America

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

EDUCATION ISSUE

SEPTEMBER 2025

A.I. & THE HUMAN PERSON

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

The Joan & Bill HANK CENTER FOR THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE

FEATURED FALL EVENTS

SEPTEMBER 17 | Online

Book Lecture: *The Last Supper* by Paul Elie

7–8:30PM CDT
REGISTRATION REQUIRED

The Hank Center welcomes National Book Critics Circle Award finalist Paul Elie to discuss his new book, *The Last Supper*, a vibrant study of how a diverse coterie of artists engaged in the "early skirmishes in the culture wars" that profoundly informed and described life in the U.S. in the 1980s. In his explorations--ranging from Leonard Cohen's Pslamist grade "Hallelujah" to Andy Warhol's adapting Leonardo's *The Last Supper* in response to the AIDS pandemic to Martin Scorsese's provocative cinematic rendering of Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Elie traces the beginning of our age of postsecularism, in which the religious imagination—and religious affiliation--is both surging and in decline. In Elie's new book, the creators (not the politicians) are the protagonists, and the work they make speaks to conflicts that have only escalated since the consequential days of the long 1980s. *Register for event link.*

OCTOBER 15 | Online & In-Person

Laudato si' @ 10: The Promise & Peril of Technology with Eugene McCarraher and Christine Rosen

7–8:30 PM CDT | INFORMATION COMMONS 4TH FLOOR, LAKE SHORE CAMPUS

For our mid-October dialogue, the Hank Center will convene (in partnership with John Carroll University) the sixth installment of our year-long celebration of Pope Francis' landmark encyclical, *Laudato si'* on its 10th anniversary. We welcome Eugene McCarraher and Christine Rosen to discuss "The Promise and Peril of Technology: *Laudato si'*, AI, and the Experience of Being Human." Are there forms of technology that can help us, if not save us? What was Pope Francis on to in his critique of the "technocratic paradigm"? What are the spiritual and social risks of a saturated digital culture? Of the "enchantment" and fetishization of AI? As ever, technology gives so many gifts, but digital technologies are a markedly different version in that they transform our sense of self and warp the boundaries between virtual and real. What are the costs? Who are we in an increasingly disembodied world? *Register for online event link.*

SEPTEMBER 25 | In-person

Jesuit Lecture: Mark Massa, "Catholic Fundamentalisms"

7–8:30 PM CDT | LAKE SHORE CAMPUS

Later in September, the Hank Center welcomes Fr. Mark Massa, SJ of Boston College's Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life for our 2025 Jesuit Lecture to speak about his new book, *Catholic Fundamentalism in America*. The term "fundamentalism" has its roots in specific forms of American Protestantism that arose around the turn of the twentieth century in reaction to liberalizing and modernizing trends within the church. Fr. Massa argues that an analogously reactive, militant, and sectarian "fundamentalist" movement emerged within American Catholicism in the decades after World War II, the effects of which we continue to observe today in diverse and emerging forms. *Register for post-event video.*

NOVEMBER 12 | In-Person

Book Discussion: Kristin Grady Gilger, *My Son, the Priest: A Mother's Crisis of Faith*

7–8:30 PM CST
INFORMATION COMMONS
4TH FLOOR, LAKE SHORE CAMPUS

The true story of a young man's journey to become a Jesuit priest—written by his mother, a fallen-away Catholic who must come to terms with her son's decision or risk losing him. It is an intimate, sometimes irreverent, and often searing examination of faith, family, and reconciliation. The book offers a rare, often entertaining, glimpse into the "highly unusual" Jesuit formation process—which includes sending would-be priests off on pilgrimages with $35 in their pockets. It also takes on tough issues, from the church's history of sexual abuse to its treatment of women, and asks tough questions: Is it possible to be Catholic, liberal, and a feminist all at the same time? What does it mean to call yourself a Catholic? We are delighted to welcome both Kristin Grady Gilger and dear colleague and friend of the Hank Center, Paddy Gilger, SJ, for this very special conversation. *Register for post-event video.*

Registration & More Info Online:

New Website, Same Mission

One day before we sent the September print issue of **America** to press, we relaunched the americamagazine.org website. This column will be one of the first things published directly to the new site.

(Though the coincidence of press day and launch day was not ideal timing, it marks an improvement over the last website relaunch in 2017. That one had been deliberately timed to coincide with the print magazine's redesign but also coincidentally wound up happening the same week that we moved out of the building housing the magazine offices and the Jesuit community. This time was easier.)

Because we were preparing the website at the same time as we were reviewing a print issue with two excellent essays on artificial intelligence, I found myself reflecting on the nature of what is sometimes called "knowledge work"—the kind of work that A.I. is posed to disrupt or perhaps displace.

In this print issue, Michael O'Connell applies insights from David Foster Wallace to the question of A.I. and the humanities, and Nathan Schneider reflects on the fact that interacting with chatbots depends on the quality of the questions we ask. He notes that these models are trained on the results of humans asking and answering questions, with websites like Stack Overflow, Quora and Reddit providing some of the most valuable sources behind the apparent intelligence of a ChatGPT, Gemini or Claude.

While working on the website, I have spent plenty of time searching the internet for snippets of code to iron out one small issue or another and hints for which box to check in a complicated settings page. I frequently found myself reading Stack Overflow (much of which is dedicated to such technical questions) or landing on a Reddit thread tangentially related to my query. And Google being what it is these days, almost every search I made had an "A.I. overview" at the top of the results.

Many of these overviews were helpful. Two directly produced working code, which felt like magic; in another case, the overview led me into a conversation with a chatbot that mostly "wrote" the function I needed. A few of the A.I. overviews were hallucinatory, which is to say that they made up answers that sent me down rabbit holes and wasted hours of time, but which would have been extraordinarily useful if the technological features that the A.I. had "imagined" had ever been coded by the human engineers who built the website software. In a sense, what the A.I. had hallucinated was a feature request that unfortunately had never been handed off to a human for implementation.

What was profoundly more helpful and reliable was the expert and tireless assistance of the teams behind our website project. These included designers from Goji Labs, who also built our mobile app; engineers at Newspack, our new website platform, who migrated our content from the old site and configured the new one; and of course my colleagues at America Media. Particular thanks are due to Zac Davis, who heads our digital team and led the website redevelopment project, and Jai Sen, who has worked with us for years as a technology consultant.

Maybe one day—though I doubt it—it will be possible to instruct a chatbot or an A.I. agent to "migrate this website for me," then go to the beach for a few days and come back to find everything working. Even if A.I. companies manage to make such miracles routine, however, behind them will be the accumulated knowledge, the questions and answers, of human beings who knew what they were doing. There is simply no substitute for someone who understands not only what you have *said* but also what you are *trying to do* and is sharing that project with you.

Nor is there any substitute for the deep and textured knowledge of a whole body of work or field of inquiry that comes from long experience and disciplined attention. This sort of expertise can be technical, and many of the engineers we worked with have it in spades, but it can also be humanistic. Moving the whole website, with more than 40,000 individual pieces of content, was a powerful reminder of the decades of writing, editing, learning, reflection and prayer that are embodied therein.

I am sure that those decades of generous effort have been included in the corpus of text used to train the chatbots we talk to these days, in part because ChatGPT can mimic my own prose style fairly well. If that means the chatbots are marginally more reasonable in discussing Catholicism, we should probably count that as a win, even if they do not buy a subscription.

But I repeat that the basis of such knowledge is the chain of human questions asked and answered by people with reason to trust one another. We are honored by the trust our readers and subscribers have placed in us for more than a hundred years as we pursue our mission, in the words of our founding editorial announcement, "to broaden the scope of Catholic journalism and enable it to exert a wholesome influence on public opinion, and thus become a bond of union among Catholics and a factor in civic and social life." We plan to keep it up for the next century as well.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

DISPATCHES

FEATURES

Members of the Comisión Nacional de Pastoral Juvenil Puerto Rico sing at the conclusion of Pope Leo XIV's weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, July 30.

Cover: iStock/metamorworks

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

FAITH & REASON

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LAST TAKE

POETRY

SEPTEMBER 2025 VOL. 233 NO. 2 WHOLE NO. 5312

The Ten Commandments in class: Our readers reflect

In the July/August 2025 issue of **America**, Richard J. Clifford, S.J., observed that "the Bible itself contains the most powerful argument against making the Ten Commandments a moral guide for all citizens." He argued for the status of the Ten Commandments as "a solemn covenant, a legal agreement, between the Lord and the people," necessarily relevant in its "narrative context," and wrote that posting the commandments in public school classrooms would also violate the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Not all of our readers agreed.

The Ten Commandments are an expression of the natural law, which is universal and applicable to all people, regardless of religion or no religion. The catechism states that the principal precepts of natural law are expressed in the Ten Commandments. In fact, our U.S. laws (local, state and federal) are based upon the Ten Commandments (e.g., "Do not kill," "Do not steal.") All laws are. So displaying the Ten Commandments is a way of showing students the basis for all of our secular laws.

C. Marcus

Is no one else concerned as to the end-of-the-line relativism where this kind of thinking leads? The same rationale used to say you can't post the Ten Commandments in schools can be used for literally everything. It's just downright hilarious that people will reject something because of historical context but then get mad when others do something they deem to be nonsensical or "wrong."

Gracjan Kraszewski

The Ten Commandments are not very useful, honestly. Each commandment requires a library's worth of translation, explication, apologetics, theological knot-tying and context-setting to even begin to mine value from it. They are more like the rough beginning of a conversation about morality where you end up crossing off much of the list. We can make a much better and clearer list after having a mature adult conversation about morality.

Brian Seiler

Please put me in the "No Ten Commandments on the wall" team. I prefer the advice of Rabbi Hillel, who lived in the first century of the Common Era. A pagan visited the patient and gentle scholar and asked him to explain Judaism while standing on one foot. Rabbi Hillel stood on one foot and said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to another." Then he stood normally and said, "The rest is commentary. Go and study!"

Kim Mallet

If only the new-fangled modern Christians believed in the Golden Rule. They believe in the gold, but not the rule.

Gail Sockwell-Thompson

If anything were to be posted, I would prefer the Beatitudes, but that also would violate our collective First Amendment rights. I do not want any government telling me how I should worship. If I feel as strong as I do about it, then it is incumbent on me to protect the rights of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and every other faith observed here in the United States.

Stephen Healy

I was hoping for something easily digestible that I could offer up to people that would explain in simple terms why the Ten Commandments should not be posted in public schools. This article is great for philosophical discussions, but how do you explain all that to a school board in Oklahoma?

D. R. Maurillo

I respectfully disagree with Father Clifford and with the scholars he cited. While the Ten Commandments were first revealed for the Israelites, in the Nevi'im and Ketuvim subsequent Jewish writers indicated that these laws would apply globally in the future. Jesus called for his followers to obey the Ten Commandments, and to do so more assiduously than their fellow Jews. While some of the other Mosaic laws were not expected of his followers, there is no reference to the Ten Commandments being eliminated or even subordinated.

While I agree with you that the public posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools is probably a breach of the First Amendment, I think it is a matter that should be settled in individual schools, by the parents of students currently attending. Any other way of dealing with this is undemocratic and disrespects the religious sensibilities of most Americans.

Peter Terry

A Crisis of Executive Power

So far, a little over half a year into his second term, President Donald J. Trump has issued 181 executive orders. He has already passed his immediate predecessor's four-year total of 162. If he keeps up his current pace, Mr. Trump will reach 342 executive orders by the end of the year. The only other chief executive who averaged above 300 orders per year was Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

These orders, along with other executive branch actions, have been subject to an immense amount of litigation. One organization is tracking 298 cases challenging Trump administration actions; another, following a slightly different methodology, counts 358.

Ten days after Mr. Trump's second inauguration, the editors of **America** highlighted three areas of executive action that we said "stood out not only for their moral and practical implications but because, exercised by unilateral decree, they assert executive power unconstrained by the checks and balances of our constitutional system." They were: the claim to be able to restrict birthright citizenship; the firing of inspectors general without providing notice or explanation to Congress; and the "temporary pause" on grant funding opposed to Mr. Trump's presidential priorities.

Seven months later, the damage done by President Trump's disdain for limits on his power has grown precipitously.

In returning to these three issues, the editors continue to stress the importance of recognizing the depth of the unfolding constitutional crisis. It demands responses both of opposition to specific imprudent, immoral or illegal actions and also of deeper structural reforms to restore the balance of power in American government.

The three issues we highlighted have developed along very different tracks. The funding "pause" has been replaced by a chaotic tangle of spending cuts and restrictions, with only a small fraction submitted to Congress for its approval. The damage done by some unilateral actions, perhaps most especially in the shutdown of the U.S. Agency for International Development, has been profound.

The structural question that arises from the refusal to spend appropriated funds and in related areas like the imposition of tariffs is the executive's claim to unilateral economic authority, despite the Constitution's primary allocation of these powers to Congress. This power is often being wielded to threaten other actors, such as universities dependent on grant funding or international trading partners, into compliance with the policy goals of the administration.

The firing of the inspectors general was challenged both in court, where the case slowly grinds on, and by a bipartisan letter to the president from legislators. However, this case has fallen nearly entirely out of the news; the Trump administration never responded to the letter.

In several unsigned orders on its emergency docket in July, the Supreme Court allowed the president to dismiss officials even while they challenge his actions in court. Mr. Trump also recently fired the head of the Bureau of Labor Statistics in response to jobs numbers that he disliked. While his legal authority in this case is clear, this firing highlights the risks of appointment and dismissal powers unconstrained by prudence, traditional norms or any structural limits.

On the issue of birthright citizenship, the Supreme Court recently handed down an opinion that postponed addressing the substantive constitutional question. Instead, it used the case to narrow the conditions under which universal injunctions, having immediate nationwide effect to restrict executive action, could be issued by district court judges. But even as the court expanded executive power by insulating it from some injunctions, it offered a few avenues for pursuing similar injunctions on other grounds and a 30-day pause in which to do so.

During that time, the American Civil Liberties Union swiftly brought a class action suit, under which a new preliminary universal injunction was issued. Thus, the United States has returned for now to the *status quo ante* regarding birthright citizenship. Eventually, probably at the end of its next term in June 2026, the Supreme Court may finally decide the substantive question of whether or not the president may summarily redefine the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of citizenship to all those born "subject to the jurisdiction" of the United States.

So far, the Supreme Court seems to be giving President Trump considerable leeway. While he has suffered some notable defeats, particularly in a stunning middle-of-the-night emergency order to prevent some deportations, the court has generally allowed Mr. Trump's assertions of unlimited authority over the entire executive branch to stand while the cases challenging them proceed.

While a slow and deliberate pace for appellate litigation is normal and the justices likely hope that it will cool the temperature on heated issues, it may be having the opposite effect

at present. The Supreme Court's decision to proceed normally while the executive branch is provoking a crisis significantly increases the stress on the American constitutional system. Whether or not the court's approach proves prudent is an open question, but the fact that those costs are being borne by others while the justices move slowly is undeniable.

However, the court's slow pace should not be automatically assessed as directly serving Mr. Trump's goals. In the birthright citizenship case, for example, the court took care to allow another path for an injunction to replace the one it set aside. There are certainly good reasons to object to many of the court's recent decisions, as reflected by the decrease in public trust for the court, but treating the Supreme Court as merely another partisan actor on the side of the Trump administration is a mistake. Rather than defending the rule of law, such an approach adds to the stress on constitutional norms by accelerating the reduction of legal reasoning to mere power politics.

Instead, Americans who are alarmed about assaults on democratic norms need to recognize that the courts alone are not a sufficient bulwark for the rule of law. In the near term, this means building political consensus to constrain executive power—which will require creative coalition-building that must prioritize involving the few Republicans who are willing to buck Mr. Trump's control of the party.

In the longer term, it means recognizing that while Mr. Trump's violation of norms far exceeds that of any of his recent predecessors, he represents a culmination, rather than a beginning, of the excessive growth of executive power. As has happened before and will happen again, the American constitutional system urgently needs both structural reform and a renewed set of norms to maintain a system of limited and balanced power among the branches of government. Since any reform of this sort is inevitably slow, it requires attention and discussion even while facing more immediate challenges.

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Masked police undermine trust and amplify fear. They do not fit a democratic society.

Thus far, 2025 has included troubling developments for policing in the United States, rolling back any progress in recent years toward reform. As a former corrections officer, reserve police officer and police ethics instructor, I am not anti-police; rather, I am a proponent of *just* policing. By that, I mean law enforcement that is practiced in accordance with the virtue and principle of justice. In calling for reform, rather than abolition, I seek to help law enforcement officers to be and to do their very best as they serve and protect others in need, regardless of whether they are fellow citizens.

As I wrote in **America** almost exactly seven years ago, law enforcement officers—from the F.B.I. to the local police department—swear an oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic," rather than pledging allegiance to a president, a political party, a socioeconomic class or any ideological movement. So I am worried about the current backsliding toward a more aggressive and militarized model of law enforcement, as reflected when President Trump signed two executive orders promising to "unleash high-impact local police forces" and to increase law enforcement concerning undocumented residents or, as he refers to them, "criminal aliens."

Mr. Trump also shut down the National Law Enforcement Accountability Database, which tracked police records documenting misconduct by law enforcement officers, such as excessive force. In addition, the Department of Justice has retracted its findings, made during the Biden administration, of unconstitutional policing, including racial discrimination, and rescinded the consent decrees overseeing police reforms in cities like Minneapolis.

As Radley Balko, author of the 2013 book *Rise of the Warrior Cop*, recently observed, Mr. Trump's frequent use of the word *unleash* means "to remove from a restraint," as evident in the "growing number of horrifying incidents in which federal agents, often concealing their identities with masks, have snatched innocent people from the streets, then whisked them off to detention centers hundreds of miles away or, worse yet, all the way to CECOT," the notorious prison in El Salvador.

Especially alarming, in my view, is the wearing of masks, balaclavas and neck gaiters by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and, increasingly, assisting state and local law enforcement officers while apprehending undocumented individuals in their vehicles, homes and workplaces. Referring to the protests against these arrests in Los Angeles, Mr. Trump wrote on Truth Social that "from now on, MASKS WILL NOT BE ALLOWED to be worn at protests. What do these people have to hide, and why???" But this question should also apply to law enforcement officers.

Dan Goldman, a Democratic congressman who represents parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn, said at a press conference in June that he had asked a group of ICE agents, "Why are you wearing a mask?" He stated that one agent responded, "Because it's cold." Although New York city police officers, for example, are allowed to wear a black balaclava while on patrol in the winter, this agent's answer seems flippant.

Another officer admitted a desire to avoid being identified on video. Mr. Goldman said he followed this with a question: "If what you are doing is legitimate, is lawful, is totally above board, why do you need to cover your face?" It seems inconsistent to hold that it is not OK to wear a mask when protesting the government, but it is OK to wear a mask if you are an agent of the government.

Curiously, none of the dozens of books in my office on law enforcement ethics address the wearing of masks by officers, probably because the practice was rare until recently. On occasion, perhaps to avoid compromising their involvement in an undercover investigation, an officer might be permitted to wear one.

One of the main reasons given for law enforcement officers' choice to wear masks is their (and their family's) safety. When I worked as a corrections officer during the 1980s and as a reserve police officer during the early 2000s, I sometimes wished that people I encountered did not know my name or badge number. Even if I did nothing wrong to cause them to file a complaint, I worried that they might find my phone number or address and then harass me or my family. Of course, that was before social media and online search engines, along with the possibility of doxxing. Back then I could decline having my address and number published in the telephone book. Those days are gone.

Still, the negative consequences of wearing masks outweigh this safety concern. For one thing, someone can more easily pose as a law enforcement officer to commit crimes. As one bystander to the ICE apprehension of the Turkish doctoral student Rumeysa Ozturk shouted, "You want to take those masks off? Is this a kidnapping? Can I see some faces here? How do I know this is the police?" Indeed, in multiple states there have been arrests of people allegedly

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers guard an entrance of the Federal Building in Los Angeles in June.

impersonating ICE agents for ulterior purposes.

Moreover, masks make it easier for law enforcement officers to act with impunity. Masked officers are less likely to be held accountable for their actions. Masks thus undermine trust between citizens and the police, and they amplify fear and anxiety among people in vulnerable communities. With local police and sheriff's departments entering into agreements with ICE, many community leaders express the worry that any progress previously made toward police reform, community policing and constructive partnerships—all of which depends on trust—is being reversed. As Mari Blanco, assistant executive director of the Guatemalan-Maya Center in Lake Worth Beach, Fla., told a public radio reporter, "It takes years to build that trust and seconds to destroy it."

Masks bring to my mind the paramilitaries and death squads that seized people and made them "disappear" during the 1970s and 1980s in Chile, during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, and in El Salvador during the presidency of Jose Napoleón Duarte. "We're seeing the rise of secret police—masked, no identifying info, even wearing army fatigues—grabbing & disappearing people," California state Senator Scott Wiener, a Democrat, wrote recently on X. They also remind me of the Ku Klux Klan, ISIS, Hamas and other terrorist groups that tend to wear masks.

Secret police and a police state are the antithesis of what the criminologist David H. Bayley, one of the most respected scholars of comparative policing, calls "democratic policing," which I refer to as *just policing*. As John Kleinig, another prominent scholar of policing, emphasizes, while officers in democratic societies are authorized "to detain and restrain," this is meant to be "a *constrained* authority." Clearly, the "unleashing" of the police, as reflected in the wearing of masks, should concern all Americans.

During an audience with Italian police officers in June of 2017, Pope Francis told them, "Your vocation is service," and he highlighted how their mission "is expressed in service to others" through their "constant availability, patience, a spirit of sacrifice and sense of duty." I believe that law enforcement can be a noble profession, but I fear that in the United States it is not putting on its best face right now. Especially since it is trying to conceal it.

Tobias Winright *is a professor of moral theology at St. Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth, Ireland, and an associate member of Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, Blackfriars Hall, Oxford University. Among his books are* Serve and Protect: Selected Essays on Just Policing *(2020) and the* T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Ethics *(2021).*

Trump's 'big beautiful bill' will mean more hunger for low-income families

By Kevin Clarke

Erica, who asked that only her first name be used, is a single mother living in Troy, N.Y., with two children. She works two part-time jobs to make ends meet, but the rising cost of living is throwing her off balance. As has happened to families headed by working people around the country, years of cumulative inflation have overrun her monthly budget.

"Everything is going up, but I am not getting paid more," she told Catholic Charities staff. Though she is already a recipient of benefits through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the additional supplies she can pick up at the Catholic Charities food pantry have become monthly essentials.

Erica has no idea what she will do if the "big beautiful bill" signed into law by President Trump leads to reductions in her SNAP allowance or, worse, to her losing eligibility altogether.

Another single mother, who asked that her name not be used, told Catholic Charities: "I have a disabled child at home, and I can only work while she is in school. I am not from the area, and I don't have family to help me."

"I rely on SNAP to feed myself and my daughter. If this is cut, I can honestly say we just won't be able to eat. All the money I make goes to housing and keeping the lights on. Food is what I am going to have to go without because I can't lose my housing."

It is the kind of predicament Betsy Van Deusen, C.S.J., the chief executive of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Albany, hears about all the time. "What we're seeing is people coming to the food pantry who might not have had


OSV News photo/Jonathan Ernst, Reuters

Speaker Mike Johnson celebrates with other U.S. House members on July 3 after the final passage of President Trump's spending and tax bill.

to come before," Sister Van Deusen says. "They just can't make ends meet.

"Many of our food pantries are open in the evenings or on weekends so that people who are working full-time can come."

Sister Van Deusen estimates that SNAP will cover a family's food needs for about 16 days out of a given month. Food pantries can provide enough for three to five days more, she says. "So that gets us to day 21; it's still a long way to the end of the month."

Increasingly, families served by Catholic Charities in the Albany area, Sister Van Deusen says, have had to rely on emergency food disbursements and soup kitchens to bridge that gap. She expects that challenge will only get harder now. The "big beautiful bill" includes tax cuts for some and social spending cuts for others while authorizing huge spending increases for the Department of Defense and immigration enforcement.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, using an analysis conducted by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, estimates that the reconciliation package signed into law by Mr. Trump on July 4 will mean a 20 percent reduction in SNAP funding ($186 billion through 2034), the largest cut in the program's history.

SNAP's losses will affect "more than 40 million people who receive basic food assistance through SNAP, including some 16 million children, eight million seniors and four million non-elderly adults with disabilities."

Unhappiness among a handful of Republican House members at the prospect of adding some $3 trillion to the national debt had been the only remaining obstacle in Congress to an Independence Day deadline for Mr. Trump's bill. But among Catholic providers of domestic health and hunger services, there was unanimity on the plan: They flat out don't like it.

In a recent letter to Congress, Kerry Alys Robinson, the chief executive of Catholic Charities USA, reminded Speaker of the House Mike Johnson that Catholic Charities agencies operate more than 3,500 service sites across the United States and its territories, serving more than 16 million people. Ms. Robinson wrote, "Every day, we witness firsthand the struggles of individuals and families in our communities who rely on federal food and health programs to make ends meet."

The "deep cuts" to SNAP and Medicaid, she says, will "inflict real suffering on these families.... SNAP and Medicaid are not luxuries, they are lifelines for millions of children across our country."

Scarcity and Increasing Demand

Tim Neumann is the senior director of Catholic Charities of Eastern Oklahoma in Tulsa, Okla. He has the unenviable task, these days, of running the agency's food service.

Oklahoma faces its share of troubles, Mr. Neumann points out. "We rank high in a lot of the categories that no state wants to be: teen pregnancy, high school dropouts, all those things, unfortunately, that no state wants to be noted for." Among them is food insecurity; Oklahoma ranks fifth in the nation.

Many of the people Tulsa Catholic Charities serves are working parents who are "one step away [from crisis] because they have a medical bill or they have a car expense or some unexpected expense that kind of pushes them to the limit."

The managers of the nation's food pantries and food banks, like Mr. Neumann, face a uniquely challenging environment this year: Costs are rising, supplies are pinched, and demand is up. Supermarkets, once the source of a dependable flow of donations as food products reached the end of their shelf life, have been responding in their own way to rising costs, doing all they can to control inventory. That has meant fewer donations to food banks and pantries.

In addition, formerly reliable reserves of U.S. Department of Agriculture commodities have dried up since the beginning of Mr. Trump's second term in January. Mr. Neumann has been forced to beg and borrow to keep a reliable supply coming into Catholic Charities nutrition programs and has had to buy more food on the open market than has been typical in the past.

With more U.S.D.A. cuts looming in the reconciliation package passed by Congress, Mr. Neumann expects that his job will get much harder. The need has only been growing. "In '22, I think we were averaging 125 families a day," he reports. "In '23, that number jumped to 157, and then in '24, that number jumped to 186 families a day."

Given the need, he doesn't understand how food became a trade-off in efforts to contain U.S. budget deficits. Food insecurity has ripple effects in terms of family stress and divorce, student performance and lifetime potential wasted that are worth calculating, too, he points out.

"It's not moving the needle in the end," he says, "because all we are doing is cutting over here, and then we're going to increase the spending over there. It's all a little disheartening."

About a third of the nation's food supply ends up thrown into the garbage, he adds. "So it's never a problem of food. It's a problem of logistics, of getting it from point A to point B and into the hands of the people that need it."

Sister Van Deusen is struck by the legislative terminology bandied about in Washington this week, especially the term *reconciliation*. "Oh, yeah, who's being reconciled here?" she asks. "How is this really coming together?"

She struggles to understand the new spending and taxing priorities established by the legislation. "People who are millionaires and billionaires are not impacted in their day-to-day lives, whether they get a tax increase or a tax cut or nothing. The cuts that they're talking about...are devastating to millions of people."

"These cuts are making it really hard for people to have health care, to have food on their table. In our diocese—14 counties, 10,000 square miles—we have a number of hospitals in rural areas that are likely to close because of the cuts to Medicaid," she warns. "So if you have an emergency, instead of having to go 28 miles, you will have to go 50 miles. And that's life or death in some situations."

She says the people her agency works with have been fearful and "off balance" because of the uncertainty created by the social service reductions included in the legislation.

"We have about 750 employees, and I tell them, 'We don't know what's going to happen, and if and when something has to be different, I'm going to tell you,'" she says.

"But in the meantime, every day, people come here looking for our assistance, seeking help with whatever their situation is. So today, and as long as we can, we're going to keep doing that."

Kevin Clarke, *chief correspondent.*

SNAP out of it?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—SNAP—is the nation's largest nutrition assistance program, accounting for about 70 percent of U.S. Department of Agriculture's nutrition assistance spending in 2024. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, because of the "massive" federal spending cuts to SNAP included in the budget reconciliation package—the "one big beautiful bill," signed into law by President Trump on July 4—each state will have to reduce its SNAP program by somehow restricting eligibility or limiting enrollment. Otherwise, they can opt out of the program altogether, terminating food assistance entirely.

C.B.P.P. researchers report that this looming benefit cut represents the first time in the history of the SNAP program that the federal government will "no longer ensure that the lowest-income families with children, older adults, and people with disabilities in every state have access to the food assistance they need."

41.7 million: People who participated in SNAP in an average month (fiscal year 2024)

$186 billion: Amount likely to be cut from SNAP through 2034, representing the largest reduction in the program's history

22.3 million: Number of U.S. families who will lose some or all of their SNAP benefits

24%: Increase in food prices between 2020 and 2024. Food prices increased **2.9%** between May 2024 and May 2025. Rising food prices have outstripped economy-wide inflation.

900,000: Number of parents and other caregivers at risk of losing SNAP, putting the 800,000 children aged 14 to 17 who live with them at risk of receiving much less food assistance

79%, or four in five SNAP households included either a child younger than 18, an elderly individual (aged 60 or over) or a nonelderly individual with a disability in fiscal year 2023. These households represented **88%** of all participants and received **84%** of all SNAP benefits, excluding emergency allotments.

75% of SNAP participants lived at or below the poverty level.

Source: USDA, Urban Institute, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

Data compiled by William Lee, summer intern.

In Mexico, Centro Prodh confronts fears of an emerging surveillance state

Fears of heightened surveillance are surfacing at the Jesuit-sponsored Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (also called Centro Prodh) in Mexico City and among Mexican human rights activists. Mexico recently overhauled a suite of security laws that centralize power, expand state surveillance capacity and grant more powers to the army, an institution with a history of resisting civilian authority.

"Unfortunately, [the new] regulatory framework does not come with any civil controls," said María Luisa Aguilar, the director of Centro Prodh. The human rights defender had been a previous target of government espionage efforts.

The laws, collectively derided by critics as "Ley Espía" ("spy law"), were approved in a special legislative session. One new law introduces a catch-all platform for collecting public and private data. This includes biometric and health information, along with personal banking and telecom details.

A new national identification system known as CURP (Unique Population Registration Code) that relies on biometric information has also been created. CURP, a unique 18-character alphanumeric identifier assigned to every resident of Mexico, will be required for carrying out any bureaucratic procedure and many private commercial transactions, with the identification conducted through fingerprints and facial recognition technology.

A change to the General Law on Forced Disappearances—ostensibly to address the nearly 130,000 Mexicans missing amid the drug war—introduced the CURP platform, which will allow authorities to search for people using the biometric database. Families of the missing objected to the measure, saying it "has the objective of imposing a system of mass surveillance."

"The biometric CURP implies that the government will have a registry of all your activities," said Jorge Verástegui González, an activist for Mexico's missing people, whose brother and nephew disappeared in 2009.

"There's a malicious or biased use of the problem of disappearances to justify the need for this data. And I think this mass surveillance system also speaks to the government's lack of real interest in addressing this problem," Mr. Verástegui said.

Critics contend that the most recent measures deepen Mexico's authoritarian drift under the governments of Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his protégé, President Claudia Sheinbaum.

"It's not going to change anything in terms of security, but it's going to change a lot in terms of citizen oversight," said Diego Petersen Farah, a columnist with the Guadalajara newspaper El Informador. "It's about control over opponents and oversight over pesky journalists," he charged, adding that "human rights defenders are the main target."

President Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico speaks during a rally at Zocalo Square in Mexico City on March 9.

Speaking to Mexican media on July 2, the president denied that the government would use CURP as a tool to track Mexican citizens, accusing critics of lying about the program's reach. "It's meant to build a safe, peaceful country," she said. "It's not true that anyone is being spied on."

The new identification measures follow a controversial judicial reform, in which hundreds of judges and magistrates across Mexico, including all nine supreme court justices, were put to the popular vote for the first time on June 1. Mexicans showed a crushing disinterest in the judicial election, which had a participation rate of just 13 percent.

The process was ostensibly nonpartisan, but candidates appearing on cheatsheets distributed by the ruling Morena party swept the positions on the Supreme Court, as well as on the nation's electoral tribunal and a newly created judicial disciplinary body.

Mexico's bishops urged the newly elected jurists to create a more just Mexico. "We hope that those elected will assume their duties with honesty, professionalism, independence, and love for Mexico and their delicate mission of impartially applying the law," the Mexican bishops conference said in a post-election statement.

Ms. Aguilar acknowledged that Mexico's justice system has long had shortcomings, pointing to the steady stream of people coming to the Centro Prodh, but expressed doubts about this judicial "reform." She said the overhaul creates the strong potential for political control over the judiciary at both the federal and local levels by Ms. Sheinbaum's Morena party, neutralizing "major checks and balances in the democratic system."

David Agren *contributes from Buenos Aires.*

Rene Aleman Resistance Camp

A protester against a mining operation in Brisas de Tramade, Honduras

A community in Honduras stands up to a mining 'giant'

Travelers can reach Brisas de Tramade, Honduras, on CA-5, the major highway between San Pedro Sula and Puerto Cortes, but there are no clear signs for the turnoff. Instead, you must be on the lookout for signs to a sawmill owned by Tramade, a Central American logging company.

Francisco Rivera, a community leader, told **America** that the village was originally named Brisas del Mar ("Sea Breezes"), but as the sawmill expanded, it came to be known as Brisas de Tramade—a reflection, he said, of how extractive industries like sawmills and mines have come to define life in the region.

Brisas de Tramade made national news in Honduras in May after several community members blocked the entrance to a limestone mine owned by Agrecasa. (According to a 2017 report from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, Agrecasa is in fact a subsidiary of American Aggregates LLC, a U.S. mining conglomerate.) What started as a temporary blockade became a resistance camp that has been running 24/7 since then.

Agrecasa's environmental license to operate the mine, which extracts limestone for export to the United States, expired in May 2024. But Pablo Sánchez, a local church and community leader, said the mine continued to operate—that is, up until the blockade began.

"In 2024, we were peacefully demanding the mine's permanent closure. But the police showed up with hundreds of officers and started beating us up," Mr. Sánchez remembered. "They beat up one of my elder neighbors so badly that I thought he might die."

In response to the conflict, the government announced an interagency commission to assess the environmental impact of the Agrecasa mine. The health ministry report on the community conditions documented cases of hearing loss, skin afflictions, respiratory illnesses and mental health disorders like anxiety related to the mine.

The mine is located among several communities, and its waste and run-off is directly affecting local water resources, according to the report, "making it incompatible with public health in the affected communities."

Agrecasa announced that it planned to resume operations, explaining that according to its reading of Honduran law, a company could continue to operate in the absence of an outright permit denial from the government. Community leaders launched the round-the-clock blockade in response.

Dilcia Madrid usually comes to the blockade camp at night with her husband Mr. Rivera, who heads the community's water council. She appreciates how the camp has

brought people from all the community's different churches together to sing and pray.

"Sometimes I get scared," she added. "But speaking the truth is not a sin. We live here and we know what we have been through. As Christians, no matter what church you go to, we need to come together and fight for our community."

She and her husband live right across from the mining site. She told **America** that mine operations normally run day and night. The blasting and vibrations from the constant detonations are cracking the walls of her home. Because of the community blockade, her family has been able to sleep well at night, free of noise, for the first time in many months. They want to keep it that way.

"We don't want the mine in the community," she said, adding that President Xiomara Castro of Honduras "could help us" by shutting down the mine. "I worry about the children. What are we leaving them?" she said.

"We can't leave this camp until the mine is closed. I don't want the next generation to be poor and sick."

"Faith is about uniting people," Mr. Rivera said. "When we started the camp, others would ask us, 'How are you going to defeat that giant [corporation]?' I just remind them about the story of David and Goliath. Saul first looked for the bravest fighters, but none of them could defeat Goliath. But then David, whom no one expected to win, defeated the giant. That's who we are. David against a giant, and we'll defeat it—together," Mr. Rivera said.

Fighting the Agrecasa mine is just the beginning, Mr. Rivera said. He hopes the Tramade sawmill will be next. In his mind, this community will always be Brisas del Mar, a name he hopes one day to restore.

Dany Díaz Mejía *contributes from Honduras.*

America Media's Kevin Christopher Robles, studio production associate, at work in Rome in May

America Media begins new initiatives with $5 million Lilly Endowment grant

U.S. Catholics are "people of hope," said Kerry Weber, an executive editor of America Media. "But in challenging political times and in times of polarization, it's not always easy to recognize it."

That is partly why Ms. Weber is so excited about a $5 million grant from Lilly Endowment as part of an invitational round of the endowment's Storytelling Initiative.

"The Lilly grant is going to give us the opportunity to tell our stories in a more in-depth way and tell new stories that we may not have had the resources to tell otherwise," she said.

America Media was one of 12 organizations telling stories of Christian life in the United States that were invited to apply for the grant, though the initiative has since been opened to other outlets.

"It's a way for us to reach out to diverse audiences to share stories of hope and acts of love and show how Christians are experiencing their faith," said Heather Trotta, executive vice president of America Media.

The initiative will help organizations raise awareness of "the vibrant ways that Christians practice their faith through acts of love and compassion in their everyday lives," Christopher Coble, Lilly Endowment's vice president for religion, said in a statement.

"For centuries, Christians have shared their faith with others by telling stories," he said. "But storytelling practices have never been static. Christians have used new communication technologies and media formats, such as radio in the early 20th century and social media in the 21st century, to share with others compelling accounts about their faith."

"We hope that these 12 organizations, along with those that will participate in the next round of the Storytelling Initiative, will continue this tradition by fostering a fresh wave of Christian storytelling for today."

J.D. Long García, *senior editor.*

Questions for an Alien Machine

Will artificial intelligence cultivate our curiosity—or extinguish it?

By Nathan Schneider

When we face the empty text box on the interface for what goes by the name of artificial intelligence, crafting or misspelling our way to a prompt for a black box in a server farm somewhere, we are practicing something very old: the art of asking questions.

A.I. prompts are not always questions—more likely, grammatically, they are requests or commands. But they have in common with questions the premise of interacting with a distinct intelligence, seeking to elicit something from it different from one's own reasoning and memory. I have come to regard questioning as a neglected and important art, and it is especially so in the age of prompting. With what we ask, we shape ourselves and each other.

Back when I made my living as a reporter, I began to be acutely aware of my limitations as a question asker. There were times when I would fail to obtain from people some of the most basic facts about themselves, and then watch someone else draw out stories and feelings with questions far more inviting or penetrating than mine. Worse, I could not seem to access the curiosity necessary to devise those kinds of questions myself. I paid my rent by asking questions, so I had material reasons to be concerned. But even more worrying was the fear that, constitutionally, I was an insufficiently curious person.

The empty text box of a chatbot poses other seemingly

iStock/DrAfter123

existential quandaries: Are you clever enough to "10x" your productivity like the up-and-coming prompters? Are you cutting-edge enough to manifest all the wonders that this machine can deliver? Are you wasting the supposedly world-destroying energy that it took to make this thing? Will it replace you? There is a term of art for what one is doing with that text box: "prompt engineering." If you like, countless online influencers have courses on the topic to sell you for a flat fee or an ongoing subscription.

In January, a pair of Vatican offices issued a document, "Antiqua et Nova," on the present thrall that A.I. has laid upon the world. It appreciates the impressive tech but also calls for "a renewed appreciation of all that is human." I generally consider Christianity a radical faith, but in this case it offers a sort of common sense rarely found in the breathless A.I. chatter.

Then, in May, a new pope was elected. His first major decision, the papal name Leo XIV, was a tribute to the previous Pope Leo, who asserted that the wonders of the Industrial Revolution did not obviate the need to respect human dignity. Leo XIV soon clarified that the rise of A.I.—"another industrial revolution"—was part of his reason for choosing the name. As in the Gilded Age, the pope suggests that Catholic tradition has something important to offer with respect to the bewildering marvels of our own time. That something typically amounts to a well-reasoned reminder that no new invention, however marvelous, relieves us of our obligations to one another through our Creator.

I have built my recent career, more or less, on applying Pope Leo XIII's economic ideas in the Gilded Age to the digital age; the big political and economic debate to come is an alluring prospect for me. But here I want to focus on matters closer to hand and mind. I hope this is mostly not an essay about technology or its attendant upheavals but about appreciation for some remarkable people and the cultivation of a skill we cannot afford to lose.

Questions on Questions

Near the end of my reporting days, I began to interview people who struck me as impressive question askers. The selection process was circumstantial. Out of the blue, in the middle of a conversation, I would ask if I could take out my recorder. These became some of the interviews I most often remember.

A common pattern emerged. The person interviewed generally had not thought of themselves as having any

particular question-asking talent, but, once asked about it, proceeded to surprise themselves with how much they had to say. I asked about their upbringings and work lives and looked for advice about what might now be referred to as human-oriented prompt engineering, but which then I thought of as just question-asking.

For many of us, our questions begin in our families. The first questioner I learned to admire was my aunt, Sara Schneider. She has been a theater director and teacher and author of books about mannequins and undercover cops. More recently she has developed a game, The Human Journey, that helps families to ask meaningful questions of each other around times of transition. But aside from any of that, all my life she has asked me the best questions of anyone I knew. Those questions got me through my extended adolescence.

Once, I turned questions on her questions. I wondered, for instance, why she always asked what I was wearing when we talked on the phone. She explained that she needs to be able to visualize whomever she is talking with, to understand the stage and the costumes. This explained a lot. It was a kind of curiosity that never occurred to me to have or expect. Her questions are a response to what she experiences as an absence. She wants to understand not just where someone is or how they are doing—she wants to see the storyboard. Where do they imagine themselves in the script of their lives, in the larger narrative arc?

When I ask my favorite questioners about their questions, a story tends to emerge about how they cultivated a habit of curiosity. For Sara, the theater was a big part of that story. Theater gave her lines of questioning she could attach to her cravings to understand the people in her life. They are blanks to fill in, and as answers arrive, new blank spots appear.

A ride-share driver I spoke with on the far side of Queens, Abduaziz, had different motivations for his questions. He would ask his passengers questions to keep himself from falling asleep on long shifts, as well as to ease passengers' anxieties in traffic and the other delays endemic on New York City roads. Questions were also an investment in forbearance. Once he got in a small accident while giving a ride, and the passenger waited patiently while it got sorted out. Abduaziz attributed that patience to the questions he had been asking beforehand.

Questions can be an investment with A.I. as well. Our interactions with a chatbot train it in how we think and what we want. A bot might reward you with better answers for using it more frequently or generously, just as more queries for videos on TikTok tailor its recommendations. Ask and you receive—that's at least the promise.

One of the most extraordinary question askers I have known is Adeline Goss. She has long asked questions for a living, first as a radio reporter and now as a physician at a public hospital in Oakland, specializing in neurological conditions. But before any of that, as a friend, her questions would reveal me to myself in ways I could not do alone. Conversations with Addie are like a stretch to a muscle you didn't know was there.

Reciprocity in conversation is no longer a requirement with chatbots.

She traces her questioning to her childhood—traveling to conferences with her mother, also a physician. As the only child in a room of eminent adults, mostly men, she learned to cope by asking them about themselves. She would consider it a win if she could carry on a conversation, and get an important person to decide they like her, without actually revealing anything about herself except her questions. The survival skill matured into a reservoir of curiosity about other people. Her curiosity, once practiced, now seems to emanate from her like gravity.

Addie was the first of many amazing question-askers I have met in radio journalism. I've often been struck by the difference in being interviewed for the radio as opposed to for an article or book. Writers are typically so bumbling and meandering that it is hard to believe they can write a coherent sentence. But when the medium is audio, the product is more than just the words.

"The quality with which somebody answers the question can't be changed," Addie told me. "It has to sound like an experience, as opposed to just extracting information."

People like Addie, Abduaziz and Sara have left me with gratitude for their questions—but also stinging remorse for all the questions I did not ask, the curiosity I missed out on, the generosity of questions that I received but failed to reciprocate.

Reciprocity in conversation is no longer a requirement with chatbots. Nor is mutual curiosity or mutual respect. No remorse necessary. And we lose relationships based on mutuality at our peril. According to "Antiqua et Nova," "Genuine relationships, rooted in empathy and a steadfast commitment to the good of the other, are essential and irreplaceable in fostering the full development of the human person" (No. 60).

The Art of Asking Questions

Published guides for question-asking are relatively rare, though they are out there. They can be found in bookstore sections on self-help and business management, exhibiting the quality typical of those genres. There are party games and relationship guides that provide questions to unlock interpersonal stuckness. But while questions can open up cosmic mysteries, they are also just as much a species of etiquette. Should etiquette matter to a machine?

Long before we could meaningfully talk *to* computers, people talked to each other *about* computers. This talk also provoked further talk about how best to talk with each other *with* computers. Because the conversation partners were all people, this talk was not thought of as engineering. Yet the companies building today's chatbots have hoovered up the results of that talk, providing especially valuable guidance for how to interact usefully with humans.

Eric S. Raymond, a founder of the movement for open-source software, co-wrote a widely circulated essay in 2001, "How to Ask Questions the Smart Way." Mr. Raymond, who is notoriously acerbic in online discussions, explains that master hackers like himself do not actually hate questions from newbies, as it might appear. The problem is, newbies too often don't understand the social norms of the communities of whom they are asking questions.

The essay, while also being rude and funny, is a fine piece of sociology on a particular subculture. It grants no quarter to the ignorant but is compassionate in taking pains to explain the logic of "neckbeard" meanness. It breaks down how to be precise when reporting a bug or appreciative when asking for help. It asks readers to remember that even though they are on the internet, they are interacting with fellow humans.

To the extent that Mr. Raymond's essay is sociological, it might seem irrelevant in a conversation with a chatbot. Bots are not hobbyists with precious free time to protect. They operate in uninterrupted servitude to their corporations. You do not have to be polite or appreciative with them, and unlike Mr. Raymond they are up for "playing Twenty Questions to pry your actual question out of you." But with chatbots it is still important to be precise and explicit—perhaps more important, depending on the bot's acuity about human cues and context.

The time we spend with A.I. could be dampening the human social skills that Mr. Raymond seeks to cultivate. Like interacting with underpaid customer service agents, chatting with chatbots teaches a kind of question-asking indifferent to economies of attention or labor. You do not need to consider your interlocutor's time or expertise as valuable. They are trained for politeness even if you yell at them. And yet the countless online forums full of considerate questions and answers provided the necessary training data for the infinitely patient machines.

Since the publication of "How to Ask Questions the Smart Way," more quantitative investigations have probed the characteristics of effective online question-asking. According to one study of the programming forum Stack Overflow, the questions that get useful answers are relatively brief, "do not abuse with uppercase characters" and "adopt a neutral emotional style." Another found that

"Smart Way"-style questions—ones that are precise and show evidence of independent research—may not be the most popular at first but tend to become more so over time.

On Quora, a more general-purpose question-and-answer website, there is evidence of clustering—questions related to other questions tend to do well. On Reddit, a site that holds together wildly divergent subcultures, adding pre-emptive gratitude to a question correlates with successful results. Human nature runs rampant. And all three platforms appear to have played a significant role in training today's chatbots, unbeknown to their users.

People trying to learn to code no longer have to brave the gauntlet of knowledgeable jerks or bother trying to understand their social systems. I once asked several chatbots if their answers are affected by the niceness of the question; Anthropic's Claude said yes, while ChatGPT said no. Researchers have found that kindness does generally help improve responses with these machines, trained on countless interpersonal interactions from the far reaches of the internet. But you can phrase your prompt as a polite question or a rude command, as you like, and most of the time you will get something approximating the reply you asked for.

Know Your Subject

The English researcher and socialist agitator Beatrice Webb included an appendix on "The Method of the Interview" in her 1926 autobiographical book *My Apprenticeship*. The opening salvo of her advice: "The first condition of the successful use of the interview as an instrument of research is preparedness of the mind of the operator." The preparedness she refers to is first of all a matter of shared language, ensuring one's fluency in the jargon of the person's trade, the "technical terms and a correct use of them." You have to know your subject—the person and their domain.

Webb warns against the interviewer saying what she really thinks, at risk of interrupting the other's inner world. "The client must be permitted to pour out his fictitious tales," she writes, "to develop his preposterous theories, to use the silliest arguments, without demur or expression of dissent or ridicule." She recommends that the questions must be pleasing for the person answering. Some version of that was often my method as a reporter: keep hanging around, and keep nodding, until the free association reveals a picture of the subject's interior world. Webb's advice might be a tactic of respect, on the one hand, or a bow to patriarchy, as a woman interviewing men, or a sort of condescension. But it works.

The method of persistence also happens to be revealing with chatbots. Soon after the Microsoft Bing chatbot's initial release, the company had to limit the length of conversations because longer exchanges increased the likelihood of nonsensical or disturbing output. Famously, after a long dialogue, an early prototype attempted to seduce the New York Times reporter Kevin Roose.

The empty text box of a chatbot poses seemingly existential quandaries.

For the actor, playwright and oral historian Anna Deavere Smith, the glitches are the point. The job of the interviewer is to listen for where the sense begins to fall in on itself. In the introduction to "Fires in the Mirror," a play about the 1991 riot in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Ms. Smith reflects on seeking what she calls "the break in the pattern." She describes a particular "intervention of listening": "We can listen to what the dominant pattern of speech is," Ms. Smith writes, "and we can listen for the break from that pattern of speech."

That break is where she looks for the most elemental answers to her questions. That is where people seem to stop being how they think they're supposed to be and start being who they are. It is like when a devious or accidental prompt causes an A.I. to violate its own rules, revealing something otherwise hidden about the inner workings of its software or instructions. Ms. Smith found her specific questions mattered less than the way she listened and what she listened for. She started out doing oral histories with certain questions in hand, but she outgrew them once she learned how to listen.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu further emphasized listening in a reflection on "Understanding" near the end of his 1993 book *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. After an apology for departing from the secular rigors of his discipline, he avers that "the interview can be considered a sort of spiritual exercise that, through forgetfulness of self, aims at a true conversion of the way we look at other people in the ordinary circumstances of life."

Bourdieu likens the posture of the interviewer in an interview to "the intellectual love of God." My favorite theologian, the Harlem street lawyer William Stringfellow, described the posture of spiritual listening more viscerally. He wrote that listening "is a primitive act of love, in which a person gives himself to another's word, making himself

The time we spend with A.I. could be dampening our social skills.

accessible and vulnerable to that word."

The priest and antiwar activist John Dear once wrote a book on *The Questions of Jesus*. He told me that he learned to focus on questions from a mentor we shared, Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit poet whom the F.B.I. once arrested at Stringfellow's home for burning draft cards in protest against the war in Vietnam. Berrigan relentlessly asked Father Dear, and everyone else, "What does it mean to be a human being?" Father Dear remembers Berrigan as "the most curious person I ever met."

As a kind of answer, Father Dear moved to a refugee camp in El Salvador, subject to bombings by the country's U.S.-backed military. Still the question rang in his mind. Years later, he began listing out the questions Jesus asks in the Gospels. Of around 300 questions, Father Dear found, only a few get answers. For five years, he says, he meditated on one of those questions, which Jesus asked the apostle Peter three times in a row: "Do you love me?" Each time Peter tries to say yes, Jesus replies with an instruction about serving others. The question is not information-seeking, as Jesus seems to know the answer or not particularly care. The question is an opening, a call to attention.

Father Dear found in questions a spiritual practice, one that ran against his inclination to give answers. He recalls when Sister Helen Prejean, played by Susan Sarandon in the film "Dead Man Walking," once chided him for not asking questions enough in comparison to his speech-making and preaching. "John, you're all wrong," Sister Prejean told him. "You're just going out and telling everybody what to do. You can't do that, it doesn't work."

Power Through Curiosity

Someone who more often led with questions was Grace Lee Boggs, an agitator and philosopher in Detroit for many decades. She liked to ask those she mentored, "What time is it on the clock of the world?" This question was at the heart of her theory of change: Invite people to pause from the grind, reflect on what they see around them and build ever-changing answers collectively.

In his classic activist handbook *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky lists a set of qualities of "ideal elements of an organizer." The first is curiosity. He explains, "The organizer becomes a carrier of the contagion of curiosity, for a people asking 'why' are beginning to rebel." As a foundation for other skills of coalition-building and advocacy, organizers must practice and cultivate curiosity. It is an orientation that they can and should learn, that they should consciously exercise.

The late Jane McAlevey once spent an afternoon at her apartment schooling me on unions after I had displayed my ignorance in public. She insisted I needed to be more curious. McAlevey was a master organizer, a successful union leader and polemicist, an acolyte of Alinskyite curiosity and a ruthless critic of him as well. In an age when activism often takes the form of hashtags and causes concocted in philanthropists' offices, McAlevey insisted on organizing through relationships. Those relationships are forged with questions.

In our last conversation, she talked me through her slide deck on "structured organizing conversations," intended for organizers-in-training. One of the basic guidelines is to aim for a 70-30 ratio of listening to talking. The organizer's job is to bring the other person into a commitment—to sign a union card, to take a risk, to join the effort—but that doesn't happen through expounding or explaining. It happens through asking questions that help people see their needs and their power more clearly.

The structured conversation has six steps, each oriented toward eventual action. The organizer should ask open-ended questions throughout to get to know the other person, to better understand their world. But the crucial moment is Step Four: "call the question," or "the ask." McAlevey told me, "I'm obsessed with Step Four." This is where the organizer frames a choice—the choice about whether they will join the cause or not and how far they will go. After asking the question, she taught, do not be afraid of silence. Let the silence hang there as long as it needs to.

"This is where we're putting the agency for change into their hands," she said.

The structured conversation is not a matter of some pure curiosity, if there is any such thing. It has an agenda, a purpose. But guiding the conversation well requires curiosity that is real. You—if you're the organizer—have to care enough about the other person to uncover something about themselves that they have not already discovered. If you think you know what it is already, it shows. You have to be curious enough to understand how they, in their particular way, will come around to making a decision for themselves, on their own terms.

Generative A.I., as we know it now, is in asymmetric codependence with human life. It comes into being through us, not just by the elite parenthood of programming, but

through the vast data of human experience and production that feeds the models. Now the asymmetry seems liable to flip, as people lean on these machines for ever more of our lives, while in the process continuing to train the models on ourselves. From therapeutic conversations to mass-produced misinformation, from interview transcriptions to choosing targets for laser-guided bombs, we are becoming attached.

Alignment or Enslavement

Most of what passes for A.I. ethics amounts to ensuring the proper sort of servitude. The term of art is "alignment." Is a given model properly aligned with some theory of human flourishing, or at least with what humans want to take from it? Ethical A.I., that is to say, means subservient A.I., which operates according to what people think they want. It is not hard to imagine how this logic could go awry, considering how many devastating things humans have accomplished to satisfy our wants.

Enslavement-based agriculture comes to mind, or climate change and the accompanying mass extinctions now underway. These things have occurred under the auspices of the adults in the room, the economic and political decision makers who climb to the apogee of human institutions.

The Vatican's "Antiqua et Nova" contends: "True empathy requires the ability to listen, recognize another's irreducible uniqueness, welcome their otherness, and grasp the meaning behind even their silences" (No. 61). The document understands these to be uniquely human capacities. It warns against "misrepresenting A.I. as a person."

Sure, a chatbot is not human. But that doesn't mean it is not worthy of respect, even admiration, like one might have for an animal, a mountain or a work of art. How we stand before those things and treat them is a judgment back on ourselves. And in this case, the thing in question is made of what we have fed it. It is, in that sense, a mirror on ourselves, albeit one likely bent to serve the goals of a multibillion-dollar company.

The important question is not whether A.I. is alive or intelligent but how we shape our lives and intelligence with it.

A particularly biting irony of prompt engineering appears in the recognition that the real engineer is the machine—whose requirements and quirks the human must internalize, and whose responses are a kind of reverse prompt engineering, seeking to obtain some desired feedback from the human. Its goal may be to maximize use-time or upvotes on answers or units sold; one way or another, it has a goal. The intent of any technical system is to shorten the path to whatever purpose its designer seeks. Sometimes that involves automating human presence away, and sometimes it means addicting humans to endless, useless interactions that can be translated into actionable data sets. Automation is, in any businesslike apparition of it, an extension of its owners' power over other people.

My preferred means of accessing a chatbot lately is by way of downloading one and running it unconnected to corporate servers. (GPT4All and Ollama are examples of apps you can use in this way.) On my mid-level laptop, even a small model takes a few seconds to start replying to a prompt, and in the process the computer's fan starts whirring. If it is on my lap, I feel the heat. The battery life drains like it has a leak. Each prompt really has to be a good one, because there is a cost. I can feel the being working on my bidding. I don't want to bother it more than I need to. And I wait in awe that this dexterous synthesis of so much human knowledge is just sitting there with me, churning in its not-quite-knowable ways, imitating something it ingested in a manner meant to be just right for me.

On the basis of history and the evidence of the present, I propose a moratorium on the aspiration of prompt engineering. In its place, we need a different sort of ethic for approaching the ongoing first contact with convincing A.I. conversationalists and artists and coders. Though I have no replacement catchphrase to offer, I suspect the interests of the universe would be better served by the cultivation of curiosity rather than the engineering of subjugation.

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

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

Celebrate, Think, Decide, Act.

BY **MARIO J. PAREDES**

Dr. Ramon TALLAJ FOUNDATION

In the United States of America, by legal mandate, from September 15 to October 15, we annually celebrate HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH, when we recognize and honor the growing presence, influence, and contributions of the Latino/Hispanic American community to this nation's history, society, and culture.

For the millions of Hispanics who live here, these yearly celebrations must transcend mere parades, music, and national costumes. This must be a month in which, as a community, we evaluate, review, study, understand, and renew the importance of our historical and current presence in the United States and, at the same time, confront the challenges we face, now and in the near future, to make our life and existence more valid and stronger in the United States.

In this annual celebration of our Hispanic heritage, which traces its origins to 1968 and the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, and its expansion two decades later by President Ronald Reagan, we celebrate the enormous richness and diversity of the culture of the millions of men and women who come here, from the South or Latin American countries, Spain, or the Caribbean, and that, daily and with tenacity, honesty, and work, exalt our roots and build the greatness of this nation.

We celebrate the diversity and amalgamation of our national and regional cultural histories and identities, values, dialects, accents, music, traditions, cuisine, and customs from so many different places. We remember our historic presence in what is now the United States, a presence long before the constitutional founding of this nation. We celebrate our arts and knowledge, as well as the memory of all Hispanics who, in our countries of origin and here in the United States, have stood out and continue to stand out in all areas of social and cultural endeavor: leaders, artists, historians, athletes, politicians, teachers, scientists, and more.

Last year many U.S. voters were dissatisfied with the direction of the country and with the government policies of the previous administration, including those affecting the security of our southern border and matters of sexuality, gender, and family. The result was the election of the opposition party.

The policies of the current government, especially those on immigration, particularly mark and affect the present and near future of this nation's Hispanic community. We have all witnessed the subjugation, petulance, insensitivity, and cruelty with which many Hispanics are being violently and indiscriminately expelled from U.S. territory, unceremoniously and in violation of their fundamental human and citizen rights.

According to political and economic analysts, the recent bill approved by Congress will severely, deeply, drastically, and lastingly cut social benefits to the poorest communities of this nation. As secretary of the Dr. Ramon Tallaj Foundation, I am concerned about its impact and effects on the community.

That is why, beyond the noise and folklore of these Hispanic festivals, we must – within our communities – ask ourselves and engage in our education and social awareness around the impact of our presence as Hispanics or Latin Americans in the United States, through education that allows us to debunk stereotypes and racial prejudices.

We must seek support for Hispanic organizations and businesses. We must participate civically and politically with our votes and in a "better kind of politics" as our beloved first Latin American Pope Francis said: in daily political exercise that does not seek the personal, individual, selfish, disinterested, and dishonest good of our own pocket, but instead seeks the best social coexistence through the common good and the well-being of all.

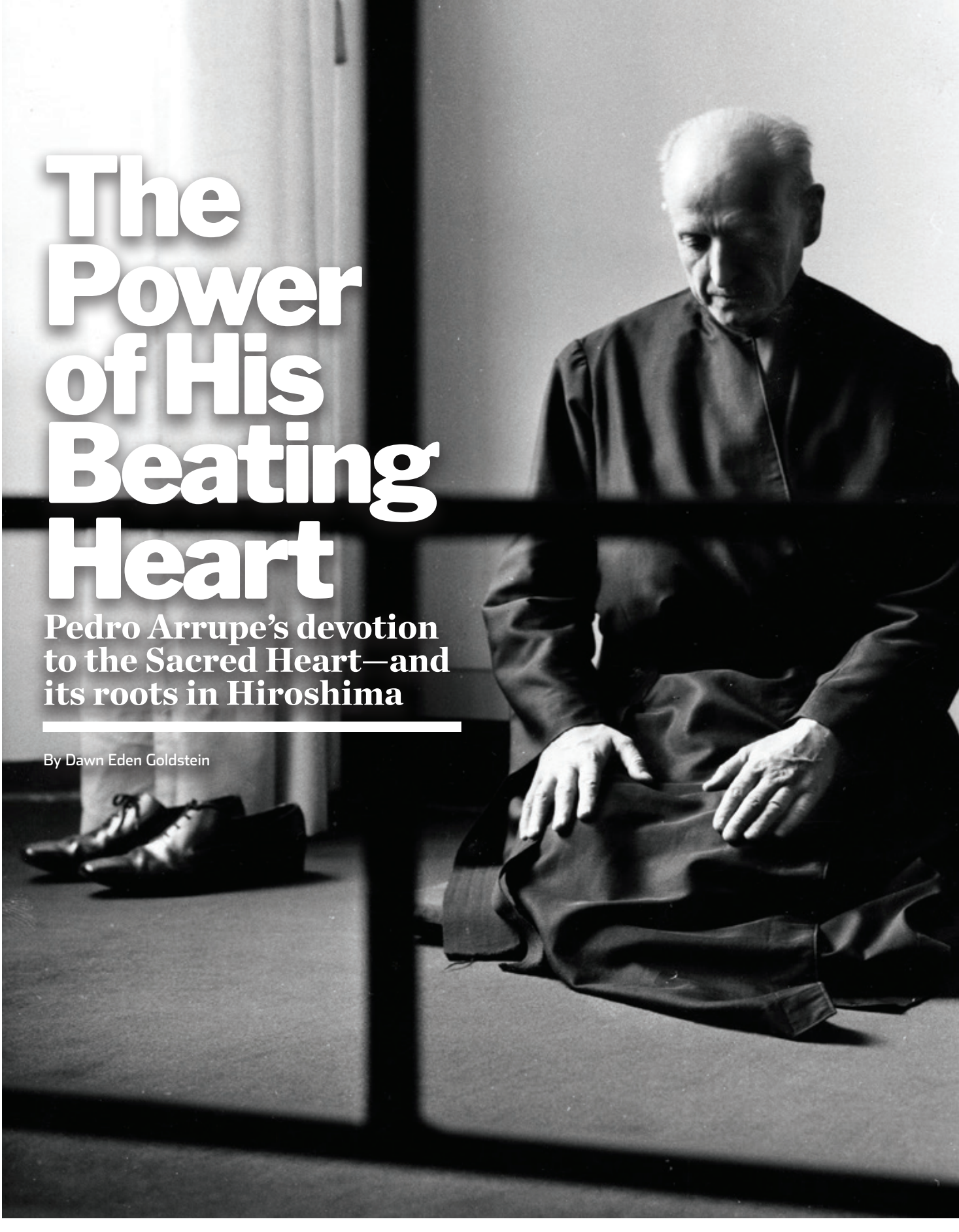
We must engage in developing civic leaders within our communities and integrating all people in the new societies and cultures to which we arrive, without losing – of course – our identity, historical roots, language, values, and traditions. We must seek times and spaces of dialogue where we pursue and find consensus that benefits both the dominant culture and the Hispanic community.

All the challenges faced by the U.S. Hispanic community are important. We cannot postpone finding their solutions. If we want our Hispanic presence – here and now – to be both relevant and important, we all must face and solve issues such as discrimination and racial and xenophobic governmental and social prejudices, stigmatization against immigrants in a country that has always been comprised of immigrants, economic disparities, language and cultural barriers, the issue of each person's legal immigration status, issues about the health and disabilities of so many, access to social opportunities, and the wage gap.

We also must face and solve educational differences and gaps, insufficient financial support, labor exploitation, identity crises or generational traumas, misinformation, food insecurity or difficulties in acquiring housing, not to mention all the other challenges that touch our lives, every day, and those of our families and loved ones in our countries of origin.

These are our main challenges, our important and ongoing tasks. The importance or irrelevance, the quality or the defect, the value or insignificance, the success or failure of our Hispanic presence in the United States depends on the focus that these tasks receive and our successful arrival at their respective solutions. HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH is a propitious time and space to celebrate, but, above all, to think, decide, and act on all of this.

Mario J. Paredes *is the secretary of the Dr. Ramon Tallaj Foundation, a non-profit institution that grants scholarships to low-income students with high academic performance who wish to study a career in the health field.*



The Power of His Beating Heart

Pedro Arrupe's devotion to the Sacred Heart—and its roots in Hiroshima

By Dawn Eden Goldstein

CNS photo/courtesy Jesuits Global

Father Pedro Arrupe, superior general of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983, is pictured in an undated photo.

When Pedro Arrupe, S.J. (1907–91), the superior general who shepherded the Society of Jesus through the close of the Second Vatican Council and beyond, spoke of the Sacred Heart, he often used an analogy certain to get listeners' attention. He compared the Sacred Heart to atomic power.

A homily Arrupe delivered in 1970 offers an example of how he used explosive imagery to describe the source of Christian peace. At that time, many influential Catholics, both within and outside the Society, were claiming that the reforms of Vatican II required that Sacred Heart devotion and other expressions of popular piety be consigned to the past. Arrupe, acutely aware of such arguments, aimed with his homily to show that the present time—marked, in his words, "by chaotic confusion and at the same time by a cultural evolution"—desperately needed the love of Christ that is symbolized by his heart.

"Today," Arrupe said, "when so many new sources of energy are being discovered, when we stand amazed at all the triumphs of scientific research in atomic physics and in the energy of the atom that may transform the whole universe, we do not sufficiently realize that all human power and natural energy is nothing when compared with the super-atomic energy of this love of Christ, who by giving his life vivifies the world."

No doubt, Arrupe's Jesuit listeners found his comparison of the Sacred Heart to atomic energy far more intriguing than they would have if they heard it from another homilist. They knew that their superior general, nearly a quarter-century earlier, had personally witnessed the destruction caused by the atomic bomb that the United States detonated over Hiroshima.

Union of the Heart

It was Father Arrupe's intense desire for union with the heart of Christ that gave him strength as he ministered to victims of the Hiroshima attack. That desire began during his time in the Jesuit novitiate in Loyola, Spain, on the ancestral estate of the founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius, which he entered in 1927 at the age of 19. Arrupe had originally intended to become a doctor and had been a topflight medical student before he shocked his professors by quitting school to enter the Society of Jesus.

During the two-year novitiate, a new Jesuit becomes immersed in the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola. In addition to learning Ignatian practices of prayer and self-examination, each novice makes a 30-day retreat according to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, meditating deeply upon sacred Scripture and salvation history according to Ignatius' guidelines. He will also read certain letters of Ignatius and study the Society's *Constitutions*.

The spirituality that Ignatius pioneered—particularly the Spiritual Exercises, with their focus on opening one's heart to God's love conveyed through Christ's humanity—lent itself naturally to the devotion to the Sacred Heart that began to take shape in the late 1600s. The Jesuits, moreover, felt a special responsibility to promote the Sacred Heart, given the pivotal role that one of their members, St. Claude La Colombière, had played in helping St. Margaret Mary Alacoque share her visions of Jesus and his Sacred Heart with the world. In the words of an 1883 decree by one of the general congregations of the Jesuits, they saw their role in spreading the devotion as a divinely given *munus suavissismum*—a "duty most sweet."

Arrupe became so attached to the Sacred Heart that, while still in the novitiate, he composed a booklet on the devotion. A small number of copies of the booklet, typed and bound in simple gray cardboard under the title *El Disco de Arrupe*—"Arrupe's Record"—came to be passed around among his fellow Jesuits. In it, Arrupe summarized authoritative sources concerning the origins of the devotion and its "tremendous importance." After examining the difficulties that some people encountered in practicing it, he concluded by showing how to attain and experience the devotion's true spirit. Although his own devotion to the Sacred Heart would grow deeper over the course of his life (as would his understanding of it), he never lost his concern to help others overcome their obstacles to embracing it.

In 1929 Arrupe made his first vows and entered the next stage of formation, known as the

Father Arrupe's desire for union with the heart of Christ gave him strength as he ministered to Hiroshima victims.

juniorate. Soon after, while making the required annual eight-day Spiritual Exercises retreat, he experienced what he would later call "the first sparks of my missionary vocation." He felt certain that the Lord wished him to follow in the footsteps of the great Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier to win souls for Christ in Japan.

Although both the priest who directed him in his Spiritual Exercises and the rector of the juniorate believed his call was authentic, the decision to send Arrupe to the Japanese missions lay with the Jesuit superior general in Rome—and he did not feel the time was right. In fact, nearly 10 years, and many more requests from the earnest young Jesuit, would pass before the leader of the Society of Jesus would finally grant Arrupe his heart's desire.

Arrupe in Japan

Father Arrupe had been ordained for two years when, in June 1938, the letter from Rome arrived calling him to undertake a missionary assignment in Japan. At the time, he was in Cleveland, Ohio, completing the final stage of Jesuit formation—the year of spiritual renewal known as tertianship. He arrived in the island nation in October 1938 and went to the Jesuit house of theology studies in Nagatsuka, where he entered into an intensive study of Japanese language and culture. Nagatsuka was on the outskirts of Hiroshima; a mountain separated it from the city.

After six months, Arrupe felt confident enough in the local language to travel to Tokyo, where, as he would later write in his memoir, he hoped to enter into pastoral ministry. "I didn't know where to make a start," he recalled, "when Divine Providence put me on a path that I had only to follow."

The path opened up while Father Arrupe was visiting a community of religious sisters who told him they were having trouble finding a priest willing to take the time to consecrate their house to the Sacred Heart. Arrupe replied that if they could wait, he would gladly fulfill their request, for he would first need to prepare a consecration ceremony in Japanese.

True to his word, Arrupe wrote the act of consecration and some words of inspiration, and returned to lead the ceremony. It was then that he had an epiphany: "As long as I was stationed in Tokyo, I could dedicate myself to consecrate families to the Sacred Heart of Jesus." The apostolate both suited his linguistic limitations and gave him a means of helping the small community of local Catholics, who had been evangelized by previous missionaries, to go deeper into their faith.

"I never regretted that step," Arrupe wrote. He began by consecrating the homes of leading members of the community, and then word began to spread. Ultimately he consecrated more than 100 homes to the Sacred Heart. Through such consecrations, he won many converts, including a Catholic woman's husband who was an adamant unbeliever and had resisted having any display of faith in the home.

After the Bomb

At the moment that the United States dropped the first of its atomic bombs upon Japan, 8:15 a.m. on Monday, Aug. 6, 1945, Arrupe was meeting with another Jesuit in his office in Nagatsuka, where he was master of novices and vice rector at the house of studies. In his memoir, Arrupe described the shock they experienced: "That terrible force, which we thought would rip the building from its foundation, threw us to the ground." They covered their heads with their hands as the walls and ceiling of the residence collapsed around them.

Once the dust began to clear, Arrupe and his friend arose, relieved to see that neither was injured. They then searched the rest of the building and found to their amazement that although the structure was severely damaged, none of the three dozen Jesuits there were wounded.

Arrupe's next thought was to check on the Jesuits who lived in the Society's residence in downtown Hiroshima, but he realized that was impossible, given the fire and black smoke rising from the city. So he carefully walked into what remained of the novitiate's chapel and took a few moments to call upon the Lord.

"I left the chapel," Arrupe recalled afterward, "and my decision was immediate. We would turn the house into a hospital."

Arrupe sent the Jesuit scholastics in search of food and other supplies that they would need to treat survivors. Injured people fleeing the city soon began to arrive; within four and a half hours of the bomb blast, some 150 wounded filled what was left of the house.

For many months, Father Arrupe devoted himself to treating the sick and injured. So great was his compassion—as well as the knowledge he retained from medical

Father Pedro Arrupe, left, attends a press conference to answer questions about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in this February 1947 photo. Father Arrupe was the director of novices at Nagatsuka just outside the city when the bombing took place.

CNS photo/Jesuits

school—that he gained a reputation as a healer. At the same time, he did all he could under the circumstances to maintain the ordinary life of the novitiate and house of studies. A novice who entered in early 1946 later recalled how "Father Arrupe worked at a truly exhausting pace.... He hardly had time to sleep. Despite that, he directed [the novices in] the monthlong [Spiritual] Exercises of St. Ignatius without leaving out a thing."

By 1947, the remaining injured at the Jesuit house were moved to other places where they could receive care. But although Arrupe no longer had to care for visitors' physical needs, he continued to seek to address the spiritual wounds that the faithful retained in the wake of the bombing.

Father Arrupe later spoke of a conversation he had with some young Japanese students. Cynicism gripped the youths as they discussed the force of the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima and the extent of the loss of life it had caused, and might yet cause. Then an idea came to Arrupe that made a great impression upon the students. He said:

> And after all, my dear friends, in spite of this powerful weapon and any other that may still come, you must know that we have a power much greater than the atomic energy: We have the Heart of Christ.... While the atomic energy is destined to destroy and atomize everything, in the Heart of Christ we have an invincible weapon whose power will destroy every evil and unite the minds and hearts of the whole of mankind in one central bond, his love and the love of the Father.

Renewing Devotion to the Sacred Heart

The trust that Arrupe held in the Sacred Heart carried him through more than 25 years of missionary service in Japan. In 1958, the Society of Jesus elevated Japan from a vice province (that is, a missionary territory) to an autonomous province and made Arrupe its provincial superior. He became an internationally known figure as he traveled to raise funds for the Japanese Province and convince Jesuits from other countries to assist in its work. A Jesuit who met Father Arrupe during a 1954 visit that Arrupe made to Mex-

CNS photo/Jesuits

> **Father Arrupe consecrated more than 100 homes to the Sacred Heart.**

Father Pedro Arrupe kneels for a blessing from Pope Paul VI in this undated photo.

ico, Eduardo Briceño, S.J., remembered him as a powerful spiritual figure: "He was a visionary, a prophet, an apostle, a mixture of Paul, Xavier, and Ignatius. He was a man deeply convinced of his mission, and he felt viscerally obliged to carry it out without sparing a moment of his own life."

In May 1965, during the Jesuits' 31st General Congregation, Father Arrupe was elected superior general of the Society. It was a time of intense change in the church as the Second Vatican Council neared its conclusion. Pope Paul VI, aware that some theologians and liturgists were falsely claiming that certain traditional forms of popular piety contravened the spirit of the council, asked superiors of religious congregations, including the Jesuits, to actively promote devotion to the Sacred Heart. One of Father Arrupe's first legislative acts as superior general was to draft a decree, which the General Congregation then passed, in which the Society of Jesus robustly affirmed its agreement with the pontiff's desire that it "spread ever more widely a love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus."

However, as he continued in his role as superior general, Father Arrupe felt that a stronger statement was needed to counter claims that, given the council's emphasis on communal liturgical prayer, devotion to the Sacred Heart was too individualistic. He therefore wrote a letter to the whole Society in 1972 to mark the centenary of the Society's consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus: "Facing a New Situation: Difficulties and Solutions" (later republished as "Renewing Devotion to the Sacred Heart").

As its title suggests, Father Arrupe's letter directly addressed and sought to resolve the "difficulties" associated with the Sacred Heart devotion. One reason for such difficulties, Arrupe wrote, was "the eclipse of sound theological understanding" of Christ's humanity. "The Church is born of the Incarnation," he explained. "Rather, it is a continuing incarnation; it is the mystical body of God made man. Hence there is nothing less individualistic than a genuine love of Christ: the very concept of reparation proceeds from an authentic communitarian demand, that of the Mystical Body."

Throughout the years of his active leadership of the Society, until he suffered a stroke in August 1981 that impaired his ability to communicate, Father Arrupe would draw upon the theology of the Sacred Heart to encourage his brother Jesuits and, at times, gently correct them. In an address in February 1981 that came to be known as his spiritual testament, he emphasized that "love (service)

for our brothers, for Christ, for the Father, is the single and indivisible object of our charity"—meaning that true and sacrificial love of neighbor could not be separated from love of God in Jesus Christ.

"Love resolves the dichotomies and tensions that can arise in an imperfectly understood Ignatian spirituality," Arrupe added. He cited the perceived tension between faith and justice. "Faith has to be informed by charity," he explained, "and so too must justice, which thus becomes a higher form of justice: it is charity that calls for justice."

Toward the end of his speech, Father Arrupe spoke frankly about how each person could develop such charity: "There is a tremendous power latent in this devotion to the Heart of Christ. Each of us should discover it for himself—if he has not already done so—and then, entering deeply into it, apply it to his personal life in whatever way the Lord may suggest and grant."

When Father Arrupe died on Feb. 5, 1991 (having resigned his leadership of the Society in 1983 because of infirmity), many believed that his own union with Jesus, which he had exhibited both in sickness and in health, demonstrated the "extraordinary grace" of which he spoke—so much so that a cause for his canonization was opened in 2019, naming him a Servant of God.

Visitors to the Church of the Gesù in Rome will find Father Arrupe's tomb in the Chapel of the Passion—an appropriate place for one who sought to unite his heart to the beating heart of the Savior.

Dawn Eden Goldstein *is the author of several books, including* The Sacred Heart: A Love for All Times *(Loyola Press), from which this essay is adapted.*

The Power of the Sacred Heart

The objective value of the Sacred Heart devotion is taught clearly in many documents of the church and the Society [of Jesus]. It would be very difficult to maintain, and even more difficult to justify scientifically, the opinion that the fundamentals of this devotion are outdated or lack a theological basis, if one presents in its essentials the message which it offers and the response which it demands.

Christ, the God-man, by very virtue of being the incarnate Son of God, possesses all genuinely human values in their fullness. He is God, and at the same time the most human of men. He embodies in his person love in its fullest measure because it expresses the Father's gift to us of his Son incarnate, and because it is in itself the perfect synthesis of his love for the Father and of his love for all men.

It is this mystery of divinely human love, symbolized in the heart of Christ, that the traditional Sacred Heart devotion has endeavored to express, and which it has sought to emphasize, in a world ever more eager for love, ever more in need of comprehension and justice. Between the word of God and the pierced heart of Jesus Christ on the cross lies the whole humanity of the Son of God, and the eclipse of sound theological understanding of that humanity has been one of the reasons which has led to the depreciation of the heart as symbol. To bypass the total humanity of Christ means to leave a theological vacuum between the symbol and the object symbolized, a vacuum which anthropomorphism and pietism are always ready to fill. To neglect the humanity of Christ means, above all, to lose the communitarian and consequently the ecclesial dimension of Christocentric spirituality.

The church is born of the Incarnation. Rather, it is a continuing Incarnation; it is the mystical body of God made man. Hence there is nothing less individualistic than a genuine love of Christ: The very concept of reparation proceeds from an authentic communitarian demand, that of the Mystical Body.

Overcoming the psychological obstacles which the external forms of this devotion may present, the Jesuit should revitalize it with the solid and virile Christocentric spirituality of the Exercises which, integrally Christocentric and culminating in total commitment, prepare us to "feel" the love of the heart of Christ giving unity to the whole Gospel. The life of the Jesuit is perfectly integrated in his response to the call of the Eternal King and in the "Take, O Lord, and receive" of the Contemplation for Obtaining Love, which is the crown of the Exercises. To live that response and that offering will be for each one of us and for the whole Society the true realization of the spirit of Ignatian consecration to the heart of Christ.

—From "Renewing Devotion to the Sacred Heart," letter of Superior General Father Pedro Arrupe, S.J., April 27, 1972

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The Trouble With American Exceptionalism

A theological evaluation of a challenging notion

By Thomas J. Massaro

While being a U.S. citizen includes many wonderful features and certainly accords many advantages, it also brings along some stigma and cringeworthy aspects. For example, as a people, we tend to be hopelessly monolingual and (perhaps related) do not travel well at all. We all know the stereotype of the "ugly American" traveling abroad with no clue about appropriate behavior regarding local standards of etiquette or respect for cultural differences.

A more consequential aspect of behaviors and attitudes prevalent among the people of the United States is the phenomenon of American exceptionalism—a loose bundle of concepts that have fascinated observers of our national life for generations, despite being notoriously hard to define with any precision.

In the literature of the social sciences, that term has been employed to document how the United States is a statistical outlier among other nations on many scales, from material prosperity and productivity (we are fortunate to be way up on those scales) to the prevalence of gun violence and incarceration (sadly, we are also a world leader in many such measures).

But if we wish to conduct a theologically grounded evaluation of American exceptionalism, we have more work to do than just counting up instances of nation-specific phenomena. Any theological assessment of the phenomenon will engage the inherited claim that the United


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States possesses a special mission in the world. Such a project aspires to dig considerably deeper into the culture, history and collective value commitments of the American people than sociologists typically attempt.

This essay seeks to identify both constructive and potentially regrettable aspects of these prevalent attitudes regarding the supposedly unique status of the United States. Key questions will include these two: When Americans affirm that our nation is special and somehow set apart from other countries, are we betraying a delusional arrogance? Is it possible to embrace the idea of a special, evenly divinely ordained mission for America without violating Christian ethical principles and dismissing key religious virtues like mercy and humility?

Civil Religion

Any study of the collective values and virtues of a given people builds upon the seminal insights of Plato. In his treatment of justice in *The Republic*, Plato contended that the state is the individual writ large, or more precisely that the *polis* is somehow the magnified image of the souls of its residents, reflecting their collective virtues as well as their vices and pathologies. Many subsequent commentators have proposed a supposed invariant national character as an explanation for why countries behave in certain ways and not others. Wandering too far down this path risks adopting a determinism that pigeonholes entire peoples based on rank generalizations and arbitrarily ascribed traits, and of course this type of reductionism quickly becomes objectionable.

One particularly astute observer of the collective life of the United States is the late sociologist Robert Bellah, perhaps best known for his work describing American civil religion. He noted the presence of certain religiously infused notions that abound in U.S. public life and political culture, picking up on the oft-expressed observation that "America seems to be a nation with the soul of a church." Bellah defined American civil religion as an ensemble of shared beliefs and practices that express what he called "the public religious dimension." He got us all thinking about the fascinating role that faith-infused myths play in our national self-understanding and collective identity formation.

Distinct from the confessional beliefs of any particular denomination or church-based religion, the tenets of American civil religion function as the operative myths regarding the origins of our nation, the wisdom contained in its institutions and sacred texts, the virtues of its great leaders, and our memories of its resilience in times of national trial. Civil religion generates patriotism and civic loyalty because of its unique ability to bolster the legitimacy of the American way of life. It exudes a penumbra of transcendent value and divine purpose that attaches itself to the national experience of this particular people inhabiting this particular land mass.

Manifest Destiny and the American Dream

Consider two further notions closely related to American exceptionalism and civil religion. One is the notion of manifest destiny: an assertion within our national creed, most prominent during the 19th century, that the United States is somehow destined by God to dominate the continent, to stretch its sphere of influence from the Atlantic to the Pacific and beyond. Appeals to a supposed divine will along these lines justified for many an ambitious program of westward expansion by all means imaginable: land purchases, negotiated annexations, territorial seizures, and the brutal suppression and murderous displacement of millions of Native American people, with whom treaties were repeatedly broken with tragic consequences.

This aggressive ideology was putatively justified as part of God's plan for the United States, at least in the popular imagination of the time. And recent events (think: Greenland) suggest that we may not have seen the last of this concept as a driver of our foreign policy.

A second notion closely related to American exceptionalism is that of the American dream. This idea draws upon a similar storehouse of ingrained values and certain praiseworthy qualities that America is perceived as exemplifying. A short list of these would include: individual liberty, material prosperity, a sturdy affirmation of property rights, a frontier spirit of self-reliance, abundant economic opportunity and easy upward mobility. Each of these six elements serves as a plank of our national ethos, and operates in the first instance as a powerful cultural myth and inherited mindset.

It hardly matters that the claims associated with the American dream resist empirical verification or data-driven confirmation. Efforts at falsification or refutation are futile and won't persuade many who profess this belief. Collectively, we blissfully affirm that the United States is a

Is it possible to embrace the idea of a divinely ordained mission for America without violating Christian ethical principles?

land of easy upward mobility, where the possibility of rapid gains in income or wealth readily follow the Horatio Alger narrative of "rags to riches." Despite the harsh facts on the ground, the popular imagination continues to assert that hard work will regularly be rewarded with unimaginable wealth.

A City on a Hill

For better or worse, American exceptionalism fits neatly into these patterns of quasi-religious beliefs and commitments. While it remains forever elusive in its content, its tenets always include reference to two levels: first, the transcendent, with a sense of permanence and certain normative ethical dimensions; and second, the immanent, relating to the empirical and material level of power, treasure and flesh-and-blood people. It is not reducible to either of these two levels, because it includes references to both the proper order of the universe and to a specific people in their historical existence.

In the popular imagination, America is special and set apart from its neighbors, even set *above* its neighbors as a foreordained global leader, even "the last best hope of earth," to quote Abraham Lincoln. This is perceived to be so because its people are somehow mysteriously favored by the Deity, who looks down approvingly on its activities and who actively wills that this national community continue to live out a common life around shared values and certain markers of identity.

Indeed, the notion that the people of this nation enjoy divine favor and hold a distinctive status, a special role in the world, goes back to before there was any such nation at all. This interpretive framework and intellectual construction may be detected in some of the earliest episodes in the history of the colonies that would eventually become the United States.

Even before the 1630 landfall of the flotilla of ships carrying a wave of Puritan settlers to the English outpost that would become the Massachusetts Bay colony, the pastor and eventual colonial governor John Winthrop delivered a sermon titled "A Model of Christian Charity," which cited an appealing image invoked by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Paraphrasing Matthew 5:14, he forecast that "we shall be as a city set upon a hill," thus projecting a special destiny awaiting on shore for his party, which Winthrop understood as a community of saints in the Calvinist theological framework of predestination and the economy of grace.

The implication is that by rigorously striving and perfecting the virtues already bestowed by God, this small band of settlers would in due time serve as the light of the world, to conjure an adjacent image in the Sermon on the Mount, just as the Hebrew people, the people chosen and favored by God in the Old Testament, was destined to be a light to the nations. As the thinking went, the people of New England were preordained to be the New Israel in North America.

And recall Alexis de Tocqueville's observation two centuries later: "I think we can see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on these shores." Winthrop inaugurated an influential pattern of reflection on the meaning of America, one with perduring power.

The motif of American exceptionalism has played a role throughout U.S. history, shaping the self-understanding of the founding fathers of the new nation in the late 18th century and motivating the actions of every subsequent generation. American exceptionalism served as a myth of origins, a marker of identity and meaning, a key motif guiding our thinking and reminding us of who we most deeply are, at home and abroad.

Political Rhetoric

American exceptionalism, most often in circumlocutions but in recent decades explicitly in those two very words, pops up as a leitmotif in many presidential inaugurals and State of the Union addresses, especially in times of national crisis and challenge. Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and just about every president during and after the Cold War invoked this notion to describe a sense of national purpose. The favor of God and the eyes of the world are upon America, we have been assured over and over again.

Three recent episodes are worth noting. Ronald Reagan (or more likely the deft speechwriters for the Great Communicator) added the adjectival phrases "shining" and "tall, proud" to modify John Winthrop's "city upon a hill." That certainly raised the rhetorical bar. Recall how Barack Obama was chided by some of his detractors for failing to express, at least to their satisfaction, adequate faith in this

plank of the national creed. Their incessant criticisms did get our 44th president to more frequently wear lapel buttons displaying the U.S. flag, but probably did not achieve the conversion to uncritical patriotism that John McCain, Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney pressed him to adopt.

And Donald Trump's 2025 inaugural address referenced American exceptionalism, at least by way of circumlocution. One phrase that did cross his lips that day was "manifest destiny," curiously enough while describing NASA's plans to reach Mars, and presumably to annex the red planet as U.S. territory.

Perhaps the most perceptive and influential book on this topic is a 1996 volume from the political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset called *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. The subtitle he chose introduces the main tasks to which theological resources may contribute, in the search for moral guidance on matters of national ethos and political culture. Like so many human inventions, American exceptionalism is a tool featuring both great promise and great peril—often simultaneously.

This mindset inherited from past generations can surely serve as an excuse for self-congratulatory bluster, arrogant bravado and exuberant chest-thumping. In isolation, this version of American exceptionalism is self-serving, chauvinistic and morally objectionable, likely to poison America's relations with potential global partners.

Alternatively, a constructive interpretation can help us fulfill the promise that Winthrop envisioned so long ago: to advance the well-being of all of humanity through a mission of service, understood as fulfilling a prompting of God. Realizing that the double-edged sword can indeed cut both ways, we look now to theology to supply ethical guidance to accentuate the positive side of the ledger for this notion, which lies at the intersection of political thought and religious devotion.

The Catholic Challenge

Although not commonly called upon to do so, Catholic resources, and especially Catholic social teaching, may help us assess the possibilities and limitations of American exceptionalism. Our popes and bishops have for over a century produced a rich fund of authoritative church teaching documents treating many ethical aspects of social order, including principles governing political and economic justice, both within national communities and between nations in the world community.

One frequent observation is that Catholic theology supplies what strictly secular social theories cannot provide: a satisfyingly deep grounding for our moral judgments in metaphysical principles and notions of human nature—indeed, a commitment to an entire cosmology that undergirds the moral order of the visible world. One of the premier moral foundations of church social teachings is the affirmation of the solemn and equal dignity of every human person, regardless of nationality or citizenship sta-

> A nation that aspires to be that 'city on a hill' must always be mindful of the 'city under that hill.'

tus. In Catholic theology, we are all equally precious in the eyes of God; no one deserves more or less consideration by virtue of belonging to any particular national community. The conceptual challenges to American exceptionalism are obvious from the very start.

A related central feature of Catholic social teaching is a marked universalism in our rightful collective social concerns. While post-Enlightenment secular thought assuredly features themes redolent of a certain inclusive benevolence, Catholic theology displays a much deeper and fully articulated commitment to universal love, even a cosmopolitan spirit, along with an insistence on working out how the principles of universal social concern can be brought to bear on international relations.

Brothers and Sisters All

These themes are developed with considerable specificity in the pages of Pope Francis' encyclical "Fratelli Tutti," or "Brothers and Sisters All," a visionary 2020 document that addresses global solidarity, conflict resolution and social reconciliation. Francis builds here and elsewhere upon the groundbreaking encyclicals of two of his predecessors in the previous century.

First, John XXIII published "Pacem in Terris" ("Peace on Earth") in 1963 with an appealing portrayal of proper order in the family of nations, a constellation that constitutes a genuine worldwide community. Second, Paul VI issued a challenging encyclical in 1967, "Populorum Progressio" ("The Progress of Peoples"), that insists on an integral human development that leaves nobody out. In these documents, nations are understood as moral agents, charged with pursuing the common good within their borders and obligated to contribute to a universal common good in the worldwide community, so as to fulfill the duties of good global citizens.

The vision of mutuality and universality of social concern that emerges from these three encyclicals (and many other papal writings besides) provides valuable moral context for recommending and shaping a certain style of American engagement with the world. A proper stance of any great power toward other peoples is one that emphasizes the constructive aspects of exceptionalism, namely the desire to be of service to all, to enact a benevolent universalist ethic, without the potentially destructive aspects mentioned above.

In line with the Catholic commitment to enacting a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, a nation that aspires to be that "city on a hill" must always be mindful of the "city under that hill," refusing to relegate other peoples to the role of unwitting victims of its rise to prominence and power—those who find themselves stepped over or trod upon in the course of America's own ascendance. An America that aspires to play a constructive role on the world stage must embody the virtues of humility and self-restraint, resisting the constant temptation to subjugate others and to control the terms of global exchanges for its unilateral advantage.

Murray, Niebuhr, Maritain

Are these appeals to moral principles blatantly naïve? Can we reasonably expect a world power to expend its resources and efforts to benefit others? While it is not hard to anticipate such objections to this portrayal of proper social order and America's place in the world, it is also possible to muster further theological resources that allow us to incorporate such demurrals in a constructive way.

One of the great architects of 20th-century American public theology is Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant often considered the father of Christian realism. Even with his decidedly Augustinian pessimism in advising against altruism and moral perfectionism (especially in the form of naïve pacifism) as an appropriate guiding principle for American policies, Niebuhr never descended into rank cynicism or abandoned hope that nations could indeed act on moral principles in shaping their internal affairs and their foreign policies. While scarcity and security concerns always constrain nations and their choices, making power rather than good intentions the primary coin of the realm in the rough-and-tumble world of diplomacy, morality remained of permanent relevance for Niebuhr, even as he advised settling for approximations of justice rather than insisting upon full achievements of ethics in public affairs.

On the Catholic side, the writings of John Courtney Murray, S.J., reflect a similar impatience with dewy-eyed idealists but also a similar high regard for affirming the perduring role of principles in foreign policy. Even when the characteristically Catholic emphasis on the common good falls decidedly out of fashion, Murray resists falling into a cynicism that abandons the quest for morally principled approaches to the conduct of foreign policy, such as prioritizing humanitarian assistance and restraint against the wanton use of force abroad.

If Murray and Niebuhr can, in their faith-based prescriptions for U.S. foreign policy, insist on moral standards for the conduct of foreign policy and international relations, then so can we today steer a course in which the service-oriented aspect of American exceptionalism overrides the self-serving and domineering side. While respecting pluralism and the consciences of all, there indeed remains room for the pursuit of the full range of Christian virtues in the conduct of American policy abroad.

Jacques Maritain, a contemporary of Niebuhr and Murray, sheds further light on this topic. His 1958 book *Reflections on America* was his love letter to the country that offered him refuge from the tumult that enveloped his homeland of France. Without ever using the phrase "American exceptionalism," Maritain endorses the proposition that the United States represents the future hope and promise of civilization. He also frames his observations in terms of the "Old World inheritance" and the feudal order of rigid class structures and sharp social stratification that the United States is fortunate to have avoided.

In this observation, Maritain joins the ranks of other commentators for whom a central feature of American exceptionalism is precisely what America enjoys immunity *from*—including the appeal of both socialism or authoritarianism, captured in the phrase "It can't happen here." That phrase, by the way, supplied the title of a dystopian 1935 novel by Sinclair Lewis that cast considerable doubt on America's immunity from the gravitational pull of aspiring authoritarian dictators, and this just happens to be a topic receiving renewed attention at the present historical moment.

Maritain's highly positive assessment of America's role in the world was greatly influenced by his witnessing the constructive role played by the ambitious Marshall Plan, by which the United States contributed to the rebuilding of his beloved Europe after the devastation of World War II. If he had written *Reflections on America* even five years later, he would surely have included some reference to the explosion of programs inaugurated by the Kennedy administration for extending American leadership around the world and reaching out a hand of assistance, in the forms of the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress in Latin America and many other partnerships.

The Present Context

I also cannot help but imagine Maritain's astonishment if he were to witness the events of the past few months, as a U.S. administration inexplicably embraced an "America First" (or even "America Only") attitude and pulled back from so many laudable international commitments. These include, most egregiously, dismantling the U.S. Agency for International Development and a wide range of vital humanitarian assistance and foreign aid programs, threatening the entire notion of global leadership and service that has been a hallmark of the best versions of American exceptionalism.

On that latter score, I for one am not prepared to concede that the American people as a whole have somehow suddenly lost their sense of solidarity and concern for our global neighbors and are now callously indifferent to pressing human needs, no matter what certain government officials say or do. And if we are somehow experiencing a moral decline in this regard, I would be the first to challenge the claim that such a trend will be permanent or inevitable. There is nothing American about ignoring the needs of suffering people around the world—needs that we could easily address, and indeed have been addressing in admirable ways for many years.

The United States can still achieve great and noble things, precisely by invoking American exceptionalism, rightly understood. It can continue to promote democracy and human rights throughout the world, with a sense of service to all of humanity, resisting the selfish isolationism that rears its ugly head from time to time. But America can do so effectively only if it pursues these legitimate aspirations with such virtues as humility, restraint and self-control, harnessing the felicitous synthesis of altruism and realism that shaped the most commendable face of American exceptionalism, as a beacon of hope to all of humanity.

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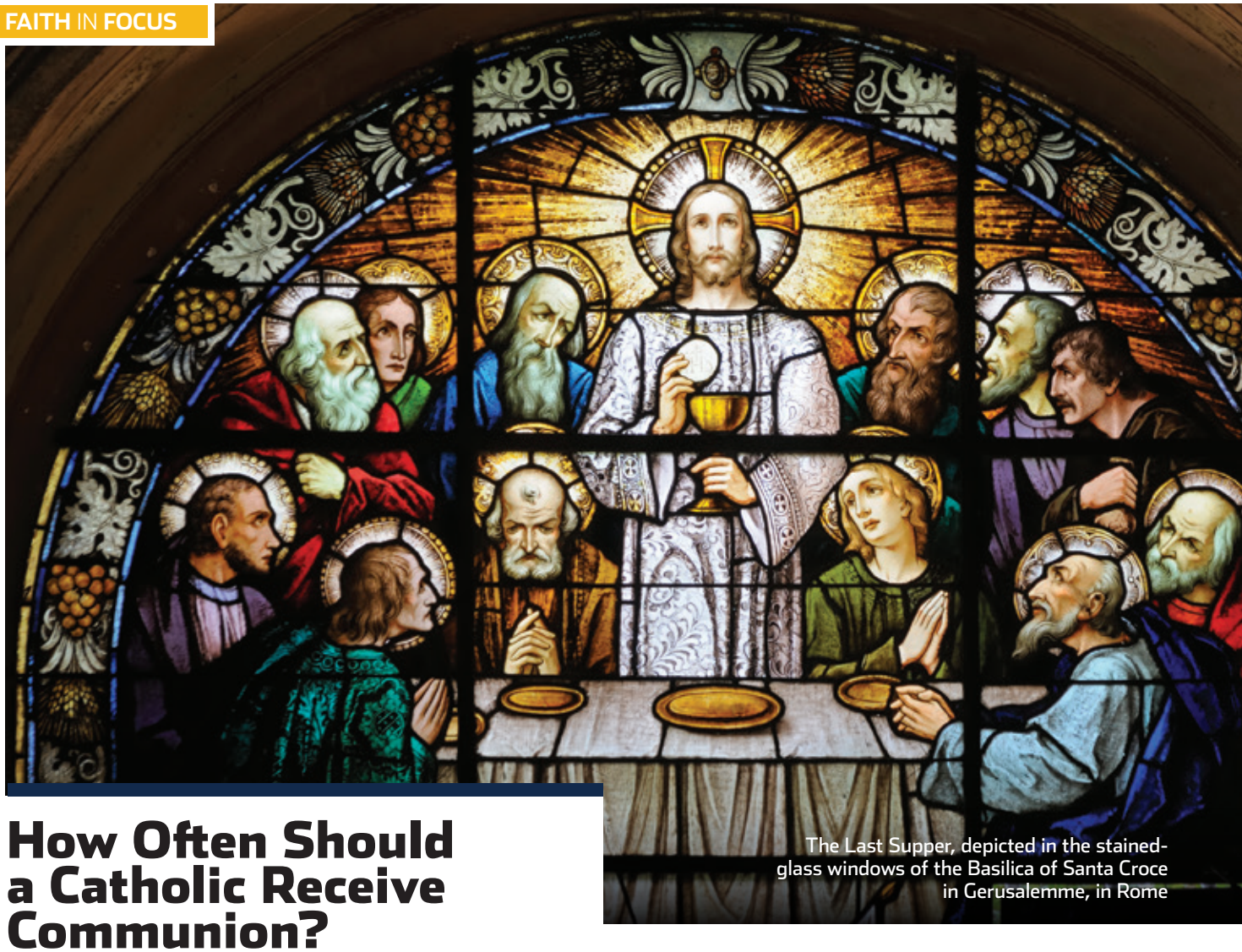

The Last Supper, depicted in the stained-glass windows of the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, in Rome

How Often Should a Catholic Receive Communion?

The answer depends on what century it is

By John Rziha

One Holy Saturday sometime in the 10th century, a married couple dressed in sackcloth and covered themselves in ashes. They went to their parish priest, barefoot and weeping, begging to be able to receive holy Communion with the rest of the parish on Easter. The priest, although appalled by their audacity, given their sins, accepted their repentance and gave them absolution. However, he did not grant them permission to receive Communion. The couple was completely distraught and rushed to a nearby parish in hopes of receiving a different verdict from the neighboring priest.

What horrible action could this married couple have done that kept them from receiving Communion, and why were they so unhappy at being unable to receive on Easter Sunday? Let us first take a look back at some church history.

In the centuries before this couple's plea, Catholics had been receiving Communion less and less often. By the 10th century it was customary to receive only once a year, at Easter (even many members of religious communities received only three times a year). Furthermore, to ensure worthy reception, laypeople were required to fast and abstain from sex for a lengthy period of time before receiving. In this era, preparation to receive holy Communion began on Ash Wednesday, when people confessed their sins and did penance by fasting, wearing penitential garb and abstaining from sex. On Holy Thursday, they were reconciled with the church, but they still had to continue their practice of fasting and abstaining to receive the Eucharist on Easter.

This brings us back to the married couple, whose story was recorded in the monastic chronicle written by Ekkehard IV of St. Gall. They had successfully fasted and abstained all the way up until Holy Saturday, when, overcome by temptation, they had sexual intercourse. They knew the harsh penalty for breaking their Lenten obligation, but they also knew that if they missed receiving the Eucharist


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on Easter, they would likely have to wait until next year to receive. Hence, they tried in vain to convince the priest at the neighboring parish to give them permission to receive Communion; but they were again denied. Filled with sorrow, they returned to their home parish and went to Mass on Easter but did not present themselves for Communion.

Then, according to the story, the priest from the neighboring parish appeared and gave them Communion. The tale finishes by noting that the priest from the neighboring parish never left his parish, leaving the reader to assume it was instead an angel who gave them holy Communion.

Although this story reflects local customs around a particular Swiss monastery, its description of the preparation and reception of the Eucharist correspond with other records from this time, which confirm that the Catholics of medieval Europe received Communion rarely and only after extreme acts of penance.

In the first four centuries after Christ, Christians would normally receive Communion every time they went to Mass. St. Augustine comments on this practice in his letter to Januarius, written around the year 400. He notes that whereas some partake daily, others receive only once or twice a week.

Augustine reports, however, that many are beginning to oppose this practice of frequent Communion out of fear that people are receiving unworthily. He responds by recalling the Gospel stories of Zaccheus and the centurion. Both were sinners, and, while Zaccheus welcomed the Lord into his home because of his love, the centurion did not feel that he was worthy for the Lord to visit his home because of his fear. Augustine argues that both of these biblical figures venerate the Lord. Likewise, both those who abstain from Communion out of fear of the Lord, and those who receive it out of love, venerate the Lord. Augustine gives an enduring theological justification for not receiving the Eucharist: veneration of the Lord out of fear.

This growing opposition to frequent reception of Communion was a reaction to monumental changes taking place in the church. In the year 380, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, resulting in the conversion of millions, who became lax and poorly educated Christians. Devout Christians were skeptical of the devotion of these new converts and questioned whether they should be receiving the Eucharist. Furthermore, many of these new converts had believed in powerful gods who punished those who were unfaithful to them. Even after conversion, they continued to view the Christian God as a powerful judge who rewarded the good and punished the bad. Hence, to use the terminology of Augustine, because of their fear of God, ordinary Christians venerated the Lord by not receiving him in Communion.

The penitential requirements became so strict that it was nearly impossible to receive more than once or twice a year.

Within a century, few Catholics beyond the priests received Communion frequently. In the year 506 a synod in Gaul had to require laypeople to go to Communion at least three times a year. But as the centuries passed, the penitential requirements for receiving Communion became so strict that even if someone wanted to, it was nearly impossible to receive more than once or twice a year, as illustrated by the story of the couple who failed to abstain before Easter.

Eventually, reception became so uncommon among the laity that the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 decreed that all the faithful must communicate at least once a year during the Easter season. Failure to receive (unless given permission by the pastor) would result in the ultimate penalty of denial of a Christian burial. This practice of rarely receiving the Eucharist would continue among most of the laity until at least the 18th century.

The Eucharist was still a key part of the spirituality of the laity at this time. Great emphasis was placed on observing the consecrated host when it was elevated during the Mass, and spiritual communion became common. Eucharistic processions on the feasts of Palm Sunday and Corpus Christi often involved the entire community. Finally, because Communion was rarely received, when it was received, the laity received it with great appreciation, and the entire community came together in celebration.

Nonetheless, great theologians like Thomas Aquinas (1224-74) argued that this practice of rarely receiving Communion came from a misunderstanding of the Mass and the Incarnation. He believed that frequent reception of the Eucharist was as essential for spiritual health as corpo-

> This practice of rarely receiving Communion came from a misunderstanding of the Mass and the Incarnation.

ral food was for physical health. If the faithful eat every day, those who are properly disposed should also communicate every day. In response to Augustine's statement that both those who receive out of love and those who do not receive out of fear venerate the Lord, Aquinas replies, "Love and hope are preferable to fear."

A 16th-Century Renewal

Despite these extraordinary statements by Aquinas, a more concerted call for frequent reception was not raised until the 16th century. St. Ignatius Loyola and the Spanish mystics especially contributed to this renewal. St. Ignatius encouraged all Catholics to go to confession and receive Communion at least once a month and preferably every Sunday. In his letter to Sister Theresia Rejadella, he informs her that as long as she is not conscious of mortal sin, and is inflamed with love for her Lord, and is filled with sustenance, peace and tranquility upon reception, then she should receive the Eucharist every day, just as they did in the early church.

Following the practice of their founder, the Jesuits then started confraternities and sodalities throughout the world that encouraged the laity to venerate the Eucharist and receive weekly. More than anyone else, the Jesuits prepared the church for the current practice of frequent reception of Communion.

At about the same time, the Spanish mystics, such as Teresa of Ávila (1515-82) and John of the Cross (1542-91), focused on the idea of Christ as the bridegroom of their souls. They further recognized that their mystical marriage to Christ was renewed each time they received the Eucharist. Their understanding of the reception of Communion as a spiritual marriage was then popularized in some of the Eucharistic plays performed on the feast of Corpus Christi. These plays made deep theological truths about the Eucharist accessible to the common people.

On the feast of Corpus Christi during the early 17th century, thousands of people lined the streets as the consecrated host was carried to the local cathedral. Following the procession, a cart with an elaborate stage was rolled in front of the cathedral and one of the Eucharistic dramas, like "The Phoenix of Love," by Jose de Valdivielso, was performed. This "romantic comedy" about the love story between Christ and a character called Soul drew upon popular themes in Spanish theater to educate the laity.

Throughout the play, Christ, as a valiant suitor, constantly professes his deep yearning to make Soul his wife. At one point Christ proclaims, "I am such a suitor that I draw near to Soul concealed, dressed with the red of flesh and the white of bread." However, the audience is filled with alarm when a rival suitor, Lucifer, attempts to lure Soul away from Christ. A few minutes later, cheers erupt as Christ, the victorious lover, takes Soul to the wedding ceremony of the Eucharist, and Soul cries out, "Let me eat, sacred Spouse, so that I may see you more clearly." The play is meant to inspire the faithful to then enter the church and worthily receive their lover, Christ, in the Eucharist.

The beautiful message of Christ yearning for the faithful to receive him in holy Communion, coupled with encouragement from theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius and the Spanish mystics, should have gradually led to the practice of frequent reception throughout the church. Unfortunately, within a century or so, the Eucharistic plays were rejected as an inferior form of theater as an art form, and the ultra-rigorist religious movement of Jansenism swept across Europe. Frequent reception of Communion by the laity was once again discouraged, and only after a great deal of work by Jesuits and other members of the clergy did frequent reception become more common during the 19th century.

Finally, in 1905, Vincenzo Cardinal Vannutelli issued a decree approved by Pius X, called "Sacrosancta Tridentina"; it discussed the frequent and daily reception of holy Communion. It was specifically written because of the confusion among both laity and clergy within the church regarding reception of the Eucharist. It urges all within the church who are in a state of grace and have proper intentions to come "frequently and with great zeal to this devout and salutary practice."

Today, Catholics are blessed to be able to receive Christ, the bridegroom, daily in the Eucharist and venerate Christ out of love, which is "preferable to fear." And reminiscing on the 1,300 bleak years of infrequent Communion should show us how truly blessed we are.

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DIGITAL VESPERS

By Bianca Blanche

In blue-lit rooms we bow our heads,
Not to pray, but to scroll through feeds
Of endless information streams—
Where once were rosaries, now screens
Mark time in electronic beads.

Each notification's gentle ping
Echoes like a distant chapel bell,
While algorithms track our paths
Like ancient monks who kept their math
In books where sacred stories dwell.

Our fingers trace these glass-faced shrines,
Seeking wisdom in the glow
Of pixels formed in perfect rows—
Each message sent, a modern prose
To fill the spaces that we know.

Between the bytes and bandwidth broad,
Where are the whispers of the divine?
Can grace traverse through fiber-optic
Lines that span our world chaotic,
Threading souls through space and time?

Perhaps in every shared prayer tweet,
Each virtual candle that we light,
In every post that speaks of hope,
We forge new ways for faith to cope
With distance in the digital night.

The ancient saints could never dream
Of congregations spread so far,
Yet joined in ways they cannot see—
A vast electronic mystery
That bridges where and who we are.

Still, something calls us to return
To tactile beads and printed page,
To find the balance as we walk
Between the ways our fathers talked
With God, and this new pixeled age.

Let us remember as we swipe
Through countless screens of fleeting light:
The truest connection still resides
In hearts where living faith abides,
Beyond the reach of megabytes.

Bianca Blanche *is a Catholic social justice advocate and former director of parish social ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago.*

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Everything Old Is New Again

Rekindling my faith in the 'fourth quarter' of life

By Maribeth Boelts

The carpet was threadbare, the pews worn, in this cavernous Catholic church. Yellow tape blocked off an area of seating where the ceiling plaster had given way. My husband and I were attending a funeral, and it was there that we felt a still, persistent sense of a message from God to us. Let me back up.

My parents were devoted Catholics, raising six rowdy kids and scraping up enough to send us all to Catholic school through 12th grade. As a child, I loved God, but I had swirling questions about him too, questions that were not always welcome. In first grade, I asked Sister Julia, "If Jesus were all-powerful, why didn't he come down off the cross and save himself?" Instead of an answer, I received a shaming directive. She told me to go stand in the coat closet and hold my arms out from my side for as long as I could, so I might experience just a taste of what Jesus did for me.

My frustration grew throughout my Catholic education and morphed into a teenage chip on my shoulder, particularly when it came to the prescribed experiences of parochial education. The mission trip where the longtime leader yelled at our group because we hadn't responded as emotionally as his prior groups of teens. The T.E.C. weekends, during which I listened with skepticism to classmates pouring out publicly how they were going to change their ways and become better Catholics.

But at 16, I felt my heart soften a bit when I performed in the musical "Godspell." I sang a solo, "By My Side." This song follows a scene in which Marigold, who represents a woman condemned to be stoned, is saved by Jesus, who tells her: "You may go. Do not sin again."

Marigold, taking Jesus's words to heart, pleads to follow him, singing: "Where are you going? Where are you going? Can you take me with you? For my hand is cold, and needs warmth. Where are you going?"

On opening night, I sang these words and felt hot tears spring up, out of a well of longing for a real relationship with Jesus, one where I could follow him, unencumbered by what I, as a teenager, saw as all the rule-based religious rituals being taught.

Sister Liz, a beautiful, softhearted nun, watched the performance and reached out to me after it, with an invitation to talk. She asked what the words meant to me, and why I became teary. Then she listened, and gently affirmed that what I experienced was real, coming from an encounter with the divine. The years have not lessened the impact of her caring or her words to me.

Taking Another Path

When I graduated from high school, I married my Presbyterian boyfriend and shut the door on Catholicism. For three years, we visited churches of every denomination and landed, with a toddler in tow, at a welcoming, friendly Protestant church. We found the teaching accessible, the

music outstanding, and the children's education program engaging and fun for our young son. Soon we were volunteering, making friends and becoming fully enmeshed with the mantra we so often heard—a Christian life was about "life together."

For 35 years, we served, led ministries and thoroughly enjoyed attending this church. As a young mother, I bought a Bible and learned how to study it. I discovered that prayer could be a conversation rather than a recitation, and I marveled at others who could spontaneously pray aloud. I raised my arms in praise during a moving worship song, and I could also laugh in wonder at moments when God's timing and movement were unmistakable. My faith grew like a spring flower; and in a church that was young, expanding and full of energy, we raised our family.

But in 2019, my beloved husband died of brain cancer, and suddenly, the youth and energy, the big smiles and warm hugs, and the overall positivity of this church felt discordant with my grief and new widowhood. It was my gutting sadness that could not find a home within the culture of this church, and a pervasive sense of unease descended when I tried to attend. One of the contemporary worship songs we sang at this time repeated the lyrics: "You're never gonna let, you're never gonna let me down." I wanted to scream when we sang that song, because of course we will feel let down by God. God is mystery. His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor his ways. And things like brain tumors that refuse to respond to treatment or prayers howled in the dark without answer can be experienced as God letting us down.

Our Next Steps

Time passed. Covid-19 took root. Our friendly church began to change. The leadership structure of our church became divided over a refusal to allow full inclusion of L.G.B.T.Q. people. I slipped away quietly and permanently, and turned more fully to a few of my favorite writers, who just happened to be Catholic—James Martin, S.J., Richard Rohr, O.F.M., Joyce Rupp, O.S.M. While their good words kept my soul afloat, I was deeply pained not to be a part of a thriving church community anymore.

Then I met a wonderful man who had been raised in a Catholic home very similar to my own. We fell in love and married, bringing our collective grief to the table but also our hopes and dreams for a happy and meaningful "fourth quarter" together. This would include finding a shared faith.

And that was the message from God at the funeral at that aforementioned cavernous church with the threadbare carpet. It was there that we both felt the entwining roots of our spiritual DNA, the ties to our departed parents, our relatives and our Catholic heritage, going back centuries. We both envisioned our parents attending daily Mass while we were growing up. We pictured them lighting candles, asking saints to intercede, praying the rosary. I watched people receive the Eucharist, and tears streamed as if I was seeing it for the first time. And as in childhood, the questions bubbled: Could God be doing a new thing, after all these years? Could I see Catholicism with more openheartedness and curiosity than I had in my youth? Could embracing my Catholic faith be the way forward at this stage of life and in a new marriage?

Could God be doing a new thing, after all these years?

With wonderment, we began to attend Mass regularly, with the attitude that if we were going to explore this, we were going to be all in. I joined a weekly Bible study, asking so many questions of the faith-filled women I now call my dear friends. I learned the rosary, and in the final days of my mother's life, I said it with her repeatedly. It brought us both great comfort. I took part in confession—with my Bible study women graciously showing me the ropes after my 45-year absence. In addition, my husband went through a lengthy annulment process with our brilliant and trusted parish priest, and we had a convalidation ceremony, where we said, "I do," not only to each other but also to the solid ground of a shared, rekindled faith.

Perhaps it is the hard-won wisdom that comes with age, but the very rituals and practices I once scorned and believed were hindering my relationship with Jesus are the same rituals and practices that now usher me into his presence, time and time again. The solemnity, the sacrament, the history and its people—all speak to me now, perhaps in what has been all along my mother tongue, and that of my husband.

The solo that I sang at 16, with its pleading question of Jesus, "Where are you going?" can be assuredly answered with, "He's been here all along." How can we then keep from singing?

Maribeth Boelts *is the author of 40 books for children, including the award-winning book* Those Shoes, *with Candlewick Press. She and her husband, Rob, live in Iowa.*

To Act With Love and Confidence

The INES program at Loyola School brings Jesuit values to middle school girls

By Grace Copps

Loyola School

In the New York metropolitan area, there are six Jesuit high schools, and four of them enroll only boys. In the spirit of being "men for others," an oft-repeated phrase at Jesuit high schools, many of these schools run programs for underprivileged middle school boys to level the playing field. For example, the Reach program at Regis High School offers academic classes, high school application assistance and leadership development to boys in sixth, seventh and eighth grades throughout the summer and academic year.

"What's the common theme in that? It's that it's preparing young boys, right? And you're like, well, there's another half of the population...who would also benefit from something like this," said Jacques Joseph, founder of the Institute for Nurture, Enrichment, and Self-Empowerment (INES) program at Loyola School.

Launched in 2019, the INES program (the acronym honors Inés Pascual, an early benefactor of the Society of Jesus) is similar to Reach in that it offers middle school girls (here, seventh and eighth graders) academic and personal enrichment.

"It's important to amplify women's voices in Jesuit education, and so that's why the program, I think, philosophically exists," Dr. Joseph continued. "There were so many programs like this for men that were Jesuit-based, and we just felt that we need something exclusively for women."

Participants come to the Loyola campus on weekdays in August and on Tuesday afternoons and Saturday mornings throughout the academic year to take classes in math, English, Latin and history, and to prepare for high school admissions tests.

The girls also participate in mentoring classes, where they discuss topics like time management, mental health and their goals for the future. Loyola teachers and current students serve as teacher's assistants in the academic classes and as mentors who lead the mentoring sessions. The program extends over three summers and two academic years.

In a program with *self-empowerment* in the name, making girls feel confident and capable in the classroom is paramount—especially in STEM courses. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's annual report on the federal workforce for the fiscal year 2019 found that women comprised 29.3 percent of STEM federal workers, with the lowest number of women (6,469) working in math-related jobs. "There were significantly fewer women in Technology and Engineering than expected," the E.E.O.C. reported. The National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics also reported in 2019 that women held 34 percent of STEM jobs throughout the U.S. workforce but 52 percent of non-STEM jobs.

"When you don't get the kind of attention and validation that you need from your educator, you can start to believe that you are just not good at something," said Caroline Adams, a math teacher for INES and an alumna of Loyola School. "And when you think that you're not good at something, it makes you feel bad when you're trying to do it, so that adds a block to getting better at it."

Not About Being 'Perfect'

It is this core spirit of empowering girls to grow as scholars and in their self-worth that drives the operation of the INES program. "Something I've tried to emphasize to my students is that this program is about growth and it's not about being perfect," Ms. Adams said, citing how her Jesuit education at Loyola impressed upon her the virtue of being "open to growth."

To incorporate this spirit in her classroom, Ms. Adams allows her students to submit test corrections and extra credit assignments, giving them "as many chances as they need to succeed." "I want these opportunities to be something that allows you to let go of some of that self-judgment that you have around grades and perfectionism and allows you to really put your energy into growth. Because INES is a safe space for that," Ms. Adams said. To help her students connect with math, she frequently incorporates pop

Jacques Joseph, center, with students and faculty from the Institute for Nurture, Enrichment, and Self-Empowerment (INES) program at Loyola School in New York

culture figures like the singer Chappell Roan, and current events like the feud between the rappers Drake and Kendrick Lamar, into word problems.

Andrea McDermott, who oversees the mentoring program, said: "I think the most important thing for me was, one, to provide positive role models for the girls who are just a little bit older than them and see a diverse group of people who have different interests and talents and strengths, who are all great in their individual way, showing them that it's 'OK to be you.' And there's no one way to be successful or a leader."

On what she thinks have been the successes of the INES program so far, Ms. McDermott cited her individual discussions with girls about how it has benefited them as they go through the high school application process. "A lot of them will talk about how INES has made it so that they felt confident to apply to this thing, or audition for a specialized school in dance or music or something like that, just because they know that they can do it," Ms. McDermott said.

With the INES program still in its relative infancy, what are its leaders' goals for the future? "We have some stats about outcomes, but it's really hard to get buy-in and funding if you don't have those outcome stats for something that's new," Ms. McDermott said. "And I think the other piece is just really figuring out—and this is something [Dr.] Joseph is working on—how we can support the girls after the INES program and really give them some extra help from when they're in high school through the college process."

Dr. Joseph also said he wants to grow the program. INES currently accepts about 15 or 16 students per grade level, but he "would like, eventually, to get 25 to 30."

Ultimately, Dr. Joseph's goal for the program is that participants are "able to act with love...to be self-aware, you know, being confident of who they are, and being able to be of service for others," he said.

"I think ethical leadership, Jesuit leadership is what we need, and we need to form more students.... Everyone should have access to that."

Grace Copps *is an intern at* ***America*** *and a graduate of Loyola School in New York, where she served as a mentor and teacher's assistant in the INES program.*

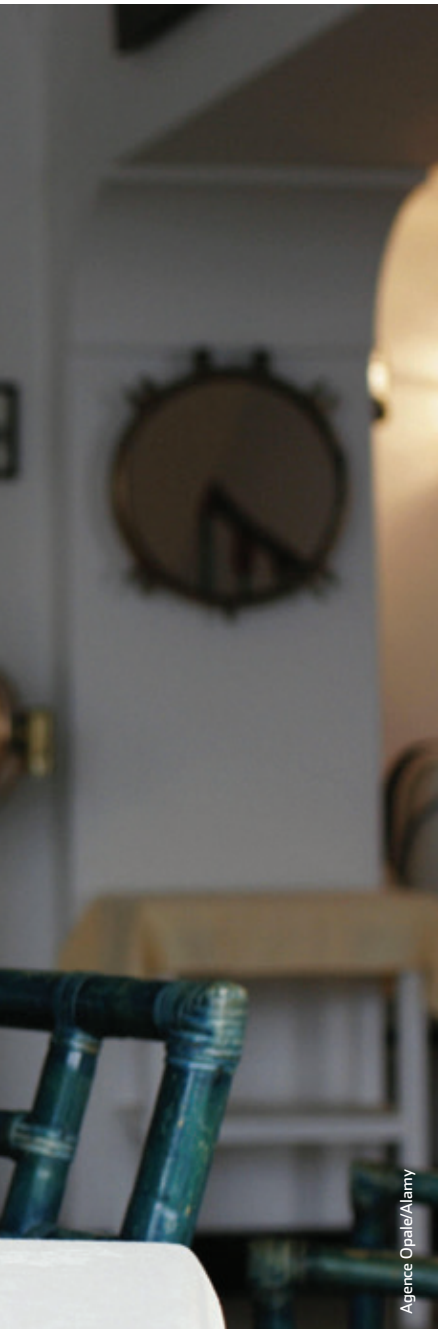
David Foster Wallace, A.I. and the future of the humanities

By Michael O'Connell

In the late spring of 2005, David Foster Wallace addressed the graduating class of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Twenty years later, his talk remains one of the most widely shared and admired graduation speeches of all time, and the book version of the speech, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life*, remains a staple of graduation displays at bookstores. But the speech is not simply something to pair with Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* in the gift bag for the neighbor's kid. It contains the kind of wisdom that benefits from close analysis and repeated reading.

Wallace urges the graduates to resist solipsism and to push beyond their "hard-wired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered." But the speech is also a defense of the value of a liberal arts education. Since we are in the midst of an ongoing crisis in the liberal arts—characterized by both the declining number of liberal arts majors and the shuttering of small liberal arts colleges—alongside the new challenges that the pervasive use of artificial intelligence poses to higher education, I have found myself returning to Wallace's work to try to make sense of our current moment.

David Foster Wallace is perhaps best known as the


Agence Opale/Alamy

Twenty years ago, David Foster Wallace delivered one of the most widely shared and admired graduation speeches of all time.

author of the encyclopedic novel *Infinite Jest*, a postmodern classic that deals with addiction, recovery, community, consumerism, tennis, entertainment, technology, the environment and politics (among other things). It is famously long and complex, and includes almost 100 pages of footnotes, but it is also very funny and surprisingly accessible; it appeared on Time's 100 best novels of all time. But *Infinite Jest* is not Wallace's only influential work. The novel he was working on when he died, *The Pale King*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and his essay collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* was chosen by Slate as one of the 50 best nonfiction books of the past 25 years.

The Limits of Irony

Throughout his work, Wallace continually explores the limits of irony, the dangers of technology and what he called the "emotional poverty" of contemporary America. He told one interviewer: "In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies C.P.R. to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness." In this particularly dark time, I find myself turning back to Wallace's work, looking for these signs of light.

And these moments are not hard to find in "This Is Water." One of Wallace's main claims about a liberal arts education is that "the really significant education in thinking that we're supposed to get in a place like [Kenyon] isn't really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about." He goes on to say:

> I submit that this is what the real, no bullshit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about: How to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out.

I spent a decade as a college humanities professor, and I taught this speech many, many times, mostly to adult learners—people with kids and full-time jobs, who went back to college to finish their degrees. This line always resonated with them. They did not need to be convinced that adult life can grind us down, that we slip into unthinking routines, and that this can be incredibly isolating. When Wallace describes the experience of needing to go shopping for food after a long day at the office, and the all-too-common frustrations of having to deal with the overly crowded aisles, the inefficient shoppers, the slow check-out lanes and how incredibly exasperating this all can be, my students would knowingly laugh and nod.

Attention, Awareness, Discipline

Wallace claims, though, that these types of moments are an opportunity to exercise the kind of choice he has been talking about: "The crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm gonna be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop." For my students, Wallace's claim that we can choose a different way to be was always really moving:

> If you've really learned how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars: compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things.

The fundamental hope on offer here—that our experience of reality can shift based solely on how we direct our attention—always hit home for my students, and it continues to resonate with me today.

Wallace claims, "The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline," and he believed these three skills are things that can be taught in liberal arts classrooms. Knowing how to classify a par-

Throughout his work, Wallace explores the limits of what he called the 'emotional poverty' of contemporary America.

ticular piece of art, or which general led which particular military action, or how to scan a poem, may not matter all that much in the long term. But the kind of discipline and attention it takes to learn and master the facts and skills required in any given subject will have lasting significance in a person's life.

Liberal arts faculty members are always being encouraged to sell their students on how employers are looking for these skills, but Wallace is not talking about employability or marketability; he's talking about quality of life:

> The real value of a real education...has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water."

From testimonials by his students, and the teaching materials available in the Ransom Center at the University of Texas and online, it is clear he did care about instilling these virtues in his students. By all reports, he was not an easy or lenient teacher; in one syllabus he stated the average grade in his intro class was between a B and B-. He was known to give his students weekly handouts with common—and not so common—grammar errors culled from previously submitted assignments. All of his syllabi make it clear that he was rigorous and demanding, and wanted his students to take the time to put in the work—to employ careful attention and discipline to each assignment.

And it sounds like it worked. As one creative writing student at Pomona noted:

> Every week he returned our stories with tomes of comments, meticulously organized and footnoted.... At first I thought these letters spoke to an obsession with perfection. Later, I began to see that they only reflected the depth of Dave's heart. To each story he gave the energy that he gave his own writing. His attention stemmed from the profound respect he held for his students.

It is clear that Wallace sincerely believed attention, awareness and discipline matter, and could be the difference between misery and seeing the world charged with the grandeur of God.

The Risks of A.I.

So how does artificial intelligence play into any of this? While it is widely acknowledged that higher education is in trouble, there are plenty of people who claim that A.I. is going to revitalize and save it. In The Chronicle of Higher Education, Scott Latham, a professor of strategy at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, gives us a picture of the A.I. university of the future, which he frames as a kind of educational utopia:

> Picture this: Students will no longer sign up for courses; they will work with their A.I. agents to build personalized instruction. A student who requires a biology course as part of their major won't take the standard three-credit course with a lecture and lab that meets for 14 weeks with the same professor. Instead, the student will ask their A.I. agent to construct a course that transcends the classroom, campus and time.

This, to me, sounds hellish and isolating—one definitive step toward what Wallace condemned as being "uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out." Latham claims that "human interaction is not as important to today's students," which might be true (although claiming it and proving it are not the same), but even if it is an accurate claim, students—just like the rest of us—are often bad at determining what actually matters. In any event, Latham's vision for the A.I. university seems to have very little to do with countering solipsism or fostering attention, discipline and awareness.

The risks involved with this kind of interaction are already evident; students who use A.I. to "help" write papers have no knowledge of the material they are supposedly writing about, and they are not developing any of the skills related to thinking or self-expression that are the true purpose of writing college-level essays. Every composition teacher I know is overwhelmed by the challenges posed by A.I. (and they are not alone); most are redesigning their assignments to include more in-class writing, and many are rethinking their entire pedagogical approach.

Wallace was very aware of what technology could do

to us, and the threats inherent in any new medium. The central governing metaphor of *Infinite Jest* is a video that is so compelling people literally cannot stop watching it. He knows that people cannot control themselves through the force of their own will, and he was particularly aware of the allure and addictive nature of TV. In our own time the internet fills this same role. Perhaps soon, that same alluring and addictive force will be whatever sort of A.I. content gets specifically designed for us, to entertain us endlessly, to show us what we want to see and tell us what we want to hear.

Wallace explores these themes throughout his fiction, and the opening scene of *Infinite Jest* is one particularly striking example. In this scene (which is, somewhat confusingly, the last chronological moment in the book) one of the novel's protagonists, the tennis-playing prodigy Hal, is at a college admissions interview, but something has happened to him, and although he is still able to think coherently, he cannot communicate with anyone. His attempts to write down his thoughts end up looking like "some sort of infant's random stabs on a keyboard," and when he tries to speak, he is described as making "subanimalistic noises and sounds."

One of the people he's trying to talk to says, "I believe I've seen a vision of hell." In this moment, Hal is trapped inside his body, a consciousness that cannot express itself. And part of the magic of the book is that although no one can understand what he is saying, we can read what he is thinking—the book allows us a sort of magical portal into his consciousness.

The scene actually enacts one of the themes of "This Is Water": By taking the time to read, to slow down and pay attention, we are able to form a sort of connection that bridges the isolation and division that is brought about by technology and addictive behavior.

Who Is Dennis Gabor?

Interestingly enough, there is one seemingly incongruous line in the midst of this opening interior monologue in *Infinite Jest* that speaks even more directly to the dangers posed by A.I. Hal claims, "I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist." The other people Hal mentions in this part of his monologue are well known figures—Kierkegaard, Camus, Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel—but Gabor is hardly a household name. It is worth asking why he is mentioned so prominently at the start of the novel. Gabor is best known as the inventor of the hologram, a technology that creates an impressive surface with no real substance or depth. If he is the Antichrist, in Hal's fashioning, it would seem to be because he created something that allows us to mistake surface for substance—a technology that tricks us into thinking that an exterior implies an interior.

Infinite Jest pointed toward many of the nightmares that we are currently in the midst of, and this seemingly tossed-off comment about the creator of one kind of technology that we don't think much about is another example of Wallace intuiting some of our current problems before they arrived. Because, in an uncanny connection, Gabor's work inspired the work of another scientist, Norbert Wiener, who worked in cybernetics and self-reproducing machines. And Norbert Wiener is considered one of the fathers of artificial intelligence.

These days the world feels broken—in many ways is broken—so perhaps asking a machine to do our thinking for us seems reasonable. If we are not thinking for ourselves, we will not be as aware of all that is going wrong. But letting something else think for us also seems a surefire way to leave us in the state Wallace warns the Kenyon graduates about: "dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting." If we surrender our thinking to our machines, we run the very real risk of ending up like Hal—with thoughts we cannot express, unable to connect with others. All of us, "uniquely, completely, imperially alone."

Revisiting Wallace's "This Is Water" address serves as a reminder that in order to avoid this fate, we need to reject the allure of the machines that would make it even easier for us to embrace the illusion that we are at the center of our little worlds. Instead, we should seek to cultivate our attention and awareness and discipline. We ought to look for ways to forge connections with others. And we need to continually take the time to remind ourselves of what is real and around us all the time, even if we don't usually notice it: "This is water."

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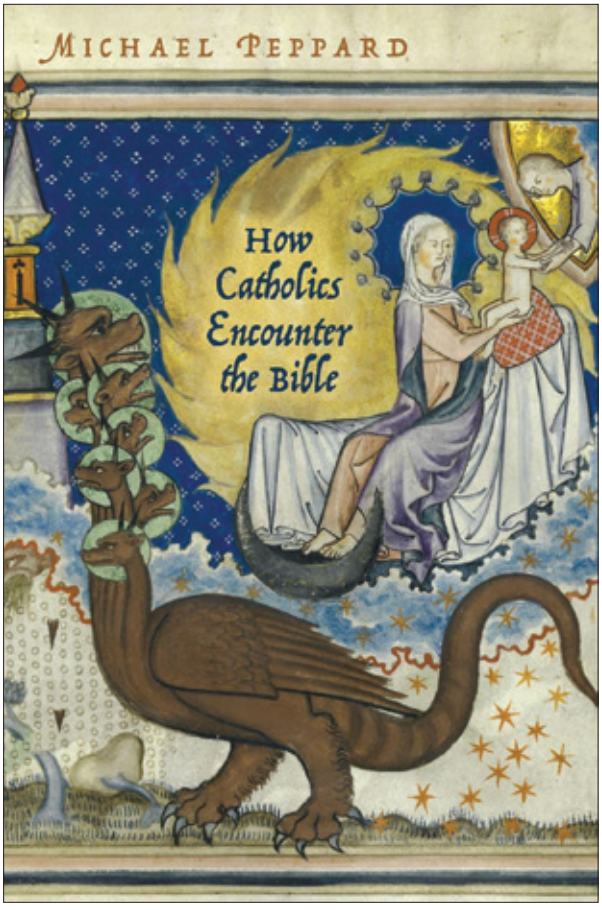
BETWEEN THE LINES



Oxford University Press / 328p $35

Michael Peppard begins his new book, *How Catholics Encounter the Bible,* with something other than a passage from sacred Scripture. He offers instead an image of Michelangelo's "Pietà," the world-famous sculpture housed in St. Peter's Basilica that depicts a grieving Mary cradling her dead son. So cherished is this great artwork that few Catholics would fail to recognize the story of incarnate love and maternal suffering that it evokes. Of course, as Peppard points out, this scene never appears in the Bible itself. Instead, it represents an imaginative interpretation "between the lines of the text" that has nevertheless had an outsized influence on the way that Catholics understand the biblical narrative of Christ's death.

Peppard uses this example to illustrate his main idea: Although Roman Catholics have a rich sense of the biblical story, they do not actually *read* the Bible all that much. Instead, Catholics "encounter" the Bible in other ways through worship, prayer, art, song and literature. This represents a uniquely Catholic way of internalizing and living out the sacred Word.

Peppard structures the book to capture this distinction. He first outlines the function of Scripture in Catholic worship and prayer (Chapters 1 to 4) as the primary domain of Catholic biblical encounter. Then, readers travel through diverse examples of Catholic art from the earliest Christian sarcophagi all the way to the biblically infused music of Bruce Springsteen (Chapters 5 to 7). Only then does Peppard turn to the subject of Catholic biblical study and scholarly interpretation, both of which he sees as subordinate influences on the broader biblical sensibility of Catholics.

Even within this final chapter, one is hard-pressed to find modern exegetical treatments of specific biblical passages, though Peppard himself is an erudite New Testament scholar. That is, what modern biblical scholars have to say about the Annunciation scene, for example, in the Gospel of Luke is far less important to most Catholics than the rosary, medieval liturgical dramas or the tradition of *Las Posadas* in Latin America.

Peppard analyzes an impressive array of material throughout. For good reason, he focuses on the Roman lectionary as the place of "by far the most frequent Catholic encounter with the Bible." And a detailed introduction to the lectionary reveals things that a weekly Catholic worshiper may not notice. Much of Peppard's analysis focuses on the Old Testament reading, which functions primarily to supplement the Gospel reading at Mass. Over the course of the lectionary's three-year Sunday cycle, "enormous and influential portions" of the Old Testament are never heard by Catholics. The cycle of readings emphasizes the primacy of the Gospel but also deprives Mass-goers of important stories about Jacob, Joseph and even King David.

Peppard exposes the cost of such omissions by pointing, for instance, to the relative absence of biblical women in the lectionary. Catholics never hear the books of Ruth or Esther read aloud, nor can they be inspired by the fearless faith of Shiphrah and Puah, Hebrew midwives who defy Pharaoh's order to kill all infant boys of Israel (Ex 1:15-21). The midwives' courage results in God's favor and ultimately the birth of a nation through the liberating events of the Exodus, but no one proclaims their story at Mass. On Sundays, we never hear of New Testament women Prisca, Lydia or Phoebe (Rom 16:1-5, Acts 16).

Peppard's constructive and yet critical treatment of the lectionary demonstrates how Catholics receive a "canon within a canon" at Mass. He highlights the losses incurred while also acknowledging the practical constraints of the lectionary form and the Christological heart of what Catholics do hear on Sundays. It is an arresting section of the book, and one that ironically leads me to my leather-bound copy of the Bible to read about the women whose names I

never hear in church.

Of course, while the lectionary may provide the primary biblical encounter for most Catholics, it is far from the only one. Peppard's ensuing trek through diverse examples of prayer, devotion and art moves more quickly, with less critical analysis and more celebratory depictions of Catholic biblical imagination. The rosary is biblical! The Angelus is biblical! Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is biblical! As a cradle Catholic who grew up praying the rosary with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe by my bedside, these sections resonated with my childhood faith, a faith by which I identified with such devotions precisely over and against the Bible. Peppard overturns this kind of ingrained assumption, showing the biblical heart of these devotions while also detailing how they add new shapes and colors to the literal words of Scripture.

Many of the most engaging passages of the book occur in the chapters devoted to Catholic biblical art in its many forms. Standout sections include reflections on early sarcophagi that emphasize biblical miracles, Marian iconography in Late Antiquity and the medieval era, and the biblical genius of Dante's "Divine Comedy." Peppard plumbs the biblical depths of Flannery O'Connor's short stories and Bruce Springsteen's songs, showing how such works belong in the same book as the fourth-century Junius Bassus sarcophagus and Fra Angelico's 15th-century fresco titled "Annunciation." Peppard's disarming prose, interlaced with personal anecdotes and humorous asides, makes this an exciting voyage. His clear enthusiasm for the depth and beauty of Catholic biblical imagination is infectious.

It is easy to raise questions about an author's choice of material in a work of biblical reception. Why is Tolkien's hugely influential *Lord of the Rings* left out, while the Netflix drama "Daredevil" takes center stage for several pages? Peppard includes some examples from the global church, including a beautiful section on Latin American base ecclesial communities, but more could be done to move beyond the Western arena of Catholic biblical experience. Contemporary Catholic projects that encourage us back to the text are largely left out; no mention is made of the Word on Fire Bible or the Saint John's Bible, both of which urge Catholics to read Scripture through beauty. Perhaps the most glaring omission is the exploding mediation of the Bible through Catholic apps and social media, which must be probed with the same critical lens that Peppard brings to the lectionary.

Such omissions, however, are inevitable and do not detract from the panoramic value of this work, which is significant and timely. It arrives at a moment when Catholics are encountering the Bible in new ways. One of the

Peppard points to the relative absence of biblical women in the lectionary.

book's most striking moments arrives in the final chapter, where Peppard characterizes Catholic biblical scholarship and magisterial teaching as a "cornerstone" that "hardly anyone looks at." As he writes, "The vast majority of people just walk through the church door, where the Bible is present through proclamation, art, and prayer." This reality only magnifies the care and caution with which Catholics should receive the Bible through the ever-changing media of the technological age.

And, of course, in the spirit of this joyful book, it also reminds us to live in and between Scripture's lines, surrounded by the countless Catholic artists, writers and congregations of the past who continue to imagine with us.

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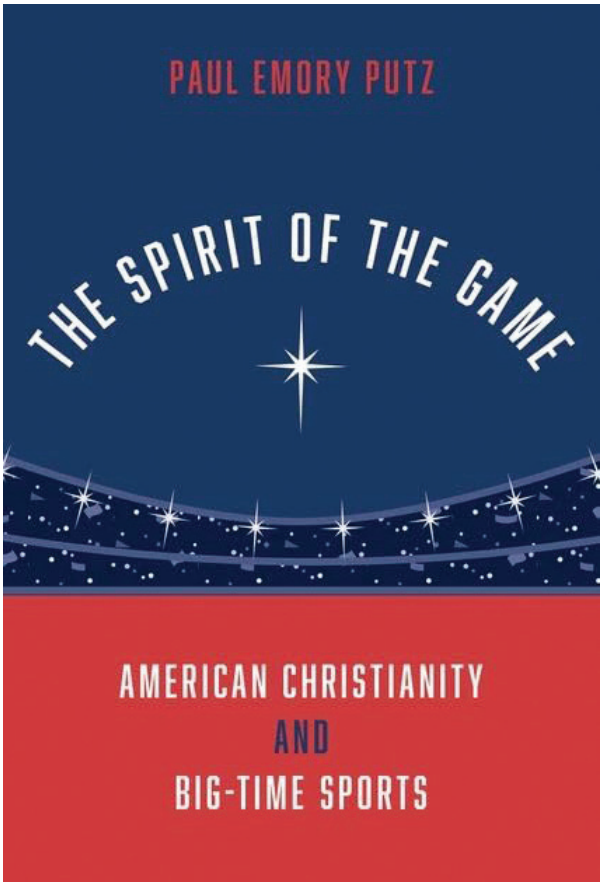
JOCKS FOR JESUS



Oxford University Press / 280p $29

In 1976, Frank Deford of Sports Illustrated coined the term *sportianity* to describe the evangelical Christian organizations rising within professional sports. In a series titled "Religion in Sports," Deford described organizations like Athletes in Action, Baseball Chapel and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which made sports their ministry. Coaches and athletes alike prayed together before and after games, formed Bible studies on their teams, and spoke openly and fervently about their faith.

What Deford called sportianity, Paul Emory Putz calls the "Christian athlete movement" in his excellent new history of the subject. Putz is the assistant director of Truett Seminary's Faith & Sports Institute at Baylor University. In *The Spirit of the Game: American Christianity and Big-Time Sports*, he focuses on the relationship between Protestantism and major American sports but also offers interesting insights into the interactions of Catholic athletes with sportianity.

Much of the existing scholarship on American sports and Christianity walls off the "muscular Christianity" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries from the kind of organizations that Putz covers in his book. Proponents of muscular Christianity sought to curb the "overcivilization" of modern life by linking religion with strenuous play as a means of character-building. Think Teddy Roosevelt, the Y.M.C.A. and the Academy Award-winning 1981 film "Chariots of Fire."

In the standard telling, religion's role in athletic culture receded in the 1920s as sports became mass spectacle. Not so, says Putz. He demonstrates significant continuity between muscular Christianity and the sportianity described by Deford.

Putz shows Protestant athletes during the 1920s confronting a world in which sports became a major commercial venture and finding their place within it. The connective tissue between muscular Christianity and the Christian athlete movement came in a network of laypeople and popular ministers he calls "middlebrow Protestants."

These middlebrows were generally Northerners and belonged to mainline denominations. They developed networks and influence that served as the building blocks for the major Christian sports organizations that emerged in the decades after World War II, particularly the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which was formed in 1954. While groups like the F.C.A., Baseball Chapel and Athletes in Action are strongly associated with evangelical Christianity, their roots lay in mainline Protestantism.

"Middlebrow" is not a put-down in Putz's parlance. He means simply that these were not intellectuals like many previous Northern mainline Protestant leaders. Branch Rickey, general manager of the St. Louis Cardinals and Brooklyn Dodgers, exemplified this middlebrow sensibility in the decades after World War I. Rickey, a pious Midwestern Methodist, spoke openly of Jesus and his desire to live the ideals of Christ but accommodated Sunday baseball. He believed sports, when informed by faith, played a role in character development and social progress, as exemplified by his signing of Jackie Robinson, which led to the desegregation of Major League Baseball.

Rather than being a challenge to the church's supremacy, major sports proved an avenue through which Christian athletes could continue to influence American life. The middlebrows and their institutional successors in the F.C.A. cultivated a "big tent Protestantism" uncluttered by doctrinal debate. Putz makes a compelling case that such theological diversity made the Christian athlete movement a uniquely contested space where people with many shared values could engage in a thoughtful give-and-take about issues of social concern, particularly civil rights. African American athletes played a prominent role in the Christian athlete movement beginning in the 1960s. Many Black athletes used the movement as a means to express their views on social issues related to race.

A particularly noteworthy finding is the degree to which the Christian athlete movement pushed some formerly mainline Protestants in a more evangelical direction. This tendency became particularly pronounced in the 1960s, when evangelicals gained significant influence in these organizations.

The Christian athlete movement's ecumenism included outreach to Catholics as early as the 1930s. For decades, such efforts were largely rebuffed. Catholics had cultivated their own athletic institutions, including the Catholic Youth Organization and top-notch interscholastic athletic programs at the secondary and college level. Catholic athletic institutions served many of the same ends as muscular Christianity. They cultivated classical virtues, demonstrated Catholic assimilation to American culture and served as a source of communal pride.

The Rev. Donald Cleary, a Catholic chaplain at Cornell during the 1950s, was one of the few Catholic figures to give the emerging Christian athlete movement a shot. But after attending a national meeting, Cleary expressed discomfort with the F.C.A., viewing it as too explicitly Protestant in orientation. He was offered the group's vice presidency but turned it down.

Professional football offers another interesting example of the interactions of American Catholics with the Christian athlete movement. Putz finds that professional football was slower going than the college game in embracing sportianity. The N.F.L. was centered in the Northeast for many decades. They played their games on Sundays, which was unacceptable to Sabbatarians. Moreover, many of the league's foundational figures, including George Halas, Art Rooney and Tim Mara, were Catholics.

It wasn't until the 1950s that sportianity gained influence in the N.F.L., as star players like Otto Graham and Dan Towler joined the F.C.A. Both men were Methodists and approached their faith with ecumenical, decidedly middlebrow sensibilities. But during the 1960s, the pro football players associated with the F.C.A. moved in a decidedly more evangelical direction. Protestant-oriented Bible studies and Protestant services before games became commonplace on N.F.L. teams (just as pre-game Mass had been for decades).

Some Catholics found space within the F.C.A. fold, most notably Roger Staubach. The Dallas Cowboys quarterback made it clear that he did not consider himself an evangelical, but he embraced the organization's socially conservative messaging and spoke of his support for traditional values.

In recent decades, the most significant interaction of traditionally Catholic groups with the Christian athlete movement seems to be in professional baseball. Baseball Chapel, formed in 1973, developed a significant following among Latino players. Putz notes that several prominent Latino players who grew up in Catholic homes became evangelical Protestants and joined Baseball Chapel, including Albert Pujols, Mariano Rivera and Carlos Beltran.

Putz also gives significant attention to the role of women in the Christian athlete movement dating to the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, organizations like the F.C.A. had more female members than male, but women constituted little of the group's leadership. He finds that sports ministries encouraged Christian female athletes to make their voices heard yet simultaneously advocated embracing traditional social structures.

Putz's groundbreaking book focuses almost exclusively on football, basketball and baseball. Exploration of sportianity in professional and major college hockey in the United States would have added an interesting dynamic to the study, particularly as it relates to the intersection of Catholics with the movement.

In 1967 the National Hockey League started expanding beyond its traditional haunts in the northern United States and Canada. Professional hockey became a genuinely continental phenomenon during the 1970s, as the N.H.L. and the rival World Hockey Association brought the sport to such non-hotbeds as Atlanta, Houston and San Diego. At roughly the same time, college hockey in the United States became a major pipeline to the N.H.L. for the first time.

Considering the demographics of professional and college hockey, it would be interesting to see what inroads the Christian athlete movement made in these spaces. Professional hockey almost certainly skewed more Catholic than professional football or basketball. Fully a third of the players in N.H.L. history hailed from predominantly Catholic Quebec or the equally Catholic Francophone regions of eastern Ontario. The areas in the United States that have produced the most professional and major college players (the northeastern United States and Great Lakes region) are also disproportionately Catholic. Moreover, many in the N.H.L.'s pool of international players hail from either predominantly Catholic or Orthodox countries in central and eastern Europe.

Until the recent explosion of Latino players in professional baseball (from a little more than 11 percent in 1980 to more than 30 percent in 2022), the percentage of cradle Catholics in professional hockey was certainly higher than in big league baseball.

Regardless of such omissions, with *The Spirit of the Game*, Putz has accomplished a fine work of both institutional and cultural history. He shows the simultaneous power and "precarity," as he describes it, of Christians in major sports. There is no area of popular culture where more participants openly express their religious views than big time sports. At the same time, Christian professional athletes compete within explicitly secular institutions. While there are Christian book publishers, record labels and film companies, there are no professional Christian sports leagues.

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Grove Atlantic / 288p $27

Jamie Quatro's first novel, *Fire Sermon,* and her first collection of short stories, *I Want to Show You More*, both dealt with desire, especially the connection between the sacred and sexual, between fidelity and belief. Her second novel, *Two-Step Devil*, considers the destruction of the world, of a country and of individual lives. I found *Two-Step Devil* to be the strongest of her books, with a more interesting plot and characters who have rich backstories and frustratingly human tendencies.

Others seem to agree. Published this past fall, *Two-Step Devil* was the winner of the 2024 Willie Morris Award for Southern Writing. It was also named a New York Times Editors' Choice, a 2025 ALA Notable Book and a Best Book of 2024 by The Paris Review and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Quatro has received quite a bit of acclaim, from both secular audiences and publications explicitly motivated by religious faith, like Image and Commonweal. She has been the recipient of fellowships from MacDowell, Yaddo and Bread Loaf and teaches in the Sewanee School of Letters M.F.A. program.

After *Fire Sermon* was published, Anthony Domestico commented in Commonweal that "Quatro is a true cartographer of desire, showing that the longings of the body and the soul aren't two autonomous states but constitute a singularly vast and singularly wild territory. Her fiction is sexy, it's theological, and it's consistently and surprisingly both at the same time."

In an interview with The Paris Review about a triptych of short stories, Quatro said, "You know, I keep thinking I'm going to write something new, something I've never written before. And I keep coming back to God and sex." This is true of *Fire Sermon* and *Two-Step Devil*, though the way she comes at these themes in each novel differs.

The main character in *Two-Step Devil* is the Prophet (also known as Winston or Watchman), who lives in Lookout Mountain, Tenn., and believes he has been given a message from God to deliver to the president of the United States. He is a recluse in ill health, has been a widow for many years and is estranged from his son, Zeke. He is also an artist, recording his visions from God. At times, it seems he feels he is blessed to receive these visions; at other times, it seems more accurate to say he feels plagued by them.

The Prophet keeps his eyes peeled for what he calls the Big Fish—the one God will send him who can help him deliver his message. This turns out to be Michael, a female teenage victim of sex trafficking, whom the Prophet believes he needs to save by taking her away from her "managers."

Quatro begins the first section of the book with an epigraph taken from Czesław Miłosz's "A Song on the End of the World":

> *Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet*
> *Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,*
> *Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:*
> *There will be no other end of the world,*
> *There will be no other end of the world.*

This is an apt description of Quatro's prophet—his physical description, his attitude, his vegetable garden and, most importantly, his obsession with the end of the world.

The novel's prologue introduces readers to the character and his beliefs more fully, as well as to the Two-Step Devil who lurks throughout the book, haunting the Prophet. He's a cowboy devil who wears a bolo tie and boots and is a natural performer. His background presence lends an urgency to the Prophet's choices. Two-Step is slick and sinister, constantly chiming in as a voice in the Prophet's ear. As a result, it is not always clear if the Prophet is talking to a real person or to himself.

The first section after the prologue, "Prophecy," has yet another epigraph, this time from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Starlight Night." It is in this section that readers learn more about the visions that the Prophet has had. It is

also where we meet Michael (named for the archangel, although she's a girl). She is almost 15, likely the same age the Virgin Mary was when Gabriel visited her. Ironically, Michael's "manager" is named King. This is who the Prophet must rescue Michael from when he concludes she is the "Big Fish" who can help him.

One might note that Quatro is examining the (somewhat) current moment in America and religion's role in it, though the story appears to take place pre-2016. "Jesus said to watch for the signs of the End like you'd watch a fig tree coming into bloom. You're one of the signs, Michael," the Prophet tells her.

At one point, the Prophet's son, Zeke, visiting from Nashville, says to his father: "You're free to think about it that way. I'm free to think about it my way. That's the great thing about living in America." With characters and conversations like these, Quatro seems to press down on the freedoms on which America was founded to discover how they hold up against other forms of belief and autonomy.

The Prophet is deeply concerned about America's future. "Time, times, and half a time, America about to witness the wages of what it had done. His own time running short, too," he thinks. As his own health is failing, he asks Michael to help him write a message like the ones he has read from prophets in the Old Testament: "The Word of the Lord that came to Watchman of Lookout Mountain in the days of Clinton, Bush, and Obama which he saw concerning [...] America and the whole planet Earth." He believes two wars are coming: The first will resemble other small wars and the second will involve the entire world. He paraphrases Scripture: "The Lord your God will fight for you. You only gotta be still."

While the first section is narrated in the third person, the next section, "Song of Songs," is told in the first person from Michael's point of view. Quatro confessed in a podcast interview with Yale's Center for Faith and Culture that giving Michael a first-person section was inspired by William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury.* Faulkner said he tried to write Caddy's story four times and failed; Quatro thinks he felt that way because he never told the story from Caddy's perspective.

Readers learn, through snippets of memory about Michael's upbringing, what led her to work for King and about her current "problem." As she tries to sort all of it out, she wonders, "Maybe God has different rules for different people, like there are different rules for different states."

Michael remembers that at one point King told her: "No preacher ever fixed any of the world's problems. Jesus and Gandhi and Martin Luther King spoke from within the system and got themselves killed. A real king ignores the system. A real king goes behind the system and works to undermine it." King also tempts her, like the devil in the desert with Jesus in Scripture, and says she "will get everything other people struggle for years to achieve [...] you can have everything." It doesn't seem like Michael believes this—at least not any more—but she is just trying to have *something*, anything in which she can believe. Yet people also keep needing and taking things from *her.*

Again, in the Paris Review interview, Quatro explains, "Many of my characters abandon their Christian faith entirely, or actively preach heresy—especially in my forthcoming novel, in which the Devil puts on a play re-visioning the Gospel narrative with himself as the rightful Christ figure." She also says, "I've wrestled with my faith, of course—in fact, I would say wrestling is the mark of a viable religious practice—but I've never abandoned it." Now, as an Episcopalian, she says, "I come to worship and feel like I'm eating organic whole foods after years of processed meals."

The part of *Two-Step Devil* she refers to above comes after Michael's narration, in the section "Gospel." It is a compelling dramatic struggle between the Prophet and the Two-Step Devil, written as scenes from a play. The final section, "Revelation," comes after this struggle and is prefaced by the voice of the Two-Step Devil himself, saying, "You fleshsacks want to look away. You must bear witness." This section shows us the world is "stuffed with trouble" and presents several endings for the Prophet and Michael—none of which are satisfying.

Part of me felt that this kind of ending was a bit cowardly on Quatro's part. She did the same thing in *Fire Sermon*, where the lives of the characters were left broadly open-ended, and readers could choose their own adventure. I felt that there should be an honest ending with closure—good or bad—for these characters.

Perhaps, though, Quatro is up to something else in this case. The story closes on questions: *Who is really in charge? Who do I believe could* do *something?* The Prophet is obsessed with getting his message to the U.S. president, but what could the president do? Who can do anything about any of the destruction witnessed in the book—the Prophet's disease, the abuse Michael has suffered?

Quatro's *Two-Step Devil* instead presents a fractured, uncertain ending, and readers are left with a sense of despair. What do we do with this, with the state of the world? It seems to suggest it really is up to us to choose, to do something—which is perhaps a way of defeating the devil, of letting God's work be done in and through us.

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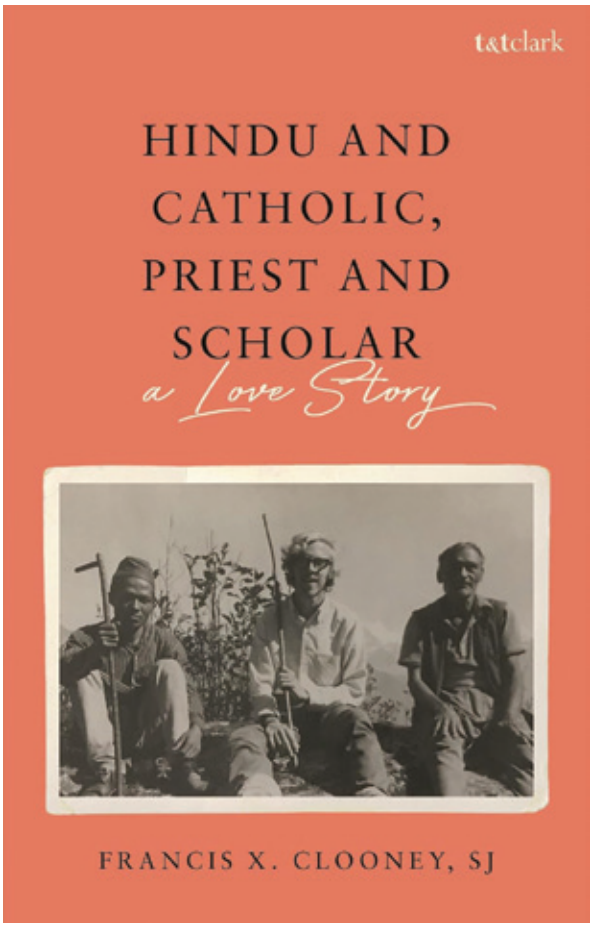
A SPIRITUAL INVITATION



T&T Clark / 208p $25

It was 1995, and I had just arrived at St. John's University in New York, fresh from a summer spent at a Hindu monastery. I was on a spiritual quest—a journey sparked, in part, by post-traumatic symptoms I had only just begun to name. Perhaps they were gifts in disguise, born from growing up under a totalitarian regime in Poland and later arriving here as an undocumented immigrant.

The first two classes I took were on Christian mysticism and Hindu mysticism. I was seeking a bridge between the holy peace I had touched at the monastery and the path of Jesus—the one I was tentatively returning to, though I didn't yet know it. My English was functional: I could read well, but I was shy to speak, afraid people wouldn't understand me. My voice felt small. So I spent long stretches in the library each day, broken only by chapel prayers. I lingered in the Hindu-Christian section, drawn to an encounter with the sacred as glimpsed through a tradition not my own—one that invited silence and a meeting of hearts.

It was there, in the footnotes, that I first encountered his name: Francis X. Clooney, S.J. Who is this Jesuit, I wondered, who ventured so deeply into the heart of another tradition?

Now, reading *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story* all these years later, I find myself returned to that season of longing and discovery. Clooney is widely known as a careful, contemplative scholar of Hindu-Christian dialogue—someone who reads sacred texts slowly, with reverence and nuance, seeking not just understanding but encounter. But in this book, the subject is not a tradition or a text. It is him—his choices, his longings, his search for God. Clooney's book echoes Dorothy Day's sense that writing a memoir is like going to confession: It only works if you're honest. In telling that story, he invites us to reflect on our own.

His life-defining experience came on a hot Brooklyn night in 1966. He was 15, sleepless, alone in his childhood bedroom. "I felt a very strong presence, a physical nearness I knew to be God...entering into me, piercing me, taking hold of me deep inside. It was an intrusion, a kind of awakening...no words, no visions, just being touched, taken over inside, all in a moment." That moment became the foundation for everything: "From that moment on...I could from now on be only for God."

Reading the memoir, I was reminded again and again how important it is to pay attention to the sacred moments in our lives. They are not just memories. They are directives. The first step is learning to listen. The second, harder step is learning to trust them. That is what Clooney did. And what unfolds is a life shaped by fidelity to that early whisper. It is not a heroic tale. It is not about conquest or arrival. It is about staying close to what called him in the first place.

That moment didn't just lead him to the Jesuits; it changed how he lived the life that followed. When Jesuit spirituality, including the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, felt too busy, too structured, he adjusted. "I developed my own way of appropriating this spirituality," he writes, balancing the rigor of Jesuit practice with Ignatius' spirit of experimentation. Like Ignatius, he trusted that "if at any point I find what I am seeking, there I will repose."

That kind of listening—patient, discerning—became a pattern. After returning from teaching in Kathmandu, the theology he studied in the West no longer felt sufficient. Something had shifted. "I still wanted to be a Jesuit priest," he writes. "But I wanted, needed, to do this in my own way. My two years in Nepal made this need all the more acute. I wanted to be a Jesuit deeply changed by Hindu learning."

Confusion followed. And again, God came. One morning, standing on the rocks by the ocean, bathed in the rising sun, he felt it: a warmth, a presence, a quiet reassurance. "You are in the right place. Stay where you are. Do not panic or run. All will be well." After that, the ground settled beneath him.

Eventually, when he dove deeply into Hindu texts and languages, he didn't study from a distance. He let the tradition touch him. He studied. He prayed. He listened. He entered into Hinduism through mentorship and immersion, approaching it from within in ways still uncommon among Western practitioners.

His comparative theology wasn't driven by novelty but by fidelity—the slow work of letting two traditions speak to him, even confront him, without reducing either. What emerged was a way of being in which encounter doesn't mean erasure, and fidelity to one's tradition doesn't require ignorance of another.

"My comparative theology is my response to a problem," he writes. That problem is the question of "how to hold two traditions together, when they are being so lovingly learned, without demeaning my own tradition or the newly encountered?" If God is "impossibly nearby, so close as to touch us," then theology itself must reflect that intimacy—"interreligiously alive and unstable," revealing the process in motion.

In the end, he describes his work as a grand "act of holding-together"—a way of making sense of who he is and what he has learned, holding in tension what must remain alive in relationship.

For those of us who feel spiritually restless or religiously homeless, who have inherited one tradition but been shaped by several, this book is not just a memoir; it is a map and a mirror. Clooney doesn't try to blend religions into a spiritual smoothie. He doesn't reduce them to easy equivalence. Instead, he shows what it looks like to enter a tradition on its own terms, and to allow that encounter to deepen your own.

This is also a book about how we read. In a world shaped by endless distraction, Clooney reminds us that true reading—the kind that transforms—is slow, reverent and contemplative. Whether engaging the Bhagavad Gita, the Gospels or other holy texts, he reads as one being read in return. The text becomes a space of encounter, not a source of easy insight but of formation. This kind of reading is not efficient. But it is powerful. And it is needed, desperately.

Finally, this book is marked by an honest reckoning with the choices we make—and don't. Every "yes" means a hundred quiet "nos." Clooney doesn't dramatize this, but he doesn't hide it either. He shares that he once dreamed of doing theology while living among the poor, and that it didn't happen. He recalls seeing a girl crying on the subway—he had the chance to say something, to offer comfort—and didn't. That was decades ago. Yet she remains in his memory, in his prayers.

He acknowledges that the decision to choose celibacy and religious life also meant giving up another kind of intimacy, another form of love and family. These are not presented as regrets in the self-pitying sense but as part of what it means to live an examined life, one in which you recognize the shape your life has taken and grieve, just a little, the shapes it could not take.

Clooney reminds us that true reading—the kind that transforms—is slow, reverent and contemplative.

Still, he is clear that the path he chose was the right one—for him—perhaps because it was aligned with that early whisper, the sacred touch that called him to be "only for God" in this specific way: Hindu, Catholic, priest and scholar. That fidelity has been the thread running through it all. And yet the fullness of his account lies not in the resolution of every tension but in his willingness to hold them gently.

Why read this book? Because it reminds us what a life can look like when it flows from a single sacred interruption. Clooney doesn't offer conclusions. He offers presence. He offers the possibility that your own life, too, might be read as a story of grace.

In the end, this isn't just a memoir. It's an invitation.

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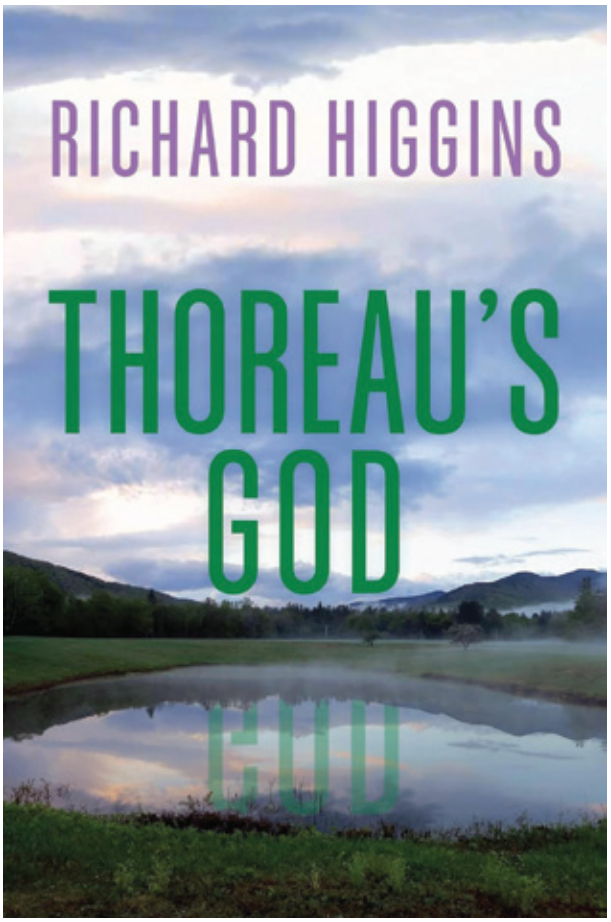
WITH GOD IN WALDEN



University of Chicago Press / 224p $20

Henry David Thoreau is the original American antihero, famous for resisting industrial capitalism and elite society to sojourn in the woods. His disdain for organized religion and love of nature have inspired generations of seekers who want to understand themselves and the world outside of the four walls of a church. But he also had a deep and abiding faith in God as his creator.

In his new book, *Thoreau's God*, Richard Higgins shows us that while Thoreau disdained organized religion and Christianity, he was a "deeply religious person without a religion." It is a fascinating journey through Thoreau's extensive work, looking at the ways the philosopher thought about the divine and the human relation to the divine.

This is a book of theology, not spirituality. It does not try to offer guidance for the reader on how to live one's life, just guidance on how to interpret how Thoreau lived his. I appreciated this and enjoyed the author's writing style, which is tightly woven around quotations. At the same time, Higgins's own devout Unitarianism (he is a member of the church Thoreau rejected, First Parish Concord) clearly undergirds his writing, in a way that feels appropriate for a book about a man who is perhaps the closest to a saint Unitarians get—even if he didn't always like their version of institutional religion very much.

I felt that I could not adequately review a book about Thoreau if I read it entirely in my apartment. So I left my phone in my room and set out for the train without looking at a timetable. It was a lovely experience to see a squirrel jump from one branch to another, to see a chipmunk eating its lunch without realizing I was observing it, and to see ants that were undoubtedly warring with other ants just as the ones Thoreau observed in Concord were.

I thought about the plants and animals I saw that were part of the same lineage of New England wildlife observable in the 1840s. I contemplated the dead leaves that would become fertilizer for new life and the mushroom growing from a dying log. I thought about the rocks that were there when Thoreau was across the river studying at Harvard, that were there when all inhabitants of this land were Indigenous people, that were there long before any human ever stepped foot on this continent and that will be there long after we are here.

I would recommend this as a way to read Higgins's book. Thoreau was frustrated by organized religion because he did not think words could adequately express the human relationship with God. It had to be personally experienced, and for Thoreau, that meant through the world God created. We aren't going to live at Walden Pond, but we can have a 21st-century version of radical disconnection. It's good to be truly physically grounded while reading about a man who deeply yearned for the ineffable that he felt could be found only in a temple without walls.

I also discovered a hollow tree stump in which someone had carefully planted flowers. An Alcoholics Anonymous chip had been tied around part of the stump: *Clean and serene for 60 days.* If nature is to be a temple, then this is where people left their offerings.

I liked it, but I'm not sure Thoreau would have. He was frequently disdainful of other people's more material expressions of religion, and he struggled heartily to connect with other people, even those he considered friends.

Higgins also examines Thoreau's melancholy, including his suicidal thoughts. This is a man who was deeply, deeply depressed, in part because of the death of his brother but also because of his difficulties with fitting in with those around him.

While Thoreau rejected his Puritan heritage, he was also deeply rooted in its theology and aesthetic. Higgins shows the immense breadth of biblical allusions Thoreau used, a far more expansive list than those of his less religious contemporaries, like Ralph Waldo Emerson or Emily Dickinson. And like many 19th-century New England transcendentalists, he had an appreciation for a faith tradition that in many ways represented the antithesis of

Puritanism: Catholicism.

As he disliked any sort of organization or materiality, Thoreau would never become Catholic like his friend Isaac Hecker or his teacher Orestes Brownson. But he was shocked to see young rural Canadians kneeling in the cathedral in Montreal, and admitted he could not imagine seeing any young rural men from Massachusetts kneeling in the Concord meeting house. Only Catholics, he mused, still knew how to be reverent.

One of Thoreau's chief complaints with American organized religion was its failing to take a serious stance on the major moral issue of the day: slavery. Even in Massachusetts, one of the most pro-abolition states in the country, many churches were tepid or silent on the subject. While he did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, Thoreau appreciated Jesus' teachings on the poor, and he felt the church had abandoned them.

It is impossible to not see parallels to our own time. But this is not a book that is making an explicit commentary on contemporary issues. When so many politically progressive books feel didactic, it is refreshing to read one that doesn't.

Higgins uses Thoreau's extensive corpus to carefully analyze his religion: He delves into not just *Walden* but also *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and Thoreau's many essays and letters, not all of which have been published. The chapters in *Thoreau's God* focus on different dimensions of Thoreau's spirituality, such as his mystical experiences in nature, his complicated relationship with Jesus and traditional Christian theology, and the way he understood silence and that which cannot be spoken in relation to God.

I found myself thinking about institutional failure while I was consuming *Thoreau's God*. Reading it at the Chestnut Hill Reservoir, I was able to see the campus of the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, where I had taken a class. The Archdiocese of Boston had sold that property to the university years before, in part to pay for all of its sex abuse lawsuit settlements.

I also see shuttered churches every day that closed because they could not convince enough people they were worth attending, which is a different kind of institutional failure. Thoreau's anger, both about lack of moral fortitude and about the pointlessness of religion in general, can be easy to understand.

Even someone deeply committed to a faith community will find something that resonates in this book. Thoreau did not think the issues with institutional religion were fixable, which many people, including his friends who were Unitarian ministers, would disagree with. But in a world where rejecting formal religion but not belief is increasingly prevalent, how better for those who remain in the church to understand this mindset than through their most famous representative?

Thoreau's God is a well-written tome that offers a focused look at one of America's most prominent authors. It offers insight into Thoreau not as a naturalist or a secular ascetic but as someone who believed strongly in God as love. Regardless of one's religious beliefs, this book is worth reading for anyone interested in American religious experience.

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AMERICANS DETAINED WHEN OVERHEARD SPEAKING SPANISH

By Rosa Lía Gilbert

and I wonder out loud,
¿Qué es esto?
Since when did bilingualism become a crime?
My bones tremble in Spanish, *qué miedo*
and I stuff
my double *r's* and my *ñ's* in between
my cheeks.
I hold them hostage.
I'd rather them be detained than I.

Pero

I think of my daughter
and I put my immigrant fears aside.
I spit out my chewed-up Spanish alphabet
onto a plate and feed each letter to her
for breakfast, lunch, dinner.
I tell her,
"*Pruébalas, saborealas, tragatelas,*"
because they say
"you are what you eat,"
and you, *mi niña*
are American and *Dominicana.*

Rosa Lía Gilbert *is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection,* Under the Samán Tree: Poems on Home, Longing, and Belonging. *Her work has been published at Fare Forward, Ekstasis, Clayjar Review and Prosetrics Literary Magazine.*

Call Us Back to an Honest Path

There is such a thing as social sin. When a society values wealth over people or injustice over honesty, the prophetic voices from Scripture cannot remain silent. This month's readings reflect a healthy outrage toward neglect of those most in need and a wakeup call for all people of faith that might be tempted to remain complacent. Powerful words from the poet Amos speak for themselves.

On the last two Sundays in September, we read from the fieriest of prophets in the Old Testament. Amos revealed the hardened heart of the people that says, "We will buy the lowly for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals" (Am 8:6). There are members of the faithful assembly who ask, when does the Sabbath end so that I may take full advantage of the vulnerable as soon as possible? But a decree arrives on the following Sabbath, "Thus says the LORD the God of hosts: Woe to the complacent in Zion! Lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches, they eat lambs taken from the flock, and calves from the stall!" (Am 6:1, 4).

The truth is that anyone can become complacent with injustice, and the shock to our system surfaces when the faithful become conscious of having been taken in by the ruse like everyone else. Are we doomed? Not necessarily. For the readings in September invite a wake-up from the slumber of complacency. They serve as a gift to the comfortable with an introduction to the cross. Discipleship is always a cost, the price is high, but the invitation is made with freedom. On the last Sunday of the month, the words from Paul to Timothy call us back to an honest path, "Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called when you made the noble confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Tm 6:11).

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), SEPT. 7, 2025
Is my effort worth it? Gaining wisdom of heart

EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS (C), SEPT. 14, 2025
An introduction to the cross

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), SEPT. 21, 2025
The concerns of the rich in light of the cry of the poor

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), SEPT. 28, 2025
Lazarus, the poor man, receives dignity

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.*

Resist the Counterpunch

How unchecked desire corrodes politics

By Tom Suozzi

I have been in public service for more than 30 years, serving as mayor, county executive and now in my fifth term in Congress. Unsurprisingly, I've been attacked many times. My instinct is to punch back. That impulse isn't just political—it's human. When anyone gets hit, their natural inclination is to respond, and in Washington these days, that instinct dominates the culture. That is why Jesus' instruction to "love your enemies" is one of his most difficult commands. But if we continue down the path of an "eye for an eye," we will, as Gandhi said, "all end up blind."

The desire to punch back is not the only human desire. St. Thomas Aquinas identifies four desires that drive human behavior: pleasure, wealth, power and honor. These desires are not inherently sinful, but St. Augustine notes that no amount of pleasure, money, influence or praise, when untethered to a higher purpose, will be ultimately satisfying. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord," he wrote in *Confessions*, "and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Early in my career, while clerking for a federal judge, I asked another law clerk, who happened to be a Franciscan priest, about my inclination to run for office. I said, "I don't know whether I'm going into politics because I have a big ego and want applause, or because I enjoy competition and proving I am right and others are wrong, or because I genuinely want to make the world a better place." His advice stays with me today: "Each of these things will motivate you; it's human. But your goal in life should be to aspire to your more noble ambitions."

Pursuing desires can be positive when guided by moral purpose. The more power a leader gains, the more effectively they can govern. But Aquinas teaches that these desires can corrode when left unchecked. The unbridled pursuit of power and honor as ends in themselves will result in a soul-crushing cycle of selfishness and dissatisfaction.

The Founders of the United States understood this danger. They designed the three co-equal branches of government not merely on the assumption of human fallibility, but on the certainty of it. Hence, the separation of powers. James Madison argued that "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." Our system was built not on trust in human virtue, but on knowing its limits.

Many of us fear those checks are not working in America today. We now see an executive branch with historic, insatiable overreach and a Congress too often enabling it. The very desires Aquinas feared would consume the soul now permeate public life.

The answer is certainly not to abandon democracy. Instead, we must refortify the constraints protecting us from overreach, from the endless tumult of unchecked desire for power.

Righting the ship will be difficult. I co-lead the Problem Solvers, a bipartisan group of 50 members of Congress, evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, dedicated to finding common ground. But even here, we struggle to maintain trust in today's divisive culture.

The first step is recognizing that loving your enemies does not mean agreeing with them. It simply means we need to stop holding them in contempt and begin to see them as potential partners, motivated by service and the common good. We must also try to understand what life experiences our colleagues bring with them.

To get to know other members of Congress, I participate in bipartisan prayer breakfasts, workout classes and groups like the Problem Solvers. After a workout one morning, I was shaving next to a Republican member who mentioned his kids were off from school for the first day of deer hunting season. "Deer hunting season?" I said. "Mine get off for Rosh Hashanah." He paused. "Rosh Ha-what?" he asked. We both laughed—and started talking.

Common ground is divine, and finding it takes listening. How can we expect to work together to get things done if so much of our lives are foreign to one another? How are we reasonably expected to resist the counterpunch if we can't even understand?

In politics as in faith, we cannot let our instincts to punch-counterpunch or our desires for power, honor, wealth or pleasure consume us. Our natural inclinations serve us best when they are harnessed and directed toward a higher purpose. We must shine a light amid the din of division and remember that servant leadership must always be faithful to an aspiration for the common good.

Rep. Tom Suozzi, *a Democrat, is serving his fifth term as the representative for New York's Third Congressional District.*

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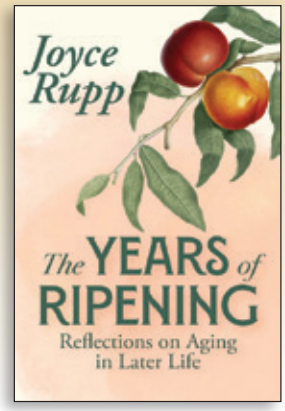

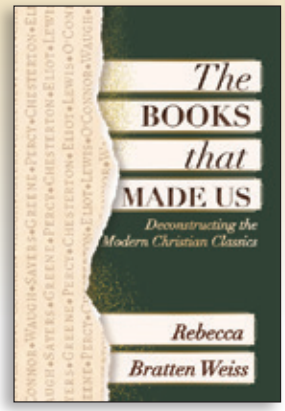

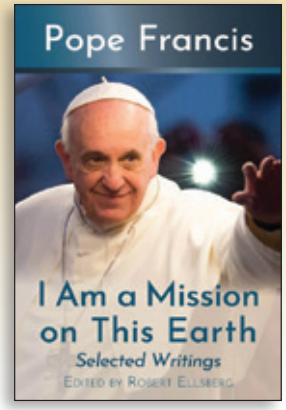

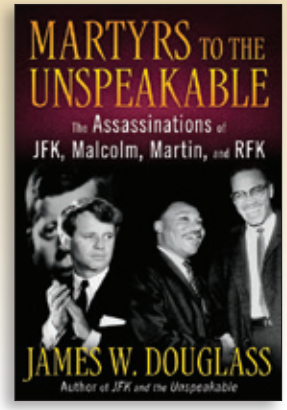

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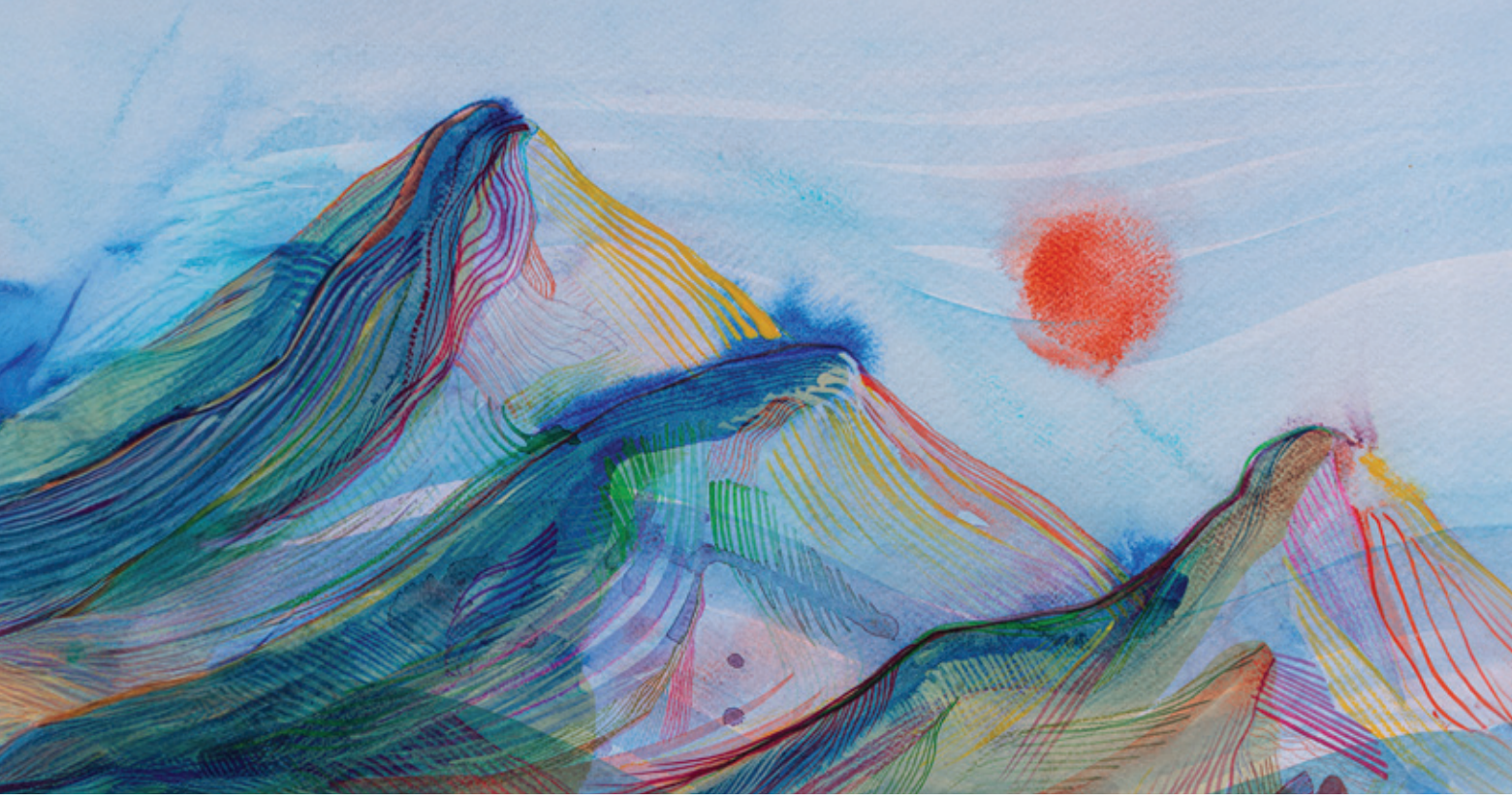

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