



# nova notes

NOVA Catholic Community

July 2010

## Chair Notes...

We will have another NOVA General Meeting on Saturday, July 10, at which we will try to reach consensus on two of the issues that were not resolved at the June 6 General Meeting: the role of former priests in Community-Led Liturgies (CLL), and the establishment of a designated minister for our CLLs. We will also discuss the kinds of socializing activities NOVA members might enjoy. Teddi or I will send out a detailed agenda before the meeting.

### June 6 Meeting Summary

Thanks to Rosemarie Annunziata for facilitating the meeting in a way that resolved one issue and revealed questions with the other two. The first part of the meeting dealt with the question “Should NOVA do more to attract and retain new and/or young members?” (Mike Timpane will summarize that discussion at a future time.)

There were three liturgical policy proposals. First, the community decided in favor of the proposal that only hierarchically ordained and approved Catholic priests should say Mass at NOVA. However, the community did not reach consensus on the other two policy proposals that relate to who may lead a Community Led Liturgy (CLL). At the March 13, 2010 general meeting, we decided that NOVA will schedule two to four CLLs throughout the year and that the planners may consider whether they wish to invite a guest homilist. The planners are free to give a homily, have no homily, call for silent reflection on the readings, or call for a community dialogue on the readings. We also decided on March 13 that the planners may invite other non-Catholic Christian ministers to take a role in the CLL, presumably including a guest homilist. At the June 6 meeting we asked whether (1) when NOVA

plans a CLL, the community is open to having laicized, married or suspended Catholic priests take a role in the liturgy at the invitation of the planners for that day (presumably including being a guest homilist); and (2) in lieu of the alternate presiders proposed in (1) above and other proposed lists of ad hoc presiders, that a member of the NOVA Community be called forth into a formal ministry – an individual who would be called a “Eucharistic Minister” or “Minister of Communion” and who would preside at the Rite of the Remembrance of the Last Supper. This person would offer a ministry of the word on that occasion, when no priest is available to officiate at Mass. A decision on these two issues is pending.

My impression from the meeting is that we didn’t come to a decision on having former priests take a CLL role because the wording of the proposal included “suspended” and that word raised some people’s concerns. Some suggested that the Chairs should make inquiries as to the reasons in the case of suspended priests who might take a role in a CLL. But it seems to me that, since we already allow the planners to decide on the suitability of non-Catholic Christian ministers to serve as homilists or in any other capacity at a CLL, we should also allow them to decide on the suitability of former priests to take a role in a CLL. However, letting the planners decide is the kind of “democratic” approach to selecting CLL ministers that Warren Reich legitimately questioned in the background discussion he gave us to the second proposal. He referred to a “principle of democratization” by which he meant there are no community-set standards for ministerial roles at a CLL. Warren stated that following this principle of democratization would trivialize the CLL ministerial role. Warren’s proposal stated “in lieu  
*(continued on page 4)*

## July Birthdays

NOVA Message Line	(703) 852-7907
Chairpersons	Tom Clarkson Teddi Ahrens
Treasurer	Joe Formoso
Coordinator, Community Life	Cece Michelotti
Liturgy Coordinator	Jeanne Clarkson
Padre Cadre Coordinator	John Mooney
Music Coordinator	Victoria Robinson
Peace & Justice Coordinators	Dianne Carroll & Marie Keefe
Christ House Coordinator	Kopp Michelotti
Facilities	Glen Passin
Newsletter Editor	Judy Christofferson

The NOVA Catholic Community invites you to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy with us every Sunday in Arlington, Virginia.

**Note:** Our Liturgy is usually celebrated at Kenmore Middle School, Arlington Blvd. and Carlin Springs Rd, Arlington, VA. Beginning Memorial Day weekend up to our Fall Retreat weekend in September, we celebrate at Lacey Woods Park, George Mason Drive near Washington Blvd., unless otherwise noted.

Liturgies at Kenmore begin at 10:15 a.m.  
Gather at 10:00 a.m.  
Liturgies at Lacey Woods begin at 9:30 a.m.  
Gather at 9:15 am

Call the Message Line (above) or check the NOVA website for the latest information.

**August Newsletter Deadline:  
July 26**

1	Bernice Todaro
2	John Cackley Nick Mele
10	Laura Goldschmidt
14	Greg Swanberg
16	John Birch
17	Jennifer Carroll
19	John Veldhuis
20	Joe Nangle, OFM
21	Jody Furlong
28	Scott Christofferson
29	Carolyn Schmidt

*Please send Judy Christofferson your birthday if you would like it to appear here (month/day only).*

### NOVA is praying for. . .

**Bill Callahan**, who is seriously ill. Cards/notes may be sent to his home address, listed in the directory. (See page 4 for further details.)

**Sonja Donahue**, who appreciates a card, a call or a visit.

**Eve Birch**, who is dealing with legal issues.

**Mike Chase**, former active member of the community, who is recovering from a motorcycle accident.

**Jody Furlong**, who would also appreciate a phone call or note.

Remember these and any other NOVA members and their friends and family who need our prayers.

*Happy Independence Day!*

## Liturgies: Cycle C

Inclusive Readings and Music Selections are available in the new NOVA Yahoo Group Files. Please give all music selections to the Music Liaison the Sunday before your liturgy and print **65 copies** of the liturgy program. Liturgies at Kenmore begin at 10:15 a.m. and at 9:30 at Lacey Woods Park.

### July Music Liaison Victoria Robinson

#### July 4 - 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

John Haughey, SJ - Tim White

Isaiah 66: 10-14

Psalm 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20

Galatians 6:14-18

Luke 10: 1-12, 17-20, or 10: 1-9

#### July 11 - 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew Aerthayil, SJ - Gloria Mog

Deuteronomy 30: 10-14

Psalm 69: 14, 17, 30-31, 33-34, 36, 37

Colossians 1: 15-20

Luke 10: 25-37

#### July 18 - 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

John Haughey, SJ - Victoria Robinson

Genesis 18: 1-10

Colossians 1: 24-28

Luke 10: 38-42

#### July 25 - 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jim Coriden - Arabians, Christies, O'Tooles

Genesis 18: 20-32

Psalm 138: 1-2, 2-3, 6-8

Colossians 2: 12-14

Luke 11: 1-13



### August Music Liaison Victoria Robinson

#### August 1 - 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Joe Nangle, OFM - Peggy Meyer

Ecclesiastes 1: 2; 2:21-23

Psalm 90: 3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17

Colossians 3: 1-5, 9-11

Luke 12: 13-21

#### August 8 - 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

John Haughey, SJ - Meg Tuccillo

Wisdom 18: 6-9

Psalm 33: 1, 12, 18, 20-22

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19 or 11: 1-2, 8-12

Luke 12: 32-48 or 12: 35-40

#### August 15 - Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

TBA - Marie Keefe

Revelation 11: 19; 12: 1-6, 10

Psalm 45: 10-12, 16

1 Corinthians 15: 20-27

Luke 1: 39-56

#### August 22 - 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

TBA - Kate Doherty

Isaiah 66: 18-21

Psalm 117: 1, 2

Hebrews 12: 5-7, 11-13

Luke 13: 22-30

#### August 29 - 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Quinn Connors, O.Carm. - Anne Passin

Sirach 3: 17-18, 20, 28-29

Psalm 68: 4-5, 6-7, 10-11

Hebrews 12: 18-19, 22-24

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

*“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”*

~Teilhard

## Continuation of Chair Notes

(Continued from page 1.)

of” and it excluded anyone but the “called forth” Eucharistic Minister from presiding or preaching at a CLL. Therefore, it seems to me that the basic question underlying both proposals is the degree to which our community wants to leave open the planners’ selection of CLL ministers. There are valid concerns on both sides. Too much restriction cuts off potentially wonderful presiders. Too little restriction could degrade the quality of our CLLs. At the meeting, a number of people favored having a well-prepared and community-approved CLL presider. But many people also objected to restricting this role to that person or persons. Some comments were:

- I like the idea of calling forth a specific person, but the CLL that we did on May 30 was beautiful.
- I like the idea of a homilist. I like the idea of this person being available to give advice on the liturgy, CLL or otherwise.
- NOVA is a horizontal, not vertical organization. We decided not to have a pastor so the community could share roles.
- The idea that we need more resources devoted to the CLL makes sense.
- The CLL as it is now, draws out individual members’ talents.
- We need to identify people with the requisite gifts. I’m worried about calling just one person. I would like “multiple talents.”
- NOVA is a lay-led community and any roles are subordinate to the community
- I want no specific (CLL) minister.

Our goal at the July 10 meeting is to decide on where we want to draw the line.

### Communication Issues

Over the past couple of years NOVA has greatly expanded its external communications. Lately several specific questions have arisen such as whether we ought to submit an announcement about NOVA to the Arlington Diocese Peace and Social Justice website (which would be decided at a General Meeting), whether we should run an ad in the “Arlington Connection” neighborhood newspaper (answer: yes), whether we should run a trial ad in *The Washington Post* during Lent along with other IECs (yes), whether

we should expand our internet presence in various ways, and whether we should write an article on IECs for Wikipedia (undecided). Ken Chaison has done most of the legwork in these areas but he wants guidance from our community on how to proceed. Perhaps we should establish a Communications Committee that would decide some things on its own and come to the community on others. Please let me know if you have suggestions on how we as a community can reach decisions on these communication questions.

### American Catholic Council (ACC)

On Sunday, May 30, we took a “straw vote” at the liturgy after informing everyone via email about the ACC. NOVA members confirmed that we are interested in working with PAX, Voice of the Faithful, and other groups who want to co-sponsor a "Listening Session" this fall prior to the Detroit Council in June 2011. The following five people have agreed to serve as a NOVA Coordinating Committee for this project: Rosemarie Annunziata, Peggy Becker, Clyde Christofferson, John Mooney, and John Veldhuis. The American Catholic Council is a movement bringing together a network of individuals, organizations, and communities to consider the state and future of our Church. For more information, visit their website at <http://americancatholiccouncil.org/>.

### Update on Bill Callahan

We continue to keep Bill Callahan in our prayers. Bill is now at a Hospice facility in DC. A calendar has been created on Google where you can sign up for time slots to visit Bill or offer other assistance. If you go to: [google.com/mail](http://google.com/mail) and sign in with the user name "careforbill" and the password "callahan" you will get into the account. Then click on "calendar" at the top of the page, and you can view (and add to) the calendar. This way you can check time slots when visitors/volunteers are needed against your availability. If you just want to visit Bill for a few minutes, you don't have to put it on the calendar.

Many thanks to Marie Keefe for providing us with updates on Bill's condition.

~ Tom Clarkson, Co-Chair

## Volunteer Opportunities and Community Life

### Gunston Volunteers Needed

Nova volunteers distribute bags of non-perishable food, cereal provided by Nova, and perishable items such as eggs, milk, and meat that are picked up at the Arlington Food Assistance Center warehouse on the night of distribution. Produce items are picked up every other week by Eric Carroll at the produce markets downtown (and funded by the Nova Peace and Justice budget). The distribution takes place at the Gunston Middle School Recreation Center in Arlington. Many volunteers have been active in this project for a lot of years. Every Thursday has already a seasoned volunteer so this is your chance to try out your skills for the summer. Having someone who speaks Spanish is a real plus for each of the teams. **Please help.** If you are interested in being a volunteer, email Dianne Carroll: [diacarroll@comcast.net](mailto:diacarroll@comcast.net)

#### July Gunston Schedule:

**July 1: Don/Ann A., James H.**  
**July 8: Eric, Marie K., 1 needed**  
**July 15: Don A., Mike Kane + 1 Kane**  
**July 22: Syd, Glen**  
**July 29: Tim, Jerry**

### Arlington Food Assistance Center

AFAC is seeking volunteers for the following:  
**Weekly grocery distribution** - In July, AFAC will begin distributing groceries at a retirement community in South Arlington. One or more volunteers are needed to help on Monday mornings from 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. (6-month commitment). Email [puwen.lee@afac.org](mailto:puwen.lee@afac.org) for more information.  
**Picking crops** – at local farms and orchards. Email Susan Calligari at [masoncal@mac.com](mailto:masoncal@mac.com) for further details.  
**Summer Teen Program** - From 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. each weekday during the summer, teens (ages 14 or older) volunteer in AFAC's warehouse and office. Teens may sign up to volunteer one or two mornings per week. AFAC is flexible so teens can fit their volunteering in around other activities. The contact is Laura Jackson, whose email is [masoncal@mac.com](mailto:masoncal@mac.com).

### Ignatian Volunteer Corps

The Ignatian Volunteer Corps (IVC) is a national organization of men and women who volunteer in their local community two days a week. They share their talents and life experiences with organizations that directly assist the materially poor or that address structural issues related to poverty. If you are interested in volunteering with the IVC, contact the IVC/Northern Virginia Regional Director at 703-533-1897 and/or see [www.ivcusa.org](http://www.ivcusa.org). Information sessions will be organized at your convenience.

### NOVA Community Life Ministry

As we begin our summer months and try to cope with the heat – by trying to keep cool or vacationing, staying healthy, working hard, let us be mindful of one another: Is there someone you haven't seen for awhile and you might have wondered to yourself how she/he is doing? Is there someone who might really love to get a note from you? A card? A visit? Take a moment this month to connect with someone who means something to you. Let's remember to minister to one another. Especially, keep in your thoughts and prayers those on the newsletter Prayer List.

#### July 4<sup>th</sup> Invitation

On another note, the Michelottis invite anyone who is celebrating the upcoming holiday in the area to stop by their home after the liturgy on the July 4<sup>th</sup> to celebrate. They will provide burgers, hot dogs, and drinks. You might bring snacks or salads to share and a lot of good will.

Please call and let them know you'll be stopping by so they will have enough burgers/hot dogs ready just for you.

~ Cece Michelotti



## Upcoming Events: Save the Dates

### General Meeting

**Date:** Saturday, July 10

**Time:** 7:00-9:00 p.m.

**Location:** The Barrett's Party Room  
200 N. Maple Ave., Falls Church, VA

**Please bring finger foods to share.**

**(See Chair Notes, page 1, for the agenda.)**

### Bread for the World Speaker

Marco Grimaldo, Regional Organizer for Bread for the World (BFW), is joining NOVA for the liturgy on August 1. He will speak to us after the liturgy about this year's Offering of Letters campaign to protect important tax policies that help low-income, working families. BFW members and churches are asking Congress to support provisions of Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit that enable low income workers to feed themselves and their families. Concluding his presentation, we will have a chance to join in this nationwide effort by writing to our own representatives in Congress. For more information about Bread for the World, visit [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)

~ Peggy Meyer, BFW contact person for NOVA

### American Catholic Council (ACC)

The Chair Notes (page 4) refer to the upcoming ACC conference on **June 10-12, 2011**. All are invited to attend Council to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Vatican II, at the Detroit Convention Center and Marriott Renaissance Center. More information about the conference is available at [www.americancatholiccouncil.org](http://www.americancatholiccouncil.org). If you register by **July 31, 2010**, the cost is lower. If you have questions about this event, please contact Gloria at [gloriamog@verizon.net](mailto:gloriamog@verizon.net).

### Registration for Annual Retreat

NOVA's annual retreat will take place September 17-19, at Shrinemont, in Orkney Springs, Virginia. A committee is working to develop a program for the weekend, which may include an outside facilitator. Because some of the details are still up in the air, the cost for the weekend has not yet been determined. However, NOVA members may reserve their spots at Shrinemont now by calling Kopp Michelotti . You may leave a message at that number with the names of all individuals for whom you are reserving space and the ages of all children/teenagers. Alternatively, you may e-mail Kopp at [koppmich@yahoo.com](mailto:koppmich@yahoo.com) with names of all participants and ages of all young people. We'll keep you posted as details firm up, including cost. ~ Kopp Michelotti

### Franciscan Missionary Service: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration

**Date/Time:** Saturday, October 23, 7:00 p.m.

**Location:** Trinity College Center, 125 Michigan Avenue Northeast, Washington, DC 20017

This event will include a silent auction, live band, and a social hour with wine and hors d'oeuvres. The keynote speaker will be Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province. He is widely known for his spiritual writing and lecturing. He currently serves as the Director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque. For further details, the website is [www.franciscanmissionservice.org](http://www.franciscanmissionservice.org). **Note:** NOVA has reserved two tables (8 persons per table). **Please register with Marie Pinho if you plan to attend.**

### Handicapped Encounter Christ Retreat

The next HEC Retreat will be the week-end of October 8-10. Bill Meyer will have raffle tickets available. For more information, please contact Bill at [billpegm@aol.com](mailto:billpegm@aol.com)

## Peace and Social Justice Proposals and Thank You Letter

### PEACE and JUSTICE PROJECT PROPOSALS – Ready for You to Read

The Nova Peace and Justice Committee (PSJ) received five proposals to be considered by the community. Committee members have read all the proposals and requested clarification where needed. Now they are ready for all of Nova to read. You can ask clarification questions by clicking on the email link at the end of each proposal on the website. We are asking that you complete this part of the process in three weeks, by July 24. There will be a general meeting in August (we hope) which will be announced later. Click on the link below to access the website:

<http://novacommunity.wikispaces.com>

PSJ Committee: Dianne Carroll/Marie Keefe, co-chairs; Joe Annunziata, Eric Carroll, Cece Michelotti, Kopp Michelotti, Cathy Showalter, Meg Tuccillo, John Veldhuis, Tim White

### Thank You Letter

*May, 2010*

*Dear Carolyn and Nova Community:*

*Greetings of peace and joy to each one of you from this corner of the world. I came to Nairobi on Friday and I got your letter with the check for \$200.00 addressed to Comboni Sisters. Thank you very much, I already gave it to the sister administrator to cash it.*

*I came to Nairobi to do some shopping for the women's program, for the school and for the community. The school will start the new scholastic year the coming week and all of us are very excited. The women's program is doing very well, even though some women have stopped coming to the program because they have to go out to the countryside to prepare the land for planting (the rainy season will be arriving soon). The kindergarten also will soon be open and we are very happy for that. God willing, in a month or two, we will be moving to our permanent building. We really hope to move in before the rains start.*

*The results of the last month elections are not yet out and people are not happy for the way it was done. We pray and wait for the coming Referendum in 2011. May God direct and guide the leaders to act justly.*

*I will return on Saturday to Leer via Juba. I pray for all Nova members and thank God for your love and generosity to us. Blessings and good wishes for the summer.*

*A big hug, con carino, Adriana*

***How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because some day in life you will have been all of these.***

*~ George Washington Carver*

## June 2010 Liturgy Photos



May 30<sup>th</sup> Community-Led Liturgy



Baby Marie Christofferson with other  
Nova Community Maries



Fr. Joe Kenna with Marie



Teddi and Tom 2010 NOVA Chairs at June 13<sup>th</sup> Investiture



Some of Nova's dads being blessed on Father's Day



Nancy and John renew their wedding vows

# Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2010

## Part 2: From Kindness to Social Justice

### C. Kindness Writ Upon the Social Fabric

Spring is a time of new life, and old habits. One of our old habits is the annual ritual of putting the umbrella in its place in the round table on the deck. The ritual includes connecting a cable that runs under the deck. A blue jay flew out from an eave under the deck, alighted on a tree branch nearby and chirped wildly as if to say “come after me!”

And then I saw why. There was a nest under the eave. The distressed mother thought I might have an interest in her eggs, and sought to distract me. I was delighted to observe nature at work, and fancied that I might have protected this bird’s nest had the opportunity presented itself. We are kindred spirits, I thought, as the blue jay chirped away.

Life is full of kindred spirits. There is a story – I think taken from the book *When Elephants Weep* by Jeffrey Masson – about a rhinoceros mother in distress because her calf was caught in mud at a river bank. Adding to her distress, a herd of elephants approached. The lead female elephant came to the river bank and reached out her trunk to pull the calf out of the mud. The mother rhino did not react well, fearing the worst. But the other elephants blocked the rhino from charging while the rescue continued.

Nature, of course, is not all sweetness and light. Far from it. The blue jay and the rhino each had responses for protecting their young against predators, responses which, over the course of evolution, had acquired the status of habit. After the successful rescue of her calf, perhaps the rhino had a sense of kindred spirit with the elephant.

The mixed blessings of nature are evident in the details of our human condition as well, although we tend to see human failings rather than the unfolding of nature in the workings of society. I watched a Ken Burns’ film about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and the long struggle leading to the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment giving women the right to vote. In the early days of the struggle advocates looked to the “equal protection” clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and challenged the law in order to bring a case to the Supreme Court. Anthony actually voted in Rochester NY, because the local registrars allowed her to do so, but then she was tried and convicted of casting a vote

unlawfully. But she never paid the \$100 fine imposed, and the authorities did not push the matter against such a notable figure as Susan B. Anthony.

But in Missouri, a woman was denied registration, and brought suit on that account under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Hopes within the suffrage movement were high. But the Supreme Court ruled against the would-be Missouri voter on the ground that registration to vote was not established by the Constitution but rather was a matter for the states. Whereupon southern states proceeded to use registration restrictions to disenfranchise black males, the very group whose right to vote was explicitly protected by the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment. There was a painful irony in this sad outcome, because gender had been deliberately excluded from the language of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in order to assure that black males would be able to vote.

Change comes slowly. What is right and kind and just – hope for “kindred spirits” – does not always prevail, at least not at first. Women did not obtain the right to vote until fifty years after the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment. When we use the term “Darwinian” to describe evolution, the reference is to biological change. But the history of change in the cosmos is much larger than biology. Viewed from that larger perspective, biological change is a relative latecomer to a progression that begins with physics. And why would we suppose that biology is the end of this progression? There are kindred spirits all around us, ready and willing to help make this world a better place. As the habits of the blue jay and the rhino imply, of course, the hope for kindred spirits – that the lion may lie down with the lamb – is a cosmic work in progress. It is an aspiration that is “present” sometimes, but more often “not yet.”

These are the signs of the times. Something more than biology is afoot in the land, but the scope of change viewed from the cosmic perspective suggests that “kindred spirits” – brought together by kindness – are part of a cosmic drama still unfolding. Kindness is all around us, although the lion often has its way with the lamb. The lion may have its way but, ever so slowly, hope for “kindred spirits” becomes an

expectation that fills the air, seeking to crowd out the harshness and unkindness to which some of our lions have become habituated.

Kindness is the cousin of the cosmic background radiation that came to the stage much earlier. The cosmic background radiation has told us much, and continues to tell us more, about the origin and composition of the universe. It is a very big universe, with tens of billions of galaxies each with trillions of stars. And the cosmos is what scientists call “isotropic” – no matter where you look, no matter how distant, you will find essentially the same stuff. The cosmic background we see here on planet Earth provides a window on the Big Bang, and that window is the same everywhere. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the progression to sentient life – and more – is simply a part of the unfolding of the cosmos. This unfolding is “isotropic” throughout an expanse that is so vast as to beggar the imagination.

If that is what the cosmic background radiation tells us, what do “kindred spirits” tell us? They also tell us that we are not alone, but in a more immediate and palpable sense. Furthermore, these kindred spirits provide examples and models. What we see *resonates* deep in our heart. Amid the storm, something good makes its presence felt.

Not that we can wish away the storm. Not all spirits are kindred. The lamb and the lion are wary bedfellows. Where is goodness – this something that makes its presence felt – going? Wouldn’t it have been easier just to get there – to have been put there – rather than suffer through this cosmic journey? That is an inquiry – about pain and suffering – for another day.

For now, we have kindred spirits and we have change. Change has a history, and we can call this history “cosmic evolution.” There is a physics perspective on this history, going back to the Big Bang. There is a chemistry perspective on this history, which overlaps with the physics perspective that began earlier, and serves as a preface for a biological perspective that began later. All these perspectives are continuing, and further perspectives await our experience.

Indeed, without our inquisitive minds we would have none of these perspectives. From a strictly chronological point of view, since the sciences of physics, chemistry and biology were some time in coming, human history itself was probably first to benefit from human inquiry and a sensible

arrangement of the evidence. Stories of the tribe were passed on orally at first, using the metrics of poetry as memory aids. Written language made possible not simply transmission of accumulated knowledge and wisdom but a more efficient and reliable accumulation of what prior generations had learned. Learning and understanding became collective activities, enabling succeeding generations to build upon what had gone before. This attribute of human society has been called “collective learning.”

We take for granted that the individual human being is able to reflect upon the self, examine past behavior and resolve to do better. It is less obvious how this works with respect to social structures and institutions that have developed over time. Where is collective learning? Our institutions seem to learn more slowly than we do as individuals, at least about how to be “kindred spirits.”

Machiavelli thought he was simply describing current political realities in *The Prince*, but he was roundly criticized by his contemporaries for accepting statecraft as it is and failing to hold a torch for what it ought to be. There is something in the human spirit that calls for what is right even though politics does not deliver. A few hundred years later Frederick II of Prussia wrote an idealistic paper opposing the guidance provided by Machiavelli, yet his behavior as King of Prussia seemed to fit the Machiavellian model, as noted by Voltaire.

There is something Darwinian about how our social and political institutions behave. In nature we understand why the lamb does not lie down with the lion. The lion is hungry and the lamb is food. It is nature, after all. We do not really expect nature to be otherwise. But does not Machiavelli’s *Prince* reflect the same expectation? Our institutions appear to evolve as animals evolve, with the prize of survival going to the most powerful and the fleetest of foot, as Darwin taught.

But is that forever? Is our individual sense of “kindred spirits” in vain? Or is it just a matter of patience – agonizingly frustrating patience. A cosmic perspective is all well and good, but does not the cosmos unfold too slowly to provide much hope for the present?

Actually, no. There is reason to hope that the pace is picking up. Look more carefully at the implications of “collective learning.” Clearly, the pace of science and technological change has been rapidly accelerating. But the relative success of

science should not blind us to the considerable growth in our understanding of our social and political institutions.

One emblematic example will suffice. There was a time in the not too distant past when kings were believed to rule by divine right. Rule by a monarch seemed a fixture of nature, whether justified by the practical reason of Hobbes or the concern of the Church for stability. In any case, it was the accepted wisdom. Several revolutions – our own included – served as a test of more democratic forms. There was enough hope kindled by these tests, whether or not the tests always proved successful, that today popular determination of governmental forms is the preferred norm.

The lesson here is not that universal democracy is a proper objective, but rather that our institutions have been evolving. Machiavelli was simply being descriptive, and “collective learning” had not in his time made enough progress to offer “kindred spirits” much relief.

It is at this point that the scope of cosmic evolution is, at least, suggestive. It is fair to see raw power as the driving rationale for statecraft at the time of *The Prince*. Although everyday kindnesses undoubtedly played a role in the society that existed below the level of statecraft, kind princes did not often survive. We needn't mimic Pollyanna to go to the next step. The next step is not sweetness and light. The next step is simply a general recognition that our current institutions have a mixed heritage, and that we are becoming more capable of evaluating and reforming these institutions. These institutions often have a pedigree that traces their practices and functions to the service of power, or whatever else was conducive to survival when these practices and functions evolved. We are becoming better able to reflect upon the now accepted structures of these institutions and ask how they can be changed to serve the ends of justice rather than of power. We can ask these questions because these structures are not untouchable – as if they were the work of God or nature – but are human constructions that can be evaluated and reformed.

And this is precisely what Pope Leo XIII did in encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 with respect to societal institutions affecting labor. Challenging institutions that generally operated to provide a more stable society was something of a novelty for the institutional Church, but the line of teaching begun

with *Rerum Novarum* and affirmed several times since (most recently in John Paul II's *Centessimus Annus* in 1991) has persisted. This is the Catholic social teaching we call “Social Justice.”

It is a worthy and challenging project. Pollyanna need not apply. This is not the errant idea of crackpot “do-gooders” tilting at *realpolitik* windmills. It is more fundamental, reflecting kindness being writ upon the social fabric.

We are only beginning along this road, and have much to learn about how evaluation and reform works. In the terms of cosmic evolution, we are looking for mechanisms or processes which are reliable and stable. We have not yet found them. It is no accident that social justice is the Church's “best kept secret.”

There are some interesting experiments that can be construed as searching for such mechanisms or processes. David Mog told us about *AmericaSpeaks*, which has for several years been promoting a methodology for sustained citizen engagement and public deliberation. Click [here](#) for further information. David recently participated as a table captain in Philadelphia, one of 19 cities across the country where citizens discussed what to do about the federal budget.

Several NOVA and PAX members are participating in “listening sessions” leading up to a conference scheduled for June 2011 in Detroit under the auspices of the American Catholic Council. The conference will have keynote addresses by a number of figures including Hans Kung and Joan Chittister. Click [here](#) for further information.

In the broad context of cosmic evolution, the notion that our institutions may have a history and baggage from times when practices and structures evolved more in response to power than to justice provides not only an understanding of the way we were but insight into how we can be better, more accommodating to “kindred spirits.” Church social teaching is a marker in the historical sand.

And this marker inevitably leads to evaluation and reform of this Church of ours, which is – after all – an institution. Vatican II may be understood as part of that reform. But there is more to come, surely, as we develop stable and reliable mechanisms for evaluation and reform of institutions generally.

How might such developments affect the structure and practices of a 2000 year old institution?

More on that next time.