



God Lives on the Margins¹

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*The spirit that we have,
not the things that we do,
is what makes us important to the people around us.*

Sr. Joan Chittister, Benedictine Sister of Erie

Rather than seeing God residing in centres of power and might, or in offices of the institutionally-acclaimed holy, or amongst the blessed rich and influential, this article proposes the thesis of God living on the margins and inviting all to the periphery of what is considered decent society for a grace-filled living. Combining academic articulation with pastoral insight through narrative account, the reality of the marginal existence of God is unpacked in five sections. The first section narrates a personal journey of being turned around at an encounter with those living on the margins, creating a crisis-intersection and compelling life-changing decisions. Second, is the scholarly research in Leuven and an articulation aligned to Lindbeck's intratexture narrative preference. Third, is the pastoral engagement phase that affirms the character of the God of the margins. The fourth section turns to the scriptural witness of compassion as the modality of the God of the margins. Finally, the article draws on paradigmatic and catalytic stories for communal growth towards a posture of compassion.

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The title for my lecture is: “God Lives on the Margins.” This is more than a personal spiritual conviction. It is a theological statement, which drives my work both theologically and pastorally, determines the issues and interests that I pursue, and the method and style of how I pursue them.

Let me briefly attend to this reflection in a sequence of five sections.

1. The personal journey: on being turned around

A London-trained Barrister, I had a busy legal practice and a false sense of the world being under my feet, when in 1986 I came upon a life-changing intersection. It began at the local Sunday market in my city Kuching in East Malaysia where the rural indigenous folks brought their jungle produce out to the city for sale. They did that week after week, year after year. But *that* Sunday, things would be different for me. I paused and I observed the rural natives and their activities. An elderly lady caught my attention. She was sitting at the edge of the shops with her heavy load. She had carried that heavy load in a huge basket on her back, balanced by straps round her forehead – a punishing logistics to be sure. As I stood there watching her and imagining her walking the jungle trails carrying that load, her knees and ankles quivering and her back pulsating with pain, a series of questions sped through my head. Isn’t she just like my dear old mother who passed away recently? How far a distance did she have to walk like that from her kampong [a rural village] to the roadside, to catch a bus to come to town yesterday afternoon, stayed the night, in order to catch the early Sunday morning market? And where did she sleep last night – just out in the open along the five-foot-way of the shops? Did she find a place to shower at all? Did she pack some dinner? And when the market is over by midday, will she have made a few “miserable” Ringgit [Malaysian dollar] for her bus fare home, and again retracing that jungle track back to her kampong?... Unconsciously, I had just become a caught captive of a transcendent power; for suddenly life seemed so grossly unfair. Look, I would make a few hundred Ringgit merely attesting a client’s signature on a piece of document prepared by my clerk – a very good money by any account. But now, compared to what that elderly rural native lady was getting for her produce and all the hard work, the kind of “good” money I was making suddenly seemed questionable. Those were troubling and subversive thoughts indeed, the kind that not only shattered some old stereotypes and fragile illusions but literally shook some foundations. But they explain why the margins matter such a great deal to me. And they marked my *ephphatha* moment which opened my heart and ear to hear and feel people’s pain and their silent cries. It marked a turning point for me. As human suffering began to weigh heavily on my consciousness, I would drive to the cathedral of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of my wife Angie. I had many questions on human suffering: “Why? Why? Why?” On my knees, I sensed that the answers to all my

questions must somehow rest with that man hanging on the cross. Before long, I went and sought instructions and baptism. But I couldn't stop. One simply cannot have that kind of foundation-shaking experience and go on with life as usual. Legal practice remained interesting but somehow, God assumed greater interest. So after struggling through excruciating discernment, I folded my legal practice and Angie resigned from her teaching profession, and off we went to Leuven, Belgium. That was how an Asian Barrister and his wife ended up spending nine years studying sacred theology at a continental European critical institution of learning – the renowned Catholic University of Leuven. To the scholarly articulation in Leuven I now turn.

2. The scholarly articulation: Lindbeck's intratexture narrative preference

One of the highlights of my time in Leuven was my doctoral research which brought me to a critical dialogue with the work of George A. Lindbeck and the emergent postliberal school of theology.² They, together with other thinkers, contributed towards three key convictions that I have about theology: *first*, narrative matters; *second*, Scripture is at the heart of the theological conversation; and *third*, stories from the margins matter. In sum, my formation days in Leuven framed and shaped my narrative theological angle, always pushing me to a narrative account.

The intratexture theology of Lindbeck is fecund for me, particularly in regards to his lens on biblical truth as depending not on the status of its historicity, the importance of the historical-critical methodology in biblical scholarship notwithstanding, but rather on its assimilative power or its capacity to draw us into a particular framework of meaning. It is through this particular framework that we construe the whole universe. And it is by this particular meaning system that we are equipped with the religious power to live a certain way of life – as creatures and as children of God. This intratexture narrative preference coheres with the creation story which captures my attention as of first importance. The opening chapter of the Book of Genesis not only tells the story that it was God who created heaven and earth, thus affirming God and not the human person as the foundation of all things, but that God created human persons in his image. From the outset, then, God invested in each and every human person with such fundamental, intrinsic, and divine dignity that humanity ignores it only to its peril. That has inspired the Leuven moral theologian, Louis Janssens, to articulate on the eight continuous dimensions

² See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religions and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox, 1984]; idem, "Barth and Textuality," in *Theology Today*, 43 [1986] 361-76; James J. Buckley (ed.), *The Church in a Postliberal Age* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002]; Jeffrey C.K. Goh, *Christian Tradition Today: A Postliberal Vision of Church and World* [Louvain: Peeters & Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000]; Joas Adiprasetya, "George A. Lindbeck and Postliberal Theology" in *The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology*, 2005.

of “HPAC,” an acronym that stands for the *human person adequately considered*, as the essential elements which all moral and ethical considerations must take account of.³ Then, the narrative of the burning bush and its culmination in the archetypal exodus narrative interprets for us the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt by portraying the liberation of these oppressed people from political, economic and social domination as an exercise of the compassion of God who calls them to be his people not only in freedom and dignity, but in responsibility as well. And then, the prophet Jeremiah emerged, almost against his will, to threaten Jerusalem and its Temple in the name of God. Theology, I would learn fairly early, must return to its origins, that is, God’s presence with the poor and the defenseless.⁴

At the same time, Leuven crystallized for me an early awareness of the marginal existence of this God of compassion, banished thereto by human progress. Paul Tillich, who had seen how the scientifically-minded society tended to explain everyday experience through empirical observables, realized that this had left very little room for God in the lives of moderns. In an attempt to introduce alternatives to the traditional theistic conception of God in order to make God an idea modern people could relate to, Tillich spoke of God in terms of the “infinite and inexhaustible depth,” the “ground of all being,” and our “ultimate concern.”⁵ And yet, there is every risk of trivialising these innovative categories in the light of the scale of values contemporary people construct for themselves. This is particularly true when we recall the disturbing words of Martin Luther: “To whom your heart adheres, that is your god.” Trivial stuff are easily elevated to the top of one’s scale of values, to assume the rank of the ultimate, and become the god of the person’s life.

Furthermore, wherever there is a surge in reliance on technological achievement and social planning, God gets correspondingly pushed further away from the centre of human existence to its periphery. Our technical-scientific age has given humankind a certain freedom from anxiety and superstition, Pope Benedict XVI critically observed, but with the temptation to view as reasonable and serious only what can be corroborated through observable data, the risk is to sideline the moral and the holy.⁶

And so, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from the Nazi prison at Tegel, we extend our human boundaries further out as we grow more able ourselves, and render God

³ See Dolores L. Christie, *Adequately Considered: An American Perspective on Louis Janssens’ Personalist Morals*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs, 4 [Leuven: Peters, 1990]. For a quick run-through of the eight continuous dimensions of HPAC, see “The Human Person Adequately Considered,” Article No.29 posted on 1 April 2011 on our website www.jeffangiegoh.com.

⁴ See Jeremiah 26:11-16, 24.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* [New York: Charles Scribner, 1948], p.57; *Dynamics of Faith* [New York: Harper & Row, 1957], p.1.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], p.46.

superfluous in areas where we have found our own resources. We increasingly push God to the outer margins of human existence. He wrote:

Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail – in fact it is always the *deus ex machina* that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure – always, that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries. Of necessity, that can go on only till people can by their own strength push these boundaries somewhat further out, so that God becomes superfluous as a *deus ex machina*.⁷

Only in areas of powerlessness, and in times of weakness, when we are at the end of our resources, do we turn to God. We have all but turned God into a “God-of-the-last-resort,” a “stop-gap God,” a “marginal deity.” What is the true character of this marginal Deity?

3. Pastoral engagement: affirming the character of the God of the margins

Since leaving Leuven in 1999, it has been a busy period of teaching and writing, speaking and dialoguing with seminarians and priests, religious sisters and lay leaders, and relating to people burdened by problems - all within a religious domain where my wife and I, though professionally qualified in our fields, are “lay people.” In an ecclesiastical system where official power structures by design always predominate and overshadow, and often control and stifle, and yet officials could wonder why lay people do not commit more to the “system,” it has given us a unique opportunity to enter into and at times appreciate firsthand the kind of marginal existence that the people generally experience in many aspects of their faith life.

Engaged with the margins, this pastoral phase has heightened my consciousness of the God of the margins and affirmed the scriptural signification of the marginal existence of the Son of God. This is one thread that runs from Jesus’ very birth, through his three-year public ministry, all the way to his death.⁸ Concerning Jesus’ birth, Saint Luke paints a bleak picture in seven words: No room *for him* at the inn.⁹ One suspects that it wasn’t a simple case of “no room” at all, but no room “for him.” And this set the tone for what Jesus would experience during his ministry in reaching out to the nation of Israel. Rejected by the religious leaders, Jesus wasn’t making a light claim when he warned a would-be follower that: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”¹⁰ In

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* [New York: Macmillan, 1972], pp.281-82.

⁸ Just as Jesus identified with the poor in his birth and ministry (2 Corinthians 8:9), so supremely in his crucifixion he showed his solidarity with the oppressed.

⁹ Luke 2:7.

¹⁰ Matthew 8:20.

fact, his first landing at the margins would find its full expression in the manifesto he later declared at the synagogue when he returned to his home town Nazareth and read from the Isaiah scroll: His calling is to the margins because it's in the margins that broken lives get mended, prisoners are set free, and the poor hear the Good News.¹¹ St John's Gospel gives us that haunting line: "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his only Son."¹² But this Son of God, the Word who became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood, was negatively judged by the world, disowned and banished to the margins of "decent" society, dragged to Golgotha, and there crucified. And so, concerning his death, the Letter to the Hebrews intones the same key like a grievous refrain:

For the bodies that are brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice are burned *outside the camp*. So Jesus also suffered *outside the gate* in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.¹³

Thus, the "no-room" theme permeates the front end, the middle and the tail end of Jesus' story on earth. He knows all about living on the margins. He understands how it feels to have society shove you to the side, to not really be accepted, and in the end to be totally rejected. He can identify with life on the margins.¹⁴

Scriptures go relentlessly further. Jesus, who died on the margins in the hands of those at the centre of power, did more than point us to a God who resides on the margins; he explicitly *identifies* himself with those living on the margins. "As you did this to the least of these..., you did it to me," he says in a passage the Christian Church has accepted as the discourse on the last judgment in Matthew 25. Jesus Christ identifies with the least, the last and the lost. In the wretched poor, the most marginalized in society, we find Jesus.

Of the depth of this identification, we need the likes of the Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta to teach us what it really means. When asked how she could go on day after day doing what she was doing to bring relief and dignity to the dying destitute, in seeming futility according to worldly terms, she would raise her hand with her five fingers spread out. "Five words," she said, "you-did-it-to-me." Where the "least" and the "dregs" of society are found, there we find God.

This God of the margins, however, is a God of three key characteristics. *First*, the God of the margins is a *God of emotions*. Emotions arise from interactions; we

¹¹ Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2.

¹² John 3:16^a.

¹³ Hebrews 13:11-12.

¹⁴ For a book that hits the experiential note, see Rick McKinley, *Jesus in the Margins: Finding God in the Places We Ignore* [New York: Doubleday, 2005].

unearth them only when we dig deep into human relationships. Biblical narratives of Jesus' interactions with the poor, the sick, the hungry and the excluded are emotionally charged stories. *Second*, this God of the margins is a *God of passion*, a suffering God, just as his Son is the suffering servant-Messiah, passionate in helping those who suffer. *Third*, this God is a *God of compassion*,¹⁵ always in solidarity with suffering humanity, not only suffering *with* the sufferers, but as Scriptures reveal, suffering *in* the sufferers. Embodied in Jesus, these three characteristics are a key to the transformative power of the gospel stories.

Pastoral engagements yielded the lessons that the margins of society are what humanity living in a busy *polis* creates, to stratify and classify, to rank and assess individual worth. But God lives vibrantly in such margins of society, never hesitating to display his emotions, passionate with love for the suffering, and compassionate in his suffering with, for and in the sufferers. All this opens to the crucial discovery that the margins are a place for compassionate, grace-filled living. To that modality of divine compassion we must turn.

4. Compassion: The modality of the God of the margins

While science moves in one direction – the way of knowledge and self-sufficiency - God moves in a different direction. On the cross, Jesus traversed his last journey alone, in darkness, in not-knowing. He who was everything and had everything taken away from him, adopted Psalm 22:1 for his lamentation, and left us an eternal sign of the cry of the suffering humanity.

At three o'clock, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*' which is translated, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'¹⁶

That lamentation wasn't one of despair; instead, the key is trust and confidence. It is, as Walter Brueggemann describes it in his lectures on the Psalms, *to give over* all one's suffering to God, in utter trust that God will do what is right. The complaint is at the same time a plea to God to correct a skewed situation.¹⁷ The point is, from Jesus' cry on the cross and many other gospel stories where those who suffer cry out to God for help, we see a piercing theme, that is, *brokenness* is the heart of the Gospel story. From brokenness, people need help to move towards hope, to find hope, to live in hope, again. It was Jesus' compassion for the brokenhearted

¹⁵ When Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated the Year of the Priests in 2009, he proclaimed that "God's heart trembles with compassion." In *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* [New York: Image Books, 2005], Henri Nouwen and Others describe the Christian life in three sections: the compassionate God, the compassionate life, and the compassionate way.

¹⁶ Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46.

¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1984].

and rejected that drew women and men to him. He ministered specially to those marginalized by society, those regarded as valueless, those left behind by the system. We see all this against a constant horizon of what Jesus announces to Philip: “He who has seen me has seen the Father”.¹⁸ And so theologians speak of Jesus as “the human face of God”¹⁹ but, even more germane to the point that I am eager to stress here, as “the compassion of God”.²⁰

The modality by which Jesus reveals God is through compassion. Study the word “compassion” in the Bible and we get to the heart of God; for every time we see the word compassion in the Gospels, a miracle took place. The singular and defining character of God is compassion.

Take the Parable of the Good Samaritan.²¹ A man is left beaten by robbers. A priest and Levite pass by in fear that helping the wounded man will leave them ritually impure under the law. The Samaritan becomes the only person free to obey the higher law, to be a neighbour to the wounded, discarded and stranded. He does not check the victim’s ID to see if the man qualifies as neighbour; he *becomes* neighbour to him. He does not look into the beaten up man’s financial background, or does his calculations; he just pays the bills. What he does may be summed up in three points: *he sees; he has compassion; he helps.*²² In this trilogy of terms, the middle term is *compassion*. Also in the exegesis of St Augustine and in the tradition of the Eastern Church, Christ himself is portrayed as the good Samaritan. The badly wounded man lying beside the highway represents all of us – the wounded humanity. Christ did not pass us by in our hour of need. Instead, filled with compassion, he bound up our wounds and brought us home to the Father’s inn. Compassion is key to the salvific activities of God.

To describe Jesus’ compassion for the people in need, the Greek New Testament uses the term εσπλαγχνισθη [*esplagchnisthe*] - a compound word that describes gut-wrenching feeling, and such deep emotions of empathy for the

¹⁸ John 14:9b.

¹⁹ Many books are titled thus. See, for example, *The Human Face of God* by John A. T. Robinson [Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1973]. Also James D.G. Dunn, in *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* [Louisville: WJK Press, 2010], posits the idea that Jesus is the “human face of God” as the confession of John’s Gospel. Jesus is the “one who made the unseen God known and known more clearly and more fully than he had ever been known before. In a real sense that the first Christians could only explain inadequately, to be in the presence of Jesus was to be in the presence of God -- not, be it noted in the presence of a god, but in the presence of God” [pp. 122-23].

²⁰ See, for example, Monica K. Hellwig, *Understanding Catholicism* [New York: Paulist, 1981], p.57.

²¹ Luke 10:29-37.

²² I find in this text a perfect locale for the illustration and reflection on the see-judge-act principle of social analysis popularized by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and first adopted in official church teaching by Pope John XXIII in the social justice encyclical *Mater et Magistra* of 1961.

sufferers as to cause one's internal organs or "the depth of the bowels" to twist and churn, to be "internally terrorized".²³ This is God's response to human suffering. More than just a little concerned about people who suffer, therefore, Jesus was absolutely, utterly, internally *moved* by their plight. We see this compassionate love in action when Jesus, his heart trembling with emotions, set aside his own needs for private space and time to grieve and mourn the senseless killing of John the Baptist and to commune with his Abba Father for the way forward, to attend to the multitude of needy people, working miracles to heal their sick and to feed the five thousand men plus women and children.²⁴ And, just as blindness severely marginalized and leprosy ruthlessly excluded sufferers from society, Jesus who only needed to utter the word to work miracles, chose to *touch* blind men and lepers as he healed them.²⁵ Physical contact being sympathy in concrete, Jesus' touch broke down walls of separation and removed the distance between giver and receiver.

The compassion of God is shown again in a gripping fashion in narratives of Jesus raising the dead where lives are ruthlessly halted, and families utterly shattered. In the raising of Lazarus,²⁶ Jesus' emotions and psychological turmoil were described by John in terms of him being "deeply moved in spirit" (*enebrimesato*) and "greatly troubled" (*etarsen*) and he wept at Lazarus' tomb (*edakrusen*). Weeping at the gravesite, Jesus confirms the need to *stand within* the space and ground of definitive loss and be emotionally connected with the grievers' very personal pain. There, lamentation becomes possible. And when he chanced across the widow of Nain burying her only son,²⁷ his heart went out to her. Here was a woman in desolation, without a name or someone to depend on because both the men in the house, first her husband and now her only son, were dead. Her future was a bleak and lonely journey in old age. Jesus said to her, "Do not weep (*Me klaie*)," and *touched* the bier to reduce the distance between the bereaved and the comforter, before raising the man from death. He revealed God's compassion through solidarity in action. To real life stories of solidarity in action I now turn for the final section to get a glimpse of the kind of church that matches the faith-community that Jesus left behind.

5. Paradigmatic stories: moving towards a posture of compassion

And finally, I look to narrative truth and embodied truth in stories of faith as vehicles for the sacred that help push us towards a posture of compassion. They point

²³ See Snyder Bible, "Lie with the Dog" at <http://jacksonsnnyder.com/arc/New%20Century/Lie%20Dog.htm> [accessed August 4, 2012].

²⁴ Matthew 14:14 and 15:32; see also Mark 8:2 and Matthew 9:36.

²⁵ Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 1:40-45.

²⁶ John 11:1-46.

²⁷ Luke 7:11-17.

to a faith community that *includes* rather than excludes, that seeks out, comforts and consoles those that suffer and are pushed to the margins. Archbishop Oscar Romero epitomizes such a narrative in Latin America. He became a voice for the voiceless, precisely when he discovered his call at the margins and came to terms with his true mission, not in defending the powerful, but in advocating for the powerless. Relentless in his insistence upon God's preferential option for the poor, he lived courageously into his martyrdom and inspired countless justice-advocates worldwide.

Saint John Chrysostom sounded the clarion call to all Catholics for whom the Eucharist is seen as “the source and summit of the life and mission of the Church.” “Those who fail to recognize Christ in the beggar at the church door,” he said, “will not find him in the chalice.” Mother Teresa teaches us all that when we accept the mission to the margins to comfort and console the suffering and afflicted, God speaks to us in five words - *You-did-it-to-me*. Jean Vanier uncovers the depth of inclusiveness in caring for the poor and suffering not so much in doing things for them, but in learning to sit at the same table with them. The fundamental ethos of the L'Arche communities that he founded is one of “living with” rather than “doing for” - a unique model by which to remember the healing and empowering words of Jesus, “I call you friends,” and to respond to an invitation to become poor, as a way to get to the heart of God.²⁸ They exemplify the invitation of friendship to share not only bread broken, but our brokenness. Jesuit Fr. Louis Gutheinz of Taipei embodies all this, as he combines academic achievement with pastoral commitment to residents of the leper villages in China and Taiwan. On his visits, residents crowd round him like an old friend. He sits down with them, holding their hands, smiling and chatting, and sharing *the same bottle* of mineral water with them – you take one sip, I take one sip. One cannot but look with awe and admiration at his tactile approach, his sympathy by contact. In one of those trips, a religious sister who accompanied him tried, from the goodness of her heart, to protect him, saying, “Father, please don't do that.” He later told her in private never to do that again, for those residents are super-sensitive and they know when they are despised. This is foot-washing at its best – a mutual acceptance that promises deep healing for marginalized humanity. These agents of Christ show us what friends of God do, by loving what and whom God loves – the vulnerable and the excluded in society. Their stories are important because, as Philip Yancey puts it: “You need only meet one saint to believe.”²⁹

Finally, we can be touched to tears by the spirit of a mother and the faith community who rallied to Sr. Louise Lears, S.C., and realise that God is truly present

²⁸ See Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008], p.17; John 15:15; and Chris Heuertz and Christine Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010].

²⁹ Philip Yancey and Dr Paul Brand, *In the Likeness of God* [Grand Rapids, Mic: Zondervan, 2004], p.14.

to the marginalised. In 2008, Sister Lears was forced out of all church ministerial roles by Saint Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke. The archbishop also placed her under a severe interdict, barring her from receiving any of the Sacraments within the archdiocese. Her “crime” was that she supported women’s ordination, even though she never sought or attempted to be ordained herself. Here is an educated woman, with a Ph.D. in Medical Ethics. She believes in freedom of religion and freedom of thoughts and conscience - fundamental rights which the church preaches to and insists upon the outside world. She is deeply committed to furthering the role of women in shaping the future of the Church but the official church vehemently excludes her from any serious discussions. The archbishop’s actions of exclusion and marginalisation had severely wounded Sr. Lears. Banishment is always cruel, for isolation causes acute emptiness to the soul and excruciating loneliness to the heart. Came Sunday, she desperately needed to be with her beloved parish community, to be present with this ecclesial body of Christ,³⁰ even though she had no intention of putting the parish in jeopardy by attempting to receive Holy Communion. But her 85-year old mother who was with her had other ideas. As her mother got up to join the communion queue, she told Louise to follow her. On receiving the Communion in her hands, the elderly mother turned around, broke it, and gave a piece to her daughter and said to her, “I was the first person to feed you, and I will feed you now.” Isn’t that divine motherly love? After witnessing this, Sr. Lears’ sister went on to do the same. And then, seeing what was going on, other parishioners, one by one, also broke their bread and gave a piece to her, so that by the end of communion, Sr. Louise’s hands were filled with fragments of the Eucharist. Not in her wildest dream, could this religious sister, barred from receiving communion from the hands of the clergy, imagine that she would receive more communion than she could ever ask for from the hands of the laity.

This is a story that shakes one up, and forces one to rethink and reshape one’s theology. God of the margins, whose modality is compassion and who strives to include and embrace the hurting, will always find a way to be present to them. I am even more convinced now that the margins are truly a holy place where God lives, where Jesus’ true face is shown, and where God’s true power lies. There is possibility for immensely grace-filled living in the margins, as the God of the margins interrupts the mighty reach of the powerful, on behalf of the powerless. In Saint Louis diocese, it took being on the margins for the laity to realize that God’s grace is working through them. *They have learned* that it is when we reach out to the poor and the marginalized that we learn about what it means to live the Gospel of love, and about what makes a true Church. *They have learned*, even if they have not read anything written by the

³⁰ “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.” – Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952].

biblical theologian N.T. Wright,³¹ that heaven really, cannot wait, because heaven is not a place for us to escape to in the future tense while we close our eyes to the injustices around us now and silently endure and put up with this sinful world, in the hope of going one day to a better world that lies elsewhere. Instead, *they have learned* that belief in heaven demands that one should in fact be hard at work making the world a godly and just place now. *They have learned*, that the Eucharist, the body of Christ, will always rise out of the people, for the people - quite specifically the lay people in this case - have tremendous and extraordinary sacramental power which any old theology to the contrary must acknowledge and adjust to. *They have learned* that where pharisaic legality would exclude, God's compassion could and would always include, for *they have learned* what a vision of "church" could look like when a community shifts away from the practices of ecclesiastical exclusion and blind obedience and instead, commits itself to God's way of solidarity and compassion. And consequently, *they have learned* a statement of theological reality - *where the laity is, there is the Church* - even though it is not a statement of ecclesiastical legality.

All this, my friends, locates me in my own narrative. Twenty-four years after the decision to take up theology was made, I have learned that I am still an advocate, really, even though the clientele has changed, because the goal has changed. Having turned around from a Barrister to a theologian, one thing that hasn't changed is that I am equally passionate in the pursuit of justice, but now it's more about the God of compassion at the margins who lives at the margins. That is because I have come to the key realisation that the margins are where God is, and where a life of grace can be found. ■



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³¹ See N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* [NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008]; Jon Meacham, "Rethinking Heaven," cover story in Time Magazine 16 April, 2012.