

Teachers as permission givers: some theological reflections for challenging times

Abstract: Pope Paul VI told us that teachers must be witnesses. This essay, which originated as a presentation to a group of faculty at the 2019 annual meeting of the *Association of Colleges of Sisters of St. Joseph* (ACSSJ), claims that we are to be “permission givers” for our students, showing them a larger vision of human life by seeking to live such lives ourselves. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that a common way we fail in this task is by “compartmentalizing.” The essay shows models of non-compartmentalized permission givers at work in the author’s own life.

Introduction—remembering a nine-year-old’s first college visit

A summer 2019 visit to *College Hall* at Regis College in Weston, MA brought a flood of memories back to me.¹ I had had two previous visits there. More recently, in 2007, I attended a dinner in *College Hall* celebrating the 50th jubilee anniversary of religious profession of my aunt, Sr. Patricia McDonough, a Sister of St. Joseph of Boston and long-time faculty member and registrar at Regis.

Farther back, in the summer of 1964, I had had my first ever visit to a college in that same *College Hall*. My aunt, back then Sr. Paul Therese McDonough, was living in the convent—*St. Joseph Hall*—connected to *College Hall* through a second-story walking bridge. We walked up to the receptionist and soon heard over a loudspeaker system: “Sr. Paul Therese McDonough, you have visitors in the *College Hall* reception area, Sr. Paul Therese.” My parents and my, then, five siblings and I were there to visit our aunt just a few weeks before she was to leave for graduate studies in French at Yale University.

College Hall, a large granite-columned building on the hill and its parlor that then seemed huge, made quite an impression on me. (If I had known then what Yale was, that too

¹ I was at Regis College to attend the National Gathering of the *Association of Colleges of Sisters of St. Joseph* at (June 10-12, 2019), where I presented an earlier version of this paper. I am grateful for the feedback I received from those present.

would have made an impression on me.) My immediate family moved to Minnesota the following year, so there would be no visits to Regis for more than forty years. Yet, it was never lost on me that my father, his three other siblings and their parents all called Aunt Pat “Doc” from almost that moment onward. I have been reflecting about how my aunt and *College Hall* itself helped open up a bigger world to me.

My intention in this essay is to reflect on my, now, thirty years in higher education as a search for a bigger world for myself and for the students I have been privileged to teach. I will develop three thoughts in the reflection.

First, I will tell stories of three other Sisters of St. Joseph who, along with my aunt Pat, have been permission givers in my life. Second, I will articulate my worry that, while we teachers are also supposed to be permission givers in our students’ lives, we are in danger of settling for a much smaller role—that of privilege dispensers. Third, I will express some tentative thoughts about how we (how I) might do a better job of being permission givers for our students in this challenging time for Catholic higher education. I will end with two final stories—one about Helen Prejean, CSJ and a final one about my aunt Pat.

1. Sister of St. Joseph “permission givers” in my life: three more stories

Our family’s 1965 move to Stillwater, a suburb of St. Paul, MN, did not end my relationship with the Sisters of St. Joseph—the CSJs. We moved into a house one hundred feet across the street from the Catholic school and convent, both important places in my life until I went away to college.² Living across the street from that convent is responsible for my meeting two of the

² St. Michael’s Catholic School in Stillwater, MN (later renamed as St. Croix Catholic School) was founded in 1880 and staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province, from its founding through the early 1990s. See: https://www.stcroixcatholic.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=195965&type=d&pREC_ID=415506.

three CSJs about whom I will write here. The two local CSJs were responsible for my first visit to the College of St. Catherine in 1976 when I was a sophomore at another Catholic college in MN.³

As a college sophomore, I could think of nothing as more important than getting into my college's "junior honors," a Great Books based program run by a very smart and very intimidating professor. I had to submit some writing for his review, and appear in his office for an early May meeting with him. He told me to spend the summer with someone who could help me learn to write, and then added that he would consider meeting with me again in the fall.

I went home dejected and unsure of what to do. However, there was that convent across the street. My mother told me that a nun who once had taught at a college somewhere had recently settled in there, and suggested I go see her. I had assumed the eighty-year old I saw cutting lilacs across the street from us was the convent gardener. Only later did I learn that Marie Philip Haley, CSJ, (the last person I knew born in the 19th century—in 1899) had taught French at the College of St. Catherine from 1928 until 1974. (She died in 1996.) That she had founded the school's Fulbright Scholars program, had established a summer language institute in Rennes, France for American high school teachers of French. That she was given the key to that city and, in 1981, awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Rennes. Oh, and that she was awarded one of the highest honors that the French government bestows, its *Ordre des Palmes académiques* ("Order of Academic Palms") given to distinguished persons in the international world of culture and education.⁴

³ I am privileged to be in my twenty-first year as a member of the theology department at the now renamed St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN.

⁴ See the retirement tribute to Sr. Marie Philip by Sister Mary Virginia Micka, "Sister Marie Philip: la vie à la Haley," *Scan--College of St. Catherine alumnae news magazine* (Spring 1976), 7-10, 16.

Really, in late May 1976, she looked like a simple, very contented gardener. I want to contribute a fraction of what Marie Philip contributed, and I want to be cutting lilacs contentedly in May when I am eighty! There is much more to write about Marie Philip Haley, but I am most grateful to her for introducing me to my writing tutor, the St. Paul CSJ who still guides my teaching—no, my understanding of my life—thirty-one years after her death.

Frances Babb, CSJ (1906-1988), was living in retirement on the fourth floor of the College of St. Catherine's main administration building (Derham Hall), which floor was then a residence for nuns. My first visit to St. Catherine's was for a 1976 meeting in that hall's parlor to which I was instructed to bring an original essay of about three type-written pages. I would do so twice a week for much of that summer.

About her life, I knew then only that she had been a high school principal. In the course of our eleven-year friendship, I learned that she had come to the University of MN from Maine after college to pursue a doctorate in English. Young graduate student Frances Babb met some local CSJs while at the university. And, after completing a master's in writing, Frances entered the CSJs here. She never regretted not completing her doctorate, having an almost forty year run as high school English teacher and principal, many of them at St. John's Academy in Jamestown, ND.

When I met her, she was very happily living in retirement at St. Catherine. What I would learn later is that, upon returning to St. Paul a couple years before I met her, Frances heard that the local archdiocese was taking first steps in re-implementing the permanent diaconate. About one hundred men and Sr. Frances showed up to an information meeting at the cathedral—in 1975, I think. Frances told the group that she had a vocation to the priesthood, but that it would

be fine if they wanted to ordain her a deacon because she was—she let them know—quite a fine preacher.

As with my aunt and with Sr. Marie Philip, it was the bigness of Frances' life, of her self-understanding, that I admired—though what I most admire to this day became clear to me in August 1988 when I had my final visit with her before her death. Our friendship had continued for over a decade and I came to say goodbye before returning to Rome for my third year of graduate school. She let me know in very clear terms that she did not expect to see me again, that she would surely die before the next summer when I would be back in Minnesota and that she was completely at peace with her life. She spoke words like the following to me:

Bill, do not feel bad for me in the least. I won't be ordained a priest but what a life I have had. The church will change someday. I have had such wonderful life as a CSJ and teacher; and haven't we had a wonderful friendship? Go your way, Bill...and take this. It is my hope for you.

She handed me an excerpt from the commencement address she had delivered to graduating seniors at St. John's Academy in 1955. It has hung just inside my office door (along with her photo) for all my years teaching:

We are not asking that you do spectacular things when we say “good-bye” to you. We are asking simply that you do GOOD THINGS... that you do considerate, generous, reverent, intelligent things. Have reverence for things, for ideas, for persons. Treat persons as human beings. Don't crowd in upon their freedom. Respect them. Reverence them. Help them. Give their personalities, their spirits, time and space and opportunity to grow. Be simple and direct. Do not pose. Above all, do not copy merely to gain approval. Select what is good and by-pass what is not.⁵

⁵ Sr. Mary Micheas, CSJ (Sr. Frances' religious name), “Do the Good—Not the Spectacular,” *The Eagle—St. John's Academy, Jamestown, ND* (1955).

Frances did die in December of that year. I also want to be an eighty-year old like Frances one day—having worked hard and straightforwardly at something important and content with however far I have gotten with it.

With respect to the final CSJ I wish to consider here, the closing pages of Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking* have long meant much to me.⁶ My reading of those pages owes much to Carol Flinders' book *Enduring Lives: Living Portraits of Women and Faith in Action*, which I love teaching to introductory theology students.⁷

Flinders writes of four contemporary or near-contemporary women who she thinks are guides for us today. She had previously written a book on the enduring value of the lives of the medieval Christian women mystics, how they are a part of a “whispered lineage” which we can tap into today. Then she saw a need for a book about some more accessible, more contemporary women—and so wrote this book about women she calls mystics in the making. Helen Prejean is her culminating figure, and Flinders quotes her as considering herself a “spiritual nun, not an activist one”—until she agreed to write a letter to a man on death row at Angola State Penitentiary in 1982, and he wrote back—asking if she would come to visit him.

Flinders tells Prejean's story as one great spiritual awakening—one equally at work in her death row visits with convicted murderer Patrick Sonnier as in her visits with Lloyd Leblanc, father of one of Sonnier's murder victims. Flinders writes:

An extraordinary thing is happening in Patrick Sonnier's last hours. In effect, Prejean has called the Church itself into existence. The word *ecclesia* means ‘called out’ I believe she wants us to understand that this is the Church itself *as it was intended to be*....

⁶ Helen Prejean, CSJ, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1994), 241-245.

⁷ Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Lives: Living Portraits of Women and Faith in Action*, first paperback edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

Prejean [also] places us right beside her on the wooden pew in the small chapel where she has come to pray with Lloyd Leblanc... This spellbinding scene is the very last in *Dead Man Walking*, and to the extent that the subtext of Prejean's book is a reconstruction of Christian belief and practice, it suggests, I think, the possibility that what really sustains 'church' is the direct engagement of ordinary men and women, way, way 'off the grid,' in the perennial and often agonized struggle against darkness of spirit.⁸

What I especially love in Flinders' book is something that dawns on the author herself after writing it. She calls attention to it in the postscript added to the book seven years after its initial publication. Flinders was invited to address a group of women spiritual seekers. South African clinical psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela was speaking at the same conference. In the mid-1990s, the South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* had asked Gobodo-Madikizela to interview Eugene de Koch, the commanding officer of state-sanctioned death squads during apartheid. Gobodo-Madikizela subsequently wrote a book called *A Human Being Died that Night*, reflecting on post-trauma forgiveness.⁹

Flinders approached Gobodo-Madikizela to tell her how much she admired her work and how much Gobodo-Madikizela reminded her of Helen Prejean. Flinders reports that the South African author immediately lit up and said to her: "That book gave me permission...to tell my own story in the way I did. It was very important for me."¹⁰ This becomes the point of Flinders' postscript:

I only wanted to make note of a phenomenon that we see over and over in the lives of women like Helen Prejean and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and everyone one of us who steps out of the cocoons and bubbles of conventional living. We'd so like to think of

⁸ Flinders, *Enduring Lives*, 232, 236.

⁹ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

¹⁰ Flinders, *Enduring Lives*, 261.

ourselves as free, but internal inhibitions run so strong. It is a fascinating exercise to sit down and think for a while about all the people in our lives who have given us permission to be more truly ourselves.... It is thrilling to realize that when we do, we pass that permission on—quietly, gently, indefinitely.¹¹

I see now that what all four of the CSJs I have written about here have given me is permission. It is a wonderful word, permission— from two Latin words *per-* "for" + *mittere* "let go, send." My dictionary adds, "See mission."¹² Permission means "for mission." Each in their own ways, these CSJs have invited me to accept the mission of becoming myself by entering into a bigger world.

- 2. But it is hard to be permission givers in academia today. I am afraid our students see us instead as privilege dispensers; I am also afraid that I will settle for privilege, becoming compartmentalized.**

It is well worth reflecting on the difference between a permission and a privilege. If permission comes from the Latin words meaning "for mission," privilege also comes from two Latin words: *privus* and *lex*.¹³ A privilege is literally a "private law," an exemption to laws everyone else has to live by. It is our ticket out of the shared human condition.

Perhaps we teachers ultimately have to decide whether we want to become permission givers or settle for dispensing privileges. This was my reflection as I sat through St. Catherine University commencement three times earlier this summer—when the following words spoken to the graduates by our president were not lost on me: "I confer upon you this diploma with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities thereunto appertaining." At least our university has

¹¹ Flinders, *Enduring Lives*, 262-263.

¹² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/permit>.

¹³ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/privilege>.

substituted “responsibilities” for the most traditional wording of the conferral: “rights, privileges and honors.”¹⁴

There are many laments about the state of higher education in our time and I hope we get to talk about some of them in our time together. I will not recite them here, except to cite Fairfield University theology professor Paul Lakeland’s recent review in *Commonweal* magazine of a scathing indictment of contemporary American higher education.¹⁵ My point in doing so is to raise the question of how to be permission givers rather than privilege dispensers in our time and place. *Commonweal* entitled Lakeland’s review “College as department store.” The review reads in part:

The problem for higher education today is that the healthy recognition of difference (to which we are indebted) has come at the price of inattention to the opposite good: the strengthening of the bonds of community that education in general, and the liberal arts in particular, have always existed to foster. The principal reason for this imbalance between the legitimacy of concern for the individual and attention to the common good is the excessive individualism that has come to bedevil American public life. And this itself is a product of the neoliberalism of the market economy, which has affected those institutions that should stand at a critical distance from all ideologies. Our universities have become like department stores. The pursuit of truth has been abandoned in favor of branding, competition, and marketing themselves.¹⁶

Are larger economic forces (the complexity of which and the proper response to which I do not pretend fully to understand) leading us away from permission giving toward privilege dispensing? I will now try to articulate the truth of that claim as applied to both my students’ lives and my own.

- a. First, students see us as privilege dispensers, and do not start from a position of trust with us

¹⁴ Some of this language spoken to university graduates (and written on their diplomas) seems to have its origins in Coronation ceremonies for British monarchs! See Charles Frederick Partington, *The British Cyclopædia of Literature, History, Geography, Law, and Politics*, volume one (London: Orr and Smith Publishers, 1836), 493.

¹⁵ Paul Lakeland, “College as Department Store,” Review of *Splintering of the American Mind* by William Egginton, *Commonweal Magazine* (May 6, 2019): 32.

¹⁶ Lakeland, “College as Department Store”: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/college-department-store>.

In my introductory theology courses, I send out an opening survey by email a week ahead of the first class and ask students to place a number between 1 and 500 on their anonymous survey, fill it out, and turn it in at the opening session—remembering their number so they can retrieve it later. I ask about religious background, level of involvement with religion as a child and now, issues they think are important, and I end with a general question—originally, a throwaway question but one that now seems key to understanding my students. The question is: “Do you want to say anything else, or is there something you want me to know about you?” Ten of 22 students had responses this term:

- I am a quiet person and like to keep to my own thoughts.*
- I am in this course because it is required.*
- I really don't like to talk about religion.*
- Please be sensitive about LGBTQ+ topics.*
- I am proudly and unapologetically Catholic.*
- I want you to know that I am a very conservative person.*
- I respect others' beliefs, but please also know that what I believe is important to me, too.*
- I am more traditional. I will keep an open mind in class but ask that you keep students like me in mind, too.*
- I am sensitive when a person of one religion looks down on a person from another religion.*
- I'm worried about how religion will be portrayed here: can we stay away from extremist views?*

This is a small polling sample—anecdotal but reflective of the last six or seven years of my teaching. My students see my course and me as a problem for them, and a significant number of them tell me at the course's beginning that they will hold their breath until it is over. They certainly do not come in expecting me to be a permission giver, someone who can help open up a bigger world.¹⁷ Still, my concern here is not only with my students.

¹⁷ Some university teachers who heard this talk expressed caution about teachers thinking of ourselves as permission givers, concerned that students might feel patronized by the term. My goal is not at all to patronize students, and if it helps in this regard, perhaps we should think of ourselves as “witnesses,” in the sense that Pope Paul VI famously

b. Second, I am in danger of settling for privilege in all of this: compartmentalization in academia

The following words of University of Notre Dame Catholic moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre challenge me deeply. He recently turned ninety years old, but three-and-a-half years ago, at a youthful eighty-seven, he published what may be his best book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.¹⁸ MacIntyre says human beings “spend our days as extended inquiries into how it is best to live.”¹⁹

Some are tempted to dismiss MacIntyre as a nostalgic conservative apologist for simpler times. But he acknowledges explicitly: “There are numerous ways in which human beings can flourish.... What it is to flourish in this or that set of particular circumstances has to be discovered and often enough rediscovered...through disagreement and debate.”²⁰ And his critique of consumer culture owes much to Marx. “Contemporary consumerist societies,” he writes, make living an integrated moral life difficult.²¹

Unintegrated lives take two forms, he says. The first, he calls hedonism, not meaning what we might imagine. Rather, he means that we avoid integrating our lives by doing whatever we can to avoid pain. I cannot help but read some of my students’ observations that way. I also cannot help but think of our national opioid catastrophe.

used the term: “Modern men and women listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelization in the Modern World* (1975), par. 15.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 32.

²⁰ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 30-31.

²¹ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 109.

More interesting and more challenging to me as a teacher is MacIntyre's other manifestation of an unintegrated life. He calls this compartmentalizing, and explains:

We lead compartmentalized lives, failing to integrate our different roles, so that in effect we lead a number of different lives.... What compartmentalization is apt to obscure is the extent to which decisions in one part of our lives impact upon our other activities and relations. How we allocate our time is a more accurate indicator of what we care about and how much than are our subjective feelings, and the more time that we expend in any one area of our lives the less time that there is for other areas. So it may be a very important fact about someone, even if quite unnoticed by that someone that he or she.... never sits alone in silence.²²

This I cannot but hear through my almost ten years of directing a small master of arts in theology program for lay persons, greatly diminished and perhaps on its way out because of wider trends—including the clergy sexual abuse crisis, our local church's bankruptcy and other economic pressures on lay ministry. What I have to reckon with here is how in danger I am of falling into my own compartmentalization: reacting doggedly, even angrily against the grinding system by pushing harder does not make me look or feel like Frances Babb. It does not make me a permission giver. Rather it is a way of withdrawing into a protected world insisting on the importance of what I do: it is hiding out in privilege. I am sure there are other ways to settle for privilege over permission giving, but I hope the basic point is clear.

3. Is there another way for all of us?: Helen Prejean and negative theology

In thinking now about what we might do about all of this, I must acknowledge that I feel very much like the priest I heard decades ago setting out to preach about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field text in Matthew, chapter six. You know: "I tell you do not worry about your life... Consider the lilies of the field. They do not work or spin. But not even Solomon in his

²² MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 228.

entire splendor was clothed like one of them. Do not worry about tomorrow.”²³ He read the text and opened his homily by placing his hand on his baldhead and saying: “Believe me I didn’t lose all my hair by being like the lilies of the field.” Well, neither am I like the lilies of the field. Yet, I so want to be a permission giver; I so want not to settle for compartmentalized privilege.

Lakeland adds a promising thought at the end of his review of the book with its scathing review on higher education:

This book focuses on elite private institutions. But to what degree does his critique extend to smaller schools, and in particular to church-related institutions like the many Catholic colleges and universities throughout the country? ... It is possible that, precisely because small schools are not going to be the beneficiaries of large amounts of soul-killing aid, they may be better placed to resist the splintering about which the author writes so persuasively.²⁴

Maybe those of us who teach in universities sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph—and those in schools like ours—can find a way ahead because we are small enough to know our students and each other. To know each other is to know that neither our students, nor we, want to settle for privilege. It is to give us a chance at reconstructing the church, with Helen Prejean. First, what might this mean for our students?

a. Deep down, is this not what they want from us?

As much as those defensive “don’t make me think” moves increasingly show themselves in the opening survey of each semester, I get different, more promising signals from my students the further we get into the course. Perhaps I am just lucky as a theologian; I am not sure.

²³ Matthew, chapter six, verse 28 ff.

²⁴ Lakeland, “College as Department Store, 33. See: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/college-department-store>.

But there are openings. Already reflecting together on the results of that initial survey is an opening, especially as students see similar concerns expressed by people of vastly different backgrounds. This spring's class of twenty-two had the following religious demographic: there were seven Muslim students (five Somali and two Middle Eastern), four Hmong shamanist students, a Tibetan Buddhist, four or five quite traditional Catholics, three rather liberal Christians, and a handful of students who belong to that other kind of nones—NONES. Just interacting with each other began loosening them up.

Then, further into the course (after we have read about those four women mystics in the making and talked about church happening wherever we experience being called out), I explain an assignment based on our religious differences. Each student is to attend and then write about the worship service of a religion not their own. They can do it on their own, but they seem enjoy doing it with me. I am a registered university van driver, and I set up various outings. This semester we visited worship services in five different traditions: the Hindu temple, a synagogue, a mosque, a Buddhist monastery, and a Christian Church. Up to eleven students can fit in the van, and students soon start asking whether they are limited to just one trip. We had fifteen students at the Hindu temple this spring, with a couple students joining me as drivers.

They and I together enjoy these van excursions: I love to listen to their excitement and their seeing me in a different role seems to help. We do another survey at the end of the term. Two lines from this semester's survey struck me—first this from a student: *I was worried at first that my ideas wouldn't be welcome here. Reflecting on that, this was not the case. My perception of theology and religion/spirituality has changed since the beginning of the course.*

A second student wrote that Flinders' book was inspiring:

All four of those women found a way to live in the present. I was talking with a friend about school and life in general when those women popped into my head. Now, the things I learn in the majority of my classes are not useful outside of class, so being able to relate my life back to something I learned from class was very interesting. Especially about how we live our lives as college students: we are working towards our future so much that we forget to live in our present, to enjoy life and not to worry so much. It is kind of sad.

It is also sad that this student expects so little of her courses! However, it is very hopeful that she discovered her desire for a bigger world. She just needed a little permission.

b. Closer to home: something is dying and something wants to be born in my experience: negative theology in my life

I am the oldest member of my department, and now starting the tenth year of my three-year commitment to direct our graduate program. Others do not want the job.

So I must begin loosening my insistence that it remain alive. There is something very un-theological about insisting that a theology program remain open. Further words of MacIntyre help me name what I have to learn from the people whom I admire most. He writes:

It may seem paradoxical but it is not, to say that we complete and perfect our lives by allowing them to remain incomplete. A good life is one in which an agent, although continuing to rank order particular and finite goods, treats none of these goods as necessary for the completion of her or his life.... Defective lives are those in which agents either mistakenly identify some particular finite good that they have achieved or will achieve as their final good or suppose their failure or defeat in achieving such goods is failure to achieve their final good.²⁵

MacIntyre calls this the “inescapably theological” nature of our lives.²⁶ We can only integrate our lives by seeing them within an always-larger whole that is bigger than anything we can accomplish. And we need others to help us see when we are holding on too tightly. Here are the

²⁵ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 231.

²⁶ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 55.

final lines of what is probably the final book of perhaps the most important English-speaking moral philosopher of our time:

The perfection and completion of a life consists in an agent's having persisted in moving toward and beyond the best goods of which she or he knows. So there is presupposed some further good, an object of desire beyond all particular and fine goods, a good toward which desire tends insofar as it remains unsatisfied by even the most desirable of fine goods, as in good lives it does.²⁷

A reviewer calls MacIntyre's book a work of "negative theology, which approaches God by renouncing the idolatry of finite goods... a theological statement about how the final good leaves room for all the myriad particular goods that make up human lives, and nevertheless about how the loss of these goods can be borne."²⁸ The German word for "idol," of course, is *Göttchen*, literally a "tiny little God," or "God, junior."

That is the "inescapably theological" nature of a human being's life. When I compartmentalize, I worship a tiny little God; and my students and everyone around me can see it. Negative theology requires that I say of anything and everything I undertake—however important: "This is not God." Not to take that stance toward my work is a failure to be a permission giver to my students, a betrayal of what I have learned from Frances Babb and from Marie Philip, the contented gardener.

Conclusion: To hold on let go—further wisdom from Helen Prejean and my aunt

Two brief stories in conclusion. First a story about Prejean. We learn in Flinders' postscript that Prejean contacted her after reading her book. Flinders describes what transpired: "She was happiest that I had focused on the spiritual dimensions of her work....What she particularly

²⁷ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 315.

²⁸ Jennifer A. Herdt, "Review of Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31/4 (2018): 492.

wanted me to know was that by foregrounding the elements, I had in effect given her permission to get cracking again on her spiritual memoir.”²⁹

Prejean had written the following in the final paragraphs of *Dead Man Walking*: “The great secret: To hold on, let go. Nothing is solid. Everything moves. Except love—hold on to love. Do what love requires.”³⁰ She just turned 80 and has published her spiritual memoir this summer under the title: *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey*. The book is very much a story of Prejean’s own holding on by letting go—as the following words from the book’s opening and closing pages make very clear:

A young woman entering a Roman Catholic religious congregation in the late 1950s expected that most things would remain the same for the rest of her life....But that world would change. And so would I ... It’s a river I’m riding. I invite you to pitch your boat into its current...

Things happen in life and you don’t always see them coming. The river has carried me thus far...led me on a journey I would not have imagined....Mamma and Daddy both died at age eight-one, so I know my death can’t be far away...Meanwhile I keep riding the river.³¹

Finally, a more personal story of holding on by letting go. My sisters, brothers and I buried our mother last fall after her three-year struggle with Alzheimer’s disease. Though my father had died a decade ago in his seventies of other causes, memory loss is also common on his side of the family. His younger sister, my aunt Pat has begun her own experience of dementia. Still, she joined me again on that recent trip back to Regis College, and so all three of my trips there have been with Aunt Pat. I asked her how she was doing. “I’m fine,” she responded: “I’m still reading,

²⁹ Flinders, *Enduring Lives*, 262.

³⁰ Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*, 244.

³¹ Helen Prejean, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey* (New York: Random House, 2019), xiv, xvi-xvii, 274-275, 286

and one thing about my current condition is that I can pick up a book on any page and continue from there. I may have read it several times before, but it is always new and exciting to me.”

Those words were, of course, one more permission, inviting me not to flee from the “inescapably theological” nature of my own life. In whatever ways I am able, I want to support my students in opening to such permissions into the bigness of their own lives.

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