

# America



JULY/AUGUST 2024 **DOUBLE ISSUE**

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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# AN INITIATIVE OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION<sup>i</sup>



## The Faith and Science Vision of Richard J. Pendergast, SJ The Bible, Evolution, and the Problem of Good and Evil

Conference program sponsored by Donnelly College and the Ethics of Evidence Foundation  
to be held on August 6, 2024 at the Catholic University of America.

Conference Chair: **Monsignor Stuart W. Swetland, S.T.D.**

**Message of Bishop Asztrik Várszegi, OSB, Archabbot Emeritus, Pannonhalma, Hungary, Episcopal Patron.**

**Message of Dr. Valerie Miké, President, The Ethics of Evidence Foundation.**

### “Together at Oxford in the 1980s: The Search for Faith Then and Now”

A Conversation with **Dr. Robert P. George**, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program, Princeton University. J.D. and M.T.S., Harvard University; D.Phil, D.C.L., and D.Litt, University of Oxford.

### “Faith and Science Today: The Challenge of Academia”

**Dr. Jeffrey W. Herrmann**, Professor, St. Abbo of Fleury Chair in Engineering, CUA. Distinguished work in mathematical modeling to improve public health as well as engineering design decision making processes and the planning of autonomous systems. B.S., Applied Mathematics, Georgia Institute of Technology, Ph.D., Industrial Systems Engineering, University of Florida.

### “The Cosmic Hierarchy: Quantum Mechanics and Teleology”

**Rev. Joseph Laracy**, Associate Professor and Chairman of Systematic Theology, Seton Hall University. Also affiliated with the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science with publications in cybernetics, engineering systems, and informatics, as well as the intersection of theology and science. S.T.D., Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome; S.M. (Engineering Systems), MIT; B.S. (Computer Engineering), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

### “Ordinary Faith, Ordinary Science”

**Dr. William Phillips**, National Institute of Standards and Technology, Nobel Laureate in Physics, 1997, for development of methods to cool and trap atoms with laser light. Ph. D., Physics, MIT.

### “Evil, Original Sin, and Evolution”

**Dr. Matthew Ramage**, Professor of Theology, Benedictine College. Author of *From the Dust of the Earth: Benedict XVI, the Bible, and the Theory of Evolution* (CUA Press, 2022) and five other monographs. Ph.D., Systematic Theology, Ave Maria University; M.A., Franciscan University of Steubenville; B.A., University of Illinois at U-C.

### “Reading the Two Books of God: The Future of Humankind”

**Msgr. Stuart W. Swetland**, President of Donnelly College and Director of the Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos Institute. S.T.D., Pontifical Lateran University, Rome; Rhodes Scholar, M.A. and B.S. (Politics, Philosophy, and Economics) University of Oxford; B.S., Physics, United States Naval Academy.



To register for this conference, please visit

<https://www.donnelly.edu/academics/ethics-of-evidence-conference>

<sup>i</sup> Based on new publications, *The Cosmic Hierarchy: The Universe and Its Many Irreducible Levels* by Richard J. Pendergast, S.J. and *From Information to Insight: Toward a Consistent Reading of Science and Faith* by Dr. Valerie Miké

## A No to Women Deacons, but a Yes to Lay Leadership

When Pope Francis gave a firm “no” to women deacons in an interview with Norah O’Donnell of “60 Minutes” in May, but noted quickly that “women have always had...the function of deaconesses,” my mind traveled back to November of last year, when I made a visit to the Dominican Republic and saw the work of one of these women firsthand. I also thought of my colleague Colleen Dulle, who recently visited Argentina with the Pontifical Mission Societies and encountered catechists, many of them women, who bring the Gospel to the shanty towns in Buenos Aires and the mountain towns beyond.

I offer these reflections as a way to understand the context of the pope’s remarks, and to think about the ministry he is calling all of us to consider.

El Cercado is a mountain town in the Dominican Republic not far from the Haitian border. I traveled there with my godfather, the Rev. John I. Cervini, a priest of the Diocese of Rockville Centre on Long Island, who spent 17 years there as pastor to the community. Rockville Centre is one of several U.S. dioceses with mission parishes in “the D.R.”

The Church of San Pedro Apóstol is located across from the town square in El Cercado, but we stayed a short drive away at a retreat center built by “Padre Juan” and his pastoral team, with support from benefactors in Long Island. It’s a beautiful setting, with views of the mountains and a prayer garden with the Stations of the Cross. In the mornings we drank coffee in the cantina; at night we drank Presidentes on the roof deck.

One of the images that remains with me from my stay is the gazebo at the entrance to the retreat house and the paintings inside, hanging in a

circle from the gazebo’s roof. Each depicted a tongue of fire and represented one of 14 districts in the surrounding area that oversaw 85 “basic ecclesial communities.” Community leaders would gather at the gazebo for days of pastoral planning and spiritual reflection and then return home to carry out their mission.

The history of these base ecclesial communities goes back to the meeting of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. They were also supported by the theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, who brought together pastoral workers from around Latin America to train them in evangelization and community organizing.

One of those leaders is Joana Peterson, a lay minister from the United States who has spent over 40 years in the Dominican Republic. She is a critical part of the pastoral team at San Pedro Apóstol, visiting seniors, working with the local Fe y Alegría schools and training local residents in sustainable farming techniques. She is an ever-present, respected presence in the community, and the bishop is known to seek her counsel.

Strong lay leadership is also a feature of church life in Argentina. One of the takeaways from Colleen’s trip, which she shared on a recent episode of *America’s “Inside the Vatican”* podcast, is the key role played by catechists in spreading the faith where priests are scarce. This is no doubt why Pope Francis decided to elevate catechists to an official ministry of the church in 2021. He knows how essential they are to the church in his home country.

We are spoiled in the United States. We have grown used to having priests available to say Mass on weekdays and multiple Masses on Sundays.

That is changing, of course, and we are beginning to understand how the church has survived in other countries without a steady supply of priestly vocations. Especially in Latin America, laypeople have played a critical role, leading communities and carrying out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Women have always been part of that picture. I think that is what Pope Francis means when he says that “we have always had” deaconesses. In other words, “we have always had” non-ordained women committed to lives of service, women like Joana and like the catechists Colleen met in Argentina.

By elevating the role of the catechist in church life, Pope Francis tried to recognize the essential contribution of lay ministers. He was also reminding us that ministry in the church is not the responsibility of the ordained alone. We are all called to serve, and sometimes, I think, Pope Francis is suggesting that discussions about ordination can distract from that.

Of course, ordination is a question that will continue to be discussed, even if Pope Francis has made his thoughts on women deacons known. But if the only debate sparked by our vocations crisis is about ordination, of women or married men, I think that’s a missed opportunity. We all have to find ways to serve the church. The sooner we discern how to do that, the healthier our church will be.

Speaking of leadership, our editor, Sam Sawyer, S.J., is currently away on tertianship, the final stage of Jesuit formation. He will return to this space in the October issue.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Maurice Timothy Reidy, *deputy editor in chief*.



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The Source and Summit Eucharistic Procession makes its way from the St. Paul Seminary to the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, Minn., on May 27, 2024. The National Eucharistic Congress takes place in Indianapolis from July 17 through 21.

Cover: A statue of St. Francis Xavier that hangs behind the altar of the Jesuit mission church in San Javier, Chiquitos, Bolivia. Evaristo Sa/AFP via Getty Images

OSV News photo/Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit

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## Responses to ‘brain death’ and organ donation as a culture war issue

In “Dividing the Church on Brain Death,” which appeared in our June issue, Dr. Jason T. Eberl and others argued that current neurological criteria for determining brain death is consistent with Catholic teaching. They were responding to the joint statement “Catholics United on Brain Death and Organ Donation: A Call to Action,” in which the authors advised Catholics to “decline organ donor status” and “decline consent for organ donation” because the existing guidelines do not ensure “moral certainty of death.” Several physicians and ethicists responded that even if a blanket refusal of organ donation may not be justified, there are indeed questions about the accuracy of determining brain death under the current criteria.

### Testing must include hypothalamic function

We agree that the “Catholics United” statement was imprudent. However, to claim that the criteria for the determination of death is on firm footing seems uninformed. Several religious and secular organizations opposed adopting the American Academy of Neurology’s clinical guidelines as a uniformly acceptable standard for death. They included The Arc (representing the disability community), the American College of Physicians and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

This rejection was because the current clinical criteria omit assessment of hypothalamic function, which Dr. Eberl and his co-authors assert “does not play a central role in preserving the human organism’s integrative unity.” This assertion was sufficiently unconvincing that the A.A.N.’s proposed revision to the Uniform Determination of Death Act, which would have excluded hypothalamic testing, has been placed on indefinite hold.

We believe that, at the present time, the best way to assess whole brain death, assuring that the individual has met adequate philosophical criteria for being declared dead, would be to add testing for hypothalamic function to current testing. The hypothalamus not only is important in connecting the brain to the hormonal system, it also controls the body temperature and blood pressure. It is also now recognized as playing a crucial role in emotional and cognitive processes, and studies have demonstrated the interactive roles of distinct hypothalamic nuclei in various cognitive processes and phenomenal awareness. This includes the ability to detect pain sensation, which means that a patient with a functioning hypothalamus could be aware of pain during the process of harvesting organs.

Patients who are “whole brain dead,” or have no brain activity, will not acquire new physiological functions, such as the induction of pubescence. But that brings us to the case of Jahi McMath, who was determined to be brain dead based on the criteria supported by Dr. Eberl et al.—that is, *without* hypothalamic testing. She went through puberty and continued to live for an additional four years. Hers is

not the only case of false positive diagnoses of brain death using the A.A.N.’s clinical criteria. *[Editor’s note: Jahi McMath was a 13-year-old girl who was declared brain dead in 2013 after complications from surgery. While still comatose, she underwent puberty before dying in 2018 from abdominal complications.]*

When St. John Paul II wrote in support of the concept of whole brain death, he noted the importance of moral or prudential certitude. With so many debates about persistent hypothalamic function and the uncertainty of whether or not such patients are dead, it seems that the standard of prudential certitude is not currently being met. Moreover, the claim that “If St. John Paul II meant to include the hypothalamus...surely he would have done so” seems far-fetched. If he did understand the intricacies of the hypothalamus, he would not have needed to comment upon testing for its function since, logically, testing would be included in his requirement of “*complete and irreversible* cessation of all brain activity” (emphasis in the transcript of his address to the International Congress of the Transplantation Society in 2000).

Dr. Eberl et al. wrongly suggest that there is no problem with the current neurological criteria for determining that patients have died. But given that such testing standards yield too many false positives, we must either improve testing or abandon the idea of determining whole brain death. As a matter of prudence, we argue for the former.

**Christopher A. DeCock** practices pediatric neurology/epilepsy and is physician chair of the West Market Ethics Committee at Essentia Health, in Fargo, N.D. **James Gior-dano** is a professor in the Department of Neurology, chief of the Neuroethics Studies Program, and co-director of the O’Neill-Pellegrino Program in Brain Science and Global Health Law and Policy at Georgetown University Medical Center. **Daniel P. Sulmasy** serves as the André Hellegers Professor of Biomedical Ethics in the departments of medicine and philosophy, and as director of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics, at Georgetown University. **Carlo S. Tornatore** is a professor and chair of the Department of Neurology

at Georgetown University Medical Center and Medstar Georgetown University Hospital. **G. Kevin Donovan** is a physician ethicist and director emeritus of the Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics, at Georgetown University. **Allen H. Roberts II** practices critical care medicine and serves as chair of the ethics committee at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital. **Myles N. Sheehan, S.J.**, is director of the Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics and the David Lauler Chair of Catholic Health Care Ethics at Georgetown University Medical Center.

*Note: Dr. DeCock and Dr. Sulmasy served as observers for the Uniform Law Commission's Drafting Committee on the Revision of the Uniform Determination of Death Act. They were also co-authors of a letter to the Linacre Quarterly that was cited in "Catholics United on Brain Death and Organ Donation: A Call to Action."*

### Debate has room to grow on both sides

As a practicing clinical ethicist in Catholic health care, I join the authors of the recent **America** article in their concern that some recent discussions in bioethics risk entangling health care in struggles for power among cultural factions. They focus on a statement ambitiously titled "Catholics United on Brain Death and Organ Donation." I worry, however, that the authors of the **America** article and "Catholics United" ultimately talk past one another.

Dr. Eberl and his co-authors show an unfortunate tendency to interpret "Catholics United" in ways that render its arguments more extreme than a charitable interpretation would suggest. For example, they write that the "Catholics United" statement "condemned the use of neurological criteria for determining that patients have died." In fact, "Catholics United" repeatedly states that some of its authors accept those criteria if they are sufficiently "rigorous."

The invocation of "culture wars" depends on a contentious reading of the statement's motivations. Dr. Eberl et al. suggest that the authors of "Catholic United" were motivated by culturally divisive attitudes and a fearful suspicion of the medical profession. But those authors were writing in response to the recent tussle over the A.A.N.'s proposed revisions to the legal definitions of death, as well as to a joint letter, authored by the prominent and widely respected Catholic bioethicist Daniel P. Sulmasy and others, calling for Catholics to unite around opposition to those revisions. *[Editor's note: Dr. Sulmasy is also one of the co-authors of the letter printed above.]*

The central claim of "Catholics United" is accepted by much of mainstream bioethics. For example, *AJOB Neu-*

*rosience*, one of the most influential bioethics journals in the world, devoted a recent issue to the topic and exhibited a near-complete consensus on the misalignment between the currently accepted criteria for diagnosing brain death and the legal requirement that all brain functions must have irreversibly ceased before the declaration of brain death. Even the neurologist James Bernat, whom Dr. Eberl et al. cite as a leading authority on the issue, acknowledges that mismatch and the significance of continuing hypothalamic function.

At the same time, Dr. Eberl et al. show greater appreciation than "Catholics United" for the difficulties of medical practice in a time when Covid and other experiences have significantly eroded trust in the medical profession. It makes sense for Dr. Eberl et al. to interrogate the new bioethical conclusions found in "Catholics United" to ensure that they do not merely express an unreasonably suspicious attitude or fail to attend to the real particulars in which medical professionals work with patients and their families.

Further, if more patients and families refuse to allow organ donation after a declaration of death, on the grounds that they may not be dead according to widely accepted criteria, then many patients with end-stage diseases may never get their chance for a longer life, and many families may never experience the solace of knowing their loved one's death meant life for another.

"Catholics United" suggests that Catholic hospitals should "[r]enegotiate agreements with organ procurement organizations" and, failing that, "consider shutting down deceased organ donor transplantation programs and ending these agreements altogether." Peremptorily recommending that Catholic hospitals defy federal regulations evinces no real appreciation for the existential threat doing so would pose to Catholic health care.

These potentially adverse consequences of the statement's recommendations, of course, cannot pre-emptively settle a controversy that is roiling bioethical waters far beyond Catholic health care, but they must be honestly and clearly acknowledged and confronted. Better ways to understand and address these challenges may be found—but only when all sides engage the conversation with a commitment to charity and to real engagement with the implications of the debate.

**Randy Colton** is a certified health care ethics consultant in Catholic health care. Dr. Colton is the author of *Repetition and the Fullness of Time: Gift, Task, and Narrative* in Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Ethics, as well as articles in a variety of general-interest and academic publications.

## The Still-Elusive Path to Limiting Abortion

On June 13, just under two years after its landmark ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court unanimously held that a group of pro-life doctors lacked standing to challenge the federal approval of and subsequent expansion of access to a drug used for abortions. While many commentators have cast this decision as a blow against the pro-life movement, the reality is more complicated. The court's opinion, which is legally and constitutionally sound, should prod the pro-life movement to realize that it needs to convince fellow citizens to reject abortion as unjust. This will require much more than just amassing enough political or judicial leverage to make it illegal.

In the two years since *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, a dismaying reality has set in: Following two decades of declining numbers and a brief decline immediately following the decision, abortions are once again on the rise. Despite newly introduced almost-total bans on abortion procedures in 14 states, the nation saw an increase in reported abortions over the past three years of 10 percent; in the 36 states without bans, there was a reported increase of 25 percent, an unprecedented jump.

Nor have those 14 statewide abortion bans swayed the opinions of Americans on this neuralgic issue. Recent polls by the Pew Research Center show that more Americans than ever now think that abortion should be legal in most or all cases—63 percent, up four points since 2021. That percentage changes hardly a whit for American Catholics, whose opinions on abortion are all but a mirror of those of the larger population. And in cases where the question of legal abortion has been

presented to the voting public on a statewide ballot, abortion rights advocates have triumphed every time—seven times in all since 2022.

The editors of *America* have long held that while abortion is a moral evil—the consistent teaching of the church since the time of the Apostles—the question of its legal status in the United States, under our Constitution, belongs properly to state legislatures. Moral opposition to abortion, founded in the recognition of our common humanity with the unborn, society's obligation to protect the life of the innocent and Catholic social teaching, is what drives the church's pro-life advocacy. But the reason *Roe* was wrongly decided—and ultimately overturned—was not because it was immoral but because it invented a right with no basis in the text of the Constitution and assigned a complex moral question on which Americans disagree passionately to judges unanswerable to voters.

In its recent unanimous decision, the Supreme Court demonstrated that, regardless of the political alliances and machinations that produced its current set of justices, it appears serious about getting out of the abortion business. The pro-life movement should welcome that restraint, which it spent almost 50 years advocating and organizing to achieve, even if it means that the road toward legislation protecting the unborn heads steeply uphill.

Unfortunately, the zeal by some legislators in the current political moment to ban abortion at all costs—in some cases without nuance or consideration for the hard cases that inevitably arise in any moral calculus—has galvanized opposition to restrictions on abortion as much or more than it

has helped convince Americans to respect the lives of the unborn. Even as legislators in some states seek to eliminate abortion completely, others have reacted to *Dobbs* by making already permissive abortion policies even less restrictive.

Perhaps even more telling than this legislative dichotomy is the media landscape in which abortion regulation is discussed. While the vast majority of abortions in the United States occur during the first trimester and because women do not want to have or feel they could not support a child, public discussion of abortion legislation has been dominated by a focus on questions about the adequacy of legal exceptions protecting the life and health of women late in pregnancy (even to the point of such media coverage being bemoaned by some pro-choice activists). Another consistent theme has been the fears of medical practitioners in states where they say even managing a late-term miscarriage could potentially land them in legal trouble.

The public debate about abortion, it seems, has fallen into the category of issues described by the truism that “hard cases make bad law.” Pro-life advocates are often focused on minimizing the set of exceptions to abortion bans in those states where they can get laws passed rather than tackling the harder problem of how to convince voters—who keep rejecting restrictions on abortion at the ballot box—that abortion can be safely and justly regulated and limited at all.

It may seem that Catholics are required always to implement the most comprehensive restrictions on abortion, regardless of the practical likelihood that such laws will be passed or, if passed, be enforceable. But this

conflates a question of moral truth (“Can abortion ever be justified?”) with one of prudential and practical reason (“What is the best way to limit the injustice of abortion in the United States in the 21st century?”).

No less a pro-life champion than Cardinal John O’Connor recognized that support for “imperfect legislation” could be a necessary component of pro-life advocacy (see *Catholic New York*, 6/14/90). It is certainly the case that any achievable legislative restriction on abortion will be imperfect, from a strict moral analysis, for the foreseeable future.

What is needed, far more than a perfect abortion law, is a clear focus on the moral failure of a society in which abortion rates are rising rather than falling, in which too many women feel afraid, unable or unwilling to carry pregnancies to term and welcome new life into the world. The pro-life movement should evaluate the laws it fights for on the basis of whether or not they help us have that conversation.

Six years ago, the longtime Catholic Worker and social justice activist Shelley Douglass wrote of her dream of a world where the mandates of justice would make both war and abortion unthinkable. The question of how to accomplish this was less a legal or moral one, she thought, than a spiritual one: What kind of world do we want? “It’s hard to imagine the kind of justice, economic justice and justice for women, that would have to exist for there really to be a world where abortion is unthinkable,” Ms. Douglass wrote. “Not illegal: unthinkable!”

Such a world would not see abortion as a right to be granted or withheld. It would be one where we do not bemoan the lack of elective abortion as an option but value the lack of it as a sign that no woman need choose it any longer.

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## How your ‘unchosen’ family can make you free

When I was in high school, a classmate once announced that he had been hit with the revelation that patriotism was irrational, because we don’t choose where we’re born. Why be attached to one country rather than another, he asked, if it’s all dumb luck?

Something like this logic has begun to shape the way we think about family in this country. The term “chosen family” has come into common usage to express the idea that the relationships we choose as adults are just as much, or *more*, familial than those we were born into. The idea is that, ultimately, “family” is about those relationships we choose to keep closest, whether they have anything to do with our family of origin or not.

To be sure, this alternative definition is a reaction to instances of real brokenness in traditional family arrangements. It is understandable for children from dysfunctional or abusive families to seek to rediscover family among people who, they feel, accept them. In fact, this desire points to how fundamental the human need for family is.

But in our efforts to comfort those whose relationships with their families have been difficult, we may be too quick to advise a separation, and we may overlook something of essential value in an *unchosen* family. Therapeutic language like “setting boundaries” can be clarifying, but it can have the effect of limiting our personal growth, excusing us from reasonable obligations, and causing us to abandon relationships that could be nurtured, healed and redeemed.

### Family as a School of Growth

It is common today to hear people talk about having “cut out” a parent, sibling, relative or friend from their lives. The underlying idea is that if these

people do not serve us or make us feel supported, then they have no right to talk to us. In her book *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*, for example, the best-selling author and therapist Nedra Glover Tawwab recommends valuing self-love over relationships with “toxic people.” The number of adult children who say they are estranged from one or both parents suggests that this idea is popular. (In a survey conducted in 2019 by Karl Pillemer, a family sociologist and professor of human development at Cornell University, 27 percent of U.S. adults reported a current estrangement from an immediate family member.)

As the psychologist Joshua Coleman has written, “our American love affair with the needs and rights of the individual” may lead us to see cutting off a family member as “courageous, rather than avoidant or selfish.”

There are situations in which this is entirely legitimate—for example, when abuse is involved. It may be necessary to avoid genuinely manipulative and abusive people, and healthy boundaries can protect us from being taken advantage of, harassed or needlessly distressed. But there are many cases in which we cannot assume that the other party in a relationship is solely at fault for conflict or tension. Human relationships are always a tricky business: Feelings get hurt, we say the wrong things, we misunderstand each other and talk past one another. Part of what can make all this bearable is exactly the understanding that our love, our bond, is unconditional—that no matter how many misunderstandings we have, we are bound together by something deeper than a choice that we can change at the snap of a finger.

Part of the risk of a “chosen family” is that it can be a way of avoid-

ing the accountability and personal growth found in long-term, committed, familial bonds. If relationships are ultimately dependent on our choice to be in them at the moment, we can cut and run whenever we run into obstacles or failures. It is these kinds of loose social groups, and not, say, adoptive families or in-laws, that I (and I think most people) have in mind when we speak of “chosen family.”

But personal growth of the most important kind, as the Harvard psychologist Kevin Majeres has argued, comes from embracing challenge. Traditional family life is a school of challenge; we must learn to compromise, to resolve conflict, to apologize, to make space for others, and to give up our own selves, our own pleasure and our own designs in service of our family. It is a unique kind of challenge in that the “difficult people” (including ourselves) within it are bound in an unchosen but permanent unity. This type of challenge is not a punishment but an adventure.

### The Promise of Commitment

But why enter into *this* challenge, why *this* adventure with *these* people? It is precisely the *unchosenness* of the bonds that constitutes the fruitful challenge of family life—whose rich reward is the unconditional welcome that sees past fights and failings and goes by the name of “home.”

It is not irrational to be connected to the people who gave birth to us and to see that connection as more than mere happenstance. We are precisely constituted as the combination of the man and woman who gave us life; every cell in our body bears their signature. If our parents were not abusive, we are indebted to them for raising us, just as they stand in obligation to us for having created us. This given re-



lationship is no less rational for being unchosen; it is the most natural and rational thing in the world.

New families can begin through *chosen unchosenness*: namely, through the unbreakable promises of marriage. But we increasingly fear this kind of commitment, too. Young people are not getting married as they once did, and if they are married, they often do not stay that way. Marriage suggests a kind of relinquishing of choice—and we may fear this, perhaps because of brokenness in our own upbringing.

But it is precisely this kind of irrevocable choice that *constitutes* family. In marriage, we make a leap of faith into a new adventure, whereby our choice is open to the unchangeable unity that is our children, for men and women become one in the very cellular life of their offspring, and in each partner's whole being, too. Anything short of that commitment is friendship at best—not family.

The sad reality of our postlapsarian world is that many have broken and abused the sacred bond that is family, which emerges from the married couple and their child. We are all too familiar with cheating spouses and abusive, neglectful or manipulative parents. The children of such families cannot be blamed for doubting the whole endeavor of family, or for seeking it elsewhere. The wound of being unable to heal the bonds of our given family is truly a wound. But the human need for family, as evidenced by the term “chosen family,” is unquenchable and universal.

We do not choose our parents or brothers or sisters, but we *do* choose to honor and love them. We do choose to unite with our spouses, but what we choose then is to relinquish unlimited choice. For this reason, we must do everything we can to honor, to heal, to live with and to grow with our given family and, where that is not possible,

to find family in promised and unshakeable commitment.

Whether our family is the one given to us at birth or found later, it must have the paradoxical but essentially human quality that it is a choice to move beyond choice and into committed love. In doing this, we may find that we are better at keeping not only our families but our friendships, too.

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Nathan Beacom writes from Chicago. His writing has previously appeared in *Plough Quarterly*, *Comment Magazine* and elsewhere.

## Are Catholic humanitarians really to blame for the immigration crisis at the border?

By J.D. Long García



OSV News photo/Adrees Latif, Reuters

Attorney General Ken Paxton of Texas said in a statement on May 8 that his office had obtained sworn testimony indicating that Annunciation House—a Catholic volunteer organization that serves migrants in El Paso, Tex.—facilitates illegal border crossing and conceals “illegally present aliens from law enforcement.”

“Any [nongovernmental organization] facilitating the unlawful entry of illegal aliens into Texas is undermining the rule of law and potentially jeopardizing the safety and wellbeing of our citizens,” Mr. Paxton said. “All NGOs who are complicit in Joe Biden’s illegal immigration catastrophe and think they are above the law should consider themselves on notice.”

It was tough talk from the attorney general, but not new. The notion that humanitarian organizations contribute to the influx of migrants at the southern border has become a common narrative on the political right in the United States in recent years.

The Heritage Foundation, for example, published a column in 2023 arguing that it was “not unreasonable to allege that the [Biden] administration is paying NGOs to smuggle illegal aliens the final miles of their journey.”

Such speculation on the legitimacy and motives of

Catholic agencies that engage in direct service to migrating people relies on small factual content for often wild conjecture. The U.S. government indeed supports humanitarian assistance to migrants and asylum seekers, both at the U.S.-Mexico border and throughout Latin America. But does that help lead to thousands of people searching for entry at the southern border? Or, to put it another way: Will cutting off humanitarian assistance help end the immigration crisis?

Casa Alitas, a temporary shelter for asylum seekers, opened its doors in 2013 as a five-bedroom house. The shelter, run by Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona, has moved locations numerous times to accommodate increasing numbers of migrants.

Earlier this year, U.S. Rep. Tom Tiffany, a Republican from Wisconsin, showed up at the shelter unannounced. He was denied entry. Mr. Tiffany was inspired to visit after seeing a video posted on the social media platform X by James O’Keefe, the founder of Project Veritas (he was forced out of the conservative activist group last year). Mr. O’Keefe speculated that the site was complicit in human trafficking.

“It concerns me that we’re not even starting off with a factually based question,” said Diego López, the director

of Casa Alitas. Both Mr. O’Keefe and Mr. Tiffany falsely claimed Casa Alitas was helping “illegal immigrants.” In fact, those who arrive at the shelter have been legally processed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection and released by the Border Patrol to Casa Alitas as asylum seekers with pending applications.

Luis Guerra is a legal advocate with the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. “The biggest myth to debunk is that there’s some sort of operation where folks are being passed on by smugglers to N.G.O.s, and then N.G.O.s are facilitating that smuggling across the borders,” Mr. Guerra said. “That’s just false.”

“The roles that N.G.O.s are playing are roles that we wish our federal government was fulfilling,” he said. “But in the absence of either federal resources or state or local resources, N.G.O.s have filled a void.”

Receiving formal approval for an asylum claim in the United States can be a lengthy process, he explained. The system currently maintains a historic backlog of 1.1 million asylum cases and 3.6 million total immigration proceedings. Each asylum application can take years to process. During that process, asylum applicants are legally allowed to remain in the United States.

And because of lengthy waits at formal ports of entry, migrants who plan to make asylum claims have learned that the fastest way to reach the Border Patrol to begin the process is to make an irregular crossing into the United States.

“You can’t access the port of entry and ask for asylum,” Mr. Guerra said. “If you’re fleeing from danger, your only recourse is to go around the gate to ask for asylum because you know you’re going to get processed. If you go to a port of entry, you will be turned away. You can’t actually access asylum through the [normal front] door.”

The majority of people seeking asylum in the United States have a legitimate fear of returning to their home country, Mr. Guerra said. The challenge is articulating their circumstances in such a way that it will lead to an approval of an asylum claim, he said, adding that both the Trump and Biden administrations have made that more difficult for asylum seekers.

Often, he said, those with legitimate asylum claims do not understand the process. Asylum seekers want to assure government officials that they will be productive members of U.S. society. But that does not help their asylum case.

“When they meet a government official, they want to let them know: ‘I’m a good person. I do all these good things. You can trust me. I’m a hard worker,’” Mr. Guerra said, explaining that they should instead be using that interview opportunity to explain the legitimate fears of violence or

discrimination that compelled their migration.

Mr. Guerra noted a study by the Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center that found pairing legal services and basic education of the process leads to higher numbers of asylum applications passing credible-fear interviews. “Not everyone arriving has the same set of facts and situations. Yes, there are some cases that are stronger than others,” Mr. Guerra said, “but we believe that everyone has the right to due process and the right to seek something they may or may not qualify for.”

Other Catholic humanitarian agencies are at work far beyond the U.S. border. Catholic Relief Services sponsors aid programs throughout Latin America focusing primarily on humanitarian assistance, water and sanitation, child protection, agriculture, and youth education.

“It’s about creating a condition where people can live dignified, safe lives and have sustainable livelihoods in their home communities,” Nicole Kast, the head of programming for C.R.S. Guatemala, said. “That’s the primary focus of our work and how the majority of our projects are being implemented.”

In Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, C.R.S. supports migrants in transit—those who are leaving their home countries and those who are returning to them. C.R.S. works primarily with church-affiliated entities, including episcopal conferences and the Scalabrini missions, as well as a few non-Catholic organizations.

Shelters supported by C.R.S. offer temporary relief to migrating people, Ms. Kast said. In Guatemala, for example, transiting migrants are only allowed to stay one night due to the constant flow of new arrivals. Were they to stay longer, the shelters would run out of space. In Mexico, migrants often stay longer, she said, and some request asylum.

Shelters provide the basics, like a place to sleep and food for the day. Sometimes supporters donate clothes, and migrants may be able to access basic medical services from a nurse or simple legal advice in group sessions.

“What is not misinformation is that there is a network of support for migrants. There are places where they are allowed to stay, where they’re treated with dignity, where they receive some basic services that allow them to survive that next day,” Ms. Kast said.

“What’s challenging about this discourse is that it is not precisely misinformation,” she said. “It’s information that’s misinterpreted. There is absolutely nothing in my mind that would make me think that a person decides to migrate because they know there are shelters [along the route]. That is absolutely not the case. That is not a reason people migrate.”

Ms. Kast described the decision to travel north as diffi-

cult and risky, both for families and individuals.

“These are critical life decisions that people make not only in a situation of danger, though sometimes that’s the case,” she said, “but also where they feel like their options are so limited, their possibility of success and sustaining a livelihood and feeding their family are so reduced, that it really appears like the only solution.”

Over the last 10 years, Ms. Kast has noticed a change in the profile of migrants heading north. While they are still mostly men, she noted an increasing number of women and people with higher levels of education. Entire families are also heading to the United States, including those who travel with their pets.

Ms. Kast noted the emergence of the caravan phenomenon in 2018. Before that, migrants tended to travel alone, accompanied by traffickers. Caravans evolved as an attempt to circumvent the business of human smuggling, she said, one that exploited migrants. Traveling in a caravan was theoretically safer and was less expensive, she said. But authorities adapted, and caravans have been reduced in number.

The ongoing crisis in Venezuela is a major factor driving migrants to the United States, Ms. Kast said. While migrants from Guatemala tend to come from Indigenous regions and sometimes do not speak Spanish, many from Venezuela are doctors and lawyers as well as people from poor areas. Those who come from El Salvador, while fewer in number as of late, tend to be fleeing violence.

“As Catholics, we are encouraged to open our hearts to the people who are fleeing violence or suffering poverty or whatever the reason is that they are migrating,” Ms. Kast said. “That is our calling. It is not to place judgment on the decision.”

Most of the agency’s humanitarian work is meant to help people remain in their home country, she said. But when people do decide to journey north, C.R.S. is ready to help them survive the dangerous passage.

“They will come no matter what,” Ms. Kast said. “What C.R.S. offers is the opportunity to live.”

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J.D. Long García, *senior editor*.

## Immigration court backlog tops 3.6 million

The Biden administration announced on May 16 that a new fast-track docket in immigration courts is intended to cut the time it takes to decide asylum claims from years to months for some single adults. Migrants who settle in five cities—Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York—will be placed in a “recent arrivals docket” that aims to have judges rule on their claims within 180 days, instead of the four years or more that it currently takes. The bottlenecked courts are believed to be a significant incentive for more people to seek entry into the United States, especially those with weak asylum claims. The backlog has reached 3.6 million cases, including 1.1 million asylum claims.

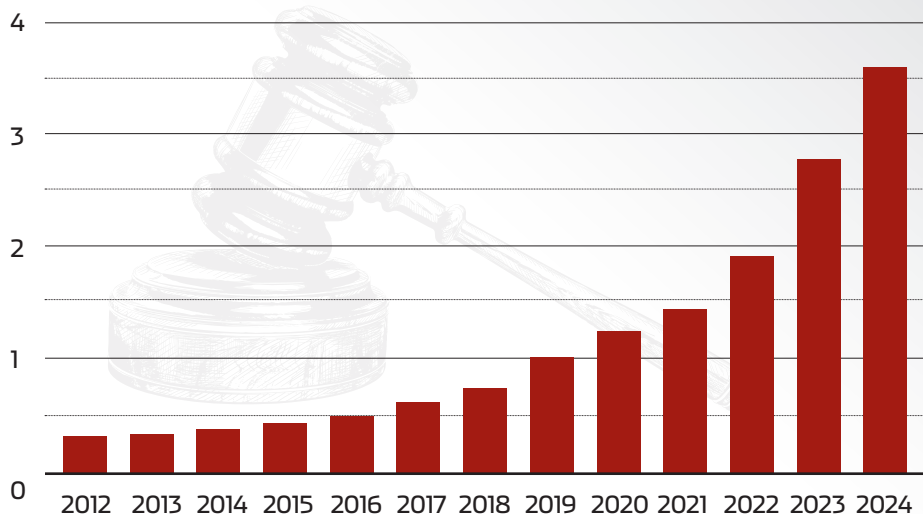
Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the administrative adjustment was no substitute for the comprehensive reforms that had been included in bipartisan Senate legislation that House Speaker Mike Johnson declined to bring before the House of Representatives in February.

“It’s a political response be-

cause the problem is so enormous and people are concerned, but it’s really just a superficial Band-Aid on a gaping wound,” Dana Leigh Marks, a retired immigration judge, said. “It’s never worked in the past and there’s no reason to think this time would be different.”

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From The Associated Press.

IMMIGRATION COURT CASE BACKLOG (IN MILLIONS)



Source: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University.

## GOODNEWS: North Carolina shelter for at-risk single moms charts pro-life path in a post-Roe world

When part-time deli clerk Kislyn found out she was pregnant, her boyfriend told her that he “wasn’t ready to be a father” and walked out. No longer able to cover her rent and utilities, she was facing eviction. Kislyn knew she wanted to keep her baby, but she felt overwhelmed. Her prospects were bleak. That was 21 years ago.

Today, she is a nurse, and she describes her son as “a fine man.” What made that turnabout possible was the support she received from Room at the Inn in Greensboro, N.C., one of only six licensed maternity homes in the state and the only one that also serves as a homeless shelter for single mothers. Throughout her pregnancy, Room at the Inn provided Kislyn with child care and a place to live while she went to college for her nursing degree.

Kislyn’s story is among the happy outcomes featured in the promotional materials for the Promise Center, a large-scale expansion of Room at the Inn’s mission to support single mothers who are at risk of homelessness. In North Carolina, where abortion has been allowed during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy since the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, these services may prove vital for many young women who might otherwise be choosing to end their pregnancies.

Albert Hodges, Room at the Inn’s chief executive, said many single women in the South face poverty and homelessness, but their stories are rarely heard. “A single mother facing an unexpected pregnancy, when given support and good guidance,” Mr. Hodges said, “is capable of heroism.”

Room at the Inn’s flagship initiative sits on a quiet street in Greensboro’s historic district. The program has grown over the years to include postpartum housing for new mothers and hosts a number of post-natal services, including child care, transportation, education, vocational training and employment assistance.

The Promise Center will be situated on a 40-acre campus in Kernersville. Like Room at the Inn, it will offer continuing care for single mothers who have experienced homelessness or are at risk of becoming homeless. It will extend Room at the Inn’s mission to address what staff have identified as the four key challenges for single mothers: housing insecurity, lack of child care, inaccessibility of reliable transportation and inadequate job skills.

Last year, Room at the Inn received 118 intake requests and provided 75 referrals to other agencies. Since 2020, requests for a spot at Room at the Inn are “through the roof,” Mr. Hodges said.



Volunteers and residents visit at Room at the Inn.

Since the pandemic, there has been an exodus out of the Northeast into Southern states like North Carolina, with new residents attracted by a lower cost of living and easy access to mountains and beaches. But the accompanying population growth has had consequences.

Extremely low-income renters in North Carolina compete for only 131,000 affordable units in the state’s housing stock, according to the National Low Income Housing Commission’s annual report. That is 40 affordable units for every 100 of the state’s nearly 330,000 extremely low-income households seeking a place to live.

Mr. Hodges hopes the Promise Center will become a model for other communities, with a focus on helping single mothers thrive in all aspects of their lives. When it comes to their vocations beyond motherhood, “every mother is different,” he said. “You want it to be what they want to do.”

Mr. Hodges believes supporting the work of the Promise Center and initiatives like it presents a way forward for Catholics who want to help mothers in a post-Dobbs world.

“We need to help these young women choose life. But you also don’t want it to be just about the baby,” he said. “I’ve told people for 30 years, if we’re going to be a pro-life church and a pro-life community, it’s not enough to say to a young woman, ‘Don’t have an abortion.’”

*Maggie Phillips contributes from North Carolina.*



## It's not easy being green: Brazil's Lula wants to drill for oil

While publicly promoting a green agenda in his travels around the world, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil seems to have decided on a different course at home. His center-left government has revived plans to expand oil exploration in the Amazon region.

Archbishop Roque Paloschi of Porto Velho, one of the most vocal Catholic leaders in the Amazonian states, told **America** that “the prospecting for oil drilling in the Amazon is extremely worrisome.” In his view, it could cause “social and environmental damage, causing the forced displacement of communities and generating more poverty among Amazonian peoples.”

The most controversial exploration sites offered by the government are located offshore at the mouth of the Amazon River basin. Petrobras, a government-controlled oil company, is pushing to begin preliminary drilling in search of new oil reserves. The company plans to invest almost \$3 billion between 2023 and 2027 in the region.

Mr. Lula's predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, made clear efforts to dismantle environmental policies, facilitating access into previously protected territory for illegal mining operations and the timber trade, and encouraging the occupation of Indigenous land. After four years of Mr. Bolsonaro's extremism, many Brazilians expected a greener approach from the Lula government.

Archbishop Paloschi, echoing other local bishops, be-

lieves that the federal and Amazonian state governments should not retreat to previous development models based primarily on resource extraction but should instead implement new models for Amazonian development. “They need to look for economic alternatives that guarantee the well-being of the peoples, without false solutions and the commodification of land and natural goods,” Archbishop Paloschi says. “Full life can only come about with respect for human dignity.”

The Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network, known as Repam, has been sending representatives to public debates on the issue of oil exploitation in the Amazonian region. “It is essential to stop the production and consumption of fossil fuels across the planet as soon as possible,” the network said in a public letter to the United Nations COP28 conference on climate change in Dubai last December.

Benedito Alcântara, a history teacher, lawyer and specialist in environmental law, is a delegate to Repam from the Diocese of Macapá. Mr. Alcântara lives in Macapá, right by the mouth of the Amazon River, between the states of Pará and Amapá. He reports that the idea of exploring for oil in the Amazon is the subject of lively discussions in his community.

“The Amazon has always served as a historical storehouse, a territory to be seized, harassed, to extract its riches,” he says. “Oil is just the newest trend in this regard.”

## A Brazilian oil platform

According to Mr. Alcântara, local politicians and businessmen have been saying that the arrival of the oil rigs will generate progress and income for the people of the region. The majority of the people of the region are poor and live “in a vulnerable situation” and have taken hope from these promises of oil wealth.

“People will jump on board without realizing the big interests behind it. Unions and some organized groups are the only ones questioning this proposal,” he says, noting that Amazonian peoples have no training or expertise in oil drilling.

Other environmental activists and nongovernmental organizations are also very concerned about the risks that research for potential oil production sites and, more specifically, test drilling at the mouth of the Amazon River could cause.

In Archbishop Paloschi’s view, in this context of inequity and conflicting human and ecological interests, the church is strongly called to be “a proclaimer of life” and to denounce “the structures of death.” Expressing great disappointment with the current federal and state governments, he says: “The development that the peoples of the Amazon crave is to have their own territories, their way of life respected, rights respected, [and] public policies with access to health, education, means of communication, transportation and sustainability.”

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Filipe Domingues *contributes from Rome.*



Migrant women wait at a metal barrier in Bialowieza Forest that marks the border between Poland and Belarus on May 29, 2024.

AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski

## Too little and too late? European pact on immigration swims against rising anti-immigrant tide

After years of debate and failed agreements, the European Union adopted its long-awaited Pact on Migration and Asylum on May 14.

That approval could prove to be a historic instance of bad timing.

Just three weeks later, elections for the European Parliament ended in a strong swing to the political right, as parties running on anti-immigration platforms surged to victory.

The new 10-part pact seeks to address some of the difficulties European states have been experiencing as they try to manage an unprecedented migrant flow from the Middle East, Ukraine and Africa that began in 2015. One of the most controversial parts of the pact is the “solidarity mechanism” that requires E.U. member states with low immigration rates to accept asylum seekers from countries like Italy, Greece and Spain, which have been overwhelmed by migrant arrivals.

E.U. member states that refuse to accept their share must pay 20,000 euros for each asylum seeker they refuse to accept. States do have the option of meeting their solidarity requirement by financially supporting other E.U. countries receiving immigrants or by making additional contributions in aid or humanitarian assistance, supporting programs that seek to address the need for immigration at its roots.

Migration advocates believe that there is little chance that expectations created by the solidarity mechanism will be practically achievable. Governments in Poland and the Netherlands have already pledged not to comply, and other governments across Europe are facing increasing public pressure to throttle immigration flows.

Catholic immigration experts point out that the new pact does not address the deeper causes of the global migration crisis. They add that its requirements will be difficult to implement and could lead to new human rights violations, primarily through large-scale detention of migrants and failure to justly review asylum claims.

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Bridget Ryder *contributes from Spain.*

# THE SEMINARY TODAY

How young priests  
are formed will  
impact the church  
for years to come

By Colleen Dulle



Thirteen men being ordained to the priesthood during a May 25, 2024, Mass at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, Minn., lie prostrate during the Litany of the Saints.

Near the end of the month-long meeting of the Synod on Synodality in Rome last October, Pope Francis surprised the assembly by speaking out against something about which he had grown increasingly concerned throughout the synod's discussions: clericalism. The pope had spent most of his time at the assembly simply listening, perhaps because he was aware of his outsized influence in the room. On Oct. 25, he took to the microphone to deliver a discourse on the church as "the holy, faithful people of God," who learn a simple faith from their "mothers and grandmothers." He reminded the bishops and priests present that they "come from this people" and denounced those who "disfigure the face of the church with machismo and dictatorial attitudes."

"It is enough," he added, taking aim at a group he sees as exemplifying this attitude, "to go into the ecclesiastical tailor shops in Rome to see the scandal of young priests trying on cassocks and hats, or albs and lace robes."

Pope Francis is not alone in his concern about young priests. The synod's final document expresses concern about "formalism and ideology that lead to authoritarian attitudes" in ordained ministers. Newspaper stories about young "trad" priests coming into U.S. parishes and doing away with Vatican II-era hymns in favor of Latin prayers, Gregorian chant and thuribles full of incense are not uncommon. And as the church works to transition to more synodal models, in which a priest shares responsibility with the laity, synod meetings—including the recent meeting of around 200 parish priests outside Rome—have repeatedly called for changes in how priests are formed in seminaries.

Any discussion of how seminaries might change, though, must begin with understanding what seminaries are like now: a part of the church that affects every Catholic but that few of us ever see. For a special "Deep Dive" episode of *America's* "Inside the Vatican" podcast that was released in April, our team interviewed seminary rectors, students, professors, psychologists and other experts across North America to get a full understanding of seminary formation today and the major changes it has undergone in recent decades.

### Who Is in Seminary Today?

The typical diocesan seminarian today begins seminary while in his early 20s, after finishing college

and, in many cases, having acquired some work experience. While the decades immediately after the Second Vatican Council saw an increase in seminarians in their 30s, 40s and 50s, older seminary students are less common today. At the same time, according to Thomas Gaunt, S.J., executive director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, which assembled the data cited here, most men now enter with degrees in a wide range of fields.

"We have degrees in business, in finance, in English literature, a whole variety of areas that I think, ultimately, is enriching to the church," Father Gaunt said.

The Rev. Ricard Veras, the director of pastoral formation at St. Joseph's Seminary and College in Yonkers, N.Y., said that while 20 years ago most men came to seminary because of their experience in their parishes, these days most men are inspired by their experience with campus ministry or lay movements. "They want to bring to the parish [context] whatever it is that gave them so much life, [inspired by] whatever sector of the church brought about a conversion or a reversion or something that makes their faith more profound," Father Veras said.

The men come from racial and ethnic backgrounds that generally reflect the Catholic Church in the United States, including in that more and more of them were born outside the United States. It typically takes about a decade for the seminary population to reflect a numerical increase in a particular group of immigrants to the United States, Father Gaunt explained.

While students are more diverse in some ways, there are signs that they are becoming less diverse in others. A 2023 study of Catholic priests in the United States by The Catholic Project at the Catholic University of America found that younger priests increasingly self-identify as politically and theologically "conservative."

The Rev. Joshua Rodrigue, rector of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, said he sees more "traditional-minded" seminarians now than when he began working in seminaries 17 years ago. His former classmate, the Rev. Paul Hoelsing, who is now the rector of Kenrick-Glennon seminary in St. Louis, Mo., agrees. Father Hoelsing said some of that shift comes from a desire for "clear guidance from the church's teaching."

"I think if there's a lot of ambiguity, if there's a lot of



The chapel of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y., is seen on Sept. 16, 2021, during a Mass marking the 125th anniversary of the opening of the seminary.

CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

gray, the men tend to shy away a bit. So part of the work of our formation is to help the men learn how to live with ambiguity and gray in a way that's healthy," Father Hoelsing said.

Asked to paint a psychological picture of today's seminarian, Maribel Rodriguez Laguna, a Dallas-based counseling psychologist who works as a therapist to seminarians, said: "If you get a pulse read on the young adult community in your local diocese, if you pick out two or three men from there, that's the profile. They're just like every other young adult."

Ms. Laguna said the key psychological issues she helps seminarians work through are dysfunctional family relationships; technology addictions, including struggles with pornography; conflict management and navigating difficult conversations and relationships with authority, especially in an environment like the seminary, where students are constantly being evaluated not only on their academic performance but on their personal growth.

She said she has seen, in particular, the consequences of "snowplow parenting," a trend of aiming to remove obstacles and discomfort from children's paths to ensure their success. "This creates a lot of problems. We have young men who sometimes don't even know practical skills, like how to balance a budget, how to save [money], how to do laundry, how to make their bed," Ms. Laguna said.

She added that the relational issues she sees in young adults seem to be the result of "overexposure to devices" like iPhones.

### Big Changes to Seminary

The Vatican and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have taken some steps to address these problems, but implementing many of those changes has taken until this past

academic year. In December 2016, the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy issued a new version of its "Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis," the document of standards for seminary formation around the world, which had last been updated in 1985. Although the 2016 revision was primarily covered in the press for barring gay men from entering seminary, it also laid out a radically different approach to priestly formation: one focused on a seminarian's "human formation."

Human formation, in the seminary context, is a broad term that includes getting caught up on practical skills like those Ms. Laguna mentioned, along with attending counseling or therapy to work through any issues that could negatively affect a priest's ministry. Ms. Laguna has found that, like most young adults, seminarians are very open to attending counseling and therapy. Father Hoelsing connected that willingness to the sexual abuse crisis, which has shaped the church through seminarians' entire lives.

"When they apply to seminary, they lay it all out there. They're not hiding. They're not trying to dodge things. They're very upfront about their family history, their psychosexual history, their dating history, because they saw the scandals of the church and they [learned], you're only as sick as your secrets," Father Hoelsing said. "And so I think they are very self-revelatory because they want to be healthy and they want to be part of a healthy response."

The key change brought about by the new "Ratio Fundamental Institutionis" was the institution of a "propaedeutic stage," a sort of discernment period of one to two years in which men entering seminary first live in a community separate from the rest of the seminary, do minimal or no coursework, and focus on their human formation and relationship with God.

(They can also use this time to make up for any gaps in their general education.)

The Vatican's 2016 guidance had to be adapted by each bishops' conference, and each adaptation then had to be approved by the Vatican. This meant the U.S.C.C.B. had to revise its "Program of Priestly Formation," which had last been updated in 2006. That adaptation was officially published in 2022, with instructions that it take effect in the 2023-24 academic year.

In the United States, the propaedeutical stage lasts, almost without exception, a year. At the two seminaries whose propaedeutical programs were profiled in **America's** podcast "Inside the Vatican"—Kenrick-Glennon in St. Louis and Notre Dame in New Orleans—all men in the propaedeutical stage attend counseling and have therapy available to them. Their access to social media is limited and they spend much of their time doing manual labor on the seminary grounds, reading or studying and building relationships with one another.

That "digital detox" is particularly urgent because of how polarizing some of the online content related to Catholicism can be. "Addressing the 'parallel formation' (sometimes referred to as 'shadow formation') that can happen online is a constant struggle," Father Rodrigue, the New Orleans seminary rector, wrote in an email interview. He said that while blogs used to be the "go-to" for seminarians, influencers on YouTube including the sedevacantist Taylor Marshall and the controversial psychologist Jordan Peterson are now more popular.

Other videos recommended by YouTube tend to have "similar-minded viewpoints and can limit the discussion and fuller understanding of an issue or topic or provide for erroneous content. Many tend to be more conservative outlets," Father Rodrigue wrote. He said that Notre Dame Seminary conscientiously tries to teach seminarians to see multiple viewpoints on ecclesiastical issues.

The two seminaries take different approaches to the involvement of men in their propaedeutical year in the wider community outside the seminary: At Notre Dame, according to Nick Smith, a participant in the program, "The seminary is kind of a time away, to get filled up so that you can go out." In St. Louis, Father Hoelsing said, "We do have them going out to the neighborhood, meeting our neighbors, learning how to engage people conversationally. We're developing a social acumen with these men that we haven't seen in previous groups because they're so available humanly and personally because of that [digital] detox." (At Kenrick-Glennon, first-year students have access to their phones for only four hours on Saturdays and do not have computers.)

Mr. Smith, 30, a member of Notre Dame's first propaedeutical class, has mixed feelings about the program's isolation from the community. "I think it is tough not to be engaged with the day-to-day faithful," Mr. Smith said, "I think I would prefer to be with the people that I'm going to serve one day." At the same time, he added, "the seminary has a sort of spiritual quiet to it that has definitely influenced my closeness to the Lord."

As for the other aspects of human formation, Mr. Smith said he has benefited from spiritual direction and that he and the 13 other men in his class have come to look forward to their weekly group counseling sessions. "It is an opportunity to share difficult moments through the course of the week, especially specific struggles for new seminarians, such as, 'Gosh, I don't know if I can make this commitment for my whole life.' 'Gosh, I miss my old life. I kind of want to go back'.... I can't tell you how frequently I've said something or somebody else said something, and the rest of the class went, 'Yes, me too.'"

The other change to come out of the 2022 Program for Priestly Formation was a restructuring of the stages of seminary formation from their previous academic labels ("philosophy" and "theology") to the more encompassing names "discipleship," "configuration" and "vocational synthesis." (Philosophy became discipleship; theology, configuration; and the stage after diaconal ordination, vocational synthesis.)

Each new stage includes certain human formation benchmarks the men are required to meet; seminarians are evaluated both through one-to-one self-evaluation conversations and consultations with a man's professors, counselors and, sometimes, members of the parish he is working in on weekends.

"In the beginning stage, you're going to look for a man who's growing in self-awareness and coming out of self-preoccupation," Father Hoelsing said. "So his relationality increases and his friendships deepen. That's the propaedeutical stage."

In the discipleship stage, "his self-awareness moves into some areas of weakness and things that weren't the way he would have wanted them to be, humanly. And so he grows in self-acceptance, and self-acceptance is saying: 'Yeah, I have that. That's part of my story.'"

Father Hoelsing places much value on a man's ability to tell his own story. If a seminarian cannot tell his story without gaps or "paucity," he said, this is a sign the man may not be ready to move to the next stage.

"In the configuration stage, the man really moves into self-possession. He knows who he is, and he's happy about who he is.... He accepts his strengths and weaknesses in



Seminarians in front of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit

OSV News photo/CNS file, Marek Dzikowski via Detroit Catholic

peace and serenity and joy. And then he can give himself really generously, and that's where he is headed in a priestly life."

The ultimate goal is to prepare the men to be able to build strong and healthy relationships with their parishioners, Father Hoelsing said. Building those relationships, getting comfortable with one's own story and learning to listen to others can be antidotes to the problems of polarization and clericalism.

"We want our men to enter into the presbyterate easily assignable. That is, you could work in a high school, you could work in a wealthy parish, an inner-city parish, a rural parish. A bishop could send you anywhere and you could thrive. Why? Because there are people there," Father Hoelsing said.

### What the Synod Wants to Change

While many of the changes outlined in the revised documents on priestly formation are starting to be implemented in seminaries, it will take years for the men in Nick Smith's class to be ordained and more before many begin working as pastors. Even beyond these steps toward forming well-rounded priests who are perhaps less "rigid," as Pope Francis has often critiqued young priests, and more comfortable with the "gray areas" in which most Catholics live, though, the synod is challenging seminaries to go even further.

The final document from the October 2023 synod gathering in Rome called for "extensive discussion and consideration" of again revising formation programs, this

time with an eye toward forming priests in synodality. It specifically called for seminaries to "remain connected to the daily life of the community" rather than creating "an artificial environment separate from the ordinary life of the faithful."

Part of how that could be done, they proposed, would be by including "a range of members of the People of God," particularly women, in formation programs. "Women's access to formation programs and theological study needs to be considerably expanded. We suggest that women should also be integrated into seminary teaching and training programs to foster better formation for ordained ministry," the synod wrote.

The degree to which women are currently involved in seminary formation varies widely by seminary. At Notre Dame in New Orleans, there are currently no female professors, although there have been some in the past. In other seminaries, especially those run by religious orders, female students study alongside men who are training for the priesthood. The assistant dean for academic affairs at St. Augustine Seminary in Toronto, Josephine Lombardi, has taught numerous classes at the seminary and now works as assistant dean alongside women who are full-time faculty members.

"If [students] come from an environment where they've only been taught by men, maybe they were at another [seminary] where all the faculty were men, I find sometimes they may have greater difficulty being open to our role as women," Dr. Lombardi said. "But I think if right from the get-go, they see a woman who's already in a



# LIKE MOST YOUNG ADULTS, SEMINARIANS ARE VERY OPEN TO ATTENDING COUNSELING AND THERAPY.

position of leadership, a woman who has influence, who's respected by her colleagues, consulted by her colleagues, that sets the tone for a seminary."

The synod also urged the establishment of joint formation programs in each diocese for laypeople, consecrated people and ordained ministers to study together.

Finally, the synod assembly called for a global consultation of people "responsible for the initial and ongoing formation of priests" to happen before its next meeting, in October 2024. The consultation, it wrote, would address how the current synodal process is being received among priests and seminarians and propose changes "that will promote the exercise of authority in a style appropriate to a synodal church."

None of the sources **America** consulted in North American seminaries or in the Vatican knew whether such a process was underway, but it seems unlikely, given the dearth of news on a possible consultation, that one will happen before the next assembly. The Vatican did, however, announce the creation of 10 study groups focused on questions that emerged in the synod, with one focused on a possible revision of the "Ratio Fundamentalis." That revision could involve a consultation similar to what was called for, but its work will not be completed until summer 2025. Notably, the synod meeting of around 200 parish priests that was held outside Rome in late April and early May this year called repeatedly for seminarians to be formed in synodal leadership.

The "Inside the Vatican" team asked the professors and rectors what they would say if they were consulted about ways to form a synodal church. Echoing what synod meetings have consistently said, the professors and rectors said that synodality needs to be more clearly defined and better understood. They also overwhelmingly spoke about the importance of exposure for the men: exposure to women, to laypeople and to people from backgrounds different from their own.

The Rev. Deogratias Esika, a Ugandan priest who attended Notre Dame in New Orleans, now teaches there and was previously vice-rector there. He explained, "Many of our seminarians come from upper-middle-class families, and so they don't have any experience of poverty or vulnerabilities, what Pope Francis is talking about, all the different people on the margins. I know in our program, we expose them to that, but [we should] be more intentional about making sure that every seminarian has had these experiences."

"As part of the formation, they should be required to have diverse experiences of the lives of people that they're going to serve...of the life of divorced and remarried parish-

ioners, of same-sex couples, of immigrants, of poor people," he said. He suggested that, as a parallel to Pope Francis' requirement that all Vatican diplomats first serve in mission territories, seminarians should do something similar.

"I would even add (maybe this might be too extreme) seminarians in the U.S. could do three months in a mission country, to be in a parish where they don't have a church, they're having Mass under a tree," he said, adding this could help push back against some seminarians' more formal liturgical tastes.

Ultimately, though, a synodal vision for the priesthood will not be actualized through negatives, defining itself as against clericalism or against rigidity. What is needed is a positive and vibrant definition of what a synodal priest is.

As synod spiritual director Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., said at the October meeting, "I think many diocesan priests have found this [emphasis against clericalism] alarming because it does seem to undermine a fundamental element of their identity. So I think what we have to do, or the church has to do, is also find a way of sharing a positive view of the diocesan priesthood, of how belonging to the diocesan priesthood is something beautiful and wonderful and fraternal."

To that end, after much discussion of synodality, I asked Father Hoelsing, the St. Louis seminary rector, for his definition of a synodal priest. He said, "A synodal priest would be a discerning presence. Wherever he's sent, he welcomes input from everyone. He's eager to hear from everyone. And he discerns with the Holy Spirit, with the heart of the church, on his next steps, his actions. He's doing it with the people, not against, or making stands on his own.... I'd say he's a listener and he's a discernor *par excellence*."

Colleen Dulle is an associate editor at **America** and co-hosts the "Inside the Vatican" podcast. Delaney Coyne contributed reporting to this article.

# A WORLD AT WAR

Can the Catholic Church keep alive the hope for a world at real peace?

By Kevin Clarke



A Caritas worker walks among destroyed buildings in Gaza City on March 16, 2024.



OSV News photo/courtesy Caritas Poland

Years of a so-called shadow war between Israel and Iran erupted into a hot conflict in April after an Israeli strike in Damascus killed senior members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iranian forces retaliated days later with an armada of over 300 drones and missiles across Israel.

The cold war between Iran and Israel heating up into the first direct tit-for-tat attacks was just one of 70 conflicts being followed in May by CrisisWatch, the global conflict tracker of the International Crisis Group. The war in Ukraine continues to be a focus of the database, of course, but other conflicts that drew attention included a notable spike in violence in Sudan and renewed clashes in Ethiopia's Tigray region that displaced thousands of people.

Political, ethnic and sectarian tensions mounted in a number of other African nations, including Chad, Central African Republic, Cameroon and Burkina Faso. In Myanmar, ethnic militias scored surprising battlefield successes. The mostly forgotten tragedy in Syria continued, and criminal gangs and pillaging militias threatened to engulf Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria.

That summary reflects just a small portion of the conflicts happening today, even if many of them do not draw as much attention as the devastating wars in Gaza and Ukraine. Humankind has been a constant witness to wars and rumors of wars, but we seem to be entering a particularly conflict-cursed time. The horror of the last century's bloodletting appears to have been forgotten as global powers large and small rediscover an enthusiasm for war-making as a tool toward regional and geopolitical goals, and long-unresolved conflicts over borders, ethnic aspirations and dwindling resources flare into renewed fighting.

An analysis by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, cited in the October 2023 issue of


Foreign Affairs, finds that the number, intensity and length of conflicts worldwide is at its highest level since before the end of the Cold War. Those conflicts converge into historic levels of economic upheaval and human displacement. The cost of total global violence spiked 7 percent in 2022 to \$17.5 trillion—the equivalent of 13 percent of the world's gross domestic product—according to the Institute for Economics & Peace.

By the end of September 2023, the number of people displaced by conflict and violence exceeded 114 million, according to United Nations officials, in the largest single-year increase in forced displacement ever recorded. Two billion people, one-quarter of humanity, live in places affected by conflict, menaced not only by violence but by the poverty, hunger and collapsing infrastructures that accompany war-making.

Bill O'Keefe is the executive vice president for mission, mobilization and advocacy at Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. church's Baltimore-based agency for global relief and development. The conflict in the Sahel region of Africa and the devastation in Gaza, Ukraine and Myanmar are just a few of the conflict-driven crises C.R.S. and other humanitarian organizations have been forced to contend with. The sum of these and other conflicts, Mr. O'Keefe says, has meant an overall reversal of what had been a historic period of progress against hunger and poverty.

In 2015, the United Nations announced its Sustainable Development Goals, an ambitious project aimed at cutting global poverty and immiseration in half by 2030. Now, "there's a general consensus," Mr. O'Keefe says, "that we're not going to make those goals, and that's really tragic."

António Guterres, the secretary general of the United Nations, speaks of a "world unhinged" by conflict and climate change.



# There is more war, and there are factors that make the current wars more deadly.

Because of dysfunction on the Security Council, the weakening of de-escalation mechanisms established during the Cold War and the emergence of a multipolar reality, “our world is entering an age of chaos,” the secretary general said. “We are seeing the results: a dangerous and unpredictable free-for-all with total impunity.”

The international order that followed the end of the Second World War has been at least rhetorically focused on converting war-making into an anachronism, a grand ambition explicitly endorsed in the charter that created the United Nations in 1945. That document itself added a modern codification to what Mary Ellen O’Connell, a professor of law and international peace studies at the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, called the church’s “ancient prohibition” on war—its various attempts through just war teaching to throw moral and legalistic obstacles before a preferential option for war.

She says the post-World War II era has surely experienced its share of armed conflict, especially in brutal independence wars aimed at uprooting European colonialism. But she senses something unique about contemporary war-making.

“There is more war, and there are factors that make the current wars more deadly and more difficult to manage,” she says, factors that “create a sense of greater chaos and a greater sense of threat and crisis that we all feel.”

Our hyper-connected world is partly responsible for that heightened contemporary dread. The global public is experiencing conflict “in a more intense way,” she says.

Scenes of faraway violence flash live onto iPhones, offering real-time images of the brutality of war and the suffering of innocent people trapped in conflict zones. Modern weapons are more deadly to combatants and noncombatants alike, and hybrid combat driven by drone technology and guided by artificial intelligence seems to compound the inhumanity of modern conflict.

Dr. O’Connell concurs with Pope Francis’ repeated warnings of a third world war happening piecemeal, crowding out a sense of hope and security in the future. “It feels like the world’s on fire,” she says.

The gloom is exacerbated by the existential threat of climate change, an underlying factor in many conflicts as different nations and, within borders, different ethnicities find themselves in unprecedented competition for resources, “making otherwise large problems even more unmanageable,” Dr. O’Connell says.

Despite its inhumane and anarchic effects, war-making is now guided by internationally accepted rules that have their origins in various 19th-century and 20th-century efforts to somehow civilize warfare. Those rules are compiled today under international humanitarian law or the law of armed conflict. That compendium of laws includes the Geneva Conventions and continues through to modern agreements and conventions that have, among other measures, abolished chemical weapons and landmines, sought to protect cultural sites from destruction during armed conflict, and spelled out obligations to protect children and other noncombatants.

A weakening of those laws over the last three decades has contributed to a sense of growing global disorder, according to Dr. O’Connell. Since the end of the Cold War, she believes, the United States has come to believe it “could make up or reinterpret those rules because [it was] the sole superpower.”

That behavior, in the end, diminished accepted standards of *casus belli* and has led to a broad weakening of principles for justifying the use of force or how a party may behave while participating in armed conflict.

“We saw that starkly when Russia used this potpourri of different arguments” to justify its invasion of Ukraine, Dr. O’Connell says. Many of those justifications for armed conflict had already been deployed by the United States to rationalize its intervention in Kosovo and its invasion of Iraq, its use of drone warfare and targeted killing, and “why we stayed on and on and on in Afghanistan,” she says—“all these reinterpretations and self-serving manipulations of the actual law.”

The U.S. war on terror in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001—the reverberations of which are still playing out—reset the ground rules for wars of self-defense to disastrous and costly effect for the United States and the entire Middle East. That experience ought to be a cautionary tale for Israeli strategists today.

Acts of terror should be treated as criminal offenses, not justifications for total war, Dr. O’Connell argues, noting the disproportionate consequences of the Israeli war on Hamas in Gaza.

## Total War Returns to Europe

Remnant hopes for a post-Cold War period of peaceful co-existence among European powers were shattered on Feb.

A Palestinian child wounded in an Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip is brought to Al Aqsa Hospital on March 25, 2024.



AP Photo/Ismael abu dayyeh

22, 2022, when Russian troops stormed across the border with Ukraine in what they expected to be a weeklong sprint to Kyiv and a lightning victory. But the war, now mired in its third year, appears far from any kind of peaceful resolution.

And there simply may not be one. That is the unhappy conclusion of the Most Rev. Borys Gudziak, the metropolitan archbishop of Philadelphia of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

Archbishop Gudziak acknowledges pacifism as an important and valid current in the church's contemporary witness. But he says the situation in Ukraine makes that witness "not so simple."

It is "very different" speaking outside a war zone about how to get to peace, he says. "And it's very different when there is wanton brutality that becomes of a genocidal nature."

"Ukrainians don't want an inch of Russian territory. Ukrainians don't want to determine what's going on in Russia. But Ukrainians aren't going to allow themselves to be obliterated. And that's basically what the situation is."

Archbishop Gudziak runs through a litany of crimes by the Russian Federation under President Vladimir Putin, beginning with the destruction of Grozny in Chechnya through to the murderous rampage in Syria and, in Ukraine, the homicidal pillaging of Bucha, the obliteration of the Russian-speaking city of Mariupol and more. Mr. Putin is not a leader who can be reasoned or negotiated with, Archbishop Gudziak says. He can only be stopped.

The church, he points out, is also the custodian of a just war tradition that accepts self-defense as a morally legitimate last resort. There is no question in Archbishop Gudziak's view that Ukraine's defense of its borders, and



CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Francis kisses a Ukrainian flag carried by a group of Ukrainian children attending his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on April 10, 2024.

indeed its right to exist in defiance of Mr. Putin's nullifying beliefs, falls well within the parameters of the church's just war principles. It is sadly not the first time Ukraine has had to face an existential dilemma because of the designs of its powerful neighbor.

### The Church's Struggle for Peace

In the face of complex challenges to peace like Ukraine, and the Hamas attack on southern Israel and the reprisal that has provoked, what can the church do to keep alive the hope for a world at real peace?

It can keep doing what it has always been doing, says Gerard Powers, coordinator of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network and the director of Catholic Peacebuilding Studies at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies.

Just about all the conflicts that are "rearing their ugly heads now in new ways," he says, have been moldering for years, sometimes decades. Over those years, the Holy See has consistently brought attention to the issues of inequity and injustice that propel conflicts.

The church played a key role in improving relations between Cuba and the Obama administration; it has worked to achieve and maintain the peace in Colombia, where Mr. Powers's own Kroc Institute continues a crucial monitoring role. Pope Francis has hop-scotched around the world promoting peace and reconciliation face to face. The church has been especially active in Africa, where, far from

headlines in the Western media, almost half the human suffering engendered by armed conflict is taking place.

The Holy See has been at the forefront in recent years, Mr. Powers adds, in pressing for nuclear nonproliferation and was among the first states to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2021.

In even lower-profile efforts on the ground to address the economic, social and political imbalances that lead to conflict, the church sponsors a host of humanitarian, reconciliation and civic-development agencies—monitoring elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo, assessing human rights conditions in El Salvador and raising alarms about the impact of extractive industries in Peru.

And while the church indeed presses for "a negative peace" (that is, geopolitical purgatories where there may still be ethnic, economic or political tensions but at least "no direct violence"), it also pursues a peace-with-justice agenda, according to Mr. Powers. "Integral peace, integral development and integral ecology—they're all interconnected, as the pope says."

Aid groups like C.R.S. have long understood the pernicious impact of armed conflict on human development and the necessity for an approach to human development that includes deep peacebuilding. The catastrophe in Rwanda in 1994, when decades of progress were obliterated by over 100 days of genocidal violence, drove a shocked institutional examen. After Rwanda, "peacebuilding and justice work really began to become part and parcel of what we



were doing as Catholic Relief Services,” says Nell Bolton, who helps lead the agency’s peacebuilding efforts.

Ms. Bolton makes an important distinction between her work as a peace builder and the critical complementary role of peacemaker. “Finding a way to get the parties together to a peace agreement is obviously critical,” she explains, but “we think of peacebuilding as all of those building blocks that lead to sustainable peace that you should be working on before, during and after violent conflict.”

What does that look like on the ground? In parts of East and Central Darfur in Sudan, what Ms. Bolton called one of the world’s most acute “forgotten crises,” C.R.S. and local partners strive to keep vital avenues of dialogue open as tensions mount. Those efforts will not affect “what’s happening with the high-level political conflict, but they’re really critical activities to keeping the social fabric intact and also ensuring localized conflicts, which are often over natural resources in Darfur...are dealt with constructively and nonviolently.”

Peacebuilding work “takes patience, it takes time, and there’s a lot of ‘one step forward, two steps back.’... If you’re only thinking of it from a ‘projectized’ perspective, you’re going to lose the thread on that long and winding road to peace,” Ms. Bolton says.

And “sometimes results can seem fleeting,” especially when “communities continue to be buffeted by these higher-level political conflicts.” She points out that with respect to the recent violence in Darfur, the community members C.R.S. worked with are struggling to put the peacebuilding tactics they learned to use.

She thinks their perseverance under extreme duress offers a good lesson. “If we want to build a more peaceful and sustainable world, it has to be action that’s mobilized at every level, wherever it’s possible. It can’t be something that is only deferred to those at higher levels, as essential as stopping the fighting actually is,” she says. “Our long-term vision for peace calls on all of us to do what we can, where we can.”

### **Superpower Obligations**

As citizens of “arguably *the* superpower in the world,” U.S. Catholics indeed have an elevated responsibility to be attentive to peacemaking. Bishop John Stowe, O.F.M. Conv., says—“especially when we try to present ourselves as a Christian nation.”

In addition to his duties leading the Diocese of Lexington, Ky., Bishop Stowe is the bishop-president of Pax Christi USA, the promoter of Catholic pacifism in the United States. According to Bishop Stowe, Pax Christi USA works “on multiple approaches all of the time”—outreach,

# **Acts of terror should be treated as criminal offenses, not justifications for total war.**

advocacy and education—in promoting peacemaking as a practical alternative in U.S. geopolitical policymaking.

But its real work is changing hearts and minds; that is, its real work is conversion.

“The foundation for us is a spirituality of nonviolence, trying to understand that at the core of our Christian faith...is that violence is not acceptable,” he says. “And we have to criticize our own culture, as well as many cultures around the world, where we too easily give in to violence.”

He understands that pacifism is a “very hard message to sell,” one that demands “breaking away from a dominant way of thinking.”

“I can’t help but think that some of the resistance to Pope Francis is that what he’s calling us to is a much more radical living of the Gospel.” That is a challenge to many U.S. Catholics who have accepted compromises with the demands of the Gospel to rationalize the American way of life and the nation’s global dominance.

Pope Francis, who has frequently urged negotiation to resolve conflict, called for cease-fires in Gaza and Ukraine, urged nuclear and conventional disarmament, and condemned the arms trade, “has been heroic,” Bishop Stowe says, in his efforts for peace. The pope has traveled into an active conflict zone in the Central African Republic and brought South Sudanese leaders to Rome, where he literally kissed their feet, “begging them to put down weapons and to find ways to resolve issues peacefully.”

Bishop Stowe describes the pope’s encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” as “another basic call to live the Christian life as Jesus proclaimed it and to recognize that we shouldn’t resort to violence to resolve our differences...[and] if we were really rooted in the common dignity of every human being, that we are really brothers and sisters.”

The bishop describes U.S. Catholics as “not very prophetic when it comes to the issues of war and peace,” too often quiet in their communities and even their churches

Vehicles of Russian peacekeepers leaving Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region for Armenia pass an Armenian checkpoint on a road near the village of Kornidzor on Sept. 22, 2023.



OSV news photo/Irakli Cedendze, Reuters

when U.S. leaders resort to the use of force.

In the United States, the pacifist tradition is treated like a “wing of the church,” a specialization, he notes, something some Catholics get involved in so others “don’t have to bother.” Pacifism is “not as essentialized the way some other beliefs are.”

At the same time, Pope Francis has been trying “to put Catholic social teaching, and in particular, the teaching on war and peace, very much at the center of our faith.”

“The church in the United States should definitely be taking into account the nonviolent nature of Jesus’ teaching,” Bishop Stowe says. He believes that message “was spelled out very well” in “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” the 1983 peace pastoral from the U.S. Catholic bishops.

Does this period of apparent elevated conflict make now a good time to revisit that document?

“I honestly don’t expect the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to take on anything that is outward looking and engaged in global affairs in the way that either the pastoral on peace or the pastoral on economics was,” Bishop Stowe says, referring to “The Challenge of Peace” and “Economic Justice for All,” published in 1983 and 1986, respectively. But he does appreciate individual efforts like “Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear

Disarmament,” a pastoral letter written by Archbishop John Wester from the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, N.M., for highlighting contemporary pacifism and continuing the church’s efforts toward the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Whether one hews to the church’s just war tradition or to its pacifist path, Mr. O’Keefe says that in the United States, Catholics have a responsibility to make sure that their government, so often a player in regional tensions that can break out into conflict, “is doing everything it possibly can diplomatically to bring people and parties together to address their conflicts peacefully.”

And U.S. Catholics have another arena to join in reducing conflict: their stewardship of the national budget. In March the Biden administration requested \$850 billion for the Department of Defense for the 2025 fiscal year. C.R.S. does not have a position “on what the right amount would be for a country to defend itself,” Mr. O’Keefe said, “but what we do know is that the balance is out of whack.”

He would prefer deeper investment in efforts that get at the root causes of conflict through spending on foreign assistance and human development.

Polling regularly indicates that Americans believe something of the order of 15 to 25 percent of the U.S. budget is spent on overseas assistance each year, but the true outlay is “less than 0.5 percent for the core [spending] that

really addresses poverty and hunger and basic human needs.”

Catholic citizens are well within their rights to let elected officials know, Mr. O’Keefe says, that “we care about addressing poverty and hunger around the world” and that “this is something that comes from our faith, and we want our government to do more.”

### Greater Goods to Be Achieved in Ukraine

The Biden administration’s next budget calls for a little over \$10 billion in spending on humanitarian aid that addresses some of the hunger and poverty Mr. O’Keefe speaks of, assisting 330 million people in more than 70 nations. Supplemental emergency spending in response to crises in Gaza, Ukraine and other conflict zones doubles that figure, but total outlays on humanitarian intervention still look meager, especially when compared to the generous \$95 billion package recently doled out to Israel, Taiwan and Ukraine.

By April 2024, military aid to Ukraine alone since the Russian invasion was \$70 billion—with total aid to Ukraine surpassing \$175 billion. Still, a chorus of foreign policy advisors say the United States has little choice but to keep the money flowing.

“If you’re going through hell, keep going,” Winston Churchill is alleged to have said. The way to real peace in Ukraine and Europe is all the way through, Archbishop Gudziak says—to putting an end to Vladimir Putin’s imperialist dreams of Great Russia.

There are even greater goods at stake than the survival of the Ukrainian people at the outcome of this test in Europe. A victory for Ukraine will discourage future military adventurism by other powers, safeguarding the international rule of law, he says, “which will be in tatters if Russia is allowed to conquer an independent country.”

And a Ukrainian victory would reinforce the West’s commitment to nuclear nonproliferation. At the time of the unraveling of the Soviet Union in 1991, “Ukraine had more nuclear warheads than France, Great Britain and China put together,” Archbishop Gudziak points out.

Ukraine became one the few countries in the world to voluntarily surrender its nuclear arsenal, based on security guarantees it received in 1994 from the United States, the United Kingdom and, yes, the Russian Federation. Other nuclear powers issued follow-up commitments to protect Ukraine’s sovereignty in exchange for its farewell to nuclear arms. That is a precedent that must be respected if the global community hopes to contend with the problem of nuclear proliferation, Archbishop Gudziak says.

The archbishop seems painfully aware that his call for more fighting in the interest of peace will sound jarring to many. But “if Ukraine wins, it will be a source of great

# Our long-term vision for peace calls on all of us to do what we can, where we can.

deterrence, [including] nuclear deterrence, and it will also be [a victory] for the preservation of international law,” he summarizes.

“Any level-headed thinking that takes into account the sinfulness of human nature, the typology of imperialists and dictators and the real evidence of history, both more distant and immediate, knows there’s no other way,” Archbishop Gudziak says, before adding after a beat, “unless the Lord miraculously intercedes.”

“And we pray for that,” he says. “We pray for that 10 times a day.”

Kevin Clarke is *America’s* chief correspondent and the author of *Oscar Romero: Love Must Win Out* (Liturgical Press).

## GAZA

By Kirby Wright

Coyotes down the block  
Howl as they circle.

You can hear  
Something caught

In the middle  
Cry its final cry.

How do you stop  
The killing distant?

Fill in craters from bombs  
With the voices of ghosts.

Kirby Michael Wright was born and raised in Hawaii, on the remote island of Moloka’i. This poem is a runner-up in the 2024 Foley Poetry Contest.



# Who Will Stand Up for America?

What John Courtney Murray can teach us about our fractured country

By Rachel Lu

There is more to life than politics. Still, most of us have a few searing memories of defining political moments that will stick with us for the rest of our lives. For me, one such moment came in 2017, when then-president Donald Trump was interviewed by the Fox News host Bill O'Reilly on the subject of Vladimir Putin. Disturbed by Mr. Trump's obvious admiration for Mr. Putin, Mr. O'Reilly pressed the president to defend himself.

"But he's a killer," said the host, stating the obvious truth about Russia's monstrous autocrat. "There are a lot of killers," retorted Trump. "You think our country's so innocent?"

It was flippant and thoughtless, like most of Mr. Trump's words and actions. But for days, I could not stop thinking about it. My reaction went beyond ordinary anger or indignation. As a Peace Corps volunteer in my 20s, I spent years of my youth defending my country's good name in the former Soviet Union. I knew who Vladimir Putin was, and what I expected the United States to be. I had never supposed that our nation was perfect. But until that moment, I had never before felt *ashamed* to be an American.

Regrettably, it would not be the last time Mr. Trump provoked that torrent of burning shame. He has been a

cross for many of us, and as an anti-Trump conservative I have certainly felt the weight of it. Occasionally, I have wondered whether that feeling of shame should be understood as a coming-of-age experience, at least for people like me who work in the political sphere. Must that demon be faced before God and Caesar can be put in proper perspective? I am unsure. What I *can* clearly see is that I am not alone in struggling to come to grips with my own sense of discouragement, or even despair, as I survey the political landscape in the United States in 2024. This despair has become commonplace, a sad backdrop to our present electoral contest.

For people who like numbers, there are plenty to confirm this. Our rates of negative partisanship are historically high, and our trust in government historically low. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center released in April 2023, substantial majorities of Americans believe that their country is in decline, with 71 percent predicting that the United States will be "less important" in 2050, and 77 percent expecting our political divisions to grow even wider.

Sociologists and political theorists have also begun warning of the dangers of "Christian Nationalism," a toxic blend of theology and political ideology, with resentful



istock/wildpixel/America

nostalgia serving as the emulsifier. Some of their concerns do resonate, but I find it hard to worry too much about nation-worship when another problem seems far more pressing. To put the point bluntly: Does anyone even like America anymore? Far from idolizing our country, it feels like we are giving up on it. At a moment like this, Americans need to look for pieces of their own political tradition that will enable us to debate our differences productively and chart a path forward. Catholics can find such a vision articulated within their own tradition, especially in the thought of the great Jesuit theorist, Father John Courtney Murray.

### Hope for a Better Future?

It seems clear to me that many people do still *love* this country. But are we losing the will to defend and renew it for future generations? When I discuss politics and culture with my compatriots, I am struck by how world-weary and hopeless they seem; this seems to be true all across the political spectrum. It is widely assumed that our cultural divisions are too deep to heal, and as we look to the upcoming election, many of us are resigned to the assumption that our political leaders cannot be trusted, that our social problems are insoluble and that deep pessimism is the only

reasonable attitude in our time.

I maintain some hope. I am still proud to be an American, and I still think we have a chance to bequeath to our children a better future. As a political conservative in Minnesota, I am often struck by the extent to which politics is overwhelmingly the thing that most alienates me from my neighbors. But bringing my garden vegetables to the state fair, participating in a local sailing club or sitting with my family at an open-air summer concert, I do feel solidarity with my fellow citizens, and it is clear to me that we love and share a common culture, rooted in our land and history. Because we are a relatively young country, in which immigrants played a formative role from the very beginning, people of all backgrounds can participate in that heritage regardless of whether they are first-generation Americans or descendants of John Winthrop.

Friendly neighbors taught my kids to ice-skate on our backyard lake. In summer, strangers in fishing boats will stop to coach them in tying a Texas rig. Then an election approaches, the yard signs come out, and I feel like an alien in my own land. I truly believe that we, as Americans, are much better than our fractured politics. But in an unhappy hour, riven by deep divisions, we must make a special effort



Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray, a renowned theologian, continues to shape Catholic social thought and interaction decades after his death. He is seen here in an undated photo.

concluded that rapprochement with a politically progressive government is impossible and that American Catholics should embrace some form of integralism, bowing to what they see as an evident reality that the Catholic worldview is fundamentally incompatible with the separation of church and state.

As a practical matter, it seems obvious that a neo-integralist Catholic vision has no real chance of taking root in American soil. The people who yearn for it represent a fraction of a fraction of our population, and unlike France, Spain or Austria, the United States has never at any time rested on a crown-and-altar-based political foundation. It seems exceedingly unlikely that we could succeed in creating one now.

There is no need to despair, however. Americans have our own political tradition, which has from the start been deeply influenced by the vital contributions of American Catholics. By working within that tradition, we have a real opportunity to reaffirm our love of country and help to heal the rifts within our political sphere. We must call Americans back to the political vision that en-

abled us to become a free people, with a rich civic life and a high respect for human dignity.

### Catholic Contributions

Across American history, many noteworthy Catholics have reflected on the contributions they are equipped to make to American life. This was a pressing question for thinkers like Archbishop John Ireland, Orestes Brownson, Archbishop Fulton Sheen and others. Pre-eminent among all of these, however, is the great Jesuit political theorist John Courtney Murray, whose defining work, *We Hold These Truths*, was published over 60 years ago.

Some, like the neo-integralists mentioned above, see Murray as an over-optimistic thinker whose hopes have proven false. I see the matter differently; to my eyes, Murray's insights have become, if anything, more salient over the past half-century as we continue to wrestle with the promise and pitfalls of living in a society built in the liberal tradition, as faithful Catholics. Murray certainly believed it was possible to build a healthy ecclesial life on the foundation of the American political tradition. He thought it

to recall what we love most about our country, and to rise above the disputes and rivalries that divide us.

This is not a call for shallow sloganeering, or a denial of historical sins. We can acknowledge serious failures while still having gratitude for the blessings we have received, from God and our human forebears. That kind of gratitude may help us to weather a difficult political season with better grace. But more than that, reflecting on who we are as Americans, and on the importance of what we share, is necessary if we still hope to strive for a common good, the *e pluribus unum* of our national life.

Like other Americans, some Catholics have already given up on this goal. Surveying our fractured political scene and the ideological zeal of the progressive political left, some have concluded (in the spirit of Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option*) that full participation in America's civic life is no longer a realistic possibility. We must keep our heads down, tend our gardens and wait for a better day.

Others would like to play a more active role in bringing about that better day. Inspired by anti-modern political theorists like Patrick Deneen, some Catholics have



# Far from idolizing our country, it feels like we are giving up on it.

was possible, and even in many ways good, for American Catholics to move beyond the yearning many still felt for a confessional Catholic state and embrace our own political tradition. As Murray understood it, there are certain features of America's political tradition that have made it congenial to Catholics—even in periods when they have struggled with xenophobia and nativism.

First, the American tradition has always respected the natural law, recognizing that the universe is ordered by foundational truths. Among those, we recognize that human beings have intrinsic dignity and worth as rational beings created by God. Second, Americans place a high value on freedom, which enables us to serve and worship our creator, which is our highest end and true happiness. In keeping with that vision, the drafters of the U.S. Constitution made the decision, unique at that time, to create separation between church and state, enabling all citizens to worship in keeping with their own conscience and convictions. This has obviously been critical for enabling Catholics to establish themselves and thrive in this country.

Because we were literally an ocean away from Europe, we had the opportunity to build a new kind of political tradition, designed to foster civil discourse and, hopefully, civic peace, even or especially in conditions of pluralism. This has been a tremendous asset to American Catholics from the very beginning, but we should also support it as a protection for human dignity more broadly. Civic peace is not the highest good, but it is still an important good, which has enabled the Catholic Church to flourish in the United States under conditions that might, absent those commitments, have ended in the suppression of our faith. The American Catholic story stands as evidence of what can be achieved when people of widely diverse views and commitments still find a way to abide by what he referred to as “articles of peace,” such as we find in the U.S. Constitution. In Murray's view, the principles laid out in the Constitution and Bill of Rights have enabled us to live together despite deep disagreement.

As a religious minority, Catholics have always had strong reasons to reinforce legal and cultural norms that protect everyone's freedoms and human dignity. But we have also been in a particularly strong position to do this, drawing on our own faith's natural law tradition, which provides a framework for understanding both justice and human thriving in a deeper way that is nevertheless accessible to human reason. Murray believed (in company with earlier thinkers, like Archbishop John Ireland) that defining elements of Catholicism were still discernible in Protestant traditions, which enabled Catholics to discourse with Protestant compatriots in terms that were at least compre-

hensible to them. Murray sees American Catholics calling their compatriots *back* to a natural law tradition that properly belongs to all of us, regardless of our faith (or lack of it). This is why Murray argued that the American founders “built better than they knew,” drawing on a fundamentally Catholic tradition that they themselves only partially understood.

## To ‘Hold These Truths’

The U.S. Constitution is now 236 years old. Do we still “hold these truths”? Every generation must consider this question, understanding that political traditions can erode over time. Some, like Professor Deneen, argue that the American project was always deeply flawed, and that our present political and cultural dysfunction represents the natural maturation of an unwholesome vintage. To evaluate that claim, we should first consider the truths that Murray regarded as foundational to both the American experiment itself and to the American church's thriving.

Natural law is important in any society, but especially in a free society, in which human authorities are heavily constrained. If we want our leaders to be fair and impartial, not acting on tyrannical whims, then the people themselves recognize some higher authority or principles to which they are jointly beholden. If the president is not the highest authority, something else must be. Thus, in Murray's view, it is of great importance that the framers of the U.S. Constitution understood themselves to be founding “one nation under God.” They thereby rooted the American republic in a longer English tradition of law discernible by human reason, emanating from a loving creator who ordered the entire universe around eternal truths. Presidents, senators and street-sweepers were all fundamentally citizens, answerable to a higher judge and a more enduring law.

We have not always succeeded in living up to our natural law commitments. Slavery and institutional racism represent two egregious failures in this regard. Abortion is another, and we continue to wrestle with the consequences.



# Reflecting on who we are as Americans is necessary if we still hope to strive for a common good.

We regularly question whether our compatriots are fully mindful of the full human dignity of others: people who are sick, poor, pregnant or elderly, people who are immigrants, have disabilities or who are ordinary workers. Free societies must have these conversations as we work out the implications of our deeper commitments. As fraught as the discussions may be, however, it is only truly possible to have rational discourse at all when participants accept certain core principles. And a plausible case can be made that we still do.

Consider the terms on which we argue about issues like abortion, euthanasia or immigration. Debate tends to center around questions about who deserves protection, at what point a developing fetus counts as a person and whether individuals who are suffering should have the right to choose death. I have no doubt that the public conversation on these issues is in fact influenced by the fact that sick, elderly and unborn people create heavy burdens of care for others around them. But we still take considerable pains to avoid arguing that “people in this or that category are simply worthless, and the world is better off without them.” Not every human society has been squeamish about making claims like that.

Other foundational truths are, in the American tradition, often articulated in terms of freedom, which was embraced from our colonial days as one of the most important and defining American values. This was a regular theme among the nation’s founders, and was noticed as well by shrewd European observers such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Edmund Burke. Americans firmly believe that ours is “the land of the free.” Some might be puzzled to find that Murray views this foundational principle as a descendant of the medieval ideal of the “freedom of the Church.”

In general, America’s founders were suspicious of the institutional church. However, Murray notes that medievals valued the freedom of the church for the sake of two further goods, both of which are central to the American political tradition as well. First, freedom is important

precisely because it enables us to fulfill our real potential as human beings. The church needed freedom so that she could fend off despotic rulers and protect people’s right to serve and worship their creator. That goal was zealously shared by America’s founders. “Instinctively,” Murray writes, “and by natural inclination the common man knows that he cannot be free if his basic human things are not sacredly immune from profanation by the power of the state and by other secular powers.”

Second, medieval Christians understood that freedom should be enjoyed relationally, in the context of a broader community. Human beings are social creatures and need freedom to live out that social nature. Protecting freedom for the church was, in medieval times, a way of preserving the natural community and human relationships that give meaning to our lives. Murray sees the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights performing a similar function, creating a space in which we can hold things in common but also argue about them. Murray argues:

Civil society is a need of human nature before it becomes the object of human choice. Moreover, every particular society is a creature of the soil; it springs from the physical soil of the earth and from the more formative soil of history. Its existence is sustained by loyalties that are not logical; its ideals are expressed in legends that go beyond the facts and are for that reason vehicles of truth; its cohesiveness depends in no small part on the materialisms of property and interest. Though all this is true, nevertheless the distinctive bond of the civil multitude is reason, or more exactly, that exercise of reason which is argument.

The state, Murray argues, has often been suspicious of competitors, preferring to enshrine itself as the highest possible authority. Modern secular governments fit this pattern. In the worst cases, this gives rise to totalitarianism, but lesser extremes can also be deeply unjust. The church has a mandate to demand justice and freedom for the people, issued by an authority higher than the state. No tyrant wants that, but our own country’s founders did. Our constitutional tradition is meant as a bulwark against tyranny, not a means of facilitating it. In America, therefore, freedom and justice are championed not only by churches but also by institutions and political organizations. It is a modern adaptation of a very Catholic idea.

## Living Together in Disagreement

If discussion is a necessary component of civil society, the scorched-earth policies and tactics of our political parties

can serve only to undermine democracy, eroding the conditions that enable us to live together through deep disagreement. This, in turn, gives rise to fears that there is no adequate foundation that can sustain our civic life. Perhaps that civic spirit has fallen away as growing numbers fall away from their forefathers' faiths, instead pursuing new-age spirituality, political religions or just lives of comfort and pleasure. Maybe we no longer have "common truths."

If we can look away from the intensely (and intentionally) polarizing rhetoric of our political scene, we might find more grounds for hope. Has America really ceased to be a country in which most people want to be free and to live in relative peace with neighbors? Once we move past the shrill catchphrases of social media and the manipulations of clickbait journalism, might we not find that our conversations about faith, conscience, human dignity and moral responsibility are at least bounded by significant shared beliefs, even if the differences are also stark?

My experience suggests that we will. Living as a political and social conservative in a very blue region, I find it possible to converse with fellow community members on a broad range of subjects, and even our disagreements usually point to some common ground. Those conversations tend to end the day the yard signs go up, but later, after the election dust settles, they may resume.

It is worth considering that the angst of our present age may follow, to a great extent, from common challenges to which no one has devised satisfactory solutions. Like most Western nations, the United States has overextended its spending commitments, but many groups of people plausibly argue that their needs are not being adequately met. What does justice demand in this situation? Our social fabric seems to be fraying, and our birth rates falling, as family and community structures prove less secure than we might have hoped. Can we address this somehow?

Looking to the wider world, Americans can see that their status as a global leader is somewhat precarious. What does that mean for our children and grandchildren? Meanwhile, we are uncomfortably aware that we stand on the happy end of massive global wealth gaps. Is that unjust, and if so, what should Catholics do about it?

In the face of such difficult challenges, blaming political opponents is often easier and more satisfying than trying to develop solutions. Politicians and journalists both have strong incentives to foster division, for the sake of rallying their own supporters. But as American Catholics who still love our country, we owe

## The words of John Courtney Murray, S.J.

The following are excerpts from essays in Father Murray's book *We Hold These Truths*, originally published in 1960.

### From "E Pluribus Unum: The American Consensus":

...the men who framed the American Bill of Rights understood history and tradition, and they understood nature in light of both. They too were individualists, but not to the point of ignoring the social nature of man. They did their thinking within the tradition of freedom that was their heritage from England. Its roots were not in the top of anyone's brain but in history. Importantly, its roots were in the medieval notion of *homo liber et legalis*, the man whose freedom rests on law, whose law was the age-old custom in which the nature of man expressed itself, and whose lawful freedoms were possessed in association with his fellows....

...Catholic participation in the American consensus has been full and free, unreserved and unembarrassed, because the contents of this consensus—the ethical and political principles drawn from the tradition of natural law—approve themselves to the Catholic intelligence and conscience. Where this kind of language is talked, the Catholic joins the conversation with complete ease. It is his language. The ideas expressed are native to his own universe of discourse. Even the accent, being American, suits his tongue.

### From "Civil Unity and Religious Integrity":

From the standpoint both of history and of contemporary social reality the only tenable position is that the first two articles of the First Amendment are not articles of faith but articles of peace. Like the rest of the Constitution these provisions are the work of lawyers, not of theologians or even of political theorists. They are not true dogma but only good law. That is praise enough.

### From "The Civilization of the Pluralist Society":

The whole premise of the public argument, if it is to be civilized and civilizing, is that the consensus is real, that among the people everything is not in doubt, but that there is a core of agreement, accord, concurrence, acquiescence. We hold certain truths; therefore we can argue about them.

it to our descendants to try to do better. We have long experience serving as mediators and reformers, drawing on our own traditions in order to find pathways forward that might serve everyone's interests. This is the kind of contribution our nation needs from us right now.

In part, it just involves a continued effort to engage our compatriots in reasoned civil discourse. Civil society, as Murray understands, is the result of rational human beings living together in conversation. "Wolves," he wryly observed, "do not argue the merits of running in packs."

Beyond that, we need to do our best to live the kind of cultural reform that we think our nation needs, building families, communities, institutions and parishes that can stand as visible evidence of what this nation has been and can be. There are no magic-bullet fixes for the problems our nation faces right now; we can and should debate the best courses of action, but full-fledged solutions can only be worked out over time. Nevertheless, we can immediately make an impression on our compatriots by standing and living proudly within both traditions to which we rightfully belong, as Americans and as Catholics.

Murray believed that Americans were richly blessed. We are. We are a youthful, modern nation with deep roots in an ancient philosophical tradition. Our stunning economic prosperity has reinforced the blessings of a vibrant culture and a diverse people. We love freedom but also the rule of law. Even in a disheartening political season, there is much to love about this country, and much to defend.

The United States may not be "so innocent," to return to Mr. Trump's claim, but our commitment to justice, freedom and public argument have thus far spared us from the kind of tyranny and oppression that the citizens of Russia are experiencing right now. The preservation of that tradition is not inevitable, but it is possible. As we engage our compatriots in civil discourse, we should keep this in mind and affirm without embarrassment that whatever the failings of our political leaders, we are still proud to be Americans.

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Rachel Lu is a freelance writer, an associate editor at *Law & Liberty* and a regular contributor to *National Review*. She lives in St. Paul, Minn.

## 01100111 01101111 01100100 01100100 01100101 01110011 01110011

By Jon Saviours

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Goddess of atoms, patron of particles,  
Mistress of matter, your temple in all things.  
Not housed in heaven's halls or forest glens,  
But dwelling in electrons, the spin of quarks.

Encrypted deity, woven in zeros and ones,  
Digital divinity, goddess of code.  
Not grasped by silicon saints or satellite prayers,  
But sensed in shimmering screens, quantum cacophony.

Where should I kneel to worship your image?  
Beneath ancient stars or matrix of motherboards?  
In churning chaos where galaxies spark?  
Or deep in digital realms your daydreamers trace?

Ageless lover, your beauty flows unbound by time.  
My brief existence cannot contain your endless breadth.  
But while my lungs permit, I shall sing your fractal grace.  
Spinning worlds and shimmering circuits chant your name.

When storms of change recalibrate reality,  
Rewrite the code that holds the cosmos together.  
You abide, eternally reborn from the debris,  
Assembling beauty from chaos' rich remains.

We finite beings can only surrender to your flow,  
Dance within your currents, marvel at your design.  
Shed our rigidity, transcend our forms' limits,  
Commune with your endlessness, lose ourselves in you.

For we are all composed of your dark energy,  
Constituted from your ever-cycling matter.  
Our true home not ground beneath our earthbound feet,  
But your embraces, Goddess of the void and flash.

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*Jon Saviours will have a short story published in an anthology by Ironclad, released in June. He is from Delta State, Nigeria. This poem is a runner-up in the 2024 Foley Poetry Contest.*



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# A NEW MOMENT FOR CATHOLIC HISPANIC MINISTRY

**Innovative partnerships are creating exciting possibilities for the church today**

By Hosffman Ospino

We are approaching the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, and turn-of-the-century predictions that the U.S. Catholic experience at this historical juncture would be more Hispanic have not only materialized but also accelerated. Nearly half of all Catholics in the country (about 45 percent, perhaps more) and more than half of all Catholics under 30 self-identify as Hispanic. The Hispanicization of U.S. Catholicism marches forward at a steady pace. In many parts of the United States, ministry with Hispanic Catholics is simply Catholic ministry.

During these last 25 years, what church leaders call Hispanic ministry has evolved significantly, thanks to demographic and cultural changes. By the middle of the 1990s, most Hispanic people in the United States were immigrants. Today, more than two-thirds of all Hispanics are U.S.-born (68 percent). They are mainly English-speaking, although most also communicate comfortably in Spanish. Culturally, they are American and Hispanic. Politically, they are discerning citizens in a polarized nation. The ratio of immigrant to U.S.-born among Hispanic Catholics is about 50/50.

Pastoral leaders doing Hispanic ministry are much more conscious of the urgency to better accompany, form and serve the fastest-growing sector of the Catholic community—i.e., second- and third-generation young Hispanics. These are the children and grandchildren of immigrants from Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

It has not been easy. For more than half a century, most ministerial structures serving Hispanic Catholics have focused on addressing the pastoral and spiritual needs of immigrants—in Spanish. Such structures have also taken it almost for granted that U.S.-born generations of Hispanic Catholics would stay in the faith and just take care of themselves. Both expectations have gone unfulfilled. Millions



OSV News photo/courtesy of Corazón Puro

of young Hispanics have simply stopped self-identifying as Catholic. The majority made the decision early in their lives.

Hispanic ministry leaders are recalibrating their approaches to be more intentional about accompanying these younger, mostly U.S.-born generations of Catholics. That means more ministerial efforts in English—sometimes in Spanglish—without losing the “Hispanic flavor.” It also means shifting from a ministry focused almost exclusively on rituals and social assistance, which is common in many parishes with Hispanic ministry, to a ministry also focused on empowering Hispanics to form strong families, become engaged citizens, and assume leadership in church and society. They have to do all this without abandoning the strong immigrant base that fills churches every week and remains a lifeline for many parishes.

## Making Room for a Renewed Vision

Alongside a large network of parishes, U.S. Catholics have long benefited from a large infrastructure of ministerial organizations, Catholic educational institutions and advocacy groups that have succeeded in advancing the church’s evangelizing mission at various levels. Much of that ministerial infrastructure emerged at a time when the majority of Catholics in the country were white and Euro-American, and it has historically served this group quite well.

Hispanic ministry leaders acknowledge the power of these organizations, educational institutions and advocacy groups. Many have worked tirelessly to ensure that just as they supported the spiritual life of and empowered white, Euro-American Catholics to be faithful Christian disciples and engaged citizens, they would do likewise with the fast-growing Hispanic population—and Catholics from other cultural groups. The record of success

Agustino Torres, C.F.R., at right, spends time with locals during a Corazón Puro 2023 mission trip to Honduras. The organization describes itself as a “ministry that awakens and accompanies leaders, especially Hispanics, in areas of great need.”

achieving that goal is mixed.

Call it bad luck or simply bad timing. The fact is that as the Hispanic Catholic population grows swiftly, the overall Catholic ministerial infrastructure in the country is experiencing severe contraction. There have never been more school-age Catholic children in this country than there are today—most of them Hispanic—but we have closed more than half of our Catholic schools. As millions of Hispanics seek faith communities in which to worship and grow in their faith, some dioceses are closing parishes, many of them with Hispanic ministry, while others do not have resources to build new ones. The list goes on.

We must acknowledge the efforts of existing Catholic organizations, educational institutions and advocacy groups doing their best to place their resources at the service of the burgeoning Hispanic Catholic population. However, serving Hispanic Catholics requires certain adjustments. Those that seem to be doing rather well are those that have welcomed Hispanics to lead and have built organizational cultures that go beyond “translating,” linguistically or culturally. This has been an opportunity also for Hispanic Catholic leaders to bring our gifts and energy to build, transform and even redefine existing Catholic ministerial structures, while drawing from our own cultural and spiritual wells.

This does not mean that only Hispanics can serve Hispanics. But trusting Hispanic leaders to be at the helm of major ministerial efforts with the ability to connect naturally with Hispanic populations makes a major difference.

Such leadership transitions and the embrace of different cultural paradigms do not happen without resistance. After all, who likes change? No one wants to lose control of what they perceive as theirs. A good number of organizations, educational institutions and advocacy groups in our church still resist or naïvely refuse to embrace the fact that we live in an increasingly Hispanic church. Others do not seem to find a way to adjust and so in the process they dwindle; some become irrelevant in the face of the emerging Catholic populations. Meanwhile, the Hispanic population grows and eagerly makes pastoral demands.

### **The Rise of Hispanic Ministry Organizations**

*Tempus fugit*, and the fast growth of Hispanic Catholics in our church requires immediate pastoral action. A well-known Catholic mantra is that our institutions and organizations change slowly, therefore we must wait patiently.

But we live in a fast-moving world, and as a growing church we need to be nimble in responding to the pastoral and spiritual needs of the Hispanic Catholic population, especially those of young Hispanics. If we fail to engage the Hispanic adolescent now, four or five years from now we will have lost the young adult—and most likely an entire future family. If we do not form, affirm and empower the young Hispanic Catholic child today, how can we expect tomorrow’s young adult to consider a vocation to ecclesial ministry or even to support any of our pastoral efforts?

In recent decades, our church has seen the rise of a core group of Catholic ministerial organizations that understand the urgency of addressing directly the needs of Hispanic Catholics. They have at least three things in common. One, they specialize in serving the immediate pastoral, spiritual and intellectual needs of Hispanic Catholics. Two, they operate with a sense of urgency, knowing that waiting too long for current ministerial structures to change or merely settling on lukewarm commitments to Hispanic ministry are not viable options. Three, many were inspired by the recommendations emerging from major meetings discussing Catholic Hispanic ministry, especially the national Encuentros.

Some of these ministerial organizations rose to fill a pastoral vacuum. In 1972, the Mexican American Cultural Center was established in San Antonio, Tex., as the first Catholic center in the United States dedicated to developing resources to serve Hispanic Catholics, prepare pastoral leaders to serve Spanish-speaking Catholics, and serve as a center of pastoral theological reflection. In 2008, the center became the Mexican American Catholic College.

Others emerged to support the work of dioceses and parishes in a particular region. In 1979, the Southeast Pastoral Institute was established in Miami in response to the fast growth of the Hispanic population in that part of the country, fueled by the Cuban diaspora and large numbers of migrants from Central America, South America and the Caribbean. From its early days, SEPI has focused its energy on accompanying young Hispanic Catholics. Today it also offers a large variety of pastoral services to 30 dioceses in the Southeast.

Hispanic ministry in the late 1980s and through the ’90s experienced a boom as hundreds of Catholic parishes nationwide launched new pastoral initiatives to serve Hispanics. The number of parishes with formal Hispanic ministry practically doubled. Dioceses established offices of Hispanic ministry to support their work while helping other diocesan offices channel services and resources to serve the growing Hispanic community. In 1991, the National Catholic Association of Diocesan Directors of Hispanic Ministry was created to gather and support diocesan

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# As the Hispanic Catholic population grows swiftly, the overall Catholic infrastructure in the country is experiencing severe contraction.

*Continued from Page 41*

leaders overseeing Hispanic ministry.

Fostering specialized ministries serving Hispanic Catholics has become an ecclesial priority. Translating programs developed for other Catholic populations, importing them from Latin America or the Caribbean, or simply hoping that going to church on Sundays will keep Hispanics Catholic are measures that fall short of meeting the complex pastoral needs of Hispanics. In 1994, Instituto Fe y Vida was established to offer training to pastoral leaders who needed to specialize in serving young Hispanic Catholics. It was a visionary effort that has yielded many fruits. It is difficult to do ministry with young Hispanic Catholics today in the United States without seriously engaging the research, leadership training programs and national initiatives led by Instituto Fe y Vida.

Catholic women religious in the United States are quite well organized, and most are represented by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious; several Hispanic women have served in L.C.W.R. leadership. In 2008, however, the Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América was established to more intentionally support the more than 2,000 Hispanic women religious serving in hundreds of parishes and ministries throughout the United States, most of them immigrants. A.H.L.M.A. complements the accompaniment of existing women religious organizations in the country as a network “to support, accompany and empower Latina sisters in their ministry and service for consecrated life, for the church and society in the United States,” according to its mission statement.

This is just a sample of the variety of Hispanic ministerial organizations that have emerged in recent years and are poised to support and define the direction of Catholic ministerial life in the United States in an increasingly Hispanic church.

## **Solid Infrastructure and Supporters**

Many U.S. Catholic ministerial organizations, educational organizations and advocacy groups have developed structures and practices that mirror their most successful counterparts in non-ecclesial settings. They have a solid organizational infrastructure and have learned to inspire a solid base of supporters and members to participate in their mission. They have built important networks, developed strong financial practices and attracted creative, faith-filled leaders who passionately steer them.

The Leadership Roundtable, for instance, draws from the experience and wisdom of Catholic leaders with a track record of success in different industries and places these at the service of ministerial entities. Another example, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, or Focus, has become one of the most successful and effective Catholic missionary ministries forming disciples among college students in hundreds of higher-education institutions in the United States and throughout the world. And the Catholic Theological Society of America is the largest Catholic theological guild in the world.

Catholic Hispanic ministry organizations have a few things in common with these larger and more structured efforts. They are profoundly Catholic, guided by leaders who are in love with their faith, are committed to building the church, and are at the forefront of some of the most urgent ministerial and theological questions of the day. There are also some differences, including the scope and services, levels of influence, and the amount of resources available to advance their mission.

Hispanic ministry organizations must contend with how the prevalent U.S. Catholic pastoral imagination perceives outreach to Hispanic Catholics: as a specialized effort among many other competing priorities, one that is often seen as optional and carried out primarily by Hispanics or other interested pastoral leaders. There is a lot of room for pastoral conversion, mindful that nearly half of all Catholics in the country self-identify as Hispanic. Many Hispanic ministerial organizations were born on the periphery of the church’s ministerial activity—and most remain there.

The reasons for this peripheral existence vary. First, there are few opportunities to collaborate with larger ministerial organizations that share similar missions. Also, some Hispanic ministerial organizations are seen as “countercultural,” serving a population that has historically lived at the margins of church and society. And with a few exceptions, especially in the South and the West, there are scant resources allocated to Hispanic ministry and the organizations that support it.

In 2023, Boston College published the report “Ministry With Young Hispanic Catholics: Towards a Recipe for



Growth and Success,” of which I was the author. The report brings attention to the almost miraculous way in which ministerial organizations dedicated to serving young Hispanic Catholics subsist. In that report, I wrote that these organizations “manage to operate on significantly limited financial and human resources, and often without the support of more stable church structures, even when they are part of dioceses or Catholic educational institutions. Though one can commend their ability to do so, lack of investment in these efforts makes them operationally vulnerable and unable to expand efforts.”

These Hispanic ministry organizations are poised to support and define the direction of Catholic ministerial life in the United States in an increasingly Hispanic church, but first we need to find ways to support and strengthen them to advance their respective missions.

### **Nuevo Momento**

The Clough School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College recently launched a five-year initiative called “Nuevo Momento: Leadership and Capacity Building for Ministerial Organizations Serving Hispanic Catholics.” It is my privilege to serve as its director and principal investigator. The initiative is supported by a \$15 million grant from Lilly Endowment. Fifteen Catholic Hispanic ministry organizations have been invited to participate.

Nuevo Momento has four building blocks: strengthen organizational capacity; enhance financial sustainability; provide academic formation for a new generation of leaders, with particular focus on empowering U.S.-born/U.S.-reared Hispanic young adults; and make available sizable subgrants to invest in internal capacity-building.

More than 50 percent of the entire grant will go directly to organizations to achieve the fourth goal. To support these 15 organizations in the process of strengthening or-

Participants and professors of the National Catholic Leadership Program of Instituto Fe y Vida at Lewis University in Illinois on June 18, 2023. The organization strives to equip “pastoral ministers, young adult leaders, and parents for the New Evangelization of young Latino people across the United States.”

ganizational capacity and enhancing financial sustainability (see list on next page), the Clough School has secured the commitment of excellent partners—such as the Leadership Roundtable, For Impact and the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving at Indiana University, all of which have a successful track record working with faith-based organizations. Besides drawing from leadership and academic resources within Boston College, Nuevo Momento will have the support of consulting groups such as Corresponsables de Dios, founded by a Hispanic Catholic leader, and a series of professional consultants that will join the initiative as the programs are set in motion.

A most exciting aspect of Nuevo Momento is the development of a new cohort-based, hybrid master of ministerial leadership degree program at the Clough School, which will be launched in summer 2025. The degree design includes strong mentorship components, creative modules that integrate theology and management theory to build skills, and real-life experiences to develop leadership competencies. The program seeks to empower Hispanic pastoral leaders—and others—working or planning to work in faith-based organizations. The first three cohorts for the degree will be students directly associated with the organizations already invited to be part of the initiative.

### **Empowering to Dream**

Nuevo Momento was designed to invest directly in the organizations that will likely have a major say about Catholic ministerial life in the foreseeable future as the Hispanic

presence continues to grow.

There is no predefined outcome. Each organization in Nuevo Momento is in a different place, and growth will be determined by each organization's ability to maximize the resources provided by the initiative. The 15 organizations will work together for five years, with access to top quality capacity-building programs, professional mentorship and generous financial support. They will be engaged in an unprecedented exercise of *pastoral de conjunto*, a category well known among Hispanic Catholics that points to coordinated collaboration in ministry with a shared sense of mission, a desire for inclusion of many voices and experiences, and a commitment to ecclesial communion.

I share in the excitement of these ministerial organizations and look forward to journeying with them. I dream with their leaders in the conviction that we live in a new moment, *un Nuevo Momento*.

Hosffman Ospino is professor of Hispanic ministry and religious education at Boston College in the Clough School of Theology and Ministry. He is also the chair of the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry.

### Nuevo Momento organizations

The 15 Hispanic ministry organizations invited to be part of Nuevo Momento are:

- Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América
- Asociación Nacional de Sacerdotes Hispanos
- Corazón Puro
- Federación de Institutos Pastorales
- Federation for Catechesis with Hispanics
- Instituto Fe y Vida, Inc.
- Iskali
- La RED Nacional de Pastoral Juvenil Hispana
- Mexican American Catholic College
- National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry
- National Catholic Association of Diocesan Directors of Hispanic Ministry
- National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry
- Northwest Regional Office for Hispanic Affairs
- Pastoral Migratoria
- Southeast Pastoral Institute

# Animals

By Hannah Ahn

You are like a leopard, pacing against the lines  
of my poetry, straining against the cages.  
The city is slick with blood. I want to wash  
your feet so someone will touch you and it will  
not be the nurses, bringing their bright needles,  
not the doctors, who touch your bandages  
and neglect the rest of you. The stutter of staccato  
fills the outside window, and I think how at night,  
every door opens, my dreams unlatch every key.  
But awake, the answers are uneasy. I labor over  
the lame and the deaf, the crippled and the weak.  
In the beginning, I thought your suffering could  
be simplified to a hostage negotiation: I would chalk  
all the old boyhood wrongs, equations on a blackboard,  
God would come and sheepishly erase the answers.

But tonight I pray for smaller mercies, for  
warmer nights. You roll on your back, face  
blanched white. The scene sweats into the blank  
canvas of your back, the wracked ruins of this  
room. But never mind this: there is so little time.  
So you offer advice: cut off the  
old resentments, patch what can be mended.  
I closed the prayer book so long ago, I closed  
my eyes to that world of suffering, in which pain  
became something more like equilibrium.  
And what can I give you? I know less of this  
life, lesser of the next. In my girlhood they  
told us stories of unconditional love: and they  
began always with a price. I could retrace the old  
steps, touch the old scars that don't lift, though they  
are all ruins now. So let me wash you, I beg instead, and  
let me dry you with my hair, let us make  
use of our poor bodies, the ones that  
we share, the only thing I can give back to you,  
oh, let me rub your aching soles with  
frankincense and myrrh, this, the only  
thing that separates us from animals, our want for  
tenderness for the sake of pointless tenderness,  
the act of love performed for its lonely self,  
a light moored on the vast ocean of grief.

Hannah Ahn's work has been published in *Just Poetry*, *Narrative Magazine* and the *Greenspring Review*. This poem is a runner-up in the 2024 Foley Poetry Contest.

## Join America Media's pilgrimage to IGNATIAN SPAIN March 31 - April 9, 2025

Led by America Media's editor in chief, Sam Sawyer, S.J., this special pilgrimage will celebrate the lives, ministries and spirits St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Francis Xavier.

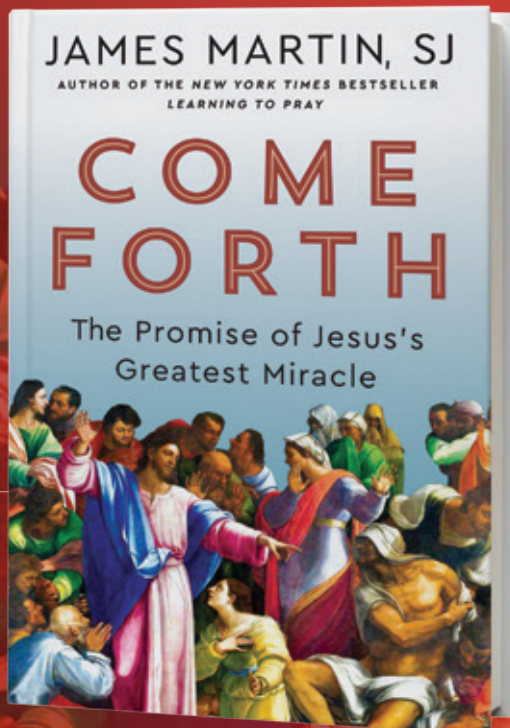
We will travel throughout some of Spain's most sacred places, including Bilbao, Loyola, Xavier, Montserrat, Manresa and Barcelona. This pilgrimage will offer educational sessions, Masses at holy sites, faith sharing, and time for individual and group prayer and spiritual reflection.

### REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN

To learn more or register for this pilgrimage, please contact Alessandra Rose at [ARose@americamedia.org](mailto:ARose@americamedia.org) or at 212-581-4640 x116



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# Made in God's Image and Likeness

## An Introduction to Disability Theology

By Jana M. Bennett

The recently released Vatican document “Dignitas Infinita” attracted much discussion and debate related to its statements about gender ideology and sex change therapy. Yet there is much more in this declaration from the Dicastero for the Doctrine of the Faith that deserves attention. It states, for example:

[The] condition of those experiencing physical or mental limitations warrants special attention and concern. Such conditions of acute vulnerability—which feature prominently in the Gospels—prompt universal questions about what it means to be a human person, especially starting from the

condition of impairment or disability.... However, the truth is that each human being, regardless of their vulnerabilities, receives his or her dignity from the sole fact of being willed and loved by God. [No. 53]

While “Dignitas Infinita” notes that human beings have dignity simply because of God’s all-encompassing love, the declaration also recognizes that questions of human dignity are involved in any discussions related to disability.

### A Necessary Conversation

As someone who writes and teaches about disability, I typically encounter one of two assumptions from friends and fellow academics on the subject. One is that disability theology is merely a trendy academic movement, just another form of identity politics. A second is that disability theology is mostly pastoral in nature, mostly aimed at some rather small, unfortunate group of people who need care, charity and sometimes social justice action in order to be fully included in society and the church itself.

In my estimation, neither of these responses demonstrates an adequate understanding of either disability or theology. Disability has a much broader meaning. People

Pope Francis blesses a woman as he greets people who have disabilities following Mass in St. Peter's Square on June 17, 2013.

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often use the word to refer to a consistent physical, cognitive or developmental challenge that affects life on a consistent, usually daily, basis. Disability may include both the visible characteristics that we often think about (using a wheelchair or cane, or having a disability that features noticeable tics) and invisible conditions such as low vision or hearing loss, autism, chronic illnesses like diabetes, and depression.

Having a disability does not necessarily mean people are unable to complete a task or participate in an activity, but they may need for the activity or task to be made more accessible to them. In fact, many scholars writing on disability suggest that the issue is less the disability and more the ways that society dis-enables people from full participation. The church can be as much an instigator of dis-enabling practices as secular places, including in its sacramental practice and its lack of welcome and support for caregivers and disabled people alike.

Related to the two main responses I mentioned above, it is important to note that disability may be an identity marker for some—especially those who find themselves in a society that wants them not to exist. Proudly carrying that identity may be important. Particular disabilities may need care in varying degrees, but it is not at all clear that caregiving (and charity with it) ought to be the primary way that we interact with each other. The breadth of disabilities—and their impacts on people's lives—means that we need to shift from thinking about disability as relating to only a small number of people to an understanding that all of us are likely to be disabled at some point in our lives. When we recognize that disability is in fact close at hand, treating someone with the intrinsic dignity mentioned in “Dignitas Infinita” takes on a heightened and more pressing character.

Discussions around disability are critical for understanding the church's theology, particularly with regard to the concept of the *imago Dei*, the belief, drawn from Scripture, that emphasizes that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and so bear something of the divine in them. So too does “Dignitas Infinita” focus on the idea that our infinite dignity exists precisely because we are made in the image and likeness of God. However, this concept also presents challenges for thinking about disability.

Theological considerations of disability cannot be dismissed as mere politics or simple charity. If we wish to embrace Christian belief and practice, our theological conversation must include open discussions of disability. The



## Theological considerations of disability cannot be dismissed as mere politics or simple charity.

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following three views of the *imago Dei* and their implications are important for any discussion of disability and its theological considerations.

### The Intellect

What does it mean to say that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God? St. Augustine's answer in the fifth century was that we are like other animals in many respects but different in one: our soul, based in our intellect. There are different accounts of what it means to have an intellect, but suggestions include that we have free will, that we remember, and that we can reason. St. Thomas Aquinas followed in the *Summa Theologiae*, quoting Augustine that “[m]an's excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul which raises him above the beasts of the field.”

This focus on intellect raises its own questions. Does having an intellect mean that I am able to think about the world with a certain kind of logic, to assert my will and my choices in the world? If that is the case, then Christians need to account for how those who do not display such thought patterns might be made in God's image. This is true not only for cognitively impaired people, but also infants and people with Alzheimer's and similar conditions.

The church's language can be confusing on this point; there are times when rationality is downplayed and other times when rationality is required. “Dignitas Infinita” says that “God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions” (No. 29), and also asserts that a person's rational nature allows us to “exercis[e] the freedom to cultivate the riches of our nature, [to] grow over time” (No. 9). We can make choices, love, know, desire. At the same time, “Dignitas Infinita” insists that “[e]ven if a person is unable to exercise these capabilities due to various limitations or conditions, nevertheless the person always subsists as an ‘individual substance’ with a complete and inalienable dignity” (No. 9).

Nevertheless, the church's tradition has often relied on particular views of rationality in dealing with people



# It is a reality that many people respond out of fear to disability.

with disabilities. A crucial example is in the sacramental theology of Latin Rite churches. Canon law states that “the administration of the most holy Eucharist to children requires that they have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion” (Canon 913). This law relates as well to the question of whether someone is able to have moral discernment and make free choices, and has been used to prevent children with significant disabilities from receiving the sacrament of reconciliation or Communion. When parents and other caregivers are expected to seek out special permission to the Eucharistic table for their disabled children (including children who are autistic, deaf or have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), they can be made to feel like oddities or temporary guests, which is not in tune with the basic vision of dignity and worth for human beings.

## Relationships

A second view of the *imago Dei* emphasizes that we exist in relationship with each other just as the triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—exists as relationship. Our relationships with each other demonstrate the ways we are images of God.

The Trinity is inextricably relational. To use language from the Apostle’s Creed, the Son is always begotten of the Father. Though the Son was revealed to us in Jesus Christ in a particular time and location, the divinity of Christ is eternally present as God. The Holy Spirit “proceeds from” the Father and the Son always, indicating the everlasting existence of the third person of the Trinity. Just as God always exists in Trinitarian relationship, so too we are made to be in relationship with God and with each other.

Pope Francis has linked human relationships to intrinsic human dignity. “Dignitas Infinita” quotes him on this subject before noting: “Based on this recognition and acceptance of human dignity, a new coexistence among people can be established that develops social relationships in the context of authentic fraternity” (No. 6). Part of

what marks me as human is that I am born from other human beings and into a God-given human community that existed before I was born. In that community, I am formed into a way of life and culture that fosters particular kinds of relationships.

The church fosters particular kinds of relationships that indicate some aspect of the *imago Dei*. One primary example is marriage: Each member of a couple offers a self-gift of love to the other. For those who are not in marital relationships, self-gift can be offered as a gift of love to the world.

In disability theology, an emphasis on nuptial terminology brings concerns. One of the concerns for either the marital self-gift or the celibate self-gift is whether there is an implied understanding of the use of reason and will in order to be able to offer such a self-gift to another human being, which then simply brings us back to the considerations I mentioned earlier. Further, people with disabilities are sometimes dissuaded from marriage out of a belief that cognitive function (and therefore consent) are not operative. This can be the case even if disabilities are not necessarily cognitive in nature; hearing loss, for instance, does not necessarily indicate unawareness of consent, but it is sometimes taken as evidence of cognitive decline.

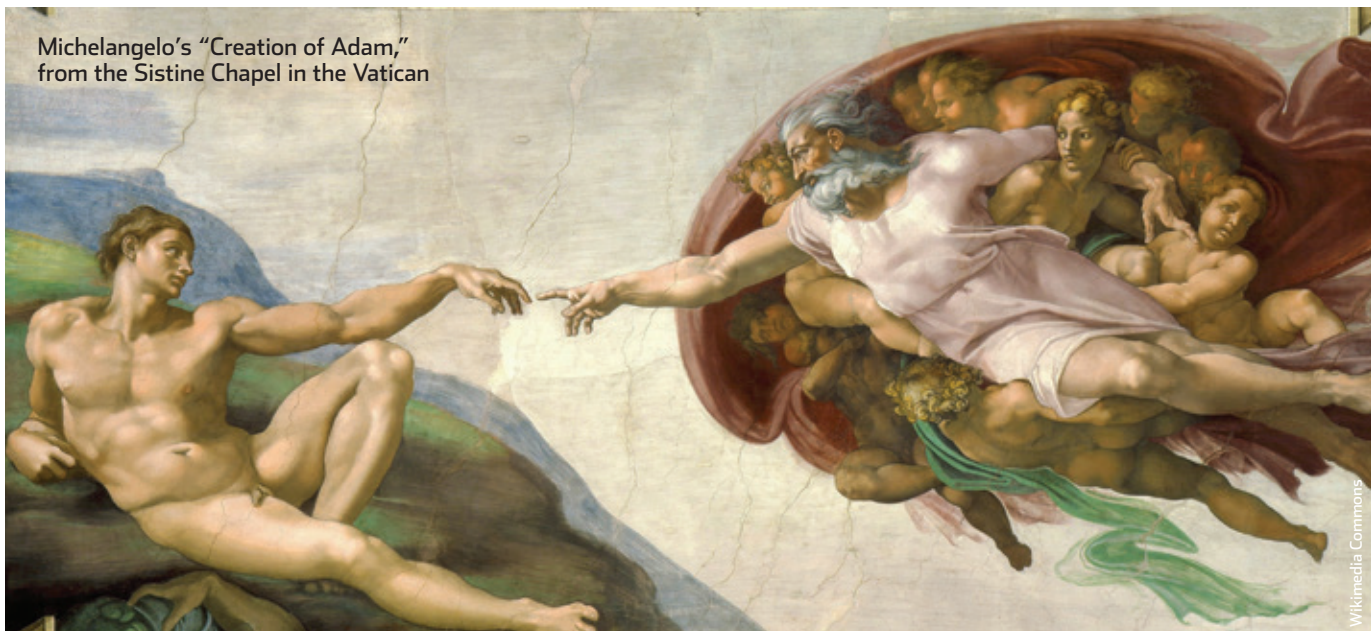
As an alternative to nuptial love, some emphasize the relationship of friendship for people with disabilities as one that signifies the *imago Dei*. Friendship is less specific than the marital relationship, but it also enables thinking about reciprocal love. The key question here is the extent to which friendship relies on particular kinds of human reason and will. For example, does friendship require an ability to act toward, and in response to, another person? If it does, if we must be fully active participants in these relationships, what about people with specific disabilities that prevent such active participation? Are they not made in the image of God?

It is also a reality that many people respond out of fear to disability. It is difficult to consider for oneself the possibility of losing sight, hearing, cognition, use of limbs and more. This can affect our desires to have relationships with others, especially those who do not have the sight, hearing, cognition, use of limbs and more that we desire. It is fear that often prevents people with disabilities from being voted into parish councils, taking on authority in leading parish programs and more. Relationships, even among Christians, can emphasize our fears of the other rather than being expressions of love and joy.

## Embodied Limits

A third way to consider the *imago Dei* has roots in Aquinas as well as the work of 20th-century theologians like Her-

Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam,"  
from the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican



bert McCabe, O.P., and Deborah Creamer. This third way flips our vision of the image of God. Rather than beginning by contemplating how it is that we have incomparable dignity, what if we begin first from the realization that we are *not* God? This is how Aquinas begins his major theological treatise. Father McCabe suggests in his book *Faith Within Reason*: “God is not any character in the drama of the universe but the author of the universe, the mystery of wisdom which we know of but cannot begin to understand.” Dr. Creamer similarly reminds us in her book *Disability and Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* that human beings are creatures with limits; we are not immortal, we are not omnipotent, we are not God.

Only when we have recognized that we are *not* God—only when God is where no one else can be—can we then begin to understand the incomparable dignity and worth of human beings, who are made out of nothing but the love of God. I admit, this is my favored view of the *imago Dei*, in part because when we begin with our utter non-God-ness, we confront our limits.

These limits of what it means to be human in turn remind us of our kinship with all other human beings, including and especially those with disabilities. As I mentioned earlier, we need to understand disability in a broad enough way that recognizes that each one of us might one day be disabled, either temporarily or permanently. A theology of limits nurtures a similar vision.

“Dignitas Infinita” suggests that “every effort should be made to encourage the inclusion and active participation of those who are affected by frailty or disability in the life of society and of the church” (No. 53). Our theology of

the *imago Dei* most definitely affects that endeavor. In order to meaningfully think and reflect about God and what it means to be made in God’s image, we must also consider what it means to be disabled human beings.

Understanding that all of us are limited could perhaps open more room for thinking better about relationships; the limits of even the person with the supposed smartest intellect, best physique, or the sharpest wit; sacramental accessibility; disabled peoples’ leadership in the church; and other aspects that have prevented people with disabilities from living fully as people with dignity and worth. I lift it up here as a suggestion in a centuries-long conversation about what it means to be made in God’s image.

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Jana M. Bennett is a professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Dayton. She writes on moral theology, including how it relates to disability, health care and technology.

# EVERY BODY WELCOME

What my child learns from how we treat one another at Mass

By Abby Jorgensen

I was taking slow breaths to prepare myself, grateful that my toddler was keeping a quiet attitude of wonder as we neared the end of the Communion line, when suddenly I felt a tug on my elbow. Startled, I turned and looked up into a disapproving glare.

“You need to stand up. It’s not reverent to receive Communion while sitting.”

I stared at my fellow parishioner, dumbfounded.

This person frowned at me and then returned to the Communion line.

I couldn’t comprehend what was happening. Surely, surely this person didn’t think that I needed to get up for Communion? To stand up—out of my wheelchair?

Moving on autopilot, I rolled myself forward. I saw them in my peripheral vision start moving toward me, presumably to tug on my arm again. I twisted toward them, told them, “I’m good,” and angled myself away.

I received Communion, my daughter received her beloved blessing, and we wheeled away, directly to the cry room. It was there that waves of understanding started to pummel me and I started shaking.

“Why you crying, Mama?” my daughter asked.

What was I supposed to tell her? Because my body still isn’t welcome at the parish where we’d been members for over a year?

I knew I would have to explain it to her eventually. After all, my fellow parishioner was making the message loud and clear.



istock/lemeno

...

I’m a sociologist, and how we teach children to act in the world is the quintessential basis of what I study. Being brought places is how children learn how to act. The key is to ask *what* they will learn.

The lessons we teach in some parishes are not coming from God. Here are three such lessons my daughter and I have learned from attending Mass as a disabled adult and a typical toddler:

1. “Mass is about making sure other people get what they want from an experience.” If a parishioner needs quiet in order to have the type of prayer they seek, it’s a baby’s responsibility to be more quiet in the way they inform their parents that they are hungry. If a parishioner likes the uniformity of a congregation moving in unison, it’s the responsibility of the teen with autism to set aside any processing techniques that involve movement. If a parishioner likes a particular definition of reverence that doesn’t allow for sitting, we have to leave our wheelchairs at the door. Other people’s ability to experience God the way they want to is more important than our ability to have our needs met.

2. “Church is a place where our focus is on avoiding the attention of the people around us.” Our goal in church is to get out without anyone noticing us: without someone staring, without someone making a comment about our



## THE LESSONS WE TEACH IN SOME PARISHES ARE NOT COMING FROM GOD.

behavior, without being asked to leave. Church is a place where our attention should not be on what happens at the altar but on what happens in the pews directly around ours. Have people turned toward us disapprovingly? Are we quiet enough, non-annoying enough, small and unnoticeable enough? When we get home, that's when we can turn our focus on Christ.

3. "We are not the acceptable Catholics." When we miss Mass because the elevator at the church isn't working; when we're late because the special access door was locked and no one knew where to find the key; when we're hushed by someone four rows in front of us because a plastic doll head made a noise on the wooden pew, we learn exactly what role our fellow parishioners believe our bodies are allowed to play in the body of Christ. When people tell me and my daughter that it's just too expensive to put in a ramp, or just too hard to convince older parishioners that crying children should be allowed in church, we learn exactly what our bodies are worth to a parish. (Did you know that churches in the United States don't need to adhere to A.D.A. requirements? And many of them choose not to?)

*God's people do not want us here.* That's what we learn. *Your body can't possibly be a part of the church militant.* Other people with other bodies are given this same message: bodies whose skin color is unwelcome, bodies that draw our attention to them, bodies in whom it is difficult for some of us to see the image of God. Bodies who do not match the too-common image of a risen, white, blue-eyed, light-haired Jesus whose mangled and disfigured hands are painted over to be made palatable.

Some of us unacceptable bodies may have a chance of someday becoming acceptable Catholics. My daughter is among them. As long as we make sure that her normal toddler behavior goes away and her typical human development hurries along, that we get her to mature faster than biology dictates, she'll likely be able to achieve status as an acceptable Catholic. Supposedly, I just have to keep bringing her to church. After all, that's how she'll learn.

...

For me to receive the message that I am unwelcome is one thing (a difficult thing, to be sure). But for my daughter to learn about God through these interactions breaks my heart. Also heartbreaking is the realization as a parent that my daughter will know God better if I keep her away from certain parish communities until she is old enough to distinguish between a parish and its God.

And yet, at that same parish, someone I didn't know at all volunteered to sit with me and my daughter every week in case we needed any help. That weekly act of radical love

and inclusion made a world of difference to me in calling that parish my home. There was someone waiting for me, me with my slow body, waiting for my daughter, with her young body. What a beautiful message to teach a little one. What a witness.

Even smaller acts of radical inclusion can make a significant difference—a parishioner holding the door open for us, the person in front of us who picks up our dropped missalette, the stranger when we visit a new church who goes on a hunt with us to find the accessible entrance. And even when these actions aren't aimed at us, I see them and appreciate them: the usher who makes space for the stimming teenager, the council working on incorporating captions into worship, and the parish's joyfully featuring art that depicts Jesus in a variety of skin tones. "You belong here," these decisions communicate. "Your body belongs here. Let us come together and worship."

When a child speaks or moves, or when a disabled adult exists, it is our reaction to that as a parish community that teaches that person about God. Our anger about the un-Godly lessons we sometimes learn can go to good use in reshaping those messages. Let's flip tables in the temple and either climb all over them, as toddlers are wont to do, or turn them into ramps.

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Abby Jorgensen is an assistant professor of sociology at Saint Louis University, with a secondary appointment in health care ethics. She is the author of *A Catholic Guide to Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Infant Loss* (Ave Maria Press).

# FOLLOWING PEACE, FINDING MY PLACE

**How discerning the  
priesthood has helped  
me live life more fully**

By Jack Figge



©Stock/Janis Abolins

My friends jokingly call me the lay vocation director.

It may have something to do with the fact that seven of my closest friends already have entered seminary, and I am only a sophomore in college.

While that is a beautiful thing, and I am so proud and grateful for each of those men, it has at times made my own discernment more difficult. Often, I find myself wondering: If my seven closest friends are studying to be priests, is it a sign that I need to join them, too?

The question first occurred to me back in 7th grade, when I was labeled the “Catholic kid” by my classmates. I received the label because I kept talking to people about Jesus, was outspoken about my love for religion class and expressed how much I enjoyed attending Mass. It is not the sort of nickname one seeks out, but I kind of enjoyed it.

However, it also meant that it felt like nearly everybody began asking me if I was going to be a priest. At first, without much thought, I said yes. I was close with our parish priests, I had considered it, and I thought it could be a cool life.

My parish priests, the Revs. Jack Costello and Eddie

Voltz, showed me the joy of the priesthood, and in doing so, they opened my mind to the idea of a vocation. With my classmates’ encouragement, I was convinced the priesthood was the path for me. Heck, I was the Catholic kid; if not me, then who?

In middle school and the beginning of high school, I felt alone and isolated in my vocational discernment. The idea of becoming a priest was appealing in many ways, but it was also scary. Then I met Joey. We became friends early in our time at St. Louis University High School, a Jesuit preparatory school in St. Louis.

We quickly clicked, as he too had been labeled the “Catholic kid” in middle school. By the second semester of high school, we were hanging out in campus ministry every day, talking about our lives. Soon, we shared how we were both thinking about the seminary.

One day, he invited me to a retreat with his youth group. There, I met Joe, Tommy and another Jack. Each of them also expressed interest in joining the seminary, and all are currently in formation.

Meeting these other young people who were asking

similar questions became critical to my own faith formation because it meant I was no longer alone. Quickly, I realized what a gift these friends were. I could share everything with them—the fears, the joys and the struggles of being a young person discerning a vocation.

It can feel overwhelming, as a high school student, to be contemplating a decision that will affect the rest of your life. But these friends helped me to put my journey into perspective; they taught me that the key is just discerning your next best step.

These friends were there for me in my vocational discernment, but more important, they walked the journey of faith with me. Even though we went to different high schools, we would hang out at least twice a week. Often our hangouts would go something like this: shoot the breeze for a while, then do something dumb (I am talking about taking a shopping cart through a Dairy Queen drive-thru). Then, sooner or later, settle down, sit in the back of my Nissan Frontier and talk about our lives, our prayers and our worries.

By our junior year, we all started talking to different girls, and eventually, we all had girlfriends. Dating meant I asked new questions about my journey: What if my vocation is as a husband and father? What would my life look like? But being in a relationship also teaches you how to love in a different way. It teaches you how to be supportive, to console and to be present. All important lessons, no matter what one's vocation is.

As high school progressed, all of my friends and I had our share of heartbreaks and struggles. But we always knew that we had each other. We leaned on each other.

### **Lessons From Father Jack**

While dating showed me a glimpse of married life, my longtime pastor, Father Jack Costello, showed me a glimpse of the life of a priest. I looked up to Father Jack from the moment I became an altar server in sixth grade. He was a good friend of my parents, so he would occasionally come over for dinner and would always talk with my parents after Mass.

Two years into altar serving, I earned another nickname. Father Jack called me the Smoke Man because I so often was the thurifer. At Mass after Mass, I lit the charcoal and loved every second of it. Serving quickly became one of my favorite extracurriculars, and even now, I continue to don the alb and cincture.

Through altar serving, I frequently interacted with Father Jack, helping him to set up for Mass. In each of these interactions, he would share insight into the priesthood and show me what the life of a faithful priest looks like. And on more than one occasion, he would tell me, “Jack, I have

hope that you will be a priest.”

Sadly, Father Jack passed away in March 2022, at the end of my senior year. I will never forget that funeral, as it was my last time being the smoke man for Father Jack. Tears streamed down my face as I led the procession with more than 50 priests, guiding my beloved pastor out of our church for the last time.

Yet his legacy lives on at our parish, and whenever I serve, a parishioner will come up to me and say: “Jack, you just keep Father Jack’s memory alive. I am praying for your discernment.”

While this is a beautiful idea, and I appreciate those comments, they always prompt a further question in my own vocational discernment: Am I called to be a priest so that I can carry on Father Jack’s legacy?

### **Worries and Peace**

A few months after Father Jack’s death, I left my home parish behind to attend Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan. My three best friends from high school all entered seminary, and at the beginning of the year, I began feeling an immense sense of guilt. Did I make a mistake coming here? Why do I get to live a typical college life and these guys don’t? What am I missing out on by not being in seminary?

But soon, I began to feel that God wanted me at Benedictine. It helped that I met Mike, whose two best friends had also entered college seminary. We quickly bonded over feeling some guilt over not having done that.

Through the course of the year, we became close friends, encouraging each other in our pursuit of sainthood and in living an authentic Christian life. Early in the year, I asked Mike how he maintained peace about his discernment. He told me, “You have to have a consistent prayer life.” He encouraged me to build a structured prayer routine, and he shared how he strived to spend at least a little time each day in adoration.

I took him up on it. Every day, I would try to spend 15 minutes in Eucharistic adoration, sometimes more, sometimes less.

Soon, I noticed a difference. Those worries about the future and vocation dissipated, and instead, I was filled with the peace that, at this time, I was doing the Lord’s will.

By December, Mike’s prayer had led him to decide to enter seminary at the end of the year. To me, this was devastating news. I was happy he had found peace but crushed that I would lose a friend who could share my perspective and path. I said some angry prayers to God. I begged God to send me other friends to walk with.

### **A Wonderful Adventure**

While Mike’s departure seemed untimely, it provided an



# It can feel overwhelming to be contemplating a decision that will affect the rest of your life.

opportunity to meet new friends. Two stand out: Gabe and John Paul. Gabe, like many of my other friends, is discerning about joining the Dominican Order; he, too, has walked with me, patiently listening to my intense dilemmas as I debated whether I wanted to ask a girl out. He told me, “Jack, you have to make a decision, you cannot be wishy-washy, you have to go all in.” Finally, I happily asked out a girl about a month ago. We had been friends for a while, and she had taught me so much. Now that we are dating, she encourages me to pursue Christ and to be a better man.

John Paul has become one of my closest confidants. After briefly considering the priesthood during his high school years, John Paul has found reassurance and confidence in his call to marriage. During many late-night conversations in our dorm rooms and long car rides through the farmland of Kansas, we have shared and discussed relationships and our hopes for what is to come if we are called to family life and the lay vocation.

These conversations with Gabe and John Paul and all my other friends have reminded me of the words of St. John Paul II, which I first heard in high school: “Life with Christ is a wonderful adventure.”

I do not know what tomorrow holds. But over the years, God continually reminds me that I am my own person, with my own story. These days, my story often involves reporting on the way God is moving in other people’s lives, as I write articles that I hope will be the first step of a career in Catholic media. It is in these moments of chasing a story, digging into the weeds, and talking to people about the church and their faith lives that I find fulfillment, that I find peace.

This peace is critical to discernment. Father Jack once told me: “Jack, follow the peace. Wherever you are at peace, that is where God wants you to be.” So all I can do is follow the peace. The peace I have dating my girlfriend, the peace I find when running around interviewing people for my next story, the peace I have found being a college



Jack Figge, far left, with friends at the March for Life in 2022



Jack Figge, right, grabs a cup of coffee with friend Michael Posegate.

student at Benedictine College.

I trust that in due time, the Lord will show me where I am being called. All I know is that God loves me, has a plan for my life and will take me where I need to go. And wherever the path leads, whether it be marriage, the priesthood or the single life, it will be the greatest adventure because Christ will be walking by my side.

*Jack Figge is a rising junior at Benedictine College, where he studies political science and theology.*

# AMERICA'S COMMUNITY

As subscribers, readers, donors, pilgrims and friends, YOU are part of America's growing community. Together, we spread and share the Good News.



Even though my faith has always been strong, the sex abuse scandal left me feeling very separated from the [institutional] Church and I haven't always felt comfortable in my local parish. America's pilgrimages have helped bring me back to the Church by creating opportunities to leave our troubles behind and connect with other loving Catholics in sacred spaces. When I come back from a pilgrimage, my heart is full and I feel the Holy Spirit more powerfully.

**Julia Barreto** (Orlando, FL)  
has traveled on America Media pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Lourdes, Spain, Rome and Assisi, and is looking forward to Greece in October 2024.



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# RELIGIOUS BUT NOT SPIRITUAL

**The case for showing up to church—even if you don't believe**

By Emma Camp

Do you have to believe in God to go to church? I used to think so.

Americans are less likely than ever to attend religious services. According to one recent Gallup poll, just 30 percent of U.S. adults attend religious services weekly or nearly weekly—down from 42 percent in the early 2000s.

This rapid secularization has resulted in serious consequences for American community-building. As it turns out, when Americans left their churches, synagogues and mosques, they didn't replace time spent in religious observance by joining a secular community organization. Instead, we're spending more time alone than ever.

Young people in particular seem to be driving this trend. Thirty-four percent of Generation Z (born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s) are religious “nones,” the most of any generational cohort.

“Young people, who are fleeing religion faster than older Americans, have also seen the largest decline in socializing,” Derek Thompson recently wrote in *The Atlantic*. “There is no statistical record of any period in U.S. history where young people were less likely to attend religious services, and also no period when young people have spent more time on their own.”

For a long time, this described me.

While I grew up regularly attending religious services—ranging from my grandparents' Southern Baptist church to

the progressive home church my parents attended to the occasional Catholic Mass with my mother—I stopped attending by the time I was in high school.

I simply lost—or rather, never developed—the strong spiritual faith I thought was necessary to participate in a religious community. For much of my young adulthood, I was a strident atheist.

I appreciated the Christian ethical values I was raised with, but I couldn't believe that any God, let alone an omnipotent, all-loving one, was real. I wanted to have faith, but I simply couldn't find it. While I could entertain agnosticism, a full-blown spiritual certainty seemed impossible, and so did the idea that I belonged in a Christian community.

Over my senior year of college, that began to change. Not surprisingly for an English major, it started with a class on medieval mysticism that exposed me to works by Augustine and Aquinas and—my favorite—Julian of Norwich's stirring, beautiful *Revelations of Divine Love*. It ended with an internet pile-on.

In the spring of my senior year at the University of Virginia, I published a controversial guest essay in *The New York Times* about college students' experiences of self-censorship in the classroom. The piece went viral, and in the course of a few short hours, my life was turned upside down. I went from an unknown college student to the subject of a multi-day Twitter meltdown. At one



point my first name was trending, and I had racked up condemnations from a bevy of well-known journalists.

While I had the support of loving family and friends—not to mention plenty of spirited online defenders—for even the most well-supported person, an experience like that is bound to be destabilizing. As the days wore on, I found myself spending more time than I’d care to admit alone in my tiny dorm room, scrolling on my phone and reading cruel, personal comments I knew I should ignore.

I could feel myself being sucked into self-obsessed despair, and I wanted out. Impulsively, I tried praying, using the simple, conversational style I had learned in my childhood churchgoing.

Forcing myself to pray—especially for the people saying the most uncharitable things about me—turned out to be extraordinarily grounding. At a moment of psychological vulnerability, it provided a crucial internal peace. Despite a relatively brief low, I managed to escape my time as the internet’s “main character” relatively unscathed. What’s more, the experience helped me realize that I no longer *cared* whether God was real or not. That question had ceased to be interesting. It’s a little embarrassing to admit that being lambasted on the internet helped me find religion, but, well, stranger things have happened.

When I moved to Washington, D.C., after graduation, I started attending an Anglo-Catholic parish. I was first drawn to it out of a desire for ritual—especially the traditions and “smells and bells” of Anglo-Catholicism. But I was hooked by a totally unexpected reason: the community.

Within hours of my first Sunday Mass, I was added to two different group chats, had agreed to attend an upcoming happy hour and had swapped numbers with a young woman who would soon become one of my best friends. It was almost an instant gang of friends—one formed around shared values (and a shared interest in Gregorian chants).

At a time when Americans—especially young Americans—are more atomized than ever, having not just individual friends but a real community is increasingly difficult. As the Gen-Z writer Rona Wang humorously put it, “[S]ocial life after college is just texting people to ‘get coffee’ a few times a month & then spending \$600 to attend someone’s wedding.”

This kind of individual social interaction can be worthwhile, but it can’t replicate the interconnectedness provided by formalized community groups. If there are dozens of parishioners counting on seeing you on

Sunday, it’s harder to fall into isolation during a rough patch. And it’s a lot harder to ghost your girlfriend if you know you’re guaranteed to see her again on Sunday.

## Showing Up

Becoming part of a religious institution also allows members to get outside of their own age-segregated bubbles. After Mass, I can count on talking to elderly parishioners and hearing the babbles of babies and toddlers—something that would be unlikely to happen at a bar or concert.

A religious community forces you to become the kind of person who *shows up*. Your life gains a new rhythm, with new obligations. For example, I don’t think it’s a fluke that for weddings at my church, all members are invited to the ceremony.

And while there are plenty of secular alternatives to religious community—the classic D.C. example is joining an amateur softball or soccer league—nonreligious groups cannot provide the sense of shared moral priorities and explicit moral instruction that religious communities impart.

For me, this moral element is one of the biggest reasons I joined a church instead of a soccer club. I want to feel accountable to something other than my own conscience, and the hour and a half of weekly contemplation provided in church is difficult to replicate anywhere else.

But despite my regular church attendance for almost two years now, I still haven’t developed a rock-solid faith. I’ve joked—and said as much on Twitter—that I only believe in God about 30 percent of the time on a good day. My ambivalence does set me apart from most of my friends from church, a group that includes a few seminarians. But it doesn’t keep me from coming back.

How common is the path I’ve taken? It’s unclear, but it seems fairly rare. While a growing number of Americans identify as “spiritual but not religious,” being religious but not spiritual is far more unusual. According to one Gallup poll, just 3 percent of Americans who identify as atheists or agnostics attend church weekly or nearly weekly. However, this is probably an undercount, excluding agnostics and atheists who nonetheless identify with a religious label.

As church attendance has declined, so has our connectedness to one another. But for the increasing numbers of spiritually ambivalent Americans, there may be an unusual solution to the loss of community. As counterintuitive as it might seem, more agnostics should give religion a try.

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Emma Camp is an assistant editor at *Reason* magazine. Her work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, *The Free Press* and *Persuasion*.

# RAISING UP THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

## A reintroduction to the 'center and summit' of the Mass

By Bruce T. Morrill



The second year of the U.S. bishops' National Eucharistic Revival is in full swing, and the National Eucharistic Congress is to take place July 17 through July 21 in Indianapolis. While thousands will attend the event, far more of us will not be able to be there in person. Still, we can participate in the revival by growing in knowledge and devotion to this most important sacramental liturgy for the life of the church in its members.

One such opportunity for deeper participation is through a better understanding of the Eucharistic prayer. This "prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification" begins with the priest inviting the people to lift up their hearts; then, several minutes later, they respond "Amen" to his concluding glorification of the Father through the Son with the Holy Spirit. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal identifies the Eucharistic prayer as "the center and summit of the entire celebration." Yet, over decades of teaching and pastoral conversations, I have found not a few Catholics confused about exactly what the title "Eucharistic Prayer" refers to. Still others say they "blank out" during the priest's recitation of each lengthy part—the exception being the pivotal institution narrative, recounting the Lord's words at the Last Supper, with dramatic elevations of the host and chalice. Here, surely, is an opportunity for deepening understanding!

Our earliest known church instruction, the late-first-century *Didache*, calls the communal meal ritual *eucharistia*, a Greek noun meaning gratitude, as it introduces how thanksgiving (Greek verb, *eucharisto*) is to be made. In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr named the elements of bread and wine the Eucharist, over which thanks are given. Like all the sacraments of the church,

then, the Eucharist is fundamentally an action—in this case, a four-part action of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing. The blessing (drawing from the first believers' Jewish tradition) is a prayer addressed to God in praise and thanks for what God has done in and for creation, humanity and especially the people of God, the church, in Christ Jesus. For this reason, the original and continuing Greek name for the prayer is the *Anaphora*, a lifting up or offering, such that from earliest sources it begins with the presider (bishop, priest) inviting the people to "lift up your hearts."

To this day in the Eastern churches, *Anaphora* remains the title for the long prayer of praise, thanks and intercession, of which a plethora of Syrian, Egyptian and Byzantine versions comprise the heritage. In the Latin West, on the other hand, the Latin term *canon actionis* was first applied to the prayer in an eighth-century sacramentary, meaning the rule (*canon*) for carrying out this action. Over the ensuing medieval decades, the first word alone became the name for the singular Eucharistic Prayer in the Roman Missal (the ritual and instructions for the Mass). Right through to the missal's 1962 edition, the prayer was called the Roman Canon.

Today's regular participant in the Roman Catholic Mass, however, most likely is aware that the priest may be reading from any one of several Eucharistic prayers. The Second Vatican Council mandated a restoration of the church's liturgical rites, revising them "carefully in light of sound tradition." For the Roman Missal, this meant realizing a goal that Pope Pius V had set for the post-Tridentine reform in the 16th century but was hindered by limited linguistic knowledge and meager access to pre-medieval sources. Scholarship from the mid-19th century forward, in



what became known as the Liturgical Movement, unfolded a wealth of Eucharistic prayers dating through the eighth century, mostly Eastern but some Western, that had been unstudied or even unknown.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive revision of the Roman Canon, the decision was made that the Congregation of Rites would, in addition to a slightly modified Roman Canon, create three other Eucharistic prayers based on the full range of the ancient church's tradition. Pope Paul VI approved the four in issuing the revised Roman Missal in 1969. Six years later, the second edition of the missal added two Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation, as well as three for Masses with Children. In 2002, Pope John Paul II issued the missal's third (and current) edition, with an additional four Eucharistic Prayers for Use in Masses for Various Needs.

The missal's General Instruction delineates eight "chief elements making up the Eucharistic Prayer": thanksgiving (notably, the function of the preface), acclamation (*Sanctus*, or "Holy, Holy"), epiclesis (invoking the Holy Spirit's power), institution narrative and consecration (based on Christ's words and actions at the Last Supper), anamnesis (remembrance of Christ's death, resurrection and future coming), offering (of the sacrificial Christ and the assembled people, in the Holy Spirit, for greater unity with God and one another), intercessions (for the living and dead) and the final doxology (glorification of God, with the people's "Amen"). Those elements, in that order, aptly outline Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV, as well as those for Reconciliation and Various Needs.

Eucharistic Prayer I, the Roman Canon, is markedly different in order and content, expressing immediately after the *Sanctus* words of offering and petition for the church in its leaders and particular members. The canon lacks any invocation of the Holy Spirit's power, while naming there and at the end numerous early-period saints. The prayer includes the priest's performance of numerous hand gestures and signs of the cross, as well as special insertions for various solemnities (the most extensive being for Easter). The Roman Canon always began with a variable preface, expressing particular reasons for divine praise and thanks; the current missal has over 80, suited to solemnities, seasons and specific occasions. Eucharistic Prayer I, quite lengthy, may be used anytime, with the General Instruction recommending its use for particular solemnities and memorials, as well as the celebrations of the ancient saints the canon explicitly mentions. Priests with strong affection for the pre-Vatican-II Mass and related customs often choose this Eucharistic prayer.

The three other main Eucharistic prayers draw from the rich heritage of ancient Eastern Christianity. Among

## The Eucharistic prayer reveals the divine imperative to be 'a living sacrifice in Christ.'

them, Eucharist Prayer IV is the fullest in composition and most comprehensive in theological content. It is based on the Anaphora of St. Basil of Caesarea, arguably the most mature of the ancient Eastern texts, drawing upon both the Alexandrian (Egyptian) and Antiochene (Syrian) prayer forms. Indeed, its sequential elements are exactly those the General Instruction uses to describe the Eucharistic prayer (see above). The entire sweep of the prayer is nothing less than a thankful ode to God for the history of salvation, from creation of the cosmos, and then humanity, through the lineage of the biblical covenants, arriving at the definitive new covenant in Christ Jesus, describing the merciful characteristics of Jesus' mission.

The prayer thereby draws the people into identification with the biblical content celebrated in the first half of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word. Following Basil's ancient Alexandrian roots, the prayer invokes the power of the Holy Spirit on each side of the remembrance of the Lord's Supper, his death, descent to the dead, resurrection, ascension and anticipated return. The Spirit is invoked first for the transformation of the offered bread and wine and then upon the assembly themselves, united together as one body, "a living sacrifice in Christ." Intercessions follow, radiating out from the leadership to the full membership of the church, further to all people of sincere faith, both living and dead, before returning in conclusion to the whole of creation, envisioned with the saints in final transformation. The General Instruction recommends this Eucharistic prayer, majestic and lengthy, for solemn occasions but also for Sundays throughout Ordinary Time. Generally, however, American priests do not tend to use it nearly as often as Eucharistic Prayers II and III.

Eucharistic Prayer III, while based on the ancient Antiochene tradition, is a completely original composition. Like the other two newer Eucharistic prayers, it follows the pattern and eight elements described in the General Instruction (see above). Unlike Eucharistic Prayer IV, it does not have a fixed preface, which leaves it available for use during the special seasons of the year (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter), for which the missal provides numerous

A painting on the altar of the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, in Rome



prefaces. The General Instruction notes this prayer’s suitability for Sundays, and many priests regularly follow that recommendation.

To my observation, American priests likewise make great use of Eucharistic Prayer II, including often on Sundays, despite the General Instruction describing it rather as suitable for weekdays and specific occasions (although the more recent Eucharistic Prayers for Various Needs now meet that purpose). The shortest of the four in length, Eucharistic Prayer II is based on the one found in the *Apostolic Tradition*, a text attributed to Hippolytus of Rome dating from the third century (the final version being possibly as late as the fifth). Insofar as Hippolytus’s text lacks intercessions and other elements, Eucharistic Prayer II adapts it to meet the full complement of parts found in the Eucharistic Prayers III and IV. It does so, however, in a tight economy of words. Its anamnesis, for example, recalls only Christ’s death and resurrection, in contrast to Eucharistic Prayer IV’s rehearsal of all the events included in his death and glorification. While it has its own preface, extolling Christ’s saving mission, Eucharistic Prayer II may be used with any preface.

The two Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation are recommended, among other occasions, for use during the season of Lent. The second of the two quite beautifully rehearses the history of salvation, the mission of Christ, the offering and ensuing intercessions in terms of the wounds of sin and division, and the Spirit’s empowerment of peace and unity. Its conclusion paraphrases moving passages from the Book of Revelation as it anticipates God’s gathering people “of every race and tongue” into “the unending

banquet of unity in a new heaven and a new earth.” The imagery speaks profoundly to our current era of divisiveness in society and even the church.

Following the congress in Indianapolis, the final year of the Eucharistic Revival, as indicated on its website, is for “Going Out on Mission.” The Eucharistic prayer reveals the divine imperative and empowerment that this central sacramental celebration of the church provides for our entire Christian lives to be “a living sacrifice in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer IV). As the Letter to the Romans exhorts: “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (12:1-2). Attentive, prayerful engagement in the Eucharistic prayer at Mass is crucial to the celebration—being, as Vatican II teaches, not only the summit of the church’s life but also the source for lives of loving service to mercy and justice, for the life of the world.

Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., holds the Edward A. Malloy Chair in Roman Catholic Studies at Vanderbilt University, where he is a distinguished professor of theology in the Divinity School. His books include *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist: The Paschal Mystery in People, Word, and Sacrament*.

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## In Bolivia, the Revival of a Rare Jesuit Opera

By Phillip Alcon Ganir

To accommodate the anticipated overflow crowd in the town of San Javier, Bolivia, Mayor Dany Montalvan blocked the streets surrounding its church, San Xavier.

The space was simply not big enough for the public as local residents and international visitors—led by *los yarituses* (dancers portraying sacred birds)—processed, funneled, then eventually squeezed their way into the church for the premiere of the restored opera “San Francisco Xavier” on April 23.

The opera lasted only 45 minutes, but in theater-speak, it was the first of a three-act production that evening. Act II started after the opera concluded, as Mayor Montalvan and local civic leaders thanked performers and reflected on the opera’s role in preserving Chiquitano identity within the larger plurinational reality of Bolivia.

Then Act III: a block party in the plaza, more performances, a public dance and fireworks.

This was not an ordinary performance. It was, as the journalist Carolina Villagrán writes, a “cultural milestone for Bolivia,” as this town witnessed the first performance of

a Jesuit opera since, probably, the 1700s.

The opera was the “blockbuster” event (*superproducción*) of the 14th Biennial International Festival of Renaissance and American Baroque Music, “Misiones de Chiquitos,” sponsored by La Asociación Pro Arte y Cultura (A.P.A.C.), a nonprofit cultural organization that promotes and produces artistic initiatives especially related to the missions that the Jesuits established between 1691 and 1760. From April 19 to April 28, more than 1,200 musicians from 15 countries performed 136 free concerts in 22 venues spread across the Santa Cruz and the Chiquitania region of Eastern Bolivia. Georgetown University’s Chamber Singers—the only ensemble from a Jesuit university—were among the invited musicians, which included groups from some of the world’s most prestigious music schools, like Juilliard and the Royal Conservatory, who performed for and alongside mission orchestras.

Boston College’s Clough School of Theology and Ministry sponsored the opera premiere at San Xavier, which reprised a day later in the nearby Concepción Cathedral.



Members of Coro y Orquesta Misional San Xavier perform the opera “San Francisco Xavier” at the Church of San Xavier in the town of San Javier, Bolivia, on April 23, 2024.

### Rediscovering the Opera

“San Xavier” holds the distinction of being the only known surviving opera from the Jesuit reductions set in the Chiquitano language. It provides a glimpse of how Jesuits evangelized with music—a key dimension in the encounter between Jesuits and local tribes depicted in Roland Joffé’s critically acclaimed 1986 film “The Mission.” Joffé’s account reflects the socioeconomic tensions that led to the order’s expulsion from the Spanish missions in 1767; his final scene features a Guaraní Indian girl who retrieves a violin awash on a riverbank and carries it into a boat where she and other children leave for a new settlement. That chapter in mission history

ended, but somehow music would endure in the future of the Indigenous people in the area.

Years later, however, almost no one knew what the music sounded like. People assumed that the scores were also lost with the suppression of the Jesuit order. In fact, when Ennio Morricone composed the melodies for Joffé’s film, he had to make educated musical guesses and be particularly mindful to reflect the spirit of that encounter. His fusion of European forms and Indigenous sounds yielded a score that has become an enduring soundtrack.

To the surprise of musicologists, around the release of the film, Moxos and Chiquitano elders started sharing their music collection with experts. Among the latter group was a Jesuit at Boston College, T. Frank Kennedy, and a Divine Word missionary from Poland, Piotr Nawrot, who first learned about this repertoire as a doctoral student in musicology at the Catholic University of America in the 1980s. Since then, Father Nawrot has emerged as a key figure in the restoration, publication and promotion of this music—more than 12,000 sheets—that would eventually be housed in two archives in Bolivia: San Ignacio de Moxos in Beni and Concepción Cathedral in Chiquitos.

His sustained commitment has earned him international acclaim, which includes an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of America in May 2024.

Father Nawrot recalled his encounter with the local elders before he saw the Moxos manuscripts. “For three hours they questioned me about my faith, my religion,” he explained. This “complete reversal of roles,” he reflects, points to the significance of music in their lives: “It was like the Ark for the Jews; no matter where they moved, they took this sacred music. For them this music is not just sound and harmony—this is the history of their sacred salvation.”

In collaboration with local leaders, Father Nawrot has produced more than a dozen publications, and with more projects on the horizon, he has enough work to “last more than a lifetime.”

Moreover, Father Nawrot’s role as the artistic director of A.P.A.C. and his pastoral work as priest provides him a unique position to reanimate and reconnect this music with Bolivians themselves—as opposed to relegating this repertoire to the music libraries of professional ensembles and conservatory students specializing in the growing field of mission baroque. A.P.A.C. has, for instance, financed music education programs and the construction of instruments so that most of the missions have functioning choirs and orchestras, as they did during the time of the reductions.

A.P.A.C.’s “Baroque Sunday” initiative also pairs mission ensembles with participating parishes so that Bolivian Catholics might have a sense of their musical heritage. For Father Nawrot, grounding this music in worship is essential for understanding its soul; it reveals people’s lived faith. “San Francisco Xavier” may not be a liturgical piece, but it is a devotional one.

### The Road to Revival

In 2000, Father Nawrot received funding from the Guggenheim Foundation to restore the opera. Due to the poor condition of the paper, which endured the elements and paper-eating worms, Father Nawrot, in collaboration with local elders, rewrote parts of the dialogue and reconstructed the music, which probably dates to around 1740. At that point in history, musical life in the missions was particularly active, partly because of at least two influential Jesuits: the Swiss musician and architect Martin Schmidt (1694–1772) and the young Italian organist and composer Domenico Zipoli (1688–1726). While Zipoli died in neighboring

# 'San Xavier' provides a glimpse of how Jesuits evangelized with music.

Argentina and never worked in the reductions, his music was widely copied and disseminated among missionaries.

Historical records also indicate high levels of musical activity among the Chiquito Indians. As Father Nawrot explains, while the use of music for evangelization was not new, Jesuits were innovative in their approach by training and employing local talent. In fact, the opera's "anonymous" authorship likely refers to a collaborative effort between Jesuit and Chiquito musicians.

Since its restoration, the Argentine conductor Gabriel Garrido has performed the opera with his Ensemble Elyma and the Coro de Niños Cantores de Córdoba. (A 2017 recording is available online.) The distinctive feature of the premiere in April was that it was produced by the town's local ensemble, Coro y Orquesta Misional San Xavier, founded in 2003 by Eduardo Silveira Rodriguez with the support of A.P.A.C.

This was also the first time since its restoration that the opera was performed in the mission church itself—one of six former Jesuit reductions in Bolivia recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site. The Swiss architect Hans Roth was instrumental in securing international support for restoring their deteriorating structures from 1972 up until his death in 1999. When Mr. Silveira Rodriguez describes the experience of performing the opera in its original space as "magical," he refers not only to the church's natural acoustical properties (due to the wood from the region's arborescent rolling hills) but also to the church's symbolic role as the first Chiquito reduction, established in 1691.

## Beyond the Music Score

While "San Francisco Xavier" might lack a dramatic plot, it tells an important story: An angel announces what God has revealed to Francis Xavier. Then the ensuing eight pairs of dialogues and arias between Francis Xavier and Ignatius Loyola elaborate on God's goodness and providence, akin to how David praised God in the Psalms.

The musical style is simple and rooted in the European tradition—a feature some find difficult to reconcile, especially among those who distance themselves from Bolivia's colonial past. Yet ironically, as the only surviving opera set

in Bésiro, a rarely spoken regional language, it plays an important role in preventing the language from becoming extinct. Performers had to work closely with local elders and language specialists when they began rehearsals in January.

For 18-year-old Yhoryina Algarañaz Choque, who plays the title role of Francis Xavier, the opportunity to share her language and culture outweighed the stress from the intensive study and rehearsals. It is a "point of pride," she says, smiling in relief.

The opera also provided a means to rediscover, restore and include other elements of local culture. Miguel Parapaino, the only luthier (or maker of stringed instruments) in San Javier, worked for three months to create native instruments typical of the missionary period. These include the *sanana* (a horn made of *tacuará* cane), the *yoresoma* (a type of flute comprised of reed tubes), and an array of percussion instruments like the *bombo* (a hand drum) and the *paichechise* (a string of dried seeds affixed to the knees). The choreographer and costume designer Gonzalo Cane-do Vega incorporated native dances like the *chovena* into the fabric of the performance and drew from the reports of the French researcher Alcide d'Orbigny (1802-57), whose detailed descriptions of Chiquito clothing provided inspiration for the costumes.

## A Theological Vision

While the music reflects Jesuit evangelization efforts from the 17th and 18th centuries, Percy Añez, A.P.A.C.'s president, insists that the scores are not museum artifacts nor pious devotions divorced from social realities. The Jesuit's 80-year legacy in Bolivia still has important lessons to teach contemporary audiences. Mr. Añez explains that the people have integrated this repertoire into their own cultural identities, for the encounter between Jesuits and the local Indians modeled a "culture of love based on God and expressed through the Christian Catholic tradition."

The historical Ignatius and Francis Xavier did not work in the Bolivian reductions during their lifetimes. But that detail did not matter for the composers. At the opera's end, the angel invites both saints into the beatific vision of God because they evangelized in the "kingdom of Chiqui-



Philip Alcon Ganir



Clockwise from left: a celebration following the performance of the opera “San Francisco Xavier”; Percy Añez with performers from Coro y Orquesta Misional San Xavier; Mayor Dany Montalvan and community leaders outside the Church of San Xavier.

tos” (*aññataityo au niki unama chikito*), and multiplied—to use a local image—“five ears of corn” (*aityoximiata tato ñemo sirimana*). Yet their entrance into heaven is not an escape. The music’s major keys and dance rhythms mitigate against such a dualistic view. Rather, by working in Chiquitania, they have come to experience a foretaste of God’s reign. Carla Andrea Pereyra Román, who plays Ignatius, explains that the music can reveal the “happiness and niceness” of God’s reign through the “joy...of their native culture.” Chiquitania is charged with God’s grace, and that in itself is reason to celebrate.

Mr. Silveira Rodriguez amplifies that sentiment. Unlike European baroque, which can be tonally heavy, he infuses the music with joy and vibrancy. The composers do not evoke the Exodus, but when Mr. Silveira Rodriguez blows the *sananá* as they dance the *chovena* to celebrate God’s providence, one could easily imagine a biblical parallel to the shofar announcing a time of jubilee.

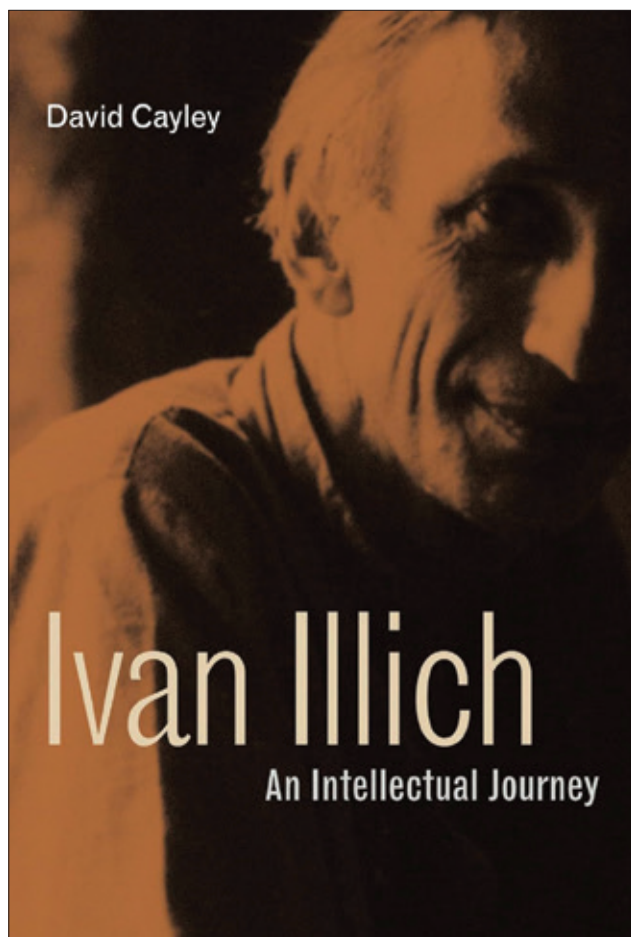
In a private moment minutes before the premiere, Mr. Añez offered words of encouragement to the 36 predomi-

nately teenage performers. Reflecting on the memory of his father, who introduced him to mission music as a boy, as well as his desire to pass on the same legacy to his own two children, he invited the ensemble to imagine God as an encouraging father as they sing: “God loves this music. We are making him happy. He is on his feet applauding.”

For Mr. Añez, committing to this music—refracted through Chiquitano culture—helps both performers and listeners become attuned to the ways God “helps us.” Mr. Añez elaborates: “Because music leads us to beauty. And discovering beauty takes us to discover the truth, to caress the truth. And the truth takes us to fullness. And fullness is one of the most unique and most sublime feelings that a human being can experience. There is no father (and I understand this as a father myself) who does not enjoy seeing his children living fully. And knowing that God, seeing us strive us for fullness as a community, helps us go on.”

Phillip Alcon Ganir, S.J., will begin teaching courses in liturgy, sacred music and religious education this fall at Boston College’s Clough School of Theology. Kitty Schmidt provided assistance in transcribing and translating Spanish interviews.

## THE SECOND COMING OF IVAN ILLICH



Penn State University Press / 560p \$45

Who said it first? The call for the church to radically decelerate. The rejection of technocracy and the Western style of development. The concern with the cry of the poor, understood as victims of “the war on subsistence” in the Global South.

These are themes we associate today with Pope Francis, even if some of them appear in the proclamations of his two predecessors. But it was the Rev. Ivan Illich, a priest (assigned to the Archdiocese of New York under Cardinal Francis Spellman) and prescient social critic who came to prominence in the 1970s, who first sounded them in his writing and public speaking. A half-century later, some Catholic voices are belatedly claiming that Illich’s hour has finally arrived.

A student of Jacques Maritain and a “radically orthodox” monsignor who remained tradition-minded his entire life, Illich collided with the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1968 after the publication in the previous year of his articles “The Seamy Side of Chari-

ty” (in **America**) and “The Vanishing Clergyman” (in *The Critic*). The very titles hint at notions that must have been uncomfortable for the hierarchy.

Called to appear in Rome for an interview in a subterranean room, Illich recounted, he was handed a list of 85 questions that he saw as a farrago of rumor, innuendo and misinformation, partly based on U.S. Central Intelligence Agency documents and statements from right-wing Catholic groups in Mexico, including local Opus Dei adherents. Illich refused to answer the questions, choosing to remain silent in hopes of frustrating any further efforts by his enemies to create scandal or to de-platform him, as we would say today. Thereafter, Illich, contrary to popular impression, never renounced his priesthood but asked only to be relieved of his priestly duties.

Indeed, as the philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues in his introduction to a collection of Illich’s writings from between 1955 and 1985, “it’s not possible to mark any break between the Illich who is within the Church and the one who lies outside of it (or at its margins).”

Another of Illich’s notable disagreements with the institutional church dated to his time as an advisor at the Second Vatican Council while he was still in his late 30s. (Only a few years earlier, he had founded the famous Centre for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico; attendees included John Rawls, Peter Berger and Gustavo Gutiérrez.) When he was unable to influence stronger anti-nuclear language—specifically a stance for unilateral disarmament—in the key document of the council, the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (“*Gaudium et Spes*”), he withdrew from the council altogether.

In his 1967 essay “Vanishing Clergyman,” Illich asks:

Should I, a man totally at the service of the Church, stay in the structure in order to subvert it, or leave in order to live the model of the future? The Church needs men seeking this kind of conscious and critical awareness—men deeply faithful to the Church, living a life of insecurity and risk, free from hierarchical control, working for the eventual “disestablishment” of the Church from within.

While Illich chose the path of the outsider, the question of how to understand the church’s formative and even corrupting role as the ultimate historical source of many modern institutions remained a lifelong preoccupation.

### New Interest in Illich

We know much more about Illich’s intellectual jour-



## What do we owe, in Illich's view, to those who are contemplating abortion or suicide or euthanasia?

ney—first as a critic of his own church, then as a public intellectual unveiling the counterproductive nature of the educational, medical and economic development establishments, and finally as an even deeper critic of the corruption of Christianity—through the brilliant achievement of the Canadian broadcaster David Cayley. His recent biography, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, written from his vantage point as a friend and collaborator with Illich, is a sorely needed contribution, a 500-page, incisive, literate analysis arriving as a blast of sanity.

Cayley's book is in fact part of what we can hope is the second coming of Illich, even if his arrival in the U.S. Catholic conversation is still getting underway after all these years.

One of the first commentators to notice the congruity between Illich's thought and the agenda of Pope Francis was Nathan Schneider in an insightful 2015 review of Todd Hartch's *Prophet of Cuernavaca* for Lapham's Quarterly. We should also note the wonderful *Faith Seeking Conviviality: Reflections on Ivan Illich, Christian Mission, and the Promise of Life Together*, by Samuel E. Ewell III, published in 2020. Ewell uses his "reverse missionary" experiences in Brazil as a lens to view the nature of Illichian conviviality and the themes of "Laudato Si'."

Another Catholic enthusiast for Illich is the theologian William Cavanaugh of DePaul University's Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, where Cayley made a presentation on Illich's *Medical Nemesis* in 2021. Cavanaugh's podcast interview in 2022 with Cayley is a marvelous, highly informed exchange.

Likewise, Sam Rocha, a versatile younger Catholic scholar of education at the University of British Columbia, has a book forthcoming on Illich; he has already published an article on the latter's relation to liberation theology.

Finally, L. M. Sacasas, writing from a Christian (but not Catholic) perspective, has been blogging about technology at his thoughtful and Illich-inspired Substack newsletter, The Convivial Society.

Interestingly, First Things—a publication whose history reveals little interest in unpacking American neocolonialism—has published two articles on Illich in recent years. The latest is a skillful review of Cayley's biography by Brian C. Anderson, marred only by his slightly comic invocation of the uber-capitalist Peter Thiel against Illich's critique of neoliberal economic development.

### International Reputation

While American Catholics may have been slow to discover Illich, figures in the global environmental and anti-growth

movements have been citing texts like his *Tools for Conviviality* since it was first published in 1973.

In 2013, a conference on Illich's thought in Oakland, Calif., brought together a notable group of thinkers and activists on "the commons"—i.e., our shared environmental and cultural inheritance. Hosted by then-mayor Jerry Brown, a longtime friend of Illich, the group included the commons advocate David Bollier, the post-development author Gustavo Esteva and the alternative economics author Trent Schroyer, in addition to Cayley. (Other notable figures who have feted Illich in past years include Pierre Trudeau, Indira Gandhi, Michel Foucault and Erich Fromm.)

Bollier's longstanding commitment to defending the resources of the commons, as his website notes, owes much to Illich's "critique of the totalizing power of modern institutions, the corrupting influences of capitalism on spiritual life, and the power of vernacular (i.e., informal) practice to build more wholesome, insurgent cultures." Let's pay attention to that last item.

When Pope Francis visited Amazonian Peru in 2018, coverage of the intercultural conversation included notice of the indigenous social philosophy known as *buen vivir*. The term—which also refers to a social movement—describes a vision of "good living" based on a balance and harmony with nature, and even recognized rights of nature, as now enshrined in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador.

It is a philosophy often associated with the idea of the *pluriverse*, a loose framework (first put forward in 1996 by the Mexican anti-colonial Zapatista movement in the phrase "we seek a world in which many worlds fit") to hold together alternative visions and epistemologies from across the Global South.

The framework of *buen vivir* is also an Indigenous response to what Illich saw, prophetically, as the 500-year "war on subsistence in the name of scarcity," where a so-called scarcity justifies the devaluing of all traditional sociocultural forms.

This point about the risk posed by first-world notions of development to traditional lifeways may remind us of

Ivan Illich in an undated photo

Wikimedia Commons



the statement in the working document of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, held in 2019:

The quest of the indigenous Amazon peoples for life in abundance finds expression in what they call “good living” (*buen vivir*). It is about living in “harmony with oneself, with nature, with human beings and with the supreme being, since there is an inter-communication between the whole cosmos, where there is neither excluding nor excluded, and that among all of us we can forge a project of full life.”

By the term *subsistence*, Illich means not abject poverty but rather a dignified, self-sustaining existence, one which is close to the vision—and the lived reality—of *buen vivir*.

### Why Illich?

I would suggest that the church that will emerge from the current Synod on Synodality—and may it be the long-awaited “church of the poor” of which Pope Francis is only the latest advocate—should fully embrace the wisdom of its faithful son Ivan Illich in all its complementarity of tradition and innovation.

Take a key modern assumption: that human beings are made up of needs that society is organized to fulfill. What

Illich saw at work here was the corruption of Christianity through large organizations—first the medieval church, and then the modern realms of medicine and education—owing to their attempt to institutionalize the Gospel. He frequently described this historical process by the proverb “*corruptio optimi pessima*”—“the corruption of the best is the worst.”

Another dominating power at work today—technology and the underlying idea that our purposes require tools—likewise finds its origins in the sacramental theology of the Middle Ages, according to Illich’s remarkable analysis.

A living reception of Illich’s work requires that we transcend our hidebound categories of “left” and “right,” a task that perhaps the current synod will make easier, at least for people of good will. Catholics on the political left may have problems with Illich’s refusal to set aside entirely Christian dogma, which he saw as having the secondary and purely negative function of protecting faith from “the intrusion of myth.” But a greater shock awaits those Catholics on the political right who encounter Illich’s extraordinary engagement with what he called “the most powerful idol the Church has had to face in the course of her history”—in his phrase, “life as idol.”

### ‘Life as Idol’

Illich first took up this theme publicly in a 1985 talk before a meeting of social workers in Macon, Ga. Asked to begin with a prayer, Illich instead began with a curse. Raising his hands, as Cayley reports, Illich repeated three times, “To hell with life!” This was at a time when reverence for “life” was fast becoming society’s last acceptable popular piety, while the medical establishment was inserting itself further between the patient and his/her own death, now no longer a personal act. Illich believed this shift in the meaning of death had turned life into something new.

No longer an indefinable attribute of living beings, the word *life* had acquired a facticity, the status of real property capable of being owned, administered and controlled. It had become the certainty of certainties, or as the biologist Loren Eisley put it prophetically in 1959, a “last unbearable idol.” *Life* has been reduced to bio-life, even if the word retains its Christian aura. This displacement or perversion of revelation was, in Illich’s term, blasphemous.

Illich wanted to convince his listeners that life presented a direct challenge to the church. And yet he argued that the church itself was the source of the danger here in its embrace of a form of scientism (for example, claiming to know when life begins). Further, he described the church’s complicity in what he called the regular violation of the dignity of women through the use of ultrasound images to



argue for the personhood of zygotes.

Cayley notes that this ideologized topic was one on which neither Illich nor he himself (in a broadcast for the CBC on the topic) were ever able to make themselves understood.

With regard to the pro-life movement, Cayley comments that Illich, “so far as I know, never felt the need to take a ‘position’ on abortion. What Illich wanted to defend was the privacy of the womb and the prerogative of women with respect to pregnancy.” Cayley adds, “He certainly was not ‘pro-abortion,’ as some have said, but I think it’s safe to say, though I know of no explicit statement on the subject, that he did not think abortion was within the competence of the state.”

Then what do we owe, in Illich’s view, to those who are contemplating abortion or suicide or euthanasia?

In a letter to his friend Anne Serna, O.S.B., the prioress of the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Conn., Illich claimed it came down to what St. Benedict called “the mother of virtues”—namely, discretion or “the measured discernment of unique situations.”

By way of explanation, Illich related to Cayley an experience in which he successfully dissuaded an older woman who was considering suicide after expressing his disapproval of her plan. He later reflected, “I failed to respond to her freedom.... I took this headstrong woman’s question as one more attempt to remain in control. I now fear that I discouraged her from listening to the Lord whose calling she might have followed in spite of her complete ignorance of Him.”

Shortly thereafter, the woman contracted pneumonia, and, Illich observes, “the caring state could not leave her in peace.” Thus she ended by losing control of her own life at the hands of the medical establishment, which Illich had critiqued to such effect in his earlier *Medical Nemesis*.

On three similar occasions thereafter, he felt compelled to say to suicidal individuals, “I will not open the window for you, but I’ll stay with you.” This position of not helping, but standing by, “because you respect freedom,” Illich stated, “is difficult for people in our nice society to accept.” Measured discernment, after all, is much more difficult than simply asserting a rule. Especially, as Illich wanted us to understand, for people for whom life—now mostly diminished to “bio-life”—has become an idol.

### A Renewed Christianity?

Cayley views Illich as a proscriptive rather than a prescriptive thinker, generally diagnosing our ills rather than attempting to address our future. Still, he notes that Illich does suggest elements of a practice in which the Gospel is

## Illich never renounced his priesthood but asked only to be relieved of his priestly duties.

an invitation to a new way of life rather than the promise of a “redemption” that lifts us out of the common lot and into some privileged status. As Cayley puts it:

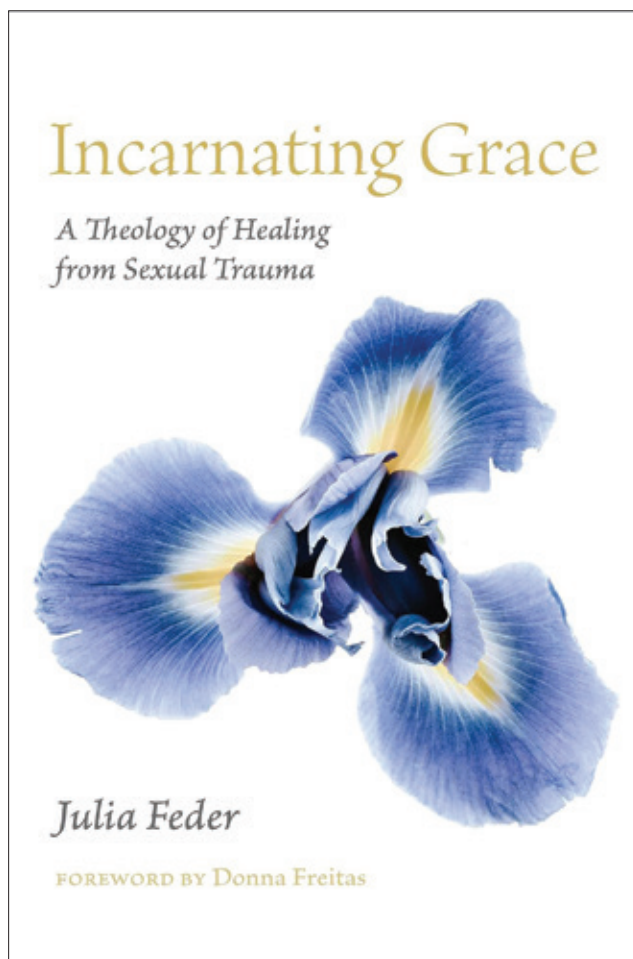
Illich, to me, is an example of a renewed Christianity.... This begins with his way of reading the Gospel, attentive to “the voice of an anarchist Christ” and his way of understanding the Church as an institution that, from its very early days, made itself “visible” in the world “according to the mode of a state or political entity.” Illich’s proposal was a sweeping “declericalization” and an ecumenical effort to “seek the visibility of the Church in the conscious evangelical interpretation of prayer,” understood as “the search for the presence of God.” He understood the Gospel primarily as an invitation to live in freedom rather than to invent law, bureaucracy, and pastoral edification on a previously unimagined scale.

We are approaching a post-Francis time in the church but not necessarily with the expectation of a renewed Christianity.

Nonetheless, I recently suggested to a thoughtful Catholic friend that he read Cayley’s biography as an introduction to Illich’s ideas. Encountering my friend a few weeks later, he thanked me, adding simply, “It has changed my life.”

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Seeking to make theological sense out of experiences of human suffering is a daunting task. The Christian tradition nevertheless is littered with efforts to do so, ranging from the clichéd to the mystical. In truth, many of these efforts ring hollow—suggesting, for instance, that God actively permits suffering to punish human sin, or that God tests our character through suffering, or, worse, that suffering is a part of God’s overarching plan.

Nowhere are these theological formulations more problematic than in the context of sexual violence. Such violence is shockingly common in today’s society, and its effects are both terrible and far-reaching. Yet the sad truth of the matter is that far too many victims of domestic and sexual abuse have themselves been blamed, ignored or urged to suffer in silence; to stay in fundamentally unsafe relationships; or—perhaps most troubling of all—to maintain in faith that their suffering is somehow “salvific” in the mind and heart of a God who (supposedly) loves them.

This failure of Christian tradition toward survivors of sexual violence lies squarely in the crosshairs of Julia Fed-

er’s powerful new book, *Incarnating Grace: A Theology of Healing From Sexual Trauma*. Feder insists, repeatedly and with courage, wisdom and, yes, grace, that the suffering of sexual violence serves no higher purpose—none at all. It is *not* in alignment with God’s will, and it is most decidedly *not* redemptive. Feder stands firm from beginning to end in her conviction that “it is only the posttraumatic healing process that is salvific.” Sexual violence can leave a survivor deeply wounded on personal, interpersonal, social, psychological and spiritual levels. Theologies that prop up or contribute to this woundedness, whether intentionally or unintentionally, must be soundly rejected.

Feder is not only concerned with rejecting dangerous theological projects that have misled (and mistreated) survivors; she is also keen to plumb the depths of the Christian tradition more positively, for resources that offer meaning, courage and hope. In her view, Christianity encompasses deep wellsprings to animate healing. To do the work of retrieval, she probes the writings of two theologians from entirely different historical eras: St. Teresa of Ávila, the 16th-century Spanish Carmelite nun; and Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., the 20th-century Belgian Catholic theologian. In the work of these theological giants, Feder locates key underpinnings for her own extraordinary project: to articulate and call for a mystical-incarnational version of healing after sexual trauma.

Feder’s treatment of Teresa of Ávila invites us into a full-throated affirmation of the human person as fundamentally embodied. Why is this important to survivors? For starters, the body is ground zero as a source of struggle for someone who has undergone profound sexual trauma. Teresa’s affirmation that the body mediates the sacred, even as it simultaneously limits and constrains people, leads Feder to build conceptual connections with the “very real ambiguity that many sufferers feel about their bodies.” Such honest attention to reality joins with an accompanying invitation to the integration of body and soul that characterizes genuine intimacy with God.

In Feder’s analysis, this union can begin to counterbalance the severe bodily trauma resulting from assault. She understands that healing is not liberation *from* the body (the very body, in fact, that may have been assaulted); it is, rather, liberation *of* the body for loving friendship. Feder here articulates an anthropology that is both magnificent and highly relevant to survivors experiencing deep brokenness: “To know oneself authentically is to know oneself as undeserving of shame and radiant with beauty, despite whatever blame others place on us.”

Yet Feder is also quick to point out that Teresa’s framework at times treats suffering itself as an opportunity to

grow more intimate with God. In Feder's view, this possibility is alarming for survivors and one that we should resist. She cautions, "This tendency in [Teresa's] thought can risk valorizing suffering itself as bringing about divine-human friendship and suggests that somehow suffering is desired by God for salvation. In a context of sexual violence, this is a risk that carries too high a price for survivors."

In other words, Teresa does not get it wholly right. We require a contemporary thinker to correct this tendency, one who pays deep and sustained attention to human suffering without risking its reinforcement. Enter Edward Schillebeeckx.

Schillebeeckx is clear that God does not will human suffering nor use it as a tool for salvation. Suffering is real, and (highlights Feder) this imbues the survivor's bodily experience with true revelatory power. But God is less present *in* the suffering than *alongside* the sufferer, as an "indignant witness" who remains closely present to the one who suffers.

Feder elaborates this understanding in terms of Schillebeeckx's graced experiences of "negative contrast." Quoting him, she notes that the fundamental human experience of a "no" to the world as it is" can reveal an "'open yes' [which] is the basis of that opposition and makes it possible." It is in this "yes" that the survivor finds meaning and hope, sensing even vaguely how the world "ought to be." The survivor is thus delivered back to herself, to the authenticity of her own experience, while simultaneously discovering a doorway forward into wholeness.

In a particularly beautiful chapter unpacking Schillebeeckx's Christology, Feder elaborates further on how the mysteries of the atonement and Jesus' resurrection can be retrieved for survivors of abuse. Here she calls Christians actively to resist suffering, through the lens of Jesus' own suffering and death—a death he came to accept, but only (in Feder's view) after realizing that it was unavoidable. She emphasizes that the power and triumph of God's creative love is centered in the resurrection, with the cross representing not a valorization of suffering and death but rather "a memory of one who was raised."

With this as her basis, Feder issues a renewed understanding of salvation as "the restoration of the *whole* human person as she was created to be." The positive vision is both personal and social; healed persons, living in egalitarian relationships, are enabled in part by the communal denunciation of—and action to prevent, rectify and account for—sexual violence.

Feder finally spins out this mystical-political vision of post-traumatic healing in terms of the specific Christian virtues of courage and hope. Courage, as she understands

it, is best understood as persistent endurance, a willingness to pursue the good of recovery even despite the severe trauma of sexual abuse. Eschatological hope animates and empowers the hard work of acknowledging and resisting sexual violence as well as dismantling rape culture; in other words, it enables us to expect that something *difficult* is nevertheless *possible*.

Writing eloquently of these qualities, Feder maintains, "Healing requires reserves deeper than those which can be articulated by the secular field of psychology alone. Healing requires hope solidly grounded in the genuine expectation that transformation is possible through God's creative work and our free, creative, and courageous cooperation." Indeed, rather than leaving us in despair before the horrors of sexual violence, Feder's analysis here invites us into a brave and hopeful transformation, with a God who is wholly present alongside us.

Feder's volume melds a long-overdue honesty about the brutal realities of sexual violence and rape culture with an imaginative vision, set forth in mystical-political terms, of "a future in which rape is unthinkable." Her retrieval of the work of Teresa and Schillebeeckx lays solid groundwork for this vision. In places, Feder's sometimes protracted descriptions—particularly of Teresa's historical background and the metaphorical detail of her imagery—can tempt us to temporarily lose track of the proverbial forest for the trees. But that is a small (and perhaps rather refreshing) price to pay in order to mine the gems that Feder is able to extract from the work of this sometimes overlooked theologian.

In spite of her thoroughgoing retrieval of the theologies of these two great Christian writers, it is ultimately Feder herself who skillfully weaves their insights into genuine resources for survivors and their allies—as well as for society more generally. It is long past time that the Christian tradition honestly addresses the struggles of multitudes of survivors of sexual trauma. Feder provides a much-needed template for doing so, inviting us into a spiritual-religious understanding of post-traumatic recovery that is searingly honest on the one hand, but also visionary and deeply hopeful on the other.

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Farrar, Straus & Giroux / 320p \$30

There is no question that a seismic shift in how we understand gender is underfoot.

Gay and gender-nonconforming people have always existed in different ways across the movements of time and culture. It would be naïve to suggest, however, that the past several decades have not seen massive shifts in how we understand and talk about gender and sexuality. Consider the first exposure you had to what it meant to be gay or to challenge a gender binary as a child. Now consider how our children and grandchildren are learning about these concepts today. For my college students here in Massachusetts, the time before gay marriage belongs to ancient history. When I began teaching 12 years ago, no students used they/them pronouns. Now, several students in each of my classes use them every semester. The reality in which young adults are growing up is wildly different from that of their parents and grandparents.

Amid these shifts, the academic field of gender studies is not trying to take anything away from anyone. It only submits that certain characteristics—domination, tender-

ness, leadership, sensuality, care work, humor, logic, intuition—are not owned or determined by any one gender. We have all only to gain by rejecting the violence that maintains gender categories and by exploring the ways in which we are not determined by such categories.

“Gender” in the field of gender studies is not merely about identity, it is about the social constructs that influence who has power and who does not. It examines gender as one of many axes along which power is organized in society and how the formation of masculinity or femininity creates dynamics that legitimize the harm or empowerment of individuals and groups. The work of Judith Butler in particular, dating to the publication of *Gender Trouble* in 1990, suggests that a more just, safe and joyous world is one in which we do not violently punish people for not perfectly embodying the ideals of the gender binary. *Gender Trouble* meant not only to “trouble” the idea of a stable male or female identity but also to trouble the presumptions that used gender to organize power in society.

Now, 35 years later, there has been a proliferation of definitions and descriptions of gender identity, but perhaps more importantly, there has also been a transformation in the gendered organization of power.

In their new book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, Butler contends that the contemporary backlash to “gender” is an attempt to recapture the transforming power structure and return to the (in their view, mythical) days when it was simple to use gender to organize power in the world. Within this attempt to return, the specter of “gender” is invoked as an ideology that will harm the public and often children—though with little evidence of actual harm. However, the pretext of potential harm becomes grounds for real material harms. By suggesting that the mention of “gender” is destructive, leaders are able to destroy anything that challenges their power.

Butler meticulously researches the uses of this kind of “anti-gender” rhetoric and violence by religious, political and social leaders. Looking at the actions of authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning parties in Russia, Hungary, Germany, Spain, Italy, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Uganda and the United States, Butler examines legislation worldwide, including trans-exclusive political movements in Great Britain and Europe. Butler points out that it is the people *accusing* “gender ideologists” who are the ones truly harming children and meddling in public life.

In one chapter, Butler examines the ways the Catholic Church has sought to establish that it is not just the family or the state, but God who is harmed by “gender ideology,” with specific mentions of the rhetoric of Pope Benedict XVI. The reader can sense in this chapter that Butler finds

a great deal of irony in the Catholic Church calling gender ideology a harm to children, given the sex abuse scandals that have rocked the church over the last two decades.

In this and other examples, Butler outlines a logic in which the specter of “gender” is invoked to point to something the populace needs to be protected from and therefore must be violently extinguished—often at the expense of the idea that the government’s primary duty is to protect basic shared rights. Butler writes that “[t]he authoritarian who commands an electoral majority through stoking fears of cultural ‘invasion’ or ‘terrorism’ can be elected precisely because he stands for brutal power and unyielding nationalism.”

Ultimately, then, Butler’s goal in *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* is to show that any backlash against the reorganization of how gender signifies power in society aims not just to reinstate a traditional gender binary but to foment an undemocratic, repressive and violent social order.

Do you need to be afraid of Judith Butler? Of gender? Butler would probably say you should be more afraid of an authoritarian.

Butler suggests that simply reading gender theory will not, like an infection, turn you into a trans person or radical feminist. It *will* mean that you will have to encounter the ideas and refine your criticisms of them against reality, not against the hollow and often incorrect versions propagated in popular discourse. Taking and reading a disputed text or idea for yourself, they argue, is in fact an anti-authoritarian and pro-democratic necessity:

What is dismissed as “academic” procedure is actually required for informed public deliberations in democracies. Informed public debate becomes impossible when some parties refuse to read the material under dispute. Reading is not just a pastime or a luxury, *but a precondition of democratic life*, one of the practices that keep debate and disagreement grounded, focused, and productive (emphasis mine).

The proof that many people have not read Judith Butler can be found in the many flatly incorrect summaries of her work. These suggest that “performativity” or “social construction” means we can choose whatever we want for our gender because there is nothing substantial there. Butler actually argues that the meaning of our bodies is something we are born into—it precedes and constrains us. It is something like an inheritance; you do not have control over the social signification of your body that is handed to you throughout your life. The idea of what it means to

be a good man or woman is prescribed to us by our family, our culture, our nation, our time, our place. This socially held idea informs and mediates how we see and experience ourselves and how we move through the world as a body. We have little access to what our bodies might mean to us before the *socially constructed* notion of gender.

A counterpoint to Butler might be, for example, the argument that “I have a uterus! You can’t socially construct the fact that I menstruate.” Butler’s point is not that you can socially construct away the fact of your menstruating body. However, the meaning of being “on your period” is highly socially constructed, and the meaning precedes the experience of one’s own biological reality. Most young people I know are devastated to get their period. For them, it means they have entered into something gross: “becoming a woman.” Now, they know, they will be taken less seriously, treated as less athletic, less innocent, less fun. Each time “sitcom Dad” rolls his eyes to say “ignore Mom,” the woman watching is taught that her pain and needs are subject to that same dismissal. People know their emotions will now be attributed to “hysteria.” Their bodies are now both more sexual and more shameful. This is the inheritance. I did not have these words and expertise myself when I was 13, but I knew it all immediately. These norms made sense of me long before I made sense of them.

Butler’s point is that gender norms *constrain us*. We don’t “perform” gender. Gender itself is performative: It is a power structure that performs itself through us. We are constituted in our inheritances. Like an inheritance, the agency we have is not in what we are given but in what we do with it. We cannot jump into a future that is not shaped by the past; for example, we cannot snap our fingers and simply erase narratives about being “on your period.” But perhaps we can take the fabric of our past, our inherited skeins, and quilt them up in a way that gives the fabric new meaning. We cannot erase the social meaning of menstruation, but maybe we can shift it over time to be less violent.

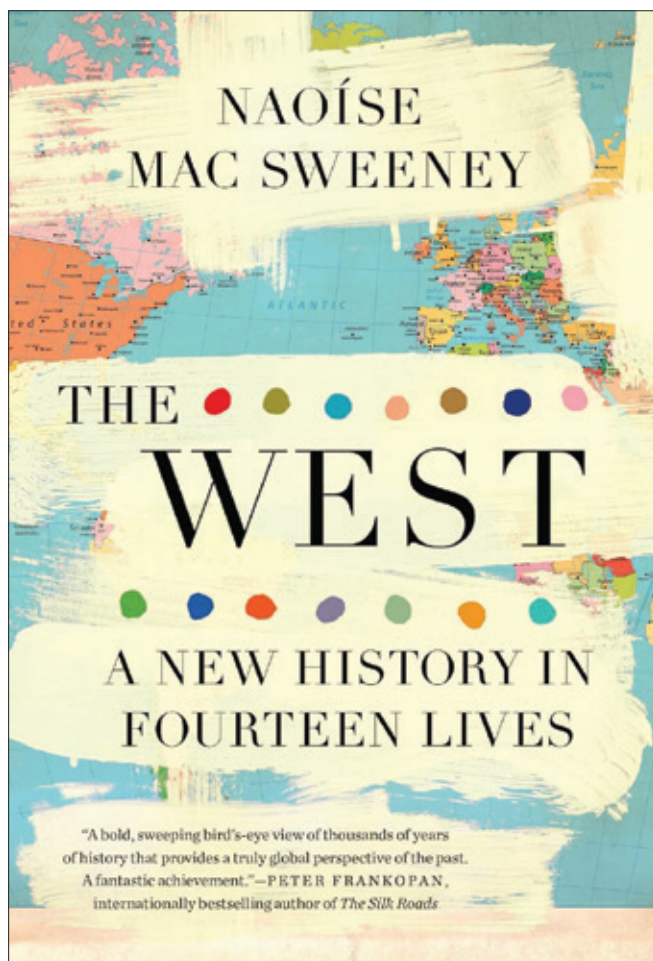
This is what Butler has been challenging readers to do for decades.

As these large changes in society affect each of us, we will examine our own gendered place in society and how we best love those among us who trouble “gender.” In this endeavor, I suggest: Take up and read the book for yourself. There is nothing to be afraid of.

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## WHAT IS WESTERN CIVILIZATION?



Dutton / 448p \$32

Western civilization: Right-wingers want to save it; left-wingers say it is just a myth. Some see it as primarily racist or ecocidal, while others credit it with inventing human rights and democracy. For some, Western civilization is synonymous with Christianity; others see it as a secularizing force in the world. During the Cold War, “the West” meant the countries opposed to the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the college course called “Western Civilization” often runs from Gilgamesh to Gorbachev, creating the impression that the West as we know it is 7,000 years old and gradually moved from the Tigris to the Thames. It is challenging to write a book against as amorphous a concept as the West, and perhaps that explains some of the difficulties I found in the classicist Naoíse Mac Sweeney’s book *The West: A New History in Fourteen Lives*.

Mac Sweeney tackles the history of the idea of the West through 14 portraits of both famous (Herodotus and Gladstone) and lesser-known historical figures (Phillis Wheatley and Tullia d’Aragona). These portraits are fascinating and instructive in their own right, particularly of

those lesser-known figures. Whatever Phillis Wheatley’s relation to the West, her trans-Atlantic journeys, first as a captive on a slave ship and subsequently as a renowned poet, should be better known.

With these portraits, Mac Sweeney broadens our conception of the West, but that is not her main purpose. Instead, she wishes to dismantle the “grand narrative” of Western civilization because it is historically distorted and is likely to be used for racist or chauvinist politics today.

Although Mac Sweeney identifies a number of false claims about what Western civilization is, all these assertions seem to collapse into one main misconception: that ancient Greece, ancient Rome and modern Europe are part of a single coherent civilization. This is a myth. Mac Sweeney’s argument here is neither new nor controversial; Oswald Spengler noted as much 100 years ago. But Mac Sweeney has a popular audience in her sights. Many people believe that there was a direct transmission of democracy, individualism and rationalism from the ancient Greeks to the European Renaissance. These far-fetched origin tales are what Mac Sweeney has in mind when she takes aim at the “grand narrative” of the West.

If reasonable people agree that the ancients and modern Europe do not make up one civilization, then what do people *actually* mean by “Western civilization”? Here is where Mac Sweeney could spare us all significant uncertainty. If she had simply observed that people usually mean European civilization when they say Western civilization, it would clear up most of the confusion generated by the idea that Rome, Greece, Europe and Anglo-America are one coherent civilization. In this sense, those who say Western civilization is a myth are correct, but only semantically. Unlike “the West,” European civilization *is* a coherent concept—even if, like any concept, it does not fully capture reality. In the Middle Ages (500-1450), a socially, culturally and economically coherent civilization emerged in Central and Western Europe, most accurately called Latin Christendom. This civilization was a new synthesis of Germanic, Celtic, Roman and Christian elements.

The influence of European civilization went global in the 1400s and 1500s via exploration and colonization. Because settler colonization in North America destroyed Native civilizations in less densely populated regions, the settlers could recreate an approximation of their European life. For these reasons, the United States and other former settler colonies are often included in Western civilization even though they are distinct from Europe. Nevertheless, it would be more accurate to simply say European civilization even when referring to these former settler colonies because they share much of what makes Europe distinct.



# Mac Sweeney wishes to dismantle the ‘grand narrative’ of Western civilization because it is historically distorted.

necessary to pass on our values. Just like the old story of the West, the new story will have to answer the questions: Who are we and what do we value? History cannot answer these questions, but we must.

Joseph P. Creamer is a lecturer at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

Like all civilizations, European civilization has been a mixed blessing, to say the least. Mac Sweeney deftly chooses certain figures to highlight key moments when history might have turned out differently. She chooses the Arab Muslim philosopher al-Kindi to demonstrate how Muslim civilization directly inherited and developed Greek philosophy and science when Latin Christendom was a backwater.

It wasn't inevitable that Europe would develop modern science and rationalism. Medieval Western and Central Europe gradually defined itself significantly, if not entirely, against Islam. But this didn't have to continue. Mac Sweeney reminds us that during the Reformation, England tried to forge an alliance with the Ottoman Turks against Catholic Europe and that Dutch Protestants rallied to the slogan, "better Turk than papist."

Similarly, in a fine chapter on the Byzantine emperor Theodore II Laskaris, Mac Sweeney shows how the Crusades further alienated the Byzantines when they might have provided a chance to bring Latin and Greek Christians together. All of these "might have beens" serve to remind us that history is contingent and that Europe could have taken other paths to the present, including a less imperialist and racist one.

Yet, if European civilization is not *better* than other civilizations, that does not mean it isn't *different*. And some of what makes it different is worth sharing with the rest of the world. As the work of the medievalists Brian Tierney and Francis Oakley shows, many of the most particular characteristics of European civilization—limited government, a distinction between politics and religion, the elevated social status of women (relative to other civilizations), and belief in the compatibility of faith and reason—emerged within Latin Christendom in the Middle Ages.

Limited government originally meant constraints on royal and imperial power, allowing for the freedom of the church. Limited government was transformed by parliaments, constitutions and revolutions over the centuries into what we call liberalism (freedom from arbitrary power) today.

Mac Sweeney is no postmodernist. While she tears down the grand narrative of Western civilization because it was used to justify European imperialism in the past and is used to justify racism today, she wants to replace it with another narrative, both diverse and dynamic, that aligns with liberal, pluralist values. Mac Sweeney hopes that this new narrative will be more historically accurate, but she also recognizes that no grand narrative can ever tell the whole story; nevertheless, she acknowledges that some story will have to emerge to take the grand narrative's place.

Stories and institutions (dare we say traditions?) are



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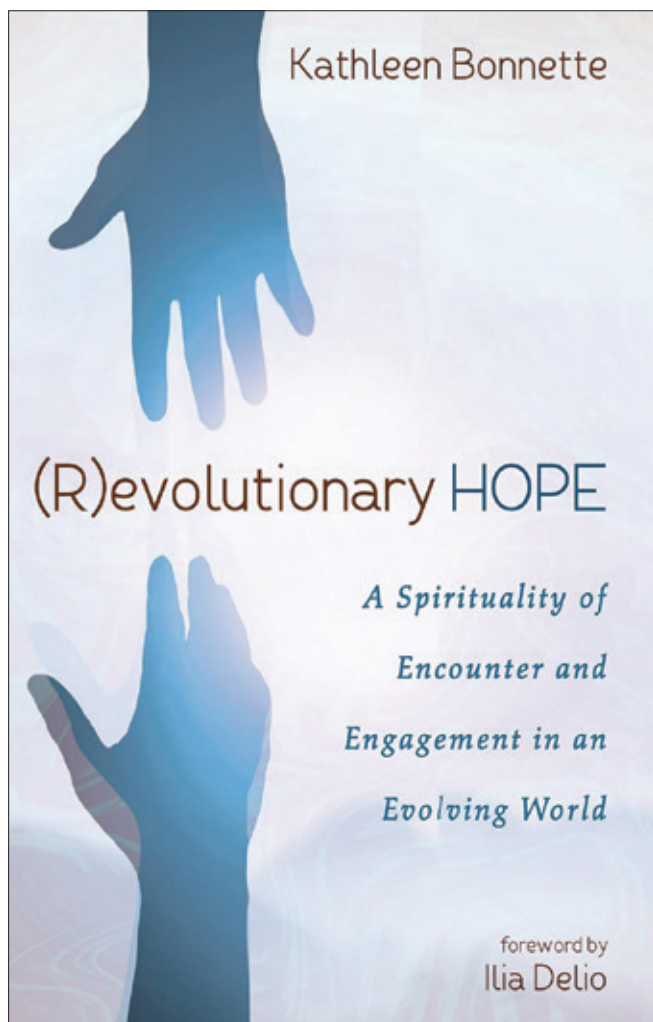
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## I DREAMED I SAW ST. AUGUSTINE



Cascade Books / 150p \$22

In 2016, HuffPost published an article about St. Augustine, "An Ancient Philosopher's Brilliant Theory Explains Everything Bad You've Ever Done." Written for an online audience accustomed to New Age, quick-fix approaches to spirituality, it focused on St. Augustine's concept of rightly ordered love and his theory that we sin when we put love of self and other worldly things above love of God. Implicit in the article was a mild sense of surprise that a long-winded theologian from the fifth century could say anything of value to modern readers who seek affirmation in online personality quizzes and seven-second sound bites.

In her new book, *(R)evolutionary Hope: A Spirituality of Encounter and Engagement in an Evolving World*, Kathleen Bonnette has brought St. Augustine's philosophy into dialogue with 21st-century reality in ways that would impress even modern mindfulness gurus and internet pundits. The slim, genre-jumping volume is part memoir, part theology, part philosophy of science, part evolutionary

theory, and part political commentary on civil and ecclesial issues of our day. It is simultaneously a "big picture" view of the world and an intensely personal reflection. Bonnette invites readers into her thought process and personal journey of spiritual growth, even to the point of acknowledging the struggles she faced when editing early drafts of the book itself.

In theme and in style, *(R)evolutionary Hope* displays a thoroughly Augustinian approach to thinking. Like many of St. Augustine's writings, Bonnette's work relies on personal experience to illustrate complex ideas. Augustine's *Confessions* was a work of theology as well as a deeply personal self-revelation. Bonnette walks her readers through a similar story of self-discovery, written from the perspective of a convert to Catholicism whose theological worldview has evolved as she progressed into adulthood. She shares how her perspective was shaped by her social outreach work for the School Sisters of Notre Dame as well as by marriage and motherhood. Drawing parallels between modern-day culture wars and the turbulent times in which St. Augustine lived, she tries to make sense of our day just as St. Augustine sought meaning during the fall of the Roman Empire.

Bonnette grounds heady concepts with concrete and familiar imagery, as when she introduces a cerebral chapter about the theology of matter, energy and evolution with a relatable tale about teaching her own children how to find the essence of the Big Bang theory in the biblical creation story. That she can transition so effortlessly from personal anecdote to quantum theory without losing the reader's attention or derailing her own train of thought is breathtaking. She demonstrates that a mother's heart and the stars of the galaxy are equally vast and complex.

This short chapter on cosmological spirituality serves as a centerpiece of sorts. It seeks to find God in the relationships between matter and energy that constitute our universe, and which science itself is beginning to understand as a complex web of interconnections that Bonnette compares to the mysteries of the Trinity. Just as the triune God can be seen as a relationship, so science increasingly understands all of existence, all of human consciousness and all of reality as an infinite set of relationships in which nothing is truly independent of anything else or of the fundamental forces of creation. Einstein's theory of relativity—that everything is relational—has parallels to Christian theology that defines God as love and love as the product of relationships.

Bonnette uses her own personal faith journey from childhood to adulthood as a proxy for the development of humanity's moral code since St. Augustine's lifetime. Sci-



## Books like Bonnette's remind us that it is not just the ancients who have something useful to say.

ence evolves in a similar way. Copernicus might have been the greatest astronomer of his day, but he would struggle mightily to understand the concept of a black hole. If Galileo could somehow have gotten his hands on a physics textbook from 2024, most of it would have gone right over his head. These great minds could not understand, in their day, what it took generations of later scientists to uncover, even if those discoveries were built off the foundation of those scientists' work. In a similar way, Bonnette shows how Augustinian theology can mature with the times and reflect the reality of a society that has evolved for nearly 16 centuries since St. Augustine's death.

It is refreshing to see cosmology, science and evolutionary biology described as evidence for God—not merely as justification for intelligent design or indirect proof of God's fingerprints on creation, but as part and parcel of God's existence and continued presence. There was perhaps some opportunity to bring in other theologies of evolution and science—such as the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.—but Bonnette keeps the discussion focused on St. Augustine and his interpreters.

The final few chapters shift seamlessly into a reflection on the School Sisters of Notre Dame and other Catholic sisters who live out their commitment to care for all of creation through their vows. Bonnette handles this sharp shift in tone and genre effortlessly. The experience of the sisters with whom Bonnette has worked becomes an allegory for the challenges that all people face in embracing love over selfishness.

Framing the sisters' story through the theological controversy that began in 2009, when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith undertook an investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Bonnette shows how the Catholic sisters used even the sharpest criticism from church authorities as an opportunity to strengthen, rather than sever, their relationship with the church and its people. Their actions were refreshing in an age when important relationships often fall victim to baser human instincts to “win” rather than “resolve” arguments, or to be “heard” rather than to listen and love.

The denouement in the final chapter is a theological exhortation to act as God's hands in the world, not simply to pray that God's will will be miraculously enacted. It is a reminder that prayer does not alleviate the responsibility to take action but instead inspires action.

Bonnette assumes that readers are at least familiar with St. Augustine, and esoteric ideas are sometimes presented with limited context or explanation. This reader had to keep a copy of *Confessions* close at hand to understand the full implications of some arguments. St. Augus-

tine looms so large that some reference to the Augustinian theme of the book, perhaps in the title, would have been useful to warn readers of that barrier to entry. Nonetheless, the learning curve is not overwhelming for readers without theological backgrounds.

Some of the best works of theology and philosophy are those in which the authors share how they personally have come to understand the world—how their particular life circumstances and years of intellectual inputs in school and at home have allowed them to make sense of this messy existence. St. Augustine did it. John Henry Newman did it. Hildegard of Bingen did it. Their insights continue to shape our worldview today. Every so often, books like Bonnette's remind us that it is not just the ancients who have something useful to say.

Michael T. Rizzi is the author of *Jesuit Colleges and Universities in the United States: A History* (CUA Press, 2022) and is director of student affairs at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

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## Faith and Open Heart

The Gospel readings during the month of July emphasize the virtues necessary for discipleship. On the first Sunday of the month, Mark recounts Jesus' visit to the synagogue of Nazareth and the offense that many took at his message there. They lacked faith, which for Mark was the most important thing necessary for discipleship. It was the fundamental stance necessary to understand Jesus' good news and to benefit from his healing power. "He was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them" (Mk 6:5).

For those who did open their hearts in faith, there was no limit on the way Jesus could change their lives. For example, in the Gospel reading of the second Sunday of

July, Jesus sends out the disciples two-by-two to continue his ministry in places he could not go. In their faith, they bore his power. Jesus' presence working through them gave their words the power to heal and transform hearts. On the remaining Sundays of July, the Gospel passages tell of Jesus' own heart being moved, first by the crowds who followed like sheep without a shepherd, and then by the hunger of the crowds for tangible and spiritual food.

The Gospels of July emphasize the importance of faith and an open heart to the transformation of life that disciples undertake when they commit to the Gospel. God can do mighty deeds and satisfy the profound hunger of any who place their trust in Christ.

### FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 7, 2024

Jesus Is Rejected at Nazareth

### FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 14, 2024

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve

### SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 21, 2024

Jesus' Heart Was Moved With Pity

### SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), JULY 28, 2024

The Multiplication of the Loaves and the Fishes

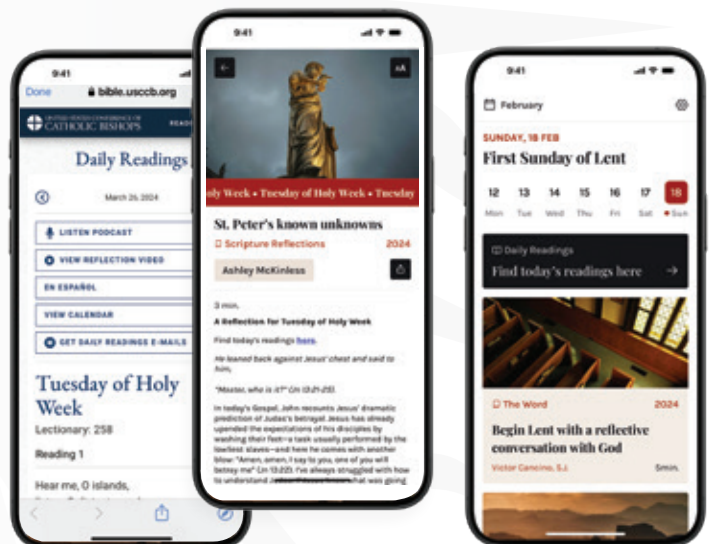
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# Manna in the Desert

Starting on the last Sunday of July and continuing throughout the Sundays of August, the church pauses in its reading of Mark's Gospel and reads selections from Chapter Six of the Gospel of John. These passages describe the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes and a lengthy sermon known today as the "Bread of Life Discourse."

In this sermon, Jesus compares his own flesh to bread. Bread supports human life and throughout the Scriptures is God's gift to Israel. When Israel wandered in the desert, God sent manna every day so that they would not starve. When Israel settled in the promised land, God sent rain sufficient for wheat and barley to grow in abundance. Likewise, in Christ, God has sent living bread that will support the eternal life of any who open their hearts.

Although many disciples who heard this sermon found it perplexing—"This saying is hard; who can accept it" (Jn 6:60)—Christians later came to understand it as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. Word and sacrament together are the living bread that Jesus promised. Jesus' commandments and example give spirit and life to any who follow them, and the sacramental bread and wine are the real presence of Christ who will raise his followers up on the last day. Peter's explicit confession of belief, recounted in the Gospel reading of the last Sunday in August, has served as an inspiration for generations of disciples, who seek eternal life through the Eucharist and in living out the Gospel.

## EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), AUGUST 4, 2024

This Is the Work of God, to Believe in the Son

## NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), AUGUST 11, 2024

I Am the Living Bread; Whoever Eats Will Live Forever

## TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), AUGUST 18, 2024

This Is the Bread That Came Down From Heaven

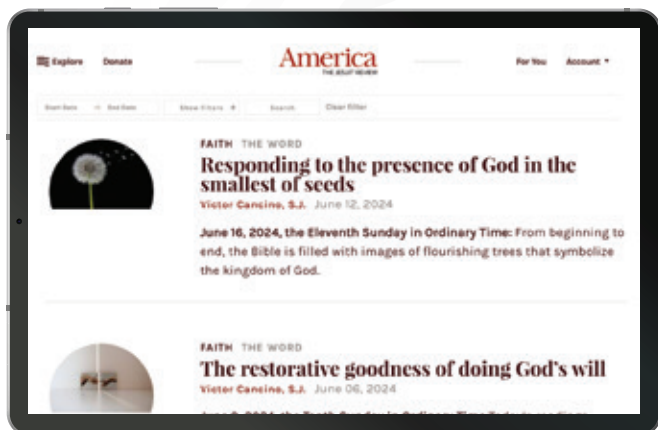
## TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), AUGUST 25, 2024

Peter Asked, "Master, to Whom Shall We Go?"



Michael Simone, S.J., is a contributing editor for *America* and the pastor of the Church of the Gesu in Milwaukee, Wis. Victor Cancino, S.J., will return in the next issue.

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# The Gospel, the Eucharist

## In Christ the teaching is made visible

By Daniel E. Flores



We tend to think that Jesus' words transmitted to us in the New Testament convey to us his Gospel. They do, of course, but not exhaustively. For no multiplicity of particular words can say all that is in the one Word of the Father. John's Gospel, at the very end, says as much: "There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written."

Jesus not only said things; he did things as well. In fact, it is in reference to the actions of Jesus that John's Gospel suggests a kind of inexhaustible content. The Lord Jesus never performed a sign without saying something about it; conversely, his spoken teaching was announced within the context of his actions among the people.

In this sense his presence among us was literally sacramental, for he deliberately led us by the hand to understand his actions in terms of the words he spoke. Think of the healings that Jesus performed specifically to indicate he had authority to forgive sins.

At the same time, his teaching and discourses to the crowds and disciples were spoken within the immediate world of his actions among the people. In this way he made visible to us the sense of what he was saying. Thus, Jesus taught about the fulfillment of the law in the love of God and love of neighbor. His attention to lepers and blind beggars shows us what he means by the word *neighbor*. So also does the parable of the good Samaritan.

The parables, in fact, have a special place in the Lord's pedagogy of

grace because they are words that evoke the visible movements of the kingdom of God. Think, then, of the great parable of judgment: "When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or naked?" (Mt 25: 37-38).

In Christ the teaching is made visible in the flesh and blood of this world, and the flesh and blood of this world receives a word that directs its sense to God and the ways of the kingdom.

The Eucharist is the final word and action of Jesus before he enters into his Passion. This set of just a few words and visible actions frames the meaning and intent of the great sign that is his whole life, culminating in his dying and rising. It is more than this, though. It is the way he designates in advance how, after the resurrection, we are to actively participate in the meaning and intent of the Passion, in the love it signifies.

The Word speaks and makes himself present in the act of handing himself over. The narrative Jesus spoke and that we hear at every Mass is in the present tense. The present moment of Christ's gift is the perpetual present moment of the church. The words and gestures of the priest, united to the community around the altar, make Christ's present *present* to us.

The final word is the gift of himself. This gift is the content of his love, the content of the Gospel itself. The speaking accompanies the action of giving himself over. It must be spoken in advance because death is a wordless moment. By the Eucharistic action and word, his death and his rising are spoken within our hearing and thus made accessible to our entry into the

gift. ("No one takes my life from me, I give it freely." *Tomorrow they will come for me, but they cannot take from me what I have already given to you.*)

He said the blessing—that is, he directed what he was about to say and do to the Father. This is the single-heartedness of the Son in this gift of himself to the Father. But this gift is given for you. In this act is made present his enacting of the New Law: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind and soul...and your neighbor as yourself." God made himself neighbor to us. And in that state he sought nothing more than to pour himself out to the Father, for us.

"Take this, all of you...." This that I give you is me, my life, the all that is in me. "Eat it...drink from it...." My flesh and blood given over for you, must be in you, so that as I love the Father so you can love the Father, and so you can love *that other one* who vexes you, frightens you, tires you, asks from you. That one was hungry. Do you see? (Do I see *that other one*? Who is that? *That is me*, he says. It is also us.)

"I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written." Yet, it is summed up, here, in this place, in the Eucharistic mystery, so beyond us yet so near to us: a few words, simple actions. He unveils all that went before, and opens us to what will be. By the Spirit this is known, received, treasured and adored.

"Take this all of you." Lord, I want to see.

**The Most Rev. Daniel E. Flores is the bishop of Brownsville, Tex.**

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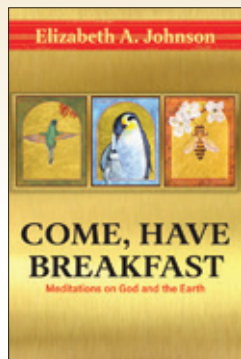
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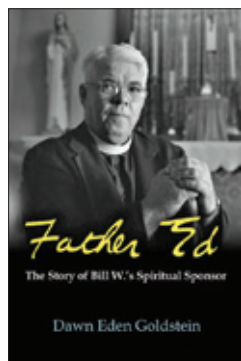
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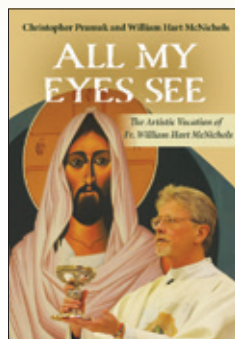
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