



The Visitation

The Publication of the Nativity House
June 2018 Volume 8 Issue 3

A Kingdom United

By Erik Olson

At least one teaching of Jesus should be plainly observable: “A kingdom divided amongst itself cannot stand.” After all, “the divider” is one of the many names of the devil. As Catholics, as Christians, we are in a perennial fight against division in our country, our families, and our spiritual life. One temptation in the life of the Christian is to pit the scholastic mind of the Church against the domestic mission of the church. The scholastically minded are often accused of being legalistic or bogged down in dogma. In contrast, people living out the domestic mission with zeal are often accused of heresy and reducing the Gospel to ‘Thou shalt try to be nice.’ It is because of this

false dichotomy between the scholastic and the domestic that someone like Dorothy Day continues to confound people. The world does not know what to do with someone who accepted the Church's theologies and philosophies, who supported the Church's position on abortion and birth control, and who forsook the world to advocate for the downtrodden and poor at all cost. It is my contention that by understanding the scholastic and the dogmatic we will actually be better able to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and to wash the feet of our brothers and sisters, even if we do not particularly like them.

continued on page 5



drawing by Annemarie Coman

Dear God, Please Enlarge Our Hearts

By Sarah Reznicek

We repeat, there is nothing that we can do but love, and dear God—please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend. – Dorothy Day

Every community meeting at Nativity House, we begin with a song inspired by these words of Dorothy Day. It has become our theme song and mission motto, to guide us in our way of life and the work we do. Lately, I have been pondering and praying these words over and over: “Dear God—please enlarge my heart!” It has made me realize how narrow my heart really is and how much I need his grace.

For example, when I was first introduced to Nativity House and learned that the way of life was “intentional community”, honestly, I was a bit skeptical. I had heard of religious communities of monastics, nuns, and priests living together “in community,” but had never encountered this as a way of life among regular lay people. What if I don’t like these people? What if they don’t like me? We are all from such different backgrounds; how are we all going to get along? Am I going to have any privacy or personal space? Will I have to give up all my free-time? Do I have to sacrifice time with my family and friends?

I had carefully calculated the risks and the sacrifices and placed them in the balance when deciding whether I should serve as an intern at Nativity House. Fortunately, God is not as ungenerous and stingy as I am. His mercy is a flood! I could not even begin to imagine the great joy and how richly he would bless me through life in community. He has stretched and expanded my heart. He has helped me to see how much I think about myself. Too much! He challenges me instead to put him first, and to put others before myself.

The most important lesson I have learned over and over in

community is that God’s gifts of life and love increase and abound when shared. This is what Dorothy Day called the “strange, upside-down teaching of the Gospel”: the heart grows when it is given and spent. In the Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis says,

Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others.

continued on page 6

The Visitation

Letter from the Directors

Dear Friends of Nativity House,

As I sit to write this during Mary's Month, I must acknowledge her role in the mission of Nativity House. It was through her intercession that the mission and vision of Nativity House was born. Mama Mary continues to walk with us and support us in our mission. Over the last year we have come to Mary with prayers of need, praise, support, wonder, trials, joys, and consecration! We aim to imitate Mama Mary, holding and pondering in our hearts the mystery of God's love as revealed to us daily through Nativity House community life

It's growing season! Nativity House is abustle with lots of exciting activity this time of year.

The Nativity House CSA (community supported agriculture) is up and running. All of our cold weather crops are in the ground to be harvested late May: radishes, spinach, lettuce, beets, turnips, kale. Our good friend, Lewis environmental science professor, Lee Witkowski, has nurtured our seedlings in the Lewis University greenhouse all semester. Thanks to he and his students' work we have 7 flats of tomatoes, peppers, basil, cucumbers, eggplant, and ground cherries that will be planted in our garden beds any day now. This year we have 8 families joining us in the garden as CSA members - 4 returning and 4 new.

Our friend, Erik Olson, has shared his gift of beekeeping with us this year. He installed a hive early April in our orchard. Already we have noticed that the blossoms on our fruit trees are more prolific. Our gardens are literally a-buzz with pollinating action. We have also tasted the sweetness of the first nectar. We have hopes of sharing our first batch of homegrown Honey Meade at this years Farm to Table Celebration.


We have introduced our year-old doelings, Ivy and Rua, to their new barnmate, Kirk. Our hope is that by this time next year we will have sweet and spunky new goat kids!

As our farm community has expanded we are hoping the same for our community of interns. We have welcomed back Kayla in a parttime live-in capacity. She not only brings a deep love and understanding for community life, but a rich appreciation and praxis of peace and social justice. We are praying for two full time interns to join us in August or September. At the end of July we will honor Sarah's two years of service to the Nativity House community. Annemarie is hoping to serve the community for one more year in a part-time capacity. We are truly blessed by the service of each of these young women.

Our guest mom Alexis, will also be moving on at the end of July. We are praying for a smooth transition for her and baby girl Charlotte. We are confident that she will remain a vital member of the Nativity House community. While we will miss Alexis and Baby Charlotte tremendously, we are happy to support them in their new chapter!

We are forever thankful for your participation in our community; whether you are a garden member, prayer warrior, avid newspaper reader, or a regular house volunteer for you we are grateful and we hold you in our prayers.

Peace of Christ to you and yours,

Venus and Justin Wozniak 

About The Visitation

This newspaper, *The Visitation*, is a publication on topics of social justice, spirituality, and theology. It is published four times a year by Nativity House. Submissions are accepted from readers everywhere.

To contact us, email us at:

newspaper@nativity-house.org

Past issues are online at:

<http://www.nativity-house.org>

About Nativity House

Nativity House serves as a shelter for first-time mothers in need of residence in the southwest Chicago suburbs. Nativity House operates an on-site community supported farm (CSA) that provides nourishment for the Nativity House and the greater community. Overall, we envision a healing environment focused on the dignity of each person, the dignity of work, and stewardship of the earth.

Nativity House is administered by a board of directors and an advisory committee of individuals with a broad range of experience. Nativity House has formed positive relationships with relevant local organizations that are extremely helpful in carrying out the mission of the house. Nativity House was recognized as a public charity in August, 2011.

To connect with us, please email Venus Wozniak at:

venusad@nativity-house.org

Postal mail should be addressed to:

Nativity House
17141 W. 143rd St.
Lockport, IL 60441

We extend the sincerest thanks to all.

Nativity House Wishlist:

Diapers (size 3,4,5), Baby girl clothes (6-24mos), Top Soil, Landscapers, Small Wooden Shed (7x7), 2 full-time interns

The Visitation

House of Hospitality

By Dorothy Day

Chapter 2: A summer day on the farm with Dorothy Day.

If we were financed our readers could say:

Oh, it is all very well for you— you've got money in back of you. But what about us? How are we to start out, without stock, without funds, without hands.

That is where the farming commune idea comes in. People can work together, can pool their resources, can think in terms of mutual aid.

But this account started to be a day at the farm. We are cooking on an old wood range collapsed in the middle. K. prepared vegetables, weeded, washed dishes and washed up the sloping kitchen. Bill Callahan in high boots shoveled manure into an old wagon to be towed out into the north field and scattered. For a few early hours in the morning I had planted onion seeds, six long rows of them, and as I crouched and bent and planted, I thought of the three million children and women working in the cotton fields, from dawn to dark. I thought of the women and children in the beet fields and onion fields in the middle and far west and I thought how even the six-year-

olds were pressed into the grueling service until they were deadened and worn and a deep smoldering resentment grew and grew within

them, shaping them for revolution or for the flight from the soil to the cities. [...]

Before bedtime, around nine, we all gather together, for the rosary and litany. Tonight there was a little breeze outside in the apple trees sighing around the house. The moon shone down on the hill top, washing the fields in a soft glow. There was quiet and perfect peace and a happiness so deep and strong and thankful, that even our words of prayer seemed inadequate to express our joy. May St. Isidore, patron of farm workers, pray for us and praise God for us! 🏠



Easy Essays: Regard for the Soil

by Peter Maurin (1877-1949)



Andrew Nelson Lytle says:

The escape from industrialism is not in socialism or in sovietism.

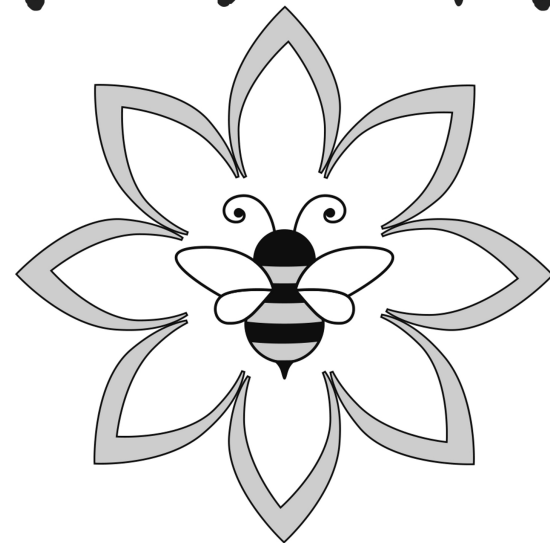
The answer lies in a return to a society where agriculture is practised by most of the people.

It is in fact impossible for any culture to be sound and healthy without a proper regard for the soil,

no matter how many urban dwellers think that their food comes from groceries and delicatessens or their milk from tin cans.

This ignorance does not release them from a final dependence upon the farm.

Save the date



Nativity House Farm to Table Celebration

Sunday, September 2 @ 4pm



Celebrations will be onsite at Nativity House
17141 W. 143rd St., Lockport IL 60441

For more information contact Venus, venusad@nativity-house.org or 773.331.1789

The Visitation

Life Under the State -

Words from Oscar Romero

by Justin Wozniak

Talk about fast- perhaps the most surprising thing about the life of Oscar Romero was how quickly events impacted him and how quickly he responded. Over the course of only three years his life transitioned from his selection as archbishop of El Salvador, to an intense period of speaking out on the issues his country faced, to his shocking assassination during Mass. Romero (d. 1980) offers a modern example of how to relate the gospel to politics and the state, which is an underlying theme in many current topics.

Romero was a talented student, rising from humble origins to study theology at the Gregorian University in Rome. He probably could have resigned himself to a successful life in academia or church administration, even though his home country was wracked by state repression and eventual civil war. However, only two weeks after his installation, military operatives raided a parish, killing a close friend, Father Grande, and desecrating the church. Romero responded by devoting his ministry to denouncing the injustices faced by the bulk of the Salvadoran people, who worked the land and were subject to extreme poverty and violence.

Romero used his popular radio program (70% of the rural population tuned in) and bulletin to publicize the acts of terror facing the people of his country. The government used torture and disappearing to suppress activists, including priests and religious, or anyone in their path. Immediately after the murder of Grande, Romero related these crimes to the greater role of the church in a broken society:

The church's social teaching tells everyone that the Christian religion does not have a merely horizontal meaning, or a merely spiritualized meaning that overlooks the wretchedness that surrounds it.

Romero is saying that the role of religion is genuinely concerned with the affairs of people, their political and economic situation. It relates these earthly realities to supernatural aspects such as right and wrong, justice and injustice, and the ultimate ends of human life. This interconnection is clear in three topics of interest today: poverty, the environment, and action.

Poverty Romero was deeply concerned about the poverty in El Salvador, a country which had massive inequality. He supported land reforms to alleviate these economic problems, calling such programs a “theological necessity.” However, he had a broader view of poverty as a form of broken relationship between the rich and the poor, and between the people and God. This relationship could only be made right by reallocating the wealth of the country.

The land is a sign of justice and reconciliation. There will be no true reconciliation between our people and God as long as there is no just distribution.

The US is at historic levels of inequality, so these words should guide us to evaluate our current economy in these terms. Do we have a just distribution of goods and services in our society? Does the current distribution of wealth reflect a Christian sense of social order?

Romero also decried the allure of money and power as modern idolatries that have replaced the baals

and other gods of the past. He also recognized that false ideologies, including “a capitalism that idolizes money,” and a media that is manipulated by material interests perpetuate and maintain an economy that is decoupled from its proper role of providing goods and services to all. Romero maintains that these gods must be overthrown like the “false gods that our natives adored.” He also firmly felt that it is important that the “church protests such selfishness, sins, and abuses,” yet he saw hope for the rich too, that they might share in the good news by joining in with the blessings in store for the poor:

The church has good news to proclaim to the rich as well; they are to turn to the poor and thus share with them in the riches of God's reign that belong to the poor.

In our society, it is worth considering how media, including social media such as Twitter, lead to a false view on the economy, and elevate personalities with fantastical conceptions of wealth.

Environment Romero was concerned with the land both economically and ecologically. While the late 1970's were an early time in environmental understanding, Romero saw creation and its conservation theologically:

When one looks at creation, ... so balanced and so wonderful, ... how tiny seem human beings before these manifestations... Whenever we open our eyes or our ears catch the murmur of creation, God is speaking to us.

Romero clearly saw that the phenomena of the natural world are forms of revelation that teach us about God and represent our relationship to God and each other.

The air and water are being polluted, ... we go on corrupting the nature we need. We don't realize we have a

commitment to God to take care of nature... That concerns our alliance with God.

Statements like this remind us of the Christian responsibility to defend the environment, a role more fully described in Pope Francis' Laudato Si.

Action Romero encouraged his listeners to participate in society and build up the common good.

As Christians formed in the gospel, you have the right to organize and, inspired by the gospel, to make concrete decisions.

Romero saw that God was active in all peoples and places in history, and noted that God was working out the salvation of El Salvador in its people, politics, and efforts for reform. He said it was a key part of the Christian way to be committed to the poor, and not to fear persecution or violence. He longed for genuine, grassroots Christian communities to be supported by priests and religious and to flourish, and that people in all states of life would contribute their talents “to promote the changes needed in politics and society.”

Only moments before his fatal shooting, Romero preached in his final homily:

Every effort to better society, especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us!



(Romero quotations are from radio broadcasts translated by Brockman in *The Violence of Love*, Orbis Books.)

Justin is a computer systems professional. He may be reached at justin@nativity-house.org

The Visitation

A Kingdom United

continued from page 1

The domestic life is truly the heart of the Church. This is where we practice our faith in our day-to-day life. We are to love and be in relationship with the person of Jesus, not a syllogism or theological treaty. The domestic mission of the church was perhaps no better represented than by Mary, exhausted, covered in sweat, feeding God in a cave with her body. The domestic ethos of the church is found in the words of God when he repeated what were probably the first words his mother said to him, “take, eat, this is my body given up for you.” In other words, the domestic life is a call for total self-gift in our everyday, simple experiences. Our mission is with real people, not ‘the masses.’ We do not serve the noble poor who are never rude, or the hungry who have no preference in what food they eat, or the elderly who always smile. We serve real people in the domestic realm of the church. People are lonely. People hurt. People hurt others when they are hurt. In our ordinary life, we are called to love them anyway. The truth is that some sons wander away for years and return looking for us to love them. We are called to love and do good for our enemies, and not merely tolerate them.


The scholastic life of the church may stand opposite to the domestic but is certainly does not stand in opposition, no more than a husband standing opposite his wife stands opposed to her. Many simply dismiss the scholastic and dogmatic as somehow being in the way of really living the gospel. This is simply not true. The scholarly work of monks in monasteries is like a warrior ready to defend what is sacred at home.

In short, the scholastic mind of the church gives space for the domestic life to flourish, even as many may be truly unaware of the connection.

I would like to point to a few examples of how the scholastic life of the church helps inform and support the domestic mission. The Church dogmatically condemned Gnosticism. This matters because it means we reject the idea that the material world is evil. It is easy to forget that there really were many people who believed that all matter, including sexual reproduction, was evil. Our rejection of this belief creates a world in which we are obligated to care for the Earth and its creatures. The Church condemns Pelagianism and the assertion that we can earn our own salvation, on our efforts alone. There really were heretics, very early on, that believed that no sins after baptism could be forgiven. Because of our rejection of this, we offer mercy, confession, and forgiveness without limit. Scholasticism and dogma help us articulate that incarnation infused human nature into the life of the trinity via the person of Jesus. Human nature is now part of God in the person of Jesus... When we say God loves us, it truly is, a marital love and not the love a person might have for a pet. Because we are IN Christ, we are partakers in the very life of the Trinity, with God as our brother. This matters because it mandates that we approach everyone as bearers of the divine and never objects for our own pleasure. Our Church rejects the idea that we should annihilate the will and attachments to achieve nirvana; rather, our church calls us to

nobly bear the burden of being, to take up our suffering and the suffering of those around us and to know that God is ever with us through our suffering. We strive to reorient the will not destroy it. This difference is why Catholics evangelized, built hospitals and orphanages around the world and rejected the impulse to become privately enlightened with no obligation to our fellow man.

A scholastic like Aquinas can help articulate what we believe about the nature of God to the modern world. Because of his work (and many others), we can assure the world that we do not believe in a magic sky wizard, a prayer genie or a sugar daddy. The popular myth is that only in recent times have people questioned God’s existence. However, the opposite is true. Our faith HAS wrestled with intellectual arguments against

God for literally thousands of years. Our church HAS solid reasoning for its social and moral teaching beyond the common trope of “the church just wants to control you.” None of this is to say that everyone needs to be a Thomist or a scholastic in order to be in love with Jesus. On the other hand, we should rest assured that our dedication to the poor, unborn, immigrant, neighbor, sexual ethics, enemy and Eucharist can be articulated and defended in a rational way. I would encourage all Christians to find ways to engage in our intellectual tradition as a way to support our living out the gospel in our homes and communities. 

Erik Olson teaches high school English and is a member of the Nativity House CSA. He also volunteers his time and skill as the Nativity House Beekeeper.



Roundtable Discussions

for clarification of thought

Wednesdays, 7-9pm

7pm - Potluck Dinner
7:30pm - Discussion
9pm - Evening Prayer

July 11 - Keeping Hope Alive in Today's Quagmire

**August 15 - I don't want to talk about it
Stories of Civil Dialogue**

**September 12 - Practical Hospitality
The poor, the refugee, the immigrant**



For more details follow Nativity House on Facebook



The Visitation

Dear God, Please Enlarge Our Hearts

continued from page 1

Our modern individualistic and self-centered culture proclaims a very different message. In seeking personal fulfillment, many people have become obsessed with “free time”, “personal space”. We seek security in small circles, or in our own pursuits of entertainment, leisure, and comfort. However, when we focus only on ourselves and our own comfort, we become blind to the needs of our brothers and sisters around us. Our lives lack joy, and we become lonely and isolated. The human person was not created for comfort, but for communion, for community.



Life is more beautiful when it is shared, and simply stated, that is what it means to live in community: to share life. Life in community is hard, but it is also glorious. It involves sacrifices, but the joy is far exceeding. I get to witness up close the ways in which God is at work in the lives of Venus, Justin, Gracie, Annemarie, Alexis, Charlotte, and Kayla, and my faith in Him is again renewed. Rather than focusing on the faults of others, I have learned how to recognize and rejoice in the good of others. My friends in community have also helped me to recognize my own gifts and they challenge me and show me the ways in which I need to grow.

In Pope Francis’ newest Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, he describes holiness as “a journey in community, side by side with others”. (141) “No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community”. (6)

So I wonder why more people are not living in Christian communities? The Church has proclaimed over and over that the call to holiness is not just for priests and nuns or for a select few; it is a universal call. If holiness is a “journey in community”, then community too must be a universal call. In the Acts of the Apostles we hear that the early Christian disciples lived in community. Perhaps that is part of what we need for the New Evangelization: a resurgence of Christian communities. What that may look like practically speaking may be different, just as holiness is made manifest in a variety of ways. However, through my own experience of growth and transformation at Nativity House, I am convinced that intentional community is not a way of life for a select few.

More people need to live in this way, to love in this way. May God enlarge our hearts to embrace the call to Christian community! 🏠

Sarah Reznicek is the Director of Faith Formation at St. Jude Catholic Church in Joliet. She has served Nativity House as an intern for the past two years.

from
POPE FRANCIS' apostolic exhortation
GAUDETE et EXSULTATE
WE ARE
N * E * V * E * R
completely ourselves
UNLESS
WE
belong to a people
(that is why no one is saved alone,
as an isolated individual)
Rather
GOD draws us to HIMSELF,
taking into account the complex fabric present
IN A
INTERPERSONAL  RELATIONSHIPS
present in a
HUMAN COMMUNITY 

Designed by Venus Wozniak, Director of Nativity House

The Visitation

Reflections on Environmental Lobby Day

By Annemarie Coman

On April 26, I had the privilege of joining the contingent from the Diocese of Joliet for the Environmental Lobby Day in Springfield. This was my second time participating in a legislative visit, and my first time lobbying in Springfield. It was quite an experience to say the least.

Our group met at the Diocesan Office bright and early and made the drive together out to Springfield. Once there, we stopped at the Catholic Conference of Illinois, one of the main organizers of the Environmental Lobby Day. They gave us some tips before we went out into the field. One of the other organizers was Faith in Place, an organization based in Chicago that brings together people of different faiths to work on environmental issues.

The first part of the Environmental Lobby Day consisted of visiting senators and representatives to bring their attention to current environmental bills. The top three issues supported by the Catholic Conference of Illinois included: a Resolution on Laudato Si, House Bill 5044/Senate Bill 3080: Access to Affordable and Clean Water, and House Bill 4469: Voting Rights for All Illinois Citizens. We walked around the Capitol and spoke to the different legislators in the districts where we had constituents. We especially focused on the bills in order to convince lawmakers to vote yes for Clean Water and Voting Rights for All Illinois Citizens.

As we know, the poor are disproportionately negatively affected by environmental degradation. The clean water bill (HB 5044, SB 3080) was especially striking to me because of the statistics. A recent Chicago Tribune report showed that out of

nearly 3,000 homes tested in Chicago, 70% had lead in their tap water. This kind of water crisis is absolutely unacceptable and reminds us of the horrors of Flint, Michigan. The clean water bill calls for the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to develop a program to help low-income individuals and families get access to affordable, clean water. The bill also requires that within 1 year, every community water system in Illinois must create a plan to remove all public and private lead-pipe service lines connecting to the water main within 10 years. Clearly, this bill would make an important impact on those who would otherwise be drinking unsafe water.

Another main focus of our lobby day was House Bill 4469, Voting Rights for All Illinois Citizens. This bill protects voting rights of former inmates and those who happen to be held in a county jail awaiting trial during an election. Currently, most people in these situations do not know that they can vote, or do not have access to a poll, and therefore cannot exercise their right to vote. You may wonder, what does this bill have to do with protecting the environment? The bill also features the Illinois' Future Energy Job Act, which targets former inmates to fill new jobs in the alternative energy industry. This would make a positive impact in the lives of formerly incarcerated men and women in need of jobs, as well as protecting the environment as a whole.

Overall, I feel that our Environmental Lobby day was very successful. We spoke to several legislators face to face, and for those we could not visit we left information and a number to call. After the legislative visits, we went to the rally, which was located on the front lawn of the Capitol building. This rally was filled with cheers and rousing speeches of

those who support caring for our common home. One adorable moment included a speech by a group of girl scouts requesting that our earth be protected to encourage the thriving of wildlife, especially butterflies.

Several legislators came forward showing support for the clean water bill and the bill about voting rights. Another major issue that was addressed is the coal bailout. Currently, there is a large coal company called Dynegy (based in Texas) that would like to tax Illinois citizens in order to bail out its failing coal plants in Illinois. These aging and failing coal plants are polluting our air significantly, as well as causing dangerous living and working conditions for those who live and work in and around the plants. Also, a recent report from February 2018 reveals that Illinois has plenty of energy without the Dynegy coal plants. In my mind, the bail out is absolutely ridiculous because it asks Illinois citizens to pay to allow Dynegy to continue to pollute our air. Instead, we need to invest in energy efficient jobs so as to provide safe working conditions for all people while also protecting our common home.

As a Catholic Christian, I am inspired by Pope Francis' encouragement in *Laudato Si* to continue to work for the sake of our earth and all those who call it home, especially the poor and those most vulnerable to the negative impact of environmental degradation. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis compels

every single one of us to come together to make a change, "The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change."

In my own life, I am trying to reduce my use of plastic, especially by avoiding single-use plastics like plastic water bottles and plastic grocery bags. I know I have a long way to go to live a life that does not harm the environment, but it gives me hope to know that little changes can make a big impact. It is a simple and easy switch to use a reusable water bottle and reusable shopping bags. The unfortunate truth is that plastic items are filling our earth and oceans to a shocking degree, and they do not decompose. Instead, growing levels of plastic particles contaminate our waters and our animals including fish and birds. It is the poorest of the poor who pay the price, living in areas where plastic garbage is their only "scenery." In our own lives, let us reflect on changes we can make to care for our common home. Let us stop our sins against creation and instead live in a way that leads to the fullness of life for all of God's handiwork. 🏠

Annemarie Coman is an Intern at Nativity House and the Editor of The Visitation.





In this issue:

- **A Kingdom United**
- **Dear God, Please Enlarge Our Hearts**
- **Reflections on Environmental Lobby Day**

Nativity House
17141 W. 143rd St.
Lockport, IL 60441



St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 120 - c. 200)

The Incarnation, Neo-Gnosticism, and Human Dignity

Feast Day: June 28th

by Matt Shultz

drawing by Annemarie Coman

18 years into the 21st century, there seems to be a lot of complaining in Catholic circles about 'the world today.' Certainly, some level of dissatisfaction with the current cultural climate is justified. There are in fact unique problems presented to the church these days. Yet, it is important to remind ourselves that in many ways the difficulties and misunderstandings of the modern age are reiterations of problems the Church has already confronted. I don't say this to belittle the actual tragedies of today, but rather to give us hope, confidence and peace in a Church that always has and always will be a guiding light for the world.

One individual who served as a guiding light was St. Irenaeus of Lyons. Born in the early 2nd century, he was a strong leader and Bishop of the early church. His lasting legacy can be seen in his work *Against Heresies*, where he confronts many of the ways that Christianity had been

misunderstood, warped, or directly attacked. One of the prominent movements St. Irenaeus confronted were the Gnostics. The Gnostics held many controversial beliefs such as Jesus being merely a man, and that secret knowledge was the key to salvation. But central to their misunderstanding of the world is their insistence that the material world is completely separate, and even directly opposed to the spiritual world.

I think many similarities exist between Gnostics and post-modern thinkers. Like the Gnostics, post-modernists often misunderstand Jesus as a nice-guy-who-taught-stuff, resulting in shallow spirituality, politicization of Christ's words out of context, and varying degrees of fundamentalism. Also, like the Gnostics, post-modernists also tend toward intellectual elitism as evidenced by the preference for cutting-edge knowledge over wisdom, jarring novelty over familiar tradition, and chic eclecticism over systematic thought. But



undergirding much of post-modern thought is the very Gnostic rejection of the unity and coherence between body and soul, the natural and spiritual. This results in the rise of gender theory, justification of environmental and human violence, and the rejection of natural law, just to name a few modern tragedies influenced by post-modernism.

But rest assured, St. Irenaeus confronted these affronts to faith boldly and eloquently, and his argument rests on the incarnation. The truth of the incarnation, he argues, undoes so much of the confusion that the Gnostics proclaimed. The word becoming flesh not only asserts that the body and soul are unified, but also

makes clear that the material and spiritual world are part of one coherent reality, thus allowing the unity of man and the divine. St. Irenaeus writes, "This Word of God which dwelt in man was made Son of man to accustom man to perceive God, and to accustom God to dwell in man, according to the good pleasure of the Father" (*Against Heresies* 20.2) The incarnation shows us how the suffering and corruption of the physical world is part of our redemption, not an obstacle to redemption. In fact, Christ's willingness to take on a mortal body is not only a loving sacrifice, but a resounding affirmation of the dignity of the human person.

St. Irenaeus' profound understanding of Christ's divine and human nature can help us reconcile the perfection of the world to come with the difficulty of the world below. We need not give in to fear, or perhaps even worse, bitter and resentful complaining. Praying with the mystery of the incarnation, and most importantly receiving Christ incarnate in the Eucharist, can provide us with much needed rest in an often-Gnostic world, as well as the courage to confront the problematic philosophies of our time. St. Irenaeus, pray for us! 🏠

Matt Shultz is a Physical Therapist at Delnor Hospital.