America

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THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

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Colleen Dulle

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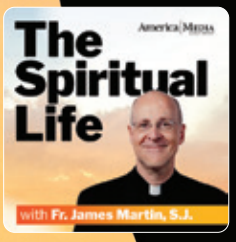


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# What Makes a Consistory 'Extraordinary'?

As this issue of **America** is going to press, Pope Leo XIV and the College of Cardinals are beginning a two-day set of meetings in Rome, called an Extraordinary Consistory. The meetings happen behind closed doors as a way for the cardinals to cooperate with the pope in shared discernment and to support him in his governance of the universal church.

The Vatican has said relatively little about the agenda for the meeting, describing it in the broadest possible terms as taking place "within the context of the life and mission of the church" and expecting it to be "characterized by moments of communion and fraternity."

Some media reports described Pope Leo's Christmas letter to the cardinals as setting out four points for discussion. Leo asked the cardinals to reread two documents from Pope Francis in preparation for the meeting: "Evangelii Gaudium," his initial apostolic exhortation, which Pope Leo summarized in his first address to the cardinals after his election; and "Praedicate Evangelium," the apostolic constitution restructuring the Roman Curia. He also asked them to reflect on synodality and liturgy.

It is likely, of course, that we will learn more about what was discussed both from official Vatican communications and from cardinals speaking to the press following the consistory. But even if the Vatican were to release a full transcript—which it certainly will not do—a detailed breakdown of the conversations among the cardinals would not be the most important takeaway from the meeting.

To understand why, it helps to understand what *extraordinary* means in the parlance of ecclesial governance and how that technical meaning may slowly be getting turned inside out.

Ordinary consistories happen either for the creation of new cardinals, when the pope names new members to the college, or for the cardinals to vote on canonizations. While any cardinal can attend an ordinary consistory, they do not require the attendance of cardinals from outside Rome.

Extraordinary consistories, on the other hand, involve every cardinal and are primarily consultative in nature. Canon law describes them as being celebrated "when particular needs of the church or the treatment of more grave affairs suggests it." While there are other mechanisms available for discussion among the cardinals (Pope Benedict XVI regularly held consultative meetings alongside ordinary consistories, and Pope Francis had his smaller "C-9" advisory council), a global meeting of all cardinals for discussion about the church has historically been a rare occurrence, literally "out of the ordinary" course of events. During his long pontificate, St. John Paul II held only six extraordinary consistories, Benedict XVI held none, and Pope Francis held only three.

But this pattern could be changing. During the cardinals' meetings before the conclave that elected Leo, a number of them commented that except for those who had participated as members of the Synod on Synodality, the cardinals did not know each other well and expressed a desire for the college to be convened more regularly. Pope Leo acknowledged this hope in his meeting with the cardinals just two days after his election.

Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, in an interview published just before the start of the consistory, commented that "many cardinals think that there should be at least one a year." Of course, if that pattern were to be established, there would be nothing "extraordinary" about such consistories in the sense that word currently holds.

In fact, that may turn out to be the point. One tension that the church faces is between its day-to-day modes of governance—bishops acting in their own dioceses and together as conferences, and the Roman Curia working at the level of the universal church—and the broader forms of consultation introduced through the synodal process over the last several years.

Pope Leo has clearly indicated that he is convinced of the importance of synodality. The pattern of this consistory reflects that commitment, with a greater role for working groups and relatively less time devoted to individual cardinals making speeches to the whole body of the college.

One practical effect of this arrangement is the greater significance given to dialogue and conversation, meaning that the relationships cardinals build with one another and their ability to forge a consensus will likely have more impact than a speech given by any one individual.

Whether Pope Leo regularizes so-called extraordinary consistories to happen annually or develops some other method for ongoing consultation, I expect that he will continue to encourage the College of Cardinals in the practice of dialogue as part of the ordinary way the church carries out its mission. The success of this meeting should not be measured solely by what decisions it influences or topics it discusses, but by its integration of dialogue into the day-to-day life of the church. That example is itself an important ministry for the cardinals to offer in support of and in union with the pope.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

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Children and others pray as Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, concelebrates Mass at Holy Family Church in Gaza City on Dec. 20, 2025.
OSV News/Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

Cover: A member of the Pontifical Swiss Guard protects the Apostolic Palace at Vatican City on Aug. 29, 2025.
iStock/narvikk

## FAITH & REASON



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## THE WORD



## LAST TAKE

## *U.S. Catholics are facing an authoritarian threat. The church has been here before.*

Our January issue included a feature story by the political scientist Maria J. Stephan, "When Catholics Confront Authoritarianism." Dr. Stephan recounted times when, domestically and abroad, Catholics have varyingly aligned themselves with authoritarianism and defended democratic freedom. She warned of current threats from authoritarianism and concluded, "Catholics can and must be a vital force for democratic freedom in the United States and around the world." Our readers had much to say in response.

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Several of the [readers commenting on this article] seem to think that authoritarian "government" is overt, using China and North Korea as examples. Authoritarians can also be subtle. Using pressure to make others comply without forcing the issue is one way, and giving special perks to the ultra-wealthy is another. Timothy Snyder's book *On Tyranny* is an excellent read, explaining how authoritarianism works without most of us even realizing it. We need to get out of our comfort zone and look around at the subtle signs. The church should be leading the way instead of cheerleading the slide into total authoritarianism.

Stephen Healy

Wonderful, well written and researched. Thank you for not only pointing out the problems and issues in these troubled times in America, but for reminding me how Catholics are making a difference. Also, this article clearly gives solutions. I was getting tired of all the hand-wringing. I will join up with at least one of the organizations [mentioned by Dr. Stephan], become a more active participant and encourage others to do the same. The whole world is watching.

Kathleen Foote

The church needs to do some introspection on this whole concept. Our church has been one of the most authoritarian organizations in history. They just don't have the power anymore. Thank the Lord for this.

David Rios

The United States just held an election wherein a socialist won the mayorship of the most important city in the world. This inconvenient truth doesn't bolster Dr. Stephan's claim that Mr. Trump is king and that we live under an all-powerful authoritarian regime. I don't know any authoritarian regime that would allow free/fair elections, along with the election of such a vocal opponent as Mayor Elect [Zohran] Mamdani.

Kevin O'Neil

It is heartening to read moral reflection on the actions of the current government of the United States. As a Canadian I have watched the hate-fueled actions of the current administration. The degradation of people arrested by ICE is appalling to watch and is in sharp contrast with the messages of love and peace Jesus gave us. The contempt for Canadians is sending a very different signal than I have experienced over the years on visits to the United States or from visitors from your lovely country visiting Canada. I hope in the future, Canadians, immigrants, people of color and people whose religious faith is other than extreme right-wing un-Christian will be heard above the sometimes deafening roar of hate and intolerance.

Tom Webb

The basic premise of the article is suspect. While there are problems with the implementation of immigration law, the evolution of the Voting Rights Act, for example, is coming from the Supreme Court, not some authoritarian. Comparing the United States to communist Poland, the Philippines under Marcos, Chile under Pinochet, Nicaragua under Ortega, communist El Salvador, and Zambia is ridiculous. Advising people to disregard what they may consider unjust law is malpractice. Yes, people should express themselves in the public square, informed by faith; but let's not hide politics, which this article clearly is, behind the curtain of faith.

Joseph Eastburn

Sadly, where I live, the current [presidential] office holder and his administration are well regarded by a number of Catholics. I will share this article with my Catholic friends as they, too, have been disheartened at our Catholic clergy, family members and friends who have not seen the overt threats to our human rights, and the leaning into authoritarianism, as counter to our Catholic faith and the embrace of Jesus and his teaching. God help us.

Maryanne Malone

# Venezuela, Trump and the End of 'Pax Americana'

What does the United States stand for among the nations of the world? While any honest observer of history could point out plenty of exceptions to the values the United States claims to champion, since the end of World War II it has generally stood for commitment to a "rules-based international order."

This era hardly brought with it a guarantee of peace—wars cold and hot have been waged around the globe since the emergence of the United States as a global hegemon in 1945, more than their fair share begun by Americans themselves. But it has mitigated against another world war, particularly by constraining other potential superpowers, and often provided a stability that allowed for the emergence of enduring democratic institutions and international relationships.

But the "Pax Americana"—insofar as other nations can rely on knowing what the United States stands for—is over.

The U.S. attack on Venezuela and the capture of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife on Jan. 3 feels like the final nail in the coffin. Speculation from President Donald J. Trump in the days following that he could order similar action against Colombia, Cuba, or even Mexico or Greenland made it clear that when it comes to American foreign policy, the only guarantee left is that there are no guarantees.

Less than a month before Mr. Trump unilaterally sent special forces into a foreign capital, the White House released the National Security Strategy, a statement of purpose that made it clear that the past eight decades of partnership and mutual defense would be more honored in the breach than the observance.

The N.S.S. document critiques American foreign policy priorities since the end of the Cold War in unusually harsh terms, calling them "laundry lists of wishes or desired end states" that relied on a "permanent American domination of the entire world." Instead, it offers an ethos of naked self-interest, aimed explicitly at ensuring the United States "remains the world's strongest, richest, most powerful, and most successful country," one freed from a "network of international institutions."

To the limited degree that Mr. Trump's foreign policy decisions proceed from a coherent larger strategy, the intervention in Venezuela and endorsement of a "Donroe Doctrine" suggest a new goal of overt domination of the Western hemisphere. But even that cannot fully be relied upon, with the president and his secretary of state unable to agree on what he means when he says the United States will be "running" Venezuela.

Unfortunately, the reality seems to be unpredictability, because the world's largest military and economic power is now essentially a rogue actor. Mr. Trump has disdained any engagement with Congress to authorize his use of military force. And given the Republican majority's general abdication of the legislature's role in checking the executive, it seems unlikely that he will need to do so. In the place of even nominal reliance on rules and principles, both American allies and opponents are left trying to guess who Mr. Trump will bully and threaten next.

The new N.S.S. statement reveals that the administration understands past efforts at multilateralism as simply window dressing for the goals of a discredited elite. This critique should not be dismissed out of hand. Far too much military adventurism has been cloaked in the mantle of coalitions for freedom, and the United Nations owns a long list of sins of commission and omission in this area. Nonetheless, discarding the cloak and openly brandishing the sword is not an improvement.

What the N.S.S. statement scoffs at as "vague platitudes" were in fact the aspirational ideals that made international cooperation possible. They acknowledged a higher law by which the United States, its allies and its enemies are bound, even if the United States tended to consider itself that law's arbiter. In their place, the administration now holds up no principle at all, other than whatever Mr. Trump asserts as fact after a military intervention has already begun.

While this state of affairs may force other countries to be more afraid of Mr. Trump, it cannot achieve security for the United States. Unprincipled and unpredictable military intervention will make regional conflicts more enduring and destructive. Nor will such disruption be contained by national borders, but will result in more widespread dislocation and migration—despite the N.S.S. document's declaration that "the era of mass migration is over."

On this issue, Venezuela itself is a canary in the coal mine: More than eight million of its citizens have left the country since 2014, and any political or economic instability that follows this attack could spur millions more to seek safety and security elsewhere. The world could again see a cycle that has repeated time and

again in Latin America—an arrogant U.S. intervention producing political and economic chaos that triggers a mass migration. If nothing else, we can be sure that U.S. actions today will have long-term consequences unforeseen by the current administration.

Catholic teaching on international relations sets out a very different vision from maximal freedom of action for the most powerful leaders. St. John XXIII in "Pacem in Terris" explained "that nations are the subjects of reciprocal rights and duties" and envisioned a public authority "set up with the consent of all nations." Pope Benedict XVI called in "Caritas in Veritate" for reform of the United Nations and transnational economic structures "so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth." Pope Francis in "Fratelli Tutti" said human solidarity requires "more effective world organizations, equipped with the power to provide for the global common good."

What the popes recognize, beyond their hope for an international order built on justice and peace, is that even national self-interest is tied up in a more universal and global common good. While no one nation can presume to define that good for all others, abandoning it as a shared goal leaves both strong and weak nations less secure.

Catholic social teaching may not always provide a sufficient answer for the challenges of cooperation between sovereign nations. But it is grounded in the truth that power must be answerable to a higher law if it is ever to achieve the true security and stability at which it aims, for us and for future generations.

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# Graduates of Catholic colleges must develop qualities that A.I. can never provide

It is true: Any college graduate needs to be proficient with artificial intelligence tools in order to contribute to the modern workplace. But it is even more vital to deepen qualities that A.I. does not and never will have. These traits will mark an individual as relevant and valuable in the workplace and beyond, no matter what happens in the digital realm.

What are those characteristics? Here are three: creativity, connection and compassion.

A.I. may be superb at compiling, processing, synthesizing and repackaging existing information. But originality? Breakthrough ideas? Grace-filled epiphanies? Lines of thinking that challenge assumptions and transcend convention? These abilities exist in each one of us at levels that A.I. cannot touch.

While A.I. deals in knowns, our world remains rife with unknowns. Indeed, the development of A.I. itself raises a raft of ethical questions that are growing ever more urgent as the feats of A.I. grow ever more astonishing. Should industry leaders provide support for those workers whom A.I. will make redundant? Who will control this superintelligence, and who will benefit from it most in our already stratified society? What to do about the rapidly expanding A.I. infrastructure and its immense consumption of energy and water resources?

No smart machine will deliver satisfactory solutions for these or any other moral conundrums. In the end, we must return to first things: inquisitive, discerning analysis; critical thinking; inventive problem-solving; and the ability to draw on higher sources of inspiration that no algorithm can replicate. These are precisely the capabilities that colleges and universities cultivate, not only by immersing students in the liberal arts and sciences, but also by forging synergies with the visual and performing arts and other disciplines that galvanize the imagination. The aim is to help students discover the fullness of their humanity, in all its dimensions and genius.

A fuel for creativity is community, especially one rooted in rich, authentic connections. While the pandemic highlighted the power of social media and video-conferencing apps to erase distances, it also showed even more clearly that technology is no substitute for the nearness of classmates, mentors, coaches, advisors and campus ministers. That's a lesson we should keep in mind now, as A.I. companies continue to develop alternatives to human interaction.

Even as chatbots proliferate, colleges prompt students to look up from their devices, engage with others, exercise their conversational muscles and form lifelong friendships. This is especially true for residential campuses, where students share spaces, meals and daily life with one another throughout the academic year. The point is for students not only to acquire social capital, but also to form relationships that bear the distinctively human and infinitely precious characteristics of trust, loyalty, mutual respect and empathy. Virtues such as these can be counted on even if, and perhaps especially if, the grid goes down.

Which brings us to compassion. A.I. certainly has I.Q., but does it have E.Q.—emotional intelligence? The word *compassion* itself may offer a clue. Its Latin roots literally mean to share in the suffering or affliction of another. That is not something you can program. There is no app for that. It is, and always will be, the exclusive province of the human heart.

College life provides daily opportunities to learn the perspectives of classmates from a wide range of cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, college-sponsored volunteer service programs bring students face-to-face with some of our society's most vulnerable members, yielding insights that touch the soul in a way that no A.I. summary could ever equal. Many institutions, including Emmanuel College, pair these service experiences with focused reflection and discussions in which young people consider the roles they can play in addressing complex issues underlying poverty, homelessness and inequality.

As any brand strategist will tell you, it's not enough to compete in the marketplace; one must stand out as different. In the age of A.I., college graduates need to do both. For academic leaders, that means integrating A.I. into curricula and programs in ways that enhance rather than replace human thinking. It also means leaning into our core strengths as keepers and transmitters of great ideas and as centers of vibrant discourse on the most pressing issues of our time.

Catholic colleges have a special mission to carry on the centuries-old Catholic intellectual tradition, which in essence is the pursuit of truth. Other institutions do much the same, drawing on their own founding visions and values. Whatever our inheritances, our goal must be the same: to form leaders with the skills to excel in a time of breathtaking technological change—and with the creativity, connection and compassion to uplift the common good.

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Beth Ross *is the president of Emmanuel College, in Boston, founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.*

OSV News photo/Hollie Adams, Reuters

# The Islamic State has been diminished, not defeated. Is an ISIS resurgence a threat to the United States?

By Kevin Clarke

The terror attack on Bondi Beach in Australia on Dec. 14 claimed 15 lives and renewed concerns about the reach of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS. Though the group may have finally been dislodged from a self-declared caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2019, this latest attack was a reminder that the Islamic State retains its deadly capacity.

The rampage against Jewish families celebrating Hanukkah in Australia highlighted a phenomenon well known to counterterrorism experts, according to Bruce Hoffman: Holiday seasons represent a period of heightened threat from extremist groups like the Islamic State. Mr. Hoffman is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a professor at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. He is the co-author, with Jacob Ware, of *God, Guns, and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America*.

Defeated on the battlefield, the Islamic State has returned to its terrorist roots, decentralizing and disseminating its message from dark corners of the internet. It remains the world's deadliest terror organization. In 2024, ISIS and its affiliates were responsible for 1,805 deaths in 22 countries.

In June, a suicide bomber killed 25 worshipers at Mar Elias Church in Damascus. In Palmyra, Syria, on Dec. 15, a government security force member believed to be acting on behalf of the Islamic State ambushed and killed three Americans—two soldiers and a civilian interpreter.

**An Ongoing Threat**

After a vast sacrifice in treasure and human suffering to rid Iraq and Syria of the ISIS menace, is the United States itself any safer from an attack orchestrated or inspired by the Islamic State?

Mr. Hoffman calls the Islamic State an "ongoing threat that we have to be vigilant about," adding that U.S. counterterrorist agencies need to pay close attention to trends abroad.

Policymakers in Washington should not be under the delusion that the Islamic State has been defeated, Daniel Byman agrees. Mr. Byman is the director of the warfare, irregular threats and terrorism program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and, like Mr. Hoffman,

Two women mourn before a makeshift memorial at Bondi Pavilion on Dec. 15, 2025.

a Georgetown University professor.

But he does believe that the terror network's capacity has been significantly diminished since its caliphate was ended by U.S., Kurdish, Syrian and Iraqi forces. "There's kind of an assumption that people can always become a terrorist if they want to," he says. "But how do you train? How do you get weapons? What do you do?"

"When [terror] groups themselves are weak, they're not providing that guidance," he says.

That contrasts to the Islamic State of 2014, when would-be terrorists could go online and connect with ISIS fighters for guidance about targets and strategy. That kind of access is not completely impossible now, he says, but it is much harder to achieve.

Even dramatic events like the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and the ensuing war in Gaza to dislodge Hamas did not lead to the spike in terrorist acts that many in the counterterrorism community anticipated. Instead, "people are looking for other ways to address their frustration and despair about something like Gaza," Mr. Byman says, especially in a global protest movement focusing on the conduct of Israeli soldiers in the campaign against Hamas.

Both counterterrorism experts worry that recent moves by the Trump administration have weakened the nation's ability to counter the Islamic State. U.S. counterterrorism attention has for months been shifting toward "antifa and other radical leftist terrorist groups" or toward narcotics traffickers, according to Mr. Hoffman.

Mr. Byman is especially concerned about the shift away from the potential of right-wing terror acts, which he views as a more likely domestic threat. That broadened terror portfolio was created at a time of professional upheaval in Washington.

Mr. Hoffman notes that "the entire top managerial level of the F.B.I. was dismissed" when Mr. Trump returned to Washington. He is particularly concerned about the administration's "dismantling" of programs "that were designed to identify radicalization in localities throughout the United States."

"We're only as good as the last terrorist attack that's been prevented," he says. "Terrorists are consummate opportunists. When they see an opportunity to take advantage of a gap in security, whether it's an actual one or one that they perceive, they will act."

**Blaming Immigrants?**

And other administration policies meant to pre-empt terrorist infiltration may not have their intended results. The White House's response to an attack by a former C.I.A. operative from Afghanistan on National Guard members in Washington on Nov. 26 was to broaden visa and immigration bans. Now visitors and would-be immigrants from 39 countries are blocked from entering the United States.

Mr. Hoffman points out that there is little likelihood that those immigrants or visitors present any more of a threat than native-born Americans or other U.S. citizens. "Political violence in the United States isn't the domain of any specific demographic," he says, urging policymaking based on empirical evidence, not whim or emotions.

"The terrorism threat from legitimate immigration has been grossly overstated" is Mr. Byman's blunt assessment. "In my view, immigrants—whether refugees or just normal economic immigrants—are very much a part of American life, part of the American tradition."

"Look at how many major U.S. companies were founded by immigrants," he says. "This is something we should be proud of."

Australian officials are seeking elevated safety after Bondi Beach through proposals to ratchet up what are already some of the strongest gun control regulations in the world. Access to firearms is obviously a worrisome aspect of America's homegrown terror threat. The United States is awash in more than 392 million handguns, rifles and military-grade firearms.

But Mr. Hoffman cautions that addressing terror threats must go "beyond gun control to issues of societal norms and attitudes."

"The Australian government has not faced up to the threat of antisemitism," he says.

The civilian suffering in Gaza, in a conflict itself provoked by a vast terror strike in southern Israel in October 2023, has triggered hostility to Jewish people around the world. In the United States, antisemitic incidents have been similarly on the rise.

Mr. Hoffman worries of a broad failure in U.S. and Australian society "to call out people who wage war on Jews simply because there's an assumption they support Israel."

"There's been a failure to address this balance between individual free speech liberties and individual safety and public safety," Mr. Hoffman says. The dilemma has only been heightened because of the rapid expansion of social media and its capacity to amplify messages of hate, radicalization and terror recruitment. (Australian government officials announced on Dec. 18 their intention to revisit the nation's hate speech laws.)

**Balancing Free Speech and Public Safety**

According to current U.S. law, he says, speech needs to express an "imminent threat" before it may face restrictions. That is a "very high threshold," Mr. Hoffman says.

## Terror threats on the rise in Africa and Europe

In 2024, 45 countries experienced deteriorating conditions related to terrorism, while only 34 nations experienced improving conditions, reversing nearly a decade of progress on terrorism. That's according to the Global Terror Index, published each year since 2012 by the Institute for Economics & Peace.

The Islamic State and its affiliates were the world's deadliest terror organizations in 2024, accounting for 1,805 deaths. The top five nations most affected by terrorism were Burkina Faso, Pakistan, Syria, Mali and Niger. Africa's Sahel region, stretching across North Central Africa from Senegal to Eritrea, remains the global epicenter of terrorism, accounting for over half of all terrorism-related deaths in 2024.

In the West, "lone wolf" attacks conducted by independent actors who have often self-radicalized now dominate in acts of terror, accounting for 93 percent of fatal attacks over the past five years. Lone actors are three times more likely to carry out a successful attack than groups of two or more plotters.

**66:** The number of countries experiencing at least one terrorist incident, an increase from **58** in 2023 and the most countries affected since 2018.

**7,555:** The number of deaths from terrorism in 2024—a **13 percent** decline from the previous year. (Much higher numbers were recorded in 2023 than in other recent years because of the Hamas attack on Israel in October of that year.)

**24:** The number of publicized plots linked to ISIS or its affiliates disrupted by counterterrorism authorities in 2024, including five in Israel, four in the United States and others in Iran, Turkey, Germany, France, Sweden and Russia. They included high-profile attempts at the Paris Olympics and a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna.

**67:** The number of terrorist incidents in Europe in 2024, twice as many as in 2023. There are now seven Western countries ranked among the 50 most affected countries on the G.T.I. with Germany being the worst ranked nation in the West at 27th on the index. The United States ranks 34th.

**84:** The total number of politically motivated attacks in North America since 2007—**58** were linked to individuals with far-right sympathies or connections.

As threats to society evolve, "our laws have to change as well," especially as social media continues to demonstrate "the ease with which it appears to be able to summon people to violence." Mr. Hoffman adds that acts of homegrown political violence like the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk and attempts on the president's life have become an "enormous problem."

"Our leaders have to tackle these issues, and they aren't," Mr. Hoffman complains. "They're ducking them."

But Mr. Byman suggests the debate over free speech and safety can be overstated. There remains a wide zone for collaboration on security that will not infringe on speech, he says.

"When social media companies are monitoring their own sites for people who are embracing violence, I don't feel freedom is significantly diminished," he explains. "When the F.B.I. is investigating people who make public threats against political figures, I don't feel it's a major diminishment of freedom."

"We should draw a pretty bright line on support for violence," Mr. Byman says. "On the other hand, political causes, some of which I will agree with, some of which I will not agree with, are OK as long as people are peaceful and they're calling for peaceful action."

Mr. Byman has some counsel for the Trump administration to get its counterterrorism efforts back on track: Remember that ISIS is diminished, not defeated; that government coordination with technology companies to identify dangerous actors is worth restoring; and that intelligence collaboration with allies around the world remains essential.

Finally, he urges the president to resist the temptation to withdraw from global hot spots. "We're going to need some military presence in places like Iraq and Syria to keep the Islamic State off-balance," Mr. Byman says.

For the rest of us, he suggests some perspective. Americans should be aware of terrorism but should not allow anxiety about it to rule their lives.

"I don't want to completely diminish it," Mr. Byman says, but he points out that people are at far greater risk each day from commonplace threats that are for the most part barely acknowledged. Terrorist attacks shock in headlines, as they are intended to, and provide fodder for movie and television thrillers, but the real world menace they represent is vanishingly small.

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

# Assisted suicide legalized in Illinois despite opposition from bishops, disability advocates


Illinois Gov. J. B. Pritzker speaks at a news conference in Carol Stream, Ill., on Aug. 3, 2025.

"For someone with terminal illness, different physicians may paint very different pictures of how things will unfold and what reasons there might be for hope," Columba Thomas, O.P., said in an email to **America** in December. Father Thomas is a physician and assistant professor of medicine at Georgetown University. According to Father Thomas, "even in cases that fall short of assisted suicide, patients' risk of being swayed in one direction or another is considerable."

It is a caution that comes too late for the people of Illinois. On Dec. 12, Gov. JB Pritzker signed the End-of-Life Options for Terminally Ill Patients Act into law. The law allows physicians to prescribe lethal medications to mentally stable, terminally ill patients with life expectancies of six months or less.

The new law takes effect despite opposition from Catholic advocates, medical providers and disability rights groups. Father Thomas was especially concerned that "abuse and coercion can be very hard to measure in real-world situations."

Illinois patients who are eligible must be at least 18 years old, and they must provide written and oral consent. Their terminal condition must be confirmed by two physicians, according to the law.

The Catholic Conference of Illinois released a statement condemning the new law: "The Illinois General Assembly has put our state on a slippery path that jeopardizes the well-being of the poor and marginalized, especially those in the disability community," it said. The conference warned of "foreseeable tragic consequences."

"With all the assaults on human dignity and the growing number of vulnerable people we see every day, sadly the leaders and members of the General Assembly who voted for this offer us suicide as its response," the conference said.

The Illinois bishops highlighted improving access to palliative care as a better alternative to assisted dying. The conference also argued that legalizing euthanasia increases the risk of suicide contagion, especially among young people.

"I'm concerned that the bill will ultimately direct limited resources away from hospice and palliative care," Father Thomas said, echoing the bishops' concerns. "We are now at a critical crossroads in trying to figure out how to make strong hospice and palliative care services available to everyone who wants them, but we are far from achieving that."

The American Medical Association joined the Illinois conference in opposition to the new law. According to an A.M.A. statement: "It is understandable, though tragic, that some patients in extreme duress...may come to decide that death is preferable to life. However, permitting physicians to engage in assisted suicide would ultimately cause more harm than good." The association argued that "physician-assisted suicide is fundamentally incompatible with the physician's role as healer."

The Catholic Church has long opposed euthanasia as part of its commitment to supporting life from conception to natural death, but popular support for assisted dying among the American public is only growing. In 2024, Gallup polling found that 71 percent of Americans supported euthanasia, defined as allowing doctors "by law to end the patient's life by some painless means if the patient and his or her family request it." Similarly, 66 percent of Americans thought "doctor-assisted suicide," when the doctor provides terminal patients with the means to take their own life, should be legal.

Illinois becomes the 12th U.S. state to legalize some form of assisted suicide. The practice is also legal in Washington, D.C., nine European countries, Canada and Australia; other nations have legalized some form of the practice.

A similar bill was on the desk of Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York in December. She pledged to sign it into law after additional requirements, including a seven-day waiting period, New York residency and a mental health evaluation, were amended to the bill. A New York-specific poll commissioned in early 2025 by End of Life Choices New York, an organization that supports assisted dying, found that 65 percent of Catholics in the state supported the legislation.

The Illinois law requires terminal patients to be Illinois residents, and its advocates say it includes safeguards that prevent coercion and abuse. Physicians are required to gauge possible patient coercion and ensure that patients have been informed of alternatives to assisted suicide. Patients must also be able to self-administer the oral medication.

Edward Desciak *is an O'Hare fellow at America Media.*

News photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters

## In South Africa, Trump's irresponsible talk about 'white genocide' stokes divisions

U.S. President Donald J. Trump has repeatedly claimed that white Afrikaners in South Africa are being killed and their farms taken from them in what he has termed a "genocide." At a time when all other refugee flows into the United States have been cut off, the Trump administration has been offering refugee status to Afrikaner farmers, a "racial minority in South Africa," according to the U.S. State Department, "who are victims of government-sponsored race-based discrimination."

South Africa's Afrikaners are descendants of 17th-century European settlers. In South Africa, the genocide narrative has been espoused by some Afrikaner groups who have found in Mr. Trump a sympathetic ear. Two of these organizations are AfriForum and Solidarity, both populist, right-wing political organizations that claim to be building a future for white Afrikaners and their descendants.

These Afrikaner movements offer to foreign governments like the United States as evidence of genocide a distorted picture of killings on farms in South Africa. There is no doubt that South Africa has a very high crime rate; many South Africans would say crime is out of control. But crime affects far more Black South Africans than whites.

Crime statistics, released in November by the South African Police Service, report that two farmers were killed in all of South Africa over the last six months. During the same period, there were 575 gang-related killings in Black communities in a single province.

Cardinal Stephen Brislin, the archbishop of Johannesburg and president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, told **America** in an email that what saddened him most about the president's allegation of genocide "is that irresponsible claims and statements can result in increased tensions and put race relationships at risk, with scant regard for the good of the people or the country."

South Africa "has emerged from a brutal past of discrimination and oppression," Cardinal Brislin said. "Our transition was nothing short of miraculous, and there was no attempt from the previously oppressed to seek revenge or to annihilate the previous oppressors. Instead, a path of reconciliation was initiated to create a society in which all South Africans belong regardless of race, culture or creed."

"Those who have stoked the rhetoric of genocide are doing so for narrow political reasons which are shortsighted, unrealistic and dangerous," Cardinal Brislin said.

"President Trump has his reasons for adopting this rhetoric, despite all evidence to the contrary, and in this, it appears that [AfriForum and Solidarity] are feeding off each other in a type of symbiotic relationship. Probably both are aware of the motivation of the other," he added.

"The vast majority of Afrikaners are committed to South Africa," Cardinal Brislin said, "and while there are many challenges, particularly those of crime and violence, they strive in harmony with others for the good of the nation."

Mr. Trump may make false claims on a global stage, but his amplification of misinformation about white genocide

A South African family granted refugee status by the Trump administration is welcomed by State Department officials at Dulles International Airport in Virginia on May 12.

has had a direct impact in South Africa, where race relations are still fragile decades after the end of the racist apartheid system.

Mr. Trump's claims have also caused division in the white community, including among the Afrikaner community, many of whom emphatically say that whites are not facing targeted attacks. None of South Africa's political parties—including those that represent Afrikaners and the white community in general—have claimed that there is a genocide being waged in South Africa. The South African Human Rights Commission has also stated that whites are not an oppressed minority group.

Apartheid came to an end in South Africa 31 years ago, but the nation continues to grapple with its legacy: Unequal access to education and health care, discrimination in pay, segregated communities, and massive economic inequalities still exist.

The nation's economy is highly racialized, and still slanted in favor of white South Africans—7.1 percent of the population—often to the detriment of Black South Africans, who represent 81 percent of the population. Land reform remains perhaps the most contested issue in South Africa. Seventy-two percent of farms are owned by the nation's minority white people. Black South Africans own only 4 percent of the land.

To redress this past injustice, the Parliament of South Africa approved a land expropriation law in January 2025, allowing farmland seizures by the state without compensation. This too has become a political trigger, used by some white Afrikaners to claim they are being persecuted.

Russell Pollitt, S.J., *contributes from Johannesburg.*


Bishop Richard Moth

CNS photo/Marcin Mazur, Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

## In England, it's the end of an era as Richard Moth chosen for Westminster

Pope Leo XIV has appointed Bishop Richard Moth of Arundel and Brighton as the 12th archbishop of Westminster and leader of the Catholic Church of England and Wales. He will be installed as archbishop at Westminster Cathedral in London on Feb. 14.

Archbishop-elect Moth, 67, succeeds Cardinal Vincent Nichols, 80, who has been archbishop of the primatial diocese since 2009.

An important era thus draws to a close for the Archdiocese of Westminster, which celebrated its 175th anniversary in September, and for the Catholic Church in England and Wales. During his 41 years in key positions, Cardinal Nichols played an important role in the ecumenical field and in interfaith relations. He gave strong backing to Catholic education and worked to combat human trafficking but came under heavy criticism from the independent Royal Commission in 2020 for his handling of clerical sexual abuse.

He also took part in some of the highest events in the realm, including the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022 and the crowning of King Charles III in May 2023, which was the first time a Catholic prelate attended a coronation since the Protestant Reformation.

Bishop Moth was born in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) on July 8, 1958, but immigrated to the United Kingdom with his family at the age of 2. Ordained in the Archdiocese of Southwark in 1982 just before his 24th birthday, he held various positions in the Archdiocese of Southwark until Pope Benedict XVI appointed him bishop of the British armed forces in July 2009.

On March 21, 2015, Pope Francis appointed Richard Moth the fifth bishop of Arundel and Brighton.

"He's prayerful, very grounded in monasticism," a layperson who knows him well but preferred to remain anonymous, told **America**. The source described him as a Francis-style bishop—"pastoral, kind, sincere, a holy man, not a show pony," and "with a good sense of humor."

"Personality-wise, he is more like Pope Leo," the source said. He is "very organized in his style. Not impulsive or emotional, very reasoned. I'd say a solid centrist, steady and highly experienced appointment."

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

# INSIDE THE SWISS GUARD

## A Renaissance-era army contends with modern challenges

By Colleen Dulle

The Swiss Guard crumpled to the marble floor, his face pale over his ruffled collar. It was August 2022, and the young man had been standing sentinel on stage with Pope Francis until he collapsed. "It can happen," a seasoned colleague would tell Rome Reports. "Since you don't move, you have to wiggle your hands and feet a bit to keep the blood flowing."

That seasoned colleague was Cpl. Nicola Crivelli, vice instructor of the Swiss Guard, who, in his role training the world's oldest army in modern security methods, knows well the importance of keeping what many perceive as a museum display always moving, even if imperceptibly.

After the pope, the Swiss Guards are arguably the most recognizable people in the Vatican, with their bright yellow, blue and red Renaissance-style uniforms, black berets and tall halberds—medieval weapons that are half-spear and half-axe. At Christmas and Easter Masses, they don 22 pounds of intricate Austrian-made armor, the helmets topped with red and yellow plumes.

Their choreography during papal Masses is also deeply moving: They stand perfectly still until the consecration at Mass, when they drop to one knee, halberds inclined in a salute. Beneath the stillness and armor, though, they remain hyper-aware of any possible threats, always prepared to leap into action to protect the pope—and to die for him, if need be.

Founded in 1506, the Pontifical Swiss Guard is the world's longest continually operating army, and, with a maximum of 135 members, one of the smallest. Although


CNS photo/Vatican Media

Members of the Pontifical Swiss Guard line up in the San Damaso Courtyard of the Apostolic Palace in this file photo from Oct. 4, 2025.

the Guard has shifted between ceremonial and protective duties at various points in its history, today it definitely performs the latter: a transformation solidified after the assassination attempt against John Paul II in 1981. Swiss Guards jumped on the pope to shield him—one of them still works as the Guard's archivist today—but it was too late; a bullet already was lodged in the pope's abdomen.

Since then, according to David Alvarez, author of *The Pope's Soldiers: A Military History of the Modern Vatican*, the Guard's training has focused more on self-defense, unarmed combat and firearms training, with new recruits training for six weeks at a Swiss police academy while their iconic uniforms are sewn in Rome.

There is, admittedly, some measure of romance that draws young men to the Swiss Guard: The uniform, the location, the history, the proximity to the pope and the oath to die for something greater than oneself appeal to men just entering adulthood. The three Guards who spoke to **America** for this story all described the Guard as a childhood dream.

The requirements to join the Guard's small ranks are strict: One must be unmarried, Swiss, a practicing Catholic and male. Guards must be between the ages of 19 and 30 at the time of recruitment; stand at least 5 feet, 8.5 inches tall; have completed mandatory Swiss Army training; and have earned a high school or professional diploma.

Halberdier Sven Rechsteiner, aged 20 when we spoke to him in fall 2024, explained that his father had always dreamed of joining the Guard but never did. When Halberdier Rechsteiner saw the Guards standing sentinel on a trip to Rome as a child, he adopted his father's dream—and now, his two younger brothers, ages 17 and 10, have done so as well.

"He's now very proud that I joined the Guard," Halberdier Rechsteiner said of his father. His 17-year-old brother is more hesitant to join, he said. "He's saying he has a girlfriend, but well, same as I, and I joined it, so there's no problem. That's not a good argument," he said, laughing. The youngest brother, he said, is "absolutely fascinated" with the Guard and dreams of becoming one. Halberdier Rechsteiner's advice? "You have to be good at school, you have to learn the languages, you have to be disciplined, you have to listen to the parents. He tries his best. It's very sweet."

Halberdier Rechsteiner, who had taken his oath to protect the pope only a few months before he spoke to **America**, was formerly a sniper in the Swiss military.

The requirements—as well as the relatively low salary compared with what civilians in Switzerland earn—make recruiting enough men to fill the ranks difficult. So too does the minimum two-year service requirement, which, as Halberdier Rechsteiner alluded to, can dissuade young men unwilling to leave friends, family or romantic partners for that long.

In recent years, the Guard has ramped up its recruitment efforts and social media presence, yet it remains short-staffed. In fall 2024, when several Guards spoke to **America** for the "Inside the Vatican" podcast on which this article is based, they already anticipated that many men would be asked to pick up extra shifts on their days off to cover the added security demands of the 2025 Jubilee Year. When Pope Francis died in April 2025, their resources were stretched even further.

**Each step forward must be preceded by a reckoning with history.**

The death of the pope and the subsequent conclave meant that the Guard's swearing-in ceremony, which takes place on May 6 every year, had to be moved to Oct. 4. The May 6 date is significant for the Guard, because it was on that day in 1527 that 147 of the 189 Swiss Guards died fighting off the army of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica as Pope Clement VII was whisked away to safety in Castel Sant'Angelo nearby (accompanied by the few remaining guards).

Each May 6, in the presence of the pope, their families, diplomats and Swiss political figures, the new Swiss Guards approach the flag of the corps one by one, gripping it, often with visible emotion, as they swear their oath to protect the pope in Swiss-German, French, Italian or the mountain language of Romansh. Cpl. Eliah Cinotti recalled that at his own swearing-in ceremony, in May 2020, only parents were allowed to attend. Corporal Cinotti, who in addition to his Guard duties also serves as press spokesman for the Guard, said that after the ceremony, his parents told him they finally understood how much the job and the sacrifice he had sworn to make meant to him.

The ceremony is a palpable moment of the weight of history, felt by each Guard in the weight of the ceremonial armor he has trained to wear every Wednesday afternoon for the month before the ceremony, and in the gravity of the oath he or one of his brothers in the corps is making. And yet, in the face of a greater need of the pope—in this case, the election of a new one—even a steel-clad history must bend.

**Changing Responsibilities**

"It's so beautiful that each morning when you wake up, you're in the Vatican," Corporal Cinotti told me over espresso on a sunny Roman day in October 2024, the kind of day the Italians have a word for: the *ottobrata*. "But you have to understand, at the same time, we see a lot of not-beautiful things," he said.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic and in the years since, when Rome has seen record numbers of visitors, Vatican security has noticed a marked increase in people with mental health issues coming to the entry points where the Guards stand. Corporal Crivelli and Halberdier Rechsteiner explained that they often encounter visitors who claim to be Jesus or the Virgin Mary and who demand to see the pope. Corporal Crivelli, the vice instructor, explained that the Guard has brought in experts to train them in de-escalation. Normally, a Guard will ask the visitor for identity papers and then listen to the person—sometimes for hours—while standing on duty.

"Some people just want to be heard," Corporal Crivelli, 37, said. "They don't want to cause any damage. They're angry about something, or maybe they're under the effect of some narcotics or alcohol.... But we cannot let them go inside the Vatican." He says he has spent hours listening to people explaining their problems to him. "I'm just saying, 'Yeah, I'm gonna pray for that. Yeah, I'm sorry.' It's a lot of hearing and de-escalation."

In his role as vice instructor, it is Corporal Crivelli's job to ensure that the Guards' training remains up-to-date with the challenges they face. In recent years, this also has meant training to protect the pope on his foreign visits, on which Swiss Guards began accompanying the pope in 2015. With the election of Pope Leo XIV, a globetrotting Augustinian who already has visited 50 countries in his lifetime and loves to travel, this relatively new Swiss Guard duty will not likely ease up anytime soon.

Ahead of the papal trips, Swiss Guards visit the pope's destination, or the local police forces visit the Vatican, so that they can train and strategize about security together. Such collaboration between security forces is vital for papal safety. In 2021, during Francis' trip to Iraq, U.K. intelligence alerted Iraqi police of two suicide bombers heading toward papal events. The Iraqis had intercepted them and "blown them up," Francis revealed in 2024; they had also alerted Francis' on-the-ground security detail.

Corporal Crivelli said that the possibility of accompanying Pope Francis on trips was what motivated him to remain in the corps long past his initial two years of service, because only more experienced Guards can travel with the pope. Corporal Crivelli went to Malta, Canada and Sudan with Francis before the pontiff's death.

Another nascent area of concern that Corporal Crivelli now has his eye on is cybersecurity. The Holy See is regularly subject to cyberattacks, like a phishing attempt from China during Vatican-China negotiations over the appointments of bishops there in 2020. The Vatican website also went down in 2022 and 2024, with cybersecurity experts commenting that each crash had the hallmarks of a cyberattack.

Vatican cybersecurity is currently managed piecemeal by an international group of volunteers set up in 2022 by a Coptic Orthodox layman in the Netherlands. While the Swiss Guard has what Corporal Crivelli called a "cyber unit," it only covers cybersecurity within the Swiss Guard. In the case of a cyberattack on the pope, "We're not ready,"

Pope Leo XIV attends the swearing-in ceremony of 27 new Swiss Guards in the Vatican's San Damaso Courtyard on Oct. 4, 2025.

CNS photo/Vatican Media

he said, because it has been only a small part of their training.

Joseph Shenouda, the layman who runs Vatican Cyber Volunteers, recently told the Dutch newspaper Nederlands Dagblad that, "In Rome, it just doesn't seem to sink in that they need to wake up" to cyber threats.

Corporal Crivelli agreed that there is resistance to change in the Vatican, particularly when it comes to changes put forward by Swiss Guards: "The fact that we are a historical corps can go a little bit against modernity. We try to become more and more modern and to see the future with our training, our equipment and our skills, but it's not always easy. Sometimes we have to go against the wall of tradition, the way of working that they have in the Vatican."

**Historic Uniforms**

Perhaps the most contentious push for change centers on the Swiss Guards' famous Renaissance-style uniforms. The Guards have a number of different uniforms—two were released in recent years, one fatigues-style for training and another dress uniform for formal dinners—but the striped "gala" uniforms remain best known, although they bring with them their own security risks.

What appear from afar to be solid pieces of striped material are actually thick bands of yellow and blue fabric attached at the shoulder and wrist, and likewise at the waist and just below the knee. They hang loosely, creating a draped effect that, while aesthetically pleasing, can make it difficult for Guards to reach the tasers or other weapons in their belts. Likewise, Corporal Crivelli explained, an attacker could easily grab the fabric bands in order to restrain or overthrow a Guard.

"Actually working with this uniform, it's not always so easy," Corporal Crivelli said. He added that there had been an unsuccessful attempt to make changes to the uniform, but he would not elaborate.

Still, the Guard's uniform has been changed in the past—and it doesn't date to the Renaissance, nor was it designed by Michelangelo, as popular legend has it. Corporal Cinotti broke the news to me as we stood in the uniform room in the barracks. "No, no," he said, laughing. "It's really a big, huge mistake of the tourist guides."

The real story of the uniforms, though, reveals how the Swiss Guard has historically balanced reverence for its tradition with the requirements of modern military service. In the early 1910s, the legendary Swiss Guard commander Jules Repond embarked on a series of reforms: He limited the Guard to only Swiss-born men (rather than mostly Romans of Swiss heritage) and implemented strict military training for the corps, which had become purely ceremonial. Repond's goal was to bring the Swiss Guard back to its roots as a security force—and he wanted to pay tribute to this history with a uniform modeled on that of the first Swiss Guards but adapted to a modern military.

Repond undertook a lengthy research project, discovering frescoes by Raphael that depicted early Swiss Guards. He adapted their costumes for ease of movement and had them produced in the colors of the Medici family, because the pope whose life was saved in the Sack of

**The Guard's uniform was not designed by Michelangelo, as popular legend has it.**

Rome had been a Medici.

For the last 28 years, the uniform has been produced by the tailor Ety Cicioni and a handful of his family members. Mr. Cicioni takes seriously the historic patrimony entrusted to him: He has signed documents saying he will not change the appearance of the uniforms. Shortly after his arrival at the Vatican, though, he did make one change: He noticed that the Guards' uniforms were deteriorating quickly at the seams because of sweat, so he changed how the seams were sewn to make them more durable.

"My main goal was to prevent the Guards from constantly needing repairs," he told me in Italian. The uniforms are custom-made for each Guard from 145 pieces, requiring 39 hours of labor to assemble. "Since each Guard has only one uniform, they don't have time to wash it, so we have to take care of it. When they finish their shift, they come to us, we make the necessary repairs and adjustments, and then they go back on duty."

Mr. Cicioni told me he had also made one aesthetic change to the uniform, but that no one noticed it except for "our dear Major Hasler"—Peter Hasler, the Guard archivist who had jumped on John Paul II after he was shot in St. Peter's Square. "No one else has figured it out," Mr. Cicioni said.

Still, he is considering future changes. The newer Guards, he said, struggle with time management and take a long time to fasten the 14 buttons on each gaiter. "Maybe we could find a system with a zipper," he mused, "try it out and see if it works." Leaning against a cabinet in the barracks' uniform room, Corporal Cinotti said most Guards' speed of getting dressed improves with practice. "Normally when you are young, it's 10, 15 minutes until you're ready. Now? It's 42 buttons in five minutes," he laughed.

The bigger challenge for Mr. Cicioni is that durable fabric for the uniforms is becoming increasingly difficult to find. "We actually need stronger, more resistant fabrics, but today's fashion trends focus on softness and aesthetics instead," meaning that fabric suppliers rush to meet that need. "It's very difficult to find the right materials," he said. A key difficulty: The world's smallest army is too small to justify a custom fabric order.


Cpl. Eliah Cinotti shows **America** executive producer Sebastian Gomes (left) and Colleen Dulle (right) around the uniform room in the Swiss Guard's barracks on Oct. 29, 2024.

As a result, Mr. Cicioni salvages whatever fabric he can from the uniforms of departing Guards. "Unfortunately, it's the young Guards who do this," he said of the salvage work. If a Guard arrives late for work or curfew, his punishment is two hours of cutting up old uniforms. Corporal Cinotti jumped in: "It's horrible! Trust me, you are there for maybe two hours, cutting and cutting." Has he had that experience? "No," he said, "I'm such a good Guard for the moment." (Later, when I asked if he could add a stop in the Sistine Chapel to our tour of the nearby Swiss Guard barracks, Corporal Cinotti responded: "Only if you want me cutting uniforms!")

**A New Barracks—and Female Guards?**

Just inside the Vatican's Saint Anne's Gate, past two Swiss Guards in blue cloaks and black berets, is the Swiss Guard barracks. One wing houses the soldiers, another the commanders, and the last the officers and administrative offices. The three wings surround a courtyard, where on the sunny day I visited, children rode around on tricycles, shrieking joyfully.

Although Swiss Guards must be unmarried to join the corps, they are allowed to start families once they begin their service—a privilege that used to be limited only to corporals and higher ranks. However, there is no more room in the barracks for families, so these days, getting married means a Guard must move out. The space has been at even more of a premium since 2018, when Pope Francis increased the number of Guards from 110 to 135.

In response to the housing shortage and the deterioration of the historic building, a Swiss foundation was established to fund a $60 million renovation of the barracks. The plans for the new barracks, designed by a Swiss firm, would give most Guards single rooms. These days, there are only

12 single rooms in the entire 150-year-old barracks. The additional space would allow more Guards to live in the Vatican with their families. It could also open the door to women Guards.

In 2008, Swiss Guard commander Col. Daniel Anrig told reporters he would love to admit women to the Guard, but first there would need to be sufficient facilities for male and female Guards to live separately. With the new barracks set to be opened on May 6, 2027—the 500th anniversary of the Sack of Rome—the possibility of opening the Guard to women could be on the table again.

Still, Corporal Cinotti explained, admitting women would not necessarily solve the Swiss Guard's recruitment problems: The same factors—low salaries, time away from home—that make recruiting male Guards difficult also apply to women. Likewise, Guards need to have completed their Swiss army basic training, which is required for men but which few Swiss women elect to do, so the candidate pool is relatively small.

The military historian David Alvarez predicted that when the all-male Vatican police force begins to include women, which he thinks is likely in the near future, there will be increased pressure on the Swiss Guard to allow women as well. He said, "The only thing that would hold them back is the same thing that holds the Vatican back in all kinds of areas: tradition."

**The Weight of History**

Layered with the sound of children playing in the barracks courtyard is the sound of construction equipment moving dirt and stone. "It's not construction," Corporal Cinotti explained, "It's more archaeology." As with most construction projects in Rome, digging into the ground will likely lead to some archaeological discoveries. "They're finding if we have some special things down there," Corporal Cinotti said, adding flatly, "We will have some special things."

Such is the law of progress in the Swiss Guard. Each step forward must be preceded by a reckoning with history. Before construction, excavation. Before new uniforms, a study of Renaissance frescoes. Before improved training, an assassination attempt against the pope. It's a tension the Guards can feel in their bodies: Hyper-aware that they may need to spring into action to protect the pope, they keep their eyes open to threats from beneath their heavy, plumed helmets.

In this way, the Swiss Guard is a microcosm of the entire Catholic Church. The Guards, like many Catholics, regard the weight of tradition differently. Some, like the youngest Guard we spoke to, Halberdier Rechsteiner, viewed it primarily as a treasure to be guarded and respected; others, like Corporal Crivelli, appreciate the historic richness but wish the Guard could respond more nimbly to current challenges.

In the end, as the Second Vatican Council determined, the answer is neither one side nor the other but a fusion of both: *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*—a "return to sources" and a "bringing up to date."

Navigating this balance is difficult to ask of anyone, and perhaps particularly for young men dealing with their own questions of faith and identity in the heart of the Vatican. "When I joined the corps," Corporal Crivelli said, "I was joining the Guard to see at what point my faith was, and to challenge it a bit."

"It is a challenge for me every day now, after six years here, to understand at what point my faith is. I pray, not a lot, not always. Sometimes I pray and remember God just when I need something. But actually, in the environment where we are, it's very important stuff," he said. "I have some colleagues who arrive with no faith at all, and they maybe become a priest or [return] to Switzerland very faithful. Others arrive very faithful and [go back] to Switzerland losing their faith, not putting a foot in a church anymore."

"For me, it's still a challenge," he said. "I also have to train [my faith]. I will try to work on it. It's still a challenge. We're not done yet."

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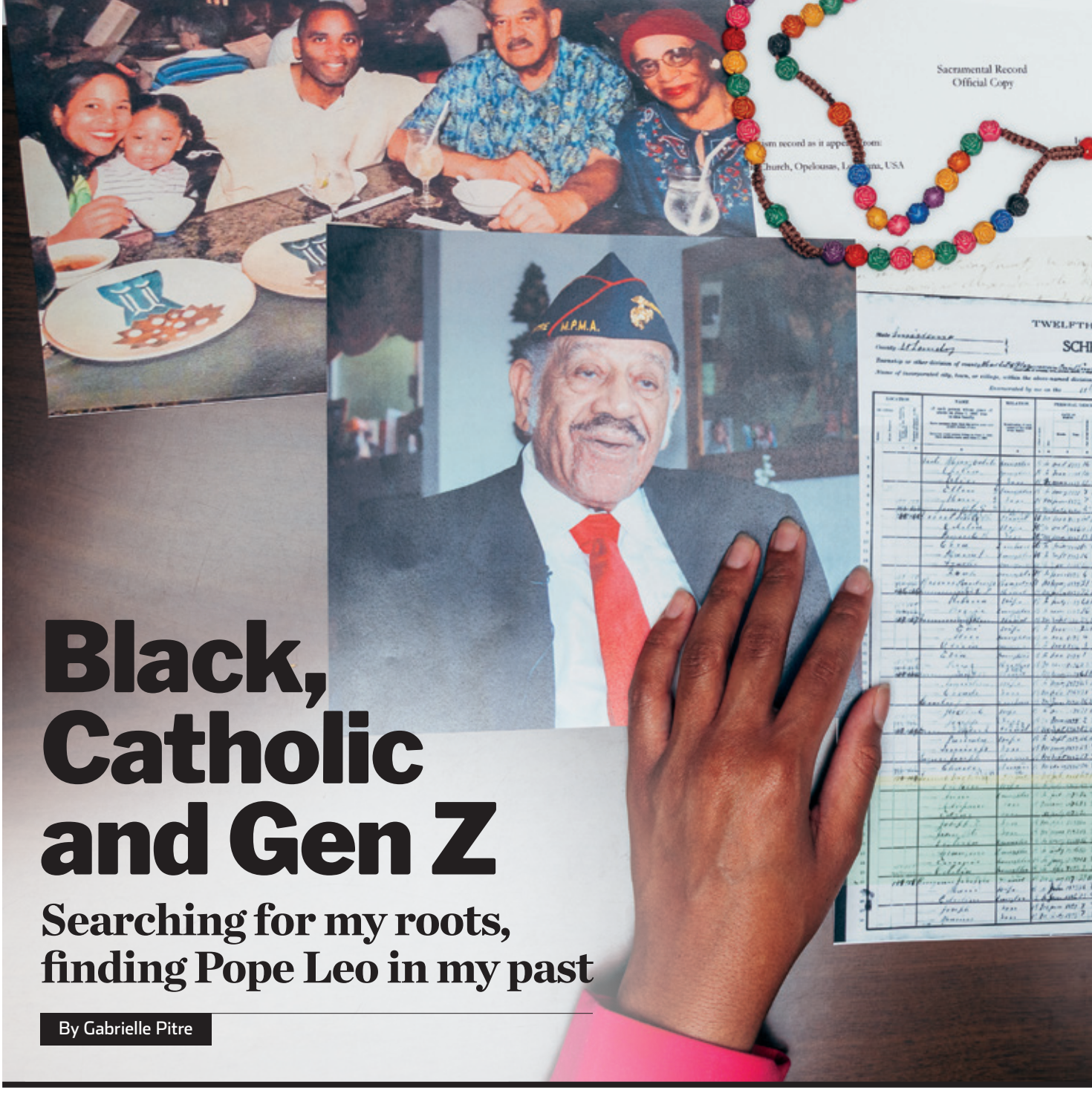
Colleen Dulle *is the Vatican correspondent at* ***America*** *and co-hosts the "Inside the Vatican" podcast. For more, listen to our "Inside the Vatican" podcast episode "Deep Dive: The Swiss Guard, Between Tradition and Reform" at americamagazine.org/swissguard.*

The ceremonial armor of the Swiss Guard

Ricardo da Silva, S.J.




# Black, Catholic and Gen Z

## Searching for my roots, finding Pope Leo in my past

By Gabrielle Pitre

What does it mean to be a member of Gen Z and a Black person of Catholic faith living in the United States at this moment of history? In searching for the answer, I discovered I belonged to a past that helps me make sense of my present.

I grew up in a Baptist and Catholic household in Seattle. My parents always instilled in me the importance of prayer and keeping my eyes on God. I remember in my early childhood singing in the children's choir of Peoples Institutional Baptist Church in Seattle. Because I was baptized Catholic, my dad wanted me to become more in touch with my Catholic faith. As I got older, my family began attending Catholic Mass at St. Therese Parish in Seattle, where I received my first Communion.

Every Sunday my dad would drive me, my mom and my grandparents to Mass. After Mass, we would always go to one of our favorite brunch spots nearby. Now that both of my paternal grandparents have passed, those memories are ones I hold close to my heart. This habit of going to Sunday Mass, praying as a family and sharing a meal afterward always helped me to start my week on a positive note. I would leave church reminded of God's love and


Gabrielle Pietre shares census records, baptismal certificates and family photographs she uncovered while researching her family's Catholic roots in Louisiana.

Miguel Ozuna

faithfulness. I would be reminded that God walks with me wherever I go.

But as I got older, the happy memories of faith collided with a world that invited doubt. Watching the racial reckoning in the United States in the past decade, including the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2016 and the protests after the killing of George Floyd in 2020, I began to grapple with the question: What does it mean to be a Black person of Catholic Christian faith while watching your people fight for the recognition that their lives matter? During the 2016 election cycle, I vividly remember politicians who used racist language when talking about communities of color. I also noticed that there were Christians who supported these same politicians. I remember feeling confused and angry because these words contradicted the word of God that I had learned growing up.

During this time, I also began taking note of African American voices of faith from the past, some of them new voices for me and some as close as my own family. First I was drawn to the story of the 272 enslaved Africans who were sold in 1838 by the Maryland Province of

While researching her Louisiana Catholic roots, Gabrielle Pitre found a surprising connection to Pope Leo XIV in her family tree.

Miguel Ozuna

the Society of Jesus. Many of the 272 were sold to cotton and sugar plantations in Louisiana, where my ancestors were living at the time. What thoughts and feelings did my ancestors have when they baptized their children into Catholicism while their people were treated as commodities by other Catholics? I began to think more about my ancestors' journeys as both Black and Catholic.

Not only did they live as Black Catholics in mid-19th-century Louisiana, but they passed down their Catholic faith through generations in the years that followed, during Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the present. Reflecting on ancestral lineage is a central part of African American culture. So I decided to trace back my ancestry to the 18th century, because this was the era when my ancestors were enslaved. My search for my Black and Christian roots would begin there. During my research, I talked with family members and relevant experts.

**Family of Origin**

My Louisiana Catholic ancestry begins with two names, Marie Jeanne Davion and François Lemelle. I first discovered these names by reading a profile written about my grandfather, Clayton Pitre, who served as a Marine in a segregated unit during World War II. Then I confirmed that my family origins go back to these names by searching in genealogical, census and sacramental records, as well as relevant histories. Marie Jeanne was an enslaved woman. François Lemelle was a plantation owner who had six children with Marie Jeanne. According to an article in St. Charles' Parish Virtual Museum, titled "The Role of Slaves and Free People of Color in the History of St. Charles Parish," the Lemelle plantation may have originally been in St. Charles Parish even before François Lemelle "moved both his white family and the family of color west to the Opelousas frontier" around 1770.

After François died, his will acknowledged his relationship and six children with Marie Jeanne Davion. He also freed her from enslavement. She received 800 acres of land and began a new life in Bayou Courtableau. One of her children was Francois Denato Lemelle, my fourth-great-grandfather. Then, Francois Denato Lemelle became the father to Leo Alexander Lemelle. Leo Alexander's son, Victorin Lemelle, was my great-great-grandfather, who was born around the year 1850. Based on the census records, it is likely he was also born in St. Landry Parish in Opelousas. In the 1880 census, he was listed as a blacksmith.

I was able to find a baptismal record for Victorin's daughter Eugenie Lemelle, my great-grandmother. This record was written in French and was difficult to read because of the age of the paper. However, I could discern that she was born in 1890 and baptized at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church in Chataignier, La. The Lemelle side of my family lived for generations in Louisiana. Their ethnic roots are in France and Africa, with the African lineage through Marie Jeanne Davion's bloodline. Along this journey of discovering my people, my uncle told me that because of the 800 acres of land that Marie Jeanne Davion had inherited, the Lemelle family was quite successful and well educated.

These are the people I come from. I found myself gain-

ing strength and inspiration just by learning their names, because these are the people in my family through whom faith has been passed down from generation to generation.

While searching for these names, I thought about how my own name fits within the legacy of my ancestors. Gabrielle Pitre is an example of French, Creole and Catholic lineage. Pitre comes from my French Creole ancestry. My parents decided to name me Gabrielle after the Archangel Gabriel, which means "God is my strength" in Hebrew. In Christianity, Gabriel is most known for telling Mary that she is favored by God and will give birth to Jesus. Another important point that resonates with me about Mary is that she wasn't wealthy, but was an ordinary person chosen by God to give birth to our savior, Jesus Christ. Mary is an example of what it means to have faith in God's plan even when it is unclear. When I think about my name now, I feel the comfort and presence of my ancestors' guidance, prayers and footsteps wherever I go.

**Of Laws and Liberties**

Researching my family's Black Catholic identity has also meant understanding the political context for free and enslaved Black people in the time of my ancestors' lives. Their faith didn't exist apart from this world but within it. There was a series of legal codes they had to navigate along with changing laws due to shifts in political control of Louisiana from the colonial era to statehood and Civil War, to Reconstruction and Jim Crow. I began this journey with Francois Lemelle and Marie Jeanne Davion in mid- to late-18th century Louisiana. During their lifetimes, political control over Louisiana changed dramatically from French to Spanish and back to French before becoming a U.S. territory and then eventually an American state. Laws that dictated liberties and restrictions for persons of color changed along with these changing political contexts.

Even though interracial marriage was illegal, there was racial mixing under French rule. As a result, a meticulous way of labeling racial status was used based on the percentage of African blood a person had. A biracial person who had a Black parent and a white parent was called a "mulatto." And if a biracial person had a child with a white person, that child would be considered a "quadroon," referring to one-quarter of African American ancestry. In fact, some of my ancestors were listed in various documents as "Negro," "White," "Mulatto," and/or "Quadroon." Marie Jeanne Davion was listed in records by the historian Donald J. Hébert as a "quadroon." Because my great-grandfather Gilbert Pitre was biracial, he was listed in some census documents as "negro," in others as "mulatto"; I also found a World War I military record that listed him as "white."

The French sold Louisiana to the United States in 1803, and Louisiana officially became a U.S. state in 1812. According to the article, "Free Persons of Color in Colonial Louisiana," published in 1966 in the journal Louisiana History, around 1830 many white Americans began to fear that free persons of color would build coalitions with abolitionists, which they feared would hinder what they saw as the economic growth brought about by the institution of slavery. As a result, legal status was often determined by race-based distinctions. This led to an increase in restrictive and oppressive laws for African Americans, including laws pertaining to free persons of color like my ancestors. These legal structures deeply affected their lives.

> **Happy memories of faith collided with a world that invited doubt.**

Sometimes the pervasive coercion of these legal structures exploded into murderous violence. One such occasion of extreme violence affected my great-great-grandfather, Victorin Lemelle. My ancestors lived in Opelousas since the early 19th century. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era in Louisiana had its benefits and drawbacks. However, whatever triumphs in politics there may have been were met with backlash from white Americans. In 1868 Louisiana revised its Constitution to allow African American men the right to vote (the 15th Amendment in the United States Constitution was in the process of being ratified). However, "former Confederates seeking to regain power and restore white supremacy in the state opposed these provisions.... The desire to keep Black people oppressed after emancipation was especially strong in Opelousas, the seat of St. Landry Parish."

St. Landry Parish was also home to white supremacist groups. Approximately 3,000 white men were members of the Seymour Knights—a branch of the white supremacist Knights of the White Camelia (similar to the Ku Klux Klan). During the election of 1868, white residents of Opelousas physically attacked Emerson Bently, a white journalist who had exposed local voter intimidation. Because of the threat of violence, many Black residents of Opelousas armed themselves. Nevertheless, according to the Equal Justice Initiative (a nonprofit that provides legal representation to those who have been denied fair trials): "Over the next two weeks, armed white men patrolled Opelousas and surrounding communities, terrorizing and killing Black residents indiscriminately. By some estimates, the violence killed at least 30 white people—including some who were targeted by mobs for being sympathetic to Black rights—

Gabrielle Pitre writes that she gained "strength and inspiration" by learning the names of her ancestors, "because these are the people in my family through whom faith has been passed down from generation to generation."

Miguel Ozuna

and left an estimated 200 Black people dead."

**A New Family Connection**

As I researched the Opelousas Massacre at my desk in my bedroom, I teared up at the realization that my great-great-grandfather, Victorin Lemelle, would have been 18 years old and likely lived in or near Opelousas during this time. I wondered what it was like to be an 18-year-old Black male in 1868 when your people were being murdered because they were in the process of claiming their rights as citizens of the United States. I wondered what he thought and felt. How did this impact his faith journey and his sense of self?

I wondered what stories my ancestors shared with their families and the others they kept to themselves to protect their children from their pain. What were their conversations with God like in the midst of the mass murders and segregation they faced throughout their lives?

I wanted to learn more about the upsetting history of the relationship between the Catholic Church and enslavement to understand my ancestors' lives and experiences as Black Catholics. So I turned to the discussion of the slow, frustrating change in Catholic teaching on slavery presented in John T. Noonan Jr.'s book *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching.* Mr. Noonan, who was a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals, told the story of how the Catholic Church finally and officially came to decide that slavery is inherently wrong—but not until Dec. 7, 1965, in a document of the Second Vatican Council.

During the long, hesitant journey to this conclusion, several things struck me as key moments. In the late 18th century, Judge Noonan notes, various political leaders and philosophers reconciled the institution of slavery with the Enlightenment. He notes that "James Madison, the enlightened Christian who became the effective champion of religious liberty, was a slaveowner contented to leave the institution as he found it. 'Enlightenment' alone did not equate with abolitionism." In the 19th century, Pope Leo XIII called out slavery's cruelty but hesitated to call it inherently wrong. As late as 1960, the Italian Jesuit Tommaso Iorio described slavery as "a state of perpetual subjection in which one is bound to furnish all his work to another in exchange for support" but also denied that slavery was against the law of nature.

While reading this part of Judge Noonan's reflections on Catholic moral teaching on "the law of nature," several questions came to mind. I wondered how Catholicism could retain for so long distorted ideas of nature that led to the justification of enslavement. Who determines what is or is not against "the law of nature?" What makes something against the law of nature? And why for so long was slavery not considered against the law of nature? Judge Noonan lists all the aspects of slavery that were not condemned as morally wrong by the teaching office of the Catholic Church until 1965:

**I thought about how my own name fits within the legacy of my ancestors.**

> The offenses to human dignity that the church did not condemn included the buying, selling, hypothecating, inheriting, and owning of human beings; the use of slave labor without any measure of just compensation; the denial to slaves of education, including instruction in reading and writing, and the denial to slaves of the right to educate their children; the denial to slaves of any right to a religious vocation or to the sacrament of holy orders; the denial of any right to personal development; and the complete exclusion of the slave from the political community.

As a young Black Catholic, reading about how long it took for the church to condemn slavery, I felt disappointed and frustrated that the reluctance to admit fault took precedence over doing what was right. I wondered what my ancestors thought and felt about this reluctance. How did they reconcile their faith identity and racial identity as Black Catholics during a time when the Catholic Church was reluctant to call slavery inherently wrong?

As I retraced my ancestors' journeys navigating their racial and Catholic identities in an anti-Black society, I found myself in awe of their strength and perseverance in the midst of racial terror and violence. I remember the day I received the baptismal records of my ancestors. I was sitting at the kitchen table back home in Seattle during spring break and got an email notification on my phone from the Diocese of Lafayette. Flooded with excitement, I rushed to my bedroom to grab my computer and open my email. I had never seen a baptismal record before, so I wasn't sure what to expect. To my surprise, my great-grandparents' baptismal records were written in French, even though Louisiana was already a U.S. state at the time and English was its official language.

To see these records was powerful because they were tangible evidence of my relatives' faith-based strength. Growing up, I had always heard stories of my Black, Catholic and French-speaking heritage, and to be able to hold these documents brought this heritage and my ancestors to life. Oftentimes we are pressured by society to separate our racial identity from our faith identity. However, this process has shown me that both can coexist and create a beautiful and unique experience. Through these baptismal records, I am convinced that my ancestors' faith was essential to their survival during the frightening times they lived through as Black Americans and French colonial subjects.

While thinking about my ancestors' journey, I wondered how they would have felt about the election of Pope Leo XIV. Not only is Pope Leo XIV the first pope from the United States, he is also a pope with a Louisiana Creole heritage similar to my family's. I wonder about the sense of pride and excitement they would have had that the leader of the Catholic Church is a descendant of people who survived the same history of discrimination and racial terror that my ancestors faced while remaining rooted in their faith.

In June 2025 a New York Times article with the blurb "Noblemen, enslaved people, freedom fighters, slaveholders: what the complex family tree of the first American pontiff reveals" analyzed Pope Leo's Creole ancestry and named some of his ancestors, which revealed one more very important family connection for me. In the article, the distinguished author Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote, "Another fourth-great-grandmother of the pope, Marie Jeanne, was an enslaved 'mulata,' counted among the property of François Lemelle, of New Orleans."

If this is the case, it means I share ancestry with Pope Leo XIV through my great-grandmother Eugenie Lemelle's paternal lineage going back to where I started the story of my ancestry in this piece—Marie Jeanne Davion. My very, very, distant cousin is the pope! I am absolutely ecstatic and in awe of this discovery.

This journey has reaffirmed my trust in God's faithfulness and guidance. Going forward, when I feel discouraged or worried, I will draw inspiration from my ancestors and how they held on to God's unchanging hand during times of great uncertainty. In our world today, when news headlines become even more troubling and life feels uncertain, I will remember how my ancestors went through worse times of racial unrest, and how they put their best foot forward to survive knowing that God would see them through their hardships. Knowing what they faced gives me strength to persevere in my Catholic faith now.

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Gabrielle Pitre *is a senior at Santa Clara University from Seattle, Wash. She wrote this article as part of her Hackworth Fellowship at the university's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, where she has studied under the guidance of the center's director, David DeCosse.*

# Beyond Tolerance

## 'Nostra Aetate' and the still-opening window

By Hal St John

In 1998, a quiet Jesuit theologian named Jacques Dupuis was summoned to Rome. His recent book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* had stirred both admiration and alarm.

Dupuis had proposed that the world's many faiths might not simply be treated as tolerated anomalies or faint echoes of Christianity. Instead, he suggested they could be living spaces where God's spirit is already at work. For this he was investigated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led then by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

Dupuis's ordeal, while painful, also illuminated challenges in interreligious theology. His fidelity to the church was never in doubt—he affirmed again and again that Christ is the unique mediator of salvation—but he insisted that divine truth could radiate through other traditions in ways not reducible to Christianity's categories. "The mystery of Christ," he wrote, "is larger than the Christian world."

That controversy, still echoing in classrooms and chancery corridors, points to an ongoing lesson: The church continues to learn to look through the window opened 60 years ago by the church's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" ("Nostra Aetate"), issued at the Second Vatican Council. The declaration, just 1,600 words long, marked one of the most radical turns in Catholic history: a shift from suspicion to encounter, from a closed fortress to an open horizon.

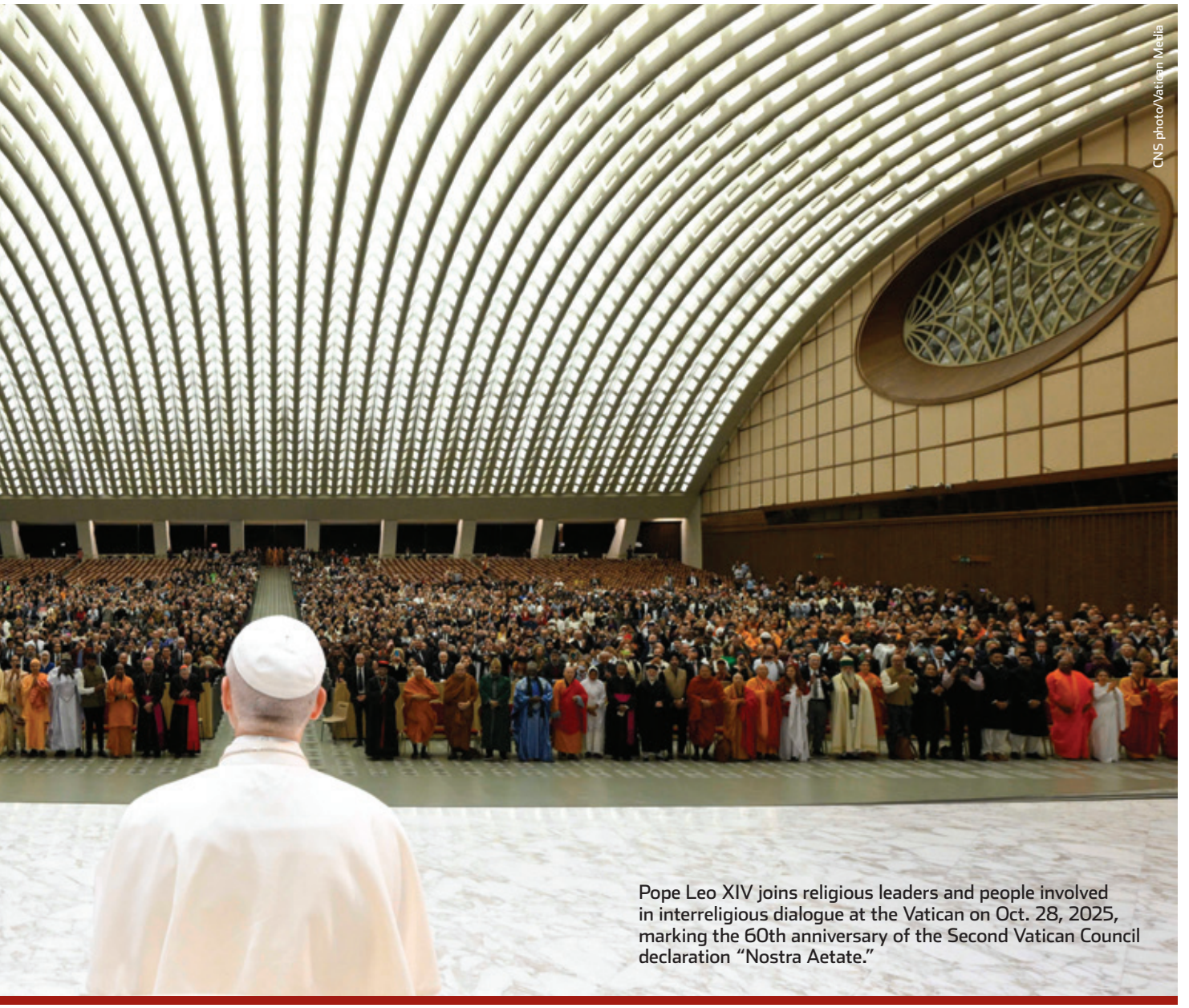
### The Promise of a New View

When the bishops of Vatican II promulgated "Nostra Aetate" in October 1965, they were concluding an age of defensiveness. For centuries, the maxim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—"no salvation outside the church"—had often been interpreted narrowly. Many believed God's grace operated almost exclusively through explicit Christian faith and sacramental life. Other religions were seen as well-intentioned errors, shadows rather than lights.

However, in the spirit of doctrinal continuity, the council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" ("Lumen Gentium"}, reaffirmed that while the church remains the ordinary means of salvation, God's grace is not confined and can extend beyond the visible bounds of the church, thus broadening the understanding of salvation without negating its traditional roots.

"Nostra Aetate" quietly dismantled the church's posture of defensiveness. Its opening paragraph named something breathtakingly simple yet revolutionary: "Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition." Suddenly, non-Christian faiths were not seen merely as obstacles. Instead, they became partners in the same human quest for meaning. The document went on to praise the "moral and spiritual truths" of Hinduism and Buddhism, to recognize in Islam those who "adore the one God" and, most movingly, to repudiate antisemitism "at any time and from any source."

The church had not altered a dogma; it had changed its posture. This was a conversion of gaze—a theological re-education of the heart.



CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Leo XIV joins religious leaders and people involved in interreligious dialogue at the Vatican on Oct. 28, 2025, marking the 60th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council declaration "Nostra Aetate."

**Grace as the Human Horizon**

Behind this shift stood the quiet genius of another Jesuit, Karl Rahner. While the council fathers drafted declarations, Rahner was building the metaphysical scaffolding that made them thinkable. He asked: How can the church affirm both the uniqueness of Christ and the real possibility of salvation for those who never know him by name?

Rahner's answer was what he called the "supernatural existential." The phrase may sound forbidding. Its meaning, though, is profoundly consoling. Every human being, Rahner argued, lives within an atmosphere of grace—an invisible, sustaining relationship with God that is not occasional but structural. Grace is not a spiritual "bonus" added to human nature. It is the horizon of our existence, the air we breathe.

To express this, Rahner borrowed language from the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger had spoken of *Dasein*, the human being as the one for whom Being itself is a question. We are thrown into a world not of our choosing. Still, we are always reaching beyond it and asking why anything exists at all.

Rahner baptized this insight. Our innate longing for truth and love, he said, is not empty curiosity. It is already God's invitation. The capacity to know and to love is graced from within.

Hence, when the Gospel is preached, we are not hearing a message alien to us; we are recognizing the voice that has already whispered in our hearts. As Rahner put it, God's self-communication is "an abiding determination of [humanity's] transcendental constitution."

**Dupuis saw Christ as the universal sacrament of salvation whose mystery overflows the visible boundaries of the church.**

In biblical terms, this is what John's prologue means when it calls Christ "the true light that enlightens everyone." The light shines not only on but *through* every person. Grace is not an external beam occasionally switched on. It is the dawn built into the human soul.

This idea underwrites the open scope of "Nostra Aetate." If every person is already touched by the offer of divine life, then dialogue with other religions is not a negotiation between insiders and outsiders. It is a mutual recognition of grace at work in different histories, languages and rituals, a shared search for the mystery that has already found us.

**Dupuis and the Courage to Go Further**

Jacques Dupuis took Rahner's insight and extended it into a new era of global Catholicism. Living in India for decades, he taught at the Jesuit theologate in Delhi. There Dupuis encountered Hinduism and Islam not as abstract systems but as living spiritual worlds. In their scriptures and mysticism, he saw genuine responses to the same divine mystery Christians encounter in Christ.

In *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997), Dupuis proposed that other religions might participate positively in God's plan, not merely as preparatory stages or reflections of Christianity, but as real, divinely willed paths of encounter with the transcendent. He was not proposing relativism but a deeper Christology: Christ as the universal sacrament of salvation whose mystery overflows the visible boundaries of the church.

The book was a milestone—and a lightning rod. In 2001 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a notification that warned that some of Dupuis's formulations risked suggesting "two parallel economies of salvation." Dupuis was asked to affirm that Christ remains the sole and universal mediator, which he readily did. Yet the episode exposed lingering anxiety within the church about the limits of openness.

The integrity showed by Dupuis during the investigation—his patience, humility and fidelity—made him a quiet martyr for the theology of dialogue. He never sought

CNS photo by John Norton

The Belgian Jesuit Jacques Dupuis was the subject of a two-year investigation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for his 1997 book, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism.*

to replace Christ with pluralism; he sought to understand how the cosmic Christ might be encountered beyond the church's institutional frontiers. In doing so, he carried forward the unfinished work of "Nostra Aetate."

If Rahner gave us the metaphysical foundation for interreligious respect, Dupuis gave us its ecclesial imagination. He asked not only how grace operates in individuals, but how God's self-communication might take communal, cultural form within the world's great religious traditions.

**From Theory to Living Encounter**

"Nostra Aetate" was never meant to remain only an idea. Theologians may parse its implications, but its true field of proof is lived experience. The decades since 1965 have shown both its fruit and its fragility.

On one side, Catholic-Muslim and Catholic-Jewish dialogues have flourished. Papal visits to synagogues and mosques have become ordinary signs of friendship. On the other hand, the temptation to retreat into suspicion remains strong. A concrete example of lingering anxiety can be seen in the reactions to the "Document on Human Fraternity" signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019 by Pope Francis and the grand imam of Al-Azhar. While celebrated as a milestone for interfaith harmony, it also stirred controversy among those who feared it blurred theological boundaries.

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# AMERICA'S GUIDE TO CATHOLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION

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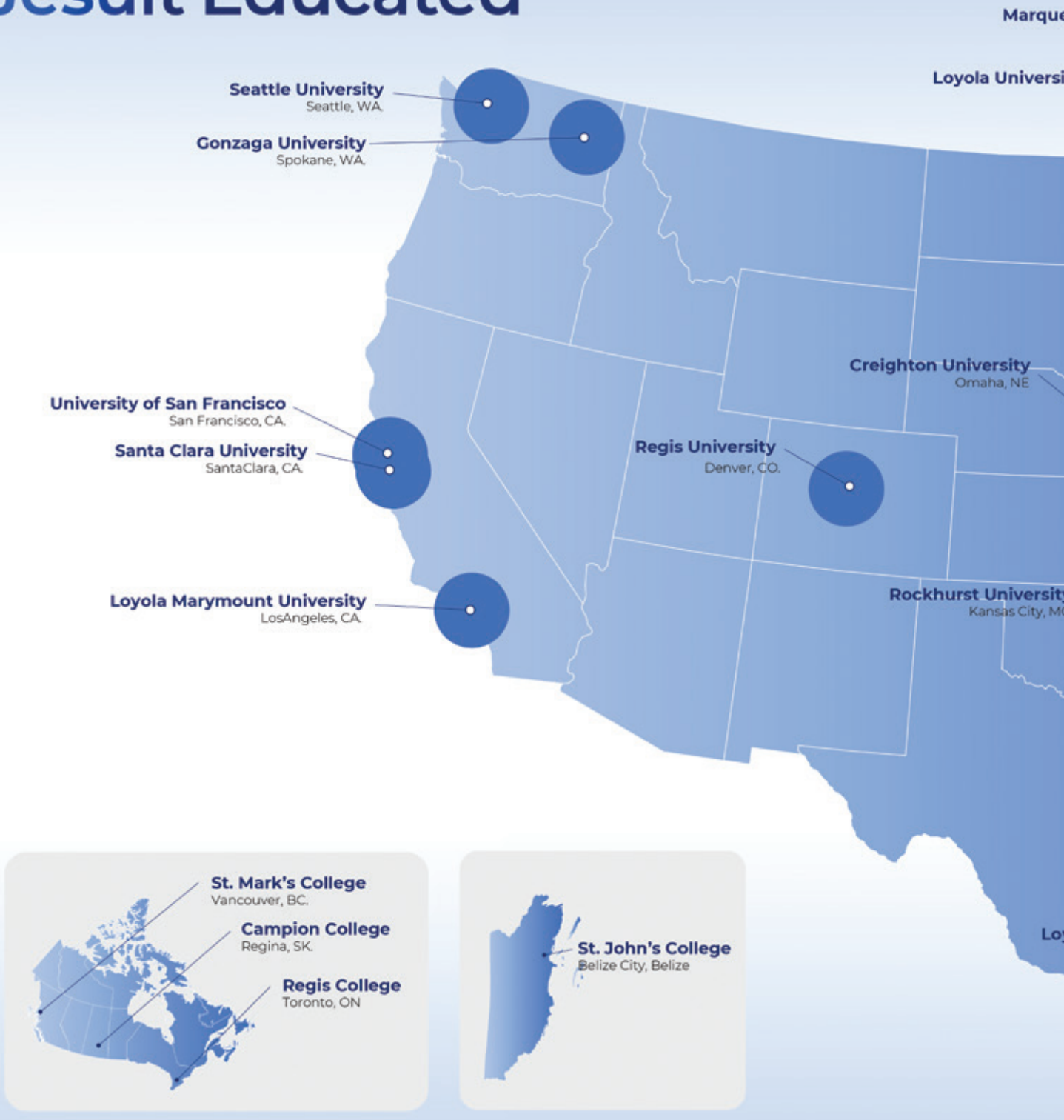

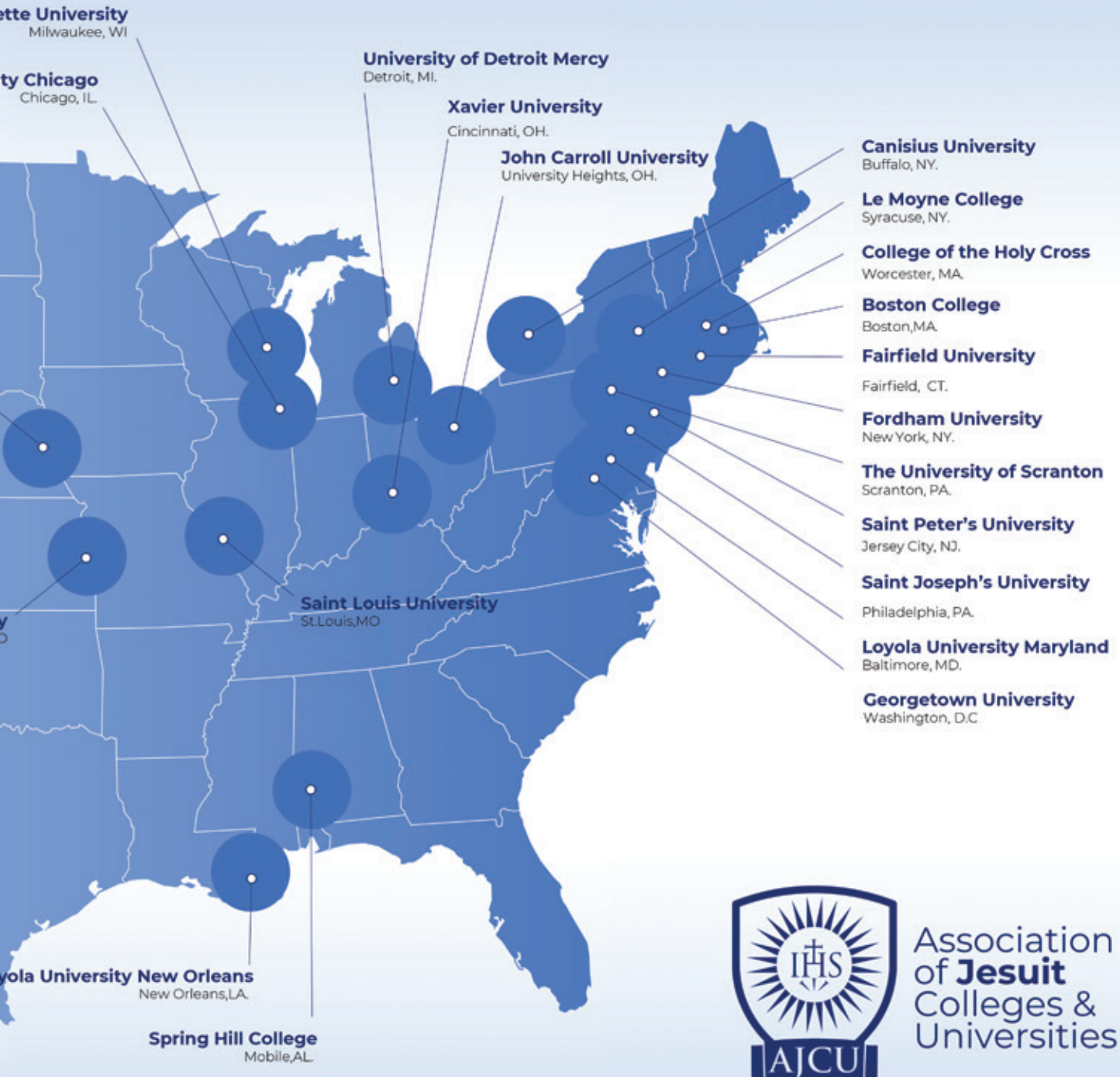


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Meanwhile, some drew stark contrasts between this event and the optimistic confidence of "Nostra Aetate," revealing the church's ongoing journey toward embracing and understanding diverse faith traditions.

Even within the church, dialogue can sound like weakness to some Catholics who fear that affirming truth in other religions dilutes Christ's uniqueness. Yet Rahner and Dupuis show the opposite is true. We affirm Christ's uniqueness precisely because we believe his grace is inexhaustible. The light is so universal that it cannot be contained by our categories.

Rahner's "supernatural existential" also helps us read the church's wounds. The clerical abuse crisis has exposed the illusion that holiness is guaranteed by institutional belonging. Grace, Rahner reminds us, is not an automatic property of office or structure. It is the silent work of God in the depths of human freedom. If the Spirit can be active in a Buddhist monk or a Muslim mystic, then surely it can also be at work in the survivor who demands truth. It can be present in the lay faithful who rebuild trust from below.

Dupuis might say that the Holy Spirit's "interreligious" presence is mirrored by its "intra-ecclesial" one: The same God who speaks in other traditions speaks also through the margins of our own. The call of "Nostra Aetate" is not only to dialogue outward but also to listen inward—to the unfamiliar voices within the body of Christ that reveal where grace is moving next.

**A Mature Faith: 'Releasement' and Trust**

In this moment, many Catholics feel disoriented by change. The insights of Rahner and Dupuis summon a deeper kind of faith, one less about possession, more about trust. Rahner often cited the mystic Meister Eckhart's term *Gelassenheit*, "releasement." Faith, he suggested, is not clinging to certainty. It is standing open to God's unforeseeable self-gift.

Applied to interreligious dialogue, this means letting go of the need to define God's presence in advance. The encounter between religions becomes not just a polite academic exchange but a shared exposure to the divine mystery that always exceeds our language. The Christian does not enter dialogue as one who owns the truth. Instead, one trusts that truth is already at work in the other.

I experienced this firsthand during a discussion with a practitioner of Buddhism. As we talked about our spiritual journeys, I was confronted with a perspective that challenged my own certainties. The profound sense of peace and acceptance this individual embodied was a living testament to grace, prompting me to release my preconceived notions and embrace a deeper, shared search for the divine.

This is the spiritual heart of "Nostra Aetate." It was never a manifesto of relativism, but a confession of faith in the universality of grace. The document asked the church to move from mere tolerance to what Pope Francis would later call "a culture of encounter," a readiness to be changed by meeting the other.

Philosophically, Rahner gave us the reason such openness is possible: because grace is not a discrete gift or a process or reception but the condition of our very being. Theologically, Dupuis gave us its consequence: the Spirit's freedom to work where it wills, even beyond our maps. Together they form a kind of dialectic of hope—Rahner's depth providing the ground, Dupuis's vision providing the horizon.

**The Still-Open Window**

Sixty years after "Nostra Aetate," the church again finds itself at a crossroads. The Synod on Synodality speaks of listening, inclusion, discernment. These are not bureaucratic words; they are theological ones. They echo the same conversion that began in 1965: from control to communion, from rigidity to relationship.

But every generation must decide whether to keep that window open. To do so is to accept vulnerability, the risk that dialogue will unsettle our tidy boundaries, that grace will appear where we least expect it. Yet perhaps that is precisely what faith demands.

The God whom Rahner described as "absolute Mystery" and whom Dupuis found shimmering in the faiths of the world is not a possession to be defended, but a presence to be discovered. When the church dares to look through the window of "Nostra Aetate," it does not lose its identity; it discovers its depth.

We stand, as Meister Eckhart said, "bareheaded beneath God's thunderstorms," and we are bathed in light. The window that was opened in 1965 is still ajar. Our task is to keep looking through it—toward a world radiant with grace, where dialogue itself becomes a form of prayer, and where the Spirit's breath, still blowing through that conciliar room, teaches the church anew how to see.

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Hal St John *is a theologian and the author of* The Call of the Holy. *His writing has also appeared in Studies in Christian Ethics, The Tablet, and Seen and Unseen.*

Isabel Legarda

"Our Mother of Africa" sculpted by Ed Dwight, in the Our Mother of Africa Chapel, Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

## AT THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

By Isabel Legarda

An angry Christ glowers from the apse
his robe a perfect match for flames
that burn about his golden head.
But this is his mother's house,
and she is everywhere, in chapels
all along the sides, and in the understory,
the crypt beneath the chancel,
her face in each locale a match
for every nation represented: African mother,
Aztec girl, Vietnamese woman dressed
in the áo dài, teaching her persecuted children
huddled in the jungles of Quảng Trị
to survive on medicinal plants.
Outside, shiny new shops on Michigan and Monroe,
their shadier forebears mere phantasms now,
soak in torrential rain. Our ark is not of this world,
even with its cafeteria, gift shop, public restrooms.
The basilica is Mary's arms around us, the crypt church
her womb, every candle a wavering voice.
She brings us to our knees.
After Mass, a gray-haired Filipina kneels
before Our Lady of Antipolo, eyes closed,
her umbrella on the marble floor, her body
tiny in this giant space, a dust mote
in the cosmos, an embryo.
She is the quickening, the leap of faith;
she the tabernacle, mother of the world.

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Isabel Cristina Legarda *is a writer and physician in the Boston area. Her work has appeared in the New York Quarterly, The Lowestoft Chronicle, The Ekphrastic Review, and others. Her poetry chapbook* Beyond the Galleons *was published in 2024 by Yellow Arrow.*

# Finding God in Suburbia

## Lessons from mowing lawns, riding bikes and a fateful walk to school

By James Martin

*How hard could it be?* was a question for all my summer jobs, almost always answered with something along the lines of "pretty hard." Most of these jobs turned out to be physically, mentally or emotionally hard. Sometimes all three. Except babysitting, which consisted of watching TV, talking on the phone and drinking Tang.

But lawn mowing, the job I was now contemplating for the summer of 1975? How hard could *that* be? By age 14, I was mowing our lawn every week during the spring, summer and fall. Fortunately, we had a new power lawn mower, a big red Toro that I loved starting.

Filling the tank with gasoline and pulling on the cord and hearing the enormous rumble as the engine revved to life made me feel like an adult. *Look at me!* I thought, *I'm mowing the lawn!* It was almost like driving a car—after all, our mower's noisy engine was powered by gasoline—which I couldn't wait to do in another two years. In fact, I liked starting the lawn mower too much. "*Jimmy!* Don't *pull* so hard," said my dad. "You're going to *break* it!"

Then he'd come out and show me how to do it. "Like this," he'd say, and pull harder than I did.

Every time I filled the tank or started the engine, I wondered whether it would explode. When I poured the pungent gasoline from the red metal gas can into the Toro's tank, it smelled like danger. Would a stone shoot up through the whirring metal blades and lodge itself in the engine and cause an explosion? Would the fact that my parents smoked when they came outside to check on my mowing progress mean that a cigarette ember would land on the motor, find its way into the tank and set off a gas-fueled conflagration? Would yanking the cord too fast create a spark that would ignite the gas and destroy our backyard in a catastrophic fireball? I saw the disaster movie "The Hindenburg" that year, and from then on I thought about the big blimp exploding every time I yanked on the cord. "Oh, the humanity!" I would say, as our neighborhood was flattened by my carelessness.

Explosions were, to my mind, just an accident away. I got this attitude from my mom: You could never be too careful. I felt that I was pushing a lethal device over the grass, though I had never known anyone in our neighborhood whose lawn mower had blown up.

Despite my fears, I was happy not to rely on a hand-push lawn mower, like my grandmother had at her row home in Philadelphia, and which I occasionally used to cut her lawn, to ill effect. It was like pushing through molasses, for all the good the dull, rusted blades did, which were probably last sharpened during World War II. On the bright side, I didn't have to worry about it exploding.

As may be evident, I spent a good portion of my adolescence in fear: of exploding lawn mowers, biting dogs, stinging bees, not to mention poison ivy (and oak and sumac), dentists, bullies, being called names, failing at sports and so on. The list grew longer each year.

I also worried that I would suffer the fate of one boy in our neighborhood. While mowing his family's lawn, he accidentally ran over a nest of baby rabbits hidden in the grass, turning them into a bloody pulp. One of the toughest boys around, a few years older than me, he burst into tears and had to be consoled by his mom.

Every time I mowed, then, I was alert to possible rabbits' nests and burrows, which meant that every hole needed to be inspected. Any perfectly formed holes were sure to house a massive snake, probably poisonous, though I lived in the Philadelphia suburbs, not the Florida Everglades.

Then again, you could never be too careful. One day a large snapping turtle walked right out of the woods, across Kings Road and up our driveway. It lived for a few weeks on rations of lettuce in a cardboard box in our garage until it tipped over its temporary home and walked away, no doubt looking for higher quality lettuce. We didn't even have time to name it.

Our lawn, a quarter of an acre, took me almost two hours to mow. This presumed that my mom or dad weren't monitoring me from the window, or even coming out to inspect my work, which meant more time, because it meant many do-overs.

I thought of my parents as the lawn police. They could get annoyed when I hadn't cut close enough to the trees or bushes or lamppost or fence, didn't make straight lines or did a substandard job on the edging around the driveway and sidewalk. I had a low tolerance for criticism, a trait that unfortunately dogged me into young adulthood. Rather than simply accepting that I wasn't a good edger, or ask for help, or apologize, I took it as a personal attack.

"If you don't like it, do it yourself!" I once said to my mom, whose face clouded as she stood in the doorway.

"HEY!" shouted my father from a bedroom window.

My parents would have made great spies, since they

were always silently monitoring my and my sister's activities. "Don't talk to your mother like that!"

I sullenly started edging again.

Occasionally daydreaming, I would stop the lawn mower, still running, to look at anything that was more interesting than the grass, which was everything: an ant mound that I had avoided, a cardinal or blue jay in the trees, a flock of geese (now a nuisance, back then a rarity) or even a strange insect, even though most bugs grossed me out. Once, my mom caught me staring at something for a few minutes.

"What are you doing?" she shouted out the kitchen window.

"*Whaaaaat*?" I said. "I'm looking at a rock, okay?"

"You're wasting gas! That costs money," she said, taking a puff on her Kent and closing the window.

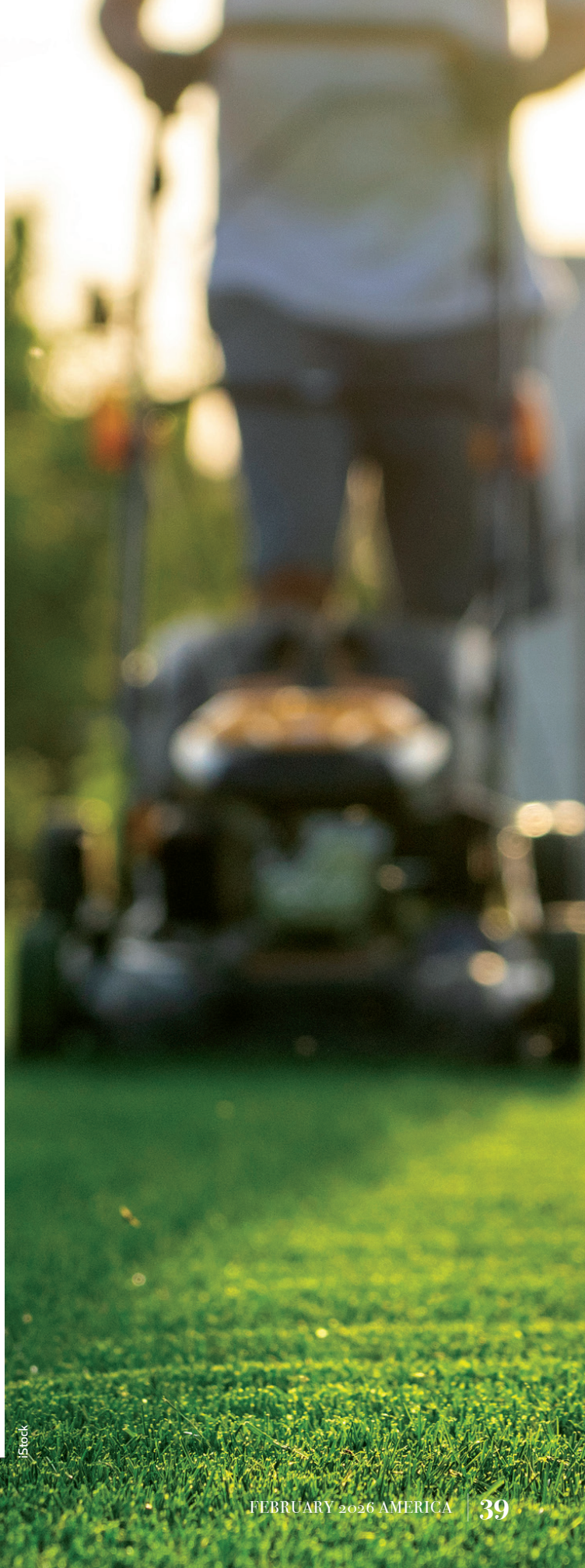
You might think that since I'm now a Jesuit priest, I was contemplating nature with a sense of religious awe. But that's not how I saw it then. If you had asked me whether I was admiring God's creation, I would have said, "No, I'm looking under a rock." Perhaps some true contemplation was going on, but I wasn't aware of it.

But there was one event in childhood, a few years before, that I now see as an early awareness of God. When it happened, I chalked it up as a strange experience and set it aside.

**On the Way to Ridge Park**

On most school days I pedaled my bike to Ridge Park Elementary School with the rest of our bike gang. But sometimes I rode alone. I loved sailing downhill to school, past the late-1950s split-levels, all constructed from the same architectural blueprints with enough variance in design to satisfy a town planner's heart: some with square windows, others with long windows paned in diamond shapes; some with doors that led to a living room on the first floor, others that opened onto a landing with a living room a few steps above the entrance.

Most of the homes in our neighborhood, including our own, were filled with Danish-modern furniture, then labeled "contemporary." In every house were low-slung chairs; maple coffee tables and end tables with spindly legs (with heavy crystal ashtrays on top); tall wooden lamps with oversize shades and tiles embedded into chunky ceramic bases; and giant metallic, moon-shaped chandeliers that hung from the dining room ceiling. By the 1970s, this décor was supplemented by thick shag carpeting and patterned wallpaper or vinyl faux-wood paneling. Nearly all the kitchens were decorated in either Harvest Gold or Avocado Green, including the blenders, crockpots, ovens and refrigerators. And nearly all the houses were filled with kids.



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**I would stop the lawn mower, still running, to look at anything that was more interesting than the grass.**

I passed the house of older kids I was afraid of; houses of friends from school; the house of my Cub Scout den mother; houses with dogs (fast); the house of our school principal's secretary, Mrs. Voros, whose name made my parents laugh because in the first grade I told them that she was my "close, personal friend"; and the house of my friend Allison, whose backyard I would cut through to get to school more quickly, if I were walking. But mostly I biked.

At the bottom of a hill at the end of our street, you dismounted from your bike to walk a few feet on pavement between two houses, at the end of which was a concrete staircase. At the top of those steps was a meadow, my memory of which remains intact, now 50 years later.

The meadow was nothing more than a small undeveloped plot of land bordered on the left by a sidewalk and a stand of oak trees, and on the right by the wide green baseball fields of our elementary school. In the fall and winter, you walked over the brown, frost-covered, desiccated oak leaves that crunched underfoot and sometimes traipsed through the shin-high snow.

But in the spring and summer, the meadow was a riot of life, filled with weeds, wild grasses and all manner of wildflowers. It was a beautiful place, especially in the morning.

One spring morning, I hoisted my blue Schwinn bike to the top of the concrete steps, pedaled a few feet over the rutted dirt path that cut diagonally across the meadow, and stopped in the middle. Maybe my schoolbooks were falling out of my bike's metal basket; maybe I stopped to check that the Wacky Packages decals or Day-Glo Flower Power stickers on my bike weren't peeling off; maybe I had run over a stone and wanted to make sure that my tires weren't punctured. Whatever the reason, I stopped and set my feet down.

On this unseasonably warm morning a sweet grassy smell came from the meadow. All around me was so much *life*: grasshoppers jumping from one blade of grass to another; Queen Anne's lace waving slowly in the sun; and wild yellow snapdragons, black-eyed Susans, white daisies, and wild strawberry plants in profusion. Even the flowering weeds looked beautiful: yellow dandelions, white clovers and purple thistles. Bees buzzed, but they seemed friendly, uninterested in me, for the time being. A chorus of crickets chirred softly.

In the distance was my elementary school, which, though I complained about it, I loved. It was an inviting place, a space for learning and exploration. It felt, above all, safe and orderly—you knew you would be welcomed every day, you knew that the teachers would have carefully planned lessons, and you knew what was expected of you. Its quasi-monastic regularity appealed to me.

I loved almost everything about it, except the homework. I loved the First Day of School (always capitalized in my mind) when, wearing my new back-to-school clothes that my mom and I had picked out at the mall, I would walk or bike in the summery weather through our neighborhood into a new year. I loved looking at the minuscule insects that swam in brackish water drawn from a nearby stream, subjects we examined between two glass slides with our classroom microscopes; I loved finger-painting (and the splattered smocks we wore to protect our clothes); I loved the fragrance of glue and paste (I also liked the taste of the latter); I loved celebrating almost every holiday, both secular and religious, by taping up cardboard decorations on the windows of our classrooms; I loved dressing up for Halloween and marching around the school parking lot with the rest of the kids in an ersatz parade; I loved the elaborate posters we drew for our social studies classes; I loved inhaling the sweet fragrance of the purple ink on the wet mimeograph pages (almost every kid pressed the newly printed sheets to their noses immediately after receiving them from the teacher); I loved covering my textbooks (which were used by dozens of kids before me, who signed their names in the back) with paper from shopping bags to keep them clean; I loved almost anything about the library—new books filled me with joy; and I loved nearly all my teachers. I loved school. It was one of the earliest sources of what I experienced as real joy.

On this sunny day, unlike other mornings, when you would pass (or be passed) by other kids on their bikes, no one else was in the meadow. So I stopped to take it all in, still astride my bike, my feet on the bumpy dirt path. Suddenly I felt a strange sensation: a profound happiness coupled with a desire to stay in that meadow forever, to understand the source of this beauty, to know what was happening—to *possess* it all somehow.

It was an odd experience that I didn't understand. But it seemed to point me to something else, something more, something beautiful, though at the time I had little understanding of what that meant. I just knew that I wanted to stay where I was.

At the time, I didn't see this experience as especially

Left: James Martin, age 13, smiles for the photo booth camera. Right: The author stands with his parents and sister Carolyn, circa 1970. Images courtesy of James Martin.

important, just a weird moment of daydreaming. Like looking under the rocks in our backyard. I got back on the bike seat and pedaled the rest of the way to school. Later I'd come to see this moment as one of the first times that I felt a longing for God.

**Spring Again**

On a recent fall day, I visited that spot, no longer a meadow but just a grassy area behind some houses that have been built during the past few decades.

The stairs I dragged my bike up back then are still there. So are the sidewalk and oak trees that border the field on the left, but the trees are enormous now, perhaps 40 feet high.

I parked my car and walked toward the field from the direction of the elementary school, which looks as it did in the 1960s: an exemplar of midcentury-modern school architecture. The broad baseball fields are still there too, and as far as I know, the wire baseball backstops are the same ones used when I was a boy dreading Little League tryouts.

I approached the plot of land cautiously because I didn't know if any homeowners would feel that I was trespassing. Someone else was on the sidewalk ahead of me, so it seemed that this was public property. Soon the person left the area, and I was alone in the crisp air.

As I walked closer, I felt a sense of consolation, an almost physical pang of recognition: How well I knew this place. Each of us knows places that are part of our core memories and can move us deeply when we encounter them again—especially if we've not seen them for a long time.

Then I saw something that amazed me: The diagonal, rutted path we took as children across the meadow was still there, 50 years later, now a deep indentation in the ground, carved out by thousands of bike wheels and children's sneakers. The rut was filled with brown fall leaves, which had blown in and settled there, revealing the path I had taken as a boy as clearly as if someone were pointing it out to me—and perhaps someone was. In a flash, the memory of that morning came back to me, and on that chilly day it was suddenly spring again.

James Martin, S.J., *is an author, editor at large at America and founder of Outreach. This essay is adapted from his latest book,* Work in Progress: Confessions of a Busboy, Dishwasher, Caddy, Usher, Factory Worker, Bank Teller, Corporate Tool, and Priest *(HarperOne), released this month.*


# Educating the Whole Person

**Learning is about more than test results. But how do we tell if it's working?**

By Pamela Patnode

It was the first day of school, and five pairs of eyes looked expectantly at me. I returned their gaze, trying my best to look confident and joyful. This was the first day of our family's new experiment—our first day of homeschooling.

My three older children had previously attended our local Catholic school. Their experience at the school was excellent. Our children had good friends as well as loving and competent teachers, which made the decision to homeschool all the more difficult.

The decision to educate our children at home was not the result of a concern with their school, nor was it rooted in an ideological belief that education in their school was corrupt. Rather, through prayer and discernment, my husband and I had heard God inviting us to momentarily step off the accelerating treadmill of life, to pause, slow down and build relationship with one another.

Because my background was not in education, I spent a year preparing for the adventure. After attending numerous conferences and receiving intensive training in instructional practices, I purchased the necessary curricular materials, I notified the school that our children would not re-enroll for the following year, and I prayed.

Deciding which subjects to teach and which pedagogical approaches were best for each child demanded ongoing learning. I tried desperately to stay a few paces ahead of my children as I considered how best to meet their academic, spiritual, social and physical needs. With the completion of each year, and while I set goals for the upcoming year, a weighty question loomed in my consciousness.

In addition to establishing goals for the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the formation of social relationships, their physical well-being and spiritual growth, I found myself wrestling with this unsettled question. It is one that philosophers, theologians, educators, politicians and parents have grappled with for thousands of years. The question, seemingly so simple yet practically so profound, is this: *What is education for?*

A perusal through the history of education from the Grecian idea of *paideia* through the secularization of education in service of the state yields numerous perspectives on the question. Despite countless years of educating children, and although different educational systems have articulated their own unique overall missions, the ultimate *telos* of education still does not have a globally accepted definition. It also remains a continued topic of discussion, as shown by the conference at Harvard University in September 2025 titled "Emerging School Models: Scaling for Success." It is notable that of the 17 different workshops and speaker sessions, multiple sessions addressed this issue, including one that used the question as its title: "What are we educating for?"

The panelists at the Harvard conference offered inter-

esting responses to the question. Their answers included the "unlocking of potential," the building of knowledge and skills that make a person "useful," and, as Dr. Kelisha Graves proposed, the development of "better human beings" who can create a "beloved community."

I found an element of truth in each of the responses, but each answer seemed incomplete. It is within the Catholic mission of education that, I believe, we discover education's fullest and most significant goals. According to the "Declaration on Christian Education" ("Gravissimum Educationis"), promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, the mission of Catholic education is to form the whole person while leading that person to Christ. It also states that parents are the primary educators of their children, with whom the church and the school partner.

This goal of forming the whole of the person requires a commitment to teach children knowledge and skills; it obliges us to instruct children on the human person and on how to form healthy human relationships (a task that is becoming more challenging in a transhumanist, virtual world); and it calls for instruction in faith and virtues, guiding students into an intimate relationship with Christ while helping them develop the habit of living their faith each and every day.

The challenge, then, is how do we measure success?

The assessment of student performance in reading, math, science and other curricular subjects can be achieved in multiple ways. One of those measures is through standardized testing. But while academics are important, they are only one aspect of the overall educational program. When considering the other areas of the Catholic mission, it becomes more difficult to measure success. For example, how does one measure virtue? How can one test a student's love for the Lord? Is there a way to measure a student's overall flourishing as a human person?

Standardized tests fail to measure these important elements that Catholic schools and many Catholic home educators take seriously. In a world with increasing levels of anxiety, depression, violence, division, addiction and loneliness, many desire to know if they are succeeding in the formation of the whole person because doing so can help alleviate many of these cultural ills.

How can we know if our efforts at forming the whole person while leading them to Christ are succeeding? What assessment do we use? I will admit my desire to answer this question is motivated by the very personal question of whether I can know whether our family homeschooling experiment succeeded or failed in this mission.

This is something I have often wondered about over the years. It has been more than 20 years since we sat around the table that September morning to begin educating our children at home. My children are now grown and starting

## Is there a way to measure a student's overall flourishing as a human person?

families of their own. When our homeschooling years ended, I continued with my own education, earning additional degrees and certificates so that I could enter the world of formal education to teach others.

In the ensuing years, I taught in a Catholic school and at the university undergraduate and graduate levels. Yet I continue to wonder: Have I succeeded? Have I helped to form the whole of each student I have taught while leading them to Christ?

We can engage in intentional practices of virtue, prayer, sacraments, catechesis and evangelization, and recognize signposts to indicate certain measures of gain, but true human flourishing, and true growth in wholeness and holiness, is a lifelong journey. Did I succeed in my efforts? I honestly don't know. And part of my own education has been learning to sit with that uncertainty. As I get older, I am beginning to recognize that it takes a lifetime of effort, prayer, faith, help from others, continual learning and grace to attain the ultimate goal of education and of life.

What I do know is that I, like countless educators, have given my very best—and I have routinely prayed for each of my students by name.

While some sectors of the educational arena are experiencing upheaval, and others appear to be growing, many continue to ask the question: *What is education for?* I believe that the Catholic Church has answered this question in its fullness, not limited to just the temporal but also looking toward the eternal. The ultimate goal of wholeness and holiness cannot be determined by an exam, because the ultimate goal is not a number on a test. It is a person, and that person is Jesus Christ.

Pamela Patnode *is a Benedictine oblate, author, international speaker and educator who holds a doctorate in educational leadership from Bethel University. She is the former director of the Catholic School Leadership graduate program at the Saint Paul Seminary in Minnesota.*

# A Journey of Faith and Service

## The AMDG program leads high school students on a yearlong spiritual adventure

By William Gualtiere

Every other Thursday morning, students at Fairfield College Preparatory School, my alma mater, wake up early to volunteer at Blessed Sacrament Church in Bridgeport, Conn., delivering bags of food to families in need. More than 1,800 miles to the west, students from Arrupe Jesuit High School in Denver, Colo., regularly serve meals at a local homeless shelter, bringing joy to a community in need, according to their theology teacher.

On paper, these two schools look very different; however, they are united by their Jesuit spirituality and commitment to service—something that recently has become strengthened through the AMDG program, run through Boston College's Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies and a grant from Lilly Endowment.

Matthew Schweitzer, associate vice president for mission and ministry at Boston College, explained the inception of the program: "We saw that there was a huge need, a huge desire among young people for service."

I spoke to a few members of Fairfield Prep's AMDG cohort; their enthusiasm for the program was palpable and their devotion to service and faith apparent. But what was more apparent was their devotion to each other. When one student wasn't speaking as much, the others paused to make sure their friend had a moment to speak. A small interaction, yes, but one that showcases the type of growth AMDG is hoping to foster.

AMDG derives its name from the Jesuit motto "*Ad majorem Dei gloriam*," meaning "for the greater glory of God." On the choice of name, Mr. Schweitzer said: "St. Ignatius and everything he did was just all about helping souls.... I think at any given point he was asking himself, 'What will help the greatest number of souls in the deepest way possible?'" AMDG seeks to inspire that same drive in its participants.

The program's goals and purpose were described by Casey Beaumier, S.J., the Haub vice president for university mission and ministry at Boston College: "When we designed AMDG, our hope was to magnify Jesuit spirituality so that it might more readily come to the assistance of the service of faith. By inundating AMDG participants with beautiful Catholic practices, our hope is that our Catholic faith might become more and more the source from which we draw as we spend our lives in service of others."

The program brings together 600 participants, aged 16 to 29, from 25 high schools, colleges and parishes in a yearlong faith exploration and service journey. It sponsors each student in full for three major milestones: Boston College's already established Ever to Excel program, a summer program for current high school students; an in-person Ignatian retreat; and a 10-day excursion on the Camino Ignaciano in Spain during the summer.

In between these larger events, each group meets weekly to continue their spiritual growth and commitment to service. AMDG staff members work directly with an adult "ambassador" chosen from each institution to provide resources and support to the groups. These meetings allow each institution's experience to be different and tailored to the group's specific needs and environment. Institutions are also assigned a "beadle," a current Boston College student who mentors and supports the groups as they go on their individualized faith journeys.

Tom Tulp, a theology teacher at Fairfield Prep, discussed his school's involvement: "AMDG has done a really good job of showing the beauty of the Catholic faith in a variety of ways, in ways that [the students] just experience it without a ton of strings attached." (Full disclosure: My father also works as dean of mission at Fairfield Prep and is involved in the AMDG program.)

Mr. Tulp serves as his institution's ambassador. He and his group of AMDG students from Fairfield Prep have committed themselves to service work at Blessed Sacrament every other week. Mr. Tulp also spoke about the program's mission of bringing faith and service together: "We are walking this journey, this journey of life and this journey of faith together, and you can't help but help those that are on the side of the road and in need on that pilgrimage."

Sam Schelble is a theology teacher and ambassador from Arrupe Jesuit, the only Cristo Rey school in the program. Mr. Schelble explained the graces he had seen in his group at Arrupe Jesuit: "This yearlong opportunity...gives students a chance to go places they would not otherwise have a chance to go, to engage in spirituality and service over a course of a full year, and also to meet other students from this [Jesuit] network."

Will Healy and Evan Mansour, the program and assistant program directors for the AMDG program, described the graces and challenges of bringing such diverse groups together: "We've actually found there's much to be gained by including different populations, because they're learning from each other. They're being inspired by one another, energized by one another."


Students from Arrupe Jesuit High School in Denver, Colo., travel to the AMDG program at Boston College

Mr. Schelble echoed this sentiment, speaking about his group's experience first arriving at Ever to Excel: "The program placed our students in a new environment—one that stretched them beyond their initial comfort zones spiritually and socially. Ultimately, this proved to be a grace, as many of them came away from Ever to Excel with deep and unexpected connections. On the last day, I remember many of our students having a hard time saying goodbye to their new friends as we prepared to return to our respective cities. That transformation was beautiful to witness."

Mr. Schelble and Mr. Tulp both spoke about the positive impact they had seen in their students from the program. Both described the passion they continue to see in their students to get involved in more service and faith-based activities—and also expressed excitement for what is to come.

Preparations for walking part of the Camino Ignaciano (a pilgrimage route that traces the path St. Ignatius took from Loyola to Manresa in Spain after his conversion experience) this summer have already started. Students from groups have been tasked with preparing the rest of their cohorts for the Camino and for the physical and spiritual challenges the experience will undoubtedly include.

AMDG is in its pilot stage, and has been approved for two years thus far. Next year, the same ambassadors will put together a group of 15 students (five more than this first cohort). The AMDG staff along with the ambassadors will be working together to fine-tune the program for a more streamlined experience going forward, with hopes of continuing it beyond these first two years.

AMDG highlights the strong desire in young people to find ways of connecting their faith to making a positive impact in their communities, a mission that is increasingly necessary in a divided world.

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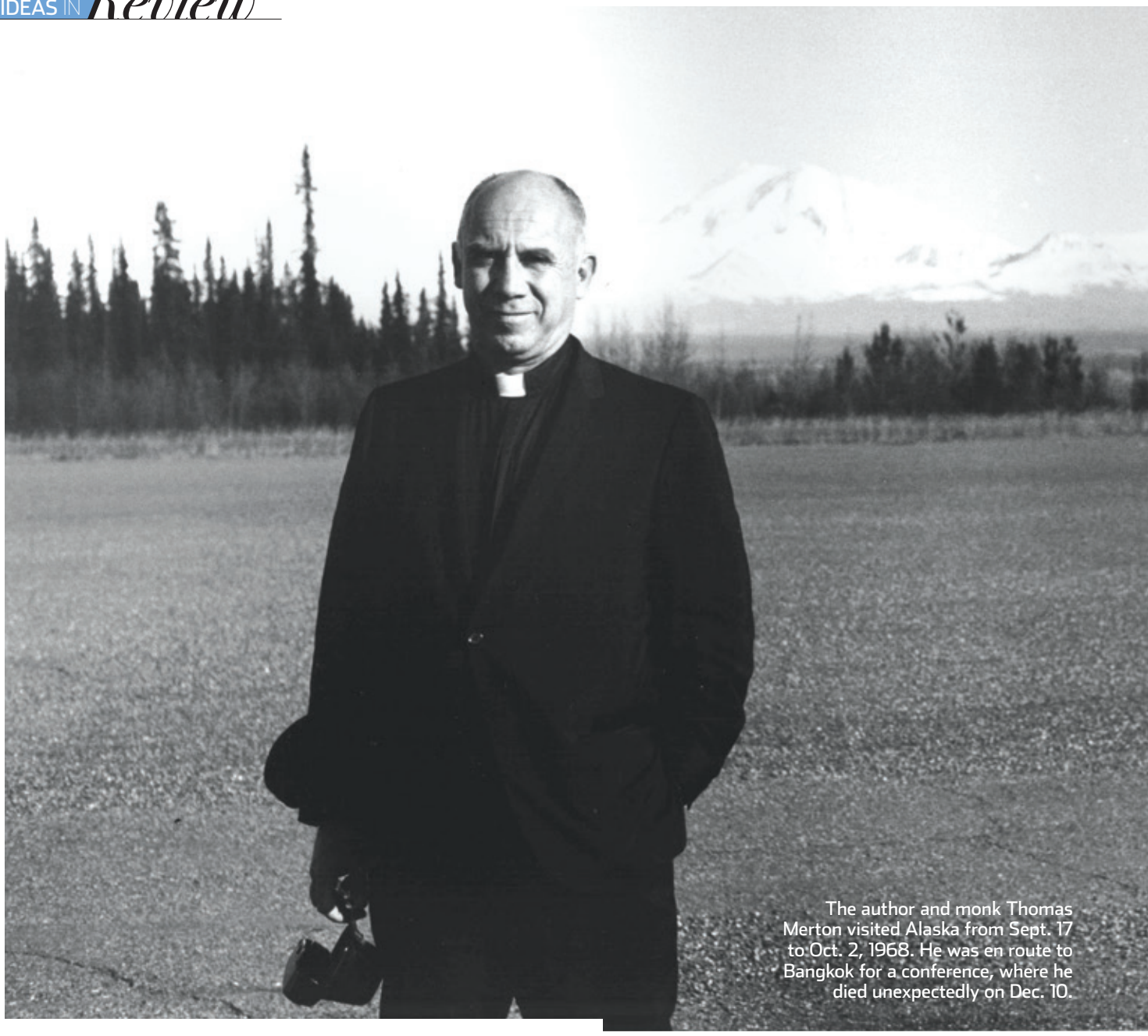
William Gualtiere *is a Joseph A. O'Hare fellow at America Media.*



The author and monk Thomas Merton visited Alaska from Sept. 17 to Oct. 2, 1968. He was en route to Bangkok for a conference, where he died unexpectedly on Dec. 10.

# Meeting Thomas Merton in Alaska

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

*Nothing among human things has such power to keep our gaze fixed ever more intensely upon God, than friendship for the friends of God.*

—Simone Weil, "Waiting for God"

*Friendship is the first and most important thing, and is the true cement of the Church built by Christ.*

—Thomas Merton, "Striving Towards Being"

Can we have friends among the dead? Is it possible to have a friendship with someone you have never met? Can you be friends with a person who never knew you even existed?

If the answer to these questions is yes, then I am friends with Thomas Merton—and you may well be, too.

I met Merton the way most of us have: through his writing. Our friendship began in a most accidental way, when a photocopy of his poem "Elegy for a Monastery Barn" drifted off the bookshelf in my English Department office I shared with a colleague. As a young literature professor and a practicing poet, I was, and still am, ever on the


Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University

lookout for voices, poems and poets who are new to me.

Of course, I had heard Merton's name before. As an educator interested in the Catholic intellectual tradition, I knew him to be a great contemplative and spiritual master. In addition, beyond Catholic circles, Merton is famous for his activism, albeit of a literary kind. His writing critiqued the materialism of mid-20th-century American society, opposed the Cold War and proliferation of nuclear weapons, and championed the civil rights movement. Along with the prominent Catholic activists Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, S.J., Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, and from within the walls of Gethsemani Abbey Monastery in rural Kentucky, Merton challenged American complacency and became one of the keepers of the conscience of his era.

Even so, when his poem was lifted from its dusty shelf by a light gust of wind from the open window and landed on my desk, it arrived like a gift. I recognized in Merton's poem the voice of a fellow traveler and fellow searcher, a Catholic writer attentive to the world and the ways in which divine presence is manifest in the ordinary places and spaces around us, a poet who knew instinctively that beauty and holiness are inextricably intertwined and who had forged a language to express that mystery. By accident, I had made a discovery that would change the course of my life as a poet, a scholar and a teacher. Thus began a friendship that would last for the next 40 years.

As with most friendships, ours evolved gradually over time. After this first introduction, I immersed myself in Merton's writing. That summer I made a concentrated effort to obtain and read every poem Merton ever wrote—or, at least, as many as I could find. This reading of his poems spilled over into reading his prose about poetry, his critical essays on other poets (whose work I also sought out) and, perhaps most enjoyably, the letters he exchanged with other writers. I was steeping myself in Merton, marveling at how he managed to be both a faithful Catholic and a serious artist who created work that seamlessly blended his art and his faith. I too was a young poet and a Catholic, and I wanted to learn how to do what he had done.

One of the many things I discovered was that Merton's faith and his art were not only inextricably linked, but they flowed from the same fountain (to mix a metaphor). In his celebrated autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, wherein he tells the story of his conversion to Catholicism as a student at Columbia University and his discovery of his vocation as a monk, Merton confesses: "I had never been able to write verse before I became a Catholic. I had tried, but I had never really succeeded." Seen through the eyes of his new faith, Merton perceived the world in a radically different way.

In his essay "Poetry and Contemplation," Merton writes:

> All good Christian poets are then contemplatives in the sense that they see God everywhere in His creation and in His mysteries, and behold the created world as filled with signs and symbols of God. To the true Christian poet, the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments—signs of God, signs of His love working in the world.

This distinctive, sacramental vision—what the late theologian David Tracy refers to as "the analogical imagination" in his book bearing that title—was fully apparent in Merton's work.

Merton made a grand entrance into my imaginative and intellectual life, and he also, perhaps inevitably, made an entrance into my classroom. His *Collected Poems,* as well as *Striving Towards Being* (a collection of letters he exchanged with the Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz), selected essays and excerpts from his journals, and *The Seven Storey Mountain* all became a permanent part of the syllabus for my Catholic studies seminars devoted to the Catholic imagination. Every semester, Merton is one of a number of Catholic writers who accompany us along a journey toward enlightenment, his wisdom books leading us in the direction we ourselves need to go.

His books are the first we read, and after we finish them, he continues with us as companion and fellow traveler. At the end of the semester, when I ask my students who among the 12 or so authors we have read is their favorite (all of them being brilliant, beautiful writers, several of whom are more recent and, one might think, more relevant to the lives of 21st-century 20-year-olds) most of them name Merton. Strangely, wonderfully, my friend has become their friend, too.

**Walking in Merton's Footsteps**

In 2015, during the yearlong celebration of Merton's birth centenary, I had occasion to make a physical journey, as well as an intellectual and spiritual one, with my students and Thomas Merton. We attended a vespers service at Cor-

> Merton made a grand entrance into my imaginative and intellectual life.

pus Christi Church on 121st Street in Manhattan, a couple of blocks from Columbia University. This was the church Merton stumbled into one Sunday, where he observed Mass for the first time, where he later returned and introduced himself to the pastor, became a catechumen and was finally received into the Catholic Church. After vespers, Corpus Christi's then-pastor and Merton aficionado, Father Raymond Rafferty, kindly led my students and me to the baptistry in the rear of the church where Merton was baptized, unlocked the wrought-iron gates, and invited us to gather around the font where Merton had been welcomed into the church. Father Rafferty read aloud passages from his dog-eared copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* wherein Merton describes with great emotion the joy of his conversion and his gratitude for Corpus Christi, as well as for the members of the Columbia community who helped him along his path.

My students were greatly moved, as am I whenever I return to that humble church, to walk in Merton's footsteps and sense something of his presence in this place where such a momentous occasion took place in our friend's life. Here in the midst of a bustling, busy, dirty city, in November 1938, at a time when he was experiencing depression and anxiety about his own future as well as the future of the world, the 23-year-old Merton found holy ground and chose to follow a new path without knowing where it would lead.

That evening, my small group of students admired his courage and his spirit of adventure, as many of my students do when they read his books—perhaps even more keenly than I, given their closeness in age to the young, newly baptized Merton and their own sense of uncertainty as they try to discern their paths in life.

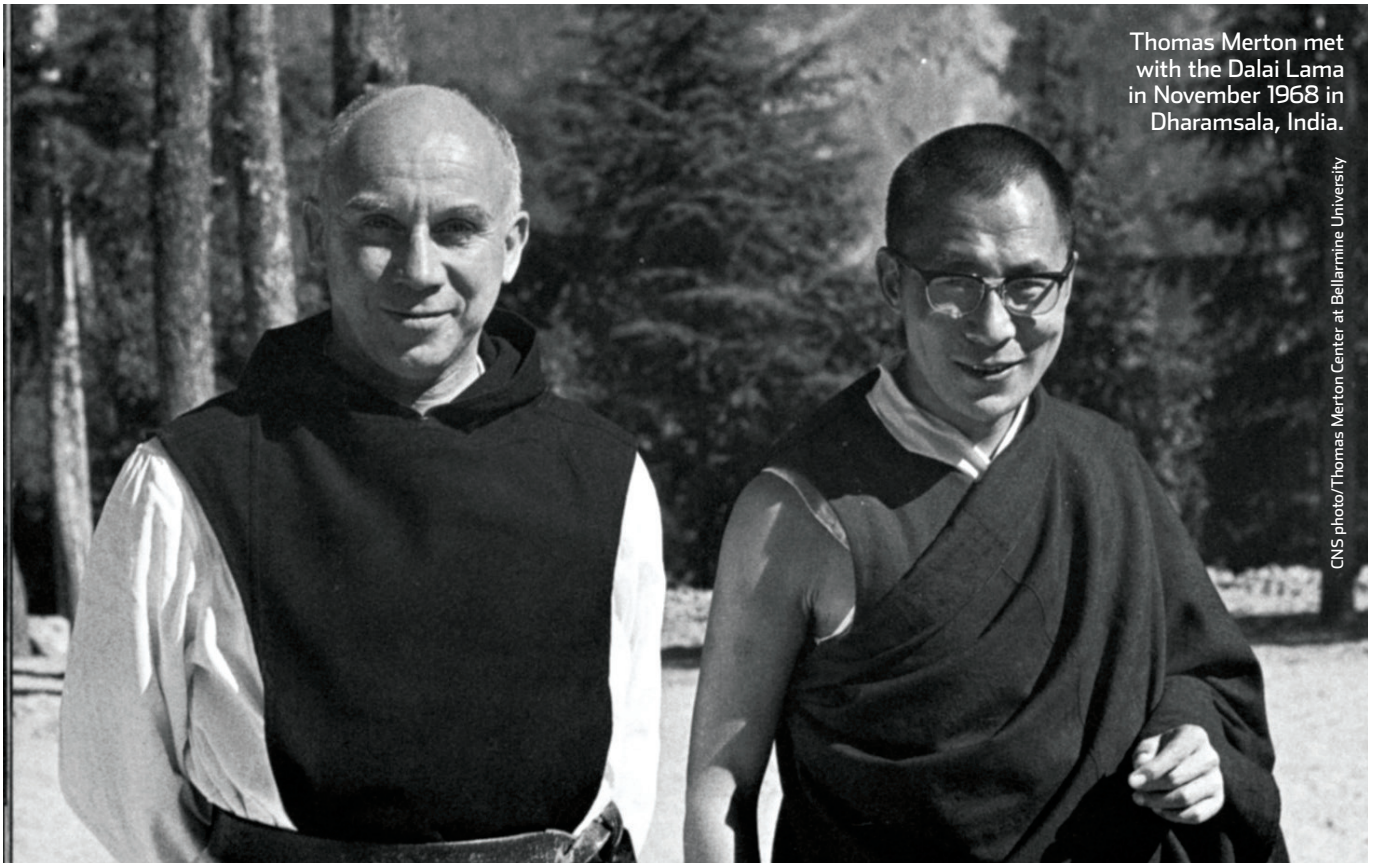
When Thomas Merton entered the Trappist monastery on Dec. 10, 1941, it surely seemed to him that his life of semi-nomadic wandering had come to a close. His many years of travel and rootlessness culminated in his simultaneously unlikely and yet somehow inevitable decision to enclose himself within the walls of Gethsemani Abbey. Here he intended to live out his life peacefully as a priest, a writer and a contemplative. If one reads only Merton's autobiography, one would assume this is how his story ends. Reading the rest of his voluminous work, however, one quickly discovers otherwise. It does not take long for Merton's spirit of curiosity and restlessness of heart to trouble the placid waters of monastic life and urge him to engage with the world he supposedly left behind and to try to find another, more satisfactory place to spend his days.

Many of us know the rest of the narrative: his cultivation of friendships with famous writers and thinkers beyond the monastery; his relocation from the monastic house where his brother monks lived to solitude in his "hermitage" (a shed repurposed as a writer's retreat); his desire to participate in conferences and public events about the spiritual life and his abbot's refusal to let him; his brief love affair with a young student nurse he met during a hospital stay for a back operation; his renunciation of her and his recommitment to his vows; and, finally, permission from his new, more liberal-thinking abbot to travel to Bangkok for a conference on monasticism in December of 1968—a trip that would prove fatal to Merton, as he would die from a heart attack after being electrocuted by a faultily wired fan. The irony of Merton's death has long troubled his admirers. That his first journey out into the world after being cloistered for so long should end so abruptly and violently, that this brilliant writer should be silenced at the comparatively young age of 53, that the death of such an extraordinary man should be so mundane and prosaic, seems like a plot from a Flannery O'Connor story. But as both Merton and O'Connor knew, truth is even stranger than fiction.

**Merton's Last Chapter**

About a year ago, I received an invitation to give some lectures in Anchorage, Alaska. Like the Thomas Merton poem that drifted onto my desk 40 years ago, the email arrived on my office computer like an unexpected gift. I had never been to Alaska—a state over 4,000 miles away from New York City, where I live and work—and it was very unlikely that I would ever go there. (I should confess here, in the spirit of David Foster Wallace, that I am not a fan of cruises.) And so I said yes, agreeing to give a series of lectures and poetry readings at Alaska Pacific University and a local parish focused on the great "saints" of the Catholic imagination, including the likes of Dante, Bruce Springsteen, Toni Morrison, Flannery O'Connor and, of course, Thomas Merton.

On the second leg of our long journey, a flight from Minneapolis to Anchorage, we soon left behind the familiar green prairies and the big blue Mississippi of America's heartland and flew over some of the most lonely and remote landscapes I had ever seen: miles and miles of creased and creviced, snow-encrusted mountains stretched as far as the horizon. There were no city lights, no cars or signs of commerce. No living creatures visibly stirred down there. Even



Thomas Merton met with the Dalai Lama in November 1968 in Dharamsala, India.

CNS photo/Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University

the rivers seemed frozen in place. I was reminded of Melville's description in *Moby-Dick* of polar regions wherein everything one beholds is unrelentingly white, a color that is perceived as colorless and yet contains all of the colors of the spectrum, rendering it a paradox and a mystery, both eloquent and menacingly mute: "there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows."

I viscerally felt why Alaska is often regarded as America's final frontier. Most of it is wild and untamed. One half of the state's inhabitants live in the Anchorage area, leaving the rest of the state only sparsely populated. The population of the entire state is 740,000, whereas the population of New York City alone is 8.5 million. The area of the state of Alaska is 12 times the size of New York State and constitutes nearly one fifth of the land mass of the continental United States. In short, Alaska is enormous, and I felt its grandeur and my smallness even before we landed.

Many writers before me have remarked on the strangeness and otherness of Alaska: its majestic mountains, its active volcanos, the spectacular light, its skies full of eagles, its waters full of whales, a place where moose and bears wander through the towns. Alaskans are justly proud of the beauty and wildness of their home state, as I discovered upon meeting my hosts and the people who attended my lectures. I suppose I expected much of this, having read about Alaska before traveling there. What I did not expect was to discover that my longtime friend Thomas Merton, who was decidedly not native to Alaska, had been there before me.

On the evening of Mardi Gras, after my lecture, over a meal of jambalaya and homemade King Cakes (thanks to my kind host, a New Orleans transplant), a member of the parish approached me to tell me about Merton's sojourn in her beloved state. In the course of our conversation, I would discover that she, too, was a friend of Merton and, in fact, had written a memoir about the unlikely intersection of their lives in this far-flung place, *We Are All Poets Here*. I was astonished and amazed, eager to know the story behind his unlikely visit to one of the most remote regions in the world. To follow in his footsteps in New York City was one thing; to find myself following him in Alaska was quite another.

I was delighted to discover that Merton—as was so typical of him, the relentless writer—kept notebooks and a journal during his Alaskan sojourn. These, along with some letters he wrote during his travels and some lectures he gave at the various religious communities and parishes he visited, are collected in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, a slim volume in which he attests passionately that Alaska is the ideal place for him to live. Disenchanted with his life at Gethsemani Abbey, feeling overwhelmed by the steady stream of visitors his fame had brought him, Merton longed to retreat from the world to live out his true vocation as a

## In His Own Words

*This excerpt is from Thomas Merton's Alaska journal, which he kept from Sept. 17, 1968, to Oct. 8, 1968.*

September 30, 1968

Light snow in Anchorage on the last day of September.

•••

Flew to Dillingham in a Piper Aztec (two engines) a fast plane that goes high. Bristol Bay area—like Siberia! Miles of tundra. Big winding rivers. At times, lakes are crowded together & shine like bits of broken glass. Or are untidy & complex like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Two volcanoes: *Illiamma*—graceful, mysterious, feminine, akin to the great Mexican volcanoes. A volcano to which one speaks with reverence, lovely in the distance, standing above the sea of clouds. Lovely, near at hand with smaller attendant peaks. *Redoubt* (which surely has another name, a secret & true name) handsome & noble in the distance, but ugly, sinister as you get near it. A brute of a dirty busted mountain that has exploded too often. A bear of a mountain. A dog mountain with steam curling up out of the snow crater. As the plane drew near there was turbulence & we felt the plane might at any moment be suddenly pulled out of its course and hurled against the mountain. As if it would not pull itself away. But finally it did. *Redoubt*. A volcano to which one says nothing.

•••

Dillingham—grey sky, smelling of snow. Cold wind. Freezing. Brown tundra. Low hemlocks. In the distance, interesting mountains. We flew to them, between them. Brown vacant slopes. A distance somewhat like New Mexico (flat, dark blue line). Another distance with snow covered mountains vanishing into low clouds. Lake Aleknagik speaks to me. A chain of lakes far from everything. Is this it?

*—Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*
(New Directions, 1988)


Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

hermit and a contemplative.

En route to the conference in Bangkok, Merton explored a variety of places he might escape to. Among these, Alaska seemed to offer the perfect combination of isolation, spartan living and immense beauty. In the course of two weeks, from Sept. 17 to Oct. 2, 1968, he visited several possible sites for his hermitage, flying over the stunningly ascetic Alaskan landscape, and vowed to return. Sadly, he never would, and so it remains a tantalizing question whether Merton would have made good on his promise, returned to this wild, untamed and sacred space, and disappeared from the world's stage.

This question haunts me still, along with other related ones. Would Merton have been happy there, so far from the great art that paved the way to his conversion in Rome, forever exiled from communication with friends, from the centers of civilization that fed his imagination in France, England, Italy and America? Would he finally find the peace that he was looking for?

These questions are unanswerable by means of the ordinary routes of logic and reason, but they are, perhaps, approachable through poetry. Upon my return to my ordinary life in my ordinary city, a city Merton both

Potter Marsh, originally named Hkaditali by the Dena'ina natives, is a coastal wildlife refuge located at the base of the Chugach Mountains in southeastern Alaska.

adored and rejected, I wrote a series of five poems, dedicated to my poet friend, that try to tell the untold story of "Merton in Alaska," each of which begins with his own words culled from his Alaska journal.

The first and last of those poems, which appear at right, attempt to trace the trajectory of Merton's journey, acknowledging his adventurous spirit as well as his impractical idealism, which goaded him to continue searching for what, finally, could not be grasped. The poems offered me—and offer all of us, I hope—the opportunity to engage in conversation with our long dead friend, who still lives in his work and who now occupies his place amid the communion of saints. Merton first spoke to me as a poet, and it is a joy and a privilege to speak to him now, poet to poet, friend to friend, in our shared language of poetry.

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## 'Merton in Alaska'

**I.**

*We took off an hour late, big plane full of children, heading for Anchorage, Tokyo, and Seoul. Flew up slowly out of the dark into the brilliant light, this Bardo of pure sky.*

—Thomas Merton, the Alaska journal, Sept. 17, 1968

How full of hope you were, leaving home,
escaping earth to find an island of your own.
The hermit's life in tame Gethsemani
not at all what you imagined it would be.
Now you eye white mountains from the sky,
lakes that shimmer and shine like bits of broken glass,
mile after mile after mile of icy
tundra where no human foot cares to pass
beyond the borders of comfort and ease,
precisely the place you yearn to be,
its wilderness speaking to your wild heart.
Long years you pursued the difficult art
of loneliness done. Here you'll rest your head.
Not knowing in 3 months' time you will be dead.

•••

**V.**

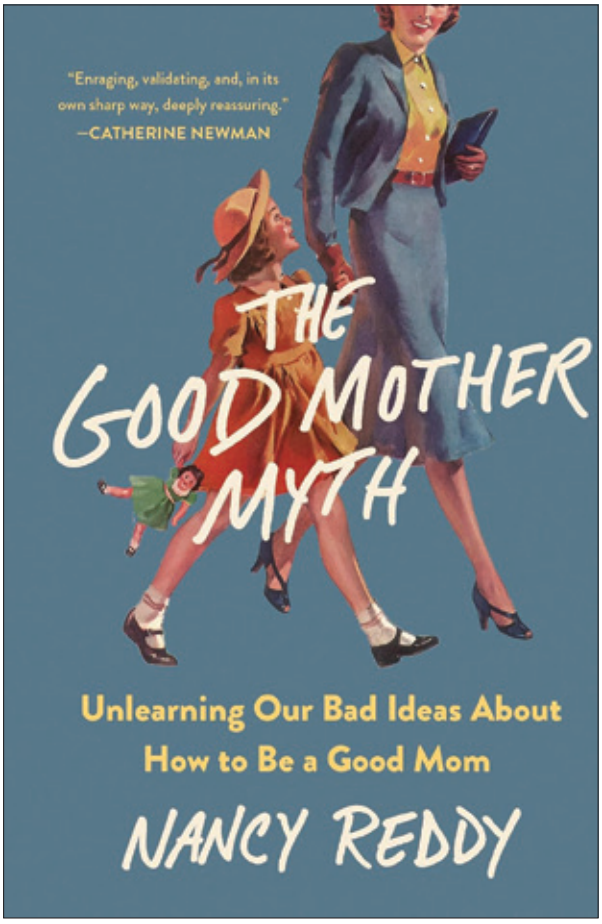
*I can't say with certitude that I think I am called to be a hermit here, but I do believe it is a very real possibility and that I must keep it in mind and look into it further and perhaps make a decision on my return from Asia.*

—Thomas Merton, the Alaska letters, Sept. 26, 1968

One thing you were sure of—that you'd return,
though not in the box that they sent you in.
Despite your wisdom, so much to learn
about what we can count on. Nothing.
The bears, volcanoes, rickety planes,
none of these dangers would do you in.
Bad teeth, gangrene, the aches and pains
you suffered could not clip your wings.
Like some Trappist Icarus, you flew far
beyond the monastery walls,
surveyed the world and loved it for
its own poor sake. You heard the call
and followed where God's voice led you.
There was nothing, nothing you would not do.

**—Angela Alaimo O'Donnell**

## DO WE OVERTHINK MOTHERHOOD?




St. Martin's Press / 256p $28

Low birth rates are now raising concern across even our widening U.S. partisan and ideological divides. To a great extent, the birth dearth is a product of both decreasing marriage rates and climbing ages for marriage. Even today, fewer people getting married means fewer people having children; meanwhile, if those who do marry tie the knot in their 30s, they will have on average fewer children than they might have had if they had married in their 20s. So a big part of our failure to reach replacement-rate fertility is economic and cultural in the broadest sense.

Still, beyond these macro-level factors lies "the discourse"—the culturally produced and curated-yet-organic "vibes"—about what it means to be a mother in 2025.

What, for example, has so emphatically convinced the singer Chappell Roan that all her friends who have children are "in hell?" Why is Paige Connell, influencer and mother of four, most relatable to so many women when she talks about how she almost divorced her present, faithful husband because he was not carrying his share of the mental load that was breaking her? Where did a married, educated, early-30-something family friend of mine get the idea that being a good mom is so truly impossible that she'd best not even attempt it?

Moms and babies are great culture war fodder and great catalysts for various societal conversations and well-meaning exhortations. Yet, moms and babies do not always seem quite so interesting as actual people that we like and want more of. Perhaps in part as a result, decreasing numbers of women are open to (more) babies.

A handful of books published over the past few years get at the question of just what makes 21st-century motherhood so uniquely tough and comparatively unappealing when compared to the child-free life. Several attempt to offer some ideas about how to make having children less difficult and more joyful for women today.

I want to zero in on two of those books: Nancy Reddy's *The Good Mother Myth* and Catherine Ruth Pakaluk's *Hannah's Children*.

Reddy, a poet and academic with two children, explains in *The Good Mother Myth* how many of our ideas about what constitutes a good mother are and always have been nonsensical. A progressive invested in parental egalitarianism with her husband, she confronted, upon becoming a mother, the myriad ways in which not only our societal norms and practices but also our own internalized idea of ourselves as mothers militates against women's well-being in motherhood.

Reddy interlaces her changing experience of motherhood with a history of changing American ideas about maternity, showing the shortcomings of the latter in the struggles of the former. "Our expectations of 'the good mother,'" she observes, "have tended to expand right as women began to take up space formerly granted to men." Toggling impressively between our national story of motherhood and her own, Reddy offers insightful, provocative food for thought about the ways in which we sanctify motherhood in order to privatize its labor.

Pakaluk, by contrast, takes the privatization of motherhood itself as a presupposition in *Hannah's Children*. An economist and mother of eight, she interviews college-educated mothers of five or more children to answer an overlooked question: In a nation where most women are now having fewer children, why do some women with other options available to them have so many? Their collective answer is civic-minded in the deepest sense, in a way that may strike some as in contrast with Pakaluk's controversial conviction that no public policy, only altered hearts and minds, can raise birth rates: "People are good for the world."

Taken together, Reddy and Pakaluk reveal what I think could be a way toward happier motherhood of (marginally)

more children. And I think that many people who read this review, as Jesuit-minded Catholics and contemplatives in action living both wholly in the faith and wholly in the world, are uniquely disposed to lead the way.

**Beyond the Motherhood Myth**

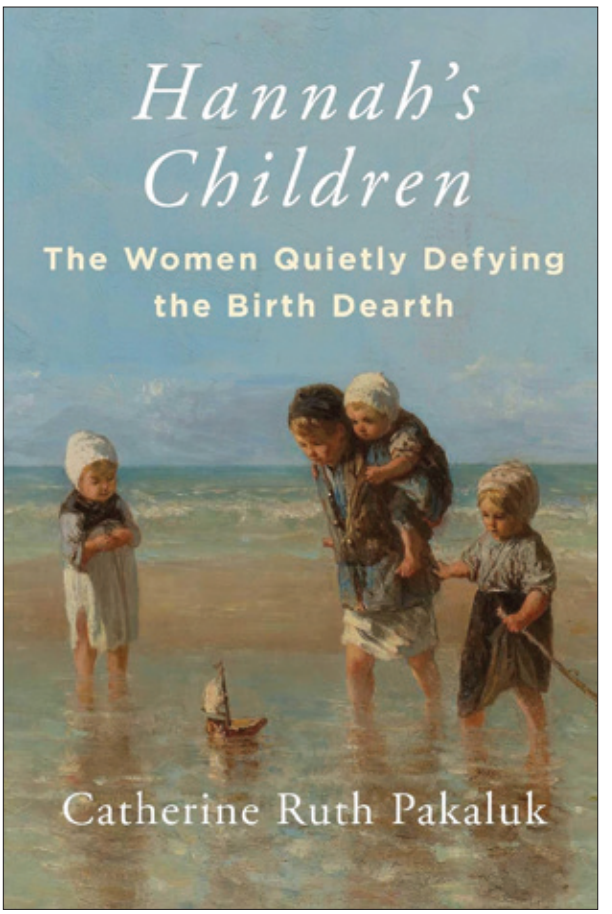
The introspective, self-denigrating rumination that initially ensnares Reddy as a new mom is made manifest by the elite subculture to which she belongs, which is an unnamed yet ever-present character in her narrative. Many secular women like Reddy find babies and maternity truly alien before becoming mothers themselves. "Girl boss" new moms enter a subculture of what seems like the world's most demanding professional hobby feeling like amateurs. Reddy believed that she could "read and research my way into motherhood and that mother-love would be instant and alchemical, transforming me into a sweeter, gentler, endlessly patient version of myself" because that is how she approached all other professions and hobbies, waiting to become expert by way of gaining clinical expertise.

When women approach motherhood from this perspective, it is easy to become consumed with introspective questions about others' perception of them as mothers: Am I mom enough to be all my child needs? Do I look effortless enough with my baby-wearing to impress passersby? Why haven't my whole personality and all of my priorities changed because I am a mother? If they are perceptive, as Reddy is, they eventually realize that "there's no way to actually be a good mother, and that that's not what my kids need anyway," and they reconcile themselves to the idiosyncratic reality of mothering particular people with specific, limited needs.

But an awareness that making motherhood feel easier might also make it more popular is curiously outside the scope of Reddy's book. It is, dispiritingly, also outside the scope of the individualistic mainstream that many American women today inevitably inhabit.

Pakaluk, by contrast, interviews women who mostly hold that it does not matter whether their personalities and priorities are transformed by motherhood; raising children simply is the most useful, impactful and meaningful thing anyone can do with her time. This exhortation to view children and child-rearing as work of incomparable value—and the attendant argument that Americans would ultimately have to adopt this view en masse in order to meaningfully raise the birthrate, given women's other options—is instructive, whether a reader has one child or 10.

It would be a mistake to dismiss Pakaluk's insightful perspective just because it emerges from her own experience and those of her subjects as outliers: moms of five or more children conceived, broadly, on purpose. Nevertheless, it also bears mentioning that the last time American women averaged five children or more was around 1870. Realistically speaking, we are not going back to a distant world in which having five or more children is normative.




Gateway Editions / 400p $35

Ironically, those who see motherhood of one or two children as a high-stakes, commodified lifestyle choice largely share an expectation of maternity's intrinsic rearrangement of the female heart and mind that is comparatively absent in those who see motherhood of five or more children as a sacred trust.

The self-abnegating, baby-centered, mother-as-angel image that plagues Reddy and her contemporaries has been reinvented many times over, but originates in 19th-century racism and classism. Before industrialization, nearly all women and men worked in the home. After industrialization, well-to-do white women kept thoroughly domestic, nonproductive homes while their husbands went out to work. But—as the formerly enslaved abolitionist Sojourner Truth memorialized in her 1851 "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, and the literary theorist bell hooks elaborated upon at length

**Reddy explains how many of our ideas about what constitutes a good mother are and always have been nonsensical.**

in her 1981 book by the same name—Black women, Irish immigrant women and poorer white women also went out to work. Like men.

With the separation of women from one another by race and class, "true womanhood" became synonymous with a reverence for the presumptive physical delicacy and attendant characterological purity of women who had the economic means to remain focused on their own homes, rather than working in the homes of others. Americans fetishized purity of maternal heart—what the French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir would later call "the religion of maternity"—accordingly.

Most women's lives today are shaped by the lockstep presumptions of disembodied feminism that Beauvoir idealized and that Reddy takes for granted. So female corporeality—its unique capacity and its attendant limitations—is widely considered negotiable. To embrace rather than reject motherhood in this context is to expect the body and its spirit to fall in line with the will and its plan, and to concomitantly expect society to do the same. In other words, the women who undertake motherhood as a morally neutral, commodified lifestyle choice rather than a godly, natural vocation tend to have outsized expectations of themselves and, ironically enough, of maternity.

All told, despite their professed distance from the religiously grounded expectations of traditional family life, secular women like Reddy often expect motherhood to transform their preferences and personalities exactly as 19th-century maternalism promised. When that does not happen—when they find baby care tedious and tiring—some blame their husbands and society for the internalized misogyny that still associates women with the primary parenthood that they themselves went into motherhood *intending* to embody until its endless, thankless labor was upon them.

Yes, I believe, contra Pakaluk, that we must make motherhood easier and family life more affordable. Many people—many Catholics—far more knowledgeable than I am have all kinds of ideas about how to do that. Still, Pakaluk is correct that any real will to invest in the American family begins with the acknowledgment that more motherhood of more children is not only economically necessary but also intrinsically good.

Our collective capacity to recognize this truth is inseparable from our willingness to accept at the same time that being a mother, even under ideal circumstances—whether the egalitarian utopia envisioned by Reddy or the traditionalist one embodied by those with opposing politics—will not radically reorder most women's personalities for either the embrace of maximal motherhood or the introspective acceptance of even limited motherhood's many inconveniences.

But what if we all thought less about being mothers and more about raising children? What if we focused on the children's vocational raising instead of the mother's rigid label? That is, what if we assumed that the understanding of motherhood espoused by Pakaluk is not just for those with basketball-team-sized families? Could we move beyond Reddy's good mother myth, and just *be* good mothers?

**For the Kids**

Parents who have several children (or reflexively support those who do) often seem to deify motherhood less than those who live thoroughly within today's secular mainstream of predominantly one- or two-child families.

Before I was expecting my fourth child, I had coffee with a friend who already had four, the oldest several years older than mine. She did not sugarcoat what I was in for, should my husband and I have another. "It's really, really hard," she said. She told me about juggling basic domestic tasks, kids' sports and activities, aging grandparents, her own part-time job, and extensive involvement in the school that her kids and mine attend.

What kind of mother she is or hoped to be never came up because it's not something she dwells on. She is, self-evidently, the kind of college-educated woman who chose to have four children despite myriad other options for how to spend her limited resources and time, and who is busy raising those four distinct future adults and immortal souls—simultaneously in the faith and in the world beyond.

The overlapping realities of those children and the context in which they are growing up is so rich with demands, reflection and wisdom in and of itself that there is no room to fantasize about any overarching theory of motherhood that will make everything fall magically into place. "Things don't always go well, and that's OK," she told me. For her, motherhood is a particularized vocation to be holistically lived, not a commodified identity to be clinically curated.

When my fourth son was born, that same mom of four organized a meal train for my family. Several nights a week for more than two months, parish and school friends brought us homemade dinners. Other days, other friends and neighbors brought breakfasts and more dinners and diapers.

Unlike Reddy, I always knew that "I deserved help, that I wasn't a failure for not floating through those early months of motherhood unscathed." Why? Because everyone around me treated the new baby not as a project they were happy to aid me in undertaking, but as a person with inestimable value of his own whose care they were delighted to support. In other words, at the bottom of all the love and kindness I was blessed to receive when my fourth son was born were two simple assumptions: First, a new baby is a good thing; second, taking care of a family with several busy children and a new baby is a hard thing.

The understanding that there is no contradiction between these premises constitutes the closest thing I can think of to realistic, child-centered pronatalism in today's world.

Yes, the fertility crisis is a profound problem that requires systemic solutions, both economic and cultural. No, thinking less about the "experience of motherhood" and more about all the discreet, idiosyncratic experiences that comprise the multifaceted lives of both mothers and children would not fix things all by itself. But it might help a few more women welcome a few more babies.

And at least that would be a few steps in the right direction.

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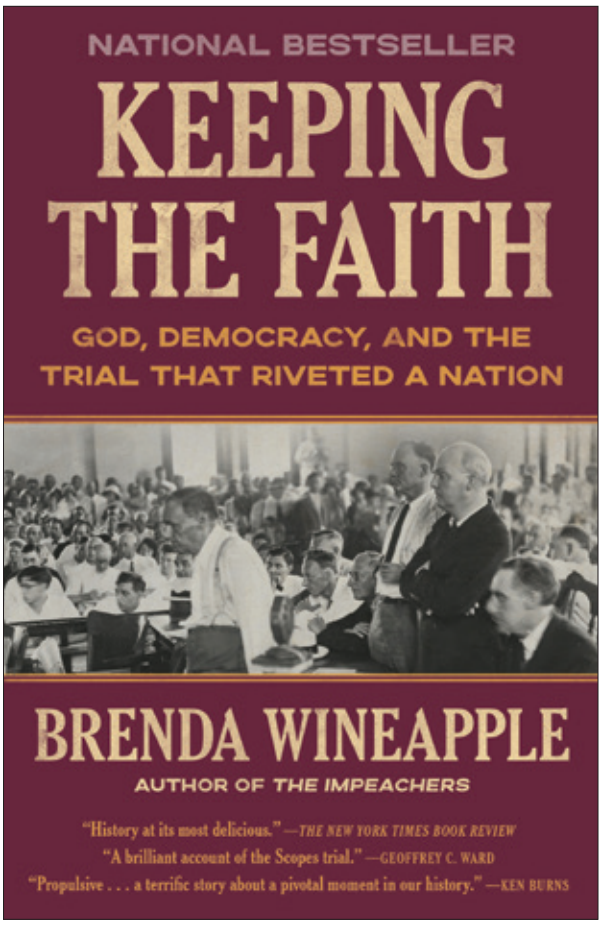
Elizabeth Grace Matthew *writes about education, politics, religion and culture on Substack. Her work has appeared in publications including USA Today, The Hill, Law and Liberty, Fairer Disputations and Public Discourse.*

## CLASS WARFARE




Random House / 544p $30

Brenda Wineapple couldn't have asked for better timing.

The release of *Keeping the Faith: God, Democracy, and the Trial That Riveted a Nation*—about the famous Scopes "monkey trial," on the eve of its 100th anniversary in 2025—came amid a torrent of church-state conflicts, including mandates by the states of Oklahoma and Louisiana to use the Bible and the Ten Commandments in classrooms. These came after several high-profile Supreme Court rulings—including the reversal of Roe v. Wade—had already stoked worries about what some pundits have called "creeping theocracy."

But there is another reason Wineapple's book is timely. Church-state conflicts simply never go away in the United States. Almost two centuries after fights about Bibles in classrooms gave way to a separate, sprawling Catholic education system, judges are again deciding whether or not taxpayers should fund religious education.

Wineapple's recent books have ventured impressively far and wide, from biographical portraits of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson to a survey of Andrew Johnson's "impeachers." These studies were all rooted in the 19th century, so it is fitting that Wineapple's latest book, about a quintessentially 20th-century event, looks as far back as the 1850s.

For many Americans, Wineapple writes in her introduction, "religion—specifically Protestantism—was the only safeguard against moral bankruptcy," and "should not be separated from government [but] should sit at its very center." The Scopes trial, she argues, "stretched forward to...our century when once again schools would try to outlaw certain modes of teaching," and it still makes us think about "where the country [is] headed."

In the end, Wineapple makes a case that is at times insightful and persuasive, but at other times raises—or evades—as many questions as it answers.

*Keeping the Faith* begins with biographical chapters about two towering public figures: the crusading attorney Clarence Darrow (1857-1938) and three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925). They squared off in the July 1925 case officially known as State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes. This somewhat Wikipedian start is a missed opportunity to explore the complex coalitions that had formed around religion and education after the Civil War in the United States. By the time of the trial, many native-born Protestants had actually embraced secular public schooling, without which (it was claimed) Jewish and Catholic immigrants would be even more culturally disruptive. The image of a quaint "little red schoolhouse" became a provocative symbol—an 1890s nativist dog whistle, even—prompting outbreaks of public discord and even violence.

At the same time, William Jennings Bryan emerged as both the Great Commoner and as a spokesman for Protestant America.

"I am more interested in religion than in government," he wrote in a fascinating 50-page pamphlet widely circulated during the 1908 presidential race—the third he would lose. America's religious tensions, like most other cultural conflicts, were eventually refracted through the blood-spattered lens of World War I, so that by the summer of 1925, Bryan (actually three years younger than Darrow) was something of a relic, at least to the urbane tastemakers of the 1920s.

Ever since, the shadow of caricature has loomed over the Scopes trial, and not just because of the dopey rubes and snooty city slickers in the 1955 play (and 1960 movie) "Inherit the Wind." Similar biases are still very much with us, which is why 21st-century readers would be wise to resist snickering at Bryan and his ilk. Because the closer you look at these characters and this time period, the blurrier the ideological lines get.

Eugenics, for one thing, "appealed to progressives and conservatives alike," Wineapple notes. Bryan himself was a favorite of the Ku Klux Klan, came from a Confederacy-supporting family and backed the disastrous national ban on alcohol. But he was also a class warrior who fought for low-income farmers and workers, supported the vote for women and condemned U.S. militarism.

To her credit, Wineapple mostly steers clear of black hats and white hats. She establishes the social context for Scopes through prominent religious figures such as the eccentric, inclusive L.A. preacher Aimee Semple McPherson, as well as Bruce Barton, whose fascinating 1924 bestseller *The Man Nobody Knows* reimagined Jesus as a kind of capitalist life coach.

On the whole, though, Edward J. Larson's 1998 Pulitzer Prize winner *Summer for the Gods* sets the era's spiritual stage more comprehensively. This is important because, for all the carnival-barking hucksters and new economic might, there was a genuine and profound spiritual longing in 1920s America.

"Our modern world...laughed at the Ten Commandments," the wildly popular 1923 movie of the same name lamented in a title card. "And now a blood-drenched, bitter world—no longer laughing—cries for a way out."

Wineapple skillfully outlines the cultural influences of Thomas Henry Huxley and Charles Darwin, Nietzsche and H. L. Mencken, including their scientific breakthroughs and rigid (even religious) rationality as well as their hypocrisies. ("All authorities were fair game," Wineapple notes of Mencken, "except of course when he was the authority.")

But she is also ultimately in the unenviable position of having to sort through the era's myriad cultural giants before settling on allusions to Theodore Dreiser and to F. Scott Fitzgerald's proto-Proud Boy Tom Buchanan (though not the God-ly eyes of T. J. Eckleburg). We also get Elmer Gantry, *The Sun Also Rises* and the forgotten playwright Sidney Howard, who lamented of the notorious 1924 murder committed by Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb: "With all this radicalism in the colleges, what do you expect?" Wineapple herself quips that to the preacher Billy Sunday the "world was fox-trotting to Perdition." (Had *Keeping the Faith* looked more closely at Sunday's takes on immigration restriction or the Spanish flu epidemic, it might at least have lent a touch of credence to Sunday's anxiety.)

Wineapple's strongest sections capture the downright surreal atmosphere of the trial proceedings. Arrest warrants are signed in a drugstore, and more than once, Darrow's New York-based team members, including the Irish Catholic Dudley Field Malone and Arthur Garfield Hays, a "secular Jew," are treated as foreigners by people in Tennessee.

And Wineapple writes that when a King James Bible is entered as evidence, Hays objects, asking: Why not "Jefferson's rewritten version.... Or the Catholic Bible" or any of "66 Protestant Bibles"? It's a fair question—at least for those

who believe such questions and faith are not incompatible.

But how can these questioners live side-by-side amicably with those who are considerably more devout? That is why, for all of the cerebral existentialism implicit in Scopes, the dull technicalities of lawmaking are just as important.

Those technicalities, in the end, are what generally avert civil wars. "The hand that writes the paycheck rules the school," Bryan liked to say.

But federalism's local control taketh as well as giveth. Not content to have "their" God in "their" schools, many of Bryan's Christian paycheck writers also wanted to deny parents any rights to opt out. This is one of many reasons why it is so hard to tell the complete 1920s church-state story without also looking at a largely forgotten Supreme Court case decided just weeks before Scopes: Pierce v. Society of Sisters.

If the Scopes trial is timely, that different landmark court case, also about to turn 100 years old, is just as relevant—even if it is not mentioned in *Keeping the Faith* or most other studies of Roaring '20s culture wars.

Pierce v. Society of Sisters—like the 1923 case Meyer v. Nebraska—reflected the decade's profound demographic and cultural changes. The former prevented lawmakers from interfering with private religious education, while the latter struck down mandates to teach only in the English language. In both of these cases, the Supreme Court—bravely, one could argue—bucked a majoritarian hostility toward all things "alien."

Bryan actually believed Pierce would buttress his prosecutorial case in Scopes. But it was Darrow who grasped the long-term implications of these 1925 religious trials.

Tennessee's "anti-evolution law," his team argued, was unconstitutionally "partial to the Bible over all other sacred books," including those used by Jews and Muslims.

"How could [state law] prefer the Koran to the Bible?" Bryan's team responded. "We are not living in a heathen country."

The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes was a pivotal moment in American history. But it was also just one chapter in a much longer epic—one that is sometimes frightening, often absurd and rarely predictable. Darrow himself expressed frustration that a trial such as Scopes was even necessary "in the 20th century in the United States of America."

But such trials will likely be necessary for a long, long time—at least as long as there is a United States of America.

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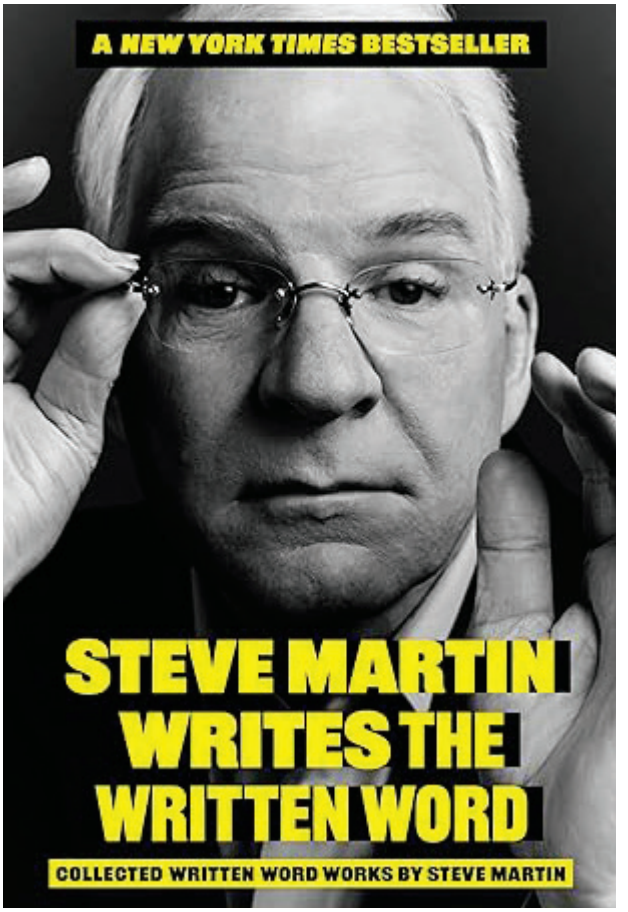
## A STEVE MARTIN SMORGASBORD




Grand Central Publishing / 432p $30

Steve Martin has been described as a comedian, actor, even reverse-mortgage seller (by Martin Short). He is less talked about for his ability to craft fiction on the page. His most recent book, *Steve Martin Writes the Written Word*, serves as something of a parallel chronology to his public-facing ventures. The humorous essays in the book mirror his career in stand-up, while the longer-form stories in the novellas *Shopgirl* and *The Pleasure of My Company* follow his breakthroughs into film. When read together, the full book reads like a memoir of Martin's life as a performer separated into several distinct sections.

Martin's autobiography explores his falling out from stand-up and decision to pursue other artistic ventures, such as acting and directing films. Now, in the latest chapter of his life, he has turned back to performing, this time with his longtime collaborator and best friend Martin Short on the stage and small screen.

The book begins with a foreword by Martin describing the contents of the book in his highly sarcastic yet heartfelt manner. It is impossible not to hear his voice as he describes a yearning to correct or alter

**Like any great writer, Martin includes pieces of himself in these characters.**

some of the older, previously published passages. The book showcases satirical essays from various literary publications, his two novellas and some never-before-seen musings included for good measure.

The transitions from one short essay to the next feel disjointed at times, with these beats functioning like setups and punchlines from a stand-up routine. Although they are silly on the surface, they hold a deeper truth. Martin is playing a character in many of these essays, confidently ignorant of his own stupidity. I found myself chuckling at too many passages to name as I was swept up in the expertly crafted irony he lays on almost every page.

These short essays serve as easy parallels to Martin's stand-up career. They do not have much narrative. They are the "wild and crazy guy" he was at the time of writing. There is undoubtedly value and strong humor here, but they aren't Martin at his peak. That's where *Shopgirl* and *The Pleasure of My Company* come in.

Unlike the essay sections, here there are characters and narrative. Like 1987's "Roxanne" and 1991's "L.A. Story," they showcase what Martin is best at: making the ordinary interesting.

In *Shopgirl,* the story is about just that, a shopgirl. Most of the chapters follow Mirabelle (depicted by Claire Danes in the 2005 film adaptation), as she navigates her daily life and whirlwind romance with Ray, a rich businessman. The story encapsulates what it means to grow and change. It is more serious than the other musings in the book, but still packs the famous Steve Martin wit and charm.

Nothing overly dramatic happens in the book, but I couldn't help but read through the entire thing quickly. Martin's work in comedy taught him to rope audiences in, so it's unsurprising he is able to do so with such skill.

The second long-form story featured in the compilation is *The Pleasure of My Company*. It follows a young man named Daniel Pecan Cambridge as he navigates a lonely, O.C.D.-ridden life. The story is told in the first person, albeit from a future perspective, different from *Shopgirl.* Martin takes the time to introduce the reader not only to Daniel but also to the quirks and intricacies of obsessive-compulsive disorder. I felt Daniel's pain as he struggles just to get around and find romance. Throughout the book, as Daniel grows out of his habits, you see him finally learn to escape from his constrained existence.

Similar threads and voices are evident in both novels. Both protagonists suffer from mental illnesses. (Martin has often described his own struggles with panic attacks and O.C.D.) Both grow and find love by the end of their stories. Both are also introverts.

Romance grounds and is a source of both characters' highest and lowest points. The excitement of Mirabelle and Daniel finding love and escaping the loneliness that marks their lives is brought to bleak and dejecting lows from the heartbreak they feel when, as Daniel explains, "It is hard to discover that the person you love loves someone else."

Like any great writer, Martin includes pieces of himself in these characters. In his many performances and films, Martin usually plays an extrovert, or at least someone unbothered by his quirky social interactions. These stories paint Martin differently. The way he writes about introverts leads me to believe Martin is an introvert himself, just one cursed with the desire to entertain.

The other fact of Martin's personality made clear by his writing is his love of Los Angeles. Both stories take place in the city and are described with such vivid, specific detail that I felt multiple times as if I had stepped off a plane into the city. (It's not something he hides either, with "L.A. Story" being a love letter to specificities of life there.)

The city is a character in itself in this book, as it emerges in the backgrounds of both longer pieces, from Daniel's struggles maneuvering around Santa Monica to Mirabelle's various attempts to enter the city's bustling art scene. Martin takes deep care to present the city as living and breathing—but at times also suffocating and deeply isolating.

Like Mirabelle and Daniel, Martin himself is an undoubtedly quirky person. He is a collector of art. He is also a deeply thoughtful and subversive creator, at his best when he is untethered to the normal conventions of performance and writing. He challenges the reader to escape their perceptions of him when he writes in a more solitary and rarely humorous manner.

In the foreword, he describes the novellas as representing different points in his life. *Shopgirl* is a story of melancholy and heartbreak from a younger Martin, and *The Pleasure of My Company* shows an older, settled Martin. He describes the latter as a "presage" of his own life: "Its ending is my ending."

The heart of the book is the evolution of Steve Martin himself. As he puts it in the foreword, "The works I present here are complete, but also represent the ghostly mechanics of a writer in process."

Like the characters he creates in the narrative-driven

sections, Martin is highly self-critical. It's interesting to see him in this light, as it feels so antithetical to the "wild and crazy guy" persona he has become known for. In that way, he feels unique from other celebrities and comedians as someone who is extremely human. If even a portion of his true self is present in Daniel and Mirabelle, he is someone who faces strong doubts, anxiety and heartbreak. And ultimately that makes his ability to craft comedy in the face of these moments of depression even greater.

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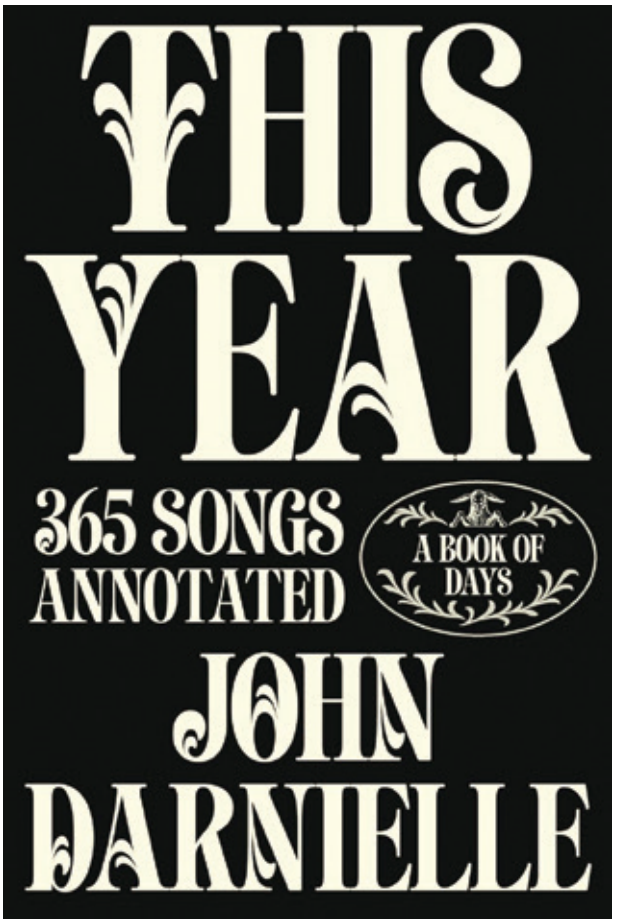
## MARKING TIME




Princeton University Press / 144p $20

John Darnielle, the musician and novelist best known as the founder, lead singer, lyricist and at times sole member of the band the Mountain Goats, has a "catholic Catholic imagination," and it is on full display in his new book, *This Year: 365 Songs Annotated: A Book of Days.*

I use a small-c *catholic* because he draws inspiration from everyone from Euripides to Auden, Dickinson to Didion, Liza Minnelli to Christopher Guest (on successive pages he connects his songs to Bowser and Toad from the video game Super Mario Bros. and to Wordsworth's "The Prelude"). But a big-c *Catholic* is also appropriate, because he is (formerly) a "fifty-two-Sundays-a-year practicing Catholic" who still identifies with the faith.

As the subtitle indicates, Darnielle collects lyrics from, and brief reflections on, 365 different Mountain Goats songs, organized around the days of the calendar. Catholicism saturates his lyrics, which include references to saints, heretics, the rosary and the Bible (there is an entire album, "The Life of the World to Come," where each song title is a Bible verse).

The songs themselves often grapple with classic Catholic themes of sin, guilt, hope and salvation, but Darnielle's complicated feelings toward Catholicism are also a thread running through the reflections he writes about them. He talks about

being "baptized Catholic and attend[ing] parochial school until my parents divorced," and then leaving the church and becoming "a very tiresome atheist for several years" before finding his way back to a more complicated and nuanced relationship to faith and to Catholicism.

The longest entry in the book, on April 1, is essentially a short spiritual autobiography in which he writes about his experiences with both Catholicism and Hinduism. At one point, reflecting on liturgical music, he writes, "Any current or former Catholic—there are no former Catholics; I should know, I am one—knows the songs that now reached my searching heart and made it ache: 'Here I Am, Lord,' 'On Eagle's Wings,' 'Lord of the Dance.'" He is well aware of the ways that Catholicism has shaped his imagination; in the July 16 entry, on the song "Heretic Pride," he writes, "Every good Catholic has pinups of the martyred saints on the dorm room wall of his mind, and no matter how many years ago you stopped going to church, you probably never left the Church."

The presence and persistence of the church in his life comes up in just about every month of this book. He writes in the Dec. 1 reflection, on the song "Grave Digger": "The rhymes here are nothing special, but the story is my favorite kind of mystery: one where you can't say exactly where the mystery is, but you sense its presence. Yes, I'm Catholic, why do you ask?"

In a March entry, writing about a period of his life from over 20 years ago, he says:

> What's happening in my personal life when I write this song is that I'm thinking about God a lot.... I keep noticing the small-c church I seem to carry around inside me, and I like it, I'm finding God in a lot of places. I'm finding God in His absence, I'm finding the shapes God leaves on surfaces once He's touched them with His presence, which is, of course, on every surface, even the hard, hurting surfaces.

Darnielle writes, "I struggled, and struggle, to believe" and "I know now that the Church is for the wrecks and that it's the wrecks who make the Church." Like Flannery O'Connor before him, Darnielle latches onto these sorts of wrecks and centers them in his work. Many of his best, and most beloved songs, deal with people on the margins, struggling with addiction, abuse, alienation and mortality.

Like O'Connor, the Mountain Goats won't appeal to everyone, but the people who *do* like them usually like them in an intense, emotional, passionate way. The writer John Green captured this dynamic in the ode he wrote to the band in his 2023 bestselling essay collection, *The Anthropocene Reviewed:*

> The Mountain Goats have shaped the way I think and listen so profoundly that I don't know who I would be without them, only that I wouldn't be me. I don't want to overstate it, but there are moments in Mountain Goats songs that are almost scriptural to me, in the sense that they give me a guide to the life I want to live and the person I wish to be when I grow up.

To the uninitiated, this can sound hyperbolic, but it makes perfect sense to me. There are over a dozen Mountain Goats songs that I think of as being pretty much perfect. When *This Year* arrived in the mail, I immediately flipped to my birthday (and my family members' birthdays) to see if any of these songs fell on these dates (they didn't) and then to the index—to see which dates they did get. But as it turns out, this scattershot approach to *This Year* is the wrong approach to take.

*This Year* is designed to be read sequentially, beginning on Jan. 1. The entries build on each other, and Darnielle (with a few minor exceptions) moves chronologically through his career as a songwriter. So the January entries are all among the earliest songs he recorded and chronicle his development as a lyricist and musician, while the final month of December covers his most recent albums.

While I appreciated the insights the early entries give into his developing craft, I was initially not entirely on board with the format, since the book opens with a couple of months' worth of reflections on songs I don't really listen to, some of which I had never heard at all. Even the most obsessive Mountain Goats fan will find entries here that they are unfamiliar with, since a few of them document unreleased, or even unrecorded, songs.

But all of these early entries set the stage for mid-career masterpieces like "All Hail West Texas," "Tallahassee" and "The Sunset Tree." The month of June is almost entirely devoted to songs off this last album, which chronicles Darnielle's abusive childhood and is widely considered the band's best work. When I first looked up two of the most well-known tracks ("Up the Wolves" and "This Year"), I was disappointed that the entries weren't more robust, but when they're read in the context of all the other posts about this album, it is easier to see why Darnielle didn't write more for each; the short pieces fit in the broader tapestry of the June reflections.

In this sense, the entries mirror the way Mountain Goats albums work. There are singles and stand-alone hits, but almost every song works best as part of an album, where the tracks speak to one another and build on one another, sonically and thematically.

Darnielle is a brilliant lyricist, but he is also a master-

ful storyteller. He's written three novels—*Wolf in White Van* (2014), *Universal Harvester* (2017) and *Devil House* (2022)—and many of his albums function like short story cycles: "Tallahassee" is an album of songs about a deteriorating marriage; "Beat the Champ" is full of songs tied to the world of professional wrestling; and "Jenny From Thebes" tells the story of a character who appears in a number of earlier Mountain Goats songs (Darnielle describes it as a "fake musical"). There are also albums themed around role-playing games, goth culture, pulp action movies and the previously mentioned Bible verses.

It is possible, even probable, that some of these themes will seem to hold no interest for a potential listener (or reader), but one of Darnielle's gifts is the ability to craft songs and narratives that appeal even to an initially indifferent audience. For instance, I have no particular affinity for goth culture, but "Goths" is one of their albums I revisit most often, and a song like "Unicorn Tolerance" still gets to me every time:

*Dig through the graveyard*
*rub the bones against my face*
*it gets real nice around the graveyard*
*once you've acquired the taste*

*And when the clouds do clear away*
*get a momentary chance to see*
*the thing I've been trying to beat to death*
*the soft creature that I used to be*
*the better animal I used to be*

There are Mountain Goats songs I have listened to so often that they feel inextricable from my own memories; and when I read these lyrics, I can hear Darnielle's voice and the accompanying music that plays under them. One of the joys of reading through *This Year* is coming upon the entries this way, but there is an equal joy in finding a song I didn't know before—and then pulling it up online and immediately realizing that I'm going to listen to it repeatedly until it, too, becomes part of me.

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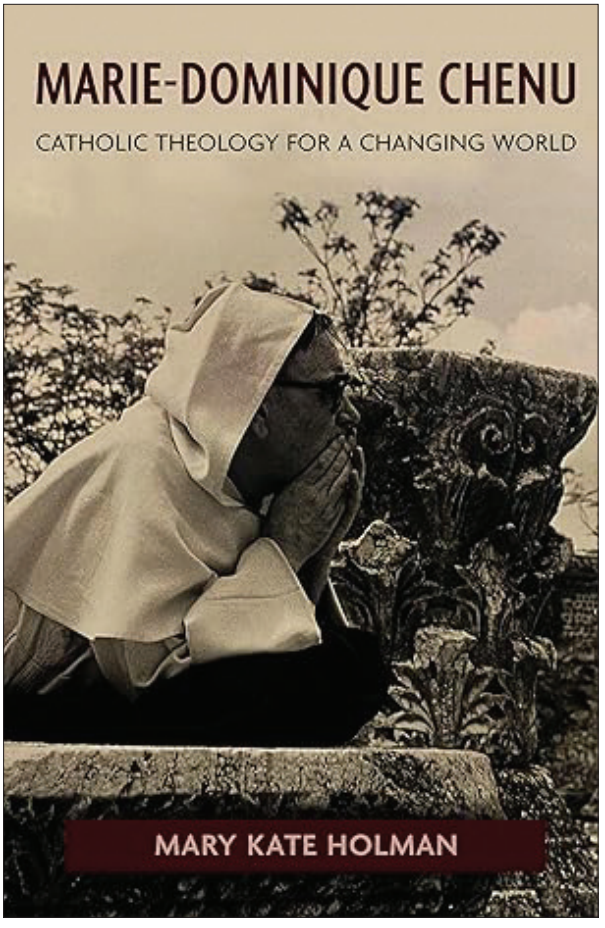
## NO EXCUSE TO FORGET CHENU




University of Notre Dame Press / 296p $49

The first decades of the 21st century have witnessed a fair amount of debate in Catholic theology among scholars on how to interpret *ressourcement* theology, the "return to the sources" movement that played such an important role at the Second Vatican Council and in numerous theological fields before and since. Mary Kate Holman has entered this conversation with boldness and verve with *Marie-Dominique Chenu: Catholic Theology for a Changing World*.

The *ressourcement* debate in recent years has included a number of English-language books on the topic, including a magisterial edited volume by Gabriel Flynn as well as more theologically conservative (Hans Boersma's *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery*) and progressive (Jürgen Mettepenningen's *Nouvelle Théologie—New Theology*) interpretations of the movement.

These works hint at how a proper historiography of *ressourcement* theology uncovers the same narrative tension—between continuity and rupture, reform and retrieval—that bedevils the interpretation of Vatican II itself. Here the familiar post-Vatican II polarities of *concilium* and *communio*, neo-Thomistic optimism and Augustinian pessimism, *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, come to the surface.

Until quite recently, it appeared that the Augustinian side had won the day. Note that favorites of that school remain visible: Dozens of Hans Urs von Balthasar's books remain in print; Joseph Ratzinger's work has appeared in new editions; and Henri de Lubac remains a reliable subject of dissertations, and a number of his works appear on graduate-course syllabi. Meanwhile, the *aggiornamento* school has fallen somewhat out of favor: Yves Congar's most important work, *Tradition and Traditions*, is out of print, and many younger theologians would be hard-pressed to name a single book by Jean Daniélou. Further, Marie-Dominique Chenu's key studies, most notably *Toward Understanding Thomas Aquinas* and his essays on 12th-century theology, are no longer in print.

But now Holman, an assistant professor of theology at Fairfield University, steps into the breach. Like Sarah Shortall in *Soldiers of God in a Secular World* (Harvard University Press, 2021), Holman (who previously co-translated Chenu's magnificent *A School of Theology: Le Saulchoir* in 2023) relies extensively on archival material, thereby offering a major contribution to *ressourcement* scholarship.

Born in 1895, Chenu entered the Dominicans and completed a dissertation on Aquinas under the direction of Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange in 1920. Already in these years, Chenu bristled at the constraints of neo-scholasticism and the particularly Dominican form of neo-Thomism exposited by Garrigou-Lagrange. Chenu essentially dropped one Lagrange for another, shifting to the founder of the École Biblique, Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855–1938), known for applying critical and historical approaches to scriptural study.

In order to understand biblical texts, and particularly the life of Jesus, taught the latter Lagrange, one needed to understand the surrounding culture, including Second Temple Judaism. Chenu pondered what would happen if one took the same approach to Aquinas. Perhaps to understand this great church doctor, one needed to situate him amid the conversations brewing in Aquinas's Paris and identify the *sitz im leben* of his non-systematic writings.

These scholarly commitments led Chenu to turn down an appointment at the Angelicum and to take up a post at the Dominican school, Le Saulchoir, which had been relocated to Belgium after the French *laïcité* laws of 1905. Four years after becoming regent of studies in 1932, Chenu gave a talk that became *Une École du Theologie: Le Saulchoir* ("A School of Theology: Le Saulchoir"). Chenu proposed that Saulchoir become a school modeled on Lagrange's École Biblique and the "Catholic Tübingen School," both of which took historical method seriously.

Chenu's proposal represented a sharp departure from what had been normalized in Catholic seminary education

since the First Vatican Council. Chenu did not hold back—first by arguing that Thomas and what was called Thomism were not always identical, and second by insisting on the incarnational, historical quality of Christian truth.

For some, this simply sounded too much like Modernism, and Chenu faced two Vatican inquiries: first in 1938, when he was compelled to sign onto a number of banal affirmations, and more consequentially in 1942, when his "little book" was placed on the Vatican's Index of Prohibited Books. Church officials also made an apostolic visit to Saulchoir, which resulted in Chenu being relocated to working-class Paris and Garrigou-Lagrange's disciple, Marie-Dominique Philippe, taking over as regent of studies at Saulchoir.

While this story is well known in theological academia, Holman uses the recently opened archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (now the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith) in Rome as well as Chenu's files at Saulchoir to unearth details hitherto only suspected. Key among these is the role played by Garrigou-Lagrange, a scholar once described as the "sacred monster of Thomism." Holman surfaces a jarring legacy of pettiness and poor character judgment by this influential Thomist and some of his disciples. (The aforementioned Philippe, for example, left the Dominicans to form the "Community of Saint John," where he coerced several nuns into sexual acts.)

Chenu's exile, meanwhile, led him into direct encounter with working-class communities and propelled him to provide the intellectual heft for the "worker-priest" movement, premised on the idea that the church in France assumed a too-easy alliance with bourgeois norms and perspectives. Chenu's social engagement coincided with some of his most important publications on medieval theology.

As Vatican II convened, Chenu was called on to advise the bishop of Madagascar, a former student. While not an official *peritus,* Chenu worked his connections, chief among them a long friendship with Congar, to push a reform agenda at the council. Perhaps his most substantial contribution was to the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" ("Gaudium et Spes"), which articulated the need to discern the "signs of the times."

During these years, Chenu used his position on the fringes to his advantage. As the dust settled and the church attempted to adopt the council's directives, Chenu aligned with the Concilium wing of theology and argued for "signs of the times" as the hermeneutical framework for interpreting the council itself. Chenu saw secularization as such a sign and took steps to be in regular dialogue with the laity while calling for priests to read Marx and rethinking (without ever officially articulating) the question of female leadership in the church. He looked with hope at the formation of liberation theology, whose leading expositor, Gustavo Gutiérrez, had studied under him.

As a scholar of Aquinas and of medieval theology, Chenu left no doubt about the consequences of bringing form criticism and historical context to these areas. The point was to breathe life into something that centuries of decadent scholasticism had rendered moribund. In one essay he concludes, "The theology that grew out of the twelfth-century schools was and remained abundantly rich in methodological variation until post-Tridentine scholasticism regrettably imposed a system of methodological conformity."

This kind of insight did not simply tweak scholarly opinion; it disrupted foundations that many had assumed to be settled. Holman appreciates Chenu's contributions to medieval theology but shifts attention, justifiably in my opinion, to Chenu's inductive method. In essay after essay (his publications totaled over 1,300), Chenu laments deduction from first principles and instead recommends that theology begin with encounter and lived experience. Holman's steady hand guides readers through a selection of the most important texts, from the 1930s through the 1980s, that display how one can do "Catholic Theology in a Changing World."

Holman concludes by underscoring her intention "to treat Chenu as he treated Aquinas, situating him in the social and intellectual context of his own time." Holman largely succeeds. One comes away with a sense of who Chenu was, especially through the countless letters cited throughout the book.

Still, Holman might have provided broader intellectual context to fulfill her promise. Scholars like Blondel and Lagrange largely drop out of the story after the first chapter, and one never quite knows who Chenu was reading all those decades. De Lubac and Chenu came to occupy very different camps after the council, and one wonders how Chenu would have explained his position to an intellectual peer who had also suffered censure but read the signs of the time much differently. Although it lies beyond the scope of her work, the resurgence of interest in and affection for Garrigou-Lagrange in recent years also signifies something worth noting—perhaps that we need to read more Chenu.

Quibbles aside, Holman's book represents a real achievement. It engages a figure who embodies the best of 20th-century Catholic theology. Holman has made a notable mark on *ressourcement* theology and left serious theologians no excuse for forgetting the great Chenu.

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Grant Kaplan *is a professor of theological studies at Saint Louis University. His latest book is* Faith and Reason through Christian History.

# Obedience Yields a Transformed Heart

Nested in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount commands our attention for the first three weeks of February. That he goes up the mountain to deliver his lengthy address may have led his listeners to expect Jesus to deliver more law as a Moses-like figure. But instead of additional law regulating outward behavior, Jesus focuses attention upon the cultivation of an interiority, one that can transform humanity.

On the first Sunday of the month, we are challenged by the beatitudes Jesus delivers and the blessedness accompanying such dispositions. For those who respond to this invitation, such blessedness defines us as claimed by God. The next week Jesus continues the sermon explaining that as his disciples, we are salt and light for the world. Like salt's capacity to preserve food, disciples preserve the values of justice and compassion. And as light, we enable others to see Jesus. The Isaiah readings and Paul's letter to the Corinthian community offer further illumination on these metaphors and invite us to concrete action stemming from a renewed interiority.

On the third Sunday, Jesus delivers what has been called the "anti-theses" of law, characterized by the formula "You have heard it said, but I say to you." Actually, he is forwarding what might be referred to as the "supreme theses" regarding law. In this sermon he sets forth a morality that requires more than going through the motions of avoiding evil or keeping within the law. Once again, moral living for Jesus is cultivated by and grounded in an interiority focused upon the good of others.

The last Sunday in February is the first Sunday of Lent. This Sunday's second reading, from Paul's Letter to the Romans, helps us reflect on the first reading, which recounts the creation and fall of humanity, and on the Gospel reading about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Paul tells us how one individual's desire to be "like the gods" led to disobedience with the consequence of being lost and separated from God. By contrast, another man rejected the temptation to be "like gods," exercising superhuman powers in the wilderness. By choosing obedience, Jesus remained the faithful servant united with God.

The season of Lent invites us daily to recite "Be merciful, O Lord, for I have sinned." Yet Lent also occasions a time for us to recognize that, while confessing we are lost and disobedient at times, still we can be assured God is already seeking us out with gifts of grace that will restore us.

### FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), FEB. 1, 2026
A referendum on the status quo

### FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), FEB. 8, 2026
A disciple's vocation: Be salt and light!

### SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), FEB. 15, 2026
A more perfect law

### FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (A), FEB. 22, 2026
Time for turning around

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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## CHOSEN

By Hayley Simon

I believe in being chosen by leaves.
Or rather, by God, who threaded roots,
ignited each branch tip with the spark
of autumn. He knew what would fall
on my head. So when a flame brushes
my counted hairs, I steal it. Read
the veins and expect to be understood.

I scour for a reflection in maple-red hues
or eyes in copper oak, while my own fill
with logs. I wait for His burning finger
to write a language I'll know.
The scroll doesn't always unfurl,
so I take the leaf and flatten it, hide it
under a stack of books I've never read,
praying the day I crease the last spine
is the one I need a leaf the most.

Pages, once trees, are numbered,
reminding me: The One who
moves the wind also moves my feet.
So yes, I believe the leaf
chose me. Or rather, God made me
someone who notices things that fall.

———

Hayley Simon's *poems have been published in The Rockvale Review and Sigma Tau Delta's literary magazine, The Rectangle.*

# A Vision of Shared Humanity

## 'Dilexi Te' and the witness of African women

By Anne Arabome

In Pope Leo XIV's apostolic exhortation "Dilexi Te," the divine declaration "I have loved you" echoes a clarion call that orients the church toward the poor, the excluded and the marginalized. For African women on the margins who have lived under the weight of social, economic and spiritual marginalization, this message is not only affirming; it is also transformative.

Love is a lived reality, not a fleeting sentiment. It manifests in the grandmother raising her grandchildren after losing her children to H.I.V./AIDS, in the poor woman in a rural village who shares her meager meal with a neighbor, or in the widow who leads a small Christian community under a tree with courage and hope. This is the kind of love that "Dilexi Te" calls us to recognize—a love that is incarnational, resilient and rooted in solidarity.

I read "Dilexi Te" not as an abstract ecclesial document but as a reflection of the spiritual wisdom and lived theology of African women. The exhortation's insistence that "faith cannot be separated from love for the poor" rings true for us as the foundation of our theology and our daily lives.

Pope Leo's invocation of the "Magnificat" in the pastoral letter is a profound theological gesture. "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Lk 1:52) is not merely a poetic flourish; it is a statement of protest. For African women, the "Magnificat" is not confined to liturgical recitation. It resonates in the fields, in refugee camps, in the quiet corners of homes where women gather to pray and lament. It is the voice of those who challenge patriarchal structures, who demand justice in the face of corruption, who nurture life in the midst of crisis.

One of the most compelling aspects of "Dilexi Te" is its call to move from charity to solidarity. Charity, while well-intentioned, gives from abundance and surplus without challenging the systems that create scarcity. Solidarity, by contrast, is embodied. It walks alongside, listens and learns.

African women have long practiced this theology of solidarity. In informal sharing groups, in community health initiatives and in grassroots peacebuilding efforts, we have modeled what it means to love in action. "Dilexi Te" challenges the global church to learn from these models, moving beyond paternalism and toward partnership.

The exhortation's attention to migration, education and equality speaks directly to the realities facing African women today. Migration is not merely a geopolitical issue—it is a theological one. Women who flee conflict, climate disasters or economic hardship carry with them stories of faith, resilience and divine accompaniment. They are modern-day analogues of Mary of Nazareth, seeking refuge while bearing life.

Education, too, is a theological imperative. In many African contexts, girls' education remains undervalued. Yet when women are educated, they become leaders and changemakers. "Dilexi Te" affirms that education is a tool for development and a path to liberation.

Equality is the third strand in this concern. African women theologians have long argued that patriarchy is not divine; it is a distortion of God's justice. "Dilexi Te" strengthens this argument as a Gospel truth, calling the church to recognize and elevate the voices of women—not as tokens, but as theologians, prophets and leaders.

The African philosophy of *ubuntu*—"I am because we are"—offers an apt theological lens through which to read "Dilexi Te." This communal ethic aligns with the exhortation's vision of a church rooted in love, justice and shared humanity. This theology of communion challenges the individualism and indifference of our times and calls us to see the church not as a hierarchy of power but as a body of mutual care.

In the end, "Dilexi Te" is a love letter from Christ to the poor, reminding us that divine love is not abstract; it is embodied and life-giving. As an African woman theologian, I receive this exhortation with both gratitude and urgency. Gratitude for the recognition of our dignity, our wisdom and our witness. Urgency to continue the work of liberation and to proclaim through word and deed that Christ's love is for all, especially those the world forgets easily.

In every act of justice, every prayer and every song of resistance, we hear the voice of Christ saying again: *Dilexi Te—I have loved you.*

Anne Arabome *is a member of the Sisters of Social Service of Los Angeles. She is the founding director of the Sophia Institute for Theological Studies and Spiritual Formation.*

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