America

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THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

POPE LEO: YEAR ONE

p18

The progress of an American pope

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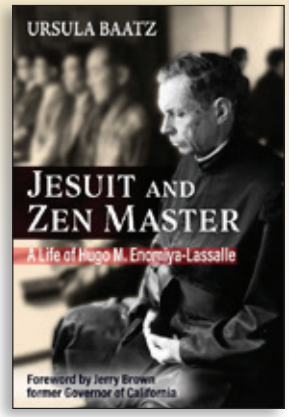

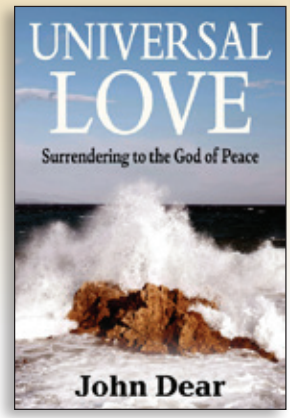

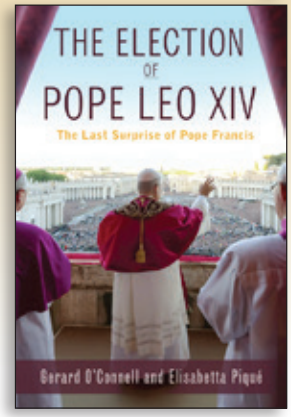

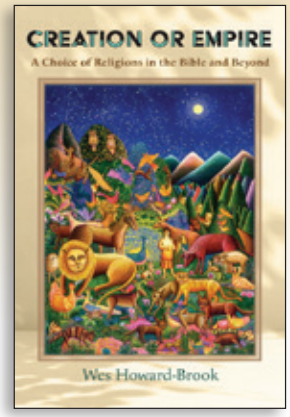

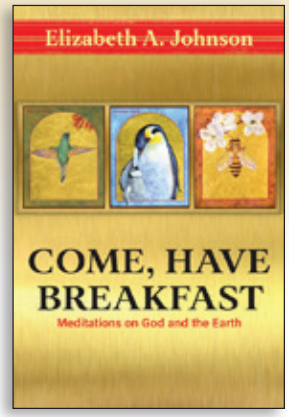

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Why We Need a Law That Is More Than Power and Violence

The United States' slow-motion constitutional crisis briefly sped up on April 7, though observers could be forgiven for missing it against the backdrop of the day's chaos.

As President Donald Trump escalated from his threat against Iran's civilian infrastructure to an apocalyptic warning that its "whole civilization will die tonight," many Democratic lawmakers began calling for his impeachment or for the invocation of the 25th Amendment to temporarily suspend a president from office. (Though they did not call for actual consequences, a few Republican legislators did express their disapproval of Mr. Trump's rhetoric.) The calls for accountability were largely dead on arrival, as impeachment would require a majority of the House and two-thirds of the Senate, and the 25th Amendment procedure begins with a majority of cabinet officials declaring the president "unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office."

America's editors have explained (see Page 8) why, as a matter of just war teaching and international law, Mr. Trump's threats against Iran's civilian population cannot be countenanced. For the time being, the risk of the U.S. military being ordered to commit war crimes has receded, thanks to an 11th-hour cease-fire agreement. Many of Mr. Trump's partisan enablers are celebrating this outcome as evidence of his brilliance as a strategist and negotiator—which means that any possibility of an official reckoning over his misuse of presidential authority in a war that Congress has still not even been asked to authorize has receded even further.

On social media, a number of commentators pointed out the dark irony of a president who has broken so many democratic and constitutional norms threatening the end of Iranian civilization, remembering the story of the Delphic oracle warning King Croesus that if he attacked Persia, "a great empire would fall," as indeed Croesus' did.

I doubt that specific ironic juxtaposition will be borne out, but it is worth thinking about what it means that American democracy has proven unable to restrain a president from waging a thoroughly unpopular and deeply dangerous war of exactly the type that he promised to avoid while campaigning. Further, what does it mean that our political system, given even the barest appearance of "success" in this military venture, will likely be unable to impose any significant constraints on the president until the next election at the earliest?

In early March, I attended a conference at Boston College, organized by Cathleen Kaveny and Gregory Kalscheur, S.J., on the rule of law and the common good. It brought together experts from the fields of both law and Catholic social teaching to consider how legal norms and institutions are related to human flourishing.

One of the themes that emerged from the conference was the need to articulate how we are committed to the rule of law in terms more substantial than mere proceduralism. In a democratic polity, we need to be able to explain, both to ourselves and to one another, how the rule of law and the common good support and require each other. We also need to enrich our imagination of how law functions, coming to see the law not only as restricting or punishing bad acts, but also helping to establish the conditions within which human beings cooperate as members of society in reciprocity and friendship, both within and across national borders.

Sadly, the patterns being established by the Trump administration are degrading rather than uplifting our imagination of how law and politics work. In early January, Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff, said, "You can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world...that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power." During weeks in which Republicans in Congress refused to call Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth to account under oath for the war in Iran, he repeatedly reveled in the superiority of American military force, while invoking God's blessing for unrestrained aggression against "fanatics who seek a nuclear capability in order for some religious Armageddon."

Rather than reminding Americans of the values that unite them and the inalienable rights that government is constituted to preserve, President Trump, in his conduct throughout the Iran war, has been demonstrating what it looks like to live in a world governed by power alone. We can pray, at least, that seeing that vision in action is terrifying enough to help us begin to reject it.

We can also be thankful for the strong witness being given across the Catholic Church by Pope Leo XIV, an increasing number of American bishops and many Catholic thinkers, leaders and laypeople to denounce such reliance on violence and desire for domination as profoundly un-Christian. The task that remains before us, however, is not only to repudiate what is evil but to build up what is good, in cooperation with all people of good will.

Sam Sawyer, S.J.

THE ISSUE

GIVE AND TAKE

DISPATCHES

POETRY

FEATURES

Deacons carry the relics of St. Oscar Romero through the streets of downtown El Paso, Texas, during a procession against the immigration policies of the Trump administration on March 24.

OSV News photo/Fernando Ceniceros, courtesy Diocese of El Paso

Cover: Pope Leo XIV blesses the faithful with holy water at the beginning of Pentecost Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on June 8, 2025.

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

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THE WORD

LAST TAKE

Is the U.S. government at war with the Catholic Church?

In a Short Take published online on March 19, "The U.S. government is at war with the Catholic Church," Nathan Scheinder, a contributing writer for **America**, argued that the Trump administration's actions on immigration enforcement, his war-making, the denial of climate change and a lack of civility constitute the acts of a "hostile power" against Catholic teaching. "The war against Catholic teaching is less kinetic than the government's recent spectacles of violence, from Minneapolis to Tehran," Mr. Schneider wrote. "It is also less visible. But once you begin to notice it, the state of war is clear." Our readers had much to say in response.

To me, if someone is at war with someone else, their goals are to destroy or dominate the other. This differs from someone considering someone else's goals as contrary to their own and not acting in a way that advances the other person's goals. I view the Trump administration as the latter, and labeling them "at war" with the Catholic Church as Trumpesque hyperbole.

I don't see Mr. Trump trying to take over the Catholic Church, or to change Catholic teaching. He wants Catholics to vote and support him. They are a core group of his supporters. Being "at war" indicates wanting to destroy or harm them. Instead, he'll do what it takes to get their vote and support.

Margaret Burch

Thank you for this statement of where our Catholic faith should take us, and I am thankful for the growing number of Catholics who recognize how we have failed to follow Jesus' teaching and profound example. But it is not just our nation and our political leadership who have led us astray. The bishops of the United States, with some notable exceptions, have been silent about or, in the case of several notables, have been cheerleaders for an accelerating wave of discrimination, "othering" and outright hatred in the country I love.

Ed Dailey

The fear of speaking up against Mr. Trump's policies as contrary to Catholic social teaching in this article is reality-based. To those readers who agree with Mr. Schneider's analysis, I can only say: Without risks to one's status in a local parish and diocese, one becomes part of the problem and not part of a solution. It is helpful to know church history and those saints whose witness drew the ire of their bishop or religious superior, not to mention secular authorities.

Father Bernard Survil

People sometimes point to the story of Mary and Joseph being warned by the angel to go to Egypt to argue that we should support illegal aliens. Mary and Joseph were not illegal aliens. Egypt and Jerusalem both formed parts of the same Roman Empire. Recently, the Department of Homeland Security sought illegal aliens, not immigrants. D.H.S. sought those people who came into this country illegally. But President Biden let in an excess of tens of thousands, including unaccompanied minors, into the U.S. illegally. That is messy and not a proper use of asylum.

Katherin Marsh

I very much enjoyed Mr. Schneider's article but was disappointed with the headline and the end of the article with statements about the U.S. government being at war with the Catholic Church. Can Mr. Schneider express his points with nonviolent language instead? I am reminded of Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa's plea for reporters to not fuel hatred and violence with rhetoric that incites division and confusion. Mr. Schneider's pitting of the U.S. government against the Catholic Church only serves to weaponize these two institutions.

Father Leo LeBlanc

This is over-the-top rhetoric. Disagreeing on issues hardly means there is a "war." And I remember when abortion was the top social issue that bishops weighed in on. This president was instrumental in the historic overturn of Roe v. Wade. How soon we forget.

John Gorman

This is a compelling and well-written article which I would like to share on social media so that more people will read it. However, I will not do so because it includes a completely unnecessary photograph of the president. Nothing in this article requires a photo of him, and including it only gives him more press. Publishing images of him reinforces his disastrous hold on the American public. I urge America Media to reconsider its policy of using photographs of Trump in every article that mentions him.

Brigid Frein

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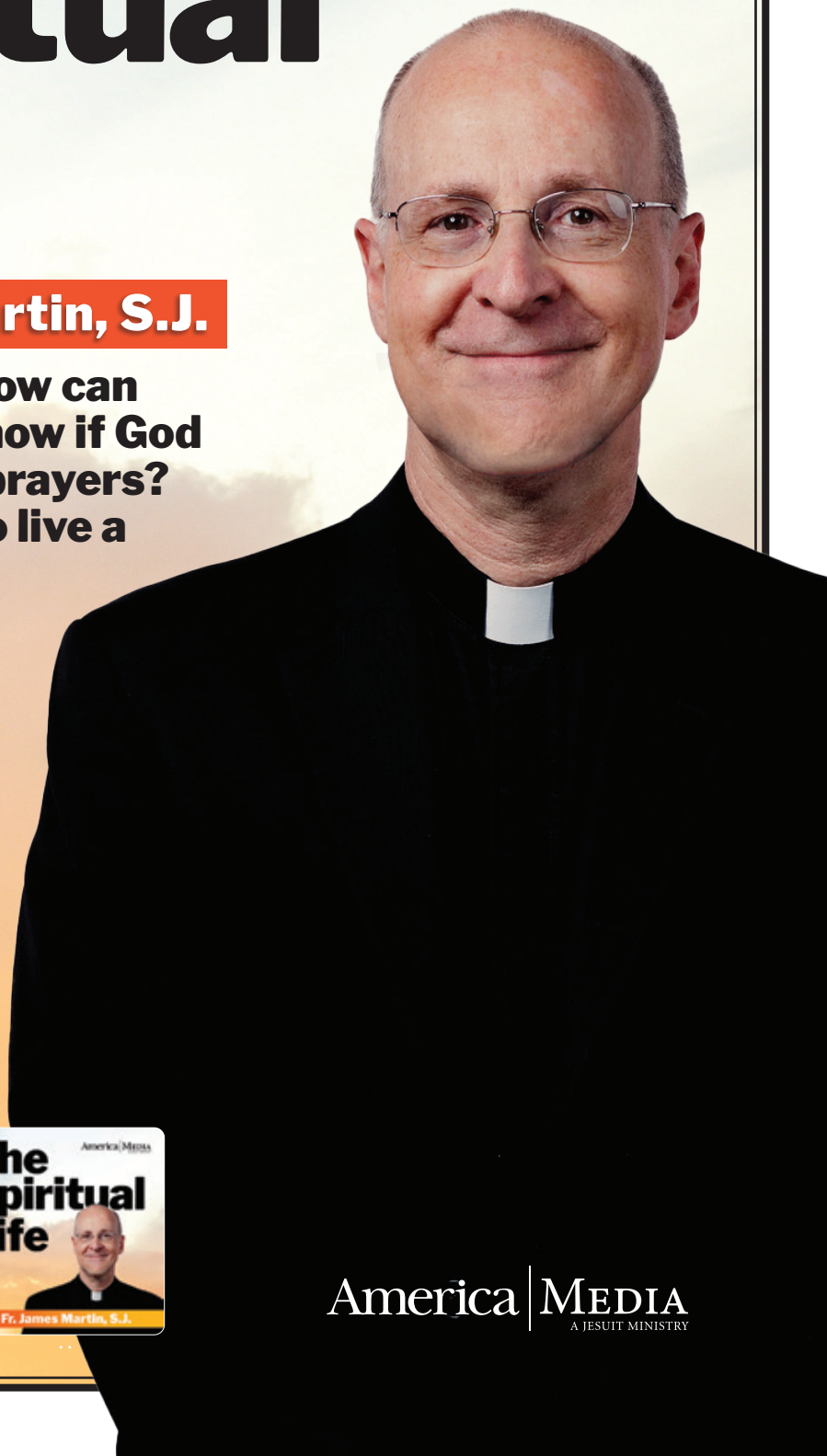

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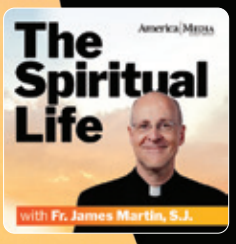

America | Media
A JESUIT MINISTRY

Threatening a 'Whole Civilization' Can Never Be Part of a Just War

On Tuesday, April 7, President Donald Trump came to the brink of committing a war crime. Over the previous two weeks, he had announced, and frequently moved, a deadline for Iran to open the Strait of Hormuz, under a threat to bomb every power plant and bridge in the country. That morning, he posted: "A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again." Within hours, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops responded that such a threat "cannot be morally justified." Pope Leo XIV called the threat "truly unacceptable" both as a matter of international law and in moral terms.

Both Mr. Trump and the Iranian regime pulled back at the last minute, announcing a two-week cease-fire for further negotiations. We must be grateful for the cease-fire and pray that it leads to a lasting peace. Yet that fortunate outcome cannot excuse the manifest evil of threatening a civilian population. Indeed, to the degree that Mr. Trump's brinksmanship and apocalyptic rhetoric suggest such threats can be effective negotiating tactics, they move the world closer to the precipice of unrestrained war.

The Catholic just war tradition unconditionally rejects the targeting of civilians in wartime. Not only can noncombatants never be a legitimate military target, but a distinction must be made, the church's centuries-old teaching insists, between civilian infrastructure that sustains innocent lives and legitimate military targets. So, too, do the Geneva Conventions—to which the United States has been a signatory from the beginning—consider attacks on infrastructure "indispensable to the survival of the civilian population" to be a war crime.

This bears repeating: No matter how much the Iranian regime deserves to fall, no matter how much the world economy is disrupted by its threats to shipping, no matter how much leverage in negotiation the president may gain by these threats, those ends cannot justify these profoundly immoral means. Treating a country's entire infrastructure as a military target is against all international conventions concerning wartime conduct.

The United States and Israel's unjust and unjustified war on Iran has not secured any of the various aims the Trump administration has floated as justification, including the thwarting of Iran's nuclear ambitions, the elimination of Iran's ability to wage war, the protection of its citizenry against oppression or any substantial regime change. Even the ceasefire, welcome as it is, promises only to reopen the strait that Iran closed in response to attacks in the first place.

In the past, American political leaders acknowledged the need for moral justification before undertaking military actions in the Middle East and attempted to call upon Christian thinkers and doctrines, including the just war tradition, to supply it, even as the church continued to call for peace. For example, in 2002, Michael Novak visited the Vatican to make the Bush administration's case for the morality of a second invasion of Iraq; soon after that, George Weigel also made a public case for the war as just, including in the pages of **America**. (Others, like Drew Christiansen, S.J., argued against it.)

Not so this time around. While the Vatican has been resolute in its opposition to this war, any *jus ad bellum* pre-war considerations were largely ignored by the United States.

While the failure to attempt to justify the war in advance is damning enough, an even more alarming specter has now arisen: the abandonment by the United States of *jus in bello*—that is, considerations for conduct by combatants within the war itself.

International law and the just war tradition recognize that limited targeting of civilian infrastructure can sometimes be justified in order to disrupt its possible use by an enemy for military advantage, but Mr. Trump did not bother to make that distinction. Instead, he said these attacks would be carried out as "retribution for our many soldiers, and others, that Iran has butchered and killed" through the regime's 47-year history.

"If the president is planting a defense for a future war-crimes trial at The Hague, he has not given his prospective legal team much to work with," Jonathan Chait wrote in The Atlantic on March 31. "As a motive for committing atrocities, 'retribution' is more of a confession than an alibi."

On a practical level, the expansion of the war to include civilian targets could provoke a humanitarian catastrophe for America's remaining allies in the fight. Iran derives less than 3 percent of its fresh water from desalination plants, but Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates rely almost entirely on such systems. A tit-for-tat military exchange that destroyed that infrastructure would place millions more in immediate peril.

On another ethical level, one *jus ad bellum* consideration that remains operative in a *jus in bello* context is also one that should be guiding U.S. military actions going forward: proportionality. This principle states that the destruction and suffering produced by any military strategy should not exceed the anticipated benefits of victory or the amelioration of moral injury being addressed by the conflict. Destroying Iran's power grid or

devastating its oil fields—with the concomitant loss of noncombatant life—for the purposes of regime change is not a proportional response; nor are such actions proportional to the goal of restoring global oil streams.

Unfortunately for all involved in this current war, a proper consideration of proportionality necessarily entails *knowing what the end goal is*. There is little indication that the Trump administration or U.S. military leaders had an achievable end goal in mind back in March, and Mr. Trump's prevarications and day-to-day bluster since then on social media and otherwise have provided no assurances in that respect. Instead, we have seen the prospect of abandoning proportionality—in the form of unrestricted warfare—used as a negotiating tactic.

Recent history—including the Vietnam War and both Gulf Wars—has demonstrated that any American plan for overseas intervention that lacks a clear goal as well as ethical guardrails eventually becomes a "forever war," in which our own soldiers as well as the innocents of the world find their lives destroyed for an undefined or misunderstood cause.

This current war is also significantly damaging any moral standing the United States may have had regarding its wartime conduct. While it is true that the Iranian regime has itself repeatedly violated contemporary norms around warfare, including the use of proxy militias to target civilian populations, the United States owes itself and its soldiers a much higher moral standard than to be "not as bad as Iran." The administration's threats betray the honor and integrity of our military, and risk inflicting real moral injury on our own troops by ordering them to undertake immoral and illegal acts as part of their service to the nation.

The resources of the just war tradition—and of secular counterparts that share its provenance, like the Geneva Conventions—give the world time-tested resources for making whole what is broken. What will it take to convince our own leaders to turn to them for guidance?

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How the cover-up of Cesar Chavez's sexual abuse mirrored the church's abuse crisis

As a child in Arizona, I grew up hearing Cesar Chavez's name. Schools, streets, plazas and parks are named after him in this state, and we learned about his movement in school. Chavez was born in Yuma, Ariz., and died not far from there, in San Luis.

Years later, I visited the old United Farm Workers headquarters while reporting on the first Trump administration's immigration crackdowns. In some ways, it felt like visiting a pilgrimage site. Chavez was Catholic, and beginning in the 1960s, Catholic leaders walked shoulder to shoulder with him in advocating for workers' rights. In 1988 he fasted for 36 days to call attention to deadly toxins used in the fields of California.

"Do you think the church will ever recognize Cesar as a saint?" I asked a friend a few years ago who had worked with the civil rights leader for a decade.

He grimaced. No, he said, he didn't think so. But he was vague in his explanation. He talked about Chavez's bad temper, but I sensed he left something unsaid.

Perhaps it was connected to what The New York Times reported this week. According to its investigation, Chavez sexually assaulted two underage girls, as well as Dolores Huerta, who co-founded the United Farm Workers movement.

"Many of the women stayed silent for decades, both out of shame and for fear of tarnishing the image of a man who has become the face of the Latino civil rights movement, his image on school murals and his birthday a state holiday in California," according to the Times report by Manny Fernandez and Sarah Hurtes.

A number of patterns surfaced by the lengthy report echo problematic institutional mechanisms that enabled a culture of abuse within the Catholic Church. Colt Anderson and I use a multidisciplinary approach to explore these problems and suggest solutions in our book *Clericalism: The Institutional Dimension of the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis*.

We relied in part on the insights of Douglass North, a Nobel Prize-winning economist. His analysis recognizes how both formal and informal rules shape social, political and economic behavior. Formal rules may be written down in church texts or human resources manuals. But informal rules, like unwritten traditions, customs and patrimonial relationships, are every bit as influential, if not more so.

These "rules of the game," as North describes them, create incentives and disincentives for certain behaviors among members of organizations. In our study, which included individual and group interviews, we identified many of the same disincentives that were outlined by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Those disincentives included fear of negative personal consequences, power differentials and other institutional factors that discourage reporting incidents of abuse.

We also found that, despite well-intentioned attempts at reform, the church still maintains many disincentives to reporting sexual abuse and other misbehavior. We spoke to people who work at parishes, schools, universities and national organizations. At every level, participants confirmed an unspoken pressure to either be silent about misconduct or to make public statements that cast the church in a positive light.

A culture that promotes silence and a lack of transparency often does so because of loyalty and a desire to protect an institution's reputation. People we interviewed said a good reputation is, among other things, essential to maintain a strong donor base.

Our interview subjects also said that priests disappear from their positions at parishes and other Catholic institutions without explanation in part so as to spare them embarrassment. (But participants said church leaders show less concern about embarrassing lay employees, an attitude that reveals a vast power differential.)

Similar disincentives discouraged people from reporting Chavez. Ms. Huerta recently said that she feared no one would believe her and that reporting Chavez would harm a movement to which she had given her life. Ana Murguia and Debra Rojas, the two women who say Chavez sexually assaulted them when they were minors, also found it difficult to come forward publicly. According to the Times, close friends and family "begged them not to, arguing that it could not be a worse time to attack a Latino hero."

But organizations simply cannot claim to be defending human dignity when they fail to recognize the dignity of their own members. Institutional reputation must not be maintained at the cost of individual human dignity.

Individuals who do step forward, despite systemic disincentives, should be celebrated. It is through their courage that we know the truth. To flourish, institutions must reckon with both formal and informal rules and create a culture that incentivizes accountability and transparency, including for beloved leaders. If we remain silent, we allow destructive behaviors to perpetuate and victims to multiply.

J.D. Long García *is a senior editor at America and co-author of* Clericalism: The Institutional Dimension of the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis.

OSV News photo/Khalil Ashawi, Reuters

What the Middle East needs: Not more bombs, but 'hard, focused diplomacy'

By Kevin Clarke

The U.S.-Israeli air campaign against Iran entered its second month in April, with U.S. forces reporting strikes on more than 13,000 targets and the Israel Defense Forces hitting more than 10,000 other sites. As usual in armed conflict, it is the region's civilian population who is paying the highest price.

According to the news agency for the organization Human Rights Activists in Iran, by April 6, 1,665 Iranian civilians, including at least 248 children, had been killed. The independent human rights group also reports 1,211 military deaths and 711 deaths that it has not been able to classify.

The war has also claimed the lives of 38 people among Persian Gulf states being targeted by Iran, and 13 U.S. service members have died. In Israel, Iranian missiles that managed to pass through the Iron Dome defense shield have claimed 23 lives.

The human suffering of this latest conflict is not limited to Tehran, Tel Aviv or sites hit by Iranian missiles in Iraq and the Gulf states. Crossings into Gaza were shuttered by Israeli officials when the bombing began, cutting off humanitarian aid to the survivors of more than two years of conflict in Gaza.

Desperately Needed—A Break From War

Alistair Dutton, secretary general of Caritas Internationalis, responding to **America** by email, mourned the much higher toll in the region since the war in Gaza began with an attack by Hamas on Israel in October 2023. "Behind these figures are families and communities that have experienced far too much war," he wrote.

The people of the Middle East, he said, "desperately need an immediate break from war and violence that are rapidly increasing the hatred between different communities."

In southern Lebanon, the Iran-supported Hezbollah militia joined the conflict on March 2, retaliating for the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Israeli military, in turn, began a massive bombing campaign across southern Lebanon and on targets in southern and central Beirut.

Lebanon stands to become the hardest-hit collateral casualty of the Iran war. After years of economic turmoil, ineffectual governance, refugee crises and a devastating port explosion, this latest conflict between Israel and Hezbollah fighters in the south pushes Lebanon closer to collapse or, worse, a return to civil war.

More than a million Lebanese, including more than 367,000 children, have been displaced by the fighting, ac-

A child shelters in a Beirut school on March 11.

cording to the United Nations, and more than 1,530 people have been killed, including 130 children, according to Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health.

Speaking from Beirut, Dan Corrou, S.J., regional director for Jesuit Refugee Service in the Middle East and North Africa, described watching missile strikes in central Beirut from the rooftop of J.R.S.'s offices. The dull buzz of Israeli surveillance and targeting drones overhead is constant, he said.

Beirut residents have no bomb shelters, and the city has no air raid alert system. If residents receive any advance warning at all about an incoming strike, Father Corrou said, it is courtesy of a phone call from the Israeli military.

Among the Lebanese displaced by the conflict are hundreds of Christian families from villages along the border with Israel. But some have decided to stay in the conflict zone, mindful of the devastation visited on their villages after they had been abandoned in past conflicts.

Israeli forces have already launched incursions to expand a buffer zone inside Lebanon. Now Lebanese worry that Israel is preparing to seize and hold Lebanese territory up to the Litani River, reviving a Zionist vision of a greater Israel that would include southern Lebanon.

Father Corrou explained that is part of the reason some Christians elected to stay in their villages as the fighting intensified, concerned that if they left now, they would never be allowed to return. That decision to remain has proved mortally costly for some.

On March 9, Father Pierre al-Rai, parish priest of the Christian-majority village of Qlayaa, was killed after what appears to have been a "double-tap attack," hitting the same target twice, from an Israeli tank. He had decided to remain behind with other villagers of Qlayaa who refused to comply with an Israeli evacuation order.

Israel has occupied southern Lebanon in the past. "It always...ended in a quagmire for them," Father Corrou said.

Diplomacy, Not Bombs

Leaflets from the Israel Defense Forces have been scattered over Beirut, urging Lebanese to disarm the Iran-backed Hezbollah and reminding residents of Israel's "remarkable success" in Gaza. Many in Israel acknowledge that success measured as ending Hezbollah or reversing the Islamic Revolution in Iran that began in 1979 is not on the table. They are content to expand Israel's "mowing the grass" strategy, once focused on periodically reducing Hamas capacity in Gaza, into a regional campaign.

With the Trump administration walking back regime change as a goal in its operations over Iran, it appears the U.S. military may be engaged in its own grass-mowing operation against Iran's Islamic revolution.

Father Corrou rejects that approach as immoral and futile. The fact that quagmire has indeed been the outcome of so many "excursions" in the Middle East, as President Trump recently described the air campaign over Iran, leaves him wondering about the point of an overwhelming military success that terminates in strategic failure.

"They've been able to demolish huge sections of Gaza, huge sections of southern Lebanon, but they've never been able to end the resistance—the work of Hezbollah and the work of Hamas."

"If this is only going to cause suffering for the mass civilian population, then what is the point of invasion?" Father Corrou asked.

Lebanese have grown weary in the face of so much tribulation, exhausted by their nation's status as a battleground for forces beyond their control.

Under the terms of the now-broken cease-fire that brought an end to the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel in 2024, the Lebanese army was given the task of disarming the Shiite militant group. Some fragile progress toward that goal had been made before this latest cascade of violence. Father Corrou wonders how that process can be revived now.

After the suffering engendered by Lebanon's long civil war, few Lebanese have a desire for a new intrastate confrontation, but most did support neutralizing Hezbollah's armed wing before the American and Israeli bombs started to fall. Now Lebanese leaders are unlikely to press for further disarming of Hezbollah, Father Corrou said, "when Israel is invading, when Israel is destroying civilian homes and hospitals and churches and killing priests." The current fight may in the end provide more justification for Hezbollah's claim that it is the only force capable of holding off an Israeli threat.

While the political mire deepens, Mr. Dutton reported that Caritas Lebanon and Caritas Jerusalem have stepped up efforts to respond to the humanitarian crisis, supporting families and individuals displaced by the fighting.

"Caritas Lebanon is helping thousands of people in temporary shelters in schools, temporary housing and convents, and they are risking their lives on a daily basis," he said, noting that Father al-Rahi had been the chaplain for Caritas Lebanon in Qlayaa.

In Beirut, J.R.S. and Beirut's St. Joseph Church are providing shelter to a kind of invisible population in Lebanon—migrant and guest workers and refugees who have come to Lebanon from other countries and conflicts, among them Filipinos, Sudanese, Sri Lankans and Bangla-

How much are Americans trading for war?

The cost of the war on Iran in terms of the human suffering on all sides is of course incalculable. But its drain on the American treasury is something less ineffable. It has become a cliché to point out the hard costs and trade-offs associated with conflict, but the words landed much more loudly when Dwight Eisenhower spoke them in his "Chance for Peace" speech in 1953: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

As the U.S.-Israeli joint campaign against Iran entered its second month in April, the Center for American Progress tracked some of the trade-offs represented by this conflict. C.A.P. researchers note: "The Trump administration's reported request for another $200 billion for the Iran war—less than a year after the president signed the largest cuts to the social safety net in U.S. history—is particularly jarring. The so-called Big Beautiful Bill is projected to leave 10 million more people without health insurance and take food assistance away from millions, including children, while simultaneously giving enormous tax cuts to the richest Americans."

What the cost of the Iran war could cover if used differently

	People covered by Medicaid for a year	Children receiving free school lunch for a school year	People with Section 8 housing assistance for a year	Children covered for a year of child care	Adults with free tuition for community college for a 2-year degree
$25 billion: Estimated cost of war as of March 26	3,106,000	29,614,000	3,147,000	1,780,000	2,865,000
$200 billion: Reported request for additional war funding	24,850,000	Every child in the United States, with >$170B left over	Every eligible person, with >$60B left over	14,237,000	22,917,000
One 30,000-pound bomb	625	5,925	625	350	575
One Tomahawk missile	275	2,600	275	150	250
One THAAD missile	1,575	15,050	1,600	900	1,450
One Patriot interceptor	500	4,850	525	300	475

Source: Table content was created by the Center for American Progress (www.americanprogress.org).

deshi people. They often are at the end of the line when the hard-pressed Lebanese government struggles to provide shelter and assistance to displaced people.

As the conflict grinds on with no easy end in sight, Mr. Dutton insists that the processes of international law, badly undermined by the Trump administration, still offer the best path out.

"At a time when the risk of wider conflict is real," he said, "the international community must do everything possible to ensure that international law remains alive, credible and respected, so that it can continue to protect civilians and limit the immense suffering caused by war."

"What we need here," Father Corrou agreed, "are caring, compassionate people to meet with other caring, compassionate people to do the very real work of building a civil society that can sustain itself across borders and work with one another. That only happens through the very hard, long-focused, smart work of diplomacy."

Dropping bombs on an enemy may provide a visceral satisfaction to some political leaders, but "that won't bring real peace," Father Corrou said. Today's violence, he argued, only lays the groundwork for more violence in the future. "I would echo what Pope Leo has said, that real peace can only come through diplomacy, and that comes from the ability to compromise, the ability to work with one another, the ability to know that we live on the same planet here together."

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

Bishop Seitz: 'Mass detention and deportations is a grave moral evil'

In a pastoral letter released on March 15, Bishop Mark Seitz of the Diocese of El Paso implored immigration enforcement agents not to follow orders that violated their consciences. "No one has to obey an illegal order," he wrote, asking those executing the mass deportation campaign at the behest of the Trump administration to "carefully discern the moral requirements of the Gospel at this moment with integrity and honesty."

"When we take off our masks and encounter each other as neighbors, we can reclaim our common dignity," Bishop Seitz wrote. He also pledged "pastoral support" to immigration agents as they "navigate the demands of conscience with sincerity."

The bishop's pastoral letter on mass detention and deportation was read during Sunday Mass across the diocese. It was the "first pastoral letter released by a Catholic bishop on this particular topic," according to a diocesan press release.

Kevin Appleby, a senior fellow at the Center for Migration Studies, commended Bishop Seitz for highlighting the issue of immoral orders. He described most Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol agents as "honorable men and women who may disagree with the abusive tactics and inhumane policies being pushed by this administration."

"They, too, may be the victims of intimidation and fear tactics within [the Department of Homeland Security]," he said.

The bishop's letter represented perhaps the strongest and most unambiguous condemnation thus far of the U.S. mass deportation campaign from a member of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy.

"I must make clear, the current national campaign of mass detention and deportations is a grave moral evil, one which must be opposed, with prayer, peaceful action and acts of solidarity with those affected," Bishop Seitz wrote.

"Mass deportations will not make our communities safer," he added. "They separate families, divide neighbors and threaten our economic wellbeing."

Recalling the nomadic experiences of Abraham and the earliest Israelites, Bishop Seitz said that "God's people" are a "people on the move." He stressed themes of care and hospitality for migrants that are abundant in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels and noted that "we meet Jesus as a child living in exile and as an adult with no place to lay his head."

Bishop Seitz wrote that it was his hope that American Catholics will come to see Jesus in the migrants of today, who have shared their "fears, sufferings and worries about deportation" with him in recent months.

OSV News photo/Fernando Cenicerosi, courtesy Diocese of El Paso

Bishop Mark J. Seitz is joined by Washington Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar and Bishop Jose Guadalupe Torres Campos of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, at a vigil and protest in El Paso against mass deportations on March 24.

"Neighbors are being snatched as they walk out of immigration court proceedings downtown. Workers are being taken from construction sites across the city. Mothers and fathers are no longer able to work because the government has taken away their legal work permits. Young women are languishing in mental torture for months in private detention centers," Bishop Seitz said.

"So many people are once again being made to feel like they are less than American."

In the letter Bishop Seitz pledged to "redouble" diocesan ministries to support immigrants and their families, including outreach to immigrants in detention and at courthouses and "work to end racism and make immigration reform a reality." He emphasized that the church stands in solidarity with migrants against enforcement abuses.

Bishop Seitz wrote that the mass deportation campaign reflects an expansion of the precariousness of the borderlands to the rest of the nation, and also that Pope Leo XIV has been clear about the need for the U.S. church "to act, to speak up."

The federal government is pouring more money than ever into immigration enforcement. Despite the ongoing government fight over D.H.S. funding, which has led to a shutdown of some D.H.S.'s capacity, ICE is fully funded through 2029 thanks to the $75 billion budget package passed by Congress in July.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, the cash injection "more than tripled ICE's annual budget and made it the largest federal law enforcement agency." The agency is increasing the detention capacity at its facilities by the tens of thousands and shows no sign of stopping.

The additional resources made available to D.H.S. include $45 billion for new detention centers, an expansion that has similarly alarmed Bishop Seitz. He called the rising numbers of deaths of immigrants held in detention "unacceptable."

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

OSV News photo/Seán Molloy, courtesy Irish Catholic

Holy ground once more? In Ireland, an upsurge of interest among young adults.

Few countries have experienced as dramatic a drop-off in faith adherence as Ireland. As recently as the 1970s, around 90 percent of the population were regular Mass-goers. Today that figure is closer to 30 percent.

But a church postmortem may not be imminently required, according to "The Turning Tide?", a report commissioned by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. Its findings suggest that even after the collapse in adherence, Ireland remains among the most religious societies in Europe, and there are new indications that young people particularly are being drawn to the faith.

Ireland's weekly Mass attendance figure of 31 percent is the fourth highest in Europe. And while the "Tide" confirms a general trend toward disaffiliation from organized religion, the authors note that "something very notable happens in the most recent [2023-24] data: a 7 percentage point 'swing' to Catholic and away from 'no religion.'"

The report highlights a surprising trend among young people. In the cohort aged 16 to 29, the most recent data shows a 10-percentage-point drop in those who declare themselves as having "no religion"—from 52 percent to 42 percent—and a 5-percentage-point increase in young adults identifying as Catholic—from 35 to 40 percent.

Speaking about the report and others like it, Father Michael Shortall, the president of St. Patrick's College in Maynooth, Ireland's national seminary, says that "some people are very excited. And I'm noting it with attention, though remembering that a 100 percent increase can mean you have moved from two people to four people. When the numbers are small, talk of 'record growth' needs to be received wisely."

He willingly admits that there is "some specific evidence, primarily anecdotal," that the context for evangelization in Ireland is changing. "In just the last two years," he says, "there has been a tangible increase in young men interested in Catholicism."

Some attribute the resurgent interest in faith among men to the influence of a certain kind of evangelization, one that emphasizes so-called traditional masculinity. But this does not track with Father Shortall's pastoral experience.

"There are podcasts and priest-influencers who model that particular kind of conviction," he says, "but the young men that I meet are a little lost, a little fragile and vulnerable maybe. And at church, they are hearing what they don't hear elsewhere—that they matter, that someone cares for them. This is very far from 'the manosphere.'"

What drives the new interest in Catholicism, he suspects, is substance. "They are searchers. They are serious young people in many ways," he says. "They are trying to take the business of this life seriously, so the church is a natural place for them to explore that."

Father Shortall insists that "while I'm very cautious about statistics," there are tangible developments that encourage real hope. The Archdiocese of Dublin, where

Father Gerard Quirke raises the chalice during Easter Mass at a historic "Mass rock" overlooking Keem Bay on Achill Island in April 2021.

he serves, reported that 70 adults were baptized during Easter Masses in 2025—nearly double the 39 recorded the year before. This year, the figure has grown to 129. To sustain and develop this new responsiveness among young people—however humble in absolute terms—requires a church committed to mission.

Patricia Carroll directs the Office of Mission and Ministry in the Dublin Archdiocese. She feels that "there are real indications that the Spirit is moving young adults in Dublin" to explore faith, and she believes it is critically important that they find a church ready to accompany them.

An important focus in the coming years, she says, will be helping local parishes to better "receive the gift that is the young adult." She suggests that as these young adults grow into church leaders in their own right, the mission and priorities of the local church will shift. That process will need to be approached with wisdom and discernment.

With numbers growing of both candidates for priestly ordination and lay students who are studying theology, Father Shortall is excited by the opportunity to join the local church in reimagining "what is needed—lay ministry, diaconal ministry, chaplaincies, catechesis and, of course, priestly ministry. There are so many different ways to serve the one church."

St. Patrick did not first encounter the people of Ireland as hospitable. That teenage, trafficked slave escaped. But in time, he returned with a message of transformational liberation. There is something fitting in the Irish church stepping forward today, millennia later, with a similarly confident humility, offering hospitality and committing to accompany anyone who might be tempted to follow in Patrick's path.

Kevin Hargaden *contributes from Dublin.*

Jackie McVicar

Bishop Jenry Ruiz in La Esperanza, Honduras, on March 1.

Berta Cáceres remains a beacon of hope in Honduras

On March 2, 2016, Berta Cáceres was murdered in her home in western Honduras by gunmen linked to the Desarrollos Energéticos Corporation S.A., known as Desa. She had been leading the Lenca Indigenous community's battle to keep Desa from building the Agua Zarca dam on the Gualcarque River.

To commemorate the 10th anniversary of her death, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras organized a series of spiritual, political and cultural events with participants drawn from around the world. Cáceres co-founded the council more than 30 years ago, and it is now led by her daughter Bertha Zúñiga.

In 2018, seven men were found guilty of Cáceres's murder. The convictions marked a historic moment for the Honduran justice system, a rare example of justice served to the powerful, but broad impunity for such crimes continues for the country's elite. Daniel Atala Midence, Desa's chief finance officer and a member of the powerful Atala Zablah family, remains at large since a warrant for his arrest was issued more than two years ago in connection to his role in the assassination of Cáceres.

"It seems that there are powerful groups who are preventing justice from prevailing," Bishop Jenry Ruiz, who leads the Diocese of Trujillo**,** told **America** on March 1.

Of Cáceres's example, he added, "Berta calls us to not abandon communities, to be there with the [Indigenous peoples] who defend their territories."

Copinh members and the Cáceres family vow to continue their struggle for integral justice in Honduras. "Hope is what we have left as [Indigenous people], and hope is what keeps us going," Ms. Zúñiga said, "because although we know about all their powers, all their interests, their weapons, their money, we also know about our strength and our capacity for resistance."

Jackie McVicar *contributes from Canada.*

POPE LEO: YEAR ONE

Pope Leo XIV greets the faithful from the popemobile after Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on March 29.

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

A year of anticipation, measured action and careful deliberation

After Pope Leo XIV was elected on May 8, 2025, many prognosticators and colleagues predicted a quiet beginning to his pontificate. The former Robert Prevost, several said, "takes his time and listens before speaking or taking concrete action." World events and the desires of so many—Catholic and not—for the pope's commentary or considerations might have forever eliminated the possibility of a quiet first year for any pontiff. But as we approach the one-year anniversary of his election, we can see the outlines of a papacy that combines quiet and measured deliberation with a clear and prophetic voice on many issues of the day, ecclesial and not.

America asked five scholars to weigh in on Leo's first year in the chair of Peter—and on what we might expect in the future. The first is **Colleen Dulle**, Vatican correspondent for **America**, on Leo's relationship with (and impact on) the church in the United States thus far. Next, **M. Cathleen Kaveny** of Boston College offers her reflections on Leo's vision for his papacy (and how that might differ from other recent popes), as well as his task to continue to embed the teachings of the Second Vatican Council in the institutions of the church.

Robert P. Hagan, O.S.A., writes of the ways in which Leo's first year has shown his Augustinian roots as well as the deep influence of Augustinian spirituality. **Anna Rowlands** of Durham University then considers Leo's public embrace of synodality and the processes Pope Francis put into place to nurture it in the church. Finally, **Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, S.J.**, reflects on what Leo's reign might mean for Africa, particularly in light of his April visit to four countries on Christianity's fastest-growing continent.

—The Editors

The American Church and the American Pope

By Colleen Dulle

One year ago, the cardinal-electors at the papal conclave overwhelmingly defied the oft-repeated belief that there could never be a pope from the United States. The conventional wisdom was that a pope from a global superpower might give that country outsized influence in the church—a sort of mirror image of historical American fears that a Catholic president would take his or her orders from the Vatican. In 1894, Puck magazine ran a famous political cartoon that portrays the first papal envoy to the United States casting a menacing shadow across the country with the caption "The American Pope." The suspicion ran both ways: Five years later, across the Atlantic, Pope Leo XIII condemned a number of heresies he lumped together under the label of "Americanism."

And yet we now have an American pope—and the United States has had two Catholic presidents. Robert Prevost's nationality, the U.S. electors insisted in a post-conclave press conference, was not something the cardinal-electors considered. Other electors suggested an American pope could serve as a needed counterpoint to U.S. President Donald Trump on the global stage and could even bring in donations from the United States that had dried up under Pope Francis, in hopes of solving the Vatican's financial crisis. Some interpreters speculated that the cardinals were open to an American pope because, as Cardinal Francis George predicted, the United States had entered into political decline.

In any case, because of his dual citizenship (the United States and Peru) and years as a missionary and world traveler, Cardinal Prevost was widely seen as "the least American of the Americans," making the prospect of a Yankee pope an easier pill to swallow for those who may have been uneasy with the prospect of an American in the chair of Peter.

But those who hoped an American pope might use his bully pulpit for a showdown with Mr. Trump have thus far been mostly disappointed. Although the pontiff had retweeted articles critical of the Trump administration before his election and reportedly helped Pope Francis draft a letter to the U.S. bishops rebutting JD Vance's interpretation of St. Augustine on the "order of loves," Leo XIV has been measured and indirect in his criticisms of his home country. Vatican insiders say he has intentionally ceded the floor to local bishops; he has also relied on Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state and runner-up in the conclave, while Leo has experienced, as he told Crux, a "huge learning curve" in becoming a world leader overnight. Cardinal Parolin recently called on Mr. Trump directly to end the war in Iran, contravening the Vatican tradition of not calling out aggressors by name.

Stronger papal comments could be coming. As Christopher Lamb, a journalist who chronicled U.S. resistance to Pope Francis in his book *The Outsider*, has written, "Leo is a lion who knows when to roar."

Leo's less direct comments, though, have been frequent and notable. In the first half of his papacy thus far, he frequently had off-the-cuff conversations with journalists outside his vacation home in Castel Gandolfo, where he spends most Tuesdays. There, he said in October, "Someone who says, 'I'm against abortion but I'm in agreement with the inhuman treatment of immigrants in the United States,' I don't know if that's pro-life."

Leo had stopped speaking to reporters at the end of the Jubilee Year; however, after the United States and Israel began strikes on Iran, the pope approached an American reporter at Castel Gandolfo, seemingly expecting to be asked about the war. He also urged "less hatred and more peace, and work for authentic dialogue," echoing his frequent appeals for peace.

Following the U.S. military operation to capture the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, in January, the pope addressed the representatives of the 184 countries that have diplomatic relations with the Holy See, lamenting that the "principle established after the Second World War, which prohibited nations from using force to violate the borders of others, has been completely undermined." Instead, he said, "A diplomacy that promotes dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force."

Analyzing this speech in The New York Times, the journalist David Gibson wrote that rather than "one half of a mano-a-mano between pope and president," Leo's comments "may be better seen as the articulation of a post-Trump global order, one informed by universal values and institutional norms rather than tribal and individual self-interest." He concludes, "Leo is not looking for a fight with Mr. Trump; he is looking past him."

What might "looking past" the current administration entail for this first American pope? Primarily, it means looking past politics to the church, which has outlasted empires greater and more long-lived than our own. Leo is not only or even primarily a head of state; he is a pope, and a relatively young one at that. He will likely have a similar-sized impact on the U.S. church, particularly its episcopacy, to that of St. John Paul II.

Leo's early selections for the U.S. episcopacy show the direction of that impact. He has repeatedly appointed bishops who are vocal critics of Mr. Trump's immigration crackdown, including Bishop Michael Pham in San Diego, Archbishop Ronald Hicks in New York and Bishop Manuel de Jesús Rodríguez in Palm Beach; several of his appointments are of men who are immigrants themselves. Leo is shoring up a generation of bishops who will share his concern for migrants and advocate for them on the local level.

The pope's most significant shift with regard to the U.S. bishops' conference has not been his appointments, though; it has been his ability to push the U.S. bishops toward greater unity in their political voice. For the last few decades, it seemed that such unity could form only around the bishops' opposition to abortion; now, however, the bishops speak frequently and boldly about migration and voted almost unanimously to approve a rare "special message," stating their opposition to "indiscriminate mass deportation."

When it comes to his home country, Pope Leo is playing the long game. He speaks out strongly but indirectly, leaving more direct criticisms to local bishops and the Vatican's diplomatic operation. He realizes that President Trump has no interest in listening to him (indeed, the two have never spoken), so Leo instead appeals to the consciences of those in the administration who might. But above all, he looks beyond President Trump: temporally, geographically and politically. Leo knows his moral authority will be exercised after Mr. Trump is no longer president, that his message is heard beyond the United States and that it is appreciated by ordinary people around the world.

Perhaps that gives this American pope an even greater influence than the one so feared in the United States a century ago.

Colleen Dulle *is a Vatican correspondent for* ***America.***

Leo's main task is to embed Vatican II in the institutions of the church.

Leo's Threefold Responsibility

By M. Cathleen Kaveny

"After a fat pope, a thin pope"—or so the Italians say.

The saying doesn't refer to the B.M.I. of the successive occupants of the see of Peter—it is a metaphor for their general outlook and style. Some Catholic commentary has tacitly drawn on its underlying sentiment to suggest that Pope Leo XIV will take a strikingly different attitude toward the Second Vatican Council than his predecessor, Pope Francis. Rather than prioritize *aggiornamento*, he will cultivate *ressourcement*. Rather than embracing the *novus ordo*, he will look kindly on the traditional Latin Mass. Rather than encouraging young Catholics to "make a mess" as Pope Francis did, he will promote law and order.

But this way of analyzing different and successive papal styles is insufficient for three reasons. First, the binary it proposes is too simple, and even simplistic. Second, it is too oppositional. It presents a successor pope as if he is a candidate from a different political party who seeks to undo the work of his predecessor. Third, and most important, it is not theologically grounded.

A far better schema can be found in the ancient understanding of the *munus triplex*—the threefold work of Jesus as prophet, priest and king. First articulated by Eusebius of Caesarea (circa 263-330), the *munus triplex* helps structure "Lumen Gentium," Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church."

All Catholics, lay and ordained, participate in the threefold work of Christ. But the schema offers a particularly helpful way of understanding the work of the pope, the vicar of Christ. All popes must faithfully exercise all three aspects of Christ's work. Yet different times in the life of the church may call for a pope who emphasizes one aspect over the other two, without denigrating or replacing them.

In my view, St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI both stressed the prophetic aspect of the *munus triplex*. This may seem counterintuitive. When we think of prophets, we think of wild-eyed, wild-haired social outcasts. But if we read "Lumen Gentium" carefully, we should think instead of teachers and witnesses. Professors by both temperament and training, both John Paul and Benedict helped the church think and learn about what fidelity to the Gospel entails in the contemporary world. While John Paul focused more on moral questions, emphasizing in particular the dignity of each human being, Benedict concentrated on metaphysical and epistemological issues: He asked us what it means to hold to Christ's truth in an era pervaded by relativism.

Francis most fully embodied the priestly role of Jesus, which prioritizes healing, forgiving and reconciling. His two predecessors had clarified doctrine in the wake of the tumult of Vatican II. But they had not fully dealt with the wounds of the world and of the church, many of which were self-inflicted. The Argentine pope met with the outcasts

CNS photo/Lola Gomez

Pope Leo XIV greets people at the conclusion of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall on Feb. 4.

of both the church and world, calling for a "revolution of tenderness." Just as St. Francis of Assisi embraced a leper, Francis encountered a man similarly deformed by neurofibromatosis. He healed by listening—most of all to victims of clergy sexual abuse.

What about Leo XIV? I suspect he will prioritize Jesus' kingly role. As "Lumen Gentium" makes clear, fidelity to Christ's kingship requires being both a shepherd and a suffering servant—not a self-involved despot. The crown Jesus wears is adorned with thorns, not with jewels. Very little, it appears, could be more painful than dealing with the thorns of church bureaucracies, both in Rome and around the globe. But Leo must take on this task if the prophetic and priestly contributions of his predecessors will have a lasting impact on future generations of Catholics.

As Leo himself is acutely aware, Vatican II is moving from personal memory to institutional memory in the life of the church. Only four of the over 2,000 bishops who participated in the council are still living. Pope John Paul II entered the council as an auxiliary bishop; he left as archbishop of Krakow. Pope Benedict XVI also attended the council; he served as the theological advisor to the archbishop of Cologne; Pope Francis did not attend, but he had entered the Jesuits before it convened. In stark contrast, when the council opened in October 1962, Pope Leo XVI was just starting second grade. No bishop, priest or Jesuit, he was a little boy who would have just made his first holy Communion.

In my view, Leo's main task is to embed Vatican II in the institutions of the church. The council is not merely a set of documents; it limns a three-dimensional way of encountering God and other people, including but not limited to fellow members of the body of Christ. He needs to ensure that this body develops "muscle memory" for the teachings of Vatican II. I think that Leo is fully cognizant of his task. For example, he is taking steps to institutionalize and regularize the practice of synodality, which grows directly from Vatican II's ecclesiology.

As a servant leader, Leo must help the first postconciliar generation hand down the patrimony of a council that they not only did not attend, but also do not remember. Servant leadership supports the prophetic and priestly functions of the *munus triplex*, allowing doctrinal integrity, social trust, mercy and forgiveness to pass from generation to generation.

This January, Leo began a series of weekly catechesis sessions on Vatican II itself. Although he recognizes that decades have passed since the council closed in 1965, he is insistent that it must be kept vibrantly alive in our institutional memory. Leo writes: "As we approach the documents of Vatican II and rediscover their prophetic and contemporary relevance, we welcome the rich tradition of the life

CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Leo XIV greets people after celebrating Mass during a parish visit to the Church of St. Mary of the Presentation in Rome on March 8.

of the Church and, at the same time, we question ourselves about the present and renew our joy in running towards the world to bring it the Gospel of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, justice and peace."

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

The Influence of Augustine's 'Rule'

By Robert P. Hagan

Anniversaries are wonderful times to reflect and remember where we have been and to look forward to what lies ahead. On May 8, 2025, Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, O.S.A., was elected through the guidance of the Holy Spirit to serve as the 267th pope for our universal church. It was no small coincidence that this would take place for this self-proclaimed "son of Augustine" on the feast of Our Lady of Grace. St. Augustine, among other things, is known as the Doctor of Grace. For Augustinians in the United States, who first arrived from Ireland in the late 18th century, May 8 would have additional significance. It is also the anniversary of the burning of St. Augustine Church in Philadelphia in 1884, part of the nativist Know Nothing Party riots opposing Catholic immigrants. Yet out of the ashes came the first Augustinian successor to St. Peter, and the first pope from the United States: Pope Leo XIV.

Augustinians around the world felt a combination of surprise, awe, humility and pride that this gifted priest would be called to this servant leadership position for our church and our world. Immediately, questions came from every corner of the world regarding this Augustinian friar from the Midwest of the United States, who graduated from Villanova University, served for many years with the poorest of the poor in Peru, and held many leadership positions within the order. Many asked crucial questions like: Does he like deep dish pizza? Does he root for the Cubs or the White Sox? However, it was not long after the white smoke cleared that a deeper inquiry began: How will he lead? What values are important to him? How will his Augustinian roots and foundation affect the papacy and the global church?

One does not have to look very far to see how his Augustinian foundation is seasoning Pope Leo's messaging, audiences, meetings, homilies and approach to the challenging issues facing our church and our world. Take a deeper dive into the life of St. Augustine and you will discover a man who lived from 354 to 430 A.D., who was a sinner before he was a saint. He was supported by friends and family, especially his mother, Monica, who never gave up on her son. Augustine was extremely intelligent and for years was swept up in the distractions of the world that can steal our focus and our purpose. Tormented by his constant

For an Augustinian, *The Rule of St. Augustine* is a way of life, a fundamental GPS for good living.

restlessness and search for peace, he pleaded with God to have mercy on him and to show him the way. Shortly after his conversion experience, Augustine began to live in community where friars would spend time focused on prayer, service to others, and growing in their relationship with God and one another.

He established a practical guide for living a monastic life, *The Rule of St. Augustine*. The *Rule* is the oldest monastic rule focusing on the virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience. This emphasis on the common good for all people centers on the scriptural command to love God and neighbor, not as something that is forced, but rather freely chosen. *The Rule of St. Augustine* also establishes the purpose and basis of common life: "Before all else love God and your neighbor because these are the chief commandments given to us." The *Rule* and Augustinian spirituality emphasize such core values as prayer, community, friendship, contemplation and action, service, missionary spirit, solidarity with the poor, listening, effective communication, forgiveness, reconciliation and peacemaking.

For an Augustinian, *The Rule of St. Augustine* is a way of life, a fundamental GPS for good living and witnessing to the Gospel. Pope Leo not only pledged his life to living this *Rule*, but has spent much of his life teaching students, parishioners and countless others to do the same. It is exciting and inspiring to see glimpses of that core belief system manifesting itself in his leadership style, challenging the communicators of our age to be truth-tellers and calling world leaders to be peacemakers and to be mindful of the poor and disenfranchised.

As we have witnessed, Leo is unafraid to enter the tensions around immigration and, as a missionary, reminds us that we all are "brothers and sisters in need of compassion." He echoes St. Augustine, who encouraged his congregation facing hardship when he preached: "The times are troublesome—change human beings, and the times will be changed." Leo will help to shepherd us through the new age of artificial intelligence, relying on the Holy Spirit, good counsel and the "teacher within," who calls us to remember that just because we can do something does not mean that we ought to, and to remember that we are all made in the image and likeness of God and at all times to treat one another with dignity and respect.

One of the observations that has been made by those who have known Leo for many years is how seamlessly he seems to have assumed the role of universal shepherd and all the many responsibilities and burdens that go along with it. There is no pope school, no papal internship, and yet he speaks clearly and calmly. He prays, sings, preaches and hosts people with a certain humble grace that Augustine would refer to as "interiority." This internal grace comes from God and appears to be divinely bestowed upon him for all of us.

Father Prevost wrote his academic dissertation on the role of the prior, which is a core leadership position held in the order. The chapter on governance and obedience in the *Rule* has much to say regarding the exercise of leadership and clearly has now shaped Leo's leadership style. It reads:

> The Superior for his part, must not think himself fortunate in his exercise of authority but in his role as serving you in love. In your eyes he shall hold the first place among you by dignity of his office, but in fear before God, he shall be as the least among you.... Let him admonish the unruly, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, and be patient towards all (1 Thes 5:14).... He should strive to be loved by you rather than feared, ever mindful that he must give an account of you to God.

May Leo continue to do just that.

Happy anniversary, Pope Leo XIV! May God bless you with the grace, wisdom, strength and humility to help us all find rest for our restless hearts. As we move through these challenging and uncertain times, with values that never go out of style, may this good shepherd guide us all along the road to peace.

Robert P. Hagan, O.S.A., *is the 41st Prior Provincial at the Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova.*

The Pope Among the People of God

By Anna Rowlands

In the days between the death of Pope Francis and the election of Pope Leo XIV, the topic of synodality emerged as one of the most controversial in the papal transition. The question of the reception of the synodal renewal envisioned by Francis became a visible, traceable fault line as a new pope was being chosen. In the communications that

Leo has continued, despite the legal complexities, to appoint women to key curial roles.

trickled out to the waiting public through carefully choreographed media interviews and Vatican press briefings, it became clear that three quite distinct perspectives were discernible. Some wished to suppress synodality; others wanted to proceed cautiously in the pastoral and missiological dimensions and perhaps on a corrected path with regard to structural and doctrinal matters; and others still hoped to move forward with energy.

As Leo emerged onto the balcony of St. Peter's, the answer to the question of the reception of the synod among the cardinals seemed to be that we would continue to move forward. The cardinal-electors chose a pope who had quietly but constructively participated in the synodal process, had prior experience of synodality as a routine way of working in Latin America and was willing to use the word constructively in his first papal address, again from the balcony of St. Peter's.

The watchwords that framed his synodal vision in that address were unity, communion, bridge-building and peace for the church and for the world. This marked a pronounced shift from Francis' own framing language of remaining with the tensions, finding the points of overflow guided by the Spirit, and being unafraid of conflict and differences. I remember standing in St. Peter's Square amid the flags and cheers, wondering if we would maintain a continuity of path but with a rather different animating vision.

In the days after his election, Leo told the gathered cardinals that he intended not only to continue the synodal process but also to be a *more* synodal pope. He would gather his cardinals more often, listen to them and discern with them. His model would be mutual accompaniment: a pope among the cardinals. They would walk only together.

This was a frontier that Francis had not managed to cross. Embattled, needing to find out who he could trust in a hurry, he pursued a modus operandi that at times contrasted with his own powerful synodal message. Leo set out upon his papacy from the other side of that frontier, and this seemed to be met with palpable relief by many.

In the year since his election, firm progress on the wider synodal vision has been harder to measure. Leo gave a green light to the full implementation of the "Final Document of the Synod" and to the planning for an ecclesial assembly in 2028. A first substantial gathering of cardinals has occurred, and the method used to guide the meeting was synodal. This allowed cardinals to choose their preferred topics and enabled a more conversational, fluid exchange. Some complained, even openly to the media, but most seemed to welcome this move.

The 10 synodal study groups that were established to examine the knotty topics that could not sensibly be moved forward by a group of 400 people over the space of two four-week sessions have been slowly publishing their reports. Many of the doctrinal and structural questions raised by the synod process are covered here: reform of canon law, the participation of women, pastoral and moral questions concerning the family, sexuality and so forth. Those reports, like the entire synodal process, constitute advice to the pope, not parallel processes. Therefore, what will matter is not merely the reports' contents, but Leo's ownership of the content once they are made public.

In other areas where the final document had suggested fairly clear pastoral pathways, cautious progress appears to be underway. Leo has continued, despite the legal complexities, to appoint women to key curial roles. This was one flashpoint among more conservative cardinals in the days before the conclave. He has thus far refused to reverse Francis' moves in this area. Instead, Leo has advanced this cause, at least for women religious. The canonical provision needs, therefore, to catch up so that such positions are better established and protected; as a canon lawyer, he must know this.

In many ways, however, the theater of action has moved away from Rome and to the local churches and continental groupings. Whether synodality will become a generative focus for renewal and reform will be determined by what happens in these contexts. The extent to which bishops, priests, deacons and laypeople will walk with Leo in the task of implementation remains to be seen. It is possible that we will see a more synodal papacy as a point of contrast rather than continuity with the wider episcopacy and presbyterate.

Here, the question is the extent to which Leo can be both a synodal beacon on the hill and leaven in the world of his priests and bishops.

One clear Roman test does remain. The synodal process will remain only partially realized and, in another sense, permanently thwarted if Leo cannot also bring the Roman Curia with him. This might well be the most intractable challenge of all. There are those in the Curia hungry for such a conversion of culture, but there remain very significant obstacles to such change.

In the daily briefing notes issued by the Vatican press office and in media interviews given by cardinals during the

Pope Leo XIV meets with Mike Sweeney, a member of the Kansas City Royals Hall of Fame, and his wife, Shara, on Oct. 1, 2025. Leo is the 267th pope.

days of the general congregations before the conclave last year, it became apparent that the three quite different takes on synodality were emerging after the death of Francis. It is unlikely that these views have gone away, but somehow Leo appears to be tentatively steering his own course. He has listened to detractors, modeled a pastoral synodality and has already offered a step beyond Francis in integrating synodality into the conduct of the papacy itself and the relationship of the successor of Peter with his cardinals.

What was also traceable in those daily notes was the kind of pope the cardinals thought the church needed: a shepherd, a teacher, a unifier, a man of peace.

This first year has been one of watching and waiting; most of the big decisions that face Leo remain ahead, including on the theological and practical vision of synodality that he will foster. Nonetheless, in an age bewitched by the idea that good leadership takes the form of an unrestrained, arbitrary will hovering over the lives of others, Leo's deepest synodal sign so far is perhaps his choice to conduct himself in style, tone and message as a pope among God's people, among his fellow bishops and cardinals, and among the struggling, suffering and longing peoples of this age. This kind of synodal leadership serves as a sign to a different kind of reign: God's.

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Pope Leo and the African Church

By Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

One can only imagine the gradient of the learning curve that Pope Leo XIV has navigated since his election. And given his 10-day trip to four African countries planned for April, it is also intriguing to explore the relationship between Leo and the continent of Africa less than a year into his pontificate.

When he served as the global leader of the Augustinian order, Robert Prevost visited members of his congregation serving in various parts of the continent several times. I recall after his election seeing a blurry photo of him with parishioners in a remote parish of my hometown, Benin City, Nigeria. Pope Leo knows Africa. Africa knows Leo.

This relationship will grow thanks to his April trip. An apostolic journey of this duration is a major testament to the religious weight of the continent and will provide many opportunities for the pope to reconnect with a region that is home to a fast-growing Catholic population. The trend will surely be visibly illustrated by the massive turnout of Catholics to welcome the pope.

The leadership of the continent's 280 million Catholics may seem at times out of step with the agenda of the pope. While the evidence suggests that synodality has received a mixed reception among the continent's Catholic leaders, it is also true that Africa is underrepresented at the church's highest levels of leadership. Drawing on its leadership potential would enrich the global Catholic Church. With the benefit of his prior knowledge of Africa and the opportunity to visit it again, Leo might encourage greater openness to synodality and remind the world that Africa's place in the church matters.

Leo's choice of countries for his visit is telling. Since he is a member of a religious order that traces its origins to St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Algeria offers a fitting setting for a papal pilgrimage. The Muslim-majority country is also the site of ongoing encounters between Christianity and Islam. A papal visit will draw attention to the delicate issue of the relationship between the two world religions and the conflict that sometimes tarnishes or undermines religious tolerance and coexistence in Africa.

It is worth noting that several of the countries on Leo's itinerary are under regimes with questionable democratic

CNS photo/Vatican Media

Pope Leo XIV greets people after celebrating Mass during a parish visit to the Church of St. Mary of the Presentation in Rome on March 8.

credentials and records of economic dysfunction. In Algeria, Human Rights Watch reports continuing repression of dissent, constraint on civic discourse and restriction of freedom of expression, the press, association, assembly and movement.

So too Angola: After 50 years of independence and ahead of elections in 2027, Angola's political climate has deteriorated, with outbreaks of violence that could derail the fragile democracy cobbled together after decades of violence and conflict.

In Equatorial Guinea, poverty is rampant as the nation struggles with endemic corruption and biting sanctions induced by illicit financial flows related to drug smuggling. And Cameroon is held captive by a regime that has overstayed its welcome by several decades, muzzled the opposition and left the economy in tatters.

Pope Benedict XVI eulogized Africa as "an immense spiritual 'lung' for a humanity which seems to be in crisis of faith and hope." Pope Leo's visit will reiterate this message about Africa as a place of resilience and hope in the face of multiple adversities.

Another grim reality that must be on Leo's mind is the spate of violence directed at Christians and their institutions in some parts of Africa. In Nigeria and the neighboring Sahel region, gangs of militants and religious extremists have attacked places of worship, schools and villages and have abducted children. Leo is aware of this situation and has been consistent in his condemnation of this trend. His pronouncements are suffused with prayers for the release of abducted Christians and their pastors and a cessation to the plague of religiously motivated violence and conflict.

It is conceivable that in the future he will issue a more robust condemnation of this phenomenon, while encouraging greater resolve and hope on the part of vulnerable Christian communities.

Like his predecessors, Pope Leo possesses a quiet moral force that allows him to name social ills, advocate for the poor and vulnerable, and goad political leaders to prioritize peace, justice and integral human development. This first papal visit offers him an opportunity to listen to African Christians, learn about the realities of their daily life, and encourage Africans who have lost faith in political institutions and look up to the church for solace, solidarity and a sense of direction.

His message of reconciliation, justice and peace in a turbulent world, along with the stress he places on the importance of diplomacy and dignity for people, especially the poor and the marginalized, will find enthusiastic reception during his peregrinations in Africa.

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A NEW CHAPTER FOR THE CHURCH

Why American Catholicism will thrive in the 21st century

By Rachel Lu

A remarkable thing has been happening in the Catholic Church in the United States over the past few years: growth.

The absolute number of Catholics remains level, largely because more Catholics are dying than are being baptized. Among adults though, it looks like more people are converting to Catholicism than leaving it. And many dioceses are reporting a significant uptick in people joining the Catholic Church just since 2024. The Archdiocese of Newark reports a 72 percent increase in adult conversions over the past three years. Similar spikes have been reported in Cleveland, Portland, Ore., Cincinnati and many other dioceses.

Dioceses widely report that the wave of new converts is disproportionately youthful, full of millennials and zoomers—who, polls suggest, show some signs of gravitating back toward religious belief. Let me be clear: It is too early to celebrate, and sociologists are still debating the numbers, which are so new that the Official Catholic Directory hasn't fully compiled the most relevant data. Still, it is always a sign of hope for the church when people seek out the faith. Many young Americans still want to be Catholic.

This pattern of conversion-based growth, especially among the young, is fairly unprecedented in the history of American Catholicism. (For simplicity, in this article I will use *conversion* in a colloquial sense, meaning all those entering into the Catholic Church, including those converting from a non-Christian religion, those seeking full communion as a baptized Christian, and Catholics who had missed at least one required sacrament of initiation.) Although the pontificate of St. John Paul II is widely remembered as a time of youthful revival for Catholicism, the impact was seen mainly on the level of *devotion,* not in numbers. Historically, the American church has fought hard just to retain membership, building its own institutions and social networks to keep immigrants and their descendants from assimilating into the larger Protestant culture. When


OSV News photo/Daniel Meloy, Detroit Catholic

Deacon Thomas Mohan holds up the Book of the Elect to catechumens coming into the church during the Rite of Election celebration on March 8, 2025, at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit. Nine hundred and seventy-seven people came into full communion with the church in 2025 in the Archdiocese of Detroit, the largest class since 2017.

membership has increased, immigration and natural growth through children born into Catholic families have always been the major driving factors.

There have been American converts, of course, and sometimes these have made noteworthy contributions (indeed, in some areas, like fiction writing, politics and apologetics, converts have been among the most prominent Catholics), but their absolute numbers have generally been tiny compared with the number who leave. For years, Catholics in ministry have had conversations about "evangelical Catholicism," "intentional Catholicism" and the "church in mission"; and those efforts have borne some good fruit, reformulating the conversion process to help people to think more deeply about the spiritual growth involved in conversion and about the particular gifts they can offer to the church. Until now though, those efforts have never had the kind of impact that would draw the attention of a demographer. Instead, cradle Catholics have for decades been drifting away in demoralizing numbers. That longstanding trend accelerated across the 2010s, creating widespread consternation as it began to appear that the American church was destined to shrink.

After a brutal quarter-century of marked decline, things began to change in 2023. The Order of Christian Initiation of Adults classes started to fill. This year, in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, 54 percent more adults and children are expected to receive sacraments of initiation than last year. Around the country, parishes and university campus ministry programs have been reporting large numbers of catechumens. Mass attendance began to rise after Covid, and then it rose further, recovering from the post-pandemic slump.

It is wise to be circumspect about this turnaround, considering its newness, and also the hazards of embracing trends that may have complex connections to our nation's polarized politics. Indeed, the political scientist Ryan Burge, who writes frequently about religious trends, already has offered some words of caution. A professor of practice at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, Burge told Religion News Service that he believes the current stability in American religiosity is the "calm before the storm" and that generational shifts will continue to cause drops in numbers over time: "Gravity still goes down," he said.

Those cautions should not be permitted to smother this moment of hope, however. If it can be sustained, conversion-based growth could open a whole new chapter for the American church. It will mean changes, some of which will inevitably be awkward or uncomfortable for longtime Massgoers. There will be new challenges, demanding patience, courage and creative problem-solving. In the end, though, this could be a very exciting time to be an American Catholic. And if God is calling us to be a light to our compatriots, we need to do our utmost to answer that call.

Some Sociological Answers

Conversion-based growth is such a new phenomenon that explanations are necessarily speculative. We know that people are knocking at our door. We are still working to explain the reasons why. As a helpful starting point though, it is worth examining a related subject on which we do have considerable data: the decline of American churches across the past several decades.

The truth is that the Catholic Church in the 21st century has been hemorrhaging members at alarming rates, with more than half of cradle Catholics leaving the faith at some point (though some may return) and infant baptisms falling by more than 40 percent. Behind those numbers we might glimpse darkened churches, shuttered schools and bereft parents praying fearfully for the souls of their children and grandchildren. It may or may not be comforting to hear that other Christian churches have been wrestling with similar problems.

Two recent works in the sociology of religion can give us a basic picture. The sociologists Jim Davis and Michael Graham (with research and commentary from Ryan Burge) focus more heavily on evangelical Protestantism in their 2023 book *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* But they discuss Catholicism as well, and it is interesting to compare their conclusions with those of the Catholic sociologist Christian Smith, whose 2025 *Why Religion Went Obsolete* is almost unremittingly bleak in its

This could be a very exciting time to be an American Catholic.

prognosis for institutional religion.

Davis and Graham walk readers through the numbers with bracing clarity, but they still have hope for institutional churches, warmly encouraging their co-religionists to redouble their efforts to reach out to the "dechurched," who need a "Christian family" for fellowship and support. Smith, by contrast, appears to have given up on any real prospect for revival. He disparagingly compares churches to electric typewriters, record players and rotary phones, implying that churchgoing, like these archaic devices, is becoming an eclectic affectation of those who refuse to submit to the "cultural zeitgeist." He thinks it likely that Americans will retain *some* form of faith or spirituality, but he argues that they will increasingly refuse to be straitjacketed by the creedal, traditional, institutionalized faiths of their fathers. Modern people expect their faith, like their shoes, playlists and coffee orders, to be adapted to their personal preferences. They are not, in his opinion, interested in accommodating themselves to a pre-set mold.

These books present sharp contrasts, but there is a deep sense in which these authors seem to be offering "half full" and "half empty" assessments of the same glass. Graham, Davis and Smith all recognize that American Christians have not in general rejected churchgoing so much as they have drifted away from it. Some do have deep objections or bruising experiences that explain their departure. In general, though, "dechurched" Christians are quite likely to have orthodox theological views and positive feelings about "Christian culture." A large share still read the Bible and pray to Jesus. Even Christian moral teachings may not be quite as alienating as has sometimes been supposed. Asked whether they might return to church, many say they could or even intend to, if they were to find a pastor, parish or social set who make churchgoing more appealing.

In short, many people have given up on church for the same kinds of reasons they have shed other institutional connections, family ties and traditions. It was not a "good fit." It is not "who they are" anymore. Life went a different way.

Davis and Graham treat this as a hopeful thing. Dechurched Christians, they argue, are still in the Christian orbit. A non-attending person who still loves Jesus, identifies as a Christian and even looks favorably on institutional churches might certainly be persuaded to return. They encourage Christians to redouble their efforts to reactivate those who have fallen away: Reach out! Have a parish picnic! Invite your dechurched friends to dinner or a movie night! Stronger social programs, or just ordinary friendliness, can sometimes make a big difference.

Davis and Graham are Protestants, but Catholics are having similar conversations, trying to figure out how to support and accompany people through the vicissitudes of life. These are important questions, and we need to keep exploring their dimensions. We certainly should want our Catholic communities to supply that network of connective tissue that keeps people close to one another and to Jesus. We want people to feel welcome at church and to value the human relationships they forge there.

Nevertheless, it is important not to miss the challenge captured in Smith's much bleaker perspective. Where Graham and Davis see millions of people who are at least open to churchgoing, Smith notes how easily they have shrugged it off. Modern people's relationships with authority and tradition, he speculates, may simply have changed. People do not agonize about leaving the faith their ancestors have kept for generations; it is just another lifestyle choice for them. Insofar as this is true, it could represent a challenge for institutional religion that cannot be resolved through mere friendliness.

Catholicism has a vast and fertile tradition, with resources to answer all sorts of questions and meet an enormous range of spiritual needs. Still, it is not a choose-your-own adventure. There are commitments. There are rules. The catechumen should present himself at the church door hoping to be changed by grace, not looking to capture a particular kind of experience or, worse, to add Catholicism to his carefully tailored platform and profile, like a well-chosen accessory. If Smith is correct to see a personalized, build-your-own faith as the main thing people want nowadays, it seems true that the church must necessarily decline.

But what if it is not? Maybe the uptick in conversions speaks to a recognition, at least in some people, that limitless personalization and preference satisfaction are not the key to real happiness. Truth is worth more than 1,000 ideological echo chambers. Grace is more powerful than a pile of self-help books. A million social media followers mean nothing in comparison with a community where one is seen and loved as a unique and precious person, created in God's own image. After a lifetime of being managed by algorithms and massaged by influencers, some people feel a deep yearning for something real. If we can help them to glimpse it within the Catholic Church, its future in the United States could be very bright indeed.

Catechumens hold candles during an Easter Vigil at St. Hugh of Lincoln Church in Huntington Station, N.Y.

File photo. OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

In Search of Truth and Beauty

Truth has become a precious commodity in modern times, not in spite of but because of the flood of information that most of us have at our fingertips 24 hours a day. It turns out that giving people access to vast stores of unfiltered "content" does not necessarily help them to live grounded, purposeful lives. Although Catholicism has always attracted a fair number of intellectual converts, most people probably do not come for the philosophy or the doorstop-sized catechism. However, ordinary people do want answers to life's most defining questions. Why does my life matter? Is there a way to find value in suffering? How can I be a better person? How can my faith provide deeper relationships, greater community, stronger social ties?

The church has answers to those questions. Sometimes Catholic teachings may seem clunky or out of date, especially when the world is fixated on a new question (or perhaps an old one asked in a new way) that the church is still weighing and considering. We live in an age of hot takes and 12-hour news cycles, and Catholicism does not move at that speed, which at times may seem like a punishing disadvantage. Every age has its "heretics," ready and eager to jettison anything necessary to build a new worldview around the latest discovery or intellectual fad. A hot take is worth nothing, however, if it is not true.

Over time those fads tend to flame out, while the church remains, helping people to order and find meaning in their lives, guiding them back toward God. The Catholic Church's answers to the big questions have, in their fundamentals, been the same across thousands of years. That can be a powerful selling point for people looking for truths that stay.

In addition, grace often seems to be in short supply in an age when nearly everything else seems abundant. I posit that *this* is the yearning that drives people to the church, when they come to recognize the inadequacy of "bread alone." People's bodies today are adequately nourished, but their souls are not.

Quite often, beauty is the stimulant that makes people aware of their spiritual hunger, and it can also be a beacon, leading them to the place where nourishment can be found. Beauty tends to give people intimations of the transcendent, and it can instill an appetite for more. This is a good reason to cultivate as much beauty as we can in our churches, liturgy and music, and we should also be forthright about the abundant sources of grace that are available within the church. Sacraments are a particularly precious source of grace, reserved for the baptized, but prayers and sacramentals can be beneficial to anyone and may for many be an entry point to a fuller Catholic life.

Too often, Catholics feel sheepish about their rosaries, scapulars or other sacramental objects, worrying that these will be perceived by outsiders as superstitious, antiquated or hokey. We should remember that sometimes these earth-

If God is calling us to be a light to our compatriots, we need to do our utmost to answer that call.

ier or more physical elements of Catholicism are appealing to people grasping for grace. We have plenty of intellectual entry points to the faith, but also points of contact with the transcendent that people can touch, hear and smell. Many Protestant faiths place great emphasis on particular feelings or experiences as important milestones for salvation. In Catholicism, we can see God in a monstrance, or taste God on our tongues. That can be an immense relief and a wonderful conduit to grace, particularly in a world where influencers of all stripes are continually trying to make us feel a particular way.

Called to Love

Love is the most defining aspect of the Christian life, and also the hardest. We know that we are called to love everyone who comes to the faith, regardless of their physical or moral condition. We also know that the point of conversion is to be reborn and transformed by grace. How can we love new or potential converts better, responding to their emotional or spiritual needs but also encouraging them to grow?

It is a daunting challenge, to say the least. Without trying to offer easy answers, it may be helpful to reflect that as the body of Christ, our communities have a transcendent purpose that the world cannot fill. Of course, we should still do ordinary human things. Casseroles, fish fries, basketball games, summer camps, baby showers, book clubs, and outreach to the elderly, sick or bereaved should all play a part in our communities.

Graham and Davis's research indicates that many of the unchurched want a lot more of these things, and we should do them, because service and fellowship help us to grow in love. But we should also bear in mind that the church will never win the fight for souls simply by having the best casseroles and summer camps. There are gyms that are better equipped for basketball tournaments, restaurants that have more experience with fish. Even when it comes to helping the poor or sick, the church's material resources are small next to those of the state. The state, however, cannot affirm a person's value as a unique and precious child of God.

If people no longer want to be loved in that way—as sinners with a transcendent destiny—then the church's mission is truly doomed. But I suspect that they do.

There are plenty of reasons to worry about how the church might change under the influence of a new wave of converts. They will have their own baggage and their own ideas about how to do things. There will be turf wars, liturgy wars and cradle Catholics who no longer feel at home in their own parishes. Some people will convert, leave and then complain about what they found in the church. Others will convert, stay and complain about what they find in the church.

But converts also bring unique gifts: Often they bring greater biblical literacy, a fresh zeal for the faith, an adult appreciation of the difficulties and graces of the church that cradle Catholics might not always consider or appreciate, and a greater diversity of background and opinion.

All together we can produce a bright and vibrant future of our faith in this country. From its colonial period, the United States has nurtured a Catholic subculture that has often flourished but always remained a definite minority. Until quite recently, even that minority seemed to be dwindling. Perhaps the time has come for the seed to bear good fruit again.

If so, that flowering will manifest the very real and precious treasures that have always defined the Catholic faith: a clear and consistent source of answers to life's defining questions, an ever-flowing source of beauty and grace, and a rich human anthropology that can help us to love one another better. Those goods have no sell-by date, and there are many indications that Americans today badly want them.

As an adult convert myself, I rejoice to see other new converts in the faith. And I pray that there will be many, many more in the years to come.

Rachel Lu *is a senior editor at Law & Liberty and a regular contributor to the National Review. She lives in St. Paul, Minn.*


Andy Kelly/Unsplash

Poverty, Human Dignity and Artificial Intelligence

By Kim Daniels

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In his first week on the job in 2013, Pope Francis famously called for a church "which is poor and for the poor." It was a phrase he repeated throughout his papacy but also one he lived out by example, showing to the world that love for the poor was at the heart of his pontificate. He reminded us all in "The Joy of the Gospel" ("Evangelii Gaudium"), sometimes called "the blueprint" for his papacy, that "God's heart has a special place for the poor."

In his first remarks after his election last May 8, Pope Leo XIV likewise said it was the mission of the church to be close to the poor. In his first apostolic exhortation, "Dilexi Te," he wrote that the "condition of the poor is a cry that, throughout human history, constantly challenges our lives, societies, political and economic systems, and, not least, the church. On the wounded faces of the poor, we see the suffering of the innocent and, therefore, the suffering of Christ himself." Love for the poor is the heart of the Gospel, and at the heart of Catholic tradition and teaching.

Pope Leo's focus on those who live in poverty is situated within his acknowledgement of our rapidly changing social and economic context. Just after he was elected, he said that the church should offer "her social teaching in response...to the developments in the field of artificial intelligence that pose new challenges for the defense of human dignity and labor." Along with concern for those who are poor, the impact of artificial intelligence has become a central theme of his early pontificate.

We all know that the advancement of artificial intelligence poses many difficult questions. What does it mean for a machine to be "intelligent"? Will these technologies stay within human control? Will jobs disappear, and if so, which ones, and how fast? What laws and policies should govern the development of A.I.? Are our political, social and civil society institutions up to the task?And are we about to face an A.I. apocalypse? A utopia? Or something in between?

A.I. and the Marginalized

These are complicated questions that do not have simple answers. But some questions are, in the words of Pope Leo and Pope Francis, "simple." One of those involves the requirement to put into practice "the clear and forceful words of the Gospel" regarding "sharing goods and caring for the poor" ("Dilexi Te," Nos. 28 and 32).

As Pope Leo says in "Dilexi Te," quoting Pope Francis,

Are we about to face an A.I. apocalypse? A utopia? Or something in between?

"the message of God's word is "so clear and direct, so simple and eloquent, that no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it. The Church's reflection on these texts ought not to obscure or weaken their force, but urge us to accept their exhortations with courage and zeal. Why complicate something so simple?" ("Dilexi Te," No. 31). "I often wonder," he says, "even though the teaching of Sacred Scripture is so clear about the poor, why many people continue to think that they can safely disregard the poor" ("Dilexi Te," No. 23).

One thing we know is that technologies driven by artificial intelligence are already disregarding the poor. Civil rights attorney Gary Rhoades reports on the case of Mary Louis, a Black woman who paid her rent without fail for 16 years. When she applied for a new apartment, she was denied by an algorithm called SafeRent, which gave her a low score. The algorithm did not consider her perfect payment history or her housing voucher; it's unclear what it did consider. Mary is one of thousands who sued the company, SafeRent Solutions, alleging that its algorithm systematically discriminated against Black and Hispanic renters.

Such scenarios are not abstract thought exercises. Real people are being harmed right now. As Pope Leo recognizes, "this technology is already having a real impact on the lives of millions of people, every day and in every part of the world." How can we in the church ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable remain at the center of discussions about artificial intelligence, and that the principles of Catholic social teaching continue to ground our choices?

Too often in our country, those who live in material poverty are left behind. The Fordham theologian Christine Firer Hinze reminds us in *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a U.S. Catholic Economic Ethic* that in the United States, "powerful structural dynamics have smoothed the path to economic success" for some, while the lower-middle and working classes, the working poor and the poor too often face numerous and persistent "roadblocks to dignified livelihood."

While A.I. doesn't create these inequalities, it perpetuates and accelerates them. As Levi Checketts observes in *Poor Technology: Artificial Intelligence and the Experience of Poverty*, "AI research has neither taken seriously the perspective of the poor nor does it have any interest in doing so."

Consider again the case of Mary Louis, the Massachusetts tenant with an excellent record who was nonetheless denied housing based on her landlord's use of SafeRent Solutions's A.I.-driven tenant screening program that didn't consider her tenancy record or the value of the housing voucher she received. Her case is not an outlier. SafeRent and similar companies have faced numerous lawsuits challenging their use of products using algorithms that draw data from, among other sources, inaccurate and incomplete criminal records.

While the SafeRent case was ultimately settled in Ms. Louis's favor, successful challenges are often difficult to achieve against companies using A.I. tools trained on sets of government and private data and employment criteria that "are inherently arbitrary and are not based on any kind of empirical evidence or studies," according to Eric Dunn, the litigation director at the National Housing Law Project.

Housing isn't the only setting where algorithmic bias occurs. In the Netherlands, the city of Rotterdam relied on an A.I. tool that used an algorithm to predict welfare fraud. The algorithm used poor Dutch language skills as one of its risk indicators, and in doing so conflated genuine paperwork errors with real fraud. The result: Migrants were discriminated against in the provision of benefits.

Algorithmic bias occurs in the criminal justice system as well. The Vatican's A.I. research group recently cited a ProPublica investigation of the use of a "proprietary algorithm that provides a risk score for potential parolees during parole hearings. Not only was the algorithm remarkably unsuccessful in predicting violent crime, but... Black individuals were more than twice as likely to be given a false high-risk score." The Vatican group's conclusion? "The widespread use and indiscriminate use of A.I. technologies to make important political and legal decisions punishes and creates undue burdens on the poor and marginalized and further exacerbates social inequality."

The environmental costs of A.I. reveal a similar pattern of harm. A.I.'s massive water consumption, energy demands and waste products reveal how technological choices have environmental consequences we cannot ignore. U.S. data centers consumed approximately 228 billion gallons of water in 2023. Total data center energy use has more than doubled between 2017 and 2023, with continued rapid growth projected. And A.I. is projected to generate an additional 1.2 million to 5 million metric tons of electronic waste by 2030.

These are not just abstract statistics; they touch real people's lives. As with algorithmic bias, environmental burdens fall disproportionately on the poor and vulnerable.

Communities with less political power find data centers built near them, straining their water supplies and energy grids. And the extraction of rare earth minerals needed for the development of A.I. hardware can devastate local environments. Once again, we conclude that the poor too often bear the costs.

Invisible Labor

Another challenge lies in the invisible labor that makes A.I. possible. In *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with A.I.*, Ethan Mollick of the Wharton School describes the process that makes A.I. systems safer, noting that it depends on "low-paid workers around the world recruited to read and rate A.I. replies, [who,] in doing so, are exposed to exactly the sort of content that A.I. companies don't want the world to see." The "human in the loop" is a real person with a face and a family and a story.

Right now, in countries such as Kenya, India, the Philippines and Venezuela, low-wage workers are sorting and labeling data for less than $2 an hour in order to train A.I. systems in what some of them call "AI sweatshops with computers instead of sewing machines." These workers have no benefits, no job security and no voice in their workplaces. Some spend more than eight hours daily reviewing graphic content: murders, suicides, sexual abuse and extreme violence. As one employee lamented, "Just because we're Black, or just because we're just vulnerable for now, that doesn't give them the right to just exploit us like this."

While some of the labor that makes A.I. possible is invisible, in some ways A.I. is also making the dignity and value of other kinds of work more visible. Think of the work of caregivers, work that is and has always been essential to human flourishing, work that is central in a faith that calls each one of us to self-giving love.

The more our personal interactions are mediated through screens, the more we should come to appreciate the dignity inherent in the embodied care of others. No technology can truly substitute for the teacher who patiently teaches a young child to read, the neighbor who sits with a dying friend, the son who feeds an elderly parent, or the nurse who comforts a scared patient.

We all have times in our lives when someone has cared for us in one of these ways, or when we have cared for another. Would any A.I.-driven tool have served as well? The advent of A.I. in our everyday lives is revealing the essential nature of this work precisely because a computer system, no matter how advanced, cannot do these things.

But visibility does not equal value. The market doesn't automatically compensate for what we recognize as essential. And care work—child care, nursing, teaching, social work, elder care and so much more—is predominantly done by women and perpetually undervalued by the market.

This care work also takes place in an economy increasingly driven by artificial intelligence embedded in what Pope Francis called a technocratic paradigm, one in which "human dignity and fraternity are often set aside in the name of efficiency, 'as if reality, goodness, and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such'" ("Antiqua et Nova," No. 54, citing "Laudato Si'," No. 105).

The church is taking steps to assess A.I.'s impact on work and workers, and affirms that A.I. could have many positive benefits as well. In "Antiqua et Nova," for instance, Vatican leaders acknowledge that A.I. "has the potential to enhance expertise and productivity, create new jobs, enable workers to focus on more innovative tasks, and open new horizons for creativity and innovation."

But the document also recognizes risks: "While A.I. promises to boost productivity by taking over mundane tasks, it frequently forces workers to adapt to the speed and demands of machines rather than machines being designed to support those who work." The stakes are clear: "If A.I. is used to replace human workers rather than complement them, there is 'a substantial risk of disproportionate benefit for the few at the price of the impoverishment of many.'"

Reasons for Hope

Despite all this, there is reason for hope. None of this is inevitable. The harms I've described stem from choices about how A.I. is developed, deployed and governed. Choices rooted in principles like human dignity, solidarity, the common good and the option for the poor are possible.

For instance, while warning of risks, Vatican leaders have also been clear that these new technologies could offer opportunities for tremendous social improvement. As Bishop Paul Tighe has observed, A.I. has the ability to remind us of "humanity's capacity to learn, to innovate, to develop, which is a God-given capacity." Looking toward the future, some are working toward A.I. development as a "as a pro-human, pro-worker tool," and some economists are seeking to harness its "transformative potential to act as a force-multiplier for human skills and expertise by expanding worker capabilities." Education technologies offer another potential opportunity for hope if the right choices are made.

Health care provides another example. "Antiqua et Nova" addresses health care directly, discussing how A.I. can assist medical diagnosis and expand access to care, and calls on health care providers to "reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbors."

When it comes to the development of artificial intelligence, then, we have choices to make. But who makes those choices, and in service of what ends?As we face these choic-

An Amazon Web Services data center in Ashburn, Va. Low-income communities have typically endured the brunt of the air pollution created by data centers built to handle the increasing demands of artificial intelligence.

OSV News photo/Jonathan Ernst, Reuters

es, it's important that we avoid both naïve optimism and fearful apocalypticism. And we don't need to wade through the tsunami of conflicting data and studies about the effects of A.I. that seem to wash over us every day before we take steps to respond. We know that the poor and vulnerable are currently being harmed, and we're not powerless.

Catholics have an important role to play in this societal response and can bring significant resources to this work, including moral clarity about what's at stake and the moral resources to respond. "Antiqua et Nova" reminds us of the principle at the heart of those resources: "The order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way around."

So what are some of those resources, and how can they help shape our responses to the "new things" that are arising with the development of artificial intelligence? Shortly after his election, Pope Leo specifically called on the church to offer "the treasury of her social teaching to developments in the field of artificial intelligence." Rooted in a robust vision of human dignity and the common good, the tradition of Catholic social thought contributes an essential moral vocabulary and framework for discernment and action in our current challenging moment

First, it offers an emphasis on the *inherent human dignity of each person*, created in the image and likeness of God, regardless of age, productivity or stage in life.

Second, that treasury includes *an understanding of the common good* that recognizes that progress must serve all, not just the powerful few. Advancing the common good means working toward a time when, as Pope Francis noted, "no one remains the victim of a system, however advanced and efficient, that fails to value the intrinsic dignity and contribution of each person."

Third, the Catholic social tradition underscores *the dignity of work*. As "Antiqua et Nova" teaches, work is not merely a means to earn income, but "part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment"—and technology should support workers rather than forcing them to approximate the output or behavior of machines.

Fourth, this tradition emphasizes *solidarity*. As Firer Hinze reminds us, solidarity means "the recognition, acceptance, and responsible engagement of our interdependencies with neighbors near and far," resisting "falsely atomistic or fatalistic understandings of personhood, work, and economy."

Fifth, our tradition gives pride of place to the *preferential option for the poor*: We evaluate from the bottom up, centering those at the margins. Pope Leo affirms this in "Dilexi Te": "The poor are at the heart of the Church because 'our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern

for the integral development of society's most neglected members.'"

From Ideas to Reality

These principles are not just abstractions; they provide criteria for helping us determine what concrete actions to take in response to the challenges of our age.

Along with resources from the Gospel and Catholic social teaching, the church also brings distinctive practical resources to these challenges: institutional presence through parishes, schools and hospitals in communities around the world; academic strength through research and formation of leaders at church-sponsored institutions; a tradition of engagement in public life through political witness, popular movements and the work of organizers in countless communities; and a renewed commitment to listening to and accompanying the vulnerable, as witnessed in the Synod on Synodality's final document and through the efforts of those working to implement it.

Catholic institutions are already putting these principles to work. To take one example, the DELTA Network, launched at the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Ethics and the Common Good under the leadership of Meghan Sullivan, offers a faith-based framework for A.I. ethics built on Christian principles: dignity, embodiment, love, transcendence and agency. This network is developing practical formation resources for scholars, educators, faith leaders and young people to help respond to advances in artificial intelligence.

DELTA isn't just for Christians; decision-makers at places like YouTube and Google are paying attention and looking for guidance from such networks. In fact, the church's strong call to keep the human person at the center of these developing technologies has also garnered attention and collaboration from companies like I.B.M. and Microsoft, which have sought the church's wisdom on the ethical implications of A.I.

And the church's response isn't only academic. Labor and community organizing are forms of applied Catholic social teaching, whether that means workers bargaining collectively for dignified wages or residents responding to a data center's arrival in their town. Organizers can help people respond more effectively.

Vincent Alvarez, former president of the New York City Central Labor Council, has observed that working families are already facing these questions—in labor markets being reshaped by A.I., in rising energy costs driven by the energy requirements of data centers, and in policy battles where the influence of big tech companies is, in his words, "as overwhelming as it is troubling." He says that this is where the Catholic Church is uniquely positioned,

> **Technologies driven by artificial intelligence are already disregarding the poor.**

because Catholic conferences and policy organizations already exist and engage legislators on these issues, and are using Catholic principles to help shape their responses.

What Next?

While advances in artificial intelligence can offer remarkable benefits, the harms they bring are happening to real people, right now, and at scale. And the rapid pace of A.I. development means that the window for helping to shape these systems, insisting that they serve persons and not the other way around, is not permanently open.

But this is not cause for despair or fear. We can work together to bring the Catholic social tradition and the principles it rests on—like respect for human dignity and a commitment to the common good—to the choices we make in our families, communities, workplaces and in political life.

The question before us is not whether A.I. will transform our world. It is already doing so. The question is whether that transformation will serve everyone, including those who are poor. The choices embedded in these systems will either reflect our beliefs about the dignity of the human person and our obligations to the poor, or they will reproduce existing inequalities.

Pope Leo writes of a church "that sets no limits to love, that knows no enemies to fight but only men and women to love." This is what the Gospel calls us to in our current moment, as in all moments: love of God and love for our neighbors, especially those who are poor.

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A Layman Preaching the Common Good

Lessons from 50 years at the intersection of Catholic social teaching and public life

By John Carr

When I was young, I wanted to be a priest or a senator. The two Johns, President John F. Kennedy and Pope John XXIII, had a huge impact on a young Irish Catholic kid. I entered a high school seminary at the age of 14 and spent four years in a college seminary. Along the way, I fell in love with my wife, Linda, which enriched my life in every way and ended the idea of becoming a priest. I ran for the Minnesota House of Representatives at the age of 24 and lost, and that ended the path to become a senator.

Instead, I have been blessed to spend 50 years at the intersection of faith and politics, Catholic social teaching and public life. My vocation was not to the priesthood or public service, but as a layman working to help the church share, apply and act on the principles of Catholic social teaching.

Looking back on those 50 years at the age of 75, I have retired with a heart full of gratitude and a lot of lessons I learned along the way.

I was the oldest of seven children in an Irish Catholic family full of faith, love and occasional crisis. It was a mixed marriage. Both my parents were Minnesota Catholics, but my mother was from St. Paul and my dad from Minneapolis, which is a bigger deal than most people understand. My mother and her family were committed Republicans. My dad and his family were diehard Democrats. One lesson I learned at an early age was that faithful Catholics could express their faith in different ways in public life.

I grew up in South Minneapolis, not far from the sites of the awful killings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good by federal agents, the murder of George Floyd and the shooting of schoolchildren at Mass at Annunciation Catholic Church. It was a very different time, full of hope, not fear, grief and anger. The examples of care for neighbors and community, and the solidarity we now see in the aftermath of awful violence, are what I experienced as a child.

Over five decades, I worked in the social ministry of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and as the secretary of social concerns in the Archdiocese of Washington. For more than 20 years, I was the director of justice and peace efforts of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Working for the U.S. bishops, I saw the Gospel at work in our nation and around the world. But my work also sometimes tested my faith.

Over the last 13 years, I founded, led and retired from the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, which promotes dialogue, convenes leaders and encourages young people to share the principles of Catholic social teaching and advance the

Cardinal Peter Turkson and John Carr speak at Georgetown University on May 31, 2017.

common good. I also had the opportunity to teach Georgetown students about Catholic social thought, Pope Francis and public life.

There was some time away from work within the church, serving as director of the White House Conference on Families under President Carter, serving as director of the National Committee on Full Employment under Coretta Scott King, and spending a period as a residential fellow on faith and public life at the Harvard Institute of Politics. But I found that my vocation, my calling, my place was in the social ministry of the Catholic Church.

Institutional Lessons

Over these 50 years, I have learned that this work should begin with our faith, not our politics; with the person of Jesus Christ, not political leaders; with the Eucharist, not rallies; and with principles of Catholic social teaching, not the details of public policy or ideological agendas.

One lesson is that "and" is the most important word in Catholic social teaching. Our faith puts things together that our society and culture pull apart. Human life and dignity. Human rights and responsibilities. Family and community. Solidarity and subsidiarity. Care for the planet and the poorest people on earth. I have found it more helpful to use "and" rather than "but" in talking about Catholic social mission. For example, saying "protection of human life begins with the unborn child, but it doesn't end there" sends one message, perhaps one of judgment. Saying "the protection of human life begins with the unborn child, and it doesn't end there" conveys another message, perhaps that we are in this together. In a church with differing priorities, responsibilities and ministries, we can divide up the work, but we shouldn't divide the community of believers.

I have also seen that the "Pick a Pope" approach to Catholic social teaching that sometimes haunts our community of faith can be divisive and destructive. We hear: "I am a part of the John Paul II generation.... Benedict was my kind of Pope.... Team Francis.... Pope Leo agrees with me, not you." Each of these popes in his own way has clearly affirmed, strengthened and taught our social doctrine and challenged all of us. Our new American pope, with his Chicago roots and ministry in Peru, chose the name Leo to lift up this social doctrine. His first formal teaching, the apostolic exhortation "Dilexi Te," calls us to place the poor at the center of our faith, our lives and our society. I hope Pope Leo, with his American ties and experience, can be the pope who brings us together.

Pope Francis, with his simple ways and powerful words, was Catholic social teaching in action. However, some resisted him, suggesting he didn't "get" the U.S. church, didn't like the United States, didn't understand us. In the most recent conclave, the cardinals took less than 24 hours to choose an American pope who speaks our language, knows us and "gets us." When Pope Leo leads us forward on the demands of Catholic social teaching, maybe the right question is not whether the pope gets us, but whether we get the pope—and whether we are prepared to listen, learn and act in new ways.

Another lesson: Leadership matters. I have learned that good leadership is critical, but bad or failed leadership can be more consequential. Consider how reckless leadership in the White House is damaging our democratic institutions and threatening the common good of our nation. Consider the moral, spiritual and institutional costs of Catholic leaders who failed to confront sexual abuse by members of the clergy. These costs were personal and professional for me. I shared eight lessons I learned when I broke my silence as a survivor in 2018 at a public dialogue held by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life and in America.

I have seen two kinds of ecclesial leadership. If you think we are being overwhelmed by the culture, there is a temptation to hunker down, to just preserve and protect what we have, to judge and condemn. But if you think we have the principles the world needs, you want our leaders to seek to engage and persuade, to listen and learn. My friend the journalist Mark Shields often said, "You can tell the health of an organization by whether they are looking for heretics or converts."

Limitations of leaders come not just from poor judgment or ideological blinders but also from isolation. Too many leaders live in a bubble, spending most of their time with people who share their views, admire their leadership, and want to preserve their own influence and access. They have assistants and colleagues unwilling or afraid to speak candidly, challenge assumptions or ask hard questions. Every leader needs someone who will say, "You have many good ideas, but this is not one of them."

It is also important to recognize that money matters. We used to be a church that lived primarily on the small donations of millions of people at Mass. Many major Catholic institutions now greatly depend on large gifts from affluent people. Their generosity is admirable and wonderful for the church, and our Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown was made possible by the investment of generous people and foundations who believed in our mission. But it also seems that the Sunday collection has often been replaced by a series of endless capital campaigns that require leaders to spend time and seek support from primarily wealthy people. One

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consequence may be a reluctance to speak or act boldly out of fear of alienating vital donors.

The boards of many of our Catholic universities, charities, ministries, hospitals and media include major donors and powerful people with little or no representation of the families, communities and people these ministries seek to serve. This makes sense in some ways, but it means the governance of our institutions often does not reflect the diversity of our community of faith and that our leaders spend a great deal of time with, and need the approval of, only a small part of our community.

Political Lessons

Catholic leadership in public life is particularly challenging. During my time at the bishops' conference, I assisted our bishops in outlining both responsibilities and limitations in political life in their "Faithful Citizenship" statements. Drawing on these documents and my own experience, I have learned that the institutional church and its pastors are called to minister in four particular ways.

First, the church should be political, but not partisan. Politics is how our nation chooses policies and priorities that affect the lives and dignity of all of us. The church and its leaders cannot be silent. However, the church cannot be chaplain for any party, cheerleader for any public official or apologist for any administration.

Second, it should be principled, but not ideological. The church and its leaders cannot abandon principles on life and dignity; but to advance our principles, they can and should work with those who may not share all our convictions. The church should help build bridges across partisan and ideological differences to advance the common good.

Third, it should be civil, but not silent. Calling people names is not a way to persuade, but silence is sometimes acquiescence in what is wrong. A test of faith and institutional integrity is whether we can challenge those in power and even our allies when they violate Catholic principles.

Finally, we should be engaged, but not used. Relationships with public leaders are essential. But we cannot trade our independence for access. Religious leaders cannot become props in photo ops or window dressing for leaders who do not take our principles, experience or advice seriously.

On Capitol Hill and in the White House, what we do is often more persuasive than what we believe. We feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, educate the young and welcome the stranger. Our everyday experience and ministries of charity, education and health care provide knowledge, urgency and credibility.

Lifting up "the least of these" (Mt 25) is at the heart of this work. Overcoming poverty was usually a priority for both political parties, though they often differed on how. Those days are gone. President Trump, Vice President Vance and Elon Musk have actually targeted the programs that serve the poorest people in our nation and world, destroying our capacity to help hungry people around the world and cutting nutrition and health care to pay for tax cuts for wealthy people here at home. And most Democrats do not talk about poverty as a priority.

In the Catholic community, I sometimes sense that much of the left has left—and the right has almost unlimited resources to advance their political, ideological and ecclesial agendas. This has sometimes included resisting the mission and message of Pope Francis and advocating for the policies and tolerating the behavior of President Trump. For those of us trying to live our faith between these factions, it is not easy to find the resources, to create spaces for dialogue, and to challenge ideological and partisan agendas of both left and right that undermine a consistent commitment to human life and dignity.

When the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was more united, clear about its mission and active in reaching out to national leaders in both parties, it could make a difference. Some examples include the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban, the refundable Child Tax Credit, renewal of the Voting Rights Act, the Hyde Amendment banning federal funding of abortion, debt relief for developing nations, PEPFAR to fund H.I.V.-AIDS programs in Africa, the International Religious Freedom Act, a halt to the use of land mines, and protecting Medicaid, food stamps and other elements of the safety net.

I wish our national leaders had listened to the bishops' questions on the morality and wisdom of the Iraq wars. But this is more difficult in an intensely polarized Washington, driven by money, ego and partisan combat, and in a church with its own divisions and credibility challenges.

In recent years, the U.S.C.C.B. has reflected those divisions and has eliminated or dramatically cut back on its communications, anti-poverty and justice efforts. More recently, bishops have united to defend the lives and dignity of immigrants. Perhaps Pope Leo XIV, with his American roots and focus on Catholic social teaching and the poor,

John Carr speaks during a panel discussion in Washington on Feb. 1, 2019.

CNS photo/Ralph Alswang, courtesy Leadership Roundtable

can help the conference renew and strengthen its social mission. I hope the Catholic community can unite around defending human dignity whenever it is threatened, especially the dignity of those who are poor and powerless. It is hard to imagine an effective Catholic contribution to U.S. public life without principled, persistent, consistent and courageous leadership from the U.S. Catholic bishops and their conference.

Lessons From the Initiative

When I left the U.S.C.C.B. in 2012, I was proud of the leadership the bishops had shown and the conference's advocacy on major domestic and international issues. I was also convinced we needed more Catholic contributions to public life: more lay leadership, more dialogue connecting Catholic social teaching and public life, and more diverse voices, especially those of women, younger leaders, and Latino and Black leaders.

In 2013, the president of Georgetown University, Jack DeGioia, invited me to launch the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. It was an untested idea. We had high hopes, but the response far exceeded our expectations. In a dozen years, the Initiative organized over 210 dialogues, reaching nearly half a million people, including almost 50 special gatherings involving 85,000 young leaders and young Latino leaders.

We learned a lot in these efforts. There is a hunger for the moral vocabulary of Catholic social thought, for principles of human life and dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity. a priority for the poor, care for creation, and the common good that offer a moral framework to challenge the bitter partisan and ideological battles that undermine the mission of the church and the health of our nation.

There is a thirst for civil, principled dialogue as an alternative to the angry polarization and tribal politics of the broken status quo.

There is an an openness, especially among young people and Latino leaders, to move beyond the stale arguments and divisive factions that often dominate Catholic and national life. There is a growing exhaustion with the chaos and destruction of these times.

But there is still a fear of questioning or challenging the orthodoxy of one's own political party or ecclesiastical faction. Some Republicans are afraid to speak candidly about Donald Trump. Some Democrats are unwilling to challenge their party's litmus tests on abortion. And some Catholics are reluctant to dissent publicly from their ecclesial faction's agenda or priorities.

Dialogue and conversation are better ways to engage challenging issues than speeches, lectures and PowerPoint presentations. In Initiative dialogues, no one gives a speech—not cardinals, professors or even the president of

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the United States.

Reflecting the diversity of our church and nation is not an option but an obligation. More than half of our dialogue participants have been women. Almost half have been Latino, Black or leaders from other minority communities. Many are young and emerging leaders. This is not political correctness; this is who we are. We have tried to build bridges, cross boundaries and seek common ground at a time of intense polarization.

We have sought to encourage the next generation of leaders with special gatherings for young leaders, especially young Latino Catholics. We have learned the wisdom of Pope Francis' warning that an institution turned in on itself is not healthy. The Initiative focuses outward, not inward, and on faith and public life, not internal disputes. Young people are less interested in battles over authority or internal processes than in how the Gospel and Catholic social teaching call them to go beyond isolation to make a difference in our hurting world.

A Personal Lesson—and Reasons for Hope

On Jan. 1 of this year, I retired from the Initiative and Georgetown with enormous gratitude, deep concern for our church and nation, and abiding hope for the future based on the faith and people who have brought me through these 50 years.

I find hope in the journey of our family, especially the hope and promise that come with 10 grandchildren. I also find hope in the tremendous response to our Initiative at Georgetown, especially our work with young leaders, which will continue and grow under the outstanding leadership of Kim Daniels and the Initiative team.

I draw hope from my personal journey of recovery. My family gave me enduring faith and love, and also a history of alcoholism. It took a long time, too much time, but I finally faced my alcoholism and found a lifegiving path to sobriety over 20 years ago.

The steps of recovery, Catholic faith and Ignatian spirituality have much in common. You acknowledge your dependence on a loving God. You recognize you are not in charge of everything, but you are responsible for your own actions. You face your own weaknesses and failures. You share those failures and make amends. You try to live your life one day at a time, seeking to serve others and do God's will. And you do all this in community; you are not alone on this journey. These lessons have saved my life. They also offer a path to renewal and recovery for our wounded church and nation.

My hope also comes from my enduring conviction that the principles of Catholic social teaching offer the best path forward and lifegiving alternatives to the anger and dysfunction in our nation and the divisions and drift in our church. This traditional moral framework helps us, in the words of Pope Francis, to share "the Joy of the Gospel" and seek "a better kind of politics."

I still have hope that our community of faith can unite across differences in a renewed commitment to mission, founded on Jesus, shaped by the Gospel, anchored in the Eucharist and expressed in the principles of Catholic social teaching. I hope and pray we can come together to defend the dignity of all God's children and carry out Jesus' mission as expressed in the Gospel of Luke, "to bring good news to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind, and set the downtrodden free."

John Carr retired on Jan. 1, 2026, from the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, which he founded in 2013. He previously served as director of the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for more than 20 years. He also was a Washington correspondent for **America***, chair of the board of Bread for the World and a residential fellow at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University.*

A statue of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

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A Relic of Faith

After a long day, a saint's bones lead to a moment of hope

By Emily Webber

I already had a long history with St. Thérèse of Lisieux when I learned that her relics were coming to the United States, including to a church just 30 minutes from my house. The opportunity to venerate the bones of the 19th-century saint was rare, because the relics leave France only once every 25 years and visit only a handful of locations. I thought of it as a pilgrimage—just what I needed.

As I left my house, the coming dawn was pushing away the darkness. Only a few squirrels and birds rustled around, and the cool, foggy air, uncommon for Florida, added a quiet mystery. My mother, retired and in her late 70s, prefers to sleep in, but I, with an 8-year-old at home, get up early all the time. Yet I had not slept well the night before, having felt full of anticipation and a restlessness I couldn't shake. I had high expectations for how the day would go.

"I didn't even eat anything this morning," I told my mother when I picked her up.

We had no idea how crowded it would be or when we would be back home. We used to attend this sort of thing often together—healing services, retreats, alleged apparition sites—but had not attempted one in a long time.

From her small purse, my mother pulled out something wrapped in aluminum foil. "Well," she said, "I've got French toast if you're hungry."

It reminded me so much of her mother, my *oma*, now long gone, I could only laugh. Oma always offered nourishment but was not one for practical travel foods like granola bars or pretzels. Once she sent me to the airport in the late morning with packed sandwiches, breaded chicken and strudel, all after offering me a quick shot of Bailey's liquor. This memory surfacing seemed like a sign that the day would be as wonderful as I had hoped.

I wanted to tell my mother but instead stayed silent on our journey. She did the same, both of us trapped in a vicious cycle of never saying enough because we are always afraid to say too much. She often told me she was scared

of being admonished by people for saying the wrong thing. Meanwhile, I could not find words to explain to her the complicated web of cracks that had formed beneath my feet when my relationship with God and the Catholic Church turned complex.

I first encountered St. Thérèse when I was a lonely high school student, and she was still a few years away from being named a doctor of the church, the third woman and the youngest to receive the honor. I found a holy card of her on my English teacher's desk one day after class. I was intrigued by the black-and-white photo, taken in 1896, of this young woman in a religious habit with a slight smile and serious eyes. In her handwriting, written in French, were the words: *To love is to give all, and to give oneself.* There was something special about it, and I took it from his desk. That may sound terrible, but I was too shy to ask him about it. I photocopied it and returned the original the next day, fairly sure he never even knew it was gone.

Having the holy card gave me comfort, and during this time I became familiar with St. Thérèse and her way of being. I loved her because she had a devoted white spaniel and loved the ocean. I loved her for her fight to gain early entrance into the Carmelite convent because she knew she belonged there. She endured periods of fear and darkness and did not let it warp her soul. She transformed ordinary actions into ones of great love and devotion, pledging to remember those on earth by showering them with roses from heaven.

A year ago, my husband unexpectedly lost his job. In the panic and stress of the moment, I thought of St. Thérèse and wanted to hold her holy card again. I tore my house apart but couldn't find it. My mother kept saying maybe it was meant for someone else who needed it more now. Selfishly, I didn't find comfort in her reasoning, but I gave up looking. Instead, I sat in silence for a few minutes each day and prayed a novena to her, asking for her to help my husband through a tough time. Days after I finished my novena, I saw a tote bag full of fresh roses hanging on the back of a chair in a bookstore. Weeks later, my husband got a job he loved, starting just days before the 100th anniversary of St. Thérèse's canonization and feast day. Later still, I opened a random book on my shelf and found the holy card. None of this was a miracle, just life working itself out, but it felt as if a dialogue between me and Thérèse had opened again.

I did, however, hope for something spectacular for myself on the Sunday my mom and I went to see Thérèse's relics. I imagined being in the presence of her bones would spark a dramatic change in me. I would suddenly feel I belonged in the church again—my soul made whole. Once an ardent Catholic, nearly becoming a religious sister, I ended up an outsider, mostly because of the sorry state of my own soul. But I have spent many years longing to return to the rituals and beliefs I once held so close, to restore the personal relationship with God I had once experienced.

I had convinced myself that no change or acceptance was possible for me.

A Moment of Light

My mother and I arrived at the church to find an almost empty parking lot. We planned to attend the 7:30 a.m. Mass and then visit the small chapel with the relics. We argued over where to sit in church. When the Mass started, a man a few rows away shouted the first word of each response, which startled me every time. Then, in the chapel, we lined up to have our moment with the relics.

Nothing went as I had envisioned. The pastor stopped the line midway to wipe down the glass cabinet protecting the relics. The next woman to go knelt on the ground and held so many items up against the glass that when she got up, she knocked the stand it sat on, causing the whole thing to shake back and forth. When it was our turn, I told my mother to go first because I wanted a moment alone, but the ushers pushed us forward together, even though there wasn't a long line. In the end, there was really nothing to see. We stood before a reliquary that looked like an ornate, tiny coffin under protective glass. Too self-conscious to hold anything up to the glass or touch it, I moved on quickly to let others take their turns.

As we settled back in the pews of the chapel, my mother kept trying to talk to me. When I waved her away, she approached one of the ushers in the front.

"What's in there?" my mother asked.

"It's St. Thérèse," the woman said sharply, because she didn't understand at first, and I felt mortified. Then her tone softened a little. "Her clavicle," she whispered and drew her hand across her upper chest.

The day was not at all like what I had imagined in my mind. Nice, yes, but entirely ordinary. I felt the same way leaving as when I had walked in. But the priest's words from the homily nagged at me. He had started by saying it is a sin to allow yourself to stay in a state of despair. I thought a lecture on not trusting God's plan would follow. Yet he explained despair in this way: as turning your back on a re-

I know that I stood in that moment and place because St. Thérèse drew me there.

lationship with God because you believe you have sinned so greatly that you cannot be forgiven. St. Thérèse herself said, "It is true I am not always faithful, but I never lose courage." I saw now that I had convinced myself that no change or acceptance was possible for me and had surrendered to a state of despair.

No switch flipped in me that morning with St. Thérèse; all the right answers didn't immediately flood my soul. But I know that I stood in that moment and place because St. Thérèse drew me there, and the smallest ray of light came through the cracks. She continued to speak to me, still. The priest's words opened another possibility. It changed my perspective to allow me to begin to focus first on a relationship between God and me alone—not an institution. And it felt good to know that the relationship did not rest entirely on my own shoulders, that I had support from saints like Thérèse.

I can't know for sure if the reliquary did in fact contain St. Thérèse's clavicle. But the usher's mention of the clavicle stayed with me. I learned that the clavicle is the first bone to form and the last to fuse. The image gave me words I couldn't have come up with before. When I talk to my mother next, I'll thank her for asking about the relics that day. I'll tell her that my faith journey is like the clavicle—present from the very beginning, but only now, finally, starting to connect as it was always meant to.

Emily Webber *is a writer of criticism, fiction and nonfiction whose work has appeared in The Rumpus, Ploughshares and elsewhere. She is the author of* Macerated, a chapbook of flash fiction, *and lives in South Florida with her husband and son.*

SYMPATHY FOR THE ANGEL

By James Davis May

According to various legends, the devil and Saint-Michael opposed each other several times on Mont-Dol. One day they came to blows: Satan was thrown against the rock with such violence that his rear-end left a mark there; then, trying not to fall from the cliff, he scratched deeply into the rock.

—Tourist sign, Mont-Dol, Brittany (translation from French)

As I show my daughter the grooves
the devil gouged into the rock
as he slid off the cliff, I wonder about Michael.
Even in this victory he seems doomed
to vigilance, the paranoia of a father who knows
evil is out there dreaming up new versions of itself,
spinning its ring of skeleton keys that open any lock
(especially the ones that have been checked
and rechecked). Wouldn't it be exhausting
to be tasked with winning this cosmic game
of whack-a-mole?

Across the bay, the angel stands
with his sword drawn, wings out, heel
pinning down the dragon in the unreal gold statue
above the grand abbey of Mont-St.-Michel.
But here near the cliff where they battled,
there's just a small church, La Chapelle l'Espérance,
the Chapel of Hope, that could hold, at most,
five or six people. Inside, a sign apologizes
for the recent price increase for votive candles.
"The maintenance of this sacred place," it says,
"is becoming harder and harder to keep up."

James Davis May *is the author of two poetry collections, most recently* Unusually Grand Ideas (Louisiana State University Press, 2023).

A statue of Saint Michael the archangel in the Cathedral of Sts. Michael and Gudula in Brussels, Belgium

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Intertwined Under the Stars

Connecting my Catholic faith and my environmental advocacy

By Megan Quinn

The insulting shouts are met with cheers from within the town hall.

At the microphone, a man yells at the life-size cardboard cutout of Eli Crane, our U.S. Representative from District 2, who had not responded to the invitation to the town hall from his constituents in Flagstaff, Ariz.

"Eli Crane does not care about his constituents! He is a self-centered disgrace, who doesn't even live in his district!"

The room sends forth an uproar of agreement. I squirm in my seat. As a Catholic who is active in environmental and creation care advocacy, I also don't agree with many of Eli Crane's policies, but this moment felt uncomfortably emblematic of the way I've noticed our country falling deeper into division and hatred.

About a month before that, I had been driving the winding roads through the mountains of the Gila River wilderness area in New Mexico. As I ascended to the high point, a view of jagged rolling mountains as far as I could see made my jaw drop. After about an hour of driving through the epic mountain scenery, I arrived at a campground where people were setting up tents.

This was the weekend of the Gila Community Campout, a gathering for the community surrounding the river to connect with one another and discuss protecting their beloved wilderness. I was attending as the representative for the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, an organization where I had served as a "Laudato Si'" intern, advocating for the environment from a Catholic perspective.

The next morning, a group of about 20 people gathered for a hike.

"Let's do introductions!"

I felt my muscles tighten. I knew that many people in the environmental movement were not fans of organized religion. I wondered how they would respond to a faith-based organization being a sponsor for this event. In addition, I had driven eight hours from Arizona, so I wasn't a part of their community. I felt like an outsider.

"I'm Megan Quinn and I am the representative from the National Religious Partnership for the Environment."

There were a few nods, a few eyes that widened and some blank expressions.

The hike began by us all crossing the Gila River. After we had laughed about our now-wet shoes, a woman approached me.

As we hiked, she told me about how she had grown up in a Mormon family in Utah but was not religious anymore.

She told me that environmental protection was not talked about when she was growing up. Salt Lake City was then one of the most polluted cities in the United States, and she said she had bad asthma as a child, but no one ever made the connection.

"But, lately, I've noticed that some of the churches are taking action. I've noticed one church in the community being a big advocate for clean air."

Our guide stopped us to point out we were walking through a burn scar from a fire that had burned through the Gila Wilderness some years ago.

My new friend continued: "I think the work you are doing is very important. You are the person who can be the bridge between different groups of people and get us all working to protect the earth."

In each of the conversations I had with different people throughout the hike, I could feel the Holy Spirit moving among us. Each person shared their different experiences with religion, and I was able to share how my Catholic faith is what inspired me to care for the earth.

This building of relationships across differences of background, faith, race and age—surrounded by the peace of God's beautiful creation, even the land that had been scarred—felt like a sort of healing.

After a day of splashing in the river and listening to stories from the Native Apache people, we sat together under the stars of the night sky.

The park ranger told us about DarkSky-designated cities and wilderness areas, which have made special efforts to fight light pollution, and how the park staff had changed the lights on their buildings to do the same.

"It's helpful for animals migrating, like birds," he said. "And we all can enjoy looking at the stars."

The sky was indeed littered with stars, so many that they made me feel small. The ranger pointed out the planet Mars with his laser pointer, and we all stared in awe at its slight red tint.

At that moment, I felt as if the stars were bringing us all together in a shared moment of connection. Their vast expanse was reminding us of the power of our deep interconnectedness as people on God's earth.

My favorite "Laudato Si'" quote came to mind: "Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself" (No. 66).

As evidenced by the nervousness I had felt at the beginning of the campout, sometimes it has been hard for me to find a home in the environmental advocacy space. At my church, I feel I am one of the few people who cares so deeply about creation. In my environmental career and among my peers, I feel that the way my faith drives my care for the environment is not totally understood.

But in this moment underneath the stars, I felt wholly connected to God, to my neighbors around me and to God's creation. I felt God bringing a new dimension of purpose to my creation care work.

As a person of faith, I can be a listening ear and builder of bridges, creating space for people to connect with God, his creation and other people. I believe it is through authentic, deep connections like those that I experienced at this community campout that we can bring God's reconciliation, healing and resurrection to a divided world.

As everyone took turns looking through the telescope, I prayed.

I gave thanks for the healing I found in other people.

I gave thanks for the way God showed me his love in the vastness of the night sky.

I gave thanks for the way this community had come together to connect and take action to protect their local land, their dark skies and the life-giving water of the river.

I prayed that all the world may come to know this healing power of relationship.

Back at the town hall, I stepped up to the microphone. I took a deep breath.

I shared my worries about how wildfire was affecting my community and how I am concerned it is damaging our safety and national security. As I spoke, I remembered the moment under the stars and the connectedness I felt to God, my neighbor and creation.

As I drove home that night, I looked up at the stars. I am lucky enough to live in a city with little light pollution and continue to receive God's hope and love every time I look at the night sky. Now the sky is a constant reminder that as a Catholic, I am called to create space for people to reflect on their own stories, connect with God's creation and work together to bring healing to our hurting world.

Megan Quinn *is an intern at Grand Canyon National Park sponsored by the American Conservation Experience. She previously worked as a "Laudato Si'" advocate at the National Religious Partnership for the Environment.*

Editors' note: ***America*** *has become aware that the article "Finding God in the Laundry Room" (March) and the poem "Digital Vespers" (September 2025) were submitted with false information about their authorship. Accordingly, we have removed these texts and the author's profile from our website.*

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Dylan Thomas and the Extravagant Perfection of Childhood

By Jayme Stayer

I love nothing more than a good biography, preferably a door-stopper the size of a Crock-Pot. Steaming with detail, juicy biographies of authors and composers fill my bookshelves. (Related guilty pleasure: memoirs of opera divas who are out to settle scores.) What is it that makes artist biographies irresistible?

For me, it is their unique combination of history, gossip, psychology and exegesis. Some years ago, I inhaled A. David Moody's three-volume, 1,700-page biography of Ezra Pound over the course of a few weeks. That I kept stopping to take notes was the only reason I couldn't read faster. I start an artist's biography because I know something of their work and want to know more. I finish most biographies in a similar state: with an enlarged view of the artist's motivations and context, and a desire to absorb more of their work.

This is not the reaction I had to Andrew Lycett's *Dylan Thomas: A New Life*. There have been a handful of Thomas's poems that I've loved and taught for decades. I had hoped that reading a biography would advance me to other poems. But even though I have a high tolerance for artists who are jerks, this biography diminished my view of the artist and his art.

Thomas was a man whose natural bent was sweetness and charm, but he spent most of his adulthood in a drunken stupor, constantly biting the hands that fed him—vomiting in their fireplaces, insulting their kindness—and frequently cheating on his wife. After a spectacular bout of drinking at the White Horse Tavern in New York City, he died at St. Vincent's Hospital at the age of 39. Other biographies note that Thomas was affectionate with his children; but a father who is emotionally distant, regularly drunk, often violent and then entirely dead does more damage than good. His wife, Caitlin, was an equally self-destructive narcissist. The account of their marriage reads like an affair of two monstrous adolescents. (A Jesuit friend who grew up in Swansea, Wales, near the Thomas home, recalls stories of the Thomases' crockery-smashing fights, which began, predictably, in pubs.)

Thomas did have a stable of friends and admirers who clung to him even in the worst of times, so he must have had a gift for friendship that went beyond his party tricks of mimicry and bawdy stories. Interestingly, there is a documentary of Caitlin Thomas's recollections of her first husband. It was filmed late in her life, after she had undertaken a 12-step program, and the result is edifying. Sober and witty, she offers a clear-eyed view of her own and her husband's failings. (Search YouTube for Vincent Kane's in-

terview with Caitlin, "The Leftover Wife," from 1977.)

Lycett helped me realize why three decades of owning a collection of Thomas's poems had not moved me beyond the few that I already loved. What I had hoped were undiscovered gems turned out to be nonsensical gibberish. As a writer, Thomas had no serious ideas he wanted to express, only a wan spirituality that waffled between atheistic humanism and benign voodoo, a politics that felt like kindergarten socialism, a sentimental love of humankind, and an abhorrence of war and suffering.

He had some murky ideas about the unity of life and the contiguity of growth and destruction. But it's all pretty thin stuff compared with the towering intellects of Eliot, Woolf, Moore, Yeats and Auden. Thomas was intellectually incurious, bored easily and aggrieved about his lack of a university education. He had instinctive rather than explicit aesthetic ideas, and his detestation of other writers was rooted in jealous insecurity rather than artistic principle. His primary desires were to play with language and perform in a resonant baritone.

In a course on modernist poetry that I taught last semester, I played a recording of Thomas reading his poem "And Death Shall Have No Dominion." The poem has no ideas in it other than the claim in the title. A hundred questions open up from this claim: If death does not have the last word, then what does? Is it love, resurrection, karmic cycles, Yeatsian reincarnation, absorption into the *Welt-Atem*? And why does death ultimately fail? How does it happen? Who can opt in or out?

Thomas is uninterested in exploring any such questions. Instead, the poem revels in gaudy, lavish wordiness and strange obscurities. However, it is still a poem that haunts. One of my students was besotted with the poem, and her memorized performance of it burned through the ceiling tiles of the classroom. Kvetch as you will, there's no denying Thomas's power.

This is all a rather ambivalent set-up for Thomas's "Fern Hill"—which I concede is an exquisitely perfect poem. Like all his verse, it is primarily an aural rather than an intellectual experience. There is exactly one obvious allusion—to the creation stories in Genesis. The poem requires no historical or biographical context to illuminate it meaningfully, although one relevant detail is that the poem draws on Thomas's memories of childhood summers spent at Fern Hill, his aunt's farm in Wales.

The speaker begins with a recollection of himself as a child on the farm:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.

It won't do to skim such poetry. Editing out the wordiness to get to the ideas short-circuits the poem's magic. Adjectives get transferred willy-nilly: "Lilting" surely describes the boy's aimlessly happy movements, yet here the adjective is ascribed to the house. John Ruskin took a dim view of such moves, dubbing them the "pathetic fallacy"—the attribution of human emotion to landscapes or objects. (Many great authors ignore Ruskin's prohibition.)

The formulation "happy as the grass was green" seems caught halfway between a simile and a grammatical analogy. The simile "happy as the grass" suggests another pathetic fallacy: Is it "I *am to* happy *as* grass *is to* green)? Or is it "I was happy *because* the grass was green?"

Whatever the semantic ambiguity here, it makes perfect sense as a nursery rhyme. In his imaginative play, the boy figures himself "honoured among wagons" (his retinue) and as "prince of the apple towns" (his kingdom). It is not nature that has draped the trees with hanging trim, but the god-like boy himself: "I lordly had the trees and leaves/ Trail with daisies and barley/ Down the rivers of the windfall light."

Poetic Structure

This is a poem about a lost paradise, being cast out of Eden forever. Note the last two words of the first stanza: "windfall light." They seem to refer to the leaves and vines that stream from the trees. But the words also evoke Genesis: Wind and light are images of God. Tucked between them is the Fall. The enemy in this paradise is not an evil serpent, but personified, capital-T Time. His danger is not yet noticed by the child, who is "young and easy," and whom Time—like an indulgent parent—allows to "hail and climb/ Golden in the heydays of his eyes." Time appears throughout the poem, capitalized at the beginning of lines, lowercase elsewhere, alternating between an unremarkable noun and a menacing abstraction.

The second stanza repeats the same form as the first: no end rhymes, no regular rhythm. But the line lengths are

Thomas had a stable of friends and admirers who clung to him even in the worst of times.

repeated, with lines 1-2 and 6-7 in something like hexameter (six stresses), while lines 3-5 and 8-9 are shorter in each stanza. The terraced indentations provide visual clues to the form. Here is more evocation of the child's imagination coloring his play among the barns and animals. Brooding Time is still there, not yet troublesome but allowing the child to "play and be/ Golden in the mercy of his means" and allowing his play beyond the threat of mortality.

The third stanza describes more pastoral scenery, with tuneful alliteration: "hay/ Fields high as the house"—an image that returns later as "house high hay." The boy recalls each night when the farm would disappear: "As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away." One of my students described this line in the language of child development: The boy has not yet learned object permanence. Groggily falling asleep to the sounds of hooting, he naïvely believes that every night the owls carry the farm somewhere else.

Equally miraculously, another bird (this time a rooster) summons the farm back every morning, like a traveler returning: "And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white/ With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder." The Genesis allusion is made explicit: "it was all/ Shining, it was Adam and maiden." The farm in summer is so achingly perfect that the speaker likens it to the beginning of creation itself: "So it must have been after the birth of the simple light/ In the first, spinning place." The inevitable fall from grace has been prefigured since the very first line of the poem, with its reference to "apple boughs." But it has been delayed by the boy's innocence and Time's forbearance. Even in the fifth stanza, the sun's daily revolutions are not yet signs of mortality but of rebirth: "In the sun born over and over,/ I ran my heedless ways."

But his heedlessness cannot last. Near the end of the fifth stanza, time begins to assert his power. The turn in the poem—that moment when the logic or emotion switches to another register—happens subtly, with the phrase "so few"

> *And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows*
> *In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs*
> *Before the children green and golden*
> *Follow him out of grace...*

It's easy to miss this quiet turn. Time does not assert himself with the brutal whack of a scythe, but with an intimation: What seem like infinite renewals are in fact *few*.

The two primary colors of the poem, green and golden, signify, respectively: nature, life, health; and value, purity, perfection. But these "children green and golden"—healthy, living, perfect—have no choice but to follow time "out of grace," out of Eden, into the realities of what Walt Whitman calls "this soiled world."

The speaker recalls his innocence now in light of its disappearance: "Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me/ Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand." Here are yet more birds, swallows signifying hope and spring. But time (not "Time") leads the child up into the barn's loft by the "shadow" of his hand: darkness, sin, ambiguity.

"Riding to sleep," the speaker does not hear the familiar owls carrying the farm away; rather, it is time who "fl[ies] with the high fields." This change means that he will not wake to the rooster and the reborn farm. He wakes instead "to the farm forever fled from the childless land." No farm, no innocence, no childhood. In the closing lines, the culmination of the Fall hits with dramatic force:

> *Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,*
> *Time held me green and dying*
> *Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

Earlier in the poem, the "mercy" of Time had been forbearance, as he patiently leaves the boy alone. But in retrospect, the speaker realizes that Time had never left him alone. All along, it had "held" him "green and dying"—both living and mortal. Time with a capital-T had always been drawing the "chains" of mortality around the oblivious boy, who sang in his innocence "like the sea"—a symbol of the unconscious, of what is vast, eternal and undiscovered.

•••

Dylan Thomas has always been ranked as a minor poet. In spite of new, critical editions of his work, his reputation has fallen even further in the 21st century. The modernist poetry anthology I use in the classroom has no space for even a single poem of Thomas's. Nevertheless, there's an important difference between a minor poet and a forgettable one. The most widely read poet in 19th-century America was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Who reads him now? By contrast, a minor poet still has something to contribute.

Sometimes the weakness of an artist can be turned to

great effect. Lotte Lehmann, the great German soprano of the early 20th century, had weak breath support—a rather incapacitating problem for an opera singer. But Lehmann startled connoisseurs by adding catch breaths, creating two or three arcs within a long line where no one else had needed to breathe. She did it so artistically that it seemed natural, as if she were illustrating something new about the melody rather than compensating for a weakness.

One of Thomas's weaknesses, a "semantic vagueness" (David Perkins's complaint), here works as nursery rhyme logic, which befits a poem about childhood. Other weaknesses include a bardic pose that borders on demagoguery, and a high rhetorical style that is musty and overdone. This style—his sensual layering of sound, his romanticized nostalgia—suggests that Thomas is a child of the Victorian era, a near-relative of Gerard Manley Hopkins, rather than of the prickly, brainy modernists who were his contemporaries. But in this poem, at least, his high rhetorical style and the extravagances of alliteration and assonance reflect a childlike wonder at the world.

To understand this poem, you don't need biography. Your own personal understanding of the loss of innocence and the pain of mortality serve just as well as Thomas's disastrous attempts at adulting. But to understand how this poem and a few others avoid the pitfalls of his other work, the biographical background is illuminating.

The context that matters is not that Thomas spent summers as a child on a farm—any decent artist could have invented such a childhood. The more relevant context is the yawning gap between the child and the adult. Thomas's youthful summers were idyllic, and his adult fall was low and sordid: alcoholism, adultery, financial insecurity, emotional instability, professional uncertainty, neglected responsibilities. Observing that gap, he feels the pain of lost innocence more than any stable adult might feel it. "Fern Hill" is an aching cry that turns both the observation and the feeling to artistic account, creating a childhood that is too perfect to be believed. When he is plumbing his own grief and nostalgia, rather than posing as an oracle, Thomas strikes the true lyric note, singing in his chains like the sea.

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Jayme Stayer on essential works of art

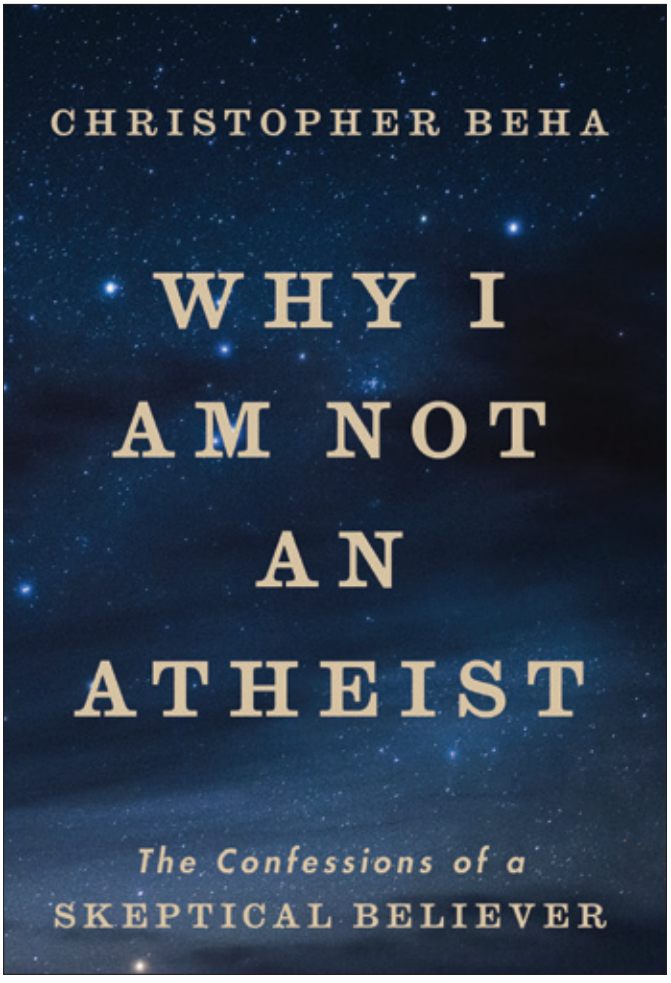
This essay is part of a series by Jayme Stayer, S.J., reflecting on essential works of art. Other essays can be found at americamagazine.org. In this series, Father Stayer reflects upon:

"Marina," by T. S. Eliot
T. S. Eliot believed that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

"I cannot live with You," by Emily Dickinson
"By force of her imagination and skill, Emily Dickinson could take the measure of solitude, opprobrium and even damnation."

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," by Richard Wilbur
"My short reading list for a desert island includes this poem by Wilbur: simple, lucid, joyful and profoundly humane."

METAPHYSICS WON'T SAVE US



Penguin Press / 432p $30

St. Anselm's famously convoluted "ontological" argument for the existence of God opens by invoking Psalm 14: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no god.'" This is not exactly a constructive opening to engage skeptics. Castigating the atheist as a "fool" is a conversation stopper.

O. K. Bouwsma, an American analytic philosopher you've probably never heard of, has a fascinating take on Psalm 14 (and Anselm). What if the one who says, "There is no god" is not shouting it in defiance but is whispering it "in his heart" as a despairing conclusion? What if this is less a refusal of faith than a *loss* of faith? What if the unbelief is born not of hubris but of wounds? Bouwsma has sympathy for this "fool": "He is desolate, tender with memories, but without hope. God, too, is only a memory."

Christopher Beha, the author of *Why I Am Not an Atheist*, is no fool. Nor does he treat the skeptic or unbeliever as a fool. But he knows of the loss of which Bouwsma speaks. *Why I Am Not an Atheist* is a memoir of his journey from cradle Catholic through painful departure, followed by intellectual wandering and wondering while trying on varieties of atheism, only to find—much to his own surprise—his way back to faith and the church. His foil is the famous British analytic philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russell, whose book *Why I Am Not a Christian* was published 100 years ago.

Beha is an accomplished novelist. His most recent novel, *The Index of Self-Destructive Acts*—an ambitious, intricate story of colliding destinies and divergent aspirations—was longlisted for the National Book Award. His earlier novel, *What Happened to Sophie Wilder*, is a sensitive exploration of our modern experiences of malaise and meaninglessness, faith and doubt. With this new work Beha returns to nonfiction, very much in the shape of his debut book. In *The Whole Five Feet* (2009), Beha recounted a harrowing year in which he attended to his dying aunt while also reading the entire shelf of the Harvard Classics—Charles Eliot's anthology of literature, history, philosophy and science from Plato to Darwin.

Why I Am Not an Atheist is also something of a bibliomemoir. But here Beha recounts decades of seeking through reading, trying to find the shape of a meaningful, sustainable worldview *sans Dieu*. Readers of Augustine's *Confessions* will find a familiar mix: a young prodigal's adventures entwined with an array of philosophical toe-dipping and the donning of various intellectual personas—all ways of trying to find himself.

A prelude provides the personal *exitus*: experiences of suffering and illness and disappointment that withered Beha's faith. The postlude provides the (expected) *reditus*: Inching his way into sacred spaces while finding new light in love, Beha finds his way back to the church. Faith has the shape of a new plausibility in his life. Meeting with a priest to talk about his intellectual struggles, Beha recalls: "He made no attempt to clear up my uncertainty, but when I'd finished talking, he offered to take my confession." This moving episode ("By the time he offered my absolution, I was in tears") exhibits Beha's new realization: Faith does not require certainty. One could receive the gifts of the Eucharist as a "skeptical believer." This is faith characterized by what Paul Ricoeur calls a "second naïveté," a recognition of the importance of sincere beliefs but also a faith informed by critical analysis and consideration.

The heart of the book is 21 chapters between these autobiographical bookends. The reader will find another "five feet" of philosophers and scientists who were Beha's companions after relinquishing faith as he was trying to figure out "what to believe instead." In these chapters, Beha's gifts as a novelist are deployed to provide clear, lively encapsulations of philosophers from Plato to Wittgenstein, including

perspicacious engagements with figures like Spinoza and Schopenhauer. If you weren't paying attention in college, this book is a liberal arts education pressed between two covers. Even as he is recounting thinkers whose ideas he ultimately rejected, Beha's expositions are generous and irenic. He has learned something from all of them.

Beha sees two versions of atheism as live options for trying to carve out a meaningful life in a world without God: either scientific materialism or Romantic idealism. Scientific materialism culminates in the so-called new atheists, but Beha tracks the intellectual roots of this in modernity. This is the path from Bacon to Bertrand Russell. If a young Beha was once tempted by this coldhearted option, the temptation wore off. Too melancholy and artistic for scientific materialism, he found the real intellectual tug was exerted by what he defines (somewhat curiously, I'd say) as Romantic idealism—the existential endeavor of forging meaning if we assume we are the only ones in the cosmos and this life is all we've got. Think: Camus as secular saint.

As one might expect, Beha finds both options wanting. But their inadequacy was unveiled not by despair or suffering. What these atheistic worldviews couldn't explain for Beha was the arrival of joy. Instead of the problem of evil, Beha faced the problem of happiness: "I had no framework for this gratitude." The arrival of love felt like a gift. He began looking for a Giver to whom he could return thanks. "I thought that once I'd faced down death without God, I could never possibly have need of him again. It turned out the thing I couldn't face without God was love."

There is much about Beha's journey that is moving, and his philosophical expositions are illuminated by a liquid prose. (If you've ever tried to read Immanuel Kant, you'll appreciate the magic Beha pulls off in making him comprehensible.) But there is a turn—a rhetorical move—at the end of the book I found maddening.

Beha keeps saying he wants to answer the question *How to live?* But much of the book feels like he's focused on the question *How can we know?* That is a different question, I think, or at least a particularly narrow take on the first question. It is a question haunted by what Richard Bernstein once called Cartesian anxiety: the worry about whether the little theater of consciousness in our minds is really projecting true representations of reality. (Richard Rorty pined for the day when we would stop trying to sucker freshmen into worrying about the artificial problems of "the external world" and "other minds.") In the end, Beha seems to think that the meaning of love needs the scaffolding of metaphysics, and that the antidote to Romantic idealism is a correspondence theory of truth that guarantees the ideas in my head represent the world outside it. I have my doubts about this. (I don't think Beha has adequately absorbed Wittgenstein's insights, but I won't play the pedantic professional philosopher here.)

Instead, I would say that this sort of Cartesian anxiety explains why Beha's project all feels just a tad bourgeois—a latent sort of therapeutic individualism reflective of the liberal status quo. I do not mean to dismiss the anxieties or the personal intellectual wrangling. They are real and many of us experience them. My question is more a matter of relevance and urgency. Is *this* the argument we need to address challenges to Christian faith today?

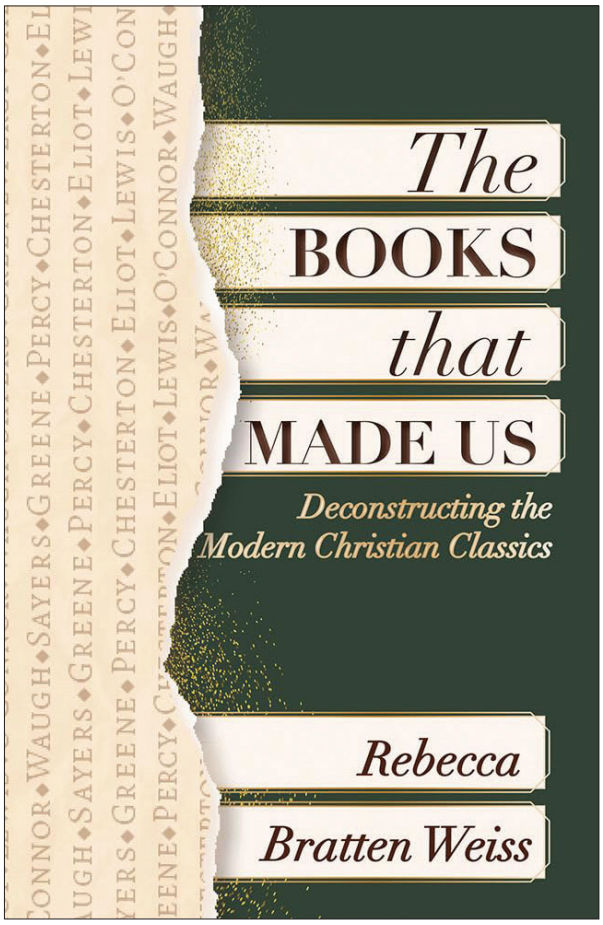
This explains my perplexity, even anger, when Beha, near the end of the book, tries to pin Christian nationalism and what he calls modern-day illiberalism on the legacy of Romantic idealism. His strange—and I think mistaken—claim is that "the rise of illiberalism has gone hand in hand with a decline of theistic belief and religious practice." (A reminder from Logic 101: Correlation is not causation.) Donald Trump, "the avatar of right-wing illiberalism," is somehow the manifestation of Romantic idealism—"our first Nietzschean president." And what about all of his support from Christians? Beha dismisses it as merely a form of identity politics. Those Trump supporters who "claim to be Christian tend to do so as an expression of a particularist identity rather than metaphysical belief."

This, to put it mildly, is an all-too-convenient parsing of current realities. Metaphysics won't save us from the specter of religious hatred and aspiring tyrants. One could argue that JD Vance shares Beha's faith *and metaphysics*. He is no doubt committed to a correspondence theory of truth to boot. When Vance and Pete Hegseth invoke God, they are pulling the levers to power, not donning some pious mask. When you take them seriously, Beha's attempt to play the cool-headed liberal feels like willful blindness.

What most makes God un-believable today? I don't think we are haunted by the ghost of Descartes's evil genius. Faith is undermined by what people who claim to believe in God do *in God's name*. I am reminded of Bouwsma again. Commenting on the fool's despairing conclusion, "There is no god," Bouwsma cautioned: This "must not be taken as a reaction to God. It is a reaction to men who do believe."

What will speak most powerfully of the love that is God today? I don't think it will be philosophical justifications of metaphysical truth. It will be those martyrs who defy tyrants. While Beha pens his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, we await another St. Oscar Romero.

James K. A. Smith *is a professor of philosophy at Calvin University. His latest book is* Make Your Home in This Luminous Dark: Mysticism, Art, and the Path of Unknowing *(Yale University Press).*



Orbis Books / 256p $18

Last summer during a long car ride, my mother and I went toe-to-toe about Flannery O'Connor. One of my aunts had used her on a course syllabus and received backlash from students. My mother argued O'Connor was a remarkable thinker worth learning from. However, I asked if my aunt had named the problem of O'Connor's often-overt racism as something to hold in tension with her positive contributions.

It was with this experience in mind that I read Rebecca Bratten Weiss's *The Books That Made Us: Deconstructing the Modern Christian Classics.* Though we seem to be past the peak of claims that any criticism of a previously lauded public figure is tantamount to "cancel culture," Bratten Weiss's work is still timely in its exploration of questions that underlie any cancellation-esque conversations: What are we to do when we realize the art that formed us is, perhaps, problematic? How do we revisit works that formed us when we ourselves have changed? Are we to throw out the good of a work when anything bad or harmful is present? Is it possible or good to separate the art from the artist?

Bratten Weiss introduces *The Books That Made Us* with the context of her own often-chaotic upbringing. She paints a picture of finding comfort, companionship and community both within the pages of books themselves and outside them through her "bookish" identity. Bratten Weiss identifies the books taught as part of the classic Christian canon at her ideologically conservative Catholic college, and she describes these books as a "fortress" within which to retreat and hold ever more tightly to a worldview that sees itself as pure and correct. On this list of authors are Flannery O'Connor, G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis, among others.

A series of upheavals in Bratten Weiss's own life shook the foundation of the fortress she had built. She began asking questions that broke cracks in the foundation. Then, following the 2016 presidential election, her fortress came crumbling down as she could not reconcile her own community's alignment with values she saw as antithetical to those of the faith they espoused.

Bratten Weiss began to call her own process "deconstruction" and was surprised to find that there was a whole community of Christians from other denominations using that term for much the same work. She notes that this became the term for a group of "influential evangelicals... publicly questioning long-held articles of faith." Further, she explains how this public form of deconstruction is connected to the academic work of deconstructionism—which examines the "assumptions latent in a system—for instance, assumptions about light versus dark, or white versus black." She goes on to write that "to deconstruct a system of meaning is not to attack it, but to show how it functions."

The most compelling argument Bratten Weiss makes for the process of revisiting the stories that formed us as faithful followers of God is the tendency of white Christians to embody what the scholar Erna Kim Hackett calls "Disney princess theology," wherein members of the community with the most power (white Christians, in the United States) see themselves as the hero of every story. Bratten Weiss quotes Hackett: "For...the most powerful country in the world, [which] enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when studying Scripture is a perfect example of Disney princess theology."

Bratten Weiss notes that her own revisitation of books that were formative for her began when she heard the authors quoted and started to find herself responding with "What if they were wrong?" Propelled by the conviction that art is not merely entertaining but formative as well, Bratten Weiss selected nine influential Christian writers to revisit while considering the ways their work would shape the minds of their readers: G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot,

Dorothy Sayers, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy.

I was simultaneously impressed and impatient with Bratten Weiss's methodical engagement of each of her nine selected authors. While I had encountered the work of many of the authors previously, there were several with whom I was unfamiliar. Bratten Weiss's analysis was so thorough that I felt I was able to get a comprehensive understanding of each, even when I lacked familiarity. I did not anticipate I would desire to read the work of these authors, given Bratten Weiss's purposes for engagement, but I found her analysis so nuanced that I occasionally added a new title to my "to read" list.

Throughout her discussion of each author, Bratten Weiss largely resists directive conclusions—such as offering recommendations for how to proceed with each author, or how to situate their work within our larger understanding or imagination. She instead points out the issues she identified through critical engagement and then moves on to the next author. It is this structural approach that prompted my impatience. After about three authors, I started writing notes in the margins toward the end of each chapter that said things like, "So what do we do with this?" By the time I did finally reach the conclusion, I was so eager to read Bratten Weiss's recommendations that I found myself wanting more. I found her conclusions powerful, concise and helpful—but I just wanted to linger with these ideas a little longer.

Many of my critiques when I read works of nonfiction are mediated through my professional lens as a university campus minister. Perhaps this is why I would have enjoyed it more if Bratten Weiss had used her classroom experience to offer recommendations for engaging the work of these authors in the classroom or with young people in the context of faith formation. However, even in the absence of explicit recommendations, I was able to extrapolate from Bratten Weiss's conclusions and imagine how I might bring this understanding into my work.

Returning to my conversation with my mother from last summer: I also read *The Books That Made Us* with curiosity about whether this book might be helpful to pass along to her or my aunt so they could better understand why I was so adamant that any use of Flannery O'Connor or an author with similarly known issues cannot be made without proactively addressing the problems.

I think this book starts about two steps beyond those conversations. It is best suited for people who have already been critically engaging with questions about their own religious formation and assumptions, rather than those who might encounter these questions for the first time in the introduction of this book.

The target audience seems to be those who find themselves wondering if they can still find comfort or inspiration in the books that formed them, even if those books or their creators are problematic.

To this question, Bratten Weiss's book offers a nuanced, but resounding yes. The work is not to do away with anything problematic but instead to face any issues with clarity and critical curiosity, while also accepting that some faithful Christians may not feel comfortable engaging the work of these authors. Our literary canon has plenty of room to expand and plenty of just, diverse, creative writing with which to do so. While authors such as Chesterton, Lewis and O'Connor will remain in the canon, Bratten Weiss is clear that they no longer need to serve as its center.

Meredith McKay *is the director of university ministry at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash.*

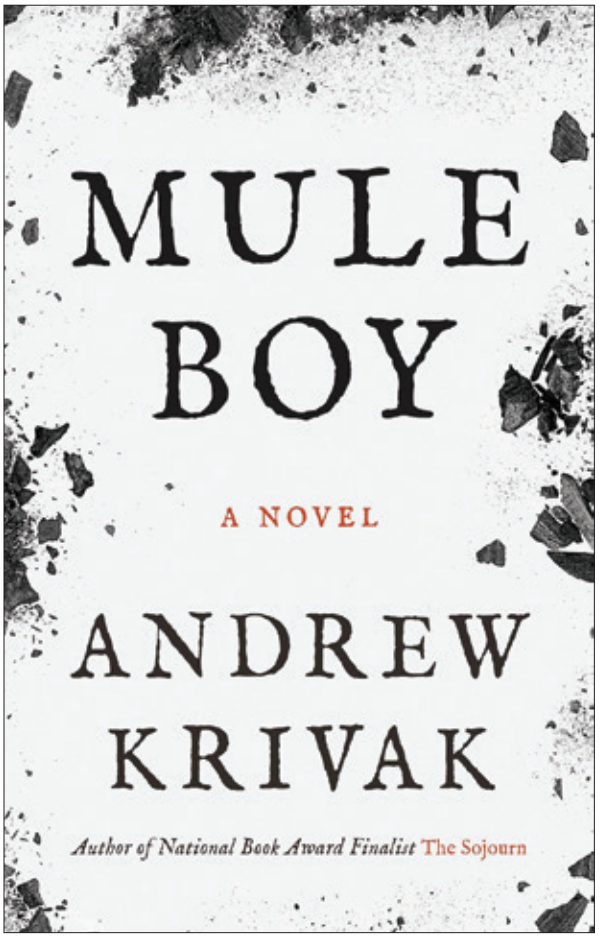
ARS PROPHETICA

By Timothy Adam Parker

I Am Who I Am, sum of melodies,
source of rhapsodies, you compose the soul
for chorus of the partial and the whole,
for serenades to your Name in all keys.
I would give praise though I drown in the sea
or confess the Faith though my heart collapse
and let my tongue set no clattering traps
but use it for beauty on bended knee.
I give my body to the song of God
and offer it up as an instrument
to amplify the music of ascent
in union with the silence of the awed:
Oh, Spirit! whisper in my inmost ear
then sing with my lips in voice loud and clear.

Father Timothy Adam Parker *is a retired Canadian military chaplain and is currently serving as a health care chaplain in Halifax, Nova Scotia.*

WAY DOWN IN THE HOLE



Bellevue Literary Press / 192p $18

"It was as if time folded over on itself."

So remarks Ondro Prach when, in his old age and states away from the Pennsylvania of his roots, he welcomes the descendants of a fellow miner killed in the tragedy that would define Ondro's life. This folding accordion of time—at once both cyclical and linear—provides the scaffold for the layers of presence and past through which we come to know Ondro. When we first meet him, he is an elderly man leading a solitary life in New Hampshire, reflecting on the final agonizing moments spent in a collapsed mine near Scranton and excavating the relics of a life lived in the cool, dark shadow cast by the pall of place and memory.

Andrew Krivak's latest novel, *Mule Boy*, invites readers on a descent into the soul as they descend with the narrator, Ondro Prach, the 13-year-old son of Slovak immigrants living and enduring in northeast Pennsylvania, into the mines, where he tends the mule that hauls the coal carts. This brutal toil defines both the industry and the culture. The community is bound up with the mine—its dangers and its detritus—and so too, is Ondro's life: He lost his own father to the mine.

Ondro has already felt the freight of poverty, grief and isolation when the room where he is working collapses on New Year's Day in 1929. The four men with whom he mined are killed, and Ondro emerges into a life defined by the disaster.

That he comes by the work of a mule boy at all is a testament to circumstances both harsh and providential. His widowed mother finds favor with the foreman in the wake of Ondro's father's death, and he is thus offered work in the mines, ascending to the role of mule boy only after an especially recalcitrant mule injures his previous child handler. Themes of darkness and violence emerge in people and place as Ondro recalls his humble work: men missing limbs, missed daylight, the most subtle of movements marking one for life or death. As narrator he reflects:

> I was certain that every man who ever made the descent with cables and coal cars and mules wondered in his heart, regardless of where he stood with God when he saw the priest in the confessional, if this was Hell into which he was descending, the wind, the whispering, the darkness, the blinking fires, the endless, endless, endless falling....

The labor is long and means are limited for these migrant Slovak families just outside of Scranton, and therefore so is any imagination of abundance or profligate joy. Family is paramount, work is prized, and conditions, though bleak, are met with resolve.

Mule Boy explores depths and recesses Krivak has invited readers to probe before. His previous novels, including the National Book Award finalist *The Sojourn*, surface themes of place, memory, embodiment and industry. Krivak's Pennsylvania is an "insular, uncreative, oppressive place," as he said in an interview with Image; such desolation echoes in *Mule Boy,* as in the description of the town of Hazleton as "nothing more than a ruin in the midst of slag heaps."

His reverence for the body also emerges anew, likening the work of mining to a ballet Ondro recalls seeing with his wife during happier times, describing an artful, delicate, muscular choreography:

> ...every movement rehearsed and exact, no motion wasted, no movement made for anything except the extraction of coal that gleamed in the sharp lights of the carbide lamps like diamonds the earth had decided long ago they would never be....

Krivak's Slovak Catholicism emerges here, too, haunting Ondro in artifacts like his father's rosary, which he parts with only in prison; in his unconscious recall of memo-

rized prayers; in his offhand references to sacraments. And perhaps a keen reader might detect a sacramental imagination: a rigorous, resilient searching for hope, dignity and humanity when the transcendent seems distant, when banal, meaningless suffering eclipses all other ephemera of a meaningful life.

Krivak's own story includes time in the Jesuits as a younger man, and his Ignatian accent echoes in his own self-awareness and his attentiveness to the holy and human throughout Ondro's self-reflection; readers are thus themselves invited to listen closely for such resonance.

We learn the story of Ondro's life over the course of two successive visits from descendants of those who died in the mine that New Year's Day. Like their fathers and grandfathers before them, they plumb Ondro's memory for something of value, something they can haul home, some nugget they can barter for self-understanding.

Ondro emerges from the mine into a community resentful over his survival, disinterested in the weight of his experience. Taunted in the schoolyard about his agonizing days spent within the earth as the men around him succumbed to their crushing injuries and the slow spread of septic shock, Ondro vows to never enact violence upon another, to not participate in advancing the horror of death he experienced when he was too young to understand it. He marries Magda Chibala, daughter of his final companion in the mines, John, after abandoning a halfhearted attempt at university studies, where his trauma is soothed by equal parts of Shakespeare and booze.

Drunk, complacent and downtrodden in the slow, swirling sadness of infertility, he surrenders ultimately to his ennui when he is sent to prison for refusing inscription in World War II. His wife abandons his most cherished belongings in a pawn shop and seeks an annulment, and Ondro finds himself once again enclosed by his circumstances and on the brink of despair.

Trapped but not alone, Ondro finds relief in sharing and storytelling. His cellmate, Jacobson, transcribes the Book of Jonah by hand for Ondro, teaching him Hebrew, and ultimately secures Ondro's release from prison as a conscientious objector. Ondro returns again and again to the manuscript after his incarceration, finding himself in the image of a prophet plunged into depths and darkness both material and metaphysical. Upon his release, Ondro is conscripted to work for the U.S. Forest Service at the base of Mount Monadnock, in New Hampshire, leaving behind both prison and Pennsylvania, scraping together a solitary life at the base of a mountain unmined, noting the calls of loons and the turning of seasons as the years unfurl.

His poetic musings on his memories and their meaning merge with the present when a figure arrives from long ago,

Krivak's Pennsylvania is an 'insular, uncreative, oppressive place.'

absolving but not resolving the untended troubles of the past. A life once marked by a hopeless wandering simply carries on ("I saw in you a glimpse of why God brought me out") like a deliverance without denouement.

The resilient endurance of relationship and hope that takes root in the background of Ondro's story does not ameliorate what is harsh. No abrasive memory softens; no frigid reality thaws. Rather than a duality, there is space for both mercy and unforgiving truth to coexist; there is reconciliation.

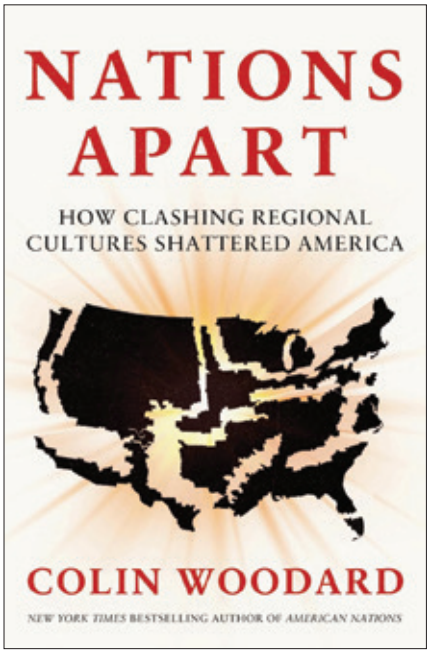
Krivak's fifth novel evinces his agile lyricism and depth, his capacity for mapping the terrain of the enduring human spirit with a gentle hand. His poetic prose accompanies readers in bearing witness to Ondro's story, itself an invitation to readers to mine the stories they have inherited, lived into, struggled to change, labored to not let fold over onto themselves. This elegy offers a rhythmic reading sensation of perhaps accompanying Ondro himself around the pond, into his home and into the recesses of his heart as he traces, in a stream-of-consciousness lyric, the contours of his soul.

So let us go with Krivak into the far depths, the caves of souls; let us explore our deepest chambers, let us journey to the farthest reaches of our memories—to the precipice of our imagination, to the borders of our wounds, to the edges of our most deeply embedded stories, and find the glimmers of grace there.

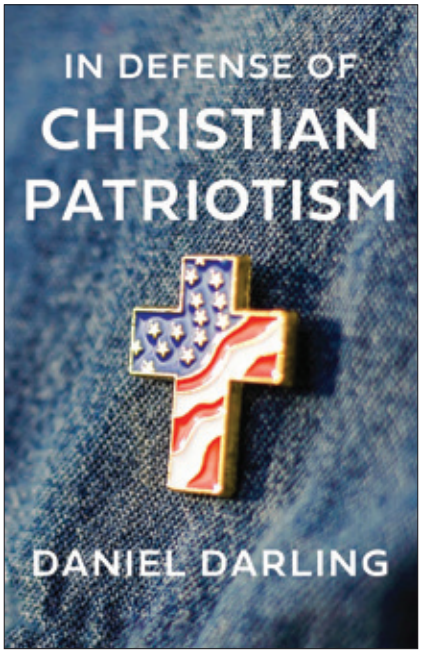
Mule Boy is gorgeous, haunting and worth journeying with. As Ondro says to his mule: *Pom het.* "Let's go."

Marissa Papula *is the director of development for Discerning Deacons and the former director of campus ministry at Loyola Marymount University.*

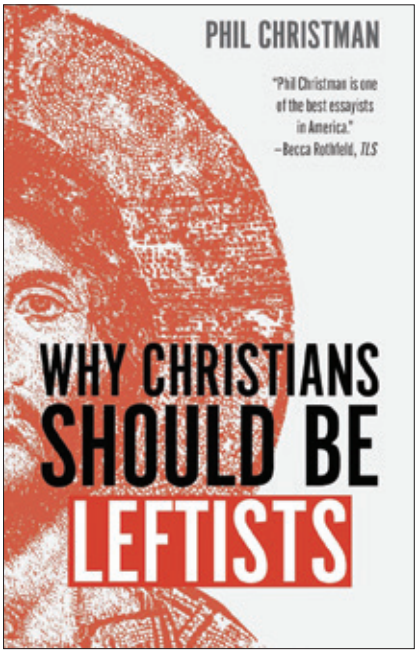
Our Separate Ways



Viking / 368p $32



Broadside Books / 288p $32



Eerdmans / 229p $24

"The Great Dismal Swamp" may sound like a nickname for Washington, D.C., but it's actually an enormous wildlife refuge that sprawls from southern Virginia into North Carolina. If you ever decide to drive across the whole country—perhaps to mark America's 250th birthday, which is finally upon us—it would take 40 hours, through 12 states and three time zones, to travel in a straight line from the Great Dismal Swamp to Las Vegas.

Only then would you finally find yourself in a congressional district that Donald Trump did not win in 2024, 2020 and 2016.

That's 2,500 uninterrupted miles of MAGA. And a whole lot more if you took a detour into six reliably Republican Deep South states.

It's been a decade now since Donald Trump turned American politics upside down. Which means that for 10 years, very smart people from very prestigious universities and media companies—not to mention the entire Democratic Party—have been saying that this onetime reality-TV star represents an unprecedented threat to America's economy and environment, its standing in the world and democracy itself.

At some point, we have to ask if Trump's critics have their own reservations about democracy, given the vast chasm between their dire warnings and actual American voting patterns.

If Trump really is an existential threat, at what point does the American left's inability—or unwillingness—to connect with flyover-country voters start to seem like a kind of resignation? Have progressives decided that they might as well build their own walls, and play the role of loyal, righteous opposition only within the confines of their cosmopolitan silos?

As we speak more and more openly about the nation's imminent collapse, or an authoritarian takeover or a second civil war, is it really so taboo to at least consider some kind of amicable national breakup, with certain states or regions going their own way, while we can still give peace a chance?

Colin Woodward's recent book, *Nations Apart: How Clashing Regional Cultures Shattered America,* offers a unique perspective on our troubled times, mainly because it is organized around geography, a topic readers tend to associate with grade school rather than fierce culture wars.

To Woodward—who runs the Nationhood Lab at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University—the United States may have 50 states, but far more important are 11 distinct regions "that were founded at different times and by very different people." A "few hundred or even a few score initial colonizers," Woodward adds, laid down "cultural DNA" hundreds of years ago that influences political behavior to this day.

So, New England is better understood as what Woodward calls "Yankeedom," stretching from northern Maine through most of New York State all the way out to parts of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. And the "tri-state area" with New Jersey and Connecticut revolving around New York City? The core of this metropolis is better understood as "New Netherland," while south Jersey and Philly belong to the American "Midlands," which squiggles its way across Pennsylvania and the Midwest to parts of the Dakotas and even northern Texas.

As for Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp, that's part of "Greater Appalachia," a region "characterized by a warrior ethic and a deep commitment to personal sovereignty and individual liberty."

Having reframed the national landscape, Woodward then analyzes how each section contends with specific issues, including religion. "After the American Revolution," he writes about Greater Appalachia, "millions of Americans embraced novel religious forms...weakening the established churches." He adds: "The region's religious heritage buttressed its individualism," placing great "emphasis...not on improving this world, but on one's personal salvation in the hereafter."

For Woodward, these influences have evolved in troubling ways. "America's democracy is collapsing," he laments, largely because of the "single-minded pursuit of individual freedom [which] is driving us to the brink of despotism."

Woodward defends the more communitarian traditions of Yankeedom and the Midlands, as well as what he calls the Left Coast, all of which have higher rates of "health, safety, happiness, wealth and longevity." And still, Woodward laments, "nearly half the American public thought it was a good idea to return [Trump] to power, apparently because they are more concerned about post-pandemic consumer price inflation than the survival of American democracy."

The problem, though, is not that "nearly half" of Americans have voted for Donald Trump—in three consecutive elections, it should be emphasized. It's the stark, not-very-complicated geographic distribution of those votes: Urbanites reject conservatives, rural types loathe liberals, and folks in the middle pretty much decide elections. And despite his many well-documented flaws—and years of relentless criticism from the broad left—a lot of folks in the middle have long believed that Donald Trump is precisely what the United States needs.

We can talk all we want about the Electoral College and deindustrialization, Joe Biden's age and the mere 107 days Kamala Harris had to campaign. At some point, the president's relentless critics need to confront some inconvenient truths about millions of non-urban voters and whether or not any "communitarian" Democrat can secure substantial support from them any time soon.

Woodward tries to conclude on a positive note, with some intricately worded polling and lofty rhetoric about the "ideals" of the Declaration of Independence, which he claims are "deeply revered by the vast majority of Americans outside of the most die-hard Trumpist right." The "rest of us"—"70 or 80 percent" of Americans, he ventures—don't "want to live in a fascistic world."

It does not make you a fascist to point out that the 2024 presidential election was a broad and "powerful repudiation of Democratic policies and strategies," as the Nobel Prize-winning economist Daron Acemoglu wrote in a recent Financial Times essay. But give Colin Woodward credit. He's right that debates about geography, individualism and communitarianism deserve a lot more attention than they're getting right now.

A Healing Role for Christianity?

Woodward's book is complemented by two other recent publications, Daniel Darling's *In Defense of Christian Patriotism* and Phil Christman's *Why Christians Should Be Leftists*. Both authors are earnest, intelligent men of faith who have written thoughtful books about the challenges facing the nation and the healing role Christianity might play.

Each author is enlightening, and maddening, in their own way. Both illustrate more about how we got into this mess than how we might get out.

Raised in a "fundamentalist Baptist" family, Christman attended a Christian college in Michigan, where he had an epiphany. "What I needed, what I so feared I'd never have, was already there...the possibility of universal solidarity," he writes of the faith he shared with fellow students. "The way of life that The Sermon on the Mount suggested was (already) available to me and to them." Christianity, Christman adds, "led me out of conservatism, past liberalism, to the left."

Christman then takes us back to the financial cataclysm of 2008, when "unrestrained capitalism...led to a world historical economic crisis," and Bernie Sanders and Occupy Wall Street suggested that the moment for a robust, new American left had arrived.

But the most consequential outcome of the '08 crisis turned out to be the right-wing Tea Party movement. As even Colin Woodward notes in *Nations Apart*: "Between 2010 and 2016, [Tea Party supporters were] deployed in

Darling and Christman both say more about how we got into this mess than how we might get out.

almost every part of the country harnessing legitimate popular anger about the misgovernment of the country."

A broad coalition of conservatives spent the Obama years doing the unglamorous work of winning town council, school board and state legislature elections—positions of great influence, it turned out.

What were various "leftists" doing at this same time? Perhaps counting down the days until America's changing demographics banished the religiously devout in general, and conservative Republicans in particular, to the dustbin of history. As late as 2021, the G.O.P. was going "the way of the Whigs," at least according to Jelani Cobb, the dean of Columbia University's School of Journalism and a New Yorker contributor. Harvard's Thomas Patterson wrote an entire book detailing how the Republican party was "destroying itself."

When legacy institutions lament their waning influence, these are the kinds of analyses they should recall.

The resurgent religiosity of the Trump years has resulted in "constant hand-wringing by the press, progressives, and a handful of religious scholars," at least according to Darling, a Southern Baptist pastor. "Freaking out over faith seems to be strangely one-sided," adds Darling, since "the mixing of politics and the pulpit is so common in progressive-leaning churches and barely registers a blip," yet conservative "Christianity's influence on government [is seen] as a threat."

This may be a simplistic take on a complex matter. But historically speaking, progressives have been skeptical of the devout, and vice versa—something, perhaps, the "leftist" Christman should have explored in greater depth. As for Darling, it's not exactly clear which "American Christians" he believes must "resist the misguided notion that to be faithfully Christian is to retreat from the public square."

In the 21st century, Republicans did not take control of the White House, Congress and the Supreme Court by "retreating" from issues like abortion, taxpayer support for religious education or "drag queen" story hours. They spoke openly of the United States as a Christian nation and of Donald Trump as God's chosen candidate.

"I'm writing this book," Darling nevertheless declares, "for Christians who love America but are afraid to express it."

There are valid critiques, of course, to be aimed at post-World War II Christianity and the compromises its leaders made to achieve a certain kind of cultural consensus. More recently, "anti-patriots" (as Darling calls them) arguably dominated woke social discourse, and some faith leaders uncritically followed along. But all of this ignores the politically active Christians who went on the offensive during such debates. Pejorative labels like "Christian Nationalist" were swiftly reclaimed by Trump cabinet members and Fox News anchors, who also kept a vigilant, unironic eye out for "anti-Christian" bigotry.

Darling admits there "are a few things I disagree with the current Republican party about," and he acknowledges the "shameful events of January 6th." Yet he has little to say about the conspicuous use of Christian symbols on that gruesome day, or, in fact, for the past decade. The $1,000 Trump-autographed Bibles come to mind, as do the endless varieties of flags on Pinterest or Etsy depicting a Rambo Jesus brandishing an automatic weapon.

"Jesus," Darling reminds us, "boiled down the responsibility of a Christian to basic instructions: love God and love our neighbors. This is a consistent theme throughout the Bible."

So, where exactly does "They're eating the dogs!" fit into all that? The "invasion" of "garbage" from "shithole countries"?

It's presumably futile to ask President Trump, or the nation's second most powerful Catholic, JD Vance, to express support for the "Cabrini pledge"—named after the patron saint of immigrants—which affirms the dignity of all human beings. But to write a book about public Christianity and overlook the corrupt bargain so many Christians have made with the proudly crude and cruel Trump administration suggests you're a few chapters short of the real story.

Say what you will about the likes of Rod Dreher and the Benedict Optioners. At least they see Trump not only for the con artist he is, but also as posing a threat to Christianity. Thomas Jefferson's much-maligned wall of separation, after all, protects not only the public from a state-imposed faith, but also the church from complicity with unseemly state actions. Just as moderate Democrats now regret ceding influence to their party's noisier factions, it's easy to imagine droves of Christians soon lamenting the 30 pieces of MAGAfied crypto-silver for which they sold their reputations and congregations.

For now, the simple truth remains that there is not too much Christian charity, decency and humility in the public square, but far too little.

The Siren Song of Socialism

Among Democrats and the broader left, meanwhile, the siren song of socialism beckons again. Christman's book was published before the proud socialists Zohran Mamdani and Katie Wilson won mayoral elections in New York City and Seattle, respectively. Time will tell if that changes many hearts or minds between Vegas and the Great Dismal Swamp.

But there is a growing sense on the left that moderates need to get out of the way and just let the firebrands fix the country.

More than 40 years after Robert Bellah wrote of the need for ideological regrouping and a "revitalized party system" in his now-classic *Habits of the Heart*, intra-factional divisions in the United States remain at least as troublesome as broader partisan strife.

If Democrats are, in fact, the party of majoritarian uplift and the "99 percent" (tax-the-rich wealth redistribution, organized labor, robust public services), to what degree can they also support an array of proudly nonconformist and minority cultural causes? How much longer can their progressive allies denounce government as structurally oppressive, secretive and racist, while at the same time demanding that it solve more and more increasingly complex social problems?

As for Republicans, their devotion to communal religious and family values remains wildly out of sync with a radically individualistic economic philosophy that empathizes with corporations as people more than it does with actual people.

If it is any comfort, 250 years ago, the founding fathers also struggled to balance the needs of city dwellers and farmers, majority and minority interests. But that was for a dozen or so Protestant villages hugging the Atlantic Ocean. The country has since been made vast by Manifest Destiny, then smaller, angrier and more narcissistic by technology.

"Hang together or hang separately," went a famous bit of Revolutionary-era gallows humor.

Maybe there's another way. Maybe, together, we need to consider living separately.

In her 2025 banger of a song, "Church and State," Brandi Carlisle sings: "While the empire was failing.... Before the revolution started." The lyrics that follow are apocalyptic and opaque—and, most provocatively, interrupted by an excerpt from Jefferson's famous letter to the Danbury Baptists about the "wall of separation" that has divided Americans ever since.

"When the blackness slowly parted," Carlisle bellows, before she articulates what may well be America's fatal flaw: the collision of unstoppable optimism with immovable realities.

They don't see
what we see...

We'll find a way
we'll find a way
we'll find a way
imagine if we could.

Tom Deignan, *a regular contributor to* ***America****, teaches at CUNY in New York City and is working on a book about religious violence in the 1920s.*

Solidarity Between the Divine and the Human

The month of May features readings that lead to the conclusion of the Easter season with the celebration of the feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. During the first two weeks, we hear Jesus delivering his farewell address to his disciples. As the theological heart of John's Gospel, this discourse defines Jesus' oneness with the Father and the share he grants us in this relationship. Jesus makes clear "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). In the third week, the Feast of the Ascension recounted in Acts 1:1-11, culminates Jesus' incarnation. With this event, the risen Jesus now joins with the Father yet does not leave us. Jesus, the one manifested in our humanity, not only disclosed who God is but also established a solidarity between the divine and the human. Paul identifies the character of this ongoing divine and human kinship for the Galatians and for us. As his followers, both the disciples of Jesus and Christians down through the ages become the body of Christ (Eph 1:23).

Pentecost celebrates the outpouring of the divine Spirit upon these Christ-like followers, as well as upon all the faithful, enabling them to take up the awesome task of Jesus' own mission. The Gospel on this feast that celebrates the birthday of our church concludes with Jesus defining and handing over that responsibility.

As we return to Ordinary Time, Trinity Sunday fittingly follows, offering an important pause to meditate upon this triune grandeur of our God. As the biblical scholar Elizabeth Johnson suggests, God as Trinity is a manifestation of self-giving love. As Father, God gave Jesus as the incarnation of the divine in human form revealing the very character of our God. That same self-giving love does not depart with Christ's ascending. Rather it descends as the gift of the divine Holy Spirit animating us to be that body of Christ, and enabling us to extend that same self-giving love to our world.

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (A), MAY 3, 2026
Challenging an empire

THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (A), MAY 10, 2026
Love and obedience

ASCENSION SUNDAY (A), MAY 17, 2026
Step out, move forward, look outward

PENTECOST SUNDAY (A), MAY 24, 2026
Embodiment of the spirit

TRINITY SUNDAY (A), MAY 31, 2026
The Love that keeps on giving

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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The Holy Spirit on the Move

On the growing religious participation of Gen Z

By Betsy Bohlen

For many months, Catholic pastors across the country have been reporting that young adults have been flocking to their churches, leading some to conclude that a religious revival of Gen Z is underway. Higher numbers of participants this year in the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults in many dioceses seem to confirm the trend. So far, however, the national data tells a more restrained story: Religious affiliation and church attendance among young adults is low, with little evidence of a broad rebound.

A combination of data analysis and on-the-ground observation suggests that both perspectives are accurate—and together they reveal something more nuanced than either decline or revival alone. What is happening today can be best understood as the collision of two opposing forces—a long-term decline in religious practice offset by a newer, more localized surge of interest.

The first force is well-established. Many statistics confirm that the practice of faith during childhood is a significant factor contributing to adult faith participation, but for many years now, each successive generation has grown up with less of it. For example, the Pew Research Center's most recent Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2023 and 2024, found that 68 percent of adults born in the 1940s reported attending weekly religious services as children, compared with only 48 percent of those born in the 2000s. This trend has continued to play out even within the young adult population. The Pew study found that adults ages 18 to 24 grew up with less religious affiliation, less regular worship and less formal religious education than even those just a few years older. On its own, this pattern would predict continued ongoing erosion in religious participation among adults.

Instead of the expected decline, there is early evidence of a flattening of the trends among young adults. The Pew study found that reported monthly worship rates among young adults has remained stable over the past few years, at about 25 percent. The youngest adults also resemble those in their later 20s and early 30s in both affiliation and practice—an unexpected result, given their weaker religious upbringing.

If religious participation rates are holding steady overall despite declining religious upbringing, then something must be counteracting the downward pull: the growing participation in faith among this group.

These opposing forces are likely playing out differently across the country. The first force, the underlying negative trend, is playing out quietly and broadly as, on average, each new group of young adults emerges with lower rates of faith practice than the previous year's group. On the other hand, our experience in the Archdiocese of Chicago suggests that the positive force is playing out in more concentrated demographic pockets with higher concentrations of adults in their 20s. Chicago area parishes located in these neighborhoods, such as Old Town, Lincoln Park and Lakeview, reported total growth in Mass attendance during 2025 of more than 12 percent, a rate significantly higher than in areas with lower young adult populations. Many of our parishes in these communities reported growth of more than 20 percent. These are surprising and very hopeful jumps.

This news is encouraging but early. Even a significant increase in the religious participation of Gen Z will not offset the magnitude of the downward shift from prior generations. Any revival might play out over a long period of time just as the decline did, as current young adults grow in faith and seed the next generations. Our emphasis should be on recognizing the emerging trend and intentionally feeding it.

Feeding the trend will require changing our mindset from "welcoming back" to "welcoming anew," as these days the majority of young adults raised Catholic grew up with low faith practice to begin with. This also means new practices and habits for most of our parishes. Young adults will need opportunities to explore questions of faith, to encounter the person of Jesus Christ, to become immersed in the richness and depth of the 2,000-year-old church and to be accompanied through the journey.

The Holy Spirit seems to be on the move. Our job is to join the wave by accompanying a new generation of young adults who may not know much about faith but are hungry and interested.

Betsy Bohlen *is the chief operating officer of the Archdiocese of Chicago.*

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