

America



NOVEMBER 2024

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

GROUNDHOG DAY IN U.S. POLITICS

A pre-election report
from Punxsutawney, Pa.

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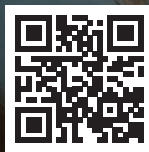
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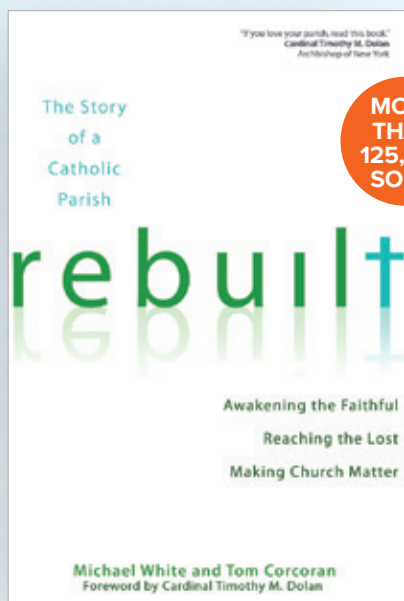


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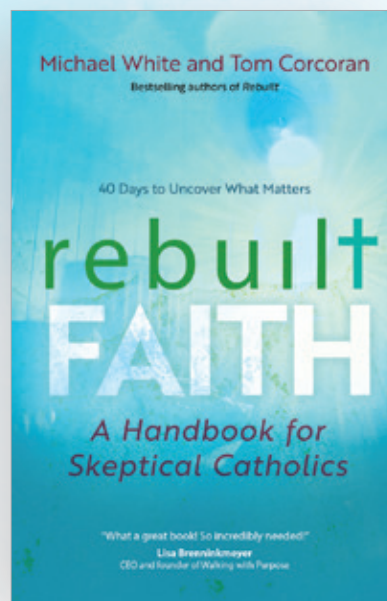
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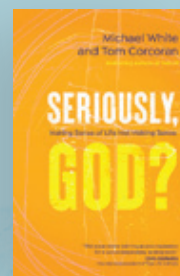
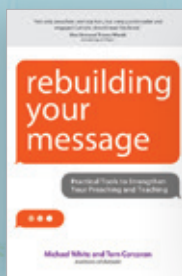
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What Most Needs to Change at the Synod: We Do

As we prepare the November issue of **America** for press, the delegates to the second session of the Synod on Synodality have just arrived in Rome and have begun their retreat before starting their meetings on Oct. 2. As we did last year, we have sent a team from the magazine to Rome to cover it all.

After the first session of the synod last year, I wrote that focusing exclusively on what might change in church teaching or discipline—whether in anticipation or in resistance—is too narrow and risks missing the grace God is offering.

Many would like the synod to discuss the neuralgic issues in the life of the church, such as clergy shortages, declining religious practice, the role of women, teachings on sexuality and the church's welcome for marginalized communities, but the agenda set for the second session does not prioritize any of those. Instead, after the first session, these issues were referred to working groups that will give interim reports during the October session and then make final reports to Pope Francis in June 2025.

What is on the agenda, as given in the *instrumentum laboris*, the working document for the session, is “*how* to be a missionary synodal church.” And yes, the italics on “*how*” are there in the title of the document distributed by the Vatican, in every translation that uses characters for which italics are possible.

This kind of stilted language can occasion eyerolls. I will confess that I have indulged in more than one—maybe many more than one—private rant about the lack of media savvy involved in the name “Synod on Synodality.” Italics for emphasis are often a red flag for editors, as are piling on adjectives (“missionary synodal”) or frequently repeated series (“communion, partic-

ipation, mission”). As a writer, I keep learning and relearning that leaning on such verbal crutches should prompt a pause to ask: Do I know what I am really trying to say?

In this case, I think that question belongs to every Catholic, and the challenge is to ask it of ourselves, not just to ask it of the synodal process. Do I know what I am really trying to say within the church and about the church? Do I really know what I am called to say in charity to those with whom I disagree? Do I know what both my words and my life say to fellow Catholics and to the world about faith in Jesus Christ?

I think that one reason that the language is stilted is because the church does not have much experience in having forthright conversations among believers about topics where we disagree. We have plenty of experience disagreeing, but we usually do so in silos of the like-minded, talking to each other about why those other folks are wrong. When those disagreements do become public, they often take the form of advocacy and sometimes even pressure tactics, effectively lobbying the Holy See to embrace or decry some position. But they rarely become conversation.

That is where the Synod on Synodality has broken new ground. And it is so new that whatever seeds have been planted have only barely begun to sprout, and are certainly not yet ready for harvest. We will have to wait to see what has fallen on good soil and what is surrounded by rocks or choked by weeds.

But the plowing and furrowing are real. The church is having direct conversations, among Catholics who disagree, and our communion with each other is holding. Thanks be to God.

Holding is not to say that there is

no tension; there is plenty, and you will read about it in **America**'s coverage of the synod. I think, however, one of the fruits that the church may eventually harvest from this time is the recognition that not all tension is crisis.

When Pope Francis was first elected, and I was writing for The Jesuit Post before I had ever imagined being missioned to **America**, I said that what he most wanted to change in the church was us. I quoted a 2007 interview in which he said: “Fidelity is always a change, a blossoming, a growth. The Lord brings about a change in those who are faithful to him.”

Let us pray that the synod may be an experience of fidelity and that the Lord may use it to bring about a change in us. Let us be willing to pause before we determine that what is on the synod's agenda, or missing from it, is weed or wheat. And let us ask first how the experience of the synod calls us to conversion before we set out to explain to other Catholics what it asks of them.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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Immigrants and the holy space created by meals

Parishioners pray during Mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral in Alappuzha, India, on March 5, 2023.

Cover: A patriotic groundhog statue in Punxsutawney, Pa.

John W. Miller

What makes liturgy ‘reverent’?

In the last issue of **America**, Rachel Lu and Matthew Cortese, S.J., reflected on how Catholics can make the liturgy more reverent. The two shared insights informed by their experiences of Masses celebrated in different traditions. Their thoughts, which took the first meeting of the Synod on Synodality as inspiration, drew dozens of reader comments.

I think both commentators would agree that a “bad” liturgy is a liturgy that is not reverent. All musical styles and any body postures can be done reverently or not. Reverence cannot be achieved by the choice of a particular type of music or a particular bodily posture when receiving Communion; it is an inner disposition that both Gregorian chant and the Dameans can elicit. I have been to both Latin Masses and “Dameans” Masses that have deadened me and others that have lifted me to the transcendent. I get concerned when anyone suggests that one “type” of liturgy is more reverent than another.

Diane Vella

I am concerned that “reverent liturgy” is inadvertently becoming the required steps that one must climb to reach God. I am troubled when I hear people say, “Mass is my opportunity to shut out the outside world and have my spiritual experience.” For these people, church has become the tower that must be climbed to find God. Reverent liturgy cannot and should not become a sorting mechanism on the stairway to heaven or hell. You are inadvertently creating a Tower of Babel.

Peter Arnez

One reason for the Vatican II reforms was to have the congregation *participate* in the liturgy rather than sit in the pews as passive spectators. Pre-Vatican II, the priest’s back was to us while he mumbled in Latin. Every now and then the people said a brief response like *Et cum Spiritu tuo*. Few knew Latin, but they had bilingual missals to read. So some read. Many women prayed the rosary during Mass. Many men dozed off.... The congregation was an audience watching a priest doing liturgy rather than participating. The music was mostly mediocre. Chant was rare—sometimes heard during a “high Mass.” My generation welcomed the changes.

Anne Chapman

For over 40 years as a presider I have struggled over what constitutes reverence in liturgy. I have come to the conclusion that it has everything to do with the disposition of hearts: mine and those who gather with me to worship. Do those hearts know the Lord intimately or from a distance?

Are they wrapped up in his infinite love or just longing to be? Beauty, if understood as transcendent (God’s view, not mine) will enhance our experience together in the multi-varied ways God reveals through this gathering. Our experience of the union will depend largely on our openness to all God calls us to in this moment of our worship and in the lives we continue when we part. Reverence would seem to be my willingness to enter into all God is already doing.

Father Patrick Michaels

In thinking about what we might “bring back,” we must be aware of why some things went away. There is a place for chant in our liturgy, and for the judicious use of Latin and other nonvernacular languages—if care is taken that the people sufficiently understand what they are praying. Some folks have an odd nostalgia for things they never experienced. If you’re not old enough to remember a “low Mass” muttered in Latin and completed in 20 minutes or less, I want to tell you—as someone who is old enough to remember that—there was nothing reverent about it.

Mike Houlihan

As a retired priest, I have come to believe that authentic spirituality is fostered and fed by celebrating the liturgy as the church prescribes—nothing more, nothing less. The liturgy can cease to challenge and encourage true conversion when it is manipulated to mirror personal wants.

Father Karl Schilken

I can imagine some folks in medieval times were outraged by the use of newfangled polyphony—how profane!—rather than chant. Yet now beautiful polyphonic music is considered perfectly acceptable. And some of those “guitar Mass” songs of several decades past are now staples of the hymnal. If we focus on what is actually happening in the Mass, and less on the trappings that are not even central to the miracle in which we are participating, maybe we can worry less about whether we are participating in a “good” or a “bad” liturgy, much less whether we “like” the trappings of any particular Mass.

Mary Gallagher

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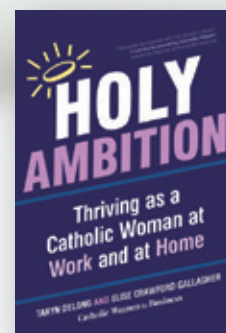
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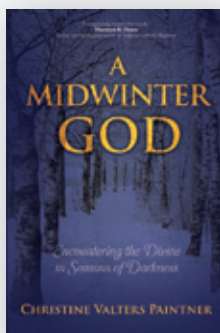
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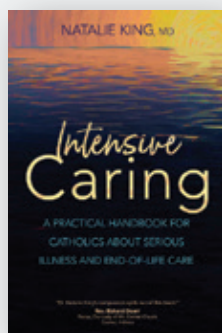
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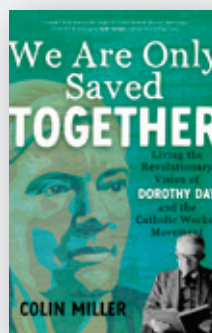
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Voting and the Primacy of Conscience

Pope Francis often makes headlines with in-flight press conferences at the end of papal trips, and his return to Rome from visiting Southeast Asia in September was no exception. Asked what advice he would give to Catholics in the United States for the upcoming presidential election, he minced no words in his assessment of the candidates: “Both are against life: the one that throws out migrants and the one that kills children. Both are against life.”

Nevertheless, he said, in response to a follow-up question about whether it was moral to vote for a candidate who supported abortion, that Catholics have a duty to “vote, and one has to choose the lesser evil.” He refused to speculate about which was the lesser evil, saying, “Each person must think and decide according to their own conscience.”

Some commentators interpreted the language of “lesser evil” as merely code to obscure a partisan preference, as if Catholics should automatically know which candidate is the lesser evil. Predictably, the candidate such commentators coded as “the lesser evil” was the one they already supported. Others described the pope’s answer as both-sidesism, as if he were drawing a lazy moral equivalence between the candidates rather than courageously speaking truth to power by specifying the lesser evil.

But both these assessments focus far too much on “lesser evil” and nowhere near enough on “according to their own conscience.” In telling American Catholics to vote according to their conscience, Pope Francis is not abandoning his supposed duty to make a moral judgment but rather is calling them to a deeper engagement with the moral challenges of this election.

An emphasis on conscience is not

a recent innovation by Francis. Commenting in 1968 on a passage about conscience in the Second Vatican Council’s “*Gaudium et Spes*,” the Rev. Joseph Ratzinger, before being made a cardinal and later elected pope, said: “Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one’s own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. Conscience confronts [the individual] with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official church.”

Of course, appeals to conscience can be made cheaply, and many will point out that conscience must be both formed and informed in light of the teaching of the church. But just as “lesser evil” is not code for automatically choosing one party over the other, neither is “formed and informed” code for the demands of conscience being identical for all Catholics in all circumstances. As Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic exhortation “*Amoris Laetitia*,” the church is “called to form consciences, not to replace them” (No. 37).

Catholics in the United States, then, should hear Pope Francis’ assessment of the two major party candidates *both* as advice for the formation of conscience and as a refusal to replace it with a judgment pre-approved by the church. Rather than throwing up their hands and acting as if the pope has said, “Vote for whomever you wish,” Catholic voters need to reason, reflect and pray to hear the voice of conscience clearly. They need to do so especially if their conscience may be calling them to vote differently than their own longstanding habits, narrow self-interest or partisan preferences might suggest.

In the depths of their conscience, God may surprise them.

In 2020, **America’s** editors, departing from a longstanding practice of commenting primarily on policies rather than candidates, registered a then-unprecedented warning that Donald J. Trump presented a unique threat to the constitutional order. In that editorial, we wrote that **America’s** commentary on elections had always been governed by two considerations: “the moral character of political decisions in light of Catholic principles and the necessity of preserving the American constitutional order.”

The editors now reiterate, as we have done repeatedly since 2020, our overriding concern about Mr. Trump’s refusal to acknowledge constraints on his own power, accept his 2020 electoral defeat or commit to respecting the outcome of the 2024 election. But we also recognize that those few voters who are still undecided at this point do not consider concerns about basic commitments to democracy determinative in themselves or perhaps are struggling in conscience with other moral issues that they may consider similarly weighty.

Thus, following Pope Francis’ example, we offer here what we hope will be a help toward the formation of conscience. Rather than a claim to know conscience’s demands for everyone, it is a challenge for voters to engage in deeper reflection, prayer and dialogue.

While many moral issues are involved in this election, Pope Francis focused on two, migration and abortion. **America** has a long tradition of commentary on both.

Founded in 1909, **America** addressed itself both to Catholic readers, many of whom were recent immigrants, and to a broader public that

was skeptical of their integration into American life. An article in 1922 made the case that anti-immigrant prejudice was itself contrary to American values, concluding with the hope that fellow citizens would recognize that “the menace to national unity is native to the soil, and that it is the native-born American who does not uphold the principles of the Constitution or the intent of its framers.”

While Americans may disagree in good conscience about the proper levels of immigration and how to regulate it, no just or moral policy can be built on racist, nativist fear-mongering.

Similarly, concern for the recognition of common humanity is at the heart of Catholic opposition to abortion. In 2022, responding to the Dobbs decision, we wrote that “unborn human life is deserving of legal protection through restrictions on abortion, which must be accompanied by protections for pregnant women and support to make it possible to welcome a child in economic security.”

While Americans may disagree in good conscience about the right way to structure laws to recognize the unique interrelationship of human life in the womb and the bodily autonomy of pregnant women, no just or moral policy can be built on the wholesale rejection of legal protection for the unborn.

These considerations—about democracy and human dignity, about immigration and abortion—do not establish a universal calculus to be applied in the voting booth this November. Nor should anyone speaking on behalf of the church pretend that decisions at the ballot box can be reduced to a tally of various positions held by candidates or a utilitarian calculation about how many lives are likely to be risked or saved.

The prudential consideration of which candidates are more trustworthy, of which concerns are more pressing, of which bad and good policies are more likely to be adopted, and of how this election will affect our civic and moral dialogue going forward belongs to voters in the integrity of their consciences.

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Our children worry about guns. How does that affect their mental health?

On a crisp January morning, I walked into my second- and third-grade Sunday school class, filled with boys and girls returning from Christmas break. The plan for the new year was to dive into Jesus' parables. Jesus talks a lot about letting go of our worries, so I asked the children, "What causes you to worry?" I thought back to my own elementary-school years, expecting to hear about grades or family problems. That was not the response I received. A girl raised her hand to answer. "At my school we have these drills..." she trailed off.

"One day I wasn't in my classroom and there was a real one, not a drill. It was scary," another said.

Similar stories kept coming. These children needed a way to make sense of the violence they were exposed to and to heal.

I am neither a therapist nor an elementary teacher; I am a nurse trained in trauma-informed care. So I was already aware that people who have experienced trauma need validation of their experience. My first step was to recognize the reality of what my students were telling me and to call it what it is: evil. We talked about what to do when facing evil, and they understood the power of prayer. Many had also discussed their fears with their families. But while they recognized the acute fear associated with these "active shooter" drills, they did not realize the long-term effect of this type of stress and why it still concerned them weeks later.

It appears that these drills are here to stay, but we must be aware of their negative effects. A recent study by the Georgia Institute of Technology found a 42 percent increase in reported feelings of anxiety and a 39 percent increase in reported feelings of depression for 90 days after active

shooter drills for K-12 students.

The human brain is designed to identify threats within our environment, but this can become a problem in situations like active-shooter drills. Our brains can mistakenly process the drill as real and turn on our fight-or-flight response. For children in particular, the emotions associated with these drills can become unhealthy. We do not fully understand the long-term impact of active-shooter drills on children, but there appears to be a strong connection to worsened mental well-being. And we are learning that the impacts of mental illness, including depression, throughout one's life are far-reaching—leading to decreased brain health and nearly doubling the risk of dementia later in life.

We must address this trauma with our neighbors—our families, churches and communities. The first step is offering education on how to recognize and respond to one another's feelings. Our families notice when we are stressed, and the ways we respond to that stress can influence our children's behavior. Another solution is setting up physical spaces for reflection and regulation. When we pick up on our less desirable feelings and remove ourselves from an environment instead of lashing out, we enhance our emotional intelligence and process stress in a healthier way.

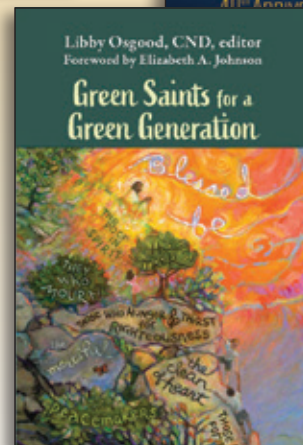
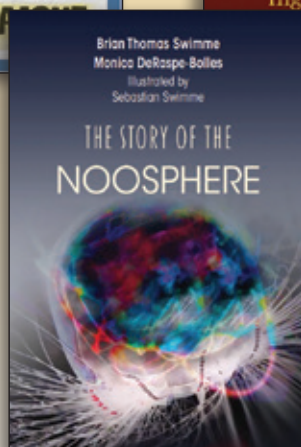
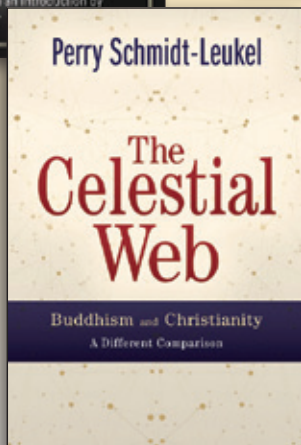
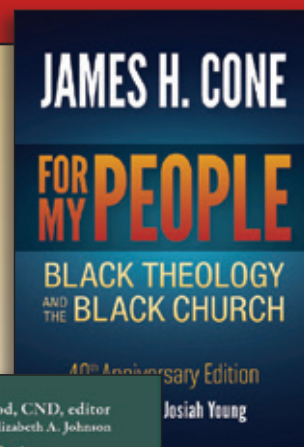
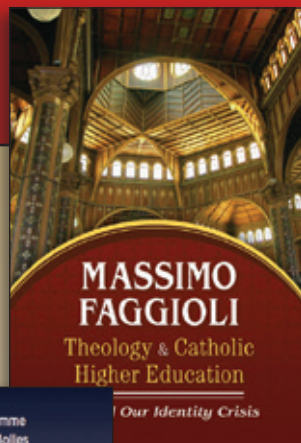
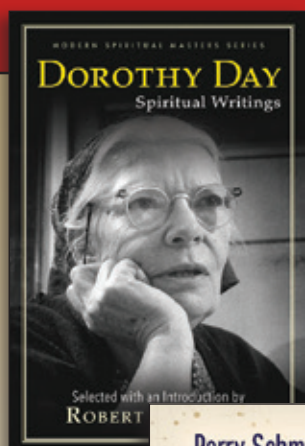
We have been gifted with love and hope in an unstable world, and we can accept this gift through acknowledging, processing and releasing our burdens. Stress is inevitable, and sometimes we need help dealing with it. Working with a trusted therapist or spiritual advisor can allow us to move through our own struggles and remind us that we have a choice in how we respond. We can provide a model for our children as they learn how to process

trauma and move forward with hope.

At the same time, solutions aimed at decreasing the sense of danger within schools are needed. For example, smartphones and social media have been identified as potential causes of worsening mental health among children and teens. A growing number of mental health professionals and parents are therefore recommending later introductions to smartphones. This year, schools in Los Angeles County will move to a cellphone-free environment; policies like this might enable children and teens to be less overwhelmed by outside pressures and to focus on their present environment.

Violence, mental illness and brain health may seem like tough issues to tackle, but one verse comforts me when I consider the challenge: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5). In other words, while darkness persists in our world, so does the light. Our children are up against a terrible darkness that brings not only short-term symptoms but also chronic disease. Our role is to be a resource, demonstrating a faith that is rooted in the redemptive power of Jesus. This is a lifelong process that sets children up to understand when they need mental, physical or spiritual help to process their stress so that their imaginations are not stuck in a cycle of fight-or-flight but can instead grow images of hope shining a light on the darkness all around them.

Calli Leighann Cook is an associate clinical professor at the Emory University Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing and a nurse practitioner at the Emory Brain Health Center.



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The killing of a defender of creation in Honduras highlights a global problem of impunity

You may have never heard of Juan López before. He was a father to two young daughters, Claudia and Julia. His wife is named Telma. He was a community leader in the city of Tocoa in northeastern Honduras.

On Sept. 14 he became a statistic, another martyr. Mr. López was gunned down as he was leaving Mass by a still-unidentified assassin, a *sicario* who fled the crime scene on a motorcycle. Mr. López became the latest casualty among defenders of creation and Indigenous and human rights—a toll that has been especially high in Honduras.

Mr. López was a member of the Municipal Committee for the Defense of Common and Public Goods of Tocoa, work that frequently brought him into conflict with commercial interests and local and national politicians eager to pursue “development” in the department of Colón. He has been among the leaders in years of struggle to turn back open-pit iron oxide mining, an industry that threatens the Guapinol and San Pedro river water the Lenca community relies on for drinking, fishing and agricultural needs.

Just days before his murder, Mr. López, along with other local community leaders, had demanded the resignation of Mayor Adán Fúnez of Tocoa. He called the mayor’s continued leadership untenable after a video surfaced of a conversation conducted in 2013 among Honduran politicians and drug traffickers concerning how to distribute bribery money. Mr. Fúnez was mentioned as a possible conduit for drug cash

to then-president Mel Zelaya, later ousted in a coup.

This was not the first source of tension with Tocoa’s mayor. Mr. López and other activists had already butted heads with Mr. Fúnez at council meetings convened to discuss mining and hydroelectric proposals in what is supposed to be the protected region of the Montaña de Botaderos Carlos Escaleras National Park.

Faith Was His Anchor

Mr. López was remembered fondly on Sept. 18 by José Artiga, the executive director of California’s Share Foundation. In an email to **America**, Mr. Artiga compared Mr. López to another prominent defender of the environment and the Indigenous people of Honduras, Berta Cáceres, who was martyred in 2016. Mr. López, he wrote, “embraced” all the struggles that confronted his community, “the Indigenous, [known as] the Tolupanes, that have been displaced by the companies cutting their trees, [and] also the struggle of the African/Honduran Garifuna, displaced to use their beautiful beach lands for tourist projects.”

Mr. Artiga described the work Mr. López committed himself to as “multi-issue from multiple fronts, including the religious all the way to the political. He himself was a City Council member and member of the Libre Party.”

But, he added, “Juan’s anchor was [his faith], formed by the Jesuits. As a catechist he interpreted the Gospel and applied it as the preferential option for the poor from the liberation theology of Puebla and Medellín.”

His efforts to protect creation were known around the

world. His killing was deplored by Pope Francis. “I have learned with sorrow that Juan Antonio López has been killed in Honduras,” the pope said after praying the Angelus on Sept. 22. “Coordinator of social pastoral care in the Diocese of Trujillo, he was a founding member of the pastoral care of integral ecology in Honduras.”

“I join in the grief of that church and condemn every form of violence,” the pope said. “I am close to all those who see their fundamental rights violated and to those who work for the common good in response to the cry of the poor and the earth.”

The bishops’ conference of Honduras remembered Mr. López as a true “disciple and missionary” who lived out his faith through concrete action in defense of the environment.

In a message addressed to Mr. López after his death, the Most Rev. Jenry Ruiz of the Diocese of Trujillo wrote, “You told me that you were not an environmentalist because for you, the social, ecological and political commitment were not an ideological question, but a question of your being of Christ and of the church.”

The bishop noted the activist’s understanding of Pope Francis’ environmental teaching and “tenderness and truth” in responding to his detractors and wrote that his friend knew the risks he was taking. “You knew very well that the extractivist and mining system is a system that kills and destroys the whole world, along with the corruption of the false politicians and the narco-governments.”

A Most Dangerous Country

Just days before Mr. López’s assassination, Global Witness, an international advocacy group tracking the persisting vulnerability of environmental activists, released its annual report, “Missing Voices,” a survey of the murder and intimidation of environmental and Indigenous activists around the world. Though the actual number is certainly much higher, Global Witness documented the killing of 196 eco-activists in 2023.

“Murdered defenders were, in different ways, trying to protect the planet and to uphold their fundamental human rights,” Global Witness reports. “Every killing leaves the world more vulnerable to the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises.”

But murder is not the only tactic used to silence entire communities as extractive industries pursue profit—often in collusion with regional and national governments. According to the report, “lethal attacks often occur alongside wider retaliations against defenders who are being targeted by government, business and other non-state actors with

violence, intimidation, smear campaigns and criminalisation. This is happening in every region of the world and in almost every sector.”

Latin America consistently has the highest number of murders of land and environmental defenders, and in 2023, 85 percent were recorded in Latin America. Seventy percent of those murders took place in just four countries—Brazil, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico. Almost half of the activists murdered worldwide were members of Indigenous communities.

Global Witness reports that Colombia had the highest death toll, with 79 killings in 2023. But on a per capita basis, Honduras emerged (not for the first time) as the most dangerous country in the world in which to be a defender of the environment—18 were murdered there last year. Three of them were colleagues of Mr. López in the fight to protect water resources in Tocoa.

The murder of Mr. López speaks to the continuing impunity protecting business executives and drug cartels in Honduras and other Latin American states. Mr. López was strongly supported by the Honduran Catholic Church and was close to its leaders. He had been under the protection of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights because of the many threats against his life, and in 2019 he traveled to the United States to receive the prestigious Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. None of those international, regional and local sponsors and connections were enough to save him.

The murder of Mr. López was quickly deplored by the faith community in Honduras. Gregorio Vásquez, S.J., representing the National Apostolic Council of the Society of Jesus in Honduras, demanded a thorough investigation of Mr. López’s murder. But, he told Jesuit-supported Radio Progreso, that investigation should be assisted by competent international entities. He joined many in Honduras concerned that the Honduran public prosecutor’s office was not up to the job, especially in the aftermath of the damning video release that suggests how deep and for how long Honduran drug traffickers have penetrated all levels of government.

The current president, Xiomara Castro, was elected in a landslide victory carrying national hope for reform and a renewed fight against government corruption and incompetence. But with her husband and current chief advisor seriously implicated by the video, many already doubt that those who killed Mr. López will be held accountable.

Esly Banegas, president of the Coordinating Board of Popular Organizations of the Aguán, told Radio Progre-

so: “We do not trust the justice system in Honduras, because we have not seen results over the years.”

“This Aguán valley has been massacred. We have fought and we are still at risk.... We hope that political will will translate into concrete actions to protect human rights defenders.”

Ms. Banegas told the independent Honduran news service *Contra Corriente* that she and Mr. López had been receiving various threats after City Council meetings in Tocoa called by the mayor. Mr. Fúnez was seeking approval for a power generation project proposed by Grupo EMCO, the parent company of the Los Pinares mining company that Mr. López and other environmental defenders in the region have for years struggled against.

Ms. Banegas called on President Castro to act against drug trafficking and to put an end to attacks on defenders of the environment and civil rights in the region. “They have established a pattern of murder,” she said. “They used it with Berta and now with Juan. They threaten, criminalize and then kill.”

It is likely that Mr. López’s assassination will be recorded in next year’s report from Global Witness.

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent, with reporting from The Associated Press and Religion News Service.*

A year in eco-martyrdom

Global Witness’s “Missing Voices” documents mortal attacks on individuals around the world who were “bravely taking a stand to defend human rights, their land, and our environment.” The report also seeks to honor many more who made the same sacrifice but who remain unknown.

Since Global Witness started reporting on killings in 2012, at least 2,106 eco-activists, described by Global Witness as “defenders,” around the world have been murdered. The report’s authors note that despite that toll, governments typically “fail to document and investigate attacks, let alone identify and tackle the root of the problem.”

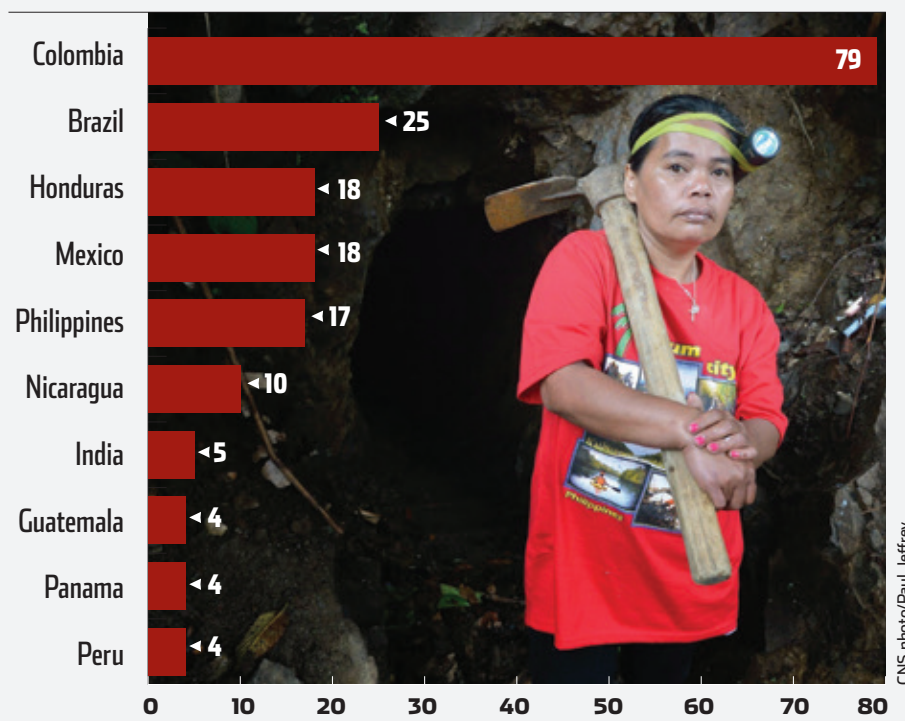
196 defenders of the earth, water and Indigenous rights were murdered in 2023.

More than 1,500 eco-defenders have been murdered since the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change in December 2015.

Establishing a direct relationship between the murder of a defender and specific corporate interests remains difficult. But Global Witness was able to identify **mining as the biggest industrial driver** by far in the killing of eco-defenders, with 25 deaths tied to the opposition of mining operations in 2023.

More than 50% of mining-related killings between 2012 and 2023 were in Latin America. Last year, 23 of the 25 mining-related killings globally happened in this region.

Murders of land, water and Indigenous rights activists in 2023



Source: “Missing Voices” from Global Witness

Vatican on Medjugorje: Visit Mary but not the 'visionaries'

The Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the assent of Pope Francis, has given its approval to the promotion of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the title "The Queen of Peace," in connection with the "Medjugorje phenomenon." However, the dicastery did not make any declaration on the alleged supernatural character of the Marian apparitions that began on June 24, 1981, in the small village in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The dicastery on Sept. 19 gave the *nihil obstat* ("no objection") to the Medjugorje phenomenon. This means, as the relevant norm states, that "Without expressing any certainty about the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon itself, many signs of the action of the Holy Spirit are acknowledged 'in the midst' of a given spiritual experience, and no aspects that are particularly critical or risky have been detected, at least so far."

The Vatican approval comes 43 years after the Virgin Mary is said to have first appeared to six children, known as "visionaries," in Medjugorje. Devotees say Mary has been appearing and giving messages to the world through these visionaries ever since. News of the apparitions quickly attracted pilgrims to the site; and since 1981 more than 50 million people from all over the world have come to visit or to pray at the site.

The "Note About the Spiritual Experience Connected with Medjugorje" was presented at a Vatican press conference by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández and Msgr. Armando Matteo, respectively the prefect and secretary of the dicastery, and Andrea Tornielli, the editorial director of Vatican Media. Both the cardinal and Mr. Tornielli had visited and prayed at Medjugorje once in the past and gave their personal witness to the profound spiritual atmosphere at the shrine.

Pope Benedict XVI set up a commission in 2010 that delved into the Medjugorje case. The results of the investigation were given to Pope Francis, who declared it "very, very good."

Pope Francis also appointed a special envoy, Msgr. Henryk Hosier, to examine the situation in Medjugorje. He produced a positive report, as did his successor, Msgr. Aldo Cavalli, who recently told Cardinal Fernández that Medjugorje is "an oasis of peace and faith where God, through the Queen of Peace, does a lot of good."

On May 12, 2019, Pope Francis authorized the organization of pilgrimages to Medjugorje, but the Vatican stated that care must be taken "to prevent these pilgrimages from being interpreted as an authentication of known events."

The Vatican emphasized that the *nihil obstat* "does not



Pilgrims gather around a statue of Mary on Apparition Hill in Medjugorje in February 2011.

imply that the alleged supernatural events are declared authentic. Instead, it only highlights that the Holy Spirit is acting fruitfully for the good of the faithful 'in the midst' of this spiritual phenomenon of Medjugorje."

The Vatican document notes "the positive fruits" that have resulted from the Medjugorje spiritual experience, including the many devotees it has inspired worldwide, "abundant conversions, a frequent return to the sacraments...many vocations to priestly, religious, and married life, a deepening of the life of faith, a more intense practice of prayer, many reconciliations between spouses, and the renewal of marriage and family life."

The positive outcomes "linked to this spiritual experience are evident and, over time, they have become distinct from the experience of the alleged visionaries, who are no longer seen as the central mediators of the 'Medjugorje phenomenon.'"

Cardinal Fernández spoke at length about "the messages" that the visionaries allege to have received from the Queen of Peace. He made it clear, as Pope Francis has done as well, that the Blessed Virgin must not be seen as a delivery person and emphasized that discernment is required regarding the alleged messages.

The Vatican note insisted that "the positive assessment that most of the messages of Medjugorje are edifying does not imply a declaration that they have a direct supernatural origin. Consequently, when referring to 'messages' from Our Lady, one should always bear in mind that they are 'alleged messages.'"

Gerard O'Connell, *Vatican correspondent.*



Ségolène Roy

Displaced Christians find a haven as the war between Hezbollah and Israel intensifies

Antelias is a quiet suburb a few miles north of Beirut, home to small manufacturing sites, shops and the Hadeal Center, a social service program primarily assisting Lebanon's Christians.

Hadeal, whose full name is the Humanitarian Association for Development, Empowerment, Assistance and Learning, began a new role after clashes began in South Lebanon between Hezbollah militants and Israel Defense Forces in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on southern Israel by Hamas militants on Oct. 7. The center has been sheltering internally displaced people from villages along the border that has become a battle zone.

As of this August, over 100,000 Lebanese had fled their villages. Many thousands more joined that exodus as the intensity of the conflict between the I.D.F. and Hezbollah sharply escalated in September.

Hanane Semaan comes from Rmeish, one of the largest Christian communities in the south, located just a mile and a half from the border with Israel. She was in Beirut for surgery when the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah started. She came straight to the center with two of her

children. Going home was too dangerous.

"Charbel, my son, is 13. He misses his friends. He always tells me that he wants to go back to his room and play with his friends. Some of them are still living in the south, and others have moved to Beirut."

His education has ground to a halt as the fighting continues. "Putting our children in Beiruti schools is very expensive. We cannot afford it since we are not working anymore," Mrs. Semaan said. "Transportation [to school in Beirut] is also an issue."

So the children play in the shady courtyard at the center of the Hadeal's compound or on its small playground, and parents keep a worried eye on them. They are safe from the shelling but not from their own trauma. "We are afraid for their future. They just missed a full year of school."

Huweida Debl, 56, has been in the center for 10 months, finding her way to Hadeal, like most residents here, about a month after the fighting started. "We thank God that someone saw us and opened their doors to us, because the Lebanese state does not see us," she said.

"We were living in a war zone. We came to Beirut,

Families play in the courtyard at the Hadeal Center north of Beirut, Lebanon.

[where] everyone is living normally. But in the south, we were simply surviving. How long does this have to last? No one knows. It's exhausting," said Mrs. Debl. Like all the displaced people in the center, she is rooted in her village and farming life and struggling to adapt to her altered conditions.

Even quick visits to the south to check on homes and farmland have become out of the question. Mrs. Semaan's eldest son is in the Lebanese Army and persuaded his mother to stay clear of the conflict zone. "He said it is too dangerous," she says.

Mrs. Semaan is the embodiment of Lebanese resilience. "If I didn't have my children, I would have stayed in the south," she said, but "I do not want my children to go through the same things we went through back in 2006." That was the period of the last major conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in southern Lebanon. It displaced more than a million Lebanese over 34 days of fighting.

Her son, now an experienced soldier, was only a child then. "I had to hide his eyes often because the things we saw were terrible. This time around, we decided to come [to the north] and stay as long as it takes for things to calm down, but we don't know when that will happen."

Hadeal's director, Charbel Merhej, said his staff are trying their best, but they know they cannot in the end truly transform the community center into a home. "People here are tired," he says, "and they want to go home."

"Going home" for now remains only a hope for the displaced people at Hadeal, who do not know when or how the war will end or how they will rebuild their damaged or destroyed communities and homes when they get back to them again.

Clotilde Bigot contributes from Beirut.



Ash Wednesday at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Johannesburg, February 2023

South African bishop on ordination: No to women, yes to married men

The Most Rev. Sithembale Sipuka, president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, questioned the ongoing discussion on the ordination of women to the diaconate during an address in August but proposed that the ordination of married men to the priesthood be given serious consideration.

"At this point in the life of the church, what material difference will the ordination of women to diaconate make?" Bishop Sipuka asked. "If women are doing practically everything that a deacon is doing except presiding over marriages, of which there is no abundance...and doing baptism, of which there is [also] not much demand, why clericalize them to do what they can do without being ordained? Why do we want to draw women into clericalism when we are having so many problems with it?"

He made those remarks at the bishops' biannual plenary gathering on Aug. 5. Bishop Sipuka highlighted a fundamental challenge for the church in southern Africa: Many Catholics in southern Africa have restricted access to the Eucharist because of the shortage of priests.

Bishop Sipuka believes that the question of ordaining "matured and proven married men" (also known as *virī probati*—Latin for "tested men") needs to be taken up. He reminded the bishops that at the Synod on the Amazon in October 2019, the "discussions concluded with a vote of 128 in favor and 41 against" a deeper exploration of the potential of *virī probati*.

Bishop Sipuka said that while his call to reopen the discussion on *virī probati* is triggered by the shortage of priestly vocations, "it also seeks to explore possibilities of varied forms of ordained priesthood that would better serve the church today in a mutually complementing manner."

But he was clear that his call for "varied forms of ordained priesthood does not include consideration for women's ordination."

Russell Pollitt, S.J., Johannesburg correspondent.

Cross Catholic Outreach's Home Building Program Restores Hope to Haitian Families

Emma and Thelius earn a small income by farming and selling a portion of their crops at a market in the rural community of Colladère, Haiti. Like most of their neighbors, they don't make enough money to afford a home beyond the dilapidated patchwork shack they lived in for many years.

Raising eight children in that small home was challenging enough, but they also faced additional hardships when it would rain. Water poured in through the roof, ruining their belongings and making them sick.

"Sometimes mud falls on the children's heads," Emma explained at the time. "Sometimes they sleep on the bed with me, and sometimes I can't even walk in the house without getting my feet wet and muddy."

For families with few economic opportunities, the idea of escaping this abject poverty and obtaining a safer, more secure home must seem like an unachievable goal — and it would be in most circumstances — but with God, all things are possible. Through a special outreach of the Kobonal Haiti Mission, Emma's family received a simple but sturdy new home, and many others are being rescued out of terrible living conditions thanks to the gift of safe housing.

"The visionary Catholic leaders at the Kobonal Haiti Mission have launched several life-transforming programs to help the poor in the Central Plateau region of Haiti, but one of their most impactful efforts involves constructing sturdy cement-block houses for the area's poorest families," said Michele Sagarino, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, a Vatican-recognized ministry involved in those projects. "Our U.S. donors have been contributing to the mission's ministries for years, and there is a growing interest in expanding its housing program because so many families still need our help."

The idea of funding a house for a needy family may initially seem daunting to some donors, but Sagarino said those concerns disappear when they learn more about the outreach.

"It may seem hard to believe, but a contribution of \$13,141 can bless a family in Haiti with a new, safe home," she explained. "That gift will build a four-room concrete block house that includes a solid cement foundation, a galvanized steel roof, a solar light system for indoor electricity and an outdoor latrine. Once they hear that, some of our donors sponsor an entire house. Others



Before and after photos of families benefiting from the mission's home-building project are dramatic and clearly reveal why providing safe shelter is such a vital part of Cross Catholic Outreach's ministry work. The Nicolas family was provided with one of these houses last year, and the gift has changed their lives. Cross Catholic Outreach is confident U.S. Catholics will help their ministry continue this effort so many other Haitian families can escape extreme poverty and enjoy a brighter future.



make a partial gift, and we combine those to achieve the same result. Their generosity has enabled us to build thousands of homes for the poor in recent years."

Sagarino also pointed out that the Kobonal Haiti Mission involves the benefiting families in the process as much as possible, because they view the program as a "hand up" rather than a handout. Family members help with unskilled labor such as clearing the land, helping move construction materials, mixing cement and painting.

Of course, the experience produces important spiritual blessings as well. "These new homes are a life-transforming blessing, and we make it clear they are a

gift from God," Sagarino said. "That's our ultimate goal. We want to bless people materially and spiritually — to restore their hope and strengthen their faith."

Readers interested in supporting Cross Catholic Outreach's housing programs and its other outreaches to the poor can contribute through the ministry brochure inserted in this issue or send tax-deductible gifts to: Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC04026, PO Box 97168, Washington DC 20090-7168. The ministry has a special need for partners willing to make gifts on a monthly basis. Use the inserted brochure to become a Mission Partner.

Ministry Seeks Support From U.S. Catholics To Build Homes for Poor Families in Developing Countries

Your rusty sheet metal roof leaks like a sieve when it rains. Your plank-and-mud walls have begun to crumble around you. Your fabric curtain “door” provides no security from intruders, and your children have to place mats on the dirt floor to sleep at night. You have no running water, no electricity and no indoor plumbing for sanitation.

Who among us would even call a place like that a home?

“At best, the makeshift houses you find in the world’s poorest communities are the simplest form of shelter,” said Michele Sagarino, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, one of the world’s leading Catholic relief and development ministries with an expanding program for providing improved housing for the poor. “Until you see one of those fragile little houses firsthand, it’s hard to imagine how a couple could live there — or raise their children there. But the sad truth is that millions of people in Haiti have been living like that for generations because there hasn’t been an alternative. They grew up living in those conditions, and without some kind of intervention, their children will too. That’s why our ministry has made it a priority to provide families with safe, sturdy housing. It’s a way to break that terrible cycle of poverty, improve lives and change things for future generations.”

According to Sagarino, Cross Catholic Outreach achieves this objective by partnering with local Catholic leaders, mobilizing community participation in its home-building projects, and utilizing the support of compassionate Catholics in the United States. Donations made by those compassionate Catholics enable Church leaders to build quality cement-block homes for those who need them most.

According to Sagarino, Cross Catholic Outreach’s current work includes extensive home-building projects in central and southern Haiti. That work is underway in and around Kobonal (See the related story on the opposite page) and in the city of Jérémie.

These efforts are supported by U.S. Catholics, many of whom have worked with the ministry for years to restore hope in deeply impoverished communities.

“When I ask those men and women why they specifically want to provide the poor with sturdier, more dignified homes, some say it is because they feel God has blessed their lives and they want to give back in a

way that will make a significant impact,” Sagarino said. “Others say they do it because they understand how important a home is to creating stability and security for a family — and that’s very true. Once people have a safe place to call home, they are able to focus on improving their lives in other ways. They can use their resources to educate their children, take care of medical needs and provide more nutritious meals. A safe, reliable house offers more than improved shelter. It provides a foundation for building a better life.”

Sagarino, who has been involved in humanitarian outreaches for more than two decades, considers providing better housing for children and the frail elderly one of the highest priorities, and the Catholic ministries she partners with in the developing world agree.

“They follow the model Jesus Christ set for us,” she explained. “He sought out the weak, the isolated, the forgotten and the destitute. He addressed their urgent needs and gave them hope. That is what our partners in Haiti, Guatemala and other countries are doing — and it’s what our generous Catholic donors in the U.S. also want to accomplish with their charitable giving. They want to help the poorest of the poor in Christ’s name and for his glory.”

The fact that Cross Catholic Outreach works through existing Catholic ministries in these countries where it serves has two purposes, according to Sagarino. It properly respects the role of the local Catholic leaders and it allows more of a donor’s gift to be used directly on home construction.

“The local Catholic ministries have the buildings and staff in place to manage the process, so our donors’ contributions can be used to buy the raw materials needed and to hire local workers to do the actual construction. It’s an approach that allows us



Some families live in old, one-room stone or wood houses, but these are typically crumbling with age, have leaky roofs and include interior kitchens that fill the small space with smoke when meals are prepared.

to do more with less, and it also strengthens the local Church.”

While providing safe housing serves an obvious purpose by improving a poor family’s living conditions, Sagarino said the gift actually has a much greater impact than most people realize.

“When people move into a sturdy home, their hope is restored. They feel they can finally escape generations of poverty and provide a better life for their children,” she said. “I see that when I visit villages transformed by a major housing project. Families see the change as an answer to prayer and they praise God for the mercy he has shown them.”

How to Help

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach’s effort to help the poor worldwide, use the postage-paid brochure inserted in this newspaper, scan the QR code, or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC04026, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The brochure also includes instructions on becoming a Mission Partner and making a regular monthly donation to this cause.

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



GROUNDHOG DAY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

The United
States will
always be
divided—
and that's
OK

By John W. Miller





As our divided country was preparing for a tense election on Tuesday, Nov. 5, I went looking for American unity. Where I live, in Pittsburgh, we have a good example of apolitical convergence in nearby Punxsutawney, Pa., in the form of a spring ritual where a groundhog announces, in “groundhogese,” how much longer winter will last.

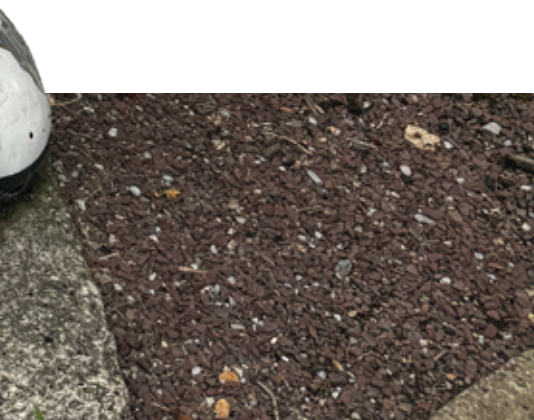
With Pennsylvania widely considered the most crucial of the seven 2024 swing states (the others being Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina and Wisconsin) and America feeling stuck in a winter of discord haunted by the specter of political violence, I decided to report on the election—the choice between Vice President Kamala Harris and former president Donald J. Trump—and the state of the country, from Punxsutawney. In 2020, for this magazine, I drove through five swing states in five days and discovered that support for Joe Biden, especially among left-wing college students, was higher than I expected. In 2024, unity, and the threat of disunity, has felt like the pressing issue.

Punxsutawney is a town of 5,600 people located an hour and a half northeast of Pittsburgh in the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania, still a land of Amish horse carts, coal mines and Steelers flags. The town was founded in 1850 on land occupied by the Lenape tribe. Timber operations and coal mining fueled its growth. In 1887, a group of German immigrants wanting to recreate a tradition of rural Germany associated with a Christian holiday—Candlemas, the 40th day of Christmas—went hunting for a badger. They settled for a groundhog, and a tradition was born. Other towns have similar celebrations, but none as famous as Punxsutawney’s.

That tradition is commemorated in the classic 1993 movie “Groundhog Day,” starring Bill Murray, which has become treasured by serious thinkers as an allegory for the pursuit of virtue. Its story feels relevant to the 2024 election and the Trump era in other ways. Mr. Murray plays Phil Connors, an urbane weatherman who despises the “hicks” of small-town America. He can’t wait to get home to Pittsburgh and move on with his career. And what does a third Donald Trump candidacy feel like if not an endless time loop? But more about that in a minute.

What Still Unites Us?

Like other western Pennsylvania industrial towns, Punxsutawney has struggled to find its footing in the last half-century, losing jobs and population, which was once around 10,000. Young people are leaving. The coal industry has shriveled. The median household income is now around \$40,000 a year, below the U.S. median of around \$75,000 a year. It’s the kind of Rust Belt place that has





Punxsutawney Mayor Rich Alexander is a Republican who is not a fan of President Donald Trump. "I've never voted straight ticket in my life," he said.

backed President Trump, with 68 percent of its population supporting him in 2020, versus 31 percent for Joe Biden. But the town is also constantly evolving. In 2020, despite threats of violence, it held racial justice marches as part of the Black Lives Matter protests.

As in the rest of the United States, people squabble daily about national politics. On my first trip, one of the first things I saw was a massive banner hanging from the side of a used book store. It said: TRUMPSUTAWNEY. GIVE ME FREEDOM OR GIVE ME DEATH.

"Oh, that? I don't like it, but we can't take it down, it's private property," said Rich Alexander, the town's 77-year-old Republican mayor, when I asked him about the sign. "And I don't really like him," Mr. Alexander said, referring to Mr. Trump. "The exception was when he got shot because that was the only time he showed humility, but then he started opening his mouth again." Mr. Alexander bemoaned the country's "lack of decency." He added, "I've never voted straight ticket in my life."

On one trip, I visited both major political party head-

quarters to ask party leaders and campaign volunteers what they thought they still had in common with people on the other side. "Less and less. It's a crisis," said LuAnn Grube, president of the Jefferson County Republicans. "I have a good friend now who refuses to talk to me." Still, she added, her side really needed to win this election. "A lot needs to happen to get our quality of life back," she said. "That's critical."

I looked around the room and invited other local Republicans to join in about what still unites Americans. What about the Oscars? I asked. Nope. Taylor Swift? People laughed. The N.B.A.? Nope. The N.F.L.? "Well, no, because of the players kneeling," said Ms. Grube. "But maybe that's changed." She looked around the room. People nodded. Football is still a religion in western Pennsylvania.

Down the street, at the Democratic Party headquarters, John Huot, chair of the Jefferson County Democrats, said that what Americans still agreed on was "that people should have good jobs and good communities. The question is how do you get there." As Mr. Huot walked me out the door of



Punxsutawney is a town of 5,600 people located an hour and a half northeast of Pittsburgh in the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania.

the headquarters, a woman driving by honked her horn, stuck a fist out the window and yelled: “Trump!”

So this is not a rose-colored, glass-half-full account of a small American town. There is real tension in Punxsutawney. At a recent Catholic Mass he attended, said Mr. Huot, the priest asked somebody in the pews to remove a loud Trump shirt.

America, like any Sunday Mass congregation, is made up of people who are unlike one another. Our country is like every human society, except—because of our story of European colonization, African enslavement and modern immigration—more fractured, more racially diverse and more extreme in cultural differences. An Amish farm is not a San Francisco gay bar is not a Polish Catholic church in Chicago.

“Division—the possibility that it might all go to pieces—is a hidden thread throughout our entire history,” wrote Richard Kreitner in his 2020 book *Break It Up*, “from the colonial era to the early republic and the Civil War and beyond, through the fabled American Century and up to our own volatile moment.”

Modern polarization has been exacerbated by the two-party system. Belonging to one of the two main political parties is part of a person’s identity. It’s human nature to pick a side—and an enemy. “People are nice here, until you start talking about politics,” said a man at the Punxsutawney Democratic Party headquarters, who would give his name only as Barry. Everybody I talked to said they struggled to discuss politics. “They told us when we were young

never to talk religion or politics,” said Doug Blose, a Republican school board member. “But maybe if we had learned how to do that, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

The mess, as 2024 election day approached, was a state of tension bad enough that Matthew Triponey, editor of *The Punxsutawney Spirit*, the local paper, declined to share any observations about politics or the town’s economy. He is tired of angry phone calls whenever he or the paper sticks its neck out on important issues.

Winter in America

There is one topic that Mr. Blose, Mr. Triponey and everybody else in Punxsutawney are happy to discuss. That is, of course, the critter that town elders in top hats pull from a log every Feb. 2 to ask about the end of winter. A group of handlers in top hats known as the Inner Circle listen to the animal and “translate” what he’s saying for the other humans. If the groundhog, named Punxsutawney Phil, sees his shadow, America is in for six more weeks of winter.

The event draws 40,000 tourists a year, making it an important source of tourism, and revenue, for the town. There are statues of groundhogs scattered throughout the streets. There’s an actual groundhog in a cage attached to the municipal building that houses the police, fire department, library and mayor’s office. “The groundhog is a good metaphor for America, because it symbolizes hope,” said Nancy Anthony, who curates the Punxsutawney Historical and Genealogical Museum. “And it’s a good metaphor for this town, because it feels like the same day every day here,” said another curator,



Americans agree they “should have good jobs and good communities,” said John Huot, chair of the Jefferson County Democrats. “The question is how do you get there.”

Laura Taladay, referring to the town’s sleepiness.

Except on Groundhog Day, when nobody is a Republican or Democrat. Josh Shapiro, Pennsylvania’s Democratic governor, appeared at Groundhog Day in 2024 and was welcomed by the town’s leaders and the organizers of the celebration, all Republicans. “Punxsutawney is the center of the universe right now,” Mr. Shapiro said.

It’s moments like that that make unity feel possible and fuel its myth. Uniting the original 13 states was considered an achievement worthy of putting the word *United* in the name of the country itself. Lincoln fought a Civil War to unite America. In 2004, in the Democratic National Convention speech that would propel him to the presidency, Barack Obama thundered, “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America—there’s the United States of America.”

Myths are hard to give up. According to the legend of Punxsutawney, its groundhog is in fact 138 years old, thanks to a magic elixir that extends its life every year. On Sept. 14 this year, in a ceremony, Punxsutawney Phil took six sips of the elixir. I asked Mr. Alexander, the town’s Republican mayor, for comment on the groundhog’s longevity. “Let’s just say that the average lifespan of a groundhog is five to seven years,” he said.

In both America and the church, the challenge is to

abandon the myth that unity means constant harmony and agreement, and to embrace the reality of living with people who are different. But unity does mean, as shown by the good Samaritan in the Gospel, that it is important to love people who are not like us, even when it is inconvenient.

In many ways, this becomes easier on a smaller scale, as we get to know our neighbors. The Catholic principle of subsidiarity allows and encourages us to work out our problems on the local level. The challenge in modern politics is that the decline of local newspapers and other forms of local storytelling has combined with an explosion of online media that purports to connect the entire country but often simply alienates us from one another.

Like other local newspapers all over the United States, The Punxsutawney Spirit is a shadow of its former self. Americans end up arguing about Mr. Trump because that is what they see presented as “news” on their phones every day and because they often don’t get sufficient context for local issues from their local news sources. Many of us don’t see local journalism being practiced every day in our backyards, or local reporters displaying journalistic principles.

The split between national and local narratives played out dramatically in September. In another Rust Belt town, Springfield, Ohio, an influx of immigrants needed to fill jobs at a factory has further exposed a national divide over



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immigration. Mr. Trump and his running mate, JD Vance, have claimed that the immigrants have overwhelmed the town, even eating people’s pets. “In Springfield, Ohio, they’re eating the dogs,” Mr. Trump thundered during the presidential debate on Sept. 10.

The last allegation was disproven. It turned out that Anna Kilgore, a woman who had filed a police report about a missing cat and was one of the sources of the Trump-Vance claim, had apologized to her Haitian neighbors after the cat was found in her basement. We treat each other better, face to face, at the local level.

The irony is that immigration is helpful in places with declining populations, like Springfield and Punxsutawney, which has not had a big influx of immigrants. Death threats against local institutions in Springfield prompted Mayor Rob Rue, a Republican, to criticize national politicians.

“When a federal politician has the stage, and they don’t take the opportunity to build up the community, instead of inadvertently not understanding what their words are, what they’re going to do to the community, it can really hurt the community like it’s hurting ours,” he said. “We’ve been punched in a way we should not have been punched.”

Put in theological terms, “the thing that unites people is the very local,” said Jason King, a theologian and director of the Center for Catholic Studies at St. Mary’s University

in San Antonio, Tex. “When we get very local, that’s where the connections are. The youth soccer. Wherever two or three are gathered in my name.” As Mr. Blose, the Republican school board member in Punxsutawney put it, “if you want to fix family, fix yourselves, and if you want to fix your country, fix your community.”

It will never be perfect. Unity, rather than a destination, “is a journey,” said Pope Francis in a 2016 speech. “Unity as a journey requires patient waiting, tenaciousness, effort and commitment. It does not annul conflicts and does not cancel out disagreement; on the contrary, at times it can mean exposure to the risk of new misunderstandings.” Or as William Portier, a theology professor at the University of Dayton, put it to me, “Unity is not about us all being the same, because we’re clearly not.”

That’s the message of “Groundhog Day,” which portrays Punxsutawney but was shot in Woodstock, Ill., because producers thought it looked more like a classic American small town. Phil Connors, the weatherman played by Bill Murray, gets stuck living the same day over and over. He finds redemption and escapes the time loop only when he perfects his heart through daily acts of kindness.

“The movie is a return to classical virtue,” said Michael Foley, a professor of patristics at Baylor University who has lectured about the film. “It’s a return to a Christian Aris-



Sixty-eight percent of voters in Punxsutawney, Pa., chose President Donald Trump in 2020.

totelian tradition. What is the good life? It's not manipulation. It's not political activism. It's cultivating the soul." It is only when Phil "authentically embraces virtue for its own sake" that he is redeemed.

Dr. Foley pointed to a scene where Phil encounters a young couple getting married. Their ideal honeymoon is a trip to the monster-truck rally in Pittsburgh. That's not what he would want. But it is what they want. So he gets them tickets to the rally. In a second plotline filled with meaning, Phil tries to save a homeless man who keeps dying. "He's developed a genuine compassion for the man," said Dr. Foley. But "his growth is realizing he can't save the old man."

A More Complicated Reality

There is an America that cannot be saved. Between World War II, which ended in 1945, and Sept. 11, 2001, the United States was uniquely positioned to feel united. The rest of the world lay in ruins in the late 1940s and '50s, while the United States was intact and its economy primed for a boom. We had an enemy in the Soviet Union. There was farmland to build suburbs in, and a baby boom to sell houses for. Technology had not yet made it possible for Americans to sort themselves into likeminded camps. If we wanted to see people, we had to physically go to the store or church or another place filled with people unlike us.

To escape the time loop, we need to grieve this America and accept a more complicated reality. Christianity, as

a wise priest told me a long time ago, is the anti-tragic religion. Humans do not need to go around in circles making the same mistake over and over again. Eventually, there will be an election without a Trump, Clinton or Biden. We will get a chance to do things differently. We can hope for resurrection.

On my first trip to Punxsutawney, I met 22-year-old Carter Kuntz. He was volunteering at the local used bookstore that day. We got coffee at McDonald's, ordered through a touchscreen. For Mr. Kuntz, how to define himself as an American is difficult. His grandfather was killed fighting in the Vietnam War, so he is much more cynical about the military than older men in his family are. His town is much poorer than it was in the 1960s and '70s.

We all have different things that make us feel American. I grew up in Europe during the Cold War and can get weepy thinking about great American journalism and the might of the First Amendment. Mr. Kuntz's generation, which grew up in a world with far fewer daily newspapers, has a different assessment of America than I do at the age of 47. Only 42 percent of Americans under 50 say it is still possible to achieve the American dream, compared with 65 percent of Americans over 50, according to a 2024 Pew Research study. One of the most striking divisions, according to the Pew study, concerns Americans' attitudes toward the military. Americans under 30 were the only group with a more negative view of the military: 53 percent of this



“The poverty around here makes people more cynical and more pessimistic,” said 22-year-old Carter Kuntz.

group had a negative view, and only 43 percent had a positive view. By comparison, 70 percent of Americans over 50 had a positive view, and only 26 percent had a negative view.

There is a new generation that will have to figure out what it means to be American. They will include people like Mr. Kuntz, who grew up in a poor place where the notion of an American dream is laughable to a lot of people. “The poverty around here makes people more cynical and more pessimistic,” Mr. Kuntz told me over coffee. “What made me less patriotic growing up was that my grandfather was killed in Vietnam.” He plans to leave town when he graduates from college next year from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Another young person who left is 25-year-old Chris Dyson, who organized the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. “There wasn’t much opportunity for me there,” said Mr. Dyson, who is Black and now lives in Philadelphia. “But there is a sense of community in Punxsutawney that’s not as easy to find where I live now.”

For young people, the world is changing quickly. For some, politics don’t feel as weighty as they do for adults. When Mr. Trump won in 2016, Mr. Kuntz recalled, “kids in high school were singing the Canadian national anthem.” I asked him if he thought there might be a violent reaction this year if Mr. Trump loses. “Maybe in the South, people might get physically pissed, but here people just talk about it,” he said.

Americans are not going to unite over politics any time soon, if ever. They will keep shouting at one another as long as there is a United States. One Democratic donor I talked to said the key to winning elections was finding the things that broad swaths of Americans agree on, and building a campaign around those, while making an enemy out of the minority who disagree.

Public opinion experts say that surveys reveal a large number of topics Americans do agree on. “People are frustrated about the name-calling, even if they laugh when their team is doing it,” said Meg Bostrom, founder of Topos, a public opinion polling firm. She listed other things Americans agree on: “The cost of housing, corporate monopolies, elites have too much power. Americans are united in their distrust of banks. According to Pew, only 38 percent of both Republicans and Democrats view banks positively. Americans are united in their attitudes toward small businesses: 88 percent of Democrats and 87 percent of Republicans have a positive view of small businesses.

One of “Groundhog Day”’s deepest messages, said Michael Foley, the Baylor theologian, is that Phil Connors “realizes that there’s no such thing as political utopia.” There’s a city of man “and a city of God,” said Dr. Foley. “The city of man is never going to be perfect.”

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CONTEMPLATIVE CARETAKING

What mothers can learn from monastic life

By Laura Loker

It is the spring of 2009, and I am a senior in high school when my religion teacher assigns a “marriage” project. Over the next several weeks, in the name of exposure to real-world finances, I suppose, my classmates and I plan pretend weddings and balance mock household budgets.

Even more absurd than pricing reception venues as a teenager, however, are our flour babies.

Our flour babies, the fruit of our hypothetical marriages, are actual bags of flour that we must carry with us everywhere, as though they were our children. If they break, our teacher warns, we fail the project. The boys carry them under their arms like footballs. We girls dress them in newborn onesies for extra protection, or maybe to indulge our burgeoning maternal instincts.

It was my first foray into mother-

hood, and the last time I’d ever get a grade for it.

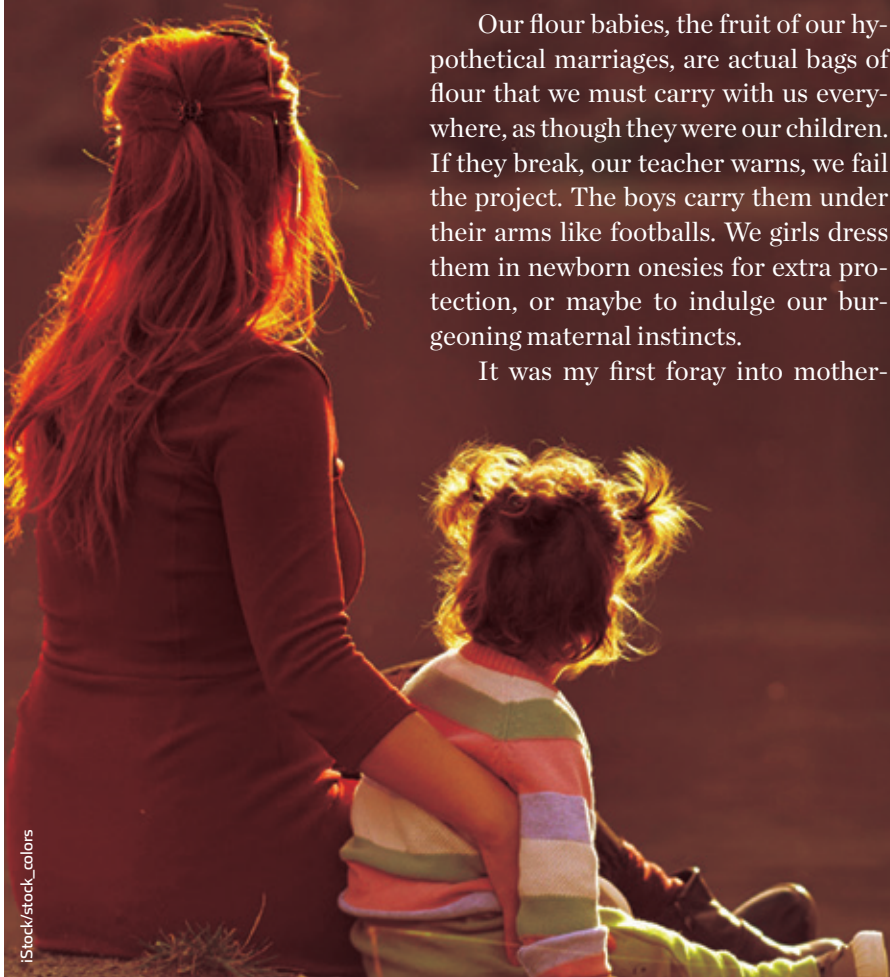
Now, eight years later, I have quit my job to take care of my real baby boy, and I would really love a grade on how I’m doing. Not only are my postpartum hormones causing me to feel as insecure and emotional as my adolescent self, I am realizing that my entire life until this point was oriented toward clear ends. First grades, then success at work. I ran marathons in my free time. Productivity was my North Star, and without it—and, with a needy newborn, I am very much without it—I am lost.

Meanwhile, my infant seems to neither need nor appreciate my modest collection of academic, professional and athletic achievements.

I am hardly the first mother to struggle with the transition from working professionally to caretaking at home. Paula Henry, a mom of two now-teenagers, has a Ph.D. in hearing sciences. She quit her high-paying job as a research audiologist when her children were 8 and 6, she said, and she found the transition challenging.

“I felt like my identity was tied to my career,” Ms. Henry told me. “I didn’t know how to introduce myself without having one.”

Indeed, the scope of full-time caretaking roles can be difficult to describe, although some have tried to quantify it. Every year Salary.com updates its es-



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timate of what stay-at-home mothers' combined tasks would earn in the current market, recently as much as \$184,000 per year (you can calculate your own based on your number of children, ZIP code and typical weekly tasks).

Yet the question of working versus staying home with children does not lend itself to the neat comparison such figures might suggest.

"It's a different kind of hard," Shae Gaier told me over the phone, her toddler son audible in the background as we talked. Ms. Gaier scaled back her work as a physical therapy assistant to one day a week when her son was an infant.

"When I'm in patient care, I have that instant gratification where patients are, within 30 minutes, like, 'Oh my gosh, I can move my leg. I feel so much better.' I don't get a lot of that at home," she continued. "The reward is much delayed."

Ms. Gaier, who likes to cook, mentioned that she does feel the reward of her efforts when her family sits together around the dinner table at the end of a long day. But "delayed" gratification is an understatement if the ultimate goal of parenting is to guide a child to become a thriving, faithful adult. Even many of the little moments of satisfaction along the way are often fleeting. A happy, snuggly toddler in one moment can be a screaming mess 10 minutes later, just as dirty dishes seem to reappear on the kitchen table as soon as the sink is finally empty.

St. Anthony of Egypt, one of the Desert Fathers, is depicted in this 1519 engraving by Albrecht Dürer.



istock/duncan1890/America



I sometimes worry that this season is happening at the expense of my sense of self.

My son learns to crawl and babble, and even as he is growing and changing, I continue to struggle to make sense of our daily life. The problem is not one of purpose or conviction: He needs care, and I want to care for him. It is important work, I know this, and furthermore it is a privilege to be able to stretch our finances so I can be at home.

But as a new mom, I sometimes worry that this season, for all its tender joys, is happening at the expense of my sense of self. Looking to my peers does not help. Most of them are working, attending graduate school or traveling the world, pursuits that make for interesting conversation at social gatherings. When I tell other people about my baby—what a marvel he is!—I search their faces for signs of boredom, signs that I’ve retreated so far into our little world that I’ve forgotten how to connect with the one outside.

If I’m going to thrive as a mother, I realize, I need a different way to understand my vocation, a set of values other than the ones I’ve absorbed from a society that seems to value only academic or professional accomplishments.

Today, after several years—and two more children—I am finding my footing. And the answer, which continues to unfold with prayer, reading and taking care of our growing family, comes from an unlikely place: contemplative religious life.

Tracing the history from the hermits and ascetics of the early church to the formation of orders like the Carmelites and the Benedictines, I notice how the men and women who live the contemplative life are able to eschew the worldly success to which I continue to gravitate. The very features of my day-to-day life that can demoralize me—the solitude, the repetitive and mundane tasks—are essential to theirs.

These days, my interest is drawn to the contemplative life more than the corporate world. I find myself asking: What might moms like me have to learn from the men and women who dedicate their lives to prayer?

A Different Rule of Life

In a historical context, the experience of 21st-century mothers is unusually isolated. Many of us live far away from family and friends, or simply not close enough for

the types of spontaneous visits or convenient babysitting opportunities that help to keep connections strong. Public communal spaces outside of home and work, often called “third” spaces, are dwindling. This means that for many mothers, a significant portion of the day is spent solely in the company of our children.

“Being at home can be incredibly lonely, especially when you don’t have family in the area,” Ms. Henry told me. “You crave adult conversation.”

Apart from the absence of companionship, solitude also has a way of exacerbating our fears, insecurities and general restlessness, all of which can be difficult to process—and often are things we intentionally avoid dealing with—amid the busyness of our modern lives.

The quiet that we find in the early years of motherhood is not always, or even usually, literal quiet. The baby is crying; the toddler’s thumping footsteps are audible even to our next-door neighbors. But the lack of the mental stimulation of school or professional work is a silence of its own. My thoughts are free to wander, and they do.

Yet those things that cause us some discomfort—that we even habitually avoid—are precisely what the Desert Fathers sought. Beginning in the third century, these early monastics left the comforts of the world behind to pursue austere lives of prayer (most notably in the Scetes Desert in Egypt). Solitude and silence were central to their spiritual ascent.

“Solitude is not simply a means to an end. Solitude is its own end,” Henri Nouwen writes in *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. “It is the place where Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of this world.”

The Desert Mothers and Fathers also prioritized routine manual labor. But while I sometimes dread the cleaning, cooking and other repetitive manual tasks of my daily life, such repetition is a valued part of the rule of a contemplative religious life. Indeed, most contemplative orders practice manual labor in service of the community’s needs and prayer. “Understand that, if your task is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans, helping you in all things spiritual and temporal,” writes St. Teresa of Ávila, a Carmelite and doctor of the church, in her *Book of the Foundations* (1610).

The author and poet Kathleen Norris has written at length about her attraction to the lives and spirituality of Benedictine monks. I asked her what she might say to moms like me, who worry that the repetitive and mundane nature of their lives represents a regression from who they were before children.

Repetition, Ms. Norris wrote to me, is “a fact of life.”

“It does seem to intensify in everyday domestic tasks,

and especially motherhood,” she added. “But this is another area in which I’ve learned much from the Benedictines. Why repeat the Psalms, every day, all day, and when you finish all 150 of them, start again? Why say the Lord’s Prayer together every day, three times a day?”

Indeed, Ms. Norris compares our everyday tasks to liturgies in her book *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and “Women’s Work.”* “Like liturgy, the work of cleaning draws much of its meaning and value from repetition, from the fact that it is never completed, but only set aside until the next day,” she writes. “Both liturgy and what is euphemistically called ‘domestic’ work also have an intense relation with the present moment.”

The present moment is where we find God, who is always waiting for us there—or, rather, here. And I find it hard to imagine better teachers of living in the present than children, whose rootedness in the physical, the immediate, alternates between charming and frustrating. The maintenance of our adult lives, which we often complete without thinking—eating, bathing, sleeping—are, for them, insurmountable without help.

And so we rock the baby, we spoon-feed bites of oatmeal, we change diapers. These make few demands on the education and professional skills our society prizes, but they offer us something else instead: the opportunity for prayer, interior stillness, even simply the use of our imaginations, while reminding us that God gave us souls and bodies. We are meeting a human need in a particular moment, and there is real value in that.

Ms. Gaier told me that some of these daily tasks have in fact become much-needed opportunities for prayer for her, since her son is such an early riser that she can no longer pray by herself in the morning. “I’m doing laundry already, so I might as well turn it into some quiet time,” she explained.

A parent’s days are not nearly as regimented as a cloistered nun’s, but they contain some similar elements: the relative separation from the world, the inner quiet, the manual labor. Maybe what God intends for me and other mothers in this season is not merely some sacrificial pause on what we consider our “real” lives, but rather greater union with him in the prayer and humility afforded by the sacred “now.”

“I’ve often felt that the parents of young children are some of the most accomplished ascetics I know,” reflected Ms. Norris.

Certainly we are in good company among the church’s contemplative saints. More importantly, we are in divine company. St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, a Carmelite canonized by Pope Francis in 2016, often reminded her friends and family that—even amid their lives in the world—they



Courtesy of Shae Gaier

Shae Gaier in January 2023, with her 2-week-old son

needed only to descend into the “cell” within their hearts to be with God.

As she wrote to her mother, “At every moment of the day and night the three Divine persons are living within you.”

An Ancient Temptation

Of course, our habits matter. Many of us—myself included—have become so attached to our devices that we rarely miss an opportunity to check in with the digital world, driven no doubt in part by the very isolation we are examining.

Through his first six months, my firstborn is hungrier far more often than everyone says is typical for an infant his age, and we spend hours upon hours nursing. Sometimes I watch TV while feeding him; more often, I scroll through my Instagram feed. I’ve recently followed some other Catholic moms, desperate for a sense of kinship as I go about my quiet days, but it isn’t helping.

If anything, social media causes more restlessness than before. I know that this little apartment is where God has asked me to be, but there are moments when I would rather be almost anywhere else, doing almost anything else. My phone makes it easy to imagine that this is so: Picture after picture shows me all the ways I could be spending my life, from packing our family into a camper van for a year of cross-country travel to selling beauty products online. And the minutes tick slowly by.

Here again we can look to the early monastics. They did not have smartphones, but they did have a keen understanding of human nature and the perils of their way of life.

Those things that cause us some discomfort are precisely what the Desert Fathers sought.

One is especially relevant today: the temptation of acedia.

Acedia, often called the “noonday demon” for its propensity to strike in the middle of the day, means “losing heart for your job,” said Robin Darling Young, a professor of church history at the Catholic University of America and an expert on monasticism.

“You get bored with what you’re doing,” as Dr. Darling Young described it. “You can’t read. You fall asleep. You go and look out the window and you see whether you can see anybody to talk to.”

Or, perhaps, you reach for your phone and see if anyone has texted you or posted anything interesting lately.

Acedia is a distaste for the spiritual good to which God is calling us, and furthermore an indifference to that distaste. And if it “arises out of repetition and loneliness,” as Dr. Darling Young explained, then we mothers—like the monks—are at particular risk of its perils.

It is important to note that acedia is a spiritual problem, distinct from depression and other mental illnesses requiring mental health care. Furthermore, while our emotional state can sometimes rightly point to where our lives need a change, acedia afflicts us when we are exactly where we ought to be.

So it is on my living room couch with my firstborn. At the time, I am not familiar with the word acedia—it has, after all, been largely forgotten to the modern Christian lexicon—and I find myself unable to explain the torpor that defines my long afternoons.

When I do read about acedia, years later, it is like turning a flashlight to some of the darker corners of my heart. By now it’s 2021, I’m pregnant with our third baby, and I’ve recently been laid off from a part-time job that I loved. The insecurities and restlessness I experienced as a new mom have come rushing back, and I realize that my sense of self has been, once again, depending on my job title and what I can produce.

Fortunately, the mere recognition of acedia ignites in me a desire to be rid of it, itself a step in the right direction. I tear through several books about it, which tell me to stay the course, to stick to my responsibilities. The Desert Fathers have their own remedies, prayer and manual work



The author with her eldest child in 2018

among them.

This time, I remove all my social media apps from my phone, and I do my best to resist fleeing the tedium. Over time, something miraculous happens: A quiet calm begins to take root. I begin to relish the extra time to think, to pray. More and more it feels possible to descend into my heart during the day, where—as St. Elizabeth of the Trinity writes—God resides. I am startled one day to notice that I am happy most of the time. Actually, truly happy, even when I’m wiping down the kitchen table or driving to the pediatrician’s office.

Mark Thibodeaux, S.J., is the author of *Armchair Mystic: How Contemplative Prayer Can Lead You Closer to God*. I asked him how we might live contemplatively—he defines contemplation as “sitting in stillness”—outside of a dedicated prayer time.

“I think the way to be contemplative here today is to just be fully present to the very ordinary task that God is asking you to do at the moment,” he reflected.

A Specific Call

It is difficult to discuss vocations without generalizing them. Vocations are, after all, individual calls, even if we sort them into broader categories. Even the early monastics, whom I admit to picturing as eccentric hermits subsisting on locusts and honey like John the Baptist, lived in a variety of ways.

“There was no one set way to be a solitary,” Dr. Darling Young clarified, noting that some lived alone, others more

communally, and that their lives varied quite a bit across cultures, languages and regions. Furthermore, most had at least some contact with the outside world, engaging in work and commercial transactions as needed to support themselves. Today's contemplative religious orders likewise differ from one another, and even from community to community within the same order.

Neither is there one set way to be a mother. So to compare motherhood to contemplative religious life is to risk idealizing, or at least simplifying, one or both vocations. The right balance of professional work and caretaking, as well as how and when we meet God during the day, is ours to discern as individuals (perhaps aided by some trial and error).

Still, to the extent that we find ourselves steeped in diapers and dishes—whether from dawn to dusk, or before and after a busy day at the office, or some combination thereof—we may find interior peace, if not literal silence, in recognizing that such tasks do not diminish us. Perhaps finding that inner stillness, in the measure that our circumstances permit, addresses the compulsion to achieve that can make the transition to motherhood so rocky.

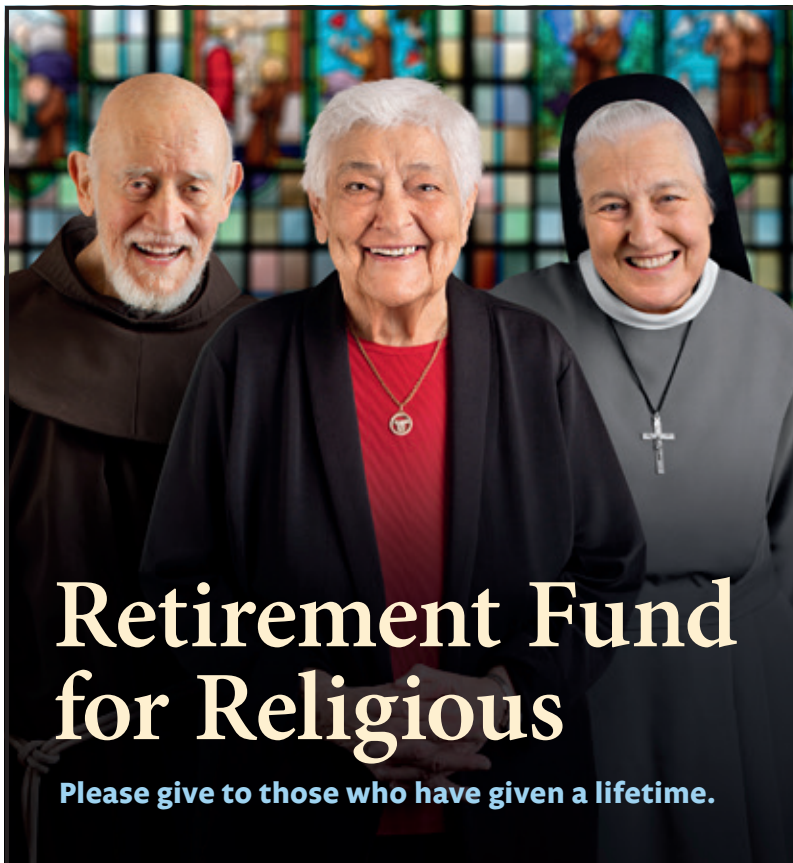
Our circumstances will, of course, change. Ms. Henry is herself in a different season from when she first quit her

job. Now that her children are in high school and college, she said, she has more time for personal prayer during the day and participates in a weekly Bible study. When we spoke, she was planning to join the Eucharistic procession to the National Eucharistic Congress as it passed through her state.

As my children get older—my firstborn, that sweet baby boy, is now 7—my daily life gets busier and louder. Maybe one day I'll feel drawn to a different way to pray (just as some mothers may balk at the suggestion that any quiet reflection is possible with children around). But that's for another season to figure out.

As Father Thibodeaux put it, "I really believe strongly that we all need to give each other permission to let the prayer life fit the vocation."

Laura Loker is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.



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Collaboration and Compassion

What is the role of the bishop in a synodal church?

By W. Shawn McKnight

Last June, I invited some young adult Catholics to my residence one evening for a discussion about the future of our parishes, our diocese and our church. They were in their 20s and 30s. Some were married, some still single. A few had young children at their homes here in Jefferson City, Mo., where they belonged to our cathedral parish.

At the time, we were beginning a small group discernment process created by our chancery staff. The process was designed to work across four sessions, guiding the faithful of our diocese to explore how the structures of our church can support their parishes as they seek to become thriving centers of charity and mercy—as revealed by Jesus in his teaching on the Beatitudes.

The group gathered at my home was a sort of test; I

wanted to see for myself how these discussions might go before we rolled out this project across our diocese.

My initial impression sitting among these young Catholics was one of feeling grounded as a bishop (while at the same time feeling older than I've ever felt!). As I listened to their thoughts, it was clear to me that there are many talented, capable and energetic young adults among us who are eager to use their gifts to help in the mission of their parishes.

Dishearteningly, however, these young people gathered with me said that they struggle to find entry into our parish cultures, which are often dominated by long-serving leaders—the trusted volunteers whom we often see as the backbone of our parishes. After discussion, they shared with me a simple proposal: Perhaps parishes could institute term limits for ministry leadership, not for mere replacement but to integrate better the old and the new.

They believed this would create a structure that would bring fresh blood into these roles, allowing young adults to be more visible in their parishes. The goal was not to take over the parish. They just want to be recognized, and to be able to use their God-given talents in service to our parish councils and other ministerial leadership positions. Term

limits would increase the opportunity for expansion and better integration of the wisdom of the elders with the creativity of the young.

We all know how important the engagement of our youth and young adults is to the future of our church. Everyone is concerned about the absence of the next generation of leaders. So how could it be that these young adults, yearning to be engaged with their parishes, don't feel wanted by the rest of us?

As we approach the second session of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission," my experience with this group of young Catholics has been on my mind.

I continue to see the synodal process face criticisms about its nature, scope and purpose. Some question the orthodoxy of such a practice, others question the methods used, and still others fear the outcomes it may produce or harbor disappointment over the changes that will not be made.

However, my time with the young adults from my diocese—and numerous other powerful experiences during my 30 years as a priest and bishop—made it even more clear to me that a synodal process, which is pastoral by nature, is very much necessary for us to continue the renewal of the church begun by the Second Vatican Council.

And I will go even further: Becoming a more synodal church is a pastoral necessity for us to remain in communion with the church of the Apostles, whose Lord is the master of accompaniment seeking out those who are lost.

Being faithful to Christ includes following his pastoral style. The church in her heart of hearts is synodal. Her mission demands it.

Confronting Crisis

I became aware of my vocation near the end of my undergraduate studies in biochemistry at the University of Dallas. During that discernment period, I felt a strong desire to serve the kind of laypeople I got to know in the community at the university chapel. I felt at home there. These people helped me form a vision for what my life as a priest could be like.

After my ordination, the Lord blessed me with a variety of experiences that have continued to shape and form my ecclesial sense of ordained ministry. I served as a parish priest and university chaplain. I was sent to Rome for doctoral studies in sacramental theology. I taught and served on the formation faculty at the Pontifical College Josephinum seminary in Columbus, Ohio. I also had the opportunity to live in Washington, D.C., and work at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the office for clergy,

consecrated life and vocations.

Then I was ordained the fourth bishop of Jefferson City on Feb. 6, 2018. This was only a few months before the Theodore McCarrick scandal and the grand jury report from Pennsylvania on sexual abuse by clerics shocked the church and the world.

As a new bishop in the wake of this crisis, I called the priests of our diocese together during the summer of 2018. I wanted to dialogue with them about what was happening in our church and share my thoughts on how I was going to respond as the local chief shepherd. They needed to know what they could do to help the people in their parishes deal with their anger, resentment and frustration over the constant stream of embarrassing news stories—as well as the heartbreaking accounts of bishops abusing their power and neglecting the welfare of their flocks.

Part of my message to the priests was that something had to change in the way we were functioning as the church.

The patience of laypeople with the clergy, especially the bishops, in exercising good leadership had largely evaporated. Many left the church because of it. Those who remained were at times despondent over the way things were. We had to work quickly and diligently to get ahead of the waves of criticism rather than getting rolled under them.

As part of our response, I realized that our faithful needed the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about their faith, their hopes and fears for their church, and especially their thoughts about the sacred trust held by the church's leadership.

We, the clergy, needed to listen to them. But just as important, laypeople needed to listen to one another.

A series of listening sessions was set up in the fall of 2018 throughout our mostly rural diocese in mid-Missouri to give people multiple times and places to participate in a process together to rebuild trust in the church. It was important for me to hear directly from them, in person and without any barriers. I wanted the priests to share that experience with me, to be co-listeners to our portion of the people of God.

I heard expressions of anger and gut-wrenching stories of personal trauma from abuse. Some claimed it was the first time they had stepped into a Catholic church since they were abused and were thankful for the opportunity to share their story. Others said it was the first time they had ever been asked their opinion on an important matter facing the church.

It was a powerful experience for all involved, and it strongly formed how I saw our church must operate going forward.

Our next step was to begin a pastoral planning process



People today do not respond very well to being governed in a dictatorial manner, nor should they.

that invited parishioners to share their thoughts with their parish leadership about how we can improve our ecclesial life in mid-Missouri—taking our inspiration from Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*”), his paradigmatic blueprint for the renewal of the church.

This required parish communities to come together, share ideas and think concretely about the people and institutions in their territories and how they are responsible for the mission of the church. In many ways, we had been swiftly moving down the path of synodality—even if we were not yet using that term.

But it wasn’t long before we would hear Pope Francis’ call for the whole people of God throughout the world to participate in the Synod of Bishops’ “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.”

Teaching Church, Learning Church

As we have experienced the synod, some have criticized this focus on listening as a useless exercise—or lamented the lack of sizable changes in our global church. We have also heard confusion about how this synodal posture aligns with our traditional sense of hierarchy.

From my experiences, however, it is clear to me that a more synodal church provides the opportunity for a more fruitful and Christian exercise of a bishop’s power and authority. It allows the bishop to be a more effective leader in teaching, sanctifying and governing.

People today do not respond very well to being governed in a dictatorial manner, nor should they.

It is very important to understand that this is not a matter of whether we, as successors to the original College of Apostles *cum Petro et sub Petro*, have the power and authority to make certain decisions. It also does not mean that we must give up our unique responsibility in the preservation of the church’s apostolic communion in what we believe, how we pray and in how we live the Gospel of charity. Bishops are distinct among the people of God in their responsibilities as guardians of our sacred tradition.

But it is a matter of recognizing the relationship between the *ecclesia docens* and the *ecclesia discens*—the teaching church and the learning church. In addition, we must come to a greater appreciation of the role that the Holy Spirit’s presence in our communities of faith, the *sensus fidei fidelium*, has in the development of doctrine.

When decisions must be made that affect the lives of others, the human dimension of the church and the examples from sacred Scripture (especially the gatherings of the whole church recorded in the Acts of the Apostles) compel us to consult those who must live under the decisions we make for them.

While contemplating the pastoral role of bishops in the church, the fathers of Vatican II taught in the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (“*Lumen Gentium*”):

[T]he laity should disclose their needs and desires with that liberty and confidence which befits children of God and brothers of Christ. By reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have the laity are empowered—indeed sometimes obliged—to manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church. [No. 37]

And again:

The pastors, indeed, should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church. They should willingly use their prudent advice and confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, leaving them freedom and scope for acting. [No. 37]

Let us also remember that this style of leadership follows the example of our Lord in his encounter with imperfect people of his time.

It was not enough for Jesus to assert the truth to those in error. He loved people and wanted the conversion of their hearts and minds. The accompaniment Jesus gave to Matthew the tax collector, the woman at the well and the disciples on the road to Emmaus all resulted in a change of heart, not a change of teaching, except for the mere human conventions that were being treated by people at the time as divine law.

‘Be Not Afraid’

With the salvation of souls as our primary concern, fostering a change in culture in the church to be centered on communion, participation and mission would only be helpful.

A synodal church provides the necessary space for true

dialogue, and is a good antidote to those committed more to their own conceptualizations than to the Catholic faith itself. If we have our minds already made up, then we are not capable of listening to the Holy Spirit and to true dialogue among the people of God, but only of asserting what we already think. This mindset leaves little to no room for growth or development.

St. John Paul II preached frequently on the words of Jesus, “Be not afraid.” To those who have high anxiety and fret over what might happen when the church’s leadership starts to pay greater attention to the experiences of people beyond our ideological viewpoints, I say as well: “Be not afraid!”

It is true that opening these conversations can be a little intimidating. Yet in the intimate, exposed moments of conversation that synodality invites, it can be breathtaking to see the Holy Spirit working among God’s people. Synodality is about listening to the Holy Spirit on our journey together.

During one of the local listening sessions held at a parish in our diocese, the evening began as usual with the customary introductions, laying down of the ground rules and with the proclamation of Scripture, communal silence and formal prayer.

When the time for sharing began in small groups, parishioner after parishioner told stories of how wonderful their parish was, that they had been raised in the parish and were happy to have their own children being formed in such a wonderful environment. People were nodding their heads and smiling. This *was* a delightful parish, they agreed, and they were grateful for all the Lord had accomplished in their community.

After more than 40 minutes of comments like these, an older gentleman cautiously spoke. He told those gathered that he moved into the parish 11 years ago to be closer to his family after the death of his wife. He said he usually sat in the same pew at the same Mass time each Sunday, and sometimes at weekday Masses.

But the mood sharply changed as he noted that over those 11 years, not once had anyone approached him, introduced themselves or invited him to participate in any of the parish activities or ministries.

The gentleman stopped speaking. The silence seemed to last a long time. The rules for the gathering didn’t allow for rebuttals or argumentation. Everyone had to sit in silence to let the impact of the man’s experience move them in a different way.

It remained with them weeks later, as they participated in leadership meetings of parish councils and organizations. They now realized they needed to rethink how they had been doing things, and to revisit their way of extending

hospitality, welcoming and inviting participation within their parish.

The result of this listening session, from just that one speaker, was not a new document or even a new policy. No decrees were signed or doctrine changed. But what did happen was a change of heart and mindset, as the Lord was once again at work in their community. It was the beginning of a change in culture, the pastoral conversion of the parish sought by our Holy Father and very much desired by me.

Grounded in Mission

One of the looming questions for some about the current synodal process is whether or not the authority of bishops can coexist in a synodal church. They would see *hierarchy* and *synodality* as oppositional terms. But from my perspective, I don’t see any other way for bishops to be more effective leaders. It really is a matter of the very Catholic principle of “both/and” that describes so much of our faith: human and divine, transcendent and immanent, divine grace and human freedom.

We face a reality where we must confront the abuse of power by some in the hierarchy, the growing polarization within both our society and our church, and the precipitous decline in participation in the church’s mission by the younger generations.

The whole people of God needs to learn how to remove the sandals from our feet “before the sacred ground of the other” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*,” No. 169), and that disposition should begin with the church’s bishops.

With this whole synodal process, I now feel better as a bishop about the prospects of our clergy and laity to respond more effectively to the various pastoral demands we face in keeping with the pastoral style of our Lord.

My hope is strengthened for a church more grounded in its mission because of our Holy Father’s pastoral efforts to convert the members of our church to be more missionary oriented. That means taking up our responsibility of being salt, light and leaven in a world in deep need of the life-giving power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We all stand in need of a missionary conversion. I know that I need this conversion as much as anyone else.

The Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight is the bishop of Jefferson City, Mo.



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A Deeper Craving

Being vegetarian for 50 years has made me a better Catholic priest

By Francis X. Clooney

On July 31, 1974, the feast of St. Ignatius Loyola, I concluded my annual retreat by committing myself to no longer eating meat. This discernment was a turning point in my life as a young man. It made me a little different, distanced from those around me and certainly from the ordinary diet of Irish-American Catholics like me in the 20th century.

My reasons for becoming a vegetarian were in the beginning contextual. I was a young Jesuit at the time, in regency—between philosophy and theology studies—teaching mainly English-language subjects to high school age students (all Hindu and Buddhist) at St. Xavier's School in Kathmandu, Nepal. Nepal was (and still is) a poor country, and meat was a luxury, saved for special occasions.

At our boarding school, we Jesuits (almost all Americans in those days) ate meat at least twice a day. By contrast, the boys in this relatively affluent school would have meat perhaps three times a week, and the lay staff just a little more frequently. Seeing the disparity even on campus, I decided that not eating meat was a way of fitting in better,

a quiet sort of solidarity with the poor—and a way of gaining a bit of credibility with our sharply observant students, who could not reconcile the luxury of Jesuit meat-eating with the Jesuit vow of poverty.

It is true that most Nepalis would eat meat when they could get it, and even strict Hindus and Buddhists were rarely absolutely vegetarian. But there were religious reasons in that ancient culture, as in India, for not eating meat: respect for all life forms, divine, human, animal and plant, and horror at the bad karma that comes from killing other living beings. As a budding scholar of Hinduism, I began to get the basic Hindu insight into the great unity of life, the great web of living beings of which humans are simply one, albeit the foremost, part.

After regency, I returned to the United States in 1975 for theological studies for ordination and had a lot of adjusting to do in a culture where vegetarianism was still considered odd, exotic. I readily made exceptions to my vegetarianism when visiting my family in New York, since most of my mother's best recipes—and my childhood favorites—were meat-based. For a decade or more, I made an exception on Thanksgiving, so as to share in the feast's turkey. But little by little, I not only did not eat meat but stopped even wanting it.

Red meats went first, then chicken and fish, and finally

I was likely to check on soups to see if beef bouillon had been used or not. Perhaps 25 years ago, I distanced myself from eating eggs, and while I still consume dairy products, I am slowly tending toward a vegan diet at this point in my life, in my mid-70s.

Social and community life, too, had to be readjusted. Unlike today, many restaurants 50 years ago did not have any vegetarian entrees, and the request for a vegetarian option not infrequently resulted in a plate of boiled, unseasoned vegetables. Vegetarianism has ancient roots in American life and piety, but in the 1970s, books like Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* were still something of a novelty. Jesuit houses, then as now, tended to serve largely meat-based entrees at meals. Even after all these years, it is rare to find a really good vegetarian entrée in one of our houses.

Over the next decades, I added other reasons for my change in diet, including the simple fact that vegetables and rice, fruits and nuts are good for you. As the past 50 years have shown me, meat is not necessary for health or energy. I was learning, too, as we all were in the 1970s and 1980s, that the mass production of animals for slaughter was a wildly costly endeavor that meant more protein for the privileged few.

In 1979 I published an article in **America**, "Vegetarianism and Religion," which was reprinted in 2001 in an edited volume, *Religious Vegetarianism*. At that early date, only five years into my new diet, I was consolidating my experience and life choice in a more objective manner. I pointed to the value of a simpler lifestyle as a rejoinder to the inequities of an unjust economic order, a daily commitment to respect for all living beings in a created world that need no longer be divided into binaries such as eater/eaten, killer/killed.

My main point in the brief essay was a hope for the church. If we in the church after the Second Vatican Council were eager to reintegrate spirituality and theology in fresh ways, we would do well to reimagine our table fellowship, ways of meeting one another in meals ordinary and sacred. Might vegetarianism gain a kind of liturgical power in a global church seeking to recalibrate its natural and cultural frames worldwide?

What surprises me now—having recently reread my 1979 essay for the first time in many years—is that it does not mention at all that I had become a vegetarian myself five years earlier. I suppose I wanted to make the case objectively, without an appeal to my own experience. By the present moment, however, I am unashamedly personal in my writing. In fact, I just published a memoir, *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar*.

As I get older, I become more sensitive to the fact that

what we believe to be true and good has more power if rooted in our own life stories. Late in life, I want people to think more about how what we eat does really matter, especially at those deepest points of our lives where soul and body, spirit and matter touch. Five decades of vegetarian diet has changed me for the better, I think: simpler, more natural, more connected to the smaller and larger life forms around me. I am mindful of what I choose to eat and not eat, less likely to rely on processed foods and fast foods, a bit more adept in resisting other ordinary cravings, such as for alcohol or sweets. For us Americans, it seems clearer and clearer: What most of us already have is more than enough.

Needless to say, my Hindu friends in both the United States and India have always been happy that I am a vegetarian. As a teacher, it helps, too. We know that today many young people prefer to be vegetarian or vegan. While perhaps—statistics vary—only 4 to 5 percent of young people are strictly vegetarian or vegan, it seems clear (at least in the Boston/Cambridge area) that more and more young people are eating less meat.

I have been teaching at the university level for 40 years now, first at Boston College and now at Harvard, and it pleases me to see that more and more frequently, my students and I have made similar dietary choices and share simple views on what it means to be spiritual and embodied at the same time. That I've kept my resolution for 50 years can be inspiring for some.

I concluded my 1979 article with the hope that we might "discover anew in our age the Lord who has always chosen to be found in the context of the meal." We have a long way to go as Americans and as a human family in reimagining even our Eucharistic hospitality, to celebrate more intimately the truth we recall at every Mass, that by God's goodness we share "the fruit of the earth and work of human hands," which become the "bread of life" and "our spiritual drink."

Or, as Pope Francis put it in "Laudato Si": "Thus, the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence."

Such are my hopes today as well, as in gratitude I keep trying to live by gifts of God nonviolently given to us from the very beginning.

Francis X. Clooney, S.J., is the Parkman Professor of Divinity at Harvard University.



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A Joyful Noise

How my 4-year-old taught me the true meaning of ‘good’ liturgical music

By Mike Jordan Laskey

My 4-year-old son—rascally, chaotic—is better behaved at church than he is anywhere else.

Before you start writing to the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Causes of Saints on his parents’ behalf, there are caveats. For this miracle to work, he has to be at our home parish’s 10:30 a.m. Sunday Mass. At any other Mass, whether at our parish or elsewhere, his natural restlessness takes over by the responsorial psalm, and he starts slamming a hymnal on the pew or going boneless in the aisle.

There are other parameters that must be met for my son to behave. We have to be sitting as close to the choir as humanly possible. And Mr. John, the bald, bespectacled Boomer who plays the drum set at this Mass, can’t be out sick or on vacation. If all these conditions are in place, our son will ask me to hold him the whole time so he can see the drums and cymbals from an elevated vantage point. He will watch Mr. John—whom our son calls “the priest,”

having figured out “the priest” means “important person at church”—for an hour straight.

When we get home, our son will spend a good chunk of the afternoon listening to our cellphone recordings of the 10:30 choir while singing Alleluia and Hosanna and drumming along. He will mimic Mr. John’s distinctive playing style, including the groovy shoulder-roll move he does. He will drum for hours over the course of the week, accompanied only by our bootleg church tracks.

My wife and I have watched this development in our preschooler’s spiritual life with enthusiasm and curiosity. Mostly, we don’t want to jinx it. How did it happen that this rascal who pokes and tackles his older sisters with relish has simultaneously become the most devoted churchgoer in the house?

One thing that’s clear to me is that just bringing him to Mass is half the battle. His fascination never would have happened if we had just read him books about liturgical music. Faith, like most traditions, is more “caught” than “taught.” Our son needed to be enchanted—to feel the bass drum boom in his chest and to look at the shiny cymbals up close. The conditions for his spiritual awakening, if a 4-year-old can have one, required us to go to Mass and sit in the sonic equivalent of the splash zone at SeaWorld’s killer whale show. We did nothing fancier or more psychological—



ly savvy than just show up week after week.

My son's focus on liturgical music has forced me to ask big questions about it too. Our parish has a vibrant music ministry and a highly talented choir director. I have wondered what would happen if the director took the singers, the engaging multilingual music and the drum set with him to another parish. At this point in our family life, we'd follow them wherever they went.

And that raises a larger point: The music we hear at Mass makes a difference. Whether because of financial or human resources, many parishes must settle for music that is less than ideal. Good music takes a large amount of resources and planning and time, yes; but if I were a pastor, it would be the first thing I'd try to get right. It is not always easy to please everyone, but when it works, it works. Our son looks forward to church all week long, and the music is the reason why.

At this point, liturgically traditional readers may be shifting uncomfortably in their seats. A drum set at Mass is a bold choice and not everyone's cup of tea. It's fair to wonder if our son is being formed as a Catholic with a sense of the sacred or just becoming a fan of loud music. And I am sympathetic to church-drum-set skepticism because I share it. I'm more of a high church, "smells and bells" aficionado than a praise and worship guy.

Before having kids, my universal declarations about what was "good" or "bad" church music made my wife roll her eyes, but my commitment was steadfast. In an effort to find music that would meet my standards, I joined a choir in a beautiful church building in a different state from where we lived. We held practice before the 6 p.m. Mass; the whole enterprise would take up three or four glorious hours each Sunday.

Once we had our first child, it became instantly clear to both of us that my routine was unsustainable. We found a parish only 20 minutes away from our house (and in our own state) that had what I deemed good music. But by the time our second child arrived, even the 20-minute Sunday commute was too much. We wound up at a smaller community just down the street from our home. It didn't nourish me liturgically, but I appreciated that our children were welcomed there and that it was a warm, caring place. And in that context, I found that the electric keyboard in the front of the church, instead of an organ or grand piano, didn't bother me as much as I thought it would. I could sense my priorities shifting.

When we moved to a new region five years ago and started shopping around for a new parish, our children now old enough to be at least semiconscious at Mass, our son's love of the Drum Set Parish made our choice an easy one.

If you had told me 10 years ago I'd be going to Drum

My son's focus on liturgical music has forced me to ask big questions about it too.

Set Mass—and not just going, but sitting as close to the drums as possible while filled with relief and gratitude—I would not have believed it. But children make you flexible in ways you never would have imagined. Thanks to my children, I can appreciate, and even enjoy, liturgical music in my not-favorite style. I can acknowledge my preferences are just preferences and not universal truths. I can happily accept with no sarcasm whatsoever the fact that we are part of a big church with plenty of room for people and instruments of every shape, size and volume level. And any aesthetic concerns pale in comparison with the main point: Our son, age 4, has already found a home here. In today's Catholic Church, that's a story that folk Mass, chant Mass, jazz Mass and organ Mass fans should be able to make joyful noise about together.

Mike Jordan Laskey is the director of communications for the Jesuit Conference, where he hosts the "AMDG" podcast. He lives in Maryland with his family.

America VOCATION DIRECTORY

If I could have my life all over again, the one thing I would wish is that when I was graduating from college someone would have told me you don't have to do what seems safe or rational. You can follow that crazy idea that whispers deep inside you. Anything that you believe you're supposed to do, or people tell you need to do, is still going to be there a year or two years from now. Meanwhile, who knows what adventures and friendships await if you just trust your instincts? God put that desire in you, and God will see you through.

Our volunteer and vocation directory is filled with opportunities like this, places all around the world where you can help people, deepen your faith and discover more about yourself. Why not take a few moments to sit with these possibilities and see what they stir up within you? Who knows? Maybe God is waiting for you here in these pages, with an experience that will change your life.



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Xavier High School

FIGHTING ANTISEMITISM THROUGH EDUCATION

Xavier High School launches a Holocaust studies program

By Maggie Phillips

The teenage boys stopped in front of an exhibit on Aktion T4, the Nazi euthanasia program that killed anywhere from 70,000 to 200,000 disabled children and adults between 1939 and 1945. They wandered through the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City on a clear June day, drawn to exhibits on the history of antisemitism in the United States and to video testimonies from survivors of Kristallnacht and Auschwitz—the human faces of a nearly century-old tragedy.

These boys were students at Xavier High School, a Jesuit school in lower Manhattan. But this was no ordinary field trip. They were there at the Battery Park museum as part of a Holocaust studies program instituted by Tom Maher, a Xavier alumnus. The museum, which describes itself

as “a living memorial to the Holocaust,” allows visitors to immerse themselves in Jewish life both before and after the murder of six million Jews from 1933 to 1945, as well as to learn more about the atrocities of the Holocaust. Earlier that spring, six of the students had been to Poland to see various historical sites related to the Holocaust, culminating with a visit to Auschwitz.

The school’s extracurricular Holocaust studies program includes book and movie discussions, as well as opportunities for both domestic and international trips. Mr. Maher’s goal is to fight rising antisemitism through education—an urgent need according to F.B.I. hate crime statistics, which indicate that 10 percent of hate crimes in 2022 (the most recent available data) were anti-Jewish, second only to hate crimes against Black Americans.

Mr. Maher first visited Auschwitz in 2019. The trip touched him deeply, and it was at the forefront of his thoughts when the rising tide of antisemitism in the United States hit close to home. In 2022, The Boston Globe reported that police were investigating after swastikas appeared on a Jewish family’s lawn in Stoneham, Mass. “I said to myself, ‘This cannot be happening in our country,’” Mr. Maher told Xavier’s alumni publication, *Xavier magazine*, earlier this year. “‘Do people know what they are doing and the significance of what they are doing? This is so wrong.’

In the spring of 2023, six students from Xavier High School visited Auschwitz with staff and faculty as part of the school's new Holocaust studies program.

I needed to do something. But what?" Remembering the impact of history courses he had taken at the College of the Holy Cross, Maher settled on a Holocaust education program for his high school alma mater, funded by himself and his wife, Nancy.

Mr. Maher credits his Jesuit education with his passion to push back against antisemitism in the United States. "My Jesuit education is vitally important to who I am and how I think and what I try to do each day," he said. When he read about the antisemitic graffiti in Stoneham, he saw a need to be a "man for others" and asked himself, "How can I help make this educational experience so that hopefully the next generation has a better understanding?" Mr. Maher said. "And there's no better place than Xavier."

In January 2023, he called Xavier's president, Jack Raslowsky, to pitch his idea. Mr. Raslowsky was receptive, and by April, they were headed to Poland for a planning trip. The inaugural program trip was announced to the student body in November, and organizers were stunned when 78 students came forward to apply for the available 14 slots.

In March 2024, the 14 boys flew to Poland accompanied by Mr. Maher, Mr. Raslowsky and other faculty members and staff. The seven-day trip was a busy, and emotionally

challenging, one. While the Auschwitz visit was the capstone, the boys also visited various sites of memory around Warsaw and Krakow. In Warsaw, they visited the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the Warsaw Rising Museum and took a guided walking tour of the Old Town district and the Ghetto Wall. They also visited the Catholic All Saints Church, whose pastor had helped hide Jews inside the Warsaw Ghetto, and Nozyk Synagogue, Warsaw's sole remaining Jewish worship site. In Krakow students attended a learning session with some college-age American Jews who were volunteers at the Jewish Community Center and saw the city's Ghetto Heroes Square, with its Empty Chairs exhibit. Also on their itinerary was Oskar Schindler's Factory Museum, familiar to many from the film "Schindler's List."

By the time they visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, the boys had a more comprehensive view of the Holocaust and its context. "How lucky was I to walk into this camp, under the 'Arbeit macht frei' sign, just as millions of others did, and simply walk out," one student later reflected in Xavier magazine. "It was the birthplace of the worst mass genocide in human history, and I simply left. I didn't know how to feel. Lucky, but almost guilty—why do I get to leave but so many didn't? This moment will stay with me for the rest of my life."



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The students saw how antisemitism, if left unchecked, can have terrible consequences.

“They fully embraced the experience,” Mr. Maher said of the students on the Poland trip. “The magnitude of what they experienced, I think, had a transformative effect...they saw how antisemitism, if left unchecked, can have terrible consequences.”

Judeo-Christian Bonds

This year, the Mahers announced a \$10,000 grant to fund summer professional development in the area of Holocaust studies for Xavier faculty members, and a second student trip to Poland is planned for October.

Due to capacity constraints, not all students can attend the Poland trip, but all are still eligible to take part in learning opportunities at the school.

“Having the domestic program available gives the opportunity to build understanding of Jewish culture space, and build that bond,” Mr. Maher said. “Obviously, that bond exists given our shared Judeo-Christian traditions.”

Many of the students interviewed at the Museum of Jewish Heritage said that they were drawn to the Holocaust studies program because they had Jewish friends and family, or were observant Jews themselves. As they trickled out of the building, the boys seemed more somber than when they entered. Unusually for a large school group, they were not talkative. Mr. Raslowsky brought them together for a huddle to reflect on what they had seen that day. “The story of the Jewish people is so much bigger than the Holocaust,” he said. “Before and after.”

Mr. Raslowsky reminded the students of a visit they had taken to Temple Emanu-El in New York City a few months earlier. “There was something for me very good about starting in Jewish life and culture,” he said, “We miss that if we just jump to Holocaust studies.”

He had previously also accompanied some Xavier students to a Shabbat service at Temple Emanu-El, a large reform synagogue founded in 1845. Mr. Raslowsky recalled that the boys’ reactions to the service were characterized by grateful curiosity. Acknowledging that it can be challenging to encounter a new faith tradition, Mr. Raslowsky said, “There’s a familiarity that kids experienced.” Although there was no kneeling or Eucharist, “There’s something sacramen-

tal about the Torah scrolls,” he said. “I think kids make that connection.” He hopes that the Shabbat service served “as an entry for them into the mystery and wonder of God.”

The Jewish-Catholic link was made explicit on the March trip to Poland. In particular, All Saints Church, which sat on the edge of the Warsaw Ghetto that the Nazis created in 1940, played a key role in Polish Catholic resistance to the Holocaust. It was often a hiding place for Jewish children en route to temporary homes in the countryside, part of the work of a Catholic nurse named Irina Sendler.

“We are joined at the hip in terms of our traditions,” Mr. Maher said of Jews and Catholics. “We were grafted onto the covenant,” said Mr. Raslowsky. “We cannot separate ourselves from the Jewish faith, nor should we.”

The students on the Poland trip in the spring agreed that familiarity with Judaism and Jews was essential to combating antisemitism.

“Many people have no relationship to the issue,” Owen Cahill, a current senior, told Xavier magazine. “This is important when trying to educate people, because it is hard to force someone to pay attention to something they care nothing about. Instead of trying to get people to share a certain opinion, it is more important that I am able to inform people just a little bit and maybe inspire them to take up their own interest in the fight against antisemitism.”

“Sympathy and empathy are so important,” said Henry Byrne, another student on the trip. He said a powerful moment for him was the response the Auschwitz tour guide gave them in response to a question someone posed at the end of their visit: “What’s next?”

The answer the guide gave stayed with Mr. Byrne. He said she was concerned about what he called “the lack of sympathy and empathy that happened in the Holocaust,” something he said “is what we see right now with the Israel and Palestine conflict. And if this doesn’t change, then acts could repeat again.”

The year 2023 was the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and January 2025 marks 80 years since the liberation of Auschwitz. To people born in the 21st century, World War II, its causes and its aftermath can seem very far away. Both Mr. Maher and Mr. Raslowsky noted that while Catholic higher education institutions offer Jewish-Catholic and Holocaust studies programs, there are not as many initiatives among Catholic high schools. “We also hope that it is an invitation to other institutions,” Mr. Raslowsky said, “particularly among the Jesuit institutions.”

Xavier is a diverse high school. Forty-three percent of the student body are students of color. Mr. Raslowsky estimates that last year, 30 out of around 900 students came from Jewish families, and the student body includes

Muslims as well.

The metaphor of Jews as the “canaries in the cultural coal mine”—what begins as antisemitism quickly spreads to other minorities—is included in the Xavier Holocaust program. The diversity of the school is one reason why Mr. Raslowsky feels an urgent need to particularly address antisemitism.

“The work is to stop Jewish hate—and to stop all hate,” he said. “How do we beat swords into plowshares?” Referring to what he calls “a biblical mandate” to work for peace, Mr. Raslowsky said that the Holocaust studies program “is giving us an exclusive way to live it out, and to move to the point of more explicitly working against antisemitism, more deliberately understanding the experience of our Jewish brothers and sisters, and by extension, other other faith traditions. To be called to our best selves.”

An Urgent Issue

One year from Hamas’s attack on Jewish civilians at the Nova Festival in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, Mr. Maher feels that Xavier’s work in Holocaust studies takes on particular urgency.

“October 7th is an important reason why we must remember,” said Mr. Maher. “We must experience a trip like this so that we can bear witness to the horrific time in our world where six million Jews were murdered, and we

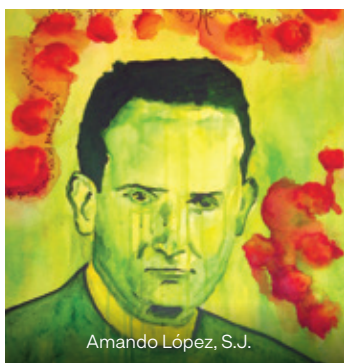
can never forget.”

During the program’s inaugural year, Mr. Raslowsky said that while the Oct. 7 attack was a topic of conversation, it was not explicitly addressed by the program. “I think we felt, maybe rightly, maybe wrongly, that year one was laying the groundwork,” he said. “So students are in a position to enter into conversation more deliberately” as they see antisemitism being normalized in the media. He cited as an example Tucker Carlson’s controversial interview in September with the podcaster Darryl Cooper, whose comments on the show and online appeared to indicate sympathy for Nazi ideology.

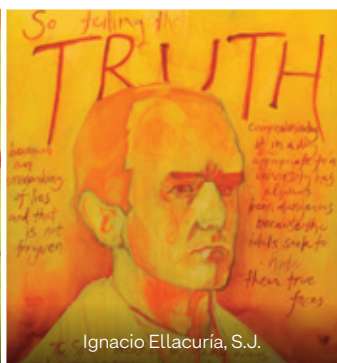
“Insidious antisemitism can, and clearly has in the past, become pervasive antisemitism,” said Mr. Maher, “and an existential threat if not rooted out through education and a commitment to stand steadfast against hate and discrimination in all forms and in all places.”

“Now that we have a year under our belt,” said Mr. Raslowsky, “I think part of [our] responsibility is to engage more directly in this, in the antisemitism conversation and in active work.”

Maggie Phillips is a freelance writer and regular contributor to Tablet magazine. Michael O’Brien and Connor Hartigan contributed reporting for this story.



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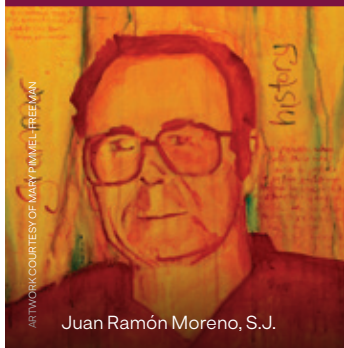


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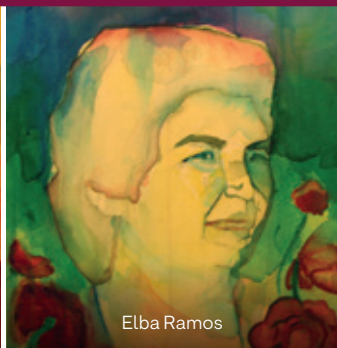
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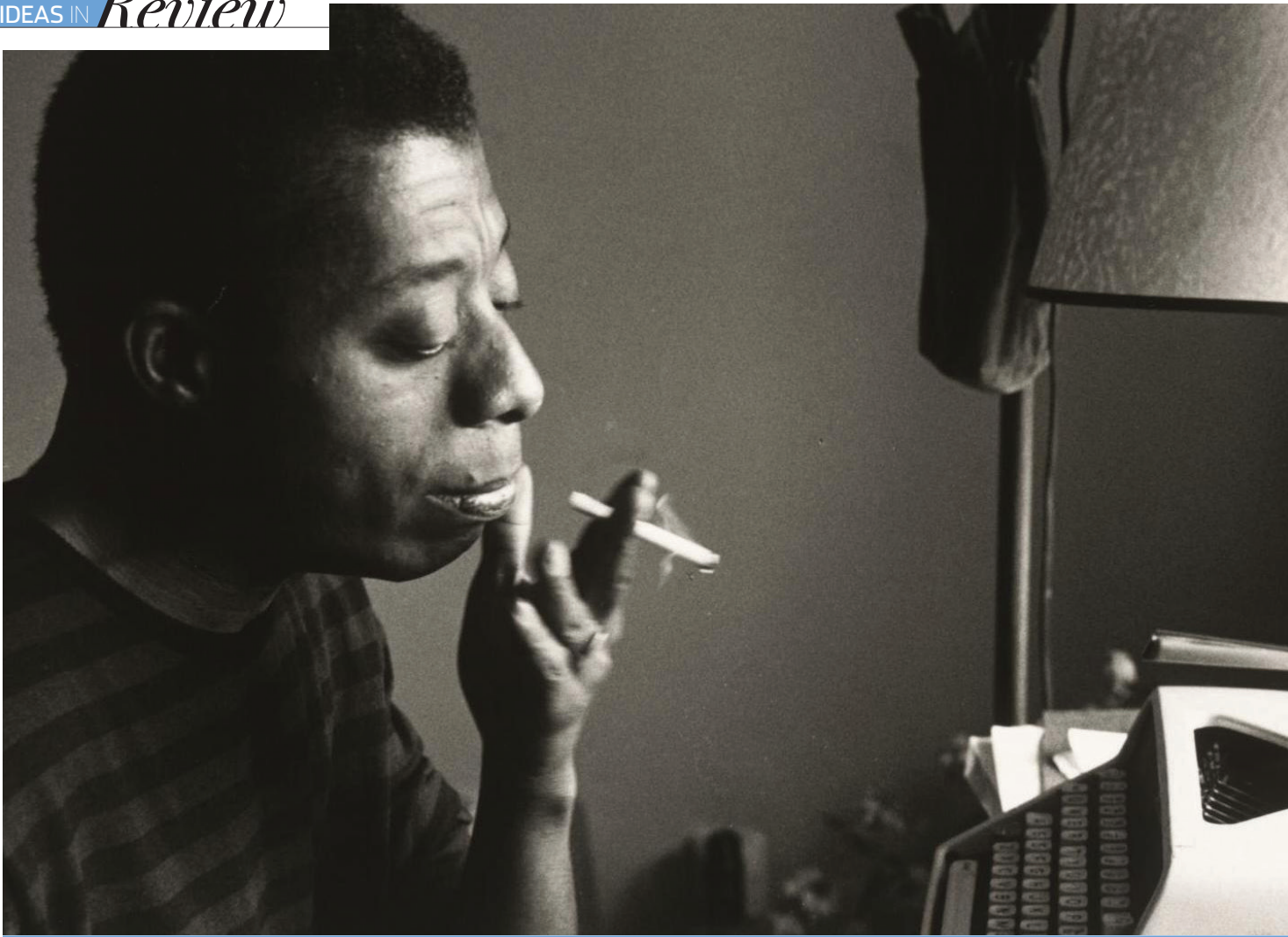
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A Century of James Baldwin's Prophetic Voice

By Bryan Massingale

Author's note: This essay uses an offensive racial epithet in citing James Baldwin's work. I choose to use it to underscore the important insight that Baldwin meant to convey by using this inflammatory term.

Every white person in this country—I do not care what he says or what she says—knows one thing.... They know that they would not like to be black here. If they know that, they know everything they need to know. And whatever else they may say is a lie.

James Baldwin, speech at the University of California Berkeley, Jan. 15, 1979

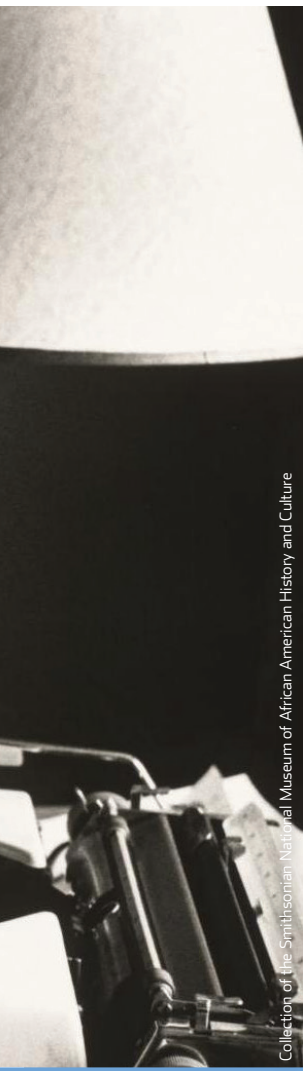
A Black queer intellectual, activist, novelist, playwright, lecturer and essayist, James Baldwin became the conscience of the nation in the latter half of the 20th century as he relentlessly critiqued its racial fears and religious hypocrisies. This

year, we celebrate the centennial of his birth.

Baldwin was born on Aug. 2, 1924, in Harlem, arguably the center of Black life in the early and mid-20th century. But Baldwin noted that he was not born in the Harlem that is often romanticized in accounts of the Harlem renaissance, but rather in the impoverished reality of rodent-infested tenements. He was born poor, Black and gay in a society that privileged the rich, white and heterosexual.

"I thought I hit the jackpot [of social liabilities]," he wryly remarked in an interview on British television. "It was so outrageous... you had to find a way to use it."

Baldwin embraced his experience of compounded marginality. In his novels, short stories, plays, poetry and essays, he used his life experiences to mirror to America its deepest fears, contradictions, repressions—and possibilities. His work is a confrontation with uncomfortable truths. He insists that we face reality with an unvarnished



Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

James Baldwin in 1966. Through his art, Baldwin probed beneath the nation's social realities, political movements and public discourse.

eye, without the patina of rationalization that enables the majority to live peacefully amid rampant injustice and exclusion.

For several years, at both Marquette University and Fordham University, I have taught a course titled “Malcolm, King, Baldwin, and the Church,” in which I examine the central ideas of these leading figures of the U.S. civil rights movement as each attempted to shape the nation's social conscience. Most of my students arrive with some (inadequate) knowledge of King, and many have only a passing acquaintance with Malcolm X. Baldwin is the one they are the least familiar with—and yet leave the course the most tantalized by.

Malcolm X, a contemporary and fellow Harlemit, called Baldwin “the poet” of the civil rights movement. Baldwin described himself in *The Price of the Ticket* as an “artist”—that is, “a disturber of the peace.” The artist, for Baldwin, is someone who reveals us to ourselves, who strives to expose the collective delusions, illusions and lies that sustain social reality. He insists

that the writer must reveal to others the forces that control them without their awareness, through what he called “the psychopathology and moral apathy of everyday life,” and must pierce the moral callousness that undergirds social injustice.

While Baldwin saw himself as a reluctant social activist, fearing it would compromise his artistic sensibility and independence, I explain to my students that the best way to understand Baldwin is as a *cultural activist*. Through his art, Baldwin probed beneath the nation's social realities, political movements and public discourse—that is, behind the visible social practices, policies and events—to excavate the collective hidden fears, the unnamed traumas and unspoken anxieties that fuel American life. Being a cultural activist means exposing the invisible scaffolding of values that undergird a people's way of life. For Baldwin, this meant bringing to light the often unacknowledged conditions that sustain a system of white supremacy—and what is required for its demise.

In this, Baldwin is a genius. So often, we lament: “Here

we are, in 2024. And we are still dealing with racism and white supremacy. Why can't we ever get beyond this?” Baldwin replies that it is because we continue to engage only with the surface or visible manifestations of racial injustice while persisting in our failures to address the deep hidden anxieties that fuel our racial conundrums and unjust social practices. Baldwin contends that unless we have the courage to address these subterranean roots of racism, the weeds of white supremacy will continue to flower and flourish, even as they might take new shape and appearance.

On Aug. 2, I attended an event marking Baldwin's 100th birthday at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. An overflow audience of hundreds gathered on a hot New York afternoon. As I observed the crowd, racially mixed yet predominately Black, with a majority being under the age of 30 (at least to my increasingly senior eyes), I wondered what it was about him that continues to resonate today.

Power and Privilege

First, James Baldwin puts the burden of the nation's social injustices squarely on the shoulders of those with power and privilege. “What white people have to do,” Baldwin said in a memorable 1963 interview, “is try to find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him. If I'm not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you have to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. On whether it has the moral strength to simply face that question.”

Note the depth of Baldwin's move. For Baldwin, the fundamental question does not concern only the tragic reality of Black suffering, but rather what is going on in white people that such injustices can be so pervasive and yet so denied, ignored or excused. As he says, “I am terrified by the moral apathy, by the death of the heart,” that has afflicted the white majority. “These people have deluded themselves for so long that they really don't believe I'm human. I base this on their conduct, not on what they say. And this means they have become moral monsters.”

I know that Baldwin's question—*Why do you need an “n-word”?*—is disturbing. It makes many white people deeply uncomfortable, even angry. My white students are stunned at the forthrightness of Baldwin's challenge. I fear that some white readers of this essay will decide to cease reading here. But it must be understood that this is the key to his continuing importance.

As an artist, Baldwin dares to disturb the peace. He ar-



Though Baldwin rejected the church, he never abandoned the religion of Jesus Christ.

gues that this role is essential because, as he writes in *The Fire Next Time*, “there are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves.” He would argue that policies such as affirmative action, police body cameras and efforts to increase diversity, equity and inclusion are necessary but insufficient. They do not address the core problem, a fundamental distortion of the human heart—what I call a “soul sickness”—that enables people to engage others with callous indifference and even cruelty. We need to address the fears, anxieties and insecurities in the white American consciousness that led to and perpetuates its racial caste system.

Baldwin argues that white Americans are imprisoned in a world of delusion, a delusion that some are less important—indeed, “n-words.” This collective delusion keeps the nation from overcoming the insanity in which we live. As he says, “Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality.... For the sake of one’s children...one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion—and the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion.” Baldwin believes that only a few may be able to free themselves from this delusion of superiority. Why? Because few possess the courage to accept that the reason racism persists lies not in Black people, but in the ways that it continues to offer advantage to whites. Yet the pursuit of this task is nonetheless necessary and essential.

Baldwin and Love

It is Baldwin’s understanding of our collective situation that leads to his understanding of love. He avows that love is the only force capable of freeing whites from the delusion in which they are so invested. No matter how angry or impatient he may at times be in his works, his essays are ultimately acts of love.

Baldwin conveys his understanding of love in a letter he wrote to his nephew in 1963, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. He writes that the country is celebrating “one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon.” He denounces the country’s contrived innocence that enables it to evade that

fact: “This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen...that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.” This “innocence” is possible because of what the Catholic philosopher Bernard Lonergan would call a collective “flight from understanding” and “refusal of unwanted insight.”

Yet Baldwin exhorts his nephew that despite this reality, he must love white Americans: “The really terrible thing...is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history they do not understand.”

I know that this is a difficult truth for many people of color, and especially Black Americans. It seems to lay the burden of liberating white people upon those who bear the consequences of injustice—injustices that benefit those who are insensitive to their plight. But here we see the influence of Baldwin’s Christian upbringing: He views white Americans through the lens of the biblical parable of the prodigal son, the arrogant and self-centered younger brother who is heedless of the wreckage caused by his interior malformation.

White Americans, Baldwin counsels his nephew, have likewise lost their grasp of reality: “But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”

Love is not soft, like a sentimental Hallmark card or romantic fantasy. Rather, for Baldwin, “love is a battle, love is a war, love is a growing up.” Love is a call to maturity, a summons to face reality and a call to radical conversion. In another place, He describes love as a tough and daring force that removes “the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” Love is an intervention, an insistent demand—akin to a lovers’ quarrel—that the loved one do better by “growing up” and accepting uncomfortable truths. Because the lover dares to hope that the one who is loved can be better.

Baldwin called upon white America to muster a maturity that up to that time, and arguably still today, it has not evidenced or realized. Rather, as I have previously argued in *America*, since Jan. 6, 2021, white resentment over the nation’s changing demography and fears of “replacement” have dominated the agenda of a major political party and significant segments of our population. This makes Baldwin’s summons perhaps more relevant today than during his life.

Baldwin believes that only a few will answer love’s summons and break free from the illusion that white skin



James Baldwin in 1963

color is a badge of superiority and dominance. Yet Baldwin knew through his own experience that radical transformation is possible. Despite being personally recruited, Baldwin refused to join the Nation of Islam, the Black separatist movement led by Elijah Muhammad. He did not disagree with their analysis of the depths of the nation's racism, but with their conviction that white people were beyond hope. He observed, "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?"

Love holds out the possibility for personal conversion and social transformation. But it is important that this not be understood as a comforting salve or easy absolution. The love that is required of both people of color and the racially privileged is searing; love is "tough," Baldwin declares. And few people of any race, in his experience, possess the courage to accept love's challenge.

Critique of the Church

People are still captivated by his critique of the church and religious faith. Baldwin was raised and became a leader within the Pentecostal experience of the Black church. Yet in his late teen years, Baldwin abandoned institutional Christianity. He gave this trenchant reason: "There was no love there." He declared the church was "a mask for hatred, self-hatred, and despair." He castigated the church for its willingness to sacrifice its noble principles of universal love in the pursuit of worldly power and status.

Baldwin also left the church because he thought it had little room for honest human desire. He criticized the sexual hypocrisy and repression that marked so many religious communities. Baldwin himself experienced and enjoyed same-sex loves. Neither the church nor the country allowed space to welcome such expressions of love. Nor were



Baldwin insists that we face reality with an unvarnished eye.

they ready to accept Baldwin's public acknowledgment of his sexuality. Black and white communities ostracized him. His sexuality made him suspect in the civil rights and Black Power movements, and religious convictions were principal reasons for these exclusions and denigrations.

Yet, though Baldwin rejected the church, he never abandoned the religion of Jesus Christ. Rather, he constantly challenged the church to live up to Christ's central teaching that all are children of God. He declared, "If one believes in the Prince of Peace, then one must stop committing crimes in the name of the Prince of Peace." Baldwin argued that by embracing Jesus' witness of radical love, the church can recover the joy and freedom that comes from a healthy embrace of sensuality and celebration of desire. As Baldwin declares in his novel *Just Above My Head*, "all love is holy."

The Resilience of Hope

Baldwin continues to resonate because he testifies to the resilience of hope. Despite all his heartbreak and bitter disappointment with his country, Baldwin never gave up hope that the nation—that human beings—could be better than we are. But his hope is not a facile optimism; it is not a belief in the myth of automatic progress, where societies always, inevitably, become more just and humane with the passing of time.

Baldwin's hope is a *blues* hope, a hope that conveys disillusionment yet without defeat. James Cone, in his book *The Spirituals and the Blues*, explains: "The blues are an expression of fortitude in the face of broken existence.... [The] blues are that stoic feeling that recognizes the painfulness of the present but refuses to surrender." Baldwin never embraced facile optimism, but he refused to give up the hope that humans could be better than their tragic past and painful present. To abandon hope, he believed, would betray coming generations. Baldwin explained his perseverance this way: "Because you can't tell the children there is no hope." Thus he clings to a hope conveyed in blues-tinged irony, expressed in the comment "I live a hope despite my knowing better."

Nowhere is this conviction better expressed than in

one of his final interviews, when he expressed his hope borrowing words from the final book of the Bible, Revelation:

The day will come when you will trust you more than you do now, and you will trust me more than you do now. And we can trust each other. *I do believe, I really do believe in the New Jerusalem.* I really do believe that we can all become better than we are. I know that we can. But the price is enormous—and people are not yet willing to pay it.

People are not ready—*yet*—to pay the high price that racial and sexual justice demands. But Baldwin never foreclosed the capacity of human beings to be better, and to do better. He never lost hope. But that hope is sore-tried. And blue.

A Witness of Courageous Truth-Telling

Why do we still need Baldwin today? Why did an overflow crowd brave the heat to celebrate the centennial of his birth? I believe that part of his continuing appeal is because we have so few people who are honest truth-tellers—who speak uncomfortable, even disturbing truths out of love and not because of self-interests or tribal loyalties. We need, especially in today's public discourse, a relentless commitment to truthful honesty.

For example, we hear some wonder whether the country is ready for a Black woman president. Setting aside the merits of any individual candidate, Baldwin would challenge the question and ask: "Who do you mean by 'country'?" He would be quick to point out that "the country" is only polite code for "the white majority."

Baldwin would insist that until we have the courage to look at our unaddressed fears, we will continue in fumbling and even futile attempts to create a nation of genuine justice and real equality. He disturbs and troubles the "peace"; that is, an avoidance of conflict that some mistake for the goal of social stability. Baldwin summons us to move beyond mere coexistence to an existence in love, where by facing the unnamed depths of our flawed desires we can embrace the "stranger in the village" without fear.

We need Baldwin today because he never abandoned the hope that through such honest confrontation, conversion could occur. He is a witness to the sore-tried hope that "relatively conscious whites" and "relatively conscious blacks"—few though they may be—could make a decisive difference in changing the consciousness of the nation.

The power of Baldwin's challenging witness to truth was captured well by Thomas Merton, the Catholic Trappist monk. After the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, Merton wrote to Baldwin praising his courage to speak an unvarnished truth. However, Merton admitted that "I

don't see [on the white side] any courage or capacity to grasp even the smallest bit of the enormous truth about ourselves." Despite the hostility that Baldwin's message to abandon white illusions would receive, Merton committed himself to that same mission and believed that this witness to truth is "very good in itself."

Baldwin's blues-tinged yet courageous hope inspires me. To leave behind my professional "objectivity": I love Baldwin. He is an author I cannot live without; I never teach Baldwin in the same way, despite having taught the course many times. He continues to amaze, delight, trouble and disturb me. King and Malcolm speak to my mind and heart; Baldwin speaks to my soul.

The centennial of his birth is both a celebration and invitation to join the ranks of "the relatively conscious," who will speak uncomfortable but necessary truths, and help the nation engage in the *metanoia* needed to become the country that Baldwin constantly believed and hoped it could become.

The Rev. Bryan Massingale is a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University in New York. He is the author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church (Orbis, 2010)*.

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WASHING WINDOWS AT THE CATHOLIC WORKER

By Colleen Shaddox

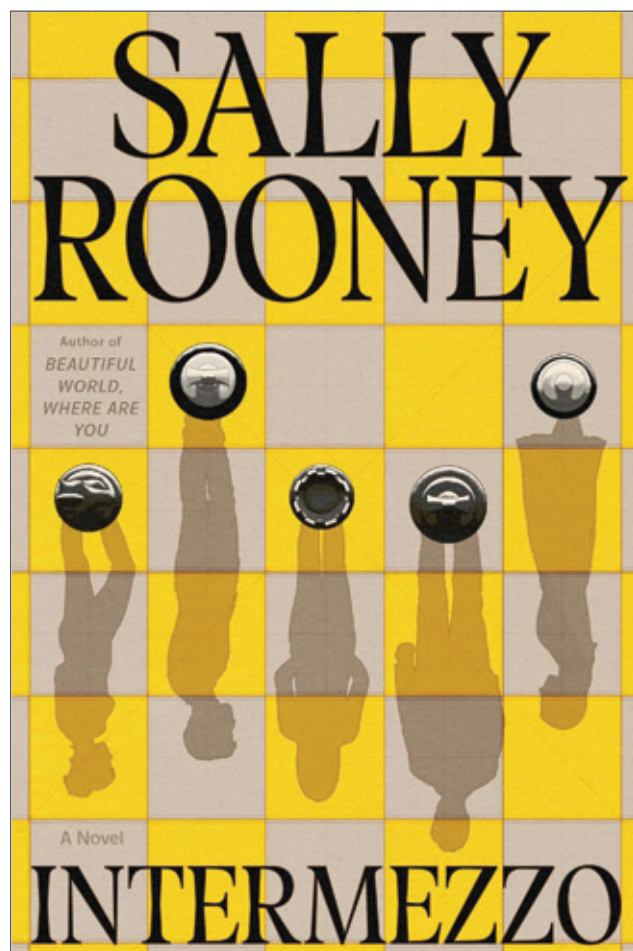
The world has thrown a million things at these windows: smoke, cooking grease, exhaust, mold running down from the shingles in a hard rain. This is no commercial, where a spray bottle of blue elixir makes everything shiny and new. Petrified scotch tape on the storm door once affixed a litany: *Black Lives Matter; Food Not Bombs; Immigrants Are Welcome Here*. Now it destroys fingernails and yields only to a putty knife. Degreaser. Ammonia. Vinegar. Serious scrubbing before buffing. But gently. Because this house is a dandelion gone to seed. Fragile and full of possibility.

Two guests, one asleep, one introducing herself over and over, with a different name each time. She asks: *You ever been a foster mom? You ever been to a hot town? Why're you washing the windows?* The washing is for you, Stacy Margaret Carol Amanda Denise. And so for the Son who longs for you.

Rejoicing in the undreamt-of honor that is tending this house, I wash every millimeter of these windows. Even when I must teeter on the ladder's top step. Alabaster jars are bought to be broken. To spill their precious oil, anoint His feet, refresh the world.

Colleen Shaddox is a print and radio journalist and activist. She has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *NPR* and *America*.

ROONEY RETURNS



Farrar, Straus and Giroux / 464p \$29

Grief is a discontinuous thing. Even when a death can be anticipated, as at the end of a long illness, the sorrow can arrive suddenly and just as suddenly ebb, erupting into our lives at unexpected moments, set off by unlikely stimuli. We go on with our lives, our dramas and loves, yet with that absence lingering always in the wings.

This irregularity characterizes *Intermezzo*, the occasionally interesting, frequently frustrating, ultimately insufficient fourth novel from the Irish writer Sally Rooney. It begins soon after the funeral of Mr. Koubek, a Slovak immigrant and late father of Peter and Ivan. Peter, the eldest, is a Dublin lawyer who works humanitarian cases and is very handsome. Ivan, 22, is a decade younger, a chess prodigy who, it turns out, is also quite handsome. (In Rooney's books, good people are never ugly or even plain.) Peter is arrogant, Ivan antisocial, and for some years their relationship has been cordial at best; their father's death pushes them even farther apart. "At one time Ivan's feelings towards [Peter] were more negative, even approaching

full enmity, but he would now characterize the feelings as neutral," Rooney writes.

Rooney mirrors this division in her narrative structure, alternating their perspectives with each chapter. While occasionally speaking to one another, their stories very rarely intersect. Ivan, with a "certain kind of panache in his absolute disregard for the material world," falls for Margaret, a 36-year-old divorcée, while teaching a chess clinic in the west of Ireland. Awkward and, at least at the beginning, described as if he is on the autism spectrum, Ivan is depicted as having an intense awareness of social codes, with his interior monologue unspooling with an objectified inner logic, as if seeing himself from without.

"He begins to experience," while looking at Margaret, "an involuntary mental image of kissing her on the mouth: not even really an image, but an idea of an image, sort of a realization that it will be possible to visualize this at some later point, what it would be like to kiss her, a promise of enjoyment simply to picture himself doing that." Not for nothing does his brother consider him a kind of machine.

Margaret also gets her say. For some years she was married to a local drunk, whose malady she feels received much more sympathy than her own suffering. Where Ivan cannot notice social norms, she is hard in their grip, and even as their relationship turns to love, she lives with the anticipation of someone in her small community discovering them. "To offer an explanation," she reflects early on, "would suggest that something is in need of explaining, raising the spectre of other, alternative explanations, which have yet occurred to no one." Her duty is to make sure they never do.

Meanwhile, Peter begins to self-destruct in Dublin, cycling among the courts, his much-younger girlfriend Naomi, and Sylvia, a professor and onetime love of his life, now suffering from incurable chronic pain. Peter's chapters proceed with a staccato stream of consciousness, threading together thoughts, references, conversation fragments and sense impressions. In the Ivan and Margaret sections, Rooney's prose is dutiful, controlled; but her sympathies are with Peter. His conversations with Sylvia are fluid, allusive, philosophical; his sex with Naomi playful and jagged. He wanders a Dublin that Rooney knows well, and even his concerns—debate club, the Irish housing crisis, God—reflect her own. When he notices how the Liffey is "dissected by the glitter of sunlight," or how the sky above Trinity College can seem like "a glass bowl struck and resounding," you sense Rooney wandering the city, gathering details.

These themes—social codes, generational gaps, the irresolvable problem of love—run through the entire nov-

el. Peter looks with disgust on Ivan's relationship with the much older Margaret, even though he is entangled with the equally young Naomi. Rooney mines their relationship for observational comedy, the millennial making note of the zoomer who only makes video calls and leaves her friends long voice memos. It's funny, for a while. But the novelist's heart just isn't in it, and though both Margaret and Peter fret about their age, it doesn't lead to significant tension within their own relationships. The conflict comes from outside: what the community will think, what their families will say. Though Rooney is ostensibly interested in the relationships among people in the novel, very little of interest happens in the present, in those moments they spend together.

This results in a genuine dramatic problem. In *Intermezzo*, the most interesting and significant things have already happened, deflating any potential tension. This is especially true regarding the two brothers. Ivan, we are told, had a bit of a men's rights activist phase, leading to fights with Peter, the strident leftist. Late in the book, the remembrance of how Ivan used to "sit there saying feminism is evil, or women make up lies about being raped" sets off a major fight between them. Yet Ivan no longer believes these things; and however hypocritical his moral posturing, Peter's politics are not undermined by his self-righteousness.

This point of real substantive conflict is smoothed over, being safely in the past, along with almost everything in their lives of dramatic or thematic weight. You could read this as the hangover of grief, how in their desperation to avoid looking their loss in the face, the brothers are dredging up a comfortingly familiar conflict. But the decision also seems a fearful one, as if Rooney is worried we will not believe either brother worthy of love should their souls become too compromised.

From the natural details to character traits, much of this feels like adornment, neither deepening the themes nor furthering any narrative. Does it matter that "for environmental reasons [Ivan] stopped purchasing new clothes at the age of nineteen"? It has no impact on his conduct, or how he treats Margaret, or what she thinks of him. It's a description that feels accurate to a type of person you meet in life, but not true to the character Rooney is constructing. So, too, the discussion of Dublin's housing crisis, which serves largely to drive Peter and Naomi under the same roof.

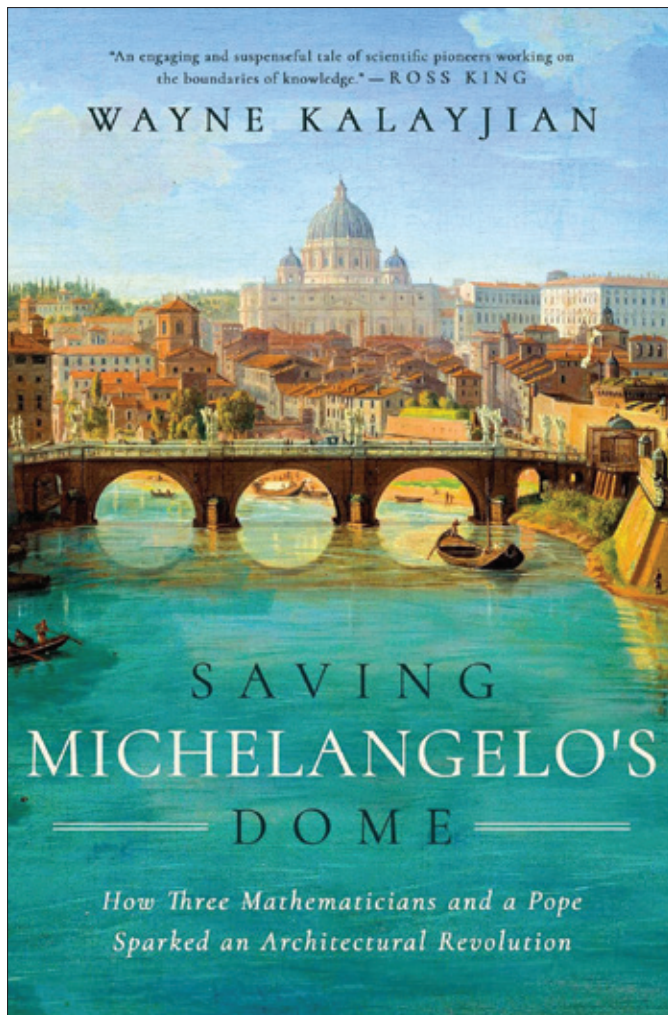
This serves Sylvia the worst. A professor and onetime debate champion, Sylvia was once essentially married to Peter until, following a horrible, unspecified accident,

she broke things off. Rooney writes movingly of their past relationship, their literary conversations and Peter's persistent feelings. Though emotional, this ends up serving a largely descriptive purpose, signifying the depth of their relationship without really plumbing it. When Rooney juxtaposes "her sincere and transcendent love of Christ" with "his ironic sort of joking but then at times terrifyingly real and serious fear of Christ," you expect that this might lead somewhere. It does not, reducing these ultimate questions to mere color, as if they were a flock of seagulls or the scent of a woman's perfume.

The result is a novel in which very little happens, and when something does—as when Ivan blocks Peter's telephone number, or Peter confronts his brother at their dead father's house—it feels oddly disconnected from Rooney's thematic concerns. Perhaps she means to structurally reflect the discontinuity of grief, in which mourning can supercharge the most mundane situations, freighting them with unexpectedly shattering emotions before ebbing away, leaving us only with the everyday. Their father remains an absent presence; we learn more about his cancer treatment than his personality. His death is ostensibly at the center of their lives. But like so much in this surprisingly light novel, it ends up on the periphery.

In opera, a musical intermezzo serves to connect one act to another. Rooney's novel ends up as an overlong interlude, poised between significant moments, not substantial enough to compose its own movement. Much of life is like this, of course: petty, insignificant, banal. But literature ought to be full, symphonic, more than life, and *Intermezzo* is only the intermission.

Robert Rubsam is a writer and critic whose work has been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Baffler*, *The Washington Post*, *Liberties*, and *The Poetry Foundation*. He is a contributing writer at *Commonweal*.



Pegasus Books / 288p \$30

Wayne Kalayjian's *Saving Michelangelo's Dome* begins with the election of Cardinal Prospero Lorenzo Lambertini to the papacy in 1740. He becomes Pope Benedict XIV after a six-month conclave, one of the longest ever. He is a charming figure: someone who never wanted to be pope, who liked hot chocolate for breakfast and who helped women become university professors at a time when that was extraordinarily controversial. He also had a problem: The dome of St. Peter's was cracking.

St. Peter's Basilica is one of the most recognizable churches in the world, a destination of spiritual pilgrimage and the symbol of the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church. In his debut book, Kalayjian explains both the complicated physics behind dome construction and the human drama that made building and fixing the dome of St. Peter's a tangled affair. He also argues that this was the first modern engineering project: the end of construction based on intuition and tradition and the beginning of construction based on mathematics.

When I heard the author speak about his book, he said he thought the fact that Benedict XIV was the pope during the dome's repair was an act of providence. A number of frail, indecisive or otherwise ineffectual 18th-century popes may have not been able to fix the dome in a timely and successful manner. Luckily, Benedict XIV was the right man for the job.

A major takeaway from this book is that it is a miracle any pre-modern church is still standing. Another is that every majestic basilica and cathedral took a really long time to build, was insanely expensive and needs constant maintenance.

Saving Michelangelo's Dome provides a brief summary of the history of Vatican Hill and Constantine's initial basilica on that spot, and then dives into the construction of the present one. There is broody Michelangelo, who is constantly changing his design for the dome. There are his rivals in the Roman architectural scene, a world that the reader quickly learns was one of immense feuding. And there are popes, including Sixtus V, who managed to construct the dome in only 22 months, in contrast to the 16 years it took for the construction of the dome of the cathedral in Florence.

Kalayjian is a structural engineer, not a church historian, which gives him the expertise to talk about the many physical forces at work on a dome and what causes it to start cracking. While he explains it as simply as possible, it can still be rough going for those of us with little background knowledge. But there are two things he makes clear: Domes are hard to build, and pre-modern architects knew very little about how they worked beyond doing what previous architects had done.

This is the thread that weaves throughout the book. The chief architectural textbook of the Renaissance was written before the birth of Christ. There were other churches that actually *did* collapse, because so much of construction was based on rules of thumb and hope.

But the world had changed since St. Peter's was built, and its cracks became too large to ignore in the 1740s, a world where suddenly mathematics was much more important. The subtitle of the book is *How Three Mathematicians and a Pope Sparked an Architectural Revolution*. Those three mathematicians were one Jesuit, Roger Boscovich, and two Minim friars, François Jacquier and Thomas Le Seur. They were all leading members of the Roman academic establishment. They did not, however, know anything about construction. But Pope Benedict XIV thought highly of them and this new world of science, and so he asked for their ideas on how to fix the dome.

It caused an uproar. The world of Roman building and design was already insular, with even architects from



To build a grand and lasting church requires intensive and difficult work.

Florence like Michelangelo viewed with suspicion. Here were a Croatian and two Frenchmen who had never held a compass telling the leading architects that everything they knew about how to do architecture was wrong. They were quickly removed from the project.

Kalayjian's argument, however, is that their *ideas* couldn't be removed. The final plan for fixing the dome was drawn up by another mathematician, the Italian Giovanni Poleni of the University of Padua. Poleni was suspicious of new ideas coming from books like Isaac Newton's *Principia*, but his plan bore a noticeable resemblance to the one illustrated by Boscovich, Jacquier and Le Seur that Poleni had criticized. The dome was saved.

The book's stance that the opinion of the three had a direct influence on the development of modern engineering can feel a little spurious. There is, in fact, too much here on the development of engineering and praise for the engineering profession. It makes the book feel untidy, especially with the part in the middle that focuses on two British architects.

There is also much about the drama of the Roman architectural establishment, and not very much about the politics of the church outside of the initial chapter talking about the conclave. The Papal States' shaky existence and its conflicts with neighboring secular countries is also alluded to but not discussed in depth. This is an architectural history book that happens to be about a religious building, and not a book about church history.

It is, however, a fascinating book that gives the reader a much better appreciation for the challenges of church construction.

One particularly novel section focuses on the builder Nicola Zabaglia, who devised a new system of scaffolding. He put out a book about how he did it, but he had to dictate the text: He was illiterate. This section is one where an "architectural history book that happens to be about a religious building" is a strength. The author's joy and excitement in scaffolding is evident, and it also appears in his praise for the neatly done construction staging. The work of the laborer is not left out in favor of solely focusing on the educated professionals, and it is also noted how dangerous this work was.

In the medieval and early modern eras, generations of workers would labor on the same church. We 21st-century Americans live in cities where we see elaborate 19th-century Gothic Revival churches that have seemingly always been part of our city's memory. But then when we visit Europe, we see churches that feel even more timeless.

Many newly built churches that imitate traditional styles do so only at the level of veneer. Well-done traditional architecture requires a lot of labor, a lot of money and a

lot of time. A rushed job, like the initial construction of St. Peter's dome, will lead to problems later.

As Kalayjian emphasizes, to build a grand and lasting church requires intensive and difficult work. Maintaining them is perhaps even more difficult—but it is worth it.

And if you are ever in St. Peter's Basilica, look up at the dome and remember that someone once had to carry a whole lot of heavy iron chains up to the top so it wouldn't fall on your head.

Greta Gaffin is a freelance writer from Boston. She has a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a master of theological studies from Boston University.

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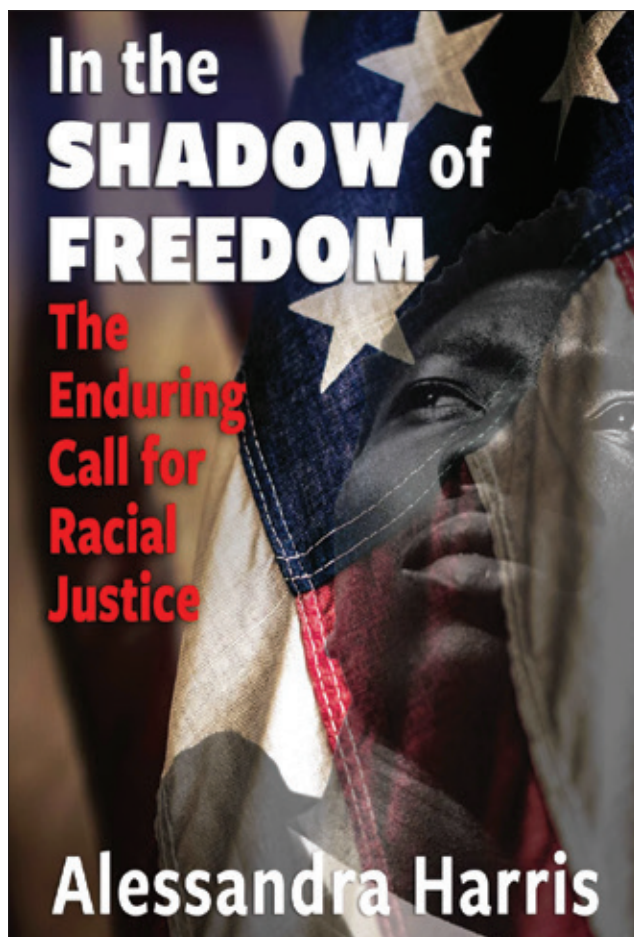
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RESTORING OUR HUMANITY



Orbis Books / 312p \$35

Readers harboring even a minimal compunction for societal failings such as racism, white superiority, inequality and the absence of simple Christian charity might rightly be troubled by Alessandra Harris's new work, *In the Shadow of Freedom*. Bolstered by extensive research and passionate prose, Harris makes a compelling argument for Catholics in particular to pay more heed to reconciliation and healing for the racist history of the United States.

Subtitled "The Enduring Search for Racial Justice," the book outlines the history and experience of African Americans from the slavery era to modern times as part of its larger argument.

A journalist and novelist, Harris is a co-founder of the Black Catholic Messenger, which since 2020 has examined issues in the Catholic Church from an African American perspective. With three books of fiction to her writing credit, Harris moves into narrative nonfiction with *In the Shadow of Freedom*. While the book comes across at times as a work of journalism or a university thesis, it contains a provocative message destined to prick the conscience of even the most complacent reader.

Harris sets the tone early by citing the Rev. Bryan N. Massingale, the African American scholar and theology professor at Fordham University: "Racism functions as an ethos, as the animating spirit of US society, which lives on despite observable changes and assumes various incarnations in different historical circumstances."

The book is structured into four main areas of focus: slavery (1619-1865), the Jim Crow era (1865-1965), the northern ghettos of the United States (1915-68) and hyper-ghettos and prisons (1968-present). By delving into the cruel mistreatment of African Americans in our present as well as our past, Harris makes a compelling case that despite the gains of the civil rights movement, African Americans are not far removed from the injustices of the Jim Crow era—a time Harris describes as "neoslavery."

"The economic devastation in Black inner-city communities in the late 1970s and early 1980s coincided with the launch of the war on drugs," Harris notes. She suggests that the federal government's efforts to combat lawlessness and drug trafficking paved the way for massive public expenditures in policing, prisons and incarceration.

"The punitive measures of over-policing, arrest, and incarceration of the African American communities that began under the Johnson administration and poured billions of dollars into waging war against Black Americans did not result in safer streets or less crime," she writes. "Instead, divestment in social programs to remedy the root causes of poverty resulted in even more devastation and violence in low-income communities."

Is Harris going out on a limb here in suggesting that the rise of inner-city ghettos in many U.S. cities is a deliberate act of government policy rather than a case of unintended consequences? Whatever the root causes, there is no denying the author's expertise and passion in shedding light on so many present-day examples of urban life gone terribly wrong.

Harris devotes significant time to the questions of over-policing and mass arrest of primarily young Black males. It is an elaboration of the case the author made in an August 2021 essay for *America* in which she argued that Catholics should seek racial justice in a number of ways, including "demilitarizing" the police and diverting funds originally intended for law enforcement toward remedial activities such as education, addiction and mental health treatment programs, and community violence prevention.

The author offers the practice of restorative justice as a progressive response to a legal system in crisis. Restorative justice emphasizes the victim and community harmed by a crime, rather than the retributive "state versus perpetrator" concept. It accords with Catholic social teaching by holding offenders accountable for their actions while offer-

ing opportunities for forgiveness and healing. For Harris, restorative justice is “a promising alternative” to the punitive system in place throughout the legal system.

“The call for restorative justice, reparations, and repair is a call for Americans to become conscious and then outraged enough to demand—and be part of—the change that needs to happen,” Harris writes. “Answering the call will cost people: their comfort, their security, their privilege, maybe even some wealth. But the moral and spiritual toll of doing nothing exacts a greater price on our collective humanity. Without justice there is no restoration; without change there is no repair.”

Harris links restorative justice, with its emphasis on restoring the humanity of the imprisoned, parolees and those who are now labeled “ex-cons,” with a message for all Catholics concerned with racial justice and community healing. “This is especially important in a society that has dehumanized Indigenous people and people of African descent since North America was colonized. Part of the process of recognizing the humanity of all people is a greater respect and understanding for people who commit harm.”

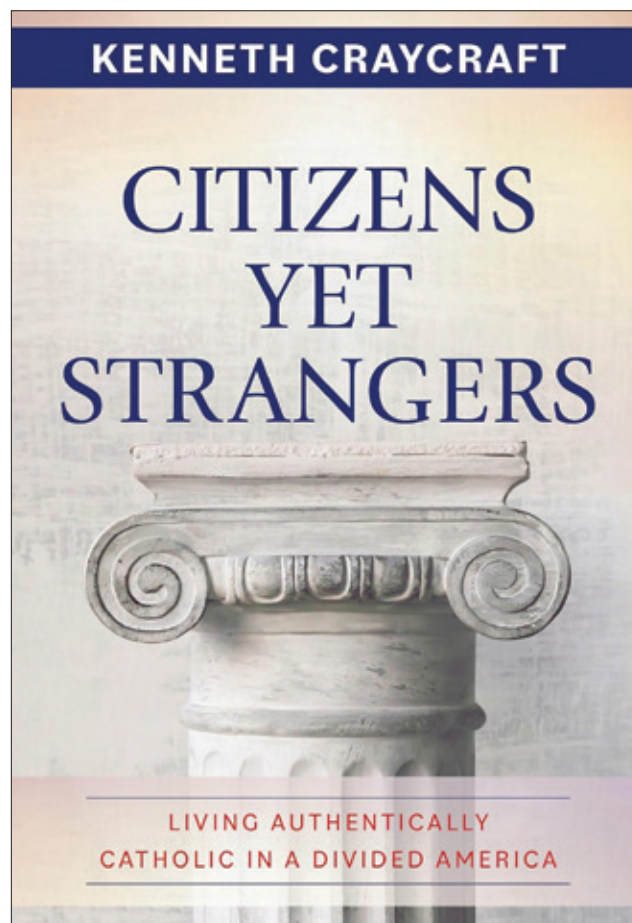
She quotes Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical, “*Populorum Progressio*,” which calls for human communities free of discrimination based on race, religion, nationality and “servitude to other men.” Harris also cites Pope Francis’ encyclical “*Fratelli Tutti*,” which denounces racism as “a virus that quickly mutates and instead of disappearing, goes into hiding and lurks in waiting.”

In addition to these papal pronouncements, Harris relies extensively on social workers, researchers and other authorities to make many of her arguments. As such, a detailed bibliography would have been a welcome addition to this work.

Nonetheless, *In the Shadow of Freedom* is an important work that needs to be taken seriously in these divisive times. This book is a committed Catholic’s prayer for racial justice to pierce a collective dark night of the soul. As Harris said in an interview shortly after the book’s release, “I did not realize how stressful it would be to write this book when I took it on. I had no idea that I would embody the pain and trauma of the Black people I wrote about in the book. I also did not realize the extent I would have to reckon with my own Catholic faith in light of the church’s history with blessing, participating in, and theologically supporting the Trans-Atlantic slave trade for centuries.”

Mike Mastromatteo is a writer, editor and book reviewer from Toronto.

ARE WE ALL LIBERAL PROTESTANTS?



Our Sunday Visitor / 208p \$27

Any argument about the political and ecclesial divisions of U.S. Catholics has a special burden: to make its account plausible, if not persuasive, across the divides it seeks to describe. This is no small thing. It is a sign of the virtue of *Citizens Yet Strangers* that it can draw reader and author alike into a conversation about the past, present and future of Catholicism in the United States.

Kenneth Craycraft’s thesis is simple: American political order presupposes the goodness of the Fall, rather than our original created goodness. In this sense we are “liberal Protestants,” treating our exile from Eden as simply normative—the state of nature, if you will. And yet Craycraft recognizes the goodness of creation and the goodness of the American political order. He thus refuses to cooperate in either a one-sided reading or the rejection of “*Gaudium et Spes*.”

One of Craycraft’s central points is that the challenges of living as “authentically Catholic,” to borrow from the book’s subtitle, do not only or even primarily arise from our citizenship in a “divided America.” The



Craycraft manages to speak to a broad audience, deploying his considerable knowledge for the benefit of anyone of good will.

human condition—created good, fallen but redeemed—preceded and will no doubt outlast the American regime. We have become antagonistic toward God and toward our fellow humans when we should really be friends.

Craycraft is aware that the response to these problems of politics, whether specific to the United States or general to the human condition, is practical as well as theoretical, a concern that his chapter on Christian citizenship as friendship addresses in a number of ways. It includes a wonderful interlude on voting, where he reminds us that in the final analysis, “the Christian vocation is not to effect social change, as Pope Benedict reminds us, but rather to witness to the truth of the Gospel.”

Craycraft also gives admirable life to the “four pillars” of Catholic social teaching. Presenting it as a set of lists or bullet points can blunt its edges and drain the life out of it, but in Craycraft’s pen we see how they illuminate and are illuminated by some of the fundamental truths about humans and their life in common. He offers systematicity without a constraining system.

In addition to all of this, Craycraft manages to speak to a broad audience, deploying his considerable knowledge for the benefit of anyone of good will. On that note, given the importance that Craycraft gives to liberal Protestantism as capturing the contemporary American political imagination, it would have been interesting to see him engage the many brilliant young Protestant thinkers in the United States who are thinking through and beyond the spirit of Rauschenbusch or Bultmann.

Perhaps the greatest gift of the book is Craycraft’s ability to draw out the political implications of an old conventional wisdom about U.S. Catholics: that we have a deep longing to fit into American society. Rejected by that society for so long, we struggle to recognize the tradeoffs of our integration into U.S. culture. But that is a necessary task if we are to be salt and light for our homeland, and indeed for the world.

Craycraft also relies upon the Jesuit priest and scholar John Courtney Murray to draw out the place of the United States in Catholic political thought. The American experiment, and particularly the religion clauses of the First Amendment, offers for the Catholic Church a vision of pluralism that, while not in keeping with the European experience, nonetheless seems to be a fruitful way forward for the church, as Pope Leo XIII himself noted in his 1895 encyclical “*Longinqua*.” And yet the challenge of such a pluralistic political order, to continually form consensus and agreement, puts tremendous pressure on the life of the faithful, and particularly the ascetic-like effort to maintain one’s faith as the rule for one’s politics, rather than allowing one’s politics to shape one’s faith.

My main criticism of the book is a minor one. One cannot cite everyone, but in a book on this topic it is to be regretted that Pope Francis is mentioned only twice, with two references to “Fratelli Tutti.” The citations include some of the most important names in this tradition, including popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI and brilliant scholars like Alasdair MacIntyre, Brian Benestad and Russell Hittinger. But the works that are *not* cited only sadly underline the intra-Catholic divisions that Craycraft seeks to overturn in other parts of the book.

The cure to our political problems is ultimately not in the constitutional or political order, although Craycraft is not calling for political quietism. We are waiting not for a Madison, but for another—doubtless very different—Archbishop Ireland.

Bill McCormick, S.J., writes for *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

WHEN FAITH FAILS US



Simon & Schuster / 192p \$28

During her freshman year of college, Anna Gazmarian was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Her constant oscillating between mania and deep depression finally had a name. But, as she explains in her debut novel, *Devout: A Memoir of Doubt*, Gazmarian does not remember reading about bipolar disorder in the Bible. Instead, she recalls biblical scenes of demonic possession, of Jesus casting out evil spirits and setting the souls of the afflicted freed.

In the evangelical Christian community in which she grew up, depression was blamed on demonic activity or a lack of “spiritual fitness.” Her church community repeatedly affirmed that her spiritual “ineptitude” led to her mental and emotional failings, and that her biological inability to “be positive” was actually just her refusal, as one pastor put it, to “look on the bright side of things like Christians do.”

In the early chapters of the memoir, we meet Gazmarian at the intersection of faith and mental health. She recalls growing up in a faith-based community in Winston-Salem, N.C., and as a young evangelical, she played by the rules: no reading Harry Potter, and no interpreting tarot cards for fear that they could summon evil spirits. She wore a puri-

ty ring, listened to Christian pop music and tried to find a “bright spot” whenever she shared stories of her mental anguish. She often shared these stories with her mother, who, as an evangelical, managed to dismiss Gazmarian’s early signs of bipolar disorder as simply her inability to find hope and happiness in the “good news” (the word *evangelical* is, in fact, derived from “good news” in Greek).

She tried to make sense of her own torment, including suicidal ideations that begin in high school, all while being told she was beloved by God. But these questions of theodicy consumed Gazmarian’s overwrought mind. “If only I said the right words, or read the right things, or through the right thoughts, then maybe God would help me,” she writes.

Faith could not free her from her anguish, and she failed to see any practical reality in the messages of Jesus’ healing that pastors, Bible study groups and spiritual directors quoted to her, like: “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering” (Mk 5:34). Faith did not heal Gazmarian; instead, an affliction of doubt haunted her.

Devout is a critique of how people of faith often respond to believers who are struggling with their mental health—and how faith answers to mental health crises while also preaching that each individual is made in the *imago Dei*. Gazmarian is told by church leaders that all the torment and mania she experiences is “the fault of [her] decisions alone” rather than a clinical disease or a biological predisposition. How could a loving God create her this way?

Gazmarian is (as am I) of Armenian descent, and she has written in the past about the horrors of the Turkish genocide against Armenians in 1915-16. Her struggles with God in *Devout* are reminiscent of Jewish writers like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, who both tried to reconcile a belief in God with a straightforward recognition of the evils present in the world, particularly with regard to the Holocaust.

Left without adequate support from her community, Gazmarian finds herself in the hands of mental health professionals who try to stabilize her internal turbulence. But over the course of young adult and adult life, doctors send her through rounds of misdiagnoses and multiple drug treatments, and they dismiss her questions and symptoms, both of her disease and the prescription cocktails, with the refrain “I’ll see you again in two weeks.”

The elements of her narrative that deal with the science of her disease are grounded in facts. When she learns that an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (A.D.H.D.) diagnosis from her childhood can overlap with symptoms of her bipolar diagnosis, she interweaves citations of medical studies into the text, almost as if she is fact-checking her doctors. The certainty with which she recounts her misdi-



We meet Gazmarian at the intersection of faith and mental health.

agnosis is juxtaposed against the swirling chaos of doubt in her faith life.

There is a sense of sterility and clarity in these moments, as she sits in waiting rooms completing intake forms or in cold leather chairs across from a new doctor. But it is easy to get lost in her timelines. While most of the memoir operates distinctively in the past or present, sometimes flashes between her present reflections as the author and her past self-introspection can be muddled. Names of drugs and their side effects start to merge, both within the body of Gazmarian and in the body of the text.

Gazmarian went through several stages of trial and error until a doctor suggested that she try ketamine to alleviate the symptoms of her bipolar disorder. If you are attuned to the world of psychiatry, names like Cymbalta, Lamictal, doxepin and Trileptal may be familiar, as they are prescribed in rapid succession, in no less than five pages.

In trying to understand who she is, in the context of both her shifting spiritual understanding and in a relentless faith community that weaponized her faith against her, Gazmarian writes in the preface: “I’ve been breaking down and rebuilding my concept of faith, searching for a faith that can exist alongside doubt, a faith that is built on trust rather than fear.”

Yet the author never tells the reader why she has remained with her evangelical community. Though stories about the balance between treating her diagnosis and maintaining the rest of her life—focusing especially on her education as a writer and poet and on her relationship with her husband, David—abound in the memoir, Gazmarian does little to explain why she remains connected to her faith.

“I needed someone to tell me that despair was also a function of faith, that even Jesus wept,” she writes of her spiritual director, Whitney, but he is one of the only salvific, “religious” figures in the memoir.

Her poems, described by Gazmarian though not included in the memoir, do not focus on spirituality but rather the milieu of the everyday. She details the relationship formed with a professor—someone who, seemingly the first to do so, sees past her mental illness and perceived brokenness and teaches her to use them as her strength.

She cites biblical stories and their examples of suf-

fering but never seems to identify what “good news” she draws from them now, only explaining what solace (or lack thereof) they provided for her past self. This is not to say the text does not answer questions that believers often ask. For those of us raised in a particular religious tradition, Gazmarian asks, “Can any of us be truly free from the ideas that shape us?” Through stories of encounters with believers and nonbelievers throughout her life, she answers with a resounding no.

This is seen most clearly in the portrait of her marriage to David, where Gazmarian spends their first years as a couple convinced that because of her illness, she is unequipped to be a loving wife to David and, later, as mother to their child, Ezra. At their wedding reception, a scene she likens to the story of the wedding at Cana, she reflects that “if this isn’t a miracle, I don’t know what is.” She sees God’s sacrificing grace peering through these human moments, and her honesty in these reflections makes the memoir’s dedication “to David and Ezra” all the more meaningful.

“God will never put you through something you can’t handle” is a mantra in her Christian community—and words often echoed by her mother. *Devout* shows how Gazmarian has “handled” and continues to handle what she has been put through, but it does not shy away from the depths of despair and doubt that are seemingly imbued within God’s providence for her. There is no tell-all scandal about her evangelical community. There is no great uncovering of medical malpractice. Instead, *Devout* is an emotional, vulnerable portrait of a woman who was failed by two institutions, both science and religion, that she rightfully believed would help her.

Christine Lenahan is a student at Boston College School of Law and a former Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., fellow at America.

JUDAS KISS
After Caravaggio’s “The Taking of the Christ”
By Angela Alaimo O’Donnell

The urgency of the kiss,
the many hands that hold him fast,
one at his throat, one furling a bright

cloak to net him in the web of lies
weft and woven by his brother,
not the first one moved to murder

the beloved in a garden. Cries
of horror sound the silence
of Christ’s sorrow at the center,

his own hands bound by his will,
they offer no resistance
to those he knows will kill

him in the dark hours to come,
their faces full of appetite
and action, only his is still,

the flick of lantern light
singling him out as the one
who dared to promise peace,

who said the kingdom come
is here and it is one of love,
not what they’re thinking of

trapped by their old violence.
He knew it would come to this.
He longs for and suffers the kiss.

Angela Alaimo O’Donnell is associate director of Fordham’s Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. She has published 11 collections of poems, most recently Dear Dante (2024).

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End the Year With Stargazing

Salvador Dalí painted perhaps the most iconic depiction of the crucifixion in the last century, called “Christ of Saint John of the Cross.” Its inspiration is said to have come from a dream the surrealist artist had. Dalí portrays a cosmic Christ whose unbloody crucifixion appears to hold the center of the universe together, while the earth below is washed with warm colors, calm waters and an empty fisherman’s boat. The work of art is haunting and comforting at the same time, and this sentiment holds true for the apocalyptic readings of this month.

The last Sunday of the liturgical year is always the Solemnity of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, which this year falls on the last Sunday of November. We read in the first reading about Daniel’s “visions during the night” that speak of the arriving kingship of one like the son of man (Dn 7:13). The opening chapter from Revelation in the second reading reminds the faithful that all the peoples of the earth will see and lament the pierced one. Not to worry,

however, for the Lord God speaks out: “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rv 1:8).

On the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, a week earlier, the readings are also taken from Jewish-Christian apocalyptic literature. The author of the Book of Daniel, like Dalí, paints a picture, but with words, and depicts a time of dread that inspires a scene of terror. “It shall be a time unsurpassed in distress,” says the author, “since nations began until that time” (Dn 12:1). This sort of writing depicts episodes of alarming crisis, like sacrilege in the most holy Temple of Jerusalem. The same passage closes, nonetheless, with words of immense comfort: “But those who lead many to justice shall be like the stars forever” (Dn 12:3).

In the surrealist images of apocalyptic writing like this, the world can appear like a dark night; but meanwhile, the stars shine brightly as divine guides that provide direction. In the actions of those who lead others to justice, one can find guides who point to our hope in the cosmic Christ.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), NOV. 3, 2024

Listen! Love your God and neighbor

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), NOV. 10, 2024

See how much the poor widow contributes

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B), NOV. 17, 2024

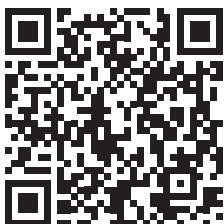
Learn from the fig tree to know the right time

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE (B), NOV. 24, 2024

Live in a kingdom that does not belong to this world



Victor M. Cancino, S.J., lives on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana and is the pastor of St. Ignatius Mission. He received his licentiate in Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

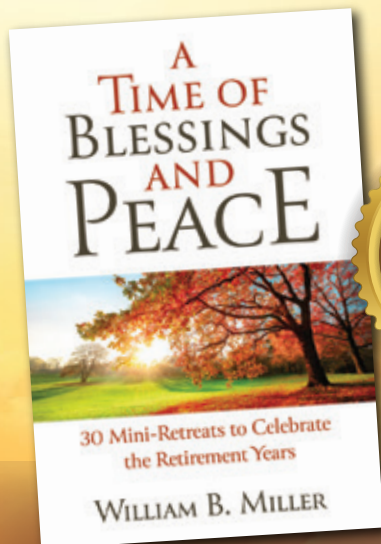


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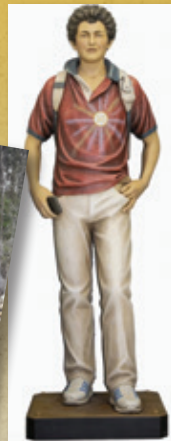


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Food and Faith

On the lies about Haitian immigrants

By Tinamarie Stolz



At the presidential debate in September, Donald Trump said that Haitian immigrants in Ohio are “eating the pets of the people that live there.” One of the debate moderators immediately debunked the rumor, but this unfounded, untrue and unhinged claim literally kept me up at night. By 1:30 a.m., I still couldn’t figure out why this particular comment felt so sticky, personal and violating.

With some deep breaths, I invited God into my reeling thoughts. It did not take long for God to show me why. I grabbed my phone, opened the Photos app, and typed “food” into the search bar—and 645 photos from my albums appeared. Most were images of meals with friends from multiple countries with varying U.S. legal statuses. As I scrolled through images of food from immersion trips to the southern U.S. border with my students, a summer at the Oakland Catholic Worker and time spent with friends, I realized that most of my most meaningful meals were prepared by friends born outside of the United States who made a courageous journey to be here.

Among the images, I found: a plate of Karen’s tamales. (I have changed the names in this essay to protect others’ privacy.) She allowed me and my students to visit her home where she gifted us with her tamales and stories about life as a person without legal status in the United States. I found *steak tlayuda* with *quesillo* from a friend’s birthday party. We celebrated with a table full of his favorite dishes from his home state in Mexico. He hasn’t been able to have his mother’s

homemade cooking in 17 years.

Also: hamburgers from the time some friends and I returned late to the Catholic Worker after a guest’s soccer practice and we just needed a pile of protein. Noodles, rice, plantains and orange juice from a family who stayed at my place for a few days after being released from an immigration detention center. *Tapado Costeño*, a Honduran seafood soup I made with a friend I consider a brother, just because he had a craving. *Gorditas* from Joan, who taught my students and me how to make them on an immersion trip at the border. (After we shared the meal together, she spoke about the intersection of disability and immigration rights through her daughter’s story.)

I found a photo of a 7-year-old’s birthday cake with green icing, a blue border and little plastic cars for decoration. His asylum case is tied to his mother’s. Then a *baleada* made as a friend recounted being shot at by gang members in his home country. His 6-year-old shared how scary it was to see “Papi with blood on him.” And the first cup of coffee a friend made at the Catholic Worker House. He didn’t trust me at first, but after he brought this over, I knew we’d be just fine.

I could go on. Over these meals, I have witnessed and experienced the love of God. Food is an inseparable part of relationships, community and faith. None of this should surprise us. As Catholics, that’s our whole thing: We share the Eucharistic meal together each time we go to Mass. We have a God who is also food, who chooses to be there for us in the form of bread.

The sacredness of God is in all things, but seems exceptionally present over a meal.


Dorothy Day said, “We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love, we must know each other. We know him in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet, and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.”

I have lived that because my siblings in Christ from all over the world, with varying stories, cuisines and U.S. legal statuses have freely given me their hospitality, care and love over a plate or a cup.

When I heard Mr. Trump spewing lies about what is on others’ plates, it struck me as more than just a deranged accusation, because his words and accusations defile those Eucharistic moments we all use to connect and need to survive. Everyone eats. He chose to weaponize the most fundamental part of our shared humanity. It was a gross violation of my community, their sacredness and the holy space they create over meals.


Sharing meals can make two humans friends. Sharing our lives and hearts and selves over meals makes us a true community.

Tinamarie Stolz is the assistant director of campus ministry at Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia.



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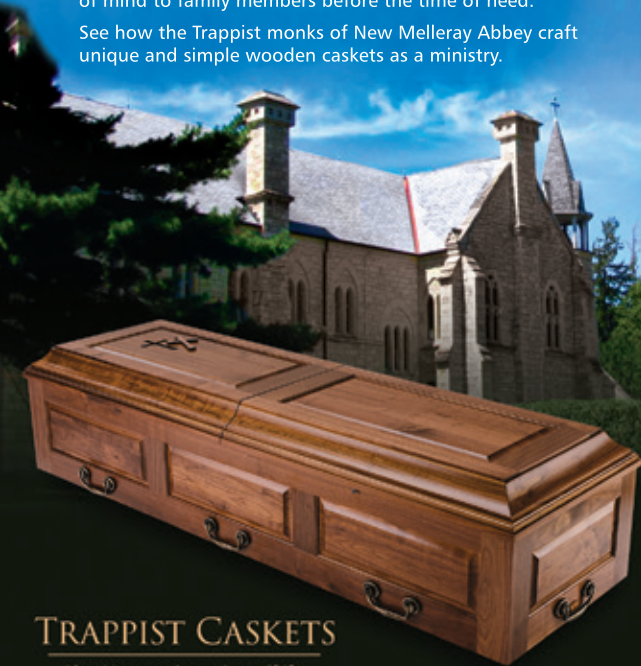
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