



Issa, teacher of solidarity

Author(s): Clemens Sedmak, Felicia Johnson O'Brien, and Leslie Eid

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CLEMENS SEDMAK

Issa, teacher of solidarity



In 2016, the Center for Social Concerns sponsored a workshop called "CST and the Idea of the University." Felicia Johnson O'Brien presented on the story of her daughter's life as an example of how the Center for Social Concerns enacted Catholic Social Tradition. Her presentation, included in the second section, inspired the development of this occasional paper.

On the day Issa Grace O'Brien was born, June 7, 2013, Pope Francis addressed students, alumni, teachers, and parents of Jesuit schools of Italy and Albania in the Audience Hall. It was the day of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that has been understood as the devotion to a word that forges a unity that makes reality present to us, that comes to us as a gift¹ – just as Issa did on that very same day. Pope Francis talked about magnanimity, “the virtue of the great and the small.” Again, we can think of Issa and her troubled heart embodying the greatness of human dignity and the smallness of human vulnerability. Solidarity is the attitude evoked by this “in-between,” this in-between greatness and smallness, this in between full undivided dignity and undeniable vulnerability. Pope Francis also encouraged the educators present to teach the students “to see the beauty and goodness of creation” – which is what Issa did, by the testimony of “being,” of “being alive.”

Solidarity is a moral virtue and a social principle of Catholic Social Tradition; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 38 defines it as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.”² Given this understanding, solidarity is a “second-order commitment,” i.e. a “commitment to commit oneself,” a decision to enter commitments, and the main features of this second-order commitment are firmness and perseverance; this again means that this second-order commitment is accepted as a strong self-obligation that is not subject to change by circumstances or obstacles. In this sense solidarity requires the courage to hold on to the labor for the common good even in the face of difficulties. The subject of this commitment can be individuals as well as collectives; in fact, Catholic Social Tradition teaches that solidarity is to be translated into structures and institutional arrangements; relationships between persons and peoples “must be purified and transformed into structures of solidarity through the creation or appropriate modification of laws, market regulations, and juridical systems” (*Compendium for the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 192). Solidarity has both an individual and an institutional face. The object of the second-order commitment of solidarity is the common good.

The common good can be understood to be the sum total of conditions that ensure the flourishing of communities and individual persons. Solidarity is a fundamental attitude that fosters habits that move a person beyond her immediate sphere of agency; solidarity makes a person acknowledge the bigger picture and the fact that we are part of a context that transcends us. Solidarity comes natural to people who understand that the first words spoke to Cain after his murder of Abel: “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen 4:9). And we learn that it will not do to say that we are not our brother’s keeper, our sister’s keeper; we learn that it will not do to say that our sister’s life is none of our business. This was an important moment in the revolution of the moral imagination about solidarity, triggered

1 In his theological essay “Behold this heart: Preliminaries to a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart” Karl Rahner writes: “the words which by their charm forge a unity, make reality first present to us, make us subject to them, spring from our hearts, come to us as a gift and transport us – these I would like to call *primordial words (Urworte)* (K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 3. Transl. K.-H. and B. Kruger. London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1967, 321-330, at 322). The Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is a feast day celebrating solidarity, union and reaching out, becoming part “in flesh” of a community to share a condition.

2 Cf., *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 193.

by the Jewish-Christian tradition. Another moment in this revolution was recounted by British theologian and economist Sabina Alkire in a sermon marking the beginning of Christian Aid week in Magdalen College Chapel of Oxford University on May 15, 2011³ – she described the famine, caused by a severe drought in Cappadocia in the year 368. “Local people who were able to afford to, brought in stocks of food to survive. But this had the effect of driving the less fortunate to famine.” Both Basil of Caesarea and his close friend Gregory of Nazianzus spoke about the situation and made it very clear in their appeals (and also in their actions!) that the famine was everybody’s business and could not be left to indifference: “Following the famine, they reached out to the poor, the homeless, the lepers, and the indebted. Peter Brown calls it ‘a revolution in the social imagination’ which occurred from 300-600 AD ... And it has a resonance for us now.” Indeed, it has resonance for us now! It is a reminder that the Christian understanding of solidarity takes the question “where is your brother, where is your sister?” seriously. This is a basic question to understand and operationalize the virtue and principle of solidarity.

Pope Francis made this point forcefully on July 8, 2013 when he visited the refugees in Lampedusa; he reminded the world of the fact that immigrants are dying at sea; the Pope’s homily was about solidarity, and he translated the abstract concept of solidarity into two biblical questions and the two biblical questions into three existential and political concerns:

“Adam, where are you?” This is the first question which God asks man after his sin. ‘Adam, where are you?’ Adam lost his bearings, his place in creation, because he thought he could be powerful, able to control everything, to be God. Harmony was lost; man erred and this error occurs over and over again, also in relationships with others. ‘The other’ is no longer a brother or sister to be loved, but simply someone who disturbs my life and my comfort. God asks a second question: ‘Cain, where is your brother?’ The illusion of being powerful, of being as great as God, even of being God himself, leads to a whole series of errors, a chain of death, even to the spilling of a brother’s blood! God’s two questions echo even today, as forcefully as ever! How many of us, myself included, have lost our bearings; we are no longer attentive to the world in which we live; we don’t care; we don’t protect what God created for everyone, and we end up unable even to care for one another! And when humanity as a whole loses its bearings, it results in tragedies like the one we have witnessed.”

Pope Francis pushes moral comfort zones by pressing the question “where is your brother?,” “where is the blood of your brother which cries out to me?”; Francis adds a third question that expresses solidarity in a yet different light, in the light of compassion and being moved: “I would like us to ask a third question: ‘Has any one of us wept because of this situation and others like it?’ Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters? Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion.”

A few years ago Yale Undergraduate student Marina Keegan published an article on “The

3 http://s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/1250464/Sermon_Magdalen_Chapel_15_May.pdf

Opposite of Loneliness,” which, after her tragic death was the lead text in a posthumously published collection. She ponders the question that she experienced in Yale, and she suggests that she found the opposite of loneliness: “It’s not quite love and it’s not quite community; it’s just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team. When the check is paid and you stay at the table. When it’s four a.m. and no one goes to bed. That night with the guitar.”⁴

Solidarity is a concept that can be seen both as the opposite of loneliness and as the opposite of indifference; in his Lampedusa sermon Pope Francis warned against the globalization of indifference; it is indifference that nurtures attitudes of carelessness and moral exhaustion.⁵ We need ethics and morality, we need spirituality and mindfulness to overcome indifference. And then we will experience “the opposite of loneliness.”

TEACHING SOLIDARITY

Solidarity can be taught in many different ways; (1) by the power of word and listening; (2) by the power of experience and doing; (3) and by the power of being.

(1) Pope Francis uses the power of the word; he is an important guide on the journey to understanding solidarity. He talks and talked about solidarity on many occasions and in many different ways – on May 6, 2016, for example, on the occasion of the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize he said: “Solidarity should never be confused with charitable assistance, but understood as a means of creating opportunities for all the inhabitants of our cities – and of so many other cities – to live with dignity.” Here he establishes two links: (i) a link between solidarity as an attitude and the structure of human agency; (ii) a link between solidarity and human dignity. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis establishes a connection between solidarity and an option for the poor (EG 187-190) and characterizes solidarity as a “spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property” (EG 189); this is an interesting and important point since a spontaneous reaction can be taken to be an authentic expression of a person’s true inner being; there is a genuineness to spontaneity and Pope Francis makes the connection between the concept of solidarity and the recognition of the universal destination of goods, which is a well-established norm in Catholic Social Teaching. Here again, solidarity is the fundamental attitude that makes a person realize the framing of her existence, the fact that she is part of something bigger, her dependence and belonging. In the same document Pope

4 M. Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness. Essays and Stories*. Introduction A. Fadiman. New York: Scribner 2014, 1.

5 “Acedia” is a term (and phenomenon) relevant to the exploration of epistemic resilience since it is used to describe inner dryness, spiritual exhaustion, inertia of the inner (see, for example, Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 1960); “acedia” is causally linked to impatience and over-ambitiousness and the burden of shouldering too heavy projects. Acedia (lack of “kados”, i.e. “care”) describes a sense of inertia and passivity facing the vastness of a task. This state, close to today’s burn out syndrome, will break all powers of inner resistance because acedia is a form of extreme ennui which blocks inner impulse and incentive.

Francis exhorts the rich and the powerful to “generous solidarity” (EG 58) based on the joy of the gospel, the joy about God who dwells among us, “fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness” (EG 71). A criterion for a well-functioning society is conditions for the establishment of solidarity;⁶ the litmus test for solidarity is “a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity” (EG 228). In another document, Pope Francis exhorts families to “go forth from their homes in a spirit of solidarity with others,” giving witness to “solidarity with the poor.”⁷

Pope Francis teaches about solidarity also in his encyclical *Laudato Si* where he renews the plea for overcoming indifference: “Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity” (LS 14); the encyclical consolidates a further link, a connection between solidarity and the environment by quoting *Caritas in Veritate* 51: “Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment” (LS 142). Solidarity is presented as the virtue that makes people feel at home (LS 148), and it is also presented as the virtue that takes future generations into account (LS 159); the Pope also suggests a simple pedagogy of solidarity: giving thanks to God before and after meals (LS 227). And finally, he does not only place solidarity as an inter-national and inter-generational value, but also as a truly global one: “Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (LS 240).

In these teachings we are confronted with an understanding of solidarity as the opposite of loneliness and the opposite of indifference that brings us to acknowledge links between solidarity and agency, human dignity, the universal destination of goods, option for the poor and for future generations, care for creation.

(2) A second way to learn about solidarity is based on experience and doing; the Center for Social Concerns enables students to experience solidarity in direct ways. The Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame sends about 230 students every year to serve for eight weeks in different sites throughout the country “being with the poor.” This is an experience of “kinship on the margins,” both because of the design of the program and because of the prominent role of Greg Boyle’s approach in the preparation for the experience. The term “kinship” is, what could be called, a “bridge term,” that sheds light on the concept of solidarity. “Solidarity” is a difficult and widely used term and it is helpful to look at the term with fresh eyes and through the lens of concepts that are less frequently used. “Kinship” is a deep “translation” of solidarity, especially since it points to a whole context of “lived solidarity,” namely Homeboy Industries, set up by Jesuit Father Gregory

6 Cf., *Evangelii Gaudium*, 196.

7 *Amoris Laetitia* 181 and 290 respectively.

8 D. Y. Choi, F. Kiesner, Homeboy Industries: An Incubator of Hope and Business. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* September 2007, 769-786.

9 An excellent background source to understand the context within which Father Boyle is in America. New York: Spiegel & Grau 2015.

Boyle.⁸ “Kinship” has been introduced by Boyle as an important term to characterize his work with former street gang members in Los Angeles.⁹ He shows his recognition of kinship by setting up structures of second chances that offer jobs and training programs for ex-gang members; having people from different gangs work together is part of the deal. Kinship is the recognition that “we belong to each other,” kinship happens when we refuse to forget that we belong to each other.¹⁰ Kinship is the experience of “being with” rather than “working for,” it is the driving force of building community, and the refusal to accept the claim that “there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives.”¹¹

When they reflect on their experience in their final papers students express insights into solidarity and kinship – some of these insights are: kinship experiences are based on *listening* and *giving attention*, the *recognition of full membership* in a community (inviting everyone into the circle) and also the *recognition of responsibility for the other*; kinship experiences are grounded in the recognition of a shared humanity; kinship experiences happen if strangers are welcomed into one’s life; one student experienced this as a key challenge during her summer experience: “The idea of developing kinship while living with complete strangers in such an intimate setting seemed so challenging. I wondered how I could relate to people with such different life experiences. What would we even talk about?” “Kinship on the margins” as an experience of solidarity means effort, effort of *reaching out*, it is about the effort of “*being with*” as/and “*doing with*.” Kinship is about the effort *learning from the other* and about the effort of *seeing*, especially the effort of seeing the gift other persons have. Kinship on the margins is about the effort of *sharing everyday life*; a student who took part in a camp commented: “Ergo, experience was the pivotal component in fostering the development of kinship and thus, solidarity. Eating, sleeping, working, and praying together with the campers and the counselors allowed me to grow in my relationships with them and allowed me to develop a kinship with them that is both transcendent to and dependent on the shared human experience.” “Kinship moments” can happen in unexpected places if life is being shared: “Eight weeks soon seemed a short time to form kinship. Relationships grew at odd times: they grew while playing go-fish, they grew while taking down laundry from the line, and they grew while sitting post-dinner on the stoop. They were not quantifiable, but that does not make them matter any less.”

A key dimension in kinship on the margins is *patience* as one student discovered: “patient actions, actions that reverberate throughout the course of time are surely the way to form bonds of kinship with others at the margins. Patient actions are actions based on the faith and trust between individuals and the faith and trust that God’s presence will eventually manifest itself in justice. In my experience, patience involves continually working with a frustrated student or a student with disabilities over and over again in order to solve a math problem--not just giving him the answer and moving on. Patient action is stopping class--even if a math problem or two might help someone do marginally better on the state

10 G. Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart. The Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York: Free Press 2010, 187.

11 *Ibid.*, 192.

exams--to give students a one-on-one, man-to-man conversation that they may be bereft of in their lives; or as we have referred to it, an intimate feeling of solidarity ... As Nouwen, McNeill and Morrison put it, 'Impatient action prevents us from recognizing the possibilities of the moment and thus easily leads us to an intolerable fanaticism'... Patient actions allow us to be present to others when they need us most and begin to form trust at the margins ... Some automatically lose patience with those at the margins because those at the margins do not look the same, do not act the same, do not share the same cultural attributes and are seen as a burden ... many people don't want to stand at the margins, more want to race ahead and outthink those at the margins, but the true servants of God will remain, patiently standing with those at the margins--the ultimate form of infinite compassion." Kinship, as another student wrote, is about "the value of being simply present" – "This summer, kinship meant to move beyond my role as an adult help 'fixing' the children; it meant standing beside them, trying to understand their history, empathizing with their pain, and affirming their sense of self-worth that life had diminished."

Kinship on the margins happens in real situations, in "*kinship moments*": "Late on one Friday afternoon, I realized that one of the older boys wasn't with the rest of the group. I found him in the playhouse, sobbing very, very hard. He said that he missed his friends from where he used to live, and that since he had no transportation to go visit them, the only way he could talk to them was through video games. At that moment, he sounded much too heartbroken for ten, and I was at a loss. The situation was so far beyond my power to fix that almost anything I said would ring false, or make me a dismissive adult. And though it felt impossibly, stupidly inadequate, I did the only thing I could do: I stayed there" – kinship is about: abiding, staying, holding out. "Kinship means being with people as they go through situations"; kinship experiences are fostered in a *setting of simplicity* when focusing on what is essential: "Kinship is very apparent at the Dorothy Day Center, in part because of the separation of our clients from material goods. I noticed that because of the lack of extravagance in the lives of the impoverished, most people embraced the simple objectives of life, which often centered on building relationships with others. Among the numerous lessons Jesus teaches in the Gospels, kinship, compassion, and trust are some of the greatest." "I have come to see that true service as kinship is characterized by love as well; service should be done 'not because they are all good, or because I am all good, but because God is good.'" This is an obvious point of connection between the joy of the gospel and the kinship experience that is built from there.

Experience teaches in a unique way what solidarity is about; it makes us smell and touch the challenges of solidarity, understood as "immersion" and "sharing" and "being with". If the world is the classroom, teaching can happen that would not be possible in a classroom.

(3) A third way to be taught about solidarity is teaching by the power of being. There are important teachers to help us understand Catholic Social Tradition or values such as solidarity – Archbishop Oscar Romero is one of them; by the testimony of his life he showed what solidarity means; this is not the mode of "saying," but the mode of "showing."¹² Romero intended to establish structures of solidarity: "There was talk already

about formally creating a Vicariate of Solidarity ... but for now, it is only a solidarity committee.”¹³ He reflected on solidarity, he preached solidarity, he lived solidarity – until the very end. He expected Christians, “from our calling in the Church, to have a great sense of solidarity with our suffering people,”¹⁴ “to cultivate the sense of solidarity.”¹⁵ Romero taught solidarity by the power of the word in his famous homilies, by the power of action through his diocesan offices and pastoral workers, but also – and probably especially – by the power of his personality and being.

A special teacher of solidarity by way of “being” is a not so famous and not so influential person who is the main reference point and interlocutor of this Occasional Paper, namely Issa Grace. She taught about solidarity by her special way of being-in-the-world, a way that called people to acts of solidarity they did not expect themselves.

Issa Grace O’Brien was the fourth child of her parents Sean and Felicia; the pregnancy was difficult and Issa was born with *Trisomy 18* on June 7, 2013. The doctors did not give the baby girl more than a few hours or a maximum of a few days to live. She beat the odds! Issa lived her life in the constant imminence of death to which more than once she came extremely close. She drew dozens of people into a circle of living solidarity and learning about solidarity. Issa’s obituary verifies: “Issa guided and taught her family all the way through her final breaths.” I was privileged to hold baby Issa in February 2014; it was an experience beyond words to hold the tiny baby, breathing with difficulties. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of peacefulness, a sense of protecting the vulnerable, also an understanding of the fragility of humanity and my own fragility.

The idea of solidarity is based on the acceptance of vulnerability; and lessons on vulnerability can be especially provided by those who are especially vulnerable. Issa demonstrated, one could say, “*the pedagogy of the weak*” – she taught those around her important lessons about life in a way that only the most vulnerable, weak and fragile can do. There is something like the power of the powerless, not unlike the newborn in the manger in Bethlehem. Issa inspired people to learn languages of solidarity and love; you have to find a new language to express your love to Issa, her parents, her siblings, her extended family, her friends. Issa made it very clear that she was not the one to love with a sense of future (future achievements, future capabilities, college degrees, a career); she was not to be measured in the language of a capability approach; she was not to be described in a vocabulary of progress. The solidarity Issa evoked was “aimless,” in the sense that it was given “in the moment,” and not “pro future,” not with a perspective of linear developments and future

13 O. Romero, *A Shepherd’s Diary*. Transl. I.B., Hodgson. Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press 1993, 36.

14 *Ibid.*, 42.

15 *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴ Note that these questions invite more than an analysis of social problems and/or of the degree to which social conditions might be criminogenic. These questions invite self-reflection, by community members, for the sake of accountability.

in mind. Thomas Nagel famously makes the point that altruism presupposed a concept of future. Well, maybe not. At least not in the case of Issa's way of making people learn about solidarity.

Issa made people learn about solidarity by challenging boundaries – the boundaries between nuclear family, extended family, circle of friends and institutional support, for instance. The medical miracle of Issa's nine months on this planet was made possible by a kind of “permeability,” an experience of openness of different contexts to other contexts (family system, the system of neighborhoods, the system of official institutions and the health care system). Issa also challenged the boundaries of “giving” and “receiving,” of “teaching” and “learning,” of “living solidarity” and “experiencing solidarity.” There was an openness, a permeability also to these categories. Issa also taught us about “being human;” she witnessed to the “*polyphony*” of life, a term used by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to describe the multifariousness of life, the colorfulness of human existence with its many dimensions even in a narrow prison cell.¹⁶ Issa was a vulnerable baby in need of care, but she was so much more than that, she was a teacher and a guide, a mystery and a gift, a human being created in the image of God and a sign of God's presence. Her life was much more than a life of medically motivated attention – she was so much more than a “medical case.” She was a teacher of solidarity without an explicit teaching mandate. And this teaching goes deep and far.

CONCLUDING REMARK

On March 24, 2014, on the day that Issa died (March 24 happens to also be the day Oscar Romero died), Pope Francis addressed the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers; he reminded his audience of the truth “that also in suffering no one is ever alone,” that “the experience of fraternal sharing with those who suffer opens us to the true beauty of human life which includes its frailty. In protecting and promoting life, at any stage or condition, we can recognize the dignity and value of every single human being, from conception until death.” Pope Francis also mentioned the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord on March 25, praising Mary who “offered up her own existence, she made her whole self available to the will of God, becoming a ‘place’ of his presence.” There are many ways to make connections between these words and Issa's life; one connection is clearly the presence of God and the presence of human persons (being created in the image of God) in Issa's life.

Solidarity is the opposite of loneliness and the opposite of indifference: Issa was literally never alone, not a single moment; and by her gentle way of being she moved people, almost visibly, making all those who knew her move beyond indifference giving testimony to the possibility of us having hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Vollständige Ausgabe, versehen mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen und Kommentaren. Edited by Chr. Gremmels, E. Bethge, R. Bethge in cooperation with I. Tödt. Bonhoeffer Werke Band 8. Gütersloh 2011, 444. English edition: *life, even in prison, “is kept multi-dimensional and polyphonous”* (D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. London: SCM 1971, 311).

FELICIA JOHNSON O'BRIEN

The Gifts of Solidarity, Inspired by Issa Grace

In *Expecting Adam*, Martha Beck writes about being an academic at Harvard when she became pregnant with her second child who was diagnosed with Down Syndrome. Her colleagues couldn't understand a) why she would have a second child while she was finishing her doctoral degree and b) why she would continue her pregnancy with the diagnosis of Down Syndrome. Despite the lack of moral support, Martha develops a strong connection to her child in utero and decides to carry the child to birth. In different ways, she is shunned by her colleagues and ultimately, she and her family leave the environment and return to their family in Utah to be near a more supportive community.

I, too, received a difficult diagnosis for my child in utero, but the response stands in stark contrast to Martha Beck's experience. I can't imagine being able to support the life of my family – myself, my husband, and 4 children, without the love and support of family and friends, but in particular, the support of the Center for Social Concerns (CSC) and the larger University of Notre Dame community. I'd like to focus specifically on the role of the Center in the life of my youngest daughter's precious and short life. I do not think that the CSC perfectly lives out Catholic Social Tradition (CST), but in this instance, it is hard for me to think of how the Center could have done it better. I want to share how my daughter's life inspired and exemplified solidarity lived out and bore unexpected gifts for all of us who knew her. I will share my family's story, what experiencing solidarity looked and felt like, and finally, what those gifts and challenges are to us today, especially as an institute within a premiere Catholic university.

My husband, Sean and I, both work at the university – Sean directs the Master's in Human Rights Program at the Center for Civil and Human Rights, and I work at the Center for Social Concerns helping to coordinate the Summer Service Learning Program. In the fall of 2012, we were pregnant with our fourth child. Very early in our pregnancy, our daughter was diagnosed with a severe condition called Trisomy 18 or Edward's syndrome, a genetic condition similar to Trisomy 21, known as Down Syndrome, that affects every cell of the body. 50% of children with this diagnosis make it to birth and 90% of children born with T18 die within the first year of life.

My pregnancy was a time of profound grief for me. Each day, I lived with the uncertainty of whether or not the life inside of me would survive. I woke up each morning asking God for the grace to accept whatever lay ahead. The constant presence of her life inside me filled me with both sadness and at the same time, hope, as I felt her life moving inside of me with certainty. My grief was also about grieving the loss of a healthy child whose dreams and hopes we would never know, the nursery we would never prepare.

Mid way through the pregnancy, knowing that it was very uncertain if our daughter would survive the pregnancy, the Center offered a prayer service for my husband and me and an anointing of the sick for our daughter. We stormed the heavens with prayers. Sean and I were buoyed by this overwhelming support. In my third trimester when I was not feeling

well physically or emotionally, the office began to bring our family meals periodically. This act of receiving from my coworkers opened our hearts to receive from others. My heart was softened by the prayers and outpouring of love. I believe that this time of learning to lean on others in the form of prayer and meals laid an essential foundation for us to live in community, in a space of trust and vulnerability that opened the doors to what we would later know as solidarity.

Issa Grace was born on June 7th, 2013. Her first cries are some of the happiest moments of my life. Issa's name was inspired originally from a Star Wars character our son Seamus admired, but we later learned that this moniker meant Savior or Jesus in Arabic, which seemed appropriate. Physically, she was doing much better than anyone anticipated. All of her systems were working on their own, but her heart was filled with hundreds of tiny holes. She was too small and fragile to endure surgery. We were sent home under hospice care with no directions about how to care for her and an unknown timeline for how long she might live. It was terrifying. There was no roadmap; only a clear message that our days with our sweet daughter, Issa, were numbered.

Issa was extremely fragile and needed to be held 24/7. Because of her reflux and heart complications she couldn't lie down for long. Her only comfort was being held chest to chest, heart to heart. After we came home with her, the meal train continued and went into full effect. Staff offered to help in multiple ways – helping with our other children, Sophie, Lucy and Seamus, coming to pray with us, or holding Issa so that I could pump breast milk or shower. Many people wanted to know how we were doing so I decided to write a blog on Caring Bridge, which I did for the duration of her life.

At 6 weeks of life, 7/21/13, I wrote the following:

*People ask how we are doing, which is a hard question to answer. We're exhausted from sleepless nights and worry, and we're filled with awe and love for our sweet baby. The kids worry about their baby sister, too, but it doesn't stop them from smothering her with love and kisses. Our community here (and afar) continues to be an amazing support to us. We are filled with gratitude for your fellowship, prayers, letters, gifts, meals, hugs and visits. The outpouring of love that is showered on our family reminds us of the awe people must have felt at **witnessing the first Christian community share and live so beautifully together**. We are in awe, and through you, we know and experience God's love.*

After my maternity leave, I tried to go back to work; this effort failed miserably. Each time I left the house, something catastrophic would happen with Issa – choking, difficulty breathing – it was too much to ask others to care for her in her fragile condition, nor could my coworkers depend on me. My supervisor offered me the opportunity to take a leave from work, which I quickly accepted in order to maximize my time with Issa. As God would have it, a coworker who was recently hired on our team was able to assume the majority of my responsibilities, however, it truly was a team effort for my 3 coworkers, Andrea, Emily, and Ben, to assume my work duties. My coworkers would come to the house for meetings, and we would schedule phone calls together to make sure that all of my work responsibilities were covered. Other staff continued to come during lunch breaks to bring me lunch and to hold Issa, do a load of laundry or scrub the toilets. One week during staff prayer, they created a painting for me as a way of showing their support, love,

and prayers. Many people from the larger community pitched in by driving our older kids to activities, knitting us blankets, folding laundry, offering financial assistance, some even strangers. The sense of solidarity was tangible.

At 3 months, 9/15/13, I reflected:

*In a recent conversation, someone commented to me that I was sure to become a saint. I laughed because I feel far from that reality, but I am certain that we are surrounded by a community of saints, holy people who are loving and supporting us. There are difficult days and we are tired, **but we are not suffering** because of the support we feel all around us. So much so, that we are free to celebrate the gift of this precious girl's life.*

In truth, we are far from saints, but we truly felt and still feel part of a holy community. Because of the love and support we received, we were free to love fully, and our suffering was alleviated.

At 7 months, 1/19/2014, I shared:

It's humbling for me that I need so much help for our family to function; simple tasks that I used to do every day, I cannot get done. We need our community and are so incredibly grateful for the hundreds of people who literally come through our door to help out in one way or another. If I'm lucky, I leave the house one day a week to run a quick errand. I feel pretty isolated, but the world seems to come to us in different ways...you, our community, have not given up on us or on Issa. We will always be grateful for the ways you accompany us each day.

Issa died on March 24th, 2014 at 9½ months old. During the middle of the night, Sean and I woke up the kids knowing that she was near the end. We snuggled up in bed together with the kids taking turns holding her, singing to her, and praying with her. Our oldest daughter, Sophie, held Issa as she breathed her last breath. March 24th is the anniversary of Oscar Romero's death, no coincidence. Romero died a pure innocent death like our daughter. He taught about the importance of defending the most vulnerable people in our society by modeling a life of solidarity. In the case of Issa, she, too, brought our community together in solidarity and in doing so, enlivened our best selves.

Issa's wake was held at the Center for Social Concerns in the chapel of Our Lady of Mercy. Hundreds of people came to honor her life and to share in the ways that she blessed us. My coworkers spoke, prayed and sang, helping to lead this service of great hospitality. Fr. Paul, the director of the CSC, celebrated Issa's funeral mass at Our Lady of Loretto; a beautiful and holy moment. The community of the CSC embodied a sense of solidarity and witnessed to the world what a truly loving community looks like. Issa is buried in Cedar Grove on the campus of Notre Dame. She is part of this community in life and in death. She is my saint now who I pray to when I need to remember who I am called to be, like she did in her own life so perfectly.

The CSC staff embraced my daughter and my family and lived out the concept of human solidarity, Christ's command to love your neighbor as yourself. Put simply, solidarity expresses our connectedness to each other, our kinship, and the desire to want for others what we would want for ourselves. In particular, solidarity calls us to care for the most vulnerable in our society (option for the poor) and that the success of our community is only as successful as the weakest members (common good). In other words, the option for the poor is what is GOOD for the common good. Not only are we concerned with the well-

being of the weakest member in our community, but that person's well-being is simply good for our own well-being. This commitment to solidarity led the Center for Social Concerns in its response to Issa's life where we see our values (theory) and actions (praxis) unified.

REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

What presupposes or lays the foundation for solidarity? What is necessary for solidarity to exist? I'd like to explore these questions and how they relate to my lived experience with Issa. In my use of the word solidarity, I define it as both a value or an ideal and a path to action – the two expressions of solidarity must coexist. Solidarity implies a relationship of dependence in which some rely on others for things they cannot achieve on their own. In 1986, *The Bishop's Pastoral Letter, Economic Justice for All*, famously defines, "Solidarity is not a feeling of vague concern or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people both near and far. Rather, it is a 'firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good' that is to say to the good of all and each individual because we are really responsible for all."

The scripture that comes to mind for me when thinking about solidarity is from 1 Corinthians 12: 21 – 26:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you," nor again the head to the feet, "I do not need you." Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are **all the more necessary**, and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor, and our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety, whereas our more presentable parts do not need this. But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; **if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.**

While this idea of dependence implies an imbalance, there is also a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship that is created. Implicit to the idea of solidarity are the CST values of love, human dignity, option for the poor, subsidiarity, and the common good. We experienced all of these principles during our time with Issa.

Learning to ask for help in the early stages of pregnancy was a crucial time of building trust, honesty, and vulnerability with those willing to help us. On the flip side, I imagine that it took sacrifice, courage, reflection, planning, and working together to figure out *how* to help us. The act of receiving is humbling, but we needed it, and we took it. What did we have to offer in return? The burden of receiving can be very difficult, almost shameful. It's countercultural; we're supposed to be strong, independent, productive. What did I do to deserve this outpouring of love? Because of the support we received preparing for Issa's birth during our pregnancy, however, we were prepared to receive from others once she was born. I felt and trusted the love and support that was offered to us. But without trust, I don't know that solidarity is possible. It is such a position of vulnerability to rely on others. There must be trust between people that we are not beholden to each other, but rather that the good of all is important to the good of each and every one. Our society places such importance on doing things on our own; our individualistic values turn into real obstacles when it comes time for us to ask for help and to receive. I recently met with one of our Summer Service Learning

Program (SSLP) site partners in Madison, WI who spoke passionately about his work running a dining room for the homeless. At one point, he turned to me and asked, “Do you know how much our guests have to pay to stand in this line and eat here?” No, I responded, surprised by his question. He replied, “The cost is greater than any one of us would ever want to pay.” The sacrifice of those suffering has already been made. They owe nothing.

Witnessing those who gave to us and sacrificed to do so was powerful. When people came to help Issa, I could almost see their hearts expand. As much as we gained, I believe that in some small way, the act of helping helped those who helped. Many people sacrificed for us in real ways – to cover my workload, to make meals, to support us financially, to hold Issa in the middle of the night. The number of ways is too hard to list. It is extremely humbling. I will never be able to repay those who helped me and my family. Thank you does not seem like enough. And yet, I trust that it was freely given and that God graced the lives of those who sacrificed in order to give to us. I can think of numerous times where sacrifice enriched the lives of people helping us and for a few who even discovered gifts about themselves that they did not know they had. People who wanted to help, seemed called and did so according to their own gifts. It all seemed very organic and collective, living out the idea of subsidiarity at a local level. I can’t explain it except that it was like watching love in action, it was love freely given without expectation. And we were blessed to witness it come in and out of our front door for nearly a year.

In the act of receiving, we were also blessed with sacred moments of friendship, of people who entered deeply into our pain, some people who we barely knew. Often, people visiting us would open up their own hearts and share their own personal struggles and suffering. A close friend of ours describes Issa as the Rock Breaker. In Western Ireland, in the Burren, there is a tiny flower that grows around massive boulders and eventually breaks them down with their miniscule roots. So, too, Issa’s life touched and broke people’s hearts open so that they might grow more. Engaging with suffering is hard, but ultimately, life-giving. Participating in Issa’s life was difficult, but our hearts are bigger because of her.

Seeing this community, the living church, breathing and alive in action is both inspiring and motivating. Shortly after Issa’s death, a coworker reflected, “This is good who we are right now, let’s not lose sight of this.” Issa’s life showed us that we can DO this. We can trust that God will use us and our talents for the good of all. We have the capacity to live in solidarity with others if we open ourselves and allow God to use us. We saw a glimpse of God’s kingdom when we saw this community in action. The acts of mercy help us to discover, use and develop our gifts. The act of solidarity is a gift that allows us to participate in something greater than ourselves or something tiny, like Issa’s precious life.

I’d like to share a painting that I did of Issa, represented as a blossom surrounded by plants. The Center for Hospice Care in Mishawaka offers free grief services to anyone in the community. A year after Issa’s death, my husband and I began going to art therapy each week to support one of our children who was grappling with her own grief. While we initially went for her, we quickly discovered how much we both needed it. If you’re not familiar with art therapy, I want to briefly explain the process. For one hour, you basically stand alone in front of a blank canvas and let your heart speak. Colors and images come out with usually no end point or particular goal. There are no images to imitate, the idea is to let your heart lead and to externalize what is too cumbersome to express in words.

The process can be very healing, and the end product is unexpected and often beautiful.

In the image presented here, Issa's life is depicted as the flower in full bloom. Her roots are thin and fragile, but deep and connected to the roots around her. The plants around her symbolize the community who surrounded her during her life and helped her to blossom. We are the plants, so closely connected to each other. It is our job now to bloom. Our work is not done. We are called to deepen our roots so that we might blossom, together, each in our own time.



As the famous adage goes, “With knowledge comes responsibility.” For me, our experience of solidarity during Issa's life is a call to action. Pope Francis very directly calls us to take our faith to the streets and to perform works of mercy. Issa's charge to us is to take this model that we have and run with it! We have seen a glimpse of God's kingdom when we saw this community in action. This experience of solidarity is a gift, a deep knowing, that we must honor as people and as a community.

During Advent last year, Sean created a piece depicting the magi departing from Bethlehem. For him it represents turning away from his powerful experience with Issa. Inspired by T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, Sean saw himself in these magi as they departed from meeting Jesus. When the wise men left Jesus in the manger, I'm sure that they must have felt alone and confused. When Jesus died, he left his friends alone and scared. I can relate to this feeling. We must also return to the world to be light and to share the good news. Leaving the light and going out into the unknown world is hard work and scary. The path is not clear.

The next painting demonstrates the road ahead after Issa's life. When I began this painting, I covered the canvas in black paint. The rays of the sun emerged harsh and bright in contrast to the dark. A road develops, and we are gently led one step at a time. As John Henry Newman's prayer invokes, “Lead, Kindly Light,” I've learned to trust in the Light to know that the path will be revealed.

CHALLENGES THAT LIE AHEAD

Issa's life challenges us to continue to live a life committed to solidarity. These are some of the challenges that I foresee for us as a community at the Center for Social Concerns.

We need to commit ourselves to creating and sustaining a culture that promotes and lives solidarity. In some ways, we've already built this culture. Our commitment to prayer, open dialogue and honesty around tough decisions, celebrating important moments and having fun together, represent foundational practices that help build trust in a community. How do we continue to build and sustain a culture that promotes honesty, transparency, trust, and accountability? What structures are needed as an institute to create and live out a culture of solidarity that seeks to support the most vulnerable?

Creating space and time to discern how to act presents a real challenge amidst busy lives. True solidarity requires the coexistence of ideals and action. As an institute, we need to conscientiously gather small groups of people or programs together in thoughtful discernment about where and how to build solidarity. We often get overwhelmed by the endless opportunities and problems. But there are small needs that we can tackle right here in our immediate community, on campus, with students, in South Bend and in the world. Making that jump is not hard, but there needs to be deliberate space, conversation, and collaborative thinking and planning in order to act in solidarity with others. In his book, *A Step Along the Way*, Stephen Pope describes the demands of solidarity,

Strong solidarity requires significant time commitment, self-denial, and self-discipline, but it also brings more profound levels of friendship and joy. Long-term engagement in strong solidarity is sustained by the close interpersonal bonds of companionship that Boyle calls 'kinship' and Jesuit Refugee Services calls 'accompaniment.' (p.201)

Kinship and accompaniment are two words that we use daily in our courses and programs at the Center. Are we prepared to live them out?

Next is the challenge of knowing who to build solidarity with? Where do we start? What makes sense? In some ways, modeling solidarity with Issa was easy. Who doesn't love a precious baby? Jesus pushes the envelope with solidarity and challenges us to extend it to those who are different than us, even to our enemies. Modeling solidarity with our coworkers is not always easy; mental illness, divorce, addiction, and other struggles are much harder to approach. How do we create environments of solidarity that nurture and cultivate a caring environment that allows us all to persist and to thrive? How do we extend beyond the borders of these walls to our students and to our neighbors in South Bend? How do we find ways to live in solidarity with those very people cleaning our offices? The parts of our university body that we don't often recognize? Who are the weakest members of our body who need our kinship and our accompaniment? The principle of subsidiarity might be our best guide here to see where our relationships and natural interests lend. By stepping out with our skills and interests, we can build relationships that are more genuine. We can't do it all and must choose intentionally, reflectively, in conversation together. Community by its very nature is exclusive and yet community is a necessity for humanity to thrive. In her book, *House of Hospitality*, Dorothy Day wisely advises, "Do what comes to hand."

This takes us to the next challenge of trusting in ourselves and in each other. We all have unique gifts to share and need to step out of our comfortable skins, the comfortable walls of Geddes Hall, to allow God to act in and through us. This requires taking risks and having courage to offer our unique gifts, trusting that they are enough. Stephen Pope recommends, “What works for one person might not work for another...It is useless to try to figure out which is ‘objectively’ better or to seek the most heroically difficult challenge we can find. Each of us has to consent to do what we can in our own lives and not compare ourselves, favorably or unfavorably, to the service performed by people who are not us.” (p. 205) As a community, we must also commit to supporting each other and self-care. I recently heard the term solidarity burnout. As a social worker, we often speak of compassion fatigue and burnout in the nonprofit world but not solidarity burnout. I love this phrase because it literally describes the problem. Too much solidarity with people, not enough time alone, in solitude, in prayer. Here again we can look to Jesus as our role model who often took time from his ministry to be alone and to pray. I’m also reminded of David Hollenbach’s article, “Courage and Patience: Education for Staying Power in the Pursuit of Justice,” one of my favorite articles in the SSLP course that I discuss with my students each year. Hollenbach points to the need for humility, self-care, community, and courage to stay in the work of social justice.

Finally, we have NOT arrived. The prayer commonly known as “The Oscar Romero Prayer” states that we are “workers, not master builders... of a future not our own.” Suffering is a deep part of our human existence. Solidarity calls us to it, to not be afraid. When we go to the margins to lift up our brothers and sisters, they need help. The cry for help is real. We cannot deny the suffering and we cannot NOT act. We must not be paralyzed by our powerlessness but respond to suffering with love and lift each other up, trusting that our actions are part of the building of God’s kingdom. Everyone needs salvation, and the option for the poor reminds us that it will be hardest for the rich, the privileged, us. Our lives are in fact only rich when we live out God’s message of love. I find comfort knowing that the future is not our own; it frees us to act in simple and imperfect ways.

Put simply, this is our command to love. The Gospel message is relevant today just as it was when Jesus preached. We need each other and our salvation depends upon it. The Gospel is not over; we are living in it still, writing it with our lives.

I invite you to look at the painting of our community once more. Our flowers will not bloom until we die. When our time on earth is finished, may our blossoms be beautiful and fragrant, each unique. May we also be inspired by the magi who turned away from the light and committed themselves to walk into the darkness to bring the light into the world.

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During Issa's life, a beautiful cohort of "holders" developed - a small group of people who had the rare gift of knowing how to comfort and hold Issa. Some of the holders would come in the wee hours of the night, from 10 PM - 2 AM, so that I could sleep for a few hours. One of these holders, Leslie Eid, was a dear friend who is also a nurse. She assisted during Issa's c-section and then later helped me develop the idea of having nighttime holders when she saw my fatigue taking over. Without this community of holders, my sanity and Issa's care would have been greatly compromised. I will always be grateful to Leslie and to this small, sacred community of holders. I asked Leslie if she'd be willing to write about her role and relationship to Issa as one of her holders, and these poignant words emerged.

LESLIE EID

My nights in solidarity: Issa Grace and a kinship with Light

“How we reach for one another and listen to one another’s music-share stories like the most amazing and nutritious food—that’s what we are all here for. Me personally I think stories are the coolest wildest prayers there are...stories matter, live forever, stories are how we shuffle quickest toward the Mercy greater than the ocean and denser than the stars in the sky. Stories maybe save lives.”

Brian Doyle

“What might we be, as a species, in the years to come? O what, o God tell me, o people tell me, o friends and lovers tell me, o enemies tell me, o come clear to me in the entrails of birds and the fleeting tails of stars, what we might be if we rise and evolve, if we reach and leap, if we deepen and sing, if we come further down from the brooding trees and out onto the smiling plain, if we unclench the fist and drop the dagger, if we emerge from the fort and the stockade and the prison, if we smash the bricks from around our hearts, if we cease to stagger and swagger, if we peel the steel from our eyes, if we yearn and learn, if we do what we say we will do, if we act as if our words really matter, if our words become muscled mercy, if we grow a fifth chamber in our hearts and a seventh and a ninth, and become as if new creatures arisen from our shucked skins, creatures who become what we are so patently and brilliantly and utterly and wholly and holy capable of.....what then?”

Brian Doyle, The Wet Engine

How we get chosen for a thing. How we remain the bumbling and forgetful and eager and uncertain and searching and hopeful disciples of our Christ and still get to stand with the suffering and hungry and imprisoned other. Now there is something. Now there is a story.

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In memory now I travel over the edges of the maps of my nights holding Issa Grace O’Brien. The book of my life of nights with her has become like an atlas of sorts, where each evening is a map I can explore again and again and recall the boundaries and borders of that night-country’s terrain. Some evenings were filled with the craggy mountain arêtes that were perilous it seemed--when Issa’s crying was mighty or her appetite was waning--and the work I had set out to do--allowing my friends some deeply needed rest—would need to be scrapped and I would have to awaken Mama Felicia. Other nights the map was filled with deep and peaceful lakes, the shores quiet coves of contemplation: that particular way Issa’s mouth moved even when she was not eating, as if she were suckling at the breast; the way her eyes were sometimes so wide and all-knowing as they gazed out the window at the first snows and I’d think, “*this young one has been here before*”; or “*the way there was [nothing else] except to Behold and watch her breathe and feel her racing heart upon my fingertips which were busy patting her back and her cheeks were fuller, her color pink and she looks like Seamus today.*” (personal journal entry, September 9, 2013) And still another map within which we’d arrive at the



country of wide and abundant fields and she would make me laugh just by looking at me and daring me to try to kiss her little nose or change her diaper or put her down so I could have a bathroom break.....sweet and wise and dear Issa Grace definitely had a look....and I was the frequent (and, oh so fortunate) recipient of it!

Issa Grace (my “little bird”, my “I.G.O’B”) was a brilliant mustard seed planter--she nestled herself right into the edges of my heart and set it to cracking open and growing and stretching and expanding. She was a visitation of Light. She was the granted opportunity to see the sun but also that upon which the sun reflects itself. She was my portal to understanding that to not glance long at what the morning or evening or moon light is touching, imaging itself upon, may be to miss the point, may be to not get the full tale.

To stand in solidarity with such a blessed other opens us to the risk of exposing our own need for Mercy—to catch sight of our own nakedness, imprisonment and homelessness--and, simultaneously, to come to see ourselves as a resting spot for light, a surface upon which the Light can be reflected and find kin. It may be that if we are fortunate, once in our lives we get the opportunity to stand with another in the kinship of Light and that if we are really lucky, the circumstances for solidarity choose us and invite us in.

Literally holding Issa each night, not in possession--though there was a part of me that dared think this was the invitation--I was being led and invited toward a letting go of possessing altogether, toward a letting go of defining even the edges of God’s invitations to me.

I considered the sight of the stars a Mercy, the feather-light touch of God, glimpses of Light, tiny visitations of light. Not one night upon my leave-taking from home for my “Issa night” did I fail to see the stars. And each night, when I looked up and searched out each constellation or singular star in its usual place-Big Dipper here, Orion’s belt there and Cassiopeia further on—I came to know a little bit more about the behavior of light and the truth of hope and the gift of remaining and abiding, of abiding long enough for Light to arrive at Earth, to sink in; for water to be drawn up from the Earth’s depths at the behest of this self-same Light.

It is the reflected light that strikes me now: sunrise onto tree tops, moon over water. As the sun crests and dips at the earth’s horizons in its rising and setting, the trees open themselves—as and where they are-- to receive that light which insinuates itself upon all that it finds within its path. And so it was with dear Issa Grace O’Brien. She tugged at each of us who came to within her sphere and orbit precisely because in her we could come to know a reflected light of the One True Light.

Recognition of a fact often comes much later, if we remain--alert and awake; if we abide within the stories that come to us and into those days long after the tale is seemingly over. A story is never meant to stop where it ends. The point of the tale of Light is that it is received—with or without one’s noting-- by that upon which it is reflected. It inhabits us, and anything in its sphere—as and where we are. And the call arises to be the source and reflection for another so that this particular Light continues and expands into every dark corner. The point of solidarity, I guess, is the continuity it can engender. Making kin with our received Light can give us opportunity to reflect it out to some other place so that we don’t hold it to within ourselves only, so that we don’t fall into that temptation to build a



tent to a singular moment of received Light for ourselves.

“*Were our hearts not burning within us...*” Realization and recognition of Christ came only *after* these Emmaus disciples got off the road. The temptation for me in solidarity had been to think that getting off the road, arriving at the destination, my intended stop, was itself the whole story. But, we are called to remain within the contours and edges and borders and terrains of the entire narrative, unto and through the epilogue. Solidarity can fall short, it seems to me, only now, if we don’t remain long enough to have our heart stretched open, to give recognition time to arrive and then...to do something with the recognition.

The humbling truth is that while I was a night-time holder of Issa-being helpful in a way that I could--I had time and desire--I was falling and failing and fighting at Love in other areas of my own life. I did not arrive at my “Issa nights” without a host of uncertainty and push-back from myself in the ways I was being invited to care with, about, or for others in my life who were dear to me. Issa was easy. They were otherwise. This was the manner in which I often arrived at these mostly quiet and always Holy nights. But, I came to see that these moments of our living never happen in a vacuum...life travels with us on the roads we are taking. And sometimes we only learn Love by untying our boat from shore, unanchoring ourselves on purpose to gain land and, in that strange and confounding way that is God, gain a foothold. But, a deliberate and intended unmooring is no less an unmooring and remaining at sea would take a measure of courage.

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I came to see the wisdom of the French, whose word for “*guest*” and “*host*” are the same word--“*hote*”. I came to understand that we are called to be both guest and host in solidarity with those known or unknown others, or we may risk being neither. The hospitality inherent in solidarity pulls us toward the ocean of the wise, who understand that there is never one who gives and one who receives. Really good hospitality may necessarily require of us the awareness that, most truly, any guest of ours is also host of a Light that they bring to within our margins. And, likewise, hopefully, us toward them. I saw that maybe, just maybe, Light and Love flow like that. And, so, within me, and further on on the road, further out to sea, I became open to that greatest of counterintuitive promises-- that the Grace comes in receiving also, and in recognizing the great mystery—and Mercy, I suppose-- that my own nakedness and brokenness was an entree point and that I had some skill and a lot of desire but that, in the end, I knew nothing and that that fact, all by itself, was likely the blessing...I came to see that this Light of God offered freely was meant to be both compass and commitment, passageway and promise, bounty and benefaction. Felicia’s painting of the emerging light and Sean’s painting of the the light that the kings eventually turned their backs toward to walk into the shadows allow me to ponder further the magnificent character of Light—it is brought forth *within* our own darkness but is also called forth *from* that self same truth of us into another dark edge that may set itself before us. The gift given us freely within the context of our humanity is likewise the gift to be shared abundantly. The ever-fluid nature of Illumination is the call to move between our being both guest and host, sometimes all in the self same moment.

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I became a nurse by grace. Nursing chose me. (I think that that must happen a lot... we are invited when we're not looking; we get caught unawares). But, I also became a labor and delivery nurse because I love babies but, also, simply to have a skill with which God could use me, something to receive that Call with, to offer up to God so that when God wanted to speak in that still small voice I had given God something to work with. Legitimize the Call, as it were.

After 22 years of being with women as they deliver their babies, this is a world that has become wholly known to me. I know how to welcome the stranger and how to help a frightened teenager to do the same; I know how to maneuver around a birthing suite or operating room and provide for the parents' needs, the doctor's needs, the family's needs, the newborn's needs, all at once. My muscle memory comes into action as I switch on the delivery lights, place the delivery table, with all its requisite tools of the trade, in just the right spot, tie the doctor's gown from the back one handed while I dial my pocket phone to request another set of hands and get a blood pressure at the same instant; I know what it literally feels like in my hands as the baby's round and precious wet head is delivered and we're awaiting the shoulders as the woman continues her labor and my voice is murmuring comfort and encouragement and belief and courage. I know the sights and smells and sounds of this my world as if they inhabited me.

But, being invited to be part of the team that was present to deliver Issa Grace O'Brien on June 7, 2013? What does one do with *this* invitation? Now what real skills did I have to arrive at this threshold, to walk through this doorway with people I so loved and admired and who bore within themselves the fullest knowing and loving of their daughter Issa Grace-- she who grew in unexpected ways within that deep mama- ocean of salt and Love and light-- and who simultaneously carried the full knowledge of impending loss, who, knowing what possibilities lay ahead, bore within themselves the totality of the road of loving Issa. In all my years in this work, these moments of life and loss so quickly are not unknown to me. This threshold was new perhaps because of the particular nature of the intentional and yearning faith of my friends, who held true to their uttered "yes"(and all that that *yes* could mean) for the entire journey and allowed so many of us on the road as well.

I believe that, for all babies born, when our mama's water breaks in labor and we begin our great journey to arriving into this world, some of those waters remain with us...they bathe those darkest corners of our being so that light has something to be held within, something to reflect itself upon. And this is how that tide within us swells....it swells as the guest and the host of the light we received directly from our mama, who received that same light of love from her mama, and from her mama ,and so on..... and so on.

So I came to understand that solidarity is not naming the struggle for the suffering, but knowing there is suffering-being in close enough proximity, standing close enough at hand to hear and to see, standing really, really close at hand, not taking the burden, but sharing it. Not naming another's struggle for them, but bearing it with them. It is that thing of the Yoke, that most miraculous and countercultural thing of the Yoke. "...and my burden is light...." not because we cannot or ought not do it by ourselves, but because we don't have to. Once you murmur, shout, whisper your "yes" to walking with another, you cannot undo that. Our yes becomes implicated and strengthened by their yes. Our "yes" becomes

a bond that can strengthen the other's "yes", and bring an added strength to ours.

In a community's standing with the O'Brien family, we had to accept that the Reality would not likely change. But *we* might. And, the slight of hand of the corporal works of mercy is that we put at risk our own hunger, nakedness, imprisonment, homelessness, or thirst. We risk being clothed and housed, fed and visited, nurtured and set free even as we set out to be the givers, the soothers, the bearers of strength and peace to those holy and broken others.

I have boxed and bordered my moments of giving and standing with another so tightly—"it can look like this; this is where and how I will give and this is why and how I will receive. Got it? Cool. Ahead we go then." There was no room for mystery to breathe and so it was no wonder my attempts at solidarity had often seemingly failed. I had wanted to both name and push away the Mystery, to be certain and unaffected. I had wanted to name the parameters of the call and the experience of the holy, unknown other. I had wanted to turn away when my presented plan for another did not come to be. I had failed more often than not to listen to or attend to the invitation as given by a God I had called "love".

*Live more deeply* seemed to be the new call—*draw from the deeper well* or *extend your roots further* into the Center. The temptation would be to live at the surface—to remain at the layer where the work simply gets done for the night, to never get to the root from whence the most clear and nourishing water is drawn.

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All that my skill and confidence and desire were were doors into the real work of a nurse (and friend and stranger)-standing in the midst of another's story and bearing witness and abiding thru it with them. A lot in my training prepared me for this particular invitation and the work it could entail...and nothing did. But I had some measure of belief that Christ does not invite us to dinner and then leave the Table or fail to provide an abundant Feast. Christ remains. Christ provides. (And...Christ is definitely a better cook than I!).

At one delivery I attended last year, my patient was accompanied by her husband and a doula (her birth companion). This doula had been present to this couple for their entire pregnancy—answering questions, calming fears, celebrating courage and strength, teaching the way of labor. As this woman moved through her labor she began to struggle and out of the mouth of her doula came the most profound wisdom: "*It is not about muscle. It is about surrender.*" There it was--three years after the birth and life and death of Issa Grace. Now I knew, again, everything...and nothing. The skills I have developed over these many years were not my gift. They were simply the entrée into the true work of the human experience...the standing by, the standing with, the standing within the whole truth and story of the other from the whole truth and story of oneself.

Issa allowed a gentle surrender to Love. She was the cracker opener of a heart that had become stone. She was my first communion all over again and anew. She was my teacher about giving and receiving in unprescribed and unprecedented ways. (Now that was a trick for that little one to play on this old girl. There was her clarity of wisdom that makes me giggle still.)

Issa wasn't The Christ. She was, however, as the purest face and body of our Christ. She unlocked for me the keys to solidarity by being the living embodiment of what the

Corporal Works of Mercy are to be about. She showed me the blessings of answering the invitation and the gifts of mutuality in the doing.

Mutuality means that I cannot hold this little one who is needing nourishment and the constant home of others' arms and seemingly imprisoned in a body that will not cooperate and expect that I will not be given opportunity to see my own homelessness and nakedness and need of nourishment. The trouble for me in solidarity seemed to be that I would get what I had asked for so fervently through the years—to touch the Great Mystery and to get touched, in turn, by the Mercy if I really arrive at the moment and into the story. The truth was that both would become necessary if I was to recognize the holiness of our own need for God that emerges, as it did for so many of us in such a tiny and beautiful and unexpected package who was Issa Grace. Christ's arrival in this little one was the arrival of the food, the robes, the keys that unlock, the drink, the home that I had sought all the world over.

At what point did Issa Grace and I meet? When all the expected cues we find in many relationships for direct communication are "missing", where does the meeting happen? That a necessary meeting of souls happens within the context of Solidarity seems likely and true. But, how do we find kin with one another? How do we recognize each other in the living? That the Corporal works of Mercy--the direct invitation to stepping thru into solidarity--are not one way streets also seems a given and a truth. But we will not find that there are straight, paved or ordered pathways upon which we travel, via which we arrive. Instead, we are placed on even ground, all of us within a circle of a moment of Solidarity. That even ground is where we met, Issa and I—at the doorway to Love and Surrender. As I held her, I was held. We became guest and host, one to the other. What a generous soul that little one. She allowed this eager and bumbling helper in so willingly, it seemed. The Grace was received in the communion-bit by bit. I received within the repeated weekly ritual of having Issa placed into my arms, at 10 p.m., by exhausted and patient and always reluctant- to-give-her-over, loving Papa Sean and, at 2-ish a.m., of the returning of that warm tiny bundle into the eager and expectant and loving arms of Mama Felicia. And in the ritual I came to wonder about the reluctances and eagernesses in our love. How both are doors and windows and boats toward the Holy. And sweet Issa was patient and kind as this "night-time holder" fumbled with the truth of the oars. Thank God for that....for the often patient and ever kindly receivers of our giving.

Receiving was the piece that struck me in all these nights and days. Not receiving goods and riches, though I would consider my Issa nights, my Issa lessons, to be riches indeed. I considered the stars a mercy and a lesson in light, and a lesson in the night sky's capacity for light, its being the playground for light. Light that never fails to still catch me up short, right at my center. So it was with Issa-she could arrive at your center so quickly. She called forth within me a floundering and faint ability to receive that could swell at the behest of Light.



I believe that "my little bird, my I.G.O'B" was the embodied Mercy and Mystery of God. Holding Issa was the recognition of the full and tenacious measure of Love.

There has been such a temptation sometimes for me to presume that my giving is the thing. Issa cracked that open for me-she pulled that curtain open and put forth the Truth

in full light—not that we will receive any gift from God upon our giving, simply because we offered ourselves up or we necessarily deserve it to be so. Rather, we will receive. Full stop. Bidden or unbidden comes the Christ. The Grace in that truth was the awakening to the plain and profound.

I travelled all over the world seeking the Face of Christ only to find Him here, at home....just there, down the street and around the corner....under the cover of Light. The temptation, of course, will be to hold firmly to the initial and immediate lesson of Love in Action—the immediate entrée lesson that gets us hooked—followed by our dedication to the actual work that we do *for* another. If we stay in this spot with Love it truly is okay...there will be riches at the banquet. But lingering long at the table of Love meant that I came to a deeper truth of my attempts at solidarity: sometimes we are the lover and sometimes we are the beloved and mostly we all are, all of us, both.... simultaneously. Solidarity doesn't mean I stand as the knower of truth-it means that what I do know is simply a doorway into God's richest Truth—that we are, all of us, simply “walking each other Home.” (Ram Dass)

Blessings, dear Issa, in your heaven. Say hello to all whom we've loved, all who have loved us, when you see them next. Bless our families, our dear ones and the stranger with a holy light.

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This series of essays represents three different viewpoints, three different genres, from a professor, a mom, and a nurse. Each of us felt called to share the impact of Issa's life on us. In her tiny way, she has called us to more and to less. More of ourselves, of who we're called to be, more openness to God's mystery unfolding in our lives. Less fear of the unknown, less fear of suffering, less focus on ourselves, and our need for independence. This opening to more - God, self, others - creates a living space for solidarity that we have each discovered in unique ways. We hope that these texts might contribute to a better understanding and a deeper appreciation of Issa's life and the gifts of solidarity. May we each bear witness to these gifts with our lives.

Clemens Sedmak came from King's College London to the Center for Social Concerns where he has been Visiting Professor in Catholic Social Tradition from 2015-2017.

Felicia Johnson O'Brien (ND '95) received her MSW from Catholic University in 2003. Since 2008, she has worked at the Center for Social Concerns helping to coordinate the Summer Service Learning Program.

Leslie LeMay Eid (BA, Anthropology/Spanish ND '84; BSN, IU '95) has been a Registered Nurse since 1995. She and her husband, Mansour, raised two children in South Bend, Indiana. Her time with Issa Grace was one of the catalysts to her finally pursuing her dream of volunteer work with Hospice House of Saint Joseph County.