

# America

MAY 2022

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE



## OUR LADY OF MANHATTAN

**Praying the Rosary  
While Circling the  
Big Apple on a Bike**



**Matt Malone**

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**Are We Praying  
the Our Father  
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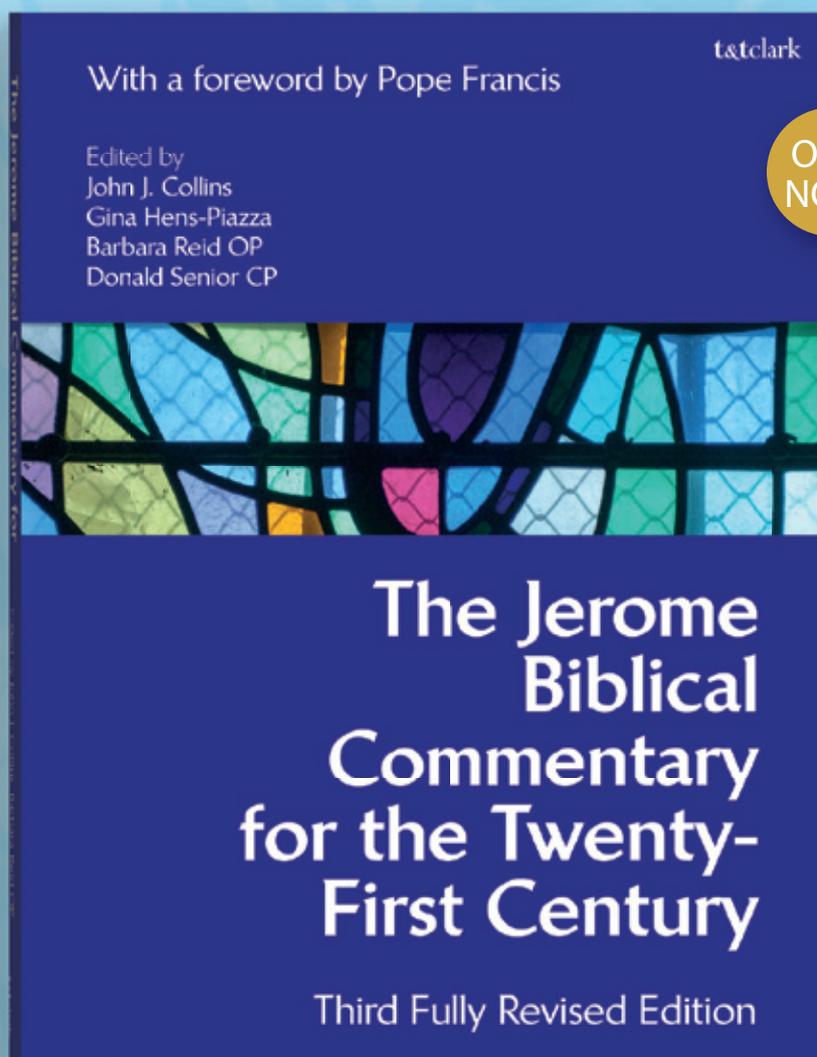
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## In Memoriam

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Drew Christiansen, S.J.  
*February 20, 1945–April 6, 2022*  
*13th Editor in Chief, 2005-2012*



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CNS photo/Paul Haring

Pope Francis departs by catamaran for Gozo from the Grand Harbor in Valletta, Malta, on April 2.  
Cover: iStock/America

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## #OwnYourFaith: Why women can lead the church

In March, America Media rolled out its first-ever brand campaign, and it was organized around a theme: #OwnYourFaith. The campaign highlights America's tradition of engaging in dialogue about topics that are not often discussed elsewhere in the church. To this end, Colleen Dulle, an associate editor of America, wrote about the future of women in the church in light of a new constitution for the Roman Curia. When it goes into effect in June, it will allow lay men and women to head Vatican dicasteries ("There Are Female Presidents and C.E.O.s. Why Are We Still Asking If Women Can Lead in the Church?" 3/28/22). Here is what readers had to say:

After reading your article, I said a prayer of thanks for you and for the Jesuits who have cleared a space for you and, thus, for women who do not in fact prefer to shout, for women who grieve the closed doors and closed ears which make some shouting necessary. Praise God for this day and your audible voice.

**J. Jones**

In an institution where the Blessed Mother is referred to by many as co-redemptrix, who has appeared to thousands for their spiritual benefit and consolation, whose intercession and promises are so greatly and often sought after—women are still considered lesser than men? The whole “separate but equal” argument is outdated and flawed. What would have become of the church without women's support of every kind?

**Juanita Menchaca**

Your last paragraph is optimistic, and possible. I doubt it is realistic. Nothing, and I mean nothing, moves fast in the organization known as the Catholic Church. Two thousand-plus years support my observation. However, here's hoping I'm totally wrong in my observation. Always remember: When the guys ran away, denied and hid during the crucifixion, the women were steadfast.

**Stephen Healy**

I am an older woman who is running out of time and patience while waiting for news of significant inclusion in the Catholic Church. Those in “positions of power” are denying a richness of thought, governance, competency, wisdom and both scientific and moral theology that women have to offer.

**Mary O'Neil**

The church needs confident and orthodox women in positions of real church leadership. Absolutely. But I

think certain cohorts of the laity will only feel frustration and anger if they continue to pursue the topic of women's ordination. The church needs to harness that healthy passion and energy and use it to address more pressing and real issues. And the church will be a much better institution because of their contributions.

**George Barnidge**

I am a life-long Catholic who loves my parish and my church. But as a senior citizen who faithfully attends Mass, I can honestly say I have never heard my experience preached about at Mass. The lack of feminine viewpoint is a loss to the entire church.

**Mary Strickland**

No laypeople of either sex are allowed to proclaim the Gospel at Mass. The “person of Christ” refers to being ordained first, then male second.

**Bruce Ryman**

When I attended Catholic schools in the 1950s and 60s, they were staffed by highly intelligent sisters who were teachers as well as administrators. Some of them were among the brightest people I have encountered in my life. However, they were not allowed to advance to positions of authority within the church. It had to be stifling for the best and the brightest of them to have their talents wasted in this manner.

Things have changed. In the 60s the feminist movement began to inform women that they were not second-class citizens, whose opportunities were limited. As a result, fewer women have found the church to be an attractive vocation.

**L. Kenney**



# A PILGRIMAGE TO ITALY... OFTEN OVER DRINKS

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## President Biden Must Help Refugees From Ukraine and Afghanistan

On March 24, President Joe Biden announced that the United States would admit “up to 100,000 Ukrainians and others fleeing Russia’s aggression.” While that figure represents less than 2 percent of the Ukrainians who have fled their home country as of this writing, not to mention the many more who are internally displaced, it is a welcome beginning. Images of innocent men, women and children massacred by occupying Russian soldiers have shocked the conscience of the world. Even before the revelation of these latest atrocities, more than two-thirds of Americans surveyed favored accepting Ukrainian refugees.

But the key phrase in Mr. Biden’s announcement is “up to.” One hundred thousand is a ceiling, not a floor, and unfortunately, this administration does not seem to have the personnel or systems in place to make reaching even that cap a reality.

A look at the president’s track record on refugees to date does not inspire confidence. After securing the presidency, Mr. Biden promised to raise the refugee cap from President Trump’s historically low 15,000 to 125,000 for fiscal year 2021. But upon taking office, he initially kept the previous administration’s cap, raising it to only 62,500 in May 2021 under intense pressure from refugee advocates. The administration admitted that reaching that goal was unlikely, and indeed fewer than 12,000 refugees (18 percent of the target) were resettled that year. The cap for 2022 was set at the promised 125,000, but only 8,000 refugees have been admitted in the first half of the fiscal year.

The administration has blamed its failure to settle more refugees on

Mr. Trump, and it is true that under his administration, immigration budgets were cut, staff were laid off, positions were left unfilled and the vetting process for applicants was made more onerous. But these realities were known to the administration, and criticizing Mr. Trump’s decimation of the resettlement process is no substitute for formulating a plan and dedicating the resources to implement it.

The evacuation effort following the United States’ exit from Afghanistan provides lessons as the administration works to fulfill its promise to the Ukrainian people. That initial evacuation, though disastrously executed, at least got tens of thousands of Afghans, many of whom risked their lives by collaborating with the United States, out of harm’s way. In the weeks after the withdrawal, 75,000 Afghans resettled in the United States, most through the humanitarian parole process. But humanitarian parole is a temporary status and does not provide a pathway to permanent legal status or citizenship. Unless the White House and Congress pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would grant a more permanent legal status to parolees, thousands of Afghans will have to apply through normal asylum and immigration channels that already have over a million backlogged cases—or face deportation when their Temporary Protected Status ends.

Meanwhile, Afghan allies and their families who were unable to catch one of those final flights out of Kabul are now living in hiding under the Taliban regime or without legal status in other countries while they wait for their applications for humanitarian parole to be processed. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency has pro-

cessed fewer than 2,000 of the 43,000 applications it has received from Afghans since July; The New York Times reports that as of Feb. 11, 1,500 have been denied and 170 approved.

If this is the process faced by those who worked alongside U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, do we believe the United States is ready to admit tens of thousands of Ukrainians when it can still make a difference?

When the Refugee Resettlement Program started in 1980, 207,000 refugees were admitted. There is no practical reason that with current technology we cannot match or exceed that number.

What will it take to get there?

First, Congress should accept the Biden administration’s proposal to hire thousands of U.S.C.I.S. staff and overhaul its funding system, which primarily relies on fees from applicants. According to J.C. Hendrickson of the International Rescue Committee, security vetting is the major bottleneck in the process. There is no way to work through the millions of backlogged cases while maintaining the level of scrutiny each application receives other than by significantly increasing the number of people processing those applications.

Second, the administration should expedite the application process for Ukrainians. In a letter to Mr. Biden, several members of Congress have proposed immediately accepting Ukrainians with pending visa applications who have family in the United States, as well as pending applications under the Lautenberg program for religious minorities with a parent, sibling or child in the United States; eliminating the 120-day wait time for student visas; and allowing

Ukrainians to temporarily use the Electronic System for Travel Authorization, an automated vetting system that can give travel approval in just 72 hours.

These are quick fixes, and surely the administration is considering others. But to handle migration and refugee flows that are expected to rise sharply in the decades to come because of climate change, the United States must not only get its own house in order but support and lead global efforts to create an equitable system for refugee placement. Signing the U.N. Global Compact on Refugees would be a good place to start.

The Biden administration has been vocal and effective in its support for the Ukrainian fight against an unjust aggressor. The United States has allocated \$13.6 billion in military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine, and Mr. Biden announced in March another \$500 million in direct budgetary aid for Volodymyr Zelensky's government. There is no doubt that the White House and Congress care deeply about the plight of the Ukrainian people.

If the United States is not able to welcome as many Ukrainians as we set out to, Mr. Biden is not solely responsible for our failure. This country's long-broken immigration system all but guarantees a perpetual crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, which overwhelms the asylum system and saps the political will to admit other refugees. But the president has an opportunity in this crisis. The American people want to help Ukrainians threatened by Vladimir Putin's vicious war; they want to fulfill our obligations to Afghan men and women who stood up to the Taliban. There is bipartisan support in Congress and among governors for investing in resettlement efforts. But for that to happen, we cannot mistake good intentions for an actual plan, and cannot simply cheer an announcement and then move on.

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## The West has a responsibility to protect, and then rebuild, Ukraine

On March 3, Russian airstrikes leveled a small village near the Ukrainian-Russian border. Like the attack on Guernica in the Spanish Civil War, this was a terror attack, pure and simple, aimed to put fear into the hearts of the Ukrainian population. It was an act outlawed by international humanitarian law. Alas, the attack was just one of many strikes against civilian targets in Ukraine. As in Grozny, Chechnya, in the 1990s and in Aleppo, Syria, in 2016, the Russian strategy (actually the Putin strategy) has been to bomb people into submission.

Does the international doctrine known as the “responsibility to protect,” or R2P, apply as a remedy for this savagery? Yes, because Ukraine needs assistance in protecting its citizens. But R2P probably does not apply in the direct sense of armed military intervention to rescue those threatened civilians.

There are three phases to R2P: the *responsibility to prevent*, the *responsibility to react* or intervene to stop ongoing atrocities and the *responsibility to rebuild*. What the public commonly regards as R2P is only phase 2, taking the form of outside military assistance or intervention. But much more will be required to restore a victimized society when armed conflict has ended.

With respect to the *responsibility to react*, R2P requires the application of what international humanitarian law terms “precautionary principles” before resorting to the use of force. Like the principles of proportionality and prospect of success in the just war tradition from which they are drawn, the precautionary principles weigh against intervention when military engagement has a good chance of increasing the harm brought about by the con-

flict. This is the kind of consideration NATO and the United States have undertaken in declining to enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine, judging that the risk of widening the war and possibly escalating it to a nuclear conflict does not justify military intervention.

The world community has nonetheless intervened in a variety of ways in Ukraine through economic, financial and diplomatic sanctions. In addition, the international community is demanding judicial accountability. Thirty-nine countries have requested the International Criminal Court to undertake investigations, and the I.C.C. prosecutor has begun building the case against Russian atrocities.

But even after such atrocities against civilians, the *responsibility to prevent* harm may still hold opportunities for involvement—for example, through support for refugees by securing humanitarian corridors and safe zones. Both Western governments and international agencies will also have roles to play in integrating refugees into host societies. And facilitating their return to Ukraine when the conflict has ended will be part of the last phase of R2P, the *responsibility to rebuild*, consisting of recovery, reconstruction and reconciliation.

R2P is just one of the innovations in the last 40 years to constrain the damage done by war and to protect civilians in wartime. While war has not been effectively outlawed, as Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro have shown in their book *The Internationalists*, much has been done under international law to limit the sorts of damage done by war and to protect civilians and other noncombatants. These measures include the landmines treaty, the cluster munitions ban

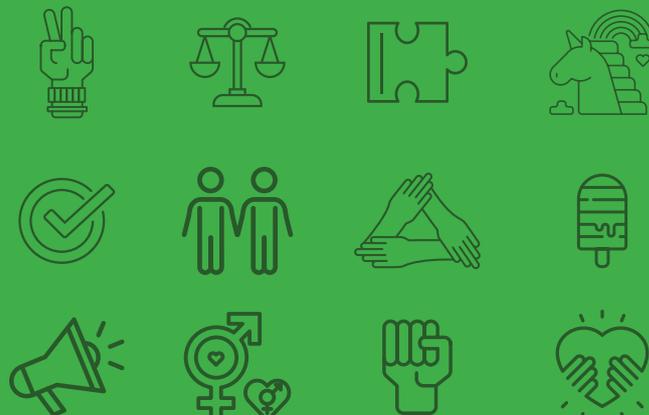
(which Russia is reported to have violated in Ukraine, but which neither Russia nor Ukraine has signed) and the Treaty on the Small Arms Trade.

Nonetheless, the civilian toll in war remains very high, and more than 95 percent of casualties in recent conflicts around the globe are civilians. And the Russian way of war under Vladimir Putin in Chechnya and Syria and now in Ukraine, ignores the constraints mentioned above. What remains is judicial accountability in the I.C.C., in the International Court of Justice and under the doctrine of universal jurisdiction through national court systems, remedies that emerged mostly in the last three decades.

Finally, R2P is a doctrine for exceptional situations, when states and the international system either fail or positively violate their primary responsibility to protect and uphold the rights of citizens. Ordinarily, under the U.N. charter, Ukraine should be an issue of peace enforcement. But the Russian veto in the Security Council precludes such a response. It has been clear from General Assembly debate that the Russian aggression has revived the commitment among the majority of member states to the U.N. Charter and the values that undergird it. While that solidarity remains, steps must be taken for U.N. reform to curb Russia’s Security Council veto, and, failing that, to significantly increase the organization’s peacekeeping capacity.

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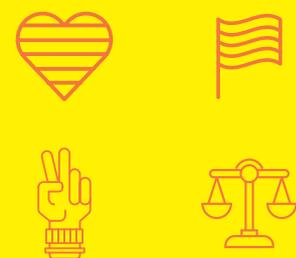
Drew Christiansen, S.J., who served as the 13th editor in chief of *America* magazine from 2005 to 2012, died on April 6. This is an edited version of his last essay for the magazine, published online on March 8.



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# Pope Francis draws on Vatican II to radically change how the church is governed

By Colleen Dulle

Pope Francis' long-awaited reform of the Roman Curia takes a head-on approach to the crises facing the church, using the Second Vatican Council as a road map for reclaiming the church's credibility.

One could argue Francis was elected to carry out this reform, given that it was a main subject of the cardinals' pre-election conversations in 2013. It is only the fifth such effort to remake the Curia in the last 500 years. The last three followed Vatican II, with efforts by St. Paul VI in 1967 and St. John Paul II in 1988 preceding Pope Francis' reform. Since then, the church has lost credibility and hemorrhaged members in wealthy Western nations, where its hold was once strongest and where it is now experiencing a severe shortage of priests, leaving some Catholics without access to the sacraments for up to a year at a time.

These grim statistics are nothing new. During John Paul II's papacy, from 1978 to 2005, the Catholic Church experienced a 40 percent increase in population, but the total number of priests worldwide decreased slightly. Despite well-funded efforts to promote vocations, the world's population of seminarians has continued to decline, and the average age of priests has continued to rise.

While Benedict XVI's response, particularly to the abuse crisis, was oriented toward purifying the church through an emphasis on doctrine, Pope Francis' reform has shifted the church's focus significantly. The new constitution for the Roman Curia, "Praedicate Evangelium" ("Preach the Gospel"), which was finally released on March 19 after nine years of work, recognizes that in the face of the crises of abuse, vocations and credibility, the way forward is not a "smaller but purer" church but rather a broad evangelization, for which Vatican II provides the road map.

The new constitution officially recognizes the evangelization office—the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples—as the top office in the Vatican, displacing the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The latter, founded in 1542 as the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, has long had the nickname of "La Suprema."

As the world's priests are stretched thinner, laypeople—in particular, laywomen—have stepped up to fill the gaps. Since Vatican II, a robust movement of lay catechists has helped form the laity in Latin America; in some areas, laypeople, including deacons and religious sisters, regular-

ly lead Communion services (a service without the consecration of the Eucharist) if the people do not have regular access to priests. Laywomen are increasingly being appointed to roles formerly held by priests, working as parish administrators and chancellors of dioceses and even being named to high-ranking Vatican positions.

Pope Francis has taken further steps toward recognizing the vital role women already play in church communities, opening the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte—formerly reserved to men pursuing priesthood—to laywomen and creating the new official lay ministry of catechist, both last year.

With his new constitution for the Roman Curia, Pope Francis has further ensured that the church in the third millennium will increasingly be led by laypeople. The constitution specifically states that the Curia reform “must foresee the involvement of lay men and women, also in roles of governance and responsibility” (Sec. 1, Art. 10) and says “any member of the faithful may preside over a Department or Body, given their particular competence, power and governance or function” (Sec. 2, Art. 5).

The Curial constitution emphasizes that it is not enough for a layperson to be well qualified for a post: He or she should be “distinguished by their spiritual life, good pastoral experience, sobriety of life and love of the poor, a spirit of communion and service, competence in the matters entrusted to them, and ability to discern the signs of the times” (Sec. 2, Art. 7). The document also stresses that priests should get out of their offices and participate in pastoral activities whenever possible (Sec. 3, Art. 6).

The constitution also emphasizes synodality—the model of church leadership Pope Francis advocates that envisions greater collaboration between bishops and laypeople. It says that the communion to which the church is called “gives the church the face of synodality; a Church, that is, of mutual listening ‘in which each has something to learn. The faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: each listening to the others, and all listening to the Holy Spirit’” (Sec. 1, Art. 4).

Its emphasis on lay leadership is best understood in the context of Vatican II, which recognized laypeople—as the vast majority of the “people of God”—as the church’s

most powerful resource for evangelization, witnessing to the faith in their daily lives.

Implementing Vatican II has been a primary goal of Francis’ pontificate. This constitution makes clear that the goals of Vatican II are the Curia’s goals, and Pope Francis frames the document as being in continuity with the post-Vatican II constitutions that preceded it (Sec. 1, Art. 3), but with an eye to the contemporary challenges facing the church.

In addition to the missionary role of the laity (Sec. 5, Art. 59), the new constitution makes use of the language of Vatican II squarely in the mission descriptions of several important Vatican offices. For example, the constitution takes a cue from Vatican II’s call for religious orders to grow “according to the spirit of the founders” (“Lumen Gentium,” No. 45). That call proved transformative for orders who realized that their current work had grown distant from their founder’s original intent and sparked discernment on how they are called to carry out that mission today.

The new Curial constitution makes clear that the Dicastery (formerly Congregation) for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life should ensure that religious orders “progress in the following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel, according to the proper charism born of the founder’s spirit and sound traditions” in order to contribute to the church’s evangelizing mission in the world (Sec. 5, Art. 123).

More strikingly, the constitution’s section on the Dicastery (formerly Congregation) for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments opens with a telling mission statement: “The Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments promotes the sacred liturgy according to the renewal undertaken by the Second Vatican Council” (Sec. 5, Art. 88).

In a nod to Vatican II’s emphasis on “full and active participation” and its goal of making the Mass more understandable across cultures, the constitution says that the dicastery should assist bishops’ conferences “in promoting, by effective and appropriate means, pastoral liturgical action, especially with regard to the celebration of the Eucharist and other liturgical sacraments and acts, so that the faithful may participate more actively in them.”

Interestingly, the constitution includes no reference to winning converts or to Catholicism as the one true religion, favoring instead the council’s language of the “mystical body of Christ” and tasking the office for interreligious dialogue with “promot[ing] among all people a true search for

God” (Sec. 5, Art. 149). This vision of evangelization, rather than proselytism, is vintage Francis. As he wrote in the programmatic document for his papacy, “Evangelii Gaudium” (“The Joy of the Gospel”), “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’” (No. 14).

That model of evangelization is possible only in a church that is attractive—that is, credible. This Curia reform both codifies Francis’ other reforms and takes direct aim at the crises that have hurt the church’s credibility. For example, it makes the Pontifical Council for the Protection

of Minors a standing part of the church’s discipline office (Sec. 5, Art. 78) and cements past financial reforms, oversight bodies and legal structures. And by making church leadership more cooperative between bishops and laypeople, especially laywomen, it may make the church more attractive to those disillusioned by the church’s lack of gender equality.

Colleen Dulle, *associate editor, co-hosts the “Inside the Vatican” podcast. Twitter: @ColleenDulle.*

## SEAMLESS GARMENT CATHOLICS FACE TOUGH CHOICES IN THE VOTING BOOTH

In the struggle between faith and party politics, says Geoffrey Layman, chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, “American two-party politics is winning. In some ways, partisanship becomes a religion unto itself.”

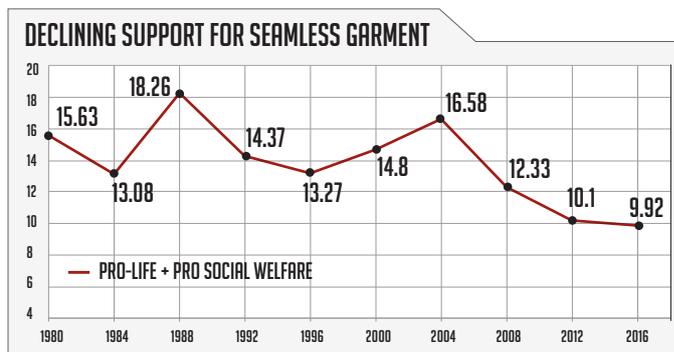
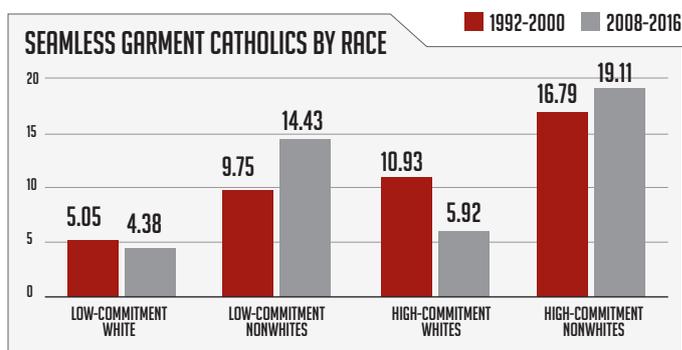
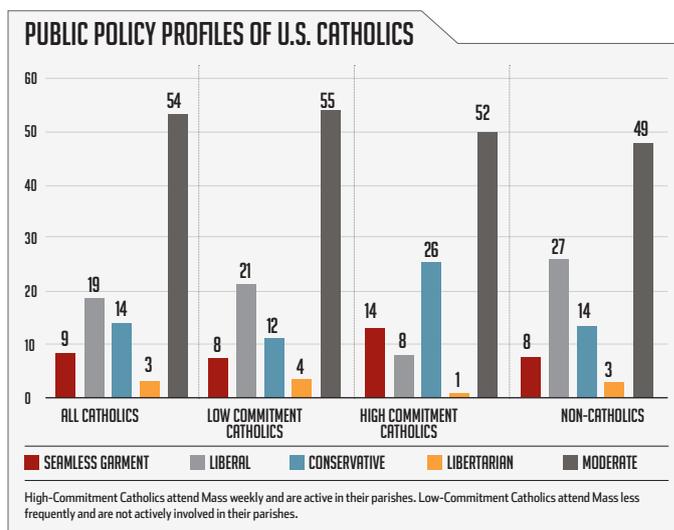
That is one of the insights gleaned from “Coping With Cross-Pressures: The Seamless Garment in Catholic Political Behavior,” a report from the University of Notre Dame focusing on the unique pressures and behaviors of “seamless garment” Catholics in making electoral decisions. The report describes “seamless garment Catholics” (which it abbreviates as S.G.C.s) as those who support the church’s spectrum of sociopolitical beliefs—people both pro-life and pro social justice, opposing abortion and supporting strong social welfare, immigration rights and environmental protections.

America’s two-party system leaves S.G.C.s in a bind, as neither party and neither ideology fully represents their beliefs. Fewer than 10 percent of U.S. Catholics qualified as S.G.C.s based on their self-reported beliefs in 2016, down from 18 percent in 1988.

Seamless garment beliefs are most prevalent among religiously committed, young, low-income Latino Catholics. They are the most likely to be socially liberal on issues of environment, immigration and social welfare, according to the report, while still supporting church teaching on abortion.

The research describes S.G.C.s as being “cross-pressured” by their Catholic identity; that is, they are subject to unique and conflicting pressures in making electoral choices because the teachings of the church encourage both Republican and Democratic positions. To cope with these cross-pressures, many S.G.C.s may avoid voting altogether or vote for a third party candidate.

Sarah Vincent, *O’Hare Media fellow. Twitter: @sgvincent7.*



# Can synodality stamp out clericalism?

*A Brazilian bishop hopes so*

The church needs to overcome clericalism once and for all in order to promote unity and synodality effectively, says Bishop Pedro Carlos Cipollini of Brazil. Bishop Cipollini leads the Diocese of Santo André, a territory that includes 2.8 million people and 106 parishes in the metropolitan area of São Paulo.

Bishop Cipollini recently published the book *Synodality: Everyone's Task* (*Sinodalidade: Tarefa de Todos*). In an exclusive interview with **America** over Zoom in December, he considered Pope Francis' proposal for synodality and challenges to its success.

"It is clericalism that prevents the church today from being missionary," Bishop Cipollini said. "I have great hope that the synod on synodality can make clericalism collapse.... If this synod doesn't overcome that difficulty, I don't know when we will have another opportunity."

"Clericalism infantilizes the laity," he said, describing it as "the first hindrance to synodality."

"Clericalist clergy may consult everyone," Bishop Cipollini said, "but they end up saying that the people don't know what they are talking about, as the Pharisees said in the Bible, as if the people were a mass of ignorants."

The Catholic Church has embarked on a three-year synodal process, inaugurated by Pope Francis in October 2021, that has been described as the largest consultation ever held in church history.

In his book, Bishop Cipollini argues that laypeople should take a more prominent role in the church. He writes: "Baptismal dignity is the foundation of the theology of the laity and also of a synodal church. Without resolving this question, there is no synodality. We need a pedagogy, a methodology of ecclesial participation."

He pointed out that Brazil, the country with the largest Catholic population in the world, has seen Catholics as a share of the total population fall toward 50 percent. In the 1980s the number had been as high as 80 percent. "We surveyed our region recently and we found out that 46 percent of the people identify as Catholic. I believe the next one will show 41 percent," the bishop said.

"Laypeople no longer accept a clericalist and authoritarian church. They don't fight anymore; they simply go out the back door," he said. "They leave."



Bishop Cipollini prays with the faithful during a "missionary pastoral visit" to São Caetano do Sul in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, in September 2016.

Photo courtesy: Diocese of Santo André

He argues that the antidote to this tendency is to embrace synodality radically, forming clergy "for service, not for the exercise of power in the way of the world" and understanding the church as a body that needs to hear all members to keep moving. "Synodality is the church's 'way of being,'" he told **America**. "Vatican II speaks of the church as a sacrament—or mystical body of Christ—but also as people of God. These two concepts need to be understood together."

Bishop Cipollini believes that the Latin American church, with its various and historic regional conferences, has made great progress in the understanding of the *sensus fidei*. According to the Second Vatican Council, all baptized participate in Christ's ministry through the gift of faith.

"We see in our communities laypeople who can't read, but they are wise people because the sense of faith is linked to the gift of faith, which the Holy Spirit gives, more than to books," Bishop Cipollini said.

Synodality, he said, allows the *sensus fidei* to find its full expression. In practice, this means that much of the church's decision-making can be decentralized. But synodality is not just about debating issues and reaching a majority vote. He recalled that Pope Francis insists that "the synod is not a parliament."

The synodal process is, in fact, a journey of authentic and selfless dialogue, Bishop Cipollini said. "It is about speaking the truth but also about searching for the truth together. The synod is a spiritual process."

Filipe Domingues lives in Rome and writes about Latin America. Twitter: @filipedomingues.

## Canada's Catholic bishops face new challenges in a rapidly changing church



With the Canadian church barely maintaining its numbers thanks to immigration, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops will be forced to adapt or even reinvent itself, observers say, in a rapidly changing religious context in Canada.

“The church is being shaken up in all sorts of ways, whether by [its past implication in] residential schools or [in child sexual abuse],” said the Rev. Gilles Routhier, a professor at Laval University’s Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies.

“And I think time is running out to deal with this situation,” he added, “considering the loss of credibility and a distancing [of the faithful] from the church.”

Last spring, the unmarked graves of hundreds of unidentified Indigenous children were discovered in Western Canada, deeply shaking the Canadian public. The discoveries revived the scandal of government-funded residential schools, most of which were run by Catholic religious orders, dioceses and other Christian churches.

In September, Canada’s bishops pledged \$30 million to initiatives aimed at reconciliation. A delegation of Canadian bishops and Indigenous leaders met with Pope Francis in Rome in March. During the visit the pope formally apologized for the treatment of Indigenous peoples in church-run residential schools.

“For the deplorable conduct of those members of the Catholic Church, I ask for God’s forgiveness,” Pope Fran-

cis told the delegation, “and I want to say to you with all my heart: I am very sorry. And I join my brothers, the Canadian bishops, in asking your pardon.”

Bishop Raymond Poisson of the Diocese of Saint-Jérôme and Mont-Laurier, the new president of the conference, responded to critics who deemed the church’s outreach to Canada’s First Nations “too little too late.”

“We have done listening circles; the bishops have gathered people in their dioceses. We have set up our ‘Our Lady of Guadalupe group’; we have prepared our delegations with our Indigenous brothers and sisters,” he said. “I think this is already very concrete.”

Canada’s bishops must also bridge fault lines between the country’s French-speaking and English-speaking Catholics. “The French-speaking bishops see things differently than the English-speaking bishops,” said Bishop Pierre-Oliver Tremblay, auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Trois-Rivières.

He sees this as both a blessing and a challenge. “In Quebec, we are faced with a very secularized society, while in Western Canada, the religious dimension is still very much present. The church in Quebec cannot entrench itself in traditional positions; it is much more engaged with today’s world.”

The decline of Catholicism in Quebec has become evident in a number of ways, from its aging clergy to a lack of financial resources, the selling of churches and Quebec’s diminishing influence over the broader church. In En-



Representatives of the Assembly of First Nations walk outside St. Peter's Square after performing there on March 31.



Ukrainian refugees wait for a transport at the central train station in Warsaw, Poland, on March 27.

## GOODNEWS: A Chicago Catholic school welcomes student refugees from Ukraine

The St. Nicholas Cathedral School, located in Chicago's Ukrainian Village neighborhood, has welcomed eight students who have left Ukraine since the Russian invasion of their country began on Feb. 24. School administrators say they are ready this year to accommodate about 50 more students.

Students, faculty and staff have made a concerted effort to show support for Ukrainians resisting the invasion since the fighting began. The younger students are celebrating their Ukrainian heritage, while the middle school students are engaged in conversations about war and peace, said Anna Cirilli, the school's principal.

Many of the students have family and friends living in Ukraine and are dealing with the fact that their loved ones have been displaced by violence. The school has brought in a crisis counselor to help students work through their feelings, and each day a prayer for peace is read over the loudspeaker.

To help the new students, the school launched a fundraising and donation campaign, asking the local community for clothing, school supplies and gift cards. Financial donations were being collected to help cover tuition costs.

Sophiya Kovalchuk arrived in the United States from Ukraine four years ago. Today she is an eighth-grader at St. Nick's, and she told the news website Block Club Chicago that she sympathizes with the challenges facing the new students.

"We are organizing all the things for them...because I know it's really stressful coming into a new country," she said. "You don't know the language, and you don't know where to go."

Ms. Cirilli said the parents of the school's Ukrainian-American students speak honestly to their children about the history of Ukraine and its challenges, so she is confident the students will continue to process the news with poise.

"They understand what we have to be thankful for," she said.

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

English-speaking provinces Catholicism appears to maintain a more vibrant persona, with multicultural Catholic communities increasingly determining the face of Catholicism nationwide.

"Catholicism—which was a French-speaking reality—is moving westward, particularly to Toronto and its suburbs," said Professor Martin Meunier of the University of Ottawa's School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies. One of the reasons for this dynamic, he said, is immigration. Newcomers, many of whom are Catholics, are settling more in the English-speaking provinces.

With this transition, "many think that the Canadian Church is becoming more conservative, that it's influenced by American Catholicism and by Toronto," the sociologist said.

Can the synodal process help the C.C.C.B. finally overcome years of friction on the array of complex challenges it faces? Bishop Poisson thinks so. "My deepest desire, in the course of this year, with our initiatives with our Indigenous brothers and sisters, is that we can turn the page," he said, "not to forget, but to write a new one about [the church] we want to be together."

Miriane Demers-Lemay reports for *Présence*, an independent news service covering religion and society based in Quebec, Canada. Twitter: @MirianeDL.

# INSIDE AMERICA

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A heartfelt thank you to everyone who supported **America's** 113th Anniversary Giving Day by making a gift on April 6. Through the generosity of many loyal readers and friends, we raised **\$132,638 from 939 donors in 47 states and 20 countries!** Not only did we exceed our goal, it was a fitting tribute to Drew Christiansen, S.J., 13th editor in chief, who passed away on our Anniversary Giving Day, and to Father Malone's late mother, Janet Malone, who would have celebrated her 83rd birthday on that day.

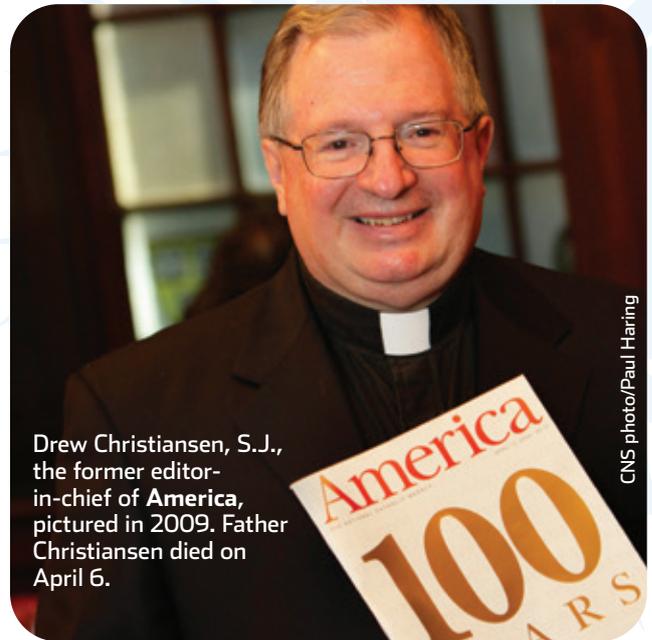
Support on our anniversary helped secure our future for generations to come, allowing us to continue our transformation into a multi-platform ministry that reaches millions each month through our magazine, daily newsletter, podcasts and videos. **America** provides a forum for bold and honest journalism in the pursuit of truth, producing the intellectual and spiritual resources that you have come to rely on.

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Drew Christiansen, S.J., the former editor-in-chief of **America**, pictured in 2009. Father Christiansen died on April 6.

CNS photo/Paul Haring



Father Malone's late mother, Janet Malone

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**Heather Trotta,**  
V.P. Advancement

With over 15 years of experience in development and fundraising, Heather is an integral part of the America Media team. A native of Southern California, she attended Syracuse University and earned a bachelor's degree in public relations. Heather started her career at a large public relations agency in its health care department. She then spent six years as the development director at Cristo Rey New York High School. After starting her family, she took some time off before joining **America** in 2017 to help with

HEATHER TROTTA



fundraising. Since then she has held various roles and was recently promoted from advancement strategist to vice president of advancement. In addition, Heather volunteers with local nonprofits and her children's school. She resides in Bedford, N.Y., with her husband and two sons.



## JOIN THE DIGITAL CONVERSATION

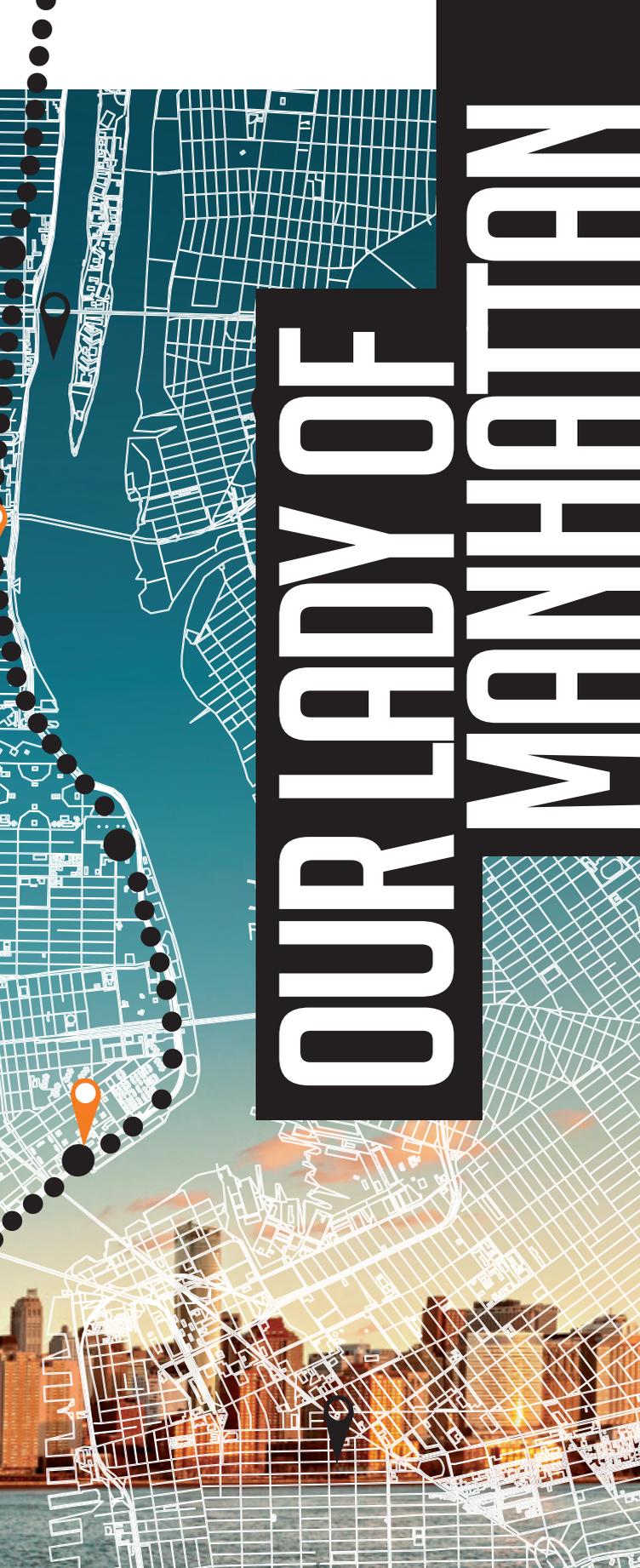


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# *What I learned praying the rosary while biking around New York City*

By Matt Malone

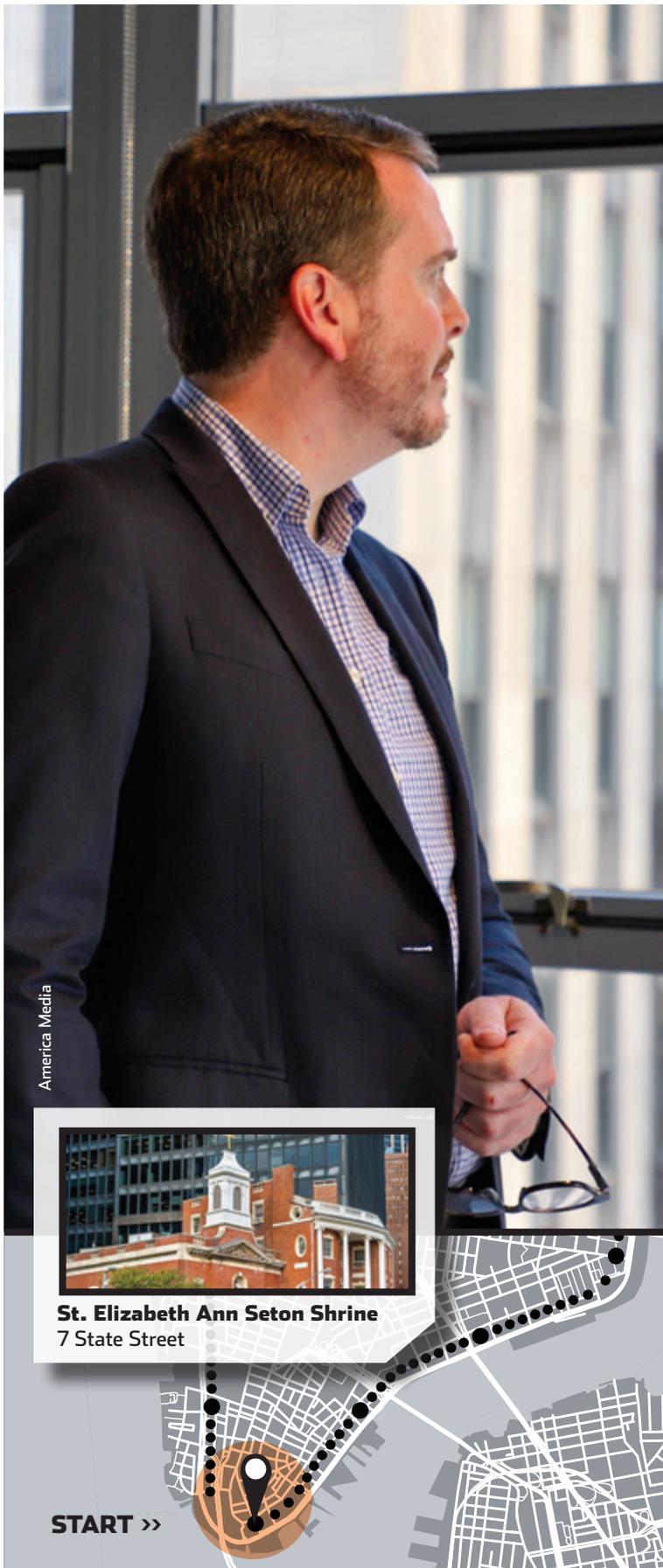


“Nothing puzzles me more than time and space,” the English essayist Charles Lamb wrote, “and yet nothing troubles me less, as I never think about them.” That’s true as far as it goes—until circumstances beyond our control force us to think about them.

We just lived through something like that. Like you, I spent the better part of the last two years trapped in the brutalist architecture of quarantine. My room in Midtown Manhattan suddenly felt a lot smaller and heavier, even oppressive. And like many of you, I resolved to try to do things that would make my world feel a bit bigger, to extend the borders that the pandemic had imposed on me.

I started by walking, by visiting places in Manhattan I had never been to before or that I had never thought to go to before or that I had gone to or passed through but had never really noticed before. And I took my rosary with me. Many years before, while living for a brief time in the interior of Guyana, South America, I had learned to pray and walk at the same time. If I

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## Walking and praying in this way, in time, I began to see how time and space are truly “charged with the grandeur of God,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., put it.

hadn't done that, I wouldn't have been able to pray at all, because every time I sat down to pray there, the heat and labor of the day would catch up with me and send me snoozing. Praying the rosary while I walked had the effect of providing a structure and rhythm to my prayer while moving.

But it had another, surprisingly grace-filled effect. For one thing, I had to pray with my eyes open—obviously. That meant that everything I encountered became a part of my prayer rather than a distraction from it. Walking and praying in this way, in time, I began to see how time and space are truly “charged with the grandeur of God,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., put it.

So nearly 20 years on from Guyana, I again adopted this habit of praying and walking. But soon, walking couldn't take me far enough to feel really free, to feel that I had been momentarily paroled from my Covid imprisonment. And that's where CitiBike came in, the bicycle ride-share program here in New York City. I discovered that with one of CitiBike's e-bikes, I could cover a vast distance in relatively little time and go places that are only accessible by bike or are just too far to hoof it to. (By the way, for that very reason—the greater distances we travel, as well as the greater frequency of our bicycle usage—e-bikers get just as much exercise from biking as conventional bikers, no matter what people say. Sorry if that sounds defensive; but I am, in fact, defensive.)

But where to go on my e-chariot of fire? I consulted the map, a real one, the kind printed on paper, which one can study intently without a battery or eyestrain. And then it happened. I noticed that



Praying for the people and places as one passes makes the experience of traveling through New York City by bike even more grace-filled and offers new perspective on familiar territory

by starting at the tip of lower Manhattan and then biking along the perimeter of the entire island in a counter-clockwise direction, encircling the borough and ending where I began, I would complete a pattern that looked almost exactly like the pattern of a rosary. So with my e-bike and rosary, I set out to do precisely that, to envelope Manhattan in a prayer, which I would offer *urbi et orbi*—for the city and the world—asking God, who is beyond time and space, to bless the here and now that is the capital of the world.

### **Time and Space**

Even casual readers of my column in **America** might have noticed that I have a preoccupation with notions of time and space: not the vast, infinite reaches above and beyond, but the vast, finite matrix of here and now. I suppose it stems from the countless hours I spent as a boy studying maps, noticing especially how historical events like war or industrialization or migration have radically changed our maps and the artificial boundaries that we impose on time and space. Yet I am fascinated by how we experience time and space for other reasons, too,

which have more to do with Jesus Christ than Gerardus Mercator.

Every Sunday at Mass we make the astonishing claim that Jesus Christ, the one “through whom all things were made...came down from heaven.” We say these words so often that we sometimes fail to recognize their world-rocking importance. But what we are saying when we make this profession is something truly astounding, almost unbelievable: God, who is beyond time and space—who created time and space—somehow entered time and space, and charged it, always and everywhere, not only with the grace of the God who creates but who also redeems.

In other words, God threw out the map we humans had imposed on his creation. As the hymn goes, “I scarce can take it in.”

I admit this sounds terribly abstract. But then I remember that what I’m talking about isn’t just a historical claim but something that happens in our present, at every Mass, when God breaks into our here and now and unites past, present and future in the Eucharist. An older rendering of the mystery of faith captures this per-



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# With my e-bike and rosary, I set out to envelope Manhattan in a prayer, which I would offer *urbi et orbi*—for the city and the world.

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factly: “Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will* come again.” In the Eucharist, then, God changes the borders in our maps of reality. It is both a spectacular and a common occurrence, which we can take for granted.

Yet that central mystery of our faith is also the warrant for believing that God can be found in all things—in all time and space—which is the central insight of St. Ignatius Loyola. And as if the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were not enough to establish the basis of that belief that God can truly be found in all things, then consider also the life of his mother, Our Lady, who has a habit, now in its third millennium, of making precisely this point by showing up at the strangest of times and in the oddest of places, turning the middle of nowhere into the center of somewhere. Lourdes, Knock, Fatima—these are not exactly bustling metropolises even today, and at the time Our Lady appeared in those places, you would have been hard-pressed to find them on a map.

## **Our Lady of Manhattan**

One of the really cool things about thinking of the perimeter of Manhattan as the route for a rosary by bicycle is that it begins and ends with sites associated with two amazing saints. At the southern tip of the island, roughly where the medallion would be located on a rosary, is the Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint, who was canonized in 1975. Mother Seton’s shrine occupies a red brick colonial church just across the street from Battery Park and the Staten Island Ferry.

I thought this was the perfect place to start the journey, by popping in, paying my respects and asking for the protection of Our Lady of the Way. The shrine was closed because of Covid restrictions, but I decided to set out from

there nonetheless. So after saying hello from afar to Mother Seton, I grabbed an e-bike and headed out.

I decided that I was going to pray the entire rosary, meaning all four sets of mysteries. So I marked on my map the places where I would stop and pray each set. Working my way counterclockwise around Manhattan, I chose locations that seemed to evoke the spirit of each group of mysteries.



## **The Joyful Mysteries – Stuyvesant Cove Park**

1. The Annunciation
2. The Visitation
3. The Nativity
4. The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple
5. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple

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Stuyvesant Cove Park is a lovely spot on the East River, located near East 20th Street and F.D.R. Drive and approximately four miles north of the Brooklyn Bridge. Opened in 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge symbolizes the union of the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn and the birth of modern New York City. Bicycling underneath it seemed appropriate, since one of the first mysteries I contemplated when I reached Stuyvesant Cove Park was the birth of Jesus.

After Stuyvesant Cove Park, I had to turn left and head into the city, as the river bike path is interrupted just south of the United Nations at around 40th Street. This made me a little nervous, as I was now in the bike lanes of the main thoroughfares. But I soon adjusted. And there were other graces that sprang from this little detour. I decided to say a prayer for the people and landmarks that I passed along the way: “There’s the United Nations! Pedal out a Hail Mary for peace! There’s the office of Cardinal Dolan! Say an Our Father for him and the archdiocese! There’s Memorial Sloan Kettering! Say a Hail Mary for the patients and staff.” Praying in this way, for the people and places I was passing, made the whole experience even more grace-filled, as if I were, in my own little way, consecrating the whole city to Jesus through Mary.



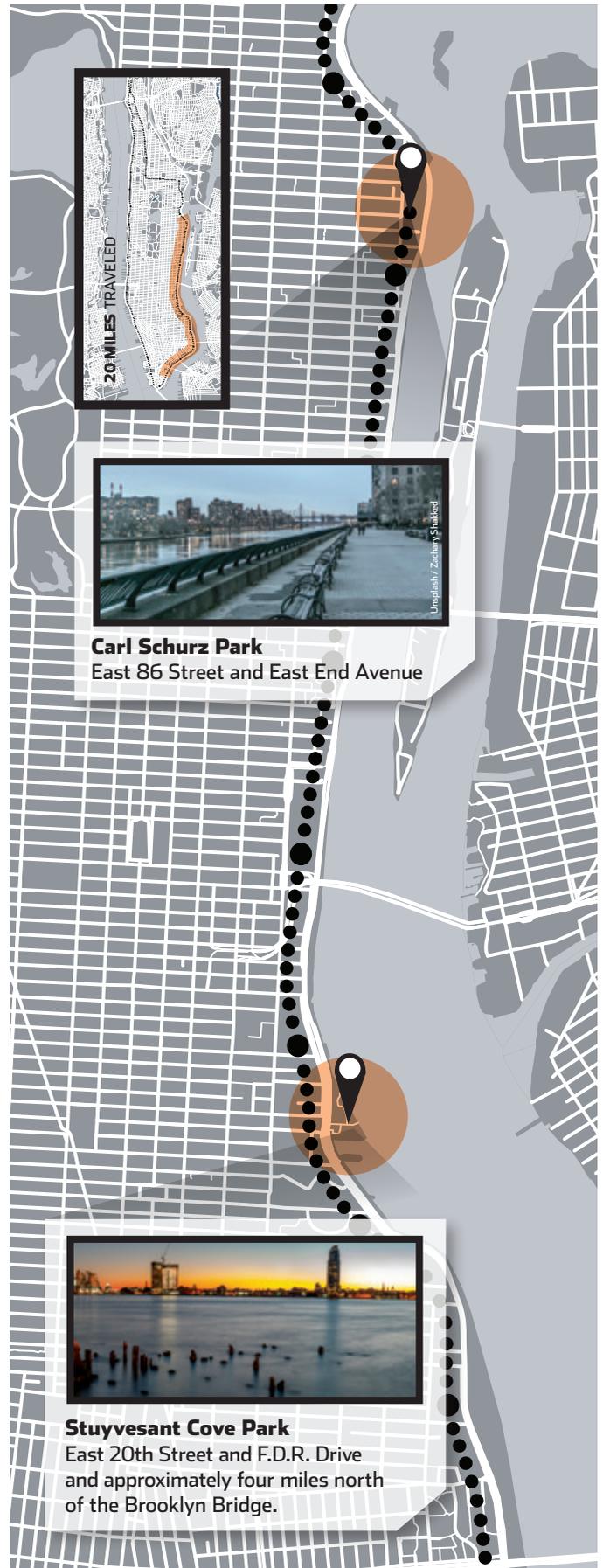
## The Luminous Mysteries - Carl Schurz Park

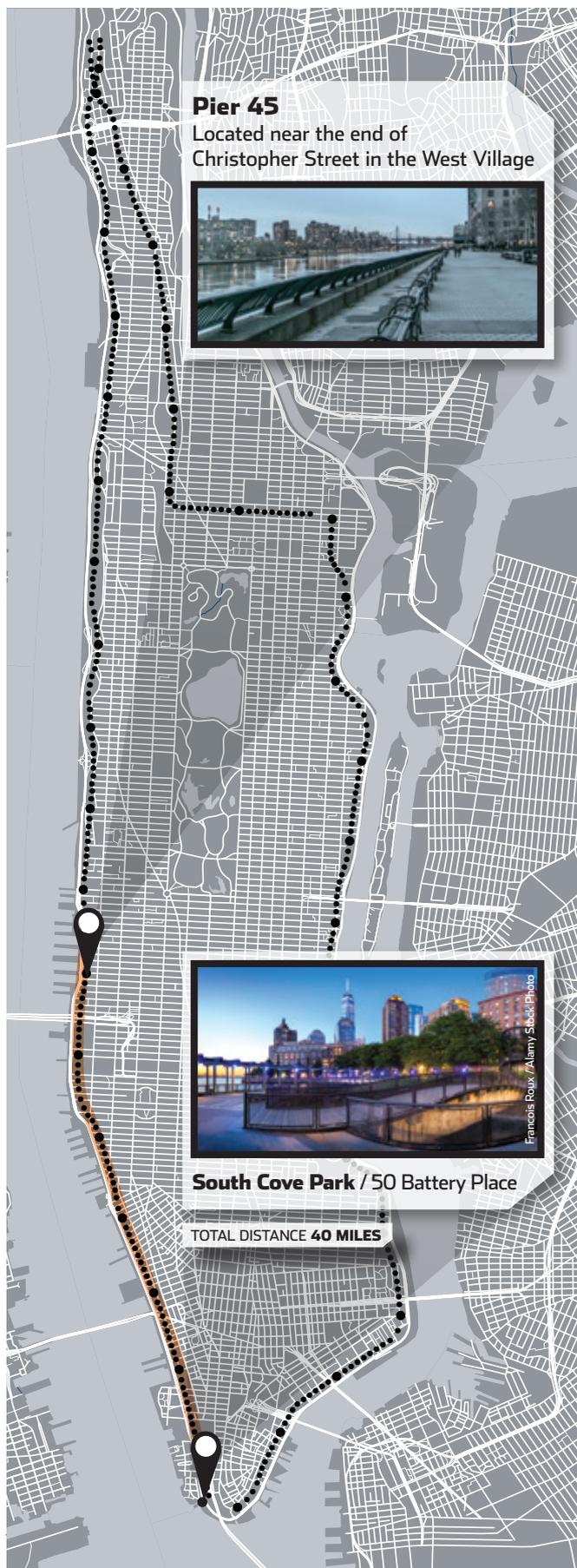
1. The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan
2. The Wedding at Cana
3. Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God
4. The Transfiguration
5. The Institution of the Eucharist

I rejoined the bike trail along the East River in the upper east 70s, and at East 87th Street I stopped in one of the little gems of the New York park system: Carl Schurz Park. Overlooking the East River, with beautiful views of Roosevelt Island, the park abuts Gracie Mansion, the official home of the mayor of New York. (I said a Hail Mary for him, too. He needs them, especially when it snows.)

The lighthouse at the northern tip of Roosevelt Island was my cue: This is where I prayed the Luminous Mysteries. To the right was the Queensboro Bridge, now known as the Ed Koch Bridge, named for the former mayor. Aha! A couple of **America** magazine connections: The Queensboro Bridge opened in 1909, the same year that **America** began publication; and Ed Koch was a good friend of my predecessor as editor in chief, Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., who served from 1975 to 1984. But I digress.

After changing bikes (I needed a fresh battery), I took a brief pedal north before the bike trail again came to an abrupt end at about 111th Street. So I crossed back into Manhattan on the pedestrian bridge nearby and picked up the bike lane at 111th Street and First Avenue in Harlem, heading north. It was now time to use the bike lanes to cross Manhattan from east to west, first at 120th Street, then turning right onto Saint Nicholas Avenue (the heart of Harlem), past the beautiful statue of the abolitionist Harriet Tubman (said a Hail Mary for racial justice!) and north to the Harlem River Greenway, then Dyckman Street, and finally Washington Heights and the shrine of Mother Cabrini at 701 Fort Washington Avenue. In 1946, Mother Francis Xavier Cabrini became the first American citizen to be canonized. Her place of repose is fittingly located at





**Pier 45**  
 Located near the end of Christopher Street in the West Village



**South Cove Park / 50 Battery Place**

TOTAL DISTANCE 40 MILES

the highest point in Manhattan, a little beyond the halfway point of my journey.

After some rest and a meal and a change of bikes, it was time to head south along the Hudson River Greenway, one of the premier bike trails in the United States, with stunningly beautiful views of the Hudson River and the Manhattan skyline. As I followed the trail below the George Washington Bridge, emerging near the small lighthouse at the bridge's base, I could see my destination, Lower Manhattan, in the far distance. The rocky shoreline near the George Washington bridge reminded me of the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and as I looked straight ahead toward the massive, awe-inspiring mountains of steel in lower Manhattan, I thought of how Jesus might have felt as he left his home in Galilee and set out for Jerusalem—how the sight of the Holy City must have filled him with fear as he contemplated the fate he would meet there.



### The Sorrowful Mysteries - Pier 45

1. The Agony in the Garden
2. The Scourging at the Pillar
3. The Crowning With Thorns
4. The Carrying of the Cross
5. The Crucifixion and Death of our Lord

Part of what makes the Hudson River Greenway so special is the way the city has transformed the old docks and piers along the river into recreational space for residents and tourists. As I approached the park at Pier 45, located near the end of Christopher Street in the West Village, One World Trade Center came fully into view for the first time. The nearby park seemed like a fitting place to pray the Sorrowful Mysteries, remembering that the Lord's passion was not his alone but included all the passions of history, including ours today.

After I had finished my prayer at Pier 45, I walked my bike several blocks along the greenway, from Christopher Street to Chambers Street. It was a reminder that Jesus himself walked during his passion, but it was also my modest tribute to the men and women who perished on 9/11, as well as the thousands of people who had run for their lives

on the very pavement beneath my feet.

At Chambers Street, I mounted my bicycle again and headed south for the last part of the journey, the shortest segment of the whole trip. I turned right onto West Thames Street, parking my CitiBike at the nearest stand. Turning left onto South End Avenue, I walked into South Cove Park, where I was surprised by joy to find another memorial to Mother Cabrini! But even more, South Cove Park and the adjacent Robert Wagner Park have the most stunning views of New York Harbor, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty—the perfect place for contemplating the Glorious Mysteries.



### **Glorious Mysteries - South Cove/Wagner Park**

1. The Resurrection
2. The Ascension
3. The Descent of the Holy Spirit
4. The Assumption of Mary
5. The Coronation of the Virgin

How fitting that I was contemplating the coronation of the Virgin Mary while gazing at a woman wearing a crown. But there is a more important reason why this was the perfect place to close out my rosary by bike, and that can be summed up in one word: freedom. Yes, the lady in the harbor symbolizes liberty. And for millions of immigrants (so many of them Catholics), Ellis Island symbolized both the end and a new beginning in their quest for liberty.

But more than that is the truth we know in faith, that freedom, in any ultimate sense, comes only from Jesus Christ, whose incarnation through the Virgin Mary destroyed the border between time and eternity, redrew the map of creation, and charged the world anew with the grandeur of its creator.

Truly, what a glorious mystery.

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*Matt Malone, S.J., is the president and editor in chief of America Media.*

## **IF YOU WANT TO GIVE IT A TRY**

If you live in New York or plan to visit soon, then you might like to give this rosary by bike a try. On an e-bike, either your own or one available from CitiBike, you can complete this roughly 35- to 40-mile route in a long day. If you do use a CitiBike e-bike, be sure to plan ahead, as you will need to change bikes at a station along the way in order to get a freshly charged battery. This might mean doing the trip on a weekday, when bikes are more widely available.

I know many people are worried about the traffic and bicycling in New York. Honestly, I was, too. In fact, I avoided biking in New York for many years for that very reason. But if you use the bike lanes, observe the traffic laws, wear a helmet and take your time, you will discover, as I did, that it is a pretty safe way to travel. In fact, many more people per capita are involved in car accidents than bicycle accidents in New York City. That being said, the road surfaces are uneven in places and the different bikeways are in varying states of repair (which predictably—and unjustly—is in direct relation to the average level of income in the neighborhood), so be prepared to improvise.

More important, here's some of what I learned through praying this way. First, I'll say it again: This is a different way of praying. Most of us are accustomed to thinking of prayer as sitting in a church or other quiet place, closing our eyes and opening our hearts. That's a wonderful way to pray; I do it every day. But a rosary by bike is prayer with our eyes wide open, in which we ask God to help us to see his creation in a new way—to find God in the people and places we are encountering.

In other words, there are no distractions here. Everything we see and smell and hear, however earthy or even annoying, becomes a part of this prayer. This might seem strange, but it can really rock your world for the better. For example, while I was praying with the mystery of the Nativity, I watched a mother playing with her baby in the park. It was a wonderful grace to see that mystery in light of the humanity in front of me.

Second, while you will be stopping and praying in specific places and with specific mysteries, that is not the only time to pray. As you pass a school, ask the Lord to bless the students and teachers, to give them wisdom. As you pass the United Nations, say a Hail Mary for peace. As you pass by a theater, ask God to help the artists glorify God through their performances.

Last, if you complete the whole route, which I highly recommend, you will encounter the world in all of its diversity. You will see every race of human being; you will hear a hundred different languages; you will see great wealth and also terrible poverty. You will bike through some of the most scenic areas in North America, and you will see some places that are downright depressing and kind of sketchy. Don't skip any of it! This is the world God entered. God became incarnate in a specific time and place, a time and place that was also a mix of lights and shadows, of rich and poor, of beautiful and wretched.

Above all, have fun; and if you have a minute, please say a Hail Mary for me along the way. I need it. Especially for my calf muscles.

Our Lady of Manhattan: Pray for us!

# THE MODEL PRAYER

Have Catholics been praying the Our Father all wrong?

By Nathan Schneider

*Our Father-Mother God, all-harmonious,  
Adorable One.*

According to Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, so begins the prayer that Jesus taught us. Not only was Ms. Eddy's use of "Father-Mother" well ahead of 19th-century gender politics, but, well, what can one say about "Adorable"? It is adorable. It gives me new affection for the First Church of Christ, Scientist half a block from where my family goes to Mass.

The practice in which Ms. Eddy was participating here was not unique to her, nor to those similarly outside the fold of Christian orthodoxy. Rewriting the Our Father, it turns out, is an ancient devotion, practiced by the likes of Teresa of Ávila, Francis de Sales and numerous luminaries of the early church.

Francis of Assisi anticipated Ms. Eddy by seven centuries:

*Who are in heaven:  
In the angels and the saints,  
enlightening them to know, for You, Lord, are light;  
inflaming them to love, for You, Lord, are love;  
dwelling in them and filling them with happiness,*

*for You, Lord, are Supreme Good, the Eternal Good,  
from Whom all good comes  
without Whom there is no good.*

These are romantic verses. But there is a rationalist current to this business as well—scientific brains trying to wrap themselves around the God they struggle to understand. Benjamin Franklin composed a version of the prayer for himself, and the 20th-century inventor and architect Buckminster Fuller elaborated on the Our Father in over 700 words like these:

*You, Dear God,  
are the totally loving intellect  
ever designing*

and, more:

*wherefore Your absolutely courageous  
omnirigorous and ruthless self-testing  
alone can and does absolutely guarantee  
total conservation  
of the integrity  
of eternally regenerative Universe*



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With respect to the kingdom coming, Fuller continues:

*and all occurs  
in optimum efficiency.*

Verses like these represent a lineage and a genre, a longstanding urge. At the outset of the book *The Lord's Prayer*, an excellent history on the subject, the Anglican bishop Kenneth W. Stevenson stresses that the prayer, “so far from being fixed in stone, is a living text.” Alongside its various interpretations and textual variants, Bishop Stevenson traces the practice of what he calls “paraphrase.” It is a word that I don’t think quite captures the creative, devotional activity in question.

Far from a gloss, a summary or a shorthand rewrite, to remake the central prayer of all Christianity is both audacious and intimate—claiming to know the mind of Jesus better than the official translators, perhaps, or accepting the Son of God’s invitation to approach his Father with what is most immediately on one’s heart.

This genre asks, that is: How creative does God really want us to be? What does God really want to hear from us?

Some Protestants refer to the Our Father as the Model Prayer—not a static text but always and only a starting

point. They contrast this to the “vain repetitions” of Catholics, reciting the same formula again and again in our rosaries and Masses. The Our Father is something we learn, memorize and pass on to the next generation, for lifelong use in private contemplation and collective recitation. We “dare” only to say it the same way each time, as the Mass reminds us, “at the Savior’s command.”

Have we been getting the prayer of Jesus all wrong?

### **‘An Epitome of the Whole Gospel’**

The North African theologian Tertullian is the first of the early Christian writers whose ruminations on the Our Father survive. His book *On Prayer* begins with an examination of the prayer, phrase by phrase, introducing it as “an epitome of the whole Gospel” and a model for all other prayer. Writing in Latin around the year 200, he already felt at liberty to adjust the biblical wording here and there—for instance, reversing the order of God’s “kingdom” and “will.” The fact of translation does not explain it; the *Didache*, a treatise from about a century earlier, made its own tweaks, despite being written in the same Greek as the Gospels.

Perhaps the willingness to modify, and even rewrite, begins from the original settings of the prayer. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the Our Father appears in two



# The Our Father that is said today in U.S. Catholic churches is not the one found in Catholic Bibles.

different but unmistakably similar forms. Jesus presents them not as liturgy in the Temple or a synagogue but as teachings, as instructions. “This is how you are to pray,” he prefaces the prayer in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. In Luke, “in a certain place,” Jesus was praying when a disciple comes and asks him how. Matthew has “your will be done,” and a few other flourishes that Luke lacks. Either the discrepancy is due to a game of scribal telephone, or it is because Jesus himself didn’t say his own prayer exactly the same way twice. The point of the teaching was less the words than the gist.

Whereas some more recent scholars like Bishop Stevenson emphasize the Our Father’s continuities with Jewish prayer, Tertullian stressed the differences. Jews avoid uttering the name of God out of awe, sticking instead to “Lord” and “Our God,” Adonai and Eloheinu. Jesus seems to head in exactly the opposite direction: “Abba,” which sounds in context more like “dad” or “papa” than father—more intimate than a name. For Tertullian, the prayer signifies the new opening to God that becomes possible for believers in Christ. God is remote no longer. Mary Baker Eddy’s word “adorable”—even in its modern, colloquial sense, which is surely more informal than she meant it—seems right.

Early sources suggest the Our Father was a personal prayer; the Didache recommends praying it three times daily. But the prayer appears there also in formal liturgy, associated with both baptism and the Eucharist. It became a fixture of what Christians did together. By the Middle Ages it had found its familiar place in the eucharistic prayers, and an extended commentary on the prayer became part of the Roman catechism. Meanwhile, it was mumbled in private breaths as part of the rosary—surely subject to adjust-

ments, intentional and otherwise, now lost to history. For Dante, the proud in purgatory recite their own version of the prayer on repeat, a version that seems to combine Fuller’s rationalism and Eddy’s affection:

*Our Father, You who dwell within the heavens—  
but are not circumscribed by them—out of  
Your greater love for Your first works above,  
praised be Your name and Your omnipotence,  
by every creature, just as it is seemly  
to offer thanks to Your sweet effluence.*

The Reformation brought both stability and tumult to the text. Martin Luther and John Calvin treated the biblical prayer as a guide more than as a formula, and their liturgies proscribed the prayer in paraphrase. The radical reformers outright avoided praying the biblical version, for fear that the words might become stale and inauthentic.

With the Reformation also came vernacular translations and the printing press, circulating established versions of the prayer that became intimately familiar and hard to shake. The Our Father that is said today in U.S. Catholic churches, of course, is not the one found in Catholic Bibles; it derives from the translations of Reformers like William Tyndale—we get “trespasses” from him, for instance. He had to complete his translation in exile, and copies smuggled back to England were liable to be burned.

Tyndale also composed an extended rewriting of the prayer in the form of dialogue, between God and “The Sinner.” The exchange goes like this:

*God: For My name through you and by your means  
is blasphemed, railed upon and evil spoken of.  
The Sinner: Yet be Thou a merciful father, and deal  
not with us according to our deservings, neither  
judge us by the rigorosity of Thy will, but give us  
grace that we may so live that Thy holy name may be  
hallowed and sanctified in us.*

And so on, at length. Despite the creativity of this rendition, it is his contribution to the standard liturgical prayer that has become far better known.

The poetry of those mnemonic and familiar words, etched in print and tradition, are hard to change. No less an authority than Pope Francis has suggested that “lead us not into temptation” should be more like “do not let us fall.” He is correct, and translations of the Bible now tend to reflect this, but good luck changing how people pray. Even when the Vatican adjusted the English translation of the Mass in 2011, they left the Our Father alone. Who cares if it comes

from Protestants like Tyndale, whom our co-religionists burned at the stake? It is now what we know best.

Translations are not the same as reinventing the prayer in paraphrase, but they involve a similar task of interpretation. To translate runs the risk of misunderstanding, yet translations keep the prayer alive, forcing with each new version a reappraisal of the meaning. The words swell with new possibilities the farther they travel from their linguistic and cultural origins in the eastern Mediterranean.

Consider this English re-translation of a Cherokee rendition:

*Our father heaven dweller,  
Glorified will be your name.  
You are God let it be known,  
Here on earth let it be as you think it.*

“Art in heaven” or “heaven dweller”? “Thy will be done” or “as you think it”? So close, and yet the difference between them holds a tension that keeps the words alive. Stretch a string between them, pluck it, and hear a meaning that neither version has on its own. As Jesus himself seems to have done, saying the Model Prayer differently each time might be part of the model. If this is true, all Christians are called to make the prayer their own.

### **Making the Prayer Ours**

Before I prayed, I learned this prayer. In the dark, when I was little and going to bed, my mother taught it to me over a series of nights. I don’t know how many. The Lord’s Prayer, she called it, like many Protestants do. I am not sure if she prayed it herself; she had grown up in a church-going family but by then her spirit was elsewhere. This was the one part of her religious upbringing she wanted me to have.

Later, when I started church-going myself, I learned to pray that same prayer, which I already knew by heart in the most metaphorical sense, as well as the literal one. The Our Father, I learned to call it, as Roman Catholics do—Pater-noster, in Latin. Each night now, decades later, I recite the same thing with my children. When they hear it begin in church, they know what to do. “That’s our prayer!”

It is a specific prayer, and it isn’t. It is a prayer that we memorize and recite—it is a thing that is done. When I hear the Tyndale-esque words my mother taught me, I am transported. The sameness matters, maybe more than getting the parts about “trespasses” or “temptation” exactly right. Repetition can be holier than accuracy. And then reinvention can awaken what repetition forgets.

“The disadvantage of paraphrase is that it can become an end in itself,” writes Bishop Stevenson in his history of

the prayer. “The advantage is that it can alert the praying Christian to the rich shades of meaning that familiar words can easily disguise.”

Try it. Make this a practice: In different moods, at different times, with different needs, rewrite the prayer. Start with the old Our Father you know and change as many words as you can, keeping the meaning but speaking from your own voice. Allow yourself to speak to God with the many voices you have within you. Stretch the meanings, but then contract them. How far can you take the meaning without breaking it?

One could begin with vernacular maximalism, like this:

*Hi, Daddy  
up there*

Does it still sound like a prayer? Perhaps the shock of excessive familiarity is like what Jesus’ disciples felt when he first taught them to pray. Keep going, jumping to the middle:

*As we take things day by day,  
help us get by,  
and don’t blame us too much—  
at least to the extent  
we manage not to blame each other*

And you could end like this:

*A bit of help from you  
with all this evil  
would go a long way.*

In place of the “amen,” a version that appeared in a 1966 America article by Gareth Edwards suggests an alternative conclusion—simply:

*Answer our prayer.*

Are these stretching too far? There is more room to stretch. Here is a contemporary Sufi scholar, Neil Douglas-Klotz, evading the paternal language altogether:

*O Breathing Life, your Name shines everywhere!  
Release a space to plant your Presence here.  
Envision your “I Can” now.*

The 1971 prayer book from the Free Church of Berkeley doubled down on Jesus’ “Abba,” while introducing an elegant sort of meter for the rest, with Luke-like concision:



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# To remake the central prayer of all Christianity is both audacious and intimate.

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*Abba, Father:  
Blessed be your working;  
Soon be your appearing;  
Done be your desiring.*

The more I think of it the less I am surprised that Francis of Assisi remade the prayer for himself; I suspect he did so more than once, beyond the one written down for history. He was, after all, someone who liked to build and repair little churches. That kind of playful remaking was how he loved to make his offerings. Like arranging a manger scene a bit differently each year—a practice he also taught—paraphrasing the prayer is a way of dwelling in a creative relationship with God. As Francis puts it in his prayer, expanding the “hallowed be” part:

*May knowledge of You become clearer in us  
that we may know  
the breadth of Your blessings,  
the length of Your promises,  
the height of Your majesty,  
the depth of Your judgments.*

To stretch the words of the prayer, Francis suggests here, helps him to further grasp their meaning. The ambiguity of invention brings us toward greater clarity in the end.

Repetition can do these same things too, in its own fashion. When one does not know what else to say, the formula is there. When one is with others, praying together, everyone making it up as they go would turn into cacophony, you need the formula. While rewriting opens the imagination, repetition can guide us into meditation, into a trance of listening, tuning out our minds so as to finally hear the voice of God.

In his preface to the prayer in Matthew, Jesus warns against too much chatter: “Do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words.” It could be safer just to say what he said.

This prayer somehow has to be everything at once. And perhaps it can be. The liberation theologian Leonardo Boff called the Our Father “the prayer of integral liberation”; it brings together heavenly hope and earthly suffering. Can it also tolerate both the rote and the visionary, the familiar and the spontaneous?

From Buckminster Fuller’s rendition again:

*Your eternally regenerative scenario Universe  
is the minimum complex  
of totally intercomplementary  
totally intertransforming  
nonsimultaneous, differently frequenced  
and differently enduring  
feedback closures  
of a finite  
but nonunitarily  
nonsimultaneously conceptual system*

This God includes both the complex and the simple, the finite and infinite, the abstract and the material. If God can be all that, and a prayer must contain all that, then surely we need lots of different ways to pray, even stemming from Jesus’ seemingly simple instructions.

Catholics, that is to say, have not necessarily been praying the Our Father wrongly, but too often we have not been praying it fully, either. While we are busy trying to get it right, we neglect to make it our own and discover its vast permutations.

We can begin to change that by recognizing the Our Father not merely as a prayer but as a genre. We can learn and share with each other this tradition of reinventing it. We can practice paraphrasing for ourselves when we need it, and then go back to the familiar formula when we need that, too. This, as far as I can tell, is how Jesus taught the prayer: as a place to begin, again and again.

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Nathan Schneider, a contributing writer for **America**, is a reporter and professor of media studies at the University of Colorado Boulder.



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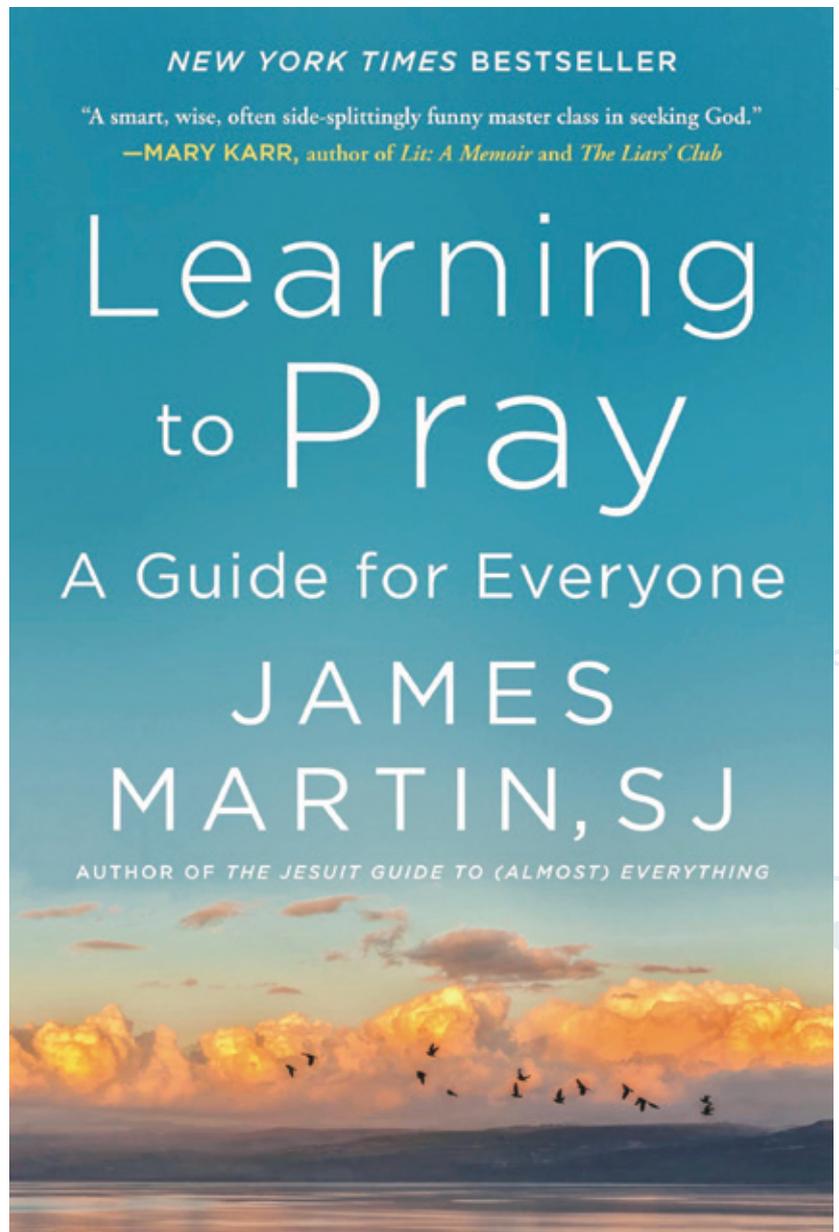
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# Learning to Pray

A Guide for Everyone

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AUTHOR OF *THE JESUIT GUIDE TO (ALMOST) EVERYTHING*

## AMERICA'S GUIDE TO RETREATS

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



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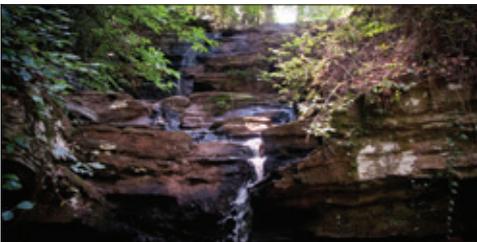
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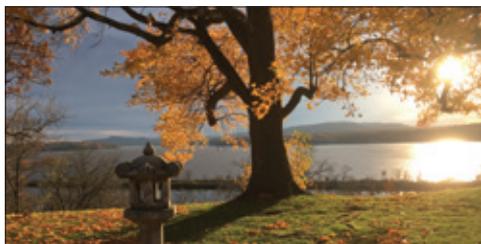
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Website: [www.loyolahouse.com](http://www.loyolahouse.com)

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Sergei Gureyev/Sputnik Pool Photo via AP

President Vladimir V. Putin speaks at a concert marking the eighth anniversary of the referendum on the status of Crimea and Sevastopol and their reunification with Russia, in Moscow on March 18.

# UNHOLY WAR

## The ideology driving Putin and Patriarch Kirill in the Russia-Ukraine war

By John Chryssavgis

As the world watches the crisis in Ukraine unfold like the legend of the Persian king Xerxes terrorizing the “300 Spartans” at the Battle of Thermopylae, an entirely different conflict is being waged on another plane. The discernable battle may be engaged in Ukraine as a modern-day Thermopylae, where the Greeks—read Ukrainians—are massacred by a superior military machine. The real contention, however, is “not against flesh and blood; it is against principalities and powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

Western critics have predictably observed that the war in Ukraine is not merely geopolitical but religious. They realize something strange is going on—if for no other reason than because, while Russians and Ukrainians speak a different language, most of their clergy wear similar exotic vestments. For their part, Russian authorities argue that the war they wage is not about territorial conquest but about remembering and reinforcing the unity that binds them with Ukraine—a unity going back to at least the 10th century, when Vladimir the Great, grand prince of Kiev (considered the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy), was baptized in 988, prompting the Christianization of Holy Rus’ (which included the territories of modern-day Belarus, Ukraine and Russia).

That unity, Russian leaders claim, is now imperiled by the West. As a result, they reiterate the outlandish mantra that Orthodox Christians—specifically Russian Ortho-

dox—are the victims in this ordeal.

Nevertheless, dismissing the war on Ukraine as religious, or diminishing it as ecclesiastical, is at best an uncritical perception of what we are witnessing on our television screens and on Twitter. Russia’s belligerence and indifference to eradicating innocent civilians and children, while in the process forcing millions of refugees to flee to bordering nations, can be explained only as blind adherence to an ideology to which Russian leaders zealously offer bloody sacrifice.

Americans, of course, are not oblivious to such militant ideologies. The international scholar John Mearsheimer has long decried the forced creation of liberal democracies in the Middle East and elsewhere in the interest of U.S. foreign policy. All of us recall the mandate and pledge in the Sermon on the Mount, inspiring us, as “a city on a hill...not to place the lamp under a bushel, but to set it on a stand, from where it can shine on the whole world” (Mt 5:14–15). Everyone quotes Scripture—conservatives and liberals alike, indeed Putin himself at a rally in Moscow on March 18—but not everyone agrees on its interpretation when they reach a crossroads that separates aggressors from victims. In the past, America rationalized its occupation of sovereign lands for the sake of oil. Today, Russia legitimizes its invasion of Ukraine for the sake of Ukraine’s soul.

As a realist, Dr. Mearsheimer is unequivocally aware of the geopolitical nuances behind President Vladimir V. Pu-



# Russia has declared war against the world order and for a new morality.

tin's unholy war. Perhaps, however, he is naïvely indifferent to the ideological rhetoric of Patriarch Kirill, the current head of the Russian Orthodox Church. For President Putin and Patriarch Kirill, the invasion of Ukraine is not just an exercise in historical or emotional reflection; nor is it an enterprise of intellectual or philosophical position. It goes far deeper than that.

The problem is not so much the less-than-holy alliance between Mr. Putin and Patriarch Kirill, which has ignored the concerted global plea for war to cease and peace to prevail in Ukraine. The trouble is that the twin tyrants of the post-Bolshevik state and post-Czarist church have been dogmatically and doggedly tone-deaf in recent decades to the free world's developments, which they consider and condemn as shades of evil in a fallen world. There is indeed religious symbolism behind the territorial invasion of Ukraine by Russia, but it reflects the much larger metaphysical fantasy of the spiritual salvation of the whole world.

To decry or describe Russia's invasion of Ukraine as fratricide is to miscalculate and misinterpret the war as perceived through the lens of both Mr. Putin and Patriarch Kirill. Their words and actions are not solely about brazen expansionism or nostalgic imperialism on the basis of some primitive nationalism. The stakes are much higher. And what reveals the underlying ambitions of the heads of church and state in Russia is a consideration of the details on the margin of history as it is being recorded.

As I see it, focusing on the underlings of Mr. Putin and Patriarch Kirill—on Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov in the case of the first, and Chairman of External Relations Metropolitan Hilarion in that of the second—provides a fresh, albeit frightening outlook.

On the one hand Mr. Lavrov, like Mr. Putin, has denounced any intervention in another state's sovereign matters—by which, of course, he denotes the interference of the United States in the independence of Ukraine. On the

other hand, he has gone so far as to impugn the newly independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church (separate from the Russian Orthodox Church since 2018) as an instrument of American foreign policy.

Like Patriarch Kirill, Metropolitan Hilarion has remained conspicuously silent on the war, issuing inconsequential statements on peace—comparable to some autocephalous Orthodox churches, which have been afraid to denounce Mr. Putin for fear of alienating the powerful Russian Orthodox Church. However, it is not what Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion say that matters as much as what they actually do. And it is not so much what they do close to their homeland that matters but what they are doing in other parts of the globe.

In this regard, it is telling that Metropolitan Hilarion traveled to the ancient Patriarchate of Jerusalem in late February, only days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, drumming up support against the leadership of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and distributing funds for the protection of Christians in the Middle East—a gesture with political baggage harking back to the mid-19th century, with the creation of the Imperial Palestinian Society. He paid a similar visit on March 5 to the ancient Patriarchate of Antioch, bearing similar gifts in the name of protecting the Christians of Syria, whose President Bashar al-Assad has coincidentally ruled as interminably and imperiously as Mr. Putin, with unqualified support from both the Russian president and the Russian Orthodox patriarch.

Such initiatives are by no means a geopolitical collateral of nationalism. They are a consequence of the doctrine known as Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*), whose platform is an ideological worldview that rejects most forms of diversity and tolerance from any long-standing Russian Orthodox positions. On March 13, an international group of scholars rejected this doctrine as foreign to Orthodox tradition and teaching.

Nationalism is not always—nor does it have to be—a bane; it can actually be a blessing for local Orthodox churches. National identity can ultimately work through its messiness, precisely because it is closely associated with a tangible devout and devoted community. This is why—while condemning the heresy of ethnophyletism, the conflation between church and nation, in 1872—the Ecumenical Patriarchate sanctioned the creation of independent national churches, establishing autocephalous and autonomous churches in Georgia, Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece (during the 19th century), and implementing the same principle in Poland, Albania, the Czech

Republic and Slovakia, Albania, Finland and Estonia (during the 20th century). In fact, every Orthodox church—with the exception of the ancient churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Cyprus—has been founded by the Ecumenical Patriarchate—including Russia.

Nationalism can be refined or reproved, but promoting a religious ideology like *Ruskiy Mir* is not a refining or an improvement of Russian Orthodoxy as much as it is a declaration of a “culture war.” Such an ideology does not simply invade borders; it unravels order. It does not merely undermine sovereignty; it erodes liberty. The enemy of such an ideology is freedom—freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of religion.

And yet *Ruskiy Mir* is the ideology to which President Putin and Patriarch Kirill subscribe. Which is why, upon annexing Crimea in 2014, Mr. Putin erected a statue to Vladimir the Great—the 10th-century baptizer and ruler of the Rus’—beside the walls of the Kremlin. It is also why Patriarch Kirill wears a white headdress or cowl, evoking the presence of pontifical power.

What President Volodymyr Zelensky says about Ukraine’s defense of democracy is true, though he is probably unaware of the ideological clash involved. This is a winner-take-all battle. If Russia prevails in Ukraine in the long term, it is likely to shape the future of the global Orthodox Church, if not the international political order. The war is not about Russia capturing Ukraine; it is about Russia challenging the Western world, which Mr. Putin and Patriarch Kirill both regard as evil.

Russia has declared war *against* the world order and *for* a new morality. Russia is competing for what it considers the soul of the world, for a cultural unity that—again in their distorted image of the world and interpretation of the Gospel—brings Russia and Ukraine together in a brave new Russian world. This worldview presumes a Russian hegemony, no matter how fictitious that appears to the rest of the world.

*John Chryssavgis is archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and theological advisor to the ecumenical patriarch. He lives in Maine.*

**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 de 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.



Cover painting by Lionel Durand



Lionel Durand broadcasting for Voice of America

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KEYNOTE SPEAKER

**Rev. Dr. James Hanvey, SJ**  
Father Hanvey heads the Secretariat for the Service of the Faith, Curia of the Society of Jesus

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**Fr. Joe Tetlow, SJ** / PANELIST  
Internationally recognized authority on Ignatian Spirituality, Author, Retreat Director

**Fr. Mark Thibodeaux, SJ** / PANELIST  
Author, Spiritual Director, Retreat Director, Pastor

**Vinita Hampton Wright** / PANELIST  
Author, Editor, Retreat Director, Spiritual Director



# WHAT MAKES A PARISH SUCCESSFUL?

*Hint: It is not a particular liturgical style*

By Holly Taylor Coolman

On a winter Sunday last year—before the Omicron variant hit—our family arrived at Mass at St. Patrick Church in Providence, R.I., just prior to the procession, and I was a little worried. Would we find a seat? In the end, we did, but the pews were in fact very full. Latecomers ended up setting up folding chairs in designated spots, a standard practice when we run out of seats.

This, of course, is not a problem in every Catholic parish. But these days, it's a nice problem to have.

In 1970, 55 percent of American Catholics attended Mass; by 2019, that number had dropped to a little over 20 percent. Many parishes have closed or merged, and many more will follow.

The pandemic seems only to have worsened the situation—although we will not have a clear accounting for some time—and left many parishes with new rows of empty seats. Even in our parish, the pews were emptier during the Covid-19 virus surges.

Still, our community has continued to thrive even in these challenging times. So, what is going on here at St. Patrick Church?

One might think that the first thing to draw people in would be a beautiful church building. But we do not have a beautiful church building. We do not have any church building at all, in fact, if by that one means a structure designed to be a church. Our history on that score is a story of loss. In 1843, a small community of

enterprising Irish Catholics laid the cornerstone of what would become a towering Gothic Revival edifice, seating over 1,000 people and standing face-to-face with Rhode Island's State House (or, from another vantage point, peering over its left shoulder).

For over 100 years, that building welcomed wave after wave of Irish immigrants. The parish established the first Catholic school in the state, a band of Sisters of Mercy arrived, and St. Patrick Church served as the kind of religious anchor at the heart of the city that is now rare.

In the late 1970s, though, everything changed. Parishioners were already moving out of the city in significant numbers when a devastating discovery was made. The foundation of that gorgeous church was unsound. The estimated costs made repair impossible, so a terrible and necessary decision was made: The church building was demolished.

Church furnishings were scavenged or sold. The community took what they could—a few stained glass windows, a wooden set of the Stations of the Cross—and limped a few blocks to the west, where the parish school was housed in a substantial two-story brick building. There, the school auditorium was requisitioned and consecrated, and the parish set up its life in an unexpected architectural exile. It is in that one-time school auditorium that we meet to this day.

One might also think that another draw to our par-



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# WHAT IS IT THAT DRAWS SO MANY PEOPLE TO OUR PARISH WEEK AFTER WEEK?

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ish would be a clear and unified version of a “parish identity.” But we do not have that either. Our identity is neither traditionalist nor progressive; we are neither liberal nor conservative. We come from many different geographic places. On any given Sunday, you can find a group of young men in jeans and sweatshirts in one pew and a young mother in her chapel veil in another. You can find some parishioners arriving, rosary in hand, to pray before the service, while a guitar is being tuned up front. I have a strong suspicion that if you turned to politics, you would find our voting patterns similarly varied and eclectic.

Socioeconomic status and race do not help in finding a label for us, either. The largest portion of the parish is made up of workers, as it always has been, raising families and living from one paycheck to the next. But many other kinds of people are mixed in: professionals and professors; a significant percentage of people who work in social services; teachers and public servants. There are a few long-established folks with more money, and a few, at the other end of the spectrum, living without secure housing or food.

Racially and culturally, we are a mix. There are still a few grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those original Irish Catholics. Other white folks, like myself, have drifted in. The majority, though, are a mix of Black and brown people, including heritages that are Cape Verdean, Haitian, Colombian and Bolivian, along with many others. We are at a tipping point on language. About half our community speaks Spanish as their first language, while English, Creole and other languages are among the mother tongues of the rest.

Given all this, you might well ask: What *does* hold this parish together? And what is it that draws so many people

to our parish week after week? In the decade or so that I have been part of this community, some crucial characteristics have become increasingly clear to me.

First of all, worship lies at the center of our life. Our parish has what could be called a lively worship style. Contemporary songs are sometimes sung; drums are played; liturgical responses from the congregation are spoken with energy. Characteristics of more traditional worship are present, too, though. Liturgies are celebrated with reverence, and rubrics are followed with care. Latin is regularly included, and the liturgical life beyond the Mass includes all-night rosary vigils and an adoration chapel that is always open. In the end, one thing seems clear to me: It is not a particular style that the people are most in love with. It is God.

In these fussy and fractious times, it is easy to forget this: We come to Mass to worship God. With our words and with our bodies, we join together to say that God is God; that, though we are broken by sin, here we find true medicine for our wounds. We come to offer our lives on the altar, to join them to the one true sacrifice that reconciles all things. We come to be nourished and remade for all that lies ahead.

In our parish, this love for God is palpable, and so, too, is a second element: love for one another. Through interactions both inside and outside the church building, real friendships are the norm. I know that I can show up and be welcomed as if I were coming home. One beautiful, elderly Cape Verdean woman—the closest thing we have to a single matriarch at the head of the parish—always pulls me close and says without apology, “I *love* you.” I believe her. As I have been incorporated into this community, I have also been given invaluable opportunities to love: to pray or to offer counsel or just to show up at someone’s front door with a dinner when it is needed most.

We do everything we can to welcome others in as well. If you come to Mass, you will be greeted warmly. We want to know your name. And we try to meet you where you are. American Sign Language interpreters are available at Mass every Sunday. We offer catechesis tailored to a continuum of individual needs, and we have hosted a summer program especially for people with disabilities. In the midst of a pandemic and all the divisions it has engendered, we have done everything we can to bear with one another and to be generous and patient.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this love also overflows. The final defining mark of this parish is that both as a community and as individual members, our parish puts itself

at the service of our neighborhood and our city. We have a food bank and a meal kitchen; a food-truck ministry heads to neighborhoods where it is needed most. Our parish high school welcomes all students, whatever their ability to pay, and assists any who are missing math or English skills so that everyone can finish well. Individual members fan out to innumerable ministries of their own, including teaching and outreach to the homeless. One directs a senior center. One is a state senator.

At the heart of all this activity is our pastor. He has many traits that nourish our community: He is humble and hardworking; he works collaboratively and generously with lay leaders; he is open and curious in asking where the Spirit is leading us. In the end, though, the trait that shapes him is deeply connected to the traits I have already described: He has a single-minded focus on our central vocation, that of living together in the love of Christ and sharing that love with others. Particular programs and initiatives come and go. What is essential is that we remember and live into that central truth.

It is important to say that our parish is, of course, not perfect. We lose focus. We get impatient with one another and ourselves. Money is always short. But love is a powerful thing. It covers a multitude of sins, and it gives us energy and hope, even in these difficult days.

It would be easy in a parish like ours to focus on what we are missing or the challenges we face. We could spend our time pining for that beautiful Gothic church that once was ours. But that is not our task. We can only be here, now, drawn to the altar and then sent back out again, in a rhythm that gives us life. And even if the details and the history were very different, what else could we want?

Holly Taylor Coolman *is an assistant professor of theology at Providence College in Rhode Island.*

## Icon

By Thomas Plank

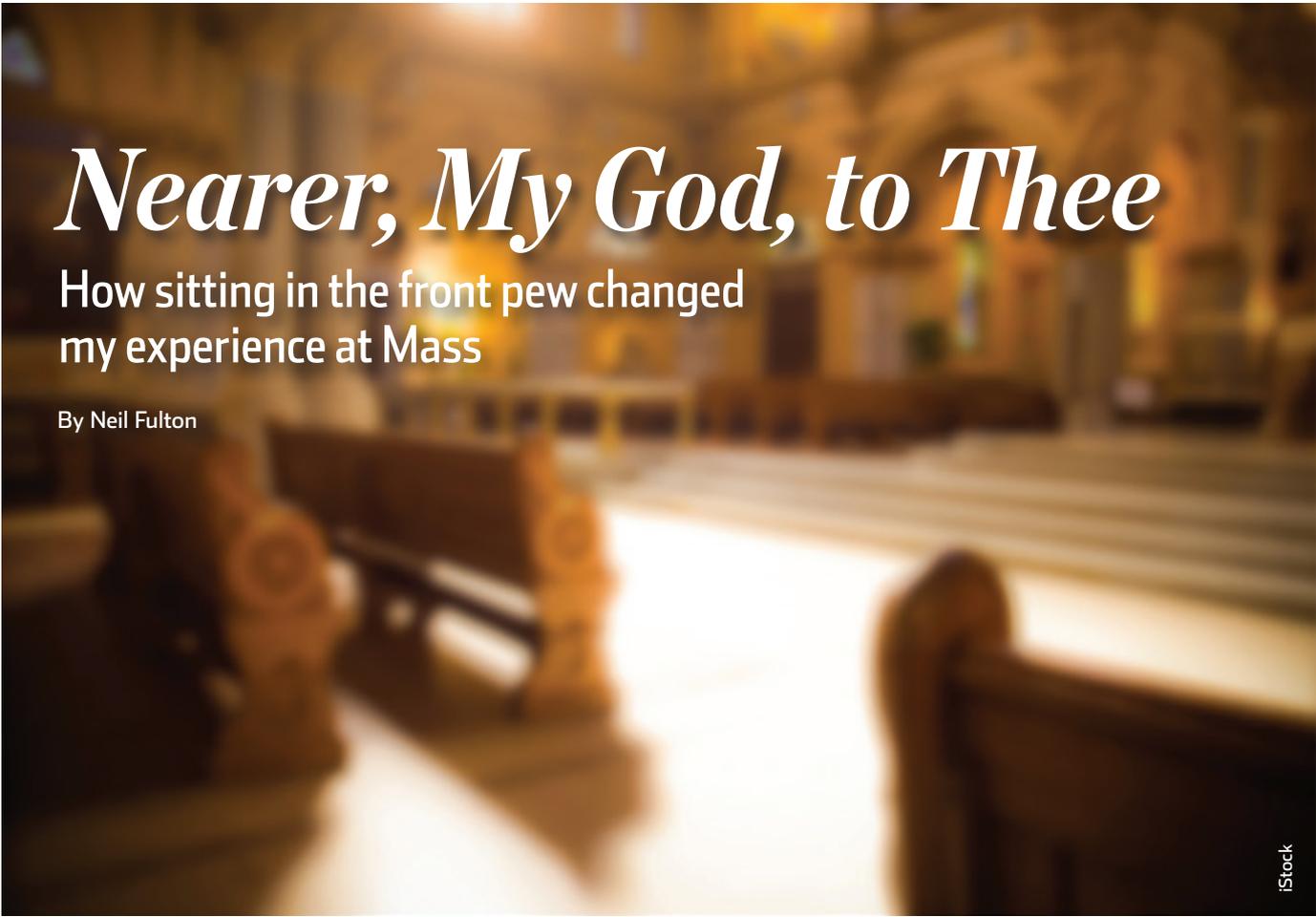
Now my concern is whether or not my lungs will fill  
or my heart will stop, if I'll be struck within  
by a cytokine storm, if the world will become more wrong,  
if the deaths of so many will have meaning—

what I will say if I was brought out in the final judgement,  
standing in a hospital line with gown open in the back  
and listening to my sentencing by a living Byzantine icon.

My defense is these: lemon trees, moonlight,  
brown carpet and low roof, rain, sorrow, love,  
the taste of salsa and beer, the winding  
of my life around a stem that I hope  
gave the structure for me to drink in grace.

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*Thomas Plank is a poet and literary critic based in Missoula, Mont.*



# *Nearer, My God, to Thee*

How sitting in the front pew changed my experience at Mass

By Neil Fulton

iStock

Almost 15 years ago, when our oldest son was born, my wife and I started to sit near the front of the sanctuary consistently for Mass. Our thinking was that the ability to see and hear the activity at the altar would help to hold the attention of a fidgety child. The addition of two more boisterous boys (and their growth from infants to toddlers to teens) has tested our theory, but it has remained a sound practice for our family.

I must confess to having allowed my own mind to wander on many Sundays. So I was pleased to find that the practice of sitting in the front pew also has helped to focus my own wandering mind. Sitting in the front pews has allowed me to hear clearly the exchange between the priest and the faithful as the latter receive the Eucharist. I often become engrossed listening to the repetition of the priest and eucharistic ministers saying, “the body of Christ,” and the recipients responding, “Amen.”

This exchange is as profound as it is simple. Offering the host, the minister asserts clearly, indisputably, “the body of Christ.” Hearing this statement repeatedly, mere feet from the altar, I have found my mind pulled into the depth of these words. They assert that Christ is truly present among us spiritually and physically, his body offered up for our salvation. My mind is pulled repeatedly to the

fundamental mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. All for the salvation of me, those present at Mass, those not present, all those, wherever they may be, who are saved by Christ’s sacrifice of his body, recreated and truly present only feet away.

The response of those receiving is no less clear or certain. A simple statement: “Amen.” One word affirming the speaker’s belief in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Over and over, clearly and simply, a single word affirming this fundamental and radical reality.

The exchange of just five words captures the entirety of our faith. Seeing the sacrament and hearing these words closely and repeatedly cannot help but sometimes pull one deeper into the mysteries of that faith. I find myself somehow both present in the moment and also transported.

In addition to hearing this exchange, my proximity to the altar also allows me to closely watch all those who approach it. My wife Molly and I have spent the entirety of our lives in South Dakota, particularly in smaller South Dakota towns. Even at Masses outside our own parish, it is rare that we do not know the names of many who are receiving the Eucharist. Because we know so many of these faces, we frequently know their stories. Watching recipients go by, I know who is sick or suffering. I see the pro-

gression of age chip away at the physical strength of our parents, and now even friends, whose bodies no longer possess the strength they once did. I see families expand and grow with children going to the altar, first in their parents' arms, then holding their hands and eventually walking forward to receive themselves.

The bodies are frail and flawed, of all ages, races, genders, experiences and circumstances—no two alike but each created wonderfully in the image of God. As I see them and hear them speak the exchange, I am reminded, over and over again, of the reality that this, the church through us its members, is the body of Christ. In truly seeing each of these people, many of whom I know so well, I am more truly seeing the body of Christ. I am more fully recognizing it as a lived reality, not simply an abstraction.

In every human encounter we encounter the body of Christ. Sometimes, long after Mass has ended, my mind wanders to the questions of whether I honor that reality in my personal engagements and what our world would look like if I did. What if we began every human encounter with the realization that we are encountering “the body of Christ”? And what if we responded “Amen”?

Could our political engagement remain as combative

and destructive if we saw each conversation as an encounter not with competing partisans but members of the body of Christ? Could our commerce remain as exploitative and shallow? Could our society remain as full of anger and violence? Could our attitude about the value of life remain as cavalier? Truly, if we began each human encounter with the recognition of the body of Christ present before us and let our actions offer an “Amen,” our world would be radically transformed. A world in which we see and accept the body of Christ is a world on its way to redemption.

These thoughts consistently have found me in the front pews in the years since the children who led us to that spot have grown as tall and taller than Molly and I. In choosing to sit up close, week after week, person after person, I have been continually reminded that each of us is possessed entirely of the gifts of Christ. That we are called by Christ. That we are redeemed by Christ. That we are inescapably loved by Christ. That we are made gloriously in the image of Christ. That we are the body of Christ. Amen.

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Neil Fulton is dean of the University of South Dakota School of Law. Twitter: @NeilFultonSD.

# America

THE JESUIT REVIEW

This one goes out to my fellow Catholics.  
The ones who are searching for answers.  
Who wonder: “Does the church want someone like me?”  
Who struggle to vote for either party.  
Who aren't afraid to ask questions.  
We get you.

## THE CATHOLIC STRUGGLE IS REAL

But that's what we're here for.  
Let's talk about prayer, doubt, sexuality, race, life and the death penalty, and everything in between. It's time to ask the tough questions. It's time for honest conversation.  
Because our Catholic faith belongs to all of us, not just the pope and the priests.

It's time to *#OwnYourFaith*



Courtesy of Verbum Dei High School

## ‘You Don’t Always Have to Go Through Sports’

*Verbum Dei offers students a different path to success in South Los Angeles*

By J.D. Long-García

The N.B.A. all-star DeMar DeRozan is from Compton, Calif., a Los Angeles suburb often associated with gangs, drugs and violence. Basketball offered Mr. DeRozan and other stars from the area—like the 2017 M.V.P. Russell Westbrook—a different option.

Growing up in the same area, Jamaul Cotton thought basketball could be his path, too. But his mother had other plans. As he was entering ninth grade, she pushed for him to enroll in Verbum Dei High School, a Jesuit-run school in the Watts neighborhood of L.A. that is part of the Cristo Rey Network.

“Being there kind of changed my perspective on life, right?” Mr. Cotton said. “It made me realize that someone like me doesn’t always have to go through sports or like, be a rapper to make it out of whatever situation you’re in. There are more outlets to being successful than the things we’re taught in the community.”

Students at Verbum Dei spend four days a week in school and one day a week in a corporate work-study program. That program helps defray the costs of tuition, but, more important, it exposes students to real-world job experiences.

For Mr. Cotton, those experiences began when he was 14. His four years at “Verb,” as the students and faculty call it, consisted of intense study, basketball and working at Crescent Capital Group, a private equity firm in L.A.

“I’m seeing multimillion-dollar people coming into the building, and I’m not even knowing they’re multimillion-dollar people,” he laughed. “They’re just talking all this fancy business talk, and I’m just kind of seeing it.” He found himself thinking, “Dang, I think this is what I want to be when I’m older.”

On mail runs through the building, he would talk to full-time employees about what they studied in college and how they wound up working at the company. Joe Viola, the chief operating officer of Crescent Capital and the board chair at Verbum Dei, met Mr. Cotton through the program. He said Mr. Cotton has great character, a great personality and a great work ethic. The corporate work-study program is the “key differentiator” at Verbum Dei because it exposes students to different career opportunities, Mr. Viola said.

After high school, Mr. Cotton enrolled in California State University, Bakersfield and began studying finance.

Norberto Hernandez, Braylon Howard, Christian Mendoza and Adan Clemente, students at Verbum Dei High School in Los Angeles. The high school focuses on serving families who would otherwise not be able to access Catholic education.

When it came time for an internship, Crescent Capital welcomed him back. He learned different dimensions of financing at the company and, eventually, was offered a full-time position to begin after he graduates this summer.

“So I stayed down for the come up, if that makes sense,” Mr. Cotton said, meaning he saw the challenge through for the payoff. “Not everybody [in South L.A.] has to go through sports [to achieve success]. And I’m kind of like a walking testimony of that.”

Tuition at Verbum Dei is \$2,700, though families typically pay around \$1,000 after financial aid. The school receives most of its funding from donations and the paid internships. Currently, there are 319 students enrolled at the school, and this year’s graduating class will be the largest in 17 years. The school, founded in 1962 by the Society of the Divine Word, implemented the Cristo Rey model in 2002 after the Jesuits took on administrative duties.

Students predominantly come from communities of color; 71 percent are Latino and 15 percent are African American. More than 60 percent of the faculty and staff are also from communities of color.

“We’re not just a Jesuit high school plopped in the middle of Watts,” said Steve Privett, S.J., president of the school. “We’re a different operation because we serve a different population.”

Where some see the area only as an impoverished neighborhood, Father Privett said the community is rich in “potential, vitality and resilience.” Jesse Jovel, vice president of Verbum Dei’s corporate work-study program, is an example of that.

“[Verbum Dei] accepted me on a probationary basis because my transcript was so out of control,” he said, noting that he had been previously expelled from public school. “This was my parents’ last attempt at correcting the path that I was on.”

Mr. Jovel had to repeat the 10th grade at Verbum Dei. If he failed, his parents planned for him to start working for his father’s truck company.

“I remember being like, ‘Wow, I can’t really disappear here the way I could at my previous school.’ And not only can you not really disappear here, you can’t really have a bad habit for too long before you get course-corrected,” Mr. Jovel said. “I felt seen at Verb for the first time.”

After graduating, Mr. Jovel went on to major in English at Loyola Marymount University. He also spent a year teaching in Colombia as a Fulbright Scholar.

“Being from working-class families means that students’ parents may be stretched really, really thin, in dif-

ferent ways. Stretched financially. But most importantly, stretched with time,” he said. “And what that means is there are more gaps and you can fall through the cracks. And because of where we all come from, there’s more temptation to go in different directions.”

### **Building on the Community’s Strength**

Most of the students live in gang territory, he said, though he believes drugs present a greater temptation. “You don’t have to be a gang member to feel the impacts of gang culture, of poverty, of not having,” Mr. Jovel said.

Yet in the work-study program, he makes it a point to build on the experiences of the students, their families and the surrounding community. The education and the corporate internships add to the gifts the students already have when they come to the school, he said.

Dr. Brandi Odom Lucas, the school’s principal, compared the mission of Verbum Dei to Freedom Schools, which sought to remedy the poor educational opportunities offered to African Americans in the 1960s, mostly in the South.

“Our mission is really to get those students who cannot afford a traditional Catholic education,” she said. “This is something we need to do because the kids deserve it. With the rising costs of housing in Los Angeles, the rising costs of gas, the impact of the pandemic, what we know is that there is enough need to go around. But our program doesn’t change.”

Dr. Odom Lucas grew up in the area and attended Junipero Serra High School in Gardena, a sports rival to Verbum Dei. She described the Latino and African American neighborhoods as tight-knit communities that look out for each other.

“We’re not the beacon of light. We’re not the hope in the darkness. That’s Jesus. That’s the Lord. We’re not all that,” she said. “It’s when I do the work alongside others, alongside students, alongside parents, that’s when Jesus shows up. And there’s so many examples of Jesus showing up at Verbum Dei. And that’s when we know we’re doing things right.”

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

### **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.*





# *‘Sex and the City’ Did Not Change. We Did.*

By Elizabeth Grace Matthew



HBO's "And Just Like That," like "Sex and the City" before it, is an exaggerated funhouse mirror of its viewers' world.

The consensus on the recent sequel to "Sex and the City," entitled "And Just Like That," seems to be that the old show's spirit and thread have been lost. And indeed, as the episodes were released each week from December 2021 to February 2022, I watched each one with a near-perpetual cringe that bespoke my visceral agreement with the prevailing view: "And Just Like That" is just bad television.

The show is not particularly funny. Some of the dialogue is awkward and tedious. Depending on one's perspective, the new inclusion of racially and sexually diverse characters either bumps up against or epitomizes tokenism. Inevitably, attempts at so-called antiracism reflect the worst of what used to be called limousine liberalism. Even more inevitably, attempts to negotiate between aging gracefully and staying relevant are strained.

Still, despite my broad dislike of the show's presumptions and plotlines, something kept me tuning in week after week. Perhaps it was just my peculiar fondness for these characters, with whom I spent many comfortable hours, despite my repugnance for much of what they stood for.

Like many of my contemporaries (I am 34—an old millennial), I have watched the original "Sex and the City" series (1998-2004) far more than once. (It remains my laundry-folding show of choice, and three young kids create a lot of laundry.) The explicit ideals of "Sex and the City"—sexual promiscuity, denigration of young marriage and moth-

erhood, irrelevance of religion and centrality of fashion—were always antithetical to what we as Catholics might call the good, the true and the beautiful. Moreover, its implicit ideals—the exclusionary presumption of whiteness in one of the most multicultural metropolises in the world, and the even more exclusionary presumption of money and status as indicative of characterological worth—were always equally central to the show and equally abhorrent.

Yet I both appreciate and like "Sex and the City" for exactly what it has always been, and what I am arguing here that "And Just Like That" is also, at bottom. Both shows are exaggerated funhouse mirrors of their viewers' worlds. They douse the elite aspirations and shibboleths of their own times in sufficient glitter that they are not just reified but also—intentionally or not—revealed and ultimately challenged.

In 1998, "Sex and the City" took on the question whether women really could "have sex like men" in a 1990s New York City that had turned the page on the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and fully absorbed the sexual revolution—not in its earlier iteration as 1970s youth culture, but as the sophisticated woman's approach to a post-romance world. The question was answered with ambivalence, in the show as in the culture: "Well, yes and no."

Meanwhile, "Sex and the City" provided a great deal of fodder not only for laughter but also for

thought—about similarities and differences between the sexes, and about the strained coexistence of modern and premodern iterations of femininity. Most of all, the show highlighted romantic and sexual behavior among elites, in a world where the conventions of Edith Wharton's upper-crust New York were simultaneously so long gone as to render the landscape utterly unrecognizable and yet recent enough to haunt the ornate hotel lobbies and brownstone homes with the whiff of their very absence.

Early in the original series, in those waning days of the 1990s, well-funded hedonism reigned supreme. Of course, there was a melancholy emptiness lurking underneath all the labels and shoes and fancy lunches: Our protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw, just couldn't get the man she loved to love her back. But the unconditional love of her friends, the unimpeded pursuit of luxury goods and the hot nights with hot men got her through. Back then, Bill Clinton—known womanizer and accused rapist—pursued an ostensibly feminist agenda in the Oval Office. #MeToo had not happened yet; and the baby boomers and Gen-Xers featured in the show mocked the era's so-called political correctness in a way that was tolerated and even expected because, after all, we all knew they were the good guys. We were living, it felt, in a moment after history: Sure, most people couldn't afford \$525 shoes, but they identified with someone who could.

By 2004, when the original se-

# ‘Sex and the City’ provided a great deal of fodder not only for laughter but also for thought. ●●

ries ended, the climaxes of the show did not take place in the bedroom any more. There was Charlotte, finally becoming a mother by adopting a baby from China with her less-than-attractive but tender and generous husband, Harry. There was Miranda, who had left her anti-man feminist past so far behind that she was taking care of her bartending husband’s elderly mother and raising her son in Brooklyn. There was Samantha, whose new gravitas as a coupled-up cancer survivor was the original show’s final word on its most stereotypically sexually liberated character (until the two movies, released in 2008 and 2012, respectively, turned her into a cartoon). And there was Carrie, whose romantic dreams of life in Paris with a Russian paramour were shattered, and who was rescued—a damsel in distress straight out of medieval lore if ever the 21st century produced one—by her big, strong man.

It was the mid-2000s. The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, had made us fearful and renewed our interest in traditional happy endings. Moreover, the reflexive anti-Americanism that had been en vogue among elites since the late 1960s had run its course for a fleeting moment—just like the indifferent-to-love feminism on offer in “Sex and the City.” What we really craved deep down, it seemed, was a safe home with a good man. It might

have been a saccharine finale, but it was the one the audience wanted.

And now, in 2022, “And Just Like That” continues the old “Sex and the City” project: revealing our moneyed, East Coast elites to themselves—and to everyone else—using just enough obvious hyperbole to soften the edges of their extreme solipsism. The likeness has never been less flattering, because such elites have never been more thoroughly out of touch with their fellow citizens.

Kristin Davis’s Charlotte is a caricature of the wealthy, liberal Karen: an off-putting mixture of white-lady tears and virtue signaling that makes everyone else’s emotional distress—from her nonbinary middle schooler, to her Black friend, to her widowed bestie—about her.

Meanwhile, Cynthia Nixon’s Miranda is a woker-than-thou white lady who crusades for anti-racism by trying to save Black peers from inconveniences that do not have anything discernable to do with their race (and further inconveniencing those very Black people in the process while attempting to make herself feel and look good). She is also a cheater—upending a now-sexless marriage with her long-time husband, Steve, to pursue unimpeded lust with a nonbinary, younger love interest with whom she has passionate, spontaneous sex while neglecting her promise to care for Carrie

after surgery.

And, finally, Sarah Jessica Parker’s Carrie is a prudish-by-today’s-standards podcast guest unwilling to talk graphically about her sex life. Carrie, who was once a columnist too seedy to date a mayoral candidate! And then she is a widow, alone once again and yearning for Mr. Big, until the next first kiss comes along—which it does, in the final moments of the series.

Kim Cattrall’s Samantha does not appear in the new series because of interpersonal issues between the actresses. Samantha is referred to as being in London, having retreated from her friendships with the rest of the erstwhile foursome after Carrie stopped using her as a publicist. The storyline is questionable—but I would likely leave New York for London, too, if these most recent iterations of Charlotte, Miranda and Carrie were my closest connections in the Big Apple.

If the characters in “And Just Like That” feel even less likable than their prior selves in “Sex and the City,” perhaps it is actually not because the show has changed, but because the social landscape it so deftly reveals by way of hyperbole has. That is, these very people—elite, 50-something East Coasters in 2022—are in fact less likable than their 30-something selves were in 2002.

“Sex and the City,” for all its limitations, was a story about the universal human condition. As all stories must do, it explored the human condition through specific characters who—love them or loathe them—were relatable because they expressed their humanity in a universally understandable way. Like other iconic antiheroes of the era—Tony Soprano of “The So-

"And Just Like That" continues the old "Sex and the City" project: revealing our moneyed, East Coast elites to themselves.



Craig Blankenhorn/HBO Max

pranos," Omar Little of "The Wire," Bill Hendrickson of "Big Love"—Carrie Bradshaw lived a life that bore no overt resemblance to any that I have lived or wanted to live.

I have never been a 30-something single woman in New York any more than I have been a New Jersey mafia boss, a Baltimore stick-up man or a polygamist in Utah. But I do not need to be any of these things to understand these characters, or to see them in all their moral complexity; to empathize and identify with them, even as I question or condemn them. Because these were great stories, and great stories are all the same beneath the splendid array of differences that makes each one unique. The *answers* (whom to kill, whom to marry, how to cope) are specific to the place, the time, the characters and the circumstances. But the *questions* (Who am I? What is my life about? What is my legacy?) that necessitate those answers are universal to the human condition.

"And Just Like That" is about the human condition, too. Love (roman-

tic, parental and other) and loss (not just Big's death, but also Miranda's unraveled marriage and Samantha's text-only appearances) are the show's themes. And yet the characters converse and behave in ways so foreign to anyone outside the tiny clique of white East Coast elites (like Charlotte and Harry, who rehearse for dinners with Black friends by preparing to name-drop as many Black authors as possible—eek!) that the momentum of the show does not wind up resting on an appeal to the universal humanity of everyone, even if they're not like us. It rests, instead, on the presumption that everyone worth sharing our humanity with is, in all the ways that actually matter, just like us.

In this way, this fictional show about these specific people reflects, in a somewhat exaggerated but by no means inaccurate manner, the newly codified and truly staggering insularity of white East Coast elites in 2022. As such, the show remains worthwhile art, and a worthy story. But it is also a sadder story, and not just because

it evocatively depicts so much love lost for the characters (though that is true). It is sad because it accurately reflects how much understanding of their shared humanity has been lost between the demographic set that the characters represent and the fellow citizens from whom they are ever more polarized by class and education (even as they are less divided along lines of race and sexual orientation within their upper-class milieu).

Maybe this is why I kept dutifully watching "And Just Like That"—not in spite of its "so out of touch and elitist we're not even aware of it" quintessence, but because of it.

After all, I couldn't help but wonder: Is this where it all ends? Or will the next season—in the show and in the culture it so aptly reflects—be better?

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# Mark Wahlberg is putting everything behind ‘Father Stu’

By Bill McGarvey



Karen Ballard / Copyright 2022 CTMG, Inc.

“The religious types were all very nervous, and they all wanted me to make a faith-based movie that was very safe, very middle of the road, and very kind of, you know, bland,” says Mark Wahlberg. “And we’ve seen those movies, and they don’t really move the needle much.”

It is early March, and Wahlberg is deep into an intense promotional campaign for his new film, “Father Stu,” which will take him through its April 13 opening, in the middle of Holy Week. He is holding screenings all across the United States beating the drum for “Father Stu,” a true story about a rough-and-tumble failed boxer who became a priest.

Wahlberg recently called the film the “most important movie I’ve ever done, and...the best movie I’ve ever been a part of.” Considering he has been nominated for two Academy Awards and has served as executive producer of iconic shows like HBO’s “Entourage” and “Boardwalk Empire,” that is quite a statement.

The film is clearly important to Wahlberg, a very public and commit-

ted Catholic with his own violent past, on personal, professional and spiritual levels. “I’ve always talked about my faith, which is good and fine and dandy and people know that,” he says. “But then at the same time, you’ve got to kind of put your money where your mouth is.”

For Wahlberg, “Father Stu” represented a level of engagement around his faith and his work life that he had been considering for years.

“I’ve always been like, O.K., as soon as I get to a certain place, and I have a certain voice and reach and platform, then I’ll start doing more things that will move the needle in terms of my faith, and things that I think could be productive, helpful and in service. So when this project came to me, I was like, ‘You know what? I need to go make this.’”

Wahlberg first came across the story in 2016 and had been developing the film with David O. Russell, who directed “The Fighter.” But he felt the script they had wasn’t going in the right direction. Wahlberg wanted complete creative control, so he decided to finance

the film largely with his own money, much as his friend and “Father Stu” co-star Mel Gibson did with “The Passion of the Christ.” The screenwriter Rosalind Ross eventually wrote a screenplay that Wahlberg loved so much that he asked her to direct as well—her first time helming a film.

In “Father Stu,” Gibson plays the troubled, alcoholic father to the film’s title character, Stuart Long (Wahlberg), a Golden Gloves-winning boxer who leaves his native Montana after his prizefighting dreams fizzle. Chasing stardom, Long moves west to become an actor in Hollywood. While looking for his big break in Los Angeles, he works as a bouncer and gets into his own share of trouble, getting arrested for fighting and drunk driving.

A near-death experience on his motorcycle leads him to explore religion, and he agrees to become a Catholic in order to marry his Mexican-American girlfriend. At his baptism, Long feels a powerful call to ordination. After significant resistance and numerous roadblocks put up by the seminary rector, he is finally ad-

mitted to study for the priesthood.

While in seminary, Long is diagnosed with inclusion body myositis, an extremely rare, incurable autoimmune disease that mimics the symptoms of A.L.S. The disease causes his once powerful body to weaken significantly, creating new roadblocks to his ordination.

Ultimately ordained in his hometown diocese of Helena, Mont., in 2007, the real-life Father Stu had only a brief career in ministry. In the seven years before his death in 2014, his physical condition deteriorated rapidly, though the spiritual impact of his ministry grew exponentially. When he was confined to a motorized wheelchair, people lined up to meet with him outside the rehabilitation center and nursing home where he lived and worked as a priest, confessor and spiritual advisor. Father Stu came to see his illness as the best thing that had ever happened to him, because it enabled him to let go of an unhealthy sense of pride he'd had for most of his life.

Wahlberg was convinced that Long's story of redemption could have a real impact on a wide range of audiences, not simply on Catholics and Christians. "Tough grace and tough mercy is what Stu earned through his suffering, and through his work and giving back," he says. Wahlberg hopes the film amplifies "the importance of redemption and rooting for people to change and grow as opposed to turning our backs on them." In very troubled and uncertain times, Wahlberg says, his intention is to "give people hope, and encourage people to pursue their faith, whatever that is."

In order to show the reality of what tough mercy truly is, Wahlberg needed the freedom to tell Father Stu's story as unapologetically and realistically as possible. The film's R rating might scare off more pious religious

audiences, but he believes strongly that the roughness of the film is also the source of its power.

"We wanted to make a movie that was edgy, and real and relatable to everybody," he says. "And Stu was one of those guys that when he did his prison ministries, it was where he was most effective, because he could speak with [prisoners] on their level and he understood that he was one of them and that he had been in those seats. And now he was on the other side, and he was reminding them that God's not going to give up on you and neither is he."

Wahlberg himself was once in that seat as well. Having dropped out of high school in the ninth grade, he became involved with drugs and gangs and was arrested several times for racially motivated violent crimes in his native Boston. At 16 he was tried as an adult and charged with attempted murder of a Vietnamese shopkeeper; he later said he was high on PCP at the time. He served only 45 days for felony assault and decades later met with the victim to make amends and received forgiveness. He credits his own faith for saving him: "When all was said and done, and I was alone, and my friends weren't there for me anymore, I had my faith, and I had people of faith trying to point me in the right direction."

Wahlberg is famously regimented in his life, waking up before dawn to work out and then spend time in prayer. (He has a chapel in his home.) He is a creature of habit and discipline and yet doesn't seem to suffer from the rigidity and judgmentalism often associated with deeply devout people. Reporters have asked him to explain his Catholic faith and his support of same-sex marriage, to which he has responded: "I just think we have a lot more important issues to be worrying about."

Perhaps it has something to do

with the true stories he is often drawn to, but it would be hard to miss the sense of mercy and surrender in the movies Wahlberg is choosing to make. Given his own experiences, it is not surprising that there is something deeply lived—and flawed—in the characters he has played of late. In 2020, there was "Joe Bell," the story of a disapproving father who sets off on an ill-fated pilgrimage across the country after his gay teenage son, Jadin, commits suicide after repeated bullying.

"I think there is a big, big issue about what it takes to make a man and what people put on the term or the emphasis of being a man.... All this macho stuff and how it's defined, to me it just doesn't matter," says Wahlberg. "I think Jadin was the epitome of what a man should be. He was loving and kind and caring, and he had so much to offer. He didn't have anybody to really accept all the wonderful gifts that he had to offer, which I found to be really heartbreaking."

Now, he brings to the screen the story of the hell-raising Stuart Long, who is moved to change his life only to find his life transformed in ways he could not have foreseen. These choices of film roles suggest that Wahlberg is compelled to move beyond rhetoric and piety. "Father Stu" will likely appeal to church audiences, but it is not a story of holiness or triumph; it is a story of struggle and accompaniment. It is as if Wahlberg wants to shed mere ideas and abstractions and move toward embodiment.

"Stu really wasn't so much about church," he says, "as he was about the guy who died to build it."

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# Joining Poetry, Song and Story

Alejandro Nava's *Street Scriptures* is haunted by the distinction between high and low culture. Pictured: Lauryn Hill in 2018.

Città di Parma/Wikimedia Commons

With *Street Scriptures: Between God and Hip-Hop*, Alejandro Nava introduces an intervention into the excesses and shortcomings of two of the major theological movements of the 20th century: Latin American liberation theology and Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of beauty, the *via pulchritudinis*. He notes how liberation theology underdetermined beauty as a suspicious distraction from social justice, while the theology of beauty, in liturgy and beyond, overdetermined beauty through a fixed cultural lens. From the outset, Nava exposes a Catholic political and aesthetic anthropology as bankrupt without an equally robust cultural anthropology.

This erudition and range make the book's most compelling case for itself. If anything, Nava's method of dynamically deploying the canon deserves its own book, set apart from theology and perhaps revealing far more about the craft of hip-hop.

This short book is thoroughly annotated with references and footnotes ranging from classical antiquity to contemporary hip-hop. In Footnote 47 of Chapter Four (my favorite chapter), for instance, on the music of rapper Kendrick Lamar, Nava contrasts Lamar's song "Loyal," featuring the international pop sensation Rihanna, with R&B singer Chris Brown's earlier eponymous diss track of Rihanna as a thematic setting continuous with Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Nava's introduction is haunted by the distinction between high and low culture. I share Nava's hostility toward this division, one born of German cultural theory. I am not as confident, however, that its destruction will be accomplished through external additions or subtractions. We should begin from the ground up when discussing things like hip-hop or any form of art, especially forms of performative and spiritual art like music.

It has been said that when Elvis

Presley was asked what kind of music he sang, he replied with "music." Louis Armstrong was similarly interrogated about what kind of music he played. He famously answered with "folk music: music for folks." The lesson is the same for both: The genrefication of music is always a gentrification of folk music.

Whether by Bach or the New Orleans funk-fusion band Tank and the Bangas, all music is folk music; the tools have never belonged to a single master. This folk alternative to Nava's *Kultur*-haunted introduction would destroy the pernicious gentrification of music, without elitism or anti-intellectualism, and clear the scene for an intervention into Catholic theology that Nava rightly criticizes as thoroughly gentrified.

Nava begins his formal analysis by situating hip-hop as something that "recovers the oral, rhythmic, and melodic nature of ancient scriptural transmission." Like the book's introduction, this opening settles for an un-

Street Scriptures  
Between God and Hip-Hop  
By Alejandro Nava  
University of Chicago Press  
256p \$27.50

derstated ethno-musicological truism expressed in a nonetheless brilliant turn of phrase: “Word is bond for the Greeks, we might say, because it joins together poetry, song, and story.”

I share Nava’s sentiment but would, again, push for a more radical rendering. The Greek word *poiesis* is derived from the verb for “to make”; it is pure creativity. Poetics, in this sense, refers to something much deeper than lyrical verse. On this more radical understanding of poetics, every act of creation is poetic, from the *ruach* of Genesis to the *logos* of the Gospel of John.

On this more fundamental interpretation of poetics, hip-hop not only recovers the spoken word, as Nava rightly insists. It also recaptures the sacred elements of divine breath and divine love that combine into something more radical than Aristotle’s generic metaphysical *poiesis*. A fully poetic hip-hop recovers the force of a distinctly Abrahamic *poiesis*, where the divine power to make is freely given to human persons made in the image and likeness of almighty God. Creation becomes an act of liberation from nothingness.

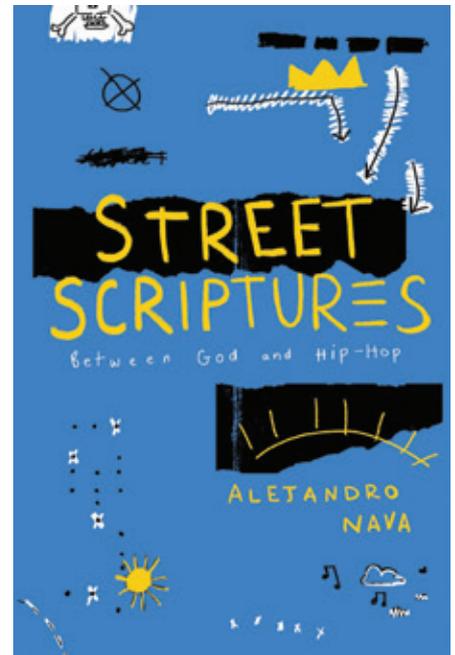
Nava’s historical account of hip-hop and his focus on major players like the R&B singer-songwriter Lauryn Hill, the hip-hop legend Tupac Shakur and the rapper Kendrick Lamar may be informative for someone unfamiliar and willing to do their homework, but it mainly invites scrutiny from hip-hop heads. I was relieved that Nava excluded the whitestreamed work of MC Hammer and others. I was shocked to see Eminem mentioned only in

negative contrast to the comparative newcomer Chance the Rapper, and I found the treatment of Kanye West defensive and arbitrary. In many ways, these curatorial and editorial decisions are always controversial, so it is not necessary to dwell on them except to note that the history presented is more than just a bit romantic—with little justification, theological or otherwise, for its selections.

Nava notes a deeper issue in the book from time to time but seems to fall victim to it nonetheless: a prosaic emphasis on lyrical content and the tacit assumption that rapping is not a form of singing. Nava acknowledges his own awareness of the latter concern several times but does not resolve it in his own analysis and seems to succumb to it.

The accusation that rapping is just talking or is incomprehensible is a generic complaint made of all music that deviates from arbitrary aesthetical standards of melodic diction. Whether it is about Bob Dylan’s and Leonard Cohen’s vocal delivery or the approach to jazz melody of the saxophonist Charlie Parker and the guitarist Mary Halverson—or the claim that the Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson and the “Godfather of Soul,” James Brown, shout too much—the insipid and philistine claim that rapping is not melodic or musical must be forcefully rejected.

The phrasing and signature flow of a rapper, entirely apart from free-style or writing skills, is indistinguishable from any and every other musical form. As a result, Nava’s overdetermination of hip-hop has



the effect of removing these essential elements (plus live instrumentation, sampling, arrangement and studio production) from the vast ensemble of hip-hop artistry.

Nava’s depiction (or lack thereof) of the relationship between hip-hop, jazz and R&B is another example of this overdetermination. Before Hill’s iconic *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* album, her hip-hop cover of Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly” in *The Score* by The Fugees showed us that hip-hop never existed entirely apart from soul standards. Furthermore, the remixed R&B standard—my personal favorite is Tupac’s “Do For Love”—is an obvious form of hip-hop composition neglected in this history. After all, Hill’s *Miseducation* also gave birth to neo-soul, a rebirth of soul music in the fusion of soul, hip-hop and jazz with the neo-soul pioneers D’Angelo, Erykah Badu and Jill Scott leading the way Hill paved. (This leaves Nava’s suggestion that rappers are better singers nowadays in a difficult position.)

Nava’s final chapters take a Latin American turn, noting for instance the

demographic composition of Compton in relation to the work of Angelica Garcia, who has Mexican and Salvadoran roots, in her song “Jícama.” Nava writes, “If Tupac once acknowledged the presence of Mexicans on the West Coast... mainstream rap has been silent on the topic lately, seeing the world only in black and white, missing the nuances and tinges of color, ignoring the shades of brown.” Nava offers a literal interpretation of Ozomatli’s question in their song “La Misma Canción”—“What is a DJ if he can’t scratch to a *ranchera*?”—and asserts that hip-hop will need to account for *ranchera* music to survive the browning of America.

Like Richard Delgado’s critique of critical race theory, claiming it inscribes a black/white binary, Nava’s critique of hip-hop rings hollow. I took particular exception to his move to decenter Blackness from hip-hop because I am increasingly aware of the ways this distorts the problem of the color line and the question of race in the Americas; if undertaken uncritically, it can offer a brown smokescreen for anti-Black rhetoric.

The quite dated browning-of-America arguments were always historically and ancestrally tortured for me, a *frontera*-born, “*más Americano*” Tejano. Recycling the same tired refrain for hip-hop strikes me as missing what D’Angelo understood in “Spanish Joint” and surely what Hill understood when she paved the road “To Zion” with the Mexican-inflected guitar licks of Carlos Santana.

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## A Poet of Gentle Nature

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Neeli Cherkovski, the prolific poet (most lately of *ABCs* and *Hang On to the Yangtze River*) and biographer of Charles Bukowski, first wrote a biography of Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1979. This recently released expanded edition of *Ferlinghetti, A Life* includes a new foreword, epilogue and afterword, each of them alight with moving, intimate stories.

In the foreword, “From the City of Angels to the City of Poets,” Cherkovski tells of how he came to write the biography. Fired from the San Francisco mayoral campaign of George Moscone and living off unemployment checks, he got to know Ferlinghetti and other local poets starting in 1974. He learned Ferlinghetti had a shy, sensitive side but was also “committed to clarity, not just in prose but in poetry as well.”

One day, hanging out in Caffe Trieste, Cherkovski met Jerry Rubin, one of the infamous Chicago Seven, a group of political activists arrested for their antiwar activities at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Ill. Cherkovski mentioned his idea for a biography of Ferlinghetti. Rubin called his agent on a pay phone. The agent loved the idea, and this book was born, but only after Cherkovski took a tab of acid to help him write the proposal and “cajoled” the secretive Ferlinghetti into telling him more details about his life and thought.

Ferlinghetti was born in Yonkers, N.Y., in 1919 to an Italian/French family. His father died when Ferlinghetti was an infant; his mother was mentally unstable thereafter. An aunt and uncle took the infant Ferlinghetti in.

Soon after, his aunt Emily left her husband and took Ferlinghetti to France; thus, like Thomas Merton, his first language was French. Though Emily returned to her husband, things did not work out; she went to work for a rich Bronxville family, taking the boy with her (after first depositing him in an orphanage for a few months). At some point she left—no one told him why—and the family adopted him.

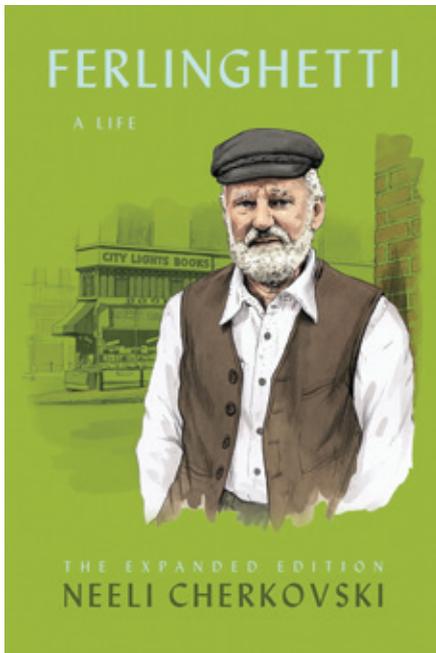
Ferlinghetti ended up having a mostly solitary childhood filled with large, clean rooms with large windows and many books. The solitude, the books and the views of oak trees in the changing light profoundly shaped his character. Cherkovski writes:

Lawrence had been uprooted as a child, and the abiding symbol of his early years continued to be the fantasy carnival—the Coney Island of his imagination—far off in the distance, unreachable but always calling. To this day he has trouble recalling the realities of his childhood.

Much of it is still buried. When he writes about his youth he uses death imagery instead of the mundane symbols of his everyday life.

But he had friends in boarding school; one of them, Alden Monroe, a.k.a. “Rube,” from Peabody, Mass., always carried around two books: *The Sun Also Rises* and *Look Homeward, Angel*. The latter, with its subtitle, “A Study of the Buried Life,” reverberated within Ferlinghetti for the rest of his life.

After an eventful stint in the Navy during the Second World War, Fer-



### Ferlinghetti, A Life

Expanded Edition  
By Neeli Cherkovski  
Black Sparrow Press  
272p \$18.95

linghetti returned to New York City; and, inspired by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (for years he carried around a copy of Eliot's *Four Quartets*), as well as Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings and Kenneth Patchen, he began writing his own poetry.

In 1948 he journeyed to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. Cherkovski writes:

As he worked on the thesis [*The City as a Symbol in Modern Poetry: In Search of a Metropolitan Tradition*], Ferlinghetti began to study Catholicism, an interest that developed as he toured the many cathedrals and churches of Paris. He read

Thomas Aquinas and other Catholic thinkers and got to know a priest with whom he would argue almost weekly for a long period of time about Catholic doctrine. Much of his mature poetry reflects the arguments that raced through his mind back then.

As noted in *America* after Ferlinghetti's passing in February 2021, one of the Catholic thinkers Ferlinghetti read was Thomas Merton, particularly *The Seven-Storey Mountain*. One of Ferlinghetti's objections to Catholicism, to judge from his poetry and his last novel, *Little Boy*, was the church's ban on artificial contraception; he was concerned about overpopulation from early on. He may also have objected to Catholicism's focus on sin; he loved Walt Whitman's passage about wanting to "live with animals" who "do not sweat and whine about their condition,/ They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,/ They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God." Of course, animals do not write poems, either.

Ferlinghetti later settled in San Francisco because it seemed to be the most European of American cities. He wrote reviews and short pieces on the local literary scene for newspapers and taught for one year at the University of San Francisco, where he sparred briefly with what he perceived as rigid Catholic dogmatism. In June of 1953, he opened City Lights Bookstore with Peter Martin, and a significant movement of literary history began. What put the store and publishing house on the map nationally was Allen Ginsberg's trial for obscenity for his poem "Howl," which Ferlinghetti published

while hailing Ginsberg as the new Walt Whitman. As usual, the banning of a book led to its mass popularity.

For the rest of his life, with much help, Ferlinghetti ran the bookstore and its small publishing house, wrote, painted and got away occasionally to a cabin in Bixby Canyon with his wife and two children. He also traveled the world and was politically active in leftist causes. He was never a "useful idiot," though. The oppressive melancholy in the Soviet Union struck him forcibly; and though the Nicaraguan revolution impressed him, he was wary because of Fidel Castro's involvement.

What struck me as I read about Ferlinghetti was that he was able to be a decent man—"His gentle nature is missed," Cherkovski writes in his afterword—while staying true to his vocations as a poet, painter and bookseller. In one sense—perhaps, ironically, because of his connection to the Beat poets—he was a Renaissance man. He had been a warrior, a family man, a businessman and poet-painter. Yet he was shy, reluctant to take center stage (also occasionally argumentative, cheap and boastful about his painting, the author notes). Cherkovski says, "You could honor him as a poet or as a publisher or as a bookseller or as an advocate for human rights and civil liberties—or simply for his whole being."

This biography is not an academic one. Rather it is a biography by "a poet who set out to celebrate another poet." "In that," Cherkovski writes, "I hope I succeeded." That he has.

Franklin Freeman, a frequent contributor to *America*, lives in Maine.

## Toleration and Assimilation

Can Catholics be Americans? In his new book, *Our Dear-Bought Liberty*, Michael D. Breidenbach offers a persuasive account of how Catholics have wrestled with this question since the earliest days of the Maryland Colony. In so doing, he exhumes treasures of great significance for our own time.

As Breidenbach sees it, religious liberty was tied to loyalty. If Catholics wanted to be tolerated, they had to prove their loyalty—first to the Stuarts, then to Parliament, then the House of Hanover and then the fledgling American republic.

This need to prove their loyalty put a kind of assimilation within reach for Catholics, albeit a tenuous one open only to elites. George Calvert, for instance, went public with his Catholic faith in 1625. Although he had to give up some of his government posts, he was permitted to run his colony of Maryland and was even created Baron Baltimore by King James I. The high-level efforts of John Carroll, a former Jesuit and the first bishop of Baltimore (and the United States), persuaded leading American statesmen like James Madison that Catholics were committed partisans of the independence effort and should be trusted with positions of responsibility in the new republic. Indeed, they could be granted religious liberty.

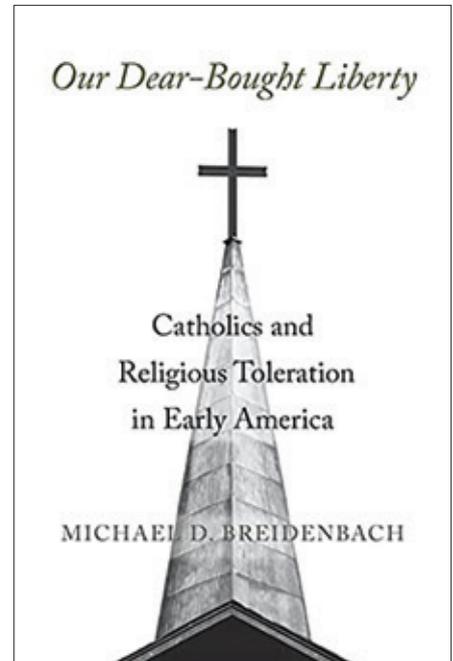
In other words, whatever the theoretical difficulties facing Catholics serving the British crown or the American republic, individual Catholics could overcome them. There was an element of contingency to such efforts. Careful, prudent and above all

politically-powerful Catholics could help secure the blessings of liberty for their co-religionists, but those blessings were always at risk. After all, there were always arguments, from Anglican divines to John Locke, about the incompatibility of Catholicism and British citizenship; and kings or parliaments could deploy those anti-Catholic arguments when it served their interest.

Here, too, Breidenbach opens up new vistas on the history of religion in the American colonies. Catholics, he notes, did not counter such arguments by becoming more Protestant. They did marshal some ancient “anti-papalist” traditions in their own defense, as Breidenbach ably recounts. Prominent English Catholics, for example, resisted the naming of a Catholic bishop for England in 1624, ultimately forcing his resignation in 1631. Similarly, U.S. Catholics ensured that the first bishop named in the new country, John Carroll, was seen to be elected by his fellow priests in 1788 and not by Rome.

Such examples underline that many U.S. Catholics could turn to ample resources in their British past to address the difficulties of proving their fidelity to the Protestant-dominated state.

The political and theological were deeply intertwined in the world Breidenbach summons forth, and so the jealous rivalry between political and ecclesial authority never drops far beneath the surface. In his recounting, Catholics even today often address this issue by buying into the Erastian doctrine of many English monarchists, in which the church was largely subservient to the state. For students of politics, it becomes clear that many of the Catholics in Breidenbach’s sto-



ry are Hobbesians: The state has full, uncontested authority, brooking no competitors.

A great attribute of the book is Breidenbach’s skillful blending of narrative and theory. *Our Dear-Bought Liberty* finds much of its organizing structure as a kind of a *roman-fleuve* of the Calvert and Carroll families. And yet Breidenbach constantly attends to the concerns that animate his subjects and the questions and dilemmas that shape their pursuit of them. Breidenbach is a historian, but he writes history with a sensitivity to political theory, philosophy and theology. In one of many delightful details, Breidenbach notes that King Charles I wanted to name the colony of Maryland “Mariana,” a double tribute to his wife Henrietta Maria and the Jesuit Juan de Mariana. Breidenbach notes the irony of a soon-to-be-executed king taking an interest in a famous theorist of regicide.

**Our Dear-Bought Liberty**  
Catholics and Religious Toleration in  
Early America

By Michael D. Breidenbach  
Harvard University Press  
368p \$45

A guiding focus of the book is Maryland's status as an exemplar of religious toleration. In fact, that story is more complicated than the founding myths of the United States. The fortunes of Catholics (and indeed many religious minorities) waxed and waned in the colonial period, and sometimes Catholics were the worst oppressors of other Catholics in their efforts to prove their royalist loyalties. And yet Breidenbach does not miss the crucial significance of Maryland in U.S. history: It was a testing ground that proved that religious pluralism and religious liberty could indeed complement one another.

The book also has its poetic moments. For instance, Breidenbach's description of Cecil Calvert, second Lord Baltimore, deftly captures the changing fortunes of the Calvert family. Cecil never enjoyed the security of his father, and his young grandson at his side was never to be a peer of the realm. Breidenbach also records with brilliant narrative flourish the fate of an exquisite Flemish crucifixion scene by Peter Paul Rubens. The painting, obtained clandestinely through the wealth and power of George Calvert, was lost in the violence of the English Civil War, like so much life and limb.

While this is a distinctively modern story in historical terms, Breidenbach also adverts judiciously in the book to premodern political theory, and the reader is left wanting to know more about the conciliarists, John of

Paris and other neglected thinkers. Breidenbach clearly does not agree with John Courtney Murray, S.J., in all things, but he shares Murray's sense that much that is good in modern politics has a premodern pedigree.

In the interplay between liberty and loyalty laid out by Breidenbach, U.S. Catholics will recognize many of the basic dilemmas they continue to face. Whether they will be as adept at navigating them will be the task of future historians to assess.

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Bill McCormick, S.J., is a contributing editor at *America* and a visiting assistant professor at Saint Louis University in the departments of political science and philosophy.

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## Life and Love in the Work of Toni Morrison

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In 1984, the Black Catholic bishops of the United States wrote a letter on evangelization, "What We Have Seen and Heard." In that letter they identified four hallmarks of Black spirituality: It is *contemplative*, *holistic*, *joyful* and *communal*. All of these characteristics are highlighted in Nadra Nittle's *Toni Morrison's Spiritual Vision: Faith, Folktales, and Feminism in Her Life and Literature*.

"In keeping with our African her-

itage, we are not ashamed of our emotions," the bishops wrote. "For us, the religious experience is an experience of the whole human being—both the feelings and the intellect, the heart as well as the head.... Not only is it possible to counteract the dehumanizing forces in our world and our work but we can restore the human."

The hallmark of Black spirituality most evident in Nittle's account is that it is holistic. "In Morrison's worldview, as in Christianity, the last do come first. This means Blackness and femaleness are not to be loathed but revered," Nittle writes. "Toni Morrison grew up convinced of this fact because the African Americans in her family weren't just faithful people. They appeared to her in many ways to be magical, divine."

Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in 1931 in Ohio, Morrison became a Catholic at age 12. At her baptism, she took the name Anthony in honor of the saint of Padua; later, someone mistakenly called her "Toni," and the name stuck. A graduate of Howard University and Cornell University, Morrison later became the first Black female fiction editor at Random House. She published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. Another novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), won the National Book Critics Circle Award and brought her to national prominence. The publication of *Beloved* a decade later led to her reception of the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, and in 1993 she was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature. President Barack Obama gave her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012.

From 1989 to 2006, Morrison was a professor at Princeton University and Cornell University. She died in

August 2019 at the age of 88. Among the eulogists at a memorial service held several months later at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City were Oprah Winfrey (who produced and starred in the screen adaptation of *Beloved*), Fran Lebowitz, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Michael Ondaatje and Angela Davis.

Nittle wrote a story for **America** in 2017 (“The Ghosts of Toni Morrison: A Catholic Writer Confronts the Legacy of Slavery”) that became the kernel for *Toni Morrison’s Spiritual Vision*. Throughout the book, Nittle explores a dimension of African American spirituality seen in past generations but that still persists to some degree today: the mixing of organized religion with native or tribal religions. I can attest to this myself. My father was a native of Louisiana, and his parents and sister had some very definite thoughts about dreams and premonitions. Like Morrison, they found this compatible with their practice of Catholicism.

I can also relate when Nittle writes how Morrison’s “family believed that certain events in dreams represented events in real life—but often in an inverted way. A dream about a joyous occasion like a wedding signified that a somber occasion like a funeral was imminent.” I recall a relative whom my family feared because whenever she spoke of a dream, someone in our family would inevitably become gravely ill or die. Yet that woman was a very devout Catholic who went to Mass every Sunday and was the president of the Rosary Guild.

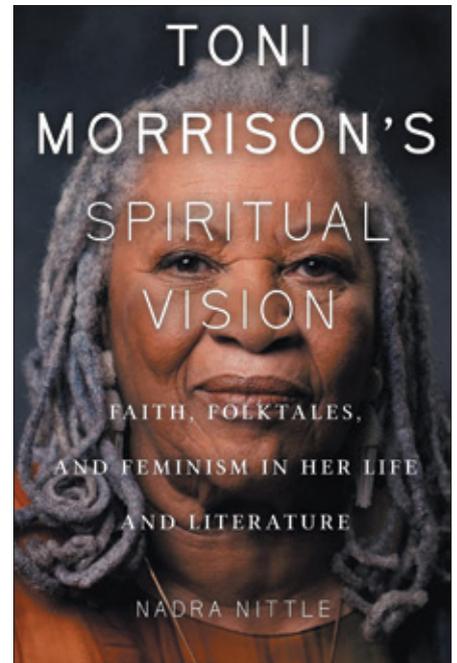
Morrison saw in this form of Christianity the beauty of ritual. We may not think of Morrison as a Catholic writer because her understanding

of the Catholic faith was not always explicitly shown in her writing, but God was often a presence along with some magical events among her characters and their circumstances. Nittle points out that in Morrison’s novel *Paradise*, there are elements of Afro-Brazilian religions along with the depiction of the Black Madonna:

In *Paradise*, a “syncretic cult” that merges West African spirituality with Roman Catholicism inspires the hatred of outsiders who brand such a belief system evil, but the Kingdom of Kongo demonstrates how Africans have approached religion in this way for centuries, if not always.

Nittle also spends a chapter discussing how Morrison’s novel *Sula* looks at the role of good and evil in a community. By setting part of the novel in New Orleans, a very Catholic city, Morrison explores the complicated issues of colorism, the treatment of Black women as sex objects and the existence of multicolored Virgin Marys. In these and other writings, Morrison recreates what I suspect she experienced as a child, as I did: the mixing of folklore, religion and dreams. Taken together, these make “the reality of an indigenous African way of being,” Nittle writes. “And in the mold of the Black oral tradition, her works have a moral core because African American storytellers serve primarily as teachers who impart life lessons to community members, particularly the young.”

I heard so many tales about life, death and how to (and how not to)



**Toni Morrison’s Spiritual Vision**  
Faith, Folktales, and Feminism in Her Life and Literature  
By Nadra Nittle  
192p \$24

act in the world from my Louisiana grandmother that their weight caused me to be extremely cautious as I grew older. Whether these stories were true or not, they had a moral conclusion and were often connected to my grandmother’s work as a housekeeper and cook. She often ended her stories with “God help them,” so as to suggest the constant human need for divine intervention.

Nittle states it well: “Healing—through religious syncretism, racial pride and the wisdom of elders—is the crux of Morrison’s fiction.” She provides the context for this assertion by exploring the origins and history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Black liberation theology, and the relationship between Black

Catholics and *hoodoo*—the use of plants, teas and other objects for healing by a leader, called a conjurer or root worker.

This last exploration encourages the reader to consider the pervasive role of racism within Christianity and the need to honor practices like *hoodoo* as a valid expression of healing and a way of restoring humanity. My grandmother believed that her healing poultices worked, but her prayers over me that I might be freed of a cold or allergy always included at least one Hail Mary. I believe this complicated amalgam of medicines and prayers cured me of my childhood allergies. Faith certainly entered into these experiences.

Toni Morrison's characters always find faith in themselves, in God and in the circumstances of life, without always explicitly naming it as faith. As Nittle notes, these discoveries lead them to new realizations and moments of deep awareness about life and love. The reader can see God in all areas of Morrison's characters' circumstances—in the "magic," in the pain and suffering, and in the call to healing and wholeness that leads to life.

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Boretta Singleton is the director of faculty formation at St. Peter's Prep High School in Jersey City, N.J. She is a candidate for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and a member of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Manhattan.

## Zoo Announcement

By Stephen Mead

We are letting go.  
We can no longer care to feed you.  
At nine a.m. cages, nets, moats, terraria  
    will be opened to effect your egress.  
Water-bound creatures, the mammals at least,  
    be sent to our inland seas.  
Insects let loose, amphibians too, reptiles and birds  
    arachnids, rodentia, lagomorpha, chiroptera—  
Say goodbye to your names, your classifications, families, groups, kingdoms.  
Because these are the New Dark Ages we must forget Latin again.  
Only remembering the words for master and servant.  
We are taking all our languages back to forget them ourselves.  
Of course, we will still have your bones, your teeth, some of your ancestors in  
amber.  
Things that require no care. We will forget about them soon enough.  
We want to thank you for the pleasure you have given our children when you  
played with your children.  
Thank you for bringing tourists to our town to spend their money here.  
Thank you for never complaining about being in a cage.  
We do not care that you have never thanked us.  
We are sorry we cannot send you back to your native land or water—  
Not that you could survive there any better, but still....

So, go. Go without names.  
Go without numbers.  
Go without knowing why.  
Just go.

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Stephen Xavier Mead teaches early literature and writing classes at Saint Martin's University in Lacey, Wash. His poetry has appeared in *The Indiana Review*, *The Crab Creek Review*, *The Artful Dodge* and *Paintbrush*.

## The Holy Spirit, Active Today

The feast of the Ascension is celebrated on the Thursday of the Sixth Week of Easter or the Seventh Sunday of Easter, depending on which diocese one lives in. It commemorates Jesus' ascension into heaven 40 days after the resurrection. Forty days is the same length as Lent, the period of preparation and prayerful reflection before celebrating Jesus' resurrection. Post-resurrection, Jesus spends 40 days encountering his followers in new ways, giving hope, empowerment and instructions for what they must do in light of his resurrection.

At the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus blesses the disciples before his ascension, and in the Acts of the

Apostles Jesus tells the disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them after he ascends. In the absence of Christ's physical presence on earth, the Holy Spirit is with the community, consoling, motivating and guiding their work. Throughout the Easter season, the promises of the Holy Spirit are heard in the Gospel readings, and the season reaches its end with the feast of Pentecost, which commemorates the sending of the Spirit.

Reflecting on the Ascension reminds us that the Spirit is active in the church and world today. We see this through people who live out the Gospel message of love and service

to others. We also see the Spirit motivating church leaders to listen and learn from the people of God. In 2021, Pope Francis began the synod on synodality as an endeavor to connect, pray and listen, calling on everyone to participate in the process: "Let's walk together as a church with the Holy Spirit."

The meetings and listening sessions throughout the world reflect the Spirit's continued presence in the church today. As we journey through the Easter season, Jesus' blessing and promise at his ascension are reminders to listen and be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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Everyone is called to serve, especially those who lead.

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Why is Jesus the Good Shepherd?

### FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (C), MAY 15, 2022

The power of love.

### SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (C), MAY 22, 2022

Recognizing the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

### SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (C), MAY 29, 2022

The power of prayer.



### Meet the Author

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# Amen! Let's Eat!

## On sharing the joy of saying grace

By Simcha Fisher



My kids once asked me if I knew what my own first word was, and I had to tell them that it was “Amen.”

They were a little abashed. What a holy, prayerful child I must have been! But it wasn't like that. My family always prayed before we ate, and since “Amen” came right before the food, I thought it meant, “Let's eat.”

“Amen! Amen!” I would holler, banging my spoon on the high chair tray like one hungering for the word of God (but actually just hungry).

The prayer we said before we got to “Amen” was a sort of all-purpose Hebrew prayer of blessing before a meal: *Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, Melekh ha'olam, shehakol nih'ye bidvaro.* (“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, by whose word all things exist.”)

I have taught this prayer to my children, and this is the one we usually say before we eat at our house. It is likely that according to Jewish tradition, this is the wrong prayer to say for most meals we eat, but I like it because it covers the bases: It acknowledges the majesty of God over everything that exists, including myself, my family and this plate of rigatoni. Amen, let's eat.

Yes, we say this prayer even when we have guests. We give them a little warning that we are going to pray in Hebrew, and say that they are welcome to bow their heads if they'd like. Occasionally it has led to some inter-

esting conversations about our heritage or about our faith.

And, yes, we say it when we're eating out in public. I have always encouraged my kids to pray before they eat no matter where they are.

They don't have to make a big show of it. There is a fine line between being a witness and being a weirdo. To illustrate: My parents, in the first blush of enthusiasm of their conversion to Christianity, would not only pray before meals; they would *sing* the prayer. Even at the Waffle House. As my older sisters remember it, my father had such an enduring love for bacon and orange juice, his joyful spirit would sort of carry them all through the embarrassment of having to sit there, while a waitress nervously stood by, belting out, “Thank you, Jesus, for this food and for our home so fair; / Help us, Lord, to do some good, and keep us in thy care.” Still, I don't think my kids would ever forgive me for subjecting them to that level of evangelical spectacle.

But I do gently push them to choose the mild discomfort of discreetly making the sign of the cross in Panera or the school cafeteria, bowing their heads while they pray silently and crossing themselves again before they dig in. I think it's good for us to experience these pinpricks of social martyrdom. Maybe saying grace won't get us tossed to the lions, but it may cause us a twinge of otherness when

we have to say, “Oh, excuse me for a moment” to our lunch partner. And that's a good thing.

It's good for the world to see it, too. It is a kindness to interrupt the workaday sameness of mealtime routines for a sort of spiritual skylight moment, when we invite the divine to poke through into our day. It's good for the world to remember that we are not just eating food, we are also partaking of a gift. Whoever else is visibly present at the table, God is also there, and it's a kindness to remind the world that this is so—or at least some people still think this is so.

But the real reason to pray in public is exactly what it says in the prayer: to bless God. To acknowledge that he made us, he made the food, he made good things, and we're grateful. Whatever else is going on in my relationship with God, I find it a relief to settle into this simplest of prayers when I sit down to eat. It's such an easy thing, but such a good way to introduce prayer and maybe even a little sacrifice into my daily life. It's something even a baby can begin to understand. *Amen!* Let's eat.

*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 lives in New Hampshire with her husband and 10 children. Twitter: @SimchaFisher*



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