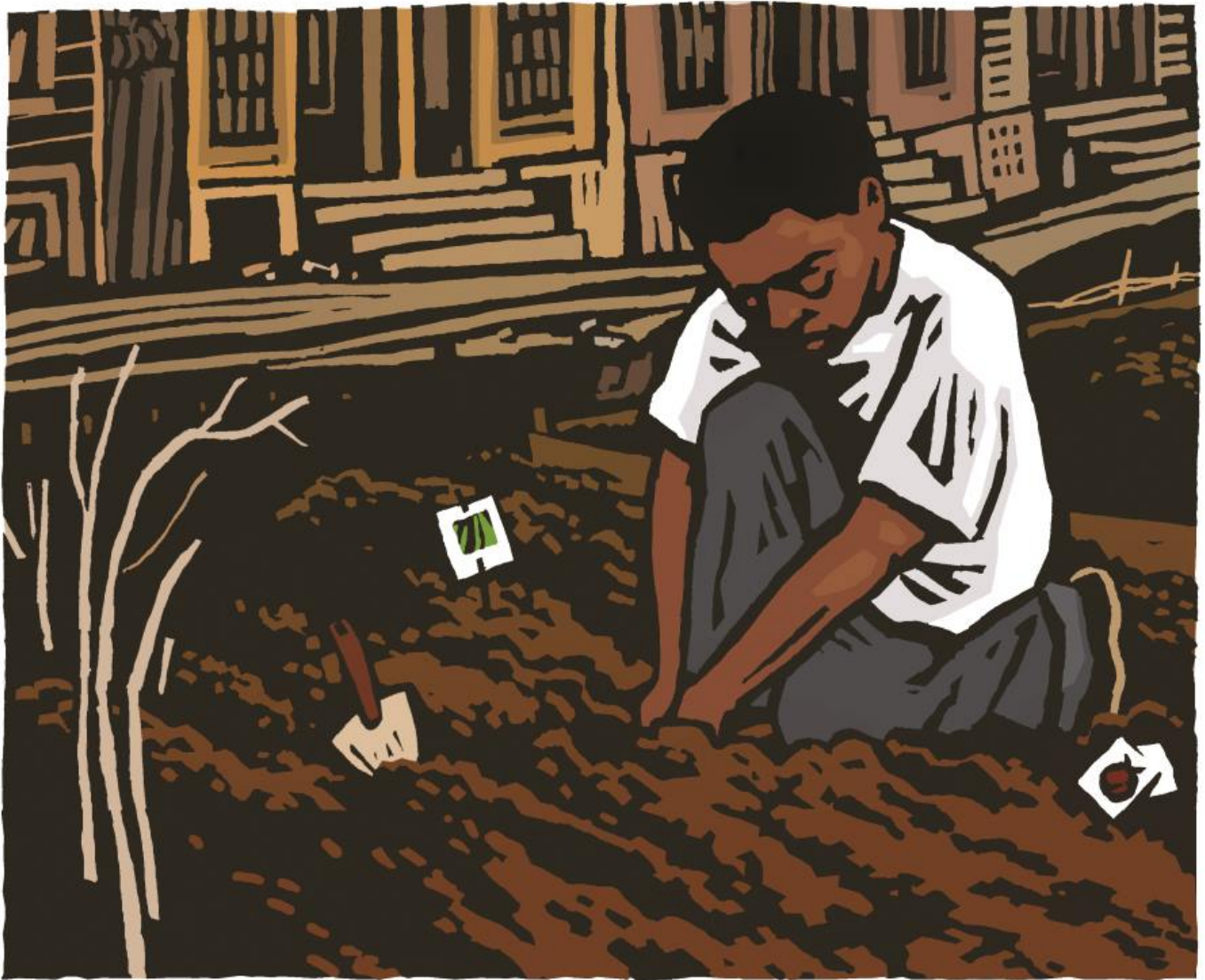


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(Julie Lonneman)



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I discovered recently that I had almost forgotten Sexagesima Sunday. Along with its companions, Septuagesima and Quinquagesima, Sexagesima Sunday disappeared from the Roman Rite when the reform of our calendar was mandated by Vatican II.

The line to the cashier in a favorite secondhand store has customers pass by bins of used DVDs, CDs and LPs. Having found a pair of jeans in good condition I hoped would fit (no try-on room) I was in that checkout line when I saw, crammed in with operas, symphonies and musicals, a boxed set of Gregorian chants sung by an Austrian choir: three unscratched LPs.

Later I Googled the information on the record labels and quickly found not only that eBay sellers were asking 10 times the \$3 I paid, but that The New York Times had reviewed these very recordings favorably in July 1964 (the month LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act and I turned 23). The recordings began with "Ad te levavi animam meam," "To you, Lord, I lift my spirit," the first sound of each year's Advent.

When I put the needle on the first band of Side 3 and heard that urgent "Exsurge, Domine," "Rise up, O Lord," I remembered how I had waited each year for that Introit of Sexagesima Sunday, waited for its text and its chant. Somehow these had so startled me when I first paid any attention: Exsurge, quare obdormis, Domine? Exsurge et ne repellas in finem. Quare faciem tuam avertis, oblivisceris tribulationem nostram? Adhaesit in terra venter noster. Exsurge, Domine, adjuva nos et libera nos.

Perhaps I tried to translate this into English in those days, to go beyond the rather unpoetic English of the hand missals. I knew it needed an English that matched not just the words of these final verses of Psalm 44 (missals then said Psalm 43), but matched the sound of that chant probably composed over many years by many singers. The ICEL translation of 1994 comes closer than any I found or made three decades earlier:

Wake up! Why do you sleep, Lord?

Wake up! Do not reject us forever!

Why do you hide from us?

Why ignore how much we suffer?

We grovel in the dust,

clutching at the ground.

Wake up and help us.

Rescue us!

What's going on? Is this some bit of primitive bargaining, some tribal ritual for times of drought and famine? Why such physical lamentation? The Latin seems so, and the Hebrew before it was likely more so: Our bellies cleave to the ground! "Belly" is venter in the Latin, the same word translated "womb" when we pray the Hail Mary. "Clutch" in the ICEL translation (often "cleave" elsewhere) is rendering the Latin adhaesit, which is, as our ears will tell us, the root of "adhesive."

Is this text like the despair of Psalm 88, grabbing at strong verbs in the ICEL translation to express how many ways we hurt?

Your torments track me down,

your rage consumes me,

your trials destroy me.

All day they flood around me,

pressing down, closing me in.

You took my friends from me,

darkness is all I have left.

These texts, abrasive as they seem to us, are as essential to our vocabulary as words of gratitude. The title Pope Francis gave to his letter, "The Joy of the Gospel," is about a joy that can only come from the pope's acquaintance with what made some psalmist write down these angry, despairing laments. Francis washes and kisses feet that ache on Holy Thursday. He unexpectedly tells the motorcade to stop so he can walk alone to Israel's separation wall, lean on that wall and pray. Could this be done without deep groans and lamentation? Is this what flows from the joy of the Gospel and asks, "Why do you sleep, Lord?"

Can Lent be Lent for us in these times unless we make such lamentation integral to our lives and ritual? We rehearse our baptized responsibility to intercede for the world God so loves, and to lament with and for that world, ourselves included. I mention here two causes for such lament in 2015.

One. I brought up the separation wall (sometimes called by Israel the "security fence" and sometimes called by Palestinians "the apartheid wall"). Do we know enough to lament as Francis did? Do we know its height and length? The effects its builders intended? Its example (the one built on the U.S. border with Mexico)? Because the United States government consistently supports Israel both financially and politically, what responsibility do we U.S. citizens have? What have our U.S. bishops had to say? What have they done to educate people about it? Why are we Catholics not talking about this wall or the apartheid system it has come to represent? "Holy Land" pilgrimages still abound. Does anyone return from those pilgrimages to tell about a wall?

Two. Perhaps as never before, we Americans are being tested: Can our striving toward political equality, and equality before the law, survive the economic free-for-all that puts more of the wealth into fewer hands? We can easily lament the lot of the poor, but in the world as it is, that won't do. Basil, bishop of Caesarea, spoke the language of the prophet Amos the best he could 1700 years ago. His notion of "belongs" might come as a surprise to many of us: "The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry. The coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money you put in the bank belongs to the poor."

Basil's lament, to our ears, is about the way that the dominant economic system, the one we take both for granted and for good, would reject that word "belongs" as heresy. Why? Because the system we tolerate seems clear: Anything and everything

is to be owned individually (and corporations are every day being considered as "persons"). We're so used to this that our imaginations stop short when searching out an alternative. I buy, I sell, I own. Therefore I am. One can even own rights to the air above and to what is below the earth's surface.

Property: owning land and rights and whatever else — a sacred right or a failed idea? I'm thinking of senior year of high school and our very fine teacher telling us how Tennyson used the sound of the hooves of a galloping horse to satirize what was happening in Victoria's kingdom. The poem is "Northern Farmer: New Style," and the poet wrote in the farmer's English as he tells his son that "love" is no reason to marry. The poem begins:

Doesn't thou 'ear my 'erse's legs, as they canters away?

Proputty, proputty, proputty — that's what I 'ears 'em say.

Proputty, proputty, proputty — Sam, thou's an ass for thy pains:

Theer's moor sense i' one o' 'is legs, nor in all thy brains.

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Tennyson wrote the poem in the 1860s even as Karl Marx was researching and writing *Das Kapital* in the British Library. Both of them feared what the reign of "proputty" would do to humankind.

And here we are in the age of Thomas Piketty, whose careful scholarship puts flesh and bones on what is deeply wrong when "proputty" is given free rein. While I'm still not sure I can handle Piketty's 600-plus pages of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, April 2014), I have tried to learn from reviews what Piketty's research supports. Let me suggest several of these available online:

Timothy Shenk [discussed four recent books](#), including Piketty's (The Nation, May 5, 2014): "Europe's per capital growth dropped to just below 2 percent from 1980 to 2012; the United States' was even slower, coming in at 1.3 percent. Meanwhile, the link between rising GDP and falling inequality was severed, with the largest gains

from diminished growth flowing to the richest of the rich — not even to the 1 percent, but to the one-tenth of 1 percent and higher."

Paul Krugman [reviewed Piketty's work](#) in The New York Review of Books (May 8, 2014), saying, "Piketty has transformed our economic discourse; we'll never talk about wealth and inequality the same way we used to."

John Cassidy, [in The New Yorker](#) (March 31, 2014), recounted the paths that led Piketty to and through the research for his book, then discussed some symptoms. For example: "In the nineteen-fifties, the average American chief executive was paid about twenty times as much as the typical employee of his firm. These days, at Fortune 500 companies, the pay ratio between the corner office and the shop floor is more than two hundred to one, and many CEOs do even better. In 2011, Apple's Tim Cook received three hundred and seventy-eight million dollars in salary, stock, and other benefits, which was sixty-two hundred and fifty-eight times the wage of an average Apple employee." Cassidy concludes: "Piketty has written a book that nobody interested in a defining issue of our era can afford to ignore."

Jesuit Fr. Matthew Carnes, [in America \(August 18, 2014\), observes](#): "Notice, though, that Piketty's indictment of capitalism's tendency toward inequality is not axiomatic. It does not claim that capitalism inexorably produces inequality. Rather, his critique is empirical, and for this reason it is perhaps even more disturbing. It shows that for nearly all countries and nearly all periods over the past three centuries for which we have data, capitalism has produced highly unequal concentrations of wealth. This has been true despite variation in levels of state intervention and regulation, differences in leaders and partisan politics and even levels of corruption."

Statistics for the United States abound. [Consider just two](#): "For every dollar earned by a family in the bottom 90 percent, a person in the top 0.01 percent earns nearly \$1000." And: "Since 1980, the average real income of the 1 percent has shot up more than 175 percent, while the bottom 90 percent's real income didn't budge." That's inequality within the nation. The nation itself, with 5 percent of the world's people, has 25 percent of the world's wealth. That too is inequality.

I am arguing for the importance of the issue and for Lenten lamentation. How well informed (and well formed) are we and our church communities by more than a century of reflection on church documents? How well informed are we of the Basil-to-Francis articulation of the Gospel in relation to equality? Pope Francis is not naive

about economics; he's paid attention in his own home country and beyond. He shows us what is lamentable in our world and calls for radical change. But do we speak the language of lament? Do we have the right in our lives and liturgy to prioritize such economic violence to the earth and its peoples?

Consider a [Huffington Post item from April 28, 2014](#):

Pope Francis took a hard stance against inequality on Monday in a tweet sent from his official Twitter page: "Inequality is the root of social evil." ... The Pontiff's warning comes months after he called unfettered capitalism "a new tyranny" and urged global leaders to fight growing income inequality in his first major written work as pope. He laid out the platform for his papacy [Evangelii Gaudium] last November, attacking the "idolatry of money" and calling on politicians to guarantee all citizens "dignified work, education and healthcare."

Here are these two laments for our world but also for our distracted selves and distracted churches: one image a separation wall, one a chasm of inequality. How shall we speak of them?

**Editor's note:** *This reflection was originally published in the March 2015 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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