America

DECEMBER 2025

E JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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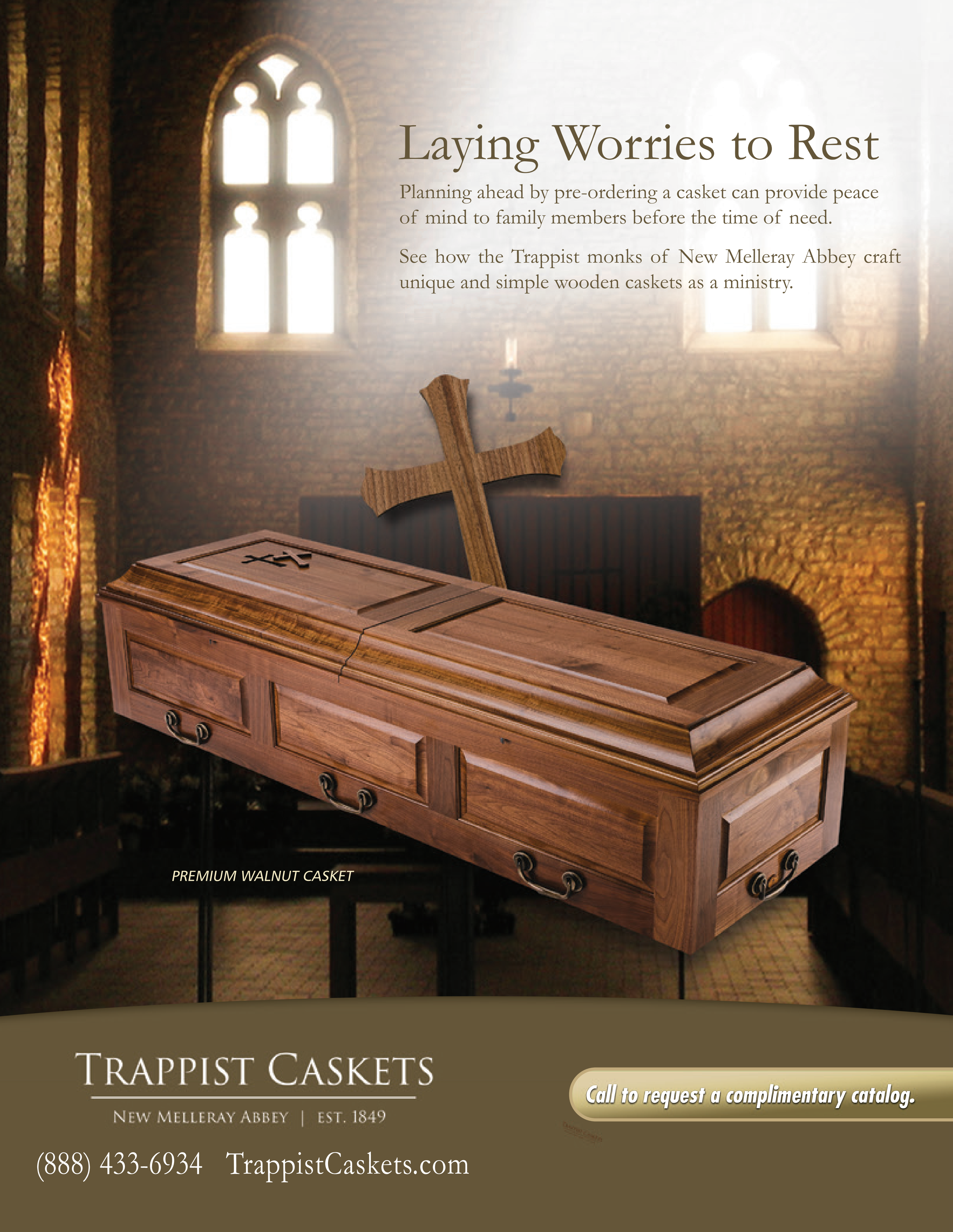
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Answering the Call of the King

I am writing this column just after completing my annual eight-day silent retreat, which this year was focused on my upcoming final vows as a Jesuit. When this column is published online, I will be about a week and a half away from professing those vows, and by the time the print edition with this column reaches mailboxes, I will have just done so, God willing.

I will profess my final vows during a parish Mass on the Sunday before Thanksgiving at the Church of St. Francis Xavier in New York, where I have been helping as a priest over the past nine years. On that last Sunday of the liturgical year, we will be celebrating, to give it its full formal liturgical name, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

I was not aiming for a particular date within the liturgical calendar for my vows. After expressing my hope for my vows to happen at a regularly scheduled Sunday Mass in the parish where I regularly serve, the rest of the timing was a matter of overlap between the schedules of my provincial, who will receive my vows, my responsibilities at **America**, and picking a time when my family could come. But I am glad they landed on the feast of Christ the King by happenstance or providence, since the "Call of the King" meditation in the Spiritual Exercises, which helped me recognize my vocation in the first place, has only grown more important to me over the years.

The meditation's full title is actually a description of its method, in St. Ignatius's distinctive prose style: "The call of the temporal king, as an aid toward contemplating the life of the eternal king." Ignatius invites the exercitant to imagine a human king summoning his followers and subjects to an arduous and taxing military campaign, with the king advising them that "whoever wishes to come with me has to be content with the same food I eat, and the drink, and the clothing which I wear, and so forth. So too each one must labor with me during the day, and keep watch in the night, and so on, so that later each may have a part with me in the victory, just as each has shared in the toil."

Ignatius assumes that this kind of invitation and challenge will be innately and automatically attractive, and so offers it as a way to energize us and our natural desires so that they may be transposed to Jesus, counseling "that all those who have judgment and reason will offer themselves wholeheartedly for this labor."

In an age when most kings have been overthrown and in which royal power, where it does persist, has been rendered largely ceremonial and symbolic, the meditation as Ignatius lays it out does not always work so smoothly. Jesuit adaptability has led many directors to propose alternate starting points: Imagine an activist, or a saint, or even a politician, calling people into a campaign for justice or reform. I have prayed this meditation with Dorothy Day as the "temporal king," for instance; I have heard others describe imagining Martin Luther King Jr. in that role.

The heart of the meditation, however, lies for me not in finding the best possible king-analogue figure as a starting point but instead in connecting to that desire to share in the toil and be part of a larger mission, and in recognizing that the desire for a purpose is meant and made to be fulfilled in the purpose of the kingdom of God. What makes the imagined figure of the temporal king attractive—even for Ignatius—is not the king's unlimited authority and power but the contrast in which that power, which could stand apart from and over its subjects, instead invites them to labor with him, sharing both hardship and triumph together.

In this model for prayer, kingly power humbles itself through service, struggle and suffering, and so lifts up those who join in the mission of the kingdom.

In the United States, we are in the midst of a crisis over how to properly constrain and balance political power and whether or not our historical forms for doing so can hold. Recently, we saw a day of demonstrations and protests under the banner "No Kings." As I have been thinking about and praying with the Call of the King, I suspect that this crisis is not just about the constraint of power and what kinds of authority we ought to reject, but also a collapse in our ability to imagine together how power ought to be used in service.

Celebrating the feast of Christ the King, and asking to be joined to his mission, offers a starting point for beginning again to imagine power being used well to seek justice and uplift those who are cast down. Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation, "Dilexi Te," provides an excellent model here, quoting from Pope Francis' own first exhortation, "Evangelii Gaudium," and reminding us that the kingdom of God "is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity. Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society. We are seeking God's Kingdom."

May we offer ourselves wholeheartedly for this labor.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

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Pope Leo XIV waves to onlookers as he leaves an ecumenical Christian prayer service inside Rome's Colosseum on Oct. 28.
CNS photo/Vatican Media

Cover: Pieter Claeissins I's "Virgin and Child," 1540-1560
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With 'Dilexi Te," Pope Leo XIV continues Pope Francis' focus on the marginalized

On Oct. 9, Pope Leo XIV released his first apostolic exhortation, "Dilexi Te." Gerard O'Connell, **America**'s senior Vatican correspondent, provided analysis for our online readers ("Pope Leo in first major document: Love for the poor is not optional for Christians"), writing that the exhortation was a continuation of Pope Francis' message of love and caring for the poor and marginalized. Mr. O'Connell noted that Leo criticized "ideologies that defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation" and said that extreme poverty "should constantly weigh upon our consciences." The pope also said, "contact with those who are lowly and powerless is a fundamental way of encountering the Lord of history." Our readers had much to say in response.

This should be so obvious. But we seem to need a reminder, a call to follow Jesus, be a Christian, be a Catholic. How can this be overlooked? Jesus showed us by his example and called us to follow, and the church has taught this for 2,000 years. Are we so swept up in capitalism? Of course. And a particularly strident and active and narrow capitalism benefiting only a few, while more and more are left out. How have so many strayed away from following Jesus? Did he die in vain?

James Lein

Many people want a religion that does not challenge but only compliments their personal prejudices. Still, the truth is the truth. God has a preferential love for the poor—no denying that. Thank God for Leo following in Francis' footsteps.

Karl Schilken

This is true Catholic social teaching. I'm especially grateful that labor rights were mentioned among the popular movements we should support.

Chris Streip

Too many, it would appear, do not listen to and take in the story of Lazarus and the rich man, as well as Matthew 25, among so many others. This seems wholly in concert with those exhortations from Christ himself. Much gratitude for this.

Michael Neary

Thank God for the blessing of Pope Leo to follow Pope Francis. I hope the American bishops embrace this teaching and preach it from every pulpit in the country. This is the first joy and happiness I have experienced since Pope Francis' letter to the U.S. bishops on the dignity of immigrants (issued on Feb. 10), especially hopeful in the midst of so much horrific news in our country.

Peter Devine

I am praising God that the Holy Father is continuing Pope Francis' emphasis on the poor. It is so timely, especially for Catholics in the United States. I just hope the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops takes it to heart.

Darla Meeks

Wow! I would like to say many things in thanksgiving to Pope Francis and Pope Leo about their love for the Lord, the church and the poor, but the state of my entire being is in such a moment of joy that I want to enjoy this precious moment as it came. This is a balm to my soul.

Oscar Jaramillo

This embrace of the poor is really a call to a leaner life: Reduce the wants *and* the needs. And also look and see "the other" as ourselves. No one is "other" unless we other them.

Thomas Gosse

Pope Leo's continuity with Pope Francis (*santo subito!*) mirrors Pope Francis' continuity with Pope Benedict XVI. Just as Francis picked up where Benedict left off by finishing "Lumen Fidei," Leo does the same for Francis in this exhortation that Francis started. Despite the riches of the Vatican, Leo identifies his pontificate with the poverty of the poor Christ in the poor of the world. May we follow his lead.

Agustin Paz

Of course there will be resistance to Pope Leo's teaching, just as there always has been to Leo XIII's "Rerum Novarum." Fortunately, Jesus answered very clearly when asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

Stephen Kaneb

Safe Borders Do Not Require Terror Tactics

"States have the right and the duty to protect their borders." These words came not from President Trump, or any other American politician, but from Pope Leo XIV on Oct. 23. That recognition provides the rationale for nations to protect the basic rights and way of life of their citizens—and also recognizes the enormous stresses on social and physical infrastructure that open borders can produce. But the assertion of that standard was followed by an appeal to human conscience that every American needs to hear. This right of every nation to secure its borders, Pope Leo said, "should be balanced by the moral obligation to provide refuge."

The pope said that many nations are ignoring this moral obligation: "Ever more inhuman measures are being adopted—even celebrated politically—that treat these 'undesirables' as if they were garbage and not human beings."

It was a clear reference to the migration policies of the developed nations of the world, including the United States, a nation that still displays on its most revered monument words that our ancestors—refugees—saw as a balm and a promise: "Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

The pope's words came during yet another day of violence and confrontation on the streets of the United States, where the masked agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency continue a crusade of intimidation, terrorizing residents in cities across the country. On Oct. 8, millions of Americans saw the image of an ICE agent firing a pepper-spray projectile directly into the face of a Christian pastor who was advocating for those bearing the brunt of ICE actions in Chicago, a city recently singled out by Mr. Trump as "a hellhole" in need of federal intervention. And on Oct. 27, ICE agents dragged a 67-year-old Chicago resident—a U.S. citizen—from his car, breaking six of his ribs and causing internal bleeding. The incident occurred during an ICE raid on a children's Halloween parade.

Those recorded acts of violence have been accompanied over the past few months by many more unseen and completely unnecessary violations of human dignity and American law by agents of ICE and other government agencies against both new migrants and longtime American citizens.

The words of Pope Leo—and the fundamental promise of America inscribed at the feet of the Statue of Liberty—are also under attack in that violence. So, too, are two traditions. First is the centuries-old compact in the United States that people deserve due process, the right to protest and the protection of the rule of law. The second is the internationally recognized right stated in the United Nations Global Compact on Migration (from which the United States withdrew during the first Trump administration) that migrants "are entitled to the same universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, which must be respected, protected and fulfilled at all times."

They are not "garbage"; they are not vermin to be eradicated; they are not the enemy. They are here in the United States seeking the same rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" with which we are all endowed by our creator.

Where did we go wrong?

When did the notion that we should protect our borders and regulate immigration devolve into a determination to unleash anonymous masked agents pulling people from cars, and to publicly celebrate the creation of true hellholes like the Alligator Alcatraz detention facility?

The Trump administration would have us believe that migrants are here to steal American jobs, to commit crime, to pollute our unique way of life. These are in some cases the same tropes used by Nazi criminals whom Americans died to overthrow in World War II. They are also an echo of the ugliest instincts of human nature. And they are, at their core, sentiments that are un-American, ones that betray our heritage as they also betray the words of the Gospel.

Americans now hear and see stories on a daily basis about people detained by ICE, both residents and visitors to the United States, who are held without a charge for weeks, and stories of those who have sought to obey American jurisprudence being seized outside the very courtrooms they were summoned to in observance of the law.

The positive contributions of immigrants to the United States are being deliberately denigrated, even as citizens reap the bounty of their work in industries where Americans simply will not toil under current conditions: agriculture, manual labor and in the many other industries that contribute to our national economic output and the necessities of daily life. No one, for example, has offered an alternative to the current economic system that orders our nation's farm life, from the breadbaskets of California to the processing plants of the Midwest. Far from compensating our agricultural workers (42 percent of whom are undocumented) with a living wage and a chance at upward mobility, our politicians are terrorizing them, telling them they are not welcome while pretending the sweat of their brows is not what keeps our economy and society robust.

People of faith across the country have stood up for these least in the past few months, often with admirable tenacity and courage, but we need to do more. The Gospel mandates it, to say nothing of history and economic reality.

On a practical level, we have also created a situation in many cities where the supposed forces of law and order are creating chaos, a classic example of setting fires to claim credit for putting them out. The public scenes provoked by ICE agents have been used in several cases by Mr. Trump to justify the deployment of National Guard troops to cities to restore order—actions that have been opposed in almost every case by the governors and mayors tasked with local governance.

Many who seek to limit immigration to the United States argue that social cohesion is impossible when any state absorbs too many newcomers at once. The response of terrorizing communities with inhumane immigration enforcement, however, demonstrates the moral blindness of this claim. It is not undocumented immigrants who threaten social cohesion in our cities, but rather the tactic of forcing them to choose between self-deportation or living in fear of arrest and detention.

Immigrants are woven into American life as our neighbors, our fellow worshipers, our friends and family. As the past months have amply demonstrated, it is not possible to target immigrants en masse without also targeting the communities of which they are an integral part. In that sense, the immoral and violent tactics presently being used for immigration enforcement are a true reflection of the goals at which they aim. They are also a compelling argument for why such goals are a betrayal of not only American values but also of the Gospel.

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Scapegoating can fuel political violence. The Gospel shows a different path.

In times of disorder and confusion, it is easy to feel helpless. Americans are in such a moment now. Recent acts of violence, like the assassination of Charlie Kirk and the attack at Annunciation Catholic Church school, have crystallized the feeling of unease about the social forces dis-integrating our society. We feel powerless to counteract all these changes and struggle to understand their causes.

René Girard, the French Catholic philosopher and historian who died in 2015, warned that an environment like this has within it the seeds of violence. When troubles with no clear cause and no clear solution befall a society, he argued in his book *The Scapegoat*, communities and groups within society naturally look for someone upon whom blame can be laid. Girard wrote that this blame leads to violence, which in turn generates more violence in the manner of a meme spreading through society. In his thinking, Christ himself—the story of the Gospels—is the antidote to this pattern of destruction.

To take one of Girard's examples, during the Black Plague of the 14th century, European communities lacked scientific explanations, but they felt the need to identify causes for their suffering and to respond in a way that would restore order. In such cases, Girard wrote, humans are prone to what he refers to as "magical thinking," which seeks a source for mysterious troubles in the moral failings of our neighbors. In selecting objects of blame, we choose persons or classes of persons on the other side of a clear social boundary; we need to reassure ourselves that *we* do not belong to the blameworthy class. During the plague, European communities began to accept a mythology whereby Jews were responsible for the pandemic (perhaps, it was thought, by poisoning the drinking water), and so Jews became victims of mob violence.

We can see similar behavior closer to our own time and place. "Why Is the Negro Lynched?," a pamphlet written in 1895 by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, suggested a similar phenomenon at work in mob violence against Black Americans. Using Girard's theory, we can deduce that the frequently repeated accusation of sexual assault leveled against Black men was, in fact, a cover for the process of scapegoating African Americans for all of the South's troubles.

We can look back on such instances of senseless violence and think we know better today. Here is the tricky part, though, as Girard described it: "Persecutors always believe in the excellence of their cause, but in reality they hate without a cause. The absence of cause in the accusation is never seen by the persecutors."

Those who engaged in the violence of the past that we now decry did not think of themselves as victimizers. They thought of themselves as the vanguard of justice, vanquishing society's wicked foes. As Girard wrote, "persecutors [have]...a sincere belief in the culpability of their victim." Indeed, persecutors often believe *themselves* to be victims.

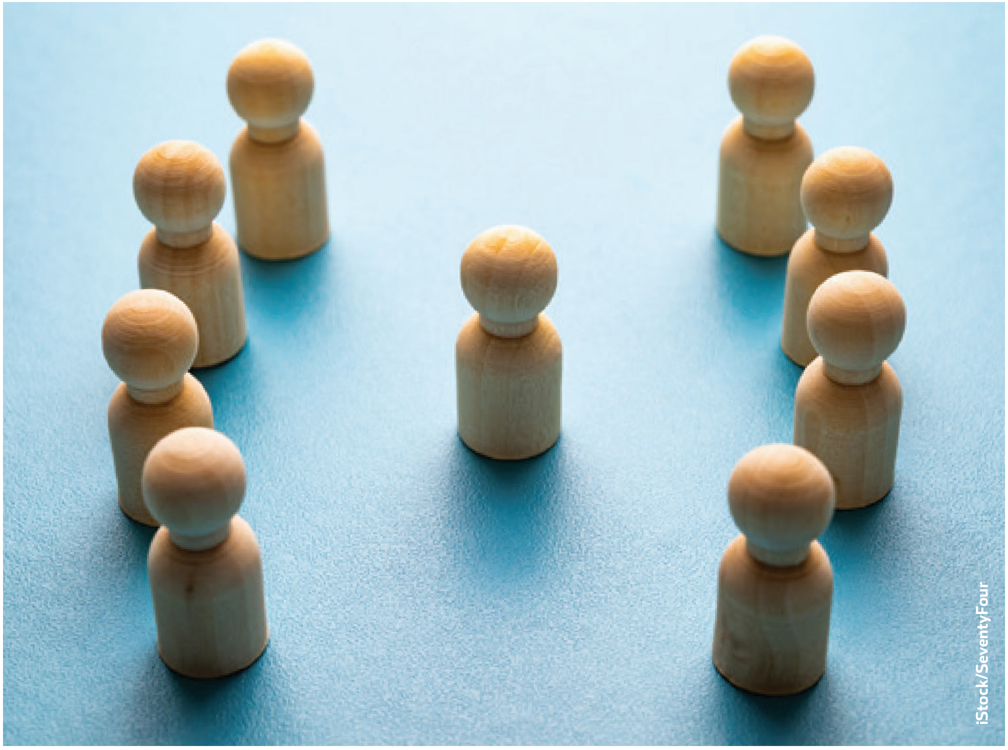
In criminal justice, properly pursued, a legitimate authority grants a fair trial to the accused, and, if found guilty, the criminal pays the penalty prescribed by law. But what Girard describes is when persons or parties act with pre-emptive violence against individuals or classes understood to be political enemies. Such violence always has something of the scapegoat about it, since it is interested not in the deliberative process of determining actual guilt for crimes committed, but in doing violence to those whom we already deem to be our enemies. Such aggression may be state-sponsored or conducted by private citizens, but it always has some of this character of lawless violence.

Girard believed that this pattern occurs over and over again throughout human history: In the face of difficult and complex challenges to a society, we seek simple stories and easy solutions. This can mean identifying a class of people to blame and acting on the idea that we can solve our problems by persecuting them.

Cycles of Retaliation

This does not always manifest on the scale of the Holocaust or in the manner of the lynch mob. In many cases, it is enough to be a civilian or a bystander to become a scapegoat. During "the Troubles" in Ireland, British troops gunned down unarmed civilians and the Irish Republican Army retaliated with bombings that also killed innocent civilians. Here we do not have the pure scapegoating of the Holocaust, but we have the sacrifice of innocent victims who "have it coming" as members of the opposed class. Girard thought these cycles of retaliation operated by means of *mimesis*, or copying: They do it to *us*, so we ought to do it to *them*.

In order to justify the path of violence, on scales great and small, we make sweeping generalizations about whole populations of people, thereby flattening the complexity of human actors, human motivations and human deeds. The people we target might be called conservatives, liberals, Christians, unbelievers, Muslims or almost anything you can imagine. Such a simplification is necessary if we are to identify our enemies, and equally necessary if we are to dehumanize and crush them.



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But, again, when we are caught up in this process, *it is not visible to us*. As Girard writes, "It is a prison whose walls cannot be seen," or "a blindness that believes its own perceptiveness."

How, then, can we know whether we ourselves are caught up in the pattern of mimetic violence?

For Girard, the only answer is the Gospel itself, for in the Gospel we see the scapegoat narrative turned upside down. We observe, step by step, as the crowd lays its own sin and guilt, its anxiety and blame, upon the innocent lamb who it collectively murders. But this scandalous other, Jesus Christ, is revealed to be none other than the Son of God. He is not the conquering military figure who will crush the Romans; he is instead the meek lamb who is led to the slaughter, and by giving up his life, saves all people. There is a reason that the church has us, as a congregation, say, on Good Friday: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" This reminds us that we, like the crowds of Jerusalem, are prone to committing this same injustice.

In the Gospel, God identifies himself with the victim. In identifying in this way, and not with the crowd, Christ unmasks the scapegoat story as an enchanting lie. It is the lie that the one the crowd has identified as its enemy is no longer worthy of life, and that, by destroying him, all will be well again.

In telling us this story, Girard thinks it important that the Holy Spirit and the devil are given names taken from courts of judgment. *Satan* means "the accuser," and *Paraclete* means "the advocate." Christians may protect themselves from becoming persecutors by taking on the spirit of the advocate and not of the accuser. When we hear whole classes of people accused and blamed for our problems, our response must be that of the advocate, who is generous, merciful and understanding. At the same time, the devil is *diabolos*, which means the "backbiter" or "he who tears apart."

The lie of the *diabolos* tells us that we must destroy *them* before they ruin *us*. And when two competing groups both think this, Girard thought, there are only two ways the cycle can end: through uniting against a common enemy, thus creating new victims, or through acts of forgiveness and reconciliation.

How can a Christian become immune to the lies that lead to these cycles of destruction? Christians can ask themselves: Is my response to our current societal situation one that fosters communion, or one that tears apart? Am I thinking like a person involved in a rational deliberation or like one involved in a mob? Have I begun to reduce and dismiss whole classes of people whom I have never met and really know little about?

René Girard recognized that, throughout history, Christians have fallen prey to mimetic violence and the scapegoat mechanism, but he believed that the better we understood the Gospel, the better we would understand that the cycle of violence is a lie and the better we could work toward communion. This is a message not for any one side of a political binary, but for each and every person. The temptation to hatred and violence will come to us clothed in the garments of justice and righteous anger, whoever we are. In such times, we must cast out the accuser and remember the lamb.

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

AP Photo/Tassanee Vejpongsa

After the shutdown, will the U.S. be heading back to the future on health care?

By Kevin Clarke

Mary Haddad, R.S.M., did not want to join the blame game over the government shutdown as it raged through October. The gridlock in Washington is "reflective of a government that is not responding to the needs of the people," Sister Haddad, the president and chief executive of the Catholic Health Association, said on Oct. 8. "Both sides need to take responsibility here; it's indicative of a government that is not working for us today."

And from her perspective, the entire dispute seemed a little beside the point. U.S. Catholics and C.H.A. membership, she said, "believe that health care is a basic human right and everyone needs access in order to flourish." C.H.A. represents more than 650 hospitals and 1,600 long-term care and other health facilities in all 50 states.

Democrats said they were holding out for the restoration of health care eligibility to Medicaid and Medicare recipients that had been tightened by congressional Republicans over the summer in an effort to achieve a historic $1.2 trillion cut in health spending. Republicans accused Democrats of shutting down the government because they want to provide taxpayer-funded health services to "illegal aliens."

Vice President JD Vance led the charge on cable news and social media. "If you're an American citizen and you've been to the hospital in the last few years," he told reporters, "you've probably noticed that wait times are especially large and very often somebody who's there in the E.R. is an illegal alien. Why do those people get health care benefits at hospitals paid for by American citizens?"

One of the Democrats' primary asks before adding their votes to a continuing resolution that would reopen government was that Congress extend tax credits that were boosted during the Covid-19 pandemic for health care plans offered under marketplaces created by the Affordable Care Act. Those programs reached a record enrollment of more than 24 million Americans by 2025. Three out of four of those A.C.A. enrollees live in states won by President Trump in the 2024 election.

"Everyone is about to experience dramatically increased premiums, co-pays and deductibles because of the Republican health care crisis—everyone," House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York warned during a news conference on Oct. 3.

For Sister Haddad, the current dysfunction in Washington was only the latest indicator of the precarious overall state of U.S. health care. She described insinuations that health care is being provided to "illegals" as misinformation that diverts attention from the true risk to health care delivery looming ahead.

"It's not about undocumented [people]," she said. The One Big Beautiful Bill, the Republican budget reconcili-

Hair stylist Christine Meehan sits in front of her medication while talking about the possible increase in her health insurance costs in Upper Chichester, Pa., on Oct. 13.

ation package crafted by the Trump administration and congressional Republicans and passed in July, "repealed services and Medicaid for those who are here legally. That's the heart of the issue," Sister Haddad said.

But it is surely true that Catholic hospitals, like all other hospitals across the United States, take care of anyone who crosses their thresholds seeking emergency care—including those without legal status. Sister Haddad describes that as a response to the church's mission and the minimum requirements of medical ethics. Beyond the moral call, though, treating all people who come to emergency rooms seeking help has been the law of the land since the Reagan administration.

The Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act requires hospitals that receive federal funding to evaluate and stabilize every person who arrives at their doors, regardless of insurance coverage, income or immigration status. Times have apparently changed, but when the law was passed in 1986, that obligation was viewed as a modest and sensible minimum care proposal meant to discourage the "dumping" of sometimes critically ill patients at other health care providers.

Hospitals may pick up the tab for that care over the short term, but if the federal government declines to pay for indigent care, hospitals will raise other fees and charges that are eventually passed on to the general public, Sister Haddad said. Facilities that are unable to find another way to pay for those care obligations, she warned, will be forced to close their doors.

She worried that could mean the loss of health care facilities, particularly in America's rural counties that face significant costs associated with the treatment of undocumented workers in the agricultural communities. She does not believe a $50 billion reserve fund for rural health care included in the Big Beautiful Bill will make up the difference. "It's a drop in the bucket," she said.

The budget package, signed by Mr. Trump on July 4, does not represent the president's first attempt to legislatively euthanize the A.C.A. In 2017 during the first Trump administration, White House allies in Congress tried to directly repeal the act.

"Thank God for John McCain, it did not happen," Sister Haddad said.

Obamacare Under Threat—Again

Passed in March 2010, the Affordable Care Act, the signature achievement of the Obama presidency, has created access to health care for more than 40 million Americans. The A.C.A. expanded Medicaid in 40 states to cover 21 million low-income adults under 65 and protected as many as 133 million with pre-existing conditions from losing their health insurance.

Since Mr. Trump's return to office, a renewed, "calculated plan to dismantle the A.C.A." began, according to Sister Haddad, through misinformation and "storylines" that characterize immigrants as violent criminals or "people on Medicaid as being lazy and not motivated to get work."

C.H.A.'s multiyear strategy, she said, heads in the opposite direction, aiming for "access to affordable, quality health care" for all.

"We will continue to fight for that, but we recognize the fact that this system is broken," Sister Haddad said.

Despite the expansion of health coverage created by Obamacare, as the A.C.A. eventually became known to critics and proponents alike, the United States remains far from making available the universal health coverage taken for granted in most Western peer states. It is a dismal possibility that with the passage of the Big Beautiful Bill, progress made under Obamacare is about to be significantly reversed.

"We have finite resources," Sister Haddad acknowledged. That means "we have to change the system of care. We have to transform health care in this country."

"We've gotten to a point in this country where we're comfortable with the status quo because we're making it work and we're inching by." But she wished more people were asking if the nation's mix of for-profit, private and public health provision is "really a just way of delivering care."

Health care costs in the United States remain twice as high as in peer high-income and industrialized states—$14,570 per capita as opposed to an average $6,850 per capita—yet health outcomes are far worse. Health care is a significant driver of both personal and public debt.

More than 100 million Americans carry more than $220 billion in medical debt, and medical debt is a contributing factor in more than two-thirds of U.S. bankruptcies. Americans die younger and suffer from an array of chronic illnesses at rates far higher than people in peer nations.

"I'm not satisfied with [the] status quo," Sister Haddad said. "That's not good enough. I hope we don't get to that sense of complacency because when we're complacent, we're complicit. And things need to change."

Care for all is not just the moral calling of Catholic health care institutions; it is also smarter social policy, according to Sister Haddad. She pointed out that U.S. residents who put off seeing a primary care physician because of their residency status or ability to pay will only become sicker. If they wait until a health crisis occurs, they will end

A repeal of Obamacare?

Since the Affordable Care Act's major provisions were implemented in 2013, the number of people with health insurance has grown by more than 38 million, and the nation's uninsured rate has nearly halved, falling from 14.4 percent in 2013 to 7.9 percent in 2023.

Under provisions of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, described by health care analysts as essentially repealing the A.C.A., the Congressional Budget Office projects the number of uninsured will increase by 16 million to 17 million people, contributing to an increase of three percentage points in the number of uninsured to 11 percent or higher by 2034.

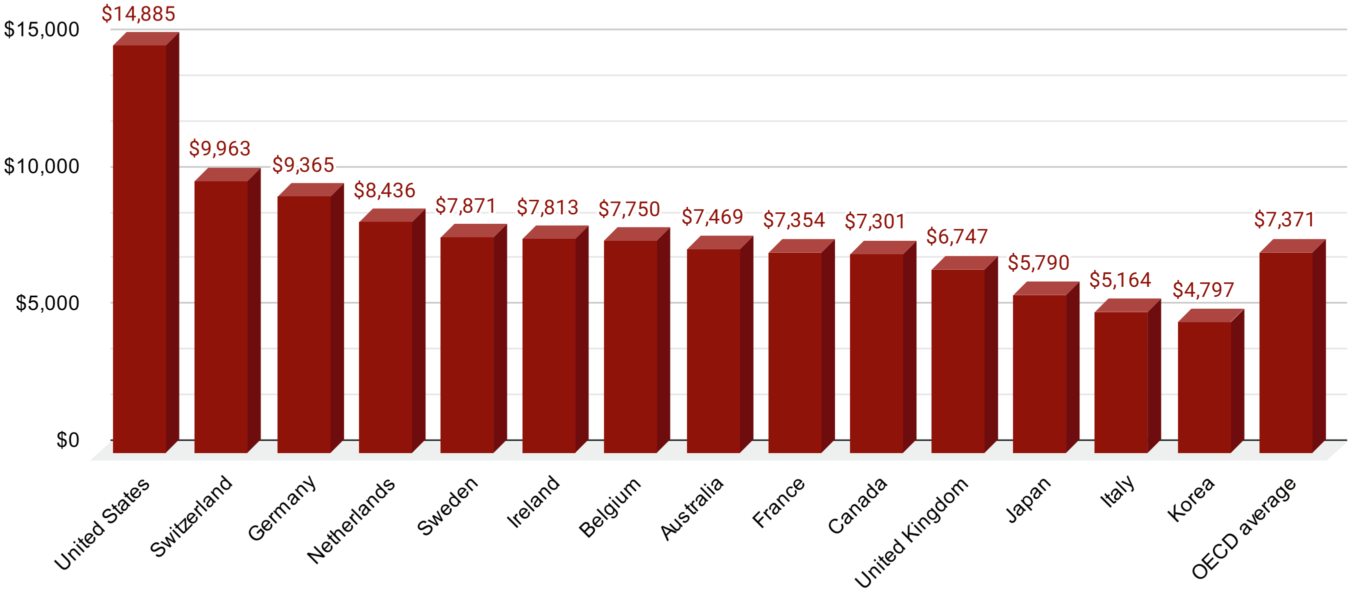
7.5%: The increase in U.S. health spending in 2023.

$4.9 trillion: U.S. spending on health care in 2023—**17.6%** of G.D.P. In 2022, average spending for health care as a share of G.D.P. among member states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development was **9.2%.**

$14,885: U.S. per-capita spending on health care—more than double the **$7,371** average cost in other O.E.C.D. member states.

$1,000: U.S. per-capita health care administrative costs—approximately five times more than the average among other high-income nations.

U.S. as outlier: O.E.C.D. per-capita health care spending in 2024



up at an emergency room, where their treatment will be far more costly. Or, worse, they may become debilitated by an illness or injury that could have been readily treatable—an individual tragedy that also represents a significant civic and social cost to all.

The cost of providing health services to some of the most marginalized people in U.S. society barely factors in that losing formula. According to an analysis of Medicaid data from 2016 conducted in 2022, the federal government spent $974 million on emergency and lifesaving services for undocumented immigrants, representing 0.2 percent of Medicaid expenditures and 0.03 percent of total national health expenditures that year.

Sister Haddad found it ironic that the parable of the good Samaritan was the Gospel reading for Mass the day she spoke with **America**: "That is what's at the heart of it: Who is my neighbor?"

"As Jesus tells the story, we see that the Samaritan is the one that cared for the [robbed and wounded] man, independent of who he was. He didn't go to check his ID when he was on the side of the road," Sister Haddad said. "Our call," as the parable says, "is to go and do likewise."

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

Catholic Relief Services is on the ground in Gaza as massive humanitarian effort begins

Speaking from Jerusalem on Oct. 16, Jason Knapp, the country representative for Catholic Relief Services in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, had just returned from a weeklong visit to assess conditions in Gaza. He said humanitarian agencies like C.R.S. were still negotiating how to begin working at a scale that matches the need in devastated Gaza, where more than 1.9 million people have been displaced from their homes and are now living in rudimentary and often tattered tent shelters.

Mr. Knapp said replacing thousands of those decrepit tents will be a focus for C.R.S. as winter approaches. Providing clean water while desalination plants and water pumping facilities are replaced or restored will also be a major priority.

The cease-fire negotiated by the Trump administration in October had created a flicker of hope among the residents of Gaza, many of whom, Mr. Knapp said, remain stunned that the end of the violence appeared truly at hand this time. "People are tired, and they really lived through hell for two years," he said.

"Everybody has his or her own timeline to kind of process news and experience the grief and the anger and the frustration and the hopelessness of it," he said. But an undeniable, if deeply cautious, optimism about the future is palpable now.

It remained difficult to discern the sincerity and intentions of both Israeli and Hamas leadership as the armed conflict appeared to be coming to a conclusion after 24 months of violence. But Mr. Knapp said "the normal civilians" that he has spoken with "were pretty hopeful that at least the war as they knew it, that war is over now."

"It feels [to the people of Gaza] like a miracle," Mr. Knapp said. "There is a lot of significance in that hope for peace and, all the more, for a just peace." He urged people of faith in the United States to remain focused on that outcome even as the vast humanitarian relief and rebuilding effort begins in Gaza.

"It's been so important to have the support of the Catholic community in the U.S.," he said, "certainly from an advocacy perspective, but also [because] it enables our [response to] scale."

"It's been really incredible to see the support from the people in the pews. I do feel deeply appreciative to the Catholic community in the U.S. for that."

The cease-fire survived a few near-breakdowns after days of tension and sporadic flare-ups of violence, during which each side accused the other of violating the terms of the agreement signed on Oct. 13 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. The truce remained fragile in late October. Israeli forces unleashed a wave of strikes across Gaza on Oct. 19 that killed at least 44 people after two I.D.F. soldiers were killed in an attack that was later disavowed by Hamas leaders.


OSV News photo/Ebrahim Hajjaj, Reuters

A Palestinian woman stands amid the rubble of her destroyed home in Gaza City on Oct. 15.

C.R.S. team members in Gaza have been working throughout the conflict under those dangerous conditions and were ready to continue despite the danger. "We've invested a lot of thinking in our safety and security analysis and protocols, and what we can do to keep staff safe," Mr. Knapp said.

Tom Fletcher, the United Nations undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, issued a statement from Cairo, Egypt, on Oct. 15. He described efforts to continue the cease-fire as "a moment of great but precarious hope."

"We need more [humanitarian] crossings open and a genuine, practical, problem-solving approach to removing remaining obstacles," he said. "Throughout this crisis, we have insisted that withholding aid from civilians is not a bargaining chip. Facilitation of aid is a legal obligation."

"No one expected this to be straightforward, nor easy," Mr. Fletcher said in his statement. "There will be more bumps in the road. We must restore trust and hope through action. It is essential that we do not squander the immense progress made."

"The test of these agreements is that families are safe and reunited, children fed, sheltered and back in school, and that Palestinians and Israelis can look forward with greater security, justice and opportunity," Mr. Fletcher said. "The world has failed so many times before—we must not fail this time."

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

Luke Olsen, S.J.

Threatened by climate change, rural Zambian farmers face an uncertain future

In rural Zambia, drought fueled by climate change threatens subsistence farmers and the communities that depend on them for food.

Zambian farmers are used to dealing with dry spells, according to Claus Recktenwald, S.J., an agriculturalist who runs the Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre outside Lusaka. But dry spells are lasting longer and becoming more severe because of climate change.

"Small scale farmers are normally the most vulnerable in terms of climate change and extreme weather because they do not have a backup system," Father Recktenwald said. When rains stop suddenly, fragile, germinating plants die and farmers must re-sow their fields. Acquiring new seeds represents a serious financial challenge.

"If then also the second sowing fails," Father Recktenwald said, "farmers have missed the chance to get crops growing in this season."

Imanga Wamunyima, a member of Parliament for Nalolo District in Western Province, said that because of drought, "we had some areas where there was completely zero [agricultural] production."

The effect of crop failures reverberates across the country. Low supply and high demand have pushed the cost of food higher even as Zambia's farmers struggled to salvage drought-devastated harvests. An emergency assessment completed in March 2024 by the United Nations and the Zambian government found that 77 percent of households interviewed reported that adults were eating less food to ensure there was enough for children.

Despite considerable improvements in rainfall this year, Western Province is not food secure. Conditions in the future are likely to be difficult. And government attempts to aid farmers in Western Province may be contributing to the region's vulnerability. The national Farmer Input Support Programme provides synthetic fertilizers and hybrid seeds to poor farmers to increase their productivity.

This strategy for increasing production, however, has significant drawbacks in Western Province, where the soil is soft and sandy. Father Recktenwald reports that the use of synthetic chemical fertilizers like those provided through F.I.S.P. is increasing desertification in the province.

Multinational corporations are eager to capitalize on the business opportunity afforded by Zambia's under-resourced agricultural market. In March, the German multinational company Bayer announced it had built a 32-million euro seed facility in Zambia. Bayer hopes to reach 10 million smallholder farmers by 2030.

Hybrid seeds are bred to have specific traits like high yields or drought resistance. This makes them especially attractive to governments, like Zambia's, concerned about food security and drought. But hybrid seeds are very expensive.

Both Father Recktenwald and Mr. Wamunyima are concerned that the massive inflow of hybrid seeds envisaged by Bayer and other large foreign agricultural companies will have a negative effect on subsistence farmers by

Drying rice seed on a farm near Mongu, Zambia

decreasing genetic diversity and increasing dependence on foreign seed companies.

Perhaps most significantly for farmers, the superior performance of hybrid seeds lasts for only one generation. The desired traits, like high yields and drought resistance, diminish rapidly. Unlike traditional local seeds, which are selected and replanted each season by farmers, hybrid seeds must be bred and bought for each planting season. According to Father Recktenwald, this makes it impossible for farmers to save and reseed their crops.

For seed companies, this is good news. If Zambia's path to food security in response to climate change runs primarily through hybrid seeds, rather than local varieties, it ensures seeds will be bought by governments and on the market year after year.

Mr. Wamunyima worries that phasing out indigenous seeds "would literally destroy the cultural heritage of farming in the country and would put the farming practices and agriculture sector at high risk."

Father Recktenwald argues that Zambia needs to develop a legal system that balances the rights of seed companies and local farmers. Seed companies should be able to do their work, and farmers should have the right to plant and develop seeds they think are suitable for them.

"As we are facing, as one human family, this climate change," he said, "we should see how we can best work together to find ways to deal with it and to adapt our food production."

If our only consideration is short-term profit margins, he said, "we are actually just increasing the amount of problems that we are passing on to those that are coming after us, and we are just increasing the space between the rich and the poor."

Luke Olsen, S.J., *a Jesuit scholastic, served this summer with the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection in Lusaka, Zambia.*

All Souls' Day at Wari Cemetery in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in November 2024

OSV News photo/Stephan Uttom Rozario

Pope calls religious freedom 'essential' as new report details global persecution

Almost two-thirds of humanity live in countries where serious violations of religious freedom are taking place, according to the 2025 edition of the Religious Freedom in the World Report. The report, released in Rome on Oct. 21, was compiled by Aid to the Church in Need.

Pope Leo XIV met an A.C.N. delegation on Oct. 10. He emphasized that religious freedom "is not merely a legal right or a privilege granted to us by governments; it is a foundational condition that makes authentic reconciliation possible."

The pope said that "every human being carries within his or her heart a profound longing for truth, for meaning and for communion with others and with God." For this reason, he said, "the right to religious freedom is not optional but essential" and "rooted in the dignity of the human person."

According to A.C.N., "religious persecution," its most serious category, could be found in 24 countries, representing 4.1 billion people, including China, India, Nigeria and North Korea. "Religious discrimination" was documented in another 38 countries, representing 1.3 billion people, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Mexico, Turkey and Vietnam.

According to the report, "authoritarianism is the greatest threat to religious freedom." It charges that in countries such as China, Eritrea, Iran and Nicaragua, "the government represses religion through pervasive surveillance, restrictive legislation, and the repression of dissenting beliefs."

A.C.N. found that jihadist violence is escalating and that religious extremism is the main driver of persecution in 15 countries and contributes to discrimination in 10 others across Africa's Sahel region, the Middle East and Asia. The report documented a sharp rise in both antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes, following the attack by Hamas on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza.

A rise in "anti-Christian incidents" in Europe and North America was notable. A.C.N. tracked a spike in attacks on churches in Canada, as well as the desecration of places of worship, physical assaults on clergy, and disruption of religious services in countries including Spain, Italy, the United States and Croatia.

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

WITH GOD IN VEGAS

Passengers peering out airplane windows during a nighttime descent into Las Vegas can attest to how far its suburbs sprawl into the vast Mojave Desert. Nearly three million people make their home here.

Still, it is the luster of the casinos on Las Vegas Boulevard, better known as the Strip, that arrests the eyes. Las Vegas typically lures more than four million visitors a year, and since 2023, arguably the brightest spot in the City of Lights is the Sphere, a music and entertainment arena with a wraparound interior screen that offers 17,600 patrons an immersive audio and visual experience.

Walk down the Strip at midnight, and you will see musicians banging on drums and blowing tunes on brass instruments while visitors stumble up and down the crowded sidewalks. Vehicles advertising escort services and live entertainment join the late-night traffic, making their way past the MGM, the Bellagio, the Flamingo and Paris Las Vegas.

Just past the Wynn and the Encore, tourists may notice a modest, A-frame church dwarfed by the buildings that surround it. Built in 1963, Guardian Angel Cathedral is the mother church of the Archdiocese of Las Vegas, one of the fastest growing dioceses in the United States. Over the last 30 years, the archdiocese has seen the number of registered Catholics triple, from 250,000 in 1995 to 750,000 in 2025.

"In no small measure, the Las Vegas Strip is one of the reasons why the church has burgeoned here," Archbishop George Leo Thomas told **America**. "People react against what they see at the Strip. St. Paul's quote—'Where sin is

Getty Images/iStockphoto

A visit to the newest archdiocese in the United States

By J.D. Long García

present, grace abounds'—I think that's what's happened. I think the carnality of the Strip, the secularity of the Strip, has driven people into the arms of the church, into the heart of the church."

But there are a number of other reasons, he said, that throughout the archdiocese's 38 parishes, it is common for Sunday Masses to be standing room only. Another is that the growth of the church mirrors the growth of the metropolitan area, which grew from 1.1 million people in 1995 to 2.4 million in 2025. As many as 50,000 people move to the area from California alone each year, drawn by the lack of state income tax, more affordable housing and a decent job market.

At St. Anne's, a predominantly Latino parish in the city of Las Vegas, priests celebrate nine Masses each weekend to accommodate its 10,000 registered families. The parish also celebrated 1,500 first Communions this year, and clergy baptize about 30 babies each weekend. Archbishop Thomas anointed more than 300 teenagers during the confirmation ceremony at the church in April.

Seeking New Vocations

Given the rapid growth, the archbishop has prioritized encouraging new priestly vocations since being appointed to the see in 2018. At the time of his appointment, there were three seminarians. Today there are 17. Archbishop Thomas also reported that there are 30 men actively discerning the priesthood in the archdiocese.

Like many Las Vegas residents, seminarians may not be from the city. Gino Esposito, for example, is from

Catholic education has played a central role in the success of the archdiocese.

Connecticut, and he received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina. He was a member of the wrestling team there and, on a whim, he reached out to Archbishop Thomas to ask if they could meet when his team was traveling to Las Vegas for a tournament.

"I sent the email but didn't expect a response," Mr. Esposito said. "Two hours later he got back to me: 'Let's make it happen.'"

During a break in the tournament, his teammates went to the Strip, but Mr. Esposito met with the archbishop. During their 90-minute meeting, Archbishop Thomas asked if he had ever considered becoming a priest.

"At this time, there's like a zero percent chance of me being a priest," Mr. Esposito said, describing his response at that time. "The thought had never crossed my mind. It wasn't on the table."

But they stayed in touch and, sure enough, Mr. Esposito felt the call 10 months later. He was not sure what diocese to join, but he visited some of the parishes in Las Vegas on a subsequent trip and saw the fervent faith of the people. And he saw they needed priests.

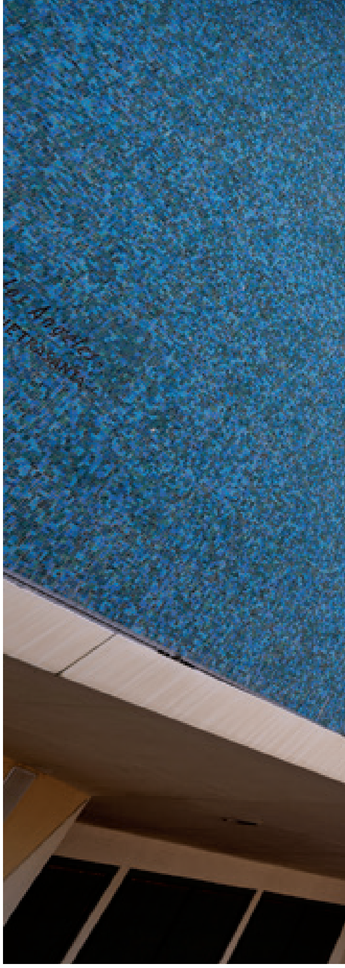
"It got to a point where I just couldn't shake the feeling that this is where God wanted me to come," Mr. Esposito said. "Despite that I don't have any family out here, and I didn't know a single person—besides the archbishop."

This summer, he helped out at St. Francis of Assisi in Henderson, a Las Vegas suburb. The parish has more than 10,000 registered families. The current church can accommodate 900 people, but it will eventually seat 1,500. St. Francis is also building a small chapel, which will be named for St. Clare.

Each building on the capacious campus is named after a Franciscan saint. The school, for example, is St. Anthony of Padua. It serves students in pre-K through eighth grade, and there is a St. Damiano cross in every classroom.

A Las Vegas Legacy

Father John T. Assalone, the pastor at St. Francis, brings years of experience in the entertainment industry to his ministry. A native of Long Island, N.Y., he was ordained at 46, but before he felt the call he worked in Hollywood and later was the executive director of entertainment at the MGM Grand Casino Hotel in Las Vegas. The connections he made on the Strip have helped produce some generous donors to the parish.



"Vegas is a very large city, but it's still a very small town," Father Assalone said.

Many casino founders and executives also helped build Bishop Gorman High School, which moved to its current location from the east side of Las Vegas 17 years ago. The football field, for example, is named after the Fertitta family, owners of Station Casinos.

John Kilduff, the president of the school, explained that the previous location was built on seven acres. Now the campus extends over 52 acres. More than $150 million has been invested in the property, which offers the school's 1,500 students amenities—like lecture halls, practice fields and a student union—that are more common at the university level.

"Living in Vegas, you know, you can go to the Strip, but you're not required," quipped Tracy Goode, principal of Bishop Gorman. "We're a separate community."

Generations from the same families have been educated at the school, which started serving students in 1954. It is named after Bishop Thomas K. Gorman, who became the first bishop of the Diocese of Reno in 1931. That became the Diocese of Reno-Las Vegas in 1976, and the Holy See created separate dioceses—Reno and Las Vegas—in 1995. Pope Francis elevated Las Vegas to an archdiocese in 2023.

Catholic education has played a central role in the success of the archdiocese. Catherine Thompson, superintendent of Catholic schools in Las Vegas, said enrollment went up during the pandemic. Las Vegas Catholic schools offered in-person classes when public schools did not, and she estimated that 95 percent of the new students stayed. Many archdiocesan schools that prepare students for Bishop Gorman have waiting lists.

Yet while some schools are expanding, Ms. Thomp-

son acknowledged that others have closed. St. Anne's, the vibrant parish previously mentioned, had to close its school earlier this year. And St. Christopher's, in North Las Vegas, closed its school in part due to the pandemic. Ms. Thompson explained that while the archdiocese has an operating budget for tuition assistance, the state has limited tax credits for private education in recent years. Lack of state funding had an acute impact on urban schools like St. Christopher's and St. Anne's.

A Better Future

Both St. Anne's and St. Christopher's parishes serve working-class Latino families. St. Christopher's is located in a city known for its immigrant community. The parish confirmed 260 teenagers this year and baptizes 10 to 20 babies each weekend, according to Deacon José Rodríguez. Parishioners come from Mexico, Central America and even further south, like Venezuela, he said.

Each weekend, there are five Spanish-language Masses and two in English. But sometimes, Mr. Rodriguez said, Spanish speakers attend the English-language Mass because they can get a seat. After the school closed, the parish began using its classrooms for its many groups—like the adult catechumenate, Marriage Encounter and the Charismatic Renewal.

The Guardian Angel Cathedral, just off of Las Vegas Boulevard, in the shadow of the Encore hotel in Las Vegas.

Mr. Rodriguez, who is 73, arrived in Las Vegas 50 years ago. He worked almost 40 years as a baker at the Mirage and retired when he was 66. He has been a deacon for 14 years but does not plan to stop serving the church any time soon.

"My thinking is that it's the Holy Spirit who decides when we retire," he said, crediting his wife for his youthful disposition.

Father Miguel Rolland, the pastor, first arrived at the parish in 2018. He is an American priest who speaks English with the inflection of a native Spanish speaker, in a gentle, melodic voice. A trained anthropologist, Father Rolland spent many years living in different parts of Mexico as a Dominican friar before being incardinated in Las Vegas.

"All the churches are full, basically. 'Sin City,' yes. It's great. For priests, it's wonderful—because it means job security," he joked. "There's plenty of work here."

The church building at St. Christopher's can hold 588, but Father Rolland would like to build a new structure to better accommodate the community. The parish counts on retired priests and Dominican friars to cover its numerous weekend Masses.

‘When you have your eyes fixed on God, the majesty of Las Vegas means nothing.’

“When all of this immigration stuff began, I was afraid we’d lose population,” he said referring to the crackdowns by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement initiated by the Trump administration. “But on the contrary, they hugged the church like they would the mantle of the Virgin. They are not afraid, and they come. Maybe with one eye over their shoulder.”

Father Rolland explained that for working-class immigrants—gardeners, restaurant and hotel workers, those in housecleaning—the church is “familiar to them because they are a long way from home and it reminds them of their family connections.”

María del Carmen, a St. Christopher parishioner, came to Las Vegas 25 years ago from Puebla in Mexico.

“We came for a better future for our children and for us,” she said. “I found what I was looking for, most of all in this parish: the embrace of family, the advice of the priests, who have helped us.”

It is good medicine, said fellow parishioner Ramona Ramírez, echoing her sentiments.

“When you have your eyes fixed on God, the majesty of Las Vegas means nothing,” she said. “You have your life, your family, your children, formed in the faith. You come to church, and you find your community here.”

Ms. Ramírez moved here with her husband from Guadalajara, in the Mexican state of Jalisco. She is very proud of her hometown, boasting of its mariachi, tamales and tequila. They first lived in a small apartment near Las Vegas Boulevard, and she saw things that shattered stereotypes about the glamour of the city.

“I saw people on the streets. You don’t hear about that. You fall in love with the structures and all of that. In your hometown, you don’t have something that beautiful,” she said. They came searching for the American dream, something short of the rags-to-riches life described in Horatio Alger’s novels. They worked hard and got ahead. But this certainly does not happen for everyone.

“The casinos try to attract you,” Ms. Ramírez said. “They give you a $5 card to gamble with, they have promotions and it’s a temptation. And you can certainly fall. You can fall a long way. People become obsessed and gamble away their paycheck. They even gamble away their homes. I’ve seen all of that.”

Finding Support in the City

Some who wind up homeless struggled with gambling,

Archbishop George Leo Thomas greets parishioners after the “Mass of Sending Forth” for seminarians of the Archdiocese of Las Vegas, celebrated at Holy Family Church on Aug. 18.

Ricardo Pradilla

according to Julia Occhiogrosso, who leads the Las Vegas Catholic Worker. She and her husband, Gary Cavalier, came to the city to start the outreach in the 1980s, and the number of people experiencing homelessness has grown along with the city.

"People who are mentally ill need supportive housing," Ms. Occhiogrosso said. "You'll find them in the jails now. That's how we house mentally ill people."

The Las Vegas Catholic Worker is in Westside, a neighborhood that used to be racially segregated. One of its houses of hospitality was originally built in 1938 by Leroy and Carrie Christensen, a married couple who used it as their home. Over the years, the family hosted neighborhood events and the home served as a social hub for Black residents in the area. The Catholic Worker is also less than a half a mile north of the Harrison Guest House, where notables like Nat King Cole and Sammy Davis Jr. stayed when the Strip hotels were segregated.

"People come to church here from all over the city," Mr. Cavalier said, noting several churches in the neighborhood—like St. James Catholic Church—that have historically served Black parishioners. "On Sundays, there's nowhere to park."

Ricardo Pradilla

Father John T. Assalone, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Henderson, Nev., blesses a parishioner after Sunday Mass on Aug. 17.

Ricardo Pradilla

Seminarians for the Archdiocese of Las Vegas are encouraged during the "Mass of Sending Forth" celebrated at Holy Family Church on Aug. 18.

Driving through the neighborhood, Mr. Cavalier points out where Catholic sisters used to run a day care center, as well as a school that used to serve Black and Paiute Native American children during segregation.

In 1855, nine years before Nevada became a state, Brigham Young sent Mormons to this area. But it was not until 1911 that Las Vegas was incorporated. Nevada outlawed gambling in 1910, but it thrived anyway. In 1931, the state made it legal, the same year construction began on the Hoover Dam.

Some of the streets near the Catholic Worker are lined by people who are homeless, and drug transactions are commonplace nearby. Before the pandemic, Mr. Cavalier said, disability checks could cover rent in low-cost dwellings. But rent in some places doubled from $600 to $1,200. Lack of affordable housing, mental illness and substance abuse are the main drivers of homelessness, he said.

"Sometimes they've ruined [family relationships] themselves by stealing from their parents because they have an addiction," he said. "Sometimes people become homeless because they lose their job. The homeless don't have anybody on the outside to take care of them."

The Catholic Worker has volunteers from 14 parishes in the archdiocese, including members of the Knights of Columbus and the Knights of Peter Claver. In a way, that is how Joy Jones got involved.

She suggested the ladies auxiliary at St. James volunteer at the Catholic Worker, but others told her "it was too early!" she laughed. On Thursdays, food line volunteers get started at 6 a.m.

Ms. Jones, a native of New Orleans, did not mind the early start and has been serving regularly for the last three years. She is retired now but first moved to Las Vegas when she was 18.

> **Over the last 30 years, the archdiocese has seen the number of registered Catholics triple.**

Ramona Ramírez, a parishioner of St. Christopher Church in North Las Vegas, moved here with her husband from Guadalajara, in the Mexican state of Jalisco. She said her parish is alive in the faith, with numerous parish ministries serving the immigrant community.

She serves alongside Mark Kelso, a former Marine, who runs the shower project. Mr. Kelso started volunteering at the Catholic Worker in the 1990s. The shower project involves a semi-truck that has space for people to have private showers. They serve about 40 people each week and offer clients underwear, socks and T-shirts—and any other clothing item that has been donated. They also provide coffee and snacks.

Sack lunches are handed out at homeless encampments on Thursdays. People experiencing homelessness often wait in line for services, Mr. Kelso said, but not in this case.

"The nice thing about that is you get these relationships going, because you have more time to talk to them," he said. "You're not in a rush because you're not trying to get everyone through the line."

A Place of Outreach

Concern for an individual's dignity must always be a priority of any program, according to Patti McGuire, who runs the human concerns ministry at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Summerlin, Nev. She moved to Las Vegas with her family from Omaha, Neb., when she was 15.

"We're such a young city here," she said, referring to the exponential growth in recent decades. Conversations among parishioners often begin by disclosing their hometowns, Ms. McGuire said. Her ministry, which counts on the support of 120 volunteers, includes a food pantry; it also distributes Christmas gifts for those in need.

Summerlin is about 10 miles from the Strip. Many parishioners at St. Seton are retired—and so are the people her ministry serves.

"People retire, they're playing pickleball, they're having a great time. And life is good," Ms. McGuire said. "But then they become elderly. Their spouse passes away, and their income gets cut in half, and they have medical bills and prescriptions. Then the choice is between food or medication."

The food pantry, which is supported by parishioners, Jewish Family Services and the local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, lets those in need select what food items they would like. They also offer non-food items like laundry detergent, toilet paper and incontinence underwear, which can be expensive. She has met seniors who ration their incontinence briefs and consequently limit their social outings. The pantry helps restore their sense of dignity. The Christmas program, which helps parents provide gifts for their children, also keeps seniors in mind.

"We make sure they can come pick out a gift for themselves, because it might be the only gift they get," Ms. McGuire said. "We always have cookies and hot chocolate and coffee and all that stuff because we wouldn't be Catholic without food."

It may be some distance from the Strip, but there is still gambling at corner casinos in the area, Ms. McGuire said. People who are lonely or have just lost a loved one are particularly susceptible to being lured by the false promise of the casinos, she said.

"This city will suck you dry," Ms. McGuire said. "It will eat you up and spit you out if you don't have some grounding."

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parishioners as well as Catholics across the valley work with Nevadans for the Common Good, most recently organizing for regulation on

Joy Jones and Gary Cavalier prepare food for clients at the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.

payday lenders in the state. N.C.G. has also worked to curb child sex trafficking, to improve the state's poorly rated education system and to advocate for affordable housing. The last effort includes work toward the regulation of vacation rentals, which can drive up the cost of housing.

The cost of housing remains a concern for many. "You could get a job, make a living wage as a pit boss or a server or a housekeeper, and buy a house. That was the American dream" as it once played out in Las Vegas, according to Anna Eng, executive director of N.C.G. "Now the cost of housing going up has changed things. People are having a harder time being able to afford things. This remains a working-class town."

The culinary union remains a positive force for workers, Ms. Eng said. But she drew a contrast between Portland, Ore., where she grew up, and Las Vegas. In Portland, the city painstakingly preserves historic buildings, but in Las Vegas, when a resort property has served its purpose, "We blow it up and build a big, brand new, shiny edifice. That's kind of the way we do things here."

Some things on the Strip have staying power, though, like the Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace. Those were the brainchild of Deacon Thomas Roberts, who developed the concept around 1990. He estimated that 80 percent of revenue on the Strip came from gaming at that time. Now he thinks it is more like 20 percent, with the other 80 coming from nongaming offerings, like food, entertainment, sports, shopping and hotels.

But Mr. Roberts, who used to work for the Fertitta family, believes gaming, if offered properly, is an entertainment vehicle. "If you go and have a great dinner, you don't ask for your money back at the end of it," he said. Some may gamble irresponsibly, he explained, but most simply see it as entertainment.

The deacon's career took a somewhat abrupt turn not long after his ordination, when the death of Msgr. Patrick Leary left open the executive director position at Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada. Mr. Roberts came in as an advisor at first. But over time, the board asked him to take the job. That was 12 years ago.

The organization's budget went from $12 million to $55 million over that span and now serves 4,000 people a day. Mr. Roberts, who stepped down from his position earlier this year, applied concepts from his previous line of work to better serve the marginalized. That includes affinity cards that clients scan when using services, which helps Catholic Charities track their needs.

"Our clients are coming to us for certain resources," he said. "We may learn what is causing them to be chronically homeless. And then we can identify which of those issues we can focus on and which we can collaborate on with other nonprofits."

Catholic Charities' Meals on Wheels program grew from 700 to 2,500 clients during his time with the organization, Mr. Roberts said, adding, "We're keeping more people in their homes with nutritious foods."

Home deliveries have also helped identify other issues, like dementia or incontinence. Some clients, Mr. Roberts discovered, were sharing their meals with their pets, so they began giving out pet food, too. As for chronic homelessness, Mr. Roberts identified mental illness as the overall leading cause, connecting it to broken family relationships, gambling and substance addiction.

"It started because they had a mental illness that was left untreated, and that suddenly turned into a vortex of bad things," he said. "And there's no shortage of [bad] things here that are open 24 hours."

Staying Strong

Back at the Guardian Angel Cathedral on the Strip, the scope of the church's influence in Las Vegas is on display in the life of Ivanka Zrnic, the maintenance director at the cathedral. She came to the United States as a refugee from Croatia in 1998. She was six months pregnant when she arrived with her husband, who had been a prisoner of war.

Catholic Charities had someone there at the airport to greet the family. They had paid for the plane fare, drove

Students at Bishop Gorman High School walk past Ferititta Field after school on Aug. 18. The school serves 1,500 students on its 52-acre campus.

them to their apartment and helped them with medical requirements.

"They took really good care of us," she said.

Ms. Zrnic started as a part-time employee cleaning the bathrooms at the cathedral, but then started helping at the gift shop. She has served under four different bishops. Her husband, Zvonko, works at one of the hotels. "They just call him 'Z,'" she said

Her two children, Joseph and Andrea, have graduated from college. Ms. Zrnic is one of 11 children and said her siblings are all over the world—from England to the Netherlands to Australia. She goes back to Croatia every two years.

"A lot of people who come here say they didn't know there was a church on the Strip," she said of tourists who happen upon the cathedral. "They just see the cross and come in."

The cathedral, designed by the architect Paul Revere Williams, seats 1,100. It contains stained glass, mosaics and a mural made by Isabel Piczek in the 1970s. Edith Piczek, her sister, designed the large mosaic on the cathedral's exterior. The Piczek sisters were originally from Hungary.

Lit by the sun, the 12 triangular stained-glass windows tell the story of the destiny of human beings, including an interpretation of the Stations of the Cross. The south sanctuary window is called "The Mask of Reality" and depicts the struggle of human beings to carry out their God-given mission amid distractions. At its base, the artist portrays Las Vegas casinos and hotels. The risen Christ and his mother are at the top. Jesus is calling us to reach up to him. Human beings are caught in the middle.

J.D. Long García *is a senior editor at* ***America.*** *Reporting for this story was supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.*

IN SEARCH OF A SUSTAINING LOVE

What does it really mean to be a pilgrim of hope?

By Simcha Fisher

Participants in the Jubilee of the Sick and Health Care Workers cross through the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on April 5.

CNS photo/Pablo Esparza

What does it really mean to be a pilgrim of hope? We all know what hope is, more or less. The Gospels call Christians to hope countless times, and Pope Francis, planning ahead, invited Catholics to "gain new strength and certainty" by becoming pilgrims of hope in the Jubilee Year of 2025, which concludes on Jan. 6, 2026. Some of my Catholic friends made a pilgrimage to Rome, and some took advantage of the chance to visit pilgrimage sites here in the United States.

But some of them made an involuntary pilgrimage, walking not through Holy Doors but through terrible trials of grief and loss—and in the process, they gained a more profound understanding of the theological virtue of hope. It is, they learned, more than optimism, more than desire, and more, even, than a belief that everything will work out someday in heaven. Hope is a force that orders their lives on earth as they walk toward heaven.

Pope Leo recently said, "We know that, even in the darkness of trial, God's love sustains us and ripens the fruit of eternal life in us." Here are three stories of Catholics who did find sustenance from God in times that felt hopeless.

Danielle McLellan-Bujnak knows about that darkness. She saw her home, her cozy neighborhood and her entire town vaporized in the Palisades fire at the beginning of this year. It burned at 2,000 degrees for 20 hours. The soil was poisoned, and the ocean went black.

"The whole town is gone. The goneness of it is mind-blowing. I still can't wrap my head around it, how thoroughly gone everything is. Fire is very final," she said.

Since January, she has lived in seven different temporary homes, and her life has changed forever. The fire wasn't her first major trauma, though.

"I had a very uprooted family life. There was so much

She believes profoundly in the value of tangible connections.

brokenness in my family," Ms. McLellan-Bujnak said.

After several moves, she finally settled in as an adult with her father and sister in Ojai, Calif., thinking she had found some peace at last. Then her father died suddenly, and because his legal affairs were not in order, she found herself pushed out of their shared home and left without anything. She eventually moved to Pacific Palisades, and spent the next 10 years trying to heal and sort out rare happy memories from a complex history of trauma and loss.

"Finding ways to connect to the loving parts of those broken stories, trying to salvage the loving memories from a broken childhood, is really hard and really important," she said.

So when she returned again and again to sift through the ashes of the Palisades, she was looking for more than mementos. She was looking for physical signs of spiritual truths: evidence of love.

"I needed to see something the fire could not take," she said.

Five months after the inferno, she found it. Under a layer of ash, between blackened chimneys and puddles of glass, she uncovered a poignant sign of hope in the form of a little figure of Jesus himself. It was a charred bit of a statue from Europe, with the arm of his mother still attached.

"It was such a solace to find that in the ashes. It was almost like a reminder my spiritual life still exists," she said.

Then she shifted a fragment of stucco and exposed another treasure: her family jewelry, singed but unmistakable. She believes St. Anthony set these things aside for her, knowing how deeply she longed for them.

A lifelong Catholic, Ms. McLellan-Bujnak believes this entire world is transient—that all of us are pilgrims passing through a fleeting life, and the material things we acquire will not last. She knows that anything necessary for our happiness will be restored to us in heaven, she said.

But she is not in heaven now. She is in the world where God placed her, and she believes profoundly in the value of tangible connections.

"We're accustomed to having these physical connections with our loved ones. I don't think that's wrong. That's why we have the Eucharist. God comes in a physical form because that's what we need, to connect with love," she said. So she received these small, material signs of hope with profound gratitude.

Courtesy of Danielle McLellan-Bujnak

Danielle McLellan-Bujnak lost her home in the Palisades fire this year.

Ms. McLellan-Bujnak is the author of two books (one under a pen name) and teaches early childhood education to community college and dual-enrolled high school students. Her work reflects a lifelong fascination with how the lived reality of the body connects us to the undeniable truth of God's love.

In the first cataclysmic week after the fire, she threw herself into preserving those connections. Ms. McLellan-Bujnak is also an overnight newborn nanny and postpartum doula, and after the fire, she maxed out her schedule, glad for the exhaustion that helped her sleep and grateful for the grounding work of welcoming new life in a time of profound destabilization. Even as her own life had been reduced to ash, she found strength in shepherding others through their most vulnerable times.

"Babies reach a very hard part of my heart and soul," she said. "It goes deeper than any fire or any loss."

The work of being a fire survivor—collecting documents, recalling and reporting every purchase, waiting on hold for hours—was a full-time job in itself, but she soon began to realize she had yet another job before her: advocacy in the face of injustice.

As devastating as the fire was, even worse was feeling betrayed by systems she thought would protect her. She and other survivors believe the complete destruction of

Courtesy of Danielle McLellan-Bujnak

The remains of a statue of the child Jesus was found in the ashes of Danielle McLellan-Bujnak's home after the California wildfires.

their town could have been avoided, and they're fighting hard for accountability and reform. Ms. McLellan-Bujnak fends off bitterness by channeling her righteous anger into action.

"I channel it toward advocacy for myself, for others in my community and for others in future communities that could ever be influenced," she said.

Those survivors are not just banding together for legal purposes. They support each other emotionally, encouraging and commiserating in a way that only other fire survivors can. Ms. McLellan-Bujnak said her adopted parish, St. Monica, also offered powerful healing by welcoming survivors specifically and repeatedly, and by disbursing $1.5 million from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

"They said they would help us, and they did," Ms. McLellan-Bujnak said. "They really live the love of God."

Like the jewelry she recovered from the ash, these relationships, old and new, are not just a sentimental comfort for Ms. McLellan-Bujnak. They express something fundamental about how she understands existence.

She teaches her students that there is never just a baby; there's a baby *and someone.* We are made to live in relationship, and it is in serving and nourishing relationships that we find meaning and hope. Now, as she throws herself into nurturing relationships with her fellow survivors, with her students, with clients and with her own past, she is living out the still deeper relationship she has with Jesus, which she knows is unshakeable.

"That is a really important part of my hope: truly believing that, no matter what happens with me, or what I choose or don't choose, there is a love that never will change or go away, and will always be there with open arms for me. That is a core component of my existence," she said. It will "survive the fire" even when nothing else does.

Healing is a long road. She still weeps when she speaks of what she lost, and she still trembles when too many firetrucks pass by. But she has already achieved the goal of remaining steadfastly in relationship, with others and with God. This is her mission, and through it she remains rooted in hope.

The Hallmark of Hope

Leticia Adams thought she understood hope nine years ago. Her family lived in what was billed as "the safest suburb in America." After decades of struggle with generational abuse, poverty and addiction, she had turned her life around, joined the Catholic Church and was living her dream with her family, her two dogs, a steady job and faith in the Lord.

Then her son hanged himself in her garage. That day was Leticia Adams's first lesson in true hope.

"Where it really began with me was 30 minutes after finding Anthony. His body was still in the garage and the ambulance was just getting there, and our priest was right behind them," she said.

It was the worst day of her life. It was also the day she felt God's presence, profoundly and unmistakably.

"It wasn't just the people around me. It was God. It was the person standing beside you, not saying floofy sh-t, not telling you everything happens for a reason. But just a strong presence," she said.

In that presence, Ms. Adams made the deliberate choice to live.

"It was a move I had to make in order to take care of [Anthony's] children. It was a move I had to make so as not to jump into his grave. It was either hope or follow in his footsteps. There was no other option," she said.

She turned, deliberately, because the only alternative was death.

This turn is what Pope Francis identifies as the hallmark of hope. In a Jubilee catechesis, he said:

> In tears, Mary looks first inside the tomb, then she turns around: the Risen one is not on the side of death, but on the side of life.... Then, when she hears her name spoken, the Gospel says that again

She does not pretend to understand God’s hidden will.

Mary turns around.... She can dry her tears, because she has heard her own name: only the Master pronounces it in this way.

Ms. Adams identifies strongly with Mary Magdalene, whom she calls “a hot freaking mess” of a saint, and she loves how Anne Catherine Emmerich described a vision of Mary Magdalene wailing and throwing stones at the soldier who arrested Jesus, while the Blessed Mother steps in to calm her down. That’s the kind of energy Ms. Adams can relate to.

She does recognize the Master’s voice in small things that speak promises of something larger. She feels strongly that God wants to be known and knows her, and that he sends her signs. This has always been true, but first she had to disentangle it from something akin to the prosperity gospel, she said.

If you had asked her as a new convert to Catholicism how she knows God loves her, she would have pointed to money—not a fortune, but enough to feed her kids or get to the doctor without scrounging. When she first gained financial stability right around the time of her conversion, it felt like evidence she had earned God’s approval.

“When you’re a convert, you’re just so freaking happy and excited, and it’s like a puzzle that all fits,” she said. It can become easy to think that if you pray enough rosaries and say enough novenas, good things will happen to you. Ms. Adams got her house, her family, her bougie little pergola with string lights in the backyard.

But when her son died, it all turned to ash. She had to start from scratch.

She understood, suddenly and acutely, that we cannot earn God’s love. What, then, was she supposed to do with her life?

“I honestly started walking toward Anthony,” she said.

She said that she wasn’t entirely sure God was real, but she knew the only way she would ever see her son again was if he was in God’s hands. The hope of seeing Anthony again made her walk forward, one step at a time.

“Then, slowly but surely, I came into this place of seeing those little things God was doing for me,” she said. Not favors she had earned, but hints, signs of something more to come.

She thinks of her mustang, Blue, one of the many animals she keeps on the property she and her husband bought after they sold their dream house and moved to rural Texas.

Leticia Adams found hope in her Catholic faith following her son’s death by suicide.

Courtesy of Leticia Adams

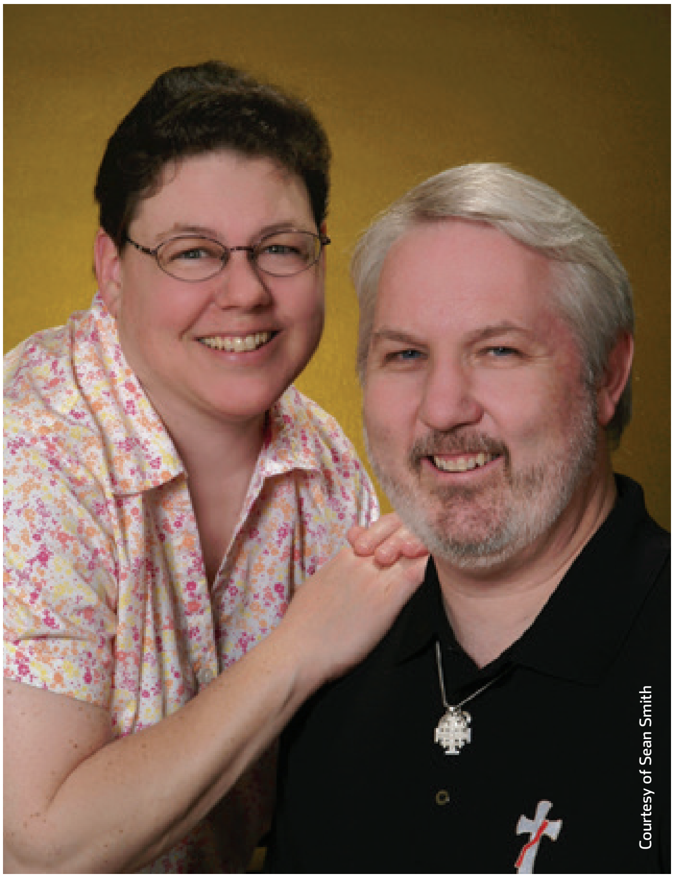
“My dumb ass who knows nothing about horses bought one off the internet. When he got here, he looked like a mule, he was so raggedy. People thought I was an idiot for buying him,” she said. But against all odds, he blossomed into something huge and majestic.

Anthony’s first car was a blue Mustang, and this horse was born on Anthony’s birthday.

“I’m holding onto tangible things to know the more unseen, unknown things,” she said.

She believes it is a small sign from God that he wants to be in her life.

“Sometimes these moments kind of go away. It fizzles



Sean Smith, right, was married to his wife Sara, left, for 27 years before Sara died of breast cancer. A deacon for many years, Sean was ordained a priest after Sara's death and is pastor of four parishes in rural eastern Iowa.

out, and you're like, 'Yeah, sure. Your kid's still dead,'" she said.

In those moments, she's left holding onto the people she loves, drawing strength from their own faith in God

She knows it is God who keeps her alive, moment to moment, even when she doesn't feel his presence.

She also thinks of how God could have miraculously intervened to keep her son alive.

"But that's one of those things that has to work out the way it works out. I made my choices, Anthony made his choices. [God] wants his children to live, but he gives us our choices," she said.

She does not pretend to understand God's hidden will.

"The only way it ends besides in despair and grief is to put it in God's hands," she said.

That realization has been a relief. She has given up "trying to orchestrate all these holy things" in her life, and this has freed her in unexpected ways. Before she surrendered to God, she was the worst version of herself, she said, condemning people based on throwaway Facebook comments or a Trump lawn sign.

Now, even when she disagrees with someone vehemently, she sees that God's in conversation with them. He wants everyone to live.

Ms. Adams just lives her life, getting up at dawn to do her chores and commute to her job helping uninsured people get access to H.I.V. medication. She feeds her goats, cleans her house, writes her essays and waits for the Lord to fulfill his promises. She does not know how it will come about, but she is leaving that up to him.

The Freedom of Surrender

Father Sean Smith also knows about the lessons of death, and about the freedom of surrendering to God.

Father Smith is the pastor of four parishes in rural eastern Iowa. He is also a widower and a bereaved father. While he does not recommend death as a teaching method, he cannot deny what his grief has done for him, and for his relationship with God.

"Death is pretty clarifying," he said.

Father Smith believes God used loss to help him order life. And in recognizing how weak he really was, and how strong God really is, Father Smith came to a more profound understanding of hope.

When he was young, Father Smith knew very little of his faith. He feels the catechesis of his youth was vague and sentimental, and he craved more, but it was not until he attended a Defending the Faith Conference at the Franciscan University of Steubenville that he heard clearly how substantial the faith is—and how sacrificial is the love that Jesus offers.

"[The faith] asked something of me," he said. "That's one of the things that actually attracts people. Our faith asks something of us."

He was newly married to his wife, Sara, establishing his career as a software engineer and starting a family, and life was busy and full. So when the family attended a charismatic conference and the bishop made a kind of altar call for vocations, they were dumbfounded to see Sean get up out of his seat and make his way to the front. What is a deacon? He wasn't even sure, but he felt a pressing urge to find out.

He found out that, at 27, he was too young. So he bided his time. He acquired a house, a motorcycle, hobbies and a full set of responsibilities as husband and father, and when he reached the required age of 35, he applied to the diaconate.

Again, they turned him down. He just had too much else on his plate, they said. He was crushed, because the call felt so strong.

Then, 18 months later, someone at the diocese had a change of heart, and they asked him to apply. He and Sara had been talking and praying about it for five years. But

> **He cannot deny what his grief has done for him, and for his relationship with God.**

they now had three little kids, two with special needs, and they were 1,000 miles away from family. Deacon's wives have massive obligations. Sara, sensibly, said, "No."

Sean is a large, bluff, blunt man, and Sara fully expected him to respond with anger and arguments. Instead, he paused, breathed and gently said he didn't know how it would work. But God was simply asking them to take the next step. If it was what God wanted, it would work. If it wasn't, it wouldn't.

She began to cry. Sean didn't sound like Sean to her; he sounded like God. So she said yes.

It did work out. He was ordained a deacon in 2003—and rather than the stern and theologically heavy treatises he expected to deliver, he found himself preaching sermons that were substantial but heartfelt. He did not want to just transmit information; he wanted God's words to penetrate the heart. One thing he preaches over and over again: The right order of things is God, then others, then ourselves. He preached it, and he had to learn it.

Sean and Sara were married for 27 years, and then she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Sean says the last six months of her life were the best part of their marriage.

"It was intimate in the best sense of the word. We didn't hide things from each other," he said. He was there when she took off her bandages and saw her fresh mastectomy wounds for the first time. He kept her clean; he packed her wounds. They talked to each other openly, holding back nothing.

"I don't know that I ever loved her more," he said.

At the very end, she was in her hospice bed, crying. She said to her husband, "What if Jesus doesn't want me?"

He asked her if she wanted Jesus. She said she did. He told her, "Then, sister, you're there."

If you want Jesus, then you will have Jesus: He gave her this hope as a comforting husband, and also as a deacon secure in his theology.

"That's the foundation of my life. If I can't say that, I can't say anything," he said.

Hope, he now believes, comes in recognizing that God is God, and in recognizing our own utter lack of power.

"It's very freeing," he said.

Even theologically correct arguments can give us the illusion we're in control and must be set aside. At some point, you have to imitate Job and place your own hand over your mouth.

"Hope is a great stripping away," he said. "What I hope for is to see the face of God, and whatever else I thought I needed, I don't really need."

He preached at Sara's funeral and then took stock of his life. At age 51, his house was paid off, his career was lucrative, his children were grown, and he could do whatever he wanted. But the one thing he wanted, he couldn't have.

He missed Sara desperately, and he also missed the vocation of being her husband. He started to push to become a priest. He was forced to take it more slowly than he wanted (and he admits that he was after instant healing and distraction from his empty home). But in 2020, in a cathedral emptied by Covid, he was ordained a priest.

Nine months later, his son, who had poorly controlled diabetes, died. Then his mother nearly died, and now she is in hospice. But God asked more of him, more stripping away.

Last year, in the fourth year of his priesthood, he went on a silent retreat. The spiritual director, a 75-year-old consecrated widow, said to him: "You need to love Jesus as much as you love Sara."

The shaft went deep. But he knew she was right.

He went home and folded up the quilt on his bed. It had been pieced together from Sara's old shirts, and he had slept under it every single night of his priesthood. Now he put it away, because it was time to belong to God first.

He still prays for Sara every day, but he doesn't talk to her constantly anymore.

"I'm still just as much crazy about her, but I'm not crazy over her," he said.

Today, as a priest, he still preaches, ministers, comforts his flock—and also laughs, cusses and rides his motorcycle when he can. But what he hopes for most of all is to become the kind of person who can just rest in Jesus. He knows a man who goes to adoration for hours every week, just being silent before the Lord, and he is a little envious.

"I wish I had that depth to be able to just rest in God that way. I'm looking forward to that. I'm looking forward to resting in God," he said.

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

Chancing the Pilgrim Sandals

Reflecting on our Year of Jubilee as a woman religious

By Julia D. E. Prinz

A Traveler

If it's chariots or sandals,
I'll take sandals.
I like the high prow of the chariot,
the daredevil speed, the wind
a quick tune you can't
quite catch
                    but I want to go
a long way
and I want to follow
paths where wheels deadlock.
                              And I don't want always
to be among gear and horses,
               blood, foam, dust. I'd like
to wean myself from their strange allure.
I'll chance
the pilgrim sandals.

—Denise Levertov

Can we still "chance the pilgrim sandals" during these final months of the 2025 Year of Jubilee? Called by Pope Francis with the theme "Peregrinantes in Spem" ("Pilgrims in Hope"), the Jubilee already has drawn millions of pilgrims to Rome and to Holy Doors in various local churches to receive the Jubilee's plenary indulgences. Beautiful images have filled social media: pilgrims all over the world who are solemn, vibrant, engaged.

Every 25 years, the Roman Catholic Church, led by the pope, calls for a Jubilee. The first pope to do so was Pope Boniface III in 1300. Inspired by the piety of the people regarding the new 14th century, his Jubilee also served his political ambition to bring pilgrims to Rome.

In his papal bull calling for the newest Jubilee, "Spes Non Confundit" ("Hope Does Not Disappoint"), Pope Francis, like Boniface eight centuries earlier, cited Leviticus 25, ancient Israel's prophetic call for Jubilee. Francis also referred to Is 61:1–2, the text that Jesus reads in the synagogue inaugurating his mission (Lk 4:18–19). With all this rich biblical heritage and Christianity's long burden of history, what might it mean to celebrate the last months of the 2025 Year of Jubilee by weaning ourselves from the strange allure of chariots—and instead chancing the pilgrim sandals?

The History of Jubilee

The concept of a Jubilee Year (Lev 25:8–17; 29–31) is closely related in the Old Testament to the sabbatical year, which is found in three legal collections of the Torah: the Code of Covenant (Ex 23:10–11), the Deuteronomic Code (Dt 15:1–3) and the Holiness Code (Lev 25: 2–8). The important relationship between the Jubilee and Sabbath changed over time, from "a sabbath of solemn rest for the land" (Lev 25:4) to a "year of favor," especially highlighting the release of prisoners and forgiveness of debts. The release (*shemitta*) becomes the center of a socially and economically changed environment. Importantly, the crushing cycle of debts and imprisonment for the poor formed the context of the reinterpretation of Sabbath and Jubilee. Both Sabbath and Jubilee are rooted spiritually in the understanding that neither land nor human beings can be sold because they belong to God (Lev 25:23).

Since the Septuagint translates the Hebrew words *yôbel* (jubilee) and *shemitta* (release) with the same Greek term, *aphesis*, this term appears twice in Lk 4:18 (quoting Is 61:1-2). Luke uses this term to announce the programmatic beginning of Jesus' public life. Luke's Jesus calls on the combined traditions of Jubilee and Sabbath when reading from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor; he has sent me to release the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19).

This is a solemn moment, but it is neither jubilant nor triumphant. Its fulfillment entails various provocations: the release of prisoners and those oppressed by debt and, implicitly, the healing of the brokenhearted. The first reaction of the listeners in the synagogue is suspense and awe, because they take it as a reference to themselves: how the year of grace will bring release and healing for them. However, when they realize that this Jubilee applies to all those outside of the synagogue, "they were all filled with fury" (Lk 4:2b) and attempted to kill Jesus. How much do we actually include those "outside" in our celebrations? Are we guilty of the same fury as the insiders who wanted to kill Jesus?

Bringing in the Outsiders

The Scripture scholar and historian Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., has argued that every religious order's charism was born out of social needs—offering what one might say is a "jubilee hope." Often, the ecclesial organization of the church itself could not address those needs. In some cases, it even participated in creating them. Because of that ecclesial dysfunction, the founders of religious orders often had to become real entrepreneurs in addressing those gaping needs.

In the early church, the desert mothers and fathers kept alive the witness-character of faith that was not always recognized as central to the incipient ecclesial organization. Centuries later, studying science and religion was at the heart of the early monastic tradition. Monastic education and influence was even accessible to women. Hildegard of Bingen, for example, preached from the pulpit in 1160 just before the catastrophic Inquisition began persecuting (especially) women.

Later mendicant communities called to conversion popes and bishops who had fallen into the decadent grip of power and riches at a time when increasing urbanization left most people in abject poverty. St. Francis of Assisi heard God asking him to "rebuild my church," something the ecclesial organization could not do by itself.

In the 16th to the 18th centuries, more communities focused on the awareness of a personal relationship with God. The insights of the pilgrim St. Ignatius Loyola into a person's inner movements helped promote discernment as a way of life. St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross both described the spiritual process as something available to all men and women equally. These movements proved crucial for a church languishing at the beginning of modernity. From the 18th century onward, especially with the possibility of women religious finally being allowed to move outside of the convent to help people in society, religious life helped build more important social institutions and ecological projects than virtually any other group.

This overly simplified history of religious life becomes complicated when abuse of power makes its inroads. Powerful members of religious orders were, in some instances, no less corrupt than their diocesan counterparts. The history of the church and its religious orders reveals that wherever authority becomes conflated with power, influence or wealth, the result is tragic at best and horrific at worst. A classic example is the crisis of sex abuse that has overtaken the church in the past two decades, a crisis that has much more to do with power than with sexuality per se.

Religious Life and Jubilee

"The strange allure" of the chariots' blood, foam and dust—to return to Levertov—is part of the "dangerous memory" of the church. We need this "dangerous memory" to unearth a Jubilee that heals the church and, through it, wider society. Luke saw clearly that Jesus' sabbath/jubilee prophetic proclamation demanded a time for self-critique, a "holy pause" that leads to realigned priorities and honest memories. Herein lies our eschatological hope.

The Jewish philosopher Elie Wiesel talked about the importance of memory in his Nobel Prize lecture in 1986:

> Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living.... For me, hope without memory is like memory without hope.... The opposite of the past is not the future but the absence of future; the opposite of the future is not the past but the absence of past. The loss of one is equivalent to the sacrifice of the other.... The call of memory, the call *to* memory, reaches us from the very dawn of history.

There is no hope without memory. This is not a romanticized memory of glorious battles or Baroque angels blowing their trumpets in gold-gilded apses. Religious life in particular can only walk in hope if it is steeped in the dangerous memory of its various foundations that were frequently counter-ecclesial, rejecting the chariots and choosing the sandals.

Bernard of Clairvaux criticized the practice of sending children to join monasteries. Hildegard of Bingen removed the male dominance of the administration of her monastery. Francis of Assisi exposed clerical involvement with aristocracy and wealth. Teresa of Ávila courageously wrote even as a member of a *converso* family. Irish 18th-century educational pioneer Nano Nagle created a school system for *all* children, including Indigenous girls not supported by parishes that often focused only on their European heritage.

Hope cannot spring forth when power and wealth control outcomes with algorithms.

In the United States in the 19th century, Mary Elizabeth Lange, O.S.P., of Haitian descent, faced seemingly insurmountable ecclesiastical objections to her vision of a religious order that would witness to the full humanity of Black people. Mary Baptist Russell built a hospital system during San Francisco's Gold Rush that kept thousands of immigrants of all races and creeds from perishing.

All these founders witnessed to the true meaning of *jubilee*, responding to the overwhelming need of the outsiders, as Jesus proclaimed.

Today, various religious congregations still operate at the margins of the world. They often "go a long way" in pilgrim sandals to create paths in the world for people in dire need of social and spiritual support. The long memories and traditions of religious life resist and denounce the mingling of state and ecclesial powers.

When they choose the sandals, Christian believers (especially vowed religious) truly become pilgrims in hope. They protest the way power and wealth have ravaged the earth, polluting the water and air. They stand with migrants and refugees who need legal advocates, and serve as spiritual supporters for those who need food and a place to live where their children can grow. Hope shines whenever we locate ourselves in precisely those places that, from the perspective of wealth and power, appear to be the "garbage" left behind after the profitable extraction of natural resources—including the exploitation of human beings. As Abraham Heschel puts it, one cannot *take* hope and love, one only receives it by giving it away. Hope cannot spring forth when power and wealth control outcomes with algorithms.

When my small community in the Mission District of San Francisco prays, we too often hear gunshots just outside our walls. Living among the urban poor, we pray for the courage of pilgrim sandals. When we counteract fear and violence in our neighborhood by creating community, we do so in humble pilgrim sandals. How else? And when we educate immigrants, so they become their own agents, it is pilgrim sandals that carry us.

Humble—and Dangerous

What a beautiful tradition it is to celebrate a Jubilee every 25 years. But how can this Jubilee allow us, in Jesus' name, to prophetically proclaim a year of grace for the whole world? Having Boniface III's political interest in mind, one might ask how the 2025 Jubilee reflects not self-serving interests but, in the words of the Old Testament scholar Helen Graham, M.M., the spirit found in the Gospel of Luke of "inter-human justice"?

Another question: How can we be more inclusive in our celebration of Jubilee? The instructions for Jubilee pilgrims this year have been in Polish, Italian, Spanish, French and English but not in German (which caught my attention as a German missionary sister to the United States) nor in Swahili, Zulu, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese or any other African or Asian language.

Our church urgently needs a Jubilee. Our world desperately needs a Jubilee! Each month throughout 2025, the church has welcomed a specific Catholic pilgrim group to Rome as part of the Jubilee of 2025. However, is that the goal of Jubilee? To separate us into affinity groups? Tightly separating the religious from the priest and seminarians and the entrepreneurs and evangelization? Keeping close boundaries on who belongs and who does not? Does this separation foster a church drilling its identity into unmovable safety, instead of actually listening to the voices mentioned above?

Is there a possibility in these remaining months of the Jubilee of 2025 to echo Isaiah and Jesus in the proclamation of a precarious and dangerous sabbath-jubilee? Such a celebration might be neither self-congratulatory nor victorious but self-critical and prophetic—so as to show the world the humility that is so desperately needed in a world drunken with devil-speed blood and foam. The world needs pilgrim sandals more urgently in 2025 than ever before. Please, let us choose them.

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Doctor of Conscience

St. John Henry Newman and our still inner voice

By Nickolas Becker

When the Holy See announced in late July that John Henry Newman was soon to be declared the 38th doctor of the church, speculation immediately arose about how Newman would be known. Doctors of the church are often given some sort of informal nickname that emphasizes their particular contributions to the tradition. St. Irenaeus, the last figure before Newman added to their number in 2022, is the Doctor of Unity. St. Teresa of Ávila, added to the roster in 1970, is the Doctor of Prayer. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, from the Cistercian reform of the Benedictine tradition, is the *Doctor mellifluus*, the Mellifluous Doctor, as his teaching was "as sweet as honey."

How, then, will St. John Henry Newman, who was declared a doctor of the church on Nov. 1, the Solemnity of All Saints, be known? He could be the doctor of the development of Christian doctrine, of faith and reason, of conversions, of Christian friendship. All of these epithets—and more—are appropriate for the new doctor. Yet there is one title that seems to be repeated with some frequency, as it is a theme often attached to Newman and is certainly present in his considerable theological corpus: Doctor of Conscience.

Newman would be comfortable with Aquinas's notion of conscience—an act of reason by which universal moral knowledge is applied to a particular situation—but his work also has unique emphases that deserve attention. What are some of the specific features of Newman's approach to conscience?

The Voice of Christ

Newman's most famous statement on conscience (and perhaps the most famous single quote in his entire corpus) can be found in his "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," where he gives one of the more famous toasts in world literature: "I shall drink—to the Pope if you please—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards." When this passage is cited, it is often assumed that Newman is somehow setting up an opposition between the teaching authority of the church and personal conscience. Nothing could be further from the truth.

CNS photo/Paul Haring

Melissa Villalobos of Chicago lights a candle during a vigil service for the canonization of John Henry Newman, at the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome, on Oct. 12, 2019. Ms. Villalobos's healing through his intercession was accepted as the miracle required for his canonization.

While the letter does describe scenarios in which a conscientious Catholic could disagree with practical (i.e., non-doctrinal) decisions a pope might make, in no way is Newman establishing a necessary conflict between personal conscience and the teaching authority of the church. For Newman, that teaching authority rests on the power of conscience. Far from being a limiting force on conscience for Newman, the Catholic Church should be conscience's greatest champion.

In a speech to the U.S. bishops in Dallas in 1991, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger effectively summarized Newman's view:

> And in contrast to mistaken forms of ultra-Montanism, Newman embraced an interpretation of the papacy, which is only then correctly conceived when it is viewed together with the primacy of conscience—a papacy not put in opposition to the primacy of conscience but based on it and guaranteeing it. Modern man, who presupposes the opposition of authority to subjectivity, has difficulty understanding this.

Newman effectively provides the response to Stalin's famous question: "How many divisions does the pope have?" The power of the papacy is not in the force of arms but the force of human conscience. It is fitting, therefore, that the modern papacy has become a great champion of the rights of conscience, a key aspect of human dignity.

In his writings, Newman tends to describe conscience more consistently than he precisely defines it. In the *Grammar of Assent*, he refers to conscience as "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ." For Newman, one's conscience is not a form of radical subjectivity, but rather the voice of another in the mind and heart. His is a fairly elevated approach to conscience:

> The supremacy of conscience is the essence of natural religion; the supremacy of Apostle, or Pope, or Church, or Bishop, is the essence of revealed; and when such external authority is taken away, the mind falls back again of necessity on that inward guide which it possessed even before Revelation was vouchsafed.

In an analogous way to the role of the papacy in determining questions of faith and morals, one's conscience provides the immediate and direct voice of Christ within the soul. The closest Newman comes to a systematic definition of conscience is also in the "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," where he speaks of conscience as "the voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of Revelation...the internal witness of both the existence and law of God." This is why, for Newman, there is such an imperative on absolute obedience to one's conscience (presuming, of course, that one has taken the trouble to form it well—more on that below). For Newman, obedience to conscience is obedience to the voice of God resounding in the mind and heart.

Newman's views lead to what many commentators feel is an implicit proof for the existence of God from conscience. He suggests that because we feel pride or guilt when reflecting on our moral choices, there must be someone before whom we feel that pride or guilt. That someone is God. As he phrases it in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, "Thus conscience, the existence of which we cannot deny, is a proof of the doctrine of a Moral Governor...the doctrine of a Judge and Judgment to come is a development of the phenomenon of conscience." Because the human person has a conscience, Newman thinks it reasonable to conclude that a supreme being exists.

Conscience and Truth

Following thinkers like Aquinas, Newman would be quite comfortable with the two traditional functions of conscience. One of those functions is called *synderesis*, innate moral knowledge of general principles: Do good, avoid evil. The other function is *syneidesis*, the Greek word for conscience, which is the application of those general principles to particular cases. If one has a well-formed conscience, one would know that it is good to help the poor (*synderesis*); the function of *syneidesis* would be the judgment of reason about what I should concretely do when I encounter this particular poor person asking for assistance.

Newman is not alone in noting that it can be easier to know general moral principles than precisely how to apply them in given circumstances: "The natural voice of Conscience is far more imperative in testifying and enforcing a rule of duty, than successful in determining that duty in particular cases."

For Newman, obedience to conscience is obedience to the voice of God resounding in the mind and heart.

He would not be comfortable with the notion that the sincere effort to follow one's conscience necessarily means that one's choices are right; he is quite clear that conscience can err. Newman writes, "It may be objected, indeed, that conscience is not infallible; it is true, but it is still ever to be obeyed." What is remarkable about his view is that the sincere effort to form and follow one's conscience will ultimately lead one to deeper virtue and greater truth:

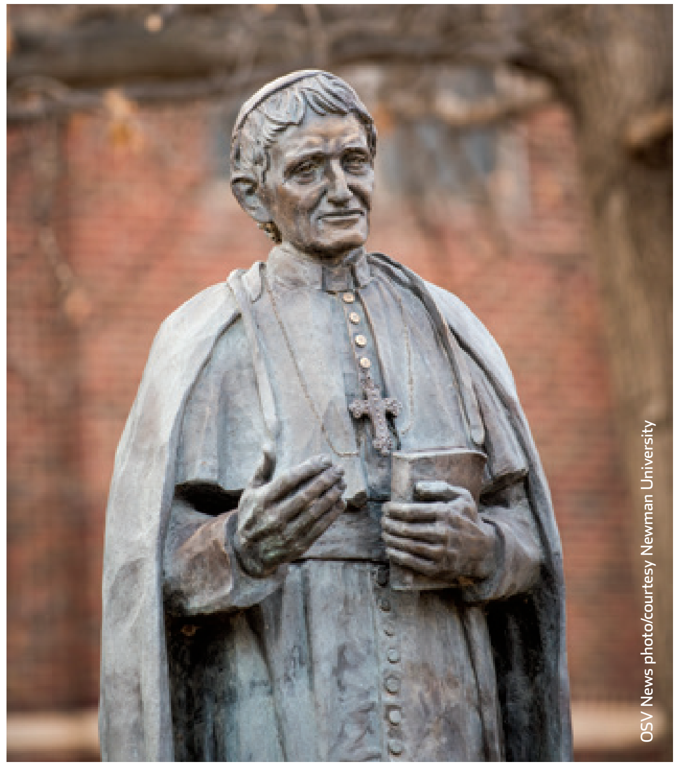
> [Conscience] mistakes error for truth; and yet we believe that on the whole, and even in those cases where it is ill-instructed, if its voice be diligently obeyed, it will gradually be cleared, simplified, and perfected, so that minds, starting differently will, if honest, in course of time converge to one and the same truth.

For Newman, even following a conscience that is both sincere and erring will lead one ever closer to truth. If I make a sincere effort to form my conscience well, and am diligent about obeying the dictates of my conscience, Newman holds, I will draw ever closer to both goodness and holiness.

The imperative to form the conscience well remains, of course, and in *Grammar of Assent* Newman introduces a favorite image for conscience: a clock. Like all timepieces, consciences need to be regulated (or formed): "Our conscience too may be said to strike the hours, and will strike them wrongly, unless it be duly regulated for the performance of its proper function." Yet simply because conscience can err does not disprove its authority, or demonstrate an inability to arrive at moral certainty in matters that cannot be empirically proven. We follow the clock, and we attempt to make sure that the clock accurately reflects the time.

Out of the Shadows

The designation of John Henry Newman as a doctor of the church is a cause for joy for the whole church. This process has spanned multiple pontificates: While his cause for canonization was opened in 1958, it was Pope John Paul II who proclaimed him venerable in 1991, Pope Benedict XVI who



A statue of St. John Henry Newman on the campus of Newman University in Wichita, Kan.

beatified him in 2010 and Pope Francis who canonized him in 2019.

Pope Francis was eager to declare Newman a doctor of the church during the Jubilee of Hope, but that task has fallen to Pope Leo XIV, who is taking this step at an early moment in his pontificate. On Oct. 22, the Vatican announced that St. John Henry would be the co-patron of Catholic education, along with St. Thomas Aquinas.

Newman's theological contributions are manifold. He is seen by many as pointing the way toward the Second Vatican Council, and some have argued there is no greater theological mind in the English language. His views on conscience are a critical part of his contribution. Conscience is a key theme not only for Newman but for the whole contemporary church—not as a concept to be used to justify radical subjectivity, but as the way to moral integrity.

If I form my conscience well and follow it diligently, I am inevitably moved, as was inscribed on Newman's gravestone, *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*: "from shadows and images into Truth."

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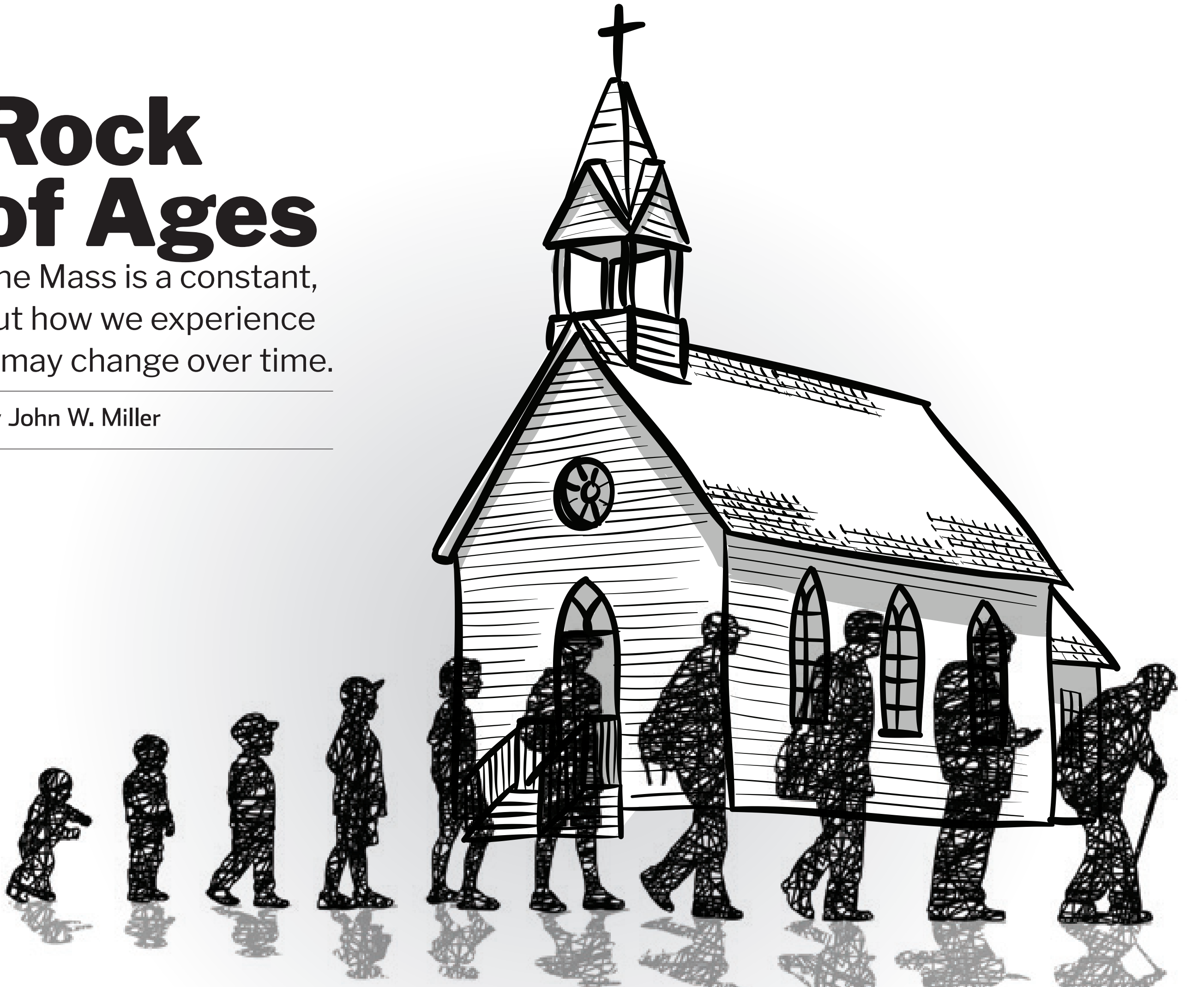
Rock of Ages

The Mass is a constant, but how we experience it may change over time.

By John W. Miller



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When I was a baby, Larry Hunt, a kind, funny Jesuit priest and my great-uncle, baptized me. At around age 12, I began attending Sunday Mass when my mom, then in her 30s, decided to cart her five children to an English-language service in French-speaking Brussels. For almost 40 years, I've attended Mass.

The experience has changed. At first, I liked the incense, and my mom and sisters' singing. I loved the coffee room in the back of the church, the hum of chatter and community. The Bible readings and homilies I could take or leave.

In my late teens, taking Communion, I was moved by the realization that my Catholic ancestors had also taken Communion. It was a way in which we were sharing the suffering of being human, the suffering of God in the world. Nowadays what I love most is talking to God in private, saying the Lord's Prayer as a group and the quiet solemnity right after Communion.

I am sure I am not the only person for whom the various parts of the Mass have felt different at different times of my life. I decided to ask a range of Catholics from all ages. My question: How does attending Mass and receiving Communion change as we go through what Shakespeare called the ages of man?

I live in the Pittsburgh area, so that's where I based my questioning. Sacred Heart Church was founded in 1872 as Pittsburgh began booming because of the steel industry. Its main building in the East End of Pittsburgh, a prosperous neighborhood near Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh, is a neo-Gothic structure built around 100 years ago during another flush time, the Roaring Twenties. I often attend its 9 a.m. Sunday service, which appeals to me in large part because there are so many families with young children. It is a Mass with plenty of toy trucks.

But a study from 2018 causes concern about whether those young children will continue to call themselves Catholic. It found that the median age when people leave the Catholic Church is 13. There was a strong correlation between not attending Mass and leaving the church. More than half the respondents who left said they had been to Mass only a few times in a year or less.

I find that some preferences about the Mass are as subjective as tastes in literature, music and food, and that people's radically different experiences can be a call to accept grace and to come together.

The Faith of a Child

Catholics baptize their babies, which means that our first significant experience in a church takes place in the murky mystery of infancy, the part of our lives that is the biggest secret to ourselves. A few years later, as we enter consciousness, we discover ourselves in a place full of grown-ups doing funny things. So most of us start our experience of churchgoing by crying, coloring or playing with toys.

"I like the singing, but I don't like the reading and responses," said Claire Rossi, a 6-year-old in Pittsburgh who attends weekly Mass with her 9-year-old sister, Maya; 3-year-old brother, John; father, Gabe, and mother, Kate, both in their mid-30s. The girls like to put on nice dresses to go to church.

The week before I met the Rossis at church, Maya had celebrated her first Communion. "She had a party at Dave and Buster's to celebrate," Claire told me. "I got the biggest toys, a stuffed lizard," said Maya.

Within the family, Mass is something that marks the passing of another week. "They have a Pavlov's dog's response," said Gabe. "I'll have my church playlist music playing on a Sunday morning, and the kids will say, 'Oh, it's church today.'" As part of her Communion preparations, Maya's family encouraged her to pay attention instead of playing with trucks and coloring with her siblings. "I used to do that, before the second grade," said Maya. Gabe explained the family has a rule, inherited from his own mother: "Once second grade hits, then it's time to pray with us."

Church leaders are waking up to the need to make children feel more welcome at Mass. In 2024, Pope Francis held the first-ever Mass for the World Day of Children after a child suggested the idea. "Don't forget this: Jesus forgives everything and he forgives always," he told the children.

Maya recalled one homily she remembers and liked. The priest had said, "Not only are the parents teaching the kids to follow Jesus, the kids are teaching the parents."

Clare Scheid, a Pittsburgh resident who is the daughter of two theologians, is ready to offer her own advice. "My favorite part of Mass is listening to the homilies and criticizing them in my head," the 14-year-old said. "That and the music."

Church leaders are waking up to the need to make children feel more welcome at Mass.

Ms. Scheid said she plans to remain a Catholic for the rest of her life. Yes, she would like more women in positions of leadership in the church hierarchy, but she sees more ways to effect change inside the church instead of from outside. Ms. Scheid's favorite Mass is the Easter Mass because it involves more people: "The church should figure out more ways of getting everybody who's there involved."

In any case, said Ms. Scheid, her most transcendent moments are never inside church at Mass. "I experience more God in nature," she said. "God is definitely more present outside a church. The Mass is more about rituals and tradition, it's not really about God. It should be. But it's not."

As a college student at Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Md., I enjoyed going to Mass, even as I was daydreaming and spying on girls I liked. I also appreciated that, like many colleges, the Mount organized Masses on Sunday evenings to spare college students the burden of waking up in the morning for church. But the truth is that Mass, like any other human enterprise, is never going to be exactly how we want it. There will always be off-key music, homilies we don't like or a lector we can't hear.

If Catholics can get over this hurdle and accept the imperfections of the humans running Mass, they are likely to keep going. Often, they are more pious than their peers. Clare Merante, 26, has been going to Mass her whole life. She doesn't remember much from her early days going to church. In California as a first grader, "I received my first holy Communion and I realized it was Jesus," she said. "It was a really big deal."

As a teenager, she felt herself going through the motions. It made her feel guilty. But the Mass is "not always user-friendly" for teenagers, she notes. Then she found herself moved by Mass again because it was "Jesus coming to us and being so available and humble."

Ms. Merante's parents were converts, so they had puzzled out their own answers to big questions about Catholicism and were able to share their thought processes with her. For example, Ms. Merante's father explained to her that the offertory means "putting ourselves on the altar just as much as putting gifts on the altar." Nowadays, she

Mass, like any other human enterprise, is never going to be exactly like we want it.

likes going to Mass at Sacred Heart Church in Pittsburgh by herself. She feels her relationship with God is "a gift that God gives me." Recently, she attended Mass with her grandmother. "That made me more aware of her journey," she said, "and how Mass is different for older people."

Growing Into Faith

The experience of Mass changes, too, when we become parents. "We've committed to raising our family in the church," said Gabe Rossi, who is the father of Claire, Maya and John, mentioned earlier, and who works out of Pittsburgh as an aid worker for Catholic Relief Services, supporting its programming in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Keeping an eye on his children at Mass "means that my individual prayer [at Mass] isn't as deep as it could be," he said, "but I'm consoled by my kids being there." Mr. Rossi recalled that Pope Francis once said, "Let the children cry.... It is a beautiful homily when a child cries in church, a beautiful homily."

There's a regularity to Mass that Lucas Briola, a theologian at St. Vincent College in nearby Latrobe, Pa., finds comforting. He is the father of a 4-year-old boy, and his child, he said, "loves the people" around him and is learning the Mass through how he is summoned to move his body. "Every time he passes a tabernacle he genuflects," Dr. Briola said. "Whenever the Eucharistic species is being elevated, he stops playing with his trucks—at least that's what we aim for." Bringing a toddler to Mass isn't easy, said Dr. Briola. Part of the liturgical sacrifice, he says, "is the unwanted attention of other people. It's easier to not bring a child to Mass."

Dr. Briola was always interested in religion, from Roman mythology to Christianity, and was fascinated by the priesthood because he liked the priests he got to know. Mass, he emphasized, is meant to affect us differently depending on our age. He quoted St. Thomas Aquinas: "What is received depends upon the mode of the receiver."

Clare Scheid's parents, Dan and Anna, are both academic theologians in their 40s. When Dan was a child in suburban Chicago, he liked being at Mass with his family. "I liked the stories, they were part of who I was," he said. "I got to know the songs." For Anna, who grew up in a Catholic culture in Indiana, "it never occurred to me to say whether I like this or not." In their 20s, while attending Chicago Theological Seminary, Dan and Anna attended a lively Mass where the congregation baked its own bread for Communion and "every homily was meaningful," said Anna. There was great music and a warm, welcoming community. "It was like, people here really care about me," said Dan. Now, Dan enjoys going to Mass. With three teenagers, "it's now the only thing my family still does all together," he said.

The Age of Wisdom

Nothing makes a Catholic appreciate Mass quite like being there with their grandchildren. "It's my favorite thing to do every day," said Mary Rossi, Gabe's 66-year-old mother. "Ever since I was a child and was instructed in the sacraments and the reverence of Communion." Getting older and attending Mass with her children and grandchildren has reinforced the sacramental quality of the Eucharist. "When I was in junior high, I was anxious to hear the homily," in order to better understand the priest's perspective. "It was gas in the tank for the week," she recalled. Now, when she attends Mass, she is often present in a church full of older people. It doesn't bother her. "People at daily Mass are there because they want to be there."

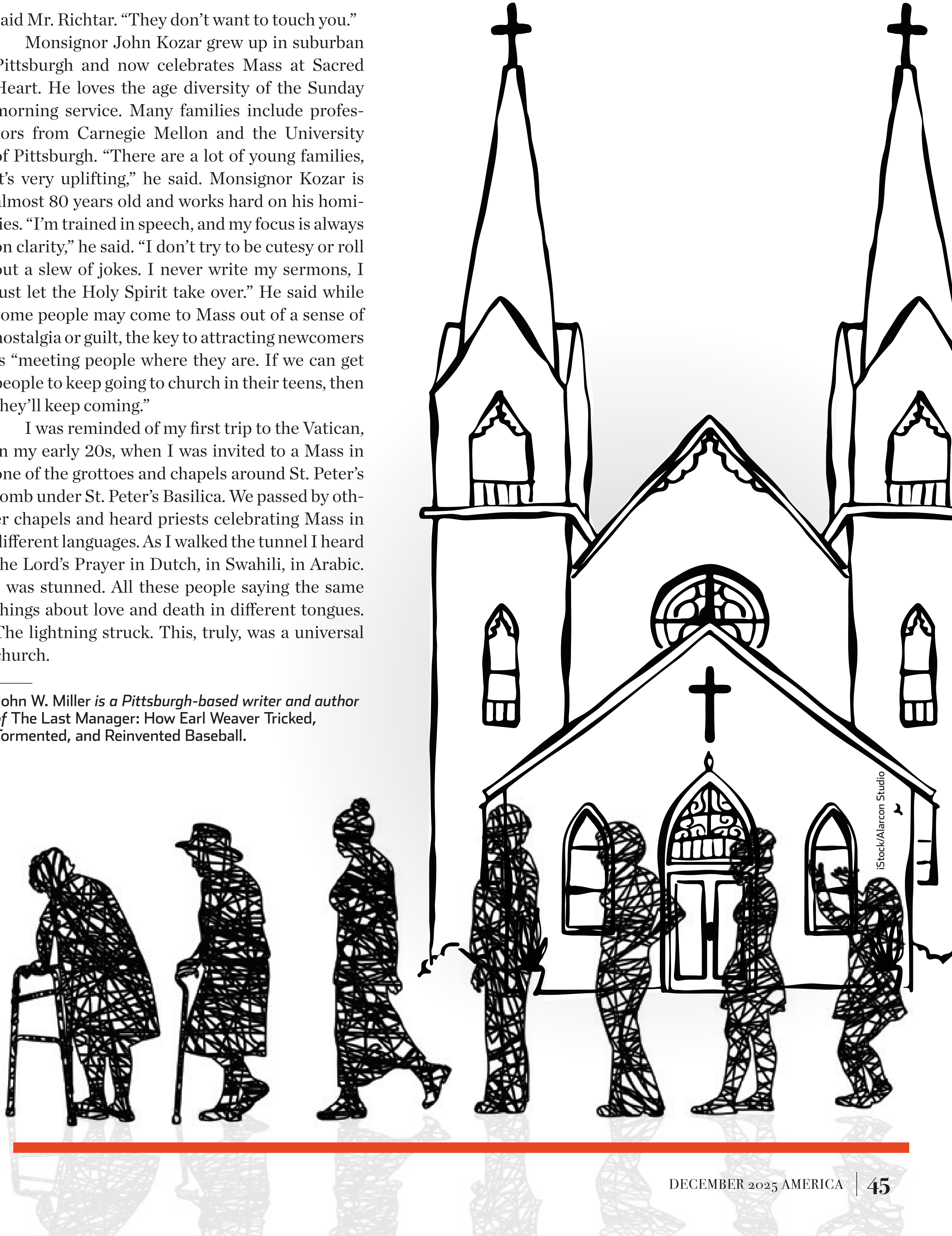
In many cities and churches, the older parishioners are the veterans of daily Mass. "As you get older, you develop a better appreciation of what Mass really is," said Rudy Richtar, a retired tobacco salesman in his 80s who lives in suburban Pittsburgh. "When you're younger you go through the motions. You know when to stand; you know when to sit down." Mr. Richtar tries to never miss a Sunday Mass. His wife is confined to a wheelchair. Mr. Richtar is a Eucharistic minister, and he tries to bring Communion home to her. "For years my favorite part of Mass was the music," he said. "Now the organist plays so loud so you can't hear yourself think." He always hopes the priest is a good speaker and can deliver a good homily, but that's not easy to count on. It's important to participate, he said.

"Some people are just staring," he said. "They're only there because people said they had to be there." To fulfill the meaning of Mass, he said, "you have to connect with your God. When I pray at church, I feel like God is closer to me. It's a house, it's his house." There is some truth, he said, to the notion that older people like going to church to prepare themselves for death. "When you look at Mass, sometimes there's very few young people," he said. The Covid-19 pandemic made the problem of Catholics' reticence at Mass worse, he said. "People don't want to shake hands," said Mr. Richtar. “They don’t want to touch you.”

Monsignor John Kozar grew up in suburban Pittsburgh and now celebrates Mass at Sacred Heart. He loves the age diversity of the Sunday morning service. Many families include professors from Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh. “There are a lot of young families, it’s very uplifting,” he said. Monsignor Kozar is almost 80 years old and works hard on his homilies. “I’m trained in speech, and my focus is always on clarity,” he said. “I don’t try to be cutesy or roll out a slew of jokes. I never write my sermons, I just let the Holy Spirit take over.” He said while some people may come to Mass out of a sense of nostalgia or guilt, the key to attracting newcomers is “meeting people where they are. If we can get people to keep going to church in their teens, then they’ll keep coming.”

I was reminded of my first trip to the Vatican, in my early 20s, when I was invited to a Mass in one of the grottoes and chapels around St. Peter’s tomb under St. Peter’s Basilica. We passed by other chapels and heard priests celebrating Mass in different languages. As I walked the tunnel I heard the Lord’s Prayer in Dutch, in Swahili, in Arabic. I was stunned. All these people saying the same things about love and death in different tongues. The lightning struck. This, truly, was a universal church.

John W. Miller ***is a Pittsburgh-based writer and author of*** **The Last Manager: How Earl Weaver Tricked, Tormented, and Reinvented Baseball.**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Christmas in the Ruins

I found the heart of the holiday in the remains of an old English cathedral

By Maggi Van Dorn

If you want to understand the meaning of Christmas, I suggest you visit the ruins of Coventry Cathedral. It is estimated that the church was first built in the mid 1400s, in what was then the fourth most powerful city in England, and which today remains in the heart of the English countryside, surrounded by bucolic pastures dotted with white sheep.

I made a trip to visit the ruins of this medieval cathedral because it is the birthplace of a Christmas carol we are featuring on the latest season of "Hark!"—America Media's podcast on the stories behind our favorite Christmas carols. The carol is as haunting as the ruins, and each tells a grim tale. "The Coventry Carol," inspired by Matthew's Gospel account of the massacre of innocents, is written as a lullaby sung by mothers to their babies, preparing for Herod's soldiers to slaughter them. The ruins stand in memory of the 11-hour German blitz that destroyed 4,300 homes and claimed an estimated 568 lives on the night of Nov. 14, 1940.

It is difficult to convey the power and the pain of this place. Imagine a red sandstone skeleton of a Gothic cathedral, roofless and exposed to the elements. The nave is still a latticework of stone frames of window arches, but the stained glass has been blown out. There are steps that may have once led to an ambo but now end a few feet mid-air. The only structure that remains totally intact is the bell tower and spire at the entrance.

"As the city was blitzed, people were taking shelter wherever they could," says the Rev. Kate Massey, the cathedral's canon for arts and reconciliation. "Through that night of bombardment they could still hear the bells of Coventry Cathedral chiming. And so in the midst of all of that, there was this comfort of 'At least the cathedral's still there.'... But in the morning, they found that it was simply that the bell tower stayed standing, and the rest of their beautiful cathedral was gone."

And yet, the day after the bombing, the cathedral's provost, Richard Howard, bore witness to the Christian imperative to forgive. Utterly countercultural, his "turn the other cheek" message was made more radical for the reason that he spoke it in the midst of a world war that would rage on for four more years. But Provost Howard's commitment to peace was so strong that you can see it etched across the back wall of the sanctuary: *FATHER FORGIVE*. Legend has it that Provost Howard first scribbled those words in chalk, surrounded by debris. They were later emblazoned in gold capital letters and are impossible to miss.

For me, these words immediately conjured what Jesus cried while hanging on the cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Rev. Massey reminded me that it's more complex than that. "It's not just about forgiving our enemies," she pointed out. "It's about all of us seeking forgiveness for the part we play in the things that damage our shared life and that damage the world we share." *FATHER FORGIVE* is a harrowing recognition that when we pray, we do so as both victim and perpetrator and that God loves us without distinction.

It's a difficult truth to sit with, and walking around the ruins, I sensed this place was full of hard truths. For instance, rather than attempting to rebuild, the cathedral leadership decided to leave the remains exactly as they fell. And 22 years later, in 1962, they consecrated a new cathedral right next to the old one.

What an astonishing choice, to leave a scar like that perfectly visible for all to see. Most of us would expect the church to be restored to its former glory, as we witnessed following the fire in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in 2019. Or that a beautiful memorial might be constructed atop the rubble, as was done at the 9/11 memorial in New York City. And while the extent of the damage varies between sites, and each has its own architectural and practical constraints, it seemed to me that Coventry Cathedral was left as is to make a theological point—that we don't need to hide our wounds from God.

In fact, when the cathedral's stonemason, Jock Forbes, noticed that two charred ceiling beams had fallen into the shape of a cross, he secured the beams in that shape. They were later erected on an altar of rubble. Without a single word, this cross is a reminder: God meets us in our brokenness and breathes hope into sites of unimaginable suffering.

Then there's the music. Just over a month after the cathedral was bombed, the BBC World Service broadcast its Christmas service from one of the underground chapels still standing at Coventry Cathedral. Again, Provost Howard spoke about building a kinder, more Christ-child like world, and at the end of the service, the choir sang a Christmas carol as old as the cathedral itself.

"The Coventry Carol" does not have a known writer or composer but grew out of the vibrant theatrical tradition of Coventry's Christian "mystery plays," which were performed around the feast of Corpus Christi, beginning in the 1300s and continuing through 1579, when they were suppressed during the English Civil War.

The song begins in a haunting minor key with what are, unmistakably, the words of a lullaby:

The Coventry Cathedral is the birthplace of "The Coventry Carol," which is inspired by Matthew's Gospel account of the massacre of innocents.

Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.

It then goes on to describe one of the most gruesome, heart-rending scenes in Scripture: the massacre of the innocents:

Herod the king, in his raging,
Chargèd he hath this day
His men of might in his own sight
All young children to slay.

It's important to note that the song did not begin as a Christmas carol. It would have been performed in June, alongside several other acts that together recounted the scenes and stories surrounding Jesus' birth.

By the 19th century, thanks to the antiquarian Thomas Sharp, the song was revived and incorporated into the caroling canon. But for me, the connection was not abundantly clear. Christmas carols, after all, are usually a meditation on the birth of Christ. And while they may differ in perspective—told from the vantage point of the magi or the shepherds, the angels on high or even the curious ox—they tend to revolve around the manger scene.

"The Coventry Carol," however, tells of something that appears only in Matthew's Gospel—Herod's massacre of all baby boys under 2 years of age in the Bethlehem area—and scholars aren't all in agreement on whether the story is historically accurate. Some argue it's a literary invention used by Matthew to draw parallels between Jesus' birth and the Jewish people's exile in Egypt. If Christmas carols are meant to center our gaze on the birth of Christ, why sing about a story that may or may not have happened and which appears peripheral to the main event?

This was the question I carried with me as I walked the ruins of Coventry Cathedral. I posed the same question to Rev. Massey, to the cathedral's organist, Rachel Mahon, and even to a local historian, Malvern Carvell. And through my journey deeper into this lullaby of lament, I heard a similar interpretation. Whether or not it actually happened, Matthew's story of the massacre of children tells the truth about the world God chose to enter: a place entrenched in poverty, riddled with military occupation and daily violence, the scales of justice perpetually favoring an empire. Does this sound eerily familiar?

If we can see Christ born in a time of bloodshed, or if we can sing this lullaby while also crying "Father, forgive," then we can also develop the kind of moral imagination that is needed to see Christ in the faces of those enduring unspeakable horrors today.

That's what makes "The Coventry Carol" a fitting song for our Advent season. It trains our gaze on the reality of the Incarnation—that no matter how bad things get, this is where God chooses to be with us, in every age. By engaging deeply with our sorrows in prayer and song, we are not swallowed but transformed by the grace of God who meets us there.

Maggi Van Dorn *is the senior audio producer for America Media. The fifth season of "Hark!" begins on Nov. 30.*

Haggerty Museum of Art, 75.1

"Madonna and Child," workshop of Onorio Marinari, 1650-1700

To See as Mary Sees

By Jonathan Malesic

It is a common observation that we live in the midst of a crisis of attention, a culture-wide inability to concentrate. Workers and students and people performing quotidian tasks cannot resist the stream of notifications on their cellphones.

To counteract the infinite scroll of photos and videos, the Harvard art historian Jennifer Roberts proposes slow and deliberate looking at works of visual art. She assigns her students to choose an artwork on display in the Boston area and view it for three hours. "The time span is explicitly designed to seem excessive," Roberts writes. But students report being "astonished by the potentials this process unlocked."

Roberts's assignment inspired The New York Times's "10-Minute Challenge," in which, once a month, readers are invited to view a painting without interruption, to see what might be revealed through a longer look than most of us are used to. As you view the picture on your screen, a timer ticks upward. When you give up, you can see how long you lasted. Readers who have taken the challenge describe boredom, discomfort, even panic at the task. Many give up within the first minute. One viewer who made it to 10 minutes said the experiment "felt revelatory and shaming at the same time." Another said, "I entered a delicious state of revelation."

It's worthwhile to take an uncomfortable amount of time to view artworks. But I don't think it will cure the attention crisis. Despite our best efforts inside the museum, we tend to leave it just as we were, eager to catch up on the online world. But art is not useless in addressing the attention crisis. Roberts treats artworks as objects of attention, but some works offer *models* of attention. They show us what attention looks like.

Consider "The Lacemaker" (1669-70), by Johannes Vermeer. In that painting, the subject gazes downward at her work through half-closed eyes. No sign of strain mars her smooth forehead, yet her fingers are tense with activity. She holds a pair of bobbins in her left hand, one on each side of her index finger. Her right hand holds an unseen needle; her ring finger presses into the cushion beneath her work. What looks to me like a closed book—perhaps a Bible—rests on the table next to her. But the time to read is later. Now, the task is to make lace. Nothing will interrupt her.

Art has long been used to show how a person should be. Certainly in the Christian tradition, visual depictions of Christ and the saints model virtues like piety, chastity and forbearance. The figure in Christian art—indeed, in all of Western art—whose attention matters most is Mary, the Mother of God. Marian art reveals attention to be much more than the intense focus of Vermeer's lacemaker or a knowledge worker absorbed in a spreadsheet, Pomodoro timer ticking away nearby. Marian art shows that our attention encompasses a range of capacities. It even suggests that distractability is itself a form of attention, one that is essential to living a Christian life.

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A few paintings of the Madonna and Child from the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University illustrate the nuances of Mary's focus. In Pieter Claeissins's mid-16th century "Virgin and Child" (see cover), Mary looks down through half-closed eyelids at the infant in her lap, who does not quite return her gaze. She cradles him against her left arm and holds the child's right foot in her right hand. Her grasp is tender, with none of the tension in the fingers that we see in Vermeer's lacemaker.

Claeissins places Mary and Jesus outside but in a busy household. In the background of the scene, Joseph kneels over a carpentry project, his hand-axe poised above a board, mid-cut. A basket of cloth and thread, weighed down by a set of shears, rests unattended behind Mary. She has, for now at least, put her work aside for the sake of her son. He is what matters to her.

In "Madonna of the Veil" (page 48), a 17th-century painting from the workshop of Onorio Marinari, Mary's attention to the infant Jesus is even more intimate than it is in the Claeissins painting. Both mother and child appear in glowing soft focus and in profile. The plane along which their gazes fall is at a right angle to the viewer. You and I are not invited into this moment. The background is completely dark; these figures are in a world of their own, outside of time.

Marinari's Madonna and Child are recognizably human. In Salvador Dalí's "Madonna of Port Lligat" (1949), by contrast, they exist beyond the physical world. Their bodies are immaterial. Mary's torso has a huge rectangular hole in it, and Jesus, similarly transparent, hovers above a green cushion that in turn hovers above his mother's lap. Mary has no upper arms. Her head is cracked open, revealing the sky beyond it. The head of Christ is at the horizon in this scene, like the sun at eternal dawn.

Dalí's Mary is contemplative. Her focus is not quite as intense as that of Vermeer's lacemaker, but it is totally given over to her son. We see only her eyelids. Her head tilts just to her left; Jesus' tilts to his right. Her face exhibits supreme serenity, visually echoing the smooth violet bay behind her. The tips of Mary's fingers graze each other as she holds her hands in a posture of prayer that is also protective and perhaps a bit like how someone would hold them to warm them over a flame.

This painting underscores how, when Mary pays attention to her child, she is simultaneously contemplating the divine. This Jesus is no ordinary infant. Though his mother is a model of contemplation, she, too, is, in an important way, not like us.

This form of attention, totally focused on Christ, appears in painting done outside Europe as well. In a 15th-century icon by a follower of the Ethiopian monk Fre Seyon, the eyes of Mary and Jesus lock onto each other. They exchange an exclusive focus.

The attention Mary models in the Madonna and Child genre is the sort that Simone Weil describes in her essay "On the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God." There she contends that "attention...is the very substance of prayer." Weil's brand of attention is focus. It's the kind of attention we believe is endangered by our phones. She describes attention as an effort but not a "muscular effort." It is not simply tension, knitting one's brow. It almost does not matter what we pay attention to, in Weil's account. She's writing for students, encouraging them that any act of attention to the object of their studies, whether a Latin text or a math problem, will strengthen them for prayer. Attention to geometry also prepares you to love your neighbor, according to Weil. To help someone in need, one must first see the person in his or her affliction. "Only he who is capable of attention can do this," she writes.

It would seem, then, that our distractability does not hinder only our productivity. It is also a failure of charity, a form of sin. For the sake of our souls, we must learn to pay the kind of undivided attention Mary exhibits. If we do, we will become more like her, more able not only to contemplate Christ but to see him in our neighbor. And as a first step toward this better way of seeing, we can spend time—10 minutes or three hours—focused on the Virgin and Child. We will become what we see.

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But focused concentration is not the only form of human attention. It isn't even the only form of attention in the tradition of Marian art. In scenes of the Annunciation, attention is not undivided concentration on the thing in front of you. It is inherently divided, and the task is not to focus but to be ready for something new to appear.

The Gospel account of the Annunciation is silent about what Mary was doing just before the angel Gabriel appeared to say she would bear the Son of God. But most often in visual depictions, Mary is shown with a book, being interrupted. We complain we cannot get any reading done. Mary can't, either. Good thing, too: If her attention had been locked in on the book, she might have missed the good news altogether.

Some early visual accounts—that is, ones in preliterate societies—show Mary receiving the angel's message not while reading but while weaving. The Annunciation mosaic in St. Mary Major Basilica in Rome dates from the fifth century, soon after the Council of Ephesus established Mary as Theotokos, Bearer of God. Mary looks up from a cloth she is working on to meet the gaze of the angel. She does not look especially perplexed, but she is certainly interrupted.

The narrow panel by Jan van Eyck now in the National Gallery in Washington (pictured right), completed in the 1430s, has all the elements we have come to expect from an Annunciation, It depicts not the moment of perplexity at the news but the moment of acceptance, occurring inside an airy gothic building that resembles a church. A thick book lies open on a bench in front of Mary as she bows her head and opens her hands. The golden rays and the dove come in through a clear but closed window high above her. The golden words, *Ecce ancilla Dei*—"Behold, the servant of God"—emerge from her mouth.

National Gallery of Art

Jan van Eyck's "The Annunciation," 1434-1436

We must learn to pay the kind of undivided attention Mary exhibits.

In Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's "Annunciation" (1660), Mary has not only allowed herself to be interrupted from her reading; she seems to have been procrastinating, judging from the basket of sewing or laundry on the floor in front of her. It suggests a hierarchy of goods to pay attention to: domestic labor is below intellectual or spiritual pursuits, but even those activities must be set aside to respond to the call of God. The painting suggests that the question of attention is not whether we have the ability to focus, but whether we have our priorities in proper order.

Openness to that kind of call is a form of attention, too. It is not very different from the way we keep wondering what is happening on our phone, waiting for the next notification. Compared with productive or prayerful focus, this form of attention can look like distractability—as it often is. But it is a valuable capacity, a genuine feat of mind, even as we do one thing, to devote a small portion of our attention to something that might happen, something we fear, expect or hope for.

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This second kind of attention is an element of Ignatian spirituality. The Ignatian concept of *magis*—"more"—means that one is always open to the next thing God might call you to. Ignatian spirituality entails "an active attentiveness to God joined with a prompt responsiveness to his leading," the late Jesuit writer David L. Fleming wrote. It is less focus than readiness. "Our response to God occurs *now*," Fleming continues. "God is working in our lives now and we are to respond now."

Ignatian attention requires "watching and waiting." It requires "noticing the ebb and flow of our feelings and inner dispositions," writes Fleming. It focuses on God every bit as much as Simone Weil demands. But God is not static. God sits in Mary's lap, but he does not stay there. God is active in the world, findable in all things. Fleming writes that "Ignatian spirituality sees God as a 'media God.' God is ever-present, constantly in touch, communicating with us in many ways."

A Christian, then, must become attuned to God's call wherever it might occur, and not only in contemplation. A Christian must have their antennae up, tweaking the frequency, seeking the call to something new, even while doing something worthwhile. A life with God demands divided attention. It is because of Abraham's one-ear-open attentiveness to the angel's call that he stays his hand instead of sacrificing Isaac. Imagine if Abraham had maintained total, undivided focus on the task before him. He would have destroyed everything.

A midcentury painting in the Haggerty collection, Virginia Broderick's "Mary Queen of Martyrs," illustrates the possibility of repurposing digital distractability. In it, Mary kneels and gestures toward a field of crosses that suggest grave markers. The palm of her left hand is open, facing upward, and her head is bowed. Her posture is familiar to all of us: We adopt it all the time to study our phones.

But this image suggests that when we remove the phone, our posture becomes a gesture of openness and reverence, of blessing. In attuning ourselves to phone notifications, we seem to have accidentally recovered a form of attention that was once more clearly vital to Christian life. It never really went away. Mothers have kept up this habit by listening for the noise—or, perhaps more worrying, the silence—from a child's bedroom while they carried out other household duties.

A Christian life demands more than the focus of the lacemaker, the art historian or the writer. It demands a readiness to redirect our attention, to drop what we are doing at the sound of God's voice. Abraham halted the sacrifice. Simon and Andrew looked up from their nets. And Mary, in the visual tradition if not in Scripture, set her reading aside.

This essay is adapted from the Theotokos Lecture sponsored by the Haggerty Museum of Art and Marquette University's Department of Theology, presented on Oct. 21.

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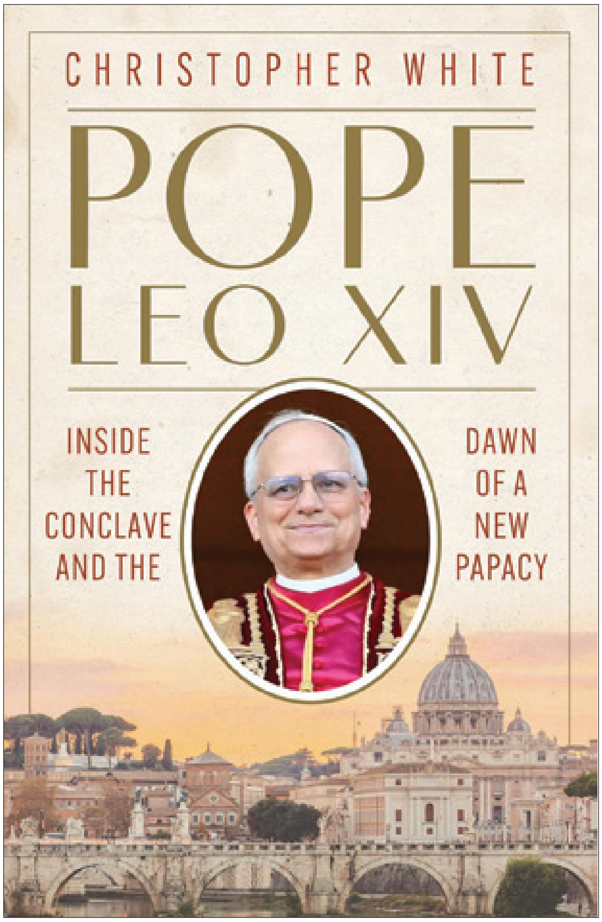
A LEONINE MOMENT



Loyola Press / 168p $20

The election of Pope Francis, an Argentine forged in the Global South in the decades following the Second Vatican Council, was a huge surprise and a shift in ecclesial spheres of influence from Europe to the Americas. Francis' pontificate was also revolutionary in his bold attempts to simplify the church, making it a poor church for the poor, led by bishops who "smelled like the sheep." At the very least, Francis captured the world's attention, restored some of the church's squandered moral credibility and brought a faith that does justice back into the global conversation.

In other words, he's a tough act to follow. When Francis died on Easter Monday, we all wondered who would succeed him, and many of us pitied the man who would be tasked with continuing—or revising—Francis' reforms.

As much as we wondered (and as an ecclesiologist, I definitely spent more time wondering than most) who could possibly succeed Francis, who was in the pool of *papabili*, whose stock was up or down at any moment, almost no one would have bet on a guy named Bob from Chicago. But the Holy Spirit, and the cardinal-electors, did indeed select Robert Francis Prevost, Bob to his friends, from Chicago's South Side by way of a string of rural parishes in Peru and some time as a vetter of fellow bishops in Rome.

Now it is up to the church, and the new pope, to decipher what this new chapter in the pilgrim church's journey will include. Will Leo XIV dampen Francis' reform agenda or intensify it? Will he be to Francis as Benedict was to JP2, meaning that he will be a pope who largely, quietly and ultimately not very successfully tries to carry on the work of his predecessor? Or will Leo be to Francis as Paul VI was to John XXIII—implementing the grand visions of the pope who came before?

Leo will, of course, wind up being his own man, his own kind of pope, and none of us know what that will be (probably not even Prevost/Leo himself).

At this moment of uncertainty, Christopher White's *Pope Leo XIV: Inside the Conclave and the Dawn of a New Papacy* provides exactly the kind of reading Catholics, especially in the United States, will appreciate. Without focusing overly on Francis, who is no longer the pope, or trying to crystal-ball the emerging pontificate of Leo, White nevertheless presents readers with a substantive, engaging portrait of where things stand right now in a church, and a world, increasingly marked by polarization, authoritarianism and violence.

The book functions perfectly as a bridge between one papacy and the next. White uses his journalistic skills to place readers in the moment at crucial points in the papal transition, including Francis' last trip in the popemobile in St. Peter's Square, the days leading up to the conclave and the presentation of the new pope on the balcony.

White's perspective is particularly useful in that he knows the stakes for this papacy in the United States and in the global church. He explains how Francis' economic reforms and reform of the Curia were unpopular, and how Prevost's different leadership style might affect the outcomes of these reforms by solidifying them. He details a meeting with Cardinal Prevost before his election to the papacy—when he was the prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops—where the prelate and the journalist sat down to "get to know one another" as fellow Americans.

With one foot in Rome and another in the United States, White's life mirrors that of Pope Leo in some respects, and as such readers can expect an interesting take on what is to come from Rome.

White tells the story of Leo's election in three parts. The first narrates Francis' final days while providing readers an assessment of the major achievements of his papacy. For White, these include the introduction of synodality and the synodal process, Francis' strong voice on migration, and the pope's reframing of climate concerns as a social justice issue. White sums up his assessment of Francis' success thus: "Twelve years later the greatest reforms he accomplished might be the public perception of the church and the tectonic paradigm shift from a church that is focused on power to a church that is focused on pastoral outreach."

White resists the urge to pre-emptively canonize Francis with only laudatory anecdotes; he is clear that on some matters, like the reform of the Curia, Francis failed, or at least was met with much resistance. In all, however, White's assessment of this revolutionary papacy, open to the world right until the end of Francis' life, sets the stage for the conclave that follows.

Part 2 helps demystify the process of selecting a new pope. After walking readers through the last moments of Francis' life, the announcement of his death and the reaction in St. Peter's Square as the news became public, White turns our attention to the conclave, a process surrounded by intrigue in a modern world where ancient practices of secrecy and social media blackouts prompt all sorts of speculation. With White, we see emerging frontrunners and get a sense of behind-the-scenes conversations while also getting some historical context on the conclave process and the set of cardinals who would undertake this task.

The crux of the book, of course, is the account of Prevost's election in Part 3. Here, White offers readers exactly what we came for. He begins with an early biographical sketch of the new pope, including some information on his parents, his upbringing in Chicago and the church that nurtured his vocation. We get background on Leo as a papal name through the centuries, including some conjecture on why Prevost would select the moniker. Most important, though, we get a sense of Prevost's formation and his priorities.

For White, Leo XIV is a man whose ministry was forged in the rural hills of Peru, in parishes and dioceses where collaboration with laypeople and local leaders was instrumental to his success. Detailing Prevost's leadership style, which he honed among those Peruvian populations, White introduces us to an unusual American priest whose ministry was global before he was chosen to lead the global church.

The selection of a U.S.-born pope was, for all insiders and *Vaticanisti*, highly unlikely. Common wisdom claimed that a pope from a global superpower was impossible, so that any election of an American pope would signal the decline of the United States's international influence and political power. But quietly, some pundits, including White, thought Prevost was a clear possibility.

In giving us a peek inside confidential conversations with commentators, bishops and other insiders, White's narrative of the ascendancy of Prevost to the pontificate is entertaining and informative in equal measure. Prelates from the United States weigh in on Prevost's relative obscurity to members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as his global experience and horizon-expanding awareness of Latin American culture. At the same time, it's clear Leo's international portfolio and his powerful role as the prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops do not make him merely a Francis 2.0. Rather, the quiet, collaborative Augustinian from the South Side by way of Chiclayo promises to be his own man: introspective but decisive, consultative but clear in his vision.

White's narrative of the ascendancy of Leo is entertaining and informative in equal measure.

What can we expect from a pope whose vocation to the priesthood was evident even from childhood, whose graduate study had him learning alongside and from women, and whose ministry was marked in important ways by the empowerment of the laity? As White notes, we can hope that Leo XIV is "a moral voice in a time of political chaos." May it be so.

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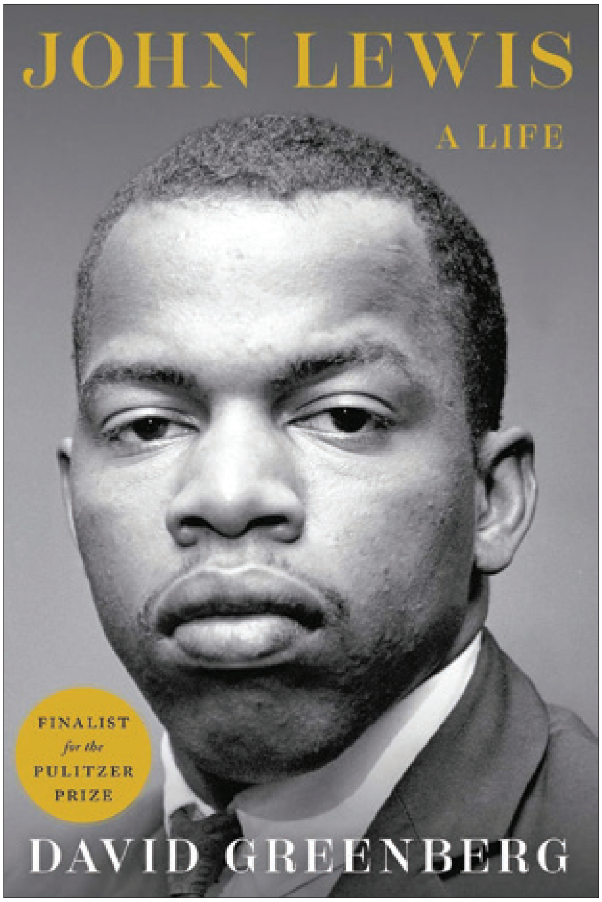
A MORAL AUTHORITY



Simon & Schuster / 704p $35

"Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation" was the headline of the final posthumous article by the congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis. The religious language was a reflection not only of Lewis's own personal faith but a reflection of his status in the United States, where for decades he had been called a living saint. With the release of *John Lewis: A Life,* by David Greenberg, "the saint" has received a biography that does justice to such a reputation.

Based on extensive interviews with Lewis and hundreds of his associates—from his loyal chief of staff, Michael Collins, to former President Bill Clinton—Greenberg has produced a biography that, if not quite definitive, is still the gold standard by which all subsequent biographies will be judged. Spanning from the Freedom Riders in the early 1960s to the coronavirus, the book provides not just a biography of Lewis, but a canvas of modern American history.

When writing about a man of such public acclaim as Lewis, one issue is avoiding blind hero worship, reducing him to a caricature. How can one not admire the son of sharecroppers from Troy, Ala., who spoke before hundreds of thousands at the age of 23 at the March on Washington in 1963—and who would later become one of the most influential members of Congress? Further compounding the issue is that compared with his contemporaries, Lewis in Greenberg's telling seems like a less complex character, being essentially the same person privately as he was publicly.

In his personal life, Lewis comes across as a loving father and faithful husband to his wife, Lilian. In politics, he stood by his beliefs even when they cost him and built friendships on both sides of the aisle. (A particularly heartwarming section shows Lewis teaming up with the Republican Sam Brownback to create the National Museum of African American History and Culture.)

In politics, central to Lewis's vision was the dream of a multiracial, pluralistic democracy he called the "beloved community." That commitment had no tolerance for bigotry in any form. For example, when he once went to talk with a group of Black nationalists, they informed him that a white friend accompanying him was not allowed in. Lewis promptly left; he had been denied too many times because of his race to allow it to be done to another.

He was a tireless advocate for the Jewish community and the gay community, meeting with members and raising awareness during the height of the AIDS crisis. And while he accepted no bigotry, he had no malice toward bigots, insisting they were just as much victims of the system as he was. John did not just say, "Love your enemies," he practiced it. In 2009, he publicly embraced and forgave former Klansman Elwin Wilson, who had beaten him during the Freedom Rides.

Greenberg avoids mythologizing the civil rights movement or its leaders. As in all groups, there were clashes of ego, jealousy and hypocrisy, the seemingly few exceptions being Lewis and Bayard Rustin. There was also a growing divide between the nonviolent, religious Southern wing to which Lewis was firmly attached (Lewis suffered from not just racism but the snobbery of some who looked down upon his "country manner" and speech) and a younger, secular and militant Northern wing that was angered at the slow rate of progress. The result was increasing militancy inside the influential Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, with Lewis increasingly out of step. The radicals could never appeal to Lewis. Not only did he abhor their disrespect for Martin Luther King Jr., but he also rejected the contention that the granting of further voting rights was only an illusion of progress—Lewis believed it was key to change.

Occasionally he repeated some of their talking points to show he was still abreast of them, but his heart was clearly not in it. The result was his replacement as the head of S.N.C.C. in 1966 by Stokely Carmichael in what can only be described as a coup. (Lewis had won the first vote, only for the militants to stage another while he and his supporters were asleep.) History would soon vindicate Lewis. Carmichael and his group turned out to be poor political leaders, and S.N.C.C.'s decision to exclude whites from membership alienated many members.

Particularly gripping and sometimes harrowing sections of the book describe the Freedom Rides and Lewis's time on Mississippi's infamous Parchman Farm, where he and other activists were stripped naked, forcibly shaved and taunted by the guards. Other riveting parts are coverage of the March on Washington, of Lewis's first unsuccessful run for Congress and of the 2008 Democratic presidential primary—where Lewis was torn between loyalty to his friendship with the Clintons and a growing sense he had to be on the "right side of history" with Barack Obama.

Lewis's relationship with the Catholic Church receives little mention despite Thomas Merton being an important influence. (Merton's memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain,* was one of the two books Lewis carried with him when he crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma.) Despite a lifetime in the Baptist Church, Lewis described himself as feeling at home in the Catholic Church, and one of the most important moments of his life involved another politician whose faith informed his work for social justice, Robert F. Kennedy.

Lewis became one of the senior advisors for Senator Robert F. Kennedy during the latter's 1968 presidential campaign. He saw Kennedy's campaign as the "beloved community" in action, as Blacks, whites, Hispanics and the poor flocked to Kennedy as the man who would make a more just and kind America. Fifty years later, Lewis called Kennedy "the man of hope, faith, and love."

In Congress, Lewis was not a master parliamentarian or a policy wonk; his true strength was as a moral authority, a living memorial to the civil rights movement and a reminder of the prevalence of racial injustice in this country.

When Greenberg's book reaches present-day affairs, he is fair and avoids sensationalism when discussing President Trump, although his distaste is obvious. While Lewis was already considered a hero, Greenberg notes that the final years of the Obama administration and the rise of Trump propelled Lewis to superstardom—with many seeing him as the perfect foil to the brash and divisive president. Amid rancorous politics, people looked to Lewis as a bright spot of hope that better times still lay ahead.

One regrettable lacuna in Greenberg's book is the absence of any material on the 2004 election and its aftermath. Lewis, along with 30 other House Democrats and Senator Barbara Boxer, objected that year to the certification of Ohio's electoral votes. Many of the objections

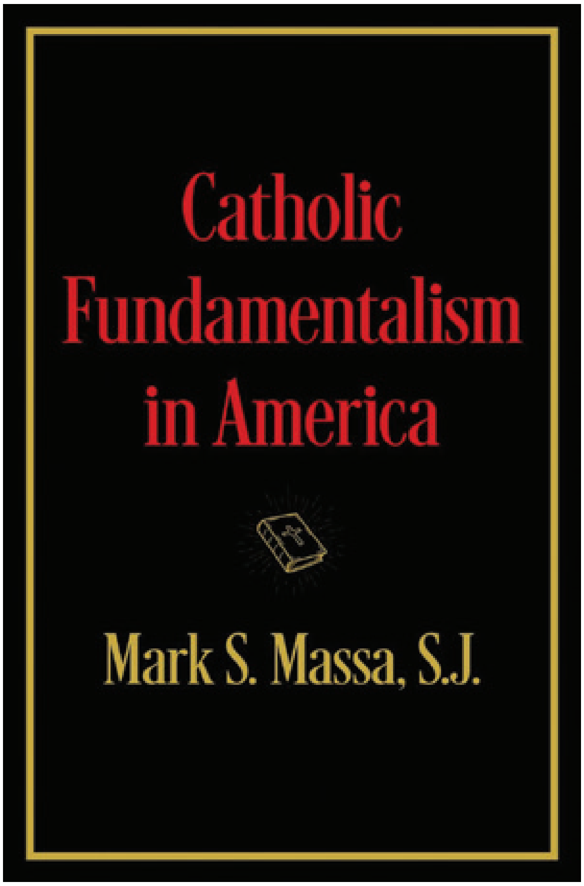
Greenberg avoids mythologizing the civil rights movement or its leaders.

Democrats lodged against the 2004 election paralleled the Republican complaints in 2020. (Ironically, if the electoral votes in 2004 had been awarded to John Kerry, he would have won the presidency despite losing the popular vote by more than three million, the same as Donald Trump in 2016.) While Lewis did not take the steps some G.O.P. representatives did in 2020, it was nonetheless a low moment that only added to the toxic conspiracies swirling around elections.

The book also includes a few mistakes. The men of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, for example, were not injected with syphilis; they had already been diagnosed with the condition, but were not told of their diagnosis and often misled that they were receiving real treatment. And while Greenberg states that between 1956 and 1992 Georgia's electoral votes went to the Democratic presidential candidate only once, the state actually went Democratic three times in that period.

These issues should not detract from Greenberg's accomplishment. Those looking for a clear and balanced history not just of Lewis, but the civil rights movement and the United States over the last 60 years, have found one with this book.

Paul James Macrae *is a recent graduate of The Catholic University of America. He has also written for the periodicals Front Porch Republic and Providence.*



Oxford University Press / 240p $30

A charismatic priest distressed about the church's accommodation to modern culture attracts standing-room-only crowds to his weekly lectures. His message: Catholics are under attack by "modern liberalism" and must fight back by living and preaching the fundamentals of the faith, namely that the church is necessary for the salvation of all, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

The simplicity of this propositional presentation of Truth with a capital *T* is especially attractive because of the massive societal change transforming an increasingly pluralistic country. Over time, the priest's tone becomes harsher and more judgmental—and he eventually turns on fellow Catholics and even the hierarchy. The "liberal" church has failed; only this priest and his followers represent the "true" orthodoxy.

Sound familiar?

Though it resembles some 21st-century influencers, this is actually the story of the Jesuit Leonard Feeney and his movement, the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which flourished in Boston in the 1940s. Mark Massa, S.J., tells the tale in *Catholic Fundamentalism in America,* arguing that the "Feeneyites" and what came to be called the Boston Heresy Case represent the birth of Catholic fundamentalism in the United States.

Feeney and later Catholic fundamentalists, like their Protestant cousins, resist change above all. As the world around them evolves, fundamentalists cling all the more tightly to the belief that their theological convictions—whether biblical inerrancy or *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church there is no salvation")—cannot be tempered. Massa argues that Feeney and his followers became apologists for an older paradigm of the church as the "perfect society" just as the church was moving to a more biblically based paradigm of the "people of God." To fundamentalists, any shift from what they consider a perfect past is apostasy.

This ahistorical understanding of the past is one of the characteristics Massa uses to describe Catholic fundamentalists—and to distinguish them from more conventional tradition-minded Catholics. Fundamentalists are also often sectarian and militant, and use political labels of *liberal* and *conservative* to delineate themselves from mainstream American Catholicism and to denounce their enemies within the church. This latter practice "paved the way for the gradual wedding of Catholic fundamentalism with conservative politics in the United States by the twenty-first century," Massa writes.

But it is the militancy and sectarianism that ultimately divide Catholic fundamentalism from mere traditionalism, Massa says. Catholic fundamentalists' apocalyptic language and references to themselves as warriors—particularly masculine warriors—mirror similar tactics in Protestant fundamentalism. And a sectarian willingness to separate themselves from the communion of the church, under the assumption that only they are the true believers, is the antithesis of Catholicism, Massa writes.

"Catholic Christianity has always condemned sectarian movements—movements that seek to break away from the larger church to become more pure and less contaminated by the world—as deeply suspect and even foreign to the Catholic impulse," he writes. Feeney, who was eventually excommunicated and dismissed from the Jesuit order, created the template for the Catholic fundamentalist movements that followed, Massa says.

The book takes up six of these movements, each with its own chapter, and categorizes them using H. Richard Niebuhr's models of "Christ against culture" and "Christ the transformer of culture." As someone who has frequently covered Catholics on the political and ecclesial right, I was familiar with all the movements in the book. (References to my reporting show up in the footnotes of the chapter on Mother Angelica and the Eternal Word Television Network.)

The "Christ against culture" movements include Father Gommar DePauw, founder of the Catholic Traditionalist Movement, which opposed the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, especially liturgical ones; Mother Angelica and the Eternal Word Television Network; and the St. Marys, Kan., community of followers of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.

Massa details how these movements see themselves as the faithful remnant in contrast to the compromised American church. For DePauw, the *novus ordo* liturgy promulgated by Vatican II was schismatic and the work of "liberal" U.S. bishops. Mother Angelica, the Poor Clare nun who founded EWTN, also seemed to regard herself as the "authentic magisterium," over and against U.S bishops. During the 1993 World Youth Day in Denver, she famously denounced the "liberal church in America," calling it "anti-God, anti-Catholic and pagan." In Kansas, the Lefebvrites took up what the writer Rod Dreher would later call the "Benedict Option" of fleeing mainstream culture to build a "resilient counterculture." (The SSPX, once technically in schism, is still not in full communion with the Catholic Church.)

The three movements in the "Christ the transformer of culture" section of Massa's book also oppose mainstream culture. But rather than withdraw, they try to revolutionize it through education and media. It is generous to call the now-defunct ChurchMilitant.com "media," given that the website was more of an activist screed against—you guessed it—the "liberal church," especially what founder Michael Voris termed its "gay subculture." The site closed in 2024 after it lost a defamation suit and Voris had been forced to resign over violations of the organization's morality clause. Massa describes Crisis magazine, on the other hand, as a thoughtful neoconservative journal that morphed into a culture war publication under the most recent editors. (Full disclosure: I worked as an intern at Crisis while a student at the University of Notre Dame in the 1980s.)

The third "transformer" of culture, the hyper-traditionalist Christendom College in Virginia, also could be seen as "against culture," but Massa describes it as trying to transform Catholic higher education and focuses on the union of Christianity and secular power that is referred to in the school's name. "Christendom" as an idea essentially collapsed after the Enlightenment, especially after the formation of an experimental country where religion would be a voluntary affair. That country, the United States, now seems to be the locus of a re-emergence of the goals of Christendom, particularly among Catholics who call themselves "integralists."

Massa is a wonderful storyteller, and the book colorfully yet accurately describes each of these movements, providing context and history to demonstrate how fundamentalist Catholicism is often at odds with the church's

Massa details how these movements see themselves as the faithful remnant in a compromised church.

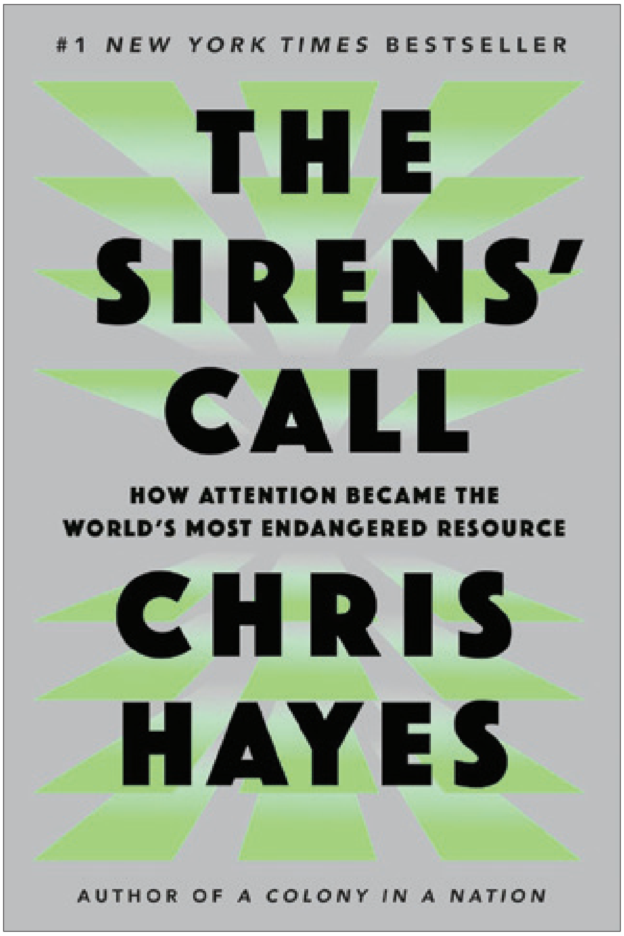
traditional understanding of itself and its mission. He also makes clear that while dogma (divinely revealed doctrines confirmed as binding by the church) does not change, church doctrine and discipline in general can develop and even be reversed. There are myriad other groups he could have included in the book, but I have no criticism of those he chose and his descriptions of them. He is to be commended for helping to fight the assumption that Protestant fundamentalist Christians are the only ones worthy of media coverage or scrutiny.

What I found lacking was any argument of where to go from here. That the United States now seems to be exploding with Catholic fundamentalist movements is more than a little concerning, not just for the church but for the country, if Catholics join forces with groups and individuals advocating for Christian nationalism. It is clear that Catholic fundamentalism, with its inherent militancy, is a serious threat, especially at a time of rising ideological violence. The solutions to these broader societal issues are not simple, but understanding the religious roots and connections is critical.

Massa concludes that the emergence of Catholic fundamentalism, like the Protestant movement that preceded it, was "not an organized theological movement or cohesive 'party' in the U.S. Church," instead emerging "helter-skelter." "If there was anything like a cohesive master plan, it has eluded discovery," he writes in the book's final pages.

Yet my own reporting—and that of other journalists at Catholic and secular publications—has revealed connections among many groups on the Catholic political right, with certain wealthy individuals' names popping up on multiple board membership and donor lists. Shedding light on the growth of such groups—and on Catholic fundamentalism more generally—is a necessary first step toward moving the church, and individual Catholics, away from it. We should be grateful to Mark Massa for describing the task ahead of us.

Heidi Schlumpf *is a journalist and co-host of "The Francis Effect" podcast. She spent 16 years with the National Catholic Reporter as a columnist, correspondent and executive editor/vice president.*



Penguin Press / 336p $32

In his new book, *The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource*, Chris Hayes argues that our attention is not just the most fundamental human need; it is also our most important resource. The commodification of attention represents the dawn of a new era, defined by the effort to access our interior lives and influence our social lives. As Hayes puts it, "Every single aspect of human life across the broadest categories of human organization is being reoriented around the pursuit of attention." Everything is now a "war for attention" in a moment when information is abundant and our attention spans are more limited.

Hayes's book is clear and easy to read, written in the conversational tone of a journalist reporting on what he's read from philosophers, cultural anthropologists and psychologists. He draws from his own experiences, including hosting a news show on MSNBC, where grabbing and holding the attention of his audience is a top priority.

He writes with concern about the latest innovations in attention capture, like how video games and social media platforms provide constant stimuli and continuous interruption, turning our phones into addictive slot machines that are incessantly summoning our attention. Odysseus only had to resist the Sirens' call once; today, screens compete for our attention every waking second.

Hayes is careful not to contribute to the moral panic that often arises in response to new technological advances. At various points in the book, he observes how everything from comic books to TVs to the Sony Walkman set off a flurry of hand-wringing.

On the other hand, while these historical trends provide some perspective today, there is also the risk of a false equivalence given that social media is designed to create psychological cravings, to say nothing of the impact on our interior lives, relationships, social norms and institutions. We have heard plenty about the fallout: the inability to focus; shrinking attention spans; endless distraction; higher rates of loneliness and isolation, anxiety and depression; vicious interactions shielded by anonymous avatars; the normalization of disrespect and callousness; and bots, misinformation and generative artificial intelligence, making it harder to distinguish between truth and deception.

Citing Kierkegaard, who wrote that boredom is the "root of all evil" in 1843, Hayes suggests that screens are the latest tool used to cope with the existential and spiritual "dis-ease" that results from a nonstop exposure to stimulation and need for diversion:

> The fundamental condition we're caught in and in many cases rebelling against is older than we realize... [T]he specific kind of mental restlessness we label boredom is the product of industrial modernity. This basic form of human civilization—jobs we work to earn money to buy what we want and need—generates ever more stimulus, which ratchets up our attentional needs, as it also provides hours of empty leisure time to fill for some and endless monotonous work for others.

St. Augustine insisted that human restlessness is a gift, since it keeps us searching for God (as nothing else will satiate our deepest desires), although others are not as confident. Nearly 50 years ago, Richard Foster lamented that "superficiality is the curse of our age." Have things only gotten worse thanks to the iPhone?

Hayes makes his strongest argument in Chapter Five, using Karl Marx's critique that capitalism commodifies labor and causes workers to experience estrangement. As Marx sees it, when labor is standardized (Hayes uses the example of a cobbler making shoes as compared with shoes made on an assembly line), there is both a subjective experience of alienation (something I do is now being de-individualized, or even dehumanized, as is the case in exploitative working conditions) and an objective experience of alienation (the value of my labor shifts from me to the owner, who can pay anyone a wage for the desired labor). Hayes claims that today we're experiencing "attention capitalism," such that our attention has been commodified. Where we direct our focus has been abstracted into "clicks," "engagement" or mere "eyeballs," and "to be reduced to a wage or an eyeball is to find oneself alienated from some part of oneself."

The result, as Hayes contends, is that we feel "our very interior life, the direction of our thoughts, is being taken against our will. This comes from the sophisticated development of attention markets, which have figured out ways to extract and commodify more and more of our attention, more and more efficiently." If things are bad now, they are likely to get even worse, since competition for attention will produce even more deceptive forms of attention extraction.

There are also urgent economic, environmental and political problems arising from the mounting pressures of commercial attention capture. For this reason, it is curious that Hayes largely sidesteps the moral valence to these trends. He claims that "[u]nlike love or recognition, attention is value neutral. It can be positive or negative; it can be the basis for adoration or revulsion." He then explains how Donald Trump leveraged attention in order to win the White House, without assigning any responsibility to media outlets for how they failed to hold him accountable for his serial dishonesty, inflammatory speech (especially when it fueled support from white supremacists and Christian nationalists), record of sexual harassment and assault, numerous business failures and tax evasion.

I was surprised to find that Hayes does not distinguish among the intentions, circumstances or desired outcomes behind how people use their attention. It is easy enough to see that attention can be differentiated by whether it is receptive and respectful as opposed to derisive, lustful or even threatening. As a Catholic moral theologian, I have been interested in the moral impact of our digital devices for some time. The church's role as the moral guardian of society requires more prophetic attention to these trends, described by Hayes as "attentional warlordism" lacking rules or structures.

What we permit and prioritize are always moral choices. The person who is driving a car while also scrolling through a newsfeed has misdirected his or her attention and endangered other drivers, passengers and any pedestrians in the area. We fail in our moral duties to one another if we see this and shrug or just hope the driver "stays in their lane." Others are impacted by our choices just as we are constantly impacted by others' choices; these decisions are rarely "value neutral."

Hayes's book is written predominantly through a lens of individualism.

The moral dimension of the life we share together is largely absent from this book, which is written predominantly through a lens of individualism. Hayes writes as if his own experience of attention and alienation is universal, without considering how this phenomenon affects people differently because of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, age, education, physical or cognitive ability, or religion. He does not focus on how the attention age impacts our most intimate ties, where the most profound formation takes place, as seen in the declining emotional health of children neglected by their parents' screen time, or how phones can derail our romantic relationships.

When Americans scroll through their phones and see news of another mass shooting or images from bombings in Ukraine or Gaza, these realities are conflated with an oversaturation of violence in media and entertainment, which can desensitize us to cruelty and injustice, letting us scroll past content that otherwise might prick our conscience, move us with compassion and urge us to act courageously in solidarity with those who are suffering.

In one promising section, Hayes notes that "[i]f attention is the substance of life, then the question of what we pay attention to is the question of what our lives will be. And here we come to a foundational question that is far harder to answer than we might like it to be. What do we *want* to pay attention to?" This is the question that St. Augustine wrestled with 1,600 years ago, insisting that we become what we love. What we love, we give our attention to; what we pay attention to shapes our desires. A community is united by shared love held in common; the church's role is to help people properly order their desires.

Hayes offers his own answer to this essential question, assuming others would answer in a similar way: "I would focus on family, friends, and loved ones, my hobbies and interests, things that brought me joy, personal projects... that bring me satisfaction." But this answer leaves no room for discernment, no sense of altruism or the common good; it is just basic self-interest. If *conscience* means "to know together," then it would benefit us to engage each other in dialogue about what we want to pay attention to, how that compares to what we *actually* give our attention to, and what we can and should do about that.

Hayes contends that boredom is making us lose sight of what really matters. Maybe the problem is not the lack of substance but being overwhelmed by all the endless possibilities we face. I'm reminded of the line by the Dutch writer Corrie ten Boom: "If the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy." It's not enough to become a deep or purposeful person; we must cultivate the discipline of taking a long, loving look at the real. This contemplative practice helps us see as God sees, with eyes of love—and since the effect of love is union, it can restore us to right relationship with God, ourselves and one another. The task of the church today—and an urgent ministry in so many homes, neighborhoods, schools and places of work—is to help people learn how to increase our capacity for loving awareness.

Sin is nothing new, whether it stems from staring at screens or the coding of the software behind them. The church has a rich tradition of contemplative practices that can help individuals and communities develop a spiritual immunity—or resource—to combat temptation.

Odysseus resisted the Sirens' call by stuffing wax in his ears and being tied to the mast of his ship. In the Christian moral life, even better than trying to control or override our impulses, we can recondition our attention to what really matters: loving well and being loved well. There may be countless Sirens trying to coerce our attention from us, but in every moment we get to decide where we look, how we look and to what end or goal.

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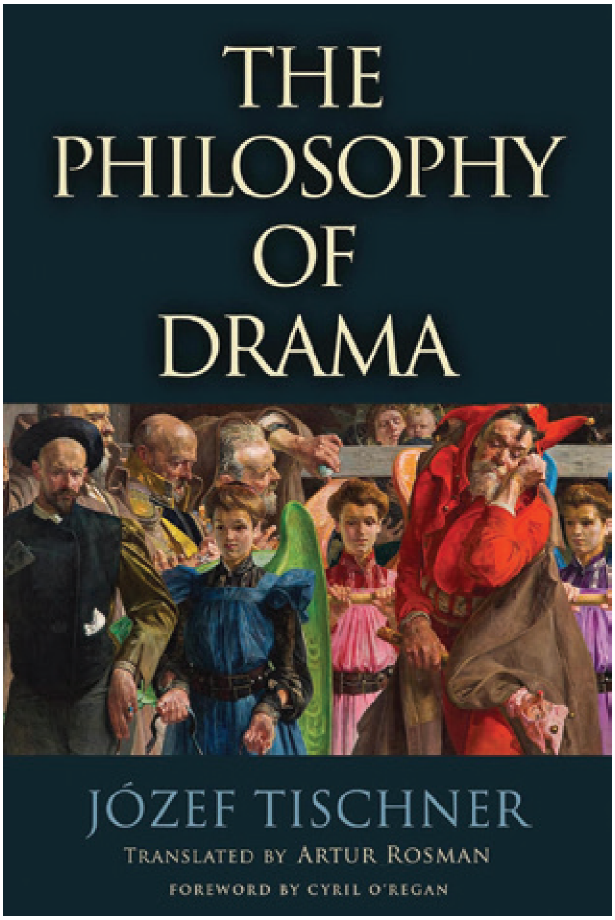
DOSTOYEVSKY SAVES



University of Notre Dame Press / 262p $40

The last novel we read in my honors English class in high school was *Crime and Punishment*. I was a voracious reader then—entranced by the existential questions of Camus and the declarations of Nietzsche. I snuck *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* under the chemistry lab table when I probably should have been memorizing the periodic table. "God is dead," Nietzsche declared, and I—like many an angsty teen—listened.

If you're picturing the goth-leaning, bookish kids who didn't quite fit in anywhere else, that's where you'd have found me: at the lunch table where quirky ideas mattered more than football scores.

But somehow, Dostoyevsky saved me—not from the lunch table where I had good friends but from the deeper temptation to believe that life was meaningless. Our teacher had us act out the trial at the heart of *Crime and Punishment*, in which Raskolnikov, the tormented protagonist, murders a pawnbroker and her sister. He believes he can justify the crime by doing greater good with the stolen money, convincing himself that some people—"louses," as he calls them—can be sacrificed for others.

We debated whether he was guilty, not just legally but morally and spiritually. For teenagers—particularly those who sometimes thought they knew better than the football players, or even their teachers—the drama of the book, and the drama we enacted, hit home.

I don't remember what part I played. But I remember feeling my heart shift. It wasn't a grand conversion. Just a recognition that I had been more selfish than I realized, and that a part of me—a part I no longer liked—had sympathized with Raskolnikov's logic. I didn't say anything then. But the book and that trial—which felt, in some ways, like a trial of my teenage soul—stayed with me.

Years later, I found language for what happened in that classroom, not just psychologically but spiritually. Despite teaching at a Catholic university and holding a doctorate in literature, I only recently encountered the work of Józef Tischner (1931–2000), thanks to Artur Rosman's excellent 2024 translation of *The Philosophy of Drama*. I wish now that my high school teacher (who I most certainly *was not* smarter than) and I had known his name. I wish I'd had his books to hide under the chemistry lab table.

Tischner—philosopher, priest, key figure in Poland's 1980s Solidarity movement, as well as a friend and intellectual colleague of John Paul II—remains virtually unknown in Western classrooms, despite being one of the pre-eminent voices in 20th-century Catholic thought. While contemporaries like Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger and Husserl are required reading in literary studies programs (including the ones I teach), Tischner is often absent. That won't be the case in my future syllabi.

Part of this neglect stems from the intellectual isolation imposed by communist regimes. Independent thinkers in Eastern Europe, especially those aligned with religious institutions, were often suppressed or ignored. Tischner wrote from within that context, openly challenging Marxist orthodoxy while wrestling with evil, freedom and conscience. *The Philosophy of Drama* is a monumental work of philosophical theology. And one of its clearest influences is the very novelist who shaped my own thinking: Dostoyevsky.

As Cyril O'Regan notes in the book's foreword, "Dostoyevsky is a stand-alone influence [on] *The Philosophy of Drama*, one who gives us some hope that in modernity we can look into the abyss and come out the other side." Tischner's dialogue with *Crime and Punishment* is particularly striking in his meditation on why people lie or, as he titles his third chapter, why they "go astray." "Raskolnikov lies," Tischner writes. "With the lie, he attempts to hide objective reality."

At first glance, the lie seems internal, intellectual, perhaps even justifiable. But Tischner shows that a lie is *always* relational—and theological. Raskolnikov goes astray because he sees only himself. (No wonder I needed Dostoyevsky as a teenager.)

Tischner reminds us our lives are not just private. They are testimonies.

And yet, Tischner reminds us, the real moral drama begins with seeking the other. When we look at another human being, we are meant to see the divine. To lie to another—and then to lie about them, and to oneself, as Raskolnikov does—is to obscure not only the truth but also conscience and reality. Ultimately, it is to obscure God.

This is the drama of Dostoyevsky's novel, and as Tischner suggests, it is also the drama of everyday life. It plays out in governments, workplaces, parishes and homes. When we reveal truth in our encounters, what changes? When we obscure it—when we lie—what changes?

Raskolnikov's story shows us what happens when truth is denied. The faces he tries to forget—those that confront him with objective reality—remain ever-present, both in the novel's drama and in his inner turmoil. The pawnbroker. Her sister. They knock at his conscience, refusing to be silenced. Eventually he confesses, not because he is forced but because he cannot hold up the burdensome weight of his lie. Deep down, he longs for punishment, not as retribution but as the first step toward restoration.

But it isn't until he's sent to prison in Siberia—through the long work of suffering and repentance—that Raskolnikov learns to love again. He confesses not only to the authorities but finally to God. And only then does he begin to see others rightly: to love others, to love God, to speak truth. That truth is not merely factual. It is spiritual—a revelation that both implicates and elevates the whole person.

Tischner reminds us that our decisions are never neutral. They shape our souls and affect even those we might dismiss as "usable," as Raskolnikov dismissed the pawnbroker. The lie he tells is not a mere moral failure; it is a refusal to recognize the dignity of the other. In this way, *The Philosophy of Drama* is not simply about personal ethics. It is about salvation history holistically. It insists that "our drama" is never just our own. We are always on God's stage, always in relationship with one another.

Tischner's central claim is deceptively simple: "Human existence is dramatic existence." Drama, for him, is not confined to the stage or to moments of crisis; it is the substance of life. "To be a dramatic being," he writes, "means living through a given time surrounded by other people while having the heart under one's feet as a stage." He names three conditions that make drama possible: openness to others, to the world and to time. A coffee shop conversation, a child's soccer game, a walk through a crowd: These are all dramatic events. Not because they are unusual but because they bind us in time and space and ask us to respond. "Dramatic time ties me to you, you to me, and ties us to the stage where our drama takes place," he writes.

But for Tischner—and this matters—the drama does not end with human contact alone. "Among the many opinions and assumptions," he writes, "one is especially worthy of attention: there is really only one drama—the drama with God." At the heart of this drama is what he calls "the event of the encounter."

This is not simply realizing someone is nearby, or passing someone in a crowd. No. "The one who encounters goes beyond—transcends—himself," Tischner writes, "toward the one to whom he can give witness (the other), and toward the One before whom he can submit his witness (before Him—the One who demands a witness)." In other words, ethics begins not in theory but in relationship. In how we face one another. In how we account for that face before God.

This is what makes Raskolnikov's lie—and his crime—so spiritually disturbing. He *refuses* transcendence. He places himself above the other. He neglects the truth of the face before him and treats it as a thing, not a person, not as an image-bearer.

And this is what gives *The Philosophy of Drama* its power, too, especially for those drawn to Catholic personalism and the theology of human dignity. Tischner reminds us our lives are not just private. They are testimonies. Every moment reveals what we believe about the human person, about freedom, about grace. We are always giving witness to God, whether we mean to or not.

Reading Tischner, I kept returning to that classroom and our makeshift trial of Raskolnikov—and to the grace that began there. Back then, I thought we were just acting. I didn't yet realize I was being drawn into the very philosophy of drama Tischner describes: a drama where freedom means taking responsibility for how we act toward others and where truth is never neutral. Where to lie is not merely to deceive but to fracture the bond between self and God. Where ethics begins not in theory but in the courage to face one another.

Tischner reminded me that the drama of life is not staged in courtrooms or classrooms but in every moment we choose: to tell the truth or obscure it, to take responsibility or avoid it, to bless or to condemn. He reminded me that the heart's small shifts—like the one I felt as a teenager, unsettled by Raskolnikov's logic—are not incidental.

They are the first rehearsals of conscience.

We are not actors reciting lines. We are image-bearers of God, called into relationship, into witness, into truth—enacting, day by day, through our choices and encounters, the drama of salvation history.

LuElla D'Amico *is an associate professor of English and coordinator of women's and gender studies at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Tex.*

INCARNATION
CHRISTMAS MORNING

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

What did she know of birthing?
Despite dear Joseph's steadfast love
she'd need to do this alone. More things
her angel made no mention of—

the labor pains that sliced like knives,
the flood of blood that somehow came
out of her body. A brand new wife,
events took place she could not name.

There was so much she didn't know.
That he would be a lonely child.
That he'd calm winds when they would blow
no matter how westerly and wild.

That he would be crowned "king" someday.
That he would be beloved and hated.
That he would die a dreadful way.
Knowledge can be overrated.

She did just what she had to do,
like all mothers, before and after.
Gave birth to him—and me, and you—
innocent of the disasters

sure to come. The world's a mess.
This is nothing new.
She clutched her child close, felt blessed,
wrapped him in her mantle, blue

as Bethlehem's December sky,
and held him to her beating heart,
death a dark and distant lie,
life her legacy, an art

that bound them tightly to each other,
this human God and his human mother.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell *is a professor and associate director of the Curran Center of American Catholic Studies at Fordham University. Her 12th book of poems,* The View from Childhood, *is forthcoming from Paraclete Press in 2026.*

Unsplash

Advent: An Invitation to Be Open and Receptive

Editors' note: Every three years **America** *bids farewell to its Word columnist as the three-year cycle of readings for the Mass ends and another Advent begins. We are grateful to Victor Cancino, S.J., for his insightful commentary over the past cycle, and we welcome Gina Hens-Piazza to our pages.*

Over the years of writing and teaching about our Scriptures, I have found that as we work on these sacred texts, they are actually working on us—deepening our faith, raising challenging questions, granting insights and nurturing our desire to know God. Humbly, I think of this interchange as the power of these texts in our lives. I am honored to continue this work as the next Word columnist for **America**.

Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year, featuring Matthew's Gospel. Though this Gospel emphasizes Jesus' special attention to the "lost house of Israel" (10:6, 15:24), his message widens to invite all nations to be part of the kingdom of God. Across each of the four Sundays before Christmas, Matthew summons us to cultivate a meaning-filled waiting, to practice forgiveness, to ponder the reality of incarnation and to prepare our hearts to recognize Christ among us now. The prophet Isaiah nurtures this anticipatory spirit, reminding us that risking to hope for the coming of the savior enlivens us and helps us navigate the way forward. The world of the prophet and even the world into which Jesus was born appear similar to our own. Nations prepared to make war with one another, and people experienced alienation even among families. Still, the prophet dares us to imagine God's vision for the world: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another nor shall they train for war anymore" (Is 2:4).

Paul also reminds us of the many ways Christ is already present among us. Across his instructions to the Romans, he invites that community, as well as our own, to put on Christ in how we live, to remember that we belong to Christ, and to welcome one another as Christ welcomes us. Such collective, faith-filled action on the part of our communities can disclose the holy presence among us now that we look forward to celebrating at the end of Advent. Thus, these Advent readings work to chasten our hearts, orient our attention and evoke a response culminating on Christmas, when we remember his birth, cherish his presence among us and joyfully exclaim, "Today is born our savior, Christ the Lord."

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A), DEC. 7, 2025
The fruit of repentance: Genuinely good deeds

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A), DEC. 14, 2025
Faith and the role of doubt

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A), DEC. 21, 2025
Daring to trust in God

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY (A), DEC. 28, 2025
Two kinds of fear: One helps with the other

Gina Hens-Piazza *is the Joseph S. Alemany professor of Biblical Studies at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, in Berkeley, Calif.*

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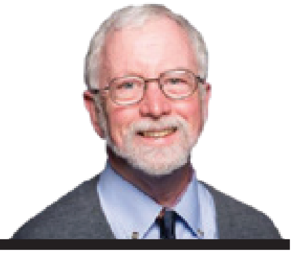
What Have We Lost?

On the abandonment of international aid

By William O'Neill



I have served for the past five and a half years with the Jesuit Refugee Service in the Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya, the Adjumani refugee settlements in Uganda and the Maban refugee camps in South Sudan. Last year, we received hundreds of refugees in Maban, all fleeing the brutal civil war in Sudan, where over 14 million have been forcibly displaced.

Truck after truck of refugees came—exhausted from the seven-mile trek from the border, covered with dust, the children too tired even to cry. Yet one little girl whom we helped from the convoy, sitting down on a blanket in the cold, looked up at me and said, "Thank you." I will never forget her face.

Living abroad, I came to recognize our many blessings as Americans, including the founding belief that each person, wherever they are born, is infinitely precious, endowed with dignity and inalienable rights. No life ever ceases to matter; dignity is never lost. But I have come to wonder whether we still cherish this founding belief. The recent cuts to international aid betray such faith.

In the Kakuma camp, home to over 300,000 refugees from war-torn neighboring countries, food rations have been reduced to 30 percent of minimal nutritional requirements as a consequence of the cutbacks. Seventy percent of the funding for the World Food Program in Kenya had been provided by the United States; now hundreds of thousands of refugees, a United Nations official says, are "slowly starving" in the Kenyan camps. Malnutrition is likewise surging in the Maban camps, putting the most vulnerable women and children at risk. The story is repeated in camps and settlements throughout the world.

Today, the U.N. Refugee Agency reports that current levels of displacement are among the highest ever recorded. One in every 67 people in the world is now forcibly displaced. By the end of this April, over 122 million people were displaced, 43 million as refugees. Forty percent of the forcibly displaced are children under 18 years.

U.S. refugee assistance programs have helped millions of displaced families all over the world, reducing maternal and infant mortality, providing life-saving medications, teacher training, and basic primary and secondary education. The costs of such assistance to our nation were miniscule, only 0.0012 percent of U.S. spending per year, according to an analysis by J.R.S. But deep cuts to programs such as Migration and Refugee Assistance and International Disaster Assistance will drastically reduce life-saving efforts. These cuts imperil not only global health and stability, but also trust in the United States to honor its commitments.

J.R.S., like other service agencies, is doing all that is possible to consolidate our programs and sustain our service to the most vulnerable. But our challenges are immense and growing.

Millions of "the least of our sisters and brothers" will now suffer because of what we fail to do (Mt. 25:40). Yet they have lessons for us. I can testify to the resilience and courage of mothers caring for their children with severe disabilities in Kakuma, Maban and Adjumani. They have lost everything, but not their hope for their children, their belief that each child is infinitely precious.

As Pope Leo reminded us in his message for the 111th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, "In a world darkened by war and injustice...migrants and refugees stand as messengers of hope. Their courage and tenacity bear heroic testimony to a faith that sees beyond what our eyes can see and gives them the strength to defy death on the various contemporary migration routes."

And I recall a young refugee father, Charite Lobo, telling us of his flight from the war-ravaged eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo with his blind daughter: "Father, there is no need to be anxious. You fear because of uncertainties. We, as refugees, experienced these uncertainties from the moment we started running away from our countries.... We do not know the future, but we know that God will care for us. Even when we die; we die with God, who loves and cares for us."

Have we such faith? Our indifference, when we can make a difference, betrays everything we hold most dear. It is not only the humanity of refugees that we are betraying; it is our own.

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