

Christ in a Covid World: Lessons from the Ship's Hold

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"Boys this is my church! And if you don't think Christ is down here on the waterfront you've got another guess coming"

– Karl Malden as Father Barry

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I spend my weekends watching old movies on television. They help to interrupt what for me has become a "life of blur" in our cloistered covid world.

Old movies are important because they withstand the test of time. They represent visual and sonic archives that we are invited to return to time and time again to relive and remember teachings that feed us: intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. One such film is *On the Waterfront* – released in 1954 – directed by Elia Kazan and written by Budd Schulberg. *On the Waterfront* tells the story of violence and corruption in the complex world of longshoremen in Hoboken, New Jersey.

I am happy to report that I had the opportunity to rewatch *On the Waterfront* this past weekend.

Beyond Marlon Brando's academy award winning performance as Terry Malloy, Karl Malden as Fr. Barry always stirs and moves me because he models a priest who lives the gospel of Christ by standing side-by-side with his people embracing a religion that is lived and practiced beyond the four walls of the parish church. I am reminded of Fr. Leo Davis (1938-1988) of the San Diego Roman Catholic Diocese and Chaplin of the Cardijn Center who dedicated his life to advancing the church's principles of social justice. I also think of Fr. Victor Salandini, Fr. Leo's mentee and Padre Juan Romero, a close friend and personal mentor; priests who dedicated themselves to living the Catholic teaching of *Rerum Novarum* by standing with farmworkers in the fields as they struggled for equitable wages and the right to unionize. All were part of a larger transnational chorus proclaiming the "Church Are the People!" or "¡Que La Iglesia Es El Pueblo!"

Father Barry's character is based on the life of the Jesuit Priest John M. Corridan who was born in New York City in 1911. Ordained in 1945, [Fr. Corridan](#) was appointed associate director of the Xavier Institute of Labor Relations and between 1946-1948 came to recognize the "harbor as

his parish” where he gave voice and bore witness to the indignity and oppression of the ordinary dockworker. He would become known as the “Waterfront Priest.” Playing Fr. Corridan’s alter ego, Malden provides a compelling performance that takes place in the ship’s hold where the dockworker, Kayo Dugan has been crushed to death by a load of whiskey in an “accident” staged by the mob. According to Schulberg, this scene constitutes the [Soul](#) of the film. It led the film’s writer to proclaim that the ministry of Corridan was the closest he “ever came to feeling what true Christianity was all about.”

Living in quarantine affords us the opportunity to deeply reflect. I find myself thinking about how *On the Waterfront* has much to teach us about our current covid crisis. We currently find ourselves like the longshoreman of Hoboken, New Jersey - relegated to a ship’s hold under the yoke of something more powerful than us. Unlike mob extortion and pilferage that dominated workers on the waterfront, today our focus is on a transnational virus that strikes at the core of our human existence. Some choose to describe it as “invisible” while others see it as a diabolical premediated plan concocted by “foreigners” to destroy our status as a superpower.

Our current challenge cries out for a Fr. Barry to join us in the ship’s hold and to guide us onto the right path. Sadly, I don’t see it in our current commander in chief. Unlike the collective vision that grounded and guided the bold Catholic priests from our past, our current leadership is trapped in a world guided by solipsism. Yet, we cannot overlook that the desperately needed compassion and empathy in this time of crisis is coming from our governors who were influenced and shaped by Roman Catholic education. In fact, recently, while speaking on how best to deal with this pandemic, the governor of California drew from the Roman Catholic value that we are “many parts but one body” that he learned under the tutelage of Fr. Richard Coz, a professor of economics at Santa Clara University. We must also seek guidance beyond a male-centric narrative. We cannot forget that the character Edie Doyle (played by Academy Award winning actor Eve Marie Saint) chastised Fr. Barry and obliged him to step outside the comforts of his church by asking him: “Did you ever hear of a saint hiding in a church?” Like Edie, the church is comprised of countless Roman Catholic nuns and lay personnel who bore witness in times of crisis. We must look to them because they have much to teach us!

The time has come for us to reflect.

I close with a quote from Fr. Barry who stands besides us in the ship’s hold during these troubled times:

“You want to know what’s wrong with our waterfront?.... It’s forgetting that every [person] down here is your [sister and] brother in Christ....remember Christ is always with you. Christ is in the shape-up, he’s in the hatch, he’s in the union hall, he’s kneeling right here.... And he’s saying to all of you: “if you do it to the least of mine you do it to me.”

