

# The Tidings

THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES



# 2016

CONGRESS SPECIAL ISSUE

## SPECIAL ISSUE

**Congress 2016**

This is a special Religious Education Congress issue of The Tidings, the weekly newspaper serving the people of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. In it, you will find stories about Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ — this year's keynote speaker — as well as on Father Chris Bazyouros, the director of the Office of Religious Education for the archdiocese.

You will also find writings from two of our regular contributors, both of whom are speaking at this year's Congress. Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, writes about not "being stingy with God's mercy." Heather King, an author, speaker and writer, talks about her new book, which she describes as "a different kind of cancer memoir."

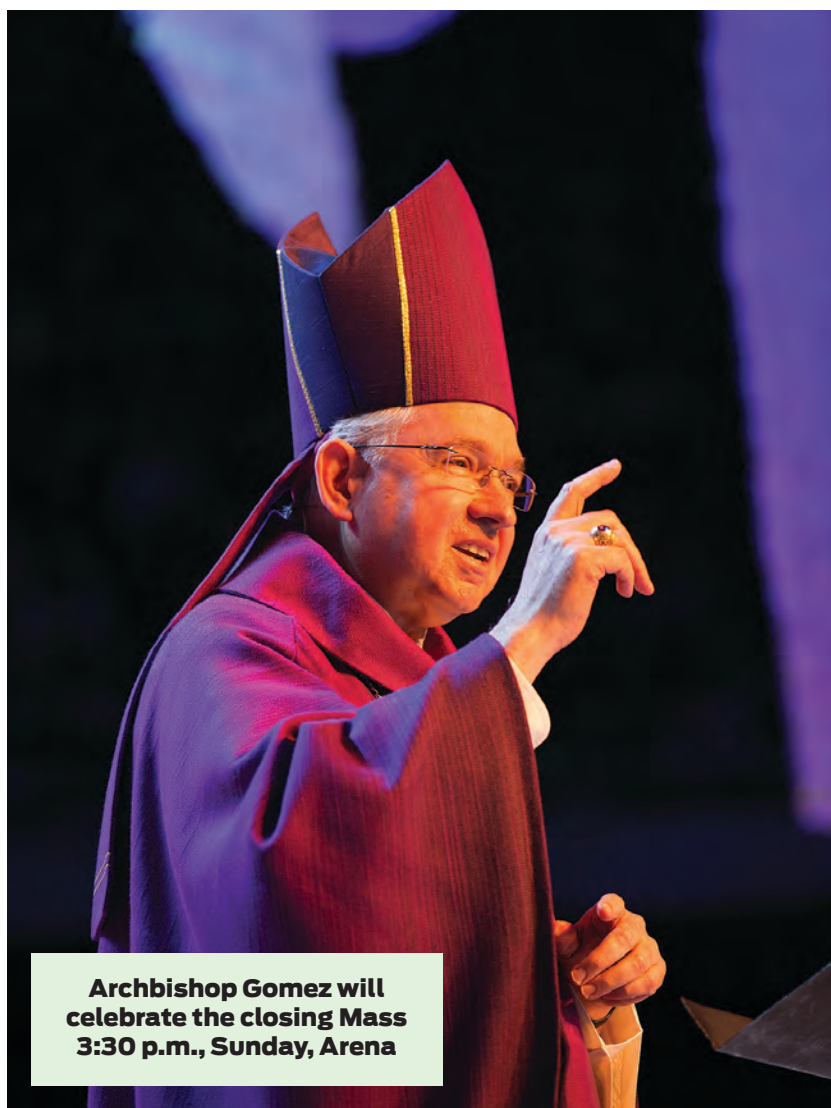
In this year's Congress program, Father Bazyouros explains this year's theme, "Boundless Mercy," which was inspired by the Gospel account of Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well.

"He promises a spring of living water springing up in each of us for eternal life," Father Bazyouros explains. "It also reflects the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy convoked by Pope Francis."

Archbishop José H. Gomez invites those who attend Congress to "enter into a deeper encounter with the gift of mercy."

"May we allow his presence to touch our hearts ever more deeply and have a conversion so that we can overcome everything that keeps us away from him and embrace a life renewed by his healing mercy."

We would like to thank the Office of Religious Education for continuing to put on the Religious Education Congress, now in its 60th year. By reporting on the event each year, our staff, too, grows in our understanding of Jesus Christ and the boundless mercy of God.



**Archbishop Gomez will  
celebrate the closing Mass  
3:30 p.m., Sunday, Arena**

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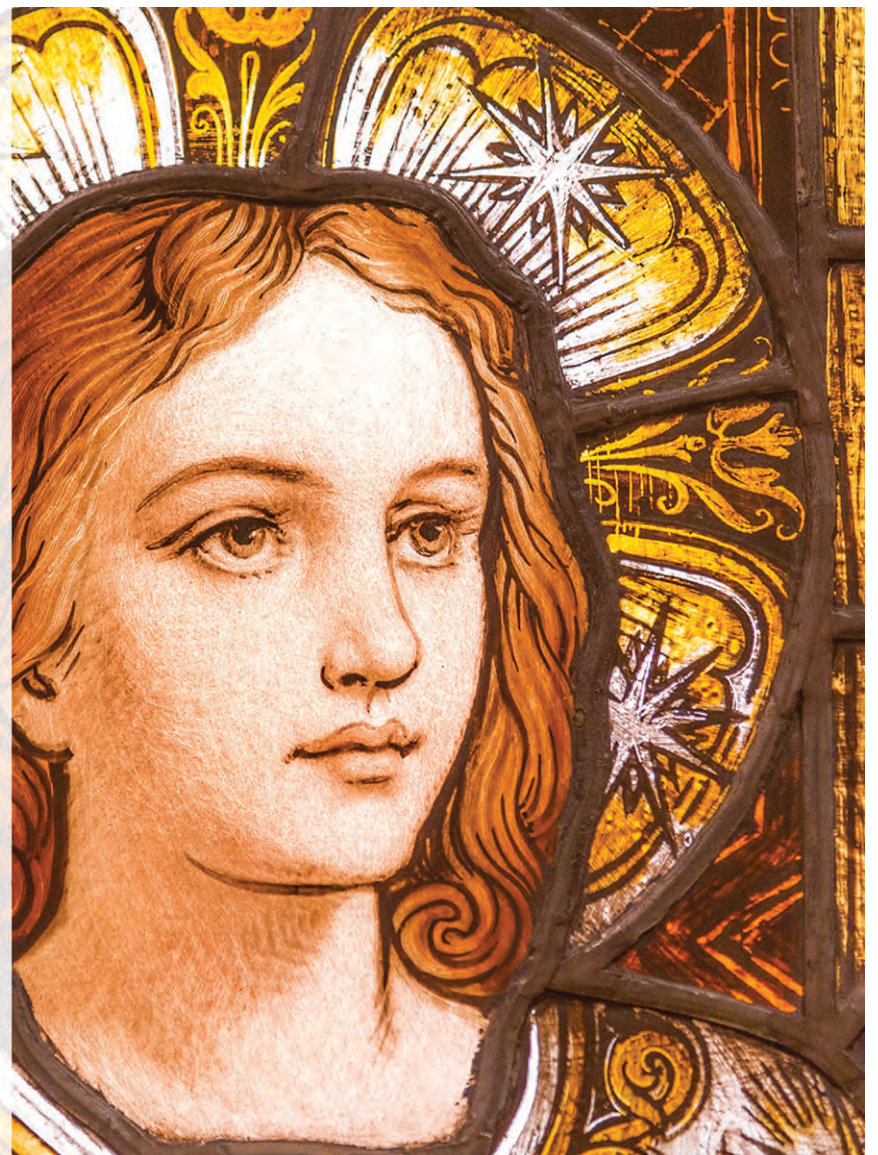
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# Sister Helen Prejean to address role of mercy in her ministry

BY MARIA LUISA TORRES

THE TIDINGS

**R**enowned human rights advocate, death penalty opponent, and best-selling author Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, will present the Saturday keynote address at this year's Religious Education Congress, titled "Boundless Mercy." In keeping with the 2016 Congress theme — and the current Holy Year of Mercy — Sister Helen will discuss how the mercy of God shapes and directs her life (and ours as well).

In her presentation "Boundless Mercy and the Compassion of Christ" — scheduled for 8:30 a.m. on Saturday, Feb. 27 — Sister Helen will explore several mercy-related questions: How far can the compassion of Christ reach? Even to murderers of the innocent? Even to atheists who hate and despise religion?

As part of her talk, she will also address how God's mercy drives us to serve "beyond our limits" — which is exactly what Sister Helen has done for years.

According to Father Chris Bazzyouros, director of the archdiocesan Office of Religious Education — which sponsors the R.E. Congress every year — Sister Helen will discuss "how the mercy of God has compelled her" to dedicate her life to extending that same mercy to those widely viewed by society as "unforgivable and unredeemable ... to accompany them, even if it's to their own death."

"[Sister Helen will] reflect upon her own spiritual journey, and how the



St. Joseph Sister Helen Prejean, who has worked in prison ministry and against the death penalty for decades, is pictured in Rome Jan. 21. During a meeting the same day, Pope Francis asked Sister Helen about the case of Richard Masterson, a Texas man who was executed the previous day.

PAUL HARRING/CNS

mercy of God has played a part [in her ministry]," said Father Bazzyouros. "Her commitment to life and justice issues is extraordinary, and is really an example for us to be looking beyond how we understand the pro-life movement as well as social justice and how they are interconnected."

Born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Sister Helen joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille in 1957 (now the Congregation of St. Joseph, CSJ). She began her prison ministry while working with the poor in New Orleans in 1981, when she became pen pals with Patrick Sonnier, the convicted killer of two teenagers, who was sentenced to die in Louisiana's Angola

State Prison. She visited him repeatedly in prison, serving as his spiritual advisor before his eventual execution.

The experience opened Sister Helen's eyes to the Louisiana execution process specifically, and to the moral realities of the death penalty in general. She relayed her powerful story in the book "Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States," which was on the New York Times Best Sellers list for more than 30 weeks, has been translated into 10 languages, and was eventually released as a major motion picture in 1996.

"Dead Man Walking" — which stars Susan Sarandon as Sister Helen and Sean

Penn as the convicted death row inmate — was directed by Tim Robbins and received four Oscar nominations, including Sarandon's win for Best Actress.

Sister Helen's second book, "The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions," tells the story of two men — Dobie Gillis Williams and Joseph O'Dell. She believes both men were innocent, and examines how flaws embedded within the death penalty system led to their executions.

In addition to her written works — she is currently writing her latest book, "River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey" — Sister Helen also travels across the nation and around the world talking about her ministry. Her tireless advocacy work, which still includes counseling death row inmates and families of murder victims, has been instrumental in sparking national dialogue regarding the issue.

In 2015 capital punishment in the U.S. continued a years-long decline, with states carrying out the fewest total executions in 24 years. In Oklahoma, where inmate Richard Glossip narrowly avoided being executed twice within a two-week period last September (once on appeal and the second time due to incorrect drugs), all executions are now on hold indefinitely while the state reviews its procedures.

Though most Americans still favor capital punishment, 2015 polling by Gallup and the Pew Research Center indicates that public opposition to the death penalty has reached its highest level in four decades, approximately 37 percent. ■

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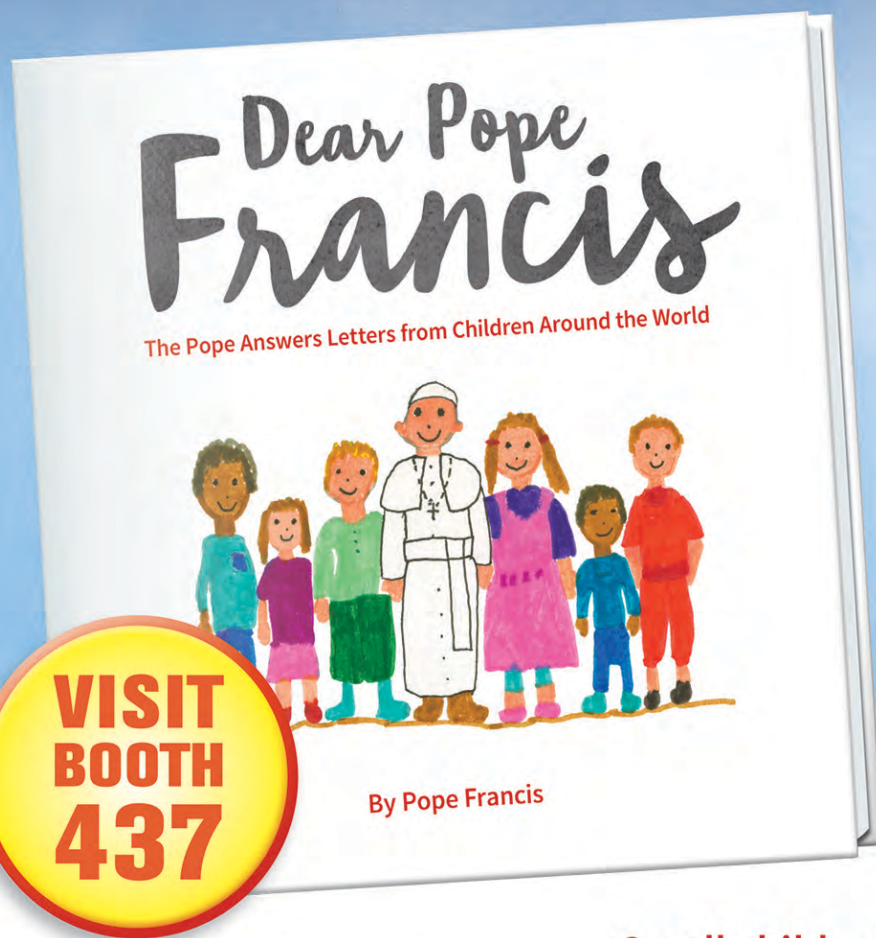
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# Our Mercy

CONGRESS 2016



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# Trust in the providence of God

What lies at the core of Father Bazyouros' ministry as the director of the Office of Religious Education

BY J.D. LONG-GARCIA

THE TIDINGS

**N**ot long before his ordination to the priesthood, then-Deacon Chris Bazyouros received news of his first assignment: St. Joseph in Hawthorne.

He couldn't wait, so he decided to go with his younger brother to sit in the congregation during a Sunday morning Mass. What he saw changed his view of ministry. Young girls and boys were receiving First Communion as part of the most popular Sunday liturgy.

"I had never seen that before," he said in an interview with *The Tidings*. "Here were all these children in their First Communion outfits, and the whole worshipping community that regularly go to Mass there, everyone was with them."

Later, he asked the pastor, Father Perry Leiker, about it. He explained that children are part of the community and celebrating sacraments of initiation with the community strengthens their connection with the parish family.

"That vision can shape how we hand on the faith," he said.

Father Bazyouros became the director of the Office of Religious Education July 1, 2015, stepping into the role held by Sister Edith Prendergast, RSC, for 27 years. He had previously led adult faith formation efforts in the office before assuming the new position.

This year the Office of Religious Education will be marking the 60th anniversary of the Religious Education Congress. The annual event draws close to 40,000 over four days, featuring hundreds of workshops in English, Spanish and Vietnamese.

## Trusting in God's providence

The priest joined Fathers James Bevacqua, Abel Loera and Samuel Ward as the first class of priests to be ordained in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in 2003. After serving as associate pastor at St. Joseph's, he became the pastor of St. Albert the Great in Compton before joining the Office of Religious Education in 2013.

"When I got ordained, I never thought I'd be in this kind of ministry — or any kind of special ministry as such," he said. "I really felt that I was going to be going to different parishes."

Sister Edith asked him to discern joining the office. Father Bazyouros went

through his discernment process, which he calls "dialogical." As an extrovert, he talks things out with a core group of friends and takes lingering questions to prayer.

"The most important thing for me is to figure out the real question: What is God asking of me or what am I asking of God?" Father Bazyouros said. "I have to be very clear about what's happening. Without that, I may be going in a place that I'm not supposed to go in my thoughts and in my prayers."

Here, too, that first assignment at St. Joseph left a mark on his process. The Sisters of Providence had served at the parish and a statue of Our Lady of Providence had been erected in their honor.

St. Theodora Guérin, who founded the Sisters of Providence of Mary-of-the-Woods, had a saying that stuck with Father Bazyouros: "Have confidence in the providence of God that so far has never failed us."

"I was doing great. Adult faith formation is exciting. I was just starting to get my sea legs, and then Sister Edith announced that she was going to be retiring and continuing her ministry in different ways," Father Bazyouros said.

After talking with friends and prayer, he decided to apply for the job.

"No, no, they won't go for it," he thought. "Then the archbishop called and wanted to have a meeting. 'OK, we're going forward...'" Then trusting myself to the providence of God became an even more fervent prayer!

Father Bazyouros said his first year as director has been wonderful and credited the work of the many contributors who work in and with the Office of Religious Education.

"There are so many great possibilities," he said. "I feel so privileged and humbled that I'm going to be in this place, to be part of this movement. It's been an amazing ride so far."

## 'Hope never fails'

In September, the Pew Research Center released a survey that found that 52 percent of all U.S. adults who were raised Catholic had left the Church at some point. Some returned, but four of every 10 people who were raised Catholic left.

The problem of Catholics leaving the Church isn't news to Father Bazyouros. But his reaction isn't to panic.

"Some of these studies can cause anxieties in our heart," he said. "I think the first response is not to be anxious, not to have a knee-jerk reaction to do something different for the sake of doing something new."

Instead, Father Bazyouros said the Church needs to discern the right response, not simply to react.

"If we're going to be the face of Christ, we have to listen to the cries of our



VICTOR ALEMAN



## “We need to look for ways that we can help adults develop a sense of being called to be disciples”

people,” he said. “Our understanding of what the Church looks like in the United States in the 21st century, particularly in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, it’s going to need to evolve and grow and take on elements to allow people to be who they are, to be faithful people who are recognized and respected.”

Adult catechesis is at the center of parish life, he added.

“We need to look for ways that we can help adults develop a sense of being called to be disciples and to live as disciples,” Father Bazzyouros said. “So with Pope Francis, we have this missionary option. We are fundamentally meant to be sent out to bring the Good News and joy of the Gospel.”

While it may seem daunting, he believes, as St. Paul wrote, that “Hope never fails.”

“So long as I can maintain hope — not just in myself, but in others — then God will never fail to show us how we can get out of any situation we’re in, or to show us how to get to the place where we need to be.”

Archbishop José H. Gomez and Father Bazzyouros met with youth ministry coordinators from throughout the archdiocese Jan. 19 at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. The dialogue, which

included the archbishop’s vision for youth ministry, also acknowledged the struggles faced in youth ministry.

“When people have hope, then miraculous things can happen,” Father Bazzyouros said. “That is one of the greatest fruits of experiencing God’s mercy. From that experience, hope comes alive and allows the soul to dream, to imagine something so much better than what is being experienced right now.”

### ‘Boundless mercy’

For years, planning for the Religious Education Congress has begun with a meditation on the Sunday readings that will be proclaimed on Congress weekend. This year, the Gospel will be the Samaritan woman at the well, from St. John’s Gospel.

“We started the process in May, to discern the theme,” Father Bazzyouros said. “We talked about the water, the dialogue, the ways God continues to show his mercy even in the face of obstinacy.”

The first reading is from Exodus. The Israelites in the desert begin to doubt God’s design. Moses strikes a rock with his staff and water flows forth. Pope Francis had already announced the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which intertwined

perfectly with the readings. The team prayed about all of it together.

“What really was filtering through was the desire to express just how grand, just how wide, just how great and unlimited God’s mercy is. It let us to the path of God’s boundless mercy,” Father Bazzyouros said. “It’s something that has a lot of different layers.”

Boundless mercy has no restrictions, he said, noting St. Anselm’s description of God’s greatness. He noted how the word “bound” connects with the prevalence of human trafficking in California, how the trafficked person becomes a slave.

“Pope Francis’ whole ministry of reaching out to people who have felt ostracized or pushed to the side or not worthy — he’s reached out and touched those people and communicated God’s mercy with simple gestures,” Father Bazzyouros said.

“There are no boundaries,” he added. “There is no place where God’s mercy cannot go. All the places where we think we can’t go, God’s mercy is already there. His mercy is already in Syria, in Iraq, in France, in our homes. It’s on the border.”

He also noted the richness of the theme in Spanish, “Misericordia inagotable.” “Gota” is the word for “drop,” which also calls to mind water. It especially

resonates since the state is still suffering through a severe drought.

“It’s important to conserve water. But God’s mercy won’t run out,” he said. “That’s been God’s M.O. since the beginning of the universe.”

Congress itself has this wider view of the Church, he said, noting the many liturgies, including those from the Eastern Rite.

“This year, we’re going to have the Syriac rite, and they use Aramaic,” he said. “What about the words of institution, hearing them in the language that Jesus had used. It’s going to be extraordinary. Congress gives people an opportunity to really see a wider Church.”

Msgr. Leland Boyer and Msgr. John Clarke organized the first Confraternity of Christian Doctrine Institute at Mount Carmel High School in 1956. Some 500 teachers and catechists attended the two-day conference, listened to speakers and gained experience from other teachers.

Sixty years later, Father Bazzyouros believes emphasizing God’s boundless mercy will drive the Religious Education Congress for years to come.

“Some soul-searching is needed on our part, to listen to our brothers and sisters,” he said. “That comes at the level of relationship, when I’m related to you and to the community.”

It’s the path marked by Christ Jesus. “He called a few people, and he gave them his teaching and they formed a relationship with him,” Father Bazzyouros said. “So when he asked them to go and take the message out, filled with the spirit, they said, ‘OK, we’re going to take what you have given us and give it to others.’” ■

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# Stripped: At the intersection of cancer, culture and Christ

**W**hen I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2000, my first thought was “I’m going to die.” My second was “I do not want to ‘battle’ cancer.”

I have my own battles.

I didn’t want to fight a battle on behalf of big pharma, my war-obsessed culture, or the fear of being thought a nutbag.



## THE CRUX

By HEATHER KING

I wanted to acknowledge that to be diagnosed with cancer is a traumatic psychic blow. I wanted to educate myself. I wanted to come to grips with my mortality. I wanted, as I have always wanted, to act in freedom (a stretch, as I was panic-stricken) and to make the decisions I thought were right for me. Not for anyone else. For me.

As it turned out, I was incredibly lucky. My cancer was grade 1, stage 1. And “Stripped,” my new book (Loyola Press), is a different kind of cancer memoir. It doesn’t describe chemo because I didn’t have chemo. It doesn’t describe radiation because I didn’t have radiation.

I had the tumor removed and then, after reams of research and untold

hours of anguished prayer, I went against medical advice and declined all further treatment.

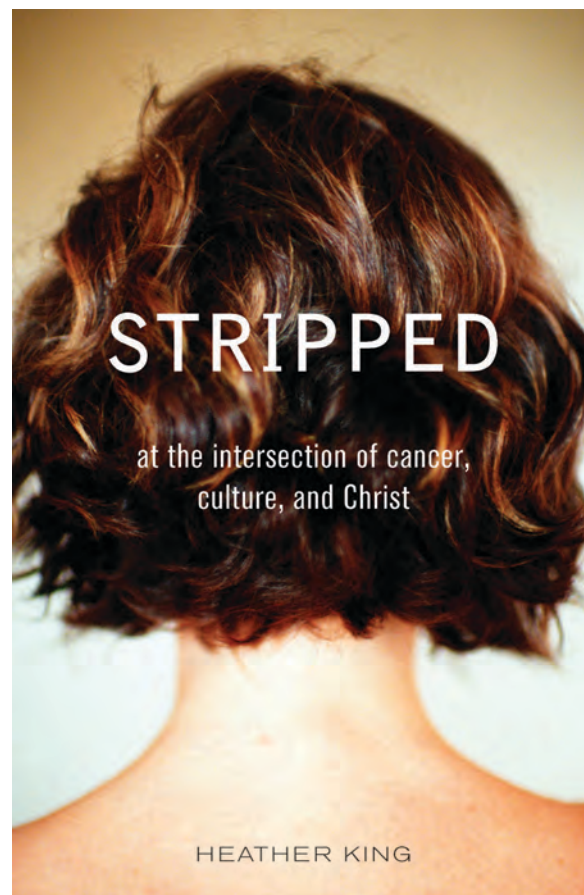
“Stripped” is about the long, slow process of coming to that decision made on Palm Sunday, 15 years ago.

It’s about the loss of a certain kind of innocence, the end of a marriage, the deepening of my faith, the vocation of writing.

In fact, it’s not a cancer memoir at all. It’s a memoir about coming to terms with this thought from Kierkegaard: “We come into this world with sealed orders.”

Here’s an excerpt. I was living in Koreatown at the time and had just schlepped, as I often did, to 8 o’clock Mass:

“One Monday morning in the parking lot of St. Basil’s I ran into Sean Dolan, a 70-ish Irishman who looked like the angel in ‘It’s a Wonderful Life,’ had been sober for years, and was squiring a fellow with a rat-like face who was clearly coming off a major bender. Sean was one of these hearty cradle Catholics who are always going off to Europe to visit shrines and talking



## STRIPPED

at the intersection of cancer,  
culture, and Christ

HEATHER KING

“Stripped” is available in paperback and ebook. You can buy it from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or directly from Loyola Press, [www.loyolapress.com](http://www.loyolapress.com).

### Our vocation is love: Called to be a Catholic artist

Heather King will share why she writes for a living and the challenges that have come with her profession.

Saturday  
1-2:30 p.m.  
Marriott Elite

about some miracle or other. He’d once lent me a very good book called ‘Abandonment to Divine Providence,’ by a 17th-century priest named Jean-Pierre de Caussade. I liked Sean.

“Still, when he asked about my cancer and, right there in the parking lot, grabbed my arm and said, ‘Come here, let’s pray,’ I instinctively recoiled. In New England, where I come from, even

your own parents don’t hug you, and I had never quite grown used to the touchy-feely ways of Southern Californians. But Sean got ahold of me, and then he made the hungover guy, who reeked of booze, come over, and we all put our arms around each other and Sean placed his free hand on the upper part of my chest and started pouring out a very heartfelt prayer. ‘Jesus, we ask you to help Heather,’ he said, with just a hint of a brogue. ‘You know she loves you so much, and we ask you to heal her: every tissue, every cell, every limb, every organ’ ...

“Ten years ago — okay, one year ago — I would have died of embarrassment to be standing out in public praying with a geriatric Irish Catholic and some poor mangy drunk, but the great thing about having cancer is that situations that formerly might have seemed traumatic pale in comparison. Also, you very quickly realize you can no longer afford to scoff at anything or anybody that might even remotely have the capacity, and more to the point, willingness, to help.

“After a few seconds I realized that to be embraced by these kind, well-meaning folks, who no doubt had many better things to do than take time out of their busy morning to comfort me, actually felt good. So afterward, I said, ‘Wow, Sean, I sure am glad we ran into each other!’ and shook the rat-faced guy’s hand, and we went our separate ways with smiles, waves and, on my part at least, a warm glow of gratitude.

“Everything was fine until around two the next morning, when I got up to use the bathroom and thought, ‘That’s strange, I could swear I’m feeling a little nauseous ...’

CLIFFHANGER!!! ■

Heather King is a blogger, speaker and the author of several books.



The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

# On not being stingy with God's mercy

**T**oday, for a number of reasons, we struggle to be generous and prodigal with God's mercy.

As the number of people who attend church services continues to decline, the temptation among many of our church leaders and ministers is to see this more as a pruning than as a tragedy and to respond by making God's mercy less, rather than more, accessible.



**IN EXILE**  
FATHER RONALD  
ROLHEISER, OMI

For example, a seminary professor whom I know shares that, after 40 years of teaching a course designed to prepare seminarians to administer the sacrament of penance, today sometimes the first question that the seminarians ask is: "When can I refuse absolution?"

In effect, how scrupulous must I be in dispensing God's mercy?

To their credit, their motivation is mostly sincere, however misguided. They sincerely fear playing fast and loose with God's grace, fearing that they might end up dispensing cheap grace.

Partly that's a valid motive. Fear of playing fast and loose with God's grace, coupled with concerns for truth, orthodoxy, proper public form and fear of scandal have their own legitimacy.

Mercy needs always to be tempered by truth. But sometimes the motives driving our hesitancy are less noble and our anxiety about handing out cheap grace arises more out of timidity, fear, legalism and our desire, however unconscious, for power.

But even when mercy is withheld for the nobler of those reasons, we're still misguided, bad shepherds, out of tune with the God whom Jesus proclaimed. God's mercy, as Jesus revealed it, embraces indiscriminately, the bad and the good, the undeserving and the deserving, the uninitiated and the initiated.

One of the truly startling insights that Jesus gave us is that the mercy of God, like the light and warmth of the sun, cannot not go out to everyone. Consequently it's always free, undeserved, unconditional, universal in embrace and has a reach beyond all religion, custom, rubric, political correctness, mandatory program, ideology and even sin itself.

For our part then, especially those of us who are parents, ministers, teachers, catechists and elders, we must risk proclaiming the prodigal character of God's mercy.

We must not spend God's mercy, as if it were ours to spend; dole out God's forgiveness, as if it were a limited commodity; put conditions on God's love, as if God were a petty tyrant or a political ideology; or cut off access to God, as if we were the keeper of the heavenly gates.

We aren't. If we tie God's mercy to our own timidity and fear, we limit it to the size of our own minds.

It is interesting to note in the Gos-



L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO VIA REUTERS/CNS

Pope Francis hears confession during a penitential liturgy in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican March 28, 2014.

## **Moral Loneliness in our lives and ministry: The deeper reality beneath our longing for a soul mate**

Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, will be speaking about the moral aspects of loneliness.

Friday  
10-2:30 p.m.  
Arena

**"One of the truly startling insights that Jesus gave us is that the mercy of God, like the light and warmth of the sun, cannot not go out to everyone."**

pels how the Apostles, well-meaning of course, often tried to keep certain people away from Jesus as if they weren't worthy, as if they were an affront to his holiness or would somehow stain his purity. So they perennially tried to prevent children, prostitutes, tax collectors, known sinners and the uninitiated of all kinds from coming to Jesus.

However, always Jesus overruled their attempts with words to this effect: "Let them come! I want them to come."

Early on in my ministry, I lived in a rectory with a saintly old priest. He was over 80, nearly blind, but widely sought out and respected, especially as a confessor. One night, alone with him, I asked him this question: "If you had your priesthood to live over again, would you do anything differently?"

From a man so full of integrity, I fully expected that there would be no regrets.

So his answer surprised me. Yes, he did have a regret, a major one, he said:

"If I had my priesthood to do over again, I would be easier on people the next time. I wouldn't be so stingy with God's mercy, with the sacraments, with forgiveness. I fear I've been too hard on people. They have pain enough without me and the Church laying further burdens on them. I should have risked God's mercy more!"

I was struck by this because, less than a year before, as I took my final exams in the seminary, one of the priests who examined me, gave me this warning: "Be careful," he said, "don't be soft. Only the truth sets people free. Risk truth over mercy."

As I age, I am ever more inclined to the old priest's advice: We need more to risk God's mercy. The place of justice and truth should never be ignored, but we must risk letting the infinite, unbounded, unconditional, undeserved mercy of

God flow free.

But, like the Apostles, we, well-intentioned persons, are forever trying to keep certain individuals and groups away from God's mercy as it is offered in word, sacrament and community. But God doesn't want our protection.

What God does want is for everyone, regardless of morality, orthodoxy, lack of preparation, age or culture, to come to the unlimited waters of divine mercy.

George Eliot once wrote: "When death, the great reconciler, has come, it is never our tenderness that we repent of, but our severity." ■

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