

Back and forth

January 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers

"Pendulum: a popular opinion characterized by regular movement from one extreme to another." This figurative dictionary definition adequately describes what seems to be happening in our society with a number of values considered basic to the well-being of every culture, one of which is marriage. For too long, spouses have suffered in secret because of the taboo that one's private life was not to be talked about. Many feel deeply relieved that in today's social climate we can finally admit and openly discuss the abuse, control, and exploitation that can make what should be a life-giving intimate relationship into a living hell.

Despite this healthy step forward, it is one thing to honestly deal with real suffering, and to take responsibility as a community for one another's well-being; it is another thing to prostitute a person's most intimate suffering at the hands of a spouse on TV talk-shows. It is one thing to finally publicly acknowledge that life-destroying marital relationships are not made in heaven and ought to be dissolved; it is another thing to opt out of a marriage because "the spark" is gone and personal fulfillment is not experienced. These trends are stark examples of the pendulum, definite movements from one extreme to the other.

Yet, even though a pendulum swings back and forth between extremes, I draw comfort from the fact that, sooner or later, God-given values reassert themselves in refreshing ways. Reading about a new book written by two of America's leading sociologists on the topic of marriage confirms this truth for me. The title itself says a lot -- *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially*. In a most "politically incorrect" manner the authors challenge the high number of divorces, wondering how necessary some of them are. Notwithstanding the experience of real suffering in marriage, the authors nevertheless point out that many couples who choose to resist thoughts of divorce can actually grow deeper in their marital commitment in ways that reach far beyond "the spark" or self-centered emotional and mental satisfaction.

This piece of wisdom resonates deeply with my own experience of marriage. Given the differences between my husband and I, we would have parted company years ago if our relationship was based solely on some romantic spark or the illusion of perfect personal fulfillment. I admit, digging for relational "gold" has at times felt too demanding and almost impossible. Yet, these moments have proven to be times when our vows and commitment have taken over, making the sacrament of marriage truly come alive for us. We somehow find the energy to make a new start, somehow are given the courage to tap into God's mercy and forgiveness. To know that we can make a new start every day has been the greatest encouragement of all. With God's active presence in our marriage, we can choose to be free from destructive and hurtful actions from the past. Acknowledging that our ultimate fulfillment lies in God alone, we can choose to free each other from unrealistic, "idol-istic" demands.

And so, when Richard Gaillardetz talks about marriage as the place where our salvation gets worked out (page 3), my whole being resounds with a heartfelt "yes." When the subsequent articles speak of the importance of offering God's, and the church's, healing to victims of broken marriages, my whole being says "yes". God's truth is not served by the swinging of a pendulum between extreme positions. God's truth is served best in a both/and approach: offering healing where it is most needed, and offering realistic encouragement to all who strive to grow in sacramental love.

The High Road

February 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers



At times of discouragement, I wonder if God should put limits on divine mercy and love. It is not those who commit crimes that frighten me the most and cause these thoughts. Rather, it is all the times we place ourselves on the judgement seat outside the courtroom that make me tremble. For all our zeal to be good people and devout Christians, our understanding and practice of justice seems millions of miles removed from God's definition of that term. In their publications, the Church Council on Justice and Corrections points out that the concept of restorative justice seems to be a hard sell particularly with Christians. Given the ease with which we pronounce judgements on one another in the ordinary events of life, this is not surprising. Yet, when harmony is shattered through crime, violence, betrayal, discrimination or exploitation there is nothing more fundamental to Biblical justice than an approach of healing and restoration, in and outside the courtroom. The notion of harsh punishment does not enter the mind of a generous and merciful God.

As a society, we react strongly to violence and crime. Calls for "justice" are heard loud and clear. But what is "justice"? And for a Christian, what kind of "justice" are we called to embrace? God's justice is concerned with healing and reconciliation. Our justice is preoccupied with retribution, punishment and revenge. God's justice is Jesus quietly writing in the sand when others are busy accusing the adulterous woman. Our justice is arrogantly judging the ability of an offender to do good and live in mercy. God's justice is the father patiently waiting for his wayward son to come home. Our justice is denying our strayed brothers and sisters the dignity of belonging, respect and a new chance. God's justice is Jesus eating with sinners and outcasts. Our justice is walking away from anything and anyone who is "unclean," concerned as we are about getting contaminated. God's justice hangs dying on the cross, taking upon himself the sin of the world. Our justice is deafening ourselves to the cry of those who are victims of our greed and then pitying their inability to make a living for themselves. Given this state of affairs, how can we even call ourselves followers of Jesus?

Simplistic solutions are not helpful, whether these are harsh or lenient. Christians need to opt for the "high" road of love, respect and mercy. This choice for love evokes tension, because our instinct wants to "lash out". A radical choice for mercy is difficult to square with our country's public justice system, intent on punishment. Jesus never promised that this "high" road of love would be easy. As a matter of fact, he was put to death for extending God's mercy to those who "deserved" only scorn.

Thank God for a few brave souls. Sister Helen Pr jean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, says: "Every human being is worth more than the worst thing we do." Pr jean lives by this divine truth as she offers a relationship of love and respect to inmates on death row. I think of a young mother, whose teenage son got involved in crime, was on the run from police, and found himself homeless and penniless. Her heart broken in a million pieces, this woman fiercely clung to God's promise of mercy and healing. Mirroring the father waiting for his prodigal son, she said: "What choice do I have but to keep loving? When he comes to his senses, I will welcome him back in love." Real love can be harsh and dreadful, tearing us to pieces and getting us crucified. Yet nothing else has the power to restore harmony, healing and true justice -- God's reign. Taking the "high" road of love, God will say: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

The cycle is broken -- Alleluia!

April 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers

Jeff grew up with a violent father and an alcoholic mother. For years he treated his own wife and children in the only way he knew how: with a possessive and jealous love that did not shy away from using a fist. Now, after the pain of seeing his wife leave and demanding a change in his attitudes and behaviour, Jeff is slowly "remaking" himself in a rehabilitation program for men who abuse. "The buck stops here," he says with remorse in his voice. "I have to learn a whole new way of being and it is not easy."

Thousands of miles away, across the ocean, Jewish and Arab Israelis, inhabitants of the same land, continue to return evil for evil. One small village has had enough: the buck stops there. Jewish and Arab families choose to live there in peace, putting all hope in their children: if only they can grow up loving one another and learning non-violent forms of conflict resolution. Christian, Moslem and Jewish children sit side by side in the classrooms of the village school, learning each other's language, prayers and history, and singing each other's songs. It is not easy, but it is their only hope.

Last February, on a snowy, bitterly cold evening in Berlin, Germany, several hundred Christians huddled together in the shadow of the Brandenburg Gate (once part of the Berlin Wall) to mark the official start of the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence. The Berlin Wall, once used to divide east and west by breeding suspicion, fear and ignorance on both sides, tells a different story now; one of unity and peace victorious over evil and violence. The buck stops here. Living the new reality of a united country is not easy, but it is the only hope for the future.

For us Christians, the commitment to overcome violence is neither an option nor an abstract idea. Rather, it is our basic calling as we place our trust in the one who broke through violence with active non-violence, and God raised him on high. Jesus refused to condemn those trapped in sin. He refused to condemn those who tortured and killed him. He refused to let death have the final word. Jesus responded with the power of a generous and merciful love right until the end, thus dismantling the destructive power of sin. We celebrate this victory of life over death this month: Christ is risen, alleluia -- meaning: the buck stops here.

Baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we celebrate this victory by choosing -- of our own free will -- to break the cycle of violence in our lives. We teach our children how to resolve conflicts peacefully, how to forgive and start over, how to respect differences. We pour the healing balm of Christ's love on those victimized by violence of all kinds: the abused and the abusing, the assaulted child, the pregnant teenager, the corporate business man trapped in fierce competition, those vying for the right to claim Israel as their homeland, victims of armed conflicts throughout the world, the underpaid and undervalued women and children at the assembly line, the child abandoned in the streets.

Jesus broke the cycle of violence, once and for all. We rejoice this Easter -- Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians everywhere -- singing alleluia from the rooftops. Once the party dies down we who profess Jesus as Lord have our work cut out for us: going about forgiving, sharing, healing, loving with a renewed and joyful heart. Christ's boundless love reigns. He is our only hope.

Soak the World

May 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers



While I embrace a strong and consistent pro-life ethic as one of my core beliefs, I shy away from direct political involvement with lobby groups. I have never felt quite comfortable with public protests while I do appreciate the commitment of others to this important task. Besides, the harsh and judgmental tone of some pro-life activism has left me feeling uneasy. Maybe Ron Rolheiser's thoughts help me understand this uneasiness. Wondering why our efforts to promote social justice and pro-life causes seem to have such little impact Rolheiser says: "(...)

Our actions for justice often mimic the very violence, injustice, hardness, and egoism they are trying to challenge. Our moral indignation very often leads to the replication of the behaviour that aroused the indignation.... The anger, crass egoism, bitterness, hardness, and aggression of so many (...) can never serve as the basis for a new world order" (The Holy Longing, 2000).

Maybe we are slowly learning that the real power to change our culture of death lies in love. The pro-life billboard with the slogan "Take my hand, not my life" can well be interpreted as a shift from judgment to love. In some communities efforts are made to reach out in love to those who oppose pro-life views. In Boston, Massachusetts, for example, six leaders on both sides of the abortion debate met for six years to better understand one another and to be open to learn. The account of that experience as published in the Boston Globe (January 28, 2001) is inspiring: "When we face our opponent, we see her dignity and goodness. Embracing this apparent contradiction stretches us spiritually. We've experienced something radical and life-altering that we describe in non-political terms 'the mystery of love,' 'holy ground,' or simply, 'mysterious.'"

The language of love is hard to learn when everything in us revolts, especially when the most vulnerable members of society are not even allowed to take their first breath. Jesus, however, leaves us no other option. Nothing has the power to dismantle injustices except for unconditional love. Women faced with unwanted pregnancies need that love and support in order to make life-giving rather than life-denying choices for themselves and their babies. We need to give that love unconditionally and permanently, especially once the baby is born. Rosalie Hall in Toronto, and Pro Vita in Romania, offer the joyful and loving support worthy of emulation in every community across Canada.

When women choose to terminate their baby's life, we do well to remember Jesus' verdict on the adulterous woman in John's Gospel. The people involved with Project Rachel in Calgary take Jesus' non-judgmental position seriously and display a courageous hope in the power of love. As one woman expressed after a Project Rachel retreat: "I shared the experience (of abortion) with others who really understood and it was the best way to overcome the pain, seek forgiveness, to connect with my baby and to be a proud mom instead of one living in complete denial, shame and guilt."

Being pro-life means taking a radical stance of love beyond protests in front of abortion clinics or sending petitions to Parliament Hill. However necessary, the protests need the commitment to daily and demanding love in projects which rarely get the media spotlight like Rosalie Hall, Pro Vita, and Project Rachel. We need to get our hands dirty and hearts ripped open by engaging with those who, for various reasons, feel forced into decisions that haunt them for the rest of their lives.

"Whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do it to me," says our Lord. The greatest expression of our obedience to the Lord of Love is to soak the world with this love.

Grieving as a sign of love

June/July 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers

In this season of Easter and Spring, much of our thoughts turn to signs of new life. Against that backdrop it seems wrong to announce the closure of this publication. Fr. Leo Mann's letter on the next page explains the Oblate decision regarding the OUR FAMILY. Already, in our immediate vicinity, where this news first travelled by word of mouth, there is shock and deep sadness. In a way this is a good sign: it means that we deeply care about this unique ministry. We do not grieve the passing of anything unless we have loved it immensely. The extent of our grief reveals the depth of our love.

Yet, if we truly live what we claim to believe, we see every death as a birth into something new, even if we do not see right away what that new thing is. In the remaining seven months of publication we will together, readers and writers, editor and staff, negotiate the closure of this much treasured ministry.

We give thanks for all the years that the magazine has offered spiritual, emotional, mental support and inspiration to Catholic families across Canada. The freedom to publish and to spread the good news of the gospel is a luxury that does not exist everywhere. I think here of those who attempt to do the same in other countries, one of whom is the writer Julia Esquivel from Guatemala. Her magazine *Dialogo*, which addressed life from a social and theological perspective, was banned by the government. She now lives in exile from her country but keeps her memories and concern for her compatriots alive by writing and publishing poetry about her beloved Guatemala. Yes, death of a magazine in one way, yet the ban and the exile showed roads to new life in other ways. That does not make the ban right, but it does show that we can choose life even in the face of death. Julia Esquivel is determined to live in resurrection light, and so can we.

Starting in our October 2001 issue, we will expand the space for Letters to the Editor. We invite you to share with all of us how the OUR FAMILY has inspired, nourished and challenged you over the years. How will you carry on the memory of the things you have read month after month, year after year? We know that several of you have been readers for decades, even for several generations. The magazine has wanted to promote that God comes to us in the ordinariness of daily existence, making sacred the events that toss us to and fro on this great journey called living. We have tried to encourage you to see God in action in your own lives by sharing the stories of others. With passion and sensitivity we have tried to journey with you in the questions and challenges facing the church today, both on personal and global levels. Now it is your turn to share stories with us. You may do so as a Letter to the Editor, or you may do so in the form of an article. Regardless of which format you use, please indicate how long you have been reading the OUR FAMILY.

Julia Esquivel had no say in how and when to cease publishing her magazine, but we do. We can use this time until February 2002 in constructive and life-giving ways. We will still be around for a while, and we are allowed the freedom to close with grace and gratitude. Yes, OUR FAMILY is a unique publication on the scene of the religious press. With its passing, an era will definitely end. But who knows what our God of the living has in store for us next.

Producing God's Fruits

August/September 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers



Once in a while I attend in-service meetings or lead workshops with Catholic school teachers. Invariably, the topic leads to one basic question: what makes our Catholic schools different from public schools? The question hides a challenge much more basic than our schools: what distinguishes any Catholic Christian from the rest of society? This question needs to be asked and answered - urgently - in our schools, in our parishes, in our homes, if we want any credibility left in the eyes of the world.

We can give obvious answers: Catholic Christians participate in weekly Eucharist called the Mass; we have a strong and visible devotional life, much of which, for many, is centred around Mary and the saints; we adhere to a hierarchical structure of ordained leadership with the Pope as the supreme head of our church. Yet, this is not enough. Jesus, who we profess as Lord and Saviour of all creation, calls us not just to some form of "party" membership. Jesus came to restore God's Kingdom of justice, love and peace among us. We, who are "born again" of water and the spirit in the sacrament of baptism, are to be bearers of these attributes of God. This calling requires nothing less than the total surrender of our lives and the radical healing of our own hearts, minds and souls. Because if we do not surrender and do not heal, this God-given mission in Jesus, unfortunately, risks getting seriously compromised in our own attitudes, actions and motivations.

I have witnessed this compromising more than once, often among well-meaning and committed Catholic Christians. "Who does he think he is, new to the school, and already forcing change upon us?", or "She sounds like a stuck record, always promoting inclusive language; what's the big deal?", or "Why can't he get over it like we all do?" More often than not we do not grant each other the justice, love and peace to which Christ Jesus calls us to witness in the world. Whether we attend teachers' meetings, parish meetings, social justice committees, pro-life gatherings, women's conferences, or simply in our one-on-one encounters, we often have real trouble walking our own talk. This is why our baptismal call takes us far beyond being a card-carrying member of the church. Especially in a choosy world, where authenticity of being becomes our only convincing witness, we need to grow into an intimate relationship with Jesus and develop a healthy spirituality.

In my own spirituality I have learned the importance of developing sharp skills of discernment. This is nothing other than learning to watch for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. If our interactions with one another, at meetings or in personal relationships, are steeped in power-trips, judgement, hurt, arrogance, pride, ignorance etc., and have a polarizing, aggressive and otherwise hurting effect, then we are not offering the world anything different from the sin in which it is already imprisoned. In other words, such interactions produce fruits that violate our baptismal calling and that obstruct Jesus' mission of bringing about the Reign of God here and now.

The difference between a Christian and the rest of the world needs to be visible in word and deed. St. Vincent Pallotti said: "The Christian life is one of action; not of speech and daydreams. Let there be few words and many deeds, and let them be done well." We are called to create schools, homes and faith communities which produce the fruits of the Spirit: a deep reverence for all life, a passion for God's justice, an abounding joy and generosity of heart, a favouring of those rejected by society, a capacity for critical thinking which makes us in the world but not of the world, a willingness to go the extra mile, a commitment to reflect the face of Christ amidst the brokenness around us. Maybe, maybe then, when the world asks what makes us different, we can answer with Jesus' words: "Go and tell what you see and hear: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

The love potion of the cross
October 2001 - Our Family magazine
Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers

Most mornings, before entering the building where my office is located, I take my walk with God through the wooded area on this beautiful Oblate property, and stop at the Marian shrine at the end of a long lane. Some of the rocks at this grotto are formed in the shape of a big cross. I touch these rocks and pray, offering to Jesus whatever is in my heart at the time. Every time that cross confronts me, inviting me into loving, and in that invitation it reveals my own inadequacy to live in this love. Some days this cross seems to mock me, because of my unwillingness to love that much. Other days I am drawn into a depth of mystery too big for words. Every time I learn a bit more about that liberating and healing power released when pain, suffering and death are infused with radical and uncompromising love. I try to take that lesson with me into the day, in particular when encountering pain, conflict and death.

As the *World Youth Day Cross* is making its way through Canada in preparation for the great event next year in Toronto, my own little ritual here at the grotto is increasing in meaning and power. The testimonies of those who received the *Cross* in their communities (<http://wyd2002.org>) reveal profound lessons and experiences in love, reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. On Manitoulin Island (Ontario) the *Cross* was taken to the native reserve's cemetery, to the home of a young man murdered a month before and then to all places on the reserve where tragic accidents had occurred. The *Cross* stopped at the site of a former residential school, and "all prayed for forgiveness and healing for former students and staff." In Whitehorse, Yukon, the *Cross* was carried to a local food bank, "where it stood inviting all to come and pray, and was a sign of Christ's love for the poor in our community." From Amos, Quebec, comes the account that the visit of the *Cross* was "as if Jesus came to visit us in each little village." The people from Chibougamau exclaimed, "For once, we have not been forgotten!"

Many who encounter the *Cross* report feeling invited by Jesus to reflect on its meaning and on their own call to Christian love in places of poverty, pain, and suffering. That, in essence, is what the cross is meant to do. There is a big difference between reverence for reasons of idolatry and reverence for reasons of healing, service and love. The first kind regards venerating the cross as an end in itself, with the risk of bordering on superstition; the second kind of reverence lets the meaning of the cross penetrate us in order to change us. The perennial Catholic temptation can take us on the path of the former without necessarily touching on the challenge of the latter. Taking excessive interest in the *World Youth Day Cross* without making connections to our own local realities of suffering, and without committing ourselves to be Christ's healing love in those realities, necessitates an examination of motives.

One day, a woman poured her heart out to me. Pain, suppressed over many years, came gushing out so forcefully that she feared for her sanity. I witnessed that pain piercing her body like the nails pierced Christ on the cross. There before me was a contemporary crucifixion complete with the challenge of Jesus to infuse God's love into this woman through my words, looks, gestures and touch, and prayers. Offering God's soothing presence in the swirling wind of this emotional hurricane was almost more than I could bear. Yet I knew it was the only power that could redeem her into new life. Even a disaster as horrific as last month's death and destruction in New York and Washington cannot heal through violent retaliations. Even acts this evil need the power of a love that will not flinch. Moments like these fill my gaze at the cross with renewed intensity and yearning. I follow the *World Youth Day Cross* on its pilgrimage through our country and know this instrument of death to be a magnetic force of love because of our Lord Jesus Christ. I touch the rocks at the grotto on my morning walk and, for a moment, I feel the power of love in my bones, a love exploding the destruction of all suffering and death.



Heaven on Earth

November 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers

My friend looked radiant as I entered the hospital room. "I found a way to be in heaven while living on earth!" she exclaimed. My open mouth and wide-eyed look gave away my shock; where was the depressed spirit, the monotone voice I heard only days ago, indicating that Carol had given up? She leafed through the book on her bedside table, while paraphrasing what she had read under the heading *A little secret for those afraid of dying*: "There are three ways to get to heaven without dying: to live fully in the present moment, since in heaven there is no time limit; to allow everything in life to move you and fill you with love, since the measure of love given and received is the only thing we get to take with us in death; and to give away those things that make for treasures in heaven like forgiveness, comfort, blessings, faith, hope and love."

These words were as much a revelation to me as they were to my friend. For what I heard was another way of saying that the kingdom of God is truly here and now. We do not have to wait until after death to enjoy this kingdom. The more in fact we learn to live in faith, hope and love in this life, the more familiar heaven will feel, the more prepared we will be to meet God face to face. Treasures in heaven are those things we give away on earth. It is God's greatest wish to give us the kingdom, and it is available here and now in the giving of ourselves, free of charge, without strings attached.

This new insight served as a corrective on my previous understandings that viewed heavenly blessings as "rewards" for living properly and faithfully. I still view the blessings as rewards, but not in some punitive/meritorious system imposed by God. Rather, heavenly blessings are a natural outcome of how we live our lives. If we can live as generously, as forgiving, as foolishly intense, as lovingly as God does, we will feel right at home in heaven once we get there. To the extent that we seem incapable of living and loving as God does, to that extent heaven will feel not only unfamiliar, but even hostile. If loving generously was not a part of our life on earth, then heaven can indeed feel like hell. It is not a vengeful God who chooses to punish. It is us that merely experience the natural consequence of a life filled with inadequate loving. Pope John Paul II said the same thing: " 'Eternal damnation' is not attributed to God's initiative because in his merciful love he can only desire the salvation of the beings he created. Damnation consists precisely in definitive separation from God, freely chosen by the human person and confirmed with death that seals his choice forever" (Papal Audience, July 28/1999). Seen in this light, God's desire to honour our human freedom at all times is the fulfillment of God's foolish loving of creation.

Last summer a parish priest in a small town in B.C. had a knock on his door one evening. A young man and his wife were stranded. They had taken a week's holiday with their old van,

camping in the Rockies. Just before heading home to Calgary, their van was robbed - purse, wallet, stereo, belongings - all gone. They filed a police report. They tried to call a brother and a mother in Calgary; everyone was on holidays. They had no way to get home. The priest gave them enough money to make it to Calgary. He gave it to them with the request that when they could pay back, they do so by turning around and giving it to someone else in need. With grateful hearts, they promised they would even increase the amount.

This is how treasures in heaven multiply. This is how we train our heart to love as fully as God does. My friend in her hospital bed took this lesson seriously. So did the parish priest in B.C. Treasures in heaven, enjoyed while on earth. It's not hard, is it?

The Heart of Christmas

December 2001 - Our Family magazine

Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers

The world changed on September 11, 2001, we are told. The carefree, insulated, indifferent, golden innocence that was so characteristic of many people's lives in the western world was shattered to pieces as jets crashed into the towers of the World Trade Centre and into the Pentagon. For many families in the United States and abroad, Christmas will be a painful and empty time this year.

It is sad that it takes such evil acts to wake us out of illusions of safety, of complacency and even of indifference. We do well to remember that such illusions are a phenomenon most prevalent in the affluent part of the world. For many other people in the world the events of September 11 reflected a reality of pain and suffering they have lived with for too long, often for generations. All of a sudden, those members of the human family who have endured the impossible, forever it seems, now stand very close to us and are reaching out. The day after the terrorist attacks, a Lutheran pastor from Bethlehem, Israel, wrote: "We understand the pain of our friends. We know what it is like not to feel safe in our own offices and homes. We understand what it means when planes attack you. We know what it feels like when the backbone of the economy is assaulted. Never before have Americans and Palestinians shared so much."

Others, struggling to come to terms with the devastation, started to feel the first signs of a deep solidarity with the poor and oppressed: "I see ghosts ... the missing posters in Manhattan remind me of the posters of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, the debris evokes images from Haiti, Cambodia, Vietnam, the children starving in Iraq, the hundreds of thousands of Afghani refugees... we are all hurting, hurting and crying" (Robin Morgan, NYC, Sept. 18/01). An abused mother, here in our own community, said with a strange affection: "Violence has always been personal and the world has never been a safe place for me. Now maybe you will understand."

This journey into solidarity is the heart of Christmas. When Mary gave birth to God in Jesus, the balance of the universe shifted. Nothing was ever the same again, and we have yet to come to terms with that in light of September 11. There was no room for Jesus in the inn. God, in this vulnerable new life, declared himself one with all those displaced, grieving and oppressed. For the first time, in Jesus, there was one who did not retaliate for the exclusion and pain inflicted on him. The buck stops here. For the first time, there was one who showed us in his life, suffering and death, the only way to break the chains of violence and destruction.: infuse the pain, encounter the enemy, with a love that knows no bounds. Hang on to love, Jesus says with his own life and death, hang on against all odds. With boldness and trust stare down evil with love, and then watch life explode into a beauty, freshness and newness never dreamt of.

Yes, the world has changed, but maybe not for the worse. Hiding among the cries of despair and the overwhelming sighs of grief is the beckoning of a loving God: become one with those who cry, draw strength from one another in times of need, lay down your life for each other, and look upon all God's people as your own flesh and blood. The holy birth we celebrate at Christmas is a stark reminder of all these beckonings: in Jesus God became one with us, laid down his life for us, and made us all one in his body and blood. Now that we scramble to make meaning of the world's atrocities, these messages of love are all we have left to try. After all, we are reminded daily that violence cannot be eradicated with more violence. There has to be another way. The solidarity Jesus established between God and humanity is permanent and delivers its promise: claiming our salvation in Jesus makes brothers and sisters of all people, especially those who suffer. The Lord's body and blood in the Eucharist is the glue of solidarity binding us to God and to one another. Only such a radical solidarity can stop the madness. Only such radical solidarity is what really changes the world. As disciples of the One who stared down evil with love right into death, our love, compassion and solidarity is the best and most lasting gift we can offer this Christmas.

