In the Prologue, Sara comes right at you. Her last words here (xvi) are from Psalm 34:8: "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him." She is affirmative and appreciative of the Biblical witness. She is also appreciative of ritual and the Lord’s Supper. Indeed, it was at an inclusive liturgy that she took communion and had a personal religious experience. “It changed everything” (xi). She became a Christian after communion, joining St. Gregory’s, and started a food pantry.

She’s not a conventional Christian, and she was not attending a conventional church (Episcopal churches have traditionally been staid by comparison to other groups). What do you think so far? Is this possibly a good religious life? A Christian life?

At eighteen she’s enrolled in Friends World College in Cuernavaca. “Liberation theology” (inspired by Karl Marx’s criticism of capitalism; my.saintleo can access the Library and Encyclopedia Britannica for an article on liberation theology) is becoming popular among Latin American theologians. (Later, Pope John Paul II will take actions against this movement.) The “Corpus Christi Massacre” took place on June 10, 1971. The US may have been involved in training some of the halcones (“Falcons”) that did the killing. The U.S. did participate in a cover-up of the massacre. But young Sara was there and saw it in su propria carne – “in our own meat” (13), a fitting expression for the celebration of the feast celebrating the eucharist – Corpus Christi, “the Body of Christ.” You can see the “take this bread” theme already developing and being related to social justice, right?

She says her education “was rooted in physical experience,” which made her “distrustful of dogma of all kinds,” whether of the left or right (14).

The experiential emphasis in American history has its origins in British empiricism (like the philosophy of John Locke, a major influence on Thomas Jefferson), in our first and foremost theologian, Jonathan Edwards, a Lockean. It was articulated famously by “pragmatists” such as John Dewey.

(“Pragmatists” [pragma = “action” in Greek] often consider the actions and consequences involved in issues. If someone asked why lying is wrong, pragmatists would point to the negative consequences of lying for a society.)

For Sara, this meant looking not at the center of things – the official stances – but “at the edges of things, at the unlikeliest and weakest people, not the most apparently powerful” (14).

By the way, did Jesus have an education “rooted in physical experience”? (Unlike Paul who was trained as a Pharisee, Jesus apparently had virtually no formal education.) Was Jesus interested in the poor? Was he a “pragmatist”? Consider: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40; NSRV) and “You will know them by their fruits”
Clearly, Jesus was interested in the less advantaged members of society and he emphasized taking into account the consequences of our actions.

Was Jesus a dogmatist? What “dogma” did he have? The “Kingdom of God?” That was his principal teaching, but he never says what the “Kingdom” is. Instead, as we all know, he offered parables and metaphors – a sower, a lost sheep, a grain of mustard seed, etc.. The parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10) summarizes Jesus’ view: a Samaritan, looked down upon by Jews, assists a Jew after Jewish priests pass him by; this illustrates the “Kingdom of God” in action (pragma).

Of being a cook: “I learned solidarity, the kind that only comes through shared bodily experience. I learned … that rituals … could carry unconscious messages of love and comfort.” A wise bishop would tell her later, “There’s a hunger beyond food that’s expressed in food, and that’s why feeding is always a kind of miracle” (23).

Note again her experiential emphasis: “solidarity.” This is a very “American” perspective. She links the basic human need for food with the basic human fact of ritual (all societies have patterns of interaction, and some of these can carry highly symbolic importance).

A slew of questions and issues emerges: who are you in solidarity with? Blacks, whites, females, males, infants, the old and sick, the rich, the poor? And how should society relate to all this? “Solidarity” is very similar to the Hebrew Scriptures’ idea of “covenant,” which was originally a kind of military pact of the ancient Hebrews and evolved into their basic metaphor for their social bond: a covenant with one another and with God. The covenant loyalty itself was called hesed, sometimes translated by the NSRV as “steadfast love.” In the Sermon on the Mount, this notion is extended in the Kingdom of God to enemies: “Love your enemies” (Mt. 5:44). The effect of this is to extend solidarity to everyone – a radical teaching, to be sure.

Sara is on dangerous ground here, isn’t she? How will we act when we are in solidarity with everyone? She believes, naturally, that the Lord’s Supper is an indication of how we should act.

Sara goes to Nicaragua where a social and political revolution, in part inspired by liberation theology, was underway. She was guided by her memory of the Corpus Christi Massacre (37) and began to study what the US military calls “low-intensity conflict.” Under president Reagan the US had been pursuing an “undeclared proxy war with Nicaragua” (36), and Sara begins working with Nicaraguan farm cooperatives and American volunteer brigades.

She also goes to El Salvador where the US had been supporting the Salvadoran government in its efforts to suppress democratic insurgents. In December 1980 three nuns and a lay woman had been raped and murdered, and government death squad (Escuadron del Muerte) had assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero on March 24, 1980. Sara gets to know Ignacio Martin-Baro, a Jesuit theologian at the elite University of Central America. Martin-Baro (43-45; 54). She gets pregnant and returns to the US.
Martin-Baro and other Jesuits were advocating a theory of justice based on an “option for the poor.” Miles links this phrase with Vatican II (36), but it was Pedro Arrupe, the brilliant Father General of the Jesuit order, who had first used the phrase “option for the poor” in a May 1968 letter to Jesuits in Latin America (http://books.google.com/books?id=OBRQmL8z064C&pg=PA179&lpg=PA179&dq=option+for+the+poor+arrupe&source=bl&ots=PkwpNr4D8A&sig=ntyD8i24kcXvHXmOobeYqhEIVTsa&hl=en&ei=isFDSszpFIWGtgfppM2gAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2). In 1977 the White Warriors death squad threatened the Jesuits in El Salvador with death if they didn’t abandon their ministry to the poor and leave the country. Arrupe replied that his men would not leave “because they are with the people.” Six months after the birth of Miles’ daughter Katie, on November 16, 1989, Martin-Baro and five other Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were shot in the head by a death squad. (http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/10th-anniv.html).

As might be expected, Sara was very much influenced about all this and by the Christian witness she observed (50). What about you? Do you think all this is worth the kind of time and reflection Miles gave to it? She’s linking food/life and the poor/sacrifice, but of course she hadn’t yet even begun to work through a theology of justice.

Her relationship with Bo ended, she stayed in San Francisco (54), her best friend Douglas died of AIDS in her arms (55), and in time she met and fell in love with Martha, a Jew (56, 62).

A table, a Byzantine mural of saints dancing, a stately dance up to the table, a woman offers Sara bread and wine. “Jesus invites everyone to his table.” Sara was unbalanced by all this. “God … was real and in my mouth [and this] utterly short-circuited my ability to do anything but cry” (59).

(St. Gregory’s website: http://www.saintgregorys.org)

Whoa … ! This is not your usual Episcopal church service. “Everyone” is invited. This is called “open communion.” Many churches – like the Catholic Church, for instance, which doesn’t recognize the validity of the Episcopal priesthood -- have strict rules about this.

By the way, did Jesus have strict rules about whom he’d eat with? Jesus practiced what one theologian, John Dominic Crossan, has called “open commensality,” that is, not drawing the “insider/outside” distinction. While John the Baptist and the Pharisees fasted, Jesus did not (Mark 2:18-19; Luke 7:33-34). He openly had the company of “tax collectors and sinners” (Mt. 11:19), and, of course, women (like Martha and Mary, and Mary Magdalene), who were reckoned in his day as very risky persons in regard to ritual cleanliness: contact with an unclean person (even where they sat – like a couch, in the case of a menstruating woman) can make a clean person unclean.
Are you OK with this? Clearly some important and knowledgeable people objected to Jesus’ behavior. He was making plenty of clerical types unhappy. Or maybe that was OK for Jesus but not for us today – we need to draw the “insider/outsider” distinction? (Remember, at times the early Christians were persecuted by the government, and it was important to know if someone was a traitor or not, so be cautious about being too judgmental here about some church practices.)

The rotunda icon at St. Gregory’s includes images of nonChristians like Anne Frank and Rumi (the Muslim mystic and founder of the “Whirling Dervishes,” who, naturally, dance). One of the founding priests, Donald Schell was married with children, the other, Rick Fabian was gay (80).

She begins reading up on Christianity and discovers along the way that while she was being an activist in Nicaragua, her grandmother Margaret had been arrested as a “disorderly person” for protesting about racism, greed, and imperial murder (83-84). Her family had a greater Social Gospel connection than she had realized (83). An Episcopalian theologian wrote that the Bible was not a set of instructions with simple answers, and that “the discovery of truth is a continuing journey guided by the Holy Spirit” (84). (In passing, we might observe that the view of Revelation put forward by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 is not very different from this; the major difference would be the place given to the Roman magisterium for interpreting Revelation. See Dei Verbum, n.10).

She becomes a deacon in St. Gregory’s (93-94).

Sara’s vision starts to emerge: “Feed my sheep” [John 21:17] (104). She is told that “the food world, it’s all evil” (105). She has a “vision of a Table where everyone was welcome” (106).

Sara says it was no accident that she opened the food pantry and was baptized in the same week (119, 121). Baptism for St. Gregory’s is a conscious choice that comes after communion at St. Gregory’s (121). Sara is worried since baptism seemed to her like a betrayal of her parents who had tried so hard to “protect” her from Christianity (122). Lynn Baird, a female priest, tells Sara “All you have to do is want it” (124). Donald baptizes her, and later says, “Wow, I never baptized anyone who’d been catechized by a martyr [Martin-Baro] before” (125).

Notice again Sara’s sensitivity to the power of ritual to help people transform their lives.

“The pantry would be church and not a social service program” (130).

She’s asked by some who came to the pantry to pray for them. A seminarian told her that laying hands on people was not “authorized” by the Book of Common Prayer (133). Sara believes that “looking to official rule books and clerics to tell you how to act – this was what is wrong with religion” (134).