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Help My Unbelief

Hope for what is not seen

By BRETT C. HOOVER

A priest I know almost always begins a homily with pithy observations about the human condition — our fears and dreams, the complexity of our relationships with one another, the ambiguity built into our appetite for comfort and security, our amnesia about those who suffer. As he lays before us these dilemmas in the fabric of our lives, I lean in to listen, hoping for help for my own Christian journey, but instead he almost inevitably concludes with a simple exhortation to pray and trust in God. Sometimes he urges us to keep attending Mass. Yet I feel I should resist pinning the blame for such a superficial response on this good and faithful man.

Criticizing our priests remains a favorite indoor sport for Catholics. But lately when I hear a homily that drifts toward moralism or superficial pieties, I feel just as responsible as my priest for such an underdeveloped vision of the Gospel. Two millennia ago the anonymous author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). I worry we hope for too little and believe in only what can see — usually, an ever-expanding array of goods and services. When did we last imagine an intimacy with God so powerful it would shake up our lives and send us on a mission of mercy to others? When did we last hope for a world where no indigent person, no stranger, no enemy would be denied the opportunity to flourish in body, heart and soul?

Some blame secularism for our trivialized faith. But this is to tar all secular ideologies with the same brush. Many secular humanist perspectives rely on the same personalism, for example, as our Catholic social teaching. The Lutheran theologian Christian Scharen argues that the primary culprit in trivializing

Pope Francis invites us to push back against the pressure to compartmentalize. He asks us to take God to all parts of our lives and even into the streets.

Christian faith is the compartmentalization of our life-worlds. In his book *Faith as a Way of Life*, Scharen shows how we separate our lives into distinct spheres — work, family life, entertainment, volunteer work, politics, religion. Each sphere has its own rules, its own values and, according to Scharen, its own “gods,” that is, centers of ultimate purpose and value. The economy focuses our attention on getting ahead, family life centers on providing a comfortable sanctuary for our own, and religion on moral foundations. These distinct spheres rarely meet or cross-reference one another.

Such a compartmentalized world leaves little room for any priest to tease out the implications of the Gospel message across our entire lives. The typical homilist is almost contractually obligated to limit his sermons to pious observations, devotional nuggets and basic moral rules. If he does more than urge us to do good and avoid evil, we begin to think he has trespassed into areas of our lives not “appropriate” for church.

Religion is no longer a matter of life and death but a tiny zone of worship and piety unrelated to the rest of our lives. In her book *Sex and the Soul*, religious studies scholar Donna Freitas illustrates the point with a thorough study of how studied avoidance of sex in contemporary Catholic speech (at least, beyond “no”) has left our young people with the impression sex and spirituality

have nothing to do with one another.

Pope Francis invites us to push back against the pressure to compartmentalize. He asks us to take God to all parts of our lives and even into the streets. In American society, I think our best examples for this come from the religious practices of some of our more marginalized communities. Suffering and discrimination have a way of bringing the social, political, economic and spiritual implications of Christian teaching and practice into bold relief. I recommend following along on a Good Friday “Living Way of the Cross” (*Via Crucis*) to see how many immigrant Latino/a Catholics make explicit connections between Jesus’ journey and the dilemmas of their own — family separation and sacrifice, the call to forgive oppressors, the criminalization of the innocent.

We might listen to a sermon or the prayers of the faithful in an urban African American Catholic parish, where we will likely hear Catholics pray fervently against racial discrimination, unemployment, urban violence and substandard schools. In these sacred places, faithful people hope for a lot and believe in much that remains tragically unseen. Such concrete and estimable faith may make our own faith feel small and vague, but it also leads straight to prayer: “I do believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Brett Hoover is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He is the author of *Comfort: An Atlas of the Body and Soul* (Riverhead, 2011) and *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism* (NYU Press, 2014).