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Should the Gospel we profess and the liturgy we do raise in us some great unease with the political, economic, military and environmental conditions that are our responsibility as U.S. citizens and residents?

My own urgency in talking about these matters comes about in this way. In the fall of 2012, my wife and I returned to New York City from seven years in Damascus. We had gone there in 2005 to continue some sort of relationship with the Middle East and specifically with Iraqis. Those bonds had formed through our four visits to Iraq during the time of the sanctions and before the U.S. invasion in 2003. By 2005 Iraqis were fleeing for safety to Syria. Syria has a long history of welcoming refugees — Armenians, Palestinians, Lebanese — and Iraqis were then arriving in large numbers. In our second year there, we saw and grasped a specific challenge: helping small groups of college-age Iraqis, 10 to 20 each year, work daily on the skills they would need to apply for scholarships and tuition waivers in U.S. colleges. The higher education system in Iraq was then being destroyed, and the Syrian universities required tuition that Iraqis could not afford. For us and perhaps for the many in the United States who helped us, this was a work of reparation.

We stumbled into many things we knew little about. Crises galore. Frequent disappointments. But all that was easy because of our interaction with the students and their families. Lives of loss and chaos were borne with amazing resiliency. Through these years, we lived in the immense hospitality of the Syrian people. But by the summer of 2012, 17 months into Syria's present disaster, we could not begin another year of work with Iraqi students, and we returned to the United States.

Even though I had been much involved in civil rights and in opposition to the Vietnam war and so much else since, returning to the States from Syria brought daily amazement at what seemed a new isolation of our citizens, an ignorance of — or, worse, an indifference to — the ways in which U.S. power is being used, both here and throughout the world. This seemed far beyond blatant military unilateralism. Now we had a spectrum of ways to inject our own will onto the lives of any people living in our ever-increasing spheres of interest. Some of those spheres are "of interest" because of various natural resources we need, some because we need flesh-and-blood enemies out there. And sometimes, not surprisingly, both!

Here in New York City, the site of the World Trade Center is still promoted as a place of pilgrimage. "Remember!" is the single message. We are urged to act as if 9/11

hadn't long been avenged in the thousands upon thousands of dead civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere. We are urged to act as if 9/11 should be something limitless.

Without a job or any desire for one yet (Social Security and a small pension were seeing us through), I decided my time was for listening, watching, reading. I quickly found that there was much truth being told in lectures, books, periodicals and documentaries. And for that I am grateful, though awed at the odds against change.

So in a very random way I have read, listened and watched, and continue to do so. In writing for Celebration I share some of this with you; for example, the discussion in a previous issue made use of Nick Turse's powerful scholarship in *Kill Anything That Moves*, the painful telling of U.S. behavior in Vietnam.

In my obviously limited experience of Roman Catholic churches in the United States during the past year, I find nearly no awareness or urgency about any of this, only what seems a broad indifference of Americans to the US. role in the world. Somehow the merging of being Catholic and being a patriot rolls right on — except, of course, where abortion or same-sex marriage is concerned. We pray for peace in Afghanistan in one breath and for our brave troops in the next, never noting that now some of those troops sit in comfortable offices in Syracuse firing hellfire missiles from drones at presumed bad guys (and gals and kids) in Pakistan and Yemen. We seem to be without moral sensitivity for what's done in our name. Tooth-and-nail, the hierarchs fight to protect "our" hospitals from something they don't agree with in the Affordable Care implementation, but what do we hear about "the new Jim Crow," the mass imprisonment of African American males? Take a look at your diocesan newspaper and see what's being discussed there.

As a reader of Celebration, you are probably in a leadership role in your parish, preaching, perhaps, and teaching. And you balance that with many more responsibilities. You may understand what I'm saying in these columns, you may even agree, but you can't imagine where you would find the time to read *Kill Anything That Moves* or Michelle Alexander's important book *The New Jim Crow*. Or any other work you may hear about in these columns.

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No easy answer to that. These are complex matters we deal with, and if they are to engage you and perhaps a few others in your parish, nothing will do except engaging with the books themselves. That's what I ask, and I've waited to ask it until we are approaching Lent. In Lent, is it possible to drop some things that now consume your time, and become faithful to reading and, in the best possible case, to regular discussions with others who are doing the same reading? If you find this possible, Lent will have shown you a pattern that can extend far beyond the season.

In hopes of a few takers on this challenge, I will list and briefly annotate here a number of important books to help us grasp the urgency of the present time and, with study and reflection, our response to that urgency. Let Lent be Lent. Challenge yourself. So, in no particular order:

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow*. The New Press, 2012. This work is fundamental to our understanding of what's happening inside the United States. Alexander shows the workings of plea bargaining and sentencing laws, racial profiling, privatization of the prison industry, discrimination (in housing, jobs, benefits, voting) against felons who have served their sentences. But, you say, we have our first African American president! The book will argue convincingly that this contributes to the present dismal situation.
- Judt, Tony. *Ill Fares the Land*. Penguin Books, 2010. In a word, "Don't give it up!" Tony Judt wrote widely and well and at length. But as he was dying at age 62 of Lou Gehrig's Disease, he wrote (dictated, rather, because he was paralyzed from the neck down) this last, slim volume. In it, he appeals to us to understand the present moment and to change the direction of our economics and politics.
- Turse, Nick. *The Changing Face of Empire*. Haymarket Books, 2012. In 10 very brief chapters, Turse explains and documents the role that the U.S. military is now given in carrying out U.S. policy. This concerns not only the so-called war on terror, but the control of resources and the control of peoples. And the cost to that control? Outspending all the rest of the world put together. And what do we buy with all that money?
- Blum, William. *America's Deadliest Export: Democracy*. Zed Books, 2013. The book is organized by distinct topics so chapters can be selected for discussion (e.g., Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, environment, media, religion).
- Al-Ali, Nadjie, and Al-Najjar, Deborah, editors. *We Are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War*. Syracuse University Press, 2013. A collection of 22

short essays with some focus on Iraqi artists, but more than that. Ten years after our military invaded their land, this is a rare chance for English-speakers to hear Iraqis, both inside and outside Iraq. Any contribution can be read as a piece in itself.

- Cook, Michael. *Islam*. Along with: Ruthven, Malise. *The Koran*. Both books are in the "A Very Short Introduction" series (Oxford, 1997 and 2000). If most of our information on Islam comes from the media, time to start reading these or other good introductions. This is only a beginning, but the discussion is essential.
- Karmi, Ghada. *Married to Another Man: Israel's Dilemma in Palestine*. Pluto Press, 2007. We desperately need to educate ourselves about the Israel/Palestine question in which our nation plays such a large part. This book covers much ground, but that's good, as our understanding of the whole period generally needs clarifying. For those who want to focus on this story, a crucial part of it, the year 1948, is told by Israeli historian Ilan Pappé in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oneworld Publications, 2006).
- Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Verso, 2013. This one is short but harder than most. What are we losing in this time when life's rhythms are being forgotten? Does instant communication mock the very notion of communication? Is the façade of communication to replace any reality of community? Who's in charge?
- Hedges, Chris, and Sacco, Joe. *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*. Nation Books, 2012. Words and images gathered on visits to four left-behind places in the United States: Pine Ridge, S.D., Camden, N.J., Welch, W.Va., Immokalee, Fla. Each story can be read separately. Are these the future?

But, you say, where are the novels? I do have two recommendations.

- Le Carre, John. *A Delicate Truth*. Viking, 2013. Fifty years and 30-some books after *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, Le Carre sets us down in a post-Cold War world that is devastating. New players. New goals. Who's in charge?
- Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Penguin Books, 1982. A parable? If so, with whom do we identify? Where does the parable jump off the expected track? A prophecy? Coetzee won the Nobel for literature and most would say this remains his finest book.

Documentary films should also be part of our education. I will mention a few titles but I do not know how accessible they are. An online search will tell you. A Lenten

series could be planned.

- "Gatekeepers" and "Five Broken Cameras" both deal with the Palestine/Israel conflict, and both were nominated last year for an Academy Award. A third film on the same subject looks at Gaza: "Where Will the Birds Fly?" And yet a fourth, "Infiltrators," looks at what Israel's "protection" wall does to the lives of Palestinians.
- Here are two excellent documentaries dealing with U.S. prisons: "At Night I Fly" and "Released" (the latter from The Fortune Society).
- "Dirty Wars" is a harsh introduction to the U.S. drones now in use in several countries. There is special focus on their use to kill American citizens.
- Who can name all the havoc and suffering caused by the U.S. role in Iraq since 1990? "In My Mother's Arms" looks at one story: orphans in Sadr City on the outskirts of Baghdad.

I am not able to add to the books or films strong suggestions on environmental crises, but this too must be part of our urgency.

What can be done in February to prepare yourself for some such Lent? What can be done to gather a group to engage in this together? What's the right balance of demanding and realistic? What's the commitment each person makes to the others as Lent begins?

If weekly gatherings are expected, what format will ensure that the time is spent well, and that they are in line with the intention of a deepened understanding for the assembly itself? Important as the various individual issues are, the aim is to realize their nearly unbearable weight when they are taken together. For this is not only about a bundle of problems, it is about the helplessness we feel before them. And it is about a mature realization that we have to get over any notion that "sin" is only about what I do that's bad or you do that's bad. Sin is about the webs that involve us all in responsibility for harm being done.

**Editor's note:** *This reflection was originally published in the February 2014 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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