Opinion
Spirituality
Book Reviews



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by Brenda McLaughlin

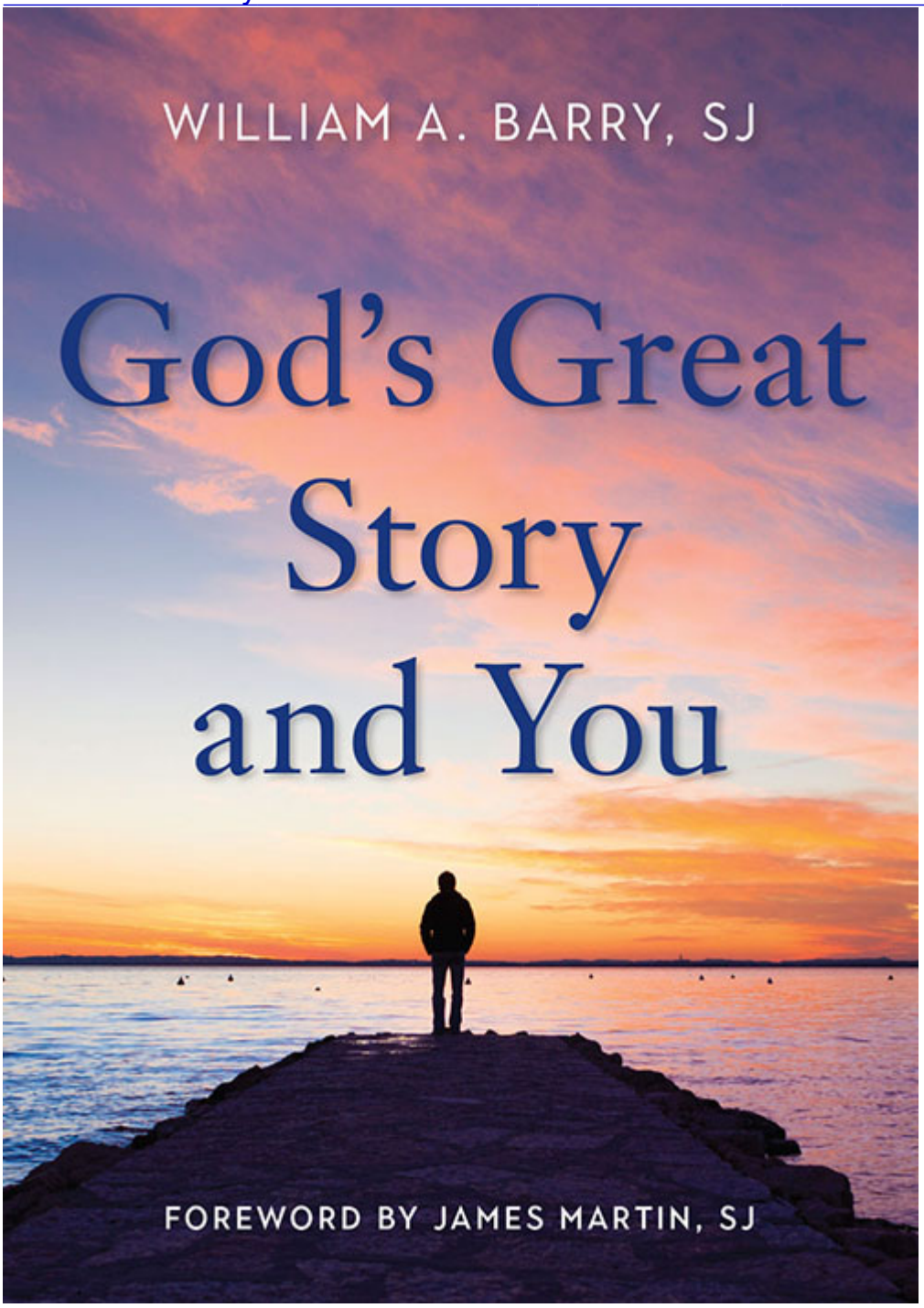
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God's Great Story and You
William A. Barry, SJ
239 pages; Loyola Press
$14.99

Many people took up so-called pandemic projects during COVID-19 lockdowns. Yeast, for example, was hard to find for a time on grocery store shelves, as many

were baking bread at home. Jesuit Fr. William Barry had written a slew of books on spirituality over the years, so it is no surprise that his pandemic project was to write another gem — his last precious offer of leaven for the world, in his 90th year, no less.

God's Great Story and You is an invitation to take Jesus' hand, realize the presence of God's love and joy in each of our being, and act as images of God. "The grand story of the world begins with this fundamental reality: God loves us and trusts us so much that he wants us to be coworkers in bringing about the divine dream for our world," he writes.

It is breathtaking to think that God wants *our* friendship and cooperation in helping to accomplish God's own vision. "A key aspect of the Trinity's deliberation about creating humans was the desire to invite us into friendship with God," Barry writes. Dare we accept the call?

To aid our deliberation, Barry traces the arc of the story of God's creation and action in the world out of love so that we might respond in kind. The entirety of the book — indeed the whole of Barry's work — encompasses friendship with God as the leitmotif.

Barry was a giant in the field of spirituality. In addition to his books, he was a renowned spiritual director, and he helped form many Christians to accompany others on their unique spiritual paths.

While the term "director" might ring at first blush as dictatorial, spiritual direction is quite the opposite. By Barry's own definition, in collaboration with co-author Jesuit Fr. William Connolly in *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, published in 1982, Christian spiritual direction is "help given by one believer to another that enables the latter to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship."

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In *God's Great Story and You*, Barry directs the reader's attention to God's active presence in the world and the string of invitations for God's people (you and me) to

respond to the call continuously. One can read Barry's book as if sitting with him (and God) on a retreat without ever leaving the comfort of home.

Through "the unfolding story of creation, conflict, redemption, and grace," Barry points us to God's offer of friendship, forgiveness and help along our way.

The text is structured with prompts to read, pray and reflect on the scriptural passages for oneself with the added support — as if in conversation — of Barry's own commentary on the same. It is clear that he knew the stories inside and out, while he was keenly aware they are always new. Conveying his full trust in God, Barry allows ample room for the reader to hear God's voice for herself or himself and discern one's own response.

Bill (I finally dispensed with calling him Fr. Barry a few years ago) was my spiritual director for eight years or so until he died in December 2020. I used to joke to friends that he didn't ever *do* anything except tell me to talk to God, and I wondered why I bothered to drive 95 miles to see him every month (until the pandemic moved our meetings to Skype) for the same spiritual advice over and over!

But Bill knew exactly what he was doing, and I continued making the trip. He knew how to point me to God and how to get way out of God's way.



Jesuit Fr. William Barry talks about friendship with God in a 2009 video. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Loyola Press)

Most masterfully, he held the space for God's presence in the conversation and in my life — for me to be forthright with all of my protests about God's seeming absence (my most common complaint), no matter God's activity despite my blindness to it. He does the same for his readers.

Struggles of all kind ensue on scales large and small in our lives the world over. We seem bent on naming the winners and losers in our conflicts, and we long for heroes.

Sometimes, we excuse our failings: "I'm only human." We are human, to be sure, but our humanity is not what makes us weak. Indeed, our humanity is the very crux of our nature.

"It is our great fortune and our challenge that we have to choose to be images of God; very often, indeed, too often, we choose to act inhumanly, and thus are part of the problem of the universe, not part of God's dream for it. Yet, God chooses to make us in God's image and to trust us to cooperate intentionally with God in the development of the universe," Barry writes.

When we flounder or fail and when we are oppressed, we look for someone to help and guide us, someone to settle our scores, perhaps, and set things right. Measured against conventional ways of thinking, God's way is both weird and ordinary at the same time. "Jesus has told us the most important things in his mind and heart, all that he knows of his Father. This is what we do with friends, isn't it, tell them what's most important to us, the deepest things in our hearts and minds?"

Amid the pandemic, we've endured months of caution about proximity to others. Conversely, the close contact with God to which Barry invites us is for the very purpose of contagion, though opposite of disease. "God's love, shown in Jesus' willingness to accept the worst that hate can do and not respond in kind, wants to transform the evil we do by facing it with love."

We cannot do this alone. It is for us, then, to take God's hand in ours, and realize, as depicted in John's Gospel (20:19-23), the Spirit that came "upon the disciples as Jesus breathed on them" is present also for us who are followers now.

Barry was a good friend of Jesus, and his voice rings and resonates beyond the grave. He has raised a vital question: "How can we mobilize ourselves to try to bring about a more just and caring society in our communities and countries?"

The answer lies in our union with "God's dream," such that we, too, might be leaven for the world. Imagine the possibilities! May we all join God as friends.

Related: Jesuit Fr. Bill Barry and a friendship like no other
A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 21-Feb 3, 2022** print issue under the headline: Fr. Barry's final book invites us to take God's hand.