Columns
Ministry



A homeless man sleeps outside Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Austin, Texas, Sept. 3. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Margaret Gonsalves

Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

December 22, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

It was Christmas morning 2004. Along with other friends we left for St. Boniface *Catholic Church* in the Tenderloin District of *San Francisco.* I was the first to enter, in all eagerness to see the church decorations. Our reason to visit that church was to serve the homeless, and after Mass to have a conversation with Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale.

Seeing all the pews occupied by homeless people sleeping soundly, I spontaneously exclaimed: "Wow, what a wonderful decoration!" Since there was no Mass at that hour, I sat silently and my heart sang, "Silent night … all is calm and all is not bright. …"

My reflections on that incident led me to write the following peace meditation: Kindly keep your physical eyes closed and inner eyes wide open.

Let us recall a quote commonly attributed to the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata: "If there is no justice for the people, let there be no peace for the government."

During Advent we harken to the message of the angels, "Glory to God in the highest … and on earth peace …" (Lk 2:14). Thanks for the COVID-19 pandemic, things are falling apart everywhere. People everywhere are wrestling through traumatizing circumstances, personal catastrophes and distressing world events, depravity; painful relationships, chronic illness, addictions, deaths of loved ones, unemployment, financial strain; suffering war, genocide, starvation and displacement.

Advertisement

This world reality must change our outlook. Let us imagine people everywhere praying "Give us this day our daily bread …" and getting bombs instead. While Jesus, the Bread of Life, invites us to "Put your sword back …" (Mt. 26:52).

The Emmanuel came to give peace to the disturbed, and by his radical stand he disturbed the powers that be. Supporting the production of nuclear weapons will defeat the message of Jesus. Based on the principle of nonviolence, organizing movements like peace and justice for all will open a space for "home for all, food for

all."

We no longer can take the reality emotionally as God's will but need to step out and enter a new realm, inspired by our intellectual meanderings. In order for Jesus to move in, we need to adopt a new worldview of leading an itinerant life. Ensconcing ourselves behind safe walls of institutions will defeat Jesus' vision.

Perhaps the ministry of "evangelization of peace through justice" is inviting us to open wide the doors of our prestigious institutions, including the churches, seminaries, community halls and theologates for peace and justice meditations, motivational programs to prepare princes of peace and justice for all.

Jesus the divine nature, born amidst nature — in a stable — inviting us to live a life of poverty. Poverty does not mean living in misery. Real poverty will lead us to introspectively consider our unnecessary hoardings and amassing of wealth. Poor Jesus became rich by emptying himself for the poor.

Church properties everywhere are common properties built on people's money, mostly tax-exempt money. Perhaps it is time for us to change the pews, sitting in circular arrangements to meditate on the word of God … which might gradually lead to One-ing of the Church.

Sometimes I feel that the faithful have tolerated too long the trusteeship of one man: the parish priest. It is time to form a team, governing the church property for the common good of all.

Instead of selling the convent buildings on church property or leaving them vacant, offer them to house inter-religious meditation services.

The era of pandemic health and environmental emergencies like biodiversity loss, the climate crisis and species extinction is calling us to repair our disconnection with nature. Gone are the days of unlimited greed, manipulation and control violating planetary boundaries, destroying the integrity of bionetworks and distinct species.

By invading the habitats of other species to deploy plants and animals for profitable greed, we have invited the viruses. By producing toxic food products that are nutritionally hollow, genetically engineered and processed with synthetic chemicals, we have fallen victims to deadly diseases.

It is time to believe in the God of universal and physical laws who is the only "element" in the universe: Everything and everyone is a part of that substance, keeping us all in the best of our "elements."

> Ensconcing ourselves behind safe walls of institutions will defeat Jesus' vision.
>
> Tweet this

I remember reading a quote somewhere "When the last tree is cut, the last fish is caught, and the last river is polluted; when to breathe the air is sickening, you will realize, too late, that wealth is not in bank accounts and that you can't eat money."

Our pandemic Advent has brought a new light of interconnectedness and solidarity among people of good will (Isaiah 9:1) who fearlessly advocate for peace and betterment of all — including creation, where peace and harmony are inbuilt.

The doors of St. Boniface Church are open to the homeless to sleep during the daytime and attend Mass. Vitale advocates for what he calls "sacred sleep": "People have rights to sleep, eat, defecate, whatever," he says. "They have to do what they have to do and we have to help them to share what God has given to all of us."

Jesus, being born in the stable, brought radical reformation through his bold action confronting the heavy-handed people in high places of authority. In the realm of spiritual disciplines, Vitale's actions resemble Jesus' example.

Recently I came across a witty aphorism: "Every dogma has its day." Maybe it is time to change our dogma to embrace a Cosmic Christ, pervading the entire universe. Let the advocates of all those outdated, uncreative doctrines fade into stupor so that all may sing: "All is calm; all is bright!"

This story appears in the **Advent**, **Sustainable Development Goal 1: No Poverty** , **Sustainable Development Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure**, and **Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions** feature series.