

Hungering and Thirsting for Justice

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.
With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you.
Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less.
That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners
of everything that can't be bought.

You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God.
He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

You're blessed when you care.
At the moment of being "care-full," you find yourselves cared for.

You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right.
Then you can see God in the outside world.

You're blessed when you can show people
how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.
That's when you discover who you really are,
and your place in God's family.

You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution.
The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

Matthew 5:2-10 (*The Message*)

Hungering and Thirsting for Justice

Real-Life
Stories
by Young Adult
Catholics

Edited by
Lacey Louwagie & Kate Ward

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Introduction

Fall of 2001 found both editors of this anthology in college—Kate in her first semester, and Lacey beginning her final year. The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centers made it a difficult time for all Americans, but Catholics walked in a double darkness. Our Church was exploding around us with stories of sexual abuse by priests and, worse yet, systematic and long-lasting cover-ups of that abuse by our trusted leaders, the bishops. In Boston, the epicenter of all that was becoming known, Kate’s friends asked her, “How can you stay?” But she remembered the first Sunday after September 11, when Catholic students packed the church as the campus priest helped everyone find a glimmer of hope, leading them in prayers for peace. Kate knew there was still so much good in the Church. But how could she make the case for the Church in the face of so much evil?

Many of us young adults who remained Catholic in those days felt a need to learn more about our faith—its history and its practice—in the midst of the growing crisis. Kate checked saints’ biographies out of the library and taught herself how to pray the Rosary. She engaged in long, late-night prayer sessions, on which she would like to, but probably shouldn’t, blame some of her dismal freshman grades. She also found vibrant campus ministers and thoughtful, committed Catholic students who encouraged her in her searching. From the other students, she learned the deep peace of Taizé prayer and the hokey glee of Pope jokes. As the Massachusetts bishops banned gay and lesbian couples from adopting through Catholic Charities and (unsuccessfully) fought against same-sex marriage in the state, Kate listened as some of her most devout Catholic friends shared their pain in loving a Church that opposed their dreams of falling in love and starting families. She found a community to pray with, to talk with, to share her questions.

Lacey grew up in a conservative parish that insisted Catholicism was

about answers instead of questions. Still, as the congregation prayed for vocations and listened to laments about the priest shortage every week, her first big question emerged: Why does the priesthood leave so many people out? When she was ten years old, her parish priest gave an emphatic homily about why women couldn't become priests (because Jesus was a man) in response to her persistent questions. That answer didn't satisfy, and starting in college she "took to the pulpit" by giving speeches, doing research, and writing essays and letters about women's ordination. But she also clung to the reassurance of ancient Catholic traditions. In the days following September 11, Lacey turned to a habit that had comforted her since she was thirteen—falling asleep to the rhythm of the prayers of the Rosary as it slipped through her fingers, awaking to find the familiar indentations in her skin left from clutching the beads all night long.

The two of us still have so many questions. Why do some bishops deny communion to politicians who are pro-choice, but never to those who are pro-death penalty? Why do some Catholic employers, heirs to the social thought of Pope Leo XIII, union-bust and lay off workers as if their Catholic identity had nothing to do with their business practice? In a nation of great wealth and staggering economic inequality, why aren't more Catholics shouting our social gospel from the rooftops and why isn't (it sometimes seems) anybody hearing the few who are?

Thank God for beloved communities who accompany us on the search for justice. Kate has been blessed by being part of a wonderful prayer group in Chicago, while Lacey never stops being thankful for a late aunt who was a questioning nun and an uncle who is a listening priest.

We both belong to a national family of young people seeking Church reform, and we edit a group blog of young adults musing on the joys and sorrows of life as Catholics who hunger and thirst for justice. (Come visit us online at youngadulthoodcatholics-blog.com.)

One day, a moving, funny piece by one of our blog's contributors, Justin Sengstock, caught the eye of Gregory Pierce, president of ACTA Publications in Chicago, a publisher of books for the Catholic/Christian market. He contacted us and suggested we put together this book, and now we joyfully offer you a sampling of ten original stories from this small community, in print for the first time: ten dialogue partners on the search for justice. We

hope their stories will inspire you to learn more about the causes that move them, perhaps to become involved. More than that, we hope their stories will inspire you to find the place where God gives you the quiet determination of Katherine Schmidt, the mystical hope of Erin Lorenz, the joyful certainty of Phillip Clark. The world needs each of us to hunger and thirst for justice and, like these writers, to answer the call of that hunger.

Common themes emerged—some expected, some less so—as we read the submissions we’d collected. Having both gone through our own experiments with traditional piety, we smiled in recognition when we read of José Martinez’s pocket Rosary and Justin Sengstock’s prayers in Latin. Like the two of us did, both men learned that faith grows in surprising ways, no matter how you pray. The SOA/WHINSEC protest was a touchstone for a number of our writers (although the name has changed, the protest continues).

And anyone wondering whether Catholic education still presents a unique experience to young people should pick up this book and put their mind at rest. In fact, we joked that we should call it, “How Catholic College Made Me a Radical!” Catholic colleges were where Magalí Del Bueno found her calling as a witness for other immigrants and where Anna Zaros learned about peacebuilding, a passion that would take her halfway across the world. And not all of our writers took their experiences in the same direction. Lauren Ivory worked hard as a justice activist and only later discerned her true calling to chaplaincy, helping people one on one. Yet Bill Przylucki, who still thinks “almost daily” about the activists by his side in college, calls activism something he is “born to do.” When he hears himself referred to as a “social-justice Catholic,” he asks the question that unifies all of our stories: “Is there another kind of Catholic?”

Our writers strive to find their place within a Church and in a world that does not always hear the voices of those who cry for justice. Secure in her own stance against the death penalty, Katherine Schmidt struggled with the apathy of her fellow students, including future priests. Anna Zaros found that her American citizenship made her a suspect peacebuilder in the eyes of some Filipino colleagues. Johanna Hatch is aware that her activism as a clinic escort diminishes her in the eyes of many Catholics, yet she also hesitates to share her faith with her fellow volunteers, seeking out a place for herself on the margins.

Catholics in America, a recent study of American Catholics led by a professor at Catholic University of America, asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement, “I cannot imagine being anything but Catholic.” Sixty-nine percent of the youngest generation of Catholics surveyed—folks born no earlier than 1979—agreed. This deep commitment to their Catholic identity shines through in our writers, despite their questions, disappointment, and sometimes downright holy anger with the institutional Church.

We see this fidelity in the ways Erin Lorenz remembers important events happening not in March of a certain year but during Lent, and Phillip Clark turns to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as a first resource when he questions his own identity. Johanna Hatch and Anna Zaros, inspired by the charisms of the women religious who taught them, discern their own vocations as laywomen. Magalí Del Bueno’s encounters with immigrants bring to mind biblical images of the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt, and José Martínez’s prayerful words from the Mass apply to all activists: “We wait in joyful hope.”

This book might seem to read like a roll call of painful growing issues within the Church: immigrant justice, women’s ordination, abortion, acceptance of gay people, discouragement with Church hierarchy. Our call for submissions, however, didn’t mention any of these issues. What you have in this book is simply what we got when we asked young Catholics what makes them hunger and thirst for justice. These are the issues we young Catholics are thinking about, praying over, and living through in our daily lives. Take these stories for what they are, in the spirit in which they were written.

The contributors to this volume are part of the Body of Christ: young and energetic, ready to love, ready to march, ready to sit and listen. They reflect the entire people of God: funny, thoughtful, sad, resigned, boiling over with anger, faithful and faith-filled.

Like it or not, this is who we young adult Catholics are and why we are still here: for the Church, for the justice for which we hunger and thirst, for and because of one another.

Lacey Louwagie and Kate Ward, Editors
July 14, 2012
Feast of St. Kateri Tekakwitha



Asking Questions and Taking Action

Bill Przylucki

When folks ask me why I became a community organizer, they are usually wondering why I'd work eighty-hour weeks in some of LA's poorest areas for relatively low pay. It's a straightforward question, but I used to fumble the answer. I thought people might as well have been asking me, "Why be alive?" I'm often tempted to answer, "Because God said so."

Two key experiences brought me to this point. Both came to me through God by way of the Church. In the first story, I saw the unending love God has for all of us, and the wonderful and creative ways our Church acts out that love even in the face of an incomprehensibly cruel world. The second story, from my time as an undergraduate, showed me how money and secular influence can endanger our Church's ability to be a vehicle of that love. I'm grateful that God arranged these experiences and put me on a path to take action for justice in the world and in the Church.

My childhood friend, Barbara, was just a little bit younger than me. We would play whenever our parents were at work together. My dad worked for Catholic Charities in Albany, New York, and Barbara's mom was a Sister of Mercy in the same diocese. I didn't think it was strange that Barbara's mom was a nun—I didn't know how remarkable her whole story was. Barbara's biological mother died of AIDS in 1988, leaving Barbara an orphan. A lot of fear and mystery still surrounded HIV and AIDS. Barbara's social workers were unable to find any "traditional" families willing to adopt her. So Sr. Mary Ann was given permission to become Barbara's mom.¹ The adoption was possible because the Sisters of Mercy and Bishop Howard Hubbard were incredibly progressive in thinking about how the diocese could be an instrument of God's love for this little girl.

Barbara's situation seemed logical to me. In Sunday school, I learned that when somebody is in need, the Church is supposed to help. I grew up across the street from my parish church, and my dad worked for the bishop. Right down the street were the nuns, my parish priest, and the bishop I looked up to as role models. They seemed part of my extended family, and I loved them. Why wouldn't they have helped Barbara?

In the last days of the summer of 1993, just a few weeks before I started third grade, my dad told me Barbara had died. A year earlier, he had explained that Barbara had a disease called AIDS and that this might happen. That's when I first started asking the big question: Why do people have to die of diseases?

I learned about AIDS annually in health class throughout the next decade, and every year the disease became less and less a death sentence and more and more a chronic condition. As the research and treatment options improved, I wondered why our society hadn't done these things sooner.

My dad was very involved with AIDS activism in the '80s and '90s. Every year, he took me to an AIDS quilt event to commemorate those who had died of the disease. A poster that hung in his office read, "The Body of Christ has AIDS." When he talked about the issue, he had a lot of hurt in his voice, the type of hurt that was holding down a burning anger.

Now that I know the history of the AIDS epidemic, I understand why

1 You can read more about Barbara's story in Sr. Mary Ann's book, *That Place Called Home: A Very Special Love Story*. Charis Books/Servant Publications, 2000.

my dad was angry. He was angry that we didn't act quickly enough. When rich people in Washington thought that this was a disease that only attacked gay people, and black people, and poor people, they debated what we should do about it. "How should we handle this?" they asked, as if the answer wasn't completely obvious. They even suggested trying to quarantine all AIDS patients in a segregated colony!

I am sure that with adequate support medical research could have made HIV and AIDS more manageable much earlier. Educating the general public could have spared thousands from discrimination and stigma. The government could have provided housing for many who died homeless, and they could have made it easier for Barbara to get adopted by a "normal" family. There never seemed to be much doubt that we would get there *eventually*, but that didn't help all those who suffered while our government and our society dragged our feet. We didn't take action in time for Barbara, and for thousands of others like her.

As I grew up, I saw this inaction wasn't unique to the AIDS epidemic. It was a pattern. Our country's leaders asked stupid questions a lot—about global warming and terrorism and poverty and all kinds of things. Whenever I heard these questions being asked in Washington or Albany, Barbara's deeply buried memory would stir inside me and I'd feel that same sad anger that my dad felt when I was young.

I went to Albany's majority-black public schools. I got an education that was equal parts book smarts and street smarts. Mostly that meant being in a freer and more diverse community where I learned to play cricket and went to poetry slams, but Albany's schools were still "inner-city"² schools, suffering from the same effects of poverty and divestment that much of upstate New York experienced in the '90s. I asked a lot of "why" questions to make sense of the malaise that I saw—overdoses, brutal fights, and random gang violence, and 77 percent of our high school class dropping out or transferring to "alternative" high schools.

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2 Paul Beatty's character in *Tuff* was right to ask, "Where is the outer-city?"

My family and the Church answered a lot of those questions. Monday through Friday could have made any kid crazy, but Sunday made sense of it all. On Sunday, I saw all my friends from the suburbs who commuted in to our Vatican II-inspired parish for its celebrated folk music choir and diverse, inclusive parish community. Together, we listened to stories about how Jesus loved us. We knew we could rely on each other, but we had to do Jesus' work for justice in the world if we wanted things to get better.

Being in that community and hearing that message jibed with what I learned from Barbara's story about what "Church" means. Her spirit let me know that at least my compass was pointing in the right direction. The world was crazy and messy, but if the Church stuck together we'd get through it, and even find love and beauty. It didn't all have to make sense; but we did have to find hope in each other.

By the time I graduated high school, I knew I wanted to live a justice-centered life, so I found a university that promised to make me "a man for others." My first day on campus at a major Catholic university was a huge culture shock. On paper, I was an Irish-Catholic academic over-achiever who fit right in, but I had never experienced anything like this in Albany. When I stepped onto campus, I couldn't help wondering, *Where did all these white people come from?*

It wasn't just the complexion of the campus community that was different from my hometown. I remember the first time another student called me a "social-justice Catholic"—was there another kind of Catholic? In college, I met a lot of people who seemed overly concerned with fitting their lived experiences into neat little theological boxes, disregarding how their razor-sharp dividing lines were slicing up living, breathing human beings.

At that university, I learned that there were different levels of Hell that matched exactly how evil you had been in life, and that abortion had always been outlawed but the death penalty was up for debate because it wasn't dogmatically banned, and how important the three words "begotten not made" are to our faith; but I stagnated emotionally and spiritually.

I stopped going to Mass because it seemed like everybody shared an unspoken goal to get out of there as quickly as possible and get back to studying, or drinking, or watching *Lost*. (Once, a priest asked for compliments on the brevity of his homily!) Even when I went on a service trip

to North Carolina or an immersion trip to Mexico, I couldn't break out of a worldview that wanted to categorize everything—left or right, right or wrong, girlfriend or friend with benefits. So while I learned and had fun and drank a lot of beer, I was pouring more and more intellectual dirt into the hole where I buried my memories of Barbara and the emotions that her story brought up. I still asked questions, but I lost touch with the instincts that made it possible to know when to take action without needing to have all the answers.

Just when I was thinking the Church was basically irrelevant, the full force of its significance hit me. I returned from study abroad only days before my senior year started, and when I got back to campus I was thrown into the middle of a controversy that had been raging almost since the day I left. Busy finding clubs and *biergärten* in Berlin, I hadn't been paying attention when the university administration decided to give an honorary degree to a top member of President Bush's cabinet, one of the cheerleaders of the Iraq War.

A group of students and teachers protested the graduation ceremonies, sparking a backlash. Then, students were targeted in a series of hate crimes: The Jewish and black student organizations' offices were defaced with swastikas, and a gay freshman's dorm room was vandalized and his possessions destroyed.

I'm not sure how related all of these events were, but things on campus were tense when I returned. During a football game in early October, a group of white dorm-mates attacked three black sophomore women, and tensions at the school rose to the boiling point.

The Campus Police Department failed to classify any of these incidents as hate crimes, and the administration didn't handle the situation with much transparency. Their primary concern appeared to be maintaining the school's prestigious reputation. Many felt that the administration was protecting bigots, and that was enough of a spark to rekindle the flames of discontent that had been smoldering among gay students, female students, and students of color for years.

With a group of my peers, I helped launch a student organization that sought to expose a side of campus life the institution had tried to suppress. We organized students to demand a campus-wide discussion around equity,

race, gender, and sexuality, demanding protections for LGBTQ students in the school's non-discrimination policy and a standardized hate-crime protocol. We also pushed to allow students to earn graduation credits studying the history courses most relevant to them, not just American and European political history.

Organizing was hard work, and it left me very tired and angry, but it was also exciting. We built an alternative vision of what our community could be while tackling problems together and supporting each other. I reflect almost daily on the leaders of that campus movement and the time I spent as a member of its ranks.

The administration's failure to address our initial demands kept me organizing throughout my senior year. The president wouldn't call an assembly to openly discuss the deep divisions amongst the student body, so we organized a 1,500-student walkout and rally that took over the middle of campus. Our demand? A university-wide dialogue. Although the school's president wouldn't come out to address the students, he did find the time to pen an Op-Ed to the *Boston Globe* opposing the state's legalization of same-sex marriage.

The university administration finally agreed to change its non-discrimination policy. But instead of including protections for LGBTQ students, the administration simply watered down the whole policy so that it no longer protected anybody. They also tried to intimidate student leaders. I was called into the dean's office after I wrote an article in the school paper criticizing the administration, and we learned that administrators had read our emails when we sent them through the school's servers.

The university defended itself by saying that giving just treatment to students of color, gay students, and women would be in conflict with its "Catholic tradition." This epitomized everything that had come to disappoint and disgust me within the Catholic Church. The university had become yet another place where the Church emphasized policy over pastoral care. Much of the guilt rested with the Board of Trustees, which was seeking to protect a set of financial and political relationships it had worked very hard to build, but most of my companions placed the blame on the entire institutional Church, totally writing Catholicism off.

God had given me a great gift in this conflict, because even as my peers

talked about how much they hated the Church, I knew I still loved it. It was ultimately through the conflict with the institutional Church hierarchy that I reconnected with everything I loved about the Catholic community. I began to uncover my memories of Barbara, and all the other events of my childhood, when I finally learned through experience what a loving Church meant.

I knew that God didn't care about categories and boxes and "us versus them." God cared about our love for each other, and God gave me righteous indignation. I started to feel the same anger I felt when I'd first realized that those with power wasted time wondering whether they should help, when any third-grader could tell them, "We have to do something about this!"

As my year of battle wound down, my advisor and mentors encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright Scholarship. I had just wrapped up a 270-page senior thesis and was preparing to return to Europe and pursue a life in academia. But my reconciliation with the Church and God was pushing me in another direction.

The day before graduation, my grandfather died. He was a staunch union man who once risked imprisonment for threatening a strike when New York City wanted to make drastic cuts to the Fire Department. He taught me to always support the union and never to cross a picket line. He loved that I was going to become a history professor, a job he had wanted but never had enough education for before he went into the Navy and then the FDNY. I wanted to make him proud—but his death freed me from concrete expectations of what that meant.

After my grandfather passed away, I realized that I couldn't read books for the rest of my life. I had to *get things done*, as he had. There were so many stories like Barbara's that required us to take action, not study and debate. I couldn't just write about other people's struggles for justice; I had to go out and make my own history.

I applied for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and headed west to Los Angeles, where JVC placed me with a community-organizing group called People

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Organized for Westside Renewal (POWER). At POWER I learned what organizing was, and that I could actually make a living fighting for justice. I knew, immediately, instinctively, that I was in the right place.

I probably could have spent 100 years at college with my head in a book, and I never would have learned about organizing. I could have learned all of Aquinas' theology, and all the doctors of the Church, but I never would have learned what God was really about. I would have spent my whole life in my head. To find God, I had to go down into my heart...and into my gut. I had to dig up my memories of Barbara and the instincts for justice she helped create in me.

When I was a child, the Church taught me that our loving relationships could help heal a cruel world. As a young adult, the Church taught me that its own institutions could be part of that cruelty, but also that oppression creates space for loving resistance. The institutional Church inadvertently taught me that I couldn't sit around and think my way out of problems. I needed to follow my instincts and take *action*.

I needed to knock on doors and build relationships with undocumented immigrants, low-income tenants, LGBTQ youth, and others fighting back against global and local injustices. I needed to bring people together to design actions to win their campaigns. I needed to learn about compromise and accountability. I needed to start trusting that my compass would keep pointing in the right direction and let God decide what the road would look like. I needed to make my life a testament to Barbara's story, which reminds me that even a third-grader knows what justice looks like, while a delusional or jaded adult can accept injustice.