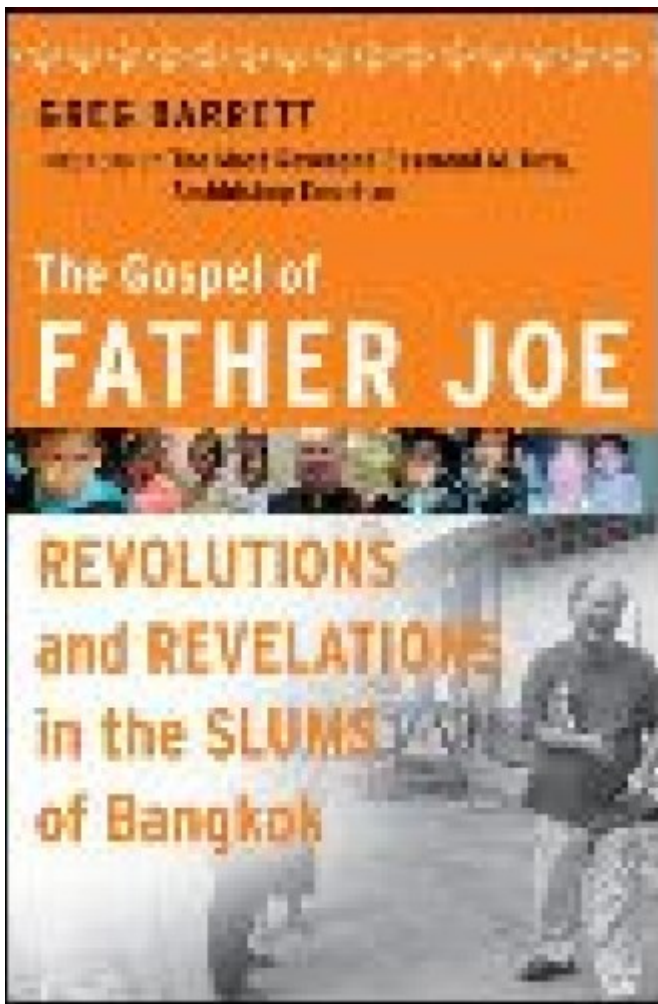


The Gospel of Father Joe: Revolutions and Revelations in the Slums of Bangkok

reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Gospel of Father Joe: Revolutions and Revelations in the Slums of Bangkok

Greg Barrett

"Water to wine" is the image that journalist Greg Barrett uses to describe the transformation in the lives of children living at Mercy Centre, an orphanage in a Bangkok slum. Most of the children have been abused, neglected, malnourished or sold into sex slavery, and many of them have AIDS. The number of children dying of AIDS and other diseases is so high that Mercy Centre recycles child-size casket lids, removing them after friends and relatives pay their last respects and immediately before cremation.

Still, as Barrett shadowed Mercy Centre's founder, Redemptorist priest Joe Maier, on several visits between 2000 and 2007, he found enough evidence of miracles to evoke the wedding at Cana. Barrett admits that he came expecting to see "pimps, pedophiles, and their prey"—and tells plenty of stories that indicate he found what he expected—but he also says that he "stumbled across something else entirely: a joyful oasis of suffering, a contradiction, it seemed." He recounts stories of giggling children watching videos, of preschool graduations at 30 sites across the city and of former Mercy Centre preschoolers who have gone on to study at universities around the world.

While he stops short of calling Maier the Christ figure who works the water-to-wine miracle, Barrett makes it clear that Maier comes awfully close. A straight-shooting priest who has been called Bangkok's Mother Teresa, Maier has spent over three decades living and working in Klong Toey, a massive Bangkok slum. He went to Bangkok in 1970 as a hard-charging, post-Vatican II priest, ready to take on American politics and cherished ecclesial teachings. His zeal, a threat to the old guard in the Bangkok diocese, landed him an assignment in the Slaughterhouse parish, where human waste and animal remains from the butcheries flowed together below decrepit wooden walkways. Maier lived in a shack in the Slaughterhouse neighborhood for many years until moving to the grounds of the Human Development Foundation and Mercy Centre, nonprofits he started on squatter land in 1971 without permits or governmental permission. Mercy Centre has since grown into a sprawling network of humanitarian agencies, including over 30 preschools, several orphanages and safe houses for children of Bangkok's poorest families, and the largest free AIDS hospice in the country. In 2005 the work expanded to include tsunami relief.

If Maier, whom Barrett calls “a gritty priest with the reputation of a saint,” is not exactly a savior, he is always a spirited presence in the book, sometimes ill-tempered and frequently crass. Barrett shadows him as he makes rounds of the Mercy Centre and talks to visiting tour groups and benefactors, and he frequently meets him at the Bangkok park where Maier jogs every morning at dawn. Their topics of conversation range from contraception and Catholicism to slum life and global economics, and Barrett learns much about the priest’s complexities, his refusal to partition life into convenient moral categories. “It’s easy to be virtuous when you’ve got a secure job,” Maier wrote once in a column for the *Bangkok Post*. “But hungry, a wink or a nod is all the same to a blind pig.”

Maier is not above paying bribes for whatever favors are required to keep the children at Mercy Centre safe; he once gave a brothel owner \$800 for one of the girls working there (she went on to major in international business at an American university), and one time he paid a debt collector so that one of Mercy’s most academically promising teenagers wouldn’t have to become a prostitute to pay her mother’s medical bills. He takes Barrett to a street known for prostitution and asks him to take a second look at the women selling their bodies there. “Now you could look at them and think to yourself, ‘Oh you blasted whores, what a scourge on society,’” Maier tells him. “But you need to look again, take a second look. . . . Maybe they’re out here risking their lives out of compassion for their moms or a son or a daughter. Maybe it’s selflessness and self-sacrifice that brought them out here. Maybe they’re far more compassionate than you or me.”

Although he may not be as well known to North Americans as humanitarian Greg Mortenson of *Three Cups of Tea* fame, Maier commands some of the same territory as Mortenson: building schools for children in Asia, bringing attention to the plight of the global poor, working on interfaith projects in a post-9/11 world. Unfortunately, this book about Maier’s life shows some of the same weaknesses as the one about Mortenson’s. Both authors seem unaware of the problematic nature of narratives about white men bringing resources and hope and answers to depressed areas of the world. Even as Barrett recounts Maier’s occasional quick-tempered outbursts, the priest emerges as likable, wise and always indispensable.

In 2005 a consultant cautioned Mercy about becoming too dependent on “Father Joe’s charisma,” Barrett recounts—a warning that perhaps he should have considered more in his own writing. Barrett includes few if any Thai voices but many North American ones, including those of other journalists who have interviewed

Maier and priests who have worked with him. Barrett also occasionally lapses into binaries that Maier himself would probably refute, as in the prologue when he asks why the children in his affluent Washington, D.C., suburb don't "hop and skip at the same excited clip as the sick, dying, orphaned, abandoned, abused, neglected, or otherwise broken children at Mercy Centre." There is a fine line between telling the stories of children in poverty and sentimentalizing them.

These problems do not render Maier's work any less impressive or worthy of note; if anything, Maier seems more aware than Barrett himself of the potential for paternalism and effusive praise. He resists the accolades heaped upon him and appears to accept fame only as it advances the cause of the children he serves. He cultivates a focused, self-renouncing spirituality and seems most himself at the bedside of a child or talking to an old woman in Klong Toey.

Perhaps the most salient and moving theme is Father Joe's commitment to interreligious work and dialogue. Children in Mercy Centre's preschools often pray to Buddha; a Muslim imam blessed the opening of Mercy's new buildings in 2000; and a bronze statue of Our Lady of Klong Toey, a local interpretation of the Virgin Mary, stands in the Mercy Centre courtyard. "We should learn from each other," Maier says at one point, "take the best lessons from all the great prophets. Don't waste any of it."

Father Joe has been criticized for this broad take on religion, especially for his comment in a 2004 PBS documentary that he was "converted" by Buddhists and Muslims. (On PBS he went on to add, "I've only learned to be a Christian by learning from the Muslims and Buddhists of tolerance and calmness and peace.") Yet as with his view of poverty and morality, Maier maintains a more nuanced view of religious diversity than either theological exclusivism or thin secularism might grant him. "Do I have an obligation to teach Catholicism to these kids?" he says to Barrett in one conversation. "No. But I do have an obligation to teach the lessons of the gospels, the Ten Commandments, the beatitudes. Those need to be here."