

# America

JANUARY 2025

JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

## MIGRATION IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

A Catholic guide  
to resisting  
extremism

Kristin E. Heyer

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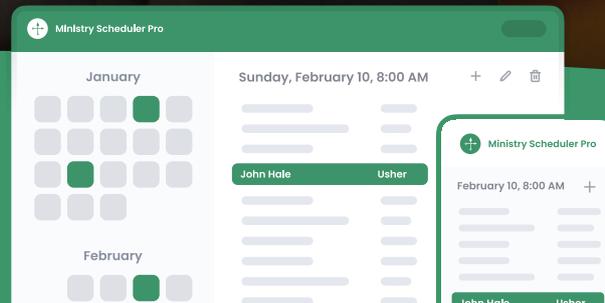
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## Compassion Means Sharing One Another's Suffering, Even at the End

At the end of November, a bill that would legalize assisted suicide for terminally ill patients in England and Wales passed its second reading in Britain's House of Commons, with 330 members in favor and 275 opposed. While the bill still faces several more hurdles before it is enacted, no other bill on the topic has ever made it this far.

Members of Parliament were free to vote their conscience, rather than being expected to hew to their party's position, and ministers within the current Labour government voted on both sides of the issue. Even though the outcome of the vote was tragic, the quality of the debate was striking, at least as viewed from this side of the Atlantic. In particular, there was serious engagement with the question of whether or not the availability of assisted suicide could lead to pressure on patients to opt to die in order to avoid being a burden on their families and loved ones.

The debate in Britain often turned to whether or not the safeguards in place in the law were sufficient or whether adequate palliative care was available so that suicide would truly be chosen freely by a patient. The guardrails in the proposed law are significant: Only patients with fewer than six months to live would be eligible; their decisions would need to be endorsed by two doctors and a judge; a waiting period would be required before proceeding; and the dying person would have to self-administer the lethal dose of medication.

Certainly, those are far more stringent conditions than have applied in Canada, where "medical assistance in dying" (MAID) accounted for more than 4 percent of all deaths in 2022, according to the government's most

recent report. This year, Canada delayed the implementation of a law that would make people suffering solely from mental illness eligible for assisted suicide; that is now scheduled to go into effect in 2027. Part of the reasoning that led to the delay was to improve the provision of mental health services to reduce the risk of people choosing death because they could not access care.

There is a striking parallel between these debates—the question of when a health system can be said to provide enough care to make it "safe" to offer people the choice to kill themselves without running the risk that they will do so for the wrong reasons.

The absurdity of that question once it is laid out in clear terms should reveal the moral crisis of the whole idea of assisted suicide. But there are tremendous pressures, involving our compassion for those suffering at the end of life and our own fear of death and loss of control, that cloud our vision when we consider such questions.

Some people may try to resolve the absurdity of that question by rejecting the idea that there are "wrong reasons" to want to die. The *New York Times* recently featured an interview with Ellen Wiebe, a Canadian physician who has performed hundreds of MAID procedures. She described her commitment to patients' ability to choose to die in terms of human rights.

Chillingly, she also told the story of a man, confined to a bed in a hospice, who asked for MAID in order to avoid being a burden on his family. "Sorry," she said, "that's not a good enough reason." But just when a reader might think the safeguards in the system have worked, she goes on to explain that "he also was very distressed at the fact that he had been a person who'd

taken care of his family and now he could have people take care of him, and it was unbearable to him that he was in that state and wasn't getting better. So I had to determine that his suffering also included that." That determination having been made, she found him eligible to ask for his own death.

Perhaps Britain's more stringent proposed safeguards might avoid such an outcome or at least make it less likely. But no guardrail, no matter how high, can manage to completely distinguish our own suffering from the suffering of those who love us and share our pain, and the burden we might want to spare them at the bitter end.

Instead, we need to recognize that suffering and compassion are not just inevitably intertwined but are in fact interdependent. We cannot be truly compassionate unless we are willing to share in others' suffering and to let others share in ours. Assisted suicide presents itself as a compassionate answer and a way out of suffering, but the goal it really serves is not compassion but an illusion of final autonomy: that we can and should control our own lives completely, even as we are losing them. No matter how many rules and procedures we put around it, that can never be a safe or compassionate way to relate to other human beings.

The truth is, our lives have never been exclusively our own. From our first dependence on our parents to our last dependence on those who love and care for us, human dignity is ennobled, rather than degraded, by our need for care from others.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.



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AP Photo/Christophe En

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Above: A medieval statue of the Virgin Mary is returned from the church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois to Notre-Dame Cathedral during a procession on Nov. 15, 2024, in Paris. Notre-Dame reopened on Dec. 8 after a devastating fire in 2019.

Cover: America/iStock

## Is ‘Conclave’ worth seeing for Catholics?

“Conclave,” a fictional account about the election of the pope, was welcomed by audiences in theaters this fall. Not only is the film a box office success, but critics believe many of the performances may be worthy of Academy Awards. **America** offered readers an analysis from Christopher Bellitto, a historian at Kean University, as well as a closer look at the film from John Anderson, who reviews films for the magazine. The analysis and review provoked online readers into a thoughtful discussion.

My reaction to this film was mixed. I loved the acting in this movie, especially that of Ralph Fiennes and Isabella Rossellini, but was not at all impressed with the plot. As a frequent consumer of mysteries and thrillers, I was disappointed especially in the last 30 minutes of the film. I found the cardinals to be stereotypical caricatures, and the focus on their ambitions made the film into a political thriller. It was set within the majesty and ancient rites of the church but lacked in the spirituality I would hope all the cardinals would radiate, even as flawed men. Even as a political thriller, though, the film’s promised “surprises” fell flat with me and seemed like a too-pat ending by an author who had written himself into a corner.

**Teresa McLendon**

I loved the movie. I love how it ended. I loved how it compared someone who has experienced war and could project a loving presence with someone willing to go to war.

**Freida Jacques**

Great review, and it’s interesting to read what elicited laughter from the crowd watching the movie with you. I laughed out loud at a different point—in response to the surprise as it was revealed.

My laughter was entirely involuntary, and I wonder now if those around me thought it was derisive, when in fact, it was pure delight. Having been immersed in Robert Harris’s rich storytelling, the exceptional cinematography and the intense contrast between the roles of the cardinals and the nuns during the conclave, I was completely caught off-guard by the denouement. As the revelation sunk in, I was filled with joy—and the whole movie left me very hopeful.

I know other Catholics have been disappointed or even outraged by the ending, but I am optimistic that most will be lifted up by this great work of theological imagination.

**Lisa Woodall**

This film will challenge Catholics who still have a Catholic grade school understanding of the church’s form of governance, including the role of cardinals in their relationship

with the pope. It will delight those who see the church as alive and open to the world. Through the stress and turmoil of this human process, it becomes clear that, true to his promise, Christ the Lord has been present through his Spirit to bring about the results that he has planned for his church. Aware of their humanity, [the cardinals] still remain open to the work of the Spirit among them.

It becomes clear that, as an institution, the church is unique and remarkable and while truly in the world, at the service of the world, she is not of the world. Another force is at work in her to accomplish the plan of God on Earth. “My thoughts are not the same as your thoughts, and my ways are above your ways,” says the Lord. As it was, and is and ever shall be. Amen.

**Elizabeth Riebschlaeger, C.C.V.I.**

While informative, Christopher Bellitto’s historic review of our Catholic conclaves points out the quaintness of an exclusive (as in non-inclusive), seemingly-but-not-really-democratic process. All happening while half of the baptized members of our church are not male.

**Mary O’Neill**

I watched the movie and, contrary to other commenters, I thought it was interesting and well done. After all, it was not produced as a documentary but as a fictional movie. As a reasonably informed Catholic, I took it as such and enjoyed it.

**James Okraszewski**

Having just finished the book, which appears to vary in some details from the movie (which I’ve yet to watch), I had the same reaction to the conclusion as you note in your review for the film. I thought Mr. Harris’s sense for Catholic clerical spirituality and Vatican culture was excellent. The book reminded me of 1963’s *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, which was similarly hard to put down. (Oh, and good on you Mr. Anderson, for not giving away the ending.)

**Alfred Chavez**

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## What Did the Election Tell Us? What Questions Should We Be Asking?

A glance at American history confirms that the 2024 election was unusual. The last time the presidency alternated between parties in three successive elections was from 1884 to 1892, when Grover Cleveland was elected to non-consecutive terms. Benjamin Harrison's election in 1888 intervened. (Mr. Harrison also won the Electoral College while losing the popular vote, which did not happen again until George W. Bush's election in 2000 and then Donald J. Trump's election in 2016.)

The 2024 election was also the fourth consecutive election in which the margin of the popular vote was less than 5 percentage points, the longest such streak since the six times between 1876 and 1896. By historical standards, partisan control in Congress has also been brief and tenuous in recent years; neither party has controlled either house of Congress for more than eight years since the Republicans lost the House in 2006.

This is not to suggest that past is prologue, or that poring over the history of the 1890s can predict the path forward. Rather, these historical comparisons offer confirmation, if such is needed, that in our present era, American politics is unusually closely divided.

As Americans try to understand the results of Mr. Trump's re-election, with his decisive Electoral College win and roughly 1.5-percentage-point margin of victory in the popular vote, this background of more than a decade of slim margins and partisan alternation deserves attention. It is not enough to simply analyze exit polls and look at the particular counties that voted for President Obama, then President Trump, then President Biden, then President Trump again.

The array of often contradictory

post-election analysis based on exit polling offers little more than a blurry and unsatisfying sketch of the electorate. Much of it focuses on determining what issues were most important for swing voters—the economy, or immigration, or the current administration's handling of either issue, or attitudes about Mr. Trump's disruption of political and constitutional norms—and what sort of mandate the incoming administration might claim.

While all of those are significant questions, we should also be asking what background conditions have left the country so closely divided across so many different issues. There may be an intersection between exit polling and the background question of a closely divided electorate. Almost three-quarters of voters think the country is headed in the wrong direction, and three-quarters also see democracy as threatened. In the seven swing states that decided the election, 68 percent to 73 percent of voters said democracy was threatened.

Before the election, most commentators—including the editors of **America**, in repeated warnings about Mr. Trump as a threat to constitutional norms—would have assumed that strong voter agreement that democracy is in trouble would have benefited Kamala Harris. Instead, we face the reality of voters who both see democracy as threatened and voted for Mr. Trump.

Some combination of effects is likely in play here, with the relative proportions being difficult or impossible to determine. First, there could be voters who believed democracy was threatened by Mr. Trump but decided that some other concern, such as inflation or immigration, was more pressing. Second, there could be voters who saw Ms. Harris, rather than

Mr. Trump, as a threat to democracy, either because of concerns about government overreach (for example, during pandemic lockdowns, which were generally stricter in states run by Democrats, or in the various prosecutions of Mr. Trump) or because they still believe Mr. Trump's lies about the 2020 election having been stolen.

Third, and probably hardest to characterize fully, are those voters who might be saying that democracy is threatened because of a feeling that the system itself does not work—because the elites of both parties do not prioritize the concerns of the average American, being focused on maintaining their own grip on power in Washington. For some of these voters, Mr. Trump's performative disdain for traditional political norms may be attractive, even if his policy proposals are incoherent, unjust or threaten economic upheaval.

While the first two cases above are mostly topics for debate and persuasion, turning on the judgments that voters make based on good or bad information about the character and policy aims of the candidates, the third issue runs deeper. Both parties routinely make policy proposals they describe as prioritizing “regular” Americans, but rather than being able to coalesce around a consensus set of proposals, some voters seem to be left in the position of casting one protest vote after another, serially rejecting the current incumbent.

It is also worth remembering that millions of voters who went to the polls in 2020 then chose to sit out the 2024 election, perhaps feeling that they had no one to vote for who represented their interests.

One clear lesson to be taken from the last election is that a large number

of Americans are unsure whether our existing democratic norms and institutions actually do, in the words of the preamble to the Constitution, help to “promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” In the language of Catholic social teaching, we might say that voters doubt whether the system in which they participate sustains the common good.

Another way to put this might be that Americans struggle to recognize a good that can truly be held in common across our differences. What is good for the coasts seems not to be good for the heartland; what is good for those with college degrees seems different from what is good for blue-collar workers.

In his encyclical “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis reminded the church that political charity involves seeking “the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them” (No. 182). The place for those who are committed to the common good to begin, then, is by working to rebuild a sense of “the social dimension that unites” individuals and communities. “Good politics,” the pope says, “will seek ways of building communities at every level of social life.”

That is a high ideal, and will require political patience as well as charity. We offer two suggestions for how this work might begin. First, local examples of cooperation, as in states where a governor of one party has proven able to work with the other party holding a legislative majority, should be both studied and celebrated. The national parties should work to recruit candidates who have proven their ability in such settings.

Second, building community requires making a distinction between opposing unjust actions and policies and vilifying or ostracizing those who voted for, or failed to vote against, the leaders who are implementing them. The same recognition of “the good of all people” that animates advocacy for justice also requires seeking to hold that good in common even with political opponents.

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## ‘Whatever God wills’: After a divisive election, Hispanics in L.A. unite in faith

As the results of the 2024 U.S. presidential election were announced, a wave of fear swept through my community in Los Angeles. Donald J. Trump’s victory left many in the city’s large immigrant population feeling anxious and uncertain about the future. (See “Trump restoration raises fears of deportation in U.S. immigrant communities,” Page 12.) For many Hispanics, this outcome signaled a potential return to a time of increased immigration raids and mass deportations at workplaces, bus stops or even local supermarkets.

In the days following the election, the atmosphere in Los Angeles was heavy with unease. On the surface, people went about their daily routines—heading to work, attending classes and trying to maintain a sense of normalcy. But beneath this veneer was a shared anxiety, a quiet dread about what might come next. For many, the prevailing sentiment was one of resignation—*Lo que Dios quiere*, or “whatever God wills”—as they

braced for the possibility of intensified immigration crackdowns.

The majority of Mexican and Hispanic immigrants in Los Angeles are devout Catholics, deeply rooted in their faith and dedicated to attending Sunday Mass. Yet this election revealed a stark division within the Catholic community. Prominent Hispanic Catholic celebrities, like the film producer Eduardo Verástegui, played a significant role in endorsing and celebrating Mr. Trump’s victory, seeming to disregard the fears of undocumented immigrants—many of whom share their faith.

For many undocumented Catholics who seek solace and community in their faith, the strong support for Mr. Trump among many Catholics and Hispanics felt like a betrayal. The people they stood alongside in church now appeared indifferent to their fears, leaving them to wonder where to turn for support as they face an uncertain future.

With over 40 percent of Califor-

nia’s Hispanic voters supporting Mr. Trump, this election indicates that many Hispanic voters feel the Democratic Party no longer fully addresses their concerns. In 2020, Joe Biden’s victory inspired hope for many Latino Americans who believed the new administration would address the issues most critical to them. With Democrats holding a majority in Congress, there seemed to be a real possibility for immigration reform that could improve the lives of millions, especially young Dreamers who were brought to the United States as children and long to become citizens. The moment seemed ripe for long-overdue immigration reform, a priority for Latino communities across the country. Yet as we look back after the 2024 election, it is clear that the Democrats missed an opportunity to fulfill this promise.

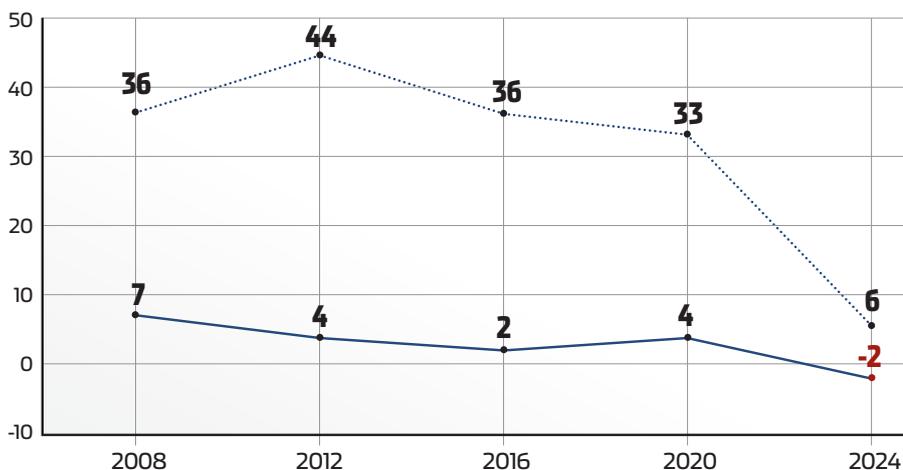
Mr. Trump capitalized on this disconnect. In California and southern Texas, where Hispanic communities are predominantly Catholic, Mr. Trump achieved record-breaking support by leaning into religious values and using influential church allies to support his platform. For many in these communities, Mr. Trump’s appeal to traditional values felt more relatable than Ms. Harris’s focus on social issues that seemed secondary to their immediate concerns.

### Hispanic Voters Shift Right

Mr. Trump’s gains among Hispanics in 2024 are a wake-up call for Democrats. The rightward shift in Hispanic politics challenges the notion of this demographic as a monolithic, naturally Democratic constituency. Instead, it signals that Hispanic voters are increasingly independent and pragmatic, choosing candidates and policies that align with their values and priorities. Republicans have made

### A falling Democratic advantage among Hispanic voters

- Democratic margin, in percentage points, among all U.S. voters
- Democratic margin, in percentage points, among Hispanic voters



Source: Brookings Institution analysis of Edison Research exit polls, as reported by CNN

significant strides by tapping into fundamental cultural values that resonate with Hispanic voters, such as faith, family and community.

The Democratic Party has at times focused on progressive social issues while ignoring Hispanic cultural values. For many Hispanic voters, faith and family are inseparable from their political choices. Mr. Trump, despite his divisive rhetoric, tapped into these overlooked values. He spoke directly to economic and security concerns while reinforcing family-oriented and religious values, appealing to conservative segments within the Hispanic community. His outreach acknowledged these core values that the Democratic Party has too often dismissed as secondary.

Republicans have capitalized on the perception that the Democratic Party's focus on progressive social issues has overlooked working-class concerns. "Latinos for Trump" amplified his economic messaging, appealing to working-class families and small business owners by focusing on job creation and opportunities for upward mobility. In contrast, Ms. Harris's outreach centered on expanding social programs and promises of immigration reform. However, the perceived shortcomings of the Biden administration are being felt on the streets of Los Angeles, where people have to work harder to pay for rent and food because of inflation.

Driving through Los Angeles, it is also impossible to ignore the devastating consequences of the fentanyl epidemic. Streets are lined with homeless encampments, and the human toll of addiction is starkly visible to the mostly Latino families who live in the city. Many view this crisis as a direct consequence of unchecked border policies that have enabled the surge in drug trafficking—a concern that Republicans successfully tied to their broader



A "Latino Americans for Trump" office opens in Reading, Pa., on June 12, 2024.

critique of Democratic governance. By prioritizing these concerns and framing them as issues of community safety, family stability and economic opportunity, the G.O.P. crafted a message that struck a chord with many Hispanic voters.

After this election, both Republicans and Democrats must understand that the support of the Hispanic electorate must be won with thoughtful, considered appeals to Hispanic voters' values and concerns, not with unfulfilled promises. By ignoring the needs of Latino voters, particularly Mexican-Americans and Hispanic Catholics with undocumented relatives, Democrats lost the trust of communities that had been loyal allies for decades.

The election may be over, but the fear and anxiety many in Los Angeles feel are a stark reminder of the human cost of political decisions and the divisions they can deepen within our communities. In the wake of Mr. Trump's victory, the dilemma for many immigrant families became not just about politics but also about a loss of trust and a struggle to reconcile their faith with the harsh realities they might soon face.

In my community, we carry on. We keep cooking in restaurants, mowing lawns and caring for children. We continue contributing to this country's economy, even as fear and anxiety linger over an uncertain future. Despite the challenges and the constant undercurrent of worry, we hold out hope that there will one day be a fair and compassionate immigration reform.

As we wait for that day, we look toward our fellow Hispanic Catholics who supported Mr. Trump in this election. We hope they will stand with the immigrant community now and advocate for their undocumented brothers and sisters. We share the same faith and values, and we hope they will use their influence to intercede for those lacking legal status in the country they call home.

---

*José Luis Castro is a Ph.D student in Chicano/an and Central American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. As a historian, his focus is on studying and analyzing the Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American communities in California. He is originally from Mexico City.*



## Trump restoration raises fears of deportation in U.S. immigrant communities

By J.D. Long García

President-elect Donald J. Trump is already preparing for his incoming administration to fulfill his campaign promises. While many of his supporters will welcome such efforts, advocates say immigrants in their communities are frightened.

Mr. Trump vowed to increase border security measures and deport millions of undocumented immigrants. On Nov. 10, Mr. Trump announced that he would appoint Thomas D. Homan, who led U.S. Immigration and Customs

Enforcement during the previous Trump administration, to oversee the border and carry out the mass deportations. Mr. Trump also tapped Stephen Miller, a longtime aide, to serve as deputy chief of staff for policy. Mr. Miller is known as an immigration hardliner, whose policies led to family separations during the previous administration.

On Nov. 12, Mr. Trump said he would nominate Gov. Kristi Noem of South Dakota to run the Department of Homeland Security. If confirmed, Ms. Noem would head an agency that is at the center of Mr. Trump's sweeping immigration plans and his campaign vow to carry out mass deportations of immigrants who are in the United States illegally. In 2021 she joined other Republican governors who sent troops to Texas to assist that state's Operation Lone Star, which sought to increase security along the border.

"These are clear signs that the president-elect intends

to carry out some of the worst campaign promises, including mass deportation,” Dylan Corbett, the executive director of Hope Border Institute, told **America**. “And we have a lot of people in the country right now who are afraid today.”

Mr. Trump likely understands the system better after serving out his first administration, and Mr. Corbett expects the coming four years to be severe for those who “live in the country without documents, and for the people who are fleeing to our country for protection.”

But it is not just immigrants who are concerned. Those who work with migrants are “feeling a lot of grief and anxiety,” Mr. Corbett said, noting how Republican politicians have been threatening church and humanitarian efforts to help immigrants. Last year, Attorney General Ken Paxton of Texas attempted to shut down Annunciation House, a Catholic nonprofit serving migrants and asylum seekers at the Southern border.

“The church needs to offer a clear word of solidarity,” Mr. Corbett said, “both with migrants and with those who minister to migrants. It’s going to be a difficult four years ahead.”

Linda Dakin-Grimm, an immigration attorney in southern California, described the reaction to Mr. Trump’s election as “12 hours of just shock and despair.”

“Everybody started wondering, ‘How bad is it going to be?’ And since we lived through this before, when there were more constraints, I think we know,” she told **America**.

Ms. Dakin-Grimm is urging her clients to complete applications for immigration status, including asylum claims, before Mr. Trump takes office. She is also urging those with work permits to renew them. Ms. Dakin-Grimm expects the administration to reduce work permits and to wind down Temporary Protected Status, which the Department of Homeland Security confers on individuals whose home countries are suffering from ongoing conflict, environmental disasters or other unsafe conditions. T.P.S. protects them from being deported back to their home countries.

“Those of us who are working in the field foresee a real closing of the doors all the way around,” Ms. Dakin-Grimm said. “They want to end family-based migration, and they want to only have employment-based migration for who they consider worthy people. That would be a really massive change to the system.”

Josephine López Paul is a lead organizer with Communities Organized for Public Service in San Antonio. Her organization expected to draw 1,000 community members together at an event in December.

“There’s division and trauma everywhere, so we’re hoping this gathering will be a light—what we need to be as a community and to be brothers and sisters to each other in this city,” she said. “The election doesn’t change what we do. We keep on going.” She reported a “palpable fear” in the community.

“The electorate voted against immigrants,” Ms. López Paul said. “But most of these folks don’t live the everyday reality that we do. We feel the pain of immigrants in our city and on the border and in our region.”

Making local connections, she said, breaks down barriers and dispels false caricatures of immigrants. “They are not a danger,” Ms. López Paul said. “These are our neighbors.”

Mr. Corbett described the next four years as a time for Catholics to answer Pope Francis’ call to be a church that accompanies and stands with the marginalized.

“Pope Francis has been asking for a church that’s committed to people who are in desperate circumstances, people who find themselves in situations of isolation and persecution and exclusion,” he said. “It will be a moment of trial for the church, but I think it will also be a moment of deep renewal.”

In recent interviews, Mr. Homan has said that he would initially pursue deporting undocumented immigrants posing a risk to public safety, according to The Associated Press. He also denied that the U.S. military would be assisting in finding and deporting immigrants.

“You concentrate on the public safety threats and the national security threats first, because they’re the worst of the worst,” Mr. Homan said on Fox News’s “Sunday Morning Futures.” He also said ICE would move to implement Mr. Trump’s plans in a “humane manner.”

“It’s going to be a well-targeted, planned operation conducted by the men of ICE,” he said. “The men and women of ICE do this daily. They’re good at it.”

*Material from The Associated Press was used in this report.*

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J.D. Long García, *senior editor*.

## Migration deterrence policies are effective—at driving up deaths along the border

Decades of accumulated data suggest that while changes over the years in border enforcement strategies have not reduced the number of unauthorized crossings into the United States, they have proved to be a major contributing factor to a rising death toll among migrants seeking to reach the United States.

That is the key finding of an analysis conducted by the Center for Migration Studies of New York. The C.M.S. study, titled “The Weight of Numbers: Counting Border Crossing Deaths and Policy Intent,” includes contributions from experts in every state along the U.S.-Mexico border.

According to the study, enforcement tactics do not in the end deter asylum seekers, who are typically fleeing life-threatening circumstances or are seeking to be reunited with loved ones. They are willing to take great risks to escape their circumstances. But stricter enforcement does push border crossers to more dangerous paths and more perilous forms of migration.

“People are dying [because of] border enforcement tactics,” said Donald Kerwin, the center’s former executive director, pointing to the latest data on migrants who have died or suffered crippling injuries after attempting to overcome fortified and heightened walls at the border in an interview with *America*. Mr. Kerwin cited one example—the death of Miriam Stephany Girón Luna, a pregnant 19-year-old woman who died in 2020 after falling from a border wall in El Paso, Tex. Doctors tried in vain to save her baby through an emergency C-section.

It is not yet clear what enforcement changes the incoming Trump administration plans to make at the border, Mr. Kerwin said, but an emphasis on fortifying the border wall would likely make migrant mortality worse. More enforcement will not stem the influx of migrants, he said. It will force migrants to find even more dangerous routes for a crossing.

In 2023, the International Organization for Migration called the U.S.-Mexico border the world’s deadliest land migration route. By August 2024, at least 5,405 individuals had died or gone missing since 2014 in the U.S. Southwest. After a few years during the Covid-19 pandemic, when migrant deaths declined because fewer people were able to migrate at all, migrant deaths rose sharply in 2023 and are trending higher in 2024.

New enforcement strategies instituted during the pandemic contributed to increases in the number of deaths, Mr. Kewin said. Title 42, an emergency component of a 1944 public health law, allowed Border Patrol agents to immediately turn back migrants at ports of entry. Thousands of migrants responded by seeking out more isolated

spots along the desert border for clandestine entry into the United States, contributing to the death toll.

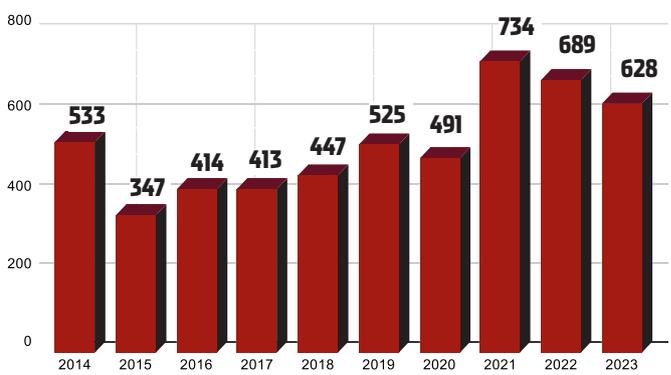
The C.M.S. analysis also found that the Border Patrol has for years undercounted migrant border deaths, according to Daniel E. Martinez, co-director of the Binational Migration Institute at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

“There is no centralized, standardized effort across the border to enumerate and track migrant fatalities,” he said. Mr. Martinez estimates that the Border Patrol undercounts migrant deaths by at least 20 percent.

“We know people are dying, and we have the capacity to prevent those deaths,” Mr. Martinez said, “but the political will to do something about it doesn’t seem to be there.” Despite 30 years of analysis and policy recommendations, he said, “migrant deaths continue unabated.”

The report recommends improvements in the track-

### Confirmed deaths at U.S.-Mexico border



Missing Migrants Project - U.N. International Organization for Migration

ing of migrant deaths and best practices for coordinating the data among U.S. states. It also urges additional fiscal support to hire more medical examiners and to make DNA testing more widely available. In the end, the report’s collaborators also called bluntly for an end to the “prevention by deterrence” approach.

Other practical steps that would reduce the migrant death toll include improving access to legal immigration and reducing the backlog of asylum claims in U.S. immigration courts. According to the report, Texas authorities should also establish “regional migrant identification centers” to improve accounting and increase documentation of migrant fatalities.

—J.D. Long García

## New Italian law extends restrictions on gestational surrogacy

Italian lawmakers moved to shut down the emerging international market in gestational surrogacy in October, when Italy's Senate passed a law prohibiting Italians from seeking surrogacy abroad.

Italian lawmakers condemned surrogacy as a “universal crime.” Before the new prohibition, an estimated 250 Italian couples annually sought surrogates abroad to “host” their pregnancies.

Domestic commercial surrogacy is already illegal in Italy, as it is in nearly all other European countries. (Surrogacy is legal in the United States, but it is not regulated by federal law, and its status varies from state to state.) The new legislation makes engaging in surrogacy in another country, even where it may be legal, a criminal offense for Italian citizens.

The law has been praised by feminists and medical ethicists around the world.

“Today is a great day of celebration for those of us who have worked tirelessly to stop the exploitation of women and the sale of children through contract surrogate pregnancies,” Jennifer Lahl, founder of the Center for Bioethics and Culture, said in a statement on Oct. 16.

The center supports an international ban on surrogacy, its executive director, Kallie Fells, told **America**. That idea is supported by Pope Francis, who called for a global surrogacy ban last January during his annual meeting with international diplomats to the Holy See.

The pope said then that surrogacy is “a grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother’s material needs.”

“A child is always a gift and never the basis of a commercial contract,” he said.

Surrogacy is widely considered a violation of human rights in Europe. The European Union even identified surrogacy as a form of human trafficking in a revision to a juridical directive on trafficking. But that has not stopped some Europeans from seeking loopholes that allow them to locate women abroad who are willing to act as gestational surrogates.

Ukraine, for example, has long been a surrogacy hot spot for Western Europeans, and a growing surrogacy industry in Mexico serves mostly Europeans, many of them gay couples.

The United States is also an attractive destination for Europeans seeking to obtain a baby through surrogacy. In many American states it is relatively easy to enter into a commercial surrogacy contract, according to Joseph Meaney, a fellow at the National Catholic Bioethics Center.



Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni joins Pope Francis in Rome on May 12, 2023.

Spain, like Italy and other European countries, recognizes motherhood only through physical birth or through adoption. In many surrogacy-friendly jurisdictions, however, so-called intended parents appear on the birth certificate without the name of the birth mother through a judicial pre-birth parentage order. European authorities will sometimes accept these birth certificates to establish parentage and confer citizenship on the child.

Many bioethicists and feminists have hailed the new Italian law as a concrete step in the protection of women and children, while critics have called it ideologically driven and inhumane. In a statement critical of the new prohibition, Alessia Crocini, president of Rainbow Families, an organization that supports L.G.B.T.Q. parents, said it was part of “a right-wing crusade against diverse families.”

But supporters of the law disagree, arguing that it will prevent some of the harms of international surrogacy.

“By ‘allowing’ Europeans an opportunity to exploit women in the United States, Ukraine, Mexico or other countries, they are facilitating the existence of a dangerous loophole,” Ms. Fells said, responding to **America** by email. She called it “an adult-centered loophole that does not consider the well-being of the infant or infants in question.”

Besides the potential for the exploitation of women inherent in the practice of commercial surrogacy, additional problems include “abandonment (as seen during the Covid pandemic), stateless children, abuse, trafficking, illicit adoption and health impacts on the mother and child,” Ms. Fells said.

Yet even its supporters wonder how well the new law can be enforced and if it will significantly affect the quickly growing international surrogacy marketplace.

*Bridget Ryder contributes from Madrid.*



DSV News photo/Mahmoud Issa, Reuters

## How much worse can the misery get in Gaza this winter?

Jason Knapp, Catholic Relief Service’s country representative for Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, knows that increasingly cold and wet conditions this winter will surely magnify the general misery of two million Palestinians displaced by conflict in Gaza. He knows that tents, tarps and bedding kits are in the pipeline. Will there be enough?

“We just need to be able to get these items in at scale,” he told **America** from Jerusalem in October, “especially given the situation that we’re seeing in Gaza right now.”

The destruction of Gaza has been near complete, with almost 70 percent of its housing damaged or destroyed, its medical system in ruins, and its water and sanitation infrastructure obliterated. Pooling lagoons of sewage are a menace, promoting skin diseases and opportunistic viral outbreaks like an unprecedented revival of polio.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are crowded into sprawling tent camps near the coast with no electricity, running water or toilets. Hunger is widespread. Even if a cease-fire is reached, the vast majority of Palestinians in Gaza have no home to return to as winter closes in.

Most families have been forced to move many times because of evacuation orders from the Israel Defense Forces, and with each new displacement, families lose or abandon more belongings. Not many of them still have clothing appropriate for winter weather conditions.

As conditions worsened over more than a year of fighting, Mr. Knapp says, C.R.S. ratcheted up its emergency response, providing cash allowances and opening warehouses to deliver food, water and hygiene kits that have reached more than 1.5 million people.

The Gaza staff has performed this feat under life-threatening conditions and enduring their own dislocation and disruption. “We’re so immensely proud about what we’ve accomplished,” Mr. Knapp said, “but we’re also so aware that so much more still needs to be done. And in a place like Gaza, it’s just this recurrent need over and over and over again. Food supplies or hygiene items, the things that are consumable need to keep coming in on a very regular basis.”

That became harder to do after the shutdown of the Rafah crossing near Egypt in a “final” I.D.F. offensive against Hamas that began in May. C.R.S. has established alternative routes to get supplies in, but it has only been able to reach 30 percent of the people it had been assisting. Mr. Knapp worries that other humanitarian organizations are having the same access problems as the I.D.F. campaign against Hamas continues. All the trends—on hunger, water, sanitation and containing disease—are heading in the wrong direction. Safe access for humanitarian and aid flows have to be improved in order to counter these con-

Palestinians crowd a food distribution center in northern Gaza on Sept. 11, 2024.

cerning trends, Mr. Knapp said.

“It’s really important that the world remains aware that the conflict in Gaza hasn’t ended and the suffering of civilians there remains very severe,” he said. “The focus cannot shift away from Gaza because of how unique of a situation it is, despite the very important priorities of the protection of civilians in Lebanon and humanitarian assistance there as well.”

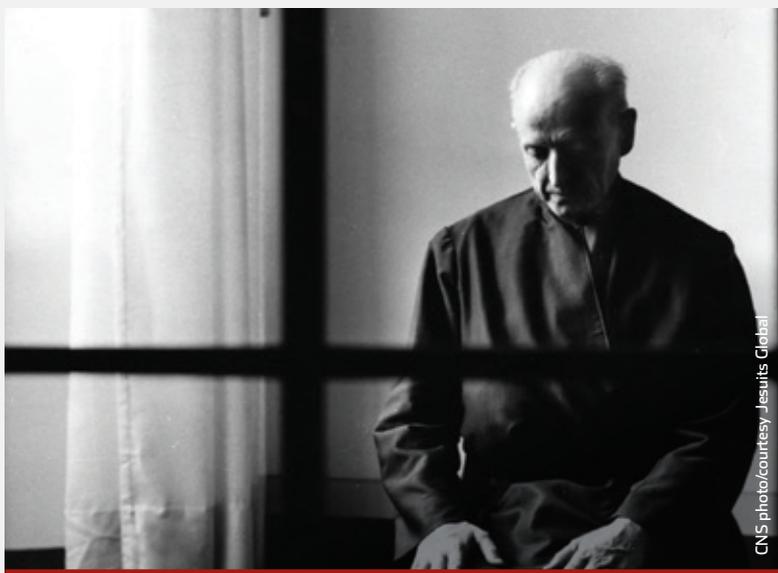
Gaza’s small Christian community, what is left of it, has sheltered since the beginning of the crisis at two church compounds near Gaza City.

“Anytime we’re able to get assistance into the north,” Mr. Knapp said, “we do make sure to take into account any of the needs at either of the church compounds and make sure that we’re supporting these families.” But reaching the compounds is no easy task. “It’s been immensely difficult for everyone in Gaza. It has been especially difficult in the north, as there is often pretty active conflict... and continuing evacuation notices in different locations.”

This, in a section of north Gaza that the I.D.F. had first stormed months ago, has Mr. Knapp wondering how the conflict could be brought to an end.

In advance of a cease-fire, “which we all hope for,” Mr. Knapp reports that he and other humanitarian groups continue to implore the U.S. government to use its leverage with Israel. “We’re still pushing most hard for safe access,” he said, “for protection of humanitarians and protection of civilians in Gaza.”

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*



## Arrupe was a ‘model of holiness’

The cause for the canonization of Pedro Arrupe, S.J. (1907-91), 28th superior general of the Society of Jesus, took an important step forward on Nov. 14, 2024, the anniversary of his birth, with the closing of the diocesan phase of the process in the Hall of Conciliation of the Lateran Palace in Rome. The celebration was presided over by Cardinal Baldassare Reina, the vicar general of the Diocese of Rome.

Cardinal Reina, in his keynote address, hailed Father Arrupe as “a model of holiness,” tracing the history of his life from his birth in Bilbao, in northern Spain, through his study of medicine in Madrid before joining the Jesuits and going as a missionary to Japan in 1938.

The Basque Jesuit spent 27 years in Japan and witnessed the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima in 1945 and its terrible consequences. The cardinal described how Father Arrupe had opened “a field hospital” at the Jesuit community outside the main blast area to try to care for some of the survivors. It was an event that forever marked his life.

Father Arrupe’s ministry in Japan came to an end when he was elected superior general of the Society of Jesus in May 1965. Under his leadership, the Jesuits made a decisive move to reform the Society in accordance with the Second Vatican Council by returning to the Ignatian sources of spirituality, especially the Spiritual Exercises. Cardinal Reina recalled how Father Arrupe led the Jesuits to a deep commitment to the poor, the social apostolate and social justice, and he described Father Arrupe’s role in the founding of the Jesuit Refugee Service in 1980.

The cardinal quoted from Father Arrupe’s moving words to the 33rd General Congregation of the Jesuits, which elected Peter Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., as his successor in 1983. His speech was read aloud for him because a stroke in 1981 had left him paralyzed and unable to speak. He told his brother Jesuits, “More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God.”

Gerard O’Connell, *Vatican correspondent.*

# An Atheist's Conversion

The story of a restless mind and a searching soul

By Jason Blakely

Among the philosophical and literary influences Jason Blakely mentions in his conversion story are (clockwise from top left) Charles Taylor, Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The crucifix at top right hangs in St. Mary Magdalen Church in Berkeley, Calif.

I graduated from high school in Colorado in 1999—the final year of the millennium and nearly 2,000 years after the birth of Christ. In April of that same year, just an hour down the road, two students by the names of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold precipitated the era of nihilistic, obliterative massacres in America, murdering 12 classmates and one teacher at their high school in Littleton, Colo., before killing themselves.

This was before “mass shootings” had been put on a seemingly endless loop. The entire country had not yet learned the unspoken, dark habit of being unsurprised. Those of us who were set to graduate that year discovered that some of our generation believed it was better to destroy than to create, better to nullify than to affirm. Rather than a journey toward graduation together, these two boy-men had chosen death. *Nulla cum laude.*

Fyodor Dostoevsky had prophetically warned in *Demons*—I wonder if it was on the shelf in the library that day at that school—that the deadliest poison in human life is not anger but boredom. A boredom that contains the most thorough rejection of existence. A mocking, lazy, listless, proud, ugly and spiteful boredom that looks at the whole of being, its shimmering grandeur, its never-spent newness,

and says a single word: *no.*

The high school where the massacre happened was named for Colorado’s official wildflower, the columbine. In the Rocky Mountains, columbines grow in alpine meadows and tundra. Their fragile blooms gather in clusters, ghostlike amid the jagged rocks, the remote peaks and dark ravines, a luminous and strange apparition of the gift of being.

I remember traveling to Columbine at least one time before the shooting, with my junior varsity soccer team to play a scrimmage. What struck me about the building was that it resembled our own. Elements repeated, as if by a copy-and-paste function: hard lines, panoptic arrangements, naked glass, and unadorned bricks and concrete. A bad infinity, without redemption. A combination of the hard boundedness of matter and the empty eternity of mathematical form.

Similarly, my hometown was sprawling to the south, away from its historical core and into an ever-repeating suburb. Tracts of anywhere-and-anyone housing, alternating the same chain stores with the same slick advertising. “Little boxes” as Pete Seeger had sung, “little boxes made of ticky tacky.” Blotting out the mountains, the columbines, the planets, the



All images from iStock except Charles Taylor (OSV) and crucifix (Jason Blakely)





Courtesy of author

The author during spring break in his college years



wind over the plains and the stars. As much as we despised Klebold and Harris for what they had done, some of us silently wondered: Was a different form of the same unholy poison inside of us, running through our veins? Had we been born into what Bob Dylan referred to in “Desolation Row” as the “sin” of “lifelessness”?

Many experienced it as an overwhelming desire to escape or move elsewhere. Arcade Fire summarized the feeling in a later song titled “The Suburbs”:

*In the suburbs I  
I learned to drive  
And you told me we'd never survive  
Grab your mother's keys we're leaving.*

### Two Atheisms

My earliest atheism was not one of conviction. That would come later. Rather, it was one of habit—a pattern of life, a disenchanting way of being in the world and perceiving reality. The feeling of an absence.

Although my father could be a fierce critic of organized religion (particularly Christianity), he was also no atheist. He taught me to see in nature a deep spiritual dimension while hiking in the mountains, and also to admire the artistic searching of the counterculture. My mother was a practicing Catholic but was mostly silent about her own faith. From before I can remember, I inherited my father's skepticism toward churches. If anything, I was far more skeptical than he was of nearly all spiritualisms, which I saw as bogus—from Christian evangelicals to New Age

hippies.

I perceived many of the Christians around me as less alive than the secular progressives I knew (and in my teens I counted myself as one) to human loss and suffering. Less responsive to injustice. More acclimated to evil and to the deadening boredom.

Their faith and my disbelief seemed to not make a jot of difference (although I might have reflected longer on my mother and what Greg Boyle, S.J., once called the “no-matter-whatness” of love). At the time, however, it seemed clear that at least unbelief had the advantage of looking at reality without any wild metaphysical conjectures or unnecessary add-ons. This initial “felt” *atheism* (as the writer Joseph Minich calls it) was not very militant—it was even somewhat apathetic—but it would later turn into a second kind of atheism that was far more intensely held and philosophically sophisticated: *an atheism of conviction*.

### Holiness of the Flesh

Have I not mentioned Lindsay yet? I met her in the fall of my senior year of high school. She edited the stories I submitted to the student newspaper. She was bright and sensitive and absolutely entrancing. She was also there before the news of the mass killing. A gift on the rocky trails of life. A columbine flower.

Beginning in 1998, when we met and started our long, sprawling conversations, Lindsay and I both wanted out of this deadening feeling—which we associated chiefly (and not completely fairly) with our hometown. One early



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# The sacrament of confirmation was the last time I went to weekly Mass for well over a decade.

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method of escape was each other. A quickening of the heart. A newness of life. There is no emotional landscape quite like that of young people infatuated or in love. You can look at each other's faces for hours.

After what seemed to me like very long months of ritual kissing, I lost any bona fide claim to chastity on Easter Vigil. I had been catechized enough to be haunted by the liturgical calendar. Lindsay did not know. She grew up in a culturally Protestant family that had long ago disgorged itself from all religion.

It must have been about two years earlier that I attended my final Mass. From early childhood, my mother insisted we go to Sunday Mass and receive the sacraments. But the sacrament of confirmation marked the last time I went to weekly Mass for well over a decade. The irony of this—like my new profane sacrament of the erotic—was not lost on me at the time. My adult confirmation of faith was in actuality my public ceremony of departure. I had my own holy Mass now and my own holy Communion. It seemed far more bodily than any paper-thin wafer rationed out by priests.

Besides, graduation meant I was leaving. From Colorado. From my mother's Mass-going. From the infinite, repeating, morbid liturgy of the suburbs. I was leaving for New York. Lindsay was leaving for Kansas and later Boston. We were staying together. We would write letters. I wrote poems. We would do everything to visit each other. If I had been asked at age 18, "What do you have faith in?", I would not have hesitated to answer (and it was not such a bad answer after all): "I have faith...in Lindsay."

## Atheist Hero

As an undergraduate studying politics and philosophy at Vassar College in the Hudson Valley of New York, I became convinced that the only rational view of existence was that it was absurd. I read Camus, Sartre, Kafka, Kierkegaard and many others. But most of all I read Nietzsche and Heidegger. I remember many slow hours in Vassar's beautiful neo-Gothic library, bent over Heidegger's *Being and Time* to learn that death is "always my own." The

authenticity of real thinking could make us aware of what we already are.

This is when the void first became palpably, even terrifyingly real to me. It became realer to me than any existent thing. Existing things were hardly here, after all, only skating for a while on the surface of the void before they vanished. But now, an emptiness was opening up before my field of perception. It was so vast and so awe-inspiring that it perhaps even heralded, without my knowing it, a mystery no mind can comprehend. If an atheist can feel the fear of God and not know it, I think this experience might have been it.

The professor who had the greatest influence on me during this time was a philosopher who offered classes in phenomenology and existentialism. She taught me that philosophy must start from existence, from the actual embodied reality of life, not from the abstractions that preoccupied so much of academic philosophy and the modern world. Academic philosophers, for instance, locked themselves inside the nutshell of all sorts of pseudo-problems, from Zeno's Paradox to Descartes's "*cogito ergo sum*." But existential philosophy went back to the reality of being in the world, which always precedes knowing.

She also offered a kind of solidarity before the absurd. She could quote Nietzsche's aphorisms the way some Christians can quote Scripture. One time, she told me that most of humanity was psychologically or even spiritually hemophilic: A single cut and they would bleed to death, so they buffered themselves from existence. Turned away from the void.

But atheists were different. Atheists had intellectual courage and spiritual strength. They could survive more truth than others could. The 17th-century French writer François de La Rochefoucauld had said neither death nor the sun can be looked at for very long. This is true, but the atheist could look at the terrifying sun the longest. *Atheist* in this way became a badge of honor for me. It was the name for a new heroism.

Those who have never been atheists must know: Everything in life can come to signify the death of God. That can include family, relationships, science, politics, technology, psychology, nature, one's own conscience. Everything can witness to the void and pay homage to it. As Nietzsche declared in *The Genealogy of Morals*: "Unconditional honest atheism...is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!"

At this time, Lindsay transferred to Boston College. We only noticed much later how the Jesuits there began to influence her. They were having her read not only Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* but also T. S. Eliot's "The



# I was already in relationship with someone and something I did not fully fathom.



Waste Land” and John’s Gospel. Once a semester, with a borrowed car, she visited Vassar College. We never gave up on each other or the relationship. I thought myself alone, but I was already in relationship with someone and something I did not fully fathom.

## A Hell of a Time

After graduating from Vassar, I followed Lindsay north to Boston, then sometime later we moved to New York. At that time, I thought of New York not only as the hub of American culture but as the capital of the times. The metropolis of the epoch. Living in “The City” (everyone referred to it this way grammatically—with the definite article, as if there were really only one) excited my pride. After growing up in a small town in Colorado, simply surviving in “The City” seemed a grand accomplishment. I decided to become a novelist and poet. For who more than artists created their own meanings *ex nihilo*, as a rebellion against the void? Art would be my great “amen” of the creative will to the emptiness of a world without God. We made our meanings. We would make our own gods.

I carried out this project for several years. By day, I worked at a branch of the Strand bookstore near Wall Street that later closed, called The Annex. When I arrived, some of the staff claimed dust from the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center towers still remained on the high shelves and hard-to-reach places. I mostly checked in new stock and shelved books in the narrow aisles. At night I wrote short stories, poems and novels.

I would also read more books than I could remember (everything from Joyce and Elizabeth Bishop to William Shirer’s *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and Julio

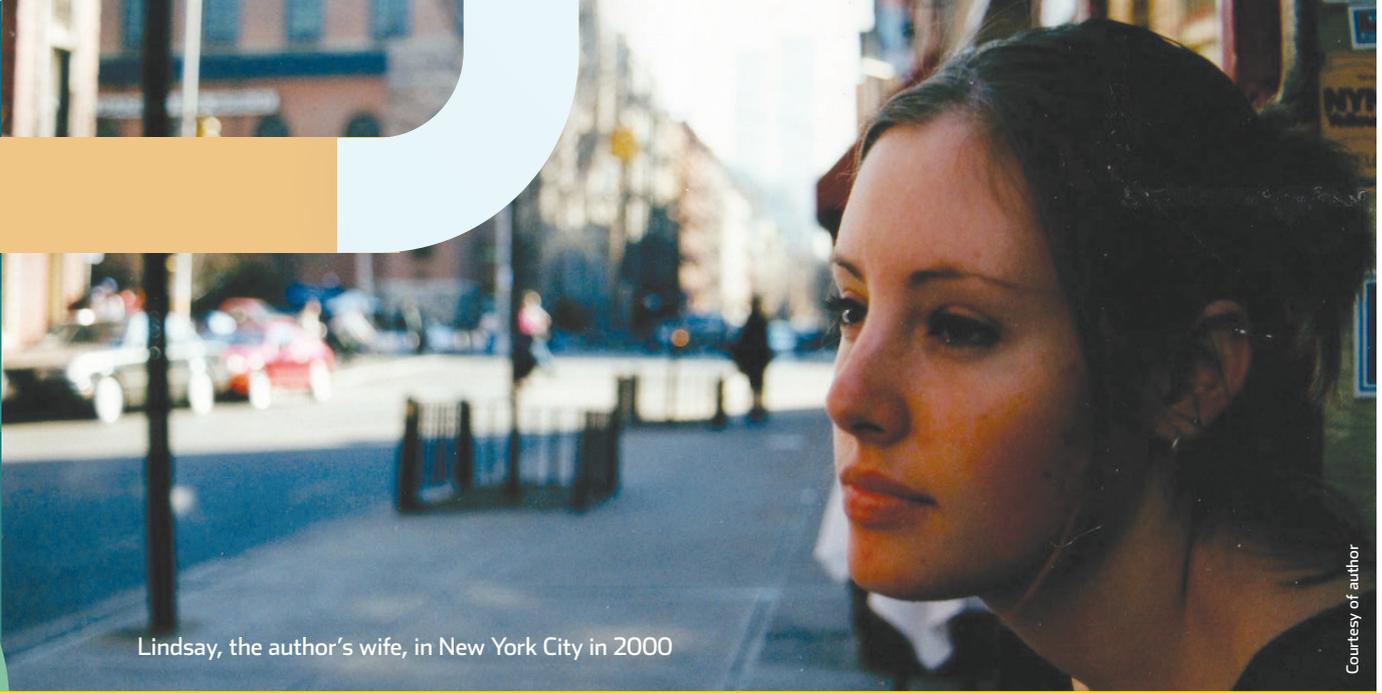
Cortázar) until my mind and body gave out in the early hours of the morning. In the background the mercurial lyrics of Bob Dylan’s “Visions of Johanna” were often playing:

*Little boy lost  
he takes himself so seriously  
He brags of misery  
he likes to live dangerously.*

This was around the time my body began to falter. I began to experience a swarm of symptoms—headaches, dizzy spells, numbing and buzzing in my arms and legs, extreme exhaustion—all of which I logged in a meticulous journal. By all appearances, I was a healthy young man, and yet my head would not stop spinning.

Finally, one night in October of 2005, I asked Lindsay to walk with me to the emergency room at the old St. Vincent’s Hospital off of Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village. My heart was palpitating and I felt dizzy. I was certain I was dying. I remember staring at the dirty fluorescent ceiling in the emergency room while Lindsay held my hand with a look of pity on her face. Whenever one of the nurses or doctors passed by, she squeezed my hand and looked up earnestly, hoping they might at least pause to ask my name and why I was there. I was discharged in the morning—directed to see a number of specialists.

For reasons I could not explain, I felt like I was failing, but I did not even know at what. If life was about resoluteness before the void—the big nothing—then what kept anything from slipping into it? A few weeks later, the dizzy spells started again. My body was numb. It seemed almost as if I lacked the will to live.



Lindsay, the author's wife, in New York City in 2000

Courtesy of author

### The Thread

This is what all my philosophy had brought me: I had no sense of what a good life was other than the struggle of my will against the void. And death—although I contemplated it constantly—was almost unthinkable. As conceited and silly as it sounds, if the sole meaning of the universe was whatever I projected outward, then if I died, everything meaningful died with me. Was this terrifying, vast emptiness also preparing a space? Even then was the hand of the divine digging in the soil, seemingly emptying me out, to later place a seed?

Over the course of several long months, I began to realize I was not sick in the medical sense at all. I was experiencing a collapse of meaning—not just spiritually but in my body. Lindsay was with me the entire time and I gradually began to return to health. One night, lying deflated in my sickbed in the West Village, I asked if she'd marry me. It surprised her. I had always said marriage was an inauthentic convention of the bourgeois class. It was like Pete Seeger's little boxes—only imposed on human eros. Marriage was the realm of anonymous anybodies.

But suffering in that way—and Lindsay's witness—had finally begun to teach me something different. Was there anything more beautiful than to promise to accompany someone to the vanishing point on the horizon of existence? No matter what? Although we were not yet married, was not this accompaniment what Lindsay was already doing for me?

I wanted to say a full, happy and eternal “yes” to this love she was already showing me. I was not able to say it anywhere near this way at the time. To the contrary, my proposal was muttered and half-stammered: “Would you marry me?” Or maybe: “I think we could maybe get

married?” But it also brought sparkling tears to pretty Lindsay's dark eyes because it was spoken in truth. She asked me: “Do you mean it?” “Yes, I mean it,” I repeated. “I mean it. Yes.”

Here was a love I did not deserve. It almost defied belief that she would still feel so moved to marry me—after all my selfishness and sickness, my arrogance and pride. Slowly I realized that even though I thought I had been living a heroic life in the face of a meaningless universe in which the only meaning came from me, I had in fact been surviving on a meaning that came from outside myself. I had always lived off of love—a dog eating scraps from the master's table—but I had not fully put myself in love's service.

Following Lindsay, I began taking small steps out of that dark corner. We married the next summer and moved to Chicago, where Lindsay attended graduate school in journalism and I worked for half a year in the basement of a bookstore near the Loop. But by the next year it was off to Berkeley for me, to study political philosophy and to begin a new life.

### The Strangeness of the Self

At UC Berkeley, I went deep into the study of politics and the human sciences. My intellectual convictions had been longstanding when it came to the social sciences: I was dissatisfied. The social scientists kept building self-refuting theories—a long chain of sciences of human behavior that all assumed a mechanistic and impersonally causal science of human life was at hand. But a self is not reducible to a bundle of mechanisms. It is a living set of meanings. The narrative and literary artists I admired were worlds ahead of the psychologists and social scientists on that point. We



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# The whole human world and cosmos became enchanted to me again.

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are storytelling animals already living inside our stories—not stories that we command autonomously, but that we already find in midpoint in our families, cities, societies and worlds.

I still believe one of the best reasons to be an atheist would be if we could give an account of reality that eliminated meanings and revealed nothing but impersonal mechanisms. If the universe could be explained in terms of a naturalistic, immanent determinism, then atheism would be far more credible philosophically than theism. But here's the rub: No one has actually accomplished this naturalist project. No one has even come close. It's just a wild aspiration, an article of faith that disavows itself as faith. Instead, the actual human situation up to the present day is that meanings and stories cannot be eliminated from the world. Human existence does not seem to permit the subtraction or elimination of stories and meanings.

This is one way to understand how the self became strange to me again. No one was more definitive to me intellectually in this regard than the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor. Before I read Taylor, I believed that no intellectually honest Christian faith was possible. Among my favorite quotes to repeat as an atheist was Nietzsche's barb from *The Genealogy of Morals* that "'thou shalt not lie' killed God." But reading Taylor's philosophy, and particularly his book *A Secular Age*, exploded forever my foolish prejudice that theists could not be intellectually honest.

The whole human world and cosmos became enchanted to me again. The only ultimately serious philosophical question is not suicide, as Camus thought, but instead: *Which story makes the most sense out of our lives?* The question is not: "Why is the universe meaningless?" Instead, it is: "Why is the world so tantalizingly and perplexingly overflowing with meaning?" *Run to the furthest corner of the cosmos! You cannot escape...your story!*

## St. Mary Magdalen, Berkeley

On campus, I was in dialogue with a fascinating array of conflicting thinkers. At the same time, away from the university, in our tree-ringed Berkeley apartment, Lindsay and I were having rolling discussions about marriage, our love, what it meant to live well. Christ came up more and more often in these discussions. Not as some kind of

moralism or dogma but as a beautiful person—as a person whose life resonated more and more as a story of what it meant to live well.

Christ seemed to be the first person in history who taught that the deepest and most fundamental meaning is love as sacrificial self-gift. Had we not been living that, even if only dimly before we even understood? Had Christ not been with us, not in our awareness, not in our cognition or comprehension, but in our unwillingness to give up on each other?

I began rereading Dostoevsky and the Gospels together and insisting that Christianity was the noblest story imaginable and that no human mind could have thought up something so beautiful. Christ's biography in its four versions was absolutely shocking, baffling, unimaginably good. It took twists and turns no one could foresee. And inside the story were *his* stories. Strange parables about widows and mustard seeds, lost coins and lost sheep, wineskins and pearls, prodigal sons, rich men and servants.

The back-and-forth between us went on for a long time—perhaps longer than it should have. But at a certain point Lindsay became weary of all the talking. She began going to different churches by herself on Sunday mornings. She was of the absolute conviction that faith needed a relationship with something or even someone outside of oneself. You loved someone with your whole person, not just your mind. One day she suggested we go together to St. Mary Magdalen parish in Berkeley. I balked, but the thought stayed with me.

After a few weeks, I relented and we attended Mass together. I remember it being Lent and the earliest Sunday Mass—with many of the pews empty and the parishioners mostly white-haired. Late winter light was coming in through the windows and painting the pews, and a massive wooden crucifix on the wall, in liquid, pale white. In that light, Christ appeared both heavy in the hewn wood and to be levitating in frozen pain and serenity over his cross. It was as if he were only experiencing his agony for the first time that morning. Or maybe as if he had been experiencing that same agony every morning, since time out of mind.

Mass began. The priest processed in with an old woman holding up the liturgical book. The priest reached the altar, bowed his head, and turned around in his robes, speaking in what I later learned was an accent from Monaco: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son..." By surprise, something in my physical body remembered the old movements from childhood. My hand hovered as I mouthed the words without sound—as if I were just shaping them around a hollow object.

But as Mass continued, something strange happened. I heard words remembered from childhood, but fuller and



Courtesy of Jason Blakely

more present (“I confess to almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters...”). As when you see someone you once loved long ago but thought you would never meet again. In fact, you had given up (perhaps secretly without telling anyone) on loving them ever again. And when their face appears it is a full-blown ambush—a surprise sprung by reality itself—as the face both dearly familiar and somehow new fastens itself on your attention.

But this arresting feeling passed again, and my conversion was gradual over that year. I did not fall from St. Paul’s proverbial horse. My atheism had its rituals, too, that had saturated my bones and my mind. And sometimes when learning to pray again or to genuflect, my ego would float just outside my body like an apparition and whisper things to me. “Now is this not ridiculous?” I heard it say. “What are you bowing before? Fool! A big nothing!”

But for weeks that turned into months, I persisted, and the voice of the ego began to evaporate into silence. Little by little the attraction was becoming stronger than any sense of awkwardness or self-awareness. The Mass was seeping into my flesh and bones. The words were reattaching to my tongue (“God from God, light from light, true God from true

The author with his children and his wife, Lindsay, in Long Beach, Calif., in 2024

God”). As Pascal had observed long before me: We often assume we need total understanding to have faith, but practice can precede belief. If you enter into relationship with God, faith will be mysteriously offered. You need only the humility to approach and ask.

Lindsay entered the church at St. Mary Magdalen on Easter Vigil in 2010. I followed her, because like so many times since we were teenagers, I wanted to stay close to her and see what she saw. For it is true as the Son of God said: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

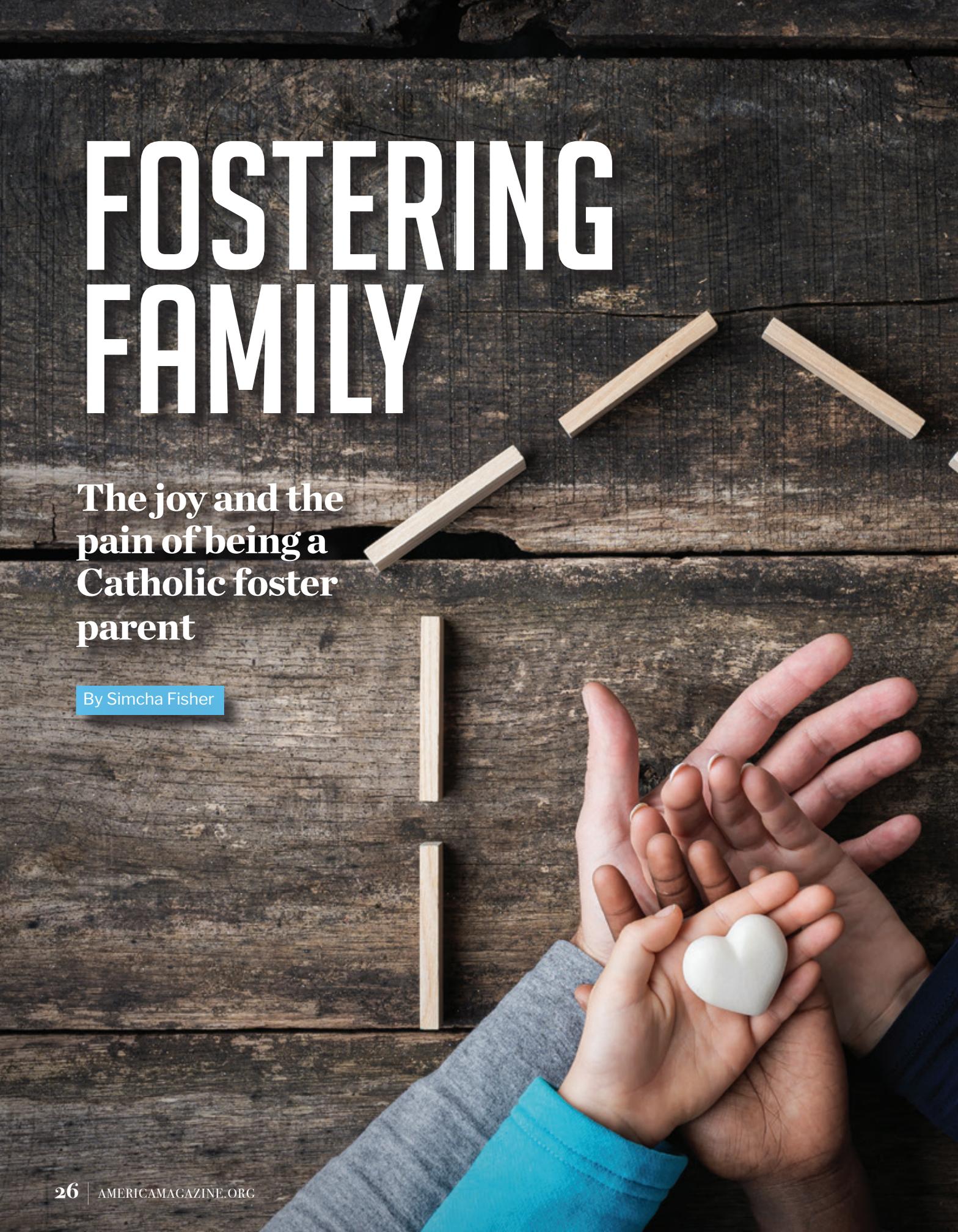
Jason Blakely is an associate professor of political science at Pepperdine University. He is the author of *We Built Reality: How Social Science Infiltrated Culture, Politics, and Power* and, most recently, of *Lost in Ideology: Interpreting Modern Political Life*. This essay is adapted from the 2024 Annual Newman Lecture at the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage on Feb. 27, 2024.



# FOSTERING FAMILY

The joy and the  
pain of being a  
Catholic foster  
parent

By Simcha Fisher





The first time Stephen and Paige Sanchez took their boys to Mass, the children had lots of questions. The boys were 2 and 4, and this was the first they had heard of Jesus. They saw a statue and asked who it was.

Mr. Sanchez told them it was St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus. The boys looked at each other.

“Jesus was a foster kid?” the older boy said.

Mr. Sanchez said he was, kind of.

To himself, he thought, *Man, the church loves us.*

The two boys are now the adopted sons of Mr. Sanchez and his wife, but at the time they were his foster children, and everyone expected them to go back to their birth parents. The Sanchezes also have an older son, who was also adopted through foster care.

Stephen and Paige first began exploring adoption after five years of struggle with infertility. Then they discovered how many children in their area needed placement through foster care. They took a class, just to learn more.

“We started thinking God was asking us [to go down this path],” Mr. Sanchez said. So they kept going.

The day after they received their fostering license, they got a call asking them to take a child.

“We decided we’d say yes, just like if we were having our own children,” Mr. Sanchez said.

That child, who came to them deeply traumatized, stayed only a few days before moving to specialized therapeutic care. But the agency immediately asked about another child, a boy whose birth parents’ parental rights were going to be terminated. Would the Sanchez family accept him, and eventually adopt him?

They talked it over for 10 minutes and agreed. The boy joined them the next day.

Two weeks later, the agency called again. This time, it was two half brothers who needed a temporary home until they could be reunified with their parents.

That was the plan, as it usually is with foster care. The reunification goal got pushed back more than once. The birth parents, who struggled with addiction, were unable to get clean and create a safe environment for their boys. Finally, after two years of limbo, the court legally severed the birth parents’ rights, and Stephen and Paige adopted the boys.

The Sanchez boy who was 2 years old in the church that day is now 15, and since that day when they first met St. Joseph and “his foster kid,” the boys have learned volumes about their faith.

But one of their first lessons was that God had a son and sent him to live with another family because God loved his son and trusted the family.



Left: The Sanchezes in their first photo together as a family. Right: The boys today.

It became a way for the Sanchezes to talk about Catholicism, and about the relationship the two boys might have with their new parents and their birth parents.

“St. Joseph became a clear patron,” Mr. Sanchez said—for the boys, and also for him.

### Sacrifice and Stability

The Sanchez family story seems to have as close to a fairy tale ending as possible. But the foster father analogy only goes so far. And the family’s story also demonstrates some of the things that make foster care so hard: the legal and psychological limbo.

In foster care, the goal is to reunite the child and their parents, but it is not always clear how long that might take. And that goal is ultimately met less than half the time. Sometimes the timeline is changed several times, and sometimes the parents’ rights are legally terminated without another family ready to step in and offer care. The future of a child frequently hinges on the sustained efforts of people who are already in crisis, in dire poverty, suffering domestic violence or in the grip of addiction.

The practice of foster care is also widely misunder-

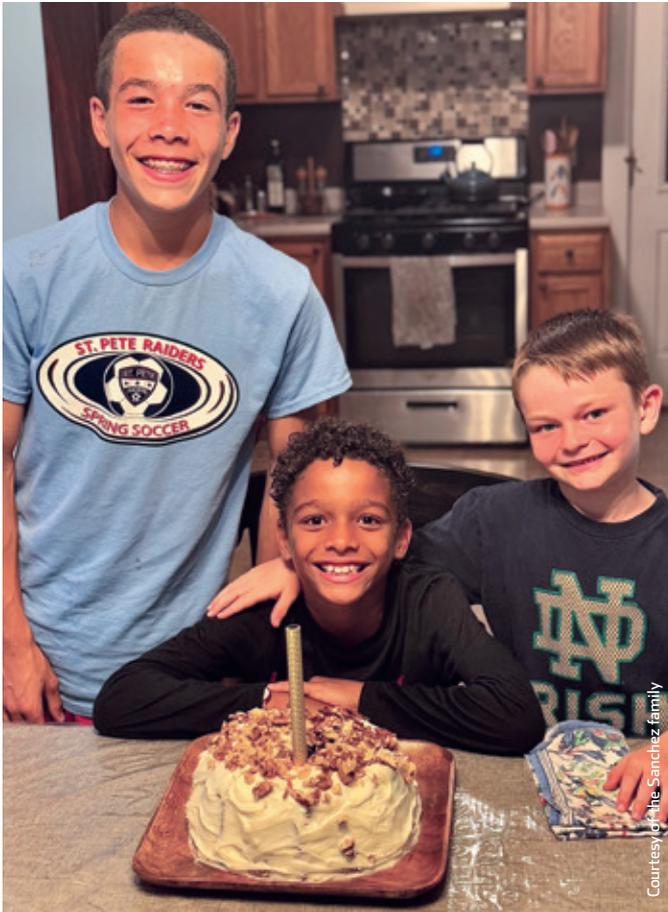
stood, leaving foster families isolated even among communities that could be helping the most. But experienced foster parents often say two things: Foster care reveals things that are true of every parenting relationship. And fostering is intensely, inherently pro-life work that should be much more vigorously supported and promoted by the Catholic Church.

Foster parents will also speak of a profound joy and satisfaction that keeps them doing this work over and over again, as long as they can.

Approximately 400,000 children—enough to fill Yankee Stadium eight times over—spend time in foster care every year in the United States. Each year around 60,000 children see their birth parents’ parental rights terminated, and around 50,000 children are adopted from foster care each year. About 25,000 children every year age out of the system, and 20 percent of these become instantly homeless.

Despite the great need, foster care can be a hard sell, even to families with the resources for it. Many foster parents say friends tell them they would love to offer foster care, but they are afraid of getting too attached. They are

# Foster care reveals things that are true of every parenting relationship.



pitality that may be very difficult for the host.”

The two youngest Sanchez boys call their adoptive mother “Mommy Paige” and their birth mother “Mommy H—,” and once poignantly suggested that their birth parents could live in the backyard, so they could visit back and forth.

Mr. Sanchez reminds his sons that it’s good to love your birth parents, and such affection doesn’t hurt him and his wife. What did hurt Mr. Sanchez is seeing times when his boys’ birth parents withdrew affection and didn’t seem to care. This is where the analogy of St. Joseph as a foster father falls short, Dr. Coolman said.

Mr. Sanchez said that when his boys are mad at him, they’ll pointedly ask how their biological parents are doing. He laughs, but also feels the sting. He knows it’s normal for the boys to have conflicted feelings. Dr. Coolman said that those feelings will likely continue throughout the children’s lifetime.

“Foster kids know better than anybody else that there really is an idea of being raised by your bio mother and father. They know it in their bones,” she said. They need to know that people who have not been raised in the so-called perfect family are also beloved and precious and are not fundamentally broken; that their biological family may not be whole, but each member can be a whole person.

“Brokenness is not the ultimate description of who they are,” she said. And yet it is essential for the new parents to affirm the children’s undeniable loss.

## The Ties That Bind

The possessiveness of American parenting as described by Mr. Sanchez sometimes leads to stigmas against the foster children themselves. More than half of Americans, for instance, believe that kids are in foster care because they’re juvenile delinquents, not because they were previously in unsafe homes.

Mr. Sanchez said that some Catholics he has met have absorbed unwholesome cultural ideas about heredity or destiny, and they harbor an unspoken fear that when you foster, you’re inviting a problem into your house. “Like they come from bad stock,” Mr. Sanchez said with disgust.

But while people are not their genetics, our biological

afraid they will fall too deeply in love with their foster children, only to lose them.

“In [American] culture, parenting is a little bit possessive,” Mr. Sanchez said.

Catholic culture puts great emphasis on the sacred bond between parent and child; and Americans often cultivate and cherish their identity as parents, emphasizing self-sacrifice in the name of forming lifelong attachments with their children.

None of this meshes easily with the goal of foster care, which is to relinquish children back to their birth parents. If foster care works as it is designed to, that sacrifice will lead to goodbyes.

The tension can be brutal. It’s also profoundly Christ-like.

Holly Taylor Coolman, assistant professor of theology at Providence College, the author of *Parenting: The Complex and Beautiful Vocation of Raising Children* and the adoptive mother of five, including one by way of foster care, said foster care is the best example of the kind of love Christians are called to.

“We’re called to love people and will the good of them, even when it requires self-sacrifice. Maybe even especially when it requires self-sacrifice,” she said. “It’s a kind of hos-



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# Foster children need to know that their biological family may not be whole, but each member can be a whole person.

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connections are important. “DNA matters, which means biological ties to parents matter,” said Dr. Coolman. “I think Catholic theology should be ready to stand up and say: These relationships with the person whose DNA you share, or the person in whose body you spend the first nine months of your existence, really matter.”

This reality is an underexplored facet of St. John Paul II’s theology of the body. “You don’t just remove a baby from the body in which [he] lived and act like you’re just taking a baby from a petri dish,” Dr. Coolman said. She added that it was, in fact, at the urging of a social worker at Catholic Charities that the country began to question its practice of closed adoption. Today, approximately 95 percent of adoptions are open adoptions, a practice that works to allow children to maintain a healthy connection to their biological family of origin.

When a child is removed from their home, the smells, the tastes and their whole physical reality changes, and it is a shock to their system. And as they grow, things like their physical appearance and their genetic predispositions will continue to assert themselves. You cannot simply sever the link, and acknowledging that this is so is profoundly Catholic.

But Catholics have a long way to go until foster care is perceived as a central dimension of pro-life activity. While it is true that Christians are twice as likely to foster or adopt as the general population, it is more often Protestant churches that sponsor foster care ministries, not Catholic parishes.

The theology is lagging, and so are the logistical supports. Catholic foster parents will tell you that while individual clergy members, schools or parishioners may be supportive, it is rare for a Catholic parish to offer robust, organized support for foster families, or even to offer information about how to get involved.

There are some Catholic communities that get it right. In South Bend, Ind., where the Sanchez family now lives, foster care has been unusually integrated into parish life.

“It’s seen as how we participate in the culture of life: Not just by being politically active, but by taking care of each other,” Mr. Sanchez said.

He also said that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was a helpful resource. This Montessori-based faith formation program gave the boys a space to talk freely about God and family as they played, and it became a kind of religious play-based therapy.

At one parish the family attended, the congregation had been deliberately instructed on how to behave around foster families. They knew, for example, to give children autonomy by asking, “Who is this you have with you?” rather than asking, “Is this your mom and dad?”

But in other situations, people made clueless blunders, asking in front of the children if their birth parents were on drugs, which provoked long follow-up conversations between Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez and their children.

## It Takes a Village

The Sanchez family’s faith was deepened immeasurably by their experience with foster care and adoption, and they constantly relied on their faith to sustain them through the difficult parts. They say their faith has strengthened tenfold since they took that leap.

Mindy Goorchenko’s story went the other way. The way the church treated her children helped fuel her eventual break-up with her Catholic faith.

Ms. Goorchenko, 45, is a forensic nurse practitioner who works for a child advocacy center in Chugiak, Alaska. She now has in her home six biological children aged 9 to 25, two adopted children who are siblings, and at times, a third sibling who has lived with them on and off for years and is close to adulthood.

Ms. Goorchenko also adopted two boys with life-limiting medical conditions, who have since died. She estimates she has fostered 15 to 20 other children over the years.

When Ms. Goorchenko first started working in Alaska, her sensibilities were shocked by the fluid sense of family among many of the Indigenous people she met. “A patient might say, ‘This is my third baby, but the first one I’m keeping.’ Babies are raised by other family members, and it’s a very open process,” she said. “There’s no stigma. Children will openly introduce an adult as ‘my aunt, but actually my mom.’”

The cliché that “it takes a village” is made real here.

But Ms. Goorchenko also saw how intergenerational trauma can haunt a historically oppressed people and felt a pull toward directly serving those invisible populations, including the inmates she served as a nurse at a correctional facility. She began working at Alaska Cares Child Abuse Response and Evaluation Services.



Courtesy of Mindy Goorchenko

Mindy Goorchenko (second from left) poses with her daughters during a family outing to North Pole, Alaska, a small city near Fairbanks.

“I ended up never leaving. I fell in love deeply with the work,” she said.

She was also falling deeply in love with Jesus, and eventually with the Catholic Church. Her husband had his vasectomy reversed, and they were soon happily ensconced in a two-bedroom townhouse with five biological children.

“We were thrilled. We had the best experience, crammed in like pickled sardines. We had a beautiful life. We were crazy busy. We ended up being the safe place where a kid could come and play,” she said.

They also raised rabbits, birds and other pets. Ms. Goorchenko has a special weakness for disabled fowl, and two footless chickens still live in her house. She was eager to be “open to life” in all its forms.

“Having children come into our house was a blessing to us, and it was also our duty as humans, not just a personal

decision,” she said.

But while they loved their new faith, they felt that they never fit into their parish. Big families were plentiful, but none looked like the Goorchenkos, with their diapers and wheelchairs, different ethnicities and fluctuating family status.

“We felt like weirdos. We adopted kids who came from pretty hard places. Those kids didn’t necessarily behave well. Two were severely disabled, with feeding tubes, and they were not able to be quieted,” she said.

The Goorchenkos weren’t ostracized, but they felt badly misunderstood. The goal for her foster kids was reunification with their parents, but fellow parishioners insisted on saying that they hoped she got to keep the kids. And they frequently told her she was a saint for doing what she did.

In her mind, she would respond, *Dude, you have money, you have resources. Why don’t you do this, too?*

Instead, other families put her on a pedestal and offered profoundly misguided platitudes.

“We had kids with severe disabilities who were going to die. It wasn’t *if*, it was *when*. But people would say, ‘I’m praying for their healing’ or ‘Their whole purpose is to love.’ No, his whole purpose was not to get viral meningitis and to be separated from his community in order to ‘be love’ for you all,” she said.

This uncomfortable history was not solely responsible for severing her relationship with the church and for making it feel like a place that could never be safe for her family. But it didn’t help.

Ms. Goorchenko was perpetually frustrated that pro-life Catholics weren’t doing more foster care. Every other homily seemed to be about culture wars, but the Goorchenkos felt alone in trying to deal with the day-to-day fallout of those battles. For instance, she said, L.B.G.T. kids really do get kicked out of their homes and end up in foster care.

“There are all these kids, who may have living parents, but they’re orphaned. They’ve been traumatized,” she said.

The fear of getting too attached is valid, she said, but she wishes adults would push themselves past it.

“It is good to get attached. That’s literally what the kids need, to have a safe attachment. It’s a huge blessing for their development, for their sense of self and safety,” she said.

### Keeping an Open Heart

It’s hard to hear Ms. Goorchenko’s story and not feel overwhelmed by the sheer, undeniable difficulty of it. But Ms. Goorchenko mentioned “duty” exactly one time. The rest of the time, she spoke of joy. “Being able to see when a child goes from fear and trauma to a place of safety and normalcy is an extremely precious opportunity. I’ll never get tired of that,” she said.



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# While people are not their genetics, our biological connections are important.

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As Ms. Goorchenko described watching a child relax and blossom in the shelter of her home, her vocabulary shifted from clinical to warm.

“Seeing a child make that transition is phenomenal. It’s such a privilege to see it. It’s a blessing. It’s really neat!” she said.

Her biological children were transformed, too. Her oldest kids were entirely on board with fostering and fell as deeply in love with the new kids as their parents did, and it mostly brought out the best in them. They suffered extreme grief when their adopted brothers died, but they never said they had regrets.

Ms. Goorchenko doesn’t sugarcoat the challenge. One foster teen had such destructive habits that the entire family felt traumatized after the older children joined that teen in dangerous and illegal behavior. But most of her foster teens had much simpler needs.

“We’ve had beautiful kids who just need to go to school and get their sh— done. Most of these kids just need a place to land and exist, without worrying about what’s going to happen to them,” she said. “They need people so badly.”

Foster parents don’t necessarily need to be overachievers. In fact, perfectionism would be an impediment. They should have a consistent and reliable schedule so they’ll be physically there for the kids. Corporal punishment is not allowed. Children need to be allowed to participate in their own faith practices, if any. Most of all, what’s needed is flexibility, and a willingness to roll with the punches.

Another perhaps unexpected saving grace that successful foster parents have: An open heart toward the birth parents.

Many foster parents will recall the horror of first learning how much abuse so many children endure; but they also refuse to speak disparagingly of the birth parents. They will insist it is vital to keep boundaries, but also to treat the birth parents with dignity.

Some Catholics take this approach even further, and make it a career.

Kimberly Bayer, a lawyer in Wisconsin, specializes in

foster care cases. Ms. Bayer, who is Catholic and also an adoptive mother, frequently represents parents threatened with termination of parental rights.

“I like the underdog. It’s easy to dump on people whose kids have been removed. It’s harder to make sure their side of the story is being told,” she said. Ms. Bayer reiterated that the first choice of Child Protective Services generally is to find a familiar friend or relative who can assist with a temporary protective plan, to keep the child safe while interviews are conducted and the parents are investigated; and the agency also tries to avoid moving too quickly toward severing parental rights.

Ms. Bayer also noted that families with more financial resources often have “a very deep bench of very functional people who would step in” to take custody of children in a dangerous family situation, so many of the families who end up with children in foster care also face challenging financial and emotional situations.

When clients face the threat of removal or termination, Ms. Bayer advises them to cooperate with Child Protective Services, which may mean enrolling in therapy or parenting classes, or substance abuse treatment. She also advises them to know their legal rights.

She believes that the whole system functions better when all parents, even the most unsympathetic, are getting the solid and competent legal defense they’re entitled to. She’s seen what happens when those rights are ignored, including defending a father who did not speak English and who was assigned a Spanish translator—despite the fact that he didn’t speak Spanish either.

“There’s just something really unfair about jamming a guy through the system who doesn’t understand what’s going on,” Ms. Bayer said.

Ms. Bayer didn’t win that case. But she did change the tone of the struggle.

“The foster parents [of his child] hated my guts. They would come to court and see me making these arguments. I ended up reaching out to [the foster mother] and saying, ‘I’m not personally out to ruin your life. I understand you love this child. You’ve had her for a long time.’” She told the foster mother that the birth father liked her, too.

That changed the tone and turned down the contentiousness, she said. When the birth father died, the foster mother went to his funeral.

Ms. Bayer wasn’t fighting for the child to be returned to an unsafe home, but to turn the termination case back into a child protection case, with the goal of doing whatever was possible to help the birth parents become safe caregivers for the child.

This, too, is in keeping with Catholic teaching.



Courtesy of Kimberly Bayer

Kimberly Bayer, a lawyer in Wisconsin, specializes in foster care cases.

“It’s a consistent principle. We say in the pro-life movement that what’s good for the mother is what’s good for the baby,” Ms. Bayer said. “It’s much better for the children if their parents’ good work is being recognized.”

That doesn’t necessarily mean reunification. But as an adoptive mother, Ms. Bayer said she adores her daughter’s birth mother.

“I want her to be a great person, because she is my daughter’s mother. I think my daughter is wonderful, and you just want the best for your kid,” she said.

Ms. Bayer has seen cases where the foster parents go above and beyond what’s legally required, to gain trust and to show they still respect the relationship between birth parent and child, even if the birth parents’ rights are eventually terminated.

As much as she relishes the challenge of her work, it can be wearying. “There’s just so many wounds. It’s hard to know where to start with some people,” she said.

Sometimes the whole C.P.S. system feels like a farce to her. Sometimes she wonders if the state should take the money it spends on foster care and just give it to struggling parents. Sometimes she is aghast to see that a parents’ rights have not been terminated.

But her job is simply to care about the client in front of her and let them see that one person is listening and will

fight for them, even in difficult situations.

“When clients call me and say they got pregnant, they’re waiting for my reaction. I say, ‘Congratulations! It’s always a beautiful thing to be pregnant.’ That’s never really steered me wrong. You’re having a baby, we’re going to make a plan and try to protect you, get you in rehab. What’s good for the mother is good for the child,” she reiterated.

Foster care may not be the first thing a Catholic thinks of as pro-life work, but the Catholic foster parents who are living it now see clearly what the church wants every parent to know: that we have a serious obligation to help the vulnerable; that all parents ultimately come to a place where they are powerless; that children ultimately belong to God; and that our children may not always be with us.

Also: They are individual persons, separate from us. Successful adoptive and foster parents often avoid the parenting trap of seeing their kids primarily as an extension of themselves and their own successes or failures, Dr. Coolman said.

“They have an easier path to seeing their children precisely as a unique, unrepeatable person who may be very different from them. This is also true for bio parents; they just don’t always know it.”

As Mr. Sanchez put it: “You’re not the maker of your kids. It’s something every parent should learn, but it’s very stark in a foster kid, and that’s hard.”

It is hard. He also says it is worth it.

“It’s worth it not only for [the boys], but also for me and my wife,” Mr Sanchez said. “We talk about this all the time: How much we have grown, changed, become more dependent on God. Having kids has been the greatest gift we’ve experienced. There are a million moments that are full of pain, sorrow, sadness, regret, you name it. None of that overwhelms the gratitude of what Christ is doing in our lives.”

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*Simcha Fisher is a speaker, freelance writer, regular contributor to The Catholic Weekly and author of The Sinner’s Guide to Natural Family Planning. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband and 10 children.*

# MIGRATION ETHICS IN THE TRUMP ERA

## A Catholic guide to resisting extremism and polarization

By Kristin E. Heyer



On day one of his new term, President-elect Donald J. Trump has pledged to enact sweeping changes that will directly endanger migrants and refugees.

He plans to launch “the largest mass deportation program in American history,” halt refugee resettlement, revoke humanitarian parole grants and end birthright citizenship. His agenda thereafter also includes ending family-based immigration, completing the construction of the border wall, invoking the Alien Enemies Act (a wartime authority that allows the president to detain and deport the natives and citizens of an “enemy nation” without a hearing) and implementing ideological vetting for admission to the United States (to “keep foreign Christian-hating Communists, Marxists, and Socialists out of America,” according to the Republican Party’s 2024 platform).

From a Catholic perspective, these plans raise deep moral concerns about undermining human dignity and the right to seek asylum, harming family unity and the com-

mon good, and risking a police state. They invite (further) demonization of racial, ethnic and religious minorities, a structural sin that has harmed human dignity and solidarity as well as malformed our collective imagination on immigration and national identity alike.

How might Catholic imagination help to clarify our vision amid the seductions of extremism and polarization? How might we bridge the internalized borders that divide us in the face of new threats?

The year after the installation of the magnificent “Angels Unawares” sculpture in St. Peter’s Square in 2019, Boston College hosted a replica of the work, by the Canadian artist Timothy P. Schmalz. Featuring immigrants from across time and locations forging ahead on a common ship, it evoked for me Pope Francis’ first journey outside Rome after his election.

On that trip, he celebrated Mass on the Italian island of Lampedusa, which has become a safe haven for migrants



Migrants continue their trek toward the Darién Gap in Acandí, Colombia, in July 2023.

consider the impact of populist discourse, neoliberal economics and virulent individualism. This scope offers a welcome reorientation to discussions that often focus on nation-states' rights or border crossers alone—much like his attentiveness to sinful indifference did on Lampedusa.

These broader emphases reveal how barriers to reception are not limited to matters of border fortification and refugee policies alone, but also include pervasive tendencies toward isolationism and populist ideologies. Recent years have witnessed a rise in nativist populism, fueled in part by anxieties about the impact of globalization. As we have seen in the U.S. context, these trends continue to play out via an opportunistic politics of exclusion. We may encounter these tendencies in our churches and families as well.

### Dominant Frameworks

Our immigration debates have long been framed by narratives emphasizing security threats and social costs, despite rhetoric about liberty and hospitality. At the same time, studies regularly indicate that higher rates of immigration correlate with lower rates of violent and property crime. The rule of law rightly occupies a privileged place in the United States, yet the lack of accountability that marks Border Patrol procedures and the denial of due process to immigrant detainees belie this rationale.

Another populist script casts newcomers as economic threats, a perception historically fueled in times of economic downturn. In fact, studies show that immigrant laborers provide a net benefit to the U.S. economy and have helped to increase jobs in recent years; all the while, the detention industry has profited from irregular migrants, further confounding the frame of economic threat. The multibillion-dollar transnational “immigrant industrial complex” raises serious questions about the financial stakes in the broken immigration system, as well as diminished public oversight and accountability. Stock prices for CoreCivic and Geo Group, two private prison companies, soared after Mr. Trump's re-election. Estimates suggest his mass deportation plan would cost at least \$500 billion to implement, with annual losses of \$126 billion in taxes and a reduction in the gross domestic product of \$5 trillion over 10 years.

Finally, anti-immigrant sentiment demonizes racial, ethnic and religious minorities. Representations of the outsider as a social menace signal the salience of racism and xenophobia in our national imagination. Portrayals of immigrants as public charges or a dangerously porous border have also long shaped our collective self-understanding. This past election cycle, we heard the president-elect

seeking passage from North Africa to Europe. Prior to making any public statement, he blessed a wreath of flowers and tossed it into the sea, commemorating the estimated 20,000 African migrants who had died over the previous 25 years trying to reach a new life in Europe.

The pope celebrated Mass within sight of the “graveyard of wrecks,” where fishing boats carrying asylum seekers end up after they drift ashore. Other reminders that Lampedusa is synonymous with dangerous attempts to reach Europe abounded: The altar was built over a small boat; the lectern and the chalice were carved from the wood of shipwrecks. Pope Francis lamented in his homily our indifference to the plight of these vulnerable brothers and sisters and prayed for the grace to weep over our anesthesia of the heart.

In the encyclical “Fratelli Tutti,” Pope Francis again draws attention to these broader forces affecting so many on the move today; he expands the migration question to



# Catholic social teaching offers a contrasting vision marked by human dignity, regardless of citizenship status.

refer to undocumented migrants as subhuman “animals” who are “poisoning the blood of our country.”

These diversionary tactics generally ignore structural relationships affecting migration. Reducing immigration matters to the border crossers in the Mediterranean or in the American Southwest eclipses transnational actors from view, much less blame. It refuses to consider those responsible for “push factors” like violent conflict, economic instability or climate change. Moreover, fear of difference is relatively easy to mass-market and shapes imagination in powerful ways.

As we all well know, actual encounters with reluctant or desperate migrants—and evocative artwork like “Angels Unawares”—can help unmask operative narratives. Catholic social teaching offers a contrasting vision marked by human dignity, regardless of citizenship status, and solidarity that crosses borders.

## A Christian Counter-Narrative

The story of the Jewish and Christian pilgrim communities is one of migration, diaspora and the call to live in memory of those experiences. Indeed, as the theologian William O’Neill, S.J., has noted, after the commandment to worship one God, no moral imperative is repeated more frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures than the command to care for the stranger. And, as Pope Pius XII noted in “*Exsul Familia*” in 1952, the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt in the New Testament establishes the émigré Holy Family as the archetype for every refugee family. Further, Jesus’ praxis of hospitality to outsiders recurs throughout the Gospels.

One of the most persistently recurrent themes in Scripture is justice and compassion for the vulnerable. The prophets repeatedly connect bringing justice for the poor to experiencing God. Concern for the economically vulnerable echoes throughout the New Testament as well, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, which depicts Jesus being born in a stable among mere shepherds and inaugurating his public ministry in terms that emphasize his mission to bring good news to the poor and release to the oppressed.

The New Testament scholar Donald Senior, C.P., has

noted that in “the overall landscape of the gospel stories, the rich and powerful are often ‘in place’—reclining at table, calculating their harvest, standing comfortably in the front of the sanctuary, or seated on the judgment seat passing judgment on the crimes of others.” The poor, however, are “often mobile or rootless: the sick coming from the four corners of the compass seeking healing; the crowds desperate to hear Jesus, roaming lost and hungry; the leper crouched outside the door of Dives.” Father Senior suggests that experiences of people on the move “reveal a profound dimension of all human experience” and “challenge false ideologies of unlimited resources [or] of unconditional national sovereignty” that “plague our contemporary world, choking its spiritual capacity.”

The theologian Christopher Vogt has noted that while the Scriptures do not provide detailed solutions to contemporary challenges posed by immigration, “for people who turn to the Scriptures for guidance on how to live and what sort of people to become, it is clear they should show a deep concern” for marginalized persons. Biblical justice—which demands active concern for the vulnerable and prophetic critique of structures of injustice—challenges approaches to immigration driven by market or security concerns alone.

## A Catholic Migration Ethic

Flowing from these biblical commitments, the Catholic social tradition champions robust rights for immigrants in its documents, outreach and advocacy. Catholic immigration directives are rooted not only in biblical injunctions to welcome the stranger, but also in longstanding social teachings on universal human rights (as seen in the encyclical “*Pacem in Terris*”), an understanding of the political community as oriented to serving the common good, and a global rather than nationalistic perspective.

Catholic social teaching is grounded in a vision of the person as inherently sacred and made for community. All persons are created in the image of God and therefore worthy of inherent dignity and respect. Whereas this vision does not compromise autonomy, it understands humans as profoundly interdependent. Hence, human rights are claims to goods necessary for each to participate with dignity in community life.

Catholic principles of economic and migration ethics protect not only civil and political rights, but also more robust social and economic rights and responsibilities. These establish persons’ rights *not* to migrate—to live with full human rights in their homeland—or to migrate if they cannot support themselves or their families in their country of origin. In situations where individuals face pervasive



OSV News photo/José Luis González, Reuters

A migrant family from Haiti crosses the Rio Bravo to El Paso, Tex., to turn themselves in to U.S. Border Patrol agents in order to request asylum, as seen from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in April 2022.

gang violence or desperate poverty, the Catholic tradition supports the right to freedom of movement so that persons can live free from credible fears of violence or severe want.

I would add that this vision of the person is not fundamentally at odds with our national narrative at its best. As Simone Campbell, S.S.S., put it during a “Nuns on the Bus” tour: “fear is crippling us and promoting an unpatriotic lie of individualism. After all, the Constitution begins, ‘We the People,’ not ‘We who got here first,’ or ‘We the owners of businesses’ or even ‘We the citizens.’”

While the Catholic social teaching tradition recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their borders, this right is not understood to be absolute. In the case of blatant human rights violations, the right to state sovereignty is relativized by the tradition’s primary commitment to protecting human dignity. Hence, its doctrinal body of migration teaching protects the right to *remain* and the right to *migrate*.

Twenty years ago, in their joint pastoral letter “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” the U.S. and Mexican bishops delineated these principles and called for their nations to address root causes of and legal avenues for migration and to safeguard family unity; by contrast, border enforcement, deportation and enforcement through attrition have remained the primary focus in the U.S. context.

Beyond its foundation in social and economic rights,

the Catholic right to migrate is also rooted in the tradition’s commitment to the universal destination of created goods—that is, the idea that the goods of the earth are generally intended for everyone. Pope Francis frequently underscores this social understanding of what belongs to those in need and constraints on market freedom.

Once people do migrate, the Catholic tradition profoundly criticizes patterns wherein stable receiving countries accept the labor of millions without offering legal protections. Such “shadow” societies risk the creation of a permanent underclass, harming both human dignity and the common good. Pope John Paul II condemned the exploitation of migrant workers based on the principle that “capital should be at the service of labor and not labor at the service of capital.” This idea that the economy should serve the person—rather than vice versa—raises significant issues not only about the freedom of markets compared to people, but also about the significant financial stakes in the broken immigration system, where detained immigrants fill beds and those assigned for deportation fill private buses.

So the Catholic tradition also provides a counternarrative of economic ethics critiquing global dynamics that allow capital and goods and information, but not laborers, to flow freely across borders. Pope Francis has spoken out against the dictatorship of faceless economies; his image of humans as commodities in a throwaway culture particular-



# Migration teaching protects the right to remain and the right to migrate.

ly resonates with vulnerable migrant workers' experiences.

In the Southern Poverty Law Center's interviews with undocumented women across sectors of the food industry in the United States, respondents overwhelmingly reported feeling like they were "seen by employers as disposable workers with no lasting value, to be squeezed of every last drop of sweat and labor before being cast aside."

## (Re)contextualizing Migration

With so many undocumented immigrants in the United States having lived here for over a decade, a "double society" increasingly threatens the common good. In their 1986 pastoral letter "Together a New People," the U.S. bishops called this double society "one visible with rights and one invisible without rights." Obstructing viable paths to legalization for the majority of immigrants welcomed in the marketplace but not the voting booth, college campus or stable workplace risks making permanent this underclass of disenfranchised persons, undermining not only Catholic commitments but also significant civic values and interests.

Not only are established communities and migrants often, in the words of the legal scholar and theologian Silas W. Allard, "bound together by history, politics and economics even before the act of migration bridges the distance of geography," but the dynamics of employer recruitment tend to be shaped by prior bonds forged by colonialism, military invasions or economic ties. For instance, the ongoing legacy of 19th- and 20th-century U.S. foreign policy and economic strategies—with their attendant narratives—has generated migration flows from Latin America to the United States.

Given such systemic culpability, some have proposed that an "instability tax" be levied on private and governmental entities that destabilize regions that then experience a large outflow of migrants and refugees—whether that means hedge funds profiting from commodity trading in African minerals, weapons manufacturers profiting from selling arms to the Middle East, or multinationals profiting from degrading or destabilizing poor nations. In light of this moral proximity to harm, the ethicist David

Hollenbach, S.J., of Georgetown University, has suggested that countries that have gained economically from their colonies or that have histories of military involvement in another nation "have special obligations to people in flight from that nation." This is particularly relevant to the issue of refugee resettlement, now under threat.

Becoming a neighbor to the migrant through a social vision of the person and the good requires meeting basic responsibilities of justice, not charity or hospitality alone. This is important given the role that receiving nations play in shaping the conditions that directly contribute to irregular migration. A social anthropology that includes a focus on robust rights and global responsibilities helps to recontextualize migration in the face of tendencies to locate responsibility solely in a migrant's choice to cross borders.

## Structural Sin

The Catholic notion of structural sin explicitly connects these relationships with their harmful consequences and abetting ideologies. Distinct elements of structural sin—dehumanizing trends, unjust structures and harmful attitudes—shape complex dynamics that perpetuate inequalities and influence receptivity to outsiders. Whether in forms of cultural superiority or profiteering, social inducements to personal sin in the immigration context abound. One prominent example is the attempt to build a southern border wall in the United States. Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Tex., has explicitly decried the white supremacy and xenophobia behind such a wall, calling it an "open wound through our sister cities" and "a monument to hate" in his pastoral letter "Night Will Be No More."

The concept of structural sin also draws attention to the connections between harmful structures and ideologies: for example, how powerful narratives casting immigrants as security threats or "takers" influence individuals' roles in collective actions that affect migration, such as voting in an election.

"Fratelli Tutti" repeatedly underscores other pervasive ideological threats to our social instincts as well, convincingly indicating how self-absorption fuels both apathy and hardened insulation or group preservation. Revisiting his theme of globalized indifference, Francis reflects in that document on the many ways we are tempted, like the priest and Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan, "to pass at a safe distance," whether we "retreat inwards, ignore others or [remain] indifferent to their plight." He elaborates how a culture of consumerist comfort abetted by social media distractions incubates false ideologies that can manipulate consciences and insulate them from different perspectives.

Beyond identifying the structural forces demanding



Timothy Schmalz's "Angels Unawares," a sculpture depicting migrants in various eras, is seen in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in June 2024.

institutional solidarity, then, a relational migration ethic entails interrogating those ideological dimensions of social sin that harden resistance to newcomers. On Lampedusa, Pope Francis lamented the pervasive idolatry that facilitates migrants' deaths and robs us of the ability to weep, a theme he revisited on visits to Manila and to Juárez, insisting that "only eyes cleansed by tears can see clearly."

The concept of structural sin offers a framework for critiquing histories of unequal relationships between countries, such as proxy wars, as well as harmful ideologies from xenophobia to meritocracy. Portraying immigration through a lens of individual culpability alone obscures these multileveled dynamics at play. Beyond rights to movement and political self-determination, categories of structural sin and transnational solidarity can orient Catholic migration analyses toward the root causes of displacement and shared accountability.

### Women and Families

As unaccompanied women undertake journeys in increasing numbers—about half of migrants worldwide are female—they face unique threats, from sexual assault by smugglers and officials to harassment on the job to mistreatment in detention facilities. Less likely to qualify for employment-based immigration than men, the majority of migrant women work in unregulated jobs in the informal sector. Undocumented immigrants already earn lower wages than citizens in the same jobs, and undocumented women routinely earn even less than their male counterparts. Undocumented women are often perceived by pred-

ators as "perfect victims" of sexual assault: They remain isolated and uninformed about their rights, and are presumed to lack credibility.

Beyond well-founded fears that they will risk job loss and family separation via deportation if they report abuses, such women lack access to legal resources and face language barriers and cultural pressures. Many remain indebted to their *coyotes* (smugglers), and because they understand that immigration officials collaborate with law enforcement, they rarely seek help from the latter.

Migrant women frequently cite family reunification as their primary motive for migrating. But in the aftermath of detention or deportation, mixed-status families face major economic instability, and children suffer poor health and behavioral outcomes. President-elect Trump's planned mass deportation would leave 4.5 million children separated from one or both parents.

Despite the courage and resilience of many immigrants, these patterns obscure their full humanity as spouses, parents and children. Families comprise our most intimate relationships; policies that undermine family unity frustrate this core. Beyond a critique of economic idolatry, the sanctity and social mission of the family indicate how conditions that perpetuate family separation undermine the common good. Catholic thought integrates a family's intimate communion with its charge to mutually engage the broader social good. Deprivation of dignified labor opportunities and traumatic enforcement mechanisms impede immigrant families' access to social goods.

Migrant women's experiences of assault on their jour-



Photo OSV News/Carlos Jasso, Reuters

Honduran migrants walk along a railroad trestle in Huimanguillo, Mexico, in March 2021, on their way to request asylum in the United States.

neys and the reality of disruptive family separation expose patterns at odds with Christian commitments to human rights and the sanctity of family life. My time with women at Casa Nazaret (Nazareth House) in Nogales, Ariz., always reminded me that migration decisions are rarely personal choices alone. As the director of the Kino Border Initiative, Joanna Williams, recently put it, “parents traveling with their children or sending them to cross the border alone are neither heroic martyrs nor conniving opportunists.”

In other words, any migrant woman’s decisions to “abandon” her children for better long-term prospects for them or for work without documents occurs within constrained social contexts. These means are not desirable, but understanding the realities shaping these “choices” highlights the shortcomings of individualistic paradigms. These women’s experiences highlight the inadequacy of approaches that flatly criminalize irregular migrants—as in, “What part of illegal don’t you understand?”

### Encounters With Solidarity

For the 107th World Day of Migrants, Pope Francis adopted the theme “Towards An Ever Wider ‘We.’” Given his ap-

proach to pastoral and social concerns alike, a dynamically more inclusive community provides an apt symbol for his migration ethic. In his 2021 message, the pope traced the history of our common origin and destiny, highlighting how we are redeemed as a people, not as individuals, “that all might be one” (Jn 17:21).

He linked this social salvation history to the present time, in which that “we” willed by God has become wounded and fragmented: “Our ‘we,’ both in the wider world and within the church, is crumbling and cracking due to myopic and aggressive forms of nationalism and radical individualism. And the highest price is being paid by those who most easily become viewed as *others*: foreigners, migrants, the marginalized, those living on the existential peripheries.”

Global migration has intensified during Francis’ papacy, both in numbers of displaced persons and in the issue’s increased politicization. Addressing each of these issues has become a central priority of his papacy, as evidenced through his voluminous teachings on the subjects through homilies, addresses, public statements and frequent pastoral visits to borders and detention facilities.



## Migrant women frequently cite family reunification as their primary motive for migrating.

As Robert Ellsberg noted in his introduction to Francis' *A Stranger and You Welcomed me: A Call to Mercy and Solidarity With Migrants and Refugees*, the central message repeated throughout his many addresses remains "migrants and refugees are human beings, precious in the eyes of God; they are our brothers and sisters; they are worthy of respect; what we do for them, we do directly for Christ."

The pope grounds his concern in scriptural texts, some reflective of the tradition he inherited, like the Exodus story, the Holy Family's flight, the parable of the good Samaritan and the summons to final judgment. He also incorporates less familiar applications, whether of Jonah and the Ninevites or the ideal of the new Jerusalem. In 2017, Francis established a new Vatican office to oversee the church's response to migrants and refugees: the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. He personally oversees its Migrants and Refugees section.

Pope Francis first introduced four verbs that are central to his teaching in a 2017 address to participants in an international forum on migration and peace: *welcome*, *protect*, *promote* and *integrate*. These offer organizing principles for his subsequent addresses (and the work of the dicastery section), where he regularly suggests that "conjugating these verbs, in the first person singular and the first person plural" is a "duty of justice, civility, and solidarity."

For Francis, *welcome* entails offering broader options for migrants to safely and legally reach destination countries; *protect* involves defending the human rights and dignity of those on the move, regardless of their legal status; *promote* summons the empowerment of newcomers' participation in areas of work, religious expression, family integrity and active citizenship; and *integrate* refers to efforts at mutual intercultural enrichment, not the mere assimilation of newcomers. His emphases encourage a two-way street of integration rather than a unidirectional model marked by assimilationist paternalism that can tempt even ecclesial groups at times.

In our U.S. context, it is worth noting the pope's historic address to Congress in 2015, where he exhorted lawmakers to apply the Golden Rule with respect to migration policy. Identifying as a fellow descendant of immigrants from a shared continent of immigrants, he asked our nation through its representatives to identify with the needs and dreams propelling those traveling north in search of a better life for themselves and for their loved ones, asking, "Is this not what we want for our own children?"

He pleaded with lawmakers to resist the temptation to discard migrants as troublesome or to fear and dehumanize them because of their numbers. With characteristic directness and clarity, he concluded: "In a word, if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life;

if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities. The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us."

### An 'Ever Wider We'

In these days clouded by new fears and divisions, it might be instructive to return to the "Angels Unawares" sculpture installed in St. Peter's Square on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. The piece was commissioned by Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and produced by Timothy Schmalz. It incorporates Muslims escaping Syria beside Jews escaping Nazi Germany beside an Irish boy escaping the potato famine. One figure could easily be an Eritrean attempting to reach Lampedusa.

The bronze and clay of "Angels Unawares" can help counter the collective delusion that we are not responsible for our neighbor and remind us that in our acts of welcome and widening we may be "entertain[ing] angels" (Heb 13:2). When I took my students at the time to see the replica that visited our campus, many instantly recognized their own family histories, their very identities. Like art, our religious practices, narratives and symbols—the tradition of Catholic social teaching—all hold potential to (re)shape moral imagination.

This pope has called attention to the urgency of this formation task, from Lampedusa to "Angels Unawares." His uses of Scripture as well as his appeal to encounters across difference illuminate a path toward the work for conversion and structural justice. These approaches to welcoming migrants spring from, and move us toward, an "ever wider we."

Kristin E. Heyer is the Joseph Chair in Theology at Boston College. This article is adapted from a keynote address at the "Church at the Borders: Best Practices, Promises, and Aspirations for New York" conference at the Center for Migration Studies, New York, N.Y., on Sept. 12, 2024.



Paola Noguera

## My Perpetual Profession

**I hoped my final vows would be an occasion of encounter with the goodness of God for each person present**

By Catherine Kirwan-Avila

The gift of a golden spike came as a surprise.

The heavy metal object was given to me by a friend when I renewed my temporary vows as a member of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 2022. He included a brief history lesson in his note, explaining that the eastern and western portions of the transcontinental railroad were linked with just such a golden spike in 1869, finally uniting the two coasts of the United States. The railroad was the completion of a long project and the realization of a dream. He wrote that he imagined such a spike might also be used in the making of a profound personal commitment.

I was touched by his gesture and felt illuminated by the historical snapshot, but initially the symbol stirred varied and even negative associations in my mind—think “a nail in the coffin,” insect specimens on a display board, or Jesus’ hands and feet pinned to the cross. Needless to say, it wasn’t my favorite image of commitment. Besides, these vows were still temporary!

In my congregation, a perpetual profession of vows

comes after 10 to 12 years of initial formation. For women religious, the perpetual profession is akin to wedding vows—permanent and lifelong. The temporary vows, which we make every three years during initial formation, are like reaffirmations of the relationship over the course of a long engagement. A stake seemed like an awfully permanent symbol for temporary vows. I was happy as a sister, and my intention was to proceed toward final vows, but we weren’t there yet. *No need to get ahead of ourselves!* I thought.

Metaphors of movement are my preference for thinking about my relationship with God. I love to dance and walk and stretch, and very often I experience God’s action in my life as a flow of grace, which I’m invited to step into. Still, given its source, the gift had sentimental value and, I must admit, it intrigued me. I wanted to better understand what it was about that nail that made me nervous and what about it my friend saw as beautiful. So, as I sometimes do with things that I don’t fully grasp, I kept it close to me and waited for its significance to be more fully revealed.

Fast forward two and a half years to this July, when, on the feast of St. Ignatius, I made the leap—or drove in the spike, as my friend might say—and professed my perpetual vows in the presence of many of the people who are most dear to me. With my profession, I af-

Catherine Kirwan-Avila, A.C.I., right, is seen during her perpetual profession ceremony in the chapel of St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

firmed my deep desire and intention to, with God's grace, live the rest of my life seeking to follow and serve Christ faithfully, guided by the Constitutions of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and loving God and others through my vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

My heart felt ready to burst as I looked out on the people who had gathered to celebrate the day and considered all that God had done and given me, so often through these people. Friends from elementary and high school, my college roommate and her husband who had lived two floors below me during freshman year at the College of the Holy Cross, my Handmaid sisters, my parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and others who have been mentors and companions in many stages of life were present. Some of them are regular churchgoers, some are more comfortable in a forest than in a pew, and others are believers or searchers who, for different reasons, do not participate in a faith community. I have experienced God through each of them and, as I took in their faces, I could only give thanks that they existed and that our lives were woven together.

I desired with all my heart that this experience be one of encounter with the goodness of God for each person present. I hoped that somewhere in the poetry of the liturgy and the music, in the witness of an oh-so-human friend, they would catch a glimpse of something that stirred their spirits, something that stoked their hope and left them thirsting and glad, something that was real and relevant to their lives. It made me so happy that these vows could be an occasion of gathering in the name of this God who is worthy of the offering of a thousand lifetimes and who invites us into an adventure of love and fidelity.

That day brought to mind so many people who have stirred and strengthened my spirit along my path. Eleven years earlier, I had entered the congregation as a postulant, apprehensive but intrigued by an unsettling desire for *more* that had been brewing in me for years. A variety of life experiences had shaped my understanding of myself and of the world—family life, friendships, study abroad, a post-grad volunteer program, the Spiritual Exercises, faith sharing, dating, work and study that I enjoyed. They had all responded in some way to the sense that God was calling me to something that would unify and direct my energies and desires in a way that was for the *good*, even if that good felt a little vague at the time. I was looking for a way to satisfy the hunger I felt for meaning, connection, *life*, and a way to bear witness to the goodness that I had glimpsed and sensed was of God.



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## I was looking for a way to satisfy the hunger I felt for meaning, connection, life.

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By my mid 20s, I had begun to make an annual retreat and had even spoken with a couple of sisters about my vocational stirrings. I would look up a congregation online and spend some time scrolling but would inevitably find something that I didn't like and would dismiss the idea of becoming a sister—satisfied, for the moment, that I had “explored.” The wondering always returned though, and eventually, a pointed question from a good friend helped me to see that I was, in fact, avoiding the issue.

Another friend introduced me to my sisters, and after getting to know them from afar, I accepted an invitation to live with the community and discern closer up. At the end of that time, I entered as a postulant. I was still incredulous, but sensed that God was inviting me down this path, at least to check it out. I marvel, looking back, at the gentle and persistent work of grace. There were many moments early on in which I thought that, after I gave the convent a try, I would be satisfied to “return to normal life” (“*What is that?!*” my friends will rightfully cry). I wondered if a vow of chastity would be a nail in the coffin of intimacy, creativity, joy. I wondered if obedience would turn me into a push-over or a coward and if I could cultivate enough interior freedom from *my* things to profess a vow of poverty with any integrity.

These and other questions demanded real examination, prayer and growth. It was only gradually that I began to live into the answers. God and I went many rounds as I questioned and tested, trembled and prayed. It was exasperating at times, but I came to realize that this tug that I experienced was an invitation, and that the response involved both dancing and anchoring. I learned that God was a masterful lead, with a rhythm and timing that were often surprising. I learned that patience, humility and curiosity deepened the connection. My own dance steps felt clumsy and even scary at first, but I learned to keep showing up and found that my partner did the same, every time. In times of fierce struggle and deep joy, I found that consolation—that blessed sense of God's nearness and goodness—always eventually came. There seemed to be no aspect of life that wasn't drawn into the encounter, no experience, question or bit of my humanity that couldn't find its place.

As I spoke the words of my perpetual profession, using



Paola Nogueiras



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Above: Members of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus gather to celebrate their newest fully professed member, Catherine Kirwan-Avila, A.C.I. (first row, third from left).

Left: The parents of Catherine Kirwan-Avila, A.C.I. (James Arthur Avila, left, and Mary Kirwan, second from left) were among those who gathered to celebrate her perpetual profession.

the same simple formula that thousands of Handmaids before me had done, I held many moments of this dance in my heart. I thanked the quiet and insistent voice that had often whispered *just keep going*, and had murmured promises of growth and newness ahead. I thanked God for drawing me into deeper trust, and for the joy that welled up in me as I rooted myself in this commitment. When, as part of the Rite of Perpetual Profession, I was asked if I wished to strive “for the perfection of charity towards God and [my] neighbor, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, living the Gospel faithfully, dedicated to the work of reparation according to the charism of the Institute” (*whew!*), I felt so blessed by the call to strive for something so beautiful, something that would take a lifetime and God’s abundant grace to live into. I smiled from within as I responded, “Yes, I do with all my heart.”

After my vows, I moved 900 miles west, from my community in Philadelphia to another community of our sisters in St. Louis. I did not bring many possessions, but tucked in my checked baggage, wrapped in tissue paper and wedged between rolled-up T-shirts and my toiletries bag, was the golden spike.

The spike is still not my favorite image; it brings to mind a harshness. Still, perhaps because of this, I have come to appreciate the symbolism of my friend’s gift. It speaks to me of the paradox of love—not without pain, but still more durable than any evil and capable of offering beauty in even the most humble or mundane places: in a tiny piece of bread, in the simplest gesture of care. New associations have emerged. The beauty and solidity of the object reminds me of the tenacity of our gentle God, who

calls forth courage and determination in those who desire to walk with him; the audacity of Mary, who said yes, not knowing what lay ahead and who, strengthened by love, never turned back; the quiet heroism of Joseph, whose steadfast presence warmed the ordinary spaces of workshop and family table.

Today, the nail speaks to me of the daring and persistent hope that undergirds a lifelong commitment. Similar to traditional wedding vows, the Rite of our Perpetual Profession includes an articulation of the desire and decision to profess and live our vows “at all costs,” come what may. The experience of faith rooted in love is the condition that creates the possibility of courage, audacity, holiness and hope. The golden spike has come to represent for me the infinite strength of God’s love for us, which empowers us to give ourselves over in a dance that will draw us out beyond ourselves, into God’s heart and out to God’s people.

Catherine Kirwan-Avila, A.C.I., is a campus minister at the Catholic Student Center at Washington University in St. Louis and is part of the formation community of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in St. Louis, Mo.

## THE PRAYER OF UNSEEKING DESPAIR

By Gretchen Tessmer

mud and murder  
persist  
despite a heavy dislike  
for both among most  
who call themselves  
children of men

and the children of God  
have been told and  
expect  
not to see an end  
to such things until  
the dark ages give way

no, *truly* give way  
to what is meant to come after

with the glory of my Father's son  
descending upon clouds  
shot through with  
prismatic glory  
or perhaps just ordinary  
sunlight  
shimmering through a drizzling, autumn rain

the cold and wintry kind  
that has a person  
gathering their sweater  
tight around their bones  
feeling long and thin, and aching deep  
as if the marrow  
has been pulled out

and only hollowness remains

in that, there is no cure  
except  
His arms stretched out  
and beckoning  
soon, to come  
to rest around your shoulders  
bringing the warmth and shine

of stars, and stars, and more stars

---

Gretchen Tessmer has published short stories and poems in *Nature*, *North American Review*, *New Welsh Review* and *Strange Horizons*.

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# The Cure for Political Polarization?

## It might be synodality

By James Martin

During the past two Octobers, I spent my days speaking with many people who disagreed with me. I'm referring, of course, to the Synod on Synodality, the final session of which just concluded. While all the roughly 350 delegates agreed on the basics of our faith (we all recited the Creed together during Mass), and while many of us agreed on other important elements of the faith (on issues like the role of episcopal conferences, women's roles in leadership and L.G.B.T.Q. outreach), I spent long periods with people who disagreed strongly with certain beliefs I hold.

Here's one example: I sat with a few bishops who are members of episcopal conferences that had supported laws that said L.G.B.T.Q. people should be jailed. Another delegate at one of my tables had said publicly that L.G.B.T.Q. issues were simply an "ideology." That is, I sat with people whose views I found reprehensible; and they sat with me, a person whose views they found reprehensible.

The delegates' disagreement on whether the diaconate should be open to women, to take another example, has been well documented. The paragraph about women in our final document received the highest number of "no" votes from the delegates: 97 out of roughly 350 votes. But we disagreed on less controversial issues as well: whether

diocesan parish synods should be mandatory, whether new ministries should be "instituted" or just "recommended," and so on.

In short, while we agreed on the essentials, there was frequent disagreement on other church matters. Nonetheless, my fellow delegates and I were able to speak civilly to one another, worship together, chat over coffee and pastries at the breaks, and laugh and even tease one another at our tables. How was this possible? A powerful idea with a boring name: synodality. Specifically, we delegates were influenced by the way that the synod invited us to listen to one another.

In the aftermath of the most contentious U.S. presidential campaign in many of our lifetimes, many Americans have friends on either side of the increasingly hardened political divide in our country. Some are elated and others are devastated; some feel justified, others are terrified.

My experience at the synod has prompted me to consider how the lessons I learned there might extend to our polarized nation. The methods of discussion that we used at the synod may not be possible in every political or even conversational setting, but I can attest to the fact that many of the tools we used truly made a difference.

Last year, we delegates came together as a rather disparate group of Catholics from all corners of the globe (at one table I sat between a delegate from Tanzania and one



James Martin

from Fiji) and with widely differing points of view on a great many topics, many of them quite incendiary. This year, with the same delegates coming from the same far-flung places, we ended the synod with a great deal of joy, friendship and camaraderie.

So let me share a few “synodal” tips to help address our polarized country.

**Pray. Always.** We began each week with a Mass, usually in St. Peter’s Basilica (which prompted one cardinal to say jokingly to me, “Do you think this is grand enough?”). Prayer reminded us that the Holy Spirit was not only with us, but would help us and *wanted* us to be united. Again, there were

some things we weren’t united on, but we wanted to draw as close together as possible. In the social sphere, even when we are speaking to people with different faiths or no faith tradition, prayer can change us and prepare us to listen. Especially in family settings, the reminder that the Holy Spirit is present, even in difficult conversations, can give us an internal peace that influences how we speak to one another.

**Listen.** The most basic approach was to listen to everyone. Now, whether you’re a devastated Democrat or a rejoicing Republican, this will be hard—as it occasionally was at the synod. It is easy to underestimate how important this was and is. We all think we listen to people on the “other side of the aisle” (a political image but also an ecclesial one), but many times we don’t. We’re so intent on catching someone out in a fallacy, or preparing our rebuttal, that we don’t truly hear what the other person is saying or what is influencing their opinion. We may still disagree, but when we truly listen at least we can understand the person better. One of the benefits of the method of discussion used at the synod was that facilitators prevented people from interrupting. This may be impossible in a family or even a work setting, but it might help as a general guideline when discussing challenging topics. Listen, don’t interrupt.

The fundamental insight of the synod was not only that this type of listening was helpful in decision making,

but also that the Holy Spirit was at work in everyone, not simply in cardinals and bishops. Everyone had the chance to have their say. Everyone was worth listening to.

**Identify areas of convergence.** Even if you have a major disagreement with someone—*Donald Trump is America’s Messiah* versus *Donald Trump is America’s Hitler*—you might be able to find convergence on another issue. For example, the belief that the economy isn’t working well for many in the middle class. Or: We need to be a welcoming country for immigrants but need fair rules for entry. During the synod, it helped to be honest on areas where we diverged—and we had lots of divergences.

We also didn’t speak only about the “tough topics.” One of the best parts of the synod was that spending time with one another reminded us that each person was more than a conglomeration of issue positions. We were full human beings—all Catholics in this case—with a wide variety of interests, experiences and perspectives. Especially during the second session, we mainly talked about the church overall, not just the so-called “hot button” topics.

In hearing people speak about their parishes, their families, their religious communities; how much they loved their ministries and those with whom they ministered; or perhaps their favorite Gospel passage or saint, we came to know each other on a deeper level. And in coming to know someone you are better able to dialogue with them. As Cardinal-elect Timothy Radcliffe reminded us at the synod, quoting my new favorite saying from St. John Paul II: “Affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality.”

I won’t pretend that the polarization in our society and in our church is not severe. Sometimes it even gets violent, as in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. And sometimes people have beliefs that need to be not only challenged but rejected outright: racism, misogyny, homophobia. But even in these difficult cases, some of the tools of synodality, especially its emphasis on listening and its underlying thesis that the Holy Spirit is active in everyone, can help us to draw together. This allows us to reject prejudice without rejecting the person who holds such beliefs, instead trying to change their heart.

I know it sounds hard, and often it is. But at the Synod on Synodality, among some of the most diverse groups you could imagine, I’ve seen it work. And it’s surely worth it.

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James Martin, S.J., is a Jesuit priest, author, editor at large at *America* and founder of *Outreach*, an L.G.B.T.Q. Catholic resource. He was a delegate to the Synod on Synodality in 2023 and 2024.

# Jesus, Mary and Satan at the Met

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

“Beauty will save the world.”

These are the words that kept running through my mind as I made a pilgrimage through “Siena: The Rise of Painting, 1300-1350,” an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York through Jan. 26. A vast space, dark and brooding, houses the exhibition—the better to see the images on display, the blazing blues and the gorgeous golds beautiful and bracing against a black backdrop. But the darkened space, punctuated by columns evoking the medieval cathedral of Siena, also seems a forewarning of the times to come.

In 1348 the Black Death would strike Siena, rage for six months and kill half the city’s population. Hundreds of people would be stricken with plague each day, suffer the growths of buboes in their armpits and groins, and die an agonizing death. Family members would abandon the sick for fear of catching their death, and burial would be left to those willing to risk their own safety—including the saintly Catherine of Siena—by dragging swollen corpses to the ditch dug outside the city and covering them in dirt, leaving room for the bodies to come the next day. To be alive in Siena in 1348 was an unimaginable nightmare.

Set against this horrific history is the work of four extraordinary artists—Duccio di Boninsegna, Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, and Simone Martini—two of whom would die in that plague. But before they died, and perhaps unbeknownst to themselves, they created works of tran-

scendent and lasting beauty that would serve as an antidote to the disease, death and destruction that would soon befall their beloved city and, indeed, the world beyond.

## Communing With the Saints

The one hundred objects on display—paintings alongside sculptures, metalwork and textiles—tell the stories and feature the figures familiar to Catholics, both medieval and modern. The paintings depict Jesus and Mary, of course, and the events of their extraordinary ordinary lives, including Jesus as a baby in his mother’s lap reaching up to touch her face (Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1340) and Jesus nursing



Simone Martini, “Virgin and Child With Four Saints and a Dominican Nun” (circa 1325)



Pietro Lorenzetti, "The Crucifixion" (circa 1340s)

at his mother's breast (Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1325)—two tender Madonnas set beside the carving of Jesus suffering horribly on a crooked cross while his desolate mother looks on (Guccio di Mannaia, 1310-20). His life, their lives all of a piece: the joy of birth, the inevitability of suffering and death.

My favorite painting, placed at the end of the exhibition, clearly occupying pride of place, is Simone Martini's "Christ Discovered in the Temple" (1342). The painting (see Page 51) depicts Mary and Joseph disciplining Jesus for going to the temple without telling them. The focus is on their parental concern for his safety, their relief combined

with their anger: Joseph's stern face, showing his disappointment at his foster son's thoughtlessness; Mary's mild correction, gesticulating as she holds a book in her hand, as if to tell him she understands his love of the law but also to say how worried she was; and young Jesus, a resentful adolescent, hugging himself with his hands and arms, a defensive posture, silently suffering the onslaught from his benighted and overprotective parents. It is a scene from the life of any family, Sienese or American, 14th century or 21st. The painting is startling in its honest and poignant depiction of universal family dynamics, offering an interpretation of a well-worn Gospel story that I had never seen before.

I pored over this painting for a long time, along with my friend Maria, who accompanied me on my pilgrimage. As veteran mothers of sons, recalcitrant and otherwise, we immediately recognized it as a depiction of episodes from our own lives. This is Jesus, Mary and Joseph's story—but it is also ours, told through images rather than words, across the distance of 700 years. I don't know if Martini him-

self was a father, but I imagine he must have been.

Between Duccio's "Madonna and Child," the first piece of the exhibition, and Martini's fresh, new version of the Holy Family, there are many other powerful depictions of Gospel stories and lives of the saints, most notably multiple Annunciations with their resplendent angels and stunned Marys. It was not lost on me that my friend and I, two Catholic women christened Maria and Angela—our names bespeaking this story of the eruption of the news of salvation into a broken world, brought to Mary by an angelic messenger—had chosen to spend the day among so many Annunciations. It seemed natural and almost inev-

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## Many of us at the museum on any given day don't believe in God. And yet they—we—still come.

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itable, from the first moment we saw the advertisement for the exhibition, that we would go to see it.

As we moved from station to station, we were given fresh glimpses into other events in Christ's life. A series of panels painted by Duccio as part of the magnificent *Maestà*, the double-sided altarpiece once housed in the Cathedral of Siena, tells a horizontal narrative, offering moving depictions of Jesus' temptation by a bleak, black devil, Jesus' calling of the disciples (who gingerly hold their net full of fish), the marriage feast at Cana (with his mother strikingly seated at the head of the table), Jesus with the woman at the well, Jesus healing the man blind from birth, the Transfiguration, and the raising of Lazarus. The latter is particularly touching, depicting Jesus flanked by Lazarus' sisters, the practical Martha watching him in wonder, the mystic Mary who has fallen to her knees, and an unidentified young man in Siennese dress standing close to the open tomb and holding his splendid gold cloak up to his nose to mask the smell from the grave.

These are details drawn from life, as well as from the stories handed down to us, generation after generation, refreshing them. There is nothing clichéd, rote or static about these depictions. They are a re-envisioning, charged with the imagination of the artist and brought to life.

Another of my favorite pieces depicts "The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine" (Barna di Siena, 1340) (see Page 52), the patron saint of Siena who betrothed herself to Jesus as a young girl, spent her life caring for the poor and the sick, and offered advice to the pope (some of which was helpful, some not). One of the three frames below the depiction of Christ placing a wedding ring on Catherine's finger shows St. Margaret mercilessly hammering the devil—that same bleak, black figure that tempted Christ in scenes before. It is a cheering sight in all times, but especially in dark times, to see a holy woman so wonderfully empowered. These are paintings created by artists who believe in the power of the saints to defeat evil in the here and now and make our world a better place.



Duccio di Buoninsegna, "The Annunciation" (circa 1307-11)

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### The Zone of Beauty

These re-imaginings of received stories are as vivid in our own time as they were in 14th-century Siena—and I trust their vivid depictions of faith served the Siennese people well in the years of plague that would follow their creation. I like to believe that the church and the art it housed—with those blazing blues and gorgeous golds—constituted an inviolable zone of beauty, a kind of inner sanctum that vied with the ugliness of the Black Death that raged outside. And when the ugliness did occasionally enter in the form



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of the black devil, he got pushed aside by Christ, hammered by St. Margaret.

Even for us, who, thank God, are not living in a time of plague, the visions presented by these paintings are utterly arresting. I couldn't look enough, nor could my fellow museum-goers—staring hungrily, eating with our eyes, as if trying to internalize them and take them with us, snapping photos of the pieces so we could do just that. Lucky us, for the Sienese had no such technological ability. They would simply have to rely on memory—or, more important, the memory of how these pictures made them feel: closer to God, certain of heaven, newly in love with Jesus and Mary,



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Simone Martini, "Christ Discovered in the Temple" (1342)

looking forward to an afterlife that will be so much better than this one.

We, on the other hand, in 21st-century New York, were gazing at these paintings from a very different place, geographically, temporally and spiritually. The weather outside that day was lovely and fine. Anyone watching us—the watchers—could see that we were well fed and well heeled, taking for granted the fact of being alive. We were not desperate to believe in a faith that would save us. Many of us at the museum on any given day, in fact, don't believe in God, let alone in the people being depicted so lovingly in these paintings and carvings. And yet they—we—still come. *Why?* I wondered.

Listening to the conversations taking place in the gallery, mostly in reverential whispers, I gathered that many of the people present were interested in history—or, more specifically, in art history—in artistic technique, in Italian culture, in beautiful objects of any kind. People love Greek sculpture, even if they don't believe in Greek gods. We love the stories they tell us about ourselves. There is truth in them, even if the stories themselves are invented.

But if one does believe in God, has even a modicum of faith and has been formed as a Catholic—if one recognizes these people and their stories as companions of one's



## These artistic renderings constitute a feast for the heart as well as a feast for the eye.

childhood, fellow pilgrims along the journey toward eternity—how much richer the experience. These artistic renderings constitute a feast for the heart as well as a feast for the eye, reminding us of the foundations of our faith and the stories that first stirred our imaginations. The precious details (Jesus touching his mother’s face, the man with the cape over his nose, that spoiled adolescent Jesus) humanize these larger-than-life figures, bring them into the room with us and also put us in the room with them. Art grounds what can sometimes seem an abstract faith in the real, appealing to our senses, bringing home to us in an experiential way the truth of the Incarnation.

“Beauty will save the world,” Dostoyevsky once wrote. Maybe not from plague, and maybe not from politics (which seems to be the plague of our current moment). But even the darkest forces cannot defeat the power of the human imagination—and, in this case, the Catholic imagination—to redeem a broken and suffering world, reminding us of our people and our story: that Mary says yes, Christ is born, the dead will be raised, saints walk among us and the devil always gets hammered.

Angela Alaimo O’Donnell is a writer, poet and professor at Fordham University and is the associate director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies.



Simone Martini, “Christ Carrying the Cross” (circa 1335)

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Barna da Siena, “The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine” (circa 1340)

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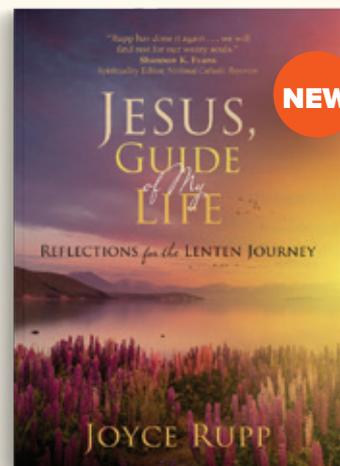
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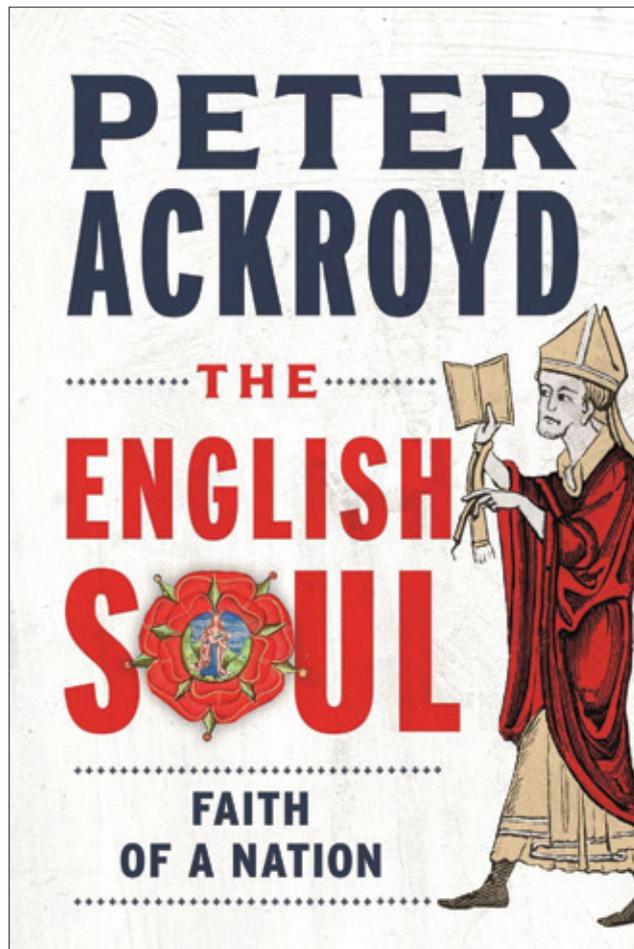
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## GETTING RELIGION WRONG



Reaktion Books / 416p \$30

Christianity, Peter Ackroyd declares at the outset of *The English Soul: Faith of a Nation*, has been “the anchoring and defining doctrine of England” and “the reflection, perhaps the embodiment of the English soul.” Other faiths and the sometimes very substantial communities who profess them—Judaism, Islam, Hinduism—have an important place in any modern understanding of that English soul, but, not being “of native origin or of native inspiration,” they “did not create it.”

Such sentiments embody obvious enough historical truisms, but in the hands of populists like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, attempts to identify the “soul” of a nation can all too easily be weaponized against what are perceived as problematic minorities. Ackroyd is aware of that danger and makes the necessary caveats. He nevertheless presents his book as an attempt to characterize the “spirit and nature of English Christianity...as it has developed over the last 1,400 years.”

But that is not in fact the book he has written. This book is largely a study of some notable figures in Protestant England.

Christianity has been the predominant faith of mainland Britain for a millennium and a half. In the sixth century, a flourishing Romano-British church was almost overwhelmed by a tide of pagan Scandinavian and Germanic “Saxon” invaders. By the seventh century, the invaders turned settlers themselves were increasingly abandoning their harsh northern pantheon for the milder and literate pieties of Christianity, and by the eighth century, English missionaries were launching missions to convert the rest of pagan northern Europe.

Over the next eight centuries, England developed a dense network of Christian mini-territories, the parishes, whose communal identity and church buildings were the setting for the landmark events of the people’s lives—birth, marriage and death—and in whose material fabric the hopes, aspirations and beliefs of successive generations were sanctified, embodied and inscribed. Twenty-six cathedrals and more than 13,000 English parish churches survive from the English middle ages, their architecture, wall-paintings, stained-glass windows, gravestones and monumental brasses constituting a vast and eloquent material archive of the English soul over its formative millennium.

As literacy increased, lay men and women acquired “Books of Hours” to help them pray, which were handed on through generations, acquiring family notes and added devotions in margins and blank pages that traced the changing patterns of belief and practice.

For those thousand years, Christian England—the England of Alfred the Great and Henry V, of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland—was, like the rest of Europe, fundamentally Catholic. That meant it was sacramental, focused especially on belief in the living presence of Christ in the Mass and in a material world transparent to the sacred and penetrated by spiritual presences, the suppliant dead and the triumphant angels and saints.

England itself was crisscrossed by pilgrimage routes to healing shrines: Becket at Canterbury, the Virgin Mary at Walsingham, St. Wilfred at York, St. Chad at Durham, St. Etheldreda at Ely, St. Edmund at Bury, and hundreds, probably thousands, of minor local shrines where, it was believed, healing and comfort for troubled souls and ailing bodies were to be found.

None of this, evidently, rates Ackroyd’s consideration, and the possibility that its forcible and sudden suppression by successive Tudor monarchs—the outlawing of prayer for the dead and the sacrifice of the Mass, the destruction of the shrines and the abolition of monastic life, “bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang”—might have constituted a trauma for the English soul is never even mooted.

England's Catholic millennium is dealt with in just three of the book's 23 chapters, and they focus exclusively on exceptional writers about religion: the seventh-century monk and biblical commentator Bede, here treated primarily as a historian; then, leaping over the next seven centuries, a cluster of 14th-century mystical writers, especially two East Anglian women, the anchoress Julian of Norwich and the wandering ex-housewife Margery Kempe; and the acrimonious Oxford philosopher, theologian and heresiarch John Wycliffe, whose principal contribution to English religion was, in Ackroyd's view, to help "build a fortress in England against the power of Rome and Catholic Europe."

The rest of Ackroyd's book follows a well-worn (and now widely questioned) Protestant triumphalist narrative, in which the royal religious revolution that forcibly swept away a thousand years of Catholicism and replaced it with what was increasingly a religion not of sign, symbol and sacrament, but of the Book, was seen as the assertion of a fundamentally English religious identity over an alien foreign imposition.

So Ackroyd, though aware of the limited appeal of Wycliffe's attack on some of the fundamentals of Catholic belief in the 14th century, nevertheless claims that he "laid bare the root cause of native discontent with the Roman faith," where the word "Roman" suggests that the faith in question, which had been normative for eight centuries, was not really "English."

In the same way he asserts that on the eve of the Reformation, "the educated laity were dismissive of friars, pluralists and bishops" and "there were doubts about Catholic doctrine." Yet there is overwhelming historical evidence that in the century before the break with Rome, those very same laypeople were pouring money into rebuilding and beautifying their parish churches and financing legions of stipendiary guild and chantry priests (the future Protestant Bible translator William Tyndale among them) to provide the Catholic ceremonies and teach the beliefs about which Ackroyd supposes they were having "doubts."

For the last 30 years, historians of the English Reformation have been calling into question the received narrative of an unpopular and decadent medieval church that was easily overturned, and the rapid adoption of a more congenial Protestantism, that underlies Ackroyd's story. A "Guide to Further Reading" in *The English Soul* significantly contains no works representing this more recent research and interpretation. From his account of Wycliffe onward, the Catholicism that nourished England's soul for a thousand years simply disappears from his story—to reappear, only briefly and without context, in chapters on John Henry Newman and G. K. Chesterton.

As a consequence, Ackroyd presents as enduring characteristics of English religion features that were in fact the consequence of the Reformation upheaval itself. "Ambiguity and compromise" he claims, "were part of the English temper: doctrinal purity was not." But this is manifestly untrue.

Wycliffe himself was notoriously argumentative, and medieval England produced many distinguished scholastic theologians, fully engaged in the doctrinal and philosophical debates that were the stuff of university theology. Confining oneself to the Archbishops of Canterbury alone, one can point to Stephen Langton, Robert Kilwardby, John Peckham and William Bradwardine. These English churchmen and theologians were frequently sticklers for orthodoxy, as the sometimes lethal 14th- and 15th-century campaigns against the Lollard heresy demonstrated.

Some English anti-heretical writings gained European status as classic statements of orthodox Catholic doctrine. The 15th-century Carmelite theologian Thomas Netter's huge anti-Lollard compendium, the *Doctrinale Fidei Ecclesiae*, became a standard European reference work against heresy, and the anti-Lutheran treatises of that archetypical Yorkshireman, John Fisher, became the basis of the European Counter-Reformation's polemic against Protestantism.

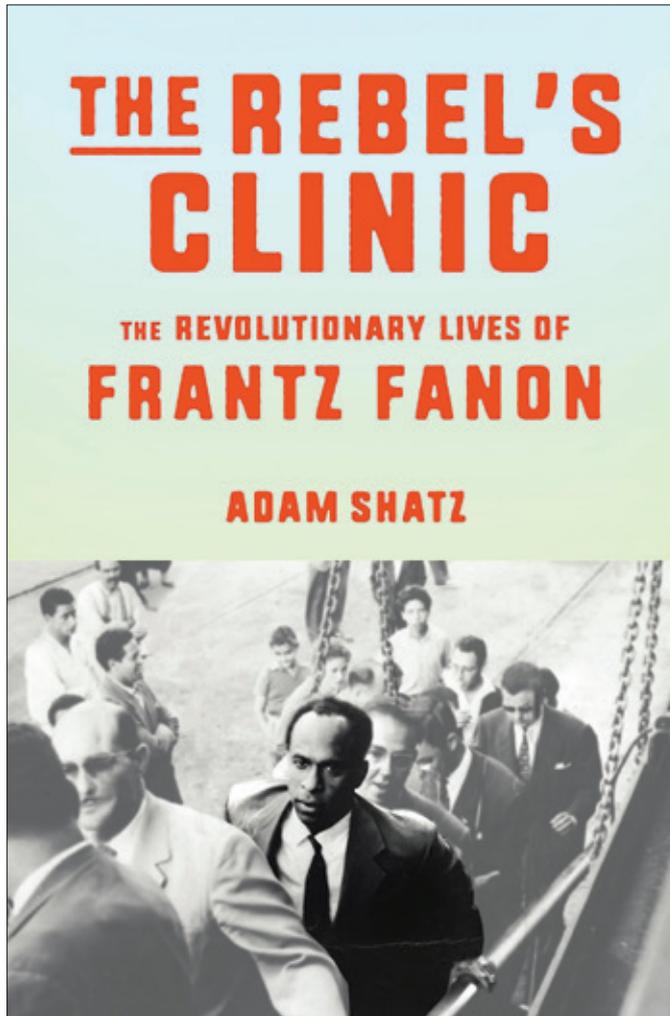
All that changed when Henry VIII and his son Edward VI imposed progressively more Protestant settlements on bishops and clergy, many of whom still retained Catholic beliefs. Doctrinal unanimity became a thing of the past, never to be regained, and ambiguity and compromise became essential survival mechanisms for those wishing to retain their jobs, and even on occasion their heads.

Doctrinal ambiguity, or at any rate self-conscious moderation, has remained a feature of the modern Anglican Church, and is often perceived as its defining virtue. But many of the historical figures featured in this book would have despised religious moderation as cowardice and apostasy, not least the gallery of "sectaries" who rejected the established church altogether: Elizabethan separatists like Robert Browne and Henry Barrow, Baptists like John Bunyan, Quakers like George Fox.

Ackroyd is an accomplished writer who has often written compellingly about the English past. But he is not at his best in this book, a sometimes dutiful catalog of major and some very minor religious figures, lacking a convincing unifying theme. Anyone looking for a key to the English soul must look elsewhere.

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux / 464p \$32

Frantz Fanon is having a moment.

In the past year, in the aftermath of the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks in southern Israel, it has been impossible to talk about decolonization and Palestinian movements for independence, whether approvingly or disapprovingly, without referencing Fanon and his ideas. Even before last October, Fanon's name was increasingly becoming a touchstone in discussions of policing and the Black Lives Matter movement—often a literal touchstone, a talisman in the author's back pocket, a name that must be mentioned but that can be divorced from all context and analysis.

With his new biography, *The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon*, Adam Shatz seeks to feed Fanon's moment and ground it in that missing context—Fanon the person, and not just his most famous soundbites.

Shatz brings us from Martinique, where Fanon grew up in a middle-class family believing he was as French as any Parisian; to France, where Fanon fought in the Second World War, became aware that he was Black, and went to

medical school; to Algeria, where Fanon ran a psychiatric hospital, provided medical treatment to both the tortured and the torturers, became radicalized against the French colonial project, and was eventually expelled for his activities assisting the National Liberation Front in Algeria (F.L.N.); and finally to Tunis, where Fanon spent the rest of his short life as a spokesperson for the F.L.N.'s Algerian government in exile.

At times, *The Rebel's Clinic* reads like a “Who's Who” of 20th-century thought, with cameos by figures as varied as Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Wright, André Mandouze, Eldridge Cleaver, Jacques Lacan, Aimé Césaire and Patrice Lumumba. Fanon's story intertwines with French literary movements like Négritude and existentialism; early psychoanalysis and the earliest research on racism's effects on health; the Black Panthers, the C.I.A., and the first diplomatic conferences among the newly independent African states; the Catholic Worker movement and the Communist Party; and, of course, decolonial movements throughout Africa, the Middle East and the world.

It is certainly an interesting and colorful life, and it is clear that Shatz likes and admires his subject as a person. But what drives the book are Fanon's ideas, and what emerges is a portrait of a man whose thinking was much more nuanced and tortured on the questions of race, oppression and violence than he is typically given credit for.

Fanon's most famous and controversial idea, and the one that Shatz's book is most oriented at understanding, comes from the first line of his final and most famous book, *The Wretched of the Earth*: “Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” Fanon was consumed by the question of how much violence the colonized could or should absorb before colonial violence provoked an equal and opposite reaction.

This is sometimes caricatured by Fanon's detractors as a focus on eye-for-eye justice or an obsession with a victim/oppressor paradigm, but that is unfair. Rather, Fanon was interested in excavating the inherent violence buried in colonization and asking whether it might be less violent and cause less harm to disrupt that status quo. He was asking about the limits of nonviolence—about the point at which repeatedly allowing oneself to be violated becomes less a form of radical love of one's enemy and more an indication of self-hatred. What about when it becomes a question of passively watching the annihilation of *other* innocent people? Of one's own children?

It can be hard to sit with such questions without feeling some degree of conflict. The question of when to choose violence is clearly weighty, but it is also a question that seems to have no correct answer. Within the church, both turning the other cheek and just war theory in defense of innocents



## In Shatz's telling, Fanon's ideas on violence were more descriptive than prescriptive.

have long-rooted histories. Shatz's biography is, ultimately, a study in that ambivalence, which he argues Fanon shared.

In Shatz's telling, Fanon's ideas on violence were more descriptive than prescriptive. He did not believe violence to be inevitable or desirable and refused to see liberty as a zero-sum game—but colonialism had created a system in which violence *was* unavoidable and the French *would* lose if the Algerians gained liberty. In a situation in which someone must be subjugated, why must the Algerians consent to be the subjugated ones?

As a psychiatrist, Fanon understood both the temptation to revenge and the genuine psychological utility of the colonized choosing to fight back. Violence “rids the colonized of his inferiority complex, of his passive and despairing attitude,” allowing him to become a subject of history rather than a mere object—a man. (And the colonized person liberated by violence in Fanon's imagination *is* a man.) But while Fanon saw anticolonial violence as “dis-intoxicating” at the individual level, he was not making a utilitarian argument about its effectiveness as a movement strategy and was quite clear-eyed about its complex effects at the national level.

Fanon acknowledged that the violence of decolonization, while unavoidable, would traumatize its participants, hobble national development, empower despotic leaders, entrench the “primitive Manichaeism of the colonizer” and lead to a more conservative and less equal society.

Shatz spends almost 400 pages untangling Fanon's life and words to reach this summary of Fanon's thoughts on violence. Others, doing the same, have reached very different conclusions. Fanon's writings can be self-contradictory and unclear in a way that turns him into a political Rorschach test.

One question that plagues Fanon's legacy is whether a person who can be used to support every idea is useful in supporting any one idea. The lines of his thinking that one focuses on reveal more about that person than they do about him. Fanon can be used to support both sides of any number of questions: Should African states be built on Black nationalism or Enlightenment universalism? Are the structural economic effects of colonialism something that can and must be remedied, or are reparations wrong? Is decolonization primarily a material process or a psychological one? Is the use of violence against an oppressor empowering or crippling?

The answer to any of these, to hear Fanon tell it, is “yes.”

I was left with one final question at the end of *The Rebel's Clinic*, to which I suspect Fanon's answer would be different: Is spending all this time deducing what Fanon “really” thought worth it? Fanon's “moment” is certainly

earned, and perhaps no thinker's ideas—about racial and national identity, about the appropriate responses to oppressive violence, about ends and means and consequences—are more worth engaging with this year than his. The questions that plagued Fanon haunt us today in only slightly modified form. The Algerian experience of decolonization, for example, was and is very important to Palestinian thought and self-conception, and understanding Fanon is a basic prerequisite for talking about the current war.

But my primary takeaway from *The Rebel's Clinic* is that reading Shatz's biography is not a particularly effective shortcut. Instead, Shatz convinced me that I ought to sit down and re-read Fanon's major works for myself—asking not what Fanon thinks, but: What do I think?

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jacqui Oesterblad is a civil rights attorney from Arizona. This review was commissioned and written prior to the author's beginning work as a federal judicial law clerk. The content of this review has no relationship to her work in that role.

## JUNIPER RISING

By Richard Schiffman

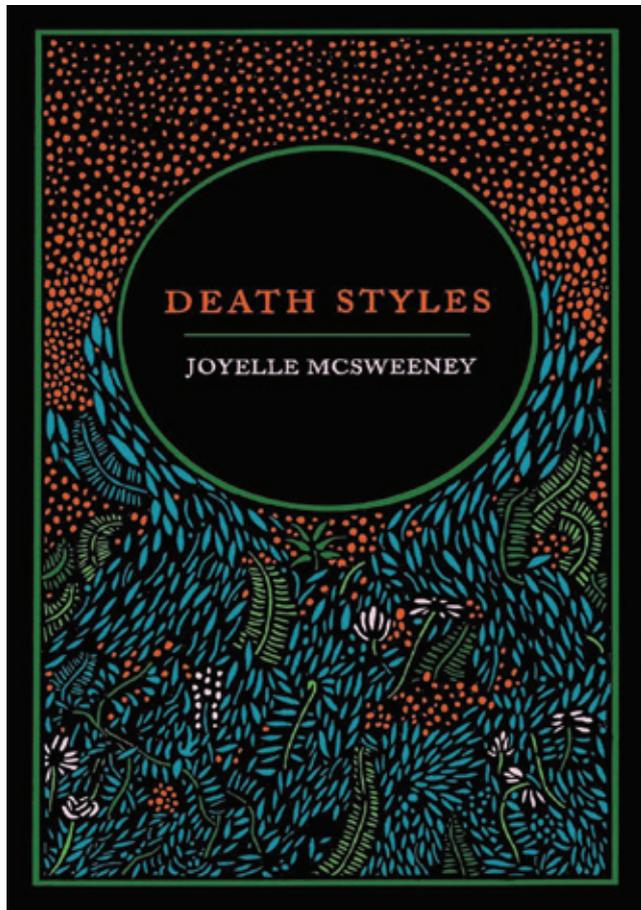
Mountain juniper by my bedroom window,  
each year rising half a foot, branches spreading,  
blocking out a cubit more of sky.

Who am I to prune the surging crown?  
I did not plant this tree, nor trip the switch that sinks  
the root, that buds the bud, that swells the trunk,

that thrusts this dizzy tonnage toward the sun.  
To grow is joy. So too to watch it year by year  
enact the script some slender seed contained.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Richard Schiffman is an environmental journalist, poet and author of two biographies. His poems have appeared in *The New York Times*, *BBC Radio*, on the “*Writer's Almanac*” podcast and in his poetry collection *What the Dust Doesn't Know*.

## MOURNING IN VERSE



Nightboat / 136p \$17.95

*What I'm waiting for: someone to shout instructions  
from the sky/ through some barely imaginable  
instrument.  
I've cleared out all my hearing for this  
but no voice comes.*

The above poem is a prayer of sorts, dated Aug. 14, 2020, and spoken by Joyelle McSweeney—the author and narrator of *Death Styles*. McSweeney's life, including her sorrows, is laid bare in this book through poems delivered with wit and solemnity.

McSweeney is an accomplished poet. A recent recipient of a fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and of a Guggenheim Fellowship, she has written 10 books across creative and critical genres and is a professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. McSweeney is also a challenging poet, and I mean that as a compliment. Her verse is linguistically complex; though certainly not inscrutable, her poetry requires sustained attention.

*Death Styles* rewards our attention. The book is a follow-up to her 2020 double volume, *Toxicon and Arachne*.

In fact, I think *Death Styles* requires that previous volume in order to be fully appreciated.

McSweeney's daughter Arachne died in October 2017 of a congenital birth defect. She was 13 days old. Arachne was the focus of McSweeney's recent books, and she haunts this new work in a supernatural manner, in the way that only a lost child can; in almost all of the poems of the book, Arachne arrives. Arachne's corporeal presence in *Death Styles* also demonstrates McSweeney's Catholic lineage and vision.

In interviews and essays, McSweeney has articulated a compelling sense of the Catholic artistic imagination, voiced in the same breath as her criticisms of the institution. "My grave problems with this Church aside," McSweeney has written, "my cultural instincts are definitely shaped by my early immersion in Catholicism: my taste for the drastic, for extremes, for the blood and the gold, for a faith based on Mysteries, on agonies, for the set-up-and-punch-line structure of the Beatitudes: *Let Beauty be convulsive*."

She is compelled by the Catholic sense that "there is something realer than real...transubstantiation itself, that a thing may be turned into its opposite through a tiny portal the size of a wafer, that's just like a basic assumption of my day-to-day life." Hers is a Catholicism of bells and smells—saintly corpses with the scent of flowers.

Catholic art is strange because Catholicism is strange. God is paradox and performance, Christ a magnifying impossibility. Tidy Catholic art is neither compelling nor clarifying. Bring on the baroque. One might identify some of McSweeney's Catholic ancestors as Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, Charles Baudelaire, Hieronymus Bosch, Salvador Dalí and Kiki Smith.

"It's one of my loose theories," Kiki Smith has said, "that Catholicism and art have gone well together because both believe in the physical manifestation of the spiritual world—that it's through the physical world that you have spiritual life—that you have to be here physically in a body." Smith's claims sound like McSweeney's *ars poetica*.

*Death Styles*, at its core, is a simple affirmation: McSweeney's daughter lives, in an embodied presence, because she once lived. The confluence of her haunting memory and the book's pandemic setting create a dizzying result.

In the book's first poem, dated Aug. 11, 2020, the narrator is out walking her dog at dawn. She thinks of a skunk that she'd seen on another day, and the poem starts to gain energy; its mostly short lines accumulate quickly. Then, her memories of Arachne rise to the surface, and overwhelm the narrative:

*I put my thumb in my mouth to mime the drinking*

*I will do at five o'clock  
on the dot  
at the spot  
in the center of the clock  
face, watch face, sundial, style.*

“Surely I am evading my responsibilities,” she writes in a later poem; this sense of drifting through life suffuses the book. Further, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates her grief: “I’m hiding in the tiny yard because I’m thronged with people, laundry, dishes, subfunctional computer equipment, weeds, animals, mold, and a virus wrapped around the planet like a tumor wrapped in veins. It should be exciting but it’s dank as a cape./ What I want is to be snatched out of this place.”

Yet McSweeney knows that grief is inescapable, not something to be outrun. In a poem dated Aug. 18, 2020, she leads with two curious epigraphs from Diana Vreeland, longtime advice columnist for Harper’s Bazaar. Vreeland’s suggestions to “rinse your blonde child’s hair in dead champagne to keep it gold” and to “have every room done up in every color green” are preceded by an anaphoric refrain: “Why don’t you?”

The question’s phrasing is accusatory, in the vein of cheeky magazine columns. McSweeney, in response, plays with the absurdities of domestic life and the flippancy of such advice. She borrows Vreeland’s phrasing:

*Why don't you  
stand before the door  
black bows on your wrists  
in one of two identical pairs of shoes  
this one with rubber soles for wet days  
any cobbler can do this  
why don't you  
palm frond, breadmold, emerald, seabladder,  
filing cabinet, verdigris, eau du Nil—.*

McSweeney’s lines roll forward, accumulating odd turns of language before disrupting their flow in a sardonic conclusion.

Her dark comedy only serves to enhance her sentimental turns; a deeply Catholic pivot in the tradition of James Joyce, Walker Percy and Fanny Howe. She continues:

*Why don't you  
wash your dead child's face in champagne  
i did wash her face in blonde  
no more tears baby shampoo  
to release the residue of tape  
when it was too late*

*I had already learned the scent of her: a shock  
of alcohol that shook the brain  
like priests and goblins shake the pews with censers  
scrabbling up the aisle toward the altar.*

In these lines, the funereal and the absurd are not in opposition; they clarify each other.

For a reader new to McSweeney’s past, these lines might be confusing. *Death Styles* concludes with an afterword; readers new to her poetry should start there. In a concise essay, she offers a way to understand her book. “Repetition, I have come to understand, is the shape trauma makes of time,” and her process was marked by self-imposed rules. She wrote every day. Rather than plan her poems, she “had to accept any inspiration presented to me as an artifact of the present tense, however incidental, embarrassing or fleeting.”

Once inspired, she, like Robert Frost’s famous poetic dictum: “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.” McSweeney writes: “I had to fully follow the flight of that inspiration for as far as it would take me.” The results are poems that take surprising routes through ephemera, observation and grief.

Although her turns of phrase are often jocular, at essential points in *Death Styles*, McSweeney is beautifully lyrical as well:

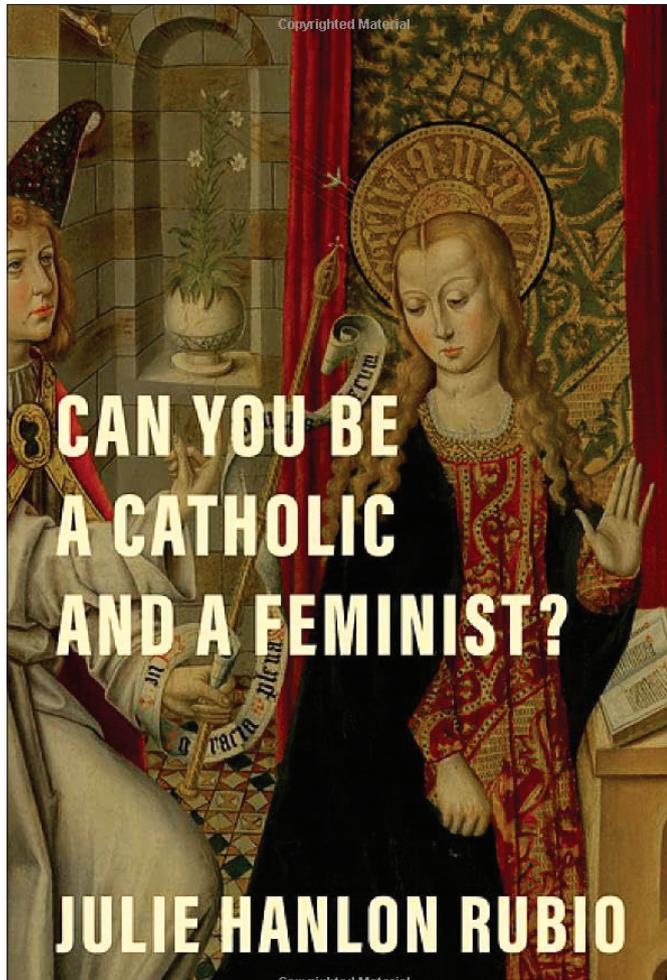
*I'm sorry we didn't take you out to feel the rain on  
your face  
before you died  
or after  
sorry we didn't take you up on the roof  
or out on the breezeway amid the hospital planters  
pale concrete things crowned with improbably  
fragrant grass  
a precious scent  
like something from the song of solomon.*

With *Death Styles*, McSweeney has crafted a moving elegy. This is a book for Arachne, a longing best articulated in a pair of heartbreaking lines: “Good bye good bye/ come back this time.”

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Nick Ripatrazzone has written for *Rolling Stone*, *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review* and *Esquire*. His books include *Ember Days*, a collection of stories and *Longing for an Absent God: Faith and Doubt in Great American Fiction*.

## THE TENSION IN BELONGING



Oxford University Press / 264p \$30

The 20th-century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, noting that the love of God extends to all, contemplated the possibility of salvation for all in his book *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?* While he is often charged by more conservative critics with providing kindling for heretical universalism, Balthasar defends himself: “I never spoke of certainty but rather of hope.”

While von Balthasar might seem like an unlikely conversation partner, I found overlap between his book, written almost 40 years ago, and Julie Hanlon Rubio’s new book *Can You Be a Catholic and a Feminist?* Both theologians forgo the despair of contradiction and ambiguity to choose hope.

Hope for a future of a Catholic Church that listens fully to women and queer folk ebbs and flows in a sometimes dramatic fashion; in our current moment, I found Hanlon Rubio’s book to be timely. In the aftermath of the Synod on Synodality, one might pick up this book as a way of considering a way forward—notwithstanding the synod’s own conclusions.

Hanlon Rubio’s book performs a balancing act that is inevitable for a thinker who is tasked with managing thousands of years’ worth of texts, history and doctrines. Add to that the complexity of describing feminism in all its history, its texts, its diversity. Taking on an overwhelming task for most, Hanlon Rubio creates a streamlined, organized answer to the book’s titular question: Can you be a Catholic and a feminist? She gives her answer in the introduction of the book—in the form of a confident “yes.”

Many of us might relate to her when she says that the question was not one we always had. I myself recognize how my mother’s own wrestling with Catholicism (wrestling I only learned much later in life was unusual in that it was visible to her children) has affected my relationship to the church, the community of believers and Catholic teachings. In my mother, I saw the embodied forms of “yes” to this question, warts and all.

Yet, as Hanlon Rubio points out, over the last nearly three decades, something has changed. A question that we might have only thought about in corollary ways in the past has become more prominent in religious discourses.

This book’s most valuable contribution is that it is honest about the often-uneasy relationship between feminism and Catholicism without collapsing into condemnation or romanticization about either tradition. Hanlon Rubio sets out to “explore tensions, map synergies, and highlight strategies of authentic belonging through a variety of lenses.” Her book can serve as a valuable resource for those who find noticeable tension between Catholicism and feminism in their lives, be it in seminaries, colleges, high schools, diocesan formation programs, parishes, spiritual direction or book clubs.

The book is broken up into an introduction, eight chapters revolving around eight themes, and a final chapter on “Belonging.” In “Being Authentically Human,” which grounds many of the book’s basic premises, Hanlon Rubio asserts that there is great agreement (or at the very least little contradiction) between Catholicism and *certain* strands of feminism. In chapters on work, sex and marriage, she finds fewer overlaps but still many resonances. In the areas of gender, life, and power, the substantial obstacles are only overcome by seeking a way forward that enables authenticity. The final chapter revisits the central question of the book.

“Belonging” names what I believe to be the most fundamental part of the question for many: “The question is not ‘Can I *do* this?’ but ‘Can I *be* this?’ or ‘Can I belong?’” Research from the Springtide Research Institute indicates that this distinction makes all the difference for young people in their sense of loneliness. Springtide’s research found that the three levels of belonging were “I am noticed,” “I am



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***“Contextual, Adaptive, and Catholic: A Reflection on Jesuit Education”***

Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos | *Seattle University*



**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19 | 7 P.M.**  
Kelley Presentation Room

The 19th Annual Lecture in Jewish/Christian Engagement

***“Catholics and Antisemitism: Reading Nostra Aetate in 2025”***

Massimo Faggioli | *Villanova University*



**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9 | 7 P.M.**  
Diffley Room, Bellarmine Hall

The 18th Annual Commonweal Lecture

***“Beyond Climate Doom: Hope as Honest, Vulnerable and Fierce”***

Vincent Miller | *University of Dayton*

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# Hanlon Rubio is hopeful without being overly optimistic and bold without being overly certain.

named” and “I am known.” The “authenticity” Hanlon Rubio seeks to attain for Catholic feminists is this third level of belonging, of being known.

Drawing from the work of Charles Taylor, she explains that relationships to others must be nontentative and noninstrumental, and must be balanced with a level of self-care and affirmation. For those for whom the tension between Catholicism and feminism is a source of pain, it is not enough to notice and to name, but there must be an ability to feel known, to be authentically themselves.

In her chapter on sex, Hanlon Rubio names the strategies of a “space between” that will be needed to address sexual violence. This space in the context of sex is somewhere between the #MeToo movement and the church’s silence on sexual violence (the “elephant in the room” being the church’s own egregious covering up of that violence). She draws on Catholic teachings on social sin and solidarity, as well as the feminist movement’s tools for talking about sex in the context of patriarchy. Neither an overemphasis on vice and virtue nor a sole focus on politics can be the solution.

This concept of “space between” that Hanlon Rubio introduces in this chapter might be stretched across much of the book. Catholic feminists exist in the liminal space where belonging is threatened by polarity. I think here of the work of Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz and the Chicana feminist group Las Hermanas.

As Latina Catholic women, they existed across many different “spaces between.” The scholar Lara Medina names Las Hermanas as the first Latina “religious-political” movement in the country. It straddled the space between the church and the political arena in a time when the Second Vatican Council and the Chicano Movement were both ushering in substantial changes.

Isasi-Díaz, a leader of Las Hermanas, existed in the in-between in many ways: the United States and Cuba, academic and political spaces, Latina feminist spaces in Las Hermanas and white feminist spaces in the Women’s

Ordination Conference, and ecumenical spaces. The lives and writings of these women testify to a deep fidelity to the church paired with feminist commitments to the empowerment of women and other marginalized groups.

Hanlon Rubio’s book differentiates itself from other books on this theme in that it promises and delivers attention to stories and experience, rather than solely theoretical debates. It is a book written *by* an academic theologian, most noticeably in its breadth of citations, but not necessarily *for* academic theologians (although, as an academic theologian myself, I still learned from it).

One of its most valuable chapters in this regard is one on “Life,” which unwaveringly takes up the national and intra-church conversation on abortion. Hanlon Rubio admits that “abortion presents a difficult case for this book’s project” and that there is an unresolvable tension on this point. However, instead of turning to abstract concepts, she draws out agency and relationality by way of stories of miscarriages, motherhood and abortions. These stories ground the conclusive thought of the chapter: As Catholics, we can choose to listen to women and make the pain of vulnerable mothers and children our own. That, for Hanlon Rubio, begins a path toward genuine authenticity—or at least, that is what she/I/we hope(s).

Hanlon Rubio’s book is a bold and hopeful work. It is hopeful without being overly optimistic and bold without being overly certain. In a time of intense individualism, where it is easy to let people simply “choose on their own” how and whether to be Catholic and/or a feminist, Hanlon Rubio’s project is an attempt to accompany people through this challenge.

These people might include the parish priest who feels defeated when yet another young, queer person becomes less involved despite his best efforts to make them feel loved and cared for, or the mother who does not know how to raise her children in a faith that contradicts other values she might want to instill, or the many others who try to live authentically in the ambiguity.

Julie Hanlon Rubio has written a letter of hope and encouragement to them all.

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*Amirah Orozco is a doctoral student in systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

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## Happy Drinking With Good Wine

The Gospel readings in January oscillate among texts from Matthew, Luke and John. Matthew sets the tone, while Luke anticipates what is unfolding through the Incarnation. John will end the month by raising awareness of how good this “new wine” really is that people are enjoying at the wedding feast.

For the Epiphany of the Lord, celebrated on the first Sunday of the month, Matthew paints with words a beautiful depiction of the magi following the dim glow of a star over Bethlehem. Isaiah also helps set the tone for this month: “Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses” (Is 60:4). Last month the readings rested on the notion of becoming vigilant; the present set of passages invites us to lift our eyes and look at what is taking place around us.

The second Sunday of the month continues the tone of awareness through Luke’s observation: “The people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts

whether John might be the Christ” (Lk 5:15). It seems that Luke has captured the early hearts of the nascent community that will one day follow after Jesus as disciples. In this early stage, writes Luke, people were filled with expectation and their hearts were active, alive and working. Where is my heart these days? Is it possible for a community of faith today to rekindle something deep inside us for the purpose of anticipation? Luke appears to invite us to discover a heart filled with expectation, especially for those of us who have everything settled or figured out prematurely.

On Jan. 19, as we leave the Christmas season behind and begin ordinary time, John recalls a happy scene of a joyful realization. The last of the wine, changed from water at Mary’s prompting, is somehow the best drink the headwaiter has tasted so far at this wedding party. “You have kept the good wine until now,” he remarks (Jn 2:10). The good wine is now in the presence of Christ within a community of faith whose hearts are alive with expectation.

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### THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD (C), JAN. 5, 2025

Setting the tone by raising your eyes

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### THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD (C), JAN. 12, 2025

Where are the people of expectation?

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### SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), JAN. 19, 2025

The party is good, so enjoy it

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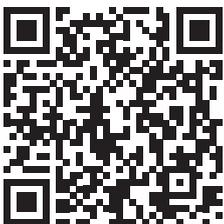
### THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), JAN. 26, 2025

The memory of a scroll that calls us to be different

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*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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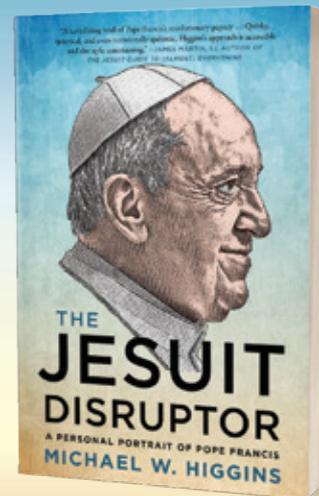
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# Friend of the Poor

## Remembering Gustavo Gutiérrez

By Daniel Castillo



A group of British reporters once asked a friend of Mahatma Gandhi how it was that Gandhi was able to speak so eloquently and at such length without any prepared notes. The friend, Mahadev Desai, replied, “You and I, we think one thing, feel another, say a third and do a fourth, so we need notes and files to keep track. What Gandhi thinks, what he feels, what he says and what he does are all the same.”

There are, of course, reasons to be wary of making comparisons between Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., who died in October, and Gandhi. Nonetheless, I found myself thinking about the manner in which Desai’s comment speaks to my experience of Gutiérrez.

Gustavo was a person of profound integrity, and his theology flowed out of that integrity—his thought, his feelings, his words and his actions were all of one piece—so that there was a truthful wholeness to him. This integrity might be best understood in relation to one of his more important, though frequently overlooked, concepts: that of spiritual poverty. For Gustavo, persons and communities of faith are called to empty themselves in humility before God—not in a self-annihilating way, but rather in a manner that allows them to move closer to their truest selves by becoming more fully attuned and responsive to the wisdom and will of God.

Spiritual poverty, or spiritual childhood, requires persons and communities to surrender not only their pride, avarice and hard-heartedness to God, but also their fears and the ways

in which they may have internalized narratives of degradation and humiliation. Through the work of surrender, these persons and communities come to be at the disposal of God—open to doing the will of God. Gustavo not only articulated this conceptualization of spiritual poverty—to a profound degree, he lived it out. It was this commitment of his whole person, I am convinced, that accounted for his consistency of thought, feeling, word and action.

Though coincidental, it is entirely appropriate that in the wake of Gustavo’s death, Pope Francis released an encyclical whose first line reads, “He loved us.” This is an essential and recurring theme in Gustavo’s work: Through Jesus and the Spirit, God has loved us first and invites us to know and respond to that love.

Indeed, it is this divine love that grounds love of neighbor and moves persons and communities to solidarity and protest at situations that mock, degrade and do violence to human life. For as surely as God favored Abel’s offering over that of Cain, divine love exhibits a preferential option for the poor, marginalized and oppressed—demanding, in love, personal, cultural and politico-economic *metanoia*.

Again, as a testament to his profound integrity, Gustavo’s whole person bore witness to that love. A tangible sign of the love that Gustavo had for others and for the world was his sense of humor and his laughter. It was dependably present. But its consistency should not obscure the fact that it was remarkable. Remarkable

in that a person who was so intimately familiar with the sin of the world, with the brutalities of injustice, dehumanization, apathy and greed, could still emit such joy in his way of being.

But perhaps it is not all that surprising. In *Resurrection Hope*, the theologian Kelly Brown Douglas notes how laughter works to de-absolutize the wretchedness that characterizes so much of history. Joyful laughter gives testimony to the reality that sin and death are not ultimate, nor do they have the final word on life. In its own modest way, laughter bears witness to the resurrection. Thus, joyful laughter is a sign of hope.

“To hope does not mean to know the future, but rather to be open, in an attitude of spiritual childhood, to accepting it as a gift,” Gutiérrez wrote in *A Theology of Liberation*. “But this gift is accepted in the negation of injustice, in the protest against trampled human rights, and in the struggle for peace and fellowship. Thus, hope fulfills a mobilizing and liberating function in history.... Camus was right when in another context he said, ‘true generosity towards the future consists in giving everything to the present.’”

In faith, in love and in hope, Gustavo gave everything to the present. The world is a better place for it. Gustavo Gutiérrez, friend of God, friend of the poor, *presente!*

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