



From left: Adrienne Alexander, Fernando Rayas and Kate Macan (Provided photos)



by Mark Piper

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Of the heresies I hold in my heart, the one that I have to suppress most often is my questioning the *goodness* of God's creation, specifically, people. I suppose peoples of every age have thought the world was going to hell in a handbasket — and hand-delivered by the most evil of their time. For us, perhaps due to political polarization, ecclesial polarization, 24-hour cable news, vitriol online, especially on "Catholic Twitter," viewable violence, warmongering, anger about everything that never seems to abate, it seems like 2018 is a pretty terrible, no good, awful, exhausting, spiritually depraved year. But I know that's not true. No matter what I see on my Twitter feed.

When I am most frustrated or despondent about our world and what seems to be the halting of the building of the kingdom of God, that's when I question the goodness of God's creation, the goodness of God's people.

Thankfully, those thoughts don't last long. I have a personal dogma: One cannot be a misanthrope and a Christian. I cannot hold on to my disgust and my calling into question the goodness of people with any conviction because of Christian hope, because of Christ who uttered the Beatitudes, and because I believe that if I claim my baptism, my Catholic faith, there's no tradition or Scripture that allows me to sit and stew when the world gets me down. Rather I am compelled to act, to offer hope, to join others and be a leaven for this world. I am not sure I'm a good leaven, but I know some people who are.

This is "2018: a happiness thread." When I see evil and folks who might get my ire up, I think of the people with good and working hearts below, people you probably haven't heard of but who are committed to the Gospel. Through not only their worship on Sunday but their behavior at work, they are building the kingdom of God despite a seemingly terrible, no good, awful and exhausting period in our cultural history.

First, Adrienne Alexander, director of intergovernmental affairs at [AFSCME Council 31](#), has been referred to as a Twiterrangelist ([@DriXander](#)). Post-[Gaudete et Exsultate](#), she feels more comfortable embracing that, citing Paragraph 14: "We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves." Oftentimes, despite attempts to put down her phone, she finds herself on Twitter.

Adrienne and I have discussed the difficulties of fellowship and ministry commitments in the church with little ones around. "My husband and I both talk about getting more involved in ministries in our parish, [St. Benedict the African](#) in Englewood, but at this point, with our little one, we've decided we're doing the best we can by making it on time to 9:30 a.m. Mass, across town, every Sunday," she said.

Adrienne is also a board member of the [Catholic Labor Network](#) and [Arise Chicago](#), an advocacy organization and worker center. When I asked what gives her hope or why she chooses to engage in Gospel values, she responded, "But for faith, the world would be a much bleaker place. There's something comforting about being able to rely on the Bible, Catholic social teaching to remember our fights are righteous, and that work for justice and the oppressed is God's work."

Next, Fernando Rayas is founder and executive director of the [Parish Peace Project](#), which has a large footprint on the Southwest Side of Chicago. The project is a multi-parish peace-building effort that seeks to engage and develop young adults as peacemakers and agents of change for the church and our communities.

Fernando's response to what gives him hopes was, "I believe that living out the Gospel values is an important part of our Christian vocation. Jesus commands us to love our neighbor and bring light and hope to the world until the end of times. Adding my faith and my gifts and talents to the work of building the kingdom of God here and now enlivens me. The alternative to leadership is to feel victimized and hopeless before the current social and political crises. Developing critical thinking leaders, who will change the world, gives me hope for the future."

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Third, Kate Macan, is a mission educator for the [Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers](#). She is also involved in [Taller de José](#) (a ministry of accompaniment for immigrants) and Big Brothers Big Sisters, and interacts with various ministries and organizations across the country.

When I asked her what gives her hope in a time like ours, she answered, "Pope Francis is a primary source of hope and inspiration for me. He is prophetic in both deed and word. He is cognizant to remind all people that God is a God of merciful

love and compassion. He demonstrates that we, too, can live out this mercy and compassion in our everyday lives. I often return to the pope's [homily from Pentecost 2013](#) for inspiration and reflection. His meditation on 'newness' is a powerful reminder of who we are called to be as people of faith."

Kate's job, interests and skills allow her to accompany young adults in their journeys to be missionary disciples. "I take much hope in the young people who are leaders in the Catholic Church. ... They have a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people; they want to make the pope's vision a reality, with churches, youth groups, and movements that are 'field hospitals,' places of refuge and healing for all. The young people I connect with desire to embrace diversity and recognize it is something worth celebrating. The young people are here now and they are ready; the question is: Is the church ready? How will she (continue to) support them (financially, institutionally, educationally, etc.)?"

Kate was clear that she has her own thread of people whom she works with and who give her solace in difficult times. Those people include Alberto Rodriguez, who leads a youth group at [St. Gall Parish](#); Carolina Perez of the Chicago Archdiocese's [Office of Human Dignity and Solidarity](#); and Yazmin Saldivar-Perez of [Pastoral Migratoria](#) at the Chicago Archdiocese.

Lastly, two longtime friends, Sarah Rakauskas and Matthew C. We all met at St. Xavier University in Chicago. At the time, Matt was interning for two Sisters of Mercy, Pat Murphy and JoAnn Persch at [the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants](#). Matt has since become a member of law enforcement.

When I see news that involves law enforcement and persons of color, it helps me to not minimize those issues but to know that there are faces and families to people who work in danger, and that there are, like Matthew, persons of integrity doing their job. When I do my job and a difficult issue presents itself, I don't have to worry about my safety or my decision affecting the constitutional rights of those involved. Matt is a dedicated board member for a social justice, peace and educational center in Chicago that interacts with youth. He's a bridge-builder, just like every other person on this happiness thread.



Sarah Rakauskas (Provided photo)

Sarah is a local Catholic high school teacher and licensed professional counselor. She participates in various campus ministry initiatives provided by her high school, including Kairos retreats, mission trips, and lay faith formation for teachers.

She says the young people with whom she works provide her with hope for our world. "These young people give so freely of their gifts and talents to serve others. They have a heart for wanting to make a difference in this world, and have not shied away from difficult discussions or being vulnerable in the face of adversity. Through

empathy and a willingness to be a companion to others in their unique life journeys, we can make a difference and impact in this world through kindness. At the end of the day," Rakauskas concludes, "it's about the greatest commandment: Love one another."

These are just some of the folks who populate my personal happiness thread, who keep my misanthropic heresy at bay. These are young adults and, despite the issues in the church and in the world, they're not going anywhere but forward, advancing the Gospel in their lives and actions.

I know that there are others across this country and across this world just like Adrienne, Fernando, Kate, Matt and Sarah. Please, find these people in your neighborhoods — make your own happiness thread with those people — and make them known.

It's a goofy, and at times infuriating world out there. All I can say is, take one day at a time, pray, and keep Catherine of Siena in mind: Let's be who we are meant to be, members of God's *good* creation, and set the world on fire.

[Mark Piper, a Packers fan in an unholy land, works in the nonprofit sector. He resides in Chicago with his family and holds a master's in public policy from DePaul University and a bachelor's from Saint Xavier University; he is an alumnus of Amate House, an AmeriCorps-approved year of service organization sponsored by the Chicago Archdiocese.]

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