

An Irrepressible Hope

NOTES FROM CHICAGO CATHOLICS

Edited by Claire Bushey
Artwork by Franklin McMahon

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CONTENTS

An irrepressible hope 5

WELCOME

Blessings for all11

A church that transforms 13

A different Catholicism..... 15

The world's largest church17

Unity and diversity19

Pastoring the flock..... 21

Where two or more are gathered.....23

Unique and creative Chicago27

Acts 2:5-13 revisited29

Living the Gospel31

The people's bishop33

A Body broken and renewed.....35

A muscular faith37

A spiritual home39

STRUGGLE

On loving and leaving 43

Do-it-yourself excommunication 45

The person on the inside 49

Blessed are the peacemakers51

Questions and answers53

'They took my church away from me'55

A kind of martyrdom	57
The meaning of perfection	59
'Just like Hurricane Katrina'	61
Spelling 'archbishop'	63
A rude awakening.....	65
Salvaging the remnants	67

REDEMPTION

A bishop who made a difference.....	71
Another Chicago fire	73
Truly present	75
Church and city	79
The spirit of the law	81
Urbs in horto.....	83

An irrepressible hope

Some books want to be written. They force their way from conception to execution to publication through a series of serendipitous events. This book is one of them.

The idea for this collection of essays started with a small clutch of priests sitting around talking with Greg Pierce, the publisher at ACTA Publications. Cardinal Francis George had submitted his pro forma resignation a few months earlier, and the priests, a loose group of friends and colleagues steeped in the ethos of Vatican II and stationed at parishes throughout the Chicago area, were feeling pessimistic about the direction of the church in general and who might succeed Cardinal George in particular. Worse than pessimistic, they felt powerless.

Let's write a book, Pierce suggested, and tell the world (and the next archbishop) what Catholicism in Chicago is all about.

The project took shape within days. The book would be a series of snapshots, brief but telling anecdotes from Chicago Catholics that would illustrate for our new archbishop, whoever he might be, and for anyone else who might be wondering, the nature of our church and city, so that he might come to know his flock. Taken collectively, these essays from pew-sitters and pulpit-pounders alike would document the splendid variety and vibrancy of the Chicago Catholic church at this moment in its history. Perhaps someone would send a copy of the book to the Papal Nuncio in Washington that might educate and edify him as he considered possible candidates to fill the see. Once his decision was made and ratified in Rome, a copy could find its way to the new archbishop too. For this unnamed, distant prelate, who would in some approaching year arrive at the skyscraped shores of Lake Michigan, we would bare our peculiar souls.

E-mails were sent, enthusiasm kindled. And over the next week

it slowly dawned on Pierce exactly how much work he'd added to his to-do list. At that uncomfortable moment, with reality setting in, I showed up.

I wasn't a book editor. I was and am a journalist by trade, a group not traditionally known as the most God-fearing of people. (Once I interviewed a minister who, when I alluded to Jesus's advice to the rich young man, gave me a pleased but puzzled smile before explaining that most reporters he talked to weren't terribly familiar with the Bible.) Yet I am a prodigal only recently returned to Holy Mother Church following years of trying to be anything else than Catholic. Chicago is a place where these aspects of my personality, Catholic and journalist, mesh well; it's a town that allows for questions and that places justice at the center of faith. But heading into the summer of 2012, I was looking to branch out into the book publishing industry and so e-mailed a number of Chicago publishers looking for part-time work. Most didn't respond. Pierce wrote back in twenty-seven minutes. A day later, I'd taken over the essay acquisition and editing of the book. It's a cliché to say God works in mysterious ways, but that doesn't mean it isn't true.

Since then, I've raised one or two eyebrows from friends and colleagues after explaining the project to them. Basically, their amusement boils down to this: The Vatican does not care what we have to say. By describing our own experiences of faith and how they might affect what we want from an archbishop, we're proffering input unsolicited. It's the old the-Catholic-church-is-not-a-democracy argument. Why bother with an answer if nobody asked a question?

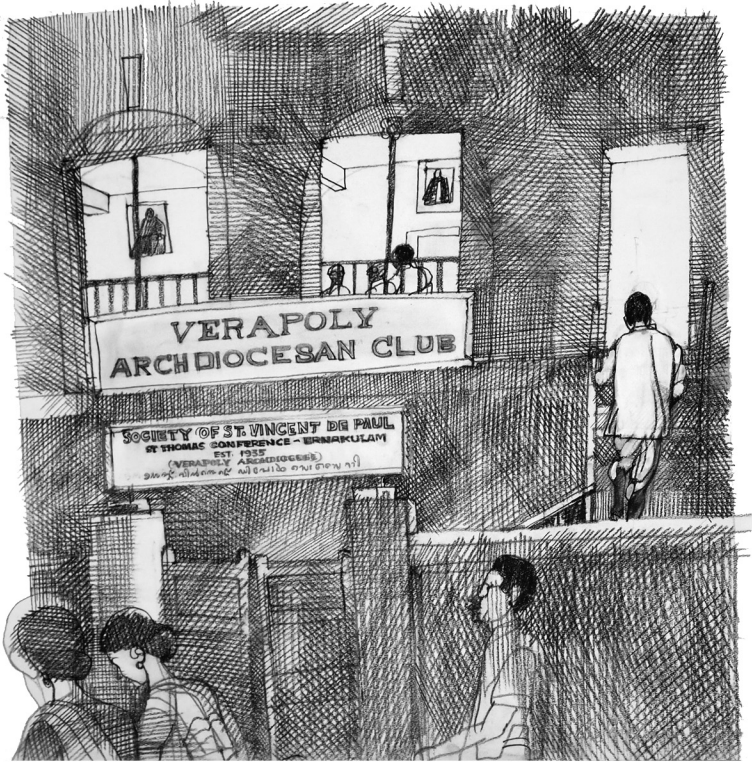
It's true that some experiences contained within this book—and the conclusions the writers draw from them—will be more familiar and acceptable to the current church hierarchy than others. I tried to solicit a range of subject matter for this collection, from essays that celebrate our common ground as Catholics, like the centrality of the

Eucharist to our faith, to stories about women's ordination and homosexuality that illuminate the terrain of our differences.

As I read these essays I see great pride in Chicago, in our shared communion across parishes and with the larger Catholic universe, as well as an irrepressible hope for what we might carry forward into the future until the day it can be claimed. Because while I do not expect the powers-that-be to select Chicago's next archbishop based on the wisdom in this slim volume, I do believe this: An idea is a durable thing. It lays around, strewn on the floor of the cultural consciousness until the day it is needed, when an individual or a society or even a religion picks it up, dusts it off, and puts it to work. This is the reason to answer unasked questions: So the answer will exist for future seekers to unbury. Or, put another way, we are responsible for no more than planting the seeds and tending the fields. The harvest will be reaped in God's own time.

CLAIRE BUSHEY, baptized 1980, writer and editor, St. Gertrude Parish in Edgewater.

WELCOME



Blessings for all

What a novel idea it is that we, Catholics, would give input to the selection of a bishop! As I thought about this prospect, I began thinking about the complexities of the city of Chicago and the challenges the archdiocese presents. I thought, too, of the experiences of past generations of both my family and my religious community and their interactions with bishops.

My favorite “bishop story” is one from the last days of my mother’s life. Cardinal George had declined to read the book my mother had given him when he first arrived in Chicago, Robert McClory’s *Turning Point*, about her experience on the Vatican’s birth control commission in the 1960s, and she and he had never really connected in any meaningful way. Yet, he and I had bonded when he publicly supported Deborah’s Place, a nonprofit that assists women who were homeless where I was executive director for 13 years. It was during a zoning controversy in the late 1990s over whether to site a transitional housing program in a former parish convent, and the cardinal went out of his way to speak publicly about this issue.

One day in 2005, the cardinal called me to ask about my mother. I invited him to come to visit her. He came, and so did a few others, among them some of her grandchildren. In her final days, my mother’s approach to visitors was to ask them to join her in singing children’s songs. The cardinal was patient. After a bit, I asked my mother if she would like the cardinal to give her a blessing. After a pregnant pause, she said to me, “Yes, but first I will give him my blessing.” Cardinal George graciously deferred to her. This story holds, for me, the seeds of a possible future for our church—one in which women are recognized for who they are as the bearers of many blessings for all.

When I look at our city and consider what it needs in a new pastor, I remember that in the Acts of the Apostles, the daily service

to the Christian community was delegated to the deacons, and the apostles took responsibility for prayer and the pastoral care of the people of God. Not much is mentioned about doctrine, and at the time, there was no Vatican in the picture. The bishops I have admired have been pastoral and have prayed well with the people of God.

The Chicago I know best is the city that nurtures grassroots movements, social action, community organizing, and healthy ethnic and cultural diversity. Historically, we are a city with segregated neighborhoods and a strong working class. That is changing, and our leaders, both civic and religious, need to recognize that. We continue to be a city of immigrants and of strong leaders. Of this we remain proud.

We have had a variety of bishops in Chicago. As a Benedictine woman, I suggest that we need a bishop who listens well to both the anguish and the joys of his people, whose approach is both pastoral and collaborative. The healing, inclusive, compassionate approach of Jesus in the Gospels will be key for our next bishop. Chicago is rich in the diversity and giftedness of its people. Called forth in this spirit, we will respond and flourish.

PATRICIA ANN CROWLEY, O.S.B., baptized 1939, former executive director of Howard Area Community Center, Deborah's Place, and the Chicago Continuum of Care, current prioress of Benedictine Sisters of Chicago at St. Scholastica Monastery in Rogers Park.

A church that transforms

It was a December noon, sunny and brisk, and I was a freshman at Loyola University Chicago. Weekday Mass had just let out at our lakefront chapel, Madonna della Strada. I meandered around the lawn outside, thinking about lunch, until a gray-haired woman in her sixties flagged me down. God, I learned, had told her to.

She sat near me at the liturgy, noting my homework on an adjoining chair—a biblical studies book. She sensed God pointing me out. She took her chance.

Reaching into her purse, she produced a cheap, silver-plated Miraculous Medal. Pope John Paul II had blessed it in Rome. She said now I was supposed to have it.

Somewhat befuddled, I started to ask the woman her name. She shook her head: “It’s not important. I’m nobody.” What was important was the medal, for it would always remind me of something.

“Don’t let yourself be pegged,” she reported. “Don’t let yourself get stuck in a box.”

With that, she was done—and so, apparently, was God—and she bid me goodbye. I felt very holy and important. Back in my dorm room I put the medal on a string. I wore it, then I wore it less and less, then I forgot about it.

But the mystery woman turned out to be eerily prophetic. A retiring, pious, by-the-book loner of a freshman, I graduated someone very different: someone who knew and loved many people, someone deeply engaged in my community, and passionate about justice in the world. I did not get pegged or stuck in a box.

Yet I did not turn out that way simply because God gave me magic trinkets. I gradually felt the need to reach out, to search for outlets. I turned to friends, projects, and activities in university ministry. And something very particular, Chicago-style Catholicism, reached back.

Loyola is Jesuit, but it is Chicago Jesuit. The Chicago church is long-famous for its creativity and jagged individuality. In his 1979 book *The Battle for the American Church*, Msgr. George Kelly noted “certain factors uniquely packaged in the Chicago environs: charismatic and overpowering energy in the priestly leadership; educated and classy laity waiting to be motivated for a cause; a good cause at the right time; a freewheeling, independent style of behavior typical of the Windy City itself; and relatively permissive bishops.”

I would add that we love a party. And we are quick to embrace outsiders and those who take a long time seeking before they find.

What a church we have in Chicago, a church that transformed me. I pray it may always offer the same to others. I pray the next archbishop of Chicago will, like his predecessors, agree.

JUSTIN SENGSTOCK, baptized 1984, freelance writer and nonprofit employee, Holy Name Cathedral (occasionally) and St. Liborius Parish in Steger.

A different Catholicism

Nuns in Des Moines, where I grew up, taught us to offer our seat on the bus to adults. Their subtext was not, "What is compassionate?" but, "The Protestants see your uniforms: Don't give scandal!"

I found a different Catholicism when I moved to Chicago where we were not other. Even the mayor was Catholic! When the Pope came in 1979, several TV "background" reporters revealed they were Catholic. No Iowa TV anchor would have separated himself from his presumed Protestant viewers by identifying as Catholic.

In Iowa we had built a separate "mission" church for Mexicans in our parish. Many Chicago parishes already had a Spanish Mass, right there in the main church, when I arrived. Chicago masses featured a variety of immigrant faces and races. It seemed very "catholic" to me.

At one Mass a street person took a big gulp from the cup... and then kept guzzling. The Eucharistic Minister tried to stop him, and they struggled for the chalice. I was oddly pleased to belong to a church where homeless alcoholics brought their needs, however inappropriately manifested. My parish also had a Mass for gays. All seemed very "catholic" to me.

When verifying the need of applicants for emergency food and cash where I volunteer, we're instructed: "Try to err on the side of compassion." This interfaith agency seems very "catholic" to me.

A very Chicago Catholic, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, asked anyone who'd ever been hurt by the church to contact him. He spent the

« Try to err on the side of compassion. »

rest of his life replying to those who wrote him, even on his deathbed.

May our leaders understand that whenever our church primarily fears scandal, we sin. May we reflect the cardinal's humility, welcoming *others* to our communion, especially those we've harmed. And when we as church err—as we certainly will—let it be on the side of our Christ-like compassion.

Let us pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.

Carol DeChant, baptized 1939, writer, wife and grandmother of ten, St. Mary Catholic Church in Evanston.

The world's largest church

For many Catholics, going to Mass every Sunday is the one day a week we practice our faith, think about our Christian beliefs, pray in the sanctuary, and focus on our religion. But a wonderful gift was given to all of us 12 years ago when Relevant Radio began broadcasting.

I had been interviewed on the station a few times in 2007 when my second book, *Parish the Thought*, was published. At that time, I was unable to hear the station in Atlanta. Since moving back to Chicago two years ago, however, anytime I am in the car, most often I will have 950 AM tuned in to listen to Relevant Radio. I appreciate the opportunity to listen to the discussions about various topics in our faith, what the catechism says about various issues, the history of our faith, insights into controversial events, advice from priests, and interviews with Catholics in the working world who bring their faith to their profession. There is so much more, but the main point is that I, and all of us, can practice our faith seven days a week now just by turning on the radio. How often I have felt the Holy Spirit fill me as I listened or prayed along with the radio host. How often I have felt like I am not alone in my faith, listening to so many Catholics share opinions which are in line with our religion.

Often I will be listening at 3 p.m. when radio host Drew Mariani prays the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and I will join with him. Even though it's a radio station, it is in many ways like being in one of the largest churches in the world, among a community of Christians praying to God. I listen to so many devout and committed Catholics call into the show looking for answers to problems they are facing in their lives. Often I will hear Drew or Father Rocky or Wendy Wiese provide insight or advice that helps those callers, those Catholics, but at the same time helps all of us because many suffer from similar problems or have the same question.

So if you see me driving down I-355 with praying hands holding my steering wheel, you can pretty much guess that I'm in church, praying with Relevant Radio.

JOHN RUANE, baptized 1956, author and journalist, Thirty-Year Husband Club, four children, formerly of St. Bede The Venerable Parish in Scottsdale, now the Catholic Community of St. Jude in New Lenox.