America

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The Need to Overturn Our Idols

During the end of November and beginning of December, two significant news stories involving crime and immigration got even more attention than they would have received under normal circumstances because of President Trump's response to them.

On Nov. 26, an Afghan man shot two soldiers from the West Virginia National Guard who were deployed in Washington, D.C. One of the soldiers, Sarah Beckstrom, died of her wounds; the other, Andrew Wolfe, is still fighting for his life as of this writing and is listed in serious condition. The man who shot them had been admitted to the United States as a refugee in 2021 after serving alongside U.S. intelligence and military personnel during the war in Afghanistan.

In response to the shooting, Mr. Trump suspended all immigration requests from Afghanistan, and later expanded the pause in immigration processing to apply to the 19 "high-risk" countries to which a travel ban had been applied earlier in the year.

Shortly before Thanksgiving, Mr. Trump announced that he was ending the Temporary Protected Status program, which shields immigrants from deportation to countries in crisis, for Somalis in Minnesota after reports of fraud cases in which members of that state's Somali diaspora set up companies that billed the state millions of dollars for social services that were never provided. (The majority of those charged in the fraud cases are American citizens, either by birth or naturalization, and are not subject to deportation even if convicted.)

During a cabinet meeting in early December, Mr. Trump said Somali immigrants should "go back to where they came from" and that the United States should not "keep taking in garbage into our country." He also attacked Representative Ilhan Omar, a Somali-American legislator who has been a frequent target of his in the past. At the same time, according to news reports, the Trump administration began planning an immigration enforcement surge targeting the Somali community in Minnesota.

In both these instances, real problems—a terrible act of violence targeting service members for representing the government and rampant abuse of resources meant to help people in need—have been leveraged as an excuse to scapegoat entire communities, depicting everyone of a certain nationality as a dangerous threat to American safety and prosperity and also tending to overshadow the real crimes that have been committed. Such scapegoating is perhaps the most consistent trope of Mr. Trump's political rhetoric, dating back to the announcement of his first presidential campaign in 2015, when he described immigrants coming across the southern border as bringing drugs and crime and being rapists.

His nativist, anti-immigrant rhetoric has continued in much the same vein ever since, despite significant empirical research demonstrating that immigrants commit crime at lower rates than the U.S.-born population and do not increase crime rates in the communities where they settle. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Mr. Trump, in accusing immigrants of bringing crime into the United States, is attempting to make a factual claim that would be subject to confirmation or falsification.

In his political rhetoric, almost all immigration from a more insecure or less prosperous country, even when immigrants are legally seeking asylum or coming as refugees, is part of a dangerous and underhanded attempt to exploit the United States. As can be seen in his administration's mass deportation effort, simply being in the country as a noncitizen, or as a citizen sharing heritage with many undocumented immigrants, is cause enough for suspicion. Despite being a matter of civil law, irregular immigration status is itself being made the equivalent of criminality.

Even more than that, *any* crime committed by an immigrant is being treated as a more serious violation than similar crimes committed by citizens born in the United States. Under this political worldview, when someone who was not born in the United States commits an act of violence or fraud, something far worse than just the violence or fraud itself has happened: the proper order of things has been disrupted.

Illegal immigration is being treated as a sacrilege because it seems to violate something that has been made into an idol: the status and the security of being American. Behind the scapegoating and nativist rhetoric, there is a myth being reinforced of the United States as automatically safe and prosperous *in itself*, requiring only a defense against outsiders to maintain that idyllic state.

In a special message on immigration, reprinted on Page 15 of this issue, the U.S. bishops "pray for an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence." In order to cooperate in seeking that goal, we need to confront and overturn the idols we have set up. Or to put it another way, we need to be purified to recognize in all human beings the image and likeness of God, and to see Jesus in our brothers and sisters most in need.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

DISPATCHES

FEATURES

A billboard depicting Pope Leo XIV along the main airport road in Beirut. The pope visited Turkey and Lebanon from Nov. 27 through Dec. 2, his first trip outside Italy.
OSV News photo/Mohamed Azakir, Reuters

Cover: Future U.S. Congressman John Lewis, an unidentified nun, and Reverends Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King Jr. during the third Selma-to-Montgomery march, March 1965.
Steve Schapiro/Corbis via Getty Images

JANUARY 2026 VOL. 234 NO. 1 WHOLE NO. 5316

Are 'terror tactics' justifiable in enforcing immigration law?

Following Pope Leo XIV's remarks on Oct. 23 defending the rights of migrants, **America**'s editors published an editorial arguing that "Safe Borders Do Not Require Terror Tactics From ICE." We decried the cruelty of the Trump administration's mass deportation campaign, from the "creation of true hellholes like the Alligator Alcatraz detention facility" to "completely unnecessary violations of human dignity and American law" in federal agents' enforcement actions. Our readers had much to say in response.

Editorials in magazines read by progressive Catholics are, unfortunately, doing very little to make an impact on what's happening in our country. I would like to see more of the action that Jesus called for, the kind of dangerous action that gets people in trouble when they stand up for their morals. I have been to some of the "No Kings" rallies, and I've been afraid in a way that I never thought I would be afraid in America. But that fear should be an impetus, and it should be clarifying. I hope our bishops and our leaders begin to join those who are already going to migrant detention centers, showing up at rallies and speaking out as individuals.
Carolyn Gorman

Your editorial admirably addresses the present cruelty of immigration enforcement. What we need now, and have needed for many years, is a process for those undocumented individuals who have contributed to our society for many years that will give them legal status (or citizenship) without requiring that they leave their family and business to self-deport.
Philip Crosby

We have a reservoir of many millions of able-bodied adults who are not currently working. If there are so many jobs to be done that we must permit a huge influx of foreign nationals of modest education and skill, Americans should be doing these jobs instead. Long gone are the days of Ellis Island. We neither need nor can we afford to keep the same kind of immigration policy we had in 1890.
Matthew K.

I am disappointed that the editors did not seem to criticize the effectively open-border policy of President Biden that let in millions of undocumented immigrants to the United States. I support amending our immigration policy, including significantly increasing the number of immigrants that are allowed to enter into the United States each year, and also dramatically increasing [the number of] immigration judges to speed claims of asylum. I support reasonable methods of arresting and deporting criminals who enter the United States illegally. I would like to read a more balanced editorial on this subject.
Michael Barberi

The heartless, soulless, unconscionable and unnecessary actions [of this administration] demonstrate a level of heartlessness that is incomprehensible to me. The lack of humanity and decency that is on display has left me in a state of despair for this country. God help all of us.
David Bowditch

A self-deportation policy is impossible for a family who has been here for years, is of mixed status, whose children are American citizens, who have been wonderful contributing members of our communities, and who have paid taxes and worshiped in our churches. As followers of Jesus, we must put compassion above the law. If we Americans have the brain power and resources to send people into space and create massively expensive atomic bombs, can we not secure our borders *and* create a compassionate path to citizenship for our sisters and brothers who are here?
Alice Bradley

Reading a recent report on the torture and sexual assault endured by Venezuelan deportees who were sent by this administration to [the CECOT prison in El Salvador] was horrifying. Due process is an American value. Treating other humans, including immigrants, with dignity and care is a Christian value. The current immigration enforcement policies reflect neither set of values.
D. R. Martin

This administration's violent crackdown has less to do with immigration and more to do with terrorizing people, citizens and non-citizens alike, and with showing their supposed power, which is just tough-guy posturing. Sadly, one of our political parties, along with certain Catholic leaders, supports this.
Daniel Lamoureux

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Good News—and How to Spread It

Gen Z is the least religious generation in U.S. history. And Gen Z is going to church more than any other generation.

Both of these statements appear to be true.

According to the Pew Research Center's latest Religious Landscape Study, 44 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds are religiously unaffiliated—the highest percentage of any age group—compared with a national average of 29 percent.

But studies also suggest that the 45 percent of young people who do identify as Christian today participate in the life of the church more than their elders. A report released on Nov. 4 from the Leadership Roundtable found that 18- to 29-year-old Catholics are "by far the most engaged." These young Catholics "are more likely than any other age group to attend Mass daily, weekly, or monthly, are far more likely to engage in parish activities beyond Mass, and are more likely to go to Confession, to engage in Eucharistic Adoration, to attend social events, and more."

This report supports new data from the Barna Group, which found that Gen Z now leads older generations in church attendance, averaging 1.9 services per month or 23 services per year. (Millennials followed closely behind with an average of 22 services per year, while boomers, the oldest of whom are now approaching 80, attend church in person just 17 times per year.)

The data also suggests that what once seemed like the irrepressible rise of the "nones"—people who identify with no religion in particular—has plateaued.

These are just a few of the data points underlying what some, in both the Christian and secular worlds, have described as a burgeoning "religious revival" in the United States. While the absolute numbers hardly paint a picture of a new Great Awakening, it is natural to ask what lies behind the surprising relative devotion of younger Americans.

Ironically, it is likely that the apparent contradiction between decreasing identification and increased religiosity among self-identified believers is attributable to the increasing social acceptability of *not* claiming Christian identity. In years past, even those with tenuous ties to the institutional church were likely to identify as Catholic or Christian because of family ties or cultural inertia.

Young people today, many raised in only loosely affiliated households, feel far less pressure to claim that identity. So those who remain Catholic have likely made a conscious decision to be a part of a particular community. They are becoming a version of what Pope Benedict XVI predicted decades ago: a church that is smaller but where Christian identity and practice are more strongly linked.

But in addition to a smaller but more committed cohort of cradle Catholics, there is also evidence of an uptick in interest in Catholicism among younger Americans. In an ongoing election study from Harvard University, the share of Gen Z respondents who identified as Catholic rose from 15 percent in 2022 to 21 percent in 2023 (surpassing the 20 percent among millennials), a possible sign that disaffiliation among younger generations has been reversed. Some colleges have reported record numbers of baptisms and participation in the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults in 2025. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, dioceses across the country have seen a surge in young adult converts.

Of course, while followers of Jesus are called to "make disciples of all nations," evangelization is not at heart simply a numbers game. The number of young people turning to the Catholic Church need not be overwhelming or even statistically significant to be a cause for joy. It is always a sign of hope when people want to come into full membership in the church.

How is the church called to respond in this moment?

First, there are temptations to be avoided. In seeking to understand why young people are turning to the church, Catholics risk imposing well-worn explanations that presuppose their preferred solutions for reversing Christianity's numerical and institutional decline. The mission of the church is not to tailor its teaching or liturgy to suit the preferences of each generation; it is to draw each person into relationship with Christ. And the best way to do that is to do what the church has been doing for 2,000 years: building communities of worship, communities of practice.

Second, the church needs to be a community of welcome—and compassion. Karl Rahner, S.J., famously wrote: "The devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic'—someone who has 'experienced something'—or will cease to be anything at all." Today, we might say that Christians will be those who find a community of practice or nothing at all.

The church, then, should focus on welcoming those who are just be-

ginning to put a toe in the waters of Christianity, to invite people into religious practice instead of identification with a set of doctrinal claims. That does not mean abandoning doctrine but rather avoiding a puritanism that discourages both Christian identification and practice.

In recent months, cities around the United States have witnessed what such communities can look like as Catholics have celebrated Mass and processed with the Eucharist in solidarity with their detained migrant siblings. Many a textbook and YouTube video might try to explain the real presence of Jesus; but there is the doctrine in practice.

Third, we need to listen—not just to young people who are finding themselves newly committed to religious practice and church affiliation, but to those who have left or are close to leaving. The temptation to impart one's own wisdom is not always negative, but it can also lead to more of the same when it comes to evangelization and openness. One thing we can be sure of is that no generation wants to be told it is doing the whole thing wrong.

Finally, when thinking about evangelizing Gen Z, it is essential to recognize that a seeker's journey to the faith may begin online. But it cannot end there. Podcasts, YouTube channels and social media personalities bring Catholic apologetics and aesthetics to millions. But, as Pope Leo XIV posted, on X no less: "The danger is that a faith discovered online is limited to individual experiences, which may be intellectually and emotionally reassuring, but never 'embodied.' Such experiences remain 'disembodied,' detached from the 'ecclesial body.'"

Whether we are at the beginning of a religious revival is a question for social scientists to settle. But for Christians, there is always fertile ground for one. And it begins by building communities of welcome and integrity so that those without a home may look around and say: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

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Good faith and fair dealing in constitutional law

The duty of good faith and fair dealing is so important to commercial life that it is deemed an implied term in commercial agreements. Is something similar essential to the practice of constitutional democracy? Is a requirement or expectation of good faith and fair dealing even consistent with American constitutional law?

In Federalist 51, one of the essays written to encourage ratification of the Constitution, the pseudonymous author Publius wrote: "You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the second place oblige it to control itself." But how is the government meant to control itself under our Constitution? The textbook answer is through vertical and horizontal separations of powers—through federalism, or the sharing of power between the states and the national government, and through the separation of powers and checks and balances among the branches of the national government. What I'd like to suggest is that these "hard" law requirements are not sufficient by themselves.

Something like a requirement or expectation of good faith and fair dealing—adherence to what we might call "constitutional conventions" or "norms"—is not only consistent with the Constitution, but *essential* to the proper functioning of American constitutional government.

Let's look again at Federalist 51, where Publius also writes, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." The point is that the proper functioning of government is to be accomplished through interbranch competition. Executive officials will think of themselves primarily as members of the executive; the same goes for judges as judges and members of Congress as members of Congress. And all anticipate that they will best advance their personal interests by safeguarding the constitutional prerogatives of their respective branch. The idea is that good results will follow from each of the branches attempting to maximize their own power, checked by a counterpressure exerted by the other branches.

We thus have a model that is not inhospitable to virtue but does not necessarily depend on it. We know, for example, that the Founders anticipated that the president would be a person of good character—one with "an honest devotion to the public interest," as the Supreme Court observed in Martin v. Mott (1827). But the whole government is designed to function like a mechanical device fueled by law and the right kind of ambition.

The basic theory articulated in Federalist 51 generally drives our constitutional jurisprudence. For example, in Immigration and Naturalization Service v. Chadha (1983), which invalidated a law that allowed a single chamber of Congress to override deportation decisions by the U.S. attorney general, Chief Justice Burger explained that "[t]he hydraulic pressure inherent within each of the separate Branches to exceed the outer limits of its power, even to accomplish desirable objectives, must be resisted." That resistance will usually come from one of the political branches, which will exert its own hydraulic pressure. If that fails, resistance must come from the courts, as in Chadha.

Chief Justice Burger provides a comforting image of equipoise. But whether equipoise materializes in practice depends on whether "the interest of the person" finds its connection "with the constitutional rights of the place." For example, will the speaker of the House consider the constitutional prerogatives of the House as his or her principal locus of allegiance—and most likely path to advancement—above political party and all other identifications, causes, ideas or commitments?

People enter politics to accomplish something, and the precise force exerted by various allegiances probably depends on which of those allegiances they think most likely to further those purposes. Promoting the relative dominance of one's branch *might* do that, but promoting one's political party might also do it. For example, did Speaker Johnson prematurely recess the House last summer to benefit the House? Unlike Publius, we live in a world in which political parties are powerful cultural forces cross-cutting and undermining the force of branch identification.

Independence and Reciprocity

In Youngstown Sheet & Tube v. Sawyer (1952), Justice Robert H. Jackson states: "While the Constitution diffuses power the better to secure liberty, it also contemplates that practice will integrate the dispersed powers into a workable government. It enjoins upon its branches separateness but interdependence, autonomy but reciprocity."

Interdependence and reciprocity depend on more than what the text of the Constitution can give us. The Constitution didn't settle everything. It left some things to Congress (including even the architecture of the executive and judicial branches), some things for determination by the courts and some things to be settled by government practice.

A. V. Dicey, the 19th-century English scholar, recognized that a written constitution cannot obviate the need for "understandings, habits, or practices" that regulate the conduct of political actors. More recently, the

political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have talked about the need for "institutional forbearance," defined as "avoiding actions that, while respecting the letter of the law, obviously violate its spirit." The exercise of power must always be tempered by the understanding that today's majority party may someday be the minority.

So what was left to convention? Well, presidents have not typically granted pre-emptive pardons to family members, and they have not routinely conflated their personal business affairs with those of the nation. They have not routinely removed military leaders as if they were civilian political appointees. Presidents have not usually mobilized a state's national guard for domestic deployment within the state without the governor's request or consent; nor have they deployed one state's national guard in another state without the receiving state's approval. But we have seen all these traditions flouted in this administration because they are mere conventions, not constitutional or legal requirements.

To take another example, President Richard Nixon deployed federal law enforcement agencies such as the I.R.S. and the Department of Justice to harass his political enemies and reward his friends. In reaction, the established convention after Watergate was to deny the president the power to pick out specific individuals or entities for investigation or prosecution. However, the Supreme Court recently held that the president is constitutionally entitled to decide who should be investigated and prosecuted. That has changed the constitutional landscape. And so the director of the Federal Housing Finance Agency has apparently searched agency records to determine whether any of Mr. Trump's

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"enemies" can be prosecuted for purposely or inadvertently claiming more than one principal residence on mortgage applications.

The flouting of conventions by the executive branch is now receiving the most attention, but there are also examples from the other branches. The Constitution says nothing about how the Supreme Court is supposed to do its work, but we had come to expect it to: decide cases after briefing, argument and deliberation; confine constitutional judgments to those necessarily required by the facts of a case; and give reasoned explanations for its decisions and rule consistently over time. This is a process that the court has increasingly abandoned. It now regularly decides important issues on its "shadow docket" with little or no explanation. These machine-gun rulings afford little more than the opportunity for the justices to vote their pre-existing views into law. And they do nothing to promote public confidence in the court.

Just as bones cannot propel us through our physical life without muscles and ligaments and tendons, the Constitution cannot propel us through our public life without conventions, norms or "soft" law. We should not let conventions that embody the spirit of the law slip away without notice. We must be as vigilant with respect to their preservation as we are of the Constitution itself. As our present circumstances teach us, conventions cannot save us by themselves, but we cannot be saved without them. Ironically, the rule of law requires more than law.

Justice Louis D. Brandeis once observed that "the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people." Many now believe that "we the people" are powerless and that inertness is our destiny. But that is unnecessarily defeatist. So long as we continue to elect our leaders, we can influence them. At least with respect to the executive and legislative branches, we can insist that they follow the spirit of the law as well as the law itself. Where it would be feasible and wise, we can insist that they elevate desirable conventions to the status of "hard" law. Where particular conventions are desirable, but translating them into positive law would not be feasible, we can still insist that the conventions be followed.

In other words, the people can assert the power that the Constitution puts in our hands.

Barry Sullivan *is the Raymond and Mary Simon Chair in Constitutional Law and the George Anastaplo Professor of Constitutional Law and History at Loyola University Chicago. This essay is adapted from the Jessica Swift Constitution Day Lecture, which the author presented at Middlebury College in September 2025.*

OSV News photo/Leah Millis, Reuters

Why did more immigrants die in ICE detention in 2025?

By Kevin Clarke

The spiritual well-being of people detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement became the focus of concern among church leaders in November, but as reports of inhumane conditions at ICE detention facilities circulated in the media and among immigrant advocates, the physical well-being of detainees also came under increasing scrutiny. An emergency class action lawsuit alleging inhumane conditions and violations of civil rights at ICE's Broadview Processing Center near Chicago's Midway Airport was filed on Oct. 31.

According to the suit, the Broadview facility is meant to serve as a short-term "holding facility," with a 12-hour limit on how long people can be detained there. It alleged that ICE and the Department of Homeland Security are holding detainees at the overcrowded facility "for multiple days and even weeks while denying them access to sufficient food, water, showers, hygiene products, and medical care. There are no beds or blankets, and detainees are forced to sleep on the cold and dirty floor."

Adding to alarm about conditions in detention facilities has been a spike in the number of detainee deaths reported for the 2025 fiscal year that ended on Sept. 30. ICE officials reported 18 deaths among detainees, but advocates at the American Immigration Council reached a count of 23 after reviewing ICE press releases. They believe the actual loss of life could be higher.

"The way that ICE defines a 'death in detention' is pretty narrow," Rebekah Wolf, a staff attorney for the council, explained. Detainees who become seriously ill may be removed from detention and die at a medical facility off-site. "ICE sometimes does not report those as someone who has died in detention," she said.

Huabing Xie, a Chinese national, became the last detainee to die in the 2025 fiscal year while under ICE custody after suffering a seizure at the Imperial Regional Detention Facility in Calexico, Calif., on Sept. 29. He is not included in the agency's official tally.

Whatever the final FY 2025 tally of deaths proves to be, the current official number is still substantially higher than the 12 deaths reported in FY 2024 and far higher than

Religious leaders place marigold flowers used on the altar into the fence surrounding the Broadview ICE facility in Chicago after an outdoor Mass on Nov. 1.

the typical loss of life under detention reported during the Biden administration. In FY 2023, just four deaths at ICE detention sites were recorded; three deaths were reported in FY 2022 and five in FY 2021.

In fact, the last time deaths under ICE custody were this high was FY 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when 21 deaths were recorded. In FY 2019, eight deaths were reported, and six were recorded in 2018, the first year ICE was compelled by Congress to publicly track deaths in detention.

Kevin Appleby, the senior fellow for policy and communications at the Center for Migration Studies of New York, sees the spike in detention deaths as the inevitable outcome of President Trump's mass deportation policy. "This administration has dehumanized immigrants and, accordingly, they are treating them inhumanely," he said. "I think respect for human rights and human dignity has been lost."

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso has been among the strongest voices in the U.S. church speaking on behalf of immigrant communities. "Twenty-three people," Bishop Seitz marveled, pondering the number of ICE detainees who died in FY 2025. "My God."

Bishop Seitz said he has heard many stories this year of drug-addicted people incarcerated by ICE struggling to receive treatment and of detained pregnant women being denied appropriate care.

"So some [detainees] might have been dealing with drug addiction," Bishop Seitz said. "We have a lot of drug-addicted people in our country, right? Why aren't they being treated? Isn't that our responsibility?"

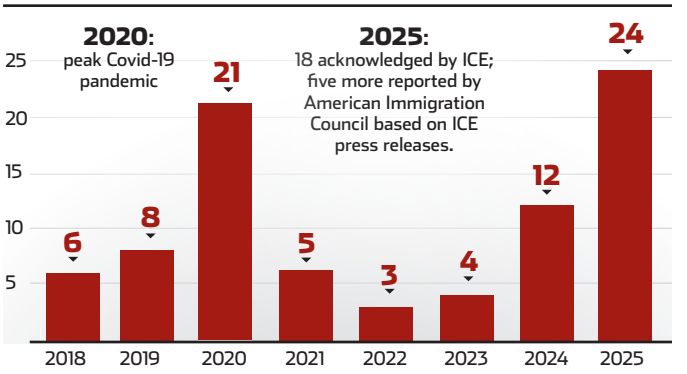
Speaking on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in a statement emailed to **America**, spokesperson Chieko Noguchi wrote, "The U.S.C.C.B. has repeatedly discouraged unnecessary detention in favor of more humane, community-based alternatives for nonviolent detainees."

"At the very least, the U.S.C.C.B. insists that detainees are consistently provided with their basic needs including regular access to medical care, as well as pastoral and spiritual care, and religious services."

Detainees have died after seizures, cardiac arrest and health crises related to chronic illness like diabetes, tuberculosis, or drug or alcohol addiction. At least three died because of suicide while in custody.

So why are so many deaths in ICE custody happening now? Part of the answer is related to the sharp increase in the number of detainees, which in 2025 averaged about 60,000 detainees each month. That figure is vastly higher than the 18,000 to 30,000 per month typically held in detention in recent years.

Deaths in ICE detention 2018-2025



According to Ms. Wolf, the higher monthly detention tallies are the result of an ICE policy "of near-universal detention."

She explained that ICE agents previously had some discretion over what to do with apprehended immigrants, particularly minors, pregnant women and people suffering from acute medical conditions. Agents could make judgment calls that could mean allowing apprehended immigrants to remain in their homes with ankle monitors, be placed in alternative forms of confinement or be released on parole while their immigration cases were heard.

But in recent months, "the statistics of people being released from detention on parole by ICE are really stark," she said. According to Ms. Wolf, in December 2024, the last full month of the Biden administration, about 5,000 people were released from detention under parole. She has seen monthly numbers consistently as low as 70 released parolees this year.

"The regulation and the statute that governs release from detention hasn't changed," she said. "What's changed is the directive from the executive, whether that's from the president directly or from the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. They have made a political decision not to release people."

Ms. Wolf is certain the quota pressure that ICE agents are currently experiencing is part of the reason so many apprehended immigrants in poor health or suffering from alcoholism or drug addiction are being consigned to detention.

"People with medical conditions are not being released when our regulations suggest that in many cases they should," Ms. Wolf said. "We're just detaining sicker people."

When in custody, detainees have the right to petition for release because of medical problems. But those kinds of appeals are just not being heard now, Ms. Wolf said; at the same time, oversight of ICE practices has been severely diminished.

Higher detainee numbers have also strained medical

Law enforcement officers scuffle with demonstrators during a protest near the Broadview ICE facility in Chicago on Nov. 1, 2025.

OSV News photo/Leah Millis, Reuters

and supervisory resources, and in the end, medical conditions are being left untreated, medications are not being properly administered, and medical and mental health crises are going unnoticed, the American Immigration Council report charges.

Retaining competent medical staff has been a longstanding problem at ICE facilities, Ms. Wolf said, but that deficit has been exacerbated by higher detention rates now. And because of diminished overall supervision due to overcrowding, some detainees have been able to take their own lives, while others have experienced fatal medical crises without being observed or properly treated.

"It's not happenstance that these deaths have increased," Mr. Appleby said. "It's a direct result of the policy of mass deportations."

Mr. Appleby believes that Congress must recover its oversight role before conditions can improve and deaths in custody can begin to decline. That will remain a difficult challenge "because many of the Republicans in the House are afraid to call the administration out on these matters."

"It goes back to the environment that [the Trump administration] created against immigrants," he said, "how they speak about them, how they treat them"—an atmosphere in which immigrants are "looked at as less than human."

"There's not an incentive there for ICE to comply with basic standards that treat people as human beings," Mr. Appleby said. "They're not rewarded for that. They're rewarded for the number of people that they can detain and deport."

"Twenty-three deaths is not a statistic; it's 23 human lives," Anna Marie Gallagher, the executive director of Clinic, the U.S. church's legal ministry for immigrants, said in a statement emailed to **America**.

"Catholic social teaching calls us to protect life and care for the vulnerable," Ms. Gallagher wrote. "Detention should never be the default when humane, community-based alternatives exist and are proven to work."

Bishop Seitz pointed out that under U.S. law, crossing the border without the proper paperwork is a misdemeanor, but "even for people who feel that crossing a border without authorization is a serious crime...are they really willing to say it's worth [risking people's lives]? People who have not committed a crime, people who have lived here peaceably and contributed to their community for years?"

"If they look at those statistics, can they be satisfied with that?"

"Where's the value of life here?" Bishop Seitz asked, "especially for us Catholics, who are so convicted about the life of a person from conception to natural death? Do we just take a pause on that here because they're immigrants?"

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

The U.S. bishops' 'special message' on immigration

During its fall plenary assembly in Baltimore on Nov. 12, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved and released a "special message" addressing the bishops' concern for the current treatment of immigrants in the United States. The message was approved with 216 votes in favor, five votes against and three abstentions. The U.S.C.C.B. noted that this was the first time since 2013 that it has "invoked this particularly urgent way of speaking as a body of bishops."

The complete special message follows below.

As pastors, we the bishops of the United States are bound to our people by ties of communion and compassion in Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement. We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants. We are concerned about the conditions in detention centers and the lack of access to pastoral care. We lament that some immigrants in the United States have arbitrarily lost their legal status. We are troubled by threats against the sanctity of houses of worship and the special nature of hospitals and schools. We are grieved when we meet parents who fear being detained when taking their children to school and when we try to console family members who have already been separated from their loved ones.

Despite obstacles and prejudices, generations of immigrants have made enormous contributions to the well-being of our nation. We as Catholic bishops love our country and pray for its peace and prosperity. For this very reason, we feel compelled now in this environment to raise our voices in defense of God-given human dignity.

Catholic teaching exhorts nations to recognize the fundamental dignity of all persons, including immigrants. We bishops advocate for a meaningful reform of our nation's immigration laws and procedures. Human dignity and national security are not in conflict. Both are possible if people of good will work together.

We recognize that nations have a responsibility to regulate their borders and establish a just and orderly immigration system for the sake of the common good. Without such processes, immigrants face the risk of trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Safe and legal pathways serve as an antidote to such risks.

The Church's teaching rests on the foundational concern for the human person, as created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). As pastors, we look to Sacred Scripture and the example of the Lord Himself, where we find the wisdom of God's compassion. The priority of the Lord, as the Prophets remind us, is for those who are most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger (Zechariah 7:10). In the Lord Jesus, we see the One who became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9), we see the Good Samaritan who lifts us from the dust (Luke 10:30–37), and we see the One who is found in the least of these (Matthew 25). The Church's concern for neighbor and our concern here for immigrants is a response to the Lord's command to love as He has loved us (John 13:34).

To our immigrant brothers and sisters, we stand with you in your suffering, since, when one member suffers, all suffer (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26). You are not alone!

We note with gratitude that so many of our clergy, consecrated religious, and lay faithful already accompany and assist immigrants in meeting their basic human needs. We urge all people of good will to continue and expand such efforts.

We oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people. We pray for an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement. We pray that the Lord may guide the leaders of our nation, and we are grateful for past and present opportunities to dialogue with public and elected officials. In this dialogue, we will continue to advocate for meaningful immigration reform.

As disciples of the Lord, we remain men and women of hope, and hope does not disappoint! (cf. Romans 5:5)

May the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe enfold us all in her maternal and loving care and draw us ever closer to the heart of Christ.

OSV News photo/Susana Vera, Reuters

In Spain, a culture war over abortion breaks out as regional elections approach

The prime minister of Spain wants it to become the next European country to explicitly include the right to abortion in its Constitution. At the same time, the national government in Madrid is pressing regional governments to create lists of medical professionals who are conscientious objectors to abortion.

France became the first country in Europe to enshrine abortion as a constitutional right in 2025. The Socialist minority coalition government led by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez filed a bill in October to change the Constitution in Spain, but analysts believe the proposal has almost no chance of passing. The abortion amendment requires the backing of three-fifths of the lower house, meaning it would rely on support from lawmakers of the conservative opposition People's Party, which is unlikely.

At the time Mr. Sánchez proposed the amendment, political analysts believed his objective was to make abortion an important issue in elections in Spain's autonomous regions, scheduled to begin in December and continue through the spring of 2026. The Socialists are not expected to perform well in regional elections because of multiple scandals and the ruling party's failure to pass a national budget.

Mr. Sánchez needed "to stoke fear of the 'far right' and the supposed 'social cuts' that [a far right] victory would entail," Miguel Gómez, president of Professionals for Ethics, a Catholic organization dedicated to promoting human dignity and the common good in public life, explained in an email to **America**. "Abortion is a card they can play."

The proposed constitutional change would add a new clause to Article 43 of the 1978 Constitution, stating: "The right of women to voluntary termination of pregnancy is recognized." It adds that "the exercise of this right shall, in all cases, be guaranteed by the public authorities, ensuring its provision under conditions of effective equality, as well as the protection of women's fundamental rights."

This latest round of the abortion culture war in European politics broke out at the end of September, when the Madrid city council passed a motion to include information on "post-abortion syndrome," psychological and emotional distress following an abortion, among health data tracked by the city health officials. City council members from the far-right Vox party proposed the measure. It was supported by the center-right People's Party and approved.

The reaction from the political left was swift. Speaking at a conference in Copenhagen, Mr. Sánchez promised, "The government will protect the right to abortion in the face of the sectarian ideology of the P.P. and Vox." By Oct. 14, the government had formally set in motion the legislative process to amend the Constitution.

An important part of the debate has been the question of doctors and nurses who conscientiously object to performing or assisting with abortions. A change to Spain's abortion law in 2023 added a requirement that regional governments, which manage their respective provincial public health systems, establish registries of conscientious

Pro-life supporters pray during a vigil in Madrid across the street from a private clinic that provides abortions in June 2022.

objectors to abortion.

Supporters say it ensures that there are doctors available to perform abortions so the government can fulfill its obligation to make sure women have access to abortion. Objectors to the law, including many doctors, consider the registry a "black list" meant to intimidate and eventually discriminate against medical professionals who refuse to participate in abortions.

In 2024 the number of abortions carried out in Spain was 106,172, according to a government report. Nationally, 78 percent of them were conducted in private clinics that are contracted with the government to provide the procedure. At the regional level, though, the percentage of abortions that take place in public health centers varies.

According to Mr. Gómez, registries of objectors appear to be inevitable in Spain, but what consequences that may have for registrants over the long term is unknown. So far, the group has not found any negative consequences or instances of professional discrimination because of the registry. His organization explains in its "Guide to Conscientious Objection" that Spain's Constitution confirms the right to object to abortion because of conscience with the expectation that medical professionals should be free to do so without fear of institutional sanction or retribution.

Nevertheless, Mr. Gómez warns, "just the registry itself is an attack on freedom of thought and puts doctors at risk."

"If there weren't going to be negative consequences, what would be the point?" asked Manuel Martínez-Sellés, president of the Medical College of Madrid. According to Dr. Martínez-Sellés, many doctors who object to performing abortions have not registered and will not do so. He is among those who have refused to add their names to the list.

Bridget Ryder *contributes from Spain.*

Pope Francis meets with Indigenous leaders in Maskwacis, Alberta, in July 2022.

CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Leo fulfills Francis' promise: 62 Indigenous artifacts returned to Canada

In a historic moment in the long journey of reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Indigenous peoples of Canada, Pope Leo XIV formally handed over 62 artifacts from the Vatican Museums to a delegation of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. The artifacts, including an Inuit kayak, masks, moccasins and etchings that had been held by the Vatican for over 100 years, are to be returned to their original owners, Canada's Indigenous peoples.

According to a joint statement from the Holy See and the Canadian bishops, the event marked "the conclusion of the journey initiated by Pope Francis." The late Jesuit pope had met with leading representatives of Canada's Indigenous peoples several times before he made a "penitential pilgrimage" to Canada in July 2022. There he apologized for the church's role in the abuse and forced assimilation of Indigenous people. In 2023, the Vatican officially repudiated the "Doctrine of Discovery," a collection of 15th-century papal decrees that were used to justify colonial practices.

During his encounters with the Indigenous leaders, Pope Francis promised that the artifacts would be returned to them. On Nov. 15, his successor, Leo XIV, delivered on that promise after he met with a three-member delegation from the C.C.C.B.: Bishop Pierre Goudreault, its president, Archbishop Richard Smith of Vancouver and the Rev. Jean Vézina, the general secretary.

The principal partner of the C.C.C.B. has been the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation. The Inuvialuit are from the Western Arctic region, where the iconic whaling kayak, which the Vatican will now return, originated.

Archbishop Smith said the C.C.C.B. is "working with our Indigenous partners as the artifacts are brought home; they'll receive them, and obviously custody will be given to them. It's the Indigenous leaders that are working on all the logistics of this, and we're supporting it as best we can."

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

When Catholics Confront Authoritarianism

If history is a guide, faithful action will be necessary to defend our nation's values

By Maria J. Stephan

The Catholic Church in the United States today is facing a crucial test. How will the church lead under what the New York Times columnist Ross Douthat calls an "imperial presidency," marked by daily attacks on human dignity, religious liberty and the republican constitutional order? Will Catholic leadership accommodate and adapt itself to authoritarian power? Or will it offer leadership to give hope, oppose authoritarian abuses and defend human freedom?

One of the first U.S. bishops appointed by Pope Leo XIV highlights the stakes and possibilities for the church's response to these challenges. Michael Pham came to the United States as a 13-year-old refugee from Vietnam. Bishop Pham has led interfaith clergy delegations to bear witness and minister at immigration hearings in San Diego. Their presence has caused masked Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to scatter. Courageous Catholic actions, including pointed denunciations of ICE activities by many bishops and lawsuits challenging federal abuses of power, have intensified over the past several months. Driven less by ideological or policy commitments, and more by a deep love for neighbor, these actions have brought priests, nuns and laity into the streets, courtrooms and picket lines.

If history is a guide, this type of faithful action will be necessary to fight encroaching authoritarianism. Broad-based movements, employing a wide range of geographically dispersed nonviolent tactics like protests, boycotts and strikes, have historically been the strongest bulwark

Peter Charlesworth/LightRocket via Getty Images

A row of nuns march on Jan. 1, 1986, to show their loyalty to Corazon Aquino during the "People Power" revolution that saw the ouster of Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos later that year.

against authoritarianism. When large numbers of people from diverse sectors of society come together across divisions, engage in organized defiance and withdraw support from authoritarian regimes—when workers withhold their labor, businesses apply financial pressure, police and military refuse orders to repress protestors, and priests, sisters and lay leaders are in the forefront—they strip autocrats of their power.

Catholics are particularly well positioned to lead such a movement. They are one of the largest religious groups in the United States, outnumbering any single Protestant denomination, and they are spread across the country. Today, 20 percent of American adults identify as Catholic, according to the Pew Research Center. And many of them are directly affected by the Trump administration's immigration crackdown and racialized attacks. More than four in 10 U.S. Catholics are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Fifty-eight percent of Hispanic Catholics were born outside the United States. Many Catholics are likely among those now living in fear of masked agents abducting them in unmarked cars to detention centers, where they risk being lost in a chaotic system. Meanwhile, close to three million Black Catholics are experiencing attacks on the Voting Rights Act and the weakening of civil rights protections.

Religious communities must choose whether to enable authoritarianism or play a critical role in defeating it. Researchers from the U.S. Institute of Peace found that religion has played a prominent role in most major nonvio-

Pope Francis lamented a global 'retreat from democracy.'

OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

A "No Kings" rally in Miller Place, N.Y., on Oct. 18, 2025; Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, speaks at the U.S.-Mexico border wall on Feb. 26, 2019; Dan Hartnett, S.J., speaks with an Illinois State Police officer during a procession near the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Broadview facility in Chicago on Oct. 11, 2025.

lent campaigns globally from 1945 to 2013 that have challenged authoritarian regimes and military occupations. The sociologist Sharon Nepstad highlighted the moral authority and mobilizational power of religious networks, and she found that religious leaders can provide safe spaces for resistance in the face of indiscriminate regime repression, while triggering international pressure on authoritarian regimes.

When the Church Aligned With Authoritarianism

What is the cost when religious leaders accommodate authoritarians, seeking short-term protections rather than demanding freedom for all and a return to democratic order? Powerful segments of the Catholic Church have at times acquiesced to and even supported authoritarian regimes, often driven by a desire for institutional protection, by anti-communist fervor or by ideological alignment. Examples include the Fascist-Vatican alliance in Mussolini's Italy (1929-39), the Falangists of Spain (1936-75) and the Salazar regime in Portugal (1932-68), each of which used church teachings and doctrine to justify its rule. During Argentina's Dirty War (1976-83), sections of the Catholic hierarchy were complicit in the military junta's campaign of terror, marked by thousands of disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings.

In the United States, the Catholic Church's role on issues of democracy and full participation in civic life has also been complicated. In 1925, W. E. B. Du Bois chided the church for ordaining almost no Black priests. In the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin used national radio to praise fascism and stoke antisemitism under the "America First" banner. During the mid-20th century many bishops tacitly accepted segregation, and Catholic schools, parishes and hospitals in the South remained segregated into the 1960s. This institutional reticence mirrored broader patterns of white Christian nationalism and its complicity with Jim Crow.

More recently, following a movement away from its focus on issues of war and social justice in the 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops appeared to many Catholics to give tacit support to Donald Trump in 2016. This was exacerbated by the bishops' choice to continue to describe abortion as the "pre-eminent priority" in their statement on voting, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," rather than update their language to reflect timely concerns about authoritarianism and immigration. Meanwhile, Catholic leaders' responses to the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol and attempt to overturn the 2020 election were, unfortunately, mixed. Some denounced the violence as an attack on democracy, while others remained silent.

Early in Donald J. Trump's second administration, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S.C.C.B., criticized executive actions on immigration, the environment and vulnerable populations as "deeply troubling." But as a group the bishops have offered only limited resistance to accelerated assaults on democratic norms. Meanwhile, MAGA insiders, including Vice President JD Vance and the media strategist Steve Bannon, tout their Catholic identities while advancing policies antithetical to Catholic values, including anti-immigrant crackdowns and mass deportations.

When the Church Defended Democratic Freedom

The Catholic Church has been, at times, a fierce opponent of authoritarianism. Catholic social teaching emphasizes the dignity of every human being, a preferential option for the poor and the pursuit of the common good, and it has served as an inspiration for many democracy movements. Pope John Paul II wrote, "The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the


OSV News photo/David Agren


OSV News photo/Jeenah Moon, Reuters

governed the possibility both of elections and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate. She cannot encourage the formation of narrow ruling groups which usurp the power of the State for individual interests or for ideological ends" ("Centesimus Annus," No. 46).

Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II highlighted solidarity and democratic freedom as key forces necessary to achieve human dignity and the common good. And in 2021, Pope Francis, who grew up under dictatorship in Argentina, lamented a global "retreat from democracy" and warned against the rise of authoritarianism.

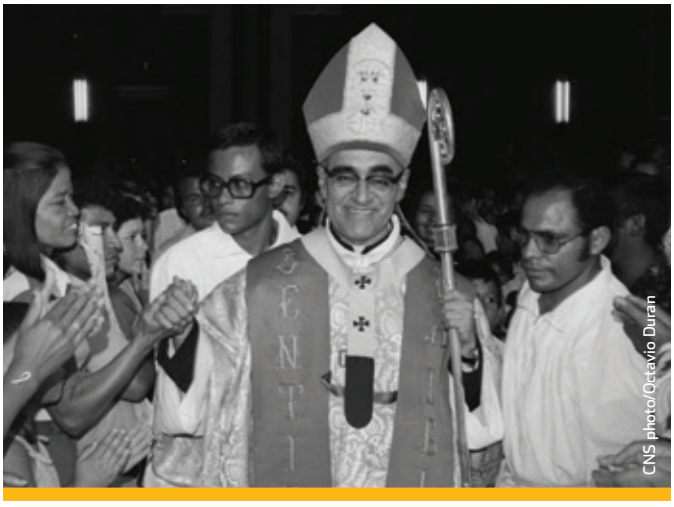
In the United States, the church has proved that it can champion Catholic social teaching in the face of societal and political pressure. In the U.S. civil rights era, Archbishop Joseph Rummel of New Orleans desegregated parochial schools despite virulent opposition from white Catholic parents, lay leaders and politicians. Catholic nuns from orders such as the Sisters of Loretto and the Sisters of St. Joseph marched in Selma and Montgomery beside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Lay activists from the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice organized voter registration drives and interracial dialogues. By the mid-1960s, the U.S. bishops proclaimed racial segregation a moral evil. They issued pastoral letters that linked civil rights to Catholic social teaching and urged Catholics to join marches, host educational workshops and support the Voting Rights Act.

Globally, Catholic communities have been on the front lines of freedom movements challenging state authoritarianism.

Poland. Under communist rule in Poland, the Catholic Church became a force for national unity and political opposition. Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage in 1979 to his native Poland galvanized national pride and resistance to Soviet domination inside Poland and across the Eastern Bloc. The church in Poland provided spiritual and logistical support to the *Solidarnosć* (Solidarity) movement, the first independent trade union in communist Europe. Churches served as meeting spaces, priests acted as intermediaries and message carriers, and religious symbols like the statue of the Black Madonna offered spiritual heft to the mass mobilizations, all of which paved the way to democratic transitions in Poland and across Eastern Europe.

More recently in Poland, following a decade of democratic backsliding under the far-right Law and Justice Party, Catholic leaders joined forces with lawyers and judges, along with youth and women's movements, to press for democratic rule. Many bishops denounced the party's anti-refugee policies and vocally opposed its more overtly anti-democratic efforts, including attacks on the independence of the judiciary. The episcopal conference refused to celebrate Mass during Poland's Independence Day rallies, citing the party's Islamophobia and "un-Christian nationalism." The Law and Justice Party was defeated by a broad-based civic coalition in Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections.

Philippines. In the Philippines, the Catholic Church was instrumental in the "People Power" revolution of 1986 that ended Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorship. Cardinal Jaime Sin, using national radio, called on Filipinos across the country to defend human rights. When Marcos attempted to overturn the results of a snap election that he lost, Cardinal Sin called on the people to support defecting military officers, prompting mass mobilization against Marcos, including the powerful business sector. Nuns and priests, who had been trained in nonviolent resistance, stood together with civilians along Manila's EDSA Boulevard, praying, singing and fraternizing with soldiers, which led entire military units to defect from the president to the side


CNS photo/Octavio Duran

of the democratic majority.

El Salvador and Chile. During El Salvador's civil war (1979-92), much of the Catholic hierarchy—especially those committed to serving the poor—stood against the U.S.-backed military dictatorship and its death squads. Archbishop Óscar Romero's slow conversion away from support of the status quo toward a prophetic stance on behalf of his people culminated in his assassination in 1980 while saying Mass. He has become a global symbol of nonviolent resistance after he publicly denounced state violence and called on soldiers to refuse orders to kill civilians. In Chile, under General Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship (1973-90), the Catholic Church provided one of the few institutional spaces for dissent. Through the Vicariate of Solidarity, the Catholic Church provided shelter, health care, legal aid and employment opportunities for victims of arbitrary detention, torture and forced disappearances. Church-run workshops and cultural programs provided safe venues for clandestine community organizing when political gatherings were banned.

Zambia. In Zambia, the Catholic Church has played a decisive role in advancing democracy. In the 1990s, the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops issued pastoral letters calling for an end to President Kenneth Kaunda's one-party state and urging constitutional reform. When President Frederick Chiluba tried to amend the constitution in 2001 to secure a third term, the bishops' conference joined forces with national Protestant and evangelical church associations, along with the Law Association of Zambia and a coalition of civil society organizations, to organize nationwide campaigns against the constitutional changes. This Oasis Forum organized public forums, issued joint pastoral letters and led civic education campaigns warning that Chiluba's moves threatened Zambia's democratic gains. Ultimately, this nonviolent, multifaith mobilization forced Mr. Chiluba to abandon his plan, preserving constitutional term limits.

Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, the Catholic Church has played a central role in supporting pro-democracy movements and peaceful resistance to authoritarianism under President Daniel Ortega. During the 2018 anti-government protests, bishops and clergy opened churches as sanctuaries for injured demonstrators and those fleeing police and paramilitary violence, while also mediating dialogue between the government and its opposition. Priests publicly denounced human rights abuses from the pulpit, organized prayer vigils and used Masses as occasions to call for justice and nonviolent change. Catholic lay groups helped document repression and provided food, medical care and legal assistance to detainees and their families. Despite harassment and arrests of clergy—including Bishop Rolando Álvarez—the church has continued to act as a moral voice for democracy, human rights and peaceful protest.

Brazil. In Brazil, where the far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro, who was raised Catholic but "rebaptized" by an evangelical Protestant pastor and has forged close ties with the evangelical community in the country, oversaw significant democratic backsliding during his term as president from 2019 to 2023, more than 150 Catholic bishops signed a "Letter to the People of God" in 2020 denouncing Mr. Bolsonaro's handling of Covid-19 and warning that his government was edging toward totalitarianism. Ahead of the 2022 election, Catholic clergy, evangelical Protestants and more than a dozen religious groups issued a public letter criticizing Mr. Bolsonaro's theocratic messaging and his demonization of minority groups. A broad front helped defeat Mr. Bolsonaro electorally in 2022, and after a Bolsonaro-backed violent mob attacked government buildings and attempted a coup, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops swiftly condemned the "criminal attacks on the democratic rule of law." Mr. Bolsonaro was impeached and sentenced to a 27-year prison term.


Alamy/Pap/Jan Morek


CNS photo from Reuters

Individual dioceses and Catholic groups have pushed back against abuses of power.

Archbishop Oscar Romero in an undated photo in San Salvador, El Salvador; President Lech Walesa welcomes Pope John Paul II on his fourth trip to Poland as pope on June 1, 1991; Manila Cardinal Jaime Sin greets former Philippine President Corazon Aquino at a special Mass coinciding with the launching of a new voters' watchdog group in the Philippines on June 10, 1996.

South Korea. In South Korea, after then-President Yoon Suk Yeol abruptly declared martial law in December 2024, the Korean Bishops' Conference condemned the move, labeling it procedurally illegitimate, and demanded that Mr. Yoon apologize, provide an explanation and face accountability. "The Catholic Church in Korea actively supports and stands in solidarity with the Korean people to protect our democracy," the bishops wrote. Two weeks earlier, 1,466 Catholic priests had released a statement accusing Mr. Yoon of neglecting his constitutional responsibilities and polarizing Korean society, and had called for his resignation. Thousands of clergy, religious and lay Catholics demanded Mr. Yoon's impeachment, and he was removed from office in April 2025.

Challenges to MAGA Authoritarianism

Following the 2020 election, during a prolonged campaign by President Trump to undermine election integrity, culminating in the attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, Catholics joined thousands of religious and community leaders in signing a public letter urging Congress to reject efforts to overturn the election. Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego called the assault "the logical trajectory of the last four years of President Trump's leadership."

During the second Trump administration, individual dioceses and Catholic groups have pushed back against its abuses of power. The Catholic Health Association and Jesuit Refugee Service protested cuts to Medicaid, refugee aid and climate programs, many of which were made unilaterally by the White House, bypassing Congress and the courts. The Catholic Labor Network denounced the president's order weakening federal collective bargaining and pressed the courts to block it, while U.S. bishops reiterated support for unions. In May 2025, prominent Christian leaders—including Catholic clergy—united to condemn the Trump administration's creation of an "anti-Christian-bias task force," calling it a dangerous overreach that threatened religious freedom and democratic principles.

In Los Angeles, Catholic leaders responded to sweeping ICE raids and the National Guard deployment by calling for a Day of Prayer for Peace and Unity on June 11. Archbishop José H. Gomez urged parishes to hold special Masses and adoration to support frightened communities. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles, in partnership with local businesses, launched the Family Assistance Program to deliver groceries, medicine, essential supplies and financial relief to families affected by immigration enforcement.

The San Diego diocese launched Faithful Accompaniment In Trust & Hope, an interfaith ministry placing clergy and lay volunteers at immigration court, organizing escorts for people leaving hearings, and offering pastoral presence and accompaniment. Catholic groups have organized de-escalation trainings and virtual webinars on nonviolent resistance and noncooperation. They have initiated public solidarity actions, like the procession that Bishop Mark Seitz led, together with the Hope Border Institute, in the streets of El Paso.

Parishes have also joined interfaith lawsuits to restore guidelines that protect houses of worship from ICE raids. Catholic dioceses like San Bernardino have even issued religious dispensations, relieving parishioners of their Sunday obligation due to fear of deportation, and have refused to permit enforcement actions on church premises. A grassroots coalition spearheaded by the Jesuits West Province—in partnership with other orders of religious men and women, other Catholic advocacy groups, and the U.S.C.C.B.—has organized One Church, One Family, a nationwide initiative that includes vigils outside of immigration offices and detention centers, prayer services at the sites of immigration arrests and rosaries prayed at court hearings.

All Catholics can bring expressions of Catholic faith into pro-democracy protests and public witnesses.

The Catholic Leadership We Need Now

U.S. Catholics have a crucial role to play in upholding fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms that are core to the Catholic faith. There are many ways to bear witness, disrupt injustices and unite around an affirmative vision of what we demand for our democracy. Catholic action is most inspired when it resists injustice and evil without dehumanizing, when it is guided by the redemptive love of Jesus, and when it emphasizes hope and courage over fear and despair.

So what can Catholics do? Bishops, priests, religious and laypeople all have a role to play in challenging authoritarianism through the power of nonviolence and nonviolent action. Here are some action points to remember.

Catholics can speak truth to power. Bishops can use sermons, pastoral letters, op-eds and media engagement to reaffirm democratic principles rooted in Catholic social teaching, and to denounce authoritarian abuses of power and the harmful religious ideologies underpinning them. They can encourage diocesan leaders, heads of Catholic academic institutions and local priests to preach on Catholic social teaching and the importance of democratic principles to the common good.

Catholic media outlets and social media influencers can act. They can amplify powerful pastoral letters like that of Bishop Mark E. Brennan of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W. Va., who wrote, "It is Catholic teaching that an unjust law does not bind in conscience" and invokes the possibility of noncooperation with unjust laws. They can also promote critical discourses on the harmful effects of white supremacy on U.S. Christianity.

Catholics can couple moral protest with an affirmative vision. This vision can be one of a democratic society grounded in respect for human dignity and the common good, like that offered by Robert McElroy, then bishop of San Diego, when he wrote, "We must dedicate ourselves to completely transforming our political and cultural life so as to emphasize unity over division, dialogue over confrontation and character over political and personal gain."

Think of the Second Vatican Council. We can revive study of Vatican II documents on the characteristics of a vibrant political community, "especially with regard to universal rights and duties both in the exercise of civil liberty and in the attainment of the common good..." ("Gaudium et Spes," No. 73).

Move past polarization. Catholic leaders can emphasize that the struggle in the United States is not between red and blue, or Republican and Democratic. Rather, it is between what Pope John Paul II called the "arrogance of power" and the forces of human freedom and a belief in the *imago Dei* (the image of God in all God's creation).

Make a place for expressions of Catholic faith. All Catholics can bring expressions of Catholic faith into pro-democracy protests and public witnesses, immigration hearings and detention centers with hymns, prayer, and public devotions like praying the rosary. They can offer pastoral care, mitigate fear and normalize noncompliance with harmful practices. The "Jericho walks" around 26 Federal Plaza in New York City (the site of immigration hearings), and weekly prayer vigils and protests outside Alligator Alcatraz in the Everglades are good examples of ritualized faithful action. In Illinois, there have been Eucharistic processions to the ICE detention facility in Broadview and "holy nuisance" actions in Chicago to slow or impede ICE arrests. Bringing the power of music into faithful gatherings, protests, vigils and demonstrations can help break fear and unite people in shared purpose.

Catholic schools can offer education and training. Catholic universities, schools, parishes and civic groups can educate the public about the dangers of our current political environment and offer strategies and tactics for defeating authoritarianism, drawing on the rich tradition of Catholic nonviolent resistance. Some examples already happening include webinars, teach-ins, pray-ins and workshops, such as those hosted by the Franciscan Action Network, Campaign Nonviolence/Pace e Bene, One Million Rising, the Freedom Trainers and Harnessing Our Power to End Political Violence. They are all focused on nonviolent resistance and making political violence and repression backfire.

In addition, the Faithful Fight toolkit series offers concrete ways for faith communities to challenge authoritarianism, ranging from bridge-building and survival strategies to noncooperation and civil disobedience. The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a project of Pax Christi International, offers a wide range of scriptural and practical tools and resources related to nonviolence and nonviolent action, and their role in challenging violence and oppression.

Act locally. Catholic parishes can provide sanctuary, aid and violence protection to communities experiencing au-

thoritarian repression. Recent examples include the Family Assistance Program in Los Angeles and brave action by the Hope Border Institute in El Paso. The visible presence of clergy and faith leaders at protests and demonstrations can help de-escalate tensions and mitigate violence targeting protestors, as well as encourage attendance by a broad constituency. In the report "A Matter of Survival," the Kairos Center calls for using church buildings, transportation networks and financial resources to shelter the vulnerable and describes other creative ways of meeting unmet needs.

Call for corporate accountability. Catholic consumers and business leaders can refuse to cooperate with unjust government action and amplify the call for corporate accountability. This could include communities boycotting corporate enablers of authoritarian practices (like Avelo airlines, the main carrier for ICE deportation flights; Home Depot, which has become a staging ground for immigration raids targeting day laborers; and Amazon, which has profited from government contracts and surveillance technologies that enable injustices) until they shift their practices. Consumers could also reward companies willing to stick their necks out to defend democratic principles (so-called buycotts).

Another tactic is putting up "No ICE" signs in businesses and near schools and places of worship. This strategy could also involve using financial leverage like investment and pension funds to influence government and corporate behaviors, or meeting with sheriffs' departments to urge noncooperation with ICE. Noncooperation is the most powerful set of tactics in nonviolent resistance because it involves directly shifting power away from unjust political and economic systems.

Catholics can build a united front and support popular movements. There is an urgent need to bring Catholics together across divides to find common ground in the face of cruel and dehumanizing government practices. It is important for the church to collaborate with organizing, social ministry and popular movements in order to live out its call. As Pope Francis said at a world meeting of popular movements in 2015: "I am pleased to see the church opening her doors to all of you, embracing you, accompanying you and establishing in each diocese, in every justice and peace commission, a genuine, ongoing and serious cooperation with popular movements. I ask everyone, bishops, priests and laity, as well as the social organizations of the urban and rural peripheries, to deepen this encounter.... As members of popular movements, you carry out your work inspired by fraternal love, which you show in opposing social injustice."

Build a bigger tent. Practically, building a bigger tent can involve parish and community dialogues, potlucks, supporting efforts like Nuns on the Bus and deep work within communities. It involves forging partnerships with key pillars like unions, businesses, veterans' groups and professional associations, which boast many Catholic members, and undertaking collective action. The Family Assistance Program in Los Angeles involving active partnership with businesses, the Catholic Labor Network's work with unions, and Catholic public interest law societies' partnerships with immigration rights groups are good examples of cross-pillar collaboration. Large, cross-sectoral nationwide actions, like Unite for Veterans and the No Kings demonstrations, offer opportunities to forge connections and build solidarity across divides. Meanwhile, during a recent meeting between Pope Leo XIV and Chicago labor leaders in Rome, the pontiff highlighted the power of unions to embrace the marginalized and encouraged them to continue to advocate for the dignity of the most vulnerable.

Build global democratic solidarity. Across national borders, Catholics can build global democratic solidarity by shedding light on how Catholics from across the political and ideological spectrum from around the world have challenged dictatorship. That includes Catholic leaders in Nicaragua, like Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who was exiled for supporting nonviolent opposition to the Ortega regime, and Filipino bishops and women religious who were outspoken in their condemnation of ex-president Rodrigo Duterte's inhumane policies as part of a "war on drugs," which included thousands of extra-judicial killings. Strengthening learning and relationships across borders is key to building global democratic solidarity in the face of rising global authoritarianism.

These are just a few ways that Catholics can help to reverse the current authoritarian path the United States is on. The leadership of an American-born pope during this critical inflection point for the United States and global democracy could serve as an antidote to the moral corrosion under an "imperial presidency," while offering hope that we can build a society where everyone can flourish. Guided by faith, moral clarity and strategic nonviolent action, Catholics can and must be a vital force for democratic freedom in the United States and around the world.

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SINGLE & SEARCHING

A ministry works to meet the needs of a growing cohort of Catholics

By Anna Keating

The site of the National Catholic Singles Conference was decorated with a mountain aesthetic. The chandelier in the lobby of the Broomfield, Colo., hotel was made of faux antlers, and behind the front desk was a large piece of fabric art depicting buffalo roaming in a field. Framed prints of aspen trees and snow-covered mountains lined the walls. Looking out the windows, you could see the freeway leading to nearby Denver.

I stood in the lobby as a diverse crowd of Catholic singles mingled, waiting for the conference to begin—men and women in their mid-30s to mid-60s in business casual, of many races and ethnicities. A few spoke only Spanish; most spoke English. Some had visible disabilities; most did not. A few were divorced or widowed, but the vast majority had never been married. Old friends hugged. First-timers introduced themselves. The nervous energy of a blind date filled the air. "Is that pizza? Is the pizza good? Maybe I'll go buy a slice."

I had arranged to meet Anastasia Northrop, 48, who for the past 20 years has been running this conference, which she began in 2005 to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of Catholics who are single and would like to be married. She greeted me wearing a blue shirtdress and spoke passionately about the spiritual needs of single Catholics like herself. "There's lots of stuff in parishes for young adults, but eventually you age out of that, and anyway, 'young adult' is really a euphemism for *single*. People have an allergy to the word single. But it's important for single people to feel seen."

There are approximately 24 million single adult Catholics in the United States. Clergy and religious make up less than 1 percent of that cohort. Statistics also show that Americans are marrying later and less often. In 1980 the average age of first marriage for men in the United States was 25, and for women it was 22. The average age of first marriage for men is now 30, and for women it is 28. The numbers for U.S. Catholics are much the same. Some are choosing capstone marriages (getting married and having children only after a couple has completed their degrees, gotten the job, bought the house and so on) over cornerstone ones (getting married earlier and working on their relationship alongside professional goals).

God's Loving Plan

Dating in one's 30s, 40s and beyond can bring its own challenges, especially while juggling a full-time career. And for many, the dating apps simply are not working. According to a recent survey by Forbes magazine, 78 percent of dating app users have at times felt dissatisfaction and "burnout." There are dating apps geared toward Catholics, like CatholicMatch.com, but for many it is not so simple

to meet enough single Catholics in person. Marriage can increasingly feel like a luxury good, accessible only to the privileged few.

That is where the Singles Conference comes in. The group hosts an annual gathering and has an app that makes it possible for participants to organize in-person meetups. Ms. Northrop hopes the conference will speak to the needs of many of the single adult Catholics in the United States who feel underserved in their parishes, which tend to gear their programming toward families and young people, not single adults.

Ms. Northrop grew up the oldest of nine children in a Byzantine Catholic home. Her parents, Susan and Mark, made a living recording Catholic speakers who gave lectures on what St. John Paul II called the theology of the body. They sold these recordings to parishes—first on cassettes and VHS, and later on CDs and DVDs. Ms. Northrop was homeschooled and began traveling with her family to record theology of the body conferences in her late teens. In many ways, promoting theology of the body is her life's work.

The theology of the body traces its origin to a series of 129 lectures given by John Paul II during his Wednesday audiences in St. Peter's Square between Sept. 5, 1979, and Nov. 28, 1984. The lectures were on love, marriage, celibacy and human sexuality. For John Paul II, the natural world, including the body itself, revealed the mind of God. He wanted Catholics to understand the church's teachings on love and marriage not merely as a series of "no's" but as a living embodiment of God's loving plan for humanity.

Drawing on natural law and the creation story in the Book of Genesis, he expounded on sexual difference and complementarity and how they demonstrate that men and women "find themselves in a sincere gift of themselves" either in married life or in consecrated life. In this worldview, some Catholics understand being single not as a vocation, but rather a liminal or in-between space, although the church also offers examples of Catholic saints—for example, St. Zita and St. Paul—who were single and never consecrated. In 1 Corinthians 7, St. Paul even suggests to the early church that it is better to remain single: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to

> ‘I’ve had love from so many other aspects of my life, but I’m open to finding someone.’

remain unmarried as I am.”

Servant of God Dorothy Day was never married and described herself as “an unwilling celibate.” For most of her life, she loved her only child’s father, Forster Batterham, but he was unwilling to convert to Catholicism and marry her. She refused to wait around for him to change his mind, and she instead devoted her energy to founding the Catholic Worker movement.

Still, the church sees the family as the basic unit of society, and Ms. Northrop recalls longing for just that: “All I ever wanted was to get married and have a big family. Lots of people are single because they prioritized their career. That is not my story.” She says, “I did not intend to be single for 20 years. Being single doesn’t mean that you are worth less.”

Ms. Northrop attributes her singleness to a “culture war,” saying, “A lot of stuff in our world can contribute to the rise of single people. There’s the sexual revolution. There’s the culture war.”

“When women in World War II lost their husbands in the war and were widowed, that was not their fault,” she said, adding that today there are again many “devout Catholic women looking for a husband.” She believes the reasons this time are cultural: “There’s a crisis of men. Radical feminism has made people feel not as attracted to each other. Men don’t feel as needed. Or, if people grew up without a good example of what a good marriage looks like, there can be a fear of commitment.”

The Right Chemistry

Women were indeed more numerous than men at the N.C.S.C. gathering this year. Before the conference, participants organized several days of small-group activities that would allow for more one-on-one time: zip-lining, tubing, a hike, a visit to Denver pilgrimage sites, a baseball game and a concert at Red Rocks. Some came early to take part.

Participants received name tags and perused the exhibitor tables at the conference. At one, a habited nun sold art. At another, jewelry. At still another, Susan Northrop (Anastasia’s mother) sold Catholic books on the theology of the body alongside spiritual classics like *Searching for and Maintaining Peace*, by Jacques Phillippe.

At one table, Madigan Maere, from Dallas, was selling her services as a “Catholic matchmaker.” She said her company, CommiTmentism (the first T is shaped like a cross), was inspired by the TV show “Love Is Blind.” Singles fill out a profile, and then she sets up phone calls for them with potential matches. “If they have conversational chemistry,” she will then send them a picture of the person they enjoyed talking with. (Ms. Maere, 30, met her Catholic fiancé in a honky-tonk. “The Lord put it on my heart to buy an R.V., and my fiancé owns an R.V. repair service,” she says, smiling. Her engagement ring is shaped like a monstrance.)

Shelly Emory, 50, from Orlando, Fla., was promoting the travel agency she runs for Catholic singles called Anchored in Faith. She said the idea for her business came to her during adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. “I was a travel agent and a Catholic school teacher,” she said. “The Lord told me, ‘If you’re going to [be a travel agent], do it for me.’” She continued: “Catholic singles love to travel. One couple came to the N.C.S.C. and then came on one of my trips and got engaged.” Her advice was simple: “Be open. This person may not be your spouse, but they may be your friend; or they may be the person who introduces you to your spouse.” She said she loves the N.C.S.C. and looks forward to it every year.

One attendee in her 40s who declined to be named told me, “My mom keeps telling me it will happen when you least expect it.” But this advice has done nothing to ease her anxiety, so she came to the N.C.S.C. hoping for a match.

Many participants told me how “nice it was to be in a room full of other single Catholics.” Some said they had already exchanged numbers. Others expressed how tiring it can be being the only single person at events where it is common to have a plus-one, like weddings, bar mitzvahs and graduations.

One of the presenters, Mary Beth Bonacci, had the crowd laughing during her presentation on the first night of the conference. She said, “As Catholic [singles], we can offer up even the things we don’t like. We can offer up having no one to blame. Who ate the last cookie? It’s always me! My sister blames her husband for everything. She’s so lucky.” But there was pain in her humor, too. “We get to offer up listening to our married friends’ meet-cute stories.... We can offer up being single at church. The sign of peace? How’s that going for you? You can stand there and count to 20 while all the families hug and kiss.”

Some participants found out about the conference while searching online. Chardell Fredd, a 63-year-old Black Catholic schoolteacher from Birmingham, Ala., said: “I saw an ad for it on CatholicMatch and thought, ‘Why not? It’s something to do.’ I never married. I’m looking at

retirement. I've been blessed with good friends. Friends have been there for me more than family. I've had love from so many other aspects of my life, but I'm open to finding someone."

After a first day of mixers, a performance by a comedian and other events, I went to the restaurant bar for a late-night dinner and beer. There, I met Brian McAlpine, a 61-year-old psychiatrist from Fort Collins, Colo., who has attended the N.C.S.C. four times. He has never been married. He said: "You won't meet a lot of people like me here. I love Pope Francis and think it's OK to be gay. I'm not gay, but some people are born gay, and I think love is love." He doesn't want me to misunderstand: "You will meet beautiful, beautiful people here, people living a kind of purity...but if you meet any peace-and-justice gals, please send them my way."

He said, "There's a passion here for [the theologian and apologist] Scott Hahn, JPII, theology of the body. I want to learn to see the beauty of that stuff. That's why I'm here. But I'm kind of more into the social justice stuff." Another attendee, a woman in her late 30s from Denver who did not want me to use her name, expressed similar feelings: "I'm pro-life, but other than that I am a liberal. I'd love to meet someone who understood."

Many participants described the conference as a "mini retreat." They felt it was more about making friends and growing in faith than finding "the one." Indeed, there were always people in line for adoration and confession, and Mass was full.

On day two, Dr. Alex Sami Harb, a Middle Eastern theology teacher from Alabama, spoke about the Desert Fathers and his Aunt Mary, who never married and did not have kids but "came to everything" and "was like a mother to me." He said, "We're not better Christians if we have a collar or seven children. At the end of our lives, God is not going to say, 'Oh, there's no ring, that's a problem.'" Dr. Harb said that his Aunt Mary was at peace at the end of her life and ready to meet God because "she had loved so well." This kind of inner peace, not checking the boxes—spouse, house, kids—was for him the goal.

Jason King, a theologian at St. Mary's in San Antonio, Tex., agrees. He told me in an interview, "Singleness can be considered a vocation. [The theologian] Jana Bennett argued for this in *Singleness and the Church: A New Theology of the Single Life*. Christian discipleship is not defined by sexuality or marriage, but by one's call to follow Christ. That means singleness, like marriage, priesthood or religious life, can be a way of living out that call."

In another of the day's presentations, the Rev. Thomas Loya, a Byzantine Catholic pastor from Illinois, said in his talk on the theology of the body that men were made "for accomplishment" and women were made to "receive life and love." He drew a woman's body on the whiteboard. It was all circles, like a pinup. He drew a man's body next to hers. It was all triangles, like an action figure. He said that women make visible "the immense tenderness of God." Men make visible "the strength of God." Father Loya's advice to women was to help their men feel "adequate for the job" of provider and protector.

Between speakers, an M.C. asked trivia questions and joked about women not being able to identify a stud finder, or men not being able to identify Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. At one moment, the M.C. asked the crowd,

"Raise your hands if you own your own home." A smattering of hands went up. Then she said, "Look around ladies, these are the eligible bachelors in the room." A 40-year-old woman next to me said, "Oops," and lowered her hand.

Searching for a Social Script

Balancing modern social dating norms and Catholic values is not easy. Kerry Cronin, a professor of philosophy at Boston College, became well known for teaching a class that helped her students grapple with their understanding of a healthy relationship by requesting that they do something seemingly old-fashioned: Ask someone on a proper date. "Dating is a social script that's no longer supported by our culture," she said in an interview for the film "The Dating Project, which follows five single people on their dating journeys." (The film is not associated with the conference.) She said in the interview that modern relationships are often undefined or start with the physical aspect. Going on a real date helps people to reconsider what a relationship should look like.

"It isn't that I'm trying to go back to the 1950s and say, 'Oh, there is some great era of dating,' but there were good things to be retrieved from that era," Dr. Cronin said in the film. "Look, it's a script that works like manners work. Manners are there to make you feel like you know what you're doing and you know what to expect."

The line between script and stereotype can be thin. Some speakers at the N.C.S.C., like Maria Spears Mumaugh, focused on psychology and attachment styles, and helping attendees understand themselves. She said: "Research shows men need to be appreciated. Appreciation is key. We are emasculating men massively, whether we realize it or not. What men find attractive is receptivity.... Let the men in our lives do things for us."

The theologian Jason King says healthy relationships can take many forms in today's society, and that we need a "rich cultural discourse around what good dating relationships look like." He noted the evolution of how our society views friendship: "It used to be a central moral and theological category," he said. "Aquinas put friendship with God at the peak of his *Summa Theologica*. But it gradually disappeared from discourse as social and political life changed."

He said that friendship and courtship "are less discussed today, even though they are crucial human relationships" and "that silence makes it harder to understand how to find and sustain healthy relationships." He noted the usefulness of the distinction in theology of the body between love and use. "It doesn't answer every question about dating, but it does provide a moral compass that can guide Catholics in discerning whether their relationships are truly life-giving."

On a break during the final day of the conference, I went for a walk in a nearby open space. I watched as prairie dogs popped in and out of their tunnels and hungry hawks circled overhead. I saw fellow conference attendees walking. I admired a pair of blue-grey mourning doves perched on

‘Being single doesn’t mean you are worth less.’

a barbed wire fence. After a while, I saw a man and a woman who I assumed to be married were planting trees along their property line. The woman was wearing overalls and a sunhat and was crouched over the earth planting saplings. The man was pulling a hose from the back of the house to water the newly planted trees. There were children’s toys in the yard, and from the outside looking in, it seemed pretty idyllic. And yet every marriage is its own little cloister, a mystery to the outside world. I wondered what non-negotiables had become negotiables? What sacrifices had they made to end up together?

Most of the conference attendees I met were kind people, simply looking for someone to build a life with, and as the days passed, I saw potential couples forming among the 250 attendees—going for walks around the hotel or sitting late into the evening by the firepit, telling stories.

Broomfield, Colo., is a suburb between Denver and Boulder. If being single when you want to be married can feel like living in an in-between space, it felt appropriate that the conference was being held in Broomfield, since it, too, is an in-between place: not quite urban, not quite rural. On one side of the two-lane highways of Broomfield, you see remnants of the Old West, ranches with barns and horses and fields of hay. On the other side of the same road there are newly built office parks for tech companies, rectangles in various shades of grey and beige. There’s the pollution of Denver, but none of the tall buildings or urban life. And if you squint, there are dozens of picturesque mountain peaks in the distance, but when navigating Broomfield traffic, that crisp mountain air can feel very far away. The in-betweenness of Broomfield is not limited to single people. In fact, it is where most of us find ourselves at some point in our lives: We can see what we want, but we’re not certain how to get there from here.

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Synodality Is Sticking Around

Let's get good at it.

By Dylan Perry and Genevieve Jordan Laskey

Over the past few years, we have seen the concept of synodality introduced into church consciousness and become a primary focus in the way church leaders think about how they gather and make decisions. In March 2025, Pope Francis announced an additional three-year phase of implementation of the synodal process.

But synodality was not just a "Pope Francis thing." In Pope Leo XIV's first address from St. Peter's Basilica last May, he said that we "want to be a synodal church, walking and always seeking peace, charity, closeness, especially to those who are suffering." And in a recent interview with Elise Ann Allen of Crux, he reiterated his support for synodality.

Discernment and decision-making in the Catholic Church, a global family of 1.4 billion members, will continue to include collaboration between lay and ordained, careful listening, shared leadership, and co-responsibility. On Oct. 24-26, the Vatican hosted a Jubilee of Synodal Teams and Participatory Bodies. This shows a continued commitment to the synodal process and connects the unfolding implementation phase to the Jubilee Year theme of hope.

Young adults, clergy and bishops participated in synodal circles during the National Catholic Association of Diocesan Directors of Hispanic Ministry conference in Newark, N.J., on Oct. 23, 2025.

OSV News/Theresa Orozco, courtesy of NCADDHM

Synodality Fatigue

When you hear about the implementation phase, is your first thought "Oh no, more synodality...and for what?" If so, chances are you have synodality fatigue.

Symptoms of synodality fatigue can include feeling like you just mustered up the energy to share all of your opinions—or organize others to share all their opinions—and you're not sure where exactly they went or what difference it will make. For some, it includes being worried we'll continue to open theological or pastoral cans of worms that cause confusion or that we are not equipped to deal with. Other symptoms include feeling like synodal-style conversations are uncomfortable or "touchy-feely."

Why do we have synodality fatigue? Synodality involves a cultural shift we are still getting used to as a church. Introducing new processes can be exhausting, especially across large organizational systems like the Catholic Church. We are still working out the kinks of how to do it well. With the next phase of synodal implementation taking place over the next three years, this is our chance as a church to get good at synodality.

The Vatican's "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission Vademecum for the Synod" outlines general principles and attitudes of local synodal processes. These include remembering that synodality is first and foremost a spiritual exercise of discernment, which involves listening to God and others, and is participatory. For local meetings to be considered synodal, they need to include time for prayer, sharing and listening. They also must be inclusive—especially of people who are on the margins. There is also a set of attitudes for participating, including but not limited to openness to conversion and change, overcoming ideologies, and leaving behind stereotypes that are essential for synodal processes.

Those who have participated in synodal meetings most likely experienced a facilitation model called "conversations in the spirit." This model introduces prayer and silence into meeting spaces and allows each participant a time to speak, without being cut off or diverting into discussion. It is great for airing out ideas that need to be spoken without debate, brainstorming or action planning. Conversation in the spirit is a wonderful tool—but it's not the only tool. And when it's overused, it can create more synodality fatigue.

What makes a meeting synodal is not whether it uses conversation in the spirit (though it could), but whether the meeting structure facilitates the journey together of those gathered in a style and a way that upholds the principles of synodal processes, like prayer, sharing, listening and participation. To get good at synodality—and to avoid process fatigue—we need more facilitation structures we can deploy for various synodal-style conversations and gatherings.

In other words, one antidote to synodality fatigue is to get good at synodal processes. We envision creating a go-to repertoire of facilitation techniques that can support synodal conversation that are dynamic, tailored to different meeting needs and easy to use.

Techniques

So what does being good at synodality actually look like? Even those who say they favor a more synodal church might not be able to articulate what that means or what it looks like in practice. It looks like more meetings without pre-written agendas or panel presentations or guest speak-

Synodality is risky because you're giving up some measure of control.

ers. It looks like more Post-its, Sharpies, sticky dots and easel pads. It looks like fewer meandering sharing sessions. It looks like more movement of participants and fewer static seating arrangements. It looks like more time for prayer and quiet woven into existing meeting time.

Synodality is risky because it calls for giving up some measure of control. It also typically means venturing outside what many meeting attendees have grown accustomed to expect. When we show up at a gathering, we tend to think: "Someone will talk at me first." "I will find my seat at the table." "The agenda will be fully set." "We will go around in a circle and I will share when it's my turn." As we continue to get good at synodality and start using a variety of synodal conversation structures, we will begin to change what participants come to expect—both of the organizers and of themselves—at these gatherings.

In writing this essay, we focused on a number of synodal facilitation structures that can be used as part of a go-to repertoire of facilitation techniques for this. You may have experienced some of these—like World Cafe Method, Appreciative Inquiry or Open Space Technology. Variations of these exercises and other unique methods make up a long menu of Liberating Structures, which are a set of facilitation structures designed to foster participation in meetings and gatherings.

We initially connected over the use of Liberating Structures. Genevieve had been trained in Liberating Structures facilitation methods. Brother Dylan was taught by one of the architects of Liberating Structures in graduate school. We love Liberating Structures because it smashes to bits the same old boring meeting agenda and provides more options for listening, discernment and inclusivity without heavy reworking. Here's how it does this, with a few vivid examples from our experience.

In an Open Space model, meeting participants are typically invited to pitch discussion topics that they then facilitate themselves. Topics are not pre-approved; they are suggested on the spot. Once a list of topics and facilitators is generated, everyone is free to choose which discussion they will attend.

This kind of meeting structure can be understandably nerve-racking to meeting organizers. There are legitimate concerns around ensuring that certain topics are adequately covered in meetings, particularly meetings that have taken a great investment of time and money to put together. Open Space seems risky because it can be difficult to envision such meetings becoming other than a free-for-all. Or, some might think the method is an opportunity to surface difficult topics that have already been addressed or cannot be properly resolved by the assembled group.

At Catholic Relief Services, Genevieve led an Open Space session at an in-person gathering with 80 people, and it was a success. Participants expressed feeling honored and empowered. Even though leaders did not rigidly define topics in advance, the right ones were raised. "Parking lot items," including those that needed more time than they had been given in the agenda, were allowed more space than just a breaktime conversation. Participants appreciated the leaders' openness and respected parameters given about realistic expectations for next steps.

One of the conversation's leaders was at first skeptical: "The idea of relinquishing control and trusting participants to shape the conversation in real time felt ambiguous—almost like it created a risk."

However, she ultimately felt that the model increased participant engagement: "People leaned into the topics and tensions that mattered most to them, and natural synergies emerged around issues that needed deeper exploration."

She continued, "Rather than feeling chaotic, the meeting became a space where critical, often-sidelined conversations had room to breathe."

This is just one example of a meeting format that honors synodal principles like participation and listening while embracing movement, spontaneity and empowerment. The format is truly open to the Spirit—sometimes in ways that are not always comfortable for organizers! The model's structure signals trust in the facilitators, participants and the Holy Spirit.

A few years ago, at the 46th General Chapter of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, Brother Dylan was able to experience global synodality in action. Salesian Sister Leslie Sándigo facilitated meetings for three weeks in the Appreciative Inquiry style of large group facilitation. This meeting gathered 70 brothers from across the world to deliberate on initiatives spanning 80 countries.

Initially, spending a lot of time getting to know each other and building shared perspectives felt frivolous when we had a big agenda ahead of us, but the relational approach proved to bear much fruit. This facilitation method allowed the group to start with strengths and a shared understanding across diverse realities. Significant time for prayer and reflection, paired with a process for getting to know one another, helped the difficult deliberations run smoothly and contributed to what was referred to by many as the most

fraternal and least contentious chapter in recent memory. The process also included experts from across the church, which contributed to a synodal approach of collaboration and openness rather than siloed self-referentialism.

Continued Fruit

The creation and development of more synodal-style facilitation techniques will necessarily include learning and adapting from a growing number of facilitation structures, like Liberating Structures, that foster participation and inclusivity. We can learn from these and adapt them with the understanding that for a meeting to be synodal, it needs to be grounded in prayer and discernment and uphold synodal process principles.

Facilitating like this also takes preparation and intentionality. You can't just wing it. We need more clergy and lay leaders who are versed in dynamic, energetic facilitation techniques. We recommend training and communities of practice that are committed to creating and becoming experts in a common repertoire of synodal facilitation structures.

When you learn to liberate your parish council meetings, staff planning retreats, provincial chapters and even your classrooms from top-down agendas and checklists, you will find that those entrusted to your leadership and care will experience the power of the Gospel in being seen, heard and valued. And you will experience increased buy-in, creativity and collaboration.

It is our sincere hope that synodality is here to stay. Some of these methods should ensure that we do more than provide lip service to the concept. Investing in the practical work of getting good at using different facilitation structures for synodality will lead to renewed energy for synodal process and continued fruit in the church.

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Sample Facilitation Exercise for Group Reflection

Adapted from Open Space Technology

Title: Unity and Variety
Description: "Unity" is the overarching topic; the "variety" is the people, topics and formats of discussion.

Group size: 25+ people
Timing: 45-60 minutes
Materials: Flipchart and markers

Preparation:

- Identify the overarching topic or guiding question to discuss. *Example: How might we be called to strengthen our synodal facilitation practice?*
- Consider whether there is any subtopic related to the overarching topic. *Related examples: prayer experience; group dynamics; room configuration; charisms.*
- Consider who can facilitate. Depending on the purpose of the gathering, subtopic facilitators can hold space for a conversation or they could be people with particular insights or expertise to share.
- Prepare a flipchart paper with the overarching topic at the top of the flipchart. Under the topic, begin a numbered list of known subtopics, facilitators and locations.

Opening prayer:

- Pray with "unity and variety" (1 Cor 12:1-11). Use lectio divina or imaginative prayer with this Scripture passage to open the session.
- Ask: Where do we experience both unity and variety in our group gathered here? How can we bring our gifts to this conversation?
- Close by asking the Holy Spirit to help guide your session.

Steps:

- Review the overarching topic and list of existing subtopics, facilitators and meeting locations. Ask if there are any additional subtopics that people feel called to add. Listen carefully and add the subtopics.
- Share that participants will be able to choose any subtopic they feel called to discuss.
- Clarify the amount of time they will have and whether they rotate topics.
- Send people forth to the discussions.
- After small group discussions, close with prayer.

—Genevieve Jordan Laskey

Faith, Freedom and Friendship

Jesuit lessons for America at 250

By William E. Lori

In just a short time, our nation will celebrate its 250th anniversary—a milestone that invites both gratitude and examination.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, the Declaration of Independence was signed, proclaiming liberty and equality for all, even as from the beginning, those words rang hollow for so many who were enslaved, displaced or excluded.

The story of America has always been a paradox of noble ideals, mixed motives, moments of heroism and chapters of heartbreak. And, in a way, that makes it the perfect story for the Jesuits to inhabit—because the history of the Society of Jesus, especially here in Maryland, is just as complex (even as the story of the Archdiocese of Baltimore is complex and paradoxical).

It is a story of great faith and painful failure, of mission and misstep. But also a story of conversion, community and deep hope in God's continuing work. (To repeat, it is a story that the Archdiocese of Baltimore mirrors).

The Jesuit presence here predates the founding of the United States by more than a century. When the Ark and the Dove sailed from England in 1634, bringing settlers to Maryland, among them were Jesuit priests like Andrew White, S.J., who dreamt of a land where Catholics could freely practice their faith and share the Gospel.

In many ways, Maryland was the seedbed of religious freedom in this country. The 1649 Act of Toleration—though fragile and short-lived—planted the idea that people of different faiths might coexist without persecution. And through centuries of shifting political winds, the Jesuits remained—often in quiet perseverance, celebrating Mass in hidden chapels, teaching, baptizing and serving communities scattered along the Chesapeake. Their pastoral imagination was incarnational—close to the land, close to the people, deeply embedded in the rhythms of daily life. They taught that faith was not an abstraction but a way of seeing and serving the world that God loves.

That incarnational spirit eventually built parishes, missions and schools, and, of course, Georgetown College, founded in 1789, the same year that the United States Constitution was ratified and the Archdiocese of Baltimore was founded.

Freedom and faith were intertwined from the start. But as we know, the Jesuit story in Maryland is not only a story of faith; it is also a story of moral failure. In 1838, Maryland Jesuits sold 272 enslaved men, women and children to sustain Georgetown and their missions. It is a wound that remains part of the Jesuit institutional memory, one that Jesuits have continued to confront with humility and repentance.

Yet, even in facing that truth, there is grace—because of the willingness to acknowledge sin. To tell the truth about history is itself a deeply Ignatian act. It is the first step of discernment: to see reality clearly and to seek the movements of God within it. The Jesuit story mirrors America's: full of promise and contradiction; always being redeemed through conversion.

Jesuit Lessons for the American Experiment

Over two and a half centuries, the Jesuits have shaped American life profoundly, not by seeking power, but by forming consciences. The Society of Jesus' schools have taught that education is not merely about achievement but

St. Ignatius Church at Chapel Point in Port Tobacco, Md., was founded in 1641 by Andrew White, S.J. It is one of the oldest Catholic parishes in continuous service in the country.

about vocation—the formation of men and women for others. Its parishes have served as centers of encounter—places where people of every background could find welcome, purpose and direction. Jesuit scholars and activists have wrestled with the moral crises of their times—from slavery to civil rights to nuclear weapons and climate change.

In every age, the Jesuit contribution to American democracy has been the same: to remind this nation that freedom without virtue is fragility, that liberty without truth is license and that true greatness is measured not by wealth or might but by justice and mercy. And perhaps most powerfully, Jesuits have modelled how faith can engage democracy—not by retreating from it, but by entering into it as leaven, conscience and companion.

To use the Ignatian phrase, Jesuits are called to be *contemplatives in action* in the public square, discerning God's movement even in politics and culture.

But what does this mean now, for the church and the Jesuit community in particular, in a moment when our society is so fractured, so angry, so weary?

We are living in an age of polarization: political, cultural, even spiritual. It is tempting to withdraw or to shout, to label or to despair. Yet the Jesuit way—the Ignatian way—offers another path. First, it calls each of us to remember with humility. The grace of history is that it humbles us. The past, both for Jesuits and for Americans, is not pristine (nor is mine!). But remembering truthfully allows redemption to take root.

Second, Ignatian spirituality teaches discernment. In an era driven by outrage and algorithms, discernment is a countercultural act. It requires slowing down, listening for the quiet movement of the Spirit beneath the noise. Discernment asks: What is leading me toward love and communion, and what is pulling me toward division and fear?

Third, the tradition of *cura personalis*—care for the whole person—offers an antidote to polarization. Our politics has become depersonalized, abstract, tribal. The Jesuit charism insists that we see the human face before us. Encounter replaces ideology. Dialogue replaces disdain. Healing begins not in winning arguments but in seeing one another as children of God.

And finally, the cross reminds us that the way forward is not triumph but love. The cross is the great unifier of opposites: strength and vulnerability, suffering and redemption. If the church and the Jesuits can hold fast to the cross in a polarized culture, we can together become the bridge our nation so desperately needs.

The Next 250 Years

The United States remains an unfinished project; it is a country still being born. So too, the Jesuit mission here is unfinished; it is a story still being written by the Spirit. As we look to the next 250 years, I would humbly suggest that the Jesuits' task is not to dominate the national conversation, but to deepen it. To form consciences capable of right judgment and compassion amid complexity. To raise up leaders who can hold tension without losing hope. To model freedom rooted, not in self-assertion, but service.

The challenge before each of us is to make sure that our civic and ecclesial lives reflect the idea at the heart of our faith and our nation: the inherent dignity of every person.

When Pedro Arrupe said that the goal of Jesuit education is to form men and women for others, he was describing the kind of citizens the American experiment most needs: people who use freedom for love, intelligence for service, faith for justice. The Jesuit story in America began on the banks of the Potomac, with small missions and great courage. It has weathered persecution, scandal and rebirth. It continues today wherever Jesuits and their collaborators teach, pray and walk with the excluded, still seeking "to find God in all things," even in this moment of division.

So perhaps as the nation turns 250, a Jesuit prayer might read like this:

> Lord, teach us again to be companions of Jesus in a wounded land. Make us instruments of dialog in a culture of shouting. Help us see in our shared history, not despair but invitation—an invitation to build the kind of freedom that leads to communion and the kind of nation that reflects your glory.

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam, and for the healing of our common home.

Editors' note: This essay is adapted from an address to the Jesuit community of Baltimore on Oct. 23, 2025.

The Most Rev. William E. Lori *is the archbishop of Baltimore.*

Finding Grace in the Laundry Room

When caregiving becomes prayer

By Bianca Blanche

The washing machine broke down again. At 11 p.m., I stood in my basement laundry room. I held my mother's dirty nightgown in one hand and my daughter's soccer uniform in the other. Both needed cleaning by morning. My 83-year-old mother had moved in with us six months ago after her stroke. She needed clean clothes for her physical therapy appointment. My 12-year-old daughter had an away game. This game would decide if her team made the playoffs.

In that instant, surrounded by mounds of laundry that seemed to grow faster than I could clean them, I felt the burden of being stuck between generations—what researchers call the sandwich generation. But as I knelt on the chilly basement floor washing clothes by hand in the utility sink, something unexpected occurred. The steady motion of scrubbing turned into a rhythm of prayer.

Lord make me an instrument of your peace, I caught myself murmuring as I worked on the stain on my mother's nightgown. The words of the Prayer of St. Francis, learned by heart years ago in Catholic school, came out without prompting from a deep part of my soul. *Where there is hatred, let me sow love.*

I'd been feeling bitter—about my brothers and sisters who lived too far to lend a hand, about friends whose biggest problem was picking a TV show to watch, about a church that talked a lot about family values but didn't help women like me swamped by the daily tasks of looking after different generations.

But down in the basement, with my hands in soapy water, I started to see something I hadn't before. This wasn't just washing clothes. This was a way to show love, a simple task that showed kindness in action.

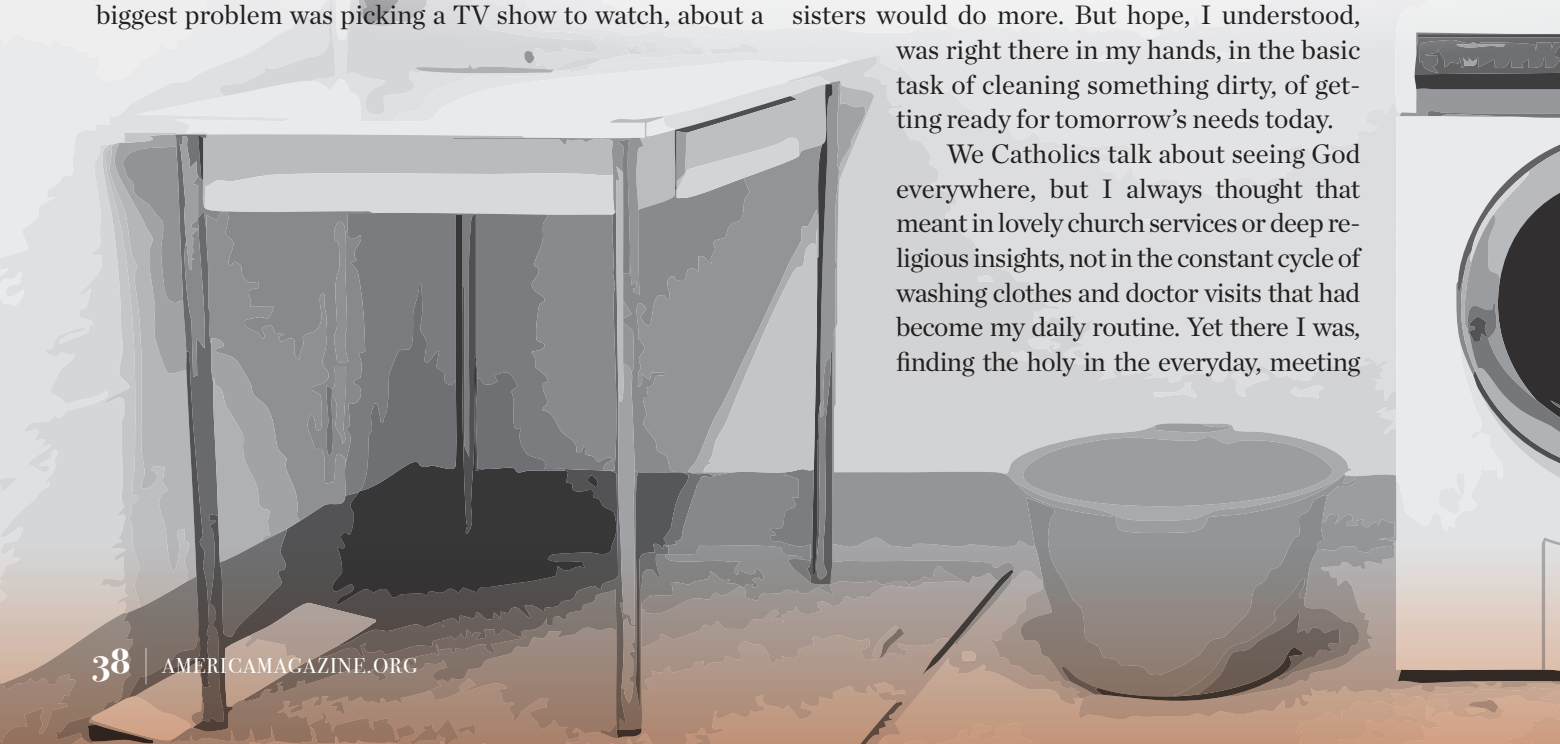
My mom spent 30 years washing my clothes, making my lunches and driving me to practices and appointments. She stayed up with me when I had fevers and heartbreaks. She celebrated every little win and felt sad about every letdown as if they were her own. Now, as dementia took bits of her memory, washing her nightgown became my way to honor that history of care.

And my daughter—strong-willed, set on her goals, growing up too fast—still needed me in big and small ways. Clean uniforms were just the start. She needed to see that taking care of family wasn't a chore but a mission, that you could find pride in helping others, that love sometimes looks like soap and hard work at midnight.

The Prayer of St. Francis kept going: *Where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope.*

I had searched for hope in all the wrong spots—in government programs that could help with my mother's care, in my husband's promotion that might ease our money troubles, in the slim chance that my brothers and sisters would do more. But hope, I understood, was right there in my hands, in the basic task of cleaning something dirty, of getting ready for tomorrow's needs today.

We Catholics talk about seeing God everywhere, but I always thought that meant in lovely church services or deep religious insights, not in the constant cycle of washing clothes and doctor visits that had become my daily routine. Yet there I was, finding the holy in the everyday, meeting



Jesus in the most common acts of helping others.

In my younger days, I believed being faithful meant big actions—maybe joining a religious group helping poor people in some faraway land, or at least being the type of Catholic woman who ran church fundraisers and taught Bible classes. I never thought it might look like researching adult day programs, setting up doctor appointments and, yes, washing load after load of clothes.

As I washed my mom's nightgown and my child's uniform in the same sink, I realized how everything connected. Three generations of women tied together by blood and the many little things we do to take care of each other. Every time we cook a meal, give someone a ride or worry about something, we add to the web of love that keeps families, and the world, together.

Where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

My mom's stroke brought dark times to our family—watching someone I love struggle with typically easy tasks, not knowing what the future held, and feeling swamped and isolated. But we saw some bright spots too. My daughter began to read to her grandma when words became hard, neighbors started to drop by more often, and our family prayer before dinner got deeper and more meaningful.

When I finished washing and hung the clothes to dry, it was almost midnight. I should have felt beat, but I felt fired up, like I'd stumbled onto something big. The laundry room had turned into a chapel, the utility sink a baptismal font, where I'd found—or rediscovered—my calling.

I don't need to write big religious books or lead huge social movements. My job is to care for the people God puts right in front of me, to see their problems as chances to be kind, to find something special in the everyday work of keeping a family going.

The washing machine would get fixed tomorrow. My mom would have clean clothes for her visit, and my daughter would make it to her game. These small wins might not change everything, but they would change everything for the people I care about most.

And in that basement laundry room, I figured out that sometimes the best prayer is not said out loud. It is lived, one load of laundry at a time.

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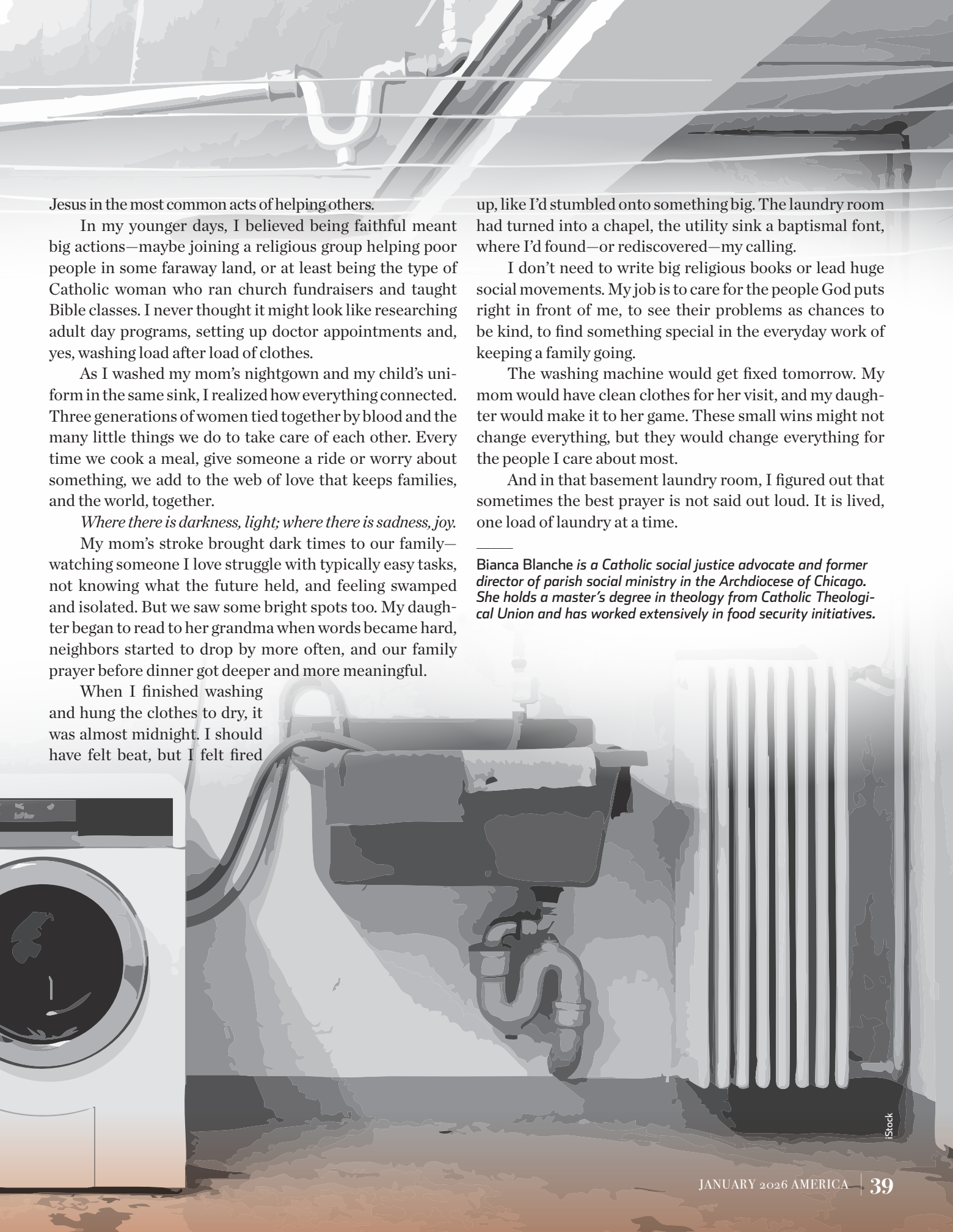

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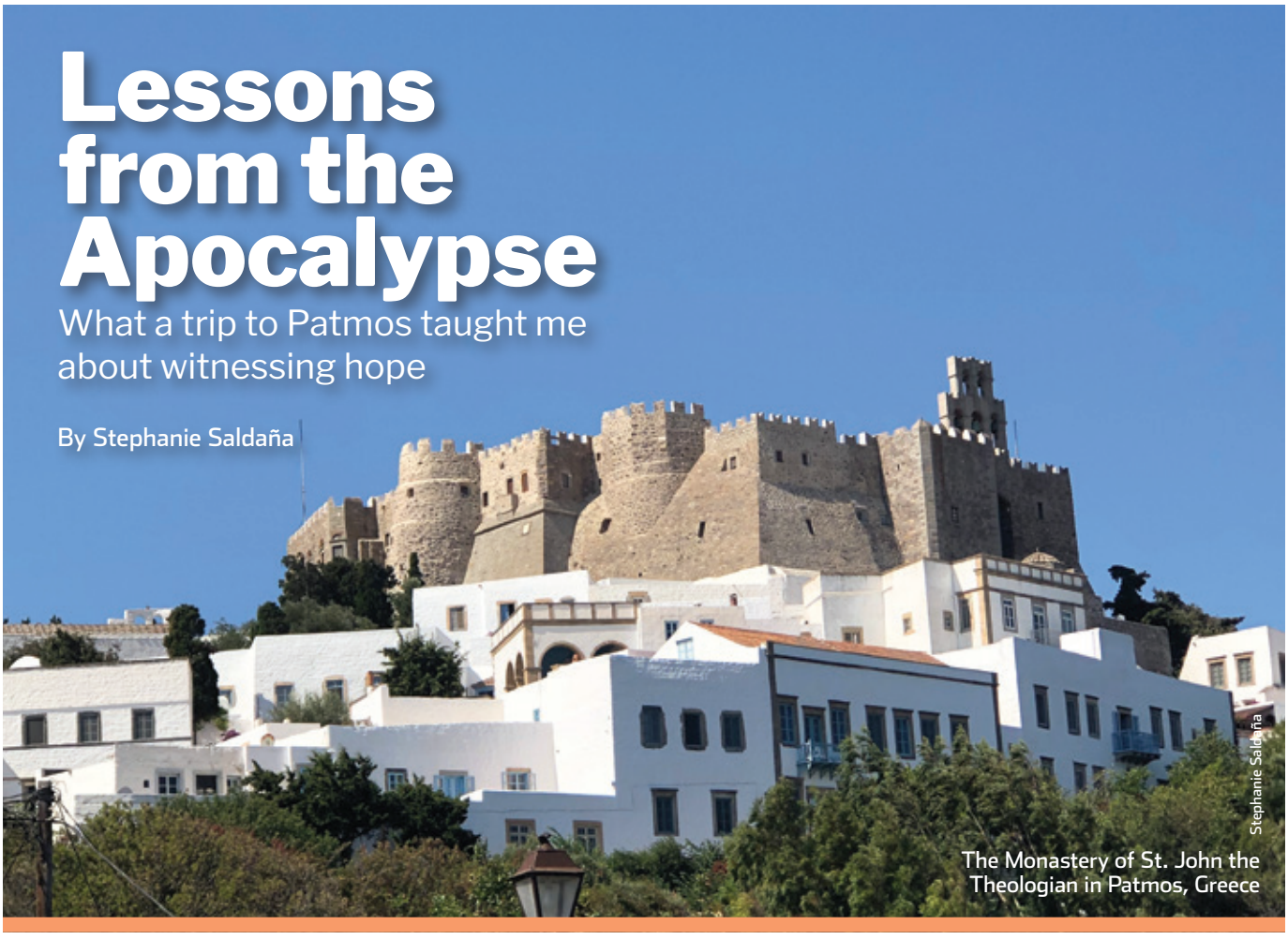
Lessons from the Apocalypse

What a trip to Patmos taught me about witnessing hope

By Stephanie Saldaña



Stephanie Saldaña

The Monastery of St. John the Theologian in Patmos, Greece

There are times when a voyage turns into a pilgrimage. Halfway through, you become aware that the presence of God has become palpable on what was meant to be an ordinary journey, that the details of breakfast, of doors opening and a breeze coming through the window have taken on a deeper resonance. For me, that pilgrimage was to Patmos.

It was the end of the summer, and I was returning with my husband and my two youngest children to the Holy Land, where we have lived for many years. I was uneasy about going back, even scared. With the war ongoing, there were still very few flights, so we decided that the easiest route would be to connect through Greece. My husband, who is a Syriac Catholic priest, suggested that we take a few days to travel to the island of Patmos, where St. John wrote the Book of Revelation.

My husband and two children would go ahead. I would drop my oldest child at university and meet them on the island. As far as I was concerned, it would be a few days of calm before we faced the unknown. I was looking forward to the beach—less so to thinking about the Apocalypse.

One can't just hop over to Patmos. A tiny island, only 7.5 miles long, it has no airport and is only reachable by boat or ferry. I arrived in the middle of the night. It was not until the next morning that I could see where I had landed. I awakened to the sun lighting up the sea and clusters of white houses on the mountains. Boats gently rocked in the harbor. There were fig trees and bougainvillea in bloom, jasmine and tamarisk. Chapels hid around almost every corner, reminding me that Patmos is sometimes called the Jerusalem of the Aegean. We spent hours swimming, the water so clear that we could see fish beneath us.

By chance, we had arrived during the Patmos Chamber Music Festival, and that first evening we traveled to the town of Hora and found our seats in an open courtyard. The atmosphere was electric with anticipation. The festival organizer introduced the concert by explaining that Patmos, as the island of the Apocalypse, was a locus of mysticism and beauty. The musicians embarked on a program pivoting from Mozart to Ravel to Gershwin, violin to piano to clarinet. I cannot remember being so captivated by a performance.

Apocalypse. It was the first time I had ever heard the word used positively, as a source of wonder, even discovery. I knew that the Greek *apokalypsis* means revelation, or un-

In Patmos, I experienced the Book of Revelation in a different light, as a message of comfort and connection.

veiling, but I had always associated it with the English word *apocalyptic*—which usually points to catastrophe. Here, it seemed to evoke the possibilities of the present. There is always something being revealed, even in a violin solo on a summer's evening.

The next day, we drove the narrow roads to the Cave of the Apocalypse, where tradition holds that St. John, in exile in the first century, wrote what would become the Book of Revelation, addressing it to seven churches in Asia Minor. The cave has maintained its simplicity—a humble church of volcanic stone, with wooden benches and an iconostasis. It is easy to imagine him there.

Scholars believe that the Book of Revelation was meant to give the early Christians courage and warn them against assimilating into the Roman Empire. In the cave, I could better understand how the inaccessibility of Patmos became part of its power. Even if St. John found himself on a remote island, God sought him out.

In the same way, the opening lines make it clear that God is aware of each small church in Asia Minor, of what they do and why they matter. *Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches,* the voice tells John. Today, it feels like a whisper to anyone who feels invisible, whether in the church or in history, that their work has meaning.

We continued up the hill to the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, fortress-like and dominating the heart of the island. The monastery was founded in 1088 by Hossios Christodoulos Latrinos, who sought permission to build it in honor of St. John. For over 900 years, it has been a center of prayer.

As I watched pilgrims lighting candles and kissing icons in the chapel of the Virgin Mary, I felt a sense of consolation. A local guidebook describes Patmos as a place of theophany—where, as at Mt. Sinai, God revealed Godself. Pilgrims journey to the island to be drawn into that closeness. That was not what I had expected to find in the land of the Apocalypse. In fact, I had often shied away from the book—frightened by the images of war and famine, uncomfortable with those who have weaponized it to assume that they are on the right side of history. In particular, I despaired every time I saw it misinterpreted to diminish people of other faiths.

But in Patmos I experienced the Book of Revelation in a different light, as a message of comfort and connection, a reminder that God seeks us out, wherever we might be, and knows our struggles. I thought of my friends in Syria, faithfully attending church despite the bomb that had killed 25 people in a Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus. I thought of the clergy in Gaza, who had recently announced their intention to stay in their church compounds to care for those who could not evacuate. I thought of the families still there, celebrating Mass and sheltering.

I remembered the letters and messages of encouragement my friends have sent me from all over the world. Those that I, too, have passed on to friends facing uncertainty. We are still that same church, invited to remind one another not to despair. To persevere requires not only living differently, but also seeing the world in a new way, witnessing hope in the face of what seems hopeless, possibility in the face of what seems impossible.

My friend Father Michael Azar, a Greek Orthodox priest and scholar, calls the Book of Revelation the most misunderstood book in the New Testament. "It is a source of joy," he told me. "At Patmos, St. John reveals that what seems like a defeat is a victory."

During my last days in Patmos, I tried to be attentive. Local swimmers made the sign of the cross before diving into the sea. Pedestrians ducked into churches to light candles. My husband returned from the bakery holding spiced bread stamped with a cross, baked for a saint's feast day.

As we waited for our ferry, a bus passed by with *Apocalypse Tours* written on the side of it, and I laughed. I would never think of the Apocalypse in the same way again.

"I suppose that we're meant to understand that in the arc of history, love will prevail?" I asked my husband.

He thought for a moment, then responded quietly: "Only in the arc of history?"

He was right. Still, even as I write this, I struggle to reconcile that insight with the violence of this moment we are collectively living through. It is a daily work, to be attentive to love breaking through, in a violin note, a prayer before diving into water, a note of encouragement from a friend. A candle still lit.

"We know that one impulse of grace is of infinitely more power than a cobalt bomb," wrote Dorothy Day.

Love is already stronger than death. If only we can live believing it to be true.

Stephanie Saldaña *is the author of* What We Remember Will Be Saved. *She writes from Jerusalem and Bethlehem.*

HARROWING

By Dan O'Brien

The time between
where did He go
not paradise

as He'd promised
the penitent
thief His brother

not yet During
the interval
between the veil

in the temple
torn and the stone
rolled away He

was harrowing
the gates of Sheol
the underground

terminus where
the ancients slept
hopelessly He

slit the earth and
reaped them into
eternity

You are nowhere
and between now
my brother cold

and unburied
upon the slab
before the fire

When I was half-
way between life
and death I woke

after the blade
had harrowed my
belly I tried

to rise and walk
again The nurse
caught my descent

as I catch you
in the praying
lines of this poem

and carry you
until heaven
opens like speech

PROFANE

By Dan O'Brien

How often I've mistyped
your given name as Christ,
as if the son of God
had taken His own life,
though in a sense He did
offer Himself to give
absolution to us.

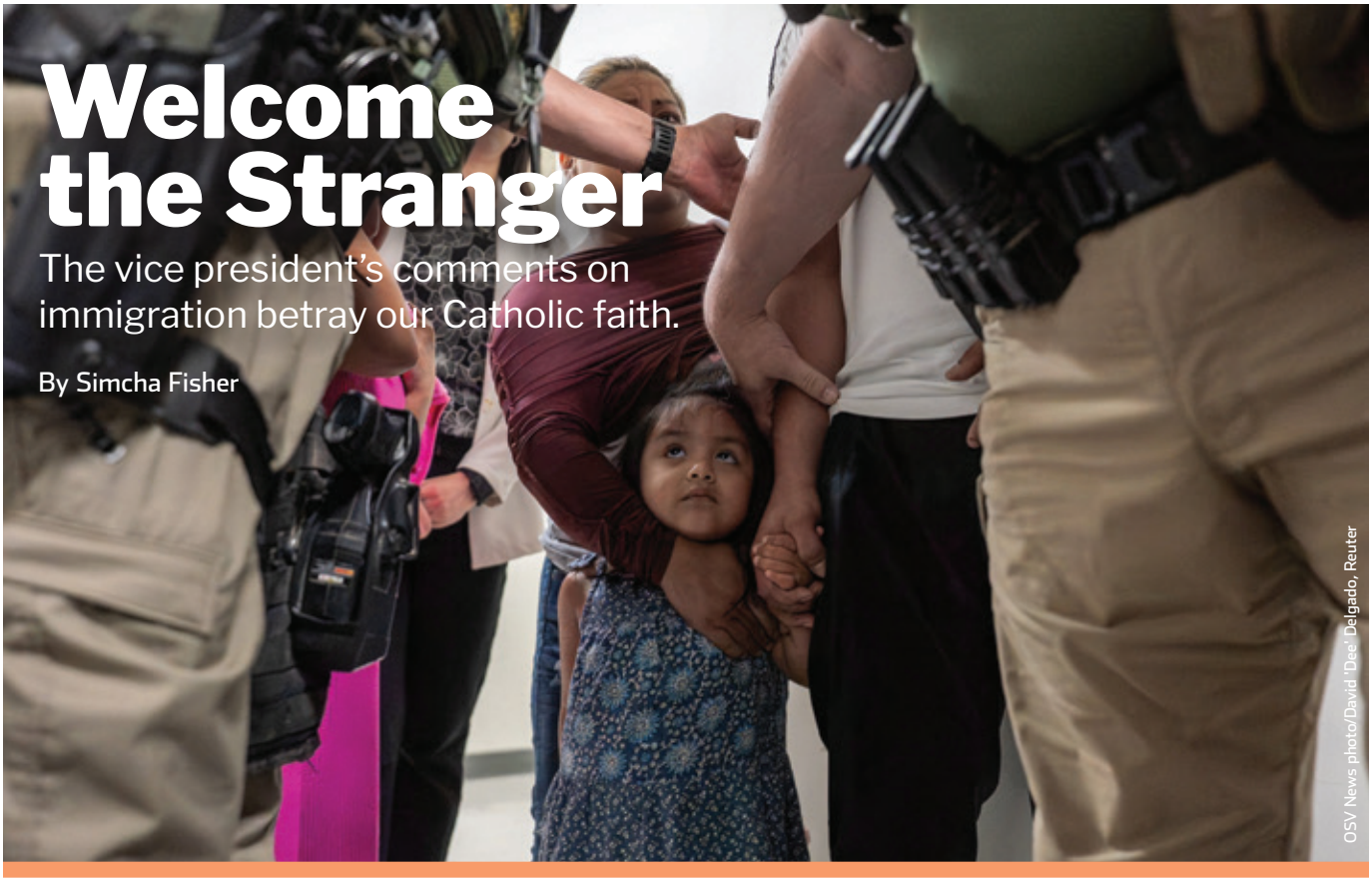
Your mistaken gift, Chris,
was refusing your life.
But you have given me
faith in a salvation
only to be received
if I deny the lie
that suffering is shame.

Dan O'Brien *is a poet, playwright and nonfiction writer. His most recent poetry collections are* Survivor's Notebook *and* Flying on Easter.

Welcome the Stranger

The vice president's comments on immigration betray our Catholic faith.

By Simcha Fisher



OSV News photo/David 'Dee' Delgado, Reuter

When I was growing up, we lived next door to a group home for adults with disabilities. There were probably 15 people living there, not including the old couple who housed them.

Some of the residents paced, some of them sat and rocked endlessly on the porch. Some of them wobbled and scuffed their feet when they walked, and others leered and rolled their eyes at passers-by. They were noisy occasionally, but mostly they were peaceful, if odd.

I hated living next to them. They were just so different. I was embarrassed when friends came over, and I especially hated it when my mother invited one of them into our house. Two of the residents, in particular, would come by a lot.

One who came often was Bill, a tall, lanky man with no teeth and a massive underbite, his cartoonishly bent legs in old-fashioned, flapping trousers. He didn't say much, but he liked to hang around the kitchen or the porch, and my mother would let him come and go as he liked while she was home. I hated it when he came over, because he was just so different.

I was also ashamed to feel that way. It was normal and understandable that I would be scared and abashed. But nobody gave me any guidance (that I can recall) about how to behave around them or how to think about them. All I knew was that my mother felt strongly that they should feel welcome in our house, and I didn't feel that way, and I felt bad about it.

I was 6 years old.

And I was not the vice president of the United States.

Here is what the man who is our vice president said in October 2025 on a podcast, describing what happens when immigrants are allowed to live in our country, in the same neighborhood as people who were born here:

> [W]hat happens is 20 people move into a three-bedroom house. Twenty people from a totally different culture, totally different ways of interacting. Again, we can respect their dignity while also being angry at the Biden administration for letting that happen, and recognizing that their neighbors are gonna say, "Well, wait a minute, what is going on here? I don't know these people. They don't speak the same language that I do. And because there are 20 in the house next door, it's a little bit rowdier than it was when it was just a family of four or a family of five."

Then he said: "It is totally reasonable and acceptable for American citizens to look at their next-door neighbors and say, 'I wanna live next to people who I have something

A child looks up at federal immigration officers as her father is detained at the U.S. immigration court in the Manhattan borough of New York City on July 25, 2025.

in common with, I don't wanna live next to four families of strangers.'"

When I was 6, I wished those different people next door lived somewhere else, instead of next door to me. But I was ashamed of feeling that way. I knew it was wrong.

Mr. Vance is not only an adult; he is a Catholic. And yet he has somehow emerged from the church's Christian initiation process for adults—which presumably required him to read at least parts of the Old and the New Testament—believing that we, the people of God, are entitled to unchallenged homogeneity, and that it is reasonable to reject people who make us uncomfortable because of their differences from us.

It may be common or even understandable to feel this way, but it is shameful to act on it. It's shameful not to try to get past it and to be better. It is cowardly, it is selfish, it is un-American, it is un-Christian to reject people just because they are different. On this particular podcast, Mr. Vance did his usual sleight-of-hand, furthering the idea that refugees who present themselves at the border have committed a crime (which is not true) and calling President Biden's immigration policy "open borders" (which it wasn't). He didn't even claim this hypothetical family next door broke laws or threatened anyone or behaved immorally or were dirty or lazy or unkind. Just that they were different, and that there were a lot of them. And that was enough to reject them.

This is such a flagrant insult to our faith that I don't even know how to explain it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that prosperous nations "are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin." That is what the catechism says. Even if it means you end up living next door to people who are still learning English.

Holy Scripture, over and over again, commands us to welcome the stranger, rescue the refugee, feed the hungry and house the homeless. Not recklessly or thoughtlessly, and not in a way that endangers your family. But, yes, in a way that might make you feel uncomfortable. Yes, in a way that stretches you a little bit. Yes, in a way that makes you open a door you would rather leave shut. This is our command, for our country and for our individual families. This is our faith. When you do something for your brother, you are doing it for Jesus.

I believe in borders. I understand that a nation needs to defend itself, and every immigrant needs to work out

It is un-American and un-Christian to reject people just because they are different.

how much assimilation will make life functional in their new home without losing their old identity. It is a nuanced and complex thing.

What JD Vance is teaching is not nuanced or complex. He is simply saying, "If you're different, go away." And it's not just a single out-of-context clip from a podcast. The entire immigration policy of the Trump administration says the same thing: Be rich, be white, be like everyone else, or go away.

Sometimes they don't give them a chance to go away; they just break their bones, imprison enough every day to populate a small city, tear gas a Halloween parade, use children as hostages. An overwhelming majority of these immigrants have no criminal record. They're just different.

This administration wants to set itself up as somehow Christian. Let them, then, do the bare minimum: Welcome the stranger.

Let me tell you another story about the people next door. One year, my family was celebrating Passover, as we did every year in accordance with our Jewish heritage. The seder includes drinking several ceremonial cups of wine, and at one point, we also pour a cup for Elijah the prophet. Then, on this one special night, the youngest person in the family gets up and opens the door to welcome Elijah in, just in case he wants to show up. Usually, the door stands open for a while, and that is all that happens.

One year, we opened the door and old Bill walked in. My parents looked at each other. Then they did the only thing that seemed reasonable: They offered him Elijah's cup. He drank it with satisfaction, set down the cup and then walked out again.

That was the day Elijah came to our house, and you cannot convince me otherwise. Imagine if we hadn't opened the door?

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.*

OSV News photo/Bob Roller

Pilgrims cheer as Dave and Lauren Moore and others perform on July 19, 2024, during the National Eucharistic Congress at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

The Modern Sounds of the U.S. Catholic Church

By Phil Hurley

The first encounter I remember having with praise and worship music was in the summer of 1993 during a pilgrimage to World Youth Day in Denver.

I recall a few first impressions. I wondered why the people in front of me were putting their arms in the air as they sang. I had seen crowd surfing at music festivals, but this was something else. I was also struck by the instrumentation and quality of the music. It was driven by the same guitars, bass, drums and impassioned vocals as the music I liked on the radio. Indeed, it was very different from the kind of music I heard at my home parish.

Perhaps most surprising, for a teenager who had been drifting away from the Catholic faith, I felt my heart moved by the words of the songs. They addressed God with an intimacy I was not used to, almost the way one friend would speak to another. Singing and eventually praying those words was among the many graces that would help keep me in the church and introduce me to God in ways I never would have imagined.

Fast forward a few decades to July 2024, when I found myself in a congregation of some 50,000 people at the National Eucharistic Congress, praying similar songs (and maybe some of the same ones) during evening Eucharistic adoration at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. I was at exactly the midpoint of the end zone, in the first row of the upper deck, with worshipers stretching out behind, on the field below and to either side of me in the dimly lit arena. The gentle roar of voices immersed me in praise music, as thousands of hands reached out toward the Eucharistic Jesus on a small, spotlit altar in the center of it all.

From that first encounter in Denver until that moment in Indianapolis, this genre of church music has played a role

in my own personal prayer and in my ministry. At times I pray with worship music in recorded audio and video form. I participate in prayer gatherings featuring worship music and sometimes help lead these sessions. On an amateur level I can also play and sing some of these songs myself.

In recent decades praise and worship has also continued to be part of the soundtrack of the U.S. Catholic Church. Across all Christian denominations, worship music can be found both in Sunday morning church services and on Spotify playlists. Worship artists often record studio or live versions of their songs, which can find a place streaming on someone's phone as well as on their lips at church. As the cultural and linguistic face of the church changes and develops, praise and worship music is being creatively adapted to remain an important part of the journey.

What Is Praise and Worship Music?

Contemporary worship music arose during the latter part of the 20th century, primarily in non-Catholic churches, in both white and Black communities and then moved into Latino and other recent immigrant communities. One way praise and worship music came more widely into Catholic circles was through ecumenical and Catholic charismatic events and groups. The embodied expressions of prayer common in these settings—such as the raising of hands in prayer—was sometimes passed along together with the music. In many church settings, praise and worship is often used alongside other forms of sacred music, such as traditional hymns, gospel and congregational songs. At times, songs originally written in these other genres are recast in full or in part in a more contemporary worship style.

Most worship music is written in a more or less pop, folk or rock style and is played with the corresponding instrumentation. Guitar, keyboards, bass, drums and individual lead singers using simple harmonies are common. Jeff Rice, who for years served as a parish music director in the Diocese of Raleigh, N.C., says the genre broadened over the years "to include more sophisticated songwriting, arranging and production." Modern worship can vary from a full-on electric and amped sound to a more pared-down acoustic vibe. Often the same songs are adapted in turns to those different arrangements. Acoustic arrangements can sometimes veer in a chamber folk or bluegrass direction, including instruments like the violin/fiddle, cello or mandolin. Some millennial or Gen-Z groups bring electronic pop and dance sounds into the mix.

Lyrically, praise and worship is typically known for intimate prayer from the heart of the believer to God. Sometimes, especially in songs from several decades ago, the words might be taken almost completely from Scripture. More recent songs often still have some scriptural basis but are also what Michael Magree, S.J., a theology professor and musician at Boston College, calls "devotional poetry." It shows the influence of both the 1980s and '90s contemporary Christian music scene and pop music in general, blending older worship music styles into a kind of love-songs-meets-praise. These songs are often written in the first-person singular, sung directly to God (sometimes specifically to the Father, Jesus or the Holy Spirit). Less frequently, songs are in the first-person plural: "We" sing to God together, or horizontally—believers singing to each other words of encouragement and faith.

As a young adult, I was immediately struck by the intimacy with God modeled by worship songs, a closeness I was invited to enter into by singing these words of simple and direct communication. This is the ultimate goal of worship music. Dave Moore, who founded the Catholic Music Initiative with his wife, Lauren, and also served as director of music at the 2024 Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis, puts it this way: "It's not about loud drums and guitars. It's not about performing like a secular rock band. It's about creating an atmosphere that leads hearts to be vulnerable with God. It's about using the tools and instruments you have to help people pray and encounter God."

Discerning Devotion

In a Catholic context, discernment is often needed regarding when and how to pray with contemporary worship music. According to Rice, "Pastors and musicians should analyze lyrics to determine if they are theologically worthy of putting on the lips of the assembly and are relevant to the particular celebration and part of the liturgy."

Members of the Vigil Project are seeking to do just that. Founded to "collaborate with musicians around the world to make music for every moment of the Catholic journey" and to support Catholic musicians, the organization records and leads prayer with music in multiple genres. Vigil Project leaders have pointed out that while some praise and worship music can appropriately be used in parts of the Mass, perhaps more often it can be helpful in Catholics' devotional and prayer life outside of Mass, in those other important parts of our faith life between Sundays.

"It seems the Holy Spirit is re-awakening Catholics to the nature of devotion," says Andrea Thomas, the project's co-director. "To the reality that our personal prayer flows from, and back to, the sacred liturgy—the source and summit of our faith. Music is meant to serve these many different moments of the life of a Catholic from the pew to our homes and the many moments in between."

"The praise and worship style, seen from a Catholic worldview, is well suited to this devotional expression of the everyday, and we need Catholic music makers to chase

Across denominations, worship music can be found both in Sunday morning church services and on Spotify playlists.

excellence in this arena just as much as in the liturgy," she added.

Some local music leaders are leaning into developing that kind of excellence in Catholic devotional spaces. In November 2024, I attended an event for Catholic musicians in the Baltimore area, organized by local parish music leaders and the recording artists Corrie Marie and Clint Felts. The presentations offered spiritual and practical tips for leading music in a contemporary worship style during an hour of Eucharistic adoration. Much of the content was focused on helping Catholic musicians hone some of the elements of the craft that have long been done with high quality in many non-Catholic congregations. For example: Get a good sound system, and a skilled sound tech to run it; try using projected lyrics on a screen; as a band, defer to and follow the singer in the lead role for each song.

Music Methods

If training is needed for some Catholic musicians to skillfully lead music in the praise and worship genre, it can also be an adjustment for many Catholics when most of their experience of music in church has been that led by a choir or cantor at Sunday Mass. When comparing the experience of a church choir leading a congregation holding hymnals to the experience of a small band leading praise and worship music with lyrics projected on a screen, I have often used the analogy of comparing a classical symphony to a jazz quintet.

Both the choir (with choir director) and symphony (with conductor) tend to follow the music note-for-note and word-for-word from sheet music, moving from verse to verse or part to part with precision and predictability. When done well, the result is beautiful, inspiring and (arguably in both cases) prayerful.

With both the contemporary worship band and the jazz quintet, the flow of the music can be, at least at times, more spontaneous. There is a basic melody line, and some set lyrics or notes. But each time a song is played (or prayed), the musicians—often led in a more informal way by one of their own instrumentalists or singers—can "riff" on the theme. The jazz musicians add innovative solos, extend this or that section, and the audience often applauds solos during the songs. The worship group repeats or loops back to a previous verse or chorus, and the leader sings or speaks additional impromptu words of prayer to God, sometimes directly addressing those gathered and encouraging them to join in the song of prayer.

Here one can note a parallel between both jazz and contemporary worship and the tradition of Black spirituals and Gospel music, with their interaction between audience or congregation and musicians. Again, when done skillfully the results can be aesthetically pleasing and deeply spiritual.

With a balanced combination of musical prowess, good liturgical training and a gift for leading more spontaneous prayer, Catholic praise and worship music leaders discern and distinguish when best to use or not use these various elements. For example, when using a contemporary worship piece appropriate for the opening song of the Mass, the music leader will often follow the verse/chorus pattern of the song as written and not attempt to lead the congregation into extended spontaneous praise as the presider is waiting at the chair to begin Mass. In an extended period of Eucharistic adoration, however, the same music leader can spend more time with the song, adding extended instrumental moments, encouraging people to speak to God from their hearts, and repeating a verse multiple times to allow for a more contemplative prayer experience.

Gathering Genres

Even though many capable church music leaders can make these discerning adaptations, it's no secret that there is sometimes passionate debate over the role of contemporary worship music in Catholic liturgical and devotional life. In some U.S. Catholic parishes and organizations, it is never heard. In others, it is a staple both during Mass and in other contexts. In a growing number of Catholic settings, both parishes and church movements alike, praise and worship is intentionally being incorporated with other genres such as traditional hymns and post-conciliar liturgical compositions.

One parish now well known for use of contemporary worship music is Church of the Nativity in Timonium, Md. Nearly all Masses at the parish feature music led by a worship band while also incorporating traditional Latin chant for many of the Mass parts. Tom Corcoran, a longtime lay leader at the parish, says, "There should always be the creation of contemporary songs of praise and worship because as Psalm 33:3 says, 'Sing a new song to the Lord.' The psalms invite us to write new songs that praise and worship God. If we are going to reach the next generation,

OSV News photo/Bob Roller

Catholic musician Matt Maher performs on July 20, 2024, during the National Eucharistic Congress at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

we must continue to create music that will resonate with them. Contemporary worship music is successful as long as it continues to use Scripture to teach us about the Lord and remind us of the intimate relationship he wants with us."

Indeed, contemporary worship music is common in many movements and organizations dedicated to ministering with teenage and young adult Catholics. It has been a staple for decades in youth conferences sponsored nationwide by the Franciscan University of Steubenville, which now regularly draw many thousands of participants each summer. Damascus, a Catholic ministry that sponsors camps and missions for young people, has its own musical arm, Damascus Worship, which composes, leads and records original music. The Fellowship of Catholic University Students (Focus) also incorporates praise and worship into its popular conferences and campus ministry.

In these youth spaces, as well in some parishes, there is a frequent combination of contemporary worship with other liturgical music and traditional hymnody and chant. A common example are holy hours of Eucharistic adoration that include the traditional Latin hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas, *"*O Salutaris Hostia*"* and "Tantum Ergo,*"* during the opening exposition and closing benediction with a series of contemporary songs (and, often, times of silence) in between. This pattern was on display at the Eucharistic Congress in 2024.

Some artists also blend original worship compositions with elements of ancient hymns or well-known Catholic liturgical songs. Matt Maher, arguably the godfather of Catholic contemporary worship, has recorded a full-band cover of "Come to the Water" that adds an original praise-style bridge to the 1978 song by John Foley, S.J. On a 2013 album recorded live in large part, his song "Adoration" includes verses of the "Tantum Ergo" in English.

Dave and Lauren Moore, while releasing and leading music in the praise and worship genre, also intentionally offer original Mass settings with the easily singable melody recorded and released (in Spanish and English) in a variety of arrangements, such as organ/choir, orchestral, contemporary and acoustic. The online albums of their "Mass of Peace" and other settings are organized according to these languages and genres, to make it easy for church music leaders to find the sound they are looking for.

"We lost our preference for the style of music," says Dave Moore. "Everything became about how we could make the sacred text come to life today through music; it became about how we could make it the most beautiful, simple expression so people could remember it and sing it with ease."

This balanced and holistic view of music for Catholic liturgical and devotional prayer is, in my opinion, one of the most hopeful and fruitful approaches being led by some of the current generation of Catholic musicians in the United States. It seeks not just to thread the needle of the "liturgy

CNS photo/Andrew Pugliese, The Tablet

Members of the Voice of Praise Ensemble sing during Mass on Nov. 17, 2019, at St. Therese of Lisieux Church in Brooklyn, N.Y.

wars" among camps preferring traditional chant, standard Catholic songbook liturgical songs, or praise and worship music, but also to sew together the best these styles have to offer into a tapestry (or maybe more of a quilt) that can amply cover and warm the hearts of a wide variety of worshipers to an encounter with God.

Multicultural and Multilingual

Sometimes, Catholic spaces that are already diverse musically because of ethnic or language diversity can help lead the way in finding this beautiful balance. I was blessed to serve for a time in a large, multicultural parish of the kind becoming more common in many places in the United States. This type of parish dynamic can provoke both challenges and a potentially helpful impetus to break people out of the mold of church music genres they are accustomed to. The ubiquitous drum set and other percussion at a lively Spanish-language Mass can get other Mass-goers to think about adding some rhythm to their organ/piano and cantor format, while the traditional hymns at an English-language Mass might introduce these richly theological texts to some Latino groups for the first time.

Contemporary worship music, which itself is increasingly multilingual and multicultural, can enrich these interactions and foster cross-cultural prayer. Indeed, many worship music artists and groups, including Catholic groups like the Moores' Catholic Music Initiative and Thomas's Vigil Project, now often write and record music in both English and Spanish, sometimes in collaboration with other musicians.

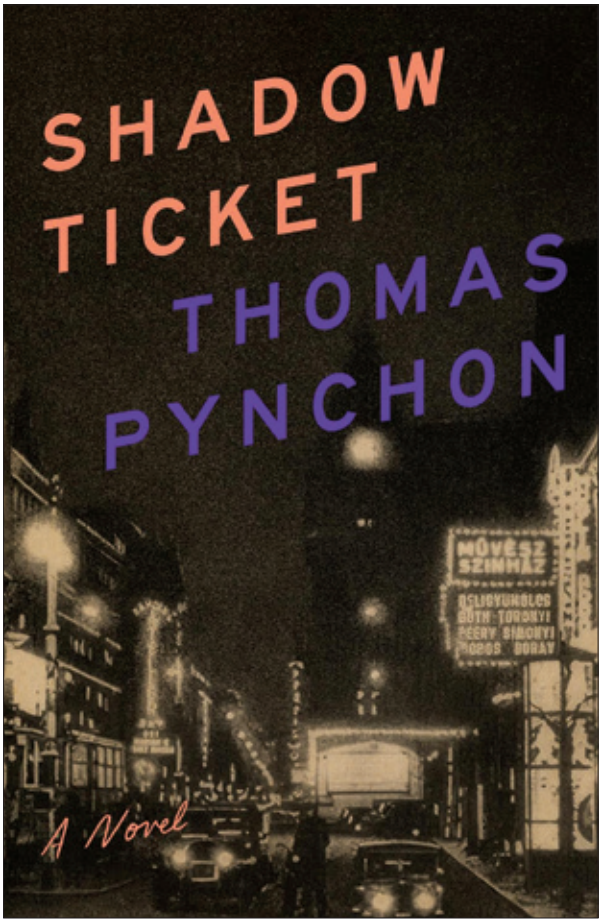
Dana Catherine, a Catholic musician originally from North Carolina now based in Nashville, and the Argentine singer Athenas recently collaborated to release a bilingual song based on the two great Commandments: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. The song's writing and production also included partnerships of native Spanish and English speakers.

"I love that creating a song for both Spanish- and English-speaking communities can bring us together," says Catherine of the partnership. "Often, we can be very separated in our worship due to language and cultural differences, but our hope is that through this song and others like it, we can come and worship God together." Athenas adds: "I think working together with Dana and sharing different backgrounds, styles and even languages is a great way to give testimony to how we are one big family in our Catholic Church."

As a young kid I grew up singing both traditional hymns and '70s and '80s Catholic liturgical songs at church. As a young adult, contemporary worship music helped draw me back into the relationship with God that is both the source and the goal of all these genres. Ministering and praying in Spanish as well as English has helped expand my horizons of prayer and music still further. Thanks be to God we all have such a rich and varied soundtrack to draw from for our continuing journey as American Catholics, "singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God" (Col. 3:16).

Phil Hurley, S.J., *serves as national director of the U.S. office of the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network and is a member of the Jesuit Tracks musical collaborative.*

REALISM FOR SURREAL TIMES



Penguin Press / 304p $27

Shadow Ticket, Thomas Pynchon's latest (and, for an octogenarian author, possibly last) novel, opens with a bang.

It is 1932, and Hicks McTaggart, a private eye in the employ of Unamalgamated Ops and former strikebreaking thug-for-hire (a "torpedo," in the novel's noir patois), is "ankling his way" around Milwaukee's Third Ward. He is keeping an eye on some suspicious types and hungrily sniffing Italian food that he can't afford this late in the pay period, when a bomb goes off. Hicks soon gets caught up in intrigues that have him all over Milwaukee and Chicago, on a transatlantic cruise, and in Belgrade, Budapest and Fiume, the port city in Croatia.

His adventures and misadventures involve European motorcycle gangs, a cocaine-crazed Interpol officer, a Czech golem driving a Bugatti, German-American Hitler sympathizers, bizarre foods ("Wisconsin lasagnas with dead raccoon somewhere in the recipe"), an international cheese syndicate, a submarine gliding beneath the ice on Lake Michigan, a search for "a lamp so stupefyingly tasteless it makes nonsense of the tasteless-lamp category itself," airborne gyroscopes and—the list goes on quite a while.

Shadow Ticket is the ninth novel from the famously media-shy author. (The most frequently used adjective is *reclusive*, though this seems to imply something amiss with a man who avoids the global celebrity apparatus rather than the other way around. He has, however, twice been a guest on "The Simpsons.") Pynchon—now, with Don DeLillo, one of the last living members of the generation of writers that also included Philip Roth, John Updike and Cormac McCarthy—first made a splash in 1963 with the densely allusive novel *V*, long considered a classic of the American postmodernism of that period. His third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, won the 1974 National Book Award for Fiction, and his mixing of genres, convoluted narratives, jokey dialogue and display of wide learning, in that novel and others, have been a significant influence on many writers (perhaps most clearly David Foster Wallace, and *Infinite Jest* in particular).

Like Pynchon's previous works, *Shadow Ticket* is about atmosphere, style and slangy dialogue, not the plot. But to an even greater degree than in Pynchon's other novels, the plot here does not quite cohere. Whether this is a flaw or irrelevant comes down to a matter of taste for the postmodernist style that the literary critic James Wood, two and a half decades ago, termed hysterical realism.

That maximalist profusion of detail and incident characterizes *Shadow Ticket*, though this new novel, like its two predecessors *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and *Inherent Vice* (2009), might also be categorized as zany neo-noir—or slapstick noir—for developing the noir tropes of the 1930s and 1940s (private detective, crooked cops, hazardous dames, barbed repartee, colorful criminal characters—all of it in a convoluted tangle) in a less hardboiled, wackier direction. This comes through largely in Pynchon's lingo, a mix of the familiar and odd coinages that seem to be Pynchon's own: *dame*, *pins* (for legs), *kisser*, *heater* (for gun) and *speak* (for speakeasy), of course; but a dame is just as often a *tomato*, a cigarette a *gasper*, a coffin a *wooden kimono* and a diamond ring a *sparkler* (including one so large "you'd expect to find one or more Black Hawks skating around on it").

Shadow Ticket, like much of Pynchon's oeuvre, transpires in a transitional era with gathering gloom in the periphery. In Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, the groovy, trippy late 1960s are starting to overtake the staid early 1960s. In *Inherent Vice*, the heady (so to speak) atmosphere of the psychedelic, bohemian 1960s begins darkening after the Manson murders and as Nixonian surveillance and policing get more aggressive. In *Vineland*, the last lingering fumes of the 1960s dissipate as the Reagan regime gathers strength. In *Bleeding Edge*, the carefree 1990s come to an

abrupt and fiery end with Sept. 11.

The year 1932 functions similarly in *Shadow Ticket*, though here the sense of impending darkness is greater. The post-war (World War I, that is) good times have come to an end with the Great Depression, and over in Europe, Nazi influence spreads. In Hamburg, one of the later destinations in the book's dizzying peregrinations, neighborhoods once "solidly Social Democratic and Communist are suddenly all infested with brownshirts" singing the "Hitlernazionale," labor's beloved "Internationale" but with fascist lyrics, and in the jazz clubs, "[blues] licks have largely given way to major triads."

There is thus a tension, a form of dramatic irony, in the reader (if he or she knows even a smidgen about World War II) knowing the fate that will soon befall the world, even though the characters are only beginning to glimpse "the relentless vortex of a sinking world order."

A few passages in the final pages of the novel suggest that *Shadow Ticket* is, at least obliquely, a counterfactual history, that the things that have transpired in America have made it entirely different and more frightening.

But Pynchon being Pynchon, it's not all gloomy and portentous. It's also zany, even cartoonish. Characters with both prolonged and fleeting presence in the book have names like Vivacia Airmont, Stuffy Keegan, Glow Tripforth del Vasto, Boynt Crosstown, Angie "Vumvum" Voltaggio, Don Peppino Infernacci, Giancarlo Foditto ("or Dippy Chazz, as he's known in the lounges of the underworld") and Squeezita Thickly; and they hang out in places with equally colorful names—Club Hypotenuse, Velocity Lunch, the Crossword Suicide Café, an ocean liner called the Stupendica.

There are the lengthy names of organizations and principles, with acronyms that, depending on the reader's receptivity to this kind of humor, can be funny or quickly wear thin, such as the Bureau Administering Golems Employed Locally (BAGEL), the Law of Unintended Effects (LOUIE) and the most memorable (and maybe most juvenile), the Semi-Military Entity Greater Milwaukee Area (SMEGMA). And there are the zany images, whether metaphorical, such as the "sombrero of uneasiness," a gumshoe's premonition of bad things on the way, or literal, such as a scene in which the nightclub chanteuse April, after watching a movie with Hicks McTaggart, had "eaten six cubic feet of popcorn and was using his tie to wipe the butter off her fingers with." This latter quotation is also an example of the sort of breeziness and deliberately incorrect grammar that is one of the hallmarks of Pynchon's style.

By the end of *Shadow Ticket*, readers have accompanied McTaggart on all manner of hijinks, with an enormous cast of characters. Taken individually, the scenes are often amusing for their high-velocity oddness and Pynchon's great capacity for verbal inventiveness—the names and acronyms, but also descriptions of "precarious sunlight," dives where "the smell of beer is generations deep" or "lunch dramas passing like storm fronts."

Like Pynchon's previous works, it is about atmosphere, style and slangy dialogue, not the plot.

On the other hand, it's hard to know what it all adds up to.

Even more than in some of Pynchon's previous works, *Shadow Ticket*'s many subplots and intrigues lead one to another without necessarily resolving or seeming to progress toward a resolution; the wacky antics are the point as well as a subversion of most conventions of narrative. To return to the "hysterical realism" designation, though, it now seems, in 2025, that whether through the uncanny prescience of a great artist or a chance confluence of stylistic tics and preferences, Pynchon's fictions are responding to a world that continues to get weirder all the time—realism for surreal times, if you will.

The frenetic pace, the paranoia, the global conspiracies that may or may not exist, secret organizations both laughable and terrifying, the absurdity, the pervasive ironizing of everything, the layers of illusion and confusion with no solid reality behind it all—from a certain perspective, the world of *Shadow Ticket*, and much of Pynchon's corpus, looks, in our world as it is now, more realistic, more plausible, than what has traditionally been called realism.

However much or little one enjoys *Shadow Ticket*, it is true as much for our world as it is for that fictional one that, to quote Pynchon, things "will never go back to the way they were, it'll all just keep getting more, what the Chinese call, 'interesting.'"

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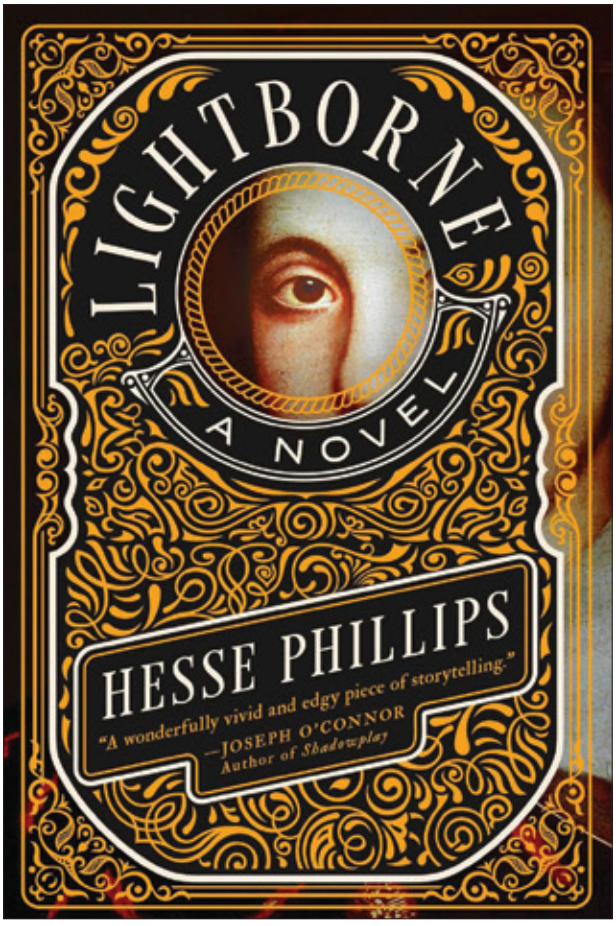

Pegasus Books / 448p $28

Christopher Marlowe was one of the pre-eminent playwrights of the Elizabethan era. He also lived a life of controversy and scandal marked by accusations of covert Catholicism, atheism, espionage, libel and homosexuality. He was killed at age 29 by Ingram Frizer, a man employed by Marlowe's patron, Thomas Walsingham. Frizer claimed the killing was in self-defense and was instigated by an argument over a dinner bill, but Frizer's potential ulterior motives have been the source of significant debate in the past four centuries.

In her debut novel *Lightborne*, Hesse Phillips portrays Frizer as Marlowe's lover, caught up in a world of intrigues he does not fully understand.

The book opens with Marlowe playing the eponymous title character in "Tamburlaine," his most famous play. Marlowe is more than a playwright and actor: He is also a spy, part of the elaborate network that answered to the Privy Council and Queen Elizabeth's secretary, Sir Francis Walsingham. Their goal is to ferret out information concerning enemies of the state—primarily Catholics trying to restore a Catholic monarch to the throne.

But Marlowe has a problem: He, too, might be an enemy of the state. This is an era where church and state were tightly intertwined, and to be insufficiently Anglican was both a sin and a crime. He was also repeatedly suspected of sodomy. This comes forth in his writing. Marlowe's play "Edward II" offers a dramatization of the life of the 14th-century English king, who was suspected to have had a male lover. Edward was allegedly killed with a hot poker because of this, and Marlowe invents a murderer, Lightborn, whose name is an Anglicization of the Latin Lucifer.

The book follows Marlowe, Frizer and others, like fellow spies Thomas Walsingham and Robin Poley, as Marlowe is brought before the Privy Council to explain his alleged manifold crimes. He runs from inn to safe house to inn and ponders a way to get to the European continent. Along the way, we learn the drama of his life, the men he has loved, the plays he has written and his anger, knowing there will ultimately be no escape.

I was initially worried about this book: Kit Marlowe gets killed by his gay lover? How far is this novel departing from fact? This anxiety was heightened when I acquired a copy and saw it described on the cover as "edgy." But I shouldn't have worried. There is sex and violence and torture, but none of it is presented in a shlocky, slasher-film kind of way. The sex scenes are also not pornographic. Frizer's imagined backstory is the closest the book gets to feeling "edgy," and that part is somewhat overwrought, but even that is not presented as shock for the sake of it.

Lightborne feels sensitive toward the fact that it is about real people, and it is well researched. The author, who has a doctorate in drama from Tufts University, spent over a decade writing the novel, and it shows. The chapters often begin with real quotes from the 16th century—a reminder that this is based on a true story. This adds something to the book: It is not some spy-novel invention. The characters are often in pubs whispering about the latest political and social developments. The world of people in service to queen and country who are running tricks and schemes feels very romantic, until the next mention of missing teeth and fingers from torture. We are reminded that being a spy is all a fun game right up until the moment it isn't.

Heavy on dialogue, the novel offers just enough physical description of London at the time to give a mental image of the city without being overburdened by it. While the author mostly hews to modern English in the dialogue, there is a hint of an earlier vernacular, which is occasionally aggravating. Direct quotes from 16th-century documents retain the original spellings.

Overall, this is not only a story about a very specific historical moment but also a story about love, fear and trying to find one's place in a complicated world. I do not have a background in either theater or British history, but I en-

joyed the book despite being unfamiliar with much of the narrative context.

It is not a didactic novel, which is refreshing in an era of the Y.A.-ification of adult literature. The characters are real people—so some are terrible. Dick Topcliffe, the government torturer, is presented as affable in a slick, used-car salesman way, a reminder of the banality of evil. Marlowe, the ostensible hero, is also an aggressive alcoholic, who has sold out others just as he is now being sold out.

Most of the characters are gay or bisexual men. Some cheat on their wives and abuse and betray their lovers. Yet there is no attempt to make a statement about what it *means* to be a queer Catholic or Anglican. A man telling another man, "Farewell sweet Robyn, if as I take thee, true to me. If not adieu, *omnius bipedum nequissimus*" ("the most wicked of all bipeds") in the letter he writes before he is to be executed, not knowing if his Anglican lover is the one who has revealed his Catholic plotting, is statement enough.

This is also not a religious novel, but it is a novel about religion. It is a reminder that today's Church of England was once an active promoter of violence in the name of enforcement of the faith. Many of the Jesuit martyrs in England met their end at the hands of Dick Topcliffe. In *Lightborne,* the archbishop of Canterbury has his own militia. One of the others before the Privy Council at the same time as Marlowe is John Penry, the Separatist preacher who was executed in 1593. To be insufficiently supportive of the Reformation was a problem; but so was being *too* in favor of it. To disagree with the church was to disagree with the state, and treason was a capital crime.

The historical specifics of Marlowe's life and death may have been lost to time, but it seems undoubtedly true that they would have been different if disagreements in matters of religion had not been viewed as sedition.

Ultimately, *Lightborne* is an engaging novel that tries to offer an explanation to one of the mysteries of English literary history. Phillips weaves together real history with fiction in a way that reads like something that could have happened and creates a charming, if irascible, Christopher Marlowe.

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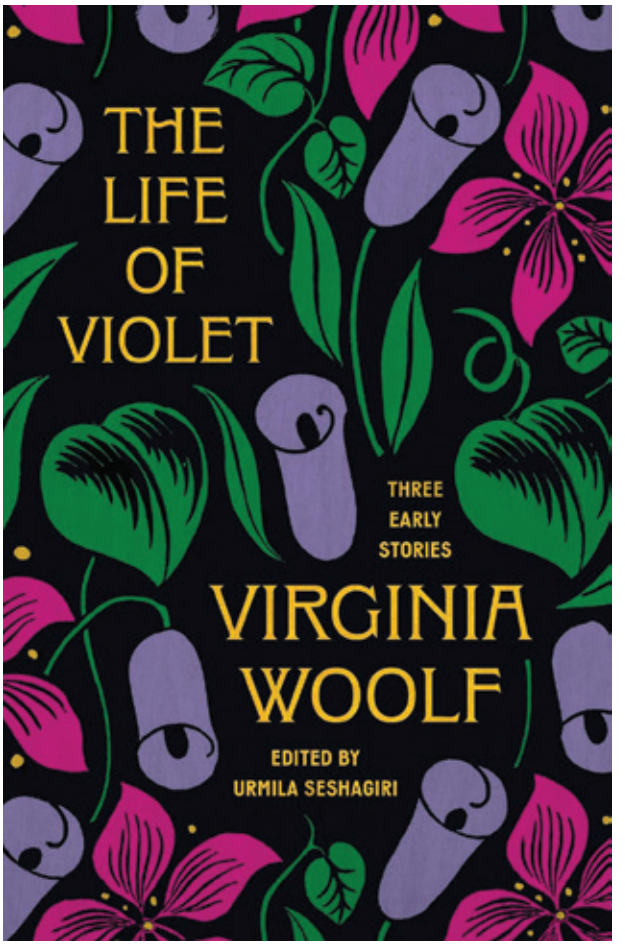
BE NOT AFRAID



Princeton University Press / 144p $20

I'm not sure what I was expecting when I cracked open Virginia Woolf's *The Life of Violet: Three Early Stories*, but it certainly wasn't a giantess who inhabits a magical garden and fights a sea monster in Tokyo. I have been an avid fan of Woolf's novels since reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in high school, so I am familiar with the complicated women who grace her pages. Yet Violet Dickinson took me by surprise.

The Life of Violet is a set of three interconnected short stories that function as a mock-biography of a giantess named Violet Dickinson as she engages in self-discovery and embarks on adventure. The collection was released in its edited form by Princeton University Press for the first time in early October.

Despite being the most recently released literature from Woolf, the work actually predates her other published fiction. According to the research of the book's editor, Urmila Seshagiri, who discovered and compiled the short-story collection, Woolf wrote these stories in 1907—eight years before her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published in 1915.

Woolf's youth is felt in the text; the stories are whimsical and playful compared with her later work.

This would make Woolf 25 when she wrote the stories in *The Life of Violet*. Her youth is felt in the text; the stories are whimsical and playful compared with her later work, maintaining a lighthearted tone throughout. Woolf adopts the voice of an unnamed male narrator who acts as the biographer of Violet's unusual life. He frequently interjects the narrative with comments about Violet, the world she inhabits and his approach to writing about her.

The stories in the collection are unpredictable. There is no cohesive storyline for much of the work, the setting is often quite vague, and there are sporadic references to otherworldly elements interwoven among the happenings of modern life. But underneath the fantastical elements is a narrative about a woman who refuses to sacrifice joy and ambition for virtue, who craves independence, who uses her mysterious "goddess-giantess" powers for good. On its most fundamental level, *The Life of Violet* tells a story about a woman who loves to make friends and loves to laugh.

Virginia Woolf met the real-life Violet Dickinson in 1902, when Woolf was 20 and Dickinson was 37. As she is described by Seshagiri in the book's preface, Dickinson was "more than six feet tall, very wealthy, and unmarried," and the duo "met regularly, exchanged voluminous letters, and traveled together." Most important, Dickinson served as an "insightful reader" for Woolf in her early years of writing. She was a source of feedback and advice for Woolf and clearly served as a source of inspiration as well.

In her fiction, Woolf depicts her friend as a benevolent giantess whose personality is even bigger than her oversized body. The first story in *The Life of Violet*, "Friendships Gallery," begins with Violet's birth, where it quickly becomes clear that she is a very special child. "There was never such a child for growing," Woolf's narrator tells us, before explaining that "Miss Violet Dickinson grew to be as tall as the tallest hollyhock in the garden before she was eight..."

Violet's impressive size is a concern for her family, especially the aunt appointed as her godmother. Upon attending her first ball, Violet is told that since she is not "in any way attractive," she must be resolutely virtuous: "[I]f you are not to be a Maypole of Derision you must see to it that you shine forth as a Beacon of Godliness."

But Violet's sense of humor allows her to break out of this constructed dichotomy and the constraints of social expectation. Her ability to laugh at herself (and at the opulent cross necklace her aunt makes her wear to the dance) unlocks a friendship with a dance partner, changing the experience from a stifling social formality to "Rattlin' good fun."

The power of laughter to build relationships and change experiences for the better is one of the most consistent and impactful themes in *The Life of Violet*. Violet repeatedly uses humor to win the interest and affection of those around her—and it seems there has never been such an inspiring and magnetic friend. The narrator describes Violet's impact on companions as one of infectious confidence and motivation, quoting them as exclaiming: "I too have a fire within me," "I too sing a delightful song," and "My God, I can write!" after being "struck" by Violet's sharp mind and quick tongue.

Violet's fantastic capacity for human connection continues through the collection. In the second story, "The Magic Garden," she encounters an "old ruddy bent gardener" beat down by his repetitive, menial tasks. With a friendly "Good day," Violet blows his world wide open. He begins to tell Violet all about his life, his work, his wife. He is humanized and empowered by her friendliness.

These moments of connection are not acts of charity for Violet; they have reciprocal and wide-reaching ripple effects that shape her as much as they shape her acquaintances. The gardener's comments in turn inspire Violet's ponderance over her desire to "build her own house." When she tells the gardener's story to the woman hosting her, her host also confesses the appeal of having "a cottage of one's own." Violet harnesses compassion such that it benefits everyone around her.

By the end of "The Magic Garden," Violet does have her own cottage, where she reads, gardens and hosts friends. Her peaceful existence in her own space where she is "very happy alone" offers a preview of the most central themes in one of Woolf's most iconic feminist works, *A Room of One's Own*, which was published in 1929.

Though the third story, "A Story to Make You Sleep," is distinct in both form and content, the importance of joyous female friendship does not fade. This installment is told by the same narrator, who chooses to tell this particular story by embodying a mother telling her child a bedtime story. The story is set in a fictional version of Tokyo that is plagued by a sea monster. Here Violet has become a mythological goddess who collaborates with another goddess (they are also called "princesses" in the text) to protect the people of Tokyo.

Yet again, humorous outlooks on both themselves and

the world around them are an integral part of the women's identities; laughter is both the vehicle of their power and the result of their influence on the people who come to celebrate them. It is fitting that one of the last scenes in the story leaves the two goddesses laughing together as they take down the monster and vanish into the ether.

In the entirety of *The Life of Violet*, Violet's ability to laugh and make others laugh is not admirable simply because wit and joy are desired traits but also because humor has a tangible ability to transform experiences and relationships. That which was awkward and stilted is now joyful; that who was once a stranger is now an intimate confidant and companion. What was scary or concerning is now really nothing to worry about—certainly not at the expense of good humor.

It is in these moments that Woolf's affection for the real-life Dickinson shines through. It's easy to imagine Woolf emulating Dickinson and inserting herself among the fictional Violet's friends, who find her to be endlessly amusing and enlightening, inspiring them to reach for their own great heights. This is perhaps the most consistent theme in the collection: a real appreciation for the way that someone's bright shine can bring you into the light alongside them.

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PLASTIC PARADISE

LIttle, Brown / 400p $32

> We must shift America from a needs to a desires culture, people must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old had been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America. Man's desires must overshadow his needs.
>
> —Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers in the Harvard Business Review, 1927

In Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si'," he observes that "modern anthropocentrism...views the cosmos... as a mere 'space' into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference." While Alexander Clapp's *Waste Wars* makes no mention of Pope Francis, the book provides a stunning illustration of the pope's insight.

The creation of a consumer culture—which the above epigraph from the Harvard Business Review called for a century ago—has resulted in ecological devastation. For starters, Clapp writes, our consumption patterns "now stand responsible for more than

Clapp traveled thousands of miles to observe the accumulations of trash around the world.

half of all carbon emissions. Every day, the world discards 1.5 billion plastic cups, 250 million pounds of clothes, 220 million aluminum cans, 3 million tires." These nearly ungraspable numbers are among the staggering revelations with which Clapp confronts us. And it's what each of us is contributing to every day.

Governments keep evidence of our wasteful ways at a distance. Garbage dumps are put in remote spaces that few even see—that is, until the trash in them becomes so mountainous that they can be spotted from the highway. New dump sites have to be found; sending trash abroad becomes attractive despite seemingly prohibitive shipping costs. Wherever it lands, we all pay when toxins or microscopic bits disperse, contributing to the travails of what Pope Francis called "our suffering planet."

Clapp tells the story of developing countries in need of roads, bridges and all manner of infrastructure in the decades after World War II. A number of poor countries willingly agreed to accept waste in exchange for payments. They also found a new way to profit from it. Clapp draws on a study by the environmental historian Emily Brownell to explain that when the oil crisis drastically increased the price per gallon of gasoline in 1974, the petrostates deposited petrodollars in U.S. banks, which in turn began lending money; "countries from Costa Rica to Cameroon now began borrowing cash from Wall Street."

Like those who find that their incomes will not cover the costs they have deferred to credit cards, many of the poor countries discovered that their weak economies left them unable to pay the worsening debt. Trash offered a way out; it became a commodity. Certain waste materials like cans, cardboard boxes and newspapers could be shipped to desperate countries as "resources" to be remanufactured and sold. But that led to "the blurring of any meaningful distinction between 'resource' and 'waste.' By the 1990s, if you didn't want something within your borders anymore, one recourse was to label it a 'resource' or 'recyclable material' and sell or even donate it to the Global South."

There was more: "In the mid-1980s, the developing countries turned to the International Monetary Fund to help them pay off the debt," but its terms forced privatization that took much of the actual resources of the debtor countries. Taking cash for accepting more and more trash became what seemed to be the only option to reduce the debt.

Clapp traveled thousands of miles to observe the accumulations of trash around the world and the ways in which bits of it can be retrieved and sold. He spent weeks in a Ghanaian slum where "burner boys" extract spools of copper from discarded electronics. Many electronic devices have been around for only a few decades, and their built-in obsolescence has resulted in the creation of slums like the one in Ghana's capital city of Accra, where each day brings more tons to be dismantled for recyclable parts—or burned in open fires, sending toxins into the atmosphere.

One of the few positives in Clapp's sad tale is that more trash than one might expect gets recycled, even from cellphones. "Much of the material stripped out of old electronics can be reprocessed and slotted back into new electronics," he writes. In India, recycled steel has been used in construction, including "some sixty thousand tons of steel that once formed New York's Twin Towers." In the city of Dubai, the world's tallest building "is constructed largely out of reforged old steel."

A surprising source of recycling comes from old ships that are dismantled in India and Turkey. After a beached hulk like the 14-story cruise ship Carnival Inspiration has its most hazardous elements removed—"asbestos, mercury, sulfuric acid, lead, polychlorinated biphenyls"—the steel from its massive 300-yard-long frame can then be cut into manageable chunks for recycling. This happens to hundreds of ships every year, leaving the surrounding coastline highly toxic. Turkey became a buyer of old ships in the late 1980s; it was cheaper to send ships there instead of the Indian Ocean, and Turkey had promoted itself as a zero-waste country, more a claim than a reality.

One of the book's best sections deals with plastic waste. Most plastic cannot be recycled, and making new plastic is cheaper anyway. The thousands of different plastic compounds in existence cannot be mixed in recycling. Finally, the plastic we use on a daily basis contains "upwards of a hundred toxic contaminants." Recycling simply diffuses them into new plastics.

Ninety percent of steel gets recycled; not so with plastic, over 90 percent of which is unrecyclable. The increase in plastic has brought about a worldwide plague; on average, Americans each use over 200 pounds of the stuff annually, up from 60 pounds in 1980. Unlike natural materials such as wood, stone and iron ore, plastic is "wholly foreign" to the earth. After plastic began filling U.S. landfills, the petrochemical industry promoted burning it. Then, like a drug pusher blaming his customers, they

blamed people for using it.

Plastic began showing up in animals and fish, and by the 1990s, microplastics were found to be contaminating the ocean, from its surface to its furthest depths in the Mariana Trench. Some desperate petrochemical merchants tried to improve their public image by making themselves advocates of recycling. Companies such as Exxon, DuPont and Union Carbide opened recycling plants, but they closed all but one by 2000.

Exporting plastic waste became an enterprise when it could be sent to China or the Global South. China banned imports of foreign waste after 2017; before then, the country had served as a principal recipient of U.S. trash. South Asia soon became a substitute. In Indonesia, "an outlaw economy had been built on the currency of American and European trash," and villages competed "at gunpoint for truckloads of *other countries'* garbage."

Clapp suggests partial solutions, such as reversing the trend of overpackaging, but that looks unlikely given that "in North America alone, nearly two hundred petrochemical plants are currently under construction." By 2050, he writes, "humanity will have produced four times the total amount of plastic it has produced up to the present." Corporate propaganda presents a further difficulty. The consulting firm McKinsey & Company "publishes regular memos on trash insisting that the problem of waste entering the ocean is not so much an environmental calamity as a missed financial opportunity," Clapp writes. Such thinking is what shapes our current governments and portends dire consequences for our "sorrowful planet."

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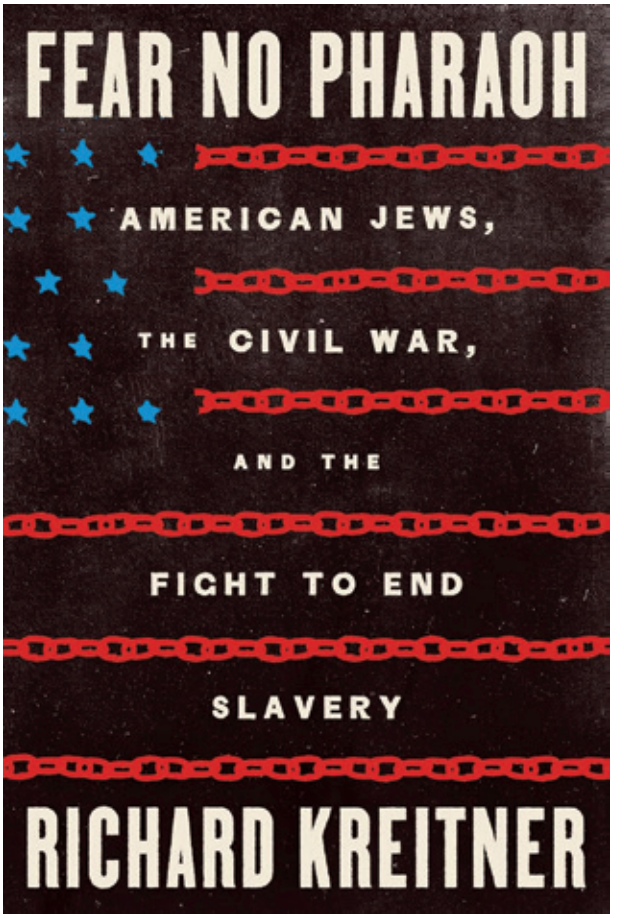
SLAVERY AND AMERICAN JEWS



Farrar, Straus & Giroux / 416p $21

The Jewish people in America have long punched above their demographic weight. Consider how deprived our science, music, letters, film and law would be absent the contributions of Abraham's stock. Owing to this and all the discredited drivel about the American slave trade's supposed Jewish hub, a fresh, thoughtful treatment of Jews and America's original sin seems fitting. Richard Kreitner has delivered that in *Fear No Pharaoh: American Jews, the Civil War, and the Fight to End Slavery.*

This superb and richly discursive work foregrounds six individuals, all Jewish immigrants: three rabbis; a young, battle-tested veteran of Europe's 1848 revolutions; a rabbi's atheist daughter; and a brilliant slaveholding lawyer and politician. The intertwined stories will leave a reader of any faith with a more nuanced appreciation for our nation's history and abundant kindling for moral reflection.

Kreitner's rabbinical triptych both illustrates his claim that, in the mid-19th century, there was no one correct Jewish position on slavery and renders un-

Kreitner's intertwined stories will leave a reader of any faith with abundant kindling for moral reflection.

surprising the fact that slave labor built America's oldest surviving synagogue building, the same building in which fugitive slaves later found refuge.

The Orthodox rabbi Morris Raphall of New York defended slavery in principle. For him, disallowing what Scripture plainly countenanced meant refashioning ancient truth to fit current politics and fell "very little short of blasphemy." Raphall faulted only America's failure to observe the mitigators and safeguards of Mosaic law on slavery.

Raphall thus foreshadowed those Catholic thinkers who, fixed on the immutability of Catholic teaching, challenge 20th-century conciliar and papal condemnations of slavery as intrinsically evil. Raphall also prefigured the Anglican clergy in the American South who sought Jim Crow's redemption through calls to belatedly upgrade Black institutions and facilities.

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, founder of American Reform Judaism, mostly sought calm. He favored slavery's territorial containment but opposed its eradication. Abolitionism's explicit (Protestant) religiosity repelled him, and he said its adherents thrived "on excitement and delight[ed] in civil wars." Above all, he felt, U.S. Jews taking a side on slavery threatened his people's claim to whiteness, a prerequisite for enjoying America's "sunlight of freedom."

Credit Wise for recognizing what so many deny today under the anti-woke banner: Whiteness, though a fiction biologically, has always carried inestimable value in America.

Rabbi David Einhorn of Baltimore, long on erudition and occasionally short on tact, shunned the course of "pseudopeace." He condemned slavery outright as "immoral"; its abolition was not optional. He felt that Raphall's biblical defense of bondage represented a "deplorable moral farce."

Einhorn's moral witness cost him his Baltimore pulpit and nearly won him a tar-and-feathers cloak. Still, he only grew in his faith-rooted belief in human equality. A century later, the universalistic Judaism he helped foster accounted for the outsized Jewish presence among the Freedom Riders of the 1960s. Today it echoes in those Jewish voices summoning Israel back from illiberalism and from Benjamin Netanyahu's brutal brand of Zionism.

Rabbi Einhorn's moral courage found a match in the physical courage of August Bondi, a layman. Bondi arrived in the United States as a teenager who had struggled and bled in Vienna during a failed uprising against the Austrian emperor. Once here, the self-described "political fugitive" immersed himself in American politics. While still a young man, he packed up two Colt revolvers and traveled to "Bleeding Kansas." There he joined John Brown's forces.

In 1861, Bondi, now a husband and father, enlisted in the Union Army. He barely survived grievous wounds and a pack of feral hogs looking to feed off a battle's aftermath. Through it all, Bondi remained "an enthusiastic Jew," a "lover of humanity" and a conscience-pricking reminder that personal sacrifice must accompany true conviction.

Polish-born Ernestine Rose demonstrated both physical and moral courage. Sharp enough in mind and tongue to appear alongside Frederick Douglass, Rose challenged slavery even in places like Charleston, S.C., the country's largest slave port. More, she challenged women's subjugation wherever she found it—that is, everywhere.

Though a rabbi's child, Rose gave religion no quarter—despite the fundamental religiousness of both her adopted country and the causes she championed.

Rose suffered for her beliefs. Through her relentless and rugged travels, she repeatedly spent herself unto dangerous exhaustion. Sniping from allies who found her too uncompromising or less American by dint of foreign birth and Jewish blood took an added toll.

She also suffered for her unbelief. When her beloved husband died, Rose fell into despondency, forbidding herself any hope of seeing him again. A believer might lament Rose's unbelief—but might also acknowledge her gritty (if spiritually adrift) trueness to self.

Last, Kreitner presents Judah Benjamin, who emerges as the most challenging figure in *Fear No Pharoah*. A preternaturally charming but self-concealing lawyer, Benjamin displayed staggering intellect, industry and resilience. He ascended in New Orleans society unhindered by either his Jewish ancestry or his tenuous claim to heterosexuality in a homophobic culture.

Benjamin was a man of many contradictions. He demonstrated a powerful empathy for the enslaved in courtroom arguments. Yet he also owned a large slave-driven sugar plantation. When conflict over slavery erupted into civil war, Benjamin readily enlisted in the Confederate cause. Formerly a U.S. senator, Benjamin took up duties as Jefferson Davis's attorney general during Secession, then as his secretary of war and finally as secretary of state. On the eve of defeat, Benjamin unsuccessfully proposed arming slaves who could fight in return for their freedom. This,

though, bespoke desperation, not moral awakening.

Benjamin makes an easy villain but better serves as a cautionary figure. True, his empathetic imagination bars any defense of ignorance as to slaves' humanity. Still, Benjamin might exemplify how, in all times and places, an institutionalized iniquity will deaden the individual conscience.

Such (im)moral acclimation explains a lot. Despite annual Passover reminders of Israelite servitude in Egypt, the attitudes of American Jews toward slavery in the 19th century hinged mostly on geographic region, leaving the Jewish landowner as likely a slaveholder as the Gentile.

Individuals who fully discern and defy the ambient sins of their time stand as exceptions; we call them heroes, prophets and saints. We can only hope that, immersed in the same moral madness, we would have differed from Benjamin and others who told themselves they could own people—including the Society of Jesus, whose slave-holding plantation outside New Orleans is mentioned in Kreitner's account.

Some quibbles: The publisher saddled Kreitner with a misleading book title. Kreitner is no ethnic cheerleader. He manifests the warm love for the Jews that the scholar Gershom Scholem believed absent in Hannah Arendt. But Kreitner fits no group or even individual for a halo (or hooves).

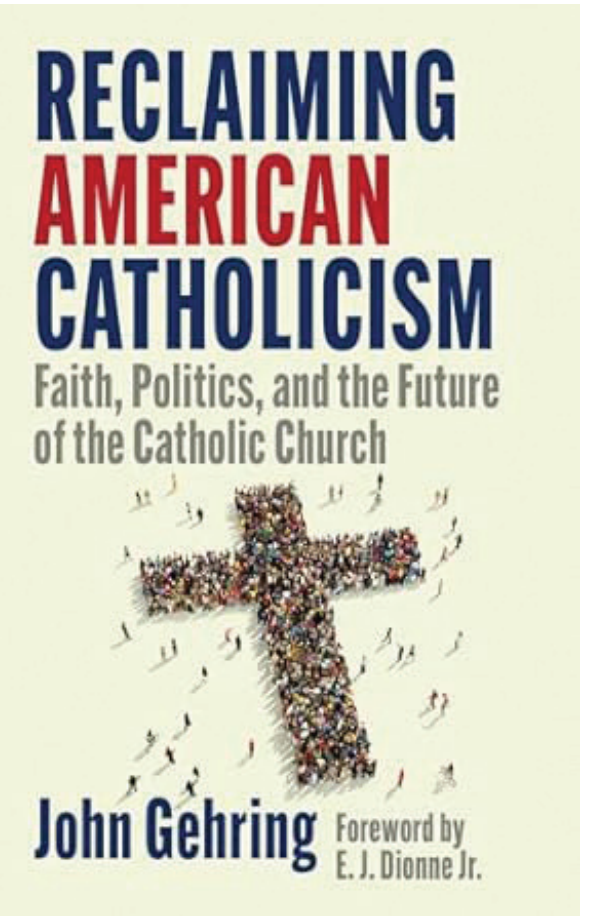
Also, at points, the author abides too easily the view that in some "zero sum" sense Jews risked changing places with Blacks as the most oppressed Americans. Asians and Native Americans would surely have figured in the competition.

Some today look to soften our history of slavery. Kreitner should have felt especially free therefore to remind his audience in most graphic terms that the enslavement of millions of human beings depended on a ruthless regime of terrorism and brutality.

These all, however, are minor off-notes in a work of fabulous sweep and grace.

Kevin M. Doyle, *a graduate of Fordham College, is on sabbatical from the practice of law.*

THE CHURCH TODAY AND TOMORROW



Georgetown University Press / 397p $30

Reading Catholic news day after day can have the unintended effect of blurring many years' worth of sensational stories into one another in one's mind. One of the great gifts of John Gehring's *Reclaiming Catholicism*, then, is that he has masterfully woven together many of these stories percolating in our minds to show how they support a set of ongoing themes in the Catholic Church in the United States.

Since this book went to press, of course, American Catholicism and the future of the church have become further entwined with the election of U.S.-born Cardinal Robert Prevost as Pope Leo XIV. A few months ago, Pope Leo said to Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Tex., the chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, "The church cannot be silent.... I wish they [the conference of bishops] were a stronger, more unified voice" on immigration. Such a clarion call for unity and prophetic witness in and from the American hierarchy is in line with the message Gehring offers in these pages. The bishops obliged with a historic video message upholding the dignity of immigrants and condemning the "indiscriminate mass deportation of people."

Gehring is happy to critique the various shortcomings of liberal politicians as well.

One of the aforementioned news stories of which I was reminded while reading this book was the essay in the July 2017 issue of La Civiltà Cattolica co-authored by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., and the Presbyterian pastor the Rev. Marcelo Figueroa, in which the authors, Gehring writes, "offered a blistering critique of the way conservative Catholics and Christian evangelicals in the United States had teamed up on some issues at the heart of Trump's agenda."

At the time that article was published, there was widespread backlash from some of the Catholic figures who suspected they were the targets of these remarks. In the end, the article was prescient in its analysis of some of the most troubling aspects of the coming years. Spadaro and Figueroa were proven correct, and those Catholics in the United States who had caricatured the two authors were wrong. Gehring takes Spadaro and Figueroa seriously in his study, and their thesis meshes nicely with Gehring's.

Reclaiming American Catholicism, coming in at nearly 400 pages, is a comprehensive and meticulous synopsis of many of the ills that are plaguing the church in the United States. In particular, Pope Francis' pontificate (2013-25) provides neat bookends for Gehring's incisive study, because it frames some of the fundamental events that led to the divisions in the American church today.

In Chapter One, he presents an account of the U.S. response to the Second Vatican Council, largely seen through the work of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. Gehring shows how the immediate aftermath of Bernardin's 1983 "consistent ethic of life" address at Fordham University led to a battle within the American hierarchy that only intensified during Pope Francis' pontificate.

Chapter Two delineates the relationship between many U.S. bishops and the Republican Party, culminating in the 2016 presidential election and the alliance between a vocal sector of the episcopacy and Donald Trump, especially on the issue of abortion. Gehring, to make an understatement, is not in favor of such a partnership.

Still, it is worth noting that this book is not an apologia for the Democratic Party; Gehring is happy to critique the various shortcomings of liberal politicians as well. He notes that in 2016, the Clinton campaign "made a strategic and ultimately flawed calculation that white Catholics were not a priority." This was, indeed, a failure.

If he writes a revised edition of this book, Gehring will have to contend with the early months of Pope Leo's papacy, the first year of Trump's second term, and other Democratic missteps vis-à-vis Catholics, such as Kamala Harris's decision to skip the Al Smith Dinner in 2024.

Chapter Three sees Gehring wrestle with the term of the second Catholic president of the United States, Joe Biden. More than that, however, Gehring analyzes the response of the U.S.C.C.B. to Biden's support for abortion rights and its treatment of whether he should be allowed access to the Eucharist. In the next chapter, Gehring examines the culture wars that have enraptured the American church, especially over the last few decades. Enter Leonard Leo, a Catholic influencer and architect of the current Supreme Court. Leo, Gehring writes, is one of a number of wealthy Catholics who are bankrolling a "distinctly American brand of Catholicism [that] is characterized by a preference for traditionalist rituals such as the pre-Vatican II liturgy, a preoccupation with fighting LGBTQ rights, and an unwavering faith in unfettered free markets."

Gehring saves his most scathing critiques for Leo, Tim Busch, Charles Koch and the members of the American hierarchy who have bought into their worldview and their rhetoric.

The last three chapters of the book highlight issues rooted deeply in the context of Catholic social teaching. Gehring goes to great lengths to show how Catholic culture warfare in the United States is challenged by these key issues: intersectionality, critical race theory, racial justice, gun violence and the culture of death, the climate crisis, restorative justice, slavery and white supremacy, sexual abuse by members of the clergy, L.G.B.T.Q. justice (especially focusing on Black and Latino L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics), women's leadership, and the rise of the nones.

At times, reading this book was a painful reminder of some of the terrible things that have befallen the Catholic Church in the United States over the last few decades: clerical sexual abuse, homophobic attitudes flying in the face of Pope Francis' movement in the direction of greater openness, racism that is excused or passed over in silence, the reduction of Catholic moral teaching to a single issue—the list could go on. But all of these are a necessary prelude to the hopeful crescendo of the book's closing chapters.

In his analysis—ranging from people of color in the pews to university professors and from faith-based mobilizing groups to religious orders of women—Gehring

shows quite clearly that there are reasons for hope in the church today. And if he is critical of many bishops who have aligned themselves behind only the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage, he is complimentary to other members of the hierarchy by name. Blase Cupich, Robert McElroy, Joseph Tobin, Wilton Gregory, Paul Etienne, John Stowe, Joseph Tyson, Gustavo García-Siller, Bernard Hebda, Michael Jackels, Shawn McKnight, Mark Seitz and Thomas Zinkula all merit particular mention for their commitments to church leadership through embrace rather than exclusion.

This book is not perfect. Many readers will find a variety of errors of fact and misspelled names to be particularly distracting at times. If an updated version of the text deals with some of the developing topics mentioned above, Gehring and a copy editor would do well to amend some of these missteps, including fixing a keen eye on the chapter endnotes, where many of these errors appear and which are sometimes incomplete.

Nevertheless, Gehring has provided a peerless book on the challenges facing Catholicism in the United States after the first quarter of the 21st century. I hope this book finds its way to many parish reading groups. More importantly, however, readers will also see reasons for hope as we move toward a future that takes into consideration a preferential option for the poor and oppressed and a renewed emphasis on the consistent ethic of life.

This book is a gift in its faithful recovery of tradition and the encouragement to all of us to hand on this treasure.

Daniel Cosacchi *is vice president for mission and ministry and a lecturer in the theology and history departments at the University of Scranton. He is the author of* Great American Prophets: Pope Francis's Models of Christian Life *(Paulist, 2022).*

DAVID

By Troy Reeves

Strange to see this glorious Greek god
here in the heart of Christendom.
Little of the shepherd boy,
round river rock heavy in his sling
or standing alone under chilled moonlight,
keeping watch over his flock,
jackals yipping on distant hills
or frozen still in the grass nearby.
Even less of the warrior king
who killed Philistines by the tens of thousands,
hamstrung their horses,
despised the lame and the bind,
sent his best soldier to the front to die
so he could sleep with that good man's wife,
cried out to heaven from his hiding place,
smothered his kingship in sackcloth and ashes,
wrote psalms of salvation, psalms of praise
until, at last, in his ripe old age
was comforted by a concubine
who lay close by his side,
keeping him warm on cold dark nights.

Il Divino hammered, drilled, fractured, and pried,
chiseled, chipped, sanded, and polished
until nothing remained but this perfect man
and, scattered about on the ground,
chunks, shards, splinters, chips,
and dust for the wind to blow away.

Troy Reeves *is a professor of English emeritus at Angelo State University, a campus of Texas Tech. His poems have appeared in Anglican Theological Review, Christian Century, Sojourners, The Writer, Dappled Things and elsewhere.*

A Call to New Beginnings

The readings for the first and last Sundays in January offer thematic bookends for our reflection. While Matthew composes his Gospel for and within a Jewish Christian community, the readings in the opening and closing weeks of this first month of the new year echo the message that rings throughout this evangelist's chapters. Jesus, the Jewish Messiah is also the one for all others—in fact, for all nations.

Week one fixes attention on the Magi, a group of outsiders, astrologers from the east who perhaps worshiped other gods. Yet these wise men are the first to recognize the Christ Child as the long-awaited king of the Jews. The last week of January manifests a parallel focus. John the Baptist's arrest and imprisonment has made clear the dangers in and around Jerusalem and Judea. Thus, Jesus heads to the northern regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, areas occupied primarily by gentiles, to initiate his mission. In our world so divided by war, politics, religion, social class, ethnicity and family strife, these readings offer a poignant occasion for self-reflection on our own willingness to build bridges with those different from ourselves, to recognize all people as God's children and to embark upon honest assessment of the gifts they offer our world. Present at both his birth and as Jesus begins his teaching, healing and proclamation of the kingdom, these least likely audiences of outsiders give us pause and perhaps an invitation to examine how inclusive is our view of the kingdom of God so central to Jesus' message.

The intervening weeks of January, which include the feast of the Baptism of the Lord and the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, are anything but ordinary. The concept of Ordinary Time derives from the term ordinal, meaning "counted." So these are the weeks counted between Christmastide and Lent and then resumed after the Easter season. Both Sundays are devoted to the baptism of Jesus but with dramatically different emphases. The first features the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus in which John questions who should baptize whom. The other account of the baptism comes from John's Gospel and consists of John's threefold theological witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Son of God and the one filled with the Spirit. Each of these readings offers rich opportunities to reflect upon our own concept of Jesus in relation to God and upon our own baptism, along with the gifts of the Spirit with which we have been endowed. In addition, the readings from Isaiah and Paul's letters, in conjunction with these Gospels, offer powerful invitations to servanthood, holiness and witness with which they challenge us.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD (A), JAN. 4, 2026
An epiphany for all

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD (A), JAN. 11, 2026
Another kind of epiphany

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JAN. 18, 2026
Called to servanthood, holiness and testimony

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), JAN. 25, 2026
Be prepared for the unexpected

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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University of San Diego

Snap Into Action

Service to others can be habit-forming

By Kerry Alys Robinson

One of the 59,226 competitors to cross the finish line of the New York City Marathon last November was our son, Christopher Cappello, a first-time marathoner running to support Catholic Charities of New York. We were there to cheer him on and to be part of an iconic New York City experience, a snapshot of humankind at its best.

The diversity and determination were breathtaking. Runners hailed from 132 countries. More than two million people lined both sides of the 26.2-mile path to encourage the athletes. Every one of us cheered with our full hearts for people we had never met.

It reminded me of a recent conversation on the "Catholic Leaders Podcast" with my friend Timothy Shriver, who chairs the board of Special Olympics. We talked about the emotional joy so evident during the opening ceremonies of the Special Olympics World Summer Games at the Yale Bowl in New Haven in 1995. Everyone cheering for everyone. We agreed: It's what heaven must surely be like.

Those of us on the sidelines were particularly solicitous of those runners who faltered, temporarily stopped because of a cramp, or needed to catch their breath or a second wind. It was to those who needed our encouragement and special care the most that our words of affirmation, reassurance and motivation were especially directed. And our exuberant admiration of them as they regained their pace toward the finish line was unrestrained.

That generous spirit in Manhattan reminded me of why I love working for Catholic Charities USA. We care about every person, but it is those who need special attention, or need merciful encouragement in the moment, or don't think they can continue, who are the focus of our mission.

One day before the marathon, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits lapsed for 42 million Americans, a consequence of the federal government shutdown. Catholic Charities USA responded with alacrity, much as we do when there is a climate-related disaster. We launched an emergency, nationwide appeal to support families and individuals who had been forced deeper into food insecurity.

Support poured in from across the country. We used every dollar raised to purchase food from our food distribution partners, in bulk and at a generous discount, and shipped more than 2.5 million pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables, plus shelf-stable milk and other food, to 129 Catholic Charities agencies in 45 states to distribute to hungry, worried families. Every agency that requested emergency food received it.

This inspiring response revealed the same truth that was on display at the marathon: When people know that others, even strangers, are in distress, they instinctively want to help. And there is joy in doing so together. While the upheaval and anxiety brought on by the SNAP lapse was truly terrible, a positive, unintended consequence was increased awareness about the unacceptable level of hunger in the richest country in the world. That awareness led to action. And that action was organized and purposeful.

In the face of human anguish and injustice it is tempting to protect our hearts and look away, or to believe that our individual acts of mercy or service cannot make a difference. But generosity inspires generosity. Service to others is habit-forming. It calls forth in us a desire to belong, to be part of what is right and just. My friend Mack McCarter quips, "Caring alone won't heal the world, but caring together will." This is why I love the Catholic Charities network, described by a colleague as "organized love."

In "Dilexi Te," his beautiful exhortation about how love and care for the poor is foundational to what it means to be Christian, Pope Leo XIV says: "By its very nature, Christian love is prophetic: it works miracles and knows no limits. It makes what was apparently impossible happen. Love is above all a way of looking at life and a way of living it. A church that sets no limits to love, that knows no enemies to fight but only men and women to love, is the church that the world needs today."

Cheering for our son and thousands of strangers at the marathon was joyous. So, too, is participating in making this a more merciful and loving world. Volunteer. Donate. Advocate. Comfort. Encourage. Cheer on those who need our loving service the most. And be amazed at the unbridled joy such purposeful communal action brings.

Kerry Alys Robinson *is the president and chief executive of Catholic Charities USA.*

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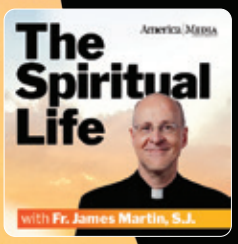

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