America
THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE
NOVEMBER 2025

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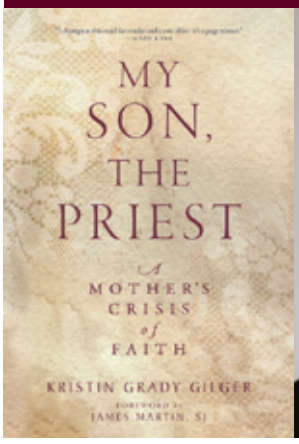

BOOK DISCUSSION

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

November 12, 2025, 7-8:30 PM
4th Floor IC, 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. We are delighted to welcome both Kristin Grady Gilger and dear friend of the Hank Center, Paddy Gilger, SJ, for this very special conversation.

LECTURE & RETREAT

Catholic Imaginations with Kevin Burke, S.J.

November 20, 2025, 7-8:30 PM
4th Floor IC, Lake Shore Campus

As we move closer to Thanksgiving, the Center is excited to present two-part event centered on poet Denise Levertov—both of them led by Levertov scholar Fr. Kevin Burke, SJ, Professor of Theology and Vice President for University Mission at Regis University. For the first event, Fr. Burke will offer a lecture on his new book, *Opening the Doors of the World*, a theological study of the poetry of Denise Levertov. With a discerning interpretive lens—one that accounts not only for the mystical and political dimensions of her spiritual belonging, but also her ecstatic attention to everyday realities—we can now see Levertov in full—an integrated spiritual, political, and poetic corpus and one of the most unique poets of the 20th Century. *An accompanying retreat will be led by Fr. Ken Burke from November 21–22 at St Gregory Hall.*

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

Leo's Message for the American Church

A few days after his election, Pope Leo XIV met with members of the media who had been covering the event. While friendly, it was a formal papal audience and not a press conference. Leo did not field questions from the gathered journalists, nor did anyone expect him to. My colleagues and I on **America**'s temporary Rome team were simply happy to be there at the end of perhaps the most intense three weeks of media work we would ever experience.

As the pope was leaving, journalists positioned themselves along his path out of the audience hall, calling out questions. Robert Sherman of NewsNation asked the American pope if he had a message for the church in the United States. Leo, smiling, answered, "Many. God bless you all."

Many journalists chuckled with respect at Leo's deft handling of the question. While it amounted to a deflection and (mostly) a "no comment," it honored and acknowledged the concerns behind the question, with the combination of reserve and good humor that have characterized Leo's first months on the chair of Peter.

In September, we began to hear some of these many messages, in an interview conducted by Elise Ann Allen of Crux, as part of her biography of the pope. Leo's responses to the few questions that touched on the United States demonstrated a realistic understanding of the American church.

Asked about what difference it would make to be the first pope from the United States, he answered that he hoped "it will make a difference eventually with the bishops in the United States," referring to the relationship between church and politics. He said that his American roots would mean that "people can't say, like they did about Francis, 'He doesn't understand the United States, he just doesn't see what's going on.'"

I made a similar observation in a piece I wrote for The New York Times after Leo's election, arguing that when U.S. Catholics disagree with the pope along partisan lines, as they came to do more and more over the course of Francis' pontificate, "whether over immigration with the right or abortion with the left, it will not be as easy to dismiss him as someone who does not understand American culture or politics."

Leo said that he will avoid partisan politics but will raise "real Gospel issues." He gave the example of a conversation he had with Vice President JD Vance, himself a Catholic convert, about "human dignity and how important that is for all people, wherever you're born."

In response to a follow-up question about how he might engage President Trump, Leo answered that, as with any government, that role belonged more to the local leadership of the church. He referred to the letter Francis sent in February of this year to the U.S. bishops expressing concern about the president's mass deportation agenda and the treatment of immigrants. Leo commented that he was "happy to see how the American bishops picked that up, and some of them were courageous enough to go with that" and that he saw his role as pope to engage with the bishops along these lines.

On one level, this could be read as a form of deflection—it allowed Leo to avoid explaining directly how he would engage Mr. Trump—but on several other levels, it starts to deliver the many messages the Holy Father has for the church in his native country.

Francis' letter to the U.S. bishops on mass deportation was, to put it mildly, a bombshell. It is not common for the pope to write to a country's bishops *en masse* about a political issue. Nor is it common for such a letter to seemingly respond to, and correct, an elected official's interpretation of a theological concept, but Francis' letter did just that with respect to Mr. Vance's use of the *ordo amoris*.

Leo's choice to refer to the letter, I think, is significant. We already knew that prior to his election, Cardinal Robert Prevost was paying attention to this issue. Some of the final posts on an X account under his name mentioned the letter, including one sharing a piece I wrote about it, arguing that the letter asked American Catholics whether "we judge our politics according to the Gospel or the other way around."

Even more significantly, given that the letter was sent by Francis to the U.S. bishops, it is almost certain that Cardinal Prevost as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops would have been involved in drafting and reviewing the letter. Back in February, a number of Catholic commentators dismissed and rejected Francis' intervention as lacking understanding of the situation on the ground; one even went so far as to describe the letter as Pope Francis' "suicide note."

Leo did not need to refer to Francis' letter. Nothing in the question that he was asked invoked it. Instead, he almost went out of his way to remind us of the letter, describing it as a model of papal engagement with a political issue, especially because of how it asked U.S. bishops to take responsibility.

The U.S. bishops' conference will meet for a plenary assembly early in November. Among many other issues, American Catholics will be looking to see how the bishops continue their advocacy for the dignity of our migrant brothers and sisters under threat of deportation. So, it seems, will the first pope from the United States.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

DISPATCHES

FEATURES

A funeral procession for José María Tojeira, S.J., at the Central American University in Antiguo Cuscatlan, El Salvador, on Sept. 11. The human rights activist, best known for leading the Central American Jesuits during El Salvador's civil war era, died on Sept. 5.
OSV News photo/Jose Cabezas

Cover: Commencement at Arrupe College, Loyola University Chicago, on Aug. 16, 2025
Courtesy of Arrupe College

FAITH & REASON

FAITH IN FOCUS

IDEAS

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POETRY

NOVEMBER 2025 VOL. 233 NO. 4 WHOLE NO. 5314

Charlie Kirk's assassination and its aftermath

*Editor's note: The editors of **America** pray for the repose of the soul of Charlie Kirk and for the consolation of his family. With political and religious leaders across the country and the world, we reject any legitimation of political violence and recognize the need for common dedication to improving civil discourse. As Sam Sawyer, S.J., our editor in chief, wrote in 2023: "We commit ourselves—and we will exhort our contributors—to both imagine and acknowledge the best motives of those with whom we may disagree, especially within the life of the church."*

In an online piece titled "Who is being served by making Charlie Kirk a saint: God or Caesar?," Father Sawyer wrestled with the political and spiritual remembrances of Mr. Kirk in the wake of his assassination. He questioned the evangelical effectiveness of attempting to convert people to Christ through politics and wrote: "I fear that whatever the best intentions of Mr. Kirk or his pastor or others connected to his Turning Point USA organization, the approach they take to politics results in treating the Gospel more as a means than an end." Our readers had much to say in response.

If politics were an "on-ramp" to Jesus, we would have politicians who would promote policies that help feed the poor (not deny them food), promote health care for all, stand up for equality and justice, welcome and support our neighbors at home and throughout the world, and promote systems of taxation where the rich pay their fare share. Our political leaders would promote "love for neighbor," not "hate your neighbor." Clearly, our political leaders need to decide if they are truly aligned with Jesus or Cesar.
Kathleen Zippilli

With all due respect, "Caesar" was not given the last word, even chronologically, at the memorial for Charlie Kirk. The immortal, eternal, living words of Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the "pivot" of all history, and "the (only) turning point" there is. Since the president did not confess his love for his enemies at the end of his speech but only his openness to being convinced, Jesus' last words await a definitive response from all of us.
Frederick Close

Barring the political speeches, the testimonies drawing attention to Jesus was quite moving. That Mr. Kirk was a supporter of Mr. Trump seems to have caused some to dismiss the magnificent Gospel message displayed. But thousands of young people across the globe are now willing to take a peek at the Gospel. Lifting young souls out of the darkness of social media is worthy of praise.
Ann Marie Amideo

I think what's happening with Christians today reveals a huge gap in solid spiritual discernment: that most Christians cannot or will not do the work of digging deeper and seeking not what is popular or self-serving, but what is truly of God and what might best align with the will of God and with the example lived by Jesus. It's so easy for me to see through the theater of that political rally disguised as a memorial, as well as all those who speak on behalf of Christ who don't seem to really know the Christ of the Gospels. As a Franciscan priest and pastor, observing all of this just gives me greater resolve to be more outspoken about discernment of spirits in my preaching and pastoral ministry. Jesus never asked to be worshiped; he asked to be followed, and there is such a dearth of that today among Christians and, sadly, even from some Catholic leaders.
Daniel Barica

Mr. Kirk espoused the family values that the church defends, upholds, protects and promotes (marriage, children, providing for one's family, etc.). This is what Cardinal Dolan was talking about. This is what St. Paul espoused. Father Sam asks who is being served. Hopefully, all people of good will who want their nation to be a moral place where kids can be kids and men and women can be who God wants them to be. Simple.
Elizabeth Weber

More and more I find myself being drawn to Peter's response to Jesus asking the Apostles if they will leave him too (after the Bread of Life discourse): "Lord, to whom shall we go?" (Jn 6:68). The "way" being proclaimed by political leaders is not the true way if it is not grounded in the Gospels. President Trump made that clear by his comments at Charlie Kirk's funeral. In the spirit of the Ignatian way of placing yourself in the Gospel readings, I imagine Jesus taking Mr. Trump aside and saying, "You still don't get it."
Russell Wyborski

Kicking the Can on the Housing Crisis

During the first Trump administration, the editors of **America** wrote that our faith demands compassion not only for migrants and refugees but for all Americans who seek new homes, whether in search of economic opportunity, a safe neighborhood or simply more room for growing families. "A truly compassionate and inclusive society," we wrote, "must work toward not only universal health care but also decent and affordable housing for all."

Eight years later, our immigration policies are even more inhumane, and the affordable housing crisis in the United States has gotten worse.

This March, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce warned of a shortage of 4.5 million homes in the United States, "rooted in a decade of underbuilding following the Great Recession and surging demand from millennials entering prime home-buying years." In addition to making it more difficult to raise families, this shortage depresses economic activity, as employers struggle to attract workers to areas without enough homes.

One poll last year found that 74 percent of Americans considered the lack of affordable homes to be a significant problem. Housing became a key issue in the 2024 presidential campaign, with Democratic nominee Kamala Harris touting a plan to build three million new homes nationwide and Republican nominee Donald Trump promising that low taxes and fewer regulations would spur homebuilding. This year, housing affordability has been a signature issue for Zohran Mamdani, who unexpectedly won the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York; in one poll, it was cited as the most important issue facing the city by voters under 35. As part of his housing plan, Mr. Mamdani has proposed building 200,000 affordable housing units over the next decade using city funds.

The affordable housing shortage is reflected in a historically low mobility rate. The Wall Street Journal reports that only 7.8 percent of Americans changed residences in 2023, the latest year for which data is available, "leaving many people in homes that are too small, in jobs they don't love or in their parents' basements looking for work." This was the lowest mobility rate since the Census Bureau began keeping records in 1948; throughout the '50s and '60s, about one-fifth of all Americans would move in a given year.

It is possible that if we do nothing, the housing crisis will slowly become less acute. The United States has a steadily dropping birth rate, and the Trump administration is seeking to end immigration almost entirely. ("The United States is on track to see negative net migration for the first time in at least five decades," the White House boasted in August.) This combination could mean that the population of the United States will soon shrink for the first time in its history.

But a shrinking population means less economic activity and thus a lower standard of living. The failure to build enough affordable housing for new families is symptomatic of a low-expectations society hoping for problems to go away instead of solving them. The same thinking can be seen in the hope that we can simply ban homelessness or corral the homeless into overcrowded shelters—an "often dehumanizing way of caring for the poorest among us," as the U.S. bishops wrote way back in 1988.

Because it is linked to so many other issues, the United States must address its housing crisis as soon as possible.

There have been some signs of progress, mostly at the local level. In order to ramp up the production of homes and apartments, numerous states and cities have enacted zoning reform and other legislation to allow for accessory dwelling units (additions to single-family homes), residential construction in commercial zones, the loosening or elimination of parking space requirements, more apartment buildings near public transit, and other ways to fast-track housing development.

But efforts to build more housing are still sluggish. According to the National Association of Home Builders, construction began on a total of 1.36 million new homes in 2024, a 3.9 percent decline from the previous year and still far below the levels before the Great Recession in 2007. The homebuilding industry now faces further uncertainties that could dampen activity, including tariffs on construction materials that could drive up the prices of homes still further and a longstanding shortage of skilled construction workers.

The church has long recognized the shortage of affordable housing in the United States. In their 1988 statement mentioned above, "Homelessness and Housing: A Human Tragedy, A Moral Challenge," the U.S. bishops wrote, "We are reminded by the Gospel that the first human problem Jesus faced on earth was a lack of shelter." More recently, in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," they wrote, "The lack of safe, affordable housing requires a renewed commitment to increase the supply of quality housing and to preserve, maintain, and improve existing housing through public/private part-

nerships, especially with religious groups and community organizations."

In its advocacy efforts, the U.S. church should put housing on the same level as health care and education. In "Faithful Citizenship," housing does not get its own section but is discussed under "Preferential Option for the Poor and Economic Justice"—though the inability to find affordable housing is hardly limited to "the poor" today.

The church can also articulate how Catholic social teaching supports efforts to build more housing. The principle of solidarity compels all of us to find solutions to not only homelessness but also housing insecurity, and it does not permit us to retreat behind physical walls in gated communities or to use zoning against the possibility of new neighbors. And while the principle of subsidiarity says that we should take local concerns into account in development planning, it does not mean that the smallest units of government should be able to veto all forms of housing.

The church can do more than advocate for more housing; in some cases, it can develop its own land and properties as housing, including closed parishes and convents. Examples include the Archdiocese of New York's former headquarters on First Avenue in Manhattan, which is being developed into 422 apartments, and a former Catholic church in New York's East Village, which is being converted into more than 500 affordable housing units.

None of these ideas will solve the housing crisis overnight, not when it has taken decades to get this bad. But simply waiting for housing demand to fall as fewer Americans decide to start families and fewer migrants are able to find opportunity here is not a life-affirming option. Pope Francis asked us to do a better job protecting our common home, and that call does not refer only to protecting the natural environment. It also means recognizing that housing is a basic human right.

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Getting smart about smartphones at Scranton Prep

On the first day of this school year, our students stepped into classrooms without the constant buzz of cellphones in their pockets. The absence was striking. Instead of peeking at lit-up screens under their desks and repeatedly reacting to push notifications, students turned to one another, asked questions and filled the space with conversation. This change affirmed a decision that was not easy but critical to our mission as educators: Our school has banned all personal devices, including phones, and we have supplied every student with a school-issued and managed iPad.

The choice by Scranton Prep administrators was not made lightly, nor was it driven by nostalgia for "simpler times." Our decision emerged from deep reflection on our mission as educators, on the social and spiritual formation of our students, and on the challenge of preparing them for a world saturated with technology. Mounting evidence—and daily school experience—has shown us that unfettered phone use undermines this mission. By removing phones from classrooms, hallways and community spaces, we are not rejecting the digital world but reclaiming something more fundamental: the capacity to learn, to relate and to be fully present.

Last summer, our faculty and trustees read Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation.* Mr. Haidt argues that starting around 2010, the prevalence of smartphones and social media has fundamentally altered childhood. As screens replaced other forms of play, rates of adolescent anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide surged globally. Childhood has historically included unsupervised exploration, rough-and-tumble play and the learning of a wide range of social rituals—experiences vital for building resilience and emotional maturity. In contrast, what Mr. Haidt calls the "phone-based childhood" robs them of these critical developmental milestones.

The Scranton Prep community spent this past year discerning where we saw Mr. Haidt's assertions in our own young people's experience of school, and how we might respond as Jesuit educators. We used "Profile of the Graduate at Graduation," from the Jesuit School Network, as our guide; it lists the desired characteristics of a graduate from a Jesuit high school as intellectually competent, religious, open to growth, committed to justice and loving to others. We came to the conclusion that unchecked use of smartphones and social media was impeding our ability to develop these characteristics in our young people.

Each morning, our 700 students slip their smartphones, smartwatches and earbuds into lockable pouches that stay closed from first bell to last. The devices may remain with the students, but they are inaccessible. (In an emergency, students may access their phones by communicating with an adult in the building.) The result? Classrooms hum with greater focus, the lunchroom buzzes with conversation and play, and a sense of calm purpose pervades our halls. When we announced this decision to our parent community, we received an overwhelming amount of support. Although teachers and parents alike acknowledge this will be difficult for our students, there is consensus that students will benefit socially, academically and spiritually.

The Cost of Distraction

As educators, we saw how smartphones were sapping students' attention. A notification buzzing, a social media feed refreshing—each pulls a student's mind out of the lesson. A study at the University of Texas found that the mere presence of a smartphone, silenced and face-down on the desk, was enough to reduce people's working memory and problem-solving ability. It's as if part of the brain is busy "not thinking about the phone," draining cognitive resources that could otherwise be devoted to a classroom lesson.

Every lesson, every skill, every spark of understanding requires students to give their minds over, at least for a while, to the slow work of learning. Yet phones are designed precisely to fracture that attention. As a result, teachers spend time redirecting focus, and students struggle to sustain deep engagement with reading, problem-solving or discussion. By creating a phone-free environment, we are protecting one of the scarcest resources of our age: uninterrupted thought and reflection.

The case for a phone-free school goes beyond academics. The more pressing concern is social. Over the past decade, educators nationwide have witnessed a marked decline in face-to-face interaction among young people. Students find it harder to maintain eye contact, sustain conversations, read social cues or resolve conflicts in person. Social maturity—the ability to build friendships, negotiate differences and empathize with others—cannot be learned through screens.

When students default to texting rather than talking, or scrolling rather than socializing, they lose valuable opportunities to practice the skills that make community possible. Jesuit schools believe that hallway chatter, lunch table conversations, and after-class debates are as important to

education as textbooks and tests—and, in fact, can lead us to God. A phone-free environment fosters presence to one another and a community oriented toward service, compassion and listening, assisting us in our mission to form men and women for others.

By setting phones aside during the school day, we are giving students the chance to rediscover the art of conversation, to learn patience in listening and to develop empathetic relationships rooted in presence rather than pixels.

Honoring Human Dignity

There is also a deeper, more fundamental reason for our decision. At the heart of Jesuit education is not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the recognition of what it means to be human. To look people in the eye, to listen without distraction, is to affirm their dignity and worth as humans created in God's image. In a culture where attention has become the most coveted commodity, undivided presence is a radical act.

Our school sees value in teaching students that being with another person requires more than being in the same room—it requires being fully present. This is not about rejecting technology but about instilling a habit of presence that honors others. Phones, for all their usefulness, too often make us absent from the very people in front of us. By removing them from school life, we are cultivating a community where each student can feel seen and respected.

"The Characteristics of Jesuit Education" (1986), a mission-focused document for Jesuit high schools, defines *cura personalis* as attention to the intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual needs of each student. We view our decision to go phone-free as an act of *cura personalis*: giving students the space to focus, reduce anxiety and form real relationships without constant digital distraction.

Already, the results are visible. Teachers report deeper discussions. Students linger longer in conversation. The air feels lighter, less hurried, more human. These are not small gains. They represent a step toward restoring the culture of learning and community that are constitutive of Catholic and Jesuit schools.

Our decision is not the only solution to the challenges of technology in schools, but it is a step we believe others can learn from. We invite other schools and educators to consider what it might mean to reclaim presence, to prioritize attention and to honor the dignity of each student by building spaces where face-to-face relationships can flourish. In the end, this is not about banning a device. It is about protecting something more precious: the possibility of being fully alive to learning, to friendship and to one another. It is about creating spaces where our students can encounter the living God.

A. J. Rizzo, S.J., *is the president of Scranton Preparatory School in Scranton, Pa.*

OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

‘We all belong to each other’: Rethinking immigration and Irish identity

By Kevin Hargaden

Cliona Ward was born in Ireland but has lived in the United States for more than 30 years. In March, as she was returning home to Santa Cruz, Calif., from a visit to Youghal, County Cork, where she had been caring for her ailing father, immigration officials flagged her re-entry because of minor offenses from her past. A green card holder, her residency assured until 2033, she was nonetheless detained for almost three weeks by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and feared deportation.

Through intense lobbying from her family, her trade union—the Service Employees International Union—and elected representatives, Ms. Ward was eventually released from ICE custody and returned to the life she built for herself in Santa Cruz. But the same cannot be said for others who, though residents for years in the United States, may face deportation this year.

Just about no one in Ireland would say that Irish citizens living in the United States are being picked off as cruelly as immigrant residents from Latin America, South Asia or Africa. But consternation is on the rise about U.S. policy on immigrant residents and its escalating use of deportation.

Just five undocumented Irish immigrants were deported from the United States to Ireland in the whole of 2021. But in 2025, that number had already reached 56 by the end of July. There is a sense that the new attention to undocumented Irish, long previously tolerated on U.S. shores, represents another symbolic collapse, suggesting that the United States is not the ally it used to be.

The rich connection between Ireland and the United States has been forged by more than a century of Irish emigration. There was a time when Irish immigrants were viewed mostly positively both by the communities where they landed and the U.S. authorities with whom they interacted.

Increasingly, this is no longer the case. What happens when the system that was once welcoming turns hostile? And how is that experience reflected in how Irish people now treat those seeking refuge on the Emerald Isle?

Lena Deevy, a member of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, is perhaps uniquely placed to speak to both issues. Sister Lena worked for almost 20 years in one of Dublin’s most disadvantaged communities, Ballymun. Her work there bore fruit but wore her out, and when it came time to take a sabbatical, she pursued a master’s degree in education from Harvard University.

Exchanging the tower blocks of Ballymun for the ivory

A drum major leads a band from Donegal, Ireland, in the 264th St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City on March 17, 2025.

towers of Cambridge, Mass., in the late 1980s produced a culture shock, but Sister Lena found her footing supporting the vulnerable Irish migrants who had made a home in the Boston area. When she began her work at the Boston Irish Immigration Center (now the Rian Immigrant Center), Irish immigrants were protected by targeted visa schemes that had been sponsored by prominent U.S. politicians. The programs allowed thousands of undocumented Irish immigrants to regularize their status.

While others celebrated a sanitized version of Irish emigration, Sister Lena confronted the racial and structural privileges that allowed Irish migrants to blend in while other immigrants were targeted by immigration officials. Whiteness offered Irish migrants a kind of conditional invisibility.

That same privilege was not extended to Black and Latino migrants, who were much more energetically surveilled and then deported. For them, "you blended in unless you spoke," she says.

Under her leadership, the center quietly reoriented the landscape of its Irish-American immigration advocacy. It began to offer legal aid, trauma-informed support and pathways to stability to all comers.

A Historic Reversal in Ireland

When Sister Lena returned home to Ireland, she found a society shifting from being a migrant-sending nation to becoming a migrant-receiving one. The change has exposed deep inconsistencies in how Irish society understands justice and belonging.

If whiteness once offered Irish migrants a kind of cover abroad, it now risks becoming the lens through which hospitality at home is rationed. The question becomes not just how others treat the Irish abroad but how the Irish treat people seeking refuge in their midst. Both the United States and Ireland "are classifying whole groups of people as 'undesirable,'" she says.

Ireland absorbed waves of immigrants from Poland and other new European Union member states from the late 1990s onward without much civic uproar, but the more recent arrivals of Chinese, South Asian and African immigrants, joined by thousands of Ukrainians seeking refuge, has provoked an Ireland First movement similar to the resistance to immigration emerging in the United States.

But there are institutions that push back. Most notable, perhaps, is the hugely influential organization for Irish sports, the Gaelic Athletic Association, which explicitly presents its mission as creating a space "where we all belong." In June the G.A.A. made its landmark stadium, Croke Park in Dublin, available for the celebration of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha.

When new G.A.A. clubs like Columbus Gaelic are established in Dublin entirely by migrants to Ireland who seek to embed themselves more fully in their new home, they replicate the role the G.A.A. had long served for Irish emigrants to the shores of America and elsewhere. The G.A.A. is a common first port of call whether an Irish immigrant lands in Knoxville, Dubai or even Kampala to find a group who play the ancient Irish sports.

The Irish Catholic Church has also played a role in confronting a surge of xenophobia in Ireland. The episcopal conference issued a 2024 pastoral letter, "A Hundred Thousand Welcomes?" which forcefully argued that hospitality was a Christian virtue and responsibility.

Michael O'Sullivan has spent decades working at the intersection of migration and public policy in Ireland. As one of the founders of the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, he has been involved in advocacy since the early 2000s.

He cautions against easy narratives of decline or backlash. "I don't think Irish attitudes have changed that much," he argues. "There's no innate or culturally fixed antipathy toward migration. But there's also no deeply ingrained hospitality either."

The welcome that exists, he suggests, has always been patchy, shaped more by context and opportunity than by deep-seated conviction. And behind even the most generous public discourse, the Irish state's approach has long been shaped by what he calls a "security manager" mindset—cautious, gatekeeping and risk-averse.

Sister Lena agrees, noting that in both the United States and Ireland "what alarms me is that in many ways we are more and more seeing migrants as a threat, missing out on the rich opportunities and gifts that they bring us."

Security Trumps Solidarity

There are significant successes the Migrant Rights Centre can point to. An ambitious amnesty for undocumented migrants in 2022 allowed more than 8,000 workers to regularize their status in Ireland. But there have also been serious setbacks, most notably a constitutional referendum that successfully changed citizenship laws to make it harder for the children of immigrants to establish themselves as Irish citizens.

Mr. O'Sullivan is clear that progress in Ireland has often depended on the persistence of civil society rather than the emergence of a comprehensive state vision. "The Department of Justice always saw immigration as something to be controlled, not something to be engaged with creatively," he says.

In recent months, asylum seekers arriving in Ireland have been left to sleep on the streets while awaiting accom-

Ireland's immigration reversal

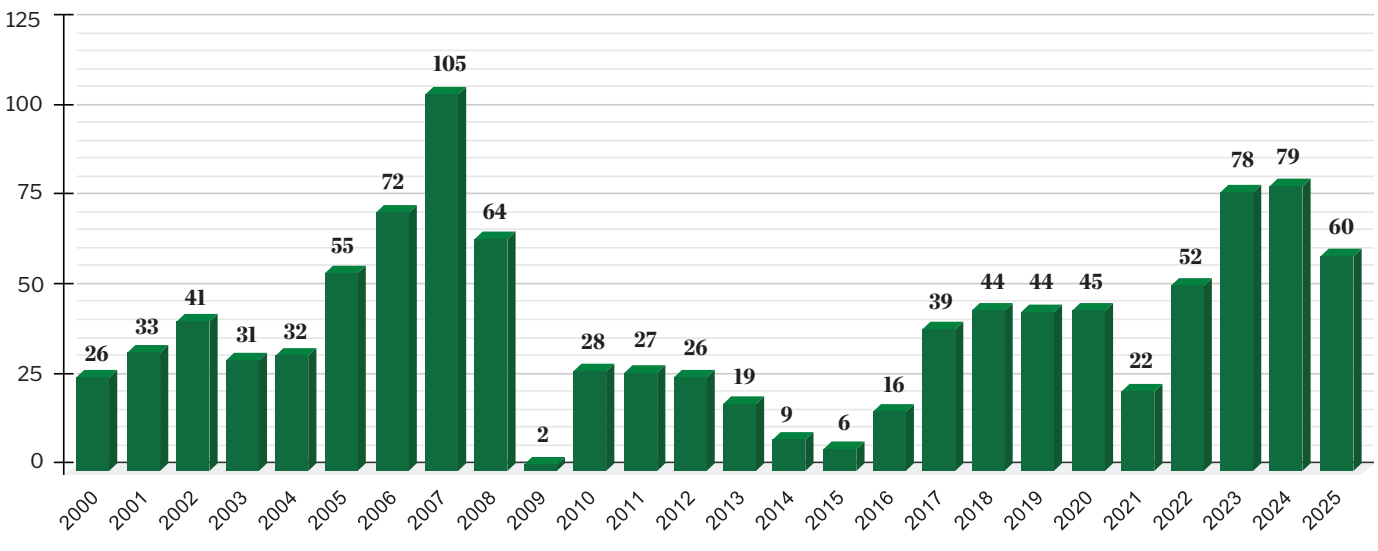
Ireland's population, including both Northern Ireland, a member state of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland, remains below its pre-famine level of **8.2 million** people (1841 census). The republic's current population is **5.5 million**. Northern Ireland's population is **1.9 million**.

A net exporter of people for almost two centuries, Ireland began to experience a reversal of fortune in the mid-1990s. But sharp increases in population during the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger era, when most immigrants came from European Community member states, ended during the 2008-09 global financial crisis.

Net migration over the last decade turned positive again, with more immigrants arriving from India and Central European and African states.

Ireland's **fertility rate of 1.5** children per woman is far below the natural replacement rate of 2.1. That means that without immigrants, Ireland's overall population would be declining. Of new immigrants in 2025, **31,500** were returning Irish citizens, **25,300** were other E.U. citizens, and **4,900** were U.K. citizens. The remaining **63,600** immigrants were citizens of other countries; **65,600** people left the republic.

Annual net migration to Republic of Ireland, 2000-25 (in thousands)



modation. And the Irish government, responding to a small but vocal bloc of voters, has begun to quietly reduce social supports like housing assistance for immigrant arrivals. Its deportation orders have been dispatched more rapidly.

"What we're seeing," Mr. O'Sullivan warns, "is a quiet sidelining of the 1951 Refugee Convention." That United Nations agreement created historic protections for asylum seekers and mandated obligations for receiving nations.

As in the United States, the official language around migration in Ireland is increasingly shaped by ideas of risk, order and control rather than solidarity or shared humanity. Ireland may continue to tell a proud story about its emigrant past, but it is increasingly distancing itself from its obligations to migrants in the present. The country that once sent its people across oceans to build bridges and skyscrapers now builds bureaucratic walls against those who arrive by ferry.

Perhaps that is what makes Cliona Ward's story so unsettling, exposing how precarious even a "desirable" immigrant's security can be. The Bible repeatedly insists that solidarity must be practiced toward resident aliens, people entitled to particular protections precisely because of their vulnerability. When solidarity can be hard to find and the ground seems to be shifting on a daily basis, large populations in both Ireland and the United States find themselves exposed.

Those lucky to be thoroughly settled in a new homeland must remain vigilant to the temptation to separate what Sister Lena categorizes as the "acceptable people" from the "unacceptable" ones. To do that is to forget how our own histories have so often been shaped by exclusion and flight.

"We need to remember," she says. "We all belong to each other."

Kevin Hargaden *contributes from Dublin.*

Pope Leo's plans to govern the church—from Rome to China to Gaza

Pope Leo XIV raised the question of genocide in Gaza and spoke about how he intends to engage with China in a wide-ranging discussion with Elise Ann Allen, the senior correspondent of Crux. The interview, released in September, was conducted for Ms. Allen's biography of the pope, *Leo XIV: Citizen of the World, Missionary of the XXI Century*. The pope also discussed his approach to the L.G.B.T.Q. community and to the traditionalists who want approval for more frequent use of pre-Vatican II liturgy.

The pope made it clear that he intends to consolidate the main paths of reform begun by Pope Francis, including reforms to the Roman Curia and Vatican finances, and to continue promoting synodality. At the same time, he said, "I'm trying not to continue to polarize or promote polarization in the church." His aim is to work for "unity and peace" in the church and the world.

He revealed "there's still a huge learning curve ahead of me" in understanding his role and mission as pope. He said he finds "the pastoral part" of the papal ministry relatively easy but finds being a world leader much more challenging.

"I don't see my primary role as trying to be the solver of the world's problems," he said, "although I think that the church has a voice, a message that needs to continue to be preached, to be spoken and spoken loudly."

The U.S.-born pope expressed great concern about the humanitarian situation in Gaza and noted that many humanitarian experts are using the term *genocide* for what is happening there. "We can't grow numb, and we can't ignore this," he said.

Asked what hope he sees for an end to the conflict in Gaza, where 2.1 million Palestinians are living in dire conditions, Pope Leo noted that despite pressure and clear statements from third parties, including the United States, "there has not been a clear response in terms of finding effective ways to alleviate the suffering of the people, the innocent people in Gaza."

"The word genocide is being thrown around more and more," Leo noted in the interview. "Officially," he said, "the Holy See does not believe that we can make any declaration at this time about that. There's a very technical definition about what genocide might be, but more and more people are raising the issue, including two human rights groups in Israel [that] have made that statement."

"It's just so horrible to see the images that we see on television; hopefully something will turn this around. Hopefully, we won't grow numb," the pope said. "That's sort of a human response because you can only stand so much pain." But Christians, he said, "have to continue to push, to try and make a change there."


CNS photo/Pablo Esparza

Pope Leo leads the Lord's Prayer in St. Peter's Square on Sept. 24.

Turning to China, Ms. Allen recalled that Pope Francis and many of his predecessors had adopted an "Ostpolitik approach," an attempt to normalize diplomatic relations with China. She asked Leo how he intended to engage with China.

He confessed that he does not yet know how he will approach this delicate but very important relationship, but he added: "I would say that in the short term, I will continue the policy that the Holy See has followed for some years now.... I in no way pretend to be wiser or more experienced than all those who have come before me."

In the interview, Pope Leo revealed that he was trying to discern how the church can continue its mission in China, "respecting both culture and political issues that have obviously great importance, but also respecting a significant group of Chinese Catholics who for many years have lived some kind of oppression or difficulty in living their faith freely."

There are some 12 million Catholics in mainland China today, and about half of them belong to the "underground" church that is not approved by Beijing authorities. Pope Leo appears keen to do what he can to overcome the divisions and to promote unity among the Catholic communities in China.

Leo is the first pope to have visited China. He went there once when he was prior general of the Augustinians to visit the friars of his order.

He concluded his remarks about China by saying: "It's a very difficult situation. In the long term, I don't pretend to say this is what I will and will not do, but after two months, I've already begun having discussions at several levels on that topic."

Gerard O'Connell *is* ***America****'s Vatican correspondent.*

U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Rylin Paul

Trump's deadly strikes on drug traffickers sets a dangerous precedent

The "targeted killing" of alleged drug smugglers in the south Caribbean shows a disregard for international law, but one that did not start with the Trump administration, said Mary Ellen O'Connell, a professor of law and international peace studies at the Kroc Institute at the University of Notre Dame. The White House ordered drone missile launches against four watercraft in September, claiming at least 17 lives.

"President Trump has a particular rhetorical flourish with everything he does that draws more attention to the severity of [his] violations, but I've been a longtime critic of targeted killing of terrorism suspects," Dr. O'Connell said in an interview with **America**, explaining that Mr. Trump has only pushed the envelope on a dubious practice that has been put to use by White House residents since the Clinton administration.

The notion of targeted killings "was never lawful," Dr. O'Connell said, even when it was aimed exclusively at terrorism suspects, and it is thoroughly unlawful "when it's aimed at drug trafficking suspects."

Cartel members and drug traffickers, as odious as their trade may be, have traditionally been treated as criminals with due process rights—not terrorists or enemy combatants. But at a press briefing on Sept. 2, Secretary of State Marco Rubio noted that Mr. Trump has designated drug cartels "terrorist organizations."

Speaking to reporters in Mexico City the next day, the secretary justified a more aggressive U.S. stance, arguing that "interdiction doesn't work because these drug cartels—what they do is they know they're going to lose 2 percent of their cargo. They bake it into their economics."

"What will stop them is when you blow them up, when you get rid of them...instead of interdicting [the vessel]. On the president's orders, [we] blew it up. And it'll happen again.... The president of the United States is going to wage war on narcoterrorist organizations."

On the academic website The Conversation, Dr. O'Connell wrote that the attack violated, among other treaties and conventions, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 6 of the covenant holds: "Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life."

And under Catholic moral teaching, there is no justification for the use of deadly force in this instance, she said in an email to **America**, since the individuals on the boat were

The guided missile destroyer U.S.S. Cole moves through the Caribbean Sea on July 22.

not involved in armed conflict, nor were they felons in flight known to pose a risk of violence to bystanders. Secretary Rubio said they could have been intercepted using law enforcement methods, but "the president simply chose to kill them to send a message."

"Catholics believe in respecting life from conception to natural death," Dr. O'Connell wrote. "We never support the death penalty even after a fair trial, let alone summary execution after no trial."

Beyond the potential misuse of military power, Dr. O'Connell worries about the "demonstration effect" of the administration's liquidation of the alleged traffickers, a trickle-down impression that the president is indifferent to constitutional war powers boundaries and standard limits on the use of force. She fears it may embolden others in law enforcement to show a similar disregard for legal constraints.

That demonstration effect is not limited to actors in the United States. She points out that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel showed no concern about how the Israeli targeted strike on Hamas negotiators who were staying in Doha, Qatar, might violate international law. She adds that other powerful leaders, like President Xi Jinping of China, are carefully tracking the apparent disregard for international law and rules of engagement shown by the Trump administration.

The demonstration effect can also work positively, Dr. O'Connell added. "The social science research that I've been doing on how you regain and rebuild [international law] principles," she said, "really shows that when a leading state models law compliance, you get these beneficial impacts. You get others measuring themselves against them."

Kevin Clarke *is* ***America****'s chief correspondent.*

A C.R.S. member meets with displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip on May 5.

A show of solidarity in the Holy Land as Gaza conflict continues

A delegation sponsored by the Catholic Near East Welfare Association visited with Christians in the Holy Land in September. The solidarity effort "encountered a spirited church," according to Michael La Civita, the association's director of communications and marketing.

"We found pastors compelled by the Gospel to counter hate with love. We met women and men of faith determined, not despondent, to carry on the work of the church," Mr. La Civita said in an email to **America**.

The visit was prompted by a letter on Aug. 12 from Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, calling for parishes across the country to hold a "special collection to provide humanitarian relief and pastoral support for our affected brothers and sisters in Gaza and surrounding areas in the Middle East."

Funds from the collection will be directed to C.N.E.W.A. and Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. church's international relief and development agency. Troubled by images of the continuing suffering and the famine emergency that has enveloped the people of Gaza, Bill O'Keefe, C.R.S's vice president for mission, mobilization and advocacy, believes U.S. Catholics are more concerned than ever about the ongoing conflict.

C.R.S. has been working in Gaza for 50 years and has assisted Holy Family Parish throughout the crisis. The Holy Family compound is the only Catholic presence in Gaza. Hundreds of Gazan Christians have sheltered there since the Israel Defense Forces moved into Gaza on Oct. 8, 2023, in response to a Hamas terror attack that killed hundreds in southern Israel.

"The bishops' conference has consistently called for an end to the violence," Mr. O'Keefe said. "I think Catholics can respond to that call and encourage our elected officials to do everything they can to support peace and an end to the violence and a generous response to the needs of people on the ground."

William Gualtiere *is an O'Hare fellow at America Media.*

A COLLEGE OF COMMUNITY

Arrupe College offers an innovative, two-year model for Jesuit education

By Michael O'Loughlin

When Sebastian Torres was about to enter high school, his parents gave him a choice. For seven years, he, his younger sister and his parents had lived in the Amazonian region of Colombia because of his father's work with the country's education department. His parents wanted him to have the best high school education possible, so they offered him the chance to move back home to Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city, with a population of about 2.4 million people. The other option, they told him, was for all of them to move to the United States, joining family living outside Chicago.

"In Colombia, to just say, 'America,' that's like, oh my gosh, something big, something that everybody wants to be part of," Mr. Torres, now 19, said. "So that's why I asked my dad to move."

The family settled in Elgin, a city of about 111,000 people located 35 miles northwest of Chicago. It was 2021, and the Covid-19 pandemic was still raging. Mr. Torres set out to make friends and perfect his English while attending classes online. It was a challenge, but he tried not to complain. His family had sacrificed so much for him, and he was determined to make it work.

"They wanted to give me the option to pursue the education I wanted, and so I made the best of it," he said.

As the world reopened and Mr. Torres transitioned to in-person classes, he threw himself into high school life, intent on filling out his résumé so that he would have a strong chance at earning scholarships for college. He volunteered at a local animal shelter and participated in student government. When it was time to apply for college, he set his sights on Loyola University Chicago, the Jesuit-affiliated research university with more than 17,000 students. With his success in Advanced Placement classes, plus his involvement in extracurriculars, Mr. Torres was a competitive candidate.

He was ultimately offered a spot, but the financial burden loomed large. Mr. Torres knew the cost would require further sacrifice from his family, and he wanted to do whatever he could to keep the costs down. After talking to a counselor at his high school, he decided to apply to a different school, one still affiliated with the Jesuits and housed within Loyola University, but distinct in nearly every other way.

Named for Pedro Arrupe, S.J., the superior general of the Jesuits in the tumultuous decades following the Second Vatican Council, Arrupe College was opened at Loyola University Chicago in 2015. It was an experiment within Jesuit higher education to provide poorer students with an option of attending a two-year college, at little or no cost, that led to an associate's degree and a clear pathway to eventual graduation from a traditional four-year university.

The idea behind the school, according to Michael Garanzini, S.J., president of Loyola from 2001 to 2015, was to create an environment in which students who might fall through the cracks at larger, traditional four-year universities would have access to multiple layers of support, so that they would have the opportunity to thrive. Recruitment focused on historically marginalized communities, including Black and Latino populations, particularly students who would be the first in their families to attend college.

Steve Katsouros, S.J., was the first dean and ex-

Courtesy of Arrupe College

In the 10 years since Arrupe opened its doors, it has seen more than 600 students graduate.

ecutive director of Arrupe College. As he and his team built the institution, he said, they were guided by three concerns—retention, completion and graduation—that formed what he called his "north star."

"What are the obstacles that prevent students from being successful?" he remembers asking. "Let's identify those and let's address them."

The goal was not, Father Katsouros said, to create "a Loyola lite," but instead to form an institution that offered a solid education along with a community that supported students by helping them overcome a variety of challenges that could hinder their success, including mental health, food insecurity, legal challenges and technology needs.

Once the first class enrolled at Arrupe, in 2015, Father Katsouros said the message to them was: Help us build a community that can help you thrive.

"The secret sauce for Arrupe," he said, "is community and belonging."

That desire to create community drove nearly every decision in the school's early days.

Take the free breakfasts and lunches, available to every student at Arrupe. At first glance, the meals seem an obvious way to reduce costs for students. But they also serve a second purpose, bringing students together twice a day, where they can chat, get to know one another and strengthen their bonds.

That desire to create community drove nearly every decision.

Seeing What Is Possible

In addition to forming a supportive community, Father Katsouros said that addressing financial challenges head on proved to be a particularly important component for ensuring a student's success. Some students graduate from high school and, faced with the financial need of their families, choose to work full time. Giving up that stream of income to go to college feels impossible to some students. To address that, Father Katsouros said, class schedules at Arrupe were designed to give students the opportunity to work 20 to 25 hours per week, so that they can continue to earn money. Plus, students are given help developing the skills they will need to thrive in a traditional university.

That's why Jacquelyn Luz-Martinez ultimately chose Arrupe.

Ms. Luz-Martinez had initially planned to join the Navy. The fifth of seven children, she wanted some independence from her family. Her parents were supportive but could be overly involved. Most of her peers attended the neighborhood high school, but she took a different path, enrolling at Rickover Naval Academy, a public school in Chicago's Portage Park neighborhood.

"I wanted to be in a space where I could build myself from zero," she recalled, and the military school offered a fresh start. She had planned on joining the military after high school but changed her mind and set her sights on college.

Her father told her that his dream was for one of his children to attend Loyola University, situated not far from the family's home. Ms. Luz-Martinez applied and was accepted, but again chose a different path, deciding to enroll at Arrupe.

"I felt confident in my decision," she said. "The conflict that I had was that my dad wanted me to go to Loyola."

For Ms. Luz-Martinez, like many Arrupe students, finances played a part in her decision. Arrupe made more economic sense. But it was more than money. Ms. Luz-Martinez said she stepped back and considered where she was in her own educational journey and discerned that Arrupe made more sense for other reasons, too.

At the time, she didn't feel ready for the heavy course-load a traditional four-year college required. Plus, she realized there were unspoken rules about navigating college life that she couldn't rely on her family to teach her. Ms. Luz-Martinez's parents had both arrived in the United States from Mexico decades ago seeking work; her father is a roofer and her mother cleans houses. Ms. Luz-Martinez is the first in her family to attend college and lacked a larger network to go to with questions about school.

What ultimately sold Ms. Luz-Martinez on Arrupe was the promise that the entire community would be there for her, helping her understand the unwritten rules of college, and would be devoted to her success. That is why each week, she made the journey downtown.

Building a Community of Trust

Arrupe's location is intentional. It is located on Loyola's Water Tower Campus, a single building situated in the heart of Chicago's bustling Magnificent Mile. The campus is accessible to all parts of the city and its surrounding area. Nearby, tourists shop for Prada handbags, lunch at the RL Restaurant and check in to one of the best hotels in the world. In other buildings on either side of Arrupe, students study at Loyola's business and law schools. The location, easily accessible by train from the city's West and South Sides, helps Arrupe students imagine a future for themselves among Chicago's professional class.

When I visited Arrupe this past July, students were wrapping up their summer term. Unlike traditional four-year institutions, Arrupe divides its school year into trimesters, so that students can spread out their coursework and invest time in internships and jobs during the regular academic year. Jobs play an important part in Arrupe's curriculum; students are offered substantial help to find professional work experience while they are in school.

No detail is too small when it comes to forming community. The ID cards for Arrupe's roughly 350 students give no indication they are enrolled in a unique college within the larger university. They have gold and maroon borders, black text and "Loyola University Chicago" emblazoned prominently above the photo. Arrupe students are invited to Loyola events, and they are encouraged to use the libraries, dining halls and gyms. "Rambler" pride is instilled in them, and the goal is that they be treated no differently than any other Loyola student. That's to help make a transition from Arrupe to Loyola as seamless as possible. And for good reason: In 2025, according to Arrupe, 53 of its 69 graduating students transferred to Loyola to continue their education.

David Keys is the associate dean for student success

at Arrupe and comes from a long line of educators in his native Tennessee. He says he can trace his family's teaching roots back to an early Black Lutheran church school in Louisiana, and he knew from a young age he wanted to work in education. Six years ago, he began working in student affairs at Arrupe.

He said that perhaps the most important part of his job is developing a sense of trust between students and the institution, so that the students learn that the support team he oversees, as well as the broader Arrupe community, has their backs.

That begins at orientation, which takes place over two weeks and includes an overnight trip to Woodstock, Ill., about 50 miles from campus, which is intended to introduce the students to the skills they will need to thrive in college and to build a sense of community.

"We get them on a bus, we take them out to the middle of nowhere and say, 'Trust us,'" Mr. Keys said. "And I think a lot of trust is built within those two days."

In addition to the standard college orientation fare—ice breakers, introductions and team-building activities—students focus on setting goals and learning the basics of college life: How long to set aside each day for studying. How much reading will be required.

But students also learn about how to handle delicate situations outside of the classroom that might be particularly prevalent among this community: How to communicate with family who might not understand the rigors of college life. Seeking out help for things like rent or food. Where to turn for support amid upheaval caused by immigration raids.

The school has a pantry on campus, which students use as they wish. Classes are not scheduled for Wednesdays, to give students more time to work, and each student gets a free laptop.

In addition to some of the practical assistance Mr. Keys and his team provide students, there's also the emotional coaching. When students are readying to transfer to Loyola or another four-year institution, for example, some begin to question if they're actually up to par. Mr. Keys says the Arrupe community is constantly confronting feelings of self-doubt.

"We're always trying to figure out ways in which we can minimize that, or better prepare students as they move forward, to understand why they feel this way, to teach them how to use their own power and their own voice to change the narrative," he said. "Because they do belong there."

One way Arrupe does that? By hosting meetings with Loyola University faculty, to help introduce them to the concept of Arrupe and to secure some good will.

Jacquelyn Luz-Martinez is the first in her family to attend college, and she chose Arrupe College because she felt it would provide a supportive community.

Growing in Confidence

Ruby Hernandez is one of the students who have felt empowered by her time at Arrupe College.

Ms. Hernandez saw how her parents, both immigrants from Mexico, struggled financially while she was growing up. Her mother is a receptionist at an optometrist's office, and her father works in a car parts factory. When it came time to apply for college, Ms. Hernandez was elated that she gained admission to Loyola, which would fulfill her parents' hopes that she attend college and keep her relatively close to their home in Waukegan, Ill. But while she was given scholarships, she would still need to take on debt to finance her education. That is partly why she chose to enroll at Arrupe.

"When you're from a lower-income family, that's what it ends up coming down to," she said.

Attending Arrupe was also something of a family affair. Ms. Hernandez's older brother, who now works for a soccer club in California, graduated from Arrupe before moving on to Loyola, as did her older cousin.

At Arrupe, Ms. Hernandez joined the entrepreneurship club and attended events at Loyola. She joined the nail club, where she made friends who bonded while choosing new shades of nail polish, and attended seminars on financial literacy.

John Cooke graduated from Arrupe College in 2023 and then transferred to Loyola University Chicago. He plans to become a pediatric neurosurgeon.

That exposure to finance set her on a career path toward accounting. Those classes gave her the confidence to ask her parents questions about money, which is how she learned that her mom had been saving for Ms. Hernandez's college education since she was a child. But she hadn't invested the money, instead keeping in a low-yield savings account. Had her mother known more about compound interest and the value of stocks, Ms. Hernandez said, she could have made her money work harder. Ms. Hernandez said a lack of financial acumen is a common experience in immigrant communities, and she hopes that she can use the skills she has learned at Arrupe and Loyola to help others.

"It was always a constant worry about paying for everything," she recalled.

Ms. Hernandez said that even though she thrived at both her high school, Cristo Rey, and at Arrupe, she felt "imposter syndrome" when she transferred to Quinlan School of Business at Loyola in 2023 to finish her bachelor's degree.

"My whole life, I've always gone to diverse schools," she said, "and that was the first time being in an environment where it wasn't as diverse."

While Ms. Hernandez pointed repeatedly to the financial incentives for choosing Arrupe, she said what sticks with her about her time there was the way professors and administrators cared for the students. The day I met her, she was back on campus to return a laptop the school had loaned her to use at Quinlan. It was gestures like that, she said, that drove everyone at Arrupe.

"Nothing is going to stop you from succeeding," she said.

Students learn how to handle delicate situations outside of the classroom.

Success is evident from Arrupe's statistics, especially when compared to other two-year schools.

About 40 percent of Arrupe's students graduate in two years; of those, 73 percent go on to study for their bachelor's degree. Those numbers are dramatically higher than at most community colleges. While collecting accurate data about community college graduation rates can be tricky, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that only about 39 percent of students graduate from two-year institutions within six years of enrollment. The number of students Arrupe and similar schools serve is relatively modest compared to the millions of Americans enrolled in community colleges and other two-year schools, but its model is being replicated at other universities.

Father Katsouros left Arrupe and started the Come to Believe Network in 2020, with the goal of expanding the Arrupe model. In addition to Arrupe at Loyola University in Chicago, three other schools are part of that network: Dougherty Family College at the University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul, Minn.; Seton College at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in the Bronx; and Founder's College at Butler University in Indianapolis.

Other Jesuit universities are adding two-year programs as well, including Fairfield University, which opened Fairfield Bellarmine in Bridgeport, Conn., in 2023; and Boston College, whose Messina College in Brookline, Mass., completed its first year in 2025.

A Network of Support

In the 10 years since Arrupe opened its doors, it has seen more than 600 students graduate, and many even come back to mentor current students.

John Cooke graduated from Arrupe in 2023 and, like most of his peers, then transferred to Loyola. He plans to take three years to finish his bachelor's degree and has dreams of becoming a pediatric neurosurgeon.

The day we spoke, he was getting ready for his off-campus job, working with children with autism as a registered behavioral therapist.

Mr. Cooke said he initially was unsure about college. He had a full-time job at a staffing agency and thought he would continue to work after high school, save up money and perhaps enroll at a traditional four-year school later.

But he said his grandmother, Paulette McDavis, had always prioritized education, making him and his brother travel from their home in the Chicago neighborhood of Englewood to a charter school downtown, "where all the other smart kids are," as he remembers her saying. When she heard that her grandson planned to take time off after high school, she contacted his guidance counselor, who then suggested to Mr. Cooke that he look into Arrupe. Mr. Cooke saw the strong community and the flexibility afforded to students and decided to enroll.

Mr. Cooke lived in campus housing both years he studied at Arrupe, and he said the school treated students with respect, helping them to reach their full potential. He looks back with awe that he was able to get so much one-on-one time not only with faculty and student advisers, but also with deans and other top-level administrators. That, he said, helped give him confidence to excel at Loyola and to find opportunities outside of school, such as when he spent time last summer studying at the University of Iowa in the radiation oncology department.

Looking back at the trajectory of his life so far, Mr. Cooke said he remains grateful to the team of educators and administrators at Arrupe and that he now helps other students at Loyola as part of the Rambler Brotherhood Project. He said he also acts as a booster for Arrupe, encouraging curious students to give it a chance.

"There are so many different, diverse people at Arrupe that can speak with you, just relate to your background, get you more involved, no matter the kind of background that you're coming from, which was really important for me," Mr. Cooke said. "Coming from a lower-income neighborhood, not growing up with any parents, I was able to find people at Arrupe to kind of play that role for me, who continue to play that role now."

Martin Connell, S.J., took the helm as dean of Arrupe College last year. His desk is covered with open books and stacks of papers, so we met in an adjacent conference room. He said that even though he is relatively new to Arrupe, what struck him immediately was how committed to the mission the faculty and staff are. Still, external factors present all kinds of challenges.

Martin Connell, S.J., is dean of Arrupe College.

The toughest part of his job, Father Connell said, is figuring out how best to support the students who need the most help—students, for instance, whose lives are touched by immigration issues or who are facing financially difficult situations at home.

"I can put out an anodyne email or public statements, but it really comes down to the care that students feel from professors and from staff members," he said. "From my own encounters with students, they're really feeling supported."

Then there are wider demographic challenges facing higher education more broadly. About 75 percent of Arrupe's student body is Latino, and the school is hoping to diversify the student body, particularly by enrolling more Black students.

Father Connell acknowledged that Arrupe is having trouble recruiting Black men to the school, a challenge he said is prevalent at many other colleges and universities. Arrupe has traditionally recruited at Catholic high schools in the Chicago area, which have a high population of Latino students. While the school has made increased efforts to recruit at more predominantly Black high schools, he said they are now reaching out to less traditional channels for recruitment, including faith leaders from Protestant and Muslim communities.

Ruby Hernandez said a lack of financial acumen is a common experience in immigrant communities, and she hopes that she can use the skills she has learned at Arrupe College and Loyola University Chicago to help others.

Then there are the financial challenges.

Keeping Arrupe affordable is essential for living out its mission. Tuition is listed at about $14,000 annually, and according to the school, 96 percent of students who graduated in 2024 left with no student debt. The school makes sure that students maximize available grants and scholarships and then fundraises to make up as much unmet need as possible. They are able to hold down costs by sharing some of the back-end administrative support with Loyola University and by working closely with admissions and financial aid teams from the wider university.

While the majority of Arrupe graduates continue their education at a four-year institution, with most of them choosing Loyola, Father Connell said the school has to do a better job preparing students for the workforce if they choose not to continue to a four-year institution.

During my visit to campus, I met up with Mr. Torres, the Arrupe student whose family had moved from Colombia to Elgin, Ill. He gave me a tour of the campus and said he had completed his classes and was awaiting graduation in August. He had secured his spot at Loyola and was looking forward to the transition in the fall. He earned a full-tuition scholarship and plans to major in finance. He hopes to work for a nonprofit organization, helping marginalized communities.

‘Nothing is going to stop you from succeeding.’

He explained how his experience at Arrupe helped him feel he could succeed in college and beyond: the work experiences, professors who helped him feel like he was a valued member of the community, his taking an ethics class in Spanish, his fellowship. It all added up to something more than he might have encountered at a larger school.

Part of that, he said, is because the school took such an interest in each student.

“Communication is so important here,” he said. “If you don’t communicate with your professor, they don’t know what’s going on with your life. But if they know what you’re going through, they will help you.”

Like many students, Mr. Torres struggled at first to find his place at Arrupe, describing those first days as “confusing.” His commute, nearly 90 minutes each way, was taking a toll. He was not able to spend much time on campus outside of class and felt he was missing out. Then the school helped him secure a dorm on campus, a coveted living situation.

The school offers only about 38 dorm rooms, and students are required to maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average and meet regularly with student affairs staff to keep their housing. Arrupe administrators are looking to expand programming for students who live on campus, to teach skills about independent living. Given the successes that students who live in dorms report—generally higher G.P.A.s and more opportunities to get involved on campus—the school is trying to secure more housing.

Housing allowed Mr. Torres the opportunity to become more involved. He signed up to tutor other students in math and signed up to be part of the school’s L.G.B.T.Q. alliance.

Concentrating his studies in finance, he participated in a fellowship that took him each week to the marble-lined hallways of Wintrust Bank downtown. The school’s special emphasis on work, and the experience of seeing how a major bank worked from the inside helped Mr. Torres imagine possibilities for himself.

“They gave us opportunities and they helped us believe in ourselves,” he said of Arrupe’s career services office.

He added, “everything feels like a little family.”

Empowered to Ask

Ms. Luz-Martinez, meanwhile, said she was empowered to ask questions and get the support she needed. "Once I got to college," she said, her outlook shifted from worrying about what she did not know to finding answers for herself. "Even if I don't know, I'm going to make it my mission to know."

In giant white letters with gold shadows and set against a maroon background, "Cura Personalis" is emblazoned on the wall of a student lounge at Arrupe. A Latin phrase meaning "care for the whole person," the concept appealed to Ms. Luz-Martinez, and it is something she said she has felt during her time at Arrupe. "I didn't feel like I had the tools" to succeed at a four-year college, she recalled, but at Arrupe, she had the ability and access needed to sharpen those skills.

She recalled the first college-level class she ever took, a philosophy course, and the panic she felt when the professor assigned the first writing assignment. She said knowing that her professors shared a background similar with her own helped her feel at ease asking for help. So she reached out to her professor, who suggested she turn to a writing fellow.

"I asked them, 'How do I go about even starting this paper? How do I make my ideas connect?'" she recalled.

Once she gained more confidence, Ms. Luz-Martinez paid it forward, signing up to be a peer educator so she could help other students succeed.

Ms. Luz-Martinez said that Arrupe also encourages faculty and staff to take seriously the challenges students face. Her family includes people who are undocumented, which has been stressful in the face of an aggressive crackdown by the federal government in recent months. A personal crisis affected her grades, threatening her high G.P.A. Rather than retreat and withdraw, she sought the counsel of professors and administrators who helped her rebound. She said she is not sure that she would have received that kind of intensive support at a larger university.

When it came time to choose a major—Arrupe offers associate degrees in liberal arts, social and behavioral sciences, and business administration—Ms. Luz-Martinez sought out advice from the school's career advisor. She was drawn to criminal justice and embarked on an internship at Loyola's law school, which is situated on the same downtown campus. There, she learned the role that social workers play in helping incarcerated people reintegrate into wider society. Already involved in helping in the broader community by volunteering with campus ministry to offer food, clothing and toiletries to unhoused people in Chicago, she decided social work was her goal and chose the social and behavioral sciences track.


Alan Epstein

After graduating from Arrupe College, Sebastian Torres earned a full-tuition scholarship to Loyola University Chicago and plans to major in finance.

One of the ancillary benefits of studying at Arrupe is that the skills learned by students can benefit their families as well. Ms. Luz-Martinez said she took advantage of the therapy offered to students. The college not only offers the services free of charge, but has two mental health professionals on staff, whose offices are readily accessible. Ms. Luz-Martinez said she learned the value of therapy and then suggested to her mom that she, as well as her siblings, might benefit, too.

Following graduation in August, Ms. Luz-Martinez is preparing to enroll at Loyola University. She said she is well prepared for the transition, even if she harbors some nerves about coming from Arrupe and what others might think.

Asked if her father, who had dreamed of one of his children attending Loyola, was happy to learn she would continue her studies there, Ms. Luz-Martinez did not have to think about it at all: "Oh, yes. He cried."

Michael O'Loughlin *is the executive director of Outreach and former national correspondent for* ***America****.* *Reporting for this story was supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.*

Rowing for Their Lives

Teamwork at this Catholic school begins on the water

By Kevin Clarke

He is swinging the truck and trailer through the narrow streets of Newburgh, N.Y., with remarkable aplomb, relying on occasional instructions shouted from the students in the back to negotiate particularly tricky moments.

Pulling a trailer loaded with a crowd of rowing shells through city streets is not for the faint of heart; a couple of the boats, four seaters, are more than 40 feet long. But Father Mark Connell has been navigating this trailer around Newburgh for years, and he betrays no fear, cheerily carrying on a commentary about the history of rowing at the San Miguel Academy while cutting corners across this Hudson River town a 60-mile drive north of Manhattan.

Boat delivery "is the one thing that I can do that nobody else can. It's the one thing that really makes me valuable," he says with a laugh, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

That is, of course, just not true. There are probably other San Miguel parents or teachers—people with nerves of steel—capable of hauling the academy's boats to rivers and regattas across the Northeast, but what Father Connell has created and sustained in Newburgh is something few others might have been able to.

Father Connell is the director of the San Miguel Program, which runs San Miguel Academy, a Catholic middle school in Newburgh. He is also the head coach of the school's rowing team. Father Connell conceived of the school while looking to create a positive space in a Rust Belt city struggling to escape a mob of negatives—poverty, crime and gun violence among them.

The San Miguel Program represents a year-round effort to keep S.M.A. students engaged in learning with afterschool, summer and other enrichment initiatives that augment the academy's efforts. The program offers a 12-year commitment to each student and their families, supporting them from 5th grade through college.

Before the various successes of San Miguel's rowers made local news, Newburgh most often figured in Hudson

Courtesy of San Miguel Academy

Students from San Miguel Academy row at the 2024 U.S. Rowing Youth National Championships in Sarasota, Fla.

Valley headlines because of drug arrests or shooting incidents. The once vibrant river town had fallen on hard times by the 1970s as manufacturing jobs, shops and residents fled and blight and drug gangs moved in. In 2011 Newburgh was described as "the murder capital of New York" in New York magazine. The handle stuck and the city's unfortunate reputation seemed sealed.

Father Connell had been handling various teaching and parish assignments in the Archdiocese of New York when, in 1998, he became chaplain and the director of campus ministry at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, where he also worked as an adjunct professor in philosophy and theology. Part of that teaching assignment was connecting Mount Saint Mary students to the lives of the people in Newburgh.

He was troubled by the poverty he encountered and the hopelessness it engendered. When he shared his concern with parishioners at his weekend assignment at the Church of St. John and St. Mary in the well-to-do suburb of Chappaqua, just across the river in Westchester County but economic worlds away from Newburgh, connections began to be made.

Father Connell's supporters in Westchester agreed that education was the best way to break generational cycles of poverty. These parishioners began networking and fundraising, pulling together the human and fiscal resources needed to open the San Miguel Academy in a former Catholic parish school in 2006 as an all-boys school serving students in fifth through eighth grades. Some of those founders continue to guide the program as members of its board of trustees. The San Miguel Program purchased the school property outright in 2020, the year San Miguel also went coed.

The academy is part of the NativityMiguel Coalition, a U.S. and Canadian network of faith-based school programs providing "financially accessible" education to students

San Miguel students have come to appreciate how rowing can get them on a path to success.

from low-income families in underserved communities.

The San Miguel Program currently serves over 250 students and their families. The San Miguel Academy covers the cost of tuition, supplies and most other related expenses for most students and accepts family contributions based on what individual families can manage. All of the students at the academy qualify for the federal school lunch program, and the school maintains a fund to help its graduates through high school and college.

The rowing team is a piece of Father Connell's strategy to create opportunities for Newburgh's young people, but he is convinced it is the kind of sport that can have a transformative effect anywhere it is tried. At San Miguel everyone rows, whether on the Hudson River as a member of one of the school's rowing teams or on an ergometer, a fancy name for an indoor rowing machine, in the school gym.

While surveying the rows of "ergs" that have taken over the school's gym, Father Connell assures, "We 'erg' every day."

The older students who want to join the boats on the Hudson River have to prove themselves capable of surviving the inevitable capsizing or other misadventure on the water. They may be tossed overboard by an out-of-sync oar stroke; the San Miguel students have to be ready to swim, not sink.

San Miguel students also have come to appreciate how rowing can get them on a path to success. Many receive rowing scholarships that take them to regional high schools or faraway boarding schools.

But even before those potential outcomes, rowing teaches the San Miguel students teamwork and gets them away for a little while from the gritty world many inhabit in Newburgh. San Miguel boats typically compete against teams from fancier zip codes in rowing regattas in Philadelphia, Saratoga Springs, Hartford and other cities.

David Jimenez, who was 14 and an eighth grader when **America** spoke with him in May 2024, tries to explain what it is that he likes the most about rowing. "It's calmer in the water," he decides. "In Newburgh, there's a lot of violence, but when you are out here on the water, it's just you and your friends having a good time."

His classmate Francisco Chihuahua agrees. Life in Newburgh can be troubled by gangs and guns, and rowing takes him away from that, but he also values how the sport "has made me a better person," he says. "It's made me more responsible.... It's personally made me stronger, physically and mentally."

"When I'm rowing on the ergs or on the water, it's really, really hard," he says, "but I have my coxswain," the teammate who sets the pace, "and my friends supporting me no matter what happens."

Rowing "helps you with everything," David adds.

Mackenzie Nihill is a former teacher at San Miguel; she left in the fall of 2024 for a job at a public school. Her preteen students have seen a lot growing up in Newburgh, she says. "A lot of drugs and gang problems; some of the things that I know that they hear and they see is a lot for any 10-year-old."

But rowing is more than an escape from all that. For some kids it is the start of physical and mental accomplishments they had to be taught they could achieve; for others it offers a first opportunity to work cooperatively toward a common goal.

That experience carries over into the classroom, Ms. Nihill says. "They have learned how getting along and working together gets them a better result. And I think rowing does that. You have to be doing it all together."

A Quad's Christening

On this afternoon excursion in May 2024, it is not long before Newburgh's streets are in the rear view and the placid greenery of a picture postcard boat landing in the nearby village of Cornwall-on-Hudson lies ahead of us, a remarkably different perspective for these students in sixth through eighth grades. Today they are off to Donahue Memorial Park for the blessing and launching of two newly donated boats.

The kids pile out of vans and trucks and head for the trailer, where they unload a number of boats in a rush of organized chaos that quickly results in the assembly of rowing sculls for both the boys' and the girls' teams. The middle-schoolers have little trouble rigging the boats themselves and getting them into the river.

Among them is the Lucy D, a brand new four-seat boat (also known as a "quad") that has been donated by a longtime supporter of the academy and Founders Council member, Patrick Donnelly, named in honor of his wife. Father Connell takes a few moments to bless the new racing scull before its noncompetitive maiden run across the Hudson.

On hand to welcome the students at Donahue Park is the mayor of Cornwall-on-Hudson, Jim Gagliano. (This April, his term as mayor ended, and he left Orange County politics.) He seems authentically delighted to welcome the San Miguel kids as they prepare for the blessing and launch

San Miguel Academy students row on the Hudson near Donahue Memorial Park in Cornwall-on-Hudson.

Kevin Clarke

of the Lucy D. That is likely because he knows how far they have come to get to this boat launch.

Before he made speeches as a politician, Mr. Gagliano served in a capacity that directly connected him to the students from San Miguel: He spent 25 years working as an F.B.I. agent, at one point heading up a task force devoted to driving the gangs out of Newburgh.

Neighborhood gangs were being pushed out by national criminal networks that local young men and women connected with while incarcerated. As big cities like New York instituted what would become model strategies to shut down crime during the 1990s, the national gangs saw smaller cities like Newburgh as safer arenas of opportunity. Turf wars quickly created chaos.

"Kids here [were] getting shot and killed in the crossfire, and we [had] to pay attention to it," he says. "It was a tough time for Newburgh." He led the Hudson Valley Safe Streets Task Force for four years between 2008 and 2012.

Mr. Gagliano first got a chance to observe the work of the San Miguel Academy in 2011. "I was in awe watching what they did there. I was very, very impressed," he remembers.

"Rowing was the carrot that got the kids in the door. And then you give them the education, and you give them the structure and the discipline; that really rounds it out," he says.

The F.B.I. task force chief became a fixture on Father Connell's fundraising tours of Westchester, providing potential donors with "an idea of what it was like on the streets [in Newburgh] and what these kids were facing. And the folks were very, very generous."

San Miguel rowers needed them to be. "With basketball, you find a piece of asphalt, you put up a hoop 10 feet high, you roll out a couple of worn-out basketballs, and everybody's good," Mr. Gagliano says. Rowing requires more logistics and capital investment, he says. The donor base for San Miguel that Father Connell was building has become essential to the success of San Miguel rowers and the academy itself.

When he became mayor in 2021, Mr. Gagliano was happy to allow the academy to use Donahue Park for boat launching and river training. "And believe it or not, as mayor, I got complaints about damn near anything and everything, but no one's ever complained to me about San Miguel Academy and the kids being down there," he said. "We're rooting for the kids and Father Mark. And the track record of San Miguel Academy, with getting kids into colleges, has just been phenomenal."

Standing Out, but Standing Together

Newburgh surely retains its share of civic challenges. In 2023, the city had a population of about 29,000 people. One in four residents lives below the poverty line, a rate 72 percent higher than the national average. More than 40 percent of Newburgh's residents are eligible for Medicaid. But crime is down, especially related to gun violence, and

When they are on the road for a regatta, the girls' and boys' rowing teams from San Miguel stand out.

real estate values in recent years have shot up.

About 22 percent of Newburgh residents were born outside the United States, well above the national average of about 14 percent. Fifty-one percent of Newburgh's residents are Hispanic; 24 percent are Black; and 22 percent are non-Hispanic white. Most of the San Miguel students are immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants from Mexico and other nations of Latin America.

Do they feel a little bit like outsiders at competitions that are often hundreds of miles and several tax brackets away from Newburgh? Emiliano Cervantes, a seventh grader, says: "We don't think about it. We just put our heads in the race and do our best."

But Francisco, who serves as his boat's coxswain, the team member who steers the boat and manages its rowing rhythm, acknowledges that it can be a little daunting when San Miguel goes up against more experienced and better financed teams that can monopolize the accolades at competitions.

"I just tell my boat that no matter what happens, that we gave it our all," Francisco says, "and we should be proud of that and [know] that we can do better next time." In fact, the San Miguel kids are doing pretty well already. In 2024, for the third year in a row, San Miguel rowers qualified for the under-15 national U.S. Rowing Youth Championship in Sarasota, Fla. One San Miguel team finished in fifth place and another in seventh.

Arshay Cooper joined the San Miguel students at the boat dedication, offering a pep talk that doubled as a personal testimonial to rowing. Mr. Cooper has achieved a degree of fame in the small world of U.S. rowing. He was a member of a rowing team out of Manly High School in Chicago that was the first all-Black rowing team in the nation. He wrote *A Most Beautiful Thing*, a memoir of that experience, and used its acclaim to begin the A Most Beautiful Thing Inclusion Fund.

The fund has been essential to the expansion of rowing at the academy. Mr. Cooper's group has either provided the financing directly or helped secure grant money from other sources that has sponsored coaching and delivered a gymnasium full of the ergometer rowing machines the San

Everybody "ergs" at San Miguel Academy in Newburgh.

Miguel kids use for off-river training.

Mr. Cooper clearly sees himself in these young rowers. His teen years, growing up in a troubled neighborhood in Chicago, easily parallels what the San Miguel kids experience in Newburgh.

"Just hearing gunshots when I slept and losing friends because of gun violence," he recalls, "mother not being around half the time. Father never around, not doing well at school, being chased, being bullied." Then he was introduced to rowing and "everything changed."

The kids surrounding Mr. Cooper on the dark grass of this riverside park do not have to strain to imagine what he is talking about. Like he did, these students are seeking an escape on the water, rowing for their lives.

"This was the only sport that calmed the storm in me, being out there, developing that magical rhythm with your teammates, sitting tall, learning how to breathe...leading the person behind you, following the person in front of you," he says. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me. This is what that boat does."

The sport has meant much to him; his delight in watching the kids head off onto the river pulling oars on their new boats is contagious. "Talent is everywhere," Mr. Cooper says, "but access and opportunity are not," explaining his determination to create more chances for disadvantaged kids to have a shot at team rowing.

Jency Pineda, a San Miguel eighth grader, says other kids in town do not quite understand her love of rowing. "Because they're more into sports like soccer or basketball,

The students at San Miguel Academy know that off-loading a boat is not for the faint of heart.

and they think it's just crazy to be out in the river," she says, adding quietly, "but I think it's beautiful."

Even more than the natural beauty she encounters on the Hudson, she has come to appreciate the new opportunities and perspectives that rowing has opened up for her. "I think beyond what other kids my age think for my future," she says. That's something her parents, who came to the United States from El Salvador "with nothing," also value about rowing.

San Miguel connected Jency with a boarding school in Virginia, St. Margaret's, which she began attending in September 2024. Pondering that upcoming big move in her life, which at the time of our conversation was just a few months away, she says, "I do get nervous sometimes, but I'm looking forward to it."

Rowing remains something of an elite pastime, but more and more children and teens from all kinds of backgrounds are finding their way to it. Mr. Cooper too had been an outlier when he lifted his first oar. It can be tough on these young people, he admits.

"There's a lot of code switching," Mr. Cooper says. "'Can I be me? Can I be myself?' And sometimes people are just staring at you...not speaking to you." It can feel "like an away game all the time."

But the kids, he knows, "have each other" to depend on in such moments. They also have a commitment from the school they can count on. In its promotional material, San Miguel attests that it is committed to "changing the trajectory of our students' lives."

That is no mere public relations; admission is accompanied by enrollment in the school's Graduate Success Program, a 12-year effort that will follow these middle school students all the way through high school, college or wherever their post-San Miguel years takes them.

The program boasts a 98 percent high school graduation rate. San Miguel students are performing at a variety of challenging programs, including "independent day and boarding secondary schools and accelerated public school programs." After high school, San Miguel graduates "pursue the path that's right for them, including college, trade school, and the military."

Rowing is a component of the program that ties body and mind and discipline and effort together. Success is an expectation, not a surprise.

"I want to get into a good high school and college, and row in high school and college, and I hope to row in the Olympics," Emiliano says.

The other students join in, talking about scholarships to high schools and colleges, graduating with diplomas from Ivy League institutions, and then coming home to Newburgh to help their working-class parents retire with dignity. It does not sound like wishful thinking.

Kevin Clarke *is* ***America****'s chief correspondent.*

U.S. Catholics Join the Church in Guatemala to Provide Safe Shelter to the Suffering Poor

Cross Catholic Outreach has launched a major effort to provide safe housing for destitute families in rural Guatemalan villages. It is asking U.S. Catholics to become part of that life-transforming mission of mercy through its "Be Someone's Miracle" campaign.

The U.S.-based ministry, which has been recognized by the Vatican for its relief and development work in more than 90 countries, has a goal to build 224 storm-resistant homes to benefit 1,164 family members in 15 communities. It also seeks to help needy families with nutritional, educational and health care needs. (See the related story on the opposite page.)

While this appeal has many technical objectives, Cross Catholic Outreach President Michele Sagarino is focused on the individual families that will be impacted.

"This is really about Santiago and Carmen and families like theirs. The challenges they face every day are heartbreaking. Santiago, Carmen and their five precious daughters live in a flimsy dwelling and fear for their health because rain often floods their house, turning the dirt floor to mud. It's also easy for vermin like scorpions and rats to crawl through the gaps in its walls," she said. "It's a situation that must grieve God — so it should be unacceptable to us too!"

According to Sagarino, Cross Catholic Outreach is working alongside Catholic leaders in the dioceses of Santa Rosa de Lima, Sololá-Chimaltenango and Suchitepéquez-Retalhuleu to find solutions for families like Santiago and Carmen's. The plans they have developed can produce life-transforming results — if U.S. Catholics will step forward to help support their work.

"Our primary goal is to construct durable, concrete-block houses for the poorest families," she explained. "The homes will have two bedrooms and a common area that can serve as a dining room and living room. Each will have a concrete foundation and walls, a galvanized metal roof, a sanitary latrine, a secure metal door and shuttered windows, providing a level of comfort and safety these families have never experienced."

Because the design is simple, the construction of one of these homes costs less than $9,000.

"That is a large sacrificial gift for one donor or family to make, but many have done that and were so happy they got involved. Most had been looking for something specific and significant they could do to bless others," Sagarino said. "This outreach was exactly what they were looking for because a home does more than offer safe shelter. It gives families a foundation for building a better life."

Father Alejandro Garcia stands with the Ramirez family outside their leaky makeshift home — one of the many in his Diocese of Santa Rosa de Lima that he hopes to replace with the help of Cross Catholic Outreach supporters.

Serving the poor through the local Church also has important spiritual benefits, according to Sagarino.

"When people learn local Church leaders love them and want a better life for them, it strengthens their faith and restores their hope," she said. "Many have felt isolated and unseen. They need to know we care about them."

Father Alejandro Garcia, director of the local Caritas ministry in the Diocese of Santa Rosa de Lima, has these words of encouragement for U.S. Catholics: "We pray for you. We pray that you continue to be generous, that you continue to be a valiant hand to those who are so needy among us. As Jesus said, 'What you have done for the least of these, you have done also for me.'"

Readers interested in supporting Cross Catholic Outreach's housing programs and other outreaches can contribute through the ministry brochure inserted in this issue or send tax-deductible gifts to: Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC06058, P.O. Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. Those interested in making gifts on a monthly basis can indicate that on the brochure in order to become a Mission Partner, or write "Monthly Mission Partner" on mailed checks to be contacted about setting up those arrangements.

Guatemalan Families Living in Extreme Poverty Look to the Church for Renewed Faith and Hope

In the rural Guatemalan community of Laguna Seca, a cluster of dirt-floor homes with scrap metal roofs sits in a low spot of a valley. Steep hillsides send floods of water that inundate these makeshift shelters during the rainy season, turning floors into mud and soaking families' belongings.

Brenda and René have raised their daughter, Ana, in one of these unstable dwellings, rebuilding time and again as storms wreak havoc. Inside the house, a wood fire poses an extra health hazard. Looking at the soot-blackened sheet metal ceiling, Brenda lamented, "Imagine what our lungs look like!"

Ana is a bright grade-schooler and takes this challenging way of life in stride. But after she put the family's new chicks into their cage, she sat on the dirt floor next to them and imagined what it would be like to live in a home like her dollhouse with a solid roof and floor. She made her own clay figurines to stand in that toy house and enjoy the security within.

"It's heartbreaking to meet children like Ana who have never known what it's like to be protected from the elements. In rural Guatemala, many families are trapped in extreme poverty, with few opportunities to improve their situation," explained Michele Sagarino, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, a trusted Catholic relief and development ministry recognized by the Vatican for its effective humanitarian and spiritual programs. "When we witnessed the extreme needs of Ana's family and so many others, we felt compelled to provide help — and our hope is that compassionate Catholics in the U.S. will want to get involved too."

Sagarino said that many of the communities Cross Catholic Outreach wants to serve can only be reached by dirt roads. These villages have little or no infrastructure, so parents there are raising their children without running water, suitable sanitation facilities or reliable electricity.

Most of the men and women in these rural areas are subsistence farmers who work long hours planting, tending and harvesting corn and beans, defenseless against unpredictable weather. Their hard work may provide simple meals for their children, but it is rarely enough to fully cover their housing, health and educational expenses.

Families without access to land for farming face even greater challenges. They typically take work as day laborers, earning about $10 a day when work is available. The Church in Guatemala reports that those families typically earn between $125 and $190 a month — far too little to afford adequate housing. Ultimately, these families must make do with what they have, cobbling together plastic sheets, scrap metal and wood planks to build flimsy, unsafe shacks.

"Our ultimate goal is to improve living conditions in those communities. We want to help families break free from the cycle of poverty that has plagued them for generations," Sagarino said. "We've learned that providing safe housing plays a major part in improving lives, so we are making that our priority. As families move into safer, sturdier homes, their hope is restored and they have a foundation for building a better life."

Cross Catholic Outreach has been partnering with Guatemalan dioceses since 2013 to help rescue families from the poverty that keeps them malnourished, sick and devoid of hope. With the help of U.S. supporters, the ministry has built more than 800 homes in Guatemala, in addition to providing educational scholarships for children, microenterprise investments for adults, feeding programs for the malnourished and more.

Through its "Be Someone's Miracle" appeal, Cross Catholic Outreach is asking compassionate U.S. Catholics to serve as God's instrument of mercy by funding the construction of homes for the poor and by helping struggling families in three Guatemalan dioceses through other important development and spiritual programs. In 2026, it aims to surpass 1,000 homes built since it began work in Guatemala.

Ana's dollhouse represents her hope for a safe home in the remote village of Laguna Seca, Guatemala.

"The homes we will build are simple but sturdy, secure and sanitary," Sagarino said. "They will change the lives of these families in profound ways, and the benefits will be lasting. Generational poverty has been a major factor in the hardships these families have been facing. Opening this door to generational prosperity will be a major step in the right direction. My prayer is that Catholics in the U.S. will want to play a role in that restoration of hope. Imagine what a powerful testimony of God's love that would be!"

How To Help

To fund Cross Catholic Outreach's effort to help the poor worldwide, use the postage-paid brochure inserted in this newspaper or mail your gift to Cross Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC06058, PO Box 97168, Washington, DC 20090-7168. The brochure also includes instructions for becoming a Mission Partner and making a regular monthly donation to this cause.

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

Veiling and Unveiling

The life and art of Corita Kent

By Lauren Tassone

When 18-year-old Corita Kent entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary women's religious order in Los Angeles in 1936, she likely never imagined the career that awaited her. Despite her formation in a culture and an institution that expected women religious to be veiled and serve in conventional roles, she became an influential artist. Her life and work were in constant conversation, revealing a dialogue of transformation that was animated by the manipulation of the veil—by a process of veiling and unveiling.

Over the next few decades, Kent experienced an artistic breakthrough largely made possible through her encounter with serigraphy, or screen printing. She became an accomplished serigraph artist whose "artwork evolved from using figurative and religious imagery to incorporating advertising images and slogans, popular song lyrics, biblical verses, and literature," according to the Corita Art Center. As she maximized her relevance to audiences both religious and secular, she and her work also emerged as symbols of political resilience.

"let the sun shine," by Corita Kent (1968)
Corita Art Center

When analyzing Kent's work, it is vital to understand the role of the veil in both the literal sense of the word and as a metaphor, in her wardrobe and in her medium. It is also crucial to consider the various historical, sociopolitical, religious and personal contexts that surrounded her throughout her career. As a veiled artist, Kent interacted with a veiled medium. In turn, the veiled medium influenced her and her artistic output. Through her cultural technique of veiling, Kent communicated innovative and nuanced ideas. In the process, she unveiled herself.

As a Roman Catholic sister, Kent lived in community with other women who also took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, she and her I.H.M. sisters also wore full religious habits with veils. To better understand Kent's situated perspective and imagine her as an artist at work, we must recall her circumstances as a woman in a religious order who chose to wear the veil each day. In addition to their function in women's religious orders, veils play an important role in a variety of religious contexts, from their presence in ceremonial attire to their use in concealing objects and/or spaces that are considered sacred.

The veil has also gained increasing relevance in the field of art history. In an article for The Art Bulletin titled "Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches," Jacqueline Jung discusses how the veil has played a crucial role in structuring sacred architectural spaces. While it may seem that veils serve to hide, or *divide*, Jung argues otherwise. Through examining choir screens in Gothic churches, Jung suggests that veils have the potential to "[unite] the discrete spaces of choir and nave while simultaneously asserting the integrity of each spatial unit.... [The] screens as architectural structures... are fundamentally complex things fraught with paradox,

markers of a highly charged site of transition and passage."

Veils also operate as sites of passage. For Kent, the presence, modification or absence of the veil in her wardrobe throughout her lifetime signaled moments of transition and resilience. Her manipulation of materials onto the fabric of the silkscreen also communicated such moments.

Proper Matter

An early assignment for Kent was teaching primary school, a common apostolate for women religious at the time. Despite Kent's limited training in education, she was a natural at teaching. She was also a talented artist. Administrators at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles took notice and invited her to join the faculty of the art department.

Kent began working with silkscreens in 1951 while obtaining a master's degree in art history from the University of Southern California. During this time, most of her work featured figurative and religious imagery. But the content of her prints evolved over time, partly because of the opportunities that stemmed from the medium itself.

Whether silk, cotton or polyester, the material involved in screen printing is always a framed fabric that the artist uses to transfer ink onto an underlying surface, except in the areas that they have made impermeable by some blocking mechanism (e.g., an image or text cutout, a stencil or glue). The serigrapher can layer ink using several screens to produce a multifaceted print that incorporates assorted colors, images and texts.

When analyzing Kent's art, it is important to consider how it is constituted through the qualities of the raw materials involved in its creation. This concept, known as medium specificity, comes from the work of the American essayist and art critic Clement Greenberg, who argues that "the unique and proper area of competence of each art [coincides] with all that [is] unique in the nature of its medium." That is, there is something about the nature and materiality of the screen (in particular, the screen in its meshed and translucent form) that allows it to operate as a veil, creating the conditions for the veiling and unveiling of different kinds of content.

While the medium in serigraphy is literally a screen, it also operates as a veil because it can provide the artist with the terrain needed to obscure and reveal—in other words, to veil and unveil. The serigrapher can use the screen to develop layered pieces saturated with multiple meanings. Resulting prints, then, are mediatic veils of their own.

Veiling as a Cultural Technique

As a serigraph artist, Kent "combined, distorted, and juxtaposed sources all around her," in the words of the Corita Art Center's introductory video. For example, Kent's 1967 work "handle with care" exemplifies her use of commercial language alongside popular poetry and religious messaging.

The print includes large bright green text that reads, "HANDLE WITH CARE!," overlying warped dark orange text that reads, "SEE THE MAN WHO CAN SAVE YOU THE MOST." The backdrop of the piece is light orange.

Here, the overtly secular language that we may normally recognize from the side of a packing box (in bright green) veils the religious language (in dark orange) that suggests there is a man who can "save." In small text off to the side, Kent has inscribed a poem by E. E. Cummings:

no time ago
or else a life
walking in the dark
i met christ

jesus)my heart
flopped over
and lay still
while he passed(as

close as i'm to you
yes closer
made of nothing
except loneliness

In "handle with care," Kent's layering of the bright green text atop the dark orange text comes into stark contrast with the light orange backdrop. This technique leads the viewer to decipher the bright green text first—and with the most ease. The small letters from the Cummings poem are visible only to the viewer who takes the time to encounter the work of art and read closely.

Upon reading the poem, the viewer better understands the entire message of the piece. With its clear invoking of "christ," the poem helps the viewer uncover the meaning behind the distorted text, originally from a Chevrolet advertisement, that reads "SEE THE MAN WHO CAN SAVE YOU THE MOST." What first appears as an instruction to "HANDLE WITH CARE!" is in fact an invitation to encounter Jesus Christ, the "MAN WHO CAN SAVE YOU THE MOST." While Kent superimposes the secular over the religious, the result is one where the secular obscures—but does not cover—the religious, still rendering the religious message accessible.

In his book *Cultural Techniques*, the German media theorist Bernhard Siegert considers the apparatus of the door and the cultural technique of "dooring." Siegert discusses how the painter "Robert Campin, who was known also as the Master of Flémalle, demonstrates how the door

Kent developed art to protest social injustices like poverty, war and racism.

initiates a sequence of operations that connect the working of the difference between opening and closing with working [of] the difference between the sacred and the profane." While dooring, through opening and closing, controls access to a sacred space, veiling blends the sacred and profane onto a single plane.

In the context of serigraphy, some lines and layers may perpetuate the distinction between binary categories; the cultural technique of veiling, however, controls the levels of opacity of different ideas and concepts. Veiling does much that dooring does not and cannot do. Veiling lets in and is deliberate about what it leaves out, blurs or obscures. In addition to enabling sites of transition, veiling creates sites of interaction between that which is considered sacred and that which is considered profane.

Surface Tension

The viewer might also consider the "surface tension" that appears in Kent's work as a site of interaction between different ideas. In her book *Surface*, the visual art scholar Giuliana Bruno considers the ways that a screen can operate as a "surface to mediate cultural fabrics." While much of *Surface* focuses on the nuanced roles of veiling in cinematic and architectural contexts, Bruno's concept of "surface tension" resonates with any analysis of Kent's work. She writes that "[whether] the material is canvas, wall or screen, surface tension has emerged as a central condition of contemporary visual art and architecture, signaling a refashioning of materiality and a reinscription of textural movement on our cultural screens."

Bruno explores the fabric of a cinema screen as a site of connection, partition and negotiation. In an analogous way, Kent uses the silk screen to negotiate the tensions found in the "cultural fabrics" surrounding her. Kent created hundreds of prints that served as sites of both transition and interaction amid a critical historical time period that was charged with social, political and religious significance.

The profound changes the Roman Catholic Church underwent in the 1960s and as a result of Vatican II have become significant factors in the lives of Kent and other Catholic women religious in the years since. When Pope John XXIII first announced his intention to call a church council in 1959, he stated his belief that the Roman Catholic Church needed *aggiornamento*, Italian for "updating." Vatican II resulted in several decrees—including the "Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life" in 1965 ("Perfectae Caritatis")—that encouraged Catholic religious orders to undergo "aggiornamento" in many aspects of their daily life.

New Unveilings

"Perfectae Caritatis" promoted experimentation in religious orders and invited Catholic religious brothers and sisters to reconsider their manner of living, including their clothing. In response, many Catholic sisters modified their use of a religious habit in their wardrobe, while others removed the habit completely and traded it in for regular street clothes. In the years following the council, Kent and many of her I.H.M. sisters took on a modified version of the habit; eventually, Kent removed the habit altogether.

As they became more visible to society in their physical appearance, Kent and other Catholic nuns also began playing a more visible and active role in meeting society's greatest needs. The news media began referring to those sisters inspired by "Perfectae Caritatis" as the "New Nuns." The New Nuns protested the Vietnam War, marched against racism in Selma and fought for human rights.

Soon Kent developed art to protest social injustices like poverty, war and racism. In addition to operating as sites of transition and interaction, Kent's prints evolved into expressions of protest and political resilience. While she chose to veil the religious beneath the secular (and vice versa) in some cases, she fully unveiled her perspectives in others.

Art and Artist in Dialogue

While Kent used the serigraph as a site of political resilience, much of her art activism throughout the 1960s was neither overtly religious nor overtly secular. Her veiled apparatus and veiled surface operated at a symbolic level. In addition to challenging the traditional distinction between sacred and profane, Kent blurred boundaries between visible/invisible, religious/secular, traditional/modern, public/private, permitted/prohibited and past/future. To analyze Kent's prints is to feel the tension between her past and her future and to witness her engagement with the tension found in the conventional binaries of sacred/profane, religious/secular and more.

In an eye-catching 1964 print titled "the juiciest tomato of all," the dominating text on the print reads: "TOM ATO." Two excerpts from the lengthy text that appears in the bottom half of the print—which Kent copied from a handwritten letter she received from an English professor, Samuel Eisenstein—read:

"the juiciest tomato of all" (1964)
Corita Art Center

"handle with care" (1967)
Corita Art Center

"with love to the everyday miracle" (1967)
Corita Art Center

> ...If we are provided with a sign that declares Del Monte tomatoes are juiciest it is not desecration to add: "Mary Mother is the juiciest tomato of them all." Perhaps this is what is meant when the slang term puts it, "She's a peach," or "What a tomato!"
>
> We long for the heart that overflows for the all-accepting of the bounteous, of the real and not synthetic, for the armful of flowers that continues the breast, for the fingers that make a perfect blessing. There is no irreligiousness in joy, even if joy is pump-primed at first...

In an essay titled "Corita Kent and the Language of Pop," the American art historian Susan Dackerman writes that "words have the power to make the heavenly present on earth, to bring God into being before us. Just as Kent invokes a God rehabilitated for '60s culture, she materializes the Virgin as 'the juiciest tomato'— an attractive, modern woman full of verve." In bringing Christianity to modern audiences, Kent revealed innovative understandings of what the church was and what it could be. She provided, in Dackerman's words, "a visualization of the divine suited to the contemporary world."

Art and Renewal

Kent's use of the silk screen enabled transformation, not only for herself, but as part of her understanding of her ministry in the world. Her art reflected her desire to transform the world. Considering how Kent's work evolved during a time when she was thinking about the role of the veil—and her taking of the veil—in her own private life, her work also reflects the ways she negotiated her relationship to religion and her place in the church. In her 1967 work "with love to the everyday miracle," viewers begin to see Kent negotiating how she identifies with religion. The small white text reads:

> Conversion
> is revolution
> is growth
> is living in a way
> appropriate to
> the coming of age
> and is not understood
> by the present age
> which is passing away
> God descends
> man ascends
> and they move on

For Kent, the presence, modification or absence of the veil in her wardrobe signaled moments of transition and resilience.

Various large fonts, layered and obscured (some facing backward), read: "For you...WITH LOVE TO...the everyday miracle...that's me! that's my color!" The contrasting colors in "with love to the everyday miracle" are such that the small white text is more legible than the small text Kent uses in other works. The large bright green text, "WITH LOVE TO...the everyday miracle," is also in clear view, although it is through its combination with the small white text and the obscured purple text that we may interpret the underlying message. "Conversion is revolution is growth..." reveals a transformation that Kent is experiencing. And as she etches the words "God descends, man ascends, and they move on," Kent plays with religious concepts of incarnation and resurrection.

Ultimately, the large text indicates her relationship to a God that is present in the "everyday miracle." Considered together, "with love to the everyday miracle" seems to uncover Kent's movement away from the institutional church and toward a more personal relationship with God.

Engaged in a decades-long dialogue with her art, Kent eventually transformed into a new version of herself, not only as a religious person but also as an artist. The tendencies in her work emerged from her private life and involvement in a religious institution that was undergoing some but not always enough change. However, they also descended from the surrounding world. Analyses of her works reveal Kent's negotiation of identity through serigraphy and her negotiation of her viewpoints both inside and outside of the institutions she inhabited. As Dackerman notes, "[although] she participated in two heady cultural undertakings—the reformation of religion and art—during the 1960s, she was an outlier in both movements, seemingly, and paradoxically, because of her association with the other."

It was Kent's position as an outlier in the Catholic Church that eventually caused her to grow weary. In 1968, she sought dispensation from her vows and moved to Boston, where she lived a new kind of sequestered life.

That same year, Kent began developing prints that directly challenged the institutional church. In "let the sun shine," the dominant text reads: "LET THE SUN SHINE IN," while the underlying quote from the progressive activist Rabbi Arthur Waskow reads: "the creative revolution—to take a chunk of the imagined future and put it into the present—to follow the law of the future and live it in the present."

The main image in the print portrays Pope John XXIII. The timing of this piece suggests a reminiscence of the hope that Kent felt when that pope opened Vatican II in 1962. While some *aggiornamento* indeed occurred through the council, many Catholics—and in particular, Catholic women religious—hoped for more, especially as the council reassessed the church's understanding of the role of women. Kent's use of the quotation from Rabbi Waskow also suggests that the church has much to learn from other religious leaders spearheading "creative revolutions" of their own. Through "let the sun shine," Kent declares that it is never too late for the church to "let the sun shine in."

The veils—of Kent's wardrobe and of the silk screen—ultimately served as intermediaries between Kent's past, present and future selves. These veils also provided conditions of possibility for these selves to be in conversation with one another. Kent created art, and Kent's art created her. She unveiled ideas of love and political resilience through art, and her art ultimately led back to her own unveiling.

Lauren Tassone *is a doctoral student in the study of religion at Harvard University. Her research focuses on Catholicism, media and gender. This essay is adapted from a paper presented at a conference at the Boisi Center for Religion & American Public Life at Boston College on "Accessing the Divine: Religious Sources of Resilience in an Age of Political Turmoil." Ms. Tassone's paper was judged the best entry by the editors of* ***America.***

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The Question of Prayer

How can we hear God's voice when the internet can easily fill any silence?

By Michael Quinn

Prayer is a conversation with God, but I don't hear any words. Isn't that a problem?

It was for me. I spent 17 years in Catholic education, and prayer remained a mystery. I had a vague spiritual sense. I liked being Catholic. I loved poetry. But in the moment, closing my eyes, clasping my hands, I felt unnerved and unnatural. My thoughts spun, irrelevant and inappropriate. Then I'd judge my thoughts and spiral until I offered generic thanks, asked for help and moved on.

More often, I gave up.

Of course prayer was uncomfortable. I was born in 1996 and grew up into the digital world. I was a toddler on an iMac. My middle school mood was broadcast via AIM status. My cellphone has been within 20 feet of my person for nearly two decades.

I've never been alone. There was always a device, or a screen, or a song or a podcast. Those things existed as relief to internal discomfort: errant emotions, memories that summon themselves, regrets. What are you supposed to do with them when you have to get on with your day?

The cleverness of the contemporary internet is that it exploits the human desire to know, to have answers. When

my brain flickers toward uncertainty—in thought, in feeling—I reach for my phone. My generation was the first that could look at a screen to escape any slight social discomfort. When you feel something uncomfortable, you go to the internet. That's the answer.

Of course, worries about the effect of new technologies on young people predate the internet. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar said about television: "It is well-known what a seductive influence [it has] on young people, who, assaulted by a multitude of chaotic images flitting across the screen, are no longer capable of asking questions about the meaning of life."

The internet is a machine that rids the world of mystery. We go to Instagram to find out how to look; TikTok for what to buy, where to eat; X for what we should talk about. For everything else, Google it. Every digital thing we've built serves the same end: Stop questioning.

So what do you do when you have a problem without an answer? Let's say you're 26, still financially dependent on your parents, and one day back in Pennsylvania your father dies in his bedroom. In the morning your mother finds him and screams, and you go. Then it's two years later and the finances are figured out, and you've learned to pay your own way, and everyone has told you you're a good son, and you look out the window and don't know how you got here.

You mistake tree branches for cracks in reality. When you see people with their parents, you are angry. You are without control. You cannot speak honestly. Emotions well up inside you; there's a maelstrom in your solar plexus. It cannot be resolved. Silently, worshiping an idol of anxiety, you go about the world. You are waiting for the next bad thing, which you are certain as sunrise will come.

This is where I found myself this past Lent when, at the end of everything, I resolved to pray. I had a problem without an answer, and I'd given up on the advice of others. I exhausted every alternative—S.S.R.I.s, alcohol, internet fame, James Joyce reading groups.

On Ash Wednesday, at a sparsely attended service in Brooklyn, I received my ashes and began again. For 40 days, I would pray.

How? First, I tried lists: Here's what I'm grateful for, here's what I'm struggling with; please help. This is a foundation. I took a step back and looked at my life, the swirl of challenge and goodness I navigated. I acknowledged I wasn't alone.

But this can make prayer pretty shallow. "Hi God, thanks for my dog; think you could spare a job interview?" There isn't much of the mystic in asking God for money.

So I cribbed some petitions: I prayed for the sick, the impoverished, the imprisoned, peace. I offered tiny meditations on the nature of our world, its violence, its injustice,

When my brain flickers toward uncertainty, I reach for my phone.

my place in it. Again, this is good. But the loftiness of it—its philosophical nature, its impossibility—made me feel like a performer. It was inauthentic. It didn't have heart.

"The heart is also the locus of sincerity," Francis wrote in his final encyclical, "Dilexit Nos," "where deceit and disguise have no place. It usually indicates our true intentions, what we really think, believe and desire, the 'secrets' that we tell no one: in a word, the naked truth about ourselves."

Could I come to prayer naked? As I am? The ego-heavy, the aggravated, the artistic, the philosophical, the Philadelphian, the feminine, the me? What was stopping me? That I felt unworthy. That prayer was something divine, rather than human.

If I had to pretend in front of God, wouldn't I have to pretend everywhere? I surrendered. I gave up on praying correctly. I made the sign of the cross and spoke as myself, in my vernacular, in my tone. I pictured the friend that listens closest. I wandered and embellished, I welcomed God into the ugliness of my life.

What did I hear in response? Only the sound of cars braking at the red light on Flushing Avenue. I heard silence, and what silence is made of: airflow, tree leaves rustling, motors, bird chirps. When I pressed my fingers in my ears to find something quieter, there was the boom of my own bloodflow.

The answers to our prayers come in the changing circumstances of our lives: what happens to us, what doesn't, what others tell us, what our heart commands. But these signals are varied and multifarious. Rarely does the stranger on the street stop you and say, "Stop applying to random openings you find on LinkedIn and utilize your college network." Rarely does your heart tell you that either. We are meant to hear God's answers in the wild environment of life, distinguish them from accident or coincidence, interpret them, and act on them. But *how?*

It's hard. Modernity does not subdue hearts to the useful and the good. Worse, the signs I know—open blue skies, reversible octopus plushies, Diet Cokes—are just *things* to you. Deepening my spiritual life meant letting go of the idea that I would see the same world as everyone else. I let go of expecting others to understand. I accepted a private vocabulary, beyond the verbal. This vocabulary is composed of words in a language only the world can speak and only I can

> **The internet is a machine that rids the world of mystery.**

understand. I entered conversation with life.

To hear what the Holy Spirit is telling you, you have to get off your phone. Go outside. Act, act repeatedly, act imperfectly. Put yourself in conflict, be in the world. *Go, go, go.*

So maybe the question I had was wrong. I now know you cannot pray, you can only be a person who prays. This is a habitual action, its existence relies on its repetition. I learned to sit in silence.

Quieting your mind does not make you stupid, informationless. In fact, the opposite. A great therapist once offered me, "Why do you have to think all the time?" Thought is an action of the mind you wield toward an end. If you're doing something else, shut it up. What you need to recognize, you'll recognize. Knowing this is called faith.

People have asked me: What do you wish you did differently when your father was alive? I wish I wasn't so afraid of being myself.

When it came to conversations with my father—he was a world-class rower; I was a thespian—I was trying to say things that I thought would provoke him to joy, or interest or laughter. Now I realize the point of a conversation is not to please the other party. The point of conversation is to express yourself, truthfully, humanly, within the bounds of society's allowance, so that you do not walk through life wishing you had said something else.

I spent years walking through life wishing I had said something else. I lived in the past. Demented, I tested the speech of others and decided whether or not it pleased me. Was this person smart enough, or funny enough; did they understand me and what I said? As a result, I missed hearing anything people said to me. Even people I loved. People who loved me.

One day, you touch your parent's cold calf and tell the dispatcher there's no point in CPR. You know that he was trying to tell you something without words, but you didn't know what. I am saying in each death is a message only you understand, in a language only you speak.

Prayer is a conversation. From the Latin *conversatio*—"a way of life," or the Middle English *conversacioun*—"a place where one dwells."

Prayer is a region. It's between the material and the

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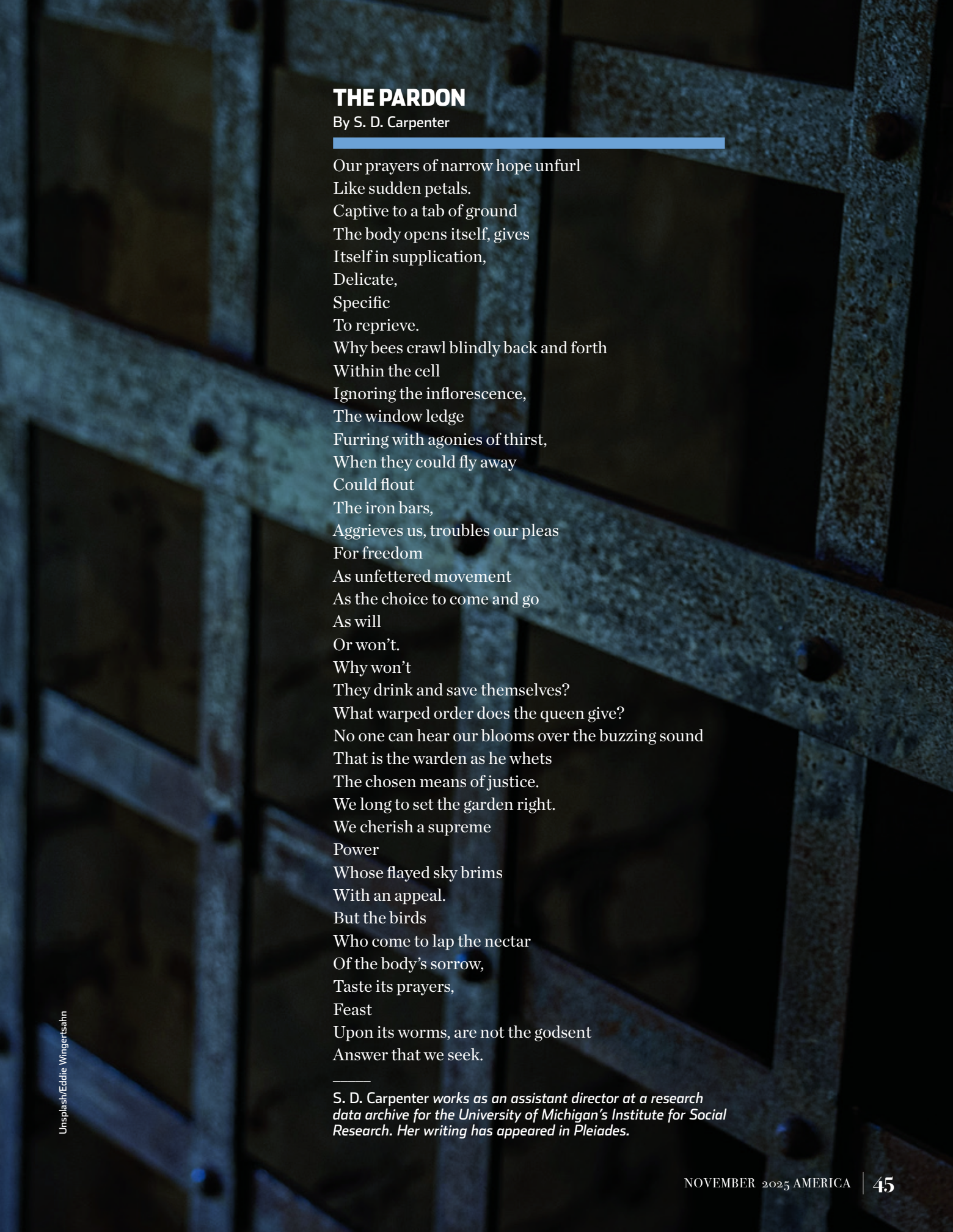
immaterial. It's about the size of a leaf. It is populated with feelings and thoughts, and twitters of the heart, and light falling on surfaces and the grooves of your fingerprints meeting. It's as real as your worst day. This is a dwelling place that follows you always, that is constant through time, that simply is.

It's kind of like, well, the internet.

We can visit as foreigners, or users, or guests, or ghosts, or we can visit as ourselves. But the only way to know it is to go.

Michael Quinn *is a writer born in Philadelphia. His play "The River East" was shortlisted for the 2024 Yale Drama Series Prize. He is a graduate of Boston College.*



THE PARDON

By S. D. Carpenter

Our prayers of narrow hope unfurl
Like sudden petals.
Captive to a tab of ground
The body opens itself, gives
Itself in supplication,
Delicate,
Specific
To reprieve.
Why bees crawl blindly back and forth
Within the cell
Ignoring the inflorescence,
The window ledge
Furring with agonies of thirst,
When they could fly away
Could flout
The iron bars,
Aggrieves us, troubles our pleas
For freedom
As unfettered movement
As the choice to come and go
As will
Or won't.
Why won't
They drink and save themselves?
What warped order does the queen give?
No one can hear our blooms over the buzzing sound
That is the warden as he whets
The chosen means of justice.
We long to set the garden right.
We cherish a supreme
Power
Whose flayed sky brims
With an appeal.
But the birds
Who come to lap the nectar
Of the body's sorrow,
Taste its prayers,
Feast
Upon its worms, are not the godsent
Answer that we seek.

S. D. Carpenter *works as an assistant director at a research data archive for the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. Her writing has appeared in Pleiades.*

Unsplash/Eddie Wingertsahn

My Son, the Priest

How writing a book about my son's vocation changed my understanding of the divine

By Kristin Grady Gilger

I am not the kind of person who brings up God in conversation. I have trouble bringing up God even when convention calls for it. "We're thinking of you," I'll write on a sympathy card to a friend or relative when someone more devout (or less self-conscious) would write: "We're praying for you."

My son, on the other hand, talks about God pretty much all the time. As a Jesuit priest, he is comfortable with God in a way that I find hard to understand. He relishes nothing more than a deep philosophical discussion about the meaning of life, the kind of discussion that makes me want to go elsewhere—fast.

But when it's your child, flight is not an option.

For the first few years after my then-21-year-old son, Patrick, joined the Jesuits, I did my best to be patient. What other option did I have, unless I wanted to be like the mother of St. Thomas Aquinas, who has gone down in history as the woman who locked her son in a tower to prevent him from becoming a Dominican?

With no tower available, I relied on time. I thought perhaps this whole religious thing was something Patrick just needed to get out of his system, and one day he would grow out of it. It would be like a love affair that he would look back on with a certain amount of nostalgia but little real regret. But as the years passed and he moved closer and closer to ordination, it became clear to me that my little scenario just wasn't going to happen. Instead, I had a choice to make: Was I in or was I out?

I was comfortable being out. While I was raised Catholic, it had been a long time since I had been a member of the church, years since I had thought seriously about religion. But Patrick had changed that, and he wanted more from me than some kind of neutral blessing. He wanted a relationship that wasn't possible unless I also made room for God—or at least the possibility of God.

The alternative, it seemed to me, was one of increasing distance: We would become the kind of family for whom the only safe topics are what teams have the best chance of making the World Series and what we should have for dinner.

I knew of just one way to change the ending. As a journalist and then a journalism educator, I often told my reporters and my students that nothing is more powerful than asking questions and then listening—really listening—

Courtesy of author

The author with her son, Patrick Gilger, S.J., at his diaconate ordination in 2013

to the answers. That's how relationships are built and how they are sustained.

So I began a conversation—make that many conversations—with my son about what drove him to choose a life that is as countercultural as can be imagined in 21st-century America. What is it like to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience? What happens if you fall in love or get assigned a job you really hate? How can you live with a bunch of guys whom you might like a whole lot better if you didn't have to share a bathroom with them or encounter their leftovers in the refrigerator?

These questions led to other, more serious, ones—about the all-too-obvious flaws in the church. About secularism and sacrifice and the search for meaning. About what it means to pray. And, yes, about God.

There was much that Patrick (better known to his friends as Paddy) and I agreed on, some we did not and some that required homework on my part. I became acquainted or reacquainted with Pedro Arrupe, S.J., St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Daniel Berrigan, S.J., Thomas Merton and St. Ignatius, and read everything I could find about this peculiar order my son had entered. I stayed as a guest in Jesuit houses, went on a spiritual retreat, interviewed other mothers of priests and reconsidered my own relationship with the Catholic Church.

In the end, I wrote a book about Patrick's journey to become a priest and my own, halting, journey toward spiritual growth.

At first, the book project struck Patrick as "exceptionally weird," especially when he learned that I had dug up his old high school journal, reread his letters home and talked to his friends—and sometimes his friends' mothers.

Still, he signed on as a collaborator, reading and editing and rereading everything I wrote. He even contributed an

The author with her son in 1981

epilogue in which he has the last say (thank you very much). There may have been an element of self-defense in all of this, but I think he mostly did it in the hope that I would begin to develop the kind of relationship with God that he has.

That's not exactly what happened. I'm still not what you would think of as the typical mother of a priest. But what did happen is almost as good, in my eyes at least. We—Patrick and I—have come to better understand and better love each other. The book, it turns out, was the bridge we needed between my world and his.

Some things have not changed, of course. Patrick still thinks and talks like a scholar and priest, and I still approach the world as a skeptical journalist. I will never understand transubstantiation, and we almost certainly will never agree on the Oxford comma. Patrick will continue to use words like *subjectivating* and *distanciated*, and I will continue to insist they are not real words.

He will always be the absolutist and I the relativist; he the lover of mystery, and I the one who wants to count things and have them explained.

But I no longer worry about what either of us has given up for him to be a priest. (The giving-up part for me largely revolved around grandchildren. But Patrick's two sisters have produced a total of five grandchildren between them, pretty much letting him off the hook.)

As for Patrick, what I had once feared would be a loveless and lonely life has turned out to be anything but that. He is a part of many families who treasure his place in their lives. Now a university professor, he adores his students and is a much loved "Uncle Paddy" to his niece and nephews. And, yes, he has God for company.

It has taken me a long time to accept that God fills a critical space in my son's life, and I'm even thankful for it. I remind myself that plenty of people don't have anyone—spiritual or corporal—to fill that space.

> **He wanted a relationship that wasn't possible unless I also made room for God.**

But what about God's place in my life? And where does God fit into our relationship, Patrick's and mine? Those are the questions he asks of me at the end of the book, the questions that linger between us.

All I can say is that I have seen grace. I have seen the way my son and his brother Jesuits lift the people around them and give them hope and how they are lifted in return. I have experienced the favor of loved ones and witnessed the efforts of strangers who do things, who give love and mercy and unmerited favor, that would be inexplicable in a world without divine influence.

I know it isn't the answer he's looking for, but I hope that it's enough.

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Flannery's Visions

By Maurice Timothy Reidy

Let's begin with the devil.

The object in question is a doll made by Mary Flannery O'Connor sometime in the 1930s. It wears a plaid shirt, a long black cape and a broad-brimmed hat. Its face is painted red, of course, with a big nose and blue eyes. Its most notable feature may be its two left feet.

Now let's look at the eyeball. A painting of oil on wood, it depicts the various elements of the eye, such as the cornea, the iris and the vitreous humor. It dates from sometime between 1938 and 1942. Perhaps young Mary painted it for science class.

Both objects are on display at a new exhibit on the art of Flannery O'Connor at Andalusia, the farm in Milledgeville, Ga., where the novelist and short story writer lived much of her life. And both could serve as keys for understanding the lifelong preoccupations of this most intriguing figure, who was born 100 years ago this past March.

"My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil," O'Connor once said. She wrote to help people to gain a different kind of vision, often using violence or death to shock the reader. As she once famously remarked: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."

But before she wrote, she drew.

She drew cartoons as a young girl: women with big noses, hats and freckles, women speaking or smoking or giving you side-eye. In college she designed linoleum cuts for campus publications, drawing a following for her spiky


Clay Benfield/Clayviation Films

The exhibit "Flannery: The Visual Artist" is on display at the new interpretive center at Andalusia, Flannery O'Connor's former home in Milledgeville, Ga.

sense of humor. And as an adult, isolated by illness, she took to painting in the long afternoons at Andalusia, applying paint *impasto* with a scalpel so she didn't have to wash brushes.

She painted landscapes and animals and still lifes and once, notably, herself.

These paintings from her adult years (21 in total) are now on view at a newly built "interpretive center" in Andalusia. They are joined by cartoons and juvenilia that were recently discovered in a family home in downtown Milledgeville. Viewed together with *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons* (Fantagraphics Books, 2012), they offer another way to take the measure of a woman who took the measure of our souls.

The Student

In Ethan Hawke's film "Wildcat," the story of Flannery O'Connor begins in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she met the poet Robert Lowell and began writing her first novel, *Wise Blood*. This is the standard account of her early years. But it is notable that she went to Iowa to be a journalist, following up on her years as a successful cartoonist in college.

What appealed to her about cartoons?

From her early drawings as a child, we can see that she enjoyed drawing people (often her relatives) in exaggerated ways. These are not the freaks and misfits she would later become known for in her fiction, but they do show us a young woman looking at life askew. I am sure some of her relatives did not like these portraits; they are not by any description flattering. But they don't come across as cruel. Instead, we see a young woman using art to relate a vision of the world—and maybe trying to get a sense of herself.

These paintings were found in the attic of the Cline Mansion in Milledgeville, where Flannery lived during her high school and college years. Through her mother, Regina, O'Connor had deep roots in the city, and her cousin, Louise Florencourt, owned the home until she died in 2023. The house is now full of family belongings that need to be catalogued by curators.

In June I visited Milledgeville to view the art exhibit at Andalusia and explore the city. I stayed down the street from the church where O'Connor attended Mass every day, and on the last day of my visit I was given a tour of the Cline Mansion. The house is adjacent to Georgia College and State University (formerly the Georgia State College for Women), and next door to the former governor's mansion. (Milledgeville was the capital of Georgia from 1804 to 1868.)

O'Connor and her mother moved into the house in 1938 when she was in seventh grade. The house was run by Regina's oldest sister, Aunt Mary Cline, who lived there with her sister, Katie, and an aunt. Notably, Flannery was the only child living in the house. One can imagine her escaping to the upper floors to paint or read while her relatives entertained around their large dining table.

What did Flannery, an only child, make of this house full of women? (Her father visited on weekends since he worked in Atlanta; he died of lupus in 1941, when she was 16.) Sharp-witted, she named her Aunt Katie the Duchess, after a character in Alice in Wonderland. Indeed, she had a talent for satirizing her family; at age 10, before moving to Milledgeville, she wrote a series of comic vignettes titled "My Relitives" (*sic*) that "was not well received," she later recalled. Her early paintings employed the same comic touch, which was often directed at women.

In these works you can start to see a style that fully matured in her writing. Pick out one or two aspects of a person's appearance—lopsided eyes, raised eyebrows—as a way to draw the viewer's attention. One thinks of Bailey's wife in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find": a "young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage."

The Cartoonist

O'Connor matriculated at the Georgia Women's College in the summer of 1942. It was not Milledgeville's most notable institution—that honor belonged to the sprawling State Hospital a few miles away, once called the Milledgeville Lunatic Asylum. But the school did "provide the town's grace notes," writes the biographer Brad Gooch, "a steady supply of male and female professors."

One might expect a bright young woman to fit right in. But like many undergraduates, O'Connor liked to question convention, and the college and its traditions became a target of her pen—or more accurately, her knife. In the pages of campus newspapers, she became known for her linoleum cuts, a method of print making in which a drawing is cut into a sheet of linoleum fastened to a wood block and then printed onto a page with ink. Linoleum cuts did not allow for nuanced detail, but they could be done quickly on a print deadline. They also had to be composed in reverse so they would appear on the page correctly after the printing process.

Clockwise from top left, paintings by Flannery O'Connor, composed between 1951 and 1964: "Portrait of an Unidentified Child," "Landscape of Andalusia's Horsebarn" and "White-Headed Chickens." Below: self-portrait, 1953. Opposite page: "Devil Doll," 1930s.

All except self-portrait: Clay Benfield/ Clayviation. Self-portrait: Georgia College & State University, copyright The Mary Flannery O'Connor Charitable Trust.

Once again, Flannery was looking at life askew—composing art from an unexpected angle. She was also telling a story with minimal images and words, a skill that serves any writer well.

The most successful cartoons take only a second to land a laugh. Two students, talking before a concert performance: "Wake me up in time to clap!"

A woman standing next to a pile of bodies after a fight: "Madame Chairman, the committee has reached a decision."

In other cartoons she takes aim at the faculty: "Do you think teachers are necessary?" WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services) were also a favorite target; the Navy used the college as a training ground before World War II.

The writer Kelly Gerald points to similarities between O'Connor's cartoons and her stories, such as the wallflower at a college dance who says, "Oh, well, I can always be a Ph.D." Fast forward a few years and you have Hulga Hopewell, the young lady with a wooden leg and an advanced degree in "Good Country People."

And the cartoons served another purpose, Gerald writes: "Placing her work in the student paper was a way for a shy girl at a new school to find an audience, one that would appreciate her uniqueness and her talents."

The Writer

The most famous painting at Andalusia is a self-portrait. Fans of O'Connor know it well: The author, her hair cut short, stares blankly ahead. She is seated next to a pheasant cock and appears to have a halo—or is it merely the Georgia sun? Painted in 1953, while O'Connor was undergoing treatment for lupus, it offers a sharp contrast to her cartoons. There is no hint of a smile.

It is an odd choice for a 28-year-old artist—even odder that she wanted to use it as her official author photo. (Her publisher demurred.) "Nobody admires my painting much but me," she remarked. "Of course this is not exactly the way I look, but it's the way I feel."

Much had changed since her days at the college paper. In December 1950, at the age of 25, she was diagnosed with lupus. After stints at Iowa and at an artists' colony in Yaddo, N.Y., and a stretch in New York City, she was now back

home, living with her mother alone on the family farm outside of town.

Not surprisingly, her art from that period is more contemplative. She is not painting to relay a point of view but to develop her eye. "I know a good many fiction writers who paint, not because they're any good at painting, but because it helps their writing," she wrote in *Mystery and Manners*. "It forces them to look at things."

There are paintings of pheasant, quail, ducks and chickens. Surprisingly, there are no peacocks, the animal O'Connor is most identified with. (Her later paintings do not have an exact date assigned; they were composed sometime between 1951 and 1964.) She painted what she saw every day: cows, the horse barn, a hill in the distance. You can see why painting appealed to her. It parallels the work of a writer. How do you describe a scene? What detail do you focus on first? What is the exact shade of that bull? (From "Greenleaf": "squirrel-colored.")

After I visited the art exhibit at Andalusia, I rode in a golf cart up to the main house. I took a few pictures and walked inside, first through the kitchen, and then into the front rooms of the house. Her bedroom was on the right. On her desk, in the middle of the room, was a typewriter. I have used a computer for so long that I can't imagine what it's like to write on a typewriter. But this is one thing that occurs to me: When you buy paper and impress ink upon a page, it's not unlike applying paint. You have to commit—to an image or a word. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it helps if it's close. And that takes practice.

O'Connor was always on the lookout for anything that would help her writing. So she read Henry James and Thomas Aquinas and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. And she painted, at one point even taking lessons from the artist Frank Stanley Herring. It seems notable, given conversations regarding O'Connor's controversial treatment of race, that two of the people O'Connor chose to paint were Black, an older woman and a young girl.

As an adult, isolated by illness, O'Connor took to painting in the long afternoons at Andalusia.

The older woman is wearing a green dress and sits in a rocking chair. The young girl is pictured in a blue dress and a white bow in her hair. Robert Donahoo, an O'Connor scholar, notes that both women are dressed "not for menial chores, but in prim clothes—Sunday best my mother would have called them." They carry a certain dignity, especially the young girl, who looks straight at the viewer.

In her stories, when O'Connor describes a pair of glasses, it's time to pay (closer) attention. A metaphor is afoot. I would suggest a similar approach to her painting. When the subject is staring at you, the choice is deliberate. So what does it mean?

In her self-portrait, the image demands contemplation, like an icon. Here is a young woman reckoning with her mortality, her cheeks swollen because of steroid treatments. By placing herself at the center of the canvas, she is taking ownership of her condition, and her worthiness before Christ. Not for nothing does it resemble the mosaics of Christ Pantocrator.

What if we looked at the young Black girl in the same way? By staring at you, she is inviting you to recognize her dignity. When I first saw it, I thought, again, of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," when the grandmother spots a young Black boy by the side of the road—"If I could paint, I'd paint that picture," she says. But where the boy in the story feels like an object, the girl in the painting comes across as a person.

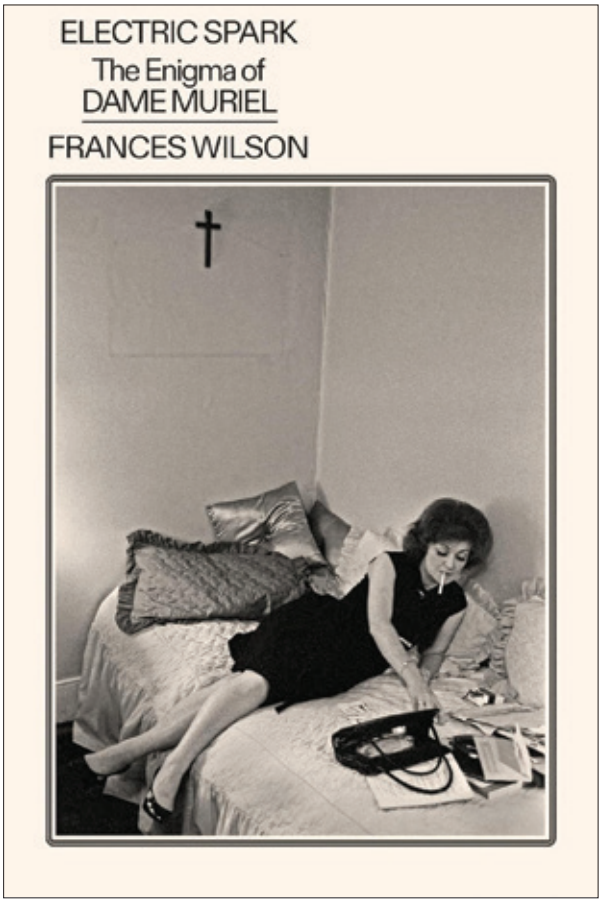
An icon should force you to contemplate the person in front of you, but also yourself. It should lead to an examination of conscience. This is what Flannery O'Connor set out to do in her fiction. At the end of "Revelation," one of the last stories published before her death in 1964, Ruby Turpin sees a parade of souls marching up to heaven, with "white trash," "black niggers in white robes" and "freaks and lunatics" leading the way. The last are, finally, first.

Can we look at the least among us and imagine a soul on the way to heaven? Can a "visionary light" settle in our eyes?

Again and again, in her writing and in her painting, Flannery O'Connor urged us, simply, to look.

Maurice Timothy Reidy *is deputy editor in chief of* ***America.***

PUZZLE MASTER



Farrar, Straus and Giroux / 392p $35

The writer Muriel Spark was famous for her acerbic wit, stylistic elegance and formal experimentation. Canny and evasive, she fascinated biographers and critics alike but carefully controlled her image. When her former lover and collaborator, Derrick Stanford, published the first full critical biography of her in 1963, it infuriated her.

In 1993, to correct the record, she undertook a stripped-down autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*. Though she also authorized the poet Martin Stannard to be her new biographer and granted him access to her massive archive, her objections to his drafts meant that his biography was not published until 2010, four years after her death. Now Frances Wilson, a fine stylist herself, as well as an enterprising researcher and venturesome critic, has written a provocative new study of Spark's life packed with the kind of details, puzzles and wordplay that Spark revered.

Electric Spark focuses on the first 39 years of Spark's life, leading to her first novel, *The Comforters*. This is the same timeframe as *Curriculum Vitae*. Wilson reads that work, as she says, "between the lines," interested in how the "books clarify [the] life," as Spark put it. Combing through fiction for biography, however, is a risky business (it was a hanging offense in the mid-century years, when New Criticism dominated literary study).

Wilson's readings of Spark's work are often seductive, sometimes reductive. In her analysis, for example, Spark's story "Bang-Bang You're Dead" becomes an equation ("Sybil the prophetess represents Muriel" and "Barry is of course Stanford"). It is true that Spark often wrote allegory (Wilson even calls *Aiding and Abetting* "unconscious allegory"), but the emphasis on personal equivalencies sometimes elides Spark's bigger concerns: the mystery of suffering, the presence of evil. Wilson's claim that her characters have "no inner lives or intelligible motivation" ignores the religious and philosophical seeking that so many of them undertake.

Spark was born Muriel Camberg in 1918 to a working-class, nonobservant, partly Jewish Edinburgh family and later referred to herself as a "Gentile Jewess." She was a literary creature from childhood. She received prizes for her precocious poetry but, because her family was poor, never attended university. She chose the marriage route out of her parents' crowded home and travelled to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to marry Ossie Spark, whom she had met in Edinburgh.

In Africa, she gave birth to a son, Robin, but soon fled her husband's mental instability and violent threats, supporting herself and her son as a secretary. Finding Rhodesia stultifying, not least because of its appalling racism, she was determined to return to Great Britain, even though World War II still raged and civilian travel was nearly impossible. With a little subterfuge, she managed passage on a troopship, leaving Robin in the care of his Dominican convent school.

The "Africa" section of *Electric Spark* is especially provocative for its leaps of imagination. Because so little is known about Spark's movements in Rhodesia after she left her husband, Wilson surmises that she "probably" spent this period spying for the United Kingdom. Well, maybe.

Wilson also believes that Spark invented Nita McEwan, a character who appears in Spark's *Curriculum Vitae* as a childhood acquaintance—one with a striking resemblance to Muriel. In the autobiography, Spark claimed to see McEwan again in Rhodesia, only to learn of her murder at the hands of her husband. It was an event that, in Spark's telling, hastened her own flight from marriage. Because Wilson can find no documentation of Nita McEwan or the murder, she believes that Spark conjured up a fictional double. This is intriguing, if not exactly definitive.

However unreal Nita McEwan was, Wilson is especial-

ly good on the period near the end of World War II when we know Spark was recruited to intelligence work. Her new mission reinforced her interest in the wordplay, deceit and spying that would find its way into her fiction. After Robin finally arrived in Edinburgh, Spark's parents became his permanent caretakers—Spark's efforts to secure suitable housing in London for them both failed. In later years, after Robin committed to the Jewish identity he felt his mother had denied, their estrangement became public.

In the meantime, Spark used her poetry and her administrative skills to immerse herself in London's peacetime literary world. As editor of the Poetry Review and general secretary of the Poetry Society in 1947-48, she presided over political infighting that provided her with great comic fodder. When traditionalists forced her out of the Poetry Society, Spark established herself as a biographer, publishing studies of Emily Brontë (coauthored with Stanford) and Mary Shelley.

Wilson quotes Spark to excellent effect. About the city of her birth, for example, she reminds us of Spark's line: "Edinburgh people were either sane, eccentric, or plain mad; they were not neurotic." As a satirist (hence a moralist), Spark was prone to many such grand generalizations, and so is Wilson. For example, placing her subject in the context of modernism, Wilson writes that Spark "wrote sentences as glinting as Hemingway's, but instead of suggesting an undertow of meaning she eliminated altogether the impression of depth."

This is baffling. Spark was clearly influenced by modernism and the *nouveau roman*, or new novel, with its chronological experimentation and emphasis on describing the physical world rather than ideas and emotions. But in her light comic tone she nonetheless arranged suggestive imagery and religious allusion that gathered force in satisfying opposition to her wry narrative voice.

In *The Girls of Slender Means,* for instance, an elocutionist's repetition of lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins, the recitation of psalms at the book's climax and the religious conversion of a crucial character all certainly suggest depth (as, ultimately, does an unlikely symbol, a Schiaparelli dress). Likewise, in *Memento Mori,* Spark signals the seriousness of her comic design from the beginning, in her epigraph from the Penny Catechism on the last four things: "Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven." Such examples abound.

Wilson does treat Spark's conversion, first to Christianity in 1953 and then to Catholicism a year later, with serious attention. She respects Spark's refusal to succinctly sum up the "why" of that conversion and is excellent on the centrality of Cardinal Newman's writing to Spark's search for meaning. Newman's line, "Religious light is intellectual darkness," grants Spark's conversion the mystery of its complexity.

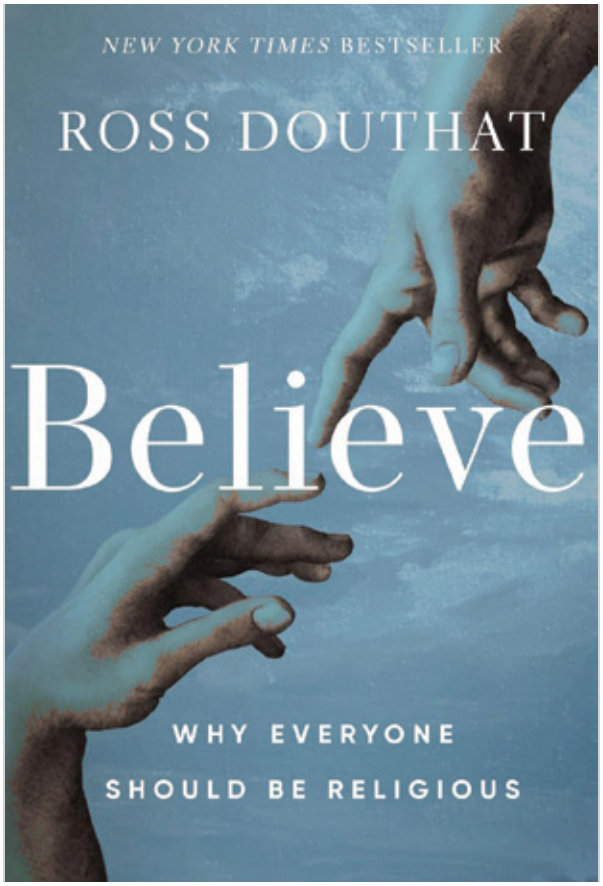
Wilson's readings of Spark's work are often seductive, sometimes reductive.

Newman's devotion to clear, simple language and to "writing as thinking and thinking as praying" appealed to a writer like Spark whose life had been full of upheaval. Her conversion preceded her own crackup, brought on in Spark's telling by the Dexedrine she took to diet. Wilson's account of the breakdown, with its distortions of language and time, is fascinating. By weird coincidence, Evelyn Waugh had during the same period experienced a similar breakdown. As Spark wrote *The Comforters,* the novel ignited by her experience, Waugh worked on his own autobiographical version, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold.* Waugh's support for the competition was a crucial boost.

Wilson's Afterword reminds us of Spark's later years in New York, from 1962 to 1966, where she was finally rich and famous. She fully earned her reputation as difficult and could even be vicious: In an interview, she called her son "one big bore." She regularly quarreled with friends, editors and agents. Her final move was to Italy, where she found the most stable friendship of her life, with Penelope Jardine. She was an art student who offered to be Spark's secretary and became companion and collaborator. Jardine gave Spark sympathy, order and a home where she continued to write strong, startling novels well into old age.

One of the pleasures of Wilson's summing up is her examination of the biographer's challenges, literary and ethical, in portraying such a complex character, one constantly reinventing herself. Because Wilson is such an ambitious and lively writer, committed to digging deep, *Electric Spark* is engaging throughout. The force and clarity of her arguments, however debatable, do her subject the literary justice she deserves. Dissatisfied as she was with most of what was written about her, however, Spark would probably disagree.

Valerie Sayers, *professor emerita at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of six novels and a collection of stories.*



Zondervan / 240p $30

Ross Douthat is a popular author, a Catholic convert and a self-described "conservative and religious" columnist for The New York Times. He also hosts a podcast, "Interesting Times." He is not a theologian and does not claim to be, as he said in an online brouhaha from a decade ago. But he enjoys a lofty platform, and he has a prominent voice. In effect, he is more of a public theologian than scores or hundreds of others who hold advanced degrees in theology.

Douthat remains remarkably prolific, and a mark of that is his recent book, *Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious*. He has been making the rounds on many other podcasts to promote the book. In the introduction to *Believe*, he writes that part of his job "is to make religious belief intelligible to irreligious readers."

In the course of eight brief chapters, Douthat addresses weighty topics. In the first half, he takes up the universe, the mind and the cosmos, disenchantment, and the case for commitment. In the latter half, he writes about the most prominent faiths, three stumbling blocks to belief, coming to the exploration's end and why he is a Christian.

I had been looking forward to reading this book, but my first exposure to it was by listening to a podcast interview with his fellow New York Times columnist Ezra Klein. The discussion puzzled me because so much of it seemed to focus on what Douthat called "strange stories" that upset a materialist world view, such as that of a broken radio that turned on apparently by itself, fairies, ghosts, hauntings and other unexplained phenomena. At one point he said, "If there seem to be higher powers interested in talking to human beings, then maybe you should assume that God is not out to trick you." Personally, I found the focus to be eccentric, but after reading the book, it seems to be an accurate reflection of Douthat's point of view, perhaps even his theology.

The first half of the book reflects public debates from a couple of decades ago between atheists and believers regarding the nature of the universe, the anthropic principle and—from Douthat's view—the lamentable letting go of the pre-scientific mindset, which was more open to mystery. Douthat is open to mystery and the unexplained, including U.F.O.s, apparitions, the irreducibility of the mind, near-death experiences and other "spiritual" or "mystical" experiences that even transition to the physical world, manifesting themselves in melting batteries, poltergeists, weeping statues and much more.

For Douthat, the fact that people still have these experiences suggests that there must be something more there than superstition or coincidence. For him, faith in a major religion can help individuals make sense of and explain these various experiences. I will admit that by the end of the first half of the book I was bewildered—and unconvinced that Douthat's arguments or hypotheses were actually the basis of what would become a call to believe.

In the second half, Douthat begins by making a case for major religions—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism (he does not mention Judaism here, but does so later)—since they "are more likely to stand in a strong relationship to the truth about existence than religions that flared and died, that subsist in cultural isolation, or that came into existence the day before yesterday." Whatever religion you enter, he writes, "will have hopefully acquired enough truth and wisdom in its long development to make a ladder upward, from the mire of meaninglessness and the snares of indecision toward whatever the full plan of your life is meant to be." With this, Douthat brushes past one of the primary reasons that people choose to be religious: It provides meaning.

Douthat could have made a much stronger case for religion if he had focused on meaning-making rather than religion's utility in addressing the "unexplained" or its ability to last centuries. My own contention is that Christians, at least, are convinced not by "thinking one's way from doubt to belief," as he writes early on, but by that personal en-

The beliefs Douthat espouses, and the reasons for them, are not so much intelligible as odd.

counter with Christ.

After addressing three "stumbling blocks" to faith—theodicy, evils done in the name of religion and religious attitudes toward sex—Douthat's penultimate chapter focuses on "the end of exploring." He advocates for placing trust in God or providence that a seeker will find a good spiritual or religious harbor. In his final chapter, Douthat speaks to why Catholicism was attractive to him, especially its systematization, its sacramental system and its antiquity. Included is a surprising statement about faith in Jesus: "But I have never found the Son of Man as reassuring a character as some Christians do, or quite achieved the sense of personal relationship that gives so many of my co-believers comfort."

Douthat has written a sincere book, and he seems genuinely motivated to help other people come to a good place with respect to religious belief. But I came away with a perplexing amalgam of platitudes, warnings and exhortations, such as: "The spiritual and supernatural never really go away, and already the time of the new atheism is passing; already mystery and magic and enchantment seem to be rushing back."

Other examples include a warning regarding spiritual experiences: "You may find what you're looking for and come away haunted and oppressed, because some of the spirits most eager to be summoned may not have your good in mind." At another point, Douthat offers a rationale for belief that harkens back to Pascal's wager but falls somewhat short of a passionate faith: "Life is short and death is certain, and what account will you give of yourself if the believers turn out to have been right all along?"

Throughout, Douthat attempts to provide a rational explanation for belief. But the beliefs he espouses, and the reasons for them, are not so much intelligible as odd. I recalled a sentiment of the late E. O. Wilson, that people today prefer science fiction to science, "Jurassic Park" to the Jurassic Era and U.F.O.s to astrophysics. Though Douthat's book has earned high praise from many of his readers, unless one is already part of the "conservative and religious" thought world he inhabits, this earnest book might leave his intended audience of "irreligious readers" more perplexed rather than grounded in belief.

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DREAM

By Rachel Hicks

We were held captive, were being sorted.

Most of us were given a choice: some indistinct camp
or Great Lavra: an ancient monastery, a remote steppe.

I knew that was the place, though winter was beginning.
We might be able to scavenge for food (they said), for kindling.

As we arrived, a late and weak sun shone blue on the snow.
At my feet in a basket: five baby chicks already stiff with frost.

It felt like the end of the world, the end of everything.

I feared, then, the coming hardship; knew some of us
would not see spring. Yet the displaced monks

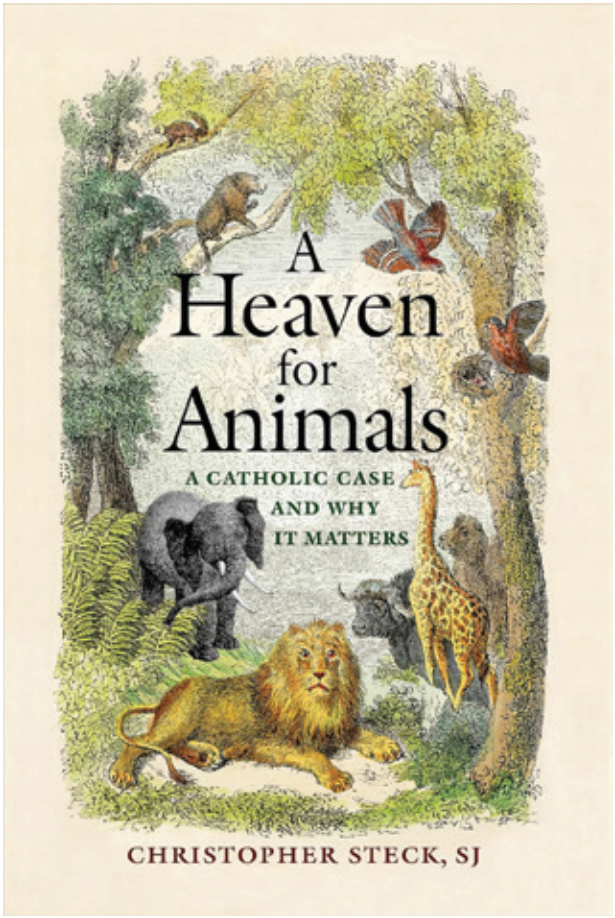
made room for us, swept aside piles of books, papers;
thinned their soup, put out more bowls in loving silence.

This was a holy place: I understood we would suffer
whatever came with the monks. The snow on the ground

was blue; the light was fading. We were too many, too ill-clad.
I was afraid—yet not afraid. The monks made room for us.

When I woke up, I wanted to return.

Rachel E. Hicks's *poetry has appeared in Presence, Ekstasis, The Baltimore Review and other journals. Her debut poetry collection is Accumulated Lessons in Displacement.*



Georgetown University Press / 184p $25

The fondest memories of my earliest childhood include those of my beloved pets: Zena, my black Labrador, my cat Saturn and my New Forest pony Diamond. More recently, I treasured my black Labrador, Dara, whom I named for theological reasons. *Dara* means "full of compassion" in Hebrew. As a family, we witnessed her slow, untimely death from an unrecognized tick-borne disease while sailing back from New York to Southampton in the summer of 2017, after I had been working in the United States for six years.

Dara, aged just 3, held us in complete trust. The Roman Catholic priest on the cruise ship resisted, at least at first, saying any last prayers for our dying companion. I knew with a firm instinct, rather than from a well-worked-out theology, that Dara had a place in heaven. Her ability to suffer without complaint, and our sense of helplessness at her demise, witnessed to her courage and ability to stir up compassion in us.

A Heaven for Animals: A Catholic Case and Why It Matters, a readable and engaging new book by Christopher Steck, S.J., is dedicated to all those who have loved an animal and hope to see it again. With piercing honesty, he faces the ethical tensions within the Roman Catholic tradition that have swung between arguments for either wanting to use other animals for the sake of human convenience or showing them compassion. The Catholic Church has never formally rejected the idea that animals are in heaven. This leaves room for theological creativity.

Steck's book is like a jigsaw puzzle that helps us to see why it is that animals are indeed necessarily included in the Christian story of salvation. He goes further than just considering what happens to our pets when they die, even if that is his starting point. Rather, he considers likely differences in what salvation might look like *between* animals, from those that are intelligent, sentient and companionable creatures through to gnats and worms.

Steck believes that we need to clear some theological ground before coming to any conclusions about what happens to animals at death. The Second Vatican Council marked a significant shift in the Catholic Church's position. It moved from an acceptance of animal use almost to the point of cruelty, and a complete lack of direct moral duties to animals, to opening the door to a more universal sense of God's love for all creatures.

Why? Theologically, the retrieval of the idea of the cosmic scope of Christology and eschatology from the early church played a role. Catholic theologians wanting to press for a more inclusive approach also turned to the Bible as a source of inspiration, drawing on the theme of God's compassion.

Steck doesn't completely dismiss Aquinas's refusal to allow animals immortality based on the Thomistic argument that they don't have an immortal, rational soul. Rather, he uses a divide common among those interested in animal rights to argue that sentient creatures, especially intelligent creatures with a sense of consciousness, could, in theory at least, have a bodily resurrection appropriate for their kinds. The salvation of other simpler animals (and presumably plants) would be caught up in salvation history in a very different way.

Evolutionary theories have challenged philosophies and theologies of sharp human separation from animals. Growing cultural awareness of ecological breakdown has forced a greater sense of connection with the earth and its creatures. But Steck is also aware of animal suffering and what could be termed the natural cruelty built into ecological and evolutionary processes. How do we begin to make sense of that suffering in the light of belief in a loving creator God?

For Steck, the ancient theological idea of a cosmic fall applies: Humanity's original fall into sin also had an impact on the lives of other creatures. He doesn't, however, consider why that suffering was going on within the animal kingdom before humans ever appeared on the scene. This

would only make sense if the narrative of paradise, creation and the fall is symbolic rather than chronological. Steck is more concerned with emphasizing the ideas of cosmic covenant, stemming from God's Noahic covenant with all creation in Genesis, and the kingdom of God, pointing to the future ideal of a just and harmonious order.

I wasn't surprised to find references to Pope Francis scattered throughout the book, given that Francis took his name from the patron saint of ecology. He also cared about the poorest members of the human community and Mother Earth, who, as he says, "is one of the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor" ("Laudato Si'," No. 2). In several places in "Laudato Si'," Pope Francis hints at the position developed in Steck's book. Pope Francis did not claim our pets would be in heaven (contrary to some news reports), but he did claim that God cares for the smallest of creatures, and that all creatures are within the scope of Christ's redemption. Our journey with others is "in union with all creatures" (No. 244) and "Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place" (No. 243).

Others involved in animal theology and ethics criticized Pope Francis for not saying enough about the ethical treatment of animals. But Steck builds on what he finds and argues for an intermediary ethical position. I agree with Steck that resisting factory farming is an appropriate ethical response to the evils such practices inflict on both human workers and animals. However, he seems to allow some ethical leeway where it would be difficult for the sake of collective social harmony to refuse food that has its origin in factory farming. These are structural sins that Steck does not really address.

I was also interested to see the reference to the work of a new doctor of the church, St. John Henry Newman. He claimed, in a way that sounds quite modern, that animals who suffer cruelty in domestic settings are joined to the suffering of Christ on the cross. Our charity, therefore, should extend to all creatures.

Hans Urs von Balthasar is another theologian not necessarily associated with animal welfare. Steck draws on von Balthasar's understanding of the Trinity that proposes an "acting space in God." This is presumably to make his dogmatic discussion more accessible, though I prefer von Balthasar's own terminology of "theo-drama."

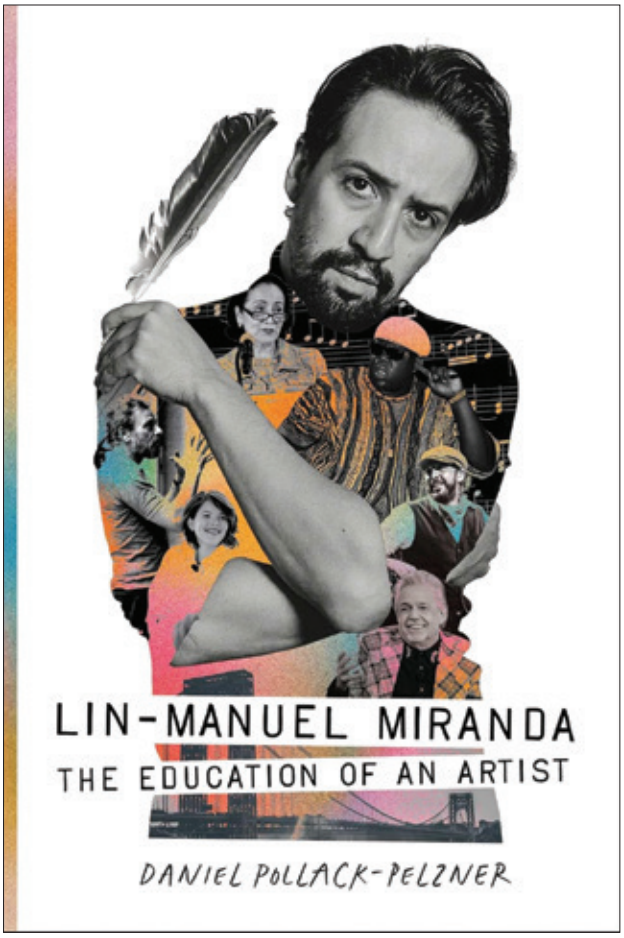
Steck extends von Balthasar and proposes that the Holy Spirit is the person in the Trinity who can somehow enable assent to God among sentient, conscious animals, so that they are caught up into the life of heaven. Certainly, if I think back on the animals I have known and loved, I perceive them as having agency and personality. Their drama is intertwined with mine, and helped shape me into the kind of theologian that I have become.

For Steck, humanity's original fall into sin also had an impact on the lives of other creatures.

Steck intended this book to be an accessible version of an earlier, more academic book that he published on the same topic. I think he has largely succeeded in this task. Pope Francis hinted at a life for animals in heaven and was not always fully consistent with some of his ethical statements on animal use. Steck has managed to navigate this complex territory with cogent theological and ethical arguments. It deserves to be widely read, appreciated and discussed.

Celia Deane-Drummond *is the director of the Laudato Si' Research Institute and a senior research fellow at Campion Hall, University of Oxford.*

YOUNG, SCRAPPY AND HUNGRY



Simon & Schuster / 400p $30

Every performer has one: the story of how they got hooked on the endorphin rush of applause. For Lin-Manuel Miranda, the prolific writer-performer who's given us "In the Heights," "Hamilton" and "Encanto," it came when he was 6 and played "Camptown Races" at his first piano recital. Pleasantly shocked by the audience response, he exclaimed, "I know another one!"

According to Miranda family lore, smilingly reported by Daniel Pollack-Pelzner in his engaging new biography, *Lin-Manuel Miranda: The Education of an Artist*, young Lin-Manuel got through no fewer than four piano pieces before his piano teacher finally yanked him offstage. "I realized cool things could happen if I kept at this," Pollack-Pelzner quotes him as saying.

Unlike many budding performers, though, Miranda had no shortage of encouragement in his pursuits even when he wasn't onstage, first from his parents, then from teachers, friends and mentors, and eventually from producers and professionals. Indeed, the lyric that kept popping into my head as I plowed through Pollack-Pelzner's involving narrative—this is the rare book where you are likely to be singing along as you read—was a line from early in "Hamilton," when the young upstart is chatting excitedly over drinks with his new compatriots and one of them shouts, "Let's get this guy in front of a crowd!"

From the start, Miranda was the kind of kid who positively thrived in the public eye, even before he had demonstrable talent or chops. In the book's telling, his life so far has been a series of triumphs on ever bigger stages, from school plays to big-budget movies, with an avid cheering section that swelled from family and friends to much of the world.

It's a credit to Pollack-Pelzner that this continuous upward ascent does not cloy as much as it might. That's partly because, as Pollack-Pelzner's subtitle is at pains to suggest, Miranda's path was hardly inevitable or solitary. Complicating the myth of the singular artistic genius, the author sets out to trace the threads of collaboration with which Miranda sewed together his craft—the villages that raised him and his work. This focus leads the book through the lessons Miranda took from the school musicals he appeared in, directed and wrote at Hunter College High School and at Wesleyan University, where an early version of "In the Heights" was born.

And it makes room for a lot of the vivid personal details that shaped Miranda's sensibility. He was raised in Inwood, a mixed-income neighborhood in northern Manhattan, by two hard-working parents: Luis Miranda, a political strategist, and Luz Towns-Miranda, a child psychologist, both of whom instilled in young Lin-Manuel a love for Broadway musicals as well as Latin music. Likewise, Miranda absorbed not only the pop culture of the 1980s and '90s, from hip-hop to video games, but the era's musical theater milestones as well, from "Les Misérables" to "Rent." Crucially, it was a time when these were becoming distinctions without a difference—when pop and rock music were increasingly the sound of Broadway, and animated Disney musicals were in every family's VHS player.

The book's emphasis on collaboration also stresses the centrality of the crew he gathered along the way. Among them are the director Tommy Kail, the musical arrangers Alex Lacamoire and Bill Sherman, the cast of the rap improv troupe Freestyle Love Supreme, which included Christopher Jackson ("Hamilton's" original George Washington), and "In the Heights" book writer Quiara Alegría Hudes. These are all folks who are said to cherish the group effort as much as the individual voice and who live by the mantra "the best idea wins, no matter where it comes from."

It's a convincing story, and no one believes or repeats it more than Miranda himself. But an emphasis on the shared creative spark also leads the book head-on into its

gnarliest collision, rendered with admirable clarity by Pollack-Pelzner: the seven-month period in late 2015 and early 2016 when, just as "Hamilton" opened on Broadway and began its runaway ascent into the cultural canon, most of the original cast was embroiled in a painful dispute with the show's producer, Jeffrey Seller, for a piece of the show's profits, citing the "collective emotional intelligence" they had been encouraged to feel a part of.

Though the dispute was finally resolved when Seller agreed to grant a 1 percent stake in profits to the show's original actors, this contretemps was not merely about show business politics. As Leslie Odom Jr., who played Aaron Burr, tells Pollack-Pelzner, "We all felt the historic success of the show meant that it had some responsibilities, by virtue of the fact that the megaphone was so large, and by virtue of the bodies on which this story was told."

It was, of course, one of the signature moves of "Hamilton" that it cast Black and Latino performers in the roles of the nation's founders and told this familiar story in pop and hip-hop idioms. But was this a case of the American story being reclaimed and reframed by folks who had been excluded from its founding, or was it an idealistic liberal gloss on that founding? Pollack-Pelzner rightly roots this debate in the Obama era, when it seemed that the answer to the question of American identity was an optimistic "yes, and" rather than either/or. This was a time when Chris Jackson, a Black man playing the nation's slave-owning first president, could serenade the nation's first Black president in the White House with the "Hamilton" ballad "One Last Time."

As we know too well by now, that multicultural vision soon gave way to the culture war divisions of the Trump era, which began with "Hamilton" actors imploring newly elected Vice President Mike Pence from the Broadway stage to "uphold *our* American values and work on behalf of *all* of us" and has more recently seen "Hamilton" canceling a planned run at the Kennedy Center, now under the thumb of President Trump. An ethos of cooperation, onstage or anywhere, has been replaced by a zero-sum transactionalism: You got yours, I got mine.

As if anticipating an era of tribal warfare, Miranda's latest effort is a concept album, co-written with Eisa Davis, based on the 1979 gangland film "The Warriors," which may or may not become a stage show one day.

Whatever you think of Lin-Manuel Miranda (I'm positively disposed, with reservations), he is nothing if not a kind of zeitgeist magnet: a man who met his wife via Facebook when the site was brand new, who staged a pop-punk jukebox musical ("Basketcase," after the Green Day song) in college before that form became ubiquitous on Broadway, who once made Twitter a sounding board

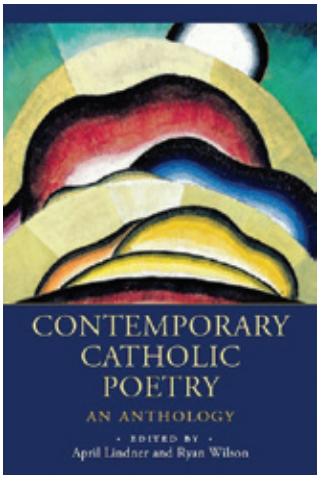
From the start, Miranda was the kind of kid who positively thrived in the public eye.

and virtual scrapbook, and whose live-capture film of "Hamilton" essentially inaugurated Disney+. Aside from Pollack-Pelzner's model of the master collaborator, this is another way to think of Miranda's genius: as an antenna uniquely attuned to the moment, including but not limited to its musical frequencies.

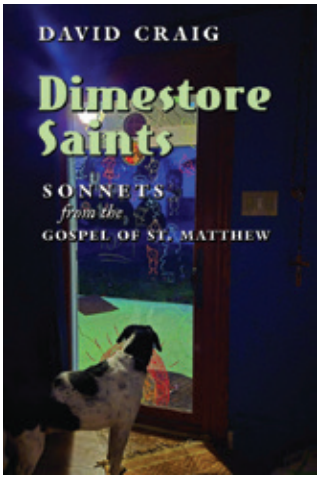
Rob Weinert-Kendt, *an arts journalist and editor of American Theatre magazine, has written for The New York Times and Time Out New York.*

Lyric Wonder, Again and Again

By Grace Copps, Edward Desciak, William Gualtiere, Joe Hoover, Brigid McCabe, Ruddy Pascall



Contemporary Catholic Poetry: An Anthology
240p / $25
Paraclete Press



Dimestore Saints by David Craig
182p / $20
Arouca Press

In a preface to the collection ***Contemporary Catholic Poetry: An Anthology***, the editors April Lindner and Ryan Wilson discuss their criteria for measuring, more or less, what kind of Catholic a poet has to be to warrant inclusion in the book. It is unintentionally hilarious: "We have included only writers who have not publicly and categorically disavowed Catholicism...."

In other words, a baptized Catholic poet has to work really hard—completely reject the faith in front of everyone—to get him or herself exiled from a book of Catholic poetry. The vast width of this book's Catholic net is itself very Catholic. Despite a few shrill moralizing voices here and there, Catholics are not very discriminatory when we consider what kind of baptized Catholic still gets to be on the Catholic team. I love this book's criteria.

The editors qualify that the poets should be writing "in the context of their faith." Which they do. (Implicitly, the poets should also be able to write, you know, good poetry.) Flipping through the pages of this anthology and opening to random poems is rewarded by some crystalline lines: In "Getting Clean," Kate Daniels writes: "Even the addicts/ who are atheists/ learn this lesson:/ There is something/ bigger than they are,/ and unlike them,/ it lives forever."

April Lindner's "Fontanel," which centers on a mother tending her infant child, observes, "When I sing your name I borrow a lilt/ I'd never use in speech. The words/ don't matter; I'm saying drink me while you can,/ like milk."

In "Memoir," Franz Wright speaks in the voice of people who might dread the man himself, Franz Wright, showing up at their door. "Just hope he forgot the address/ and don't answer the phone// for a week: put out all the lights// in the house—/ behave like you aren't there."

In the anthology's introduction, Wilson writes that "underlying these poems is an acute awareness that this world is a wonder, that each moment of every human being's life is a wonder."

In this year's poetry roundup, some of the poets whose collections we discuss are Catholic, some are not (neither baptized Catholic nor denouncers of their Catholicism, they just never had it in the first place). But regardless of their religious commitments, wonder shows up in these poets' work again and again.

Joe Hoover

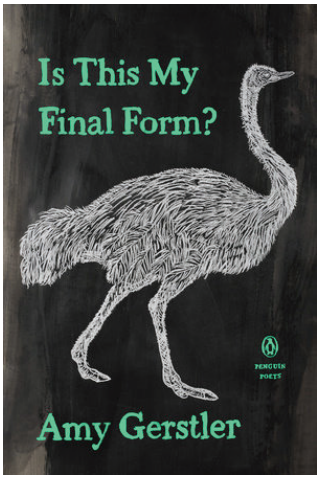
Amy Gerstler's collection ***Is This My Final Form*** examines themes of transition, change and even reincarnation through satirical and, at times, highly conceptual poems. The book is comic yet thoughtful. It even goes beyond poetry to include a 10-minute play, "Siren Island." The sirens, half-human, half-fish and unbound from human responsibilities and yearnings, nevertheless bicker and argue about the intricacies of love, passion and substance abuse. At the end of the play they ultimately give in to their carnal desires.

Gerstler's opening poem, "When I was a bird," perhaps best captures her themes and style. The piece dives into the speaker's supposed past lives as different aviary companions, describing a vivid and free life unburdened with the struggles of mankind. She goes deeper and deeper into the descriptions of her past lives as different birds before ending with the line: "Alas, no one believes me."

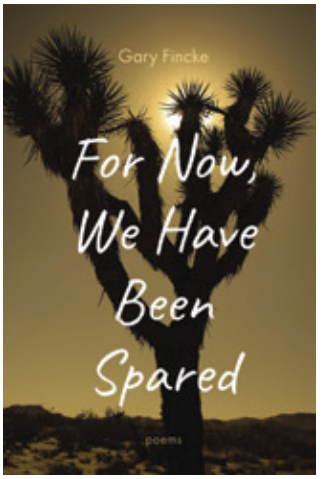
Will Gualtiere

After the Carnival, by Alfred Nicol, is a collection of poems that go from sorrowful to devastating to uplifting and back around again. While many of the poems end in some sort of tragedy, Nicol is consistently winking at the reader even in the gloomiest places. The author's quick wit and energy are on full display,

The poem that stands out the most is "An Irreverent Portrait of Father McLaughlin." Its pithy theme is a familiar three-word mantra at the



Is This My Final Form by Amy Gerstler
96p / $20
Penguin



For Now, We Have Been Spared by Gary Fincke
124p / $19
Slant Books

A Little Daylight Left by Sarah Kay
112p / $24
Penguin

heart of Father McLaughlin's preaching: "God is Love." As the poem points out, "Against the Catholic preference for doom,// three words for all that's beautiful and true." This biblical truth permeates moments of darkness that can blind us. God is the love that shines upon us and keeps us together.

Lifted up by Nicol's sharp words, the works in this collection jerk us from poem to poem and emotion to emotion. But the author guides the reader to a powerful source of hope, the same one Father McLaughlin is drawn to. Nicol sprinkles this and other religious imagery throughout the book and creates a narrative showcasing the redemptive power of faith.

Will Gualtiere

In ***Shocking the Dark***, the poet Robert Lowes does just that, illuminating and exploring some of the darkest chapters in American history. In "The Temple of the Lost Cause," Lowes ruminates on a painting in a funeral home that depicted Robert E. Lee holding a sleeping white child and a Bible on his lap. Lowes examines how such portrayals of Confederate figures keep the "lost cause" of the Confederacy alive and well in the South: "Inside the gilt frame, the Lost Cause/ wasn't lost, wasn't subject to slaughter./ God's leather-bound word guarded the boy."

Along with the ruminations on Lee, Lowes features the Swiss-born German painter Paul Klee, who used his art to defy the Nazis. In other poems, such as a section called "Overnight Snow: Haiku and Senryu," he speaks to the banality of American life: divorce, therapy, friends moving away, antidepressants, drinking coffee, making small talk with a waitress, passing a panhandler on the street and "the snowstorm I feared/ lovely/ coming down."

Grace Copps

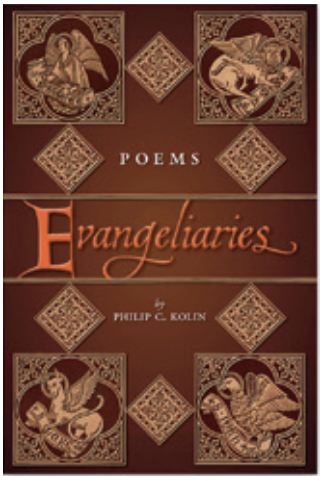
In ***Which Seeds Will Grow?***, the Palestinian-American poet Andrew J. Calis grapples with the generational trauma and nascent dreaming inherent to his heritage. One poem illustrates this theme in surprising fashion. In "The Mowing That Woke My Daughter," Calis compares a landscaping project happening next door to the forced eviction his father experienced in Jerusalem. "*They are not my enemy*/ I remind myself,/ Though they are/ tearing up the public hill just past my fence," Calis writes. "But here, at home, I am left/ with the broken purple-yellow bruising and the memories/ of my father: who saw/ Israeli jets swoop over his house in Jerusalem."

He ends the poem with a succinct summary of the delicate balance between pain and hope at the core of his identity: "I wonder what seeds will grow from this,/ what next year will look like, and what sort of/ hate it is to watch things fall apart."

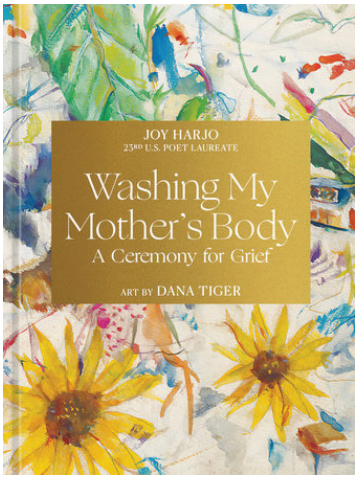
Grace Copps

Anne Montgomery, R.S.C.J., entered the Society of the Sacred Heart at the age of 21 and began a life of service. She taught children with learning disabilities, got arrested protesting for nuclear disarmament, and aided families in Iraq that lost their homes and loved ones during the first Persian Gulf war. ***Arise and Witness*** is a collection of poems that features the "Resister Sister" meditating on various Gospel stories and characters, her time in prison for her activism, and how she is able to balance hope and despair in the middle of a war zone.

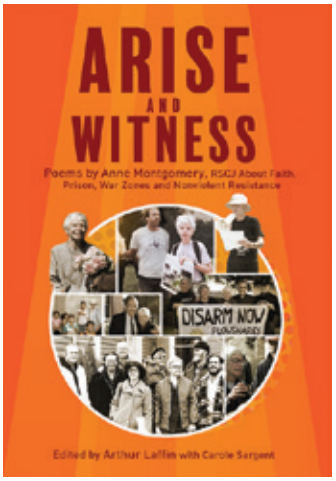
"Ourselves the seeds,/ fallen,/ broken,/ empty—/ in the desert of our flight/ to freedom,/ as pure as truth,/ a Child," writes Sister Montgomery in



Evangeliaries by Philip C. Kolin
112p / $15
Angelico Press



Washing My Mother's Body by Joy Harjo
80p / $18
Penguin, 2025



Arise and Witness by Anne Montgomery
116p / $18
New Academia

"Feast of the Innocents." This is her credo. While humans continue to perpetuate wars and other atrocities on one another, we can look to Jesus to be our salvation, to free us from cycles of violence, pain and oppression.

Grace Copps

Washing My Mother's Body, by Joy Harjo, the first Native American poet laureate of the United States, is an extended meditation on the poet grieving and accepting her mother's death by imagining washing her dead body. Harjo feels she would have been able to accept her mother's death more fully if she could have performed this ritual. The poem is an elegy, a lament about the death of a loved one as well as an art book. Vibrant watercolor paintings stream and dance around the words on every page, depicting faces, people, bowls and doves, which in their own way reinforce the author's inner conflict.

Toward the end of the book-length poem, Harjo writes, "It is heavier than the spirit who lifted up and flew." The body is heavy without a soul, and the poet coming to terms with that, with her mother's death, is powerful and relatable.

Ruddy Pascall

"Evangeliary" is defined on the book jacket of Philip C. Kolin's ***Evangeliaries*** as "a book of only those portions of the Gospel, Acts of the Apostles, and Old Testament texts that would be read at a Mass." It describes the books as "extremely ornate" with "highly emblematic covers." Like its namesake, *Evangeliaries* is a collection of devotional works that adorn familiar scenes from Scripture, liturgical life and beyond, with richly descriptive yet accessible verse. The work is formally consistent, with short stanzas used almost exclusively throughout.

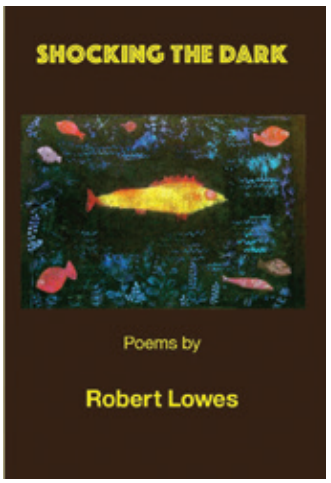
The anthology follows a loose narrative structure that embraces a throughline of biblical allusion while weaving in outside historical material. The poem "Faith" showcases this particular style: "A garden full of mustard seeds,/ St. Thérèse's 'Little Way' to heaven./ Dame Julian singing, *All will be well; All will be well.*"

Kolin ends with a touching and often heartbreaking series of poems that grapple with death and old age. In "An Old Man Reflects on Job," the narrator observes, "I take shorter steps on longer distances./ My body is stamped with brown red moles,/ a dated passport to enter life's last country." These poems serve as icons—functioning both as windows inviting the reader to gaze into deeper theological knowledge and as mirrors urging interior spiritual searching.

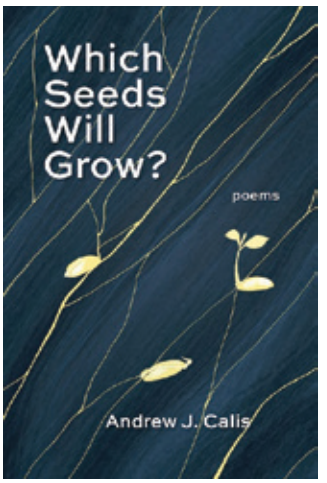
Edward Desciak

The concept of David Craig's ***Dimestore Saints*** is straightforward: a collection of sonnets that chronologically retell the Gospel of Matthew. Craig does not muddle the message of the Gospel. He refers to the familiar settings and characters of the Bible: Nazareth, the Holy Family, the Apostles. Even in sonnets featuring more abstract images and experiences—like "the faceless penitential road" or a "day at the beach"—the emotional tone of Craig's poetry is firmly connected to the Scripture it is inspired by.

While Craig is faithful to the source material, he weaves in modern references to make Matthew feel alive and timely. Alongside St. Peter and Bethlehem, Craig alludes to New York City, Paris, Walt Whitman, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday—a union of radically different faces and places that, in an interpretation of the Gospel, should not make sense but does.



Shocking the Dark by Robert Lowes
104p / $23
Kelsay Books



Which Seeds Will Grow? by Andrew J. Calis
96p / $21
Paraclete Press

After the Carnival by Alfred Nicol
84p / $17
Wiseblood Books

The poems also translate Gospel verses into everyday scenarios familiar to a modern reader. "The poor don't own their shirt, or their back./ They live downtown, might have a little dog," he writes in the poem inspired by the Beatitudes. "They eat in soup kitchens—adjust in fog." Craig intertwines the world of Jesus with the world we inhabit today and refuses to draw lines between the two.

Brigid McCabe

In Sarah Kay's ***A Little Daylight Left***, readers will find themselves on the streets of New York City, riding the L train or watching the "Times Square crowds" alongside the author. Kay describes the city as an experience rather than merely a place, allowing her readers to fully immerse themselves in the poetry's landscapes.

The poems are steeped in a sense of nostalgia and contemplation, as if the author were beckoning her readers to sink into her memories. Kay grapples with her experiences at a transitional moment in her life, creating a cohesive collection through repetition of key themes: changing family relationships, gender dynamics, friendships and self-identity.

The book also explores how the writer herself uses poetry to process and understand these experiences. For Kay, there is always a distinct self-awareness of her role as a poet. In "Jello," she writes, "The poem says, Be honest./ This is where you put/ everything you wish you could wrap your arms around—encircled with a ribbon of language, neatly packaged, handed off."

Brigid McCabe

Written in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Gary Fincke's ***For Now, We Have Been Spared*** captures a moment of communal suffering and grief by grounding it in the personal and the individual. Each of Fincke's poems tells an immersive story in which readers are invited to accompany characters through moments of great love, loss and longing. Some of the pieces engage with social commentary, like "On the Eve of the Presidential Election." While it is unclear whether he is talking about the 2020 or 2024 election, Fincke tracks the mood of a country grappling with war and shoplifting (and shopping in general). He ends with the wistful and telling line, "Tomorrow half of these shoppers will not vote."

While there are some specifically Christian references in the collection, most of Fincke's poems speak to universal human experiences. In "Upon the Death of Sons: An Elegy," the author describes a father who mourns the loss of a second son, while in "Missing: A Psalm," he describes a mother's relief at being reunited with her young son, who had wandered off and gotten lost.

With a striking combination of descriptive storytelling and vivid imagery, Fincke shows us how the most delicate and fleeting images, like that of "coiled clusters of Christmas lights" or of "raised shades of cloud," can help us navigate the tenuous balance between mourning and hope.

Brigid McCabe

Grace Copps *is a student at Georgetown University and a former summer intern at America Media.* Edward Desciak, Will Gualtiere *and* Brigid McCabe *are O'Hare fellows at America Media.* Joe Hoover, S.J., *is* ***America****'s poetry editor and the producer of the new film "The Allegory."* Ruddy Pascall *is a former America Media intern and a freshman at John Carroll University.*

The Souls of the Just Are in the Hand of God

Sundays in November usher in five extraordinary liturgical celebrations, as well as the close of Liturgical Year C.

On the first Sunday, the Commemoration of All Souls, the first reading is perhaps one of the most used liturgical readings for funerals to comfort those who mourn: "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them. They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; and their passing away was thought an affliction and their going forth from us, utter destruction. But they are in peace" (Wis 3:1-3).

There is one verse that is sometimes omittted because it is not understood: "In the time of their visitation they shall shine, and shall dart about as sparks through stubble" (Wis 3:7). This is unfortunate because the line expresses hope and is filled with promise. "Their visitation" implies a time of judgement or divine review of the life lived by the deceased. Since God's verdict is filled with mercy, they will pass inspection. These faithful departed become like stars in the night sky that live on by helping to guide pilgrims through life.

On the last Sunday of November, a new star rises on the horizon with the beginning of Advent and the new liturgical year, which for 2026 is Year A. The promise that awaits all the faithful is one that must be renewed with every generation, as Isaiah reminds the faithful: "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

The end of Year C marks the end of my time as columnist for The Word at **America**. I feel overwhelmed by gratitude, as this experience provided me the opportunity to reflect and write on the Sunday Lectionary readings for the past three years. I am grateful for the readers and to the staff at **America** for their constant encouragement and editorial insight along the way.

THE COMMEMORATION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED (ALL SOULS), NOV. 2, 2025
A visitation as merciful judgment

FEAST OF THE DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA IN ROME, NOV. 9, 2025
You are God's building

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C), NOV. 16, 2025
As Christ did, so you will give testimony

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE (C), NOV. 23, 2025
Jesus between two criminals, which one are you?

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A), NOV. 30, 2025
It is now time to sober up and awake from sleep

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

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Jesus and Johnny Cash

How to listen to the Gospel, not dissect it

By M. Cathleen Kaveny

As a university professor, I read all the time. You could say that I am a professional reader. I show my students how to pull apart texts by identifying tacit premises and pinpointing holes in argumentation.

Being a professional reader has its drawbacks. It makes it harder to be an *amateur* reader: a person who reads for the sheer love (*amor*) of doing so. A bigger challenge has been reading for spiritual enrichment. Because my specialization includes religion and theology, it can be doubly hard to turn down the critical impulse and draw sustenance from the text in front of me.

Yet I have found a way to get that necessary sustenance. I have become a hearer of the Word, not merely a reader of words. After downloading the Audible app on my iPhone, I proceeded to explore the offerings on the New Testament. What I settled on was Johnny Cash reading the New King James Version of the four Gospels. It is just marvelous.

According to the Audible blurb, Cash was urged by his mother to record the New Testament for 20 years before finally agreeing to do so. He reflected that he approached the project with "fear, respect, awe, and reverence for the subject matter." Cash added: "I also did it with a great deal of joy, because I love the Word."

Cash not only loves the Word, but he also makes it sing. His deep and resonant voice perfectly channels the ongoing conversation between Jesus and the motley bunch of human beings he encounters. Cash conveys Jesus' love, pity, hope and occasional exasperation toward his followers.

Even more strikingly, however, Cash communicates the desolation of those who turn to Jesus as Lord and Savior. His voice carries the desperation of parents seeking help for dying children, the resignation of the paralyzed seeking to walk again and the misery of demoniacs begging to be set free. He unerringly conveys the deadly weariness of those who are trapped in sin, looking (or not looking) for a way out.

Cash's own personal experience saturates his voice. Of course, his outlaw image was as much style as substance. Although he spent a few nights in jail for misdemeanors, he never did hard time. Yet Cash was haunted by his sickness (drug addiction) and his sins (familial betrayals). Indeed, they were threaded through his life in the same ways they intertwine in many Gospel stories. When Cash reads a passage from the Gospel of Luke (7:47), it is clear that he applies it to himself—and invites us to do the same. "Therefore, I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

When I encounter the Good News as read by Johnny Cash, I encounter it as a living proclamation (*kerygma*)—not as a dead letter. The very orality of the message helps to ensure I receive it fruitfully, by counteracting my ingrained habits of reading. The message keeps unfolding as the words flow into my ears. It is consequently much harder to perseverate on one phrase or image, or to engage in proof-texting (which is a form of intellectual perseveration). As one passage follows another, the words in an oral account are automatically contextualized for the listener. They are a living stream.

Moreover, in an oral account, the whole is greater not only than any single part, but also than the sum of its parts. It therefore encourages a constructive approach to the stories of Jesus, rather than an analytical approach, which by definition breaks things down to its components. One does not end up asking many small questions, such as "what does this one little verse mean?" or even "do we have sufficient evidence that Jesus really said or did this particular thing?" Rather, listening to the Gospels asks us to focus on one big question: Who exactly is Jesus of Nazareth?

I still profit from reading the Gospels, of course. But I am aware of the spiritual dangers, at least for me. The fundamental problem with reading rather than listening to them is that it can tempt us to pin their meaning down, dissect it, and parcel it out in bite-sized, manageable chunks. But that is to treat the Gospels as a message to be decoded, not a person to be encountered. The Good News, ultimately, is the person of Jesus Christ—whose living voice we are called to hear and recognize in our own lives.

M. Cathleen Kaveny *is the Darald and Juliet Libby Professor of Law and Theology at Boston College.*

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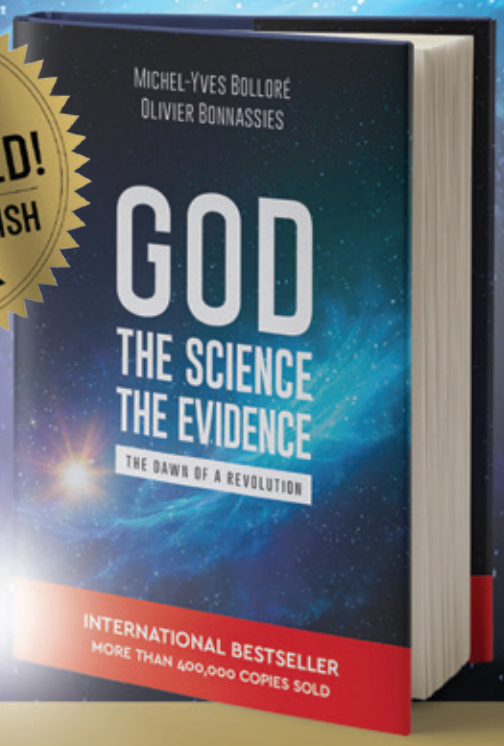

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