

# America

DECEMBER 2021

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

## THE END OF ORDINARY TIME

Nothing will change  
the church more  
profoundly than  
climate change

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## A Warning From Rhode Island

Hundreds of our fellow Americans gathered in Dallas, Tex., in early November to witness the second coming of John F. Kennedy Jr. Members of the QAnon conspiracy cult, who believe that former president Donald J. Trump is leading a crusade against a Satan-worshipping cabal of pedophilic sex traffickers led by Hilary Clinton, gathered at the site where President John F. Kennedy was assassinated because they believed that the late president's late son was about to be resurrected in order to run for vice president on a ticket with Mr. Trump in 2024.

You read that right.

The whole thing is so utterly absurd that it would be laughable if not for the fact that this insanity is but the tip of a sizable iceberg. Lurking beneath the JFK Jr., story, which few people are willing or able to believe, is a deeper, more impenetrable and more dangerous complex of lies and half-truths, which many people are all too willing and able to believe. Call it misinformation, fake news, alternative facts or just plain hooley—whatever you call it, it forms a big part of the daily information diet of many Americans. According to a 2019 poll from the Pew Research Center, more than half of Americans report encountering fake news online and rate it as a more serious threat to American democracy than terrorism.

They are right to worry. The algorithms that drive our digital news feeds on platforms like Facebook (see the editorial in this issue), not only connect us with news and information we are likely to “like,” but with people and groups we are likely to either love or hate. This is how groups

like QAnon form. On a more mundane level, it is also why Republicans and Democrats, among other groups, seem to operate from completely different datasets, for those algorithms create a silo effect. News and information, accurate or not, can be easily shared within a group but not easily shared from one group to another, and especially not among groups who hold divergent worldviews.

This is a 21st-century problem, but we were first warned about it in the 18th century. Our founding fathers called what we are experiencing today factionalism. Faction was the bugbear of men like James Madison. In Federalist Number 10, Madison defines a faction as “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a minority or majority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens or to the permanent or aggregate interests of the community.” A faction, in other words, pursues its narrow interests at the expense of the common good. And Madison was not just theorizing. He had a specific example in mind: Rhode Island. Eighteenth-century Rhode Island was rife with factionalism. And he knew why, as he related to his readers in Federalist Number 51: Rhode Island was too small.

It sounds counterintuitive, perhaps, but James Madison believed that only a large society, occupying a vast expanse of space, could be effectively governed as a republic. If the place were too small, then like-minded people could too easily find one another and form a faction. A large country would be more stable. “In the extended republic of the United

States,” Madison wrote, “a coalition of a majority of the whole society could seldom take place on any other principles than those of justice and common good.”

What does this say about the United States in the 21st century? Quite a lot, actually. By annihilating distance, the internet has transformed the contemporary United States into 18th-century Rhode Island. That's why there were hundreds of people in Dallas looking for JFK Jr. rather than just one lone nutter. By forming us into like-minded groups, the algorithms are, in fact, tearing us apart. As the editors write in this issue about the Facebook papers, “these revelations offer a robust demonstration of the reality of original sin, which seeps through our social media feeds much as it does anywhere else in human society.”

James Madison was all too familiar with original sin. He believed it was the primordial force that drives us to seek one's self-interest instead of the common good. Since human beings are disposed to factionalism by virtue of original sin, thought Madison, the success of the republic would require a carefully calibrated system of checks and balances in a government with separation of powers.

The question now is whether that revolutionary 18th-century system can still effectively work in a 21st-century country that has become, through the digital revolution, paradoxically, a lot smaller.

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



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AP Photo/Peter Dejong

People dance at Paradiso, a club and cultural center, in Amsterdam on Sept. 25, the day after the Netherlands dropped its 1.5 meters social distancing rule. Paradiso is housed in a former church building.

Cover: iStock/Joseph Gloor - Word on Fire

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## Has polarization poisoned the two-party system?

*Below is a curated selection of responses to the November issue's cover story, "A Pro-life Democrat, a Divided Nation: Lessons From 16 Years in Congress," by Daniel Lipinski, who served eight terms as the U.S. Representative for Illinois' Third Congressional District, from 2005 to 2021. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.*

The author says that the Democratic Party or some parts of it moved "leftward." I'm not sure what that word means. There are a few Democratic members who are economically progressive, but there is no great movement in the direction of democratic socialism. It might help if the author specified what "leftward" actually means and what he thinks is problematic with it.

I think the author is correct about the problem of the two-party system and polarization. My dream would be to have a many-party system (with the present two parties in the dustbin of history) representing different alignments. Then parties would have to collaborate and compromise.

**Stanley Kopacz**

As a political centrist, I see both parties as lacking much interest in anything resembling tolerance. Congressman Lipinski followed his ideals, a near-impossible achievement in today's political malaise.

**Loretta de Córdova**

Mr. Lipinski's view on Catholics and the abortion issue is why President Trump came to power. Catholics supported Trump because of his insincere and self-serving stance on abortion, forgetting that there are more issues regarding human dignity than just abortion, such as poverty, racism, immigration, etc.

**Linda Talcott**

As a pro-life Independent who lives in Mr. Lipinski's district, I read his article with a certain fascination. Between the two elections against his opponent, I received a number of calls from her focus groups contrasting their positions on more than just abortion. Those were designed to show her as more compassionate and reasonable than Mr. Lipinski. From these calls I knew his re-election was in trouble.

While I agree that life begins at conception, I believe there are more important things than one's stand on abortion. The pro-life cause should also be concerned about suicide by veterans, suicide over gender orientation, deaths

in refugee camps, and for people escaping from murder and abuse in foreign countries.

As a political moderate, I wished I saw more political leadership on his positions beyond abortion. Mr. Lipinski's concern for reaching across the aisle is the mantra for all reasonable citizens hoping to save our democracy, but I do not see much action or leadership toward this end.

**Jim Fogarty**

I am a Democrat, because the party agrees with me on nearly every issue I can think of: climate change, conservation, immigration, expanding the electorate, gun control, international relations, etc. There are, of course, a few issues we disagree on, such as abortion and the "defense" budget (it's way too high). But by contrast, the Republican Party and I agree on almost nothing.

The last Republican I ever voted for for any office was Reagan in 1984. Since then, it's been a straight Democratic ticket right down the line. It used to be possible to be bipartisan, but not any longer. I've always been proud to say that I am the only person I know who voted for both Barry Goldwater and George McGovern. That would, sadly, never happen today.

**Robert Prokop**

Kudos to the writer for articulating a dilemma I feel every day. "Old" Democratic party principles now being submerged by a pro-choice mandate. To that part of old party principles, like the common good, I would add the Beatitudes, which could be found in the old days if one looked hard enough. No more, and our country is poorer for that loss of compassion.

**Joseph Russell**

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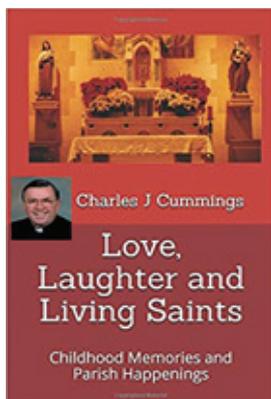


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## Facebook's focus on engagement endangers the common good

What does a company with more than two billion monthly users—more than a quarter of the human race—owe the rest of us? The recent revelations of internal corporate documents, research and conversations show that Facebook—recently rebranded as Meta—has been wrestling with the negative effects of its platforms and products even while offering public assurances about them.

These materials, leaked by a former Facebook employee, Frances Haugen, have been extensively reported on, first by *The Wall Street Journal* and then by a consortium of other news organizations. They have also been turned over to the Securities and Exchange Commission and were the subject of congressional hearings.

One takeaway from the flood of headlines about these leaks is that Facebook is concerned about a broad range of negative impacts and fosters an extensive internal discussion about them—very little of which ordinarily makes it into public view. For example, internal Facebook research looked at the ways Instagram damages the mental health of teenagers, how misinformation moves through Facebook's algorithmic feeds, the involvement of its platforms in disseminating hate speech and encouraging political violence in developing countries, and how its own privileging of reactions like “angry” over the default “like” for registering engagement has amplified toxic and low-quality posts.

Alongside these internal discussions, the leaks also revealed that Facebook has a special program that protects “VIP users,” including celebrities, politicians and journalists. This special category includes millions of accounts, which are exempt from the

company's normal enforcement and review processes. And complicating the frequent assertion that Facebook and other social media companies censor conservative political content, the documents show that many of Facebook's own employees argue that in fact, Facebook protects right-wing publishers from even-handed enforcement of its own rules in order to avoid political backlash.

To offer a theological gloss on what seems to be a story about an impersonal corporation's malfeasance, we can point out that these revelations offer a robust demonstration of the reality of original sin, which seeps through our social media feeds much as it does anywhere else in human society.

Looked at from this angle, the problem is not that Facebook, its employees or its executives are notably more or less corrupt than any other large corporation. Rather, the issue is that Facebook's business model, built on monetizing human attention while outsourcing human judgment to algorithms, is a uniquely comprehensive and dangerous abdication of responsibility.

Facebook's dependence on algorithms to drive its platforms' feeds allows it to function as a global-scale media company based on the free labor of billions of users creating and interacting with content that Facebook hosts and from which it profits, but for which it refuses to accept any substantive responsibility. While the willingness of Facebook and other large social media platforms to host all this content for free may seem to profoundly democratize the ability to publish, the platforms have every incentive to monopolize their users' attention as much as possible.

As a consequence of this incentive, Facebook's algorithms use “engagement” as a proxy for “attention-worthy.” What Facebook presents for its users to pay attention to is precisely what it expects will keep them engaged with Facebook, a signal that is easy to measure without human effort. But the fact that human beings—sinful and subject to temptation as we are—are often prone to engage with the worst in ourselves and one another is not something Facebook has proven itself able to code around.

The effect of privileging engagement—which, remember, is for the sake of Facebook's shareholders and profit margin, not its users—can be analogized to rubbernecking at a vehicular accident: The more people who pay attention to (“engage” with) the accident, the worse the traffic jam gets. But while a GPS algorithm would likely attempt to route drivers away from the traffic jam for the sake of getting them to their destinations, Facebook's feed algorithms instead funnel users toward it, since such attention is exactly what Facebook sells.

One of the most disturbing revelations from the leaked documents was an experiment in which a Facebook researcher set up a new mock account that started off following mainstream conservative pages. Within days, Facebook's recommendations algorithm started surfacing QAnon groups and other conspiracy theory content for this account. This is not evidence that Facebook is intentionally biased in favor of conspiracy theories, but rather evidence that conspiracy theories are more “engaging” than the truth—in approximately the same sense that cocaine is more addictive than kale. Engagement is not a reliable proxy for

value, except in the narrow sense of monetary value for Facebook's ad sales.

The first step to reining in Facebook must be a far-reaching commitment by the company to transparency, both about Facebook's internal research into its negative effects and about such closely guarded secrets as its feed algorithms. Any company at Facebook's scale has an outsized effect on the common good. It is absolutely necessary to enable others who do not share the profit motives of Facebook executives to evaluate those effects. The same argument also applies to other tech companies whose platforms shape the digital environment that we all share. Facebook's recent renaming of itself as Meta to emphasize its focus on building the "metaverse," envisioned as a virtual reality space for, well, *everything*, only underlines this point.

Along with greater transparency, Facebook should also be pushed to limit its scale and reach in significant ways, including through the threat of antitrust enforcement. But the most important constraint to apply is that the reach of information in Facebook's feeds needs to have human judgment in the loop, not merely algorithmic amplification. Facebook tells us—and itself—that its platform is just a tool, and thus value-neutral, committed primarily to free speech. Users post content, their engagement feeds the algorithm and they see more of what they pay attention to. This supposed commitment to free speech, however, obfuscates the fact that the engagement the company seeks more precisely means "activity valuable to Facebook." No matter how much Facebook would like that to be neutral, someone needs to take responsibility for how it affects the world.

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## Things that matter: descending into deceit and the impact of the post-truth era

We are living in a period in history that demands clear, honest, scientifically guided responses to existential threats like the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. But as great as that need is, we see so many instances of elected officials and policymakers failing to adequately address the great challenges of our times. We see science providing us with answers and approaches, but too often these lifelines are brushed aside or ignored. Too frequently, our elected officials fail us, elevating artful pandering and dishonesty over real solutions.

I have had the honor to serve in the U.S. Congress and then become a chancellor—and now president—of my alma mater, the University of Massachusetts. In government and in higher education, I have been guided by Robert F. Kennedy’s belief that the purpose of life is to contribute in a meaningful way to making things better in the world. Today, I believe it is more important than ever that we embrace policies and follow paths that we know to be in the public interest and to be fact-based. There is too much at stake to do otherwise.

From our earliest days, we are told about the importance of truth. The Bible tells us, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” and the Prophet Muhammad urges us to “speak the truth, even when it is bitter.” Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, observed, “This is a moral universe and you’ve got to take account of the fact that truth and lies and goodness and evil are things that matter.” Finally, the preamble of one of America’s foundational documents, the Declaration of Independence, asserts the existence of essential, “self-evident” truths.

Humans have never fully embraced the concept of telling the truth, which can be painful, inconvenient and embarrassing. In her book *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*, Sophia Rosenfeld, a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, notes that the relationship between democracy and the truth has always been uneasy. But she also writes that the “truth crisis” we see today transcends anything that has come before. There is a new willingness to stand truth on its head and to wield the weapon of deception whenever it is convenient to do so.

Let us just say the name: Donald Trump. In any discussion about a post-truth world and a new willingness to embrace deceit as a *modus operandi*, our former president is the proverbial 800-pound gorilla. According to The Washington Post’s Fact Checker team, Mr. Trump spoke 30,573 untruths during his presidency—an average of 21 falsehoods a day. While Mr. Trump’s deceptions came in all shapes and sizes, he will especially be remembered for his assertion that the 2020 election was stolen.

However large Mr. Trump looms, he may be pained to hear that it is not all about him. As Andrew Higgins noted earlier this year in The New York Times, “Lying as a political tool is hardly new.” And the political right does not have a monopoly on deception. Glenn Kessler, who has led the Fact Checker team since 2011, told one interviewer that “Both political parties will manipulate the truth if they think it gives them a political advantage.”

Certainly, other American presidents have lied. Lyndon Johnson spread so much disinformation about the Vietnam War that journalists in-

vented a new term, saying that the president had a “credibility gap.” Richard Nixon assured the nation that no member of his administration was connected to the Watergate break-in. And Dwight D. Eisenhower signed off on a false statement to the public that a plane shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960 was conducting “weather research.” The United States was ultimately forced to acknowledge that the U-2 plane was on an espionage mission, and Eisenhower later called the initial lie his “greatest regret.”

But Donald Trump brought deception to a new level, in part through his ability to communicate directly with millions of Americans by way of social media. This ability to wage verbal warfare without concern for taste, veracity or the dignity of the presidency made him a potent political force. At the same time, the diminished size and impact of the news media in the digital age has made it more difficult for it to play its traditional role as a watchdog.

### How Lies Can Cost Lives

Why is it wrong to lie? Because it offends our sensibilities? Because our parents and teachers told us not to?

Those are good reasons to steer clear of deception, but lying on a grand scale by public leaders is even more alarming because it has the power to pervert public policy and even end lives. This is the point I made when I took on the tobacco industry as a member of Congress in the 1990s.

Smoking was and continues to be the leading cause of preventable death, claiming nearly half a million lives in the United States annually. Worldwide, the number of smokers has increased to 1.1 billion, with to-

Donald Trump brought deception to a new level.

bacco smoking causing nearly eight million deaths per year, or one in five deaths among males.

In confronting the tobacco industry, I met an opponent that was willing to spin fairy tales about its product and the risks associated with it. The tobacco industry's deceptions were blatant, with three industry C.E.O.s telling Congress in 1994 that they did not believe nicotine to be addictive. This testimony was astounding because the companies by that time thoroughly understood the many health risks that tobacco posed. Thirty years earlier, a lawyer at the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp. had plainly stated in a confidential memo, "We are...in the business of selling nicotine, an addictive drug."

In 2006, thanks in part to our efforts in Congress, a federal judge imposed numerous sanctions on the tobacco industry. But the industry's disinformation campaign took a massive toll. Public understanding was muddled, regulation was delayed, and many people got sick or died because of the industry's desperate and deceitful tactics. Some say that "the truth hurts," but lying kills.

We see deception and dishonesty in many areas, not just in politics and government. For example, while the antivaccine movement includes people who are driven by their earnestly held beliefs, it has also spawned a multibillion-dollar "anti-vax" industry that includes many who are not true believers and are in it strictly for the money to be gained from selling everything from books and videos to alternative medicines and "miracle cures."

The Center for Countering Digital Hate recently identified what it



called the "Disinformation Dozen," a list of 12 people responsible for creating up to 70 percent of all spurious antivaccine messaging on social media. The person who tops the list has woven deception into a \$100 million personal empire.

### Time Running Out

So how do we stand up for truth? Some good ideas have emerged in recent years.

- As the Los Angeles Times business columnist David Lazarus wrote in January, "It's intriguing to look at some of the laws in place to deter bogus claims in the business world and to consider—even just as a thought experiment—how such laws could serve as a template for limits on deceptive political speech."
- The Pro-Truth Pledge, formulated by the authors Gleb Tsipursky and Tim Ward in 2016, encourages politicians—and everyone else—to commit to truth-oriented behaviors and to protect facts and civility.
- Professional sanctions can also work. Several months ago, a New York State appeals court suspended Rudolph Giuliani's law license, contending that he made "false and misleading" statements about the 2020 election while serving as Mr. Trump's personal lawyer.
- At the grassroots level, concerned

citizens are mobilizing to challenge and rebut social-media disinformation on issues ranging from Covid-19 vaccines to climate change.

Ultimately, we need leaders who will lead. We need leaders who have the moral fiber to police themselves and others, and who are able to fashion solutions for social and economic problems that can create fertile ground for demagogues.

Lies do not die with each passing news cycle. They are like poisoned fruit littering the landscape. Earlier this year, we all saw the halls of Congress trampled and democracy attacked. Without question, the outrageous actions we saw on that infamous day were triggered by people who were willing to weaponize falsehoods and deceit.

It is up to all of us to stand up to those who would place lives and democracy at risk. We still have time, but the clock is ticking.

---

Marty Meehan is president of the University of Massachusetts system. This essay has been adapted from his remarks to the conference "Truth and Post-Truth in Communication, Media and Society," conducted by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and held at the Vatican on Sept. 13 and 14.



CNS photo/Hal Brown, The Monitor

## We contacted every diocese in America about their synod plans. Here's what we found.

By Colleen Dulle and Doug Girardot

The diocesan phase of the global synodal process, officially titled “Toward a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” began on Sunday, Oct. 17, but at that point only about half of U.S. dioceses had taken the first step of appointing a local synod coordinator, as called for by the Vatican’s instructions.

In September and October, a team of **America** reporters contacted all 196 “particular churches” in the United States—dioceses, eparchies and the personal ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter—and was able to confirm the appointment of just 62 local synod coordinators. Richard Coll, the executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, who is the conference’s liaison with these coordinators, said that with many appointments being made just days before the synod had been scheduled to begin, that number was around 80 by the opening of the diocesan phase, representing about half of the United States’ 176 dioceses, and had increased to 90 by early November.

The synod, commonly referred to as the synod on synodality, aims to shift the church toward a more decentral-

ized model of decision-making by inviting laypeople and those who have not traditionally had a voice in church leadership into discussions on how the church can be more inclusive and collaborative. The three-step process includes a diocesan phase, which began in October 2021 and extended on Oct. 29 until August 2022; a continental phase, spanning late 2022 and early 2023; and a final, universal phase, which will take the form of a gathering of bishops and others in Rome in October 2023. Although the synod is unlikely to bring about a large-scale transformation of church structures, Pope Francis sees it as a necessary first step in that direction.

Of the 196 churches contacted by America Media, 104 did not respond. Of the 92 that did, the vast majority had planned an opening Mass, about two-thirds had appointed a local coordinator, and 35 had a plan in place for reaching out to parishes and gathering feedback. Despite Vatican instructions that “special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, Catholics who rarely or never practice their

faith, etc.," only a handful described plans to specifically reach out to those groups.

### Challenges

While the U.S. bishops have, on the whole, been slower to embrace the synodal model than bishops in, for example, Ireland, Germany, Australia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the delays in this particular process cannot be attributed entirely to a lack of openness to synodality, Mr. Coll of the U.S.C.C.B. cautioned. Dioceses in the United States face a variety of challenges in implementing the process, including inadequate time to prepare, a lack of informational and financial resources, and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic—issues that are not unique to them.

The Vatican's synod office released its two key documents—the preparatory document and the *vademecum*, or handbook, for dioceses—only on Sept. 7, which, some dioceses said, did not give them enough time to prepare for an Oct. 17 launch date. Other dioceses that had more concrete plans by the 17th had begun planning even before the Vatican documents were distributed, as in the Bridgeport, Conn., and Gary, Ind., dioceses. The pandemic has also slowed down the planning process for dioceses, Mr. Coll said.

Finally, around 40 percent of U.S. dioceses are considered “mission” dioceses, meaning they cover a large area, have few Catholics or face financial difficulties. Eastern Catholic eparchies face many of these same challenges. Because of the large distances and scant resources, planning listening sessions that will reach as many people as possible has been particularly difficult.

### Preparations

Despite the logistical challenges that have confronted many dioceses in the United States, several dioceses that **America** reached out to indicated that they were well prepared.

In the Diocese of Gary, Ind., Bishop Robert J. McClory said that his diocese decided to start preparing for the synod as soon as the Vatican announced its plans in May 2021. Months before the synod was scheduled to begin, the diocese conducted meetings with both the priests of the diocese and the diocesan pastoral council. The logistical wrinkles of this process have been smoothed out by the fact that the Diocese of Gary carried out its own local synod in 2017.

Likewise, the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., began the process over the summer. In late August, Bishop Frank Caggiano sent a letter to pastors in the diocese explaining the goals of the synod, and he instructed parishes to choose

synodal delegates by Sept. 15—a month before the synod's official opening Mass in Rome.

In Gary and in several other dioceses, including Corpus Christi, Tex.; Marquette, Mich.; Phoenix, Ariz.; and Reno, Nev., the leaders of the synodal process have plans to reach out to a wide range of groups that have traditionally been left out of church discussions, in keeping with the Vatican's recommendations.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Timothy Ekaitis, who serves as the synodal coordinator in the Diocese of Marquette, Mich., said in an email that his diocese is making efforts to involve members of Native American tribes, Christians of other denominations and Eastern Rite Catholics. In Phoenix, the synodal organizers will endeavor to include perspectives from homeless people and people who no longer practice the Catholic faith.

Of course, it is one thing to aspire to include people from diverse backgrounds and another to do it—especially when a given diocese includes people who speak a variety of languages and come from different cultures. The dioceses that are best prepared for the synod have made efforts to address this challenge, undertaking the task of reaching a representative cross-section of people by employing strategies that resemble get-out-the-vote campaigns before national elections.

### Takeaways

The stakes are high. While popes have been convening the Synod of Bishops since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (30 times since 1967), perhaps no other synod meeting has had so much potential to change the structures of the church, or at least the image that the church has of itself—shifting from a model that identifies the church primarily with the hierarchy to a vision of the church as the “people of God,” a strong emphasis of Vatican II. Pope Francis has made the implementation of the council one of the principal goals of his pontificate, and the “synod on synodality” could significantly shape his legacy.

What remains in question is the effect the synod will have on the U.S. church and whether a Catholic community and episcopate divided along political lines will be able to come together for open discussions that will certainly touch on hot-button issues that have divided the American church for decades. The pope believes strongly in the transformative power of encounter and listening among people who disagree, but he has cautioned against synods becoming “parliaments.” Without a commitment to listening, humility and charity, these synod discussions run the risk of drawing

ever-deeper battle lines in an already-divided U.S. church.

A further risk concerns inclusivity. Many of the dioceses contacted by **America** reported no plan to reach beyond parishes, and parish discussion groups will likely draw in only those who are already most involved in the parish. While these voices are certainly important, the Vatican has stressed reaching out to those on the margins of the church or outside it.

“I think if it were to be limited to sort of traditional voices, as important as they are, that would not be a good outcome because we would be excluding exactly the kind of voices that are most crucial to the synodal process,” Mr. Coll said.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the U.S. bishops in this process is the end goal of the process itself: increasing collaboration and decentralizing power. The synod seeks to move the church away from a purely preaching model toward one that listens, engages in dialogue and discerns together with a variety of people. This would be a significant shift for a number of American bishops.

Those who have previously participated in synods, like Bishop McClory, also emphasize that the synod process itself can be transformative.

Bishop McClory said he believes that this synod “holds a great deal of promise,” even if the task is somewhat daunting. “I have experienced, directly and indirectly, the vitality that they [synods] can add to a local church,” he said.

“That synod experience was really a time of great joy for them. So I want to build upon that.”

---

Colleen Dulle, *associate editor*.  
Twitter: @ColleenDulle.  
Doug Girardot, *O’Hare fellow*.  
Twitter: @laslo0728.

**Correction:** In an article in the November issue, “Feed the hungry, shelter the homeless...,” Maria Robinson was misidentified as Maria Raskob.

## The ‘synod on synodality’: Ready or not?

“Since the first centuries, the word synod has been applied...to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.”

—“Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”:  
International Theological Commission



**176:** U.S. dioceses

**90:** Dioceses with synod coordinators  
(as of Nov. 8)

**16,703:** U.S. parishes

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**1.3 billion:** Global Catholic population.

**3,181:** Global “ecclesiastical jurisdictions,” including 652 archdioceses and 2,248 dioceses, as well as apostolic vicariates, administrations, prefectures, military and personal ordinariates, missions and more.

### Five countries with largest Catholic populations

Brazil:	138 million (65% of the total population)
Mexico:	108 million (83%)
Philippines:	89 million (81%)
United States:	70 million (21%)
Italy:	50 million (81%)

### SYNOD TIMELINE

**Diocesan phase:** October 2021 to August 2022

**Continental phase:** Autumn 2022 to Spring 2023

**Universal phase (Synod of Bishops in Rome):** October 2023

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**Sept. 15, 1965:** Pope Paul VI issues “*Apostolica Sollicitudo*,” establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church. Since then there have been 15 ordinary general assemblies of the Synod of Bishops, 3 extraordinary assemblies and 11 special assemblies.

### Synods/assemblies under Pope Francis:

On the church in the Pan-Amazon region—2019

On youth—2018

On the family—2014

### The first synod?

The apostolic Council of Jerusalem (see Acts 15 and Gal 2:1-10)

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Sources: CIA World Factbook; General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops; catholic-hierarchy.org.



## GOODNEWS: 'Nobody flees from love'

*Brazil's alternative prisons  
offer a model of restoration*

*A recuperando stands  
before the entrance to the  
prison, over which hangs  
the APAC slogan: "Here  
enters the person, the  
crime stays outside."*

Photo courtesy of Bruno Tiezzi, "Unguarded," © Camino NYC Productions

In Brazil's overcrowded prisons, it is difficult to maintain social distancing precautions, and violence and inmate riots are a frequent threat. After doors were closed to visitors at Easter time in 2020 because of the pandemic, inmates rioted at four São Paulo prisons. More than 400 inmates escaped.

But inside Brazil's APAC detention sites—short for *Associação de Proteção e Assistência aos Condenados* (Association for Protecting and Assisting Convicts)—that kind of reaction was unknown, and the Covid-19 crisis has been contained. What is it about an APAC prison that makes inmates willing to stay?

Denio Marx Menezes, APAC's director of international relations, recalled an inmate who escaped from six prisons before entering APAC. Asked why he did not attempt to escape anymore, "Do amor ninguém foge," he replied. ("Nobody flees from love.")

The better security performance of APAC sites is even more incredible when one considers that APAC facilities do not use prison guards. Select prisoners, in fact, are entrusted with the keys to the prison, enabling them to come and go during scheduled hours. There are no weapons in the prison and inmates can wear civilian clothes.

All of these measures reflect the unique recovery-focused goals of the APAC model. "We try to teach them as God teaches us: with love," Mr. Menezes said. "We help them to acknowledge that they chose to commit a crime and how doing that harms society," he added, "but we also give them the tools to make amends and to choose to do good for others."

Inmates, or *recuperandi* (people who are recovering from their criminal acts), as they are called, follow a 12-step program and a strict daily schedule. As one of the most well-known APAC slogans puts it: "Here enters the man;

the crime stays outside."

Whether cleaning cells, cooking, gardening, taking classes, praying or playing sports, the inmates are always kept busy from when they wake up at 6:30 a.m. to "lights out" at 10 p.m. "They are not permitted to do nothing," Mr. Menezes said. "They are always doing something."

Maintaining a clean and beautiful environment is essential to maintaining the inmates' sense of dignity and humanity, Mr. Menezes said. In addition to learning a skill or craft, working and studying, inmates are required to participate in counseling groups and religious services.

The APAC model has been receiving new attention thanks to an upcoming documentary titled "Unguarded." Its director, Simonetta D'Italia-Wiener, visited an APAC prison in Itauna, Brazil.

The film is set to tour U.S. universities this fall, including the University of Notre Dame, Loyola University Chicago, the University of Florida and the University of Omaha. It will be aired on PBS in the late winter of 2022.

There are over 100 APAC prisons in Brazil, and the program has been adopted in 23 other countries. Many Americans who are attracted to the APAC method wonder if it will ever be possible to implement one in the United States.

After a recent screening of "Unguarded" at a transitional work program in Lafourche Parish, La., one inmate told members of the local media, "In our country, prisons are a place where you put someone in and throw away the key. And it suits us because it is a business. APAC is something else: unimaginable, but possible. Because if it is possible there, it is also possible here."

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## In El Salvador, death squads continue their bloody work

Death squads were a diabolical presence during the brutal civil war in El Salvador from 1979 to 1992. Peace finally came, but extrajudicial killings at the hands of El Salvador's military or National Civil Police have continued.

Many among the more than 1,800 deaths at the hands of national police and other security forces between 2015 and 2020 represent extrajudicial killings through executions conducted by contemporary death squads or through the use of excessive force during police and security encounters with El Salvador's notorious gang members. That is the assessment of researchers at the Observatory of Human Rights at the José Simeón Cañas University of Central America, which published an analysis of contemporary extrajudicial killings in El Salvador in September.

"During the civil war, there were a lot of reports of extrajudicial killings, and most of them went unpunished," Gerardo Alejandro, one of the report's authors, said. A broad amnesty law passed in 1993 also "managed to sweep all the cases, all the reports under the rug. And now it is 30 years later, and I believe that the violence that wasn't attended to at that time is the same violence that we are experiencing in these times."

After the war ended, El Salvador fell victim to a new and relentless form of civil violence. Drug and human trafficking gangs have made El Salvador one of the most violent societies on earth. El Salvador's contemporary death

squads largely target criminal suspects connected to organized crime. The observatory's human rights researchers found that between 2015 and 2020, killings by police peaked in 2016 at 603 and have been in a sharp decline since. In 2020, the observatory recorded 88 cases of possible extrajudicial homicides by security forces and police.

The report focused on 13 recent cases of lethal use of force reported to human rights offices in El Salvador. Researchers concluded that official narratives of "armed confrontation" in these lethal force incidents were not convincing. In fact, they believe the confrontations described by police never occurred, suggesting that the fatalities that resulted were closer to outright executions of suspects.

More people were killed than wounded during arrests by police and security forces in the five-year period reviewed by the observatory, suggesting a systematic, excessive use of force. "What the study shows is that there is abuse of force on the part of the state institutions, that there is cover-up and that there is no desire to thoroughly analyze reality, much less to make proposals that improve the situation," José María Tojeira, S.J., the director of U.C.A.'s Human Rights Institute, said during a presentation of the report's findings to local media in San Salvador in September.

Fifteen clandestine "extermination groups" have been identified by public ministry investigators in El Salvador, ac-



CNS photo/José Cabezas, Reuters

Suspected gang members are presented to the media in San Salvador, El Salvador, in November 2020.

According to the report. The hit teams include current and former police and security personnel as well as civilians. The observatory believes at least 188 people were killed by these death squads between 2016 and 2020.

The cases are being investigated, when they are investigated at all, as simple homicides, Mr. Alejandro explained, not as crimes committed by agents of the state. El Salvador, in fact, does not have a specific criminal code that applies to homicide by members of official security entities. That leaves an investigatorial lacuna, Mr. Alejandro argues, in which state actors behind death squads can remain hidden.

He speculates that part of the reason extrajudicial homicide as an unspoken state policy survives is the support it receives from everyday Salvadorans exhausted by the daily gang violence. They may hope, he said, that the extrajudicial killings will reduce the nation's soaring crime rate.

"The political will to use other kinds of [anti-crime] strategy is very low," Mr. Alejandro said, "because people want quick results.... They want the violence to stop now."

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Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*  
Twitter: @ClarkeAtAmerica.



## 'De facto deacons'

*New report listens to women who feel called to serve*

Catholic women's experiences with ministry and their feelings about the possibility of a women's diaconate are described in their own words in a new report, "Called to Contribute," published with the support of Discerning Deacons, a campaign aimed at engaging Catholics in discernment about the role of women and the diaconate. Even though women make up 80 percent of lay ecclesial ministers, the report found that Catholic women still struggle to have their contributions recognized. While church leaders have closed the door on even the discussion of ordaining women to the priesthood, many Catholic women still hope for a formal recognition of their role.

"There's something really corrosive about being rendered invisible," one woman said, describing her experience serving as a lay woman in the Catholic Church. "The church, the decision-makers, the people who hold the power—what would it be for them to really see women? It's sinful that they don't."

The report found that many Catholic women act as "de facto deacons" in their church communities even as they have to defer to male authority figures in their parishes. A common theme across the women's experiences was frustration with the limits imposed by the church.

Respondents described the particular hurt of seeing men with lesser talents become ordained while they remain ineligible. Many of the women feel they have a talent for preaching and ministry that they are unable to express, even when their parish badly needs those gifts.

One respondent talked about a damaging sense of rejection she felt as she stepped away from pastoral work, realizing there was no path to ordained ministry for her: "I love Jesus and the church, and I wanted to give my life to it. But the church basically said, 'No, we don't want you.'"

---

Sarah Vincent, *O'Hare fellow.*  
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# INSIDE AMERICA

HIGHLIGHTING WHAT IS HAPPENING INSIDE AMERICA MEDIA. - THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

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Our pilgrimage to Spain was a wonderful experience. Visiting, learning and exploring where St. Ignatius' transformation happened was the trip of a lifetime. The churches and countryside were breathtaking and our tour guide and spiritual leaders were exceptional.

Mark and Diane Sundrup



Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Spain

## 2022 AMERICA MEDIA PILGRIMAGES

In 2022, we look forward to formally restarting our pilgrimage and travel program. In consultation with the Catholic Travel Centre, our pilgrimage partner, here are some details on our planned pilgrimages in 2022.

## FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST. IGNATIUS AND HIS COMPANIONS IN SPAIN APRIL 24 - MAY 2, 2022

In partnership with Boston College High School and Xavier High School (N.Y.), we will visit Bilbao in northwestern Spain, traverse Pamplona to Javier (Xavier), the castle that was home to St. Francis Xavier, and continue to beautiful Montserrat and Manresa (where we'll have a private Mass in the cave where St. Ignatius lived as a hermit and completed the Spiritual Exercises), ending our journey in Barcelona.



The Sanctuary of Our Lady in Lourdes, France

**WALKING WITH OUR LADY IN LOURDES  
AND EXPLORING THE PARIS OF ST. IGNATIUS  
SEPTEMBER 17 - 25, 2022**



During America Media's inaugural trip to Lourdes and Paris, we'll walk with our Lady in Lourdes, where the Blessed Mother appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous. Our pilgrims will visit the healing baths in Lourdes and participate in the torchlight procession of the Blessed Sacrament, as well as explore the Paris of St. Ignatius, with visits to Sainte-Chapelle, Notre Dame and Montmartre, among other places.

To learn more about one or both of these pilgrimages, please contact Michelle Smith, Advancement Associate, at [msmith@americamedia.org](mailto:msmith@americamedia.org) or at 212-515-0153.

We hope you can join us on one of these life-changing pilgrimages!



# Hark!

*The stories behind our favorite Christmas carols.*

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# SCORCHED

Nothing will change the church more profoundly than the color green ceasing to be ordinary

By Dorothy Fortenberry

# EARTH

This starts with children's books because this starts with children. Or, really, because it ends with them.

If you start reading the book *Betsy-Tacy*, by Maud Hart Lovelace, on the night before your daughter's fifth birthday, and you read one chapter per night, then you will read the chapter where Betsy turns 5, "Betsy's Birthday Party," on the same day that your daughter turns five.

I figured this out with my older daughter and did the same with my younger, in 2016 and then again in 2020.

*Betsy-Tacy* is the first book in a series of 10 books about a fictional town called Deep Valley, Minn. The series starts in 1897 and covers the first decade and a half of the 20th century. The world portrayed is idyllic in some ways—hot chocolate and homemade cakes and ice-skating on frozen lakes—but not free of problems.

Tacy, Betsy's best friend and neighbor, loses her baby sister to an infection for which there is no medicine. The Syrian refugees who have settled in town are treated cruelly by some. Betsy and Tacy and their friend Tib are punished by their parents for imitating beggars, which implies that somewhere, perhaps beyond the outlines of the downtown drawn in the book, people are living in poverty.

There are also, of course, the contemporaneous horrors of the 19th and early 20th century, which go undiscussed in the book's pages: The

crowded and unsafe conditions in factories. The racial violence and terrorism of Redemption. The process by which Minnesota itself became "empty" for settlement.

Any book can be only what it is, and these books are the story of an economically comfortable, basically happy white girl with extraordinary ambition and perhaps unearned confidence. And any reader can find only whatever resonances she can with a protagonist.

One of the pleasures of reading these books is discussing what has changed. *Imagine riding in a carriage pulled by a horse! Imagine not having indoor plumbing!* But the deeper pleasures are to be found in what stays the same: Playing with friends. Imagining futures. Crushes and dances and acting in plays and worrying you have disappointed someone you love. Bluebirds and lilacs. Asters and goldenrods.

Reading the *Betsy-Tacy* books and knowing that they end in 1917 and that two world wars and an influenza pandemic are waiting for our young heroes as they emerge into adulthood casts a shadow over the events of their childhood, rendering each passing moment sweeter and sharper.

Not all these boys and girls, you realize, will make it.

You do not tell your daughters this, though, as you read them. They are, after all, bedtime stories.

The Pagami Creek wildfire in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota. The fire burned over 100,000 acres.

...

I have always loved the liturgical calendar. And the regular calendar. All calendars, basically. I use the dividing markers of seasons to help sort through my own various moods.

On church time, Advent and Lent are waiting seasons. Christmas and Easter are party seasons. Green is ordinary time because, ordinarily, things are green.

On regular time, fall is for organization, winter is for inwardness, spring for hope, and summer for abandon.

When I first moved to Southern California from the East Coast, I felt deeply ill at ease because the weather every day was the same. Was I really going to have to spend an entire year in my indolent summer mood? That is a lot of indolence.

In September, I yearned to get serious, but how could I buy a planner when it was 80 degrees and sunny? In January, I wanted to hunker down and avoid everyone and read books that made me cry and eat soups. But, again, it was 80 degrees and sunny.

At the time, I thought this was merely my intense emotional response to a cross-country move.

What I did not know then was that I moved to California in the middle of a drought. One that would then be followed by another drought, the longest in California's history.

The weather was not supposed to be so hot and so dry.

My disorientation at the lack of change was everyone's disorientation.

None of us knew how to feel.

...

The climate is changing. It is a fact, and it has been a fact for years and years and there are a small but very important handful of people who spent large amounts of money and time rendering this fact a "controversy" and "in dispute," and the reward for their tireless efforts is that we have spent the last 30 years not fixing a problem known to be a problem since I was a child.

Lots of people have said lots of things about climate change. People have discussed the science and the charts and the oceans and their acidification and the polar bears and coral reefs and residents of the small islands that are now being submerged. People, especially our Holy Father, have discussed the unfairness of the fact that those who have done the least to cause the problems are currently suffering and will continue to suffer the most.

All of it is true, but what I would like to discuss is this dislocation. Being in something and feeling somehow off because the very thing—the weather itself—that used to tell you *when* and therefore *how* you were no longer functions as it has for millennia.

Seasons, sun, rain, wind. These patterns are what we have; they draw us out of ourselves and connect us to others. They make us smaller and bigger than we feel, but maybe as small and big as we really are.



# Mess with nature and you also mess with the past and our connection to it.



What else does that? Well, the only other things I really care about: art and church and children.

Nature also happens to be, along with art and religion and children, the only possible hedge we have against our own mortality. We will not last forever, but we—at least I—harbor hope that people who know me might remember me, especially when they participate in cyclical traditions. Ash Wednesday. Spring rain. Las Posadas. Mountain snowfall.

Mess with nature and you do not just mess with people who are living now and will live in the future, you also mess with the past and our connection to it.

When you grow up learning to ice skate on a frozen pond in Minnesota because your grandfather who grew up ice skating on a frozen pond in Minnesota taught you, and you continue to ice skate on that pond after your grandfather's death, then in some ways your grandfather continues to live on. And, conversely, when the pond becomes too warm in the winter months to develop a solid crust of ice, if it freezes but just barely and is unsafe, then, in some ways, your grandfather dies again.

When you grow up eating lobster rolls with your aunts and cousins at the beach, then even after they are gone, you can share lobster rolls with your nieces and nephews, except if the ocean gets too warm and the lobsters all leave and then you cannot.

I should be honest with you. I did not grow up reading the *Betsy-Tacy* books. My mother tried in vain to get me to read them because she had enjoyed them as a child; and I, as usual when nudged by my mother, rebelled and decided to read anything but. Except that, after I had kids,

for some reason, I relented. Tired, maybe, of reading children's books whose endings I knew by heart, I turned to *Betsy-Tacy* for a welcome dose of surprise.

The books were, of course, great. And they quickly vaulted over *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Secret Garden* to become my kids' favorites. And a link has been created across generations.

The pleasures are what changes. The pleasures are also what stays the same. Books cannot, to my knowledge, melt like ice on ponds, but if the ice on the ponds in the books no longer behaves like it once did, that is its own form of loss. It is one more time your grandfather dies.

Not my grandfathers, to be clear. Neither of them grew up anywhere cold enough for ice skating. But someone's grandfather, somewhere.

In other, better, words, to quote from "Laudato si'":

Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.

The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighborhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves.

...

So, if you are a person, like me, who values at all what is traditional, who is invested with some sense of reverence for the unchanging, if you look at certain aspects of modern life with horror, then I will submit to you that climate change is the most important thing that you could possibly care about.

If you are concerned by what you see as a disposable culture of mindless consumption and de-humanized sexuality, you should be concerned about climate change.

If the pace of modern life feels frenetic and unmoored, if the tone of discussion feels unforgiving and opportunistic, if you worry about what we have become and what we are doing to each other, you should be concerned about climate change.



Protesters outside Senator Amy Klobuchar's office in Minneapolis on Jan. 9, 2017, the national Day Against Denial, in protest against members of President Donald Trump's cabinet who denied climate change.

iStock

If you are worried about income inequality and social stratification, and the retreat of a hyper-elite class into literal rocket ships facing away from our collective problems, you should be concerned about climate change.

Climate change will not improve any of the negative aspects of our modern existence and, indeed, by messing with the natural world, it will take away the few remaining ways we have of resisting the frantic whine of self-absorbed, techno-capitalistic excess.

A lot of energy is spent these days on negotiating questions of innovation and tradition within the church. I have my opinions—you will have to ask me directly, but I will tell you—about the Latin Mass or clerical celibacy or women priests or gay marriage or anything else. But my opinions do not particularly matter because climate change is going to render all these other arguments preposterous.

When ocean and wind patterns are shifting, when what we have named the “permafrost” has burst into flames, I have a hard time worrying about anything else being too disruptive to our established patterns of doing things.

Or, to put it a blunter way, nothing will change the church more profoundly than the color green ceasing to be ordinary.

•••

Maud Hart Lovelace wrote *Betsy-Tacy* in 1940, when she was a few years older than I am now.

By that point, Deep Valley, or, to call it by its real name, Mankato, had survived flappers and the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. Then the Dust Bowl years hit Minnesota hard. Any families that made it through the teens and '20s would have found record-breaking heat and dry-

ness waiting for them on the other side. The native grasses that had once held the topsoil in had been removed to turn the land into farmland. So when the crops died, the wind swept the loose dirt up in black clouds and sent families on the move to somewhere more hospitable.

Today, as the seasons are rapidly changing, Minnesota is marketing itself as a climate refuge. The city of Duluth runs advertisements extolling the fact that as the rest of the United States warms, Minnesota's once extremely cold weather will become pleasantly temperate. And the famed thousand lakes can provide fresh water as the rest of our aquifers dry up.

Much as I like these books, I do not particularly want to live in Minnesota. What I want, and I do not know if I will get it, but I want it very much, is for my children to—if they were to grow up to write a book about their own childhoods, like Maud Hart Lovelace did—be able to see the landscape they currently live in reflected in some form outside their windows in 2050, should they choose to return home for inspiration.

I know Southern California cannot stay frozen in time, nor should it. There will be new buildings, new people, new foods and languages and some unforeseeable form of sidewalk scooters. I am not really asking for a pause on anything but the weather. It is still probably too much to ask.

And even if I got it, even if the average global temperature stopped climbing today, this would not be the climate of the 20th century; that change already has occurred.

My children are used to the lack of rain and the presence of forest fires. The relentless heat and sunshine do not strike them as unusual, and historically average rainy sea-

A California wildfire, named Sand Fire, approaches the city of Santa Clarita in 2016.

The climate is changing. It is a fact, and it has been a fact for years and years.

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sons register as monsoons. They even have “smoke days,” the California equivalent of a snow day, at elementary school.

But they know Monarch butterflies and Joshua Trees. They eat fresh salmon in the summers. They watch bees on our basil.

Still. For now.

And I watch them watching the bees, feeling sometimes like I do about the doomed young men dancing away in Deep Valley’s gymnasium in 1916.

I can see what is coming. You cannot.

I hope it does not get here. I want more for you. For all of us.

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Dorothy Fortenberry is a playwright and screenwriter and the 2021 laureate of the George W. Hunt, S.J., Prize for Journalism, Arts & Letters for outstanding work in the category of fiction writer or dramatist. The Hunt Prize is co-sponsored by America Media and the Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel & Center at Yale University. Fortenberry is an executive producer of “Extrapolations,” a new upcoming television series about climate change on Apple TV+. She was a writer and producer for the first four seasons of Hulu’s award-winning adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Her new play, “*The Lotus Paradox*,” a commission from Yale Repertory Theater about climate change and children’s literature, will have its world premiere in January, 2022 at the Warehouse Theatre in Greenville, S.C.

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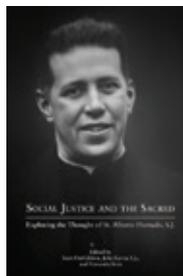
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## MEET THE

**In a generation known to shun commitments, these women are embracing lifelong vows**

By John Rosengren

Sunlight streams through stained glass windows and washes across four women in front of the altar. They stand before 500 family members, friends, coworkers and fellow members of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, including Patricia McDermott, R.S.M., president of the institute. Sister Patricia asks the four women about to profess their final, or perpetual vows, “Will you strive for holiness in your love of God and God’s people by living the Gospel with all your heart and faithfully observing the constitutions of this institute?”

The woman on the far right, wearing

a simple black dress, her dark brown hair pulled back, is Marjorie Tapia, who more often goes by Margie. At 33, she is the youngest of the four. Her parents, both attorneys, had Margie baptized and confirmed, sent her to Catholic schools, but were not the type to make her go to Sunday Mass in high school if she preferred to sleep in. They were taken aback when their only daughter told them, after graduating from Boston College with a nursing major, that she wanted to be a nun. The images of schoolteachers in habits from their youth did not match the image of the independent woman they wanted their daugh-



Pia Jude, S.V., opposite page, and Margie Tapia, R.S.M., left on this page, are among the the small number of millennial women who each year join religious congregations in the United States.

(All photos courtesy of the Sisters of Life and the Sisters of Mercy)

ter to be. They did not approve.

“Yes, I will,” Margie answers along with the other women in the 2019 ceremony.

On those Sunday mornings she stayed in bed instead of going to Mass, Sister Margie would never have imagined herself in this moment. Though she attended Mount Saint Mary Academy, a Catholic high school in Watchung, N.J., run by the Sisters of Mercy, she had never considered becoming one herself. “I didn’t see any young sisters while in high school,” she said, “so I didn’t really think it was an option for me to become one.”

The median age in the Sisters of Mercy is 81, which mirrors the general population of women religious in the United States. In 2009, the last time this data was compiled by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, there were more Catholic sisters in the country over the age of 90 than under the age of 60.

Sister Margie represents a small but steady number of millennial women who are joining religious orders in the United States. While becoming a religious sister may seem out of character for a generation that largely rejects organized religion, millennials like Sister Margie may in fact be drawn to religious life by characteristics peculiar to their demographic. In communities of women religious, the number of aging members who are dying is much larger than the number of those entering; but these women are not only continuing the mission of those orders and con-

gregations, they are also perhaps healing the heart of the church, for that is what they have become.

### **Resisting Religion**

Half a century ago, women religious, readily identifiable by their habits, were the face of the church and served as distinctive role models. Though fewer habits are visible now, the sisters remain role models. A 2021 survey by America and CARA found religious sisters and nuns were the most trusted of the nine groups of church leaders named in the survey question. Seventy five percent of respondents said consecrated religious women were “somewhat or very trustworthy” in offering guidance on matters of faith and morals.

Still, the number of women religious in the United States has dropped. The number peaked in 1965 at 179,954; today, there are only 42,441, according to CARA—a 76 percent drop. “In the ’50s and ’60s, young Catholic women tended to see a lot of women religious out there doing heroic things, even teaching high school,” said Mary Gautier, who spent 21 years as a sociologist and senior research associate at CARA. “So they considered the religious life.”

Consecrated religious life provided a route to a career or doing good works before the Peace Corps or other such avenues were available to women. “When the average Catholic woman in the United States from the 19th century through the ’60s looked around her for opportunities in



education, work and leadership, she saw the sisters,” said Kathleen Cummings, a historian and associate professor at the University of Notre Dame. “Since the late ’60s, the opposite is true. Where the average Catholic woman sees opportunities in education, work and leadership today is outside the church structures—it flipped.”

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 25 to 40 today), are not a religious lot. Only one in four (27 percent) attend religious services weekly, half as many as those in the Silent Generation (born between 1928 and 1945), according to the Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study. About 40 percent of millennials report religion is “very important” in their lives, compared with more than half in the older generations. Also, roughly half of millennials say they believe in God with absolute certainty, compared with 70 percent of those in the Silent Generation and the baby boomers (born 1946-64).

Generally speaking, millennials don’t like rules, which is one of the reasons they cite for resisting religion, said Jean Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University and author of *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before*. She also sees them as products of the trends in American culture during the past half century. “This precipitous decline in religious commitment and participation is likely due primarily to the rise in individualism, with more reliance on the self than on social rules,” she said.

Given these trends, it would seem a miracle would need to take place for a millennial woman to enter religious life—but it is happening.

In 2020, 75 women professed final vows, with an aver-

age age of 38, according to CARA. The average age of those entering religious life, or beginning the process toward final vows, was 28.

### Community and Commitment

Sister Margie considers herself a typical millennial in many ways. She is confident, optimistic, educated, posts on Facebook and Instagram, relies on Amazon and consults YouTube videos for guidance on tasks like how to cut a friend’s hair. “If you give me a list of stereotypes of millennials, I probably fit 80 percent,” she said, almost two years after professing final vows and now 35. “But millennials don’t make commitments. In that way, I’m very different.”

A U.S. Census Bureau report in 2017 found millennials to be commitment-averse, at least when compared with previous generations, often delaying marriage, children and purchasing a home. But Sister Margie has pledged herself to a life of chastity, poverty, obedience and service “to the poor, sick and ignorant.” (All consecrated women and men religious take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Some orders add an additional vow. For the Sisters of Mercy, it is a vow of service.) And so that announcement to her parents upon graduation from college finally came to fruition.

It was not always a sure thing. When Sister Margie returned home on breaks from Boston College, she would visit family, friends and the sisters. The Sisters of Mercy were the only women religious she had really known and the only congregation she considered joining. She was drawn to their sense of community and commitment to social justice.

Founded in 1831 by Catherine McAuley of Dublin, the



▲ Sister Margie Tapia (front right) and her fellow Sisters of Mercy gather around a statue of their founder, Catherine McAuley, in Dublin. The sisters take a vow of service and focus their work on five “critical concerns”: the earth, immigration, women, anti-racism and nonviolence.

Opposite page: Sister Pia Jude (back row, second from left) and her fellow Sisters of Life take a vow “to protect and enhance the sacredness of every human life,” and their community’s ministry focuses on serving women who are vulnerable to abortion.

group took the name Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in 1991, when nine provinces and 16 congregations of Sisters of Mercy consolidated. With 2,147 members living in the United States today, they are the largest community of women religious in the country, though their numbers are down from nearly 13,000 in 1970. Known for their works of mercy (hence the name) “that alleviate suffering,” they have identified five “critical concerns” to which they devote their work: the earth, immigration, women, anti-racism and nonviolence.

That has led to their active engagement in the communities where they live, from an 85-year-old sister who runs a homeless shelter in Rochester, N.Y., to another sister leading a hospital in Arkansas. Sisters of Mercy marched in the protests against police violence in 2020, educated voters on issues before the November election, and a pair of sisters held a weekly vigil outside an immigrant detention center in Chicago (in 2019, one of those sisters, then-90-year-old Sister Pat Murphy, was arrested in an act of civil disobedience in Washington, D.C., where she protested the treatment of immigrant children at the U.S.-Mexico border). The sisters also stand on the front lines of the pandemic, like Sister Karen Schneider, who is a physician and assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

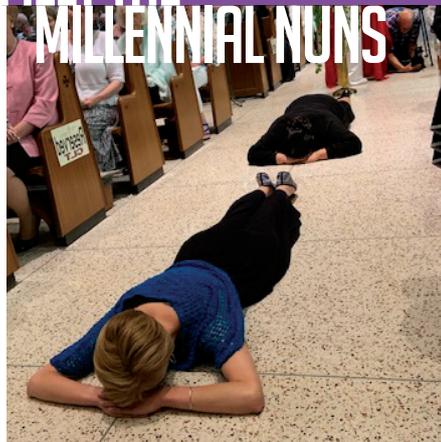
Sister Margie had come to admire these women, but when the vocation director called her one evening while she was watching television with her parents, flustered, she ran upstairs to her bedroom. “Who was that?” her mother later asked. “A friend from school,” she fibbed. Sister Margie’s parents had raised her to make decisions for herself, but she feared they might not approve of this one.

From the time she was young, Sister Margie had seen herself in health care. But several months after that phone call, she casually mentioned to her parents she was considering becoming a religious sister. They said little in response—which she interpreted to mean they had a problem with the idea. Eventually, Sister Margie’s mother told her daughter she worried that her strong loyalty to commitments might cause undue influence on whether or not religious life was a good fit, that she would stick it out even if it was not right for her. Her brother, six years younger, was more blunt when he got into the car after a get-acquainted lunch with several Sisters of Mercy and the family before Sister Margie actually entered: “What is she doing?”

Sister Margie’s family is not unusual. Almost a quarter of the women who professed final vows last year reported in CARA’s survey that their fathers encouraged them to enter religious life, and a third reported that their mothers had done the same. But 39 percent of the women said their fathers had discouraged them from entering religious life. Similarly, 36 percent of the women said their mothers had discouraged them from joining.

Nevertheless, Sister Margie followed her yearning and entered the Sisters of Mercy in 2011. Three years later, she discovered doubts of her own, when it came time for her to move to St. Louis for the year of novitiate required by

# MEET THE MILLENNIAL NUNS



church law, during which she would study with other novices the theology behind the vows she would take and the history of her congregation. She was enjoying her work as a nurse practitioner and did not want to be uprooted, she said. She remembers thinking: “I don’t think I should be doing this.”

She went, but her doubts came with her. Having grown up with material comforts, she worried about taking a vow of poverty. And then there was the vow of obedience. She had always made her own decisions. Would she feel like she was being controlled? The vow of chastity had not seemed a big deal when she started at 25 but she wondered, as she got older, if she might want to be a mother. Service was the only vow that never gave her pause. “I knew I wanted to make a difference in the world regardless of whether I was a Sister of Mercy or not,” she said. Joining them, “gave me the feeling of being a part of something bigger than myself, belonging to this group of women crazy enough to try to make a change in the world.”

Being part of a community, and the relationships she formed within it, sustained her. “What had always been grounding for me was the relationships I had with the other women I professed my final vows with,” Sister Margie said. “They were dealing with the same things. That made the other moments [of doubt] much smaller compared to the relationships I had.”

The longer she stayed with the community, through her profession of temporary vows in 2016, the deeper those relationships became, and the deeper her faith. “The spirituality of the community formed my understanding of my relationship with God,” she said. “In my giving of mercy, I’m a recipient of God’s mercy.”

Sister Margie’s parents did attend her perpetual vows ceremony. “It has taken them a while to understand that what they knew as religious life [growing up in the ‘60s and ‘70s] wasn’t what I was entering into,” said Sister Margie. “They see me happy and are supportive now.”

During the ceremony, after Sister Margie and the other three women—Jen Barrow, 37; Danielle Gagnon, 39; and Marybeth Beretta, 57—had answered Sister Patricia’s questions but before they signed their vows, the four of them prostrated themselves before the altar. The three-hour long ceremony was the culmination of eight years of formation—or incorporation, as the Sisters of Mercy call it—and months of event preparation. But this moment, lying face down on the tiled floor, was the most beautiful—the most powerful of all for Sister Margie. “It’s a moment of total surrender, a sign to God you’re giving your total self,” she said. “There’s a bit of discomfort; it’s an awkward thing to do in front of 500 people. But that’s part of what makes it so powerful. This moment of giving it all to God.”

## A Desire for Something Deeper

The desire Sister Margie has for something deeper, and to be part of something bigger than herself, runs through her generation. Millennials “are seeking both a deep spiritual experience and a community experience, each of which provides them with meaning in their lives, and is meaningless without the other,” write Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller in *The Embodied Spirituality of the Post-Boomer Generations*.

While some pursue that in Crossfit, Soul Cycle and dinner parties, as noted in the 2015 Harvard study “How We Gather,” others are seeking that experience in religious institutions. “One large attractor for today’s new generation of sisters is community on many levels,” said Sister Mary Johnson, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and professor of sociology at Trinity Washington University. “It comes from the sense of isolation and fragmentation in society, the yearning to be with people who share the same deep values about mission as found in the Gospel.”

For the past few years, Sister Margie has done just that in a rented, rust-colored, Victorian house with gray shutters on a city street in Plainfield, N.J. She shares the



Opposite page, far left: Sister Margie Tapia and Sister Danielle Gagnon professed their final vows in the Sisters of Mercy in 2019.

Opposite page, center: Sister Margie (left) and Dr. Virginia Clerkin, chair of the nursing department at Saint Elizabeth University in Morristown, N.J., where Sister Margie is an assistant professor of nursing.

This page: Sister Pia Jude professed her final vows with other members of the Sisters of Life at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

house with two other Sisters of Mercy, both in their 70s, one a health care worker and the other an administrator in their institute. The three have formed a micro-community. They take turns cooking (Sister Margie's specialty is pasta dishes), share meals, pray together (on the wraparound porch when the weather is nice) and support one another. The backyard is filled with flowers and a vegetable garden that Sister Margie tends. She has the third floor to herself, a large space that doubles as bedroom and office.

Sister Margie completed her master's degree in advanced practice nursing with a specialty in geriatrics at New York University, and then her doctorate in nursing practice with a focus on healthy leadership and policy change at Yale University. During the last four years, she has served as director of health and aging for another community of women religious, the Religious Teachers Filippini, at their mother house in Morristown, N.J., before taking on her current role of assistant professor of nursing at St. Elizabeth University in Morristown in June 2021.

Now a fully professed Sister of Mercy, Sister Margie can vote on issues within the institute and be elected to leadership positions, but little has changed in her daily life. Her reasons for joining, she said, have become her reasons for staying—growing in her relationship with God, feeling part of something bigger: “The reasons are the same, but the understanding has grown with me, having lived in the community for 10 years.”

The video of the perpetual vows ceremony shows Sister Margie walking down the center aisle at the close of the ceremony, alongside her newly professed sisters. She looks almost giddy with happiness, glancing back and forth at those in the pews. When she spots her two housemates, she smiles broadly and—to their apparent delight—gives a spontaneous double fist pump of joy.

The Sisters of Mercy may be the largest order of women in the United States, but their numbers, like those of 90 percent of U.S. women's religious orders, are shrinking—

rapidly. In 2019, the year Margie and her three classmates professed perpetual vows, 144 members of the Sisters of Mercy died. Last year, when Covid-19 delayed the profession of two members ready for perpetual vows, 162 members of the congregation died.

#### ‘A Freedom That Comes From God’

But a handful of communities of women religious have grown steadily over the past two decades. The Sisters of Life is one such community. Established in 2004, the institute has 117 members—almost half of those (57) are in formation—living in New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Toronto, Canada. They take a fourth vow “to protect and enhance the sacredness of every human life,” with an emphasis on “serving women who are vulnerable to abortion.”

Their mother house in Suffern, N.Y., is reached by a gravel drive through a wooded lot that opens to a marble statue of the Virgin Mary in the middle of a circular flower bed, greeting visitors in front of a three-story red brick building flanked by a chapel. Three dozen sisters live here, including 37-year-old Sister Pia Jude.

Sister Pia Jude speaks via Zoom while seated at a table in a common room. The wall behind her is stark white except for a framed oil painting of The Madonna and Child. She is wearing her community's blue habit and a white headpiece, a sliver of brown hair rimming her face. A rosary, four-feet-long with wooden beads the size of pinto beans, hangs from a brown leather belt. She occasionally grips its four-inch-long cross in her palm. “A reminder he is with me,” she said, referring to Jesus hanging on the wooden cross she holds in her hand. When she professed her final vows in August, the presiding archbishop placed a ring on her finger, saying, “Sister, receive this ring, for you are betrothed to the Eternal King. Keep faith in your bridegroom so that you may come to the wedding feast of eternal joy.”

It is, in effect, a wedding band, and the habit—which

# Religious life is not going to die out. But it is going to be much smaller.



Sister Pia Jude at work in the office of her congregation's superior general, Mother Agnes Mary Donovan.

the sisters sew for themselves—a wedding dress, befitting the women who see themselves as “brides of Christ.” “This is a real marriage,” Sister Pia Jude said with a cheerful earnestness. “We get to wear our wedding dress every day.”

Born Christen Furka (she took the religious name Pia Jude upon her profession of first vows), she grew up comfortably middle class in Secaucus, N.J., her father and mother both employees of the U.S. Postal Service. She did almost everything with her twin sister, Natalie: piano and flute lessons, dance, cheerleading, track, working at Mike’s Ice Cream shop and college at St. Peter’s University. As a 19-year-old sophomore home on break, she prayed one day in church before the Eucharist, “Lord, what is your will for my life?”

At that moment, Sister Pia Jude happened to spot a woman in her early 30s she had not noticed before wearing a full white habit. It scared her. She returned her gaze to the Eucharist on the altar, praying: “Oh, Jesus. I could never do that.”

She had attended daily Mass, served as an altar server, joined the youth group and attended C.C.D. classes but could not see herself as a religious sister. “God called saints,” she said. “I knew I wasn’t one. I was just an ordinary girl from Jersey.”

So Sister Pia Jude finished college, graduated from Rutgers School of Law and practiced as an attorney for five years at a Wall Street firm. She had friends, a good apartment she shared with her twin sister, and money to travel and buy the stylish clothes she liked. She thought she had been following God’s direction for her life, but something was missing—the invitation left unanswered.

Her spiritual director suggested she go on a retreat over New Year’s Eve with the Sisters of Life. “On the retreat, I saw the sisters had a freedom I didn’t,” she said, “a freedom that comes from God because they had given everything to him.”

She made two more retreats focused on discernment about whether to enter religious life. By the end of the third, she was willing to say yes to the invitation she had first experienced 10 years earlier at 19. It had been hard to tell her twin sister, harder still to be separated from her. So she was

thrilled three years later, in 2016, when Natalie answered the call herself, leaving her job as an attending physician at Hackensack University Medical Center to join her twin in the Sisters of Life.

The sisters at the mother house lead a regimented life, rising at 5 for morning prayer and Mass before breakfast. Each day follows the rhythm of praying, eating and working together, ending with night prayer at 8:15 p.m. Sister Pia Jude currently works in the office of the superior general, Mother Agnes Mary Donovan, doing administrative work. Her previous assignments include ministering to women who have had an abortion—“listen them back to life”—coordinating volunteers, advocating for prolife issues and meeting with students on college campuses, “to let young women know they have a purpose.”

Much has been written about millennial malaise. Having been raised with the notion they were special and could do whatever they wanted, they launched into adulthood in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which wiped out their self-esteem portfolios. They are more anxious than other generations, suffer burnout earlier and worry about money. “You were told your dreams could come true: Study, work hard and the doors will open for you,” Sister Pia Jude said. “Yet that angst and loneliness can only be filled by Jesus Christ.”

Though Sister Margie and Sister Pia Jude both responded to a spiritual calling and sought out their places within religious communities, the institutes they chose reflect some of the differences among women religious orders and the different values or charisms that define them. Each, too, may be responding to influences characteristic among millennials, those beyond the desire for spiritual community.

“There’s a fair number of women that enter religious life today that are advocates of social justice,” said Margaret McGuinness, professor of religion and theology at La-



Sister Margie Tapia served for four years as director of health and aging for another community of women religious, the Religious Teachers Filippini, at their mother house in Morristown, N.J.

For any woman entering religious life, the process can be arduous. Communities of women religious institutions now screen candidates with more scrutiny than in decades past, including psychological testing. They are asking women to finish college (and pay off student loans) before joining. They have extended the formation period. As a result, 71 percent of those who professed final vows in 2020 had at least a bachelor's degree, according to the most recent CARA study. The median age at final vows was 34 (average age 38). This is significantly older than in the '50s and '60s, when many young women entered right out of high school. "They are more self-aware, recognizing they have a call from God," said Dr. Gautier. "But it's a mature call, not just because of something Sister So-and-so said in high school,"

salle University and author of *Called to Serve: A History of American Nuns*. "That, combined with their faith is what drives them to religious life, not existential or millennial angst. It's almost the opposite."

### A Mature Call

Sister Margie and Sister Pia Jude and their institutes each belong to a separate national umbrella group of women religious. The largest, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, founded in 1956, has about 1,350 member institutions, including the Sisters of Mercy, and represents nearly 80 percent of all women religious in the United States. Its member institutions tend to be seen as more progressive, though that is a term the members are often reluctant to use, and their demographic skews older than the members of the other major association. The Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, founded in 1992, represents about 5,700 sisters, including the Sisters of Life, with an average age of 58.

Each year, approximately the same number of women join the L.C.W.R. communities as join C.M.S.W.R. communities. But the number joining the L.C.W.R. communities are spread out over a larger base, which means there are fewer new candidates per order, according to the most recent data analyzed in 2014. The significant ongoing growth of the Sisters of Life and several other traditional orders since then suggests these orders are likely to expand; yet they remain relatively small. The largest among them, the Dominican Sisters of the Congregation of St. Cecilia, based in Nashville, Tenn., has a total of 299 members, including 27 in their first four years of formation and 22 in the second phase.

### The Heart of the Church

Despite the growth of some religious communities, the total number of those joining is nowhere near large enough to offset the number of religious sisters dying each year. Some communities of consecrated women religious already have consolidated. More seem likely to do so in the future. Others have resigned themselves to "completion," as they call it, which means they are no longer taking on new members. They have closed schools, sold property and turned over hospitals to lay staff. But many still hope that women like Sister Margie and Sister Pia Jude will continue to hear and answer the call to religious life, assuring the future of at least some religious orders. "The hunger for religious virtuosity is too strong," said Patricia Wittberg, a Sister of Charity, sociologist and research associate at CARA. "Religious life is not going to die out. But it is going to be much smaller."

Women religious still outnumber priests roughly four to one. They remain an essential force within the very heart of the church. "I think women's religious orders are as necessary to the Catholic Church as the priesthood is. They perform two essential service functions for the church," said Sister Wittberg. "Priests keep the lights on. Religious women's institutes change—they drive the church into the next century, making the church relevant. They're absolutely necessary."

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John Rosengren is a freelance journalist and author of the novel *A Clean Heart*.

# Children in Developing Countries Face Very Different Challenges Than Their U.S. Counterparts

It may seem obvious, but boys and girls from developing countries face very different challenges than our children or grandchildren experience. By whatever measure you choose — access to safe water, the availability of food, living and sleeping conditions, the quality of medical care, or educational opportunities — children in developing countries must struggle to get what they need — even the most basic necessities.

“As a parent, I have never had to send my kids out before dawn to collect pond water for our family to drink, cook and bathe — but that’s a common chore for kids living in remote areas of Haiti,” explained Jim Cavnar, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, one of the leading Catholic ministries involved in relief and development missions worldwide. “You see the same dichotomy in education. Very few boys and girls living in the U.S. have any problem getting into a school, but in the most impoverished parts of Haiti, a child can grow up without ever seeing the inside of a classroom. Even those lucky enough to attend school routinely deal with challenges my own sons and daughters never had to face. In the poorest parts of Haiti, kids often have to walk miles to school and arrive so weakened by malnutrition that they have trouble focusing on their studies. It is literally a different world for poor children like these — and as Catholics, we should be doing everything we can to improve their situation.”

Fortunately, what Cavnar suggests is very possible thanks to the work of the dedicated priests, religious sisters and Catholic lay leaders in countries like Haiti. Their missions of mercy are often founded to give vulnerable children some of the same benefits their counterparts in counties like America are receiving.

“I’ve seen Catholic missions achieve



incredible things,” Cavnar said. “The Kobonal Haiti Mission is one of those success stories, and the programs it has established to help vulnerable children are having life-transforming impacts.” [See related story on opposite page.]

In order to address the need for easy access to safe water, the Mission has undertaken large- and small-scale projects ranging from capping springs and digging wells to organizing major distribution systems that bring safe water right to a family’s doorstep. To reduce illiteracy in the diocese, the Mission established a quality school system for younger children and a scholarship program for students who want to pursue opportunities for higher learning after their basic education.

To accomplish these things, the Kobonal Haiti Mission works in partnership with Cross Catholic Outreach.

“Cross Catholic Outreach was founded to help existing Catholic missions achieve their goals. Many priests, sisters and Catholic leaders serving in countries like Haiti are eager to help the poor in their communities, but they lack the funding and resources they need to succeed,” Cavnar explained. “Our project officers have extensive experience with feeding programs, water systems, house-building initiatives, educational projects and medical outreaches. They share that expertise and help by providing resources

and financial support.”

Thousands of Catholics in the U.S. participate in these works of mercy, too. In fact, their generous contributions have funded hundreds of outreaches to bless needy children in Haiti and the other developing countries of the world.

“Those people often tell us how much God has blessed their families. Then they say they want to make sure other children enjoy the same opportunities and advantages their sons and daughters have had,” Cavnar said. “That’s why I’m confident they will continue to give generously to the Catholic projects we undertake in developing countries. They understand their support is critical to the Church’s mission to improve the lives of the world’s neediest boys and girls.”

*Readers interested in supporting the ongoing and transformational work of Cross Catholic Outreach can contribute through the ministry brochure inserted in this issue or send tax-deductible gifts to: Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC01838, PO Box 97168, Washington DC 20090-7168. The ministry has a special need for partners willing to make gifts on a monthly basis. Use the inserted brochure to become a Mission Partner or write “Monthly Mission Partner” on mailed checks to be contacted about setting up those arrangements.*

# American Catholics' Support of Fr. Meaux's Mission Addresses Urgent Needs of Haiti's Vulnerable Children

While most American Catholics are eager to address the serious needs of vulnerable children in developing countries like Haiti, it can be difficult for them to know how to get involved or decide which specific ministries to support. After all, every donor wants his or her gift to have an impact and to bless as many children as possible.

"When I'm asked which Catholic missions are having a major impact on the lives of poor children, I usually start by commending the work of the Kobonal Haiti Mission run by Father Glenn Meaux. He is a missionary from Louisiana who moved to Haiti in 1989, and his Mission has been serving the poorest of the poor very effectively for decades now," explained Jim Cavnar, President of Cross Catholic Outreach, a respected Catholic relief and development ministry with a long history of serving vulnerable children worldwide. Because Cross Catholic Outreach's strategy for helping the poor is based on empowering existing ministries, it is critical for them to find good in-country partners like the Kobonal Haiti Mission to distribute food and medical supplies, manage construction projects, and run key outreaches.

According to Cavnar, when Fr. Meaux arrived in Kobonal, he was deeply disturbed by the poverty he saw. He was particularly saddened by the struggles faced by local children, some of whom were dying from drinking contaminated water. Hunger was also rampant, and some children were victims of acute malnutrition, and were at risk of long-term physical and mental disabilities.

Because these needs were urgent and particularly harmful to the area's most vulnerable children, Fr. Meaux made addressing them a priority, and he worked with Cross Catholic Outreach on projects to deliver safe water and healthier foods to those in greatest need.

After ensuring there was sufficient nutritious food and safe water, Fr. Meaux and his team worked on additional plans to revitalize the Kobonal community. As he had before, the priest made addressing the needs of vulnerable children a priority because they were often at the greatest risk.

"As Cross Catholic Outreach's relationship with the Kobonal Haiti Mission grew stronger, we began to help in three other areas — education, housing and medical care," Cavnar explained. "Before



*The first project Cross Catholic Outreach launched at the Kobonal Haiti Mission involved tapping a freshwater spring to supply safe, clean water to a community that had been relying on a muddy, contaminated stream as its main water source. Fr. Meaux made the project a priority after learning a shocking number of families had lost their children to waterborne illnesses.*

the Mission was established, there was no formal school and certainly no spiritual formation program in place. In fact, the people in Kobonal were being influenced by superstitions and occult practices, and few had ever heard the name of Christ. Establishing the school allowed the Mission to accomplish two important things. It reduced illiteracy in the area by providing a quality education for the children, and it became a spiritual beacon of light and hope, bringing the area's children into a deeper relationship with Christ and eventually blessing their families, too."

Improving the Kobonal homes became another big priority for the Mission because many families were living in terrible one-room shacks with dirt floors and leaky roofs. This meant children were often sleeping on a dirt floor and were exposed to all kinds of health risks from rain and vermin.

"As we worked with Fr. Glenn to replace those flimsy huts with sturdy, multiroom houses, we were able to provide vulnerable children with the security and healthy living conditions they needed to thrive," Cavnar said.

To address the medical needs of local children and families, Fr. Meaux developed a clinic and arranged for medical teams from the U.S. to visit regularly. This vastly improved the medical care that people in the community could receive and afford.

"Of course, almost everything the

Kobonal Haiti Mission does benefits vulnerable children, but I typically highlight the work they do to improve educational opportunities, build homes and address medical needs, because those are truly life-transforming blessings with many long-term benefits," Cavnar said. "My hope is that as more American Catholics learn about these incredible works of mercy, more of them will join the cause, add their support and further empowering the Mission to serve the poor. Fr. Meaux and his team have worked marvels in Kobonal and helped hundreds of families, but they feel still more can be done. Our goal is to inspire more people to support him and the Mission, so every vulnerable child there gets the love and care they deserve."

## HOW TO HELP

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach's effort to help the poor worldwide, use the postage-paid brochure inserted in this newspaper or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC01838, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The brochure also includes instructions on becoming a Mission Partner and making a regular monthly donation to this cause.

If you identify a specific aid project with your gift, 100% of the proceeds will be restricted to be used for that specific project. However, if more is raised for the project than needed, funds will be redirected to other urgent needs in the ministry.

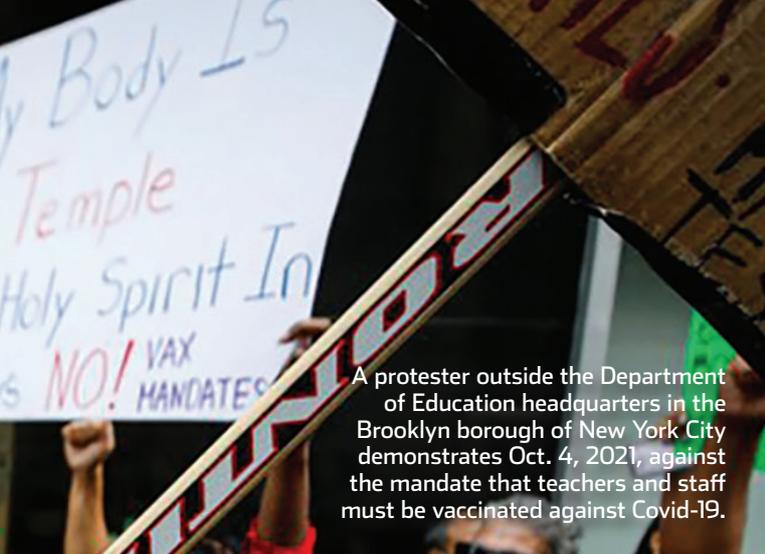


CNS photo/Brendan McDeamid, Reuters

# OUR UNCIVIL WAR

## CATHOLICS AND THE POLITICS OF 'RESSENTIMENT'

By William O'Neil



A protester outside the Department of Education headquarters in the Brooklyn borough of New York City demonstrates Oct. 4, 2021, against the mandate that teachers and staff must be vaccinated against Covid-19.

Now we are engaged in a great uncivil war. Politics quickly succumbs to the polemics of rage and recrimination—so much so that reconciling our differences seems a fool’s errand. Every age, of course, has its divisions. But today we differ over the very meaning of our differences: a stolen election, an insurrection, a big lie. Can unity still be forged of such diversity? Our answer will go far to determine whether our republican experiment endures.

In defending the place of Catholics in U.S. civil life, John Courtney Murray, S.J., in an article in *America* (10/3/1956), emphasized the singular contributions of the Catholic moral tradition in fostering a “reasonable disposition to argue our many disagreements in an intelligent and temperate fashion.” Citizens will surely differ, but can we still argue our many disagreements reasonably, in an intelligent and temperate fashion? There are, I will argue, three stumbling blocks to saying “yes,” and they are closely related. First, meaning is unmoored from truth; second, rights are converted to interests; and third, civil religion becomes sectarian.

### Meaning and Truth

St. Ignatius Loyola recognized at the very beginning of his Spiritual Exercises a critical social truth: Our differences make sense only against the backdrop of deep agreement. His Presupposition urges us to place the best, most favorable interpretation upon our opponent’s position. For if we are to differ intelligently and temperately, we must first share a great deal in common. Think of games we play, like chess or soccer: We may disagree about the wisdom of a gambit or whether a yellow or red card was deserved. But we cannot blithely change the rules or “grammar” of the game; one cannot be given a red card for a failed gambit in chess.

Today, though, claims and counter-claims are made as if they were vindicated by the mere vehemence of their assertion. There is, we might say, a willing suspension of be-

lief—that is, a belief that can be vindicated or verified “in an intelligent and temperate fashion.” What remains is the shell or simulacrum of belief. For veritable “post-truthers,” as for Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty, a word “means just what I choose it to mean.” For others, truth becomes the proprietary interest of *my* group.

But for neither is there “a reasonable disposition to argue our many disagreements.” Politics becomes performance, or what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*: the self-vindicating exercise of grievance, rage or indignation. And *ressentiment* is useful—giving credence to Machiavelli’s epigram that those who desire to deceive will always find those who desire to be deceived. Perhaps we even take a perverse comfort in our bad faith, thinking that Machiavelli’s is the only game in town.

Our political ecology is thus degraded; arguments over beliefs give way to a spurious political purity. On each side of our great political divide, there are those who like their heroes neat, dismissing or “cancelling” the political tropes, stories and symbols that once served to unite us as a polity. Ambrose Bierce described a saint as a “sinner, revised and edited”; so too, there is much in our political history that we would like to subject to revision and editing. Yet for all our original sins of slavery and racism, there were also original blessings of prophetic resistance. Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln remain icons of *our* common history—our better angels, forgotten at our peril.

But today, we are busy forgetting. The rich, shared background so necessary to a political culture is steadily eroded so that for many what remains is the narrow, self-righteous politics of *ressentiment*.

### Rights and Interests

Increasingly, the politics of *ressentiment* is expressed in the idiom of individual rights. But just as political meaning is unmoored from truth, so rights are divested of duties or responsibilities. My freedom is limited only by the negative liberties of others. Claims thus become convertible to interests, and interests are unassailable: my liberty to refuse a mask or vaccination, my liberty to bear a gun, my liberty to procure an abortion.

All of these claims can be argued in an intelligent and temperate fashion. What I wish to underscore is that for many partisans, both red and blue, there is simply nothing to *argue*. Indeed, we trade in the currency of outrage, not argument, having lost the very “reasonable disposition” that makes civil discourse possible. Some, to be sure, bear the greater guilt—Team Trump certainly deserved a red card for ignoring the rules by which we “argue our many differences” about voter fraud, immigration and more. But

the loss of civil discourse affects us all, threatening our republican experiment.

The church is charged in Scripture with the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18); here in our political climate, it has a role to play. For Murray, the church was open to the world, firm in its conviction that real-life politics were subject to natural law, and that reason was vested in citizens to realize a temporal common good. The Catholic Church was thus also “catholic”—in the Greek sense of universal. American Catholics could accept the particular tropes, stories and symbols of American political culture inasmuch as they realized a greater universal good. The temporal, political order was legitimate because it was not ultimate. But as the rich heritage of Catholic social teaching reminds us, the political order was bound by truth.

Deriving from our creation in the very image of God, our dignity as agents binds us in solidarity. In Catholic social teaching, rights thus look not only to negative liberties, but to all the necessary conditions or capabilities of exercising agency. Rights imply correlative duties—to respect liberties, yes, but no less to ensure that no child is hungry, lacking health care or education and more.

In Catholic social teaching, human rights are viewed integrally and comprehensively. Those rights necessary for exercising agency (welfare, civil liberties and security) are basic and interdependent, so that threatening one imperils all. (Private property, conversely, was deemed an instrumental right, a means of realizing more basic rights and hence subject to the exigencies of the common good.) And duties entail not only forbearance—non-interference in others’ life plans—but performance. Securing basic human rights depends upon recognizing positive social duties of protection and provision. Even our most “negative liberties,” like freedom of religion, assembly or speech, depend upon such fitting institutional guarantees.

In short, for Catholic social teaching, our rights talk is ordered to a political common good, a public order that ensures the basic well-being of all. And it was this *common* good, guaranteeing the rights of all and especially the most vulnerable among us, that formed the backdrop or grammar of our politics—our vocation of public argument and discourse. But now we are a house divided by the this-worldly tokens of *ressentiment*.

### Church and Sect: the Example of Abortion

Religious leaders, too, have fallen captive to this degraded political culture by uncritically talking of rights while neglecting the background conditions of mutual respect and recognition that make rights talk possible. For some

Christians, bearing arms becomes a godly right—a Second Amendment to the Beatitudes. But the issue of legal abortion becomes the true testing ground for pursuing our political common good. Many evangelicals and Catholics alike have condemned abortion in sectarian terms by invoking a biblical or ecclesial positivism; yet opposing abortion is not one sectarian *interest* among others, however important that interest may be. Opposing abortion is not a sectarian shibboleth, marking “true” Catholics, but an expression of a catholic faith in dignity and rights.

Opposition to abortion will be argued “intelligently and temperately” only if we have recourse to a rich sense of the common good guaranteeing the basic rights of all, *especially* the most vulnerable. But in playing the language game of interests, in privileging abortion as our “paramount” interest over forced migration, global hunger, systemic racism and gender bias, ecological devastation and more, we risk betraying this very catholic/Catholic heritage. For it is precisely in upholding the rights of all those whose equal dignity and rights are unequally threatened (and here we must always think of women, minorities and children) that we make our strongest case against abortion.

Finally, we are catholic because we are Catholic, because we are convicted of a truth that transcends even as it subsumes all temporal truths. Our “ministry of reconciliation” is not a fool’s errand. *Ressentiment* is not the final word; we are more than the sum of our grievances. In “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis invites us to imagine otherwise. “It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Fraternity between all men and women,” he writes.

No one can face life in isolation, Pope Francis notes. We all need a community that supports and helps us and allows us to “dream together.” For that reason, he writes, “Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all” (“Fratelli Tutti,” No. 8).

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William O’Neill, S.J., is professor emeritus of social ethics at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University. He is currently working with the Jesuit Refugee Service in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. He recently published two books: *Reimagining Human Rights: Religion and the Common Good* (Georgetown University) and *Catholic Social Teaching: A User’s Guide* (Orbis Books).



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In Arabic, Hakimah means a wise woman. In Hebrew, Hokhmah means wisdom. In both Arabic and Hebrew, the word for wisdom is feminine.

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## Transfiguration

By Jeffrey Essmann

Unwritten, unrecorded are the times,  
a long day gone, they sat around the fire  
and Jesus, deeply silent, watched the flames  
that wavered weakly in the onyx night.

Perhaps there'd been a miracle that day;  
a parable that shook a heart of stone,  
perhaps something as simple as a fig,  
a dab of yeast or missing silver coin.

But as the light fell soft across His face  
and somewhere off a creature made a sound,  
they all (among themselves, the next day) marked  
His eyes transfigured diamond-like with tears.

*Jeffrey Essmann's poetry has appeared in Dappled Things, U.S. Catholic, America, Grand Little Things and other venues. He is a Benedictine oblate and lives in New York City.*



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# *Roll On, All Ye Faithful*

# The story behind the Venezuelan Christmas tradition of roller skating to Mass at dawn

By Jim McDermott

One of the best parts of Christmas, in my opinion, is hearing about how other people celebrate it. It is going to your in-laws' house and learning that in place of turkey or ham, they eat polish sausage, or that they open all but one of their presents on Christmas Eve, or that each person has to do a duet with Grandma.

In China people give apples wrapped in colored paper as gifts on Christmas Eve, because the Mandarin word for "peace" sounds like the word for apple. In Greenland they fill their windows with red-orange stars and dance around Christmas trees.

And in Venezuela, they have all-night roller skating, which ends with everyone skating to Mass at dawn.

Yes, you read that right. I, too, had my doubts when I first heard of this tradition—so many that I wrote to a friend at the Jesuit Curia in Rome to see if there are any Jesuits from Venezuela working there who could confirm this is a real thing.

It took him a little while to answer, and when he did, it was with a question: "Are you kidding?"

"I know, it sounds unlikely to me too," I wrote back. "No," he responded. "Father General is from Venezuela, you nut. (And by the way, I just saw him and, yes, this is a real thing. Also, you're fired.)"

*Lapatinatas*, "the skating," "is most definitely real," the Venezuelan-born Coromoto Power told me by phone from England, where she and her mother Beatrix now live. "It's like a mini-festival. There's just loads of people that turn up in a park, and there's music. Imagine Central Park, with its paths and so on, and you skate around and sing Christmas songs."

Is there a lot of drinking? I wonder, thinking of some memorable ice skating events in the Midwest. No, Beatrix clarifies. "It's a family affair. It's for kids. It would be coffee and hot chocolate, soft drinks, juice." It turns out there is no real need for hot toddies in December in Caracas, as it is the height of summer.

While the practice sounds quite secular, Beatrix explained to me that in fact, the all-night roller skating is very much tied to the Catholic faith. "It's normally the nine days before Christmas (although others do it just on the weekend or on Sunday—with people working and in school, it's a bit more difficult). You go skating all night, and then to what is called *Misa de gallo*—the cockerel's Mass, because

it's at 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning."

The songs being sung in the parks are not ballads from the Venezuelan Top 40 but *aguinaldos*, religious songs written specifically for Christmas. Coromoto—who was named for a Venezuelan indigenous chief to whom the Virgin Mary appeared—recalls one song that imagines a world in which the Virgin Mary was from the Andes and St. Joseph from another region; "then Jesus would be from Venezuela," she laughs. "It's borderline blasphemy," she kids.

"No no no, it's not; it's very beautiful," her mother interjects, as Coromoto describes additional verses of the song, in which the baby Jesus is reimagined as a Venezuelan infant, with traditional shoes and a special kind of hat.

Each region, Coromoto explains, has its own *aguinaldos*. "There's a big regional conflict between Caracas and Maracaibo. They're the two big cities; there's a big baseball rivalry," she says. "So people in Caracas wouldn't necessarily embrace their song."

Growing up in Venezuela, Sonia Castillo and her siblings experienced a similar sort of celebration in Caracas, but on a more intimate scale. "It was more of a family affair with us and some of our cousins," she tells me through her son Alonso Martínez, who translates from Spanish. "We used to go out pre-dawn and skate on the wider streets and stop for fried sweet *arepas*," a tasty cornmeal cake filled with things like black beans and avocado, or cheese and steak.

Ms. Castillo also remembered larger gatherings for more experienced skaters in the Parque Los Caobos in downtown Caracas. "It was common to see 'snakes'—15 or more skaters holding on to each other [and moving] at high speeds. Sometimes they spin uncontrolled." Ms. Castillo once tried to join in and ended up with a badly bruised knee.

Beatrix Power notes that escalating violence in recent years in Venezuela has made the bigger community celebrations less common. "In the last 12 to 15 years," her daughter explains, "things have been escalating. It's such a gun culture. Safety is a very real concern at this point." So now skaters are more likely to stay between a few local roads or within a particular suburb.

Coromoto points out that the annual tradition is particularly special because roller skating is not a year-round national fascination of Venezuela. "It's not like people roll-

er skate all the time,” she says. “It’s just a Christmas thing.”

But why? No one seems to know for sure. Beatrix said while the nine days of cockerel Masses and the *aguinaldos* have been around forever, the roller skating through the night and then to Mass did not begin until the 1950s.

Alexander J. Salas, S.J., a Venezuelan Jesuit currently studying in Toronto, thought the tradition might have ties to the United States. “The skates came to Venezuela when our relationship with the United States was very good,” he said. “Many things from the U.S. and Europe came. And families started to create something new from that—that’s my guess.”

It is not a bad one. In the United States, the era from 1937 to 1959 is known as the Golden Age of Roller Skating; there were an estimated 5,000 rinks in operation around the country, and 18 million Americans skating. It was the number-one participatory sport throughout the United States. And, indeed, after Marcos Pérez Jiménez overthrew the Communist government of President Rómulo Gallegos in 1952, the relationship between Venezuela and the United States expanded.

Mr. Salas noted that the practice of roller skating during the last nine days of Advent is part of a much broader set of Advent customs and Marian practices. “Our Marian devotion is so strong in my state,” he explains. “She is central for us. She brings Jesus Christ.” As such, the months leading up to Christmas are filled with devotions to Mary built around that sense of waiting for Jesus.

In the weeks before Christmas, Venezuelans also embody that sense of preparation for the Lord in various ways. For instance, people will paint their houses, perhaps even buy some new furniture, Mr. Salas told me. “We need to keep our houses beautiful because Jesus Christ will come to our houses,” he said. Then, close to Christmas, children will go through the neighborhood singing and playing instruments indigenous to Venezuela, two of them playing the roles of Mary and Joseph looking for a place to stay. “The other children sing and play instruments while Mary and Joseph go around. The families open their doors and offer hot chocolate and coffee,” Mr. Salas says. “Then we pray for five minutes for the families, for hope and peace at each house.”

Much like St. Ignatius would encourage people to imagine themselves in different scenes of Scripture, Venezuelan Catholics create an ongoing, living tableaux of the Holy Family. “We accompany the Virgin Mary and Joseph to find a house for the baby,” Mr. Salas explains. “We create a very happy moment before Jesus comes.”

Mr. Salas notes that this tradition is especially strong in poorer communities. “In the poor areas everybody knows each other—every child knows every child, every grandmother knows every grandmother. They can create something bigger.”

Maybe that is another part of the blessing of sharing our different experiences of Christmas. Whether we ever get to dance around a Christmas tree in one of the darkest places on the planet or are offered an apple that signifies peace, our stories draw us together into a closer community of love and friendship. We help one another become a more fitting place for Christ to be born.

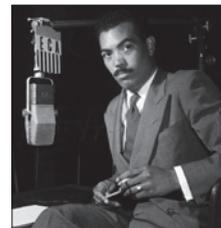
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Jim McDermott is an associate editor of *America*.

## America | CLASSIFIEDS MARKETPLACE

### ***Revelation and Healing: A Father and Son Reunion***

recounts the author’s slow journey from an adoption that left him longing for his biological mother and wondering about his biological father. Discovering, while in high school, his mother’s identity, years later he found that of his biological father, Lionel Durand (1920-1961), a Black man born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Suddenly the author realized the source of his own immediate empathy as a boy with Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement he led. The author shares the often-shocking details of his adoption, and the therapies that brought him healing, therapies helpful not only to adoptees but to all who need healing from emotional suffering and losses of all kinds. With filial admiration, the author traces the life of his beloved father, Lionel Durand, friends with Gaulle and Picasso, an internationally acclaimed newsman and journalist, who fought in the French Resistance during World War II, twice imprisoned, twice escaped, and whose struggles for peace and justice mirror those of our own day. Welcome to this reading journey and its wondrous surprises.



Morgan Zo Callahan graduated from a Jesuit high school and then served nine years as a Jesuit scholastic. Through networking with other former Jesuits and Jesuits, Morgan discovered the support he needed to discover his biological father after a years-long search, and the help he needed to tell his story of trauma, loss and healing in this book.

Paperback and Kindle editions available at  
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# Advent Dawns at the Sacred Cafe

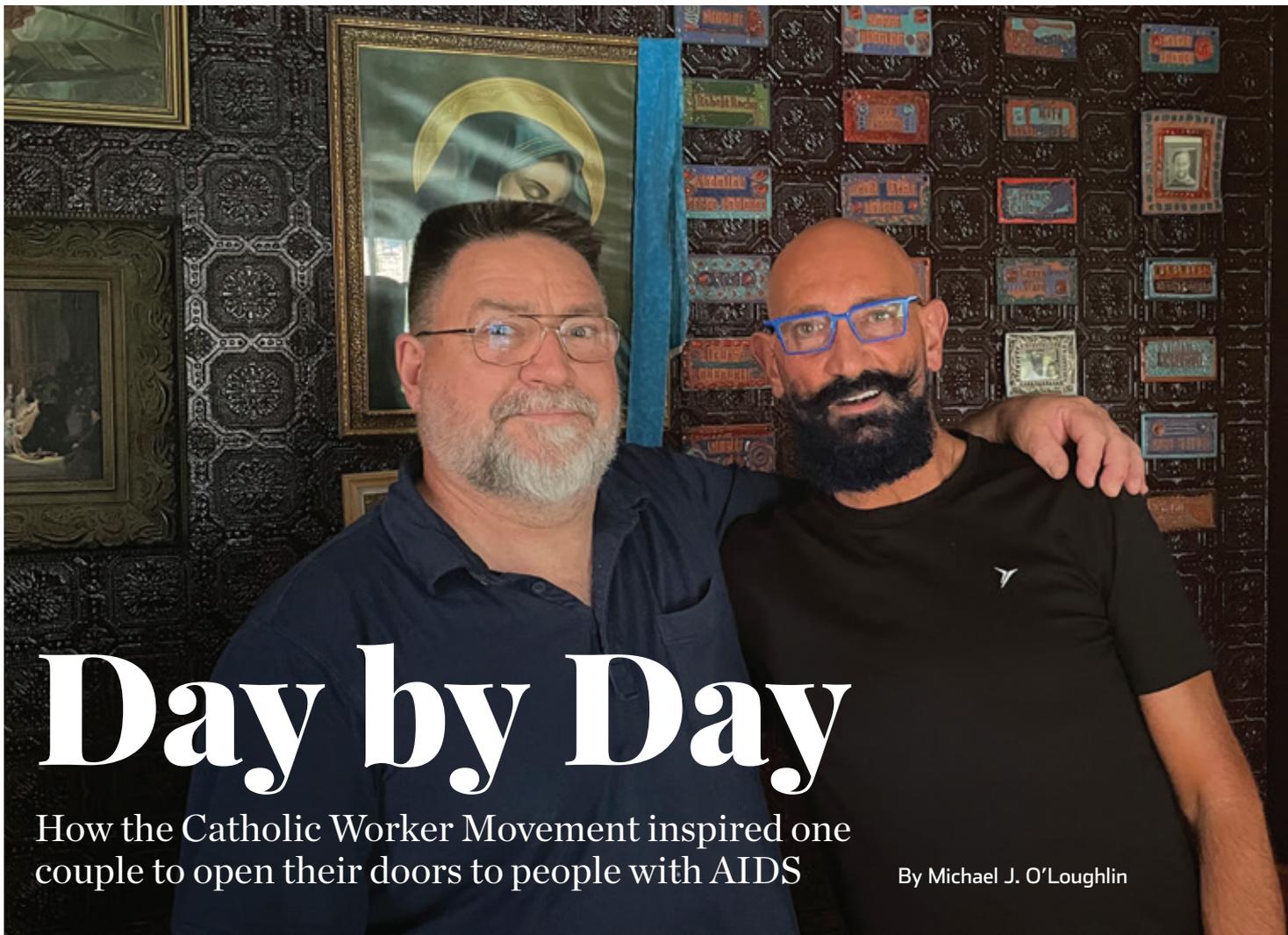
By Joe Hoover

Frankie had wanted to be a priest but not all the way just like one-third a priest like instead of running a Mass every Sunday have a restaurant where he could eucharistically serve food and drink to people etc so he bought an old Arby's exposed the pipes and all that made sacred onion ciabatta bread served sanctified juice coffee soursop smoothies and people came and proverbially joined hands over the liturgical supper that was breakfast and he even had church music playing overhead like Come to the Water which is there a better song period and then lo what really? it came to pass that he had to do payroll and actually pay the people serving the hallowed ciabatta and then the Health Department showed up fined him for three unsacred violations and then foot traffic slowed down his revenues tanked and Frankie got so far behind on the rent he had to take out like a second mortgage on his house to keep the cafe open and his house was just like this little gray bungalow which who takes out a second mortgage on a bungalow and then part of the cafe ceiling caved in and then one of the guys on the morning shift stole like four hundred dollars from the cash register all in singles which you always need and finally it dawned on Frankie and this was like late November the days getting darker fitting for where his mind was going namely that this cafe was not really at all like church there was nothing priestly about what he was doing it was just frankly hell and he wanted to close it and he closed it.

But before he did an Advent calendar showed up in the mail one where when you opened each window there was a piece of chocolate shaped like a cow or sheep or sleigh bell and Frankie exhausted banished from himself the usual opened up the window for Dec 24 even though it was like Dec 3 and there was a little trumpet announcing the arrival of you know etc and he started sort of crying and he ate the little trumpet and looked around the cafe and took some bread not the homemade symbolically eucharistic kind just like an Arby's bun that was still around and put a small piece of it in the Dec 24 window and closed it up again for the day he could have the bread inside it but legitimately and he went home to his gray bungalow and hung the calendar on the wall next to a crucifix and pictures of his kid did I mention there was a kid a boy one he hadn't seen in three years because when his girl-friend left she took him but now Frankie felt like something had cleared away that he was ready for the kid to return home that there was a place now at his not very sacred formica kitchen table for the child a place for the kid even in the purple and white Lewis Hamilton Formula One race car bed stored in the attic an F1 bed that wasn't sacred either but was just empty and waiting for Dec 24 or whenever really to be filled again by the little kid he basically just wanted to see again and cook for.

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Joe Hoover, S.J., is *America's* poetry editor.



# Day by Day

How the Catholic Worker Movement inspired one couple to open their doors to people with AIDS

By Michael J. O'Loughlin

I stand on the sidewalk in front of a three-story Victorian house in Syracuse, N.Y. The intricate details are painstakingly painted in bright hues of yellows and blues and greens. Michael DeSalvo and Nick Orth are outside to greet me. They purchased the home in the early 1990s as they started a life together. At the time, they did not know that this house would one day serve as more than their own home. They had no idea that over the next several years, dozens of people would spend their final days and weeks there alongside them.

We make our way inside. The walls contain more Catholic kitsch than a cathedral gift shop. Michael notices me looking around and begins an impromptu tour. Icons of the Virgin Mary in ornate, faux-gold frames. Celtic crosses. Saints whose names and images I do not immediately recognize. He explains that friends have donated many of the items and they are in on it, the over-the-top fabulousness of their particular expression of Catholicism. But when he catches me glancing over at one particular wall, he becomes more serious. This wall is why I'm here.

Just opposite the front door, on a wall painted a deep

red, are rows and rows of small brightly colored ceramic plaques, each one inscribed with a different name. A few photos, mostly of young men, hang in between. Juan. Tommy. Mark.

Nick and Michael opened their home to people dying from AIDS in 1992. They were intent on responding with mercy to a crisis that at the time showed no signs of slowing.

By the end of that year, nearly 200,000 Americans had died from AIDS, most of them gay men, and effective therapies were still a few years away. Shame and stigma surrounded the virus, and the need for housing and hospice care far exceeded available resources.

For the past few years, I have been meeting Catholics who responded to H.I.V. and AIDS with care and compassion, often at great risk to their own vocations and reputations. I've sought to understand how they stayed committed to an institution that seemed intent on fighting against their civil rights during an epidemic that upended their community.

I was drawn to Michael and Nick's home in Syracuse because I wanted to ask how their faith compelled them to respond to the need with such great generosity.

Nick Orth, left, and Michael DeSalvo co-founded the Friends of Dorothy Catholic Worker House in Syracuse, N.Y., in order to serve people dying of AIDS.

They told me about the first person to move in, a man named David. A mutual friend had asked Michael, a talented hairstylist and community activist, to visit David, who was homebound, and give him a haircut. When Michael arrived, he encountered what was becoming an all too familiar scene, but one that held its power to shock the senses. David was wasting away, lying on the floor, unable to clean or feed himself. He told Michael that friends and volunteers would bring by food when they could; but the rest of the time, David was on his own. He could not cope.

“Do you wanna come home with me?” Michael blurted out.

He then took a second to consider his words. Michael and Nick had just moved into their new home. They were still unpacking. He had not even asked Nick if they would be able to care for guests with intense medical and emotional needs. But when David accepted the invitation, Michael felt God’s presence. This is what he and Nick were being called to do.

For the next few weeks, Nick, a trained chef, cooked healthy meals for David. Michael used his contacts in the community to ensure no needs went unmet. David died, but his final days were spent in dignity, surrounded by caring people, rather than being stuck at home alone.

So much need remained, yet the community offered few resources. It didn’t take long for another guest to move in. And then another. And another.

In a way, it seemed predestined that Michael and Nick would turn their home into something akin to an AIDS hospice. They had met while protesting war and nuclear weapons and had both been active in the Catholic Worker, the movement founded by Dorothy Day to serve the poor and fight for peace. They knew they would continue to be involved in social justice activism in Syracuse, though they were not sure what that would look like. Now they did.

To pay homage to their involvement in the Catholic Worker, Nick and Michael decided they would transform their home into a house of hospitality, in the style of the dozens of similar homes modeled after the original one Dorothy Day started in 1933 in New York. Though there is no process to become a Catholic Worker House—the movement is anarchistic, after all—Michael and Nick decided they needed a name for their house.

Thus “The Friends of Dorothy Catholic Worker House” was born. For gay men of a certain age, asking if another

man was a “friend of Dorothy” was a coded way of finding out if he was gay, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Wizard of Oz’s Dorothy, Judy Garland’s most famous character. At the same time, the house name paid homage to Dorothy Day, who had inspired Michael and Nick to undertake this work in the first place.

### Serving an Imperfect Church

Dorothy Day was born in 1897 to a somewhat irreligious family. But while writing for socialist newspapers in Greenwich Village in the 1920s, she began to wonder why Catholicism appealed to the working immigrants whose rights she had been fighting for. That eventually led to her conversion, her founding of the Catholic Worker newspaper and then the establishment of Houses of Hospitality, which offered rooms and soup lines and food pantries.

The Catholic Worker attracted a number of gay and lesbian volunteers from its beginning, the biographer John Loughery told me. He and Blythe Randolph co-wrote *Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century*, in which they recount Day’s ambivalence toward homosexuality. She could be kind to individuals who identified as such, including the young man who returned to the Catholic Worker following a brief absence, telling Day that he had left his wife after discovering he was gay. Day told him she loved him and welcomed him back.

On the other hand, she was a faithful to church teaching, writing in her diary in the 1970s that her heart was “troubled” by the fact that “this practice of ‘unnatural sex’ is now being proclaimed from the housetops in America.” She preferred the approach of St. Paul, whom she quoted often when confronted with the issue: “Let these things be not so much as mentioned among you.” As Loughery put it to me, “That’s a classier way of saying ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell,’” a de facto policy that he said had been in place at the Catholic Worker for decades.

Ambivalence aside, something about Dorothy Day’s witness and work inspired countless numbers of L.G.B.T. Catholic Workers over the past many decades. In the 1990s, in addition to the Friends of Dorothy House in Syracuse, at least a handful of other houses opened specifically for people with AIDS, including the St. Catherine of Genoa House in Chicago and the Bethany House in Oakland, Calif.

I asked Michael what he made of this, how he and so many other L.G.B.T. Catholics drew inspiration from a woman who seemed unable to fully embrace people like him. He said he and Nick have long experienced discrimination in the church. Few Catholics he knew were willing to help in the early days of their AIDS ministry, seeming-

ly unwilling to be associated with an illness so colored by shame and stigma. Some Catholics even refused to recognize them as a couple, including the time an article in a Catholic publication about an award they were slated to win insisted on ignoring this important part of their lives.

Michael and Nick said Day was never under the impression that the church was perfect. She had been critical of its leaders and thought its priorities could be misplaced. Yet she did the hard work of the Gospel anyway. That is the spirit from which they drew their inspiration, how they found the courage to ask a dying man to move into their home even though they were still unpacking their own lives. Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and sheltering those without homes became far more important than the slights they felt from other Catholics.

“When you are taking care of people who are dying, a lot of pretense is gone,” he explained. “We just love them and treat them with kindness and respect and give them dignity.”

Michael told me that he and Nick are not looking for approval from the institutional church. They feel Dorothy Day lived out her faith in a similar way. And ultimately, it is their relationships with God that sustain their work.

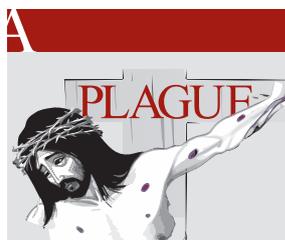
“The one thing I have confidence in is that God loves me,” Michael said.

He said his Catholic faith and belief in God were bigger

than the prejudices he encountered from other believers and that they continue to sustain their work nearly three decades later. As both treatments for H.I.V. and the need for intensive services continue to evolve, the Friends of Dorothy House has expanded its mission to serve a broader segment of people.

“If we’re expressing love and we’re expressing kindness, that’s what it’s about.”

Michael J. O’Loughlin is *America’s national correspondent and the author of Hidden Mercy: AIDS, Catholics, and the Untold Stories of Compassion in the Face of Fear.*



This story is also featured in a new episode of “Plague: Untold Stories of AIDS and the Catholic Church,” a documentary podcast produced by America Media and hosted by Michael O’Loughlin. Listen to the entire series at [americamagazine.org/plague](http://americamagazine.org/plague) or wherever you get your podcasts.

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Christopher Lauber/Fordham Prep

## ‘Let’s See if We Can Inject a Little Competition for a Common Good.’

By Maurice Timothy Reidy

### *Jim Rowen discusses the genesis of the Great Ignatian Challenge*

*Jim Rowen is the chief operating officer of Renaissance Technologies, a hedge fund, and a 1982 graduate of Fordham Preparatory School in the Bronx, New York. He served as chairman of Fordham Prep’s board of trustees from 2014 to 2017, where he developed the idea for the Great Ignatian Challenge, a yearly competition among Jesuit high schools to see which institution can bring in the most donations for local charities. Fifteen schools in seven states now take part in the challenge, which began in 2016. The schools compete for a series of awards that fund financial assistance programs and endowments. Mr. Rowen has donated over \$1.3 million to the program. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**T.R.:** *We’re both graduates of Fordham Prep in the Bronx. Can you tell me a little bit about how you wound up going there?*

J.R.: I grew up in Long Beach, a town on Long Island. My parents divorced when I was 1 year old, and my father had gone to Brooklyn Prep and was a big believer in the structure

that Jesuits provide. When it came to high school, the question was: “Where do I go?” My mother wanted me to go to Long Beach High, and my father wanted me to go to a Jesuit school. He had friends who had gone to the Prep. He had impressed upon me how important it is to have a good high school education and told me that’s where I was going. In the ’70s, you never were asked. You kind of were told.

So for the next four years, I commuted from Long Beach to Fordham Prep in the Bronx, leaving my house at 5:30 a.m. and getting home after football or swimming practice around 9 p.m.

It was an interesting time, right? Because at that point, there are no cellphones. City’s a tough place, and I will tell you: that commute was part of my education because it just prepared me to deal with things.

Needless to say, the whole experience that Fordham Prep provided me was something that shaped my life forever. I have a tremendous sense of gratitude and a feeling of debt to the Jesuits and to Fordham Prep.

Fordham Prep students collect donations for the Great Ignatian Challenge in 2019. The annual holiday food drive, which now takes place at 15 Jesuit schools, also raises money for financial assistance programs.

***Who were some of your favorite teachers there at the Prep?***

I had Jack Foley. He was still there when I was chairman of the Prep's board. Father Stan O'Konsky. Man, he saved my bacon. When my family couldn't come up with money for me to go to college, he was like, "Supply your application. We'll figure it out." Dean Robert Baisley, who was our dean of discipline, the administrator of jug [detention] and all things wonderful like that.

For me and for my kids, I was the same way as my father was, focused on high school, because when you come out is kind of who you're going to be. It's a formidable time, and that sausage machine.... It better be the best sausage machine.

***You are also a graduate of Fordham University and what is now the Gabelli School of Business. When you were figuring out whether to go to business school, how did you come to that decision? Was there something about being at Fordham Prep that pointed you in that direction?***

I'll just give you a story. When I started in the financial services industry, part of the aspect that would differentiate me was the ability to solve problems, under what I would consider tremendous pressure. Everything for me would just slow down, and I would take that kind of process that I'd learned from my commute as well as from the Jesuits and say, "Okay, let's take a step back, and let's compartmentalize. Let's sequence and see what we can come up with."

I was in a meeting one time with a group of people that I didn't really know, but a big issue had occurred at a bank, and it had to be solved. There were probably 20 people in there. I made a comment, "Man, someone's going to get jug for this." You would assume that no one would know what you were talking about, but five people in the audience stared at me, right?

We came up with the solution, and at the end, those five people came up, and they go, "You went to a Jesuit school?" That immediately created a bond among that group of five because we shared something.

That kind of connection from a Jesuit school really just never leaves you.

***Let's discuss the Great Ignatian Challenge. How did that come about?***

What I realized is all these schools are doing basically a canned food drive, but competition yields a better result. What I did is applied a very basic business school universal

truth or law to it and said, "Okay, let's see if we can inject a little competition for a common good."

If everybody's already doing this can drive, it's no more work for them. The first year we did this, the yield per student was up like seven times. Where somebody would bring in five or six Campbell's Soup cans, they were now bringing in 15 or 20. It just started to snowball.

If you think about it, it's probably the most profitable to the schools of anything they do. There's no rentals required. There's no media companies required. There's no catering required, so it's all pure profit to them. They're getting a tremendous amount of what I call franchise value, right? Folks like you who are interested in writing a story about it. "Why should I send my kid to a Jesuit school?" Well, look at the good that they're doing.

***Since you were on the board at Fordham Prep, you know how it's grown over the years. Do you think alumni need to play a greater role in helping these schools to grow and to cultivate their identity, especially at a time when there are fewer Jesuits?***

For me, Tim, this is a strategy question that you and I should have over a beer, but what I think should happen is there has to be some understanding of what schools can do to better improve sense of debt or obligation that I mentioned early on in our conversation—because I don't know how many students leave with that. I have a feeling you did, but I'm not sure how many others do. How many shared the Tim or Jim feeling that, wow, this was pretty special, and I have an obligation to pay it forward? Because if you don't have that, my experience will be foreign to other alumni.

I think the schools today have to figure out how to cultivate that—because in 10 or 15 or 20 years, when you try to reel them back in, it'll be easy, and they'll be plentiful, right? If you don't do that, if it's just an education, a diploma, you're not going to be that interested in coming back to help. So creating that connection, that feeling of obligation, I feel, is extremely important.

Maurice Timothy Reidy is deputy editor in chief of *America* and a 1993 graduate of Fordham Prep.

**JESUIT SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT**

*Jesuit School Spotlight is a monthly feature focusing on Jesuit middle and secondary schools from around the country. It is underwritten in part by Jesuit high schools of the USA East Province of the Society of Jesus.*





# *Death Comes for the Don*

By Simcha Fisher



Alamy

Death is there, from the very beginning of HBO's "The Sopranos," and it's telling you something.

It's one big *memento mori*, "The Sopranos." You don't realize it while you're watching the series at first, because the show is so drenched in sex and food, gore and comedy, violence and pathos and banality. But death is there from the very beginning, and it's telling you something: *Just wait. It will happen to you.*

The series has recently gained a whole new audience, almost 15 years after its finale on HBO. This is obviously in large part because of the recent release of "The Many Saints of Newark," a feature film purporting to fill in some of the backstory of the lives of Tony Soprano and his kin. But the comeback is also due to something else: As the New York Times's Willy Staley posited, younger audiences see themselves in Tony Soprano's "combination of privilege and self-loathing," or they see today's America in the show's portrayal of the '90s era of decline and fall.

Staley says the show was prescient in a way that sheds light on our specific timeline. But I think it deals with a theme that never stopped being relevant, namely, salvation. And did I mention death?

In the very first episode, Carmela Soprano, Tony's wife, steps into the room where Tony is getting an MRI, hoping to find the source of his inexplicable collapses. In eight lines of dialogue that provide a primer to their marriage, Tony mawkishly offers a nostalgic olive branch, and Carmela quickly escalates: "What's different between you and me is you're going to hell when you die!" Then Tony's body, covered only by a hospital gown, is fed into the machine.

Carmela later retracts her furious words. But where Tony is going from Episode One on—and Carmela, too—really is the central question of the show.

It is not explicitly a religious question. The church appears mainly as a cultural and aesthetic force in the lives of the show's characters. Sin and virtue are treated as a curiosity, and even the priests are willing

to help that world view limp along unchallenged, as long as they get their *manigot*.

### A Moral Force

In a sense, the most Catholic parts of the show are not the explicitly Catholic parts. Whether it's the Holy Spirit (in the guise of that numinous wind that moves throughout the series) or something more amorphous, a moral force does press on the lives of the various characters, demanding their attention.

They are all constantly presented with choices: What matters more, business and efficiency or loyalty and family? When we identify what was wrong with the past, do we reject everything about it? If we see what was good about the past, may we hope to retain any of it? Once we understand why we do things, how culpable are we, and how capable are we of change? Once we realize we are wrong, how much must we give up to make things right? Anything?

Carmela is given perhaps the starkest moral choice of any of the characters (except for maybe Paulie Walnuts, with his cataclysmic vision of the Virgin Mary at the stripper's pole): The almost prophetic psychiatrist Dr. Krakower tells Carmela, plainly and without pity, that she must leave Tony, must take no more blood money, must be an accomplice no longer.

"One thing you can never say: that you haven't been told," he intones.

You could see this scene as the show leaving a small marker, bobbing on the surface of the water, reminding the viewer: *Don't forget, wrong is still wrong.* We may be humanizing murderers in every episode, showing them eating their sloppy pepper sandwiches and struggling with their teenagers just like anyone else, but murder is still murder. Death is still death.

Carmela leaves Dr. Krakower's office stricken. She huddles on the couch at home, pondering these things in her heart. And then she finds a priest, a good priest,

# ‘The Sopranos’ is ultimately about the day when Tony Soprano will not wake up. 🐞

who gives her a softer message. He tells her that she should find a way to live off only the legitimate parts of her husband’s income, and that is how she will find her way. But soon enough, despite some dramatic side journeys, she makes her way back into the same old patterns.

Carmela is almost an inverse of the Lady of Sorrows, who endures so many awful indignities: Carmela takes away no good from her anguish; she only suffers. She feeds everyone and cares for everyone, and everyone comes to her for comfort. She listens to everyone, and with her deep, hollow eyes she sees through everyone, and she always tells people the truth about themselves. But when it comes down to it, she has her price, and can be had for presents and jewelry.

Carmela’s insight also goes dim when there is something she doesn’t want to know. It has been her life’s work not to see that Tony was capable of killing people—including his own loved ones and relatives. Carmela’s brittle manicure and spraddle-legged gait betray the terrible tension of keeping so much horror in check within her.

Her dalliance with real estate is more than just a way to build a nest egg. It is her answer to Tony’s impending, inevitable death: to pile up money for herself and her children. She knows that throughout her whole life, she has been building with rotten materials. But she also knows she can make the sale if she keeps pushing hard enough.

It’s not just the house she’s building as her own project to sell, it’s everything.

## Layers of the Heart

And this is how the show draws us in. It gives us the same choice: *How will you hold all this knowledge in check? We’re going to show you so many things about what people are like. What will you do with the knowledge? How will you accommodate it?*

“The Sopranos” invites us into multiple layers of inquiry into the human heart: We not only watch the Soprano family, but the family’s therapists, and the therapist’s therapist, and at one point a whole party of the therapist’s therapist’s therapist friends, all looking and talking and interpreting and wondering what to make of the lives of these fascinating people who steal and kill for a living. And then we, the viewers, do the same.

That first scene where Tony is fed into the MRI machine? It’s not just a foreshadowing, it’s a tell. We are going to take a little peek inside this man’s brain and see if we can’t figure out what’s going on in there.

The truth is, our layers of inquiry show that the story is not any more complicated than one man’s brain. The show is about the mafia, but only circumstantially. Tony wants what most men want. Not just sex and power and *gabagool*, but a little appreciation. One exhausting episode culminates in Christopher Moltisanti and Furio Giunta grinding up the body of Richie

Aprile. But the real bathos comes after Tony has finished mopping up after the bloody corpse in his undershirt as the sun rises. At this point he has also had to clean up, metaphorically, after his narcissistic mother, his suicidal ex-mistress and his unstable sister yet again. He returns home to find his wife in another cold rage, sarcastically threatening suicide if he refuses to take care of the kids’ dentist appointments and tennis clinics while she’s in Rome. “Hey, hey, I saved the world today,” swells the music, and even though you know so much of this mess is his own fault, you want to give the poor man a hug for taking care of everything once again.

And we are left to mop up the aftermath of what has just happened to our hearts. What kind of accommodation did we just make?

## ‘Til Death Do Us Part

Somehow we come to a place where Tony’s choice to sell Mr. Caputo’s poultry store in their old neighborhood in Newark so that a Jamba Juice can move in feels colder and more stinging than the scene where he mercy-executes his own cousin, Tony Blundetto. This is what the show does to you. You know what the real moral laws are: murder is wrong, always; we must not root for barbaric criminals. But even if the message is delivered in stark terms, we can’t receive it, any more than Carmela was able to receive the judgment from Dr. Krakower. Instead, we are counseled to find some middle way, to seek out some kind of balance, to keep ourselves engaged without becoming too contaminated.

And we truly do. This is the genius of the show, that it is possible to achieve this balance. Six seasons of perfectly paced brutality and com-

passion never let you forget who these people are and what they really do. And yet the success of “The Sopranos” is partially because the show is, as Staley also said, funnier than most shows that bill themselves explicitly as comedies. And it succeeds because it has the courage to end in the only possible way such a show could end, daring to baffle and outrage so many viewers with one final invitation to see clearly what the show is about.

In the final few episodes, Dr. Mel-fi, Tony’s therapist, decides once and for all that, yes, Tony is a sociopath, and therapy is just helping him hone his skills at manipulation and deception. She dismisses him abruptly, and he furiously tells her that what she is doing is immoral.

I am inclined to agree. I think Tony does get better during the show. He does make some movements toward self-awareness, and probably weathers his son AJ’s meltdown better than he might have otherwise. Because of what Tony has accomplished in therapy, in one of the weirdest love scenes put to film, he decides not to cheat on Carmela just one time. Instead he ends up reeling around his kitchen in a stupid rage, to his wife’s disgust, suffering under the torments of a budding new conscience. We also see him fighting to change the mafia script when he holds back and lets the police deal with the pedophile coach rather than rubbing him out. Tony is reachable.

But it would take an act of heroism for him to break out of the life he inherited. (Which is not to say it would be impossible. His unconscious is apparently capable of imagining it, in the absolutely brilliant coma episodes featuring his doppelgänger, Kevin Finnerty.) With his family his-

tory, with his upbringing, with the burdens and expectations he carries, with the way atrocities are thoroughly normalized by his crowd, what would it take for him to break away from that life and do something completely different? Tony is not a great man, but is he worse than most men? Is he? I don’t know!

What I do know is, like everyone in the show, he is given the chance to at least try. He is given chance after chance to do better, and even by his own standards, he does fail. He chooses poorly. Strictly speaking, his loathsome nemesis, Phil Leotardo, is in the right: Tony has become an ineffective boss, and should be taken down. But that is not what the show is about. The show is about the day when Tony Soprano will not wake up.

I am not swayed by arguments that the final jarring scene is some kind of reprimand to the viewer, a slap in the face for erroneously sympathizing too much with a monster like Tony. I think arguing about “what really happened” is missing the point.

Through-out the show, and more and more frequently at the opening of each episode, the first thing we see (echoing the view of the MRI machine) is Tony asleep in bed—and then he wakes up. He

wakes up. He wakes up. He wakes up. And one day, we’re prompted to imagine, he will not. One day his eyes will not open. It doesn’t matter how.

The abrupt and ambiguous ending tells me that it doesn’t matter if Tony gets killed at Holsten’s or not, if he is killed by a hitman or in jail or by cancer or whatever. The point is, sooner or later Tony Soprano will die. The point is, sooner or later everyone will die. But first, everyone gets their chances.

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*Simcha Fisher is a speaker, freelance writer and author of The Sinner’s Guide to Natural Family Planning. She blogs daily at [simchafisher.com](http://simchafisher.com) and weekly at The Catholic Weekly. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband and 10 children.*

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 Jonathan Franzen is shown from the chest up, smiling and looking towards the camera. He has grey hair and is wearing black-rimmed glasses and a blue and green plaid button-down shirt. He is seated at a table covered with a black cloth, with his hands resting on a white piece of paper. In the background, a busy book signing event is taking place with other people and bookshelves.
 

# Jonathan Franzen's *'American Middlemarch'*

In a time when Americans are reading less, Jonathan Franzen stands alone as a writer whose novels are treated as events.

Few American writers regularly earn as much conversation as Jonathan Franzen. When advance copies of the 62-year-old's new novel, *Crossroads*, began making the rounds, literary Twitter fixated on a bit of advertising copy to the effect that he is "widely regarded as the leading novelist of his generation," and the extent of the mock outrage more than proved the point. In a time when Americans are reading less—and even fewer read literary fiction—Franzen stands alone as a writer whose novels are treated as events.

*Crossroads* is very much an event. Following 2015's techno-paranoiac misfire, *Purity*, Franzen's sixth novel marks a return to the Midwestern realism of his National Book Award-winning novel, *The Corrections*. The story opens in New Prospect, a fictional Chicago suburb much like the one in

which Franzen was born. It is two days before Christmas 1971, and the novel follows the fates of the Hildebrandt family, each member on a quest for ill-conceived self-fulfillment.

The patriarch of the family is Russ, a local pastor at First Reformed Church who longs to regain his edge—and in the process to sleep with his congregation's most eligible divorcée. His frustrated wife, Marion, wants to lose either some weight or her crippling need for self-control. The children aren't doing any better: Their son Perry becomes convinced of his own damnation, daughter Becky is trying to get dreamy folk-rocker Tanner to break up with his girlfriend, and the college student Clem declines the student draft deferment because he believes it has made him as weak as his father.

The family's frustrations and fears are deeply interwoven. Marion

sees signs of her own youthful downfall in Perry's increasingly drugged-out behavior. Clem's unsettling attachment to his sister Becky colors his every decision, and her rejection of him leads ultimately to a rejection of her family. Russ still fumes over being kicked out of First Reformed Church's youth group, *Crossroads*, an event that caused all his children to despise him in their own particular ways and has led to a years-long silent feud with the church's youth pastor. Secrets are revealed; mistakes made and recouped; profound moments give way to base desires; and vice versa.

This is all familiar territory for Franzen, but hardly boring. *Crossroads* is a remarkably confident novel by a man who has spent the greater part of his life writing them. Though more than half the novel's 600 pages are set over just two days in Decem-

## Crossroads

By Jonathan Franzen  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
592p \$30

ber, Franzen is always peering back into the past—by a few hours, days or decades. Something is always simmering just beneath the present moment.

While often regarded as a bit of a scold, he mixes a post-60s satirical sensibility with a Victorian eye for pithy bits of characterization. The story overflows with jokes and digressions, and even minor characters are given their moment in the sun. And yet the story rarely veers off track. By giving readers space with each member of the family, Franzen turns exposition into little dramas of revelation and withholding, leaving us with the expectation of clarity always just around the bend.

This approach is effective up to a point. At times the hopscotching narrative serves to generate cliffhangers that fade in the reader's mind long before they are resolved, killing the narrative's momentum. The endless motivational elaborations in others do not complicate so much as over-explain, and whole pages go by that feel like rationalization. Marion's story in particular, while acidic and often humorous, feels precisely but thinly drawn, a substantial surface that never quite yields to further depths. Instead, the self-defeating suburban man remains Franzen's great subject, and the further he gets from Russ and Perry, the greater the novel's lag between precision and pleasure.

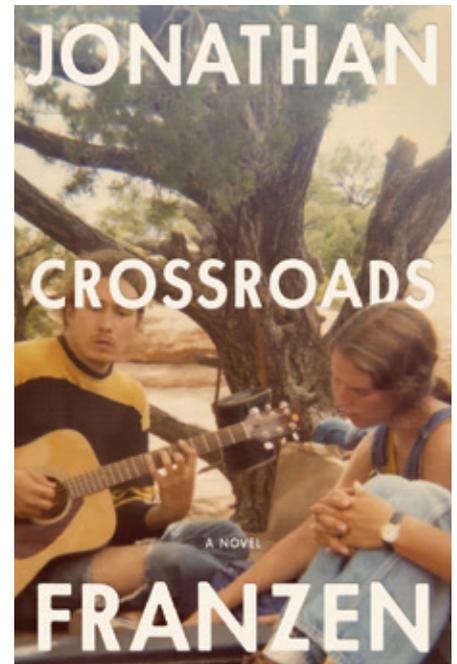
Ironically, *Crossroads* must leave the suburbs in order to achieve lift-off. Throughout the second half, titled "Easter," Franzen delves into Russ's boyhood and his coming to spiritual, political and sexual consciousness during a service trip he leads with

*Crossroads* on the Navajo reservation. Unlike the novel's other characters, Russ is allowed to develop past the point of label or caricature, his manifold failings stacked within his virtues and convictions like an elaborately self-pitying matryoshka nesting doll. His satisfactions, however grotesque, never quite outweigh his rationalizations. I am sure that many readers will despise Russ, but Franzen allows us to understand this fallen man.

*Crossroads* takes seriously the role of religion in everyday life to an extent not often found in contemporary novels. Several of the novel's most overpowering moments—a vision in a quiet chapel, a man washing his enemy's feet—could have emerged from Tolstoy. But these revelations do not remain unalloyed. Bitterness and self-interest, lust and perversion are always found in both sacred and profane spaces. For instance, when Russ takes up a charity run to a Black inner-city partner church, he both cares about his spiritual duties and desires to spin them into sexual success.

*Crossroads* is only the first part of a proposed trilogy, with subsequent volumes to follow the Hildebrandts across the following decades. This cycle shares its title, *A Key to All Mythologies*, with Mr. Casaubon's magnum opus in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a work famous for remaining incomplete.

It takes guts to put oneself on the level of our language's greatest social novel, and Franzen has more than earned the right to try. Through this one family's story, he wants to weave together those forces that defined life for much of the American century, from economic turmoil and radical



politics to evangelicalism, the counterculture, the legacies of colonialism at home and their enactment worldwide via the Cold War. Through this disintegrating family he will show the disintegration of a country.

In an article in *Harper's* in 1996, Franzen argued against the sort of sweeping social novel then in vogue among authors like Tom Wolfe and Bret Easton Ellis, writing instead that the novel's future lay in the minute exploration of a character's interior life. In recent years, he has written a number of pieces for *The New Yorker* arguing against politics on a societal scale, claiming, instead, that in a world unraveling under the pressures of climate change and inequality, it is the responsibility of the individual to attend to one's immediate surroundings, to conserve what one can and do one's best to others. Everything ultimately originates with the self and thus requires individuals to act as they can, and no better.

Perhaps this explains the peculiarly petty feeling of much of the novel. *Crossroads* funnels every gesture,



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## Crossroads *takes seriously* the role of religion in everyday life. ●●

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every experience, back to whoever happens to be in frame. The characters suck in every last bit of light, leaving the world in all its richness and tumult feeling oddly drab and occluded. The novel's cinematic sweep can at times look like a painted panorama, overflowing with detail but without relief. It frequently seems as if the 20th century has conspired to ruin this one suburban family.

Eliot believed that great and profound things find themselves incarnated in the smallest lives, and that even the most trivial elements of everyday experience point in turn to the most powerful forces at work in the cosmos. For all his attention to unhistoric acts, Franzen misses ultimately the growing good of the world. Like *Middlemarch's* Mr. Casaubon, he is so caught up in the minutiae that he loses the bigger picture, if he ever grasped it to begin with.

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Robert Rubsam is a writer and critic whose work has been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Baffler*, *Commonweal* and *Image Journal*.

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### Stepping Outside Our Enclosures

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When I traveled to Bosnia in 1998, the active phase of the war there had already been over for a couple of years. But the conflict there was quite

evident—and not just in the bombed-out buildings and minefield warning signs. Rather, it was in what I heard from the local religious leaders.

Traveling with other theology students, I first met Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church, then a series of Catholic bishops and then Muslim leaders in Sarajevo. Each had a painful and compelling story to tell us about the war. There were many similarities in their stories, in fact—but radically different ways of ascribing blame. We were left baffled, confused, with our sympathies deeply torn. It felt impossible to construct any kind of coherent narrative about what had really happened.

Oddly, though, the dizzying feeling from hearing such wildly different viewpoints from the Balkan leaders was quite familiar. I had experienced the same thing back in the United States when listening to my divorcing parents. Their bitterness, grief and utter inability to understand the other's perspective was precisely what I heard from the opposing sides in the Bosnian war. It was both disturbing and comforting to see how similar the dynamics were.

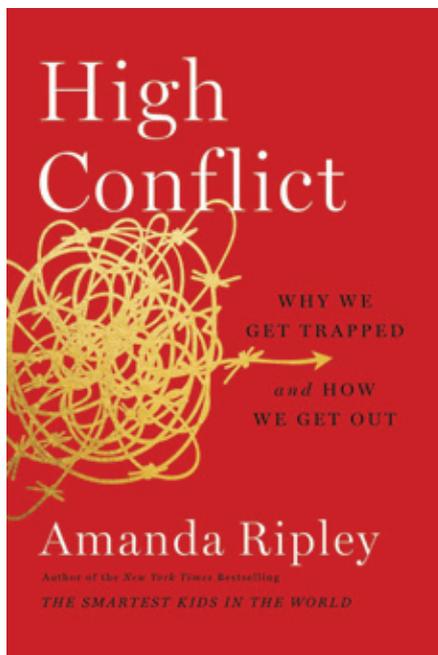
This is precisely what Amanda Ripley's astute new book *High Conflict* reveals: "People behave very similarly in all kinds of high conflict, from neighborhood feuds to divorce courts to labor strikes." An investigative journalist who has written for *Time* and

*The Atlantic*, Ripley is clearly someone who does not avoid conflict. At a time when many of us are experiencing painful overlaps between political conflict and family conflict, this book offers some hope for a way forward. Along the way, her masterful storytelling makes for a fascinating read.

Much of this nonfiction book focuses on Gary Friedman, a divorce lawyer who is asked by friends to represent them both in their divorce. Surely that would be unethical, he thinks; as a lawyer, he ought to be an advocate for one side or another. But when they persist, they set him upon a radically new path. Gary becomes a pioneer in the field of divorce mediation. He goes on to help many other couples—and even large organizations—navigate conflicts in less destructive ways.

But after decades as the "godfather of mediation," Gary finds himself part of a bitter conflict. He is elected to a volunteer position on his local neighborhood governing committee, where he sees himself as part of "the new guard" that has arrived to save the neighborhood from the mistakes made by "the old guard." Despite his best intentions, seemingly minor disagreements soon spiral into the "high conflict" of Ripley's book title.

Conflict is a normal part of human life; it is vital, in fact, for change and growth. It is impossible to fix injustice without conflict. The challenge is in making it productive rather than part of a zero-sum or even lose-lose game. "When conflict escalates past a certain point," Ripley writes, "the conflict itself takes charge. The original facts and forces that led to the dispute fade into the background. The us-versus-them dynamic takes over." She offers the metaphor of the La Brea Tar Pits:



## High Conflict

Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out

By Amanda Ripley

Simon & Schuster

368p \$28

It is easy to get sucked into conflict, but when you try to get out, everything you do seems to make the situation worse. Indeed, Gary's neighborhood dispute ultimately gets so bad that he and his wife consider moving away.

Gary's story is quite humbling to read. Despite all his expertise in conflict resolution, he is no more immune to "high conflict" than the rest of us. Actually, he has a great deal in common with the other individuals whom Ripley profiles: an anti-G.M.O. activist in the United Kingdom, a gang member in Chicago and a member of the FARC guerilla movement in Colombia. In each case, they are stuck in destructive conflict. And yet in each case, they eventually find a way out.

Mark Lynas comes to understand that his radical activism against genet-

ically modified crops is actually causing harm to humans and to the environment he claims he is protecting. He realizes that making common cause with scientists—rather than throwing whipped cream at them during their book signings, as Lynas once did—is a better way to pursue his goals. Curtis Toler becomes a violence "interrupter" in Chicago. Sandra Milena Vera Bustos leaves FARC, returns to her family and becomes a social justice activist in Bogotá. The process is bumpy for all of them, but the key is that they all find a new identity in a way that does not require them to utterly betray their previous identity.

Just as Gary imagined that he was immune to high conflict, many in the United States have imagined that our country is immune to the kind of internecine conflict or election violence that might happen elsewhere. Ripley's book is an antidote to such exceptionalism, and it provides a helpful context for understanding recent events, particularly the insurrection at the Capitol in Washington on Jan. 6. She reminds us that to address many of our contemporary problems—climate change, the pandemic, racism—we need groups with different goals to work together. Protest movements are vital to raise awareness and force people to come to the table; but once they are at the table, they have to collaborate somehow.

The final portion of Ripley's book describes what happens when she accompanies a group of New York Jews who visit a group of prison guards in central Michigan in an attempt to bridge political divides, and the synagogue members later host the guards back in New York. Genuine friendships develop despite the significant

cultural divide. But without ongoing interaction, these friendships fade; and the two groups slide back into their own political and social bubbles.

High conflict is not inevitable, Ripley says—but factors in our society are certainly making it more likely: the sped-up interactions that happen on social media, the "power of the binary" that emerges in a two-party political system and the decreasing likelihood that we live near people who do not share our political opinions. Unless we push back against these things intentionally, high conflict (and, often, violent conflict) will become more and more widespread. New modes of interacting are crucial.

How can we recognize when we are stuck in "high conflict"? The most common feeling is bafflement at the people on the other side. That is precisely why curiosity is a key tool for getting out of high conflict. Ripley says that what we need is not less conflict, but better conflict; we need to go deeper into it by becoming curious and examining the "understory" that is really driving the conflict. Part of the power of her book is that she herself models this curiosity throughout, showing us—with genuine humility—what she learns from each of the people she profiles.

Pope Francis writes in "Fratelli Tutti": "Disagreements may well give rise to conflicts, but uniformity proves stifling and leads to cultural decay. May we not be content with being enclosed in one fragment of reality." Ripley's book is a powerful invitation to step outside that enclosure.

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Laurie Johnston is an associate professor of theology at Emmanuel College Boston and a member of the Community of Sant'Egidio.

## Sally Rooney is at her best when she leans into the corporeality of her imagination. 💧

### If ‘Fratelli Tutti’ Were Millennial Fiction

Sally Rooney has a particular style of writing. If you have read one of her books, her others will feel familiar—almost to a fault. Like herself, Rooney’s characters are young Irish intellectuals, usually writers. In Dublin, they write slam poetry, short stories, literary reviews and popular novels. They are smart and self-aware, cynical and searching. In her pages, they type and think and talk about capitalism, climate change, beauty, sex, God and general systems collapse, all without quotation marks. Her primary narrative concern is how her characters navigate their relationships in a time of historical crisis.

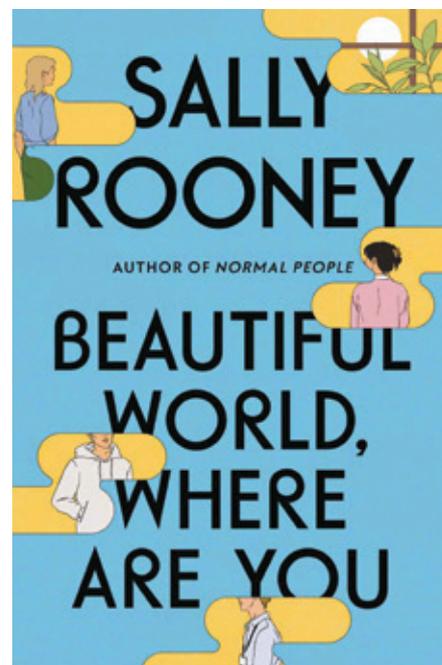
“How’s the book?” a dear friend texted me, knowing I had an advance reader’s copy of Rooney’s new novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. “I’m only 40 pages in. It’s similar to her other ones,” I responded, “good in a familiar way.”

There comes a point in each of her novels, usually about 100 pages in, where I find myself falling in love. This time, I can pinpoint that moment to Page 117 exactly—the point when I put my book down to text my friend. Two of the characters find themselves attending the 9 a.m.

Mass at the Church of Mary Immaculate, Refuge of Sinners after spending the night together. These alienated, anxious characters find a moment of peace together in the pews. For at least a bit, their restless relationship is filled with grace.

*Beautiful World, Where Are You* revolves around four characters: Alice, Felix, Simon and Eileen. It is hard to resist visualizing their names emblazoned in white Helvetica stacked vertically on a plain black T-shirt. In chapters with alternating formats, we watch in splendid detail from a third-person perspective before Rooney switches to giving us Alice and Eileen’s emails in epistolary form. These exchanges are filled with the sharp social commentary to which we have grown accustomed in Rooney’s writing.

Alice, a best-selling novelist contending with early-onset celebrity, retreats to a coastal town in the west of Ireland after a nervous breakdown. There she matches with Felix, a local warehouse worker, on Tinder. She invites him to join her on a press trip to Rome. Back in Dublin, Alice’s best (and, well, really only) friend from college, Eileen, adds periods to the name “WH Auden,” standardizing its appearance in the little-read literary magazine she edits. Eileen lies in bed



### Beautiful World, Where Are You

By Sally Rooney  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
368p \$28

at night thinking about Simon, the boy with seizures who grew up next door, five years her senior.

Catholicism, while present in her first two novels, moves from the fringes to the center of this text. Felix, after learning of Simon’s faith and religiosity, asks Alice, “He’s weird in the head or something is he?” Lola, Eileen’s difficult older sister, insists he must be a freak.

Rooney is writing within the context of a post-Catholic Ireland. She and her characters grew up in a world where the church’s firm grasp on every aspect of life rapidly weakened after revelations of physical and sexual abuse. “We got rid of the Catholic Church and replaced it with predatory capitalism,” Rooney told *The Irish Times* in 2017. “In some ways

that was a good trade off, and in other ways, really bad.” She writes for an audience that lacks faith in an institutional church, yet yearns for something to believe in. She writes for me and my friends.

As Alice—and I—understand Catholic doctrine, “beauty, truth and goodness are properties of being which are one with God.” Throughout the novel, Alice and Eileen are gradually opened to the idea that there might be something special about a first-century Judean preacher in their search for a beautiful world. In an email to Alice, Eileen describes Mass as “strangely romantic.”

If I had gone straight home this morning instead of going with him to the church, I’m not sure I would feel the same way now—but at the same time, if we had just gone to Mass this morning and we hadn’t slept together last night, I don’t think I’d feel like this now either.

She wonders if she grew to admire the sincerity of Simon’s faith while watching him receive Communion among the little old ladies.

As usual, Rooney is at her best when she leans into the corporeality of her imagination. Her writing in this novel is most compelling when describing capitalism’s effect on the body. In a moment of vulnerability, Felix explains to Alice how he struggles to understand that the hands he uses at work can be the same hands he uses in bed:

It’s hard to believe I have to use the same body for both

things, I’ll say it like that. And it doesn’t feel like the same. These hands touching you now, I use them to pack boxes? I don’t know. At work my hands are f—ing freezing all the time. And like, basically numb. Even if you wear gloves they go numb eventually, everyone says that. Sometimes I’ll get a little cut or scrape or something and I won’t notice until I see it’s bleeding. And these are the same hands touching you?

Working in the warehouse, Felix disassociates his body from his personhood. The effects of late-stage capitalism on the individual are isolation and despair. Felix feels this through his body.

What does Rooney present as the alternative? Love. It is an idea her characters may have picked up on while in Rome. *Beautiful World, Where Are You* reads like a sexy, millennial novelization of Pope Francis’ “Fratelli Tutti.” Francis writes what could be a thesis statement for this novel in that encyclical: “Authentic and mature love and true friendship can only take root in hearts open to growth through relationships with others.”

If the goal of art from the Catholic perspective is to reveal beauty, truth and light—to point in the direction of God—then Sally Rooney is my generation’s great Catholic writer.

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Ciaran Freeman is an art teacher at Gonzaga College High School in Washington, D.C., and a former O’Hare fellow at America Media.

## Racial Deformation in the Academy

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Willie James Jennings, a professor of theology and Africana studies at Yale Divinity School, has produced a convincing analysis of the racism baked into Western theological education in *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*.

In the opening chapter, Jennings recalls interviewing a young white man for a faculty position at Yale. His description of the interviewee sounded uncannily similar to many of my own colleagues at theology school:

A tall, dark-haired, baritone-voiced, perfectly groomed bearded man dressed like a professor in the middle of a celebrated career. He had 1.5 years of study in Germany, knowledge of German language, theology, biblical languages, seminars, blue suit, brown wingtip shoes, slow speech, legs crossed, quiet confident comportment. This US-born-and-raised scholar even spoke in the interview and during his public lecture with a slight German accent.

Not only did I recognize the type, I recognized the desire that stirred within Jennings in response. During the interview Jennings notices his and his colleagues’ desire to imitate that image of whiteness.

I always looked *longingly* at anyone who had mastered German and Germany.... I had learned to love an intellectual



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# *Of all the academic disciplines that ought to resist the coercive grip of whiteness, it should be theology. ●●*

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form that performed white masculinist self-sufficiency, a way of being in the world that aspires to exhibit possession, mastery, and control of knowledge first, and of one's self second, and if possible of one's world.

It is this image of this bearded white man—the one fluent in German and French who can weave into his question in class a short philosophical history from Plato to Kierkegaard—that Jennings draws upon to guide us through his excellent treatise on theological formation in the academy. “Western education has offered us a distorted vision of what an educated person should look like, and we theological educators have accepted it,” Jennings writes.

Jennings uses the phrase “white self-sufficient masculinity” as a way of designating structures of whiteness or white supremacy in the theological academy. He defines it as “a way of organizing life with ideas and forming a persona that distorts identity and strangles the possibilities of dense life together.” Whiteness functions here as a symbol of mastery, of social power that functions by way of coercive dom-

inance rather than dialogue.

The irony, as Jennings points out throughout the book, is that theology is fundamentally a discipline of humility. Of all the academic disciplines that ought to resist the coercive grip of whiteness, it should be theology, which is properly done, Pope Benedict XVI said, on one's knees.

“We always and only work in the fragments,” writes Jennings. Theology as a discipline is a practice of grasping at fragments: of papyri, of collective memory, of the Godhead, of eternity. At its core, theology means clutching at the coattails of pure mystery. But that is easy to forget.

“The formation of the self-sufficient man has always been the greatest temptation for Christian formation because Christian formation has always been so close to it,” Jennings writes. He tells multiple stories of students transfixed by this self-sufficient master. When they compare themselves with this image, students receive the message that they do not belong, that “white self-sufficient masculinity is the quintessential image of an educated person.”

In my own studies, I noticed the male students began to take on the accoutrements that Jennings de-

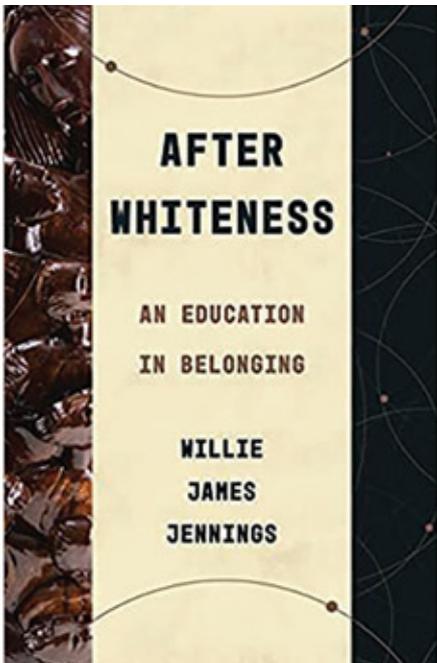
scribes—horn-rimmed glasses, cardigans and beards. Oh, the beards. It is the rare male graduate student who does not stretch his facial follicles' capacities in order to transform his chin into an advertisement of his philosophical prowess.

And, although beardless, I was not immune. I have 20-20 vision, but throughout graduate studies, I began to wish—not as facetiously as I would like—for eyeglasses. I remember thinking that what I said in class would sound better *to myself* if I wore glasses. I longed to conform in some way to the image of what I thought a competent scholar *ought* to look like. It's a rather self-destructive wish—to hope for distorted vision.

Jennings analyzes the structures and designs of the academy that subtly reiterate to students that they are “not smart enough, mature enough, prepared enough to be in the theological academy. Even if such students remain in school,” he writes, “we have lost them.”

Jennings considers the constructive question: How does one build an education system free of these messages? How do you communicate to people they are worthy when the structures of society tell them over and over again that wisdom, expertise and power look like someone completely different from who they are? And how can an institution that has embraced a specific image of expertise grow beyond its fear that other forms of wisdom or knowing will in some way mar its excellence?

“Many administrators are afraid that ‘diversity’ means they will lose something in terms of the quality of their institution,” said Jennings in a discussion of his book. “It's an un-



**After Whiteness**  
An Education in Belonging  
By Willie James Jennings  
Eerdmans  
176p \$19.99

founded fear,” he added.

It is unfounded, he says, because that version of intellectual excellence is bound up in whiteness, or what he calls “the logic of the plantation.” But theological education, Jennings argues, does not have to simply regurgitate the master’s rules in the master’s house. “After all, the God of the Christians was a crucified slave who cried and prayed to God for help, not a self-sufficient man,” he writes.

White supremacy is a mode of imagination, according to Jennings. It is sometimes difficult for us to see its influence on us because imagination is not an image we argue toward, but a perception or intuition *from which* we do our thinking. The assumptions and beliefs that underlie it can thus persist without our knowledge or attention.

The goal of theological learning is wisdom, Jennings argues, but so often, the academy values and forms humans instead for mastery—for mastering or dominating concepts—rather than for a wisdom born from the communal experience of faith and our own existential fragility. “Formation in theological education is a formation in communion and desire,” Jennings declares.

Theology’s purpose is not simply to attain or produce knowledge, but to clarify for the body of Christ its own understanding of itself. And, as Paul states, exclusion and division have no place in the mystical body of the church, which is all union and belonging. “The cultivation of belonging should be the goal of all education,” writes Jennings.

What is at stake in the racial deformation of the theological academy? Why must theological institutions rid themselves of systems that have formed them for centuries? In a discussion of Jennings’s book, LaRysa Herrington, a doctoral student at the University of Notre Dame, said that racism in theological formation threatens the identity of the church:

If we are one body united in Jesus Christ ontologically, then all of human particularity also exists within that body of Christ. The transcendent never hides human particularity—it accentuates it. When we privilege one particularity over another in the tradition, we lose the different facets of who God is.

The church, including its members in the academy, as Christ’s mystical body, is tasked with the imitation

of Christ. Divisions within the church, particularly the division of racism, threaten the church’s mission. “Our salvation is at stake. When we lose the ability to conform to the image of Christ in a real, transformative way—that puts our salvation in jeopardy,” Herrington said.

Jennings argues for an institution that does not replicate structures of exclusion or division, but rather reflects the image of the body of Christ. The theological academy, Jennings suggests, should expand its imagination beyond the beards and spectacles of sameness, and seek wisdom and belonging in fragments of every race, gender and nationality who gather together in Christ. Jennings describes the institution built on resurrection as those who belong together in their shared desire for wisdom—and for God. He writes: “An institution is a sustained work of building. It is a joining aimed at eternity where people, seeking to create the new, commit themselves to a powerful repetition that they hope will never end.”

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*Renée Darline Roden is a writer and playwright in New York City. She holds a degree in theology from the University of Notre Dame and an M.S. in journalism from Columbia University.*

## Get Ready

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 5, 2021

READINGS: BAR 5:1-9; PS 126; PHIL 1:4-11; LK 3:1-6

The first reading from Baruch builds on themes we have encountered over the past few weeks, as divine splendor is at the forefront. God's awesomeness is affirmed using royal imagery, and divine majesty is explicitly connected with justice as God is wrapped in a "cloak of justice."

The second reading from the Letter to the Philippians builds on the idea of justice in the first reading. Paul prays for the community as partners with God who create a just society by embracing and living out the Gospel message of love. Paul notes actions that help to strengthen the relationship with God, praying that the Philippians increase in love, knowledge, perception and discernment "so that you may be pure and blameless." These practices are foundational to fostering a good relationship with God and one another.

During the season of Advent, we should be intentional in trying to improve, to grow mentally and spiritually and to help to create a just society. Perhaps increasing one's service, reading a new book, learning a new skill or devoting time to spiritual dis-

cernment are ways that we can live out some of the principles highlighted in the second reading. Moreover, the emphasis on justice should not be missed. During Advent (and always) we must remain aware of the many injustices that plague the world and find ways to address and alleviate suffering. Paul's language of partnership should empower us to be engaged in helping to create a just society, not simply praying for divine justice to take effect but working to promote justice.

In the Gospel of Luke, we hear about John the Baptist and his preaching ministry which prepared people for the arrival of the Messiah. John's preparation is not simply proclaiming the arrival, but helping people to live righteously, echoing the focus on justice in the other readings. His ministry emphasized repentance and forgiveness of sins. The beginning of the new liturgical year as well as the end of the calendar year is an opportune time to reflect, acknowledge our shortcomings and correct wrongdoing.

In the midst of all of this preparation, there is an element of joy that permeates today's readings and this

*The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy. (Ps 126:3)*

### Praying With Scripture

How do you respond to the needs of the world?

What brings you joy?

What can you do to prepare yourself spiritually for the celebration of Christmas?

season. The theme of joy is present in the first reading as people are instructed to seek and find joy in God. The responsorial psalm emphasizes rejoicing because of God's active presence in the world. Joy is also found in the second reading, as Paul is joyful in his prayer for the Philippians. This language of joy anticipates Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday celebrated next week. It is an important element that we should heed during Advent. While many of the Advent readings have a heightened urgency, anticipation and vigilance within them, the season should also inspire us to rejoice and be glad.

## Joy in the World

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 12, 2021

READINGS: ZEP 3:14-18; IS 12; PHIL 4:4-7; LK 3:10-18

During the third week of Advent, we are reminded of the importance of joy which can sometimes be forgotten in the midst of suffering in the world. Today is Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday. Many priests wear rose vestments today, and the third candle on the advent wreath is also rose. The change in color in a season normally filled with violet is a visual reminder

to literally lighten up and rejoice as we continue to prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas.

The readings today reflect on God's presence on earth. The first and second readings proclaim joy in God's closeness, and the Gospel reminds us to be like God in our actions. In the first reading from Zephaniah, the prophet addresses people in Jerusa-

lem who were suffering, exclaiming to them to shout for joy because "the Lord is in your midst." Although the beginning of Zephaniah 3 describes judgment and punishment, by the end of the chapter, the perspective shifts to emphasize God's love and concern, actions that are worthy of celebration.

The second reading from the Letter to the Philippians builds on this

idea, reminding the community to rejoice because God is near. Importantly, Paul reminds the community of the power of prayer. Paul notes that when people suffer and are filled with anxiety, prayer offers a way to connect with God, allowing people to express what is needed and offer thanksgiving for blessings.

In some ways, these reminders to rejoice and be glad could feel out of touch with the realities of today, but the second reading gives us a needed perspective. When there are times that we lack joy, we should remember the power of prayer to help us persevere, seeking comfort and joy in God's presence and love, even if it is not always felt.

The Gospel pushes us to bring joy into the world by living morally and emulating God. In Luke, John the Baptist preaches on how to live righteously, calling for generosity and integrity. While baptizing people, John tells them to share their blessings with people who have less. More-

over, he addresses various financial and legal corruptions, calling on tax collectors not to collect more than is required. John also tells soldiers, "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages." These statements suggest abuse of authority in the land, with people with power misusing their offices at the expense of others in the community.

It is especially notable that John makes these statements while baptizing people, showing the link between ritual and moral actions. It is not enough to be baptized. Rather, ritual action must be coupled with moral behavior. John preaches the good news through word and deed, and he inspires his community to live out their faith in all aspects of their lives. John teaches his community to see their baptism as requiring a change in behavior that treats members of the community with dignity and respect. We, too, should recognize the

*By prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. (Phil 4:6)*

### *Praying With Scripture*

How can you foster joy in the world?

How can you enrich your prayer life?

What can you do to live rightly and promote a just society?

requirements and implications of our own baptism.

On Gaudete Sunday (and always), we should find joy in God's presence in our lives, looking for ways to foster joy in the world as we live out our faith. Prayer is a powerful and important way to connect with God and express our needs and our thanks. Likewise, living rightly and abstaining from corrupt practices enriches our lives and the lives of others.

## The Visitation

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C), DEC. 19, 2021**

READINGS: MI 5:1-4; PS 80; HEB 10:5-10; LK 1:39-25

As we near the end of Advent, today's Gospel can inspire us to feel God's presence in our lives and respond when we are called in new, challenging directions. Though the Gospel is powerful, we should be mindful that it could be difficult for women who are struggling with conception, miscarriage or other difficulties related to childbearing, fertility and loss.

The Gospel reading is a unique story from Luke that describes Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth. The encounter, known as the Visitation, has been

depicted in religious art, and it typically portrays Mary and Elizabeth in conversation, sometimes visibly pregnant, cradling their bellies or embracing one another. The artistic renditions frequently highlight the excitement, surprise and joy of the women, as each is unexpectedly expecting a child.

The scene in the Gospel is powerful for several reasons. Both of these conceptions are divinely ordained and fulfilled. Earlier in the Gospel, Luke states that Elizabeth had not been able to have children, and he stresses that

she is older, suggesting she is beyond childbearing age. Yet the angel Gabriel appears to her husband, Zechariah, and announces that she will bear a son named John. Elizabeth does conceive and stays in seclusion for five months. Luke does not state the reason for her isolation. Perhaps it is for her protection and to avoid revealing to others that she is pregnant, precautions that could suggest an insecurity over whether the baby would come to term.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary, who is a virgin, is vis-

ited by Gabriel, who announces that she will conceive and bear a son named Jesus. Mary is also informed of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Despite biological circumstances that make pregnancy unlikely if not impossible, both women become pregnant by divine proclamation and action. In today's Gospel, the cousins meet and celebrate their divine favor and their sons.

The narrative gives us a biblical example of God's active involvement with humanity. God changes the lives of these women and their families, and God also calls on them to embrace their pregnancies, which will ultimately affect all the world.

Mary's acceptance of her calling is notable and admirable, especially as a young, engaged woman. Despite the shocking change in her life, Mary's response of "Here I am...may it be done to me according to your word," shows her open acceptance of her calling.

Elizabeth's reaction to her pregnancy is relatable for many women

and reveals some of the implicit pains associated with today's reading. When Elizabeth conceives, she responds by saying, "So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others." Many women, past and present, feel ashamed and inadequate for not bearing children. In antiquity (and for some even today), challenges with fertility and conception are viewed as women's faults and problems. Women were considered "forgotten" by God if they could not conceive, and miraculous conceptions are framed as God "remembering" women.

Many women hope to celebrate their pregnancies as Mary and Elizabeth do in today's Gospel, and some never will have that opportunity. We must be conscious of how this passage can at once inspire and enrich our spiritual lives but can also trigger diverse reactions and emotions. Rather than focusing on how others, especially men, will evaluate their

*'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'*  
(Lk 1:42)

### *Praying With Scripture*

How can you support women experiencing challenges related to conception and pregnancy?

Do you maintain faith even during difficult times?

How and where do you experience God's presence in your life?

unexpected pregnancies, Mary and Elizabeth offer each other support. Today we face many challenges and debates centered on women and their bodies. The Gospel reminds us to listen to women and hear their complex experiences, showing care and empathy above all else.

## Human Family

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH (C), DEC. 26, 2021

READINGS: SIR 3:2-14 OR 1 SM 1:20-28; PS 128 OR 84; COL 3:12-17 OR 1 JN 3:1-24; LK 2:41-52

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family. The multiple Lectionary reading options highlight different aspects of conception, parenting, marriage and family. The readings from 1 Samuel, Psalm 84, and 1 John are recommended.

The first reading from 1 Samuel builds on last Sunday's Gospel focused on Elizabeth and Mary. Like Elizabeth, Hannah had difficulty conceiving a child. Hannah and her husband, Elkanah, pray for a child, and Hannah

agrees that if she conceives a son, she will offer him for service in the sanctuary. Hannah's prayer is answered, as she conceived and bore Samuel, who will become a prophet. Hannah proclaims: "I prayed for this child, and the Lord granted my request." The Hannah-Elkanah story is echoed in the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Similarly, recall that Mary's Magnificat, which occurs in Luke after the Visitation, also echoes Hannah's song.

The second reading from 1 John

builds on the first reading by emphasizing the power of prayer and the interrelationship among all humans. This emphasis is more fitting for the feast of the Holy Family than the potentially damaging Col 3:12-17. In 1 John, we have an image of God as a loving father. Multiple times, we are reminded that we are all children of God. By extension, we are all united as a human family, created by a God who loves, listens and answers prayers. This reading shows the range of what

it means to be family, pushing us to look beyond mere biological connection to see ourselves in relationship with all people.

The Gospel reading is another uniquely Lukan story. This narrative focuses on Jesus as a preteen traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Although he goes with his parents, he finds himself studying and learning from teachers in the Temple. He learns from them, and they are impressed with his understanding. While Mary and Joseph worry when they are unable to locate Jesus, the Holy Family eventually reunites. The end of the story says that Jesus was obedient to them and continued to increase in wisdom and divine and human favor.

Jesus' interaction with his parents, his Father in heaven and his

community show the range of familial connections that Jesus had in his life. Jesus learns and grows with his parents and with his teachers at the temple. While the Gospels record accounts of Jesus not being accepted by his family and hometown, Luke's account today offers a tradition of Jesus thriving in his community at a young age.

The Gospel reading reminds us that we should cultivate relationships within and outside of our biological family and seek opportunities for growth through our relationships. We are reminded to interact with people beyond our household, as different experiences and perspectives can enrich our lives and increase our wisdom. The end of the reading notes that Jesus increased in wisdom and human

*After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers. (Lk 2:24)*

### *Praying With Scripture*

Whom do you consider family?

Do you recognize the power and importance of prayer?

How do you support others in their growth and development?

and divine favor as he grew, and this growth is supported by his immediate family and larger community.

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

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# A Newly Abundant Christmas

## *Fewer gifts can mean a more precious time*

By Tsh Oxenreider



Creating a plan and budget for buying Christmas presents is something families do every year. We want to emphasize “the reason for the season” and avoid going overboard with gifts, while not appearing stingy or curmudgeonly. But this is no ordinary holiday season.

While I was growing up in the '80s and '90s, my parents would spend a few afternoons and evenings in December finding gifts at local stores. If it wasn't stocked in our general vicinity, it wasn't meant to be under our tree. Now we buy almost anything from almost anywhere at almost any time, and we have all but forgotten how to live without this luxury. If we are out of laundry detergent, we can use our phone to get a doorstep delivery within hours, so of course we can order a new toy manufactured across the world and have it wrapped and under the tree by Christmas Eve.

This year the supply chain crisis, illustrated by shipping containers piling up at our seaports, has led to understocked stores and unpredictable delivery times for gifts ordered online. So we are being told to order early and then order some more, before our neighbors toss everything into their own digital shopping carts. But what if instead we recognized how little “just right” gifts actually matter?

This idea is not new, of course. Storytellers from Dickens to Alcott to Dr. Seuss remind us that Christmas is

not about presents; it is about people and family and home and Jesus. We might do well this year to try living as if this is true.

What could this look like? First, we can limit our shopping to stores within a five-mile radius of our homes. We can restrain ourselves to what we can pick up with our actual hands and place in a real-life cart. Not only can we better support our local shopkeepers; we can also temper our own desires by drawing a literal boundary around our options.

We can also prioritize events as gifts over tangible items. When you reminisce about childhood holidays, do you remember everything you unwrapped? Probably not—but you may better remember what you did with family and friends. You may remember going to a concert or a midnight Christmas Eve service, gathering with your family and sitting at the “kids' table” with your cousins, baking cookies with your friend or boarding a plane. In the same way, tickets to a concert or play may not be as much fun to unwrap as bulky gifts are, but they are often more fun to use.

We can also go the homemade gift route, as hackneyed as it may feel. My teenage daughter bakes and wraps a batch of cookies for her father every Christmas, Father's Day and on his birthday, and he never tires of it. He knows they are coming, yet he cannot wait to see what she has concocted

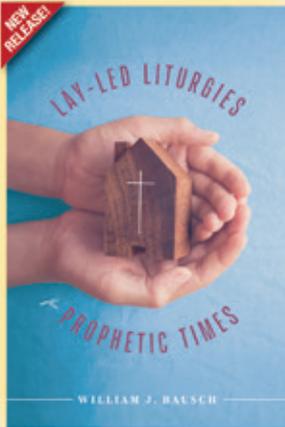
each time. Knitted hats, hand-carved bowls, a well-framed photograph of a beloved place—there are ideas ad infinitum; and none of them are trite, no matter what the stores say.

Finally, there is the obvious solution we might be forced into anyway: Buy less. Perhaps this is the Christmas when we finally say “enough” earlier than we usually do and discover that this won't ruin the holiday. In fact, we may create an abundance of another kind, in which we open gifts more slowly, take more time with that group puzzle or start a new tradition of a long neighborhood walk on Christmas Day.

The encyclical “Laudato Si” invites us to “return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things...and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack” (No. 222). This year's supply-chain slowdown might be the invitation we didn't know we needed to live with more intention. May this holiday season be more about the simplicity of small things, and may we carry that gift with us into the Christmases to come.

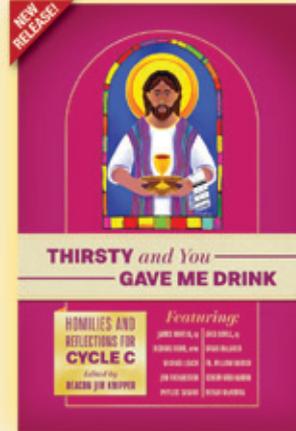
*Tsh Oxenreider is a podcaster, travel guide and the author of several books, including Shadow & Light, a guide for the Advent season, and At Home in the World. She lives in Georgetown, Tex.*

# INTRODUCING



Roman Catholics are a communal people. We gather for worship because we are more than the sum total of our individual selves. When public worship was curtailed due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, Mass via TV proved helpful, but as an isolating activity it ultimately undermines the Catholic genius of the Communion of Saints and corporate witness. Nothing can replace common worship in church, but we do what we can, when necessary, with inspiration. The awareness of our need to include those traditionally excluded has provided another rich resource for legitimizing the gifts of the laity in many

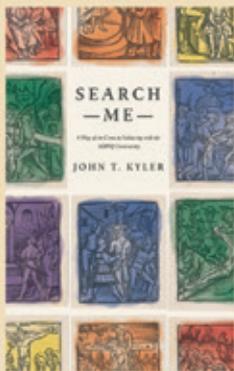
areas of the Church, including conducting public worship. In the end, when all pandemics are over, a more prophetic Church of shared and collaborative ministry may emerge. This latest book by Fr. Bill Bausch of lay-led liturgies foresees that day. | \$17.00



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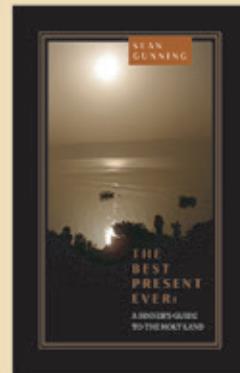
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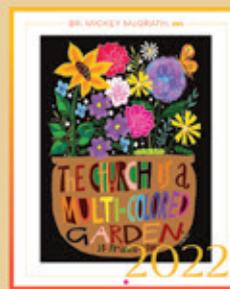


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