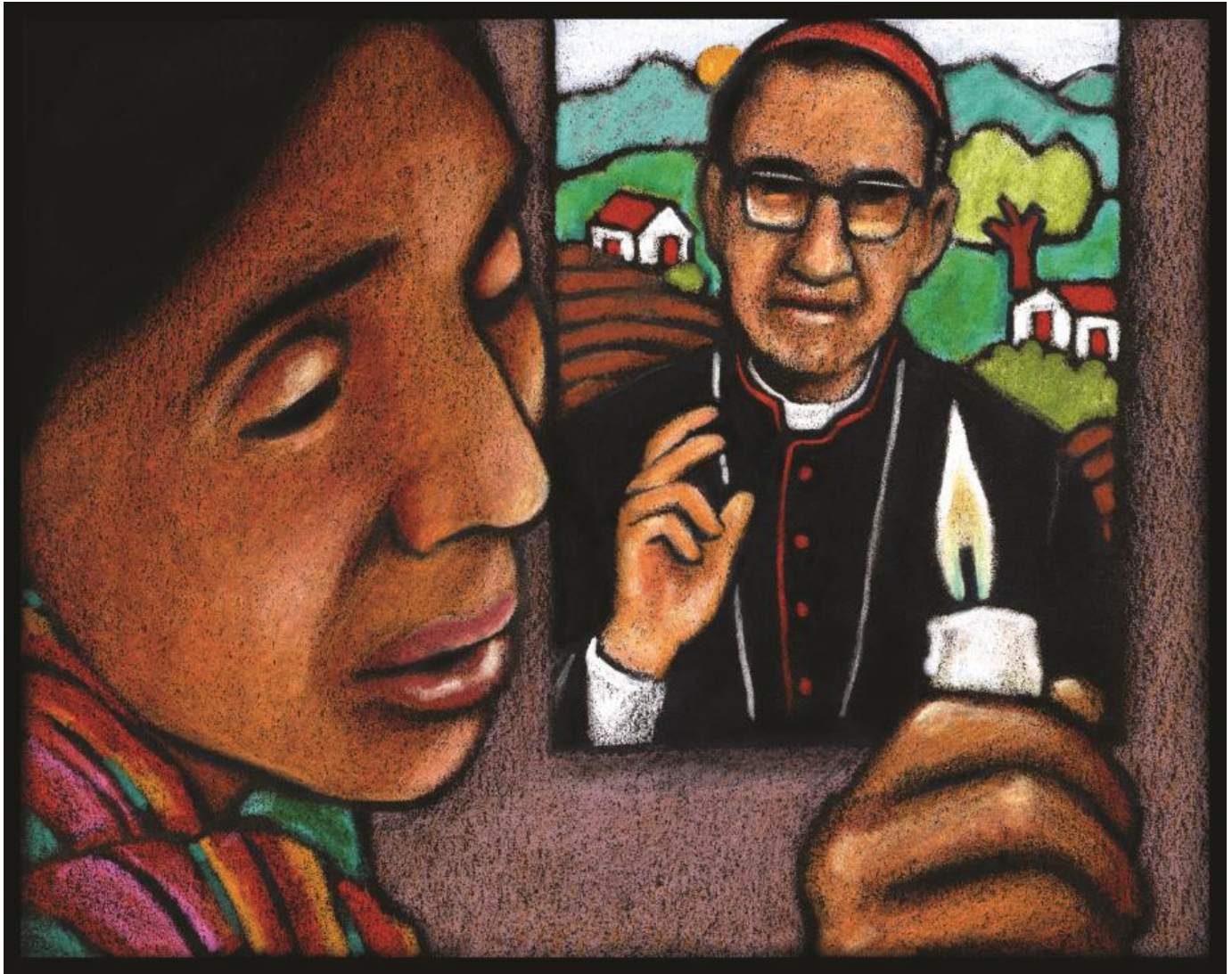


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Should the Gospel we profess and the liturgy we do raise in us some great unease with the political, economic, military and environmental conditions that are our responsibility as U.S. citizens and residents?

Perhaps the core of our Lent this year is well grasped in these few lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins' best known poem, "God's Grandeur," written in 1877:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell; the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

The words let us say, "That's it! I know it. I feel it." This Hopkins does in very particular images. We wear shoes as we tread and they keep us from feeling in our own flesh how "the earth is bare now." "Being shod" becomes a metaphor for isolation, alienation.

But Hopkins also has images for our life among others, for the world we have created: "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell." That "all" is the physical world of which we are part, but does not that smudge and that smell also permeate our economies and hierarchies and priorities? And if here too we can say, "That's it. I know it. I feel it," then our "I" is a way to seek solidarity. That's hard for us. Most of us are just privileged enough to cast our lots easily with the corporate and political and military

powers-that-be. That's the temptation — a good Lenten word — for who can argue that the Gospel choice is to stand with the earth and those who know perfectly well what it means to be "seared" and "bleared" and "smeared"?

We know that all is not well in the world. Many of us feel we have no ability and so perhaps no responsibility (no response ability?) to grapple with the "wars and rumors of wars," the ones waged against each other or against the earth itself. But have we noticed that most of the wars are so subtle we just call them "life in the 21st century"? We modestly settle for holding our own little worlds together, and that seems hard enough.

Others among us go so far as to recognize, name and grieve for the troubles, but so often the more we know, the more helpless and even ignorant we feel. Who am I to understand the wars, the economies, the science? "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me" is often as far as we feel we can ever go.

Lent can put us somewhere else entirely. One could see it as a whole tribe of "re" verbs that both demand and make a future. Here's a start: Lent is Repent. Return. Refrain. Renew. Reconcile. Restore. Relent. Reform. Renounce. I would add repair, or its noun form, reparation — and it may be key. The subject we need for all these verbs is first-person plural, and that is a great hurdle for us, because all of these are about our corporate life as a nation and as a particular assembly within that nation. They are likewise about our corporate life within the church.

The Confiteor at the Latin Mass had one phrase that everyone knew: "Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!" From the Latin "culpa" we have the English words "culprit" and "culpable." The associations of culpa are with fault, sin, crime, evil, harm done.

We said in the confessional: "for I have sinned." If that was ever adequate, the time is long over. "Alone or with others?" might have been an often-asked question, but it was still all about "me." But it isn't now. It's about us. Sin once seemed something individuals did. Perhaps the regular practice of communal penance services was

building some sense of communal responsibility, some sense of "for we have sinned," but the powers-that-be insisted that we hold to individual confession of my sins.

"Mea culpa" doesn't do it. What is our fault/sin/evil? That, I suggest, could be the task of Lent this year: To do a corporate examination of our conscience and to face honestly the results. Sound negative? No more than Papa Francis is negative when he sees no tension between loving affirmation of persons and a no-nonsense call for them to do justice.

If we are deeply involved in unjust ways, we need to study how the injustice is happening and find our place in turning it around. This costs. Our repentance, to make just what is not just, will be hard. We need to take seriously that the burden will be lighter than we can imagine, even perhaps a joy.

Let me suggest just one situation I know well as a way to understand this corporate culpa. Through seven years, my wife and I worked with young adults who were Iraqi and who were refugees in Syria. We knew them and we knew their families. Over and over we heard news of yet additional difficulties and burdens for these families, whether in Syria or back in Iraq: sudden deaths from uncommon diseases, long suffering from such diseases, corruption from top to bottom that eclipses anything in Saddam's time, bureaucratic blunders affecting pensions and property, financial troubles galore in an economy where only a few are succeeding and many are without work, the lack of good education at any level leaving so few hopes for the next generation, the breakdown of relations in extended families (the core of the society through centuries), the breakdown also of the shared community among people of different backgrounds and ethnicities and religions, the end of the physical environment that made Baghdad dear to its people, the loss of that sense of tolerance and shared life that is now only a memory. On and on.

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We thought sometimes that nearly the entire Iraqi population was to live out their lives stricken over and over by direct results of 13 years of sanctions followed by invasion and nine years of occupation. And not only their lives, but as scripture says: the children and the children's children. In the United States, Iraq is over and largely forgotten. But it isn't over. In late 2011 President Obama, observing the departure of the last U.S. military forces, proclaimed what a glorious thing had been done for Iraq. This was Orwell's newspeak at its most arrogant. We never apologize, do we? And we take no responsibility for the ongoing results of our arrogance.

Mea maxima culpa? Yes, and some military veterans have said it and do say it and they work for reconciliation. But like so many military and political and economic deeds, this ongoing destruction is "nostra" culpa. It is not wrong to say clearly that in this society we all bear responsibility for the deeds done with our money and in our name.

That is one story. We know there are more. Where is the responsibility for the deaths by police violence or by the desert's heat of those trying to enter this nation to work and help their families? Where is the responsibility for "the new Jim Crow," the mass incarceration of the African American male population in the United States? Where the responsibility for choosing to pay for prisons, often now in corporate hands, and not for the pre-kindergarten programs and much else that would help to end the need for prisons? In so many ways, we live with dealing death and suffering as national policies.

Who will say "mea culpa" to these evils? They involve us all. Realizing that and taking responsibility is a beginning. The point is not absolution but resolution and reparation. What are we going to do? How well can we take hold of some one strand to understand how it works, to learn what efforts are being made for change and what efforts to at least refuse support? A couple generations ago, the preaching often seemed to say we are sordid individuals because of our private sins. We seemed never to think corporately. The reaction to this has been 50 years of much preaching and teaching in a very different mentality, but still without probing, without challenge, without a solid understanding that much evil is being done in our day, and how are we implicated? And can there still be any doubt that this is a

seamless garment?

Do we need Lent? As never before. But how shall we keep it and how preach it? What preaching, what teaching, what practice, what educational effort? Two examples:

The Lenten rites of initiation are public rituals that involve not only the elect, but all of us in the assembly. For example, the rites of scrutiny: Are they ritualized to involve the whole assembly in this scrutinizing of our actions as a church community and a political community? Do we place ourselves as the baptized under the scrutiny of the Gospel itself? Do we grasp that the "exorcism" of these scrutiny rites is best directed at us all? Do we know that these rites are to be preached as mystagogy, not as explanations? These scrutinies are, as a whole, scary invitations.

The scriptures of Year A in Lent are there for us to ponder how sin means far more than what I do, or fail to do. Examples: "Bear your share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God" (Second Sunday). So many parishes will sing "Amazing Grace" on the Fourth Sunday of Lent: "I once was blind but now I see." The author was a man who had once traded in slaves but then saw slavery as sin, as blindness, as a net that was held by many. Fifth Sunday: "O my people, I will open your graves." People! We are in this together. Also on that Sunday: "The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands." Indeed we are! And on the last Sunday of Lent: "I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame." And: "I am innocent of this man's blood." Aren't we all claiming that?

Lent is often thought of as a time to purify ourselves of bad habits or extra weight. We like that it has a beginning and an end. But conversion is not like that. If Lent is a time of training and of communal pondering where we go from here, then its end is not the end. We will have incorporated (taken into the body we are) some more mature determination about who we are and what we are to be in this society. Perhaps this Lent we will challenge ourselves to confront the sin of the world, the sin we commission and so commit, the sin we lose track of, forget. Nostra culpa! But know what? We do this because we believe God loved this world!

Editor's note: This reflection was originally published in the March 2014 issue of [*Celebration*](#). Sign up to receive [*daily Lenten reflections*](#).

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