



Welcome to the
ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM
HOME PAGE
DISCUSSING WHAT NEEDS TO BE DISCUSSED



**Toward a More Welcoming Church:
Pastoral and Prophetic Perspectives”**

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Thank you for inviting me to a part of the world that I don't get a chance to visit very often; and for welcoming me to your particularly on the insite that our world brings. A couple of months ago, Bishop Gumbleton left a message on my phone that moved me greatly and prompted me to call him right back. You see, as a professor who works with several different populations in my university, beyond it, I become increasingly concerned about something that Bishop Gumbleton's call crystalized for me.



losing our
memoria
▶ histórica

We're in danger of losing our *memoria historica*, i.e., the intricate inheritance of the richness of the richness of the experience, lectures, and with them as a community of faith, we should be transmitting from generation to generation. Bishop Gumbleton's voice reminded me of his vial contributions to our Church's communal memoria. He

made me more grateful for his considerable import, and the pieces of influence formed me! Listening to him, I immediately felt the pool of familia with him and with all of you. The pool of shared concern and shared love, and the invitation to respect and values, the wisdom of an elder, and my own upbringing as a Latina installed in me.

Let me begin here. In the hope that your invitation to join you was the sincere way to nudge me into some new areas of reflection. Your community has asked me to think with you on how it is and continue the hard work of counsel inconcivity; and to do this, my reflections have to begin exactly at this moment we inhabit. Your group's name, Elephants in the Living Room,

discussing what needs to be discussed, provides a remarkable image, an image that our present moment requires we problematize even more. To help with that, I am enlisting the help of an artist and activist. In my experience, captured images from the film, "Exit through the Gift Shop," we're crowded into a



reconstructed living room in a warehouse where unsuspecting visitors were met by an actual elephant in a living room. The artist was asking his audience to wake up and notice an actual live elephant in the living room; but more importantly, our contemporary culture is intent on making that elephant ever more difficult for us to see that elephant. That difficulty is being fabricated in a particular way. So, friends, what is happening here?

Let's backtrack a little. I'm going to ask you a question; and I want you to pay attention to the answer that first pops into your head. Ready?

What is the opposite of beauty? If you thought of ugly immediately, you're absolutely right. For most of the part of history that is accessible to us today, let's face it, there's a lot of history that is lost to us. We human creatures seem to have developed a keen sense for discerning between the beautiful and the ugly.

We recognize the beautiful because it calls to us, it invites us, attracts us, and makes us want to delight and celebrate. Beauty created community because it draws into the kingship of loving something and doing so together. Conversely, our ancestors also learned to recognize the ugly, which pushed us away from something. The ugly told us to be cautious and brought about a response to flee, to not touch, to run away, to protect those we love from it. The ugly can break our hearts. And because if this, when we recognize this, it also created community, because we shared in the horror and the heartbreak. We have an experience together. The ancients paid attention to the human response, to the reality around them. Theologians all started talking about a mysterious link between beauty, truth, goodness, and its opposite: ugliness, deceptions, evil. And before we had a name for it, ancient humans had evolved and developed effectively as a community based on their vision of reality, with their fellow creatures and with their own hearts.

Now I'm not going to retrace all of the many instances when this sense started breaking down in human history. So, with the half of art, I'm going to point out to you why I think this primordial ethical sense has never been in more danger. This something, an insidious and confusing something, between beauty, which calls us in its clarity, and ugliness, which breaks out hearts, also in its clarity. That something which we have come to call is glamour. This elephant has been altered to be glamorous, to be so thoroughly stunning and luxurious, that she will blend into her stunning and luxurious surroundings and reflect them back. The elephant has been manipulated so that she will offer up a measure of superficial delight – a wow moment. This might even make us envy her apparently beautiful pink and gold, which we will then wish to buy to dress up our own surroundings and ourselves in all this glamour when we have this elephant in the living room.

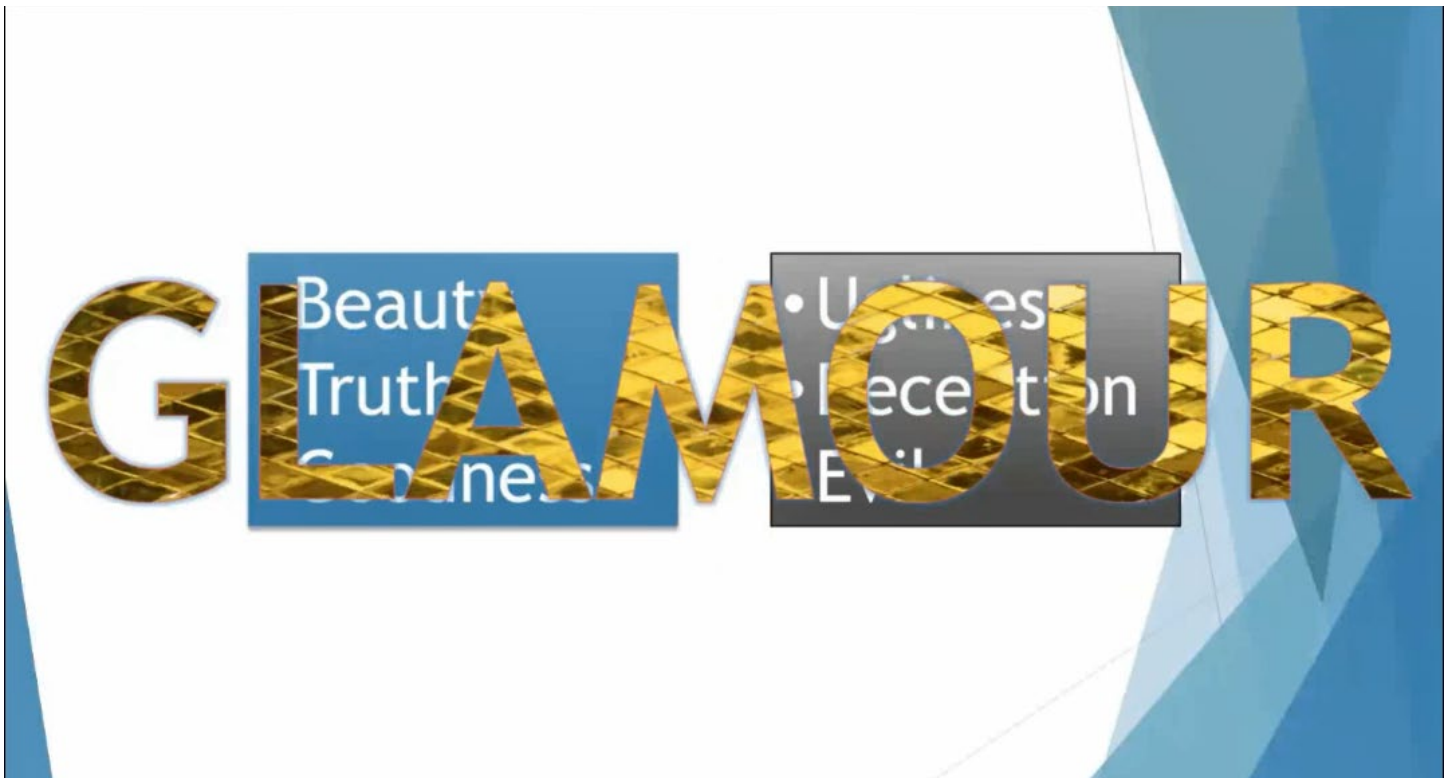
What have we lost in the process? On the side of beauty, we have lost the actual elephant. We have lost the complicated reality of her unique skin, er full and wrinkled skin, the color, the other glorious creatureness, her aliveness, and her dignity.

Blinded by the glamour, we have lost or kingship with the elephant, who, using the concept the wise Jewish philosopher, Martin Duberman, has come from being a doubt, a free and unique creature whose very being makes demands of us, to care and protect us, to an “it,” an object, just a means to something else, but not an end in itself.

The thing about objects is that we can exploit them. The elephant has become an object. Our world is full of objects who used to be people and creatures. But what have we lost that we cannot see? The ugliness. First, we have lost the shock of seeing an elephant in a living room- your group’s call to pay attention. This elephant in this enclosure is quite angry. We have lost the ability to be outraged that she is where she doesn’t belong; and there’s no way that being in a living room is something that she wants for herself.



Unable to see the ugliness, we lower our ability to reason and reality that she was forced into that living room. Confused by her false glamorous opulence, we have lost our sense of outrage that she has been forcibly taken from her home and her family, and painfully removed from everything that makes an elephant an elephant.



Like with our awareness of her unique beauty, our attentiveness to the ugliness of her situation should also cause our hearts to stir; but now, in defiance and denunciation, wanting to right the wrong of her exile and captivity, glamour destroys the possibility of building prophetic solidarity, which beauty calls and the heartbreak of ugliness festers in us. Glamour allows none of the clarity of heart that calls us to respond. Instead, glamour confuses us, specifically that our innate ethical markers, though written on our hearts, through our *historica memoria*, disappear. What is astounding to me is that it doesn't happen to Christianity, because as a community, we stopped paying attention to the historic wisdom of our own tradition.

If our goal today is to develop some tools so that each one of us becomes an agent to build a more welcoming Church, this mandate already tells us that there is something wrong. We have stopped welcoming. And if that is true, then we have stopped being heirs to the communities that formed around the prophets that Jesus and his friends grew to and understood to everyone and everything.

Now, I want to add a careful note here and say that I discern as a closed and unwelcoming Church, which is bleeding people, especially the young, in a way that is really shocking, is not, I repeat not a feature of our entire global Church. This is a U.S. phenomenon. This is very much our problem.

And what I am hoping we can do is remove that red and white and blue paint from U.S. glamour, so we can see more clearly, with the pain and the discomfort as well as the promise that such seeing can bring.



Let me get back to my initial point about the loss of our *memoria historica*. What are the things that we forego then, for which earlier generations, many of you listening to this as part of that generation, worked so hard to make present; and let me answer this through the concreteness of the communities I have had the privilege of encountering and accompanying.

Let's start with the young. I teach and accompany college students, young people with one foot in adolescence and the other in adulthood. If we remove the gold barrage, we see a group that is hurting in ways that are more insidious than our ancestors can say could have ever met.

Glamour places unobtainable requirements on our young. Living life on social media means experiencing a constant dream of judgment, self-loathing, and insecurity. It also means living in constant competition with others in what we call aspirational goals. But it just meant to serve a consumer society. Glamour makes us open our wallets in the hope that somehow fitting in, being accepted, feeling less known.

Glamour loves the extreme and lies to our young; and is often presented either as a place where there is absolutely no classical markers, as anything goes, or its opposite, a place of stifling rigidity and control, where a clear eye awareness of the ambiguity and complexity of history, and openness to the questions of our moment are forbidden. It is an either/or world, where they cannot find their place or be subject to their own history.

In an initial exercise that I do with my undergrad students, when they privately and confidently disclose to me through a set of questions, how they understand themselves in relation to Christianity and are possibly heartbroken. And I need to be: their disclosures are ugly. They show up our failures, and we need to see them. Many have been in Catholic schools their whole lives. By the time they have reached my university classes, and experience has forced them to walk away and no longer be able to see themselves in any relationships that are what demographers call “done.” And if you notice, the largest group of people in this country who are done with religious affiliation, a big whopping 39%, are former Catholics.

If we dare to see the heartbreaking ugliness this reveals, we will see that those who are done with the Church are exhibiting urgent symptoms which we don't want to see. I'm grateful for my students candor, because as they sensitively begin to articulate why it is they are done with the Church, their reflections reveal something wondrous: it is because they love, because those they love, and in some cases themselves, have been judged unworthy.

I encouraged my students then to express themselves creatively, to take a break, and to push past the paralysis of indifference that is the result of feeling overwhelmed by the world's pain. Through their creativity they make evident how their hearts push against decisions, dressed up in glamorous garble of unyielding self-righteousness that say some people are more human than others, that claim freedom for some and silence for others, that use labels that dehumanize and create “it” so that we will not cry to heaven born with the **dow.**



Young people worry incessantly and with much grief about the destruction brought about by climate change. It is their future after all; and they are surprised in Christianity, a religious tradition that values creatureliness and materiality. As we save together the ugliness, the destruction that asserts a loving God, who declares all God has made good, Mayan people began to make common cause with St. Francis and his vision of radical kingship of all that is.

To them, it starts to make beautiful sense that the family of creation includes our sister, Moon, and our brother, Wind, and beautiful brother, Sun, who helps things grow.

When our hearts are broken, our religious traditions confound sense of planetary kingship calls us to rebuild them. We are called by the beauty of this, which points to beauty's source. We know what good is and true, because we recognize the beautiful, and then is heartbroken full.

I have also accompanied my students at this stage of protest to call attention to the fear experienced by immigrants for the lunacy of living in a world that practices access to guns over the lives of children. Surrounded by a polarized environment that puts Christianity, nationalism and guns in the same sentence, and hides behind religious liberty, we try to unmask it all.

It is difficult, but imperative, that Jesus, the peacemaker. Be made present to all people in truly public ways, supporting their unique sense that non-violence be demanded and very Christian principles.

The work we need to do with our young is to remove the pink and gold paint of those who we likely and unclearly declare know who they should be, and we need to see them for who they really are. We need to have our eyes riveted on their pain, on the horror they feel, when things like white nationalism builds up their glamorous idols and claims themselves Christians so they can keep their guns and their power.

What is it our baptismal promises say? Oh yes! “Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of god’s children? Do you reject the glamour of evil and refuse to be mastered by sin?” It says there in our own rite, the warning about the glamour of evil. In saying they’re done with us, that we are blind. Our own religious tradition tells us that glamour is something dangerous, that it dresses itself in empty gestures, that it goes with its own always perfect religiosity, while readily condemning others. Glamour helps us forget that sinfulness in our own tradition is about not loving the neighbor, about not welcoming the stranger, about not sharing with the hungry, about not freeing the oppressed, about not doing as Jesus did, and what God wants, which is to be the absolute and complete truthfulness in all its beauty and goodness, we who are free and joined there; and God is love.

As I have, all of my students, many for the first time, read the Gospel of Luke, it’s quite stunning how many of them when asked to pick out a section that speaks to their heart and to the world’s scene, chose this:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

we have stopped being heirs to the communities that formed around the prophets and that Jesus, and his friends understood to include everyone and everything.



“Jesus heals the blind man”
Michael Buesking

Their sense is so on target, eyes wide open on the job description that Jesus claims for himself. This is his self-understanding. I feel the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue. This is Jesus, after he has faced down the glamour that could derail him. His time in the desert process is his moment of clarity. He can see God’s vision because he has intentionally walked away from comfort, from power, and from trying to control God.

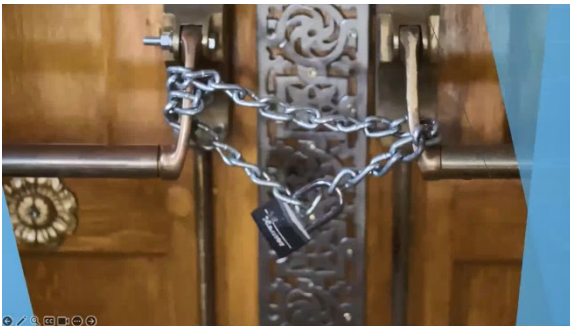
Now, I want to talk to you about the second group I accompany, and that is my graduate students. They are the teachers, the priests, the religious sisters, the spiritual directors, the chaplains, the ‘grown-ups” so to speak, that many of my young students are running from. It provides me with a mind healing contrast.

In many cases, when they start their journey, these would be grad students arrive full of certainty and answers deep in the culture wars.

In the U.S. we have a surprising number of very well-funded organizations inviting people of faith into the glamour of always being right, always being holy, always belonging to the in-crowd at church, and very busy spiritualizing everything away from real life. The elephant, discovered in a lot of glamorous paint and plenty of lace; it will take time and work to remove it all. That is the work of education.

The "always right" will need to face as many times in history the mystery of the church's institution represented in particular moments and people, has been mostly wrong. To come to this understanding, we need to open ourselves to uncertainty, to the hard work of discerning, to step away from always being right, and admit our mistakes, makes us vulnerable, makes us truthful, makes us human, and opens up to the kind of self-critical analysis that we need to take as a community. The synodal path which the global Church has been asking us for the past three years is the path of our company charter, to what is painful, as well as what is joyful, to acknowledge what is wrong, makes it possible to learn from our mistakes and speak to right. It opens up to history and the demands it makes of us. It recovers our *memoria historica* in its complexity, and it builds on the wisdom, much of it in the pain and confrontation of our ancestors in the faith. When we have come to the full realization that in the past, we have been blind, we can ask the uncomfortable question: "Is it possible that we are blind again?"

The "always holy" prop themselves up on judgement and exclusion. They rely on amnesia to keep themselves from recognizing themselves simple and keep picking at the spec in their neighbor's eye, while pretending in theirs is in our imagination. Self-proclaimed and vulnerable righteousness requires we gas-light everyone else – He rode away free and claimed goodness where there is no goodness.



The "in crowd" wants to lock up the church doors tight to feel worthy. They require exclusivity. They work to pile rules on rules and more rules so that those they believe the unworthy just give up and go away. Many of our "holy certain in crowd" would never let the Jesus of history in the door, with his feet caked with mud from walking, his eyes

bleary from lack of sleep, hungry and tired, and needing a place to lay his head down. "Where is your passport? How about your platinum club card? Where is your assurance that you are saved?"

Finally, I want to explore with you the *Memoria historica* of the third group I try to put at the top of my priority, even though many people caught up in the hamster-wheel of career vastness, this makes no sense.



The most vulnerable

These are the most vulnerable. And in my part of the world, they are my undocumented students, custodians, cafeteria workers and ground keepers, and their extended families.

Pope Francisco has asked us to constantly remind ourselves to go out to the peripheries. In the first

world, we most often interpret this Christian duty with a conscious seasoning of interpretation that we should worry about the foreign geographical hinterlands of the shanty towns of renewal, or the families threatened in the war-torn African countries. We send money and we feel good about our generosity. We send our well fed and our highly privileged students there on service trips, students who have passports and the financial resources to travel. We proudly fill our social media with picture streams with our awesomeness. We check a box: help the less fortunate.



euphemisms

My students and I have to have a very difficult conversation about this. The very first thing is to expunge the euphemism from our language. What do we mean by “less fortunate?” What is the meaning of fortune? Do we realize that its actual meaning refers to chance or luck? Do we really think that people are starving,

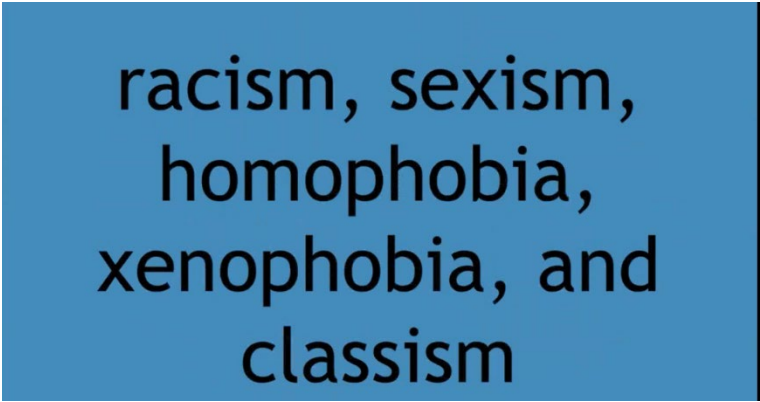
desperately fleeing in rickety boats, or tracking through the desert at the mercy of human traffickers because they are unlucky?

In the context of the United States, I actually need to give my students permission to call people "poor." In their either/or world of anything goes, or nothing goes, for glamour fosters paralysis; there's little space for truth telling. You and I know that this is what we mean by prophetic. They think that prophetic means somehow to tell the future, to be a fortune teller. Notice all the confusion and glamour convergence here: the less fortunate are lucky; the less fortunate are far away; I help the less fortunate by serving them a couple of weeks a year; I get points for that; I am a good person.

And then we have to talk about the living room we are inhabiting. Are they peripheral geographic locations, or are they about power and dynamics? Are there people in this very living room that we can silence, who are invisible? As a minority woman, first generation to go to college, and work in an overwhelmingly male environment in both the academy and the Church, I know something about living in that periphery of a living room, about being just some of the useful furniture, about being reduced to an “it.”

So, what can critical education do here? Well, I do have two recent success stories to share with you. Our work in the classes, scraping off layers of red, white and blue paint, can and does bear fruit; but it is work we need to do in our parishes in our neighborhoods, and in every space available to us, by fostering courageous civil engagement, and a truth-telling community.

The first thing my students learn to do is precisely to excite euphemisms, to call poverty what it is, and see the state of being poor as the result of carefully camouflaged interlocked systems colluding in providing a glamorous subsistence to some and confining others to powerlessness in disabilities. Let’s call racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism by their real names. Only then can we scrap off the paint and see what is underneath.



racism, sexism,
homophobia,
xenophobia, and
classism

The second thing my students learn is that these extreme conditions of vulnerability are right in front of their eyes. The only passport to them is they just need to wake up. The poor of our cities clean our classrooms, serve out food, care for our buildings. Over the last couple of years, as they dug further, the students found that none of these workers made close to a living wage, as calculated in our state of California. Many of our workers live in crowded conditions, often sheltering multi-generational families. And the largest concentration of Latino persons on our campus is precisely those who are the poorest, the workers among us.

When they started paying attention to the sufferings around us rather than escaping to poverty tourism, our students created extraordinary change.

They started sittings; they protested outside board of trustee luncheons; and they gave force of critical mass to what the few religious sisters we have left have been trying to argue: that we need to raise all the salaries to a level of a living wage. The coalition of students, through the student media, with some of us grown-ups, workers. This is what happens. We realize that a prophetic



Church means that we tell the truth; we denounce what goes against God's vision; and we build what goes to God's very heart.

The final and difficult step our students take is to recognize their own privilege and fourth anonymity of those without it. The war in Africa is right here in our classroom

in the form of the story they cannot know, but who is nevertheless there. Undocumented, with a family hiding in the shadows, they somehow manage to spend four years in high school, getting solid grades, and showed everyone they were serious about contributing to the flourishing of the world. The grinding poverty of badura, the constant danger of allure, the political repression of China, these are all around us. They have names and faces.

In my classroom the world's pain is in classes, in the vulnerable, undocumented youngsters sitting next to someone who lives in a world of privilege. The world's pain brims over in cities where these parents make everything run while locking all legal and labor and health protection; and yet, being powerful economic engines.

Almost two decades ago, we started welcoming a handful of students, providing scholarships, ensuring mentoring and health and legal counseling, and community. We have done this through administrations in Washington that granted some protection to administrations that openly targeted them and their families every single day of their lives, making life precarious.

IMMIGRATION, NEWS

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY TO OPEN DREAM CENTER FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS



BY ISN STAFF | *May 2, 2023*

Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in Los Angeles announced the anticipated opening of a Dream Center in Fall 2023, serving as a designated staff and space, to support undocumented students and families, as well as students who hold Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, status, often referred to as DACAmended. This marks the culmination of decades of grassroots organizing by LMU students, faculty, and staff.

Finally, just this last year, we came up from the shadows, where we have operated for a long time, and officially opened an office for undocumented student support services with a director and staff. We have welcomed the largest group, eight, of incoming, undocumented students and full scholarships; and we're hoping that the stability of the office will bring many others who are here, but we cannot know, through our doors, and to a growing, loving, supportive community. This is the welcoming and prophetic Church at its very best.

As we make the most vulnerable our top priority, and through the power of education and persistent on the ground advocacy, we change the underlying cause that often goes unchallenged, and allow social sin to thrive. We do this, we give the young, and the not so young, a reason to sustain. Don't be done with us; come, work with us.

After my several decades in tis work, I can tell you my undocumented former students are medical doctors; they're lawyers; they're community organizers; many of them are teachers; some of them are planning our cities, creating innovation. They are lives whose eyes are opened, walking with them, are working in non-profits, in grass roots, or running for political office. All are dedicating themselves to a version of our world that delights God and claims the real grace of God.

Removing the glamour that is responsible for our collective blindness to a sense of what is beautiful, and what breaks our hearts, we begin to see the nearness of those who need us, the truth of their suffering, and the action that all this requires of us.

The elephant is no longer covered up, and together we can get her home to where God first envisioned her peace.



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1/ Cecelia Gonzalez Andrieu is a theology professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. The Catholic Theology Society of America recently recognized her as an “activist scholar ...who demonstrates the power of theology to speak on the real lives of people in the margins and encourages them to work for liberation and justice.”

She is a contributing writer for America Magazine and serves on the board of directors of both the Ignition Solidarity Network and Discerning Deacons (an organization that works for the restoration of women to the ministry of the Deaconate). We feel very fortunate that she is able and willing to fit us into her busy schedule.