



CENTER FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES

TO: WBC AND MICAH PARTICIPANTS
FROM: MONSIGNOR RICHARD M. LIDDY
SUBJECT: TWO CRITICAL SOCIAL ISSUES
DATE: MARCH, 2016

- Welcome and Self-Introductions
- Woodstock Business Conference Mission Statement
 - The Mission of the Woodstock Business Conference is to establish and lead a national and international network of business executives to explore their respective religious traditions in order to assist the individual executives:
 - To integrate faith, family and professional life,
 - To develop a corporate culture that is reflective of their religious faith and values and
 - To exercise a beneficial influence upon society at large
 - The Conference, grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, welcomes believers who are open to and respectful of one another's religious tradition. It is committed to the conviction that ethics and values grow out of one's religious heritage.

- **Scripture Reading:** Jeremiah, 32, 26-44

Then this word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: I am the Lord, the God of all mankind! Is anything impossible to me? This now is what the Lord says: I will hand over this city to the Chaldeans, for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to take. The Chaldeans who are attacking it shall enter this city and set fire to it, burning it and its houses, on the roofs of which incense was burned to Baal and libations were poured out to strange gods as a provocation to me.

The Israelites and the Judeans from their youth have done only what is evil in my eyes; the Israelites did nothing but provoke me with the works of their hands, says the Lord. From the day

it was built to this day, this city has excited my anger and wrath so that I must put it out of my sight for all the wickedness the Israelites and the Judeans, with their kings and their princes, their priests and their prophets, the men of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem, have done to provoke me.

They turned their backs to me, not their faces; though I kept teaching them, they would not listen to my correction. They defiled the house named after me by the horrid idols they set up in it. They built high places to Baal the Valley of Benhinnom, and immolated their sons and daughters to Molech, bringing sin upon Judah, this I never commanded them, nor did it even enter my mind that they should practice such abominations.

Now therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning this city, which as you say is handed over to the king of Babylon amid sword, famine, and pestilence: Behold, I will gather them together from all the lands to which in anger, wrath, and great rage I banish them; I will bring them back to this place and settle them here in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God. One heart and one way I will give them, that they fear me always, to their own good and that of their children after them.

I will make them an eternal covenant, never to cease doing good to them; into their hearts I will put the fear of me, that they never depart from me. I will take delight in doing good to them: I will replant them firmly in this land, with all my heart and soul. For thus says the Lord: Just as I brought upon this people all this great evil, so I will bring upon them all the good I promise them.

Fields shall again be brought to this land, which you call a desert without man or beast, handed over to the Chaldeans. Fields shall be bought with money, deeds written and sealed, and witnesses shall be used in the land of Benjamin, in the suburbs of Jerusalem, in the cities of Judah and of the hill country, in the cities of the foothills and of the Negeb, when I change their lot, says the Lord.

- **Quiet Reflection:**
- **1st Reading: Bloomberg BusinessWeek**

“No Cheers When Walmart Packs Up” Feb. 2016 Issue

The Town ‘n Country grocery in Oriental, N.C., a local fixture for 44 years, closed its doors in October, unable to compete with a Walmart Express. Three months later- and less than two years after the Walmart arrived- the retail giant is pulling out, leaving Oriental with no grocery store and no pharmacy.

Mom-and-pop stores have steadily disappeared from many small communities across America over the past three decades as Walmart Stores methodically expanded. Now many of the Walmarts are disappearing, too, as part of the giant chain’s plan to shutter 269 outlets worldwide, leaving some towns with no grocery stores at all.

“I was devastated when I found out,” says Barb Venturi, mayor pro tem for Oriental, a retirement and summer vacation town along the intercoastal waterway with a population of about 900. Before the big retailer’s arrival, “we had a pharmacy and a perfectly satisfactory grocery store; maybe Walmart sold apples for a nickel less,” she says. Now, “if you take into account what no longer having a grocery store does to property values here, it is a significant impact for us.”

Walmart said on Jan. 15 it will close all 102 of its small Express stores, many in rural or isolated towns, to focus on its supercenters and midsize Neighborhood Markets. As recently as 2014 the company touted the solid performance of its smaller stores and announced plans to open an additional 90. Now the residents of Oriental are looking at a 50-minutes round-trip drive to the nearest grocery and pharmacy.

Walmart says it’s sensitive to the dislocations and its decisions are causing. “in towns impacted by store closures, we have had hundreds of conversations with elected officials and community leaders to discuss relevant issues, and we are working with communities on how we can be helpful,” says company spokesman Brian Nick.

The chain has been increasing pressure as sales in the U.S. have failed to keep up with the rising labor costs. It’s also spending more on Web operations. In October it forecast that profit in 2016 would fall as much as 12 percent. The outlook helped fuel a 29 percent drop in its share price in the last 12 months. “It is more important now than ever to review our portfolio and close the stores and clubs that should be closed,” Chief Executive Officer Doug McMillan said, in a statement on the company’s website.

That’s why Oriental’s plight isn’t unique. In Godley, Texas, with a population of roughly 1000 Walmart opened a store just a year ago. Within months, the the only other grocery store- a Brookshire Brothers, part of an employee-owned regional chain- shuts its doors. With Walmart gone, the closest full-service grocery store is about a 20-minute drive away.

Some closed businesses may return to towns where Walmart is shutting down. In Merkel, Texas, the Lawrence Brothers Supermarkets store, which closed about two months ago, plans to reopen now that Walmart is leaving, says Jay Lawrence, head of the regional chain in Texas and New Mexico.

Residents of Oriental, where some city officials originally tried to block Walmart from opening, are hoping for a similar outcome. But for now, the damage has been done, they say. Renee Ireland Smith, who ran Town ‘n Country, says sales immediately fell by 30 percent after Walmart opened in May 2014. Whenever her store cut prices, Walmart would reduce its prices even more.

Smith’s mother, who owned the store, invested \$100,000 of her savings into the doomed effort to rescue the store. By October 2015, the family decided to cut its losses and close the business. “They ruined our lives,” says Smith of Walmart. “They came in here with their experiment and ruined us.” ---- . The bottom line Walmart will close 102 of its small Express stores. That may please investors but leave some rural towns without grocers.

- **2nd Reading:**
- ***Sports Illustrated. “Troubled Water” February 1, 2016 Michael Rosenberg***

When the people of Flint, Mich, learned they would get their water from the town’s eponymous river, they thought: That river? “If you walk by, the river stinks,” says former NFL receiver Courtney Hawkins, a Flint native who now coaches at a high school there. “The river is nasty looking. Just the smell-and-the-look test a person not being from here would be--- like---, ‘I know good and well they’re not hooking up from here’. We were in disbelief.”

For decades, Flint purchased a portion of its water supply from Detroit, but in 2014 the financially strapped city stopped and began drawing water from the river-without using corrosion control to prevent lead from seeping from ancient pipes carrying water into people’s homes. But the change saved some money, and who would notice, anyway?

Flint, where the poverty rate is 41.5% and 56.6% of the population is African American, is the America that most of America hides from itself. Hawkins caught 366 passes over nine NFL seasons, the last in 2000. He started coaching at Flint’s Beecher High in ‘06 for a simple reason: Kids in his hometown needed him.

He emphasized academics and instilled discipline and won games, and he tried to be a dam against the decline of a city that has seen its population fall 20% in the last 15 years. In ‘09, at the nadir of its economic downturn, Flint’s unemployment rate was almost 30%. (It is now 9.7%, still nearly twice the national average.) All around the city, lawn signs tout home-alarm systems, even at houses with no alarms. Many residents can’t afford the alarm, just the sign. They hope it deters burglars. As Hawkins says, “You gotta do what you gotta do.”

These are the people the government was “serving” when it connected to the Flint River. The first boil-water advisory came in August 2014, long before the water crisis became a national story. The *Detroit Free Press* reported in October ‘14 that General Motors pulled an engine plant off the river feed because the water was corroding its parts. The city kept using it. The water was not good enough for a Cadillac, but it was fine for a child.

Hawkins is fortunate; his home and his school are in the Beecher district, which uses a separate water source. One of his assistant coaches, Frank Gause, is not so lucky. Gause saw disturbing particles in his water and a brown film on his bathtub after he showered. His daughter’s skin got “dry” and “ashy”. He saw open fire hydrants spilling brown water into the streets, “but [the city] hadn’t said, ‘Don’t drink the water’ yet”

Now Gause sees the fallout of a government-ordered catastrophe. He gets bottled water delivered, but not enough. And he shakes his head at his water bill, which has more than doubled since the switch. “This wouldn’t happen in a more affluent county or city, “ Hawkins says. “The unemployment rate, the poverty, it’s almost as if people looked at the city as if it didn’t really matter.

Nobody should have to live like that in the United States of America.” The extent of the physical damage-lead-contaminated water can lead to brain and kidney damage and learning disabilities in kids- won’t be fully understood for years. But the crisis is another blow to the city, another devaluing of Flint lives. You want to see the ripple effect?

Try persuading high school kids who have been drinking leaded water that their country will give them a fair shot. As a football coach and athletic director, Hawkins tries to teach skills that will help students build better lives for themselves. “The biggest challenge is changing mind-sets,” says Hawkins. “[Kids} start to make what they see into their reality: [They think} this is the best we can do.”

Hawkins, 46 and Gause, 47, are old enough to have known a different Flint. They grew up there when the auto plants were thriving, citizens could reasonably expect to pay a mortgage and high school kids could find a reason to hope. “Thirty years ago was a different life around here, “

Gause says. “Now it’s close to being a ghost town.” You want to believe Flint can be someplace again, but then you turn on the faucet and it hits you: If you can’t afford an alarm, it never goes off.

● **Be Attentive** : In Lent we usually do a personal assessment and we might recognize personal sin.

The readings today could evoke reflection on social sin that is a more systematic look that invites us not to look for guilty parties to blame but to understand how we can become more conscious of the larger systems that impact our lives and the lives of our communities. As you read the readings what feelings did the articles evoke? Were they different from WalMart to Flint? What came to mind? Any personal stories?

● **Be Intelligent** : What were the flash judgments that you made as you read the articles? What analysis do you bring to each case? Who are the key stakeholders? How were decisions made? How do we understand the ecological and economic issues present in both cases? How can Catholic Social Teaching inform our conversation?

● **Be Reasonable** : How do we move past finding fault, scapegoating, and continuing business as usual? How would we create a dialogue that would see and address the larger issues at play, what assumptions need to be challenged what possibilities need to be envisioned and acted upon?

● **Be Responsible** : Who bears responsibility in these cases? What are the social and systemic implications? How will the conversation today impact you and your work? Discuss your thoughts, strategies and actions.

Closing Prayer: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without