

*By Doug Davidson*

# The Mysterious Journey of Barbara Green

*Our 2016 Sarlo Award winner discusses theological education, diversity at the GTU, and the joys of writing*

**D**r. Barbara Green, O.P., first heard about the Graduate Theological Union in 1964, when she entered the Dominican Convent in San Rafael, California, to begin her training to become a religious sister. “The priest who taught us would come in and, instead of focusing on Saint Thomas or whatever was scheduled for that day, he’d talk about this exciting new project up in Berkeley where Catholics and Protestants were working together.”

Dr. Green, or Sister Barbara as she’s known by many students, couldn’t have imagined then how intertwined her life’s journey would become with this “new project” up on the hill in Berkeley. Sitting in the convent that day, Green says she had “no idea where she was headed.” She didn’t know her order would send her to the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley six years later to pursue an MA in Biblical Studies, or that she’d go on to earn a doctorate in Near Eastern Studies through a joint program offered by the GTU and the University of California, Berkeley. She didn’t expect that, after five years as a high-school teacher and twelve years teaching undergraduates at Dominican University, she’d return to the GTU to become a professor of Biblical Studies at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology. And Barbara Green couldn’t have imagined that, after nearly a quarter century teaching at the GTU, she’d receive the GTU’s 2016 Sarlo Excellence in Teaching Award, honoring her interreligious commitment, interdisciplinary approach, sensitivity to diversity, and creative and effective pedagogy.

Green believes the diversity of the GTU community creates great opportunities for broadening the perspective of her students. As Professor of Biblical Studies at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, she teaches classes in Hebrew Bible at all



levels, as well as some New Testament classes. She enjoys the challenges of working with students across the consortium: “Bible has always been an area at the GTU where students can really explore, where there’s less need for students to take classes at their own particular school.” This means diverse classrooms, and dialogue that touches on the real issues and conflicts that shape our world.

Dr. Green believes it’s essential that people of faith learn to dialogue respectfully across religious traditions without setting aside their own commitments. “Openness to other traditions doesn’t mean individuals aren’t committed to their own tradition, or that they won’t continue to live it very intentionally. But we can all do that without denying other groups a place at the table.”

“I really enjoy opening up the ears of my Christian students to how critical the Hebrew Bible is for understanding the New Testament,” Green says. “That’s my favorite part of the interreligious work I do, helping Christians see how much richer their understanding of the New Testament can be when we acknowledge its Hebrew Bible roots.” She acknowledges that there’s “a lot to do there,” because students may be unaware of how anti-Jewish attitudes have shaped the Christian tradition or their own thinking. In a recent New Testament course, she sought to help students understand how “powerfully present the Hebrew Bible

and the feasts of the Jewish calendar year are in the Gospel of John.” Acknowledging that some passages of that Gospel “sound very anti-Jewish,” she sought to help students “adjust their ears” to better understand the context in which they were written. “We can understand that in the first century, Judaism was beleaguered because of the Romans; their temple had been destroyed.” This history provides a context that can help offer a “structure of understanding” around first-century Judaism.

Dr. Green celebrates how the strong Jewish presence at the GTU through its Center for Jewish Studies “challenges Christians to learn a lot of things we might not have otherwise learned.” She also remembers the early conversations, some fifteen years ago, that preceded the GTU’s establishment of the Center for Islamic Studies in 2007. “Every time a new tradition is added to the GTU,” says Green, “we all have to re-examine where we are on a host of issues.” This is both one of the beauties and the tensions of the GTU today. “We sometimes think we’ve got it solved, but it’s always challenging.”

Over her quarter century on the GTU faculty, Green has seen changes in both the student population and the educational environment. “Today’s students are different from their parents; different from even their older brothers and sisters,” she says. “I don’t think anyone would disagree that students are not reading the way they used to read. The library used to be filled with people; now it doesn’t always have to be. People access material via the Web, they move around on their screens.” Green believes theological educators need to be adaptable, to design their courses to meet the needs of the people who are present. “We need to find what will work for them; to figure out the right combination of technology, group work, library research, and new kinds of learning. That’s fun, for the most part.”

Sister Barbara celebrates the ways her students consistently push her into areas of inquiry that she would not have investigated otherwise. As one example she cites students interested in anthropologist René Girard’s work around violence and nonviolence. “I wouldn’t have pursued that on my own. I’m interested in nonviolence, but more the nonviolence of the Dalai Lama or Gandhi. But when I had several people who wanted to study Girard, I was happy to do it. That’s where students should be getting their money’s worth; when they have an interest, and faculty don’t know that much about it, we have the leisure to find out—and it can be lots of fun to do that.”

Green’s students have also broadened her appre-

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ciation of the visual arts, an interest that shaped her approach on her upcoming book, *David’s Capacity for Compassion*. “I spent three years studying the biblical character of David, trying to pin down how he moves from these flaws we all know about to this compassion we find later in his life. The high point, of course is where David mourns for his son—but that, in a sense, comes from nowhere, because he’d been struggling with Absalom right up until the day he died.” Green knew she wanted to “find

an image that would draw more out of the story,” so she turned to a former doctoral student for help in finding the right one. Eventually she discovered a piece by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painter Giambattista Pittoni. “The painting shows David before the Ark of the Covenant. His harp is thrown down; he is pictured from the back, but you can see he’s in anguish. It’s not so clear what he’s praying about, but it’s clear he’s in distress.” Green sees the image as representative of a moment in which David “leaves behind some of the arrogance he had as a king” so he can become a gentler and more compassionate person.

In addition to her scholarly writing, Barbara Green has also written three works of imaginative fiction, each of which re-envision a key Bible story in the form of a contemporary mystery. “The challenge is to make the plot of the biblical tale work in a modern context,” she says. “If you didn’t know the Bible story, you could still read each one as a mystery.” The three books are all set at the GTU, and feature a fictional GTU professor as the lead character. The book based on Ruth involves a theft from the rotunda in the downstairs of the GTU library; the story of Joseph and his brothers is retold through a large Italian family that owns a nearby Berkeley grocery store. “There aren’t any real GTU names,” Green says, “but they’re usually combinations of people. And there’s no really bad people or real malevolence; the characters are mostly like us.”

Despite a quarter century at the GTU, Sister Barbara recognizes that each new group of students she encounters will present new questions and different issues that demand new approaches. “No teacher at any level today can simply rest on her laurels and think, ‘OK, I have solved this.’ There are always fresh challenges and new things to learn.” It is that desire to continue to grow as a scholar, an educator, and a person that makes Dr. Barbara Green a worthy recipient of the GTU’s 2016 Sarlo Award.

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