL

When I tell people that I teach religious studies for a living, I often get one of those questions that is less a request for my erudite analysis of an issue, and more the laying of groundwork for the questioner’s opinion. So it was with Conrad, a fellow volunteer with whom I had been paired to scribe the layout of studs, windows, and doors on the frames for interior walls of a new Habitat for Humanity house in Morgan Hill. He asked, “Do you ever talk in your classes about whether organized religion does more harm than good?” He soon told me his position—the harm definitely outweighs the good—which made him wonder why any thinking person would invest time and resources in institutional religion.

*I do not count myself among the large number of lapsed Catholics (by Pew's estimates Catholicism is losing market share at a greater rate than any other denomination, to the point that now one in ten Americans is an ex-Catholic), although I must admit that regular participation in the liturgical and prayer life of my home church has faded recently, so much so that my wife has observed with some irony that I have drifted into the ranks of the unaffiliated.*

I suggested to Conrad that he was not alone. Many of my students agree with him. (In a survey of my Winter quarter first-year class, 14 out of 20 students agreed that “religion causes more problems than it solves.”) His position actually has garnered not a little notoriety of late, in the form of the Atheist Bus Campaign. With the support of British new atheist Richard Dawkins, the mobile ads were launched on October 21, 2008, in England and have since spread across Europe and the United States, including my hometown of Des Moines, Iowa.<sup>2</sup> The bus campaign began when a British comedy writer, Ariane Sherine, visited a website advertised on a bus. It invited her and her fellow riders to ponder, “When the Son of Man comes, will He Find Faith on Earth?” only to learn she and anyone else who did not accept Jesus as Lord (Matthew 25:41 was cited) would be condemned to hell for eternity. Appealing to the online community, Sherine raised over 150,000 pounds to fund ads on buses with slogans like, “There is no god—deal with it,” “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone,” and “There’s probably no God—now stop worrying and enjoy life.” The campaign, which continues to draw financial support, was designed to counter the unwelcome intrusion of organized religion and its perceived dogmatic intolerance into our public space with pithy and compelling messages inviting us to give up on religion.<sup>3</sup>

Entertained as he was by the bus story, Conrad was adamant that he had no interest

in professing atheism; he just wanted nothing to do with organized religion. I again observed that many of my students tended to see things the same way. (In that same class, 11 students reported affiliation with a religious tradition, while 12 reported none.) Conrad’s position is shared by the fastest growing group in America’s religious landscape, according to a recent Pew study. They are the “religiously unaffiliated,” a designation over 16 percent of Americans use to describe their religious leanings. The Pew researchers found that these Americans distrust any form of organized religion, a position they share with the new atheists.<sup>4</sup>

#### WHERE DO I STAND?

When Conrad asked where I stood on organized religion, I told him that I usually give one of three answers to that question, each of which I qualify. Sometimes I say I stand within Catholicism, my tradition of origin. My *qualifier*: I do not count myself among the large number of lapsed Catholics (by Pew’s estimates Catholicism is losing market share at a greater rate than any other denomination, to the point that now one in ten Americans is an ex-Catholic), although I must admit that regular participation in the liturgical and prayer life of my home church has faded recently, so much so that my wife has observed with some irony that I have drifted into the ranks of the unaffiliated. Other times I say I stand within what Robert Bellah called enlightenment fundamentalism.

But—and here’s my qualifier—I am also persuaded by his argument that this is ultimately an untenable position for someone, like me, who professes to study religion.<sup>5</sup> Lately, I explained to Conrad, I’ve taken to describing myself as a religious enthusiast (qualifier: as I will explain below, this term is not without its ambiguity). My enthusiasm relates to the reception I have received from congregations and organizations as I wander about the local community, often accompanied by students, trying to learn what it’s like to be religious in the Silicon Valley.

It is the religious enthusiast in me who thinks I have something of a counternarrative to the distrust, if not disdain, for organized religion among the new atheists, the Atheist Bus Campaign, some of my students, and a growing portion of the American public.

#### RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND PRAYER

In my wanderings about the Valley’s faith communities—which last December extended to the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne with several Santa Clara University students and Associate Campus Minister Aimee Moiso—I’ve had occasion to pray in a variety

of different settings. I’ve participated in vespers with Orthodox Christians, evening prayer with Muslims, chanting the Diamond Sutra with Zen Buddhists, singing hymns with Episcopal priests, guided meditation at the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment led by a Catholic laywoman, and the equivalent of laying on of hands with two different Japanese new religious movements. My students and I have observed Friday prayer at a mosque in Milpitas, unrolled a Torah scroll in San Jose’s oldest synagogue, spent time with an evangelical pastor in his downtown church’s sanctuary, lit candles at the Yom HaShoah (Holocaust memorial observance) hosted annually by the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, bathed the Buddha on his birthday with Chinese Buddhists in Sunnyvale, enjoyed *langar* at the new Sikh *gurdwara* in San Jose’s Eastside foothills, broken fast during Ramadan with the youth group at the South Bay Islamic Association, and heard practitioners describe their experiences with auditing and e-meters at a Santa Clara Scientology church.

Despite this somewhat dubious religious grounding, I’ve also ventured into interfaith prayer and worship on a number of occasions.



Courtesy of Gurqibal Singh

Students from Professor Riley’s Globalization and Encounters of Religion class visiting Sikh Gurdwara, San Jose, CA .

*I am humbled and genuinely moved by the generosity of spirit evident in the individuals who open their community's doors to me and my students to share in what they hold sacred. I—and to a lesser degree, my students—cannot help but come away from these encounters with the beliefs and practices of these various “others” with a measure of enthusiasm for organized religion!*

A week at the Parliament of World Religions presented formal and informal opportunities for interfaith prayer; I participate in interfaith prayer at the San Jose mayor's “faith leaders appreciation breakfast”; and for the past five years I've been part of South Bay Interfaith (SBIF). This local organization began sponsoring “public displays of religion” in downtown San Jose's Circle of Palms in 2005. An Abrahamic Religions celebration of the convergence of holy days that year shared the three traditions' calls to prayer. In subsequent years that annual event—and the composition of SBIF—has morphed into a celebration of diversity and harmony that draws from over a dozen different traditions. Religious leaders and volunteers from their congregations contribute to each event and share in the preparation of food from around the world. SBIF's most recent program, *New Beginnings: Building a Community of Hope*, drew over 400 people to SCU's campus to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and to pray for President Obama on the eve of his inauguration.

My wanderings are not entirely unique. According to a Hartford Seminary study of congregations across the United States, as many as 40 percent partner with other faith communities in service projects, and 20 percent engage in interfaith worship.<sup>6</sup> In his 2008 study, *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America*, Gustav Niebuhr chronicles this “mutual curiosity” and interchange between America's faith communities.<sup>7</sup>

The invidious religious violence around the globe that grabs headlines and provides grist for the new atheists' mill obscures, Niebuhr believes, the far more important and engaging interactions among persons of faith at the grassroots level. Martin Marty developed a similar insight in his 2005 study of religion in America, *When Faiths Collide*. He suggests that at a *global* level there is ample evidence that the boundaries organized religion draws around its communities lead to mutual distrust and demonization of the other. But, Marty goes on, at local levels we find countless examples of religious individuals welcoming and sharing with the stranger those truths and practices that make them who they are.<sup>8</sup>

Niebuhr's and Marty's descriptions of the intersections of different faith communities at the local level as “acts of hospitality” capture quite well what I experience in my wanderings about the Silicon Valley's congregations and interfaith organizations. I am humbled and genuinely moved by the generosity of spirit evident in the individuals who open their community's doors to me and my students to share in what they hold sacred. I—and to a lesser degree, my students—cannot help but come away from these encounters with the beliefs and practices of these various “others” with a measure of enthusiasm for organized religion!

#### CAVEAT REGARDING PRAYER LIFE

Do these wanderings constitute a prayer life? A hermeneutics of goodwill might lead me to invoke the historically informed proposal for

a world theology that participates in multiple religious traditions made by comparative religions scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Contemporary globalization, he argued, allows us to participate in a historical reality that has been obscured by our tendency to codify religious persons' faith in separate religious systems. In fact, borrowings and crossings over religious boundaries have been the norm for most of our planet's religious history; (Smith's example is the use of prayer beads across several traditions, continents, and eras).<sup>9</sup> I could invoke the cross-cultural reflections of Jesuit theologians Peter Phan ("being religious inter-religiously")<sup>10</sup> and Carl Starkloff, S.J. ("syncretism" fashioned after what he observed in North American indigenous Catholic communities).<sup>11</sup> Or I could borrow Erik Davis's proposal that California's religious landscape—what he describes as a "laboratory of the spirit"—taken as a variegated whole provides a spiritual home, albeit one with "rootless roots," for postmodern spiritual seekers like him.<sup>12</sup>

But the scholar in me is more inclined toward a hermeneutics of suspicion. Eclecticism is a well-worn path in American religion, going back to Emerson and the Transcendentalists in the mid-19th century. Jack Kerouac turned

it into something of a creed in his *Mexico City Blues*:

I believe in the sweetness  
of Jesus  
And Buddha—  
I believe  
In St. Francis,  
Avaloki  
Tesvara,  
the Saints  
Of First Century  
India AD  
And Scholars  
Santidevan  
And Otherwise  
Santayanan  
Everywhere<sup>13</sup>

While such eclecticism can nurture openness and appreciation for the rich spirituality of diverse traditions, its appropriation of those traditions—as in the case of Beats like Allen Ginsberg—can be shallow, uncritical, and even self-serving. Indeed, my rather undisciplined wanderings could be seen as a blend of America's individualist and consumerist tendencies, a variation on the ersatz religion of those who profess to be "spiritual but not religious." Martin Marty critiqued



Courtesy of Boo Riley

Professor Boo Riley and Jian Wei, Dean of Chung Tai Buddhist Institute, meet at the Parliament of World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia, December 2009.

*Indeed, my rather undisciplined wanderings could be seen as a blend of America's individualist and consumerist tendencies, a variation on the ersatz religion of those who profess to be "spiritual but not religious."*

this stance as one in which “people find meaning without belonging, religions without community. They pick and choose...taking this from science and that from Zen, this from remembered Catholicism and that from hoped-for therapy, to form what Margaret Mead in one speech called a ‘mishmash of all the religions ever known.’”<sup>14</sup> As much as I hope this is not where my peripatetic prayer life takes me—and sometimes my students—I must admit it is a worry.

### BACK TO THE BUS

Even as I vacillate between these two hermeneutics, I do think I am onto something here with my enthusiasm for the organized religions I encounter in my wanderings. While not likely to be converted to see the error of their ways, I suspect the new atheists on the bus will at least have to pause—as have my students, who regularly report a particular visit as a “first” (...time in a synagogue...conversation with a Muslim ...visit to a Sikh *gurdwara*)—and ponder instances of hospitality, like those that have been extended to me in invitations to pray, learn, converse, sing, and share a meal with my friends and co-religionists, here in the Silicon Valley. 

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Knopf Publishers, 2009); Michael Novak, *No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 2 Atheist Campaign.org: Official Website of the Atheist Bus Campaign, <http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/>. See Richard Dawkins' website, which also chronicles the campaign, and for reference to the Iowa case, see <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/4132>.
- 3 Ariane Sherine, “Atheists—Gimme Five,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentsisfree/2008/jun/20/transport.religion>; for an overview of its spread across Europe and the USA, see <http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/a-quick-international-round-up/>.
- 4 The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Summary of Key Findings” (Report 1: Religious Affiliation), U.S. Religious Landscape Study, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>.
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- 7 Gustav Niebuhr, *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 2008), 90.
- 8 Martin E. Marty, *When Faiths Collide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
- 9 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).
- 10 Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).
- 11 Carl F. Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between: the Value of Syncretic Process* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2002).
- 12 Erik Davis, “Envisioning California: An Introduction to THE VISIONARY STATE,” <http://www.visionarystate.com/introduction.htm>. See Erik Davis, *The Visionary State: A Journey Through California's Spiritual Landscape* (photographs by Michael Rauner) (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006).
- 13 Cited in Stephen Prothero, “Introduction,” in *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tonkinson (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 14.
- 14 Martin E. Marty, “Interpreting American Pluralism,” cited in Wade Clark Roof, “CONCLUSION—Faith and Spirituality in a Fluid Environment” in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Region: Fluid Identities*, ed. Wade Clark Roof and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005), 177. Another term from Roof that might apply is “Californication of religion,” which he borrows from Mark Shibley's *Resurgent Evangelicalism in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

# Why I Pray



BY AGNIESZKA WINKLER  
*Trustee,  
Santa Clara University*

A YEAR AGO LAST JANUARY MY HUSBAND AND I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF PARTICIPATING IN A 200<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EXPEDITION RE-TRACING DARWIN'S VOYAGE OF THE *BEAGLE*. DARWIN TOOK FIVE YEARS BY SAILING SHIP TO DO THIS, WHILE OUR EXPEDITION IN OUR WARP-SPEED CULTURE WAS CONDENSED TO ONE MONTH BY AIR. DARWIN'S MAJOR INSIGHTS, CONTROVERSIAL AS THEY WERE IN HIS TIME, INCLUDED THE "TREE OF LIFE" WHICH WAS THE UNDERSTANDING THAT WE ARE ALL BIOLOGICALLY CONNECTED. THE DEVELOPMENT OF DNA SCIENCE HAS SUBSEQUENTLY PROVEN HIM RIGHT.

So, why do I pray? I pray because prayer connects me. Prayer connects me to the source of life, to the beginning and the end and everything in the middle. It connects me to a universal love which I feel almost every day with senses that I actually don't even know I have.

With this connectedness, I see people whom I had not noticed before—the woman whose ribs show through her T-shirt as she stumbles through traffic in the Tenderloin in San Francisco; the bent black man with the beautiful smile selling the Street Sheet; the co-worker whose darkness under the eyes tells a story different from the polite placidity of her speech. I see and feel and participate in a world that is much greater than my own narrow confines of race, education, economic status, and emotional makeup on any given day. And why should that matter? It matters, because I know I can make a difference, often as small as a smile or a hello. They make a difference to me when I receive them and they make a difference to others when I remember to send them. Prayer helps me remember.

Why do I pray? I pray out of a profound sense of gratitude—gratitude for a rich life of many blessings. That is not to say that all goes well every day. There are problems with children, aging parents, death, sickness,

economic reversals, disagreements—all the normal frustrations and issues of daily life. But I have always had enough to eat, even when my parents were penniless immigrants displaced by World War II. And I was always loved. In the end, what more does anyone really need?

I pray for others who may not have been so blessed, who may be hungry or thirsty at this very moment, who may have never felt loved in their lives. I pray for those who may be loved by someone they know or by the God they do not, but cannot accept it.

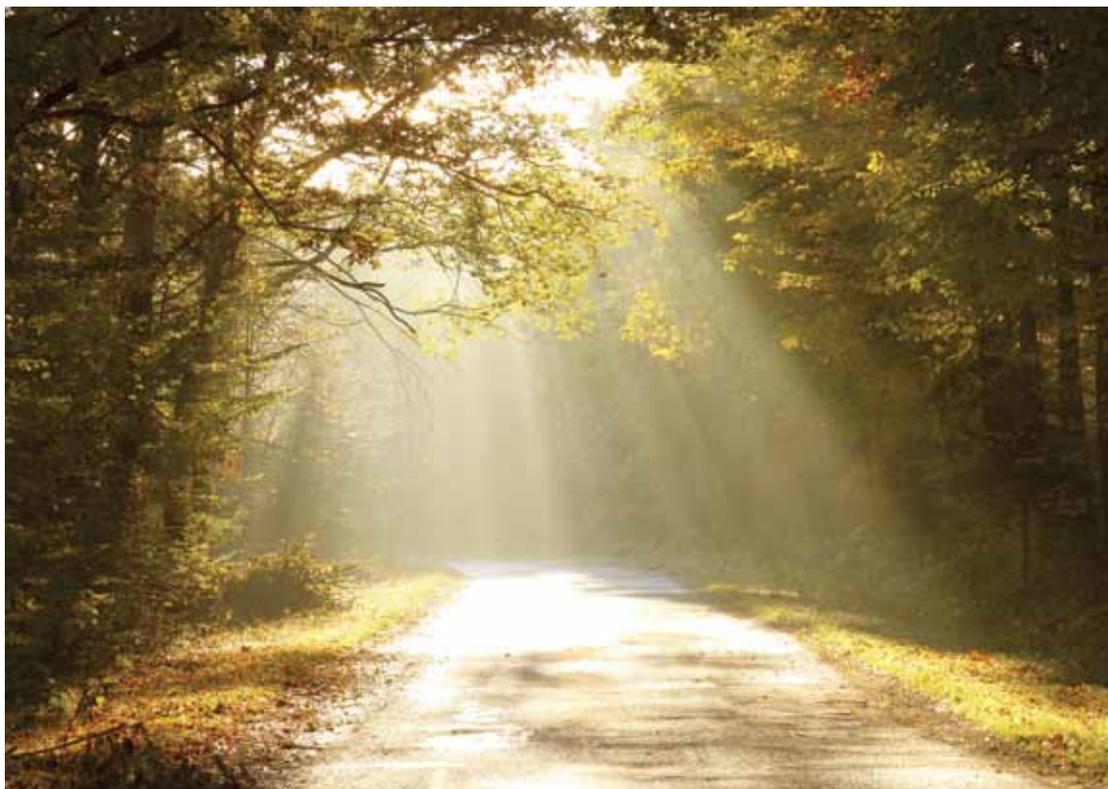
I pray because prayer brings me peace. Through prayer I am more easily able to sort out what is important and what is not. What matters in the long run and what does not. What is worth getting frustrated about and what is not. When there is a connection to a universal good, a universal God, a universal love, it is easier to keep my energy focused and to resist the temptation to let it dissipate in anger or frustration.

I pray because it helps me be more generous. Because when I remember what is really important, I don't feel the need to cling so tightly to what I have amassed, whether that is material possessions or emotional energy. I

can be a more generous friend or even a more generous enemy. I can forgive more easily, because prayer gives me the reminder and the strength. "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Science and faith converge again, as medical knowledge supports the notion that an anger-free person is a medically healthier person.

I pray for forgiveness. My life has certainly not been free of vice. I have done things that I am not proud of and not done things that I should have when I had the opportunity. Most troubling are the people I have hurt when I was not even aware that I had done so. I pray for backward forgiveness and forward forgiveness, because I'm pretty sure it will happen again, even though I don't want it to.

I pray for wisdom to make better decisions in both my personal and professional lives. I have personally experienced difficult and contentious meetings that changed their energy completely when the Holy Spirit was called upon to aid in the discussion and deliberation. With the changed energy came more open minds and hearts and better decisions that took into account shared benefit for all stakeholders.





# Origins

What means the Tree of Life?  
An organized connectedness  
The material plane of lovely creation  
Breathing pulsing linear progression  
The breath of life  
Flowing connectedness through time and space  
Energy to matter, matter to energy  
Cycling out and in, unconfined transcending  
Transcendence  
Unifying force of oneness through love  
The Origin

*Agnieszka Winkler*  
*Written on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary expedition of the Voyage of the Beagle*  
*January 20, 2009*

W. West lith. Hatton Garden

*The longer I live, the more comfortable I am with the “un-understanding” and “un-knowing” that comes with the human condition. It is perfectly comfortable for me to know deeply within me that the Great Mystery understands and knows, and that this is just plain good enough.*

Win-win has proven to be better in business in the long run than win-lose.

I pray even when it seems difficult to focus and the distractions are many. I make the best of it because I know that the intent to pray is as important as the prayer itself.

I pray with great praise and awe and admiration for the God who has created this stupendously beautiful world with vast oceans that gleam with gold and silver depending on the light; with little birds who look like they move on roller wheels as they follow the foam of the surf; for the majestic mountains of all colors from purple and red horizons to white needles poking the sky; for the tiniest frog and the biggest elephant. And for God’s people, from the nomadic family in the steppes of central Mongolia who shared fermented mare’s milk with us in their ger, to the shaman in mountains of Bhutan who blessed us just because we were there, to the 8-year-old indigenous girl on the edges of the Amazon who sang us a song of thanks for the pencils and paper she has just received, to the “Captains of Industry” with whom I had the pleasure of working for many years in Silicon Valley, San Francisco, New York, and other places around the world. These CEOs, VPs, and managers care deeply that their products really help customers in their business or personal lives. They care about their employees’ well being and believe their companies are part of a community and that this means they owe something to that community as much as they do to their shareholders.

I have a lump in my throat and a tear forming in my eye as I write this and think about how much there is to praise and for which to be grateful.

Closing with our Voyage of the *Beagle* Expedition, our chartered 757 airplane was filled to the brim with type-A overachievers. They were all highly educated, scientifically minded, well traveled, and knowledgeable. We had 18 formal lectures and many *in situ* impromptu lectures and discussions with our Stanford and Harvard professors during our month together. Our professors did their best to keep the discussions about the existence of God within the historical context of the controversies that Darwin’s insights caused. Towards the end of the trip, however, once there was a greater sense of intimacy among the group, the professors were unable to contain the discussions and they veered to a modern context of “Is there or is there not a God?” and what role does this God have. We had all spectrums of belief and religious practice and non-practice represented. As the discussions became more intimate, it became apparent that some without religious tradition and even some without an expressed belief in a higher power, struggled within themselves on how to explain so much of creation and so much of what they had witnessed in their own lives without acknowledging a higher power of some kind, an energy force beyond our humanness, a cosmic entity that encompasses time, space, and matter.

The longer I live, the more comfortable I am with the “un-understanding” and “un-knowing” that comes with the human condition. It is perfectly comfortable for me to know deeply within me that the Great Mystery understands and knows, and that this is just plain good enough. 

# Why I Pray



**BY PAULA HUSTON**  
*Camaldolese Benedictine oblate  
and author of several books on  
spirituality, including The Holy  
Way: Practices for a Simple Life*

MANY YEARS AGO, EASILY 20 BY NOW, I BEGAN HAVING EXPERIENCES OF LIGHT—THESE, DURING A PARTICULARLY DARK AND GRUELING TIME, AND AFTER NEARLY TWO DECADES OF CALLING MYSELF AN ATHEIST. THEY CAME UNBIDDEN, AND THERE WERE ONLY A HANDFUL OF THEM. BUT THEY WERE REAL ENOUGH TO MOVE ME FROM ANGRY NON-BELIEF TO TEARFUL SURRENDER.

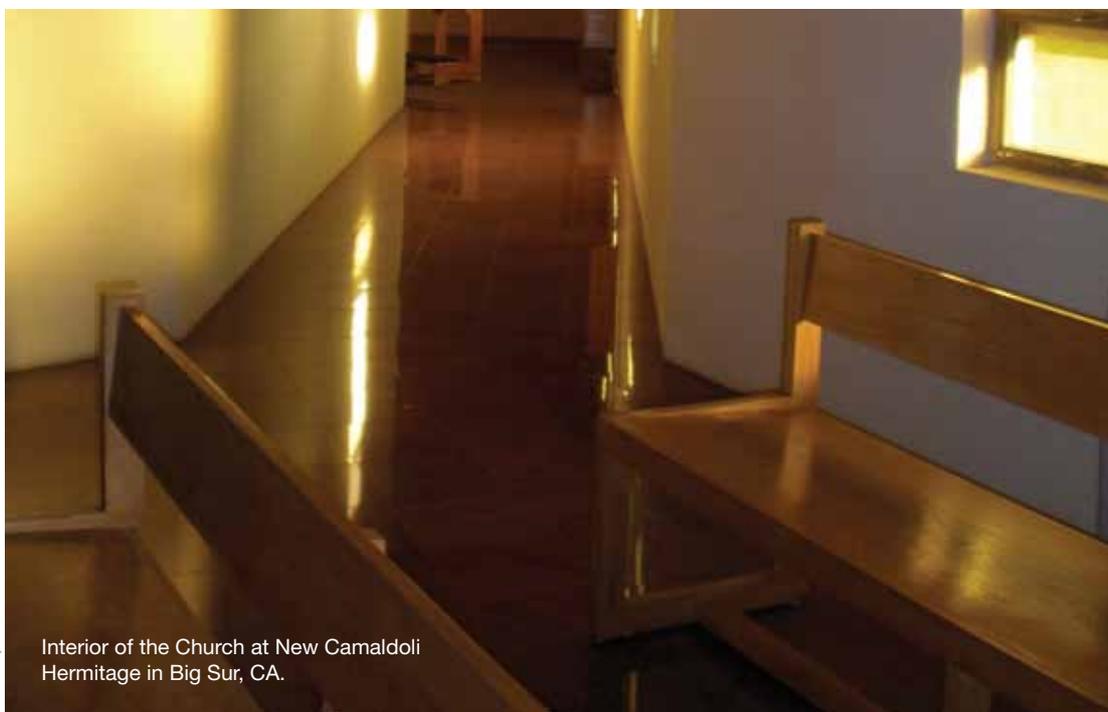
The first happened in my kitchen. I was kneading bread and mulling over my many problems when suddenly the room began to fill with a gentle light. I looked toward the window, assuming it was some trick of sun and clouds and time of day, but this was not the case. Meanwhile, as I stood there with my hands sunk in warm dough, I saw that the butcher-block, the double sink, and the wooden cupboards around me were becoming drenched in gold. I froze, waiting for whatever might happen next.

Nothing. Instead, after minutes or perhaps only seconds—weirdly, time had stopped too—the light began to drain from the air as quietly as it had appeared.

Does such an event come out of the blue? No, surely not. For months before, I'd been restless and disturbed by what felt dangerously close to a resurgence of religious longing. But I had so very many reasons to resist: a broken marriage, secret guilt, vengeful thoughts, disgust at the very notion of an all-powerful, purely loving God who could prevent suffering but chose not to. Inside me, armies clashed in the night.

But then came the visitation of the light, followed by waves of relief and a dawning hope. Within weeks, I was reading Tolstoy's *Confession*, and soon after, found myself weeping in the middle of the night while a steamroller crushed me under the weight of new, unwelcome self-knowledge. At the end of all this *Sturm und Drang*, I emerged, exhausted but freed from the stubborn tentacles of resistance. Still frail, still bemused, but a Christian once again.

Some months later, I had a second experience of the light, this time while walking in the countryside with a young friend. Again, time stopped and the air seemed to tremble with expectation. I looked down at the skipping child beside me, happily oblivious to what was going



Interior of the Church at New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, CA.

Courtesy of Paula Huston

*Despite the insouciant bravado of contemporary atheism—and for years I was one of its most adamant proponents—the atheist adventure, sad to say, has no final destination except the crumbling edge of the abyss. Those who do not realize this have simply not yet traveled far enough along the path.*

on but nevertheless gold as an icon. Then the wave passed over us and was gone.

If the first experience brought with it private self-revelation leading to reconversion, the second was prophetic: this little girl would eventually be lured into the dark byways of hell, trying to kill herself with alcohol, prescription drugs, knives, and finally cocaine. After years of rehab, she would live with us for a time, and then fail again. I would grieve and grow angry and plead her cause before God as though she were a daughter of my own flesh. But thanks to the light, at the deepest level lay peace, for no matter what else happened to her, I knew she was riding on the wings of angels.

Why these particular manifestations and not some other phenomenon? And why, after a third

and equally overwhelming experience six years later, did they stop, apparently never to return?

I believe these floods of luminosity helped armor me against the soul-killing temptation of nihilism, which at that time constituted my gravest danger. Despite the insouciant bravado of contemporary atheism—and for years I was one of its most adamant proponents—the atheist adventure, sad to say, has no final destination except the crumbling edge of the abyss. Those who do not realize this have simply not yet traveled far enough along the path.

Christ is called the light of the world because “what came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race” (John 1:3–4). Nihilism, so attractive in our time because of the false freedom it seems to offer,

cannot prevail against this light which has the power to flood the darkest spider holes. I believe these light phenomena were meant to wake me from my complacent slumber, and once I grasped what was happening to me, there was no longer the need for them.

Instead, prayer became my lamp. Though there are hundreds of reasons to pray—for guidance, for sustenance, for courage, for a cessation of suffering, in praise and thanksgiving, in awe—two in particular have been most important to me. One is directly linked to my identity as a child of God, and the other to my particular place within a vast spiritual realm.

During that long-ago night in which I felt myself being crushed under the weight of compunction, things had never looked so grim. Could there be a bigger sinner than I? Yet by dawn, and even in the face of this woeful revelation, something else had taken hold: the conviction that hidden within me was a pearl of great price, a mysterious purity unsullied by the cartload of dross lying heaped upon it. And that God was waiting there to meet me.

Later, I would find validation for this notion in Julian of Norwich’s bold declaration, “In every soul to be saved is a godly will that has never consented to sin, in the past or in the future.”<sup>1</sup> Despite our indisputable propensity to evil, she was convinced, some part of us remains inviolate. Thomas Merton concurred: “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion.... This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us.”<sup>2</sup>

This virgin point, he taught, is the nexus between what is human and what is divine. When we pray truly and honestly and, as St. Paul urges us, unceasingly, we hold open the portal to that place. When we stop praying, as we do when we become discouraged or weary or full of doubts, we quickly forget this connection exists and go back to living on the surface.

The 20th-century Cistercian, Andre Louf, uses a different image to describe this portal of prayer. Inside us, he says, lies a spring covered by a stone. It is not until we become conscious of the quiet babble of water—the ongoing



Courtesy of Mike Huston

Paula Huston and Father Bernard Massicotte on a bench overlooking the Pacific Ocean at New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur, CA.

*The second reason I pray is as a way of keeping vigil, of watching and waiting for the faint signs and indicators that point me toward my purpose. As the Camaldolese monk Bede Healy puts it, “To keep vigil is to maintain a state of poised alertness to the surrounding spiritual environment,”<sup>3</sup> which, unless we truly concentrate, remains mostly silent and invisible.*

prayer taking place beneath the surface of our distracted lives—that the stone falls away and the living water that Jesus describes comes gushing forth in all its wild beauty.

When I tap into this interior center of purity and communion with God, I know who I am—no longer a spiritually blind cave fish, but a creature of the light.

But I also need to discover why I am here, what my place and purpose might be within the kingdom.

Thus, the second reason I pray is as a way of keeping vigil, of watching and waiting for the faint signs and indicators that point me toward my purpose. As the Camaldolese monk Bede Healy puts it, “To keep vigil is to maintain a state of poised alertness to the surrounding spiritual environment,”<sup>3</sup> which, unless we truly concentrate, remains mostly silent and invisible.

Prayer, however, sharpens spiritual hearing and vision. When I am in a state of prayer, I am focused on the subtle spiritual rustlings going on around me. Often the messages seem prosaic: go visit your father-in-law this morning, call Karen, sit Annie down for a talk. At times, however, they involve life-and-death issues: Chris is doing drugs again, Ted is suicidal, get yourself to a doctor. I am nudged along mysterious routes I never would have taken on my own. Only later—sometimes years later—can I see the significance of these seemingly unrelated happenings.

Keeping vigil through prayer led me to my third and final experience of the light. For more than a year, I was plagued by a diffuse

restlessness that had no obvious cause; I loved my husband and college-age children, and I was happy to be teaching literature and creative writing at the local university, so what was the problem? Only when I looked at this mysterious unease through the lens of prayer did it start to come clear; I was being called on pilgrimage. Eventually, I heeded that call, setting out for two long months alone around the world.

Partway through the trip, I found myself inside the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. As I knelt beside the stone slab that once held the body of Christ, the tomb began to fill with the same delicate golden light I’d witnessed twice before. And I knew that, once again, I was being urged into new spiritual territory.

Julian’s beautiful words sum up best what I learned during those light-drenched moments in the tomb: “I saw for certain, both here and elsewhere, that before ever he made us, God loved us; and that his love has never slackened, nor ever shall. In this love all his works have been done, and in this love he has made everything serve us; and in this love our life is everlasting.”<sup>4</sup> 

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 118.
- 2 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1989), 158.
- 3 Bede Healy, from a retreat offered at New Camaldoli Hermitage, February 5, 2010.
- 4 *Revelations* 212.

# Why I Pray



**BY REV. AIMEE MOISO**

*Director of Ecumenical and  
Interfaith Ministries,  
Santa Clara University*

WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, THERE ARE BASICALLY TWO REASONS WHY I PRAY: I'M ASKED TO AS A PROFESSIONAL, OR I'M DESPERATE.

AS A PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER, I'M REGULARLY CALLED UPON TO LEAD CORPORATE PRAYER: BEFORE MEALS WITH FRIENDS OR FAMILY, AT CHURCH MEETINGS, WITH STUDENT GROUPS, AT BIBLE STUDIES, AND, OF COURSE, DURING SUNDAY WORSHIP.

This is something all clergy get used to being asked to do. One of my friends got this clergy-to-clergy advice as she left for seminary: "Whenever anyone says, 'Pastor, would you pray?' the answer is always, 'I would love to.'"

Sometimes when I join non-religious friends for a meal, there is an awkward pause before we all pick up our forks. I can hear them wondering, "Is Aimee-the-minister going to want us to pray before we eat?" Even dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterians seem to defer to the religious

professional when it comes to saying grace before a potluck supper. There is always a quiet moment after the tables are set but before everyone lines up to fill empty plates...and all eyes turn toward the pastor.

"I would love to," I respond.

Don't get me wrong; I am happy to lead a table grace or offer a closing prayer. But I wonder about this phenomenon. When everyone turns to the pastor for prayer, is it because the community perceives prayer as something the *minister* thinks is necessary? Do prayers feel perfunctory, sort of like being polite to God by offering "please" and "thank you" to the Divine under the watchful eye of the minister?

As a child, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, I remember kids on the playground avoiding bad words and dirty jokes in my presence because, said one in a stage whisper, "Aimee's dad is a *minister*." The implication was that my dad had a direct line to God that could, if needed, get the other kids in trouble. Having heard my dad swear under his breath after hitting

*I wonder if Jesus got called upon to pray at every gathering with the disciples. Perhaps that's why he taught them some all-purpose, all occasion words everyone could memorize: "Our Father, who art in heaven..."*

his thumb with a hammer, I didn't have a clue what my classmates were talking about.

I often find that people seem to think prayer offered by a pastor has some kind of authority that is not present in the words of a lay person. Various churches and denominations may come to different conclusions on this point, but in Presbyterianism *the people* are the church. The pastor has no more power to talk to or influence God than anyone else. Still, there's something about the minister that seems to carry weight. As an ordained, professionally-trained Christian minister, should I have some special insight into how to pray or how to say what God wants to hear? Perhaps, by virtue of spending time studying many faithful who have come before, I have resources from and knowledge of the myriad ways people have called upon God in times of celebration and need. Mostly, though, I just have more practice stringing words of prayer together in a way that sounds nice, or even just appropriate, in diverse situations.

But this can also be a problem. I am susceptible to the idea that, as a minister, I need to sound "professional" when I lead prayer. It is not uncommon for me to be thinking more about how my words of prayer *sound* and than about whether I feel and mean them in the moment. This is, perhaps, the other side of "praying because it's expected of you": you can start to believe that the beauty or elegance you give a prayer is more important than its sincerity.

I wonder if Jesus got called upon to pray at every gathering with the disciples. Perhaps that's why he taught them some all-purpose, all-occasion words everyone could memorize: "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

I have a small clergy group with whom I meet monthly for conversation, prayer, and

Mexican food. The awkward pause before we dig into our burritos is usually rooted in the silent question, "Whose turn is it to pray?" While all of us are amenable to the task, each is also aware that we are all "professionals" and are regularly asked to pray "professionally." I won't speak for my colleagues, but in my head I'm often thinking, "Oh, I hope it's not my turn—it's nice to not have to lead."

Fortunately, in this particular group we often drop all pretense and pray the words that are truest: "God, I don't know." "God, I'm angry." "God, I don't understand." "God, I have sinned." "God, help." It's nice to express these words around other ministers, because they are sometimes hard sentiments for parishioners to hear. Clergy are supposed to be strong in their faith and connected to God, not scared, confused and in doubt. But such three- or four-word prayers are still the ones I pray when I'm desperate, and, even as a minister, they are the most common and most honest prayers I pray.

The time in my life when I was most consistent about personal prayer was while my mom was sick with cancer. I had a regular group with whom I prayed weekly for my mom's recovery, and I led something of a life of constant prayer myself: prayers for miracles of healing, prayers that God would use my family as an example of the power of prayer, prayers that the next phone call from home would be good news rather than bad, prayers that the tumors would shrink and vanish, prayers to awaken from the nightmare of waiting for your mom to die. I sent these prayers to the heavens as often as I thought about it, which was about every three or four seconds. Mostly, I prayed because I didn't know what else to do.

All of my prayers of desperation are like that, because they come at the moments I slow down enough to remember I'm not in control. We all know our illusions of control—over our lives, our jobs, our health, our security—are just that: illusions. But we exist in a world where every day we get ready for work, brush our teeth, and lock our front doors anyway, and it is easy to start thinking that we're in charge.

Watching my mom die in an easy chair in our living room was probably the moment when I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was not in control of my life or anyone else's. That day, I stopped believing God would protect me or my loved ones from pain and grief, and my prayer life (such as it was) changed forever. I still pray boldly for healing of mind, soul, and body, but I don't have the same hope those prayers will be answered. Even as I ask God for healing, I'm actually looking for strength and wisdom to deal with what is, and whatever is to come.

And so I pray desperation prayers all day long, even now. Sometimes these prayers start early in the day, like as I'm in the shower thinking about all that is on my plate. Usually, that prayer is, "How am I going to deal with this?" Sometimes, the desperation prayers come at night as I rest my head on the pillow. Those prayers sound more like, "How could I have done that?" or "Tell me it's not true" or, simply, "I don't know what to do." These prayers come from my lips unbidden, raw, and unvarnished,

and totally aware of mortality and vulnerability and frailty. I pray them in the face of utter powerlessness, when there is nothing else I can do but hope someone is listening who has more power than I do.

I used to beat myself up about not having a more rigorous, regular prayer life. I know that for many people, the discipline of daily prayer time is a source of strength and centering in their life of faith. Perhaps it could be that for me, too.

But for now, I take comfort in the fact that prayers of desperation keep me honest and focus me on the realities around me today: the hundreds of thousands dead after the earthquake in Haiti ("God, have mercy"), interesting and perhaps unsettling changes happening in the office ("Be with us"), conversations—both promising and difficult—with students ("Thanks" and "Forgive me"), and successes and failures and unknowns all around ("Grant me love").

In the end, desperation prayers are bridges for me: between the professional realities of serving as a minister and the lived experience of being merely human; between modeling a life of faithfulness and honestly acknowledging my brokenness; between pretty, poetic prayers that lift the heart, and gritty, dirty ones that reveal both my faith and my doubt.

And I pray them all—sometimes because I'm asked to, and just about all the time because I'm desperate. **e**



# Why I Pray



BY ANDREW J. GARAVEL, S.J.

*Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Santa Clara University*

I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN CONNECTICUT, SO ALLOW ME TO CONFESS A CERTAIN YANKEE RETICENCE IN SPEAKING OF A SUBJECT MY BACKGROUND TELLS ME IS USUALLY LEFT UNSPOKEN. IF I AM GOING TO TELL YOU WHY I PRAY, AS OPPOSED TO WHY ANYONE DOES OR MIGHT, IT OUGHT TO COME FROM MY LIFE, AND A LARGE PART OF THAT HAS BEEN SPENT AS A TEACHER OF ENGLISH. SO I HAVE A STORY FOR YOU. It's not my own, but from a wonderful Irish writer named John McGahern, who died in 2006. Even if nothing else I have to say is of interest, you might be moved to read the story for yourself and maybe look up some other things McGahern has written. And if that happens, I will be satisfied.

It's called "The Country Funeral,"<sup>1</sup> and it's the story of three brothers from Dublin named Ryan: Philly works in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia, returning home once every 18 months; Fonsie, who has lost his legs, lives with their widowed mother; John, a schoolteacher, is the only one to have married. The story begins

three weeks into one of Philly's visits, when he is beginning to grow bored:

...Philly had come home in a fever of excitement from the oil fields. He always came home in that high state of fever and it lasted for a few days in the distribution of the presents he always brought home, especially to his mother;...the meetings with old school friends, the meetings with neighbours, the buying of rounds and rounds of drinks; his own fever for company after the months at the oil wells and delight in the rounds of celebration...and now all that fever had subsided to leave him alone and companionless in just another morning as he left the house... with nothing better to do than walk to Mulligan's [the corner pub].

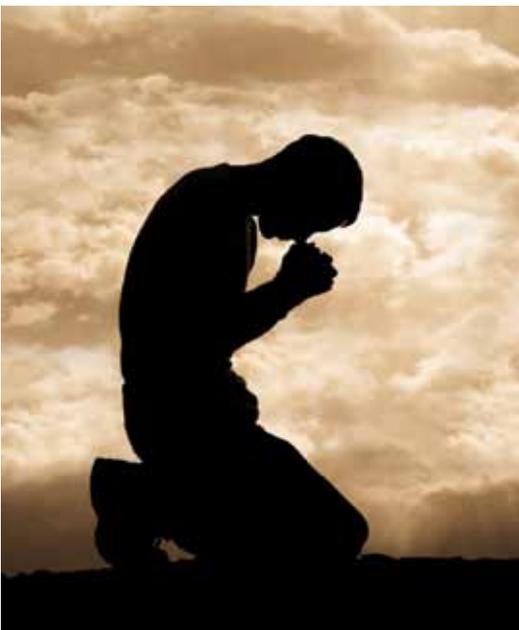
Once there, he comes to a decision:

The waiting silence of the bar became too close an echo of the emptiness he felt all around his life.... He'd go back to the house and tell his mother he was returning early to the oil fields. There were other places he could kill time in.

He comes home, however, to momentous news: the mother's brother has died at the family farm in the midlands of Ireland, and the three nephews are to go down for the funeral (their mother pleads her dubious frailty). When they were boys, their mother took them to Uncle Peter's farm every summer—for "the plain, good food" and to get out of the city, she claimed, but really to escape their father. Peter, a bachelor, was a solitary man and put up with them only out of family duty:

He showed them no welcome when they came, spent as little time in the house as possible, the days working in the fields, visiting other houses at night where, as soon as he had eaten, he complained to everybody about the burden he had to put up with. He never troubled to hide his relief when the day finally came at the end of the summer for them to leave. In the quick way of children, the three boys picked up his resentment and suffered its constraint ... Out of loneliness there were times when he tried to talk to them but the constraint had so solidified that all they were ever able to give back were childish echoes of his own awkward questions.

Now, 20 years later, Philly seizes on the funeral as a diversion from his boredom and



eagerly starts making plans. Fonsie, on the other hand, goes only after an angry protest, while John immediately agrees, but without a word of his feelings or motivations. The three are about as different from one another as possible, and each brother's response to a given memory or event illuminates his personality. Philly, as we've seen, is something of a hail-fellow-well-met, jovial, at least on the surface, and hungry to be liked. He makes good money and spends it freely when he comes home. Projecting an air of good will, he glosses over pain when he sees it at all; his answer to most problems is to buy the world another round of drinks.

Unless you're a saint, you wouldn't want to spend more than three minutes with Fonsie. A more conventional writer might have given him at least one sympathetic trait but, confined to his wheelchair, he embodies the sad truth that suffering does not necessarily ennoble. He responds to everything around him with unrelenting sarcasm and bitterness, as in his description of the funeral procession:

Several times I thought you were going to drop the coffin. It was more like a crowd of apes staggering up a hill with something they had just looted. The whole lot of you could have come right out of the Dark Ages, without even a dab of make-up.

John is another sort entirely, less talkative than his brothers and more sober (in every sense of the word). Cautious and reserved, the few things he says are uttered "vaguely" and "carefully": you don't get much from John. At first he seems to be the peacemaker of the family, but it becomes clear that his primary wish in life is to be left alone ("He got on better with strangers than with either of his brothers"). Though he seems to detest his job, he buries himself in teaching and the school routine; he has even refused an offer to become headmaster just so no one will bother him. As he says during the umpteenth wrangle between Philly and Fonsie: "I'm out of this ... What people do is their own business. All I ask is to be let go about my own life."

In this passage, the brothers reveal themselves in their divergent responses to their late uncle:

*I know that without prayer I will be left with my shadows; I pray so that I might see my life and others' lives less through those shadows and distortions, and more and more with the eyes of love with which Jesus looked on the world.*

[Philly said,] “He wasn’t all bad. Once I helped him drive cattle into the fair of Boyle...After we sold the cattle...he took me to the Rockingham Arms. He bought me lemonade and ginger snaps and lifted me up on the counter and said I was a great gossoon [boy] to the whole bar even if I had the misfortune to be from Dublin.”

“You make me sick,” Fonsie said angrily. “The man wasn’t civilized. I always felt if he got a chance he’d have put me in a bag with a stone and thrown me in a bog hole like that [dog].”

“That’s exaggerating now. He never did and we’re almost there,” John said as the car passed the church ...

Indeed, their characters are far more important than the prosaic events of the story: they attend the wake and funeral, reminisce about Uncle Peter, and settle his estate. The only surprise is Philly’s rash announcement that he intends to return to the farm and live there—his stubborn testimony that the long-ago summers were actually idyllic, though everyone else remembers them as painful and tedious. This leads to one final drunken fight before the brothers head home to report to their mother. Fonsie repeats his bitter jibe—“They were like a crowd of apes carrying the coffin up the hill”—while the last word belongs to Philly: “Anyhow, we buried poor Peter, [he] said, as if it was at last a fact.”

So what does all this have to do with prayer? As I said at the outset, this ought to have some connection to my life, and believe me, I *know* these guys. In fact, I might say I’ve *been* each of them at one time or another. Like Philly, I have too often lived out of a baseless, cockeyed

optimism, and an inordinate need to be liked and accepted. I have stewed resentfully in my own hurts and disappointments like Fonsie, and have gone on to speak words of sarcasm and condescension. And like John, I have longed for what I imagined was safety, losing myself in the daily routine and asking that the world do no more than leave me alone. All of these, of course, are illusions. At one point McGahern says that Philly’s false sense of well-being is “blinding him to the poor fact that it is not generally light but shadow that we cast.” I know that without prayer I will be left with my shadows; I pray so that I might see my life and others’ lives less through those shadows and distortions, and more and more with the eyes of love with which Jesus looked on the world, through the eyes of the one who said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). As the late Pedro Arrupe, S.J., asked the Lord:

Teach me your way of looking at people: as you glanced at Peter after his denial, as you penetrated the heart of the rich young man and the hearts of your disciples. I would like to meet you as you really are, since your image changes those with whom you come into contact.<sup>2</sup> e

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 John McGahern, “The Country Funeral,” in *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*, ed. Colm Toibin (New York and London: Penguin, 1999), 834–58.
- 2 Pedro Arrupe, S.J., from *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*, ed. Michael Harter, S.J. <http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/prayers-by-st-ignatius-and-others/teach-me-your-ways/>.

# A Seat at the Table

Conversations on Clare of Assisi



BY JEAN MOLESKY-POZ

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Santa Clara University*

IN 1777 THE FRANCISCAN MISSIONARIES NAMED THE NEW MISSION SANTA CLARA DE ASÍS, THE FIRST CALIFORNIA MISSION TO BE DEDICATED IN HONOR OF A WOMAN, AS THE SOUTHERN COMPANION FOR SAN FRANCISCO DE ASÍS (MISSION DOLORES) AT THE MOUTH OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY. In 1851, Italian Jesuits Michael Accolti, S.J., and John Nobili, S.J., established the original Santa Clara College around the Mission Santa Clara de Asís, which in 1912 became the University of Santa Clara. Thus Santa Clara University finds itself endowed with two extraordinary legacies: Clare of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan community of women, and Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus.

The Greek term *charism* designates spiritual gifts that are received by an individual or group for the service and building up of the community. These gifts are “unusual, spontaneous and creative.”<sup>1</sup> A charism, then,

is a living gift, a breath of the creator spirit in a dynamic history to be adapted to the times and places, to the sociocultural contexts and needs of people. If we look at our roots, the SCU community is blessed with two distinct yet incredibly complimentary charismata.

The Ignatian charism and vision deeply shapes our Jesuit, Catholic identity at SCU. Students engage in an education that addresses the whole person. Physical spaces, such as the St. Ignatius lawn and residential learning communities, are named after Jesuits. The Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, the Arrupe Center, the Bannan Institute, the Kolvenbach Solidarity Program, and the DISCOVER project reflect Jesuit influences, as do the Campus Ministry program, the Ignatian retreats, and resources for serving in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Many students and alumni understand themselves as “leaders of competence, conscience, and compassion who will help fashion a more just, humane, and sustainable world.”<sup>2</sup>

Courtesy of Jean Molesky-Poz



Santa Clara University faculty, staff, and student participants in the House of Clare Retreat, January 2010.

Santa Clara University bears the name of St. Clare of Assisi (1193–1253). Two colonial Spanish statues of St. Clare grace the Mission chapel, and one stands in the St. Clare Room. In recent years, a medieval garden (2003), a new sculpture (2009), and the St. Clare Room in the new Harrington Learning Commons and Orradre Library have been dedicated and named after her. But many on campus do not know that Clare of Assisi was a medieval contemplative woman, healer, leader, and partner in developing the Franciscan community; she was the first woman to write a Form of Life for a woman's community. This dialogue and design grant from the Bannan Institute to the Department of Religious Studies for *A Seat at the Table* provided us resources to consider in intentional, reflective, and communal venues the charism of Clare. We asked, "How can Clare of Assisi be a light to us here at her namesake, SCU?" That is, how can SCU draw on the life, writings, and living embodiment of Clare to clarify and develop our unique vocations, our contemplative lives, our mutual relations with one another, and our activity in the world?

To this end, *A Seat at the Table* has sought to initiate projects to examine the charism of Clare of Assisi. The activities of 2009–2010 have included the St. Clare Reflection Group; *Conversations with Clare of Assisi: Woman of the Gospel*, January 28, 2010; and the House of Clare Retreat, January 29–31, 2010.

### ST. CLARE REFLECTION GROUP

The St. Clare Reflection Group is a small gathering of 15 faculty, administrators, and staff who have met once each quarter (2009–2010) to consider Clare of Assisi through prayer, reflection, and study of early documents. In October, after a meal together, we met in the St. Francis Chapel and investigated her life through medieval texts. What emerged, as we discussed the *Papal Decree of Canonization* (1255), was not only a chronology of her life, but papal images of Clare as light, a clear mirror, as vessel, as cornerstone, and as fountain. Investigating her *Letters to Agnes of Prague*, we uncovered in Clare's own words her clarity of vocation, courage to act, her marvelous joy in contemplation, and how she cultivated a spirituality of mutual relationality.<sup>3</sup>

### CONVERSATIONS WITH CLARE OF ASSISI: WOMAN OF THE GOSPEL

Two Poor Clare sisters, Beth Lynn from the Minneapolis Monastery, and Dianne Short of the Cincinnati Monastery, joined us for *Conversations with Clare of Assisi*, on January 28, 2010, in the St. Clare Room. It was the first time in Santa Clara University's 155 years that the SCU community engaged in dialogue with women from Poor Clare communities, who embody Clare's charism of poverty, contemplation, and relational love. These women, who live contemplative and generally cloistered lives, do not often leave their monasteries, except "for reasonable cause."

*This medieval woman who “had cast the anchor of her soul in God” offers us living gifts to cherish our vocations, claim our contemplative dimension, and be mirrors to one another in shared love and spontaneous joy.*

After an invitation these women and their sisters discerned that the students, staff, and faculty of Santa Clara University, which bears Clare’s name, were a “reasonable cause.” This spontaneous, fluid, and joyful conversation, facilitated by Andrea Carrera, Diana Bustos, and Lauren Glen, students from the upper-division religious studies course Clare of Assisi/Ignatius of Loyola, illuminated the importance of relational living. “Our mutual relations of love can give us the courage to act on our vocations,” said Sr. Beth. Approximately 80 faculty, staff, and students participated in this conversation, entertaining questions such as, “Who or what is God?” “Can we have miracles of healing today?” and “Why is contemplative life important to us?” (The audio clip of this 70-minute conversation is available online at The House of Clare website <http://webpages.scu.edu/ftp/houseofclare/>.)

#### THE HOUSE OF CLARE RETREAT

To more carefully reflect and perceive how Clare’s charism might be integrated into Santa Clara University, the St. Clare Reflection Group and 14 SCU students, facilitated by Keith Warner, OFM of the Religious Studies Department, and myself, traveled to the St. Francis Retreat Center in San Juan Bautista, January 29–31. Sisters Dianne Short and Beth Lynn, and Franciscan scholar Bill Short, OFM, led us into the House of Clare, using themes from *Letters to Agnes* to understand how following the footprints at San Damiano in community was a movement of circling Christ at the center. As lay women and men, we understood that this medieval woman who “had cast the anchor of her soul in God” offers us living gifts to cherish our vocations, claim our contemplative dimension, and be mirrors to one another in shared love and spontaneous joy.

At SCU the two charismata of Clare of Assisi and of Ignatius of Loyola intersect theologically

and energetically. Put in dialogue they could further clarify, render, and nurture qualities of our Santa Clara University community. Sister Dianne Short suggests that there is not a gap between the two of them, as some might think. “Both Clare and Ignatius share a very human and incarnational spirituality,” she wrote. “They are both contemplatives, though they may have different nuances in how they live out their relationship to Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

Beth Lynn further clarifies: “Clare is the woman of the hearth, the tender of the fire who is God in our midst. Ignatius is the lone Christ warrior who goes forth to spread mercy and goodness to God’s people. These are not gender specific roles. Most of us will engage in both during our lifetimes.”<sup>5</sup>

In 2012, the Franciscan family throughout the world celebrates the beginning of the community of “poor sisters which the blessed Francis founded” at the church of San Damiano. How might Santa Clara University consider and claim Clare’s charism and light? 

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Beth Lynn, O.S.C., “The Body and the Text: The Charismatic Community at San Damiano that Produced the Charismatic Text Known as *The Form of Life of the Poor Sisters*” (2009, n.p.). Cited from Richard P. McBrien, ed., *Catholicism*, revised and enlarged ed. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 366.
- 2 Sarah Esparza, “St. Clare’s Little Plant: A Jesuit Institution, Santa Clara University” (student paper written for TESP 118, Clare of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, winter 2010, n.p.).
- 3 Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., ed. and tran., *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, rev. ed., edited and translated by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., ed. (New York: New City Press, 2006).
- 4 Dianne Short, O.S.C., to Irene Kearney, 23 February 23, 2010, e-mail.
- 5 Beth Lynn, O.S.C., to Irene Kearney, 19 February 19, 2010, e-mail.



## The Cup

This chalice, made of burnished gold, rests in the place of honor when it's not in use high on the old oak cupboard in our modest dining room here in Montague. It's a modest thing, the cup, with a small cross in Chinese red, in the center of which there rests a more modest diamond, which once adorned the engagement ring which forty years ago I placed on my wife's fourth finger there among the unicorns sequestered in the Cloisters, and which look out to this day over the fabled Hudson toward New Jersey. This was the same ring her catty girlfriends used to say was oh so cute and so adorable, and which seemed to wince under a Long Island canapé light. And to tell the truth, I'd be the first to go along with them, though the ring cost me twelve back-breaking weeks of work hauling bales of hay and rank manure down at Baumann's Day Camp in Merrick the summer after college, when I was armed then with a degree in English and—except for her—nearly zero prospects for the future. A week before I left home to begin teaching in the inhospitable Chenango Valley, we drove down to Canal Street to a jeweler her father knew, where I bought the biggest diamond two hundred and forty bucks could buy.

Understand: I did what I could, and she, for her part, always made it seem as if it were enough, love filling the gap twelve twenties could not supply. And here's the thing: over the intervening years, as I learned to make a living, and that a good one, I used to joke about the ring, though it strikes me as I tell this that she never did. Twelve months later we got married, exchanging rings and vows, which I surely tested with the years. In time I saw our three sons elbow their way into the world, saw our oldest enter Loyola's Company and at last become a priest. And as the time for ordination loomed, amidst the awful scandals that broke his heart and ours, she took the little ring she had for so long treasured to a jeweler's somewhere down in Brooklyn, and had the baby diamond soldered to the center of the cross there on the cup, a sign of something good that held against the years, where now, when the late summer sun spreads like blood-red wine across our dining room, it makes the little diamond shine, until it says straight out whatever diamonds say in that language only light and diamonds know.

15 August 2002

POEM AND PHOTO BY PAUL MARIANI,  
UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, BOSTON COLLEGE



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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Sustainability Initiative at Santa Clara

Co-sponsored by the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, the SCU Environmental Studies Institute, and the SCU Office of Sustainability, this yearlong initiative responds to the challenge of SCU President Michael Engh, S.J.'s 2009 inaugural address—to deepen and renew SCU's commitment to sustainability and environmental justice and to become a major center of innovative practice, study, and debate around issues of sustainability. Initiative events will include public lectures, panel discussions and workshops, faculty seminars, and a campus-wide Sustainability Teach-In.

### Sustainability Public Lecture

OCTOBER 22, 2010, 1-2:30 P.M.  
WILLIMAN ROOM, BENSON MEMORIAL CENTER,  
SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY  
*Free and open to the public*

As part of the Sustainability Initiative



at Santa Clara, Kristin Schrader-Frechette, O'Neill Family Professor, Department of Biological Sciences and Department of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame, will present on

“Environmental Injustice and Catholic Social Ethics: The Reality of the Issues and the Scope of our Response” (tentative title).

### Western Conversations 2010

OCTOBER 22-24, 2010  
SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

Each year faculty members from the six western Jesuit universities gather together for a conference designed to probe the mission of Jesuit education and explore the contribution of faculty to such mission. This year Santa Clara University will host Western Conversations with the focus: “Sustainability and Environmental Justice on Jesuit Campuses.”

### Santa Clara Lecture Series

NOVEMBER 11, 2010, 7:30-9 P.M.  
WILLIMAN ROOM, BENSON MEMORIAL CENTER  
SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY  
*Free and open to the public*



Fr. Bryan Massingale, Associate Professor in the Theology Department at Marquette University and President of the Catholic Theological Society of America, will deliver this year's Santa Clara Lecture. Professor Massingale

specializes in social ethics with a focus on Catholic Social Teaching, liberation theologies, African American religious ethics, and racial justice.

For more information on these and other events sponsored by the Ignatian Center, visit [www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/events/](http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/events/).