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Faith Today

Promise amid the pain

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

I took a friend recently on a tour of San Francisco and the Napa Valley, the famous wine growing region north of the city. My friend is a religious researcher from Washington, D.C. He has done much work describing the values that operate in people's lives.

As we drove over the Bay Bridge, with the entire San Francisco skyline bathed in a bright spring sun and spread out before us, he commented on our California cities. They have come to symbolize the good life that people want, he said.

Think of San Francisco, Palm Springs or Hollywood. What comes to mind? For many people, those cities create images of leisure and palm trees, freeways and cable cars, and a lifestyle of golden youth. This is the image which comes across on many a television program.

But it is very one-sided. Along many an urban freeway there are blocks of poor and dreary bungalows, the dilapidated remnants of small towns that have grown into big cities. Their lawns are dead and littered, their windows cracked.

In them live some of our refugees from Southeast Asia and Central America, people who hope to live here only for a little while, until they become better established. In them also live people who have no more hope. For these people, the broken-down shells are the bottom of the barrel.

Just two weeks before my Washington friend arrived, I had been visited by another friend, a young man who lives in just such a place. But he is not there as one of the hopeless. On the contrary, he is there as a symbol of hope.

This friend is a member of a religious community dedicated to being a sign of God's presence among the

Alongside sprawling freeways, in shattered neighborhoods, live broken people. In one of these depressed and depressing areas, writes Father David O'Rourke, a community has emerged. It is a jigsaw puzzle of a community, made up of the hopeless and the hopeful, those who live and those who merely exist.

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My friend and his brethren don't just live in these urban slums. What they do goes beyond their mere physical presence. Together with the people there, this religious order has formed a real community.

I think of all this and I find myself wondering. What kind of God is it who oversees these pockets of misery in the midst of such prosperity, and then sends in more people to share it? Why not just get rid of the misery in the first place?

This God certainly does not do things the way an efficiency expert might.

What can we say about such a God? Why would he build a church community out of such unlikely combinations of the hopeless and the hopeful, winners and losers, those who cope so well and those who no longer even try?

I suppose that there are many answers to that question. But the one that says the most to me is a gospel story. It is found in the very beginning of the Gospel, when Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple and to take control of the world.

In effect, Satan asked Jesus to show his control over hunger, the laws of nature and political powers; to show that he could, by his will, do away with the three greatest ills that face humankind — famine, disease and tyranny.

But Jesus said "no" to the temptation. For reasons that are unfathomable to us he chose instead to submit himself to the human condition, to its hunger and pain and indignities. Jesus would not reconcile humankind with God by the magical snap of a finger but in the toil of his own human life.

We are not given a reason why. What we are given is the fact. This is what happened.

We also are told that what happened was consistent with the will of his Father. And it would seem that it is in this same submission to the Father's will that we find the basis of our own community life.

There are many good human reasons why our Christian communities do what they do. But the explanation for the action of my friend, who went to live among poor and hopeless people as a symbol of hope is found first and foremost in the life of Christ.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)



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