

Palaima: Comforts of society make it difficult properly to see need

By Tom Palaima

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Pope Francis, *Time* magazine's person of the year for 2013, enjoined us in his Christmas message to "place ourselves at the service of the poor." His message took me back 50 years to my Jesuit high school days when the Catholic Church and our country were trying to put into action the radical religious and political message of Jesus Christ found in Matthew 25:35-46.

Roman Catholics then were instructed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and Pope John XXIII to "recognize the essential dignity of every human being." Governments worldwide were charged with "protecting the rights and equality of all citizens as part of their essential role in promoting the public good." In response to the courageous actions of Americans in the civil rights movement and the realities brought home by race-related urban riots in Los Angeles (1965), Cleveland (1966), Detroit and Newark (1967), Washington (1968) and elsewhere, our own government developed the Great Society programs.

The Gospel passage that Pope Francis uses begins, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." The Gospel writer and the pontiff both make clear how easy it is for us not to see those in need.

In fact, we have to go beyond seeing need. We have to internalize the feeling of need and act upon it. We all belong to groups, organizations and institutions within society, including our own families. Most of these only have the moral conscience we infuse into them.

We need to reach the stage of "consciousness and spiritual maturity" about how we contribute to and tolerate the human suffering of others that United States Marine Corps veteran Karl Marlantes writes about in his recent book, *What It is Like to Go to War*. Marlantes write profoundly about the debilitating effects that war experiences will continue to have on young men and women unless we all change our ways of thinking.

He makes two key points that we can apply to our civilian lives. The first is that “our young warriors are raised in possibly the only culture on the planet that thinks death is an option.” Indeed, we shy away from looking not only at death, but at the realities of poverty, income disparity and lack of access to essential services like health care.

Marlantes’ second point is that in American culture, we no longer have initiatory rites of a “spiritual nature” that make us aware of hunger, of how easy it is to die, of how small and vulnerable we are. He points out that “we mostly undergo a series of partial initiations and we undergo them unconsciously and without guidance.”

Pope Francis calls for us to place ourselves at the service of fellow human beings who are poor, hungry, homeless and marginalized. I think he means more than writing out a check to Meals on Wheels or working a few weekends a year for Habitat for the Homeless or doing one Eagle Scout project. These are all good and important acts. But the pope means something very akin to what Marlantes understands from his service in the U.S. Marine Corps and his own resulting life problems. We need to initiate or re-initiate ourselves to feel the needs of others in ways that re-focus our own appetites, desires and actions on others.

When I was young, we Catholics fasted during the Lenten season before Easter. We ate no meat on Fridays. We fasted until after we received the Eucharist on Sundays. My father recalled in his teenage years during the Great Depression calling out and claiming “core” when a buddy was lucky enough to have an apple to eat. We reminded ourselves regularly of hunger.

In the last year of the Great Depression, Scarlett O’Hara in “Gone With the Wind” captured the spirit of the times when she declared, “I’m going to live through this and when it’s all over, I’ll never be hungry again.” Pope Francis asks us to do more than look to ourselves. He asks us to be so committed to tending to the needy around us that eventually no one will go needy. He asks us to remember that Jesus was a social activist.

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