America
MARCH 2026
THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

‘JUST WAR’ UNDER TRUMP

Against a warrior ethos

Tobias Winright

p32

THE JOAN & BILL HANK CENTER FOR THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE

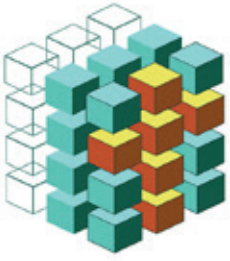
Exploring the Catholic Imagination

Discuss and celebrate the Catholic Imagination through storytelling this March with two events: ***A Faith That Builds Worlds: The Catholic Imagination and Speculative Storytelling Conference***, and ***Flannery 101: Capping the Centenary Year of an American Master***.

Both events are free and open to the public. Registration is required.

A Faith That Builds Worlds: The Catholic Imagination and Speculative Storytelling

March 14, 2026, 8am–5pm
Loyola University Chicago, Lake Shore Campus



A Faith That Builds Worlds
The catholic imagination and speculative storytelling

Worldbuilding is inherently spiritual. In speculative storytelling, it insists that all things have meaning, that—if we but hold on until the end, gathering up pieces of language and lore, architecture and myth—all will be revealed. Worldbuilding, when seen through a spiritual lens, sits squarely atop the oft-noted Ignatian insight that God *is in all things*. The Catholic imagination insists that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, but it also reminds us that all things unfold in God's time, not ours. What if we reclaimed the need for worldbuilding once more—and did so as a way to better grapple with God and God's world? This event is co-sponsored by Jesuit Media Lab.

SPEAKERS

Eric Clayton
Br. Guy Consolmagno, SJ
Ryan Duns, SJ
Susan Haarman
John Hendrix
Rose John Sheffler
Emily Strand
Joe Vukov

Flannery 101: Capping the Centenary Year of an American Master

featuring Amy Alznauer, Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, Elizabeth Coffman, Fr. Mark Bosco, S.J., and Special Guests

March 25, 2026, 12–9pm
Loyola University Chicago, Lake Shore Campus

March 25th, 2025 marks 101 years since the birth of acclaimed author, Flannery O'Connor. Though she only published two novels and two collections of short fiction in her life, O'Connor continues to compel and inspire scholars of literature, devotees of the short story, theologians, visual artists, and a cast of others. O'Connor has been identified and grouped in a number of ways, but she always seems to transcend simple reductions. Join us for a day of unorthodox, mixed media celebration of an artist who put her storytelling first—an artist who both embraced discomfort and who understood her own fallibility in "hot pursuit of the real" and her quest for God.

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JESUIT MEDIA LAB

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

Finding Neighbors in Minnesota

As this issue of **America** is being prepared for publication, Congress has just passed a bill that separated funding for the Department of Homeland Security from a larger budget package, ending a brief partial government shutdown and starting a two-week window for negotiation of legal restraints on the Trump administration's immigration enforcement surge. The debate over those reforms will unfold while this issue is making its way to your mailbox.

Like so many, I have been thinking about and praying for people in Minneapolis for the past month. Certainly, that includes praying for an end to the "indiscriminate mass deportation of people," as the U.S. bishops described it in their November "special message" on immigration, and for a drawdown of the enforcement surge in the Twin Cities.

It has also included prayers of gratitude: gratitude that over the past month, more and more Americans have been moved to reject the violence our government is directing against our immigrant brothers and sisters and often against American citizens who dare to object to it. Gratitude for the courage of those who speak out in protest, as the Our Take in this issue highlights on Page 8. Gratitude for those who have borne witness, in person and via video, so that the rest of us are not taken in by lies, as my colleague James T. Keane eloquently explains in this issue's Last Take on Page 66.

Even more, I have found myself moved by gratitude for the basic witness of goodness in and around and behind the more visible protests against the demonization of those who have come to the United States, following the pattern of so many of our immigrant forebears, seeking a better life for themselves and their families. That goodness, providing for the immediate and practical needs of people who are living in fear of immigration enforcement, is a concrete answer to Jesus' profound question following the parable of the good Samaritan: "Which of these...was neighbor to the robbers' victim?"

Laura Kelly Fanucci, in an article published on **America**'s website on Jan. 30, captured that reality, including a number of quotes from fellow Minnesotans. I am devoting the rest of this column to Ms. Fanucci's introduction to that piece, in the hope that you will read the whole article online and join in gratitude for the goodness of those who make themselves neighbors to the vulnerable and the suffering. That response is at the heart of the Gospel, modelled on the generosity of Jesus offering himself for us.

Make breakfast. Check the news. Wake the kids. Check ICE activity website for updates along the drive to school. Pack lunches. Text friend to confirm I'll bring home her kids today since she's not leaving the house. Brush kids' hair. Put Signal app notifications on silent since local mutual aid groups are already buzzing, but I can't answer. Brush kids' teeth.

Scribble grocery list of items to buy for neighbors who have been at home for weeks. Run outside to warm up the car. Hear radio updates about local preschooler detained by ICE. Dash back inside, zip kids' coats, pull on mittens, tug on hats. Head out into the frigid cold again.

I am a Catholic author, a mother of five, and a Minnesotan. In the past month, the last part of my identity has taken over my life and work. The dramatic and violent occupation of our cities by federal agents in Minneapolis and St. Paul has become national headlines. The deaths of Renee Good and Alex Pretti, the detainments of children and elders, the countless friends who are U.S. citizens staying home out of fear that their brown or black skin will put them in danger—all have moved me to join thousands of Minnesotans in rallying to care for our neighbors living under the threat of deportation.

We are buying groceries for families who have not left the house in over a month because they fear being targeted by ICE. We are driving children to school because their bus stops are no longer safe. We are organizing patrols to stand outside daycares and schools, to make sure children and parents can get in and out safely. We are fundraising rent money for neighbors who can't go to work for fear of detainment or deportation. We are helping find midwives for pregnant women terrified to go to hospitals and finding nurses willing to check on elderly and disabled neighbors with serious conditions.

We are calling our representatives and writing our bishops. We are asking our pastors to speak up for their suffering parishioners and thanking our liturgists for including the dead in the Prayers of the Faithful. We are mobilizing parish emergency funds, holding prayer services, buying diapers and formula, and bringing coats to the detention center where people are put out into the subzero cold after they are released, with no way to get home.

Read the rest of the piece online at: https://www.americamagazine.org/minnesota-fanucci

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Sam Sawyer, S.J.

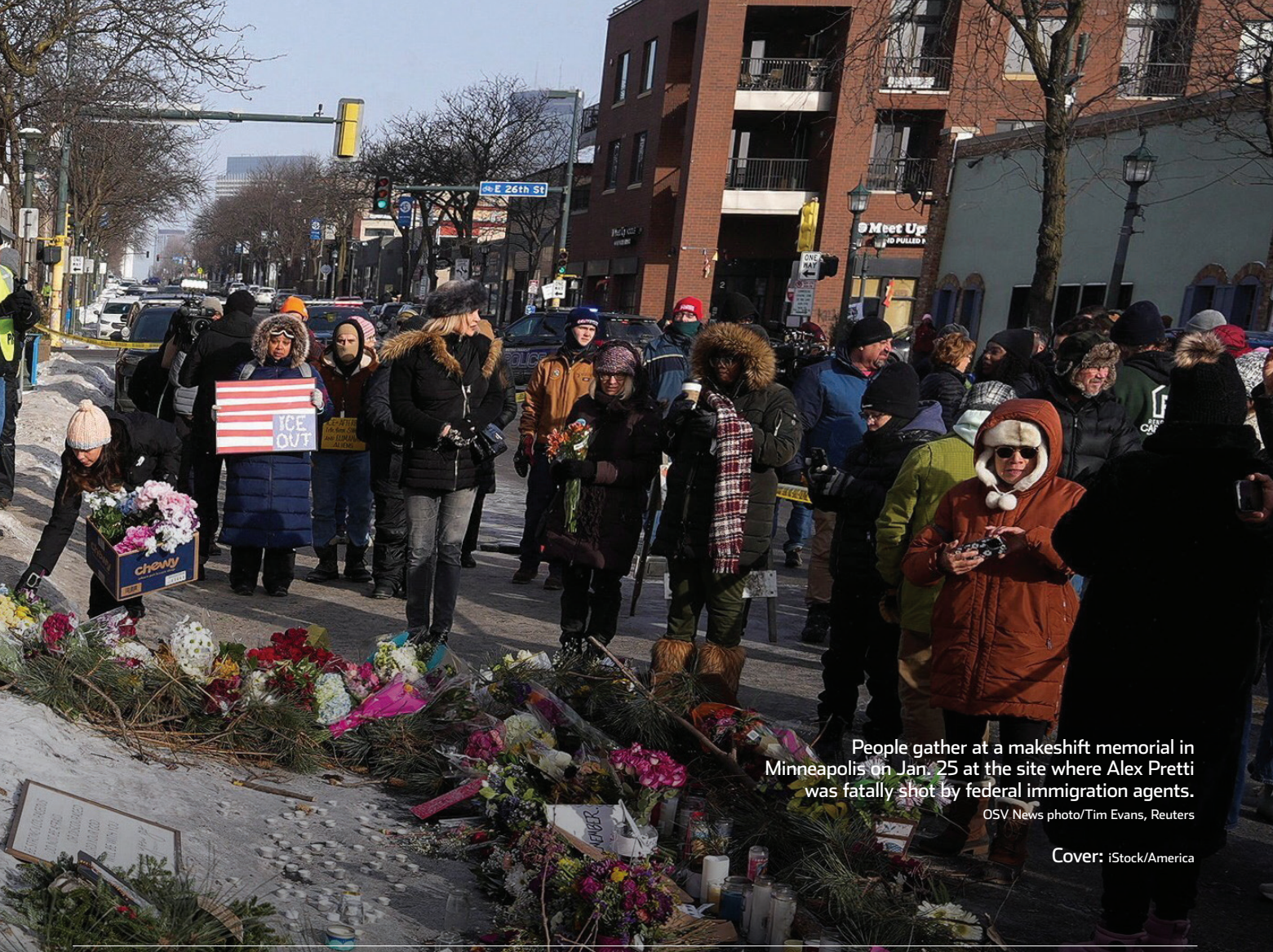
THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

DISPATCHES

FEATURES

POETRY



People gather at a makeshift memorial in Minneapolis on Jan. 25 at the site where Alex Pretti was fatally shot by federal immigration agents.
OSV News photo/Tim Evans, Reuters

Cover: iStock/America

FAITH & REASON

FAITH IN FOCUS

IDEAS

BOOKS

THE WORD

LAST TAKE

MARCH 2026 VOL. 234 NO. 3 WHOLE NO. 5318

Venezuela, Trump and the end of 'Pax Americana'

In the Our Take of our February issue, "Venezuela, Trump and the end of 'Pax Americana'," **America**'s editors evaluated the second Trump administration's abandonment of the rules-based international order in the context of the U.S. capture of Nicolás Maduro, then the president of Venezuela. The editors suggested that the new "ethos of naked self-interest" will render the world less stable and less cooperative and the United States less secure. "If nothing else," the editors wrote, "we can be sure that U.S. actions today will have long-term consequences unforeseen by the current administration." Our readers had much to say in response.

An evil man has been brought to justice. This is cause for commendation, not condemnation. Be glad. I'm wondering what a political prisoner, who is sitting—unjustly—in a Venezuelan jail, would say if he/she read this editorial?

Greg Murra

Are we supposed to mourn Mr. Maduro's ouster? Is this bad news? I don't think so. This past weekend I attended the Sunday vigil Mass at my parish. A woman I regularly greet waited for me after Mass. Her face was shining with joy. She was ecstatic at the news that Venezuela was free of Mr. Maduro. It turns out her father was a geologist in Venezuela and met her mother there. She recalled her nation with such love and fondness. The removal of a brutal and oppressive 25-year dictatorship (her words) is something Catholics should celebrate. This isn't the time for partisanship or nitpicking. The fall of Mr. Maduro is good news.

Sure, there will be challenges ahead for Venezuela, but that's to be expected. Don't expect a robust democratic republic by next week. Let's take a moment to thank God that a brutal, anti-Catholic and oppressive dictatorship has fallen—this is a rare thing. May more fall and may more people experience the joys of freedom.

Amy Chapmann

Mr. Maduro's removal is certainly good news for Venezuelans who suffered under his rule. But his corrupt administration remains at the helm. Why would anybody expect the remainder of his corrupt administration to suddenly dedicate themselves to good government?

The bad news: Our leadership of the free world has been badly damaged. If we suddenly have the right to depose heads of state, don't Russia, North Korea and China have the same right? And the stated basis for abducting Mr. Maduro—drugs—fails the smell test considering President Trump's recent pardon of former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. [*Editors' note: Mr. Hernández was sentenced last year to 45 years in U.S. prison for helping drug traffickers move hundreds of tons of cocaine to the United States but was pardoned by President Trump in December.*] He was indicted and convicted in a U.S. federal court for his massive drug shipments to the United States and had started to serve a long sentence. Oddly, no military attack was needed for this: Honduras extradited him.

Joseph McGuire

I'm perplexed by this editorial. There is no such thing as a "rules-based international order." A great Jesuit history teacher in high school taught me this uncomfortable truth years ago. Everything and anything is always up for grabs. Alliances come and go, as do kings and kingdoms. Nothing is guaranteed except Christ's Catholic Church. That's the history of mankind.

If the worst thing that Donald Trump does is arrest an evil despot who is guilty of murder, sending dangerous gangs to the United States, drug dealing, oppression of his people and happens to be on the most wanted list, then I join my fellow Catholic Venezuelans and celebrate with them. It looks like the evil regimes in Iran and Cuba may fall next. This would be great news for freedom-loving peoples. Mr. Trump is clearly doing something right. Let's pray for true peace and demand freedom for all people—not just Americans.

Greg Rumak

Are we in favor of the "law of the jungle"? Or as Stephen Miller stated (paraphrasing), "We want Greenland. Nobody is going to put up a serious fight against our powerful military. So we should just take it." This is OK?

As far as liberating Venezuela goes, the Trump administration has chosen not to support the democratically elected president, Edmundo Gonzáles, who won by a large margin in the last election. Instead, against the wishes of Nobel Prize winner María Corina Machado, they are supporting Maduro cronies. An article in The New York Times documented the increasing repression in the country since Mr. Maduro's removal. And is cheering lower gas prices really in line with church teaching on the environment (see "Laudato Si'," for example)?

Robert Reinke

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Courageous Voices in the Cacophony

More than a year into Donald J. Trump's second term as president, our national politics can often feel dominated by rage, anguish and cynicism. As we celebrate the nation's 250th anniversary, rhetoric describing America as a generous refuge for the world's downtrodden and as a land of new beginnings rings false.

Violent actions against both migrants and American citizens, Mr. Trump's threats and bullying of longtime allies as well as political colleagues at home, and haphazard military strikes against Venezuela, Iran and now possibly Cuba and Colombia lead many to question what this nation has become. What is the antidote for the anger, cynicism and despair that roil the land?

As always, there are lights among the shadows, and it is worthwhile to hold up those groups and people who are valiantly and publicly pushing back against the worst impulses of our national character and the specific violence and dishonesty of the current administration. Their work of courageous fortitude provides powerful counter-examples and reasons for hope.

First and foremost are the many activists taking part in actions of civil disobedience and peaceful protest around the nation. Mr. Trump has threatened to use the Insurrection Act to quash protests in Minneapolis and elsewhere, and his vice president has falsely described activists as "insurrectionists carrying foreign flags" and "far left agitators, working with local authorities." This is part of a concerted effort to discredit any resistance to the administration's plans—even as the national headlines have been dominated with the news of the recent killings of Renee Good and of Alex Pretti by federal officers and the subsequent resignation of six federal prosecutors over the Justice Department's mishandling of both incidents.

But the vast majority of protestors, including in hotspots like Chicago, Los Angeles, Portland and most prominently Minneapolis, have undertaken peaceful, nonviolent and legal action to decry the actions of ICE and other federal agencies leading Mr. Trump's campaign against our nation's most vulnerable. Many have done so knowing that no such quarter would be offered by ICE or Border Patrol agents who have operated with seeming impunity in attacking Americans at the slightest pretext and have turned to violence without compunction.

These activists and fellow neighbors are doing the daily anonymous work of ensuring the dignity and safety of migrants who fear for their lives and their livelihoods in this dark time, providing food, shelter and comfort in small and quiet ways. We might never know most of their names—but we can take consolation from their example.

It has also been heartening to see the Catholic bishops take the lead standing up to Mr. Trump on a number of issues. The "special message" released by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Nov. 12, 2025, was remarkable not just for its rejection of Mr. Trump's plans for the violent mass deportation of millions but for its collective nature. Not since 2013 have the bishops released such a joint statement, giving added weight to the blunt critique.

So, too, have individual prelates taken the lead in calling the Trump administration to account. In January, the three U.S. cardinals currently leading dioceses issued a joint statement calling for the Trump administration to abandon the actions and rhetoric against foreign nations that have roiled international diplomacy and raised the specter of worldwide conflict. The cardinals—Blase Cupich of Chicago, Robert McElroy of Washington and Joseph Tobin of Newark—warned that "the building of just and sustainable peace...is being reduced to partisan categories that encourage polarization and destructive policies."

On Jan. 25, Cardinal Tobin was even more outspoken in his criticism of the Trump administration's deportation and immigration enforcement plans, encouraging Americans to call their legislators and demand ICE be defunded. "We mourn for our world, for our country, that allows 5-year-olds to be legally kidnapped and protesters to be slaughtered," he said, adding that voters should ask the legislators, "for the love of God and the love of human beings, which can't be separated, [to] vote against renewing funding for such a lawless organization."

Another welcome voice of conscience has been that of Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, who told U.S. troops on Jan. 18 that they could in good conscience disobey orders to participate in an immoral and unjustified military operation such as Mr. Trump's proposed takeover of Greenland. Calling the decision to disobey such orders "morally acceptable," the archbishop evoked the ire of the administration and some figures in the military—but also exercised his duties as the spiritual shepherd of those whose lives are put on the line when the United States makes its unilateral shows of force.

Additional groups that deserve credit for their resistance to the government's immoral actions can be

found on the other end of the political spectrum from many protestors and activists: pro-life advocates. In recent years, this lobby has seemed solidly in Mr. Trump's camp despite his repeated betrayals of the pro-life cause, from the removal of the "pro-life" plank from the Republican Party platform in 2024 to his recent statement to Republican politicians that they should "be a little flexible" on the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits taxpayer funding of abortion.

No more. On Jan. 7, Marjorie Dannenfelser, the president of a lobby that works to elect pro-life candidates to public office, said that any change in the government's support of Hyde would be "a massive betrayal." John Mize of Americans United for Life predicted that if Mr. Trump forsook the amendment (one long supported by the U.S. bishops and generally popular with the public), "it will leave the Republican Party in pieces, fractured and without a base strong enough to win important battles for life in coming years." In a political world where pro-life friends can be hard to find, the courage of these groups to buck their onetime ally is admirable.

So too have a number of Republican elected officials displayed fortitude in the face of what has often been furious pushback from Mr. Trump when his party members do not fall into lockstep. Senator Thom Tillis has been a leading critic of many of the president's actions, but Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana has also been an outspoken voice for accountability and honesty.

It takes great courage and faith to speak truth to power. It requires even more in an environment dominated by threats of economic or political retribution—or, in recent days, by the physical violence and intimidation that used to be associated with totalitarian regimes and police states. As we are all called to stand by our moral principles and longheld convictions in the days to come, may their examples be beacons of hope.

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Antisemitism is bad politics—and even worse Christianity

The resurgence of antisemitism on the American right has of late often been reduced to a matter of strategy. Is JD Vance doing what he needs to do to win the 2028 Republican presidential nomination? Is Donald Trump a hypocrite for speaking out against antisemitism but doing nothing to expel those who make antisemitc comments from his political coalition? Has the Heritage Foundation lost support on the non-MAGA right, following the think tank's president defending a podcast interview with a white nationalist and antisemite?

Focusing on these questions can easily lead to bad political strategy. But superficial political analysis also allows critics of the U.S. right to be complacent about their own failings. As the Jewish population continues to face violence in the United States and around the world, the Republican Party needs to get its house in order, but the rest of Americans do too.

Mr. Vance illustrates these dynamics well, because he has played an elusive game with antisemitism recently. While he said in an interview with the conservative writer Sohrab Ahmari that antisemitism has "no place in the conservative moment," he has also rejected efforts to condemn individuals in the G.O.P. who have made antisemitic statements (saying at Turning Point USA's annual convention in December, "We have far more important work to do than canceling each other") and has downplayed the problem of antisemitism within his own political party.

A widespread interpretation of this equivocation is that it is a strategy: Mr. Vance is trying to keep the 2024 Trump coalition together for his own 2028 presidential campaign. And it is a divided coalition. As recently released opinion data from the Manhattan Institute illustrates, the G.O.P. under Mr. Trump "is broader than any Republican coalition in recent memory, but also more internally contradictory and harder to manage."

If it is true that Mr. Vance is trying to have it both ways on Israel and antisemitism, this is a perilous strategy. First, there is little hope of the Trump coalition enduring in 2028. Held together in large part by grievances against the left as articulated by Mr. Trump and shaped by his personality, a substantial portion of the new G.O.P. came in with Mr. Trump, and many will leave with Mr. Trump. Some will vote Democratic, but many others will simply drop out of political life again. The 2028 Republican candidate for president cannot assume he will win with the 2024 Trump coalition but rather must work hard to form his own, doubtless different, coalition.

Second, while Mr. Vance has thus far rejected the idea of expelling antisemitic elements of MAGA from the movement, drawing bright red lines is just what successful political coalitions occasionally must do. Coalitions can tolerate many contradictions, but some are a bridge too far. Antisemitism is a dangerous ideology that is fundamentally wrong, evil and a betrayal of Christianity. It undercuts the basic liberties of U.S. society and denies their foundation in a fundamental Jewish and Christian principle: "the profound, inherent, and equal dignity of each and every member of the human family," as the Catholic natural law and Princeton University professor Robert P. George argued before resigning from the Heritage Foundation board in November 2025. Antisemitism is a death cult, leading to violence and the deaths of many people. In other words, it works against much that the G.O.P. claims to value.

Mr. Vance and others are already on the record in agreeing that coalitions have their limits. Many current leaders in the G.O.P. have argued for the Trump-era changes in the G.O.P. on the grounds that certain policies, including free trade and neoconservatism, are disconsonant with the aims of the MAGA right. If they can rule supply-side economics out of bounds, they can certainly do the same with antisemitism.

Third, and this reason is specific to Mr. Vance, surrendering to young antisemites undermines one of Mr. Vance's main self-reported strengths: that he can be a leader for young men disillusioned by modernity and left out of the economy.

Right-wing antisemitism is particularly visible in online spaces and among younger people. Its resurgence stems from several converging factors at work among Gen Z, including skepticism regarding Israel's place in U.S. foreign policy, economic discontent that encourages scapegoating and the internet's amplification of conspiratorial ideas that easily slide into antisemitic patterns.

As the political commentator Rod Dreher points out, antisemitism among young men cannot be addressed effectively with lofty appeals to authority or values: "[W]hile it's important to take a clear stand against anti-Semitism in the ranks, there is no way to gatekeep our way out of this. You cannot simply point at the Zoomers and say, 'Thou shalt not,' and expect it to work. The problems are too deep and complex, and anyway, they have learned to have no respect for authority."

Whoever would exorcise antisemitism on the right, then, must have real credibility and an ability to lead. Mr. Vance has claimed that ability many times among the young,

Vice President JD Vance speaks at Turning Point USA's annual convention on Dec. 21, 2025, in Phoenix, where he said, "We have far more important work to do than canceling each other."

very online men at stake in this conversation. But will he lead them or follow them? Much will hinge upon whether he, a Catholic social conservative and economical populist, can educate and lead the postmodern, post-religious right.

Again, these challenges are not peculiar to Mr. Vance. Whoever wins the mantle of Mr. Trump's successor in 2028 will not be able to avoid the basic tasks of coalitional politics. Mr. Trump has not made it easy to establish bright red lines about what is acceptable in the party, and no candidate will want to alienate new G.O.P. voters, who, being younger, are already less likely to go to the polls than other citizens. But the work of such coalitional "hygiene" cannot be avoided indefinitely if the G.O.P. wants to build that most elusive of unicorns in contemporary U.S. politics: a stable party coalition that wins successive elections.

A Time of Decision

Tolerating antisemitism is bad politics, but it is also something far worse. Antisemitism is a modern expression of a long history of anti-Judaism, in which many Christians played a role. At stake have been profoundly wrong and dangerous ideas about "supersessionism," the claim that Christ abolished the law and the covenant between God and Israel; the "deicide" charge of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Christ; and anti-Jewish discourses and practices that have accrued throughout history, often for the political and economic benefit of powerful elites. This history means that antisemitism is an ever-ready weapon when political and social elites want to manipulate angry, disaffected people by channeling their energies toward a scapegoat. The Shoah was far and away the worst such instance, but by no means the only one.

Any movement that tolerates antisemitism cannot claim to represent Christians. For this reason, Pope Leo XIV recently restated the "Catholic Church's firm condemnation of all forms of antisemitism, which, throughout the world, continues to sow fear in Jewish communities and in society as a whole."

Perhaps the key word here for Catholics, including Mr. Vance, is *firm*. Choosing not to resist evil is just that: a choice. As the Wall Street Journal columnist William Galston writes, recent events have been "a textbook case of how this ancient hatred spreads when those who are in a position to resist it choose not to do so."

A G.O.P. that got tough on antisemitism would help stem the tide of violence and save lives. It would remind the millions of Christians in the party that antisemitism is anti-Christian. It would also be good for Democrats. The American left also has a tremendous antisemitism problem, and G.O.P. backsliding gives others permission not to tend their own garden.

And, yes, taking a firm stand against antisemitism would be good for Israel. There is no question that U.S. public opinion toward Israel is changing, particularly on the left and among younger Americans. In response, many on the right are searching for a new way to talk about the relationship between Israel and the United States, one in which, as the New York Times columnist Ross Douthat argues, allows "normal criticism" of Israel in ways that can "clearly distinguish those normal debates from paranoid and antisemitic criticism."

Mr. Vance may have the credibility on the right to initiate such a move for the greater good of the United States, Israel and the Middle East more generally. But it will be salutary only if he can pair it with a forthright rejection of antisemitism.

As with so much else, Christians cannot put their trust in princes when it comes to resisting antisemitism. But we can still pray that those princes will occasionally find politically advantageous reasons to do the right thing.

Bill McCormick, S.J., *is a writer at La Civiltà Cattolica in Rome and a research fellow in the Department of Political Science at Saint Louis University in Missouri.*

OSV News photo/Simone Risoluti, Vatican Media

A former Irish president asks: Is infant baptism a violation of human rights?

By Kevin Hargaden

Ireland may be the only country in the world to have a former president who has a doctorate in canon law from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Mary McAleese—the social activist, lawyer and journalist who served as the president of Ireland from 1997 to 2011—pursued and received her doctorate in her (very active) retirement.

Her most recent book arises from her doctoral research and considers the implications of canon law for children. And it was this topic that she addressed in January in a prominent weekend op-ed in Ireland's paper of record, The Irish Times. Inciting considerable comment, she argues that baptizing babies "restricts" their human rights.

Ms. McAleese presents baptism as a kind of recruitment tool that ignores children's right, as they mature, to freely decide their own religious identity. She notes that canon law acknowledges no right to leave the Catholic Church, adding that attempts "to leave the Church or change religion or challenge Church teaching or magisterial authority, constitute canonical crimes of heresy, apostasy, schism."

In her reading, this represents a systemic restriction on a child's human rights that conflicts with international treaties that have been signed by both the Irish state and the Vatican. All of this rests on the "risible" idea, as Ms. McAleese put it, that an infant can make a promise of any kind. Based on this "fictitious" premise, she argues, the institutional church imposes lifelong membership and exerts a "powerful psychological hold" over baptized children, even if they never cross the threshold of a church ever again.

It is important to state that Ms. McAleese is not seeking to attack the sacrament Christians call baptism. She explicitly clarifies that she is "not challenging the routine practice of infant Baptism itself" but does want Christians to consider the "man-made juridic effect" that flows from the "gratuitous spiritual effects" of the practice.

This is a provocative argument. Especially in this age of rage-clicking, social media frenzies, it could be easily chopped up and offered to people as a serving of bitter indignation.

Pope Leo XIV baptizes one of 20 children in the Sistine Chapel on Jan. 11, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

But Ms. McAleese's argument is not meant to be trollish. Her concern is that through a kind of institutional blind spot, Christians have ended up harming people who are definitionally vulnerable—"the 300 million church members who are children." Leaving aside whether the detail of her argument persuades, its form is significantly theological. If it turns out that common practices of the church are inherently discriminatory, the faithful should be concerned.

A Church in Decline in Ireland

There is also an important contextual factor at play. Ms. McAleese lives and writes from Ireland, a country where, as recently as the 1970s, more than 90 percent of citizens were regular Mass attendees. In recent years, however, there has been a decline in practice that is arguably as precipitous as any in the history of the church.

The clerical abuse scandals played a decisive role. But as the journalist Derek Scally explains in his excellent account of the recent history of the Irish church, *The Best Catholics in the World*, "the shallowness of many people's religious belief allowed prosperity and secularism to erode Catholic Ireland's foundations with great speed."

The Rev. Jo Kershaw is a tutor in liturgy at the College of the Resurrection, a monastic seminary for the Church of England. She read Ms. McAleese's piece as "coming out of quite a real pastoral concern" for people who could be harmed by a culture that ties the profundity of sacramental initiation with a tangle of mundane concerns like access to primary school education. But she found the inter-church implications of her position "distressing."

Ms. McAleese has been a longstanding champion of ecumenical efforts, and, as Rev. Kershaw sees it, ecumenical endeavors were advanced because of the Second Vatican Council's "really strong commitment to shared baptism." That "made a difference in terms of ecumenical engagement." She worries that Ms. McAleese's argument skirts the reality that the practice of infant baptism is one of the most important places of common ground upon which the Eastern and Western churches can meet.

She thinks that ecumenical engagement might also offer a constructive path forward. "From an Anglican perspective, I think I would want very much to distinguish between sacramental membership of church, the body of Christ, which is indelible and conveyed by baptism, and membership in the institutional church."

As a result of important post-Reformational debates, Rev. Kershaw says, there are "very easy ways to unambiguously walk away" from the church as a structure in society. Perhaps, she suggests, Ms. McAleese's argument could inspire a conversation about whether the German practice of *kirchenaustritt*—a civil process to formally disassociate oneself from the church—could be adapted in an Irish context.

If the Irish state, recognizing the various ways the Catholic Church is involved in the provision of social services, were to similarly create a civic register for those who wished to no longer be associated with the church, that might address many of the concerns Ms. McAleese raises.

Original Blessing

Attending to how other churches practice baptism might also strengthen some of the positions that Ms. McAleese feels are unsupportable. Rev. Kershaw finds the extensive pastoral notes that accompany the liturgical instructions around baptism in the Church of England instructive. They address many of the sensitivities raised by Ms. McAleese but in a holistic fashion.

In the Anglican Communion the local parish hosts baptism as the first of five elements of Christian initiation. The local congregation commits to a central role in the fulfillment of the baptismal promises and, while a baby cannot commit to anything, it is not unreasonable that "godparents are speaking on behalf of the child," since the anthropological reality is that so much of our early lives are entirely dependent on the care of those around us.

"None of us choose our communities" as babies, Rev. Kershaw says. We are born into a social context that has a dramatic influence on our moral vision, aesthetic preferences and view of the world: "Baptism, at its best, is this sort of joyous welcoming of the child into a wider community that is taking the child seriously as a full human being."

Ms. McAleese sees these ties that bind in terms of the "formidable restrictions on my inalienable intellectual human rights." But for the acclaimed moral theologian William T. Cavanaugh of DePaul University, baptism has a potent political edge that is all too easily overlooked in the kinds of critiques that Ms. McAleese levies.

"Theoretically, at least, the idea is that you are baptized into this global body and that means that your national identities, your tribal identities, your ethnic identity and all your other identities are relativized," Mr. Cavanaugh explained to **America**. He grants that there are many instances where the faithful fail to fully embrace that overriding identity—Ms. McAleese's original home of Northern Ireland is one such case—but the existence of this bond is a "recognition of the universality of our humanity."

Declining Catholic baptisms a worldwide phenomenon

At the end of 2023, the number of Catholics in the world reached 1.405 billion, up 1.15 percent from 1.389 billion Catholics at the end of 2022. But even as improving life expectancy nudges those numbers higher, the number of Catholic baptisms worldwide, according to the Vatican's *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*, has been on a steady decline since the turn of the century.

A contemporary peak was reported during the Holy Year 2000, when 18,408,076 baptisms were administered worldwide. By 2023, global baptisms had fallen to 13,150,780. The yearbook reports the "general downward trend in the relative number of baptisms" has been "following closely the trend in the birthrate in most countries."

54,825: Baptisms under age 7 in Ireland in 2022.

643: Baptisms over age 7 in Ireland in 2022.

70: Number of adults baptized into the Catholic Church during the Easter Vigil in the Archdiocese of Dublin in 2025, "marking the highest number of adult baptisms in recent memory for the Irish capital," according to the church news service Zenit. "For a diocese once reeling from a sharp decline in religious affiliation," Zenit reported, "this development hints at a quiet, complex resurgence of faith—especially among young adults and new arrivals to Ireland."

66,963: First Communions in Ireland in 2022.

70,218: Confirmations in Ireland in 2022.

10: Percent one-year decline in baptisms recorded in the Archdiocese of Dublin in 2019, from **13,234** to **11,922**, after the "baptism barrier" was removed. That year Catholic primary schools, which are supported by the state, for the first time could no longer use religion as a selection criterion in school admissions.

7.4 per 1,000: The rate of infant baptisms within the global Catholic population in 2023.

71.2 per 1,000: The highest rate of infant baptisms within a national Catholic population, recorded in American Samoa. Several islands in Oceania recorded the next highest rates—from 37.7 to 21.8 per 1,000—followed by Burundi (23.6), Cambodia (22.3), Timor Leste (20.3) and Myanmar (20.1). The lowest rates were recorded in Armenia, Georgia, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iran, Tunisia and Algeria (below 1), followed by Russia and Djibouti (1.1).

2,696,521: The total number of adult baptisms in the worldwide Catholic Church registered in 2023, about 20 percent of all baptisms. The highest proportion of adult baptisms occurred in Africa—35.9 percent.

Sources: Catholic & Culture, Catholic News Service, Fides, OSV News

From this perspective, baptism is an obligation to live the values of universal fraternity and solidarity that are so central to the Gospel. He appreciates that Ms. McAleese's argument presses Christians to see baptism not merely as an institutional alignment but as the beginning of a journey where we "invest in our faith." But he has concerns about whether that is the key message that the church needs to underline at this time.

"There are two aspects to baptism. One is that God chooses you, and the other is you choose God. They're both right," Mr. Cavanaugh says. "But it seems to me that the priority has to be theologically that God chooses you, before you choose God. And infant baptism is a recognition of that fact."

Informed by the work of the historian Sophia Rosenfeld, he argues that the Western world is marked today by "the idea that we are sovereign choosers."

As Mr. Cavanaugh's teacher, the theologian Stanley Hauerwas, famously described it, our cultural moment is one in which we are told to believe that we have no story except the story we chose when we had no story. This commitment to shaping our lives around conscious choice—"sentient consent," to use Ms. McAleese's term—is "an ideology of choice, but it's not reality," Mr. Cavanaugh said.

Exactly because "we are marinated in market ideology and learn to think ourselves as these autonomous choosers when we're clearly not that at all," it is important that the "idea that what we need to hold up is the idea that God chooses us," Mr. Cavanaugh argues. "God is not a consumer item that we choose."

Ms. McAleese's argument might be a rich opportunity to consider the ways in which the conveyor-belt view of sacramental formation is ripe for replacement. Her warning about how baptism can inculcate discrimination in a society should be considered.

But when Mr. Cavanaugh proposes the priority of God's choice, what is being described is a context where the human rights of the child can be respected. When done right, baptism tells a child—before they can even put a word to this force—that they are loved and that they will be loved to the end of time and beyond. It declares that a power higher than the state is invested in their flourishing. It assures them that they belong to a family wider than their kin or the borders of a nation-state.

Kevin Hargaden *contributes from Dublin.*

In Venezuela drama, Vatican's patient and pragmatic diplomacy stands out

USV News photo/Eduardo Munoz, Reuters

Nicolás Maduro, the captured president of Venezuela, arrives at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport in New York City on Jan. 5.

American Catholics may have been surprised to learn through a report in The Washington Post in January of the significant involvement of Vatican diplomats in negotiations to resolve the standoff between the Trump administration and the Maduro government in Venezuela.

While the rest of the Christian world enjoyed its Christmas Eve, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, met with Brian Burch, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, to discuss a deal that would allow Venezuela's President Nicholás Maduro to escape to exile in Russia before shots might be fired. Vatican officials, in the end, were unable to persuade Mr. Maduro to accept that option before his capture by U.S. Special Forces on Jan. 3.

Vatican journalist Victor Gaetan was less surprised to learn of the frenetic last-minute diplomacy aimed at the peaceful removal of Mr. Maduro. Mr. Gaetan is the author of *God's Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy and America's Armageddon*.

He saw in the Post account a familiar example of the Vatican's engaged and patient diplomacy. Mr. Gaetan noted the challenging dynamics at play: the implacable Americans, jockeying business executives, officials in Russia and Turkey trying to create a credible out for the Venezuelan leader, and the recalcitrant Mr. Maduro himself—for his own reasons resisting the attempt to end the standoff without violence. The Maduro drama, he suggested, represented a premier characteristic of Vatican diplomacy: an insistence that dialogue, not violence, should direct international relations.

Cardinal Parolin's deep connections in Venezuela no doubt made his outreach easier, but it was not because of those personal relationships that he became involved in the ultimately unsuccessful effort to depose Mr. Maduro without violence. Vatican diplomats are opportunistic, Mr. Gaetan said, ready to intercede anytime with anyone if they perceive an opening to resolve tensions before disputing parties turn to violent means to achieve their ends.

"Connections that have been developed throughout the years are everywhere important," Mr. Gaetan said. "We see this all the time—the capacity, the dexterity of Vatican diplomats to entertain relations [across] the religious spectrum and political spectrum in any given country, including in the United States."

And why do diplomats across political and ideological boundaries welcome Holy See interventions? Vatican diplomacy "is recognized by everyone" to "have no biased interests," Mr. Gaetan said.

"They have no political, no economic, no military interests, and they are trusted. Their advice has proven to be beneficial," he said. "This is the record of Vatican diplomacy."

The Vatican's diplomatic reach rivals that of any superpower. The Holy See holds permanent observer status at the United Nations and maintains diplomatic relations with 184 nations, the European Union and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. It participates in scores of international governing bodies. Under Pope Francis, it extended its diplomatic reach to the global margins with appointments and elevations to the cardinalate in Asia and through new overtures to religious and political leaders in Muslim nations.

Despite their moral and spiritual grounding, church diplomats can hardly be described as geopolitical idealists, according to Mr. Gaetan. Theirs is not pie-in-the-sky diplomacy. In addressing difficult international entanglements, church diplomats decline to allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good.

Pragmatism and patience typify the Vatican diplomatic style. And when it becomes engaged, he said, "the Vatican does not think in terms of winning or losing. They are preoccupied, first of all, with facilitating understanding and avoiding violence."

He calls that approach "pastoral diplomacy."

A characteristic of Vatican diplomacy, according to Mr. Gaetan, is resistance to the demands for "aggressive regime change." The Vatican maintains a "time horizon," Mr. Gaetan said, that extends across decades, "not years, as we see the secular governments planning their policies."

Secular authorities, he suggested, are too ready to resort to force to see their aims achieved, while the church continues a restraining role focused on avoiding violence. This pattern has become clear "since the end of the Cold War," he said, and in particular as the United States began to move more freely across the world as global hegemon.

"The positive opponent who comes with constructive, peaceful alternatives is the church," Mr. Gaetan said—a dichotomy that will likely only become more obvious as two very different Americans, Donald Trump and Pope Leo XIV, play profoundly different roles on the world stage.

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

AP Photo/Evan Vucci

The Trump administration's 'Make America Isolated' policy

President Donald J. Trump's Greenland fixation created a crisis with European allies in January. But the tussle over that frozen island is only the most prominent in a series of policy shifts that suggest a broad U.S. disengagement from world affairs, a self-imposed isolation that threatens the country's own interests and, in worst-case scenarios, world peace.

Raising tariff barriers and withdrawing from significant international collaborations like the World Health Organization and the Paris climate agreement are among the most notable of the administration's retreats. The White House has also ordered travel restrictions, visa bans and a "pause" on immigration from 75 nations across the world.

On Jan. 7, Mr. Trump issued an executive order that withdrew the United States from 66 international cooperative bodies and commissions, dismissing them as "wasteful, ineffective, and harmful." The organizations, including many independent transnational efforts and United Nations organizations, served as forums addressing, among other issues, trade, sustainable energy production, counterterrorism and cybersecurity.

Sarah Lockhart is an associate professor of political science and director of international studies at Fordham University in New York. "I struggle to see an upside or what the long-term strategy is here," Ms. Lockhart said, "because, if anything, one of the crowning achievements of American foreign policy in the post-World War II period has been the use of multilateralism to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals."

"The biggest collective action problem that we face right now is climate change," Ms. Lockhart said. "That's an existential threat that the U.S. is backing away from, just as many other countries are really getting on board."

The various steps away from multilateralism are especially striking, she said, because over decades the United States had proven to be an adept player within such policy-making bodies. The United States played a prominent role in the creation of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other multilateral efforts now mocked or denigrated by Mr. Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Now, under President Trump, the United States seems to be "actively seeking to dismantle" such international bodies, Ms. Lockhart said.

The nation's broad withdrawal means the United States will, to steal a line from Lin-Manuel Miranda, cease being "in the room where it happens," self-sabotaging a capacity to advance interests or resolve disputes through dialogue and in coordination with allied states.

The Catholic Church has been a consistent supporter of multilateral efforts directed at peacemaking and collaboration to protect what might be characterized as a global common good. Pope Francis, in particular, was a believer in international cooperation and the kinds of global commissions that the Trump administration is abandoning.

Pope Leo XIV seems poised to continue that support for international bodies. In a recent address to the diplomatic corps to the Holy See, he deplored the resurgence of a "zeal for war" and the weakening of esteem for multilateralism.

"In our times," the pope told the assembled diplomats, "the weakness of multilateralism is a particular cause for concern at the international level. A diplomacy that promotes

President Donald J. Trump launches his Board of Peace during the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on Jan. 22.

dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force, by either individuals or groups of allies."

Ms. Lockhart is concerned that as the United States pulls back from multilateralism, other countries "will turn to a kind of self-help and then also begin looking to some of our rivals to fill that gap—particularly China." And a major contributing factor in outbreaks of conflict, according to Ms. Lockhart, is insufficient information about a global antagonist.

"One of the purposes that all these multilateral institutions serve is to build this dense network of communication, sharing best practices [and] intelligence, understanding each other and what different countries' goals are." This is critical data for making good international policy decisions, Ms. Lockhart said.

"Much of what multilateral institutions do, fostering lines of communication and finding points of coordination and cooperation," she said, "are cost-effective means of "getting the American message out there and influencing through soft power."

Hard power, after all, does not come cheap. The Trump administration announced on Jan. 7 that it will seek a 50 percent increase in the annual defense budget next year, jumping from nearly $1 trillion in direct spending to $1.5 trillion for 2027. Other European powers are similarly increasing defense spending (while cutting humanitarian assistance), suggesting even higher levels of global arms spending, something regularly condemned as a moral scandal by the church.

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


AP Photo/Hussein Malla

In Beirut, the beat goes on for the D.J. Priest

"Electronic music is one language that all understand," the Rev. Guilherme Peixoto told Lebanese students before a performance in Beirut in January. "It will not solve the problems of the church, of course, but it can help convey messages of faith and peace."

Father Peixoto, known to fans as the D.J. Priest or Padre Guilherme, is globally popular on the techno and house music scene. In 2023, during World Youth Day in Lisbon, he performed before the closing Mass with Pope Francis, who took a moment to privately support his D.J. evangelization.

His D.J. style—mixing religious songs with electronic music—is unique. But the priest's nightclub appearance struck some members of Beirut's Maronite community as scandalous, and a group of Beirut Christians filed a lawsuit seeking to halt the show.

"We are not like Europe," said Sabeh Haddad, a Lebanese Christian close to the Jnoud el Rab (Soldiers of God) group, a hardline Christian militia known for its opposition to L.G.B.T.Q. events.

"In Europe, there are no more values; nothing is holy anymore," Mr. Haddad said. "But in Lebanon, we do not follow these principles."

"If the church itself had asked us to cancel the event, we would have, but [the litigants] have no institutional authority," said Jad Souaid, the chief executive and co-founder of Factory People, which had hired Padre Guilherme to appear at a prominent Beirut nightclub. He goes by his professional D.J. name, Jade.

Responding to the controversy, Factory People made a few adjustments. "We asked Padre Guilherme not to perform in his clerical clothing, and [that] no Christian symbols would be shown," Jade said.

When these new restrictions were shared on social media, some of the backlash subsided. Mr. Haddad decided to call off a demonstration his organization had planned.

The last-minute limitations on his performance in Beirut did not prevent Padre Guilherme from conveying his central message of faith through different means. A recording of St. John Paul II was shown on a big screen above the D.J. with a simple message: "Let the Lord speak to man."

Clotilde Bigot *contributes from Beirut.*

Waiting for White Smoke

America's senior Vatican correspondent chronicles the historic election of the first American pope

By Gerard O'Connell

On May 8—the second day of the conclave—at Santa Marta, the cardinals have a continental breakfast between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m. Cardinal Timothy Dolan sits at a table with his jar of peanut butter that he brought from New York, and to his surprise Cardinal Robert Prevost comes and sits next to him.

"No doubt he was attracted by the peanut butter!" Cardinal Dolan joked later, in a lecture at Fairfield University in early September. He also revealed that prior to the conclave, cardinals kept asking him, "Who is Robert Prevost?" but he confessed that at that time he didn't really know the man. Later, however, Cardinal Dolan will tell the New York Post that as they chatted he found Cardinal Prevost to be open and engaging. "We swapped some stories about my hometown of St. Louis, where he had lived during his novitiate with the Augustinian order," Cardinal Dolan said. "I came away impressed."

After breakfast the cardinals, again dressed in their scarlet robes, go to the Pauline Chapel where they concelebrate Mass. Cardinal Pietro Parolin presides and delivers the homily. They remain for a moment in silent prayer before heading to the Sistine Chapel, where they resume their assigned seats and recite Lauds, the church's morning prayer.

Once the prayers are concluded, the second ballot begins, following exactly the same ritual as that of the previous evening. Three new tellers (who count the votes) and three new reviewers are randomly chosen by the junior cardinal deacons using wooden balls, and two ballots are

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

White smoke billows from the chimney of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel on May 8, 2025, indicating a new pope has been elected.

given to each voter, as two votes are expected to be held this morning.

The third teller, who will read out the names, is Robert Francis Prevost!

"It's God's sense of humor," one cardinal will comment later.

At around 9:30 a.m. each of the 133 cardinals writes the name of the person they have chosen to be pope on their ballot, folds it into the appropriate shape, and solemnly carries it to the altar.

Unlike the previous evening, when a livelier atmosphere reigned, not a fly can be heard buzzing in the Sistine Chapel now: Cardinal Parolin has expressly requested that silence be maintained during the voting.

Once the votes are cast, the tellers then mix the ballot sheets and count the votes to verify that the number of votes corresponds to the number of electors present.

They then proceed with the opening of the ballot sheets. Each teller performs his task and the third one, Cardinal Prevost, reads the names aloud for all to hear. He must read his own name repeatedly.

Since no cardinal has obtained a two-thirds majority, the electors immediately proceed to the third ballot. The atmosphere is tense.

Once the third ballot is complete, the votes are counted. Following the same ritual, the same three tellers verify that the ballots cast match the number of electors and read the names on the ballots, and Cardinal Prevost again "sings" the names of those who have received votes loudly and clearly. The Chicago-born cardinal now has to read his own name more frequently. He is doing it well, but one wonders: What must he be feeling?

After the count, no cardinal has obtained the 89 votes necessary to be elected. But it is clear that Cardinal Prevost has gained momentum. The ballots from the two rounds of voting are gathered and taken to the stove at the back of the Sistine Chapel for burning. The appropriate chemicals are activated in the second furnace to produce a very dark smoke signal.

An American Pope?

Outside, the clock strikes 11 a.m., and once again thousands of Romans and pilgrims gather in St. Peter's Square and along the Via della Conciliazione awaiting the smoke. At 11:51, black smoke rises. "Ohhhhhhhh!" is the reaction of the 15,000 people present, who take videos and photos of this extraordinary scene, which, in broad daylight, looks much better than the night before. It is fascinating, as some tourists comment, because in the advanced technological age of the 21st century, the Vatican continues to send news by means of smoke signals!

My wife, Elisabetta Piqué, Vatican correspondent for the Argentine newspaper La Nación, provides a minute-by-minute report from the press room. Betta conducts an interview with Cardinal Seán O'Malley, who not only grants her request but also speaks some words that will prove prophetic. When Betta asks him the meaning of the two black smokes—last night and this afternoon—and whether they reflect a "division," Cardinal O'Malley downplays the situation. "Partly it's due to the fact that there are several candidates who could be considered. On the other hand, the vast majority of the cardinals are newcomers; it's

‘We were moving in a direction that was probably unstoppable.’

their first time participating in a conclave, and many don’t speak Italian,” he tells her.

Asked if an American pope is possible, Cardinal O’Malley, who was a *papabile* last time, assures her that this time the taboo could be broken. “I think anything is possible. The fact that we’ve already had popes from Poland, Germany and Argentina makes anything possible. A pope from the United States can’t be ruled out. It’s true that in today’s world it’s more difficult for an American to be elected, but not impossible.”

Which kind of pope is your dream? Betta asks. “We all dream of a pope who is perfect and who can meet all the needs of the church, but that person doesn’t exist. I hope the Holy Spirit chooses the best possible person and everyone is willing to help him. Everyone realizes the importance of the papacy, and this was made clear by the international response we saw to the death of Pope Francis. The funeral demonstrated the importance of the Petrine Ministry, which goes beyond the church in a world where leadership is lacking and there is so much polarization. The prophetic voice of the Holy Father is fundamental because it can bring to the whole world the Gospel message of help for the least, of peace, of justice, and it is a service to humanity. And above all, Pope Francis, with his personality and desire for closeness, had an enormous impact outside the church. I think the cardinals want that to continue with the next pope.” Betta immediately writes up the interview for La Nación.

A True Discernment

Inside that otherworldly capsule that is the conclave, meanwhile, the 133 cardinal electors, after leaving the Sistine Chapel, return to their apartments in Santa Marta. They remove their ceremonial robes and go down to the dining room for lunch. There, the air is filled with great anticipation. Everyone knows that, barring some unexpected event, the end of the conclave is near. The waiters serving the tables notice that the atmosphere has changed: If the previous evening had been tense, this afternoon it is almost cheerful, and the electors seem more relaxed. The menu is also good: Italian pasta and steak with salad.

While they eat, many look around to see if Cardinal Prevost, having endured the stress of having to read out his name so many times at the end of the second and third ballots, will appear for lunch. Although some media outlets will say that he stayed in his room writing his introductory speech, he does come down for lunch and becomes the center of attention for many of his colleagues. “It was already clear then that we could complete [our mission] by the end of the day. How many more votes it would take, I didn’t know. But it was very clear that we were moving in a direction that was probably unstoppable,” Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago would later say.

Cardinal Stephen Chow would tell us: “When you look at the results of the first ballot, you can see which candidates carry the most weight,” and then, when the cardinals vote on the second and third ballots, “there is more clarity; individually, there is more clarity.”

“It’s truly discernment,” he added, highlighting the spiritual perspective. “Discernment consists of going in with some data, contemplating it, praying about it, and following the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves your heart, and you can choose to respond or not. You can choose to focus on your own preference. Or you listen. And then you see people gradually come to an agreement. It’s truly the Holy Spirit, if you listen, who unites us. Our hearts were moved by the Holy Spirit, and we responded.”

After lunch, with everyone sensing that these will be the last hours of their confinement, the cardinals retire to their rooms. Some to rest—even to take a nap—and others to read or pray. Cardinal Prevost also retires to his room. But this former mathematics graduate from Villanova University, aware that he could in all likelihood be elected in the afternoon session, decides to jot down what he might say from the loggia of the Vatican Basilica, the central balcony of St. Peter’s, that same day. Unlike then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, who felt comfortable speaking spontaneously and did not prepare a text for the 2013 conclave, Cardinal Prevost—who is of a different age, a different style, a different personality—prefers not to improvise and likes to have a prepared text.

The cardinals gather again in the Pauline Chapel and head for the Sistine Chapel at 4:45 p.m., aware that they will cross the Atlantic for the second time in this first quarter of the 21st century to elect the next pope.

When they take their preassigned seats in the Sistine Chapel, under the presidency of Cardinal Parolin, they follow the well-known and well-oiled procedure established by the apostolic constitution. This time, three new tellers are chosen at random. They are Cardinals Timothy Radcliffe, Reinhard Marx and Fernando Filoni, who will read out the names. Two ballot sheets are again given to each cardinal elector. Each one writes the name of his chosen candidate, folds the paper, takes it to the altar and casts his vote.

Incredibly, the same thing happens today as in the fifth

Cardinals stand in the Sistine Chapel following the election of Pope Leo XIV on May 8, 2025.

OSV News photo/Francesco Sforza, Vatican Media via Reuters

ballot of the 2013 conclave. When the tellers count the ballots, something doesn't add up: there should be 133 ballots, but instead there are 134! The third teller, Cardinal Filoni, verifies this and informs the other cardinals of the error. Cardinal Parolin then, following the constitution, declares the count void without reading any of the names on the ballot sheets, which will be burned unopened at the end of the afternoon vote.

As happened in 2013, two ballots were stuck together.

This time we know the "culprit": Spanish Cardinal Carlos Osoro Sierra, archbishop emeritus of Madrid—who would turn 80 just eight days later—publicly admits that he made a mistake by accidentally placing one of his ballots on top of the other. Deeply embarrassed, he apologizes to the other cardinals and asks for two new ballots.

In an atmosphere of great expectation, the cardinals repeat the fourth round of voting. They write the name of their chosen candidate on the ballot, fold it and take it to the altar where they place it, following the same pre-established ritual.

"At the time of the final vote, everyone knew what was coming. You approached with your ballot in hand, placed it on the paten, then slid it into the urn. People were radiant with joy. Even those who had been planning to vote for others smiled, moved by the clarity of what was emerging. It was a profound spiritual gift for all of us," Cardinal Robert McElroy will recount.

"[Cardinal Luis Antonio] Tagle sat next to Prevost while the votes were being counted, supporting and encouraging him," recalled Cardinal Chow, who sat opposite the future pope. Cardinal Tagle offered him a Halls candy as the situation was becoming tense, other firsthand witnesses of the moment noted. Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako, patriarch of the Chaldeans and the first Iraqi to vote in a conclave, sat on the other side of Cardinal Prevost, also encouraging him.

"I was amazed at how much he seemed at peace, even as the votes were being counted," an elector told me.

"Each cardinal had a notebook with all the names, to keep track, which we had to hand over at the end, but throughout the process, we all knew when the threshold was approaching. It wasn't a surprise. We applauded when the 89th vote was confirmed, but the reality had already been building before then," Cardinal McElroy explained.

The applause lasted about five minutes, according to several sources, and then Cardinal Parolin intervened to remind them that the tellers had not finished counting the votes. In fact, the cardinals would hear Cardinal Filoni read Cardinal Prevost's name aloud many more times. When the tellers finished counting and the third teller announced that Cardinal Prevost had received 108 votes, applause erupted again.

The Acceptance

The apostolic constitution clearly lays down the steps to be taken once the conclave reaches this stage. All are scrupulously followed.

First, the junior cardinal deacon, George Jacob Koo-

Pope Leo XIV waves to the crowds in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican after his election on May 8, 2025.

CNS photo/Vatican Media

vakad, summons the secretary of the College of Cardinals, Archbishop Ilson de Jesus Montanari, and the master of papal liturgical celebrations, Archbishop Diego Ravelli, as well as two other masters of ceremonies, to the Sistine Chapel. Then comes the time to ask Cardinal Prevost if he accepts his election.

In the apostolic constitution, Pope John Paul II says the following: "I also ask whoever is elected not to renounce the ministry to which he is called for fear of its burden, but to humbly submit to the plan of the divine will. Indeed, God, in imposing this burden upon him, will hold him with his hand so that he may carry it; in conferring upon him such a burdensome task, he will also give him the help to carry it out, and, in giving him the dignity, he will grant him the strength not to be overwhelmed by the weight of his office."

Cardinal Parolin, who presides over the conclave, is responsible for asking in Latin—with Cardinal Prevost standing before him—on behalf of the entire College of Electors: "Do you accept the canonical election as supreme pontiff?"

"I accept!" Cardinal Prevost replies in Latin.

Cardinal Ángel Rossi of Argentina will later disclose: "From where I was sitting, I could see his face, which was a gentle face. And when he was asked [if he accepted], he was smiling, but not as if saying 'I won,' but with a confirmation of peace in his heart."

The apostolic constitution establishes that "after his acceptance, the elected person, if he has already received episcopal consecration, is immediately Bishop of the Church of Rome, true Pope and Head of the College of Bishops. He thus acquires and can exercise full and supreme power over the universal church." It further declares that "the conclave ends immediately after the new Supreme Pontiff assents to his election, unless he determines otherwise."

As soon as Cardinal Prevost gives his assent, Cardinal Parolin asks him a second question: "How do you wish to be called?"

The new pope replies: "Leone."

The cardinals look at each other, surprised by this decision linked to Pope Leo XIII, the pope famous for the first "social" encyclical, "Rerum Novarum."

"I very much appreciate the name and the obvious reference to 'Rerum Novarum'," Cardinal Michael Czerny tells us later in an interview. "I don't know if there is an issue of greater and more inclusive concern for the vast majority of people on the planet than work, which is so threatened not only by artificial intelligence and the market model that Francis criticized so much, but also by climate change, by war and violence, and by human rights violations. You could say that work is the central issue today. I am very grateful that he has quietly stated that our church will accompany the people of God, all the people, in this fundamental concern that everyone have a good job."

After the acceptance and choice of name, the master of ceremonies, Archbishop Ravelli, following the ritual and "acting as a notary and having two masters of ceremonies as witnesses," drafts "a document certifying the acceptance of the new pope and the name he has taken."

After accepting the election and declaring his new name, Pope Leo XIV leaves the Sistine Chapel and heads to

the so-called Room of Tears, the small dressing room located at the top left of the Sistine Chapel, where the new pope removes his cardinal's robes and puts on the white cassock that popes began wearing in the 13th century. This place is called the Room of Tears because of the strong emotions felt by the newly elected pope. Leo enters with Archbishop Ravelli, who closes the door.

In the room there are three sets of papal robes in three different sizes (small, medium and large), consisting of a white woolen vestment, a short red ermine cape called a mozzetta and some accessories: a gold cord for the cross, a white belt with gold tassels that will later bear the new pope's coat of arms and red leather shoes.

The curious thing is that, because of the "spending review" initiated by Francis in the Vatican to eliminate unnecessary expenses, only one new set of robes has been created: the medium-sized one. The other two, the small and the large, have been recycled! They are the same ones from the 2013 election (when the Argentine pope was elected after Benedict XVI's resignation) and were not used at the time by then-Cardinal Bergoglio. With great reserve, the Italian ecclesiastical tailor, Ety Cicioni, in his Borgo Pio laboratory has made only size M. He has aired out and ironed sizes S and L, something that is necessary after they've been wrapped in cellophane for 12 years.

Probably unaware that these are "low-cost habits," as the newspaper Il Messaggero defined them, Leo opts for size M.

Unlike Francis, he decides to follow tradition by wearing the mozzetta. But, like Francis, he chooses to continue wearing his own black shoes, not the red ones that had been specially made. When he finishes changing, he returns to the Sistine Chapel and is again greeted by the cardinals with warm applause.

While Leo changes, the scrutineers collect the ballots from both rounds of voting (including those that had been spoiled because two were stuck together), take them to the stove at the back of the chapel to be burned, and add the appropriate chemical into the second stove to make the smoke white.

The Reaction

At that moment, Via della Conciliazione is packed with people, and St. Peter's Square is jammed. Betta and I had covered the conclaves in 2005 and 2013; we knew that atmosphere of excitement, but we have never seen such a large crowd at this time on the second day.

After lunch, I head back up to the rooftop terrace of the Augustinian House to join the team from the Canadian television network CTV. Drones and helicopters hover in the sunny blue sky, also waiting in anticipation.

Betta and a colleague are just leaving the press room to try to get something to eat, figuring, like everyone else, that since no *fumata* has been released, the votes in the fourth ballot have not yet been collected, and there is still time for a coffee.

Almost everyone in the press room thinks exactly the same. 'It's Parolin.'

They haven't had lunch, and at the bar on Via della Conciliazione, a block from the Sala Stampa, people are waiting in line. Crossing to the other side of the street is impossible, so they try Via dei Corridori, which has been fenced off because of the crush of people who keep arriving. At that moment, another "Ohhhhhh!" is heard, but it's a false alarm: On the giant screens on Via della Concilizione, the "star" seagull, the one that hovers around the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, suddenly appears with her little chick, her gray-feathered baby, which she is feeding through her beak. "Ohhhhhhh," exclaims the crowd, celebrating this tender scene.

Two minutes later, at 6:07 p.m., there's not an "Ohhhhhhh!" but something much louder, like a scream: "Yes!" It's white smoke!

"Abbiamo il papa!" ("We have a pope!"), everyone exults, and they start filming the white smoke that begins to rise in the distance, first timidly, then forcefully, from the most closely watched chimney in the world. Some people dance with joy, others hug, take selfies and start running to get closer to the basilica, a scene Betta captures and posts on X.

A minute later, as if to make it clear that yes, it's true, there is a new pope, the six bells of St. Peter's Basilica begin to ring in celebration. The atmosphere is euphoric.

The First Glimpse

The news immediately hits social media and television screens across the world. Vatican officials from the Secretariat of State, upon hearing the news, like the Romans who begin to head toward the Vatican, run to see the smoke. Everyone is convinced that such a rapid result—only four rounds of votes—can mean only one thing: Cardinal Parolin has been elected pope. Almost everyone in the press room thinks exactly the same. "It's Parolin, for sure, it's Parolin," people say. And Vatican media leaders share that opinion: Their support for Cardinal Parolin is no secret. We're even

OSV News photo/Amanda Perobelli, Reuters

Men holding a U.S. flag cheer as Pope Leo XIV appears on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on May 8, 2025.

told that there's an edition of L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, ready to roll off the press.

When the white smoke clears, things immediately begin to change in the area in front of St. Peter's Basilica: Various members of the Italian armed forces—the army, the air force and the navy—arrive, as if on a military parade, with their bands. So too do the Vatican Gendarmerie and the Swiss Guard, all ready to stand at attention to salute the new pope with all due honors. At 7:14 p.m., an hour and a few minutes after the white smoke erupted, following a tradition dating back to 1484, the senior cardinal deacon of the College of Cardinals, the 73-year-old French cardinal of Moroccan origin, Dominique Mamberti, appears on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to announce the name of the new pope to the world.

The windows open, the large burgundy curtains open, and now the atmosphere is beyond electric. Cardinal Mamberti steps forward and stands there for a moment while the crowd festively roars. He remains silent until the noise subsides, and then he makes the famous announcement in Latin: *"Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: Habemus papam!"* ("I announce to you great joy: We have a pope!"). The human tide erupts into another mighty roar. Cardinal Mamberti has to wait. Then, breaking the suspense, he pronounces, in Latin: *"Eminentissimum ac reverendissimum Dominum, Dominum Robertum Franciscum, Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalem Prevost."*

Another impressive ovation then erupts, which is, in truth, a bit subdued, followed by much perplexity: Few know who he is! Betta begins explaining to everyone around her in the square—very many of whom are speechless, surprised, almost disappointed—that the new pope is American, but also Peruvian, and that he is in line with Francis.

Cardinal Mamberti then announces the name the new pope has chosen: Leo XIV. The crowd erupts in thunderous excitement at the name, chanting the resonant "Leooooo-ne" in the full-throated style of enraptured Italian soccer fans.

Shortly after this, the first American-born pope, Leo XIV, steps onto the balcony. Although few know him, the euphoria is immense, and he is greeted with applause and cheers. Overwhelmed by emotion, he remains silent for a few minutes, bowing, surrounded by a few cardinal electors, including Cardinal Parolin, who wears a forced smile. This is logical. Cardinal Prevost's election represents a severe blow to that lobby of Italian cardinals who dreamed of reconquering the papacy and stemming the tide of novelty brought about by Francis. The conclave dared to break the taboo that there could be no pontiff from the United States, one of the world's superpowers. With that audacity that Francis always lauded, it has chosen Cardinal Prevost, the first American pope, but with a Latin American and—especially—Peruvian heart, as he himself will make clear when he presents himself to the world and speaks not just in Italian, but at the end also in Spanish, though not in English.

Amid a jubilant St. Peter's Square packed with people waving the flags of various countries and holding cellphones to record the moment, the new pope not only immediately

says, "Thank you" to Francis—a phrase that triggers another round of heartfelt applause—but also makes it clear that he will follow in his footsteps in favor of a church that is open to all: synodal, missionary and working for peace. He also makes clear that he will do so in his own style, without being a carbon copy of Francis. In fact, everyone instantly notices that he has decided to wear the red mozzetta over his white cassock that his predecessor, Jorge Bergoglio, had intentionally eschewed.

"Peace be with you all" are his first words in a soaring voice, which once again sends St. Peter's Square into a jubilation. "Dear sisters and brothers, this is the first greeting of the risen Christ, the good shepherd who gave his life for God's flock," he introduces himself, speaking fluently in Italian, with a bit of a South American accent that is anything but North American.

"I also hope that this greeting of peace enters your hearts, reaches your families, all people, wherever they may be, all nations, and the whole earth." Then he adds, "Peace be with you. This is the peace of the risen Christ, an unarmed peace and a disarming peace, humble and persevering," using the same words Jesus used after Easter.

"[This peace] comes from God, God who loves us all unconditionally," he says, recalling words often repeated by his Argentine predecessor, whom he immediately mentions. "We still hear in our ears that weak but always courageous voice of Pope Francis blessing Rome!" he exclaims, alluding to the superhuman effort his predecessor made on his last outing, on Sunday, April 20, Easter Sunday, the day before his death.

"The pope who blessed Rome gave his blessing to the world, to the whole world, that Easter morning. Let me continue that same blessing: God loves us, God loves you all, and evil will not prevail," he asserts, offering the same message of hope as Francis. "We are all in God's hands. Therefore, without fear, united hand in hand with God and with one another, we move forward. We are disciples of Christ with God, and we move forward with one another. Christ precedes us. The world needs his light. Humanity needs him as a bridge to be reached by God and by his love," he affirms, appearing very spiritual yet concrete.

"Help us too, together, to build bridges, through dialogue, through encounter, uniting all of us to be one people always at peace," he asks, reflecting, once again, another point in common with his predecessor, who tirelessly called for a culture of dialogue and encounter and said to build bridges, not walls.

"Thank you, Pope Francis!" he reiterates, also thanking all "the brother cardinals who have chosen me to be the successor of Peter and to walk alongside you, as a united church, always seeking peace, justice, always seeking to work as men and women faithful to Jesus Christ, without fear, to proclaim the Gospel, to be missionaries," reading from the text he prepared after lunch.

'Peace be with you all' are Leo XIV's first words in a soaring voice.

In a square where few know who he is, the pope also makes it known that he is an Augustinian, "a son of Saint Augustine," who said, he recalls: "with you I am a Christian and for you a bishop." The new pope then adds that "In this sense, we can all walk together toward that homeland that God has prepared for us."

As the new bishop of Rome, the former Cardinal Prevost then expressly greets the church of the Eternal City. "We must seek together to be a missionary church, a church that builds bridges, dialogue, always open to welcome like this square with open arms," he declares. "All, all those who need our charity, our presence, dialogue and love," he adds, visibly moved.

Immediately after this, the new pope, who has a Peruvian passport and was not only a missionary there for 20 years but also a bishop, shifts to speaking in Spanish, his second language.

"And if you allow me, a word, a greeting to all those, and in particular to my beloved diocese of Chiclayo, in Peru, where a faithful people have accompanied their bishop, shared their faith and given so much, so much to continue being the faithful Church of Jesus Christ," he says, captivating the thousands of Latin Americans present, including many Argentines with flags.

"To all of you, brothers and sisters of Rome, of Italy, and throughout the world, we want to be a synodal church, a church that journeys, a church that always seeks peace, that always seeks charity, that always seeks to be close, especially to those who suffer," he continues, leaving no doubt that his election was the great gamble of those cardinals who were looking for someone to follow in the footsteps of Francis.

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A GREAT HUNGER

Finding my ancestors on a famine walk through Ireland

By Sonja Livingston

Walkers jam the pavement, trying to keep to the left. Like many roads in rural Ireland, this one through the Doolough Valley is narrow.

"I can't wait to spread out," I whisper to my niece, Shannon. She smiles back. We both enjoy a good walk but are used to setting our own pace. I push toward the edge of the crowd, reminding myself that today's route is 12 miles long, so there will be plenty of time to find my own rhythm and stride.

The sun beats down. It is unusually warm for spring in County Mayo, which is as far west as you can go in Ireland without falling into the sea. County Mayo is named from the Irish *mhaigh eo*, meaning "plain of the yew trees," and its uplands rise in stark ridges; the lowlands unfold into expanses of heath broken by whitewashed houses and grazing sheep.

We don hats and apply sunscreen, grateful for the shade of rhododendrons and moss-covered oaks as we set out. After the first quarter mile, the trees give way to open stretches of land. Mountains surround us; an overlay of grasses makes the ridges appear velvet. A lake shimmers alongside the road. Blooming gorse adds bits of yellow to the landscape. The views are so stunning, I have to remind myself that the Doolough Valley may look like the Ireland of dreams, but we are here because it also represents a kind of nightmare.

Participants in the Afri Famine Walk make their way through Doolough Valley.

Sonja Livingston

"Walking is a desperate act," Joe Murray said to the hundreds of us walkers before the annual Afri Famine Walk began. We had gathered to hear from an impressive array of speakers, and judging by the tears and nodding heads in the crowd, each speaker's words and music had hit home. But Joe's in particular struck a chord with me. The words of the former coordinator of Action From Ireland—known as Afri, which has organized the walk since 1988—were simple and softly spoken. "Think about those who walked in desperation in the past," he said. "And those who continue to walk in desperation today."

This 12-mile walk is a choice for me, my sister and my niece; all of us have traveled many miles to be here today. But walking is also what people do when they have nothing left to lose.

I think of the neighborhoods I grew up in, places where people take buses when they're lucky enough to scrape together fare but otherwise rely on their feet. I think of unhoused people shuffling along city streets; refugees crossing borders; the Choctaw, Cherokee and other Native American people walking hundreds of miles on the Trail of Tears after being cleared from their land. And when the potato failed and families were evicted or forced to abandon their homes in search of food, the Irish took to walking too.

An Gorta Mór

Many Americans know about the 19th-century famine that turned Ireland inside out. Whether we learned about it in school or from family stories, we understand the failure of the potato crop as a catastrophic event that shaped not only Ireland but America itself, as the Irish were forced to flee their homes in droves. More than 38 million Americans claim Irish ancestry; over half are Irish Catholics whose families emigrated as a result of the famine. Known as An Gorta Mór (the "Great Hunger") in Irish, the famine is often discussed in terms of Ireland's overreliance on the potato as a food source and the misfortune of the blight that decimated its crops starting in 1845. We tend to speak less about England's negligent response or the tons of food grown in Ireland that was exported to Britain even as Irish families starved. We do not always know or remember that Ireland was already reeling from centuries of foreign occupation before the first potato ever went black.

The failure of the potato crop was simply the last straw and brought Irish suffering to a fever pitch. In the seven years of the famine (1845-52), one million people died and more than two million (or a quarter of Ireland's population) emigrated to Canada, England, Australia—but most of all, to the United States. This trend continued for 50 years, so that, by 1901, Ireland's population had been halved. No county was left untouched, though the situation was particularly dire in the south and west, where 90 percent of the population relied on the potato to feed themselves. Things were so bad in Mayo, people took to adding "God help us" whenever the name of their home county was invoked. *Where do you come from?* someone might ask, and the answer was never simply Ballina, Westport or Swinford, but *Mayo, God help us.*

It is no coincidence that this annual Famine Walk, which retraces the steps of those who walked in desperation and hunger during the height of the famine, takes place in Mayo's Doolough Valley.

Two of the leaders of the 2025 Afri Famine Walk included the Palestinian photojournalist Eman Mohammed and the screenwriter Paul Laverty (both center).

Shannon Heywood

The Doolough Tragedy

It was the weekend before Easter 1849 when the poor of western Mayo gathered in Louisburgh.

Because palms were not widely available, the feast day was called Domhnach an Iúir, or Yew Sunday, in Ireland, and people broke sprigs from yews to have them blessed at Mass. Church is where those in Louisburgh would have been on a Sunday morning in ordinary times, but in March of that year, nothing was normal in Ireland.

The British system of famine relief was predicated on the belief that the Irish character was not only lacking but to blame for the crisis. A scheme of local workhouses and outdoor work projects was preferred over charity, which was viewed as a last resort. The rules for its receipt were unyielding. To be certain the poor were worthy of relief, for instance, they were required to submit to regular inspection. Neither grain nor admission to the workhouse would be given without an officer checking to be sure those seeking it were truly in need. As Captain J. M. Primrose, one of the local inspectors, wrote in a report for the Westport Poor Law Union the month before:

> No application for relief has been granted by the Vice-Guardians, without a most careful scrutiny into the circumstances of each case : as a proof, I may adduce that during the last six weeks the number of applicants amounted to 11,430, of whom 6362 were either rejected or did not appear... [Feb. 7, 1849]

It is unclear how many gathered for inspection in Louisburgh the last week of March, but nearly 1,000 adults had been inspected the week before—along with 1,500 children who also required examination. No record exists, because Captain Primrose and a fellow inspector, Colonel Francis Hogrove, left without seeing those in need. Instead, the men rode on to Delphi Lodge, a hunting lodge 12 miles south. The hungry were, without warning, told to report instead to Delphi Lodge the following morning. Malnourished to begin with, many did not have coats or shoes and had already walked miles to attend inspection in Louisburgh.

They set out at night. It was an unusually cold March. Winds blew in from the Atlantic. Rain became sleet as temperatures dipped below freezing. When those who survived the trek arrived, they were told the officers were lunching and could not be disturbed. No one knows if the inspectors eventually saw the hundreds gathered outside the lodge. All that's certain is that they were turned away without water or food.

Their bodies were husks, so underweight and broken by hunger that some say many were swept into the lake by the wind. When they trudged barefoot and freezing the day before, they had hope at least. Once they were turned away, whatever hope propelled them the day before was gone.

Katherine Dillon was found with her two children by

the side of the road. The bodies of Catherine Grady, Mary McHale and James Flynn were discovered later on. Some say dozens died of starvation and exposure, others report hundreds. Beyond local stories collected by James Berry 60 years later in The Mayo News, much of what is known comes from a series of letters published in The Mayo Constitution in the spring of 1849. An anonymous writer condemned the treatment of those forced to walk to and from Delphi and rebuked the soldiers who turned a blind eye.

What is most shocking is how ordinary Irish misery was by then. In the fourth year of the famine, workhouses were so crowded, the starving were regularly turned away. Fever sheds were packed, as were paupers' graveyards and ships crossing the Atlantic, which James Joyce would later call the "bowl of bitter tears." Children slept in hedges and alleyways; men and women roamed the countryside in search of food. So all-encompassing was Irish suffering that, terrible as the incident at Doolough was, it was not well known at the time. Without that anonymous letter writer, the story might have been lost for good.

Hills of Ghosts

"What made you want to walk?" I ask the woman who has come up beside us.

Maura Walsh from Galway says she has been wanting to do the walk for years. "With the day being so sunny," she says. "I decided this was the year."

"What about you," she asks. "What brings you all this way?"

I wonder how to explain the past few years of trying to reconstruct my rather broken family tree. We never knew our extended family growing up, and while we never considered ourselves anything other than an American hodgepodge, a DNA test a few years ago showed my mother had more Irish ancestry than anything else. In piecing together our heritage, I have discovered immigrants named Croake and Cass, Horan and Bahan, Murphy and McNeela. Some came from Tipperary and Offaly, Dublin or Cork, but most came from the hard-hit areas of Mayo, Galway and Donegal.

Because passage was cheaper to Canada, they sailed to Ontario before crossing the border for jobs mining iron in the Adirondacks, cleaning houses in Glens Falls or laboring on the Erie Canal near Rochester.

"I'm here to learn more about my Irish ancestors and the famine," I tell Maura, knowing how much I sound like an American stereotype. "I'll bet you've heard that a thousand times."

"Yes," Maura hesitates. "But it's important to hear again. We Irish are not great at facing the pain of the past.

Maybe that's why we drink so much."

Others have shared similar thoughts today. Walkers have talked about the importance of remembering the past but also the necessity of allowing themselves to face the ache of that old wound. Hundreds have come from Canada, England, the United States—but mostly, from all over Ireland—as a way to do that.

Here my sister Stephanie chimes in, telling how we relied on food baskets and donations from our local church as kids. Though we were often the recipients of help, our mother insisted we stand for others besides. For years, she walked the annual Crop Walk for hunger in Rochester, N.Y.

"Our mother died a year and half ago," Stephanie says. "We're walking in memory of her, too."

The sun beats down, the sky is blue for miles. The Mweelrea Mountains rise to the west; to the east are the Sheeffry Hills, Cnoic Shíofra in Irish, meaning "Hills of the Wraith." The range is aptly named. No matter the reasons we speak aloud, ghosts have brought us here today.

A Famine Repressed

As we push north, the drama of lakes and ridges is replaced by pastureland and boggy fields.

Croagh Patrick comes into view, the holy mountain where St. Patrick is said to have prayed for 40 nights and days. It is a perennial site of pilgrimage.

Abandoned cottages and the furrows of potato beds from the time of the famine still shape the landscape. Just as the earth still bears the mark of history after 175 years, so do the descendants of those who died or emigrated. The Irish are not the only ones who have not fully reckoned with the famine. Americans of Irish ancestry seem more comfortable with a romanticized ideal of an Irish homeland than with the horrors of forced migration that are our bedrock.

Some aches run so deep they are difficult to speak aloud. Unfortunately, silence does not banish the pain but sends it underground, where it is transmitted without words. Perhaps worst of all, our unacknowledged sorrow blunts our ability to see ourselves in those who hunger today. Which is why the Irish-American activist and writer Tom Hayden believed we have a moral and spiritual need to remember, writing "a famine repressed breeds an insipid hunger of its own."

"We are the ancestors of the future," Katie Martin, Afri's newest coordinator, said when I met with her last summer. Founded in 1975 by Father Sean McFerren, a priest of the Salesians of Don Bosco, Afri has moved from a charity model to one of action, solidarity and justice.

Each year the organization invites artists and activists from communities affected by famine, human rights abuses or genocide to lead the walk. Past leaders have included Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Gary White Deer of the Choctaw Tribe, who, recognizing something of themselves in the Irish, had donated money to help victims of the famine in 1847. This year's leaders are the screenwriter Paul Laverty, the seed keeper Dr. Clare O'Grady Walshe, the Palestinian

Sonja Livingston (center), with her niece Shannon Heywood (left) and sister Stephanie Livingston-Heywood at the pub post-walk

A brochure for the Doolough Famine Walk, seen with family photos and religious images from the author's collection

photojournalist Eman Mohammed and the Irish-Libyan musician Farah Elle.

"The actions we take today become our legacy," Katie Martin said. "Will we care for those in need or look the other way?"

The Real Blight

We walk on. Croagh Patrick is close enough that we can see the chapel on its summit. Maura chats with my sister. My niece and I study the columbine and marsh orchids along the roadside.

"How much longer?" I ask.

"An hour," Shannon says.

After five hours of walking, we feel the effects of the heat. Volunteers pass on bicycles and cars to check in. "Almost there," they say, offering encouragement and bottled water. I can't help but think how such care would have changed everything for the hundreds on this path in 1849 and how it still might change the lives of others today.

While poverty is not new to me, it has been largely relegated to the past. Like many, I struggle with how best to respond to the overwhelming need today. Even if we could somehow untangle the politics and agree on an approach to ensure that every person is fed and housed, there is another hunger, deeper still. How else to explain why even those of us with plenty seem famished for something we can't quite name?

Up ahead, a trio of walkers has stopped. They cup their ears and lean toward the hedge. A bird calls as we approach. "A cuckoo!" I say. We stop walking and go quiet, smiling while listening to the bird's distinctive song.

This is why I'm here, I realize. Not the cuckoo necessarily, but the simple act of stopping to share the ordinary miracle of its song—and the example of those checking in to help anyone with a blister or too much sun. They seem like such simple things, yet how often do I stop and check in? I'd told myself I'd traveled to the Doolough Valley to face the hunger of the past, but hadn't I really come to better understand how to face the hungers of today?

An Gorta Mór was willful blindness at best, genocide at worst. Irish crops began to rot in 1845, but the failure to recognize God in the faces of the suffering was the real blight—one that remains with us today. Whether in Mayo or Belfast, Ukraine or Russia, Gaza or Israel, El Paso or Rochester, N.Y., we must do our best to help those who suffer—for their sake, but also for ours.

I think back to how I began this walk, lingering along the edges, searching for my own pocket of space. There is nothing wrong with solitude, but the greatest hunger we have is for one another. What good is walking for the victims of historical famine if I cut myself off from people on the same path today? We can rally for change and donate with the best of intentions—both of which are essential—but we cannot heal from the devastating divisions of the past until we step out of our comfort zones and accompany others on the road today.

"If we have no peace," St. Teresa of Kolkata said. "It is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

We belong to one another. Is anything more radical or hopeful than that?

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'Just War' After Trump

Just war theory is withering away when we need it more than ever

By Tobias Winright

Four days after the U.S. military invasion of Iraq, Drew Christiansen, S.J., asked in the pages of **America**: "Whither the 'Just War'?" (March 24, 2003). Now that President Donald Trump, after amassing warships, aircraft and troops in the Caribbean in recent months, has carried out military strikes in Venezuela and captured President Nicolás Maduro, I think it worthwhile to revisit Father Christiansen's article, written before he served as editor in chief of **America** from 2005 to 2012, for insights about the continuing relevance of just war theory—especially since it is withering away with the Trump administration's "Rambo" militarism, as well as its apparent fall from favor in Catholic magisterial teaching.

In 2002, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Jim Nicholson, invited Michael Novak of the American Enterprise Institute to fly to Rome in an attempt to persuade the Vatican that a "preventive war" against Iraq would be morally justified, based on emerging threats and terrorism. Mr. Novak was unsuccessful in what Father Christensen called "a bold move." The Vatican, along with the U.S. Catholic bishops and many moral theologians (including myself), continued to use just war principles to raise serious questions about the looming war.

According to Father Christiansen, this disagreement reflected a deeper internal dispute about just war theory itself, and how it is understood. He noted that, beginning with the Second Vatican Council's "Gaudium et Spes," Catholic teaching on war and peace had been shifting from just war as its only approach toward "a composite of nonviolent and just war elements." Both the U.S. bishops' 1983 pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace" and their 1993 statement "The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace" held that proponents of nonviolence and of just war theory must share a "presumption" for peace and against war.

It was this hybrid position that just war thinkers disagreed about at the time. On the one hand, there were "mainline" just war theorists who favorably regarded this development in magisterial teaching and who supported more attention to nonviolence in order to make sure just war is truly a last resort. But there were also critics who were wary of pacifism, and who countered that the supposed presumption against armed force was, as Father Christiansen wrote, "an innovation that impedes the restoration of justice." Father Christiansen called the latter group "moralists of the permissive school" because of "their willingness to justify most government policies" based on the principle of just cause.

For Father Christiansen, while just cause is necessary for military action, it is insufficient. The other criteria used to determine ahead of time if a war is just (jus ad bellum)—legitimate authority, right intention, last resort, probability of success and proportionality—also "must be met before a war is judged to be moral." Moreover, Father Christiansen observed that the Bush administration's National Security Strategy report in 2002 asserted "U.S. dominance over all potential rivals," which he added was "a position directly at odds with the Augustinian notion of right intention, which excludes the *libido dominandi*, the lust for power."

It was this objective of military domination that fueled the Bush administration's expansion of the principle of just cause to include preventive war, which Father Christiansen pointed out was actually "a dangerous innovation" in Catholic just war thinking and teaching. Although pre-emptive strikes may be permissible in the face of a grave and imminent threat, preventive wars in anticipation of possible threats further in the future are not legitimate. According to Father Christiansen, the Bush administration juxtaposed *pre-emptive* with *preventive*, a move that permissive just war proponents like the late Mr. Novak supported and stricter just war adherents opposed.

Is There Such a Thing as a 'Just War'?

In addition to providing this update on the thinking about just war among its theorists, Father Christiansen pointed out to readers in his article that some Catholics were suggesting that just war no longer has any place in church teaching. He mentioned Archbishop Renato Martino, at


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the time president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, who suggested that just war should go the way of the death penalty, since modern societies have other means to protect themselves and "to avoid war." Father Christiansen noted that the archbishop was "not the first Vatican voice to urge the church to discard the Just War as outmoded."

In Father Christiansen's view, however, such a position "would have serious implications," including that the ability for the church to use just war criteria "to prevent and limit war would be greatly reduced, as would its ability to provide moral commentary on the formation of military policy and the actual conduct of war."

He also mentioned Joaquín Navarro-Valls, the head of the Vatican Press Office at the time, who said that "the pope is not a pacifist." Accordingly, Father Christiansen called for "authoritative clarification" and "clearer articulation" about how nonviolence, just war and peacemaking might fit "into a coherent teaching on peace and war."

Just War From Bush to Biden

Recently, the Catholic ethicist Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., noted in Commonweal how just war's *jus in bello* principles of discrimination (also known as noncombatant immunity) and proportionality were taken more seriously by the Pentagon after military experts realized from the Bush administration's "war on terror" that high numbers of civilian casualties turned local populations against the United States. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2009, Barack Obama expressed his respect for the just war tradition "to regulate the destructive power of war," even though he admitted that it has been "rarely observed." Under his administration, in 2015, the Department of Defense's *Law of War Manual* sought to minimize civilian casualties. Such a commitment allowed just war ethicists such as Mark Allman and myself to critique drone strikes Mr. Obama ordered that were indiscriminate and disproportionate.

During Mr. Trump's first term, Georgetown law professor Rosa Brooks wrote that "in contrast to Bush, Trump makes no secret of his disdain for the laws of war." In her judgment, "Bush at least tried to cloak his administration's use of torture in legal sophistry, a backhanded testament to the strength of the norms his aides sought to circumvent."

President Biden's administration attempted to rein-

In just war theory, preventive wars in anticipation of possible threats are not legitimate.

force the efforts made during President Obama's two terms to limit and reduce civilian casualties. In 2022, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin called for the creation of the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (CHMR-AP), which was released eight months later and stated at the outset: "[t]he protection of civilians is a strategic priority as well as a moral imperative." This stated commitment permitted just war theorists to criticize U.S. military actions and policies, such as providing Ukraine with indiscriminate cluster munitions.

Not *Just* War, but Just *War*: The Rambo Position

We can no longer count on such a commitment during Mr. Trump's second term, with its use of gunboat diplomacy to enforce the president's "Donroe corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. In his new book *Killing Machines: Trump, the Law of War, and the Future of Military Impunity*, Thomas Gift argues "that Trump is unique among U.S. presidents in the extent of his willingness to discard the law of war." His defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, has fired top Army and Air Force lawyers and has removed staff assigned to implement CHMR-AP.

Mr. Hegseth's actions, according to Father Himes, "reflect an agenda he held prior to his role as a member of the Trump cabinet"—namely, inculcating "a 'warrior ethos' in the military." Indeed, Mr. Hegseth told military leaders in September: "We fight to win. We unleash overwhelming and punishing violence on the enemy. We don't fight with stupid rules of engagement. We untie the hands of our warfighters to intimidate, demoralize, hunt and kill the enemies of our country."

The warrior ethos is also evident in the Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy document. Although purporting to be "muscular without being 'hawkish,' and restrained without being 'dovish,'" it has extended the "war on terror" to include drug cartels and gangs, as well as "the use of lethal force to replace the failed law enforcement-only strategy of the last several decades."

Accordingly, Mr. Hegseth posted on X:

> Narco-terrorists are enemies of the United States—actively bringing death to our shores. We will stop at nothing to defend our homeland and our citizens. We will track them, kill them and dismantle their networks throughout our hemisphere—at the times and places of our choosing.

We witnessed this approach beginning in September with deadly strikes on small civilian boats in the Caribbean.

This warrior ethos manifests even more the *libido dominandi* about which Father Christiansen warned in 2003. As the Catholic ethicist Matthew Shadle has recently written, for Augustine, the *libido dominandi* is the foundation of an unjust political order that initiates unjust wars. Given its emphasis on masculinity and virility, the warrior ethos reminds me of what one of my teachers, John Howard Yoder, called "the Rambo position," with its excessive violence in which "neither other parties in the conflict nor any principles above the fray have any moral standing."

Not *Just* War, but *Holy* War

The warrior ethos promulgated by Mr. Hegseth, moreover, converges with the "holy war" logic that the historian Roland Bainton highlighted in his 1960 classic *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*. Bainton included the medieval Crusades among his examples of this holy war attitude. In contrast to just war reasoning, the holy war mentality tends to ignore criteria such as probable success and last resort, as well as noncombatant immunity. Accordingly, in "The Challenge of Peace," the U.S. bishops admonished against "a crusade mentality" whereby a nation acts as if it has "absolute justice" on its side and is no longer compelled "to restrain the use of force even in a 'justified' conflict."

Similarly, in his Nobel Prize speech, Mr. Obama warned "that no holy war can ever be a just war. For if you truly believe that you are carrying out divine will, then there is no need for restraint—no need to spare the pregnant mother, or the medic, or the Red Cross worker, or even a person of one's own faith."

Yet the holy war attitude is exactly what Mr. Hegseth openly and proudly promotes, as evident in his 2020 book *American Crusade* and even in his tattoos, including the phrase "Deus Vult" ("God Wills It"), which he has said is the "battle cry" of the Crusades. Echoes of it also surfaced in the Signal chat message scandal earlier in 2025. As the Catholic political theorist David Carroll Cochran noted, "Those in the [first] chat expressed no concern about dead civilians." Some of them, Mr. Cochran added, "even invoked their faith during the attacks on Yemenis." Mr. Hegseth wrote, "Godspeed to our Warriors," and Vice President JD Vance followed with "I will say a prayer for victory." This holy war mentality may also be reflected in the Trump administration's strikes against Islamic militants

in Nigeria, justified as a means of protecting Christians, as well as in Pentagon videos reflecting Mr. Hegseth's zeal for Christian nationalism.

Just War 'Unwithered' for an Integral Peace

I fear, therefore, we are now witnessing the withering of just war. Unfortunately, this is happening when just war theory has also apparently withered in Catholic thought and teaching. For example, in April 2016, a gathering of Catholic activists and scholars sponsored by the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International issued an "Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence," which exhorted the church "no longer to use or teach" just war theory, and rather to shift to a "just peace" approach with "nonviolent practices and strategies." The statement also called on Pope Francis to issue an encyclical on nonviolence and "just peace."

Although such an encyclical never appeared, Francis' 2017 World Day of Peace message promoted nonviolence as an effective "style of politics for peace" for individual, social and international relationships. His 2020 encyclical "Fratelli Tutti" raised questions about the honest and rigorous application of just war principles today, leading Francis to write that "it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a 'just war'." Yet, the pope still acknowledged that the *Catechism* "speaks of the possibility of legitimate defense by means of military force, which involves demonstrating that certain 'rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy' have been met." And as the *Catechism* notes, these moral norms "are the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the 'just war' doctrine."

Even in his 2017 peace message, Francis suggested, much like the U.S. bishops did in 1983 with "The Challenge of Peace," that "peacebuilding through active nonviolence is the natural and necessary *complement* to the Church's continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms" (emphasis added). In their 1983 pastoral letter, the U.S. bishops also refer to "just war" as a "limited war" doctrine, providing the moral norms that I think Francis refers to.

Still, there remains Father Christiansen's call for further "authoritative clarification" and "clearer articulation" of a more "coherent teaching on peace and war." Instead of an encyclical on nonviolence and just peace, I think we need to build on the "hybrid Catholic position" that Father Christiansen highlighted.

During their visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki this past August, Cardinals Robert McElroy and Blase Cupich similarly called for "a more holistic approach, an integral one" in which "priority should be given to nonviolence... with just war theory...taking a more secondary role." Yet, thus far, Pope Leo XIV has referred only to nonviolence in his statements. In his 2026 World Day of Peace message, "Peace be with you all: Towards an 'unarmed and disarming' peace," Leo notes that John XXIII was the first pope to advocate "integral disarmament." To this I would add that Pius XII urged—in the midst of the Second World War—for an "integral peace."

I suggest *integral peace* as a more positive and constructive way of naming the coherent, holistic and hybrid approach that Father Christiansen, and now Cardinals McElroy and Cupich, have called for. I hope that, as an Augustinian, Pope Leo will be receptive. Rather than no longer teaching or using just war theory, we need it now more than ever. As Mr. Yoder, a pacifist, counseled, nonviolence advocates and just war proponents should stop attacking each other and instead "spend more energy...[on] their responsibility to challenge the realists, crusaders, and Rambos on their 'right' who in fact are shooting up the world."

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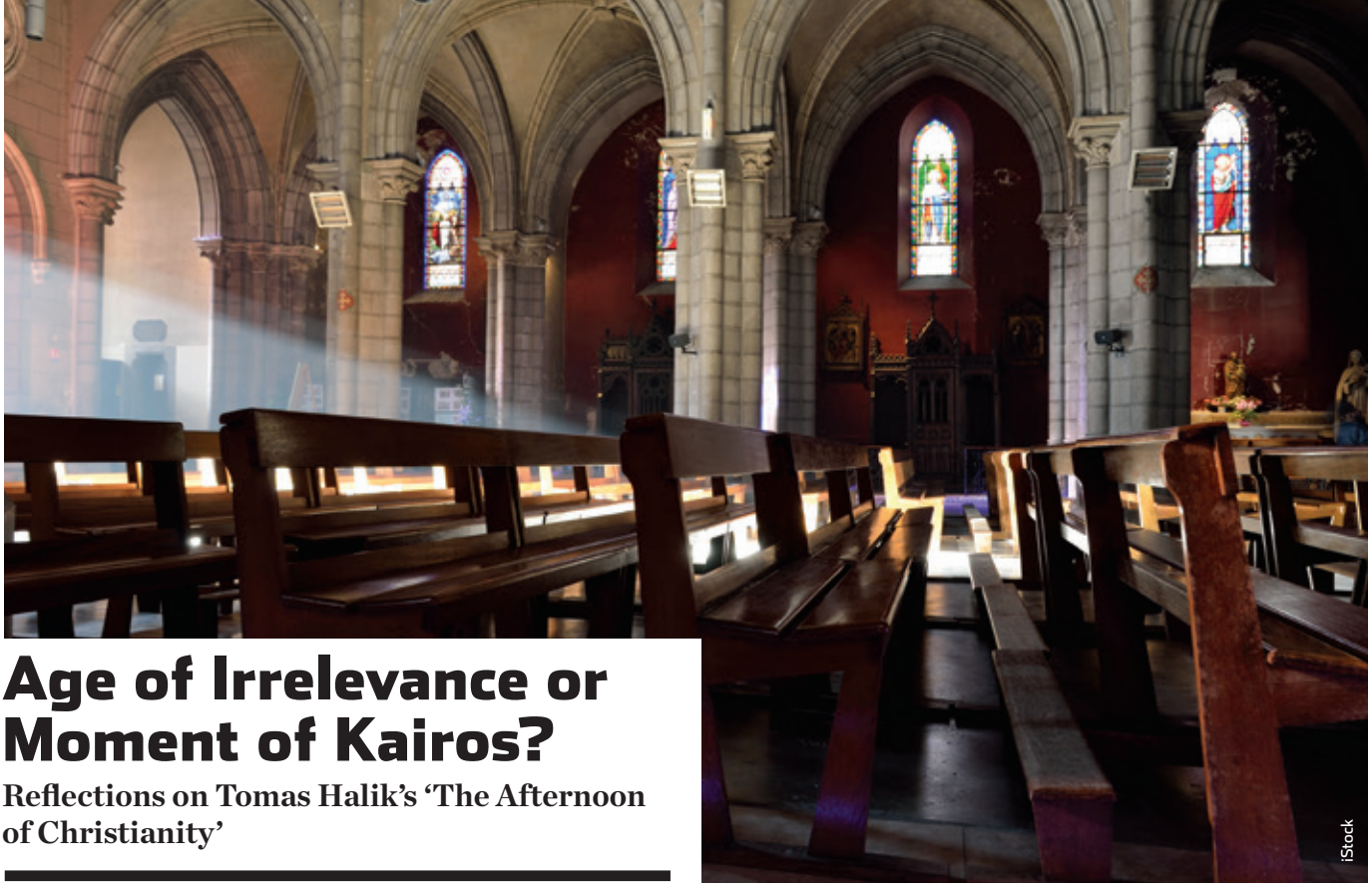

Age of Irrelevance or Moment of Kairos?

Reflections on Tomas Halik's 'The Afternoon of Christianity'

Over the past five decades, the Czech priest, philosopher and theologian Tomas Halik has served as a prominent voice in contemporary debates in the church and civil society on subjects ranging from ecumenism and interreligious dialogue to atheism, political Christianity, postmodern belief and more. He has published over 40 books, both in his native Czech and in many other languages.

Born in 1948 in what was then Czechoslovakia, he converted to Catholicism at the age of 18 and was secretly ordained a priest in communist-controlled East Germany in 1978. Father Halik worked for many years as a psychologist in the Eastern Bloc and was also active in the underground church in Eastern Europe before the fall of communism. His written work (including two essays in **America**: "Ukraine, World War III and Pope Francis' Roadmap for the Church" and "Christianity in a Time of Sickness") incorporates the insights of thinkers across multiple genres and religious backgrounds, placing him in dialogue with figures inside and outside the church on contemporary issues.

In 2024, he published *The Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*, a reflection on challenges facing the church and contemporary believers. Multidisciplinary in its scope, the book suggests that Christianity is not necessarily in decline but instead entering a time of maturity. Nevertheless, Father Halik writes, Christians run the risk of falling into irrelevance and marginalization unless we face the challenges of faith in a postmodern world with honesty, deep spiritual reflection and an openness to other cultures and beliefs—aiming toward the "universal fraternity" of which Pope Francis often spoke.

America asked five theologians—Erin Brigham, Rita George-Tvrtković, Michael Kirwan, S.J., Brent Little and the Rev. Robert Imbelli—to reflect on *The Afternoon of Christianity* and its relevance for the contemporary Christian. Their responses are below.

James T. Keane *is a senior editor at* ***America*****.**

TOWARD A RENEWAL OF THE FAITH

Tomas Halik's *The Afternoon of Christianity* is an articulate, clear-sighted appraisal and advocacy of the pastoral theological project of Pope Francis. Its impulse is the same as that of the Second Vatican Council: a centrifugal, Spirit-led movement away from defensive insularity to dialogue and engagement. Father Halik seeks to establish the "conditions of possibility" for a resurgence of the Christian faith. This is "kairology": a reading of the signs of the times so as to be able to respond to a privileged moment of opportunity. Christianity is not benighted or eclipsed. Just the opposite: It is—potentially—enjoying its "afternoon."

The book is for me the intellectual equivalent of a college reunion, with many familiar names—Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Richard Kearney, Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner—cited in support of Father Halik's expansive project. I would ask whether his "canon," so familiar and

accessible to a baby boomer theologian like myself, carries the same weight with younger readers, as none of the thinkers listed here come without complexity or qualification.

Father Halik's argument rests on transposing Carl Jung's metaphorical "afternoon," a description of the individual's growth journey, onto the history of the church. "Morning" corresponds to the church's identity formation, from its beginnings to the cusp of modernity. The "noonday" crisis denotes the painful unravelling in modernity of this necessarily protective construct. Once successfully negotiated, however, an "afternoon" of mature integration can take place.

Threefold structuring myths can be invaluable (even if we hesitate about Jung's version). One can instance Paul Ricoeur's "second naïveté," or Karl Rahner's "three epochs of the church," or Richard Kearney's "anatheism" (a stance after theism and atheism). Challenged to name God "in an age that cannot name itself" (David Tracy), we need all the help we can get.

For church-affiliated believers, *The Afternoon of Christianity* is—in equal measure—consoling and challenging. Two major crises, the clerical sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church and the Covid-19 pandemic, have seismically affected the church's self-understanding and self-confidence. But Father Halik writes as a public theologian, seeking also to address unbelievers and seekers in all their complexity while recognizing the paradox of the intended dialogue partners being, at best, "curious but disinterested."

For this reason, two further challenges merit greater attention. First, Father Halik calls out the dismal phenomenon of President Donald Trump, whom he is not afraid to call "fascist." If he is serious about this, however, then the distorting and corrosive religiosity of too many of Mr. Trump's followers (Catholics included) surely needs greater and more urgent diagnosis.

Second, the absence of any mention of artificial intelligence is a disturbing indicator of how recently we are realizing the implications of this technology. Large numbers of people are now seeking intimacy, consolation and wisdom from a "non-human other," with varying degrees of awareness that their significant "relationship" is essentially hollow. The theological task of confronting this new reality has fallen to Pope Leo.

These two threats—the catastrophic debasement of religious faith through political extremism and the existential threat posed by the technological reshaping of humanity—are ones before which no sane person can remain "curious but indifferent." Is it possible that reading these two "signs of the times" may provide new common ground between religious belief and humanist good will? If so, believers and unbelievers alike may find a new place where the journey to the depths, to which Tomas Halik summons all of us, can be undertaken together.

———

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MOVING BEYOND NOSTALGIA

Tomas Halik dedicates *The Afternoon of Christianity* to the late Pope Francis, and so it is unsurprising that his book harmonizes with much of Francis' papacy. The book is an exhortation for the church and its members to move beyond nostalgia for an irretrievable past, remember tradition as a living, developing dynamism and engage the world with a humility firmly rooted in the Gospel of the crucified Christ.

It is also a beautiful theology of faith. Moreover, his ecclesiology is built on it. Father Halik distinguishes between faith and belief: If belief is what one holds (or hopes) to be true, faith is "a certain attitude of life, an orientation, a way of being in the world and how we understand it." A person's life reveals their faith much more than their words do, for the way one lives reveals "their emotional richness, their imagination and creativity, their sense of beauty and sense of humor, their capacity for empathy, and a host of other qualities." A person's faith, therefore, involves their entire identity in a way conceptual beliefs do not. One can claim to believe in the teachings of Jesus, only to mirror political and economic systems that prize profits and power above the dignity of fellow human beings created in the image of God.

Father Halik resists any attempt to reduce faith to a mere list of propositions. Faith cannot be measured by a poll; to believe otherwise is a misunderstanding that the theologian Terrence Tilley has memorably dubbed the "Gallup fallacy." Father Halik also challenges any American Catholic who wants their faith to be a shelter from the world, a justification for political domination or an avoidance of fearful uncertainty. Pope Francis frequently remarked that a person who clings to certainty has created their own idol. Father Halik would rebuke this form of idolatry as well as others. (I sense he would agree with William Cavanaugh that strident nationalism is also idolatrous.)

Idolatry, of course, is neither a lack of faith nor atheism nor agnosticism. It is the worship—consciously or not—of a false god or gods. If we are honest, we are all probably idolaters in some way, at least with how we structure and prioritize our lives. We frequently claim to hold beliefs that are contradicted by our actions.

Father Halik's book, then, articulates how a healthy

form of Catholic faith might be lived in the world today. He remarks that earlier categories of belief and unbelief "are no longer able to encompass and reflect the diversity and dynamism of the spiritual life of our time." I would observe further that the "diversity and dynamism" of a person's spiritual life may be driven by a host of factors, synthesizing various sources of meaning, for good or ill.

A Catholic's faith is certainly formed by the celebration of the Eucharist, but it probably bears the imprint of numerous cultural norms, social media trends, the political milieu, consumerist culture, other religious, spiritual, artistic and intellectual traditions, and so on. This mixture is not necessarily bad. Ideas and values ostensibly outside the church can sometimes prompt personal and institutional critique, thereby becoming a catalyst for conversion. This mixture also seems to be the norm for more and more of us.

How do we determine if the faith that we live (and not just the faith that we believe) is an authentically Christian faith? How do we discern when elements of our faith are idolatrous? No doubt this is a perennial challenge. But my hunch is that Father Halik would advise us to begin any self-critique with a return to an explicit identification of Jesus' divinity in the Gospels: when Thomas touches the wounds of the resurrected Christ. We "touch the wounds" of Christ so we can be present to the wounds in those around us to better live a faith faithful to the Gospel.

"Here, in the wounds of our world," he urges in *The Afternoon of Christianity*, "we can authentically see the invisible God in a Christian way and touch an otherwise barely touchable mystery." Any faith, then, that does not touch the wounds of the world fails to live out a Gospel revealed in the wounds of Christ.

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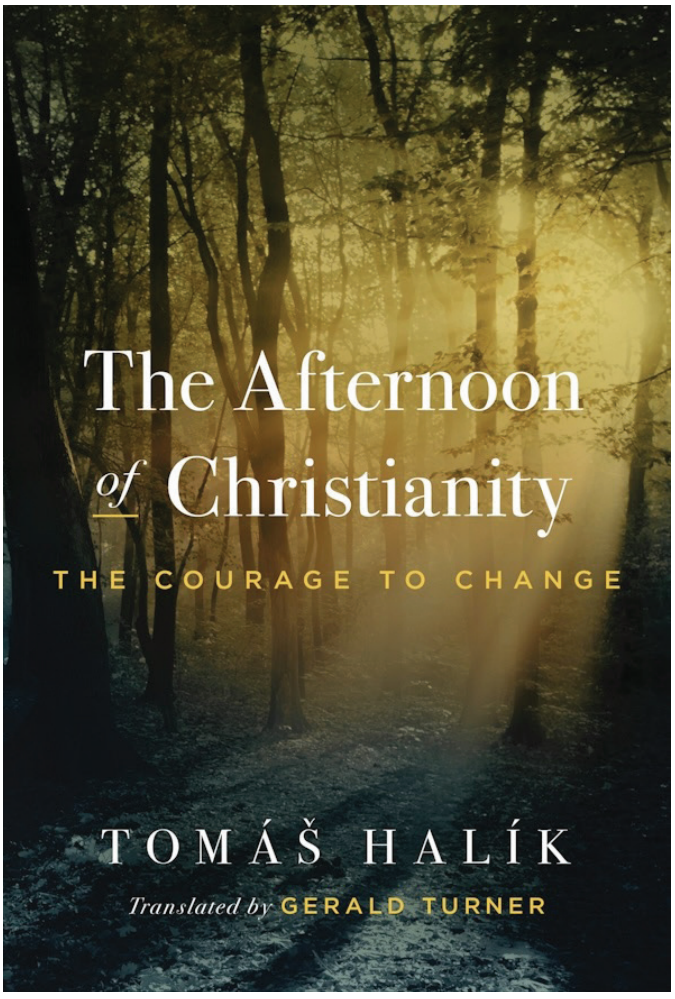
WISDOM FOR A POST-SECULAR AGE

Writing from my context at a Jesuit university in a largely nonreligious city, San Francisco, I found Tomas Halik's approach to secularization in *The Afternoon of Christianity* to be relevant and hopeful. As a sociologist, Father Halik describes the secular context as one in which religion is transformed, not extinguished. As a faithful Catholic, he invites us to join him in imagining what kind of transformed religion and church might provide a space for Christianity in a postmodern, post-secular period—a time Father Halik describes as its afternoon.

I teach students who relate to faith in a variety of



ways—from those who identify as spiritual but not religious to those who experience more traditional ways of religious belonging. Father Halik speaks to this context with openness and curiosity, affirming the experience of faith beyond religion. For Father Halik, faith is best understood as a dimension of human existence, a capacity for and experience of self-transcendence and a longing or deep desire for that mystery which some of us name God. The book evokes hope because of the sincerity of his engagement with nonreligious seekers and his deep commitment to Christianity that comes through his personal narrative woven throughout the text.

Father Halik embraces a spirit of dialogue, convinced that religious and nonreligious people can mutually enrich each other, while also acknowledging the barriers to this exchange. Specifically, he criticizes fundamentalist religions that reduce faith to a set of doctrines or diminish God as an object rather than an ultimate mystery. He also criticizes forms of atheism that reject the experience of mystery as part of what it means to be human.

Through historical analysis, Father Halik argues that Christianity informed the most cherished ideals that, in

CNS photo/Oliva Harris, Reuters

Tomas Halik at a news conference after being awarded the 2014 Templeton Prize in London. Father Halik was honored for his work in promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding.

turn, informed the secularizing event of the Enlightenment: the dignity of the person. At the same time, he invites us to consider if Christianity has sufficiently learned from the fruits of secularization to mature into this afternoon stage of history.

Such learning depends on a mutually enriching dialogue among religious and nonreligious people on faith. Father Halik lifts up universities as one of the privileged spaces for spiritual accompaniment, as they embrace the resources of religion in a nonecclesial context. One of the challenges I face as I teach theology to students who relate to faith in different ways is finding a language that is publicly accessible but also honest about its particularity. Jürgen Habermas, whom Father Halik mentions in the book, has challenged the idea that religion should be bracketed off from public discourse and favors a process of mutual learning among religious and nonreligious people.

This challenge invites us to suspend what we think we know about the experience of those who are spiritual but not religious as well as that of those with a more traditional approach to religion. Despite Father Halik's humble and curious posture, he makes some assumptions about the "anonymous faith" of nonbelievers and about the experience of Catholics who lean toward traditional expressions of faith. I am curious what an honest and sustained dialogue among these groups would reveal about faith and religious belonging.

Perhaps synodality offers a context for cultivating skills for such dialogue and a way to embody the all-encompassing ecumenism he envisions. Synodality is built upon deep listening and inclusive participation that honors difference and reflects the humility and openness of faith that Father Halik describes.

The Synod on Synodality (2023-24) endorsed a methodology of spiritual conversation that facilitates depth and honesty, which I think is essential for the dialogue needed for mutual learning and maturing within and beyond the church. Everyone invested in the possibilities of the synod should read this book.

With Father Halik, I hope synodality will move the church to embody the field hospital Pope Francis envisioned, one that is not self-referential but embracing of its mission to embody Jesus' self-emptying love, especially for people on the margins. If the Catholic Church, a global community that has traveled through many stages of religious history, can figure out how to foster spiritual belonging amid many ways of relating to faith, it will serve as a model for navigating the post-secular context.

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CONCERNS AND AMBIGUITIES

Having read Father Tomas Halik's *Patience With God* and *I Want You to Be: On the God of Love*, I am no stranger to the force of his writing and the passion of his pastoral concerns. Let me mention a few of those concerns as they appear once again in *The Afternoon of Christianity*.

Father Halik's ongoing challenge to his fellow Christians is that their faith be personally appropriated and not merely a notional affirmation of doctrines. Hence, he constantly appeals to spirituality as the making real of what believers profess. He goes so far as to say (not without some ambiguity): "Spirituality, a living faith, precedes intellectual reflection [the doctrinal aspect] and institutional expressions of faith; it transcends them and sometimes revives and reforms them in moments of crisis."

As he expands this insight, Father Halik shows particular preference for the writings of the mystics who often found themselves on the margins of institutional religion. They everywhere impress upon their fellow believers the urgent need for conversion and transformation of their lives. Indeed, they bear witness to the cost of conversion

Halik urges us to engage in dialogue with unlikely partners in unlikely places.

through their experience of the "dark night," in which all traditional supports seem to fade. In this regard, Father Halik issues a welcome affirmation of the crucial importance, in an internet-saturated society, of contemplation and the pressing need to cultivate a contemplative habit of life.

The book's second vital concern is directed toward "spiritual seekers" who fail to find in the churches an adequate articulation of their longing for meaning and wholeness. Conjoined to this concern is the author's respectful attention to non-Christian religions that embody alternate paths of spiritual richness. Here the inspiration of Pope Francis (to whom the book is dedicated) is patent. Indeed, Father Halik goes so far as to consider Francis' 2020 encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti," "to be the most important document of our time, comparable to the importance of the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'."

My questions about the book, however, surface in its very first chapter, "Faith in Motion," where Father Halik announces a key methodological choice. He writes: "This is a book about faith as a journey in search of God in the midst of a changing world, about lived faith, the act of faith, how we believe (*fides qua)* rather than what we believe (*fides quae*), what is the 'object' of faith." Later he does concede that the two "belong together." But he clearly privileges the subjective and existential over the objective and doctrinal, speaking of an "ontological proto-faith" that manifests itself as a primal trust. This allows him to accommodate both spiritual seekers and the adherents of other religions, by de-emphasizing explicit confessional commitments.

Father Halik notably favors the apophatic tradition in theology, which seeks to understand God in the negative through establishing what God is not, and appeals to "Mystery" as the horizon of implicit faith and trust. But the risk he thereby runs is either to leave Mystery devoid of specific content or to import presuppositions about the "shape" of ultimate reality surreptitiously—as when he declares Mystery's nearness rather than indifference. Hence, in its concern to promote ecumenical openness, the book risks advocating a strangely amorphous faith.

Thus arises my paramount concern with the book: Does it preserve the distinctive identity of Christianity? Chapter 11, "The Identity of Christianity," is central here.

Father Halik asks, "What constitutes the identity of Christianity?" and forthrightly replies that "the Christianness of Christianity resides in faith in Jesus Christ." The chapter then proceeds to elaborate on what the tradition professes about Jesus Christ, drawing from the Gospels, St. Paul, the Greek fathers, medieval Franciscan spirituality and the mystical cosmology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. Father Halik summarizes Teilhard's teaching approvingly as the "vision of an omnipresent and almighty Christ, in whom the unity of the divine and human is achieved" and whose Incarnation initiates "the Christification of matter." *Fides quae* returns robustly!

One may take issue with one or another of the emphases of the chapter, but the vision set forth is clearly Christocentric. Consequently, puzzlement arises when the author, later in the book, peremptorily declares: "the time has come for the self-transcendence of Christianity" and postulates the need to "transcend the boundaries of the Church's language game"—presumably the very language game he so lavishly displayed in Chapter 11.

There arises, then, the crucial question: Is "the courage to change," both personally and ecclesially, that Father Halik references a reform of church structures or a going beyond Christianity itself—and, hence, beyond Christ? A troubling sign, in this regard, is the failure to include the "body of Christ" among the "ecclesiological concepts" that "must be built upon" to meet "the present signs of the times." Still more concerning is the absence of any substantial treatment of the Eucharist. I have found only two passing references (the book lacks an index). Yet, the Eucharist, as Jesus Christ's real presence among us, remains the compass, sustenance and goal of our journey of faith.

The book was written over a period of six years, and the author's views may have undergone change during that time. So my questions are genuine requests for clarification Seeking this, I am encouraged by Father Halik's own openness. He concedes that "some of the criticism by educated Conservative Christians of superficial progressivism in the Church and theology provides useful feedback and is worth listening to carefully."

Robert P. Imbelli *is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York. He taught theology for 30 years at Boston College and is the author of* Christ Brings All Newness.

THE TIME IS NOW

This is a book about salvation history and church renewal. The themes seemed to me especially apt, as I did my reading during Advent, the season in which I always feel

a heightened sense of awareness about time and a palpable longing for the transformation that will arrive with the coming of Christ and the kingdom of God.

The author, Tomas Halik, a discerning reader of the "signs of the times," presents us with his views of *when* the church must renew itself, *with whom* and *where*.

When. Father Halik suggests that current church crises present us with a *kairos*, an opportune moment to take decisive action. I appreciate this shift of perspective from what seem to be two extreme forms of inertia today: either a panicky "oh no, religion is dying" or a complacent "whew, religion is coming back." While one could argue that every moment is a wake-up call—as even Father Halik does—his book does a fine job describing the characteristics of this particular *kairos* and its urgency by comparing it to defining moments like the Protestant Reformation, the Shoah and other collective "dark nights of the soul."

The time for change is now, he says, due in large part to the dehumanization that comes from an over-focus on group identity. Christian nationalism (both Eastern European and American varieties) and radical political Islamism are surprisingly similar in their aggressive efforts to widen divides between peoples. Those who see Catholicism as an "ism" are also susceptible to this kind of thinking. In the 1930s, Simone Weil called it "Christian patriotism," and it was one reason she eschewed baptism.

With whom. Father Halik uses the word *ecumenism* often in this book, but not according to the standard definition of restoring Christian unity. Rather, he redefines the term to include the broadest group of interlocutors, with the broadest goal: "to turn the world into an *oikumene*, a habitable space, a home." His ecumenism involves everyone: diverse Catholics, diverse Christians, all religions, atheists, agnostics, seekers, "nones," the "spiritual but not religious" and global voices (though he quotes only one African theologian and no Asians or Latin Americans). These are the people with whom the church must engage if it is to renew itself now.

In the 15th century, Nicholas of Cusa suggested a similarly expansive ecumenism in response to another *kairos* moment, the fall of Constantinople in 1453. As a scholar of Nicholas, I was delighted to see Father Halik refer to him several times throughout his book, including a quotation of what is arguably Nicholas's most famous line: "una religio in rituum varietate" ("one religion in a variety of rites"), a conclusion reached by a council of leaders from 17 different religions. Nicholas's council was as inclusive as he could make it, with a Bohemian, Arab, Jew, Indian and Tartar among them.

Would that he had included a "none"! The ecumenical dialogue about which Father Halik offers the greatest insights is that between the non-religious ("nones") and religious. In Chapter 14, "The Faith of Non-Believers," he describes personal conversations he has had about unbelief not only with post-communist Czech atheists but also within himself, observing that "the prerequisite for a fruitful dialogue with atheism is to first discover the atheist, doubter, or nonconformist within oneself."

Where. We know when the church must change (now), and with whom (everyone). But where? A clue can be found in Chapter 15, "The Community of the Way," where Father Halik revisits key images of the church as a community on the road and at the borders. "Living Christianity is a movement, it is happening, it is becoming, it is still unfinished," he writes. He argues that we must have the courage to "go beyond the present mental and institutional boundaries of traditional churches, and following the example of St. Paul...venture out as seekers with seekers onto new paths."

Father Halik includes practical suggestions for how to do this: Read together, encounter the other, listen, build centers of shared prayer, engage in the synodal process, practice Ignatian discernment and create ministries of spiritual accompaniment. These ministries should happen everywhere, he says, not just at parishes—a traditional locus of Catholic life that Father Halik claims is dying. But are they dying? Pope Francis said we should go to the margins, true. But why not thoroughly rethink parishes, not abandon them? A both/and approach might be more fruitful than either/or.

If we seize the "afternoon" *kairos* of now, engage in dialogue with unlikely partners and do so in unlikely places, Father Halik believes, the church will both "transcend itself" and become its most mature, truest self.

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‘Won’t Bow Down, Don’t Know How’

The faith and perseverance of the New Orleans Black Masking Indians

By Ansel Augustine

My hometown of New Orleans is known for many things: food, jazz, second-line gatherings, conventions, the Saints football team. But my favorite thing about my city is Carnival season, which includes Mardi Gras.

This time of celebration, starting on the feast of the Epiphany and ending on Ash Wednesday, is a festive period for locals in New Orleans and extends throughout the Gulf Coast. I remember when I was younger, waking up early on Mardi Gras to catch the parades in my neighborhood. What I wanted to see most was the Black Masking Indians, more commonly known as Mardi Gras Indians, because the various tribes display their new suits on Mardi Gras morning. But the history of this tradition goes much deeper than Mardi Gras itself and is a story of faith, cultural preservation and resilience.

I remember hearing the echo of the drums, tambourines and chants that flowed underneath the Interstate 10 overpass, which ran through my neighborhood. I was enchanted by them. I remember running toward the colorful feathers in the distance to join the revelry and crowds that surrounded the tribes as they searched the city streets for other tribes to enter into the sacred meeting rituals that go back hundreds of years. It was a dream fulfilled, years later, following Hurricane Katrina, when I became a culture bearer myself by singing, sewing and chanting with the tribes, and eventually donning my own suit and participating in this sacred tradition.

In the living cultural tapestry of New Orleans, few traditions embody resilience and perseverance as vividly as the Black Masking Indians. Known for our hand-sewn suits of intricate beadwork and towering plumes of feathers, Black Masking Indians are far more than a Carnival curiosity. We represent a centuries-long story of survival, dignity and faith—an Afro-Indigenous expression forged in the crucible of enslavement, segregation, poverty and spiritual endurance. When viewed through a Catholic lens, the tradition resonates deeply with themes of suffering and redemption, sacrifice and hope, ritual and resurrection. This culture, which the Black diaspora has seen versions of in Africa and the Caribbean, has been an integral part of my Catholic journey in rebuilding my hometown following the devastation of Katrina in 2005.

Roots in Resistance and Solidarity

The Black Masking Indian tradition traces its origins to the encounters between enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples in colonial Louisiana. As Africans fled bondage, many found refuge among Native tribes who offered protection, knowledge of the land and pathways to freedom. Over time, African Americans in New Orleans honored that solidarity by “masking Indian,” forming tribes named after Native nations or symbolic virtues—Yellow Pocahontas, Wild Magnolias, Wild Tchoupitoulas, Guardians of the Flame.

This honoring was itself an act of resistance. In a city where Black expression was policed and criminalized, Black Masking Indians claimed public space through beauty and ceremony. Masking was not simply performance; it was proclamation. Each bead sewn, each feather placed, testified to a people who refused erasure. Perseverance here was communal and generational: skills passed down, songs taught by ear and codes of respect learned in the

Ansel Augustine with the Golden Blades Tribe at the Mardi Gras Ball in Washington, D.C., in 2025

streets. This connected with the struggle for self-identity that Black Catholics in the area were trying to create and maintain. I wonder at times if Venerable Mother Henriette Delille, one of the African American Catholics currently on the road to canonization, saw or connected with the Black Masking Indians when they would participate in the gatherings in Congo Square, which was located around the corner from St. Augustine Church, where she co-founded the Sisters of the Holy Family.

The Labor of Love

A single Black Masking Indian suit can take a year or more to complete. Chiefs and queens, as the men and women who participate are called, spend thousands of hours hand-sewing beads into complex tableaux: biblical scenes, African symbols, Native iconography, neighborhood stories. The labor is intense, often done at night after long workdays, sacrificing rest and resources for a moment of public revelation. Much of my free time, when I lived in New Orleans, was spent with fellow culture bearers preparing for Mardi Gras morning.

This discipline echoes Catholic notions of sacrifice and vocation. Like the preparation for Easter following the rigors of Lent, masking demands patience, humility and perseverance. The suit is unveiled on Mardi Gras Day, Super Sunday (when the tribes have a huge parade) or St. Joseph's Night—moments that feel liturgical in their rhythm. Suffering gives way to splendor; hidden labor blooms into communal joy. Over the years, the struggle has been educating folks that this, along with other Black Masking traditions (including similar groups like the Baby Dolls and Skull and Bones), are sacred.

This is why places like Backstreet Cultural Museum, where I volunteer when I am home, are also sacred. Spaces like these allow culture bearers to tell our story authentically from our perspective. Yes, our cultures are entertaining, but they are not entertainment. The same can be said for Black expressions of the Catholic faith, whether it is our preaching, teaching, song, dance or art. These are gifts to the church as Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman, another Black Catholic on the road to canonization, stated during her address to the U.S. bishops in 1989.

Ritual Time and Sacred Streets

Though not a church rite, Black Masking Indian processions follow a ritual calendar that mirrors Catholic sacred time. Mardi Gras Day itself precedes Ash Wednesday, the threshold between feasting and fasting.

St. Joseph's Night—March 19—is especially significant. Tribes emerge again, often at dusk. Due to the limiting of Black expression under the Code Noir that once regulated the lives of people of color in the New Orleans area, it was safe for Black Maskers to practice their culture on these days because crowds were in the streets (everyone on Mardi Gras Day and Italians on the Feast of St. Joseph), and Black Maskers could be in the streets as well, engaging in their cultures without fear of punishment.

Altars to St. Joseph are prepared in many homes, laden with food and prayer. When Indians mask on this night, they weave their tradition into the broader Catholic imagination of the city—one where saints walk the streets, the sacred mingles with the everyday, and public devotion is as important as private prayer.

The chants of Black Masking Indians—"Indian Red," "Shallow Water," "Two-Way-Pocky-Way"—function as communal prayers. Call-and-response patterns recall African spirituals and the responsorial psalms of Catholic worship. Rhythm binds the group together, aligning breath and step, voice and movement.

Historically, these songs also mediated conflict. Where violence once occurred between tribes, a code evolved: Disputes would be settled through competition in song, dance

Black Masking Indians celebrate Super Sunday Uptown in New Orleans in 2019.

and visual magnificence. "Who's the prettiest?" became a nonviolent contest of creativity. This transformation—from conflict to artistry—mirrors the Catholic ethic of reconciliation and peacebuilding, perseverance turned toward communion. Many of these songs and ritual dancing are still practiced on Sunday evenings around the city during various Indian Practices, which are extensions of the gatherings that took place on Sundays in Congo Square centuries ago.

Faith in the Face of Hardship

The resilience of Black Masking Indians is inseparable from the realities of Black life in New Orleans. Hurricanes, economic inequality, mass incarceration and neighborhood disinvestment have all threatened the continuity of the tradition. After Hurricane Katrina, many feared that masking would disappear as communities were scattered and homes destroyed.

Instead, perseverance prevailed. Tribes reassembled, suits were remade, and processions returned—sometimes with fewer resources but greater resolve. This mirrors Catholic theology after catastrophe: lamentation followed by rebuilding, ashes giving way to renewal. The Indians' return to the streets was a kind of resurrection, a declaration that culture and faith endure even when structures collapse.

One of the most revered Black Masking Indians, and a fellow Black Catholic who was a parishioner at St. Augustine Church, was Big Chief Allison Tootie Montana. As a master plasterer who designed many of the intricate decorations of buildings throughout the city, including St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter, he revolutionized the Black Masking Indian tradition by incorporating these designs into his suit. He had many notable accomplishments in the culture that made him a revered chief, but he will forever be remembered because he died amid a fight for the culture.

In the summer of 2005, a few months before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the Indian Nation would gather in the City Council chambers to decry the harassment we experienced from the New Orleans Police Department during St. Joseph's Night earlier that year. During his impassioned speech advocating for the culture and documenting his years of harassment from the N.O.P.D. during his years of masking, Big Chief Montana suffered a heart attack and died at the podium in the City Council chamber, which was subsequently dedicated to him. A plaque now hangs there in his honor, and a statue of him stands in Congo Square. His life is reminiscent of the fight that is detailed in Catholic social teaching, which calls all humans to be recognized for the dignity that comes from being a child made in the image and likeness of God.

In fact, the feast of the Epiphany, the start of Carnival season, is also known as "Big Chief Tootie Montana Day" in New Orleans. I used to gather the Indians at his statue and lead a prayer service blessing our drums for the season.

Catholicism in New Orleans has always been embodied—felt in food, music, procession and art. Black Masking Indians, though not formally ecclesial, participate in this sacramental worldview. Their suits are icons: material objects that point beyond themselves to deeper truths. Feathers lift the eye heavenward; beads narrate salvation histories both sacred and secular.

Many Black Masking Indians were raised Catholic, attended Catholic schools and absorbed a theology in which

Reynold Verret, president of Xavier University of Louisiana, poses with members of the masking community after the centennial Mass for the university, held at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans on Oct. 1, 2025.

OSV News photo/Gavin Goins, courtesy Xavier University of Louisiana

suffering is not meaningless and beauty is a path to God. The streets become a nave, the procession a pilgrimage, the chants a litany. Perseverance is not abstract; it is stitched, worn and walked.

Passing It On

A defining mark of resilience is transmission. Today, young people are being mentored and welcomed into the tradition through sewing circles, school programs and neighborhood practices. Elders teach not only technique but values: respect, patience, nonviolence, pride in heritage. This catechesis-by-culture ensures continuity.

In Catholic terms, this is apostolic succession of a different kind—wisdom handed down so the community may live. Each new masker learns that perseverance is communal: You do not mask alone, and you do not survive alone.

The New Orleans Black Masking Indians stand as a living witness to resilience and perseverance rooted in history, community and faith. Our tradition proclaims that beauty can rise from suffering, that discipline can yield joy and that public ritual can heal private wounds. Seen through a Catholic lens, masking becomes an embodied theology—one that honors ancestors, sanctifies time and insists on hope.

In a world that too often prizes speed over patience and spectacle over substance, the Black Masking Indians remind us that perseverance is slow, costly and luminous. Like the church at its best, they endure by remembering who they are, honoring those who came before and stepping into the future adorned with faith. This is why our sacred saying, "Won't Bow Down, Don't Know How!" is something that reminds us to keep pressing on, as our Catholic faith does, in times of struggle toward the light of a better day.

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CNS photo/Vatican Media

Lenten Migrations

Journeying to Easter with Augustine and Pope Leo

By James K. A. Smith

It still feels surprising to hear the faint echoes of a Chicago accent as I listen to the pope. (It is even more jarring to imagine the Holy Father enjoying the culinary delights of a "Chicago dog" in the stands at a White Sox game.) But what I hear, above all, in the witness and leadership of Pope Leo XIV is a distinctly Augustinian accent. One of the gifts of Pope Leo's ministry has been to offer the gifts of Augustinian spirituality to the entire world. Lent, I would suggest, is an opportune season to consider how Augustine frames the Christian life in ways that are echoed in Pope Leo's witness.

A Refugee Spirituality

We often think of Lent as a pilgrimage to the cross, a journey to Easter. In this sense, the Lenten journey is a compressed picture of the arduous journey that is the Christian life. But for Augustine, it is crucial that we do not confuse this pilgrimage with spiritual tourism—a getaway to simply recharge our religious batteries.

Indeed, for Augustine, if you really want to understand the harrowing, vulnerable journey of Lent—and the whole of the Christian life—picture the plight of the migrant. The Latin term that suffuses Augustine's writings and sermons is *peregrinatio*. This is often translated into the language of "pilgrimage." But that does not quite fit the picture Augustine has in mind.

The pilgrim usually makes a religious journey and then returns home. There is a certain kind of security in such an endeavor, an Odyssean sense of return. This might be why pilgrimage, in our day, can slide into a kind of pious tourism.

That is not what Augustine is describing. The *peregrinus* is not visiting abroad to just return home; rather, the Christian is called to a homeland she has never been to. We are resident aliens en route to the foreign *patria* we were made for. In one of his letters, Augustine says that God is the country "where true consolation of our migration is found."

This means that the soul is more than just a pilgrim. We are migrants. We are spiritual refugees. We are looking and longing for a homeland we have seen before. But upon arrival in this foreign country, we realize it is home. We breathe a sigh of relief because finally, in God's care, we are safe.

This reframing should help us hear afresh Augustine's famous distinction, in his later work, between "the City of God" and the "City of man"—between the "earthly city" and the "heavenly city." This is not a distinction between some ethereal realm and the cold, hard realities of this world. The City of God and the City of man are two dif-

Pope Leo XIV receives a copy of a painting of St. Augustine from Michele R. Pistone, founder and faculty director of the Mother Cabrini Institute on Immigration at Villanova University, on Oct. 2, 2025. At left: Father Joseph L. Farrell, prior general of the Augustinian order.

ferent social realities, two different expressions of how to be human together—two different ways to imagine what it means to be a "society." What distinguishes these two cities is their collective loves. The earthly city is governed by lust for power and domination (the *libido dominandi*, in Augustine's memorable phrase); it is animated by love of self. In contrast, the City of God is a society animated by love of God; it is marked by sacrifice and humility.

Augustine envisions the City of God as a *societas peregrina*—a community of migrants. In the same way that Pope Francis described the church as a "field hospital," we should picture the city of God as a refugee camp—a tent city of migrants journeying together, caring for one another, as we collectively make our way toward the *patria* that is *Pater Noster*. Conversion, for Augustine, is joining this caravan. There is no citizen of the city of God who did not arrive there as a refugee.

It is this picture of the Christian life that informs Pope Leo's unfailing advocacy for migrants and refugees. In "Dilexi Te," he exhorts the church to be a community *on the way*: "The Church, like a mother, accompanies those who are walking," he says. "And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community."

I hear the same sensibility in Pope Leo's homily on the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord: "There is no room for God if there is no room for the human person," he preached. "Yet, where there is room for the human person, there is room for God; even a stable can become more sacred than a temple."

Sometimes our devotion to the security and stability of the temple bars the arrival of Christ. But God arrives in every stable where humility makes room. God is found in the precarious conviviality of the migrant caravan rather than the staid safety of our temples—whether on Wall Street or Pennsylvania Avenue.

Let us hear in Pope Leo's words a Lenten invitation to recognize our solidarity as migrants who are journeying with the caravan that is the city of God. The picture invites daily reflection in this season of self-examination.

Let us ask ourselves: Where am I going? What sort of journey am I on? Do I prize security more than venturing to the country that is God? Have I settled for spiritual tourism rather than the precarity of the tent city where Jesus tabernacles with the poor, the needy, the rejected and undocumented? Who am I journeying with? What doors have I closed? When have I conveniently failed to hear Christ knocking? How can I make room in my life for God's arrival in the poor, the migrant, the refugee?

If you really want to understand the harrowing, vulnerable journey of Lent, picture the plight of the migrant.

The Cross Is a Raft

In one of his homilies on the Gospel of John, Augustine evokes an image that feels even more charged to us today—having watched waves of migrants foundering on the seas, having witnessed their bodies on the shore. Preaching on the Mediterranean shore in north Africa, Augustine pictures the Christian life as emigration: "It is as if someone could see his home country from a long way away, but is cut off from it by the sea."

This home country, paradoxically, is a place he has never been. But this migrant sees where he needs to go; he sees where home is "but does not have the means to get there." We are stranded. The foaming "sea of this world" lies between us and home.

But the good news, proclaims the Doctor of Grace, is that God sends a boat from the other side: "So that we might also have the means to go, the one we were longing to go to came here from there. And what did he make? A wooden raft for us to cross the sea." It is a raft in the shape of a cross. "For no one can cross the sea of this world unless carried over it on the cross of Christ."

We journey to Easter on the cross. We are migrants seeking the homeland that is God, but Christ himself has joined our caravan, pitched his tent in our refugee camp. We will recognize him, Pope Leo says, in the face of every migrant. This Lent, God invites us to throw overboard all the distractions and temptations that take up so much space in our frantic, anxious lives. Let us throw overboard our penchants for security and comfort, throw overboard our idols and anger—all in order to make room for the arrival of Christ who arrives on this precarious raft, knocking at the door of our border, asking to be born in us again.

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‘Stranger Things’ Puts Evil in Its Place

By Marie Glancy O’Shea

This essay contains spoilers for the series “Stranger Things.”

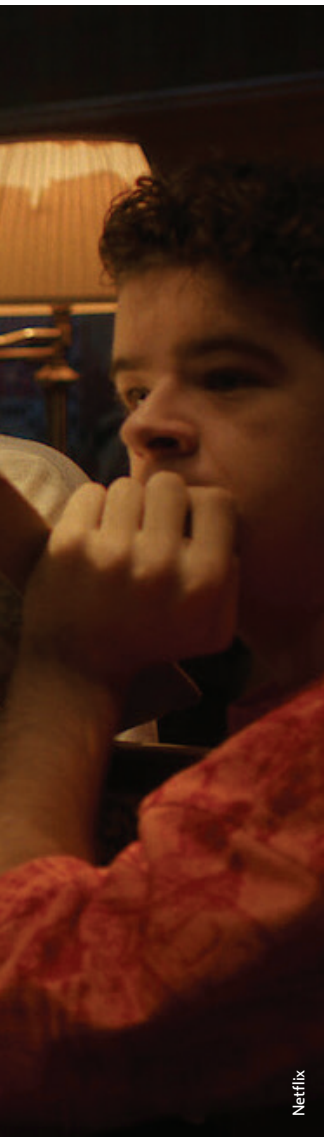
I have been trying to teach my kindergartener (and myself) that people who seem bad can always turn toward good. We’re often talking about a remote possibility indeed, but the Christian story has always been a study in the improbable. Conversion should be our abiding hope.

No such conversion happened in the series finale of the hit Netflix show “Stranger Things,” which was released on New Year’s Eve. Yet the episode contained a moment that was arresting simply because it admitted the possibility of redemption for the worst of sinners.

The show has always depicted evil vividly, much like Dungeons & Dragons, the game that helped inspire it. The finale reminded me in a unique way that evil is never one and the same with any human being. The Enemy goes back much further.

Set in the fictional town of Hawkins, Ind., in the 1980s, the series began with the disappearance of Will Byers, a preteen D&D enthusiast whose friends join his mother, brother and the local police chief to search for him. They discover the secret, government-run Hawkins Lab, where experiments into psychokinetic powers have run amok and opened a portal to a malevolent dimension, the Upside Down, which infernally mirrors their familiar small town.

Though Will is rescued, he retains an enigmatic psychic connection to that underworld—one mystery among many that are unraveled in subsequent seasons. It transpires that Will is intermittently controlled by a shadowy force that one of his friends dubs the Mind Flayer, a hive mind forever seeking to merge new consciousnesses with



"Stranger Things" has always depicted evil vividly, much like Dungeons & Dragons, the game that helped inspire it.

itself. In Season 4, as we sense bigger answers at hand, we meet an alpha fiend, Vecna, whose human alter ego is the stony-faced Henry Creel.

Along the way, evil takes many forms: sinewy "demodogs" and "demogorgons"; a sprawling spider monster; the possession of humans whose eyes roll back in thrall to the Mind Flayer's relentless power. As seasons progress and that power makes greater incursions into the known world, physical and psycho-spiritual realities become less distinct from each other. Evil literally looms over Hawkins, in crimson-tinged skies swirling with dark clouds.

Henry's Journey

Perhaps I should have known, laying out the puzzle pieces, that Henry was not inherently evil, that his soul was, in a way, fallen territory in a very long war. His back story, after all, includes a human childhood in 1950s Hawkins. Nonetheless, I interpreted Vecna as one and the same with the Mind Flayer. Occasionally, he took the form of Henry—say, when he wanted to deceive children into befriending him. Then, as soon as this human disguise became unnecessary, it would fall away to reveal the tangled root-like contours of his true self.

Or so I thought. As it turns out, the show's melding of the physical and the intangible means that Henry's spiritual condition is represented through the melting face of Vecna. His "true self" remains an open question, right up until his final, gruesome end.

When the children he has abducted finally escape from the prison of his own mind, Henry forces himself to pursue them into a cave that is the site of a traumatic childhood memory. He is shaky and weakened even before he sees the manifestation of himself as a boy—dressed in a Boy Scout's uniform, no less—bludgeoning a Russian spy who has just shot him in the hand. After bashing the man with a rock, Henry opens the briefcase the Russian was clutching and finds a fragment from the Mind Flayer. "It will consume you. It will consume all," the dying man gasps. It dawns on us, and on the observing Will (who has found his own powers, allowing him to spy through the hive mind), that Henry was not born as he is, but was infected with the Mind Flayer by chance through this fateful encounter.

"It wasn't you. It was never you," says Will, his voice full of sympathy, from deep inside Henry's consciousness. "That's why the Mind Flayer didn't want you in the cave. It didn't want you to remember."

"Leave me alone," answers Henry, but the ice in his voice has melted to liquid vulnerability. His face is transformed, too, softened by grief, fear and confusion.

Any daylight between Henry and the Mind Flayer is short-lived, however. Hard as Will tries to dislodge him from the Mind Flayer's grip ("You can resist it.... Don't let it win, Henry, please!"), Henry finally rejects his efforts, insisting that the Mind Flayer is right and the world of humankind is broken. "It needs me, and I need it," he concludes, hardening again to proclaim his perverse anti-theology. "We are one."

I don't think I believed Will's pleas would convince Henry to join the Hawkins gang of heroes. But seeing him teeter between light and dark electrified me all the same. Here, clearly signaled, was the agency God has granted us as long as there is life in us. Even Henry gets his opportunity to turn away from the demonic and be cleansed.

Facing the Devil

"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils," C. S. Lewis wrote in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*. "One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."

The latter error is what worries those religious observers who have objected to "Stranger Things," D&D, the Harry Potter series and almost any entertainment that personifies evil without following an explicitly biblical framework. They charge that these stories lead children toward the occult. For those of us leading a high-tech, 21st-century life, though, the first of Lewis's possibilities seems the greater pitfall. To classify Satan as a cartoonish figment is the default.

I value a show like "Stranger Things" for its visceral depictions of an entity that has many vessels but one hideous intent. It reminds us that evil is not a gauzy abstraction but a real thing: a lying, manipulative force that understands and preys on our weaknesses. This serves several purposes that we might call "spiritually practical."

> Evil literally looms over Hawkins, in crimson-tinged skies swirling with dark clouds.

The most obvious is that comprehending a specific enemy automatically rouses the imagination and makes us take our soul's battle seriously. Let us be, each in our own way, teenagers throwing flames at the demogorgons of greed, envy and lust.

Maybe less obvious is how believing in the devil mitigates the temptation to hate other people whose actions we consider monstrous. A quick thought experiment shows me how different the models are. If I call someone evil (or, popular in today's lexicon, toxic), I quickly become preoccupied with their wrongs. How can they be so cruel and heartless? Yet if I imagine that the Evil One has gained ground in that person's soul, I can still hope for the person's redemption without changing my attitude toward their deeds. I can partake in that hope while maintaining my baptismal vow to reject Satan's works. Adding fellow humans to the blacklist no longer makes sense, since we share a common enemy.

Here we return to Lewis's warning about "excessive interest" in devils. Our work isn't to fixate on evil, no matter how prevalent it may be. "Whenever we foolishly turn our attention to those we deem not to be on a spiritual path," wrote the 14th-century mystic Julian of Norwich, "our Lord God tenderly touches us and blessedly calls to us, speaking to our souls: Let me be the only object of your attention, my beloved child. Focus on me alone, for I am enough for you."

Pathways to Sin

If we listen attentively to Christ and refrain from projecting our will on what we hear, then our mission is to love God and our neighbor. Anything that pulls us away from this mission is an evil. I've tried to limit my news consumption for this reason, noticing that gross injustice without any recourse to action is a swift path to wrathful thoughts. If my eye is leading me to sin, I'll adhere to Matthew 18:9 and tear it out—or, as a first resort, shut the browser.

Believing in the existence of "the prince of this world" means being awake to his threat while comprehending his limits. The enemy is bigger and older than any one person, which makes it daunting—but redemption is available to every person because no one "is" evil, only subject to it. Evil is a trespasser in creation, and it can be driven out. Like Christ in the desert, we resist the tempter by seeing right through his sparkling cities, keeping our focus on the work of loving each other in humility and faith. If a partially corrupted vessel can wreak great evil, how much good can God accomplish with even a partial saint?

Not long ago I rewatched "Schindler's List." Its famous scene portraying Oskar Schindler's remorse, though perhaps melodramatic, is instructive here. Schindler has a moral awakening, and his conscience is suddenly sensitive to the infinite potential of God's goodness. This allows him to do right, but it also opens his eyes to "what I have done, and what I have failed to do." The fact that he lives in a time of rampant evil, among men so corrupted they must be bribed to spare human lives, is peripheral. He is not seething with outrage but concerned with the only thing he can actually control: the work God might do through him.

Hope dwells here, in connection and love. Henry Creel seals his destruction by doubling down on isolation. Will Byers finds his strength by humbly reaching out to friends and family, asking for their embrace, and finding it.

Despite its hellish settings, "Stranger Things" draws us in like a cozy hearth. The dim realm of the Upside Down gives us biological matter minus any sense of God's order. Tentacles reach, mucus oozes, particles float like dead skin in the air. Our heroes enter it and become steadfast in their bonds of mutual responsibility, sure in their mission, brave in their willingness to sacrifice. Call it "horror-comfort": goodness shining brighter through the power of contrast.

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Kate Bush's Catholic Hope

Since it was used in Season 4 of "Stranger Things" and again throughout the show's final season, Kate Bush's 1985 hit "Running Up that Hill" exploded across pop culture. But "Running Up that Hill" is more than just the song in "Stranger Things": It's also deeply religious.

As Bush explained back in 1989, the song is about two lovers, a man and a woman, who dream of swapping places so that they could understand each other better. "I thought the only way it could be done was, you know, a deal with the devil," Bush said. "And then I thought: Well no, why not a deal with God? Because that's so much more powerful."

Bush herself was raised Catholic and attended St. Joseph Convent School in Kent, England. "I would never say I was a strict follower of Roman Catholic belief," Bush later said, "but a lot of images are in there [in my work]. They have to be; they're so strong. Such powerful, beautiful, passionate images!"

Bush noted that "there's a lot of suffering in Roman Catholicism." You hear that in "Running." The song, she said, reflects that experience of "seeing something incredibly beautiful, having a religious experience as such, but not being able to get back there."

This sense that nothing more is possible, and yet still she won't stop dreaming, won't stop singing, won't stop running up that hill, is at the heart of Bush's power. It is perfect for the plight of Max Mayfield and all the characters of "Stranger Things." For Max, the only thing that saves her from a horrifying crucifixion-like death is listening to "Running." The song inspires her to remember the good moments in her life and the friends that love her, and with those memories, she begins to fight to return to them. The scene in which she runs away from Vecna across the Upside Down, striving to reach her friends while Bush sings, is iconic, a great moment in television.

The song is also a powerful expression of Christian hope. For Catholics, hope is not the same as a Hail Mary pass. It's not an act that we perform because we think if we do things will get better but because it is who we are. It doesn't matter if all is lost; this is still what we do. It is Jesus on the cross, his death the final expression of his love for humanity, even as it also represents the utter failure of that relationship. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" he asks, grief-stricken and yet also still reaching. And miraculously, against all odds, it turns out death is not the end.

So of course "Stranger Things" should feature a Kate Bush song saving a child's life. She has long been the poet who calls us to keep going. In 1986, Peter Gabriel turned to Bush to be the voice of encouragement in his song "Don't Give Up." The song ends: "You know it's never been easy/ Don't give up/ 'Cause I believe there's a place/ There's a place where we belong."

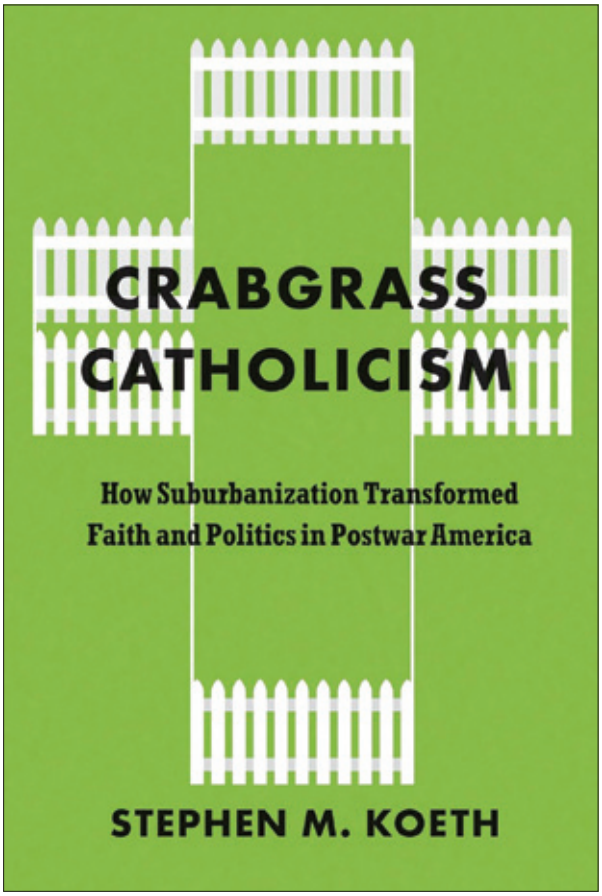
In her 1989 interview, Bush said that she saw her vocation as a musician as an expression of a search for God. "People who create feel a great empty sense of hunger, a feeling of emptiness in life," she said. "So many artists are looking for God, and this is where we find the voice to try and speak."

In fact, it's not just artists that are searching for God. In her songs, Kate Bush brings us with her on that journey to a place she believes in without knowing whether it can be reached, "a place where we belong."

Editors' note: This is an excerpt from "'Stranger Things' brings Kate Bush's Catholic hope to a new generation," written by Jim McDermott and published at americamagazine.org on June 20, 2022.

Alamy

A CHANGING CHURCH



University of Chicago Press / 336p $30

Soon after World War II, partly in response to a serious housing shortage in the cities, Catholics joined millions of other Americans—Jews, Protestants of various denominations, nonbelievers—in relocating to the newly built suburbs. The typical parish plant (the cluster of church, rectory, convent, gymnasium and school), diocese administrative offices and priests, and monsignors, nuns and bishops followed Catholic families closely behind. While suburban Catholic parishes existed before this, they were few and small and would have to multiply and expand to serve a rapidly growing laity.

Focusing on Long Island, in New York, Stephen Koeth, an assistant professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, documents in *Crabgrass Catholicism* the institutional adjustments that occurred as once-urban Catholic families took up suburban living.

Between 1952 and 1980, the proportion of Catholics living in U.S. cities fell from approximately one-half to one-quarter, according to Koeth, while the suburban share rose from one-third to one-half. The Catholic population in Detroit declined from approximately 1 million to 100,000, in Baltimore from 150,000 to 33,000, and in San Francisco from 120,000 to 47,000 over those years. In New York City, the archdiocese lost over 160,000 parishioners between 1940 and 1970, almost all of whom left for nearby suburbs.

The church hierarchy and the laity worked separately and together to draw new parish boundaries, build churches, construct and manage schools and maintain Catholic values. Because families were young, having babies and raising small children, building schools and organizing catechism classes to pass the faith to the next generation were of special importance. The extraordinary adaptations made by the church led to the newly designated Archdiocese of Rockville Center being touted as "a prototype of the suburban church."

What most interests Koeth and serves as the focal point of this deeply researched and thoughtful history are the consequences that suburbanization had for the practice of Catholicism. Looming large in his story are the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1962-65.

Koeth's argument centers on how the sizable increase in the number of Catholics overwhelmed existing and newly formed suburban parishes. The church simply could not provide priests, nuns, churches, schools and religious programming quickly enough or of sufficient magnitude to meet demand. The resultant shifting of church services, matrimonial counseling and catechism classes from the public space of the church to the private spaces of the home undermined the devotional ethos. To compensate for the deficit of priests and nuns, the laity was given more responsibility in church affairs, dramatically altering, in Koeth's words, "the balance of power between clergy and laity."

To this Koeth adds the geographic dispersal of Catholic families, in stark contrast to urban parishes, and the intermingling of families of various faiths that increased intermarriage across ethnic lines. As Catholics socialized more in secular settings, religion became less of a social marker. The institutional and associational relations that had previously anchored Catholic life weakened.

In addition, Catholics were experiencing a society in turmoil. As in many Western European nations, the United States was undergoing unprecedented economic growth, its welfare state was expanding, public engagement with social justice was on the rise, and young people were rebelling against puritanical norms. Vatican II was paralleled by the rise of the social activism of the civil rights movement, women's liberation and antiwar protests. One consequence was that many nuns opted to work with anti-poverty and other social service agencies, thereby depriving the parochial schools of low-cost religious teachers.

Many suburban families were first-time homeowners, and their local municipalities needed increased tax revenues to build public schools and roads, to fund police and

fire departments, and to operate libraries. The burden of real estate taxes made it more difficult for these families to afford Catholic school tuition, while both the demands and the attractions of suburban living lessened time for church activities.

For Koeth, the relaxation of religious ties and the church's struggles to accommodate parishioners with suburban lifestyles were the grassroots origins of Vatican II. The liberalization launched from Rome, in effect, was not a sudden break in the continuity of Catholic worship but was instead recognition of changes already underway. The encouragement of interfaith dialogue and increased participation of the laity in the liturgy, as well as more use of scriptural readings, vernacular language and less physical separation between priest and congregants at Mass, were reforms new only in being officially endorsed.

For many in the laity and the clergy as well, the reforms of Vatican II were unwelcome. They worried about secularization, materialism and the dilution of Catholic education. The "new" Catholic Church, in their view, exacerbated the threat that the feminist movement posed to the patriarchal family, was too tolerant of changing attitudes toward birth control and abortion, and accelerated the shift away from priestly authority. For such Catholics, the reforms brought about by the council were more anxiety-provoking than supportive.

Combined with rising real estate taxes, these apprehensions drew many suburban Catholics to an anti-liberal politics that was increasingly in the grip of a white ethnic identity. Koeth notes, however, that the "ethnic revival of the late 1960s and 1970s and the Catholic revolt from the New Deal coalition were not principally driven by race consciousness or anti-black racism." Rather, "the overriding concern of white ethnics and their advocates was economic," involving tax increases and inflation. Nevertheless, the laity was now deeply divided ideologically between traditionalist and liberalizing trends.

In the historical framing that begins *Crabgrass Catholicism*, Koeth points out Catholic leadership's centuries-long concern with where Catholics live. In the early 19th century, most Catholics in the United States resided in rural areas or small towns. With industrialization and late-19th and 20th-century immigration, Catholics congregated in cities.

As anti-urbanism became more pronounced, the nation's cities became viewed as places of vice, violence, secularization and individualism, and thus a threat to Catholic morality. Anti-urbanism also flared up in the postwar decades as the older cities became associated with large Black populations and racial unrest, poverty and crime. One response was migration to the suburbs.

Koeth's argument centers on how the sizable increase in the number of Catholics overwhelmed suburban parishes.

For some, suburbanization was itself a problem, undermining the ethnic neighborhood and parish, exposing Catholic families to consumerism, and dissolving Catholicism in an American citizenship that held religion at arm's length. Today, this debate continues as commentators argue whether rural homesteading, urban living or suburban life best fits with the Catholic faith.

Koeth comes across as nostalgic for the immigrant church of the early 20th century. Then, many urban parishes were organized around national groups—Italians, Irish, Polish and more—that congregated in ethnic neighborhoods. The parish church and its lay organizations, like the Holy Name Society and the Legion of Mary, were centers of associational life and the church was institutionally strong. By contrast, new suburban parishes were territorial, not national. Parishioners were scattered across neighborhoods and towns, numerous secular associations (e.g., bowling leagues, library committees) competed for their time, and political opposition to taxes pulled suburbanites into the divisive politics of "big" government, race, youth culture and abortion.

Because religion is always practiced somewhere, geography matters. The differences among and distinctiveness of places have much to do with how people worship and the accommodation that the church is subsequently compelled to make. The Catholic hierarchy was unable to fully serve its suburban congregants or replicate the cohesiveness of the urban parish. Koeth, though, is reluctant to pass judgment. Nevertheless, he makes a clear and convincing case that the church and Catholic laity understood what needed to be done—and that whatever failings occurred had less to do with the intensity of their commitment than with factors beyond their control.

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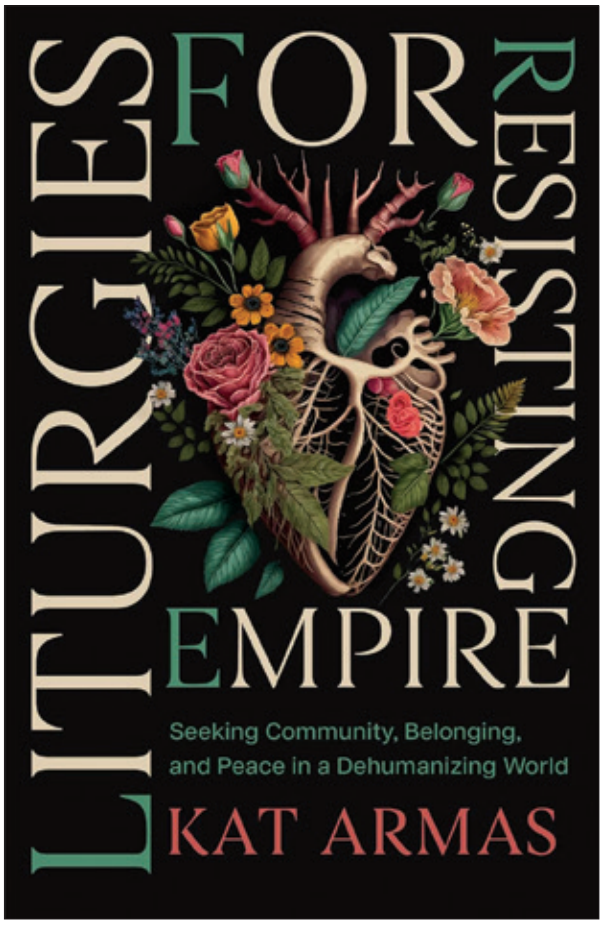
AWAKENING TO HARD TRUTHS



Brazos Press / 224p $20

Do you know that hauntingly beautiful moment in a story where the narrator zooms the perspective out just enough for you to see that everything is connected? When the shocking realization dawns that the plot was driven by an unseen force the entire time, our experience of the story itself is altered. Reading Kat Armas's newest book, *Liturgies for Resisting Empire,* inspires the same feeling of being awakened to the unseen forces that affect our lives.

The dominating influence that Armas outlines throughout her book is "a theology of empire, one so deeply embedded in our faith and our world that we often don't see it for what it is. It's a way of thinking that has shaped us, shaped how we see each other, and shaped how we understand divinity."

Armas seamlessly weaves together a book that unites personal story, biblical and historical research, and present-day theology, and approaches its topic through a feminist and liberative theological lens. As in her two previous books, Armas's writing is polished in the flow and layout of ideas while retaining a conversational tone. It takes a talented author to recall scenes from a childhood in Miami, evoke the imperialism of the Roman Empire and connect this all back to our understanding of theology in the present day, but Armas is more than up to the challenge.

The layout of the book follows a liturgical pattern, with section titles including "Invocation," "Reflection," "Prayer of Resistance" and "Benediction." Defining empire as "the relationship between a dominant, ruling state and a less powerful one," she writes that "empire is fundamentally about the extension of control, whether through direct domination or subtle influence." Empire is the force of power and control that has seeped not only into our imaginations and daily jargon but also into our theology and our understanding of the divine.

Never one to shy away from a tough theological truth, Armas addresses Scripture's role in creating and upholding empire. She notes, "only by acknowledging the Bible's complicity in violent ideologies and actions can we begin the work of addressing the injustices woven into its pages." Armas asserts that we see the harmful influence of the Roman Empire in the glorification of conquest reflected in Scripture and therein in our churches and theology of today.

"Scripture is full of imperial imagery and ideology. Even when it's subverting it," she writes. "The imperial metaphors—including submission, warfare, and rulers—have shaped Christian identity and practice for centuries, sometimes in ways that tether faith to power.... It's a paradox: a text meant to equip communities to resist empire has also been used to uphold it."

What is her answer to this tangle of empire in which we find our theology ensnared? To confront it, unravel the imperial threads from our faith and move toward a liberated, healed vision of God and community. Reading her book is a great way to start this process of decolonizing our ideas around theology and developing an understanding of how Scripture affects "structural and relational realities of those living under empire and the lasting impact of its power."

Her chapter "Rejecting Sameness, Embracing Wholeness" includes a powerful explanation of why we are called to decolonize our imaginations. Armas explains another paradox, that of the nation, which "holds out the promise of belonging, but only for those who fit the mold." Belonging in an empire often requires assimilation; and failing to assimilate places you in harm's way of nationalism. "[Nationalism] tells you that you're a part of something but often only by turning you against someone else," Armas pens. "The threat of the outsider has been a constant tool to unite peoples."

Throughout the book, Armas speaks to the importance of how we tell stories and whose stories we tell. Decolonizing the stories of Scripture, then, is "an ongoing process of

breaking free from a worldview that has shaped how we see God, ourselves, and others." To do this, Armas explains, we must embrace the wholeness of our knowledge and God's gifts of wisdom to others. She states: "To truly decolonize, we must learn to hold space for indigenous, native, and non-western wisdom—alternative ways of knowing that are just as valid. To decolonize our understanding of God, we must learn to reimagine the divine through the guidance of those whom empire has tried to silence."

She goes on to outline how this silencing was enacted in America's policies and pursuit of Manifest Destiny. First and foremost were the U.S. government's unjust actions toward Native American peoples, who were ripped away not only from their land but also their way of life, culture and language. European peoples, believing themselves to be chosen by God to expand and redeem other nations, intertwined religion and imperial ambition in incredibly harmful ways. Armas writes, "Christian entanglement with the militarized approach of Manifest Destiny is grounded in the image of Christ as a warrior who conquers rather than communes, who subdues rather than restores."

Reiterating how this mindset of conquering has seeped into our language, our theology and our imaginations, Armas explains that restoration begins with "reimagin[ing] a Messiah who leads not with domination but with love."

The final two chapters examine what this restoration could look like through the rejection of dominance and violence for the embrace of connection and peace. Armas writes that "true flourishing is not found in separation and control but in mutuality and interdependence." She reminds us that Shalom calls for healing, not further hurt. Untangling the knots of empire that have held us hostage does not mean we tie those same knots around another, but instead that we learn to work together toward a better, reimagined world of peace and vulnerability. We are called to see one another as a "reflection of the sacred... not through the lens of power or privilege but through the lens of belovedness."

Armas further notes that "perhaps this is the truest resistance to empire, the one we must first cultivate within ourselves—to choose vulnerability over violence, peace over power, love over fear."

Reading this book felt like an awakening for me. Armas's words made me feel seen and validated in my unease around imperialistic tactics and language in sacred spaces, but they also challenged me to see how interwoven empire was in my own actions. Armas preaches without ever becoming preachy, connecting her research on empire's impact to our present-day realities of deportation, environmental decline and desire for true belonging.

For anyone who has considered how power structures affect our understanding of Scripture, the divine and our interactions with one another, *Liturgies for Resisting Empire* holds richness, grace and wisdom.

Never one to shy away from a tough theological truth, Armas addresses Scripture's role in creating and upholding empire.

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A SISTER'S LOVE

InterVarsity Press / 240p $26

Kathleen Norris is one of my favorite spiritual writers. Few books have moved me more than her now-classic memoirs *Dakota* (about her relationship with her family's homeland) and *The Cloister Walk* (my favorite of her books, about her experiences as an oblate at a Benedictine monastery). I also wrote the foreword to her 2024 book with Gareth Higgins on a very different subject: *A Whole Life in Twelve Movies: A Cinematic Journey to a Deeper Spirituality.*

Whenever I think about Norris's writing, I think of the word quiet. Her sentences, paragraphs and chapters, for all their power, verve and energy, never shout. They are quiet, reserved, modest. But they pack a real punch.

Thanks to her books, I've also learned a great deal about how to write; in fact, I often use the framework that I first noticed in *Dakota* with aspiring writers who tell me how daunted they are by the prospect of writing "a whole book." I'll often say, "Read *Dakota* or *The Cloister Walk* and see what Kathleen Norris does. Essentially, she writes a series of essays and then connects them chronologically or thematically." I can't tell you how many times I've said to a writer, "You may not be able to write 'a whole book,' but you can write 20 essays and link them together." Of course, I always point out, if you want to write like Kathleen Norris, it also helps to be able to write beautifully. Structure might be teachable, art perhaps less so.

Thus, I was not surprised to find the same method present in her beautiful, moving and often profound new book *Rebecca Sue*, a kind of double memoir of Norris's sister, who had suffered from severe mental disabilities, as well of the author herself and her family.

In 1952, Rebecca Sue, Norris's younger sister, was born with "perinatal hypoxia," which the author describes as "being deprived of oxygen during a critical time of her birth." What followed was a lifetime of confusing and often pernicious mental, emotional and physical disabilities. *Rebecca Sue* is the story of how Becky, as Norris calls her, dealt with these challenges and how Norris and her warm and loving family responded.

I wasn't sure what to expect from this book. From her writings and from speaking with the author, I knew that Norris had a sister with a disability. And I knew that it required a good deal of her time to care for Becky, especially as their parents aged and ultimately died. I was prepared for a book that described many challenges. What I wasn't prepared for was Becky's own vivid character: sometimes angry, sometimes frustrated, often funny (and very blunt) but, most of all, resilient.

One of the most poignant aspects of this book is how clearly Becky understood her condition: "Will I always be slow?" she asks early on. Frequent letters to Norris provide not only a wealth of quotes, but insights into Becky's mind and soul.

Becky led, it is fair to say, a difficult life, beyond simply her mental and physical challenges. In 1965 the family moved from Hawaii (where their father, a Navy band director, was stationed) to a new posting in Virginia. On the five-day trip, the 13-year-old Becky was sexually molested by a steward. Not until years later was this revealed to her parents (by one of Becky's psychiatrists). This seems to have contributed to Becky's fraught relationship with men; sex is a constant topic of conversation between the two sisters. She desperately wants a boyfriend. At one point, Norris describes it as "an obsession." But Becky also grasps that her limitations work against her finding a romantic partner.

"I know I got to widen my interests and communicate with people," she writes to Norris. "Can you give me ideas that most people would enjoy doing? I feel like an old maid." Becky wrote this when she was 22.

Honesty is a constant theme in her letters, and Norris notes that while she occasionally found her sister's blunt missives and comments stinging, they were far more often refreshing. For her part, Norris shows herself to be a patient and caring sister, even when criticized by Becky.

When *Dakota* is published, Becky writes, "I feel hurt because you wrote a book and I didn't. Happy for you and I tried to read your book and was bored with it."

"One great thing about Becky," writes Norris, "is that she put it all out there..."

Rebecca Sue is as much about Norris and her family as it is about the woman in the title. Over the years, as Becky moves in and out of homes (her often fractious relationships with her roommates is another constant), changes therapists, doctors and medications, and ultimately ages, her family remains faithful to her. Eventually she suffers the loss of both parents and is diagnosed with breast cancer. Her response: "I'll be fine. I have a positive attitude."

God is also a constant in this book, and not only for the well-known spiritual writer (that is, Norris). Becky believes in God, prays often, enjoys going to what she calls a "hugging church" and is especially sure that angels are helping her. "Becky held on," Norris writes. "[S]he had faith that God had something better in store for her."

The bright rainbow-colored painting that graces the front cover is Becky's, and it bespeaks joy. Throughout the book, I rejoiced every time Becky had a "success": a new roommate whom she liked, a cheerful conversation with a boy, praise in a painting class that she is a natural "colorist."

It is almost impossible to summarize this rich and complex book because it is the story of a person's entire life, which is at times sad, at times joyful and at times difficult but always, thanks to the deep-down faith of Becky and her family, hopeful. Along the way, the reader also follows the ups and downs of the author's life.

Describing the book that details Becky's manifold problems may suggest that I found it sad. But this book is not. It is about real life. And it is deeply inspiring. I learned about love, about siblings, about family and, not incidentally, about pastoral care. One of the most moving exchanges comes toward the end of the book and the end of Becky's life, when she says to a nurse about her radiation treatment and her illness, "I hate my symptoms." The nurse replies, "I hate your symptoms too." That's a pastoral care course in two sentences.

Thanks not only to Kathleen Norris's consummate skill as a writer, but also to the many letters that Becky wrote to her family, we are offered a privileged window into the life of one of God's children, who may have otherwise seemed mysterious and opaque. To understand how people like Becky see and experience the world is enough reason to read this magnificent book. To see how God's love works through these experiences is an even better reason.

James Martin, S.J., *is a priest, author, editor at large at* ***America*** *and founder of Outreach.*

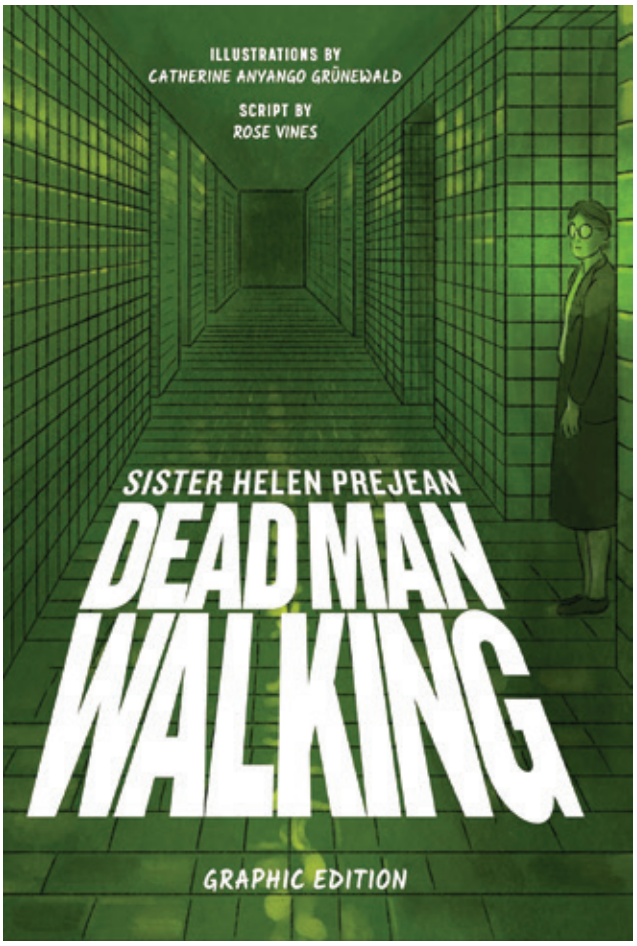
ONE

By Julia Alvarez

O that like a flower I could unearth
one pure blossom! Find in some vital
depth a gold, a blue passion
that bursts above this thinking
like a halo. How simple it seems
when the flower does it: seed, root,
stem...and then, poised
like an angel on a green ladder
the lily, the rose, the narcissus.
O, heaven does not have to be
too high—just a little above
the roots, above darkness,
above the mind—not a bird
or an angel, a flower,
four petals, two, one

Julia Alvarez *is the author of several novels, poetry, essays and books for younger readers. Her latest book is* Visitations, *a new collection of poetry. She was a recipient of the National Medal of Arts in 2013.*

A GRAPHIC VIEW OF DEATH ROW



Random House / 304p $20

Dead Man Walking has been a book, a movie, a play, an opera and now a graphic novel. All that is left, says Helen Prejean, C.S.J., the intrepid activist who almost singlehandedly changed the focus of Catholic teaching on the death penalty, is for it to become a ballet (she has been known to suggest "Dead Man Kicking" as the title).

Having so many adaptations runs a risk of redundancy, but *Dead Man Walking* has proven compelling enough to thrive across its many mediums. The most recent version, a graphic novel illustrated by Catherine Anyango Grünewald and scripted by Rose Vines, is no exception. Through six years of labor, Grünewald and Vines have produced a work that captures the heart-wrenching emotion of Sister Prejean's testimony and doubles as an accessible education on the history and legality of the death penalty in the United States. In its graphic format, *Dead Man Walking* becomes a sort of introductory textbook on capital punishment.

First published in 1993, *Dead Man Walking* is a first-person account of Sister Prejean's experience serving as spiritual director to two inmates on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. Sister Prejean briefly narrates her middle-class upbringing in Baton Rouge, La., and her vocation to social justice activism before focusing on her interactions with the inmates, advocates, victims' family members and corrections staff closest to the death penalty. She humanizes those on death row while taking great care not to minimize the horror of their crimes and the toll on the victims' families, insisting on the dignity of all of us, even those who have committed acts many would consider irredeemable.

These narrative beats are present in the graphic edition. Sister Prejean begins a correspondence with Elmo Patrick Sonnier, a death row inmate convicted of the rape and murder of Loretta Ann Bourque, 18, and the murder of David LeBlanc, 17, a couple that he abducted with his brother following a high school football game in 1977. Working with Sonnier as his spiritual advisor leads Sister Prejean to become involved in his commutation case, for which she meets other advocates, like attorney Millard Farmer, who educate Sister Prejean—and by proxy, the reader—on the unequal, racialized enforcement of capital sentences.

She also comes to know the parents of Sonnier's victims. Lloyd LeBlanc's ultimate forgiveness of his son's killer is one of the more poignant moments in this incredibly moving story. His recounting of the words of the "Our Father" at the murder site when he had to identify the body of his son ends Sister Prejean's story: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us."

Sister Prejean also discusses her experience with a second death row inmate, Robert Lee Willie, a serial killer and member of the Aryan Brotherhood who confessed to six murders and was put to death for the rape and murder of 18-year-old Faith Hathaway. Willie is a deplorable inmate, glorifying Hitler and only accepting varying degrees of responsibility for his brutal crimes. But Sister Prejean insists upon his essential humanity regardless, guiding him toward a sliver of redemption in coming to terms with his own death and the pain he has caused.

Faith Hathaway's father, Vernon, is a sort of foil to Lloyd LeBlanc, as he is consumed by grief in the wake of his daughter's murder, rejoicing in the execution of Willie and becoming a vocal advocate for the death penalty and victims' rights. Sister Prejean is careful not to demonize him, however, as she takes great care to explain his anger and how her interactions with him and his wife Elizabeth led her to found Survive, a victims' rights organization, alongside her anti-death penalty activism.

These details are not new. What is new is that they are depicted in Grünewald's muted, at times haunting, style that heightens *Dead Man Walking*'s emotional impact. The artist, who previously adapted Joseph Conrad's *Heart*

of Darkness into a graphic novel, uses color sparingly in a manner that functions almost as a legend, highlighting key moments and themes for readers.

Mostly grayscale illustrations are punctuated with color for dramatic effect. For example, a black-and-white image showing the face-down bodies of Loretta Ann Borque and David LeBlanc in the field where they were murdered contains red blood splatters that sharply contrast with the rest of the image. Red blood droplets form the dew on black grass.

Grünewald's art also draws powerful, unspoken connections. Later on, when Sister Prejean is reflecting on the unimaginable horror felt by the victims' parents, a page shows Borque lying in the field and facing the reader. The following page features her father positioned in the same way, lying awake in bed, unable to sleep in the wake of his daughter's death. His depiction is framed by a quote from the Book of Jeremiah (31:15) about an inconsolable mourning parent.

This version of *Dead Man Walking* is peppered with many such creative choices. The graphic edition also enables moments of visual learning. When Farmer explains the legal appeals process to Sister Prejean on a car ride to Angola, the notorious Louisiana prison, his explanation is translated into a graphic, with a car driving through a series of labeled stops and small paragraphs explaining what happens at each level of the criminal judicial process, from trial court to state and federal appeals.

The book embraces a multimedia approach, with real newspaper clippings, letters and photographs mixed with original illustrations in a collage style that provides primary sources for the reader to dive deeper into the history of the death penalty. Explanations of former court cases feature illustrations of the justices who rendered them along with direct quotes from the majority and dissenting opinions. The education is not exhaustive, but it provides the reader with a fair amount of information on the criminal system in a digestible format.

Grünewald also uses color to highlight selections from Albert Camus—the 20th-century French philosopher who wrote another seminal work against the death penalty, the extended essay "Reflections on the Guillotine"—throughout the work. Vines quotes Camus, who is identifiable by a distinctive blue outline, to bolster the moral theory that underlies Sister Prejean's humanizing storytelling.

Coming over 30 years after the original *Dead Man Walking*, this graphic edition also contains updated information on the state of the death penalty in the United States today. For example, it mentions Pope Francis' decision to revise the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to declare that capital punishment is "inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person" in 2018.

Sister Prejean's harrowing tale remains jarringly relevant as progress on eliminating the death penalty has been reversed.

Many states have also abolished the death penalty since the original publication of *Dead Man Walking*, and national support for the death penalty has dropped from 80 percent in 1994 to 52 percent in 2025, according to Gallup polling, with only 36 percent supporting death when offered a choice between capital punishment and life without parole for murder.

Still, Sister Prejean's harrowing tale remains jarringly relevant. On day one in office, the second Trump administration reversed the Biden-era moratorium on federal executions by executive order; further, it demanded that federal prosecutors pursue the death penalty for all death-eligible crimes and every capital crime committed by an undocumented person or involving the murder of a law enforcement officer, regardless of mitigating factors.

As the dignity of life again comes under attack, the graphic edition of *Dead Man Walking* holds promise to compel the next generation of anti-death-penalty advocates to action.

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BOTH SIDES OF THE BINARY

Word on Fire / 360p $25

I am writing this on Ascension Thursday. It is a strange feast where we seem to celebrate Jesus *leaving*. He ascends to heaven and away from earth. Christianity seems all too heavenly. Heaven's the place to go, and earth's a place to leave. On the other hand, Ascension is really *earthy*, just like Christianity too. A man of flesh and blood, made from the earth itself, ascends to the highest.

So, which is it? Heavenly or earthly? Having just finished Matthew Becklo's *The Way of Heaven and Earth: From Either/Or to the Catholic Both/And*, I feel confident that the answer is both. Ascension, as with the whole Catholic tradition, is not about falling into a binary of heaven and earth but ascending with both. Becklo helps us enter this way of heaven and earth—which is, as he explains, the Catholic way.

It is easy to fall into binary thinking where we have contrasting ideas and feel compelled to pick between them. Whether we invert or affirm these binaries, we often feel stuck with them. For Becklo, "everywhere we turn, we're tempted into an either/or." And we end up choosing "one way at the expense of the other." Such binaries include spiritual or physical, providence or freedom and contemplation or action. And "when one side of a dilemma dominates our thinking, the other side will eventually build up, explode through our conscious controls and wreak new havoc." From Gnosticism to modernism, a lot of church history can be understood in light of this.

The fundamental binary, according to Becklo, centers on heaven-earth dilemmas. We are faced with a choice between the vertical and the horizontal, the spiritual and the corporeal, the idealistic and the realistic. But the challenge is not picking a side of the binary; it's living out *both*. We can do so only in Christ: "our heaven-earth dilemmas are only resolved in Christ, the way of heaven and earth."

Becklo does not think that a both/and framework eliminates the distinction between the heavenly and earthly. Rather, it shows that they can be united without confusion or separation. Thus "the heavens and the earth *connect* with each other. Despite its clear contrast, they cannot be neatly divided, each in its own separate self-contained space." Christ, and his body, the church, are the way to live out this connection.

Becklo forms each chapter on the vertical, the horizontal and then the cruciform. It is a clever and Christocentric way to structure his book, showing the unity of the seemingly disparate. At the same time, this strategy can feel formulaic over the course of the book. He could have united some of the chapters and in the process made the book a little shorter and more compelling, especially for the lay reader. His chapters are also perhaps too focused on the church itself and not evangelical enough. A non-Christian would be lost in some of these both/ands.

Becklo lives out his both/and philosophy in his writing. With each binary, we find a deeply sympathetic reading. Whether dealing with Gnostics, moderns, Pelagians or Protestants, Becklo is willing to learn and take what he can. He writes with the spirit of Thomas Aquinas, never afraid to find wisdom wherever it may lie.

Though his readings of rival traditions are understandably brief, they are generally quite fair. When I first saw Descartes's name, I was ready for a standard dismissive take—but got something much different. Becklo is no Cartesian, but he sees the wisdom in Descartes's intellectual project. His take on Descartes was not groundbreaking, but it was more importantly *fair*, and thus allows one to learn from one of the bogeymen of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Likewise, his engagement with liberation theology is nuanced. He sees, as Joseph Ratzinger did, that while some liberation theologians go very wrong, many have made rich and orthodox contributions to Catholic thought. Becklo contrasts liberation theology with quietism in an unexpected but insightful way. While quietism too quickly resigns itself to the heavenly, liberation theology too easily becomes focused on earthly politics. Becklo sees the deep

good in quietism's reliance on God *and* in liberation theology's work for justice and prophetic witness for the poor.

He similarly navigates well the question of salvation—whether one believes it comes only through the church or accepts a radical inclusivism that degrades the centrality of baptism and Christ. The "way of hope refuses both despair and presumption, and it extends that hope to the whole of humanity." Salvation is only through Christ and the church, but we hope in the God of salvation for all through Christ.

While Becklo admirably draws his readers into the way of heaven and earth, I fear his book might at times be too irenic. There is time for choosing. Christianity introduces a *crisis* into our life—as in a fundamental moment of decision. "I place before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life that you may live" (Dt 30: 19). Christ separates those who chose him in serving the least of these from those who chose to serve themselves. Paul is clear that we must put on Christ or fall. And, as St. Thomas of Villanova puts it, "if you wish to be a friend of God, you must be an enemy of the world."

There is wisdom in the both/and, but is it more central than the Christian either/or? Becklo does express this requirement for decision in his conclusion, but it needs stronger emphasis. Catholicism is a both/and religion, true, but that puts before us some strong binaries between having faith in Christ or not, between serving the least of these or not, between living according to the City of God or according to the City of Man. Becklo's book could use a bit more of the prophetic demand to help us see the radical urgency of his both/and.

Despite this, I hope his book will fall into the hands of more people. It is not just a piece of theology or apologetics. It is meant to form us into a way of being that would enrich our lives and deepen our being Catholic.

The Way of Heaven and Earth is also a resource for those of us torn between false either/ors, especially in our polarizing times. It is especially fitting that this book was published near the beginning of Leo XIV's papacy. Leo XIV calls the world to bridge-building, both between heaven and earth but also between Christians and among all people of good will. Becklo's book reminds us that this bridge-building between polarities is at the heart of Christianity, which is itself a faith of ascension to heaven in union with the earth. *The Way of Heaven and Earth* is the way of Christ, who ascends in his earthly body to his heavenly home so that we too may join him on the way and in the ultimate union of, as Revelation says, "a new heaven and a new earth."

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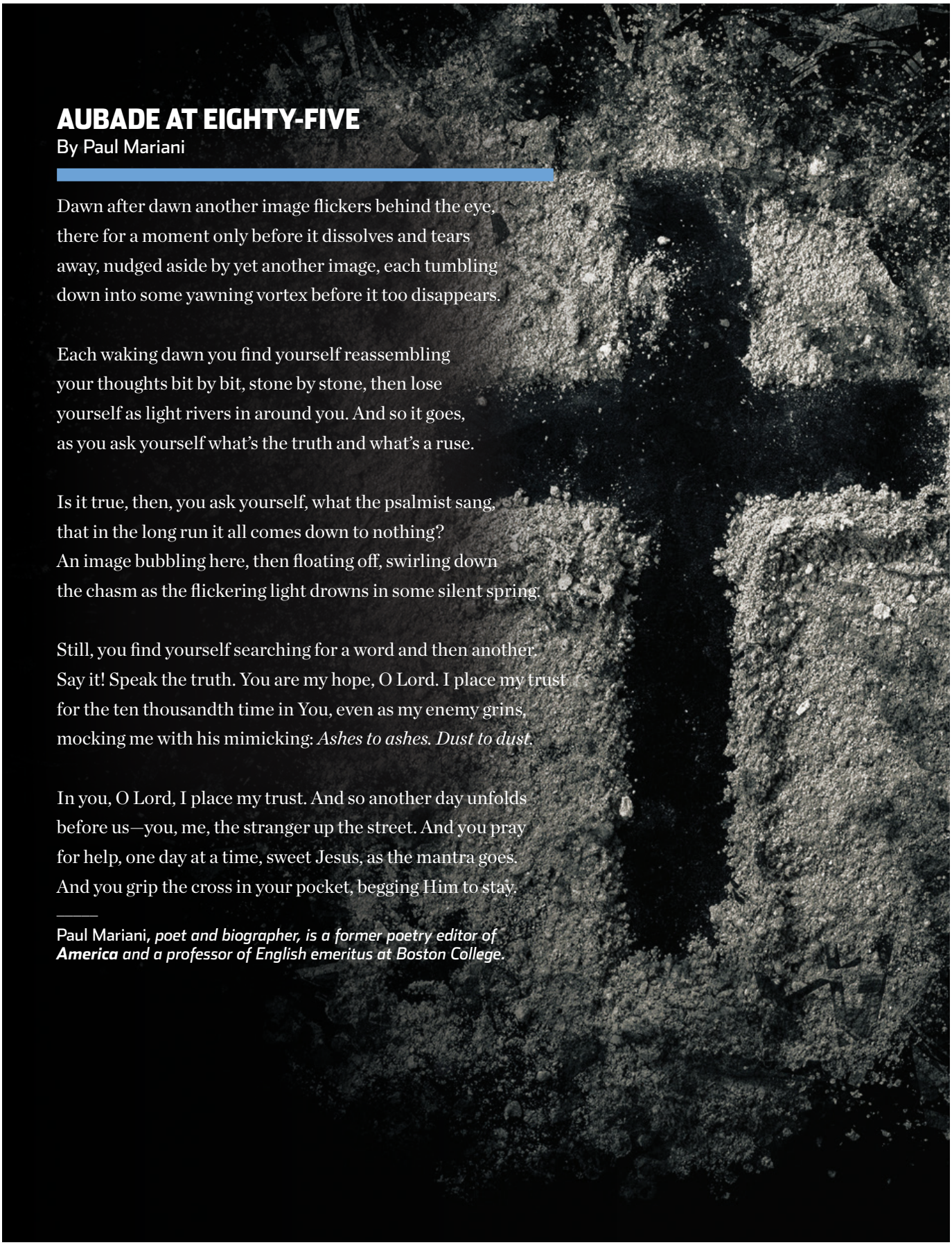

AUBADE AT EIGHTY-FIVE

By Paul Mariani

Dawn after dawn another image flickers behind the eye,
there for a moment only before it dissolves and tears
away, nudged aside by yet another image, each tumbling
down into some yawning vortex before it too disappears.

Each waking dawn you find yourself reassembling
your thoughts bit by bit, stone by stone, then lose
yourself as light rivers in around you. And so it goes,
as you ask yourself what's the truth and what's a ruse.

Is it true, then, you ask yourself, what the psalmist sang,
that in the long run it all comes down to nothing?
An image bubbling here, then floating off, swirling down
the chasm as the flickering light drowns in some silent spring.

Still, you find yourself searching for a word and then another.
Say it! Speak the truth. You are my hope, O Lord. I place my trust
for the ten thousandth time in You, even as my enemy grins,
mocking me with his mimicking: *Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.*

In you, O Lord, I place my trust. And so another day unfolds
before us—you, me, the stranger up the street. And you pray
for help, one day at a time, sweet Jesus, as the mantra goes.
And you grip the cross in your pocket, begging Him to stay.

Paul Mariani, *poet and biographer, is a former poetry editor of* ***America*** *and a professor of English emeritus at Boston College.*

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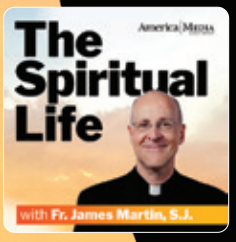

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America | Media
A JESUIT MINISTRY

Called to Live According to Christ's High Ethic of Love

The five Sundays in March summon us to a Lenten discipline that deepens our relationships, both with our God and with one another in preparation for the renewal of our baptism at Easter. The account of the Transfiguration also challenges us to cultivate our relationship with Jesus in concrete ways. Both time and attention are required to grasp what has been revealed, to behold Jesus' transfigured self. The author of 2 Timothy describes it well when he calls us to "a holy life, not according to our works but according to his own design and the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus" (2 Tm 1:9).

On the second Sunday of the month (the Third Sunday of Lent), Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman turns our attention to cultivating our human relationships. The willingness of Jesus and the woman to truthfully be who they are before one another not only dismantles unimaginable barriers but discloses an encounter of profound human relatedness, the very essence of a Christ-like life. As Paul reminds us in Romans, when "the love of God is poured out in our hearts," we are made for relationships (Rom 5:5). The Gospel stories on the following Sundays, the cure of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus, deepen this focus upon relationships. Jesus' healing of the blind man by water invites us to seek illumination through baptism for our own blind spots, which may render us judgmental, unforgiving, dishonest or self-promoting. When our vision of others is corrected, we will begin to see as God sees. And like Lazarus, we need only pray that Jesus calls us from the dark and deadly place of resistance and ask that we, too, be set free to a life devoted to others.

Palm Sunday's readings provide the capstone to this focus upon relationships. Amid our hosannas and waving of palms, we hear the Christological hymn in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Jesus' greatest glorification as the Christ was his willingness to be self-emptying, to assume the position of the servant. Throughout his life, and especially in his passion and death, he shows us how self-emptying conditions us for empathic servanthood. It makes us radically present to those who are present in our lives. What Jesus invites us to is exactly what we are made for, a participation in his high ethic of love.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 1, 2026
Catching a glimpse of the divine

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 8, 2026
Relationships that eclipse all barriers

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 15, 2026
A cure for blindness: Seeing as God sees

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A), MARCH 22, 2026
Unrestrained discipleship

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION (A), MARCH 29, 2026
The high ethic of love

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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When the Lie Becomes Too Much

Blaming Renee Good for her own murder

By James T. Keane

"The nuns were not just nuns. The nuns were also political activists."

These infamous words were spoken in 1980 by Jeane Kirkpatrick, one of the top foreign policy advisors to incoming President Ronald Reagan, after the brutal murder of four American women, three of them nuns, by government forces in El Salvador. The four—Maryknoll sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan—had been raped, killed and dumped in a shallow grave on May 2, 1980, by soldiers of the Salvadoran National Guard on orders from higher up.

Ms. Fitzpatrick sensed, correctly, that such a savage crime might turn public opinion against the massive military and economic aid the United States was providing to the brutal junta ruling El Salvador. So why not put the responsibility on the unarmed, defenseless nuns instead? After all, they were already dead.

A few months later, U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig took that gambit and ran with it, suggesting that maybe the nuns were to blame for their own murder. "I'd like to suggest to you that...perhaps the vehicle the nuns were riding in may have tried to run through a roadblock."

Mr. Haig, whose brother was a Jesuit priest, later removed Robert White, the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, from his post for stating that there was no evidence the Salvadoran government was "conducting a serious investigation" of any kind into the murder of the nuns.

If that rhetoric sounds familiar, it is because we are hearing it again.

After Renee Nicole Good was shot and killed by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer in Minneapolis on Jan. 7, Vice President JD Vance called her murder "a tragedy of her own making" and claimed that Ms. Good, a community activist and a mother of three, was "part of a broader left-wing network to attack, to dox, to assault and to make it impossible for our ICE officers to do their job." Mr. Vance claimed further that Ms. Good "viciously ran over the ICE officer" who shot and killed her, an assertion contradicted by video evidence taken from multiple angles.

Why the obvious lie? Because, similar to Ms. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Haig, Mr. Vance recognizes the potential for this atrocity to turn American public opinion against President Trump's brutal campaign against undocumented immigrants, particularly because Ms. Good is an American citizen, was apparently denied medical assistance by ICE agents after the shooting and, according to the video evidence, posed no real threat to the shooter. Not even the most fervent supporter of the arrest and deportation of undocumented migrants, one assumes, would defend such Gestapo-like tactics.

The answer? Blame Ms. Good for her own murder.

Mr. Vance's boss, President Trump, has engaged in further deceit and hyperbole in support of that same goal, claiming that Ms. Good "violently, willfully, and viciously ran over the ICE officer, who seems to have shot her in self-defense." She made for an easy culprit for a man desperate to justify ICE's actions. After all, she was already dead.

The murder of the churchwomen in El Salvador in 1980 was not an isolated incident; they shared the fate of tens of thousands of other Salvadorans, including Rutilio Grande, S.J., St. Oscar Romero, and the six Jesuits and two laywomen who were murdered by the Salvadoran military in 1989 in San Salvador. Eventually, the overwhelming evidence of these murders became too much for American politicians to justify, and U.S. funding for the Salvadoran military government dried up. It just became impossible to believe the lie anymore.

Let us hope the same will happen in Minneapolis. Nothing can bring Renee Good back; her three children are without their mother now, her partner a widow. The masked man who killed her simply drove away. Nor is her death an isolated incident: The killing of Alex Pretti by Border Patrol agents in Minneapolis on Jan. 24 made that clear. All over the country, we hear and see more and more examples of violent attacks by masked federal agents who seem to face no accountability for their crime. And we hear the brutal claims used after the fact to justify them.

How long before it simply becomes impossible to believe the lie anymore?

James T. Keane *is a senior editor at* ***America.***

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