Opinion
Spirituality



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Globally, a report from the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, described the malaise, the inward-turning drift of the global community's elites,

organizations and countries without strong direction from either Europe or the U.S. Europe is embroiled in the turmoil surrounding the U.K.'s Brexit effort. And the U.S. has just ended its longest-ever partial government shutdown. A world adrift at a time when the survival of life as we know it on planet Earth demands coordination, collaboration and a strong, clear sense of direction to deal effectively in time with climate change.

Painful education

Nationally, the 35-day partial shutdown of the federal government has continued the deep education of anyone who is paying attention to the great service, importance and impact of government in the two years since the election of the Trump administration to run the country. It is, unfortunately, education by removal, distraction, abuse. In the past two years, we have seen some rapid removal of protections for the environment, workers and coastlands.

Just in the recent shutdown over the last 35 days, we have had our attention called to the role of the federal government in guaranteeing consumer product safety, including food, pharmaceutical and medical safety, airline security, air safety, Coast Guard protections — from South Pacific peace missions to drug interdiction in the Caribbean. We faced the possibility of not receiving annual tax returns. FBI and other high security police actions as well as weather services had to be carried out by people forced to work without being paid. National parks were closed, and businesses relying on them suffered. Agricultural programs, including essential food stamps and other resources for the poor, were in danger.

The skills, dedication and sacrifices of government workers were, fortunately, highlighted by media reports.

The financial fragility of so many families with regular jobs and so-called "middle class incomes" came to light. So many people live paycheck to paycheck. With the loss of one or two paychecks, hundreds of thousands of families were facing choices between having adequate food or necessary medications and services, even shelter and more.

The insensitivity of the wealthy in positions of high government power was scandalous: recommending that the struggling workers just take out loans or "enjoy" the shutdown as eventually-paid vacation time.

We saw illustrated too how interdependent our economies and communities are. People with paychecks that read $0.00 cannot purchase much in their local communities — and the losses ripple out much farther through the fabric of society. And as anxieties grow, community suffers.

At the same time, as so often happens, the goodness and generosity of so many people to those in need is an inspiration.

Is it possible we might be able to grasp and retain these lessons rather than to have to suffer through them again?

The Gospel call

Still, as I have been watching it all unfold, I have found myself sad, frustrated, angry at the lack of understanding and compassion, the ways everything gets politicized, hardened into left/right, win/lose.

As I turn again to Jesus and his inaugural address in the synagogue in Nazareth in Sunday's liturgy, though, I see the foundational religious root that must guide us in our response as Christians. Jesus came — and we have been sent — to bring good news to the poor, liberation to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free and to declare a year of jubilee acceptable to our God. We are not sent to be good news to the left or right, the rich or privileged, the powerful and elites. Good news to the poor.

I'm not so naïve as to think it's enough to say that and the logjams will break. Many don't believe it and even blame the poor for their impoverishment. Others will disagree on the best way to help the poor. But it is the single focus that can guide Christians into honest dialogue in search of ways forward. It is the religious ground we can and must stand on. God loves each and all. We all are brothers and sisters. We all share the dignity of God's loving creation. How we respond to those most in need is the measure of the quality of our Christian life and depth.

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We need to take courage and celebrate when the leaders of our communities respond to that Gospel call and speak out with that vision. Religious communities and the bishops' conference have been outspoken and active for a long time in

defense and support of refugees and migrants, challenging the administration's policies and actions at the southern border. In a statement in the last few days calling for an end to the shutdown, the bishops noted that bishops on neither side of the border want a wall.

In a similar but much more extensive statement available on the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns website, a broad coalition of Catholic communities and coalitions issued a statement called "Facing the Crisis: A Catholic Offer of Wisdom and Courage to Congress." It addresses political virtues and vices in a nation in crisis, border security and immigration reform, racial justice and voter suppression, climate change and care for the environment, nonviolence and an end to war and the strategy of fear, and good politics at the service of justice and peace. And it addresses them all not in a way to appeal to the left or right in U.S. politics, but from the root care for providing good news to the poor, the oppressed, the blind and the captive.

All members of the body of Christ

In the Jan. 27 passage from the first letter to the Corinthians, we have the extended metaphor of the many parts of the body of Christ. We all have different gifts, skills, opportunities, graces and roles. Whatever each of them is, they all are meant to be put into action together in these times to bring good news to the poor.

We need to give thanks for those who are doing that in what ever ways they can, in word and action, listening, working, praying. Let the Spirit move in, through, and among us.

[Jesuit Fr. James E. Hug serves as sacramental minister for the Adrian Dominican Sisters and writes on spirituality for social transformation. His blog, "Truth that does Justice," can be found on the website for the Dominican Center: Spirituality for Mission.]