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Editorial: A search for light amid dark tidings

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light,
sun of justice:
come and shine on those who dwell in
darkness
and in the shadow of death.

There are few prayers more evocative than the O Antiphons of Advent. Blending poetry and theology, they teach us lessons about the human condition and our relationship with the divine that a hundred pages of prose cannot. They confront us with the fear we, in our human brokenness, have felt when we look into the shadows of doubt, the darkness of our own frailties and mortality. We do not abandon ourselves to despair because we also have known the splendor of the Radiant Dawn. We have known -- however fleetingly -- the sun of justice. Because of this we have hope.

And we need hope.

This issue of *NCR* is heavy with stories of shadow and darkness. The stories tell of people, sincere believers in the eternal light and sun of justice, who are being silenced: Jesuit Fr. Bill Brennan in Milwaukee (see story), Roy Bourgeois (see story and see story), a Wisconsin pastor removed from his parish on questionable charges of breaking the seal of confession (see story), Fr. Helmut Schüller in Austria (see story), Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery in Ireland (see story). Scholars at the University of San Diego (see story). A deacon stopped from talking to other deacons (see story). The silencing of academics -- through direct edict or by intimidation -- is most worrying and must be looked at seriously. The level of fear among the academic community, especially the theologians, is the highest we have ever seen. We fear that we are losing our best Catholic thinkers. This would be a shameful waste that

ultimately will harm us all.

But these are only examples of high-profile cases and individuals. In the shadows of darkness, there are many more stories. The silenced live among us.

Every day at the *NCR* editorial offices we receive phone calls, emails and letters from people who are afraid: high school and religious education teachers who are afraid to talk openly in class. Pastoral workers unsure of how to respond to an edict from the chancery or the pastor. Ecumenical relationships built up over years severed by a single decree. Threats to withhold Communion from people used to come in four-year cycles and involved a politician. Now we're hearing stories about people denied sacraments because they are gay or support women's ordination.

Is this the church we want to live in? The answer must be a resounding no. Such a church will dwindle into insignificance.

Amid the shadows and darkness, however, some church leaders are shining lights. This editorial provides one example.

Bishop Patrick Joseph McGrath of San Jose, Calif., meets annually with the theology faculty of Santa Clara University, the sole Catholic university in his diocese. While the U.S. bishops' Doctrine Committee was investigating St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, McGrath warmly welcomed the Catholic Theological Society of America to his diocese, spending time with its members during their annual meeting.

Archbishop Robert Carlson of St. Louis also hosts meetings with the theology faculties from Catholic colleges in his archdiocese. Earlier in 2012 we reported how he reached out to a parish community, St. Cronan, hurt by the two previous archbishops (*NCR*, Feb. 17-March 1). He met with parish leadership and joined a parish picnic. Carlson promised the parish leaders that he would stay engaged: "We've begun a journey," he said. "What's the next step? I don't know. When I was ordained 40 years ago, I had all the answers."

It was such humility that Bishop Walter Sullivan (Page 9) exhibited throughout the 30 years he led the Richmond, Va., diocese. We've been told that among the last visitors Sullivan saw was an African-American preacher. The two had met before the man was a minister, when he was incarcerated and Sullivan was visiting his jail. They kept in touch after the man's release and as he began his new life. Sullivan was a noted progressive, a liberal. But he put people before ideology. It's no wonder 400 people would come to sing to Sullivan as he lay dying.

That is the kind of church we want.

In March, Florian Stangl, 26, was elected to the parish council of the local parish in Stützenhofen, Austria. His pastor barred him from the post because Stangl was living in a registered domestic partnership with a man. The Vienna archdiocese upheld the ban, but when Stangl asked to meet with Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Schönborn said, yes, come to lunch and bring your partner. After the meeting, Schönborn said that he had been "deeply impressed" by Stangl's commitment to serving the Gospel and reinstated him to the parish council. Here is another example of putting people before ideology, the Gospel made real.

As this year closes and darkness seems so near, we need more stories of hope and light. In 2013, *NCR* will be looking for stories that are like light at dawn, shining into the darkness that overshadows us and

guiding us on the way of peace. In a word, it's time for Incarnation.

O Root of Jesse's stem,
sign of God's love for all God's people:
come to save us without delay!

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