

America



JANUARY 2021

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

JESUITS AND THE PLAGUE OF ST. CHARLES

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can help us in the 21st*

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Michelle Smith
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‘I Got Through All of Last Year. And I’m Here’

I have a thing for old buildings, the kind of places, as my Gram used to say, that have “more history than the Bible.” So whenever time, convenience and funds allow (the last being the most serious consideration given my state of life), I like to stay in old hotels, which I think of as *les grande dames* of a city’s architectural high society. A great, historic hotel not only tells a thousand fascinating stories, but speaks a kind of wisdom—to those who are listening.

The Saint Francis Hotel in San Francisco (now called the Westin St. Francis) is such an oracle. Built in 1904, the original 12-story building presides over the city’s ever-bustling Union Square, a kind of society matron reminding the passersby, in the lyrics of the Stephen Sondheim song, that there have been “good times and bum times. I’ve seen them all. And, my dear, I’m still here.”

The Saint Francis survived the great earthquake and fire of 1906, not to mention two world wars and a great depression. Here is where the career of Fatty Arbuckle, the silent-film star, came to an inglorious end in a scandal that the New York tabloids would still kill to have on its front pages. The hotel hosted nearly a third of the delegates to the founding meeting of the United Nations; Salvador Dalí photographed himself in one of its bathtubs—wearing a lobster on his head; Al Jolson died while dining on bisque in one of its guest rooms; Queen Elizabeth II dined here at a rare state dinner held outside of the Washington, D.C., area; and Sarah Jane Moore tried to assassinate President Gerald R. Ford just outside the lobby.

And it’s still here. The Saint Fran-

cis was built in the style of an Irishman, Louis Sullivan, a Boston native and mentor to Frank Lloyd Wright, who pioneered the use of steel framing in American architecture and is said to have coined the phrase “form follows function.” The key to Sullivan’s idea is that he saw all of creation as a story and he viewed buildings as characters who represent specific times and places, but whose purpose is to advance the story by performing specific functions. Aesthetics are important, but what makes a building beautiful, said Sullivan, is what it does.

Sullivan wrote: “Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight, or the open apple-blossom, the toiling work-horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, form ever follows function, and this is the law. Where function does not change, form does not change. The granite rocks, the ever-brooding hills, remain for ages; the lightning lives, comes into shape, and dies, in a twinkling.”

It seemed to me during a recent stay that the function of the Saint Francis might be changing, or is less certain at least. If Mr. Sullivan was right, we know what follows. It is not entirely the hotel’s fault, of course. Tastes have changed, for sure, but the old girl’s slightly tattered beauty is due more to suburbanization, Covid-19 shutdowns, a lack of commerce in the surrounding neighborhood and an abundance of petty crime.

As I wandered the lonely hallways, one of the precious few guests, I wondered what will become of all this—of all the places we said goodbye to in 2020. I don’t just mean the bricks

and mortar, but the stories. And not just the stories of the rich and famous. The people who made the Saint Francis truly beautiful were the ones who worked there, not the folks who stayed there. The two doormen who between them served for more than a century. Or Arnold Batliner, who, in an era when white gloves were de rigueur for ladies, operated the coin-washing machine in the basement. It is estimated that in the course of his 35-year career, he cleaned more than \$17 million in loose change.

The problem with Mr. Sullivan’s maxim is the extreme to which it’s been taken, which he never intended. In contemporary America, function is too often the only measure of something’s value. This leads to what Pope Francis has called “the throw-away culture.” In this country, we value youth but we don’t value beauty, mainly because we think they are the same thing. But beauty is related to memory in a way youth cannot be. Memory is the soul of conscience, but it is also the muse of art and culture. The persistent desire to create beautiful things stems in large measure from the wonderful memory of what it felt like to first encounter someone or something beautiful.

A people who disdain beauty, or equate it with youth, can form a nation; but they cannot build a great civilization. And that, in the end, should be both the form and the function of the great American story.

Matt Malone, S.J.
Twitter: @americaeditor.



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AP Photo/Aaron Favila

Residents push baby strollers full of belongings they retrieved from their homes damaged by Typhoon Vamco in Rodriguez, Rizal province, Philippines, Nov. 17.

Cover: "Saint Charles Borromée communiant les pestiférés de Milan," Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier, 1785
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What should Biden do in his first 100 days?

Readers of **America** were asked to give their take on what President-elect Joe Biden's first 100 days in office should look like. Their opinions, submitted in our online comments section, are edited and excerpted below.

President Biden's priority must be the Covid vaccine, its distribution plan and ensuring that all people will have access to it regardless of whether they have medical coverage or not.

Ruth Carpenter

Biden will have to address two major crises simultaneously: Covid-19 and the sputtering economy. And he'll have to do it with a narrow majority in the House, a slim (or nonexistent) margin in the Senate and millions of Americans who have been deluded into thinking he stole the election. Oh, and he has to undo a series of bad policy decisions from the previous administration right away, too. This is an extremely tall order. Biden can't complete all this in 100 days, or maybe even in four years. But Biden's greatest strength is his decency. He should stay above the fray and be the voice of calm and collected leadership we desperately need right now.

Benjamin Recchie

We need a mental vacation from presidential grandstanding. Trump managed to dominate every news cycle. Everything was always about him rather than the nation. He was either on television congratulating himself, spreading disinformation or he was engaged in an angry tweet storm. It was just exhausting watching this unhinged reality show play out. According to Brad Bannon, a Democratic strategist, "Biden believes less is more when it comes to presidential visibility and power." He will work behind the scenes to get things done. This will be a welcome change.

L. Kenney

As much as I despise Trump's tweets and self congratulatory attitude toward just about everything, I also think transparency is important, at least when it comes to policy. Biden's voting history backs a lot of policies that were not in the best interests of a lot of people. I understand that it's great to see him change his stance on a lot of issues. However, visibility from his administration and the media would further hold him accountable in order to create the positive change that is needed in America.

Naomi Bernardino

Do not expedite abortion, either in the United States or in other countries. The right to life is necessarily a basic right before introducing any social interventions to make life easier.

Kate Schlaerth

Our current crisis has the capacity to be far more devastating than the Great Depression. I urge President Biden to put forth a guaranteed income initiative to support individuals and families to avoid the disintegration of family units or having people turn to suicide because of their extreme hopelessness. Let's create public and subsidized private sector jobs that give dignity and restore a sense of worth to those affected. Changing the status quo means ending subsidies and increasing taxes on the wealthiest Americans and corporations. By reaching out to help one another at a time of crisis, we all can restore the sense of purpose that has made us a great country.

Jay Trainor

Address the existential climate crisis killing millions already around the world with a vision of integral ecology that recognizes that pandemics, national security and economics are intimately connected to how we solve the climate crisis. Within that framework, lead on solving the pandemic, lead our nation around the racial reckoning with truth and reconciliation and the related systemic inequalities.

Carol Gonzalez

The Center for Biological Diversity, in its new report "The Last Decade to Save the Planet," recommends that the first act of the president should be to declare, under the National Emergencies Act of 1976, that we are experiencing a climate crisis. The official declaration would give his administration, across all its agencies, emergency powers to hasten a just transition from fossil fuels to a clean energy economy.

James Cleghorn



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Ann Millin, PhD, Former Historian, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

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The Ethics of Covid-19 Vaccination

Encouraging news reports beginning in October brought the welcome prospect of an effective vaccine (or several) for Covid-19 in the coming year. For a nation and a world grown weary from almost a year of a pandemic that has killed millions across the globe and altered the life of almost every person on the planet, any news of the possibility of relief and a return to some degree of normalcy is a leaven for the spirit.

It will be impossible to provide everyone with a vaccine at once, so any program of inoculation will have to be informed by a carefully considered system for distributing the vaccine in the most effective and just manner possible. For that reason, it is crucial that all government agencies work through the ethical conundrums of vaccine distribution beforehand—and be prepared to make hard decisions.

The United States and other developed nations may be tempted to purchase enormous quantities of the various vaccines being produced worldwide for their own citizens, at the expense of the world's populace. To some extent this is already happening, with the result that residents of poorer nations may have to wait until 2023 or 2024 for vaccination. Much of the world cannot compete with the aggressive purchases of possible vaccines the Trump administration made this summer, including 300 million doses from AstraZeneca, 100 million doses from Moderna, 100 million doses from Pfizer (with an option for 500 million more), 100 million doses from Sanofi and GlaxoSmithKline (with an option for 500 million more) and 100 million doses from Johnson & Johnson. It is worth noting that the entire population of the United States is 330 million

people. If the excess is not shared with less fortunate nations, their best hope for assistance may be from nongovernmental sources like the Gates Foundation, which has pledged \$70 million to global efforts to develop and distribute safe, affordable and timely vaccines for low- and middle-income countries.

Within the United States, one challenge will be to make sure receiving a vaccine does not become a privilege for wealthy individuals rather than a right for all. While many insurers cover Covid-19 tests, the early days of the pandemic saw a severe shortage of testing centers and available clinicians—except for those who had the financial wherewithal to visit someone who would administer a test for a significantly increased price. Many also saw price-gouging providers charge their insurers thousands of dollars for a nasal swab test that is commonly estimated to cost less than \$50 to administer and process. In a time of significant social unrest over issues of racism and civil rights violations, it was but one more glaring example of unjust social structures. It would be even more egregious if the same occurs with a Covid-19 vaccine, where millions wait impatiently for medical relief while the wealthy simply buy their way to health.

It will also be necessary to allocate the vaccine according to need and effectiveness as the primary criteria. While a random selection process might seem the most fair, it does not take into account the significant differences in levels of risk and exposure—as well as the importance of keeping first responders and medical personnel healthy, not just for their sake but for the sake of the vulnerable populations they serve. The World Health Organization has already made its position

clear that “once a novel vaccine is found to be safe and effective, to prioritize those at highest risk, as well as populations like health care workers who may be more likely to serve as vectors for transmission, is justified.”

Once our frontline workers and medical personnel are accommodated, teachers and other educational support staff seem to be the next natural choice. They are at high risk, and they are essential to the crucial task of getting students back into situations of face-to-face learning.

But after those populations are inoculated, the ethical questions become thornier. Who should receive the vaccine next? Those most at risk? Or those with the best expected outcomes—that is, those without comorbidities and with the greatest chance of thriving? We should be wary of applying too utilitarian a calculus to the distribution of a vaccine. Approaches that prioritize helping those who will contribute the most as healthy adults tread dangerously close to what Pope Francis calls the “throwaway culture,” in which the elderly, sick, disabled and marginalized are treated as less deserving of their human rights than the healthy, the wealthy and the well-connected.

Another reason for working out these ethical principles in advance is that some of the choices to be made will be unpopular. For example, Covid-19 infections are rampant among the 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States. In the event that prisoners are put near the head of the line for a vaccine, there could be a backlash from the general public—but should people be deprived of their basic right to health care simply because they are incarcerated? Others at extreme risk are the tens of thousands of undocu-

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mented migrants and asylum seekers held in jails and detention centers by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Finally, we come to the question of how to convince large swaths of the public to take the vaccines at all. It is unlikely that the federal or state governments would try to mandate vaccination (though the Supreme Court ruled in 1905 that it was not a violation of the Constitution to do so), but smaller units of society—schools, hospitals, nursing homes, service industry employers—may find themselves in the awkward position of trying to coerce vaccination to protect their own employees and customers. Sentiment against any kind of vaccine, not just for the one that targets the coronavirus, is fairly common.

In some cases, this resistance is the result of mistrust because of past harms suffered by minority groups in the name of science (including the infamous Tuskegee Study). Others have questioned the ethics of using vaccines developed using cell lines derived from aborted fetal tissue (though the U.S. bishops have declared that it is licit to accept such vaccines). Transparency on the benefits and limits of vaccines is essential to gain social trust. Unfortunately, President Trump, with his denials of the severity of the pandemic and his repeated attempts to undermine the W.H.O. and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has further eroded social trust in science by politicizing it.

A Gallup poll from August found that 35 percent of Americans would refuse to accept even a free, F.D.A.-approved vaccine. Would it be ethically acceptable to require employees or customers to show they have been inoculated? Or is the ethical response to respect their personal autonomy? In the case of health care, when does the common good trump individual rights?

Such questions might sound vexing now but are still relatively abstract. They will become seriously troublesome if we enter a period of mass vaccinations without having thought through their consequences.

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TV and streaming video have ruined the potential of our free time

During the Covid pandemic, my young children discovered “The Jetsons,” thanks to a meme suggesting that the futuristic TV cartoon from the 1960s was “more accurate than expected.” While the show’s prescience is fun to consider, it is more revealing to see how it missed the mark.

Among these miscalculations, none is as striking as the show’s vision of free time, one area where it actually underestimated the effects of technology. Like many of their contemporaries, the creators of “The Jetsons” imagined that technology would be a boon for recreation: We would shift our most time-consuming chores to machines and gain time to enjoy with family and friends. What they failed to appreciate is that we would not confine our technological advances to eliminating work. Instead, we have also embraced technology during our leisure time and ended up farther apart from each other.

But the “Jetsons” creators would have been familiar with the main culprit: television.

Across almost every demographic group, watching TV or streaming video is by far the most common leisure activity, according to the American Time Use Survey. The effects of this dominance over recreational time have been dramatic, and mostly negative, on both a personal and a social level.

There is nothing inherently wrong with using one’s free time to watch TV. Television is an effective means of relaxation, and there can be some self-care in a judicious use of this technology. The problem is that the benefits of television amount to a mere sliver of all the goods that free time can offer. When it becomes our default pastime, it leaves leisure’s true potential unre-

alized in our lives.

Television is an intrinsically passive medium, which means it can never generate what psychologists deem an “optimal experience”—the state of enjoyment that emerges when an activity perfectly balances our skills with the challenges of the task at hand. Worse, watching TV not only prevents us from achieving this optimal state in the moment but can leave us less interested in finding a pathway to it once the screen is off. Television thus colonizes our free time, leaving little room for the truly fulfilling pursuits that leisure can afford in other circumstances.

This is not the only cost television inflicts on free time. Beyond optimal experience, one of the greatest benefits of free time is its ability to foster relational connection. Unlike other contexts, in which our relationships are always at risk of being reduced to their utility, leisure lets us simply be with one another. We need no pretense to enjoy someone’s company when we are at rest together.

But when we are watching TV, we are not socializing, even though we may be in the same room. Given that, by one estimate, the average couple in the United States talks together for less than a third of the amount of time they spend watching TV, it is not hard to see how this technological intrusion harms relationships.

Television also has an insidious effect on civic engagement. People who report that TV is their primary form of entertainment have fewer interactions with their friends and are less likely to be involved in community organizations. As the sociologist Robert Putnam chronicled in *Bowling Alone*, television has torn at the very fabric of our common life.

It does not have to be this way. If we reclaim our identity as human beings made in the likeness of a relational God, we can come closer to the goodness that free time has to offer. The first step is to think about the relationships we would like to cultivate during our free time. Consistent with the Thomistic ordering of charity, I like to think about a weekly leisure examen that allows me to assess whether I have made time for God, time for self and time for others. In each case, I search for moments of optimal engagement, where I value the relationship for its own sake and not some extrinsic reward.

The next step is to challenge the structural factors that limit free time and make television so appealing. Major changes in the sphere of work, from the living minimum wage advocated by Catholic social teaching to guaranteed vacations and paid parental leave, could give us all more time to spend nurturing our relationships. Greater investment in shared leisure resources, like public parks and civic museums, could make alternatives to television more accessible. If we view good leisure as a shared responsibility, free time can be an occasion for solidarity and thus a route to our own flourishing. All we need to do is turn away from technology and toward each other.

Personally, I can start by turning off “The Jetsons.”

Conor Kelly is an assistant professor of theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He is the author of *The Fullness of Free Time*.

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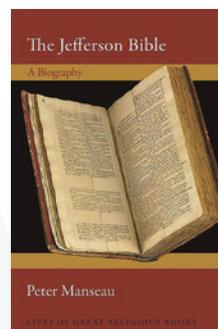
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When white Catholics suffer from not knowing the marginalized

“I told my children it is not safe for us here. It is not safe for us until this election is over, and maybe not even after.” My neighbor Widad shook her head and, lost in thought, touched her hijab. “Why not just go back to South Sudan?”

We stood at a street corner in our neighborhood in central Iowa, me pushing a double stroller with my two youngest children inside and she walking with a bicycle pump to rescue her daughter, who was stranded with a flat tire up the road. Two mothers on an election night: one listening to podcasts to keep anxiety at bay, one imploring every person she comes across to vote as if the life of her Muslim neighbor depends on it.

Our children go to the same public elementary school, where Widad has volunteered hundreds of hours. She speaks fluent English and laughs easily. She has buried a child.

Widad found refuge in the United States in 2011 and for five years experienced this country only as a place of kindness. Upon Donald J. Trump’s election as president in 2016, she says, she began receiving harassment almost overnight. She says she was once followed for miles and miles as she drove her van around town, not daring to go home and fearful of running out of gas.

“I no longer recognize this country that was once so safe for me,” she lamented at our corner. I wanted to reach out and squeeze her hand, but in this time of pandemic we stood six ghostly feet apart.

I stayed up watching election results and pondering Widad’s words. As I flipped channels, my mind went back to earlier in the day, when I overheard neighborhood boys waiting for my kids to come outside to play. The first

grader had read our yard sign aloud to his brother: “In this home we believe Black Lives Matter.” I could hear the strength in his voice even through my office window. I was glad they had noticed the sign. As part of the Black community in America, they had been through a summer of hell that culminated in a public refusal from their president to disavow white supremacy. They deserved to feel safe in their own neighborhood.

Many Christians have voiced qualms about my yard sign. They object to the Black Lives Matter movement’s association with the idea of “defunding” the police, and they point out that the views on abortion held by B.L.M. organizers are inconsistent with the Christian faith. I have been lectured on these points many times, so I am familiar with all the arguments.

What if these people could hear the comforted voice of a 7-year-old, if they knew these kids and knew how much the words meant to them? Wouldn’t assuring a child of his or her value become the most important thing if that child were standing before you? But most white Christians do not have such children standing before us, for we have arranged our lives—our schools, our churches and our cities—to avoid looking into their eyes.

We cannot be changed by what we never encounter. Many Catholics “serve the least of these” through fundraisers for women’s care centers, donating diapers or dropping off meals at homeless shelters—efforts that seek to change things for others without necessarily changing ourselves. The result can be a kind of Christian duty that is sincere but not transformative. Often we have no proximity to the ones who have been broken by our

political and economic systems. We are not hearing their stories, sitting in their living rooms or breaking bread together at a table of reciprocity.

I am lucky to have such friendships right here in my neighborhood. Even so, I get it wrong more often than I get it right: hurrying past people I would rather not talk to, failing to take the time to listen to the stories of hurting neighbors or opting for long-distance forms of giving as a replacement for my physical presence. I need a renewed spirit as much as anyone.

Regardless of where we live, we are all accountable to Jesus for the call to solidarity with those whose voices have been drowned out. We must all seek ways to walk with the marginalized, whether by participating in diverse community organizations, inviting those of other faiths to speak to our parish groups or engaging in person-centric volunteer work. The possibilities are endless, but they do require intentionality.

Until all Catholics engage in such long-term relationships with a willingness to have our eyes opened to the experience of another, we have no business claiming that our faith informs our politics. Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., the Peruvian theologian, once said, “So you say you love the poor? Name them.” I think it is the same question Jesus will ask when we see him face to face.

Shannon K. Evans writes the *Everyday Ignatian* column at *Jesuits.org* and is the author of *Rewilding Motherhood: Your Path to an Empowered Feminine Spirituality* (forthcoming from Brazos Press).

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THE YEAR THAT FELT LIKE A LIFETIME

What were the biggest stories of 2020?

By Robert David Sullivan

The year began with Pope Francis slapping the hand of a pilgrim who grabbed him and would not let go as he tried to walk through St. Peter's Square on New Year's Eve. The human reaction of the pope is what passed as viral news, worthy of spirited debate, in early January. We had no idea what we were in for.

Here at **America**, as at pretty much every news outlet in the United States, the year 2020 was dominated by three huge, intersecting stories, each of them with repercussions for the church.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had so many dimensions—from its disproportionately deadly impact on essential workers and marginalized communities to the effects of quarantines and social distancing on our faith lives—that we are still scrambling to report on it after nine months. The killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25 renewed widespread anger and sadness over systemic racism as well as the church's complicity in racial

injustice over the years. And a nasty presidential election seemed to end with more partisanship and division than ever in the United States, along with intense disagreement over the moral obligations of Catholics in participating in civic life.

What follows is a month-by-month summary of the stories that most engaged our readers over the past 12 months.

DECEMBER 2019: Last year's Advent season seems like a childhood memory. The most popular story on our website was Joseph McAuley's dissection of the charming film about Benedict XVI and then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, "The Two Popes": What's fact and what's fiction?" (Sorry, but "it is doubtful [Benedict] would spend time watching sporting events on television.") Our readers also enjoyed John W. Miller's feature story on Spencer Brewery, a Trappist beer maker, and Isabel Senechal's rundown of the worst (religious) Christmas songs of all time.

MOST POPULAR AMERICA CONTENT BY MONTH

Visit americamagazine.org to find and read these selections.

December 2019

"The Two Popes":
What's fact and what's fiction?
Joseph McAuley, Nov. 27

January

The papal hand slap divides Catholics
and the media
Kevin Clarke, Jan. 2

February

Internal report finds that L'Arche founder Jean Vanier
engaged in decades of sexual misconduct
Michael J. O'Loughlin, Feb. 22

March

A Coronavirus Prayer/translations
Kerry Weber, March 2 (published in March 30 issue)

April

The pope just proposed a "universal basic wage."
What does that mean for the United States?
Nathan Schneider, April 12

May

Dr. Anthony Fauci: To keep churches safe, use masks,
limit singing and wait to resume Communion
Michael J. O'Loughlin, May 27



Photo by Peter Mountain/Netflix



CNS photo/Kham, Reuters





AP Images / CNS photo

JANUARY: That papal hand slap served as our inauspicious introduction to 2020. As Kevin Clarke wrote in his analysis, “what the unhappy encounter had to say about the ‘real’ Pope Francis—revealed finally as a sour hypocrite or merely an actual human being who can be startled into anger—remained hotly disputed on social media.” Close behind in reader popularity was Vatican correspondent Gerald O’Connell’s report on Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s request to be removed as co-author of a book by Cardinal Robert Sarah arguing against the ordination of married men.

FEBRUARY: The two most widely read pieces concerned revelations about sexual misconduct by Jean Vanier, the charismatic founder of a global movement serving adults with disabilities who died in 2019: our report by Michael O’Loughlin and Colleen Dulle’s essay “How can I reconcile the good and evil of Jean Vanier?” Readers also took to a diverse trio of long-form stories: “How can Catholic colleges welcome the L.G.B.T. person?” by James Martin, S.J.; Sonja Livingston’s search for American versions of the pre-Lenten Polish pastry called paczki (a traditional way “to use up stores of sugar and lard”); and James T. Keane’s true-crime story “The Great Maryknoll Post Office Robbery of 1964.”

MARCH: The coronavirus, not yet commonly known as Covid-19, hit the United States with devastating effects beginning in March. Kerry Weber’s “A Coronavirus Prayer,” and its translations into five other languages, was America’s most popular content, not only of the month, but the entire year. Readers showed great interest in the responses to the global pandemic by Pope Francis, including his “Urbi et Orbi” blessing that likened the pandemic to “an unexpected, turbulent storm” and his guidance on the granting of absolution to those quarantined by Covid-19. Also popular this month: “I am

a scientist working to stop coronavirus. We should cancel all Masses.”

APRIL: Almost all of the most popular content of the month involved Covid-19, including an account of life in the pandemic hotspot of Milan, written by Patrick Gilger, S.J., and Gregory Hillis’s advice on handling social isolation from the Cistercian monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Pope Francis continued to make news, not only by comforting the faithful but also by using an Easter address to advocate for a “universal basic wage.”

MAY: The third month of All Things Covid included Mr. O’Loughlin’s interview with Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (“To keep churches safe, use masks, limit singing and wait to resume Communion”); and David Dark’s essay about the economic injustices laid bare by the pandemic (“We are living in an apocalypse”).

JUNE: After more than a week of anti-racism protests across the country—following the killing of Mr. Floyd—President Trump visited the St. John Paul II National Shrine in Washington, and our most-read story of the month concerned then-Archbishop (and now Cardinal) Wilton Gregory’s condemnation of the president’s use of a Catholic shrine for political purposes. Other widely read stories included “An open letter to my fellow white Americans,” by our editor-in-chief Matt Malone, S.J. (“You and I are a part of this problem, whether we like it or not, whether we chose it or not, whether we know it or not.”); and Olga Segura’s “How can Catholics help lead the fight against racism?” (“Many black and brown Catholics are turning to the church for solace, only to find, at worst, silence, and at best, a delayed response.”)

JULY: Divisions within the church once again bubbled to the surface, and our most-read story was Mr. O’Connell’s report headlined “Cardinal Scola calls out Pope Francis’

June
Washington Archbishop Wilton Gregory calls Trump’s visit to John Paul II Shrine “reprehensible,”
Michael J. O’Loughlin, June 2



CNS photo/Paul Haring

July
Cardinal Scola calls out Pope Francis’ critics: “The pope is the pope,”
Gerard O’Connell, July 21

August
Pope Francis’ critics are dividing the church and families—including mine
Mike Lewis, Aug. 13 (October issue)

September
Pope Francis to parents of L.G.B.T. children: “God loves your children as they are.”
Gerard O’Connell, Sept. 17.

October
My loved ones told me “real” Catholics vote for Trump. Here’s my response.
Jeannie Gaffigan, Oct. 1

November
Joe Biden will be the second Catholic president. Here’s what you need to know about his faith.
Michael J. O’Loughlin, Nov. 7



CNS photo/Chad Griffin

critics: “The pope is the pope.” But the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd continued to drive discussion, and an essay by Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, “How church teaching can help explain why ‘Black Lives Matter,’” was widely shared and commented upon. Also popular: Karen Park’s “Hi, my name is Karen. Embarrassed to meet you,” in which the author described coping with how her name “has come to mean an entitled, racist white woman.”

AUGUST: Again, the most popular **America** story addressed conflict in the church: Mike Lewis’s Faith in Focus essay “Pope Francis’ critics are dividing the church and families—including mine.” (“I have several friends who belong to Catholic book clubs where members will refuse to read anything by Pope Francis.”) But most of the other top stories were about the impending U.S. presidential election, including the Explainer “If Joe Biden wins, what does that mean for abortion policies?” and an analysis by Sam Sawyer, S.J., of how the political media covers pro-life issues (“mainstream coverage seems aimed to dismiss and discredit anything opposed to abortion”).

SEPTEMBER: Candid comments by Pope Francis often get our readers’ attention, so it was no surprise that his meeting with the parents of L.G.B.T. individuals (in which he said, “God loves your children as they are”) was the most popular story of the month. Below that, politics dominated the news. Our editorial “Donald Trump is a unique threat to the Constitution” generated more reader comments than almost anything we published this year, and there was much curiosity about Amy Coney Barrett, nominated to the Supreme Court after Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died with only a few weeks left in the presidential campaign. In particular, Mr. O’Loughlin wrote an Explainer on People of Praise, the Catholic charismatic group that Ms. Barrett has belonged to.

OCTOBER: Could abortion opponents vote for Joe Biden and the unequivocally pro-choice Democratic Party? That was one of the most contentious questions of the 2020 election, and in the the second most widely read story of the year, the actress and author Jeannie Gaffigan lamented that the abortion issue has “become an idol for some Catholics at the expense of everything else.” (See “My loved ones told me ‘real’ Catholics vote for Trump. Here’s my response.”) This got even more reader comments than our editorial, and not everyone agreed with Ms. Gaffigan. Oh, and October also saw the release of a new encyclical letter from Pope Francis, “Fratelli Tutti.” Among other things, explained Father Martin, the encyclical “closed the door” on the death penalty as permissible under church teaching.

NOVEMBER: Appropriately for 2020, the presidential election threatened to never end, with President Trump refusing to concede weeks after Mr. Biden’s victory became apparent. Our readers were most interested in Mr. Biden becoming only the second Catholic president in U.S. history, and Mr. O’Loughlin gave us a rundown on the president-elect’s faith. But our readers also looked to the rest of the world, showing great interest in correspondent Filipe Domingues’s report on the possible sainthood of Blessed Carlo Acutis, who has been called the “patron of the internet” for sharing stories of Eucharistic miracles online. (Acutis died in 2006, at the age of 15, of leukemia.) With Mr. Biden promising to generate less news than the current president, we can hope for a 2021 with fewer crises and more miracles.

Robert David Sullivan, *associate editor*.
Twitter: @RobertDSullivan.

Most viewed Vatican Dispatches

1. Pope Francis’ Urbi et Orbi address on coronavirus and Jesus calming the storm, **Pope Francis**, March 27
2. Pope Francis to parents of L.G.B.T. children: ‘God loves your children as they are.’ **Gerard O’Connell**, Sept. 17
3. In his Pentecost homily, Pope Francis asks Christians to reject narcissism and pessimism, **Gerard O’Connell**, May 31
4. Pope Francis calls on Christians worldwide to combat coronavirus pandemic with midday prayer on March 25, **Gerard O’Connell**, March 22
5. Pope Francis authorizes plenary indulgences and general absolution as coronavirus crisis escalates, **Gerard O’Connell**, March 20

Most viewed Dispatches

1. Internal report finds that L’Arche founder Jean Vanier engaged in decades of sexual misconduct, **Michael J. O’Loughlin**, Feb. 22
2. Joe Biden will be the second Catholic president. Here’s what you need to know about his faith. **Michael J. O’Loughlin**, Nov. 7
3. Dr. Anthony Fauci: To keep churches safe, use masks, limit singing and wait to resume Communion, **Michael J. O’Loughlin**, May 27
4. Washington Archbishop Wilton Gregory calls Trump’s visit to John Paul II Shrine ‘reprehensible,’ **Michael J. O’Loughlin**, June 2
5. Pope Francis declares support for same-sex civil unions for the first time as pope, **Michael J. O’Loughlin**, Oct. 21

Sources: Data cover the period from Dec. 1, 2019, to Nov. 30, 2020. Only stories original to America Media are counted; each story is counted for the month of its highest readership only. Monthly data is based on estimates of total time spent viewing each story by online readers. Some content is posted on the America Media website before it appears in print.

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Seminaries need clear sexual harassment guidelines to prevent clerical abuse

Theodore E. McCarrick, middle row center. Detail from the official portrait of the class of 1958, St. Joseph's Seminary, Yonkers, N.Y.

When the former cardinal Theodore McCarrick was bishop of the Diocese of Metuchen, N.J., he routinely asked seminarians to join him at his vacation home, visits that regularly included the bishop sharing a bed with one of his visitors. Stories like these led to Mr. McCarrick's downfall, as was laid out in a recent Vatican investigation into allegations of harassment and abuse.

But a group of theologians, bishops and administrative professionals say that even decades later, seminaries and formation houses are still learning how best to equip their students to recognize and report inappropriate behavior. According to a working group assembled by the University of Notre Dame theologian John Cavadini, leaders should strive to implement five benchmarks for protecting faculty, staff and students.

There is a need, the group agreed, for regular training on harassment policies, clarity around reporting and investigating, support for victims, periodic review of policies, and the ability to apply guidelines to specific conditions.

"It's not just policy training but part of the seminarian's human and pastoral formation. These seminarians are going to be priests, and we want them to go away from the seminary formed in the kind of culture that takes this seriously," Mr. Cavadini, who directs the McGrath Institute for Church Life, told **America**.

According to research released last year by the McGrath Institute and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, 6 percent of active Catholic seminarians surveyed in 2019 said they had been subject to sexual harassment, abuse or misconduct.

Eighty percent of those who said they were subject to harassment or abuse said the perpetrator was another seminarian. Most seminarians who said they were subject to harassment did not report it to seminary leaders; among those who did, most said their claims were not taken seriously.

The Rev. John Kartje is the rector of Mundelein Seminary, in suburban Chicago. Father Kartje said one of the most important tools to protect students is creating independent structures to report harassment and abuse, and making students aware of how to use them.

"Let seminarians know there is a zero-tolerance policy, that this is the expectation of anyone in seminary today, and make it clear that this is never something that should be suffered in silence," said Father Kartje, who was a member of the working group.

Some laypeople who teach at Catholic seminaries say seminarians deserve basic protections from sexual harassment and commend the group's efforts, but they also noted the task of curbing sexual harassment and holding institutions accountable should not be left to students. "Seminarians are not experts on sexual violence," Julie Hanlon Rubio, an ethicist at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University in California, told **America**. "Calls for better training on policies, reporting and victim support are important, but most social science research on clergy sexual abuse suggests a need for better sexual formation, including study of sexual violence, sex and gender."

Seminarians are also preparing for life in an institution that requires celibacy. Dawn Eden Goldstein has taught at Catholic seminaries in the United Kingdom and the United States. She said seminarians need to be guaranteed protections as robust as those offered any other students but that sexuality and celibacy must be addressed more candidly.

"Seminarians should have particular protections against sexual harassment because with the discipline of celibacy comes the opportunity for predators to use that discipline to hide and pressure and blackmail," she said.

Michael O'Loughlin, *national correspondent*.
Twitter: @MikeOLoughlin.



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Bernard Prusak (King's College) and Jennifer Reed-Bouley (College of St. Mary)

Tuesday, February 2, 7-8:15 p.m., CST



WHAT STUDENTS? WHICH MISSION?

Laura Nichols (Santa Clara University),

Tuesday, February 16, 7-8:15 p.m., CST



HELP WANTED: LABOR POLICIES, PROBLEMS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Joseph McCartin (Georgetown University)

Tuesday, March 2, 7-8:15 p.m., CST



BEYOND PATRIARCHY: WOMEN AND LAY LEADERSHIP

Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos (University of Detroit Mercy)

Tuesday, March 23, 7-8:15 p.m., CST

PUBLIC LECTURES

CATHOLIC IMAGINATION LECTURE
"A Canticle for Leibowitz and the
Monastic Figure in a Dystopian
World"

Fr. Stephen Gregg, O. Cist.
(University of Dallas)

Tuesday, January 26
noon-1:15 p.m., CST

PUBLICATION LECTURE:
"Chicago Católico: Making Catholic
Parishes Mexican"

Deborah E. Kanter (Albion College)

Tuesday, February 23
4-5:15 p.m., CST

2021 SAINT JOHN HENRY NEWMAN
LECTURE:
"From the Rust Belt to Rome:
The Conversion of a Working-Class
Atheist"

Jennifer Frey (University of South
Carolina)

Thursday, March 25
4-5:15 p.m., CST

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After latest violence in France, a counterintuitive proposal for ending terror



President Emmanuel Macron of France doubled down on an intention first proposed in early October to root out what he called “Islamic separatism” from French society after a series of horrific attacks shocked the nation. On Oct. 16 a schoolteacher in Paris was beheaded by an extremist, and just two weeks later, on Oct. 29, three people were brutally murdered in Nice at the Basilica of Notre-Dame. Mr. Macron plans enhanced secular oversight of the Muslim community that will lead to “an Islam in France that can be an Islam of the Enlightenment.”

Jocelyn Cesari, a professor of religion and politics at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom and at Georgetown University in Washington, worries that the president’s moves to counter the threat of homegrown extremism may in the end “boomerang,” leading only to greater alienation of Muslim youth from French society. Her counterintuitive advice for Mr. Macron and other Western leaders seeking to tamp down Islamic extremism is not to tighten controls over religious expression but to make more civic room for it.

Muslims in modern France, Professor Cesari said, already live at a socioeconomic flashpoint, targets of heightened social surveillance because of religion, race, immigration status, poverty and “urban disenfranchisement.”

“[From] the moment they step out until they go back home and turn on the evening news, everything tells them

that Islam is wrong,” she said.

Today about 5.7 million Muslims live in France, about 9 percent of the republic’s total population. As its Muslim population has grown in recent decades because of immigration and higher birth rates, France has struggled to absorb these newcomers.

The secular tradition in French, known as *laïcité*, makes “illegitimate any visible signs of religion in public space,” said Professor Cesari. French-born, she is intimately familiar with the demands of *laïcité*. To appear “as a believer” in France, she explained, places “a doubt on you...a suspicion that you are not a good citizen.”

In countries more at ease with religious pluralism, displays of religious expression in civic spaces, whether wearing a crucifix or a hijab, are widely understood as acceptable. But under *laïcité*, the French state enforces secular unity by strict regulation of religious expression.

Professor Cesari worries that in France today it has become impossible to “distinguish between a radical politicized act and a religious act, so the more conservative you look as a Muslim, the higher the probability that you are going to be seen as a radical terrorist.”

Without being able to make such distinctions, she fears, security forces that have been given elevated powers to contain the threat of extremist terror may only be contributing to more of it.



CNS photo/Lionel Urman, Panoramic via Reuters

Tributes to murder victims outside the Basilica of Notre-Dame in Nice, France, on Nov. 1, as French bishops conducted a "penitential rite of reparation," following a deadly attack at the church on Oct. 29.

Contemporary extremism is not emerging from the practitioners of traditional Islam who would be swept up in new secularist controls, she said, noting that mainstream Muslim imams and organizations in France have already stepped forward to condemn the attacks of October.

The "politicized Islam" that is driving much of the extremism connects most often with young people who have in fact become disconnected from communal sources of Islamic tradition, those adrift in the West who latch on to an alternative understanding of Islam, Professor Cesari said, that they find on the internet or through social media.

"You need a lot of political courage to draw the line between fighting against terrorism and tolerating religious conservatives," Professor Cesari said, in a time when "the lines have been blurred completely" and political dividends are reaped by leaders who can appear toughest on Islamic expression. Vigilance is necessary, of course, but her research demonstrates "if young people are educated in their religion, they tend to be less vulnerable to radical claims."

Kevin Clarke, chief correspondent.
Twitter: @ClarkeAtAmerica.



GOODNEWS: An online prayer service makes room for all

Moira Egan, an academic advisor at Queens College in New York, began a Zoom prayer service on Nov. 17 by providing those joining online with an "image description" of her appearance—details that help people who are visually impaired perceive what is happening in online content, fliers, events or video. Ms. Egan herself was born blind.

Ability Xavier, an advocacy group composed of parishioners at the Church of St. Francis Xavier in Manhattan, organized the online service. Its members have long pressed for the church to become more accessible and inclusive.

Sometimes, Ms. Egan said, churches send the unspoken message that "you're welcome as long as you figure out how to get yourself welcomed." That means excluding a great many potential parishioners—one in five people in the United States live with a disability. She said that when a church like Xavier makes strides toward becoming more accessible and inclusive, it is really just living out a belief that all people are valued.

The members of Ability Xavier hope that the online prayer service and the parish's commitment to greater inclusion serve as signs of hope both for the Xavier community and other parishes. Start with a simple question, Ms. Egan said. "If somebody accessed information or traveled or moved through their environment differently than you did, as you're planning an event [think about] how would they enjoy it and get something out of it."

Making church an accessible, inclusive space is simply Jesus' call, said Allison Connelly, a third-year master's of divinity student. "We know that God doesn't ask people to change who they are before being in community with them," Ms. Connelly said. "We don't know God fully until we have gotten to witness how every person knows God."

Erika Rasmussen, O'Hare Media Fellow.
Twitter: @erika_razz.

INSIDE AMERICA

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EDITORS' PICKS

Jesuit tools to help you survive the election (and its aftermath)

James Martin, S.J.

Coronavirus Prayer

Kerry Weber

I participated in Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine trial—and it taught me a lot about Christian hope

John Feister

Faith in the time of Coronavirus

James Martin, S.J.



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EMMA GREEN



2020 GEORGE W. HUNT, S.J. PRIZE RECIPIENT

Emma Green, the 2020 George W. Hunt, S.J. Prize recipient, reflects on her responsibility as a journalist in a time marred by misinformation and a world-wide pandemic. Green is a staff writer at The Atlantic, where she covers religion and politics, including the 2016 and 2018 elections, conservative religious subcultures, minority religious communities, federal court cases and social issues.

The George W. Hunt, S.J. Prize is awarded by the trustees of America Media and the Saint Thomas More Chapel and Center at Yale University.

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CHURCH MEETS WORLD

CHURCH MEETS WORLD: THE AMERICA MAGAZINE PODCAST

What does God think about our free time? We know from the Judeo-Christian observance of Sabbath that we are invited to make a spiritual practice of rest. But we've also heard the old proverb "idle hands are the devil's workshop." And in our modern, fast-paced culture and capitalist economy, leisure time is often an afterthought. Then again, for many of us the Covid-19 pandemic has radically restructured our days and disrupted our boundaries around work, home and rest.

In this episode of "Church Meets World," Maggi Van Dorn speaks with Catholic ethicist Conor Kelly, author of *The Fullness of Free Time: A Theological Account of Leisure and Recreation in the Moral Life*, and writer Jonathan Malesic, about how to make the most of our time. And why, in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, it is actually a sin not to enjoy recreation. This podcast episode was inspired by the work of Conor Kelly, whose article about television and streaming video you can read on page 10 of this issue.

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Jesuits in the Plague of St. Charles

By Aaron Pidel

A model of pastoral discernment for today

When the Catholic Church opted to go virtual for its Holy Week services this past year, I had misgivings about the relative scale of values this implied. Jesus certainly teaches us to prioritize spiritual health over temporal concerns: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Mt 10:28). As a Jesuit, moreover, I am haunted by the stories of forebears who put themselves in harm’s way to minister to the faithful. “What are the sons of Loyola for,” Blessed Miguel Agustín Pro, S.J., asked in a letter written shortly before his martyrdom, “if they flee at the first flare?” Does the cancellation of the sacraments and ministries because of the coronavirus reflect a loss of faith or at least of nerve?

With this rather unsettling question in mind, I began to study the historical record, especially the pastoral

response of Jesuits in Italy to the so-called Plague of St. Charles in Milan (1576-78). What I found surprised me. Even then, the Jesuits restricted sacramental offerings to preserve temporal life, though not life for its own sake. But by strategically tempering their boldness, they found themselves feuding with none other than St. Charles Borromeo. The “case study” may provide a more forgiving standard by which to assess the contemporary church’s pastoral response.

Before describing in detail the Jesuit pastoral strategy and its logic, however, it is helpful to note a few key similarities and differences between *la peste di San Carlo* and our novel coronavirus pandemic. It is sometimes assumed that early moderns had no notion of interpersonal contagion and thus of the danger plague ministers posed not



The people of Tournai bury victims of the Black Death. Miniature by Pierart dou Tiel.

only to themselves but to others. This is false. By the 16th century, the Milanese board of health subscribed to contagion theory, taking this as the justification for confining the sick to an isolated hospital (a *lazaretto*) outside Milan's city walls. The pestilence of Milan proved far more virulent than Covid-19. Most estimate that over 18 months it claimed about 17,000 Milanese, roughly 15 percent of the city's population. The proportional death toll in the United States would be nearly 50 million. In short, the Milanese Jesuits faced a health crisis that, though analogous to our own, belonged to a different order of magnitude.

How did the Jesuits in Milan respond to a pestilence assumed to be highly contagious? According to A. Lynn Martin's book *Plague? Jesuit Accounts of Epidemic Disease in the 16th Century*, they adopted what was more or less the

“official” Jesuit policy for plague-time ministry. With the blessing of the Jesuit superior general, Everard Mercurian, they isolated the majority of Jesuits while dedicating a few to vital spiritual ministries for plague victims, especially confession. At that time Milan had Jesuit communities attached to both the Collegio di Brera and the parish of San Fedele. They sequestered the teachers and scholars of the college, by far the larger group, but left a handful of volunteers at the Casa di San Fedele to care for plague victims. Two of the Jesuit volunteers fell to the pestilence almost immediately, and others then volunteered to take their place. Though the Jesuits did not shy from heroism, they channeled their heroic impulses so as to reap the greatest spiritual dividends from their investment of life.

This measured response, however, did not please all.

The 16th-century Jesuits, much like contemporary pastors, did not scruple to curtail sacramental services when confronted with epidemic disease.

St. Charles Borromeo, then the cardinal archbishop of Milan, reproached the Society bitterly when he learned that the Jesuits of San Fedele were not giving Communion to the sick but only hearing their confessions. One of the Jesuits at the college, Bernardino Viottino, revealed in a letter written to Father Mercurian that he tried in vain to placate the archbishop with theological authorities. Having adduced weighty opinions against the existence of a strict obligation to dispense Communion to plague victims, Viottino concluded, “Monsignor, we teach the doctrine that we have from the Holy Doctors and nothing else.” Cardinal Borromeo is said to have retorted, “You are not a bishop, and to say that we should do that is none of your business; I do not like this doctrine and I do not want it.” He doubtlessly preferred the approach of the Capuchins, who sent their friars en masse to minister in the *lazaretto*, losing 10 all told. The Society of Jesus clearly used different criteria to determine the scope of its response.

What principles guided their deliberation? The two most significant were indifference, in the Jesuit sense, and the more universal good. Jesuit indifference finds classic expression in the “First Principle and Foundation,” the introductory consideration in the Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius. After noting that the purpose of human persons is to “praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their souls,” the First Principle and Foundation draws a rather bracing conclusion: “To do this, I must make myself indifferent to all created things, in re-

gard to everything which is left to my freedom of will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on my own part, I ought not to seek health more than sickness....” This indifference to health implies, of course, that a good Jesuit will risk his health when the salvation of souls calls for it. But indifference to sickness, also implied, means that a good Jesuit will not insist on reckless self-immolation, either. The option to be chosen should depend solely on its conduciveness to the end in view: divine service.

According to the Jesuit *Constitutions*, however, this greater divine service is practically synonymous with the “more universal good”: “The more universal the good is, the more it is divine.” This second principle dictates that Jesuit superiors, looking to the “universal” church rather than to a single region, should prioritize missions that meet more urgent spiritual needs or have a more far-reaching spiritual influence.

Given this standard for the choice of missions, one easily sees why the Jesuits arrived at a prudential judgment different from that of Cardinal Borromeo, whose pastoral horizon remained his single, plague-ridden diocese. As members of an international religious order, by contrast, the Jesuits’ horizon included a far-flung but chronically understaffed educational enterprise. In 1575, the Jesuits had 3,905 members and 210 schools, many of them in religious battleground regions like Germany. In light of this situation, they continued to favor the policy Juan de Polanco proposed to St. Peter Canisius already in 1562:

The shortage of members that we have in Germany obliges us to conserve them as best we can for the divine service and the common good. Although we ought to prefer the good of another’s soul to our own life, we should not expose the life of an effective servant for the consolation of one person, because if the servant lives he could help many souls.

Having different responsibilities than Cardinal Borromeo and different customary ministries than the Capuchins, Jesuit superiors judged that the “more universal good” would ordinarily be served by mothballing their teaching corps.

Compared with the approach of the Milanese Jesuits to epidemic disease, our contemporary church’s response shows both instructive differences and comforting similarities. On the side of differences, the Milanese Jesuits prioritized confession as the sacrament least safely delayed. It

would have puzzled them to see how some parishes during the pandemic effectively suppressed confession or reinstated it last of all the sacraments.

On the side of similarities, the 16th-century Jesuits, much like contemporary pastors, did not scruple to curtail sacramental services when confronted with epidemic disease. Though some then doubtlessly sequestered themselves out of excessive attachment to earthly life, there is good reason to think that many remained truly indifferent. Impartially reckoning that their longevity better served the “more universal good,” they exhibited a kind of selfless self-preservation. I like to think that many in the contemporary church, whether ordained or lay, are also so motivated.

The 16th-century Jesuit pastoral strategy suggests how one can square the Gospel’s scale of values with a plague-time curtailment of the sacraments. For those Jesuits, the sacramental suspension reflected not an excessive fear of what can “kill the body” but a prudential judgment about what can save more souls. Even Blessed Miguel Pro admitted this in principle. Just after asking rhetorically whether the “sons of Loyola” could ever flee, he hedged humbly: “I am not speaking in general; some should certainly be spared because they will be very useful someday.”

Blessed Miguel Pro’s words thus cut two ways. They remind Christians that opting for self-preservation is not always “selling out” or diluting the Gospel. But they also remind Christians that from the perspective of the Gospel, the point of abstaining from the sacraments for a season is not to live longer but by living longer, to live more usefully.

Aaron Pidel, S.J., is an assistant professor of theology at Marquette University.

Crossing El Rio San Pedro, Puebla, Mexico

By Gary Stein

After four hours on a horse
Padre says if the water’s too high
we’ll turn back,
and the small Indian village
will miss Communion again.

The river proves hard to read
so he sends me first
on the shorter horse.

Current foams my ankles,
then rises to our flanks
and saddle bags.
Hooves wobble on rock
and a shock of river
flashes up my jeans.

Suddenly we lift off bottom,
pistons blurring beneath me.
He snorts froth as his muzzle dips
and dips beneath the surface.

We swim toward peasants
waiting in a stone church
for what we bring,
waiting for what brought us:
release from the ground we know,
a ride through startling water
on the broad, slippery back
of an ordinary beast.

Gary Stein’s *Touring the Shadow Factory* won the *Brick Road Poetry Press* annual competition. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poet Lore* and *Penn Review*, among other publications.

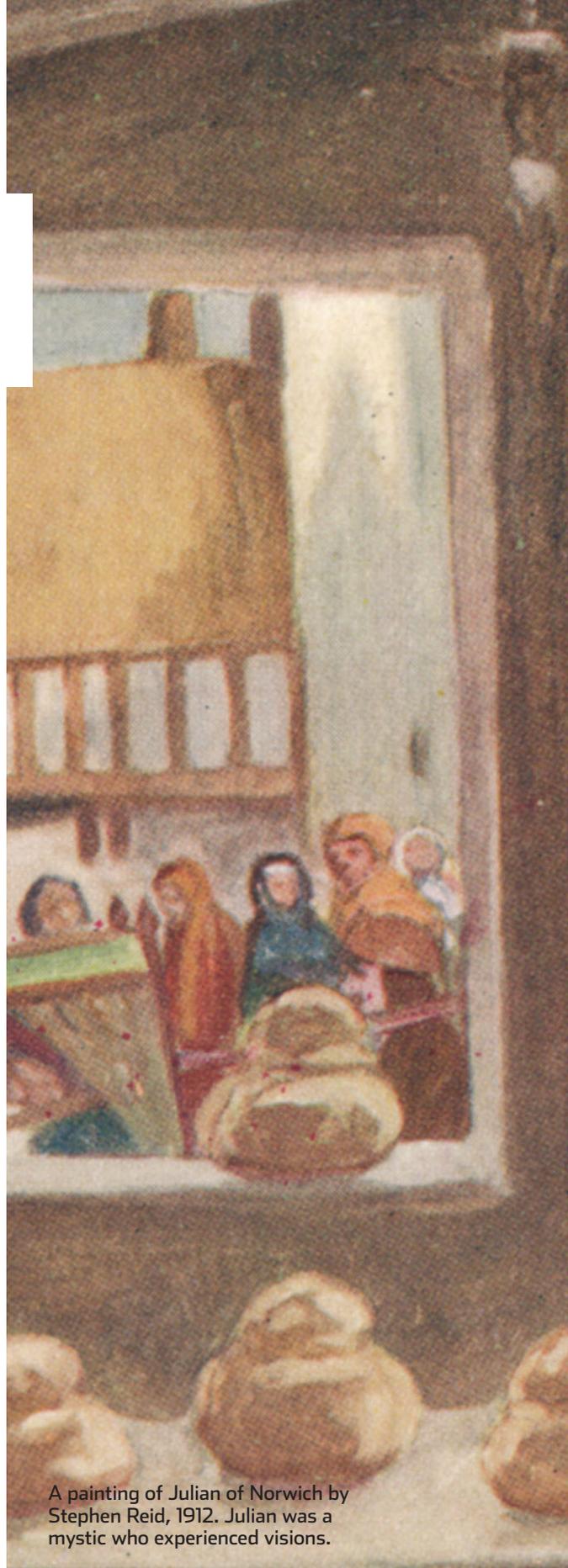
WHY WE BECAME MYSTICS

What Julian of Norwich can teach us about oneness with God

By Kaya Oakes

A woman is walled into a small room, which is attached to the side of a church. In that room, there is not much she can do other than contemplate and pray. There are two small holes carved into the walls. One faces the outside, and people approach it to ask her for advice and prayers; the other faces inside, into the church. Through this window she can receive blessings and the Eucharist. She will never leave this room until she dies. Its bricks were laid to seal her in—to make her an anchoress, or a kind of religious hermit.

We do not know much about how she passes her days except for the writing she leaves behind. Wildly imaginative and sometimes hallucinatory, her recollection of the visions she had had during an illness in her previous life, titled *Revelations of Divine Love*, will survive the medieval era as the oldest extant book written by a woman in English. We do not know her real name or how she came to be named for the church to which her cell was attached and the city in which that church stood. We do not know why she chose that cell, except that women had few choices about their lives in her era. To us, she is known as Julian of Norwich, a solitary seeker of God, living through an era of sickness and fear. She is also a key to understanding the mystical experiences



A painting of Julian of Norwich by Stephen Reid, 1912. Julian was a mystic who experienced visions.



Almay



Our understanding of mysticism is rooted in the ascetic practices of monastics who fled society to immerse themselves in silence.

many people have experienced during our own era of sickness and fear.

Mysticism, broadly defined, is the transcendent experience of an encounter with God. For Catholic mystics like Julian, Hildegard von Bingen, St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, it takes the form of a vision. For others, it is akin to the “still, small voice,” a moment of encounter with the ineffable that becomes transformational to their spiritual lives.

Since Covid-19 stripped away many of the distractions with which we would normally fill our days and forced us to slow down, a renewed interest in contemplative practice has meant that more people have time to be open to mystical experiences. These experiences can include a new appreciation for encounters with nature, hearing favorite music in new ways, and deeper and more honest conversations with beloveds. In these moments, we sometimes experience what Celtic Christians refer to as the feeling we are in “thin places,” where the veil between our physical, earthbound lives and something greater than ourselves is momentarily pulled back.

Kevin Johnson, who co-hosts the podcast “Encountering Silence,” says that mysticism is something that goes beyond a single experience and is “only a piece of the puzzle” of the lifelong practice of meditation and contemplation. For mystics like Julian, the writing that emerges from these encounters is a kind of visionary literature, an attempt to “put words on something that’s ineffable.” And we know mysticism is not that uncommon, since it is not confined to the Christian tradition. There are records of mystical experiences ranging from the Buddha’s moment of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree to the Jewish kabbalah to the poetry of Sufi Muslim mystics like Rumi. For Christians, however, our understanding of mysticism is rooted in the ascetic practices of monastics who fled society to immerse

themselves in silence.

In the early church, the Desert Fathers and Mothers experienced mysticism through contemplation, the silent practice of meditation. These ammas and abbas also withdrew from society to put themselves through what my spiritual director sometimes refers to as an extended psychological experiment. What happens if a person devotes all their attention, longings and waking hours not to the material world but to God? In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, we are told that a hermit in the 300s said contemplation and mysticism involve only a few steps. “Take care to be silent. Empty your mind. Attend to your meditation in the fear of God, whether you are resting or at work.”

Evagrius, one of the first monks to record the sayings of the Desert Fathers and later a desert father himself, taught that mysticism required a threefold practice of purgation, illumination and unification. In ordinary language, this means that to have that mystical experience of encounter with God, individuals must first empty themselves of distractions, then be open to enlightenment; only then can a person achieve that elusive oneness with God or window into eternity. As Evagrius put it, “A man in chains cannot run. Nor can the mind that is enslaved to passion see the place of spiritual prayer.”

For contemporary people, Mr. Johnson describes mysticism as “a whole other level of reality that opens up” when people learn to sit silently and pray. “And it was always there. It’s nothing new. It’s not extraordinary.” Mr. Johnson says that the philosopher Martin Buber referred to this state as embodied engagement, letting the words, ideas and experiences that race through our minds drop away so we can be open to something deeper.

But one of the things we learn from Julian is that sometimes the experience of emptiness and silence comes from outside of us, not from within. Julian lived through several cycles of the plague and at one point, she writes, wished herself sick so that she might identify with the suffering Christ. But when sickness came, she also had a vision of Christ that revealed to her that suffering is not necessarily the best path to oneness with God. In Julian’s vision, Christ takes up our suffering and unites his own suffering with ours to give us freedom. Oneness with God is not about suffering itself, but about accepting that God is still present in our suffering. In her vision of the world held in God’s hands like a hazelnut, Julian explains that this understanding “lasts and ever shall, for God loves it.” This is why she is also able to repeatedly tell us that in spite of whatever we are living through, “all will be well.” The profound consola-

The Covid-19 pandemic has stripped away many of our usual distractions and, at times, opened spaces for greater contemplation.



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tion in the midst of the chaos and pain that she experienced can resonate in unexpected ways for many of us who feel increasingly isolated today.

Since the pandemic began, I have noticed how quiet my normally noisy city has become. I live one street from a freeway offramp, and on an average day, cars and trucks would have begun vibrating and honking me into awareness as early as 5 a.m. These days, the sounds are merely occasional, the whoosh of an essential worker putting their tires on the road. Some of us work at home, anchorites tethered to our Wi-Fi connections, where we peer not through windows into the outside world like Julian, but into virtual windows that lead us into other people's rooms, where they sit peering back into our rooms, monastic cells upon monastic cells, multiplying and dividing as we log on and off.

The extended psychological experiment of our own era will not end in the same way that Julian's plague years did, since science and medicine have advanced so far be-

yond what she could have imagined; and thus science and medicine will, we can hope, find effective treatment for the virus or a vaccine. But we are still watching the deaths pile up, dreading the long-term health effects, the economic devastation, the profound loneliness and the global mental health issues that will remain long after the virus is vanquished.

Many of us who are spiritual directors have been asked where God is in this pandemic, but we have also heard reports of God becoming manifest in unexpected ways, of people experiencing startling encounters with the divine in the absence of collective physical worship. Because the sureties of our past lives as they existed less than a year ago have been steadily stripped away, what remains is our ability to live in the present moment alone. For religiously inclined people, this means that we may be moving closer to God in the simple awareness that nothing is guaranteed.

Understanding that we are not in control is, in some



Part of Julian’s vision of the world is that sense of oneness and connectedness that is common to mystical experience.

ways, what unites us with Christ, which is what Julian eventually came to understand. “We need to fall,” she tells us in her *Revelations*, “for if we did not fall, we would not know how weak and wretched we are of ourselves, nor should we know our Maker’s marvelous love so fully.”

Because mysticism is so difficult to explain, its definition is constantly being debated, and thus it may be hard for some to believe that mystical experiences can even take place in the modern era. After all, much of what the mystics describe sounds like mental illness to our modern ears, and today we have effective mental health treatments available. The pragmatic American bent toward explaining everything away means religious experiences can more easily be dismissed as momentary distractions or flights of fancy. The commodification of “mindfulness” into apps and corporate-speak means that contemplation, too, is something to be bought and sold rather than experienced, and “new agey” practices like tarot cards and crystals that have recently experienced a revival of popularity can also be commodified.

But the Anglo-Catholic Edwardian mystic Evelyn Underhill, a British pacifist who lived through both World Wars, tells us that mysticism experienced in troubled times is meant to be a lived experience, not to be overanalyzed. “Where the philosopher guesses and argues,” she writes in *The Complete Christian Mystic*, “the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools.” This is vividly shown in Julian’s *Revelations*, where the language she uses to convey the sufferings of Christ and her own suffering and illness is sometimes downright gory, but the language used to describe transcendence, love and recovery is equally vivid.

We are all finding our own ways to contemplate. Since

the pandemic began, a friend of mine has started each day by looking up people who have died from Covid and praying for them by name. I have immersed myself in the narratives of doctors and patients, the deep-dive first-person accounts of life in an intensive care unit, trying to unpack what kind of suffering this virus is capable of unleashing, trying to move closer to what that suffering might be like as a way of contemplating where God might be met in that setting.

And as the pandemic overlapped with news of more deaths of Black Americans, with news of the destructiveness and horror that seem rampant and all-encompassing in our country, it was good to remember that Julian tells us that in times like this, “deeds are done which appear so evil to us and people suffer such terrible evils that it does not seem as though any good will ever come of them.” But when we focus on that, “we cannot find peace in the blessed contemplation of God,” whereas God is constantly nudging us back into feeling his love. “Pay attention to this now, faithfully and confidently,” God says to Julian, “and at the end of time you will truly see it in the fullness of joy.”

The poet and theologian David Russell Mosley has been reading mystical literature throughout the pandemic, and he recently returned to Julian’s work. Mr. Mosley, who grew up in a nondenominational Christian church and became a Catholic in college, encountered the work of the mystics through studies of Celtic Christianity and felt “immediately drawn to them,” he told me. His own spirituality had always included moments of “intense feeling,” and discovering Christian mysticism helped him to understand that mystics “had actually codified the things I’d experienced, and gone further.” The pandemic, he says, gave him a chance to take up some monastic practices at home with his family and to reframe the time at home as a period of spiritual reflection.

Julian, he says, offered an example of someone who “chose to go into herself,” whereas most of us were forced into a life of contemplation because of stay-at-home orders. Mr. Mosley describes encountering Julian and being “entranced” by her vision of the world, particularly by her vision of the world being held in God’s hand like a hazelnut. He calls Julian’s imagery an eschatological vision of a better world than the one we live in at the moment, “a hope that one day Christ will return, and there’ll be no more sickness, no more sadness, no more racism.” In a difficult time, particularly in a pandemic, reminders of the inevitability of death can make life seem pointless; but according to Mr. Mosley, Julian’s work is a reminder that even death is “not the end of the story.” What reading her work gave

Continued on page 36

AMERICA'S GUIDE TO RETREATS

Many of our readers are curious about retreats. What does one do on a retreat? Where does one go? What are some good retreat houses? Simply put, a retreat is an extended period of prayer, usually done in silence, and usually at a retreat house, where a team of spiritual directors helps you find God in your prayer. There are also different kinds of retreats. On a directed retreat a person meets daily with a spiritual director to discuss what is happening in prayer. A guided retreat focuses more on one topic (say, women's spirituality) and offers presentations as well as opportunities to meet with a director a few times. Preached retreats consist in listening to presentations and praying on your own, but with less opportunity for direction. And our retreat houses are also good places to connect with trained professional who will help you with regular spiritual direction.



Bellarmino Jesuit Retreat Center

420 W. County Line Road, Barrington, IL 60010
 Ph: (847) 381-1261; Email: info@jesuitretreat.org
 Website: www.jesuitretreat.org

Bellarmino Jesuit Retreat House is located on 80 acres of rolling meadows and wooded countryside 40 miles northwest of Chicago. Bellarmine offers silent retreats for men and women based on St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. Other offerings include day-long spirituality programs, 12-step recovery retreats, and directed retreats. Learn more at jesuitretreat.org.



Ignatius House Jesuit Retreat Center

6700 Riverside Drive NW, Sandy Springs, GA 30328
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 Ph: (610) 670-3642; Email: mleonowitz@jesuitcenter.org
 Website: www.jesuitcenter.org

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 Ph: (440) 884-9300; Email: info@jesuitretreatcenter.org
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Ph: (920) 231-9060; Email: office@jesuitretreathouse.org
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Website: www.loyolaonthepotomac.com

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1390 Quarton Road, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48304
Ph: (248) 644-4933; Email: office@manresa-sj.org
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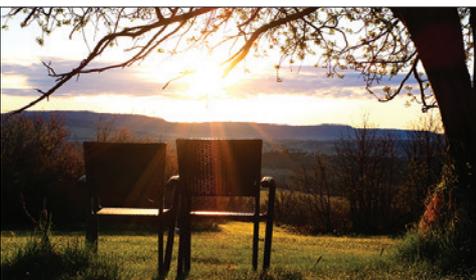
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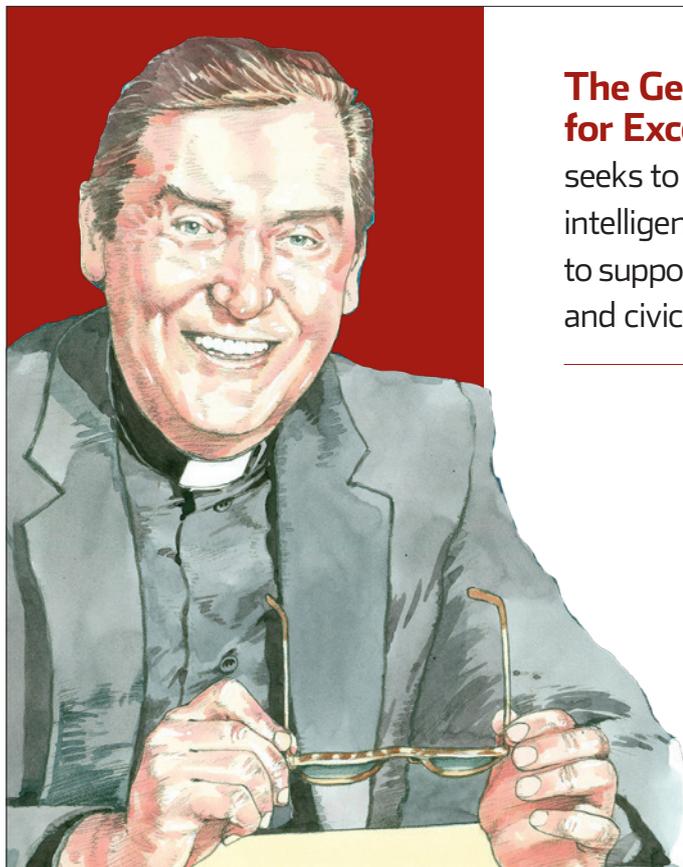
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Ph: (866) 930-1181 ext. 122 or (303) 688-4198 ext. 122
Website: www.sacredheartretreat.org

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America | MEDIA
A JESUIT MINISTRY

 **Saint Thomas More**
The Catholic Chapel & Center at Yale University

Continued from page 32

him, he says, is a sense of hope.

A part of Julian's vision of the world is that sense of oneness and connectedness that is common to mystical experience. "God loved us before he made us," she writes, "and his love has never diminished and never shall." Contemplation and mystical experiences, according to Mr. Johnson, are a way of discovering "an other inside of us," which is "the ground of God, and my neighbor. We are all of that same otherness."

Mystical experiences and contemplative practices, Mr. Johnson says, help us to disconnect from our egos and reconnect with the wild part of ourselves that is deeply intertwined with the natural and human world. In other words, they help us tap into the same overwhelming love that Julian experienced, even in a time of plague and war. For a mystic, that overwhelming love is what they know as God.

Because of this pandemic, so many of us have been staying home for months on end, with no end in sight. The safety of my community trumps my own freedom of movement, and I accept that as a form of love for my neighbor. I live with this isolation as the way things will be for some time to come. My fall classes will be online, the monastic cell of my tiny home office becoming a classroom and a

writing lab, the Zoom windows on my laptop a portal into other people's worlds. By the time this essay is published, who knows what kind of world its readers and its writer will be living in.

That, too, is mysticism, the idea that time is elastic, that we are creating things not knowing how they will be received or who will receive them, that creating is itself the time of encounter with grace. But, like immersing ourselves in Julian's visions, that sense of not knowing can free us up to understand that we are living in God's hands, in *kairos* time.

"For lack of attention," Evelyn Underhill wrote, "a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day." So, too, do a thousand visions of oneness with others elude us in this time of separation, until we notice them shimmering, just on the edge of our vision.

Kaya Oakes, a contributing writer for *America*, teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley. Her fifth book, *The Defiant Middle*, will be released in the fall of 2021.

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Pope Francis the Dreamer

*Pope Francis wants
Catholics to dare to
dream of a better
politics*

By David Albertson and Jason Blakely



Politically, the United States is facing a crisis of the real. We confront political realities of an urgency and scale not witnessed in more than a generation—from ecological death to global pandemic. But we also face a crisis of the real in a different sense.

Amidst these calamities, millions of Americans struggle to discern real news from fake, and science from conspiracy theory. As reality grows more menacing, fewer Americans are in touch with it. At the same time, the advice given by serious politicians and monks for decades as the only “realistic” way forward seems more like magical thinking with each passing day. Our entire way of life seems unchangeable, yet in need of radical intervention, lest we continue the downward spiral.

This paradoxical predicament was described by the British theorist Mark Fisher over a decade ago as “capitalist realism”: “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative.” Yet Fisher also suggests that the

crises generated by capitalism, understood properly, might awaken us from the trance. Once the realist fantasy is dispelled, our political imaginations will be free to dream quite different futures.

The prospect of imagining more hopeful futures amid

a self-destructive, unrealistic “realism” unlocks the political views of Pope Francis, whose pastoral letters and encyclicals have stirred controversy among conservatives and liberals alike. Unlike Marxists, Pope Francis embraces a utopianism not grounded in violent struggle but in a deeply Christological hope for the transformation of people and communities from the bottom up. The pope’s utopianism could already be glimpsed in his older writings, but now with his new encyclical, “Fratelli Tutti,” and his new book, *Let Us Dream*, the picture has sharpened considerably. Pope Francis is urging Catholics toward a stance of radical hope that dreams of a very different economy and different politics in the near future.

Unrealistic Realisms

In his apostolic exhortation “The Gospel of Joy” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*”) and his encyclical “*Laudato Si’*,” Pope Francis already argued against the popular economic theory that presents financialized global capitalism as the given, inescapable order of things. For Francis, naturalizing capitalism not only falsifies reality; it also hides a grave spiritual danger. Once capitalism appears as the only realistic way of life, Christians succumb to the temptation to view it as the will of God.

For example, in “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” Francis writes that the trickle-down theory of economic distribution—often presented as a scientific finding of economics—“has never been confirmed by the facts” and “expresses a crude and naïve trust in...the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system” (No. 54). All the consequences of unregulated free markets, from extreme poverty and homelessness to environmental degradation, appear as the reality of the world governed by God’s will. In Francis’ words, all bow before the golden calf of a “deified market” that consumes the weak and defenseless with indifference.

Likewise, in “*Laudato Si’*,” Francis observes that the common faith of free-market economists in infinite or unlimited growth “is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods” (No. 106). Here the danger is not the acceptance of an artificial order of things as natural but a disordered relationship to creation. Rather than nature being understood as a precious and finite gift to be cared for, the world appears as a system of objects to be exploited ceaselessly for the extraction of material value. Francis condemns the “magical conception of the market” that allows capitalists to say: “Let us allow the invisible

forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage” (Nos. 190, 123).

In his post-synodal exhortation to young people in 2019, “Christ Is Alive” (“Christus Vivit,”), Francis adds a surprising element to his critique of capitalism’s false realism. He turns his attention to the way consumer culture enlists young people into a “cult of youth” that worships the “idol” of the youthful body and renders them more manipulable for financial and political profit. In the mirages of celebrity and mass entertainment, the past no longer exists and the future never arrives, leaving the young marooned in the escapist dream of an eternal present. To resist this fate, not only the young but all the church’s faithful must recover the practice of authentic hope and dreaming.

Faithful Christians as Youthful Dreamers

Part of what has made Pope Francis’ political views so difficult to grasp is his refusal to limit himself to an abstract ideological platform. Instead, the pope asks the faithful to go deeper, even to undergo a conversion in how they relate to politics. This is a spiritual stance that refuses to idolize either present realities or some past golden age and instead asks us to risk a dream of very different political futures.

In this way, Francis participates in the long tradition of Christian social utopianism. Beginning with St. Thomas More and sustained up through Dorothy Day, Christian utopianism has deployed the imagination to criticize current politics radically while daring to propose a sweeping vision of an alternative future. Like More, the pope never assumes history will automatically ascend to enlightenment by necessity, as in progressive liberalism or Marxism. But neither does he accept the cultural pessimism or civilizational nostalgia one often encounters among Catholic conservatives in the United States. The Christian utopian sees all the violence and injustice of the current order with open eyes, yet rather than worship the powers that be, insists on a complete transformation of our social world out of fidelity to Christian hope.

Pope Francis does not dictate the content of these dreams to us. Instead, he exhorts his flock to engage in the creative work of dreaming together with him. This stance of faithful, hopeful and critical dreaming is newly evident in “Christus Vivit” (2019) and “Querida Amazonia” (2020).

Utopian dreaming counteracts the world’s false realisms and dethrones the false cult of youth by replacing it

with a true one, that of Jesus Christ. It is almost comical to have to state it clearly: “Jesus was a young person,” Pope Francis writes, “in today’s terms, a young adult” (C.V., No. 23). And the risen Lord remains young to this day. In the new life of the resurrection, Jesus only intensifies his inherent youth as “the true youthfulness of a world grown old” (No. 32).

The youthfulness of Jesus Christ is his willingness to dream the Father’s “creative dream” of communion and solidarity (C.V., Nos. 193-94). The kingdom of heaven is a communion of those spiritually young enough to remain open to imagining the future. But mysteriously, Jesus is also himself God’s dream: “Jesus can bring all the young people of the Church together in a single dream,” the pope writes, “a dream whose name is Jesus, planted by the Father in the confidence that it would grow and live in every heart. A concrete dream who is a person, running through our veins, thrilling our hearts and making them dance” (No. 157). The church’s youth does not come from the world’s novel ideas but from the Spirit and the Eucharist.

To remain faithfully young means feeling a “healthy restlessness” that makes one bold enough to venture “trials and experiments” (Nos. 137-38). The young possess a “certain audacity” and “critical spirit” (No. 190). Youthful dreamers are “meant to dream great things” (No. 15). In a striking passage in “Christus Vivit,” Pope Francis underscores his remarks from the 2013 World Youth Day:

Young people taking to the streets! The young want to be protagonists of change. Please, do not leave it to others to be protagonists of change. You are the ones who hold the future! Through you, the future enters into the world....I ask you to build the future, to work for a better world. Dear young people, please, do not be bystanders in life. Get involved! Jesus was not a bystander. He got involved. Don’t stand aloof, but immerse yourself in the reality of life, as Jesus did. (No. 174)

Francis asks the spiritually “retired” not to mock the daring dreams of the youthful in their midst (C.V., No. 143). “Jesus had no use for adults who looked down on the young,” Francis pointedly observes (No. 14). “A Church always on the defensive,” he adds, “loses her youth and turns into a museum.” But the utopianism of the young

keeps the church humble, attentive to God and close to the poor (No. 41).

Christian Politics of the Future

Pope Francis asks the young to risk their utopian dreams as gifts to the church, and he is not afraid to add his own. He tells us that God granted him a “renewed youth” following his election to the papacy (C.V., No. 160). In “Querida Amazonia,” Francis utters his own youthful dream, a utopian program if ever there was one, strengthened by a lifetime spent exercising his imagination in Ignatian contemplation. The exhortation opens with a fourfold dream that mirrors the dimensions of Francis’ integral ecology in “Laudato Si’”: economic, cultural, environmental and ecclesial.

“I dream,” he writes, “of an Amazon region that fights for the rights of the poor, the original peoples and the least of our brothers and sisters,” even as global capitalists have ruined local economies across Latin America over decades. He dreams of a region that hastens to defend the dignity of indigenous cultures, even as European Catholics openly mocked them during the synod. He dreams of preserving the overwhelming beauty of the Amazon, even as unprecedented fires rage through its heart—a fragile, impossible “dream made of water” (Q.A., No. 43). And he dreams of a future church “giving the Church new faces with Amazonian features” (No. 7), particularly the faces of women (Nos. 99-100).

In the opening chapters of “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis strikes a similar note. “How important it is to dream together,” he writes. “By ourselves, we risk seeking mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together” (No. 8). He acknowledges that policies for providing “land, housing, and work for all” will sound “wildly unrealistic.” Yet rather than compromise, Christians should insist upon an “alternative way of thinking” (No. 127).

Throughout *Let Us Dream*, his reflections on the pandemic point in the same direction:

A gap has opened up between the realities and challenges we face and the recipes and solutions available to us.... The categories and assumptions that we used before to navigate our world are no longer effective. Things we never imagined would take place...we are now living through, and what we once considered normal will increasingly no

longer be. It is an illusion to think that we can go back to where we were.... One of my hopes for this crisis we are living is that we come back to contact with reality. We need to move from the virtual to the real, from the abstract to the concrete....

If the choice is between saving lives and saving the financial system, which will we choose? ... For me it’s clear: we must redesign the economy, so that it can offer to every person access to a dignified existence while protecting and regenerating the natural world. What I also see...is a people’s movement calling for profound change, a change that flows from the roots, from the concrete needs of people, that arises from the dignity and freedom of the people.

Pope Francis asks the church to disentangle itself from the world’s moribund realisms, which only serve to excuse our indifference to the weakest and poorest around us. His politics are neither liberal nor conservative, but a vision of fraternity grounded in utopian hope. We can remain frightened, grasping at the security of a sentimentalized past. We can remain captive to the market logic of the present, unable to imagine an alternative to its endless violence. Or we can devote ourselves to the task of audacious dreaming of a radically different future, awaiting the most unexpected solidarities to come.

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Our Screens, Ourselves

By Marcus Mescher

Screen time is now officially part of Catholic Social Teaching

In “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis urges us to commit ourselves to practice universal love in the pursuit of inclusive and interdependent solidarity. Even before the pandemic—but especially since Covid-19 disrupted our routines and changed how we gather—our social context was marked by encounters mediated through our screens, thanks to digital technology and social media.

Francis updates the canon of Catholic social thought by scrutinizing these digital tools and networks. “Fratelli Tutti” invites us to consider how our screens too often reflect and reinforce “reductive anthropological visions” that distort inherent human dignity, obscure rights and responsibilities, sow distrust and exacerbate social division (No. 22).

In Paragraphs 42 through 50, Francis highlights the dangers of digital communication: the lack of privacy; habits of voyeurism and constant surveillance; misinformation and emotional manipulation; contempt for others expressed—sometimes anonymously—by unchecked aggression; the vanity of catering everything to our interests and preferences while being able to swipe or click past anything unpleasant; the problems of a “cancel culture” that prefers to excise rather than engage what may be disagreeable.

The pope is right to point out these threats to human dignity and community. The church has not given adequate attention to the moral impact of screens on our identity, agency and relationships. Tristan Harris, a former tech

designer at Google, warns that if we do not become more aware of the influence of digital technology on us, we will fail to prevent the trend of “human downgrading” that makes us more dependent on these tools.

From a theological and moral perspective, we must consider how these digital devices and networks can cultivate vice and induce people to sin. Although these digital tools are not inherently good or bad, their moral value depends on how they are used, both in terms of intention and circumstances, as well as the effects of their use.

We may see platforms like Facebook, for example, as harmless ways to access information or entertainment, to enhance efficiency or forge more connections. In reality, we are the product Facebook seeks while the company collects and sells user data, predicts and parlays preferences and disillusion some users while emboldening others. The result is not just more divisiveness but more radicalization that normalizes fear, disgust and even violence.

Following rampant misinformation campaigns in the run-up to the 2016 election, Facebook finally took action against “troll farms” hoping to sway voters in the recent 2020 presidential election. Facebook has made some changes to their policies, including a decision not to run political ads the week before the election in November. Current and former employees, though, continue to express concern about what is at stake for our democracy. Re-

cently, the former Facebook engineer Ashok Chandwaney accused the company of “profiting off hate” in the United States and around the globe.

This should give pause to every Facebook account holder. The cause for alarm reaches beyond the compare-and-despair dynamic so prevalent on social media, or the diminishing rates of empathy and rising rates of depression, anxiety and social isolation due to impoverished interactions online. If our newsfeeds remain echo chambers that confirm our own views, we may have fewer opportunities to practice humility in striving to listen and learn from others who look or think differently from us. This is an especially important moral consideration in a social context where the majority of Americans have racially segregated social bonds, which may explain why white Americans struggle to understand the experiences of Black Americans.

While “Fratelli Tutti” underscores how digital media and connections undermine social friendship, the encyclical fails to address how they can be harnessed for a “culture of encounter” that leads to “communities of belonging” (Nos. 30, 36). Francis makes clear that our screens will not save us, but no viable solution will be found in a Luddite rejection of technology.

Francis’ misgivings about these digital tools and networks are ironic because his vision of church reform includes decentralization and drawing near to the peripheries; when used well, social media provides an essential platform for underrepresented individuals and groups to lift their voices. These tools and networks have been used effectively to resist hegemonic power structures and build egalitarian coalitions across physical distance. They are also essential avenues for connection and support for people who are socially marginalized, like L.G.B.T. individuals and persons with disabilities. Solidarity today demands digital freedom as a right and co-responsibility.

Individually, we need to become more reflective and intentional about how and why we use these digital tools and networks. We should become more attuned to how time spent online affects our thoughts, feelings and behaviors, as well as how our digital decisions affect others. Do our digital habits help manifest that we are all members of “a single family dwelling in a common home” (No. 17)? This means, for example, resisting the temptation to swipe or scroll past suffering, and instead becoming more sensitive to the ways our screens can serve as a buffer that keeps

us from confronting injustice, whether near or far. If our screens train us to see ourselves more as spectators than as stakeholders in our communities, we might consider adopting a digital fast to give ourselves the reset we need.

Our moral formation happens through relationships with others and our shared practices, which gives credence to Francis’ line that “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together” (No. 32). In “The Joy of Love” Pope Francis reminds the church, “We have been called to form consciences, not replace them” (No. 37). This duty to inform our conscience and help form others’ consciences requires safety and trust. These requirements are not as likely to be accomplished by clicks and taps on a screen as by meaningful offline interactions with friends, family, neighbors, co-workers and strangers. Screens should serve and supplement but never supplant these relationships.

Invoking the story of the good Samaritan, Francis observes, “All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the good Samaritan” (No. 69). To “go and do likewise,” following the example of the Samaritan, we do not need to rid ourselves of technology. But we do need to rethink our approach to these digital devices and networks so they can be more than tools for information or entertainment. We need to embrace them as portals to more diverse views and voices to deepen our grasp of our complex and interdependent reality. We need to ensure they serve as instruments of greater transparency and accountability, especially in resisting abuses of power that silence, stigmatize or shame individuals or groups. We should use them to raise consciousness, activate agency, organize collaboratively and creatively stretch our imagination.

By doing so, we can work toward our shared flourishing and the global common good. A vision for the universal love of solidarity requires nothing less in a digital age.

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The Glory of God

Is God as good as we believe?

By Joe Hoover

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For a few weeks as a novice I was a chaplain in a gray jail for kids. I think of it as gray because the boys wore gray sweats and the walls were cinderblock and the air was dead and the quiet unnatural and I did not want to be there. I wanted the boys to not be there, too. I prayed with them, insisted on the learning of lessons. Three-point plans, step by little step, sure-fire methods—biblical and secular—for staying out of trouble and away from the Minneapolis Juvenile Detention Center.

Over the weeks, one of the guards, Paul, had been

watching me. Finally, he told me something that stopped me cold. “Every one of these kids,” he said, “will be back. Every one.” These kids will be in and out of jail, and back in again. Some for the rest of their lives.

This guard was not trying to be gloomy. He was just stating what is. He had worked at this place for 20 years. He was telling me what he knows. All these inmates, nearly all of them Black children, will get out of here and live their lives and go back to the streets and then end up, again, back in juvy; eventually, many of them will end up in state or



county or federal prison for months or years, maybe for life. There is no hope for those kids. Their souls? Sure. Lives as free men? No. End of story. Thirteen-year-old boys headed to life in a cage.

Why were they born? For this? Is anyone born for prison? Evidently some are. And others are born for, who knows, endless soccer camps that parlay a half-hearted midfielder onto first-team All-Metro. Neither party asked for their state in life. It just happened. Two were grinding at the mill, one was taken away, the other left to breathe the fresh clean air.

Is there a God? A ridiculous question. We all know the answer to that. Just look around. Behold: We are so far past the Beginning and yet the earth is still a formless wasteland, darkness covers the abyss of us, a ferocious wind sweeps over foul waters and these children are going away forever.

No matter what we do, no matter the counseling, the stern but loving discipline, the schooling, the life-training—do they even receive such things?—they will all be back. The guard wore a black sport shirt. He came across like a reasonable-minded school counselor, one who might lean forward in a leather chair and quietly nod his head every so often as a kid tells him about his mom’s charming, violent boyfriend. His black hair was not feathered, but it might have been several years back. The boys were segmented into groups, lived in pods, tucked into cells with heavy doors and thick glass. He said it calmly. They will return. All of them. Is there a God? An even worse answer: There is a God, and every one of those kids is coming back.

Who or what can we blame for this? Society? The breakdown of the family? The obliteration of father figures? A lack of jobs, the pervasiveness of drugs, crowded schools, harsh drug laws, the proliferation of guns, the profit-seeking prison industry, brutal cops, institutional racism, corrupted civil will, a deflation of things spiritual in the general culture? Religious novices and their ignorance of the absurd rates of Black incarceration? Simply the 12-year-olds themselves?

Why doesn’t God, who has lovingly given us free will, take it back for a few minutes? Take it back and airlift these children into a life of excellent schools, churches that bring the Gospel to the streets, cities abundant with jobs, and just make things better? It is too discouraging. The bad has been so lodged into, so caked over the world, evil become so stuck, with old growth and tree rings and roots reaching way down, so much sadness that it will take ages to chip it away.

Oh, maybe if we all just believe in Jesus Christ enough he will blast through and save us. Like children at a “Peter Pan” matinee reviving Tinkerbell, if we keep clapping and clapping and clapping our hands, Christ will appear and briskly lift us out of these tragedies. Is that how it is? Is it? An act of will can upend the whole rotten thing? Heresy, you say? Trying to force God onto the scene? Are we simply to wait? Wait to make sense of sadness, of evil? Then, as we wait, don’t we begin to feel a little stupid?

“I’m waiting, it’s coming. Just hang on. It’ll all get better.”

“Good for you! How adorable. He’s waiting, the dear.

He really thinks it will all get better.”

“God is good!” some religious person says, as if she is saying, “Panama is an isthmus.” Who says such things so matter-of-factly? God is good? Where do you live? God is good! Said by the same people who think they are going to win Powerball every time they buy a ticket. God is good?

These days are an exciting time for New Atheists, and I wonder, who is not a new atheist? Who does not pass into the cold? We all wish for something as clear and convincing as science to bind up all wounds, heal every ill, patch up all rents in the existential fabric. So that nothing ever goes down again.

•••

I stood on my roof on the Lower East Side and watched the second tower fall. Its crumbling and falling felt like the most unreal and the most solidly real thing I had ever seen. It was as if the falling were a kind of creation. A collapsing of concrete and mass and purpose and will so resolute and final that it seemed in its very nature to be a new thing. It went down in a cascade of gray and black powder, and I expected some kind of mystical spirit shadow to remain there, because how could nothing be there? But there was no such consolation for a distant viewer. Instantly, it seemed, the names and faces of the missing appeared taped to lampposts, street signs, bus stops and subway walls. Their faces stared out as their families asked: “Have you seen this person? Where is this man, this woman? Call this number if you have seen her.”

It was also as if the dead were staring out and asking us, the living, *Where are you? Who are you? This is not a joke. We really are missing. Why are you still walking around while we have vanished into vapor? What gives you the right? The right to be on the living side of this smudged, torn, and godforsaken flyer while we languish among the disappeared?*

And far, far away, as all the numbers click in the right slots, God is good!

•••

God is good? God is just? I met Philip and we prayed together in his room. We crouched down on the floor and looked at his candles and a rocket he had drawn and pictures of his dead brother, Aaron, the archangel Michael, Jesus, a priest named Henri. These icons sat in his prayer corner, a cardboard box covered with a red bandana; somehow Philip had found me worthy to help him worship here. When we prayed, Philip, who was in his 50s, talked

to his brother Aaron, who himself could never talk, as if Aaron were right there. Philip said to Aaron, “You are in my heart,” and he meant it. As if Aaron were, literally, a tiny man abiding in Philip’s aorta. He also said to Aaron, every time, “You gotta help me.”

I wondered if Philip said this because his mind was ravaged by illness, because he was hunched over when he walked, and he couldn’t speak very fast, or eat very fast or get anywhere fast. Because every single solitary morning, Philip hated waking up.

If Philip was in his room and needed someone, he put his fingers in his mouth to whistle but instead a yell came out. Or, if he fell off his bed while trying to get his clothes on, he would shout, “Somebody come and help me!” Sometimes he stumbled when he walked into a room, and with the precious bravado of a child sitcom actor he would mutter, “Some days you just can’t win.” One day he said to me, “You are in my heart.” I froze, and stopped breathing.

•••

Philip lived outside Toronto with a cluster of people like him in homes with those who assisted them. It was called L’Arche Daybreak. I was there as one who had just finished the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. I came cresting on a spiritual wave. Sometimes I looked around and couldn’t help but feel how beautiful and spiritual it must be to live as one of these weak, vulnerable and honest people who talk directly to the dead; who yell happily when they mean to whistle; who make loud, moaning noises in church because they have no control over their bodies and voices. How holy and blessed are these wounded people. Here at L’Arche, the flood waters were baptismal, everything anointed.

Nevertheless, even if all that happened at L’Arche was holy, it was disturbing to consider the pain of being anointed like that. Maybe those back-pew moans were not delightful. Maybe they were moans arising from the horror of being engulfed and drowned and helpless to do anything about it because you just don’t have it in you. Being at the mercy of people like me who come and go for six weeks, six months, a year at a time. Being taken care of, all the time, day in and day out. Being always a burden, always suffering.

Maybe that is why Philip watched Batman movies, put on Superman T-shirts, slept in Spider-Man pajamas. To clothe himself in powers alien to his body. There he was, stumbling around with that big red “S” on his chest, and it all felt like a cruel joke.



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The bitter joke that we fall for every time is that God created us to be greatly depleted so that we could become abundant in God. The Lord cast us deep into the well of mean existence so we would grasp onto the rope he throws down. We rely on God to get us through the terrible things God lets happen to us.

It's all a set-up. Like giving a child five cents when admission to the fair is twice that. The child has to come back for the extra nickel, and to get past the gate again he has to come back again, and keep coming back, and back, and back, and has to be grateful, oh so grateful, this kid, to the Keeper of the Coin!

The fix is in, and has been basically forever. God made us sick so we would reach out to the physician in him. I boast of my weakness, says Paul, for when I am weak then I am strong, for the Lord is strong in me. I boast of my obliterated face on the subway wall, my body trapped in a tiny cell. I brag that I hate getting up in the morning, that when I use the toilet, I need someone to wipe for me. God made us frail so that God could swoop in and be mighty for us, and how needy, self-involved and completely screwed up is that?

•••

Why is it this way? It is the child's most basic question, dealing with the most bewildering thing of all. Referring to life and its diamond-sharp edges, harsh enough to throw us down at a moment's notice, all overseen by a God whose love, coiled up in the cells of our cells, firing every moment of our existence, evidently drives people into the ground on

a daily basis. Why? This question rears up again and again in our lives. Who gets the healthy genes and why? Why does one financial analyst have to jump from the 70th floor while another walks away in a dust-covered suit? Behold any crumbling human sputtering and begging on the sidewalk: There but for the grace of God...

Really? The shining thread of God's grace was held out to you and not to him? And he received from the Lord what? A sharp stick in the eye? Sometimes the goodness of God, the order of the universe and the joy of any given life appears to be a tightrope made of braided grass. It could disintegrate at any moment. How come? We can look around at the created world, we who inhabit it as poorly as we do, and we can ask: Who thought any of this was a good idea? It may be, we are told, that the planet is careening toward irreversible catastrophe. Who let this happen? Is it something that can even occur? Can we really blow it, utterly and entirely, the energy of us collapsing the entire gift of creation? And if so, is it really our fault? Weren't we all just trying to drive to church?

It matters little, I think, that these eternal questions wind through the life of a Catholic religious, a Jesuit sent from this place to that, plains reservations to humming cities, El Mozote to a small, dark-lit chapel and points between. Any soul paying the barest attention to life gasps, at least now and then, at the apparent ludicrousness of it all, no?

The glory of God, says St. Irenaeus, is the human being fully alive. And any human fully alive can get shattered by life again and again. Which leads to the question: When will God get enough glory that we can quit being so completely alive and just sit around for a few minutes?

Joe Hoover, S.J., is *America's* poetry editor. This essay has been excerpted from his new book, *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting? A Meditation on Suffering* (Orbis Books).

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Associate Professor of Theology, Boston College
Experiencing God in the Struggle for Liberation



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Catherine Mooney, Ph.D.
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Catholic Women on Racial, Environmental and Gender Justice



APRIL 7, 7 P.M.

Nancy Dallavalle, Ph.D.
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Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Catholic Thought: A Proposal



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LESSONS LONG OVERDUE

The wrong people are in charge of protecting our children from sexual abuse

By J.D. Long-García

It hurts every time. The first time I remember reading about sex abuse in the Catholic Church was in 2002. I was studying theology in graduate school when The Boston Globe published its report on abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston.

A couple of years later, after I got a job at the diocesan newspaper back home, victims stepped forward to name the pastor of our parish as an abuser. A few of the priests at the chancery told us the charges were false, but everything I read sounded true.

A few years after that, my boss pulled me aside to tell me that the new pastor, who had replaced the previous one, also had been accused. Later that year, I was working late and the father of one of the victims called my office. He was angry. He told me what my pastor had done to his son. His son was never the same and, after years of suffering, he killed himself.

Each time I hear one of these stories, it hurts again. It reminds me of my confirmation sponsor. He was also a guidance counselor at my high school. It reminds me how he took me under his wing as a fellow Latino. How he introduced me to other Latino kids and bragged that I spoke Spanish. And how, after he brought me to his house to teach

me to play The Beatles' "And I Love Her," he molested me.

Years ago, I saw Theodore McCarrick, then a cardinal, speak during my sister's graduation from the Catholic University of America. This was, of course, well before I had ever heard a whisper about his abuse of children and seminarians (but not before he did it). He walked with such presence through the crowds of students in their gowns. I admired him, and I could not keep my eyes off him. I didn't know.

I had held these men in such high regard. It hurts as much as it does precisely because I placed such deep trust in them. I feel betrayed each time. But somehow I also blame myself. Some part of me still believes I should have known better than to trust them.

With the publishing of the McCarrick report, we undoubtedly learned that the church still has a lot of work to do regarding sexual abuse. These lessons are long overdue. Yes, we do need lay supervisory boards. And yes, we need transparency. And yes, we need accountability and recompense.

But as a layperson, and as a father, I cannot continue to make myself dependent on ordained men. Not for this.

There is a propensity in my community to elevate priests above everyone else. At some Latino parishes, it is

iStock

difficult to organize successful events without a priest or deacon being involved. It is like the presence of ordained men makes church events legitimate. (The Latino community is not unique in this.)

But things can change. In 2018, after the McCarrick news came out, I attended the V Encuentro national gathering in Grapevine, Tex. I was covering the event for **America**, and I wasn't sure what to expect.

More than 3,200 people came together from across the country, and the lingering cloud of the abuse crisis was on everyone's mind. But while the response in many parts of the church had been to chastise bishops, this group instead offered to help.

This may sound contrary, but I think of it this way. Have you ever tried to cook something in your grandmother's presence? The few times I have, inevitably my grandmother would step in and say, "Let me help you." This is *abuelita* wisdom. I'm doing it wrong, and as she fixes it, she shows me how. Some things are too important to leave to the wrong people.

When it comes to sexual abuse, the wrong people are in charge. If we continue to expect bishops to take care of this for us, we perpetuate a fundamental problem. We enable clericalism. We must set that aside and take over.

For me, as a father, it starts at home. From an early age, I

have talked to my son about sexual abuse. (I learned to do this during a mandatory Safe Environment training at church.) Those conversations can sometimes be uncomfortable. But I know what can happen if things aren't talked about.

We also have to be vigilant together in our communities. We can only protect our children together. It is not just clergy or confirmation sponsors that are predators, but also uncles and aunts, cousins and siblings, teachers and neighbors. It could be anyone.

We must be intentional about creating a culture that protects our children. We need to have relationships with our children and with our community that make this possible. The culture built through these measures believes children when they come forward and can identify predatory behavior in others. This kind of community is made of parents who have open, loving relationships with their kids. No topic is taboo.

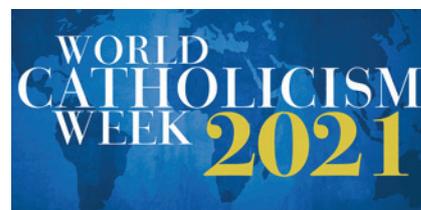
No bishop can do this. Only we can. The hard work of addressing the sexual abuse crisis in our families and in our communities won't happen overnight, but it must happen. So let us begin. Again.

J.D. Long-García is a senior editor at **America**.

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Keynotes

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Return to the Shire

By Jessica Hooten Wilson

I always thought the Shire was better than the Ring of Power.

To love *The Lord of the Rings*, one must desire the simple life of ordinary things, of anonymity, of local community, of what can still sometimes be found in rural, small-town America. When Frodo has lost all hope near the top of Mount Doom in the final installment of J. R. R. Tolkien's famous trilogy, his companion and fellow hobbit Sam Gamgee remembers the Shire for him. The film version captures the scattered reminiscences of Sam in one adapted paragraph of dialogue:

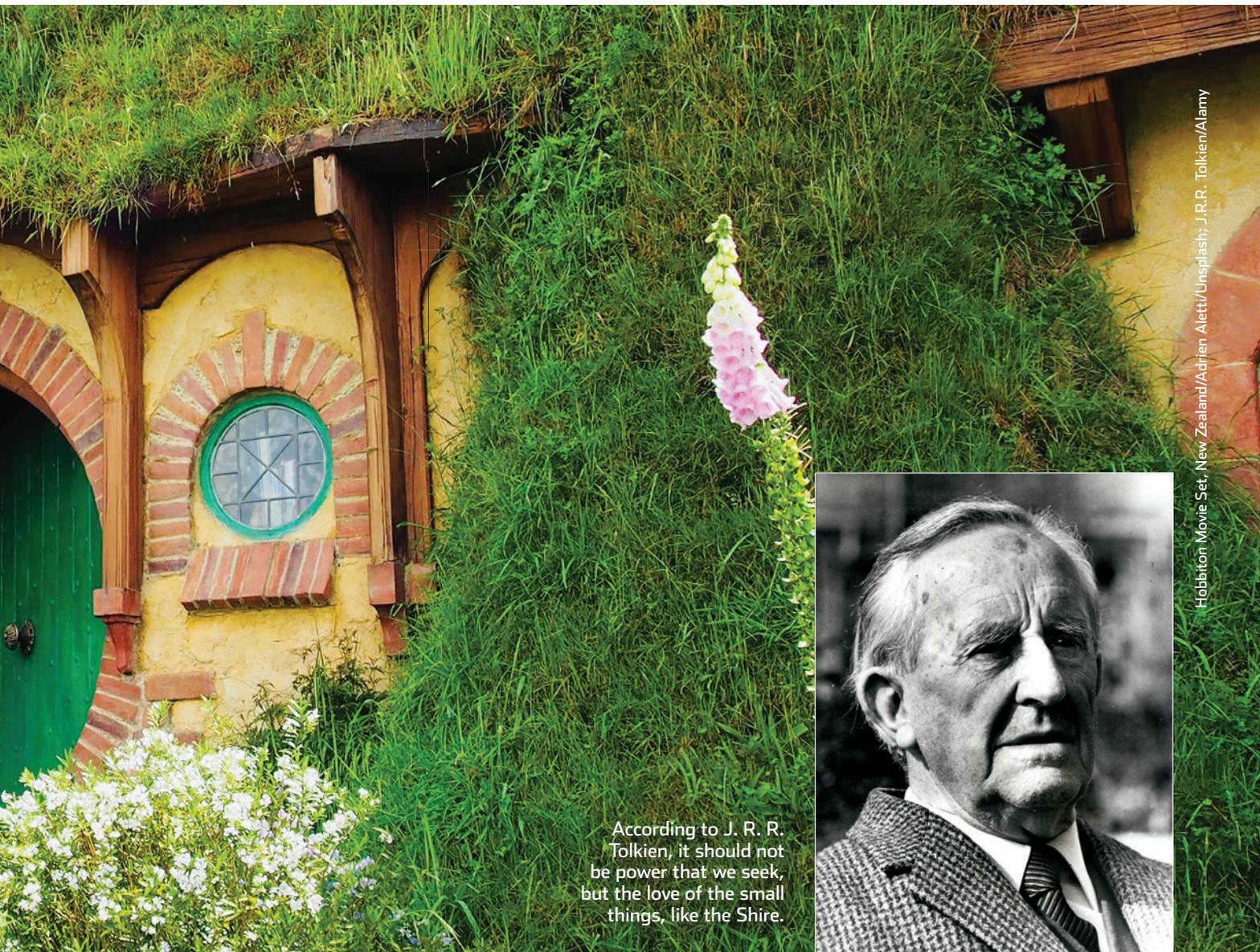
Do you remember the Shire, Mr. Frodo? It will be spring soon, and the orchards will be in blossom. And the birds will be nesting in the hazel thicket. And they'll be sowing the summer barley in the lower fields. And they'll be eating the first of the strawberries with cream? Do you remember the taste of strawberries?

Under the burden of the Ring of Power around his neck, which

gains greater sway as they ascend to the Cracks of Doom, Frodo laments, "No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left for me." For the story to work, Tolkien depends on an audience that will refuse a compromise that exchanges one's delight in small, ordinary things for the provision of great power.

Yet, I worry this audience is diminishing.

Tolkien was a Catholic, and although he wrote stories that are not



Hobbiton Movie Set, New Zealand/Adrien Aleotti/Unsplash; J.R.R. Tolkien/Alamy

According to J. R. R. Tolkien, it should not be power that we seek, but the love of the small things, like the Shire.

didactic regarding his beliefs, they imagine a world that imitates the one that the triune God created. Through fiction, Tolkien expounds on human nature, our responsibilities, our desires and our temptations. When the hobbit Pippin declares that he would rather not be dealing with the war engulfing Middle Earth, the wizard Gandalf wisely responds, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” Is that not so true? We cannot wish ourselves into a different time and place. We cannot alter the world to be something other than

it is. Our choices are limited to how to employ the gifts we have received. In one line, Gandalf explains vocation to Pippin and to the audience. Rather than overcome your limitations, listen to them as a guide for how you are to be in your particular time and place.

In many ways, *The Lord of the Rings* imitates Scripture. Over and over again in the Old Testament, the Lord calls the smallest and weakest. Remember when Samuel visits Jesse’s home? He is predisposed by his culture to choose the tallest in stature and most powerful to anoint as

the next king of Israel. But the Lord leads him to anoint the youngest son, David, the scrawny boy shepherd in the fields. Similarly, Gandalf must continually remind the fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy not to underestimate their hobbit companions. Their size may be diminutive, but they are perseverant, courageous and loyal. They have virtues that are needed to withstand the temptation of the Ring; they can handle the long journey; they will accomplish the heroic good not by power but by repeated good actions in the face of hopelessness.

To love *The Lord of the Rings*, one must desire the simple life of ordinary things. 💧💧

The novels read like a combination of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (but without the compression that Virgil performs in the *Aeneid*). There are battle scenes with heroic actors, and ultimately the journey concludes with the hobbits returning home. Simone Weil has argued that “force” is the main protagonist in the *Iliad*, dehumanizing Achilles and the other warriors who behave like predators—they are compared to lions and wolves. A contemporary, Rachel Betspaloff, argues that force can be divine rather than animalistic.

When Hector employs force to save Troy and protect his family, he acts in a godlike manner. Force cannot be condemned, Betspaloff claims, because it is inevitable. Instead, we must decide whether to use force toward protecting life or sacking cities. One can tell these women wrote under the pressures of the Nazi invasion of France. A veteran of World War I, Tolkien aligns with Betspaloff. In *Lord of the Rings*, force responds defensively rather than offensively. The hobbits fight to defend the Shire.

Like an ancient epic, such as the *Odyssey*, *The Lord of the Rings* is a slow read. Three volumes of a journey compel the reader to become a pilgrim herself. Readers who want immediate gratification, in which heroes prevail, will be disappointed. Whereas Homer’s story relies on *xenia* (hos-

pitality) for its distinctions between good and evil, Tolkien emphasizes resistance to power against lust for power. In the *Odyssey*, the good characters know how to make strangers into guests (instead of into meals); in *The Lord of the Rings*, the heroes band together in fellowship and friendship to withstand the One Ring. Those who crave power have no friends, only temporary alliances. They have no joy in singing, dancing or telling stories. They lose the taste of strawberries.

By combining war with the journey, Tolkien reveals how these two life narratives are actually one. There is not war and peace, not the *Iliad* separate from the *Odyssey*. Instead, our lives are warring pilgrimages, journeys that demand repeatedly for us to fight. In contrast to his ancient predecessors, Tolkien subscribes to a Catholic imagination in which the greatest fight is not external but against temptation. And the most alluring temptation in the narrative, the one that must be resisted no matter what the cost, is the temptation to power.

Unfortunately, Americans seem predisposed to the temptation of power. We have bought the lie that there are winners and losers in the world, and that winners possess the most power. Instead of hobbits, we celebrate supermen and avengers. Would Clark Kent be a hero without his power? Would we still see the life worth

imitating in the farm boy who decided to be a journalist, loved Lois Lane and took care of those around him? If we inhabited Middle Earth, would we act like Boromir or Aragorn?

When we talk about contemporary issues, the word *power* keeps rising up. Christians laud their power when thousands of them sing hymns of praise at the National Mall, or when their candidate is elected to office. Who is “in power” has become an all-encompassing concern, as though one’s day-to-day morality is affected by the offices in Washington.

Have we forgotten that Augustine still gave sermons while the barbarians sacked Rome, that Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* from death row, that Dante was exiled and powerless when he crafted *The Divine Comedy*, or that Julian of Norwich shared her gifts from her anchoress’s cell in the side of a church? We do not need the seat of power to protect the Shire. We need to practice loving the Shire.

When people justify their voting choice by its outcome, I always think of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien emphasizes repeatedly that we cannot make decisions based on the hoped-for result. We can only control the means. If we validate our choice of voting for someone who may not be a good person in hopes that he or she will use his power to our advantage, we succumb to the fallacy of Boromir, who assumed he too would use the Ring of Power for good. Power cannot be controlled; it enslaves you. To act freely is to acknowledge your limits, to see the journey as a long road that includes dozens of future elections and to fight against the temptation for power.

Tolkien himself did not see history as a series of worldly victories: “Actually I am a Christian and indeed a Roman Catholic,” he once wrote in a letter, “so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’—though it contains...some samples or glimpses of final victory.” Ultimately, it should not be power that we seek, a worldly game and a worldly goal, but the love of the small things. We should invest our time delighting in the beauty of the Shire.

Jessica Hooten Wilson is the Louise Cowan scholar in residence at the University of Dallas in the classical education and humanities graduate program. She is the author of three books.

The Sorrows of Migration

By Steven Peterson

They navigate by stars at night,
The moon, and some magnetic field,
North up the Mississippi Flyway
In spring, or south in fall, concealed
By darkness from our human sight.

Migrating birds by millions pass
Through overhead while we're asleep,
But in Chicago birds that die may
Be found each dawn in feathered heaps—
Killed by striking walls of glass.

Skyscraper lights attract them in,
Their navigation gets thrown off,
And creatures used to field and forest
Collide a thousand feet aloft
With what to them has never been.

We gather bodies one by one
In every color of creation,
Our songbirds now a silent chorus.
We grieve the sorrows of migration
While building till we reach the sun.

Steven Peterson is a poet and playwright living in Chicago. His recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Alabama Literary Review*, *The Christian Century*, *Dappled Things* and *First Things*.

The living relevance of Scripture

By Kirsty Jane Falconer

N. T. Wright brings his readers up close to John's Gospel, allowing them to see it through the eyes of an expert.

The concept behind *Broken Signposts* is both simple and challenging, old and new. In the most recent of his many books, the Anglican theologian and biblical scholar N. T. Wright—formerly bishop of Durham, now a professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews—takes us through seven universally preoccupying themes: justice, love, spirituality, beauty, freedom, truth and power.

His premise is that each of these themes is a kind of signpost directing us toward some fundamentally important truth—the kind that philosophers, writers and artists all try to decode. But their attempts are necessarily flawed, because the only way to real understanding is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Unless we ground our thinking in that one perfect and universal source of knowledge, the signposts of our world cannot do more than point us vaguely along the right path. On their own, they are broken.

Wright's formulation of this problem is his own, and those familiar with his work will recognize it from his *History and Eschatology*, which was based on his Gifford Lectures from 2018. But the interaction between the claims of philosophy and those of religion—the question of where thinking should end and faith begin—has troubled Christianity from the beginning. Every historically aware reader will be reminded of someone: Paul, inveighing against the eloquent “super-apostles” of 2 Cor 11; Augustine, in constant creative tension with his own pagan philosophical training; Savonarola, expounding on Scripture in deliberately plain language as an assault on Florentine aristocratic humanism. In this sense, *Broken Signposts* is an original approach to a very old question.

Part of that originality is Wright's choice to base his exposition on the Gospel of John. He gives us a detailed and knowledgeable account of the Gospel, and his idiomatic trans-

lations—drawn from Wright's own version of the New Testament (*The Kingdom New Testament*)—also bring freshness and accessibility to what could easily be a complicated and rather dry undertaking. It takes an exceptional communicator to make close exegesis of Scripture quite this readable. And Wright is an exceptional communicator. The narrative he presents is compelling and tightly bound: John emerges as the sophisticated work of a disciple-evangelist whose overwhelming desire is to bring us into contact with Jesus and his message. We can hear and understand the entirety of this message by considering John with the correct attention.

In this reading, everything follows in sequence. The prophecies of the Hebrew Bible pointed to Jesus, and he came and fulfilled them; the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, like the Trinity, flow out from the time of his coming. It is a category error, Wright tells us, to think that there

Broken Signposts

How Christianity Makes Sense of the World

By N. T. Wright

HarperOne

208p \$27.99

is no Trinitarianism in the New Testament simply because “the word ‘Trinity’ and the technical terms associated with it” came later. “In fact, the reality that those later words were struggling to express is woven deep and tight into the very fabric of the earliest Christian life, thought and prayer.” If we understand the love at the heart of the story—“the rich, many-sided mutual delight you find in healthy families and wider communities”—then we understand what the idea of the Trinity is about, terminology be damned.

Wright’s argument is deeply informed, and even those who disagree with his approach will find it a serious one. And yet the insistent completeness of his analysis—in which little or nothing in Scripture appears unresolved, ambiguous, historically contingent or simply unimportant—throws up a few loose ends of its own. What happens, for example, when the reader of John in the NRSV or KJV—or any other widely used English translation—runs up against “the Jews”?

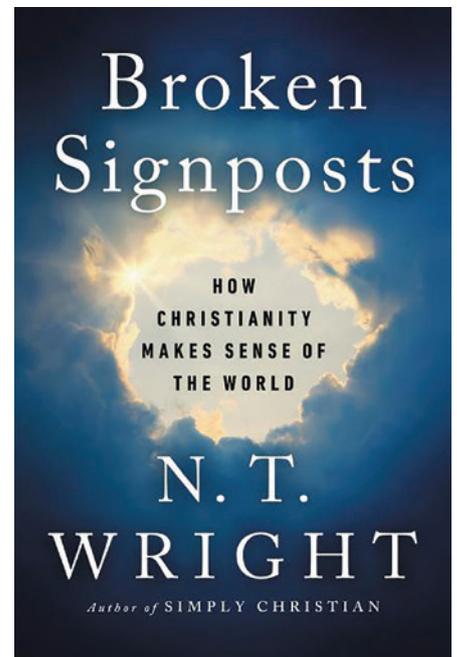
The Greek is *hoi Ioudaioi*. Wright’s translation renders it “the Judaeans,” meaning “those who live in Jerusalem and its vicinity.” In doing this, he aligns himself with several other prominent scholars, most notably Steve Mason, Shaye Cohen and Philip Esler. The debate around the translation of *hoi Ioudaioi* is complex and important, especially with regard to John, where the term is used more frequently and with greater vitriol than in the other Gospels. But this debate has not yet reached the majority of people outside the academic community. Accordingly, the reader who

relies on a standard translation is confronted with an apparent inconsistency: a broken signpost that even a brief contextualizing comment would go a long way to fix.

Another set of questions arises when Wright tackles secular thought and culture, which function here as imperfect foils to the perfection of Christianity. Precisely because he makes such a forceful and well-supported argument for the Bible as the ultimate intellectual and spiritual resource, his sweeping statements about the world can strike a jarring note.

Sometimes this is a matter of detail. When Machiavelli—one of the most interesting and contentious voices of any period, whose *The Prince* is shot through with irony—is described as arguing “that naked power is what’s needed even if you have to lie and cheat to make it work,” that is a cheap shot. But when Wright hits his rhetorical stride and lets loose on the modern world, its “muddled” thought, the “cynicism” of its outlook and the “self-serving and often narcissistic parodies” that bedevil its spirituality, this description (although entertaining) begins to clash with the stated purpose of the book—namely, that the idea is not to approach Christianity as if it presented a heavenly alternative to our sordid earthly existence but to engage with the world and “make sense of it” with reference to Christian belief.

Not all that Wright says about the world is negative—or, rather, not all the negativity he presents is without hope. Some of the most touching passages are those in which he explores the uncertainty, pain and loss that af-



flict us even at our happiest moments. In this life, neither beauty nor love can be pinned down for long: “Either we stand at someone else’s graveside, or they stand at ours.” It is at these moments, anchored in emotion and experience, that Wright’s case for Christianity is most compelling. The sheer precariousness of all that is earthly could make anyone feel, however briefly, an urge toward the divine.

In *Broken Signposts*, N. T. Wright presents an invigorating argument for the living relevance of Scripture. He brings his readers up close to John’s Gospel, allowing them to see it through the eyes of an expert. These two things are worth a very great deal, and this book deserves to be read—and contested, when necessary—as a major new contribution to accessible, scripturally based Christian theology.

Kirsty Jane Falconer is a writer and translator living in Italy. Her work has appeared in *The Tablet*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Honest Ulsterman*.

What in the world do we need from theology?

By Michael C. McCarthy

David Tracy has for years promised a “big book” on God. These volumes whet the appetite.

By almost any standard, it has been a horrible year. Covid-19 has claimed over a million lives worldwide and has destroyed untold livelihoods. For the United States, often immune to (and ignorant of) the plagues that others around the world routinely face, the pandemic erupted along with other crises and disasters. We have felt outrage over our history of racial injustice. The political landscape is bleak, and the country’s west coast seemed for months to be literally turning to cinders. The sheer totality of tragedy seems apocalyptic.

Into this world David Tracy has published a two-volume collection of previously-published essays. For those familiar with the work of this distinguished American theologian, such a publication is itself an event. In a year that has seen such suffering, however, it is fair to ask why we need two more volumes of learned reflections on everyone from Plotinus to Proust, from the Gospel of Mark to passages of Toni Morrison... and many, many, many others in between.

If I read Tracy correctly, he himself would positively encourage such a question. How does theology matter to those who fight fires, nurse dying patients or barely survive in refugee camps? What can theology do for those who have been traumatized by centuries of racism? For Tracy, who has always seen theology as developing critical correlations between contemporary experience and the Christian tradition, the emergence of almost 900 pages of his essays together with the events of 2020 presents something of a stress test.

Tracy asks us to read the essays as fragments and filaments. The latter term alludes to a poem by Walt Whitman in which a lonely spider launches “filament, filament, filament out of itself” to bridge spheres that are otherwise detached. The creature does so “Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.” Like the patient spider (or Whitman himself), this theologian hopes to draw slender but real connections joining a range of thinkers, ancient and modern, that

may help souls in their own journeys.

The image of fragment, however, is the far more important construct for understanding what theology may contribute to our world. As an archaeologist unearths shards of pottery or stones from fallen buildings to understand an ancient civilization, often all we have are pieces of traditions that may provide some spiritual insight. Whereas thinkers since the Enlightenment may have had confidence in a rationality that tried to assimilate all reality into closed, centralized, totalizing systems, more and more we recognize otherness, difference and irreducible particularity. As a result, those totalities have been shattered, and we are left with fragments of former structures. That, as Tracy sees it, is not a bad thing. Not only have these systems led to economic, political and cultural oppression; they have also marginalized religious phenomena that did not conform to what counted as “rational.” Fragments can still reveal so much.

The term *fragments*, then, oper-

Fragments

The Existential Situation of
Our Time
By David Tracy
University of Chicago Press
408p \$39

Filaments

Theological Profiles
By David Tracy
University of Chicago Press
432p \$39

ates metaphorically to suggest cultural resources that resist the totalizing impulse of so much of modern thinking, especially in relation to religion. For Tracy, fragments can be portals of hope. Discover the right fragment, he says, “and you will discover an entry into the eventful, infinite character of reality itself.” A Christian like Tracy would name that reality God, who is infinite love.

Infinity as a category for thinking about God remains prominent throughout these two volumes. It provides Tracy with a point of entry into conversation with philosophers, mathematicians and scientists, as well as other schools of thought (religious and otherwise). In finding language that can be applied across disciplines or confessional and philosophical boundaries, Tracy remains firmly committed to public theology, which engages a range of publics in service of a better common life.

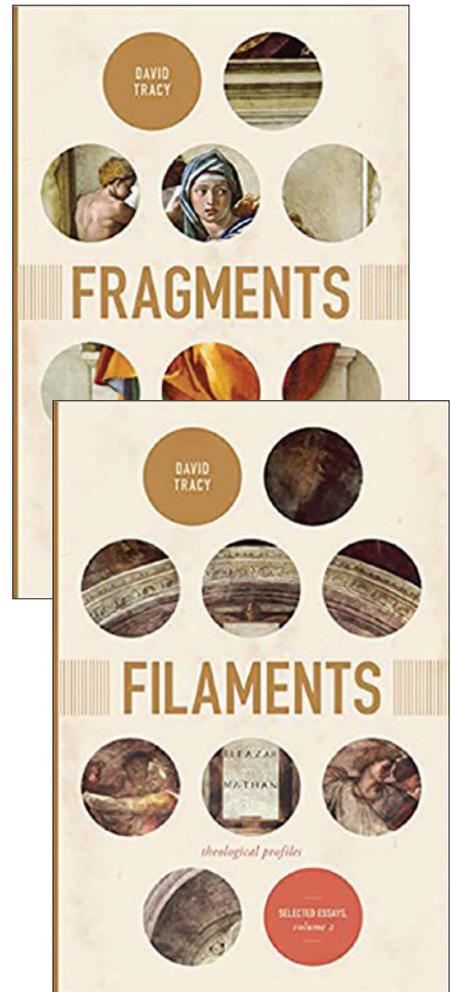
One of his essays, for instance, reflects on “Religion in the Public Realm: Three Forms of Publicness.” First, Tracy makes a strong case that good theological thinking contributes to a larger “community of inquiry,” which has to reflect on what counts as reasonable, sharable public assertions. Second, lest public discourse be limited to techno-economic means rather than more substantive ends, Tracy argues that religious thinkers (like artists) can contribute to visions of the common good that provide insight on matters ranging from the environment to restorative justice. Third, the prophetic and contemplative strains of religion offer resources

for public discussion of reality that goes past the limits of reason. If theology can contribute in the ways Tracy suggests, it will surely edify public discourse.

Following thinkers like Tillich and Jaspers, Tracy frequently refers to boundary situations that all human beings experience—the death of a loved one, for instance, anxiety over one’s own impending death or a dread of nothingness. Together with occasions of joy, these “limit-experiences” often call for expression that exceeds the limits of ordinary language. “Limit questions,” like why one should be moral at all or why one should fight for justice, again gesture to an implicit religious dimension of our ordinary experience and encourage the deployment of different language forms (e.g., metaphor, narrative, analogy, etc.) in various traditions.

Tracy is also especially concerned with issues of hermeneutics. Interpreting the principal texts and events of a tradition remains a key task of the theologian, whether the purpose is to retrieve with trust, to render a critique or with a certain suspicion to expose subtle, perhaps unconscious patterns that repress, silence and harm.

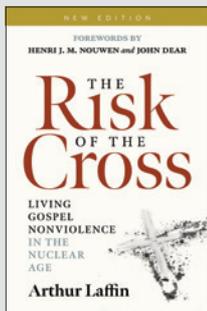
Tracy’s interlocutors are many, but the circle is also limited. For instance, he names feminism in its various forms as the most powerful and influential of modern critical theories. And yet his single chapter on feminist theology is one of the shortest in the volumes (five pages). In no way does Tracy oppose contextual theologies (e.g., feminist, African-American, liberationist), but he is aware that his



context is what he calls “my own male, white, academic theology.” Clearly such a group is being de-centered, and one senses that Tracy, at the end of his long career, welcomes that movement.

Tracy has given us a gift in his very depth of thought and imagination. As a Catholic, Christian theologian he exemplifies how one can engage the world from a particular tradition, which imperfectly strives toward the infinite love of God, who is Trinity and revealed in the singular person of Jesus. Tracy has for years promised a “big book” on God, and these volumes of fragments whet the appetite.

Michael C. McCarthy, S.J., is vice president for mission integration and planning and an associate professor of theology at Fordham University.



The Risk of the Cross
Living Gospel nonviolence in the nuclear age
By Arthur Laffin
Twenty-Third Publications
145p \$16.95

The path of resistance

It is a frequent temptation in the United States today to underestimate the threat of nuclear warfare. The U.S. Catholic community has had an exceptionally difficult time coming to terms with this over the past couple of decades. Bishops who spoke out against nuclear arms in the past, like Raymond Hunthausen, Walter Sullivan and Thomas Gumbleton, have no real ideological heirs among the American episcopacy today. What place does nuclear resistance have in the church now? Who should take up the mantle in our time, and how should they go about doing it?

In *The Risk of the Cross*, Arthur Laffin, a longtime peace activist and practitioner of Gospel nonviolence, answers these questions in no uncertain terms. First, nuclear resistance ought to be at the very heart of the church's mission globally—but especially in the United States. Second, rather than waiting for the hierarchy and local clergy to take the reins of the peace movement today, Laffin argues that this work begins on the local level. Third is the way laypeople can take these concerns on their own shoulders through prayer and action.

The heart of the book's message is found in the five “sessions”

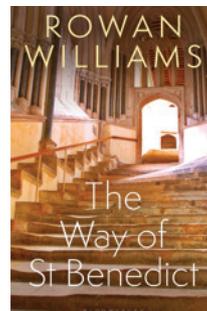
that Laffin provides the reader. These sessions lend themselves organically to small prayer groups. Each session examines a passage from Mark's Gospel and is rooted in scriptural exegesis and group prayer, with the goal that it leads to action in the world. The last of these five appendices, in fact, addresses

the very notion of taking action, even providing concrete actions that groups can take upon themselves to bring peace to the world in a practical way.

There are a number of highlights in this very fine text. While all five sessions are refreshingly revelatory, Session Five proposes a “liturgy of life” and will be especially welcome to those peacemakers who find themselves part of a eucharistic community. The discussion questions at the end of each session allow readers to see how the Gospel affects them personally. The book, therefore, is both an intellectual exercise and a spiritual one.

In his recent encyclical, “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis calls the church to move away from just war theory. This book is one of the most practical ways to carry that call into a small group setting. Local communities will devour this book. To such intrepid groups, I heartily recommend these hopeful pages.

Daniel Cosacchi is co-editor of *The Berrigan Letters: Personal Correspondence between Daniel and Philip Berrigan*.



The Way of St. Benedict
By Rowan Williams
Bloomsbury Continuum
160p \$18

Call to Stability

A study in 2019 claimed that 20 percent of Democrats and 16 percent of Republicans reported that they “think on occasion that the country would be better off if large numbers of the opposition died.” Given the sour spirit that saturates our political and social atmospheres, perhaps the statistic is not surprising. But it is disturbing. And it raises the question: What is the duty of a Christian in a vitriolic political environment?

In his latest collection of essays, *The Way of St. Benedict*, Rowan Williams proposes an answer. For 1,500 years, Benedict of Nursia's monastic rule has guided Christians who seek to conform to Christ in their day-to-day lives. Williams applies Benedict's eternal wisdom to our contemporary political and ecclesial milieu.

Benedict's rule rests on three main pillars: obedience, *conversatio morum* (meaning a commitment to examining and reforming habits that make up our lives) and stability.

Williams homes in on stability as a salve for many of our contemporary ills. Stability offers a countercultural witness to our transient culture. “Benedict regards monastic life as a discipline for being where you are, rather than taking refuge in the infinite smallness of your own

fantasies,” writes Williams. Monastic stability is not simply geographic, but essentially communal, “because at its basis lies the recognition that others won’t go away.”

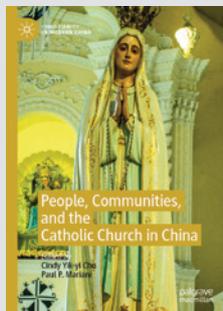
Stability, in Williams’s interpretation, means a commitment to dwelling with the other—even the unpleasant or antagonistic other. It means acknowledging that my own unhappiness will not be solved by the absence of the offending person.

Williams’s definition of stability directly opposes the scapegoating that is the current order of the day. A stable community does not seek to mend disruptions by removing or eradicating the disturbance.

These essays, in part, respond to the idea of the “Benedict option” popularized by Rod Dreher. As a rejoinder to Dreher’s project, Williams argues that a truly Benedictine option does not mean retreating from the wider culture. Rather, Benedict’s rule—particularly the commitment to stability—offers a way of communal life that can accommodate difference and authentically renew any culture in which Christians find themselves.

This was, ultimately, Benedict’s original project—to fuse new life into the world through communities committed to radical love of the neighbor, who will never go away.

Renée Darline Roden works as an editor for *FaithND* and as a playwright in New York City. Her writing has appeared in *Howlround*, *Church Life Journal* and *Image Journal’s* “Good Letters.”



People, Communities, and the Catholic Church in China
By Cindy Yik-yi Chu and Paul P. Mariani (editors)
Palgrave Pivot
176p \$59.99

What will the future hold for Chinese Catholics?

Since the Vatican announced in September 2018 that Pope Francis had reached an agreement with Beijing on the appointment of bishops in China, the fate of some 12 million Chinese Catholics—some adhering to the government-backed Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and others affiliated with an “underground” church historically loyal to the Vatican—has been uncertain.

This collection of informed, timely chapters edited by Professor Cindy Yik-yi Chu and Professor Paul P. Mariani, S.J., ably captures the evolving turmoil. Carefully detailing the thinking that motivated Pope Francis’ decision as well as providing context for understanding cultural complexities, *People, Communities, and the Catholic Church in China* offers precious background.

In addition to discussing current struggles, there are also chapters that represent hope for the future. One such by Raissa De Gruttola of the University of Perugia details the achievement of the Franciscan missionary Gabriele Allegra (1907–76), the only 20th-century biblical scholar to be beatified. Father Allegra spearheaded an effort to produce the first complete translated edition

of the Catholic Bible in a Chinese language, completed in 1961 by the Hong Kong branch of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum.

Even after Father Allegra’s premature death, related publications continued to appear in Chinese, including a revision in 2016 of Father Allegra’s edition. In 2012, the Studium Biblicum, Hong Kong Baptist University and the Yale University Divinity Library collaborated in a digitization project, “Preservation for the Documentation of Chinese Christianity,” making future research more possible.

The development of youth ministry in China since the early 2000s is examined in a chapter by the Rev. Bruno Lepeu of Hong Kong’s Holy Spirit Study Centre. Despite disapproval by government-authorized church leaders, youth ministry is growing in China. Citing Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan’s *Evangelization in China: Challenges and Prospects*, Father Lepeu underlines the ardor and affection felt by young Chinese Catholics, who refer to Jesus informally as “elder brother Su” to emphasize the church’s fraternal identity.

Readers who care for the future of the church will want to cast their eyes eastward, toward elder brother Su and his dauntless devotees.

Benjamin Ivry has written biographies of Francis Poulenc, Maurice Ravel and Arthur Rimbaud and has translated many books from French.



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Overcoming Corruption

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD (B), JANUARY 3, 2021

READINGS: IS 60:1-6; PS 72; EPH 3:2-6; MT 2:1-12

Today is the feast of the Epiphany, the celebration of the magi following a star to find their way to the newborn Jesus. Their journey and acts of worship are examples of how we should seek and find Christ in our lives. The feast is often interpreted as an invitation and inclusion of Gentiles together with Jews in worshipping Jesus as Messiah, a point that is buttressed in the first and second readings. The narrative also provides examples of how to reckon with corrupt leaders, which are especially relevant during this time of transition of power.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, we hear King Herod's concern about Jesus being king of the Jews, interpreting his birth as a potential threat to power. Herod consults the chief priests and scribes for details on what is known of the coming Messiah. The Jewish leaders counsel Herod, paraphrasing texts from Micah and 2 Samuel saying: "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." These passages were about King David and the covenant that promised him an everlasting dynasty.

Matthew interprets these texts in the light of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, making connections between Jesus, David and the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jewish leaders do not cower. They do not placate or indulge Herod with only what he wants to hear. They do not deny a potential threat to Herod's power; rather, they affirm the significance of a Messiah who would emerge as a leader from Bethlehem. While Herod's evil intent was likely clear to them, they still opt to speak truth to power.

Clearly concerned, Herod enlists the magi as spies, sending them to uncover Jesus' whereabouts. Matthew depicts them offering gifts that his Jewish audience would recognize as significant: gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts connected with royalty, priesthood and anointing.

The magi are warned in a dream—a common biblical motif for divine communication—not to return to Herod, so they avoid him and shrewdly go home by another route. Presumably, he would press them on Jesus' location and attempt to do him harm, as he does later in the narrative in the massacre of infants. Rather than endanger Jesus or themselves, the magi avoid Herod as

Nations shall come to your light. (Is 60:3)

Praying With Scripture

Do you speak truth to power?

How can you be a light to the world?

How does your faith inform your civic engagement?

an act of protection.

The Jewish leaders and the magi contend with a king with nefarious intentions and find meaningful ways to avoid supporting his corruption. Recent history has given us plenty of examples of people resisting and failing to resist the corrupt use of political power. As we look to the upcoming transition of power in national government, these readings remind us to be grateful for those who confront unjust leaders and to be alert to the ways God continues to call us to speak truth to power. On this Epiphany we should, like the magi, journey nearer to Christ, remain engaged in the world and avoid corruption at all costs.

Justice and Truth

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD (B), JANUARY 10, 2021

READINGS: IS 42:1-7/IS 55:1-11; PS 29/IS 12; ACTS 10:34-38/1 JN 5:1-9; MK 1:7-11

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. Mark describes the event with a few key details—Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River; the heavens part; the Spirit descends like a dove and a voice in heaven affirms Jesus as the beloved Son. The narrative reveals the Trinity with

Father, Son and Holy Spirit clearly and distinctly represented together at the event. The celebration of Jesus' baptism is an opportune time to reflect on the requirements that come with being baptized.

There are two options for the first and second readings this Sunday.

The reading from Isaiah 55 is fitting today with its reference to "coming to the water," as the prophet expounds on the divine invitation to be sustained by God. A complement to this reading is the second reading option from Acts, in which Peter highlights God's openness to people "in every

nation,” empowering them with the Holy Spirit through baptism.

The reading from Isaiah 42 proclaims the significance of the Spirit’s descent. The prophet describes a figure who suffers and serves as a light to the nations. The New Testament alludes to and quotes Isaiah’s Suffering Servant prophecies, understanding them in a new way in light of Jesus’ suffering. In Isaiah, when the Spirit descends on the servant, it is a signal that “he shall bring forth justice to the nations.” There is a clear call to work toward the “victory of justice” when receiving the Spirit. The second reading option from 1 John articulates relationships in the Trinity, between Father and Son and the Spirit who promotes truth in the world. The

reading also highlights victory that comes through faith in Christ as Son of God.

The Gospel turns our attention to Jesus’ baptism. Mark’s Gospel begins with the appearance of John the Baptist, and Jesus’ first public act is to be baptized before beginning his ministry. Jesus models the ritual for his followers and is proclaimed as the beloved Son and empowered by the Spirit to do his work.

Today we must consider the implications of baptism and faith in Christ. The readings and the larger Gospel message affirm that receiving the Spirit at baptism is only the beginning, and important work must follow. All are welcomed and invited to be baptized, and that baptism

He establishes justice on the earth. (Is 42:4)

Praying With Scripture

What can you do to promote justice?

How do you live out your baptism promises?

Do you openly accept all people?

requires believers to promote justice and truth. The Spirit is directly connected to both of those ideals, and receiving the Spirit is a call to action. On this feast of the baptism of Christ, let us be inspired to actively participate in the quest for justice and truth.

Be Open

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JANUARY 17, 2021
READINGS: 1 SM 3:3-19; PS 40; 1 COR 6:13-20; JN 1:35-42

The United States approaches an important moment, the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as president and vice president of the United States. This is a moment to pray for these leaders to succeed in their commitment to governing on behalf of all Americans and working to heal a damaged and divided nation. At this juncture, today’s readings offer wisdom on the importance of new beginnings and answering a call to service.

In the first reading, we hear the calling of Samuel to be a prophet. Samuel served in ministry under the priest Eli, and in the Temple Samuel hears God call him by name. Samuel responds “*Hineni*,” which is often translated from Hebrew as “Here I

am.” God calls Samuel three times, and to each call Samuel answers *Hineni*, “Here I am.” Samuel’s response is not simply saying that he is present. *Hineni* frequently occurs as an answer to divine instructions or callings. It can acknowledge being in the divine presence, and it reveals an openness to hear and respond to God’s call.

Samuel’s prophetic-call story is about God’s selection and Samuel’s willingness to accept. While most of us will likely not hear God calling us by name, we should be attentive to the world and, like Samuel, be open to answering our calling.

In today’s Gospel from John, Jesus is early in his ministry. After his baptism, Jesus’ next act is to call followers. In John’s account, Jesus is followed

‘Here I am.’ (1 Sm 3:4, 6, 8)

Praying With Scripture

Are you open to answering God’s call?

What do you feel called to do?

What do you hope to see in the new administration?

by two of John the Baptist’s disciples. Andrew invites his brother Simon to meet Jesus and affirms him as Messiah. When Simon arrives, Jesus says, “You will be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter). For Peter, being addressed with a different name represents a new beginning and a preview of his role in building upon Jesus’ ministry. The et-

ymology of the names is connected to the words *kepha* in Aramaic and *petra* in Greek, both meaning “rock.”

The year 2020 has been difficult in countless ways; and January 2021 is, we hope, the beginning of a less tumultuous period. In addition to the new calendar year, last week we began Ordinary Time, and this month ushers in both a new Congress and a new administration. We should take this moment to be thankful for these

fresh starts, reflect on the past and look forward to opportunities to arise in the future.

In today’s readings, both Samuel and Peter serve as models for how to react to new beginnings and calls to serve: Be open. We must be open in mind and heart to what God is calling us to do. Samuel is called to serve as a prophet, a difficult but meaningful role, as he must encourage and criticize people in order to help them live

righteously. Likewise, the disciples Jesus calls are open to the unknown opportunities and obstacles of associating with Jesus. These first followers ultimately became leaders in the service of the early Christian community. Let us be inspired by these biblical examples and approach the future with openness and willingness to serve.

Answer the Call

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JANUARY 24, 2021

READINGS: JON 3:1-10; PS 25; 1 COR 7:29-31; MK 1:14-20

Today’s readings build on last Sunday’s texts about callings. The first reading and the Gospel reveal the power of accepting one’s calling, as it can lead to the conversion of others.

The first reading from Jonah describes the prophet delivering a message of condemnation against the people of Nineveh in Assyria. Upon hearing the warning, the people change their ways, repenting of their sins and fasting. Moved by their acts of contrition, God does not destroy the Ninevites. The narrative reveals the power of change, and it also reveals the importance of accepting one’s calling. Earlier, the prophet had refused his calling. When told to travel to Nineveh, Jonah instead boarded a ship heading in the opposite direction. Only after a tumultuous journey does he reluctantly prophesy to the Ninevites, and yet his short prophecy has a major impact.

Last week we read the calling of the disciples according to John. Today

we hear Mark’s account, and there are notable differences in the traditions. John’s account has John the Baptist present, but Mark says that John had already been arrested. John says Andrew, an unnamed disciple and Simon Peter were called first. Mark similarly has Andrew and Peter followed by brothers James and John. Unlike John’s account, in Mark the disciples are at work, fishing or mending nets, and Jesus invites them to embark on a new vocation, to be fishers for people. Jesus calls the disciples so that they can call others.

The Gospel reminds us to think carefully about our vocation. As the disciples were called while “on the job,” the Gospel could encourage us to broaden our idea of what we should be doing and how we influence our community. A vocation might be one’s career, or it could be broadly understood as one’s purpose. While career and vocation may have closer overlap for some than for others, all of us are called to find

‘Repent and believe in the Gospel.’ (Mk 1:15)

Praying With Scripture

Like Jonah, are you avoiding your calling?

How can you live a life in service to others?

Have you taken time to discern your vocation?

ways to live lives filled with meaning for ourselves and others. In light of the past two Sundays’ readings, this is an excellent opportunity for reflection and discernment of ways to live out one’s purpose.

While the second reading is not a tight thematic fit with the others, it has some language that calls for careful contextualization. Paul writes to the Corinthian community about turbulent times, as he considered the return of Christ, the end of days and final judgment to be immi-

ment. For that reason, he encourages the community not to worry about things like marriage, mourning, joy or possessions because soon all

things would end. Paul's rhetoric saying, "let those having wives act as not having them" ought not be interpreted as some invitation to dis-

regard, denigrate or be unfaithful to wives, or partners generally. Instead, Paul simply wants people to focus on the most pressing issues of the day.

Teaching and Preaching

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME(B), JANUARY 31, 2021

READINGS: DT 18:15-20; PS 95; 1 COR 7:32-35; MK 1:21-28

Today we hear about the power of teaching and preaching. In the readings, Moses, Paul and Jesus offer perspectives on issues they believed were important for their communities.

In the first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to the Israelites about a future prophet. Moses reminds his community that they requested an intermediary between themselves and God at Mt. Horeb (Sinai), and Moses affirms that in the future there would be prophets like him. Moses is often interpreted as the prophet *par excellence*, and he assures the Israelites that true prophets can and will be distinguished from false prophets. Moses assures the Israelites that they will continue to have guidance after his death.

Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians are a continuation of last Sunday's second reading. Recall that Paul is focused on the return of Christ, contrasting that concern with the typical worries of the world. In today's reading, Paul stresses that the Corinthians should be free of anxieties. Both married and unmarried people, in Paul's view, need to focus on preparing themselves for judgment. The second reading should not be misinterpreted to support disregard of family matters. Instead, the reading simply emphasize

devotion to God.

The Gospel gives an example of how Jesus preaches, through words and actions. The passage occurs after Jesus has called his first followers. They enter the synagogue, where Jesus both preaches and casts out demons. These actions would be surprising and compelling to many, as they provide evidence of Jesus' divine authority. Once Jesus reveals this power, "his fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee."

One aspect that might be curious in the Gospel is Jesus' exchange with the unclean spirit. The spirit recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God, and Jesus rebukes him, insisting on silence. There are a few possible reasons for this rebuke. Jesus might not want the spirit speaking his name aloud because using a name was sometimes viewed as a sign of power over someone or something. Likewise, the secrecy could be because Jesus is not ready for everyone to know who he is just yet. This concern with secrecy will recur in other Gospel readings during this liturgical year.

Today's readings remind us of the importance of having good teachers whose authority is trustworthy. The

He taught them as one having authority. (Mk 1:22)

Praying With Scripture

Who are your teachers?

What can you do to increase your knowledge and understanding?

How can you impart wisdom in the world?

readings also remind us to be attentive to what we see and hear and to critically evaluate the world in order to learn and grow.

Jaime L. Waters teaches Scripture at DePaul University in Chicago. She is an associate professor of Catholic studies.

Being ‘at One’

How our faiths can lead us to national unity

By Tim Shriver



We are living in a crisis of collective meaning and purpose that has led to divisiveness and fear. Centuries of racism, inequality and indifference have crested in a moment of national reckoning. Religion must play a key role in transforming this moment from one of despair to one of hope. When we reopen our churches, synagogues and mosques, we need to build back a better version of faith, of shared meaning and of collective purpose. When the Covid-19 pandemic is over, we need to build our relationship with God back better.

Of course, we do not need to change God. But we do need to change how our religious traditions present the many and diverse faces of God. It is not audacious to suggest that, in this moment, our society would benefit from the rituals, teachings and practices that focus on unity. To heal painful divisions, we will need religion to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

This should not be difficult. Virtually every religious tradition includes an invitation to experience both the divine and the human as being “at one.” The Jewish tradition of atonement marks the journey from separation to “at-one-ment.” The Christian hope “that they may be one” is celebrated in every denomination. The holy names of Allah in Islam include the concept that God is one, all-loving and indivisible.

Being “at one” is pursued in prac-

tices of silence, stillness and simplicity—not the usual fare of most religious gatherings. But when these practices are taught and sustained, believers are invited into a new way of seeing, where oneness and beauty are not only what we recognize in others but also the lens through which we see.

At a certain level, we seem to know this already. We have all felt the hunger to love all things and all people, a desire to heal the wounds of others whom we do not even know, a sense that we are all held in an embrace both gentle and powerful. Many young people find these experiences in nature. Others find them in those they love. Still others find them in struggle and solidarity against injustice. Beyond what we dare imagine lies what we most deeply are: equal in the sight of God.

Oneness does not end the work of seeking moral or ethical justice, but it can guide it. By being invited to view life through the lens of unity, we see a larger wholeness where our differences are not erased but rather affirmed and made safe. By seeing from oneness, we find ourselves always and endlessly seeking the good of others because we know it is no different from the good of ourselves.

What a difference it would make if ministers, religious leaders and authority figures in the churches, synagogues and mosques of the United States were to make a joint commit-

ment to unite our country with sacred practices of oneness. What a difference it would make if we constructed a new normal after this pandemic, in which these leaders created common prayers for unity and healing—prayers grounded in each distinct faith tradition but also grounded in the oneness of divinity that binds us together, recognizes our interdependence and delights in the overwhelming goodness of God. The current era of division and scapegoating and violence should be met by people of faith with healing, transformation and change.

Decades ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized the call to unite without separating his faith from his capacity to see each of his fellow Americans as his brothers and sisters. He made his appeal without violence or demonization or superiority or hatred—the telltale sign of a uniter spirit. His work is unfinished, and our work is now more urgent than ever.

When we return to our churches, synagogues and mosques, someday soon, I hope we return to a faith that unites rather than divides us. That would surely be a better vision of God and, therefore, a better version of ourselves, too.

Tim Shriver is the longtime chair of Special Olympics, a best-selling author, a film producer and a seeker of unity in society and in himself.

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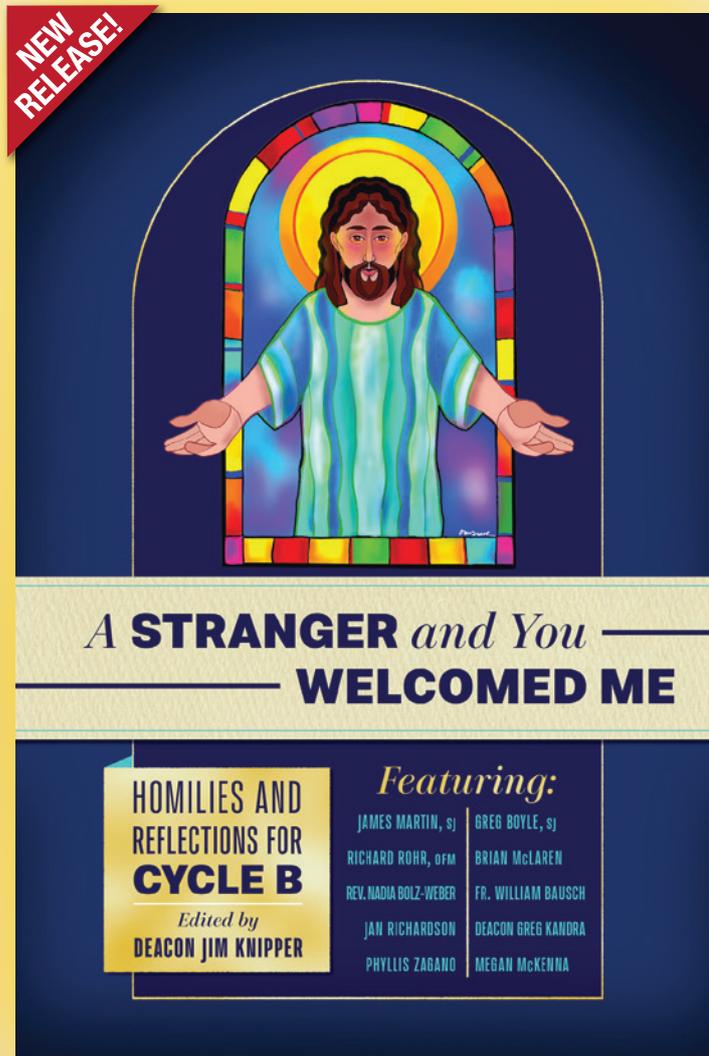
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