

The City of God: Reflections for Lent 2009

by Joshua Casteel
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reflection for March 24, Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

readings:

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12 • Psalm 45 • John 5:1-16

Isn't it sometimes tempting to believe that "truth" might be a team sport? There are those who "get it" and those who don't, those who believe in God and Love (. . . and the Sabbath) and those who don't, etcetera, etcetera. How many times have you (have I) refused to help—or refused the help of—someone, or some organization, because that specific someone or organization didn't quite pass your (my) muster? According to the logic of today's readings, the result of such refusals could quite literally mean not tending to the sick.

But, as Jesus told the disciples, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). The point of such an exhortation is that building the City of God is a work that we ourselves have been blessed to join, but it is not our work—our possession. The works of God are God's. They are not our own. If God permits any of us to join in building the City of God—and every last one of

us fails to pass divine muster—how much more readily accepting should we be of all those who need or seek to join in the works of charity and mercy to which we have been called? But what if such persons are from another faith? Or no faith at all? Or advocate war, abortion, and euthanasia? What if we ourselves are such people? (Hint: in one way or another, we all are.)

Today's Gospel again reminds us that there is no time that is not ripe for building the City of God, that humankind was not created for the Sabbath, but rather the Sabbath for humankind (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath weekly reminds us of the City of God, the medicinal rest to which all humanity has been called. But the Sabbath is a gift, just as our calling to work in the Vineyard is a gift.

How is God calling you to lay down your ownership of your own vocation? Your own understanding? How might this laying down allow others to enter through gates we, like Pharisees, have closed shut?

About the Author of the Daily Reflection Booklet:

Joshua Casteel enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves at age 17 and received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point at 18. Less than 30 days after receiving his B.A., Joshua was called up to full Active Duty in the U.S. Army. After training as an interrogator and studying Arabic, Joshua served at the Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center at Abu Ghraib, Iraq, from June 2004 to January 2005, as a member of the interrogation units sent to overhaul the prison after the prisoner abuse scandal. During his time at Abu Ghraib, Joshua came to realize he was a conscientious objector. At age 25, he was honorably discharged from Active Duty as a conscientious objector. Since then, Joshua has been writing and speaking widely in the United States and Europe about his wartime experiences. He serves on the board of directors of Iraq Veterans Against the War. Joshua holds MFAs in playwriting and nonfiction writing and has studied theology at the University of Notre Dame. His first book, *Letters From Abu Ghraib* (Essay Press), was released July 4th, 2008. He lives in Iowa City.

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Visit www.paxchristiusa.org for more educational and spiritual resources for peace.

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NATIONAL CATHOLIC PEACE MOVEMENT

A blessed New Year to you! I'm sure you join me in praying that in this new year, we will begin to see hope transformed into real, substantial changes in U.S. policy, from the torture chambers of Guantánamo to the war-ravaged streets of Baghdad, from the neglected neighborhoods of our own cities, to the dying fields of the U.S.-Mexican border. We have heard a great deal about change over the last 18 months. The time has come to see that change take shape. As people of faith, our activism is rooted in a deep hope for a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world, and it is informed by a solidarity that compels us to enter the harshest realities of our sisters and brothers struggling for justice.

As I wrote this letter, the violence in Gaza reached new heights. In Israel-Palestine, the world's longest-lasting conflict continues to scream for solution. Sadly, among U.S. policymakers, too few have been willing to raise their voices in opposition to the unrestrained violence Israel unleashed on the population of Gaza for fear of political retribution and accusations of anti-Semitism. Pax Christi USA continues to engage the new Administration in support of the ceasefire and continues to resource Pax Christi members through our Website and Rapid Response e-mail network. In addition I ask that you incorporate the enclosed Muslim, Jewish, Christian Prayer for Peace in your prayers and share it within your parish, group, community, or school.

In his acceptance speech, President-elect Obama reminded us all that "this victory alone is not the change we seek—it is only the chance for us to make that change." Since the election, Pax Christi USA has been consistently engaged with the Transition Team to

offer input on a range of issues of deep concern to Pax Christi members. Over the coming months and years, I know that you and all Pax Christi USA members will be in the forefront of those who take up that "chance for us to make that change" by raising a prophetic voice, offering a vision for that change rooted in Catholic Social Teaching and animated by a deep belief in the overarching power of nonviolence. Please visit our Website www.paxchristiusa.org for ongoing analysis, resources, and action items to assist you in being part of this vital effort at social transformation.

As we move ahead, we face a critical dilemma: the opportunities for all of us in Pax Christi USA to make an impact on important policy changes have never been greater. At the same time, the economic collapse has seriously diminished the resources available to organizations like Pax Christi USA. Mindful of the struggle and uncertainty that you are no doubt experiencing, but also mindful of your deep commitment to the work of Pax Christi USA, I ask you to prayerfully consider sending an extra gift, no matter how modest, in the enclosed Economic Security for All Fund envelope. Every dollar will be deeply appreciated and make a real difference in our ability to foster the change for which we all yearn.

I thank you for your ongoing and future support. Together we will ensure that this moment, pregnant with possibility, will indeed give birth to a new direction for our nation.

In peace,

Dave Robinson,
Executive Director, Pax Christi USA

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PEACEMAKING: Day by Day

"Our perilous situation makes clear the mission of the church. We must step out, walk around diplomatic channels, ignore the obstacles, break the laws, and make friends of our enemies."

- Jim Wallis,
Sojourners

* This quote and hundreds more are available in Pax Christi USA's *Peacemaking Day by Day*, Volume I. To order your copy, visit our Website, www.paxchristiusa.org.

PAX CHRISTI USA BISHOP PRESIDENT SIGNS INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE STATEMENT

Catholic Church officials from 38 countries and more than 170 Catholic organizations have launched a campaign to persuade the United Nations to meet the “moral obligation” of tackling climate change. Pax Christi USA Bishop President Bishop Gabino Zavala signed on to the statement “A Call for Climate Justice.”

“Climate change is a reality today affecting the lives and livelihoods of millions in developing countries by exacerbating storms, droughts and natural disasters,” said an appeal signed by 92 bishops, archbishops, and cardinals. “As a matter of equity and responsibility, those who have created the problem must pay for the solution. Economically developed nations have a moral obligation to tackle climate change because of their disproportionate consumption of natural resources.”

PAX CHRISTI USA RAISES PROPHETIC VOICE DURING AND AFTER U.S. ELECTION

Since the 2008 election, Pax Christi USA staff have had several meetings with the Obama Transition Team in Washington, D.C., as part of Catholic community groups working on social concerns, as well as an interfaith meeting on Israel-Palestine and the Gaza crisis. We registered the importance of the Administration

boldly setting a new direction for this country, and registered our movement’s concerns and proposals on dramatically cutting the military budget, abolishing nuclear weapons, ending the war in Iraq, pursuing non-military responses to Afghanistan, dialoging with Iran, closing the SOA/WHINSEC, and more.

Pax Christi USA’s work during the 2008 election season included an advertising campaign featuring Father Joseph Nangle, OFM, speaking on the war in Iraq and racism, aired in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and featured in a story on CNN’s “The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer,” reaching 1.4 million viewers. Pax Christi USA Bishop President Bishop Gabino Zavala was featured in a national column on the election by E. J. Dionne, seen by millions in local and national newspapers. Pax Christi hosted an evening focusing on “The War at Home, the War Abroad” and a National Catholic Teach-in on the Iraq War at the Convention for the Common Good in Philadelphia, with a combined attendance of over

600 people at the events. For a full summary of our election cycle activities, please visit the PCUSA Website.



Daniel Tillias (at right), Pax Christi Haiti’s Program Director, with members of PC Haiti’s Education and Soccer program in Cite Soleil, one of Port Au Prince’s largest slums.
photo by Patrick Cashio

PAX CHRISTI USA STAFF INTERN DOCUMENTS THE WORK OF PAX CHRISTI HAITI

Patrick Cashio, a communications intern with Pax Christi USA, traveled to Haiti in December to meet with Pax Christi Haiti leadership, document their program
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in Cite Soleil, and take video and photos of their program.

Pax Christi Haiti has an impressive and ambitious program focused in Cite Soleil (Sun City), one of the poorest slums in the capital city, Port-au-Prince. About 18 months ago, after two years of extreme violence and gang wars in Cite Soleil, Junior St-Vil and Daniel Tillias, Pax Christi Haiti’s Executive and Program Directors, decided that if a culture of peace was to be cultivated in Haiti, it must start in Cite Soleil. Their program now has about 85 kids representing about 75% of the neighborhoods in Cite Soleil.

The children in their programs come as a package of needs. Most need to be fed. Money and resources are scarce for many of their families and anywhere that the young people can eat is well worth it. Tuition help is also crucial to keep them in school. Pax Christi Haiti’s soccer program provides an outlet and a space to practice non-violence skills and team-building.

To read Patrick’s report and see more photos from Haiti, visit the PCUSA Website. Video will also be posted in the weeks to come.

PAX CHRISTI FLORIDA COUPLE FEATURED IN ARTICLE FOR THEIR WORK FOR PEACE

In late November, *The St. Petersburg Times* featured Pax Christi Florida members John and Sheila Stewart in an article highlighting their work for peace and justice. The Stewarts, both public school teachers in Pinellas County, stated that their social activism began nearly thirty years ago when they heard a Presbyterian minister preach on the incompatibility of Jesus’ teachings with the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The article talked about how the Stewarts embrace their counterculturalism, working to close the School of the Americas, protesting on street corners, and advocating for the homeless.

“I’m trying to live out the Sermon on the Mount. One of the ways I do that is when I go out on street corners,” stated John Stewart, holding a sign that said, “Financial Crisis? Bring the troops home! Spend the money here!”

PAX CHRISTI MADISON (WI) MEMBERS PRAY FOR VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Members of Pax Christi Madison (WI) and others involved in peace and justice work prayed a “Novenario,” or nine days of prayer, from November 13-21 for victims of violence and oppression in Latin America. The Novenario led up to the fourth annual vigil in Madison to remember the victims of oppression and to support the movement to close the School of the Americas (WHINSEC). The November 21 vigil included a procession around the Capitol Square in Madison, followed by a prayer service at the First United Methodist Church. Copies of the Novenario are available on the Website of the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice at www.wnpj.org/node/832 or from Dennis Collier at dennis.collier@hotmail.com or 608-221-8025.

PAX CHRISTI HUDSON VALLEY (NY) CELEBRATES SECOND ANNUAL PEACE MASS

Hudson Valley (NY) Pax Christi celebrated their Second Annual Peace Mass which commemorated the life of Sr. Dorothy Stang, martyred in Brazil. It was followed by a workshop on climate change featuring the Thomas Berry film *The Great Story*.

Hudson Valley PC also hosted a discussion on the book *War and the Christian Conscience* by PCUSA Ambassador of Peace Joe Fahey. Additionally, Tom Cornell, one of the founders of PCUSA and an outspoken peace activist and author, joined the program.

Several members attended the Catholic Peacebuilding Conference at Notre Dame and the Convention for the Common Good in Philadelphia this past summer. Two members were able to attend the UN Conference on Human Rights in Paris.

As part of a goal to help Catholics make an informed decision on Election Day, Hudson Valley PC sent letters with information about the election to all area priests with an offer of more materials or meeting with them.

Ash Wednesday is February 25th. Be sure to visit the PCUSA Website for Lenten resources.

The following are initiatives for which Pax Christi USA is a partner or supporter.
We encourage you to participate in any way possible.

1. **January 20-April 30: 100 Days to Close Guantánamo and End Torture**
 - Campaign calling for an end to U.S. complicity in torture; includes nonviolent witness and a series of events taking place in Washington, DC, but people are encouraged to organize events in their own areas. Visit: www.100dayscampaign.org
2. **February 14-17: School of the Americas Watch Strategy Meeting and Lobby Day**
 - Gathering to strategize advocacy for closing the SOA/WHINSEC and changing U.S. policy on Latin America; includes grassroots lobby day on Capitol Hill. Visit: www.soaw.org
3. **February 22-25: Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, Washington, DC**
 - Conference theme: "Christ Our Hope: Healing a Broken World." Lobby day includes a broad range of domestic and international issues. Visit: www.CatholicSocialMinistryGathering.org.
4. **February 27-March 2: Security Without Empire Conference, Washington, DC**
 - National organizing conference on closing foreign U.S. military bases. Visit: www.unitedforpeace.org and look under "events" for more information.
5. **February 27-March 2: Power Shift Conference 2009, Washington, DC**
 - National youth summit on climate change. Visit www.powershift.org
6. **March 13-16: Ecumenical Advocacy Days: "Enough for Creation," Washington, DC**
 - Seventh annual conference and advocacy day for faith-based activists from around the country on peace and security issues, nuclear weapons, eco-justice, climate change, the Middle East, Africa, domestic concerns, etc. Visit: www.advocacydays.org
7. **March 19: Sixth Anniversary of the Launch of the War on Iraq, Local Actions**
 - Pax Christi USA has endorsed the call of the United for Peace and Justice Coalition for local actions around the country focused on the human, economic, and domestic costs of the Iraq war. Watch PCUSA's Website (www.paxchristiusa.org) for information and resources or visit www.unitedforpeace.org.
8. **April 4 (proposed): National Mobilization to End the War and Occupation in Iraq**
 - United for Peace is also considering a national mobilization on Iraq in New York on April 4th, timed with the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Beyond Vietnam" speech and in solidarity with European peace mobilizations on that day, the 60th anniversary of NATO. Watch www.unitedforpeace.org for information.
9. **April 10-12: National Grassroots Immigrant Strategy Conference, Chicago, IL**
 - Visit www.unitedforpeace.org (under events) for more information.
10. **April 29-30: Christian Peace Witness for Iraq (CPWI) Worship and Witness**
 - National gathering in Washington, DC, for Pax Christi and other faith activists at the end of the first 100 days of the new Presidential Administration to pray and call for an end to the war in Iraq. Worship services will be on Wednesday evening, followed by a witness and nonviolent action at the Capitol on Thursday. Visit Pax Christi USA's Website and www.christianpeacewitness.org.

Below is an excerpt from a letter to President Obama coordinated by the Connect U.S. Fund and co-signed by Pax Christi USA and many other organizations.

Dear President-Elect Obama:

Your Administration will confront challenges and opportunities in an interconnected world, in which our security and prosperity are tied to the security and prosperity of others, problems cannot be managed in isolation, and addressing critical national security concerns will require that we advance shared global interests.

The ability of the United States to achieve key national security objectives has eroded over the past eight years, as the war in Iraq has diverted attention and resources from other vital needs, the civilian instruments of U.S. power—both development and diplomacy—have been neglected, and our capacity to lead effectively has been undermined through unilateral actions in disregard of the views and interests of key friends and allies.

For these reasons, our capacity to address both urgent crises and long term challenges will require that your Administration articulate—and quickly signal to the American public and the world—a renewed commitment to international cooperation. During the first six months of your Administration, action on the following measures will be critically important to signal this new commitment and new course for U.S. foreign policy.

We urge that you take action in the following areas:

Repair U.S. credibility and influence on international human rights and humanitarian law:

- Issue an executive order that reaffirms an absolute prohibition on torture; and re-engage in a positive way with international human rights institutions, such as by supporting the work of the International Criminal Court to investigate and prosecute individuals for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Reduce the threat of nuclear war and weapons proliferation:

- Outlaw nuclear weapons testing.
- Resume talks with Russia on a new, legally-binding and verifiable agreement that would, by the end of 2012, achieve significantly deeper and irreversible reductions than currently planned in deployed and reserve U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles and delivery systems.

Establish U.S. leadership on international efforts to address climate change:

- Commit to binding caps on carbon emissions that would reduce greenhouse gases by at least 80% by 2050.

Ensure a safer and more secure world by dramatically strengthening U.S. programs to promote diplomacy and development:

- Include in the FY2010 budget substantially increased resources for civilian agencies engaged in development, diplomacy and efforts to assist fragile states.

- Ensure that international deliberations on the global financial crisis include representatives of developing countries.

While this listing of policy priorities is not exhaustive, it does include measures that represent crucial indicators of a new direction for U.S. policy that will enhance your capacity to lead effectively on the full range of national security challenges. We commit to working with your Administration to engage both the Congress and the American people in a national dialogue on these critical concerns.

Signatories:

*Dave Robinson, Pax Christi USA
along with 146 leaders from the foreign policy, academic, peace and justice, and faith communities, including:*
Jimmy Carter, The Carter Center, Former President of the United States of America
John Cavanaugh, Institute for Policy Studies
Lauren Coletta, Common Cause
Brian Concannon, Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti
Morton Halperin, Center for American Progress
Sarah Holewinski, Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict
Aura Kanegis, American Friends Service Committee
Reverend Jim Kofski, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Stewart Patrick, Council on Foreign Relations
Ted Piccone, Brookings Institution
Rocco Puopolo, Africa Faith and Justice Network
Rabbi David Saperstein, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
Neil Watkins, Jubilee USA Network

For the full text and signatories,
visit www.connectusfund.org.

Prayer, Study, and Action on Urgent Issues

Torture

In its eight years, the Bush Administration dis-

mantled some of the most essential rights and protections of the U.S. Constitution through abusing executive power, setting up a system of illegal detentions, redefining “torture,” and ignoring the rule of law by stripping detainees of basic rights. To keep secret its actions, the Administration classified more documents than any administration in history and invoked state secret privilege to avoid scrutiny and protect illegal actions like torture and wrongful death by government officials and military contractors.

U.S. involvement in torture far predates the Bush years of presidency, but the shameful exposure of photos and stories from Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo as well as the use of extraordinary rendition stained the U.S. image abroad, weakened its capacity for leadership, served to fan terrorism, and set a dangerous precedent for other countries to feel justified in using such practices.

President Obama has pledged that the United States will reverse course and not engage in torture.

An apology to the world for this chapter of abuse in U.S. history would begin to set us in the right direction. While the incoming President has used guarded language when asked about the possibility of investigating Bush Administration torture practices, a few in Congress have begun

writing letters to the editor and other public means of elevating the call for full disclosure and, if laws were broken, holding people accountable.

From the experience of countries that have undertaken Truth Commissions and those who have tried to keep human rights abuses hidden, we know we cannot afford to permit impunity. Not only does it set a dangerous precedent and open channels for abuse by political leaders in the future, but societal healing and restoring U.S. standing abroad hinge on a full investigation and accounting.

A priority should be given in the first 100 days of the Obama Administration to signal to the world the seriousness of our country’s commitment to upholding the highest standards of human rights by issuing executive orders that can restore and protect the rights on which our nation was founded.

ACTION SUGGESTIONS

Contact President Obama, via the White House comment line: 202-456-1111; email: president@whitehouse.gov; or Website: www.whitehouse.gov, asking him in the first 100 days of his Administration to issue executive orders to:

- Ban all use of torture, degrading treatment of prisoners, and indefinite detention;
- Stop extraordinary rendition and launch a Department of Justice investigation into its use;
- Close U.S. detention centers worldwide that do not comply with international human rights standards;
- Close the SOA/WHINSEC;
- Establish a formal commission to investigate the origins and evolution of the Bush Administration’s detention policies and hold architects of this system accountable, including through prosecution;
- As well as send legislation to Congress to repeal the Military Commissions Act, eliminate military tribunals, and give detainees access to the U.S. court system.

Contact your Members of Congress to support the call for a full investigation. Capitol switchboard: 202-234-3121.

to pursue this path. We should support this effort and contribute to it by

Immigration: The “War at Home”

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a “war at home” has been waged against immigrants. The government set up a Department of Homeland Security in 2003, bringing in the Immigration and Naturalization Service as well as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which has resulted in heavy surveillance and FBI interception of phone calls, particularly directed at Arab and Muslim immigrants.

The federal government also has increasingly militarized the U.S.-Mexico border, spending vast resources for more fence construction, border patrol presence, and installation of advanced surveillance technology. These measures have proven ineffective at decreasing undocumented immigration and instead have resulted in moving the migrant flow to areas where the crossing is more dangerous, resulting in immigrants dying in the desert.

Detention centers and indiscriminate immigration raids in homes and workplaces carried out by ICE have caused trauma and suffering for thousands of individuals. Every year tens of thousands of undocumented children under age 18, many

of whom are unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian, are apprehended and repatriated to their country of origin—often mistreated in the process and with little regard for child safety.

It is clear that the U.S. immigration system is broken and outdated, replete with obstacles to obtain swift and accessible legalization for immigrants. There is widespread mistreatment of migrant workers and undocumented immigrants, and current policies often separate families and deprive people of basic human rights.

Immigrants have become a scapegoat and target for hate crimes and hate radio talk shows. The racism underlying much of the repressive policy and anti-immigrant sentiment needs to be confronted, and the broken immigration system needs to be fixed. Our work is to help elevate and live out our faith’s call to “welcome the stranger” in our local communities and to advocate on their behalf. It will be an uphill battle in Congress to address the needed reforms. We need to challenge all whose language contributes to demonizing immigrants.

ACTION SUGGESTIONS

Contact President Obama to prioritize and help set a new tone on immigration. White House comment line: 202-456-1111; email: president@whitehouse.gov; or Website: www.whitehouse.gov.

Contact your Members of Congress via their Websites or the Capitol switchboard (202-234-3121) to act on the following:

- Place a moratorium on ICE raids at homes and workplaces;
- Create an effective and efficient process for undocumented immigrants to earn legal status;
- End the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border;
- Suspend indefinite detentions and deportations until comprehensive immigration policies are adopted;
- Hold family reunification as a core guiding principle for U.S. immigration policy;
- Restore due process rights to ensure equality before the law of all persons;
- End the criminalization of immigrants, including local police collaboration in immigration enforcement;
- Commit to addressing the economic reasons that compel many people to leave their countries of origin, including the free trade policies promoted by the United States.



Jesus, Guiding Spirit,

Call out to those who torture, “Know the evil you have done and repent.”

Call out to the rest of us, “What meaning does love have if you allow torture to continue unopposed?”

In the name of all the tortured of the world, give us the strength, give us the courage, give us the will to bring this horror to an end, in the name of love, justice, and the God of us all.

*From “Jesus, Our Tortured Brother Today”
by Sr. Dianna Ortiz, OSU
available from Pax Christi USA*